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Social Media to Balance Tourism Flow in Natural Heritage Destinations

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Abstract

ICT and social media have in recent years increasingly influenced visitors' behaviour and resulted in negative impacts on heritage sites. While single sites are getting exponentially huge visibility and attraction, others are still little popular. The analysis of the presence on Instagram and Trip Advisor of the Swiss Alps Jungfrau-Aletsch World Heritage Site shows considerable differences between over and under tourism among the site destinations. Communication and ICT tools will play a key role in the realization of new concepts of destination stewardship. Destination dedicated channels on social media providing information on tourism flows and carrying capacity related issues could be relevant for future tourism management. A "heritage stewardship destination" model, focusing on quality tourism and involving all actors, creates value added for locals and visitors, opportunities to jointly engage in conservation of their heritage, to improve their own living standards and experience, and to share equally costs and benefits.

Keywords: heritage destinations, ICT, social media, visitor's management, over and under tourism, sustainable tourism

1 Introduction

In order to create expectations about a destination and what they can find there - and therefore, reduce the uncertainty - tourists look out for sources which they can trust. Modern tourists have more trust in other travellers' opinions using social media rather than official marketing advices [1]. Social Media influence travellers in all the steps of the customer purchasing process [2, 3], before, during, and after holidays, but with a different extent and with diverse objectives [4]. What travellers look for when scrolling through Instagram feeds is how trendy or 'instagrammable' the destination is, which nowadays has a huge impact on their decision-making process. Instagrammability is a term used to describe "a picture which is worth posting on Instagram" [5]. In terms of destination marketing, it means, for example, a colourful landscape or a cityscape which would look worthy as an Instagram post and which would attract attention of Instagram users and therefore, potential tourists to the destination.

The increasing use of technology during the travel planning process, especially in the during-trip stage, and an ever-increasing tourists' interconnectedness, affects the way experience is created [6]. People like to share their travel experiences, posting pictures and textual content online through different social media platforms. Visual content (e.g. pictures and videos) have been demonstrated to be particularly engaging and, having a mediating effect on travel experience [7]. Some of the most visited destinations and heritage sites today were not that popular few years ago. Thanks to the social media and other Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), many of them attract a significant number of visitors compared to the past. On the other hand, there are many destinations and heritage sites which have not or not enough been promoted, so they are still not or little known to social media users due to their absence on these platforms. Regarding the places popular on social media platforms, many of them face impacts caused by the number of visitors. It is not about too many visitors at the heritage site, instead it is about the number of visitors the capacity of the site can support. World Heritage sites are precious assets and thus, it is important for site managements to be aware of the maximal number of visitors which these assets can support in order to preserve their Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). In the case of natural heritage sites some places might be overloaded, while others need tourism enhancement initiatives.

In order to ensure sustainable development, to reduce pressure and to avoid negative impact in overloaded places as well as to help less visited areas to benefit from tourism, it is important to better balance visitor flows. Since posting pictures of visited places on different social media platforms is very common nowadays, social media can be used to provide opportunities for visitor flow improvement as well as to balance over and under tourism within the area of heritage sites.

The Swiss Alps Jungfrau-Aletsch World Heritage Site (SAJA), one of the sites with the need for visitor flow balance, is located in the centre of Switzerland and has attracted visitors for centuries. It covers 824 km2 and encompasses 23 municipalities with 35.000 residents and 5 million visitors per year. Social media analysis of the destinations of the SAJA Heritage Region has been conducted in order to collect the information shared through these platforms and to find smart solutions for visitors' guidance which would reduce pressure in places already overrun. Another aim of this analysis has been to examine which are destinations with less presence on social media and how these platforms can be used to stimulate tourism and its sustainable development. For this purpose, Instagram and TripAdvisor have been selected. The Content of the two platforms is user-generated and public - using hashtags on Instagram or providing reviews on TripAdvisor.

More than 70% of the overall content on Instagram is travel-related while TripAdvisor has been considered the largest, most experience-driven, and strongly user-generated online network of travel consumers [8, 9]. Differences between these two platforms have to be taken into account. Instagram enables its users to share pictures or Instagram stories on different topics, while TripAdvisor relates to the reviews on accommodations, restaurants and attractions, which narrows down the users' circle. Opposite to Instagram, TripAdvisor provides much more detailed information on features of a hotel or restaurant, opening hours, and reviews. Visitors to these places, and at the same time users of TripAdvisor, are expected to be judgmental and to rate the service provided.

