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# **CONSOLIDATING SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES**

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## **Abstract**

This study revisits and integrates the insights of recent studies on emergent social media strategies deployed by destination and event management organisations. In a comparative analysis Munar (2012) identified four generic approaches pursued by national tourism boards in the Nordic region, while Gyimóthy & Larson (2014) portrayed three digital value co-creation strategies deployed by festival social media. Both frameworks provided novel analytical typologies which identified a series of categories (mimetic, analytic, immersion, advertising and insourcing, crowdsourcing and community consolidation). This paper discusses the complementary nature of these conceptual proposals and advances an integrated conceptual framework of social media strategies. Today, social media has a much larger impact in tourism and become an inherent part of strategic marketing activities. A new level of professionalization can be observed which entails more sophisticated analytical tools, diversified campaign tactics and an organisational design more geared to meet the needs of these digital platforms. Based on the empirical findings of a case study that revisits evolving digital and social media strategies of European DMOs this paper maps the dynamics behind strategic change and concludes with a refined theoretical framework acknowledging diverse strategic scenarios and tactics.

## **Introduction**

The digital revolution is one of the most significant and extensive phenomena that has affected the conditions of tourism worldwide in the past 25 years. Within a quarter of a century, the Internet has transformed the organizational landscape of tourism and has become an inseparable part of the travel consumption process. According to a recent study on tourism trends over 80% of American tourists drew on Internet sources to get inspiration and make travel decisions in 2013 and 52% used a smartphone to book some elements of their journey (Ipsos Media CT 2013). Furthermore, digital platforms are becoming central to assist, share and reflect upon on-site travel experiences. As such, advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) have brought about new opportunities and challenges in interacting with tourists. This paper addresses the phenomenon and consequences of the digital revolution from an intersubjective perspective, that is, through a discussion of changes in tourism behavior and consumer relations in the wake of interactive digitalization. In the main section, we present and examine five strategies deployed by tourism organizations aiming at adopting social media. Empirical examples are provided to contextualize the digital trends and commercial strategies in Denmark and abroad, with particular focus on the evolution of VisitDenmark's digital media strategies since 2010. Finally, organizational

implications of customer involvement in commercial operations are discussed, with due attention to critical aspects of organizational design and human resources management.

### **Interactive opportunities**

After the turn of the millennium, the digital revolution has entered into a new phase. The Internet has evolved into a dynamic space of interactive communication platforms. The Web 2.0 includes and empowers customers to a greater extent than the Web 1.0, as it allows them to create, publish, and comment on digitized content worldwide (Leung, Law, van Hoof & Buhalis 2013). The Internet is no longer just an informational medium with functional utilities, rather, social web technologies augment and modify social interactions and communication. The social web is also increasingly mobile. Since the first launch of the smartphone barely five years ago, a whole new generation of mobile technological tools has seen the light. These mobile opportunities impact on tourists' activities before, during and after travelling; in fact, new digital tourism cultures and practices are born. New media combined with mobile technologies increases the possibility of real-time experience sharing and encourages synchronic communication. It allows tourists to diffuse the frontiers between being home and away, and it impacts on the processes of information search and decision-making.

Tourists are active and participative consumers (Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides 2012); they receive and share information online and form virtual communities on a whole array of social media software, which complement and expand the experience of physical travel in diverse ways. Some of the most popular ones are wikis, blogs and microblogs, social networks, media sharing sites, review sites, and voting sites. These types differ in levels of enabled social interactivity, temporal structure and reach of communication, amount of social cues and context richness (e.g. information about personal identities and spatial/environmental contexts), as well as levels of hierarchy and control established by site administrators. Tourists share their travel images on Instagram, upload videos to YouTube, write personal stories on Travelblog, provide reviews on TripAdvisor, and publish updates about their tourism experience on Facebook. On the other hand, everyday life and work issues gradually infiltrate the days on the road. As long as wireless network hubs make it possible, tourists are eager to regularly keep in touch with their friends, families, peers (and sometimes, work) back home. Digital media platforms nurture collective consumption and sociality, opening new strategic opportunities for tourism firms and destinations as well (Sigala, Christou & Gretzel 2012).

