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Sosiaalinen media osana venäläisten turistien tiedonhakua

Tiivistelmä

Tämä opinnäytetyö tarkastelee sosiaalisen media käyttöä osana venäläisten turistien tiedonhakua. Tutkimuksen kohderyhmäksi valittiin Pohjois-Karjalassa vierailevat venäläiset turistit. Tutkimuksessa tarkasteltiin kuluttajakäyttäytymisen matkailuun liittyviä erityispiirteitä. Lisäksi tutkittiin, mistä venäläiset turistit etsivät Pohjois-Karjalaan liittyvää matkailutietoa ja kuinka laajasti sosiaalista mediaa käytettiin tiedon lähteenä. Tutkimus selvitti, onko sosiaalisella medialla vaikutusta venäläisen turistin ratkaisuntekoon ja kohteen valintaan liittyvissä kysymyksissä ja arvioitiin sosiaalisen median mahdollisuuksia kohdemarkkinoinnissa venäläisille turisteille. Idean tutkimuksen toteutukseen antoi paikallinen matkailuorganisaatio Joensuusta, mutta tutkimustulokset ovat hyödyllisiä kaikille niille osapuolille, jotka haluavat hyödyntää sosiaalista mediaa osana markkinointistrategiaansa venäläisille turisteille.
Tutkimus toteutettiin määrällisen tutkimuksen metodia käyttäen. Empiirinen osa tutkimusta toteutettiin Joulukuussa 2010 haastattelemalla venäläisiä turisteja kauppakeskus Prismassa Joensuussa. Haastattelumateriaalin keräyksessä käytettiin kyselylomaketta. Osallistujat tutkimukseen valittiin sattumanvaraisesti, jotta tutkimukseen saatiin mukaan kattava otanta venäläisiä Pohjois-Karjalassa vierailevia turisteja. Kaiken kaikkiaan 96 vastausta hyväksyttiin mukaan tutkimukseen.
Saatujen tuloksien mukaan Pohjois-Karjalaan matkaavat venäläiset turistit vierailevat kohteessaan toistuvasti ja näin ollen eivät etsi matkakohteestaan aktiivisesti tietoa. Kuitenkin, tutkimus osoittaa että venäläiset turistit käyttävät sosiaalista mediaa aktiivisesti osana yleisesti matkailuun liittyvää tiedonhakua, koska se yhdistää kaksi tiedonhaussa heidän eniten käyttämäänsä lähdettä - internetin ja ystävät ja sukulaiset. Lisäksi tulokset osoittavat, että sosiaalisella medialla on vaikutusta venäläisten turistien päätöksentekoon, mikä tukee sosiaalisen median hyödyllisyyttä kohdemarkkinoinnissa venäläisille turisteille.

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Title
The Role of social media in Russian tourists' search for information

Abstract

This thesis discusses the consumer behaviour of tourist and the use of social media in Russian tourists' search for information. The focus group of the study was Russian tourists visiting North Karelia as a travel destination. The study investigated the specific features of the consumer behaviour of Russian tourists: how the tourists find information about the North Karelia region and more specifically how largely social media is used as the source for this information. The study also investiged whether social media affects the decision making and destination choosing of the Russian tourists. The purpose was to find out if social media marketing can be used to reach potential Russian tourists. The idea for this study was generated by a local tourism organisation in Joensuu, but the results of this study are beneficial for all parties assessing the possibilities of social media marketing for Russian tourists.

The study was quantitative practise-based by nature. The empirical part of this study was implemented in December 2010 by interviewing Russian tourists in Prisma supermarket in Joensuu. The data collection method was a questionnaire. The participants for this study were randomly selected in order to reach an extensive sample of the Russian tourists visiting North Karelia, and all together 96 questionnaire answer were qualified for this study.

The results of the study show that Russian tourists visit North Karelia quite frequently and do not look for tourism information very actively. However, social media is actively used as the source of touristm related information in general, because it merges together the two main sources of information most used by the Russian tourists - the internet and frineds and relatives. In addition, the result prove that social media has a significant influence on the Russian tourists decision making and thus provide support for the use of social media for marketing purposes for Russian tourists.

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THESIS:
THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN RUSSIAN TOURISTS' SEARCH FOR INFORMATION

Thesis
August 30, 2011

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Study background

Finland, including the North Karelia region, is regarded as an interesting tourism location among Russian tourists. Every year hundreds of thousands of Russians visit Finland on holiday or for other purposes. Flexible means of transportation between Russia and Finland makes Finland a convenient choice of travel destination. In Finland Russian tourists comprise a class of their own; without a doubt they are considered as having some of the most potential out of customer groups in Finland. Therefore, the focus of the study was put on the Russian tourists.

What attracts Russian tourists to come to Finland and how do Russian tourists choose their travel destination? This is essential information for tourism providers. The knowledge of the preferences of Russian tourists and their means of information research gives the tourism providers the possibility to influence the tourists' decision making by promotional means. The key task is to identify the main channels where the information is distributed. The Internet nowdays is naturally the most popular source of information for many tourists. A broad variation of different pages with travel related information is provided for tourists. In addition, the information distribution on the Internet has brought about a new environment known as social media. Social media acts as a growing trend in tourism marketing. Marketers have come to understand that the power of tourism related information distribution has passed from tourism providers to the tourists themselves. Tourists do not look for official tourism information sources, but rather ask recommendation from other travelers. Therefore, exploiting the possibilities of new innovative social media marketing would be an advantage for tourism companies.

An objective of this study was to find out how Russian tourists find information about the North Karelia region as a travel destination. Referring to the changes in information research in the Internet, the main interest was to examine to what extend Russian tourists use social media in their information research process. The study explains the patterns of information research related to tourism and their effects on consumer buying behavior. It also introduces viewpoints on how social media can be utilized in destination marketing.

The information research habits of Russian tourists are then presented according to the results gained by questionnaire interviews. Finally, the conclusions based on the results are discussed at the end of this study.

1.2 Russian tourism

The political, economical and social changes in Russia have been immense in the past few decades. This has influenced Russian outbound tourism as well. Actually, the demand for travelling in Russia started to grow particulary after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when travelling became possible on a larger scale. The possibility to travel has contributed to the Russian tourism in Finland as well. Evidently, the convenient accessibility from Russia to Finland by railway and by road plays a role in the destination choice, and the statistics certify the significance of the Russian tourism in Finland. According to a study executed in 2010 by the Finnish Tourist Board, a total of 2.2 million Russian visitors entered Finland in 2009, which contributed one third of the total amount of foreign visitors to Finland. Over 80% of these travels were done by road (Finnish Tourist Board 2010). Moreover, according to the latest statistics, Russians were the largest group of foreign tourists in Finland in January 2011, encompassing nearly 51% of the total overnights stays by foreign tourists (Statistics Finland 2011). In 2010 the border crossings in the eastern borders of Finland grew by 13.7% compared to the previous year, and the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs granted in 2010 a record number of visas for foreign tourists (Findikaattori 2011). Among other popular Western European holiday destinations such as Turkey, Egypt, Estonia or Germany, Finland was ranked as the undisputed leader with 2.8 million Russian visitors in 2007 (World Tourism organisation 2009).

It is clear that Russian tourists comprise a high potential group for Finnish tourism. Finnish holiday destinations continuously allure Russian tourists to visit. Russian tourists have several reasons for visiting Finland. The three main recorded reasons are tours, sport holidays and seasonal holidays during Christmas and the New Year. It is worth mentioning that Russians often travel abroad for other reasons than just taking a holiday. Day trips, shuttle trading and shopping constitute a considerable amount of the visits too (World Tourism Organisation 2009).

Although the statistics report the high amount of Russian tourists travelling to Finland, it is essential to mention that not all tourists have Finland as their final destination. Finland is also used by Russian tourists as a getaway country to travel elsewhere in Europe. Three main types of tourist groups can be recognised to explain the differences in travel motivation. The first group consists of those Russian tourists with Finland as the main destination. They visit Finland either for leisure purposes or come to visit friends and family. The second group is Russian tourists who travel through Finland to other countries and use Finland as a getaway destination. These tourists stay in Finland only a few days and are not interested in Finland as their main travel destination. The third group consists of Russian tourists who use Finland only as a transit country. For them, Finland is a convenient travel point with safe and well functioning transport connections to continue their travel to the final destination (Kosonen, Paajanen&Reittu 2005).

1.3 North Karelia region as a travel destination

North Karelia is a competitive travel region in Finland. The attractiveness and competitiveness of the North Karelia region comprises from its nature and peaceful environment with various middle sized cities offering cultural experiences. North Karelia has a competitive assortment of active sports holiday, shopping and countryside travelling, along with good possibilities for fishing and cottage renting. The cities of North Karelia offer various festival events around the year and presentable options for accommodation and dining.

The North Karelia region is located next to Russia and the region has a long history of cooperation with its neighbouring country. For example Joensuu, which is the capital city of North Karelia, was founded in 1848 by Tsar Nikolai I of Russia. The traditions in trade between North Karelia and Russia extend to the last century, and the customs of close relationships are due to the long history. Because of its close location to Russia, North Karelia can be easily reached by Russian tourists by air, by road or by railway.

North Karelia attracts Russian tourists. Recently its popularity among Russian tourists has seen a slight increase in the number of recorded visits to the region. According to the Statistics Finland the overnights spent in Finland by foreign tourists increased in 2010 overall by 9% from the previous year. North Karelia was one of the regions with the

largest increase, with 17% in the overnight stays (Statistics Finland 2011). Russian tourists are considered as a profitable customer group for North Karelia tourism, and the region continuously develops the strategies in receiving its share of Russian tourism in Finland.

2. CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOUR IN TOURISM

2.1 Consumer behaviour

The study of consumer behaviour is the most dynamic of all marketing activities. What attracts customers today can already tomorrow be something very different. Due to the fact that consumer preferences change continuously and are affected by various factors, they are difficult to analyse. However, understanding the buying behaviour of the target market is essential to marketing managers. By understanding the buying behaviour the marketers concentrate their marketing activities on adapting product offerings to the particular target segment's wants and needs. In this study the starting point for understanding the Russian tourists' decision making behaviour was to reflect the previous studies of consumer behaviour in the result analysis.

Consumer buying behaviour has no rigid rules. A decision can be made spontaneously or after evaluating multiple alternatives. The social environment, family, friends and society, affect the buyer's decision making as well. Over the years consumer buying behaviour has evoked several attempts to put forward models to explain this complex subject. Notwithstanding the numerous efforts of trying to make sense of the complex phenomenon of consumer behaviour, the interpretative models are not all-embracing. They can only give a general picture about the factors that influence consumer's behavioural patterns, but not prefigure the behaviour to the core.

