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Identifying the Marketing Channels that Will Attract Millennials to National Parks

Millennials will soon become the biggest tourist group to be served because of their sheer numbers as well as their current and potential future income. At the same time, previous studies have shown a decline in national park visitation worldwide which necessitates an investigation into why these numbers are dwindling and how to attract different consumers to the Parks so that appropriate marketing and operational strategies can be drafted. The purpose of this paper was thus to identify the marketing channels that millennials are most likely to use, the types of information that they look for and the marketing methods that will inform and persuade them to visit a holiday destination, and more specifically a National Park. Six focus groups were held with millennials from different life stages, with findings showing that social media seems to be the most popular channel and marketing method to use. The research holds implications for destinations. Proactive participation in social media is needed and tourism marketers should consider how to incorporate millennials' requirements into their general marketing plans and specifically their social media engagement.

Key words: Marketing channels, Millennials, social media, South African National Parks.

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Introduction

Researchers, journalists and even marketers are paying increasing attention to the millennial generation (Garikapati, Pendyala, Morris, Mokhtarian, & McDonald, 2016; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). The main drive for this increasing interest is the belief this generation will soon become the biggest tourist group to be served because of their sheer numbers and current and potential future income (Bucic, Harris & Arli, 2012). There are at least two additional reasons why millennials are important for the tourism industry's future: first is the fact that their original decisions may result in new attitudes towards tourism by the broader society (Fermani, Crocetti & Carradori in Cavagnaro, Staffieri & Postma, 2018; Leask, Fyall, & Barron, 2013) and second is the expectation that this generation will continue travelling in the future (Barton, Haywood, Jhunjhunwala & Bhatia, 2013).

Migacz and Petrick (2018) suggest millennials to be an exceptional primary market for destinations because of this growing impact on society that they have. Knowing which marketing channels and methods to use to capture the attention of this market could have major implications for destinations. The aim of this paper is thus to investigate the marketing channels that appeal to millennials, to identify the types of information that millennials look for when searching for a holiday destination, and lastly to explore the marketing methods that are most effective to inform and persuade them to visit a holiday destination, and more specifically a National Park.

This paper responds to calls for more research on the role of technology (Eastman, Iyer, Liao-Troth, Williams & Griffin, 2014) when marketing to millennials and also adds to research by beginning to fill the gap that has existed on millennials' travel behaviours (Leask et al., 2014). Furthermore, even though social media undoubtedly has a significant role to play in the lives of millennials, limited research on its usage among millennials exists (Bolton, Parasuraman, Hoefnagels, Migchels, Kabadayi, Gruber, Loureiro, & Solnet, 2013).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: first, we discuss the literature on millennials as consumers of tourism products, after which we look at the digital marketing methods that attract millennials. Then, we discuss the methodology followed, where after we give the findings. Finally, conclusions are drawn and managerial implications provided.

Literature Review

Millennials as consumers of tourism products

In comparison to other generations, millennials are considered to be well travelled and highly educated (Leask et al., 2014). They see themselves as explorers, and prefer to spend money on experiences rather than on material things (Santos, Veiga & Aguas, 2016). In addition, Fromm and Garton (2013) found that 75 percent of millennials want to travel internationally as often as possible, while Polzin, Chu and Godfrey (2014) estimated that on average they take 3.9 leisure trips and 4.2 business trips per annum. Furthermore, to them travel is equated to novelty: the opportunity to live new experiences, to attempt a different lifestyle, to obtain new knowledge and see new places (UNWTO and WYSE Travel Confederation, 2016). Added to this is the fact that millennials travel with a purpose, they want to experience the local way of living and they are keen to make a difference in the world (UNWTO and WYSE Travel Confederation, 2016).

Overall, the holiday experiences that millennials look for are characterized by three specific factors, namely involvement (engagement), perceived freedom (from the need to work) and intrinsic satisfaction (Babin & Darden, 1995; Hirschman, 1983). One of the key characteristics of millennials is their need for experiential consumption and their desire ‘to listen less and do more’ when they visit destinations (Benckendorff & Moscardo, 2010). In their research, Rita, Brochado and Dimova (2018) found the desire ‘to relax’, the longing ‘to escape from the ordinary’ and the yearning ‘to experience different lifestyles’ to be the most

important motivators for millennials when considering a holiday. Their least important motivations are to ‘visit family and friends’, ‘meet people with similar interests’ and ‘visit places my friends have not visited’. Regarding the importance of destination activities, their results show that ‘trying local food’ and ‘sightseeing’ are the most attractive. Furthermore, ‘partying’ and ‘gambling’ are the least appealing destination activities. According to Kattiyapornpong (2009) millennial travellers do not only seek relaxation and socialization but they also have a preference for more active activities such as bike riding, fishing and surfing.

