

# THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND WEB 2.0 TECHNOLOGIES IN THE CHOICE OF TOURISTIC DESTINATION

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## Abstract

*Social Media nowadays in daily use for marketing purposes and knowledge-experience dissemination of Touristic destinations have undergone four evolutionary stages: Infancy, Dissemination, Exponential Growth and Maturity. Use cases of social media through web2.0 technologies for knowledge-management in the Greek Touristic Sector are examined, especially those of the GNTO. The paper proceeds to examine how Greek's use social media in order to accumulate information about domestic/foreign destinations and which social media they use in order to plan their trip. An electronic survey was conducted for this purpose through which multiple categories of social media usage emerged. The analysis indicated that NTO and private sector pages are perceived as more reliable sources of touristic information than social media.*

## Introduction

Social Media and the related web 2.0 ecosystems play a crucial role in the marketing strategies of tourism related businesses and in the dissemination of knowledge pertaining to Tourism destination selection.

The impact of Social Media is significant both on the demand and supply side of tourism allowing destinations to interact directly with visitors. Visitor's behavior also seems to be influenced by the destination communication strategy, of which Social Media is nowadays a crucial factor. Strategies aligned with social media can help destinations remain competitive [1]. Usage of Social Media promotes knowledge sharing processes and Web 2.0 services serve as integrators of knowledge in tacit form which can be shared during pre-travelling decision making [2]. Tourism Marketing is also significantly influenced by advancements in technology and consumer culture influencing the distribution and accessibility of travel-related information [3].

Traveler's attitudes towards Social Media should be considered by the Tourism Industry and approaches must be found to popularize information available on social

media services [4]. Furthermore, social media services and online travel communities play a significant role in internet marketing and electronic commerce [5]. Obtaining information about the preferences of customers through social media can enable Hotels and other travel companies gain a strategic advantage against competitors [6]. Furthermore, there seems to be a relation between traveler's participation in social media and the expected social, hedonic and functional profits the participant expects to obtain [7]. Web 2.0 platforms and standard cyberspace technology like search engines or online travel booking websites, accelerate the information exchange between online travelers and the online tourism domain [8]. In addition to individual knowledge generation, Web 2.0 platforms emerge as a viable channel of knowledge building for general and discipline-specific communities [9] while simultaneously they also support a personal, dynamic and social learning process where explicit and tacit knowledge interact with each other in a continuous process [10].

Social media has the power to influence potential tourists and this has been widely acknowledged in the literature [11]. The feeling of belonging to a virtual travel community [12] is an important factor of the influence that social media exert on potential tourists. In light of the introductory discussion on Social Media and their application in the marketing strategies of national and regional destinations the goal of this paper is to assess the impact of social media on the destination selection behavior of prospective tourists.

## **Social Media and the GNTO**

Social media have undergone four distinct evolutionary phases [14]. The first is that of infancy (2003-2006), followed by the gradual growth phase (2007-2010), the booming development phase (2011-2013) and the maturity phase (2013- ). During the infancy stage, social media were mostly treated as a communication tool for teenagers while business had not yet grasped the significance of social media as a marketing tool. In the gradual growth phase, the first experimental attempts were conducted to use social media as a marketing tool. The touristic business was a pioneer in this phase since the communicative power of these new at the time media could quickly and effectively spread information about various touristic destinations. It was also quickly acknowledged that infamy could also be disseminated through social media and that social media response teams were required to counter such actions.

Moving on to the booming development phase, everyone wanted to jump on the social media bandwagon. Cost reduction, the ability to interactively communicate with potential customers and especially important for the touristic business the content contribution of tourists in various wikis and other content sharing services forced all major constituents of the touristic marketing world to adopt social media as a vital component of their marketing strategy [15]. Finally, during the maturity

phase the importance of social media is well acknowledged and no serious contender in the touristic sector is without some presence on them.

The GNTO has been applying social media as a basic tenet of its marketing strategy since 2010 [16]. Starting from a basic web site back in 2001, the GNTO now uses a plethora of web 2.0 platforms to communicate and disseminate information about renowned and not so well known regions of Greece. Some of these platforms are the marketing web portal ([www.visitgreece.gr](http://www.visitgreece.gr)), the corporate web portal ([www.gnto.gr](http://www.gnto.gr)), the visit Greece blog ([blog.visitgreece.gr](http://blog.visitgreece.gr)), Facebook, Google+, Twitter, Instagram, Pininterest and other social media accounts (visitgreece), which are daily updated.

