IDENTIFYING THE IMPORTANCE AND USE OF WEB 2.0 TOOLS AND NETWORKS IN TOURISM SECTOR: CASE STUDY OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA[1]

Marjan Angeleski
University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'- Bitola, Faculty of Economics, Prilep
marjan.angeleski@uklo.edu.mk
Dejan Zdraveski
University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'- Bitola, Faculty of Economics, Prilep
dejan.zdraveski@uklo.edu.mk
Miroslav Andonovski
University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'- Bitola, Faculty of Economics, Prilep
miroslav.andonovski@uklo.edu.mk

ABSTRACT

The Internet has become the main source of information for tourism workers and tourists who have increased requirements and preferences. The transformation from passive searching for information, content creation, collaboration and networking by using the Internet, into an interactive tool with a new opportunity for easy obtaining information for tourist exchanging opinions with other people, booking trips, payments etc. is very significant today. Simultaneously with the demand for personalized trips, the travel agencies offer highly personalized travel services to its clients on the net. A key role in this transformation of the Internet into an interactive tool had the emergence of web 2.0 technologies that allow users active participation not only in consumption but also in generating the contents. Web 2.0 tools and networks transform the web from static provider of information into an area for exchange of dynamic information. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is twofold: to identify the importance of web 2.0 tools and networks for the tourism sector as well as to examine the web 2.0 technologies that can be used in the development of the tourism sector strategies.
KEY WORDS: web 2.0, Internet, tourism

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[1] Review paper

INTRODUCTION

The concept of web 2.0 represents the second generation of Web-based services and undoubtedly plays a very important role when planning holidays and trips. The widespread use of the Internet to search information about trips and in particular the use of the various services associated with web 2.0 technologies such as social networks, blogs, forums and so on has caused major changes in the tourism sector. People that are traveling can find information and communicate with other users at any time and without financial consequences.

Therefore web 2.0 performed significant influence on the behavior of tourists and decision-making in the selection of tourism offers. The digital environment transformed the way of communication of tourists replacing the passive information searching with content creation, collaboration and networking. Therefore, through the development of the Internet as an interactive tool, it is opened a new opportunity to easily and comfortably obtain tourist information and knowledge. All this led to a change of preferences of tourists who are now looking for exceptional value for their money and time. Tourists use the Internet to find different types of information, to exchange opinions with other people, to booking trips, to make payments and so on.

In addition to the increased demand for personalized travel offers, the tourist offer of contents and information on the Web is developed as well. Web 2.0 contributed for this situation. 'Web 2.0 actually represents Network as a Platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform...'(Kortzfleisch, Mergel, Manouchehri, & M, 2008).

This term is commonly used to describe the various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010); therefore, Web 2.0 is seen as a changing global network, from environment that only provides information in an environment where besides the use there is also creation of information. Users use the contents in different ways in order to meet their different needs. Sharing and creating new contents, the network evolves to move to the area of social and ideological connection.

With this in mind, Web 2.0 is 'the philosophy of mutually maximizing collective intelligence and added value for each participant by formalized and dynamic information sharing and creation.' (Hoegg, Martignoni, Meckel, & Stanoevska, 2006). Tim O'Reilly, the founder of O'Reilly Media, in his paper dedicated to web 2.0, this concept has been defined as 'composition of economical,

technological and social trends, together forming a basis of the next generation Internet - a more mature and distinctive medium, which can be characterized through user participation, openers and network effects' (O'Reilly, 2005).

Word-of-mouth is considered as the most effective marketing communication strategy, allowing consumers to share their opinions and other information with potential buyers (Lopes, Abrantes, & Kastenholz, 2012). In some way web 2.0 represents digitization of Word-of-mouth digital generated contents and digital networking using the power of customers (Wieser, 2008).

WEB 2.0 PLATFORMS AND TECHNOLOGIES AND THEIR ROLE IN THE TOURISM SECTOR

One of the most significant differences between the concept of Web 2.0 and the traditional offer of web content is the broad cooperation among the Internet users, content providers and enterprises. The social nature of web 2.0 also sets it apart from static web allowing interaction, content sharing and cooperation i.e. allowing the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Web 2.0 covers a wide range of technologies of which the most widely used are blogs, wikis, podcasts, information tagging, social networks, virtual worlds, RSS etc. (Almeida, 2012; Harris & Rea, 2010).

