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**UM ESTUDO SOBRE A ADOÇÃO, PERCEPÇÃO E POTENCIAL  
DOS MEDIA SOCIAIS COMO FERRAMENTAS DE MARKETING:  
O CASO DAS AGÊNCIAS DE VIAGENS NO AZERBAIJÃO**

**A STUDY ON THE UTILIZATION, PERCEPTION AND  
POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MARKETING TOOL: THE  
CASE OF TRAVEL AGENCIES IN AZERBAIJAN**

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# Abstract

In the last years Internet and Social Media has influenced business-to-customer and customer-to-customer relationships. Concurrently, this influence is still growing and businesses are paying more and more attention to these new marketing tools in their overall marketing strategy.

Although there are already some studies that investigate Social Media Marketing, most of these studies have examined Social Media use and perceptions from consumers' perspective. In academic literature there is lack of studies about Social Media from business context and little guidance on how to use Social Media in an effective way for travel companies. Therefore considering aforementioned gap this study aims to analyze Social Media as a marketing tool in the tourism business context from the practitioners' perspective and provide guidelines for travel agencies in Baku, Azerbaijan. In order to achieve this aim the following objectives have been defined: to understand how Social Media are being approached in the literature as a marketing tool, in particular in the tourism industry, to investigate the perception of travel agencies regarding Social Media as a marketing tool, to analyze the current usage and maintenance of Social Media by travel agencies, to identify the major problems of travel agencies regarding Social Media usage and to identify and recommend effective ways of using Social Media by travel agencies.

These objectives were achieved using two main methods. The first semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from a selective sample of six travel agencies in Baku, Azerbaijan through the periods of April, May and November. The second method was used to complement the data from interviews with analyzing their Social Media presence and activity, namely on their Facebook pages during the month of November.

According to the results of the study, Social Media is not fully exploited as a marketing tool and is used just another channel for advertising. Moreover, the participants have a lack of regular activity at their Social Media channels. Social networking sites (Facebook) are

mostly used by participants and they are perceived as the most effective channels. The overall uptake of other Social Media channels is in early stage and they are not considered powerful as a marketing tool by participants. There is no clear target market and marketing strategy defined for Social Media usage by travel agencies. The study also revealed that perceived difficulties for the usage of Social Media by travel agencies are lack of time, lack of knowledge and difficulty to measure the success of Social Media.

Moreover, the analysis of the collected data revealed several problems regarding the usage and adoption of Social Media as a marketing tool by travel agencies in Baku, Azerbaijan. After identifying the problems, set of recommendations that is intended to assist the effective adoption and usage of Social Media for travel agencies are provided.

**Keywords:** Social Media Marketing; Travel agencies; Baku; Utilization, perception and potential of Social Media

# Resumo

Nos últimos anos a Internet e os Media Sociais têm influenciado as relações empresa-cliente e cliente-cliente. Concorrentemente, esta influência está a crescer e as empresas estão a tomar mais atenção a estas novas ferramentas na sua estratégia geral de marketing.

Embora existam alguns estudos que investigam o Marketing em Medias Sociais, a maior parte destes estudos foca o uso e percepção dos Media Sociais do ponto de vista do consumidor. Na literatura verificou-se existir um défice de estudos sobre o uso e percepção dos Media Sociais do ponto de vista da empresa e poucas orientações sobre a forma mais eficaz de usar os Media Sociais no contexto das agências de viagens.

Assim, e tendo em consideração os défices referidos, o presente estudo pretende analisar os Media Sociais como uma ferramenta de marketing no contexto das atividades empresariais ligadas ao turismo e do ponto de vista da empresa. Pretende também fornecer orientações para o uso efetivo destas ferramentas, em particular para o negócio das agências de viagens em Baku no Azerbaijão. Para concretizar este intento foram definidos os seguintes objectivos: investigar a percepção das agências de viagens relativamente à utilização dos Media Sociais como ferramenta de marketing, analisar a adoção e uso destas ferramenta por agências de viagens, identificar obstáculos e problemas associados ao uso de Medias Sociais e recomendar formas de incrementar a eficácia no uso dos Media Sociais como ferramenta de marketing por agências de viagens.

Estes objectivos foram atingidos através da investigação tendo recorrido a dois métodos principais. O primeiro dos métodos consistiu numa entrevista semiestruturada aplicada, nos meses de Maio, Abril e Novembro, a uma amostra seletiva de seis agências de viagens sediadas em Baku, Azerbaijão. O segundo método foi utilizado para complementar a informação das entrevistas através da análise da presença e atividade das agências de viagens nos Media Sociais, em particular no Facebook, durante o mês de Novembro.

De acordo com os resultados, os Media Sociais não são explorados, como uma ferramenta de marketing, em toda a sua plenitude, sendo apenas usados como mais um canal de publicidade. Acresce a identificação de um défice nos níveis de atividade nos canais

associados aos Media Sociais. Os sites de serviços de redes sociais (Facebook) são os mais usados pelos participantes e os que são percebidos como os mais eficazes. A adoção generalizada de outros canais associados aos Media Sociais encontra-se numa fase precoce do seu potencial desenvolvimento não sendo ainda considerados instrumentos de marketing poderosos. Foi ainda identificada a ausência de definição, pelas agências de viagens, de um mercado alvo e de uma estratégia de marketing. O estudo revelou que os principais problemas experimentados pelas agências de viagens no uso eficaz dos Media Sociais estão relacionados com aspetos como a dedicação de recursos (tempo), falhas no conhecimento, e dificuldades em medir o sucesso da utilização de Medias Sociais.

Adicionalmente, a análise dos dados recolhidos revelou diversos problemas relacionados com a adoção dos Media Sociais como uma ferramenta de marketing por agências de viagens em Baku no Azerbaijão. Na sequência da identificação destes problemas é proposto um conjunto de recomendações que pretende orientar as agências de viagens para uma adoção e utilização mais eficaz dos Media Sociais.

**Palavras chave:** Marketing com recurso a Medias Sociais, Agências de Viagens, Baku, Percepção e Potencial dos Media Sociais.

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# List of Abbreviations

CDC	Citizens Development Corps
CESD	Center for Economic and Social Development
CRS	Computer Reservation Systems
ENPI	European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDS	Global Distribution Systems
SSC	The Statistical State Committee of Azerbaijan
SMM	Social Media Marketing
TA	Travel Agencies
UNWTO	The World Tourism Organization
WOM	Word-of-Mouth

# Chapter 1. Introduction

This chapter provides a general overview of the study presented in this thesis. It starts with the introduction of the background for this study and research problem. Following the aim and objectives, significance and contribution of the study as well as related work are stated. Finally definition of key terms and structure of the study are presented.

## 1.1 Background of the study

Since the 1990s the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), especially the Internet, has grown rapidly and changed the way how businesses operate and work. Being an information intensive industry, technology has had more effects in the tourism industry than in many other business sectors (Buhalis, 2003, as cited in Vidovic, 2012). Tourism organizations especially travel agencies, hotels and destination marketing organizations, have been seriously challenged by the rise of the Internet but at the same time enormous opportunities have been emerged and most of these organizations have seized these opportunities for profitable online commerce (Akehurst, 2009:1). The Internet has improved communications, distribution channels and transactions in ways which could not have been imagined even at the beginning of the 2000s (Akehurst, 2009). The development of Internet has led to emergence of Web 2.0 which enables travellers to use various online platforms during each stage of their consumption process. On such platforms travellers increasingly search for travel related information and share their own experiences with others (Gretzel and Fesenmaier, 2009, as cited in Vidovic, 2012). With the emergence of Web 2.0, new web services and business models have been introduced. These new web services such as blogs, wikis, online videos and social networking, collectively called Social Media allow the user to interact as much as possible to develop and enrich the site (O'Reilly 2005).

In the early stage of Web 2.0 and Social Media was primarily individuals who used Social Media, but today, the companies found a value in that figure at various sites to market themselves to customers. The growth of Social Media, where anyone can publish their opinions and participate in discussions has significantly changed the way how companies should promote themselves and approach to consumers (Weinberg, 2009). The travel industry is one of the industries that have been affected the most, as customers are eager to share their experiences online. Therefore, in order to stay competitive businesses, especially tourism businesses should understand and adjust changing market conditions by using opportunities created through Social Media.

Azerbaijan's tourism industry is one of the main sources of employment and after Oil it has the second biggest contribution to GDP (SSC, 2012). Within tourism industry, travel sector, especially travel agencies is considered as one of the biggest sources for employment (SSC, 2012). Therefore it is not only interesting but also important to investigate how travel agencies (TAs) in Azerbaijan tourism industry use Social Media as marketing tool and if they are using that effectively.

## **1.2 Research Problem**

Although Social Media is a relatively new media emerged in recent years, it is popularly used around the world. Currently most of the global organizations and companies use Social Media as a part of their online marketing strategies. A research made by public relation organization Burson-Marsteller (2012) has found out that 87% of 100 largest companies on the Fortune 500 list utilize at least one of the Social Media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or blogs, and 28% of them use all four channels. The study also shows that 74% of these companies use Facebook, which makes it as the most popular Social Media channel among businesses (Burson-Marsteller, 2012). The reason for this popularity among companies is that Social Media has opened up new opportunities for them such as communicating directly with customers and building customer relationships (Neti, 2011). Some other opportunities of doing marketing on Social Media for businesses are as following:

- generating exposure to businesses
- increasing traffic
- building new business partnerships
- rise in search engine rankings
- generating qualified leads due to better lead
- generation efforts
- selling more products and services
- reduction in overall marketing expenses.

(Neti, 2011: 6, Stelzner, 2012)

Despite the continuing growth of Social Media and considering that Social Media has a great influence on business-to-customer and customer-to-customer relationships, there is a few research has been conducted, especially which takes into account businesses and tourism companies and there is little guidance about how to use Social Media more effectively (Chan and Guillet, 2011; Bergstrom and Svensson, 2010). From other perspective there is also no research conducted about Social Media which focuses on Azerbaijan. Therefore understanding this gap this study aims to analyze Social Media perception of and usage as marketing from business perspective focusing on travel agencies in Baku, Azerbaijan and then to provide the ways for effective usage of Social Media.

### **1.3 Aim and objectives**

The main aim of this study is to analyze Social Media as a marketing tool from the practitioners view and to make recommendations for effective use of Social Media.

#### **Objectives**

In order to achieve the main aim of the study the following objectives have been identified:

1. To understand how Social Media are being approached in the literature as a marketing tool, in particular in the tourism industry;
2. To investigate the perception of travel agencies' in Baku, Azerbaijan regarding Social Media as a marketing tool;
3. To examine the current usage and maintenance of Social Media by travel agencies;
4. To find out the major problems of travel agencies regarding their Social Media performance;
5. To provide a set of guidelines for effective use of Social Media by travel agencies.

#### **1.4 Significance and contribution of this research**

Today with more than 1.1 billion active users in Facebook (Facebook, 2013), more than 100 million blogs in blogosphere (Kietzmann et al., 2011), 140 million tweets per day, 4 billion videos viewed per day (Burson-Marsteller, 2012), it seems the communication between company and consumer have changed and customers have taken control over their media consumption by collecting information in a way that was not possible before, which has made the customers more powerful. Social Media has fundamentally changed the way how customers interact and share their experiences with firms and other customers and it has become an important part of the buyer decision making process. With Social Media, customers are increasingly turning to other customers rather than traditional advertising (Bergstrom and Svensson, 2010).

Considering the rising popularity of Social Media as a marketing tool and since Social Media is a new phenomenon for tourism businesses in Azerbaijan, it is not only interesting, but also important to investigate how this type of media is being utilized by Azerbaijani tourism companies. There are some studies in existing literature which mainly focused on Social Media from customers' perceptions but the research which examines companies' perspective, especially from travel companies context is still limited. Considering this gap it is important to understand how travel companies use and perceive

Social Media as a marketing tool. Therefore being aware of potential of Social Media and lack of research in this field this topic was chosen.

This study may contribute to the available literature and research in this topic and provide guidelines for TAs and other tourism businesses in Baku, Azerbaijan towards an effective use of Social Media. The findings may provide a source for travel agencies in Baku to formulate their Social Media Marketing (SMM) strategy. Overall, this study may help TAs in Baku, Azerbaijan and other tourism businesses to improve their Social Media usage and enhance their competitiveness.

## 1.5 Definition of key terms

In this section the definitions of most fundamental terms are going to be presented as following:

- **Tourism-** UNWTO defines tourism as “*activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes*” (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2009:7).
- **Web 2.0-** Web.2 could be defined as “*the philosophy of mutually maximizing collective intelligence and added value for each participant by formalized and dynamic information sharing and creation*” (Hoegg et al., 2006: 13).
- **Social Media-** Social Media is the “*umbrella term for the wide variety of tools and applications that give the Web its social capabilities- capabilities that allow a community to come together, communicate, and build upon each other’s opinions and ideas*” (Miletsky, 2009: 75).
- **Social Media Marketing-** Social Media marketing is “*any form of direct or indirect marketing that is used to build awareness, recognition, recall, and action for a brand, business, product, person, or other entity and is carried out using the tools of the social Web, such as blogging, micro-blogging, social networking, social bookmarking, and content sharing*” (Gunelius, 2011: 10)

- **Travel agencies-** Travel agencies are intermediaries between the end users and the suppliers, the principals, wholesalers and the consolidators (Gharavi and Sor, 2006, as cited in Zehrer and Möschl, 2008: 361). Travel agencies mainly arrange tickets and accommodation for travelers (Collin, 2006, as cited in, Bergström and Svensson, 2010:

## **1.6 Related work**

The present study is inspired partly by and relates to the study made by Jonscher in 2011. Jonscher investigated Social Media as a marketing tool by small and medium sized accommodation providers in Auckland. For this purpose the author used a sample consisted of 8 businesses. For the herein presented study it has been adopted a structure, a methodology and an instrument that are partially based on those introduced by Jonscher (2011). The domain of the study is different as the present study focus on travel agencies of Baku, Azerbaijan. Additionally, two major differences can be pointed. The first is that this study uses a second instrument– analysis of Social Media activities in order to complement the research with factual data in order to characterize the companies and their effective use of Social Media marketing tools. A second difference is that this study uses an adapted and restricted version of the interview instrument designed by Jonscher (2011) as it focus in less comprehensive set of research questions.

## **1.7 Structure of Dissertation**

The first chapter of the thesis, the introduction chapter, provides general overview regarding the topic and relates to the discussion of the problem area. Based on the purpose of this study, the four main objectives are presented. Moreover, the introduction contains contribution and significance of the study and definition of key terms related to this topic. Related work and structure of the thesis is also presented in this chapter.

The second chapter contains the literature review. This chapter provides an overview of literature relevant to this topic, like development of tourism, ICT and Web, definition of Social Media and its platforms, influence of Social Media on decision making, Social

Media in tourism, Internet and Social Media marketing as well as information about travel agencies in general and in Azerbaijan.

In the third chapter of this study, the methodology used in this study is presented. This chapter focuses on research methodology and research design chosen. Furthermore the data collection methods are provided.

The fourth chapter contains the results of this study. This chapter presents study's main findings with respect to the first, second and third objectives. First and second part of this chapter provides the characterization of interviewees and businesses followed by the data from Social Media analysis and analysis and discussion of the participants' perceptions about Social Media. The next section includes the presentation and discussion concerning the adoption and utilization of Social Media. Lastly, the major problems defined from data analysis are provided.

The fifth chapter, which is recommendations, is based on research results, especially identified problems. This chapter includes guidelines on how to use Social Media as a marketing tool.

The sixth chapter contains the conclusion and implications of the study and concludes the main findings and provides implications based on research results. Moreover, the study's limitations and recommendations for further research are provided in this chapter.

## **1.8 Summary**

This chapter provided a brief overview of the study and presented the background, research problem, purpose and objectives and significance and contribution. Moreover definition of key terms, related work and structure of the study were also presented.

# Chapter 2. Literature review

This chapter begins with the introduction of the development of the tourism industry, ICT and the Web. Following, the definitions of Social Media, its platforms and influence are presented. The next section of this chapter presents the analysis of Internet marketing along with its types and Social Media marketing. The last section is devoted travel agencies which include their definitions and role in tourism industry The growth of the tourism industry

The tourism industry has been growing constantly during the last decades becoming one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world and it is considered to be one of the key players in international commerce representing the major income for many countries (Huotary and Nyberg, 2012: 8). The number of international tourist arrivals was only 25 million in 1950's, but the number was increased to more than one billion in the end of 2012 (UNWTO, 2013a). Over the decades, tourism has experienced continued growth and deepening diversification to become one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world. According to the report of UNWTO (2013a) in 2011 tourism industry have generated US\$1,032 billion and 235 million jobs worldwide which forms 6-7% of all jobs. Moreover UNWTO (2013b), forecasts that the growth of tourism will continue till 2030 and number of international tourist will grow up to 1.8 billion arrivals.

## 2.1 Progress in ICT industry and Web

### 2.1.1 Development of ICT

Probably another industry that has developed as much as tourism industry is ICT) sector (Buhalis and Law, 2008, as cited in Jonscher, 2011:10). According to Buhalis (2003, as cited in Buhalis and Jun, 2011:5), ICTs include “*the entire range of electronic tools, which*

*facilitate the operational and strategic management of organizations by enabling them to manage their information, functions and processes as well as to communicate interactively with their stakeholders for achieving their mission and objectives”.*

ICT developments have certainly changed the business practices and strategies, as well as industrial structures (Porter, 2001). Tourism is one of the sectors that was affected most by the new technologies of ICT. The emergence of the Computer Reservation Systems (CRS) in the 1970's, Global Distribution Systems (GDS) in the late 1980's and development of the Internet in the late 1990s, have significantly changed the best operational and strategic practices in the industry (Buhalis and Law, 2008: 609). The tourism industry initially focused on the use of computerized systems (e.g., CRS, GDS) to improve the efficiency of internal information processing and distribution management. Currently, the Internet and ICT are relevant in all operational, structural, strategic and marketing levels to facilitate global interaction between suppliers, intermediaries and consumers around the world (Buhalis and Jun, 2011: 4).

The integration of information processing, multimedia and communications created the “World Wide Web” (WWW), a multimedia protocol which is using the “Internet” to enable the near instant distribution of media-rich documents (such as textual data, graphics, pictures, video, and sounds) and to revolutionize the interactivity between computer users and servers (Buhalis, 2013: 5). Since the day the first domain was registered in 1985, the Internet is growing continuously. In 2000 there were 361 million Internet users, but by 2016, it is forecasted to have 3 billion Internet users globally—almost half the world's population. From the economics side the Internet economy will reach \$4.2 trillion in the G-20 economies (Buhalis, 2013: 3).