### **Value co-creation with tourists**

Networked travelers are thought to be more empowered and sophisticated than before, and online consumer communities emerge as important agents of shaping new market offerings and meanings. Among the 5000 travelers surveyed by Ipsos Media (2013), 40% admitted to share amateur videos on online platforms. However it is crucial to move beyond global generalizations of online travel behaviour. When analysing tourism social media it is relevant to take into consideration factors

such as the type of destination and travel form, as well as levels of e-literacy, demographic factors such as age or nationality and personality characteristics of the tourists. Furthermore, empirical studies of Scandinavian holidaymakers show that although sharing of tourism experiences online is increasingly popular, there are important differences depending on the type of social media site and type of content shared. They also identify different motivation factors and a preference for visual content sharing. Through their films, tourists adopt, complement or transform strategic marketing messages and branding values of destinations they visit.

Virtual community interactions are equally characterised by ludic and disclosing communication practices, which do not necessarily revolve around rational behaviour or marketer-consumer interactions (Munar & Gyimóthy 2013). Instead, brand meanings or promotional messages are creatively altered and transformed to serve communal purposes, bearing upon several implications for tourism operators. Digitally active tourists are part-time marketers and value co-creators, in their capacity of legitimate ‘endorsers’ of tourism offerings. Peer reviews and content posted by individual travellers may be considered more genuine and trustworthy than messages conveyed through commercial sites and agents. Amateur opinion leaders on social media contribute to the production and circulation of meaning in tourism experiences, which are powered by fantasy, strong emotions and playfulness. For instance, the dramaturgical design of VisitDanmark’s viral campaign “Danish Mother Seeking” has been reappropriated and re-posted on Youtube with fans tenderly holding a teddy bear, smurf or a beer bottle instead of a baby. As co-creators of value, consumers carry out important branding and marketing functions for an organisation, including repositioning prevalent meanings and lifestyle associations – and as such are key drivers of development and innovation (Kozinets et al., 2008; Kozinets et al. 2010).

Active and networked consumer cultures require a new way of strategic thinking for tourism destinations. Destinations must assess how they contribute to the value creation and maintenance of consumer lifestyles and tribes, *rather* than just looking at the individual consumer as a novel source of corporate value creation. Consumers may be involved in the value-creation process to different extent, depending on the degree of control over the resources associated with the offering. For instance consumers may fully undertake the delivery of a service/product once performed by producers, take part in designing or producing the experience or actively modify the original/intended form and meaning of an offering. A comparative study of three Scandinavian festivals’ integration of social media into strategic communications identified a number of co-creative practices, such as delegating relationship marketing tasks to lead users, crowdsourcing for experience innovation as well as stimulating and monitoring the tribal dialogue (Gyimóthy & Larson 2012). These practices can be translated into three types of festival value co-creation: (1) *Customer insourcing*, i.e. recruiting lead-users to distribute information, communicating for the purpose of service recovery and posting and boosting positive user-generated content; (2) *Crowdsourcing*, i.e. fostering involvement to generate innovative suggestions; and (3) *Community consolidation*, i.e. facilitating the tribal community dynamics. Table 1 depicts the character of these three value co-creation strategies, in terms of diversified roles assumed by festivals and fans. Within this framework, management control over value co-creation is gradually delegated to the

community members. Such an approach may be equally useful to apply when incorporating social media in strategic activities of other tourism organisations, for example Destination Management Organisations (DMOs).

Co-creation strategies	Managerial role	Fan role	Degree of management control
<b>Customer insourcing</b>	Recruit lead-users Delegate tasks previously assumed by the organisation	Inform Recover services Post and boost UGC	Relatively high
<b>Crowdsourcing</b>	Involvement and crowdsourcing	Suggest artists Identify problems Generate new ideas	Moderate
<b>Community Consolidation</b>	Facilitate and stimulate dialogue among tribe members	Contribute to collective atmosphere experience by posting and sharing UGC	Relatively low

*Table 1. Digital value co-creation strategies on festival social media*

### **Social Media Strategies for Destination Management Organizations**

In the attempt of creating successful destination positions in a competitive and globalized tourism industry, DMOs face several challenges in their management activities (such as securing community involvement in branding processes, alignment of the various stakeholders' interests and creating unique and attractive brands). Social media and user generated content (UGC) become increasingly significant in this complex intermediating landscape. DMOs are aware both of the challenges and opportunities to use tourist digitized content and social media and several studies have tried to conceptualize and classify the strategies used by these organizations. There are five emerging generic social media strategies adopted by DMOs: advertisement, mimetic, analytic, immersion and 'gamification' strategies (Munar 2012). In this section, we complete this typology by introducing a consumer-centred perspective and discuss the different ways in which tourists can be incorporated in the processes of digital value creation. This framework is summarized in figure 1.

