

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND TOURISM: CASE STUDY IN CATALONIA

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*Processo de Avaliação: Double Blind Review*

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### ABSTRACT

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In this article we study the social media used by tourist businesses to attract visitors to Barcelona (Catalonia). The methodology used is a quantitative method that converts the object of the study into numerical data, with emphasis on the measurable objective. A quantitative questionnaire was prepared. The multiple choices questions are an instrument for obtaining data and are used to gather the information needed, such as facts, opinions, and trends. The data collection was carried out for 4 months in 2015 with a final sample of 494 participants. The conclusion is that Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Foursquare are the types of social media used mostly by young people, and gender does not influence their use. However, the degree of use of Google+, LinkedIn, TripAdvisor and Booking has no significant relationship among them, considering such variables as age and gender.

**Keywords:** Hotel; Business; Social media; Tourism; Communication; Marketing



## 1 INTRODUCTION

This investigation intends to prove that virtual communities or the use of social media influence the purchase decision of tourist products in a full-fledged Broadband Society (FONDEVILA, 2013). Specifically, we have decided to prove that bookings made through smartphones by tourists businesses in Barcelona are increasingly more than usual.

The Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) are having a big impact on our society. The new generations assimilate naturally the new culture in this technological era. Nowadays, by using the new technological advances, human beings have achieved things that were impossible to carry out previously. Hardware and software have been implemented in areas such as education, health, security, government offices and private companies with the aim to manage information (FONDEVILA; ESTELLA; DEL OLMO, 2013).

According to the report "The Information Society in Spain" (INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE ESTADÍSTICA, 2014), more than half of Spaniards (76.2%) between 16 and 74 years old use the Internet on a daily basis. At the time of the report, there were 26.2 million of Internet users, 1.45% more than in 2013. Frequent users (who connect at least once a week) account for 93.5% of total Internet users. The report also states that the device that is mostly used to access the Internet when travelling is the smartphone (63.2%), using its own network to access it; followed by laptops (including netbooks and tablets) with 31.6%, and other devices (PDAs, game consoles etc.) with 6.3%. Spain is the fourth European country in number of smartphones.

Smartphones often help tourists on their trips (KENTERIS; GAVALAS; ECONOMOU 2009), and have a significant impact on the activity of the trip (WANG; KRACHT 2010). According to Wang and Kracht (2010), today travelers are in constant search for information in order to reduce uncertainty and make use of their smartphones as assistants throughout all phases. Especially before and during the trip, they rely on mobile technology to simplify the trip by looking for information on transportation, lodging, attractions and activities. Travelers also use smartphones in order to communicate with others, making phone calls, sending text messages, accessing emails and social networks (FONDEVILA; DEL OLMO; BRAVO, 2012). On the other hand, smartphones also represent a tool for self-entertainment, offering the ability to play games, listen to music, share photos, watch movies or read news.



As for the supply side, there are various categorizations in the scope of *mTourism* (mobile Tourism) (KENNEDY; GRETZEL-EDEN, 2012; WANG; XIANG, 2012) to discover the complexity and diversity of this topic. Kennedy and Gretzel-Eden (2012) have created two classifications about applications on mobile tourism; the first is divided into seven categories, depending on the application services related to travel, and are: navigation social, mobile marketing, security/emergency, transactional, information and entertainment, which are broken down into several sub-categories. The second is based on the level of customization and is classified into seven major areas, ranging from personal preferences – which indicates the highest level – to sensitive location, security/data control, control by means of the Internet, addiction to content, cosmetic changes and, lastly, the applications that cannot be customized in any way and do not offer any type of interaction.

Besides studying conventional guidebooks for mobiles (RASINGER; FUCHS; HÖPKEN; BEER 2007; KENTERIS et al., 2011), there are investigation on basic location context (HÖPKEN et al., 2010; BARRAGÁN-MARTÍNEZ; COSTA-MONTENEGRO, 2013; LAMSFUS et al., 2013), augmented reality (YOVCHEVA; BUHALIS; GATZIDIS, 2012), as well as analysis about mobile applications in the context of the business of various tourist service providers such as airlines (LIU; LAW, 2013), theme parks (BROWN; KAPPES; MARKS, 2013), and hotels (KIM; ADLER, 2011).