### **2.1.2 From Web 1.0 to Web 2.0**

The latest ICT developments have created a more social, collaborative and participatory Web, referred as Web 2.0. Web 2.0, refers to a second generation of web-based applications which based on citizens/consumer generated content—such as social networking sites, blogs, wikis, communication tools, that emphasize online collaboration and sharing among users (Noti, 2013: 117). In the Web 1.0 phase tourists could just use the

Internet for getting information, but in the stage of Web 2.0 tourists can use the Internet before or during the travel to find information and make purchases; and after the travel to share experience, photos, videos etc (Chung and Buhalis, 2008, as cited in Rodriguez, 2009). The terms of Web 2.0 applications, user-generated content (UGC) or Social Media refer to the same new media, where the individual consumers are given the possibility to submit, review and to respond an online content (Cox et al., 2009, as cited in Arisandi, 2013). According to O'Reilly (2005) Web 2.0 is "*the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the Internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform*" (as cited in, Noti, 2013:117). The figure below demonstrates the key differences between Web 1.0 and the Web 2.0 and indicates how the Web 2.0 emphasizes online collaboration and sharing among users via various Internet application tools and the how the static Web 1.0 has been replaced by the interactive Web 2.0, much of the Web 1.0 applications are gone or barely used.

Web 1.0		Web 2.0
DoubleClick	-->	Google AdSense
Ofoto	-->	Flickr
Akamai	-->	BitTorrent
mp3.com	-->	Napster
Britannica Online	-->	Wikipedia
personal websites	-->	blogging
evite	-->	upcoming.org and EVDB
domain name speculation	-->	search engine optimization
page views	-->	cost per click
screen scraping	-->	web services
publishing	-->	participation
content management systems	-->	wikis
directories (taxonomy)	-->	tagging ("folksonomy")
stickiness	-->	syndication

Figure 1- Development from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0

Source: O'Reilly, 2005 (as cited in Osinga, 2012)

One of the most important features of the Web 2.0 is UGC which is one of the main differences between Web 2.0 and Web 1.0 where individuals are not only passive consumers of content, but also can actively contribute to the content (Consantinides, 2009). According to Poynter (2010: 161) Web 2.0 includes two elements: *“the first is the emergence, growth, and popularity of Social Media; the second is a change in the paradigm of how control is shared between providers and users. The adoption of the idea*

*of Web 2.0 reflected the evidence that users were taking more control of their interactions with media, with organisations, and with each other”.*

## **2.2 Social Media**

Social Media is a relatively new concept and there is a lack of a consensual academic definition. However some academics and professionals have tried to establish a definition for Social Media, but perhaps the clearest definitions come from Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61) who defines Social Media as “*a group of Internet based applications that build on ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user generated content*” and Safko and Brake (2012: 6), whom have defined Social Media as the “*activities, practices and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge.* Halligan and Shah (2010: 85) state that Social Media is all about “*people connecting, interacting, and sharing online*”. They argue that a large proportion of consumers use Social Media and companies must therefore be in Social Media to get in touch with the new market. From the business side, Social Media are about enabling, prompting, promoting and monetizing conversation (Safko and Brake, 2012). According to Mayfield (2008: 5) Social Media consists of the new types of online marketing and contains several groups of features. These features are as following:

- **Participation.** Social Media encourages everyone who is willing to contribute and give feedback
- **Openness.** Social Media are open to feedback and participation.
- **Conversation.** Social Media allows the two-way conversation differently from traditional media.
- **Community.** Social Media enables communities to form quickly and communicate effectively.
- **Connectedness.** Social Media allows making use of links to other sites, resources and people.

The Universal McCann (2012) study which was made in 62 countries with 41.738 Internet users of Social Media revealed that the Social Media are being used very actively by users. According to this report:

- 1.5 billion people are visiting social networking sites every day,
- 81% of users are visiting the profiles of friends in social networks,
- 88% of users are watching online videos
- 77% of the users have a profile on social networking sites,
- 47% of Internet users are participating in brand communities,
- 49% of users upload videos to video sharing sites
- Internet users are spending an average of 13 hours per week on social networks,
- 42.9% of the respondents' s are using microblogging (Twitter)
- 30% of users access Social Media tools with mobile devices

The key feature of Social Media is that individuals in these media have control over usage and content. Moreover, people with little or zero income can also use Social Media easily which leads to high level of usage by people.

### **2.2.1 Social Media Platforms**

Social Media can be divided into different types of platforms that all have distinguishable features starting from social networks, microblogs, blogs, wikis, video and photo sharing to chat rooms, forums. Universal McCann (2008, as cited in Rodriguez, 2009) defines the key social platforms as shown in the following figure.



Figure 2- Key Social Media platforms

Source: Universal McCANN (2008, as cited in Rodriguez, 2009: 23)

From the Figure 2, it can be highlighted, described and analysed the main platforms (blogs, social networks, microblogs, wikis, video sharing and photo sharing) which define the main focus of this study. These platforms of the Social Media and their definitions are going to be presented in the next paragraphs.

According to Eley and Tilley (2009: 1) a **blog or blogging**—which derives its name from weblog—is a frequently updated web site that shows updates in reverse chronological order (newest at the top). These updates could take the form of journal entries, articles, or just cool links that people had come across. The most famous blogging platforms are: Blogger, Wordpress, Livejournal and Blog.com (Rodriguez, 2009). By using blogs user can share their ideas, opinions, different topics of interest, or somebody’s experiences, opinions. The most popular blog for travellers is a Travepod which is a web site providing blogs for travellers. It was established in 1997 and therefore the advertising slogan of this site is “The Web’s Original Travel Blog” (Dippelreiter, 2008). As the features of travel communities have changed in recent years, Travepod, a well-established “traditional” Web site has tried to integrate new features and technologies, such as Blogs and geographical

maps which are linked in a mash up. Blogs are the most important feature of this Web site (Dippelreiter, 2008).

**Social networking sites** (SNS) are type of virtual services where people can connect with each other (Das and Sahoo, 2011). Social networking sites are applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles. With SNSs users are able to create a public or semi-public profile within a confined system, formulate a list of other users with whom they want to share a connection (Boyd and Ellison, 2007), invite friends, and colleagues to have access to their profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other (Lange-Faria and Elliot, 2012). There are three types of SNSs: friend sites such as Facebook and MySpace; dating sites such as Meetic and okCupid; and common interests web sites such as TripAdvisor, travellerspoint, Minube or Trabbudy which are related to tourism (Valkenburg et al., 2006, as cited in Rodriguez, 2009: 24). Among these sites Facebook is the biggest and most popular social network site which has more than 1.1 billion active users (Facebook, 2013). Facebook is used to promote communication within different networks via customizable user interface and a number of compatible applications to further enhance the experience (Safko and Brake, 2012). With using Facebook companies are having the opportunity to communicate with their clients through the Facebook pages (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Another popular SNS is LinkedIn which was launched in mid-2003. LinkedIn is a network that connects professionals in all disciplines all over the world and is intended for those who are business-oriented, and is best described as a “virtual resume” and social network connecting professionals (Weinberg 2009: 11).

**Microblogs** allow to users to post short updates with few characters, about your life, work, experiences or anything and the updates are usually sent via instant message, SMS text message, or on a web site to people who follow your updates (Eley and Tilley, 2009: 82). Twitter is the most popular microblogging service where users post "articles" in real time. Unlike a regular blog, messages are called as tweets and contain only 140 characters (Halligan and Shah, 2010).

**Wikis** are content websites where the users are the authors. Users are allowed to add or edit the information. This can be considered as an online database where users around the world

can enter their information. The most popular wiki website is Wikipedia (Bafia and Rodgers, 2011: 7). Another wiki website is Wikitravel which aims to create a free, comprehensive and up-to-date worldwide travel guide (Dippelreiter, 2008).

Regarding **Video or photo sharing platforms**, they are Web sites that allow users to upload photos and videos and share them with families, friends, and the general public (Eley and Tilley 2009). Examples of photo sharing platforms are Instagram and Flickr and the example for video sharing platform is YouTube. YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) is one of the essential channels of Social Media which allows users to upload, view and share videos with the rest of the world by using Flash technology. YouTube has 60% of all online video viewers with up to 79 million viewers in an evening and over 65,000 videos uploaded every day (Stokes, 2008).

### **2.2.2 Social Media influence on decision- making process**

The word "social" in Social Web or Social Media implies more than technologies to networks where people communicate with each other, share ideas, thoughts and feelings. Social Media is about questions like "how, why, among whom" rather than "what" which distinguishes it from earlier, transactional online technologies (Evans and McKee, 2010: 30). Nowadays more and more people are influenced by the information what they read and find on Social Media. According to research conducted by DEI Worldwide (2008) among US Internet users, 70% of users have visited Social Media sites and platforms such as message boards, social networking sites, and blogs to get information while making decision and about half of them indicated that they made purchase decision based on gathered information from these sites. Therefore, the users of Social Media, what they share and with whom they share are important. Because these shares have the potential to influence the decisions of other Social Media users. According to Mangold and Faulds (2009) customer reviews made in Social Media channels are much more powerful and trusted than expert product reviews. As a result, the Internet, and particularly the Web 2.0 as a new marketplace component, further complicates the traditional buying behavior process described in the Inputs - Processing- Response model shown in Figure 3, where the elements A and B represent the traditional influencers of the consumer behavior: these are

the conventional marketing influences (A) and the uncontrollable personal influencers (B) (Kotler, 2003, as cited in Constantinides and Fountain, 2008). In today's digital marketing environment, the Internet as a communication and transaction channel adds two more inputs and influencers of buying behavior to the model, online marketing mix (C) and further Web 2.0 and Social Media influences (D) (Constantinides and Fountain 2008: 239-240).

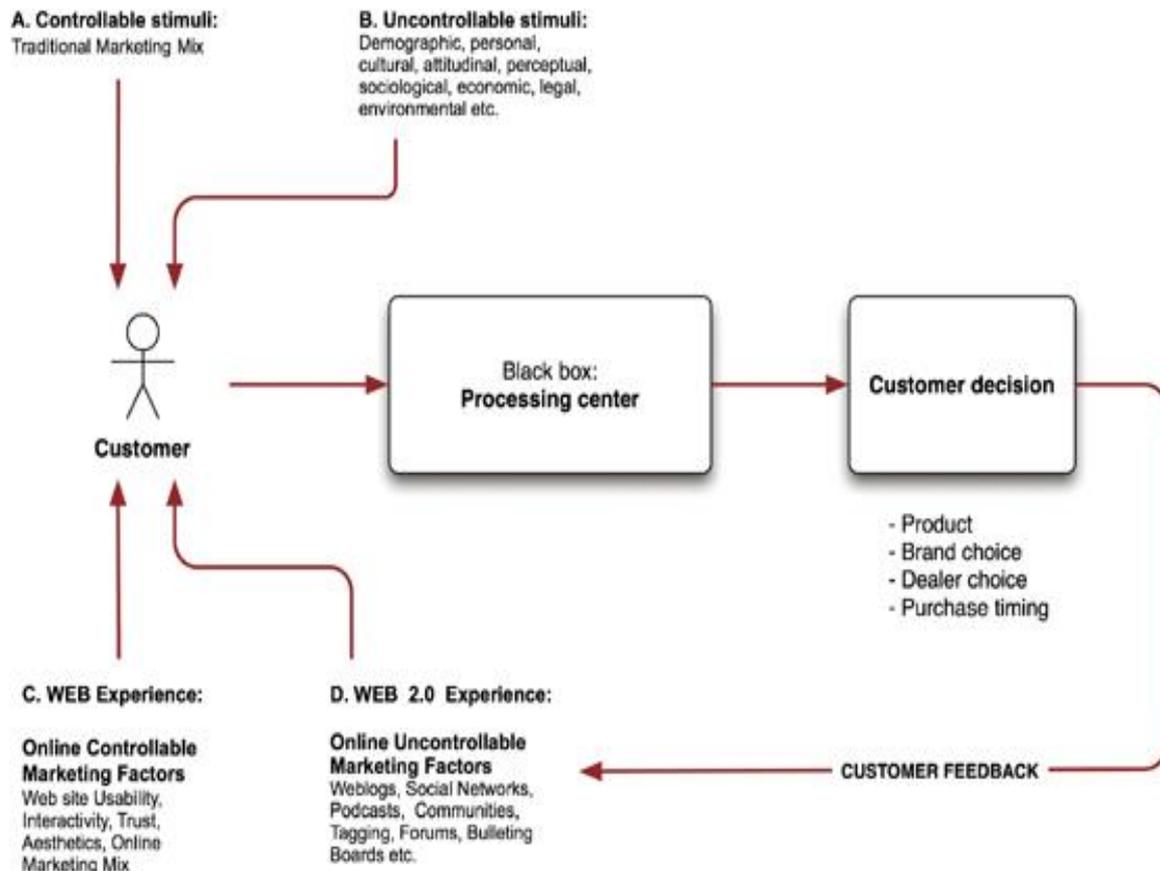


Figure 3 – Factors influencing the decision making process in an information-based marketplace

Source: Constantinides and Fountain (2008)

This figure emphasizes the complexity of decision-making process in the Internet, Web 2.0 and Social Media environment. In this new technology and Social Media era marketers discovered that influencing the consumer behavior by means of traditional marketing media and practices becomes less effective (Constantinides and Fountain, 2008: 240). The presence of active and intensive Social Media consumers' purchasing behavior has led also to the

emergence differences and changes in the purchasing funnel. Evans (2008) explained these differences by presenting the Social Feedback Cycle which is presented in Figure 4.

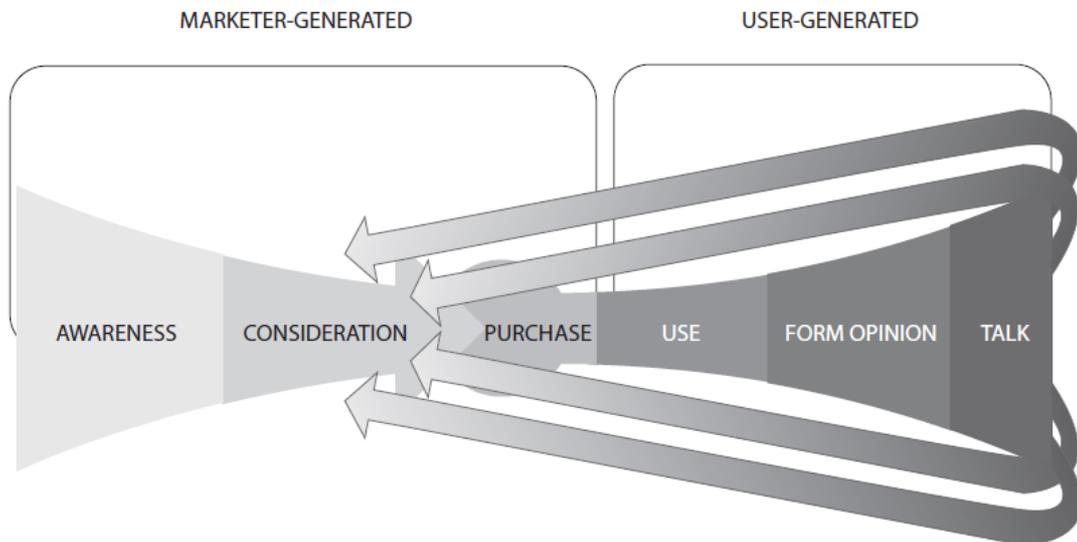


Figure 4: The Social Feedback Cycle

Source: Evans (2008: 5)

The social feedback cycle adds three more elements to classic purchase funnel, which are use, form opinion and talk under which helps mainly to consider the product. The social feedback cycle is important to understand because it forms the basis of social business. Social feedback demonstrates how Internet-based publishing and social technology has connected people around business or business-like activities Evans (2008: 5).

### 2.2.3 Social Media in the Tourism industry

Gretzel et al. (2008, as cited in Arisandi, 2013: 7) argue that due to the search-engine friendliness, increased credibility, experiential properties and having no commercial interest in promoting the product, Social Media is believed to have great influence in tourism, since tourism is an “information-intensive industry”. Social Media or UGC are the recent source of online information for consumers where the travellers are able to identify and examine text, videos, graphics, and photo that have been posted via online by other users or experienced travellers (Manap and Adzharudin, 2013). In tourism consumers

mainly are using Social Media to get information to assist in their trip-planning process and to make precise decisions about destinations, accommodation, restaurants, tours, and attractions (Hays et al., 2013). Moreover several other studies analyzed how consumers approach to Social Media when planning a travel and most of this studies concluded that the different types of Social Media channels play a very important role in the travel planning process, but not as a sole source and not in every phase of the travel planning process (Cox et al., 2009; O'Connor, 2008, as cited in Treer, 2010). It is because tourism experiences cannot be evaluated prior to consumption as they are intangible (Hays et al., 2013: 212). Nowadays travellers, rely more on other travellers' advice on Social Media, rather than guidebooks and standard print advertisements (Hays et al., 2013). According to the research conducted by a web analytics firm Compete (2006), the half of online travel buyers who visit one of Social Media channels during the purchasing process are making a product purchase and one of three of these customers mentioned that Social Media was useful in their decision making. As a result, travel companies such as Lonely Planet developed their own online travel communities to engage consumers in conversations and these travel communities are expected to gain more importance in the future (Hays et al., 2013).

## **2.3 Internet marketing**

Marketing may be defined as “*a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating and exchanging products and values with others*” (Kotler et al., 2006: 12) whereas Dibb et al., (2001, as cited in Chaffey, et al., 2006: 38) state that marketing consists of individual and organizational activities that facilitate and expedite satisfying exchange relationships in a dynamic environment through the creation, distribution, promotion and pricing of goods, services and ideas. Internet marketing as one of the main types of marketing is defined by Chaffey et al (2006: 37), as “*achieving marketing objectives through applying digital technologies*”. Internet marketing contains usage of a company's web site together with online promotional techniques, such as search engine marketing, interactive advertising, e-mail marketing and partnership arrangements with other web sites. These techniques are used to support objectives of

acquiring new customers and providing services to existing customers that help develop the customer relationship. However, for Internet marketing to be successful, these techniques should be integrated with traditional media channels such as print, TV and direct mail (Chaffey et al., 2006: 39)

### 2.3.1 Types and techniques

Online marketing is a huge subject and for doing online marketing successfully businesses must find an adequate strategy of marketing, to reach the real target market and find appropriate online marketing tools to reach these target markets (Admin, 2010, as cited in, Nguyen and Wang). Next follows the main techniques and types of internet marketing:

- **Search engine optimization** is the function of improving a web site's position in the results of a search engine query for a target set of keywords. This includes optimizing your own pages—making your site attractive to search engines, as well as encouraging other sites to link back to you (Elley and Tilley, 2009). Search engines such as Google and Bing (Microsoft's competing search engine to Google) index content and try to display the most relevant information to users when they perform a search (Ariesf, 2010).
- **Social Media marketing** is the use of Social Media to persuade consumers that one's company, products or services are worthwhile using online communities, social networks, blog marketing and more (Nety, 2011: 3). As a main focus of this study SMM is going to be defined and discussed more deeply in the next section.
- **Email marketing** is a form of direct marketing which utilises electronic means to deliver commercial messages to an audience (Stokes. 2008: 8).
- **Pay per click** is an online marketing technique with costs. The companies create different advertisements with keywords and place them on the related websites. The more the company pays for the click the more its advertisement appears on the search engine (Admin, 2010 as cited in, Nguyen and Wang: 13).

