# THE SOCIAL MEDIA FACTOR IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM*

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## ABSTRACT

Tourism and religion have been in co-operation with each other due to the"Hajj pilgrimage" throughout history. The concept of religious tourism of today is based on this co-operation. All sectors of tourism, including religious tourism, need publicity first and then to market their destinations and the travel programs for survival. The emerging "social media networks " that appeared after the developments in Internet technology are thought to be useful tools in both fields. Scientific researches have discovered a strong relationship between the use of social media and consumers' purchasing decisions or renunciation. This relationship can be used as an efficient support in promoting and marketing of destinations and tour programs in religious tourism industry. According to reseachers, people, who share their past travel experiences with friends and relatives on the social media, can be effective on the travel plans of others, from choosing destinations to hotels and restaurants. Social media is seen as a great tool of promotion and marketing for all kinds of businesses but like any other tools, social media have useful and harmful aspects. If they are used cleverly, social media can carry businesses to distant horizons beyond their imaginations but improper use of social media can do more harm than good. There is no study which examines the role of social media in promoting and development of religious tourism. The purpose of this study is to research the importance of the role that social media can play in the development and promotion of religious tourism and produce solutions to probable problems that may arise.

**Key Words:** social media, religious tourism, faith tourism

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## İNANÇ TURİZMİNİN TANITIMINDA VE GELİŞİMİNDE SOSYAL MEDYA FAKTÖRÜ

### ÖZET

Turizm ile din tarih boyunca "Hac ziyaretleri" sayesinde birbirleriyle işbirliği halinde olmuşlar. Bugünkü inanç turizmi kavramının temeli bu işbirliğine dayanmaktadır. İnanç turizmi de dahil olmak üzere turizmin tüm sektörlerinin varlıklarını sürdürebilmeleri için önce tanıtıma sonra da destinasyonlarını ve bu destinasyonlarda uygulayacakları gezi programlarını pazarlamaya ihtiyaçları vardır. İnternet teknolojisinin gelişmesiyle ortaya çıkan "sosyal medya" organları, her iki alanda da rahatlıkla kullanılabilecek uygun araçlar olarak görülmektedir. Yapılan bilimsel araştırmalarda sosyal medya kullanımı ile müşterilerin satınalma veya vazgeçme kararları arasında güçlü bir ilişkinin var olduğu ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu ilişki, inanç turizmi sektöründe destinasyonların ve tur programlarının pazarlanmasında etkin bir destek olarak kullanılabilir. Araştırmacılara göre, sosyal medya organları aracılığıyla gezi izlenimlerini eş, dost arkadaşlarıyla paylaşan kişiler, yakın bir zaman içinde bir yerlere gezi yapmayı planlayan başka kişilerin gezi destinasyonlarından, kalacakları otellere, yemek yiyecekleri lokantaların seçimine kadar tüm gezi planları üzerinde büyük ölçüde etkili olabilmektedirler. Sosyal medya her tür iş kolu için çok faydalı bir tanıtım ve pazarlama aracı olarak görülmektedir. Ancak her araç gibi sosyal medyanın da faydalı ve zararlı yönleri vardır. Sosyal medya, kendisini akıllıca kullanan işyerlerini hayalini bile kuramayacakları uzak ufuklara taşır ama aksi durumlarda ise faydadan daha çok zarar getirir. Literatürde, sosyal medya faktörünün, inanç turizminin tanıtım ve gelişmesinde oynayabileceği rol üzerinde yapılmış bir araştırmaya rastlanmıyor. Bu çalışmanın amacı, hem literatürdeki bu boşluğu doldurmak hem de sosyal medyanın, inanç turizminin tanıtım ve pazarlamasında oynayabileceği rolün öneminin araştırmak ve ortaya çıkabilecek muhtemel sorunlara çözüm yolları üretilmesi olacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** inanç turizmi, sosyal medya, dini turizm,

### 1.    Introduction

All branches of the tourism sector, including religious tourism had to cooperate with the media constantly, in order to survive, throughout their thistory. Tourism, as an industry, can carry out their traveling programs to larger areas through the media. News and comments in the media about destinations can be effective on the decisions of people who are planning to travel.

Growing numbers of travellers search and consume travel information created by other travellers for their travel planning and then share their experiences when they return from their trips. Given the experiential nature of tourism, the information created by other travellers is even more important and influential in the search and decision-making process than when considering other types of purchases (Gretzel, 2011, Para. 2).

