

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON GENERATION Y'S TRAVEL CHOICES

Maria-Irina ANA

*Bucharest University of Economic Studies
6 Piața Romană, 010371, Bucharest, Romania
ana.mariairina@yahoo.com*

Laura-Gabriela ISTUDOR

*Bucharest University of Economic Studies
6 Piața Romană, 010371, Bucharest, Romania
laura.istudor@gmail.com*

Luminița NICOLESCU

*Bucharest University of Economic Studies
6 Piața Romană, 010371, Bucharest, Romania
luminicolescu@gmail.com*

Abstract. *Information Communication Technology (ICT) has reformed the business environment worldwide, providing retailers with expanded markets, while offering consumers a greater range of alternatives. It is thought that by the year 2050, e-commerce will break through all companies, and most of the business transactions on a global level will actually take place electronically. E-commerce is becoming the fastest growing form of commerce globally. One of the industries most impacted by e-commerce is tourism; tourism has become an information-intensive industry. Nevertheless, e-commerce is an essential component of travel and tourism sector and the use of the Internet for brand building is an increasingly common. When we talk about online marketing, we are mainly referring to e-mail marketing, search engine optimization, affiliate marketing, display advertising and Social Media, which is perhaps most prevalent in the tourism industry. In the given context, the aim of this paper is to analyze the impact of Social Media on consumers' behavior related to their travel choices, to investigate whether Social Media influence people's decision to visit specific tourist destination. The primary method used is an online questionnaire, along with documentary analysis, statistical analysis, and personal observation. The paper will start with a brief literature review to explore themes such as tourists decision-making behavior or motivation of travel. Then, the relationship between Social Media and the desire to travel, as well as the use of Social Media throughout the whole holiday decision-making process, including before, after and during the trip will be examined. Therefore, this paper investigates the influence of Social Media on the overseas travel choices of Romanian Millennial users, also known as Generation Y or Echo Boomers, the largest cohort of Internet users, often called digital natives, as they are the first generation born in the Information Age and for whom travel is a way of life. Plus, the paper also highlights opportunities for travel and tourism businesses to reshape and customize their marketing strategies to gain competitive advantage.*

Keywords: *UGC; Social Media; tourism; Generation Y; digital marketing.*

Introduction

Nowadays, the Internet represents such a tremendous opportunity for both businesses and consumers, but might also be a threat, “the increase in customer power and knowledge [...] the bargaining power of customers” being, perhaps, the biggest challenge posed by electronic trading (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Mayer, & Johnston, 2009, p.47), along with the too high level of competition (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015, p.190). One of the sectors most impacted by e-commerce is considered to be tourism that, according to the World Tourism Organization (2001), has become an information-intensive industry. Nevertheless, e-commerce is an essential component of travel and tourism sector and the use of the Internet (through online marketing tools and practices) for brand building is an increasingly common custom (Hudak & Kianickova, 2017), as “traditional (offline) marketing strategies are already widely used [...] and there are almost no new options for fostering competition” (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015, p.187). Hence, everyone should clearly understand the implications of online marketing for tourism, mainly the importance of e-mail marketing, affiliate marketing, and last, but not least, Social Media, which is perhaps most prevalent in the tourism industry.

Literature review

According to scholars, tourists’ decision-making behavior is a five stages process that goes from biological and physiological needs to safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs and finally to self-actualization that can be translated into personal growth and fulfillment (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015). As per Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs which has been widely accepted and used to explain travelers’ behavior, the consumer’s “need” is the fundamental reason for making a purchase decision – it is rather a basic human requirement, like air or food.

When one realizes that this need exists, the “problem recognition”, often called “gap analysis” phase appears, this representing the first stage in the decision-making process. The second stage, “information search”, is very often met in the tourism-related buying decision. According to Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Mayer, & Johnston (2009, p.7), “there is a dramatic difference in online consumer behavior in different markets”, and for the travel and tourism case, people usually research and then also buy online, while for purchases such as a house or a car, they only use the internet as a research tool. Stage three, “evaluation of alternatives”, brings out two essential concepts for marketing, namely brands and consumer value (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015). Consumers also buy products for what they communicate to them, for the “feelings” or “emotions” those products may create. Since travel and tourism is actually a service and not a tangible product, people, in fact, buy experiences and it is more often than not an emotional purchase, meant to satisfy belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs. This idea is also supported by Pearce (1982), who made an experiment and analyzed 400 travel experiences of 200 tourists from USA, Europe, Canada, and Australia. These people were asked to describe one positive and one negative travel experience, and then he analyzed and coded their stories into five categories, as per Maslow’s pyramid. In the positive experiences case, self-actualization (35%) and love (33%) prevailed, while for the negative ones, safety (43%) and physiological needs (27%) came first.

