AALBORG UNIVERSITY – COPENHAGEN
MASTER THESIS IN GLOBAL TOURISM
DEVELOPMENT

STRATEGIC IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES ON TRAVEL PLANNING

Written by: Hristo Gavazov

Supervisor: Tina Jørgensen

28 July 2016

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

During the last decade we have seen a significant increase in the use of both social media and the general development of Internet technologies around the world, which have impacted businesses and the way they operate. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have had and are having a profound impact on the tourism and leisure industry, giving rise to the multi-faceted phenomenon of eTourism (Buhalis 2003; Lassning and Reich 2009, as cited in Xiang, 2014, p. 19). Moreover, the Internet has fundamentally reshaped the way tourism related information is distributed among users and also the way people plan and consume travel (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

Traditionally, individuals who would desire to travel and explore particular destinations would contact a travel agent, who would provide them with information about the place, and help them in organizing their trips including booking accommodation, and arranging transport. However, with the development of Internet technologies, and the rise of social media networks, the whole travel experience for tourists has changed. Since it became easier for them to explore and find all kind of information shared on the Internet, this has resulted in transforming travelers "from passive consumers to active prosumers (producers and consumers) of travel experiences, while changing the way in which travelers develop relations, their perceived image of and loyalty to tourism firms (Christou 2003 and 2010 as cited in Sigala et al., 2016, p. 7)". Along the same line, it has been discussed that in this era of social media, the Internet has evolved from broadcasting medium to a participatory platform which allows people to become the "media" themselves for collaborating and sharing information (Li and Wang, 2011; Thevenot, 2007 as cited in Leung et al., 2013, p. 3).

As the Internet evolved, it enabled new sort of interactive communication among users, where users became involved in generation and distribution of information. The appearance of sites such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TripAdvisor changed the way users can engage and connect with one another, as it made it possible for them to not only communicate with tourism operators, but also with other fellow tourists, from whom they can get first-hand information about how their travel experience was, and make decision based on their stories. Due to the new possibilities and challenges offered by the Internet together with the rise of social media and

Social Networking Sites, it is critical to understand how the changes in technologies have impact the tourism industry as well as the consumers involved.

1.1 Motivation and Problem area

Thanks to the development of Internet and the variety of Information and Communication tools (ICTs) – such as web technology, mobile technology etc. – tourists have the chance to access such information and purchasing opportunities which were only available with the help of intermediaries earlier (Buhalis and Jun 2007, as cited in Rathonyi, 2013, p. 105). Additionally, Buhalis and Law (2008, as cited in Rathonyi, 2013, p. 105) has argued that providing wide range of possibilities, Web 2.0 has fundamentally changed the way of tourists' information search behavior and travelling decision making.

Since tourism products are intangible and difficult or even impossible to be evaluated prior purchase, a number of researchers argue that in order to reduce the risk associated with the purchase, users search for information in a variety of sources (Chung and Buhalis, 2008; Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). According to Xiang and Gretzel (2010) social media play a still increasing, important role in travel planning as information sources of potential travelers

As a result of these changes in behavior and travel planning patterns seen in tourists, this study is focused on investigating to what extend travel industry has been transformed by the impact of the Internet and more precisely Social Networking Sites (SNSs). To further narrow down the scope of this study, this thesis aims to investigate the impact of SNSs on travel planning process of tourist. The motivation to explore this particular topic has arisen from the fact that being a student within the field of Tourism, and active Internet user, I have personally experienced through the recent years, the extent to which my travel decisions have been influenced by the information I had encountered on the web in many Social Networking Sites. Furthermore, the purpose of this study is to investigate and understand in what ways the travel planning decisions of tourists have been altered. What is more, this research focuses on studying the challenges and opportunities which internet technologies have brought to both tourists with the advancement of the Internet.

1.2 Research question

Taking into consideration all of the above mentioned, the main problem which this thesis aims to investigate is the following research question:

STRATEGIC IMPACT OF SOCIAL TRAVEL NETWORKS ON TRAVEL PLANNING

In order to answer this research question, it will be investigated how individuals engage in using Social Networking Sites, for what purposes, and how they use the content and information which they come across. Therefore, this study aims at investigating a conceptual framework of travelers' interactions with the online tourism content, distributed through Social Networks, and whether this impacts their travel related decisions, and if yes, in what ways. By investigating this particular topic, my aim is to present what opportunities and challenges the use of SNSs might deliver to individuals, and also to determine how influential the content shared on these networks is perceived by tourists.

1.3 Structure of the study

This project is being divided into 5 chapters. In Chapter 1 there is an introduction to the main topic this thesis aims to answers, followed by Chapter 2 – Theoretical Framework, where relevant theories necessary for the elaboration of this paper are presented. This paper continues on with Chapter 3, where the methodology of this dissertation is described, together with how the data for the study has been collected and systematized. It is then followed by Chapter 4 where the analysis and discussion of all the findings takes place, and final answers to the problem this thesis aims to solve are given. In the last section a through conclusion is provided, covering the main points of this dissertation.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For the present study it is crucial to understand the role social travel networks have on travel planning of tourists, but to achieve that it is also essential to look into the consumer behavior, and more particularly the travel planning process of tourists. For that purpose, the theories presented in this chapter constitute the theoretical foundation for this study's discussion and they aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research scope and the problem this paper focuses to solve.

The chapter begins with presenting the main concepts of Web 2.0 and Travel 2.0, followed by a literature review on the concepts word of mouth (WOM) and electronic word of mouth (eWOM). Next, it will be discussed the role of social networking sites in tourism, and the chapter ends by presenting theories on tourism behavior regarding travel planning and information search processes.

2.1 Web 2.0

Web 2.0 is a concept introduced by O'Reilly (2005) and it refers to the second generation of services based on the Internet. Web 2.0 sites have the ability to be the platform for users to interact and collaborate with each other, on contrast to other websites (Web 1.0) where users are limited to the passive viewing of the content (Cormode and Krishnamurthy 2008, as cited in Rathonyi, 2013, p. 106). In a similar line Turban et al., (2011 as cited in Rathonyi, 2013, p. 106) determined Web 2.0 as "the second-generation of Internet-based services that let people collaborate and share information online *in perceived new ways such as social networking sites, blogs, wikis, video sharing sites, web, applications and communication tools*".

The most famous online development reshaping traditional marketing methods of tourism businesses currently are the Web 2.0 and user-generated content (Reactive, 2007, as cited in Noti, 2013). Indeed, the evolution of the Internet throughout the years has empowered its users to such extent, that they are now able to participate in the creation of content and share it with others, which encourages more online users "who have little or no face-to-face interaction to participate in online communities" (Wang, Yu and Fesenmaier, 2002, as cited in Tan, Chen, 2012, p. 453). Furthermore, users can also be active content providers and "assert their need for information that

is framed within their personal context rather than that of the promoter" (Pan, Fescenmaier, 2006, as cited in Tan, Chen, 2012, p. 453).

As argued by Turban et al., (2010) the concept of Web 2.0 means that there is more collaboration between users on the Internet. In Web 2.0 different stakeholders are involved in the information creation processes and its distribution. Similar thoughts are shared by O'Reilly (2005) who suggests that users are not only consumers, like in the previous generations of the web, but they are also creators of user-generated content in a virtual community. Social networking sites, blogs, forums and wikis are some of the new ways through which people can collaborate and share information today (Turban et al., 2010).

It has also been argued that the Internet has changed consumer behavior (Mills, Law, 2004 as cited in Buhalis and Law, 2008, p. 611) due to the much greater wealth of information to which travelers are being exposed, provided by different private enterprises, tourism organizations and increasingly by other consumers. Thus, further in this chapter, much more attention will be paid to various theoretical explanations of the process of travelers' planning behavior, providing the basis for a later discussion taking place in the analysis part of this study.

Having in mind the above discussed, it can be noted the role Web 2.0 has had in the tourism sector, and how it has changed the way users share and create information. With the rise of content sharing, blogging, forums, online video and social networking sites, a new term called Travel 2.0 has been generated, which "represents the extension and customization of the concept of Web 2.0 in the tourism sector" (Rathonyi, 2013, p. 106). As Filgueira (2008, as cited in Mendez et al., 2015, p. 1003) states this is "a new Internet model to access, publish, share, discuss and distribute information on tourism whose content is created by users interacting with each other". Moreover, a study by the Hotel Technology Institute (2007, as cited in Mendez et al. 2015, p. 1003) defines the Travel 2.0 as WOM (word of mouth) applied to the twenty-first century using technology.

2.2 Social Networking Sites

As discussed above, the development of Web 2.0 sites has provided a lot of different platforms and ways, through which tourists can create and share information on the Internet. However, since the thesis aims to explore the strategic impact of Social Networking Sites on consumer

travel planning, this section draws on a number of literature sources in order to get a deeper understanding of the characteristics of Social Networking Sites, together with their influence and history.

By 2013, 82% of the world's Internet population age 15 and older was social networking users, representing 1.2 billion users around the globe (comScore, 2011 as cited in Sukhu et al., 2015, p. 318). Social networking sites are popular as they seem to be "easily accessible, straightforward and appealing" (Seth 2012 as cited in Yazdanifard, Yee, 2014, p. 2) for consumers. However, they are also the reason for change in consumer behavior, as SNSs provide platforms for consumers to connect with the company and other consumers (Bilgihan, Peng & Kandampully, 2014, as cited in Yazdanifard, Yee, 2014, p. 1).

According to Powell (2009 as cited in Sukhu et al., 2015, p. 317) SNSs have integrated into people's lives and have developed into sophisticated platforms for communication. A definition presented by Boyd and Ellison (2007, p. 211) defined SNSs as: "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of others users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system". In a similar line of thoughts Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 63) have described social networking as sites which enable users to create personal profiles and connecting with other people by inviting friends and colleagues and by sending emails and instant message between one another.

