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The Influence of Online Platforms on Decision-Making Process and Behavioural Traits of International Travelers

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Abstract

Marketing communications in the international travel and hospitality industry greatly depend on online platforms. Various goals can be achieved by using digital technologies: advertising, PR, sales, branding, customer relationship management (CRM), data analytics, and online reputation management (ORM). At the same time, international travelers actively use online channels for various stages of behaviour and decision-making processes, for different purposes: pre-departure information search, evaluation of alternatives, booking and purchasing services, and post-travel actions. Besides, the peculiarities of Web 2.0 give customers wide opportunities to disseminate their reviews concerning a service. It may significantly impact potential travelers' decisions as opinions of other customers are regarded as more reliable. Hence, digital platforms must be considered one of the central issues in tourism marketing. The importance of the issue has increased in the post-pandemic conditions when competition in the international tourism industry worldwide has moved to a new level. The paper provides a discussion and comprehensive analysis of various aspects of using online platforms for marketing purposes: opportunities, decision-making process under the influence of online platforms, behaviour peculiarities of international travelers, and strategies for using online channels to increase influence efficiency. Recommendations and solutions are presented for managing various online platforms. The conclusion briefly summarizes the issues discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Tourism marketing, Online platforms, Consumer behaviour

Introduction

The internet constantly transforms the tourism industry globally. To a great extent, marketing communications and business transactions depend on online platforms. On the one hand, international travelers use online platforms for making decisions regarding their travel plans, and, on the other hand, tourism business entities use internet technologies to manage marketing communications and other types of business processes. Therefore, the demand for online platforms in global tourism is increasingly high. According to World Travel and Tourism Council data, in 2022, the travel and tourism sector contributed 7.6% to global GDP, an increase of 22% from 2021; international visitor spending rose by 81.9% in 2022 (WTTC, 2022)

While discussing the international tourism industry, it is necessary to mention the global pandemic that emerged in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a global economic crisis which is also referred to as the coronomic crisis (Papava and Charaia, 2021). Therefore, needless to say, the pandemic caused the biggest fall for the international tourism industry ever, alongside other industries. It has experienced sharply falling revenues and is an economic sector among those most severely affected by the pandemic. The shock affects both the demand side and the supply side (Uğur and Akbıyık, 2020). The influx of tourists contributes to various sectors of the economy, including accommodation, transportation, food and beverage services, entertainment, and retail (Gamsakhurdia and Fetelava, 2023). The absence of these contributions created severe conditions not only for the industry but for the entire global economy. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the imposed mobility restrictions have been unprecedented on a local, regional and global scale (Ioannides and Gyimóthy, 2020). According to the World Tourism Organization data, international tourism recorded its worst year ever on record; international tourism declined by 74% (UNWTO, 2021). With the onset of the recovery of the industry, the number of international tourist arrivals worldwide bounced back after dropping sharply in 2020. Despite the significant annual increase, international tourism arrivals remained below pre-pandemic levels, totaling approximately 963 million in 2022 (Statista, 2023).

Post-pandemic era prompts the global tourism industry to rethink strategies and policies. Countries and particular companies in international tourism are engaged in a new stage of competition where marketing communications and online platforms, in particular, play one of the main roles in attracting international travelers. Companies need to enhance online communications management methodology to increase their competitiveness. Especially when it comes to Web 2.0 environments and

platforms supporting UGC (user-generated content). In turn, increased competition is a prerequisite for higher quality of service.

Whilst making decisions to improve online presence, it is necessary to take into account the cultural distinctions of various target audiences in the international tourism market. However, it is also noteworthy that online platforms, to some degree, facilitate the creation of similar patterns of behaviour for different types of target audiences. Nevertheless, it is extremely important to conduct thorough research on the decision-making process and behavioural traits of international travelers. Understanding consumer behaviour will allow a more effective marketing planning process (Horner and Swarbrooke, 2021).

