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USER GENERATED CONTENT
AND
TOURISM MARKETING

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During the last decades, tourism, the biggest and increasingly growing industry in the world, has entered a new digital era, totally transformed in terms of marketing, word of mouth communication and optimized digital services. The appearance of Web 2.0 brings together the concept of social networking communities and applies it to the tourism industry, thereby facilitating communication, interactivity and information sharing. Web 2.0’s main features are the Web based communities and a variety of web applications with user-centered design. There is a growing popularity about websites containing travel information and advice by internet users (e.g. comments in TripAdvisor, social networking sites etc.) and a shift on how potential tourists select and evaluate their travel destinations. The experience of travelling has been completely transformed since the emergence of User-Generated Content websites. Web 2.0 sites are currently being used widely by potential travelers in order to get informed. ‘Sharing experiences’ and online-rating have become very popular, thus forming the travel sector by intensifying organizational "e-World of Mouth" reputation in the travel market. Undoubtedly, marketing is a very essential part of any tourism industry as it raises awareness of the industry’s brand name and promotes tourism services. Marketing in the travel sector as well as the organizational reputation-making practices are influenced by this User-Generated Content. The present dissertation will try to examine how Social Media and User Generated Content (UGC) are used by consumers and tourism managers and how they influence the tourism product. The interaction between tourism marketers and potential travelers will be examined in User generated content platforms. Lastly, it will examine through an empirical research (online questionnaire) if Greek people are affected by user generated content when they opt for a tourism destination and in what way. The theoretical contributions of this study and the implications for designing better tourism marketing will be discussed thoroughly.

Keywords:

vacation planning; information search; internet; web; Tourism marketing; UGC (User generated content); Blogs; Tourism; Travel Internet Marketing

OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

The general introduction to this thesis provides overall background information about the UGC platforms and tourism marketing, while the presented problem statement and the posed
Introduction

Web 2.0 technologies have stimulated the creation of online communities (Castells, 2000), as people took advantage of these technologies to connect with others with similar characteristics and similar interests (Bruns, 2008), and create a personalized online content, as a way that opposes the today model of mass society (Blank and Reisdorf, 2012). The main feature of these groups is the fact that their users are motivated in terms of social compensations (Benkler, 2006). For example, a common hobby, a common interest, sharing of music, video, images, photographs and texts, along with the feeling of belonging to a group are the main factors motivating one to join a community in a social networking medium (Shirky, 2008; Zhang, 2011). Within this context, online communities facilitated the exchange of ideas, sharing opinions, and preferences.

The applications included in the term Web 2.0, such as blogs, forums in websites, and social media, facilitate the interactive sharing and the exchange of perceptions and opinions, in an online environment, where all people can read and write (Milano et al., 2011). The sector of tourism could be unaffected by this technological advancement, and as a result, Travel 2.0 emerged. Its impact on tourism is huge, since various studies indicate the effect of Travel 2.0 on consumer behavior, on consumers’ travel choices, and tourism destinations’ image and reputation (Milano et al., 2011). Hence, it can be supported that Travel 2.0, including opinions and comments posted by the users, has an effect on tourism marketing. Tourism marketing is related to tourist needs and desires of individuals and aims at the

research question set the stage for the thesis. The first chapter presents the most relevant theories, provides an understanding of tourism marketing e-Word of Mouth concepts and introduces the proposed hypotheses framework. The second deals with social media in tourism industry. The third chapter clarifies methodological considerations and provides description and justification of the chosen research design. In the methodology section, the design of the research is also explained. Findings are then presented in correspondence with each of the research questions. The fourth chapter presents the results of the online survey and semi-structured interviews. Consequently, the fifth chapter analyses and discusses the gathered empirical results. Further, the sixth chapter provides conclusions, made by taking into account the limitations of this study. Finally, managerial implications for marketers and online users as well as limitations of this study and plans for future research are discussed thoroughly.
following: a) better and higher satisfaction of tourist needs and / or desires of people in quantitative and qualitative terms; b) creation of active demand for tourism goods and services at the appropriate time and c) the profitable disposal of tourist goods and services (Igoumenakis and Igoumenakis, 2004).

Research question 1: Do potential tourists make use of User-Generated Content platforms and social Media?
Research question 2: Do users and tourism marketers read and take into account comments and reviews of other online consumers?

Hypothesis: Social media and User Generated Content (UGC) affect Tourism marketing strategies. Online users influence tourism marketing, through their comments, ratings, and in general the content they create in an online environment.

The aim of this thesis is to examine the role of Travel 2.0 on tourism marketing. More precisely, it will examine the significance of online users in travel websites, blogs social media and its influence on tourism marketing. The initial hypothesis, based on what has been stated above, is that online users affect tourism marketing, through their comments, ratings, and in general the content they create in an online environment.
1.1 Definitions of tourism marketing and Travel. 2.0

According to Benetatos al. (2004), the marketing planning process regarding a tourist organization or a tourism destination combines the overall marketing strategy of an organization / destination with the analysis of fundamental trends in the business environment: the strengths and weaknesses of a company / destination, opportunities and threats raised the competitive strategies and segmentation of the market. Finally, the process leads to the formation of marketing programs that facilitate the realization of marketing objectives of the organization / destination. Overall, tourist marketing can be regarded as a series of methods and techniques (research, analysis, evaluation) aimed at meeting the travel needs (expressed or not) for recreational or work purposes, under optimum psychosociological conditions for tourists and local residents, and optimum and economic conditions for tourism organizations, businesses, and destinations.

The significance of tourism marketing stems from the fact that it focuses on attracting new customers through its impact on their purchasing decisions, taking into account the fierce competition in the tourism sector, between businesses and destinations, and the constant changes that take place in the tourism sector (Edgell et al., 2000). Besides, it is argued that tourism marketing focuses on sustainable tourism, meaning that it aims to protect and promote the economic, the social, the cultural and the environmental values of the local community (Lew, 2007). Thus, tourism marketing is important, since it influences consumers’ purchasing decisions in the field of tourism, and focuses on the satisfaction of need of all stakeholders, fostering a sustainable tourism development (Baker and Cameron, 2008).

Sustainable tourism development has a considerable role in travel industry nowadays. Many discussions and researches on this area have been held among academics, government and organizations worldwide. This research area of sustainable tourism marketing is growing and still requires further research. The concept of sustainable tourism marketing has been perceived differently by researchers and a variety of alternatives have been discussed within the literature (Hunter, 1997). According to (Castellani and Sala, 2010), sustainable tourism is about "…..development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Sustainable tourism literature shows the impact of tourism on environment. Saarinen (2006) says that the relationship between sustainable development and tourism are very complex and have to do with both local and global responsibilities. Raising consumer awareness through education is one of the ways to
encourage more environmentally behavior towards sustainable tourism and effective tourism marketing (Castellani and Sala, 2010).

Pearce (1998) states that sustainability means being durable. The concept of sustainability has been criticized for being very abstract causing challenges and difficulties to those implementing it, especially in the tourism marketing area (Soteriou and Coccossis 2009). Castellani and Sala (2010) also point out that sustainability is not clearly defined. Despite these issues of abstractness the concept continues to receive high attention and maturity through research (Connell 2009). Especially in Greece there is little known about tourism marketing and sustainable tourism.

Web 2.0, or better Travel 2.0, is based on what is called as User Generated Content (UGC) (Akar and Topçu, 2011; Sotiriadis and Zyl, 2013). These technologies include the following: tourism websites (e.g. TripAdvisor, Booking, Trivago), generic online social networks (OSNs) (e.g. Facebook, Flickr), microblogging (e.g. Twitter), cooperative projects (e.g. wikis), content communities (e.g. You Tube), virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft), virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life), as well as blogs, and websites of social bookmarking (Milano et al., 2011; Baird and Parasnis, 2011; Akar and Topçu, 2011). In all the above, users have the ability to share images, texts, videos (e.g. from a tourist destination), to exchange ideas and opinions about tourist organization’s service quality, to state preferences and recommendations about tourist destinations.

1.1.2. The relation between Travel 2.0 and tourism marketing

At first it should be mentioned that UGC influences consumers’ travel behavior through the influence this content has on consumers’ purchasing intentions and decisions (Akar and Topçu, 2011). This can be better understood through the travel planning process, which is illustrated in the figure below.
As one can see, there are two crucial steps in this process: information search and post purchase evaluation. In these two steps, online evaluation on behalf of consumers plays a crucial role in tourism marketing. The buying behavior of tourists has changed with the development of new technologies and the introduction of various booking sites. In order to attract the interest and loyalty of customers, these websites generally offer ratings to help consumers find tourist organizations, such as hotels, which meet their needs (European Commission, 2014). The online reviews for the travel services play a key role in consumer purchasing decision. The advantages for the customer include the ability to easily compare tourist companies, and the gathering of more information in a faster and easier way (Minazzi, 2010).

In order to provide further evaluation information to prospective customers, websites often include quantitative consumer ratings services, as well a star rating system for the hotel business. Faced with a lot of information about various tourist providers (e.g. hotels, restaurants) and the need for quick and efficient decision, customers can use the ratings as a way to make assessments, without having to seek further information. This can be particularly attractive, because people use readily available information to make decisions. Consequently,
consumers can turn to ratings as a quick and easy way to evaluate the quality of a service, especially when faced with limited or ambiguous information. Therefore, it can be concluded that, clients will be based on evaluations at an online site, as a means of assessment and evaluation of the service provided by an organization (Browning and Sparks, 2013). This means that organizations, such as hotels, with higher ratings, will attract more customers. Attracting customers is one of the primary aims of tourism marketing, as stated above. Thus, it can be concluded that online reviews in various sites, influence tourism marketing, via their influence on consumers’ purchase decisions.