Nowadays, social media and specialized opinion platforms are becoming an essential source of information when it comes to validating the choices of consumers and helping other users to make purchasing decisions (O'MAHONY; SMYTH, 2010; BRONNER; DE HOOG, 2013). Individuals are increasingly making use of this kind of platforms when taking travel-related decisions (AYEH; AU; LAW, 2013). According to a study by the professional services company PricewaterhouseCoopers, the Internet is the main source of information for 65% of European Internet users when it comes to travel planning (LABBÉ, 2011).

However, it is not only clients that use this kind of online opinion platforms. Hotels also use them, since these platforms allow them to know their clients' opinions about them (MELIÁN GONZÁLEZ; BULCHAND GIDUMAL; GONZÁLEZ LÓPEZ-VALCÁRCEL, 2010). Many companies in the tourism and hotel sector have already integrated online opinion platforms in their business strategies (AYEH et al. , 2013). As



early as 2007, 71.7% of hotels in Spain checked the opinions posted by clients in such platforms (MELIÁN GONZÁLEZ et al., 2010).

Besides independent platforms such as Booking and TripAdvisor, in many cases hotels also allow their clients to publish their opinions in the hotel's webpage, replacing former satisfaction surveys that used to be left in the rooms and had to be returned to suggestion mailboxes. This is the case in hotel chains such as Melià, Marriott, Hilton, NH or Sercotel Hotels, for example.

Opinions posted by users in opinion platforms can be very useful for other users. However, as the number of opinions increases, the problem to recognize which ones are truthful and truly useful arises. Some of these online platforms, such as Booking and TripAdvisor, have tried to give a solution to this problem by asking users to evaluate other users' opinions based on their utility (O'MAHONY; SMYTH, 2010).

In fact, there have already been some press reports and complaints from hoteliers that have cast doubt on the credibility of the content generated by users regarding trips and hotel stays. The academic world has also shown interest on this issue. For instance, Chua and Banerjee (2013) concluded in a study about TripAdvisor that comments posted on it are highly reliable.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this paper was first a comprehensive literature review on the topic, i.e., media and social networks as a way of tourist promotion and product recommendation.

This research was based on a quantitative method that converts the object of study into numerical data, with emphasis on the objective measurement and, therefore, requiring the use of statistics (FONDEVILA; DEL OLMO, 2013). For the purpose of this study, it was agreed to develop a quantitative questionnaire, which is the usual method for data collection in researches. The questionnaire is an instrument for obtaining the information needed, such as facts, opinions and trends.

According to Merino Sanz et al. (2010), the questionnaire homogenises the information, since all subjects respond to the survey questions that are formulated in a standardized way, allowing the information to be processed faster. We used a questionnaire that was designed to learn the use of social media from a business perspective as the main motivation for the trip.

First of all, there is a number of questions related to age, gender, nationality and level of education used to either identify the profile of participants or to check how representative the sample is.

The various sets of questions want to know the reasons that motivate participants to use social media, their degree of confidence, how the tourists organize their trip (before, during and after), and the role of social media in these aspects.

For the assessment of the majority of questions, we used the Likert Scale, which measures attitudes toward a proposal depending on the respondent's degree of agreement or disagreement.

In quantitative research process we usually select a representative sample of the population that is under study, so the results can be generalized to study the sample that is being analyzed (FONDEVILA; DEL OLMO, 2013).

Samples have some obvious advantages with respect to the object of study, as it is possible to survey large populations and human beings with a restricted sample; otherwise, it would be very difficult to do so.

## 3 RESULTS

The data was collected over a four-month period (May-August 2015) and 1,512 valid results were obtained. A streaming process was performed, using inclusive and exclusive criteria, and all those participants who were not on a business trip were discarded. The final sample included 494 participants (Table 1).

Table 1 Sample of the research.