Based on the above discussion, it is important to acknowledge the popularity of Social Networking Sites among users, and how they have changed the way people interact and exchange information with one another. However, for the purpose of this study it is important to attempt to identify not only the characteristics of SNSs and their role, but also to go deeper and examine what are the purposes for travelers to use SNSs, and whether that impacts the travel planning processes. For that purpose, in the next subsection emphasis will be placed on what are the purposes of using SNSs and their influence in tourism context.

2.2.1   Purposes of using social networks sites and their influence

The internet is a virtual place where many consumers search for information for decision-making regarding tourism and hospitality through communication (Popescu, Iancu, Vasile & Popescu,

2013, as cited in Yazdanifard, Yee, 2014, p. 2). Social travel networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Myspace and Microblog are platforms with dynamic, multimodal features by which users can post, share and discuss interests with other interested users (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel & Chowdury, 2009 as cited in Luo & Zhong, 2013, p. 274).

As discussed earlier due to intangibility of most of the products and services in tourism industry, it is hard for customers to perceive the quality of tourism products in advance, therefore "interpersonal communications have become an important technique to reducing the risks of travel" (Murray, 1991, as cited in Luo, Zhong, 2013, p. 275). Huang, Basu and Hsu (2010 as cited in Luo, Zhong, 2013, p. 275) further identified three functional motives for sharing travel-related information via SNSs: (1) obtaining travel information, (2) disseminating information and (3) documenting personal experiences.

One of the arguments for why travelers engage in SNSs is because of the need to obtain travel-related information and share their personal experiences, reviews, comments, opinions, about their vacations, and travel packages before, during and after their trips (Sukhu et al., 2015, p. 318). Similar thoughts have been expressed by Xiang and Gretzel (2010, as cited in Sukhu et al., 2015, p. 319) who state that SNSs act as important source of information for travelers during their decision-making process. More importantly, the platform which online SNSs have provided for participants to interact and share their experiences, has resulted in effect on destination image, as suggested by Sigala (2012, as cited in Li et al., 2015, .p 519).

In a study conducted by comScore (2007 as cited in Leung et al., 2013, p. 9), 84 % of travelers reported that travel reviews had a significant influence on their purchase decisions. Furthermore, findings of a North American study conducted by iProspect and Jupiter Research found that approximately one-third of consumers were influenced by the information on social networking sites when making purchase decisions (iProspects, 2007 as cited in Leung et al., 2013, p. 9).

2.2.2 Credibility of Social Networking Sites

Despite of the importance SNSs have in the process of information search and exchange as discussed above, the reliability and credibility of what is communicated through SNSs can be questioned, as often the sender of information is unknown and lack of physical contact in online communications creates challenges in exchanging information.

As noted by Seth (2012, as cited in Yazdanifard & Yee, 2014, p. 3) a consumer may give a false statement that is negative by sharing a testimonial or recounting an experience or downloading content based on his or her personal impression towards the company, and others in the network may be affected by the opinion of the consumer. Moreover, a study by Jupiter Research finds that only 21 % of consumers surveyed actually trust information provided about products on social networking sites (Wasserman, 2006 as cited in Cox et al., 2009, p. 749).

Travelers believe that the quality of information concerning the characteristics of the desired location has become a driving force in user perception and decision making (Chung & Koo, 2012, p. 221). Therefore, understanding the role of credibility and trustworthiness of the content shared on SNSs is a significant area of interest, since the degree to which travelers trust the information they are provided during travel planning, can have effect on how influential Social Networking Sites actually are. If tourists use SNSs to obtain certain info about a destination or a product they would like to purchase, yet, they do not believe the source of that content is credible enough, it could be argued how influential SNSs might be in travel planning.

2.3 From WOM to eWOM

In this section the concept WOM (word of mouth) will be presented as a source of information which tourists use when planning a trip, since WOM has also been shown to be a very influential source of information in consumer decision-making process (Chealier & Myazlin, 2003; Westbrook, 1987 as cited in Mendez et al. 2015, p. 1005). The evolution of the Internet in recent years due to the advent of Web 2.0 has also modified tradition WOM, which has given raise to new concepts such as eWOM (electronic word of mouth). The development of eWOM has also had an impact on the tourism industry, by providing new knowledge and changing the perception of travel (Mendez et al. 2015, p. 1006). Having in mind the above stated, discussing theories about WOM and eWOM, presents a great interest to this study, as it will illustrate how information is shared through consumers and in what way it influences the decision-making of tourists.

2.3.1 WOM

It has long been argued that an important issue in tourism is the lack of direct experience with a tourism product, meaning that the quality and the perceived benefits of tourism and hospitality products can hardly be evaluated before the product is consumed (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008, as cited in Leung et al., 2013, p. 8). Among all available information sources, word-of-mouth (WOM) has long been recognized as one of the important external information sources for travel planning because of its high perceived credibility (Murphy, Moscardo & Benckendorff, 2007, as cited in Leung et al., 2013, p. 8). Furthermore, as argued by Litvin et al. (2006) interpersonal communications have long been recognized as influential in the tourism industry.

Arndt (1967) was one of the earliest researches to define the influence of WOM on consumer behavior and he characterized WOM as "oral, person-to-person communication between a received and a communication whom the receiver perceived as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product or service" (Arndt, 1967, as cited in Buttle, 1998, p. 242). However, more recent definitions of the term developed, and the one suggested by Latvin, Goldsmth and Pan (2008) defined WOM as being the informal, interpersonal communication among users who circulate information about a service, product or company without a commercial motive.

One of the most important difference between WOM information and any other information is that "word of mouth is the only promotion method that is of consumers, by consumers for consumers" (Kotler et al., 2010, p. 166). Moreover, because tourism services are products of experience and cannot be evaluated prior to their consumption, consumers tend to rely more on the recommendations and views of others (Fakharyan, Reza & Elyasi, 2012; Senecal & Nantel, 2004; Walker, 2001). In that sense, due to the intangibility of travel experiences, information gathered through WOM is something travelers rely on in their information search process and it is important to acknowledge its importance and high influential value for tourists.

2.3.2 eWOM

With the advancement of Internet technologies, increasing number of travelers are using the Internet to seek destination information and to conduct transactions online (Litvin et al., 2006, p. 461). This changing scenario has given rise to new concepts such as electronic word of mouth (eWOM). According to Henning-Thurau et al., (2004, p. 39) eWOM communication was defined

as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institution via the Internet".

The advent of eWOM has also had an impact on the tourism industry (Ye, Law, Gu & Chen, 2011, as cited in Mendez et al., 2015, p. 1006). Firstly, as more information is available to tourists from a wide range of users, thus providing new knowledge and changing their perception of travel. Secondly, the online medium has changed the way in which user access information and how that information is structured (Litvin, et al., 2008 as cited in Mendez et al. 2015, p. 1006).

The use of various electronic technologies such as online discussion forum, electronic bulletin board, newsgroup, blogs, review sites and social networking sites facilitate the information exchange among communicators (Goldsmith, 2006 as cited in Cheung & Thadani, 2010, p. 331). Social media websites are considered as truly appropriate platforms for eWOM (Canhoto & Clark, 2013; Erkan & Evans, 2014; Kim, Sung & Kang, 2014, as cited in Erkan & Evans, 2015, p. 48), as they allow opinion leaders to create and promote profiles relating to products and services of brands.

While in traditional WOM the source of information is usually known to the receiver, thereby the credibility of the communication and the message is known to the receiver (Cheung & Thadani, 2010, p. 333), within social media information providers and receivers interpret online content, often without knowing who is providing or reviewing the information and what is their purpose for disseminating or seeking the information (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011, as cited in Tham, et al., 2013, p. 148-149). Having that in mind, it might be questioned whether the other travelers' personality and background play a role in the quality and reliability of information which is shared. Since the sender of information is often unknown in eWOM, it would be rather difficult to judge the credibility of and quality of the content created by individuals, and whether it would be relevant to others. Therefore, due to the "distant" source-receiver relations mediated through eWOM, it could lessen the potential credibility and consequent influence of the information (Brown et al., 2007; Lee & Youn, 2009, as cited in Tham, et al., 2013, p. 149).
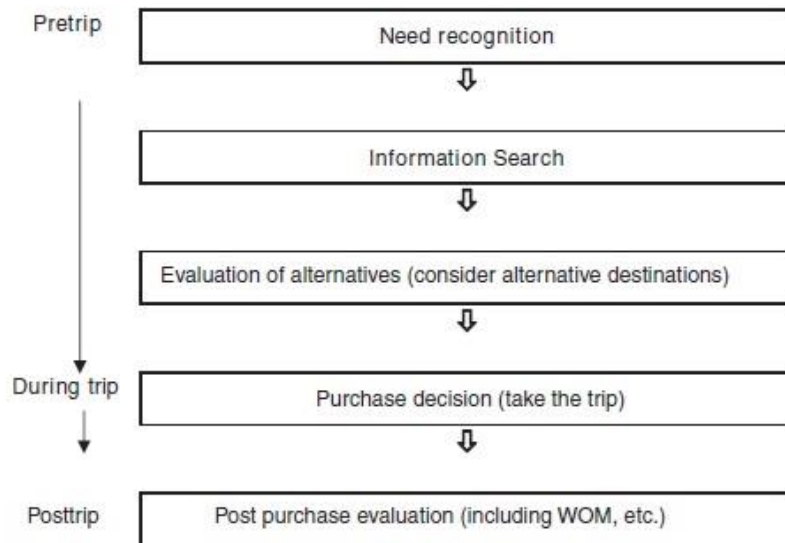
2.4 Travel planning & Information search processes

In this section it will be looked into the field of consumer behavior, and more particularly theories in regard to tourists' travel planning and information search processes will be outlined, aiming to provide a thorough understanding of the actions and decisions made by travelers and what influences those decisions. In order to provide answers to the problem this thesis aims to clear up, it is crucial to get an understanding of the travel planning and related behavior of tourists, providing the basis for further discussions *(taking place in Chapter 4)*, where it will be investigated in what way Social Networking Sites influence and impact those processes.