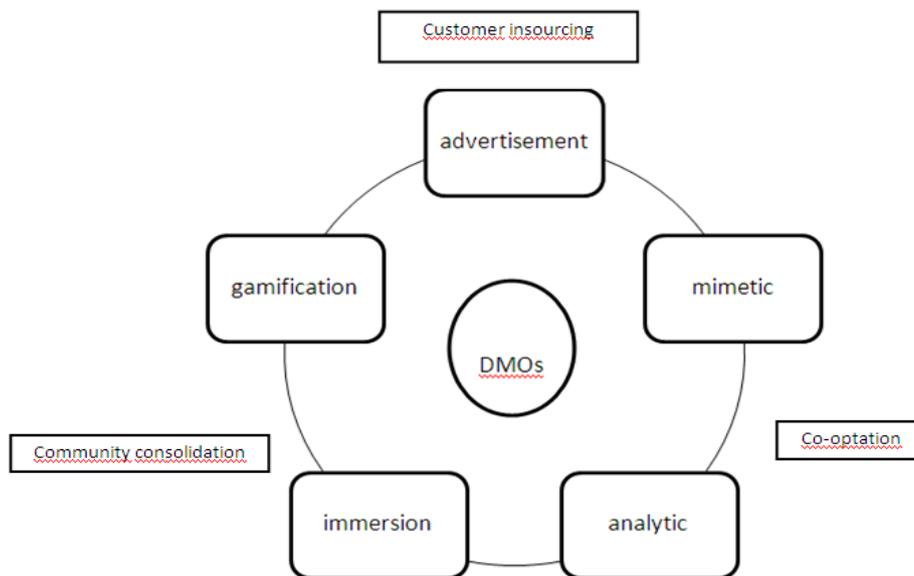


Figure 1. Social media strategies for destination management organizations

### *The Mimetic Strategy*

Through *mimetic strategies*, DMOs copy the style and e-culture of social network sites and virtual communities and apply it to their corporate websites. Some examples of the mimetic strategy are tools in DMOs portals that invite users to write about their destination experiences or to share photos or videos about their travels. By opening their websites to user contributions DMOs create a kind of ‘artificial’ social network or community, even though the main reason for their sites is still to officially promote their destinations rather than to feature user-to-user communication. An example of the mimetic initiatives taken by VisitDenmark was a ‘guest book’ where tourists could upload photos and text. Another popular trend is the inclusion of UGC elements in the destination campaigns, where DMOs try to tap into the knowledge and experiences of the tourists. Recent international examples are the “New Mexico True” campaign or the “Spain Addict” campaign where visitors were invited to share their experiences on the DMOs website. Initiatives to introduce web 2.0 features to corporate web 1.0 websites have been very popular among DMOs but in general most of these campaigns have difficulties achieving an important volume of tourist contributions and also to maintain user involvement. Usually, this or similar strategic initiatives rely on extrinsic motivation factors (i.e. rewards or prizes). Tourists’ contributions become data banks of images and stories about tourism products that can later be used for promotional purposes. Although providing possibilities of interaction, these social fora may not be seen as relevant or valuable for the tourists. Compared to other generic social networking sites (virtultourist.org), these communities are temporary and focused on a single theme (such as destination preferences or specific events). The community only remains alive as long as the campaign is running but it fades out very fast after, there is no real ‘community’

feeling or involvement over time resulting in what has been termed ‘social media black-outs’ for the organization. Such was the case of Vandrefestivalen in Nordjylland, which recruited ‘likes’ of their Facebook site through the extrinsic reward of a weekend spa package. The campaign quickly generated new fans, but the festival’s Facebook site was never really adopted by users.