Visual content shared by visitors is mainly about mountains, beaches, built architecture, food, which can be seen as an outsider's perspective. An insider's perspective is mainly given by the locals and businesses of the place (e.g. destination marketing organizations – DMOs, hotels, restaurants). The visual content shared by them shows local festivities, traditional events and food, crafts as well as the nature and architecture.

Furthermore, there is a difference regarding the total traffic. Instagram is much more visited compared to TripAdvisor [10]. It could be expected that the content on TripAdvisor will be inferior in terms of numbers of reviews compared to the content on Instagram. As a consequence, it provides considerably lower numbers in the analysis of the heritage destinations, compared to the same analysis on Instagram.

Regarding the delivery of results, visualization is considered an effective way - especially, using maps as it is an easy-to-read way of interpretation of the analysis outcome. For the purpose of better understanding the presence of destinations on social media, two maps were created - one based on the information collected on Instagram and another one based on interpreting the results from TripAdvisor. Maps will then be used to define a strategy to manage visitors flow within the area. The methodology of the analysis and a model for visitors' guidance will be highly relevant for similar areas with the need for visitor flow management.

2 Methods

In order to get relevant and on-site information, the management centre of the SAJA World Heritage site has been involved in the project by providing the list of key tourism spots of the region. In addition, 22 hiking trails recommended through the website www.myswissalps.ch have been analysed in April 2019 [11]. The same list of highlights (i.e. key tourism spots) has been used for Instagram and TripAdvisor content analysis.

2.1 Instagram analysis

On Instagram, by using different hashtags, people express opinions related to their travel experiences in a public way which is not the case with other social media platforms (e.g. Facebook). Each tourism spot along the trails was analysed and then sorted depending on trails' position and added to the nearest destination - i.e. hiking trail in the Gastere Valley is part of the destination Kandersteg. Some of the places were mentioned more than once - e.g. Kandersteg as destination and then again as a place on the trail - and in order to avoid the repetition of numbers, it has been considered only once. The number of examined spots was 185, sorted into 13 categories based on their location: Jungfrau, Lauterbrunnen, Kandersteg, Schilthorn, Grindelwald, Rosenlaui, Guttannen, Goms, Eggishorn, Bettmeralp, Aletschbord-Belalp, Raron-Niedergesteln and Fafleralp [12].

Some of the places do not have any hashtag, therefore it was necessary to examine which of them have hashtags and which do not. More precisely, 78% (145) of analysed tourism spots have hashtags created. On the other hand, there can be found two or more hashtags related to the same location - mainly due to the language differences - e.g. #oeschinensee and #oeschinenlake, where priority is given to a hashtag which contains more posts. In this particular example, hashtag Oeschinensee (#oeschinensee) is analysed as it contains more than 40.000 posts instead of hashtag Lake Oeschinen (#oeschinenlake) which contains around 5.000 posts (on March 22, 2019) [13].

Hashtags containing up to a few hundred thousand posts - sometimes up to 400.000 - can be found as well. The process used in the analysis is

sampling - more specifically, a relative sample which includes 100 posts that were the last ones posted on Instagram. The relative sample is considered an accurate reflection of the characteristics of the entire content, which has been done for all the hashtags.

Attention is payed to multiple meaning - i.e. hashtag Jungfrau does not necessarily mean that all the posts will relate to the mountain, instead Jungfrau might be addressed to a virgin, as translated from German language. After having the information on the number of posts (containing pictures and videos) and multiple meanings, a percentage is calculated - i.e. #aletschgletscher contains 17.468 posts (March 22, 2019) with 2% of multiple meanings, which implies that 2% will be extracted as they do not relate to the place of the analysis.

2.2 TripAdvisor analysis

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the term social media refers to "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking" [14]. Nowadays, tourists do not wait for the information to be posted by the owners of different websites - e.g. an official website of a destination or tour operator. Instead, they collect information from the content shared by their fellows online.

In 2000, when TripAdvisor was launched, it was a travel and restaurant website creating the content similar to what could be found in guidebooks. There was also a button with a call-for-action: "Visitors, add your own review", which was crucial for growth of the travel site. Still, there is a doubt: Can TripAdvisor be considered a social media?

