



MASTER THESIS

**Social media marketing of international DMOs
in Russian social network VKontakte.**

**Case study: Catalan Tourism Board, comparative content
analysis and recommendations for improvement.**

Master's in Tourism Management and Planning

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1. INTRODUCTION.

This study explores how selected international Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) - Turkish Culture and Tourism Office, Greek National Tourism Organisation, Tourism Authority of Thailand, and our regional Catalan Tourism Board (CTB) - use Russian social media to promote their destinations at the corresponding target market. By means of comparative content analysis of the above mentioned DMOs' publications in Russian n°1 website and social network VKontakte (VK), carried out through 7 categories including 48 measures of content – content, major theme, information type, interactivity, promotion, customer service and engagement - the success measurement metrics are suggested, best practices are identified and recommendations to our CTB case study are formulated.

With the aim of elaboration of guidelines for the Catalan DMO's effective communication strategy in Russian social media, our multi-discipline transversal research provides an insight into such fields of knowledge as consumer behaviour (expectations, motivations, decision-making, involvement, engagement), marketing (social media tools, market segmentation, benchmarking, communication tools), management skills (planning, measurement and improvement of results), destinations development (strategic plans for image creation), mixed quantitative and qualitative approach of content analysis methodology (coding, interpretation, calculation, statistics), through the prism of national cultural differences. That is, the resulting recommendations as to communication tools and hints of content creation are based on academic and empirical research, taking into consideration peculiarities of national identity, values and social interaction rooted in history.

1.1. Background.

Over the last decades the impact of information and communication technologies on the global economy has been stunning, completely changing the way human activities are performed, material and immaterial resources are mobilised, wealth is generated, and business opportunities are created and seized (Mariani, Felice, and Mura, 2016).

In particular, social media in tourism influence such important aspects of travellers behaviour as awareness, information search, destination choice, purchase attitude and evaluation (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). It plays a significant role in dissemination of information and tourism promotion through interaction with consumers. This bidirectional communication is fundamental for customers engagement, recognised the most important purpose of the social media from the business point of view (Brake and Safko, 2009), leading to trust and loyalty.

Being both tourism and social media global, knowledge of national cultural differences can contribute to a better understanding of tourist motivations, information search and choice which are essential to market segmentation and tourism marketing strategy (Mazanec, Crotts, Gursoy, and Lu, 2015).

Russian national culture values are studied in this thesis from the point of view of implications for effective destinations promotion. A complex combination of cultural dimensions acting in configurations influence the international tourism behaviour of people in a nation, where a nation is defined as a "meaningful proxy for culture because of the existence of within-country commonalities and between-countries differences" (Hsu, Woodside, and Marshall, 2013).

In this context, the vast and powerful Russian internet space (RuNet), characterised by distinct non-Latin script, popular social networks different from the global leaders, peculiar informational needs and behaviours of the consumers, conditioned by

national culture dimensions, should be comprehensively studied for avoidance of ad-hoc decision-making and appropriate design of communication strategies by destination marketers.

The choice of Russia as a target market of the DMOs of our research is due to its importance as a tourism source and its peculiarities of internet use. Being the ninth most populous country of the world, with over 146 million people (RosStat, 2017), Russia is currently the sixth world spender on tourism expenditure, after China, United States, Germany, United Kingdom, and France (UNWTO, 2016); and the 4th country in number of visits to Catalonia (Idescat, 2017). As far as promotion strategies in RuNet are concerned, ECT and WTO (2015, p.61) key recommendations to European tourism destinations are "speak Russian with Russians", "connect to current trends rather than building marketing messages in isolation" and "make yourself available through popular social platforms".

The destinations selected for our comparative content analysis are among the top preferred by the target market (Table 2 adapted from RosStat, 2017), have Russian version of their official webpages and active VK social network accounts. Catalonia has been included into the list of the analysed destinations instead of the absent in VK Spain, as it represents the 1st Spanish incoming tourism destination by the number of international tourists (Idescat, 2017), the 1st Spanish destination preferred by the Russian tourists (Tourspain, 2017), and the 3rd most-visited tourist destination in the EU-28 (Eurostat, 2017). Besides, the geographical position of the University of Girona where the present thesis of Master in Tourism Management and Planning is written, is an additional argument due to the managerial implications of the analysis which may contribute to the improvement of the regional DMOs' promotional strategies. As to the comparability of the national and regional DMOs, the research of Hays, Page, and Buhalis (2013) has been taken as a reference.

1.2. Objectives and research questions.

The objective of this thesis is twofold.

First, to carry out the comparative content analysis of publications of the selected DMOs in the Russian social network VK, for identification of best practices of effective destination promotion. Second, to suggest recommendations for improvement to our regional DMO Catalan Tourism Board, based on the performed empirical analysis and academic research.

The research questions related with the above stated objectives are the following:

- Which are the implications of the Russian national culture dimensions for the tourism related information search and content creation?
- How to measure success of international DMOs interacting with their virtual communities in Russian social network VKontakte?
- Which are the best practices in VK and the resulting recommendations to the DMO of our case study, Catalan Tourism Board?
- Which is the most suitable methodology for building a concept analysis that suits the defined framework?

1.3. Gap and contribution.

Although the overwhelming online communication platforms have demonstrated a growing and reciprocal interest in the highly competitive tourism industry, the empirically-based tourism research on the effective use of social media remains limited and has been identified as a gap by several comprehensive studies (Usakli,

Koça, and Sönmez, S., 2017; Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica, and O'Leary, 2006; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014; Munar, 2012; Hays et al., 2013). Other academic sources fairly emphasise the lack of the cross-cultural studies in the field (de Mooij and Hofstede, 2011; Mazanec et al., 2015; Fotis, Buhalis, and Rossides, 2011).

No recent research has been found exploring how international tourism DMOs are evolving in the Russian Internet and specially in the national n°1 webpage and social networking platform VKontakte. Despite the existence of exploratory investigations of the global platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, other social media platforms need to be investigated. Fotis et al. (2011) in this regard highlight that national tourism source markets should be studied individually prior to the design and implementation of social media campaigns.

In response to the call for additional research, our thesis pretends to cover the above described gap, with a special focus on the activity of the leading Destination Marketing Organisations (DMO) in the national n°1 social media platform VKontakte. Using the method of content analysis, this study provides insights and guidelines to communication strategies for the maximum engagement with Russian consumers in accordance to their special informational needs based on the national culture values.

Additionally, the reviewed tourism and hospitality literature can be divided into consumer-centric studies focused on the use and impact of social media on travellers' decision-making and planning processes, and supplier-related studies concentrated on the promotion, management, and research functions; while our research pretends to combine both directions, exploring consumer behaviour issues and suggesting recommendations to professionals.

The results of our research are helpful for tourism destinations and their marketers in charge of communication in Russian social media, enabling them to fine-tune their campaigns to the peculiarities of the target country.

1.4. Structure.

The thesis is organised as follows. First, the state of the art is introduced, with focus on rationale, contribution to the field of cross-cultural studies in tourism research and managerial implications. Afterwards, the theoretical framework is developed, based on literature review of key concepts related with our research questions and covering peculiarities of information search, social media in tourism, comparative content analysis relevance and implications of national cultural differences. Subsequently, presentation of destinations and population of study is realised, statistically justifying the selection for the empirical research. Thereafter, description of methodology outlines the employed research paradigm, methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Following on, findings and recommendations are presented. Concluding, both academic and managerial implications of this study are discussed, limitations set out, and ideas for further research mapped out. Finally, the reference list is provided in APA format.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW.

Within the framework of the objectives of this thesis, such key concepts gain relevance as information search, social media in tourism, content analysis in empirical research of social media usage by international DMOs, and national cultures' implications for design of the effective marketing strategies. Hereinafter we introduce relevant definitions and theories, referencing them to their authors.

2.1. Information search.

As in many products and services, **consumer behaviour** in tourism begins with acquiring and selecting **information**, in order to make the right decision according to individual needs (Coromina and Camprubí, 2016). Hays et al. (2013) call tourism an "information-intensive industry", emphasising the trip-planning process, making informed decisions about destinations, accommodation, restaurants, tours, attractions, and further evaluation. Mazanec et al. (2015) assure that global knowledge of **cultural values** can contribute to a better understanding of tourist motivations, information search and choice which are essential to market segmentation and tourism marketing strategy.

2.1.1. Driving forces.

In terms of importance of study of information search processes for tourism, Gitelson and Crompton (1983) point out the following main reasons: vacations as a **high-risk** purchase, **intangibility** of the tourism product and unfamiliarity with **new destinations**. In line with this statement, Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) highlight that "travel-related decisions involve high risks due to the nature of tourism services and thus require risk reduction strategies such as **extensive information search**".

Related to the concepts of risk, intangibility of tourism product and unfamiliarity with destinations, **management of expectations** by tourism marketers gains importance. It is generally agreed that expectations are "consumer-defined probabilities of the occurrence of positive and negative events if the consumer engages in some behaviour" (Oliver, 1981, p. 33 cited by Li, Lai, Harrill, Kline, and Wang, 2011). Tourists basically search and collect information in order to reduce the negative probabilities and choose what fits the most their expectations. Understanding customers' expectations and preferences, and the benefits they seek is critical to marketers. Some researchers have considered it "the starting point for all marketing efforts" (Kaczynski, 2008, p. 254 cited by Li et al., 2011).

As across different countries and cultures, peoples' behavioural characteristics, values, and expectations differ substantially, Turner, Reisinger, and McQuilken (2001) suggest that **cultural differences influence pre-travel expectations**, which in turn significantly **affect their post-trip satisfaction level**. Findings of Li et al. (2011) imply that **national culture** is a critical factor in shaping tourists' travel expectations, as their behaviour is even more obviously affected by their own culture and value system when foreign environment is concerned.

In line with management of expectations stands another driving force of tourism information search, **motivation**. Yoon and Uysal (2005) compile that tourists' motivated behaviours result from biological or psychological needs, when individuals are "**pushed**" to travel by some internal desires and emotions; and "**pulled**" by external reasons that induce the desire to visit a particular destination.

In this context, it is essential for a destination to build a strong appealing **image**, through the available **information channels**, to motivate the tourists **choice**

(Andrades, Dimanche, and Ilkevich, 2015). Perceived tourist images are extremely important for destinations as they affect tourist behaviour (Marine-Roig and Clavé, 2016).

In response to management of expectations and motivations during information search processes, and aware of the national differences, market segmentation results helpful to serve the informational needs of "homogeneous consumer subpopulations" (Dolnicar, 2004). It is also important to point out that differences exist not only between cultures but also within a culture. The so-called segmentation in "tribes" within the same culture enables specialisation and creation of niche markets, synergies between them and effective promotion (Kozinets, 2006; Pesonen, 2013). The cited researchers coincide that **tourism market segmentation** is one of the most crucial long-term strategic marketing decisions of a destination marketing organisation, as it identifies target markets and attract them to destinations.

Robledo (2001) highlights several marketer-controllable aspects of expectation management such as customers past experience, reputation/destination image, informal recommendations (word-of-mouth), formal recommendations (professional advice or recommendation of the official DMO), personal needs, and price.

2.1.2. Sources.

Tourism information search is a **dynamic** process where consumers use various amounts and types of information sources, different on the **stages** before, during, after travel decision-making and trip preparation (Bieger and Laesser, 2004; Usakli et al., 2017), in response to their **information needs** and with the aim to facilitate travel planning (Fodness and Murray, 1997).

Information search can be **internal** through the motivated activation of knowledge stored in one's memory or **external** through the acquisition of information from the environment (Engel, Blackwell, and Minlard, 1995 cited by Coromina and Camprubí, 2016). It is characteristic that the internal information "may have been acquired at one time from previous experience and past information searches, or passively through low-involvement learning where consumers are repeatedly exposed to marketing stimuli" (Money and Crotts, 2003, p. 193), while the external information is obtained from the environment which reflects a conscious effort to seek out new information (Gitelson and Crompton, 1983). From this point of view, the task of a destination marketer is to take advantage of both internal (low involvement learning) and external (environment of conscious seek) stimuli creation for the effective communication processes through relevant information sources.

As far as the best practices of communication are concerned, the focus is precisely on the targeted markets according to their **informational needs** and the most **frequently used sources** (Fodness and Murray, 1999; Gitelson and Crompton, 1983; Llodrà-Riera, Martínez-Ruiz, Jiménez-Zarco, and Izquierdo-Yusta, 2015; Coromina and Camprubí, 2016).

No commonly accepted classification of the **sources of information** exists, and those suggested by different researchers vary substantially. Independently whether the channels of communication are online or offline, the generalized categorization by Money and Crotts (2003, p.193) proposes the division into: **personal** (e.g. **word-of-mouth or advice** from friends and relatives); **marketer dominated** (e.g. **advertisements** in print and electronic media); **neutral** (e.g. third-party sources such as travel agents or ranking and opinions collecting sites) and **empirical** sources (direct contacts with retailer).

Regarding their **credibility**, the best considered are the personal, both traditional or web 2.0 paradigm, due to its clear word-of mouth characteristics (Camprubí, Guia, and Comas, 2013; Llodrà-Riera et al., 2015).

The detailed classification of **tourism information sources**, proposed by Llodrà-Riera et al. (2015), determines 14 traditional along with 19 recently emerged online sources (Table 1):

<i>Table 1. Classification of tourism information sources.</i>	
TRADITIONAL SOURCES, provided by	NEW ONLINE SOURCES, provided by
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ promotional organisations for the destination, ○ suppliers (transport, accommodations, complementary offers), ○ intermediaries (travel agencies, tour operators), ○ media specializing in tourism, media specializing in thematic areas of interest (e.g., sports, wine, potholing or speleology, cinema), ○ books, ○ travel guides, ○ documentaries, ○ television films and series, ○ advertising, ○ fairs, ○ friends and acquaintances, ○ opinion leaders, ○ the static Internet 1.0. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ search engines, ○ official tourist information web pages, ○ unofficial tourist information web pages, ○ intermediary web pages (e.g., accommodation, complementary offers, discounts), ○ web pages with user assessments, ○ blogs specializing in tourism, ○ house swapping portals, ○ tourist rental accommodation portals, ○ hotel reservation portals, ○ tourist resources and activities portals, ○ photo-sharing applications, ○ video-sharing applications, ○ forums, ○ hospitality travellers' portals, ○ portals for renting private houses or rooms, ○ maps, ○ general social networks and social networks specializing in tourism.
<i>Adapted from: Llodrà-Riera et al. (2015)</i>	

Undoubtedly, creation and accessibility of the Internet have fundamentally changed how travellers access information, the way they plan for and book trips, and the way they share their travel experiences (Hays et al., 2013).

The online sources of information have become effective and affordable marketing channels challenging the existing customer service and promotional processes throughout the tourism sector, able to create motivations, enhance expectations management and mitigate perceived risks. Fotis, Rossides, and Buhalis (2010) conclude that the presence of the new media seems to have caused an increasing mistrust for traditional marketing tactics, as well as diminishing the effect of traditional mass media. While Tham (2013) recommend **to integrate social media with more traditional forms of market**, which along with cooperative promotional initiatives, are supposed to contribute to an improved destination management partnership.

Within the framework of sources of information, apart from organisations' contents, the user created content (UGC) gains influence. Defined as any positive or negative statement or multimedia published by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, and Gremler, 2004), the UGC is compared with the highly trusted electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Nowadays an increasing number of organisations are recognising the aggregated value of interactions with the users which build a closer to the reality image and creates engagement, based on a bidirectional information exchange. Furthermore, organisations cannot control their image using only their own resources any longer, being compelled to regularly control the inputs sent by their consumers and the stakeholders involved in their production and selling process.

Evolution from Web 1.0, with static information and practically non-existent interaction of the publishers with the other Internet users, to Web 2.0, with a focus on the UGC, enabled integration of the following five functional properties: "information presentation, collaboration, communication, interactivity and transactions" (Gretzel et al., 2006).