Maslow (1970) also discusses two other human needs, which some scholars (Hsu & Huang, 2007) find more suitable in explaining some tourists' behaviors, namely the aesthetic needs, and the need to know and understand. People do travel to learn about something new, to be exposed to various kind of beauty, belief also sustained by Šimková & Holzner (2014), who found out that for Millennials at a Czech Republic University, "seeking personal rewards", "telling others about their new experience", "inspiration", as well as "escaping personal environments" are the main motives for travel. Moving further, we reach the fourth stage of the consumer decision-making process, often called simply "purchase", when potential customers "must decide when and where they are going to buy" (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015, p.192), a very important decision, that usually takes three to six seconds (Mooradian, 2012) and has recently started to take place online for tourism-related purchases, travel being "the leading e-commerce category in Europe by revenue for the fixed internet" (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Mayer, & Johnston, 2009, p.124). Last, but not least, "post-purchase-process", the fifth and last stage of the travelers decision-making process, as identified by Schwarzl & Grabowska (2015), rather refers to building and maintaining a long-term relationship with your customers, turning them into loyal consumers by understanding various key aspects such as how they used your product and for how long, or what feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction they experienced and how they intend to act next.

Lately, companies are also concerned about how consumers might create additional value for their touristic product, or about how often and when their products are in fact used until the ultimate disposal, furtherance called by scholars "customer-value chain" (Mooradian, 2012), that "shows highly important information concerning products' innovation and how to change customers' behavior" (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015, p.192). Yet, it is quite hard to define which advertising medium really convinced the customer and was, in fact, the crucial one for the final purchase choice, so it is very important for a company to know more about the conversion rate of their marketing means, to identify which are worth keeping or investing in (Bockhorni, 2014), given that, with the online marketing expansion, companies are currently offered an increasingly higher amount of possibilities.

Altogether, "nowadays it seems to be indispensable running a business without any online presence" (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015, p.195), especially since travel products and services seem to be well suited to online selling – they are "high involvement products [...] less tangible and more differentiated than many other consumer goods", these characteristics making them more appropriate to be purchased over the Internet (Garín-Muñoz & Pérez-Amaral, 2011). Furthermore, the Web is also shifting travel and tourism marketing practices from a B2C approach to a peer-to-peer model, mainly in what regards information sharing. Thus, a good understanding of the e-mechanisms designed for spreading information online can facilitate tourism companies to market effectively their businesses via the Internet.

In fact, one of the most important online tools used nowadays in Travel and Tourism is considered to be Social Media, "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.61), increasing the power of Word-of-Mouth (WOM), transforming it into electronic-Word-of-Mouth (eWOM), and expanding the potential audience beyond the traditional parties, family and friends, to new, wider, geographically dispersed networks of strangers (Lo,

McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011). According to the literature, “at the start of the process when inspiration is sought, the recommendations of family and friends (via social networking) are the most used source of information” (Rushton & Kennell, 2015), and, when compared to traditional forms of advertising, it was found that people trust eWOM more (Jamaludin, Aziz, Mariapan, & Lim Ain Lin, 2017).

One of the most comprehensive studies about the impact of online travel reviews on potential travelers was undertaken by Gretzel (2007) in cooperation with TripAdvisor – roughly 1500 TripAdvisor users answered an online survey. This project revealed that reading other consumers’ posts in Social Media was the most frequently used source of information and that users usually consider these UGC sites and social networking platforms more reliable, enjoyable and up to date than information presented on official travel providers’ websites.