The emerging "social media networks " that appeared after the developments in Internet technology, opened up new horizons for the tourism industry representatives beyond their

imaginations and started to promote them to people in distant lands and in a short time have become an integral part of tourism. An article published by USA Today, explains how the social media became an inseparable component of tourism industry in detail:

> Social media are being incorporated at a rapid rate into every part of a journey, from making the reservation to finding out where to eat. For instance: As of August, Delta passengers can buy tickets on Delta's Facebook page. Southwest has three staffers dedicated to monitoring and responding to queries made through social-media channels. Marriott is launching its Marriott Courtyard Facebook page Tuesday to issue messages about the chain and related information that might interest customers. (Jone & Yu, 2010, para. 6).

With these findings in mind, we can infer that like other sub-sectors of tourism industry, religious tourism also should make use of social media networks which may be considered the most developed and sophisticated promotional media tool of our age. A resarch paper (2013) points out the necessity of social media use for  the tourism companies to stay afloat in the market:

> In order to reach a larger population, companies need to participate in social media websites. Unlike traditional websites, social media allows companies to form one-on-one relationships with their clientele. The social media effects on tourism directly influence a company's profit margin and ability to succeed in a competitive environment. Companies need to develop a solid social media marketing plan to stay afloat. (Thomas, 2013,  para. 7).

Fotis et al. (2011) who have similar findings with Thomas report that as the social media become effective, the possibility, for people,  to make changes in travel plans increases (p. 14). That's why, it can be said that religious tourism which addresses a growing market, should cooperate closely with social media networks in order to promote her travel programs to people who make travel plans according to the comments published in social media networks.

The purpose of this study is to find out the importance of the role that social media can play in the development and promotion of religious tourism and recommend possible solutions to problems that may arise from this interaction.

Since the concepts of religious tourism and social media are new comparing with the traditional ones, there are not much studies which we can examine the interaction process. There are some studies which examine the relationships between tourism sector and social media (Fotis et al., 2011; Boz & Unal, n.d.; Ranjha, 2010 ). There are also a lot of studies on tourism sector and traditional media relations in general (Woodside & Ronkainen, 1982; Scott, 2007; Gonzales, 2008; Meehan, 2008; Harrett & Benjamin, 2009; Bingqi et al., 2011; Govers et al., 2007; Popescu & Corboş, 2012). As we stated above there is a gap in the literature on social media use in religious tourism companies and the probable problems that may arise from this interaction.

The aim of this study is to fill this gap and prepare a suitable scientific background to future scholars who wish to make  more detailed research on the same issue and contribute to development of religious tourism both in Turkey and in the world.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: The first section gives detailed  definitions of the concepts of religious tourism and social media networks and a theoretical background of  the relationships between religious tourism and social media use. This is followed by explanation of research method. Then comes the findings section. The discussion, limitation of this research and recommendations for future studies and results (closing sentences) will take place in the last section.

### *1.1 The concept of religious tourism and historical background*

According to a study, religious tourism which emerged as a new branch of the tourism industry, introduced herself to the world through the " pilgrimage travels" for the first time in history . (Rodrige, 2012, p. 1).

Trips to sites that are considered sacred by Islam, Christianity or any other religion is called "religious tourism" or "faith tourism" in English (Religious and Pilgrimage Tourism International, 2012, para. 1) . The areas covered by the concept of "religious tourism" is not just limited to visits to the sacred places like pilgrimage. Religious festivals, meetings and different activities carried out for religious purposes are considered to be in the scope of the religious tourism. For instance, different organizations like Mevlana (Rumi) week activities organized each year in Konya, Turkey, Christmas and Ester festivals in Romania (Popescu ve Corboş, 2012, p. 23) and International Conference on Religious Tourism and Tolerance held by The Tourism Faculty of Necmettin Erbakan University of Konya may be classified as activities of religious tourism.

Analysis of the literature on religious tourism sources shows that there is a long-running debate over the concept and scope on religious tourism. The main actors of this unending conflict are the theologians and tourism industry representatives. Then come the scholars, some of which support one group and some back up the other group. According to Rodrigo, theologians of both of the two great religions, Islam and Christianity, and their supporters have similar points on opposing the use of two concepts "religion" and "tourism" side by side: "Theologians do not want to call religious trips as religious tourism since they believe religion and tourism are two different concepts both in the scope and the aim" (Rodrigo, 2012, p. 9).

