Social media tools in tourism co-creation

Zsuzsanna Horváth

College of Commerce, Catering and Tourism, Department of Tourism
Budapest Business School, Budapest, Hungary
zsenilia1 @gmail.com

1.   Creative industries

Creative industries' expansion and growing importance relies on the increasing need of consumers, traditionally 'alienated' from the means and processes of production, to be actively involved in the creative process. Firms are bound to incorporate new co-creation techniques in their product or services innovations. As consumers claim more active role, their eagerness to participate can be harnessed by firms and thus collective production or creation is a mechanism that cannot be disregarded today.

In recent managerial writing as mentioned by Kozinets, Hemetsberger, Schau (2008), the creativity of networked consumers had been defined as a rich resource with the potential to be exploited by business and managed. The networked context of ICT had enabled a flowering of online communities and their attendant collective production and innovation. The previously unmanagable consumer is now brought within the confines of the firm as a partner in the co-creation process offering skills and creativity that support the firm's goals of rationalising key drivers of growth and innovation (Bonsu, Darmody 2008).

Cultural analysis emphasises that consumption is a socially and culturally contextual process and, furthermore, that creativity is an ordinary aspect of this. This „ordinary creativity" can then connect back into the innovation system of producer creativity through the emergence of social networks of C2C and C2P production and innovation, resulting in new producer models of design and development activities, especially important in the domain of the new digital media, where both the technology effects and the economic impact of socially networked creative consumers-as-producers are the strongest. Furthermore, this is not just a rapidly growing sector within itself[1], but is also embedding in many other industrial sectors through new components of added value and innovation models. In this way, ordinary consumer creativity is becoming more and more important part of the global market capitalism model of production.

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[1] Cci/NESTA, (2008)

1.1. Situated creativity

Situated creativity is an extension of the concept of situated knowledge in which knowledge resides not only in the minds of individuals and in external codified forms, but also in situational contexts of spaces and places, languages and media, organisations, networks and other systems of social interaction. Situated creativity thus allows that individual creative acts, such as by an enterpreneur or an artist, - or as a recent development, the consumers - are not the entire domain of creativity in economic and cultural systems, but that creativity is also situated in localised and contingent systems of social interaction. Creativity is always situated both historically and within socio-technical networks inasmuch as it is understood not as a result of a psychological impulse, but rather as the process that results in cultural (and economic) innovation (Potts et al. 2008). The underlying value model is that creativity is the driver of economic and cultural evolution and source of value creation.

Social network interactions among consumers begin to function in a way previously understood to be the exclusive preserve of the internal dynamics of R&D laboratories by open innovation. Situated creativity is defined not as a static situation of an organisational or spatial state, whether culturally or economically defined, but rather as a feedback dynamic of creativity between production and consumption.

Co-creation processes are thus dynamically situated in the context of continually shifting cultural relations and economic opportunities for social networks. Situated creativity, in other words, is a disequilibrium phenomenon that arises only when existing institutions have been sufficiently or suitably disrupted by the technological, socio-cultural or economic innovations that the existing institutions, which normally maintain clear boundary separation between production and consumption, are open to creative response and the possibility of new boundary creation (Potts et al. 2008). This is both an economic and cultural opportunity into which new ideas, behaviours, coalitions and business models may extend. From the evolutionary perspective, those that succeed will eventually be reabsorbed into the evolved economic and cultural order as new institutions with new normal boundaries. This knowledge and creativity will no longer be situated but rather institutionalised.

2. Leisure experience

Tourism, categorised as part of the creative industries contribute in some ways to the cultural wealth of economies. As the share of creative industries in overall economies is said to be increasing, it is of growing importance not only to define and understand which the areas of value creation are but to equally analyse prevailing mechanisms.