An overview of previous studies presents several different approaches to consumer behavioural studies and gives a general picture about the evolution of the models. Andreason (1965) presented one of the earliest models of consumer behaviour. In his theory the importance of information is recognised in the consumer decision making process. Nicosia (1966) evolved the model by adding that the information change can be interactive; firms can influence consumers through advertising and conversely learn from consumer purchasing behaviour. Further models have gone deeper in trying to understand the psychological aspects of consumer behaviour. Howarth-Seth (1969) model is one of the most well-known. It emphasises the importance of different inputs that influence the

consumer buying process and introduces the ways these inputs are considered before the final purchasing decision.

2.2 Consumer behaviour in tourism

When considering consumer behavior, the division between the behavior model in buying a product or a service arises. Before understanding the consumer behavior in tourism, one must think about the wider concept of tourism itself and what defines it. The term tourism invokes associations to words like hospitality or accommodation, travel, tours, entertainment and leisure. All these different aspects together comprise a phenomenon defined as tourism. "*Tourism is a study of man away from his usual habitat, of the industry which responds to his needs, and of the impacts that both he and the industry have on the host's sociocultural, economic and physical environment*" (Pike 2008,22). Tourism is, by its very nature, a service rather than a product. The classification of tourism as a service has a considerable effect on consumer behaviour as well (Swarbrooke and Horner 2007,45).

Thus, tourism as a product has a distinctive feature: it is intangible. An intangible product is a non-physical product that the consumer cannot experience before the actual purchase. This means that service is also inseparable: production and consumption happen stimultaneously. A service results from producer-consumer interaction. The intangible nature of the service offer has a considerable effect on the consumer during the decision-making process involved with a purchase. The purchase of a product which cannot be experienced and physically assessed before the buying decision is made inflicts contingency on the consumer. This, coupled with the high spending aspect of tourism, means that tourism for the consumer is a high- risk decision-making process. Therefore, the consumer will be highly interested and involved in the purchase decision. (Swarbrooke and Horner 2007,45)

The differences between tourist behaviour and consumer behaviour are due to distinctive activities surrounding the tourist. These are an anticipation or pre-purchase, a travel to the site segment, an on-site experience, a return travel component, and an extended recall and recollection stage (Clawson and Knetsch 1966). Consumer behaviour traditionally concentrates on examining the choice of a product and product satisfaction. Clawson and

Knetsch (1996) derive some differences from standard consumer behaviour studies. In the pre-travel phase, the anticipation stage, a tourist keenly awaits the forthcoming travel. This, together with the post-travel phase, is an important influence on the actual on-site experience. "*People think about their tourist experiences a month, two months, sometimes years after they have been on the site. In this sense the experienced product does not decay or wear out and may indeed be augmented by ongoing information about the site or by repeat visits*" (Pearce 2008,10).

Another factor that separates tourist behaviour from consumer behaviour is that tourism is related to more social business both in consumption and production (Pearce 2008,11). Tourism includes interaction between tourists who have expectations about their holiday and travel providers who try to fulfil these expectations. The role of expectations and satisfaction in tourist behaviour is however more difficult to define. Overall, it can be said that tourism consuming behaviour is more delicately complex than the buying process of more regular product. Tourism buying behaviour includes greater number of contributing factors that influence the buying decision. To understand the difference between regular consumer behaviour and consumer behaviour in tourism, a model adapted for tourism is used in analysing these differences. The preconditions of the study are thus that the buying process in tourism involves a higher risk and also higher anticipations for the purchased service. Together, these factors increase the tourist's involvement in the information search process. Models of consumer behaviour adapted to tourism explain the differences in information search in tourism further in the next chapter.

2.3 Models for consumer behaviour in tourism

As in other industries, a few broadly characterised groups of consumers can be identified in tourism. The travel can be motivated for example by work motives such as a meeting, or physical motives such as outdoor sport. A festival acts as a cultural motivator to travellers. Other motivators can be social, religious or entertainment: a trip to visit a friend, pilgrimage or shopping can all be reasons to travel. The point is that the decision to travel is always related to an individual's personal circumstances. Individual motivation derives from these circumstances and, the motivation again leads to the will to purchase. The interest of travel marketers is to understand what the motivating factors leading to the act of purchasing are. Motivation can be influenced through marketing decisions and with the

ways the product is introduced to the consumer. Therefore, communication channels such as external advertising and social group influence and contribute to motivation and ultimately to the buying decision.

Mathieson and Wall (1982) recognise that a holiday is a service product. By characteristics it is intangible, perishable and heterogeneous. These aspects affect the consumer's decision-making. Mathieson and Wall (1982) model also point out that with a service product such as a holiday, consumption and evaluation occur simultaneously. In addition, the model incorporates ideas that consumers are purposeful in actively seeking out information during the decision making process and recognise the importance of the external factors (Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert and Wanhill 2008,59). Mathieson and Wall (1983,28) presented a linear model of travel buying behaviour. This basic model shown below presents the five stages of the decision making process.

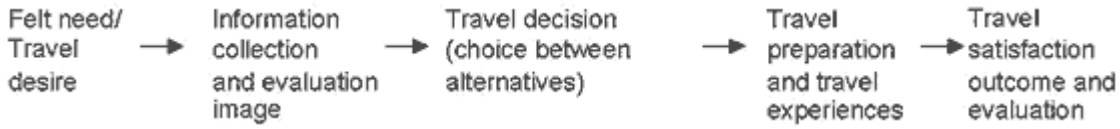

Figure 1. Travel-buying behaviour, Mathieson and Wall (1983,28)

The model above represents the framework of the decision making stages and suggests that each of these stages influence each other. The model of Mathieson and Wall (1982) does not go into the details of the distinctive factors that affect the buying decision process. However, it does support the assumptions of this study that the information search is actively related to decision making in tourism.

The differences in consumer behaviour in tourism are also explained in the model of Middleton (1994). His model is adapted to explain the distinctive features of tourism buying behaviour and their effect on tourism marketing. The distinctive features of tourism buying behaviour are separated out as motivators and determinants influencing the purchase decision. The model of Middleton (Middleton 1994, 54) attempts to explain the different variables affecting the travel purchase decision and the connection between these variables.

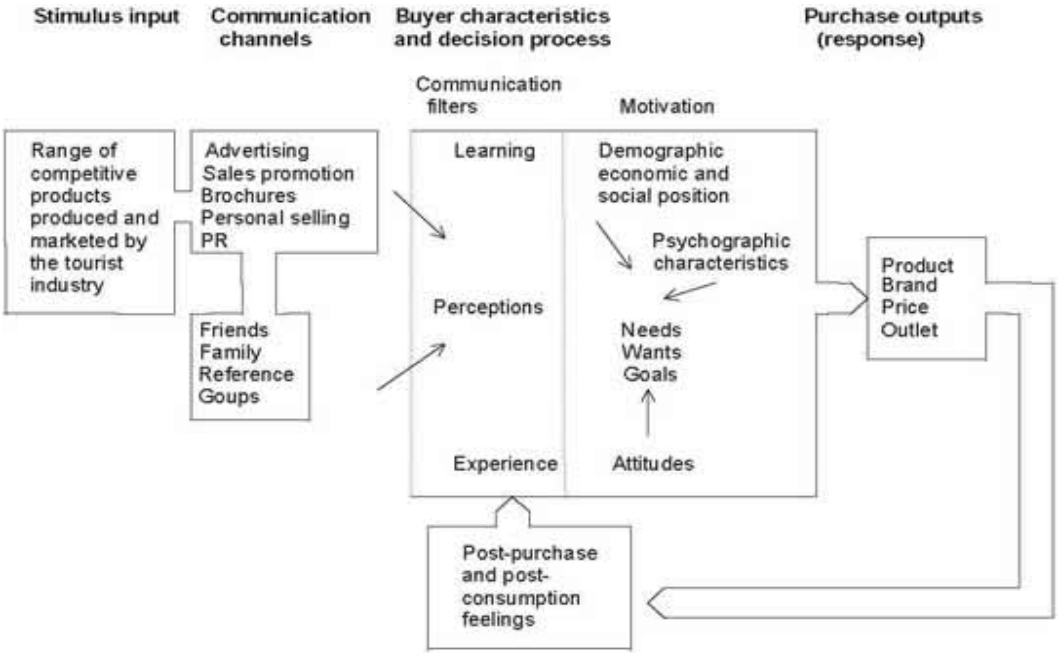

Figure 2. Adapted model of consumer behaviour in tourism (Middleton 1994, 54)

There are four components in the stimulus-response model. The two first, “Stimulus input” and “Communication channels” represent inputs which are the range of products available in the market and marketing activities. The first two components are the sources of product information for the buyer. The model shows that both public advertising and the social environment distribute the information. Formal communication channels operate through sales promotion techniques to attract prospective customers. The social environment provides information through groups such as family and friends, with whom the consumer interacts socially. In the next component “buyer characteristics and decision process”, the information is assessed with the incorporation of personal motivators. Personal motivators according to the model are the general demographic and psychographic attributes of the individual. These attributes are discussed later in the study.

Finally in the fourth component the decision forms into a purchase, which is the output of the process, i.e. the customer’s response. In order to execute successful marketing, is it necessary to understand the framework of a buyer’s motivation and decision processes. Middleton’s (1994) model introduces the scale of factors that are likely to affect travel and tourism purchase decision. It is noteworthy that travel purchase decision is not routine but

calls for “extensive problem solving”, which includes careful information search and assessment before the final decision is made. The theory of Middleton (1994) can be used as the framework in analysing the Russian tourists’ consumer behaviour. Each country has its own specific attributes in tourism marketing and tourists’ psychographic attributes, related to the cultural background. Understanding these country specific attributes can help tourism marketers to adapt the promotion more effectively to the needs of Russian tourists.

2.4 Criticism

Even if there exists a wide selection of consumer behaviour models with different approaches in evaluating the consumer behaviour, these models and theories agree on one thing: every purchase has a reason behind it. Theories vary by arguing whether this reason derives from rational or reasonable behaviour. The search process of a new product can be done through reflecting on the consumer’s personal criteria to the information found on product. It may also be done in reflection of the individual’s ability to identify the procurement criterion and evaluate its relative importance. (Öörni 2002,15).

In addition, theories about consumer behaviour are insufficient because they tend to be universal in trying to model a too complex phenomenon under one simple concept. Consumers are oversimplified under one homogeneous group with identical consuming behaviour. This stereotyping of consumers has received criticism from Simon (1987). He describes the difference between the economic approach and social science approach as one of rationality. “In economics, rationality is viewed as in terms of the choices it produces; in the other social sciences, it is viewed in terms of the process it employs”(Simon 1987,368). In other words, the economical theory of consumer behaviour predicts rationality being substantive, thus it is the same with every individual in every country. Social science claims that rationality originates from values and their changes with time and experience, claiming that rationality is not substantive but procedural. A theory is needed to set the general framework for this study, by which the Russian tourist’s consumer behaviour can be analysed. However, the criticism about the attempts to over-simplify consumer behaviour under one model argue about the fact of how consumer behaviour studies are always suggestive, but hardly all-inclusive, which is valid to the study at hand too.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA

3.1 Definition of Social media

The study has now introduced the theory base for analysing the Russian tourists' consumer behaviour and further explained how consumer behaviour varies in tourism. As the decision making process in tourism involves greater engagement in the information search process, the next step in this study is to take a look how largely social media is related to this information search process.

