

TripAdvisor in Organising a Vacation: Tourists' Characteristics and Types of Information

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Abstract

For decades printed information sources have been used in information gathering process in tourism and personal contact with tourism providers in the process of organizing a vacation was needed. This trend began to change with the introduction of computers, in particular with the development of Internet and social networking web sites. Internet can be used for many different purposes that include promotion of tourism destination, creation of tourism destination image, but it is also an excellent tool in organising a vacation. The main purpose of this paper is to examine the characteristics of tourists who visited Istria County, Croatia in 2015 from the aspect of using TripAdvisor as a tool in organising their vacation. Data was collected through self-complete questionnaire on a sample of tourists staying in hotels and camping sites in nine tourism towns. This study was conducted from July through September in 2015. A total of 1554 responders were taken into analysis. Based on the descriptive results a little bit less than 30% of responders used TripAdvisor for organising their vacation. First time visitors relayed more on TripAdvisor compared to repeat visitors and country of origin also played important part in using TripAdvisor for organising vacation. Information about beaches, cultural heritage and restaurants in Istria County, Croatia were the most commonly searched types of information about the destination.

Keywords: tourists' characteristics, types of information, TripAdvisor, vacation organisation

1 Introduction

The number of Internet users is constantly increasing. Currently it is estimated that more than 3 billion people use Internet and it is forecasted that more than 4 billion people will use

Internet in 2020. ICT and Internet are becoming a part of our everyday life (Kotler and Armstrong, 2010). Internet is used for many different activities like entertainment, on-line sales, and information collection. In marketing, Internet can be used for many different purposes: promotion of different commodities and services, creating company image, public relations, e-sales (Ozretić Došen and Previšić Škare, 2003). Currently, Internet and social networking web sites present a great opportunity for promotion and sales of goods and services (Kotler and Caslione, 2009) because they enable direct contact with customer. Through Internet and especially social networking web sites customers obtain information in an easy and quick manner. They can also find different types of information, see their occupancy, book services, write their comments and desires, make payments etc.

Social networking websites are becoming more and more popular in recent years. In 2009 the social networking web sites with the highest number of users were: Facebook (123 million), YouTube (85.1 million), MySpace (54 million) (Hollensen, 2011). In 2015 Facebook is still number one regarding active users (The Statistics Portal, 2016) with 1.550 millions of users. In general the number of social networking web sites users increased from 0.97 billion in 2010 to 1.96 billion in 2015 and further growth is projected to 2.44 billion in 2018 (The Statistics Portal, 2016).

Through different tool, social networking web sites connect different individuals that have common interests forming a certain type of community. These virtual communities connect their users in different manners. Virtual communities like Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Google +, Instagram, Tumblr, VK, Flickr, Vine, Meetup Netlog, MySpice.com and Twitter offer different connection and types of information that are shared on them. Different manners of communications are available like messages, discussion forums, photographs, videos, blogs etc. Users can easily become a part of the community and share their experiences. This is especially important for tourism because the main focus of tourism lies on the creation of experiences (Andersson, 2007).

On social networking web sites, tourists can express and share their tendencies for certain tourist destinations, opinions, preferences and experiences. More and more people join social networking web sites daily, so these sites are fast gaining on importance and should be explored and used in marketing tourist destinations. Social networking websites provide tourist destinations and enterprises with a very efficient way for promoting their products and services compared to “classic” communication channels. They also enable direct promotion and may decrease promotion costs.

Tourists that had a satisfactory and fulfilling experience with a tourist destination may become powerful promoters of the tourist destination and its services and products. On the other hand, Internet and social networking web sites may provide different benefits to tourism enterprises especially in the form of cost reduction. Rumours and bad experiences shared through social networking web sites spread very quickly to other users and may have bad influence on tourist destinations and tourism enterprises.