In terms of specific destinations or experiences that millennials seek out, Chatzigeorgiou (2017) studied the behavioural intentions of this cohort when visiting rural areas including natural landscapes, wildlife experiences and tourism aiming at preserving the natural environment. The location itself seems less important to millennials than the activities carried out in the rural areas. For this reason, rural tourism suppliers should identify those activities that may be carried out in the natural environment and be attractive to millennials. Thus, tourism in rural areas may come much closer to millennials and their lifestyle. Vermeersch, Sanders and Willson’s (2016) results contradict this. Their millennial participants showed considerably more interest in cultural indigenous tourism experiences (such as meeting and interacting with indigenous peoples and visiting rural communities) than nature-based tourism activities. In addition, Huang and Petrick (2010) found that millennials look for destinations with big lively cities as well as several shopping opportunities. Since it has been suggested that millennials could be an exceptional primary market for destinations, it is important to know which marketing channels and methods will appeal to them.

Marketing channels and methods that appeal to millennials

Millennials are technologically well informed as they are the first generation to be born and to grow up in a digital world (Maxwell, Ogden & Broadbridge, 2010). They are known to be impatient and they value instant gratification. They find significance in ‘fitting in’ and connecting with their peers. It is imperative for marketers to know precisely how millennials utilise media, which media they make use of as well as when they use it (Luck & Mathews, 2010). Kim et al. (2015) established that millennials are more involved and more active in travel planning than previous generations; they utilise an assortment of information and communication devices, and varied Internet channels; they look for information from a number of sources including social media, TV, video and documentaries, they make internet bookings more regularly and display higher usage of Online Travel Agents (OTAs). More recently, Migacz and Petrick (2018) found that millennials use the following mediums in travel planning: television ads, web banners/internet ads, magazine ads, newspaper ads, radio ads, TV shows/news stories, travel guides/books, magazine articles, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube channels, Tumblr, Trip Advisor, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, apps, Google, destination websites, travel agents, friends/family, and online reviews. The least favourite travel mediums for millennials are: Twitter, magazine ads, Tumblr, radio ads, Snapchat and newspaper ads (Migacz & Petrick, 2018).

In terms of social media specifically, millennials have grown up alongside platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Yelp, and Twitter, which influence their needs, the way they see themselves and how they communicate (Shridhar, 2019). They consider social networking sites as important since it allows them to connect with their peers on important matters (Williams & Page, 2011) and broadcast their experiences and personal thoughts (Fromm, Butler & Dickey, 2015). Interestingly, almost 25% of teens monitor Facebook over 10 times per day (Zaslow, 2009). When travelling, Facebook and other social media apps and

websites have altered how travellers assess and share information, prior to but also for the duration of a trip. By posting and sharing travel experiences online, millennials often – whether deliberately or not – influence others’ opinions of brands or destinations through eWOM (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006).

Considering the types of information that millennials value, Kim et al. (2015) found that they contemplate more potential destinations to visit; they look for activities to partake in, places for shopping and eating out and they search for a diverse range of tourism experiences including events, spectator sports and festivals. They listen to podcasts, use live chat, watch videos and they are more open and receptive to online advertising. Brands (and destinations) that are wanting to target millennials online should do so subtly by advertising through influencers, peers or community groups, rather than overtly dictating what they should be purchasing (Shridhar, 2019). Companies are encouraged to be more creative when communicating with millennials by using media and promotional themes that will capture their attention. This market is not likely to react to marketing hype. Ads aimed at this generation, should appear on suitable Internet sites and in applicable magazines, TV and radio programmes, and video games (Williams & Page, 2011).

Next, we discuss the methodology followed to achieve the purpose of the paper, which is to identify the marketing channels and methods as well as types of information that will appeal to millennials.

Methodology

Despite insights gained into the millennial market from previous research, the need has been recognised to segment this generation even further (Hritz, Sidman, & D’Abundo, 2014; Torres, 2015) since millennials are anything but a homogenous cohort and in fact, are made up of sub-groups, each with its own unique characteristics and outlooks. Several factors

have been used by researchers to identify millennial sub-groups, including variables that incorporate the “family life cycle” (Brida, Disegna & Scuderi, 2013). For instance, the findings of Garikapati et al. (2016) showed that “younger millennials” (ages 18-24) differ significantly from “older millennials” (ages 25-34). Still, the majority of studies that have investigated millennials have looked at them as a homogenous group. For this reason, and to make our sample more representative of all millennials, our study followed a family life cycle approach to segment the market and investigate the different millennial sub-groups.