Social media is frequently mentioned term in different medias, however the definition of the term is not always clear. In general, social media is related to online content and people who are involved with that content. The core of social media is in one-to-few or one-to-many type communication practices. (Lietsala, Sirkkunen 2008:17) In social media, people voluntarily share content, for example, text, images, music, through online platforms and with the help of applications that are based on social software (Lietsala, Sirkkunen 2008:19).

The giant of free internet encyclopaedia the Wikipedia is one of the most frequently referred source for the definition for social media and is itself a perfect representative of social media. Wikipedia defines social media, and in a sense its own function, as a media devoted for social interaction which utilizes highly accessible publishing techniques. Social media uses internet-based applications created for networking online. These applications are referred to as the web 2.0. Web 2.0 is a foundation for the occurrence of user-generated-content (Wikipedia 2010). Social media allows everybody to publish and participate. People can find information from peer users and find help to their problem solving.

Evans (2008) defines social media basically as a conversation between people. The conversation is build on sharing thoughts and experiences with an objective of collective problem solving or better informed choice (Evans 2008:31). In fact, social media is often characterised by its use in sharing information. However, social media is, as indicated by its name, about social interaction between people. Social media is a tool for communication and connectedness and characterised by its social aspects. There are

several social networking applications existing in the Internet. They include among others social networks, blogs, wikis, podcasts, discussion forums, virtual words and photo-, audio-, and video sharing. All of these applications provide the user a way to connect and communicate with other users. A personal “space” in a social networking site provides the user a possibility to share photos and videos, maintain personal blogs or interact with others through instant messaging or via e-mailing.

Whatever the different definitions about social media emphasize, it could be said that the most significant feature of social media is its new way in the content creation of the shared information. It is suggested that that social media should actually not be categorised as a form of media at all but rather a new platform for information sharing, resulting from the radical change in the content creating. When in the times of Web 1.0 the content of the sites were strictly under control of the internet page provider, Web 2.0 functions vice versa. In Web 2.0 the users create the content with text, pictures, comments and estimations and the goal is actually together construct the content. Social media is the revolution of content creation.

3.2 Motivation to use social media

Communication methods have gone through a major transformation. The power of the computer and other communication technology, computer-enabled consumer devices and the internet have changed the way of communication and the concept of traditional media. Technological development in communication has enabled access to interconnectedness at anytime, anywhere. The new way of communication is dynamic and the relationship between the media and media consumers is interactive: they both participate in the content creation. Social media is in one sense democratic playing field for the publishing and consumption of media. The accessibility and convenience of the advanced communication tools makes the information search fast and easy. Due to the easy accessibility, social media can be understood to be related closely to a revolution in information sharing. As well as consumers are able to obtain the information anywhere and from anybody, they are equally able to create the shared information themselves for others to use: the information search and creation is thus, a mutually supplementing system.

People's information sharing purposes in social media have several motivations. Yinghua, Choton and Maxwell (2010) suggest several key motivating factors for knowledge sharing in social networking sites. They include seeking advice and information dissemination, social interaction, friendship, enjoyment, status and personal documentation. In general, information dissemination and exchange are the main motivators to participate in online communities. Other emphasised factors are related to social interaction: people participate in social communities to be in contact with friends, with other peer participants and simply to entertain oneself. (Yinghua, Choton&Maxwell 2010)

Gangadharbatla (2008) suggest that a psychological aspect such as needs of belonging and collective self-esteem are factors that positively affect the attitudes towards social community sites, the level of their usage and the motivation to join social networking site. The need of belonging refers to the fundamental need for every human to be able to form positive and lasting interpersonal relationships. It includes the possibility to gain social approval, exchange opinions and influence others. Thus, some individuals are by their personal characteristics more willing to participate in social networking sites than others. Collective self-esteem refers to an individual's perception of how valued he or she is as a member of the group, and also how non-members outside evaluate the group. An individual with a high motivation to the need of belonging and collective self-esteem is hence more willing to join social networking sites. (Gangadharbatla 2008). In Russia, the social media use motivation can be however explained by a more practical aspect. For a geographically large country like Russia, social media represents a resort to connect its nation. Thus, social media in Russia is merely used as a tool to stay in contact with a friend due to the great distances inside the country.

3.3 The use of social media in tourism

Social media is widely used in the tourism industry. One can find countless different kinds of travelling sites on the internet were tourist share information about travel destinations and discuss their evaluation and opinions about the destinations with peer users. Travel information sharing has become especially useful in the tourism industry, because tourists are trusting peer travellers over marketing messages from advertisers (Yinghua, Choton&Maxwell 2010). The change in attitudes opens a completely new practise in tourism marketing. Conventional advertisements are compensated with user generated

content types of community sites, were tourist themselves create the content and at the same time promote the destination.

As argued earlier, travel purchase is a high-risk decision that involves carefully considered decision making. Typically tourists find information about the travel destinations from several different sources. The phase of information search is a crucial part of the decision process and has been revolutionised as a result of the internet. Tourists are treated with various alternatives for finding information. Nowadays tourists do not necessarily look for expert recommendations from a travel book, but they are interested in other tourists' opinions from social networking sites about the travel destination. Consequently, travel knowledge obtained from social media and social networking sites is a way to reduce the uncertainty of buying a tourism product with no guaranteed satisfaction. Social media also provides the tourist a chance to plan the trip better (Yinghua et al. 2010). It is quite presumable that recommendations from social networks influence the traveller's destination selection and travel-planning behaviour. What makes social media even more beneficial in tourism is the fact that information searches on the internet enable communication beyond geographical constrains. With the help of social networking contacts travellers can seek out travel information or maintain connections, find travel companions or for instance a place for accommodation.

3.4 The impact of social media on decision-making

The power of social media is in groups. People want to connect with like-minded users and gain a feeling of mutual understanding and acceptance. A group can be identified as a number of individuals who share common interests and aspects in behaviour, identity and interpersonal interaction (Chayko 2010,6). Groups influence consumer behaviour. Consumers are ever increasingly finding information online to support the decision making process.

There are three types of reference groups that can influence a consumer: 1. Primary group, 2. secondary group and 3. aspiration group. To these groups consumers are a either part of or aspire to be part of. A primary group is a small social group of close relationships and it influences the decision making directly. In secondary groups, people have limited contacts but this group can nevertheless have an influence on certain decision making. The third

group is the aspiration group, to which an individual may not have a direct contact. An aspiration group is a source of reference that an individual has a positive attraction to. The consumer can make the purchasing decision based on what he believes this aspiration group would recommend (Linnell 2010). Traditionally the decision making is affected by a number of factors that are often in immediate proximity in one's life. In social media, the immediate connection can be superseded with trust by relativity or like-mindedness (Bulmer and DiMauro 2009). People make decisions based on opinions from other people they trust and who they consider creditable and believable, no matter what type of the relationship – online or offline. Yet again this supports the fact of how deeply social media can influence the consumer decision making process; groups in social media platforms act as a significant influence for the consumers. Therefore an essential aim for marketers is to learn about the Russian tourists' social media user behaviour in order to successfully direct the social media marketing for Russian tourists.

3.5 Social media in Russia

In short, Russian social media audience was assessed in 2009 as a country with highest engagement in social networking usage (comScore 2009). Social networking is extremely popular in Russia. Most active social media users are found in the large cities such as Moscow, St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg (ECCO 2010). This is partly connected to the growth in internet access in Russia. Not so long time ago Russian companies did not see the need to establish a webpage for their company. Now, modern social media advertising campaigns are launched and companies are rapidly developing their own strategies in social media marketing. In 2009 Russia was placed as the world's fourth largest market for social media in Europe (Rhodes 2009). In 2007 only 12% of the Russian population had an access to the Internet; this figure is projected to grow up to 43% by 2012. Not surprisingly, young users from 18 to 24 years old dominate the internet user group (46% of total), when compared to users over 45 years and older (9%). The top identified internet user groups in Russian again are students, top managers and qualified specialists (World Tourism Organization 2009).

The most popular networking site in Russia is vkontakte.ru, a Russian version of the popular social networking site facebook.com. Two other popular social networking sites are odnoklassiniki.ru and moimir.ru. Peculiar for the social media concepts in Russia is

that many of them are more or less adaptations from foreign media (ECCO 2010). In Russia social networking is done in domestic social networks, rather than the international networks, such as myspace.com, del.icio.us or twitter.com. Consumers have also found their way to online in Russia. Russians regularly spend time online for product information search purposes and online shopping is relatively common in Russia. According to a survey, up to 25 % of consumers in Russia prefer online shopping to traditional stores (World Tourism Organization 2009). In online shopping Russians trust recommendations received from friends and other users, but not online advertising. Round-the-clock online shopping provides Russians with a convenient way to purchase a product at home, save time and receive good delivery services. However, traditional shopping on-the-spot is preferred in case there are concerns about delivery or product return services (SKRIN Market & Corporate News 2009).

4. DESTINATION MARKETING

4.1 Online advertising and promotion

So far this study has described the need for information searches in tourism and the role of social media as a source of travel related information. This chapter describes in more detail the ways social media is used in marketing. One of the aims of this study was to find out about the social media usage activeness among Russian tourists, in order to estimate the possibilities in social media marketing. The benefits of destination marketing online are quite arguable. It requires little money if at all: marketing in the internet is practically free. One example of the benefits in social media marketing is the so called electronic word-of-mouth. Travel blogs for example can gain unexpected popularity and function as a free advertisement for a travel destination. Thus, travel destination promotion through social media can affectively reach a large group of tourists, even across nations.

The above mentioned electronic word-of-mouth is one example of social media marketing, how companies are able to increase their sales at relatively low costs. In addition, with online marketing companies are able to reach a wider audience thanks to the advantage of portable communication devices. As consumers are aware of the increased source of product information on the internet, marketing through the internet to a more specific niche groups has become the desired new trend. Online marketing can offer something exclusive to “members only”, with specials offers. Marketing needs to react fast to consumer’s needs. This can be better done through internet campaigns (Sweeney 2008).

The Internet offer various advertising places: search engines, content sites, advertising sites, portals and online magasines. Online marketing is advantageous because the response to an advertisement can easily be measured with web traffic analysis, plus a web site can offer far more information than a convenstional advertising campaign (Sweeney 2008,232).

4.2 Destination branding

Tourism is being somewhere; it requires a destination. A destination can be understood as one product, or a group of products organized by tourism operators and the like. A destination can also be seen as a socio-cultural entity with its history, people, traditions and a way of life – forming together the concept of tourism. Tourism marketing is conversation between two parties: the travel and tourism industry which stimulates demand for a product or service, and consumer-travelers who seek travel products and services to satisfy a certain needs. The principles of making marketing decisions are made in keeping the customer's needs in mind.

