Tourist destination branding on social networks *

Summary: Social networks have become the modern means of communication. Intensive electronic word of mouth to mouth (eWOM) leads to faster sharing of experiences, and the creation of positive and negative attitudes. On the other hand, branding of tourist destinations has become one of the most powerful resources in the implementation of marketing strategies in tourism. The aim of this study, which is based on primary research, is to examine the concept of electronic word of mouth, as well as the role of social networks in the process of branding tourist destinations.

Key words: electronic word of mouth, branding, social networks, tourist destination.

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Rezime: Društvene mreže su postale savremeni način komunikacije. Intezivna elektronska komunikacija „od usta do usta“ (elektronski marketing od usta do usta, usmena propaganda elektronskim putem) utiče na brzo prenošenje iskustva i kreiranje pozitivnih i negativnih stavova. Sa druge strane, brendiranje turističkih destinacija postalo je jedno od najmoćnijih sredstava u primeni marketing strategije u turizmu. Cilj ovog rada zasnovanog na primarnom istraživanju je ispitivanje koncepta elektronskog marketinga od usta do usta i uloge društvenih mreža u procesu brendiranja turističkih destinacija.

Ključne reči: brendiranje turističkih destinacija, društvene mreže, elektronski
1. INTRODUCTION

Tourist destination branding is based on the application of basic elements of branding strategy, with partial variations due to the fact that it does not concern tangible products or services. The branding destinations (e.g. cities) is based on the belief that terminology and branding tools can be applied equally successfully on cities, as they can be on specific products and services in the sphere of economy [34]. However, although there are many opinions on whether destination branding can be applied in the same manner as the branding products or services, it is necessary to point out the main differences, as well as focus on the specifics of tourist destination branding.

Modern means of communication, breakthrough of the Internet and the various forms of communication through this media, have an impact on the creation of consumer attitudes regarding certain products or services. Communication via social networks is becoming an inevitable part of private and business everyday life. This paper is based on an examination of the role of social networks in the process of tourist destination branding, as well as an analysis of the opportunities that social networks can provide in this marketing process.

2. THE ELEMENTS OF BRANDING

Brand is the term used to refer to products and services of the highest quality, but more broadly observed, according to the Brandmagazine, the concept of brand has, with globalization and the rapid development of modern society, become a synonym for the highest universal value, and has thus become accepted as a concept in many other fields as well. The word »brand« in its literal meaning in English means – a mark or trademark. By analogy, a brand is the product of branding, and as such, the process of branding represents the function and process of marking, labeling, and establishing a symbol. According to the definition by the American Marketing Association (AMA), a brand is a “name, concept, sign, symbol, design or combination of the above, which identify the goods or services of a seller, or a group of sellers, which set them apart from the competition”. An affirmed product brand or service brand conveys information, minimizes risks and increases consumer confidence [23], differentiates a particular brand from the competition, and encourages recommendations [30]. The principles of branding are based on consistency, clarity, continuity, visibility, authenticity and brand leadership. The construction, consolidation and expansion of a brand require the dimensions of clarity, consistency and leadership.

The central role in the process of branding and building a clear market position, whether it concerns a product, service or company, is reflected in the
establishment of precise brand architecture. Brand architecture represents the process of organizing and building, i.e. structuring of the brand portfolio, with an aim of defining the role of the brand, as well as the natural relationships between brands and different product markets. In theory, there are three basic models of brand architecture: house of brands architecture (corporate brand), supported brand architecture (umbrella brand) and branded house architecture (family brand) [33]. In contemporary literature [1] we find an amended division of brand architecture which, in addition to the three mentioned models, also includes the architecture of a confirmed brand (endorsed brand), as well as the architecture of an individual product brand.

We can observe that branding is a complex marketing process, which requires the application of a comprehensive analysis of brand characteristics, as well as its consistent implementation.