In a top of vacation-inspiration sites, Facebook ranked first, with 29%, followed by TripAdvisor, that scored 14% (Carter, 2017), while Instagram is expected to get the lead in the near future, given that nowadays people engage with Instagram posts and stories ten times more than they do with Facebook (Miller, 2017). Even though people use Social Media mainly when looking for travel information research showed that they continue to use it also while they are on vacation or even post-holiday - while still traveling, 72% of people post pictures on a Social Network, and 70% of them update their Facebook status with travel-related information. Furthermore, after returning from a trip, 76% of travelers post photos from their travels, 55% like Facebook pages specific to the vacation they have just had, 46% post hotel reviews, 40% post touristic-attractions reviews, and 40% post restaurant reviews (Carter, 2017). Some other statistics are even more convincing for travel business interested in promoting their products online: as per a survey commissioned by Chase Card Services that reached 1002 travelers in the USA, aged 18-67, 97% of the Millennials share their travel photos, while 73% of them even post on Social Media at least once per day during the holiday, and 87% use Facebook for travel inspiration. In this regard, UGC can also impact the trip itself, as real-time images shared, for example, during some events, might often inspire others to attend attractions or events they had not initially planned. Of all the persons questioned, Millennials are more likely (44%) than other older-aged travelers (35-49 years old 28% and 50-67 years old 11%) to seek opinions on Social Media while they research a prospective holiday.

Methodology

There is currently still a limited understanding of how consumers use UGC sites for the decision-making process and the impact of these sites on travelers’ behavior worldwide, worthless to say that generations-wise studies on the topic are quite a few at the moment despite the rather prosperous times the travel and tourism industry experiences. While people appear to increasingly embrace these practices, the travel industry members and businesses seem to be skeptical about UGC sites benefits and also unsure of how to respond. However, any strategic decision to integrate UGC tools and features into a business should be preceded by comprehensive studies on how the UGC sites are being used by consumers. Our focus was represented by Generation Y travelers, as they are the most active Internet-users and we have explored the following research questions:

Q1: What role do UGC travel sites play in the decision-making process of Generation Y?

H1: UGC travel sites are mainly used during the information-search stage of the decision-making process.

Q2: How much do Generation Y consumers trust UGC compared to the traditional sources of travel information (official travel websites, travel brochures, email travel promotions, commercial operators, visitor centers, travel guides etc.)?

H2: Consumers trust UGC information more than other sources of travel information.

Q3: How important do Generation Y online consumers find the most popular forms of UGC information compared to other travel information?

H3: Various forms of UGC are considered more important than other sources of travel information.

H4: Consumers consider third party (i.e. non-commercial) sources of travel information less important than photos/videos posted on Social Networking sites.

To answer the aforementioned research questions and test the corresponding hypotheses, we have conducted a quantitative study and distributed an online questionnaire to a random set of 100 Romanian Millennial citizens, developed after reviewing existing literature up to date. Our survey took place in the period 27-29th of June; a web-link to the survey was distributed via Social Networking sites. A total of 80 completed surveys was collected from respondents. All data received was analyzed using SPSS version 20 and Excel. Thus, descriptive statistics, as well as regression analysis were used for this research.

The instrument consisted of seven sections, as follows: the first section focused on demographic characteristics, the second one was related to Generation Y travel habits and the third section concerned the Social Media usage by Generation Y. These three sections were made up of both multiple choice and single choice types of questions, but also one "short answer" part. For the next four sections, a 5-point Likert scale was used, ranging from a response of "1" corresponding to "I strongly disagree" to "5" representing "I strongly agree". Section four, five and six coincide with our hypotheses, while in the last section we added two more insightful questions, that enabled us to gain further understanding of the impact that UGC has on Millennial travelers' final trip planning decisions.

Results and discussion

The questionnaire was intended for respondents aged up to 38 years old, as they are representative for generation Y. The age of our respondents was mainly between 25-30 years old, and most of the respondents were Romanian women. Their occupations vary from students to economists, and 42.3% of respondents earn between 500-1000 EUR. More demographic data can be found in Table 1.

55.7% of the surveyed subjects take less than 5 trips during the course of a year, while 36.7% of them pursue between 5-10 trips and 7.6% travel more than 10 times/year. The majority travel both in Romania and abroad (81%), and the fact that more than half of the respondents usually take less than 5 trips per year can be linked with the fact that 63.29% of them have a disposable income of maximum 1000 EUR/month.

Table 1. Profile of Survey Respondents (Source: authors' work, based on survey data)

Age group	Number of respondents	% of respondents
18-25	26	32,50%
25-30	40	50,00%
30-38	14	17,50%
Gender	Number of respondents	% of respondents
Female	48	60,76%
Male	31	39,24%
Monthly income	Number of respondents	% of respondents
<500 EUR	17	21,52%
500-1000 EUR	33	41,77%
1000-2000 EUR	20	25,32%
>2000 EUR	9	11,39%

86.1% of the respondents travel for leisure and 93.7% opt for self-planned trips when booking a holiday, the services bought online being mainly transportation tickets (93.7%) and accommodation (84.8%), while 29.1% also rent cars or other vehicles.

