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Discovering Germany: Analysis on User-Generated Content as a Travel Information Source

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Discovering Germany: Analysis on User-generated Content as a Travel Information Source

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This Bachelor's thesis examines the role of user-generated content in destination promotion. The research reviews the image Finnish consumers have about Germany as a tourist destination. In addition, the study aims at revealing the standpoint of user-generated content as an information source in the online environment. The analysis emphasizes travel related user-generated content which refers to content shared and created by consumers online including photographs, videos, podcasts, blogs, reviews and postings on social media sites concerning travel experiences. The thesis is commissioned by Finnlines.

The theoretical framework of the thesis supports the execution of the research. In the theoretical part the concept of destination image is introduced and the process of image formation is discussed in detail. Acquisition of information is emphasized in the context of image formation with an effect on destination selection. Moreover, the transformation from consumption to production of information is examined through the concept of user-generated content. The research methodology applied in the thesis is quantitative research. A self-administered survey was published by Finnlines in the Facebook page of the company. A statistical analysis was conducted for accurate and precise information.

According to the results Germany as a tourist destination is valued due to the diverse offer of activities, affordable price level and geographical proximity. However, the results demonstrated variance in perceptions of Germany between consumer segments of young adults and adults, middle aged and the elderly. Young adults and adults focus on meeting personal needs whilst travelling, and therefore have one-sided image about Germany. The middle aged highlight features of enjoyment and accessibility due to the dependency on travel companions. The diverse image which the elderly have is influenced by historical and social changes occurred in the destination.

In terms of information search online sources with authority are preferred over user-generated content. Yet, user-generated content is a useful source of information in the initial stages of destination selection. The reliance of consumers on commercial sources is explained by the lack of quality control in the online environment and the unorganized manner user-generated content is presented online. Consequently, consumers tend to share and produce knowledge on travel experiences for self-serving reasons with preference on social networks and commercial reviews sites. Based on the findings the thesis provides Finnlines suggestions for effective destination promotion and welfare of consumer relations. The key actions to be taken refer to visualization of travel experiences and effortless flow of information through a variety of mediums.

Key words: Destination image, Germany, web 2.0, user-generated content

Siri Suontausta

Saksa matkakohteena: Analyysi käyttäjien luoman verkkosisällön merkityksestä matkan suunnittelussa

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Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena oli tutkia käyttäjien luoman verkkosisällön merkitystä matkakohteiden markkinoinnissa keskittyen suomalaisten kuluttajien mielikuviin Saksasta matkakohteena. Lisäksi tutkimuksen pyrkimyksenä oli tuoda ilmi käyttäjien luoman verkkosisällön todellinen merkitys tietolähteenä suhteessa muihin verkkolähteisiin. Tutkimuksessa painotettiin kuluttajien matkakokemuksiin liittyvän sisällön jakamista ja tuottamista mukaan lukien valokuvat, videot, podcast-lähettykset, blogit, arvostelut ja julkaisut sosiaalisessa mediassa. Opinnäytetyön toimeksiantajana toimi Finnlines.

Opinnäytetyön teoreettinen viitekehys tukee tutkimuksen toteutusta. Teoreettinen viitekehys rakentuu matkakohteen ja kohdemielikuvan määritelmien ympärille. Tiedon etsinnän merkitystä korostetaan kohdemielikuvaa muodostettaessa, mikä vaikuttaa matkakohteen valintaan. Nykyajan kuluttajat arvostavat tietolähteiden tarkkuutta sekä luotettavuutta. Käyttäjien luoman verkkosisällön ansiosta kuluttajilla on mahdollisuus vaikuttaa verkossa saatavilla olevan tiedon laatuun ja sisältöön. Tämän opinnäytetyön tutkimusmenetelmänä käytettiin kvantitatiivista tutkimusta, joka toteutettiin sähköisenä kyselynä. Finnlines julkaisi kyselyn omilla Facebook-sivuillaan.

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittivat suomalaisten suosivan Saksaa matkakohteena monipuolisuuden, edullisen hintatason ja läheisen sijainnin vuoksi. Mielikuvissa löytyi eroavaisuuksia nuorten aikuisten ja aikuisten, keski-ikäisten ja senioreiden kesken. Nuoret aikuiset ja aikuiset korostavat henkilökohtaisia tarpeita matkustaessaan jättäen siten muodostetun mielikuvan yksipuoliseksi. Keski-ikäiset puolestaan keskittyvät matkakumppaneidensa viihtyvyyteen, jolloin mielikuvat perustuvat kohteen toiminnallisuuteen. Seniorimatkaajien monipuolisiin mielikuviin vaikuttavat historialliset mullistukset ja muutokset kohteen sosiaalisessa rakenteessa.

Suomalaisten kuluttajien matkan suunnittelussa korostuu auktoriteettien merkitys hankittaessa tietoa tietystä matkakohteesta. Kuluttajien luoman verkkosisällön puoleen käännetään kuitenkin matkakohdetta valittaessa. Kuluttajien luottamukseen kaupallisia sivustoja kohtaan vaikuttavat laadun valvonnan puute virtuaalisessa ympäristössä sekä kuluttajien järjestäytymätön tapa jakaa ja luoda sisältöä. Siitä johtuen kuluttajat luovat verkkosisältöä, jonka katsovat ajavan omaa etuaan. Tutkimustuloksiin perustuen opinnäytetyö sisältää ehdotuksia, joita Finnlinesin on mahdollista hyödyntää matkakohteiden markkinoinnissa ja asiakassuhteiden hyvinvoinnin ylläpitämisessä. Saksan vetovoiman kasvattamiseksi Finnlinesin tulisi painottaa matkakokemusten monipuolisuutta visuaalisten elementtien avulla. Reaaliaikainen tiedonvälitys sosiaalisen median kautta puolestaan tukisi asiakastytyvääsiä.

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1 Introduction

The construction of a destination image is based on intentional and unintentional acquisition of information and influenced by socio-psychological features of a consumer. The emergence of internet in the 1980s had a great impact on the information search behavior of a consumer. Consequently, development of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) taking place in the 21st century is seen as the starting point of the web revolution. Nowadays, internet is considered as the number one source when seeking for information, solution or inspiration. Tourism industry in particular is dependent from the information available online due to the intangible nature of the industry. In terms of travel planning consumers of today prefer online sources referring to web platforms with features of user-generated content (UGC). Content produced by travellers with authentic experiences is valued due to the unbiased and accurate nature of the information.

The purpose of the study is to examine the importance of travel related user-generated content in tourism promotion concerning Germany. The thesis reviews the image Finnish consumers have about Germany as a tourism destination and their preferences concerning information sources whilst obtaining information on a destination. The study has focus on travel related UGC which refers to content shared and created by consumers in an online environment including photographs, videos, podcasts, blogs, reviews and postings on social media sites concerning travel experiences. The thesis is commissioned by Finnlines. As a tourism service provider Finnlines has acknowledged the importance of user-generated content in tourism marketing and is therefore interested in the consumers' relation towards user-generated content in travel planning. By being accustomed to the needs and interests of consumers regarding travel planning and destination selection Finnlines is able to promote Germany in an attractive and effective manner.

The thesis is structured according to the theoretical framework and the conducted research. The theoretical framework introduces the manner a destination image is constructed with emphasis on information acquisition. The image formation process is introduced in chapter 3. The role of information sources in destination selection is discussed in detail in chapter 4. A definition of the concept of user-generated content and motivations for consulting or producing user-generated content are found in chapter 5. The research method of choice is quantitative of nature and the research is conducted in a form of electronic survey. The research method highlighting the questionnaire design is clarified in chapter 6. The results of the research are illustrated in chapter 7. Based on the conclusions of chapter 8 the thesis provides

Finlines development suggestions concerning promotion of Germany and welfare of consumer relations. The development suggestions can be found in chapter 9.

2 Finlines

Finlines provides sea transport and port services with an incentive to serve the European industrial, commercial and transport sectors as well as the individual passengers. The company operates in the North Sea and the Baltic Sea with focus on cargo and passenger services. Finlines is a part of Grimaldi Group which is known to be one of the largest freight operators in the world. Concerning passenger services Finlines provides transportation from Finland to Germany and Sweden. In addition, the company operates between Germany and Russia and between Sweden and Finland. The provided port services take place in Finland more precisely in Helsinki and Turku. Overall, as a service provider Finlines is described to be competent, reliable and experienced. The company values a customer-based approach emphasizing the importance of consumer satisfaction. Thus, satisfactory consumers reflect business success. By recognizing consumers' individual needs the company is able to refresh the service concept and maintain consumer loyalty. (Finlines 2015.)

Finlines operates between Finland and Germany six days a week and during the high season consumers are offered daily departures. The vessels operate routes from Helsinki to Travemünde, Lübeck and Rostock. Travemünde is an ideal summer destination with easy-going small town atmosphere and long beaches to enjoy the warm weather. On the contrary Lübeck is well-known known Hansa town with medieval atmosphere. The various cultural and historical attractions of Lübeck emphasize the rich history of the city. Moreover, Rostock is ideal destination for a daily excursion due to the compact design of the city. Relating to passenger services the cruises provided by Finlines consist of a relaxing journey and a visit at one of the cities located in the coast of the Baltic Sea. Also trips including overnight on board are in offer. During the sea voyage one is free to enjoy the services on board including a jacuzzi, sauna, gym and restaurant services. Gastronomical pleasure in mind the buffet of the vessel offers a variety of delicacies prepared according to Finnish and German traditions. Additionally, the sea voyage provides spectacular views for the enjoyment of tourists. For overnight stays in a city Finlines offers hotel packages in assistance with a tour operator called Voigt Seereisen Agentur. Finlines is favoured by tourists travelling with a vehicle allowing the travellers to execute a roundtrip or a likewise arrangement. (Finlines 2015.)

Finlines has realized the need to embrace the developments relating to communication and marketing activities enabled by Information and Communication Technologies. For the tourism industry ICTs provide an opportunity to reach potential customers thorough online repre-

sentation (Hu, Marchiori, Kalbaska & Cantoni 2014, 138.) The online representation of Finnlines originates from the official website of the company <http://www.finnlines.com/ferry-trips>. The main function of the website is to present the offer of services available, hence the site contains information for instance on routes and fares, cruises and packages, special offers and destinations on offer. The site includes both textual and multimedia material for the consumers to gain an understanding of the travel experience provided by Finnlines. Photographs and videos relating to impressions of the routes could be mentioned as examples of the multimedia material. In addition, one is able to book the requested services through online booking portal on the webpage. Finnlines takes actively part in social media referring to platforms of Facebook, Flickr and YouTube. The company considers the sites as channels for conveying information, targeting potential customers and gaining recognition.

3 Destination Image

The concept of destination image has raised a great interest in the field of tourism during the past three decades. A detailed revision of the image formation has led to acknowledging the influence of destination image on consumer behaviour. Particularly, destination choice and consumer satisfaction have been stressed in image research. Due to the intangible nature of tourism products destinations are evaluated based on the perceived image. Commonly, the image is seen as the competitive advantage of a destination when compared to other locations. Nowadays the array of destinations to choose from is endless therefore the present-day traveller considers the perceived image as a key determinant in the initial stages of destination selection. Guthrie and Gale (in Gallarza, Saura & García, 2002) stress the significance of perceptions over reality by stating that “perceptions rather than reality are what motivate consumers to act or not to act” (Gallarza, Saura & García 2002, 56-58). Additionally, the value set for perceptions of a destination in terms of consumer decision-making is utilized in actions of marketing, branding and managing a destination with a focus on increase in visitation numbers. (Shani & Wang 2011, 130; Pike 2008, 201.)

3.1 Defining Destination and Destination Image

In order to examine destination image in detail the term destination requires clarification. Conforming to Pike “A destination is a geographical space in which a cluster of tourism resources exists, rather than a political boundary” (Pike 2008.) By a cluster of tourism resources Pike refers to elements which provide customers a satisfactory experience within the destination. Thus, tourist destinations are characterized in terms of physical and social features reforming the tourist product according to the preferences of consumers. The physical features relate to the tourism resources mentioned by Pike including activities, settings and fa-

cilities. Descriptions of available activities in a destination attract a specific interest group or consumer segment. Settings address the environmental aspect of a tourist space. Consequently, a space is divided into various zones according to the natural state of the place as well as tourist use. Lastly, physical contentment of a consumer is acknowledged in the design of tourist facilities. (Pike 2008, 24-26; Pearce 2005, 87-89.)

In contrast, elements of service, hosts and management highlight the social dimension of a destination. The quality of service affects considerably on the satisfaction of visitors. Therefore the service encounter is evaluated according to reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness. The attitudes of locals regarding visitors and the appeal to take part in tourism in terms of commerce influence the enjoyment of visitors. The forces to guide tourism management are civic pride and economic benefit. That is why the vision of a destination is emphasized in destination marketing. The definition of a tourist destination by World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is consistent with the approaches for characterizing a destination. UNWTO describes a destination to be a complex unit which provides tourism products and services. To manage the operations of the unit physical boundaries are acknowledged and administrative authorities operate actively. Lastly, the perceptions about the destination empower the competitiveness of the destination in the tourism market. Altogether, communities equipped with tourism resources aiming at attracting visitors are classified as destinations. (Pearce 2005, 87-91; UNWTO 2002.)

Destination as a concept relies on the physical and social features of the location lying in the hands of marketers, organizations, community and administration of the destination. On the contrary destination image is seen as a mental construct generated by a consumer by the influence of internal and external features. Emphasis on the mental representations of reality is applied by Crompton and Kotler (in Balogly & McCleary 1999) in defining image as "a set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that people have of a place or a destination" (Balogly & McCleary 1999, 871). A subjective representation of image is known as person-dominated whilst the internal features of an individual referring to attitudes lead the image formation. On the other hand destination-dominated image stresses previous visitation in the destination for cognitive evaluation of the destination characteristics. (Pike 2008, 205.) Oxfeld and Dichter (in Balogly & McCleary, 1999) recognize the existence of the two schools of image formation and thus have described image as "an overall or total impression which is formed as a result of the evaluation of individual attributes which may contain both cognitive and emotional content" (Balogly & McCleary 1999, 871-873.)

The concept of destination image is considered to be multidimensional by nature and is characterized as complex, multiple, relativistic and dynamic. (Gallarza, Saura & García 2002, 68; Beerli & Martin 2004, 658). Complexity reflects the controversial nature of the concept refer-

ring to the lack of universally agreed definition of destination image. Multiplicity associates with the character of the destination by utilizing physical, functional and holistic attributes to describe the identity of the destination. The features of multiplicity are reflected during the image formation process through integration of a continuum of information agents utilized in image development. In relation to relativism destination image is considered to be subjective yet comparative. Variance in destination perceptions enables comparison of destinations. As a dynamic concept destination image is seen static. Yet, changes dependent from time and space are expected to occur. (Gallarza, Saura & García 2002, 68-72; Shani & Wang 2011, 131.)