3. TOURIST DESTINATION BRANDING

In the same manner as products of durable or nondurable goods, destinations are also faced with modern market trends - globalization, internal and external government policies, changes in exchange rates and the natural environment, as well as increased costs intended for marketing purposes. Therefore, corporate branding strategies can, to a certain extent, also be applied on destinations [2]. However, destinations are far more complex and multidisciplinary in comparison to goods or services [31]. Management of a destination can be viewed as a set, or better yet, a system of strategic and operative intentions and decisions, undertaken with the goal of managing the process of the establishment, promotion and commercialization of the tourist product of a destination [21]. In order to achieve the desired effect, theories of positioning suggest that the only way to reach the consciousness of busy consumers is to create a concise message, which will be based on several of the most significant associations towards the brand. However, one should bear in mind that the market segments being addressed by the slogans of particular destinations are very heterogeneous. Unlike with products and their brands which mainly address selected target markets, in the case of destinations, it is a matter of different geographic markets that need to be addressed, by focusing on certain characteristics of the destinations, or products that originate from a destination whose use is often limited. As one of the reasons due to which destination branding is a much more complex process than branding of a product or service, Pike [31] states the fact that the results of numerous scientific theories on destination positioning are irrelevant in regards to political decisions, which driven by their own short term interests, often change the development and branding strategy of destinations. Pike also points out that control of the implementation of a destination branding strategy is very difficult to implement in practice. Seeing as how we are dealing with a top down approach, it is difficult to predict whether the local population and tourism businesses and organizations
will actually implement the strategies they have generally accepted, whose behavior is very important in the creation of a tourist experience. The author also underlines the fact that it is very difficult to maintain contact with the numerous visitors who have spent a certain amount of time at the destination. Finally, it should be borne in mind that financing of the destination branding process is far smaller in comparison to the amounts set out for the creation of large corporate brands that depend on the sales of a particular product or service. The number of visitors does not affect the amount set aside for the branding of destinations, and the management of destinations is often forced to turn to other public and private sources of funding.

Therefore, we can observe that Destination brands, similarly to products and services, have intangible components that are mainly service-dependent and can be positioned through slogans [31]. The key elements of branding destinations [2] can be grouped as follows: vision and management of stakeholders, connecting target consumers and products, positioning and differentiation based on the characteristics of the brand, communication strategy and the management of responses and reactions.

A vision is the starting point of all great strategies [4]. With clearly defined long-term goals that can range from the quality of the tourist offer to business prosperity and social well-being [9], [4], visions are able to achieve results and meet the expectations of stakeholders. Successful policies not only increase economic gain, but they harmonize culture (who are we?), the process (how do we know?), content (what do we know?) and infrastructure (who, how and when?) [7] coordinate the brand, image and reputation. Therefore, the government is required to formulate, communicate and adapt the vision to all stakeholders, and create a service-oriented culture that will provide the destination with a competitive advantage [31]. The branding process increases with a higher degree of diversity of the stakeholders, the needs of the target consumers [17], as well as their conflicting interests [41]. The local authorities must be completely certain that their strategies of creating and positioning the destination are in accordance with the expectations and needs of the local population [41], [31]. When brands are based on national culture, there is a greater synergy with the marketing strategy [37]. Furthermore, it should also be borne in mind that each destination has its own history, cultural heritage, values and image, which can be both positive or negative [40].

The products and services that can be found at destinations must be integrated into the overall branding strategy, and based on realistic potentials [16]. The products require investments into infrastructure (airports, harbors, roads, technology); the use of natural resources (such as safe harbors, access to petroleum sources), and options such as an open sky or other economic policy measures (duty free zones and credit facilities) [3]. Likewise, different market segments perceive destinations in different manners [24]. Positioning is more effective when the image of a destination fits the psychological profile of the tourist [43], the values of his or her lifestyle [13], or activities and experiences [45].
A brand’s identity is the image through which it creates a sustainable advantage through brand differentiation, in relation to other competitors [36]. In the brand value pyramid, effective positioning drives consumers from the functional, towards the emotional and self-expressive benefits. According to research [18], the emotional component of destinations is responsible for the majority of variations in the character of destinations. Another study has shown that consumers prefer brands that are based on symbolic, rather than functional attributes [19]. Symbolic values provide a sustainable competitive advantage [28]. Destinations should base their brands on several key attributes, instead of applying a comprehensive differentiation strategy [44], [45].

The destinations are not the owners of the vertical and horizontal elements of the delivery of their products, which makes differentiating, communicating and maintaining an image through media and products more difficult [22], [37], [8], [15]. Although there are studies that indicate how newspapers, television and magazines are considered to be much more reliable than online forms of advertising [27], it should be borne in mind that marketing by word of mouth (oral propaganda) is one of the favorite manners of communication between tourists. Seeing as how the topic of this paper is precisely the use of social networks in the tourist destination branding process and the possibilities of application and utilization of social networks, this concept will be given special attention in the following section.

Marketing research in destination branding management has the task of mitigating the difference between that which is transmitted through the marketing channels of communication, the perceived image of the destination, and its desired identity [20], [4].

Destinations must be sold on the basis of true, and not hypothetical and exaggerated information, since this is the only way to increase loyalty and spread a positive word of mouth marketing [30]. The research conducted by the agency AC Nielsen in 47 countries via the Internet showed that 78% of consumers base most of their trust on recommendations [27].

4. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN BRANDING TOURIST DESTINATION

Social networks (social networking sites) have enabled users to come together into virtual communities on the basis of several different grounds: on the principle of prior personal acquaintance, but also on the basis of a common place of residence, as well as similarity in professions and matching interests [15]. Social networks are a form of social media whose development has significantly changed the means and strategies of communication with consumers. Social media are consumer-generated media [26], and they represent a diverse source of online information that are created, driven and used by consumers with the intent of informing each other about products,
brands, services, as well as problems they have encountered [5]. They include various types of Internet communications, of which we are naming several types [26]:

- Social networking sites (MySpace, Facebook, Faceparty)
- Creativity works sharing sites (photos, videos, music, intellectual property, etc.) (YouTube, Flickr, Jamendo.com, Piczo.com, Creative Commons)
- User-sponsored blogs (The Unofficial AppleWeblog, Cnet.com)
- Collaborative sites (Wikipedia)
- Virtual worlds (Second Life)
- Commercial communities (eBay, Amazon.com, Craig’s List, iStockphoto, Threadless.com)
- Business networks (LinkedIn)

The increasingly important role of social media is reflected in the fact that, through social media, organizations are able to communicate with their consumers, but also encourage consumers to communicate amongst each other. Particularly important is the communication between consumers, because consumers have more trust in information regarding products and services that they receive through social media, rather than through the traditional means of communication through a promotional mix [9]. Therefore, based on the fact that social media are frequently updated, that they have a large number of hyperlinks and encourage further social networking on the Internet [46], as well as the fact that sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Youtube, Flickr, TripAdvisor, etc. allow consumers to share their experiences in different ways by posting their comments, pictures and videos [46], it is our opinion that the tourist destination branding process must not neglect the role and potential of social media. Seeing as how consumers of tourism services feel that their travel experiences are interesting conversation topics [39], this paper will devote special attention to the phenomenon of word of mouth marketing (WOMM) on social networks.

Word of mouth marketing includes every form of interpersonal communication that refers to a product or service in which the recipient of the message considers the sender of the message to be neutral [39]. Such a manner of communication can be the input in the process of making a purchase decision or the output of the purchase process, its judgment can be positive or negative, while its range depends on the number of people to whom the message is sent [6], [39]. Studies have shown the impact of both negative as well as positive word of mouth marketing on tourism products: it has been observed that [28] negative word of mouth marketing has an unstoppable impact on the image of a destination, because dissatisfied visitors spread negative impressions of their own experiences; the tourists’ choice of destinations has been investigated [38] and a conclusion has been reached that the majority of decisions of Western Australians are based on WOM communication. In support of the development of this technique of communication, which is becoming increasingly less
neglected by both small and large tourism businesses, is the fact that in the era of development of Internet communication tools we have come to the definition of electronic WOM (eWOM), as well as the classification of the Internet word of mouth marketing channel, depending on whether it is intended for mass or direct communication [25].

Special attention was attracted by the role of social networks in the searching of tourist information on the Internet, seeing as how tourists are increasingly using the Internet as a means of describing, reconstructing and reviving their travel experiences [32], [42].

The research that we conducted had an aim of directing us towards the basic purposes and usages of social media, so that in the light of tourist destination branding we could observe the possibilities of their application.

5. RESEARCH METHOD

The research was conducted during the month of February, 2011. The goal of the research was to investigate the potential roles of social networks in the branding of tourist destinations. The study included a total of 225 students. The main research instrument was a questionnaire, consisting of 30 questions of a closed and open-ended type. This paper analyzes two groups of questions: one group of questions relates to the types of social networks that the respondents use and the reasons and intensity of their use, while the other group refers to the analysis and degree of correlation of the information obtained by the respondents on social networks, and the tourist destinations they choose for their vacation. Through presentation and comparison of this information, observed can be their effect (total and partial) on the respondent’s decision regarding the choice of a tourist destination, and the creation of their image of it. A high percentage of respondents gave an answer to all thirty questions in the survey, thus demonstrating a high awareness of the importance of the survey in which they participated. However, although in a small percentage, a certain number of surveys have shown that there is still under development of the research culture, which is in short reflected in the following:

• On certain questions, where from clearly defined responses it was necessary to circle one of the two offered diametrically opposing answers, the respondents circled both,
• Incompleteness of the survey - in a certain number of surveys, the respondents did not answer all of the questions,
• Indifference of the respondents – which is in the best manner reflected in the case of the questions and answers that were slightly longer than others; the respondents left these questions unanswered (examples are questions 23, 28, 29).
Lack of concentration and dedication of the respondents while filling out the survey – which is reflected in the fact that on associated questions some of the respondents gave contradictory answers (for example, when asked whether they use social networks they responded with NO, while on the next question of which social network they use, they gave a specific name of the social network they use).