The characteristics of the main Web 2.0 technologies and their importance for the tourism sector will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Blogs. Blogs represent the earliest form of web 2.0 and they are a special type of websites that display contents usually created by a user in reverse chronological order. Those are web pages containing user-created entries updated at regular intervals and/or user-submitted content that was investigated outside of traditional media (OECD, 2007). This form of web 2.0 is similar to a personal web page that can display personal diary that describes the daily life of the author, or to summarize different opinions and relevant information for a specific area.

Although, blogs are mostly managed by one person, they provide interaction with other visitors to the blog through the possibility of leaving comments on published content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Corporate blogging is a significant content marketing tool for businesses that is used for creating content that addresses industry updates, expert tips or best practices and company news from the perspective of a brand. Corporate blogs provide direct feedback on

specific topics by consumers or potential consumers by leaving their comments, suggestions or criticisms.

In the tourism sector blogs are commonly used by travel agencies, hotels, departments and so on in order to share information to potential customers and serves as a gateway for the travelers, providing information and news for their offers. On the other hand, visitors comments serve as a good basis for making decisions on potential future travelers and the same can attract the attention of Internet users who require further information, to develop a desire for the Internet visitors to visit a particular destination and so on. (Sigala, 2007).

Microblogging. Microblogging is the practice of posting small pieces of digital content-which could be text, pictures, links, short videos, or other media-on the Internet (Prothero, 2009). In fact, microblogging is combination of blogging and instant messaging allowing users to describe their status and to create short messages that can be posted or shared with a wider audience by instant messages, mobile phones, email or the Web (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007). The most known microblogging platforms are Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram. Many traveling businesses do microblogging as part of their business. Microblogging is an excellent way to communicate with customers whether in the time of travel, travel planning, or have already realized the trip.

Podcasts. The term 'podcasting' was first introduced in print in February 2004, and was derived from the words 'iPod', a brand of portable digital audio players made by Apple Computer and 'broadcasting' (Hammersley, 2004). Podcast basically is an audio or video file that can be automatically delivered to the user's computer or mobile device by subscription (usually via RSS), at the same time as it is attached to the creator's page.

Nowadays many tourism service providers are using Podcasting as an effective form of marketing, as well as a communication tool. Podcasting allows users to make better decisions and it is a way to explore the experiences of others before making a decision to reserve a hotel, destination and so on.

Basically, podcast in tourism can be generalized into one of the following three types: (1) Destination podcasts - which can be sponsored by Destination Marketing Organizations; (2) Travel Experience podcasts - which refers to the sharing of experiences for travel mostly from personal perspective and the same can be focused on trip planning, the flight experience, hotels and meals, or descriptions and experiences of a variety of different places; (3) Travel and Tourism Industry and Education podcasts - These podcasts are more focused on special areas of travel and tourism. (Feifan Xie & Lew, 2008)

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Wikis. A wiki is a collection of webpages that enable users to add, delete, and in general edit and change the site's content of a website. Wiki allows Internet users to collaborate online, to add a variety of content such as text, images, hyperlinks, etc., to view and change the contents that are generated by other users using simple editors and without some broad background knowledge for making web pages etc. As a result of such cooperation, this means that such websites are developed collaboratively through their users. Wikis provide a medium for storing, organizing and reformulating the ideas that are contributed by each community member (D. Jonassen, J. Howland, R. Marra, 2008).

One of the most famous wiki pages is Wikipedia.com which is a free online encyclopedia whose contents are created, continuously supplemented and enriched by its users. Wikis can be used in tourism to collaboratively create contents that will improve the information for certain destinations. One of the most famous wiki pages related to tourism is wikitravel.org which represents the effort of Internet users to collaboratively create a free, complete, reliable and continuously update an online global travel guide (Sigala, 2007; Wikitravel, n.d.).

Video and Photo Sharing. Platforms for sharing video and photo allow users to upload, store and share photos and videos with other users (Rathonyi & Varallyai, 2011). Often, the photos can be edited online, organized in albums and commented upon by other users. Companies use video sharing to share commercials saving costs, since it is much lower compared to TV advertising. (Aichner & Jacob, 2015).