2.1.3. Tourism information consumers.

According to the consumers role in tourism information search, Maldonado (HOSTELTUR, 2009), developing the definitions of Kotler (1986), proposes classification in consumers, prosumers and adprosumers. **Consumers** are the classic tourists who rely on traditional sources such as tour operators and buy suggested packs without exhaustive information search; back from their trips, generate a local word-of-mouth of low impact on the potential clients, and if satisfied, repeat and are loyal. **Prosumers** are the tourists who actively create their own products, through thorough Internet information search, opinions review and services selection, looking for personalised experiences; do not create contents, presenting limited prescription capacity and are not loyal, as are searching for experimentation, diversity, unique experience. **Adprosumers** are the evolution of prosumers to those who navigate bidirectionally, consuming information and generating contents; similar to prosumers, they create their own touristic products and are not loyal to destinations, still their value can be called indirect loyalty or influencing in form of comments or recommendations which inspire other tourist to visit or use a service, contributing with the so trusted electronic word of mouth.

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) outline the following motivations for consumers interaction during the information search processes, which are to be taken into consideration by the destination marketing eager to encourage the eWOM):

- altruism (positive WOM) - the act of doing something for others without anticipating any reward in return;
- product involvement - personal interest in the product, excitement resulting from product ownership and product use;
- self-enhancement - enhancing images among other consumers by projecting themselves as intelligent shoppers;
- helping the company/organisation - desire to help the company/organisation;
- altruism (negative WOM) - to prevent others from experiencing the problems they had encountered;
- anxiety - reduction of anger, anxiety and frustration;
- vengeance - counterattack the company/organisation associated with a negative consumption experience;
- advice seeking - obtaining advice on how to resolve problems.

Several researchers have considered the relevance of determining the factors that influence information search behaviour. Coromina and Camprubí (2016) identify personal characteristics (emotional, educational, and demographic variables), social or interpersonal variables, and environmental variables (economic variables and source characteristics). Besides, the researchers present a consistent literature review on the grade of relationship between information search and trip-specific variables (length of stay, travel party composition, purpose of the trip, number of previous visits, distance travelled, planning horizon and level of familiarity with the destination), concluding that **both sociodemographic and travel behavioural** factors are complementary.

The reviewed cross-cultural studies once again confirm that **nationality** influences information search behaviour (Mazanec et al., 2015; Money and Crotts, 2003, Fotis et al., 2011, de Mooij and Hofstede, 2011).

Andrade et al., 2015 state that it is responsibility of a destination tourism marketer to adapt marketing and management strategies to consumers' information search needs, as far as travel related motivations, expectations, behaviours are different according to nationality, culture, social class, travel experience; and conclude that such relevant sources of the up-to-date information as the UNWTO and ETC reports and national sources of sociodemographic and tourism statistics are to be consulted on a regular base, to understand better international travel demand and the factors that affect it.

2.2. Social media in tourism.

Social media have fundamentally altered the way society creates and disseminates information, thereby changing both the demand (consumer decision process) and supply (marketing and management practices for businesses and organisations) sides of the tourism industry (Usakli et al., 2017). As travellers use social media before (search of potential destination, transportation, accommodation, leisure activities), during (somewhat passive participation related basically with visual content creation) and after (recommendations, level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction through reviews and comments) the trip, it serves as a crucial information platform that influence other travellers' decisions.

2.2.1. Social media and social networks.

Social media have been commonly defined as a group of Internet-based applications that, built on the ideological and technological foundation of Web 2.0, allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010); and embrace activities, practices and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge and opinions using conversational media (Brake and Safko, 2009).

Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) emphasize that social media continue to evolve and its uses change and expand, so does its definition. Cohen (2011) summarizes 30 different definitions from different perspectives which can be organized into three groups according to their most important characteristics and natures:

- social media are online tools, applications, platforms, and media, and therefore depend on information **technology**;
- social media are peer-to-peer **communication channels**, which enable the interactive websites content creation, collaboration and exchange by participants and the public, facets which introduce substantial and pervasive

- changes to communication between organisations, communities, and individuals; and,
- social media link users to form a virtual community by using cross-platforms, and therefore **affect people's behaviours** and real life.

Usakli et al (2017) reveal that tourism organisations use social media primarily in the areas of marketing, management, communication, and product distribution, highlighting that the most often usage is for marketing purposes since traditional media is no longer sufficient, and due the new channels popularity among consumers.

Social networking sites represent a part of social media and refer to “on-line systems enabling users to become members, create profiles, build personal networks connecting them to other users with whom they exchange on a frequent basis skills, knowledge, preferences and other information” (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). Commonly the content of such online virtual communities is perceived as “similar to recommendations provided by friends, family members, or even like-minded souls” (Wang, Yu, Fesenmaier, 2002), thus becoming a vital information source of high **credibility** for potential tourists (Fotis et al., 2011).

2.2.2. Impact on decision-making and travel planning.

Social media influence several components of consumer behaviour such as awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase behaviour, post-purchase communications, evaluation (Mangold and Faulds, 2009), and plays an important role in tourism promotion and in focusing on best practices for interacting with consumers (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014).

Social media decrease uncertainty and increase the exchange utility on one hand, and provide users by storytelling a sense of belonging to virtual travel communities on the other hand (Gretzel et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2002). In the former case, social media may most likely contribute directly to an increasing destination visitation; in the latter case, might contribute to brand building of tourist destinations in the long run but be less likely to lead an immediate increase in tourist visitation (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014).

The role and impact of social media for the decision-making and the travel planning process have been thoroughly analysed by Fotis et al. (2011) on the sample of the Russian-speaking active travellers and Internet users from Russia and former Soviet Union countries. Emphasizing the highest level of engagement to social networking worldwide in statistical terms of time spent per user, the authors studied the “before, during and after holidays” stages. The researchers have proved that at the “before holidays” stage the users of social media mainly search for, in order of popularity, (1) ideas on where to go for holidays – 44.5% of all the respondents, (2) once the destination chosen, seek ideas and information on excursions and other leisure activities – 41.6%, (3) once the destination chosen, seek ideas and information on accommodation options – 34.4%, (4) once the destination definitely chosen, check the good destination choice – 30.9%, (5) when trying to narrow down a choice of destination – 24%. “During holidays” the social media is mostly used (1) to stay connected with friend or relatives – 49.1%, (2) when trying to find out information about specific attractions and leisure activities – 29.5%, (3) to provide comments and reviews about the current holiday experience – 16.5%. “After holidays” the respondents primarily used social media (1) to share their experiences and photos with their friends or other travellers - 78%, and to a much lesser extent (2) to look for ideas as an inspiration for the next holidays – 29.2%, (3) to provide evaluations and reviews about my accommodation and/or my holiday destination – 26.6%. While assessing changes in original holiday plans after visualization of other travellers’

opinions, reviews, photos, videos or other information from social media, 65% of respondents answered they made some sort of changes, while 34% replied they did not make any change.

All these phases and corresponding interactions are to be taken in consideration for successful communication strategies at the target market.

2.2.3. Customer engagement, from involvement to loyalty.

According to Brake and Safko (2009), the most important purpose of the social media, from the business point of view, is to engage the audience. The researchers define four categories of engagement with social media: "communication, collaboration, education and entertainment", and consider they definitely help to sell product and services.

Social media are the dominant enablers of customer engagement, being these technologies very different from the previous marketer-consumer technology platforms, as they are owned by the customer but are transparent, and facilitate the two-way interaction between customers and organisations (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009; Hennig-Thurau, Malhotra, Frieger, Gensler, Lobschat, and Rangaswamy, 2010).

In tourism, customer engagement has been found to boost loyalty, trust and brand evaluations, which in turn are linked with such important brand performance indicator as sales growth (Harrigan et al, 2017).

Customers engagement is characterised by repeated interaction between a customer and an organisation that strengthen the emotional, psychological or physical investment a customer has in the brand or organisation (Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie, 2014). The **social exchange** theory supports this notion of investment, which holds that individuals evaluate the tangible and intangible costs and benefits of engaging in relationships (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). In other words, for customer-brand engagement to persist, customers must at least achieve a balance in these costs and benefits over time. For example, consumers may invest enthusiasm and attention in engaging with a brand to receive benefits such as product news, offers, sense of belonging (Foa and Foa, 1980). Customers engaged with brand communities online feel more connected to their brands, trust their preferred brands more, are more committed to their chosen brands, demonstrate higher brand satisfaction and are more brand loyal (Jahn and Kunz, 2012).

Kuvykaite and Tarute (2015) conclude that customer engagement is a "multi-dimensional construct" consisting of three dimensions: **cognitive** (a customer's focus and interest in a particular brand); **emotional** (feelings of inspiration or pride caused by a particular brand) and **behavioural** (customer's effort and energy necessary for interaction with a particular brand).

So, King, and Sparks (2014) draw up five customer engagement dimensions: **enthusiasm** (an individual's strong level of excitement and interest in a focus of engagement, brand); **attention** (conscious or subconscious level of focus on the brand, more attention - more engagement); **absorption** (further than attention, it's a content concentration in a brand); **interaction** (sharing ideas and feelings about experiences with the brand and its customers); **identification** (particularly with those that match their self-image). These dimensions of customer engagement are readily applicable to tourism brands on social media, whose "communication managers will seek to inspire customer engagement in each of the five dimensions" (Harrigan et al., 2017).

Customer engagement is often compared with involvement, still the constructs are discriminately different. Involvement tends to be limited to a cognitive component, whereas engagement incorporates cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Zaichkowsky (1985, p.342) defines customer **involvement** as a customer's perceived relevance of an object (brand) based on their needs, values, interests, and states that involvement is "independent of the behaviour resulting from involvement". There are certain tourism brands on social media that may elicit higher involvement for different types of customers through different strategies (storytelling, ease of use, social influence etc.)

So et al. (2014) consider that customer involvement with a social media is an antecedent of customer engagement; while customer's behavioural intention of loyalty (to recommend or revisit) is a consequence of customer engagement. Hence the communication managers are responsible for developing a brand that inspires involvement and designing strategies for customer engagement, leading to loyalty.

Mariani et al. (2016) consider community's engagement metrics a measure of success of a DMO's activity in social media; the proposed formula for calculation of users engagement on a monthly basis takes into consideration users' likes, comments and shares, while discards the fan-base value for its flexibility and biasing active/passive community segmentation: **(Likes + Comments + Shares) / Total posts x 100**.

2.2.4. Social media for communication strategies of Destination Marketing Organisations (DMO).

Destinations are traditionally defined as "territories, geographical areas, such as a country, an island or town, with political and legislative framework for tourism marketing and planning" (Davidson and Maitland, 1997). Destinations are "places towards which people travel and where they choose to stay for a certain period" (Leiper, 1995) and can be "recognized as a perceptual concept, interpreted subjectively by visitors, where a combination of all products, services and experiences are provided locally" (Buhalis, 2000). Destinations are also considered as "geographical region understood by visitors as a unique entity where facilities and services are designed to meet the needs of the visitors" (Cooper, Fletcher, Gilbert, Shepherd, and Wanhill, 2008).

Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) are non-profit entities aimed at generating tourist visitation for a given area, generally "responsible for developing a unique image of the area, coordinating most private and public tourism industry constituencies, providing information to visitors, and leading the overall tourism industry at a destination" (Prideaux and Cooper, 2002).

The development of a strategic tourism plan for a destination is an articulation of the strategic priorities and direction that have been identified by stakeholders for the planning, development, management, and marketing of a destination and is essential for the long-term success and sustainability. Basic purpose of the **strategy** is to increase destination competitiveness (Kiralova, 2015).

Integration of social media with more traditional forms of marketing, along with cooperative promotional initiatives, "contributes to an improved destination management partnership" (Tham, 2013).

Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) conclude that social media provide new means for tourism organisations including DMOs to reengineer and implement their business models

and operations, such as development of new services, marketing, networking, knowledge management, provision of customised information to the individual tourist.

Hays et al. (2013) state social media is a tool to reach a global audience with limited resources, and argue that its usage among DMOs is still largely experimental and that strategies vary significantly. The researchers underline that tourism organisations that do not adopt social media will lack a competitive advantage; while some of them actively manage and grow their social media endeavours, others simply join but perhaps lack the support, knowledge, or interest to maintain the accounts effectively.

By marketing on social media, organisations see a form of reaching consumers in the places where they live online, thanks to the potential of social media to achieve customer engagement, as a final aim, through techniques such as segmentation, viral marketing, and personalization of messages (Oviedo-García, Muñoz-Expósito, Castellanos-Verdugo, Sancho-Mejías, 2014).

There are some challenges for DMOs using social media, such as the conflicting relationship between corporate and social media cultures, the challenges innovative communication tools present for traditional management structures, poor levels of formalization and the lack of a knowledge base, which results in ad-hoc decision making (Munar, 2012; Mariani et al., 2016; Gretzel et al., 2006; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

2.3. Content analysis in empirical research of social media usage by international DMOs.

Content analysis is defined by Berg (2009) as a “careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings”. Paisley (1969, p.133) characterises it as a “phase of information processing in which communication content is transformed, through objective and systematic application of categorization rules, into data that can be summarised and compared”. As far as content analysis involves counting, it can be considered a quantitative method (Krippendorff, 1990), but at the same time it’s about the qualitative textual interpretation; thus, it could be regarded a mixed research method, where the analytical flexibility admits both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Camprubí and Coromina, 2016).

Several relevant for our thesis investigations (Hays et al., 2013; Stepchenkova and Zhan, 2013; Mariani et al., 2016; Usakli et al., 2017), carried out by the means of content analysis, contributed to better understanding of the strategies used by leading national and regional DMOs in such social media platforms as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube. However, our focus is on the unexplored but vast and powerful Russian Vkontakte social media and social networking service, the content analysis research method by the same token allows to investigate a plenty of publicly available information, in order to provide insights and guidelines of the best practices for the effective promotion of destinations on the top outbound tourism market.

Hays et al. (2013) propose a cycle of key steps for “humanisation” of a promoted brand/destination and successful social media marketing: attract users, engage users interest and participation, retain users, and build loyalty, learn about users’ preferences, provide relevant customised information. In this context engagement and encouragement of participation are both outlined as key in attracting and retaining users. Besides, the researchers elaborate a list of categories for

comprehensive content analysis, commonly used by the succeeding investigators, which take into consideration: content (text, links, photo, video, tags, hashtags, influencers), interaction (comments, likes, shares, contests, request for user generated content, directly asked questions), theme (information vs opinion), promotion (event, destination, DMO's official website, another website, attraction, restaurant, hotel, particular food, another DMO's social media platform), customer service orientation (enquiry, thanking, responding to criticism), frequency of posts. The strategies of the 7 top international tourism destinations in social media platforms Facebook and Twitter have been analysed through the balance of all the categories. For measuring success of social media strategy such metrics have been adopted as audience size (number of followers, and the rate of increase), reach (viral impact), engagement (number of likes, comments, shares), sentiment (positive or negative consumer response) and outcomes (resulting traffic, conversions) have been adopted. Measuring is supposed to corroborate what is successful versus what is futile, with a plenty of room for experimentation and improvement. Special attention is paid to the misuse of the great potential of social media, appointing counteracting the formal or monologue style or just duplication of contents of the traditional marketing sources (advertising festivals and events). The return on investment (ROI) is defined as difficult to measure in case of official tourism boards, as far as they are not commercial companies dedicated to direct sales. Still targets are in place. The comparative approach of the study allows the subjects being researched and others to detect and employ the best practices. In conformity with the above described measures of success of social media strategy, two cases of the national DMO VisitBritain run by the British Tourist Authority and the **regional DMO** representing the Australian state Tourism Queensland run by Tourism and Events of Queensland have been recognised as best practices "which may well offer important lessons" for other DMOs, thanks to their creativity, innovation, ability to interact and engage with consumers. As to the applicability to our case study, it is also relevant as an example from academic literature where national and regional DMOs are compared as equal, and even the regional results to be an example to follow.