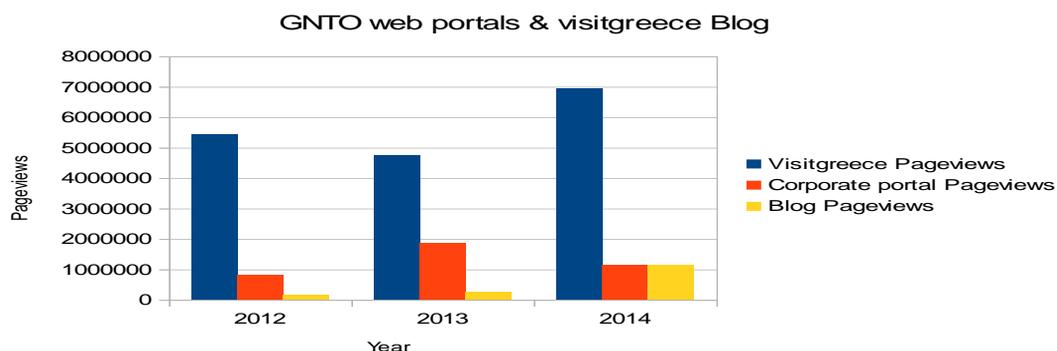


Figure 1 – GNTO web portals and blog traffic

Figure 1 depicts page views of the visitgreece web portal, the GNTO corporate web site and the visitgreece blog, as measured by a Google Analytics account that the organization maintains. The visitgreece web portal is the main marketing portal of Greek national and regional touristic destinations. Visitors of this portal can obtain general historical and cultural information about the various regions of Greece while the portal also offers agents which help prospective tourists choose a specific destination of Greece starting from the kind of experience he/she wishes to live. The portal also offers information about cultural events happening throughout the whole country, ferry timetables, links to the various social media accounts of the GNTO and hosts various promotional videos of Greece.

On the other hand the corporate website contains information about the various laws pertinent to touristic development, information on the competitions of the GNTO for obtaining materiel and services, press releases, statistics on touristic arrivals and also hosts a gallery of copyrighted photos of Greece that can be used after permission of the GNTO. The visitgreece blog is updated at least twice a week by a network of specialized GNTO employees and contains real accounts of travelers to various regions of Greece, articles on Greek cuisine, articles on the flora and fauna of Greece and other subjects related to Greek tourism.

From Figure 1 we can notice a drop of page views for the visitgreece marketing web portal in 2013 which seem to denote a lack of interest in Greek Touristic destinations. This is surmised to be a result of the social turmoil in Greece brought

about by the second MoU signed in late 2012. The GNT0 responded by creating a crisis response mini portal which was nonetheless unable to stem the tide of infamy. Visits to the marketing web portal rebounded in 2014, surpassing the visits of 2012 something which is attributed to the cost effective use of social media by the GNT0 and also to the favorable international climate resulting from the Arabic spring revolts. On the contrary, the corporate portal exhibited a reverse pattern in which the page views peaked in 2013. This can be explained due to a surge of interest of various touristic businesses and Hotels which were concerned about the implications of the crisis on their business and wanted to stay informed about developments in the touristic sector. Finally, blog visitors had a much smaller but gradual continuous growth even in 2013, in which Greece was most afflicted by protests. This could signify that blog visitors are of a different qualitative category, possible merely interested in obtaining information about a touristic region but not necessarily planning to travel.

The GNT0 uses all prominent social media services as tourism destination promotion tools. It maintains a Facebook page, Google+, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Foursquare, PinInterest, Instagram as well as other social media accounts. All these account are periodically updated according to their nature and content generation rate. For instance the Facebook, Twitter and Google+ are daily updated with new content while the YouTube account is updated several times per month [17]. This heavy reliance on social media is done according to a tourism promotion strategy but is alsodue to the imposed austerity measures which lead to public sector cuts [16].

Besides using the above standard social media services to promote and disseminate its marketing strategy the GNT0 is also a member of various public – private sectors synergies. The most prominent of these collaborations are the Samsung smartTV visitgreece channel, which is weekly updated according to the trendiest content of the visitgreece marketing portal [18].