Many tourists share photos and videos of their trips using media-sharing sites. The increased use of broadband Internet and cheap mobile devices like smart phones has enabled the rapid growth of these sites. Such sites not only provide benefits for the easily displaying photos and videos, but also allow users to share, evaluate and write comments about them (Benckendorff, Sheldon, & Fesenmaier, 2014).

Many smart phones have built-in GPS geotags to locate the photo and to add geographical identification with metadata that allows finding news, web sites and other sources of information related to a certain location. On the other hand, for tourist operators, the video and photo sharing is an excellent opportunity for sharing digital content without paying a fee for their disclosure and the easy availability of potential customers to them.

Social - collaborative networking. The term social network site refers to web sites that allow users to establish a network of relationships with other users,

sharing access to information on their profiles, news, status updates, comments, photos, or other forms of shared contents (Steinfield, Ellison, Lampe, & Vitak, 2012).

In fact social network sites are web-based services that allow individuals to "(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Conole, Galley, & Culver, 2011). The most popular social network platform is Facebook with more than 2.19 billion monthly active users (http://www.statista.com/, n.d.). Facebook has a great influence over consumer choices globally, especially in the travel sector (Živković, Gajić, & Brdar, 2014) because one of the most popular activities among tourists during their holiday and after the holiday is to share self-made videos or photos.

Considering the nature of these sites, social networks made a radical change in the way of planning holidays offering opportunities to interact and share opinions and experiences about certain tourist locations, hotels, restaurants, attractions etc. Namely, if a service exceed the expectations of the customer, it is highly possible that he will be motivated to share his positive experiences and to recommend that destination through social networks. The same applies to consumers who had negative experiences with which it would have a negative impact on the choice of the following customers (Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2005).

Virtual worlds. Virtual worlds are persistent virtual environments in which people can interact each other similar to real life (Schroeder, 2008). The virtual world actually represents three-dimensional environment in which participants can be in a certain interaction with other participants in form of virtual representation called avatar. The use of virtual technologies in tourism from day to day becomes more noticeable. The virtual tourists can access the virtual platform where through the realistic simulation can receive much different information, to move to different parts of the places of the virtual environment, to get in contact with tourist information office in order to be introduced to the specific destination etc. (Cruz-Lara et al., 2012).

Tagging. Social tagging is a way of sharing and categorizing online contents that allows users to express their opinions, perceptions, and feelings with respect to diverse concepts. In social tagging, contents are connected by keywords generated by users called 'Tags'. In this way through tags, contents become more recognizable for search (Nam & Kannan, 2014). In fact using tags the

content is classified in a unique way with complete freedom of the customer with some specific meaning for him.

Once tags are assigned, they play a role as index terms and if they can be searched by all users represent system called 'folksonomy' (Hayman, Schemes, & Square, 2007). Tagging is potentially a very powerful information management resource and in planning trips can play a key role. For example, when searching a particular destination the user can get information, photos and videos associated with the name of the location for which we want to obtain information if we write key term associated with the tags associated with a particular destination.

Mashups. "A mashup is a web application that integrates heterogeneous resources from more than one source to create a single new service displayed in a single interface" (Cappiello, Daniel, & Matera, 2009). An example, can be combined addresses and photos owned by any user with a Google map to create a map mashup, which is one of the most popular types of mashup. One of the benefits of mashup in tourism is that tourists can easily create new forms of visualization by combining images of destinations and hotels with certain locations from Google maps. In this way to the users are given additional information for specified location, the opportunity for closer acquaintance with it and help in making a decision on choosing a particular destination.

RSS. RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is an XML based form to share contents published on web sites. Namely, if some web site wants to share specific published contents at the same time to another site, RSS file must be created. This so-called syndication actually allows information to be shared with other sites at the same time (Çelikbaş, 2004). The RSS information, which are available from blogs and other web sites that frequently update contents, are called feeds. Feeds are gathered for the user by an aggregator. In fact the user does not have need to visit a number of individual sites to access up-to-date information, but it is necessary to be registered in some RSS feed aggregator which collects and organizes contents of many sites for which the user is interested in (Duffy & Bruns, 2006).

