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**Article**

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## THE DUALITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN TOURISM

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### Abstract

Today's technologies offer many opportunities for communication and for developing the social, political and economic environments. Social media is one of the channels highly used for personal and business communication in our informational society. However, the various facets of the social media may not be employed in the same manner for the needs of the individual as they are for the needs of the businesses aiming to develop in the tourism sector.

This paper aims to identify which of the social media platforms are appropriate for being used for personal purposes and which are more suitable for developing a business in tourism, amongst the users of social media. The paper bases its conclusions on a survey applied on a sample of Romanian young people (18 – 35 years old) involved in tourism business environment, as according to research in the field such as Lenhart, Purcell, Smith and Zichur (2010) and Cabral (2011) this is the most active segment in social media.

The findings presented in the paper result from the analysis of the survey responses and they indicate that all four types of social media platforms taken into account: social networks, blogs, micro-blogs and video file sharing platforms are used for both personal and business purposes. However, inside each of the four types of platforms surveyed there were noticed certain preferences, from the point of view of users' interests in communication: personal purpose communication or business in tourism purpose communication.

**Keywords:** social media, business in tourism, communication, social networks, video file sharing, blogging, micro-blogging.

**JEL Classification:** L14, L17, L22, L83, L86.

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### Introduction

Emerging technologies offer an ever expanding variety of means to support and enrich social and economic environments. The Internet-based Social Media made possible for people to communicate with hundreds or even thousands of other persons about events, people, products and the companies that provide them. Social Media combines the traditional communication approach of companies when talking to their customers, while in a non-traditional manner it allows customers to communicate directly one to another (Mangold and Faulds, 2009).

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The huge amount of diverse information that spreads through users' communities presents an interesting opportunity for linking that data to users' profiles, allowing companies to make predictions about users' behaviour (Onete, Dina and Vlad, 2013; Negrea, 2007). Models may be built with the purpose of predicting future trends in user's behaviour in the real market and of designing the proper marketing and advertising campaigns (Asur and Huberman, 2010). However, the numerous applications of Social Media may not be used in the same way for the needs of the individual as for the needs of the organizations (Isacsson and Gretzel, 2011).

In this paper, starting from the condensed literature review of social media implications for tourism business environment, the results of a research aiming to determine the most appropriate use of the various social media platforms in communication will be presented. Thus, social networks, blogs, micro-blogs and video file sharing platforms are analyzed from the point of view of their utility in communicating for personal purpose and for business related purposes in tourism sector.

### **1. Review of the scientific literature**

Social media may be used in many ways by companies for promoting and developing the business, but also for analyzing clients' opinion about the offered products and services. In the same time, information about companies and markets that some time ago was little spread out or held only by a small group of people is now available to mass through social media platforms. Thus, organizations may benefit from new ideas and knowledge and clients may get better informed and may express their concerns and views regarding the offers and companies (Melian-Gonzalez, Bulchand-Gidumal and Lopez-Valcarcel, 2013).

There are numerous Social Media applications that are developed at a high speed rate. These applications enhance the voice of the consumers (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014), allowing those who share common interests to join their ideas and points of view and to influence global markets. Thus social media online initiatives may shift thus the balance of power among companies, consumer associations, NGOs and governmental bodies (Kane et al., 2012).

Until recently, communication and information about a touristic destination was generally supported by traditional tourist agencies. Today, a great number of people willing to travel towards a specific touristic location choose the online communicating and planning alternatives, being influenced by social media applications (Dina and Sabou, 2012). As such, companies from tourism sector chose to adapt to the new behavioural trend of tourists, becoming increasingly active in social media, as its applications have revolutionized communication and, consequently, the marketing of tourism destinations and businesses strategies of development (Sotiriadis and Van Zyl, 2013). It has been noticed that when a touristic place has a high number of posts associated with, the amount of positive comments is larger than the amount of negative ones, proving thus the necessity of being actively involved when promoting a touristic destination through social media (Melian-Gonzalez et al., 2013).

