

YOUTUBE'S ROLE IN DESTINATION IMAGE CREATION



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ABSTRACT

Contemporary promotion of tourist destinations represents a challenge and gives rise to many questions in a regard to numerous ways of communicating and transferring information. With concern to modern communication practices in society and due to fast-paced lifestyle, individuals are looking for information online and are making decisions based on available Internet data. Attracting tourists through traditional promotional techniques such as brochures, leaflets, printed guidebooks, fairs and festivals are insufficient with a respect to the rising number of online users. Promotion of tourism is based on destination image which is created through direct or mediated experience and projected on the minds of individuals. It is greatly dependent on available information mostly visual. YouTube is a popular video sharing site that counts over one billion users. It gives open access to a great number of videos and therefore could have an important role in promoting tourist destinations. The website was firstly used for non-commercial purposes but today it is very attractive for advertisers. The author examines phenomena of YouTube and its potential for destination image creation. The aim of this article is to give an insight on characteristics of promotional videos used for tourism and to explore how various national and local tourist boards can use them on YouTube. The author identifies the public relations profession's role in creation of promotional audio-visual material.

Keywords: YouTube, tourism, destination image, public relations, semiotics.

YOUTUBE AS A PROMOTIONAL TOOL

It is easy to recognize global trends concerning communication practices in modern societies. Every day there are more individuals, active users, who are communicating and obtaining information using information and communication technology. The notion can be supported with the Nielsen Global Survey of Trust in Advertising (www.nielsen.com, 2013), a study conducted on more than 29,000 consumers, which shows that people mostly rely on recommendations from people they know (84 %), but also on branded websites (69 %) and consumer opinions posted online (68 %). A significant number of people see the Internet as a trustworthy medium. A question remains - to what extent do users trust information published online considering that the most popular websites have already surpassed the number of viewers, listeners and readers that some of the respectable newspapers, radio and television stations have. YouTube as a popu-

lar video-sharing site surely influenced and changed the way information can be distributed. The growth and popularity of this website can be recognized through the number of unique users and hours of videos that are being watched every day. By the official YouTube statistics (www.youtube.com, 2015), more than 1 billion unique users visit YouTube each month, over 6 billion hours of video are watched each month on YouTube and 100 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute. These numbers also indicate that YouTube has a great potential of reaching many people and therefore it is attractive for advertisers, various media, politicians and other interest groups. "The audience traffic to the major news and politics publishers on YouTube is, indeed, evolving, as media corporations adapt to the new environment by airing more raw and sensational videos with little political content, thereby building their audiences" (May, 2010, p. 501).

The website has made a shift in a regard to its original idea of distributing user-generated content characterized by various "amateur" audio-visual material, and is now a site where organizations are also publishing their promotional material. This step towards commercialization was also the moment when YouTube launched paid subscriptions for some popular channels in 2013. For that reason, some of the audio-visual material, available on channels, can be watched only for a monthly or annual fee. Jin Kim (2012, p. 58) notices that although YouTube creators resisted the idea of commercialization, as YouTube matured, the pressure to provide stable revenue led to diverse e-commerce practices, including banner advertisements, and the selling of key words and web space. Another example is given by world celebrities who got famous by publishing their videos on YouTube and some of them are still earning several million dollars a year in ad revenue thanks to their YouTube channels and videos. Joanne Morreale (2014) points out that YouTube is constantly professionalizing user content through conferences that provide tips on how to be a YouTube Star, and also a Partnership program. This reshaped commercial role of YouTube is somehow defined on the YouTube site: "YouTube allows billions of people to discover, watch and share originally-created videos. YouTube provides a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe and acts as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small" (www.youtube.com, 2015). Even traditional media have turned to publishing news on the site. "Media convergence comes about because people use YouTube as a stepping-stone to mainstream media, and mainstream media use YouTube to promote their programs, especially in 'webisode' format, a 3-5-minute episodes of TV shows for web showing only." (Kim, 2012, pp. 54-55). Considering that users are overwhelmed by information, it is not easy to draw their attention so they often abandon videos that are too long. The research conducted by video hosting provider Wistia indicated that 30-second online videos get watched on average about 80% and on the other hand, videos with duration from 3 to 4 minutes, are watched less, about 60% (Raines, 2013). That is why official movie trailers, often uploaded to YouTube in many cases represent a "first touch" with the movie, don't last more than two minutes. A similar path should be followed by tourist promotion videos. From a technical point of view, visual content on YouTube is now even more attractive because the