Apart from the above, tourism marketing is related also to market analysis, trying to capture the needs and desires of consumers, in order to offer products and services that meet tourists’ needs and demands. Within this framework, the ability of customers to evaluate the quality of services provided by an organization is part of a wider discussion regarding the importance of customer participation in the improvement of services offered. In this way, consumers contribute to the further improvement and development of quality assurance standards. Standards that are based on consensus between all parties involved, including consumers, is more likely to address their basic needs. This will strengthen consumer confidence in the services provided (ISO, 2011). Hence, it can be concluded that through the online comments and reviews, organizations can identify the areas in which improvement should be made, in order to reach customer satisfaction and loyalty. From this point of view, online users can influence tourism marketing.

Furthermore, it was mentioned above that tourism marketing is also related to market segmentation. Online users, through their interaction with tourist businesses, can affect this process. A tourism business that interacts through online media with consumers can acquire information related to the profile of these consumers, their needs, their demands, their preferences, their motives (Chan and Guillet, 2011). Hence, a more effective strategy regarding targeting at specific groups of people is possible, leading to increased sales and profitability for tourist businesses.

What is important to be mentioned at this point, is that online users’ comments, opinions, reviews and evaluations actually have an effect on tourism marketing, through the control they exercise upon the communication with tourist companies. More precisely, the main reason for which consumers communicate through social networks with various companies is the need to feel connected (Baird and Parasnis, 2011). However, in the context of consumer communication with businesses via social networks, it is important to note that companies in fact do not control this communication. On the contrary, consumers are those...
who influence social networks and can affect a business in these networks and thus its sales and profitability.

As new technologies facilitate the exchange of views, experiences and evaluations among travelers, they have an impact on tourist marketing on behalf of tourist destinations (Hays et al., 2013; Živković et al., 2014). Social media and general Travel 2.0 tools allow tourist destinations to communicate with visitors at relatively low cost and with higher levels of efficiency, compared to traditional communication tools. The benefit of social media and their effectiveness in tourist destinations can be indicated through the increased consumer awareness in a tourist destination brand, their commitment towards this brand, and the word of mouth communication (Kiráľová and Pavlíčeka, 2015). Within this framework, the online brand communities play an important role, especially in the evaluation process on behalf of consumers. Brand communities are defined as “specialized, non-geographically bound communities, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Hudson and Thal, 2013, p. 158). As an example, the group ‘Visit Maldives’ in Facebook can be stated. In this group, several photos and videos from Maldives are posted, where group’s friends comment, like and share. In this way, Maldives can increase consumers’ commitment to the brand ‘Maldives’ and influence their decision to visit this destination.

In general, new technologies of Travel 2.0 influence consumer purchasing decisions through the users’ feedback and evaluations. The trust on behalf of consumers to the information available on various websites’ online reviews and comments is highlighted by Zhang and Mao (2012). This trust can be explained through the fact that the comments, ratings, evaluations and so on are written by users, who are considered to be as more objective and less biased, in comparison, for example, to reporters and journalists (Colliander and Dahlen, 2011). As Baird and Parasnis (2011) characteristically state, Web 2.0 technology is from the user and for the user.

This is more apparent through the results of the Tourism Economics Research (2013), according to which the increases amount of information in social media and in general in various online communities, leads to a greater effect on sales. More specifically, the survey has indicated the following:

a) An increase by 10% on hotel rankings on TripAdvisor corresponds to an increase of 4.4% in sales
b) Consumer decisions in relation to sales are affected by the helpfulness of the evaluation, the evaluator status, and the visibility of the evaluation
c) Eight out of ten travelers stated that the reviews in various travel forums are an important part of their decision-making process

d) Websites like TripAdvisor and Yelp remove all the barriers and thus enable a ‘bidirectional communication’, creating a direct relationship between the buyer and the seller. This open approach provides information which users believe they can trust, mainly because the reviews are written by travelers and address to travelers

e) Members of online communities evaluate more positively any comments include details of the person who has registered, and the disclosure of the user identity is associated with increases in subsequent online sales

f) 52% of Facebook users said that seeing holiday photos of their friends influenced their decision to travel to this destination

g) Almost two thirds (62%) of consumers read the reviews written from users on the Internet, and 82% of them stated that their decision to buy a tourism product / service is influenced directly by reading these evaluations

1.1.3. Theoretical aspects regarding the influence of online communities on tourism marketing

In general, the influence of online users on tourism marketing is based on the theory of social influence and the power of word of mouth communication. Social influence can be defined as the perceived external pressure on people, both in the process of informing them about a product and / or service and in the decision making process of whether to make use of this product and / or service. Social influence also concerns the extent to which individuals perceive others’ opinions as positive to a product / service, especially when ‘others’ opinions’ are expressed by significant others. Consequently, the theory of social influence supports that people may be influenced in their decisions by other people, just because they expressed positive or negative opinions (Nistor, 2011).

A very important aspect of online communities is the effect they have on word of mouth communication (Cao et al., 2009; Chen et al., 2011; Akar and Topçu, 2011; Acker et al., 2011; Huang, 2012; Sotiriadis and Zyl, 2013). The word of mouth communication
concerns the use of informal methods of communication, in order to promote specific products/services/brands/information. Schweidel et al. (2011) argue that those who have a very positive or very negative opinion about a product/service or an organization, is much more likely to communicate this opinion to an online community, compared with those with a relatively moderate point of view. If one combines this assumption with the theory of social influence proposed by Nistor (2001), then one can easily understand the relationship between social networks and word of mouth communication. This action in an online environment can act as a viral advertising (Trusov et al., 2008), since people tend to connect with others with whom they share similar interests. For this reason the opinion expressed by a person in an online community can influence the opinion of another person.

Apart from the above, social cognitive theory can also be used in this discussion regarding the effect of online users on tourism marketing, since it can be used to explain why consumers tend to participate in the exchange of photos, videos, ideas and opinions in online communities. A person’s cognitions depend on self-efficacy and outcome expectations. Self-efficacy is related to one’s capabilities for decision-making, and individualism. Thus, the interaction through online communities leads to one’s empowerment, and increased individualism. In addition, it is supported that users assess positively the users and evaluations of other travelers, in the case the cost of sharing knowledge is the expected, or exceeds beyond this level (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). What is more, users tend to share and exchange information in online communities because they do not want to be passive; they prefer to take active part in a discussion, to interact with other people, to feel connected with them (Shah et al., 2005).

One more theory that can explain the use of social media, websites, blogs and other Web 2.0 tools on behalf of online users is the self-determination theory. This theory can also be used in order to explain the relationship that exists between the content of online users (e.g. ratings, evaluations, opinions expressed), the trust that consumers have on this content, as stated above, and the use of online communities by users, which is related to their perceived autonomy and competence. According to this theory, there are three needs that online users try to satisfy via their online behavior. The first is the need for competence, which can be defined as “the desire to achieve optimally challenging tasks and attain desired outcomes (e.g., produce interesting and attractive UGC)” (Wang and Li, 2014, p. 243). The second is the need for autonomy, which can be defined as “the desire to experience choices while
producing UGC and claim ownership as the initiator of one’s own actions (e.g., decide what to produce and how to produce UGC)” (Wang and Li, 2014, p. 243).

Tourism marketing practice depended on multiple intermediaries with many utilities to the tourism product’s functional quality. Intermediaries are the travel agents, tour operators etc. They offer access to products for a wide range of people. Marketers who deal with tourism marketing have the opportunity to use social media and other user-generated content platforms. Through the above platforms marketers stimulate conversation and interactivity (Tuten 2008).

1.2. Web 2.0 and Word-of-mouth information in User generated content platforms

The last definition of Web 2.0 according to Reilly(2005) is the following:

«Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an "architecture of participation," and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences.»

Web 2.0 applications in the tourism sector have been named Travel 2.0 applications by Philip C. Wolf (president and CEO of PhoCus Wright, expert in the tourism industry). A new consumer appeared, more dynamic who can easily gain access in many tourism channels and share comments and suggestions in many users worldwide. Reilly (2005)

Tourism has been, for many years, the most popular industry as far as the volume of e-transactions is concerned (Werthner and Ricci 2004). It is a highly complicated industry whose travel organizations are based on the communication with tourists via many channels in order to create marketing customer relationships (Poon 1993). The Internet is the most popular means for users to search for tourism related information and purchase tourism-related products.

Internet, as we all know, is a huge hypertext system comprised of interconnected web documents. Through the use of UGC new opportunities in marketing appeared, including distribution channels, making management and marketing research in the tourism sector more and more effective (Liu 2005). Users traverse through many links in order to obtain tourism content. Since the Internet possesses the capability for high levels of interactivity and
can be customized, it can provide highly tailored content to users according to their personal preferences (Newhagen and Rafaeli 1996). Therefore, its value in promoting vacation planning is determined by the ease of access and related to its hypertext content and the user’s navigation manner (Hoffman and Novak, 1996 and Werthner and Klein, 1999). Nevertheless, users many times feel that they are bombarded by a great amount of information online and many times feel misled (Werthner and Klein 1999).

One of internet’s innovation the last years has been the emergence of user generated content in many applications thanks to Web 2.0 (O’Reilly 2005) and social websites, such as YouTube, Facebook, etc. Thanks to Internet new forms of communication platforms emerged, giving power both tourism providers and online consumers. There is an unstoppable sharing of information and exchange opinions, both from a tourism industry to Consumer, and from Consumer to Consumer. Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) communication is considered any positive or negative comment made by a potential, an actual, or former online user which becomes available to a great multitude of people and institutions through the Internet. (D., Hoffman, and T. Novak 1996). User generated content (UGC) via e-WOM inform tourism marketers and promote tourism transactions. The value of UGC has previously been underestimated, but undoubtedly it is a valuable source of information. Unfortunately researches till now have failed to identify the exact type of a traveler who writes blogs and who uploads a meaningful UGC. If future researches will be successfully completed extracting useful outcomes, then tourism enterprises and travelers will obtain a considerable decision-making power.