Online platforms provide travelers with various opportunities while planning a trip. They are equipped with detailed information and can make optimal decisions. This is, simultaneously, an opportunity and a challenge for international tourism companies. Online communication has opened an opportunity for brands to talk directly with their users and to know them better (Kaur, 2017). On the other hand, travelers have great diversity in making choices. Thus, online communication platform management is one of the most important issues in the international tourism industry. It can serve several marketing purposes: sales, advertising, PR and branding. Besides, this type of communication is an opportunity to create expectations for travelers which is an extremely important premise for successful implementation of marketing campaigns and the overall performance of a company.

Consumer journey and behaviour traits in general and in the tourism industry, in particular, is a complex, evolving phenomenon that requires comprehensive theoretical research and practical studies. This is necessary for enhancing approaches in tourism marketing communications on an international scale.

Methods. Observation is used as the main method. Additionally, analysis of various sources was made. Namely, research and reports of influential authors and international organizations. Both primary and secondary data are used. Qualitative data is used for analyzing the issue from various perspectives and making conclusions.

Results. Various aspects of the influence of online platforms on the decision-making process and behavioural traits of international travelers are analyzed; Online platforms are categorized in terms of utilizing them as marketing communication tools; Comprehensive analysis of the following issues is provided: opportunities of online platforms in international tourism, aspects of customer journey and factors affecting decision-making process, peculiarities of behaviour under the conditions of Web 2.0 environment. The

issues discussed below combine unified research that can help practitioners and researchers make insightful inferences.

Opportunities of online platforms in tourism marketing

Online communication platforms are the main medium between customers and companies in today's international tourism transactions. These platforms can serve multiple marketing purposes, including branding. According to introductory features of new technologies and digital marketing, we need to pay special attention to obvious advantages of technologies in branding a destination as a tourism product (Parlov et al., 2016). Furthermore, nowadays, tourists mainly plan their trips online which is changing consumption and production processes in tourism (Castro et al., 2017). Therefore, companies operating in the industry need to base their business models on various online platforms: online booking websites, social media networks, mobile applications, video portals, blogs, etc. These platforms may serve their direct purposes, as well as can bring indirect benefits to a company. For example, proper management of an online booking website can also boost a company's reputation and grow a loyal customer base.

While discussing the issue of opportunities of online platforms, it is necessary to focus both on tourism industry companies and customers. For international travelers, digital technologies provide the opportunity to choose from multiple options, diverse offers of service and products, and a convenient process of making decisions. As for companies, online platforms allow them to reach vast audiences internationally and take advantage of the diversity of marketing solutions. Besides, the analytical capabilities of online platforms must be stressed. Customer interactions and processes online are a valuable source of analytical data that is used for optimizing marketing decisions. Last but not least, online platforms can be integrated into in-house software and systems that increase the automation and efficiency of business processes.

Online platforms for booking are one of the central issues in planning international trips for various purposes. One of the main peculiarities of these platforms is that they are owned by third-party entities, which makes it an outsourcing process. Nevertheless, companies still have leverage and wide opportunities to promote their property and increase sales. Online booking platforms get high-traffic users and are a convenient way to attract a specific target audience. To achieve this goal, a listing must correspond to high standards and meet appropriate criteria. In addition, online booking websites should also be interactive by allowing two-way communication (Emir et al., 2016). This is extremely important as consumer decisions and behaviour

largely depend on impressions from interactions with potential service providers (hotels, airline companies, tourism agencies, etc).

Various marketing objectives can be achieved by using social media platforms. For example, raising brand awareness, advertising, branding, CRM (customer relationship management), PR, content marketing strategies, data analytics, audience segmentation and even sales. Social media is a quick and effective way to increase public opinion, awareness, loyalty and confidence (Meladze and Olkishvili, 2018). The multifunctionality of social media in marketing objectives makes this platform one of the most powerful tools for reaching the right audience by spreading the right message, at the right time and place. In addition, by collecting consumer information and observing their online behaviour, it is possible to process valuable data and use it for planning future marketing campaigns. Another advantage of social media in terms of marketing communications is that it has no time and geographic boundaries which is one of the best ways to establish long-lasting communication with customers globally.

