

The role of Travel Blogs in the process of Travel Planning

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<p>The Internet is nowadays the most important tool in any kind of business. Hospitality business is not an exception. Different tourism organizations are trying to use all the possibilities that the Internet opens to them with 100% effectiveness, but there is still a certain lack of knowledge concerning many of the features that are available nowadays with the help of World Wide Web.</p> <p>The objective of this thesis was to study the phenomenon of blogging and its role in the process of travel planning.</p> <p>Theoretical Framework concentrated on the properties of UGC, specifically blogs and their benefit towards other sources of information. The process of choosing of travel destination was also studied in deep in order to understand the stages on which blogs as information sources are the most useful.</p> <p>The data for this research was collected through literature review and conducting the survey. The empirical part of the research was implemented by using a quantitative questionnaire, which was spread via the Internet to people who read travel blogs.</p> <p>The findings of the study showed that travel blogs have got several important roles in travel planning process: they act as motivators, sources of important information, as well as a way to give feedback. There are specific qualities that make blogs trustworthy, and if the blogger knows those, a blog might become a very effective and cheap marketing tool.</p> <p>The findings of the given research might be extremely useful for any company in travel business which wants to learn how to effectively track and implement online word-of-mouth. A few constructional suggestions were made for those companies in order to wisely use blogging in business and understand the world of blogosphere and its huge capabilities.</p>	
<p>Key words travel, word-of-mouth, e-WOM, user generated content (UGC), blog, online trust</p>	

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1 Introduction

It is difficult to imagine our life without the Internet nowadays. It is needed for work, studies, communication, entertainment and etc. It has developed tremendously during the past years. According to statistics, the Internet population has reached 2 billion in 2011 (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>). The number of hosts was more than 760 million in 2010 - increase of 826% in ten years (<http://internetstatstoday.com/>). Facebook (the most popular social network nowadays) has over 750 million active users. The number of blogs on the Internet, according to BlogPulse, will soon reach the number of 170 million (<http://blogpulse.com/>). These numbers show that already nowadays the Internet, and especially social media, is a powerful tool in the information search and exchange. It created new ways for consumers to share their experiences and whereby influence the decisions and choice of other people. Social media might become one of the most powerful tools in many different industries if used with proper knowledge.

When we think about social media and its influence on people's purchasing behavior, we mainly mean the importance of such a phenomenon as "word of mouth" (WOM), which is definitely familiar to all of us. With the expansion of the Internet, there appeared a new definition – e-WOM, which means electronic (based on the Internet) Word of Mouth. Today the Internet offers many different ways of sharing the information and spreading the word. Here are weblogs, forums, communities, rating websites, social networks and etc. All these are called online user-generated content (UGC) and are the most important information source nowadays in the Internet.

This thesis examines the impact that UGC, specifically travel blogs, has on purchasing behavior of potential customers and shows its positive and negative sides compared to marketer-created sources of information.

First of all, this paper analyzes related studies on WOM and e-WOM. Secondly, it tells briefly about blogs and their types. Then it touches the topic of importance of UGC (User Generated Content) as one of the easiest ways nowadays to spread WOM. It examines the impact that UGC has on the process of choosing a travel destination. Furthermore, the paper discusses the positive and negative aspects of using blogs as a marketing tool and suggests the ways to create a UGC which might be used as a cheap and effective way to market a travel destination.

Recent research in the tourism area has demonstrated that WOM, both positive and negative, has an influence upon tourism products (e.g. Morgan, Pritchard, and Piggott's New Zealand study 2003, Crick's Caribbean study 2003), but so far little research has been made on the role and effectiveness of different kinds of user generated websites in the process of travel planning. This paper wants to go deeper into the problem of reliability and relevance of travel blogs and to find out the success factors that can help different tourism organizations to make benefit of e-WOM.

1.1 Aim and Objectives

The objective of the given research is to understand the needs of potential customer searching for the information on social media websites. What does he want to find there? What is not so important? What factors make him trust the specific source of information?

Moreover, this study is supposed to investigate how the Internet can be used to improve efficiency in tourism business management and reduce the costs of market research. The results of the given research will provide travel organizations with the information that they will be able to use in order to make their web pages more informative and whereby more attractive for potential customers.

1.2 Research questions

One of the main questions of the given research is **what is the role and impact of UGC, specifically travel blogs, in the process of travel planning?** In order to understand this it is important to answer the following questions:

- How do consumers use the Internet when they are willing to find certain information?
- How does UGC affect people's choices?
- How much weight do people give to personal sources versus impersonal sources and what is more valuable for them?
- What are the factors that influence readers' evaluations of UGC credibility and usefulness?
- In which form do people prefer to get information from personal sources: stories, pictures, videos?

1.3 Research methods

For the given research there was used a quantitative method. The main tool was a questionnaire which was spread via the Internet to the readers of travel blogs. The reasons to choose this method of research were first of all the possibility of getting a vast amount of responses and also ease of analyzing such a huge amount of data.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 WOM & e-WOM

This is a proven fact that most of people like to share information that they have with others. They are interested in talking about products, brands and services that they purchase, discussing their positive and negative aspects, giving their own opinion about them. And most of us tend to trust others' opinion, especially if that is our close friend or relative who is sharing it. This is understandable – every company tries to show its product or service from the best side in order to sell it for the best price. That is why potential customer always gets one-side information from official sources, while people who have previously purchased the product will be able to tell about both its positive and negative aspects. Thereby word-of-mouth is the most important source of getting information about different products and services.

Talking about travel business, WOM has been acknowledged as the most important source of information while trip planning (Litvin et al., 2008) and the reason for this is the perceived independence of the message source. (Akehurst, 2009)

2.1.1 Definition and characteristics of WOM and e-WOM

Research on the personal referral on consumer behaviour started already in 1960's. Arndt (1967) was one of the first ones to show the link between WOM (word-of-mouth) and consumer behaviour. Moreover, he was one of the first ones to give a clear definition of WOM. WOM (word-of-mouth) is “an oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, regarding a brand, product or service”. (Arndt, 1967) A simpler definition was provided by Kotler (2006, 408) – “personal communication about a product between target buyers and neighbours, friends, family members and associates”.

Nowadays WOM is considered to be an extremely powerful marketing tool. The influence of WOM is greater than other marketing methods, such as printed advertisement, individual selling or even radio. The effectiveness of WOM can be explained by several reasons (Herr et al., 1991):

- It is customised. In most of the cases the informer is giving the information in the way that is the most understandable for the recipient. He can also distinguish between important information and also the information that is not of the first importance, so that the recipient does not get lots of unnecessary facts.
- It saves time and money. The recipient does not have to search for the information from different places – he gets everything from one place.
- It is independent. Due to the non-commercial nature of WOM the informer does not have any interest in selling the product or service to the recipient. This adds to the credibility of the information. (Herr et al., 1991)

It is obvious that favourable WOM is definitely increasing the purchase probability, while negative WOM has got a drastically opposite effect. (Litvin et. al., 2006) But it is also important to note that while positive WOM increases expectations, it also affects the level of satisfaction of those who decide to purchase the product, and it becomes much easier to leave the person unsatisfied due to his high expectations. (Litvin et. al., 2006)

The difference between WOM and e-WOM is absolutely explicit – e-WOM is based on the Internet. It is clear that e-WOM has already changed and will continue to change the whole structure of travel business. With its help the information that is interesting to people became much more accessible, and whereby the travelers' knowledge of various travel products has grown, they became more selective and captious.

E-WOM is lacking some of the features that are common for traditional WOM. It is no more face-to-face, neither it is direct or ephemeral. (Buttle, 2011) In spite of this it does not make e-WOM less effective, it just makes it slightly different. Most people think that virtual space allows communication to grow to international level without regard to nationality, gender, age or geographical position, but there is also a point of view that the Internet can never become meaningful enough because of the lack of potential inter-personal contact. (Wellman and Gulia, 1997) Both these statements are somehow true.

Traditional WOM functions only in social communication activities and is no more influential in terms of time or distance. The Internet has diminished these limitations of WOM. There are no more geographical borders; neither there is a problem of time. The information that is put on the Internet can be seen by anyone in the World who has got an access to World Wide Web, moreover, it can always be recalled at a later time, unless the user decides to remove it herself/himself, while traditional WOM is perishable. (Buttle, 2011) This leads to the fact that traditional WOM gives a vague and ambiguous impression and fades out after some time. (Li, 2009)

E-WOM is also thought to be highly spreading efficient. If traditional WOM communication is a part of personal conversation, e-WOM is covering a much wider layer of people. With the help of the Internet consumers can know the opinion of both people that they know, as well as strangers.

One more important feature of e-WOM which normal WOM lacks is anonymity. Most often you do not know the person that posted the information on the Internet. This brings both positive and negative aspects to the characteristics of e-WOM. When you do not know the person, you automatically raise up the question of trust. Is his opinion reliable enough? Why should I trust him? We are more likely to trust those people who we know (our friends or relatives), not strangers. But it might happen that a vast amount of similar opinions from anonymous people will overweight one single opinion of the person that we know and trust. Here comes the question of numbers. The positive aspect of anonymity is that people are more willing to share their opinions, especially if they are negative ones, if they know that their identity is in secret. They become more honest and forthcoming with their viewpoints. Moreover, traditional WOM communication is always affected by such factors as age, status, nationality, etc. In e-WOM due to its anonymity the social hierarchy differences between people disappear, which makes everybody on the Internet equal. (Roed, 2003)

E-WOM is also interactive, or bi-directional. We do not only receive information, but can also ask questions, continue discussion and whereby get the full picture and formulate our own image of the product. This is what makes e-WOM more effective than, for example, official web-sites, but a bit less effective than traditional WOM where discussion takes place in reality and whereby takes less time and can be supplemented by gestures, mimics, etc. But the benefit of e-WOM is that the person has got time and ability to search for more information on the

Internet before starting discussion. And then already based on both information gathered from the WOM-source and information from other sources he can ask questions that interest him, make comments or share his opinion about the topic.

The important characteristic of e-WOM is also that it has got transmission diversification – can be spread in many different ways. It can be either one-to-one (via e-mail, instant messages, closed chats, etc.), one-to-many (web page, mailing list, personal blog) or many-to-many (discussion boards, open chat rooms, rating web-sites, etc.). (Li, 2009)

Videos and sound that might be included in the message, make e-WOM more experiential and whereby more trustworthy. Video is one of the most powerful tools to interest people to visit a certain destination. It makes an effect of a small virtual trip, you can see the place “from inside”, and this is much more trustworthy and effective than simple words or even pictures made from “right angles” and showing just a small bit of the place.

