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Belenioti, Zoe Charis (Zoi Charis)

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The contribution of social media to small scale events: Boosting the city branding & tourism demand through Thessaloniki Food Festival

*Belenioti Z.C

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
Egnatia Str. 46, 541 24 Thessaloniki, Greece

E -mail: zoibelenioti@gmail.com / zbele@jour.auth.gr

Gkarane S.

University of Macedonia
Egnatia Str. 156, 546 36 Thessaloniki, Greece

Vassiliadis C.

University of Macedonia
Egnatia Str. 156, 546 36 Thessaloniki, Greece

Abstract

Social media is becoming the new communication tool of every organization thanks to its multidimensional benefits. However, despite its importance there is still little published data on the influence of social media on brand awareness. Precisely, apart from few recent studies, no previous study has investigated the impact of social media platforms on brand awareness within food festivals. Performing festivals is a worldwide tourism phenomenon, notably increased in numbers, diversity and popularity in recent years. Although food festivals offer a complete tourism experience, as being one of the most well-known festivals, raising in numbers around the world and attracting many visitors, so far very little is known regarding social media and food festivals.

The methodological approach taken in this study is a mixed methodology. This study follows a case-study design. The primary data of this exploratory qualitative study derive from in-depth interviews and the analysis of communication managers and decision makers of the Thessaloniki Food Festival, that has been held for a month in 2017 (18 November- 18 December 2017). The paper also presents valuable research insights and managerial implications.

Keywords: Social media marketing, food festivals, branding, tourism & destination branding, small scale events marketing

1. Introduction: Social media transform the branding notion & consumers' behavior

Recent developments in connectivity have remarked the overarching role of social media in our daily life. Social media "is constantly reflected upon in our daily routine and lies in two streams: the social and the business strand derived from their implementation" (Belenioti, et.al. 2015:176). Particularly, social media constitute "an ideal, cost effective, interactive and, above all, targeted communication tool for every organization thanks to its high consumer engagement offered through the E- WOM and web-interactivity" (Belenioti, 2015 :1). Social media is becoming the new communication tool of every organization (Coursaris, Osch, & Balogh, 2013). At the same time, social media has also upset the state of art within tourism system as they serve as a driver or indicator of purchase behavior (Buhalis & Inversini, 2014; Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013), and as an accelerator of brand awareness or engagement within cultural tourism experiences, such as museums or festivals (Hoksbergen & Insch, 2016; Hudson et al., 2015; Belenioti, Tsourvakas, & Vassiliadis, 2016). In the dawn of the social media era, brand awareness is becoming an increasingly important area for social media and marketing scholars. However, given the infancy of this research field, few studies have examined the impact of social media on brand awareness (Barreda et al., 2015; Jensen, Walsh, Cobbs, & Turner, 2015; Langaro, Rita, & de Fátima Salgueiro, 2015). All these studies confirm the positive correlation between social media communication and brand awareness. However, no single study investigates the impact of social media on brand awareness within the cultural non- profit organization aspect (NPO's). This study attempts to address this gap by investigating the effect of social media use on brand awareness of food festivals.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The diachronic value of festivals both to economy and society

Performing festivals is a worldwide tourism phenomenon (Prentice & Andersen, 2003), notably increased in numbers, diversity (Gursoy et al., 2004; Yoon et al., 2010) and popularity (Gursoy et al., 2004). However, it is impossible to quantify them on a global scale due to the fact that most countries provide no statistics on festival numbers and growth trends (Getz & Page, 2016). Festivals are planned events (McDowall, 2011), a distinctive type of special events and themed public celebrations of limited duration, providing a wide range of new experiences that differ from daily routine (Axelsen & Swan, 2009; Huang et al., 2010). Festivals, part of cultural tourism defined as cultural celebrations (Getz, 2008), have been one of the most frequently occurring events within tourism (Kim et al., 2014), one of the fastest growing sectors in the tourism industry (McDowall, 2011) and a significant tourist asset and product (Cudny et al., 2012). Communities organize festivals for a great deal of reasons given that the benefits of the latter are economic and socio-cultural (Yolal et al., 2016). Several researchers (Gursoy et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2012; Yoon et al., 2010) stress the economic impact of festivals, such as economy boost of the community and business opportunities. Festivals also may provide socio-cultural benefits not only to community residents but also to visitors (Yolal et al., 2016) by creating social incentives (Gursoy et al., 2004), offering social experiences (Axelsen & Swan, 2009), aiding the preservation of local culture and history (Huang et al., 2010; McDowall, 2011) and reinforcing social cohesiveness within communities (Yoon et al., 2010). Besides, they can be a form of tourism boosting sustainable development (McDowall, 2011; Yoon et al., 2010). In their study, Yolal et al. (2016) observe that although festivals may result in some negative impacts, the positive impacts are likely to outweigh the negative ones.

