

An Exploratory Study on Contributions of Information and Communication Technologies to the Development of eco-cultural Tourism in Central Kazakhstan

A Guillaume Tiberghien ^a, and
Vladimir Garkavenko ^{a,b}

^a Bang College of Business, Marketing and Management department
Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research, Kazakhstan
tibergui@kimep.kz

^b New Zealand Tourism Research Institute, Auckland University of Technology,
New Zealand
gvlad@kimep.kz

Abstract

This exploratory study investigates the contributions of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to the development of eco-cultural tourism practices undertaken in Central Kazakhstan through the lens of different stakeholders involved in Community Based Tourism (CBT) projects in the country. Empirical research is based on semi structured in-depth structured interviews conducted in 2010 which were carried out with different stakeholders involved in the tourism development of CBT in Central Kazakhstan. Findings reveal that ICTs are used in the forms of Social media networks as well as websites, microblogs, and E-mails. Despite a very positive attitude towards the usage of ICTs, the research also identified a number of barriers to the implementation of ICTs for Community Based Tourism (e-CBT) including the limited number of bookings, the need to develop the online business model as well as a lack of government initiatives to backup the funding of the project.

Keywords: Information and Communication Technologies; Eco-cultural tourism; Community Based Tourism; Tourism practices

1 Introduction

It has become widely accepted that the Internet can serve as an effective marketing tool in tourism (D. Buhalis, 2003; D. Buhalis & Law, 2008) and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have been regarded as strategic tools to facilitate tourism development at destination (Ali & Frew, 2009; D Buhalis, 1997; D. Buhalis, 2003; Frew, 2000; Liburd, 2005). Meanwhile, given the rapid eCommerce development in the tourism industry, maintaining an effective website becomes crucial for a business to strengthen its relationship with customers and gain a larger market segment (Law, Qi & Buhalis, 2010). eMarketer estimates that 58% of all US Internet users (127 million people) use a social network at least once a month in 2010 and 33% of Facebook users have become fans of brands on the network (eMarketer 2010).

Kazakhstan is following some international patterns in terms of usage of ICTs and social networks, and according to the Internet market analysis by ROMIR Monitoring (2009) as well as some academic research (Garkavenko & Tiberghien, 2010), the Kazakhstan and Russian internet markets are the fastest growing in Europe (Garkavenko, Tiberghien, Surnina & Gimranova, 2010). In particular, the number of blogs posted on the main regional blogs platforms (www.liveinternet.ru, www.blogs.mail.ru, www.yvison.kz, and www.diary.ru) have been multiplied by three between 2009 and 2010 (Rjmetrics data, 2010) to reach more than 100 000 blogs (12 000 active) in Kazakhstan. Regarding microblogs, Twitter accounts represent more than 180 000 users in Russia and 1500 users in Kazakhstan in 2009, and are used mostly to share news, share commentary or useful information (Neweurasia, 2009). According to the World Tourism Organisation, Cultural tourism is one of the forms of tourism that will witness the most important growth in the future (WTO, 2004). Meanwhile, Information and Communication Technologies are being deployed with poor communities in developing countries and are beginning to demonstrate their potential for inducing local development (Davison, Harris, & Vogel, 2002), and the applications of ICT to cultural heritage have so far concentrated their efforts on the digitalisation of cultural goods (Riganti, 2007). The construction and deployment of e-commerce technologies capable of marketing the destinations for appropriate tourists and for transacting payments for such products needs the involvement of content management systems, adapted for use in communities where English is not widely spoken or written (Davison et al., 2002).

2 Literature/Past Research Review

Eco-cultural tourism can be presented as a concept in which ecological and cultural aspects of a landscape are combined to create a site for tourists (Wallace & Russel, 2004). One of the main discourses of cultural tourism is derived from Hobsbawn and Ranger's (1983) work on the ever-increasing nostalgia for the past felt primarily by citizens of developed countries who run to the countryside, in order to flee modernity and get back to a simpler way of life (MacCannell, 1992). In removing oneself far from any crowded place, the eco-tourist yearns for a specialised, exclusive experience (Wallace & Russel, 2004). Community-based tourism is regarded as a tool for natural and cultural resource conservation and community development and is closely associated with ecotourism (Davison et al., 2002). Furthermore, Community-based approaches are central to many tourism development plans around the world and there is a growing realisation that localised cooperations, trust and networking are essential ingredients in providing the right mix for successful tourism development (Milne & Ateljevic, 2001). Meanwhile, the introduction of ICTs to CBT (e-CBT) suits very well "neo-consumers" that are characterised by their tendency to travel and spend more than the average, look for more authentic and experiential tourist opportunities and use the Internet widely and often (Honeywill, 2002). Whereas e-CBT represents an appropriate form of engaging with them regarding promotion, marketing, information exchange as well as sales transaction processing, it also fosters conservation practices, handicraft as well as helping to enhance the quality of natural and cultural resource utilisation (Di Castri & Balaji, 2002). E-CBT may enable communities to choose how to present themselves to the world and Internet connectivity may also open up communities to external influences, information and

values as well as incorporate little interactive or transactional capabilities with the community (Davison et al., 2002).