- **Mobile marketing** is a “A set of practices that enables organizations to communicate and engage with their audience in an interactive and relevant manner through any mobile device or network” (Mobile Marketing Association, cited in Dushinski. 2012: 3). Another definition is presented by Dushinski (2012: 4) where he defines “Mobile marketing, as communication by with consumers on their mobile devices, with their explicit permission, at the right time, at the right place while providing relevant value”. (Dushinski. 2012: 4)

### **2.3.2 Social Media marketing**

Social Media marketing is a process that empowers individuals to promote their websites, products, or services through online social channels and to communicate with and tap into a much larger community that may not have been available via traditional advertising channels. Social Media marketing also involves listening to communities and establishing relationships with them as a representative of your company (Weinberg, 2009: 3). SMM is a newer component of search engine market and it does not relate only to searching; it relates to a broad class of WOM marketing that has taken the Internet by its horns (Weinberg, 2009). In a broad sense Social Media marketing is the marketing with social networks, blogs, online communities and more (Neti, 2011).

Social Media advances have provided new extraordinary opportunities for management, marketing and the consumer transmission (Dryer, 2010). According to Weinberg (2009: 4) marketing in Social Media is about listening and responding to the community and it also refers to reviewing content or finding a particularly useful piece of content and promoting it within the vast social sphere of the Internet. On Social Media sites the number of people is getting more and relationships among people are getting stronger (Pempek, et al., 2009). Thus, businesses can reach a much wider audience. Some authors suggest that Social Media will transform and will revolutionise commerce, as well as the relationships between business-to-customer, business-to-business and customer-to-customer (O’Connor, 2008). In order to see how marketing is changed and transformed in Social Media era Table 1 presents the fundamental differences between traditional marketing and Social Media marketing approaches.

Table 1- Traditional marketing versus Social Media marketing

Components	Traditional Marketing	Social Marketing
Marketing mindset	Use one-way, one-sided communication to tell brand story.	Nurture dialogue and relationships; be more transparent, earn trust, build credibility.
Brand equity	Brand recall is holy grail.	Brand value is determined by customers: How likely are customers to highly recommend the good or service?
Segmentation	Group customers by demographics.	Group customers by behaviour, attitudes, and interests – what's important to them.
Targeting	Target by demographics, especially for media buying.	Target according to customer behaviour.
Communication	Broadcast style: create and push message out for customers to absorb.	Digital environment for interactive communication through search and query, customer comments, personal reviews, or dialogue.
Content	Professional content created and controlled by marketers.	Mix of professional and user-generated content, increasingly visual.
Virality	A nice feature but popularity too often driven by flashy presentation rather than content.	Virality based on solid content about remarkable products or features that will get people talking and forwarding e-mail.
Reviews	Think Michelin Guide: the experts weigh in.	Think Zagat or Amazon: users review and vote on everything.
Advertiser / Publisher Role	Publisher establishes channel and controls content to gather an audience for the advertisers who sponsor channels or programs.	Build relationships by sponsoring (not controlling) content and interaction when, where, and how customers want it.
Strategy	Top-down strategy imposed by senior management drives tactics.	Bottom-up strategy builds on winning ideas culled from constant testing and customer input.
Hierarchy	Information is organized into channels, folders, and categories to suit advertisers.	Information is available on demand by keyword, to suit users.
Payment	Cost per thousand (CPM): emphasis on cost; Advertisers buy with the idea that share of voice = share of mind = share of market.	Return on investment (ROI): Invest in marketing for future growth and profitability based on measurable return.

Source: Weber (2007:33, as cited in Kloos, 2007)

According to Fernando (2007) the main difference between Social Media and traditional media is the direction of communication, as in Social Media the content is generated by the consumer rather than by the marketer. Furthermore, besides the communication direction the nature of the communication also changes in Social Media and it becomes two-way communication which allows interactivity, a peer-to-peer communication, rather than only providing a uni-directional communication (Treer, 2010: 48). Traditional marketing approach, by the methods it uses to achieve the objectives in target market generates whole marketing mix activities, which consists of product, price, place and promotion (Kotler et al., 2006). However, in general, SMM takes place around promotion activity. (Hartline et al, 2008). According to Madden and Smith (2010) marketing on Social Media are only about reputation management, brand loyalty creation and image management activities. With Social Media sites such as Facebook and Twitter companies can directly meet their

customers, exhibit their products and respond online to consumer expectations (Martinez, 2010).

## **2.4 Travel agencies**

### **2.4.1 Definition of Travel agencies and their role in the tourism industry**

Travel agencies being an involved party constitute a key element within tourism, essentially due to their role as mediator (Ramirez, 2004, as cited in Ramirez-Hurtado and Berbel-Pinado: 25). Travel agencies basically act as intermediaries between suppliers of travel services (Dolnicar and Laesser, 2007) such as airlines and hotels, and customers. Unlike distributors in many industries, travel agencies do not deal with physical products but with information (Cheung and Lam, 2009).

The main role of a travel agency can be broadly summarized as: information, distribution, reservation and services. (Cheung and Lam, 2009: 85-86). According to Tsaour et al (2006, as cited in Cheung and Lam, 2009: 85-86) for a typical business day, a travel agency's functions include:

1. Organizing transportation - air, sea cruises, bus, and rail, car rentals locally and abroad;
2. Arranging individual itineraries, guided tours, group tours and selling prepared package tours;
3. Dealing with arrangements of accommodations, meals, sightseeing, transfers of passengers and special events such as music festivals and theatre tickets;
4. Dealing with and advising on the documentation requirements (visas, health certificates etc.);
5. Using professional know-how and experience in the provision of air, train and other transportation schedules, hotel rates and their standards as well as qualities;

6. Arranging reservations for special activities like, religious pilgrimages, business travels and conventions, incentive and educational tours, eco tours etc.

### **2.4.2 Travel agencies and ICT**

The ICTs and Internet have impacted the tourism sector significantly and have become key applications in the tourism industry: Consumers, on the one hand, are able to interact directly with tourism providers, which allow them to identify and satisfy their constantly changing needs for tourism products. Suppliers, on the other hand, are able to deal more effectively with the increasing complexity and diversity of consumer requirements (Noty, 2013: 119). With the technological developments tourism organizations could develop their processes and adapt their management to take advantage of the emerging digital tools and mechanisms to (Buhalis, 2011: 11):

- Increase their internal efficiency and manage their capacity
- Interact effectively with customers
- Revolutionize tourism intermediation and increase the points of sale
- Encourage customers to communicate with other customers
- Provide Location Based Services by incorporating data, content and multimedia
- Support efficient cooperation between partners in the value system
- Enhance the operational and geographic scope by offering strategic tools for global expansion.

Travel agencies are one of the tourism sectors that benefited most from ICTs and Internet as they provide information and reservation systems such as GDS which mainly enable TAs to check availability and make reservations for tourism products and support the intermediation between consumers and principals (Buhalis and Jun, 2011). GDS are very important for travel agencies since it allows accessing information and making reservations on scheduled airlines, hotel chains, car rentals and a variety of ancillary services (Buhalis,

2013). GDSs mostly allow TAs to create complicated itineraries, while they provide up-to-date schedules, prices and availability information, as well as an effective reservation method (Buhalis and Jun, 2011:20). Besides the benefits there are also drawbacks of ICTs and Internet for TAs. One of the most important drawbacks is the online booking systems which allows consumers to book all the components that traveler needs (Zehrer. and Möschl, 2008). This aspect creates a threat for the competitiveness of TAs in the future if they do not benefit from technological advances properly.

## **2.5 Summary**

In this chapter the main literature was presented regarding to the topic of the study. Firstly the development of tourism, ICT and web was provided. The next section gave information about Social Media, its platforms and influence. Following Internet marketing along with Social Media Marketing were provided. Last section provided information regarding to travel agencies.

# **Chapter 3. Information about tourism in Azerbaijan**

## **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides information regarding to the tourism and Social Media usage in Azerbaijan. First section presents the introduction of tourism in Azerbaijan. Following section is devoted to information about travel agencies in Azerbaijan. Lastly Social Media usage in Azerbaijan is provided.

## **3.2 Tourism in Azerbaijan**

Tourism industry in Azerbaijan is constantly growing and becoming one of the most important sectors of the economy. This can be seen from the report of UNWTO about tourism of Azerbaijan. According to UNWTO (2011) report, during the years of 2009 and 2011, the contribution of Tourism to GDP rose from 7% to 9.5 and the contribution of Tourism to employment is forecasting to rise 5% annually, rising to 375,000 jobs (8.3%) by 2021. This growth of tourism also can be seen in the number of tourists coming to Azerbaijan. Figure 5 illustrates the number of visitors to Azerbaijan and Baku from 2006 to 2011 years, which shows the gradually increasing numbers of tourists.

2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Economic regions
206 628	233 575	325 771	367 087	349 566	418 889	By country – total
89 282	108 795	181 664	205 242	184 464	223 442	Baku city

Figure 5 - Number of arrivals to Baku 2006- 2011 years.

Source: The Statistical State Committee of Azerbaijan (SSC) (2012:186).

Regarding the purpose of the visit of tourists as presented in Figure 6 the main purposes are business and leisure, recreation. Tourists coming for these two purposes have shown a significant growth over the period of 2006 and 2011.

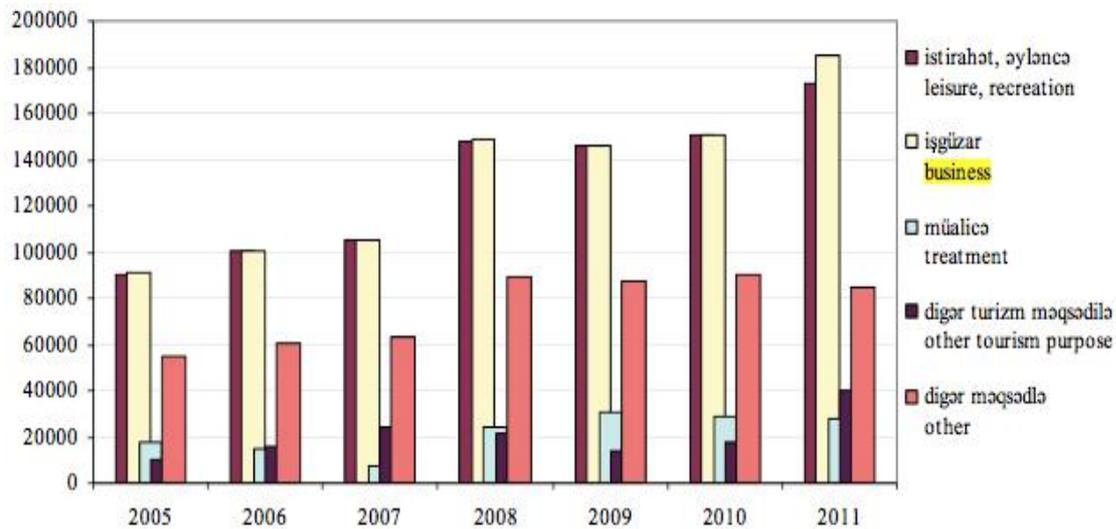


Figure 6 -The number of tourists by purpose of visits

Source: SSC (2012: 89)

Visitors to Azerbaijan come from the following countries (5 most important): Russia (598,894), Georgia (529,613), Iran (329,913), Turkey (177,308) and Ukraine (28,606) (ENPI Action Programme, 2009: 3). That is because of the close distance that they have from Azerbaijan and also the citizens of these countries either do not need a visa to come to Azerbaijan or the visa regulations are easy for these countries

The total amount of tourism incomes of Azerbaijan country constituted approximately \$177 million in 2007, and it was \$96.5 million in the second half of 2008 (CESD, 2011) .

Furthermore foreign visitors spend per trip averagely 821 USD, total receipts from tourism estimated at 1.227 million USD for the year 2010 (ENPI Action Programme, 2009).

### **3.3 Travel agencies in Azerbaijan**

According to the press release of The Ministry of Tourism and Culture, today 170 travel agencies, which 90 of them located in Baku, and 504 hotels, operate in the Azerbaijan (CESD, 2011). Table 2 shows how the number of travel agencies, employees working there, income and number of trips sold increased during the years of 2008 and 2012.

Table 2- Main indicators of tourist enterprises in Azerbaijan

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
<b>Number of enterprises</b>	123	124	126	141	170
<b>Number of employess (including substituties), person</b>	1174	1393	1418	1541	1730
of which:					
number of employees engaged in tourism activity, persons	749	1136	1159	1279	1473
<b>Gross income of enterprises, thsd. manat</b>	17120.5	17839.6	19065.3	22634.8	27121.5
of which:					
from tourism services	12987.6	14013.6	14755.5	17804.7	21597.1
<b>Expenditures for product (service) output– total, thsd. manat</b>	15612.1	16907.9	17811.3	20662.1	23540.8
of which:					
tourist services	11909.5	13220.7	13805.7	16065.6	18903.1
<b>Number of trip sheets sold to population, unit</b>	27055	28509	34121	42583	62866
including:					
sold to Azerbaijan citi-zens for traveling within the country-total, unit	2517	3259	3385	4045	5121
sold to Azerbaijan citizens for traveling outside of the country-total, unit	20843	21776	27030	34254	52378
sold to foreign citizens for traveling within Azerbaijan territory, unit	3695	3474	3706	4284	5367
<b>Number of received and dispatched tourists, person</b>	59607	59700	69923	83620	101431

Source: SSC (2013)

Among 170 travel agencies in Azerbaijan only few dozens of them offer incoming services, but the bulk of incoming tour business is handled by just 6-8 larger inbound operators (ENPI Action Programme, 2009: 3). Moreover, it appears that TAs in Azerbaijan mainly sell tours and tickets to locals that travel outside Azerbaijan, rather than selling internal tours and tickets, or even selling packages to foreigners that could come into the country (CDC, 2004).

### 3.4 Social Media usage in Azerbaijan

According to last conducted statistics, there are almost 5000000 users of Internet out of 9500000 total population in Azerbaijan (Internet World Stats, 2012). Currently there are 1360000 Facebook users in the country, which 880,000 out of them are male and 480000 are women (Allin1Social, 2013). Furthermore, Figure 7 demonstrates the statistics about Facebook demographics among Azerbaijani users from the age perspective.

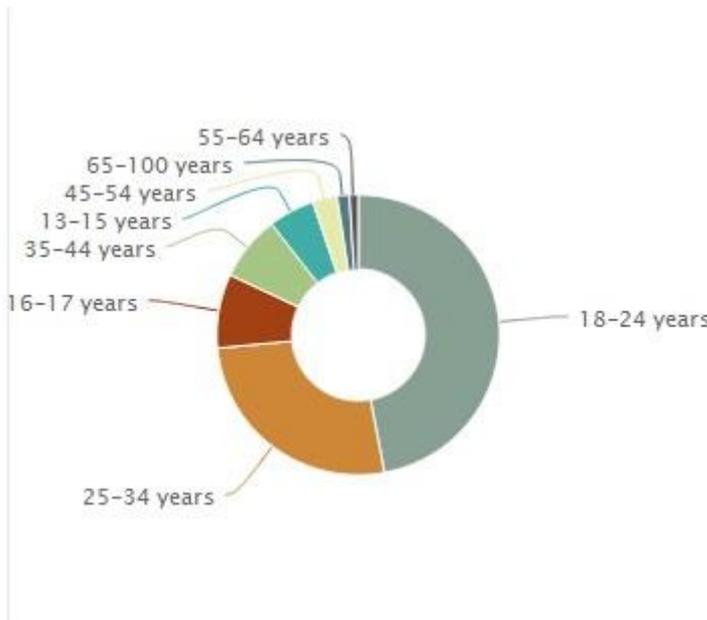


Figure 7- User age distribution

Source: SocialBakers (2013)

As seen from the figure, Facebook is mostly used by young generation. The largest age group is currently 18-24, followed by the users in the age of 25-34.

A good example of Social Media usage in Azerbaijan for marketing purposes is the launch of campaign on Facebook and Twitter called “Baku- Light your fire” during the Eurovision Song contest in 2012. The campaign aimed to increase awareness of the country and draw the attention of other countries to this contest.

### **3.5 Summary**

This chapter provided the important information regarding the tourism and travel agencies in Azerbaijan. It also included the Social Media usage in the context of Azerbaijan.

# Chapter 4. Methodology

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the outline of methodology and data collection. The chapter starts by presenting the aim and research questions, followed by presenting the research approach. Then, the chapter provides the data collection techniques for this study. Following, which research instrument, sampling method and data analysis type used, are presented.

## 4.2 Aim and research questions

The main aim of this study is to analyze the perceptions and usage of Social Media for marketing purposes by travel agencies in Baku, Azerbaijan and to make recommendations for effective use of Social Media.

### Research questions

In order to achieve the study's aim and objectives the research questions proposed are as following:

1. How do travel agencies in Baku, Azerbaijan perceive Social Media as a marketing tool?
2. How are Social Media utilized and maintained by travel agencies in Baku, Azerbaijan?
3. What are the major problems of TAs regarding the Social Media performance?
4. How Social Media could be used more effectively by 'travel agencies'?

