

MONITORING ONLINE REPUTATION OF TOURIST DESTINATIONS IN FINLAND

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With the support of the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



This research is done in the framework of the Project 2020-1-CZ01-KA203-078479 "Online reputation management" co-funded by Erasmus+ Program of the European Union

Abstract

Tourism of nowadays is strongly influenced by the internet and different online applications. But the existing university syllabuses of tourism management and marketing are mainly not adapted to cover the topic of online reputation. There are courses focused on reputation management available, only few are focused on online reputation and even less are focused on online reputation in tourism and hospitality. The new course of "Online reputation management" will support students to increase the skills and key competences in this area.

The main objective of [the Erasmus+ project "Online Reputation Management" \(ORM\)](#), which is running by 4 European partner universities, is to create a syllabus and teaching materials for the new course that will enable to teach this topic for the students systematically and based on a real data and experience.

One of the research groups involved in ORM, is tourism business enterprises (companies, destinations, sightseeing etc). To create teaching materials for the course, besides other topics, it was decided to conduct separate research in destination ORM. eWOM of this group has its own motivations, needs and expectations regarding online reputation. As the overall strategy of the project is to develop skills and competencies of future managers and tourism workers, it was decided to conduct a semi-structured interview with tourist boards and destination bureaus by all project partner universities. Questions for the interview were created so that the answers help to describe, how destination managers work with eWOM reviews of the customers in current times.

Due to corona pandemic, interviews were conducted online, manually transcribed, and analysed. The qualitative questionnaire is formed by 8 main questions in important macro-areas. In each macro-area there are 5-8 smaller questions, which help the interviewee answering the main one.

This article describes the answers which were collected in Finland. Messages were sent to 16 destination marketing organizations (DMO's), which were chosen randomly without any relevance to any Finnish tourist destination. Due to the overload of this period of the year, only 3 answers were received. But answers were so alike that it could be concluded that the attitude of other Finnish DMO's could be rather similar. The research shows that eWOM is managed well in Finland. Social media networks and destination websites are mostly appreciated by the Finnish DMO's. Finnish destination managers understand importance of online reputation and have a person in charge or giving this duty to a staff person who is managing eWOM's by handling effectively both positive and negative reviews. They are quickly responding to online reviews from within CRM platforms, and creating customized campaigns by influencing the customer journey, which is resulting in increased guest engagement and direct bookings.

Results of these interviews give the relevant data for creation of the sustainable teaching materials for an e-learning module, which will lead to the most visible result of the project.

Keywords: Erasmus+ project, online reputation, ORM, eWOM, destination, DMO, Finland.

1 INTRODUCTION

Online public opinions using various forms of electronic online reviews and subjective experiences are generating challenges for the tourism industry. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has forced

destination managers to rethink their digital destination marketing strategies by monitoring of online conversations of consumers.

The success of tourism destinations is influenced by their relative competitiveness, as they compete in attracting visitors, residents, and related businesses. Any tourism destination with good reputation, created by consumers, could more easily attract money, staff and other resources for further development. Thus, we could say that reputation plays a vital role in their economic development.

With the progress of Internet, consumers could express their opinions about experiences got in different tourism destinations online, which makes the Internet the primary channel for tourists of getting information about a destination and all other activities involved in holiday planning. Many studies confirmed that consumers increasingly rely on eWOM while making a variety of decisions about their holidays (De Ascaniis and Gretzel, 2013; J. Ngacha Weru, 2021).

The importance of online reputation for tourist destinations is evident, and creation of skills and competencies of future managers and tourism workers who could manage it, seems to be absolutely necessary. But the existing university syllabuses of tourism management and marketing are mainly not adapted to cover the topic of online reputation. There are courses focused on reputation management available, only few are focused on online reputation and even less are focused on online reputation in tourism and hospitality. The main objective of the Erasmus+ project "Online Reputation Management" (ORM), which is running by 4 European partner universities, is to create a syllabus and teaching materials for the new course that will enable to teach this topic for the students systematically and based on a real data and experience.