<i>WOM</i>	<i>E-WOM</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - based on face-to-face communication - direct - ephemeral - inter-personal contact → more trustworthy - communication affected by age, gender, nationality, etc. - has distance borders - can be supplemented by gestures and mimics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - based on the Internet - non-direct - long-lasting - anonymous → less trustworthy, but people are more willing to share thoughts - no influence in terms of distance - spreading efficient - interactive, bi-directional - transmission diversification - more experiential due to ability to use video, photos and sound

Table 1. Main characteristics of WOM and E-WOM

2.1.2 Importance of WOM in Hospitality Business

WOM in hospitality business is an important question to research. Tourism as a service product is characterised as being:

- intangible
- perishable
- inseparable

First of all, hospitality and tourism product offerings are mostly intangible – you cannot evaluate the product before its consumption, neither can you return it if you did not like it. Intangible assets are all those non-monetary assets that cannot be physically measured, seen or touched. When we talk about hospitality business, those are mainly quality of service, cultural heritage, even the weather during the trip. Those assets play a huge role when we talk about customer satisfaction, but the only way to learn something about them before the trip is WOM – opinions of those people who have already experienced them. (Cooper, 2008)

Secondly, tourism products are perishable, which means that they cannot be stored for the sale. The hotel room is either sold or not, it cannot be carried over to the next time – the hotel just loses its revenue if the room is not sold or makes its customers disappointed if there are not enough rooms. That is why marketing in this business is even more important than other businesses. But as long as traditional marketing unfortunately cannot always be persuasive enough, other ways of promoting the product should be used in combination with it. WOM is one of those. Moreover, it does not cost anything and when company knows how to use it in a right way, it plays a huge role in the processes of marketing and selling the product. (Cooper, 2008)

Finally, the tourism product is inseparable – it is consumed and produced simultaneously. This leads to the fact that customer never knows what he/she will get. It might be that during the first visit to the restaurant the waiter was extremely professional and the food was delicious, but when you come to the same restaurant on the other day, there is another waiter serving you and the same food is cooked by another cook, and you do not enjoy that anymore. (Cooper, 2008)

Finally, travel product is not a cheap purchase – whereby, taking into consideration the previous characteristics of it, travel product is thought to be a high-risk product to purchase. These characteristics lead to the fact that for most of the people the choice of travel destination is a

very complex and high-risk process. It is not always easy to make the decision, but it was proven that word-of-mouth is the most important source of risk reduction. (Cooper, 2008)

The fact that tourism services are mostly seen as experience, is the reason for gathering as much information about the product as possible from those individuals who have already experienced the service. But it does not mean that if the person gets a vast amount of positive comments, he or she will definitely purchase the product. Here comes the question of source credibility and relevance. These two source characteristics determine effectiveness and affect the decision making process. So, all the sources have got different credibility levels and whereby provide different amount of meaningful information. (Osti, 2009) When the person does not know how to distinguish relevant information from irrelevant, he or she gets an enormous amount of facts and opinions. This leads to the situation when it is extremely difficult to process all the given information and make decision. (Osti, 2009)

2.2 User Generated Content

User generated content (UGC) is “any data or media that is contributed by the users of a website – rather than being created by professional journalists and editors”. (Mackenzie, 2011) The important part of UGC sites is that content there is not managed by the host organizations, but is loaded directly onto the sites by users, whereby it is seen as being less profit-oriented. But, on the other side, it may be highly inaccurate due to the fact that these are not always experts who are posting information.

Nevertheless, the amount of people who are contributing to UGC platforms is growing with an enormous level. During the past years it has become extremely popular – nowadays a great number of the most visited sites on the Internet is primarily user generated – Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Wikipedia, etc. (<http://toolbar.netcraft.com/stats/topsites>). If we have a look at the list of the top visited travel websites (<http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/travel-websites>), we will see that the most popular of them are user-generated (Tripadvisor) or partly user-generated (Yahoo! Travel, Expedia).

The reasons for why so many people are contributing to UGC are thought to be either simply connecting with others, a form of self-expression or receiving recognition or prestige for their work. (Web 2.0, Wikis and social Networking: OECD study on user generated content, October 27, 2007)

2.2.1 Types of UGC

All of the e-WOM types can be classified according to different characteristics. They can have either synchronous communication (chat rooms or instant messaging) or asynchronous communication (blogs, forums, etc.). (Li, 2009) In synchronous communication the information sender and the recipient have to be online at the same time, while in asynchronous this is not vital – the information can be acquired at a later time. The communication can also occur either between acquaintances (e-mails) or strangers (blogs, forums, review sites, etc.). Moreover, e-WOM can be classified as being either one-to-one (e-mails), one-to-many (blogs) or many-to-many (chat rooms or forums).

When we talk about UGC that is the most influential for tourism business, we mainly mean asynchronous one-to-many or many-to-many communication between strangers (less often – acquaintances). Whereby e-mails, instant messages, chat rooms do not play huge role in creating e-WOM, even though to some extent they are present as well.

UGC sites that play a huge role in tourism business can be divided into several categories:

Social networking:	Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, hi5, LinkedIn
Blogging:	Blogger, Wordpress, LiveJournal, Travelblog, Tumblr, Twitter
Forums:	TravelForum, LonelyPlanet, Virtual Tourist
Video-sharing:	YouTube, MetaCafe, MegaVideo
Photo-sharing:	Flickr, Photobucket, Twitpic
Review-sites:	Epinions, Tripadvisor, Expedia
Wikis:	Wikitravel

In Table 1 we can see that the trend in UGC nowadays is moving towards blogs. These are the most personal types of UGC. That is why in this paper we concentrate mainly on blogging, even though most of the UGC sites have got similar features and are used in more or less same way in the travel world.

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Video	36,0%	39,8%	42,5%	44,8%	47,2%	49,2%
Social networking	41,2%	44,2%	46,9%	49,1%	50,5%	51,8%

Blogs	54,0%	58,0%	61,0%	64,0%	67,0%	69,0%
Wikis	33,9%	36,6%	39,0%	41,0%	42,6%	43,9%
UGC Consumers	60,0%	62,0%	64,0%	66,0%	68,0%	70,0%

Table 2. User-Generated Content Consumers 2008-2013

(<http://www.emarketer.com/Article.aspx?R=1006895>)

2.3 Weblogs

Blogs are web sites that contain the writer's or group of writers' own experiences, observations, opinions, etc. The word "blog" that was coined by Peter Merholz in 1999, is a blend of the term "web log" coined by Jorn Barger in 1997. (<http://drweb.typepad.com>) and is interpreted as both the noun and the verb (to blog – to edit one's weblog or to post into it). In blogs this is the blogger who is in control of the discussion, but there is possibility to post questions and comments. The popularity of blogs has rapidly risen during the past years and nowadays they are one of the most popular social media. According to BlogPulse (<http://blogpulse.com>) statistics, there are more than 170 million blogs on the Internet so far. Tourism and travel is put on the 8-th place as being the primary topic for the blog.

Blogs have got a number of advantages over other forms of information content. First of all, they are very easily updated. Almost everybody, even those people who are not familiar a lot with technologies, are able to create and maintain a blog. Moreover, blogs are very flexible in structure and encourage interaction between the author and readers. (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008)

2.3.1 Classification of blogs

All the blogs that are falling into travel and tourism topic can be classified into three main categories: individual, collaborative and corporate. (Thevenot, 2007)

Individual, also known as personal, blogs are most often having a form of an online diary. An individual blog usually gives a combination of writers' personal life and a certain subject that they would like to provide information or comments on. Such blogs are thought to have a C2C (consumer to consumer) one-to-many communication style. The number of public travel

blog sites is growing all the time. Some of the most well-known nowadays include travelblog.org, travelpod.com, mytripjournal.com. There is also a space for personal travel blogs on specialized customer review sites (e.g. tripadvisor.com) and other travel related companies' sites (such as travel agencies and travel guides). Nowadays an increasing number of official tourism destination organizations are launching travel blogs on their sites to create a successful communication platform for the readers. An example of this could be blogs provided by the government of Sweden, Austria, Canada and New Zealand.

It was found out that the main topics that are touched in individual travel blogs are quite general, such as climate, cuisine, transport, or regional specific stereotypes. Usually those blogs do not provide very specific information such as service quality or restaurant and accommodation reviews. (Thevenot, 2007)

Collaborative blogs differ from individual ones in the way that posts are written by more than one author. This makes those blogs more regularly updated, having wider range of information and whereby they are seen as being more relevant for the reader. While in personal blog the author can choose any topic he wants for the next post – first writing about himself, then about his trip to Asia, then about his university studies - collaborative blog has a specific topic which has to be followed. This makes such kind of blogs more organized. These blogs can follow C2C, B2C or even B2B communication style, but the main point is that instead of being one-to-many, they turn into being many-to-many. (Thraenhart, 2007) One example of collaborative travel blog is gadling.com, where professional travel writers are sharing information about different destinations, reviews, new trends, recent news, etc.

Corporate blogs are published by a certain organization. They can be either internal or external. Internal blogs are reached through the organization's intranet and are meant for the employees. They are successfully used in business instead of meeting or e-mails. External blogs are publicly available weblogs. (Thraenhart, 2007)

Corporate blogs can be either B2C (business to consumer) and G2C (government to consumer) or B2B (business to business) and G2B (government to business).

B2B travel blogs are also known as “expert blogs” and are used for networking purposes between tourism professionals, businesses and tourism organizations. They discuss latest indus-

try trends, research findings, technological developments, marketing tips, etc. (Thraenhart, 2007)

B2C blogs' role is to announce a new product or service, explain policies or react to criticism. The benefit of corporate blog compared to traditional press releases is that although it is also biased, it is usually seen as being less informal and whereby more credible and appealing for the reader, because it allows to communicate with the reader in a more personal manner. G2C blogs have got almost the same role as B2C blogs, they hire experienced and professional bloggers as "opinion leaders". Sometimes they engage local people to provide information. This raises the trustworthiness of the source. Moreover, some of the organizations use paid or sponsored bloggers. (Akehurst, 2009)

Marriott International has got its own corporate blog for almost 5 years. This blog is one of the most popular and visited corporate blogs on the Internet nowadays. The topics that are touched there are the information about opening new hotels, launching loyalty programs, receiving awards, etc. The comments posted by the visitors are replied by the CEO of Marriott International, Bill Marriott. One more example of applying weblogs in business is Starwood Hotels and Resorts strategy – they have got a team of travel writers who are posting into their official blog, where the Starwood Preferred Guests can read about the latest travel trends.

2.3.2 Trends in blogosphere

Blogs can be classified not only by their authors, but also by different media types that are used. Nowadays there is a trend for using media in blogging. There are special blogs using mainly videos (vlogs), photos (photoblogs), and links (linklogs). With the rising popularity of different handheld devices, microblogging is becoming highly fashionable and at the same time effective. Here the posts can be sent either from the site or via a text message and are restricted to just 140 characters. Twitter is nowadays the best known microblogging website. Mobile microblogging is highly helpful for tourists because they do not need an access to the computer with the Internet connection. It allows extremely fast one-to-many sharing of information. This way the tourist can inform all his friends and relatives about his location as well as ask for advice about choosing a restaurant or attraction to visit.

2.4 UGC credibility and relevance

According to the study by Yoo (Trust in Travel-Related Consumer Generated Media) most of the Internet users indicate that UGC is most credible when posted on tourism bureau web sites (41,2%). The next most credible sources of UGC are travel agency web sites (36,8%) followed by third party web sites such as TripAdvisor (33,5%), travel company sites (31,2%), personal blogs (18,1%), personal web sites (16,1%), social networking sites (13,2%) and sharing sites like YouTube (10,7%). The factors that affect the level of trust to the certain source of information are somewhat explained by the Source Credibility Theory of Ohanian (1990) and the Model of Online Trust by Corritore (2003).

2.4.1 Source Credibility Model

Ohanian (1990) in her Source Credibility Model (Figure 1) proposed that there are three factors that contribute to the credibility of different information sources. First of them is trust of the source – “the extent to which the audience perceives the communication as valid” (Hovland, 1953). The concept of trust has got several dependent variables: honesty, sincerity, addition and reliability. The next factor is expertise, which shows the ability of the source to be qualified, knowledgeable and professional. The last factor is the source attractiveness with dependent variables as similarity, familiarity, likeability.