Deviation from the clear instructions - a certain number of questions in the survey required the respondents to choose only one of the several offered choices, but a certain number of respondents circled two, three, and even more answers on the given questions.

6. RESEARCH RESULTS

The study included 225 adult respondents, most of whom (52%) were born in Belgrade. In regards to the gender composition of the respondents, we can conclude that there is an equal gender representation because the share of male respondents is 47%, while the share of female respondents is 53%. The research results obtained through data processing are presented in tabular and figures that follow. Fig. 1 shows the age structure of the respondents.

![Figure 1. Age structure of the respondents (in percentages)](image)

Fig. 1 shows that the greatest number of respondents belongs to the age group of 19 to 25 years of age (96%). We have decided to focus the research on the role of social networks in tourist destination branding on this population, based on research results of EUSTAT on the use of social media, which show that as many as 80% of the respondents aged 19-24 use social networks. Therefore,
the research was conducted on a sample of students in order to make it simpler to meet the age requirement of the respondents.

The percentage of respondents who have graduated from high school in Belgrade is 56%, so we conclude that there is a high correlation between the place of birth (52% born in Belgrade) and the place in which the respondents have completed their high school education. Over 90% of the respondents fall into the category of single-unmarried. The research has shown that the respondents who fall into the other categories (married, divorced...) use social networks less frequently. This data can be indicative for tourist destination branding aimed at young people.

Figure 2. Use of computers, Internet and social networks on the Internet (in percentages)

Fig. 2 shows that over 98% of the respondents own a computer, and just as many of them use the Internet. Social media on the Internet are used by 93% of the respondents. Social networks (Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace) are used the most, so as many as 77% of the respondents opted for them. They are followed by creative sites for exchanging videos, photos and music material (Youtube, Picassa), and collaborative sites (Wikipedia). Less than 5% of the respondents use professional networks (LinkedIn) and virtual worlds.

84% of the respondents have a profile on one of the social networks. The social network used by the majority of the respondents (92.5%) is Facebook, where most of the respondents have had a profile on this social network for over a year (Fig. 3). Out of those who do have a profile on a social network, 57% of them use and update their profile daily, while 28% use their profile once or several times per week (Fig. 4). Regardless of whether it comes to everyday use or use in every few days, the data shows that this social network is a part of the routine communication amongst young people. Since most of them have been using
Facebook for over a year, it was expected that the level of awareness of the potential of this network is at a high level.

![Figure 3. Representation of the time period of the use of profiles on social networks](image)

![Figure 4. Temporal frequency of the use of social networks (in percentages)](image)

Out of all of the respondents, as already indicated, 16% do not have a profile on social networks. Out of the remaining respondents, 56% are connected with between 100 and 1000 other virtual profiles. Those who have less than 100 “friends” make up 24%. It is interesting that among the respondents there are 3% of those who are networked with over 1000 virtual profiles, while common for this category is the fact that they have had a profile for over a year, and use it daily.
We can observe that the number of recipients of a potential message through social networks is extremely high, and that as such, in the development of the electronic concept of word of mouth marketing, it must not be neglected. Although the majority of respondents, as we shall see later in the research analysis, use social networks to follow the activities of networked users, this high availability refers tourism enterprises and the management of tourist destinations towards great potential, but also a risk of rapid spreading of negative impressions, gained on a specific destination through social networks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of using a profile on social networks</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To post interesting things</td>
<td>29.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To share new knowledge regarding my profession</td>
<td>19.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To inform friends regarding my business activities</td>
<td>8.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To observe the activities of my friends</td>
<td>38.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5. Purpose of using a profile on social networks**

The research result presented in Fig. 5 shows that nearly 39% of the respondents who have a profile on a social network, use the profile to observe the activities of their “friends”. When we add onto this the 30% of those who use their profile to publish personal points of interest, we come to a conclusion that 70% of the respondents primarily use their profile to be informed about the activities of others, or to inform others about their personal activities. Only 30% of the respondents use their profile for business purposes, of which 20% share new knowledge regarding their profession, while 10% of them mainly use their profile to inform “friends” on their business activities.