Marketing orientation is said to be the third stage in the evolution of marketing. Marketing orientation emphasizes the importance in identifying consumer needs. Selling itself is not enough, because the starting point for production is derived from consumers' needs and wants (Pike 2008,26). Destination marketing is about enhancing the destination competitiveness. The competitiveness comprises from economical, social, cultural and environmental dimensions. Thus, a competitive travel destination has to have a profitable tourism business with a supportive local residence, an attractive environment, an effective market position and satisfactory visitor experiences (Pike 2008,41). To sustain the competitiveness, a destination needs effective destination marketing.

Destination marketing should include the strategy for branding. Albeit branding of tourism destinations has been relatively remote, tourism destinations are said to be the next biggest brands emerging (Morgan, Pritchard&Pride 2004). The theory of branding underlines that the promotion of product features is not sufficient to differentiate a product against competitors. A brand is expected create and deliver expectations. However, in tourism the complex process of brand development is even more difficult for destination marketers, who can not control the actual delivery of the brand promise (Pike 2008).

Among others, the internet business dictionary defines branding as an entire process involved in creating a unique name and image for a product (good or service) in the consumers' mind, through advertising campaigns with a consistent theme (Business Dictionary 2010). Branding consructs from brand identity, which is the company's self-

image and vision for motivating stakeholders. A brand image represents the actual image of the product in the market. Brand position is the interface of these two (Pike 2008,179).

Branding is connected to social media. Social media can be used as a tool for branding. With a social media strategy a company can influence the brand reputation and increase brand awareness. It can prove its search engine rankings and website traffic, concluding to increased online sales. Social media is considered as the most effective in building brand reputation and awareness (MarketingSherpa 2009). In tourism, the destinations are required to create a distinguishable image and to differentiate themselves from their competitors.

4.3 Destination marketing through social media

Advertising through social media is very popular. Since social networking sites are used very widely, ignoring their marketing potential would be a wastage of opportunities. Social media is used to connect the company with its target market. Marketing in social media is a mix of advertising and sales promotion, but also a publicity creation. In traditional marketing advertising communication is done in collaboration with an external party, such as a marketing agency. Social media provides companies with a chance to create its business connections independently.

In fact, social media has revolutionised the way of marketing. With the possibility to address the marketing to a special target audience, companies are able to reach their customers better than ever. Marketing in social media has grown at the same speed as its audience. There are many advantages in using social media as a part of the advertising. Social media provides a decentralized information existance in the internet and thus maximizes the brand recognition. Marketing can be done with the help of different applications which make the information distribution easy. The marketing related content is open to everybody for information sharing, evaluation and commentory (Leino 2010,255).

The aim in social media marketing is to create a content that attracts attention and allures consumers to spread the message forward in their own social networks. Thus, the Internet gives voice to a consumer. It is a place where a consumer can publish their opinion for

others to read. Consumer generated media (CGM) is about consumers creating the content of the webpage, encompassing their comment, critics and reviews. Social media is directed for other readers, distinguished from the users of traditional media like TV, radio or newspapers have. The most considerable difference between these two groups is that in social media people enjoy sharing the content they have made themselves (Lietsala&Sirkkunen 2008,19). In a way, CGM is a new form for word-of-mouth communication and it is an important part in marketing effectively for travel and tourism industry (Sweeney 2008,164). Recognizing and listening to consumer generated media can become an important source of competitive advantage for a tourism company – it reveals the truthful insight about how the product or destination is considered in the eyes of consumers.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research questions

The focus group of the study was Russian tourists visiting the North Karelia region as a travel destination. The purpose of the study was to examine the usage of social media among Russian tourists in the process of information research related to travelling. The main research problem of the study was approached by working out the various attributes linked to the usage of social media in the information research process. The attributes connected to the usage of social media among Russian tourists are explored through logical steps in decoding the usage behaviour.

The introduced theory behind the study is a framework for investigating what kind of tourists visit North Karelia: what are the general demographic features that affect the buying behaviour? The demographic features of the respondents are explored to formulate a picture of the typical Russian tourist visiting North Karelia. Then the general means of information research behaviour are surveyed in order to find out how widely the use of social media is connected to the means of information research, i.e. if Russian tourists use social media as an information source before they travel to North Karelia or not. After that, the various attributes related to the usage of social media in the information research process are explored. The intention is to find out whether social media affects the decision making and destination choosing of the Russian tourists.

5.2 Research method

The data for this research was collected through a questionnaire. This method was selected because of its advantages in providing respondses from a large group of people. The questionnaire is largely used in consumer opinion and attitude exploratory studies and was considered the most effective means to reach the target respondent group. The questionnaire was directed to all kinds of Russian tourists visiting North Karelia and was not limited by demographical factors. The purpose was to collect an extensive sample of the Russian tourists visiting the North Karelia region and, based on the received results, analyze the variation between age, gender, occupation and other comparable attributes.

Each respondent was required to answer an identical set of questions designed to answer the research question. The questionnaire was made for descriptive purposes in order to find out the inferences from the interviewed target group. The questionnaire was also designed to enable the analytical research of the relationships between the variables – their cause-and-effect relationships.

5.3 Research tool

A tourist tries to select the best possible alternative for travel destination and the supply of different alternatives for tourists is wide. However, there are factors which set limits on the selection, for instance age, income and attitudes. These internal determinants can either inhibit the purchase decision or increase the purchase motivation. In contrast, there are external stimuli that affect the purchase decision as well. The external stimuli are provided by travel marketers and the tourism industry who offer a wide selection of various product alternatives. In addition, communication channels such as advertising and reference groups act as stimuli for the consumer and influence the purchase decision. Thus, the model can be used to measure the impact of social media marketing as the external stimuli for a tourist.

Middleton (1994), whose adapted model of consumer behaviour in tourism is the basis for this research, further describes in this model the three main elements which affect purchase motivation. These three main elements are related to the buyer characteristics and decision process component and they define the individual consumer behaviour.

1. Democratic, social, economic positions collate consumers' physical limitations. These positions are factors such as age, gender, occupation, region of residence, household size and social class. Physical limitations are easy to measure and comprehend. By categorising a Russian tourist by their democratic, social and economic positions, tourists can be grouped, for example, by their age or social class. These factors will provide general knowledge of which kinds of tourists use social media.

2. Psychographic attributes describe an individual's personal preferences. These attributes determine what kind of person the consumer is and what kind of product the consumer prefers to buy. They also indicate how a consumer reacts to different communication

messages and advertising. Psychographic attributes present personality traits such as confident or diffident, gregarious or loner, adventurous or unadventurous. Identified traits can help marketers to design more attractive advertising and adjust the product better to consumers' needs. The questionnaire will measure psychographic attributes in order to understand what kinds of people are interested in travelling to North Karelia: e.g. whether they are citizens of big cities who seek a peaceful holiday outside the city or a tourist with an interest in shopping in Finland.

3. The third element is attitudes. Every person formulates an attitude towards ideas, things and people in the living environment. These attitudes are formed on a conscious or unconscious level and they are often extended to beliefs and knowledge about different products as well. Attitudes are expressed with feelings such as likes and dislikes. Buying behaviour depends on attitudes: they reveal a consumer's disposition to act in certain way, comprising a wider complex of these attitudes referred to as "life style". Attitudes can be formed towards a product even if the consumer does not have a direct experience of its use; thus, attitudes are unpredictable. However, understanding consumer attitudes can help companies in product positioning. Attitudes are measured in the questionnaire in order to discover: how actively Russian tourists use social media in the information research process in general, what factors act as the main motivators in the usage of social media, how trustworthy the information obtained from social media is considered among the Russian tourists and also the level of influence of social media on decision-making.

5.4 The sample and data collection

The questionnaire was delivered to Russian tourists in Prisma Joensuu. Prisma is a large supermarket and shopping centre in Joensuu which attracts Russian customers around the year. The period for the data collection was determined to be close to the turn of the year, since the New Year celebration is traditionally the peak season of Russian tourists in Finland. The period for the data collection was 27-28.12.2010. The data was collected during those two days in Prisma by one interviewer. In practise, the interviewer explained the study background, requested the tourists to participate and then handed the questionnaires personally to tourists.

All potential Russian customers in Prisma were requested to join the study and in practise the study received all together 96 qualified questionnaires. However, some selective limitation of the respondents was done. For example, some tourists frequently travelling to North Karelia explained that they did not look for travel information because the travel destination was already well-known to them. These tourists were not included in the study due to their inconsistency with the study purposes. The data collection with the questionnaire proved to be a quite challenging work. The environment where the data was collected was filled with distractions. One was the time limits of the respondents. Not every tourist had time to stop and participate in the study. Secondly the inconvenient place for writing the answers may have reduced turnout for this study, because of the lack of concentration. Fairly often the reluctance to participate in the study was due to time limits of the tourists. The best location for the questionnaire delivery proved to be near tax free desk. During the queuing process the participants had free time to join the study. The fill in of the questionnaire took approximately three minutes from each respondent and thus enabled simultaneous collection of answers from several respondents.

5.5 Data analysis

The turnout of 96 respondents gives a satisfactory basis for descriptive analyses of the answers. The results of the questionnaire were analysed with the help of statistical information analysis program SPSS to calculate the correlation between several variables of the questionnaire. The purpose of the data analysis is to first draw a picture about the respondents' demographic features, in order to recognise for example any unbalanced deviation between the age groups and gender of the respondents. Then each theme according to the questionnaire was analysed separately. The themes in the questionnaire are the means of information research, recommendation influence of peer travellers, social media influence in information research, the respondents' internet usage behaviour and a level of contentment towards the found information about the travel destination. The themes are analysed by examining the frequencies of a certain topic and by various correlations between the questions. The results analysis is presented with the help of illustrative diagrams and figures.

6. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

6.1 Respondents' background information

The aim of this study was to find out what kinds of Russian tourists visit North Karelia and what the general attributes by which the consumer behvaiour of the tourists can be assessed are. The respondents for the questionnaire were selected randomly during the data collection in Prisma. All together 102 respondents participated in the survey. Out of this turnout, 96 questionnaires were qualified for further analysis, leaving six respondents with other travel destination out from the focus group of the study. The female respondents dominated with 64.5%, leaving male respondents 35.5% of the total. The age distribution of the respondents was divided into a more mixed group. The questionnaire had representatives from 16 to 65 years of age. The aim of the data collection was to reach Russian tourists from all age groups which, was successfully attained in the study.The average age for the respondents turned out to be 38 years. Quite expectedly, all of the respondents reported their place of recidence the Republic of Karelia in Russia. Sortavala, Petroskoi, Värtsilä and Pitkäranta were most frequently mentioned home towns. These cities are all situated close to the Russian-Finnish border.

