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**Digital Collaboration: A Solution for Destinations**

This research aims to explore the elements of next-generation digital collaborative platforms for Destination Management Organisations (DMO) from the perspective of both businesses and visitors, allowing a more comprehensive understanding of digital platforms. The research is conducted in partnership with Visit Surrey (regional DMO) and Minted Box (bespoke platform developer). Preliminary results from interviews and focus groups indicate the need for DMOs to play an active role in facilitating business collaboration and knowledge sharing on the supply side of the digital platform. This process will aspire to then provide a more personalised experience on the visitors' end.

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Key words: Destination Management Organisation; digital collaboration; B2B2C; digital platforms; experience design

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## **Introduction**

Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) used to be the core foundation of destination development. However, the tourism industry has seen many DMOs struggling to maintain their position with the emergence of new technologies, raising questions of their current role in this digital era (Gursoy, Saayman, & Sotiriadis, 2015). The current role of DMOs in using digital technology is generally limited as an advertising platform for local businesses, through the request of promotion by businesses or what a DMO should be marketed. However, digital collaboration is the key to sustaining DMOs' role within the ecosystem, an area which is less researched upon. Thus, leading to the need to identify the functionalities of next-generation DMO digital platforms as a potential holistic infrastructure model, which could further strengthen the role of a DMO in this digital age (Merinero-Rodríguez & Pulido-Fernández, 2016). This research aims to explore the opportunities towards organisational digital collaboration and identify the key desirable characteristics and operational capabilities of next-generation digital platforms for supporting new functions of DMOs.

### **Current scenario on digitalisation**

The future of DMOs rests on its relevance to their main stakeholders, i.e., the supply chain (local businesses) and the visitors. Previous studies have been predominantly focused on investigating their roles as a management and marketing organisation (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica, & O'Leary, 2006; Pike & Page, 2014). To date, there remains limited literature focusing on the changing nature and roles of DMOs in the digital world (Choi, Lehto, & O'Leary, 2007).

With many DMOs and local businesses facing scarce resources, the future of destinations relies heavily on the DMOs capabilities and efficiency in developing a strategy for utilising resources controlled by others, i.e. the involvement and collaboration of destination stakeholders (Gretzel et al., 2006; Law, Qi, & Buhalis, 2010; Sheehan, Vargas-Sánchez,

Presenza, & Abbate, 2016). Collaboration goes beyond the intersection of common goals and can be defined as a deep, collective determination to realise shared goals through knowledge sharing, learning and establishing consensus between two or more organisations (Gursoy et al., 2015).

Various theories have been used in collaboration studies. These include: stakeholder theory, social exchange theory, network theory, game theory, resourced based theory and social representations theory to examine the roles of trust, power, informal collaborative forms and the social construct of collaboration (Beritelli, 2011; Farsari, 2018; Fyall, Garrod, & Wang, 2012; Jamal & Stronza, 2009). The variety of relevant theories indicate the significant diversity of tourism collaboration research and its importance.

Benefits of collaboration includes an increase in competitive advantage (Braun, 2002; Goerzen, 2007), community cohesion (Zapata Campos, 2014), and value creation (Hjalager, 2010), through knowledge sharing (Dussauge, Garrette, Mitchell, & Wiley, 2000), co-creation (Heo, 2016), and resource pooling (Bornhorst, Brent Ritchie, & Sheehan, 2010). The internet has now enabled collaboration to evolve and move on to digital spaces. The seamless sharing of databases and information widens businesses market range and reduces time and costs (Antonelli, Bruno, Taurino, & Villa, 2015). Thus, further increasing global competitive advantage (Spagnoletti, Resca, & Lee, 2015).

DMOs not only have to cater to local businesses' needs but visitors' needs as well. Currently acting as an information channel for visitors, next-generation DMO platforms would have a framework that allows the needs of visitors to be served through the collaborative efforts between the local businesses and the DMO. The online purchase of "experience goods" such as museum tickets, dining, and shopping are increasing throughout visitors' travel planning (Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015). The concept of digital platforms as an ideal space for the transaction and distribution of products digitally is one that DMOs can take on (Pan & Li,

2011). With the advancement of technologies, visitors have more expectations when planning their travels. Different platforms offer different roles within a tourists' travel planning, and the study on visitor's expectation upon a DMOs digital platform must be further investigated.

