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SOCIAL MEDIA AND DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT

The case of community-based tourism

Raymond Rastegar and Zohreh (Zara) Zarezadeh

23.1 Introduction

It is well discussed that tourism is able to provide enough revenue to enhance environmental conservation and preserve unique cultural identities (Weaver, 2009), while also providing a primary source of job creation for local communities in many destinations (Adeleke, 2015; Prideaux, 2014). Community-based tourism (CBT) is known as a tool to help diversify the economy in small communities and provide benefits to local residents (Mbaiwa, 2005; Rastegar, 2017). CBT is also recognised as a successful strategy for developing rural regions in many countries (Tolkach & King, 2015). However, there are still many communities that, despite having strong potential, have not been successful in developing tourism. It is also argued that despite the large body of research on CBT, there are still concerns regarding the issues small communities are facing in successfully developing tourism (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017). It is suggested that lack of information or presence of an undesirable image have limited many of these destinations from receiving benefits in today’s highly competitive travel market (Morrison, 2018). To overcome the issues, destinations are adding digital tools to their traditional marketing approaches to attract tourists (Uşaklı et al., 2017). Such a strategy has helped destinations directly interact with their visitors, to provide information and react to visitor perceptions (Kiráľová & Pavlíčeka, 2015). However, despite the significant impact of adopting social media marketing on destination development, tourism research assessing the impacts in small communities remains limited. It is also argued that despite the large body of literature on the application of technology in tourism, there is limited research on how technology and communication platforms can be used to develop tourism in CBT (Gan et al., 2016). To overcome the issue, scholars have called for more research to investigate the application of technologies, innovation and digital marketing among small tourism providers at the community level (Gao & Lee, 2017; Gan et al., 2016; Sakdiyakorn & Sivarak, 2016). Therefore, as a response to this gap, this study aims to investigate the extent to which social media marketing has been adopted for tourism and destination development by small communities. The contribution of this study will benefit academic and practitioners interested in adopting social media marketing in CBT.
23.2 Literature review

23.2.1 Local communities, conservation and tourism

While in some cases, strictly conserved and protected areas are necessary to protect species and reduce visitor impacts, some conservationists consider that more inclusionary approaches such as community-based ones benefit both wildlife and local communities (Hausner et al., 2017). Development approaches can provide communities with both economic incentives (such as fees, management payments and tax) and social incentives (such as social recognition and esteem). Nature-based tourism can play a significant role in the economy; for example, in the small island of Zanzibar, nature-based tourism contributes 25% to GDP (Lange, 2015). Other studies on visitor ‘willingness to pay’ showed successful stories of providing benefits to both the community and conservation (Miller, 2001; Tsaur et al., 2006). Many protected areas have also adopted the payment vehicle method, such as entrance fee, licence fee and taxation to overcome the issue of lack of funding for conservation programmes (Kolahi et al., 2014). Nevertheless, it is also argued that issuing hunting permits in protected areas is not always based on wildlife surveys and studies (Darvish, 2013) but may simply be revenue raising. The other issue is that despite the presence of tourism economic incentives, the contribution of tourism to poverty reduction and environmental conservation might be limited (Lange, 2015).

In many areas, the rights of the local communities and the approach that they need to develop their communities are neglected when they are considered only a tool to achieve tourism development (George et al., 2009). However, it is suggested that local community perceptions and support play a vital role in the success of biodiversity conservation (Lunstruma & Ybarra, 2018) and tourism development in protected areas as well (Ebua et al., 2011; Nastran, 2015). Facing problems in traditional economic activities and observing the development of other communities due to new approaches in using available resources have encouraged many communities to look for alternatives. This can include finding opportunities, seeing new potential, looking for new approaches and acting in a way that guarantees the sustainable growth of their community (UNEP, 2005).