3 Case: ICTs Usage within the ETPACK Project

Eco-cultural tours in Kazakhstan have been developed by the Ecological Tourism and Public Awareness in Central Kazakhstan (ETPACK) project which is looking at the development of Community-based eco-tourism in Central Kazakhstan promoted by national and international organizations. The two years project started in September 2008 by the European Union, the German Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU) and the Kazakh NGO Eco-museum Karaganda. During the project implementation, three eco-sites with a network of home-stays and one souvenir production of traditional handicrafts was built up in Karaganda region in Central Kazakhstan and an official eco-tourism operator, “Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan”, is now marketing offline and online (www.nomadic.kz) the tours as well as the tourism products of the eco-sites.

4 Methodology

The study employed 9 semi-structured in-depth interviews using open-ended questions with various stakeholders who were directly and indirectly involved with the development of eco-cultural tourism and CBT in central Kazakhstan through the Ecological Tourism and Public Awareness in Central Kazakhstan (ETPACK) project. Members of “Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan” tourism operator who is advertising the project, the Delegation of European Union in Kazakhstan, the German Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU), the Avalon historico-geographical society and public foundation and the Kazakh NGO Ecomuseum Karaganda were interviewed. The duration of the interviews was approximately one to two hours. Notes were taken during the interviews and subsequent analysis of the interviews was employed to identify themes of interest including the roles of ICTs and Kazakhstani tourism websites with cultural contents in the understanding, valuation, preservation and promotion of CBT in Kazakhstan. The interviewees were probed with additional questions including the sustainability and profitability of the eco-cultural tours themselves and whether the official cultural website selling the eco-cultural tours was representative of the culture under study. An additional questionnaire in the form of open-ended questions was sent to the main stakeholders of the ETPACK project with questions including the type of Social Medias, websites, micro-blogs and E-mails used to promote the tours online as well as the type of website evaluation software that monitored their tourism activities. Twenty questionnaires were sent with a response rate of 50% and a content analysis was used to analyse the responses. In order to investigate a phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2003) and provide valuable understandings of people, events experiences and organisations in their social and historical context (Veal, 2006), the researchers participated in one of the eco-cultural tours “Kyzylalai” organised by “Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan” and managed to get in touch with the local community as well as experienced some of the CBT activities prepared for prospective tourists.

5 Research Findings

In the context of Central Kazakhstan as a tourism destination for eco-cultural tourism, the use of ICTs constituted a strategic contributor to the development of awareness of eco-cultural tours from a local and international point of view. The findings show that ICT tools which are commonly used are social media, websites, microblogs and e-mails. One of the main organisers of the ETPACK project mentioned that “the promotion of the tours through mobile telephone using SMS, MMS and potentially WAP technologies has a big potential in Kazakhstan but so far ICTs are mostly used for sustainable awareness campaigns to promote the uniqueness of ecological and cultural features of the tours at the international level and attract local and international visitors”. The eco-cultural tours were created in September 2008 and were advertised by the official site of ETPACK project (<http://etpack.ecotourism.kz/>) as well as the website www.nomadic.kz. As maintaining an effective website has become vital for business to strengthen its customer relationships and gain a larger target market as well as providing useful content that meets user expectations (Law et al., 2010), “Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan” through their website www.nomadic.kz is trying to adjust to the international market by using different languages (English, Russian and German) for general information, news and bookings of the tours as well as photo galleries. Taking into account that the most researched online features of tourism and hospitality websites are information and process, value added, relationships, trust, design and usability (Hashim, Murphy & Law, 2007), the findings show that the site clearly does not meet all of the criteria but does have a simple design directed to book the tours. The website www.nomadic.kz is mixing both the representation of the place and the marketing tools at the same time and has developed a brand name and a logo reflecting the nomadic culture. Furthermore, “Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan” is monitoring its web presence with Google Analytics software.