As it has been noted by Swarbrooke and Horner (1999), the area of consumer behavior is a rather difficult area to research and even more in the tourism sector, where the decisions are of emotional significance. In addition, because travel behavior is generally considered a continuous process that involves varied yet inter-correlated stages and concepts that cannot always be analyzed separately (Mill & Morrison, 2002 as cited in Cohen et al., 2014, p.873), makes the subjects a complex one to study.

Research conducted by Cox et el. (2009) identified that in tourism context, travelers' decision making process follow a pattern which is similar to the original consumer decision making model which proposes five key stages (Engel, Blackwell & Miniard, 1990; Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 1999). When adapted in tourism context, these five stages in tourism context comprise of three stages as shown in Figure 1 below. According to the model, during the pre-trip phase, it is the time when tourists realize that they have a need to travel, and start their information search and gather information. Once they have gathered enough information, they start evaluating the alternatives, and once that is done, the actual travel experience take place, and the purchase decision would take place. In the last phase of the model, which takes place after the trip is over and when travelers share their experiences with other individuals.

Figure 1. Travel Planning Process

Pretrip	Need recognition
	⇩
	Information Search
	⇩
	Evaluation of alternatives (consider alternative destinations)
	⇩
During trip	Purchase decision (take the trip)
	⇩
Posttrip	Post purchase evaluation (including WOM, etc.)

Source: Cox et al., 2009; adopted from Engel, Blackwell & Miniard (1990)   and Kotler, Bowen & Makens (1999)

It has also been argued by Jeng and Fasenmaier (2002) that in order to avoid making poor choices of their travel destination, travelers usually collect and evaluate various sources of travel information during their travel planning. As discussed earlier, Social Networking Sites are having a great influence on travel planning, "primarily for their functions as vital information sources providing access to other travelers' experiences" (Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Yoo et al., 2011, as cited in Fotis et al., 2012, p. 14-15). Besides, given the very intangible nature of tourism and travel to a destination never seen before, it is not surprising that travelers are embracing the information supplied by other people through user generated content and social networking sites on the Internet (Saranow, 2004; Ricci & Wietsma, 2006, as cited in Cox et al., 2009, p. 747).

According to Chung and Buhalis (2008) tourism information sources have been identified as a key factor which influence destination choice, therefore it can be seen how important is the purpose of travel information and the central role it plays in the travel planning process. Furthermore, as it was already discussed Web 2.0 has fundamentally changed the way of tourists' information search behavior and travelling decision making (Buhalis and Law, 2008 as citeed in Rathonyi, 2013, p. 105), as it has changed the amount of time spent on information collection together with the wide range of information that has become available to consumers.

The above presented shows that travel planning is a complex multi-level process, during which tourists go through numerous decisions and actions in each phase. Moreover as it was discussed above, SNSs play a significant role in the travel planning process, as tourists often rely on information provided shared through them, however, it could be argued whether SNSs might be used differently during each phases in the planning process. Investigating the actual role of SNSs throughout each phase of travel planning process; pre-trip, during trip and post trip experience of consumers, will be done with purpose to provide a better understanding of the overall impact and role of SNSs, and how they are used during different stages of travel planning.

3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the steps that have been undertaken by the researcher in order to provide answers to the problem which this thesis aims to identify. Furthermore, the approach to this study, together with what type of data have been gathered, and the methods used to collect it are being described.

Bearing in mind that an understanding of philosophy of research is considered as a fundamental prerequisite in carrying out a research, the chapter first discusses the research philosophy which has been adopted in this paper. This over-arching term relates to the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 101). Therefore identifying the philosophical assumptions that have effect on the knowledge I have developed is critical, as it provides awareness and reasoning about the research strategy and the methods undertaken throughout this paper. The chapter continues on discussing the research aim and objectives of this study, followed by an outline of the research methods in relation to both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods.

3.1 Theory of science

In order to present and discuss the research philosophies related to my project I will use the research 'onion' adopted by Saunders M., Lewis, P., and Thornhill, A., (2009) as illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 2. The research'onion'
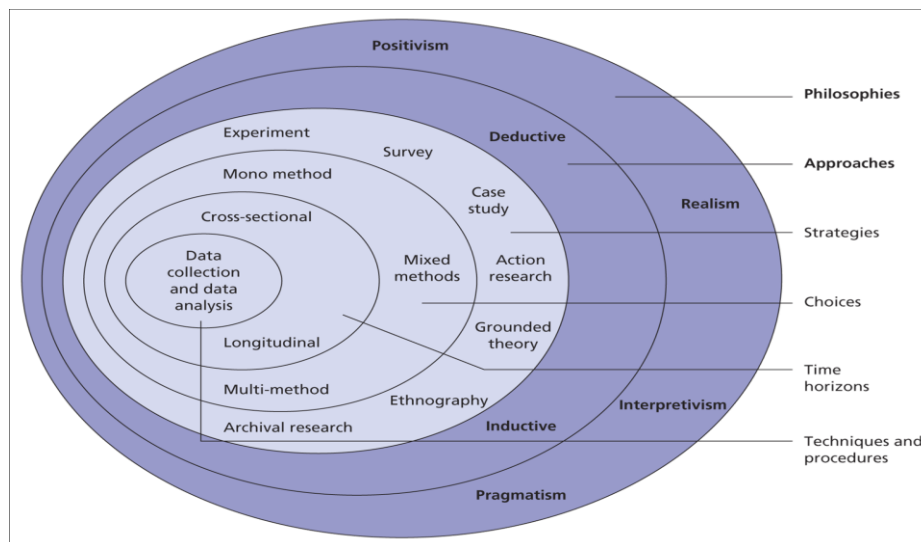
Source: M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A. (2009)

In order to provide insights into how the research process was carried out, and what influenced the decisions made throughout this paper, I will only present the first two levels of the research onion: philosophies and approaches, as "each contains differences which will influence the way in which we think about the research process" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 103).

3.1.1 Ontology: what assumptions do we make about the way in which the world works?

According to Saunders et al. (2009, p. 110) ontology is concerned with the nature of reality; the assumptions the researchers have about the world operated and the commitment held to particular views. As each one of us is different, we all perceive and interpret things in a different way. The first aspect of ontology is objectivism, and as argued by Saunders et al. (2009, p. 110) it portrays the positions that "social entities exist in reality external to social actors". On the other hand, the second aspect described by the authors - subjectivism, holds that social phenomena "are created from the perceptions and consequent actions of social actors" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 111)

Due to the complex nature of this study, which purpose us to investigate how the usage of Social Networking Sites impacts the travel planning of tourists, a subjective approach seems to be most accurate. Firstly, as the project focuses on a social science research and looking into tourists' travel planning patterns and decision making processes, it is important to approach the problem bearing in mind the difference among people in the way they plan their trips, and also how they use Social Networking Sites, and for what purposes. In that way, be being subjective one can take into account the emotions, passions and values of tourists and be aware of the differences between them, when trying to interpret and understand how they use SNSs and in what way that use have impact on their travel related decisions and choices. In a similar line Saunders et al. (2009, p. 111) argues that it is necessary to explore the subjective meanings, motivating the actions of social actors in order for the researcher to be able to understand these actions (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 111).

3.1.2 Epistemology: what is acceptable knowledge in a particular field of study?

Epistemology concerns what constitutes acceptable knowledge in a field of study (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 112). We can differentiate two types of researchers in connection to epistemology – the 'feelings' researcher and 'resources' researcher. The first one is concerned with the feelings and attitudes of the study object and adopts interpretivist philosophy in its study, whereas the resource

researcher is adopting positivist philosophy to the development of knowledge, and reality is presented by objects that are considered to be 'real' and which can be measured (Sanders Lewis and Thornhill, 2009).

In the case of this project I have to accept as acceptable knowledge both 'resources' and 'feelings' elements. Since the problem investigated in this paper is connected with Social Networks and Internet technologies, I will be collecting and using some statistical data which is concrete and has already been collected by other researchers. My aim will be to question and elaborate on it in the process of answering my main problem, and possibly providing basis for further research and/or hypothesis testing.

On the other hand I must also take into consideration the feelings and emotions of the study objects in this project, being the tourists. Much more attention will be paid to the feelings and emotions that are created within tourists from using Social Networking Sites, and how the information shared on them influences their travel planning patterns and decision-making processes. Furthermore, I should be aware that travel related information shared on SNSs is constructed through the interaction with other users' interpretations, meaning and understanding of the world, therefore knowledge about reality is socially constructed. Acknowledging the differences between humans and how their actions have effect on reality, makes it rather difficult to make objective statements, as it is necessary to go deeper into understanding the differences between people and how they perceive and view the world.

3.1.3 Inductive and deductive approaches

As argued by Gratton and Jones (2004, p. 26-27) the inductive research is more often associated with interpretative, qualitative studies where the pattern is to collect data, and analyze that data to develop a theory, model or explanation. On the other hand deductive research is more generally associated with positivist and quantitative research and it involves the development of an idea, or hypothesis, from existing theory which can then be tested through the collection of data (Gratton, C., Jones, I., 2004, p. 27).

Due to the nature of this study, and the fact that previous researchers have been made, and the topic has been discussed quite a lot, a deductive approach has been adopted in this project. Since I am not developing any new theory, but rather using existence knowledge on the subject, which

will be examined and questioned in the process of presenting findings to my main problem. Even though the effects of social media and internet technologies is something that has long been researched, the purpose of this paper is to go deeper and explore the role of Social Networking Sites and point out how decision making of tourists has been impacted before, during and after their travel. Indeed, by investigating in what way travelers' experiences and behavior has been influenced by Social Networking Sites during all stages of their travel planning, the study aims is to provide a comprehensive picture of the actual impact and influence of these online networks.

