

# Determinants of the effectiveness of integrated marketing communications (IMC): Insights from volunteer tourism organizations

Xinru Yu <sup>1</sup> and Uraiporn Kattiyapornpong <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia

**Corresponding Author:** Uraiporn Kattiyapornpong

**Corresponding author's e-mail:** pink@uow.edu.au

**Received January:** 24, 2019

**Accepted for publication:** April 2, 2019

**Published:** September 9, 2019

---

## Abstract

The rise of advanced technology, Internet and information and communication technology (ICT) not only has facilitated the changing consumer behaviour but also enable organizations' ability to search for their target markets efficiently and tailor their market offering and marketing programs effectively. On another hand, it creates a complex challenge for all organizations to maintain their sustained competitive advantages. This paper aims to investigate the most effective marketing communication channels (offline/online) and content (visual/verbal) used by volunteer tourism organizations to promote their volunteer tourism projects. The total of five volunteer tourism organizations was selected and interviewed regarding their volunteer tourism projects including the target audience, marketing communication channels and content used in each project, and the outcomes of using those marketing communication channels and content. The findings present the insights of the most effective integrated marketing communication channels and content that appropriately help volunteer tourism organizations to achieve their marketing objectives.

**Keywords:** Volunteer tourism, marketing communication channels and content, integrated marketing communication, volunteer tourism organizations

---

## 1. Introduction

Integrated marketing communication (IMC) is the combined use of promotional tools in order to create clear, consistent, and compelling messages in an effective way, thus, bring about the maximum communication impacts on consumer's decision-making (e.g. Diaconu, Oancea, & Brinzea, 2016; Mihaela, 2015; Schultz, 1992; Schultz & Schultz, 2003). It synthesizes the elements of communication mix so that the strengths of each channel are used to offset the weaknesses of others; that is, the synergy among different marketing communication channels is created to put forward a single unified voice (Chitty, Luck, Barker, Valos, & shimp, 2015; Diaconu et al., 2016; Kitchen & Schultz, 1999; Mihaela, 2015; Peter & John, 2011; Porcu, Barrio-García, & Kitchen, 2012). With the continued

growth of advanced technology, marketing communication has divided into two main channels; namely, offline (any channels which deliver information without using the internet such as brochures, posters and traditional word of mouth) and online (any channels used by marketers to reach the audience through internet such as social media, search engine and websites) (Chiou, Wan, & Lee, 2008; Dholakia et al., 2010; Hun & Yazdanifard, 2014; Owen & Humphrey, 2009; Seabra, Abrantes, & Lages, 2007; Voorveld, Smit, Neijens, & Bronner, 2016). Both channels are highly relevant as they have significant impacts on consumer purchase decision-making (Hawkins, Mothersbaugh, & Best, 2013; Voorveld et al., 2016). In addition, different channels (offline and online) and content (visual and verbal) play different roles in consumer decision-making stages (Chen et al., 2015; Chitty et al., 2015; Hippner, 2013; Mihaela, 2015; Pieters & Wedel, 2004). Therefore, it is significant to understand the impacts of integrated marketing communication channels because consumers nowadays are largely exposed to a far richer variety of marketing communication channels (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2017). In other words, consumers not only rely on offline or online marketing communication channels but they also use a mix of marketing communication channels to inform themselves about their purchases (Chiou et al., 2008; Seabra et al., 2007; Voorveld et al., 2016). Moreover, from organization's perspective, different marketing communication channels work better at specific consumer decision-making process stages (Mihaela, 2015; Porcu et al., 2012; Stancioiu, Orzan, Pargaru, Arsene, & Botos, 2013).