Regarding Social Medias, “Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan” has an official page in English on Facebook where the different tours and events are advertised through separate pages. Members of the Avalon historico-geographical society and public foundation, EcoMuseum Karaganda, the NABU project manager as well as the director and the marketing manager of www.nomadic.kz are administrating the Facebook pages. In particular, one of the eco-tours, “To the Center of the Kazak Land”, has its own logo and is directly recruiting its customer through the page itself. The information broadcasted contains itineraries, dates, contact details as well as the main goals of the expedition. More than half of the respondents indicated that Social Medias are useful tools for the promotion, understanding and development of the tours for mostly international visitors as well as increase the richness of available and accurate information especially when pictures about the tours are posted. The different stakeholders are considering moving to Russian Social Networks (www.odnoklassniki.ru, www.vkontakte.ru, www.moimirmail.ru) to attract Russian speaking customers in the future. The different tours are advertised on the main local tourism websites (www.ecomuseum.kz, www.centralasia.travel, www.discovery-kazakhstan.com, www.guide.kz, www.visitkazakhstan.kz, www.wanaway.kz) through banners, description of the tours and destinations as well as articles related to the destinations themselves (www.centralasia.travel,

www.discovery-kazakhstan.com). In order to increase the awareness of the project, “Kazakhstan Nomadic Travel” is considering advertising its tours through short trailers on Youtube in the near future. A microblog account on Twitter was recently added to their promotional materials but has proved to be so far inefficient as the current number of “followers” of the tours is still quite limited. Instead, e-mails campaigns in the form of newsletters are sent to embassies, international organizations as well as former and potential clients every time a new tour is scheduled and has so far proved to be one of the most efficient ICT tool to gain new customers.

6 Conclusions

The study reveals that ICTs are beginning to be used effectively by the main stakeholders responsible to develop eco-cultural tourism through CBT projects in Central Kazakhstan. It has also outlined some ICT tools like Social Networks (Facebook, Vkontakte), websites as well as microblogs (Twitter) and E-mails to facilitate the development of sustainable tourism awareness in that region as well as the promotion of tours. The potential of eco-cultural tourism as a tool for empowerment and development of a tourism region is dependent on many different stakeholders’ points of views. As local communities themselves are not able to develop and manage ICTs due to a lack of Internet access in the region, the different stakeholders of the ETPACK project are acting as “intermediaries” in the development of e-CBT projects in Central Kazakhstan. Furthermore, funding may be the most practical constraint, outside funding, such as from non-governmental organizations or national, regional and local governments, may be first required to develop and maintain eco-cultural tourism in the short term (Wallace & Russel, 2004). A proper development of sustainable development could be achieved both within the public and private sectors through effective use of ICTs (Simpson, 2001). In particular, a better partnership between the Ministry of Tourism and Sport of Kazakhstan and the main stakeholders responsible to develop CBT in Central Kazakhstan using ICTs could be achieved by increasing the access to Internet and web literacy in the region in order to promote traditional nomadic culture and reach a bigger number of prospective visitors. The Kazakhstani government involvement in e-CBT development could participate in a better economic and technological regulation of eco-cultural tourism practices in the region.

7 Future Research

The rapid progress of ICTs has clearly manifested that organizations have more powerful tools for enhancing their efficiency and sustainable competitive advantage and the dynamic capabilities of ICTs have managed to enhance interactivity, flexibility, efficiency, productivity and competitiveness (Buhalis, 2003; Poon, 1993). A further website content analysis will be necessary to analyse Kazakhstani websites regarding the creation of perception of the different consumer dimensions of eco-cultural tours before visitors arrive on the eco-sites. Interestingly, according to the Kazakhstani Statistics Agency (2009a) the number of internet network subscribers in 2008 was 600,000 out of 15mln living in Kazakhstan (approximately 4% of the population), and the number of mobile network subscribers in 2008 was 16mln (more than 100%) (Kazakhstani Statistics Agency, 2009b). However, there is little or no empirical

research in Kazakhstan on the contribution of more recent mobile digital technologies including Short Message Service (SMS) in connection with Destination Management Systems to sustainable tourism development from a multiple-stakeholder approach (Buhalis & Law, 2008). E-CBT has the potential for balancing market conditions more in favour of small local operators who can promote their sought-after products to global niche markets on equal terms with large corporations. Subsequent in depth qualitative research will be needed to assess the extent to which m-business can help the empowerment of local community to have access and develop local tourism content. A future research that will be investigating the usage of ICT and e-CBT customer side will be conducted in order to understand the challenges of e-CBT development in Central Kazakhstan.

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