Choosing the platforms fit for personal purposes or those that are fit for business related purposes is a matter of defining the purpose, the aimed target group and the nature of message to be communicated. Each Social Media application usually attracts certain groups of people, with specific behavioural patterns. Companies should be aware of their

stakeholders and be active in Social Media wherever their customers are present (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

A forecast provided by Forrester Research about how Western European Social Media marketing is going to evolve from 2012 to 2017, indicates that the European Union Social Media marketing spending will rise, due to the high diversity of devices available for accessing it and to the increasing number of Western Europeans who use social networks. There are several factors likely to restrain this development in spending, linked to the legislation governing online privacy, consumers' more and more risen awareness about their rights in the online environment and the difficulty of quantifying the benefits brought by Social Media (Western European Social Media Marketing Forecast - 2012 to 2017, 2013).

Social Media's use in tourism business varies from advertising to sales and PR, as communication with stakeholders in online environment relies on the same key points of other media channels communication. Through social media, tourism companies may easily build their desired image in the virtual space (Lee, Tyrrell and Erdem, 2013). Research shows that that Social Media provide a beneficial communication channel during a crisis situation in organizations. However, it is important that the organizations recognize stakeholders' needs during difficult events, as Social Media presence alone does not ensure the successful solving of problems (Hvass, 2013).

## **2. Research Methodology**

The research was based on an online questionnaire distributed to on 254 subjects of both sexes, with ages between 18 – 35 years, involved in tourism business (either as employees or as business developers).

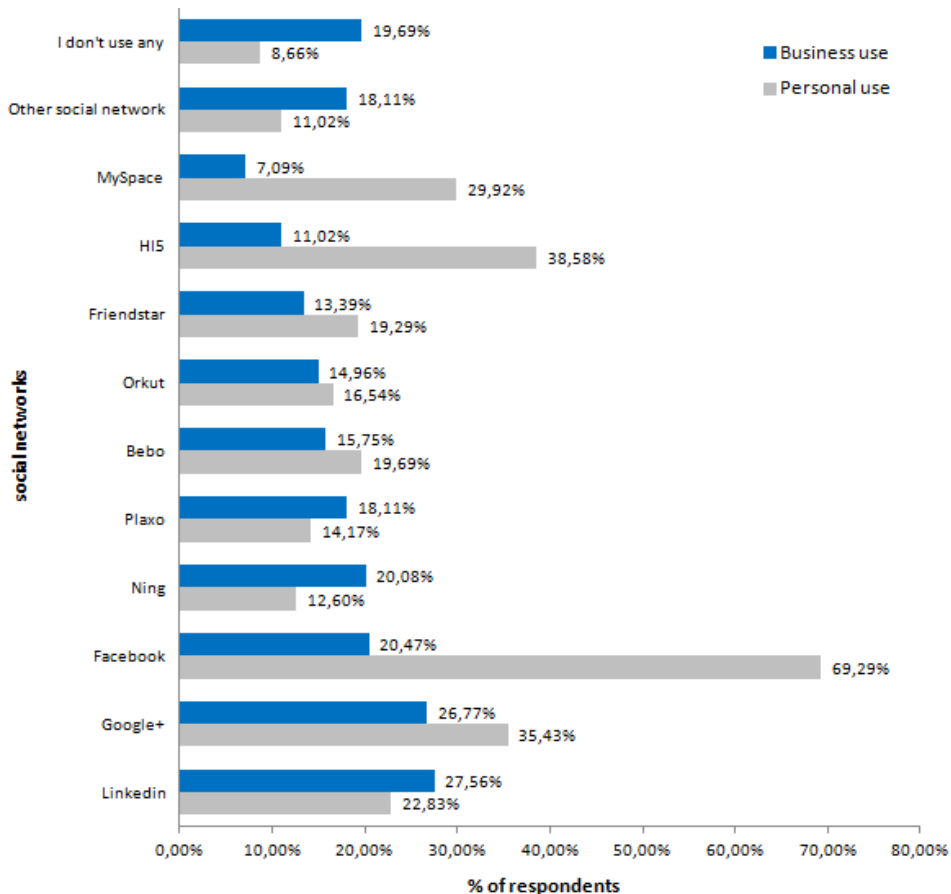
The research aimed to determine how the various Social Media platforms are used: for developing the tourism business Romanian users are involved into or for individual, personal reasons. As such, an online survey was conducted, as the studied population had to use Internet and its various applications. There was used a non-probability sampling, a purposive one, as the online questionnaires were distributed only to those persons involved in tourism business sector, with ages between 18-35, according to authors own selection. Due to the specific of respondents' selection, the calculus of sample error cannot be done. Therefore, the results of the research need to be carefully pondered, as they may not be associated to a probability of representing the overall population. Accordingly, the results do not guarantee a characterization of the whole population of Romanian young users of Internet involved in tourism sector.

