

NETWORK CREATION AND USE OF TOURISM INFORMATION CHANNELS IN A DESTINATION OF RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE

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This paper examines the structure of the tourism information channels employed, as well as the existence of networks for the promotion of religious tourism in the prefecture of Arcadia, in Peloponnese, Greece. Quantitative methodology was employed with the use of a field survey research based on 775 valid questionnaires, in the province of Arcadia, including Greek and foreign tourists. Content analysis of 124 hotels websites which have an online presence also took place in order to examine the existence of networks in the area. Results regarding the type of the tourism information channels employed from the key stakeholders involved in the promotion of the region of Arcadia, reveal that the existence of networks in regard to religious tourism in Arcadia, Greece, is extremely limited, if not existing at all; religious tourists depend firstly on the traditional channel of word of mouth, as recommendations from friends and relatives is their first information channel choice, followed by the internet and thirdly, by hotel listings. However, all information channels do not take advantage of the density of the region and do not cooperate for marketing the area as a whole; the promotion of specific areas and businesses over others does not allow the expansion of networks to take place, as research has shown. The absence of network creation in the region under study illustrates an area that could be further improved, a goal of significant importance for economic development, especially in a period of economic crisis in Greece.

Keywords: *tourism networks, religious tourism, advertising, social media, information channels*

INTRODUCTION

The projected image of a destination is formed by a complex and dynamic network of agents acting as information sources such as residents, businesses, marketing organisations, travel agencies (Frías et al, 2012, p.439). The structure of the tourism information channels employed, as well as the existence or not of entrepreneurial networks that may promote and advertise a region, a place, a city and its distinct characteristics (such as religious tourism), is what authors have called for research (Mariani et al, 2014; Kavoura & Katsoni, 2013a; Lemmetyinen & Go, 2010; Anderson & Ekman, 2009; Wray, 2009).

Networks are associated with the creation of ties for the collaboration and cooperation between members who collectively join together in order to create and encourage alliances and share similar ends basing their existence on relationships (Scott et al, 2008; Achrol & Kotler, 1999). Network analysis describes the structure of relations displayed by links between given entities displayed by nodes (Shih, 2006, p. 1031). An important issue is to identify nodes in the network, to see the centrality that exists between entities, the interaction between pairs of other nodes (Shih, 2006; Wray, 2009). The research questions refer to:

- 1) The significance attributed from tourist stakeholders of the region (both religious visitors and hotel associations) to the information provided for advertising and promoting religious tourism in the region.
- 2) The examination of the existence of networks in regard to the promotion of religious tourism and the marketing of the region.

- 3) The extent of use of networking associated with the religious tourism market segment.

To answer the abovementioned questions, the research employed both quantitative and qualitative research methodology for the triangulation of the results following a case study design. 'Triangulation' enabled the researchers to have a mixture of sources for gathering data and thus, "gain a better assessment of the validity of the explanations" (Maxwell, 1996, p.75-76). The paper adds to the literature on the examination of the structure of the tourism information channels employed and the existence of networks for the specific area, focusing on the promotion of religious tourism. Such research which examines the role of networks and information channels for marketing Arcadia, Greece has not taken place at national and local level.

Religious tourism and information channels

According to Baum (2000) and the tendency of New Age Spirituality (Rountree, 2002), the concept of religion has shifted with the advent of modern secularizing trends such as post-industrialism, cultural pluralism and scientific rationality; the term "religion" refers to things outside the realm of traditional religious institutions, seen as a privatized and pluralized experience where the "spiritual" and the "religious" are separate (Olsen & Timothy, 2006). According to Simone-Charteris & Boyd (2010, p.233), tourists can be either pilgrims, religious travelers and cultural tourists (Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell, 2006), as they travel to a widening variety of sacred sites not only for religious or spiritual purposes, but also for reasons of a more secular and cultural nature, e.g. when people have an educational interest in learning about the history of a site or understanding a particular religious faith and its culture and beliefs; for nostalgic reasons or patriotic stirrings; for a chance to admire architectural or

natural wonders; in search of authentic experiences; or simply out of curiosity (Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Shackley, 2001, 2002). Thus, “religious tourism can, and does, include other forms of travel activities that do not fall into the category of pilgrimage” (Ron, 2009, p.289).