NAME	AVERAGE	SD	CI (95%)	N
AGE	38.92	10.30	(38.12 a 40.13)	494

Table 2 below shows that the least social media networks used are Instagram and Foursquare, which are below the average (2.5). The knowledge of Facebook, Booking, Twitter, Google+ and TripAdvisor is over 3 out of 5. The weight of the opinion platforms is, in the singular average, over the weight of social media. It justifies the efforts by hotels, airlines companies and other tourism enterprises to check and post comments in these platforms, because the customers are used to follow the opinions of the other tourists that access these platforms. If an enterprise is out in this field, the factor of consideration, familiarity, purchase and loyalty could be under the competitors, and the effects in the return on investment could be dangerous for the future economic expectatives.

In general, we observe a solid impact of social media, except for the case of Foursquare. Instagram is increasing its representation, because the multimedia trend (FONDEVILA GASCÓN, 2010; FONDEVILA, BERIAIN; DEL OLMO, 2013) is attracting more users. The methodology to analyse multimedia factor, along with hypertext and interactivity, indicates the importance of this question (FONDEVILA GASCÓN; 2014).

Table 2 Level of knowledge of social media (0=nothing, 5=mastery).

Name	$\bar{X}$	SD	CI (95%)	n
Facebook	3.88	1.51	(3.74; 4.05)	489
Twitter	3.13	1.88	(2.97; 3.34)	487
Google+	3.04	1.85	(2.94; 3.30)	487
LinkedIn	2.86	1.86	(2.63; 3.01)	485
Instagram	2.25	1.80	(2.09; 2.45)	491

<i>Foursquare</i>	0.93	1.44	(0.75; 1.03)	490
<i>TripAdvisor</i>	3.03	1.54	(2.85; 3.15)	489
<i>Booking</i>	3.67	1.37	(3.52; 3.80)	491

The most used social media platforms are Booking and TripAdvisor (Table 3), the only ones over the average (2.5). The least used are Instagram and Foursquare. We notice that the opinion platforms are essential to achieve the attention of the tourists. Regarding social networks, Facebook and Google+ are the preferred ones by the sample in level of use. After them, we see Twitter and the professional network LinkedIn. Curiously, in this case, if we attend business target, for hotels and other tourism enterprises it is advisable to have a page in this social network. In terms of social media marketing, the active participation on LinkedIn allows opportunities to attract the natural target.

Table 3 Level of use of social media (0=no use; 1=little use; 5=a lot of use).

<i>Name</i>	$\bar{x}$	<i>SD</i>	<i>CI (95%)</i>	<i>n</i>
<i>Facebook</i>	2.21	2.08	(2.05; 2.45)	491
<i>Twitter</i>	1.67	2.05	(1.49; 1.90)	485
<i>Google+</i>	2.01	2.20	(1.84; 2.28)	486
<i>LinkedIn</i>	1.16	1.75	(1.02; 1.37)	486
<i>Instagram</i>	0.91	1.49	(0.75; 1.03)	490
<i>Foursquare</i>	0.48	1.11	(0.35; 0.55)	487
<i>TripAdvisor</i>	2.86	1.61	(2.64; 2.96)	491
<i>Booking</i>	3.59	1.44	(3.44; 3.73)	492

The degree of trust and privacy opinion on social media below 3 (<3) is associated with the item "Information and comments offered by social networking companies inspire confidence". The reliability and confidence increase when information is offered to companies that choose to follow the participants (Table 4).

Users consider that the information provided by the companies they follow as reliable, and that the information on online social networks has helped them in the purchase decisions. This relationship between the received information and the last decision (buying) illuminates the relevance of information on online social networks.





Nevertheless, some users indicated that they stopped publishing opinions because they did not want them to be seen by others. However, the users inform that the information found on online social networks seems reliable. The free sensation at the moment of inserting the opinions in these platforms generates entrustment to the users. The word of mouth phenomenon is very attended in this framework.

Table 4 Opinion on the trust and privacy of social media (1=strongly disagree; 5=totally agree).

