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Towards an Online Learning Community on Digitalization in Tourism

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Information technology and digital solutions as enablers in the tourism sector require continuous development of skills, as digital transformation is characterized by fast change, complexity and uncertainty. This research investigates how a cMOOC concept could support the tourism industry. A consortium of three universities, a tourism association, and a tourist attraction investigates online learning needs and habits of tourism industry stakeholders in the field of digitalization in a cross-border study in the Baltic Sea region. The multi-national survey (n = 244) reveals a high interest in participating in an online learning community, with two-thirds of respondents seeing opportunities to contributing to such community apart from consuming knowledge. The paper demonstrates preferred ways of learning, motivational and hampering aspects as well as types of possible contributions.

1 Introduction

Information technology is regarded as a main enabler or even inseparable from tourism management, with an accelerating change rate [15]. For building digitalization capacity, one-off approaches and quick fixes are not enough. Instead, there is a need for constantly evolving knowledge tied to the progress of IT development. The 2018 report on digitalization in tourism [3] identified skills in digitalization and mentoring initiatives as major needs of the tourism sector. While Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) of various forms have been established also in the field of digitalization in tourism, the long-term support of such course-oriented struc-

ture could be a challenge given the complexity, speed of change and uncertainty attributed to digital transformation [5, 9, 7].

As part of an international, European-funded project, Baltic DigiTour⁷, a consortium of five partners explored if a network of universities, a tourism association, and a single museum can reach out to relevant stakeholders that could both benefit from and simultaneously contribute to an online learning community to facilitate joint advancement of skills on digitalization in tourism in the Baltic Sea region.

2 Background

Developing skills on digitalization are recognized challenges in the tourism sector [3], yet the fast pace of change and uncertainty are characteristics of digital transformation [5, 9, 7]. According to the learning theory of connectivism by Siemens [13, page 4], in an increasingly unpredictable environment, “meaning-making and forming connections between specialized communities” are major learning activities, focusing the capacity to learn from a variety of opinions, human or non-human information sources. This concept is embraced by connectivist Massive Open Online Courses (cMOOCs). While MOOCs provide teacher-based knowledge publicly online scaling the outreach of teacher-knowledge, cMOOCs emphasize the collaboration of learners and the knowledge that learners provide themselves, as “a social platform for collaboratively sharing and building knowledge within a community of people” [6]. Group interaction is the core of cMOOCs [2]. The connectivism supports collaborative dialogue and knowledge building by linking content from a variety of sources in a dynamic way [1]. The connectivist approach sees all participants as both learners and teachers, with mutual exchange building the content and value of learning. The cMOOC approach focuses on community building without setting up a fixed structure with an openness of the community, e.g. facilitated by social platforms. According to Margaryan, Bianco, and Littlejohn [8] the cMOOCs, when compared to other MOOCs, were e.g. superior in authenticity of learning activities, activation of prior knowledge and skills, and accommodating learner’s preferences. They were slightly inferior in organization and presentation of course materials and collaboration with others outside the course [8]. Given the dynamic nature of digitalization and the group of professionals in the tourism sector with prior experience and special learning preferences, a cMOOC approach might facilitate the development of skills as needed by the sector. In the seed-money project “Baltic DigiTour”, a consortium of five institutions

⁷Connectivist Massive Open Online Courses for Digitalization in Baltic Tourism Attractions funded by Interreg Baltic Sea Region 2020–2021

(three universities, a tourism association and a museum) from Germany, Finland and Poland set out to investigate the opportunities and requirements for facilitating learning on digitalization in the tourism sector online. In a first analysis of existing MOOCs on the topic, most were not updated or even not available after some time. Thus, sustainably providing a MOOC in this sector seemed a challenge. In first qualitative investigations, neither the term Massive Open Online Course nor the abbreviation MOOC were well understood by tourism stakeholders. The consortium concluded to speak of an online learning community in the study. The research should answer the question, if with the network approachable by the consortium an online learning community on digitalization in tourism could be set up supporting both double roles of knowledge consumption and production, as well as understanding the overall attitudes to learning, motivation to participate and aspects hampering learning of the tourism professionals.

3 Research Methodology and Results

For the research, we decided for a survey strategy [12] to get a better understanding of the problem at hand. We wanted to investigate if the present network of the consortium addresses both knowledge providers and consumers in the relevant field. Therefore, we chose a combination of non-probability sampling techniques, of self-selection and snowball [12]. The initial questionnaire was developed in English, and then translated by native speakers to German, Finnish and Polish to be delivered in all partner countries, among selected tourism stakeholders. The online survey was open between December 2020 and January 2021. The Polish version was distributed by direct contacts and special interest groups in social media), the German version was distributed by direct contacts and a newsletter of the regional tourism board, the Finnish version was distributed by direct contacts and the English version was addressing a multi-national database of tourism experts in the Baltic Sea region. In the target sample, there were various tourism actors yet no hotels and restaurants.