Although people’s religion has been characterized as a key factor that influences individuals’ behaviors as travelers, travel agencies and other tourism organizations do not effectively manage religious travelers, despite the fact that the religious market group consists the 25 per cent of the tourism market” (Triantafyllidou et al., 2010, p.383). Elements that are advertised and promoted can be related to religious tourism all over the world such as Mount Athos, Greece or Jerusalem in Israel (Simone-Charteris & Boyd, 2010, p.230). It is important though, that an advertising message intended at a specific audience from a specific person, state, stakeholder who promotes this message, should have an ‘effective community of minds’ in order for the message to be received, taking into consideration the prior knowledge of the target group (Kilamby, Laroche, & Richard, 2013, p.49).

Since tourism distribution and information channels are part of touristic infrastructure, tourist stakeholders need to understand the strength and effectiveness of using them in order to deploy a better marketing and promotion strategy. The ease of use, interactivity and flexibility of Web-based interfaces suggests an allied and important role for World Wide Web technology in destination marketing and tourism Websites are constantly being made more interactive (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008), support communication with service providers and interpret the visitors’ experience of local assets (Mitsche et al., 2008; Katsoni & Dionysopoulou, 2013). Internet is now an immense platform of interaction which opens new levels of engagement, exchange and collaboration between users (Sigala, 2009; Ramaswamy, 2009), and one of the critical forces for the advancement of society and the growth of the empowered consumer. Diffusion of information through online technologies within the tourism industry has significantly impacted communications,

transactions and relationships between the various industry operators and with the customer, as well as between regulators and operators (Katsoni, 2014; Sheldon, 1998). Recent research has shown that the web and online reviews in regard to a destination are considered to be among the most important channels to collect information about a tourism destination and are more reliable than official sources for a tourist (Milano, Baggio, & Piattelli, 2011).

Social media advances change the way tourists access, share, discuss and distribute information (Sigala, 2017a), play an important role in the travel planning process (Katsoni & Venetsanopoulou, 2013; Leung & Bai, 2013 p.59, 62) and influence experience co-creation (Sigala & Gretzel, 2017b). The ‘virtual’ or ‘social’ network has really revolutionized communication, interaction and business in general. ‘Virtual’ or ‘social’ networks can be defined as permeable structures without physical borders separating them from the environment, comprising a multiplicity of autonomous, interdependent and self-organizing actors that rely on the internet infrastructure to integrate and exchange value (Katsoni, 2013a).

Important changes have also occurred in the travelers’ search for information when choosing a tourist destination since the advent of internet and Online Travel Agencies with booking and ratings/review functions (hereafter OTAs) and User Generated Content (hereafter UGC) all attract the attention of consumers. Although there exists great variation of credibility in different types of social media tools (PhoCusWright 2009; Del Chiappa, 2013, 2012; Yoo et al., 2009), online reviews and recommendations that tourists post online are perceived to have a higher credibility than traditional tourist information sources (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008), with OTAs being the most credible and the most able to influence tourists’ choice. In addition, it was found that viral marketing through Facebook messages has a strong effect on the increasing number of members (Leung & Bai, 2013, p.62). Both Word of Mouth (WoM) and electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) enable destination management

organizations (DMOs) to strategically position their marketing collateral to meet the specific needs of destination decision makers (Tham, Croy, & Mair, 2013). According to Leung and Bai (2013), Kim, Kim and Nam (2010) and Kim, Shim and Ahn (2011), individuals' motivations to use a social networking site has a positive relationship with social networking site use, which will be strengthened if social media is believed to bring benefits to the user.