Although consumers generally can store visual and verbal content, the integrated marketing communication content (visual and verbal), however, performs better than individual content (e.g. advertisements with text only) (Paivio, 1991, 2014). Therefore, using integrated marketing communication content can reinforce the messages to consumers, and consequently, increases the effectiveness of marketing communication content. Despite substantial studies on marketing communication, they mainly focus on visual and verbal content in general (e.g. Hippner, 2013; Pieters & Wedel, 2004), the marketing communication content in tourism context is not extensively addressed in the past research. Due to the intangible nature of tourism products and services, tourists often have high levels of insecurity during purchasing process and with all available and accessible information, their purchasing behaviour patterns become highly complex in nature, and constitute multiple decisions for reassurance about their choices (Azim, 2010; Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002; Morrison, 2013). In addition, they use extensive information search as a risk reduction strategy to ensure the correct decision-making in their travel purchases (Fodness & Murray, 1997; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Therefore it is of significance to extend the study on marketing communication content in tourism. On another hand, past research has extensively investigated the impacts of offline and online marketing communication channels on tourist's decision-making when purchasing a holiday and finds that different marketing communication channels induce distinctive consumer behaviors (e.g. Arturo & Agueda, 2006; Chen, Nguyen, Klaus, & Wu, 2015; Chiou et al., 2008; Filieri, Alguezaui, & McLeay, 2015). However, past research only focuses on marketing communication channels experienced by tourists and those studies do not investigate integrated marketing communication channels (both offline and online channels) used by volunteer tourism organizations. Furthermore, the integrated marketing communication content is also paramount in the tourism industry, as past research shows that the communication results are better when a tourism marketer delivers a message that can be processed by more than one system (e.g. verbal and visual) (Paivio, 1991, 2014). Additionally, although past research in tourism context mainly focuses on how marketing communication channels influence tourist's decision-making process (e.g. Chen et al., 2015; Filieri et al., 2015; Ring, Tkaczynski, & Dolnicar, 2014), the effectiveness of integrated marketing communication content are not extensively addressed. Therefore, this research aims to fill the knowledge gaps to investigate the effectiveness of integrated marketing communication channels (offline and online) and content (visual and verbal) in volunteer tourism industry.

Volunteer tourism is a new form of niche tourism with continuing growth in the recent years (Butcher & Smith, 2015; Griffin, 2013; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). For example, the GoAbroad website offered links to 938 organizations that offer 5568 volunteer abroad programs (Wilkinson, McCool, & Bois, 2014). Wearing (2001, p.1)

defines volunteer tourism participants as “those who for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment”. Over the years, researchers have extensively studied various motivations for people to engage in volunteer tourism (Otoo, 2013; Ryan, Kaplan, & Grese, 2001; Simpson, 2004; Söderman & Snead, 2008; Wearing, 2001, 2004). However, the effectiveness of integrated marketing communication channels and content in volunteer tourism is not extensively investigated. Although few researchers investigate the impact of marketing communication channels or content on volunteer tourist’s decision-making (e.g. Coghlan, 2007; Grimm & Needham, 2012), their research only focuses on either marketing communication channels or content. Additionally, in such an increasingly competitive environment, volunteer tourist’s buying decision processes become complex and their bargaining power become powerful as they can access to a variety of choices on volunteer tourism organizations and projects. Therefore, it is necessary for volunteer tourism organizations to better understand the effectiveness of marketing communication channels (offline and online) and content (verbal and visual) in order to tailor their marketing communication strategies to reach their target audience (volunteer tourists) and achieve their organizational objectives within limited budget and resources.

This research aims to fill those aforementioned gaps by investigating the effectiveness of integrated marketing communication channels and content in the context of volunteer tourism. Specifically, this research is exploratory in nature and aims at providing a preliminary understanding of marketing communication channels and content used by volunteer tourism organizations. Therefore, this research attempts to answer the research question: Which marketing communication channels (offline/online) and content (visual/verbal) are the most effective tools used by volunteer tourism organizations to promote their volunteer tourism projects?