RSS in the tourism sector can be greatly used to share news by travel agencies, airlines and hotels for holidays, discounts and offers. On the other hand, it allows potential customers to be always supplied with the latest information at the same time when they are published on the source web page for which the client requested to receive RSS.

THE USE OF WEB 2.0 WITHIN TOURIST AGENCIES AND HOTELS IN
THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

The main goal of the research was to explore the level of use of web 2.0 in the
tourism sector, i.e. the level of use of web 2.0 in the registered travel agencies
and categorized hotels in the Republic of Macedonia. Based on the review of
categorized hotels from the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Macedonia,
the country has a total of 236 categorized hotels from two to five stars (46 of the
hotels that are categorized with one star were not subject to the research). The
schedule of categorized registered hotels from 2* to 5* superior in the Republic
of Macedonia by category is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Categorization of hotels in R. Macedonia (Source: 29.02.2016 Ministry
of Economy)

Category	Total
5*superior/5*	5/12
4*superior/4*	7/63
3*superior/3*	6/79
2*superior/2*	7/57
Total	236

According to the register of travel agencies published by the Ministry of
Economy, there are 636 registered travel agencies in the Republic of Macedonia
(23.03.2018 Ministry of Economy), of which 284 are from category A, while
352 are from category B.
A structured survey with closed questions was conducted for the proposes of this
research. Namely, in the period February - April 2018, the questionnaire was
sent by email to 149 hotels (16 in category 5* superior or 5*; 54 in category 4*
superior or 4*; 45 in category 3* superior or 3* and 34 in category 2* superior
2*) and to 219 travel agencies at random choice. A total of 68 representatives
from the agencies responded to the questionnaire (60 with license A and 8 with
license B) as well as 48 hotel representatives, out of which 6 in the category of
superior 5* or 5*; 18 in the category superior 4* or 4*; 12 in the category of
superior 3* or 3* and 12 in the category of superior 2* or 2*.

When assessing the impact of different media on clients in choosing the services, most of the respondents think that the Internet has the greatest influence. Namely, on the scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means the lowest and 5 the greatest importance, the impact of the Internet is rated at 4.41, while the lowest influence has the radio and print media with a total score of 1.71. The responses of the respondents from the travel agencies and hotels are given in Figure 1.
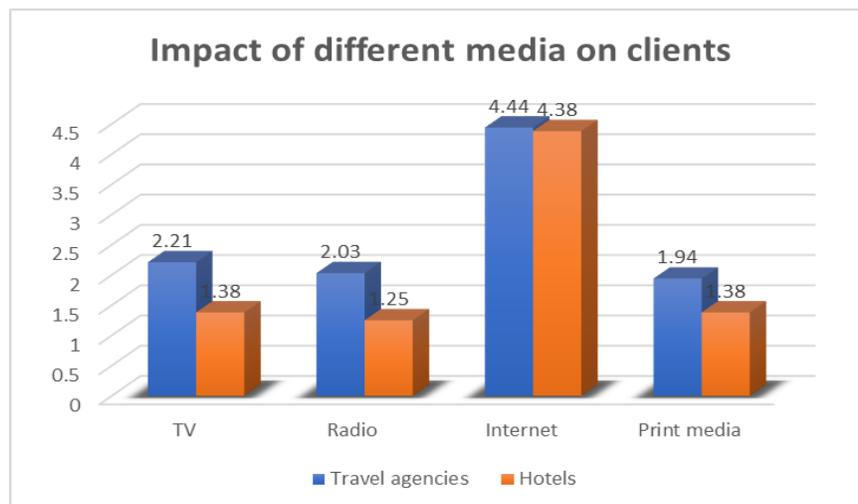