The interest concerning the tourism in North Karelia region was to see what attracts the Russian tourists to visit the region and what was their primary reason for the visit. As argued earlier, travel motivation affects the level of devotion for the information search process before the travel. The travel motivation was thus surveyd in the questionnaire by providing the respondent with four alternative options as the general purpose of the travel. According to the response analysis, by far the most notable reason to visit North Karelia proved to be shopping: 65.5% of the respondents declared shopping as their main purpose for travel. Work related travelling was a reason for only 1% of the respondents, and Russian tourists travelling to North Karelia for leisure related purposes constituted 8.3% of the respondents. The alternatives are shown in Figure 3.

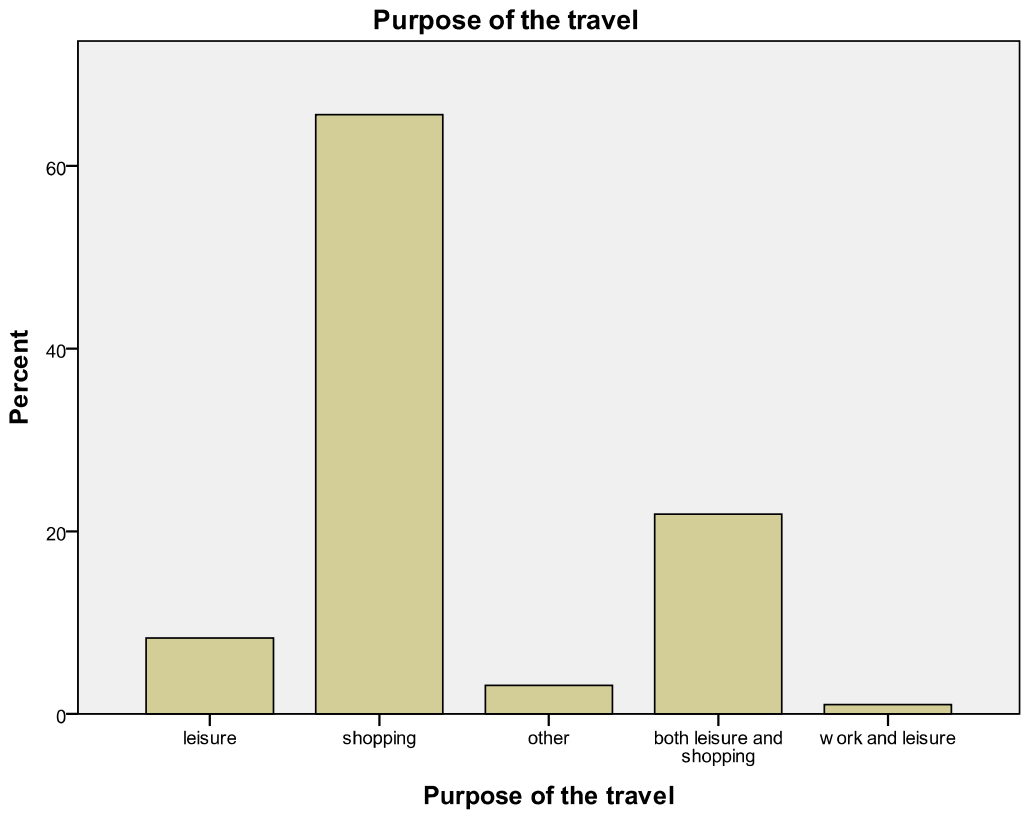

Figure 3. Respondents' travel purpose by percentages

The respondents were also asked to identify the determinant of their decision to travel to North Karelia. The purpose was to find out what kind of expectations Russian tourists had about their travels to North Karelia. The respondents divided into three even groups with different determinants. Approximately one-third of the respondents informed that they expected peace and relaxation from their travel. Another third expected activities and adventures, and the last third had cultural related interests for their travel, or other expectations which were not further clarified.

The various types of expectations of the Russian tourists betokens the fact that there exists a need for different tourism products in Joensuu. The given alternatives of the expectations represent the types of products that can be associated with the expectation. For instance, a ski resort acts as a product for tourists with expectations about activities and adventures, the diverse supply of hotels, shops and restaurants allure tourists with expectations of peace and relaxation and so on. The products need to meet the fact that the associated expectations can be different. Nevertheless, the different expectations represent the mental

picture that Russian tourists have about products they presume North Karelia is able to offer.

6.2 The means of information research

After identifying what kind of Russian tourists travel to North Karelia, the questionnaire continued to the main goal of this study: identifying how widely social media is used among Russian tourists as a source of information related to travelling. The study started with investigating the information research behaviour of the respondents in general. First it was essential to know whether there had been a need to find pre-travel information at all. In addition, the questionnaire explored what sources of information, for example the internet or newspapers, were used among the tourists.

Thus, the first measured indicator was the overall activeness in the information search among the Russian tourists. According to the results, 44% of the respondents of the survey reported that they had been initiatively looking for information about their travel destination. The relatively low percentage may be due to the fact that Russian tourists visit North Karelia quite frequently and consequently do not require any information before the travel, because the destination is already well-known to them. This information initiative group included respondents from all age groups and genders, with no significant variation.

The next interest was to find out where the respondents had found their information and what information the respondents considered as the most convenient and trustworthy. These questions were directed to only the information initivative respondents. The purpose was to measure the attitudes towards traditional and new medias and information achieved from the social environment. Traditional medias were represented by newspapers and travel agencies and new media was refered to as the internet. Friends and relatives represented the social environment. According to the answers, 41.9% of the information initiative respondents chose the Internet as the most used source of information. Friends and relatives were a source of information for 20.9% of the respondents. Likewise, a substantial group of 30.2% of the respondents reported that they had found their information both from the internet or obtained it from their friends and relatives. It is notworthy that none of the respondents reported a travel agency as their source of information, and newspapers were used only by three respondents.

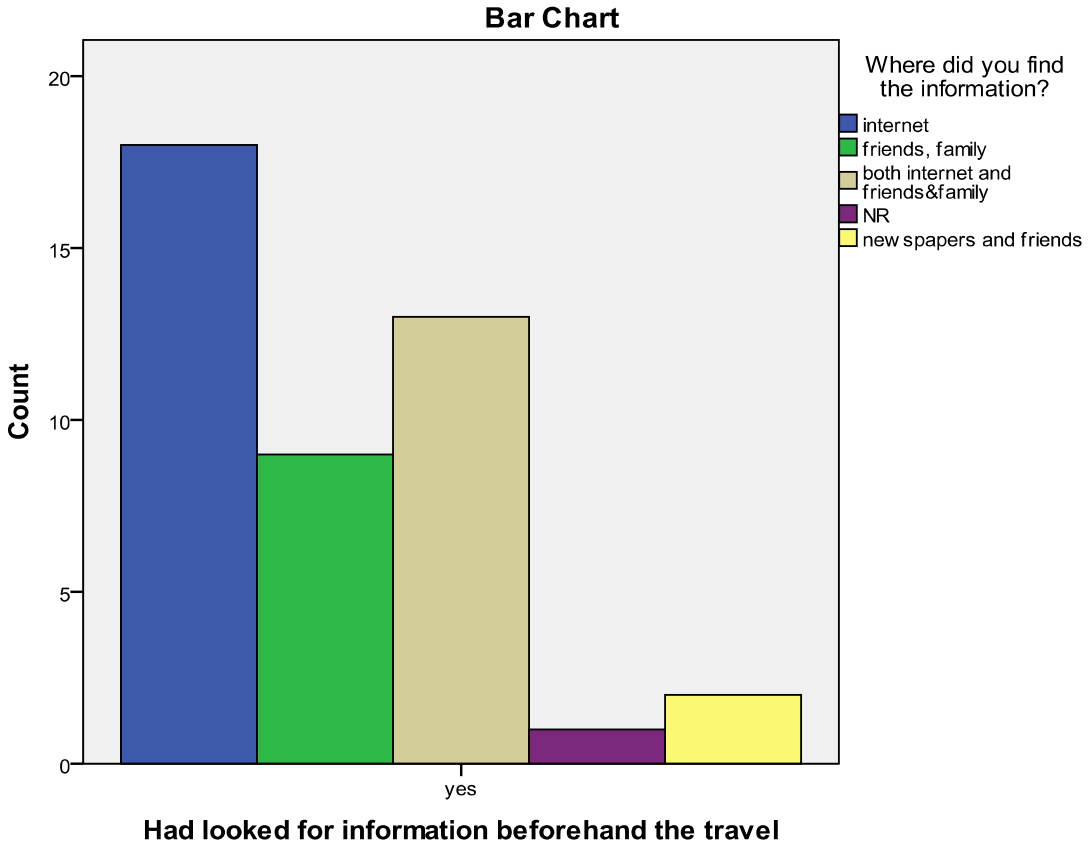

Figure 4. Where the information was found: answers of respondents that had looked for travel information beforehand their travel.

The higher volume of the travel related information research is naturally done on the Internet. More interesting is the fact that the information obtained from social environments, i.e. friends and family, also represented an important role in the information research process. The intensive social networking culture has its particular influence on the information search behaviour in Russia. The collective information sharing among people close to each other is a specific characteristic in the Russian culture and to some extent attributable to the results of this study.

The popularity of two main sources of information, the internet and friends and relatives, also followed in the quality assesment of the information sources. Both the internet and friends and relatives received equal support as the most convinient and trustworthy source for information. By far the most convienient place for information research was the Internet. The question of trustworthiness divided the respondents equally as well.

As the results show, the information search of Russian tourists is concentraded both in the use of modern media, the internet, and in social environments. These results may not reveil surprasing new knowledge about the information research behaviour. Nonetheless, the received results confirm the wide use of the Internet as a source of information among Russian tourists and thus enables the further investigation of the use of social media in the information research behaviour.

6.3 Information research related to social media

Along with the use of the internet as a source of information, the study explored the use of social media as a part of the information search and the level of the influence that social media has on the Russian tourists' decision making. The aspects of information distribution and user-generated content of the information are strongly connected to social media and these aspects characterise the information research through social media. Morover, social media as a source for travel related information is a growing trend and competes with more traditional media. The questionnaire explored the use of social media in the information search process of the Russian tourists and more specifically analysed the type of social networking sites that were possibly used. The questions related to the usage of social media were directed to all respondents in the survey in order to find the general usage level among the respondents. According to the answers, 51% of the respondents mentioned using social media in the information research. Figure 5 below illustrates the results.