The internet increases the effectiveness of traditional global markets and international partnerships are created. It results in new business models, effective segmentation, targeting and positioning strategies and increases profitability. It is full in capabilities and functionalities. Undoubtedly, as mentioned before, no travel industry can ignore the UGC power as a tool of tourism marketing. Via the internet, which is one of the most important marketing communication channels, (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004) tourism marketers deal with the 4 Ps marketing mixture (of product, place, price and promotion). This mixture is being enhanced by the 4 Cs of customer solution, cost, convenience and communication. Newhagen and Rafaeli (1996) state that the internet provides a big amount of information and can be easily customized and personalized by users. According to Carson (2005) there are many internet applications for travel industries. The significant functions of the internet are interactive communication, promotion, product distribution, management and research. The interactive communication is not only from producer to potential tourist, but from consumer to consumer and from consumer to producer as well. Furthermore the interactive communication takes place from many to one, from one to many, one to one, from many to
many (Buhalis 2003). This interactivity helps consumers to determine the time and place of resulting transactions and not the suppliers. Consumers nowadays obtain tourism information about tourism product providers than providers have about consumers. This means that online users have gained control of tourism information between buyers and sellers.

E-WOM has a good influence on tourist behavior and intentions concerning some destinations. There is a considerable link between these destinations and the intention to travel. This is what Jalilvand and al (2012) stated about online WOM. Particularly, according to his studies, E-WOM reflects potential consumers’ travel intentions toward a tourism product. With the emergence of online social network sites and users’ interactions, traditional Word of Mouth was enhanced with the electronic WOM (e-WOM). E-WOM consists of positive or negative comments made by a potential, current or former customer concerning a tourism product or service that is available to other online user or organizations through the Internet (Jalilvand and al, 2012).

The e-WOM differs from the traditional WOM in the following:

- Consumers in traditional WOM have specific information source that consists of a limited number of people -1 or 2 (Zeithaml et al, 2006). On the other hand the users in e-WOM have much more people with different mentalities from all over the world as information source (Litvin et al., 2008).

- Secondly the traditional WOM information is based on opinions from friends relatives etc. E-WOM information has comments, reviews and opinions from unknown as well. The reliability of the source (Kelman and Hovland, 1953) of WOM is a controversial issue for many online users and researchers. Some UGC platforms in order to be more reliable they force users to write their personal info (name, date of arrival in a hotel, hometown, sex etc.)

- Finally, it is much easier for consumers to interact orally with the person who has the travel information. The consumer can evaluate more effectively the travel info that is interested in. He can ask more in detail the travel info provider about his travel experience and this way he obtains more analytical info about the travel product-service. With this information, the potential consumer is able to make more effective assessment (Weiner, 2000). In the online domain this detailed information is difficult to be extracted. An online user usually uploads one-two lines with comments. Maybe some important info might be omitted by the user.
1.3. Information search and vacation planning

The e-vacation planning is not static, but dynamic, contingent and depends on individual’s background knowledge, his personal characteristics, tasks etc. (Jeng 1999). No research has been focused for examining the use of the Internet for vacation planning (Bond et al., 1999, Suskind et al., 2003 and Weber and Roehl, 1999). Relevant research concerning vacation planning and online consumer search in tourism marketing has been focusing on analysis and outcomes of tourist information search including the degree and direction of various source usage (Fodness and Murray, 1997, Fodness and Murray, 1999). However those studies have not examined the full process in detail. For example, when a potential traveler decides to use the Internet for organizing vacation, how does he move from one website to another? How does he search for hotel choices / restaurants?

The Internet is the best solution for potential travelers, since it is accessible everywhere and has an abundance of travel information and specifically E-WOM (Bond et al., 1999, Suskind et al., 2003 and Weber and Roehl, 1999). According to many studies, vacation planning on the internet is a complicated and frustrating experience (Bond et al., 1999, Suskind et al., 2003 and Weber and Roehl, 1999).

Tourists’ planning on the Internet can be considered as the interactivity between the online users and the online space concerning the tourism industry. There are many kinds of travel content, provided by various parties, along with tourism professionals who promote marketing communication with tourists. Based on this framework, an Internet search model can be proposed, built of three components: the tourist, the interface, and the online space. A tourist’s situation, knowledge, and skills regarding traveling and the online space contribute to effective search. The online space is tourism related UGC sites. The interface is the functions of web browsers and search engines that help on surfing- searching (Bond et al., 1999, Suskind et al., 2003 and Weber and Roehl, 1999).

The fast growth of information generated by online users of hospitality services is a big part of the Big technology revolution. Individuals now have the possibility to instantaneously put “digital traces” while traveling and report on their experiences by reviewing the airline, hotel, and restaurant services, posting a complaint/and videos. User-generated content is more trusted and more cost effective. People trust online users’ experiences more than advertisements. Electronic word of mouth takes the form of uploading travel experiences photos etc. This way travel related communities are built.
It is argued that the impact of User Generated content –WOM communication in travel and tourism must be understood in relation to the overall online tourism domain and specifically within a travel information search context. Many studies are focused mainly on travel information search behavior on the Internet (Huang, 2012) and deal with the online traveler. According to these, users get information on both marketing-dominated sources in order to organize their journeys. The marketing-dominated sources is the advertising and commercials on media, brochures, travel guidebooks; and non-marketing dominated sources are considered the friends, relatives, and personal experiences (Fodness and Murray, 1999).

According a study by Compete Inc., User Generated Content has an influence on around US$10 billion concerning travel bookings via internet and more than 20% of users get informed by UGC platforms when trip planning (Sarks G., 2007). Nowadays it has become clear that potential tourists consider credible the opinions that are uploaded in UGC platforms compared with traditional information sources regarding tourism. That is why online user generated content comments and word of mouth recommendations are significant source for the tourism marketers because of the independence of the message source (Gitleson R. & Kerstetter D, 1994). UGC users identify and engage with individuals that have the same interests. Customers love to see their content published by their favorite trip, hotel restaurant etc. This young travelers’ passion to post online is very useful for tourism marketer; the take advantage of it and an Engaged Audience is built easily effortlessly. Stronger SEO is created. The more times a tourism brand is mentioned the better its SEO is. User-generated content can build a tourism brand and delivers value as well. Tourism businesses this way collect genuine feedback from verified customers and display it on their own websites. Loyalty and awareness is increased (Gitleson R. & Kerstetter D, 1994). Many believe that online UGC - Electronic word of mouth recommendations are a growing source because of the independence of the message source (Crotts 1999; MacLaurin T et al. 2007).

Social media has been a new, revolutionary chapter for the travel sector around the globe, forming the global interconnected markets into a vast easily accessible field where the fundamental characteristics are immediacy and multidimensional interactions.

The tourism industry is no different than any other service economy orientated industry. In fact, tourism has entered a new digital era totally transformed in terms of marketing, word of mouth and optimized digital services. The tourism industry is the biggest and increasingly growing industry in the world (Clarke and Chen, 2007). The hospitality and travel market overall has been transformed due to the technological achievements of social
Media Networks, creating innovative services, but also creating new challenges and threats that have to face and confront in order to evolve and prosper.

1.4. Travel blogs and microblogs

Blogs, established in 1997, have mainly text information and rarely video and audio files. The majority are focused on general themes of cuisine, fashion etc. (Wenger 2008; Carson 2008; Pan et al. 2007). They are often updated and are put in a chronological order. The majority of blogs focused on general themes of cuisine, fashion etc. (Wenger 2008; Carson 2008; Pan et al. 2007). They are characterized by interactivity since users upload photos and comments (Pan et al. 2007; Cobanoglu 2006; Kelleher and Miller 2006; Ellion 2007; Reactive 2007). This interaction of bloggers is known as the “blogosphere” (Carson 2008). There are many types of blogs; blogs for consumer to consumer, or for business blogs to business (B2B), business blogs to consumers (B2C), government blogs to businesses and back (G2C). Blogs often have a short life span making tracking and investigating difficult. Most of the travel blogs are from consumer to consumer (C2C). These are the so-called e-diaries where users upload personal stories and experiences. These kinds of blogs reveal the need of people to “belong” to something and share their personal experiences by interacting (Pan et al. 2007; Gretzel et al. 2007). According to many users, blogs may reflect more genuine opinions. However, this is not thoroughly examined (Pan et al. 2007; Wenger 2008).

The travel blogs have users’ personal experiences, opinions and comment, personal travel stories and info details for a destination. It is only the last years that they became more popular in tourism industry. These blogs for tourism issues have a considerable value for marketing management. They are useful for customer engagement, profiling and acquisition. Moreover they promote brand awareness and reinforcement, reputation management and of course customer service (Laboy and Torchio 2007 and Dellarocas 2003). Moreover blogs analyze strategies of competitors and enable market research (Litvin et al. 2007). They promote an internal communication management tool within a tourism-related organization (Nacht 2007). Young tourists consider blogs more credible than traditional tourist information platforms because they prefer the online user opinions and comments.