Therefore, the paper examines the significance attributed from tourist stakeholders of the area (both religious visitors and hotel associations) to the information provided for advertising and promoting religious tourism in the region.

Network Creation in the Tourism Industry

Networks are associated with the planning and interaction between corporate pressure groups that are influential and occupy top positions in a related sector, setting the agenda and creating subsystems (Wray, 2009). Density and centrality are important for a network and there is limited research on the dynamics associated with actor strategies (Wray, 2009, p.676). The tourism industry consists of the ideal context for the creation and expansion of networks. Tourist private networks are created with the individuals involved (for example, family run businesses) and the relationships created among them; they allow people to have access to power and resources important to entrepreneurship (McGehee et al., 2010, p. 486); furthermore, these resources are only effective if distributed and traded through a channel or a network (Hazra, Fletcher, & Wilkes, 2014). The regional planning process can also include local businesses, since private businesses associated with tourism have a better knowledge of the area and consist of various distribution channels so that people can get the information they need (Del Chiappa, 2013).

Furthermore, the interdependence of public and private actors in policymaking influences networks and this is also an issue that needs

to be studied in order to build on the developing literature (Katsoni, 2018; Tsartas & Sarantakou, 2016; Kavoura & Katsoni, 2013b). Networks between the private and the public sector may include public and private alignments, a cooperation that needs to be accounted for in the creation of networks. Networks “get Small Medium Enterprises that would normally work in isolation to co-operate and build a successful tourism product in a locality” (Novelli, Schmitz, & Spencer 2006:1143). The public sector sets the preconditions for effective public-private cooperation (Mariani et al., 2014) although research shows that this may not always be the case, since public sectors may be slow to the initiation of such collaboration (Kavoura & Katsoni, 2013b). Private stakeholders are encouraged to participate. Cooperation between members in tourism strengthens the brand image of a destination (Mariani et al., 2014).

ICTs all add to the image and reputation of a tourist destination (Katsoni & Dionysopoulou, 2018; Mariani et al., 2014:5; Stratigea & Hatzichristos, 2011). People in networked markets believe that the information they get is better online because there is consumer engagement (Milano, Baggio & Piattelli, 2011). The person involved is in fact the co-creator of the information provided. Nonetheless, tourism operators have not yet fully understood the new technological world (Milano, Baggio & Piattelli, 2011; Katsoni & Kavoura, 2013) although online social networks facilitate interactive information sharing and the creation of communities that share similar interests.

Networks share specific characteristics such as specific way of behavior, the discovery of relations and not the a priori allocation to categories, multiple relationships in a group (Scott, Baggio & Cooper, 2008). Trust plays a prominent role in which exchanges take place and networks devote more time and resources to manage information for the product (Achrol & Kotler, 1999:146). Since firms in tourism often regard one another as competitors and not as colleagues, the issues of ‘trust’, ‘ties’ and ‘social capital’ are important determinants of the provision of the tourism product at the destination level (Inkpen

& Tsang, 2005). Trust, rather than competition with each other is the objective since networks deter competition (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008; McGehee et al., 2010:486). The emphasis is on cooperation among businesses; rather than on spending energy, time and money to observe how to 'compete' other businesses, everyone works as part of a group with multiple benefits and results for all.

Taking the supply side perspective, that is the senders of the communication messages in regard to the advertising of a place or a region, there is a necessity to specify what it is that they want to project to the rest of the world, so as to have a consistent message to reach the demand side (Kavoura, 2013; Konečnik & Go, 2008:178-179). The identification of the coordination of cooperative activities in tourism business networks may be a prerequisite for enhancing the value-creation process in order to build the brand-identity process across the network (Lemmetyinen & Go, 2009). Case studies have been suggested in literature which are necessary in order to shed light on the local tourism networks created (Katsoni, 2014; Wray, 2009:688), thus offering reason for the present study. Taking into account that destination network management may introduce a dynamic, activity-oriented approach as opposed to the actor-focused DMO's view (Meriläinen & Lemmetyinen, 2011), the paper examines the existence of networks in regard to the promotion of religious tourism and the marketing of the region of Arcadia, Greece and the extent of use of networking associated with the religious tourism market segment.