3.2 Research aim & objectives

The discussion of the literature review in the previous chapter has showed that there are quite a lot of studies which attempt to explain how the development of Internet, and use of Social Networking Sites impact tourists. However, most of these studies either focus on a specific stage of the travel planning (such as information search, or pre-trip planning), or exploring an individual social medium (e.g travel forums, Facebook). It seems therefore that there is a need of more comprehensive study, which should investigate the overall impact of social networking sites throughout the whole travel planning of tourists, and point out how they are influenced during different stages of their experience.

Having in mind the above mentioned, the research aim of this study is to investigate the overall impact of SNSs on travel planning. In order to do this, it will be investigated how the use of SNSs affects tourists and their decision making process throughout different stages of the travel planning, which were outlined by Cox et al. (2009) in the previous chapter. By exploring how SNSs are used during pre-trip, during trip and after trip decisions and for what purposes, the study aims to provide a comprehensive findings on the overall impact and influence of Social Networking Sites throughout different stages of the planning process.

3.3 The approach to this study

Taking into consideration the purpose of this study which attempts to explore the behavior of tourists through different stages of their travel planning, and by investigating how the use of Social Networking Sites influence tourists' behavior, the adoption of mixed methods research approach is believed to be most suitable for gathering empirical knowledge and providing insights to this study.

Mixed method research design focuses on collection, analyzing and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or series of studies. Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination, provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p. 5).

As Creswell and Clark (2011, p. 12) argue, mixed methods research provides more evidence for studying a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative research alone, and also that this type of research helps answer questions that cannot be answered by quantitative or qualitative approaches alone. Due to the complex problem this projects aims to answer, and to provide insights into the tourists' pre-, during and after experience decision making and use of social networking communication, conducting an online questionnaire was chosen as a quantitative method. As it was pointed by Selm and Jankowski (2006) one of the main advantages of online questionnaires is that they are practical in research on the topic of Internet use, as they allow the researcher to reach an audience with Internet experience. However, in order to reflect deeper and gain better understanding of how Social Networking Sites influence the decision making of tourists, qualitative interviews were also conducted. A more detailed description of how the quantitative and qualitative data methods were conducted, will be provided in the next section.

3.4   Research methods

For the purpose of this study, it was used mainly primary data in order to provide answers to the research question. As argued by Ghaury and Grønhaug (2005, p. 102), one of the main advantages of primary data is that they are collected for the particular project at hand. The authors further continue by suggesting that if we want to know about people's attitudes, intentions and buying behavior, only primary data can help us answer these questions. Given the above, but also having in mind the nature of the aim and the research scope of this study, primary data was viewed at the most suitable and relevant source of information.

3.4.3   Quantitative data

The quantitative research method for gathering empirical evidence for this study, consisted of an online survey that was created using Obsurvey, a professional web-based online survey software. One of the reasons to choose an online questionnaire for this particular study is because, as argued by Selm and Jankowski (2006), they are useful in research on the topic of internet use, as

they allow the researcher to reach an audience with Internet experience. Moreover, an online survey allows to reach a diverse group of people, with different backgrounds, nationalities, and experience and at the same time it is time-saving and cost-effective (Wright, 2005).

Questions for the survey were developed with the help of literature on tourists' motivation and decision making, and structured in a way aimed to provide insights into understanding the respondents' intentions towards using SNSs, and how they influenced their travel planning choices and decisions.

In order to ensure that the respondents filling out the survey were the right target group, the questionnaire started off by screening questions (q1) (q2) aimed to check if they were familiar with Social Networking Sites and whether they used them in the past year. The rest of the survey was structured in way, aiming to understand the respondents' intention towards using SNSs before, during and after their trip. Furthermore, questions regarding how different information sources are used in travel planning were also included, in order to determine the usefulness of different information sources and evaluate where SNSs stands. The last part was designed with a purpose to collect demographic data such as age, gender, purpose of the trip and trying to find out whether the personal characteristics of the respondents would have any influence on their decisions in relation to what information sources they are likely to use.

The survey was conducted during the June and July, and was distributed online on different Facebook and LinkedIn travel-related groups. The time required to fill out the survey was approximately 5 minutes, and the survey was designed in English. The total number of 180 attempted to complete the survey, however, after screening the results only 150 completely filled it out. Out of the 150 responses, 15 were not counted due to different reasons such as missing answers or lack of involvement, giving 135 qualified responses. Since the survey was distributed online, it reached a wide range of people, originating from different nationalities and backgrounds, thus providing a global sample in terms of geographic standpoint.

3.4.4   Qualitative data

From the findings which have been obtained through the online questionnaire, a lot of valuable insights in relation to the exact use of Social Networking Sites and their influence on travel planning were provided. However, there still was a need for more concrete and valid evidence to

the actual perception and impact of various SNSs. Therefore, 5 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted.

During the process of creating and conducting the interviews, insights from Ghauri and Grønhaug (2005) were used, in order to get a better understanding of how to approach the process, and what challenges and obstacles might occur along the way. The structure of interviews that was chosen for this study were semi-structured, as they obtain information about personal, attitudinal and value-laden material, and we are likely to be dealing with matters that call for social sensitivity in their own right (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005, p. 132). Moreover, this type of interviews were chosen because they can gain a more accurate and clear picture of respondent's position or behavior, as they are free to answer according to their own thinking and the open ended questions (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005, p. 133).

As it as further been argued by the authors, conducting interviews requires a lot of skills and practice, and the researched problem should be well understood by the researcher. Keeping this in mind, together with Social Networking Sites being the central theme in this study, the interviewees were carefully selected, as one of the main priorities was that they have traveled a lot, thus it can be examined how they engage in planning their trips. The questions designed for the interview were open, allowing the interviewees the possibility to express their own understanding and perception of the subject. Once the interviews were taken, they were transcribed, to convert them into valid data used in the analysis. Only extracts of the interviews will be referred to in the analysis, which content has been found valuable and bringing credible knowledge to this research. When cited in the text, the interviewees were referred to with the letter "I" followed by a number from 1-5 corresponding to each one of the 5 participants. Additionally, the evidence gained through the qualitative and quantitative methods will be both correlated, together with the theoretical considerations introduced earlier, leading to a discussion and presenting final findings to the research problem.

In the end, a total number of 5 interviews were conducted, with four male a one female representatives. They were all of mixed nationalities and various backgrounds, hoping to provide a broader and more credible understanding of how they used different information sources in their travel planning, and the extent to which they relied on information obtained through SNSs. Yet the thing they all had in common was that they were all passionate about travelling. The

interviews were conducted in English; however, English was a second language for some of the respondents, which might have affected the quality of information obtained.

4. ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

In this chapter, it will be analyzed and discussed the research question of this study: *Strategic impact of Social Networking Sites on travel planning.* Moreover, the main goal of this chapter is to present and discuss the findings obtained through the primary data collection process, which aim is to provide the basis of answering the main research question and determine if SNSs impact travel planning, and if yes, in what ways.

As it was discussed earlier, in order to fully understand how Social Networking Sites influence consumers, the role of their use will be investigated during different stages of travel planning process. Therefore, the chapter is divided into several sections, where each one of them will discuss the pre-, during- and post trip stages of travel planning process, and examining the users' motivations and approaches towards using SNSs.

In addition, it is important to point out that throughout this analysis, the use of qualitative and quantitative data gathered are not equally balanced. The information obtained through the questionnaires, provides a more statistical info in relation to how users engage with SNSs and for what purposes, while the interviews provide deeper insights into the motivations and purposes of why travelers use them and for what purposes. Moreover, as some interviews vary in quality and length, it is possible that some of them are quoted more frequent than others.

4.1 Social Networking Sites use before the trip

This section provides insights on how SNSs are used in the pre-trip stage of the travel process of tourists, and the associated impact of that use. Throughout the data collection process, the information which has been gathered revealed that Social Networking Sites serve three main functionalities before the travel. Firstly, as inspiration sources among travelers; secondly as information source providing meaning to travel planning decisions and thirdly as platforms for self-expressions. In the following subsections each of the functionalities will be examined into more details, and evidence will be provided to support these findings.