<i>Item</i>	$\bar{x}$	<i>SD</i>	<i>CI (95%)</i>	<i>n</i>
<i>I believe that my personal data is properly treated in online social networks</i>	2.94	1.23	(2.85; 3.09)	492
<i>Privacy measures of online social networks inspire sufficient confidence to continue using them</i>	3.13	1.13	(3.05; 3.27)	492
<i>The information I provide is treated safely</i>	3.08	1.18	(3.04; 3.26)	492
<i>The information provided by the companies I follow is reliable</i>	3.37	1.12	(3.32; 3.54)	492
<i>I stopped publishing my opinions because I do not want them to be seen by others</i>	3.24	1.14	(3.19; 3.42)	492
<i>The information and comments provided by businesses on social networks inspire confidence</i>	2.63	1.09	(2.50; 2.77)	492
<i>Information on online social networks has helped me in my purchase decisions</i>	3.31	1.17	(3.24; 3.47)	492
<i>The information found on online social networks seems reliable</i>	3.18	1.09	(3.11; 3.32)	492

Table 5 shows that the main motivation for using social media is the fact that most people around the user belong to an online social network. Another reason is the immediate communication with contacts, family or friends of the participants, and the idea that online social networks are nice, fun and the users are proud to share their opinions and assessments. Furthermore, online social networks make the users life



easier by allowing them to solve problems quickly; and online social networks allow the users to follow the path of their favorite companies.

Table 5 Motivations that lead to use social media (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = totally agree).

<i>Item</i>	$\bar{x}$	<i>SD</i>	<i>CI (95%)</i>	<i>n</i>
<i>Online social networks are nice, fun and I am proud to share my opinions and assessments</i>	3.62	1.21	(3.53; 3.77)	492
<i>Online social networks allow me to stay in touch with my friends/family and contacts</i>	4.03	1.20	(3.99; 4.21)	492
<i>Online social networks make me feel a sense of belonging to a group</i>	3.05	1.53	(2.89; 3.19)	492
<i>Most people around me belong to an online social network</i>	4.09	1.14	(4.04; 4.25)	492
<i>I use them because they are necessary for my job</i>	3.18	1.62	(3.05; 3.37)	492
<i>Online social networks make my life easier by allowing me to solve problems quickly</i>	3.43	1.41	(3.32; 3.60)	492
<i>Online social networks allow me to follow the path of my favorite companies</i>	3.41	1.42	(3.27; 3.55)	492
<i>I use them because others do so</i>	2.89	1.49	(2.73; 3.03)	492

When organizing a trip, participants seem to prefer to seek information and engage primarily in the pages of suppliers, fully exceeding the average (3) (Table 6). Thus, they look for information on the webpages of tourism providers (airline or hotels, among others), they book their trip on the webpages of tourism providers (airline or hotel, for example) and they look for information on social network. In parallel, they look for information from traditional travel agencies and they book their trip on the media/social network.

Table 6 When arranging a trip (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = totally agree).

<i>Item</i>	$\bar{x}$	<i>SD</i>	<i>CI (95%)</i>	<i>n</i>
<i>I look for information on social network</i>	3.53	1.48	(3.47; 3.76)	492

<i>I look for information on the webpages of tourism providers (airline, hotel etc.)</i>	3.97	1.23	(3.89; 4.13)	492
<i>I look for information from traditional travel agencies</i>	3.15	1.52	(3.05; 3.35)	492
<i>I book my trip on the media/social network</i>	3.04	1.56	(2.96; 3.27)	492
<i>I book my trip on the webpages of tourism providers (airline, hotel etc.)</i>	3.91	1.22	(3.81; 4.05)	492
<i>I book my trip at traditional travel agencies</i>	3.09	1.53	(2.97; 3.27)	492

Table 7 shows that participants interact with media/social network especially while traveling. During the trip, they look for reviews of places to visit and restaurants, and before departing they observe other hotel guests' opinions. Furthermore, before departing they also look at the opinions of other travel agency users.

Table 7 Value if you perform the following actions regarding the use of media/social networks before, during and after the trip (1=strongly disagree; 5=totally agree).