### *The Advertising Strategy*

The *advertising strategy* adopts social media sites as if they were traditional advertising and promotional platforms. It uses banners and other promotional tools available on online media. The advertising strategy re-directs advertisements, promotional campaigns and news to sites with the largest traffic of users, or increases the volume of DMOs’ information on those sites. Several studies confirm the dominance of this strategy. Typically, by using an advertisement strategy DMOs’ use social media to simply market via an additional media channel, changing little about the content of the message. This also includes basic share or like buttons that have become ubiquitous features on the websites of DMOs. A common weakness of this strategy is a dominant use of a broadcast style of communication on posts and information pushed to the tourists. An example is the inclusion of destination ads on Facebook or YouTube. VisitDenmark has made extensive use of this strategy for example through the use of its Facebook pages for campaign and product promotion and achieved improved customer interaction. For example, users have increasingly shared their photos on VisitDenmark’s page and depending on the type of post, there is an increased level of dialog through users comments. However, although there is greater dedication to social media in general, other empirical studies show that, with a few exceptions (e.g. Visit Britain use of a flicker account) a majority of content shared in these pages came almost exclusively from the DMOs themselves, not other users. If not used adequately, ‘sociality’ of this strategy can turn out to be minimal. The recommendation is therefore to change this top-down broadcasting style and instead increase richness (immediacy, reliability, and dialog) in the content provided. DMOs try to optimize their impact on social media platforms and this has resulted in an increased professionalization and outsourcing of advertising strategies to specialized consultants (e.g. Betapond, an agency specialized in Facebook optimization, has developed strategies both for Visit Britain and Tourism Ireland).

Today, online travel video usage is increasing; for instance 62% of American travellers admit to rely on videos made by hotels, airlines, cruises and tour operators. Recognising the importance of peer endorsements, DMOs use Youtube (and similar video sharing sites) to upload traditional video advertisements and (more recently), to launch viral marketing campaigns. In the beginning, a key feature of viral video ads were their resemblance with UGC (e.g. amateur videos), concealing the true identity of its sender. Today, viral marketing videos have become more sophisticated, resulting in professionally produced (and pricy) advertisements which at times can include a clear reference to a commercial brand. Viral advertising initiatives are not problem-free. Despite the advantages of increasing awareness about the destination, viral marketing also entails lack of distributive control and the difficulties to relate popularity levels to sales performance. “The best job in the world” (an ad for the Islands of the Great Barrier Reef in Queensland, Australia) is often mentioned as a success story of viral marketing for destinations,

but VisitDenmark had a problematic viral marketing campaign during 2009 with a video posted on YouTube. The main objective of the advertisement was to promote a new strategic vision for Danish tourism, presenting the country as a free, informal and open-minded place where people would feel welcome. The video, which did not make any reference to the DMO or the Danish brand, portrayed a young single mother, Karen, looking for the father of her baby. The advertisement showed a young independent woman who, after consuming alcohol, had unsafe sex and could not remember the name of the man she had slept with. The campaign caused a media storm and was met with strong political opposition. It also initiated an internal critical debate about the use of social media and viral campaigns by the national DMOs in the Nordic region.

An upward going trend is to adapt advertising strategies to the use of mobile technologies. This is due both to the fast adoption of smart phones and tablets and the expansion of wifi and internet access available at destinations. This trend includes the development of mobile applications (apps) and use of location-based technologies, for example making use of augmented reality technologies. Traditional tourist information provision is recycled and made available through multiple platforms including mobile devices (e.g. tourist guides about the destination or information about tourism activities such as events). These initiatives often encourage interactivity through social media platforms (e.g. including access to sharing of content for users of social networks or microblogging sites). Examples of this increasingly popular tendency can be found at national level like in the case of the mobile app “Amazing Thailand” (this app incorporates information of 99 different destinations), and at regional/local levels, this latest tendency being the one mostly adopted in Denmark (e.g. “Toppen af Danmark”, “Visit Frederikshavn” and “Welcome to Royal North Sealand”).

A parallel trend still in its infancy is the use of Google glass technology applied to destination marketing campaigns, e.g. the campaign launched by the tourism authorities at the beaches of Fort Myers and Sanibel in Florida (U.S.). This technology allows tourists to get information about the destination through the glasses; they can make visual recordings of their experience and share them on social media platforms. In fact, these apps, google glasses and other similar initiatives make information more accessible and useful (real-time and on location), although this was often already available on the traditional website of the destination. They cater to the information-seeking tourist but have a weak focus on the socializing activities that tourists conduct in-situ. They also enrich digital communication by incorporating a share function that encourages a social-interactive dimension (such as a share/like button from FB). This type of strategy has been labelled “the mobile concierge” by the industry and it is not only adopted by DMO’s but increasingly by other industry players as well. For instance, TUI Travel’s Digital Assistant app provides advice to tourists prior, during and after the trip, InterContinental Hotels’ Concierge Insider Guides app offers insights based on the knowledge of the company’s concierges at 127 destinations. It is however worth mentioning that some apps can act as game changer and as an innovative tool to encourage innovative social experiences. This is the case of the gender ratio app developed for the Gothenburg based music festival Way Out West or the SceneTap App currently popularising in U.S. cities. Using location-based mobile technologies,