The survey result shows that as many as 83% of the respondents believe that the information transmitted through social networks are different from the information transmitted through personal contact. When it comes to credibility of the information, 70% of the respondents believe that the information transmitted through personal contact is more reliable in relation to the information transmitted on social networks, while 11% of the respondents think otherwise. 19% of the respondents did not give an answer to this question, due to the
reasons given in the Research method section. In light of the branding of tourist
information, the management of tourist destinations must bear in mind the views
of social network users regarding information being spread in such a manner.
Seeing as how most of the respondents consider information received in person
to be credible, the building of the image of all factors of the tourist offer within the
tourist destination branding process must be very serious, in order to avoid a
disproportionately unrealistic image of a chosen destination.

Out of the respondents who share their experiences on social networks, 73%
share positive experiences, while 22% share their negative experiences. 
Although the concept of word of mouth marketing, particularly in the field of
tourism, has a greater representation of transferring negative experiences, social
networks as a more long-term manner of communication with the public imply a
tendency of the users to show their own profile (personality) in the best possible
light bringing about a tendency to transfer good experiences (most often the
photos and videos posted on social networks are the most representative), thus
the management of tourist destinations can become acquainted with the
experiences of the visitors and gain an insight into the tourists’ perception, and
can thus adapt their offer and promotional mix. However, when it comes to
sharing personal experiences on social networks, only 6% of the respondents
indicated that they share them very frequently, while 26% of them share them
frequently. More than 60% of the survey participants share their experiences
rarely or occasionally. This result shows that there is a high degree of distrust in
the respondents towards social networks when it comes to personal experiences
and their privacy.

When it comes to sharing experiences on social networks in general, 27% of the
respondents share their experiences from the world of entertainment and
culture, 19% share their experiences of student life and experiences of a
personal nature, while 16% most frequently share their experiences from travels
(Fig. 6). Based on the type of experiences that are most frequently shared on
social networks, the management of a tourist destination can adjust its offer and
its appropriate promotional mix to the thematically most represented
experiences: festivals, cultural events and the world of entertainment are,
according to the survey results, interesting topics for social networks, thus their
presence in the process of destination branding can be the motive for
exchanging experiences through social networks.

Among the surveyed respondents, 68% share their travel experiences on social
networks. 53% of the respondents mostly publish positive experiences from their
trips to tourist destinations, while 27% of them share both their positive and
negative experiences. When it comes to decision-making of the users of social
networks on the choice of a vacation destination, the experiences of other users
regarding tourist destinations have an effect on 46% of the respondents (Fig. 7).
The answers to these questions indicate a far greater role of social networks in
decision making regarding the choice of destinations, as well as the very
process of destination branding.
A high percentage of the respondents share their impressions from trips on social networks and inform themselves about the experiences of others before choosing a destination, and if we add to this data the fact that most respondents use social networks to follow the activities of networked users, we conclude that both the direct and indirect impacts of this form of communication are very important for creating an image of a particular destination, especially when the positioning of the destination is in accordance with the lifestyle of the visitors, for whose study social networks can be of great use.
As many as 52% of the respondents gather information on tourist travel and destinations on social networks before making a decision on the choice of a vacation destination. The research result shows that the respondents most often inform themselves through social networks by watching pictures and videos on the profiles of their “friends” (32%). Furthermore, 15% of the respondents send personal messages to their “friends” with specific questions about the tourist destination, while 14% read the comments on the profiles they are networked with (Fig. 8).

**Figure 8. Methods of gathering information about tourist destinations by users of social networks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In which manner do you gather experiences regarding travel?</th>
<th>Users (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I read comments on the...</td>
<td>13,78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I send direct personal...</td>
<td>14,67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I watch pictures and videos</td>
<td>31,56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of above</td>
<td>24,89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. **CONCLUSION**

The results of the conducted research show that in the world of modern communications, the Internet and globalization, social networks can play an important role in the branding of tourist destinations, particularly regarding destinations aimed at young people. The experiences of network users presented through comments on transport, accommodation and hospitality, especially through pictures and videos, have an influence on the potential users.
of tourism services. Although the number of respondents who speak openly about the manner and intensity of their use of social networks is not great, the implicit responses indicate a wide range of possibilities offered by social networks. Based on the given research, companies involved in providing tourism services at certain tourist destinations, or the management of a tourist destination, should adapt their promotional mix and in various ways be present on social networks. This leads to a win-win situation in which the social network users receive full information about a destination of their choice, because specific companies with their offer are also involved in their informing, while tourist organizations (management of the destination, hoteliers, small and medium tourism enterprises, etc.) can thus increase the size of their target market segment, but also use social networks as an inexhaustible source of information regarding the perceived and realistic lifestyle of the selected segment.

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