3.2 Destination Image Components

Despite the conflicts related to the acceptance of destination image components three inter-related components; cognitive, affective and conative component have been recognized to influence image formation. The cognitive component concerns knowledge and beliefs with focus on the physical features of a destination. On the contrary the affective component represents feelings towards a destination. The experienced emotions reflect the quality of the location through consumer satisfaction. Affect is described to be favourable, unfavourable or neutral. Russel (in Pike 2008) illustrates the affective response on a destination through dimensions of pleasant/unpleasant, relaxing/distressing, arousing/sleepy and exciting/gloomy. The combination of the two components leads to construction of the overall image. Lastly, the conative component stresses the behavioural intentions such as visitation to be conducted based on the image perceived through the previously mentioned components. Furthermore, marketers show interest regarding the behavioural component in retrospect of consumers' actions. Despite the similarity of affective responses and cognitive views a consumer has a tendency to act upon personal skills and values. (Beerli & Martin 2004, 658; Pike 2008, 207.)

The hierarchical nature of the construct is evident in the process of destination selection. The process lies on mediation of information between the cognitive and affective partials. The cognitive component modifies the overall image directly as a result of fact-based assessment and indirectly through affective evaluations. The core of the cognitive component is awareness concerning the destination. Contrariwise the affective component highlights consumers' desire and interest related to the destination. In order to a consumer to hold certain emotions on a destination one is expected to be aware of the offer of the said destination. Thus, affection is based on cognitive assessment of the destination and the affective component is seen as an adjacent of the cognitive component. However, the decision-making process is not unambiguous at all times. Example wise the affect may assist in reduction of destination alternatives followed by cognitive evaluation of the chosen destination. (Pike 2008, 207- 209; Llodrà Riera, Martínez-Ruiz Jiménez-Zarco & Izquierdo-Yusta, 2015, 321; Shani & Wang 2011,

133.) Additionally, the level of involvement with the destination is proposed to affect the operational order of the components. In case a respondent is involved with a destination cognition is prioritized. Quite in reverse, low-investment relies on the affective response. (Pearce 2005, 96.)

Furthermore, the model of destination image components introduced by Echtner and Ritchie (1991) provides an understanding for the manner consumers view destinations. The four dimensional model represents attribute based and holistic perceptions of a destination. Consequently, the impressions are assessed according traits ranging from functional to psychological and from common to unique. The functional dimension includes tangible features of a destination and is every so often emphasized by consumers. On the other hand the intangible features represent the psychological traits of a destination. Additionally, common destination attributes enable comparison among destinations while unique destination attributes are destination specific differentiating locations from each other. Altogether, the functional and psychological traits are embedded in the common and unique dimensions. Hence, common functional attributes refer for instance to infrastructure and accommodation. Common psychological attributes include abstract features such as friendliness of locals and attractiveness of the scenery. Every so often a certain event or universally known attraction exemplifies the unique functional attributes. The unique psychological features highlight the aspect of feelings realizing the atmosphere or aura of the destination. Accordingly, each destination obtains all six dimensions for evaluative and descriptive actions as the base for credible image formation. However, from marketers point of view emphasis on psychological and unique features of a destination would provide a competitive advantage for the destination through differentiation. As the base of a touristic experience the common and functional features should not be ignored in marketing efforts. (Shani & Wang 2011, 131-132; Jenkins 1999, 5, 9; Jørgensen 2004, 17.)

3.3 Destination Image Formation

Identifying and understanding the influential forces in development of destination image is considered essential in order to influence consumer behaviour in a profitable manner. In-depth knowledge on the key determinants of image formation enables strategic marketing actions to be taken according to characteristics and preferences of each consumer segment. The theoretical framework of destination image formation by Balogly and McCleary examines the previously discussed destination image components in detail; hence the model could be seen as the starting point for harnessing the power of destination image in tourism promotion. (Balogly & McCleary 1999, 869.)

The framework introduces personal and stimulus factors as the influential forces in destination image development (Balogly & McCleary 1999; Beerli & Martin 2004). Personal factors describe the nature of the consumer through psychological and social features. The psychological aspect stresses values, personality and motivation, whereas age and education are emphasized as representatives of the social aspect. Though, motivation is considered as the most influential force of the three due to the linkage with the affective component. Tourist motivation is stated to derive from the affective image of a destination. Conversely, stimulus factors imply to external stimulus such as information sources and previous travel experience. In relation to the cognitive component external stimulus is seen as the indicator of cognitive evaluations of a destination. However, in the case of non-existent experience the features of tourism motivations, sociodemographics and variety of information sources modify the image jointly. All in all, the formation of a destination image originates from the cognitive and affective evaluations reformed by the physical and social features along with information acquirement. (Balogly & McCleary 1999, 870-874; Beerli & Martin 2004, 661; Jørgensen 2004, 19-21.)

Moreover, the role of information sources is considerable in image formation. Gartner (in Beerli & Martin 2004) describes the destination image formation process as a continuum of information sources. In addition, Gunn (in Pike 2008) states that images are formed in two levels which are organic and induced. The organic image is formed as a consequence of acquiring information via various intermediaries including media, visitation and literature. Further the influential factor in formation of the induced image is tourism promotion. However, Gunn's concept of destination image has been criticised to be exclusive relating to a specific destination. Consequently, Gartner (in Beerli & Martin 2004) represented a universally recognized continuum of image formation agents based on Gunn's model. Gartner categorized the agents a) overt Induced I, referring non-commercial advertising taking place in mass media b) overt Induced II, information relating to commercial sources including travel agents, tour operators and wholesalers c) covert Induced I, utilizing the visibility of celebrities in marketing endeavours d) covert Induced II, contributing on biased travel writing e) autonomous, related to destination-specific journalism, literature and media productions f) unsolicited organic, realizing personal experiences based on visitation in a destination g) solicited organic, comprehending information acquired via word of mouth from relatives and acquaintances. (Beerli & Martin 2004, 661; Llodrà Riera, Martínez-Ruiz, Jiménez-Zarco & Izquierdo-Yusta, 2015, 321; Pearce 2005, 91.)

The variety and quality of information sources are proven to have an influence on the nature of the formed image. Firstly, image based on induced and autonomous information sources with no personal on-site experience is described to be secondary. Secondly, visitation in the destination results into formation of primary image hence emphasizing familiarity with the

destination. Personal experience in terms of duration of stay, number of visits as well as intensity of stay differentiates first time visitors from visitors with previous experience of the destination. The key of image development is to enhance the present image of the destination. As formation of an organic image requires personal experience of the destination the aim of marketing communication is to contribute on induced images formed in co-operation with commercial agents. (Balogly & McCleary, 1999, 874; Beerli & Martin 2004, 662-663.)

3.4 Germany as a Destination

Located in the midst of Europe Germany was considered the second most popular tourist destination within the continent in 2010 and 2011. Approximately 76 % of the overnight stays in Germany are by foreign visitors of which Northeast Europe contributes a share of 15 %. Germany offers a combination of beautiful sceneries, urban lifestyles and historical and cultural traditions for the enjoyment of a tourist. Yet, the country is known for the rich history referring to the period of time involving Post World War II and reunification of Germany in 1990. In addition to leisure travel business travel is an integral part of the destination's image. As one of the top ten business travel destinations within Europe Germany is considered number one conference location in Europe and number two worldwide. As a consequence of belonging to the Schengen zone no border control is required whilst traveling to Germany from a country which has signed the Schengen agreement. Hence, both leisure and business travel have grown considerably. (German National Tourist Board 2012, 5,9, 13-15, 19; WikiTravel 2015; Lonely Planet 2015; Facts about Germany 2015.)

The most preferred German destinations for city breaks include Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, Frankfurt and Cologne with 41 % market share of overnight stays by foreign visitors. The cosmopolitan atmosphere and vibrant nightlife of Berlin attract visitors worldwide. The offbeat nature of fashion and architecture as well as tense political history characterizes Berlin. In comparison Munich provides ideal settings for a relaxing getaway to the Alps. Additionally, gastro tourists favour Munich due to the long beer tradition. The maritime charm of Hamburg and the nightlife district Reeperbahn attract visitors to the seaside city. By serving as the international travel hub to Europe Frankfurt is recognized internationally and thus favoured by business travellers. Cologne as one of the oldest cities of Germany holds up to the historical atmosphere and is known for the artistic masterpiece Cologne Cathedral. Moreover, small towns and villages fascinate travellers as examples of the old-days displaying slow-life. (about travel 2015; TripAdvisor 2015; German National Tourist Board 2012, 12.)

The nation's love for sports is recognized internationally as a consequence of hosting FIFA World Cup in 2006. Overall, the country provides cultural experiences integrating design, music and arts in a variety of forms for inspiration of tourists. Germany is known to be one of

the leading destinations contributing on high health standards, infrastructure and environmental sustainability and therefore considered a secure destination. Due to the mild climate Germany is a year-round destination with warm summers and cool winters. Yet, the peak of visitation takes place from July to September. The price level in Germany is a tad affordable in comparison to Finland. Particularly, dining in restaurant and purchasing groceries expose a considerable price difference. Car rental and accommodation are 10 to 20 % lower in Germany than in Finland. Consequently, 49 % of travellers headed for Germany travel by car and the country is a common destination for travellers aiming to tour Europe with a car. The comprehensive network of roads connects the cities within Germany in an effective manner as well as enables external access by land to the country. The connection by sea provided by Finnlines is favoured by travellers with a car. (Rantapallo Oy 2015; German National Tourist Board 2012, 6-7, 10, 17.)

4 Role of Information Sources in Travel Destination Choice

The tourism industry thrives from effective distribution of information, thus information sources are considered to be significant partials influencing travel behaviour and destination choice of a tourist. Evaluation of alternative destinations requires knowledge on characteristics of each destination under consideration. Accordingly, information search is requested in case there is lack of knowledge concerning the destination of choice. Attachment on a destination leading to selection of a specific location is developed as a result of this factual evaluation of the characteristics. Therefore, availability of information alongside with acquired awareness on a destination is emphasized in the process of travel decision-making. Particularly, information sources are of importance due to the tangible nature of the tourism products and the novelty-seeking character of consumers. Commonly, the geographical distance between potential consumer and the desired product is proved to be an obstacle in gathering credible information. (Krebs 2010, 39-42; Pan & Turner 2006, 4.)

In terms of destination choice a tourist is described as a problem solver. Hence tourist behaviour is examined from two viewpoints referring to the economic approach and the process based approach known as the choice set model. The economic approach emphasizes the relation of cost and benefit, thus pricing tactics and economic exchange rates guide the destination selection. Contrariwise, the choice set model underlines the act of information search to reach a pleasurable decision. In addition, in the context of tourism the pleasure seeking nature of a consumer is considered as one of the main motivations with impact on destination selection. Due to the recreational nature of the tourism field consumers focus on finding emotional satisfaction as a compensation of a travel purchase. (Pearce 2005, 104; Huan & Beamnan 2004, 162.)

4.1 Destination Choice Set Model

The choice set based on Um and Crompton's (1990) destination choice model introduces the decision-making process of an individual. The concept of choice set is applied in destination selection in cases of seeking for novelty in terms of unfamiliar destinations and the purchase of tourism product involving a high risk referring to the monetary aspect. The structure of destination choice set is based on the notion of simplifying the decision-making process by generating sets of destination options. The options are reduced stage by stage according to the touristic images a consumer has about a destination. Therefore, reaching a decision calls for processing no more than a fragment of information related to potential destinations in order to conduct a decision. (Crompton 1992, 420-422; Pearce 2005, 104-105.)

Destination selection takes place in three stages. In the first stage one generates a set of destinations which is referred as awareness set originating from initial destination images. The awareness set includes potential destinations of which one has acquired information in passive manner and thus familiarized with unintentionally. The awareness set is followed by the evoked set regarding destinations for detailed examination. The choice set model emphasizes the influence of internal input and external output in structuration of the awareness and evoked set. The internal input includes social and psychological factors such as motives and special interest whereas external output weighs information acquired via personal experience, promotion or consultation of other sources realizing destination specific features. In the second stage of destination selection the decision to travel is conducted, thus the awareness set is narrowed down to evoke set according to individual constraints such as financial situation of the consumer and the time available for travelling. As a subset of awareness set evoke set includes destinations one regards probable for vacationing in a certain period of time. (Pearce 2005, 104-105; Crompton 1992, 422-423; Huan & Beaman 2004, 150-151.)

Moreover, selection of the travel destination is conducted in the third stage by integrating active information search into the model. Consequently, a final set of destinations is generated resulting into final choice. The final choice is dependent from action and interaction of an individual. Action refers to sought information from tourism marketers regarding the destination whilst interaction enables direct sales endeavours. Thus, the role of information sources in destination selection is stressed through passive and active information search in stages of identification and evaluation of potential destinations. The ranking order of destinations during the selection process indicates the level of interest a consumer has towards a destination. Effective marketing efforts are called for in case a destination is excluded from the initial consideration set by a significantly sized consumer segment. However, a disappearance of a destination from the latter stages of the selection process requires a well-positioned encour-

agement of consumers to contact service providers in order to reconsider the selection of a destination. (Pearce 2005, 105-106; Crompton 1992, 423- 426, 429-430.)

Despite the broad-spectrum approach for destination selection the choice set model is confronted with difficulties in classification of potential destinations, joint decision-making and applying the model universally. Firstly, the most efficient manner for classification of destinations is based on tourist motivations realized in participation in activities within the destination. Introducing activities as features characterizing destinations and describing expectations of travellers would contribute on the dilemma of joint decision-making alongside with destination specific approach. In case a joint decision-making is required a group, partners or a family unit would select a set of activities reflecting personal preferences. The selection of activities would result into selection of a destination in which the favoured activities are available. In case the region provides less than two activities to base the selection on factors such as convenience, proximity and price determine the destination. Commonly, the purpose of visitation in a specific destination is to acquire memorable experiences. Therefore the motivational aspect of destination selection is stressed. (Pearce 2005, 107-112; Huan & Beaman 2004, 162.)

4.2 Travel Information Search Behaviour

As stated previously destination selection relies on passive and active information search. Commercial agents along with scholars of the tourism field have contributed on studies of external information search behaviour of a consumer dating back to the 1980s and 1990s. Accordingly, tangible features of tourism products along with consumers' tendencies of information source usage were discovered to lead the process of information search. Nevertheless, the intangible nature of tourism has brought up the elements of motivation, economics and information processing as approaches for external information search. The motivational factor reflects the needs of an individual, the economic aspect highlights rationality of a consumer in terms of resources put to information search and the element of cognitive information processing views data search as target oriented action. (Fodness & Murray 1997, 504; Erawan, Krairit & Khang 2011, 298- 299.)

The operation of travel information search has been described to be a dynamic procedure. According to Engel & al (in Gursoy & Umbreit 2004) travel information search has been defined as "the motivated activation of knowledge stored in memory or acquisition of information from the external environment" (Gursoy & Umbreit 2004, 57). Hence, acquisition of information is either internal or external by nature. Internal search relies on personal travel experience and first hand experiences of friends and family relating to a specific destination. Internal search is utilized in the initial stages of decision-making. On the contrary, external

information search is conducted to acquire in depth knowledge on a destination of which internal sources provide insufficient data. External information search involves consultation of commercial and non-commercial sources. Seeking for information is measured in direction and degree of the search. Furthermore, the degree of effort laid in the search operation and variety of information sources used provides assets for consumer segmentation. (Fodness & Murray 1997, 505-506; Gursoy & McCleary 2004, 355; Gursoy & Umbreit 2004, 58.)