Figure 1. Impact of different media on clients

This situation also corresponds with the orientation of travel agencies and hotels in terms of choosing a medium to promote their products and services. Namely, most of them use the Internet as a promotional tool while only small number of respondent use the radio and print media as a promotional tool. On the scale from 1 to 5, the Internet has a total score of 4.36 and the radio and print media has 1.34. (Figure 2).
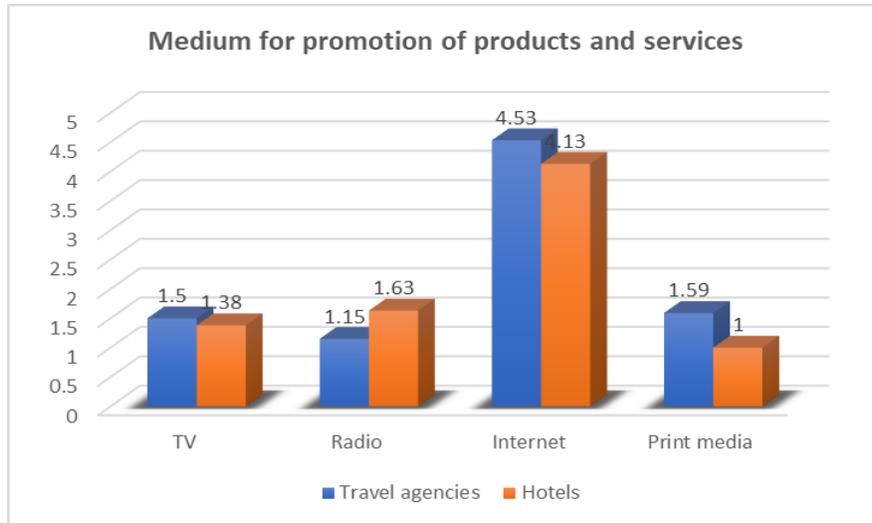
Figure 2. Mediums used by the travel agencies and hotels for promotion of their products and services

According to the research, only 8.82% of the travel agencies and 25% of the hotels answered affirmatively on the question "do you know what does the term web 2.0 mean?". However, this high percentage of negative response does not correspond with the actual use of the sites and tools covered by the web 2.0 concept. Perhaps such responses of travel agencies and hotels are due to insufficient familiarity of the concept of web 2.0, i.e. the lack of knowledge about the web 2.0 concept.

According to the results from the research, most of the travel agencies are familiar with photo sharing websites, but even though they are familiar with these websites they either do not use them or use them to a very small extent. This situation is shown in Figure 3
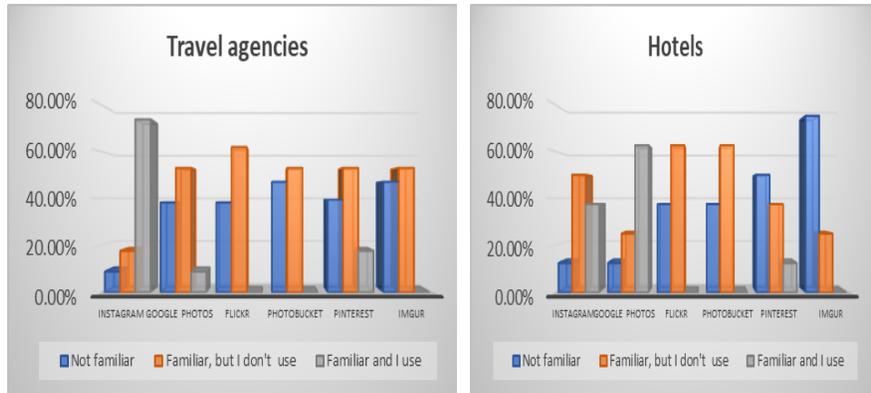
Figure 3. Using and familiarity with Photo sharing web pages

The situation is similar regarding the hotels representatives' responses and their familiarity of using Photo sharing websites. That means most of the hotels are familiar with these types of websites but in most cases they do not use them.
Identical is the situation with the familiarity and the use of video sharing tools (see Figure 4). The research shows that the most used video sharing platform is Youtube, both by the travel agencies as well as the hotels in the Republic of Macedonia.
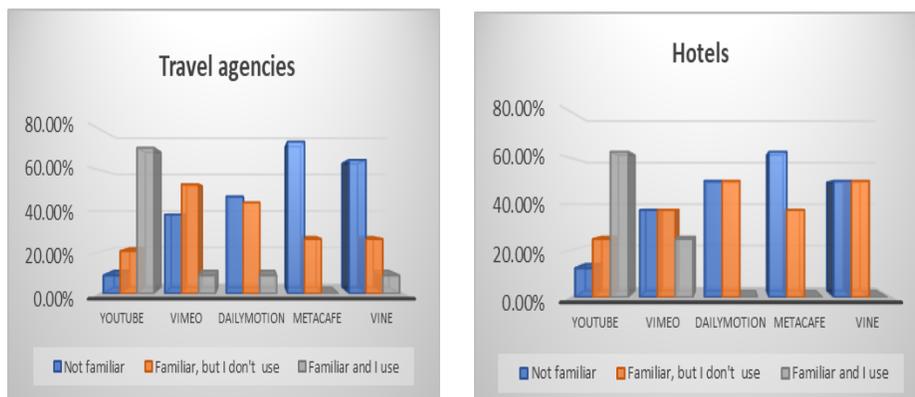