4.1.1 Inspiration for the trip

In order to get an understanding of the reasons and motivations of travelers to use Social Networking Sites before their trips take place, the questionnaire was designed in a way to provide concrete answers to that matter. Results of the survey revealed the mixture of intentions among

respondents when it comes to their use of SNSs before the trip, yet the majority of them (55) stated that they use SNSs in order to get inspiration for their next travel, as illustrated in the figure below.
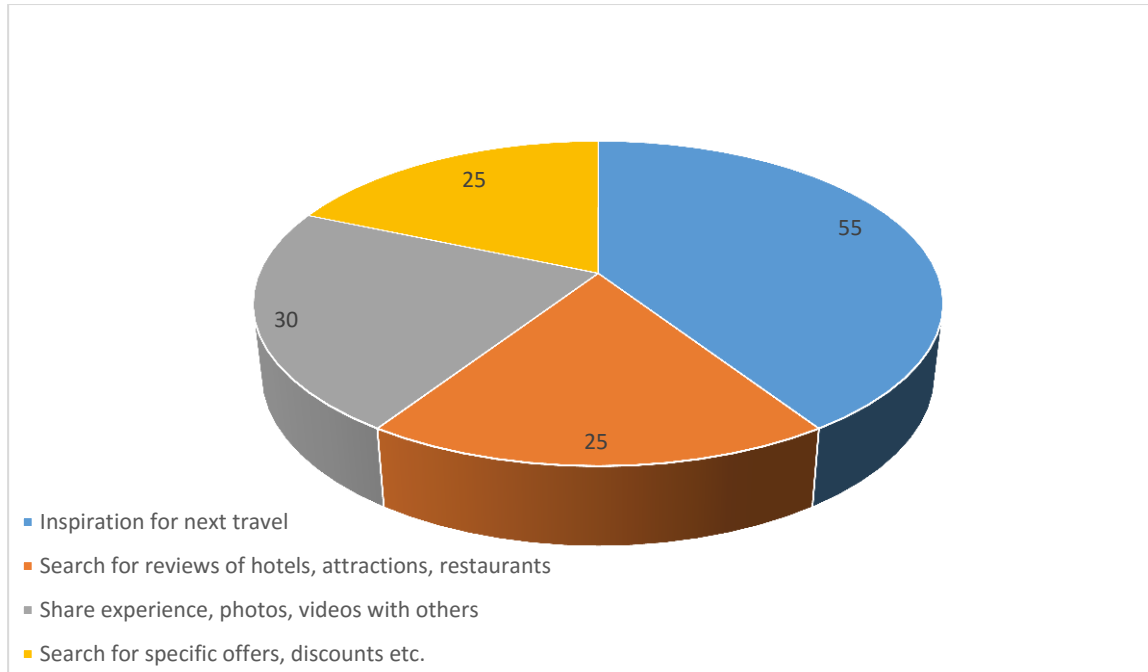

Figure 4.3 SNSs purpose of use before the trip

Moreover, it was also illustrated in the data gathered from the interviewees, where it was emphasized the inspirational role SNSs can have, and more particularly social sites such as Instagram and TripAdvisor, as pointed out in the following statements.

"I am a keen user of Instagram, and whenever I have free time I always browse the application and looking at what people post there […] and often I would see these amazing pictures of different places around the world, which make me really want to go there and experience what the destination has to offer. In a sense I get inspired to explore the world and visit all these beautiful places I see." (I2)

Similar line of thoughts were expressed by another interviewee, when asked in what ways she uses Social Networks:

"I have been using TripAdvisor for many years now, and I just love reading about people's stories and experiences they share on the website […] some of them share photos, so when you

read their stories it feels like you have been together with them, as they make it so personal. Quite often, after reading a review or a story, I feel so inspired to visit the place, that last summer we went to Split (Croatia), because of what I learned the place has to offer." (I5)

However, other participants revealed use of social networks had complete opposite effect on them, and instead of being inspired they felt discouraged due the content they encountered:

"My boyfriend and I booked our holiday through a tour operator, so they booked our hotel and made all other arrangements. However, as I tried and googled the place we were about to stay, I read all these negative comments posted on TripAdvisor, and the horrible service provided by the staff, so I told him something had to be done about it" (I3)

This raises the question whether the content shared on SNSs can have influence on what decisions and choices travelers make, as they come across either negative or positive comments about certain destinations, products and/or services. Moreover, as it was referred earlier to Chung and Koo (2012), who claimed that travelers believe the quality of information concerning characteristic of the desired locations has become a driving force in user perception and decision making. Therefore, it could be argued how influential the information shared on the web is perceived by users, considering whether it is perceived as credible enough and the level of its quality.

As the above findings reveal, the information posted on SNSs is often used to inspire travelers, where to go and what to visit. However, the findings also showed that in the pre-trip phase of travel planning, travelers use them for other purposes, such as to look for offers, or read reviews, thus the purpose of use should not only be limited to inspirational. Nonetheless, as it was the predominant answer among the survey respondents, and also expressed in the statements made by interviewees, the inspirational functionality role is viewed as an important factor which can influence travel related decisions. On the other side, it could also be argued, whether people intentionally search for information shared on SNSs to get inspired for their travel, or it happens unintentionally and without realizing it. As the interviewees already knew they wanted to travel, they used SNSs for inspiration and get information, yet, in other cases people might just see a photo or a story posted on Facebook or other Social Network Site and feel the need to visit this place, even though they did not even consider travelling at first, and it can be seen as a sudden impulse.

4.1.2 SNSs as information sources providing inputs to decision making

As it has been discussed earlier, the Internet has changed consumer behavior due to the much greater wealth of information to which travelers are being exposed (Mills, Law, 2004 as cited in Buhalis and Law, 2008, p. 611), as well as the development of Web 2.0 has resulted in new ways of collaboration and information sharing among people (Turban et al., 2011 as cited in Rathonyi-, 2013, p. 106). Therefore, it was important to investigate whether and how SNSs are used in the information search process.

After careful examination of the data from the interviews, what became evident was that when asked "Did you use the Internet at all for any reason related with planning and preparing your last travel experience?" different types of social networks and media were used in order to provide various inputs into travel related decisions, such as holiday accommodation choice, which destination to be visited, and what activities and sites to visit when on site.

As one of the participants revealed how he has shifted from using travel guides and tour operators for information search, into using different online sources such as travel blogs and internet forums, in order to make his decision in relation to accommodation planning:

"In the past I would always consult with the local travel agency, for recommendation on which accommodation to choose, so that it is at reasonable price and good location as they have a lot of experience and deals with different hotels. However, now I prefer to use travel related forums and networks, or TripAdvisor, where I can just get all the information I need directly from other travelers, just like me. I can also compare the reviews and the comments on different sites, just to make sure that the information is correct." (I1)

According to the statement provided by another participant, he and his friends used the content posted on Facebook, and the stories of others shared on the Internet, in various travel blogs and sites:

"We were just graduating from high school, and me and my friends wanted to have unforgettable summer, so we did some research on the web, checking out where to go, and also checking some Facebook pages, where we could see comments and pictures about the places we considered to visit. What is more, we found out about what activities and which disco clubs we should go, because of the crazy videos we saw posted on Facebook." (I4))

The above passages provide preliminary indications that the content shared on the Internet, and SNSs is a preferred method for gathering travel related information, because as stated by the interviewees, the information comes directly from other users who have already used the product and/or the services. Similar findings were presented in a study conducted by comScore (2007 as cited in Leung et al., 2013, p. 9), which revealed that 84 % of travelers reported that travel reviews had a significant influence on their purchase decision. Furthermore, as expressed in the quote from I1, the person does not only rely on a single source when trying to evaluate the information about his accommodation choice, but rather try to verify it by comparing several different sources. One for the arguments why users tend to collect and evaluate various sources is, as suggested by Jeng and Fasenmaier (2002) to avoid making poor choices of their travel destination. Yet, it could also be argued that the reason for consumers to do so is because when double checking, it is more likely for them to believe and trust the information which they encounter, whereas if they refer to only one source they might be more skeptical and find the content not relevant to them.

What is more, an interesting opinion was shared by another respondent, who expressed:

"I tend to use social media sites, in order to gain various kind of information prior to my trip and even discuss things with friends on social networks when I need to know something, however, it is important to consider how relevant is the information you are given, since some people would say positive things about a certain product, while others could be very negative […] therefore it is important to take into consideration that people are different, and they value and view things in different ways, so they might share opposite opinion about things". (I5)

Since users are no longer only consumers, like in the past, but they are also creators of user generated content in the virtual community (O'Reilly, 2005), it must be noted the subjective understanding and opinion of those who create and share information on various SNSs, and how others will perceive their message. That has been acknowledged by the person above, who questions how credible and relevant is the information he encounters on the web, due to the different personal characteristics among people. For that matter, it could be questioned how influential Social Networking Sites are in reality, since some people find the content posted on them to be either not relevant due to subjectivity of the information, or being skeptical of the

validity of that information and feel the need to cross-check different sources before making any assumptions or decisions.

Figure 4.4 Information sources used prior travel experience
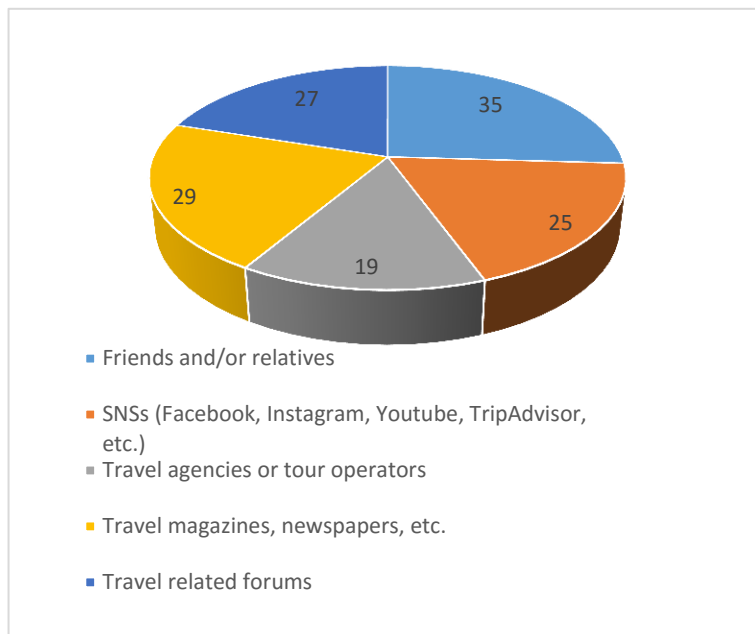
In figure 4.4 it is shown the results from the survey, in relation to how respondents answered when asked which is the most preferable source of information to them prior they travel. What became evident was that the majority stated that they rely mostly on friends and/or relatives to obtain information when planning and taking trips, while SNSs was ranked as the third most preferred method with 25 respondents stating that the content posted and shared on social networks is their main source for information search prior travel experiences. Interestingly, travel agencies and/or tour operators which served as a main source of travel related information in the past were not very popular among the respondents with only 19 stating they use them in order to find out certain things in their travel planning. One of the factors which might have influenced the results from the survey might be the relatively young age of the respondents being between 25-35. According to Pfeil et al., (2009) younger age groups have more extensively use of the Internet and social networking sites than older age groups. Additionally, Leven et al. (2011 as cited in Montag & Reuter 2015, p. 189) argued that younger people show much greater willingness to reveal personal data, for instance on social networks than older people, which might be interpreted as a result of the different relationship towards new media. Having that in mind, it should be taken into account the differences which exist between different age groups and their information search patterns and choices. Thus, the age factor have played an important role in the data obtained through the surveys, and it might explain the low interest in travel agencies and tour operators as information sources, as opposed to the more preferred friends and relatives or SNSs. Considering the point that young people tend to use the web more frequently, and rely on personal communications

with people they know such as friends or relatives, and that tour operators and agencies were more used in the past, as one of the few sources of information, it must be pointed out that the young age of respondents has produced knowledge for this thesis, which might have brought different knowledge, had other people with contrasting background and age participated in the survey.