Consumers' need to enhance the quality of the upcoming trip acts as the core motivation for information search. Additionally, credible information reduces the uncertainty experienced by consumers in relation to choices conducted during travel planning. The process of information search is characterized as time-limited or source-limited according to the tendencies of a consumer to conduct a data search. Alternatively, the search strategy is described as routine or extended. In brief, representatives of source-limited search require only a short planning time yet access a variety of sources. On the contrary time-limited searchers prefer a long planning time for a trip and tend to consult few information-rich sources. There is a resemblance between time-limited searchers and routine searchers referring to the quick manner of browsing through information. Commonly, routine information search takes place in case one has close relations with residents of the intended destination. Travellers taking advantage of an extensive search strategy favour a long planning time as well as consult various sources to weigh carefully available options. (Fodness & Murray 1997, 505, 510-511.)

4.2.1 Determinants of External Information Search

Information search strategies are influenced by situational and environmental variables as well as characteristics related to consumers and products of interest. Fodness and Murray introduced demographic characteristics, purpose of the trip and expenditure patterns as the most influential variables. Demographical changes including increase of income level and changes in familial relations reflect the cycle of life. Hence, consumer segments such as travellers with children tend to prefer extensive information search. Whilst young married couples require longer period of travel planning in comparison with single consumers due to joint decision-making. Travel purpose has a direct impact on the choice of consulted information sources. Travellers with an aim to take a vacation access a variety of sources whilst travellers visiting relatives or friends during the trip consider word of mouth as the primary source of information. Lastly, expenditure patterns draw marketers' attention and thus the economic aspect is emphasized in relation to information search and tourist's behaviour on site. Consequently, extensive information search correlates positively with high expenditure. On the other hand time-limited search strategy indicated low level of expenditure. (Gursoy & McCleary 2004, 354; Fodness & Murray 1997, 512-514, 518-519.)

Moreover, Erawan, Krarait and Khang identified six determinants of external information search with an aim to introduce strategies for marketing communication. Concerning travel planning determinants of usefulness and accessibility of information sources, perceived personal risk, benefit and experience are essential. Usefulness and accessibility of information sources involves the effort of an individual to consult sources and the usefulness of the consulted sources in relation to the required data. The aspect of perceived personal risk involves loss as result of decision-making. A tourist associates personal loss with value for money or satisfaction gained from a travel purchase. On the contrary perceived benefit refers to the outcomes of actual information search contributing on sufficient knowledge to base a decision on. Naturally, tourist's previous trips contribute on the perceived experience. (Erawan, Krarait & Khang 2011, 297, 305-306.)

To showcase the relations of the determinants and information search behaviour an intention to search is introduced as an intervening agent between the two partials. Correspondingly, usefulness and accessibility of information sources, perceived benefit and personal risk influence the intention to search thus encouraging one to conduct an extensive search. As a result of the emergence of internet usefulness and accessibility of information sources are valued, thus the variable effects directly to information search behaviour in terms of extent of the search. Yet, information search in terms of time prior to travel is influenced by perceived experience. Accordingly, the underlying determinants are available for operationalization of marketers. The valued usefulness and accessibility of information sources provide a channel for effective communication and promotional activities. Identifying the preferred channel of consumers for data acquisition enables targeting a large market segment. Stressing the perceived benefit provided by a product or service has the power to increase sales profit and decrease the expected feeling of loss. (Erawan, Krarait & Khang 2011, 298, 310- 313.)

4.2.2 Online Information Search

For a majority of the consumers web is considered as the primary source of information due to the interactive nature, universal access and availability of large quantities of customized data. Approximately 95 % of internet users consult internet in travel planning. Travel related search equals already 6, 5 % of the total web searching. Interests of travel information search lie in geographical location since 60 % of travel related queries compose of location focused data referring to specific destinations, countries, states or cities. Price comparison is seen as the secondary interest of information search. Otherwise the spectrum of travel related topics is diverse which supports the notion of travel information search as an activity reducing uncertainty in travel planning. Overall, consumers experience difficulties in expressing their needs in an effective manner originating from common tendencies to conduct either location

specific or rather general inquiries. In order to improve the online service environment cross-platform linkages could be considered. Thus, a consumer would receive an opportunity to access several trustworthy sources at once. (Jensen, Ciamacca & Spink 2008, 14-16; Gretzel, Law & Fuchs 2010, 382- 383; Visit Finland 2010; Sustainable Tourism Co-operative Research Center 2008, 6.)

Online information search centers in the relation between a tourist and an information space. Personal skills and knowledge reforming mental models on travel related issues guide information search in the online environment. The mental models are described as internal representations of a subject in question and are known to transform constantly as travel planning progresses. In sum, information search consists of episodes each evaluating one alternative section essential in travel planning. The episodes form a chapter symbolizing an issue to be handled or a conducted decision. To start assessments of alternatives consumers consult information hubs frequently to access a variety of links simultaneously, thus decreasing the cost of search in terms of time and effort. Previously marketers have been responsible for the destination image which consumers have formed in assistance with the information distributed online. However, emphasis on the interactive nature of internet supports usage of a variety of communication forms such as social networks and blogs as sources of information. Currently, consumers are provided with an opportunity to influence the quality of travel related content available online through active participation on production and sharing of information. (Pan & Fesenmaier 2006, 813-814, 820-821, 825-827.)

Revolution of Information and Communication Technologies has led to emergence of internet as a tool for planning, booking and purchasing services. In addition, internet is stated to provide inspiration for travelling and to enable evaluation of a conducted trip by sharing knowledge among other travellers. Hence, the framework for tourist information search introduced by Pan and Turner recognizing stages of ongoing search, pre-purchase search, planning search, en-route search and after-trip search relates to actions taken by a consumer in the online environment. Consumers contribute on information search in order to fulfil both functional and hedonic information needs. Through examination of functional aspects related to travelling such as transportation and accommodation one aims at conducting a satisfactory decision. However, the hedonic aspect emphasizes the pure enjoyment gained from acquisition of information. (Jansen, Ciamacca & Spink 2008, 2-4; Pan & Turner 2006, 4-5.)

The variety of information sources are actively consulted in the phases of ongoing search and pre-purchase search when a destination choice is still under consideration. Ongoing search is said to shape destination image whereas pre-purchase search guides the process of destination selection on the basis of rates and fares of tourism services. En-route search encompasses the travel experience as a directory for decision-making during the trip. Yet, after-trip

search involves evaluation of perceived satisfaction concerning travel planning. Presumably, the ease of use, trust and efficacy of the chosen online tools is said to reflect the gained planning experience. Sharing experiences during and after a trip to provide first-hand knowledge to other travellers shapes the information search process of individuals in the initial stages of the planning process. Nevertheless, online travel information search varies among consumers in terms of familiarity with websites and products under investigation. Also expertise in search activities and technological knowhow impact the search strategy. (Pan & Turner 2006, 8-13; Gretzel, Law, Fuchs 2010, 383-384; Visit Finland 2010.)

5 User-Generated Content

Information intense industries such as tourism are run by production and circulation of information. (Xiang & Gretzel 2010, 179). In addition to the extensive flow of information to present the offer of the industry online consumers have taken over the web domain through user generated content (UGC). No longer does the professional elite hold control over communication but the consumers eagerly take part in online communities to pinpoint themes of interest. Comprehensively, media content is considered UGC in case the material is publicly available on a website or social networking site, reflects creative effort and is published by end-users without commercial endeavours (Kaplan & Haenlein 2009, 61). A shift from search and consumption into creation of information has taken place (Llodrá-Riera, Martínez-Ruiz, Jiménez-Zarco & Izquierdo-Yusta 2015, 320). Along with user-created content the term UGC realizes user driven content (UDC) referring to data which is copied by a user from an original source to a source of interest. (Lietsala & Sirkkunen 2007, 19-20.)

Transformation of Information and Communication Technologies occurred in the 21st century has resulted into the rise of web 2.0 enabling the flow of non-market oriented information online. Poon (in Buhalis 2003) describes ICT as followed “ the collective term given to the most recent developments in the mode (electronic) and the mechanisms (computers and communication technologies) used for acquisition, processing, analysis, storage, retrieval, dissemination and application of information”(Buhalis 2003, 7). The concept of ICT has influenced three partials of the tourism industry referring to technological innovations, consumer behaviour and industry functions. ICTs have provided support for development of technological tools such as web 2.0 and UGC which are known to improve the process of information acquisition. Moreover, ICTs have revolutionized communication in the context of tourism industry by facilitating interaction among consumers and tourism enterprises. The collaboration of consumers and marketers has generated development concerning management and marketing of tourism products and destinations. The easy access of reliable and accurate information has encouraged consumers to display the personalized and detailed wishes and needs they

possess and demand services corresponding with the individual needs. Overall, the consumers of today are characterized as independent and knowledgeable in terms of gaining value for money and time put to information search in relation to travel. (Buhalis & Law 2008, 609-612, 619-620.)

User-generated content is stated to derive from word of mouth communication (WOM) referring to informal communication among consumers dealing with a product, service or a company with no commercial interest. For instance, face to face conversation with friends or family represents WOM and is considered credible due to the personal nature of communication. However, WOM taking place in an online environment is counted as electronic-word of mouth (eVOM), defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler 2004, 39). Online communication is valued considerably in the tourism industry as eVOM provides unique insights for evaluation of intangible products and services prior consumption. Emergence of eVOM has blurred the line between formal and informal communication enabling interaction between marketers and consumers. Marketers are able to generate content to support their business ventures overlooking the aspect of trustworthiness. On the other hand, discussions and feedback provided by consumers are valuable for marketers aiming at improving services to guarantee customer satisfaction. (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan 2008, 458-463; King, Racherla & Bush 2014, 169.)

5.1 Web 2.0

As a ground-breaking manner to utilize the World Wide Web the concept of web 2.0 introduces web as a platform of which users are free to modify according to one’s experiences, knowledge and opinions. Web 2.0 harnesses collective intelligence through interaction, participation and exchange of information. Accordingly, the core of collective intelligence lies on co-operation of individuals to contribute on the quality and nature of the information environment (Maleszka & Nguyen 2014, 332-333). Construction of the interactive platform is said to facilitate the development of social media. According to Kaplan & Haenlein “UGC can be seen as the sum of all ways of which people use social media” (Kaplan & Haenlein 2009, 61). As a consequence of evolution of social media the power relations of the society have transformed. The key features of web 2.0 such as collaboration and user centism are considered the corner stones of UGC in an ideological level. In addition, technological, economic and social enhancements empower the standpoint of UGC as a source of information among present day travellers. Technological functions such as availability of broadband connection worldwide enable access of UGC whilst economic drivers referring to a variety of tools to manage UGC are available. Yet, social changes such as the emergence of the generation of digital na-

tives in relation to increased technological knowledge guide the evolution of social media. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2009, 60-61; Lincoln 2009, 7-10.)

To sum the key features of social media include a space to share content and participants to produce or evaluate most of the content in the designated space in an interactive manner. In addition, construction of a profile page is requested from active participants and an URL address is obliged in order to link the space to external networks. To define social media six genres showcasing variety in the role and preferred activity of a user are introduced. As platforms for UGC social media genres of content creation and publishing tools, content sharing sites and collaborative productions are examined in detail. Categorization of social media actors proved to be a challenge due to the overlapping nature of the genres and actors' tendency to develop in a consistent manner. Yet, to conduct a systematic classification of the social media applications the nature of the media content is analysed in terms of social presence and media richness. Additionally, integration of social features within the genres is examined through processes of self-presentation and self-disclosure. (Lietsala & Sirkkunen 2008, 24-27; Kaplan & Hanelein 2009, 61-62.)

To start with social presence refers to the contact which occurs between two individuals taking acoustic, visual or physical forms. In addition, the level of intimacy and proximity of interaction influences the social presence. Media richness reflects the effectivity of a medium to distribute information. Collaborative productions such as blogs, wikis and podcasts result into low media richness and social presence due to text-based communication. Content creation and sharing sites enable submitting videos and photos ranking up the credibility of the sources. Furthermore, self-presentation displays the need to control impressions formed by other people in social interactions. In an online environment self-presentation occurs through self-disclosure referring to uncovering intimate information in line with the image one wishes to exhibit. Hence, blogs are considered to provide subjective information in comparison to collaborative productions. Social networking sites are known to portrait a personality of an individual in digital form thus supporting self-disclosure. In terms of information acquisition in relation to travel collaborative productions and websites designed for sharing content are examined in detail. (Kaplan & Haenelein 2009, 61-62 Safko 2010, 3-4.)

5.1.1 Online Communities

The purpose of online communities is to share information among users of the web service. (Haenlein & Kaplan 2009, 63.) The desire to convey information originates from the basic human need one obtains to connect with other representatives of the species. Humans are known to seek for similar-minded people in order to share personal thoughts and experiences in an environment one feels at ease. To connect with other humans one utilizes elements such as

written word, audio or video hence referring to the media content. (Safko 2009, 4.) For the generation of digital natives the online environment is the primary setting to reach the required feeling of belonging. The term digital natives refers to individuals to whom technologies is part of the daily life since they were born to the realm of technological revolution. The effortless assimilation to technology has transformed the behavior and attitudes of the generation. They are known for a desire for freedom of self-expression and choice. Thus, net geners have a tendency to skim through data in order to locate the information which fits to their personalized needs. To execute the need for self-expression net genres participate actively online to create or convey media content. When considering a purchase integrity and openness of the organization is of importance for the digital natives. The generation is described collaborative and relation-based. Moreover, net geners are first and for most innovators seeking for brand new ways to co-operate in free-time as well as in corporate life highlighting the need for speed as a necessity for communication. (Tapscott 2009, 18, 34-36.)

Online communities differ according to the type of media content such as photos and video which is shared within the community. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2009, 63.) Multimedia content representing a destination operates as a mediator of a touristic experience. Still images reflect the travel experience by capturing time and space thus the images assist in construction of memories. Consequently, memories provide foundations for story telling in relation to the authentic experiences. Photographing provides a means for transforming an intangible experience into a tangible form for one reminisce with travel companions or to share knowledge with people who were not on-site during the occurrence of the event. Hence, photo sharing is known to contribute on relationship building. The visual nature of tourism is nurtured in variety of web platforms including personal and travel blogs, social networking sites, websites with photo album features and platforms designed solely for photo sharing such as Flickr. The photo sharing services allow adding titles, keywords and descriptions of photos for external search and encourage peers to distribute commentary on the contents. (Markwick 2001 419; Scheunting Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung & Law 2010, 725-726.)

Furthermore, videos capture the true essence of a travel experience via sound and motion with emphasis on authenticity. Consumption of videos contributes in travel enjoyment in terms of mental travel without geographical movements. Sharing travel experiences through videos provides a viewer an imaginative access into foreign surroundings. The narratives constructed from travel experiences inspire a viewer to outlive the potential travel experience by considering elements one could see, touch, feel or think whilst physically traveling to the destination. Videos dealing with authentic travel experiences provided by travelers themselves have a significant social stand in terms of sharing multimedia content and allowing viewers to enjoy the cost-free travel experience. When it comes to globally known video sharing platforms YouTube could be mentioned. Additionally, vlogs referring to video blogs have

grown their popularity as a means of communication. (Tussydiah & Fesenmaier 2009, 28, 35-38; Lincoln 2009, 173-174.)