these applications inform customers instantly about crowd size, male/female ratio and average age at bars, restaurants and night clubs they are about to enter. By logging on the app, visitors will receive notifications when the current audience at certain venue meets their socio-demographic preferences. Such apps mapping crowd and gender statistics may be equally useful for venues to test promotions and tailor customer campaigns.

*Advertising strategies* can increase levels of engagement and expanding the reach of possible audiences. Although they can turn out to be powerful promotional tools standing alone, they do not help organizations to benefit from the pool of knowledge provided by tourists on the social media universe. Social media is seen as a marketing function, and less as a contributor to the analysis or strategic thinking in the organization.

### *The Analytic Strategy*

The *analytic strategy* has a very different logic from the mimetic and advertising strategies. It does not aim to build 'artificial' social network sites on corporation sites or enhance traditional promotional campaigns with new tools. It uses UGC already available on the Web and is extremely flexible because it can follow tourists to where they are contributing information. It does so by using ICT to examine, select, classify, monitor and evaluate tourist content on the Internet. As the analytic strategy is based on monitoring and trend analysis, it is a valuable tool in forecasting and impact studies and can therefore be expected to be more useful in risk analysis. The analytic strategy has two main dimensions: prevention and knowledge. Through prevention DMOs try to understand how user contributions relate to their destination brand and then take action to minimize damage, prevent crises or improve marketing. Prevention is often applied by using consultancy firms or webmasters to search and monitor how social network sites portray the destination and report back to the DMOs' departments. User generated content can be the source of a crisis (e.g. like in the case of negative reviews on specific attractions) however, in other cases, through what has been termed Social Mediated Crisis Communication, tourists posts contribute to recovery after a crisis, providing emotional support or information for example photos and comments posted by tourists and residents after the flood in Queensland showed that many places at the destination were not affected.

The second dimension, knowledge, is increasingly developed by the organizations. It is highly demanding and requires investments in ICT development, training and a concerted innovation effort from an organizational perspective. This strategy allows DMOs to transform massive and chaotic amounts of user generated content into strategic knowledge and can, for example, provide statistics on the frequency and type of digitized tourist content related to a specific brand campaign. This type of strategic information can help improving product development and visitor satisfaction, discover the visitor experience, analyse the competitive strategies used by competitors and help to monitor the image and reputation of an organization. Analytics includes both quantitative/statistical analysis of digital communication as well as in-depth analysis of UGC and the socio-cultural practices of social media platforms interactivity. There exist a number of so-called listening tools developed to capture social media buzz based

on keywords (such as White Vector or Radian 6), which give a comprehensive picture of how selected target markets think and talk about a destination online. There are clear advances in the use of quantitative analysis in this field, DMOs use the tools and information that is provided by social media sites themselves (e.g. Facebook pages insights that provides metrics about the size and level of engagement of audiences) or outsource this activity to specialized agencies that map the impact and reach of social media campaigns. However an increase of macro-statistical information available does not always result in knowledge development, for example there is often lack of appropriate metrics, resulting in success of a social media initiative simply being measured by size (amount of likes/followers of a campaign).

Although there is an enormous potential in the in-depth study of online communicative practices, in-depth analysis of these communities is very seldom applied by DMOs. Current research shows that applying novel qualitative and quantitative methodologies expands knowledge production and provides key insights to understand the evolution of tourism experiences (Gyimóthy 2013; Hvass 2013; Bødker 2013; Lexhagen et al. 2013). These methodologies re-think traditional market analysis and acknowledge both the sociality of Web 2.0 communication and its potential to e-tribalize consumer markets. They help to understand why communities are formed, how they evolve and how digital communication provides meaning and enacts different tourism realities. Some examples of these methodologies are presented in the textbox below.

