Virtual Community Based Destination Marketing with YouTube:
Investigation of a Typology

Arunasalam Sambhanthan, Curtin University, Perth, Australia

Samantha Thelijjagoda, Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Alice Good, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK

Ada Scupola, Roskilde University, Roskilde, Denmark

ABSTRACT

YouTube has now evolved into a powerful medium for social interaction. Utilizing YouTube for enhancing marketing endeavours is a strategy practiced by marketing professionals across several industries. This paper rationalizes on the different strategies of leveraging YouTube-based platforms for effective destination marketing by the hospitality industry (hotels) and provides insights on the critical drivers and challenges embedded within YouTube-based community interactions for destination marketing. The comments made by YouTube users have been subjected to a content analysis and the results are reported under the five broad clusters of virtual communities. More broadly, the typology of virtual communities is adapted to evaluate the YouTube platform for effective destination marketing.

Keywords Destination Marketing, Interaction Design, Tourism, Virtual Communities, YouTube

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media is increasingly being seen as a success factor in tourism promotion. Social media is changing the ways in which businesses are marketing themselves to their consumers, as it forces a rethink of traditional marketing methods. A recent study claims that social media and new technology will play a key role in the growth of the hospitality industry in 2015 (Roseman & Stuhura, 2013); and in the world's largest social media market, China, where brands and activities differ significantly from those in other parts of the globe, social networking is still more popular. For example, Kemp (2014) identifies QZone as having the highest number of active social networking users at 625 million, while Weixin and Sina have 355 million and 129 million active users respectively.

For decades, the computer-mediated information exchange has been an area of growing research interest. This includes the study of a variety of virtual platforms and the use of those platforms in key e-Business applications such as e-marketing, e-learning and e-health. Marketers are challenged to keep pace with the latest development of online social networks (OSNs) such as MySpace (MS), YouTube (YT) and Facebook (FB) due to the rapid growth of information exchange among consumers on the internet facilitated through OSNs (Valck et al., 2009). Although empirical work has illustrated the uneven quality of the research undertaken into virtual communities (Leimeister et al., 2004), there is evidence that virtual communities are among the most powerful tools available for customer bonding (Szmigin et al., 2004; Tsai & Bagozzi, 2014).

A number of studies have focused on the usability, accessibility and e-commerce success aspects of tourism websites in developing countries (Sambhanthan and Good, 2012; 2013; 2014). Among the many studies investigating use of the internet in tourism promotion, one recent study unveiled a very high level of computer and internet usage in tourism-related user-based information search (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012). This study also noted that 75% of respondents had a FB profile, adding confirmation of the trend towards continuing growth in OSNs for destination marketing.

YouTube (YT), a premier social media platform, has more than 800 million users each month (YouTube, 2013). Other research into YT has highlighted the potential of this channel for tourism-related marketing (Rotman & Preece, 2010), though this is still an emerging area. One relatively recent paper reports that YT videos have the potential to substantially improve the experience of tourists through elevating tourism-related information and experiences (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). This study notes that these videos generate mental pleasure through firing people's imaginations, as well as imparting the feeling of travelling again to destinations tourists have already visited in the past. Such findings illustrate the importance of further research into the use of the YT platform for destination marketing. Selecting YT as a medium to market tourist destinations however remains an open question for exploration in the context of rapidly emerging marketing models using the web 2.0. The present research project thus focuses on the following question:

- How can hotels make use of YouTube-based Virtual Communities for Destination Marketing?

The usage of YT for destination marketing has been a well-researched area. A study reported by Reino and Hay (2011) reports that the YT was useful as a promotional/ communications tool, but more research is required to understand how the YT generation filter, select and use tourism information in their trip planning. On the other hand, Hays et al., (2012) argues that the use of social media usage among the top destination marketing organisations is still largely experimental and the strategies vary significantly. Arguably, Bonifaciao (2015) confirms that the Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are ranked as most effective marketing channels in today's world. Another recent study reported by Riera et al., (2015) indicates that the users who publish tourist information online value the web platforms which provide user generated content for supporting decision making that could include platforms like YT. Hudson et al., (2015) reports that the social media based relationships also lead to positive word of mouth recommendations. All these studies show the emerging trend in social media based tourism promotion in different ways. Thus, the research question posed above has been argued to be making a timely contribution to the existing body of knowledge in this space.

This research question has been addressed by means of a qualitative study. The investigation presented here uses a typology-based approach to assess the interaction effectiveness of YT-based virtual communities. In addition, the study focuses on developing a set of implications for utilising YT-based community interactions as a means for destination marketing. The research question has therefore been operationalised into four specific objectives as follows:

- To investigate YT-based virtual communities
- To investigate the user perceptions on human interaction with virtual communities
- To develop a set of implications for virtual community-based destination marketing

In this paper, we organise our thoughts as follows: firstly, a literature review is conducted into YT-based virtual communities. Following this theoretical understanding user perception of – and their interactions with – YT-based virtual communities is evaluated by scanning YouTube comments

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