The survey received 244 answers, mainly from tourism companies, associations or museums (Table 1). Of the sample 21% are under 34 years old, 31% 35–44 years, 26% 45–54 years, and 21% above 55 years. The respondents reside in different countries around the Baltic Sea, most hail from Germany (36%), Poland (28%), and Finland (17%). The majority claims tourism (80%) and marketing (49%) to be their key area of expertise, while only 29% chose education and 10% information technology in our sample.

Learning by doing is the most preferred way of learning in this professional community (74%) (Table 2). Listening to an expert, reading or watching a video rank

Table 1: Type of organizations

Type of organization	In% of n = 244
Tourism company	19%
Tourism association, Destination management or marketing organization (DMO)	19%
Museum, a cultural site or institution	16%
Zoo/aquarium	9%
Governmental organization	9%
University, research institution or other knowledge producer	8%
Other	20%

on the positions two to four. Learning by a game or competition is ranked second last, yet this may also result from lacking experience in the area of gamification.

Table 2: Preferred ways of learning (multiple choice)

Preferred ways of learning	In% of n = 244
Learning by doing	74%
Listening to an expert	66%
Reading about a topic	56%
Watching a video	48%
Participating in online courses	48%
Learning with others by socialization, dialogue, interaction	48%
Getting individual coaching or mentoring by an expert	41%
Following/shadowing another person doing	27%
Preparing myself independently and completing a test	13%
Learning by a game or a competition	12%
Writing about a topic	10%

The community of touristic stakeholders (strongly) agrees with an interest in online learning (80%) and is experienced in taking online courses (70%) (Figure 1). For the majority, it is (very) important that the material is for free (75%). In the same sample 28% state that they are (very) experienced in teaching online. While 67% (strongly) agree, that self-paced learning is efficient, the majority favours

social interaction (78% (strongly) agree) and learning from peers – 83% (strongly) agree.

The most important factors (multiple choice) that hamper learning about digitalization of the addressed tourism stakeholders are lack of time (74%), lack of information (50%), lack of technical skills (28%), but also lack of money and lack of partners or networks (20% each). Only 17% mention lack of motivation. When asked if they would join an online learning community on digitalization in tourism and attractions, 84% answered yes. The top three factors driving this motivation to participate in an online learning community (multiple choice) are: develop my own skills (88%), improve my/our organization’s performance (75%), and get inspiration (58%). It is important to note that only 14% marked to receive a certificate, diploma, university degree as a motivational factor. Almost one third (30%) claimed to be motivated by the pure joy of learning.