### **4.3 Research approach**

There are two types of research methods: qualitative and quantitative research methods. Quantitative research method aims to determine how one thing (a variable) affects another in a population, by quantifying the relationships between variables (Altinay and Paraskevas, 2008: 75). On the other hand qualitative method aims to develop an understanding of the context in which phenomena and behaviours take place (Altinay and Paraskevas, 2008: 75). The major difference between these two methods is that quantitative techniques involve numbers- quantities- whereas qualitative not (Veal, 1997: 71). For a qualitative research method, data can be collected through the questionnaires but qualitative data through the interviews or observations (Veal, 1997). A quantitative study is best when you know a lot about the problem that will be examined. A qualitative research, however, is better when you want to get a holistic view and understanding of the context (Christensen et al 2001, as cited in Fridolf and Arnautovich, 2011: 7). As researcher is not analyzing numerical data, but investigating and trying to get a deep understanding of the problem it was decided to use the qualitative approach. Qualitative data is relevant when the study analyses interpretive understanding of the phenomenon from participants view in the organizational context (Kaplan and Maxwell, 2005: 32, as cited in Jonscher, 2011). Qualitative method is also considered suitable for marketing studies.

### **4.4 Data collection**

There are two type of data collection, primary and secondary data collection. The primary data are those, which are original data generated by new research through utilizing different techniques such as, interviews, questionaries, surverys and observations (Finn, et al, 2000). On the other hand according to Kothari (2004:25) secondary data are the data which “*have already been collected by someone else and already passed through the statistical process*”. In other words secondary data are which have already been published in any form. For this study the both types of data collection have been utilized.

#### **4.4.1 Primary data**

##### **Interview**

According to Altinay and Paraskevas (2008: 107) interviewing is the “*systematic collection of data through asking questions, then carefully listening to and recording or noting the responses concerning your research topic*”. There are four main interview techniques: unstructured, structured, semi structured and focus groups. This study will employ semi structured interviews. Semi structured interview “*strikes the balance between a broad investigation through using unstructured interviews on one hand and a very structured explanatory approach on other*” (Altinay and Paraskevas, 2008: 113). Taking into consideration the distance to targeted location researcher used online interviews with the help of video conference programme.

The interview process started by contacting potential participants by e-mailing to introduce the research project, which included an information sheet about research (Appendix 4). Then date and time convenient for the interviews were identified. The interviews were conducted in two phases: first phase is done during the months of April and May and the second phase during the month of November.

Interviews were done with one respondent from each agency that included in the survey. The purpose of the selection of respondents is to interview the person within the company who possess the greatest knowledge of how agency uses Social Media. The interview started with introductory questions about the personal background and characteristics of the company. For the rest of the interview, the open ended questions were asked around the research objectives. The duration of interviews lasted between 20-30 minutes.

In order to reduce risk of misunderstanding the interviews were conducted in Azerbaijani, because this is only language that all respondents would speak. Because of this dissertation will be written in English all the answers and opinions then were translated from Azerbaijani to English.

## **Content Analysis: Social Media Activities**

In order to analyze how participants are using Social Media and to complement the data from interviews, the Social Media activity of each participant was observed from their Facebook pages. The reason why Facebook has been chosen is that Facebook is more popular than any other Social Media channel in Azerbaijan and the selected companies of this study are more active on this channel. The Social Media activities analysis has been restricted to the month of November of 2013 as this process has been conducted manually.

As websites which provide analytics and statistics do not have enough data for the sites of TAs and the statistical data is not available for regular users, most of data was collected manually. The analysis was achieved through the identified categories which were formed according to secondary data analysis, in particular the available literature in this domain of knowledge (Appendix 2). First some metrics have been taken from the Facebook pages, such as number of fans and number of posts and comments. The next step is the analysis of the content of the published posts. For this part of the analysis the published posts are first determined according to different topic categories. In a second step the content of the posts is divided into three classes: videos, pictures and link to website. Following the customer engagement and responsiveness to feedback are also analysed.

### **4.4.2 Secondary data**

In this study the wide amount of secondary data sources has been utilized in order to build the base of this research. According to Finn *et al.* (2000) the main sources of secondary information for tourism related studies are libraries and archives, museums and collections, government departments and professional bodies, the Internet and the field. In this study secondary data has been collected from multiple sources, such as journal articles, statistics, reports, books, the Web and others.

For this study, considering the novelty of the Social Media phenomenon and that there is no source in the library of the university, the researcher mainly retrieved sources of books, articles, reports, journals from the Internet. The articles and books used in this study were mainly retrieved from journal data bases such as, Science direct, Google books, Taylor&

Francis online and B-On online data base. In order to collect data about how businesses and companies utilize Social Media the study made by Stelzner (2013) was mostly utilized. Furthermore secondary research also assisted to form the primary data collection questions.

#### **4.5 The instrument of the research method: Interview**

In order to answer the first, second and third research questions of this study the semi-structured interview used with open ended questions (Appendix 3). The interview consisted of four sections. In the first section the general information about the person, who is participating in interview were analyzed. The second section provides characterization of the selected companies. The third section includes questions about the perceptions of TAs towards Social Media marketing. The last section aimed to analyze Social Media usage by TAs for marketing purposes.

#### **4.6 The development of research instrument**

For the current study, it was inspired by methodology and research instrument that are partially based on those introduced by Jonscher (2011). Herein stated study was considered as particularly relevant in developing the research instrument for this study. Jonscher (2011) investigated how small and medium sized accommodation providers use Social Media as a marketing tool. An interview, which comprised of twenty three items that asked about the perception of and usage of Social Media as a marketing of these companies. These twenty three items were divided into four sections and the interview was conducted with eight small and medium sized accommodation providers. In conclusion, The research instrument used by Jonscher was considered as particularly relevant in developing the research instrument for this study.

## **4.7 Sample selection**

For this study a purposeful sampling were applied in order to define a sample frame of participants. Purposive or judgemental sampling enables researcher to use judgement to select cases that will best enable to answer research question(s) and to meet the objectives (Saunders et al., 2009: 237). Purposive sampling is relevant when working with small samples and when it is needed to select cases that are particularly informative (Saunders et al., 2009). The participants for this study were chosen based on two criteria. Firstly the travel agency had to be located in Baku as a defined location; it is because most of the travel agencies are located in Baku, in Azerbaijan. Secondly they have to be found at least in two types of Social Media channels.

In order to find respondents for this study the researcher first contacted to Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan, to get the list of the travel agencies in Baku, Azerbaijan and to get websites of travel agencies. After getting the list of companies the research was made in order to find which of them are located in Baku and to get in what channels of Social Media are they participating. As a result only nine TAs in Baku were identified to fulfill these criteria. As a result, six of nine TAs agreed to participate in the research.

## **4.8 Data analysis**

There are different techniques for interview analysis which are grounded theory technique, hermeneutic analysis and thematic analysis. In order to analyse data from the interviews thematic analysis technique was chosen. Thematic Analysis is a type of qualitative analysis which is used to analyse classifications and present themes (patterns) that relate to the data (Boyatzis, 1998 as cited in, Ibrahim, 2012: 10). By using thematic analysis researcher can determine precisely the relationships between concepts and compare them with the replicated data. Thematic analysis allows researcher to link the various concepts and opinions of other authors and compare this data with the data that has been gathered. (Ibrahim, 2012: 10). In this context the data analysis of the interviews started by

transcribing the answers. After that, it was much easier to categorize the data to different themes and under different headlines which was also supported by secondary data sources.

After analyzing the results from interviews, researcher started analyzing the Social Media (Facebook) maintenance of the selected companies. As the specialized web analytics services which provide analytics and statistics do not have enough data for the sites of the selected TAs and as the statistical data is not available for users, most of data was collected manually and individually. This data was collected and recorded and then it was presented through the diagrams which will be presented in the Chapter 4.

## **4.9 Summary**

In the present chapter the outline of the method has been presented as well as the aims and research questions of the study have been introduced. Thereafter the main methods for data collection and research instrument have been presented and justified. In the last section sampling and data analysis has been provided.

# **Chapter 5. Results and discussion**

## **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter contains the results and main findings from observations and interviews directed to the first, second and third research objective. This chapter starts with information about respondents. Secondly the company characterizations are provided. In the next section results from observation is presented. In the last section data from interview is provided, which is divided into two parts the, perception of respondents towards Social Media and the usage of Social Media as a marketing tool.

## **5.2 Interviewee characteristics**

This section contains information interviewees of this study. The name of interviewees, their role in company, their ages, background and the usage level in their personal life are presented and summarized in Table 3.

Table 3- Interviewee characteristics

Participant	Company name	Role	Age	Background	Social Media use in personal life
Leyla	Spektr	Manager	28	Linguistics	Everyday
Aydin	Compass	Owner	25	Tourism	Yes, everyday
Konul	Atlas	Owner	24	Tourism	All day long
Ferid	Elite	Manager	33	Tourism	Yes, checks everyday
Alyona	Pasha	Manager	42	Tourism	Doesn't use
Sevil	Mirvari	Manager	35	Economics	Uses everyday

Overall the majority of participants are young and they are either managers or owners. Mainly interviewees have the backgrounds from tourism. Only one respondent has a Economics background and one respondent has a Linguistics background. Furthermore in order to see how much participants are aware of features of Social they were asked how they use Social Media in their personal life, if they use or not and how frequently they use it. Except Alyona all participants use Social Media sites quite frequently, like at least once a day, in their personal and social life. As Alyona responded:

*I only use Social Media at work and for me it is a totally waste of time to use it in my social life. Initially I used to utilize but then I realized that it takes a lot of my time just for nothing and then I decided to deactivate all my Social Media accounts (Alyona)*

### 5.3 The characterization of selected companies

In this section, the selected travel companies are presented. Information retrieved from interviews and from websites of selected travel companies is combined in order to provide description of selected travel companies. The information about companies and their web

pages are demonstrated in Table 4. Moreover target markets, promotional channels to be used in future and the way selected companies do the sales are also presented in the Table.

Table 4- Company presentations

Company name	Web page	Description	Target market	Promotional channels to be used	Sales
Mirvari Travel	www.mirvarittravel.az	Mirvari Travel has begun its activity from 2010, and during the short period has taken a concrete and significant place among travel agencies working in Azerbaijan. At present the company is the many-sided representative of tourism in Azerbaijan.	Businessmen, Corporative clients	Facebook, magazines, email marketing	direct
Atlas Travel	www.atlastravel.az	Atlas Travel Company successfully works in the tourist market of international and domestic tourism since 2008. Atlas travel offer/s a variety of tours to the most beautiful places of Azerbaijan, Turkey, UAE, CIS countries, Europe, Southeast Asia, and Medical Tours, Exotic tours , cruises , etc and different price categories from economy to VIP tours.	Youth and students	Social Media, direct marketing, TV	direct
Elite Travel	www.elite-travel.az	Elite Travel is working in the tourism market since the September 17, 2002. The company has two offices in the city centre. In short time Elite Travel could become a member of international organizations such as IATA (International Air Transport Association) and UFTA (United Field Trailers Association)	Students	Social Media Web advertising	direct
Spektr travel	www.spektr.az	"Spektr travel" started its operation from 2003. Spektr travel offers a service to customers in all the popular resorts of the world.	Corporative clients	Social Media and web site	direct
Compass Travel	www.compassstravel.az	Compass Travel Azerbaijan is a full service travel agency offering professional booking and consulting for all your domestic and international travel needs. Compass travel was established in November of 2011. This is quite new company but it already gain popularity and reliability in tourism market in Azerbaijan.	Corporate and leisure people	Facebook, email marketing, TV and radio	Direct and email
Pasha Travel	www.pashatravel.az	Pasha Travel is an IATA accredited Travel Agency, which was founded in 2006 as part of holding in Azerbaijan – PASHA Group, which includes interests in banking, construction, and insurance.	Families Students	Website, facebook	direct

As seen from the Table 4, all agencies included in this survey have identified their target, which are mainly corporative clients. Another target market that was defined by two travel agencies are students and young people. With regard to promotional tools to be used in future there are some similarities. Most of them stated that they are going to use Social Media, especially Facebook and their websites. Furthermore all agencies do their sales directly in the office, from the participants only *Alyona* indicated that they additionally to direct sales they also use emails. The snapshots of the Facebook pages of case companies have been indicated in the Appendix 1.

## **5.4 Results from Social Media analysis**

As mentioned in earlier sections the analysis was made during the month of November on selected six travel agencies' Facebook pages. The objective of this analysis was to examine how travel agencies maintain their Facebook pages. Facebook was chosen due to the fact that it has the widest coverage and it was considered as the most effective channel by travel agencies. Moreover, the snapshots of Facebook pages of each travel agency are presented in Appendix 1.

### **5.4.1 Number of likes**

The number of fans for the last day of November vary somehow between participants in this study which is presented in Figure 8.

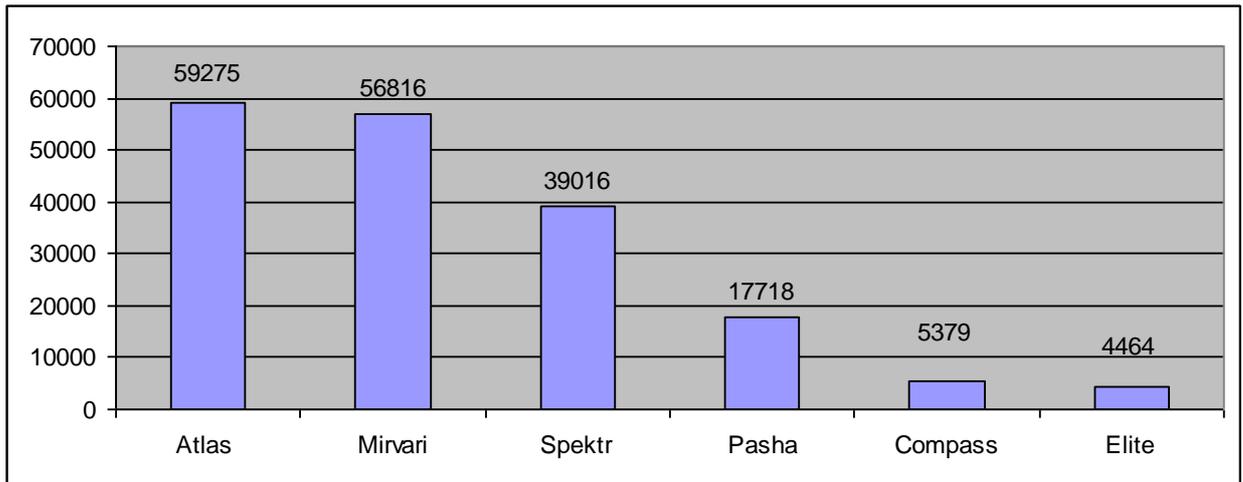


Figure 8- **Number of likes**

As seen from Figure 8 Atlas travel has the most fans among these travel agencies, which is 59275. The second place which has slightly less number of fans is Mirvari travel which is 56816. The following are Spektr travel (39016), Pasha travel (17718), Compass (5379) and Elite travel (4464). Taking into account that there are 1300000 Facebook users in Azerbaijan these numbers could be considered quite low.

#### 5.4.2 Level of activity

There are many challenges for businesses to use Social Media sites. The level of activity and the content of their posts are one of the most important ones (Salkhordeh, 2010). In this study the level of activity from business side (number of posts); from user side (number of comments) and average number of user's activity (like, comment and share) per post were analyzed. The results have been indicated in the Figure 9, Figure 10 and Figure 11 which is provided below:

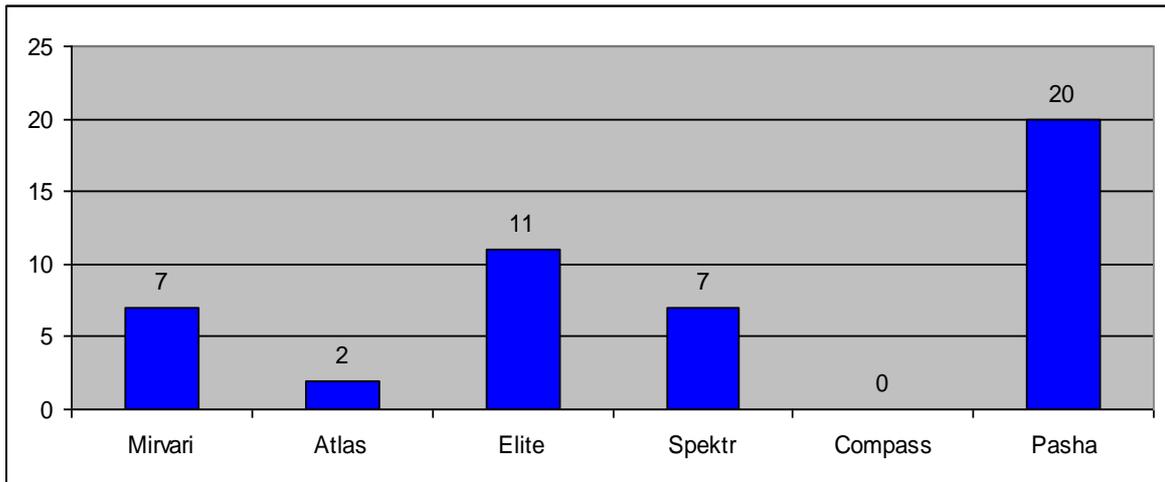


Figure 9- Number of posts

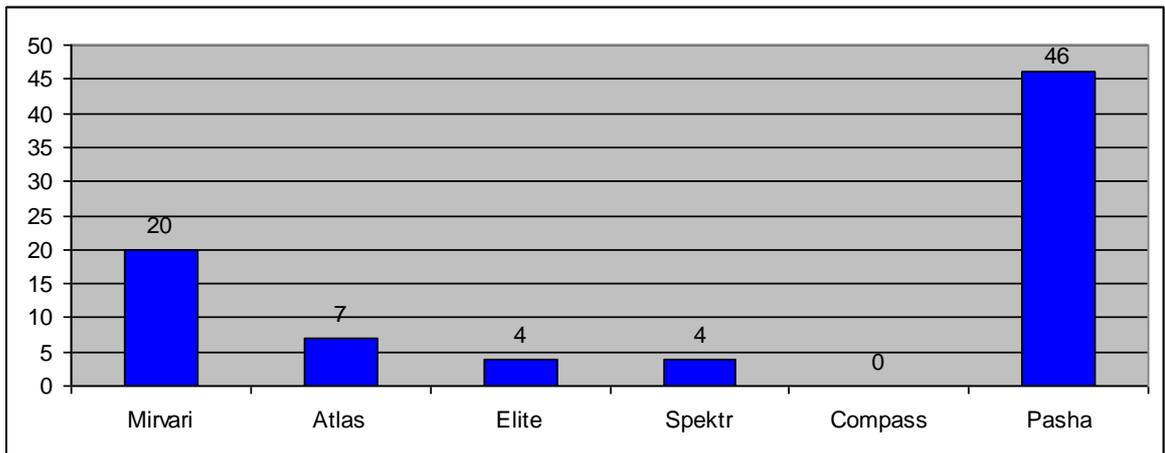


Figure 10- Number of comments

The level of activity both from company side and from user side can be considered low. This can be seen from the figures above, which shows that maximum number of posts made is 20 and highest number of comment is 46 during one month. These maximum activity levels were both achieved by Pasha travel.