Touristic destinations and their management offer emotional and cognitive stimuli and facilitate service experience consumption. It is therefore more appropriate to define co-creation in terms of co-creating the experience rather than that of the value. As Chan (2009) succinctly explains, the experience is the object of value. Or, as McIntosh (2009) develops in more detail, valued dimensions of the experience are produced in part by the visitors themselves through their personal thoughts, feelings, imaginations and the unique backgrounds that they bring with them to the leisure setting. By encouraging visitors to co-create their service experience, the aspects that they individually value are likely to be incorporated into the experience, making it unique and personal. Furthermore, co-creation is an organisational capability which potentially drives a positional advantage for the marketeers of touristic destinations.

When trying to define the leisure experience, we can agree with Binkhorst (2006) concluding that the specific character of the leisure experience is derived from the tension of everyday life and other realities which is to be experienced most obviously as a result of changes in habitual temporal and spatial structures.

Processes of globalisation and symbolic competition seem to be leading to the serial reproduction of touristic attractions and 'commodification' of the tourism product, most acutely observed in the area of cultural tourism Richards, Wilson 2006). Commodification has also been the result of the widespread adoption of the Internet, a growing number of low-cost airlines, hotel reservation sites and new online travel intermediaries offering travel and accomodation at prices that fluctuate according to supply and demand through the use of yield management systems. Availability of similar offerings leads to customers making a selection, only on the basis of price, quality and reliability taken for granted. The result of the process was a development that can be best described as the serial reproduction of touristic destinations, a flourishing of destinations affordable and accessible to visitors, often to the detriment of established destinations.

One way of avoiding the commodification of the touristic offer is by offering unique experiences to the consumers. Part of the uniqueness of the experience is the value creation. Creative tourism implies that the managers understand that creativity should be an attribute of the production process as well as the consumption process. By way of being developed endogenously, creative tourism does more than add a creative element to the destination product and services. It has to involve the creative use of destination assets, (inherited, created and creative assets) to provide creative experience for tourists. In order to harness the benefits of creative tourism, managers need to engage more actively with the creative process, not just in terms of product innovation, but recognising and making full use of the tourists' creative potentials.

The very desire for experience, or 'experience hunger'[2] that characterises modern society has always been a major driver in tourism and the trend that can be observed to day is that people have become separated from 'genuine' cumulative forms of experience that predominated in the past and are increasingly reliant on individual and (increasingly individualised) experiences for development of the life course. This makes it increasingly necessary for individuals to piece these discrete fragments of experience together into a concrete story that says something about who they are.

The growth of creative tourism was first defined as an extension or reaction to cultural tourism inasmuch as cultural tourists, creative consumers as they are, are searching for more engaging, interactive experiences that can contribute to their personal growth. In the area of individualisation, identity can be best developed in the process of collecting unique experiences. This can then be extended to touristic destinations. Each and individual tourist perceives the destination and the experience offered by the destination in their very special, individualised way which is the summum of their past life experience, education, attitudes , in other words, a wholes series of personal characteristics. The focus of the touristic experience creation is the individual, to fulfill the aspirations, wishes and expectations relating to his personal growth.

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[2] Richards, Wilson (2006) p. 1214.

3.   Need for collective creation

Co-creation is about collaboration. It's about working together to solve problems, uniting a range of perspectives and approaches to an issue. Very often this collaboration involves consumers working directly with professionals from inside and outside a client organisation, to define and create a range of outputs, from strategy to communications, from products to experiences.

The notion of collaboration is central to the way that co-creation works. It isn't about handing over control to 'the crowd', although often crowdsourcing and harnessing crowd wisdom is a useful input or stage within a wider model of open innovation. In co-creation the work is carried out in teams that span disciplines and backgrounds, so that ideas are generated and validated by producers and consumers together.