Although research on collaboration and its importance have been investigated by various authors, Beritelli (2011) highlights that this issue has yet to be sufficiently explored. In particular, there is a significant gap in research on digital technologies and the actual application and implementation for DMOs (Buhalis & Wagner, 2013). Overall, there is a necessity to conduct further investigation towards a holistic understanding of businesses and visitors' collective needs through digital means. This research aims to fill in the literature gap by identifying the characteristics and operational capabilities of next-generation digital platforms that DMOs need to have as part of their functions, from both perspectives of the business and visitor.

### **Methods / procedures**

A qualitative exploratory research approach is used to achieve the aim of the paper. Such research seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomena by communicating knowledge, i.e., interpretative and evaluative knowledge. By using different sources of data, it also provides a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of issues researched. Data collection is conducted in three phases, and this paper is in response to Phase 1 of the research. Phase 1 aims to explore the current scenario in which key tourism stakeholders face in this digital age; in particular, the challenges and opportunities in the use of digital platforms and DMO collaboration. Phase 2 is the development of the proposed digital platform. The platform development is supported by the data themes that emerged from Phase 1. Finally, Phase 3 aims to test the digital platform with key stakeholders. Eye tracking will be used, and an interview session will be conducted to receive feedback on the digital platform. The three phases allow

the researcher to have a comprehensive understanding of digital collaboration and user needs on next-generation digital platforms for destinations.

In Phase 1, 25 in-depth interviews (B1-B23) with key business stakeholders of Surrey alongside nine visitor focus groups (V1-V9) consisting of 3 to 5 people per group were conducted. Research such as this uses a purposeful sampling method rather than random sampling as the researcher aims to seek for groups and units which ensures that the studied phenomena will occur (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Visit Surrey, the regional DMO acts as a gatekeeper in connecting the research with key stakeholders of the region. Several criteria were formulated for the selection for key business stakeholders and visitors. For the supply side, the businesses must be a combination of those who have existing forms of organisational collaboration with Visit Surrey and those without. Second, there is a high level of tourism activity within the business. The third criterion requires the business representative to have sufficient experience and knowledge of the organisation and its operational process within tourism. Therefore, participants were marketing and management personnel from each business segment within the destination namely, museums, art galleries, wineries, farms, national heritages, events, and festivals. In-depth interviews were conducted to understand the challenges posed and opportunities provided by digital collaboration, and to further understand the role of a DMO in this digital era.

Focus group with visitors were conducted to collect rich and detailed information from different perspectives through the interaction of participants (Acocella, 2012). Participants were selected through convenience and snowball sampling. In this approach, public advertisement through social media was used. Information was collected from members of the population who volunteered to participate and subsequently asked to indicate further potential participants as useful sources of information to partake in the focus group. Criteria for focus group participants included those who were residents of the United Kingdom and were

potential visitors of Surrey. Participants' ages ranged from 18 years old to retirees. The criteria were formulated in line with Visit Surrey's target audience. The aim of the focus group was to understand the role of different digital platforms, the relevance of a DMO in visitors' travel planning, and to explore their attitude towards DMO digital platforms. Both the interview and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher NVivo was used to store and analyse the data. The number of interviews and focus groups were conducted until data saturation was achieved through thematic analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

### **Results, Discussion and Recommendations**

Initial themes that emerged from Phase 1 indicate that the majority of businesses are keen on undertaking digital collaborations with a DMO, perceiving the DMO with networking, coordinating, consultation and knowledge sharing role.