The user generated content of blogs providestourism industry with market intelligence and market-research challenges in many fields. They are often perceived to be more credible and trustworthy than traditional marketing communications (Carson 2008). Nevertheless, there are some considering that tourism blogs content might not have considerable value or effective structure.
Tourism industries realized that blogging is a cheaper and more effective way than advertising. According to researchers, blogs help to define a destination (Pan et al. 2007; Choi et al. 2007; Douglas and Mills 2006). The majority of the hotel companies encourage visitors to write on their hotel blogs. Sometimes they encourage them to write with rewards such as many discounts and vouchers (Price and Starkov 2006). However, credibility is in danger in these cases because the same question remains—are the blogs written by real customers or not? (Litvin et al. 2007; Hotelmarketing.com 2007). According to Mack et al. (2008, p. 141) “nothing beats traditional word-of-mouth” and blogs, whether business related or personal, were perceived to be “significantly less trustworthy than traditional word-of-mouth”. However, it is broadly argued that fake reviews are spotted (Gobbi 2005; Schmollgruber 2007) and professional sites, such as tripadvisor.com, force their editors to check submissions. Blogs should provide interesting information; otherwise they might quickly wither and become useless. Especially when travel content remains static for many months makes their whole purpose worse. A travel blog needs regular proper updating in order to be effective (Price and Starkov 2006). Tripadvisor.com for instance is one of the tourism sites that provides useful interactivity since there is exchange of recommendations about tourism products and services, with in most cases ratings of a particular hotel etc. Many studies have investigated the impact of user-generated communities as useful travel information providers (Schwabe and Prestipino 2006; Wang et al. 2002; Dellaert 2000; Laboy and Torchio 2007; Pan et al. 2007; Thraenhart 2007; Mack et al. 2008). According to the majority of online users and according to this dissertation’s survey, the websites with reviews and UGC platforms are considered more trusted than professional guides and travel agencies, enabling distribution with revenues coming from booking platforms (Price and Starkov 2006).

Some people worry that negative reviews - comments on UGC sites, like blogs, could harm businesses or tourism destinations. However, many believe that travel blogs have little impact. The blogs in online travel-related networks discuss more in detail about accommodation, restaurants etc. (Schwabe and Prestipino 2006; Wang et al. 2002; Dellaert 2000; Laboy and Torchio 2007; Pan et al. 2007; Thraenhart 2007; Mack et al. 2008). Business to business blogs are considered as “expert” blogs with networking among tourism professionals. Often the information exchange involves industry trends, market data, research and technical issues (Thraenhart 2007; Lew 2007; Oellrich and Bauhuber 2007; Price and Starkov, 2006). Businesses to consumer (B2C) blogs are very useful for tourism industries. Thanks to them tourism services and products are promoted and customer relationships are built (Oellrich and Bauhuber 2007; Smudde 2005). These kind of corporate blogs usually promote the official websites of the National tourism organizations increasing website’s traffic. Nevertheless there is no confirmed evidence for that. In Canada, Sweden
and New Zealand, for instance, blogs are provided on official destination websites (Schmollgruber2007; Thraenhart2007).

How to monitor the opinions and satisfaction with tourism products is an ongoing problem for tourism organizations. Can these attitudes be tracked or reinforced and what attitudes need to be changed? Blogs might offer opportunities for addressing some of these issues. Carson (2008) made a study concerning word-of-mouth. According to the study “word-of-mouth” recommendations is an indispensable source of journey planning information. This is mainly for independent travel markets which includes backpackers. He started this study having in mind that blogs might be more representative of the real tourist opinions, but there was a real need to interpret blog content (Carson 2008, p. 112). Till now there is no research on the type of traveler who uploads tourist info in blogs and what trip types are more popular in blog contents (Carson 2008; Weber and Roehl 1999; Li and Buhalis2005). Carson (2008) in his research realized that the most usual bloggers were relatively young travelers on long trips.

The last ten years we have seen the emergence of “microblogging”. Microblogging is a compact blogging and is carried out usually by mobile text messages and restricted to just less characters (Beaumont 2008). Twitter the most popular microblogging site that was launched in 2006. Potential tourists share opinions on topics and ask for info. For instance, there are many users when they want to find a decent hotel they ask the Twitter network. However it is not so popular method in Greece. The main advantage of this UGC is the immediacy.

Immediacy is the main characteristic of the microblogs as it promotes participation. Almost everyone has a mobile phone encouraging users to leave a voice message, uploading photos, comments and location-based information with Facebook-style updates. This kind of microblogging is not to everyone’s taste; nevertheless, there does appear to be an overwhelming human desire to be connected with those we care about and socialize with (Carson,2008). This growing popularity of websites that contain travel content made by internet users (e.g. comments in TripAdvisor, social networking sites etc.) reveal a shift on how potential tourists select and evaluate their travel destinations. Web 2.0 sites are currently being used by potential travelers.

1.5. Information Technologies: Tourism and interactivity

The appearance of Web 2.0 brings together the concept of Social networking communities and applies it to the tourism industry. When we refer to Web 2.0 we mean the second
generation of web development and design. This Web facilitated communication, interactivity, information sharing. Web’s 2.0 main features are the Web based communities and a variety of web applications with user-centered design. (Tsekeris & Katerelos, 2014). Potential consumers search for tourism related information on the web in order to minimize the gap between their expectations and their actual tourism experience. As a result, according to O’Connor (2001), the fast exchange of information has become essential for effective tourism product distribution. The online search engines and speed of networks enabled travelers to organize their travels more efficiently. Thus, we can say that Internet has also changed drastically the efficiency of tourism organizations, as well as how potential tourists interact with organizations (Buhalis, 2003). Undoubtedly, the new tourism industry went through new processes in order to segue into the internet empowered environment (Laudon & Laudon, 2007).

2. Tourism and Social Media

Tourism is a powerful information industry (Sheldon, 1997; Werthner & Klein, 1999). Nowadays everyone can observe the changes in digital technology and tourism behavior that impact the visibility and accessibility of tourism information. Wöber (2006) has studied thoroughly the visibility of tourism industries, particularly tourism marketing organizations and hotel operations, among six popular search engines. His findings revealed that websites concerning tourism issues suffer from low rankings among the search results. That makes it difficult for online users to directly access individual tourism websites through these search engines. Thus, social media is a way of somehow “promoting” the tourism product. Given the fact that their popularity is increasingly growing, they can “work” as a supportive digital tool for tourism enterprises (in combination with their official website). In the following pages I will refer to some examples of this promotion.

Social networks grow by gathering social connections with users and tapping into their social networks to reach out to more and more people. One of the main characteristics of social media is that they are open to everyone and easy to use. Sometimes the only requirement for access is an one-time registration. (Boyd, D., Ellison, N., 2007).

The range of social media works depends on the functions of each social media: finding people, messaging, profile viewing etc. For instance, some Facebook functions differ from Twitter functions. Many of these social media websites assist users in sharing their travel-related comments, points of view, and experiences, which in turn serve as information
for others. Moreover they enable companies to talk to customers, while it enables customers to talk directly to one another. It is like a circle among all companies to customers, customers to customers, companies to companies and so on. Social media are “Internet applications providing information exchange etc. in virtual communities”. They are built on the foundations of Web 2.0 (Blackshaw, 2006, Kaplan Andreas M., Haenlein Michael, 2010) and exist in many forms serving numerous goals. In tourism industry, a lot of researchers and scholars have focused on the socio-psychological aspects of social media usage. This indicates the high importance that has been given to them.

Undoubtedly, social media have transformed radically the tourism sector over the past years (Nezakati et al, 2015: 120); they have established new ways regarding tourism promotion and marketing; they have reshaped the way travelers communicate with each other (Litvin et al, 2008). The use of websites and digital applications like Flickr, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, amongst people who travel, increases over time. Internet influences the way people decide their travelling destinations, promotes interaction and sharing experiences. This process is very important for all people who are engaged in tourism industry (McCarthy et al, 2010).

Social media are an effective means for tourism industry because they provide the opportunity to trace, to understand, and to evaluate general public’s trends around travelling, so they can adjust their services and their philosophy to that trends. In addition, hotels and travel agencies have a powerful tool to promote their business and increase their visibility to the world (Leung et al, 2013). A very strong indication of the importance of social media is the fact “that search engines likely direct travelers to social media” on the internet (Xiang & Gretzel, 2009). Of course the fact that travelers, today more than ever, have the opportunity to exchange and share experiences and information, underlines an important shift: the transfer of power from companies to the consumers (Minazzi, 2015: 22).

2.1. Classification & the role of social media

According to Minazzi (2015) there is a wide variety of social media tools and web platforms. Depending on their purposes and digital “abilities” they can be distinguished in:
• Collaborative projects, like Wikipedia, where the user has the power to change and enrich the content.
• Virtual communities like Twitter and Tripadvisor where people can exchange and share information in various formats (text, video and audio).
• Content communities, like Pinterest, Youtube or Instagram, where people share media content, also in text, video or audio formats.
• Social network sites, like Facebook or Linkedin, with more complex digital environment, where people can create their personal profile, sharing their interests and their experiences.
• Virtual game/social world platforms which provide the opportunity for the user to create an avatar and interact with other people.

Amongst these aforementioned social media tools, virtual communities are being considered to be more close to what is named as the “core” of tourism, such as “attractions, activities and accommodation”. On the other hand, web sites and social media platforms that engage consumers in reviews and ratings are more related to “shopping, hotels and restaurants, and, social networking, blogs, and photo / video sharing sites with events” (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010)

Travelers create travel information for other travelers. Experiences, reviews and ratings about hotels, destinations, services and many more, are being shared. The extent of these interactions is so big, that social media have become probably the most influencing factor in decision and travel planning. Also, it is very interesting noticing that the travel content which is online “is considered to be more credible and trustworthy than reviews from professionals or marketer information” (Amaro et al, 2016: 2). One of the great advantages that social media brought –at least for the travelers– is the decrease, not only for the search costs, but for the costs of travelling as well (Amaro, 2016: 54)

2.2. Social media in traveling process

The important role of social media is being proved by their influence that they have in all phases of a trip: the pre-trip phase, during-trip and the post-trip phase. It has been shown that virtual communities and social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter play an important role in the creation of a “need” in the pre-trip phase, stimulate new travel ideas, and help people in finding information about destinations they never visited, about accommodation and transportation. During the trip people use social media in order to
discover places to visit and to make decisions about where to sleep or where to eat. Mobile applications and websites like “Tonight” of Booking.com, “Hotel Tonight” or Foursquare help travelers find in real time information on hotels, restaurants or bars and are very familiar amongst travelers. Regarding the post-trip phase, according to a research almost 45% of the travelers use social media to publish their travel content. Facebook and Twitter are very popular platforms where people upload written reviews and ratings, photos and videos which compose a broader set of travelling information for use by other potential travelers (Amaro, 2016).