The third section of the questionnaire concerned the social media usage - the most popular platforms are Facebook with 94.8% respondents and Instagram, with 85.7%, and the time spent on social media platform varies from 1 to 3 hours for 56.4% of the respondents, while 28.2% of them spend between 3-5 hours/day online. 15.4% spend more than 5 hours on these platforms, however not mentioned if the time spent is work-related.

The fourth section comprises questions related to the role of UGC sites in the decision-making process of a trip for a generation. Figure 1 summarizes our findings:

Stage of travel planning process	Question	Totally Disagree	Tend to Disagree	Not Sure	Tend to Agree	Totally Agree
Information search	I use UGC sites pre-trip when I had already chosen where to go	10%	5%	32.5%	27.5%	25%
Information search	I use UGC sites pre-trip when I search for ideas on where to travel	11.25%	10%	23.75%	35%	20%
Evaluation of alternatives	I use UGC sites pre-trip, when I evaluate the alternatives and try to narrow down the choice of destination	7.5%	10%	35%	28.75%	18.75%

Stage of travel planning process	Question	Totally Disagree	Tend to Disagree	Not Sure	Tend to Agree	Totally Agree
Purchase decision	I use UGC sites pre-trip, before the actual purchase decision, to confirm I had made the right destination choice	12.5%	17.5%	37.5%	16.25%	16.25%
Purchase (during trip)	I use UGC sites during the trip, when I try to find out information about specific attractions/activities	7.5%	10%	28.75%	30%	23.75%
Purchase (during trip)	I use UGC sites during the trip to share my experience with other travelers/friends	25%	20%	27.5%	16.25	11.25
Post purchase evaluation	I use UGC sites after the trip to compare my experience with those of other travelers	31.25	26.25%	26.25%	10%	6.25%
Post purchase evaluation	I use UGC sites after the trip to share my impressions with other people.	30%	21.5%	23.75%	10%	15%

Figure 1. Usage of UGC sites depending on the stage of the Trip Planning Process
(Authors' work, based on survey data)

According to our results, more than half of the respondents turn to UGC sites during the information search stage of the travel planning process. Also, most of them use UGC sites when trying to evaluate their alternatives pre-purchase and during the trip, in order to find out more about the local attractions and activities.

To enable Hypothesis 2 to be tested, we asked how much UGC sites are trusted compared to the other traditional sources of travel information. As it can be noticed from Table 2, UGC sites are trusted more (32% of the responses in favor of UGC, 24% prefer the traditional sources of travel information, while the rest 44% are not sure which source to trust more). A t-test also confirms that non-UGC sources are less trusted by prospective travelers than UGC sites ($t = 2.57$, $\text{sig.} = 0.006$). Among the traditional sources of travel information, email promotions and commercial operations seem to be less trusted compared to UGC sites, while visitor centers and guidebooks are the most trusted of the traditional sources mentioned, followed by official travel websites.

To test Hypothesis 3, where we assumed that various forms of UGC are considered more important than other sources of travel information we asked respondents to rank the importance of each UGC type (photos posted on Social Networking sites, videos posted on Social Networking sites, independent traveler reviews on travel-related websites, independent traveler blogs) and also non-UGC sources (state tourism websites, commercial operators, travel reviews written by professional travel writers, interactive travel planners, live webcams) on a 5-point scale, where 1 = I totally disagree and 5 = I total agree. We conducted t-tests to compare the mean importance scores for both

groups of travel information sources but also highlighted the percentage of respondents who indicated which of the components, UGC or non-UGC type, was more important to them.