To sum up, the results gained from both interviews and surveys revealed that tourists actively seek for various kind of information prior travelling, and the information they encounter can have huge influence on their travel planning decisions. The consumer-generated content shared on SNSs is often viewed as credible and providing inspiration and ideas for future travel ideas, as the content is perceived as more personal and providing description of what tourists can expect by even sharing pictures and/or videos. As stated earlier in the project, due to intangibility of tourism products, they are rather difficult to describe and explain before consuming, yet it could be pointed out that by using SNSs users aim to minimize the risk involved with tourism products and seek to obtain different sort of information which might help them in their travel planning. However, it was also noted that users may be exposed to content which is not viewed as credible and relevant due to the subjective nature of the shared information, and the different interests and personal characteristics among users.

4.1.3 Platforms for Pre-trip self-expression

During the interviews, from the responses provided by the participants, it was revealed that SNSs and especially Facebook were used with the purpose for self-expression before the travel took place, as users shared different thoughts, feelings and emotions representing their state of mind and other aspects of the forthcoming trip. Even though participants expressed they used SNSs for self-expression by announcing certain information to their online social networks, it was not the content and the messages that were distributed to their networks which were central to be studied, but rather the motivation and the reasons which drove them towards using SNSs in order to define and express themselves.

Interviewees stated that they used SNSs to self-express themselves by sharing their feelings and emotions of happiness and excitement about a trip which they were about to go on, as it can be seen in the following quote:

"Whenever I am about to travel somewhere, I announce it on Facebook as I am happy and excited about where I will go, and I also want my friends to be aware of it. It just feels better when I know other people know that I will travel somewhere nice, and this make me even happier" (I3).

Another individual pointed out that by sharing his trip with the members of his social network, helped him to boost his confidence by showing off the cool places he was about to visit:

"Before my last trip to Dubai, I shared the news for it with all my social contacts, as I wanted them to know to what an amazing place I was about to go, and for people to know where they can find me if they need me. In a way I was showing off."(I5)

It could be questioned what is the reason for consumers to share information about their trips before they even take place, however, as suggested by Kim et al. (2012 as cited in Tussyadiah & Inversini, 2015 p. 231) individuals with a high level of self-image expression desired to get positive favors from other users. The need of appreciation, attention and positive favors from others, seems as a legitimate motivator for people to share posts on SNSs which purpose is to define and self-express their identity, and seeking affirmation from others. Taking into consideration the wide spectrum of audience that can be reached in a short period of time; Social Networks represent a suitable platform where users can express themselves and receive the attention which they desire.

Furthermore, Wang and Sasenmaier (2004 as cited in Tussyadiah & Inversini, 2015 p.231) insisted that expressing identity in an online travel community enhances a higher level of member participation which stimulates contribution to the community. When used for self-expression, the role of consumers changes from being passive, as it was in the case when SNSs were used for information search and people were just looking for content shared by others, to active where by sharing and posting content on the web, users can influence other travelers with the content they create about specific destination, product and/ or service.

4.2 SNSs use during the trip

In order to better understand how the use of Social Networks influence travel planning of users, it is important to also look into how they are used during the trip stage as well. The purpose of doing so is to find out whether there are any differences in how SNSs are used throughout the different stages of travelling, the purpose of their use, and finding any patterns in how often they are used at the various phases. When asked whether SNSs were used during the trip to get any sort of travel-related information, out of the 135 respondents only 53 reported that they did. What is more when further inquired whether the information they encountered influenced their travel plans in any way, most of them pointed out that it did not affect the initial arrangements they had as it can be seen in Figure 4.5.
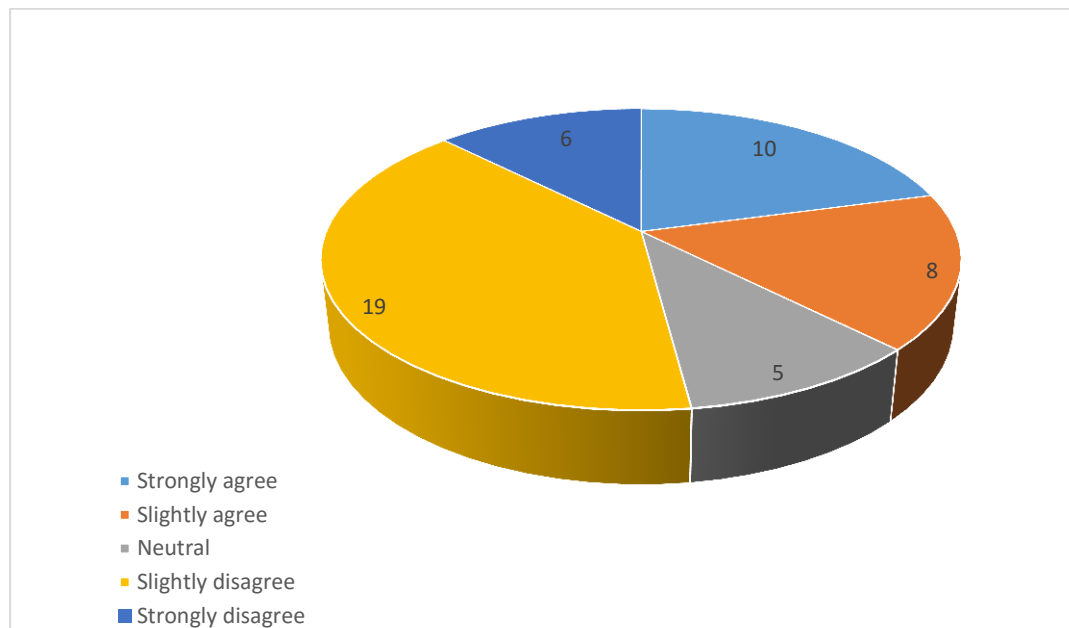

Figure 4.5 Respondents who stated they made changes to all or part of their existing travel plans after using the content shared on SNS

It could be argued that a reason for why users used SNSs far less during the trip to obtain travel related information, could be that while travelling tourists might be less likely to use the Internet, and browse through different Social Networks, as whey would normally engage in various activities keeping them busy. Additionally, if the trip takes place abroad, it might be harder to get access to Internet, as it might require additional cost to access it, and this could be considered as another limiting factor. The purpose and duration of the trip could also have impact on what is the

likelihood of users to use SNSs to obtain information, since a longer trip to multiple destinations would require longer planning taking place not only before, but during the trip as well, and it seems to be more demanding compared to a shorter trip.

The analysis of the information obtained through the qualitative data revealed that Social Networks were mainly used as a source to provide both inputs and outputs to holiday related decisions, by gathering information and using it to make adjustments while on the trip, but also providing feedback to other users. In addition, similarly as in the pre- trip travel planning, SNSs were used by travelers for self-expression by posting updates and notifications about the destination they are visiting and sharing photos. In the following subsections more detailed discussion will examine the use of SNSs during the trip phase of consumers.

4.2.1 Source for providing inputs to holiday related decisions

Similarly as it was observed in the pre-trip stage of travel planning, some of the interviewees shared that they used SNSs while they were travelling as information source which would hopefully help them in their travel related decisions. What is more, the qualitative data revealed that users used SNSs in different ways in order to obtain the information they need, as some of them directly contacted people from their own Social Networks and requesting further travel related info, while other users used the content created by others and shared on Social Networking Sites.

"While we were backpacking in Thailand, I was keeping in touch with a friend of mine on Facebook, who had previously come here and she was in a way my tour guide, as she told me all the places I must visit, where to go and what to explore. I have seen a lot of pictures and heard many stories about her trip, and I was sure she was the right person to ask for any sort of guidance. In the end I did not regret my choice." (I5)

The above illustrates how SNSs serve as a mediator for transferring information between friends, where the other person is providing feedback and suggesting activities which can be undertaken by the traveler located at the destination. Since the other person had already visited the destination before and the pre-existing social tie between the two individuals, it could be argued that these two factors have great influence on how trustful the guidance and provision of suggested activities are perceived by the person on site.

In another case, it was revealed that while on a trip, users referred to content shared by other individuals outside of their online social network, with the purpose to access travel related content, assisting them in making decisions such as which attractions to visit and where to go.