## **2. Literature Review**

Comparing to general consumer behavior, tourist’s decision-making is far more complex due to intangible nature of tourism products and services (Azim 2010; Morrison 2013), and influenced by many factors such as internal factors (push motivation) and external factors (pull motivation) (Crompton 1979; Dann 1977). Therefore, tourists use various information sources: internal (tourists past travel experience and their memories of trips) and external (personal or “known” and non-personal or “unknown” (Morrison 2013)) to search for information about products and services (Chen et al. 2015; Chitty et al. 2015; Hippner 2013; Mihaela 2015; Pieters & Wedel 2004). In addition, the advanced technological revolutions have changed the dynamics of tourist’s behaviors (Ho et al. 2012), therefore, marketing communication becomes paramount in influencing tourist’s decision making (Chitty et al. 2015; Govers & Go 2004; Hippner 2013; Mihaela 2015; Stancioiu et al. 2013; Yeshin 2012).

Marketing communication, the vehicle to deliver information or messages to tourists, includes both marketing communication channels (offline and online channel) (Voorveld et al. 2016), and marketing communication content (visual and verbal) (Paivio 2014). Since marketing communication has significant impacts on tourist’s decision-making (Chitty et al. 2015; Govers & Go 2004; Hippner 2013; Mihaela 2015; Stancioiu et al. 2013), better understanding of effectiveness marketing communication is critical for tourism organizations. In addition, marketing communication also plays an increasingly significant role in volunteer tourism. With the continued growth of volunteer tourism (Wearing & McGehee 2013) and the available vast amount of information, volunteer tourists consequently have a variety of choices including volunteer tourism organizations and projects to choose from. Therefore, it is significant for volunteer tourism organizations to delivery information or messages about their products’ attributes and benefits to volunteer tourists in an effective way. In other words, understanding the effectiveness of marketing communication becomes paramount in volunteer tourism organization’s goal achievement (Chen et al. 2015; Chitty et al. 2015; Hippner 2013; Mihaela 2015; Pieters & Wedel 2004). There are

two categories of marketing communication channels; namely, offline and online marketing communication channels (Voorveld et.al, 2016). With the growth of advanced technology, it is significant to understand both offline and online marketing communication channels, because consumers use different marketing communication channels to search information about products and services (Chiou et al. 2008; Seabra et al. 2007; Voorveld et al. 2016). Past research demonstrates that online marketing communication channels are easiest and fastest ways to gain more information about certain products or services (Hun & Yazdanifard 2014). On another hand, marketing communication content includes audio or visual messages which are used to inform customers about products or services (Appiah 2006; Scheinbaum et al. 2017). In general, past research shows that marketing communication content plays an important role in consumer's decision-making (e.g. Hippner 2013; Pieters & Wedel 2004; Scheinbaum et al. 2017; Shani et al. 2010). Pieters and Wedel (2004) find that the larger picture size especially enhances consumer's attention. In addition, Lewandowska and Jankowski (2017) find that visual content attracts web user's attention. However, their studies mainly focus on consumer's need recognition stage, while they do not investigate the impacts of visual content on consumer's information searching behaviours. Besides, their findings have yet been studied on its application in tourism context. Furthermore, some research investigates visual content in tourism context (e.g. Coghlan 2007; Grimm & Needham 2012; Gupta & Utkarsh 2014; Han & Mills 2006), and reveals that the visual content can attract first time visitors to form an image of the destination (Han and Mills, 2006). Moreover, Gupta and Utkarsh (2014) find that images and videos can communicate the attractiveness of destinations. Nevertheless, their research does not identify which marketing communication content has the major impact on tourist's decision-making, especially in the need recognition and information searching stages, respectively.