Methodology

Arcadia is located in Peloponnese and is one of the 9 geographical Prefectures of Greece. It is a well defined area to analyze regarding the promotion of religious sites in the area. The monasteries and the prefecture is two hours away from Athens, the capital of Greece, within a distance of 120 kilometers from the capital. Thus, the proximity of the region to a big urban centre such as Athens is of

significance for those that would like to have a one or more days to spend in Arcadia. Research has shown that proximity in big urban centers may influence the influx of tourists in a region (Bitsani & Kavoura, 2012).

Since the proposed purpose of the study was to examine the way local public and private authorities employ means of advertising and communication for the promotion of religious tourism in the area and the existence of networks, quantitative and qualitative research were employed for the thorough examination of both demand and supply side of the religious tourism market for the triangulation of the results, which is presented below.

Results

Quantitative methodology and results

Quantitative methodology was employed with the gathering of 775 valid questionnaires, out of a total of 3500 in order to further understand the tourism market in the province of Arcadia, Greece, over a period of 12 months, to eliminate seasonality, starting in May 2012. The response rate was a satisfactory 22%. We used a convenience sample by distributing questionnaires to various survey sites of the region; people working in the prefecture of Arcadia helped in the process. Data were collected by using a self-administered questionnaire, in Greek and English, primarily designed to gather data regarding the significance attributed from religious visitors of the area to the information provided for advertising and promoting the region. Their participation in religious attractions was identified through the question: "As part of your vacation how likely is it to be interested in visiting religious sites in Arcadia". The visitors' choice of information channels used was identified through the question: "What kind of information have you used to visit Arcadia?"

The overall goal of the present research was to extract results regarding the use of tourism information channels in an attempt to verify the existence and importance of networking at the destination, as well as the extent of use of such networking.

The survey data were coded and analyzed using R, an open-source statistical package. Descriptive statistical analysis was applied to the collected data to explore the overall sample profile. In order to identify special characteristics of the sub-population of tourists that have replied positively to the question on how likely they are to be interested in visiting religious sites in their vacation, we have separated this group from the rest of respondents and have constructed the following sub-groups for subsequent analysis:

- Group A (N = 321): ‘Very likely’ to be interested in visiting religious sites
- Group B (N = 454): ‘Very unlikely’ to be interested in visiting religious sites

We conducted Chi-square tests to verify whether differences between the two sub-groups, as regards particular characteristics of the population of tourists, are due to chance variation or reveal some statistically significant trend. Chi-square tests were chosen for use in this exploratory investigation to aid in making inference about the uniform distribution (or not) of the two sub-groups in relation to demographic, trip and booking characteristics.

The initial chi-square analyses were conducted to determine differences among the Group A and Group B tourists’ nationality, but we came up with a non-significant result $p = 0.13$ so we concluded that it was an appropriate way of splitting the data. It is typical to note, that in regard to nationality, Greek visitors are more in relation to non-native visitors. There were only 41 foreign visitors filling in the research, out of whom 3 from Denmark, 15 came from Germany, 12 from England, 7 from France, and 4 from Sweden.

The aim of the following part of the analysis is to explore the tourists' preference regarding the selection of tourism information channels for their journey. The researchers content analyzed 124 hotels out of the 312 existing hotels in the region (Katsoni, 2011b) in September, 2014, which were listed under expedia.com, booking.com and HRS.com

(HotelReservationSystem)([http://www.expedia.ie/HotelSearch?#&destination=Arkadia](http://www.expedia.ie/HotelSearch?#&destination=Arkadia;);http://www.booking.com/searchresults.el.html?src=index&nflt=&ss_raw=Arcadia <http://www.hrs.com/web3/>).