2.2. Branding & food festivals

According to Aaker (1992) brand awareness is an indicator of familiarity and commitment; it refers to the degree of name recognition based on perceptual repetitiveness (Yuan & Jang, 2008). As concerns festivals, because of their particularities, branding is considered more complicated and a rather new field in marketing, including several kind of core service, peripheral, physical and interactional attributes (Esu & Arrey, 2008). Dimance (2002) points out that not only small events, such as festivals, influence visitor's awareness towards a destination but they also may be the reason for a future visit. Besides, if potential visitors are exposed to certain events or festivals, their future behavioral purpose toward a lesser-known product will be enhanced, therefore, settling strong brand awareness among potential consumers implies higher purchase intention (Yuan & Jang, 2008). Researchers have recognized that festivals have been used as a method for destination branding (which is a common practice to promote the history, lifestyle and culture of a destination) and local food festivals may be suitable to the contribution of the branding of a particular location (Türkmenoğlu, 2017). However, there is little research emphasizing on food festivals for destination branding but rather on sport or large events (Lee & Arcodia, 2011). With the rising of the importance of food tourism, food has been a basic part of destination marketing strategies (Tsai & Wang, 2016). Williams et al. (2014) describe food as star attraction, replacing location with destination brand. Gastronomic experiences have "a positive effect on destination image and loyalty" and investment in a regional brand is essential when increasing tourist loyalty to local food events (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2016). Researchers confirm that the destination brand has a positive link to overall destination image and event loyalty, and food consumption in food events must be considered as the connection of all factors and elements that relate with loyalty. Food is becoming more and more important in the promotion of tourist destinations and may crucially contribute to their economy (Kim et al., 2010). Smith et al. (2010), note that the food, as a principal resource with strong pulling power, attracts visitors to "a destination specially for the unique food products offered". It represents notable opportunities for regional development since it is recognized as a significant part of the cultural tourism market (Lee & Arcodia, 2011). Food tourism, "an intentional, experiential trip to a gastronomic region for recreational or entertainment purposes" has been an emerging phenomenon which attracts millions of tourists (Folgado-Fernández et al., 2016), while travelling internationally, regionally or locally, and it is implemented via festivals, public displays, nutritional guidelines, etc. (Williams et al., 2014). A festival that simply includes food cannot be classified as food festival (Kim et al., 2014) since the latter is determined as such when it really gives emphasis to regional/local specialty food or to food-themed activities and programs, where communities involve in the public celebration and promotion of local food (Lee & Arcodia, 2011). This local community participation is vital since it enhances local pride and promotes authenticity (Jung et al., 2015). Food festivals are multi-functional, serving plenty of purposes (Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2013). They can contribute to the enhancement or change of an existing destination brand and the improvement of the image of local food (Lee & Arcodia, 2011), they can display new tastes and different traditions to tourists' holidays (Kim et al., 2010) and they can be an effective promotional strategy to regions by building customer loyalty, creating awareness of regional brands, encouraging repeat tourist visitation and promoting the attractiveness of a region (Axelsen

& Swan, 2009). Food festivals can also entail economic impact on many retail businesses, offer delightful entertainment and contribute to the tourism industry (Wong et al., 2014). There is little research regarding food events and festivals despite the fact that food festivals may offer a complete tourism experience, being one of the most well-known festivals (Kim et al., 2014), raising in numbers around the world and attracting many visitors (Axelsen & Swan, 2009; Blichfeldt & Halkier, 2013; Lee & Arcodia, 2011).

2.3. Harnessing social media in the festival sector to boost festivals' brand awareness

The concept of marketing communication tools along with Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) tools is central to brand equity of any service or product (Keller, 1993, 1999, 2001, 2009; Keller and Lehmann, 2003; Yoo et al., 2000). For instance, within festivals context, Odemir & Türkmenoğlu (2017) extol IMC as a key factor to build strong festival brands with lasting results. Evidently, the emergence of Web 2.0 era along with the social media platforms has upset the previous theory about the brand or corporate image (Barreda, et al. 2015; Belenioti, 2015; Belenioti, et al. 2015). However, given the embryonic stage of the research field, a limited number of authors have explored and appraised social media as a viable strategic and promotion tool either in tourism (Buhalis & Inversini, 2014; Leung, et al., 2013; Wu, Sun, & Tan, 2013) or in festivals' branding (Hays et al., 2013; Hoksbergen & Insch, 2016; Hudson & Hudson, 2013; Hudson et al., 2015; Williams, Inversini, Buhalis, & Ferdinand, 2015). First, Hudson & Hudson (2013) recognizing the beneficial impact of social media on destination marketing organizations (DMOs) by boosting awareness and engagement show that within music festival context, social media can "be leveraged by festivals and events to expand brand recognition, drive sales and profitability and engender loyalty" (:221). In addition, two years later, Hudson et al., (2015) found that social media enormously affect attendees' engagement in the music festival sector and they urge festival organizers to use their full potential to foster the customer brand interactions and brand bonding. Moreover, Williams et al., (2015) accentuate that social media via online word-of-mouth (eWOM) constitute an ideal tool to promote both festival and destination brands. Finally, Hoksbergen & Insch (2016) pointed out that five are the gratifications from using a music festival's SNS (Facebook) page, namely the: functional, social, emotional, interactive and aesthetic value. Precisely, their findings categorized the majority of attendees as passive viewers or information-seekers. Despite their significant contribution, all previous studies were limited not only to the impact of certain social media applications, such as Facebook (i.e. the investigation of social networking sites /Facebook, as applied in the studies of Barreda et al., 2015; Coursaris et al., 2013; Hassan Zadeh & Sharda, 2014; Langaro et al., 2015) but also in the context of for-profit areas (Hutter et al., 2013; Langaro et al., 2015). Likewise, when it comes to the impact of social media on festivals' branding, nevertheless these studies indicate the significant influence of social media both in festivals' brand awareness and in brand bonding between festivals and attendees, there is little published data on the influence of social media on brand awareness, and particularly within food festivals given the infancy of social media research in festivals (Hudson et al., 2015; Hudson & Hudson, 2013). Thus far, no single study exists which investigates the impact of social media on brand awareness within the non-profit sector and precisely in the context of cultural NPOs' brands, such as museums or festivals. Following the call of Barreda et al. (2015), this study attempts to address this gap by investigating the effect of social media use on brand awareness within food festivals.