"Since my wife and I are both vegetarians, and we had a long holiday traveling to different places, I was often checking travel reviews posted by other people, to get inspiration which vegetarian restaurants to visit, and where to find them. As we did not know which part of the country we would visit beforehand, it was hard to plan everything before our trip, and therefore I was often browsing various travel forums and also TripAdvisor, to find out what we needed." (I1)

From the response given by another interviewee, it became evident that SNSs were not only employed for information search by users while being on the trip, but also for evaluation of alternatives:

"While we were in Ibiza with my friends, we were checking different videos on YouTube to find out which disco clubs offered the best kind of music and entertainment. There were also some personal videos made by others people just like us, so we could get a feeling of what the real atmosphere in the clubs was, and not just some commercial videos promoting the places". (I4)

The above quotations illustrate that during the trip, SNSs could be used for different purposes, such as travel related information, or to choose between alternatives. What is more, tourists have the flexibility to choose in what way to access the information they need, by either contacting friends and/or relatives from their online social network, or referring to the content created and shared by other individuals. However, it should be noted that the content shared by unknown users might possess a greater risk and it could be perceived as less credible and trustworthy compared to when the sender of the information is a known member. Because of a study by Jupiter Research which finds that only 21% of consumers surveyed actually trust information provided about products on social networking sites (Wasserman as cited in Cox et al., 2009, p. 749), it might be questioned what is the main reason and motivator for individuals to seek for travel related information when they do not find it trustworthy. Since SNSs enable users to create personal profiles and connect with other users, it might be claimed that the feeling of being part of a community and the connection with other members, is more valued than the actual content which is being shared by some users.

4.2.2 Source for providing outputs to holiday related decisions

Looking into all of the examples above, SNSs were used with the purpose to provide insights to the members who used them, and assist them in their travel related decisions. In this scenario, the travelers were having rather passive role, as they were just absorbing the content and information they encountered, however, what was reported by a single participant in the interviews, was that he used social networks to share his feedback about the product and services which had been consumed by him:

"I always write a review about the restaurant in which I am eating, whether that be a positive or negative feedback, as I hope my input would help for the better experience of other people" (I2)

Thus by providing output and creating content which could be used by other members in their evaluation and information search processes, the individual doing that takes a rather active role, as he/she is actively participating on the social network community and creating content for other members. This kind of review and feedback sharing are usually more typical in the post-trip stage, when users have more time to refer to their past experience and share their thoughts and opinions of what was experienced. Yet, in longer trips that involve visiting more than one destination, staying at various hotels and dining in numerous restaurants, providing feedback right after the experience is over, seems as the better choice, since the memories and emotions of the experience are still recent. In any case, with the development of Internet and mobile devices technologies, and the increasing number of establishments providing free Wi-Fi, that would most likely lead to increased number of users who provide reviews and feedback during the trip in the future, as it will ease the whole process.

4.2.3 Self-expression

As it was discussed earlier, users used SNSs in the pre-trip stage of travel planning for self-expression, by projecting their feelings, emotions and thoughts about the upcoming trip. Similarly, from the responses provided by the interviewees, it was revealed users tend to do the same thing during the trip as well, by sharing updates, photos and text messages through Social Networking Sites, to fulfill different purposes.

As illustrated in the quote below, the person used Facebook to announce her arrival at the holiday destination she was going, by checking-in and making people aware of where he was:

"Occasionally when I travel abroad, I go on Facebook and check-in at the place I am visiting, to let my social network where I am, and maybe post a picture as well, so that they can see how awesome the place is." (I3)

It could be argued that the need to make others aware of "where I am" and share it with their friends and relatives, even when located far-away from one another, is because users want to remain sociable and make people aware of know of their current status and location. Additionally, by announcing their arrival it might also serve as a proof of their well-being and safe reach to the destination.

Coming across something unusual, interesting or rather different during the trip might also result in self-expression, supported with the need to express the feeling provoked by that encounter:

"When we were in Brazil we went to a football game, and it was just unbelievable. The whole stadium was jumping up and down, and they fired fireworks at the kick-off... I made a few videos and pictures and shared it with my friends, because it was so different and amazing compared to what we were used to watch back home" (I3)

Even though Social Networking Sites were used as a platform for self-expression by users both before and during travel, the discussion and findings reveal that there are number of indicators which point out to some differences in relation to how the pre- and during trip self-expression takes place. While the content of the pre-trip expression by users mainly consist of a text describing the destination which is to be visited, during the trip self-expression posts also included photos and videos. By providing visual content to their social networks, travelers are able to better present the place and the environment visited by them.

4.3 SNSs use after the trip

This section will provide insights into how SNSs are used in the post-trip phase of the travel planning. As the survey was designed to address this issue, it was pre-assumed that the main use of SNSs once the trip is over would be to share feedback, reviews and comments about the overall experiences. Therefore the respondents were asked to answer how likely is for them to provide post consumption evaluation, the results of which can be seen in the figure below.

Figure 4.6 Number of respondents who stated how likely are they to provide feedback and reviews after their trip
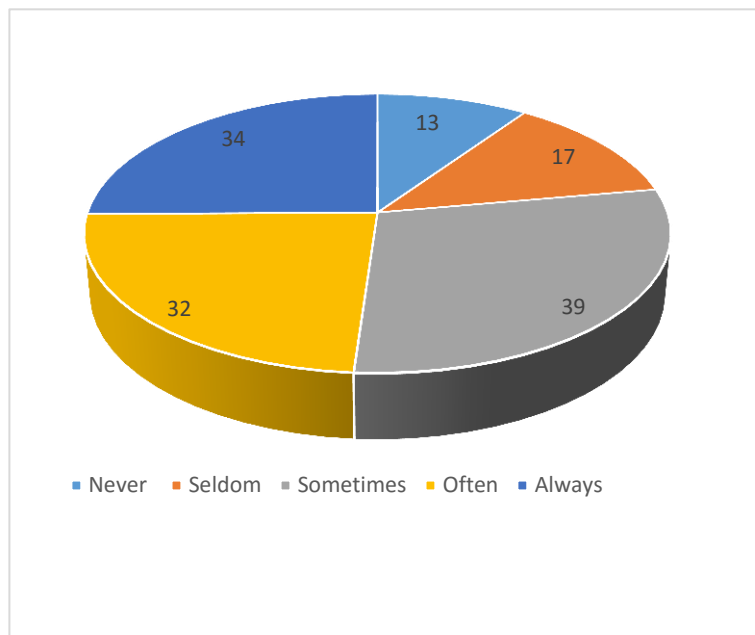
As it can be seen from the results a great majority of respondents 47 % claimed that they are always or often providing feedback and reviews after their trip is over, while only 17 % stated that they never or seldom use SNSs to share their opinions. In order to better understand what motivates and discourage users to evaluate the products and/or services they had consumed, the data gathered from the interviews will be examined.

As one of the interviewees claimed he was not very eager to share his experiences by providing any sort of feedback with his online social network:

"Usually I am not providing any sort of reviews using SNSs, as there have not been any events which have caught my attention, either positive or negative, and that would force me to share it with others. Normally I would rather just talk with my friends and tell them how my experience was, instead of doing it online." (I5)

The lack of motivation in this respondent to contribute in any way by providing feedback to evaluate his experiences, is due to lack of occasions and events which would urge him to share his opinion on the Internet, as he would rather talk about it in person and use traditional WOM. On the other hand, another individual claimed that the very bad nature of some experiences is what motivates him to share his bad fortune with others, and warn them:

"If I encounter a really bad experience along my trip, I feel the need and desire to warn the rest of the people about it, and let them know what to expect. However, if it is a good one, I just don't find a need to share it, as I do not want to raise the expectations of people by telling them how good everything is. On the contrary, if it is a bad one, then it is another story." (I3)

As opposed to the above quotes, where travelers expressed that they do not feel motivated to provide feedback of their experiences, unless they feel it is necessary or if the experience was negative enough to force them talk about it, the citation below illustrates the frequent usage of SNSs after the travel experience is over:

"No matter what my holiday offered me, I always like to share my experiences both negative and positive, and make people aware of what to expect. Whether that be how the food tasted in the restaurant we ate, or how was the overall service at the hotel we stayed, I will share it" (I2)

By creating and posting review and feedback content on different SNSs, the information which is shared serve the purpose to guide and help future travelers in their travel related decisions and choices. However, when individuals refer to such information, they should also be aware of the subjective nature of that content, and assess whether it could be applied to them or not. What is more, travelers must also be aware of the false content created for promotional purposes, which is also distributed through various Social Networking Sites. Therefore, it could be claimed that eWOM possess more challenges and obstacles compared to the traditional WOM, since the online communication has resulted in not knowing whom we are corresponding, and whether the producer of the information we encounter could be trusted. Additionally, looking into the different phases of travel planning, it could be distinguished the numerous roles consumers can have using SNSs, from being passive and taking decisions based on the information shared by other members, and turning into active ones whose information is used by others in the online community and having effect on their decisions.

5. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This study has contributed towards broader understanding of Social Networking Sites, and how their use within tourism context has impacted travel planning decisions of tourists. To address the main problem presented in the beginning of this paper which served as a guiding principle, both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered, aiming to provide deeper understanding of the issue, and to tackle the problem from different angles.

In order to understand the influence of SNSs on travel planning process, in the sections above it was looked into how Social Networking Sites were used throughout different stages of travel planning, and in what ways travelers were influenced from their use. What became evident was

that there were some similarities in the use of SNSs during different phases such as self-expression and information search use in both pre- and during trip stages. However, major differences were outlined in the way users used them, and for what purposes.

As it was presented earlier in this thesis, travel planning is a multi-level process, consisting of several stages, during which travelers are required to make complex decisions, which often require specific knowledge. Moreover, due to the intangibility of tourism products and services, providing relevant description and information about them is often a difficult task, as it is rather challenging to describe something that cannot be touched. However, with the development of Internet technologies and rise of Social Media and Social Networks, consumers were offered a new way through which they can create and share information about their travel experiences, which provided the basis for this study, which aim was to investigate in what ways SNSs impact travel planning.

