The Role of Social Media and User-Generated-Content in Millennials' Travel Behavior

Maria-Irina ANA
Bucharest University of Economic Studies
6 Piața Romană, 010371, Bucharest, RO
ana.mariairina@yahoo.com

Laura-Gabriela ISTUDOR
Bucharest University of Economic Studies
6 Piața Romană, 010371, Bucharest, RO
laura.istudor@gmail.com

Abstract. *One of the sectors most influenced by digitalization is tourism and the use of the Internet for brand building is an increasingly common custom, especially by taking advantage of the benefits Social Media has to offer to related businesses. In the given context, the aim of this article is to analyze the role of Social Media and User-Generated-Content in Millennial consumers' travel behavior, to investigate how these influence people's decisions to visit specific tourist destination and how various tourism indicators fluctuated in the last two decades, in order to have a better understanding of the current tourism trends. The primary method used is an online questionnaire, along with documentary analysis, statistical analysis, and personal observation. The article starts with a comprehensive literature review that addresses key themes such as tourists decision-making behavior, motivation of travel, or user-generated content. The relationship between Social Media and the desire to travel, but also the manner in which Social Media is used throughout the whole holiday decision-making process are examined. Hence, the paper investigates the impact of Social Media on the travel choices of Romanian Millennial residents, also known as Generation Y, the largest cohort of Internet users, often called digital natives, as they are the first generation born in the Information Age and for whom travel is a way of life. The paper also draws attention to the ways in which travel and tourism businesses could reshape and customize their current marketing strategies in order to gain competitive advantage in the industry.*

Keywords: *UGC; Social Media; tourism; Generation Y; digital marketing.*

Introduction

In today's society, the Internet represents a sea of opportunities for both companies and consumers, but can also turn into a threat, as "the increase in customer power and knowledge […] the bargaining power of customers" has become one of the greatest challenges brought by electronic trading (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Mayer, & Johnston, 2009, p.47), together with the increased level of competition (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015, p.190). As per the World Tourism Organization (2001), the tourism industry has become an information-intensive one, being one of the most impacted sectors by e-commerce. However, e-commerce is an important element for the tourism sector, while

online marketing activities employment has become a common way of developing a brand. (Hudak & Kianickova, 2017), as "traditional (offline) marketing strategies are already widely used […] and there are almost no new options for fostering competition" (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015, p.187). Therefore, the impact of online marketing for the tourism sector must be understood, especially the one of e-mail marketing, affiliate marketing, and Social Media, which is proving to be the most used way to increase awareness for the aforementioned industry.

The present research investigates on the importance of UGC sites for the decision-making process of Generation Y in choosing a travel destination and their impact on travelers' behavior. Although there have been constant increases in international tourist arrivals after the economic crisis from 2008 and the UNWTO's forecasts of further increase until 2020 (World Tourism Organization, 2018), studies on the topic have been scarce.

The role of UGC travel sites has been investigated by means of a quantitative analysis answering questions and testing hypotheses related to the role of UGC travel sites in the decision-making process for the aforementioned Generation Y, the trust it grants to UGC sites compared to traditional sources of travel information and the importance of the type of UGC content viewed.

The paper aims at providing relevant information regarding the benefits of UGC sites for shareholders in the Travel and Tourism industry, as marketers need a deep understanding of the consumer behavior in order to pursue strategic decisions.

Literature review

One of the many domains where the Theory of Needs has been often applied is Travel and Tourism sector, the Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs being used to explain travelers' behavior (Šimková & Holzner, 2014). Thus, scholars consider that the consumer's "need" is the fundamental reason for making a purchase decision – it is rather a basic human requirement, like air, food, drink, sleep, shelter, and that tourists decision-making behavior is in fact a five different stages process that goes from biological and physiological needs to safety needs, belongingness and love needs, esteem needs and finally to self-actualization that can be translated into personal growth and fulfilment (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015).

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and tourists' decision-making process