Table 2. Trust in UGC sites compared to traditional sources of travel information
(Source: authors' work, based on survey data)

	Mean score	Totally Disagree	Tend to disagree	Not sure	Tend to agree	Totally Agree
I trust UGC sites less than any other traditional sources of travel information	2.90	8	17	36	13	6
I trust UGC sites less than official travel websites	2.75	8	28	26	12	6
I trust UGC sites less than travel brochures	2.66	11	25	27	14	3
I trust UGC sites less than email travel promotions	2.46	18	25	22	12	3
I trust UGC sites less than commercial operators	2.59	13	25	28	10	4
I trust UGC sites less than visitor centers	2.90	6	21	33	15	5
I trust UGC sites less than travel guides (guidebooks)	2.86	7	20	36	11	6

As shown in Table 3, consistent with our other findings and hypotheses, information provided by UGC sites was considered more important than that coming from non-UGC sources, the independent traveler reviews on travel-related sites such as TripAdvisor, Booking, or Airbnb are considered most important of the UGC sites, followed by the content posted on Social Networking sites. The only non-UGC source with a similar mean score as the UGC sites were represented by the blogs written by professional travel writers, which might also suggest how important blogs have become nowadays, no matter they have sponsored content or not. Blogs written by independent travelers, UGC source was also a popular choice of our respondents. The least important for Romanian Millennials surveyed were the information provided by state tourism websites and commercial operators, emphasizing the power of Social Media in this generation. 67.5% of the respondents consider travelers' reviews important or very important, 60% consider videos of places posted on Social Networking sites important or very important, 53.75% believe that photos of places posted on Social Networking sites are important or very important to them when planning their trip, and 51.9% assessed independent traveler blogs as important or very important for their holidays. On the other hand, only 13.75% of the Romanian Millennials in our sample think that information provided by state tourism websites are important or very important.

T-tests results also supported our hypotheses – when we compared the mean score on UGC's importance (mean = 3.62) against the mean score on non-UGC's importance (mean = 3.11), we noticed that UGC content is considerably more important to travelers than non-UGC sources ($t = 5.92$, $\text{sig.} = .000$). As such, both hypotheses H3 and H4 are supported.

Table 3. The importance of UGC and Non-UGC sites content for travel decisions
(Source: authors' work, based on survey data)

		Mean	Totally unimp.	Unimp.	Neutral	Imp.	Very imp.
UGC	Photos of places posted by real travelers on Social Networking sites (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest etc.)	3.53	3.75%	13.75%	28.75%	33.75%	20.00%
	Videos of places posted by real travelers on Social Networking sites (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat etc.)	3.61	3.75%	3.75%	25.00%	40.00%	20.00%
	Independent travelers reviews on travel-related websites (TripAdvisor, Booking, Airbnb etc.)	3.89	1.25%	3.75%	27.50%	40.00%	27.50%
	Independent travelers blogs	3.43	5.06%	13.92%	29.11%	36.71%	15.19%
Non-UGC	Information provided by state tourism websites	2.7	8.75%	30.00%	47.50%	10.00%	3.75%
	Information provided by tourism operators	2.8	8.86%	27.85%	43.04%	15.19%	5.06%
	Travel reviews written by professional travel writers	3.54	1.25%	11.25%	32.50%	42.50%	12.50%
	Live webcams from particular destinations/ attractions	3.3	3.75%	20.00%	32.50%	30.00%	13.75%
	Interactive trip planners	3.23	7.50%	10.00%	41.25%	35.00%	6.25%

As regards the final additional questions, the results in Figure 2 show that 55% of the respondents might make a final decision relating to booking a trip or travel product based only on the influence of UGC sites (33.75% chose they are likely to, while 21.25% would definitely make-up their mind relating to booking a trip based solely on UGC's influence). 31.25% were unsure what they would do, while 3.75% would definitely not base their travel choice influenced by UGC, and 8.75% stated they are unlikely to make a travel decision relating to booking a trip based on the influence of UGC sites. On the other hand, 27.5% might change their existing travel plans only because of the influence of UGC sites, and 13.75% would definitely change their travel plans after seeing certain

photos, videos or reviews in Social Media. Only 6.25% claimed that UGC sites will certainly not influence their existing travel plans.