quality of video stream can be adjusted. At first video materials were watched in standard definition - 240 or 360 pixels, today they are available in high definition - 720 or 1080 pixels.

TOURISM PROMOTION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS ON YOUTUBE

National tourist boards as supreme country organizations for tourism have an important role in enhancing destination reputation and building destination image among travellers. Their responsibility is promotion of a country's tourism and identity, so state bodies are often engaged in functioning of these organizations. Promotional activities are applied not only on a national level, but also cities, towns and regions have their own local tourist boards. Some of these countries and their economies are highly dependent on tourism. Most of them have recognized the opportunity to promote tourist destinations without any cost for publishing material and reaching a great number of users, and potential visitors. They are frequently uploading audio-video materials on their YouTube channels. The question is do they make the most of it in the promotion of their county. For example, in its channel of the Turespaña – the Spanish national tourist board is popular among users, with 8,236 subscribers and 3,150,683 views (www.youtube.com/spain, January, 2015). They opened their YouTube channel on 7 December 2005 and since then have uploaded 341 audio-visual materials. The Croatian CNTB - National Tourist Board has also joined YouTube on 22 November 2005 and their 97 videos have 5,151,969 views (www.youtube.com/user/croatia/about, January 2015). The Swedish National Tourist Board joined YouTube on 9 November 2005 and with a slogan "Let Sweden inspire you through videos – both ours and those from other YouTube users" gathered 9,055 subscribers (www.youtube.com/user/Sweden/about, January, 2015). The Greek National Tourism Organisation started to publish videos on YouTube on 9 March 2010, meanwhile they succeeded in getting 5,450,182 views with 472 videos (www.youtube.com/user/visitgreecegr/about, January 2015). ENIT –the Italian National Tourist Board joined YouTube on 25 October 2011 and already published 523 videos (www.youtube.com/user/JoinItaly/about, January, 2015). They are promoting Italy with a slogan: „Promoting the unified image of the Italian tourist offer“ (www.enit.it/en/, January, 2015).

Clearly, not all tourist boards are making the same efforts in maintaining and developing their YouTube channel nor are the effects (for example, number of subscribers and viewers) the same. Nevertheless, it is obvious that millions of views have certain impact on creating destination images and on promotion of tourism. Success in destination online promotion implies reconfiguring the roles of certain professions, primary marketing and public relations. The term *marketing communications* is often associated with activities that are used for tourism promotion. By the American Marketing Association Board of Directors marketing "is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large." (AMA, 2013). For most organizations exchanging offerings is

focused on getting a Return on Marketing Investment (ROMI) or Return on Investment (ROI) expressed in financial value. It is the same with tourism. To be more precise, tourism is defined in the Encyclopedia of Tourism “as the study of man (the tourist) away from his usual habitat, of the touristic apparatus and networks responding to his various needs, and of the ordinary (where the tourist is coming from) and nonordinary (where the tourist goes to) world and their dialectic relationships” (Jafari, 2000). It is also described as “the business activity connected with providing accommodation, services and entertainment for people who are visiting a place for pleasure” (www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/tourism, 2014). Therefore, we can see tourism as being business oriented on tourists, their needs and accordingly exchanging money for pleasure and satisfaction. The important roles in attracting tourists have marketing and public relations activities. Functional decomposition and explanation is given through “marketing mix” (Borden, 1964) which consists of 4Ps – product, price, promotion and place. These 4Ps represent tools that can influence on sales of a certain service or product. Some of the contemporary authors modernized this concept by adding new Ps. For example, Brian Solis (2012) uses the concept of marketing mix with 5Ps, where the 5th P represents people. The idea is that it is necessary to better understand people’s needs and expectations inside of marketing mix therefore the 5th P is placed in the centre of everything, overlapping with 4Ps. Public relations (PR) are a part of *promotion* tool which is oriented on a message that stimulates “awareness, interest and purchase” (Willis, 2009, p. 411). Except PR, promotion can include techniques used in direct marketing, advertising, sales promotion and management.