The first stage in the decision-making process is the "problem recognition", often called "gap analysis". During this phase, the consumer simply realizes that this need exists, they become aware of it and will reach the next stage, "information search", very often met in the tourism-related buying decision. According to Chaffey et al. (2009, p.7), "there is a dramatic difference in online consumer behavior in different markets", and given that in the Travel and Tourism sector people usually research and then also buy online, while for purchases such as a house or a car, they only use the internet as a research tool, internet and digital platforms are key aspects for tourism marketers. Stage three, "evaluation of alternatives", brings out two

essential concepts for marketing, namely brands and consumer value (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015). Consumers also buy products for what they communicate to them, for the "feelings" or "emotions" those products may create, and, since travel and tourism is actually a service, not a tangible product, people in fact buy experiences, tourism being more often than not an emotional purchase, meant to satisfy belonging, esteem and self-actualization needs. Pearce (1982) is a proponent of this idea, so he analyzed 400 travel experiences of 200 tourists from USA, Canada, Australia and Europe, asking them to describe one positive and one negative travel experience. After collecting all the responses, he analyzed and coded their stories into five categories, as per Maslow's (1943) pyramid. In the positive experiences case, self-actualization (35%) and love (33%) prevailed, while for the negative ones, safety (43%) and physiological needs (27%) came first, suggesting that travel motivation mirrors the "approach-avoidance" theory, that aims "to describe the major systems that motivate behaviors in reaction to classes of appetitive (rewarding) and aversive (punishing) stimuli, and to explain consistent patterns of individual differences in these behaviors" (Corr, 2013, p.285).

Maslow (1970) addressed two other human needs, that, in some scholars' vision (Hsu & Huang, 2007) are very suitable for explaining tourists' behaviors, namely the aesthetic needs, and the need to know and understand. People travel to discover themselves, to explore and learn about something new, to be exposed to various kind of beauty, idea also supported by Šimková and Holzner (2014), who found out that for Millennials at a Czech Republic University, "seeking personal rewards", "telling others about their new experience", "inspiration", as well as "escaping personal environments" are the main reasons for travel. The fourth stage of the consumer decision-making process, also called "purchase", refers to the part when potential customers "must decide when and where they are going to buy" (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015, p.192), a critical decision, that usually takes three to six seconds (Mooradian, 2012) and have recently started to take place online for tourism-related purchases, travel being "the leading e-commerce category in Europe by revenue for the fixed internet" (Chaffey et al., 2009, p.124). Subsequently, "post-purchase-process", the fifth and last stage of the travelers decision-making process, as identified by Schwarzl and Grabowska (2015), refers to building and maintaining a long-term relationship with the consumers, turning them into loyal customers by understanding various key aspects such as how they used your product and for how long, what feelings they experienced, but also how they intend to act next.

Other factors that influence tourists' decision-making process

Culture is another aspect that influences tourists' choices, but also tourists' level of satisfaction, despite the fact that globalization build bridges between cultures all over the world. Thus, the relation between Hofstede cultural dimensions and tourism products has been of increased interest for various scholars, including Manrai and Manrai (2011, p.45) who concluded that "the influence of culture on tourist behavior spans from basic travel motivation to tourist decision making process involving preference and choice behaviors, and continues to various aspects of post-purchase behaviors such as service quality and perceived value evaluations, satisfaction and revisit intentions", thus enabling travel and tourism marketers to design effective, well-targeted tourism products and services, but also promote these properly. However, "while information provided by fellow consumers is important, the actual decision to visit still resides with the consumers, who base their choices on the cognitive and evaluative attributes of the destination" (Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2018, p.258), so

managers and marketers should not give up as a consequence of bad comments or reviews related to their services, but rather struggle to improve them, because consumers also want to evaluate and see on their own many times, do not always make a decision based on what they are told or what they read. However, it must be emphasized that negative posts, comments or reviews spread faster than positive ones, so "it is high time for destination marketers to concentrate on each traveler's expectation and attempt to provide satisfaction with the aspects of destination" (Gurung & Goswami, 2017, p.13).

Travel and tourism businesses' concerns in the context of creative economy

Apart from this, one of the main concerns of the Travel and Tourism companies lately is how consumers might create additional value for their touristic product, or how often and when their products are in fact used until the ultimate disposal, concept called in the literature "customer-value chain" (Mooradian, 2012), that "shows highly important information concerning products' innovation and how to change customers' behavior" (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015, p.192). However, it is rather difficult to determine which advertising medium really convinced the customer to buy that product and was in fact the pivotal one for the final purchase, so it is very important for a company to know more about the conversion rate of their marketing means, to identify which are worth keeping or investing in (Bockhorni, 2014), given that, with the online marketing expansion, companies are currently offered an increasingly higher number of possibilities.

In the context of creative economy, a concept coined by John Hopkins (2001), since innovation in the IT industry, one of the main creative industries, revolutionized the way people and businesses communicate and buy products, respectively sell products, it is of great importance to acknowledge the impact of incorporating these new tools into the business models of companies. Companies from a sector of the economy can make use of the knowledge generated by other industries in order to develop new ways of doing business. The improvement of processes and the development of new techniques can lead to an increase in productivity in every industry (Suciu, 2008).