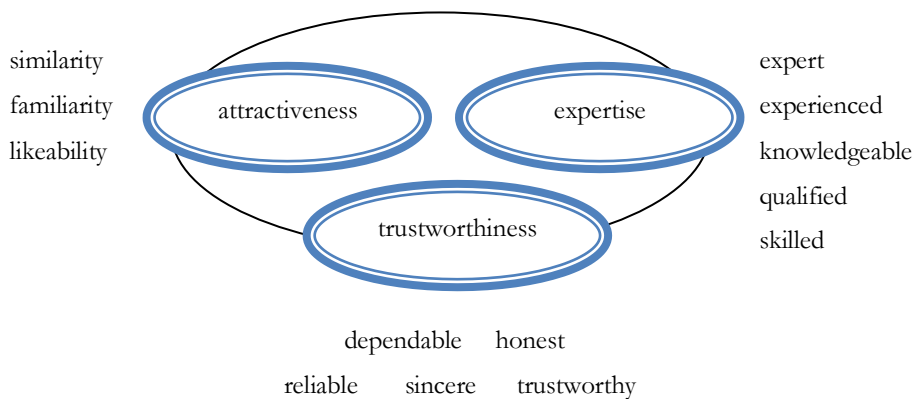


Figure 1. Ohanian Model of Source Credibility (1990)

Research made by Serban Corina showed that this model perfectly works for online sources of information as well. Online trust is also based on the same factors: attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise. Expertise factor in the model closely links with such a concept as generality – trust in certain persons and groups of people. We tend to believe doctors (even if we do not know them in person) when it comes to our health, lawyers when it comes to the questions of law, etc. The same is in the online world – the information posted by people who are

definitely experts (or know a lot) in a certain question, will be more trusted. Whereby when searching for the information online, people first of all tend to check those web sites which gather together people who know what they are writing about (e.g. a blog of a person who is travelling a lot and is widely known on the Internet world or a community of professional backpackers).

Online trust is usually developed during the process of repeated visits. It can be shown as: trust-action-learning-trust. This is also called as the slow trust. So, after several return visits to the site, the person is slowly building a trust on this source of information. If once the person trusted the information given on a specific web site and it turned out to be credible, he will definitely return to the same web site while searching for the other information. This happens because the user's expectations are met during the visits to the web site and he believes all the information that is posted there ("trustworthiness" factor in Ohanian model). There is also a phenomenon of swift trust (Meyerson et al., 1996) – when trust develops spontaneously due to some emotional reasons. Both of these types of online trust play a huge role on UGC credibility.

The web sites which are playing the role of UGC platforms must make sure that all the security and privacy rules are not omitted (the "reliability factor" in Ohanian model). The personal data that is given on such web sites must be protected. The provision of impressive experience can also raise the online trust. Moreover, even design of the web site plays a huge role in building online trust ("attractiveness" factor in Ohanian model).

According to Yoon (2002), the perceived size and reputation of the Web site are extremely important in the question of online trust building. Smith et al. (2005) adds site longevity to this list as well. All these features make the online information source more reliable in the eyes of the visitors.

2.4.2 UGC vs. other sources of information

According to the number of studies (Smith, Menon & Sivakumar, 2005; Jin, Bloch & Cameron, 2002), consumers tend to think of UGC (E-WOM) as less trustworthy than traditional WOM (friends, relatives, etc.). The main reason for that is that in most of the cases it is difficult or even impossible to identify the source of the message, because UGC is often created anonymously. Moreover, Mack, Blose & Pan (2007) suggested that the quality of the infor-

mation that UGC is giving to us vary a lot. Traditional WOM is associated with face-to-face interaction, close proximity and social cues, while e-WOM does not have a benefit of providing such contextual information, so individuals are able to create fully formed impressions of others based only on the linguistic content of electronic messages. (Brown, Broderick & Lee, 2007)

When we compare e-WOM with traditional advertisement, the first one nowadays has got much more influence on consumers. According to the research of Yankelovich, 75% of consumers do not trust the information that is given in the advertisements made by the companies. E-Marketer also discovered that consumer reviews are trusted 12 times more than product descriptions by the company. (Mackenzie, 2011) Bickart and Schindler (2001) suggest that e-WOM has got higher credibility, empathy and relevance compared to marketer-created sources of information on the Internet.

According to the study by Yoo et al. (Trust in Travel-Related Consumer Generated Media), different travel reviews and photos posted by other travellers are used a lot while planning trips. Most of the people tend to trust comments and reviews when they are posted on the websites with a good reputation. But the results of this study also demonstrate how important it is to increase trust in travel-related UGC, since credibility of the source is extremely important. For example, Yoo et al. note that even though many tourism bureaus do not feel confident about adding UGC on their websites, the results of the study suggest that they would actually benefit a lot from them, as long as posts on those websites would have much higher credibility than posts on personal blogs or social networking websites. (Höpken, 2009)

These findings are also partly confirmed by Technorati report published in 2010. According to this report, more than 89% of consumers tend to trust the information that is given by friends or family. Moreover, friends on Facebook or Twitter have got much higher rate of trustworthiness than a brand on Facebook or Twitter. But according to this research, blogs are trusted by a bit less than half of consumers, while official web portals and magazines/newspapers get around 60% of consumer trust and are on the second place after traditional WOM. This shows that even though nowadays people pay a lot of attention to WOM, they still need to be sure that the information is posted on a trusted web site, and the process of choosing between different sources of information on the Web is quite complex and difficult to explain and predict, because it varies a lot depending on the personality of the searcher, the information that he is willing to find and a lot of other factors.

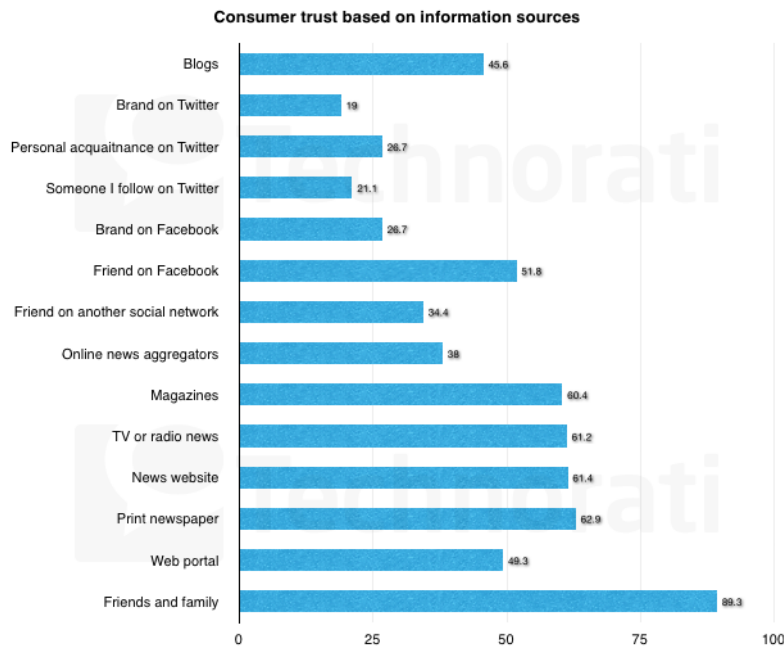


Figure 2. Consumer Trust based on information sources. Technorati, 2010 report

2.5 Information Search Process while travel planning

During the process of collecting information and planning a trip any potential customer goes through several important stages. In this thesis two models of information search process are described: the Information Search Process Model by Pan (2006) and Destination Choice Process Model by Lewis & Chambers (2000). These models are later used in the practical part of the thesis in order to understand the importance of blogs during each of the stages of travel planning.

2.5.1 Information Search Process Phases

According to Pan (2006), the information search process can be divided into 5 phases:



Figure 3. Information search process, Pan (2006)

On-going search is built based on our everyday life: own travel knowledge, experience and even our personality and preferences. During this phase all the information that we have gath-

ered long time ago from a variety of different sources is combined together into one image. Usually we are not able to say exactly where we got a certain piece of information from, it is all mixed together. This process is very lengthy, starts from the early childhood and continues through our whole life. (Pan, 2006)

Pre-purchase search is the most important when trying to understand the whole process of destination choice. During this phase gathering of as much functional information as possible is vital. The information might be coming from a variety of different sources: family members, friends, web sites, travel magazines or travel agencies. Vogt & Fesenmaier (1998) suggest that different travellers may have different information search needs, such as sign need, innovation need, hedonic need or aesthetic need. Sign needs involve symbolic expressions and social interaction. Innovation needs involve trying something new. Hedonic needs are about pursuit of enjoyment. Aesthetic needs involve visual stimulation in order to use imagination and fantasy. Dependent on what is the most important for the customer, he will search for particular information, omitting the rest of it, which does not interest him. (Vogt & Fesenmaier, 1998)

Planning search starts when destination decision has already been made. The information gathered during this phase involves all the aspects of the trip, such as travel partners, transportation, accommodation, attractions, restaurants, etc. Here again, as in pre-purchase search, different travellers may have different needs – some of them might travel without any planning process, just deciding what is the final destination, while others may include even the smallest details in their travel plans. Here the information search sources are again the same – family, friends, the Internet, travel agencies and magazines. (Pan, 2006)

During en-route information search travellers are gathering information from the sources that are met “on the way”, such as highway visitor centers, commercial signs, radio, cell phones with GPS and the Internet, interaction with local residents. (Pan, 2006)

Finally, even after finishing the trip, search for the information still continues – this is called after-trip search. Travellers will continue to pay attention to the information about the destination that they have visited because they have built an attachment with this place. Moreover, they might have a need to share the information that they gathered themselves during the trip.

However, it might be so that travellers do not go through all the five phases of information search while planning a trip. During repeat visiting, for example, the first two phases will be omitted and the person will go straight to planning search or even en-route search. (Pan, 2006)

2.5.2 Destination Choice Process

The most important question that bothers many people working in travel (especially destination) business is how leisure travelers decide where they shall go on vacation. This is a very complex decision-making process. Due to the vast amount of different sources of information, nowadays it became more and more difficult to make a decision about the travel destination.

Many researches were studying the process of choosing a particular destination, trying to analyse how it happens and what are the most important factors that have to be paid attention to. There is a huge variety of different theories explaining the process of decision-making and different authors tend to emphasize different variables. According to many theories, emotions are the main stimulator factor in choosing a destination, while Muller (1991) suggests that these are personal values that play the most important role in this process. Kelly & Nankervis (2001, 64) suggest that there is a certain link between choosing the travel destination and different socioeconomic attributes (such as age, income, education level, etc.). However, despite these obvious factors, there are also some additional factors that affect the choice process.

According to Jeng (1999), travel planning is a hierarchy of decisions which involves a set of sub-decisions (e.g. destination, travel partners, accommodation, transportation, dining, etc.). Moreover, it is a contingent, dynamic and multi-facet process. While searching for travel information, people use a mixture of different combinations of sources. (Fodness & Murray, 1998)

The fullest picture of the destination choice process is shown in the model by Lewis and Chambers (2000).