Public relations is by different authors defined as a profession whose job is to manage communication between organization and the public (Edwards, 2009; Broom, 2010). Considering that PR is oriented on communication thus focused on building relationships, we can say that addressing the public at large implies communication through a medium. Media relations actually represent the most visible part of public relations activities and for that purpose PR uses different techniques such as press releases, press conferences, advertorials and different audio-visual material. Lynne Dore and Geoffrey I. Crouch (2003, p. 138) see publicity as a group of tools by which public relations goals are carried out. Image is accordingly manifested, from one part, through the efforts of public relations - attempts to influence public opinions, attitudes and behaviour. It represents a “public view of something or someone” (Danesi, 2009, p. 154). We can say that it is appearing in the minds of individuals. From that perspective, it has important role in the process of selecting a destination. Destination choice is dependent on destination image which refers to attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, ideas about geographic areas in the world but also represents a mental picture that is promoted among different groups of the public (Jafari, 2000). Considering previous arguments, one could say that public relations has a central role in promoting tourism through YouTube, as a way of communicating with users through audio-visual material and maintaining, organizing YouTube channels.

IMPORTANCE OF SEMIOTICS FOR IMAGE CREATION

Semiotics, as the science of signs and symbols, is applied in different fields of human interest. It is developed in literacy, anthropology, design, music and many more. The foundations of semiotics were *inter alia* set by Ferdinand de Saussure (1983), Charles Sanders Peirce (1991), Charles W. Morris (1938) and Roland Barthes (1977). Paul Cobley explains, referring to the work of Umberto Eco, that semiotics, “rather than a discipline or a theory, is an interdisciplinary field and ongoing process of cognition based on the active intervention of our experience and encyclopedic competence (our overall culture)” (2005, p. 186). In addition to term semiotics, it is possible to hear the expression *semiology* that relates to the science of signs, although there is not much difference between those two. “The terms semiology and semiotics are both used to refer to this science, the only difference between them being that semiology is preferred by Europeans, out of deference to Saussure’s coinage of the term, and semiotics tends to be preferred by English speakers, out of deference to the American Peirce” (Hawkes, 2004, p. 101). In general, we can explain semiotics as it was described by P. Colbey (2005, p. 259) as the name given to the action of signs, it is used for producing signs about signs.

Semiotics in the light of tourism is observed through creation of identity and creation of image. Tourists relate to destinations by framing certain symbols, mostly those ones which are already exposed in the media. The most famous buildings, arts and natural beauties are often used feature in promotional videos of different countries. For example, the motive to visit Paris could be the Eiffel Tower or the Mona Lisa. Video produced for tourism promotion is known as *film tourism* or film induced tourism which is by Simon Hudson and J. R. Brent Ritchie (2006, p. 387) defined as tourist visit to destinations or attractions which took part in movies, on television, video or cinema. One of the most successful examples of film tourism is the *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy which was filmed in New Zealand and shows this beautiful country’s landscapes. Media relations had a huge importance in associating scenes from the film with New Zealand. Just for the first film sequel The New Zealand Tourism Board estimated that exposure was worth over 41 million US dollars (Hudson, & Ritchie, 2006).