With little known about the different sub-groups making up this cohort, the project was qualitative in nature. By using focus groups to collect data among millennials, greater insights into each sub-group as well as the overall cohort were obtained. The following family life cycle groups (Golijani-Moghaddam, 2014; Shange, 2010), probably linked best to the millennials cohort, were included in separate focus groups:

- single adults, not permanently employed (SA- NE);
- single adults, permanently employed (SA-PE);
- new couples, living together or newly married – no children (NC);
- pre-school families, children 0-6 years (PRE);
- primary school families, 7-13 years (PRI);

The objectives of the focus groups were to identify the marketing channels that millennials are most likely to use, the types of information that they look for and the marketing methods that will inform and persuade them to visit a holiday destination, and more specifically a National Park. To achieve these objectives, a focus-group schedule was developed from the literature. Thereafter a pre-test was done on selected individuals who assessed the document and made final recommendations and comments to ensure the appropriateness of content and language. Between seven and 12 individuals participated in each focus group. The focus groups were held at the University of Pretoria. The researchers’

personal networks were used to source initial participants for each of the focus groups, followed by snowball sampling to increase the number of participants. Even though this study was qualitative in nature, every effort was made to ensure the representativeness of the sample. Millennials of all genders, ages, South African population groups and life cycle groups took part in the focus groups. Glaser and Strauss (1967) propose the notion of saturation for realizing a suitable sample size in qualitative studies. After six focus groups the researchers concluded that data saturation was reached. Content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. The central idea in content analysis is that the many words of the text are categorized into significantly fewer content categories. Seven steps were followed to ensure that the data analysis complied with the requirements of being objective, systematic and quantitative (Berelson, 1952).

STEP 1: List respondent statements.

STEP 2: Highlight the concepts in each statement.

STEP 3: Code concepts within statements.

STEP 4: Recognise differences in the underlying meaning of concepts. For example a certain concept could have a negative connotation for some participants and a positive connotation for others.

STEP 5: Count the number of times that the concept was mentioned by participants.

STEP 6: Identify differences between sub-groups.

STEP 7: Identify quotes that describe the concept under discussion the best.

Findings and discussion

Channels and types of information used when searching for holiday destinations

For most participants, their search for information on holiday destinations starts with Google. Social media, such as Facebook, Pinterest and blogs also seem to be popular sources

of information, although Instagram was only mentioned once, possibly because as one participant said: “*Instagram is important for showcasing and not really information*” (SA-PE, male). Another participant opined: “*When it comes to Instagram, I know the content is filtered and that is why I never use it* (SA-PE, female). This confirms the results of Haddouche and Salomone (2018), who found that younger generations are much more suspicious and cautious regarding social networks and their use.

Booking.com was the third most mentioned channel of information followed by travel agents. The propensity to use a travel agent appears to be linked with travel experience. Travellers who are more experienced seem to have the confidence to do their own arrangements whereas those with less experience trust the travel agent more. Other channels mentioned were: Trip Advisor, Airbnb and word-of-mouth. The use of printed media as an information source seems to be ineffective for destinations, since only two participants mentioned it. These findings correspond with the findings of Kim et al. (2015). Their results showed that millennials use an assortment of information and communication devices, and varied Internet channels; they look for information from a number of sources including social media, TV, video and documentaries, they make online bookings more regularly and display higher usage of OTAs. Migacz and Petrick (2018), on the other hand, found that the least favourite mediums for millennials are: Twitter, magazine ads, Tumblr, radio ads, Snapchat and newspaper ads. Our study shows similar findings to Migacz and Petrick (2018) and also confirms the results of Williams and Page (2011) that this generation is unlikely to subscribe to a newspaper and their interest in television is less than all the other generations.

In terms of the type of information that participants searched for, cost/specials/discounts was the most mentioned category. The second most mentioned category of information looked for was reviews. Participants stated that they read reviews of destinations before they decide on one. Typical platforms used to read reviews are Trip

Advisor, Booking.com and Airbnb. Reviews on the website of suppliers are not taken into consideration, since it is not regarded as objective. Participants also look for information on the activities, type of accommodation, facilities and other general information on the destination before they make up their mind on where to go. This is similar to the results of Kim et al. (2015) who found that almost 50% of millennial respondents looked for information on places for shopping and eating out, “things to do at the destination”, and experiences.

Effective marketing methods in general and for South African National Parks (SANParks)

Participants were first asked to elaborate on the marketing methods that they feel are effective in terms of informing and persuading them to visit *any* holiday destination. As expected, social media was one of the categories most mentioned by participants. Amongst the platforms Facebook, Instagram and YouTube were mentioned the most frequently. Twitter and blogs were each mentioned once. Images, photos, videos and music also play a major role in informing and persuading millennials to visit a destination. Quite interesting, participants mentioned an affinity to see other people in the photos, for example one participant mentioned: “*Where you see everyday people enjoying themselves at the park or hotel. So for me this attracts me to a place (SA-PE, female)*”. Another participant said: “*To me seeing people interacting in that scenery, and someone else having the experience is what attracts me to a place (NC, female)*”. The findings confirm the importance of using suitable images, music and language when marketing to millennials (Williams & Page, 2011).