5.1.2 Collaborative Productions

Social media drives on user participation taking place in online communities. The communities provide surroundings to share common interests or seek for solutions to mind-boggling questions. The core concept of collaborative productions is to produce content in a collaborative manner with a joint goal in mind. For instance wikis referring to websites which one is able to modify the text-based content through actions of removing and adding pieces of information are labelled as collaborative productions. Wikis allow editing the content simultaneously with another user hence the latest version of the content is displayed. Comprehensively, online encyclopedia Wikipedia is one example of globally known wikis to acquire and produce information for free. Wikipedia has inspired the creation of WikiTravel which aims at providing up to date travel information on destinations worldwide. However, one should keep in mind that the data available on wikis might not be accurate and to consult such a source one is required to have a critical mindset. Yet, wiki-based information does provide a quick overview of the topic under scrutiny. Collaborative productions are characterized as the most democratic form of UGC due to trust on team effort in high quality content creation over individual attempts. (Heanlein & Kaplan 2009, 62-63; Lietsala & Sirkkunen 2008, 34-36; 51-52; WikiTravel 2015.)

5.1.3 Content Creation Tools

Tools for content creation are seen as the essence of online communities due to integration of elements of audio, vision and text. Blogging and podcasting could be mentioned as examples of content creation tools. A blog displays individual's experiences, thoughts and activities as entries in a chronological order. A blog can take a form of a personal journal or focus on a specific theme such as travel. Articles of a blog are accompanied by permalinks, blog-rolls and trackbacks enabling linkage with other blogs and web pages. The personal style of writing integrating conversational elements differentiates blogs from websites. In addition, each blog post is followed by a comment section allowing participation of readers. Along with individuals corporate agents have discovered the potential of blogs as vessels for internal and external communication. Blogs are taken advantage of for instance to inform employees, stakeholders and consumers on current changes taking place within an organization. Moreover, the concept of blog is defined according to media format and the level of privacy determined by the blogger. Majority of the blogs are text-based, yet multimedia elements such as graphics, audio or video are integrated in the blogosphere in a growing rate. Accordingly, a blog can be either public enabling open access for the general public or private intended for

writer's own enjoyment or for a circle of friends. (Lietsala & Sirkkunen 2008, 31-34; Heanlein & Kaplan 2009, 63; Safko 2010, 145-147.)

Blogging and podcasting are seen to enhance citizen journalism since any individual with internet access and enthusiasm to share experiences and knowledge is able to contribute on media content online. In comparison with blogging podcasting integrates solely audio and video content published online. Podcasting allows one to stream the media content live or download the files to be listened on a suitable period of time. Consequently, a listener is free to select the content to consume according to one's interests and control the location and occasion to reflect the contents. The nature of podcasting is multiplex as one is able to produce for instance interviews, talk shows, radio shows or educational sessions which are available world wide. As entertaining yet informative mediums podcasts are directed to audiences of passion, referring to group of people with similar interests. (Lincoln 2009, 119-131; Safko 2010, 192-194.)

5.1.4 Social Networks

Social networking sites (SNSs) focus on creation of connections through establishment of profiles consisting of personal information. The profiles represent individuals as well as groups set up for a certain cause, organizations, products or businesses. The uniqueness of social networking sites is emphasized by making the social relations of the profile's owner visual. Web services such as Facebook and Twitter represent social networks. Boyd and Ellison define social networking sites as "web based services that allow individuals to 1) construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection with, and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd & Ellison 2008, 211). (Lietsala & Sirkkunen 2009, 47-51; Boyd & Ellison 2008, 211-214, 221.)

The main function of SNSs is to maintain relationships established offline based on a common element rather than networking with strangers. In the context of social networks the term user-generated content refers first and for most to the data the system automatically tracks down based on the user's activities within the network. Hence, private messages, comments and discussion chains are considered as UGC along with data shared and created by the user. Individuals share media content in SNSs platforms in order uphold a favorable profile corresponding with the personality of the user. Yet, for corporations SNSs provide an opportunity to interact with consumers locally and overseas. Social networking increases visibility of a brand considerably resulting into growth of consumer interest. (Lietsala & Sirkkunen 2009, 47-51; Boyd & Ellison 2008, 211-214, 221.)

5.1.5 Corporate Implications of User-Generated Content

As active participation in social media is said to increase the visibility of a brand corporations have taken interest towards user-generated content as a means of marketing. Marketers have realized the great force of authenticity provided by consumers as well as the ever so growing manner of sharing data on personal experiences. For instance companies operating in fields of entertainment, tourism, technology, sports and journalism have launched user-generated campaigns. The trend of UGC-focused campaigns took off in 2014 and is still going strong in 2015. (Engage Software Limited 2014.)

In relation to the tourism industry campaigns launched by Air New Zealand in 2014, National Geographic and Three in 2015 could be mentioned. Air New Zealand encouraged the consumers to upload pictures of the contents of their luggage and post the pictures on Pinterest and Twitter. The best picture was rewarded with an Air New Zealand Holiday voucher worthy of \$ 1000. National Geographic launched a photo contest with focus on “unforgettable people, amazing sights and life-changing experiences consumers had faces whilst travelling” (Engage Software Limited 2015). The platform utilized for the contest was Instagram and the winner of the contest received a 7-day Yosemite National Park Photo Expedition for two accompanied by a National Geographic photographer. Three which is a UK based tele operator provided their clients an opportunity to operate their phone abroad with no extra cost. In detail, the company created unique settings for the clients to share photos on Instagram and Twitter with no extra cost in 18 destinations around the world. Finland was one of those 18 destinations. The aim of the campaign was to make the clients feel at home even abroad. (Engage Software Limited 2014; Hutchinson 3G UK Limited 2002; National Geographic Society 2015; Air New Zealand Ltd 2014.)

5.2 Motivation

The unrestricted circulation of information characterizing social media has transformed the field of communications. Due to the great amount of information available on the net the quality of the media content has decreased substantially. Communication taking place online suffers from lack of vision in data distribution and linear line of discussion. Instead infinite streams of data are produced in an unorganized manner. In relation to tourism the main function of UGC is to share travel experiences with the general public. The experiences reflect the knowledge one has obtained whilst visiting a specific destination and the emotions related to the visit. From the consumers' standpoint UGC provides detailed information for the use of today's traveler with specific requirements. Consumers tend to trust more on information provided by peers than organizations and government due to various violations of that trust from the side of commercial parties. (Lincoln 2009, 17-23; Munar & Jacobsen 2014, 47.)

Sharing travel experiences online provides emotional support through the act of socialization, thus contributions of users are beneficial for the individual and the community. Individuals empowered by self-centered motivations share content online for reasons of personal enjoyment, gaining recognition for their experiences and maintaining social connections. Additionally, self-centrism leads to content contribution on websites one considers personally valuable. However, majority of consumers is led by community-related motivators. Assisting other consumers in decision-making and keeping them from unsatisfactory experiences are considered altruistic motivators. Moreover, the altruistic and self-centered motivations are interlinked due to the correlation among activities led by the motivators. For instance providing useful advice in an online community leads to rise of a person's status within the community, while self-centered action may serve the common good in case one experiences the need to give back to the social media sites one has taken advantage of. (Munar & Jacobsen 2014, 46-49, 50-53; Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler 2004, 42-43.)

According to Shao usage of UGC can be divided into three categories of consuming, participating and producing. Individuals who merely consult UGC through actions of reading, watching or viewing are regarded as consumers with a motivation to seek for information or entertainment. Thus, individual's desire to learn from the environment is proven to stimulate information acquisition. Entertainment provided by user-generated media is considered to inspire an individual through regulation of one's mood. Participating involves the aspect of social interaction by facilitating user-to-user relations and user-to-content relations. The social interaction refers to ranking and sharing content and posting comments with an aim for community development. Participation in operations of online communities also strengthens the feeling of belonging whilst connecting over common interests. Lastly, creation and publication of content including text, images and videos relates to producing. Production of content is stated to enable self-expression and self-actualization which are of importance for management of an individual's image. (Shao 2008, 9-15.)

From the variety of platforms where to share and produce media content social networking sites primarily referring to Facebook followed by commercial review sites such as TripAdvisor are preferred by consumers. Although, tourism industry thrives from visualization of services and products picture and video sharing sites draw little attention compared to the social networking sites. Interest of social networks for data distribution emphasizes the motivations of sharing and comparing experiences, expressing satisfaction in relation to the trip and reflection of personal experiences. In comparison, postings on travel review sites highlight motivations such as warning others of bad experiences and promoting experiences. Motivations related to social networking sites are considered hedonic and functional. The appeal for SNSs is explained by the users' tendency to share intimate expressions among a group of friends.

Whereas reviews sites correspond to more explicit and functional motivations due to the restricted nature of feedback a consumer is able to produce. (Gretzel, Law & Fuchs 2010, 474-476; Munar & Jacobsen 2014, 52-53.)

On the other hand the level of integrity, honesty and expertise are of importance during the process of information acquisition. Already one third of consumers consult UGC whilst planning a trip. However, lack of quality control online has diminished the stand of UGC as a travel information source. A present day traveler prefers commercial websites such as official tourism sites over UGC sites due to the reliable nature of commercial sources. However, sites including features of UGC such as Trip Advisor are highly valued among consumers. Online reviews of consumers in the tourism and hospitality field are of importance due to the intangible nature of the services. Ratings and reviews directed for masses are easily accessible and thus widely consulted. However, the possibility of deception in relation to online reviews decreases consumer trust on the source since generation of reviews does not require identification from the producer. Yet, social networking sites are rated less useful in travel planning due to low distribution of actual travel information. UGC is commonly reflected upon when a destination is selected and further information on a location is required. Alternatively, alterations of travel plans caused by UGC in latter stages of travel planning are rather common. (Sustainable Tourism Research Center 2008, 12-13; H pken, Gretzel & Law 2009, 37-39.)

6 Methodology

The chosen methodology for the research is quantitative of nature. Quantitative research method relies on acquisition of numerical data upon which a researcher is able to construct or verify theoretical models. The result oriented method enables effortless comparison of the findings with previous research conducted within the field and thus allow generalization of the findings. Due to utilization of pre-determined statistical methods for gathering data the method is described as rational and precise. The form of quantitative research method in use is known as explanatory research which origins from descriptive research. Descriptive research measures characteristics of a product or phenomena and the research is aimed to generate descriptive statics to review the findings in a comprehensible manner. The aim of explanatory research is to display correlations between variables of the research in order to rationalize the subject under study (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2008, 140-141.) Altogether, the quantitative approach is preferred due to the timesaving manner to administer and analyze the results of the research. The research in question was conducted in a form of electronic survey due to the need to perform the research in short time-frame for reliable results. For generalization of the results of the questionnaire sampling was applied. (Creswell 2009, 15-17; Ghauri & Gr nhaug 2005, 109-110; Choy 2014, 100-102.)

The questionnaire design relies on theoretical notions related to techniques on destination image measurement. Through revision of image measurement techniques in the field of tourism Echtner and Ritchie recognized structured and unstructured methods to be the most preferred ones to measure destination image. Structured methods focus on examination of attributes characterizing a destination. The attributes are organized in a form of standardized instrument commonly based on Likert or semantic differential scales for evaluations conducted by respondents. Alternatively, unstructured methods emphasize the distinctive traits representing a mental picture of a destination. Whilst applying unstructured methods respondents are encouraged to describe the nature of a destination in a free manner and the collection of data is executed in forms of open-ended survey questions. As proposed by Echtner and Ritchie to capture the overall image of a destination consisting of holistic and attribute based components a combination of structured and unstructured methods is applied in this research. (Echtner & Ritchie 2003, 44-46.)

Furthermore, the role of information sources and characteristics of a traveller in destination image formation is emphasized in the context of the research. Beerli and Martin as well as Balogly and McCleary state that personal and stimulus factors have an influence on destination image formation. Motivation is named to be the central determinant influencing destination choice and encouraging consumers for further information acquisition. Therefore, the motivations for consulting, sharing and creating media content online are surveyed. The researcher has interest towards the role of UGC in relation to travel planning since individuals with tendencies to publish information online consider web platforms with features of UGC as valuable sources of information whilst seeking for knowledge on a specific destination (Llodrá-Riera et al. 2015, 319). As external stimulus factors the importance of information sources varying from traditional to UGC-based sources is evaluated. Travel experience and familiarity with the destination are known to influence the need for data search and are therefore included in the questionnaire.

6.1 Sample

Sampling is employed in the process of data collection for assurance of selecting a unit of individuals to represent the whole of population. Sampling requires specificity in terms of dates, times and location for data collection. Additionally, the selection of the participants of the survey is based on a certain characteristics common to the respondents. The chosen set of individuals is referred as the conceptual population. Whilst access of the conceptual population is not possible a subset of individuals are selected to generate the study population. The required sample size is determined according to the purpose of the study. An advantage of a relatively small sample is acquisition of accurate results which are considered generalizable.

However, a large sample provides an accurate representation of the whole of population. (Smith 2010, 87-88; Ghauri & Grønhaug 2005, 145-146.)

The selected sample of the research consists of 18-34 year old Finnish people. Firstly, regarding nationality Finnish as the study population reflect the consumer base of Finnlines. The company is known as a service provider preferred by seniors and families. Yet, the sample population of 18-34 year old persons provides valuable insights for modifying the concept of Finnlines to attract the younger generations along with the aim of promoting Germany as an intriguing tourist destination. Second, a group of individuals in their 20s and 30s represents the continually growing population of digital natives. The study population's tendency to possess experience on usage of internet as means of communication and interest towards sharing and creating media content on social media platforms qualifies the sample for the research. Moreover, non-probability sampling is applied to determine the size of the sample. The lack of random selection of respondents characterizes the nonprobability sample. Based on previous research on consumer behavior and travel information search conducted online, individuals aged 18 to 34 meet the criteria for the sample.

6.2 Questionnaire Design

A self-administered survey was distributed online for the reasons relating to the characteristics of selected study population and the objectives of the study. As stated previously, online sources and user-generated content in particular are preferred by travellers as information sources for travel planning. Moreover, travellers of today are described to be well-informed in terms of technological utilities referring to means to contribute, share and consult user-generated content. The most effective means to gain access the study population with experience on internet was to conduct the questionnaire in an online environment. Hence, the questionnaire was distributed on Facebook known to be one of the main social media platforms to share and create user-generated content.

The questionnaire consist of three sections including demographical data, destination image of Germany and consumers' motivations and interest related to UGC in general and as a travel information source. The questionnaire is built upon a standardized Likert-type scale which is known to measure attitudes, opinions and experiences of respondents taking part in a research. Likert-type scales provide fixed responses, thus a respondent is able to evaluate a certain statement according to personal preferences. The numerical values of the responses provide means for measurement of the phenomenon under scrutiny. (Dunne, Pryor & Yates, 2005, 47.)The questionnaire applies a five-point Likert Scale by employing factors of frequency and importance related to the provided responses. To draw a description of the sample the first section of the questionnaire records the demographical information involving age, educa-

tion and gender and travel experience of the respondent. The travel experience maps the frequency of a respondent's travel abroad to identify the experienced and inexperienced travellers. Moreover, the number of visits to Germany is inquired in order to differentiate visitors familiar with the destination from visitors with little on-site experience of Germany.