Comparisons between the two sub-groups (Group A and Group B) have been conducted using the chi-squared test (Table 1) and a significant chi-square has been derived for Internet only ($\chi^2_{df} = 6.4, p < 0.02$). Figures in Table 1 reveal that it is less likely for tourists in Group A to use the Internet to book their vacation. Information sources are displayed in Table 1, showing the preference for tourists in Group A.

Table 1 Chi-Square Analysis of Tourism Information Channels' Characteristics of Tourists who find interest in visiting religious sites in their vacation

			Very likely to be interested (Group A)	Very unlikely to be interested (Group B)		
			n	%	n	%
Total			321		454	
Recommendations from friends and relatives			166	51.7	256	56.4
						<i>X-squared</i> <i>= 1.4734, df</i> <i>= 1, p-value</i> <i>= 0.2248</i>

	Very likely to be interested (Group A)		Very unlikely to be interested (Group B)		
Internet	152	47.4	258	56.8	$X^2 = 6.4022, df = 1, p\text{-value} = 0.01140$
Information from using a Global Positioning System (GPS)	15	4.7	23	5.1	$X^2 = 0.0065, df = 1, p\text{-value} = 0.9356$
Hotel listings in OTAs: Booking.com, Expedia.com, HRS.com	24	7.5	23	5.1	$X^2 = 1.5183, df = 1, p\text{-value} = 0.2179$
VIDEO/CD- ROM/DVD/VIDEO TEXT	21	6.5	22	4.8	$X^2 = 0.7341, df = 1, p\text{-value} = 0.3916$
Information from using a P.D.A (Personal Digital assistant)	13	4	24	5.3	$X^2 = 0.3897, df = 1, p\text{-value} = 0.5325$

The results of the research question regarding the type of the advertising channels employed from tourism stakeholders to promote

religious sites in Arcadia, Greece reveal that religious tourists depend firstly in the traditional channel of word of mouth, as recommendations from friends and relatives is their first choice with a percentage of 51.7%, followed by the internet and official websites of the hotels (47.4%) and thirdly, by hotel listings such as Booking.com, Expedia, HRS (7.5%). The word of mouth (WOM) such as recommendations from friends and relatives that this research highlighted as the most important tourism distribution channel for dissemination of information is consistent with Andersson & Ekman (2009, p.43; Tham, Croy & Mair, 2013) regarding the fact that consumers have far more confidence in the views of friends and acquaintances than in a message that emanated from advertising or corporate spokespeople. However, results also reveal that it is less likely for religious tourists to use the Internet to book their vacation (see Table 1).

Qualitative methodology and results

Interpretive phenomenology was used in this research, as it is a method which permits the identification of themes -a statement of meaning that runs through all or most of the pertinent data or one in the minority that carries heavy emotional or factual impact (Holstein & Gubrium, 1998, p.150; Myrray & Chamberlain, 1999, p.220). It aims to offer insights into how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a given phenomenon (Smith, Jarman & Osborn 1999, p.220). Issues that repeatedly emerge in the data create patterns for the research. Then, themes are headed under the umbrella of a superordinate theme, a theme that incorporates many sub-themes (Kavoura, 2007). Themes that emerged from the analysis of the promotional material are associated with the role of the local private tourism entrepreneurs to promote the region and the elements used as significant to be branded. It is the credibility that is searched in qualitative research; convergence of a major theme or pattern

provides credibility to the findings (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p.146).