There are different web sites related to travel and tourism. TripAdvisor is one of the most popular and largest travel sites. It enables travellers to plan and book their trip by offering advices from different travellers. This site covers more than 5.2 million accommodations, restaurants, and attractions in more than 26,000 destinations and operates in 47 countries worldwide (TripAdvisor, 2015). It is in part similar to a social networking web sites, a virtual

community and a blog, its primary function is collecting and disseminating user-generated content about travel, including comments, ratings (reviews), photos and videos (Limberger et al., 2010). Previous research is mostly focused on examining TripAdvisor taking into consideration different aspects related to their users like ranking (Jeacle and Carter, 2011), satisfaction (Limberger et al., 2010), reviews (Tuominen, 2011) etc. The main purpose of this paper is to examine the characteristics of tourists who visited Istria County, Croatia in 2015 from the aspect of using TripAdvisor as a tool in organising their vacation.

2 Methodology

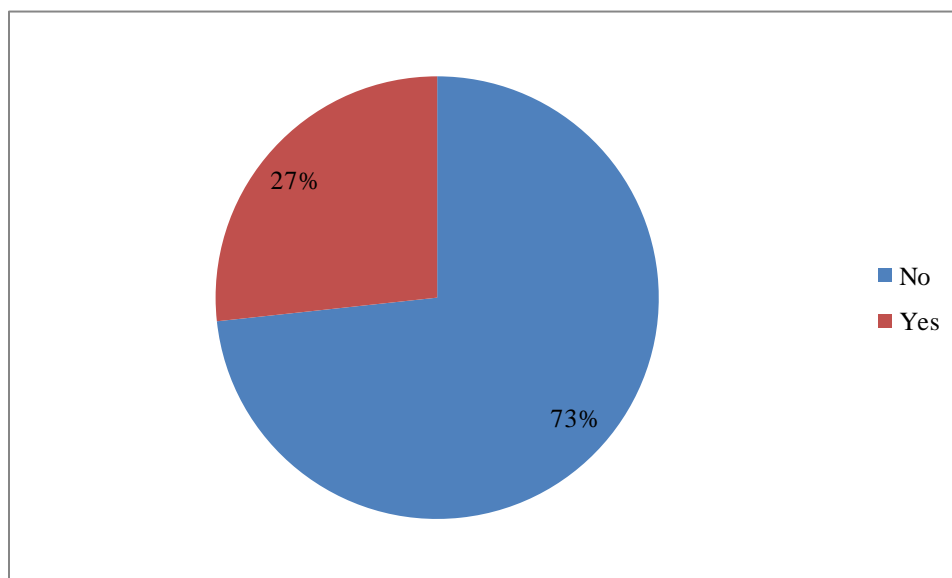
A study focused on tourists' usage of Internet and social networking web sites in tourism context was conducted from July to September 5. In this study the target population included those tourists who visited nine seaside tourist resorts in the Istria tourist destination: Umag, Novigrad, Poreč, Vrsar, Funtana, Rovinj, Pula, Medulin and Rabac. The survey was carried out in 20 hotels and six camping sites through a self-completed questionnaire. Tourists were approached by trained researchers and asked to participate in the survey. The researcher explained the purpose of the survey, said that the survey was anonymous and handed out a questionnaire in the appropriate language. In the process of on-site data collection in hotels, researchers were stationary while responders were mobile while in the case of camping sites researchers were mobile while responders were stationary (Veal, 2006). A convenient sample was used. Hotels and camping sites were preselected based on location i.e. they were located in seaside tourists resorts and hotels' capacity was from 100 to 500 rooms while camping sites' capacity varied between 1,000 and 5,000 people.

For the purpose of data gathering, the questionnaire was constructed. It consisted of 16 questions which were divided into six sections: 1) general usage of Internet, tourist web sites and social networking web sites, 2) usage of Internet and social networking web sites for the purpose of organising vacation, 3) benefits and obstacle in using social networking web sites for tourism purposes, 4) usage of Internet and social networking web sites during vacation, 5) usual usage of Internet and social networking web sites after returning home and 6) respondents' socio-demographic characteristics (country of origin, age, gender, income level, occupation, size of settlement, travelling party) and trip characteristics (number of visits, length of stay and sources of information). It was originally designed in Croatian and then translated into the following languages: English, German, Italian and Slovene.