The design for destination image measurement is adopted from Echtner and Ritchie introducing a list of attributes varying from functional to psychological according to previous studies on image measurement. The design is accompanied by an improvement of an image measurement scale through construction of a four factor model developed by Byon and Zhang. The model includes four factors including infrastructure, attraction, enjoyment and value for money to base a destination image upon. Each of the four factors contains at minimum three items representing an aspect of the core factor. For instance infrastructure refers to the quality of infrastructure and touristic facilities, good standard of hygiene, offer of natural and historical attractions as well as cultural events (Byon & Zhang 2011, 523.) Since each destination is unique the attributes qualified for the study were examined in the frame of online sources describing Germany as a tourist destination. The list included a total of 31 attributes of which a respondent was requested to select attributes corresponding with one's image of Germany. In addition, the affective dimension was integrated in the questionnaire by adding the factor of enjoyment according to the four factor model into the questionnaire. Additionally, the questionnaire included an open ended question which provided a respondent an opportunity to describe Germany as a tourism destination with one's own words leaving room for unique commentary. However, the minimum requirement was to name at least three words to indicate the uniqueness of the destination.

Concerning user-generated content the questionnaire reviewed consumers' preferences of traditional information sources in relation to UGC based sources during travel planning to reveal the standpoint of UGC as a travel information source. The respondents were requested to indicate the importance of traditional information sources as well as UGC sources whilst obtaining information on a destination on a scale from 1 being not used at all to 5 being used frequently. In order to survey the respondents' interest to create and share UGC the questionnaire instrument developed by Murphy, Gil and Schegg for investigating the motivations and preferred platforms to share UGC was applied in the questionnaire. Murphy et al. suggest categorization of UGC based sources according to the nature of the media content into groups of photographs, videos, podcasts and reviews. Additionally, the platforms for sharing UGC include social networking sites, commercial review sites, blogs, picture and video sharing sites, online booking sites and official websites of suppliers and service providers. (Gretzel, Law & Fuchs 2010, 473-474.) Accordingly, the respondents were asked to indicate the frequency for creating each form of UGC and to display the preference of platforms for sharing the content on a scale from 1 being never to 5 being frequently.

Furthermore, the motivations for sharing and creating UGC originate from Wang and Fesenmaier's study on motivations for participation in online travel communities. The study introduces 17 incentive elements for online contribution. Additionally, Murphy & al contribute on motivations to share UGC regarding travel. Altogether 15 motivations for sharing and creating UGC were selected to be rated in the questionnaire on a scale varying from 1 to 5. Moreover, motivations for consulting UGC as an information source in travel planning are examined according to respondents' opinions on the given statements on a scale from 1 being strongly disagree to 5 being strongly agree. Consequently, the study on use and impact of online travel reviews by Gretzel and Yoo established the common benefits of consulting travel reviews provided by others. Since commercial reviews represent one aspect of UGC the benefits of consulting travel reviews are applied to the survey to examine the motivations of UGC consultation. (Gretzel & Yoo 2007, 51-53.) Moreover, the concluding section of the questionnaire deals with usefulness and credibility of UGC in general.

7 Results

An electronic questionnaire was published on the Facebook page of Finnlines on 13th of May 2015. The given response time equalled two weeks starting from 13th of May and ending on 26th of May 2015. The number of replies received was 117 which was an adequate number of responses for a study this magnitude. A statistical analysis was performed in order to display the data in a comprehensive manner. To start with a demographic profile of the respondents is presented to convey an overall image of the sample. Secondly, the number of visits in Germany and motives for visitation are examined to reveal consumers' level of familiarity with Germany. The revision is followed by an outlook of the image of Germany providing the marketers of tourism industry insights on destination perceptions. Lastly, to uncover the standpoint of user-generated content as a travel information source the information search behaviour of consumers is reviewed. The section concerning user-generated content provides an understanding on the manners consumers share and create user-generated content.

7.1 Demographic Profile and Travel Experience

According to the demographic profile 48 % of the respondents were female and 52 % male which results into an equal response rate among the genders. Regarding the sample of 18-34 year olds the response rate of the study group was only 18 %. Therefore, to gain generalizable results the responses of individuals aged from 35 to 65 and beyond were included in the study. The response rate of the group aged 35-65 and beyond was altogether 82 %. The high

response rate of the elderly group can be explained by respondent's familiarity with Finnlines. As the questionnaire was published on the Facebook page of Finnlines the possibility for taking part in the survey was far greater with persons who have visited the Finnlines Facebook page previously. Majority of the respondents were between ages of 35-44 with 29 % or 45-54 with 27 %. The response rate of adults aged 25-34 was 16 %. Seniors were presented with 13 %. Yet, young adults referring to 18-24 year olds with 2 % response rate proved to be a minority. Due to the age diversion the respondents were divided into groups of young adults and adults, middle aged and seniors for further analysis.

The section covering travel experience included questions in overall travel experience during the past year as well as the number of times the respondent had visited Germany. Over than half of the respondents had been abroad during the past year from one to three times and 40 % stated to have taken upon a journey abroad during the past year. However, 7 % of the respondents had travelled seldom or not at all during the past year. Figure 1 below summarizes the respondents travel experience relating to Germany. Majority of the respondents with 73 % stated to have visited Germany more than four times. One to two visits were conducted by 14 % and three to four visits by 10 % of the respondents. Only 3 % of the survey participants had never visited Germany. To clarify the level of familiarity regarding Germany the respondents who have visited the country previously were asked to indicate the reasons for visitation. Vacationing with 83 % was rated as the most important reason for visitation followed by participation on a business trip with 32 %. To show a higher level of familiarity regarding Germany 27 % of the respondents indicated to have visited friends and family and 10 % mentioned studies to be the reason for visitation.

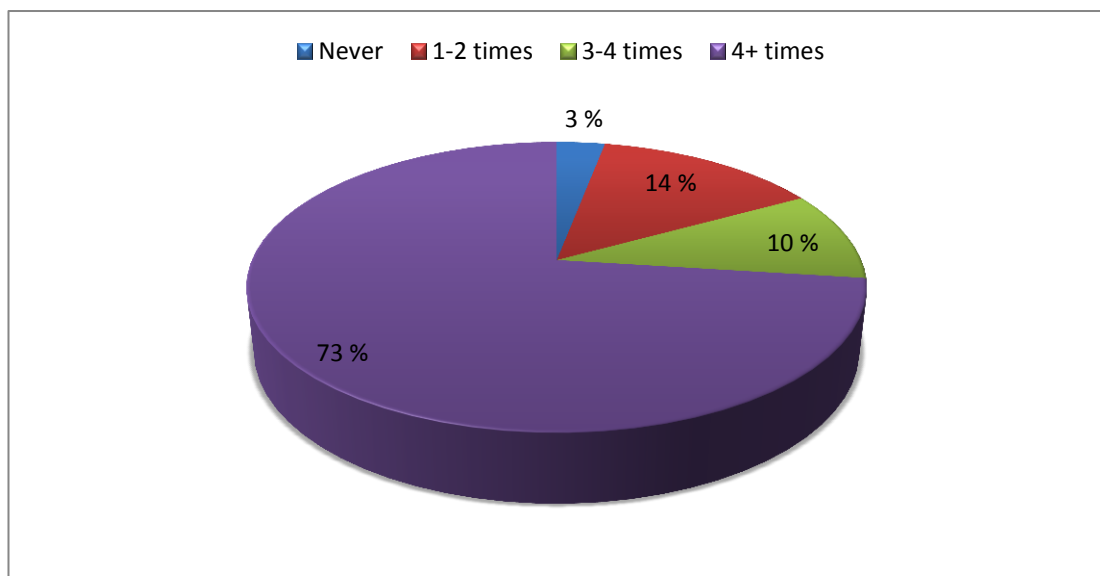


Figure 1: Visitation in Germany

7.2 Image of Germany as a Tourism Destination

Age is considered to be one of the most influential of the social factors relating to destination image formation. The factor of age is also considered to be the dominate factor describing the customer base of Finnlines. Therefore, the questionnaire results concerning the destination image of Germany are displayed according to the age of the respondents. The age groups under scrutiny are 18-34, 35-54, 55-65 and beyond. In the second section of the questionnaire the respondents were given the option to choose one to four attributes which in their opinion described Germany as a tourist destination. To portray the results of the destination image respondents have about Germany in an effective manner 23 out of 31 attributes under evaluation are listed in figure 2 below. The chosen attributes portray the cognitive image one has about Germany.

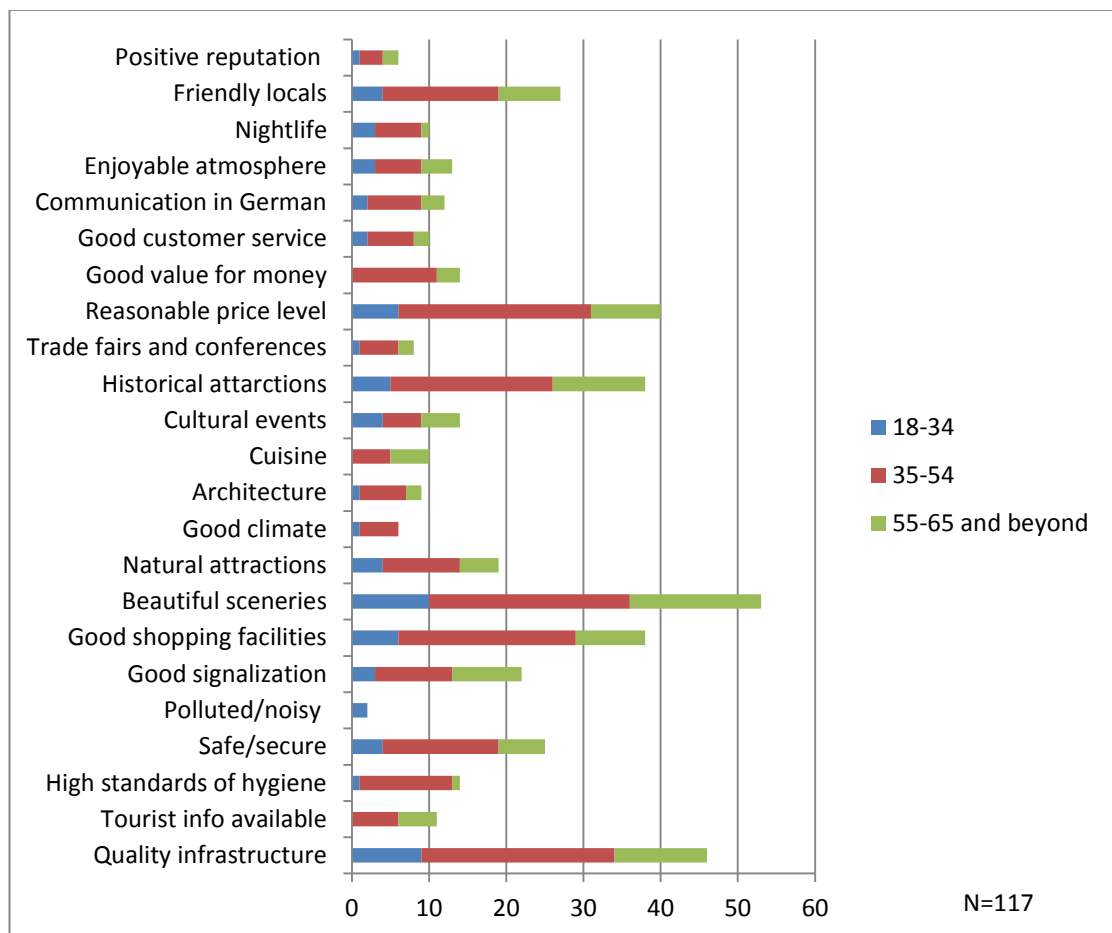


Figure 2: Respondents' image of Germany

To begin with the five most favourable attributes describing Germany as a destination in the order of appearance are beautiful sceneries, good quality of infrastructure, reasonable price level, historical attractions and good shopping facilities. The significance of beautiful sceneries was regarded by 45 % of respondents followed by acknowledgement of good quality of in-

infrastructure by 35 %. Reasonable price level was acknowledged by 34 % of respondents. A total of 32 % of respondents considered historical attractions and good shopping facilities to characterize Germany. On the other hand, attributes with low interest from respondents included availability of tourist information 9 %, good quality of customer service 9 % and good climate 5 %. A minority of 2 % of the respondents acknowledged polluted or noisy environment. Yet, the positive reputation of Germany was regarded significant by 5 % of respondents. The respondents displayed no interest towards attributes such as inconveniency to travel to the destination and difficulties to travel around the destination. Moreover, the relaxing or on the contrary exciting nature of the destination drew no interest among the respondents.

The age groups of 18-34, 35-54 and 55-65 and beyond showed consistency regarding the elemental features to describe Germany. Beautiful scenery was ranked as the most descriptive feature of Germany by 26 % of 18-34 year olds, 18 % of 35-54 year olds and 22 % of the age group of 55-65 and beyond. Good quality of infrastructure was regarded an elemental feature of Germany by 24 % of 18-34 year olds, 17 % of 34-54 year olds and 16 % of the eldest age group. Reasonable price level and good shopping facilities were of importance to 16 % of 18-34 year olds. Consequently, 16 % of respondents belonging to the age group of 34-54 stated reasonable price level to be of importance and 17 % emphasized good shopping facilities. Merely 12 % of the age group of 55-65 and beyond acknowledged reasonable price level and good shopping facilities. Historical attractions were acknowledged by 12 % of 18-34 year olds, 13 % of 35-54 year olds and 16 % of the age group of 55-65 and beyond. Nevertheless, the responses of the three age groups indicate variance regarding additional attributes describing Germany. To begin with, the age group of 18-34 indicated interest towards cultural events with 10 % and nightlife with 8 %. Respondents belonging to the age group of 35-54 emphasized safe and secure environment as well as high standards of hygiene. The safety of the environment was acknowledged by 12 % of the age group and high standards of hygiene by 10 %. Lastly, 12 % of age group of 55-65 and beyond took notice of good signalization and 10 % emphasized the influence of friendly locals into the experienced enjoyment during visitation.

Furthermore, the questionnaire included a section in which the respondents were asked to describe Germany as a tourist destination with their own words. The liberty to express oneself demonstrated the affective destination image. The previously analysed attribute-based model has focus on the tangible features including functional and physical traits of a destination. Thus, to capture the holistic impressions of a destination a unique outlook given by each respondent is required. A majority of the respondents described Germany to be beautiful with spectacular sceneries, diverse and affordable. Common terms such as diverse, organized and historical were mentioned frequently by the respondents. Germany was also considered to be an easy holiday destination due to the proximity of the country in relation to Finland. The holistic impressions the respondents have about Germany conform to the attribute-based im-

age shown in figure 2. However, the freedom of expression brought up unique terms such as fresh and elegant. The unique commentary also emphasized characteristics specific to the German culture including carnival, beautiful language, river valleys with vineyards and alp scenery with small towns.

