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E-WOM THROUGH THE PRISM OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF USERS OF TOURIST SERVICES

Abstract

Objectives: Interpersonal influence and word-of-mouth communication represent the most important sources of information used in the purchase decision process. This form of communication has a special role and importance in tourism due to the intangible nature of products offered in this market. With the advancement in information technologies an increasing number of consumers – users of tourist services use the Internet to obtain information about a tourist destination and, at the same time, share their experiences with other consumers. In this way online interpersonal influence and electronic word-of-mouth communication are realized. The aim of this paper is to examine whether there are any significant differences in the electronic word-of-mouth effects and generation by consumers – users of tourist services in relation to their socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, and education). Methodology: The sample included 228 respondents from the province of Vojvodina. The method of cross-tabulation was applied in order to test the hypotheses. Implications/results: Survey results provide tourism marketers with a more detailed insight into the behavior of users of tourist services with respect to their socio-demographic characteristics. Contribution: This paper contributes to further theoretical elaboration of the current phenomenon of electronic word-of-mouth in terms of explaining it through the prism of causes and effects.

Key words: *tourism, e-WOM, recommendations, socio-demographic characteristics*

JEL classification: *M31, Z30*

E-WOM КРОЗ ПРИЗМУ СОЦИОДЕМОГРАФСКЕ АНАЛИЗЕ КОРИСНИКА ТУРИСТИЧКИХ УСЛУГА

Apstrakt

Циљеви: Интерперсонални утицај и word-of-mouth комуникација представљају један од најважнијих извора информација у процесу доношења одлука о куповини. Посебну улогу и значај овај вид комуникације има у туризму с обзиром на неопитљиву природу услужног производа који се појављују на овом тржишту.

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Развојем информационих технологија све већи број потрошача – корисника туристичких услуга користи Интернет како би прибавили информације о туристичкој дестинацији али и поделили своја искуства са другим потрошачима. На овај начин остварује се онлине интерперсонални утицај и електронска word-of-mouth комуникација. Циљ рада је да се испита да ли постоје значајне разлике у ефектима и генерисању е-вом од стране потрошача – корисника туристичких услуга у односу на њихове социодемографске карактеристике (пол, године и образовање). Методологија: Узорак је обухватио 228 испитаника са територије покрајине Војводине. За тестирање постављених хипотеза примењен је метод унакрсног табелирања. Импликације/резултати: Резултати истраживања омогућавају доносиоцима одлука у сектору туризма детаљнији увид у понашање корисника туристичких услуга са аспекта њихових социодемографских карактеристика. Допринос: Рад треба да пружи допринос даљој теоријској грађи актуелног феномена е-вом у смислу објашњавања истог кроз призму узрочника али и ефеката овог опредељујућег фактора који обликује понашање потрошача -корисника туристичких услуга.

Кључнеречи: туризам, е-WOM, препоруке, социодемографске карактеристике потрошача

Introduction

The emergence and further development of the Internet have led to dramatic changes in the behaviour of consumers – users of tourist services. Today’s potential tourists have access to a wide range of different types of information provided by tourist organisations, companies, and other consumers (Buhalis, Law, 2008). Thus, blogs, online reviews, and social networks enable consumers to interact virtually and to share information, opinions, and experiences about different products and services (Filieri, McLeay, 2014).

This paper deals with the phenomenon of electronic interpersonal communication – e-WOM (electronic word-of-mouth) in tourism. The aim is to examine whether there are any significant differences regarding the e-WOM effects and generation by consumers – users of tourist services with respect to their socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, and education). Following the introduction, the paper proceeds with the review of literature related to the studied phenomenon – e-WOM, explanation of methodology, research results, and the discussion and conclusion.