In the context of volunteer tourism, past research reveals that promotional photographs can affect potential volunteer tourist's attention and expectations (Coghlan 2007; Grimm & Needham 2012). Nevertheless, their studies do not investigate details of pictures (e.g. animal, landscape, and children) in affecting volunteer tourist's decisions to choose a volunteer tourism holiday and the effectiveness of promotional videos in promoting volunteer tourism products. In addition, the combination of visual and verbal content works better than the singular content. Past research finds that verbal-visual messages (e.g. those with text and video) can increase informativeness, product interest, perceived prestige, and intentions to spread e-WOM for a brand when comparing to text-only messages (Hippner, 2013; Scheinbaum et al. 2017, p. 627). Similarly, several research shows that both visual and verbal content are also important in tourism context (Lee & Tussyadiah 2010; Ring et al. 2014). Based on the 'dual coding theory', Paivio (1991, 2014) argues that both visual (e.g. photographs) and verbal (e.g. text and face to face verbal conversations) constitute a tourist's mental representation of a destination, and tourists can store visual and verbal content simultaneously. Therefore, it implies that the integrated marketing communication content (visual and verbal) can reinforce the messages to tourists and consequently increases the effectiveness of marketing communication. Furthermore, Lee and Tussyadiah (2010) find that the most influential source of information is the combination of text and photo in the context of an online travel community. However, their research only examines text (verbal) and photos (visual), while the impacts of other visual content (e.g. video) and verbal content (e.g. face to face verbal conversations) on tourist's decision-making are not investigated in their research. They only focus on the importance of the combination of visual and verbal content in e-word of mouth, while the significance of integrated marketing communication content in other marketing communication channels (e.g. websites and social media) is not included in their research. In addition, Ring et al. (2014) classify tourists' shared information into visual and verbal content, however, their research does not study the impact of marketing communication content (visual and verbal) in tourist's pre-purchase stages (from initial need recognition to information search). Therefore, in line with Lee and Tussyadiah (2010) and Ring et al. (2014), this research paper aims to fill the gap knowledge in investigating the effectiveness of integrated marketing communication content (visual and verbal) in pre-purchase stage within volunteer tourism context, which is an area that has not yet been extensively studied.

In summary, past research does not extensively study the effectiveness of integrated marketing communication channels (offline and online) and content (verbal and visual) across multiple tourist behavioral decision-making stages in a single comprehensive study, from initial need recognition to information searching stages and from volunteer tourism organization's perspectives. In addition, past research has not yet explored and analyzed the integrated marketing communication channels (offline and online) with information sources (personal and non-personal) in order to investigate the effectiveness of marketing communication channels on volunteer tourist's decision-making. Therefore, this research paper aims to investigate the effectiveness of integrated marketing communication channels and content in volunteer tourism context.

### **3. Methodology**

In order to address the research question, this research applied a qualitative approach as it can help the researcher to explore and understand the feelings, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, emotions, perceptions, intentions, and behavior of respondents (Aaker, Kumar, Leone, & Day, 2016; Aaker et al., 2016; Beddows, 2008; Malhotra, 2007). In addition, the in-depth interview method was selected because it allows the researchers to gain insights of volunteer tourism organization's marketing communication approaches. The selection criteria included the active organizations with well-establishment and good reputation, for example, years of establishing, number of projects and the positive reviews on online and available sources were considered in selecting the sample. Volunteer tourism organizations' particular information was checked from their corporate official websites and social media such as Facebook and Instagram. The total of five volunteer tourism organizations was recruited from June to July 2017. This small sample size is considered sufficient to answer the research question and suitable for this research approach and method that is generally smaller than those used in descriptive and casual approaches (Aaker et al. 2016; Gentles et al. 2015). In addition, the size of samples typically relies on the concept of 'saturation', or the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data (Guest et al. 2006) as saturation is widely recognized as a guide or indicator that sufficient data collection has been achieved (Gentles et al. 2015). In this research, the interview process continued until theoretical saturation was reached to the point where additional data collection contributes little or nothing new to the study (Gentles et al. 2015, p. 1781; Glaser 1992). Apart from that, there were two main constraints of sample selection in this research. Firstly, finding large sample sizes was often challenging in collecting data from volunteer organization's representatives due to busy work schedule. Secondly, volunteer tourism is a niche market (Wearing & McGehee 2013), finding greater sample size is challenging, consequently, the sample size was small and narrow in this research. The audio-recorded interview data was transcribed, and the number coding was assigned to each interview transcript for checking purpose. Two researchers listened to and transcribed the recordings, read and reviewed the transcripts repeatedly and separately, and then compared the transcribed data. This reiterative process allowed the researchers to gain familiarity with the data and increase the accuracy of data analysis. The researchers then coded and analyzed interview transcripts using N-vivo 11.0 software, which enabled the researchers to group and compare the data (Clisbee, 2003). The N-vivo 11.0 indeed reduced a great number of manual tasks and provided more time to discover tendencies, analyze data and derive conclusions (Michale, 2007) as it facilitated organizing and searching data in this research. Moreover, the process of importing and grouping the data in N-vivo was checked to avoid any errors. Besides using the software, the manual based analysis was also used in this research to ensure the reliability of the results. Furthermore, the combination of manual and software based analysis provided more accurate and reliable results (Crowley, Harré, & Tagg, 2002; Healy & Perry, 2000). In addition, this research adopted content analysis to analyze data. The content analysis show three distinct approaches; namely, conventional, directed, or summative, and all those approaches are used to interpret meaning from the content of text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The researchers in this research adopted conventional content analysis to analyze data in this research because it is generally "used with a study design whose aim is to describe a phenomenon" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), and it is appropriate when existing theory or research literature on a