Stepchenkova and Zhan (2013), carrying out the comparative content analysis of the visual destination images of Perú in different social media platforms, contribute with the depleted categorisation of the researched materials. The total of 20 categories include: nature and landscape, people, archaeological sites, way of life, traditional clothing, architecture/buildings, outdoor/adventure, wildlife, art object, tourism facilities, urban landscape, domesticated animals, plants, festivals and rituals, leisure activities, food, country landscape, transport/infrastructures, tour, other. The most representative for our case study categories have been adapted and employed for our 8 Major theme measures of the Table 3.

Usakli A., et al. (2017) adopts the above described measures of categorisation of Hays et al. (2013) and Stepchenkova and Zhan (2013), and extends the study using for the content analysis a larger sample size of 50 European countries, including two additional social media platforms (Instagram and YouTube). Conclusions confirm that social media is now of interest to European DMO, as the majority of the 50 European destinations analysed in the study have an official presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Other findings reveal that the length of stay on social media does not predict success of activity measured by the audience size, likes and views; that the moderate positive correlation exists among engagement, interactivity and international tourists arrivals; that DMOs generally use hashtags that are familiar in their traditional advertising campaigns (e.g. I feel Slovenia, I Like Italy, Love Great Britain, Visit Spain) rather than hashtag representing unfamiliar or unique destination characteristics; that the most frequently projected major theme (destination image) of postings is "natural attractions", followed by "cultural attractions, historical attractions, local cuisine, and recreation facilities"; that the well-established mature destinations provide mainly subjective information (opinions/reviews), whereas

emerging destinations are more likely to provide factual information (historical data/events); that a great majority of all posts are promotion-related and specific sights (towns, etc) within the destination are by far the most often promoted across all platforms, followed by attractions, hotels, events, restaurants or local cuisine; last but not the least is the finding that European DMOs still use social media as a traditional marketing tool rather than exploiting it as a customer service tool (responding to criticism, compliment or enquiry) in order to mitigate the customers problems or reputation crisis. Turkish DMO run by Turkish Culture & Tourism Office has been recognised the first in total number of likes, followers, subscribers, and views.

The research of Mariani et al. (2016) on how Italian regional DMOs strategically employ Facebook to promote and market their destinations, realised on the basis of content analysis, apart from improving metrics for capturing user engagement, sheds light on the factors contributing to superior level of social activity. The proposed formula for calculation of the Generic Engagement of users activity on a monthly basis is the following:

$$\text{(Likes + Comments + Shares) / Total posts} \times 100$$

It does not include the number of followers, defending that normalising by fan-base size does not yield reliable engagement metrics for benchmarking objectives, because the size of the community that sees promoted posts over a long period of time is flexible, and differentiation between active (at least 1 comment a year) and inactive followers is a bias. Experimentally, according to the social exchange theory, different weightings have been applied to Likes (20%), Shares (30%) and Comments (50%), based on important antecedents of users activity (the time required to complete the action) and on an outcome (the visibility and effectiveness of dissemination of the users' actions and content). Interestingly, different weight percentages yield different absolute values of the engagement variable, still the resultant ranking of the DMOs' accounts in terms of engagement does not change. The revealed factors influencing user activity and engagement are: type of post (photos and videos elicit more comments); length of post (mid-long posts of about 200 characters); posting time of day (positive effect of evenings posts); posting day of the week (more comments over the weekend); frequency of posting (too many daily posts is counterproductive); posting month of the year (highest engagement in January, May-June-July). The emphasis is on the active and experimental communication, efforts on call to action, enhancing engagement and interaction with the followers. The most effective techniques, as the content analysis shows, are opinion polls (e.g., asking to indicate in comments which of the presented photos/images the users would choose as a cover or choose one of the 4 photos corresponding to your perfect day in a destination), quizzes (e.g., asking for etymology of a word related with a local tourism product), games, involving influencers, telling the story of a destination through people rather than through places. The style should be friendly, politically correct, colloquial, and sympathetic, but simultaneously also kind of authoritative because it comes from a public organisation. The study also confirms that there is no general agreement in literature on a single dominant metric for gauging success or ROI in social media strategies.

Hays et al. (2013) and Mariani et al. (2016) cite the list of five key actions when managing a social media presence proposed by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010): "be active, be interesting, be humble, be informal and be honest".

2.4. National culture dimensions, differences, and implications.

According to Mooij (2017), cultural values have proved to explain the differences in consumer motives and behaviour, product ownership and usage, success of a product or brand and appeals in advertising.

The Hofstede's model of national cultural differences, widely used in research on communication and marketing strategies, defines culture as the "collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from those of another" (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). This model based on the empirical research of differences between the concepts of **identity, values, and social interaction**, all three rooted in **history**, is able to explain the corresponding variations in **promotional strategies to be used in various target markets** and impact consumer behaviour (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2011).

Hofstede first identified differences along four cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980, 2001); further research together with Minkov detected and added two additional dimensions: long-term versus short-term orientation and indulgence versus restraint to the original four dimensions of culture (Hofstede et al., 2010). **Power distance** (Russian score 93 of 100) is defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally; the higher it is, the greater importance gain status symbols, clear mandates and call for action. **Individualism** (Russian score 39 of 100) illustrates the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members; the lower it is, the more weight has belonging to group, interpersonal relationships for obtaining information, trust and being recommended (UGT). **Masculinity** (Russian score 36 of 100) the conceptual issue here is what motivates people, wanting to be the best (Masculine) or liking what you do (Feminine). A Feminine society perceives the quality of life as the sign of success, while Masculine is driven by competition, achievement and success defined by the winner/best in field. **Uncertainty Avoidance** (Russian score 95 of 100) assesses the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these; the higher is the score, the more extensive information about the destination is to be provided, in accordance with previously studied informational needs, emphasizing friendliness and safety issues. **Long Term Orientation** (Russian score 81 of 100) describes how every society maintains links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future. Normative societies which score low on this dimension, prefer to maintain time-honoured traditions and norms while viewing societal change with suspicion. Those with a culture which scores high, on the other hand, take a more pragmatic approach: they encourage thrift and efforts in modern education as a way to prepare for the future, show an ability to adapt traditions easily to changed conditions, a strong propensity to save and invest, thriftiness and perseverance in achieving results. This dimension explains the expenditure rankings and prompt whether the marketing messages of travelling/tourism/holidays/trip should contain connotation of preparation for future, combination of affective with cognitive, traditional with emerging. **Indulgence** (Russian score 20 of 100) is defined as the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses, based on the way they were raised and socialised. Relatively weak control is called "Indulgence" and relatively strong control is called "Restraint". In contrast to Indulgent societies, Restrained societies do not put much emphasis on leisure time and control the gratification of their desires. People with this orientation have the perception that their actions are restrained by social norms and feel that indulging themselves may be somewhat wrong; from this point of view, communication strategies should be based on invitation to relax and suggesting convincing excuses for gratification of desires.

Further to the above cited research, Hsu, Woodside, and Marshall (2013) conclude that national culture consists of a complex **combination of cultural values**, acting in **configurations**, to influence the **international tourism behaviour** of people in a nation, defining nation as a meaningful proxy for culture because of the existence of within-country commonalities and between-countries differences. According to the authors, these cultural influences do not differ substantially by age, as cultures have centuries-old roots and change very slowly; while the degree of cultural influences is greater for holiday travellers than for travellers visiting family and friends, and greater for first-time visitors than for repeat visitors. The article examines five variables of travellers consumption behaviour: length of stay, daily expenditure, shopping expenditure, number of states/regions visited, and pre-trip planning time. Based on the findings, the study provides helpful clues for countries' destination management organisations and hospitality firms in designing marketing plans to attract international tourists, such as different tourism products and different communication highlights in different target markets. So, designing five- to seven-day tour packages, with four- or five-star hotel accommodations, including quality shopping places, just a few attractions and promotional actions in media during the period of time between one and two months prior to national holidays or summer and winter vacations could be effective for "Eastern countries", with higher score in Power distance, Masculinity, Collectivism, Uncertainty avoidance and lower score in Indulgence. At the same time providing many mid-price-range accommodation choices with discounts for staying for a week or longer, through continuously and publicly available in all media marketing communications containing information about many tourist attractions could be yielding for long visiting "Western countries", explained by lower score of Power distance, Masculinity, Collectivism, Uncertainty avoidance and higher level of Long-Term Orientation and Indulgence.

Regarding the **national culture peculiarities in the use of social media and trust**, and in conformity with Hofstede's classification and interpretation of Russia's scoring, Gretzel et al. (2008) suggested that:

- in **collectivist** cultures, the opinion of others and the group values are important, therefore social media that enable social interaction and the creation of communities are more likely to be used;
- in **high power distance** and masculine cultures favour interactive websites such as those including consumer reviews and interactivity features as in the case of the most social networking websites;
- cultures with **high levels of uncertainty avoidance** seem to prefer comprehensive information with high credibility and experiential basis as complementary sources to company provided information, although privacy concerns seem to prevent those cultures from substantial engagement with creation of user generated content.

Rhodes and Emery (2003), compiling academic literature on the successful cross-cultural marketing, point out that the first step is to understand the cultural differences and adapt the advertising contents, or "tailor ads to reflect its values"; and the second step is to understand a society's sensitivity to advertising appeals, or "approaches advertisers use to communicate how their products will satisfy customer needs by embedding culture's values, norms, and characteristics", endorsing, glamorizing and inevitably reinforcing cultural values.

Whang, Yong and Ko (2016), on the basis of the empiric comparative analysis highlight that for Russian tourists learning knowledge/culture is as important as physical activities, and both affective and cognitive images directly influence the overall positive image of the destination and visit intention.

It is characteristic that the above exposed academic research outcomes go in line with the key recommendations given to “all destinations seeking to join the growing list of those tapping into the immense potential of the Russian market” by European Travel Commission and World Tourism Organisation (2015).

Undoubtedly, national cultures’ dimensions give an important clue on not only how to expose the maximum of consumers to a source of information with a one-fits-all message, but foremost how to build up the communication strategies, create quality content, fitting themes, using appropriate key-words, styles, and interaction techniques, covering the identified travellers’ segments, which is extremely important in the context of our case study.

3. PRESENTATION OF THE CASE.

The case study of the present thesis is focused on the Catalan Tourism Board marketing activity in Russian n°1 website and social network Vkontakte. Hereunder the target market and destination of the empirical research are characterised and contrasted through national culture dimensions, and all the international DMOs subject of the comparative content analysis are introduced.

3.1. Russian tourism outbound market.

The choice of Russia as a target market of DMOs is due to its importance as a tourism source market. Being the largest country in the world by surface area, covering more than one-eighth of the Earth's inhabited land area, and the ninth most populous, with over 146 million people (Rosstat, 2017), Russia is currently the sixth world spender on tourism expenditure, after China, United States, Germany, United Kingdom, and France (UNWTO, 2016, p.13).

In response to the worries about the economic difficulties in Russia, the World Bank (2017) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2017) state the inspiring signs of recovery and growth. After the 2014 crisis related with the global decrease of fuel prices, conflict with Ukraine, weakened rouble, European sanctions, and foster impact on the standards of living, the forecasts indicate continuous growth of GDP to 1.6% in 2018 (OECD, 2017) and to 1.8% in 2019 (the World Bank, 2017).

Being our research specially dedicated to Catalan DMO, the latest statistic data of Idescat (2017) confirm the positive dynamics of Russian tourism to Catalonia, so in June 2017 Russia was the 4th country in visit (groups as Rest of the world/EU/America or Nordic countries omitted).

According to the 2016 Executive data sheet by countries of Tourspain (2017), Russian tourists travel to Spain mainly for sun and beach, although cultural tourism and urban tourism are also in demand. In 2016, 1 million of tourists visited Spain, which represent the growth of +2.2% compared to 2015. The expenditure also slightly increased at +0.7%, with an average per person and day at 1594 and 150 euros respectively, which is the highest rate among European tourists. Hotel accommodations rate augmented at +7.7%; with an average stay of 10.6 nights which is the longest period among all the outbound tourism countries. In 2016 the main motivation of Russian tourists' visits was recreation (87%). About 75% of visitants stayed at tourism accommodation establishments, and 66% came without any tourism pack. The favourite destination within the country is Catalonia (55%), followed at some distance by Valencia (10%) and the Canary Islands (8%). As to the expenditure, Catalonia is also the destination where Russian tourist spend most (61%) followed by Valencia (11%) and Madrid (11%). Catalonia is also a leader in tourism accommodation establishments receiving Russian tourists, with 56% of the national overall, followed by the Balearic Islands (14%), and the Canary Islands (12%). These facts justify our selection of the Russian tourism outbound market and the Catalan receiving destination.

As to the profiles of the Russians tourists arriving to Spain in 2016, Tourspain (2017) outlines that 92% of annual visitors are university graduates, 50% represent a middle class; 46% travel in families, 24% travel solo and 19% in a couple; the average age of tourists is 36,7 years, the youngest of all the outbound tourism markets; and the main activities carried out by Russian tourists during their stay in Spain were shopping (81%), cultural visits (64%), urban visits (45%), followed by sun and beach (43%).

It is worth special attention that in the first half of 2017, according to the same source of statistics (Tourspain, 2017), the Russian tourism dynamics point out +13.5% growth of arrivals, and +10.1% growth of overnight stays at tourism accommodation establishments.

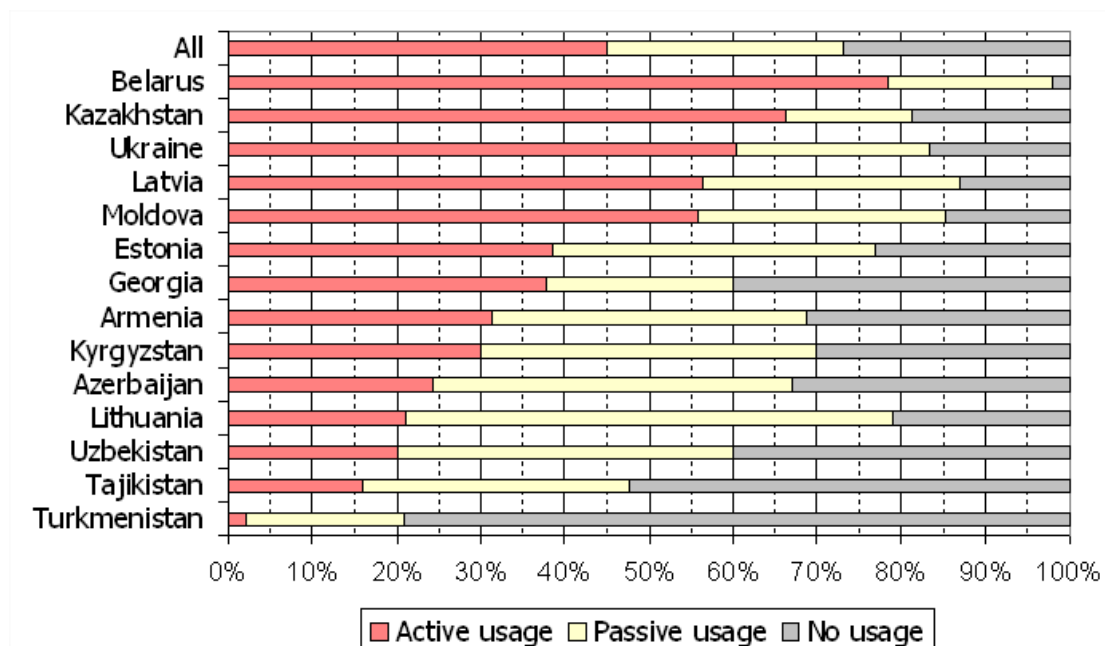
3.2. Russian information search specifics.