Social Media Analytics	Purpose/focus	Method	Providing insights into	Example
Symbolic Convergence Theory	Constitution of virtual communities	Fantasy Chain Analysis (in-depth textual analysis)	impact of UGC on destination/event branding and image formation.	Gyimóthy ( 2013)
Netnography	Social dynamics of virtual communities	Adapts ethnographic methods to online communities.	Mechanisms and impacts of peer-to-peer reviews in tourism	Hvass (2013) SAS crisis communication during Iceland's volcano eruption
Mobile tracking, tracing, locating (TTL) methods	Reveal tourists' mobility patterns and digital sharing behavior on-site	Ego-POV (real-time audiovisual or mobility recordings)	digitally enhanced tourist experiences identifies areas of improvement at the local attraction level	Bødker (2013)
Social Media Analytics	Theory based quantitative methods	Multi-platform data mining (crawling, sniffing, etc.) to analyse big data	Tourist motivation, decision making, communicative patterns of online communities	Lexhagen et al. (2013) Pop culture fans and Twilight tourism

*Table 2. Examples of emerging methods to understand the character and characteristics of social media tourism*

Analytics through the application of in-depth and specially designed methodological tools to the study of social media shows that these sites are rich repositories of information about tourists' socio-cultural practices and that new methodologies and content analysis of UGC can provide a deeper understanding of the visitor experience.

### *The Immersion Strategy*

*Immersion* happens when DMOs take the initiative to develop a ‘pure’ social network site or web community based on user contribution systems that follow the rules of social media in relation to transparency, participation and trust. The DMOs provide the resources necessary to launch and to administer the platform. The immersion strategy demands an internalization of the web cultures of user based social networks such as TripAdvisor, IgoUgo, Travelblog, etc. The success of these communities relies on the independence of their specific corporate interests. This strategy does not benefit from all of the relevant content displayed in the social media universe. However, it adapts to the rules of online communities. This strategy is very seldom applied by DMOs, an example is “Community of Sweden” an online community created by Visit Sweden in 2007. The members of this virtual community were invited to upload photos, stories related to their visit to Sweden and to engage in discussions on various fora. After six years of operations, Community of Sweden has been permanently closed and Visit Sweden is now consolidating its social media presence on established platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest.

### *The Gamification Strategy*

*Gamification* is a strategic initiative that is increasingly deployed by DMOs. It refers to the application of game technologies and design into non-game websites. This strategy aims to transform tourists into players and it is used as part of advertisement campaigns, often linked to external rewards systems (e.g. prizes in the form of trips or money) and in combination with location-based technologies as in the case of VisitBritain check-in game. In this game fans of the Love UK Facebook page are asked to check-in using Facebook places at one of 300 tourist spots in the country. Once the fan has completed the check-in she/he can win a holiday worth £2,000 and £1,000 worth of shopping vouchers. Other examples include earning badges (e.g. TripAdvisor).

Many of these games are similar to lottery games, but instead of paying through economic transactions tourists pay by trading access to their ‘digital capital’. In exchange for the possibility of winning the user will have to allow a DMOs or other tourism suppliers access to the information of her personal page and/or will have to like/share the ads of the campaign with her online social network. These games are closely related to the advertisement strategies previously introduced in this section. While benefiting from reaching a wider audience their level of ‘sociality’ and interactivity is low. A more original and very successful gamification example is “The Homenkollen Ski Jump” developed by Visit Norway. This game promotes one of Oslo’s most visited tourist attractions. Since its launch in 2009 it has been played more than 600 million times. The site where the users can play this game provides links to the DMOs in Norway and the popularity of the game has resulted in an important increase of transit to the sites.

However, other games have a deeper transformative potential. They help rethinking the visitor experience and provide novel ways of engaging with the destination-space. They have a

stronger focus on enhancing socializing activities and on the in-situ performativity of the tourism experience. Their success is related to an increase in the use of smart phones, tablets and mobile technologies. An example is “Bram Stoker’s Vampires”, an augmented reality mobile game developed by Haunted Planet for Trinity College Dublin. Bram Stoker, the famous author of Dracula, lived in the college. In this game tourists play the role of vampire hunters. The game uses the cultural heritage of Trinity College while transforming the physical surroundings of the place into an interactive playground. Tourists can take photos of themselves or others with their hunted vampires and share them on their social networks. How gaming mixes and transforms place, heritage and experience is evident in this quote of Haunted Planet:

*“A key idea of Haunted Planet is to blur the boundary between the real [surroundings] and virtual [gameworld]. Augmented reality is great for doing that with visuals and audio, but it requires visuals and audio that blend well with the surroundings. The blurring of the boundary is a technique used traditionally in Gothic literature and also in modern horror films. For example, Bram Stoker’s Dracula is presented as a collection of evidence [journal extracts, newspaper clippings and the like], much like Blair Witch Project and the Paranormal Activity films were presented as being real found footage. For the same reason, Haunted Planet does not present itself as a game [although that is of course what it is] but a ghost hunter’s app. The idea is that it could be real.”—haunted planet.ie*

### **Managerial implications**

In order to establish an integrated conceptual framework for the strategic use of tourism social media, the five approaches discussed above can be incorporated with digital co-creation typologies acknowledging customer and community rationales in value processes. The five DMO strategies can be seen as addressing different stages of co-creation, where customers’ operant resources (skills, knowledge, social network and digital capital) are exploited to varying degrees. As such, *advertising* and *mimetic* strategies reflect the *customer insourcing* approach, enabling delegating responsibilities to loyal visitors to present their UGC of the destination, however in a very controlled virtual environment. The *immersion* and *analytical* approaches take use of a *crowdsourcing* approach where the intention is to harness comments, ideas and criticism from fans. In order to amass generalizable amounts of data, the control of UGC is less significant here. Rather, the main goal is to provide virtual fans with an illusion of involvement through well-designed feedback applications. *Gamification* represents a more sophisticated deployment of social media potentials, as it creates opportunities for long-term emotional bonding and *community consolidation* (tribal marketing). Gamification strategies enable value-creation processes of complex tourism experiences where DMOs facilitate, but by no means control the tribal dynamics on digital platforms. This approach enables virtual, emotional, and imaginative modes of travel experiences, enhancing and running parallel with the actual physical journey.

### **Evolution of VisitDenmark’s social media strategies**

The five generic strategic considerations explained can also be traced in the recent progress VisitDenmark has achieved concerning interactive communications on digital platforms. In this section we examine key changes in how social media has been strategically approached by VDK since the release of the first smartphones in the late 2000s. This evolution can be portrayed through three key tendencies: *professionalization*, *centralization* and *synergized integration*. The most important change is an increase in the level of professionalization and specialization regarding the management of digital media. Within a matter of less than a decade, social and digital media have become central to VisitDenmark's market communication, currently accounting for 80% the marketing initiatives. The number of employees responsible for digital marketing and social media has grown rapidly since 2010; from one junior employee at the head office to seven in 2014, including senior managerial and analytical positions. Increased staff expertise and specialization has resulted in an improved knowledge-base to inform analytical strategies and diversified marketing tactics. During the first years of digital marketing, VisitDenmark (similar to other DMOs in the Nordic region) social media activities entailed uncoordinated and casual campaigns rolled out by the individual VDK-subsiidiaries, often inspired by popular hypes. More recently, the extent of ad-hoc decision diminished in favour of carefully selected campaigns tailored to specific target markets and social media platforms. Visit Denmark's latest strategies demonstrate a higher level of formalization and maturity, informed by increased use of analytics. Such advances have also led to an acknowledgement of the overall relevance and significance of social media strategies across all departments.

The second tendency is the change from a decentralized communication approaches to increased social media coordination between VisitDenmark and its domestic and international subsidiaries. While in the first stages of development VisitDenmark's offices exerted a high autonomy in terms of social media initiatives launched on the regional markets, recent activities witness a division between distant and near tourism markets. There is an overall coordination on social media directed from VDK central office located in Copenhagen. The marketing department develops the social media guidelines and strategies, and controls the major international communication channels (e.g. having one single international profile in Facebook for all distant markets). The offices located in the close markets (e.g. Sweden or Germany) maintain a higher level of responsibility in the management of their social media sites. Several reasons lie behind the increased centralization tendency: awareness of the need to improve the coordination of communication strategies, an effort to benefit from economies of scale and to diminish the impact of the increase in the capacity (number of working hours) and specialization of labour needed for the management of social media platforms. However, the maintenance of nation-based social media managers in the close markets point to the importance of addressing cultural differences in social media communication.