Along with these two groups there are some scholars like Holderness (2009) who argues that both religious and non-religious people should participate in the religious tour organizations (p. 1). Coming up with a different idea, Rojo (2007) asserts that religious tourism is turning into a cultural tourism: "….what is known nowadays as religious tourism, after numerous centuries nourishing itself exclusively of religious people that made a pilgrimage to religious places solely motivated bytheir beliefs, has a clearly tendency towards the cultural tourism" (p. 57). Differing from these scholars Shinde (2010) put forward a thesis that defends the division of religious tourism into three sub-sectors: "….at least three different yet related submarket segments can be identified in religious tourism: cultural tourism, spiritual tourism and religious travel" (p. 527).

Taking into account of these discussions on the issue, World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) recommends tolerance and points out that more and more attention needed to inform the parties involved in the debate:

> The debate on the importance of, and distinction between, tourism as a ritual and as a form of spirituality has not been conclusive. ….at the individual and social level, and from the cultural and theoretical point of view, in order to realise its benefits and circumvent or limit its negative aspects. ….there is a need for more and precise information on religious tourism as opposed to cultural tourism. (Religious Tourism in Asia and the Pacific, 2011, p. 14).

"Religious tourism, whose popularity is on the rise in the international arena, has become a rapidly growing and developing industry. More than 300 million people have been traveling to Hajj or other religious visits in every year. It's annual return is $ 18 billion" (Leisuregrouptravel.com, 2009; Religious Tourism in Asia and the Pacific, 2011, p. 25).

A study conducted by Saltzman reports that 900 thousand people went abroad for religious purposes in the United States in 2008 and the total volume of religious tourism market of the

country is estimated to be $ 16 billion (2010).  Special attention of people to the issue of religious visits may be thought to be the reason to reach such high figures in the American religious tourism market in terms of volume. The findings of the Wright support Saltzman: "The Travel Industry Association of America reported that one in four travelers are currently interested in spiritual vacations " (Wright, 2008, p. 33).

The economic crises that was seen in countries around the world from time to time can also affect the tourism sector but that is not the case for religious tourism sector as Crain (1996) (as cited by Rodrigo, 2012) says:

> Pilgrimage travel is often less prone to economic ups and downs in the market place. Because faith-based travellers are committed travellers they tend to save for these religious experiences and travel despite the state of the economy….Faith-based travel can provide a steady flow of income to a local tourism economy (p. 4).

### 1.2 Concept of social media: Theoretical background of the emergence and development

Unlike traditional media, there are a variety of definitions of social media, the content of which prepared by the users. For example, Weber (2009) (as cited: Boz ve Unal, n.d.) defines it as a virtual environment where people with common interests share ideas and comments (p. 467). According to Kaplan &  Haenlein (2010) social media is a group of Internet applications based on Web 2.0 technology that give the users the opportunity to produce content and share it with other people (p. 60). Boyd & Ellison (2008) come up with a detailed definition:

> We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (p. 211).

The world agenda has become a field, formerly dominated by newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, as well as traditional giant media outlets, where the man on the street can be effective by making use of social media which is sometimes defined as the new media or social networks. "Social media, unlike traditional media, is aggregated and produced by the general public. Content is distributed to the masses on the Internet free of charge" (Thomas, 2013, p. 7).

Researchers made many experiments at different times to establish virtual environments, where people can stay in touch with each other, share their thoughts and comments through Internet, since the first e-mail is sent in 1971. "TheGlobe.com", the first social network was established by 20-year-old college students Todd Krizelman ve Stephan Paternot in 1995(10 big dot.com flops, 2010, March 10, para. 1).. Since then a lot of people made of different initiatives in order to develop more sophisticated social media networks and as a result of this, more than 500 social media networks are established (Craig, 2013, para. 4). A major study conducted by Boyd & Ellison (2008)  asserts that "SixDegrees.com" is the first social network site by characterizing it as "the first recognizable social network" (p. 214).

After this initiative, a large number media outlets, that can be called social media, began operating in virtual environment, until the foundation of all-time record-breaking Facebook with a 1 billion members.

> In 1997, two years after the occurrence of the term "weblog", the first major sub-structures such as Blogger and LiveJournal which designed for that purpose was introduced. Blogging has become even more important after the release of WordPress in

2004. The opening of Wikipedia in 2000, StumbleUpon in 2001, Friendster in 2002, Myspace in 2003 and Facebook in 2004 have been effective on socialization in the digital environment (Sosyal medya tarihi, n.d., para. 2).

Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Reddit, MySpace, You Tube, Newsvine, StumbleUpon, Digg ve Xing are considered to be the top players of all social media networks (The complete guide to social media, 2010, pp. 13-15).

### 1.3 Relationships between social media and religious tourism: An interaction history

The business community obtained a good opportunity with the development of social media outlets, which spread around the world and give their users the right to produce their own content and send it to any country they want. Hundreds of thousands of companies from different regions of the world have become active members of social media networks in order to make use of this unique opportunity.

It is an ongoing process. Everyday more and more companies are registering with the social media networks. Registering is easiest part of the process then comes the difficult question: "How to use social media effectively?" The answer is to train company staff on social media use. Then allow them to practice for some time to gain experience. Once training is over the staff will use social media cleverly and the company will be able promote her products and services not only in the region they based but in every part of the world where Internet access is possible. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) point out the same issue: "Using Social Media is not an easy task and may require new ways of thinking, but the potential gains are far from being negligible" (p. 67).

Introduction of social media, which provides an easy and cost-effective promotion opportunity, were met with great interest in the tourism industry, too. Social media is useful for every company but for tourism companies it is essential. Social media use made it possible to promote travel destinations and the programs, such as travel packages and tours with very low prices. Some studies on social media are encouraging tourism companies to use social media in their businesses:

Social media has made a huge impact on essentially every major industry across the world, and the business of travel and hospitality has reaped the rewards perhaps as well as any other commercial venture. Travel and tourism depends heavily on the use of word-of-mouth to spread opinions and recommendations, and social platforms such as Twitter and Facebook allow customers to easily share tips and suggestions, which can be enormously valuable when positive (Bennett, 2012, para.1).

"Social media such as Facebook and Myspace, provide instant ways to reach thousands or millions of people, Twitter is a fast way to get a few words out, and social media, such as Linkedin connect people interested in business relationships" (Tourism & More, 2011, para. 3).

"Social media is free and does not require upfront costs besides labor. The short-term "buzz" quickly transforms into long-term reputation and trust " (Thomas, n.d, para. 8).

Taking advantage of the opportunities offered by social media, a lot of people who have become users of this media share their experiences with friends and colleagues around the world. Some studies on social media use report that sharing experiences with others plays an important role on the decision of people, who live in different regions or countries, to purchase any products and services or to give up buying. Groups of friends sharing their work and travel experiences in social media are becoming effective on consumers decisions. This influence is also true in the field

of travel and tourism (Gretzel, 2011; Tourism & More, 2011; Gonzalo, 2012; "Social media inspires travels (2013). With similar findings to the studies mentioned above Fotis et al. (2011) add: "Social media are used during all stages of the holiday planning process (before, during and after holidays)…. " (p. 13).

At this point, a question may arise: "Do people who are planning a trip change their decisions trusting the comments of some other people even they don't know? Is it a logical?" The study of Gretzel (2011) reached findings that confirm above discussed supposition:

> Trust levels are very high and that a considerable number of people even prefer the opinions of unknown others over opinions of friends and relatives…. Experimental studies we conducted have also shown that individuals are pretty good at detecting false reviews, and this ability increases with the length of the review (para. 6).

Many large scale and small companies have already taken first steps in social media use. "Of the Fortune Global 100 companies, 65 percent have active Twitter accounts, 54 percent have Facebook fan pages, 50 percent have YouTube video channels and 33 percent have corporate blogs (Social Media: Business Benefits and Security, Governance and Assurance Perspectives (2010, p. 3).

A resarch paper by Shaw reports that companies do not use social media professionally. Emphasising on the dangers of the improper use of social media the paper says:

> …. the Social Media platforms implies that a business would need a solid strategy to tap these media for business and brand promotion because an ill-conceived campaign, backed by a flawed Social Media strategy could become a major bottleneck to the areas of brand promotion, brand awareness and brand positioning (2011, para. 1).

In a previous research (2010) by Harvard Business Review reports that most companies are not using social media effectively. The percengate of those that claim to use it properly is only 12 %. Many companies still do not know how to make use of social media tools and apply them for best use of their business growing. (the New Conversation: taking Social Media from talk to action, 2010,  pp. 1-4). The result of a survey carried out by Stanford University found enough evidence to confirm that companies do not use social media properly. The survey conducted with CEO's, Board Members and other high level administrators, whose age range is between 50 and 60 years reached important findings.