Many of the world’s 15 most undeveloped countries are situated in biodiversity-rich regions and in all these areas either tourism has developed or is considered an approach for development (UNEP, 2003). This shows that tourism projects can contribute many benefits to rural communities in these countries. For example, ecotourism is believed to contribute its benefits to both environmental conservation as well as local communities. In other words, benefits from tourism are used to link conservation to community development (Spiteri & Nepal, 2006). Stronza and Gordillo (2008) suggested that economic benefits from ecotourism alone may not be sufficient to ensure local communities conserve the environment, as it may become a tool to enhance unsustainable use of natural resources. What is clear from the discussion in the literature is that usually CBT projects aim to encourage local communities to conserve natural resources by providing revenues from tourism activities and also reducing the pressure on natural resources. Lack of sufficient benefits to local communities can increase the risk of conflict between local people and park authorities (Brandon, 2001). Though it is discussed that economic and social benefits from tourism projects can enhance environmental conservation and community development (Chapman, 2003), it is hard to find projects that could bring both conservation and improvement in the quality of life of local people (Spiteri & Nepal, 2006). Successful tourism programmes have to satisfy the same needs of the community that makes them use natural resources in an unsustainable way (Hernandez Cruz et al., 2005).
23.2.2 Tourism as an approach for community development

Scholars have long criticised the application of methods based on Western values (Shoreman-Ouimet & Kopnina, 2015). For example, Sirolli (1999) criticised the adoption of Western development approaches in third-world communities in Africa and Asia. He argued that applying these methods by investing too much money in development projects put the local people in more debt as it changes their traditional way of life and might make life more expensive. It could also induce dependency in the regions as local people do not have sufficient skills to use and maintain imported equipment (Sirolli, 1999). So, such development is not easily managed by a local community (George et al., 2009) and may result in dissatisfaction of communities, who could otherwise have continued to enjoy their traditional way of life.

We should not put all our efforts into finding the perfect solution for communities’ problems as there may not be only one best approach for every community development. Moreover, it is still essential to find an approach suitable to the region, considering the rights of local people to express their feelings and also their meaningful participation in the decision-making process (Rastegar, 2020; Rastegar, Zarezadeh & Gretzel, 2020; Velicu, 2019). In this way we can achieve satisfaction and create positive attitudes in local people and also gain their support for conservation and future development (Rastegar, 2019). The main aim of community development is to help the community understand their rights and exercise them in a way that provides better living conditions for the entire community (Tesoriero, 2010).

In the course of development, especially in developing countries, the current focus of is on finding alternatives to use available resources in a sustainable way. This can also be achieved by maximising the efficiency of available resources. Martinussen (1996) discusses the same concept in defining development in the third world, stating that such development is about finding and using the potential and available resources in these societies and especially rural communities. During 1950s and 1960s, rural regions started receiving more attention and the concept of community development was introduced. As Catley (1999) expresses, the main aim of community development was to increase the level of education and local people’s involvement in the decision-making process. However, this method was not practiced successfully until the late 1960s, when it was seen that most rural development projects were based on top-down approaches and there was a need for more involvement of local people (Sebele, 2010). After confronting different problems and in contrast to traditional development paradigms, an alternative development paradigm was developed, which “centred upon people and the natural environment, emphasising democracy and planning from the bottom-up rather than the top-down” (Holden, 2005). The presence of many problems and their impacts, especially in the developing world, made the people living in those countries very vulnerable. Problems such as loss of biodiversity, poverty, hunger, diseases, climate change and lack of gender equality are frequently seen in these regions.

In addition to providing development opportunities for rural areas, tourism has been identified as an industry that is able to provide local people with the potential for economic development (Rastegar, 2018a). The aim of any potential tourism development is to improve the economy and quality of life of the community in the destination, but there are many approaches to achieving such goals. There are many goals mentioned in United Nations programmes (UN, 2010; UNDP, 2005; UNEP, 2005) and many other organisations that all aim for community development and improving the quality of life of local people in a sustainable way. Tourism is just one way among many others to achieve these goals, but what makes tourism a special case is that every day more communities decide to get involved in this fast-growing business (UNDP, 2005). It is very important to know what makes...
local, regional, national and international bodies choose tourism as a tool for development/-
sustainable development. One reason could be introducing and implementing tourism proj-
ects as a potential way of boosting the local economy (OECD, 1994). Another could be the
increasing demand for tourism destinations such as beaches, national parks and world heri-
tage sites (George et al., 2009). Demand for rural tourism, on one hand, and the need for a
new approach to help the economy in local regions, on the other, have made tourism a very
important method of achieving sustainable community development all around the world
(Rastegar, 2018b). Acknowledging the importance of tourism in community development,
it is essential to increase the number of visitors by promoting the destination. Rapid changes
in information technologies facilitate easy and quick access to huge number of potential
tourists. Social media as an influential marketing tools has a decisive role to play in destina-
tion marketing (Gretzel & Yoo, 2013).