The third trend is synergized integration, indicating a shift in understanding the nature of digital marketing. While earlier social media marketing was understood as the sum of individual social media initiatives, today steps are taken towards a more complex and integrated approaches to harness the synergies between, for instance viral videos, teasers on twitter and advergames. Integrated digital marketing aims to benefit from the interdependency of marketing

initiatives making use of different social media tools across different platforms and markets. This results in higher levels of coordination between the different strategies. VDK's Friday Fan Photos is an example of such synergy (rewarding Facebook fans for uploading their own photos of Denmark), effectively combining advertisement and gamification strategies. Additionally, this trend refers to the increased coordination of virtual/digital and physical/place based initiatives. Social media communication is no longer seen as on-going in isolated channels (silos) but rather, as layers of communication that can supplement and add value to events taking place at the destination level. An example of the virtual augmentation of local events is the centennial celebration of the Little Mermaid campaign, taking place in August 2013. The campaign consisted of a number of coordinated international events, featuring live mermaid-models in destinations across the world. Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms were used intensively to enhance awareness and participation in the weeks up to, during and after the event. The Mermaid campaign outperformed on all campaign indicators, proving to be one of the most successful VDK digital marketing initiatives ever.

## **Conclusions and managerial implications**

Tourists and the world of tourism have entered into a special relationship with digital technologies. Technological tools are not passive objects; they carry affordances enabling as well as shaping tourist behavior. A tourist with a smartphone in her hand is a hybrid with a number of new action possibilities: capable of calling others, paying entry tickets, sharing touristic moments across time and space, and listening to audioguides. However, by enabling Facebook status updates or checking in on 4Square or QR-code scans, the smartphone discloses the physical location of its bearer, which may allow the virtual harvesting and distribution of personal information. In other words, digital technology fundamentally changes one's social world and has the potential to enact new tourism realities.

The typology of generic strategies presented in this paper helps to map, examine and classify the different ways in which DMOs approach the new world of social digital realities. However, it is important to bear in mind that these strategies do not act as silos, on the contrary, they are often fluid and complement each other. DMOs overall social media strategy may incorporate layers and elements of several of these strategic dimensions. In some cases a game acts as a complement to a traditional advertising campaign, analytics can be applied to better understand an immersion strategy community development, or mimetic strategies such as the uploading and downloading of images can be turn into a lottery game where tourists with the most voted or downloaded photos compete for a prize. Social media management has important implications for human resource management and leadership in DMOs.

Leadership of DMOs have in the past been sceptical of the potential of social media and on occasions have left this important area of development to a few internal champions that despite being enthusiastic did not hold key management positions and had difficulties to get funding and support for their initiatives. As previously explained, strategies promote different ways in which

tourists can be incorporated in the processes of digital value creation. Increased customer empowerment diminishes the amount of control that DMOs have over their brands. This is a radical change that disrupts traditional control on destination branding strategies. The developing and managing of the destination brand is probably one of the most important DMO tasks. A change in the locus of control of the brand is often perceived as a threat to traditional organizational structures. A general resilience to internal processes of change and the difficulty to measure return on investment of social media initiatives add complexity to this situation. There is no one single model or rule of who and what position in the organization is to manage social media strategies. Insights of studies of organizational implications of social media strategies in DMOs, or festival and event managing organizations all indicate that staff responsible of social media management are often those that already are active on those media and are technology-savvy in general, but do not necessarily maintain high (or full-time) positions in the organization or take part in defining the overall strategy of the organization. A lack of strategic initiative often appears when there is no 'champion' to push for social media strategies in the organization.

Nevertheless, to have staff who has a general training in social media is not enough. In order to turn social media initiatives successful demands expertise in this area. The question that remains is where do DMOs employees (or potential employees) gain this expertise? Increased competitive pressure to gain access to new technologies, the speed of change of social media platforms and a tendency to further specialization of technical skills in this field (e.g. from crowd-sourcing, to social network optimization, to game-developing, etc.) are factors favoring outsourcing. A popular opinion is that younger generations of digital natives may bring increased levels of social media skills into the labor market, including tourism organizations. We find this to be a naïve understanding of the complexities of this new media field. That young generations have a very extensive use of this media for personal purposes does not mean that they may as well have an in-depth knowledge (both organizational and technically wise) of how to optimize social media for market expansion and product development. As this paper has showed the strategic management of social media communication is a wide, challenging and fast evolving landscape. Until now DMOs have made use of strategic choices that make poor use of the social and co-creation potential of this media. Organizations will have to face this challenge seriously if they are to succeed. This will demand actions to increase the skills and knowledge of the employees of the organizations, a general understanding that social media initiatives are not only one among many things that a marketing department can do, but a crucial change in the way DMOs can develop their brands, their products and their relationship with customers.

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