Figure 4. Using and familiarity with Video sharing web pages

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According to this research, high 70,59% of the travel agencies are familiar with Youtube and thay use this platform for their activities. Also, 62,50% of the hotels are familiar and use Youtube as tool for video sharing.

These may be expected results, considering the fact that Youtube is the most used video sharing platform. This coresponds with the latest world's data which shows that Youtube has a 1,57 billion montly active users, 30 million daily active users, 5 billion videos watched per day etc. So, the results from the research is in according to the world trends(Source: https://www.omnicoreagency.com/youtube-statistics/).

Figure 5 shows the familiarity and use of social networks of the travel agencies and hotels. According to the them the most popular social network is Facebook. This is an expected situation, given that the number of Facebook users as a target group is the largest.
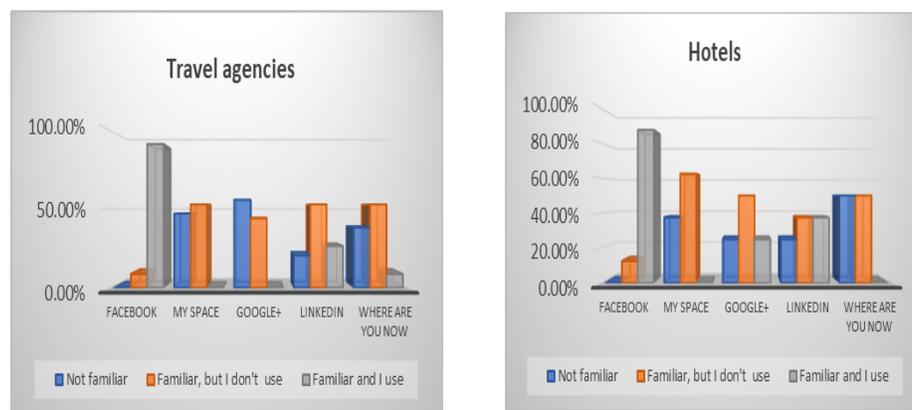

Figure 5. Using and familiarity with social network

Facebook, as a global phenomenon, is by far the most known and used social network by the travel agencies with 91.5% and the hotels with 87,5%. These percentages coincide with the popularity of this social network worldwide. The number of Facebook users also confirms the fact of the popularity of this social network. Namely, according to recent research in the first quarter of 2018, Facebook has 2.2 billion active monthly users (Source: https://detailed.com/facebook-usage statistics). Compared to Facebook, other well-known social networks have far fewer users.
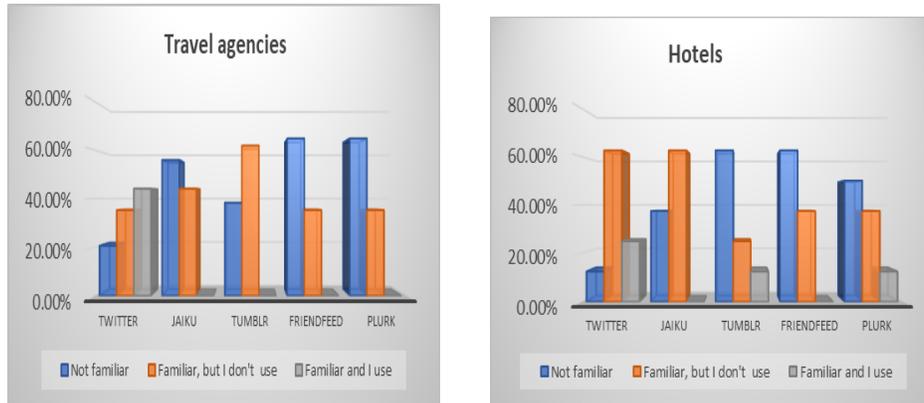
Figure 6. Usage and familiarity with microblogging tools