C. S. Peirce (1991; Jafari, 2000) defines three types of signs that could be adopted for understanding semiotics in tourism; 1. Iconic signs - for example photograph of a famous sight, material in guidebooks and brochures (but also in video) represent recognized sights that as iconic images motivate travellers to travel to specific destination, 2. Indexical signs - indicate the sharing of a destination with other people, the more crowded the destination, the more popular, 3. Symbolic signs - symbols based on agreement of society on proper meaning, as Statue of Liberty represents freedom. We can say that iconic signs are those ones that drive people to tourist locations by imitating or reflecting destination/attraction through media. As Catherine Palmer notices (1999, p. 316) that these symbols often refer to the physical environment such as the sea, country houses, castles and landscapes, as well as to the moral characteristics of virtue, faith, honour and courage.

According to discussion, Simon Anholt identifies the issues that are associated with promotional videos often produced by tourist boards:

“Most »nation branding« films I’ve seen are simply strings of library shots of the country’s most impressive buildings, beaches and landscapes, interspersed with shots of smiling families, aeroplanes taking off (look! we have airports!), chemists in white coats looking at blue fluids in glass beakers (look! we do science!), and trails of red tail-lights stretching along night-time freeways (look! we have cars!), set to pompous and triumphal music tracks with just a hint of something ethnic, in order to create the correct impression of respect for ancient traditions co-existing with a dynamic and thrusting modernity” (2010, p. 87).

This is one of the reasons why numerous films used in promotion of tourist destinations look similar and go unnoticed. What sometimes lacks in production of these films is an approach which communicates a destination in its true light with all the imperfections of everyday life that makes it charming, distinguishing and evokes emotions. Film is made of verbal and nonverbal signs, combinations of picture, music and film narrative, therefore Danijel Labaš and Maja Mihovilović (2011) think that, in comparison to other media, it creates a stronger image. All over the world tourists are in search of signs of Frenchness, typical Italian behavior, Oriental scenes, typical American thruways, traditional English pubs (Culler, 1990). These are the images mostly created through media. Tourists see these practices as cultural signs, not thinking about the pragmatic reasons why are native people acting like that. The elements being promoted in videos are in accordance with notion that “the tourism industry relies upon a form of nationalistic rhetoric as a way of conveying images and meanings about what it considers to be the nation’s communal heritage” (Palmer, 1999, p. 316).

TOURISM AS A PART OF NATION BRAND

Tourism and nation branding mutually influence each other. Positive images of tourist destinations can be in some parts transferred and reflected on the country’s whole image. That is why some countries are seen exclusively as countries for vacation. We can also say that positive image of a country based on economy, product, services and many more can have impact on tourism in the country. For example, Italy is well known because of “pizza” therefore, for some tourists, attraction and adventure represents eating pizza in Italy. S. Anholt’s (2000) Nation Brand Hexagon indicates that nation brand consists of: Exports (products and services), Governance, Culture and Heritage, People, Tourism, Investment and Immigration. As explained, tourism interrelates with other elements that make nation brand. S. Anholt (2010, p. 89) points out that tourism has a secondary impact which is less well recognized, and by which the overall brand image of a country can be enhanced. The interrelation between the elements that make country as a brand is without clear boundaries. Therefore the concept of nation

branding is widely understood. Melissa Aronczyk (2008, p. 42) emphasizes that nation branding allows national governments to better manage and control the image they project to the world, and to attract the “right” kinds of investment, tourism, trade, and talent, successfully competing with a growing pool of national contenders for a shrinking set of available resources. Surely, we can agree that public relations have an important role in planning communication strategies, but influencing public opinion is not limited only to advertising or public relations (Kaneva, 2011, p. 118). There are numerous elements that can affect a country’s image because it is dependent on views of individuals all over the world. “A nation’s image is defined by the people outside the country; their perceptions are influenced by stereotyping, media coverage as well as personal experience” (Fan, 2010, p. 5). With the strong influence of media on creating perception about a country or tourist destination, we can say that promotional videos have specific informational value, and can have influence in the decision making process. Božo Skoko (2010, p. 146) points out that promotional messages can tell people what the country looks like, who the people that live there are, what they are doing there, something about climate, food, culture and history of a country.