As opposed to creativity observed in the individual consumer, collective consumer creativity occurs when social interaction trigger new interpretations and new discoveries that consumers alone could not have generated. Companies might think of themselves not as managers of collective creativity but as part of the cultural fabric of an ongoing community. Individual creativity can be collectively fostered through the communal provision of high degrees of visibility, support, information and opportunities for contribution. Collective creativity needs appropriate enabling technology and the complex social and cultural fabric of community. In the networked world, individual efforts shade effortlessly into collective creativity. Business, consumer culture and wider society are being transformed in their wake

3.1.   Shifts in consumption patterns inducing the emergence of the co-creation framework

a.   Traditional rationale-driven decision making of the consumers has been overtaken by an emotional attitude and therefore price is not an attribute per se which would make the consumer delighted with his choice. Satisfaction is measured over the whole time-frame of the touristic experience and not against a mental checklist.

b.   Consumer is not seeking for the fulfilment of his needs, but rather his aspirations, desires and dreams that can carry him further on in personal improvement and growth. This will in turn lead to the active search of unique experiences that the consumer can use as a stage for the transformation of past life experiences into a better self. This is one where it is essential to understand what kind of value creation is taking place, what is exactly its mechanism and which are the actors that can contribute to taking the self to a higher level of sophistication. Physical and intellectual activities involved in the growth process are at the same time exercises of the imagination, with participants acting out roles determined by myth and fantasy. Shared experiences can create close bonds between tourists, a sense of community, contributing to the better identification of attributes that make each person individual, thus to gain recognition, status or kudos.

c.   Transition from passive to active attitude of the consumer. Participants of the touristic experience gain increased satisfaction from continued improvement of the capabilities, skills and knowledge required for the activity. The optimum flow of consciousness is likely to manifest itself when, despite the challenging nature of the task, the participant is in possession of the skills required to complete it. This means, in practical

terms, that the consumer will experience a state of flow when, immersed in the process of creation (or transformation), certain challenges will be offered, but he is prepared to complete them. This transformation can be called the creative process, the value creation in tourism, and co-creation takes place when various stakeholders in the touristic experience are invited to participate in the process.

d.   Increasing need for the personalisation of services

Researchers approach this trend from various angles, among which the following definitions can be pointed out: „Any behaviours occuring in the interaction intended to contribute to the individuation of the customer" or „ability to target individuals, engage them in dialogue with them and personalise and offering that meets their requirements", else „customising services to an individual customer through the adaptive behaviour of service representatives"(Xiang-Gretzel 2010).

This latter is especially important for our research objectives as they point directly to the basic question : what is the reason for the success of social media community sites in the realm of touristic services ?
Tourism experience is being provided at the touristic destinations, the conventional creators, designers and providers of the experience are those who participate in the touristic destination management. Marketeers' role and responsibility is to prepare and deliver to the potential consumers of the touristic experience. With the arrival of new innovative marketing techniques, marketeers of the touristic destination have to be prepared to deliver messages and offer values to the potential consumers that are in line with these modern methods and channels of marketing. The most recent development in the enhancement of brands is the exponential growth of social media sites that invite consumers, eager to obtain information about the offer and to maintain a certain kind of situated community with those that have already benefited from the experience. This holds true for brands in the retail and services sector, as well sales of the touristic destinations.

4.   Social media and the touristic experience

Much of the growth of interest in co-creation as an approach and philosophy comes against a backdrop of dramatic changes in the communications landscape in recent years. The evolution of the internet has had an enormous impact on the way that businesses interact with their audiences, and vice versa. It is near-impossible to underestimate the extent to which social media has empowered consumers to voice their opinions, create and distribute their own content, and, as active stakeholders in the brands they consume, to set a new agenda for producer-consumer relationships, and in many ways the advent of co-creation is a corollary of these developments.

Today we have quick, easy, cheap ways for voicing our opinion, we are organically connected and always on. Social media has created a real-time collective mind where people are becoming used to ongoing interactions (not campaigns), immediacy (not asynchronous responses) and closeness (not ivory tower distance) to the brands they admire.

This is a step change that's forcing businesses to switch to open and collaborative approaches where they have to listen, engage and collaborate with their audiences in shaping what they do in order to stay relevant. Brands have always placed great store in listening to their customers, but in the current economic climate staying close and staying constantly close has become more important than ever.