Literature Review

Being a process which includes provision of information and the exchange of ideas, emotions, and experiences with the aim of achieving a particular effect, marketing communication is of huge importance in tourism (Lončarić, Ribarić, Farkaš, 2016). This is also due to the fact that tourist services are intangible and cannot be experienced and evaluated prior to purchase (Litvin et al., 2008; Philips et al., 2013). Therefore, before

choosing a tourist destination, potential users of tourist services search for information which would facilitate their decision-making process. The development of the Internet has led to the expansion of possibilities of collecting information – consumers can view comments made by other consumers as well as post their own comments, and thus participate actively in the e-WOM process (Bronner, de Hoog, 2011). In this way, the Internet supports all phases of the purchasing process – the pre-travel phase (the phase in which all activities relating to search for information and the purchase can be undertaken online), the on-travel phase (the phase in which consumers can use various interactive platforms during the travel), and the post-travel phase (the phase in which consumers “share” their experiences, opinions, and advice online) (Chung, Buhalis, 2008; Grubor, Leković, Tomić, 2019).

Jalilvand, Esfahani and Samiei (2011) define e-WOM as a positive or negative statement made by potential, current or previous users – consumers about a product, service or company, which is accessible to a wide audience through the Internet. Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan (2008) describe the e-WOM as informal communication among consumers which takes place on the Internet. Thus, e-WOM includes online reviews, recommendations and opinions (Serra Cantalops, Salvi, 2014). Unlike traditional WOM, e-WOM enables consumers to collect information from a large number of geographically dispersed and anonymous consumers (Park, Lee, 2009).

Depending on the extent of participation in e-WOM, there are several types of consumers – users of tourist services (Nonnecke, Preece, 2001; Yoo, Gretzel, 2008). The first type refers to consumers who just browse and collect information via the e-WOM, but do not contribute. The second type includes consumers who ask questions, whereas the third type comprises consumers who participate actively in the e-WOM by asking and answering questions, and sharing their opinions and experiences related to a certain product. Similarly, Lončarić, Ribarić and Farkaš (2016) identify two types of consumers in their research. The first type refers to “moderate e-WOM users”, who occasionally read other consumers’ comments and sometimes use the Internet as a source of information regarding their travel plans and destination choices. These consumers are not likely to “share” their opinion, experiences, and recommendations. The second type refers to “passionate e-WOM users”, who almost always use the Internet as a source of information, and read comments and recommendations made by other consumers. The majority of consumers belonging to this type “share” their opinion and experiences with other consumers, especially when they are extremely satisfied or dissatisfied with a certain product or service. The most common motives for “sharing” opinions and recommendations through the Internet are as follows: the desire to help other consumers choose the right product or service, and the need to publicly express the opinion about a product or service (Lee et al., 2011).

Taking into account the socio-demographic characteristics of consumers – users of tourist services, Brooner and de Hoog (2011) conclude that online comments are most frequently posted by consumers who belong to the middle class and are under the age of 55. Similarly, Lončarić, Ribarić and Farkaš (2016) conclude in their research that younger persons are more inclined to post comments and “share” their opinion, experience, and recommendation via the Internet.

Methodology

The paper presents a part of the results of the research which aims to point to the existence of differences in frequency of making recommendations (related to the choice of tourist destination) via the Internet and social network membership with respect to gender, age, and level of education. The online enquiry was conducted in the period from October to December 2018 on a convenience sample of 228 respondents of both genders and different age and education levels in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part contained questions about socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, the second part included questions related to personal recommendations, whereas the third part consisted of questions related to recommendations made by consumers via the Internet (Brooner, de Hoog, 2011). The characteristics of respondents are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of respondents (n=228)

Characteristics		Number of respondents (n)	Structure (%)
Gender	Male	57	25,0
	Female	171	75,0
Age	up to 30	195	85,5
	31-45	26	11,4
	46-65	7	3,1
	65+	-	-
Education	Elementary education	-	-
	Secondary education	73	32,0
	Higher education	155	68,0
Recommendations (the Internet)	Several times/day	27	11,8
	2-3 times/week	49	21,5
	2-3 times/month	49	21,5
	2-3 times/year	46	20,2
	Never	57	25,0
Social network membership	Facebook	153	67,1
	Twitter	4	1,8
	I use both networks, but I use Facebook more.	56	24,6
	I am a member of another social network.	7	3,1
	I am not a member of any social network.	8	3,5

Source: The authors' calculation

The structure of the sample shows that female respondents make up the dominant gender category (75%). A significant portion of surveyed participants are up to 30 years of age (85.5%), whereas the smallest percentage of respondents belong to the 46 - 65 age group (3.1%). The majority of respondents completed higher education (68.0%), whereas a smaller share of respondents (32.0%) completed secondary education. The most commonly reported frequency of recommendations made via the Internet refers to respondents who share them 2-3 times a week and 2-3 times a month. The majority of research participants are members of Facebook.