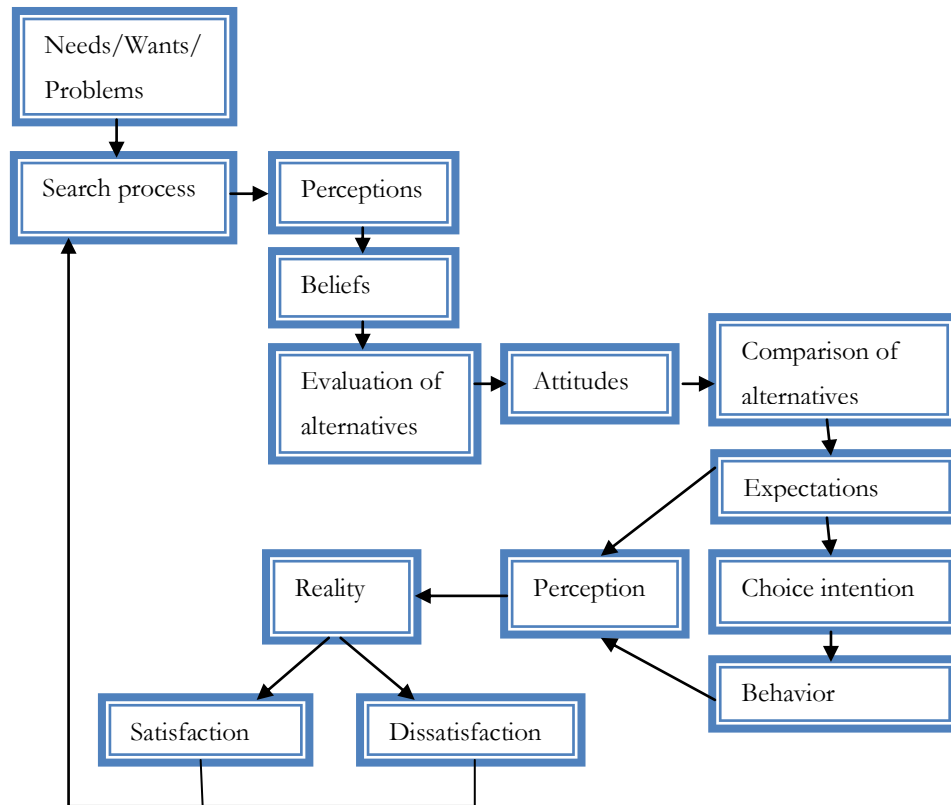


Figure 4. Destination Choice Process, Lewis and Chambers

According to this model, the first phase comes when the customer recognizes that he has a need/want and starts to seek for the solution to solve this problem (phase 2). It might be that the recognition of the need comes from a stimulus, which could be an advertisement in the magazine, a story from a friend about a wonderful holiday and etc.

During the search process the perceptions and beliefs of the potential customer play a huge role – some of the destinations are excluded at the very beginning of the process, while others are coming to the next phase (phase 3) – evaluation of alternatives. Here potential customers will make their choice based on variety of factors, such as price, location, accessibility, quality. But there is also a huge amount of other factors that might influence the final decision. There is little research done on the ways in which the customer is reducing the list of alternative destinations, and this is actually the stage where any kind of information (whether it is WOM, official sources or e-WOM) can overweight other sources and play the final role in making decision. (Lewis & Chambers, 2000)

Consumers are likely to utilize several sources of information and make the final decision based on all of them, even though it might happen that by the end of the information search process, the person is already not able to distinguish between all the sources that he was using.

Öörni (2004) also suggests that search is a cumulative process, which means that those who seek the information from one source will also turn to others.

The final stage of destination choice process is evaluation of post-purchase experience. Here the main role plays customer's expectations. If they match (or even better – exceed) with reality, the customer is satisfied with the destination choice, if expectations do not match with reality, there is dissatisfaction. In both cases the customer might want to share his/her positive or negative experience with friends and relatives or even online through the Internet. (Lewis & Chambers, 2000)

2.5.3 Formation of destination image

According to Gunn (1988), formation of the destination image is going through the following stages:

1. accumulating mental images of the destination, thus forming an organic image
2. modifying the initial image after more information, thus forming an induced image
3. deciding to visit the destination
4. visiting the destination
5. participation at the destination
6. returning home
7. modifying the image based on the experience in the destination

The three stages that are actually identifying image formation are 1, 2 and 7. During stages 1 and 2 image is formed with the help of secondary sources of information, while in phase 7 the first-hand experience is used to modify the destination's image.

The organic image during stage 1 is meant as the image that is based on non-commercial sources of information (for example, education, mass media, news, movies, etc.). This is the part of our everyday information acquisition, but it has got an enormously great impact on choosing the travel destination. The negative news on TV about a certain place might destroy the positive image regardless of the amount of money that DMOs have spent for marketing it. On contrary, a popular movie shot at a certain destination will enhance its image dramatically.

The induced image (stage 2), on contrary, is based on commercial sources of information (for example, all forms of advertising, information from travel agents and tour operators).

It is interesting to note that most often individuals already have a certain image of a destination, even if they have never visited it or been exposed to commercial sources of information. Quite often if this image is not positive, the individual will no longer be willing to consider this alternative. (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003)

2.6 Sources of Travel Information

Nowadays with the rise of the Internet and popularity of various kinds of media there is a huge amount of different sources that people can use in order to find information about destinations that interest them. Different kinds of sources have different levels of credibility and usefulness. That is why it is very important to learn to orientate in this vast information flow.

2.6.1 Categories of information source for travellers

Vogt and Fesenmaier (1998) state that there are four different categories of information source for travellers. Those are social, personal, marketing and editorial. Moreover, all the sources can be divided into being external and internal. Internal sources occur when the person uses the information that is already stored in his memory, while external source are all the sources acquired from the surrounding environment. (Fodness and Murray, 1999)

According to Shaver (2007, pp 27-39) the consumer purchase decision is always based on the mixture of information got from public information sources and personal information sources. The weight of each source will always vary contextually dependent on different external factors as well as personal characteristics of the searcher. Demographic characteristics influence a lot on the source preferences and choices. For example, people of higher socio-economic class prefer to use travel agents as an information, while younger people with medium income prefer personal source or the Internet. Gender, education, income, race, and occupation – all these factors influence the sources that people use as the main ones while information gathering and travel planning.

Buhalis (1998) states that the tourism information gathering behaviour has been influenced a lot by the technological revolution. Debowski (2001) suggests that the information search

tasks create both physical and psychological effort, and whereby people choose those sources of information that are less time and effort consuming for them and more comfortable emotionally.

2.6.2 UGC as a source of travel information

Many of the researches agree that e-WOM “has empowered the consumers by allowing them to access more accurate, up-to-date information about products”. (Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2007) Thus, UGC can be called a quality information source, which does not inferior to other information sources.

According to survey produced by Yoo and Purifoy (Online Travel Review Study, 2007), a large majority of people (more than 82%) use the Internet for their trip planning. Most of the online activities that people take part in during trip planning are reading consumers’ comments and materials, printing out maps and directions, reading travel-related blogs, requesting printed materials/brochures, watching online videos, using interactive trip planners, talking online to travel experts. The same research shows that the most visited websites while the process of travel planning are first of all virtual communities (such as TripAdvisor, VirtualTourist, LonelyPlanet), then travel guidebook sites (Frommers, Fodors, WikiTravel), online travel agency/auction sites (Expedia, Travelocity), search engines (Google, Yahoo), local destination websites, state tourism websites, and company sites. (Yoo, 2007)

Online WOM has a variety of impacts on travel planning. First of all, it allows readers to learn more about travel destinations. Secondly, it makes them evaluate the alternatives. Moreover, UGC allows narrowing down the alternatives by avoiding the destinations with bad online reputation. Finally, it provides travellers with ideas about future trips. (Yoo, 2007)

UGC also increases confidence in travellers’ decisions, making it easier to imagine what the place will be like. What is even more important, it reduces the risk/uncertainty rate and the likelihood of regret. Overall, online search, as stated by many people, brings more fun and excitement into travel planning process. (Yoo, 2007)

According to the results of the global study by Sheraton Hotel & Resorts, more than 64% of the respondents use UGC while making their travel plans and about 60% use social media web sites to stay in touch with their friends and relatives while travelling. (Hotelmaket-

ing.com, 2010) They provide status updates or commentary during their trip on Facebook (or other social web site) and also share videos and photos.

2.6.3 Relevance of UGC sources

Due to the vast amount of information sources that is surrounding us, it is not possible to think of all the information as being relevant, reliable and up-to-date. Sometimes it takes time and effort to get what we are looking for. McCartney et al. have created a model for an Optimum Communication Mix to show the amount of information that leads to effective communication. Even though this model is not specified only to UGC, but to all the Internet sources, it can be used in a smaller scale as well. The model shows that the optimum communication mix is compiled from relevant messages received by potential traveller and relevant messages that are not received by potential traveller. For effective use of UGC it is very important to make sure that all the relevant messages are received, while non-relevant messages are omitted. (McCartney et al, 2008)

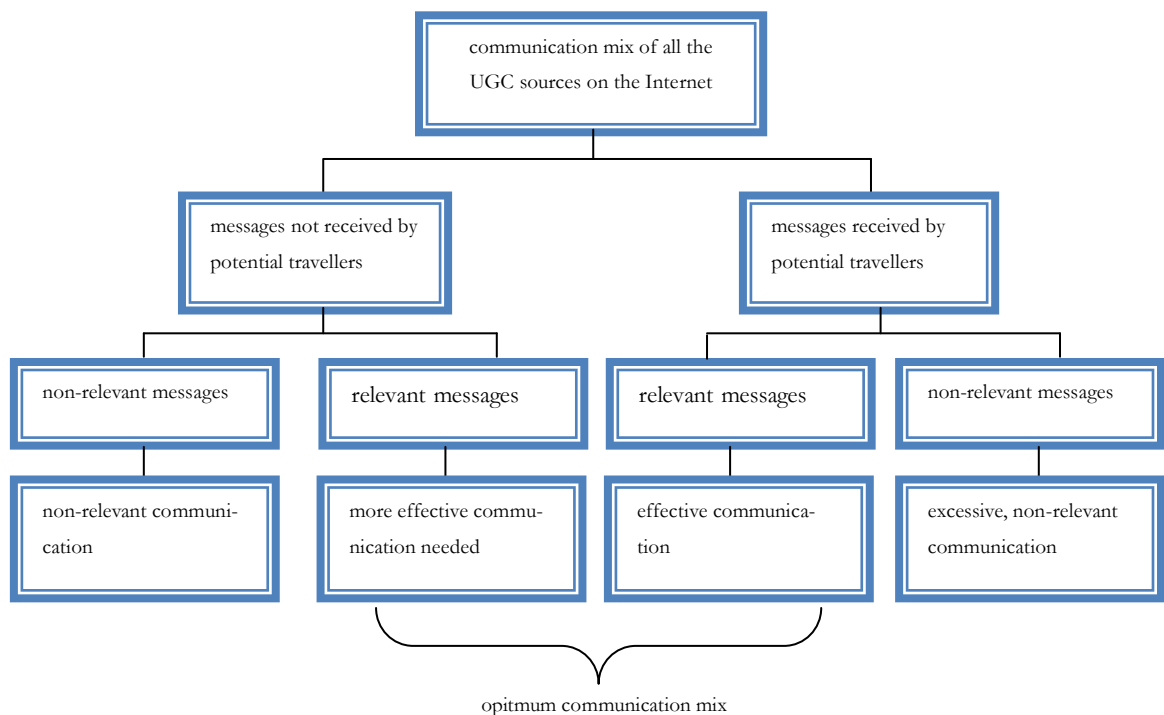


Figure 5. Optimum Communication Mix, McCartney et al.(2008)

2.7 How travel websites incorporate UGC

There are two effective ways of incorporating UGC in travel business. First of all, UGC can be tracked, analyzed and used to raise the level of satisfaction. Secondly, UGC can be implemented onto the travel websites and whereby bring interactivity and cause interest from potential customers.

2.7.1 Tracking WOM

Most of the tourism companies and organizations nowadays do not have carefully thought-out plans and systems for tracking WOM. There can be several reasons for that: indifference, disbelief, cynicism and ostrich behavior. Some of the companies think that WOM does not matter and plays a minor role in marketing and sales, and whereby they feel indifferent about what people write. Then there are companies that strongly believe in the power of advertising and think that WOM has no effect on consumers at all. Cynic companies tend to think that they cannot control or influence WOM, and companies with ostrich behavior are hoping that if they ignore WOM, it will not have an impact on their business. (Pruden & Vavra 2004, 27.)