Web 2.0 and tourism

Altogether, "nowadays it seems to be indispensable running a business without any online presence" (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015, p.195), especially since travel products and services seem to be well suited to online selling – they are "high involvement products [...] less tangible and more differentiated than many other consumer goods", these characteristics making them more appropriate to be purchased over the Internet (Garín-Muñoz & Pérez-Amaral, 2011). Furthermore, the Web is also shifting travel and tourism marketing practices from a B2C approach to a peer-to-peer model, mainly in what regards information sharing, so a good, extensive understanding of the e-mechanisms designed for spreading information online can facilitate tourism companies to market their businesses via the Internet efficiently and effectively.

In this regard, one of the most important online tools used nowadays in Travel and Tourism sector is Social Media, "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.61), increasing the

power of Word-of-Mouth (WOM), transforming it into electronic-Word-of-Mouth (eWOM), and expanding the potential audience beyond the traditional parties, family and friends, to new, wider, geographically dispersed networks of strangers (Lo, McKercher, Lo, Cheung, & Law, 2011). As such, "at the start of the process when inspiration is sought, the recommendations of family and friends (via social networking) are the most used source of information" (Rushton & Kennell, 2015), and, when compared to traditional forms of advertising, it was found that people trust eWOM more (Jamaludin, Aziz, Mariapan, & Lim Ain Lin, 2017).

Gretzel (2007) in cooperation with TripAdvisor undertook one of the most comprehensive studies on the influence of online travel reviews on potential travelers – roughly 1500 TripAdvisor users answered an online survey, revealing that reading other consumers' posts in Social Media is the most frequently used source of information for travelers, and that users usually consider UGC sites and platforms most reliable, enjoyable and up to date. Additionally, most recent related data revealed that 52% of Facebook users in the USA admitted that their friends' photos inspired their travel choices, proving again that eWOM is the most credible form of advertising and Social Media might be valuable tool for travel brands that intend to engage travelers (Abramovich, 2018). Plus, 83% of Millennials in the USA stated that they would not mind letting travel brands track their digital behavior if this would provide them with a more personalized, satisfying travel experience, showing that this generation is quite open to these practices as long as there is a win-win result (MDG Advertising, 2017).

In a top of vacation-inspiration sites made in 2017, Facebook ranked first, with 29%, followed by TripAdvisor 14% (Carter, 2017), while Instagram is expected to get the lead in the near future, given that nowadays people engage with Instagram posts and stories ten times more than they do with Facebook (Miller, 2017). Even though people use Social Media mainly when looking for travel information (27% research destinations, 23% hotels, 22% vacation activities, 21% attractions, 17% restaurants), research showed that they continue to use it also while they are on vacation or even post-holiday - while still traveling, 72% of people post pictures on a Social Network, and 70% of them update their Facebook status with travel-related information. Plus, after coming back from a trip, 76% of travelers post photos from holiday, 55% like Facebook pages related to their vacation, 46% post hotel reviews, 40% post touristic-attractions reviews, and 40% post restaurant reviews (Carter, 2017). Some other statistics are even more persuasive for travel business that are considering online marketing for presenting and promoting their products and services: according to a survey commissioned by Chase Card Services on 1002 travelers in the USA, aged 18-67, 97% of the Millennials share their travel photos, while 73% of them even post on Social Media at least once per day during the holiday, and 87% use Facebook for travel inspiration. Thus, UGC can influence the whole trip and the daily activities while on holiday, as real-time images shared, for example, during some events, might often inspire others to attend attractions or events they had not initially planned. Of all the persons questioned, Millennial consumers are more likely (44%) than other older-aged travelers (35-49 year-old 28% and 50-67 year-old 11%) to seek opinions on Social Media while they research a prospective holiday.

User-generated content in travel and tourism

In the given context, the potential and influence of user-generated-content is hard to be ignored and it can be certainly stated that "digital platforms are changing the way travel is traditionally researched, bought, sold, experienced and shared" (World Bank, 2018). Broadly speaking, "the social media shared by users, along with the associated metadata are collectively known as user generated content (UGC)" (Moens, Li, & Chua, 2014, p.xv), but this concept can also be met in various papers as "user created content" or "consumer generated media"; it comes in any language, from a great range of sources, including social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube or Twitter, from questions-answering websites like Wiki-Answers or Yahoo! Answers, as well as from forums or blogs. According to Eastin (2010), UGC and eWOM must not be confused, as UGC is the Internet content published by everyday consumers, not media or communication professionals, while in the eWOM category any statement, positive or negative, made by potential, actual or former consumers about a product or a brand posted online and made available to a wide public can be included.