23.2.3 Social media marketing and CBT

Implementation of CBT projects can ensure the active participation of local communities.
CBT projects aim to provide an opportunity for local people to improve their quality of life
without putting any pressure on natural resources and adversely affecting the environment
(Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011). CBT increases the involvement of local people and, consequently,
ensures local people receive the benefits from tourism development. For example, Hiwasaki
(2006), in studying CBT projects as an approach to sustainability for Japan’s protected ar-
areas, notes that there are many benefits in implementing CBT projects, which improve local
perceptions towards tourism development and increases their involvement, which, in turn,
guarantees social and economic development of the community while conserving the en-
vironment. It also shifts attention from what tourists seek to the value of local culture and
local people’s rights. Similarly, in another study, Sebele (2010) indicates that a Community
Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) programme is a sustainable alternative
development approach to traditional methods, as it involves local people in all aspects of
development projects by sustainable use of natural resources. Many rural destinations are in
urgent need of development to diversify the local economies. However, it may not be easy
to successfully develop tourism in smaller communities as it requires skills and resources.

To be able to attract tourists in a highly competitive market, many destinations are diver-
sifying their marketing strategies by using digital marketing in their campaigns (Usakli et al.,
2017). Social media, as a digital marketing tool has made information available to a large
number of travellers. For example, Pornprasit and Rurkkhum (2019) noticed the important
role of social media platforms in marketing CBT in Thailand. The findings showed that
using platforms such as Facebook along with other marketing activities can be effective in
promoting local festivals, like horse racing, to attract tourists. Social media provides the op-
portunity for destinations to reach their target market quicker, at lower cost and with higher
efficiency, compared to traditional marketing tools (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In studying
the development of social media strategies in tourism destination, Kiralova and Pavliceka
(2015) discuss the case of the “Ultimate Instameet” campaign using social media to promote
tourism in Hamilton Island, Australia in 2012. The campaign successfully creates $2 million
room revenue growth over the campaign period (Hamilton Island, 2012). Therefore, it can
now be argued that digital marketing, and particularly the use of social media, is more pow-
erful in attracting travellers than traditional marketing (Denizci Guillet et al., 2016). One
reason might be that social media is now known as a critical source of information, used to
reduce the risk of decision-making for tourists (Leung et al., 2013). This explains why there
are now more travellers using social media pre-, during and post-trip. Sharing experiences on social media platforms, if positive, can work as word of mouth to attract other travellers to the destination. For example, in a study on online rural destination images in China, Zhou (2014) discusses the significant role of Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) using social media platforms to create a desirable image of and promote rural destinations. There are also examples of social media platforms being used to restore a destination's image after natural disaster. For example, Facebook was used by the Nepal Tourism Board after the Gurkha earthquake as a tool to reach diverse audiences (Ketter 2016).

Usakli et al. (2017) argued that research on social media in the tourism literature has mainly focussed on studying the tourists’ perspectives and the adoption of the strategy by tourism enterprises. Therefore, the use of social media as a marketing tool and the adoption of the strategy by DMOs, particularly in small communities, are unknown (Munar, 2012). The need for digital marketing is becoming even more important as rural destinations are becoming increasingly popular tourism spots (Zhou, 2014). For example, in 2012 in China alone, the number of rural tourists was 700 million, with the annual total revenue of more than 200 billion Chinese yuan. The number increased to 1.51 billion rural tourist trips in the first half of 2019 alone (Xinhua, 2019). To use this great opportunity, it is further argued that social media marketing can play an important role in creating a desirable image for rural destinations (Dwivedi, 2009) particularly when little is known about many rural destinations and their attractions. Similarly, a study examining the evolving dynamic of social-media-driven sustainable development in the tourism industry, identified the significant role of social media in promoting sustainable tourism and ecotourism (Sarkar and George, 2018). Information presented on social media platforms creates an image about a destination and also set of expectations in tourists’ mind (Kiralova & Pavliceka, 2015). Social media marketing to promote tourism can also help promote the local culture, heritage and lifestyle (Choi et al., 2007; Zhou, 2014). The application of social media marketing provides the opportunity for rural destinations to promote their products through different online platforms. Particularly for CBT initiatives, the adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and social media marketing enables communities to (i) reach their target market globally, (ii) manage the increasing amount of information and (iii) also sell their tourism product online (Gan et al., 2016).