Mobile application is another powerful tool in modern marketing communications. Similar to social media, it can serve multiple purposes. The opportunity for companies and customers to maintain constant communication regardless of location is one of the main advantages of mobile applications. This feature is one of the most important opportunities when it comes to travel and leisure. Mobile applications, alongside other functions, can serve as a mobile version of transport ticket sales websites, flight booking websites and other travel-related services. In this case, similar to hotel booking platforms, the process is often outsourced. This is both an opportunity and a challenge for tourism industry companies. They often engage in tough competition on these platforms. However, this is also an opportunity to become visible to vast audiences of potential customers. Nonetheless, tourism companies can use their own mobile applications and manage them for various purposes: CRM, sales, loyalty programs, etc.

Websites and blogs can be considered to be one of the main online platforms for international tourism companies. They can serve a high number of purposes: sales, PR, branding, CRM, PR, data analytics, etc. The biggest advantage of these platforms is that they are owned media and companies have full control over them, unlike booking platforms. However, additional efforts and resources are necessary to attract traffic on these platforms. This may turn out to be a challenging task, especially for small companies and in conditions of high competition.

One of the characteristic features of international travelers' behavior is to visit video portals and watch content related to intended destinations. This may have an immense impact on the decision-making process and various stages of their behaviour. In conditions of the Web 2.0 environment,

often travelers are independent content creators who produce quality content that may attract millions of viewers as potential travelers. In the context of travel YouTubers, it is essential to develop a positive attitude. This positive attitude that users can develop towards travel YouTubers over time can become a behaviour, better to say, a feeling of loyalty towards them. (Sarmiento Guede et al., 2021). Companies often have no control over this type of content. However, they can create and manage owned video channels and use content marketing strategies to reach various marketing goals. This type of communication requires significant investments and long-lasting periods to reach the intended marketing results.

Digital maps and services like Google My Business or Bing Places For Business are other important online platforms in international tourism marketing. They combine various services and opportunities: direct communication, visual content sharing, business information, customer reviews and location information. Travelers searching for information about various tourism services often get results from these platforms on the highest positions of SERPs (search engine results pages). Hence, it is extremely important to manage this medium properly as it has the potential to attract vast audiences of valuable potential customers.

By using the above-mentioned online platforms, various tourism products and services can be promoted: accommodation, transportation, thematic tours, gastronomy, attraction destinations, etc. Each of these services and products requires specific marketing approaches. Therefore, tourism industry companies need to select appropriate platforms for each of them. This is one of the necessary conditions to influence customers' decision-making process effectively.

Decision-making process through online platforms

Since products related to travel and leisure are categorized mostly as specialty products, customers may go through every stage of purchase behaviour: need recognition, information search, alternatives evaluation, purchase and post-purchase behaviour. All of these stages can be carried out online. For example, advertising on social media may prompt a potential customer to decide on spending their holiday in a particular foreign country, search engines help them find the necessary information on various aspects of a trip, video content can help choose a desired destination from several options, online booking websites and other types of platforms can be used for buying necessary products and services (accommodation, airline tickets, tours etc.) and finally, mobile applications can be used to write reviews on different platforms after the completion of a trip. Hence, it is obvious that as tourism has become a global industry, employing sophisticated marketing and consumer research, tourists are ever more experienced and empowered.

It is reasonable to assume that tourist decision-making processes have also evolved (McCabe et al., 2015).

Many factors affect tourists' travel decisions, which include motivation and purpose, psychological expectations, the type of destination and the characteristics of different tourism activities is the main factor affecting the travel decisions (Liu et al., 2015). Since travel and leisure are mostly emotional experiences, it is expedient to infer that the decision-making process at every stage is affected predominantly by emotional factors. However, rational factors play an important role as well. Especially when it comes to prices, accommodation amenities, service packages, catering, etc. Therefore, the decision-making process through online platforms is a complex phenomenon in the tourism industry. Besides, various external factors may significantly influence the process. For example, stereotypes, general reputation and image of a destination, environmental conditions and political situation in a country or region. As a result, the final decision on almost every aspect of a trip is a result of thorough consideration and detailed evaluation.