The significant difference in information search processes of the Russian-speaking internet audience, conditioned among other factors by the non-Latin script and existence of proper sources and channels, should be taken into consideration for successful promotional actions of tourism destinations.

3.2.1. Russian language.

While the importance of the Russian tourism market is clear, the question is how to establish the effective communication with the target. The key recommendations of the ECT and WTO (p.61, 2015) to tourism destinations are "speak Russian with Russians", "connect to current trends rather than building marketing messages in isolation" and "make yourself available through popular social platforms". In this regard, it is remarkable that Russian is the primary language of about 164 million people and the secondary language of 114 million people outside its borders. The Figure 1 below shows the rate of active usage of Russian language in 15 former USSR countries, which represents an additional value as to promotional actions reach.

Figure 1. Russian language usage in the former USSR countries.



Source: Wikipedia (1/7/2017)
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_language

As of March 2017, Russian occupies the 8th place of the list of the world top ten languages in the Internet, with 104,5 million users and 72,9% of the Internet penetration, characterised by a frenetic growth of 3,272.7 % (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Top Ten Languages Used in the Web – March 31, 2017.

Number of Internet users by language

Top ten languages in the internet	Internet Users by Language	Internet Penetration (% Population)	Users Growth in Internet (2000 - 2017)	Internet Users % of World Total (Participation)	World Population for this Language (2017 Estimate)
English	952,055,837	66.3 %	576.4 %	25.5 %	1,434,937,438
Chinese	763,262,224	53.5 %	2,262.8 %	20.4 %	1,425,430,865
Spanish	293,817,719	57.6 %	1,516.1 %	7.9 %	510,380,423
Arabic	173,538,690	42.5 %	6,805.9 %	4.6 %	408,249,235
Portuguese	155,036,606	55.1 %	1,946.4 %	4.1 %	281,603,515
Indonesian	154,694,982	52.4 %	2,599.7 %	4.1 %	295,108,771
Japanese	118,453,595	94.0 %	151.6 %	3.2 %	126,045,211
Russian	104,553,691	72.9 %	3,272.7 %	2.8 %	143,375,006
French	100,581,456	24.8 %	738.3 %	2.7 %	405,644,599
German	83,966,634	88.4 %	205.1 %	2.2 %	94,943,848
TOP 10 LANGUAGES	2,899,961,434	56.6 %	877.2 %	77.5 %	5,125,718,911
Rest of the Languages	839,737,066	35.1 %	1,207.5 %	22.5 %	2,393,310,059
WORLD TOTAL	3,739,698,500	49.7 %	936.0 %	100.0 %	7,519,028,97

Source: International World Stats (2017)

<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm>

3.2.2. Russian online travelling audience and its segmentation into tribes.

ETC and UNWTO (2015) identify in Russian social media four tribes, representing different approaches to travel, based on how they search and share information, discuss and photograph their trips:

- the Rookie (50-60%) is a patriotic Russian becoming a tourist who longs for the experience of travel, simply going abroad; limited UGT, tourism "consumer";
- the Guru (25-35%) is a self-proclaimed expert who strives to maximize the travel experience; active UGT creator, tourism "prosumers" and even "adprosumers" still within the safe touristic environment;
- the Immersive Explorer (10-20%) is a daring traveller who seeks new local adventures and immersive experiences off-the-beaten track; active UGT creator and influencer, "adprosumer";
- the Wealthy World Citizen (5%) who is looking for the best that money can buy, rubs shoulders with celebrities, prefers a tailored visit that reflects the local culture in a more "polished" way; influenced by other Wealthy World Citizens and influencer for other tribes; is an expert at assembling status symbols and flaunting them on social media, that is a luxury content creator and "adprosumer".

From the point of view of destinations marketing, their different travel styles and motivations can be taken as the point of departure for devising products and marketing messages that strike a chord with the right type of Russian traveller.

Hereafter the recommended by ETC and WTO (2015, p.26) tribe specific travel products and marketing messages are summarised.

The Rookie's preferred concept is travelling with guides and ready-made package deals. Travel products that appeal to the Rookie are packed with great experiences, "must-sees", all at a good price and convenient to book; positive reviews from other travellers provide the feeling of safety. The tribe's specific marketing message is "Great experiences, well-known places and excellent Russian guides!"

The Guru's key concept is flexibility in design of their own travels. Businesses and organisations targeting the needs of Gurus should offer them the possibility of picking their own destinations and shaping their own routes; still partnering with well-known brands ensures an experience that seems safe and accessible. The tribe's specific marketing message is "Travelling at your own pace, to the places you want to see, with the locals you want to meet – all with comfortable hotels and resorts!"

The Immersive Explorer search for cheap and easily accessible plane tickets to destinations that are just on the rise. The travel product needs an aura of uniqueness, of being "off the beaten track", offer the potential to challenge the traveller in a fun and different way. The tribe's specific marketing message is "Experience as much as possible of what the destination has to offer. Hang out with the locals and try the local cuisine!"

The Wealthy World Citizen prefers travel products characterized by luxury, high fashion and haute cuisine. The travel product must appear uniquely tailored for the particular traveller. New transport technologies play an important role in travel products for this group. The tribe's specific marketing message is "Savour the best the world has to offer. Travel from start to finish in a seamless experience of style and luxury to the most unique resorts in the world."

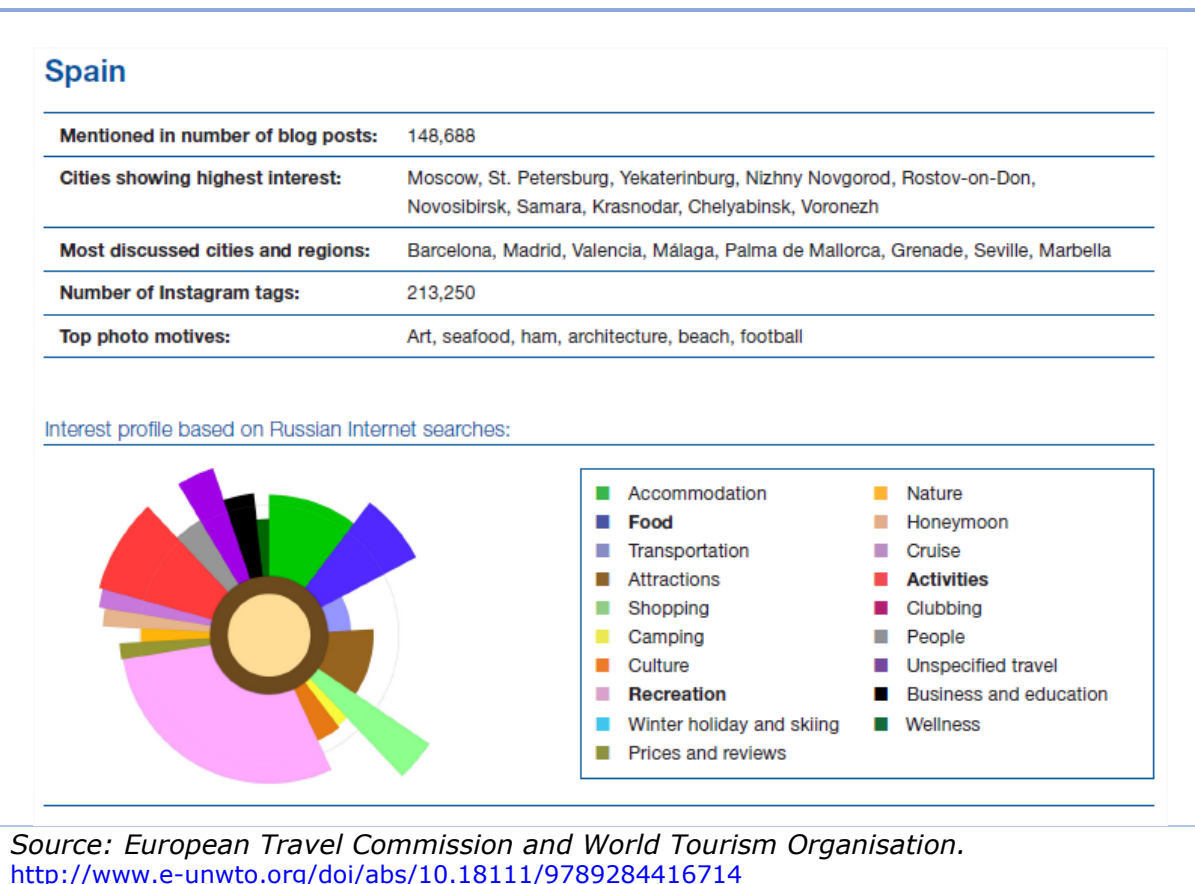
Identification with this tribe is not permanent, however. There are many examples of Rookies transitioning to the more experienced Guru as they start to feel more confident in their abilities to travel independently.

3.2.3. Major themes based on Russian internet searches.

Figure 3 demonstrates the distribution of interest by themes based on Russian Internet searches related with Spain. The most popular coincide with the above mention statistic data placing in leading positions recreation, activities, accommodation, attractions, food, transportation, shopping, followed by culture, clubbing, people, business and education, wellness, nature, prices and reviews, cruise, honeymoon, camping.

The Catalan destination Barcelona is the 1st in the list of the cities of the highest interest. It is characteristic that the searchers showing highest interest live mainly in the European part of Russia: Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Rostov-on-Don, Novosibirsk, Samara, Krasnodar, Chelyabinsk, Voronezh.

Figure 3. Interests profile based on Russian Internet searches.


















3.2.4. VKontakte social network, leader of national websites ranking.

As to the top sites lists of Russia, these vary significantly from the world tendencies. According to the monthly traffic rank retrieved on 12/8/2017 from Alexa ratings webpage <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/RU>, calculated using a combination of average daily visitors and pageviews over the past month, **VKontakte.com (VK)** occupies the first position demonstrating the highest combination of visitors and pageviews. VK (1) is followed in popularity by Google.ru (2), **Youtube.com (3)**, Yandex.ru (4), Mail.ru (5), Ok.ru (6), Google.com (7), Avito.ru (8), Aliexpress.com (9), Wikipedia.org (10), **Instagram.com (11)**, Sberbank.ru (12), Gismeteo.ru (13), Rambler.ru (14), Kinogo.club (15), Kinopoisk.ru (16), Drom.ru (17), Livejournal.com (18), Userapi.com (19), **Facebook.com (20)**. The presence of the global leaders of social media in the Russian top list is a sign of interconnection of the closed Runet with the world channels, which should be definitely used by the international marketers.

VKontakte (meaning in Russian In Contact) is the largest European online social media and social networking service by the number of users, with headquarters based in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Available in 80 supported languages, it is mainly used by the Russian-speaking internet audience. As of August 2017, VK has at least 443 million accounts, 95 million monthly active users, **77% of mobile users** (Vkontakte, 2017), and is ranked **16 in Alexa's global Top 500 sites** (Alexa, August 2017). Among the most active users are the following countries, with the representative national rankings of the VK website:

Figure 4. VKontakte world users and page ranking by country.

Country	Percent of Visitors	Rank in Country
 Russia	52.3%	1
 Germany	6.7%	8
 Kazakhstan	3.7%	3
 Netherlands	3.6%	5
 United States	3.5%	90
 Belarus	2.7%	2
 Ukraine	2.2%	4
 United Kingdom	2.2%	25
 China	2.0%	94
 Poland	2.0%	11
 France	1.6%	27
 Romania	1.5%	5
 Azerbaijan	1.5%	6
 Italy	1.4%	27
 Spain	1.0%	37

Source: Alexa (12/8/2017)

<https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/vk.com>

These national rankings of the VK website illustrate the additional value of being present in the leading social network of Russian-speakers, because of its international reach.

With regard to VK functioning, as most social networks, the site's core functionality is based around private messaging, sharing photos, status updates, links with friends and community belonging and interaction. The site allows its users to upload, search and stream media content, such as videos and music. VK features an advanced search engine, that allows complex queries for finding friends, as well as a real-time news search. VK users can post on their profile walls, each post may contain up to 10 attachments – media files, maps, and documents. In case of multiple photo-attachments the previews are automatically scaled and arranged in a magazine-style layout. The news feed can be switched between all news (default) and most interesting modes. The site features a news-recommendation engine, global real-time search and individual search for posts and comments on specific users' walls.

VK features two types of communities: groups are better suited for decentralised communities (discussion-boards, wiki-style articles, editable by all members, etc.); public pages are a news feed orientated broadcasting tool for celebrities and businesses. The two types are largely interchangeable, the main difference consists in default settings. Such community options are available as forum, chat, direct contact with the community manager.

User mentions and hashtags are supported. VK like and share buttons for posts, comments, media, and external sites operate in a similar way as Facebook, so share buttons automatically offer three options of sharing with public and fixing on your wall, sharing with friends, or through private message to a friend. Besides, for providing better feedback on the public interest of every post, the new feature of “clicked views counter” was introduced by the developers in March 2017; only the number of unique visitors after a click over the post is displayed.

Users can control their privacy and availability of their content within the network and on the Internet. VK is synchronized with other social networks: any news published on the VK wall may appear on Facebook or Twitter; editing post in VK does not change the post in Facebook or Twitter and vice versa; however, removing the news in VK will remove it from other social networks. This interconnection may be used as an effective tool by international marketers.

3.3. Catalonia and other top international destinations of Russian tourism in VKontakte.

Our analysis is focused on VK activity of the selected international tourism destinations - Turkey, Greece, Thailand, and Catalonia. The first three are in the list of top 10 international destinations for Russian tourists published by RosStat, 2017 (Table 2). Surprisingly some leading destinations are not present in VK social network (Cyprus and Spain, ranking 7th and 9th). Catalonia has been included into the list of the analysed destinations, instead of the absent in VK Spain, as it represents the 1st Spanish incoming tourism destination by the number of international tourists (Idescat, 2017), and it is the third most-visited tourist destination in the EU-28 as defined by Eurostat, 2017. Availability of an active official Russian-language account in VK, and geographical position of the University of Girona where the present thesis of Master in Tourism Administration and Planning is written, are the additional argument due to the managerial implications of the analysis which may contribute to the improvement of the local DMOs promotional strategies. Furthermore, Hays et al. (2013) employs the comparative content analysis of both national and regional tourism destinations.

Table 2. Top 10 countries visited by the Russian Federation travellers.

Position	Countries	2015	2016	Variation
1	Finland	3.066.658	2.894.394	-6%
2	China	1.284.324	1.676.214	31%
3	Estonia	1.476.915	1.511.413	2%
4	Poland	1.321.767	1.103.532	-17%
5	Germany	1.111.448	1.057.388	-5%
6	Thailand	675.089	866.597	28%
7	Cyprus	550.327	812.741	48%
8	Turkey	3.460.325	797.304	-77%
9	Spain	692.996	789.769	14%
10	Greece	633.585	782.476	23

Source: RosStat (12/8/2017)

http://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat_main/rosstat/en/main/

Content analysis of the official accounts of 4 top destinations with active VK accounts and with similar touristic appeals (“sun and sea” combined with the “outstanding cultural heritage”, UNWTO, 2015) has been adopted for representative comparison.

The open VK Community “Турция ♥ Turkey ♥ Turkiye” was created on 5/11/2011 (almost 6 years ago), it is the earliest adopter of Russian social media for tourism

promotion among the compared destinations. The VK activity is run by the DMO National Culture and Tourism Office situated in Moscow, and the account is mutually linked to the Russian-language web page www.tourismturkey.ru. The community amounts to 74408 followers, with 13642 overall posts published.

The Greek Government Organisation VK Community "Visit Greece" was created on 18/07/2013 (4 years ago). The activity is run by the DMO Greek National Tourism Organisation with Office in Moscow, and the VK account is also mutually linked with the Russian-language version of the official web page www.gnto.ru. The community has 4715 followers and 2602 posts published.