In addition to economic benefits, social media marketing increases the interaction between local communities and tourists. For example, it is suggested that, besides the economic benefits, ICT can enhance the awareness of tourists about local communities, their culture and the sustainable utilisation of natural resources (Hlee et al., 2017; Sarkar & George, 2018). Despite the significance of social media marketing, it is argued that the use of ICT and social media in the context of CBT and ecotourism has been insignificant (Ali & Frew, 2010; Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012; Sarkar et al., 2014). When it comes to the use of social media in small communities, the lack of familiarity with technology can be a serious issue. For example, it has been identified that tourism practitioners from non-English language countries (Hsu, 2012) or a lack of innovation in IT or knowledge of website design (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) can be constraints in effective use of social media in tourism marketing.

Local communities can use social media platforms to introduce and promote their cultures and services to tourists. It can also be used to promote local sustainability (environmental, socio-cultural and economic), which not only enhances sustainability awareness among visitors but also encourages them to join and engage in social and environmental activities (Walter, 2016). In a study reviewing and analysing the research publications focussed on social media in tourism, Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) suggested that future research needs to
focus on community engagement and marketing strategies. They further argued that to enhance the economic contribution of social media in tourism, a comprehensive investigation of social media and its impacts on local communities is required.

### 23.3 Methodology

To identify studies on social media and destination development with the focus on CBT, a series of search queries, including “Community based tourism” AND “Social media”, “Community development” AND “social media”, “Rural community” AND “Social media”, “Small community” AND “Social media”, were run through Google Scholar to collect relevant publications since 2010. Up to five pages of Google Scholar results for each query were reviewed, which resulted in identifying a total of 65 publications.

After retrieving the studies via Google Scholar searches, a two-step process was utilised in the selection of the studies. First, book chapters, conference papers and non-English articles were removed from the database. Only journal articles were retained for further analysis as they generally represent high-level research conducted in the field (Chan & Ngai, 2011). In the second step, the authors reviewed the titles and abstracts of articles retrieved from the first step to select those potentially relevant in CBT-related social media publications for further examination. A total of 41 articles were retrieved for a more detailed review at a full-text level. After selecting the publications, detailed reading and filtering were undertaken by both authors to analyse the publications.

### 23.4 Discussion

In a majority of the previous studies, scholars studied social media marketing and its role in increasing the number of tourists in destinations, but only few stated the role of social media marketing in enhancing community engagement and a feeling of belonging for the community. For example, Cui (2014) stated that the Facebook page for Cedar Park Farmers Market (CPFM), located in the city of Cidar Park near Austin, Texas, operated as a cyber-social hub for connecting and engaging the local community. Community engagement increased in the local community as they were required to manage their Facebook page. However, not all social media marketing brings communities together; the lack of proper management of social media could also challenge community cohesion (Wallace et al., 2017).

It should be noted that in today’s competitive market, tourists also have many different destinations to choose from, therefore a destination must be able to differentiate itself from competitors (Kiralova & Pavliceka, 2015). The adoption of social media marketing is a known advantage to help promote a destination in a highly competitive market. However, despite arguments on the benefits of social media marketing in rural destination development, there are also challenges in the application of it in small communities. The adoption of new technologies such as social media platforms, particularly as part of marketing campaign, is usually very slow in small communities (Beldona & Cai, 2006).

The process of social media adoption, like other innovation and technologies adoption, pose some challenges for the local community and also necessitate some preconditions. Access is the biggest challenge for many local communities. There are two types of access: infrastructure access (Chowdhury & Odame, 2013) and knowledge and information access. Infrastructure access consists of downloading and uploading speeds and using suitable devices such as smartphones to access and use social media. Social media tools such as YouTube and blogs require high download and upload speeds, which are unavailable in some rural
areas. For example, in rural Canada the low quality of service from broadband infrastructure (Chowdhury & Odame, 2013) creates a challenge for local community in using social media marketing. They might be able to post some content on the platforms but uploading videos is almost impossible due to the low-speed internet. The best device to access online social networks is a smartphone, which is expensive and unaffordable for many local communities. Even availability of the smartphone may not guarantee successful social media marketing as there might be other challenges, such as lacking the skills to use the device or the small size of the screen. For example, studies on agricultural communities showed that the community used their mobile devices only to check and send texts rather than using social media applications due to the small size of the screen, coverage and the quality of the internet connection (Chowdhury & Odame, 2013). Access to knowledge and information is decisive for social media marketing. It includes knowledge of target markets and the ability to select the right one (Bouchon & Rawat, 2016), language (Gao & Lee, 2017) and communication skills.