phenomenon is limited (Krippendorff, 2004). Since there is a lack of research in investigating the effectiveness of integrated marketing communication channels and content in volunteer tourism context, thus, the conventional content analysis was appropriate in this research.

#### **4. Discussions of Results**

##### **4.1 Profile of Respondents**

The total of five volunteer tourism organizations participated in this research project. The findings show that the earliest year of establishment of volunteer tourism organization was in year 1948, and the latest year of establishment of volunteer tourism organization was in year 2012. Moreover, the findings from this research show that volunteer tourism projects mostly fall into several categories, for example, culture exchange, wild life, archaeology, education and teaching, environmental protection and research, and medical, which are consistent with previous research (e.g. Brown, 2005; Butcher & Smith, 2015; Wearing & McGehee, 2013). In addition, the findings from this research reveal that those volunteer tourism projects are developed in different continents and countries. The profile of volunteer tourism organizations is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The profile of volunteer tourism organizations

Volunteer Tourism Organization (VTO)	Year of Establish	Projects	Distribution (Destination)
VTO 1	1948	Education, Medical, Technical, Environmental, General Labour, Culture Exchange	3 continents
VTO 2	2012	Education, Medical, Technical, Environmental, Culture Exchange	Over 20 developing countries, and 26 cities
VTO 3	1971	Archaeology & Culture, Climate Change, Wildlife & Ecosystems, Ocean Health	Nearly 40 countries
VTO 4	2000	Education, Medical, Technical, Environmental, Culture Exchange	13 countries
VTO 5	1948	Education, Medical, Technical, Environmental, General Labour, Culture Exchange	120 countries and territories

##### **4.2 The use of integrated marketing communication channels**

Tourism is known as an information-intensive industry (Bieger & Laesser, 2004; Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006), which individuals need to be exposed to as much information as possible in order to make informed decisions. Specifically, with the growing tourism market and advanced technology, people alternatively use different channels to gain travel information (Chiou et al., 2008). Additionally, “one message from an organization may not get to the intended receiver” (Morrison, 2013, p.320). Therefore, it is essential for tourism organizations to consider the value of the integrated marketing communication channels (Stancioiu et al., 2013). The findings show that volunteer tourism organizations engage in extensive planning to determine the mix of marketing communication channels in delivering messages and promoting volunteer tourism projects, consequently, reaching the desired target market and achieving organizational objectives.

*“We have multiple ways to promote our projects. One of the ways is through online advertisements such as google engines and social media. The second way we promote our programs is through word-of-mouth projects, and we provide platforms for past volunteers to share their experience with potential volunteer tourists. A large part of our volunteer tourists are made up of repeat volunteers and their referrals onto our projects...” [VTO 1]*