Compared to traditional marketing tools, UGC's economic benefits, although meaningful, they are not quite self-evident. The most important advantage of Social Media would be that on the Social Media platforms people reveal personal information and preferences without being asked to, because "uploading content has become second nature" (Salem & Twining-Ward, 2018, p.18) while when they are asked officially by marketers, they either cannot or do not want to provide such valuable information for businesses. Therefore, more accurate, complex, well-targeted and tailor-made marketing campaigns can be done using the information readily-available in Social Media. Some other authors consider that the most valuable characteristic of UGC is the knowledge one can learn about life at local level, UGC becoming a predominant source of information about various geographic features, such as cities, towns, local attractions etc. (Hecht & Gergle, 2010). Plus, studying the communities' members, their roles in the community and profiling them in a structured manner could also be an important aspect businesses and marketers should take into consideration (Mkono & Tribe, 2017). Last but not least, it has been noticed that most UGC have a significant influence on tourists' expectations related to the destination of choice, while the level of satisfaction is rather indirectly connected to UGC sources (Artola & Sánchez García, 2019). For example, in regards to the hotel customers, it was found that willingness to recommend a hotel to others is more related to intangible aspects, such as staff members, while the disatisfaction comes more often from the tangible aspects of the hotel stay, such as rooms furnishing or value for money (Berezina, Bilgihan, Cobanoglu, & Okumus, 2016).

All things considered, having a deeper understanding on how tourists use and interact with the Travel and Tourism products and services offered, businesses in this industry are better able to serve them relevant, personalized and well-targeted content that will get their attention faster and very often even at a lower cost.

Methodology

Although there have been a number of studies on online marketing and social media strategies in travel and tourism, there is still a considerable gap concerning the usage of UGC sites for decision-making process and the impact of these sites on travelers' behavior worldwide, needless to mention that generations-wise studies on this topic are currently quite scarce despite the prosperous times for the Travel and Tourism industry - international tourist arrivals grew 7.0% in 2017, the highest increase since the 2009 global economic crisis and well above UNWTO's long-term forecast of 3.8% per year for the period 2010 to 2020 according to the latest report published by the World Tourism Organization (2018).

While there is an increasingly higher number of people that use Social Media for travel-related purposes, the Travel and Tourism industry shareholders are still skeptical regarding UGC sites benefits and also unsure of how to respond to these more recent trends in the online and digital marketing. Nevertheless, any strategic decision that Travel and Tourism marketers would take to integrate UGC tools and features into a business in this sector should be preceded by a deep understanding of the market, of the current trends, but also by comprehensive studies on how the UGC platforms and sites are being used by all stakeholders, but mainly by consumers. Thus, the focus of this paper was represented by Generation Y travelers, as they are the most active Internet-users and the largest cohort of Internet users nowadays. In this regard, we have explored the following research questions:

Q1: What role do UGC travel sites play in the decision-making process of Generation Y?
H1: UGC travel sites are mainly used during the information-search stage of the decision-making process.

Q2: How much do Generation Y consumers trust UGC compared to the traditional sources of travel information (official travel websites, travel brochures, email travel promotions, commercial operators, visitor centers, travel guides etc.)?
H2: Consumers trust UGC information more than other sources of travel information.

Q3: How important do Generation Y online consumers find the most popular forms of UGC information compared to other of travel information?
H3: Various forms of UGC are considered more important than other sources of travel information.
H4: Consumers consider third party (i.e. noncommercial) sources of travel information less important than photos/videos posted on Social Networking sites.

To test the aforementioned hypotheses and answer the related research questions, a quantitative analysis was conducted after reviewing existing literature up to date. In the period 27-29th of June we distributed an online questionnaire to a random set of 100 Romanian Millennial citizens; a web-link to the survey created on a platform supported by Google was distributed via Social Networking sites and a total of 80 completed surveys was collected from the 100 respondents. The data was then analyzed using Excel, descriptive statistics, as well as regression analysis being used for this research.

The research instrument was made-up of seven sections, as follows:
• demographic characteristics of the respondents;

• Generation Y travel habits;
• Social Media usage habits of Generation Y.

For these three sections we used both multiple choice and single choice questions, but included also one "short answer" sections. For the next four sections, we considered a 5-point Likert scale was most relevant, and the answered were coded from "1" corresponding to "I strongly disagree" to "5" representing "I strongly agree". Sections 4, 5 and 6 correspond to the paper's hypotheses, while in section 7 we added two extra insightful questions, in order to have a deeper understanding of the influence Social Media and User-Generated-Content have on Generation Y travelers' final trip planning behavior.