*“we just haven't got enough and so we've had to find something else to offer... we are going to promote group visits with different attractions ... with the collaboration, we can organise it all with the partner” (B3)*

*“we need to know other businesses in town, other organisations in town. it helps us reach new audiences.” (B4)*

*“a digital platform makes you much more effective and a better use of time because you know you are not driving half way across the county or further and sitting in a meeting for an hour and a half and driving back...It's much better usage of time.” (B6)*

Businesses expect a DMO to match-make and facilitate the engagement with potential partners. Due to lack of time, they are unaware of the various other businesses that they could connect with that would possibly have similar aims and add product value. Collaboration is important to tap into other untouched markets. Having a platform with all the businesses on board would increase the visibility of other businesses, particularly small medium enterprises

(SMEs) (Gursoy et al., 2015). A digital platform by the DMO could provide suggestions of collaboration for different types of businesses (i.e., attractions, festivals, hotels, restaurants, and advertising). Another main role of a DMO's digital platform includes as a means of knowledge sharing.

*“Really useful I mean; virtual networks are just so valuable because you can have a problem and you can just put it out and you get six or seven people immediately reply.” (B3)*

*“The wider in the network the better really because it opens up what you do to so many more people and people see value in that.” (B6)*

*“integrating social media will be the easiest way than having to upload separately, ... It'll be less time for me to input and more time I can focus elsewhere on putting things up or getting on social media posts.” (B16)*

Businesses are keen on a digital space that enables them to seek advice from other businesses who have been through the same challenges. Possibly being a learning platform, business managers have proposed the idea of having access to business marketing templates, resources, and cheaper access to enhance staff skills. Furthermore, many are keen to collaborate on their marketing initiatives. They would also want to have access to available marketing channels such as radios, news portals, and magazines. Likewise, these channels need businesses to produce content. As businesses are unaware of who is available geographically, having a digital platform would help their awareness particularly of smaller businesses. Businesses have also proposed the DMO to incorporate a management platform. The platform should be helpful in their daily work, i.e., notifications and reminders and a function that could help with volunteering arrangements. Businesses were not keen on changing to different platforms and would rather have an integration of other key platforms such as social media channels. They believe an integration of social media will not only show how active the

businesses are but help to liven up the DMO digital platform for visitors. Important concerns were raised on issues of data protection, platform usability and barriers to collaboration.

From the visitors' side, a DMO digital collaborative platform is expected to play a less significant role in planning a journey, but visitors will still use a DMO's digital platform for risk mitigation. Emerging themes from visitors within the focus group include enhancement of DMO's digital platform usability, integration with other platforms and the possibility of using Ai chat boxes. The use of DMO digital platform was not a predominant factor in planning the visitors' trip as many found the digital platform to have an information overload, them not knowing where to navigate.

*"Generally, there's too many information...I don't know where to start. You can see that they have multiple headings and subheadings. When you click inside, you don't really find anything much." (V7)*

Visitors wanted personalised interfaces that were targeted to their travel intentions. Thus, an introductory survey has been suggested to capture the visitor's interest and filter the appropriate information and marketing content. This would also include the suggestion of personalised detailed itineraries. Others have suggested the use of artificial intelligence chat boxes on the main page to enhance website navigation. With regard to the functionality of booking through a DMO's digital platform, visitors have the perception that acquisition through the DMO will be expensive and they believe that they could find cheaper deals elsewhere. Thus, providing booking facilities for all aspects of holiday needs through a DMO's digital platform is not currently seen as a necessity because visitors will likely opt to purchase the cheapest package directly from their chosen companies and websites.

*"one website can never serve as a one-stop shop. One can never rely only on one thing." (V9)*



In summary, preliminary results for Phase 1 has reached the research aim of identifying several key desirable characteristics and operational capabilities of next-generation digital platforms for supporting new functions of DMOs. These include the facilitation of collaboration between local businesses for added value, opportunities for networking to reach wider audiences, knowledge sharing, and personalised product development which incorporates the needs of destination businesses and visitors. Such platforms are expected to promote digital applications by DMOs; helps invigorate collaborations between players, thus addressing the issue of diminishing relevance of DMOs in the tourism industry. This research provides opportunities for future research to design a framework in facilitating digital collaborations for next generation platforms for destinations.

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