Social media as a modern platform for information exchange often used as a marketing solution to create brand communities and awareness in the retail and services industries, has reached the domain of tourism. More and more often, travellers-to be have access to these sources of information in order to prepare journeys and to find the best offer and services. Analysis of the use of search engine for travel planning by using a set of pre-defined keywords in combination with nine U.S. tourist destination names demonstrates that social media constitute a substantial part of the search results, indicating that search engines likely direct travellers to social media sites (Xiang-Gretzel 2010). It also provides evidence for challenges faced by traditional providers of travel-related information.

As mentioned before, co-creation is an institutional capability offering a positional advantage for the marketeers of touristic destinations. Social media sites in the touristic sector are initiated by either the marketeers of the destinations themselves, or by some enthusiastic „fan" of the destination who has already been immersed in the experience offered by that particular destination.

TDM agents and marketeers can thus make full use of the social media platforms in order to create brand awareness and enhance achieved levels of brand awareness. Consumers are invited to participate in online communities where a whole range of levels of engagement of participation are provided, thus offering a non-compelling choice of value creation.

It is in these communities that C2C and C2P (or service provider) co-creation can be best observed. Consumers can freely express their expectations, beliefs and reactions to the TDM offer. TDM managers create experience spaces where dialogue, transparency and access to information allow consumers to develop experiences that suit their own needs and level of involvement.

These consumers can be divided into 3 distinct categories: 1: those who are preparing for the visit of the destination 2: who have freshly experienced the destination 3: who want to remember the experience and are eventually planning a new „immersion". Conversion from one category to the other is made possible.

The enormous success of the social media sites and online communities, business models such as MySpace, Facebook and Flickr for example hold the value proposition that they embrace the articulation of everyday experience and personal social networking with both mundane and exceptional user-created content. Creative self-expression, creative remixing and propagation of unique, individualistic contributions all add to the attractiveness of the communities.

Facebook pages for destinations are becoming more and more popular as a marketing tool, and while many may think they are easy to produce and maintain, it may not exactly be the case. Mastering social media requires full participation, creativity and mainly time that is most required for the proper maintenance.

Among the otherwise rapidly developing sites, some are more spectacular than others, owing to a mastering of the creative processes that the community proposes and delivers. This is the case of the Pure Michigan Facebook page which managed to double its followers in less than 2 months, in spring 2010 [3] and has acquired by August 2010. almost 130.000 fans.

4.1. Effect of social media practices

Inspired by Schau's (2009) exhaustive research paper on brand community practices based on practice theory of sociological approach, we try to both define the effects of these practices and to apply them to the creative experience.

Brand communities in the tourism experience and for the purposes of this paper are those social media platforms that are created either by enthousiastic tourists or by the tourist destination managers or marketeers. They can be perceived as brand communities because their purpose is to provide a platform for C2C and C2S (service provider) interaction having the destination or the experience as the major „theme" or subject.

Practices, when used as a systematic research tool, can be characterised as follows: they are implicit ways of understanding, saying and doing things. They comprise a temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of behaviours that include practical activities, performances and representations or talk. Practices link behaviours, performances, and representations through (1) procedures – explicit rules, principles, precepts, and instructions, called „discursive knowledge" ; (2) understandings – knowledge of what to say and do, skills and projects, or know-how (i.e., tacit cultural templates for understanding and action) ; and (3) engagements – ends and purposes that are emotionally charged insofar as people are committed to them). To engage in practices, people must develop shared understandings and demonstrate competencies that reinforce social order while allowing them to distinguish themselves through adroit performances.

Below, we will try to establish the effects of practices or interthematic interactions of the brand communities enhancing the touristic experience and rely on the list of practices as enumerated by Schau (2009).