In reality monitoring WOM allows achieving several goals: revealing the existing problems, finding out the strong sides of the company, solving customer problems, researching the focus group, tracking consumer opinion, predicting the following trends, analyzing closest competitors, etc. This allows manager to better understand their customers, increase satisfaction level and create loyalty.

Nowadays there are a lot of website which allow monitoring and searching for consumers' opinions. For example, Technorati (<http://technorati.com>) monitors more that 30 million blogs. It is also recommended for the companies to participate in conversations, but before that the information should be carefully analyzed. It is important to understand whether the information is positive, negative or neutral, whether it concerns the whole company or a specific service or product, how many people this information might affect. (Pruden & Vavra 2004, 29.) Participating in the conversation will allow information flow. It also shows that the company cares about its customers. But the important point here is that the conversation cannot be sales oriented. Negative WOM, if it is seen by the company as being truthful and not exaggerated, can be fixed by apology and sometimes offering compensation. Moreover, factual errors can be corrected if they exist. Otherwise negative writings are better of ignored.

2.7.2 Implementing UGC onto official websites

There is a new trend for tourism companies and organizations to make their official websites interactive, whereby attracting more people and creating a BUZZ. A lot of destinations start to implement blogs for tourists to share their experiences on the official websites (Schmalleger and Carson, 2008), add forums and chats for more effective communication. This makes websites more valuable and adds extra credibility. Moreover, UGC increases the number of people that are coming to the website, and, in turn, convert more of the visitors to buyers. So, UGC is an extremely powerful sales tool nowadays. (Josiah Mackenzie)

UGC is an important factor in the search algorithms that determine how web pages are ranked. The increased page ranking is of a great importance for travel organizations, as long as it was proven that only 3% of searchers go beyond the first page of result pages and the main clicks are on the top three links. (Josiah Mackenzie)

Some of the ideas for successful implementing of UGC onto a website, according to Josiah Mackenzie, are:

- collecting and sharing stories of delighted customers (with the help of blogging)
- putting guest feedback on every page of the website
- mixing up different media formats, such as text, photos, and video
- adding discussion board in order to make a website more interactive

Nowadays there is a practice for some of the tourism agencies to pay famous bloggers in order to make references to certain locations. This is called “sponsored blogging”. The main problem of this is that as long as readers become aware of the funding of the blog, their trust in the source will disappear right away. Moreover, there is an ethical issue about this question – is it right and fair to use such way of advertising? The right way to solve this problem will be revealing to the readers that the blog is sponsored by a certain company.

A certain amount of time and effort has to be invested into incorporating weblogs and other types of UGC onto websites. This requires regular attention, as the successful blog has to be updated very often. Moreover, it is crucial that the content is sufficiently interesting for the reader. Managing responses also takes a lot of time and effort. But if the weblog is carefully managed, it will become an extremely powerful tool.

2.8 Theory summary

During the past years different literature on tourism marketing has concentrated a lot on the importance of the Internet as a strongly effective marketing tool. The analysis of the existing literature has shown that there was a lot of research made on the topic of importance of WOM and e-WOM in travel business. Most of the literature sources suggest that so far UGC (e-WOM) is one of the most popular and trusted sources of travel information and it plays a huge role in information gathering and travel planning. Moreover, a lot of researchers emphasize a high importance of UGC in hospitality and travel industry, which is thought to offer a high-risk product to purchase.

It has been investigated that a lot of travel organizations nowadays are already successfully using UGC for their own benefit: they are effectively tracking online WOM, as well as implementing it on their own web sites. The main questions that rise after analyzing various sources are how to raise UGC sources' credibility and how to use UGC in the most effective way for the benefit of the travel related businesses and organizations. What are the most important factors that make UGC reliable, relevant and useful?

Previous research on UGC mostly focused on the questions of reliability and online trust, but there is not enough data about the role of UGC during different stages of travel planning. The research part of this thesis tries to cover this question and to make conclusions about how different tourism and hospitality organizations can implement UGC on their web sites in the most effective way.

3 Conducting the research

The primary objective of the given research was to find out the role of travel blogs in travel planning process by learning the motives of people to read travel blogs, their preferences in blog filling and reasons for trusting/not trusting the words that they read in the Internet. The aim was to figure out the ways in which organizations can make benefit of implementing travel blogs into their marketing strategy.

3.1 Methods

The method used in this thesis was quantitative data collection with utilization of some of the qualitative methods (open questions) in order to get more detailed information on certain topics and whereby more comprehensive experience from blog readers. A quantitative research was chosen due to the fact that it was important to get a large number of answers in a short period of time and be able to easily analyze this amount of information. My aim was to get at least 200 answers in order to count the survey valid.

I decided to use the web-based (Webropol) questionnaire. This allowed me to gather needed amount of answers in a short time. The limit of the web-based questionnaire is that many people omit open-ended questions. Moreover, you cannot always be sure whether the respondent completed the survey seriously, whether he understood all the questions right or it can also be that the respondent does not simply have knowledge about the topic asked in the given question. All these factors can affect the final results of the survey. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 195.) That is why it is so important to make sure that all the questions are easily understood and will not cause misunderstanding. In order to avoid the problems listed above I have tested my questionnaire on 5 people before sending it to others.

3.2 Creating the survey

Questions were formed according to the theory part of the thesis. The responses to the questions of the survey were supposed to answer the main research questions: How do consumers use the Internet when they are willing to find certain information? How does UGC affect people's choices? Do people consider UGC as being credible enough? In which form do they prefer to get information?

There were a total of 14 questions in the questionnaire. The first three questions were distinguishing the sample group – basic information about demographic factors, such as gender and age of participants as well as their attitude towards travel blogs (whether they are frequent or rare visitors and are they blogging themselves). The rest of the questions were asked in order to find more detailed information about respondents' attitude and feeling towards travel blogs.

There were four types of question formats: multiple choice questions (with the open-ended answer option), single choice questions, ordinal scale questions and matrix of choices. Multiple choice questions and single answer questions were used in order to receive the basic information about the participants and their preferences concerning the topic, e.g. their gender,

age, whether they are frequent readers of travel blogs, what are their primary reasons to read blogs and etc. The option of open-ended answers was made in order to make sure that the respondents can mention those options and perspectives that the author might have not taken into account. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2009, 198-199). Ordinal scale method (ranking 1-5) was used in the question about the factors that make people interested in a certain travel blog. This was made as long as it was assumed that all the options listed were somehow important to the blog readers, so ranking was the way to figure out the most and the least preferred factors. The matrix of choice method was used in the question about the sources where people prefer to find certain information.

The data was gathered from February till April 2012 and the analysis was conducted using Webropol, Microsoft Excel and SPSS tools.

3.3 Presentation of target under study

The questionnaire was directed to all the travel blog readers regardless of their gender, age, nationality or occupation. Both people who are rare visitors of travel blogs and those who are regular readers and maybe even blog themselves were able to participate in the research, so the level of awareness of the topic varied a lot among all the respondents.

As long as the main goal of the given research was to learn about the role of travel blogs in the process of travel planning, the main target under study were permanent users of the Internet, particularly people who read travel blogs or have got a blog of their own. Collecting the answers from this particular niche group was not a problem due to the fact that the research questionnaire was spread on the web-sites that are devoted to blogging and tourism.

For this study, quantitative data was collected from the users of several travel blog web-sites. Those web-sites were chosen on the basis of the results of the most popular Internet search engine – Google. The main criteria for choosing those specific web-sites were:

- main topics discussed are travelling and different countries
- international directivity of the web-site
- high traffic of postings
- huge number of travel blogs and followers
- presence of a forum on the web-site

Counting all these criteria there were chosen four websites on which the link to the survey was posted:

1. www.travelblog.org
2. www.travelpod.com
3. www.travelblogs.com
4. www.travellerspoint.com.

A new thread in the panel discussion on each of the web-sites was made in order to share the link to the survey.

4 Findings

This chapter presents the results that were gained from the given survey. First of all, the information about the participants of the survey is presented. Secondly, the results of the study itself are shown and explained. All the information is supported by various tables and figures in order to visually reinforce the results.

4.1 Participants

The core goal of the research was to get 200 answers. The final amount that I received was 225. It would have been possible to get even more answers, but there was a certain time limit that I had to fit into in order to finish my thesis on time, so I was forced to close the questionnaire after receiving the needed minimum amount of answers. However, a sample of around 200 answers can be counted as being huge enough in order to make certain conclusions.

Out of a total of 290 visitors to the survey page the answer of 225 makes a response rate 77,5%, which is an extremely good result.

It was a surprise for me to find out that out of 225 respondents 180 (80%) were female and only 45 (20%) – male. I cannot find an explanation for this huge difference, because according to overall blog demographics statistics (<http://www.sysomos.com/reports/bloggers/>) the proportions of male-female in the blogosphere is around 49,1% (male) – 50,9% (female).

Talking about the age of the respondents – there was also a huge gap between various options: 38% of the people got into the category 21-25 years old, 27,1% were 16-20 years old and 20% were 26-30, but only 5,7% got into categories from 36 and over (Figure 6). But when we check the overall statistics about blog demographics, we can see that the results somewhat repeat it. (<http://www.sysomos.com/reports/bloggers/>) According to this statistics, 53,3% of all the bloggers are from 21 till 35 years old, 20,2% are younger than 20 and the rest are older than 35.

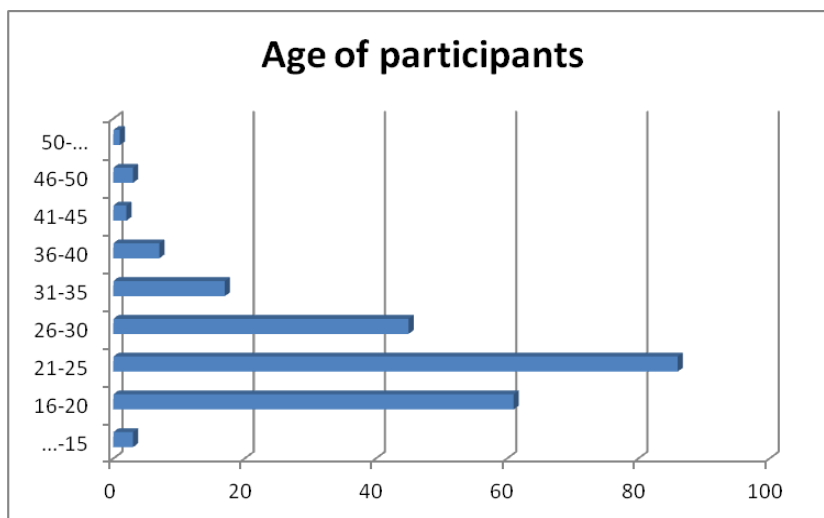


Figure 6. Age of participants

There was no statistics gathered in terms of the nationality of the respondents, but as long as while choosing the web-sites on which to post the link to the questionnaire the internationality of it was one of the main criteria, I assume that I got the answers from people of different nationalities and backgrounds. I cannot assure that the final sample of the respondents was descriptive of the overall population, but the attempt was made to make the research international, not linked to a certain country or nationality.

As seen in Figure 7, most of the respondents (53%) said that they read travel blogs from time to time. There was also an imposing number of people who admitted that they are rare visitors of travel blogs (68 out of 225; 30,2%). Only 23 people (10,2%) out of 225 stated that they are frequent readers of travel blogs, and 14 more admitted that they do not only read them often, but also make comments and participate in discussions.