2.3. Information & knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing means that a person projects his/her experiences, insights, and knowledge to the public, thus offering the change for them to use this information for developing, improving and further expanding their own experiences and performance (Ridings et al, 2002). Researchers and scholars point out that the significance of social media in tourism is reflected upon the travel information and knowledge context (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). This of course is related to the emergence and expansion of the information technology and Web 2.0 applications (Nezakati, 2015). In the world of internet there are many tools, sites and platforms that can do this job easily and fast. Facebook, TripAdvisor, Flickr, Youtube, RenRen are some of them amongst a wide set provided on the internet (Nezakati, 2015).

Nowadays, tourism sector is a highly “knowledge-based” and an “information-intense” industry. If we consider the major role of communication technologies, the wide use of internet and the evolution of transferring and sharing knowledge, then we shouldn’t be surprised why social media is such an important part of tourism industry. Social media shape today’s distribution and accessibility of travel information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). This is why social media knowledge sharing is so important “for sustainability and success of hospitality and tourism sector” (Nezakati, 2015: 124). The examination of the influence that social media have on the phases of travel in the previous part of the thesis proves that information and knowledge are strongly linked with decision-making behaviors in tourism industry (Fotis et al, 2011).

Tourism today is a significant economic sector and an element that can revitalize regions in many ways. The tourism sector (like any other profit-oriented sector) can achieve new goals with the help of Social Media. Social media are very important when it has to do
with information search and travel decision-making behaviors in travel industry (Buhalis, 2011). They have become one of travel sector’s digital tools in various ways that will be explained in the following lines. Social media are integrated with many tourism marketing activities, programs and information flow. For instance, “likes”, having “followers” and “active connections” in social media are important components for a tourism industry to achieve social media success and financial prosperity. A variety of applications are included when we talk about social media in the digital technical sense which allow users/consumers to “post”, “tag” or “blog”, and so forth, on the Internet. Social media have gained substantial popularity in online travelers’ as well as in businesses that deal with tourism in general facilitating the interactions among online users and tourism related companies.

2.4. Features and characteristics of social media in tourism sector

The most significant feature of social media is that there is feedback and updates for public awareness. These features make it possible for tourism industries to share marketing messages and promote their product on public. Thus, the hospitality industry is enhanced, encouraging sharing and group participation, such as with photo sharing and marketing messages through the social media. A social media, in order to contribute to the promotion of a tourism product, has to establish network connections through public shared links and ‘like’ options with clicks appearing on the page of all friends. (Boyd, D., Ellison, N., 2007).

Social media are useful for hotels and generally for tourism industries (tourist agencies etc.) in order to pursue international e-Marketing. The social networking sites facilitate information collection and utilization to enhance competitive positioning in tourism marketing sector (Cross and Parker, 2004). It is imperative that a tourism company be aware of the above characteristics when planning a marketing/social media strategy.

Furthermore, social media are characterized by usability, immediacy, and permanence. They operate in a transmission system (many sources - to many receivers) contrary to the traditional media that use one way transmission model (one source to many receivers). Concluding, social media are inexpensive and widely accessible electronic tools enabling anyone to share and obtain information (Kaplan Andreas M., Heinlein Michael, 2010).

Facebook page provides a web presence on a platform where there is a large potential audience in an instant. We can say that tourism related Facebook page is like a mini
website which has updating newsfeed informing the internet users about tourism issues. It accommodates a wide range of users from application developers, advertisers and personal users. It provides updates allowing users to comment, respond and exchange views about travel experiences etc. One advantage of this function is the ability to interact and connect with many online users with no cost. Furthermore, it is very quick to set up and easy to use. Tourism businesses, such as hotels or tourism organizations, can utilize a well-structured Facebook page by selecting the appropriate functions. Facebook has features that enable e-Marketing and tourism product promotion (Holzner, 2009).

Tagging on social networks is very popular, and it's the best way for marketers to make their travel content more visible to the target group. Although each platform has its own tagging style, they all follow the same general idea. A tag is a keyword or phrase used to group a collection of content together or to assign a piece of content to a specific person.

A definition of "tagging" could be a keyword or phrase describing the theme of a group of articles, photos, videos, or other media files. It somehow organizes those groups in order to be easily accessible later. For example, if someone published daily a great number of travel articles about many destinations and completely different from each other there would be a confusion when someone tried to search for something specific. Thus “tagging” is the easiest way for an easy organization and searching. Someone can assign multiple tags to any post in order to distinguish amongst more advanced types travel posts (Baird, C.H., Parasnis, G., 2011).

If someone, for example, uploaded a bunch of photos on Facebook of a Euro - tour journey he did, he could tag his co-travelers’ profiles to the specific photos where they appear. Moreover he can distinguish photos of the cities, countries he has visited by tagging. Tagging on social media is useful for getting conversations going and for exchanging opinions, experiences etc. Users organize their data much better and they socialize. Additionally, they meet other people through the Social media tags. (Baird, C.H., Parasnis, G., 2011).

All sorts of web travel services use tagging from social networks to blogging platforms. In general, users can either tag pieces of the travel content they upload, or they can tag people.

The categories that are used are useful for organizing larger groups of content based on a general theme, for example travel content. Tags, on the other hand, allow online users to
obtain more specific and grouping content. Furthermore, they have many keywords and phrase tags in order to be more specific.

On Facebook, users tag friends in photos or posts by simply clicking on the "Tag" option at the bottom of the photo and add a friend's name or location. A notification is sent to the tagged persons that they have been tagged. Also a user can tag a friend's name in any post or comment by just typing the @ symbol and their Facebook name.

On Instagram is almost the same thing. But, tagging posts help more online users who aren't already connected to each other to find your content when they search for specific tags. By typing the # sign and then a keyword - phrase, for instance #dark tourism the photos that will come first deal with dark tourism places, locations that promote dark tourism, people who are photographed in there etc.

Twitter has the hashtags. Like Instagram, a # symbol is added to the beginning or a keyword. This helps users to follow a specific discussion and see their tweets.

3. Social media and Marketing

Undoubtedly marketing is a very essential part of any tourism industry that can raise awareness of industry’s brand name and promote the tourism services. The Internet as well as the social media is nowadays the most significant marketing tools for the tourism market and they are both characterized by interactivity. It has been argued that understanding the nature of the online-digital tourism domain provides a significant stepping-stone for the development of organized marketing programs and information tourism systems (Fesenmaier, Wöber, and Werthner, 2006; Xiang et al., 2008). The reason social media became popular with travelers when it comes to travel content is that they were tired of being talked at by companies via traditional mediums. This interactivity enables tourism industries not only to send messages to the potential travelers, but to also receive messages back and watch the posts and comments of users are having with each other”. Marketing via Facebook and YouTube make sense as they are among the top social media sites being used. Being a great source of economic benefit, Social media can be viewed as a reason for local authorities, businesses and citizens of areas of interest to invest in the promotions of their area via them. There are many
cities and focused in promoting their area through social media since it is a free way of marketing advertising.

The proliferation of Internet strengthened the role of electronic intermediaries on tourism threatening the traditional distributors. They determine the price and manipulate tourism products. They also enable promotion, by focusing on specific markets.

Tourism marketers need to understand the technological dynamics of Internet tool and give strong emphasis on the social media in order to promote their tourism businesses and destinations to potential online travelers. Moreover, tourism related industries need to transform their systems in order to record customer interaction and achieve customer centricity and ultimately to improve their “visibility”.

While social media are becoming increasingly important in the online tourism domain, there is of course a lack of empirical data to explain efficiently the role of social media in the context of online travel information search and mainly in marketing.

Many tourism marketers assist users in sharing their travel-related comments, points of view, and experiences, which in turn serve as information for others. According to previous studies, websites concerning tourism issues suffer from low rankings among the search results. That makes it difficult for online users to directly access individual tourism websites through these search engines (Buhalis D. 2001). Thus social media is a way of somehow ‘promoting’ the tourism product. Given the fact that their popularity is increasingly growing, they can ‘work’ as a supportive digital tool for tourism enterprises (in combination with their official website). In the ‘Social Media’ part some examples of this promotion were discussed thoroughly. For instance, Facebook -in providing updates- allows users to comment, respond and exchange views about travel experiences. One advantage of this function is the ability to interact and connect with many online users with no cost. Its features enable e-Marketing and tourism product promotion (Buhalis D. 2001). These features make it possible for tourism industries to share marketing messages and promote their product on public. Undoubtedly there is a struggle for control between tourism marketers and online users. This struggle led in a symbiotic relationship that, ultimately, has led to the evolution in communication on the Internet offering significant implications for producer and consumer (Fotis, J. Buhalis, D. Rossides, 2011).