In this research, distinctions were made between users of blogs and registered users on micro blogging platforms. Also, due to the fact that a small number of companies own their personal forum discussions platforms, most of the forum topics being opened and managed by customers communities, the research didn't take into account the extremely vast number of discussion forum platforms. The participants were asked to select, for each type of Social Media platform, the category they mainly use it for: personal purposes or work related issues. For each type of Social Media platforms, respondents were asked to select the one(s) they use for personal and for business related issues (regardless of their area of expertise: front office, marketing, sales, PR, customer communication, development etc.).

### 3. Results and Discussions

#### • Social Networks Analysis

As respondents were requested to indicate the social networks they use for personal or for business purposes, they could choose one or several options. The social networks included in the questionnaire were selected taking into account their popularity measured by number of registered users (MySpace, 2014; Hi5, 2014; Orkut, 2014; Friendster, 2014; Plaxo, 2014; Ning, 2014; Bebo, 2014; Facebook, 2014; Google+, 2014; LinkedIn, 2014). The results of social networks usage are shown in Figure nr. 1.



**Figure no. 1: Social network platforms: personal use vs. business use**

*Source: authors, according to research data*

As seen in Figure nr. 1, Facebook is the most used when it comes to personal purposes, 69.29% of respondents stating this. Hi5 – used by 38.58%, Google+ -used by 35.43% and MySpace - 29.92%, are next in the ranking of the most used social networks for personal purposes, having a considerable reduced number of users when compared to Facebook. LinkedIn, a social network dedicated to business circles, is shown to be preferred also by Romanian users when aiming business development in tourism sector (27.56%).

Another social network more used for professional than for personal purposes is Ning. It is oriented towards communities sharing the same interests and hobbies, explaining thus the interest of business companies for these already targeted customers groups (Markova and Petkovska-Mirčevska, 2013). About a fifth of the questioned people – 18.11%, use for their professional activity other social networks than the ones shown (Figure nr. 1), showing that there are in Romania local social networks, like Puzzled.by or Mamaloo.ro, addressing to only Romanian people.

An interesting aspect is the one regarding Google+, as it is the 3rd most used social network for personal purposes and the 2nd for business purposes. Here, there are no such high differences between the number of personal and business users (35.43% vs. 26.77%), as we see in the case of Facebook (69.49% vs. 20.47%).

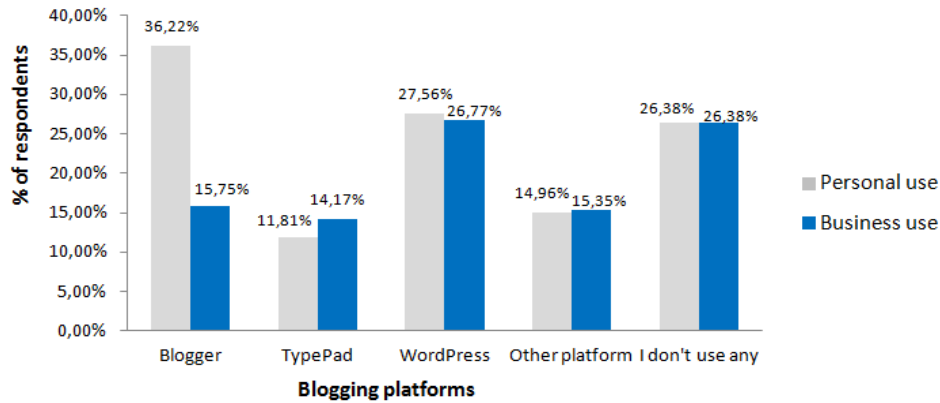
Generally it can be remarked that social networks are rather used for personal purposes, than for work related issues and business. However, the number of Romanian people using social networks for business purposes is not insignificant, as only 19.69% state they don't use any social network for business purposes.

The distribution of answers regarding the use of social networks for business is more equilibrated, meaning that respondents don't have an obvious preferred social network for work related and business development issues, as it is Facebook - a social network for personal purposes.