Messages on the Web containing information about distant countries and tourist destinations are approachable and in time. Tourists want to see a potential destination before they make a choice. As a famous adage says “a picture is worth a thousand words”. “If the campaign is exceptionally beautiful, funny, moving, thought provoking, controversial, weird or otherwise captivating to watch (and this is most likely to happen with TV or cinema advertising as it’s very difficult to captivate an indifferent consumer without sound and moving images), and screened sufficiently often, it may itself »become the product« and make people talk about it” (Anholt, 2010, p. 86). In comparison with television, online visual communication is empowered with the possibility to interact with users through reviews and comments thus making a closer connection with the user. Tourists are nowadays more demanding considering the competitiveness of tourism in different countries all over the world. It is not so easy to catch their attention and tourism organizations are in search for more profound ways of attracting travelers. Public relations efforts are important in that segment. Most national tourist boards, except those using traditional techniques, communicate with potential visitors through social media. Their role is undoubtedly central in promoting a country’s tourism and as is their responsibility. B. Skoko (2010, p. 146) emphasizes that communication through a tourist board is seen as justifiable presentation of the country to a global audience. Considering different ways of funding activities of national tourist boards such as tourist taxes, membership fees, allocations from the state budget, the organizations have to meet the expectations shown in the number of tourists that visited the country. “As long as the tourist board has enough marketing expertise, resources and patience, it can be fairly sure of increasing tourism arrivals” (Anholt, 2010, p. 89). One of the most important tasks for future promotional activities is to monitor quickly changing social practices and behaviour in “information society” that could lead communication with potential tourist to a whole new level. The national tourist board’s contemporary role in

enhancing tourism is dependent not only in communicating the image of a country and its tourism, but also creating relationship with the potential visitors based on this image.

DETERMINING CONTEMPORARY RELATIONS AND ROLES

Relations between tourists and tourism organizations has changed. Especially in a way communication between these two flows. It is not any more sufficient to use just brochures, printed guidebooks and leaflets, because information that a potential visitor is looking for has to be up to date and easy accessible. Considering their fast-pace lifestyle, individuals don't wait for information to come to them when selecting a destination. They are in growing numbers becoming proactive users in the search for information according to their needs. Currently, the Internet is the most widespread aggregator of various information that many people use. Apart from trust in information from people they know, individuals in large numbers trust official websites where they can find prices and specifications for services and products, but also they trust reviews, comments from other users in online interaction. Information about tourist destinations that is in general influencing destination choice is mostly dependent on visual communication. In comparison to the other ways of transferring messages, video creates a much stronger image because of the mixture of picture, sounds, verbal and nonverbal signs. Producing audio-visual material in tourism should include understanding of semiotics as the science about signs and symbols. It is not only important to comprehend how denotative meanings in visual communication are being transferred to tourists, but also how tourists accept and interpret connotative meanings implanted in videos. As the image is not created simply based on mediated experience but also direct experience and previous knowledge of the individual, the destination's visual presentation is used as a first impression in accepting it and making a choice to visit. Visual communication represents a powerful tool for creating destination image. National tourist boards as countries tourism organizations have recognized the importance of destination image creation through audio-visual material. Therefore, film tourism became a very important part of tourism promotion and nation branding in the past decade. On the other hand, communication through social media has influenced new approaches for transferring visual messages. YouTube as a popular video sharing site became a central stop for amateurs, actors, musicians, politicians and mainstream media who are willing to publish their own audio-visual material with a common goal to reach millions of users. Numerous national tourist organizations such as Spanish, Swedish, Croatian, Greek, Italian and many more have launched YouTube channels for promoting destinations considering that the website is more focused on advertising than ever before. Marketing communications, as an often used term in tourism promotion, is divided into several functions. The public relations profession being one of them has a central role in dealing with online visual communication. That implies production of audio-visual material with informational value, organizing

and maintaining YouTube channels of tourist boards to make destination image distinguishing in competitive global tourism market.

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