The decision-making process online may have specific characteristics depending on the purpose and type of a trip. There are diverse trip purposes with their own unique features: leisure, cultural, business, eco-tourism, educational, medical, wellness, sports, camping, wildlife, ecotourism etc. One of the most obvious differences between these types of trips is the duration of stay in a destination country. Respectively, the peculiarities of the usage of online platforms in decision-making stages may drastically differ. In some cases, rational motivations and factors may have a bigger influence on decisions, rather than emotional factors. However, it would be incorrect if we attribute influencing factors solely to emotional or rational determinants. The decision-making process is a combination of numerous psychological aspects: internal and external factors, and emotional and rational motivations.

The consideration stage of the decision-making process online is greatly influenced by the opinions of people who have already experienced service in reality. Online reviews have an immense impact on the decisions and behavior of potential travelers. 95% of travelers read seven reviews before making a booking, leisure travelers spend an average of 30 minutes reading reviews before making a booking (Pridham, 2023). This feature of the Web 2.0 environment is a factor that significantly determines decisions concerning almost all types of trips. It is noteworthy that there are two main types of reviews on the Internet: reviews by consumers and reviews by professional editors. Consumer reviews may include critical information that hotels are reluctant to reveal to the public (Zhao et al., 2015). Therefore,

customer satisfaction is the most important prerequisite for maintaining efficient marketing communications in the international tourism industry.

Many websites allow travelers to rate a travel service by giving scores. This is a way for customers to express their satisfaction level. As a result, the average score for service becomes the indicator of service quality. Thus, internet platforms prompt the tourism industry to focus foremostly on quality of service. Each customer may turn out to be an extremely influential factor in other potential travelers' decisions. In the conditions of the global network, it has no boundaries and each review or score given is transparent and public for everyone. Positive experience and impressions are the foundation for a loyal customer base and high CLV (customer lifetime value).

Hotels, airline companies and other players in the tourism industry can leverage loyalty programs. A loyalty program aims to bind customers to a company and retain them for the long term (Fäs and Zumstein, 2019). Websites and mobile applications integrated into loyalty programs can be a good incentive for potential customers while making decisions. This approach may result in both direct and indirect marketing results; Customers attracted by a loyalty program may turn into recommenders for other potential customers. This type of word-of-mouth can be a strong marketing result. Additionally, it generates positive reputation for a company, which is an extremely important factor for branding and other marketing objectives in the long run.

Loyalty programs and other types of online platforms influence customer decisions mostly in the pre-departure stage. Although, they can be an important factor in planning repeated trips and expressing behaviour after the completion of a trip. Web 2.0 platforms give customers diverse opportunities to express their impressions publicly, which is one of the most frequent post-trip behaviours.

The impact of Web 2.0 on behaviour of international travelers

As mentioned above, various types of behaviour can be demonstrated online. It means that the reputation of destination marketing organizations (DMOs) is formed mostly online. Web 2.0 platforms play a central role in this process. They possess features that encourage a two-way interaction between DMOs and destination stakeholders (i.e., tourists, residents, the public and private sector) and allow for fast, one-to-many, many-to-many communication (Mariani, 2020). Therefore, Web 2.0 platforms are extremely important for both sides: tourists and companies.

Tourism bloggers are one of the main examples of how Web 2.0 can impact the international tourism industry. In most cases, they are individuals who visit various destinations and create blog posts based on their own

impressions and experiences. They often have a large number of followers on various online platforms. As a result, their opinions get high publicity and strongly influence behaviour and decisions of potential travelers. Special attention should be drawn to video content and vloggers. Video portals, as one of the most influential Web 2.0 platforms, are an extremely important sources of information for vast audiences and potential travelers. Travel vloggers with a high number of subscribers can be considered to be strong influencers. They often have financial intentions and monetize their content. Therefore, one of the most important aspects of the issue of vloggers is that their content is mostly unbiased and has a high degree of trust among potential travelers. However, in some cases tourism industry entities may collaborate with them to promote various services and destinations. Organizations that use Web 2.0 are more focused on users and try to do everything they can to satisfy them (Noti, 2013).