From November 2018, TripAdvisor can be officially called social media platform, just like Facebook or Instagram. At this point TripAdvisor relaunched its website as a social network enabling users to connect with other travellers, to see their preferences, and to share experiences from the places they have visited by posting travel-related content on their own Activity Feeds. By doing this, they are creating a two-way communication which generates more interest in sharing experiences online. For these reasons TripAdvisor can be included in the analysis of the destinations' presence on social media.

The aim of the second part of the analysis was to examine the presence of the destinations of the SAJA Heritage Region on TripAdvisor, where the most important feature to be analysed is the number of reviews for all tourism spots on the list. After the information for each spot is collected, all the places are sorted into 13 categories (destinations).

3 **Results**

3.1 Instagram

The presence of the destinations of the SAJA World Heritage Region on Instagram is presented in Table 1. The first column represents destinations, the second and the third one represents number of posts of destinations and spots on hiking trails. The fourth column - sum (Σ) shows the total number of posts each destination contains including posts related to hiking trails (spots along the trails). Based on this information, a map is created with the aim to provide better understanding on the presence of the destinations on social media.

Table 1. The presence of the SAJA Heritage Region destinations
on Instagram

Destination	Number of posts	Hiking trails	Σ
Jungfrau	317.133	/	317.133
Lauterbrunnen	143.824	128.799	272.623
Grindelwald	202.660	27.715	230.375
Schilthorn	94.507	28.657	123.164
Kandersteg	108.731	8.800	117.531
Eggishorn	22.332	14.850	37.182
Guttannen	22.123	5.924	28.047
Bettmeralp	27.724	/	27.724
Rosenlaui	22.234	1.147	23.381
Fafleralp	11.984	2.805	14.789
Aletschbord-Belalp	12.137	1.332	13.469
Goms	3.361	8.699	12.060
Fafleralp	1.585	1.605	3.190
Raron-Niedergesteln	1.837	900	2.737

Tourism spots in the area of the Jungfrau - such as: Jungfrau, Jungfraujoch, Jungfraubahn, Konkordiaplatz, Sphinx, Ice Palace, Alpine Sensation and Jungfrau Eiger Walk - hold the first position as the most present spots on Instagram with more than 317.000 posts (on March 22, 2019). Lauterbrunnen follows with more than 270.000, Grindelwald with more than 230.000 and then, Schilthorn and Kandersteg with around 120.000 posts.

The analysis shows that the northern part is the area of the SAJA Heritage Region most presented on Instagram (Fig. 1).

3.2 TripAdvisor

Compared to Instagram, the analysis of the destinations presence on TripAdvisor produced considerably lower numbers. This is due to different concepts of platforms, hence different targets - especially before TripAdvisor announced a change to its website becoming more social. The numbers of reviews on TripAdvisor, show the absence of many tourism spots. The number of analysed spots is 185 out of which 57 have been reviewed by visitors. The total of 31% of the analysed key tourism spots have been reviewed on TripAdvisor [15].

The presence of the destinations of SAJA Heritage Region on TripAdvisor are presented in Table 2. It shows number of reviews for each destination, number of reviews of the places on each of 22 hiking trails, and the total number of reviews (i.e. sum of destinations and hiking trails reviews). The fundamental column is number of reviews and therefore, this column has been used for the map creation.

Destination	Number of reviews	Hiking trails	Σ
Jungfrau	4.463	/	4.463
Lauterbrunnen	565	2.289	2.854
Grindelwald	/	4.197	4.197
Schilthorn	4.084	65	4.149
Kandersteg	541	102	643
Eggishorn	111	356	467
Guttannen	438	132	570
Bettmeralp	1.572	/	1.572
Rosenlaui	1.273	/	1.273
Fafleralp	74	49	123
Aletschbord-Belalp	84	251	337
Goms	/	/	/
Raron-Niedergesteln	/	14	14

 Table 2. The presence of the SAJA Heritage Region destinations on TripAdvisor

Visual representation of the analysis (Fig. 2) shows that the northern destinations of the Heritage Region are most present on TripAdvisor. All the other destinations are less present - especially the southern ones. Destination on the first position on TripAdvisor is Jungfrau with more than 4.400 reviews (April 4, 2019) which corresponds to the results of Instagram. Fafleralp and Raron-Niedergesteln are the destinations with the lowest presence - 123 and 14 reviews, while spots of Goms have not been reviewed on TripAdvisor [12].