This research can help educational institutions in teaching different online reputation management courses by providing a practical information for analysing the online management of a tourism destination in online media. This study will also allow researchers and marketers to identify potential areas of developing a destination attractions' system through an analysis of their online strategies.

2 METHODOLOGY

A semi-structured interview with tourist boards and destination bureaus managers was conducted to pursue an in-depth information around a topic of online reputation of a tourist destination. Semi-structured in-depth interviews are commonly used in qualitative research and are the most frequent qualitative data source in different research (DeJonckheere M, Vaughn LM., 2019). This method typically consists of a dialogue between researcher and participant, guided by a flexible interview protocol and supplemented by follow-up questions, probes and comments. The method allows the researcher to collect open-ended data, to explore participant thoughts, feelings and beliefs about a particular topic and to delve deeply into personal and sometimes sensitive issues. A semi-structured interview is a qualitative method of inquiry that combines a pre-determined set of questions with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses further (Whiting L.S., 2008). Questions for the interview were created so, that the answers helped to describe, how destination managers work with eWOM reviews of the customers in current times. Messages with invitations for the interview were sent to 16 destination marketing organizations (DMO's), which were chosen randomly without any relevance to any Finnish tourist destination.

This article describes the analysis of destination managers' answers which were collected in Finland in the mid of November – mid of December 2021. Due to corona pandemic, some interviews were conducted online, manually transcribed and analysed. A semi-structured interview does not limit respondents to a set of pre-determined answers. The qualitative questionnaire was formed by 8 main questions in important macro-areas: external and internal sources of online reviews, company instruments of monitoring online reviews, marketing strategies used by the company and expected outcomes of managing online reviews. Each macro-area (main question) included 5-8 smaller questions, which helped the interviewee answering the main one.

3 RESULTS

Most tourist business leaders believe that a positive reputation of tourist destination is important. Internet is the most convenient way of exploring the place of future holiday, and thus it is no surprise that Internet is hugely influential in people's travel decisions. The Internet allows one-to-one and many-to-many communications, and in this arena, it is possible to find shared opinions that compose electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004, p. 39) refer to eWOM communication

"as any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet".

A recent analysis of Nielsen Global Online Consumer Survey (2012) shows that 92% of consumers around the world say they "trust earned media, such as word-of-mouth and recommendations from friends and family, above all other forms of advertising" (Nielsen, 2012). Internet allows people to share opinions and experiences easily online, in the form of text, audio, or video/pictures, which work as an information source in the marketing communication mix and helping potential consumers to find information that matches their needs (Chen and Xie, 2008).

The purpose of the study is to analyze answers from destination and DMO managers, how they monitor and manage online reputation, and to collect real data for educational purposes to use them in university syllabuses of tourism management and marketing courses and modules for future specialists.

3.1 Sources of online reputation

Online Reputation Management (ORM) refers to the systematic management of customer comments and ratings, to respond to and shape the conversation around consumer experiences. By doing this, business managers take control of a situation and make use of the content created. There are two sources of information from where data about online reviews is collected for digital strategy of a tourist information centre or DMO can be obtained: external and internal.

3.1.1 External sources (charts, blogs, feedback surveys...)

What people say about the destination, matters a lot as these are the people who will turn out to be loyal and faithful customers for the business. Managing external sources play an important role in maintaining destination reputation. All three respondents said that they are actively using different external sources but prefer to monitor reviews that are not controlled by the company, so called peer reviews. Channels that are valued most are e.g. Google, Tripadvisor, Booking.com, etc., social networks are also important, like Facebook or Instagram, mostly themed communities about domestic travel Matkailu kotimaassa – "Travelling inside the country". Influencers can bring more people recognizing and appreciating more peer feedback. Rather often destinations use reviewing from influencers, as they consider them a good choice for paid marketing. In the EU, any commercial cooperation should be marked by law, - that's why any "free" publicity which they get through them is highly appreciated. One respondent said that they aim to bring themes close to their operations to local, national and international media and follow yearly visibility afterwards. For moderating media exposure destinations are using different tools for social media coverage as well as media coverage.