Apart from this, we also looked at statistical data regarding the number of overnight stays and number of international tourists' flows as reported on Eurostat. The number of arrivals include longer-time tourists, as well as same-day non-resident visitors, while the number of overnights refers to the number of nights spent by guests, non-resident tourists in all kinds of tourism accommodation establishments, hotels, holiday and other short-stay accommodation, camping grounds, recreational vehicle parks and trailer parks (World Tourism Organization, 2016). It has to be mentioned that the number of arrivals and the number of visitors is way different, because the same person can make several trips to a certain country during a given period, resulting in more arrivals, but the number of visitors remaining the same (Ana, 2018).

Results and discussion

The questionnaire was addressed to respondents of maximum 38 years old, as they represent the population belonging to generation Y. The respondents of our survey had ages comprised between 25-30 years old, with the majority of them being Romanian women. Their occupations vary from students to economists, while 42.3% of them have incomes between 500-1000 EUR. More demographic data is to be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of survey respondents

Age group	Number of respondents	% of respondents
18-25	26	32,50%
25-30	40	50,00%
30-38	14	17,50%
Gender	**Number of respondents**	**% of respondents**
Female	48	60,76%
Male	31	39,24%
Monthly income	**Number of respondents**	**% of respondents**
<500 EUR	17	21,52%
500-1000 EUR	33	41,77%
1000-2000 EUR	20	25,32%
>2000 EUR	9	11,39%

From the total of respondents, 55.7% take less than 5 trips in the course of a year, while 36.7% of them pursue between 5-10 trips and 7.6% travel more than 10 times/year. A great percentage of them, 81%, travel both in Romania and abroad and the fact that more than half usually take less than 5 trips per year, can be linked with the fact that 63.29% of them have a disposable income of maximum 1000 EUR/month. The survey revealed that 86.1% of the respondents travel for leisure, while 93.7% opt for self-planned trips, the online services acquired being mainly transportation tickets (93.7%) and accommodation (84.8%), while 29.1% also rent cars or other vehicles.

In other respects, if we analyze the latest overnight and international arrivals at tourist accommodation establishments by country/world region of residence of the tourist from 2000 up to 2017 (the last year for which data is available) reported on Eurostat, we can notice that Romanians spent in total 53% more nights in tourism accommodation establishments all over the world in 2017 compared to 2000, while the number of international arrivals of Romanian residents in tourism accommodation establishments around the world increased 2.5 times, indicating that people traveled nowadays travel more often than they used to, but their trips are shorter, the so-called "city breaks" being preferred to longer holidays (Eurostat, 2018). Approximately 92% of the total trips and overnights spent abroad by Romanian residents are to countries from the European Union, mainly as a consequence of geographical and cultural proximity, budget rationales or time limitations. (Nicolescu & Ana, 2018). Approximately 30% of the total number of Romanian residents that travel abroad belong to Generation Y according to Eurostat (2018). However, in regards to the share of nights spent by residents and non-residents in Romania in 2018, a very high percentage is represented by residents, 81% of the total nights spent, this also being the largest share among the EU Member States (Eurostat, 2019), indicating that Romania residents tend to travel inside the country way more than abroad, but also that Romania still has a lot to work on improving the tourism sector and becoming more attractive for international travelers.

The third section of the survey concerned the social media usage - the most popular platforms respondents use are Facebook (94.8%) and Instagram (85.7%), while the time they spend on social media platforms can vary between 1 to 3 hours for 56.4% of them and between 3-5 hours for 28.2% of them. A percentage of 15.4% spend more than 5 hours on the aforementioned platforms, although it is not clear whether the time spent is also work-related.

The fourth section of the questionnaire addresses the role of UGC sites in the decision-making process of a trip for the generation Y. Table 2 summarizes our findings.

Table 2. Usage of UGC sites depending on stage of the Trip Planning Process

Stage of travel planning process	Question	Totally Disagree	Tend to disagree	Not sure	Tend to agree	Totally Agree
Information search	I use UGC sites pre-trip, when I had already chosen where to go, but I am looking for various information about the destination.	10%	5%	32.5%	27.5%	25%
Information search	I use UGC sites pre-trip, when I search for ideas on where to travel.	11.25%	10%	23.75%	35%	20%
Evaluation of alternatives	I use UGC sites pre-trip, when I evaluate the alternatives and try to narrow down the choice of destinations.	7.5%	10%	35%	28.75%	18.75%
Purchase decision	I use UGC sites pre-trip, before the actual purchase decision, to confirm I had made the right destination choice.	12.5%	17.25%	37.5%	16.25%	16.25%
Purchase (during the trip)	I use UGC sites during the trip, when I try to find out information about specific attractions/activities.	7.5%	10%	28.75%	30%	23.75%
Purchase (during the trip)	I use UGC sites during the trip to share my experience with other travelers/friends.	25%	20%	27.5%	16.25%	11.25%
Post purchase evaluation	I use UGC sites after the trip to compare my experience with those of other travelers.	31.25%	26.25%	26.25%	10%	6.25%
Post purchase evaluation	I use UGC sites after the trip to share my impressions with other people.	30%	21.25%	23.75%	10%	15%