The authors analyzed the advertising tourism materials -printed and electronic-employing interpretative phenomenological methodological approach for Greek and English speaking visitors, for a well defined period of 8 years. The first edition that took place for promoting the region in print in 2006 and all the other printing material which was created since then were analyzed. Printed promotional material was analyzed from the Hotels' Association and Hotels' Owners in Eastern Arcadia, the Secretary General of the Prefecture of Peloponnese, where Arcadia belongs but also the leaflets that hotel owners distribute in the region. Our criterion was to collect the information that was first created for the promotion of the region in order to consider any changes made in the passage of time. Our aim was to collect all the existing information related to the promotion of the region to a truly international population. The one and only one booklet of the Hotels' Association and Hotels' Owners is written in Greek. In regard to the place identity of the region, information is provided in this booklet about the monasteries of the region (Vachaviolos, 2006, p.16) putting in that way emphasis on the cultural-religious element of place identity which is presented as the first information about the region. Nature and natural capital is the other bid section in the booklet promoting the flora and fauna, the waterfalls, the caves of the region (Vachaviolos, 2006, p.22). When it comes to the presentation of the hotels, which can be associated with the network creation, there is a list of the accommodation available but more specific information about the hotels is not provided, neither information regarding other tourism enterprises, such as restaurants, taverns and various forms of entertainment (Vachaviolos, 2006). It is stated that this accommodation officially operates under the license and within the network of the Greek National Tourism Organization (GNTA) (Vachaviolos, 2006). However, information about food and gastronomical choices of the region is presented in just three lines just before the booklet ends; names of restaurants and shops could be

presented to enable the tourist to have an idea of where to go and eat (Vachaviolos, 2006). A network does not seem to exist between private tourism stakeholders in the area for the printed advertising material of the region.

Furthermore, the cultural association of Doliana in Arcadia, Greece has created a leaflet for the promotion of the region implementing a network; the leaflet contains information about accommodation, restaurants and taverns, traditional food and gifts from the region, athletic and cultural activities (Ano Doliana Arcadias, 2007). However, this is an exemption in regard to the network practices applied in the region. Even such effort, is not fully implemented since the title of the leaflet is written both in Greek and English while the information in the leaflet is only in Greek discouraging in that way, the English speaking visitors for getting the information they would like but also the networks promoted and described above, to reach the potential target groups.

Electronic material on the websites was also searched, in order to delimit the huge amount of data that could emerge; thus, we searched only the sites that were created from associations and organizations that incorporate more than one business. In fact, it was found out that the official site of Peloponnese <http://www.discover-peloponnisos.gr/> does refer to a limited number of private accommodation sector tourist enterprises when you look for the specific area of the prefecture of Arcadia and also has a connection to “odysseus”, the official server of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture (<http://odysseus.culture.gr/>), but surprisingly, the latter has no reference to the important religious sites of Arcadia. The Church’s website was another web site that was searched as it could be possibly a potential part of the network. Unfortunately though, church’s official website <http://www.ecclisia.gr> has neither connection with any tourists’ enterprises of any kind of tourism in the private sector nor connection with the prefecture’s official site; there is only reference to monasteries in Arcadia.

The authors also employed content analysis of hotels' websites as a supplementary research method when multiple methods are used. According to Neuman (2003, p.219) "content analysis is a technique for gathering and analyzing the content of text. The content refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or nay message that can be communicated". The so called direct way of content analysis was employed, that is those words or phrases that are physically present and counted rather than on the latent content which depends on the subjective judgment in order to lead to reliable results (Robson, 2010, p. 420-421; Leiss et al., 2008; Holstein & Gubrium, 1998).

The themes that were examined were associated with the existence of a Company's Website, the existence of a Website in English, the connection of Social Media (Facebook, Twitter), the existence of Google Map and live web camera in the official website, the promotion of Religious Sites Events and Activities in the official website, the presence of Links with other Private Tourism Stakeholders in the area and whether this is presented in the official website, and finally, the presence of Links with Public DMOs .