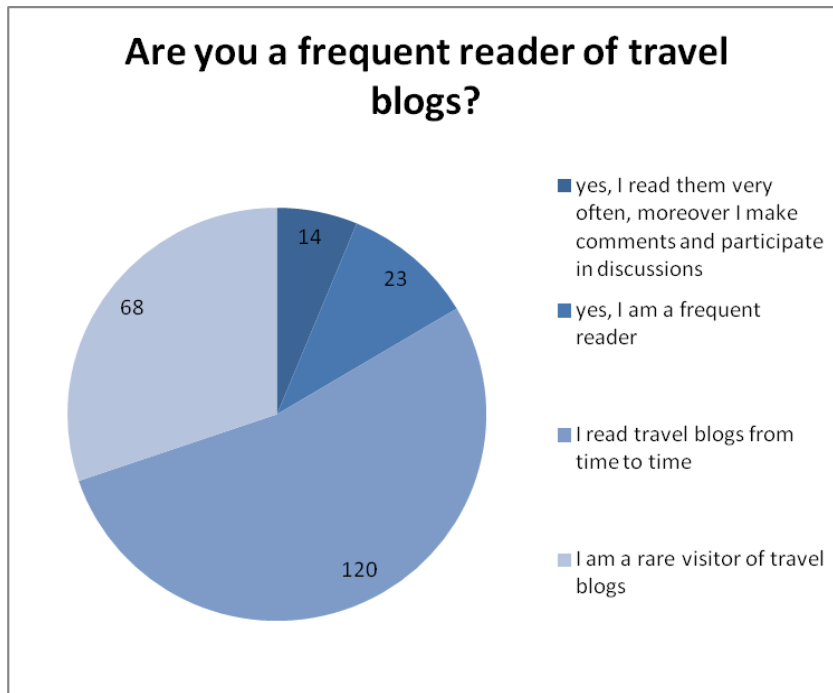


Figure 7. Frequency of reading travel blogs

For this research one of the most important issues was to find out the correlation between the gender, age, frequency of visiting travel blogs and answers to other questions (e.g. level of trust, reasons for reading travel blogs and factors that make blogs interesting to the reader). Later on in the presentation of research results the difference between the answers of various groups of respondents will be shown and analyzed.

4.2 Study results

The results got from the answers to the questionnaire can be divided into several parts: travel blogs as a source of information, trust in travel blogs, and effect of travel blogs on travel planning. All these issues are discussed separately in the next three subchapters. The results are shown in the form of tables, figures and also as excerpts from people's responses.

4.2.1 Travel blog as a source of information

There is no surprise that while answering the questions about sources that people use to get information about travel destinations, the most popular answer was online social media. The reason is that the questionnaire was eventually spread out on those online social media portals. Of course, the aim of this question was not to cover the overall picture of people's preferences, but only the segment of people that are travel blog readers. And the most interesting

part was to find out which more sources do people who read travel blogs use. The results were quite graphic: people prefer official travel websites and portals and word-of-mouth to brochures, travel guides and media (TV, journals, magazines).

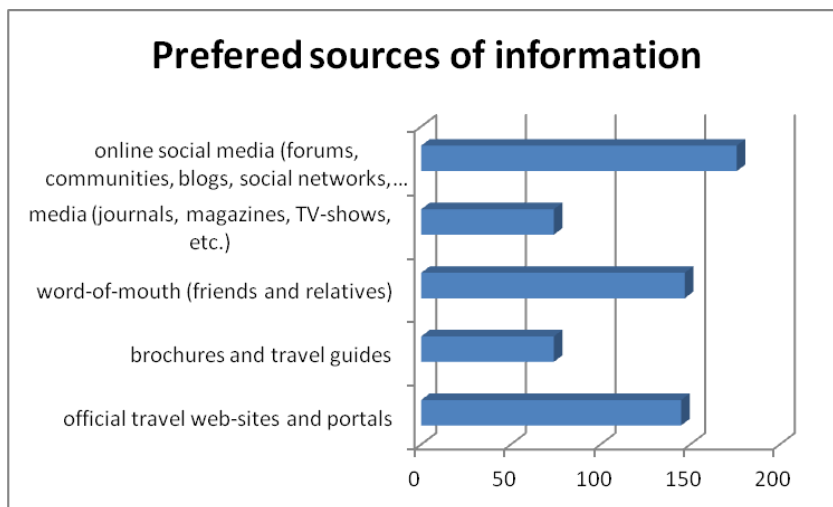


Figure 8. Preferred sources of information

Respondents also mentioned other sources where they get information from. Those were web-sites like “Lonely Planet” (www.lonelyplanet.com) and VirtualTourist (www.virtualtourist.com), which are online travel guides and cannot be categories neither as online social media nor as official travel web-sites and portals. Several people said that they still prefer to consult with the travel agent when choosing a travel destination and a couple of respondents said that they just decide what they want to see based on their current mood and needs and by looking at the map choose the next place to visit.

There are various reasons why people read travel blogs. Table 3 shows that 3 out of 4 options got almost the same amount of answers. Those were “get ideas about destinations that I might want to visit in the future”, “get information about destinations where I am already planning to go” and “spend time reading interesting stories about different places”. This shows that travel blogs can act both as simply a source of information about the destination that interests a person as well as a motivator to choose a certain destination. Moreover, 11 respondents mentioned that they read blogs because they belong to their friends, and this is the only way to follow them while they are travelling. Several people noted that travel blogs inspire them while they are not travelling and wake up their imagination. A couple more said that they read blogs to figure out the most interesting way to write a blog of their own.

Reasons to read travel blogs	# of answers
Get ideas about destinations that I might want to visit in future	140
Get information about destinations that I am already planning to go to	131
Read about destinations where I have already been	57
Spend time reading interesting stories about different places	132

Table 3. Reasons to read travel blogs

When talking about the factors that make people interested in certain travel blogs (Table 4), the answers that got the highest scores were “useful information about the place I am currently interested in” with the average of 4,5 (on a 5-point scale) and “good writing style” with the average of 3,9. Most of the travel blog readers are not interested at all whether the blog has got a high number of subscribers or not. The inviting personality of the author is not perceived as a very important factor to choose a certain blog, but despite this 62,7% of all the respondents rated it with a score 3 and higher, which means that even though it is not the primary factor to choose a certain blog, people still pay attention to who is the author of the blog. The same is with frequent updates – 79% of respondents rated this option with the score 3 and higher.

Factors making certain blog interesting	Grade
useful information about the place that I am currently interested in	4,5
good writing style	3,9
inviting personality of the author	2,9
frequent updates	3,4
high number of subscribers	2,1

Table 4. Factors that make certain blogs interesting

Some other factors that are important for travel blog readers are appealing design and user-friendly interface, variety of topics presented, information actuality, sense of humor, high quality of information presented (whether it is text, pictures or video) and longevity of the blog.

The information that travel blog readers are willing to see in the blog is first of all factual data (85,7% of respondents' answers), quality pictures (94,7%) and suggestion and advice from the author (80,4%). (Figure 9)



Figure 9. Most important information in a travel blog

There were a huge number of respondents who noted that author's personal stories and personal opinion are also important components of a good travel blog. The presence of video was significant only for 21,3% of the blog readers. 55 people stated that they would like to read a further discussion on the topic. An interesting correlation is that most of the people (67,3%) who stated that further discussion on the topic is important for them are the ones who pointed out that they read travel blogs just to spend time reading interesting stories.

Not all the information about destinations people prefer to find from a travel blog. Most of the respondents stated that they would rather check general information about accommodation, transportation and visa issues from an official web-site. The same is with the historical notes. But when it comes to the prices, people prefer to check various sources and compare the results. Suggestions about the outdoor activities, tips for the journey and information about the local culture are most commonly looked at in a travel blog. (Table 5)

Types of information	official web-site	travel blog
general information	210	49
suggestions about outdoor activities	54	195
prices	127	135
information about local culture	88	178
historical notes	161	81
tips for the journey	69	189

Table 5. Sources of gaining certain types of information

4.2.2 Trust in travel blogs

An enormous number of respondents (183 out of 225) stated that they trust most of the information that they read in travel blogs. 32 people said that they trust only a small amount of information. Only one person admitted that he does not trust blogs at all and 9 people said that they believe in all the information that is posted. (Figure 10)

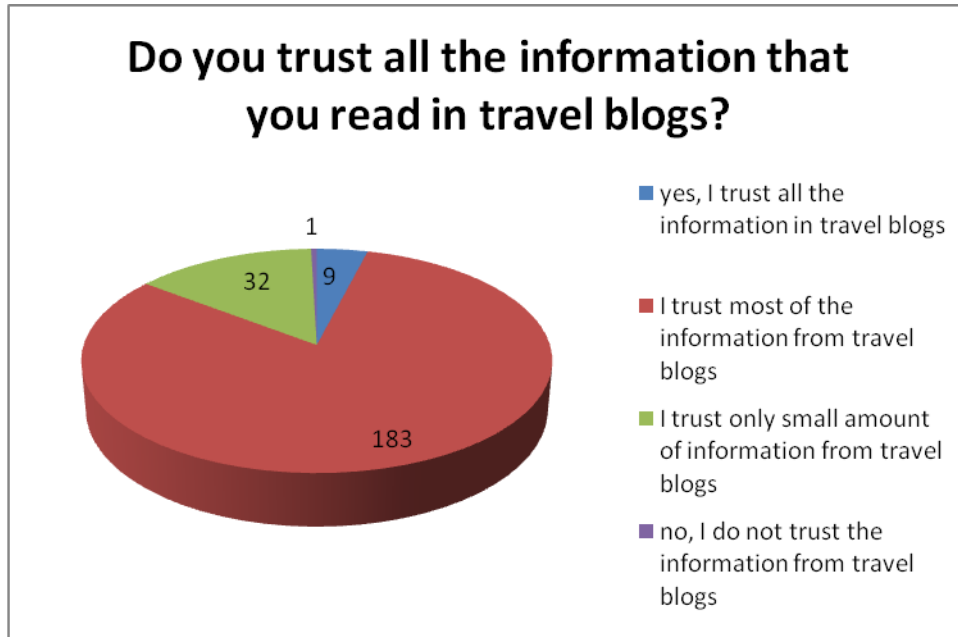


Figure 10. Trust in travel blogs

It is interesting to note that people aged 26-30 had the highest % of trust in travel blogs. 84,4% of the respondents in this age group said that they trust most of the information and 6,7% said that they trust all the information. (Table 6)

		Do you trust all the information that you read in travel blogs?			
		yes, I trust all the information	I trust most of the information	I trust only small amount of information	I do not trust travel blogs
Age	less than 15	0	2	1	0
		0,0%	66,7%	33,3%	0,0%
	16-20	3	47	11	0
		4,9%	77,0%	18,0%	0,0%
	21-25	3	70	13	0
	3,5%	81,4%	15,1%	0,0%	
	26-30	3	38	4	0
		6,7%	84,4%	8,9%	0,0%

31-35	0	14	2	1
	0,0%	82,4%	11,8%	5,9%
36-40	0	6	1	0
	0,0%	85,7%	14,3%	0,0%
41-45	0	2	0	0
	0,0%	100,0%	0,0%	0,0%
46-50	0	3	0	0
	0,0%	100,0%	0,0%	0,0%
more than 50	0	1	0	0
	0,0%	100,0%	0,0%	0,0%
Total	9	183	32	1
	4,0%	81,3%	14,2%	,4%

Table 6. Level of trust in travel blogs in different age groups

When the respondents were asked about their own reasons to trust or not to trust a certain travel blog, most of them stated that as all the information from the Internet, travel blogs might be biased. But blog readers also admit that all the information that they get is useful, no matter whether it is 100% true or not, because later on it is anyway filtered and the person's own conclusions are made out of all the information from all the sources. So, the more travel blogs you visit, the more information you get and later on it would be easier for you to make the right conclusions:

I am always double checking all information also from other travel blogs and websites to make sure that the information is correct.