#### • **Blogs Analysis**

Respondents were presented the worldwide most accessed blogging platforms, being asked to select the ones they use - if they use any and, also, the purpose of their blogging activity: personal or business related. The blogging platforms included in the questionnaire were selected taking into account their popularity measured by number of registered users (Blogger, 2014; TypePad, 2014; WordPress, 2014). Some of respondents stated that they have several blogs on different platforms and for different purposes. About a quarter of the respondents said that they don't use blogs neither for personal, nor for business related issues. The overall distribution of the answers is presented in Figure no. 2.

Blogger is the most used platform for personal blogging, 36.22 % of respondents admitting they have a blog on it, followed by WordPress – used by 27.56% of respondents. Except Blogger which attracts clearly more personal issues oriented users, all the other platforms gather almost in the same proportion users who write about personal interests and users who aim a business development in tourism sector. About 15 % of respondents stated they use various other platforms, some of them private. TypePad is a paid access platform, therefore this might be the reason why the analysis revealed more business oriented users than personal oriented ones on this platform.

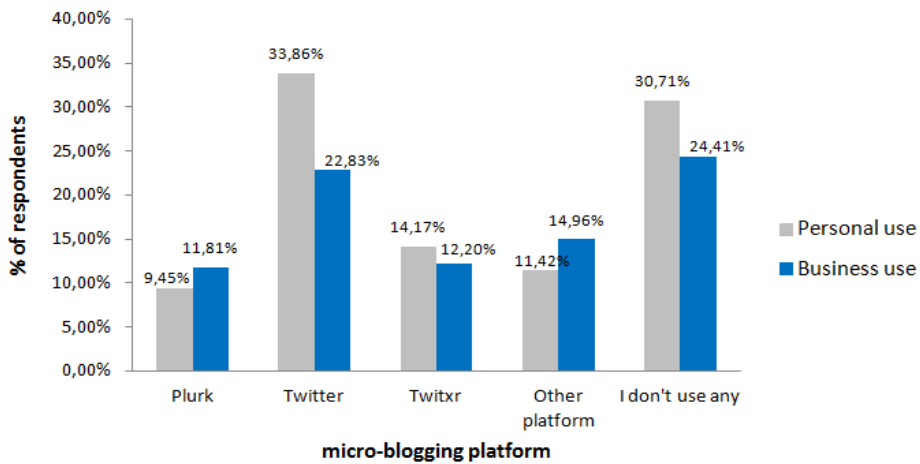


**Figure no. 2: Main blogging platforms: personal use vs. business use**  
 Source: authors, according to research data

It can also be remarked that, its number of users is lower than the number of those working with WordPress or Blogger, which are free access platforms.

• **Micro-blogs Analysis**

A first remark would be that, unlike the case of social networks, of blogging and video files sharing platforms, the number of users of micro-blogging platforms is lower. The micro-blogging platforms included in the questionnaire were selected taking into account their popularity measured by number of registered users (Plurk, 2014; Twitter, 2014; Twitxr, 2014). The results of micro blogging use are presented in Figure nr. 3.



**Figure no. 3: Main micro-blogging platforms: personal use vs. business use**  
 Source: authors, according to research data