The Thai Government Organisation VK Community "Amazing Thailand" was created on 24/11/2015, (almost 2 years experience), and is run by the DMO Tourism Authority of Thailand with Office in Moscow. The account is mutually linked with the Russian-language version of the official page www.tourismthailand.ru. The total outcome for now is 12391 followers and 622 posts published.

The Government Organisation Community "Catalunya Experience (RU)" was created on 21/08/2014, thus has been present in VK for almost 3 years. The official DMO Catalan Tourist Board (CTB) is in charge of the account activity through its Office in Moscow. The profile is linked to the Catalan-language official website www.catalunya.com, with the option of selection of languages, but the perfectly edited and updated Russian-language version has no direct link or icon to the VK account which is interpreted as a neglect. 383 followers are achieved and 767 posts are published during 3 years of presence.

Figure 5. DMOs' logos in VKontakte.

 <p>Турция ♥ Turkey ♥ Türkiye Open community 74,612 members</p>	 <p>Греция Visit Greece Government Organization 4,715 followers</p>
 <p>Удивительный Таиланд Government Organization 12,391 followers</p>	 <p>Catalunya Experience (RU) Government Organization 383 followers</p>

According to the official site of the CTB (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2017), the body was created by the autonomous Government of Catalonia under Law 15/2007, of 5 December 2007, in conformity with the powers related to tourism conferred by article 171 of the Catalan Statute of Self-Government. It replaced the Catalan Tourism Consortium, formerly responsible for tourism issues, in early 2010. The purpose of the CTB is to promote Catalonia as a leading tourist destination based on quality and the social and economic profitability of the tourism industry. The CTB is part of the Ministry of Business and Knowledge. It draws its members from the Government of Catalonia, the General Council of the Catalan Chambers of Commerce, representing the private sector, from the tourism boards of the provincial councils of Barcelona, Tarragona, Lleida and Girona, and from the mixed public and private tourism board of the Catalan capital, Turisme de Barcelona, all of them supplying funds for the planned activities.

Its framework program and the main annual document Plan of Actions for 2017 CTB includes more than 30 traditional promotional actions in Russia such as workshops, press trips, road shows, business breakfasts, trades, fam trips and other; these

actions cover MICE, luxury, medical, snow, wellness, cultural, gastronomic, wine, wedding, family, active tourism, shopping, and city breaks to the Catalan capitals Girona, Lleida, Barcelona. Regarding our thesis objectives, remarkable in this Plan of Action is the Social Media Plan 2017 for Russia and Eastern Europe countries, which demonstrates understanding of the necessity of the strategic planning and good will, yet does not provide any additional information of actions so far.

The existence of well-developed and regularly updated Russian-language version of the official website and the active official account on the national n°1 social network VK is the best confirmation of interest in communication and further promotion on this target market.

As to the destination itself, Catalonia is a European geographic region and destination that covers an area of 32,107 km² and has 7,5 million inhabitants. It has a clear identity, based on its own history and language (Catalan) and distinct cultural, political, and legal traditions. It is a first-order worldwide tourist destination, and offers many attractions for all sorts of visitors, including beaches, culture, relaxation, nature, family holidays, sports, and business tourism.

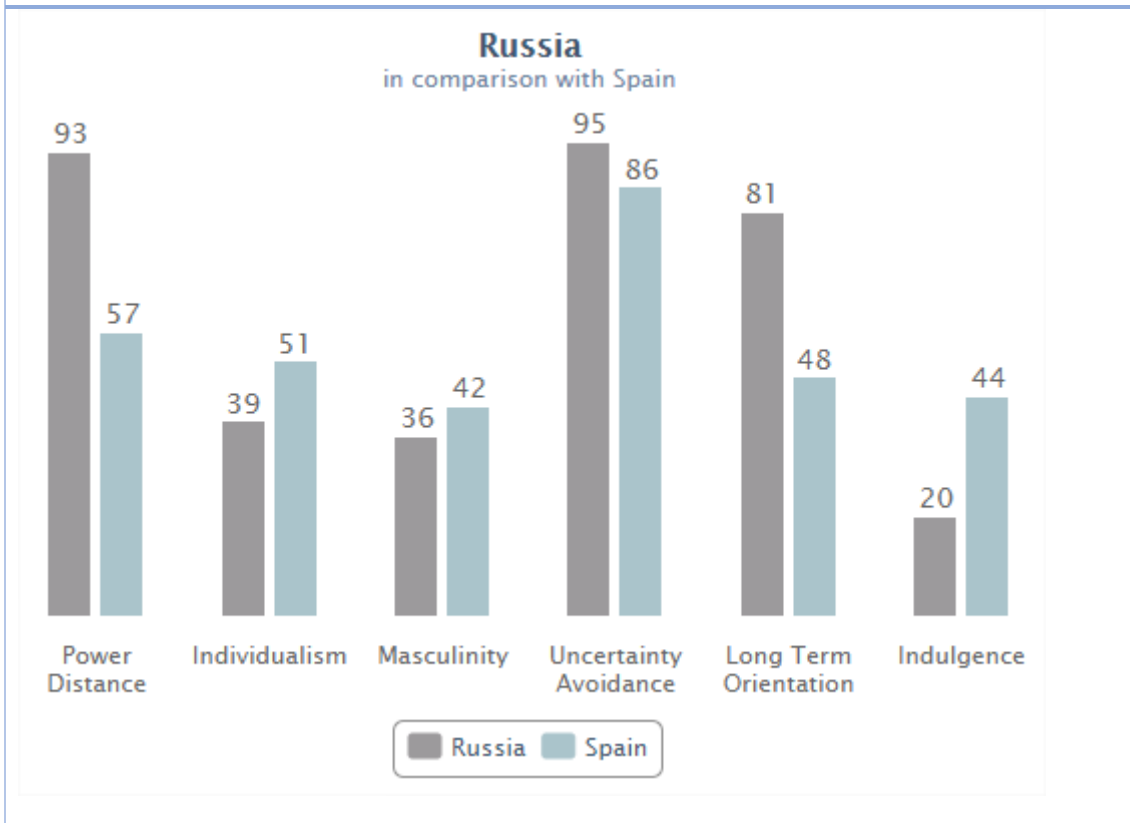
Even though Catalonia is a destination brand in its own right, drawing from the capital of Catalonia, Barcelona, it clearly is a multiscale tourism destination, where the regional brand acts as an umbrella brand that includes nine geographical or subregional brands: Barcelona, Catalunya Central, Costa Barcelona, Costa Brava, Costa Daurada, Pyrenees, Terres de l'Ebre, Terres de Lleida, and Val d'Aran; these tourist brands are linked to groups of bordering counties defining subregions with a relatively homogeneous tourist supply (Marine-Roig, Clavé, 2016).

3.4. Contrast of national culture dimensions.

Based on the academic argumentation of national culture dimensions (Hofstede et al., 2010) and under the supervision of the authors, a special software has been created and is publicly available at the website Geert Hofstede <https://geert-hofstede.com>, which helps to classify and compare different countries subjects of research, providing interpretation of scoring.

The Figure 6 contrasts the national culture dimensions of Russia and Spain, both relevant for our thesis as a target market and a country of a communicating tourism destination. It is obvious that differences exist and are to be taken into consideration for suitable promotional strategies related with appropriate stimuli and content creation, able to positively impact the consumer behaviour.

Figure 6. Russian national value dimensions in comparison with Spain.



Source: Hofstede, G. (25/5/2017)
<https://geert-hofstede.com/russia.html>

As far as the focus is on the target market, Hofstede's 6D national culture model determines Russian national culture dimensions as follows:

Power distance (Russia 93 vs. Spain 57 of 100). Russia, scoring 93, represents a huge discrepancy between the less and the more powerful people leading to a great importance of **status symbols**. Behaviour has to reflect and represent the status roles, real or aspired, in all areas of interactions: be it visits, negotiations or cooperation. In terms of communication strategies, the approach should be top-down and provide clear mandates for any task, call for action, with the subtle hint of status symbols.

Individualism (Russia 39 vs. Spain 51 of 100). While in Individualist societies people are supposed to look after themselves and their direct family only; in Collectivist societies people belong to 'in groups' that take care of them in exchange for loyalty. If Russians plan to go out with their friends they would literally say "We with friends" instead of "I and my friends", if they talk about brothers and sisters it may well be cousins, so a lower score of 39 even finds its manifestations in the language. Family, friends and not seldom the neighbourhood are extremely important to get along with everyday life's challenges. Thus, Interpersonal relationships are crucial in obtaining information or even getting introduced. With regard to effective social interaction, the most appropriate communication style is personal, authentic, and trustful, searching to stimulate recommendations through UGT and working through community engagement.

Masculinity (Russia 42 vs. Spain 36 of 100). Russia's relatively low score of 36 means that the dominant values in society are caring for others and quality of life. It

may surprise with regard to its preference for status symbols, but these are in Russia related to the high Power Distance. At second glance one can see, that Russians at workplace as well as when meeting a stranger rather modestly understate their personal achievements, contributions, or capacities. For effective communication strategies, it is to be considered that dominant behaviour is not appreciated among peers and quality of life caring messages are the most appropriate.

Uncertainty Avoidance (Russia 95 vs. Spain 86 of 100). Scoring 95 Russians feel very much threatened by ambiguous situations. Detailed planning is very common. Russians prefer to have context and background information. As long as Russians interact with people considered to be strangers they appear very formal and distant. At the same time formality is used as a sign of respect. In terms of implications for communication strategies, the marketers should provide extensive information about the destination, in accordance with previously studied informational needs, in Russian language and emphasizing friendliness and safety issues.

Long Term Orientation (Russia 81 vs. Spain 48 of 100). With a very high score of 81, Russia is definitely a country with a pragmatic mindset. In societies with a pragmatic orientation, people believe that truth depends very much on situation, context and time; they encourage thrift and efforts in modern education as a way to prepare for the future; they show an ability to adapt traditions easily to changed conditions, a strong propensity to save and invest, thriftiness and perseverance in achieving results. This dimension explains the expenditure rankings of Russian tourists and early planning; besides it prompts the messages of travelling/tourism/holidays/trip as a way to prepare for the future, combine affective with cognitive, traditional with emerging. Continuous display of attractiveness of a destination may create a need, convert it in a desirable objective.

Indulgence (Russia 20 vs. Spain 44 of 100). The restrained nature of Russian culture is easily visible through its very low score of 20 on this dimension. Societies with a low score in this dimension have a tendency to cynicism and pessimism. Also, in contrast to indulgent societies, restrained societies do not put much emphasis on leisure time and control the gratification of their desires. People with this orientation have the perception that their actions are restrained by social norms and feel that indulging themselves may be somewhat wrong. From the point of view of this dimension, communication strategies should be based on invitation to relax and suggesting convincing excuses for gratification of desires.

4. METHODOLOGY.

This thesis is exploratory in nature and adopts an **inductive** paradigm seeking to explore the communication strategies used by the top most visited by Russian tourists international destinations present on the leading national social media platform VKontakte, with the aim of identification of the best practices resulting in higher level of engagement, and further elaboration of recommendations for Catalan Tourist Board DMO, based on the empirical research supported by the academic literature.

Content analysis is selected as the preferred research method as it allows to use "a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text (posts), to describe trends in communication strategies, besides its pursuit is fundamentally empirical in orientation, exploratory, concerned with real phenomena, and predictive in intent" (Krippendorff, 1980, p.9, cited by Hays et al., 2013). Hence, it meets our objective of derivation of general principles and patterns from specific observations, and enables guidance of the selected DMO.

A comparative approach is employed not only to draw out similarities and differences, but also to "go beyond description toward the more fundamental goal of explanation", allowing the subjects being researched to "transfer experiences and learn from others" (Pearce and Buttler, 1993, p.32 cited by Hays et al., 2013). The principal focus of this study is the analysis and interpretation of data collected from the posts published by 4 international DMOs: Catalan Tourism Board, Turkish Culture and Tourism Office, Greek National Tourism Organisation, and Tourism Authority of Thailand, in their respective VK official accounts.

The research is complemented by the use of **secondary** sources (ETC and WTO reports, etc), to help benchmark performance and the activities in DMO marketing.

The pre-test has been undertaken, consisting in examination of the applicability of the measures developed by Hays et al. (2013) for Facebook and Twitter, for the Russian social networking platform VKontakte. Thus, the consistency of measures across the platforms is ensured in order to make valid comparisons and conclusions. The total of 7 categories containing 48 measures have been used for the content analysis: content, major theme, information type, interactivity, promotion, customer service and engagement.

The manual **data collection** starts with a selection of the most representative for the Russian outbound tourism destinations (Table 2), and search of their official accounts in VKontakte social networking service. The rationale behind choosing the top international destinations is that these destinations have well-established level of DMOs promoting their regions and attractions over a long-time period through sophisticated digital marketing strategies. Besides, this approach is adopted in the reviewed academic literature (Hays et al., 2013; Usakli et al, 2017).

As stated in the Presentation of the Case, our analysis is focused on VK activity of the selected international tourism destinations - Turkey, Greece, Thailand and Catalonia.

An initial scan of destinations' official websites has been employed, to obtain links to their official DMOs' accounts in VKontakte social media, in order to discard the unofficial accounts administrated by other entities. Keywords are used in combination with country or region names to locate official websites (tourism board/office/official tourism site, etc.). After confirming that websites were official, links of VK social media accounts are obtained. To confirm the authenticity of VK social media accounts, they are cross-checked with links on DMOs' official home pages used to

direct visitors to social media platforms. In case of Catalunya Experience (RU) which is connected with the official website from VK but does not have mutual link or icon, the validity is relied on the detailed description of the official profile provided by the community manager and the VK mark "government organisation" awarded after strict check-up procedure.

By the means of a non-probability purposive **sampling**, also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, **Catalan, Turkish, Greek and Thai** destinations **posts in VK** published from **1 June to 30 June 2017** have been selected. Specifically, we gather information on the **number and types of posts** published on DMO's Vkontakte accounts, and on the **user responses** elicited by the posts, for further determination of the best practices leading to higher engagement and elaboration of recommendations for Catalan Tourist Board DMO. The **month of June** is the same period studied by Hays et al. (2013), justifying "that the busy summer season would require increased marketing initiatives by DMOs and provide a large and diverse sample of social media contact to analyse". Examining the social media usage of DMOs for a total of 30 days (1 month) is also considered adequate by Usakli et al. (2017). Mariani et al. (2016) in their research point out that June is one of the month when the users engagement is the highest; besides in the formula calculating the Generic engagement for users activity, a monthly basis is applied.

A total of 266 social media postings in VKontakte (14 - Catalan Tourist Board, 192 - Turkish, 34 - Greek, 26 - Thai) are obtained and analysed each through 48 content analysis measures (Tables 3 and 4). It is considered an effective sample case, as it's representative of the topic of the study and the above mentioned academic sources.

The date of data collection is indicated for each DMO, as our content analysis is retrospective and social network is dynamic; thus, the only unchangeable information is the number of posts published within the past period of time and the content.

Coding is carried out in three steps: firstly, the relevant categories are identified in the academic literature and the pre-test of the consistency is done; secondly, individual coding of the VK posts is realised by two judges (the author and other independent expert) according to pre-established rules, procedures and training; and finally, examination of the categorization between both judges takes place; in case of divergences, an agreement through grounded discussion is reached. Due to the short nature of VKontakte posts, this research codifies entire posts, usually composed of a couple of sentences or/and visual content (photos, videos). Categories' measures are not mutually exclusive, so any post could be classified in several of them.

By employing both **quantitative and qualitative** approaches, our **analysis** seeks to gain a well-rounded understanding of the effectiveness of use of Russian social media potential among leading international DMOs. The qualitative approach is chosen as the primary research method for this study to analyse and describe how top international tourism authorities use social media to engage with consumers of the target market, and provide recommendations. The quantitative method is chosen to incorporate as much data and scope of social media activity as possible, and generate relevant statistics and graphics.