My opinion is usually based on several sources. One blog is never enough.

Information that is given in travel blogs is rather subjective, thus it cannot be fully trusted - each traveler describes his or her own experience which, in fact, differs from person to person. For example, if the traveler did or did not like a certain hotel, it does not necessarily mean you will or will not like it as well.

Moreover, people suppose that there is no reason for a blogger to lie. But they admit that before they really trust all the information from a travel blog, they have to try to know a bit more about the owner of the blog – his age, occupation, interests and life style. People give more weight to the recommendations from the bloggers who are somehow similar to them (students will prefer to read travel adventures of the person of their age, married people would like to hear the stories from family couples, etc.):

I don't think anyone would be likely to lie. Of course, I have to decide how much like me the person is, before I know how much weight to give to his/her recommendations.

People are aware of advertising in travel blogs and based on their answers I can say that they know how to distinguish whether the blog is sponsored or not:

I certainly do not trust most of the official web-sites of travel agencies - obviously, these agencies make profit on what they promote. Travel blogs are run by travelers and usually are nonprofit so there's no reason for authors to provide false information. But I know that travel bloggers can sometimes get money for advertising, but this kind of advertising is usually quite obvious and straight away causes rejection.

Many of the respondents state that they trust more those bloggers who tell not only about pluses, but also about bad sides of the journey/destination:

I trust the information if it contains a description of not only the advantages but also disadvantages. I think that if there are only advantages, the information is false.

But there are also several people who said that they are always very careful with the negative opinions, because they find them too subjective:

If a person takes the time to write about his journeys, to post pictures, stories and information, then I guess he/she has a passion for it and I don't see any reason not to trust it... I'm a bit more careful with critics and opinions which are after all just one point of view!

There are a lot of smaller details that make people trust certain blogs. Most of the blog readers think that blogs with frequent updates are more trustworthy. Some assume that a high number of subscribers and a lot of comments under each blog entry are good reasons to trust the information. Pictures make blogs more trustworthy as well. But despite all these factors almost all the respondents understand that personal opinion is always subjective, and whereby the information from any kind of the Internet source has to be double-checked.

4.2.3 Effect of travel blogs on travel planning

Most of the travel blog readers (68%) state that blogs have got some impact on choosing their travel destination, 25,3% say that they do not have any impact at all, while 6,7% admit that the impact is huge. (Table 7)

Do travel blogs have impact on choosing your travel destination?	Frequency	Percent
yes, a huge impact	15	6,7%
yes, to some extent	153	68,0%
no, no impact	57	25,3%
Total	225	100,0%

Table 7. Impact of travel blogs on choosing travel destination

There is a visible correlation between the frequency of reading travel blogs and the level of impact of those on choosing a travel destination. People that are frequent readers of travel blogs believe that blogs have got at least some impact on choosing their travel destination. (Table 8) But there are also some constant blog readers who say that travel blogs do not have any impact on their decisions at all. An interesting fact is that those people marked the main reasons for reading blogs as just spending time reading interesting stories about different countries. Their motives were different from the very beginning, and travel blogs for these people are seen more like interesting books rather than sources of important information and guides.

	Do travel blogs have impact on choosing your travel destination?			Total
	yes, a huge impact	yes, to some extent	no, no impact	
yes, I read and comment	0	12	2	14
yes, I read very often	2	19	2	23
I read from time to time	10	82	28	120
I am a rare visitor	3	40	25	68
Total	15	153	57	225

Pearson Chi-Square 0,083

Table 8. Correlation between frequency of reading travel blogs and their impact on choosing a travel destination

Most of the people who have a travel blog of their own tend to trust the information from other blogs (Table 9), while among people without blogs there is a bit higher percent of those who say that they trust only small amount of information written on these sources.

		Do you have a personal travel blog?		Total
		yes	no	
Do you trust all the information that you read in travel blogs?	yes, I trust all the information	2	7	9
	I trust most of the information	28	153	181
	I trust only small amount of information	3	29	32
	I do not trust travel blogs	0	0	0
Total		33	189	222

Table 9. Correlation between having a personal blog and trusting the information written in blogs

One more fully logical fact is that people who trust all or most of the information written in travel blogs say that blogs have got at least some impact on choosing their travel destinations, while people that do not trust blogs admit that reading blogs does not have any impact on them at all.

		Do you trust all the information that you read in travel blogs?				Total
		yes, I trust all the information	I trust most of the information	I trust only small amount of information	I do not trust travel blogs	
Do travel blogs have impact on choosing your travel destination?	yes, a huge impact	2	13	0	0	15
	yes, to some extent	6	129	18	0	153
	no, no impact	1	41	14	1	57
Total		9	183	32	1	225

Pearson Chi-Square 0,022

Table 10. Correlation between trust in blogs and their impact on choosing travel destination

5 Analysis of the results

This chapter thoroughly analyzes and interprets the results of the given research. The conclusions about the different roles of travel blogs are made. Moreover, benefits of blogs compared to other sources of information are introduced. At the end of the chapter the question of trust in blogs is touched and discussed.

5.1 Roles of travel blogs

The results of the survey clearly showed that travel blogs have got several roles in the whole process of travel planning. The first and the most important role is acting as a motivator. 140 out of 225 respondents in the survey stated that they read travel blogs to get ideas about destinations that they might want to visit in the future. An interesting blog might become a great stimulus. In one of the open questions some of the respondents noted that travel blogs act as an inspiration for them. Even though sometimes the primary reason for reading a blog might be just spending time reading interesting stories, at the end the person recognizes that he or she has a need to go on vacation, to visit a certain country or to get familiar with a certain culture.

Blogs are also very important in the search process and evaluation of alternatives (Model of Destination Choice Process by Lewis and Chambers). 131 out of 225 respondents said that they read blogs to get information about destinations that they are already planning to visit. Here it is important to note that according to Aichtner & Ritchie (2003) people's personal perceptions and beliefs straight away narrow the amount of destinations to choose from, moreover people always have an organic image of each destination which is usually very difficult to be changed.

Moreover, travel blogs help to plan a trip – find out the best restaurants at the destination, must-see places, what and where to buy, etc. 80,4% of all the respondents of the survey noted that they are willing to see suggestions and advice in a travel blog, which will allow them to plan a trip more carefully. So, travel blogs act as indispensable source of information as long as they provide facts which are not available on official web-sites or other sources.

With the appearance of micro-blogging and huge popularity of smartphones and communicators it became much easier to search for the information when you are travelling. This led to the fact that blogs became quite important during en-route search process as well.

According to Pan, a big amount of travellers have a need to share the information about the destination that they have visited with others. This is one of the reasons for people to start writing a travel blog of their own. Moreover, people continue to search for information about destination even after trip, because, first of all, they have built an attachment with the place and secondly, they would like to compare their own experience with others’.

So, as we can see, travel blogs have got five important roles in the process of choosing a travel destination (Figure 11). It might be that for certain people only 1 or 2 of those roles are of great importance (e.g. they read blogs only while trip planning or see them only as motivators, but do not use the information from blogs for other purposes), while others trust blogs so much that they use the information from them during all the stages of the trip.

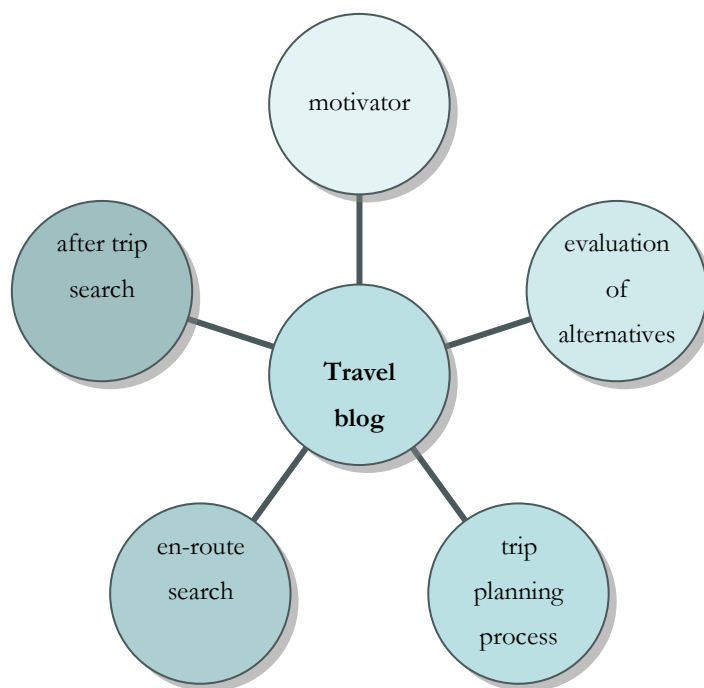


Figure 11. Different roles of travel blogs in the process of travel planning

5.2 Benefits of travel blogs compared to other sources

According to Dobowski (2001), people tend to choose those sources of information that do not require a lot of time and effort and are emotionally more comfortable. Blogs are usually

written in a story style, they combine together different information in one place (facts, pictures, suggestions, discussions, etc). Moreover, the information is posted in chronological order. This makes blogs very easy to follow and interesting to read. Many of the respondents of the survey said that they are strongly for the sense of humour in blogging and they do care who the writer of the blog is. So, out of a huge amount of travel blogs that we have nowadays every person can choose the blog that is the most attractive for him due to some specific reasons.

According to the results of the survey, almost all the respondents prefer to check several sources of information. So, online social media (including blogs) was always supported by word-of-mouth or official web-sites or other a bit less popular sources. Osti (2009) stated that all the sources have got different levels of credibility and whereby the reader chooses himself what information is meaningful for him. Based on the information from several sources he is already able to make a final decision. For example, in the given survey, respondents said that they check and combine prices from both official sources and blogs. Travel blogs, most probably will never be able to be the only source of information for travel planning, but in combination with other sources they work quite effectively.

5.3 Question of trust

In the Source Credibility Model by Ohanian (1990) she stated that there are 3 main factors that contribute to the credibility of the information source. Those are trust, expertise and attractiveness. The results of the given survey suggest that those three factors are extremely important in the blogosphere as well.

Most of the questioned people assume that if bloggers write about their trips, they are somehow experts in that. Whereby, they assume that the information written in blogs cannot be purposely wrong, even though most of the respondents admit that there is always a certain level of bias in every opinion. A lot of the respondents stated that they prefer to trust a blogger who is somehow similar to them (e.g. a married person will read a blog of the traveler who has a family, while an adolescent interested in adventure sports will choose someone who shares his interests).

The findings also show that there is some correlation between the age of the readers and their level of trust – people aged 26-30 tend to trust blogs a little bit more. But there was no correlation found between the gender of the respondents and their level of trust.

Attractiveness of the source (its design, navigation, good writing style, humor) was also mentioned by a big amount of respondents as an important reason for trusting.

6 Conclusions

According to the results of the survey, several conclusions about the use of blogs in travel business are made. Moreover, there is presented a list of important rules for companies that would like to start their own blog. Finally, the validity and reliability of the given research are evaluated and the evaluation of the thesis process is made.

6.1 Use of blogging in travel business

The main question of this research was to identify how people use blogs and do they affect their purchasing behaviour. The findings clearly show that e-WOM, particularly travel blogging, has got several important roles in the travellers' purchasing process. Unfortunately, not all the travel companies understand the huge impact that e-WOM has on potential customers and do not know how to use it for their benefit.

