
ANALYSIS OF ROMANIAN MILLENNIAL TOURISTS' MOTIVATIONS TOWARDS GAMIFICATION, AS A WAY TO DEVELOP ECOTOURISM

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Abstract

The tourism industry has always presented, for investors, tourists and the communities, a series of benefits, of both economic and social status, by the great potential of creating revenue and jobs. It is also experiencing a new, rapid rise, after the financial crisis, which makes it an appealing and nonetheless challenging domain for investors. During the last period new trends of tourism demand have emerged, with a special focus towards sustainable forms of tourism, including ecotourism, understood as the tourism form practiced in natural protected areas. At the same time the Millennials have gained a significant amount of importance on the map of tourism demand, as characteristics such as motivation towards practicing tourism in a more responsible way, innate curiosity and extensive use of technology have made young tourists real life promoters of tourism.

The use of technology in branding a destination, through gamification, although represents a quite recent trend, has a significant potential to become great selling points for ecotourism destinations. The fact that studies on this topics are still very few represents the starting point of the present research, which is aimed towards filling this gap.

The primary objective of the undergone research is to analyze the motivations of young tourists to use gamification and technology, with a view towards developing ecotourism, thus supporting the practice of responsible and sustainable tourism forms.

Keywords

Gamification, ecotourism, millennial tourists, technology in tourism

JEL Classification

O13, Q56, L8

Introduction

Dominguez et al. (2013) argued that the concept of gamification has gained ground in the recent period, amid a substantial increase in the importance of technology among members of modern society. This trend is especially visible among the young generation, also called the Millennials generation or the Y generation. One of the multitude of studies (WYSE, 2016) on the young included in this category highlights some of their defining features, significant for the tourism industry, among which:

- *Age*, aged between 15 and 30,

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- Their *free time*, which in many cases presents high levels,
- The *predilection for technology*, the use of devices, applications and gadgets is a must for them,
- *Traveling motivations*, as in many cases young tourists enroll on the path of sustainable tourism development, amid the drop in interest for mass tourism
- *The budget* they have is higher, given that the vast majority of young tourists are either in full ascension on the career ladder or have money from their parents; it is projected that over the 2020 horizon, young tourists will spend \$ 400 billion, double the level achieved in 2009.

With the development of technology and its level of involvement in many aspects of modern day life, gamification has also emerged (Gentes, Guyot-Mbodji & Demeure, 2010), viewed as a process of inclusion, in an already existing structure of the web page or application, of a game, the main purpose being to develop the feeling of the community, to educate, to create involvement, but also to increase the feel of long-term loyalty. In this way, through gamification, new levels of inter-relationship, communication, are either achieved or diversified and amplified, since it operates on a system of motivation, competition, success and gain.

The use of technology (Kim, Ritchie & McCormick, 2012) to educate, motivate and create new experiences proves to be particularly successful among young tourists, eager to relax and also to learn. Thus, using gamification in the development of sustainable tourism forms has many benefits, including for the evolution of ecotourism, broadly defined as the tourism practiced in the protected areas.

This article is aiming to analyze the motivations of young tourists to engage in gamification activities carried out in protected areas in Romania, with a view to developing ecotourism, a form of sustainable tourism. The literature review highlights the importance of applying gamification in the tourism practiced by young tourists and the quantitative research reveals basic aspects regarding the motivations of Millennial tourists in this direction as well as the advantages brought to the development of ecotourism in protected areas by using technology through games.

Literature review

The concept of gamification (Celtek, 2010) appears on the background of a growing popularity of technology and video games, of games played in the network, but also of those based on the use of mobile phones in the form of applications that allow users to get new experiences. Lack of security about what's next, winning or losing, getting competitive scores, and the big dose of luck needed when an interactive game is involved, make gaming and gamification extremely attractive, but on sometimes, very addictive.

The games (Bartoli, Elmi, Pascuzii & Smorti, 2018) that persuasively use technology are those types of games that are primarily characterized by the transfer and gain of new information by modifying the user's behavior, these features being the ones that differentiate them from games aimed at the simple fun of those who play them. In this way, a series of important user information is obtained, identifying behavioral patterns, offering new experiences and improving both the level of knowledge and the quality of existing experiences.

Defining the concept of gamification is not an easy task, as this term is in the early stages of conceptualization and even conscious use for business purposes. A definition that is widely

accepted in the scientific world (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled & Nacke, 2011) is that of contextualizing games outside their home domain. This includes elements such as creating a brand, involving the participants, and influencing user behavior patterns. Often the winning and losing feature is eliminated, which is so infrequent in the classic games; this type of game is quite often used in the field of tourism, where the main purpose is not to compete, to gain something material, but to gain new experiences, knowledge, and also memories. As a consequence, (Feifei, Buhalis & Weber, 2017), to the currently accepted definition of gamification, there are also aspects concerning the differences from the usual games in terms of the intended purpose; games played under the aegis of gamification are not based on the motivation of gain but the motivation of pleasure, fun, enrichment of knowledge.