Based on the literature review and research aims, the following hypotheses were set:

H₁: There are gender-related differences in the frequency of recommendations made via the Internet and social network membership, i.e. female respondents make recommendations more often and are more frequent members of social networks.

H₂: There are age-related differences in the frequency of recommendations made via the Internet and social network membership, i.e. the respondents up to 30 years of age make recommendations more often and are more frequent members of social networks.

H₃: There are education-related differences in the frequency of recommendations made via the Internet and social network membership, i.e. the respondents who completed secondary education make recommendations more often and are more frequent members of social networks.

The hypotheses were tested using the cross-tabulation method. The IBM SPSS 21 statistical software was employed for processing data and testing the proposed hypotheses.

Results

A difference in frequency of recommendations (related to the choice of tourist destination) made via the Internet and social network membership according to respondents' gender is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Testing the independence of variables: recommendations – the Internet, social network membership, and respondents' gender

		Gender		Total	
		Male	Female		
Recommendations (the Internet)	Several times/ day	Frequency	6	21	27
		% Recommendations	22.2%	77.8%	100.0%
		% Gender	10.5%	12.3%	11.8%
	2-3 times/ week	Frequency	19	30	49
		% Recommendations	38.8%	61.2%	100.0%
		% Gender	33.3%	17.5%	21.5%
	2-3 times / month	Frequency	17	32	49
		% Recommendations	34.7%	65.3%	100.0%
		% Gender	29.8%	18.7%	21.5%
	2-3 times/ year	Učestalost	10	36	46
		% Preporuke	21.7%	78.3%	100.0%
		% Pol	17.5%	21.1%	20.2%
	Never	Frequency	5	52	57
		% Recommendations	8.8%	91.2%	100.0%
		% Gender	8.8%	30.4%	25.0%

Social membership network	Facebook	Frequency	34	119	153
		% Membership	22.2%	77.8%	100.0%
		% Gender	59.6%	69.6%	67.1%
	Twitter	Frequency	2	2	4
		% Membership	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
		% Gender	3.5%	1.2%	1.8%
	I use both networks, but I use Facebook more.	Frequency	14	42	56
		% Membership	25.0%	75.0%	100.0%
		% Gender	24.6%	24.6%	24.6%
	I am a member of another social network.	Frequency	2	5	7
		% Membership	28.6%	71.4%	100.0%
		% Gender	3.5%	2.9%	3.1%
	I am not a member of any social network.	Frequency	5	3	8
		% Membership	62.5%	37.5%	100.0%
% Gender		8.8%	1.8%	3.5%	

Source: The authors' calculation

The cross-tabulation of category variables: recommendations – the Internet and respondents' gender shows that 6 male respondents (22.2%) disseminate information about tourist products/services to other consumers via the Internet several times a day, 19 male respondents (38.8%) disseminate recommendations 2-3 times a week, 17 male respondents (34.7%) share recommendations 2-3 times a month, 10 male respondents (21.7%) disseminate recommendations 2-3 times a year, whereas 5 male respondents (8.8%) never share recommendations via the Internet. As regards female respondents, 21 of them (77.8%) disseminate information about tourist products/services to other consumers via the Internet several times a day, 30 female respondents (61.2%) share recommendations 2-3 times a week, 32 female respondents (65.3%) share recommendations 2-3 times a month, 36 female respondents (78.3%) disseminate recommendations 2-3 times a year, whereas 52 women (91.2%) never share recommendations via the Internet. The majority of male respondents disseminate information about tourist products/services to other consumers via the Internet 2-3 times a week (33.3%), whereas most women do it 2-3 times a year (21.1%), i.e. male respondents make recommendations via the Internet more often.