The holistic impressions varied among the context groups. A representative of the younger generation described Germany as “modern, trendy and affordable”. The younger generation also appreciates the functionality of the country by stating that “everything works as expected with German punctuality”. The diversity of Germany is acknowledged by the young adults and adults, middle aged and the elderly. Accordingly, from the middle aged point of view Germany is described to be suitable for “lovers of sports, food and shopping” as well as “to offer always something new although I have been travelling there since -84”. Moreover, the middle-aged emphasized the easy access to Germany from Finland, the network of public transportation and the road manners of Germans. The elderly were interested in the versatile nature, sceneries and historical cities. No more than two respondents described Germany with a negative tone. The negative commentary was provided by middle aged males. The commentary evaluated the customer service on-site as followed “poor language skills in customer service and a lack of heartiness”. The destination was also described to be “expensive, boring and ruined by immigrants”.

In addition to internal factors external factors modify destination images gradually. As a representative of external features travel experience is stated to influence the image formation process. Destination image is developed as a consequence of cognitive assessment concerning the functional features of the destination along with experienced emotions relating to the travel experience. The affection is modified by the cognitive assessment of the destination. However, the level of familiarity regarding the destination has the potential to reverse the hierarchical nature of the image components. In the scope of this research the travel experience concerns the level of travel experience a respondent has regarding Germany as a travel destination. The images of travellers with no or little experience and travellers with plenty of experience specify the differences in destination perceptions brought by mere travel experience. Out of 117 respondents 83 % had visited Germany three to four times or more than four times. Thus, the remaining 17 % had either no experience concerning Germany as a destination or had visited the country 1-2 times. The images of the experienced and unexperienced travellers are illustrated in figures 3 and 4.

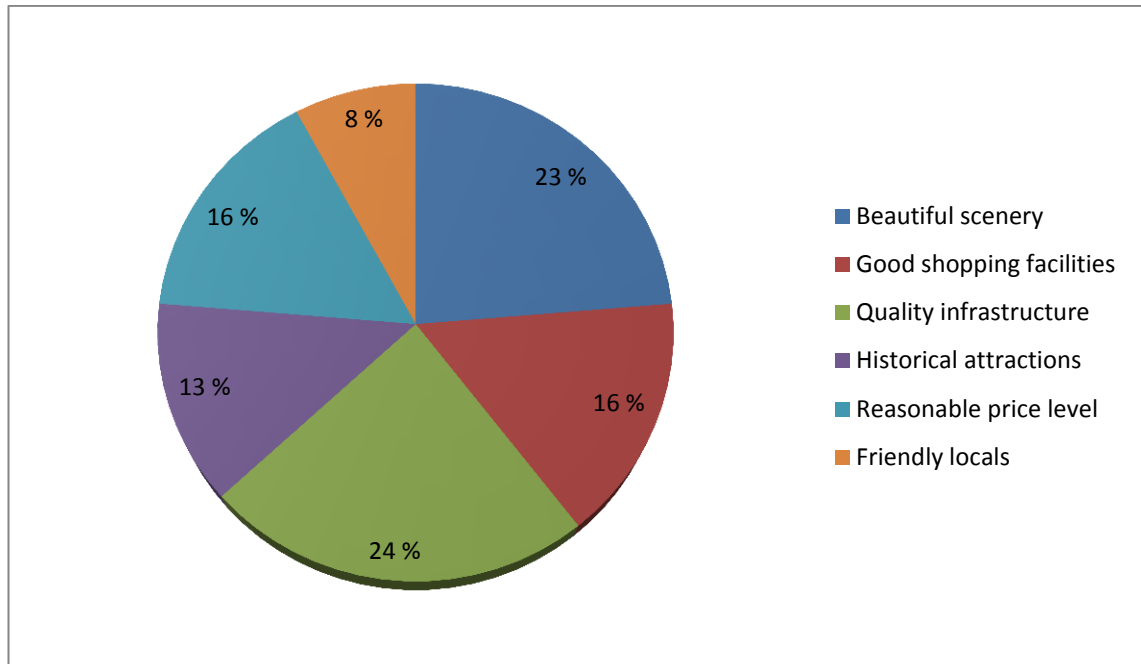


Figure 3: Perceptions of Germany according unexperienced travellers

The analysed features indicating differentiation in perceptions concerning Germany among unexperienced and experienced travellers include beautiful scenery, good shopping facilities, quality infrastructure, historical attraction, reasonable price level and friendly locals. The features are considered to highly characterize Germany as a travel destination. Figure 3 illustrates the perceptions of unexperienced travellers regarding travellers who have not previously visited Germany or have visited the country one to two times. The most descriptive features of Germany according to unexperienced travellers are good quality of infrastructure and beautiful scenery. Overall, 24 % of unexperienced travellers acknowledged the importance of infrastructure and 23 % emphasized the value of beautiful scenery. Reasonable price level and good shopping facilities were both mentioned by 16 % of travellers. Among the attributes referred most frequently to describe Germany historical attractions and friendly locals were considered the least compelling according to unexperienced travellers. Historical attractions were mentioned by 13 % and friendly locals by 8 % of unexperienced travellers.

Concerning the holistic impressions on Germany the unexperienced travellers characterized the destination to be pleasant, business-like, wonderful, fabulous and beautiful. Moreover, Germany was described as diverse, interesting and affordable. Respondents with little or some experience of Germany as a travel destination described the destination with vague expressions with emphasis on feelings towards the destination. The utilization of common words for destination description reflects the lack of on-site experiences in order to evaluate the destination as a whole. Therefore, the influence of personal traits and information sources are stressed in image formation.

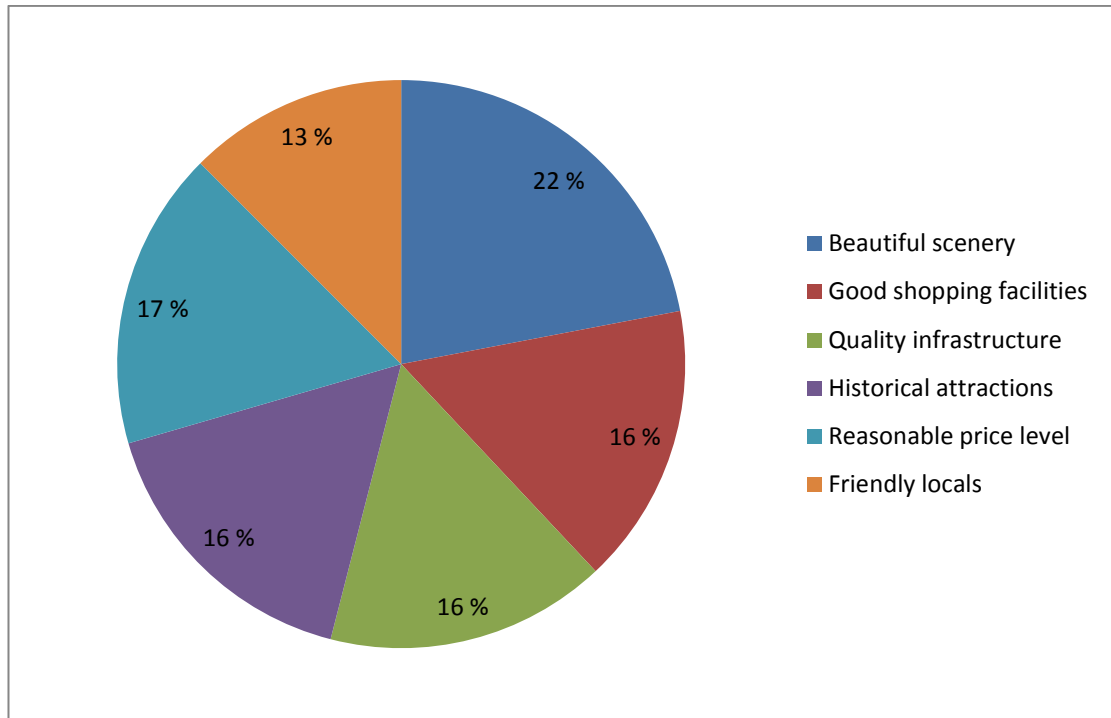


Figure 4: Perceptions of Germany according to experienced travellers

To examine the perceptions of experienced travellers concerning Germany figure 4 illustrates features of importance to travellers who have visited Germany several times. The images of experienced travellers do not considerably differentiate from the images of unexperienced travellers. However, to tell apart from travellers with little on-site experience of Germany as a destination the experienced travellers consider beautiful scenery and reasonable price level as the most significant features to describe the destination. Beautiful scenery is acknowledged by 22 % of experienced travellers and reasonable price level is of importance to 17 % travellers. Moreover, 16 % of experienced travellers refer to features of quality infrastructure, good shopping facilities and historical attractions whilst describing the destination. The feature of friendly locals is considered the least characterizing attribute of the six elemental features according to 13 % of experienced travellers.

Similar to unexperienced travellers also experienced travellers consider common features of a destination whilst describing Germany. In the case of experienced travellers the mentioned common terms are interesting, historic, cosy, cheap, safe and easy. However, the experienced travellers produced detailed commentary regarding travel experiences from the past three decades. Experienced travellers described Germany as followed “cheap prices, great accommodation, excellent cuisine and functioning health care”. Germany was also described to be “ideal for touring with a car, have visited dozens of time, yet one can always find more interesting destinations, miss there already”. The detailed descriptions entail common knowledge concerning the destination as well as emotions brought up by reminiscence of satisfactory travel experiences.

7.3 Consultation of Information Sources

The respondents were asked to evaluate the frequency of use of traditional information sources along with online sources whilst planning a trip. The traditional sources to be evaluated included travel agencies and tour operators, travel guidebooks and brochures, printed media referring to newspapers and magazines, television and radio, fairs, official websites of service providers, web pages of official tourist information and social media. Moreover, the online sources referred to social networking sites, travel service providers' sites, commercial review sites, online booking sites, picture and video sharing sites, blogs and travel forums. The tendencies concerning consultation of traditional information sources in relation to online sources verifies the stand of online sources as the go-to source in travel planning. Furthermore, the tendencies to consult a variety of online sources give indication of the consumers' relation towards user-generated content as a source of travel information.

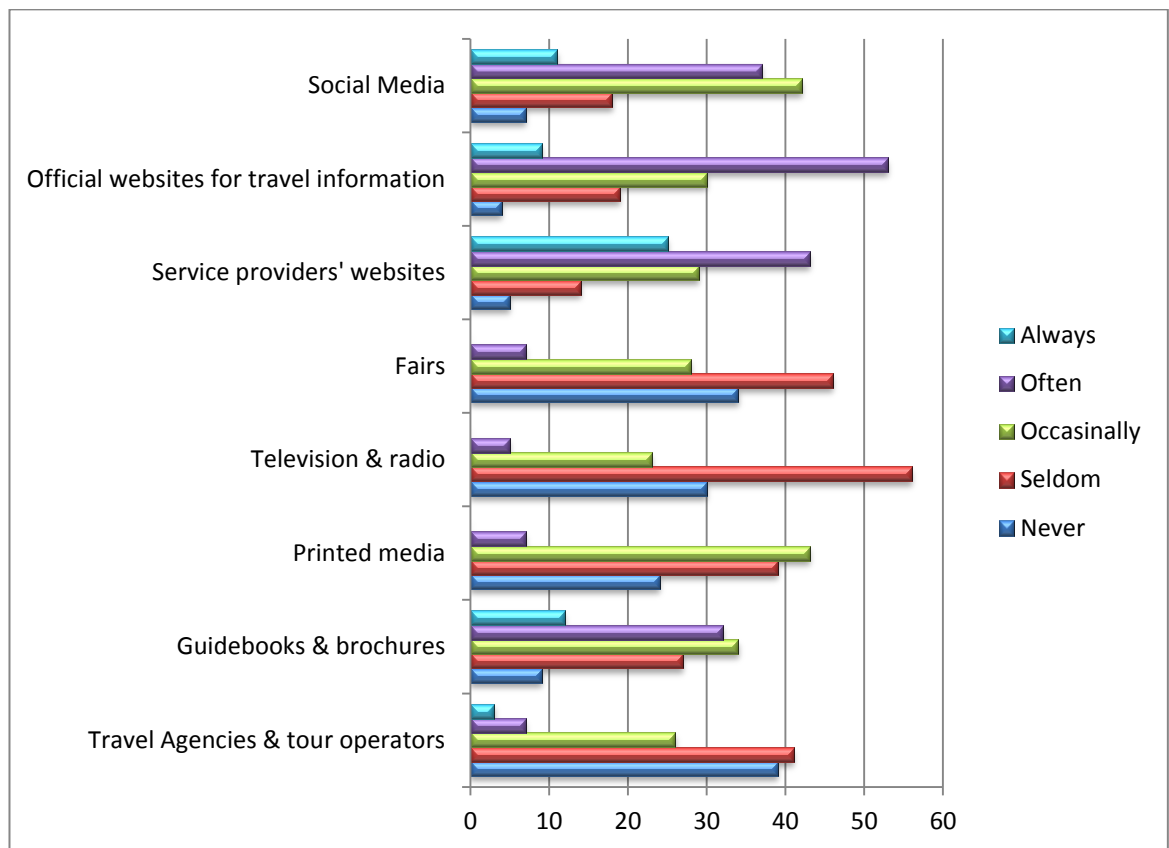


Figure 5: Information sources consulted during travel planning

Figure 5 displays the variance between traditional and online information sources when obtaining information on a destination. The most preferred information source is websites of service providers with 37 % of respondents stating to turn to service providers often and 22 % always whilst planning a trip. However, web pages of official tourist information were accessed by 46 % of respondents frequently and by 7 % without an exception. Social media re-

ferring to social networking sites such as Facebook is consulted frequently by 42 % of respondents. Social media and printed media are both consulted occasionally by 38 % of the respondents. Television and radio along with guide books and brochures are utilized rather infrequently. A whole of 49 % of respondents consult television and radio seldom. Guide books and brochures are utilized in travel planning occasionally by 30 % of respondents. Additionally, 10 % of respondents consult guidebooks and brochures always whilst planning a trip. Travel agents and tour operators along with fairs are the least consulted sources of information. Travel agencies and tour operators are turned to seldom by 35 % of the respondents. Fairs are a rarely consulted source by 40 % of the respondents.