According to these findings, social media play an importan role in marketing, and it is a useful tool in reaching the customer and making face to face talk but it is a harmful tool at the same time if it is not used properly. Preventive measures are not taken against the property damage incurred due to improper use of social media companies, and hazards such as loss of reputation. Senior executives and directors do not make use of and do not trust the information coming from social media to use for their companies. Companies do not have any infrastructure which to process the information they gather from the social media and do not know how to use this information (F. Larcker, S., Larcker, & Tayan, 2012, p. 1).

A white paper published by ISACA advises companies to pay attention to the risks of social media use:

> ….It is therefore important that the enterprise create a social media strategy and have a plan to address the risks that accompany the technology. While the use of social media does have inherent risks that could negatively impact enterprise security, it also presents opportunities such as accelerated business growth and improved brand recognition. Therefore, simply choosing to prohibit the use of social media can also incur

an opportunity cost based on forgoing these potential business benefits (Social Media: Business Benefits and Security, Governance and Assurance Perspectives, 2010, p. 5).

It seems that there is still a long way to go to for all companies to reach the professional standarts in social media use.

## 2. Research Method

In this study, I used descriptive literature review method. During the research period I carefully reviewed and analyzed all available related articles, conference presentations, books, four survey reports by Harvard Business Review (the New Conversation: taking Social Media from talk to action, 2010), World Tourism Organization (Religious Tourism in Asia and the Pacific, 2011), Stanford University (Social media survey, 2012), ISACA (Social Media: Business Benefits and Security, Governance and Assurance Perspectives, 2010), media news, reports and Internet documents on social media and religious tourism.

## 3. Findings

There is a dispute between theologians and the tourism sector representatives on definition of religious tourism and the areas covered.

Social media use is very important in religious tourism sector as in the case of other sub-sectors of tourism industry. If religious tourism sector companies use social media properly, they can get good results in promoting their companies, destinations and the tour programs.

There is a strong relationship between comments, written and shared about travel experiences of people and consumer decisions. Comments, written and shared about  travel experiences of people on social media are becoming effective on consumers decisions.

Social media use has risks as well as advantages. Improper use of social media can cause poperty damage and loss of reputation.

Most of the companies do not use social media professionaly. They don't know how to use the information they get from social media.

### 3.1 Discussion

Findings of this study show that there is a long-running debate over the concept and scope on religious tourism. This old dispute over the concept and scope on religious tourism is an important issue which may be hindering the development of this industry. It can be said that if this conflict ends, new opportunities may arise for religious tourism industry, such as opening new destinations, attracting more people. This will contribute religious tourism companies and people living in new destinations economically.

The findings obtained from this research produced enough evidence to explain and support the main subject of this study. These findings confirm that if tourism companies, including religious tourism companies use social media properly, they will gain from it.

"Social media such as Facebook and Myspace, provide instant ways to reach thousands or millions of people, twitter is a fast way to get a few words out, and social media, such as Linkedin connect people interested in business relationships" (Tourism & More, 2011, para. 3).

"Social media is free and does not require upfront costs besides labor. The short-term "buzz" quickly transforms into long-term reputation and trust" (Thomas, nd, para, 8).

In general, our results indicate that sharing experiences with others in social media plays an important role on the decision of people, who live in different regions or countries, to purchase any products and services or to give up buying. That is in line with the findings of studies of (Gretzel, 2011; Tourism & More, 2011; Gonzalo, 2012; Social media inspires travels, 2013).

Our results confirms that improper use of social media, brings more harm than good. Social media use has risks as well as advantages. Improper use of Social media can cause poperty damage and loss of reputation.

Finally, our findings indicates there is a long way to go for most of the companies to learn effective use social media.

### 3.2 Implications

The results of this study is thought to be useful both for religious tourism companies and academics. Current study, which examines the importance of the role of social media use in the development and promotion of religious tourism and possible solutions to problems that may arise from this interaction, has prepared the appropriate scientific infrastructure for future research. Mobile social media and religious tourism relationships may be the future research subject. The weak side of this study is to keep the universe of research with literature.

### 3.3 Results

The purpose of this study was to find out the importance of the role that social media played in the development and promotion of religious tourism and recommend possible solutions to problems that may arise from this interaction.

The findings of the study produced enough evidence to explain and support the main subject of this study. These findings confirm that social media plays an effective role in the development of religious tourism.

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