According to Boukas (2013), young tourists of the Millennials type are a special category of tourists, in terms of their characteristics, including in terms of travel motivations and tourist behavior. Promoters of new era type of sustainable tourism, young tourists are driven to ecotourism destinations by intrinsic motivations for knowledge, new experiences they can have, protecting the environment in a proactive way, helping host communities, and relaxation. Thus, the main motivations of young tourists when choosing an ecotourism destination are based on adventure, risk, and novelty, but also relaxation, fun and opportunities to practice outdoor sporting activities.

The aforementioned issues come to reinforce the introduction of gamification in the promotion of ecotourism destinations through games among the younger generation. Tourists in this category (Yeong, Eves & Scarles, 2009) are characterized by curiosity, so they will be attracted to the possibility of trying a new game, combining education with pleasure, experimenting with the transgression between virtual and real. Another benefit of gamification implementation in the development of ecotourism in protected areas is of a social nature, as the games allow contact with members of the local community as well as with other tourists.

In the case of gamification in tourism (Feifei, Buhalis & Weber, 2017), two categories of objectives stand out. In the first category there are the aims related to motivating young tourists to change their behavior, most often through education, new information and pleasure, entertainment. In the second category there are the goals related to the co-creation effect, leading to intrinsic motivation. This creates a win-win situation by getting benefits for both young tourists and the destination, in this case the protected areas, by obtaining important information that can later be used to develop tourist products, unique selling points for the destination in question.

The introduction of the gamification concept in the tourism industry helps to create new experiences that are out of the ordinary for young tourists (Buffa, 2015), thus creating emotional links with the ecotourism destination. The whole tourist experience turns into a game with strong links to reality, often involving both fun and physical education and movement.

A number of benefits (Kim, Ritchie & McCormick, 2012) are highlighted by the implementation of gamification in promoting the protected area destination. A first benefit is to improve the ecotourism experience that young tourists have once they have reached their destination. Secondly, a new level of loyalty to ecotourism is achieved by facilitating interactions both at the interpersonal level and at the tourist-system level. The third benefit of gamification implementation to develop ecotourism in protected areas is to form the brand image of the destination; a game can be created with the aim of branding and promoting the protected area among young tourists.

Designing clear gamification systems is a real challenge in terms of the elements that games can rely on, because not every aspect of the tourist experience can be gamified.

Research methodology

The aim of this paper is the analysis of young Romanian – students studying tourism – tourists’ perceptions about gamification in ecotourism. Therefore, we conducted a research, based on the following questions: What are the young Romanian - students studying tourism – tourists’ motivations to discover the ecotourism attractions from protected areas by using technology in tourism through games? What are their perceptions regarding the importance of the advantages of gamification in ecotourism? Taking into consideration these research questions which intend to explain the perceptions of young Romanian – students studying tourism – tourists about the concept of gamification in ecotourism, the appropriate research method is the survey, based on a self-completed questionnaire with 10 questions regarding the following variables: respondents' motivations to explore the natural and anthropic ecotourism potential of protected areas by using technology through games and their perception toward the advantages of gamification in ecotourism. During the period January-March 2018, a total of 163 questionnaires were downloaded from iSondaje.ro website and completed by the students studying tourism from Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES). Therefore, we esteemed this number of respondents as representative sample, having in mind, that we intended to research the motivations and perceptions of Romanian students who study tourism and the results of this sample can be used to draw conclusions on the population. The SPSS software was used for data processing.

Research results

The survey results provide significant insights for future development of ecotourism in protected areas by promotion of technology through games. Students motivations to explore the natural and anthropic potential of protected areas through gamification imply methods to valorise currently ecotourism in protected areas markets. However, as this study targeted a limited number of individuals in a niche market, inferences based on the research results are, to a certain degree, limited. The total number of respondents was 163, from which: 110 (67.5%) women, 56 (32.5%) men.

Table no. 1. Distribution indicators of young Romanian - students studying tourism – tourists’ motivations to discover the ecotourism attractions from protected areas by using technology in tourism through games

| Motivations to discover the ecotourism attractions from protected areas by using technology in tourism through games | N Valid | Mean | Median | Mode | Std. Dev. |
|---|----------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|------------------|
| Curiosity | 163 | 4.53 | 5.00 | 5 | 0.855 |
| Social desire | 163 | 3.72 | 4.00 | 4 | 1.038 |
| Entertainment | 163 | 4.24 | 5.00 | 5 | .943 |
| Feeling of membership | 163 | 3.55 | 4.00 | 4 | 1.060 |
| Desire for knowledge | 163 | 4.44 | 5.00 | 5 | .847 |
| Desire to discover new things | 163 | 4.51 | 5.00 | 5 | .898 |
| The challenge offered by the game | 163 | 4.03 | 4.00 | 5 | 1.002 |
| Incitement | 163 | 3.79 | 4.00 | 4 | 1.013 |
| Pleasure | 163 | 4.14 | 4.00 | 5 | .928 |
| Personal Search | 163 | 3.88 | 4.00 | 5 | 1.129 |
| Escapade | 163 | 3.86 | 4.00 | 5 | 1.102 |
| Adventure | 163 | 4.23 | 5.00 | 5 | .939 |
| Challenge | 163 | 4.19 | 5.00 | 5 | .984 |

| | | | | | |
|-----------|-----|------|------|---|------|
| Exploring | 163 | 4.39 | 5.00 | 5 | .864 |
|-----------|-----|------|------|---|------|