Moreover, there are several integrated marketing communication channels to promote volunteer tourism projects. Integrated marketing communication channels help to increase the coverage of the target market. VTO 2' view illustrates that: *“Using different marketing communication channels can increase the coverage of target customers, and it can help us reach customers who come from different regions or countries...”*. The findings also highlight that volunteer tourism organizations use different channels to target different market segments. *“We use different channels to target different market groups. For example, word-of-mouth advertising from returning volunteer tourists is our specific promotional strategy for those private groups, especially for family. Some returning volunteer tourists talk about their experience to their family members, and after that, they bring their family members to join our projects as a group.”* Additionally, integrated marketing communication channels provide an opportunity to create new target markets. For example, different festivals appeal to different types of people, so festivals can be used to target new markets or to reinforce an established position (Hsu, Killion, Brown, J.Gross, & Huang, 2008). VTO 3 mentions that: *“We attend different festivals, for example, a sustainable living festival which is held annually in Melbourne... we find out there is a large market for us, actually retirees...”*.

Integrated marketing communication channels can also facilitate potential volunteer tourists' learning. Keller (2001) mentions that repeated exposures give consumers multiple opportunities to encode brand-related information. In other words, exposing information in different marketing communication channels can further facilitate learning (Unnava & Burnkrant, 1991; Young & Bellezza, 1982). VTO 2 mentions that: *“I think repeating information on different communication channels can increase their (potential volunteer tourists) awareness, and provide an in-depth understanding of our projects...volunteer tourists can learn more about our projects from different marketing communication channels”*. In summary, the findings reveal that volunteer tourism organizations integrate various channels to deliver a compelling message about their volunteer tourism projects to the target audience, in order to attract or communicate to the target market effectively and efficiently (Diaconu et al., 2016).

#### **4.3. The most effective marketing communication channels**

Blaga (2013) highlights that the effectiveness of marketing communications depends on how the tourism organizations manage to develop the messages, choose the target audience, and select the media by which the information is delivered to the target audience. Table 2 presents the most effective marketing communication channels that are social media (online) and word-of-mouth (offline and online).

Social media have increased in popularity globally in the recent years (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013; Leung, Law, Van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013). In volunteer tourism, this research finds that most volunteer tourism organizations are keen adopters of social media to promote their volunteer tourism projects due to the large number of social media users. VTO 3 mentions that *“Facebook is now a medium used socially and for business by the majority of the population”*. VTO 2 supplements that *“I think the most effective marketing communication channel is social media. Nowadays, almost everyone uses social media, and news or information can be spread through different social media platforms in very short time with covering a large range of people”*. Apart from its popularity, social media also play a significant role in focusing on the best practices for interacting with travellers (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014),

which are consistent with the findings from this research. *“We can create different conversation groups according to different projects on social media. It is a platform for past volunteer tourists to share volunteer tourism experience with prospective volunteer tourists. The prospective volunteer tourists also have opportunities to make inquiries directly with us, therefore, they can have better understandings of our projects, and make their own decisions” [VTO 2].* Of those social media, the findings show that Facebook has higher credibility comparing to other channels, as the users trust other users and their experiences (Maurer & Wiegmann, 2011). *“...The prospective volunteer tourists can see comments from other Facebook users or have direct communications with them...they believe what they say...it is more credible...” [VTO 2].* In addition, the findings reveal that social media is the most popular channel used by students; therefore, some volunteer tourism organizations use social media as their main marketing communication channel in order to target this particular market. *“Social media becomes the most popular platform among universities’ students, so we use them heavily to promote our projects to students, since most of our customers are students...” [VTO 2]*

**Table 2.** The Summary of the Most Effective Marketing Communication Channels and Content

Marketing Communication	VTO1	VTO2	VTO3	VTO4	VTO5
Word of Mouth (Channel)	✓				✓
Social Media (Channel)		✓	✓	✓	
Picture (Visual Content)		✓		✓	
Video (Visual Content)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