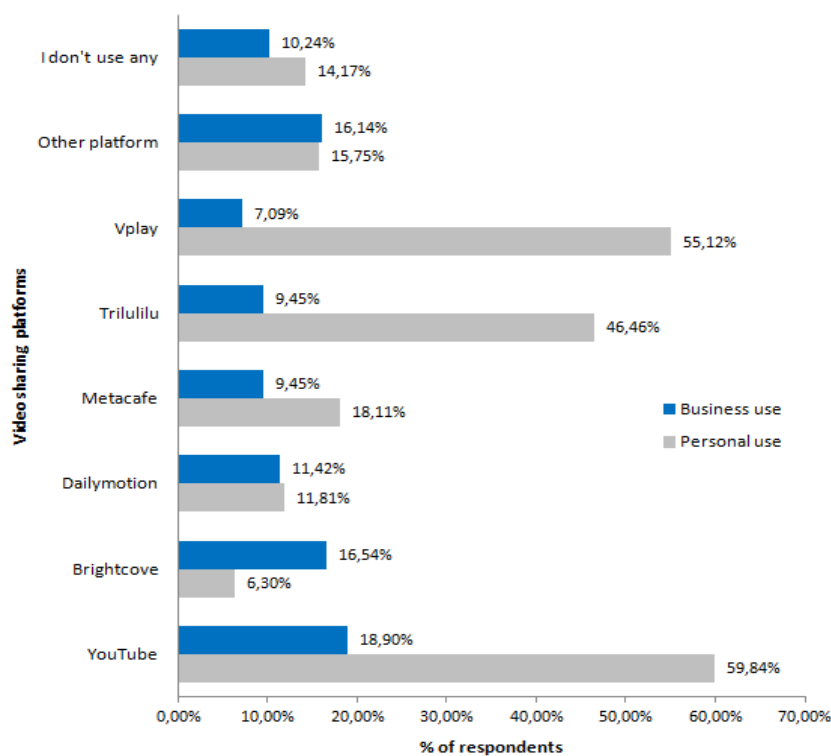
From the overall number of personal purpose users, 30.71% declare that they don't use this type of Social Media platform, while the percentage of business purposes non-users is

24.41%. In what concerns personal and business issues, twitter results as the most used micro-blogging platform. Not as much used are Twitxr and Plurk, each of them gathering less than 15% of the total number of users, in both segments: business and personal users.

• **Video File Sharing Platforms Analysis**

One of the most used types of Social Media platforms is Video File Sharing, a very large number of video sharing platforms being globally available. The video file sharing platforms included in the questionnaire were selected taking into account their popularity measured by number of registered users (Metacafe, 2014; Dailymotion, 2014; Brightcove, 2014; YouTube, 2014).

Due to the fact that there are also available several Romanian platforms for video sharing, two of the most frequented, according to their reports (Vplay, 2014; Trilulilu, 2014), Vplay and Trilulilu were included in the list of platforms available for being chosen by respondents. The distribution of users' preferences in accessing one or several platforms for business or personal purposes is shown in Figure no. 4.



**Figure no. 4: Main video sharing platforms: personal use vs. business use**

*Source: authors, according to research data*

The research shows that YouTube is the most used platform for sharing and distributing video content. It is the most frequently used platform for both personal and business related issues. The next in ranking after YouTube are the Romanian platforms: Vplay and Trilulilu,



as responses show that when searching for or sharing video files of personal interest, the preferences of users go towards these two next. One of the reasons could be that these platforms do not have very strong copyright policies applied.

Video sharing is used for business purposes by 89.76% users, the most accessed platforms being YouTube (18.90%) and BrightCove (16.54%). Vplay (7.09%) and Trilulilu (9.45%) are little used by respondents when looking for their business development. Due to the very high number of video sharing platforms, about 15% of respondents stated they use different platforms than the ones provided by questionnaire.

### **Conclusions**

Internet and its applications, especially Social Media, are more and more used by both companies and individuals for their communication needs. There are many types of Social Media platforms: blogs, micro-blogs, social networks, video file sharing, forums for discussions etc. Not every platform is suited for being accessed when aiming various communicational purposes.

Our analysis showed that all forms of Social Media are used for both personal communication purposes and for business in tourism related communicational purposes. However, users prefer in a higher or lower degree the various Social Media applications, according to their communicational target: personal or business in tourism related. Also the results of research indicated that, inside the various types of platforms taken into account users prefer in a higher degree some of them for personal use while was the same applications are considered unsuited for business communication by the same users, as is the case of MySpace and Hi5. The most preferred types of Social Media platforms to be used for personal communicational purposes and, also, for business related issues are video file sharing and social networks. Blogs and micro-blogs - as forms of Social Media, are used by less people, despite their intention for communication: a personal interest communication or a business related communication. Due to sampling technique used, there are limitations of the research. Consequently, although the obtained results are relevant for the studied community, their expanding to the whole population of young Romanian Internet users involved in a tourism business has to be carefully considered. However, the obtained results provide an overall image of social media communication particularities in tourism sector. These may be completed by further future research about the possibilities of promoting through social media Romania's cultural assets and touristic offers. Overall, Social Media appears as an extremely popular form of communication, regardless of purpose. As it is a continuously growing in influence communicational channel, companies from tourism sector need to carefully convey their messages through the appropriate platforms.

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