It is important to note that several spreadsheets containing formulas and functions have been developed specifically for this study using Microsoft Excel. These spreadsheets are utilized both in collecting and analysing data according to above described procedures. Measuring is supposed to corroborate what is successful versus what is futile, with a plenty of room for experimentation and improvement (Hays et al., 2013).

All the webpages, social media and network account and posts analysed in this work are in Russian, the only official language of the country, with the high rate of active speakers all over the world (Figures 1 and 2), being this by definition the target market.

The recommendations are specific for the DMO Catalan Tourist Board, in charge of promotion of Catalonia as a leading tourist destination based on quality and the social and economic profitability of the tourism industry.

Table 3. List of categories by measures used for the content analysis.

(adapted from Hays, 2013; Stepchenkova, 2013; Mariani, M., 2016; Usakli, 2017)

Part A - Official representation

A1	Official website of the destination indicated in VK account
A2	Icon VK/BK with direct link to the VK account on the official website
A3	Membership date
A4	Run by the public official body/DMO

Part B - Basic statistics

(from start of membership to collection date)

B1	Membership period, days/years
B2	Number of overall posts
B3	Number of followers

Part C - Content analysis statistics (derived from postings between 1-30/6/2017)

CONTENT category measures

C1	Number of posts between 1-30/6/2017
C2	Average number of daily posts
C3	Number of posts people tagged @
C4	Number of people tagged @
C5	Number of posts with a hashtag
C6	Number of Hashtags used
C7	Hashtags used #
C8	Number of posts including a link to a website
C9	Number of posts including a photo
C10	Number of photos posted
C11	Number of posts including a video
C12	Number of videos posted

MAJOR THEME category measures (not mutually exclusive)

C13	Natural attractions
C14	Historical monuments, spiritual centres
C15	Traditions, events
C16	Local cuisine
C17	Recreation facilities, shopping
C18	Friendliness of people
C19	Personal safety
C20	General (e.g "good morning")

INFORMATION TYPE category measures (not mutually exclusive)

C21	Number of posts providing historical / factual information
C22	Number of posts providing opinion / review / sensation
INTERACTIVITY category measures (not mutually exclusive)	
C23	Number of posts that directly ask questions to users
C24	Number of posts requesting feedback or call for action
C25	Number of posts requesting photos from users
C26	Number of posts requesting videos from users
PROMOTION category measures (not mutually exclusive)	
C27	Number of posts promoting an event
C28	Number of posts promoting a specific destination within the country
C29	Number of posts promoting an attraction or hotel
C30	Number of posts promoting a restaurant or local cuisine
C31	Number of posts promoting DMO's official website
C32	Number of posts promoting another website
C33	Number of posts promoting another social media outlet of DMO
C34	Name of the promoted social media outlet of DMO
CUSTOMER SERVICE category measures	
C35	Number of posts responding to criticism
C36	Number of posts responding to compliment
C37	Number of posts responding to an enquiry
ENGAGEMENT category measures	
C38	Number of posts that are liked
C39	Number of likes
C40	Number of posts that are shared
C41	Number of shares
C42	Number of posts with comment/reply
C43	Number of comments
C44	Number of total views of posts
C45	Average of views per post
C47*	Generic Engagement for users activity, monthly / FORMULA
C48**	Generic Involvement for users clicked views, monthly / FORMULA

Table 4. Results by categories by measures used for the content analysis.

List of categories by measures used for the content analysis (adapted from Hays, 2013; Stepchenkova, 2013; Mariani, M., 2016; Usakli, 2017)									
Part A - Official representation			▼ Turkey ▼			Visit Greece		Amazing Thailand	Catalunya Experience (RU)
A1	Official website of the destination indicated in VK account		www.tourismturkey.ru			www.gnto.ru		www.tourismthailand.ru	www.catalunya.com
A2	Icon VK/BK with direct link to the VK account on the official website		Si			Si		Si	No
A3	Membership date		5/11/2011			18/07/2013		24/11/2015	21/08/2014
A4	Run by the public official body/DMO		Culture and Tourism Office			Greek National Tourism Organisation		Tourism Authority of Thailand	Catalan Tourism Board (ACT)
Part B - Basic statistics (from start of membership to collection date)			▼ Turkey ▼			Visit Greece		Amazing Thailand	Catalunya Experience (RU)
B1	Membership period, days/years		06/08/2017	5.75 years		09/08/2017	4.06 years	10/08/2017	09/08/2017
B2	Number of overall posts		2102 days			1484 days		626 days	1085 days
B3	Number of followers		13642			2602		622	767
			74334			4679		12375	361
Part C - Content analysis statistics (derived from postings between 1-30/6/2017)			▼ Turkey ▼			Visit Greece		Amazing Thailand	Catalunya Experience (RU)
CONTENT category measures									
C1	Number of posts between 1-30/6/2017		192	100%		34	100%	26	14
C2	Average number of daily posts		6,4			1,1		0,9	0,5
C3	Number of posts people tagged @		0			0		0	0
C4	Number of people tagged @		0			0		0	0
C5	Number of posts with a hashtag		0			6		27	1
C6	Number of Hashtags used		0			4		5	3
C7	Hashtags used #		0			visitgreece.ru, нидиябезморя/ notasingledaywithoutsea, adultingin5words		FoodAmazing Thailand, TraditionsThailand, AdviceThailand, Places Thailand, ExcursionsThailand	codorniu, enoturisme, cavalovers
C8	Number of posts including a link to a website		9	5%		13	38%	0	13
C9	Number of posts including a photo		189	96%		33	97%	23	14
C10	Number of photos posted		512			55		65	24
C11	Number of posts including a video		3	2%		1	3%	3	1
C12	Number of videos posted		3			1		3	1
MAJOR THEME category measures (not mutually exclusive)									
C13	Natural attractions		52	27%		16	47%	11	2
C14	Historical monuments, spiritual centres		42	22%		11	32%	8	3
C15	Traditions, events		7	4%		4	12%	7	13
C16	Local cuisine		26	14%		5	15%	6	4
C17	Recreation facilities, shopping		18	9%		10	29%	13	2
C18	Friendliness of people		14	7%		2	6%	4	4
C19	Personal safety		11	6%		6	18%	3	0
C20	General (e.g. "good morning")		60	31%		3	9%	0	0
INFORMATION TYPE category measures (not mutually exclusive)									
C21	Number of posts providing historical / factual information		41	21%		30	88%	18	14
C22	Number of posts providing opinion / review / sensation		149	78%		19	56%	12	0
INTERACTIVITY category measures (not mutually exclusive)									
C23	Number of posts that directly ask questions to users		2	1%		8	24%	18	0
C24	Number of posts requesting feedback or call for action		0	0%		8	24%	13	0
C25	Number of posts requesting photos from users		0	0%		3	9%	1	0
C26	Number of posts requesting videos from users		0	0%		1	3%	1	0
PROMOTION category measures (not mutually exclusive)									
C27	Number of posts promoting an event		2	1%		3	9%	2	13
C28	Number of posts promoting a specific destination within the country		34	18%		25	74%	12	9
C29	Number of posts promoting an attraction or hotel		6	3%		3	9%	9	2
C30	Number of posts promoting a restaurant or local cuisine		8	4%		5	15%	6	2
C31	Number of posts promoting DMO's official website		1	1%		3	9%	0	0
C32	Number of posts promoting another website		8	4%		7	21%	0	12
C33	Number of posts promoting another social media outlet of DMO		0	0%		3	9%	0	0
C34	Name of the promoted social media outlet of DMO		-	-		Instagram		-	-
CUSTOMER SERVICE category measures									
C35	Number of posts responding to criticism		0			0		2	0
C36	Number of posts responding to compliment		0			0		5	0
C37	Number of posts responding to an enquiry		0			0		3	0
ENGAGEMENT category measures									
C38	Number of posts that are liked		192	100%		34	100%	26	13
C39	Number of likes		24.639			643		1380	55
C40	Number of posts that are shared		179	93%		30	88%	23	11
C41	Number of shares		1250			71		127	20
C42	Number of posts with comment/reply		150	78%		10	29%	21	1
C43	Number of comments		758			16		336	1
C44	Number of total views of posts		507.500			19.885		199.000	1.955
C45	Average of views per post		2.643	4%		585	12%	7.654	140
C47*	Generic Engagement for users activity, monthly / FORMULA		13.879			2.147		7.088	543
C48**	Generic Involvement for users clicked views, monthly / FORMULA		264.323			58.485		765.385	13.964

5. ANALYSIS.

The idea of the necessity of individual approach to the important tourism source national markets, expressed in the academic literature (de Mooij and Hofstede, 2011; Fotis, Buhalis, and Rossides, 2011; Mazanec et al., 2015; Whang, 2016), is confirmed by the fact that the most popular within Russian tourists international DMOs have Russian version of the up-to-date dynamic websites and active accounts in the n°1 social network of the country VKontakte.

The data of the selected 4 DMOs (Catalan Tourism Board, Turkish Culture and Tourism Office, Greek National Tourism Organisation, and Tourism Authority of Thailand), collected into a Excel worksheet (Tables 3 and 4), are interpreted according to 7 categories of Content analysis (adapted from Hays, 2013; Stepchenkova, 2013; Mariani, M., 2016; Usakli, 2017): content, major theme, information type, interactivity, promotion, customer service, engagement; each category includes several measures of content analysis, 48 in total. The analysis hereinafter is provided by categories' measures, outlining relevant data, good practices and recommendations, all based on the previously reviewed academic research and our empirical comparative content analysis, within the inductive paradigm.

Part A of our Table of content analysis of the posting in VK published by the compared leading internationals DMOs - Turkey, Greece, Thailand, and Catalonia - collects the Official representation data such as the name of VK account/community, official website of the destination indicated in VK account, icon VK/BK with direct link to the social network account on the official webpage, membership date, public official body/DMO in charge of the account. This part shows that all the destinations' VK accounts, except the Catalan, are mutually linked with the official Russian-language websites. In case of Catalonia the link from the VK account leads to the generic version of the official webpage in Catalan language, with the option of change of language; but there is no either icon or mention of the existing and active Russian-language VK account on the official Russian-language website. Our recommendation to CTB DMO is to correct this lapse, that is to provide mutual **direct links** on all the web 2.0 platforms, in order to increase the visibility of the active communication platforms, with the aim of further reach and impact on customers behaviour. The VK entry dates vary from 2011 to 2015. All the accounts are run by the corresponding official bodies/DMOs.

Part B of our Table provides such VK basic statistics as membership period, number of overall posts and number of followers. It is worth mentioning that all the analysed DMOs have several years of experience in this Russian social network (Turkey almost 6 years, Greece 4 years, Thailand almost 2 years, Catalonia almost 3 years); so, had time to **measure** success of the adopted communication strategies, benchmark and **react**. Here we observe the correlation between the years of presence in VK and the number of posts. What is remarkable is that the number of followers is not correlated with the membership period: still Turkey is the **leader** in both 6 years - 74334 followers, Thailand surpassed the more experienced competitors and in less than 2 years attracted 12375 followers, Greece in 4 years achieved 4679 followers, and Catalonia in almost 3 years gained 381 followers. Our recommendation to CTB DMO is to work out the **audience growth**, being this indicator considered one of the success enablers of interaction leading to higher users engagement (Hays et al., 2013; Usakli et al., 2017).

Part C of our Table reflects the VK content statistics of the selected period, divided into 7 categories composed of relevant measures (48 in total).

The 1st category - Content - comprises such measures as number of posts, average of daily posts, people tagged, hashtags, links to websites, photos and videos included. Analysed the data, the **leader of frequency** of publications is Turkey with an average of 6.4 daily posts, followed by Greece 1.1, Thailand 0.9 and Catalonia 0.5. None of the destinations **tag** people, that goes against academic conclusions of the positive impact of **influencers** involvement. Relevant thematic **hashtags** which help to organise and search the needed information are used mostly by Thailand with 5 hashtags used in 27 posts and Greece with 4 hashtags used in 6 posts, Turkey does not employ it at all, and Catalonia has only 1 post dedicated to a local wine provider with 3 hashtags related to the same topic of enotourism. The usage of active **links to other website** in posts is scarce, only Catalonia has 93% of its publications linked to its stakeholders'. Awareness of the positive impact of **visual material** on social media success, highlighted in academic research, is reflected in close to 100% presence of posts with photos of all DMOs' VK accounts; the highest video containing posts rate (12%) is Greek. The related set of recommendations to CTB DMO would be to increase the frequency of publications, to involve influencers for promotion of the destination and reflect it by tagging the posts, to introduce hashtags enabling comfortable search according to the informational needs, and to continue with good practice of visual content publishing.

The 2nd category - Major themes - is not mutually exclusive, so codification accepts mixed interpretations of any post as related to Natural attractions; Historical monuments, spiritual centres; Traditions, events; Local cuisine; Recreation facilities, shopping; Friendliness of people; Personal safety; General (e.g. "good morning"). Here the variety of communication strategies is significantly pronounced. The most balanced coverage of all the themes is observed in Greek account. Thai postings are also fairly distributed between all the themes, except for General theme. On the contrary, Turkish highest percentage of posts belong to General theme. Catalan 93% of posts are related with Traditions, current events (mostly local religious festivities with 1-2 days of anticipation). Natural attractions are remarked in 47% of Greek, 42% of Thai, 27% of Turkish and 14% of Catalan posts. Historical monuments, spiritual centres are reflected in 32% of Greek, 31% of Thai, 22% of Turkish and 21% of Catalan posts. Recreation facilities, shopping are exposed in 50% of Thai, 29% of Greek, 14% of Catalan and 9% of Turkish posts. Local cuisine theme is present in 29 % of Catalan, 23% of Thai, 15% of Greek, and 14% of Turkish posts. The rest of themes are also reflected, yet with lower frequency. The measures of the category Major themes correlate with the reviewed literature regarding national cultural values (Hofstede et al., 2010; Rhodes and Emery, 2003; Whang et al., 2016), consumer behaviour in decision-making and travel-planning (Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Fotis et al., 2011; Usakli et al., 2017), and both Russian tourism related internet searches and market segmentation by tribes (ETC and WTO, 2015; Kozinets, 2006; Pesonen, 2013). From this point of view, the recommendations as to the most successful communication strategy for positive image and visit intention should be based on meeting affective and cognitive needs, resolving uncertainty avoidance, highlighting status notions, enabling long-term orientation and indulgence, covering general statistics of Russian internet searches by theme (Figure 3: recreation, activities, attractions, food, people) and taking into account the proportion of "tribes" among the internet travelling audience and the respective informational needs. Particularly CTB DMO would benefit reducing the number of local event posts, maintaining the representative rate of local cuisine publications, and increasing publications about recreation options, enabling long- or mid-term planning.

The 3rd category - Information type - contains only two measures: posts providing historical/factual information and posts providing opinion/review/sensation. It is characteristic that there are posts containing both factual and emotional features at the same time. This classification is distributed as follows: Turkey 78% factual vs. 21% opinion & emotion, Greece 88% factual vs. 56% opinion & emotion, Thailand

69 factual vs. 46% opinion, Catalonia 100% factual. Usakli et al. (2017) states that well-established mature destinations provide mainly subjective information (opinions/reviews), whereas emerging destinations are more likely to provide factual information (historical data/events). In view of the previously remarked best practices grounded on the literature review, our recommendation to CTB DMO is to diversify the style of information presentation, applying both factual and opinion & emotion contents, in accordance with affective and cognitive needs of different segments of Russian tourists (Whang et al., 2016).