Nonetheless, no matter of the phenomenal omnipotence of social media, the literature still reminds us that the recommendation of friends is still considered the most important source of information for touristic destinations, closely followed by social media and classic printed media [13]. Culture also seems to play a crucial role when searching for touristic destinations [13]. Due to these conflicting trends, where users seem to use social media but also trust the recommendation of friends or colleagues more, our research was conducted in order to obtain the impact of social media on the choice of destination of prospective tourists.

## **Experiment and Methodology**

In this paper the impact and influence of Social Media on prospective Greek domestic tourists is examined through a survey conducted on a web platform. The goal of our experiment was to obtain insights about the usage of social media by prospective domestic tourists in accordance with their demographic profile. Secondly, we wanted to obtain a quantitative measure of the preferred usage and perceived importance of the usage of social networks by prospective tourists.

The experiment was conducted via an online survey platform (Limesurvey) and included four sections of questions. The first section comprised of demographic questions, the second section was comprised of questions related to social media usage and the third section assessed the preferred methods when searching for information on touristic destinations. Finally, the fourth section related to the perceived importance that respondent's attached to the methods of searching for information about touristic destinations.

Sections 1 and 2 contained multiple selection or exclusive selection questions while a Likert scale (1-7 scale, where 1 denotes the least interested and 7 fully interested) was used for the quantitative questions of sections 3 and 4. In relation to the results assessment techniques a simple count of participants belonging to each category (age group, gender, social media user, etc.) was done for sections 1 & 2 while the average values of each question posed was used for sections 3 & 4. In total there were 101 completed questionnaires on which our analysis was based.