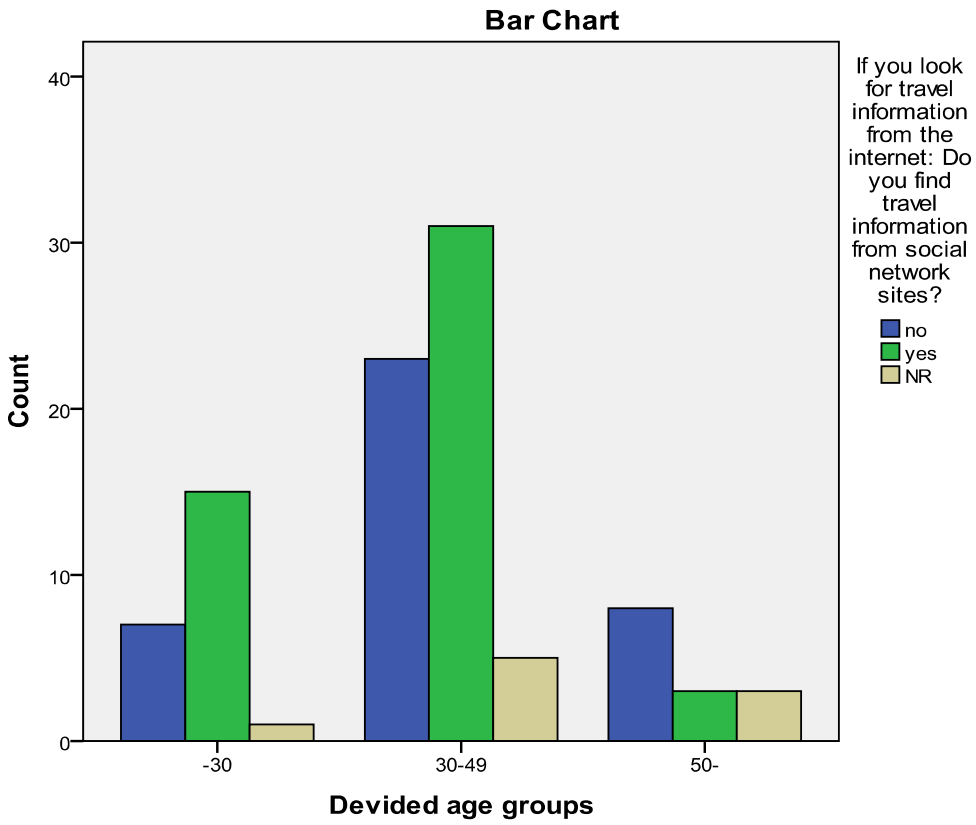

Figure 5. The use of social media in information research by devided age groups

The Figure 5 shows that social media has active users in all age groups. All together a significant amount 51% of the respodents used social media as their source of travel related information. The result is analoguous with the fact that Russians use social media actively. The use of social media was then examined further in the questionnaire. The interest was to find out in more detail what type of social media the respondents had been using. The resondents were provided with three alternative themes of internet sites that are related to tourism information.

The first alternative was internet sites for social networking, such as vkontakte.ru. This alternative representing social networking sites is not directly designed for providing tourism related information, but nevertheless function as an arena for travelling related information. For example, the popular internet site for social networking, vkontakte.ru, which is a Russian version similar to the social networking site facebook.com, involves a type of discussion groups which provide information about the travelling in Finland and to which all users of the site are free to join.

The second internet site alternative was so called user- generated-content types of internet sites that are focused directly in providing travel information. These sites are directly concetrated in providing information about travelling, but with the distinction that the information is generated by other travellers rather than by a web site producer or by a tourism company. The last alternative represented the internet sites in contras to the two previous: internet sites provided by national tourism officials with statistical information about Finland. These sites do not represent social media due to the fact that the information provided there is not user generated. However, they function as a significant source of information for tourists and were thus added to the alternatives in order to measure their usage as well.

The response analysis revealed that social networking internet sites like vkontakte.ru and social networking sites directly related to tourism were the most widely used among the respondents. Both of these alternatives got an equal support of 22.9% of the respondents. The internet sites provided by national officials of tourism were examined by 7,3% of the respondents and the rest 14.6% of the respondents had looked for information from other internet sites outside of the given alternatives. A few respondents had been looking for information from several types of internet sites. The variety and distibution between the alternatives are shown in Figure 6.

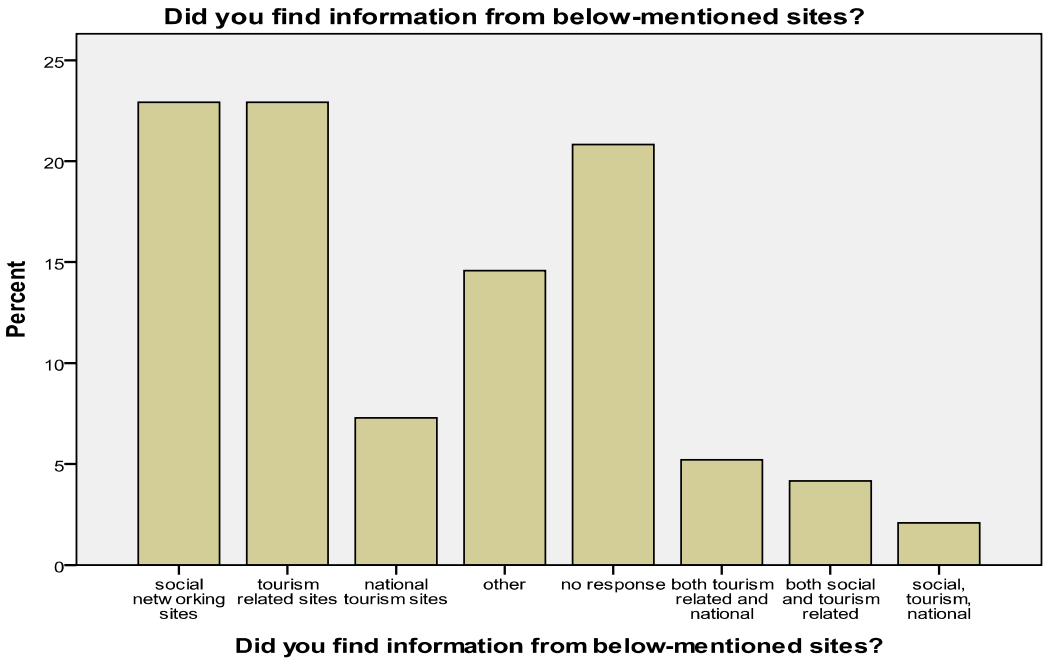

Figure 6. Types of internet pages where the information was found

The results show that the user- generated-content types of internet sites gain more support among the respondents when compared to the opposite alternative of sites which provide official tourism information directly by a web site producer. The assumptions about the significance of social media in tourism related information research correspond with the results.

6.4 Social media usage motivation

So far the respondents were inquired about their preferences in information searches and the extent of the use of social media in the process. The types of social media were also explored in more detail. After this, the respondents were asked to answer about what motivates them to use social media in general. The questionnaire provided the respondents seven spesific factors of motivation. These alternatives represented different actions which are recognized as typical motivators in the usage of social media, especially related to travelling. The given alternatives included factors of motivation that emphasized information retrieval aspects, like distributing information in social media. Some alternatives categorised the aspects of communication, social networking and building of one's own image inside the social networks.

The question about the social media usage motivation was again directed to all respondents in order to measure the general attitude of the users. The response rate to this question was 86.5%. Out of this group, 37.5% of the respondents considered their main motivating factor in using social networking sites related to toursim to be finding travel related information. Likewise, for 16.7% of the respondents the most important motivator was to share travel information with other users. This shows that the information retrieval aspects in the use of social media were considered most important.

The second most influental motivator emphasized the practical aspects of the usage of social media. Out of the resondents 11.5 % were interested in finding friends and peer travellers, and 12.5% of the respondents used social media sites simply to be entertained. The aspects of social networking and building of one's own image inside the social networks were considered to be the least important motivators. The social support of the social networks were considered important to 9.5% of the respondents. Moreover, additional alternatives of gaining prestige or restoring travel experinces in social network

sites were selected by none of the respondents as the main motivator. The distribution of the motivators are seen in Figure 7.

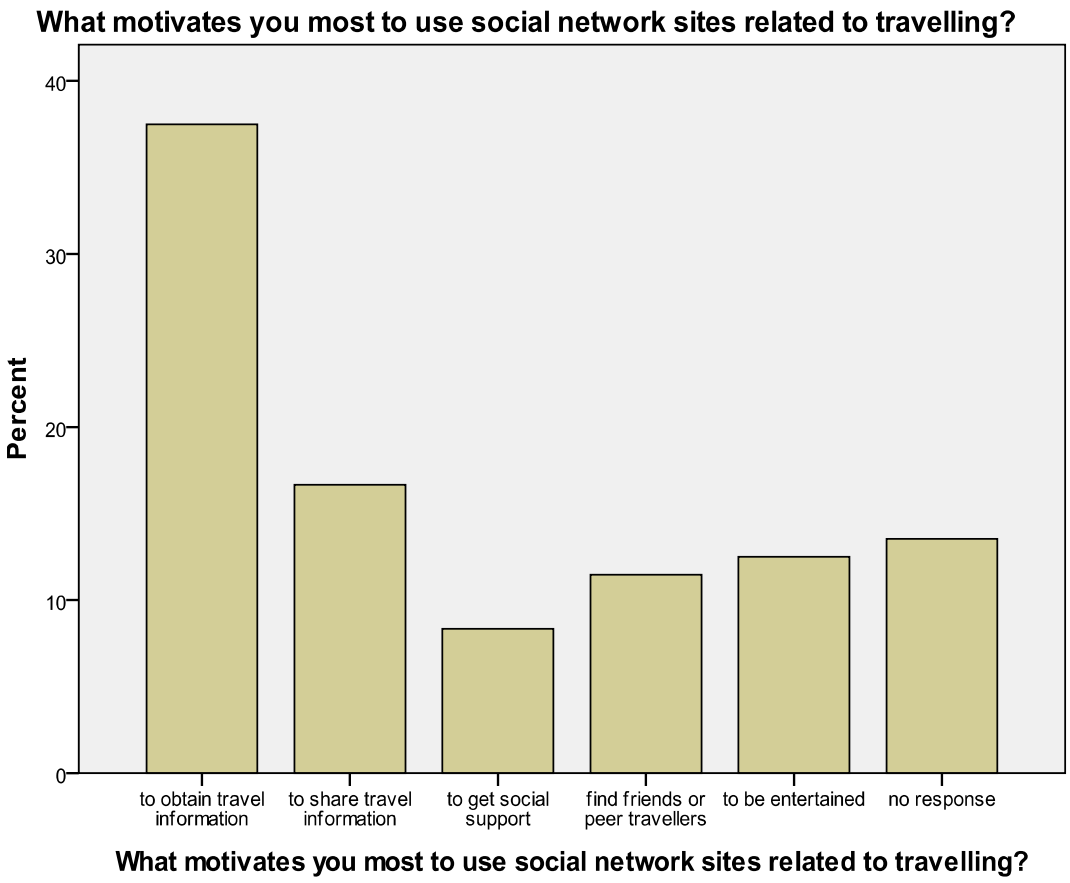

Figure 7. Motivating factors

The fact that the information retrievel aspect is emphasized in the use of social media is not trivial: if social media sites that are related to travelling are such a valuable setting for information distribution, it creates a modern space of opportunities for those who are interested in promoting their travel business on the internet. It proves that social media truly serves as a setting for information searches for tourists. Social networking thus not only acts as an arena for social networking and communication, but has an information distribution function as well. This fact can be taken advantage of when designing the marketing of North Karelia for Russian tourists through social media.