Nevertheless, blog software is extremely easy to use. Companies have got a choice – they can build up a corporate blog into their web-site, which will take some time and effort to take care of, or they can also build a platform for the users who will basically do all the work for them, and the company will just need to support them and maintain the rules.

A SWOT analysis is a very effective tool to show all the benefits and negative sides of using blogs in travel business:

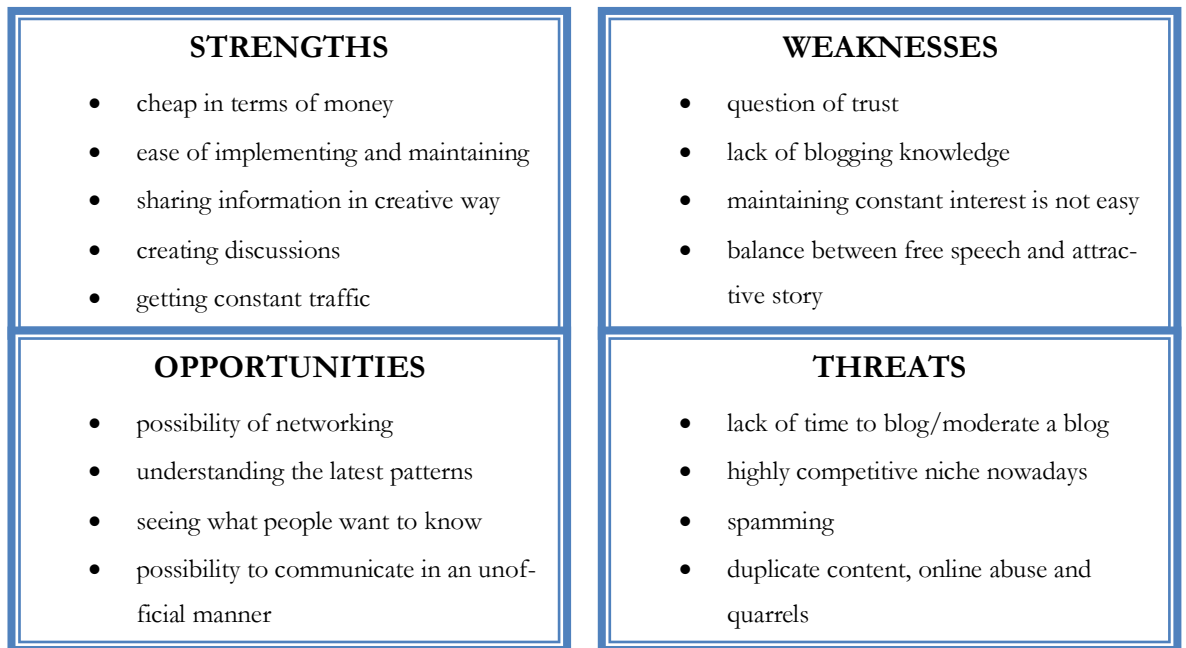


Figure 12. SWOT analysis of blogging.

Even though there are clearly visible strengths in blogging (such as being a cheap marketing tool, ease of implementing, creativity, getting constant traffic and arranging discussions on the topic), we should not forget that blogging also has certain weakness. People will never trust blogs 100%, because they understand the possibility of biased points of view of any blogger. Moreover, blogs cannot be written by any person. Certain skills are needed in order to write an interesting, attractive story. The same goes with maintaining a constant interest – there should always be new topics risen, new ways of sharing information introduced, so that the reader will not get bored. Being a blogger is a profession which involves passion, time and diligence. But if blogging is used in a right way, it offers a lot of opportunities to the company: networking, tracking the latest patterns, possibility to communicate with potential customers in a unofficial atmosphere, unobtrusive advertising, etc. It is just important to remember that there might be certain threats of blogging, such as spamming, quarrels and abuse, duplicate content (so that relevant information is lost in dozens of irrelevant one). Moreover, blogging does require lots of time, which is not always enough, and due to the fact that nowadays most of the businesses start to understand the importance of UGC, implementing blogs into official web-sites is a highly competitive niche nowadays. It seems like soon instead of being a benefit it will become a must.

As we can see, if tourism companies learn to effectively combine classical marketing and e-WOM, they might easily raise the amount of potential customers interested in their product. There are just several rules that have to be known about blogging:

1. Different people have different needs. Before starting a blog the owner has to understand who the target group is and to write particularly for this group. What is interesting for a businessman will not be interesting for a housewife. Certain homogeneity between the users of a certain web source is extremely important.
2. The more ways to share the information – the better. Pure text is not always enough; people want to see pictures, video, discussions. This also makes information more reliable.
3. Blog posts should be personal and conversational – this builds more trust to the source.
4. People understand when the blog is sponsored, but there is nothing terrible if this fact is properly presented to the reader.
5. E-WOM is just one of the sources of getting information. People will never trust only word-of-mouth, they will collect information from different sources, compare it and come to certain conclusions. That is why it is so effective to have a certain source of e-WOM on official web-site – people straight away get information from two different sources.
6. Relevant information has to be emphasized, while irrelevant information has to be omitted (Optimum Communication Mix Model by McCartney).
7. People return to the same source if they understand that the information they found on it was credible. That is why building trust on the company's web source is extremely important.

6.2 Validity and reliability

To make sure that the results of the given research are valid, while designing the questionnaire I was trying to follow certain rules:

- all the questions in the survey had to go along with the main research questions that were stated in the beginning of the thesis
- the questions should be clearly understood by everybody, moreover, the wording of the questions should not imply any specific answer

- there should be an alternative answer in all the questions in order to make sure that none of the possible answers is forgotten

As long as the survey was conducted on the Internet, unfortunately it was impossible for me to make sure that all the questions were clearly understood by all the participants, even though before running the questionnaire I have tested it on several people. As I could see from the results, there was a certain misunderstanding in one of the questions. When I asked “If you have (or had) a travel blog of your own, what was the primary reason for you to start it?” I assumed that only blog owners will answer it, but most of the respondents understood it differently (like “if you decided to have a blog of your own, what would be the primary reason to start it?”) and answered to this question even if they never had a travel blog. That is why unfortunately I could not use the results of this answer in my analysis.

In my research I have not used a lot of questions to find out the full portrait of the respondent. The main characteristics that I was interested in were gender, age and frequency of reading travel blogs. Whereby I admit that there might be a certain restriction of the results concerning other socioeconomic factors that were not asked. For example, I cannot make sure that there was not any overweight towards people of certain nationality, even though I tried to avoid it by using international web-sites for posting a link to my survey.

The fact that in my research there was only 20% of male respondents also leads me to the conclusion that the results might be a bit one-sided. Due to such a huge difference in male and female answers I could not figure out any correlation between gender and, e.g. level of trust, even though I assume that there is a certain link between those variables.

6.3 Evaluation of the thesis process

The question of importance of UGC in business has always been interesting for me, so I did not have any problems in choosing the topic of my thesis. The only obstacle was that I understood that I had to narrow the topic somehow and this took me some time, because I could not choose what to concentrate on. Finally out of all the UGC sources I have chosen blogs. I suppose that this was the right choice, because blogging is an extremely interesting and independent phenomenon on the Internet world nowadays, it has not been thoroughly researched so far and whereby there are still a lot of unanswered questions concerning it.

The process of writing theory part was the most difficult for me, because I had to find out the key theories and somehow to combine them with the research questions that I stated in the beginning of the thesis writing process. Conducting the research itself went very smoothly, even though I would have loved to have more time for gathering answers, because I am pretty sure that I could have got much more responses and whereby the results of the research could have been even better. The process of analysis of the results was extremely interesting, even though time consuming.

While writing given thesis I have learnt a lot about the importance of UGC nowadays, its positive and negative sides and the ways in which UGC could be used for the benefit of a certain tourism company. Right now I am working in one of the big hotel chains and I assume that the information that I have learned I can indirectly use at my work place as well.

6.4 Suggestions for further research

My thesis was focused mainly on blogosphere and its role in the process of travel planning, but it would have been extremely interesting to see the effect that other UGC has got nowadays in travel business. One of the most interesting topics is the usage of social media (e.g. Facebook) in business.

Moreover, as long as many of different socioeconomic attributes were excluded from the given survey, for the future research it would be interesting to see the link between travel destination choosing process and such features as nationality, education, marital status.

One more extremely important question to investigate is what the ways to build trust on a certain web source are and to make a list of do's and don'ts for the companies.

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Attachments

Attachment 1. Questionnaire.

Role of Travel Blogs in the process of travel planning

Dear Respondent, I am a student of Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences in Finland and I am writing a final thesis about the role of travel blogs in the process of travel planning. This questionnaire is a part of my thesis research. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and your answers will form part of statistical study and will not identify you as an individual. I hope you will take a few minutes to complete this questionnaire. Sincerely, Ekaterina Davydova.

1. Gender
 - male
 - female
2. Age
 - ...-15
 - 16-20
 - 21-25
 - 26-30
 - 31-35
 - 36-40
 - 41-45
 - 46-50
 - 50-...
3. What sources do you usually use to get information about travel destinations that interest you?
 - official travel web-sites and portals
 - brochures and travel guides
 - word-of-mouth (friends and relatives)
 - media (journals, magazines, TV-shows, etc.)
 - online social media (forums, communities, blogs, social networks, user-generated review web-sites, etc.)
 - other (please, specify) _____
4. Are you a frequent reader of travel blogs?
 - yes, I read them very often, moreover I make comments and participate in discussions
 - yes, I am a frequent reader
 - I read travel blogs from time to time
 - I am a rare visitor of travel blogs
5. For which of the following reasons do you read travel blogs? (multiple choice)
 - get ideas about the places that I might want to visit in the future
 - get information about destinations where I am already planning to go
 - read about destinations where I have already been
 - spend time reading interesting stories about different places
 - other (please, specify) _____

6. To which extent the presence of factors listed below makes you interested in a certain travel blog?
- information about the place that I am currently interested in 1 2 3 4 5
 - good writing style 1 2 3 4 5
 - inviting personality of the author 1 2 3 4 5
 - frequent updates 1 2 3 4 5
 - high number of subscribers 1 2 3 4 5
7. If there is some other factor that is important for you in travel blogs, please, specify:
-
-
8. What information are you first of all willing to see in the travel blog?
- factual information (What? Where? How?)
 - author's personal stories about the journey
 - pictures
 - video
 - suggestions and advice
 - critique, controversy, personal opinion
 - further discussions on the topic
 - other (please, specify): _____
9. When you need to find the following information about a certain destination, which source are you more likely to check first – travel blog or official web-site?
- General information about accommodation, transportation, visa issues
 - Suggestions about outdoor activities: where to go, what to see, what to buy
 - Prices
 - Information about local culture, traditions, people, food
 - Historical notes
 - Tips for the journey
10. Do you trust all the information that you read in travel blogs?
- yes, I trust all the information from travel blogs
 - I trust most of the information from travel blogs
 - I trust only small amount of information from travel blogs
 - no, I do not trust the information from the travel blogs
11. Can you explain your reasons for trusting/not trusting blogs?
-
-
-
12. Do travel blogs have an effect on your travel destination?
- yes, they have a huge impact
 - yes, to some extent
 - no, they do not have any impact
13. Do you have a personal travel blog?
- yes
 - no
14. If you have (or had) a blog of your own, what was the primary reason for you to start it?
- share your experience with the world
 - keep your friends and relatives up-to-date
 - remember and relive your experience later on
 - meet other people who share your passion for travelling
 - other (please, specify): _____