The results show that over a half of the respondents choose UGC sites during the information search stage of the travel planning process. From the responses given, the respondents show an inclination towards searching for information on UGC sites when

they already decided the travel destination, in order to search for reviews about the place to be visited on various topics such as accommodation, restaurants, local tourist attractions and activities.

According to the results, we can also draw the conclusion that more than half of the respondents look for UGC sites when searching for a new travel destination, given that media content and written reviews can have a great impact on the final decision. Also, most of them use UGC sites when trying to evaluate their alternatives pre-purchase and during the trip, in order to find out more about the local attractions and activities.

In order to test Hypothesis 2, the respondents were asked how much they trust UGC sites compared to the traditional sources of travel information. As shown in Table 2, UGC sites are trusted more than the traditional sources (32% of the responses are in favor of UGC sites, 24% turn towards traditional sources, while the remaining 44% are indecisive between the two). A t-test also confirms that non-UGC sources are less trusted by prospective travelers than UGC sites ($t = 2.57$, sig. $= 0.006$). From the available traditional sources of travel information, email promotions and commercial operations appear to be less trusted than UGC sites, while visitor centers and guidebooks are considered the most reliable of the traditional sources, closely followed by official travel websites.

Table 3. Trust in UGC sites compared to traditional sources of travel information

	Mean score	Totally Disagree	Tend to disagree	Not sure	Tend to agree	Totally Agree
I trust UGC sites less than any other traditional sources of travel information	2.90	8	17	36	13	6
I trust UGC sites less than official travel websites	2.75	8	28	26	12	6
I trust UGC sites less than travel brochures	2.66	11	25	27	14	3
I trust UGC sites less than email travel promotions	2.46	18	25	22	12	3
I trust UGC sites less than commercial operators	2.59	13	25	28	10	4
I trust UGC sites less than visitor centers	2.90	6	21	33	15	5
I trust UGC sites less than travel guides (guidebooks)	2.86	7	20	36	11	6

In order to test Hypothesis 3, which assumes that several forms of UGC are considered more important than other sources of travel information the respondents were asked to rank the importance of each UGC type (photos posted on Social Networking sites, videos posted on Social Networking sites, independent traveler reviews on travel-related websites, independent traveler blogs) and also non-UGC sources (state tourism websites, commercial operators, travel reviews written by professional travel writers, interactive travel planners, live webcams) on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = I totally disagree and 5 = I total agree. T-tests were conducted in order to compare the mean

importance scores for both groups of travel information sources, while also highlighting the percentage of responses that indicated which of the components, UGC or non-UGC type, was more important.

As Table 3 depicts, consistent with our other findings and hypotheses, information provided by UGC sites was considered more important to the respondents than that coming from non-UGC sources, the independent traveler reviews on travel-related sites such as TripAdvisor, Booking, or Airbnb rank in top positions of the UGC sites, followed by the content posted on Social Networking sites. The only non-UGC source with a similar mean score as the UGC sites was represented by the blogs written by professional travel writers, which might also suggest how the popularity of blogs has increased nowadays, regardless of the sponsored content or not. Blogs written by independent travelers, UGC source was also a popular choice of our respondents. Whether they are professional travelers' blogs or independent travelers' blogs, the social media influencers are an online presence that became a third party endorser in the past years. Present in all the popular social media platforms, among which Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, they publish products/services information and share the latest promotions with their followers, as they benefit from credibility in their communities. (Lim, Radzol, Cheah, & Wong, 2017, p.19) The process has become more transparent, as since 2017 year the sponsored content has started to be flagged on Instagram, one of the most widespread social media platform of the moment.