Survey and interview findings indicated the important use of Social Networking Sites as they were actively used by the respondents through different stages of travel planning. In the pre-trip stage of travel SNSs were mainly used as information source, providing valuable knowledge and inputs which tourists could use for their upcoming trips, though it might serve as an inspiration and ideas for future trips. The inspiration can either occur without intentional seeking of travel related information, or as part of the exposure to visual and personal content shared by other users. During the trip, the purpose of SNSs was associated again with the objective to provide travel related inputs, yet, some respondents reported that they used travel related networks to deliver outputs and share their feedback, which would hopefully help other individuals. Self-expression and projection of emotions and thoughts during the trip were also identified as an important element associated with the use of SNSs. In the final stage of travel, when the process is over, providing feedback and reviews evaluating the past experiences which had taken place during the trip represent an opportunity for consumers to contribute to the online Social Networks community by creating and distributing travel related content.

All of the stated above, together with the detailed discussion and comments taking place previously in the paper, indicate the great impact of Social Networking Sites on consumers, and how they interact with one another. However, it could be questioned whether the same results would have been gathered for the study, had other participants were interviewed and took part in

the survey. Taking into consideration the relatively young age of the people who provided the knowledge for this study, and that they are more likely to use SNSs than older groups, as argued earlier in the thesis, further research on the topic might be done, involving wider spectrum of people representing all age groups and various backgrounds.

In addition, with the opportunities created by using SNSs, providing easy access to substantial quantity of information, flexibility for users, and possibility for peer-to-peer communication, SNSs could lead to a number of obstacles and challenges for those using them as outlined previously. Therefore, some respondents claimed that they refer to content shared on various Social Networks; however, they are often skeptical and find the information which they encounter as not relevant to them. Thus it could be questioned what are the motivations and purposes of people to participate in various Social Networks, as they question the credibility and origin of the content distributed in those networks. Perhaps, the feeling of being part of online community is what is more valued by some users, or the possibility to interact and communicate with other consumers, without exposing their real identity and staying anonymous.

One of the limitations of this study is that it focuses on the entire travel and tourism industry, and fails to better understand how SNSs impact specific industry, such as the hospitality industry for example, where it can be investigated how the reviews and comments posted on Social Networks influence the image of specific hotel, and how hotel owners could use these feedback in their advantage, and improve their products and services. Furthermore, by reducing the scope of the study and examining how SNSs are used in different types of tourism, such as leisure, business, dark or volunteer, a more precise and detailed description of the actual influence and different use by tourists might be presented.

After analyzing the strategic impact of Social Networking Site, it can be concluded that SNSs have great influence on travel planning process of tourists, as their functionalities are used for different purposes such as information search, inspirational purposes, self-expression as well as providing inputs and outputs to travel related decisions. However, the level to which the information shared through these networks is viewed and perceived by individuals is very subjective, as users have different patterns and methods through which they look information. Moreover, it should also be pointed out that how credible and trustworthy the content is perceived by users is also very individually dependent.

BIBLIORAPHY:

Boyd, D., & Ellison, N., (2007). Social Network sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. Journal of computer-mediated communication, 13(1), 210-230

Buhalis, D. & Law, R., (2008). Progress in information technology and tourism management: 20 years on and 10 years after the Internet – The state of eTourism research. *Tourism management* 29 (4), 609-623.

Buttle, F., (1998). Word of mouth: understanding and managing referral marketing, Journal of strategic Markeiting, 6L3, 241-254

Cheung, C. & Thadani, D., (2010). The effectiveness of electronic word-of-mouth communication: A literature analysis

Chung, N. & Koo, C., (2014). The use of social media in travel information search

Cohen, S., Prayag, G. & Moital, M., (2014). Consumer behavior in tourism: Concepts, influences and opportunities. Current issues in tourism, 17:10, 872-909

Cox, C., Burgess, S., Sellitto, C. & Buultjens, J., (2009). The role of user-generated content in Tourists' travel planning behavior. Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management, 18(8), 743-746

Creswell, J. & Clark, P., (2007). Designing and Conducting mixed methods research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Creswell, J. & Clark, V., (2011). Designing and conducting mixed methods research 2nd edition

Erkan, I., Evans, C., (2015). The influence of eWOM in social media on consumer's purchase intentions: An extended approach to information adoption

Fotis, J., Buhalis, D. & Rossides, N. (2012). Social media use and impact during holiday travel planning process.

Ghauri, P. & Grønhaug, K., (2005). Researh methods in business studies A Practical Guide. 3rd Ed. Harlow, UK: Financial Times prentice Hall

Gratton, C., Jones, I., 2004. *Research methods for sport studies*. 1st ed. Abingdon: Rouledge

Henning-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K., Walsch, G. & Gremler, D., (2004). Electronic word of mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the internet? International Journal of Electronic Commerce, 8(2), 51-74

Jeng, J. & Fesenmaier, D., (2002). Coneptualizing the travel decision-making hierarchy. A review of recent developments *Tourism Analysis*, 7(1), 15-32

Kaplan, A. & Haenlein, M., (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. Business Horizons, 53(1), 59-68

Kotler, P., Bowen, J. & Makens, J., (2010). Marketing for hospitality and tourism. 5th ed. Pearson, Upper Saddle River.

Leung, D., Law, D., Hoof, H. & Buhalis, D., (2013). Social Media in Tourism and Hospitality: A literature review, journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing, 30:1-2, 3-22

Li, Y., Lin, Y., Tsai, P. & Wang, Y., (2015). Traveller-generated contents for destination image formation: Mainland china travelers to Taiwan as a case study. Journal of travel & Tourism marketing, 32:518-533

Litvin, S., Goldsmith, R. & Pan, B., (2006). Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management.

Luo, Q. & Zhong, D., (2013). Using social network analysis to explain communication characteristics of travel-related electronic word-of-mouth networking sites

*Mack, R., Blose, J. * Pan, B. (2007). Believe it or not: Credibility of blogs in tourism. Journal of Vacation Marketing, 14, 133-144*

Mendez, J., Leiva, F. & Fernandez, J., (2015). The influence of e-word-of-mouth on travel decision-making: consumer profiles, Current issues in tourism, 18:11, 1001-1021

Montag, C., & Reuter, M. (2015). Internet Addiction: Neuroscientific Approaches and Therapeutical Interventions

Noti, E., (2013). Web 2.0 and its influence in the tourism sector. European Scientific Journal, vol. 9, No 20

O'Reilly, T., (2005). What is Web 2.0? Design patters and business models for the next generation of software. Accessed on: June 2016, http://www.oreilly.com/pub/a//web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html

Rathonyi, G., (2013). Influence of social media on tourism- especially among student of the University of Debrecen, Volume 07

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. &Thornhill, A., (2009). *Research methods for business students.* 5th ed. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited

Sawbrooke, J. & Horner, S. (1999). Consumer behavior in tourism.

Selm, M & Jankowski, W., (2006). Conducting online surveys: Quality and Quantity, 40(3), 435-456

Sigala, M., Christou, E., & Gretzel, U. (2016). Social Media in Travel, Tourism and Hospitality

Sukhu, A., Zhang, T. & Bilgihan, Z. (2015). Factors influencing Information-sharing behavior in Social Networking Sites

Tan, W. & Chen, T., (2012). The Usage of online tourist information sources in tourist information search: an exploratory study, The service industries Journal, 32:3, 451-476

Tham, A., Croy, G. & Mair, J., (2013. Social media in Destination choice: Distinctive electronic word-of-moth dimensions.

Turban, E., King, D., Lee, J., Lian. T. & Turban, D., (2010). Electronic commerce 2010: a managerial perspective (6th. Ed). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson-prentice Hall.

Tussyadiah, I., & Inversini, A. (2015) Information and communication technologies in tourism 2015

Wright, B., (2005). Researching Internet-based populations: Advantages and disadvantages of online surveys research. Journal of computer-mediated communication, 10(3)

Xiang, Z., (2014). Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2014

Yazdanifard, R. & Yee, L. (2014). Impact of social networking sited on hospitality and tourism industries. Journal of human social science Volume 14 Issue 8

APPENDIX:

Appendix 1: Interview questions

1) In relation to the last trip you had, how did you start planning it in terms of collecting information about it?

   a. Did you use the internet at all for any reason related with planning and preparing your holiday trip? How?

2) During your holidays did u visit any types of social networking sites for any reason? If yes, tell me what you did during these visits.

3) When you returned back from your travel trip, did u visit any social networking site to write feedback and provide review of your experience?

4) Overall do you consider social media helped you at all in planning your holidays, both before and during?

5) Could you summarize the role of SNSs in your travel planning process? Does it supplement other information sources or do you use it as the main source of information?

6) How do the different sites influence you in your travel planning?

7) What do you think about the content presented in different social media sites?

Appendix 2: Survey

Screening questions:

1) Have you used Facebook or Twitter within the last 5 months?
   o Yes
   o No

2) Have you used Facebook, TripAdvisor or other tourism related social websites for travel related information within the last year?
   o Yes
   o No

3) How do use the SNSs in relation to travel planning?
   o Search for specific, offers, discounts etc.
   o To get an inspiration for my next travel
   o To search for reviews of hotels, restaurants, attractions
   o To share my experience, photos, videos with other

4) Which of the following information sources do you use when you are about to travel somewhere?
    o Friends and/or relatives
    o Tour operators or travel agencies
    o Newspapers, travel brochures, magazines
    o Social Networking Sites, such as Facebook, MySpace, Youtube, Instagram, TripAdvisor
    o Travel blogs and forums

5) How important is the following when using SNSs when planning/making trips?
    o Obtaining travel information
    o Trusting the site
    o Seeking a sense of belonging
    o Be amused by other members
    o Communicating with other members
    o Having fun
    o Seeking identity of myself
    o Getting involved with other members

6) Do you use SNSs during your trips to get any sort of information for your trip? If yes, do you make changes to all or part of your existing travel plans after using the content provided on SNSs?
    o Strongly disagree
    o Slightly disagree
    o Neutral
    o Slightly agree
    o Strongly agree

7) Once your trip is over how likely are you to provide feedback and/or write a review to evaluate your experiences?
    o Never
    o Seldom
    o Sometimes
    o Often
    o Always