Source: created by authors

When it comes to appreciate the measure of the respondents' motivations to discover the ecotourism attractions from protected areas (Table no.1), Curiosity reported the highest mean – 4.53, followed by Discover new things – mean 4.51, Desire for knowledge - mean 4.44, Exploring - mean 4.39, Entertainment - mean 4.24, Adventure - mean 4.23, Challenge - mean 4.19, Pleasure - mean 4.14, The challenge offered by the game - mean 4.03, Personal search - mean 3.88, Escapade - mean 3.86, Incitement - mean 3.79, Social desire - mean 3.72, Feeling of membership - mean 3.55. In respect with the consistency of answers, the first rank was occupied by Desire for knowledge (standard deviation 0.847), meaning that, generally, respondents assessed that this motivation deserve a (5) rating (very important). At the other end there was Personal search (standard deviation 1.129), but taking into consideration the mean of 3.88 and a median of 4.00, it means that respondents have a the same perception regarding the measure of the importance of this motivation and evaluated it at very important level (5). There was a great number of responses granting a high importance' measure to all motivations (mode values were 5), less Social desire, Feeling of membership and Incitement (mode values were 4).

Regarding the perceptions of young tourists on the advantages of gamification in ecotourism in protected areas (tabel no.2) we report the following ranking: Generates an increase in the degree of knowledge (brand awareness) of the touristic attractions - mean 4.17, followed by Increases the degree of involvement in tourism activities - mean 4.05, Generates economic benefits for tourism operators - mean 4.02, Leads to increased satisfaction of tourists - mean 3.98, Reduces the degradation of the touristic attractions - mean 3.41.

Table no. 2: Distribution indicators of young Romanian - students studying tourism – tourists’ perceptions on the advantages’ importance of gamification in ecotourism in protected areas

| The advantages of using technology in tourism through games in protected areas: | N Valid | Mean | Median | Mode | Std. Dev. |
|---|---------|------|--------|------|-----------|
| Leads to increased satisfaction of tourists | 163 | 3.98 | 4.00 | 4 | .860 |
| Generates economic benefits for tourism operators | 163 | 4.02 | 4.00 | 4 | .769 |
| Generates an increase in the degree of knowledge (brand awareness) of the touristic attractions | 163 | 4.17 | 4.00 | 4 | .835 |
| Reduces the degradation of the touristic attractions | 163 | 3.41 | 3.00 | 4 | 1.120 |
| Increases the degree of involvement in tourism activities | 163 | 4.05 | 4.00 | 4 | .890 |

Source: created by authors

To the advantage of using technology in tourism through games in protected area which leads to increased satisfaction of tourists, respondents granted a high score in terms of importance, in this case the median being higher than the mean. We also report that athter the analysis of homogeneity of responses, on one hand the advantage that Generates

economic benefits for tourism operators is on first place with a standard deviation of 0.769, meaning that the majority of the respondents evaluated the importance of this advantage with 4 - important. On the other hand, the advantage that Reduces the degradation of the touristic attractions reported a standard deviation of 1.120, with a mean of 3.41 and a median of 3.00, meaning that the evaluation of the respondents regarding the importance of this advantage is not so consistent as the one that Generates economic benefits for tourism operators. The mode value of 4 determined by the high degree of importance attributed to all advantages show the high frequency of responses.

Conclusions

The main contribution of the paper is the analysis of young Romanian – students studying tourism – tourists’ perceptions about gamification in ecotourism. We report that the most important young tourists motivations to discover the ecotourism attractions from protected areas are: Curiosity, Discover new things, Desire for knowledge, Exploring, Entertainment and Adventure. The respondents evaluated with high degree of importance the following advantages of using technology in tourism through games in protected area, that: Generates an increase in the degree of knowledge (brand awareness) of the touristic attractions, Increases the degree of involvement in tourism activities and Generates economic benefits for tourism operators. The paper has some limitations regarding its small scale research conducted on one students studying tourism community and the risk of subjectivity in this type of attempt. Generalising the research results has to made carefulness, as perceptions regarding gamification in ecotourism might be diverse in other international contexts. Nevertheless, the research results of this paper offer added value by the identification of millennials tourists motivations to explore the natural and anthropic potential of protected areas through games, as well as the advantages brought to the development of ecotourism in protected areas by using technology through games. These results represents the base for the future research aiming to test the correlations between the research variables such as young Romanian – students studying tourism – tourists’ motivations to discover the ecotourism attractions from protected areas and the amount of money that the respondents are willing to pay for using the game.

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