For the Romanian Millennials surveyed, the least important travel related information were provided by state tourism websites and commercial operators, thus emphasizing the impact of Social Media on this generation. A percentage of 67.5% categorize travelers' reviews as important or very important, 60% categorize videos of places posted on Social Networking sites important or very important, 53.75% consider that photos of places posted on Social Networking sites are important or very important to them in the planning phase of a trip, while 51.9% assessed independent traveler blogs as important or very important. From the non-UGC sites, only 13.75% of the Romanian Millennials surveyed believe that information provided by state tourism websites are important or very important. T-tests results also supported our hypotheses – when comparing the mean score on UGC's importance (mean = 3.62) against the mean score on non-UGC's importance (mean = 3.11), UGC content is considerably more important to travelers than non-UGC sources (t = 5.92, sig. = .000). Consequently, both hypotheses H3 and H4 are supported.

Table 4. The importance of UGC and Non-UGC sites content for travel decisions

		Mean	Totally unimp.	Unimp.	Neutral	Imp.	Very imp.
UGC	Photos of places posted by real travelers on Social Networking sites (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Pinterest etc.)	3.53	3.75%	13.75%	28.75%	33.75%	20.00%

	Videos of places posted by real travelers on Social Networking sites (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat etc.)	3.61	3.75%	3.75%	25.00%	40.00%	20.00%
	Independent travelers reviews on travel-related websites (TripAdvisor, Booking, Airbnb etc.)	3.89	1.25%	3.75%	27.50%	40.00%	27.50%
	Independent travelers blogs	3.43	5.06%	13.92%	29.11%	36.71%	15.19%
Non-UGC	Information provided by state tourism websites	2.7	8.75%	30.00%	47.50%	10.00%	3.75%
	Information provided by tourism operators	2.8	8.86%	27.85%	43.04%	15.19%	5.06%
	Travel reviews written by professional travel writers	3.54	1.25%	11.25%	32.50%	42.50%	12.50%
	Live webcams from particular destinations/ attractions	3.3	3.75%	20.00%	32.50%	30.00%	13.75%
	Interactive trip planners	3.23	7.50%	10.00%	41.25%	35.00%	6.25%

Regarding the final additional questions addressed in the survey, the results in Figure 1 point that 55% of the respondents might make a final decision related to booking a trip or travel product based only on the influence of UGC sites (33.75% claimed that they are likely to, while 21.25% would definitely decide to book a trip based solely on UGC's influence). 31.25% were unsure of what they would do, while 3.75% would definitely not make their travel choice influenced by UGC and 8.75% stated that it is unlikely they will make a travel decision related to booking a trip based on the influence of UGC sites. On the other hand, 27.5% claimed that they would consider changing their existing travel plans only because of the influence of UGC sites, and 13.75% would definitely change their travel plans after seeing certain photos, videos or reviews on Social Media. Only 6.25% claimed that UGC sites would not have an impact on their existing travel plans.
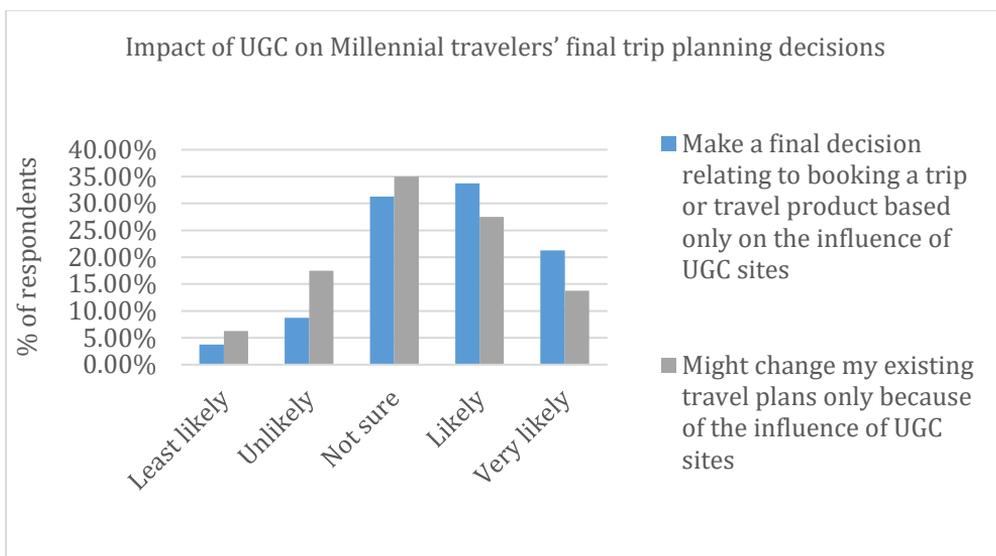
Figure 1. Impact of UGC on Millennial travelers' final trip planning decisions

Conclusions

By analyzing the responses, we can draw the conclusion that Hypothesis 1 was validated, as over a half of the respondents tend to choose UGC sites during the information search stage of the travel planning process.