According to the research findings, some volunteer tourism organizations emphasize that word-of-mouth (WOM) promotion is also one of the most effective marketing communication channel. *“Word of Mouth – it is the channel which has the best conversion from people who express interest in our projects to people who end up going on volunteer tourism projects with us. It generates a large amount of people to join our projects” [VTO 5].* Furthermore, VTO 2’ view conforms Francesco and Wietsma (2006)’ findings that positive reviews are used for increasing product knowledge. *“The reviews (positive reviews) are also very helpful and credible, and it’s actually like an evidence to support the projects, and provide additional information about projects”.* In addition, the findings show that the testimonial is considered as a part of WOM, which is a marketing communication channel used by volunteer tourism organizations to deliver messages about their projects. Furthermore, the findings reveal that volunteer tourism organizations believe multiple testimonials from different parties seem to be effective. VTO 1’s view illustrates that: *“Multiple perspectives of testimonials are quite effective...our testimonials include testimonials from volunteer tourists, parents and local communities. The first perspective is the testimonial from volunteer tourists, and it reflects other volunteers’ experience, and it also informs prospective volunteer tourists that this is a reliable and eligible organization, and they can gain different travelling experience from this trip. The second perspective is the testimonial from parents, for example, the parent testimonials show that all the parents have the same concerns about their children’ safety issues, so the parent testimonials can tell other parents that their daughters and sons will be safe with us. The third testimonial is from local communities, it shows to parents and volunteers that we do have positive relationships with the local community, and it also informs prospective volunteer tourists that they can make some contributions to society or environment”.*



#### 4.4. The use of integrated marketing communication content

This research finds that volunteer tourism organizations prefer to use both visual and verbal content to satisfy volunteer tourists' different preferences in marketing communication content. *"We use different content to appeal to a wider audience and engage with them in a manner that they prefer"* [VTO 2]. In other words, integrated marketing communication content can satisfy volunteer tourist's various information exposure and search preferences about volunteer tourism products. More specifically, some people prefer to read text on printed materials or online, while other people find it is easier to absorb information by listening to others (Morrison 2013). In addition, some people may prefer to visually see some pictures or videos to get information efficiently. *"Different customers prefer different content to get information about projects. Some people may prefer reading things, but some people may prefer listening to other people. So we use different marketing communication content to delivery messages to our prospective volunteer tourists, and satisfy their different needs, thus, attract more volunteer tourists and reach our goals"* [VTO 2]. VTO 5 also emphasizes that *"different types of marketing communication content work better on different marketing communication channels, for example, blogs and videos work better on Facebook, while photos with minimal words work better on Instagram"*. Moreover, respondents mention that different marketing communication content provides different amount of information about volunteer tourism organizations or projects. For example, volunteer tourists can get more information from text messages comparing to pictures. VTO 4 highlights that *"types of content we offer depend on what kind of information individuals require and the details they want"*.

#### 4.5 The most effective marketing communication content

Tourism organizations communicate with tourists by providing virtual experience such as videos and photos so that tourists can get a direct experience without actually being there (Chiou et al., 2008), and they can experience the sights in advance (Klein, 1998). The findings reveal that the most effective marketing communication content is the visual content; namely, videos and pictures (see Table 2). *"In today's environment, individuals want to know about the experience without having to be burdened with a 'text-heavy' website. Because of this, individuals want to see pictures and videos, and learn about volunteer tourism experience visually"*. [VTO 1]

According to dual coding theory, texts are less likely to have visual representations, while pictures and videos are better remembered because they are especially able to elicit mental images (Paivio, 1991, 2014). Besides that, visual content allows tourists the chance to have the "first touch" of their travel destinations on the internet (Chiou et al., 2008), and it also can stimulate volunteer tourists' awareness and hidden needs. VTO 2' view illustrates that: *"If tourists only rely on text content, it might not be so attractive, they cannot have a rough idea of what the project is. Sometimes, the text content is not so powerful, and tourists also cannot remember the information presented there. Therefore, pictures and videos definitely help a lot. Pictures and videos can provide the first impression of the project, and they can stimulate volunteer tourists' awareness and needs, after that, volunteers tourists would like to know more details through text content"*. In addition, VTO 2 highlights that visual content can increase the reliability of volunteer tourism organizations. They suggest that: *"The information about ongoing projects is updated through pictures and videos on Instagram every day. Those pictures and videos reflect volunteer tourist's actual life at the destination. Consequently, it can increase the reliability of our organization"*.