## Experimental Results

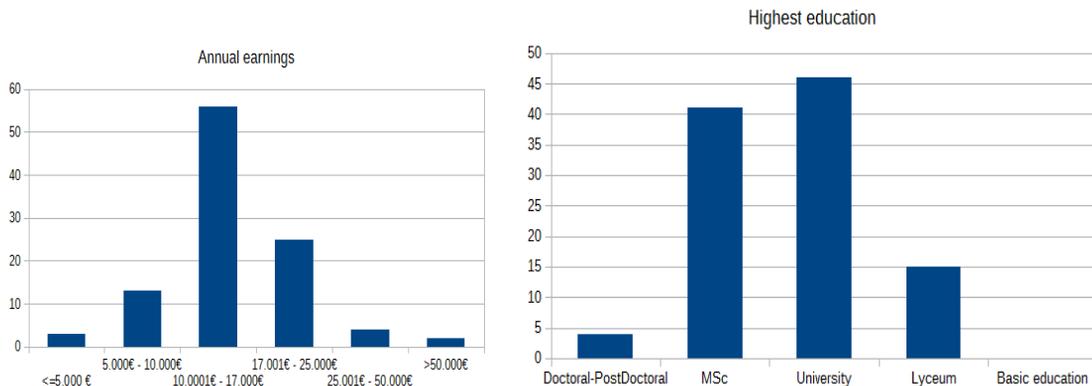


Figure 2 – Annual earnings of participants

Figure 3 – Highest education of participants

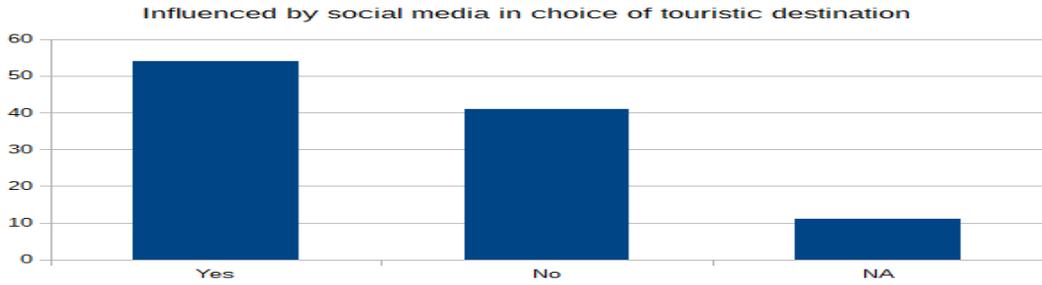


Figure 4 – Influence of social media on choice of touristic destination

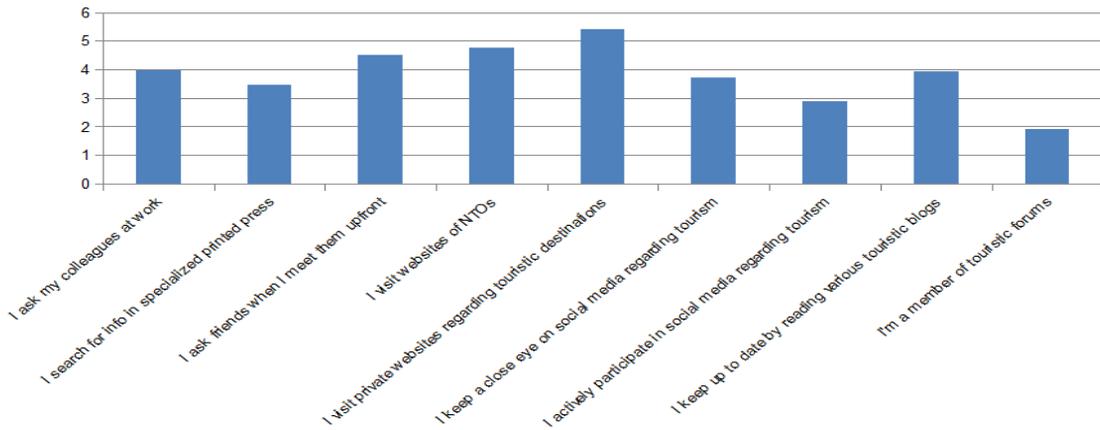


Figure 5 – Information seeking methods on touristic destinations

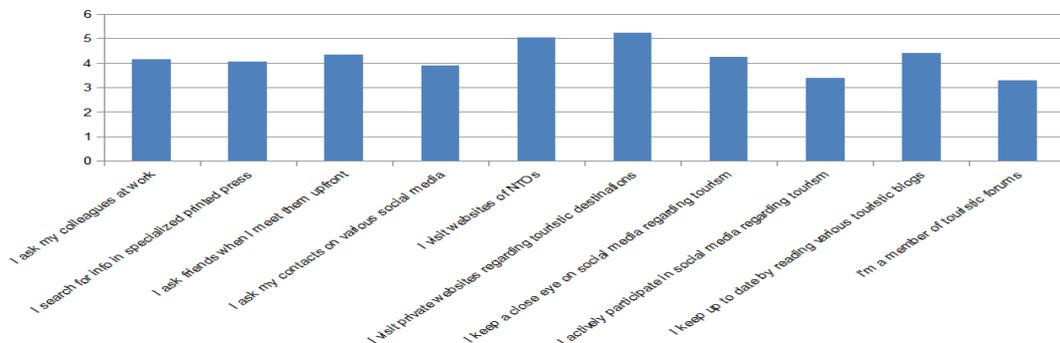


Figure 6 –Perceived importance of information seeking methods on touristic destinations

From Figure 2 we can see that our sample consisted mainly of participants that earned between 10.000€ - 17.000€ per year and from Figure 3 we can see that the majority had at least a University or MSc degree.

It can also be seen from Figure4 that more than half of the respondents claim to be influenced by social media in their choice of destination. An interesting find shown in Figures 5 and 6 is that National Travel Organizations (NTO) web portals and private sector touristic web pages top all social media in preferred usage and perceived importance when searching for touristic destinations. In other finds,

almost 75% of respondents claimed to believe that they could spot sales on social media while most of them do not actively use a content sharing service.

From Figures 5 and 6 it is clear that most respondents prefer to visit private web sites and NTO web portals regarding Touristic destinations and they also attribute a heavier perceived importance on such sites as opposed to social media. It is also of interest to note that although respondents seem to prefer to ask friends or colleagues about touristic destinations they nonetheless attribute a higher perceived importance on social media. Furthermore, although most participants responded that they do not use online touristic forums they attribute a rather heavy perceived importance on them regarding information on touristic destinations. It also seems that most respondents prefer to passively read information and consume content than actively uploading content and taking part in an online discussion. This can be explained by the high amount of time and energy required to actively participate in forums, wikis and blogs as opposed to passively reading information.

## Conclusions

Social media seems to be an important factor when searching for touristic destinations. However, more conventional approaches like simply asking a friend or colleague at work seems to still play an important role. Focusing on electronic media, NTO (National Tourism Organization) and private sector pages are also perceived as more reliable sources of information than most mainstream social media services. This is possibly due to a correlation between a social media account and the fame of a corporate brand name linked to that account which seems to denote that social media usage should be tied to a reliable and systematically updated web site or portal.

Our future research interests are to further investigate such a possible linkage and further examine the correlation between the choices that users of social media made and destinations that actively use them.

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