3.1.2 Internal sources (service, structure, amenities...)

From a service perspective, the pre-purchase stage of the holiday significantly shapes the relationship between the company and the customer. It is mainly characterized by customers' information search, through which they gather information from company-controlled and peer-driven sources in traditional and digital media channels (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015). This puts a focus on the design and management of the customer journey to provide the customer with relevant information across different media channels (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Exposure to different information sources or media touchpoints before making a purchase decision is a key feature of customer journeys though, especially in the digital age (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Voorhees et al., 2017).

Different earned media and a good mix purchased vs earned media is important in destination marketing strategy. Earned media is a focus for all businesses because these sources help create a positive outlook and create trust with online visitors.

Service and quality are fundamental for online reputation, the most important issue is meeting and exceeding expectations of visitors, this is how positive eWOM is created, to ensure that things should be communicated authentically without faking things. DMO's and tourist information centres are trying to give an image of the destination as a friendly one with fine local experiences that will last with the visitor long after leaving. That's why they try to attract to their marketing strategy companies which give out the same impression as they're the ones which making an impact.

Competence is also communicated on the destination website where the highest quality images or photos and good texts are published. It is evident that the information there is kept up to date.

3.2 Monitoring online reputation

3.2.1 Methods of monitoring

There are many ORM methods offering various solutions for monitoring online reviews. Online reputation can be defined by search results on a search engine, social media comments, a ranking of consumer reviews, articles and news about the organization or the related attributes such as products and services (Capatina A,2017). An affordable and reliable ORM systems of monitoring are used in Finnish destination companies. Yearly media coverage reports include some positive/negative implications within the visibility. They also ask for feedback on the website and social media where they are presented. Some DMO's do not follow social media conversations about how the destination's main town is represented.

Nearly all DMO's have deadlines for reporting to their stakeholders, and thus they have defined and structured procedures, when reports are done regularly. Respondents said that they monitor external sources like chat and emails on a daily basis and respond to them immediately. Even though the reporting is done regularly, responding companies do not have a full-time online reputation manager. On the other hand, all respondents state that they have communicating mission and vision of their company.

3.2.2 Instruments of monitoring

Keeping track of what people say about the brand online is beneficial. Destination companies use both paid and free instruments of monitoring online reputation. They allow to monitor online mentions, including sentiment scores and resource authority. Net promoter score (NPS) is a widely used market research metric for ORM and is typically interpreted and used as an indicator of customer loyalty. Both B2B and B2C operations are benefiting as instruments of monitoring online reviews.

Destination companies adopt a qualitative and quantitative approach to monitor corporate online reputation media and social media regularly. Coverage analyses include - mentioning resource authority, positive exposure vs negative exposure, tracking referral traffic from mentions, spotting tourism industry influencers and identifying mention sentiment. It is wise to monitor more than just own pages and accounts, but public mentions and comments also.

3.3 Managing negative feedbacks

Every company feels the impact of negative reviews. If someone writes something negative about the company online, it can put at a serious disadvantage over the long term—especially if the company are not aware of it. As of Google search (2020), 70% of consumers don't use services from companies that have 4 or more negative items (on brands, products and services) in Google search results. Brand monitoring helps recognizing patterns in online presence.

There is no "Delete" button for negative reviews! The lack of negative comments at the destination's online media account does not mean their online reputation is 100 percent positive. Negative reviews are not only indicating a bad customer experience, but they also show a lack of a brand's willingness to resolve the issue. If it is something about destination activities, DMO replies positively, if the feedback is about some company in their region, they forward this feedback to the company.