Moreover Figure 11 presents the average level of users activity per post made by company. When company posts in Facebook, users can comment, share or click the “like” button to show their interest (Salkhordeh, 2010)

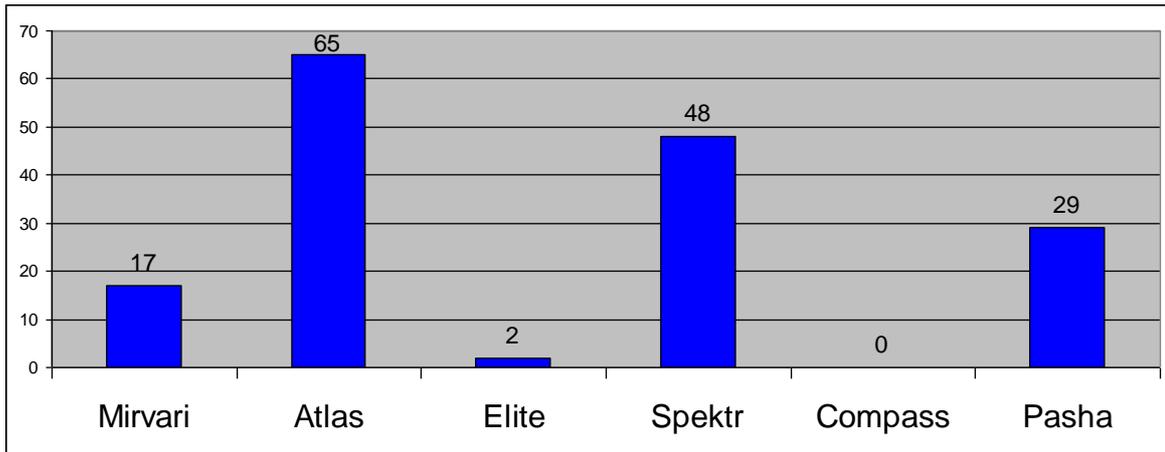


Figure 11- Average number of user's activity (like, comment and share) per post

As can be seen from Figure 11, Atlas travel has the highest level of user's activity of likes, comments and shares with 65 per companies post. Spektr travel has the second highest level of user's activity which is 48.

### 5.4.3 Content analysis

As it was mentioned another important issue in addition to the level of activity is contents of posts. Firstly, the contents were divided into several. After reading and analyzing the posts made on Facebook eight categories of posts have been categorized as shown in Figure 12. Additionally, the figure includes the percentage of posts for each category.

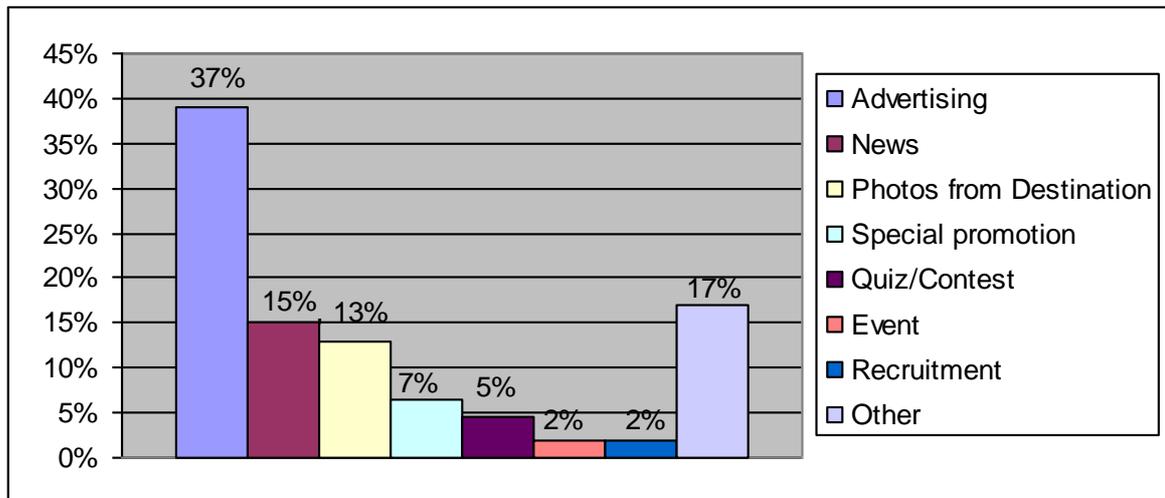


Figure 12- Content of the posts (1)

As seen from the figure content containing advertising (39%) were used most. The next most used contents were other type of posts (17%), news (15%) and photos from destinations (13%). the results from analysis the Facebook pages of travel agencies were used more for advertisement. Advertisement here presents the advertising of tour packages, flight tickets and hotel sales.

The second step in analysing the published contents was to analyse posts dividing into Photo, Video and Link to Website. The result of this analysis is presented in Figure 13.

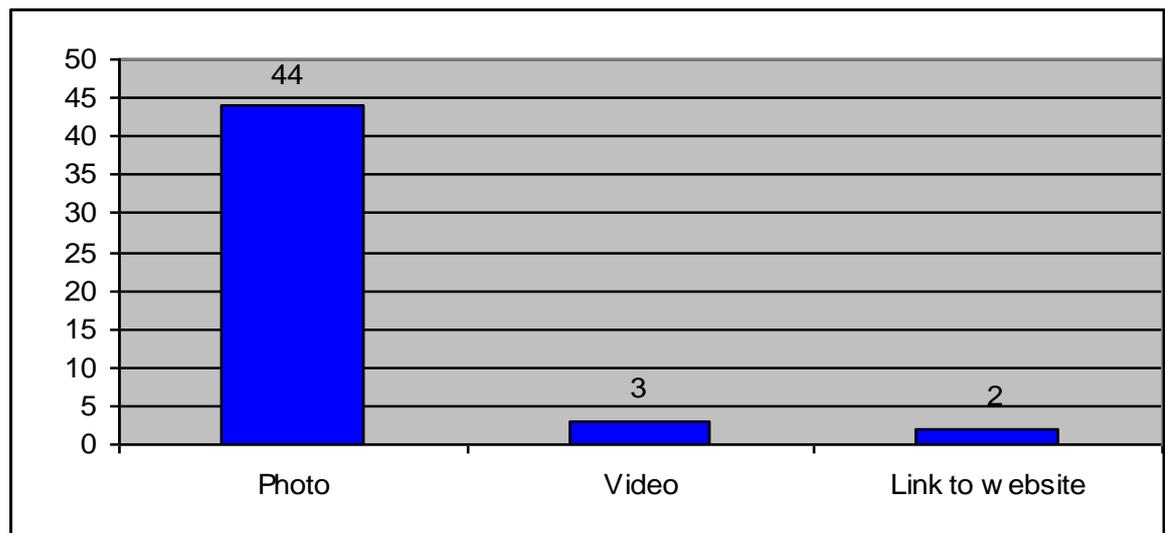


Figure 13- Content of the posts (2)

According to analysis mainly the posts are made using different pictures. 44 posts are made using pictures, whereas 3 of total posts are made as a video. Furthermore only 2 posts out of 47 total posts have been linked to their website. Taking into account that Facebook has more popularity and users than other Social Media channels companies could use it for creating more traffic to their website and to their other channels of Social Media.

#### **5.4.4 Customer engagement**

To summarize the content analysis, it could be mentioned that the way in which Social Media are used has been found to be similar among the participants. The most frequent and common activity that TAs do is to promote the company's products or services offered to customers. Uploading pictures about the tour packages, tours, campaign and posting some pictures about touristic destinations are the most frequent activities that take place on their Facebook pages while engaging to users. Other popular activities are answering guests' inquiries, handling complaints, and holding contests.

In this context to analyze how is Social Media being used to engage the customers Facebook pages has also been analyzed according to their interactivity. Interactivity here means if the posts made by company require a feedback about the product or is that asks a question to users about the product. The results have been presented in Figure 14, which is divided into Interactive and Non-interactive posts.

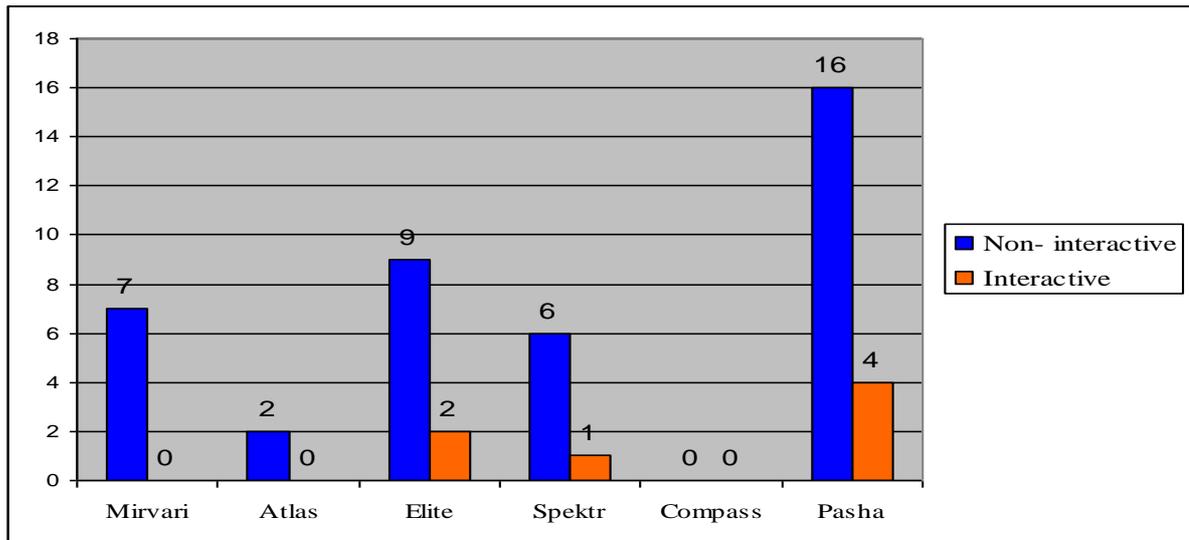


Figure 14- Summary of non-interactive and interactive posts

Figure 14 displays the degree of interactivity of each TAs posts. As seen from the figure only three TAs had somehow interactive posts which could be considered as a low interactivity. Pasha travel had four interactive posts out of twenty which is the highest number among TAs.

The study also analyzed in what language travel agencies are engaging with their customers. The result of this analysis is presented in Figure 15 below.

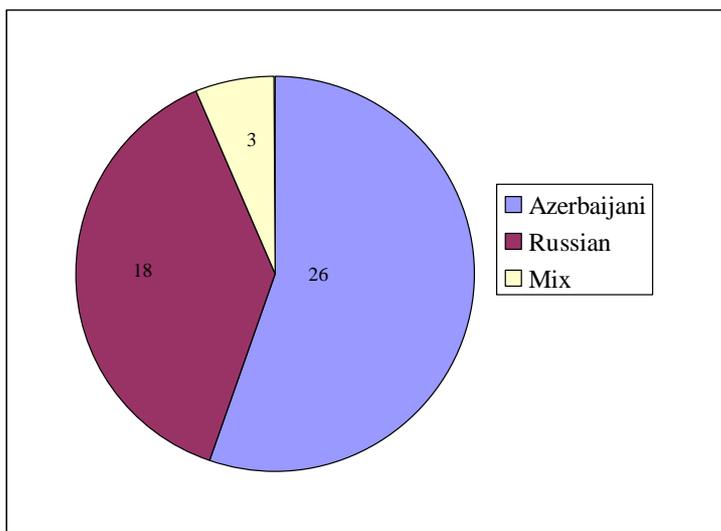


Figure 15- Language usage distribution

As seen from the figure selected travel companies in this study merely use Azerbaijani and Russian language to share the information. 26 posts out of 47 have been made in Azerbaijani language, whereas 18 of them in Russian and 3 of them have been posted in both languages. Considering that travel agencies can sell tour packages, accommodation and flight tickets also to customers from other countries this could affect the competitiveness of company and number of clients.

One of the key factors in the Social Media field while engaging with customers is how company responses to customers. In order to analyse responsiveness to feedback and comments the model which was proposed by Chan and Guillet (2011) will be used. Chan and Guillet (2011) have identified that there could be four types of responses. The first type is standart response. That means that companies answer to all kind of comments, negative and positive, in all languages. The second type is selective response which companies only answer to inquires, questions and do not respond to negative comments. The another type could be late response, where companies fail to answer in time to feedback. The last type is not responding at all.

After conducting the analysis on how do companies respond to feedback, it was found that mostly selected companies respond to all questions, negative comments and inquiries which is standart type of responding. Late response was only found on Elite Travel's page, where they were giving responses quite late, about 2-3 days after user made a complaint or asked a question.

## **5.5 Results from interview**

This section contains the results from interviews regarding to first and second objective of the study. Firstly the perceptions of the respondents towards Social Media marketing are presented. Then, in the second section Social Media usage as marketing tool is provided.

## 5.5.1 Perception about Social Media use

### 5.5.1.1 Purpose of use

The purpose using Social Media are different among the interviewees. However the most mentioned responses, which were indicated by everyone, were “*to promote our products through Social Media*” and “*to get closer with customers*”.

In spite of having a number of different answers, three main purposes have been identified as they were the most mentioned answers. Firstly, it was considered that Social Media is an effective way to promote and advertise their products. The expressions “to promote our business” and to “advertise our tour packages” has been mentioned by all the participants

Secondly using it was thought that as Social Media is getting popular and more and more people are that, they want be closer to their customers and communicate them through Social Media channels

*We found that our customers were on Facebook so we wanted to meet them there at the same place and to communicate with them. It is just like we realize we have to have a phone open for there are many who call us. We realize that we must have e-mail as many want to send email and the same goes for Facebook, Twitter and other channels (Leyla)*

*We want to be where our customers are and today many are on Facebook and on other Social Media channels so we saw it as a good channel to get close to our consumers. To also be able to communicate directly with our followers and even get their feedback is valuable to us (Sevil).*

Thirdly Social Media is thought to be a good way for disseminating information.

*Social Media is an excellent way to disseminate the information and knowledge we have outside of our web site to any person who is interested but does not go to us directly. YouTube is a great example where our films reach many more than if they would just lie on our website (Leyla)*

*Nowadays we are selling most of our tours and tour packages through Facebook as we are creating an event and inviting all the followers of our Facebook page (Ferid)*

To summarize the results the main purpose for using is mainly to promote the product and to get closer with the customers. On the other hand from the literature the main purposes for Social Media were indicated as, disseminate significant information, attract new customers, increase traffic to the corporate website, gain feedback, fostering customer relationships, and establish a two-way conversation (Busscher, 2013)

#### **5.5.1.2 Satisfaction with Social Media usage**

According to the participants, majority of them mentioned that the current use of Social Media has mostly met their initially set expectations. From the interviewees only two mentioned that their current use of Social Media has not met their first expectations the other four indicated that SM did meet their first expectations. The two satisfied participants, Konul and Ferid comment:

*After short time than we started our Social Media use and spending some money on advertisement on Facebook, we felt the increase in number of customers and sales (Konul)*

*We are receiving a lot of new customers from the Social Media channels (Ferid)*

The research of Stelzner (2013) has found that 83% of marketers participated in the research mentioned that Social Media was important to their business and it has met their expectations, while 17% of them indicated opposite. On the contrary Leitch (2011, as cited in Jonscher, 2011) study among business owners has shown different results where about 60% businesses participated in this study indicated that Social Media have not met their initial expectations and goals or slightly met their expectations.

#### **5.5.1.3 Time, financial resources and knowledge needed**

All participants of this interview have agreed that it is free and it requires not so much time and knowledge to create your Social Media sites. But on the contrary maintenance of

Social Media sites was perceived by everyone quite difficult and especially time consuming.

*Only basic knowledge and short time needed to set up a Social Media site but when it comes to maintain, time is required. It is needed to update your page everyday, for example to put information about new tour packages, to inform users if there is promotion by some airline companies. About the financial site every month we are paying to Facebook ads in order to advertise our company (Aydin).*

Furthermore, almost all the respondents mentioned that initially it seemed for them easy to maintain their Social Media presence and they underestimated the time and knowledge required to manage their Social Media presence.

*I wouldn't expect that it could take so much time to be on Social Media. I thought that you just create a Social Media profile and starting posting news, but to be in contact with costumers and to answer their inquiries takes a lot of time of ours (Sevil).*

Another research by Rockbridge Associates (2010) among 204 businesses has shown the similar results in this context. According 43% of the business owners participated in the study underestimated the time required to manage their Social Media use. Before starting to be on Social Media or in the beginning of using that usually it seems easy and not time consuming. However to use effectively Social Media as a marketing tool requires some time, which is not so less and a high level knowledge as it is a new phenomenon and it has a lot of new features and characteristics which traditional media does not have.

#### **5.5.1.4 Benefits and risks of Social Media**

##### **Benefits**

As a marketing Tool Social Media's potential benefits are perceived by interviewees differently, from “*promoting company*” (Aydin) to “*communicating with clients*” (Ferid).

*It is a good way to promote company, increase the sales and attract more clients (Alyona).*

*To gain the popularity, as a lot of people are now using Social Media and people get information mainly from these channels, to communicate with people, to get their feedback (Sevil).*

The most frequently mentioned potential benefit was to advertise our products and to *reach new target markets* (Leyla).

Interestingly the respondents have not mentioned the potential of Social Media sites to drive traffic to their website, which is indicated as one of the most important benefits of doing SMM (Stelzner, 2013, Neti, 2011). Overall, the main benefits of using Social Media differs significantly between some studies found on this area, from cost effective marketing (Neti, 2011), to attracting new customers, to increasing traffic (Arca, 2012). Additionally, in 2013, Stelzner made a research among more than 3000 marketers to analyze “How Marketers are using Social Media to grow their businesses” and one of the questions he analyzed was “What are the benefits of Social Media marketing for your business”. The results of this research are shown in Figure 16.