Table 2. Content Analysis of themes on 124 Arcadia Hotels' Websites in 2015

Themes' analysed	Companies	Percentage (%)
Existence of Company's Website	111	89.5
Website in English	90	72.5
Social Media Connection (Facebook Twitter)	46	37
Google Map	68	54.8
Existence of live web camera	12	9.6

Promotion of Religious Sites Events and Activities	81	65.3
Presence of Links with other Private Tourism Stakeholders in the area	43	34.6
Presence of Links with Public Destination Management Organisations	12	9.6
Reciprocal interaction between Public and Private Companies	0	

The content analysis of the 124 hotels in Arcadia, Greece, illustrated that 65.3% of the hotels promote religious sites, events and activities in their websites. Table 2 also illustrates that social media are not fully implemented to the degree that they could be used by hotel companies. Although ICTs all add to the image and reputation of a tourist destination (Mariani et al., 2014, p. 5) and OTAs are the most credible and the most able to influence tourists' choice, they are not exploited by the primary stakeholders in Arcadia. Taking the tourist demand side, the use of hotel listings accounts only of a 7.5% of the respondents (see table 1). In the supply side, according to the content analysis that took place in the websites of the hotels showed that 34.6% of the hotels joined coordinated activities to create synergies with other Private Tourism Stakeholders in the area (see Table 2) The limited effort of hotels to have an online presence and combine advertising communication activities (thus, creating a network) might also explain the limited use of hotel listings by tourists.

The authors also employed the method of interview. The use of multiple measures of the same construct pointing information in the same direction, allows for a better interpretation since different sources of evidence are used for the presentation of findings (Yin, 1993, p.69). Since the examination of networks is qualitative in nature (Scott, Baggio & Cooper, 2008), this study presents data collected from an interview held with the President of the Peloponnesian Tourism Organisation and President of the Arcadian Hotels' Association, Dr Marinakos in September 2015, as purposive or purposeful sampling is used when selecting people to interview because the sample is intentionally selected according to the purpose of the study (Salmons, 2012, p.14). It is important to note that the existing promotional material of the region taken from the Hotels' Association in Arcadia as well as the Hotels' Owners Association in Eastern Arcadia is written, produced and signed from one person only; he was in charge of advertising the region of Arcadia, Greece. That is why, interpretative phenomenological analysis was considered to be the most appropriate method since phenomenology is generally associated with individual accounts of a given domain of experience (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989) and is associated with the close examination of the experiences and meaning-making activities of only one participant.

Although the President of the Association of Hotels in Arcadia, Dr. Marinakos, mentioned that "there are synergies with the public; for example, the Greek National Tourism Organization to a very high grade over the recent years through our collective bodies which is the main social partner in matters of planning and implementing tourism promotion policies of the region's tourism product" (personal interview in September, 2015), nonetheless, this does not seem to be appropriate, since only 12 synergies existed online as content analysis illustrated (Table 2), that is, a 9.6% of the hotels in the area.

Dr. Marinakos also referred to the official website for the Association of Hotels in Arcadia (www.hotelsarcadia.gr) which aims to promote products and services of hotels' members and to reinforce

the corporate identity of the institution in the inter-regional Tourist Agency of Peloponnese. Nonetheless, the researchers found out that the webpage automatically turns to <http://arcadiaimages.gr/> and only presents a few photos from the region but there is not a single reference to a hotel.

Dr. Marinakos also mentioned that “religious tourism is promoted as an interesting form of alternative tourism due to the richness of religious monuments”, (personal interview in September, 2015), a view which is in accordance with the results of content analysis of Table 2. The small percentage of hotels which is advertised through social media 37%, that is 46 hotels out of the 124 hotels in Table 2, was also verified by the President of the Peloponnesian Tourism. Weak cooperation between hotels, which seem to be unable to attract the interest of the tourists was also pointed out by Dr. Marinakos, as he admitted that: “Clusters have not developed to the degree that they could develop”, and “there is space for further development between related companies which is due to the lack of professionalism and cooperativeness” (personal interview in September, 2015).