The cross-tabulation of category variables: social network membership and respondents' gender shows that 34 male respondents (22.2%) are members of Facebook, 2 male respondents (50.0%) are members of Twitter, 14 male respondents (25.0%) are members of both networks, but use Facebook more, 2 male respondents (28.6%) are members of another social network, whereas 5 male respondents (62.5%) are not members of any social network. As for female respondents, it can be seen that 119 of them (77.8%) are members of Facebook, 2 female respondents (50.0%) are members of Twitter, 42 female respondents (75.0%) are members of both networks, but use Facebook more, 5 female respondents (71.4%) are members of another social network, whereas 3 female respondents (37.5%) are not members of any social network. Male respondents are

most frequently members of Facebook (59.6%), the same as women (69.6%). However, female respondents are members of social networks more often.

Based on the results derived from cross-tabulation, we can conclude that women are more likely to be members of social networks, whereas male respondents make recommendations via the Internet more often. The obtained results indicate that the hypothesis H_1 is partly confirmed.

The age-related difference in frequency of recommendations (related to the choice of tourist destination) made via the Internet and social network membership is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Testing the independence of variables: recommendations – the Internet, social network membership, and respondents' age

		Age			Total	
		Up to 30	31-45	46-65		
Recommendations (the Internet)	Several times/ day	Frequency	24	1	2	27
		% Recommendations	88.9%	3.7%	7.4%	100.0%
		% Age	12.3%	3.8%	28.6%	11.8%
	2-3 times/week	Frequency	42	6	1	49
		% Recommendations	85.7%	12.2%	2.0%	100.0%
		% Age	21.5%	23.1%	14.3%	21.5%
	2-3 times/ month	Frequency	39	10	0	49
		% Recommendations	79.6%	20.4%	0.0%	100.0%
		% Age	20.0%	38.5%	0.0%	21.5%
	2-3 times/year	Frequency	40	4	2	46
		% Recommendations	87.0%	8.7%	4.3%	100.0%
		% Age	20.5%	15.4%	28.6%	20.2%
	Never	Frequency	50	5	2	57
		% Recommendations	87.7%	8.8%	3.5%	100.0%
		% Age	25.6%	19.2%	28.6%	25.0%
Social network membership	Facebook	Frequency	137	11	5	153
		% Membership	89.5%	7.2%	3.3%	100.0%
		% Age	70.3%	42.3%	71.4%	67.1%
	Twitter	Frequency	4	0	0	4
		% Membership	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
		% Age	2.1%	0.0%	0.0%	1.8%
	I use both networks, but I use Facebook more.	Frequency	47	8	1	56
		% Membership	83.9%	14.3%	1.8%	100.0%
		% Age	24.1%	30.8%	14.3%	24.6%
	I am a member of another social network.	Frequency	5	1	1	7
		% Membership	71.4%	14.3%	14.3%	100.0%
		% Age	2.6%	3.8%	14.3%	3.1%
	I am not a member of any social network.	Frequency	2	6	0	8
		% Membership	25.0%	75.0%	0.0%	100.0%
		% Age	1.0%	23.1%	0.0%	3.5%