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) wrote a list of 5 key actions when someone deals with social media managing; be active, be interesting, informal, humble and honest.
4. Research methodology

4.1 Case studies from Greece

*Pre-study qualitative research about social media page structure & the use of social media*

In order to design the research of this study, the first stage consisted of an one-year detailed search and keeping records of how tourist products are being promoted through Social Media. In this pre-study research stage many FB pages were examined as well as Social Media accounts of tourist destinations; some Facebook pages for hotels (for example HILTON) and destinations: (facebook.com/VISITGREECE etc.). The aim was to investigate the use of Social Media on tourism industries. There was a search in Facebook pages of hotels, National tourism organizations etc. The only thing that hotel Facebook pages are different from the other tourism Facebook pages is at the feature ‘‘booking’’ (see picture1source:https:// picture 1 from : www.facebook.com/hilton.athens ‘‘book now’’ button). This shows that a Facebook page not only shows the tourism product, but it promotes it. It becomes a marketing tool for hotel industries in order them to enhance their marketing tourism strategy. The online reservation system provides the best information to visitors. There are many examples of residencies that have obtained an engagement with social media, especially Facebook which is the most popular social media in order to promote their place. Users’ reviews and comments, photo uploads etc. are very important for a tourism related page.
As mentioned above, a hotel should use all digital means to promote itself and become familiar with the public (Karagiannis, 2001). Some of the digital means is the official website and the use of social media. It is widely accepted that both Internet and Social media are cost-effective ways to approach target groups, since the tourism industries, especially in our country, cannot afford the use of traditional media. The Internet and especially social media seem to be the ideal for achieving the objectives. Hotel industries, such as Hilton, use a Facebook page to promote their brand name. Positive posts in the page can be translated into potential sales by focusing on interaction in the Facebook fan page. Posts in the accounts of the Hilton hotels worldwide have a variety of posts on games, events and promotions hosted by Hilton generate plenty of response from users. There are many likes and many of the comments expressing excitement in visiting the hotel or satisfaction after visiting the hotel. These pages (if they have positive comments by users) can promote e-Marketing messages and spread the brand name awareness.
‘‘Hilton’’ main universal Facebook page is: facebook.com/Hiltonhotels. Every country has its individual Facebook Hilton page. (Athens’ Hilton: www.facebook.com/hilton.athens). A positive feedback via the Facebook through informative and interactive content may reinforce buying behavior. For example, a Facebook user in Greece might see a “like” or a “comment” on his news feed page about an illustrated post from the Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/hilton.athens]: “enjoying a delicious cocktail and reading the latest Hilton Athens Magazine issue at Galaxy Bar”. This appearance on his news feed is because someone of his Facebook friends liked the post or commented on this. This is a simple, no-cost marketing strategy which a tourism oriented industry can do in order to promote its features.

Structure and Interactivity: Hilton’s Facebook page contains such features, which encourages visitors to voice questions and express the experience of staying in Hilton hotels. As I mentioned before on Hilton’s Facebook page there is an on-line system of booking. Online users entering the page can communicate electronically at any time, without time constraints.

4.2 Greek National Tourism Organization’s official site and Social media structure – VISITGREECE.GR

Tourism is frequently underestimated and is not given the credit it deserves as an industry. Especially in countries, like Greece, it is not properly organized as it should be in order to fully prosper. We could say that the only successful campaign about Greek tourism is the dynamic website: www.visitgreece.gr. Some characteristics of this site is the interactivity as it is connected with social media pages like Facebook, Instagram etc. The design and development is "friendly" and easy accessible to every user. It is dynamic because it can be easily updated and expanded in content as well as applications. Moreover, the navigation features, art graphics, photos and interactivity makes it more appealing. The content on its Facebook page is associated with the official website and aims at the targeting audience-the potential tourists. The site is developed in two languages: in Greek and secondly in English (as the universal language of communication). As far as the visibility is concerned I realized that this site can be easily found from the majority of search engines and advertising media. For instance in Google search Visitgreece.com appears on the first rank. The tool for ameliorating the site’s volume traffic through search engines is called (SEO) Search Engine Optimization. This mechanism improves the “visibility” of a website on the search results. Namely, if a site appears first in a search engine, typically more users will visit it in contrast
with a site placed 10th in the search engine. The major target of SEO is to increase the site’s score rating from search engines (Sezgin, G., 2009).

“VISITGREECE.GR” promotes Greece’s tourism attractions through key platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Instagram, Pinterest etc. Moreover, it provides a blog and uses cookies in order to give the best personalized web experience to online users. Cookies are files which are stored in a user’s browser and are used to help personalized web experience recording the browsing activity (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HTTP_cookie). This website is the official tourism web site, run by the Greek National Tourism Organization and has useful info about sea routes, flights, weather, upcoming events for every Greek region etc. Another interesting structure of this site is the possibility to download banners, wallpapers, guides of every Greek region, as well as brochures and maps. Lastly, it provides eBook and newsletter in order to be interactive. VISITGREECE Facebook page has a high level of engagement and concentrates on uploading landscape photos from all the Greek territory. It encourages Facebook users to share their own stories, opinions and travel experiences. Its central updating facility (Newsfeed) updates links, photos very often which is very significant for a right promotion.

Tourism Greece's Instagram profile provides shots from around Greece, which are chosen from followers who upload their photos with #visit Greece. The same promoting style is conducted by its twitter account and Google+ profile and Pinterest providing photos and updates about Greece.

Being almost the biggest social media platform after Facebook, the virtual community known as Twitter provides the opportunity for Greece to promote its self to Greeks and international travelers. In @VisitGreece people can be informed and take ideas about their future trip. From places and hotels to events and local gastronomy, @VisitGreece is an example of how social media have established new “grounds” upon which tourism is growing. Short texts, colorful photos and attractive videos are being combined in tune with the broader trend which determines the importance of social media in the sector of tourism.

This year, as we speak, in an attempt to successfully combine the aforementioned characteristics of the relation between social media and tourism, in Greece, Google creates the project Grow Greek Tourism. Twenty young men, specialized in digital marketing are travelling amongst thirty areas and thirteen regions of Greece. Their aim? To communicate the project to people of tourism industry and to show them how they could exploit the possibilities of the social media. From small local shops and cafes to restaurants and hotels, people are being informed and trained on using social media tools in order to be engaged with people and attract travelers (Karakaśidis, 2016).
4.3 Quantitative research: online questionnaire

This study focuses on Greek millennials. These ‘’Millennials’’ were born in or after the 1980 and entered the labor market in the 2000s (the young adults of the 1980s and 1990s). According to literature review they are better-educated than the past generations. The main characteristic of millennial’s generation is that they are highly skilled with the new technology, particularly with the social media platforms etc. They are accustomed to the e-information and communication technologies ICTs (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Kowske, Rasch, & Wiley, 2010). This target group knows better about new technologies and User Generated Content platforms than anyone else.

Since the target group is supposed to use technologies, the research tool is a quantitative electronic questionnaire (empirical research) that was launched on March 2017 and consisted of 11 questions. The target group was slit in two; those until 35 and the older age (from 35 and plus). The nature of the posed questions was of multiple choice, using the Likert scale, whereby answering all questions was required. The targeted respondents completed the questionnaire voluntarily and autonomously. This means that they were not subject of anyone’s influence.

There was a need of focusing on the intentions concerning social media and UGC in travel content and the implications on tourism marketing. This survey could be used as a pilot survey for a bigger one with a bigger sample. March was selected for the uploading for the questionnaire because tourism planning starts from this month. Additionally advertisements are launched for summer vacations on the first month of spring.

Moreover, in order to detect any possible misunderstandings concerning the asked questions, a careful literature study had been made before distributing this online survey. The received feedback indicated that the survey questions were clear enough and the respondents did not have any problems completing the questionnaire.

Following from the conceptual framework, this study focuses on the role of social media in the online tourism domain within a travel planning context and decision making by analyzing the relations between User Generated Content and tourism marketing. Based on the above literature and findings from similar studies, the following two research questions were formulated:
Research question 1: Do potential tourists make use of User-Generated Content platforms and social Media?
Research question 2: Do users and tourism marketers read and take into account comments and reviews of other online consumers?

Hypothesis: Social media and User Generated Content (UGC) affect Tourism marketing strategies. Online users influence tourism marketing, through their comments, ratings, and in general the content they create in an online environment.

RESEARCH AIM:
1. The main focus was to investigate the present situation and the digital social media trends of tourism industry in general
2. To discuss the implementations and the Impact of Social Media on Tourism
3. To examine if social media are important features in tourism marketing; all information technologies in general play an important role on the tourism domain
4. To show that social media platforms affect travel information and that tourism industry needs dynamic representation of photos and graphics, user generated content, animations and videos that can promote dynamic interaction

This survey through this empirical research (electronic questionnaire) aimed to examine if Greek people are affected by user generated content when they opt for a tourism destination and in what way. This selection of questions was deemed appropriate given the exploratory nature of the thesis. An online survey is considered the most effective method of gathering data. The questions are result of the above literature review about the review sites. UGC platforms that potential travellers visit and use.

The idea was to first collect all possible answers concerning review-related data and opinions from the Greeks. The questions were the primary tools in collecting the necessary information about the thesis. These aspects included:

(1) The age of the questioned (18-35 or 35+)
(2) Gender
(3) How often is there exchange of travel-related comments, opinions, and personal trip experiences online - with the following Likert scales; Very often(almost every day), Fairly often (once a week), Sometimes (once a month), Almost never, Never. Likert scales (Likert, R., 1932) is a very useful technique for measuring the attitudes. Undoubtedly it is very difficult to measure the characters, tensions, and personality attitudes, especially in such a small period. The procedure for transforming those qualities into a quantitative measure for data analysis aims is very demanding. Likert (1932) developed a measurement with attitudinal scales. The original Likert scale was a series of questions with the following responses: strongly approve (1), approve (2), undecided (3), disapprove (4), and strongly disapprove (5). While Likert used a five-point scale, and other variations are appropriate. Neutral response can be omitted (Clason & Dormody, 1994).

(4) How often photo or video sharing with events, nightlife, and destinations in social media platforms is made by the questioned with the following answers; Very often, Fairly often, Sometimes, Almost never, Never

(5) If the hyperlinks in travel sites about opinions about shopping, dining and hotels are clicked and visited by the online users - with the following scales; Very often, Fairly often, Sometimes, Almost never, Never

(6) What digital users prefer to use when it comes to share their travel experiences.

They had to choose among the following answers (more than one)

- Official websites of a destination
- Facebook
- YouTube
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Travel forums
- Travel blogs
- booking.com
- TripAdvisor
- Google maps
- Hotel Finder
- Google +
- Email Marketing Platforms
- Vimeo
- Pinterest
- Wikipedia
- Nothing
- All of them
- Other
(7) The seventh question dealt with which Social Media platform ("Which Social Media platform you prefer to use in order to get informed about a travel destination?") with possible answers the following: (The user could choose more than one answer).