Hypothesis 2 was also validated, as UGC sites are perceived as more trustworthy than the traditional sources with 32% of the responses in favor of UGC sites, 24% in favor of traditional sources and 44% indecisive between the two.

Furthermore, Hypotheses 3 and 4 were supported, as the responses show that various forms of UGC are considered more important than other sources of travel information, while showing a preference towards media content posted on Social Networking sites.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects we should mention is that this research supports the idea that UGC has become a very powerful tool lately, especially among the younger generations, successfully complementing the non-UGC sources for travel information, as the innovations in the IT industry and the rise of the internet gave people access to more sources of information. Throughout the information searching stage of the travel product buying decision making process, UGC sites seem to have had replaced non-UGC for Generation Y travelers, a higher number of Millennial users admitting they use Social Networks, travel blogs, travel-related forums to inform themselves, rather than official state tourism websites, travel brochures, or the more interactive trip planners, such as visitacity.com.

Also, worth mentioning and quite interesting to notice is how the way in which UGC is used changes throughout the trip planning process. To begin with, UGC is the most used source of information in the initial phases, while potential travelers look for inspiration and evaluate their alternatives for a future holiday. However, Millennials use UGC rather

often also during their trips, when they try to find information about the places they are visiting, from where to eat to where to go out during the night, where to go shopping or even what to visit, but as the decision-making process goes further, the respondents to the survey claimed that they are not willing to share their experiences with other people in Social Media. We should mention, though, that in most cases, users simply do not admit to themselves that they spend so much time on Social Media or that they share more content than they think they do. Thus, in our opinion, these answers were not entirely accurate and the matter should be further investigated, considering that the same respondents also claimed they trust more the information on Social Media, such as travelers' pictures, videos, or reviews than similar information from travel companies. The reasons for using UGC more during the initial stages of the decision-making process are that the users want to fuel the enjoyment from anticipation, to see what they can expect from the trip they intend to buy, to transpose themselves at the destination, but also to confirm for themselves that they made the right decisions. Apart from these, users on Social Media also want to find tips and tricks from other travelers, in regards to the places they visit, in order to get the most from their trip and be prepared, to avoid getting lost, mixing up or missing touristic attractions, reduce the time spent still planning while at destination. From all the UGC sources, blogs are least trusted nowadays, despite their increased popularity a few years ago, but, when asked about the trust in non-UGC sources, professional travel writers ranked the highest, suggesting that to a certain degree Millennials still prefer to hear and read others' experiences (be they sponsored or not) than official, detached information about the destinations chosen. The young generation though prefer looking at pictures and videos than reading content, therefore Social Network platforms like Instagram have become increasingly popular among Youth, especially for Travel and Tourism related content, where such posts have a high impact.

Regarding the businesses and professionals involved in the Travel and Tourism sector, one of the key aspects to be mentioned is that marketing-responsible persons should combine both UGC and non-UGC sources in designing their strategies, as to make their brands more visible and reliable, better off and more trusted, but also more interactive, as travelers look for interactions with their favorite brands and want to know they have been heard when they spell-out their opinions. Plus, they tend to appreciate when real travelers can post comments and share their impressions to businesses' online websites and Social Network pages or when their questions and concerns are answered in minutes. To sum up, there are great opportunities for tourism providers if they manage to integrate UGC functionalities into their existing websites and Social Media pages and create real communities around their brands, where they can be seen and heard. Yet, marketers should be aware that an active online presence also comes with important challenges, so they should carefully monitor what people say about their brands online, as negative reviews tend to have a higher impact on the brands' image. Apart from this, brands should focus on boosting consumers' engagement and increase organic reach, convince users to join sincere, meaningful conversations, rather than trying to control and manipulate through traditional forms of advertising. Incentives may be granted to active users, as well as to people that sign up to newsletters, create accounts and update their profile with as many personal information and preferences as possible, because these elements often help marketers provide well-targeted content to the customers and conduct webnographic research. Other offline and online combined add-ins, such as QR codes added to travel brochures or flyers to boost call to action and raise awareness to

online media means might also represent a suitable tourism marketing strategy for Millennial customers.

On the other hand, regarding the future research directions, it might be interesting to investigate the potential differences between the tourism behavior between Romanian Millennial travelers' other counterparts' abroad. Additionally, finding out the reasons behind the lack of trust some travelers still show regarding UGC sources might also be of interest, not to mention the means to increase general confidence in online content, or the always present question marketers ask themselves, namely how to increase users' engagement with the brands they represent.

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