The first step in social media marketing is to know the target market in order to choose the best platform, the content of posts and videos and the right approach to deliver the message. But local communities mostly have a lack of knowledge about their target market and the method that they can use to identify it. Even for local communities who successfully identify their target market, language can be a barrier to creating a global presence. As most local communities are usually in rural areas, the English language is a challenge for them, so they can only promote their communities to small group of tourists. Another barrier is the lack of communication skills. Social media marketing requires conversation and communication management. Social media marketers need to be able to identify issues in conversations between tourists and also between tourists and locals to address issues effectively. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) stated that social media marketing needs informal, funny and humble administrators who have enough skill to manage the conversations.

To be able to adopt continuous technology advancements, local communities are required to develop new skills, which brings an opportunity for them to continuously learn and educate themselves about new technologies and increase their ability to connect and communicate with rest of the world. For example, it is suggested that adopting new technologies or social media marketing as a new tool requires two types of individuals in the community: First, individuals with entrepreneurial spirit who are mostly risk takers and willing to try new things. Entrepreneurs have supported the growth of many industries, such as tourism and hospitality (Peters et al., 2009). Second, transformational leaders who are able to drive ideas to industries. They are able to motivate and inspire others to apply new technologies (Ryan & Tipu, 2013). They are the best people to interact with local communities to encourage them to use social media marketing. Therefore, to empower the communities, to identify the right individuals and also overcome the lack of knowledge and information accessibility, training is a key. Training is not only required to develop the knowledge of local communities about target market, language and communication skills but is also required to motivate local communities to continually use social media marketing. Davison (2017) highlighted the importance of training on people’s motivation to use technology in successful implementation of the method. The author believed that local communities should understand the reason they need to use social media and the benefits it can bring to their business and the community. They also need to learn about social media and how they can use and manage it to promote their product or destination effectively. Training can be run by the government or NGOs. NGOs play an important role in helping communities in rural areas use technologies such as social media platforms. For example, in some rural areas, NGOs offer training.
and advice on the benefits of using it and skills to manage and monitor the conversation on different platforms (Chowdhury & Odame, 2013).

To successfully manage social media marketing, Sakdiyakorn and Sivarak (2016) suggested the development of network collaboration, entrepreneurial spirit, transformation leaders, technology advancement, competition and profitability as preconditions to adopting new technologies. Participation and the relationship among stakeholders play an important role in development, implementation and success of any CBT programmes. Collaboration among the stakeholders has been recognised as being very effective in social media marketing adoption (Alberti & Giusti, 2012). In network collaboration, the adoption of new technologies is more successful when all stakeholders consider local communities’ benefit and empowerment and when they have genuine interest in helping the communities.

23.5 Conclusion

Social media marketing increases economic benefits and brings social value to the communities. Social media platforms can be used to reach people on a larger scale and at a much faster rate than previous marketing tools. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that social media marketing has been adopted by many destinations as a low-cost but effective marketing tool. However, it is still at its early stages in CBT due to the lack of skills or resources in rural remote destinations, where the majority of residents are still engaged in traditional jobs such as agriculture and animal husbandry. For example, Mkono (2016), in discussing sustainability and Indigenous tourism insights from social media, found that despite the opportunity for local communities to use online platforms, there is minimal engagement between Indigenous tour operators and tourists through social media.

Local communities with strong intentions to promote their businesses such as CBT are more willing to enhance their ability to adopt new technologies particularly when they understand that new technologies bring lots of profit to their communities. For example, when local communities realise that they can increase their income by attracting more tourists to their area through social media platforms, they are more interested in adopting this type of marketing. However, some preconditions are required to prepare local communities before they adopt it. Therefore, in order to maximise benefits, local communities need to address barriers to adopting social media marketing. In the case of CBT, communities cannot go through this journey alone as help and support are required from other stakeholders such as volunteers, NGOs and government organisations.

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