The 4th category - Interactivity - reflects number of posts that directly ask questions to followers, request feedback, call for action, asking for users' photos, videos. The leader of interactivity is Thailand, this destination makes use of all the above listed measures. Greece is also a good practitioner, with all the measures covered although with lower percentage over the total posts of the period. Turkey limits its interaction with daily "Good morning" and "Good night". And finally, Catalonia does not interact requesting feedback or calling for actions at all. In this regard, web 2.0 in general and social media in particular by definition are enablers of collaboration, exchange, interactive content creation (Cohen, 2011; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014), thus the DMOs ignoring interactivity misuse the potential of these dynamic peer-to-peer platforms. The next recommendation to CTB DMO is to publish the call for action posts, including request for opinion, information, photos, videos, suggesting the best practices outlined by Mariani et al. (2016) such as opinion polls (e.g., asking to indicate in comments which of the presented photos/images the users would choose as a cover or choose one of the 4 photos corresponding to your perfect day in a destination), quizzes (e.g., asking for etymology of a word related with a local tourism product), games. "Communication, collaboration, education and entertainment" are the basis of successful social media activity and engagement (Brake and Safko, 2009). From the point of view of the national culture values (Hofstede et al., 2010), the measure of Interactivity is relevant for meeting the Power distance high score, requiring clear mandates and call for action; at the same time Collectivism suppose trustful interpersonal relationships in spreading information (UGT). This category goes in line with the Russian touristic tribes of "guru" and "immersive explorers", who search for interaction and immersions with local agents.

The 5th category - Promotion - demonstrates that all the DMOs promote something, to a greater or lesser extent, may it be events, specific destinations within the region/country, attractions, hotels, restaurants, local cuisine, DMO's official website, external websites, other social media outlets/channels of DMO. The strategy of Turkey, Greece and Thailand DMOs coincide in the major rate of promotion of specific destinations within the area. Catalonia is the only destination promoting local events in 93% of publications, which shows a certain one-sidedness of the communication and marketing strategy. On the contrary, Greece has all the category's measures covered, and is the only one promoting another DMO's social media channel (Instagram). So, our recommendations to CTB DMO is to effectively use the traditional marketing facet of social media, taking advantage of the wide audience accessibility and low cost of the promotional actions. Besides, taking in consideration the Long-term orientation of Russian society (Hofstede et al., 2010), provide information with time margin for planning. In terms of tribes, it would be interesting to present the corresponding tourism products and services.

The 6th category - Customer service - embrace such measures as responding to criticism, compliment or enquiry. The only destination that supports and replies customers' concerns is Thailand. This practice is considered innovative and desirable by the academic literature as represent a kind of tool for management of engagement and reputation, especially helpful in cases of reputation crisis related with natural disasters or hostility incidents (Usakli et al., 2017). In addition, such information exchange option as forum Discussion Board is available in all DMOs' VK accounts,

except the Catalan. Our recommendation to CTB DMO is to start introducing customer service elements and activate the Discussion Board within the VK account.

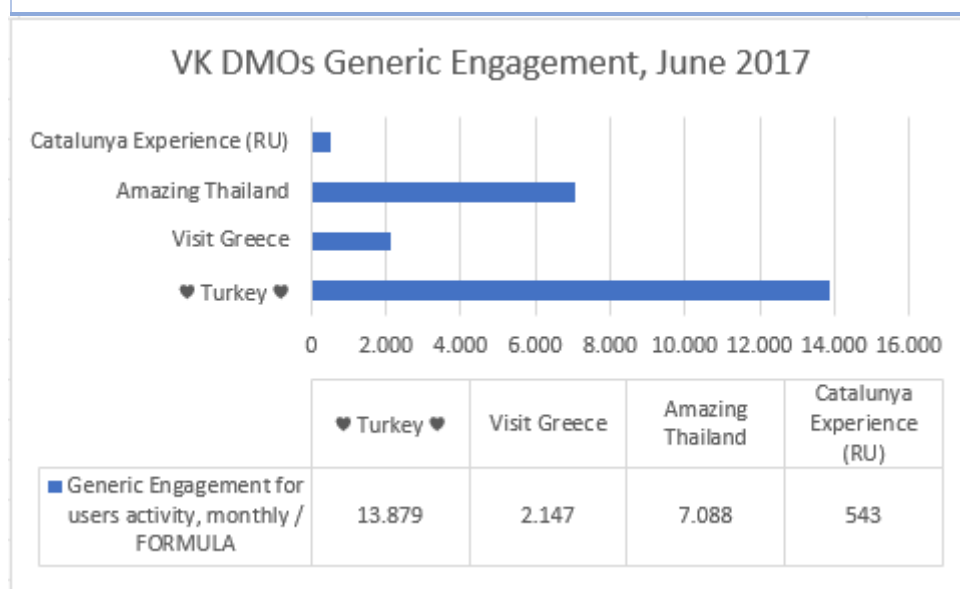
The 7th category - Engagement - takes into consideration **social exchange** theory manifestations (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959; Foa and Foa, 1980; Mariani et al., 2016): likes, shares, and comments; besides the additional measures of total clicked views per post and average clicked views, both by unique user, are introduced as revealing the part of the involved (cognitively) yet not engaged (cognitively + emotionally + behaviourally) audience. Back to the academic definitions, while **engagement** consists of cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions, and "boost loyalty, trust and evaluations" (Harrigan et al., 2017); **involvement** is limited to a cognitive component and reflects a customer's "perceived relevance based on his needs, values, interests", and is commonly defined as an "antecedent of customer engagement" (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Zaichkowsky, 1985; So et al., 2014). Thus, by definition we can consider the clicked posts' views as a cognitive involvement performance, relevant to the customers' informational needs and representing a conscious effort in external information search.

The formula for calculating "Generic Engagement for users activity calculated on a monthly basis" is:

$(\text{Likes} + \text{Comments} + \text{Shares}) / \text{Total posts} \times 100$ (Mariani et al., 2016);

it represents the average reactions of the users on the posts of the period, and it is not normalised by the fan-base size for bias avoidance. According to this formula (Figure 7), the leader of the generic engagement is Turkey (13.879), followed by Thailand (7.088), Greece (2.147) and Catalonia (543).

Figure 7. VK DMOs' engagement results.

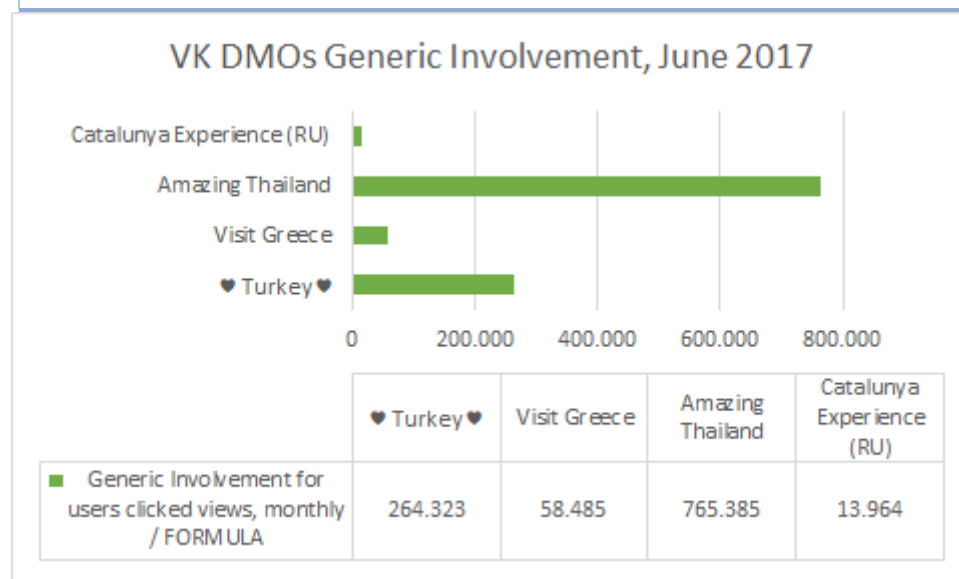


In conformity with the logics of the formula of Generic Engagement, we introduce the formula of Generic Involvement as an average of the clicked views of the posts of the period:

$\text{Clicked Views} / \text{Total posts} \times 100$.

The results of this formula reveal the leading position of the most interactive Thailand (765.385), followed at important distance by Turkey (264.323), Greece (58.485) and finally Catalonia (13.964), as the Figure 8 shows.

Figure 8. VK DMOs' involvement results.



In view of these analysis results, it can be recommended to carefully **plan, provide** and **measure** a balanced coverage of **all** the previous **categories** of the list - content, major theme, engagement, interactivity, promotion, and customer service, as all of them contribute to the index of users' reactions (likes, shares, comments, views).

Summarising the analysed DMOs activity in Russian social network VK, the resulting profiles of communication strategies are the following:

Turkey - large audience, frequent posting, high definition photos, no people/influencers tagged, no thematic hashtags, few links to external websites; major themes in order of posts numerosity: general, nature, historical monuments, local cuisine, recreation facilities/shopping, friendliness of people, personal safety and traditions/ events; emotional over factual information type; interactiveness limited to daily "Good morning" and "Good night" messages; promotes mostly specific destinations within the country, followed at some distance by national cuisine, attractions and other external sites, does not promote its own other social media channels; no customer service is suggested in publications, still the community has an active forum Discussion Board for exchanging opinions between the members; **1st in customers engagement - 2nd in customers involvement** (of 4 compared DMOs, Figures 7 and 8).

Greece - moderate audience, regular frequency posting, high definition photos, no people tagged, some thematic hashtags used, several links to external websites; major themes in order of posts numerosity: national attractions, historical monuments, recreation facilities, personal safety, local cuisine, traditions/events, general, friendliness of people; rather balanced information type with slight prevalence of factual over emotional; interactive mainly asking questions or requesting users feedback; promotes mostly specific destinations within the country, followed by external websites as reposts many interesting publications related with the destination from other sources, local cuisine, and then with the same percentage of frequency events, attractions, DMO's official site, and another DMO's social

channel (Instagram), being the only DMO covering all the possible measures of promotional potential of social media according to our categorisation; no customer service is suggested in publications, still the community has an active forum Discussion Board for exchanging opinions between the members with participation of the administrator; **3rd in customers engagement - 3rd in customers involvement** (of 4 compared DMOs, Figures 7 and 8).

Thailand - growing audience, moderate frequency of posting, photos, no people tagged, systematic use of thematic hashtags, no links to external websites; major themes in order of posts numerosity: recreation facilities/shopping, natural attractions, historical monuments, traditions/events, local cuisine, friendliness of people, personal safety, no general; close to absolute balance of factual and emotional information type; the most interactive of all the compared DMOs, actively asking questions, calling for action, requesting photos and videos, suggesting quizzes, tests (e.g., Whats is your type of traveller?), public polls (e.g., What is your ideal holiday? to choose 1 of 4 suggested photos and reply in comments); promotes specific destinations within the country, closely followed by attractions and local cuisine, and finally events, with no place for DMO's official website, other DMO's social media channels or external webpages; the only DMO providing a kind of customer service replying customers' concerns, in addition the forum Discussion Board for exchanging opinions between the members is available; **2nd in customers engagement - 1st in customers involvement** (of 4 compared DMOs, Figures 7 and 8).

Catalonia - small audience, low frequency of posting, photos, no people/influencers tagged, seldom use of thematic hashtags, almost all postings linked to external websites; major themes in order of posts numerosity: 93% traditions/events (mainly religious, local, with 1-2 days of anticipation), local cuisine, friendliness of people, historical monuments, natural attractions, recreation facilities/shopping; 100% factual information type with absent emotional aspect; promotes majoritarilly local events (religious festivities) and by means of it specific regional destinations, closely followed by promotion of external websites, and then at some distance by attractions and local cuisine; surprisingly the up-to-date Russian version of the official website is not promoted, nor other DMO's social media channel; neither customer service is provided nor Discussion Board for information exchange between the community members is available; **4th in customers engagement - 4th in customers involvement** (of 4 compared DMOs, Figures 7 and 8). According to the reviewed academic literature, the communication strategy of the Catalan DMO in VKontakte social network may be characterised as proper of an emergent not mature destination (Usakli et al., 2017), with the clear signs of conflicting relationship between corporate and social media cultures, deficient usage of innovative communication tools, lack of knowledge base, which results in ad-hoc decision making (Munar, 2012; Mariani et al., 2016; Gretzel et al., 2006; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Concluding, through the critical analysis of the communication strategy of the Catalan Tourism Board, in comparison with other leading international DMOs, the following recommendations has been developed, according to the identified international best practices (described in academic literature and corroborated empirically), leading to higher users engagement and involvement:

The **1st recommendation** to CTB DMO (based on the comparative content analysis of "Official representation" is to provide **mutual direct links** on all the web 2.0 platform (official website, VKontakte, Instagram, Facebook), in order to increase the visibility of the active communication platforms, with the aim of further reach and impact on customers behaviour (Hays, et al., 2013; Oviedo-García et al., 2014).

The **2nd recommendation** to CTB DMO (based on the comparative content analysis of "Basic statistics" and following "Interactions" and "Engagement" categories) is to work out the **audience growth**, being this indicator considered one of the success enablers of interaction leading to higher users engagement (Hays et al., 2013; Usakli et al., 2017).

The **3rd recommendation** to CTB DMO (based on the comparative content analysis of "Content" category) is to increase the **frequency of publications**, to involve **influencers** for promotion of the destination and reflect it by **tagging** the posts, to introduce **hashtags** enabling comfortable search according to the informational needs, and to continue with good practice of **visual content publishing** (Hays et al., 2013; Stepchenkova et al., 2013; Mariani et al., 2016)

The **4th recommendation** to CTB DMO (based on the comparative content analysis of "Major themes" category) is meeting **affective** and **cognitive needs** of the travelling community, resolving uncertainty avoidance, highlighting status notions, enabling long-term orientation and indulgence, covering general statistics of Russian internet searches by theme (Figure 3: recreation, activities, attractions, food, people) and taking into account the **proportion of "tribes"** among the internet travelling audience and the respective informational needs (50-60% Rookies search for "must see", growing 25-35% Gurus for trendy "niche" products and itineraries, 10-20% for local immersive experiences; 5% for luxury lifestyle). Particularly beneficial would be reducing the number of local event posts, maintaining the representative rate of local cuisine publications, and increasing publications about recreation options, enabling long- or mid-term planning (Hofstede et al., 2010; ETC, and WTO, 2015; Whang et al., 2016; Usakli, 2017; Kozinets, 2006; Pesonen, 2013).

The **5th recommendation** to CTB DMO (based on the comparative content analysis of "Information type" category) is to diversify the style of information presentation, applying **both factual** (historical events, local fests, etc) and **opinion & emotion** contents, in accordance with affective and cognitive needs of different segments of Russian tourists, and reducing the typical for emerging destination factual information predominance (Whang et al., 2016; Usakli 2017).

The **6th recommendation** to CTB DMO (based on the comparative content analysis of "Interactivity" category) is to publish the **call for action** posts, including request for opinion, information, photos, videos, suggesting the **best practices** outlined by Mariani et al. (2016) such as **opinion polls** (e.g., asking to indicate in comments which of the presented photos/images the users would choose as a cover or choose one of the 4 photos corresponding to your perfect day in a destination), **quizzes** (e.g., asking for etymology of a word related with a local tourism product), **games**. "**Communication, collaboration, education and entertainment**" are the basis of successful social media activity and engagement (Brake and Safko, 2009). From the point of view of the **national culture values** (Hofstede et al., 2010), the measure of **Interactivity** is relevant for meeting the **Power distance** high score, requiring clear mandates and call for action; at the same time **Collectivism** suppose trustful interpersonal relationships in spreading information through user generated content (Wang et al., 2002; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Fotis et al., 2011).

The **7th recommendation** to CTB DMO (based on content analysis of "Promotion" category) is to effectively use the traditional marketing facet of social media, diversifying contents, and taking advantage of the **wide audience** accessibility and **low cost** of the **promotional** actions (Tham, 2013). Besides, taking in consideration the **Long-term orientation** of Russian society (Hofstede et al., 2010), it is necessary to provide information with time margin for planning.

The **8th recommendation** to CTB DMO (based on content analysis of "Customer service" category) is to start introducing **customer service** elements (responding to criticism, compliment or enquiry) and activate the Discussion Board within the VK account which enables **UGT**, personal **interaction between users**, and **trustful bidirectional** relationship between **users and organisations** (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010).