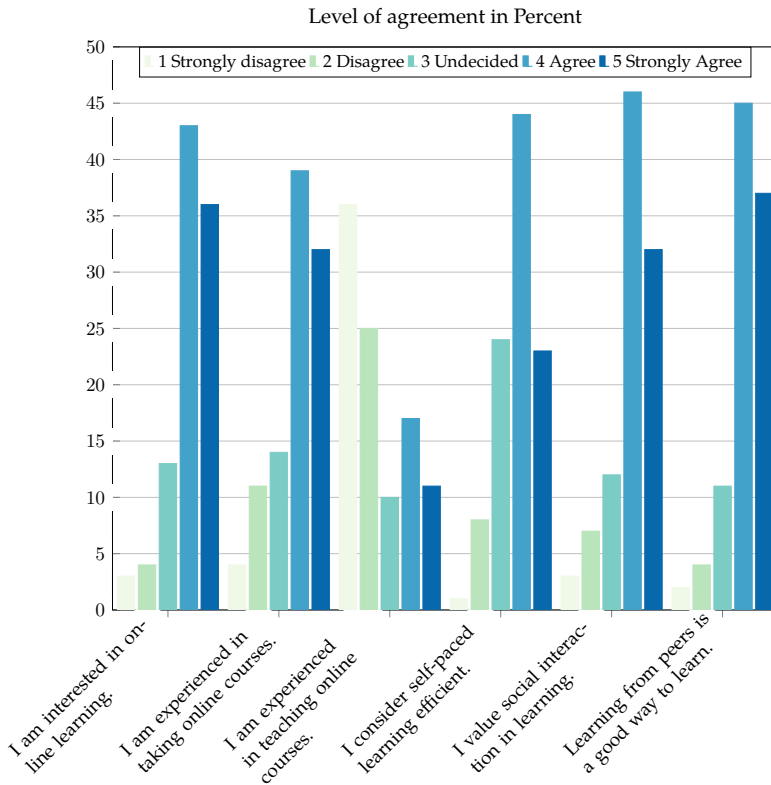


Figure 1: Attitude to learning

To understand the double role of a participant in an online learning community of both knowledge receiver and knowledge provider, the participants were asked: How could you imagine contributing to such an online learning community? (multiple choice). Only 32% stated only wanting to learn, while 1% showed no interest (Table 3). The other participants agreed to being able to contribute by mainly sharing experiences (test new technology 49%, talk/write about my experiences 39% and provide a case from my organization 37%, or serving as an interview partner 27%). Another aspect is the provision of feedback to others (31%). Another group of contributions is to act as a knowledge provider (provide expert knowledge (20%), material (11%), and/or trend reports (7%)). Only few opted for taking specific community roles (mentor 10%, moderator 7%).

Table 3: Potential contribution to an online learning community on digitalization in tourism (multiple choice)

Potential contribution as in survey	Type of contribution	In% of n = 244
Test new technology	Share experience	49%
Talk/write about my experiences	Share experience	39%
Provide a case from my organization	Share experience	37%
<i>Nothing, I only want to learn/No interest</i>	<i>Nothing</i>	33%
Provide feedback to peers	Give feedback	31%
Be an interview partner	Share experience	27%
Provide expert knowledge	Be knowledge provider	20%
Provide learning material (e.g. video lecture, SCORM modules, MOOC, PDF)	Be knowledge provider	11%
Be a mentor	Organizational role	10%
Report on trends in digitalization	Be knowledge provider	7%
Be a moderator	Organizational role	7%

4 Discussion

The survey showed that both the interest and the experience in learning online is high in the group of tourism professionals. The research also demonstrated that a consortium of universities, tourism associations and individual tourism attractions addresses both knowledge providers and consumers in their network. The tourism professionals show a high interest in social interaction and in learning from peers. That relates to the concept of a community of practice [14, page 139]: a group of “people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise”. Considering that more than three-quarters of our sample are willing to join a digital learning community, we argue that the community of practice concept is valid outside of a single enterprise. This could be explained by the micro, small and medium-sized companies that constitute the tourism sector [4] and thus a need to exchange beyond the single enterprise. This interest in peer exchange seems though somewhat in conflict with the appreciation of self-paced learning. The latter might be attributed to the time constraints that were mentioned as the main factor impeding learning. This points to the importance of applying both synchronous and asynchronous learning elements. This time-based view is suggested as a main approach of designing blended learning [10, 11] in addition to a space-based considerations of combining classroom and online teaching.

While the majority (over 70%) is hardly experienced in teaching online yet, the willingness to share experiences and knowledge in various formats is apparent. Only one third claims solely only wanting to consume knowledge. That supports the approach of cMOOCs in seeing the participants both as learners and as teachers. However, the format of contributing knowledge is mainly attributed to sharing experiences and giving feedback, yet less with providing expert material or taking a specific organizational role. The high relevance of the preferred ways of learning (especially learning by doing, using synchronous as well as asynchronous ways and learning with others by interaction) and the willingness to test new technology points to learning elements to apply knowledge in practice. Thus, the concept should contain self-paced knowledge packages, followed by a phase of testing and applying in practice, resulting then into peer exchange and experience reports of various forms (e.g. audio, video, text). We suggest that time and roles are the major design elements for the set up the online learning community. This also would address the main motivation for participation of the professionals developing their own skills towards the benefit of their organization.

We believe there is room for additional research on an appropriate governance model for a cMOOC community in the tourism industry, defining roles and a critical mass of actors and external, non-human nodes of the network. Our study is limited by focusing the specific sector of tourism and does not allow generalization

due to the chosen sampling techniques. Future research could analyse differences by types of organizations or countries and add other sectors for comparative studies. The influence of the key thematic area of learning on the most suitable way of (digital) learning is another avenue for future research. The solutions should – based on the data presented – include a significant degree of interaction, participation, and experimentation to activate the tourism professionals in online learning to facilitate learning by *doing*.

5 Conclusion

There is a high interest in an online learning community for digitalization in tourism in the Baltic Sea region. An existing network of academia, businesses and organizations can reach out to relevant actors with different competencies, both interested in learning and in contributing to a learning community. The insights will help develop a main project, which combines the cMOOC approach with a community of practice with actors having double roles of contributing and consuming knowledge, facilitating peer-driven exchange and social interaction. Apart from roles, the major challenge appears to unite both asynchronous self-paced and synchronous elements placing process and time aspects at the centre of the approach [10]. Free learning material is appreciated, yet, we conclude that the major currency for learning of professionals is: time.

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