The most used web 2.0 websites for microblogging that the travel agencies but also the hotels use and are familiar with is Twitter. Other offered microblogging tools for most travel agencies and hotels are either unknown to them or they do know them but do not use them. Travel agencies are familiar with Twitter, but only 44,12% use this tool for microbloging. When it comes to hotels, like the travel agencies, they are familiar with Twitter but only 25% are use this tool for microbloging in their operations. Travel agencies and hotels, according to the research don't use any other tools for microbloging except Twittter.

In terms of wiki sites, although there are a number of specialized wiki tourism pages, the most popular and commonly used is Wikipedia which is still a general encyclopedia. According to the research 60% of travel agencies are familiar with Wikipedia moreover 100% of the hotels are familiar with Wikipedia. There are many wiki websites that are specialized for the tourism sector such as Travellerspoint, Wikitravel, Wikivoyage but only small number of travel agencies and hotels use this type of websites for their operations.
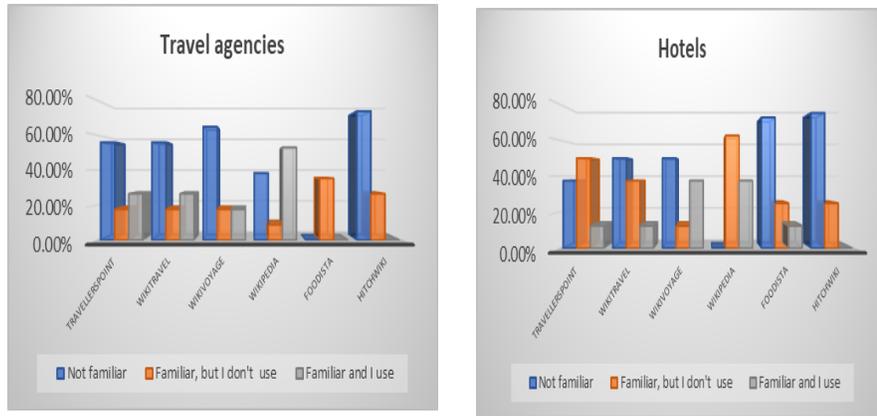
Figure 7. Usage and familiarity with wiki websites

From the results of this research we can conclude that most of the travel agencies and hotels are not fully familiar with the advantages offered by the new information technologies. Most of the travel agencies and hotels do not recognize the web 2.0 term, although they use some tools based on web 2.0 technologies such as Facebook and YouTube. Likewise, almost every travel agency and hotel use only the most famous world tools in their operation such as Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so on, even though there is a number of specialized tools for the tourism sector. Despite the conclusion that the travel agencies and hotels use information technologies in their operation, we can stress that they must make an effort to use the most specialized tools for their work.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To attract more tourists is not easy, especially at a time when preferences for travel are constantly changing. The rapid development of the Internet, especially in the last two decades, has significantly changed the customer behavior. It had a huge impact on tourism, in particular when the tourists are looking for some travel and accommodation information. Undoubtedly, in this regard Web 2.0 plays a significant impact on the tourists and the tourism sector.

Exactly therefore, tourist operators should not to ignore the growing popularity of web 2.0, neither the role that web 2.0 plays in the behavior of the travelers

when planning their journey. There are is a wide range of technologies of which the most widely used are blogs, wikis, podcasts, information tagging, social networks, virtual worlds, RSS etc. that offer opportunities for using the effect of netting thus the exchange of information generated by the users will be faster and with greater impact on the expectations and the decision-making process.

The results of the conducted survey in the Macedonian travel agencies and hotels, shows that both categories (travel agencies and hotels) identified the Internet as the most important promotion medium. The responds show the correlation of the familiarity and usage of Web 2.0. In other words, even though most of the travel agencies and hotels do not recognize the Web 2.0 term they still use some tools based on Web 2.0 technologies.

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