A recurring theme throughout the focus groups was the importance of costs, discounts, specials and free items when deciding on a holiday destination. It is thus not surprising that it was also one of the most mentioned categories in terms of marketing methods that will inform and persuade millennials. Websites were also mentioned by some

participants as well as the more traditional marketing methods such as Billboards, TV and magazines. Other marketing methods that were mentioned less frequently were: word-of-mouth, travel expos and information booths at shopping malls. Art (2009) found that referrals from people that they know (word-of-mouth advertising) influence millennials and should thus be seen as crucial by marketers. Our results showed the contrary, but did expose the power of influencers on social media: *“But I also actually think social media plays an important part because if you follow certain influencers, when they go on holiday and post these amazing photos and videos, you get the sense that you also want to experience that and have that lifestyle (SA-NE, male)”*.

Lastly, participants were asked about the marketing methods that will inform and persuade them to visit any of the SANParks. Social media again received the most mentions from participants as a marketing method. Often times, participants just referred to social media, without making a distinction between the platforms. Others specifically referred to Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, and one or two mentions were made of Pinterest, Twitter, blogs and Trip Advisor. The findings support Litvin et al. (2008) who opined that social media have become more persuasive as an information source than the information issued by travel suppliers. The importance of social media is further highlighted by the results of Kim and Fesenmaier (2017) who suggested that sharing experiences on social media influence the post-trip experiences and emotions of travellers.

Interestingly (and opposed to marketing methods in general) traditional methods such as television and magazines received several mentions from respondents. This is contrary to the findings of Belch and Belch (2015), who suggested that traditional sources of information might not be effective when targeting millennials. It supports Kim et al. (2015) who found that millennials use radio, travel documentaries, and movies to develop their itineraries.

Again, similar to marketing methods in general, participants replied that specials, discounts, free offers and competitions would inform and persuade them to visit SANParks. Williams and Page (2011) opined that it is crucial for marketers to recognize triggers for millennials and then to make use of these triggers in marketing material. SANParks should thus incorporate these triggers in their marketing material. Participants also referred to the power of photos, videos, music and images to persuade them. Other methods such as word-of-mouth, trade shows and even school education were also mentioned, albeit less frequently.

Some general comments were made in terms of SANParks' marketing methods and information. Some participants felt that SANParks' marketing methods are directed to an older target market, and they do not feel catered for *"If I think SANParks I think older people and I am not the target market, there is probably not much to do if I am not into wildlife so why would I ever go onto their website"* (NC, female). Another participant noticed *"I think they can step up their social media a bit as I think they are marketing more towards older people, I don't feel that I am their target market. I associate SANParks more with older people...."* (NC, female). According to Art (2009) it is important to observe this market for variations in their communication preferences in order to develop marketing methods that will be memorable to them.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to investigate the marketing channels that appeal to millennials, identify the types of information that millennials look for when searching for a holiday destination, and lastly explore the marketing methods that are most effective to inform and persuade them to visit a holiday destination. The paper answered the call from Eastman et al. (2014), Leask et al. (2014) and Bolton et al. (2013) for more research into the use of technology by Millennials, and more specifically the use of social media among

millennials. The findings showed that Millennials use a variety of channels to look for information, confirming the results of Kim et al. (2015) as well as Migacz and Petrick (2018). Our findings identified social media as the most popular information channel to use, and also the most effective in persuading millennials to visit a destination. Unlike the findings of Hritz, Sidman and D'Abundo (2014) and Torres (2015), our findings showed no noticeable differences between millennials of different life cycle groups, in fact, when considering the marketing channels and methods that they use and the information that they look for, millennials seem to be a homogenous market. The research holds various implications for destinations and more specifically SANParks. First, proactive participation in social media is needed and tourism marketers must extend their efforts beyond merely creating a social media page and going through the motions of being engaged. Therefore, marketers targeting millennials should consider how to incorporate their requirements into their general marketing plans and specifically their social media engagement (Kim et al., 2015). It is also important for suppliers to provide visitor satisfaction to encourage millennials to share their experiences online, since the opinions of other travellers have become more influential as an information source than the information given by travel suppliers (Litvin et al., 2008). Finally, the paper confirms the viewpoint of Ek Styvén and Foster (2018) that the country from which these millennials originate may not be that important. Millennials seem to have more in common across national borders than there are differences between them. Like all papers, this one is not without limitations. The results of this study cannot be generalised to all Millennials since the sample was non-random. Future research could be quantitative in nature, during which larger numbers of millennials' travel-related behaviour could be examined.

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