A total of 2500 questionnaires were prepared and 1554 questionnaires were taken into analysis. Data was processed using univariate statistics (general description of sample) and bivariate statistics, namely chi square test, for determining differences between those responders who used TripAdvisor as a source of information when they organized their current vacation based on their personal characteristics.

3 Results and discussion

A bit less than 30% of responders used TripAdvisor web site as a source of information when they organized their current vacation (Graph 1).



Graph 1: Usage of TripAdvisor in organising current vacation

The proportion of female responders (54.0%) was slightly higher than that of male (Table 1). Most of the responders were between 35 and 54 years of age (53%). The majority of responders obtained some kind of higher education level (58%). The responders had different backgrounds and occupations, most of the responders stated that they were employees (56%), while 13% were self-employed or freelance. Most of the responders were from Austria (23%), about 18% were from Italy and 17% from Germany. Most of the responders stated that their monthly net income was between €1,000 and €2,000 (31%). They mostly stayed in the accommodation facility for the first time (82%) but most of them have already visited Istria County as a tourist destination (52%).

Variable	Usage of TripAdvisor.com		Total
	No	Yes	
Gender			
Male	34,5	11,5	46,0
Female	38,1	15,9	54,0
Age (M; SD)	40,07 (12,538)	39,19 (12,075)	39,83 (12,417)
16-24	8,9	3,5	12,4
25-34	15,7	6,4	22,2
35-44	19,7	7,7	27,4
45-54	19,1	6,3	25,5
55+	9,5	3,1	12,6
Education level			
Elementary school	5,1	0,6	5,6
Secondary school	27,4	9,2	36,6
College or Bachelor's Degree	19,6	8,0	27,6
University or Master's Degree	17,2	8,6	25,7

Ph.D.	3,1	1,3	4,5
Profession			
Self-employed/freelance	9,7	3,3	13,1
Manager	7,8	3,9	11,8
Employee (full time)	33,0	12,2	45,2
Employee (part time)	8,6	2,0	10,7
Student	6,0	2,7	8,6
Retired	3,1	0,8	3,9
Other	4,7	2,1	6,8
Income			
Up to € 500	4,5	1,5	6,0
€ 500 – € 1,000	9,0	2,6	11,6
€ 1,000 – € 2,000	21,6	9,2	30,9
€ 2,000 – € 3,000	16,8	5,4	22,2
€ 3,000 – € 4,000	7,7	3,3	11,0
€ 4,000 – € 5,000	4,2	2,0	6,2
€ 5,000 – € 6,000	2,8	0,5	3,3
Over € 6,000	5,8	3,1	8,9
Country of origin			
Austria	20,9	2,6	23,5
Italy	11,5	6,9	18,4
Germany	14,0	2,9	17,0
UK	4,8	8,2	13,0
The Netherlands	4,3	1,0	5,3
Slovenia	4,1	0,7	4,8
Other	13,3	4,8	18,1
First/repeat visitation (accommodation)			
Repeat visitor	15,9	2,3	18,2
First time visitor	57,4	24,4	81,8
First/repeat visitation (destination)			
Repeat visitor	42,4	9,9	52,3
First time visitor	31,2	16,5	47,7

Table 1: Characteristics' of responders (in %)

Education level ($\chi^2 = 20,789$; $df = 4$; $sig. = 0,000$), first/repeat visitation (accommodation) ($\chi^2 = 33,281$; $df = 1$; $sig. = 0,000$) and first/repeat visitation (destination) ($\chi^2 = 44,391$; $df = 1$; $sig. = 0,000$) were significant related to usage of TripAdvisor for the purposes of organising their current trip. Those responders who obtained University or Master's Degree were more likely to use TripAdvisor while those with Elementary school were less likely to use TripAdvisor for the purposes of organising their current trip. The responders who visited accommodation facility for the first time were more likely to use TripAdvisor compared to repeat visitors. Likewise, those responders who previously visited Istria County were more likely not to use TripAdvisor compared to first time visitors.