Practices endow participants with cultural capital. A competitive spirit underlies much brand community behaviour . Practices, especially community engagement practices, present opportunities for individual differentiation through adroit performance. Members compete on brand devotion, knowledge, and history to display their various competencies. Consumers who achieve status within the brand community are reluctant to give it up.

Members of brand communities accrue cultural capital through the accumulation an increasingly diverse set of increasingly intricate practices, and they work to maintain it, and will be habituated to learning. This learning process is a drive in itself to remain an active member of the community and to stay informed and in the centre of the activities.

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[3] Michigan.org official website, accessed on Aug. 15. 2010.

Practices produce a repertoire for insider sharing

Practices provide participants with an almost inexhaustible source of shared jargon and modes of representation enhancing the consumers' brand experience. Insider information sharing is of key importance when defining and maintaining brand community identity and creates a sense of uniqueness among the members.

When Facebook launched the new „Like" button for websites in April 2010 it initiated a practice allowing if not inviting community members to share first hand evaluation. Many websites have already placed the button next to any piece of content, and when users click on it - it will appear in their news feed, exposing their circle of friends to that website. Apart from increasing Facebook's online dominance, this button has a lot to offer to e-Tourism businesses in terms of credibility, which is an important element of any website - and   booking   websites   in   particular.

Users will leave a website that they feel is not reliable. For that reason, TripAdvisor was one of the first e-Tourism websites (if not the first one) to grab the new "Like" button and place it next to any hotel page they have. It must also be mentioned that community users often post unauthentic critiques the negative effects of which service providers then have difficulties repairing .

Tourists will increasingly chose destinations or services after checking with their Facebook community   .

Practices generate further consumption opportunities

Through practices, members generate, reify and perpetuate consumption behaviour and patterns. Documenting the preparation of the touristic experience, the delivery of the service at the destination and the description of the experience as felt by the author, are all enticing for potential consumers of that particular experience. Consumers are critical and will not be afraid to spread a negative criticism if they have to . Fellow consumers can thus learn from these negative past experiences and the destination managers will feel compelled to improve the services. In this way, practices can lead to an overall improvement of the services of the touristic offer and services.

Practices enhance brand community vitality and thus create value

The number of posts, replies and hits provide evidence of participant interest in online sites. The more varied the practices of a community, the more likely it is to bring vitality and generate more reactions and participation, resulting in an enlarged array of opportunities for deriving greater value from the brand community. Continuous involvement of the page creators in the discussion, and of encouraging followers to participate and to "celebrate the brand" will result in an „escalation" of visits and interactions. When the conversation is vibrant and the post quality is high community members truly feel a distinctive feature that they only can master and thus create further satisfaction. We must not forget the effect of a positive WOMM (word of mouth marketing) that is invaluable in the case of touristic services.

Interconnectivity with other communities creates further value

Tourism social media sites can have links to and from to other sites, for example professionals' communities attaching the industry to the tourists/visitors, and strengthening the connection between the two. This win-win situation leads to more useful content, more business opportunities and invites more members to the communities.

Managerial implications
The ever expanding platform of community websites in the tourism industry, the arrival of e-tourism will certainly redesign the ways and methods of TDM management. Marketeers of touristic destinations will inevitably deploy these new techniques in order to enhance 1. brand awareness 2. the quality and degree of immersion in the touristic experience 3. to create professionals' communities to serve and to support the above two objectives.

Conclusion

Creative industries' expansion and growing importance relies on the increasing need of consumers, traditionally 'alienated' from the means and processes of production, to be involved, to take an active part in the creative process. Firms are bound to incorporate new co-creation techniques in their product or services innovations. The process, extended to the realm of tourism, manifests itself in the form of a co-creation between 1. consumers 2. tourist destination managers and consumers.

Social media community websites are today the ideal framework for the collective creation, interactions, exchanging information. When observing practices of the communities, we can better understand what are the underlying mechanisms, why are they so attractive for the members and in what way they can influence brand awareness and the complete touristic experience.

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