Negative employee reviews affect much more than internal business operations. Destination companies answer or react in a positive way to all relevant messages and comments, and any feedback that they might get that ask for an answer / provide a contact information. This is done by the person, responsible for a particular channel who responds to negative feedbacks.

3.4 Online reputation management strategies

Destination online reputation is one of the strongest measures of success of the business. This means that keeping up with, and monitoring, online presence is a highly important part of the digital marketing strategy. Online reputation monitoring is the best way to ensure that the chatter is accurate and positive. The company needs a process / strategy for successful online reputation management. Of course, the process will vary from company to company, depending on the size, industry, and resources. Online reputation management means taking control of the online conversation.

All respondents said that they do not have any online management training nor strategy. Interns or other staff that work directly with B2C customers are taught how to answer and forward feedback. If a

reputational problem occurs (e.g. with an influencer or on social media), they are organizing an internal meeting to discuss how to proceed. So, instead of a “big picture” of online reputation, they only follow some relevant single discussions.

Main problem for destination managers is getting companies to be active on digital channels. Alone, they can't really uphold online reputation: it needs to stem from real experiences of tourists and real offering from the companies. But for destination companies the main goal is increasing the income of the tourist companies in the region. But DMO's cannot control company's service quality etc., that might in the end destroy customer experience. So excellent quality and customer experience should be a goal for all parties in the customer value chain to succeed.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This research attempts to propose an affordable and reliable real data information for creating a studying module of ORM for students. The research evaluates interview answers of the Finnish destination managers about ORM and their digital strategies.

During post-COVID era consumers are looking at different feedbacks and reviews before and after holiday planning, and they are becoming even more important for them during their decision journey. The research shows that eWOM is managed well in Finland, and Finnish destination managers understand well the importance of online reputation. Social media networks and destination websites are mostly appreciated by the Finnish DMO's.

Customers lack full information about destinations before purchase, so they search for destination-related information to reduce their purchase risk. Positive peer-driven information about destination may be reinforced by the company-controlled communication. Even though digital channels are typically associated with greater uncertainty and lower perceptions of the clarity and credibility of paid and earned media, influencers are playing an important role in the digital strategy of the destination.

There are many ORM companies offering monitoring solutions for online reviews. However, the service cost varies based on the needs and difficulty. This research shows that online reputation is an invaluable intangible asset that should be monitored by organizations of all sizes, types, and popularities. It would be very advisable to organise a special course or a topic of the course, which will help students study different methods of monitoring online reviews.

By analysing global media database, when a manager can see all mentions in the news media, it is wise to analyse separate media individually. When it comes to managing and repairing online reputation, it is important to remember that you must target all the digital channels and not just one. And every channel will involve a different strategy for this. So, it is recommended to train continuously online managers for using new and up-to-date monitoring tools for various digital channels of the company.

As respondents say that the company should provide answers to both positive and negative reviews, students should know psychological basis of responding to them. It would be nice to include into the course a topic about consumer online behaviour. Consumers discovered positive components to online holiday planning. These positive online travelling experiences will encourage new trends in consumer behaviours to take a steadfast hold.

Expectations like service availability, and more recently, a convenient buying journey, all affect how consumers make decisions to buy services or journeys online (and whether or not they'll remain loyal customers once they've made a purchase).

After successful finishing the course of ORM, the graduate could look for a job, as companies do not have full-time workers for monitoring online reputation.

LIMITATIONS

Due to the overload of the end of the year, which could be explained with the raising inbound tourist season, only 3 answers were received. All the answers got, were very alike, which helped the author concluding that the attitude of other Finnish DMO's was rather similar and the study findings could be generalized.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is done in the framework of the Project 2020-1-CZ01-KA203-078479 “Online reputation management” co-funded by Erasmus+ Program of the European Union. The author would also like to express sincere gratitude to all managers for their collaborative effort during data collection. Finally, many thanks to all participants that took part in the study and enabled this research to be possible.

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