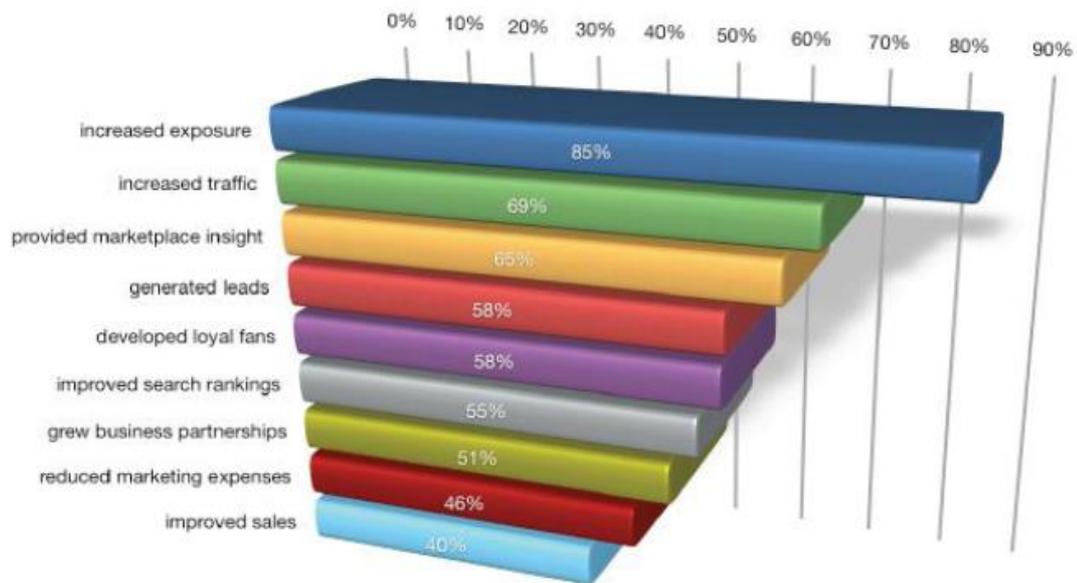


Figure 16- Benefits of Social Media Marketing for businesses

Source: Stelzner (2013: 15)

According to this research and as it is seen from the figure the most mentioned benefit of Social Media marketing is that their Social Media efforts have generated exposure for their businesses and increased the web traffic.

### **Risks**

Mostly respondents do not see any negative aspects and risks of Social Media for business. Mostly they just answered no; there are no any risks with Social Media. But only one respondent mentioned the potential of Social Media to create a negative WOM for a business.

*If you do something wrong in Facebook, or if you do not respond to questions or complaint the users can quickly share a bad posts with their friends which will result on bad publicity for you (Aydin)*

However as Greven and Sibring (2013) states there are as many risks as benefits for businesses. They indicated negative WOM, legal aspects, aggressive advertising, inaccurate content as main negative aspects and potential risks of doing Social Media from the business context.

#### **5.5.1.5 Influence of Social Media on decision making process**

Mostly respondents agree that Social Media have some influence on decision making of customers but not in a high level.

*I do not think it affects customer decisions appreciably since most already have a clear picture of where to go and how (charter versus booking hotels, flights, etc. separately) (Aydin)*

*I do not think that Social Media itself has such a large influence on the decision making process of buying a trip from us or not. Maybe we can attract new consumers who are discovering us on the road but it finally is product and price that guide their final decision (Alyona).*

There is several studies show that in the last years Social Media has a great impact on consumer's decisions, especially in the tourism industry. For example according to study made by Constantinides and Fountain (2008) 62% of American consumers are reading the opinions and evaluations of other consumers in online forums. From these consumers 98 % of them specify that they see these reviews reliable and 80 of them mentioned that these reviews changed their intention to buy this product. Qualman (2010) states that million dollar TV ads is no longer the primary factor that influence purchase intention and the factor that replaced this factor are users that talk about products and services on Social Media channels

#### **5.5.1.6 Main barriers**

From the interviews, the identified barriers and problems with regard to Social Media use were: lack of time, difficulty to measure and lack of knowledge. These three barriers are going to be elaborated in following paragraphs.

- **Lack of time.** The most important perceived issue for travel agencies is the lack of time, and this generally was mentioned by every participant through the interviews. As it was mentioned in the previous sections it is considered that to maintain the Social Media

activities is time consuming, especially considering that Social Media is mainly managed by the managers and owners by themselves in Baku, Azerbaijan.

- **Difficulty to Measure.** The second most frequently given answer regarding the obstacles of utilization was the difficulty to measure. In order to know the actual benefits gained from Social Media, you need to know how and what to measure, otherwise you will not be able to connect your Social Media efforts to its effect. But the data obtained from the interviews revealed that Social Media is difficult to measure at this phase for respondents.

*The benefits of Social Media should be measured, but the difficulty is that how it should be measured (Aydin).*

*It is difficult to measure the success of your Social Media activities, and even maybe not possible. We do not know what we really want and what should be measured (Sevil).*

The results of other studies and data from secondary sources also shows the same result that for companies it is very difficult to measure the Social Media benefits. For example according to Weiberg (2009) there are still problems in what to measure, how to measure and what the measurements mean in Social Media.

- **Lack of knowledge about Social Media.** Another most frequently given answer regarding the obstacles of utilization was the lack of knowledge. The main factor for the lack of knowledge was the novelty of Social Media and insufficient understanding of the concept Social Media. The participants have just a basic knowledge of Social Media. As Leyla mentions:

*To tell you the truth, I do not have a lot of knowledge about Social Media, I just know how to post new things in Facebook but I am not aware of other functionalities of it, as it offers more (Konul).*

In most cases when they were asked about their knowledge about Social Media, they considered their knowledge somehow sufficient. But when they were asked some

functionality of Social Media, it revealed that the knowledge is not sufficient. It appears from the interviews that almost all the participants do not understand the basic functions of social networking, microblogging or blogging sites.

When analyzed the other studies we can see that the results differ from this study. So that the most mentioned barriers for tourism businesses were as following; absence of adequate infrastructure; unsuccessful past experiences; internal politics; Internet security issues; absence of strategic management for IT and the threat of the Internet to the business (Au, 2010).

## **5.5.2 Utilization**

### **5.5.2.1 An Overview of the Participants' Social Media Marketing Performance**

According to the analysis made during the time of selecting participants, only nine Travel Agencies in the whole Baku area found to be on two or more Social Media types, that is why the uptake of Social Media by TAs could be considered low. While many TAs were found on Facebook and Twitter, very few appear to use blogging and multimedia content communities (YouTube, Instagram). Table 5 includes an overview of different Social Media utilized by travel agencies, the year when they created their channels in Social Media, Social Media management, which are further elaborated in the next sections.

Table 5- Overview of participants' Social Media usage

<b>Participant</b>	<b>S.M. channel</b>	<b>Since</b>	<b>Social Media management</b>	<b>Most effective SM tool</b>	<b>Potential use</b>
Leyla	Facebook, twitter, Youtube	2011	Social Media specialist	Facebook	Instagram
Aydin	Facebook, twitter	2011	Owner	Facebook	Youtube
Konul	Facebook, Twitter, instagram, blog	2009'	Owner/CEO	Facebook	None
Ferid	Facebook, twitter, blog	2008	Manager	Facebook	YouTube
Alyona	Facebook, twitter, blog	2010	Manager	Facebook	Instagram
Sevil	Facebook, twitter	2010	Marketing department	Facebook	Nothing else

As seen from the table, Social Media sites are mostly managed by owners and managers by themselves. As they do not have a lot of budget for marketing and they have less number of employees they mentioned that we prefer to do that by ourselves. One of the respondents recruited a Social Media specialist for them to manage their presence.

The greatest presence in Social Media by travel agencies has been found to be on Facebook. Facebook obviously is the most used Social Media tool by travel agencies and all of the participants consider Facebook as the most effective and powerful channel in terms of marketing. The research done by Lenoir (2012) has shown the same results. So that he surveyed Social Media usage among tour operators in United States of America and the result was that SNNs, especially Facebook, are the most popular Social Media channel and also they are considered the most effective ones. Half of the Tour operators indicated that their bookings increased because of their presence on this large social networking site.

Although all interviewees had set up a Twitter account only two of them were or have been microblogging. Secondly only two of the agencies are using blogging by sharing some posts about agency and news. Lastly only one agency has attempted to make use of the Instagram which is a picture- sharing channel by sharing a couple of short pictures. Overall

apart from Facebook and Twitter the most preferred Social Media by Baku's TA's seems to be Blogging sites.

### **5.5.2.2 Time commitment**

According to the results four of the respondents spend an average of 1-5 hours a week on Social Media and two of them spend from 5 to 10 hours. The study by Stelzner (2013) indicated almost the same results. According to this study from the researched businesses, 38% of them spend 1-5 hours a week and 26% spend 6-10 hours a week. Stelzner (2013) also states that time commitment for Social Media varies among different businesses sizes. Larger companies invest more time on Social Media than smaller companies. For example companies with more than 100 employees spend more than 40 hours per week on Social Media.

### **5.5.2.3 Responsiveness to Feedback**

Dealing with negative comments is one of the greatest concerns for the companies which intend to use Social Media. According to the responses received from participants almost all of them reply to comments especially to those which are negative.

*We never leave any negative comment without response. First we analyze the problem and after if there is something to change or to improve, we take the action and do that (Aydin)*

*If we get any negative feedback about our service or about channels in Social Media, sooner or later we response (Ferid)*

*Clients are always right, so we cannot argue with them, what we can do, try to understand what is wrong and solve the problem. For example, after one of our tours we have got some negative feedback and criticism from clients through the Social Media, that they were not satisfied with the transportation company. Then situation was analyzed by our staff and we decided stop working with that transportation company (Konul)*

According to The Retail Customer Report done by RightNow (2011: 3-4), 68% of customers that made a complaint or a negative review on Social Media channels about their negative experience, received response from the retailer. From those clients, 33 % of them changed their mind and posted a positive review after that and 34% of them deleted their negative review. Moreover 18% became loyal clients and purchased even more. This study proves that how important is to reply to negative feedback for keeping the clients and gaining a loyalty from clients. As Chan and Guillet (2011) states that it is very dangerous not to respond to customers through Social Media. As a result this can create negative WOM which can damage the businesses reputation and image.

#### **5.5.2.4 Target Market**

Based on the results, it can be mentioned that only one of interviewed respondents have identified a target people for their Social Media usage.

*As you know there are mainly young people who use Social Media in Azerbaijan, that is why we defined young people and students as our main target market that we want to reach through Social Media. In order to reach other segments of market we are using more traditional marketing channels (Alyona).*

The other respondents just applied the same target audience to Social Media as they had in general.

*The target audience that marketing is directed to Social Media, the same audience as we have generally, which is families with children. Facebook is so large that the channel is very wide through all classes of audiences. Users that follow our profile on Facebook are very active and is mainly women between 25 and 40 years (Sevil).*

Thackeray et al (2012) mentions that businesses are failing to determine the target audience for their Social Media activities and usually they use the same tactics and audience as they have it in traditional marketing. But considering the differences between Social Media and traditional media and differences between functionalities and user demographics, which will be discussed in the next sections, there is a need to have a Social Media specific target markets. Thackeray et al (2012) also describes that the first step in

the process of interacting marketing in Social Media is to define the target audience and find out how they use Social Media.

#### **5.5.2.5 Marketing strategy**

The results of these interviews revealed that majority of respondents do not seem to have a strategy for their Social Media activities. But this survey also shows that there is a growing interest from companies to develop business and marketing strategies via Social Media. As each company participating in the survey sees the many benefits of Social Media as a tool to reach and get closer to customers and promoting the products, they expressed that they are going to develop a kind of Social Media strategy in the near future.

*Firstly when I started to utilize Social Media and when I opened an account on Facebook, I just did it because it was free and I did not know that it could be so beneficial and useful especially for promotion. And now I am planning to extend our Social Media activities and develop a strategy and organize trainings for my employees (Aydin).*

According to Kitin (2011) one of the most usual mistakes that businesses make with Social Media Marketing is not developing a Social Media strategy. Because Social Media is the new phenomenon in marketing and therefore companies consider that all they need to do is create a Facebook page and a Twitter account. However, just like any other marketing medium, Social Media also requires a well-defined marketing strategy plan (Kitin, 2011: 8).

#### **5.5.2.6 Competitor analysis**

In general, all the participants stated that they are following their competitors Social Media accounts to be informed about new campaigns and try to get some new ideas. The mostly mentioned idea was “we are following our competitors if our competitors are having new promotions we are also trying to do that”

The other answers from participants were as following:

*Mainly we are checking the Facebook accounts of our competitors, if we like ideas made by them, we also try to adapt them in our business. We are also paying attitude of people towards to new campaign. Moreover we are reading the comments made by people in their accounts in order to benefit from that. (Aydin)*

*Yes we are checking every day Social Media of the other agencies which we are in competition, mainly to see if they some updates or new tour packages. (Konul)*

From the participants only *Sevil* said that they are disinterested and they do not care what the others doing. She explained it like:

*Actually I do not care so much about what the others are doing and we do not check.*

*Social Media is something new for businesses, especially in Azerbaijan, this is why everybody is trying to find the ways to use it effectively like we do.*

#### **5.5.2.7 Social Media monitoring and measuring**

None of the participants seems to care about the need to monitor the Social Media activities and measure return on investment (ROI). However it also seems that none of the participating agencies appear to have a clear understanding of how to do so. Either they do not know how to do that or they do not understand the importance and meaning of measuring Social Media activities.

Other studies in this area about measuring and monitoring SM activities have shown similar results. For instance according to the results of the research done by Stelzner (2013) from the 3000 marketers that participated in this survey only about one in four (26%) indicated that they are able to measure their social activities. Weinberg (2009) also states that it is difficult for businesses to measure the success of Social Media activities

while it is not obvious what to measure and how to measure and what are the benefits of measuring the Social Media activities.

## **5.6 Major Problems in Doing Social Media Marketing**

After analysing data both from Social Media and interviews some major problems have been identified regarding Social Media maintenance and performance of participants of this study. The major problem is the lack of knowledge about Social Media by participants. During the interviews researcher found that the respondents acquire a very basic knowledge which every user of Facebook could have which is a threat to competitiveness of the company in this digital era. Another important problem was found during the analysis of Facebook pages where it was obvious that there is a misunderstanding about Social Media by respondents, which is not used effectively and mainly it is seen as an another advertising channel. Moreover the following problems were found about Social Media usage after conducting observation:

- **Low level of activity-** As it was revealed from the Social Media analysis the frequency of updates by companies is considered quite low
- **Not linking Facebook to website and to other Social Media channels-** Case companies of this study do not use effectively Social Media to drive traffic to their website
- **Low level of interactivity-** The participants mostly do not encourage users to give a feedback
- **Language use-** Selected travel companies in this study merely use Azerbaijani and Russian language to make posts and share the information.
- **Not developing a strategy for Social Media usage-** As stated participants does not have a strategy for their Social Media use,

- **Not identifying Social Media specific target market-** The respondents just applied the same target audience to Social Media as they had in general for their traditional marketing.
- **Not measuring Social Media activities-** The participants of this study do not measure their Social Media activities or they do not know how to do so.

## 5.7 Summary

This chapter presented the main results and discussion. First the interviewee characteristics were presented. Secondly, characterization of companies participated in this research was provided. In the next section the results from Social Media analysis were presented. Following, the results from interviews were presented. Finally the problems regarding to Social Media usage and maintenance were provided which was directed to third research objective.

# **Chapter 6. Recommendations**

## **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter is concerned to the fourth objective and presents the recommendations for travel agencies to use Social Media more effectively. Based on the results of interviews and analysis on Social Media activities, especially based on the identified problems, several recommendations are presented. These recommendations are supported by the literature and adapted to the context of this study.

## **6.2 Understanding Social Media**

As a first and basic step of doing SMM, the TAs should understand what the true meaning of Social Media is and how this new type media should be used. Some travel agencies have a misunderstanding about Social Media and they are just using it as another traditional media channel for advertising. Hence, as emphasized by several authors from literature Social Media is not just for advertising. Socializing, responding, interacting, and building relationship with clients are also the essential components which distinguishes Social Media from other traditional media channels (Briscoe, 2009; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Scott, 2007; Tylee, 2009; Xiang and Gretzel, 2009, as cited in Chan and Guillet, 2011)

In general as it was mentioned in the previous chapter the respondents of this study have a very basic knowledge in terms of using Social Media as a marketing tool and about the beneficial features which Social Media offers for businesses. Currently there are some freely available books in literature such as books by Safko and Brake (2012: Social Media Bible), by Dave Evans (2008: Social Media Marketing: An hour a day) and by Evans and Mckee (2010: Social Media Marketing: The Next Generation of Business Engagement) where businesses can benefit and get very valuable knowledge about doing SMM.

### **6.3 Identify business goals and objectives**

The study has identified that there is a lack of strategic marketing among travel agencies in terms of defining measurable and clear goals and segmenting target markets. Before starting a Social Media marketing activity, it is crucial to identify what goals the company wants to achieve with the activity. As Evans (2008: 291) states regardless of where your directives for traditional media come from, your directives for Social Media must be tightly coupled with operations-based efforts and business objectives. Through Social Media Marketing the company can achieve various objectives goals increased traffic, increased brand awareness, improved search engine ranking, increased sales and established thought leadership (Ahlberg, 2010: 20, 21). Objectives should be the basis for the SMM strategy and decisions should be made according to them. Weinberg (2009) identifies that in SMM goals should be defined according to SMART principle being: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely which presented as following:

- Specific- The objectives should be specific in order to know exactly how (and if) the goals were achieved;
- Measurable- Goals should also be measurable therefore it is crucial to establish concrete criteria for measurement;
- Attainable- Goals should be set which is believed that they can be achieved;
- Realistic- The goals should be according to the resources that company possesses;
- Timely- Deadlines should be set for goals, when these goals are desired to be achieved.

### **6.4 Defining the target audience**

Target market is one of the critical factors that could affect the effectiveness of a marketing strategy. Therefore it is important for businesses to recognize the characteristics of SMM target market to ensure the effectiveness of their campaigns (Pradiptarini, 2011: 9). Segmenting the markets appropriately allows marketers to reach people who can light the

fuse of among others (Wright, 2010, as cited in, Fridolf and Arnautovic, 2011: 3). Haydon (2013) provides a model which helps to businesses and companies about how to define a target audience, which consists of: understanding the marketing funnel, defining the best customers, selecting demographic criteria for target audience and using personas to give target audience personality. This model is going to be presented and described in the following sections.

**1. Understanding the marketing funnel.** Marketing funnel is a useful model which helps to understand and define the target audience. The marketing funnel which is presented in Figure 17, shows the categories of customers, from being aware of the product to becoming loyal customer and recommending to others, and describes how those categories are related to each other.