<i>Item</i>	$\bar{x}$	<i>SD</i>	<i>CI (95%)</i>	<i>n</i>
<i>Before departing, I let my acquaintances know media/social networks</i>	2.58	1.41	(2.47; 2.75)	492
<i>Before departing I look at the opinions of other travel agency users</i>	3.13	1.36	(3.07; 3.34)	492
<i>Before departing I look at other hotel guests' opinions</i>	3.62	1.31	(3.57 3.83)	492
<i>During the trip, I look for reviews of restaurants</i>	3.69	1.25	(3.64; 3.88)	492
<i>During the trip, I look for reviews of places to visit</i>	3.80	1.20	(3.76; 3.99)	492
<i>After the trip I communicate my impressions</i>	3	1.47	(2.89; 3.17)	492
<i>After the trip I evaluate travel agencies, hotels, restaurants</i>	3.03	1.36	(2.94; 3.21)	492

Table 8 shows that the media or social networks most used by travellers are Facebook and Booking exceeding the average value (3). Twitter, TripAdvisor, Google+, LinkedIn, Instagram and Foursquare are the next ones.

Table 8 Indicate the degree in which you have used media/social network on one trip (1 = rarely or never; 5 = always).

<i>Item</i>	$\bar{x}$	<i>SD</i>	<i>CI (95%)</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Facebook</i>	3.38	1.55	(3.30; 3.60)	491
<i>Twitter</i>	2.83	1.69	(2.75; 3.08)	490
<i>Google+</i>	2.54	1.68	(2.44; 2.78)	490
<i>LinkedIn</i>	2.48	1.59	(2.33; 2.64)	489
<i>Instagram</i>	2.12	1.41	(2; 2.29)	490
<i>Foursquare</i>	1.39	0.86	(1.30; 1.46)	486
<i>TripAdvisor</i>	2.65	1.40	(2.50; 2.78)	491
<i>Booking</i>	3.11	1.49	(2.97; 3.26)	491

In the case of Booking, the results of some hotels in Spain (NH Hoteles, Sercotel Hotels, Hoteles Silken, Abba Hotels and Best Western) reflect the effort to offer the right service to the customer (Table 9).

Table 9 Average scores in Booking of Spanish hotels.

					
	8,1	8,1	8,2	8,2	7,8

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

The tourism sector depends deeply on social media. For this kind of enterprises, it is necessary to develop all kinds of tools to foster possibilities. We mentioned Social Media Marketing in this paper, but it is an enhanced Social Engine Optimization that

will most likely bring more results. In concrete moments, the tourism business can invest in Social Engine Marketing to reinforce some campaigns.

We notice, in the case of Catalonia, the knowledge of Facebook, Booking, Twitter, Google+ and TripAdvisor is high. On the other hand, Instagram and Foursquare have to improve their perception. Instagram is relatively easy to promote, especially for tourism products focused on image and multimedia.

The most used social media platforms among travellers are Booking and TripAdvisor. These are opinions platforms, and their role in the decision-making is increasing. In fact, when we consider Quality of Experience, Booking and TripAdvisor are very useful. Social media platforms are the main forum to express feelings and complaints. And, in general, it has more importance than traditional ads insertion. The opinion of a tourist is a key performance indicator in the decision-making process.

This opinion development increases its impact in the decision-making if we observe the reliability factor. Indeed, tourists consider the information provided by social media reliable. Information on online social networks helps the users in the purchase decisions.

A motivation for the use of social media is family and friends using it as well. The Internet density or intermediation becomes a strength when evaluating a tourist. If the tourist is influencer, the efforts to satisfy him or her will swell. The “always on” factor is other success indicator. The immediacy of communication with contacts adds value to social media and to the update of tourism enterprises.

In the process of organizing a trip, tourists prefer to search information and engage primarily in the webpages of suppliers. Updating is, again, an obligation for them. Information on the webpages of tourism providers and on social network is essential.

Interactivity is an added value factor to engage with tourists. In fact, they use social media or social networks especially while traveling. Broadband Society means connectivity, always on, and tourist is commenting experiences during the trip. Places to visit or restaurants to eat depend on the opinions exposed in social media.

In the future, we suggest developing sentiment analysis studies of social media or social networks, looking for the strategic words used by tourists when evaluating a destination, product or service. It could be interesting to do it in a comparative way. It could allow differences depending on the country.



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