The **9th recommendation** to CTB DMO (based on content analysis of "Engagement" category) is to foster customer engagement in each of its five manifestations **enthusiasm, attention, absorption, interaction** and **identification** (So et al., 2014; Harrigan et al., 2017); in view of this carefully **plan, provide** and **measure** a balanced coverage of **all** the previous **categories** of the list - content, major theme, engagement, interactivity, promotion, and customer service, as all of them contribute to the index of users' reactions (likes, shares, comments, views) (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959; Foa and Foa, 1980; Mariani et al., 2016). Being customer engagement "the most important purpose of the social media, from the business point of view" (Brake and Safko, 2009), "boosting loyalty, trust and brand evaluations" (Harrigan et al., 2017); and involvement "an antecedent of customer engagement" (So et al., 2014), these measures are recognised the main **metrics of success of social media strategy in academic and empirical research**.

With a deeper focus on **national cultural values** (Hofstede et al., 2010) of Russian outbound tourism market, the recommendations for appropriate **content creation** and communication style are the following. High level of power distance requires **clear** but respectful **mandates, calls for action** and presence of **status symbols**. Low Individualism supposes success of social media group communication, social exchange and **interpersonal relationships** are crucial for this dimension; with regard to effective social interaction, the most appropriate communication style is personal, authentic, trustful, **careful to user**, rather implicit, searching to **stimulate recommendations through UGT** and working through **community engagement**. Low Masculinity implies **quality of life** illustrating posts, **caring for others (family, friends)** messages, **subtle** rather than dominant rhetoric. High Uncertainty avoidance score demands **context** and **background information**, thus it is important to inform the users **learning** about their **preferences** and informational needs (for example, asking questions, observing reactions or consulting professional reports of ETC, UNWTO, etc), emphasizing **friendliness** and **safety** issues. High Long-time orientation prompts the messages of travelling/tourism/holidays/trip as a way to prepare for the **future**, combine **affective with cognitive**, traditional with emerging; continuous display of attractiveness of a destination all-year-round may **create a need**, convert it in a desirable objective, **facilitate planning**. Low Indulgence rate highlights the restrained nature of Russian tourists, requiring **invitation to relax** and suggesting convincing **excuses for gratification** of desires.

From the point of view of **segmentation of Russian outbound tourism market into "tribes"**, it's useful to remember composition in percent and corresponding effective **marketing stimuli** (ETC and UNWTO, 2015): 50-60% ↓ (Rookies) respond to "Great experiences, well-known places and Russian connection"; 25-35% ↑ (Guru) are receptive to "Travelling at your own pace, to the places you want to see, with the locals you want to meet – all with comfortable hotels and resorts"; 10-20% ↑ (Immersive Explorer) positively react on "Experience as much as possible of what the destination has to offer. Hang out with the locals and try the local cuisine"; 5% (Wealthy World Citizen) like "Savour the best the world has to offer. Travel from start to finish in a seamless experience of style and luxury to the most unique resorts in the world."

Overall, the success of a destination communication strategies is to be regularly measured; based on benchmarking, it should lead to the own best practice and ways of improvement of engagement and involvement metrics.

And, to crown the analysis part, we corroborate our findings and recommendations with the relevant cites determining successful social media marketing activity from the academic literature.

“Information presentation, collaboration, communication, interactivity and transactions”.

(Gretzel et al., 2016)

“Be active, be interesting, be humble, be informal and be honest”.

(Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010)

“Attract users, engage users interest and participation, retain users and build loyalty, learn about users’ preferences, provide relevant customised information”.

(Hays et al., 2013)

6. CONCLUSIONS.

This explorative research analyses how leading international Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) - Turkish Culture and Tourism Office, Greek National Tourism Organisation, Tourism Authority of Thailand, and our regional Catalan Tourism Board (CTB) - use Russian social media to market and promote their destinations. By means of methodology of comparative content analysis of the above mentioned DMOs' publications in Russian n°1 website and social network VKontakte (VK), carried out through 7 categories including 48 measures of content - content, major theme, information type, interactivity, promotion, customer service and engagement - the success measurement metrics are suggested, best practices identified and recommendations to our CTB case study formulated.

6.1. Contribution.

In response to the academic call for additional research, our thesis contributes to cover the gap of the cross-cultural empirically-based tourism research of the effective use of social media.

Focused on the activity of the leading international Destination Marketing Organisations (DMO) in the national n°1 social media platform VKontakte, using the method of content analysis, this study provides insights and guidelines to communication strategies for the maximum engagement with Russian consumers in accordance to their special informational needs based on the national culture values and segmentation into travel "tribes".

Additionally, our research combines both directions: the consumer-related, centred on the use and impact of social media on travellers' decision-making and planning processes; and the supplier-related focused on the promotion, management, and research functions.

The results of our research are helpful for tourism destinations and their marketers in charge of communication in Russian social media, enabling them to fine-tune their campaigns to the peculiarities of the target country.

6.2. Findings and recommendations.

The most popular within Russian tourists international DMOs have Russian version of the up-to-date dynamic websites and active accounts in the n°1 social network of the country VKontakte, demonstrating awareness of the necessity of individual approach to the important tourism source national markets, expressed in the academic literature (de Mooij and Hofstede, 2011; Fotis, Buhalis, and Rossides, 2011; Mazanec et al., 2015; Whang, 2016).

The peculiarities of Russian information search are characterised by the described in the thesis national culture values rooted in history, by RuNet specifics such as the language and social media channels different from the global leaders, and by tourism market segmentation into tribes according to travel preferences, determining different marketing stimuli receptiveness.

With focus on the **national cultural values** (Hofstede et al., 2010) of Russian outbound tourism market, the recommendations for appropriate **content creation** and communication style are the following. High level of power distance requires **clear** but respectful **mandates, calls for action** and presence of **status symbols**. Low Individualism supposes success of social media group communication, social exchange and **interpersonal relationships** are crucial for this dimension; with

regard to effective social interaction, the most appropriate communication style is personal, authentic, trustful, **careful to user**, rather implicit, searching to **stimulate recommendations through UGT** and working through **community engagement**. Low Masculinity implies **quality of life** illustrating posts, **caring for others (family, friends)** messages, **subtle** rather than dominant rhetoric. High Uncertainty avoidance score demands **context** and **background information**, thus it is important to inform the users **learning** about their **preferences** and informational needs (for example, asking questions, observing reactions or consulting professional reports of ETC, UNWTO, etc), emphasizing **friendliness** and **safety** issues. High Long-time orientation prompts the messages of travelling/tourism/holidays/trip as a way to prepare for the **future**, combine **affective with cognitive**, traditional with emerging; continuous display of attractiveness of a destination all-year-round may **create a need**, convert it in a desirable objective, **facilitate planning**. Low Indulgence rate highlights the restrained nature of Russian tourists, requiring **invitation to relax** and suggesting convincing **excuses for gratification** of desires.

From the point of view of **segmentation of Russian outbound tourism market into "tribes"** (ETC and UNWTO, 2015), it's useful to remember composition in percent and corresponding effective **marketing stimuli**. So, 50-60% ↓ (Rookies) respond to the messages promoting well-known places, must-see, Russian connections and great experiences; 25-35% ↑ (Guru) are receptive to discovering new places off-the-beaten track still accommodated at comfortable hotels and resorts; 10-20% ↑ (Immersive Explorer) positively react on immersion into local environment; 5% (Wealthy World Citizen) prefer luxury and exclusiveness.

Undoubtedly, national cultures' dimensions give an important clue on not only how to expose the maximum of consumers to a source of information with a one-fits-all message, but foremost how to build up the communication strategies, create quality content, fitting themes, using appropriate key-words, styles and interaction techniques, covering the identified travellers' segments, which is extremely important in the context of our case study.

In spite of national cultural differences between the countries and peculiarities of Russian internet, the main measures of content analysis developed by Hays et al. (2013) for Facebook and Twitter have been experimentally recognised applicable for the Russian social networking platform VKontakte. Although the measures are valid for codification and comparison, the resulting recommendations to Catalan Tourism Board are formulated taking into consideration the national values and peculiarities. Below is the best practices and recommendations list, ordered by the analysed content categories:

- OFFICIAL REPRESENTATION: to provide **mutual direct links** on all the web 2.0 platform (official website, VKontakte, Instagram, Facebook), in order to increase the visibility of the active communication platforms, with the aim of further reach and impact on customers behaviour;
- BASIC STATISTICS: to work out the **audience growth**, being this indicator considered one of the success enablers of interaction leading to higher users;
- CONTENT: to increase the **frequency of publications**, involve **influencers/"adprosumers"** for promotion of the destination and reflect it by **tagging** the posts, introduce **hashtags** enabling comfortable search according to the informational needs, and to continue with a good practice of **visual content publishing**;
- MAJOR THEME: to meet **affective** and **cognitive needs** of the travelling community, resolving uncertainty avoidance, highlighting **status** notions, enabling long-term orientation and indulgence, covering general statistics of Russian internet searches by theme (Figure 3: recreation, activities,

attractions, food, people) and taking into account the **proportion of "tribes"** among the internet travelling audience and the respective informational needs (50-60% Rookies search for "must see", growing 25-35% Gurus for trendy "niche" products and itineraries, 10-20% for local immersive experiences; 5% for luxury lifestyle). Particularly beneficial would be reducing the number of local event posts, maintaining the representative rate of local cuisine publications, and increasing publications about recreation options, enabling long- or mid-term planning;

- **INFORMATION TYPE:** to diversify the style of information presentation, applying **both factual** (historical events, local fests, etc) and **opinion & emotion** contents, in accordance with affective and cognitive needs of different segments of Russian tourists, and reducing the typical for emerging destination factual information predominance;
- **INTERACTIVITY:** to encourage the user generated content, to publish the **call for action** posts, including request for opinion, information, photos, videos, suggesting the **best practices** such as **opinion polls** (e.g., asking to indicate in comments which of the presented photos/images the users would choose as a cover or choose one of the 4 photos corresponding to your perfect day in a destination), **quizzes** (e.g., asking for etymology of a word related with a local tourism product), **games**. **"Communication, collaboration, education and entertainment"** are the basis of successful social media activity and engagement (Brake and Safko, 2009).
- **PROMOTION:** to effectively use the traditional marketing facet of social media, diversifying contents, and taking advantage of the **wide audience** accessibility and **low cost** of the **promotional** actions. Besides, taking in consideration the Long-term orientation of Russian society (Hofstede et al., 2010), it is necessary to provide information with time margin for planning.
- **CUSTOMER SERVICE:** to start introducing **customer service** elements (responding to criticism, compliment or enquiry) and activate the Discussion Board within the VK account which enables **UGT**, personal **interaction between users**, and **trustful bidirectional** relationship between **users and organisations** (Deighton and Kornfeld, 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010).
- **ENGAGEMENT** to foster customer engagement in each of its five manifestations **enthusiasm, attention, absorption, interaction and identification** (So et al., 2014; Harrigan et al., 2017); **in view of this carefully plan, provide and measure a balanced coverage of all the previous categories of the list - content, major theme, engagement, interactivity, promotion, and customer service, as all of them contribute to the index of users' reactions (likes, shares, comments, views)**. Being customer engagement "the most important purpose of the social media, from the business point of view" (Brake and Safko, 2009), "boosting loyalty, trust and brand evaluations" (Harrigan et al., 2017); and involvement "an antecedent of customer engagement" (So et al., 2014), **these measures are recognised the main metrics of success of social media strategy in academic and empirical research.**

Generic Engagement and Generic Involvement can be considered the success metrics. The results reflect the grade of employment of 7 categories consisting of 48 measures of content analysis developed by the academic literature based on the empiric research: the more balanced coverage get the measures of content, major theme, information type, interactivity, promotion, customer service and engagement are covered, the higher are the rates. Thus, **the list of categories for content analysis may be used as a checklist of good practice across social media platforms.**

The formulas for calculation of Generic Engagement and Generic Involvement are not normalised by the number of followers, as it is a bias for retrospective analysis due to its dynamic nature and segmentation into active/passive social networks users. Still the number of followers indirectly impacts the results of success metrics, as the more members has a community - the more likes, shares, comments and clicked views it gains, in some cases independently on the proportion of the directly reacting audience.

ROI, which the majority of enterprises use as an indicator of success, is difficult to measure in case of official tourism boards, as far as they are not commercial companies dedicated to direct sales.

Calculated on the basis of findings in academic literature and our empirical research, the highest level of users engagement is achieved by the Turkish Culture and Tourism Office, while the most interactive is Tourism Authority of Thailand, followed by Greek National Tourism Organisation. Catalan Tourism Board activity in VK social network may be characterised as a distinctive of an emergent rather than mature destination, with 100% of factual information posts and non-existent interaction; while others actively manage and make grow their social media community, the DMO of our case study has simply joined and publish from time to time the same themes' contents or duplicate those already published in the more static platforms, perhaps because of lack of support, knowledge or interest to maintain the account and effectively engage with the audience.

As to the common features of VKontakte activity of the compared international destinations, all are run by the official bodies, are aware of the positive effect of the visual content (mostly photos), use VK social network as a traditional marketing tool focused on advertising and a top-down approach, allowing little spontaneous user generated content and lacking customer service. All the compared DMOs have from 2 to 6 years of presence in the Russian VKontakte social media, so had time to measure success of the adopted communication strategies, benchmark and react. Measuring is supposed to corroborate what is successful versus what is futile, with a plenty of room for experimentation and improvement in the highly competitive tourism industry.

As far as managerial implications are concerned, the task of the communication manager is to adapt the communication strategies to the information search peculiarities of each its target market, and to encourage the UGC creation, for higher engagement and further impact on the consumer behaviour and sales growth. Comparative approach is highly recommended, as DMOs need to be up to date and understand how other tourism professionals and organisations are implementing social media strategies to learn from their achievement. Special attention is to be paid to the misuse of the great potential of social media, "appointing counteracting" the formal or monologue style or just duplication of contents of the traditional marketing sources (Hays et al., 2013). Poor levels of formalization and the lack of a knowledge base result in ad-hoc decision making (Munar, 2012; Mariani et al., 2016; Gretzel et al., 2006; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). In view of this, strategic social media plan should exist and the marketing actions or publications should be planned and measured. While comparison with other destinations is positive, analysis of the own evolution is decisive.

6.3. Limitations and areas of further research.

Although the objective of this thesis is to carry out content analysis of the publications of the selected DMOs in the Russian VK social network, in order to identify best communication practices and draw up corresponding recommendations, the face to

face semi-structured interviews with DMOs could contribute to a deeper insight on the different strategies and results. In this regard, for better understanding of how and why certain social media initiatives are chosen and implemented or dismissed, the list of questions may be adopted from Hays et al. (2013), which includes open-ended questions about such key issues as the employed strategies, tools, personnel involved, leaders support, funding, relationship with tradition marketing structure and budgeting, content nature and reasons, success measurement metrics, the biggest success/failure, plans for future, targets, ROI. Still the original model admits that, as in any interview process, the qualitative nature and policies of each organisation may result in questionable validity, subjective opinions, or biased responses, this kind of interview would suggest a broader vision of the policies determining the final effectiveness of the destination marketing strategies.

The comparative content analysis employed in this thesis would ideally benefit from a longer timeframe, and a larger sample size, with more leading international DMOs' accounts studied.

Repeating the similar study of the recent period in future, would most likely yield significantly different results, due to the constantly evolving nature of technology and social media. The list of categories' measures, best practices and recommendations would be expanded.

Special softwares (NVivo, Atlas.ti, QDA Miner) could be useful for the future research of big data of the Russian social networking service VKontakte, for the deeper analysis of the content through data mining, including more DMOs' accounts and larger periods of study, with the aim of research of evolution of the marketing and communication strategies, and evaluation of engagement results.

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