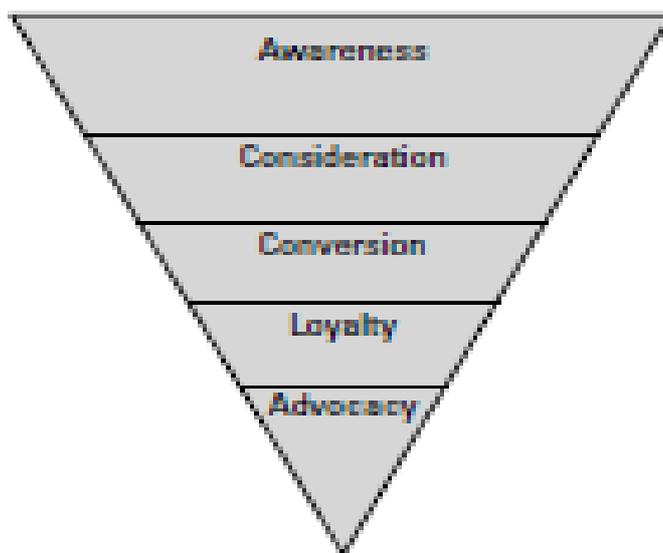


Figure 17- Diagram of the marketing funnel

Source: Haydon (2013: 20)

The purpose of the marketing funnel is to help marketers develop specific marketing strategies for potential customers, new customers, repeat customers and raving fans Haydon (2013: 20). In the marketing funnel, the marketplace is broken down into five behavior stages, or phases, as indicated in the Figure 16 as follows:

- Awareness- The people in this stage are aware of product or service, but have yet to consider purchasing it.
- Consideration- The people in this stage are considering product or service, but have yet to purchase it.
- Conversion- The people in this stage have already decided to purchase the product or service.
- Loyalty- The people in this stage have decided to purchase product or service repeatedly.
- Advocacy- The people in this stage actively recommend product or service to others.

Haydon (2013)

**2. Defining the best customers.** Analyzing the current customer base and defining the best customers is one of the first steps in defining a target audience strategy. There are customers who like product that company sells and who buy product and recommend it to others. From this perspective, companies can begin to define target audience as “the ideal person whom company wants to reach”.

**3. Selecting demographic criteria for target audience.** While creating a target audience there are several demographic factors that needs to be considered which presented as following:

- Age
- Gender
- Location
- Interests

This is important because different Social Media channels attract different level of people from different ages, different gender, location, income etc (Haydon, 2013).

**4. Using personas to give target audience personality.** After understanding the demographics of target audience, the next comes analyzing customers' behaviors. This helps to better understand what motivates customer to actually buy your product or service. By using personas it is possible to understand target audience's behaviors (Haydon, 2013: 24).

## **6.5 Develop a strategy**

After the identification of business goals and target market a strategy should be developed on how to reach these goals. As it was mentioned study has found that majority of participants have not identified a strategy for their Social Media use. However it is very important to have a planned marketing strategy if you want your marketing activities to be successful. Having a SMM strategy is important for all companies that have decided to engage with this kind of marketing tool and should start through analyzing your organization and the business environment. According to Safko & Brake (2009, as cited in Huotari and Nyberg, 2012) as a first step, organization should analyze its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in the context of Social Media by using the SWOT analysis. To understand how companies can build strategies within this area Safko and Brake's (2012) four different Social Media strategy pillars is going to be mentioned:

1. Communication (Social Media being all about engaging audience)
2. Collaboration (tools used to enhance the collaboration of employees)
3. Education (leveraging the expertise of the company through its employees but also through its customers)
4. Entertainment (Entertaining audience by finding those attributes of the product or aspects of the company that others might consider entertaining)

These four pillars provided by Safko and Brako (2012) mainly help to understand the structure of the Social Media and what could be the aims for Social Media strategy.

## 6.6 Choosing Social Media channels strategically

There are dozens of Social Media applications and every day new channels are emerging in the area. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) mention that it is advisable for the businesses not be present in all of them, especially since “being active” is one key requirement of success. Moreover Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) also state that before being present in any of Social Media channels, companies should spend some time to understand the platform and learn about the basic rules of this platform. Choosing the right medium for any given purpose depends on the goal and target group to be reached and the message to be communicated. On the one hand, each Social Media application usually attracts a certain group of people and firms should be active wherever their customers are present. On the other hand, there may be situations whereby certain features are necessary to ensure effective communication, and these features are only offered by one specific application (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010: 65). In order to identify right Social Media channels for the businesses Singh (2010) provided the following steps:

**1. Understand your customers.** The first step for choosing right Social Media channels is to start by understanding them better. Depending on their socio-technographics (which means how customers engage on the social platforms), they might be spending a lot of time on the major social platforms or very little. Forrester Social Technographics Tool which is free allows businesses to profile the customers’ social computing behavior, just selecting the age range, country, and gender of the people that wanted to be researched. The tool then returns an analysis of customers, dividing them up into creators, critics, collectors, joiners, spectators and inactives (Singh, 2010: 25, 26).

**2. Research the platforms.** Before starting to be present in any Social Media channel it is also important to spend some time and research this channel especially in terms of their functionalities and implications (Singh, 2010). Kietzmann et al. (2011) provides a honeycomb framework model where Social Media channels were compared and analyzed in terms of their main functionalities and implications according. This model consists of seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. Each of these blocks allows unpacking and exploring specific

aspect of Social Media user experience and its implications for firms. This model is divided to 2 clusters which are presented in Figure 18.

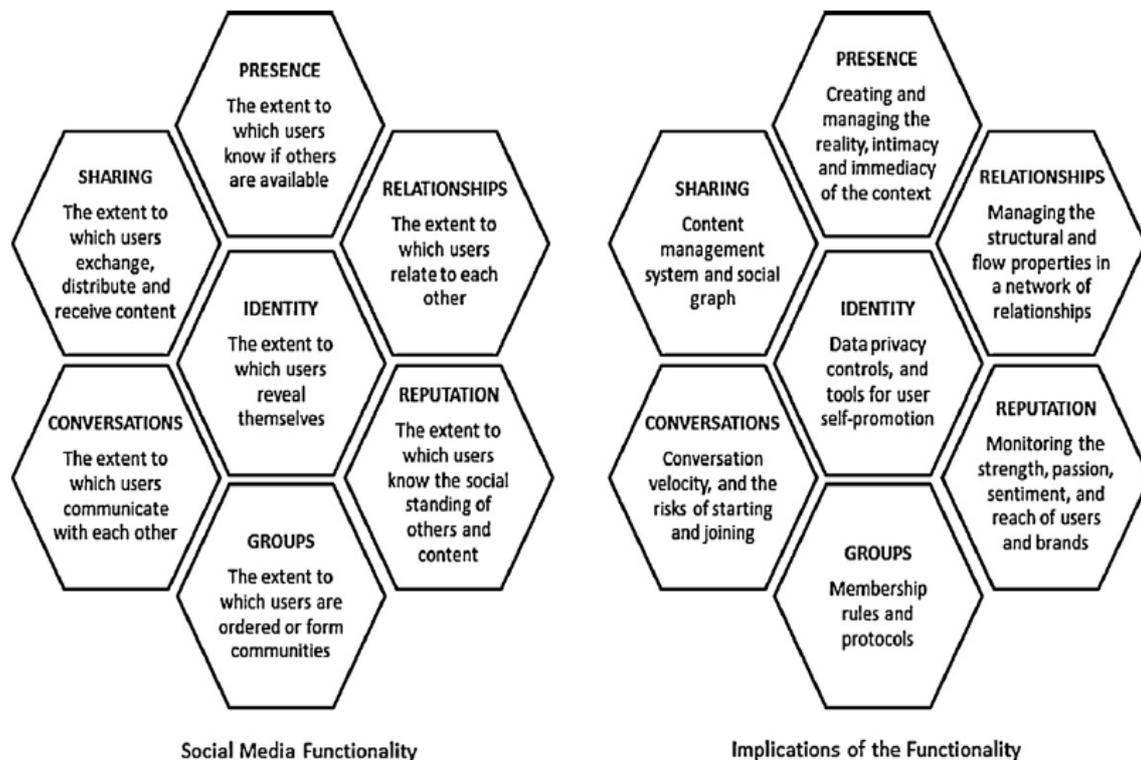


Figure 18- The honeycomb model of Social Media

Source: Kietzmann et al. (2011: 243)

The first cluster of this model analyzes Social Media functionalities and the second cluster demonstrates the different implications of each block to marketer. Kietzmann et al. (2011) also provided the individual functionalities for some of the Social Media channels (LinkedIn, Foursquare, YouTube, Facebook) which is illustrated in Figure 19. The darker the color of a block, the greater this Social Media functionality is within this site (Kietzmann et al., 2011: 249).

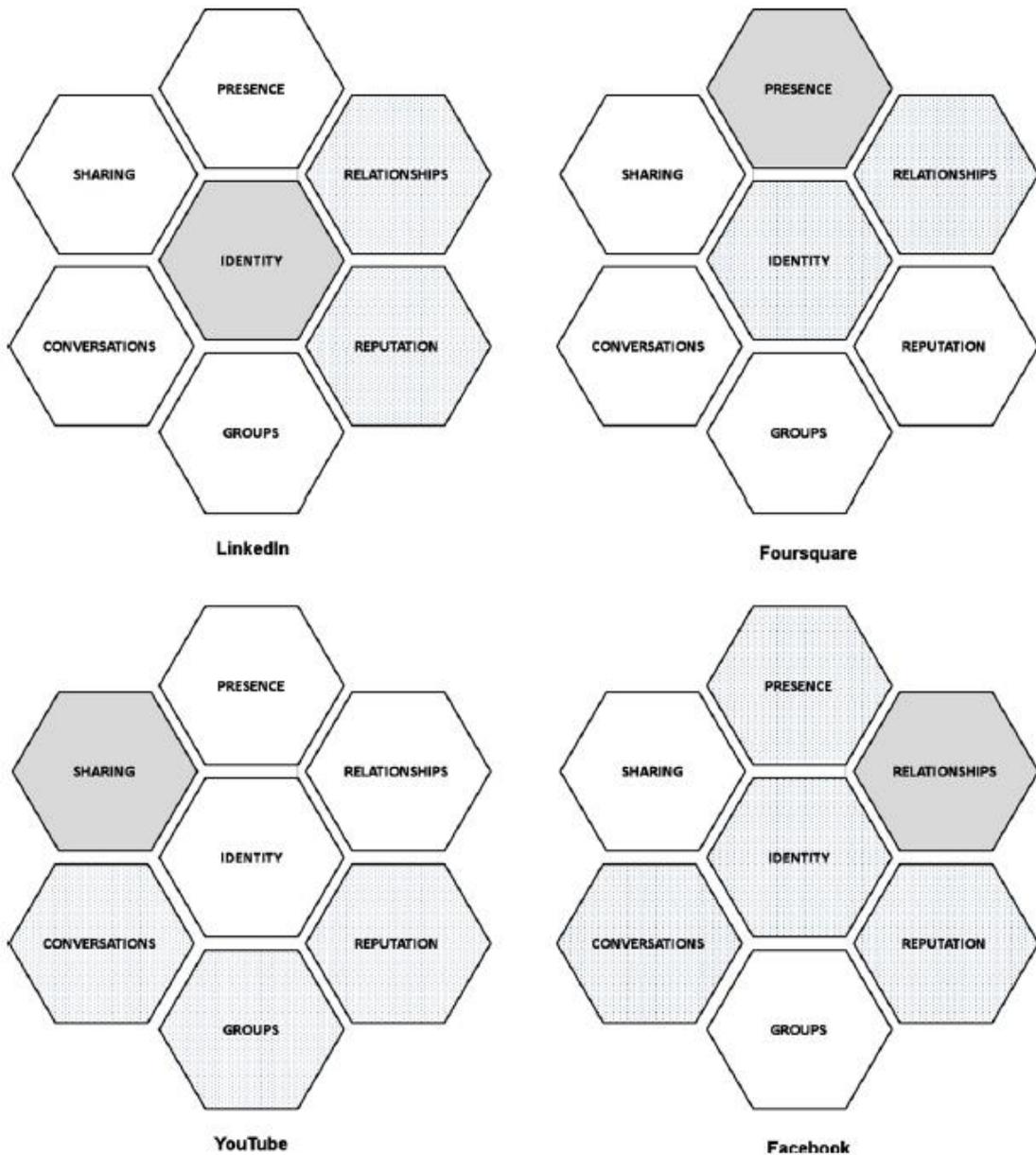


Figure 19- Contrasting the functionalities of different sites

Source: Kietzmann et al. (2011: 248)

As the figure shows all of these channels require different level of engagement and different management approach. Therefore it is increasingly important to use tools like the honeycomb framework in order to research, understand and develop Social Media platforms (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

**3. Evaluate and plan strategically.** As stated by Singh (2010: 31) planning is the most important step while choosing a right Social Media channel. Therefore companies should have some plan while trying to reach the best audiences for Social Media activities and engaging with them in an authentic, transparent, and meaningful fashion.

## **6.7 Update regularly with accurate and interesting content**

Creating, aggregating, and distributing information via Social Media channels is crucial in marketing and helps build trust between company and with its customers (Haydon, 2013). Ramsay (2010) states that one of the biggest mistakes that companies might make is to start using one of the Social Media channels and then be inactive and not update that regularly. In order to develop a relationship with customers, it is always advisable to take the lead and to be active. Social Media are all about sharing and interaction, so it is important to ensure that content is always fresh and that you engage in discussions with your customers (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

If information in your content is off-topic or inaccurate and if the company is not performing according to what they have stated in the marketing material, this may result with unrealized promise and can damage the reputation of the business (Chan and Guillet, 2011; Haydon, 2013). Inaccurate content here means the information posted on the Social Media sites being incorrect (Chan and Guillet, 2011). Therefore the businesses should be very careful when they update the content and put new posts to their sites.

## **6.8 Increase traffic for web site and link all Social Media channels**

As the results found out the case companies of this study do not benefit from the Social Media sites linking to their website. However one of the most critical benefits of Social Media is increasing traffic to website as it is the fastest and easiest means of redirecting traffic to company's website (Stelzner, 2012., Neti, 2011).

By simply placing their website URL in their profile, the company can have all their profile visitors check out their website and a percentage of traffic is sure to get converted in course of time (Neti, 2011: 10). As a result it can raise prices for advertising costs if marketers and content creators aim to monetize their own content (Weinberg, 2009: 25). Therefore all Social Media channels and activities should have a direct link to the website and vice versa. Furthermore, considering the importance of search engines in the travel planning process and the potential of Social Media to optimize the company's search engine rating, resulting in the increased traffic to the website (the foundation), it should be of top priority for businesses to ensure that the website design, navigation and performance are appropriate in order to convert Internet surfers into buyers (Hudson and Gilbert, 2006). It is also important to align all Social Media activities with each other. One goal of communication is the resolution of ambiguity and reduction of uncertainty and nothing is more confusing than contradicting messages across different channels (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010: 65).

## **6.9 Measuring effectiveness and monitoring SM activities**

One of the key issues for businesses which involved in Social Media is measurement of effectiveness. Measuring Social Media activities is important because it allows the businesses to follow up what actions are effective in their Social Media campaigns and what should be changed. This just proves that measuring the organization's marketing effectiveness is applicable to Social Media marketing as much as it is to traditional marketing (Evans and McKee, 2010, as cited in, Huotari and Nyberg: 34). There are a number of measurement metrics for the social web. These metrics should be selected based on the objectives and goals of the Social Media strategy, what is wanted to be achieved (Halligan and Shah 2010). It is advantageous to identify metrics to help define success, determine the suitable level of investment, and measure value to the business (Shih 2009).

As it was mentioned it is difficult to measure the success and benefits of Social Media activities. From the literature a lot of options have been provided to monitor Social Media activities which are presented in the Table 6. Table 6 shows an overview of wide range of monitoring tools.

Table 6- Social Media monitoring tools for businesses

<b>A tool that monitor social campaigns</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wildlife’s Social Media Monitor</li> </ul>
<b>A tool that monitors upcoming events</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plancast</li> </ul>
<b>Tools that monitor with alerts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Google Alerts</li> <li>• BackType Alerts</li> <li>• Yahoo Pipes</li> <li>• Northern Light Search</li> </ul>
<b>Tools that monitor comments &amp; Forums</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comment Sniper</li> <li>• coComment</li> <li>• Board Reader</li> <li>• Google Trends</li> </ul>
<b>Tools that Monitor Social Networks &amp; Blogs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SocialMention</li> <li>• Google Reader</li> <li>• BlogPulse</li> <li>• AllTop</li> <li>• Google Realtime Search</li> </ul>
<b>Tool that monitors web page changes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• WatchThatPage</li> </ul>
<b>Tools that monitor with social search</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addict-o-matic</li> <li>• Guzzle</li> <li>• Socail seek</li> <li>• BuzzFeed</li> </ul>
<b>Tools that monitor Twitter&amp; Facebook</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seismic</li> <li>• Twitter</li> <li>• Facebook Search</li> <li>• Twittersverse Web Apps</li> </ul>

Source: Mendelssohn et al. (2011)

According to Sterne (2010) measuring the success of SMM can be started with analyzing the audience it reaches. Reach here means the percentage of the population a company wants to obtain. That defines how many people have the possibility to see a company's brand in general and the campaign's message in particular. It can be defined by the number of links the story has garnered, the number of people sharing that, or the number of connections is accumulated since company listed their fan page on Facebook (Weinberg 2009, as cited in Ahlberg, 2010).

## **6.10 Practical tips**

This section provides practical recommendations for effective use of Social Media as a marketing tool. Firstly five characteristics of Social Media under heading of “being social” proposed by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) are presented. Second section includes Facebook oriented business etiquette recommendations.

### **6.10.1 Being Social**

To make the Social Media strategy work after its implementation there are certain characteristics a company should have to be able to get closer to their customers. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) five characteristics are important for companies to have if they want to be successful with Social Media.

- **Be active.** In order to develop a relationship with somebody, it is always recommended for companies to take the lead and be active. Social Media are all about sharing and interaction, so businesses have to update their content and keep it fresh and participate in discussions with their clients.
- **Be interesting.** Because nobody likes to communicate with boring people. If company wants their clients are engaged with them, they need to be interesting and give a reason to them to do so.

- **Be humble.** Before entering to any application, it is important to discover it and to learn about its history and basic rules. Therefore it is better to gain the necessary understanding before starting to participate in any Social Media channel.
- **Be unprofessional.** Firms should avoid overly-professional content offerings on Social Media, because users are people like you, who understand that things do not always go smoothly. And, if you are nice to them, they may even give you free advice on how to do it better the next time.
- **Be honest and respect the rules of the game.** Some Social Media channels may not allow companies to be involved so do not try to force your way in.

(Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010)

### 6.10.2 Facebook specific etiquettes

- Use language relevant to the channel and the target demographic
- Do not swamp users with too much information. Too many updates will impact the numbers of people you like your page. Sometimes updating too often can be as dangerous as no information at all
- Remember all wall posts are public – so do not write anything which is not for wider consumption
- Show appreciation. Positive comments made by users should be acknowledged: the interaction should be based around a conversation with consumers rather than talking at them
- Report spammers: this helps to maintain the health of the network
- Do ask questions on wall posts – but later follow up and respond to any answer and feedback received

- Don't Forget Birthday Greetings- Facebook always reminds about your users' birthdays. So it could be nice for them and they will like you more if you visit their profiles and leave a birthday greeting.

(Ramsay, 2010; Haydon, 2013)

# Chapter 7. Conclusions and Implications

## 7.1 Conclusions

Internet and especially, Social Media is continuously growing and becoming a part of our daily life. Nowadays companies from larger to smaller have found a value in using Social Media to market their business because Social Media offers a lot of benefits, from cost effective to increasing traffic to website (Arca, 2012). This growth of Social Media was particularly affected tourism and tourism businesses as being information intensive industry (Hays et al, 2013). This new media is also getting more and more popular in Azerbaijan among tourism businesses. However until now there was no research conducted which analyses Social Media usage among tourism businesses in Azerbaijan. Therefore considering this gap the aim of this research was to gain a deep understanding to Social Media phenomenon as a marketing tool in the tourism from business context and provide a set of recommendations for effective use. In order to achieve this aim the following objectives have been defined: to understand how Social Media are being approached in the literature as a marketing tool, in particular in the tourism industry, to investigate the perception of travel agencies regarding Social Media as a marketing tool, to analyze the current adoption and usage of Social Media by travel agencies, to find out the major problems of travel agencies regarding their Social Media performance and to determine effective ways of using Social Media by travel agencies. These objectives were achieved with the series of interviews with a selected six travel agencies in Baku through the month of April, May and November and analysis on Facebook pages made through the month of November. Data from interviews was analyzed using thematic analyze. Based on the analyzed data from the Social Media analysis and interviews and the study's key findings were identified as summarized below.

### **7.1.1 Conclusions from analysis of Social Media activities**

- Low number of likes
- Low level of activity both from respondents and customers are observed by participants
- Content containing mainly advertising is mostly used
- Uploading posts about the tour packages, tours, campaign and posting some pictures about touristic destinations, exclusively to the online community are the most frequent activities that take place on companies Facebook pages
- The posts made by companies are usually non-interactive
- Facebook is mostly not linked to website and other Social Media channels
- The language used is Azerbaijani and Russian while updating Facebook pages
- High level of responsiveness towards feedback

### **7.1.2 Conclusions from interview analysis**

#### **7.1.2.1 Perception about Social Media use**

With respect to the first objective “The perception of Social Media as a marketing tool by Travel agencies” the following findings have been revealed by interviewees.

#### **Purpose of Social Media use:**

- To promote the products
- To get closer and communicate with customers
- To disseminate the information

### **Time, financial resources and knowledge needed**

- All participants of this interview are agreed that it is free and it requires not so much time and knowledge to create your Social Media sites. But on the contrary maintenance of social networking, microblogging and blogging sites was perceived by everyone quite difficult and especially time consuming.

### **Benefits:**

The frequently mentioned potentials by participants were:

- To promote the business
- Communication with customers
- To reach new target markets

### **Potential risk**

- Negative WOM

### **Influence of Social Media on decision making process**

- Mostly respondents agree that Social Media have some influence on decision making of customers but not in a high level.

### **Perceived barriers:**

- Lack of time
- Difficulty to measure the benefits/activity
- Lack of knowledge about Social Media

### **7.1.2.2 Adoption and Utilization of Social Media**

In order to answer the second question “How are Social Media adopted and utilized by travel agencies” the following conclusions can be made:

- 1- 5 hour and more spend on Social Media by travel agencies
- Very low uptake and ineffective use of Social Media
- Facebook is mostly used Social Media among Baku's TAs and it is considered as most effective one
- The same target market applied for Social Media
- No marketing strategy has been clearly defined by TAs
- High responsiveness to feedback, especially to negative comments
- Respondents mostly check their competitors Social Media activities
- None or insufficient monitoring or measuring of Social Media success

### **7.1.3 Conclusions from recommendations for an effective Social Media usage**

The fourth objective was expected to give practical recommendations about 'How could Social Media be used more effectively by travel agencies?' Therefore according to the research results and findings several recommendations have been formulated as summarized below:

- Understand Social Media
- Identify business goals through Social Media
- Define target markets
- Develop a Social Media strategy
- Choose Social Media tools carefully (based on business goals, target market, characteristics of the different target markets)
- Update regularly with interesting content

- Increase traffic for web site and link all Social Media channels
- Measure Social Media activities and its success

## **7.2 Implications**

Social Media is a new trend which emerged in the last years and nowadays all companies in all sectors are trying to use and find some strategy for that new media. Considering that Social Media is continuously growing and getting more and more important for businesses as well as for consumers, not being on Social Media or not using this media effectively could present a potential threat for the competitiveness of the businesses. According to the present research findings, Social Media is underestimated by TAs in Baku and the maintenance and effective use of Social Media among Baku's TAs is in early stage and they are not performing on that media very effectively. In this context in order to assist travel agencies and help them Regional Destination Marketing Organization of Baku can organize workshops, seminars for the business owners in travel sector where they will be informed and trained about the importance of Social Media and how to use Social Media in a more effective way to market themselves..

## **7.3 Limitations**

The main limitations of this study could be presented as following:

- First limitation is the number of participants. The reduced number of participants was mainly due to the very low uptake of Social Media marketing among travel agencies in Baku, Azerbaijan.
- Secondly, due to the distance from Baku, all the communication was conducted using Internet based channels, as email and video conference. This had also some impact as a personal approach could be more effective regarding to travel agencies' captivation and thus increasing the number of available participants.

## **7.4 Recommendations for future research**

As this study sample is relatively small and based on a specific travel sector in Baku, Azerbaijan, it would be also interesting to analyze the other tourism sectors and compare the results with this research.

Furthermore, it would be interesting and useful to analyze Social Media marketing impact on different marketing objectives such as sales, branding or customer loyalty. Another significant research direction is to analyze why Travel Agencies are apparently not as interested as other tourism businesses regarding to the use of Social Media as a marketing tool.

Further research on Social Media should also take into consideration a detailed observation and analysis of Social Media channels. The time period of the analysis should also be enlarged. This kind of analysis should also be assisted by specialized analytics services, as for instance: [alexa.com](http://alexa.com); [compete.com](http://compete.com); [similarweb.com](http://similarweb.com); and [simplymeasure.com](http://simplymeasure.com).

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Snapshots of Facebook pages of travel agencies.

### 1.1 Snapshot of Atlas Travel Fan Page

The image is a screenshot of the Atlas Travel Facebook fan page. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the Facebook logo and search bar. The main header features a large banner for 'EKONOM ANTALYA TURU' with a price of 349 AZN. Below the banner, there are statistics for likes (67,138) and posts (360). The main content area shows a post from Atlas Travel about a 'SHAHDAĞ TURU' on 09.02.2014, including a photo of a bus and a video. The right sidebar shows a list of friends who liked the post and a review section with a star rating and a comment.

**Facebook** | İsmi, yer ve başqa geyen axtar | **Səhifə** | **Agalar** | **Səhifə** | **Yerək**

**Atlas Travel**  
★★★★☆ (27 dəyərləndirmə)  
67.138 bəyən - 4.828 kəs burunla bağlı danış

Tur Şirkəti - Turist Əylən  
Atlas Travel - Marc Thon a Travel Agency

Həzrətdə - Bir Duzalıq Ömər

Şəkillər | Bəyənlər | Tapşırıqlar | 360° Virtual Tur

**Yaradıcı** | **Şəkil / Video**

Write something on Atlas Travel's Page...

**Atlas Travel**  
13 Fevral · İki

**SHAHDAĞ TURU 09.02.2014 (320 şəkil)**  
09.02.2014 SHAHDAĞ TURU FOTOSƏSİZMƏ

**Bəyən** - Ray Ələbr - Paylaş

135 nəfər nəfər bunu bəyənlər. | **Uc Raylar**

**20 Dost**  
Atlas Travel səhifəsini bəyənlər

**Dostlarını Bu Səhifəni Bəyənməyə Çağır** | **Həmişə Gör**

Bir dostun adını yaz...

**Ramin Həkimov** | **Çağır**

**Kristi Unt** | **Çağır**

**Leyla Abdullayeva** | **Çağır**

**Reviews** | **Həmişə Gör**

★★★★☆  
What do you think of Atlas Travel?

**Tariyah Nəgizade**  
★★★★☆ **super**  
Bəyən **1** · **Köpin Səzar İbrazim** · İki

**Elio Soltanov**  
★★★★☆ **Cynoz**  
Bəyən **1** · **hardax bir həftə öncə** · İki

**Ünvan** | **Həmişə Gör**

**Atlas Travel**  
Yeni Səhifə | **Bəyən**

**CHINAR**

## 1.2 Snapshot of Pasha Travel Fan Page

facebook  Sebnik Agalar Bag SehiŒe

**Romantic Getaways**  
from  
**PASHA Travel**

**PASHA Travel, Azerbaijan**  
★★★★☆ (73 deyerlendirme)  
23,655 kəs beynir - 2,423 kəs bunurŒa bađı deŒer - 4 vort  
hazır

**Turkm Agadly**  
131, Neftchilar Ave, office@pashatravel.az Bakı, Azerbaijan  
T: (+994 12) 404 1090 / F: (+994 12) 404 1091  
Closed until 5 saat bŒek 09:00 - 18:00  
Hoşaydı - Bir Duzely Onir

**23.655**

**Yerleđdir**  
Write something on PASHA Travel, Azerbaijan's Page...

**PASHA Travel, Azerbaijan**  
21 saat Onca

Железні вази найбільше волшебних моментів в цих вихідних 😊

**СОБИРАЙТЕ МОМЕНТЫ, А НЕ ВЕЩИ**

BeŒen - Ray Eldir - Paylađ

55 neŒer neŒer bunu beynir.

BeŒen - Cavabla - 18 saat Onca

**7 DoŒt**  
PASHA Travel, Azerbaijan sehiŒisini beynir

**DoŒtlerini Bu SehiŒisini BeŒenmeye eđir** Hamam GŒr

Siz deŒerim adim yaz...

**SeŒen Mehramov** **eđir**

**ST SM** **eđir**

**Turkm Qeriahge** **eđir**

**Reviews** Hamama Bax

What do you think of PASHA Travel, Azerbaijan?

**Natavan Mamedova** **★★★★☆** **Почувствовала ощущение счастья...** **OK!**  
BeŒen - 3 saat Onca

**PASHA Travel, Azerbaijan sehiŒesinde Sađaqların Axırına Yazılan** Hamama Bax

**Xatirə Xəlilova**  
**Salam. Oktyabrın 10 dan 13-đək Portuqaliyaya bildi nasa...**  
12 saat Onca



## 1.4 Snapshot of Spektr Travel Fan Page

facebook  Beğeniler Beğeniler Beğeniler

**SPEKTR** **Spektr Travel**  
39.057 kişi beğenir - 201 kişi bununla bağlı derler

• Turlar/Gecir  
• Yn. Hırazmı 111., Bakı AZ1000 Bakı, Azərbaycan  
• + (994 12) 495-05-05, 495 77 74, \*4000 Garmaç, Bakı

Hakkında - Bir Duzely Öner

Şekiller Beğenmeler Videolar

Yüksekli İspandirmeler

Yerleşdir Şekil / Video  
Write something on Spektr Travel's Page...

**Spektr Travel**  
Düzenli

Лети, лети, моя стрела,  
От Сен-Шартъе до Шангри-Ла,  
Экспресом, первым классом, без билета,  
Лети в тоннелях под землей,  
Сквозь двери с надписью «Открой»,  
Сквозь двери, на которых «Входа нет».

Beğen - Rey Sâdr - Paylaş  
25 kişi bunu beğenir.  
Bir açıklama yaz...

Çayhan Mirzaimmedov Ona minnan hayata nasaleyib  
Beğen - Cavabla - Düzenli saat: 16:07-da

**5 Beğen**  
Spektr Travel sahifasını beğenir

Doğularını Bu Şehriñi Beğenmeye Çağır Hemen Gör  
Bir doğun adı yaz...

**Suaker Pinheiro**  H  
**Emil Quliyev**  H  
**Yusuf Sahinli**  H

Spektr Travel sahifesinde Beğenilerin Anonim Yazıları Hemen Gör

**Dilana Seidbayli**  
Поздравляю кузнецкую компанию тур в Баку на Н...  
23 Yanvar, saat: 12:25

**Leşgin Bendiyeva**  
Leningradu xudu.  
23 Oktabr 2013, saat: 01:17

**Nahid Cembazlihi**  
H NCP (/votonia.az/ahov-business/17510.html)  
23 Oktyabr 2013, saat: 03:27

**Nahid Cembazlihi**  
H NCP (/votonia.az/ahov-business/17510.html)  
23 Oktyabr 2013, saat: 03:28

Daha Çox Yerleşdirmeler



## 1.6 Snapshot of Mirvari Travel Fan Page

facebook

Antalya  
Yay 2014 erkən bronlaşdırılma  
25%-dan 40%-dək Endirimlər  
Qiymətlər və online bron  
bizim yeni saytımızda  
www.mirvaritravel.az  
Tel.: (012) 492-09-44/45, (055) 287-88-08

**MIRVARI TRAVEL**  
55.125 kəs bəyəni - 524 kəs bununla bağlı danışdı

Şirkət  
Mirvari Travel, İstiqlaliyyət küç. 23, Bakı, Azərbaycan, Tel.: (+99412) 492-09-44  
Mobi.: (+99495) 287-88-08

Həqiqətdə - Bir Düzgün Öner

58.195

MIRVARI TRAVEL

Yazmaq  
Şəkil / Video

Write something on MIRVARI TRAVEL's Page...

MIRVARI TRAVEL  
51 dəqiqə öncə · ʘ

PALMET RESORT HOTEL SP, Antalya / Kemer, 20% endirim  
Qiymətlər və online bron (erkən bronlaşdırılma ilə) bizim saytımızda:  
[http://mirvaritravel.az/Mirvari/hotel/sz/ANT265/palmet\\_resort.aspx](http://mirvaritravel.az/Mirvari/hotel/sz/ANT265/palmet_resort.aspx)

Sevən · Ray Sədr · Paylaş

10 Dost  
MIRVARI TRAVEL səhifəsinə bəyəni

Dostlarınızı Bu Səhifəni Bəyənməyə Çəğir

Siz dostun adını yazın...

Çəğir

Səhə Mehbəbəyəkova Çəğir

Diogo Leite Çəğir

Əmil Quliyev Çəğir

MIRVARI TRAVEL səhifəsində Səğlələrin Axırına Yarolan Həmənə Səğ

Rəhədd İbədov  
Səğləmdə 5 ulduz otelə 7 gün 8 gəcə 2 böyük 2 uşağ...  
11 104 · 9 Pəvənd, saat 23:40

Bənimə Bənimə  
Səğləm. Əylə ayı uşaq iminə bilət və 7 nəççəydir! İmənə...  
10 5 · 7 Pəvənd, saat 19:27

Daha Çox Yazğıdımələr

Likə

## **Appendix 2. Categories for Social Media (Facebook) analysis**

1. How many likes (Facebook)?
2. What is level of activity by travel agencies and by users?
  - How many posts?
  - How many comments or replies?
  - How many comments, likes and shares per post?
2. What kind of content do posts include?
3. Does the post include other content?
  - Does it include a photo?
  - Does it include a video?
  - Does it include a link to a website?
6. How do travel agencies engage with customers through the posts?
  - Is the post interactive?
  - Are they requesting feedback from customers?
  - What language do they use while they engage with users?
  - Do they respond to feedback?
  - Do they respond to criticism?
  - Do they respond to questions?

Source: based on Hays, 2013; Salkhordeh, 2010

## **Appendix 3. Interview guide**

### **Interviewee characteristics**

What is your age?

What is your position in the business?

What is your background?

Do you use Social Media in your social/ personal life?

How frequently do you use Social Media in your social/ personal life?

### **Background of the company**

How long is this company in operation?

What is your target market?

How do you do the most of the sales? (E.g. direct sales, sales through Internet ec)

What kind of promotional channels do you intend to utilise the most in the near future? ( Social Media, web advertising, WOMM, magazines, radio others)

### **Perceptions about Social Media as a marketing tool**

What is your purpose of using Social Media?

Are you satisfied with your Social Media activities?

How do you perceive time, knowledge and financial resources needed to set up and maintain your Social Media presence?

How do you perceive the influence of Social Media on decision making of the consumer?

How do you perceive the benefits of Social Media marketing for travel agencies?

Do you think that there are negative aspects of using Social Media for businesses? If yes, what are they?

What were your main difficulties implementing your current use of Social Media as a marketing tool?

How would you estimate your knowledge about Social Media marketing?

### **Social Media usage**

When did you start using Social Media in your company?

Who is responsible for maintaining the Social Media in your company?

What type of Social Media channel(s) are you using?

Which of those channels do you engage in the most?

Which of those channels do you engage in least?

From Social Media channels you are using which appears to be most effective?

How much time per week do you dedicate to your Social Media channels?

How active are you in your Social Media Channels? (Frequency, interaction, etc)

Have you defined target group with your Social Media Marketing activities?

Do you reply to positive or negative comments?

How do you deal with negative comments or criticisms?

Do you check Social Media channels of your competitors in order to get some ideas or to see what comments or feedback have made by customers? If yes was the information useful?

Do you monitor the success of your Social Media performance? If yes, how?

## **Appendix 4. Participant information sheet**

### **Project Title**

A Study on the Utilization, Perception and Potential of Social Media as a marketing tool: the case of travel agencies in Azerbaijan

### **Purpose of the study**

The main aim of this study is to analyze the perception and usage of Social Media for marketing purposes by travel agencies and recommend set of guidelines for effective use of Social Media.

### **An Invitation**

I would like to invite you to participate in a study concerning the potential and current usage of Social Media as a marketing tool by Baku's travel agencies.

My name is Babak Aghalarov, and I am conducting this research as part of my academic Master's degree in Innovative Tourism Development, Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo, Portugal.

I would be very grateful for your consideration of this invitation.