- Facebook
- Official websites of a destination
- YouTube
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Travel forums
- Travel blogs
- booking.com
- TripAdvisor
- Google maps
- Hotel Finder
- Google +
- Email Marketing Platforms
- Vimeo
- Pinterest
- Wikipedia
- Nothing
- All of them
- Other

(8) The eighth question had to do with social media importance ("Social Media fundamentally reshaped the way tourism information is distributed and the way people plan and consume travel?"). According to literature review, social media play an important role in tourism and travel. It is therefore crucial to examine what our target group believes. It is a Closed-Ended Question that limits the answers of the respondents and it is ideal for this quantitative type of research. With this kind of questions responses are easy to code and interpret. The possible answers were the following: (only one answer)

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

(9) The ninth question was: do you trust comments of other online users when it comes your travel planning? The questions were the following:

- Very often
- Fairly often
- Sometimes
- Almost never
- Never
(10) The open-ended question about tourism marketers is very important about the analysis of the survey; (Social Media should be mainly used in order to promote a tourism destination effectively tourism) - with possible answer just one:

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

(11) I take into consideration other users’ opinions on the Internet about tourism issues (destination, hotels etc.)

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

More specifically....

The respondents of the questionnaire were 202. The demographic data concerning gender and age of the respondents is graphically represented in the following section. The sample shows a domination of female respondents (118 individuals constituting 58.4 % of the sample), over males (84 individuals constituting 41.6 % of the sample).
➢ The 3rd question dealt with the share and exchange of the travel-related comments, opinions, and online experiences. The aim was to examine how often there is a sharing of personal experiences. The majority stated that sometimes (32.2%). Additionally, there are 26% of respondents that select to share online travel experiences every time they travel and around 16% fairly often.

➢ According to literature review since user accounts are mainly profile-based and have non-anonymous features, in many cases their UGC considered to be more credible than professional tourism marketing sites (Svensson, 2011: 4). This implies that
this social networking site (SNS) is a remarkable source of travel information about tourism products or brands, promoting electronic WoM.

➢ 4th Question: How often do you make photo or video sharing with events, nightlife, and destinations in social media?

According to literature review since user accounts are mainly profile-based and have non-anonymous features, in many cases their UGC considered to be more credible than professional tourism marketing sites (Svensson, 2011: 4). This implies that this social networking site (SNS) is a remarkable source of travel information about tourism products or brands, promoting electronic WoM. The pie chart indicates that there are some major differences in the proportion concerning the frequency of sharing user generated content on the internet platforms. “Sometimes” is the main answer with 33.2%. As we can see from the pie chart the huge majority is in favour of sharing in Social Media. “Almost never” or “Never” have around 20% of the pie chart.
5th Question: In the fifth question responders answered if they open hyperlinks in travel sites with User generated opinions about traveling, restaurants and hotels. The main answer is fairly often with almost 32%. The answer “Very often” gathered the 27% of the responders. Social media influenced information agents (Travel 2.0 users). Nowadays they are considered many times reliable and trustworthy source than the tourism suppliers themselves. The reviews generated by users deal with information on various tourism topics, such as destination attractions, hotel etc. (Baird, C.H., Parasnis, G., 2011).

➢ 6th Question: 127 of 202 the questioned the 62.9% prefer to use Facebook for sharing travel experiences. Trip advisor comes 2nd with 37.1%. Travel blogs (17.8%) are popularamong the respondents who combine it with Facebook. Google map has 12.9% popularity. Facebook was indicated as the mostly used social networking site.

➢ The results confirm the researchers’ choice of Facebook as being an efficient platform for reaching respondents online. This is not weird, as it is currently the biggest online social network with more than 800 million users (September 2011) and the most dominant UGC channel within the target group of 18-30-year-old individuals, not only for socializing, but also for searching information about the issues of relevance or sharing travel experiences (Chappuis, 2011: 1). Other platforms, such as blogs and Google+, Google maps etc. are preferred for online interaction via sharing but with less popularity.
The sample shows a domination of male respondents who are in favour of trip advisor when it comes to select a destination (56%), over females (36% of the sample). Females select the official websites and Facebook mainly when they want to search for tourism destination.

7th Question: In order to get informed about a travel destination the answer is not the same; the most noticeable difference relates to the most popular for each of the answer. TripAdvisor is the most favored when people want to search travel related issues, accounting for 50% of the users. This contrasts with 20% by the older ones (35 plus) that prefer travel blogs instead. Wikipedia is not a popular platform anymore. Google maps are growing more and more in popularity (37%). The 36.6% of the respondents are in favor of official websites that deal with tourism related issues. According to the survey the official tourism websites are the second significant source for travel information; around 36.6% of users are informed by these websites in order to gather travel content; one interesting result is that about 27.7% visit Facebook when planning for vacations. According to Munar (2014) TripAdvisor’s goal is to promote social interactivity in the travel sector. Users are encouraged to share their personal experiences, bad or good with the hospitality fields. As mentioned in the above literature review voting utility system regarding opinions is very useful for the other users and for the tourism marketers. One of the most important characteristics of TripAdvisor community is the use of user-generated content. That content poses a challenge to managers, since that rating methods influence a hotel’s image. Organizations, past tourists if they provide information about a destination may influence destination’s image (Munar, 2014).
8th Question: Surprisingly, more than a half of the young respondents stated that Social Media have fundamentally reshaped the way tourism information is distributed and the way that people consume travel products. It is interesting to see that there is a 14.4% that selected the ‘’strongly agree’’. Thus the majority of the respondent answered that Social Media have changed the distribution of travel information. However the answer ‘’neutral’’ gathered a considerable number of respondents and cannot be ignored (27.7%).
9th Question: Do you trust comments of other online users when it comes travel planning?

In this question we see that 41.6% of the respondents state that sometimes trust personal comments of other online users. The answer “fairly often” gathers 31.7% and the “very often” 21.3%”. Social media platforms and particularly UGC content platforms allow replicating marketing strategies on a new technology. The survey confirms that many users, especially the younger ones, typically use Social media on a daily basis when it comes to select a destination. The significance of the social network websites and their User generated content is examined in many studies. According to many researchers if Social media will continue their popularity as predicted, tourism issues will be of great importance for travel planning (Mislove, M., Marcon, K., Gummadi, P., Druschel and B. Bhattacharjee, 2007)
10th Question: Social Media should be mainly used in order to promote a tourism destination effectively.

The majority of the respondents stated that they agree that Social media should be mainly used in order to promote a tourism destination effectively. Particularly, almost 57% agree with that. We should not also ignore the ‘strongly agree’ which is considerably high (29.2%). These two together consist the 86.2% of the pie.
11th question: I take into consideration other users’ opinions on the Internet about tourism issues (destination, hotels etc.)

The majority of the responders take into account other users’ opinions on the Internet about tourism issues (destination, hotels etc.). Via the UGC platforms travelers have the opportunity to comment and suggest when the other users want to find an appropriate hotel or destination. Surveys reveal that WOM is a useful information source from the consumers and it has the power to affect other users’ opinion (Jalilvand and al, 2012). Electronic WoM provide travellers with higher quality user generated content, providing great expertise about a specific topic. Particularly, 48 % stated that they are agree with the above statement (“I take into account other users’ opinions on the Internet about tourism issues ’’). Neutral were the 37.6 % of respondents.

5. Discussion of the findings and Conclusions

Through the literature review it was concluded that the important role of social media is being identified in two fields: in those who “produce” tourism and in those who “consume” it. Apart from intending an interpretation of the economical extensions of the relation between travelers and tourism industry, we realized that social media shape a new “reality”; a reality which is launched by the terms of internet-based communication and online marketing. In that case both “consumers” and “producers” can benefit by the emergence of social media in the field of tourism. The reduction of the cost and the facilitation regarding the preparation of the
trip for the first group, the promotion and the improvement of their services –through feedback– for the second group. This reality is unavoidable and still emerging. What’s left is to see in what new ways social media and tourism can be engaged in the future.

Furthermore, this thesis explored the tourism marketing and the effect of online consumer-generated reviews. Through the above analysis it can be concluded that online users’ opinions, comments, ratings, evaluations and so on, regarding tourist products / services, are very significant, because they influence consumers’ purchase decisions and hence tourism marketing. Various theories explain why users tend to engage themselves in ratings, evaluations, and exchange of opinions and preferences related to tourist products, services and/or destinations in an online environment. In the current globalized environment, both tourist organizations and destinations try to raise consumers’ awareness, in an effort to increase their sales and hence their profitability. Through this massive amount of information, consumers tend to rely upon other users’ opinions, comments and evaluation, in order to make their decisions. This information by other users is perceived as less biased, and thus as trustworthy. Hence, through Travel 2.0 tools, users tend to impact tourism marketing.

In addition, the above analysis indicated that tourist businesses have the ability to identify through consumers’ comments and evaluations the areas that need to be improved, in order to further enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, which has again an effect on tourism marketing. Finally, it was mentioned that through the interaction between consumers and tourist organizations/destinations, the latter have the ability to determine consumers’ preferences, profile and needs, which is valuable information in the process of market segmentation. In this context, again there is an influence on tourism marketing.

Those who work in tourism select the power of the Internet, and especially the e-Word Of Mouth platforms that enable interactivity among the travellers and the marketers. Especially, when it comes to searching a hotel or a destination, e-Word Of Mouth platforms are the best solution for potential tourists, especially the young ones. Trip Advisor is the most popular of all according to the literature review and survey. For instance, the majority of people, after reading the comments on Trip Advisor and other tourism-related platforms about a hotel, they select the hotel that has the fewer bad comments. That means that people take it into account if there are bad comments. Moreover a good comment makes sense to the majority of the online users. When using a search engine, like Google, according the questionnaire, the majority prefer to use social media platforms, as opposed to other websites that have to do with tourism (Munar, 2014).