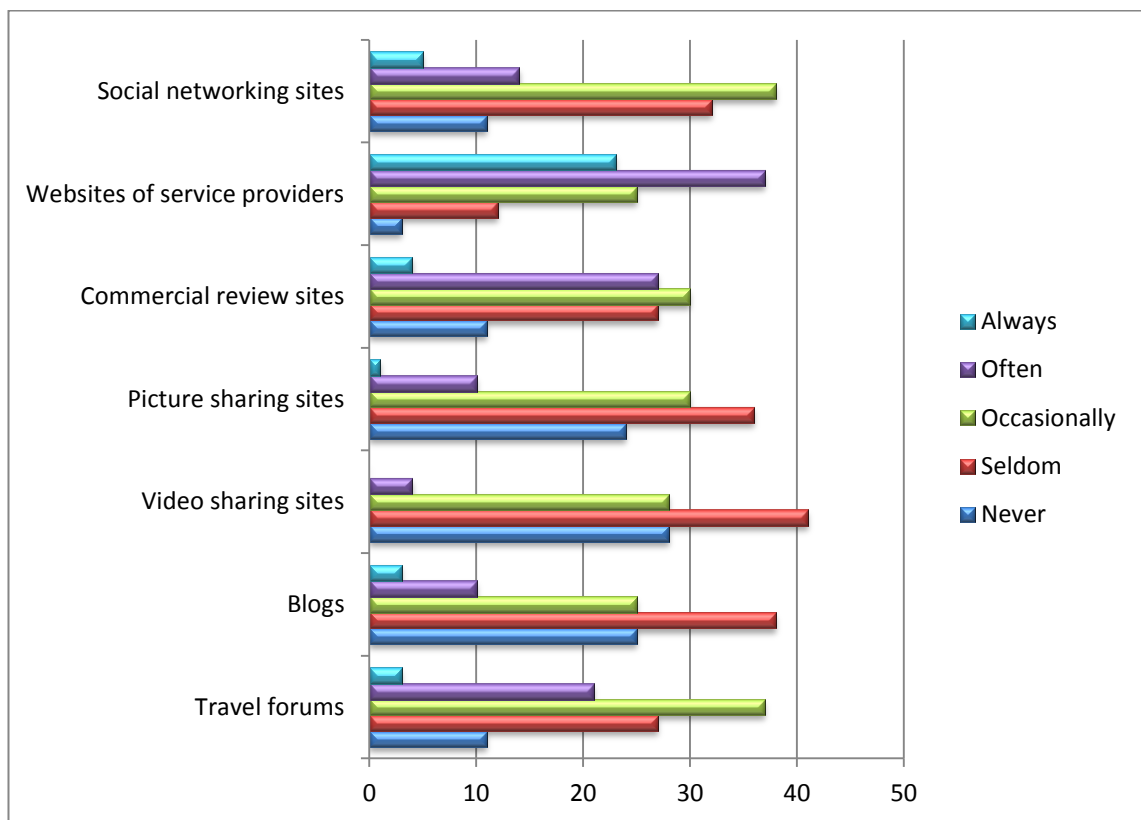


Figure 6: Consultation of online sources during travel planning

Figure 6 provides a more detailed view on acquisition of information in the online environment. Information search online is characterized by the importance of information provided by marketers in the tourism field. The most frequently consulted source are websites of service providers' with 37 % of respondents relying on them in travel planning at all times. Websites of service providers' are followed by social media consulted on occasion by 38 % of respondents. One third of the respondents seek advice from commercial review sites such as TripAdvisor on a regular basis and 22 % turn to travel forums frequently. Blogs are consulted every so often by one fourth of the respondents leaving picture and video sharing sites as the least consulted form of online sources. Picture sharing sites are consulted infrequently by

36 % of respondents and video sharing sites by 41 %. The results concerning consultation of traditional or online sources during travel planning did not show variance regarding respondents' age.

7.4 Respondents' relation to User-Generated Content

The section uncovers the respondents' relation to production of user-generated content and their preferences on platforms to produce or share content related to travel experiences. Furthermore, the motivations behind sharing and creating user-generated content in relation to travel are discussed and the reasoning for consulting content provided by authentic travelers is exposed. To conclude the results section the credibility and usefulness of user-generated content as a source of information is reviewed.

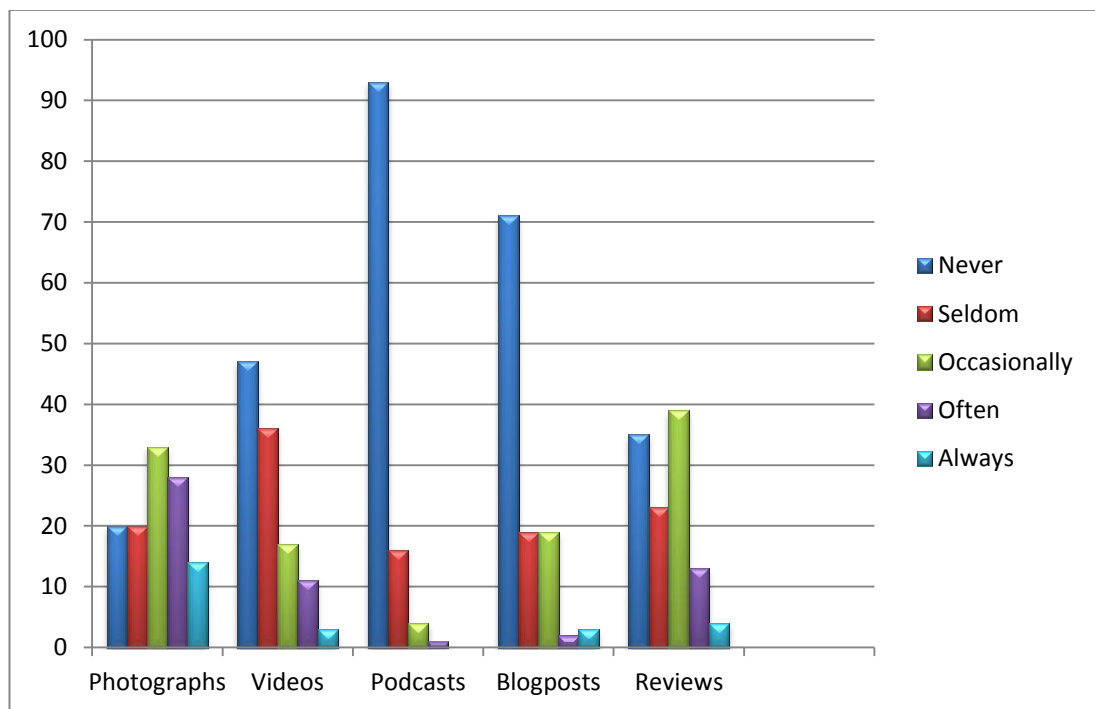


Figure 7: Production of travel related UGC

As shown in figure 7 the most common forms of travel related content generated by consumers are photographs with 24 % of respondents producing pictures on a regular basis and 29 % on occasion. Reviews are generated occasionally or seldom by over than half of the respondents with 54 %. Videos are produced rarely or not at all by 73 % of respondents and on occasion by 15 %. Blogposts along with podcasts are proven to be the least popular forms of user-generated content to contribute on. Overall 78 % of respondents have generated blogposts either seldom or never and 83 % has not once created a podcast.

The results indicated certain variations in production of travel related user-generated content age wise. Differentiating from the middle-aged and elderly the context group of young adults and adults are familiar with the production of each of the forms of user-generated content. Altogether 87 % of 18-34 year olds produce photographs often and 15 % of the age group produces photographs about travel experiences without an exception. Moreover, 25 % of 18-34 year olds generates reviews frequently and one third of the age group produces video material on a regular basis. Merely 10 % of 18-34 year olds contribute on blogposts and 5 % on podcasts often. From the representatives of the age groups of 35-54 and 55-65 and beyond 42 % generates photographs regularly. Overall 73 % of 35-54 year olds produces reviews regularly and 56 % of the age group of 55-65 and beyond contributes in review writing occasionally. Blogposts are created on occasion by 31 % of 35-54 year olds and 35 % by the age group of 55-65 and beyond. Along with podcasts videos are produced rarely by the middle aged and elderly.

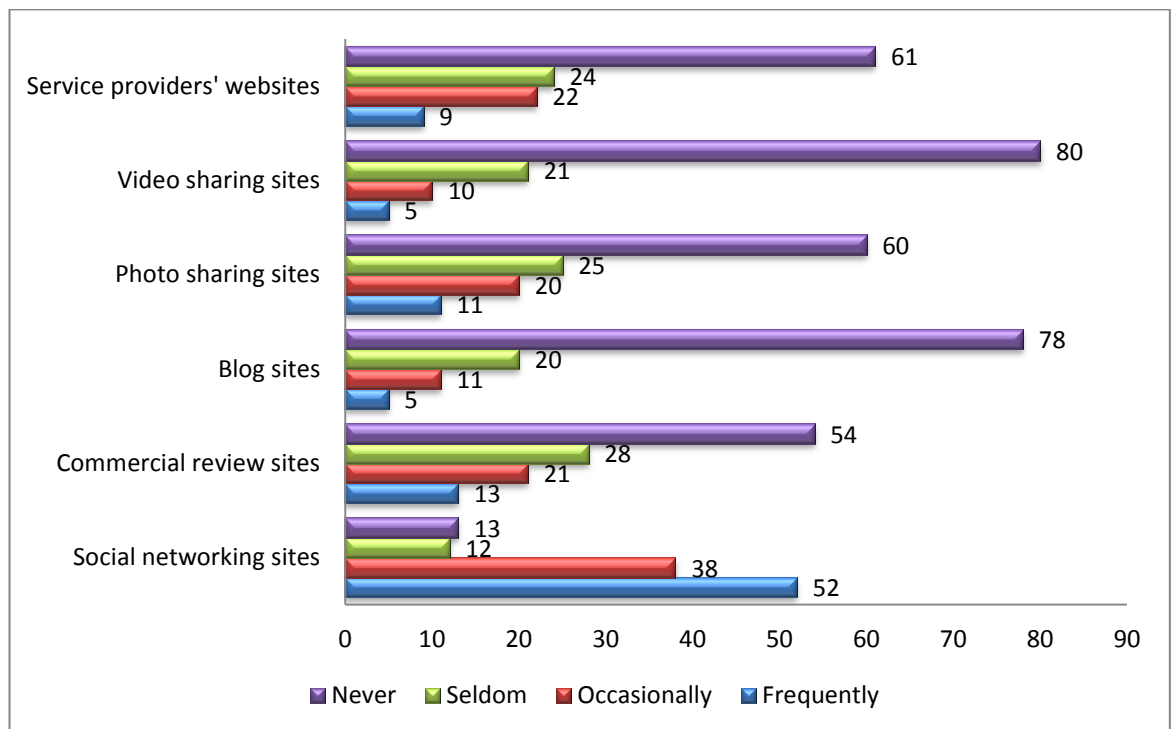


Figure 8: Utilization of web platforms on sharing travel related UGC

Utilization of web platforms for sharing travel related user-generated content shown in figure 8 correlates with the respondent's preferences on consultation of online sources during travel planning displayed in figure 6. Social networking sites are a highly preferred source with 45 % of respondents stating to share experiences on them frequently. Commercial review sites receive commentary from 47 % of respondents occasionally. Blogsites and video sharing sites draw only a little attention as 68 % of respondents has not once shared information on travel experiences on a blogsite and 67 % state to have no experience on video sharing sites. Photo

sharing platforms are taken advantage of infrequently by 39 % of respondents. Despite the significance of service providers' websites as information sources during travel planning, web sites of service providers are rarely utilized for sharing content. Websites of service providers acts as a platform for data distribution for 40 % of respondents occasionally, yet over than half of respondents do not share knowledge on service providers' websites at all.

Nevertheless, the age of the respondent leads to variations concerning the utilization of web platforms for sharing user-generated content related to travel. Altogether, 76 % of 18-34 year olds, 63 % of 35-54 year olds and 54 % of the age group of 55-65 and beyond utilizes social networking sites to share content on travel experiences frequently. Commercial review sites are the most utilized platform to share content after social networking sites. Review sites are utilized for sharing knowledge occasionally by 43 % of 35-54 year olds and 13 % of the age group of 55-65 and beyond. Conversely, young adults and adults prefer blog sites over commercial review sites. Blog sites are utilized for content sharing frequently by 50 % of the age group, whereas commercial review sites are utilized regularly by 16 % of the context group. The age group of 35-54 is the only one to utilize photo sharing sites in a frequent manner to share content. Accordingly, 24 % of 35-54 year olds generates content on photo sharing sites every so often.

Motivations for sharing/creating UGC	Mean on a scale of 1-5 (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)	Percentage of respondents with agreement rate of 4/5
Expressing satisfaction to a trip	3,8	75,00 %
Sharing experiences with friends	3,7	70,18 %
Reliving a travel experience	3,4	56,25 %
Being helpful to others	3,3	52,68 %
Sharing enjoyment	3,3	46,90 %
Contributing on sources one has found useful to show gratefulness	2,9	34,51 %
Seeking approval from others to boost self-confidence	1,9	5,31 %
Attaining a status in a community	1,9	8,93 %

Table 1: Motivations for sharing and creating user-generated content

The reasons for sharing and producing user-generated content are presented in table 1. The mean of each factor of motivation is calculated and the percentage of respondents with a

response rate of “4 or 5” referring to agreement with the given factor are included into the display. The key motivation to contribute on UGC is “expressing satisfaction to a trip”. Overall 75 % of respondents ranked the factor as the most essential one of all the factors with the highest mean of 3, 8. The factor “sharing experiences with friends” ranked the second highest mean of 3, 7 and is considered to highly motivate sharing and creating of UGC according to 70, 18 % of respondents. Nevertheless, “attaining status in a community” and “seeking approval from others to boost self-confidence” ranked the lowest means of 1, 9 of all the factors. Only 5, 31 % of respondents considered “seeking approval from others to boost self-confidence” as an important reason to contribute on UGC and 8, 93 % aimed for status boost.

What do you think of UGC as a travel information source?	Mean on a scale of 1-5 (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)	Percentage of respondents With high agreement rate of 4/5
Helps to evaluate alternatives	3,7	66,37 %
Is a good way to learn about a destination, product or service	3,6	59,29 %
Provides help for efficient trip planning	3,5	55,75 %
Inspires to plan a trip	3,5	54,87 %
Reduces the risk involved in making travel decisions	3,2	43,36 %
Increases confidence in decision-making	3,2	39,28 %
Does not interest me whilst planning a trip	2,4	9,91 %

Table 2: Perceptions of user-generated content as a travel information source

Table 2 presents the views respondents have about user-generated content as a travel information source. Majority of the respondents with 66, 37 % turn to UGC in order to evaluate alternatives. Additionally, this statement had the highest mean of 3, 7. Yet, 59, 29 % of respondents consider UGC as “a good way to learn about a destination, product or service. The statement had the second highest mean of 3, 6. UGC is also seen to “provide help for efficient travel planning” according to 55, 75 % of respondents. The statement UGC “does not interest me whilst trip planning” had the lowest mean of 2, 4 and 9, 91 % of respondents considers UGC an uninteresting source of information. However, related to the motivations to consult UGC “increases confidence in decision-making” scored one of the lowest means of 3, 2 leaving 39, 28 % of respondents to seek for reassurance for their travel decisions.