Source: The authors' calculation

The cross-tabulation of category variables: recommendations – the Internet and the age of respondents shows that 24 respondents up to 30 years of age (92.3%) disseminate information about tourist products/services to other consumers via the Internet several times a day, 42 respondents up to 30 years of age (85.7%) share recommendations 2-3 times a week, 39 respondents up to 30 years of age (79.6%) share recommendations 2-3 times a month, 40 respondents up to 30 years of age (87.0%) share recommendations 2-3 times a year, whereas 50 respondents up to 30 years of age (87.7%) never share recommendations via the Internet. As regards respondents belonging to the 31-45 age group, it can be seen that 1 respondent (3.8%) disseminates information about tourist products/services to other consumers via the Internet several times a day, 6 respondents (12.2%) share recommendations 2-3 times a week, 10 respondents (20.4%) share recommendations 2-3 times a month, 4 respondents (8.7%) share recommendations 2-3 times a year, whereas 5 respondents (8.8%) never share recommendations via the Internet. Among the respondents aged 46 to 65, 1 respondent (3.8%) disseminates information about tourist products/services to other consumers via the Internet several times a day, 1 respondent (2.0%) shares recommendations 2-3 times a week, 2 respondents (4.3%) share recommendations 2-3 times a year, whereas 2 respondents (3.5%) never share recommendations via the Internet. The respondents in the age group up to 30 most frequently disseminate information about tourist products/services to other consumers via the Internet 2-3 times a week (21.5%), the respondents in the 31-45 age group 2-3 times a month (38.5%), whereas the respondents in the 46-65 age group 2-3 times a year (28.6%), i.e. the respondents up to 30 years of age make recommendations via the Internet more often.

The cross-tabulation of category variables: social network membership and respondents' age shows that 138 respondents up to 30 years of age (90.2%) are members of Facebook, 4 respondents (100.0%) are members of Twitter, 47 respondents (83.9%) are members of both networks, but use Facebook more, 5 respondents (71.4%) are members of another social network, whereas 2 respondents (25.0%) are not members of any social network. As for respondents aged 31-45, it can be seen that 11 respondents (7.2%) are members of Facebook, 8 respondents (14.3%) are members of both Facebook and Twitter, but use Facebook more, 1 respondent (14.3%) is a member of another social network, whereas 6 respondents (75.0%) are not members of any social network. As regards respondents belonging to the 46 to 65 age group, we see that 4 respondents (2.6%) are members of Facebook, 1 respondent (1.8%) is a member of both Facebook and Twitter, but uses Facebook more, 1 respondent (14.3%) is a member of another social network, whereas 6 respondents (75%) are not members of any social network. Among respondents aged 46 to 65, it can be seen that 4 respondents (2.6%) are members of Facebook, 1 respondent (1.8%) is a member of both Facebook and Twitter, but uses Facebook more, and 1 respondent (14.3%) is a member of another social network. The respondents aged up to 30 are most frequently members of Facebook (70.4%), the respondents aged 31 to 45 are members of Facebook (42.3%) as well as the respondents belonging to the 46-50 age group (66.6%), i.e. the respondents aged up to 30 are members of social networks more often.

Based on the results derived from cross-tabulation, it can be concluded that the respondents up to 30 years of age make recommendations via the Internet more often and are more frequently members of social networks. Taking into account the obtained results, it can be concluded that the hypothesis H_2 is confirmed.

A difference in frequency of recommendations (related to the choice of tourist destination) made via the Internet and social network membership according to the level of education is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Testing the independence of variables :recommendations – the Internet, social network membership, respondents' level of education

		Level of education		Total	
		Secondary	Higher		
Recommendations (the Internet)	Several times/day	Frequency	6	21	27
		% Recommendations	22.2%	77.8%	100.0%
		% Education	8.2%	13.5%	11.8%
	2-3 times/week	Frequency	16	33	49
		% Recommendations	32.7%	67.3%	100.0%
		% Education	21.9%	21.3%	21.5%
	2-3 times/month	Frequency	19	30	49
		% Recommendations	38.8%	61.2%	100.0%
		% Education	26.0%	19.4%	21.5%
	2-3 times/year	Frequency	9	37	46
		% Recommendations	19.6%	80.4%	100.0%
		% Education	12.3%	23.9%	20.2%
	Never	Frequency	23	34	57
		% Recommendations	40.4%	59.6%	100.0%
		% Education	31.5%	21.9%	25.0%
Social network membership	Facebook	Frequency	45	108	153
		% Membership	29.4%	70.6%	100.0%
		% Education	61.6%	69.7%	67.1%
	Twitter	Frequency	4	0	4
		% Membership	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
		% Education	5.5%	0.0%	1.8%
	I use both networks, but I use Facebook more.	Frequency	20	36	56
		% Membership	35.7%	64.3%	100.0%
		% Education	27.4%	23.2%	24.6%
	I am a member of another social network.	Frequency	2	5	7
		% Membership	28.6%	71.4%	100.0%
		% Education	2.7%	3.2%	3.1%
	I am not a member of any social network.	Frequency	2	6	8
		% Membership	25.0%	75.0%	100.0%
		% Education	2.7%	3.9%	3.5%