Activity within social media platforms is another prevalent form of online behaviour. It contributes to forming attitudes and expectations among potential travelers. Besides, social media is the primary platform for most travelers to express their impressions during and after the completion of their trips. This is primarily an emotional type of behaviour that serves as a way of individual self-expression. Social media helps people satisfy several important human needs: a sense of connection, respect, self-esteem, status and recognition. Posts about a trip abroad can be regarded as a good way to satisfy these needs. Such individuals, in most cases, are active users of social media platforms. Their posts can trigger discussions that may transform into eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth) campaigns in their circle of acquaintances. However, the online environment can enable this type of eWOM much larger publicity. eWOM communication provides numerous opportunities for tourism companies by making it possible to objectively present tourism products and services with minimum expenses, and often with greater impact on sales (Lončarić et al., 2016).

Needless to say, there may be huge differences between individuals while expressing their behaviour online. Behaviour is formed as a result of a combination of multiple factors: personal psychological factors and external environment. Therefore, the degree of intensity of customer behaviour online is extremely diverse. Some individuals prefer to express even small satisfaction or dissatisfaction online. For example, as a review on a booking platform. By contrast, some travelers are reluctant to express their attitudes towards a tourism product. Nevertheless, even passive forms of expression of behaviour can have a significant influence on the intentions of potential travelers. The more they travel, the more comfortable they are asking and comparing experiences (Piranashvili et al., 2018). Thus, online platforms allow travelers of various degrees of activeness to disseminate influential

information since each review has unlimited reach among potential travelers in an online environment.

The diversity of customer behaviour on online platforms may be caused by the type of target audience. There are a number of criteria for categorizing audiences: income, age groups, interests, travel intentions, travel frequency, cultural groups, and travel planning habits. The latter is important in the context of using online platforms on various stages of traveling: planning, duration and post-trip evaluation online. Some travelers prefer to plan every detail of their trip, while others are more spontaneous. However, in both cases, online platforms play an important role. Even spontaneous travelers actively use digital tools. For example, they use digital maps for orientation where customer reviews and other types of information for various tourist objects are available. Accordingly, it is necessary to elaborate marketing strategies to increase the efficiency of influence on potential travelers by using online platforms.

Marketing strategies for increasing influence efficiency

Strategies to increase the efficiency of influence on international travelers' behaviour comprise multiple aspects. Data analytics is one of the most important prerequisites for making the right marketing decisions: service and product development, segmentation, positioning, promotion, branding, and sales. Since online platforms are a rich source of analytical data, marketers can collect, process, interpret, and use it in optimizing marketing campaigns. Various types of online platforms can be used as a source of data: search engines, websites, social media, mobile applications, and video portals. These platforms generate both qualitative and quantitative information.

Online reputation management (ORM) strategy is one of the key elements in data analytics and general strategy for increasing influence efficiency. It allows companies to monitor customer reviews and opinions, which contributes to the formation of a company's reputation. Accordingly, data generated as a result of ORM is mostly qualitative, which requires comprehensive analysis. Data analytics capable information systems positively influence the development of niche tourism destinations' ORM strategies and online reputation. In turn, online reputation improves competitiveness in the tourism sector (Ardito et al., 2019). Therefore, companies need to implement and manage ORM systems to ensure protection of their reputation, and prevent possible complications in PR and even a full-scale crisis.

Data analytics is important but this is just one element in the strategy. A holistic approach must be used where brand values and positioning elements must be incorporated in every stage of the communication process.

Considering cross-cultural peculiarities in managing international tourism marketing is crucial. Tourism promotion leads inevitably to challenges related to cultural differences, including the preference for certain product themes over others, as well as communication styles (Mele et al., 2021). Prior marketing research and market analysis are necessary for avoiding complications concerning cultural differences, including behaviour patterns on online platforms.

When it comes to using online platforms by customers, marketers should consider this process from multilateral perspectives. Besides its primary purposes, media owned by a company can be used as a tool to form customer opinions, impressions and attitudes. Therefore, all the platforms must correspond to user-friendly criteria, including compatibility with mobile devices. Customer relationship management (CRM) system is one of the most important mediums in this process. CRM can also be used as a source of analytical data. In turn, CRM and other online touchpoints can positively influence the brand-building process and PR strategy of a company. Having a strong brand image allows a company to reach various marketing objectives more easily. Another role of a brand is that it can simplify decision-making and reduce the risk perceived by consumers (Almeyda-Ibáñez and George, 2017).