Discussion and Conclusions

This research sheds light in the structure of networks and the role actors have within the network in the region of Arcadia, Greece. The promoters of the communication messages to visitors related to religious tourism need to take into consideration tourists’ and visitors’ perception of such promotion; marketers but also tourism policy makers should be informed about this target group to understand the communication channels they employ and enhance the services on offer for the provision of information to them.

In regard to the research question on whether there are networks created in regard to religious tourism in Arcadia, Greece, the researchers found out that they are extremely limited, if not existing at all, contrary to the significance that literature has attributed to it

(Katsoni & Dologlou 2017; Kavoura & Katsoni, 2013; Lemmetyinen & Go, 2010; Meriläinen & Lemmetyinen, 2011). Although collaboration is theoretically welcomed by most organizations from both the public and private sectors, there remains confusion with regard to respective roles and responsibilities for both sectors. Contrary to the literature which argues for centrality between entities and interaction between pairs of other nodes (Shih, 2006; Wray, 2009), the content analysis illustrated that there is not reciprocal interaction between private and public sectors in the area and it seems that the various stakeholders are not prepared to collaborate to develop and promote religious tourism. The content analysis illustrated that 34.6% of the hoteliers in the region initiate synergies that are visible in line with other Private Tourism Stakeholders in the area. The small percentage of respondents who used hotel listings (a form of network creation between hotels) and found interest in visiting religious sites in their vacation in Arcadia also verified the limited network existence as this is understood by the demand side. Although literature illustrates that social media are important resources in travelers' information search processes and play an important role in the travel planning process (Leung & Bai, 2013), only one third of the hotels in the region of Arcadia, Greece employ social media.

Since this research illustrated that destination network management is not in fact implemented and that the network does not really exist, the quantitative results of the findings argue for the dependence of visitors on the word of mouth as the most significant means of communication and advertising. The promotion of the region takes place via traditional marketing channels as is the word of mouth and only a small percentage of 37% of hotels is advertised through social media. There is lack of coordination of activities stemming from different sectors and associations. In fact, it was found out that only one person was in charge of the advertising of the region and its religious elements and he expressed both the public and the private sector's official perspective. The researchers also found that

there is very limited advertising on religious tourism, mainly in Greek language, with no revised editions neither in Greek nor in English.

A destination marketing strategy could be more effective if different key actors representing the various tourism stakeholders had created networks, thus, contributing in destination branding with the provision of a consistent and informed message via the means of various tourism distribution channels (Povilanskas & Armaitiene, 2010; Lemmetyinen & Go, 2010). Rather than basing their relations on competition, the actors involved in the promotion of the distinct characteristics of a destination, can offer and enhance the whole created system. Thus, an integrated approach can be the alternative for bringing those involved in the tourism industry together (Povilanskas & Armaitiene, 2010).

As Wight (2013) mentions “the role of National Tourist Organisations...is increasingly supported by the involvement of the private sector towards a collaborative and entrepreneurial set of values” (Wight, 2013, p.135). In regard to the Greek legislation, Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) allow for the cooperation of the public and private sector and constitute an important reform employing the existing framework of the public sector. PPPs yield important benefits for all involved stakeholders: the public sector, the country's citizens and the private sector, which now gains access to a new expanding market. This is the reason why PPPs are considered an important reform and a fundamental pillar for the development of the country (Greek Law 3389/2005, 2005). PPPs are based on European Directives (Directive 2004/17/EC; Directive 2004/18/EC). It was necessary to overcome a legal gap in Greece, which led each contractual agreement for a project co-financed by the private sector for ratification by the Parliament. Within the framework of tourism and Greece, it remains to be seen which will be the case with the effective application of the Greek Law and the future of tourism development in the country.

Some limitations of the study is that Internet use was treated in its general term in order to find tourists' ICT competence, so research was limited to tourists' general perception of the broad and generic Internet use. Furthermore, although social network theory argues that the attributes of individuals are less important than their relationships and ties with other actors within the network, the research was not applied to the latter field. Further research on the tourism stakeholders themselves could be of use to improve the relevance of the researchs.

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