6.5 Additional attributes in the use of social media

The above presented results discussed the use of social media in information research and the aspects of motivation. The questionnaire carried on with a question exploring how influental the information received from other travellers acted on the respondents. With this question the aim was to find out the general attitudes towards recommendations received from other travellers. The purpose was to see whether or not a connection between the sensitivity to influence from peer travellers and the active usage of social media as an information source existed. The argument behind the question was based on was the fact that previous studies have indicated that especially in tourism the recommendations of peer travelers can substantially influence travel planning and decision making.

Figure 8 shows the overall attitudes towards the peer travellers' recommendations and how influental the respondents consider these to be. Peer travellers' recommendation cover the recommendations received through social media and through other social environments. The response rate to this question was 93 answer in total. All together 75% of this group considered that the recommendations of others have an overall positive influence on their decision making. Most of the respondents selected the neutral answer, saying that the recommendations sometimes had an influence on their decision making.

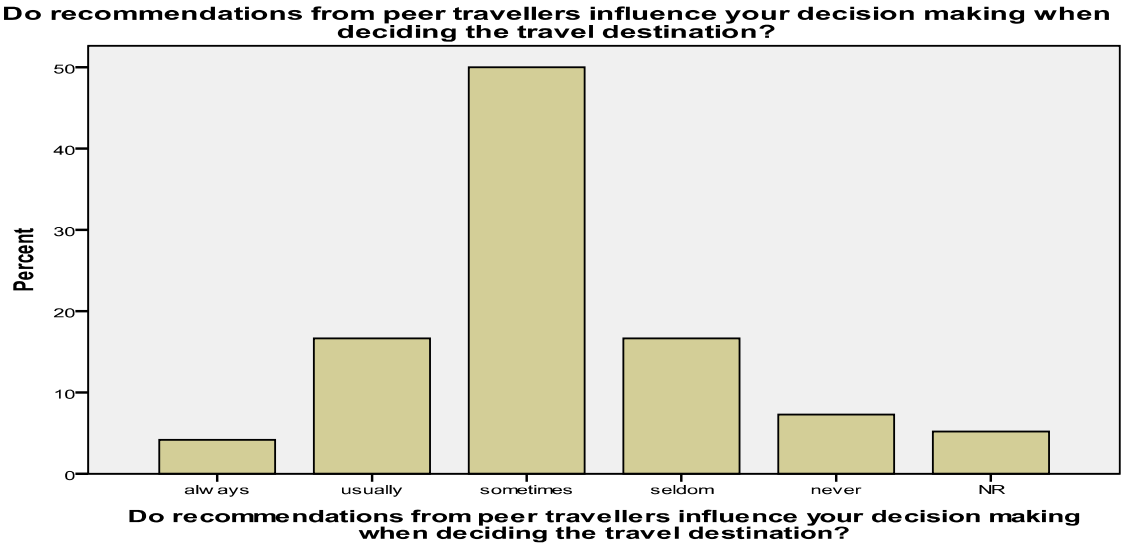

Figure 8. Influence of recommendations

The respondents attitudes towards the use of social media in information research was then compared to the level of influence sensitivity towards peers travellers' recommendation. Figure 9 shows the relationship between the factors.

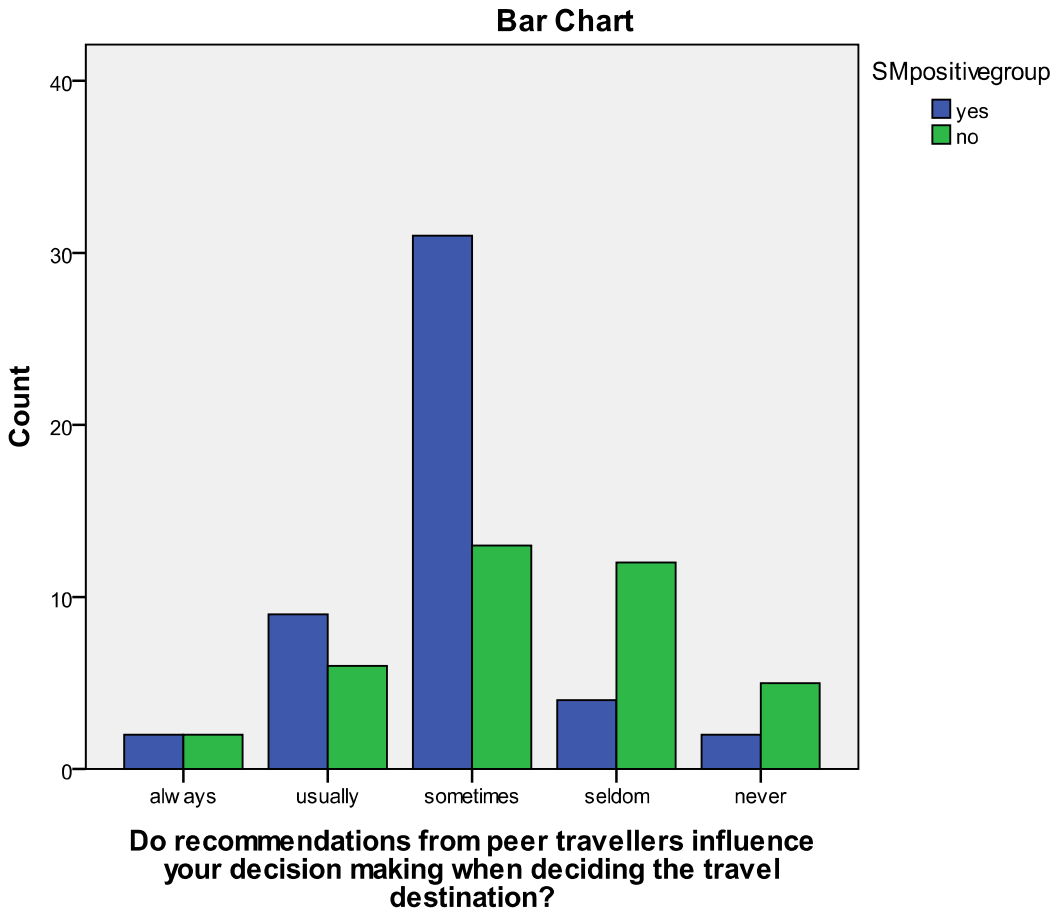

Figure 9. The level of influence compared to the use of social media in information research

Those respondents that took into consideration opinions of other travelers also had positive attitude towards information searches in social media. Figure 7 shows that a Russian tourist having used social media as an information source also expresses a higher influence sensitivity towards other travelers' recommendations. The results weakly but nevertheless visibly signal the fact that a connection between the sensitivity to recommendation influence and active use of social media exists. Conversely, a total of 25% of the respondents with low usage of social media also mentioned little influence from the recommedations on their decision-making.

Another attribute compared to the usage activeness of social media was the extent of hours spent on the internet per day. The aim of the question was to find out whether high usage hours have a positive connection towards the use of social media. First of all the result analysis explored the variation of internet usage hours between different age groups. In general, the age distribution in this survey proved to be versatile, giving an interesting basis for analysing the disparity of the internet usage hours between the respondents. Table 10 presents the results.

Devided age groups * How many hours you use the Internet per day? Crosstabulation

Count

		How many hours you use the Internet per day?				
		0-1	1-3	3-	No response	Total
Devided age groups	– 30	2	6	14	1	23
	30–49	21	15	19	4	59
	50-	5	7	1	1	14
Total		28	28	34	6	96

Figure 10. Internet usage hours of different age groups

An overview of the table 10 shows the main tendency between the age groups: the younger respondents inform about the higher usage hours of the Internet compared to older respondents. Also, more than half of the young Russian tourists respondents use the internet three or more hours per day. When compared to older Russian tourists, only one of the respondents of this age group used the internet equivalent number of hours. An overview of the internet usage in total shows that slightly over one-third of the respondents are using the internet three or more hours a day.

The amount of hours spent on the internet were then compared with the attitudes towards the use of social media as an information source. According to the response analysis 70.5% of those respondents who used the internet three or more hours per day answered having used social media for information research purposes. Conversely, 60.7% of those respondents who reported using the internet at most one hour per day had not used social media as their information source. The results verify to some extent the presumptions that the younger the respondent, the higher the amount of hours spent on the internet as well as

the amount of social media usage in the information research process. The internet and social media are mostly used among younger Russian tourists.

6.6 Information about North Karelia

Finally as the main theme of the questionnaire it also examined the satisfactions with the available information about North Karelia. The respondents where asked to evaluate whether there exists a sufficient amount of information about their travel destination. The respondents were asked to specify their travel destination in the questionnaire in order to assure the correct focus group for this study. With a few exceptions, the city of Joensuu was the destionatioin point of the interviewed Russian tourists. According to the study results 92.7 % of all respondents answered that they were satisfied with the information they had found on North Karelia. A few respondents informed about some lack of information and specified futher what information they thought was missing. Suggestions about adding information were: prices, a map of the city, driving instructions, shopping possibilities and information about the hotels in Russian.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Conclusions and recommendations

The idea for this study was generated by a well known tourism organisation of North Karelia. The initiative agenda for the study was to find out the specific features of the Russian consumer behaviour: how the tourists find information about the North Karelia region and more specifically how largely social media is used as the source for this information. The purpose was to find out if social media marketing can be used to reach potential Russian tourists. Therefore, the results of this study are beneficial for all parties assessing the possibilities of social media marketing for Russian tourists.

This study examined the consumer behaviour of a tourist. The tourist buying behaviour includes a high risk decision making process. The aspect of high risk again requires larger information gathering before the decision making. Information of the travel destination can be obtained from several sources, but the most essential question of the study was to find out how largely the sources of social media are related to this information search. As a part of the information search behaviour of Russian tourists, an essential aspect became discovering, how well-known the travel destination is among the tourists and how much information the tourists actually need to gather about the destination. In order to measure the level of social media use in the information search process, the respondents needed to have been more engaged to the information search process. However, as shown in the results less than half of the tourists travelling to North Karelia actually had looked for pre-travel information. Therefore, the results are not consistent with the study hypothesis that high risk decision making in tourism requires wider information research.

The fact that the respondents of this study had not looked for pre-travel information could be due to their frequent visits in North Karelia, to where the Russian tourists travel mainly for shopping purposes. Russian tourists often travel to Finland for one day shopping visits. The day visits are done from nearby Russian cities due to the small distances. North Karelia belongs to the destionations which can be visited from Russia in one day. In addition, the data collection location was Prisma shopping centre which can bias the results to represent only a certain tourist group. The interviewed Russian tourists may not represent the most

optimal tourist group in studying the social media usage behaviour and do not provide congruent information of Russian tourists in general. The New Years' time is the high season for Russian tourists who visit Finland for holiday purposes. The lack of these representatives in the study group suggest that those Russian tourists who travel to North Karelia have a different profile compared to an average peak season visitor in Finland.