Totally 22 hiking tours are offered through www.myswissalps.ch official website - 5 on the east, 5 on the west, 7 on the north and 5 on the south of the region. Their promotion has been done through their websites only. Social media platforms can be used to spread the tourism activities and the nature preservation simultaneously.

4 Discussion

Good transport connections are what makes these destinations easily accessible which is one of the reasons why they are destinations with the so-called "Hit and Run Tourism". Thanks to the good connectivity, it is possible to visit these destinations in one day from almost any part of Switzerland. Due to Hit and Run Tourism, destinations might face certain impact of mass tourism - usually, in short periods [16]. It's impact on the site, local community as well as tourists' experience in the destinations has to be taken seriously. Therefore, strategies should be created to prevent negative impacts on the natural site and local population.

The perimeter of the World Heritage site is almost inhabited; hence the mentioned numbers include posts shared by tourists and few inhabitants. The Sphinx Observatory - an international research station at the Jungfraujoch - is a particular spot receiving a number of posts from scientific professionals as well. Additionally, when choosing a holiday destination, tourists look for information on distance and weather. Therefore, access and seasonality are considered important parts of the analysis outcome interpretation. Due to the accessibility, geographic situation, fame of the tourist attractions, understanding of the tourism segments, communication and marketing, the north of the region is much more visited compared to the other parts which is confirmed by the analysis - presence of other parts on Instagram is significantly lower compared to the north. It does not necessarily mean that parts of the region which are not highlighted on the map are not visited at all. Instead, these are the spots with either no hashtag - which means they are not that popular among Instagram users - or not mentioned on the list of highlights, which means these particular spots are not promoted by the heritage site management and, consequently, lack communication to potential visitors.

In regard to seasonality, some of the heritage sites' destinations face problems related to visitor flow management during high seasons, trying

to focus their promotion on low-season periods. The case of the Heritage Region is different. There is no seasonality in terms of tourism flows, neither at the site itself nor within the region. Due to the altitude of the heritage site (Jungfraujoch 3454 meters above sea level), visitors are able to enjoy winter activities during summer period which can be also understood from the posts they share. The fact that it is a year-round destination is important and is part of the strategies of site's management or strategies of other stakeholders, such as train companies either to promote the site or to manage visitor flows. Year-round destinations are present within the whole region where tourists find enjoyable winter as well as summer activities. This is the reason why the region attracts different tourist segments - i.e. those who prefer places easily accessible by train or gondola and those interested in hiking; those interested in winter activities such as skiing, snowboarding, ski crossing, sledging, winter hiking or summer activities such as hiking, biking, bike racing, trotti biking, mountain cart etc. This results in difference in numbers of visitors in destinations within the region and this factor has to be considered when creating a promotional strategy or visitor guidance with social media (i.e. visitor flow management).

ICTs - in particular, mobile technologies - have been considered a good assistance of heritage site managers in promoting responsible and sustainable tourism. Therefore, an ICT solution could be one of the ways to balance out visitor flows within the area. This could be useful for both overloaded and less visited areas. Geographic Information Systems (GISs) offer great opportunities for the development of modern tourism applications using maps [17]. Since the maximal number of visitors, which natural heritage sites can support may differ, a GIS-based mobile application could be beneficial for the whole area. It could be created to provide a visualization of a current situation on different tourism spots on a map where the visual part would present the spots, highlighting those which are overloaded and offering tourists an alternative. Maps are considered easy-to-read and therefore, an effective way of interpreting the information.

Destinations offered as alternatives would be suggestions only – and it will be up to the visitors' decision whether to visit the place at that particular time or to choose proposed alternative. Potential visitors, planning journeys to tourism spots, would appreciate, getting the information up-to-date at the spot of their choice. Moreover, considering

that 85% of leisure travellers decide about their activities and the tourism spots after arriving at the destination [18], it is likely that many travellers will choose a proposed alternative in case their first choice is highlighted on the map as crowded at that specific time.

As there are many destinations without official social media pages, it would be necessary first to create official pages on both Instagram and TripAdvisor (and possibly Facebook) as well as to create hashtags and geotags and to communicate the destinations to potential visitors. Communication of those places will be especially useful for destinations with the need for tourism enhancement. Without social media communication, destinations are running the risk of not reaching their audiences and specific tourism segments. Particular focus should be on tourism segments, referring to different types of tourists grouped according to their interests, preferences, demographic characteristics, etc [19]. It is crucial to know who are the guests coming to the destination in order to find ways to interact with this audience.