3. Method

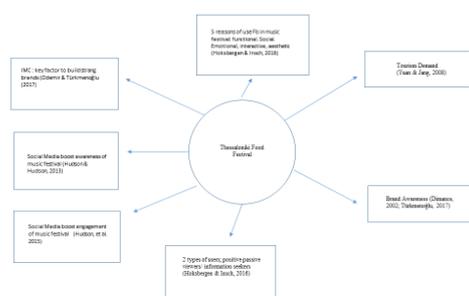
A systematic literature review was deployed by two scholars between January – April 2017 using the following search strands: "social media and brand awareness", "social media in festivals", "social media and food festivals", "social media and destination branding" (Zoe- Charis Belenioti) and "festivals as small scale events", "food festivals", "tourism demand and festivals", "brand awareness in festivals" (Sofia Gkarane). These publications were identified and gathered from renowned online database and search engines such as Science Direct (<http://www.sciencedirect.com>), EBSCOHost (<http://search.ebscohost.com>), and Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com>). Findings of this review were further assessed (Chris A. Vassiliadis). Hence, drawing on a review of 53 papers we formulated the following research questions: RQ1: Do social media affect the brand awareness of Thessaloniki Food Festival? RQ2: Do social media boost Thessaloniki's branding? RQ3: Do social media presence of Thessaloniki Food Festival contributes on increasing the tourism demand of the city? These questions were used to compile the interview guide, which was also the basic research tool for this qualitative research and the related analysis of the data collected by the respondents. Respondents were representatives of Municipality of Thessaloniki serving as coordinator and communication officers of Thessaloniki Food Festival. The interview lasted 45 minutes. Finally, a case-study approach was used to allow a deeper insight into this exploratory study. "Case research is specifically welcome in new situations where little is known about the phenomenon and in situations where current theories seem

inadequate (Eisenhardt, 1989).” (Hudson & Hudson, 2013:221). Thessaloniki Food Festival exemplifies the best case of food festival within Eastern Balkan European region. The Municipality, in cooperation with local organizations, organizes for 6 consecutive years the Thessaloniki Food Festival action with a view to updating the local gastronomy and establishing the city as a magnet for culinary tourism. Its main objectives are the determination of the culinary identity of Thessaloniki, the promotion of local goods through various activities where citizens take part (discussions, guided tours, lectures, events) and the promotion of the city as the top gastronomic destination for Greeks and foreigners for the tourism development. The target group are Greek and foreign tourists, citizens and businesses.

4. Findings, Conclusion and Implications

The present study was designed to explore the effect of social media on food festival’s brand awareness along with the effect of social media on tourism demand and city branding. With respect to the first research question, during desk research no association was found between social media and brand awareness within food festival. However, a strong relationship between social media use and music festival has been reported in the literature (Hoksbergen & Insch, 2016; Hudson, et al. 2015). Moreover, regarding the second research question, literature review showed a correlation between social media and city branding (Williams et al., 2015; Buhalis & Inversini, 2014). Similarly, these results confirm the link between social media and increase of tourism demand. Below we conceptualize the basic dimensions of social media use within food festivals (figure 1).

Figure 1



In the same vein, findings of qualitative survey confirm the contribution of social media, in line with prior studies in other festival sectors. Precisely, regarding the first question (R1), both interviewees appraised the importance of social media in terms of reach, engagement (Facebook) or attract new audience (Blogs). Moreover, informants reported that social media constitute a low -cost, efficient and direct tool to attract tourists and boost the city branding. Hence, they underscored that

social media has been dramatically boosting tourism demand (+42% visits comparing to last year) (RQ2, RQ3). Ultimately, these results confirming the association between social media and food festivals’ brand awareness, between social media and city branding and social media and tourism demand, are in agreement with those obtained by Hoksbergen & Insch, 2016; Hudson & Hudson, 2013; Hudson, et al. 2015; Williams, et al. 2015; Buhalis & Inversini, 2014; Leung et al., 2013.

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