To conclude the results section the attitudes of consumers towards user-generated content as a source of information is reviewed. Figures 9 and 10 below indicate the credibility and usefulness of user-generated content as an information source in general. Credibility of user-

generated content is somewhat unimportant to 40 % of respondents. However, 42 % of respondents consider user-generated content to be a reliable source of information. Merely 11 % of respondents have mistrust towards user-generated content as a credible source of data. The credibility of UGC is utterly questioned by 3 % of respondents. On the other hand 4 % of respondents consider UGC a very reliable source of information. In addition, user-generated content is considered a useful source of information by 67 % of the respondents. Conversely, 7 % of the respondents find user-generated content impractical source of information, hence disagreeing with the statement. The usefulness of user-generated content is referred insignificant by 26 % of the respondents. Overall, user-generated content is considered a useful source of information with tendencies to overlook reliability.

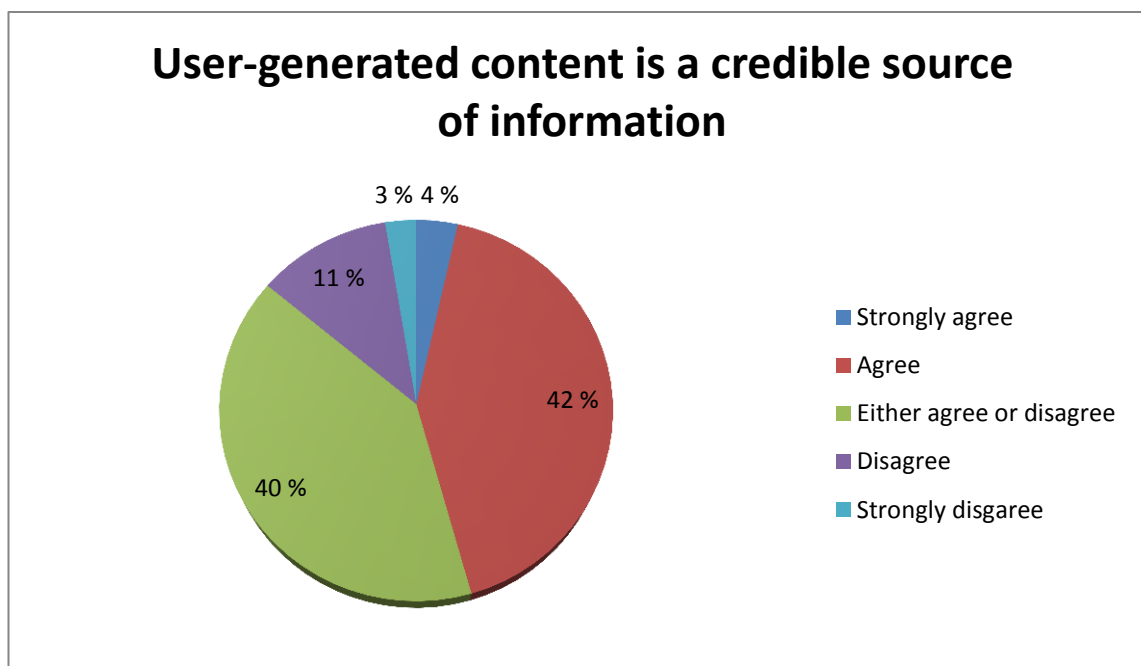


Figure 9: Credibility of user-generated content as an information source

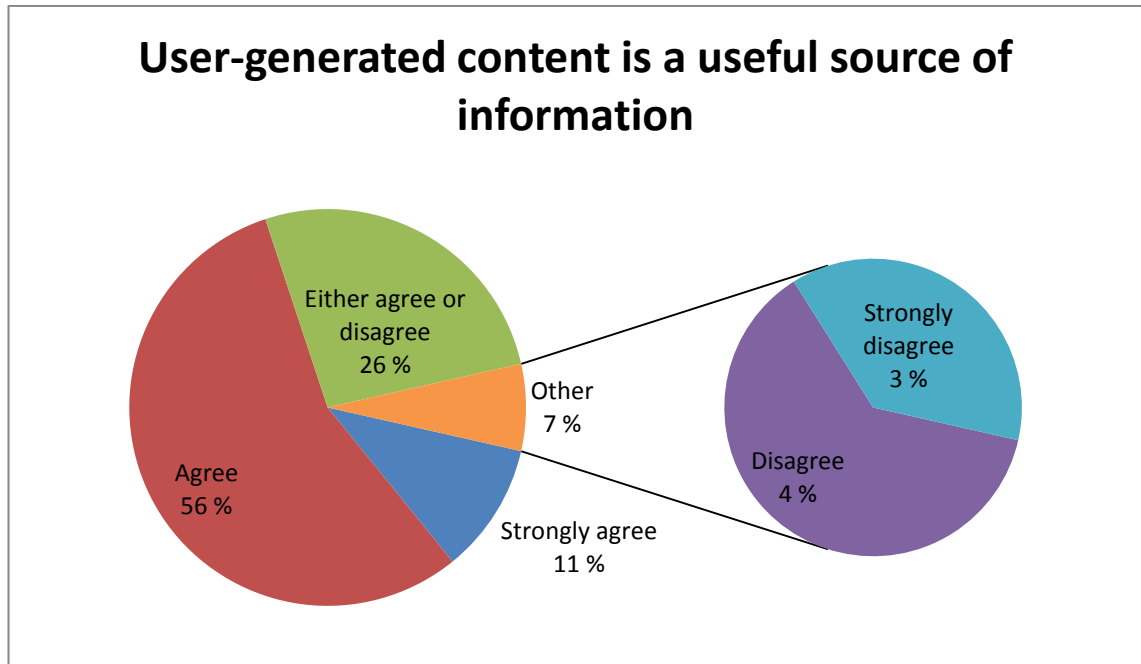


Figure 10: Usefulness of user-generated content as an information source

8 Conclusion

The aim of the study was to review the perceptions Finnish consumers have about Germany and map the preferred information sources influencing the formed images. Accordingly, Finns stress the tangible features of Germany thus allowing comparison between other holiday destinations. The image of Germany is built upon infrastructure and attraction followed by elements of enjoyment and value for money. Therefore, natural and historical attractions characterize Germany as a destination. The high quality of infrastructure, safety and high standards of hygiene in Germany are valued by Finnish travelers. As a western destination Germany is similar to Finland and therefore corresponds to the practicality and security Finns have grown accustomed to. Furthermore, the monetary aspect is taken into consideration within the processes of destination selection. Firstly, the financial situation of an individual may act as a limitation in travel decision-making. Secondly, personal loss associated with value for money is seen as a risk of tourism purchase. Hence, the easy access to Germany and reasonable price level of the destination indicate a visit to Germany to be a low risk purchase. Moreover, friendly locals along with a wide selection of activities contribute on the enjoyable atmosphere during visitation. Emphasis on the functionality and uniqueness of Germany as a destination has the potential to boost the positive reputation of the destination to increase visitation numbers.

Nevertheless, consumer segments of young adults and adults, middle aged and seniors display variance in perceptions regarding Germany. As the generation of digital natives is character-

ized self-centred the tendency to travel on one's own is stressed. Due to the freedom experienced during unaccompanied travels the younger generation bases the image of a destination on their personal needs leaving the formed image one-sided. On the other hand, the image the middle-aged have about Germany is dependent from their travel companions including partners and family members. The focus of the middle-aged travellers is on enjoyment and accessibility during a trip; hence they value the essentials of travel such as infrastructure and attraction. Lastly, the elderly appear to have the most versatile image about Germany. Due to travel experience from the past three decades the historical and social changes taken place in the destination have modified the image the elderly have and provided a broad view on the destination.

Moreover, the perceptions regarding Germany as a travel destination differ in terms of travel experience. Travellers with little on-site experience of Germany characterize the destination according to beautiful scenery and good quality of infrastructure. The perceptions of unexperienced travellers stress the common features of a destination with emphasis on the emotional aspect of the perceived image. Similar to unexperienced travellers experienced travellers who have visited Germany on several occasions consider sceneries as the elemental feature of the destination. However, experienced travellers regard historical attractions, good shopping facilities and reasonable price level to characterize the destination equally. The image perceived by experienced travellers is balanced due to recognition of functional features providing common travel information and embracement of emotions related to previous travel experiences. The culture-specific unique features recognized by experienced travellers characterizing Germany provide marketers of the tourism industry cutting-edge material for tourism promotion. In addition, the functional destination features stressed by consumers enable markets to contribute on providing satisfactory travel experiences through reflection of the needs of the consumer segment in question.

The high level of familiarity with Germany among the respondents indicates that the perceptions of the destination base on primary data acquired during visitation at the destination. Therefore, information sources are utilized to deepen the knowledge perceived on-site. Accordingly, online sources with authority are preferred over user-generated content in information search. Online sources are valued due to the easy access of data as well as the usefulness of the sources available. However, user-generated content is considered a useful source of information in the initial stages of destination selection as the main motivations for consultation of UGC included activities of learning on a destination and evaluating alternatives. Content provided by consumers showcases the potential a destination has by stressing satisfaction and personal experiences. Finnish consumers contribute on user-generated content initially for self-serving reasons. In relation to travel egoism is justified since travel purchases contain a high risk of loss in terms of money and satisfaction towards the received services.

Moreover, the tendency to share and create content concerning travel experience for self-centred reasons supports the notion that consumers rely on commercial sources over user-generated content. The reliance on commercial sources can be explained by the lack of quality control in the online environment along with the unorganized manner consumers share and generate content.

Nevertheless, user-generated content as a travel information source favours the travellers' necessity to gain authentic and credible information about a destination. Despite the reliance towards user-generated content Finns do not actively produce content on travel experiences but rather consult content provided by other travellers. Accordingly, Finns are considered as consumers of UGC due to the activities of viewing, watching and reading. The preference of social networking sites and commercial review sites as platforms for sharing travel related content highlights the need of belonging. Through participation consumers are able to connect with one another through common interests and serve the community by providing up-to-date information. However, Finns reliance on authority along with the need of self-expression come together when stressing the importance of service providers' websites as a platform for sharing travel related content.

9 Development Suggestions for Finnlines

The research provided Finnlines tools to be utilized to enhance destination promotion and contribute on welfare of consumer relations. In order to differentiate Germany from other central European holiday destinations the psychological and unique qualities of the country should be emphasized in tourism promotion. Consequently, psychological traits such as beautiful sceneries, historical and natural attractions as well as friendly locals are well represented in the destination. The unique qualities refer to the country's history which is known to be full of character and the modern yet elegant feeling of Germany.

To increase attractiveness of the German cities Finnlines operates routes to the main attractions and qualities which Travemünde, Rostock and Lübeck are known for call for attention. Nevertheless, tourism promotion is stated to be based on visualization of travel experiences. That in mind Finnlines ought to emphasize the variety the cities offer as travel destinations and introduce the destinations to the common public though visual material referring to photographs and videos accessed through social networking sites, photo sharing sites as well as review sites. Through visualization consumers are able to outlive the potential journey without financial contribution. Consequently, consumers are inspired to take up a journey to the desired destination to experience the destination through actual sensations.

Finnlines has acknowledged the significance of user-generated content generated for commercial purposes through active utilization of a variety of social media platforms for data distribution. However, to serve the existing consumer base consisting of age groups of 35-54 and 55-65 and beyond Finnlines ought to contribute on the visual look and content of the official web page of the company. Providing updated travel information through social networking platforms would also serve the established consumer segment prior and during a trip. Moreover, integration of consumer reviews as a commonly consulted and produced form of UGC into the official website of Finnlines serves both the company and the consumers. Firstly, positive commentary regarding the services of Finnlines increases the value of the company's brand and therefore ensures consumer loyalty. Secondly, Germany would gain attention as a destination with a wide tourism offer which is known to intrigue potential travellers.

Arguably, consumers with high interest towards producing user-generated content tend to consult content generated by authentic travellers more often than consumers with low interest toward production of content. Thus, Finnlines ought to consider following the footsteps of a variety of actors in the business field by integrating a UGC-based campaign in the marketing strategy of the company. A marketing campaign based on user-generated content would increase recognition of the brand of Finnlines and assist in establishment of fresh consumer relationships. A UGC-based campaign could be executed in a form of online competition taking place in social media to reach a wide segment of consumers. As the most preferred form of UGC is photographs travellers could capture the highlight of their journey in form of a photograph to stress the authenticity of the situation. The photographs would be posted on the Facebook page of Finnlines or a picture sharing site such as Instagram to provide inspiration for potential travellers. A prize along with encouragement from a marketer may activate Finnish consumers to take part in production of online content and thus influence the quality of the content available online. All in all, observing the nature and quality of UGC produced concerning Finnlines as a service provider and Germany as tourist destination would provide the company insights on the tourism market.

To conclude with the motivations for creating and sharing travel related UGC provide Finnlines a deeper understanding on behaviour of Finnish consumers. In addition, the motivations provide insights on the importance of UGC as a source of information during travel planning. Awareness on the reasons why consumers share and produce user-generated content provides a marketer an advantage to meet the needs of the consumers in an effective and specific manner as the motivations reflect the features a consumer considers to be important in relation to travel planning. All in all, UGC is considered a useful source of information according to 67 % of consumers and a source of information which is turned to in the initial stages of travel planning. Therefore, Finnlines ought to take the opportunity to connect with potential consumers during those early stages of destination selection.

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Motivations for sharing/creating UGC	Mean on a scale of 1-5 (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)	Percentage of respondents answering 4 or 5
Seeking emotional support	2,8	32,18 %
Expressing identity	3,2	49,10 %
Reliving a travel experience	3,4	56,25 %
Expressing satisfaction to a trip	3,8	75,00 %
Seeking approval from others to boost self-confidence	1,9	5,31 %
Maintaining relationships	2,8	32,15 %
Being helpful to others	3,3	52,68 %
Contributing on sources one has found useful to show gratefulness	2,9	34,51 %
Sharing enjoyment	3,3	46,90 %
Sharing experiences with friends	3,7	70,18 %
Promoting experiences	3,0	36,61 %
Warning others of a negative experience	3,2	42,86 %
Seeking or providing advice	3,2	40,02 %
Providing product/service suggestions and evaluations	3,1	45,13 %
Displaying knowledge on a destination	3,1	39,82 %
Attaining a status in a community	1,9	8,93 %
Expecting help from people who one has helped	2,3	21,43 %
Expecting help from other consumers	2,5	28,31 %

Appendix 1: Motivations for sharing and creating user-generated content

What do you think of UGC as a travel information source?	Mean on a scale of 1-5 (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)	Percentage of respondents answering 4 or 5
Is a good way to learn about a destination, product or service	3,6	59,29 %
Helps to evaluate alternatives	3,7	66,37 %
Helps to avoid unsatisfactory places/services	3,5	49,56 %
Provides innovative ideas	3,5	51,76 %
Increases confidence in decision-making	3,2	39,28 %
Provides a truthful image of a place	3,3	43,36 %
Reduces the risk involved in making travel decisions	3,2	43,36 %
Eases decision-making	3,4	52,21 %
Provides help for efficient trip planning	3,5	55,75 %
Saves time in trip planning	3,4	48,25 %
Makes travel planning more enjoyable	3,4	46,02 %
Inspires to plan a trip	3,5	54,87 %
Adds fun to trip planning	3,4	50,00%
Is an unreliable source of information	2,6	12,61 %
Does not interest me whilst planning a trip	2,4	9,91 %

Appendix 2: Perceptions of user-generated content as a source of travel information