Information about accommodations (71%), beaches (51%) were the two types of information that responders searched for the most in general (Table 2). Information

about Cultural heritage (21%), restaurants (20%) and Suggestions on one-day individual trips (20%) were of interest for about 1/5 of the responders. Some of the responders used TripAdvisor in order to obtain this information. Although over 70% of responders searched for information about accommodation through Internet, only 1/5 of the responders used TripAdvisor for those purposes. The same pattern is present for other types of information.

Variable	Usage of TripAdvisor.com		Total
	No	Yes	
Accommodation			
Not searched	23,9	5,2	29,2
Searched	49,4	21,5	70,8
Restaurants			
Not searched	62,0	18,5	80,5
Searched	11,3	8,2	19,5
Beaches			
Not searched	38,4	11,1	49,4
Searched	34,9	15,6	50,6
Cultural and historical heritage			
Not searched	61,0	18,4	79,4
Searched	12,3	8,3	20,6
Natural Heritage			
Not searched	65,0	21,0	86,0
Searched	8,3	5,7	14,0
Events			
Not searched	66,0	22,1	88,1
Searched	7,3	4,6	11,9
Traditional food and drink			
Not searched	67,6	21,5	89,1
Searched	5,7	5,2	10,9
Trails (e.g. walking, cycling trails)			
Not searched	67,2	23,8	91,0
Searched	6,1	2,9	9,0
Suggestions on one-day individual trips			
Not searched	61,1	19,4	80,5
Searched	12,2	7,3	19,5

Table 2: Types of Information (in %)

Based on the results certain implications can be drawn. In general, only 1/3 of responder used TripAdvisor in order to obtain information about Istria County as a tourist destination. This may be due to the age factor. Namely, tourists that stayed in Istria County were mostly older than 35 years of age, with almost 40% 45 or older. Responders who used TripAdvisor for the purposes of organising their current trip are more likely to have a higher level of education. TripAdvisor as a source of information is more likely to be used by first time visitors. First time visitors of a certain accommodation facility used TripAdvisor more frequently compared to tourists to visiting Istria County for the first time. This is probably due to the fact that TripAdvisor offers more information regarding accommodation in Istria County. This is

supported by the fact that most of the tourists used Internet to find information about accommodation. Although only 1/5 of the responders used TripAdvisor for those purposes, it was still the most frequently sought information in the case of TripAdvisor. Since many tourist destinations are present on TripAdvisor, it is advisable to reinforce efforts in promoting Istria County through this site, as well as other sites.

4 Conclusion

Internet and social networking web sites present a great opportunity for promotion of tourist destination and enterprises. They may also be a good tool in the process of planning a vacation. There are many different sites that collect and disseminate user-generated content about travel. TripAdvisor is one of such tools.

Although TripAdvisor offers information about thousands of tourist destination and lists a few million accommodation facilities, only about 1/3 of tourists staying in Istria County have used this site to get information about the destination. This is probably related to age of tourist. Those responders that have used TripAdvisor to get information about the destination, were usually first time visitors (accommodation facility and Istria County) and have obtained higher education level. The most commonly sought information was about accommodation facilities. Information regarding beaches was of interest to one half of the tourists which is directly related to the main motive for visiting Istria County i.e. sun and sea.

There are some limitations to this study. These results are based on a sample of tourists who stayed in selected hotels and resorts and the responders either used or not used TripAdvisor for planning their vacation so the results may not be generalized to the overall Istria County's tourism market or to user of TripAdvisor in general. The sample included commercial accommodation users only, so tourists not staying in commercial accommodation were omitted from the study. Future research regarding Internet and social networking web sites may focus on differences and similarities among different accommodation facilities. Since only 1/3 of responders used TripAdvisor in planning their vacation, future research may focus on reasons why tourists do not use TripAdvisor and similar sites while they are planning and organising their vacation.

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