Despite the low activity in the information search, the study results gives valuable general information about the patterns of information searches of Russian tourists. The internet is used as the main source of information and friend and relatives are considered as equally convenient and trustworthy sources for information along with the internet. The results are analogous with the general knowledge that Russians often ask for advice from their friends and family, and this behaviour is a conventional part of Russian culture. Information sharing with friends and family can be understood to include the information distribution in social media as well. A little over half of the respondents said they had used social media as a part of their information research. This is a significant amount. Perhaps, social media in this sense could be seen as one influence to the consumer, because social media for Russian tourists is a practical tool for the information research method: asking recommendations from friends and family. This is also supported by the study results about the level of recommendation influence. As introduced in the results, 75% of the Russian tourists had a somewhat positive attitude towards the recommendations of other tourists, stating that these recommendations had an influence on their decision making. These results support the fact that an external stimulus such as advertising and information sharing through social media has an influence on tourists' decision making.

The results clearly show that the use of social media is part of the information research process of Russian tourists. The presumptions about the active use of social media in the information search process among the Russian tourists are tenable and give a positive signal to the parties wanting to exploit the possibilities of social media in destination marketing. The main motivator for the use of social media according to the results was information distribution. This refers to the practical function of the social networking as an information provider for the tourists and attests to the use of social media for promotional purposes directed to Russian tourists. If every second tourist can be reached via the internet, the possibilities for information distribution in various internet platforms are worth exploiting. In addition, the study result show that Russian tourists find their travel related information

mainly from the user-generated-content types of internet sites, i.e. from internet sites that can be classified as platforms of social media. Thus, destination marketing through social media in Russia is recommended in tourism marketing.

7.2 Suggestions for futher studies

The moderate success of this study in reaching the suitable Russian tourists for the interviews leads to conclusions that further studies should take a different approach in finding the user patterns of social media in Russia. For this it would be recommendable to consentrate on taking an overview of the used forms of social media in Russia in general and to find the right arena for promoting the destination for the target customers. The study at hand investigated the general consumer attitudes towards the use of social media in information research. Future studies could thus concentrate on investigating in more detail what forms of social media Russian tourists use the most and what do these tourists actually discuss in social media about tourism in North Karelia. However, this kind of overview would require an extensive examination of the various social media forms and special knowledge of the social media websites used in Russia, as well as excelent knowledge of Russain language. Due to the fact that social media includes an immense range of different platforms, monitoring the whole scene of the tourism related conversation would be quite a challenging task to do. Therefore, parties wishing to use social media in promoting their travel destination in social media should first decide about the target customers they want to reach. Segmenting the profitable tourists into smaller target groups would help the marketers control the social media promotion better.

This study included a relatively small sample and does not provide enough information to draw conclusions about the use of social media in a more wider context. Therefore, a comparable study should be done with a larger respondent group using a more specific approach in choosing the respondent audience. It is common knowledge that social media is more often used by younger individuals, and Russia is no exception. This fact was indicated in the results of this study. Therefore, if social media is used for promotional purposes, it would be essential to know what kind of consumers can actually be reached via social media. The results of this study have already proven that social media is used in the travel related information search process among Russian tourists, but what is the most profitable user group of the Russian tourists is a question to find out in the future studies.

7.3 Validity and reliability

The sample of the data collestion was rather small to provide a wider conclusion of the consumer behaviour of Russian tourists. The study results repserent a specific customer group travelling to a specific destination. The received information is valid to represent tourists who have already travelled to North Karelia regions, but does not represent the potential new tuorists travelling to the region. The information research process might prove to be more extended. In addition, the fact that the data was collected in a shopping centre may have caused bias. In this light, in gaining a better validity of the received results in analysing the consumer behaviour, the sample size would require a larger number of respondents collected in various locations. In addition, the personal characteristics of the respondents may have had an influence on the study results. This is because understanding of the term social media may differ with the tourists. Those tourists who are familiar with using the internet as a part of their everyday lives and now about the modern infromation distribution phenomena have the correct understanding of the concept of social media and its advantages. To others the term refers to only a few of the most mentioned social networking webpages. Due to the different understandings, the questions of the interview may not have been comprehended in the same manner. Because of the differences in perception of the term social media, the results do not represent coherent picture of the Russian tourists. As in other small size sample consumer behaviour researches, this study can represent only some suggestive evidence of consumer behaviour and not a wider cause-and-effect relationship.

7.4 Learning outcome

The estimated study results and hypothesis of this study were strictly connected to the assumption that the decision making in tourism involves higher risk and wider information gathering before making the actual buying decision. The hypothesis also included assumptions that social media as a source for this information is widely used among tourists to whom social media is able to provide peer travellers' recommendations. The theoretical basis for this study was chosen to be a model of consumer behaviour adapted to tourists. The study concentrated on investigating the consumers' behavioural patterns and the information research behaviour as a part of the decision-making, but the more specific information of the user patterns of social media itself was not included. During the primary

data collection and the principal designing of the study methods it was noticed that the term North Karelia is not recognized among Russians. The provinces of Finland are not distinguished by average Russians tourists travelling to Finland. Russian tourists do not base their decision of the destination by regions, but rather simply by cities. Because of this the study was reversed into investigating the tourists already travelling to North Karelia. Due to the limitations of time and recourses for this study, interviewing the Russian tourists with the help of questionnaire resulted as an effective method for reaching those Russian tourists who travel to North Karelia. However, because of the fact that the data was collected in only one location, the study was left out with any kind of data from tourist with other destinations, thus leaving out a change to draw comparative analysis. Another approach to the study could have been a qualitative research interviewing the Russian marketing specialist about the use of social media in tourism marketing in Russia. Because social media as a term is relatively new and can be comprehended differently by the tourists, the tourists themselves may not be able to accurately estimate their use of social media. In this sense, the marketing professional would have been able to provide more detailed knowledge of the specifics of social media marketing in Russia and its relevance in the tourism sphere.

Overall the study was successful in bringing the theory into a practice. The design of the study was well constructed in applying the theory into a practical consumer buying behaviour evaluation. On the other hand, only after the received result it became possible to understand that evidently the tourists in North Karelia mostly consists of tourists travelling to the region for shopping purposes. This again limited the possibilities to measure the usage level of social media as a part of the information search process. However, the conclusions and ideas drawn from the results of this study would be interesting to continue to investigate in future studies and continue the specialization towards social media marketing. Social media is an actual subject in marketing and most probably will continue to play even greater role in the future marketing strategies of all companies, being not solely beneficial for tourism. Marketing activities have to be adapted to the changes in consumer behaviour and continuously find new ways in reaching the consumer's attention with innovative marketing. Social media marketing can enable an unexpected success with little effort which increases the attractiveness in taking advantages of social media marketing.

8. APPENDIX

Appendix 1. The questionnaire in Russian

Данное работа представляет собой исследование в сфере туризма. Предмет исследования: информационные системы, предоставляющие соответствующий сервис, социальные медиа включительно.

Возраст:_____Пол:_____ Профессия:_____

Откуда вы?:_____

Пункт назначения вашей поездки:_____

1. Цель вашей поездки:

1. Работа
2. Отдых
3. Шоппинг
4. Другое

2. Я ожидаю от своего отпуска:

1. спокойствия и расслабления
2. активный мероприятий и приключений
3. культурный опыт
4. другое

3. Вы смотрели заранее информацию по поездке? да____ нет_____

Если да:

	Где вы нашли информацию?	Какой из предложенных 4х вариантов самый удобный для поиска нужной информации для вас?	Какой из предложенных 4х вариантов самый надежный источник по вашему мнению?
1. интернет			
2. туристическое агентство			
3. газеты			
4. друзья, родственники			

4. Влияет ли на ваше решение по пункту назначения поездки рекомендации других путешественников?

1. всегда
2. обычно
3. иногда
4. редко
5. никогда

5. Если вы смотрите информацию о поездке в Интернете, смотрите ли вы информацию на сайтах социальных сетей? (например, вконтакте) да____ нет_____

6. Находили ли вы интересующую вас информацию о поездке из нижеперечисленных сайтов?

1. сайты социальных сетей, например, вконтакте, одноклассники, мой мир
2. сайты туристического направления, которые предоставляют рекомендации и отзывы от поездок туристов
3. национальные туристические сайты страны
4. другие?_____

7. Было ли достаточно информации о пункте вашего назначения? да____ нет_____

8. Если нет, то какой информации не хватало?_____
_____
_____

9. Что является наиболее важной целью использования социальных сетей в вопросах о поездке? Выберите один вариант.

1. получать информацию о поездке
2. делиться информацией о поездке
3. чтобы получить моральную поддержку (например, в случае какой-то проблемы во время поездки)
4. найти друзей или путешественников своего возраста
5. как способ развлечься
6. завоевать авторитет на сайте социальной сети
7. задокументировать свой опыт

10. Сколько часов в день вы используете Интернет?

1. 0-1
2. 1-3
3. 3-

Спасибо за ваше участие в исследовании, С Новым Годом Вас!

Appendix 2. The questionnaire in English

This questionnaire is a part of a study examining tourism. The study objective is the information research methods and social media as a part of them.

Age: _____ Gender: _____ Occupation: _____

Place of residence: _____
Destination of your travel: _____

1. Purpose of the travel

1. Work
2. Leisure
3. Shopping
4. Other

2. I want my holiday to offer me:

1. Peace and relaxation
2. Activities and adventures
3. Cultural experiences
4. Other

3. Did you look for travel information beforehand the travel? Yes____ No_____

If yes:

	Where did you find the information?	Out of these four, what is the easiest source to find information?	Out of these four, what information you consider most trustworthy?
1. internet			
2. travel agency			
3. newspapers			
4. friends, family			

4.Do recommendation from peer travellers influence your decision making when deciding the travel destination?

1. always
2. usually
3. sometimes
4. seldom
5. never

5. If you look for travel information from the internet: Do you find travel information from social network sites? (for example vkontakte) Yes _____ No _____

6. Did you find information from below-mentioned sites?

1. social networking sites like vkontakte, odnoklassiniki, moi mir
2. tourism related sites which provide recommendations from peer travellers
3. national tourism sites of the country
4. Other?_____

7. Was there enough of information available about your travel destination? Yes ___ No __

8. If not, what was missing? _____
_____

9. What motivates you most to use social network sites related to travelling? Choose one option.

1. to obtain travel information
2. to share travel information
3. to get social support (e.g. in a case if I have some kind of problem while travelling)
4. find friends or peer travellers
5. to be entertained
6. gain prestige on social network site
7. to document my experiences

10. How many hours you use the Internet per day?

1. 0-1
2. 1-3
3. 3-

Thank you for your participation and Happy New Year!

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