Communication of the areas with the need for tourism development would be beneficial for both, less visited destinations as well as places already overrun. For example, a new gondola lift - Fiesch-Kühboden will be operating more frequently and with the Carrying Capacity of 1.800 persons per hour compared to the current gondola lift with 800 persons per hour. It could serve as a feature to attract tourists - e.g. Chinese tourists as they prefer destinations which are easily accessible and with supporting facilities and activities.

One of the characteristics of the SAJA Heritage Region is the picturesque landscape, this could be used for marketing, posting pictures containing vivid colours of the clear sky, green trees, mountains, on their official pages on social media.

Places are more than physical spaces and connecting with them creates connections with people - i.e. we find an important place and share our impressions with others, creating interactions and values. During their travel experience tourists hear and create their own stories, which, in turn, can be shared with others as memories [6]. Storytelling is part of tourism interpretation and could be especially useful for less visited parts of the region. Locals can be involved by telling their story or a legend about the place they live in, to be shared on social media platforms. Bottom-up approach, where the local population is involved in decision making and contributes to the development of tourism is an excellent opportunity to ensure its sustainable development.

Hashtags are a public mean to share experiences and opinions and they connect people with similar interests and in this way, connect them with destinations they might be interested in. In order to make tourists use them, hashtags should be communicated - i.e. destinations should invite visitors to use them. For this purpose, the application of signs, made by artists or craftsmen, in less visited spots could be an appropriate way to facilitate the use of the hashtags. Signs would contain a call-for-action to take a "perfect picture" with marks on where to stand, providing information regarding the hashtag to use and to invite visitors to share their pictures using it. It is important to think of materials which could represent local resources and traditions, e.g. wood or stone works. Involving locals can contribute to the sustainable development of tourism in the region. Signs can contain touch objects for visually impaired people and give them a possibility to enjoy the beauty of nature in front of them and communicate it to everyone.

In this way, signs would be multi-functional - they would be used to promote places (as visitors would share pictures using indicated hashtags) while at the same time, assisting people with different abilities. In order to avoid overcrowding at those places, marks (on where to stand to take a selfie or a picture) would be moved to another place periodically.

5 Conclusions

A World Heritage Site recognized by UNESCO should be a prestige and local pride, using the World Heritage label is favourable for destinations with need for tourism enhancement. Results of studies conducted in other countries show that the label could be an excellent promotional tool if used in a responsible way.

It is crucial to have main stakeholders working together and creating a dense cooperation. But also, other actors within the Region as well as from the outside - e.g. universities, tourism operators, sponsors.

Afterward improvements and reactions have to be monitored in the destinations of each site and all the changes need to be evaluated in order to respond adequately. Results of the analysis of the destinations'

presence on social media before and after the implementation of the model will be assessed.

People have never been educated on how to participate in visiting heritage destinations - either natural or cultural. In order to make use of social media and their online presence and educate potential visitors, posts can be created to promote a picturesque landscape of destinations while at the same time, integrating heritage values, preservation and threats into education, delegating responsibility to visitors. Visiting communities, groups and individuals, [20] fostering social cohesion, which has positive effects on the wellbeing of people, both residents and visitors. Therefore, all actors have to be involved in the co-developing of heritage and tourism leading to the creation of a corporate and positive image of destinations.

It is important to spread the message that heritage is not just about sites themselves, but the encounter of people and the importance of tourism being a steward for heritage and not vice versa.

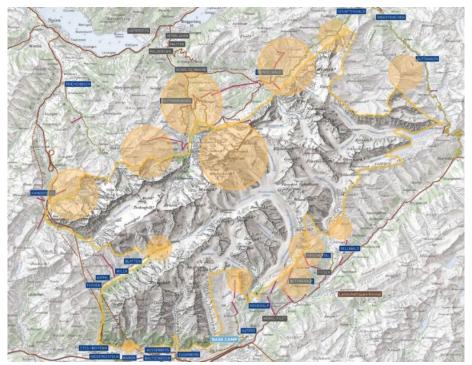


Fig. 1. Destinations of the SAJA World Heritage Region including places and their presence on Instagram (map source: SAJA Management Center)



Fig. 2. Destinations of the SAJA World Heritage Region including places and their presence on TripAdvisor (map source: SAJA Management Center)

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