Source: *The authors' calculation*

The cross-tabulation of category variables: recommendations – the Internet and respondents' level of education shows that 6 respondents who completed secondary education (22.2%) disseminate information about tourist products/services to other consumers via the Internet several times a day, 16 respondents (32.7%) share

recommendations 2-3 times a week, 19 respondents (38.8%) share recommendations 2-3 times a month, 9 respondents (19.6%) share recommendations 2-3 times a year, whereas 23 respondents (40.4%) never share recommendations via the Internet. As regards respondents who completed higher education, it can be seen that 21 respondents (77.8%) disseminate information about tourist products/services to other consumers via the Internet several times a day, 33 respondents (67.3%) share recommendations 2-3 times a week, 30 respondents (61.2%) disseminate recommendations 2-3 times a month, 37 respondents (80.4%) share recommendations 2-3 times a year, whereas 34 respondents (59.6%) never disseminate information via the Internet. The respondents who completed secondary education most frequently disseminate information about tourist products/services to other consumers via the Internet 2-3 times a month (26.0%), whereas the respondents who completed higher education 2-3 times a year (23.9%), i.e. the respondents who completed secondary education make recommendations via the Internet more often.

The cross-tabulation of category variables: social network membership and the level of education of surveyed participants shows that 68 respondents who completed secondary education (44.4%) are members of Facebook, 4 respondents (100%) are members of Twitter, 20 respondents (35.7%) are members of both networks, but use Facebook more, 2 respondents (28.6%) are members of another social network, whereas 2 respondents (25.0%) are not members of any social network. As regards respondents who completed higher education, it can be seen that 85 respondents (55.6%) are members of Facebook, 36 respondents (64.3%) are members of both Facebook and Twitter, but use Facebook more, 5 respondents (71.4%) are members of another social network, whereas 6 respondents (75.0%) are not members of any social network. Both, the respondents who completed secondary education (70.8%) and the respondents who completed higher education (64.6%) are most frequently members of Facebook. However, the respondents who completed secondary education use social networks more often.

Based on the results derived from cross-tabulation, it can be concluded that the respondents who completed higher education make recommendations via the Internet more often and are members of social networks more frequently. Taking into account the obtained results, it can be concluded that the hypothesis H_3 is confirmed.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although marketing managers in tourism strive to create a positive and attractive image of a destination, there are factors which are outside their control. One of those factors is manifested in the fact that consumers – users of tourist services interact with one another (Grubor, Leković, Tomić, 2019). In this process, which is called interpersonal communication, consumers exchange their opinions, experiences, and recommendations related to tourist destinations they have visited. In this way, consumers, both personally or via the Internet, affect the behaviour of other consumers in the process of choosing the potential tourist destination. It is marketing managers' responsibility to ensure that their consumers “go” on the Internet and “share” their experiences with other consumers, and at the same time become affected by experiences and recommendations of their peers. Additionally, with the aim of improving the tourist offer and increasing sales,

marketing managers must target consumers who consider online purchase “a good idea” (Đokić, Milićević, 2017).

Similar to findings of previous studies (Bronner, de Hoog, 2011; Lončarić, Ribarić and Farkaš, 2016), the results presented in this paper confirm the claim that males aged up to 30 who completed secondary education most frequently recommend tourist products/services to other consumers via the Internet. Furthermore, the results suggest that females aged up to 30 who completed secondary education are members of Facebook more often, and that Facebook is the social network most commonly used by respondents.

The main limitation of this paper lies in the relatively small convenience sample as well as the fact that the research was conducted only in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. Further research could include a greater number of respondents and cover a larger research territory, as well as look into consumers’ motives for “sharing” experiences and recommendations related to the choice of tourist destination via the Internet.

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