The diversity of platforms contributes to multipurpose communication with target audiences. Hence, it is necessary to use unified marketing standards. Each online touchpoint is an integral part of a brand. Every detail of a platform must correspond to the principles of integrated marketing communications (IMC). Even a minor discrepancy between the platforms may cause confusion among potential customers. The tone of voice in personal communication, design, offers, products, service conditions and general values of a brand are key elements for ensuring unified marketing standards. Each online touchpoint may create an expectation for a customer that must be justified in case they use another communication channel for any purpose.

The issue of managing reviews is of utmost importance. This medium has great potential to influence customer decisions and behaviour. One of the most important principles in this process is how reviews are answered as they are public to any potential customer. Personalized replies on every review are necessary to demonstrate responsibility. Furthermore, both negative and positive reviews require equal attention. Demonstrating gratitude and respect toward customers facilitates establishing positive communication. This aspect may determine the reputation and image of a company. Especially, in the conditions of Web 2.0.

Trust plays a key role in maintaining competitiveness in the tourism industry. Tourism marketers may need to place a high priority on improving

the level of customers' trust in online environments (Kim et al., 2011). The sense of security at all stages of behaviour is extremely important: booking, online payments, transportation and accommodation. Besides, the degree of compliance between expectations and impressions greatly determines customer actions. Accordingly, security must be one of the most prioritized positioning elements in the international tourism and hospitality industry.

Proper operation of online platforms is also important in increasing influence efficiency. Both technical aspects and content quality must be taken into careful consideration. Unimpeded usage of websites, mobile applications, social media platforms on the one hand and constant updates of quality content, on the other hand, can ensure a positive user experience. As a result, combination of factors creates a basis for successful branding and positioning policy. To be successfully promoted in the targeted markets, a destination must be favorably differentiated from its competitors, or positively positioned, in the minds of the consumers and potential visitors (Oliveira and Panyik, 2015). Online platforms can be used as one of the main tools in this process.

Conclusion

Competition level in the international travel and hospitality industry has increased in the post-pandemic world. New challenges prompt companies to rethink approaches and strategies, including ways to use online communication channels. In particular, brands need to elaborate marketing strategies designated specifically for online platforms as consumers' online activities have increased significantly after the pandemic. Constant monitoring and adoption of emerging novelties is one of the most important criteria for attaining high standards of service and customer satisfaction. Hence, it is necessary to create business models that incorporate cross-platform management of online channels in a unified strategy. Customer opinions and reviews are one of the central issues that must be dealt with high responsibility. Otherwise, it will be impossible to maintain a high level of influence on customer decision-making process and behavior.

Studying customer behaviour is a complex but crucial issue in making right marketing decisions. As online platforms generate high amounts of customer data, companies can utilize it for multiple marketing purposes. Digital platforms are involved in every stage of the data analytics process: collection, processing, and interpretation. Proper management of data analytics process can provide a company with valuable information about customers. Therefore, travel and hospitality companies need to invest in information technologies and human resources with respective qualification and experience.

The issue of influencing customer decision-making process and their behaviour is dynamic and complex since they are influenced by numerous factors, including factors that emerge on a regular basis. For example, technological novelties and new developments in online platforms. Since modern customers are extremely informed and tech-savvy, they easily get used to modern digital technologies. Companies need to meet their requirements and expectations by including online channels in various stages of customer behaviour. At the same time, despite platform diversity, the execution of marketing strategies through online channels must strictly incorporate several aspects: standardized approaches for every platform, integrated marketing communications (IMC) principles, brand values, and positioning. Otherwise, various risks increase that may threaten a brand reputation, image and even development prospects.

Generally, the issue of consumer behaviour is an extremely complex phenomenon in marketing communications. Therefore, constant observation of online customer behaviour and theoretical study is necessary. In this case, it will be possible to elaborate efficient marketing plans for influencing customer behaviour and decisions.

Human Studies:

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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