The dissertation, based mainly on relevant literature in tourism, e-Word of Mouth (e-WOM) and the process of vacation planning on the Internet, briefly presented some logical
impacts of social media, especially Facebook, with examples concerning social media awareness. It arrives to the conclusion that social media may not only be the future of tourism, but also be one of the main economic marketing tools for any kind of tourism. This will happen because the ways that travelers search for, view and evaluate travel information is potentially changing to this direction. This study investigated how travel-related User-Generated Content (UGC) web sites (also known as Web 2.0 sites) were being used by consumers and tourism marketers. Understanding this impact on behavior can help tourism and destination marketers to develop more effective e-business strategies and relationships with their existing and future customers. There was a try to examine through the questionnaire if the user generated content changes the travel behavior of users or not. The results, representing the opinion of a sample of 202 technology users and travelers, showed somehow if these User Generated Content platforms are considered trustworthy and popular. Real statistics from a neutral provider were used; questionnaire - Google form. Although the investigation involved a very limited number of questioned (small sample), the findings revealed interesting dynamics in some of the User Generated Content platforms. Thus, this personal research contributes to the understanding of the importance of user generated content and social media for users and tourism marketers. Moreover implications for online tourism marketing are revealed in a number of ways through the literature review and the survey. For instance, the case study about VISIT Greece revealed the power of Social media usage. If Greek tourism marketers followed an organized social media usage then the messages to their targeted audience would be more effective.

While exploratory in nature, this study offers some useful insights and findings about the users’ satisfaction about tourism marketing and Social Media. The study presents evidence of the relation between the reviews written in User Generated Content comments like Trip Advisor and tourism marketing. Second, this study provides an extended understanding of the potential tension when it comes to travel organizing. Through the questionnaire and the literature review, the correlation of the two types of travel information providers was examined, i.e., the tourism industry and online consumers.

According the dissertation’s survey, online users trusted more User Generated Content sites with reviews, rather than professional guides and travel agencies. This is confirmed by many studies. (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Thus, marketers, in order to be effective, should explore in depth the power of social networks, using dual communication and interactivity. This explore in UGC platforms will enable them to enhance their customer relationships. This ability to influence the purchasing decisions of the online users by passing information via e-word of mouth (WOM) is examined and analysed by many researchers (Shin D., J.H. Song, and Biswas, 2014).
Some similar research made, especially in UK, stated that comments of online users are considered highly credible. These radically different circumstances, due to the interactive digital media, enable organizations to customize tourism marketing messages allowing user interaction and input. The tourism organizations take into account the opinions and reviews of every customer about their tourism product so that their marketing-oriented travel content focuses on selling (Buhalis D 2001). The personal recent online questionnaire revealed that looking at other tourists’ comments, especially on Facebook, is the most popular online activity, especially for the young people - millenians.

It has become clear from the survey that certain social media Websites, such as TripAdvisor (50% of the survey respondents select it), which are considered more comprehensive and travel-specific, are becoming more and more popular. Specifically, TripAdvisor is likely to evolve into primary online travel information sources. For instance, when it comes for a hotel, TripAdvisor is a useful tool with user generated content presence. The hotels are presented in the order of popularity index. Thus they influence in purchasing decision process (Buhalis, D. 2003).

In addition, the growth of social media is not only represented by those websites, but also by other types of User Generated Content platforms within a tourism information search setting. Blogs and other social networking sites are selected by millennials and older people and traditional suppliers began to lose their power. Particularly 33.7% of the respondents select blogs that deal with tourism related issues in order to get informed (see graph 7).

The results of the personal survey confirm that tourism marketers can no longer ignore the role of User Generated Content platforms and social media when it comes to vacation planning and travel information distribution. Their power is undeniable. According to many similar studies, tourism marketers have found difficulties when changes in distribution channels and new media happen (Fesenmaier, 2007; Werthner and Klein, 1999). In response to these shifts, those who work in the tourism industry need to comprehend these dynamics in order to promote their travel businesses and destinations to users.

As mentioned in the above chapters, thanks to the changes on the Internet, users are obtaining more power over what and how information is distributed and used on the Internet. The results of this study provide inputs on which tourism marketing can reflect their online strategies. The future of Internet-based tourism will be focused on User-generated-content and consumer-centric technologies. These powerful UGC platforms and the new technologies help tourism industries to interact with their potential customers more dynamically than ever before (Buhalis & Law, 2008). The findings clearly indicate a great need for quality tourism
marketing efforts in order for the tourism product to be represented efficiently and manage to compete with the rankings of on User-generated-content and review sites.

In the future, users will become different with different mentality (Buhalis & Law, 2008). They will become more demanding, more information intensive and individualistic. The dissertations’ survey confirms that the majority of the questioned believe that tourism marketers in Greece should make more use of social media in order to support their online tourism marketing efforts. That means that they are not completely satisfied with the tourism marketing strategies in Greece. Greek tourism companies, as well as Greek consumers, are learning new ways of interaction and consumption. Thus, consumers and tourism marketer’s expectations have been raised.

Online users, as mentioned above, have at their command many resources that enable research of travel destinations, transportation, accommodation and travel activities, and enable the purchase online of these. The step from online travel agencies to direct customer involvement with tourism providers is a new trend (Buhalis 2001). This step is inevitable, as potential travelers gain more experience and obtain more confidence in using the internet. This of course causes a great challenge to travel agencies that must to take more measures in order to be competitive. The trip planning behavior generally is not analyzed further in many studies. This dissertation tried to examine the means that a sample of population uses when it comes to vacation planning.

The results of the vacation planning indicate that online space is huge and highly diversified. It indicates that tourists’ planning can be deconstructed into many chapters. In addition, findings indicate that the UGC platforms people use differ. The results also show that the searchers, to facilitate the navigation process, generally use information hubs containing many links to other authoritative websites regarding the designated destination when searching for a travel destination, a hotel etc. In the questions that respondents had the possibility to select more than one answer they selected more than three. Particularly, in the question 6 and 7 they 80% selected more than 2 options. That means that they are not focused only in one social media platform. For instance, on the 7th question online users, in order to get informed about a travel destination, they use more than one Social media platform in order to decide where to travel. Moreover it is revealed that Facebook is very popular means for uploading photos from tourism destinations etc. Finally, Instagram is a popular platform for young women under 35 years old. Particularly young female millenians (40%) select this Social Media tool in order to share travel experiences.

The results of the survey confirm that vacation planning is a complex, dynamic, and contingent process. Tourists’ online behavior is much more complicated than originally
expected. Nevertheless commonalities were also found among the participants. The study results (like many results of similar studies) indicate that vacation planning on the Internet is an intensive task which is most of the times beyond the searchers’ processing capability. This process usually follows a contingent structure.

Concluding, this research represents an initial effort in understanding the interaction among online users travel reviews, vacation planning and tourism marketing. The goal of this study is to provide a conceptual model of online search and vacation planning. Through analysis and process tracing methods, this paper explores the information processing and decision behavior involved in online vacation planning activities.

6. Limitations and Suggestions for future research

This thesis provides useful insights for tourism managers that want to use specific social media in order to make effective tourism marketing campaigns. Given its exploratory nature, this study has limitations. In addition to the small number of respondents, this study employed only an introductory view and raised the issue of the significance of user generated reviews and social media. Other tourism related review and travel information sites should be included in analyses in the future.

Further, future studies should focus on improving the structure for this type of research, by including more people from many countries, reflecting a greater range of types of tourists and generally people (students, unemployed, tourism marketers etc.). It would be interesting to explore the opinion and attitudes of international travellers and how tourism marketers react in a tourism marketing message from an opponent marketer. A scope of future research can also be the development of some practical tools and systems to keep track of the change in the role of User-generated-content platforms and review sites. These tracking tools are useful, because timely outcomes for tourism marketers could be resulted.

The literature review also explores the development of user generated content (UGC) and specifically the growing use of blogs in tourism. For future research would be useful the surveying UGC of individuals and analyse its applicability for tourism and hospitality
One of the main questions that has not yet fully answered concerns the likelihood with which a potential traveller, when using a search engine like Google prefers to enter social media as opposed to other websites that have to do with tourism in order to get informed.

As mentioned before, this dissertation presents both opportunities and challenges for tourism researchers. It provides a considerable insight into the use of the user generated content platforms for vacation planning. It indicates that a thorough understanding of the use of UGC is needed for Greek marketers in order to design more effective online systems that deal with these platforms (Bishop and Starr, 1996 and Shneiderman and Plaisant, 2005). It has undoubtedly limitations concerning the methodological development in the area under investigation. Particularly there are major limitations; first, this research drew the sample from 202 people from a network of friends, colleagues, and friends of friends. Without doubt this sampling method determined that they are not a representative sample of the population of Greeks. However a great effort was made to ensure unbiased results. While exploratory in nature, this research was intended to provide insights in the tourist search on User Generated Content platforms and the results provide a meaningful beginning to achieving this goal. However there is a problem in extracting the results: given the small sample and the little time of the survey.

Also another question that has not yet been fully answered by many studies and which the above chapters addressed is the following: Does a potential traveler, when using a search engine like Google, prefer to use social media platforms, as opposed to other websites that have to do with tourism, in order to get informed about his or her trip?

However, this essay aims at explaining the representation of social media as part of the online tourism domain in the context of travel information search supported by search engines. It is hoped that my thesis managed somehow to provide some primitive insights for online tourism marketing and UGC. Moreover, managerial implications for online tourism marketing, as well as plans for future research is hoped to be discussed in feature studies.
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And…

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Visit Greece
4 stars
Greek Tourism. An eternal journey!

Greek Tourism
On every journey!

Tourism. Greece’s oldest industry... an industry of dreams. 1914. The 1st National Tourism Organization. Greece’s fame spreads around the world!!! 10,000

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