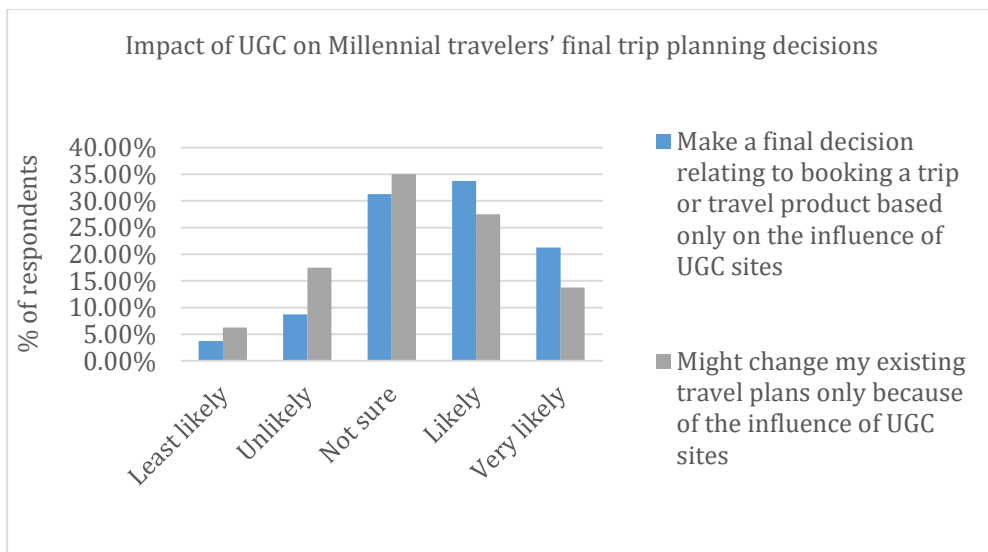


Figure 2. Impact of UGC on Millennial travelers' final trip planning decisions (authors' work, based on survey data)

Conclusions

First and foremost, this research found that UGC has become very powerful lately, especially among the younger generations, and complements successfully non-UGC sources in what concerns travel information. In certain stages of the travel product buying decision, such as information searching, UGC sites have even started to replace non-UGC in Generation Y's buying behavior, far more of them using Social Networks, travel blogs, travel-related forums than official state tourism websites, travel brochures, or even interactive trip planners.

It is also very interesting to notice how the use of UGC changes throughout the trip planning process, UGC being a most used source of information at the beginning of the process while looking for inspiration and evaluating alternatives. Millennials use UGC quite often also during the trip when they want to find various information about the place they are visiting, but as the decision-making process moves on, our respondents did not seem to be willing to share their experiences with other people in Social Media. Yet, they trust more the information on Social Media, such as travelers' pictures, videos, or reviews than similar information from travel companies. The explanation for the intense usage of UGC during the initial stages of the decision-making process may be that the users want to fuel the enjoyment from anticipation, to confirm for themselves that they made the right decisions, but also to find out about various tips and tricks from other travelers, so to be prepared and get the most from their own holiday. Among the UGC sources, blogs are least trusted, but, when asked about the trust in non-UGC sources, professional travel writers ranked the highest, suggesting that Generation Y prefer to hear and read others' experiences (be they sponsored or not) than official, detached information about the destinations chosen.

This research brings up some key aspects for the parties involved in the travel and tourism industry – marketers should design strategies that combine UGC and non-UGC sources in ways that could make their brands better off, more trusted, reliable. People look for interactions with their favorite brands, want to voice their opinions and like to know they have been heard. They appreciate when real travelers are allowed to contribute to businesses' online websites and Social Network pages or when they can get answers to their concerns in minutes. Thus, there is a great opportunity for tourism providers to enhance their current e-commerce and digital marketing strategies by integrating various UGC functionalities into their existing websites, create a big community around their brand, be a voice in the online media. Yet, this may also be a challenge, and businesses should at least monitor carefully what people say about their brands online, as negative reviews could very easily damage their image. Marketers should rather work harder to boost consumers' engagement and increase organic reach through Social Networks, to make consumers join honest conversations than try to control and manipulate them through traditional forms of advertising – in the given circumstances, these latter tactics might actually lead to negative opinions about the brand. Furthermore, consumers should be encouraged to engage with the brands, to post reviews, opinions, share pictures, videos or any other form of content. Perhaps they should be reminded that others' opinions helped them decide about a certain destination, accommodation or tourist attraction, so they could also contribute and help others in return. Plus, incentives may be granted to users that update their profile and add as many personal information and preferences as possible. These would help businesses provide targeted content to the readers and also conduct webnographic research. Other add-ins, combinations of offline and online promotional sources, for example adding QR codes to brochures or flyers to boost call to action and raise awareness to online media means might also represent a suitable tourism marketing strategy for Generation Y.

Last but not least, regarding future research directions, it might be appealing to investigate if and how is the Romanian Millennial consumers' tourism behavior different than the counterparts' from abroad. Additionally, scrutinizing the reasons why some travelers still do not trust UGC sources might also be of interest, as well as how to increase people confidence in online content, how to increase users' engagement with your brand.

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