The findings show that the video is an effective type among other types of content to engage prospective volunteer tourists by reflecting former volunteer tourist's experience. For example, *"Videos in particular are the most effective at engaging our audience (volunteer tourists) and showcasing our past volunteer tourists' experience."* [VTO 5]. In addition, the findings highlight that the video can also increase credibility of the content. *"The video is the most effective content, because it shows the experience from a person's point-of-view. It reduces the chance of*

*it being a 'fake' experience as you can see various individuals on the project and their experience in the video. Individuals want to make sure that their money goes to where it is needed, this (the video) really helps a lot" [VTO 1]. Besides that, VTO 3 highlights that videos offer less bias, since they include reflections from third parties such as past volunteer tourists and local communities. "It (the video) allows a stakeholder/follower (e.g. potential volunteer tourists) to hear about our projects from someone who currently engaged with our volunteer tourism products. They play a role as a third party user, and offer less bias". Videos also provide better accessibilities and understandings for prospective volunteer tourists to know about volunteer tourism projects. "I think in today's environment, people want to visually see what they are going to do, as they don't want to read the long text message. In other words, they want to have easy accessibility to information about volunteer tourism projects. So using videos is much easier to demonstrate our projects' benefits and attributes comparing to other content. Videos can also show the impacts of our projects on the local community and on themselves (volunteer tourists)" [VTO 1].*

Lastly, the findings show that video is the mixture of verbal and visual content which provides a deeper impression on prospective volunteer tourists compare to other content. VTO 5 mentions that *"Video is one type of content which combines both pictures and sounds; therefore, it can impress volunteer tourists before they visit there, while other content cannot satisfy". "One picture can represent hundreds of words. People are overloaded by the text from various platforms. They don't want to spend time on reading articles to get information, while pictures take their less time to know the information" [VTO 2].* Moreover, the findings also reveal that pictures can create and communicate destination images. *"We can use pictures to deliver messages about destination countries, for example, pictures of landscape, pictures of food and people. Therefore, the destination images can be formed and communicated via those pictures" [VTO 3].* Additionally, the findings reveal that details of pictures (e.g. animals and children) can be used as a tool to stimulate volunteer tourist's pull motivations and affect their decision-making. For example, VTO 2 mentions that animals in pictures can reflect the culture of destinations or countries (e.g., the panda represents a symbol of good luck in China). Therefore, when potential volunteer tourists see some animals in the picture, they feel like to know more about the culture (pull motivation) of the destination, consequently, they want to choose the specific volunteer tourism project, which can satisfy their needs. VTO 2 supplements that landscape considers as one of attractive factors which can arouse sightseeing lovers' desires to join volunteer tourism projects as well. Furthermore, the findings reveal that animals and children in pictures are the pull motivation factors, because the majority of volunteer tourists, particular female volunteer tourists, they love animals and children, therefore, those pictures can pull volunteer tourists to choose a particular volunteer tourism project. VTO 2 supports that *"adorable children in pictures can affect potential volunteer tourist's decision-making, especially female volunteer tourists".*

## **5. Conclusions, Implementations, Future Research and Limitations**

This research provides theoretical contributions to volunteer tourism and marketing communication literature. It contributes towards the limited research in marketing communication channels (offline and online) and content (visual and verbal) in volunteer tourism context. It extends the knowledge by identifying the most effective marketing communication channels and content used by volunteer tourism organizations. Furthermore, this research contributes to filling the knowledge gaps in investigating effectiveness of both integrated marketing communication channels and content in volunteer tourism context. By understanding the marketing communication channels and content used by volunteer tourism organizations, this provides better understandings of the effectiveness of marketing communication channels and content in volunteer tourism.

Volunteer tourism industry practitioners can benefit from the findings presented in this research. More specifically, the findings from this research can help volunteer tourism organizations to evaluate the effectiveness of their current marketing communication channels and content, and subsequently determine the appropriate mix of marketing communication approaches to specific target groups and secure the substantial impacts on volunteer

tourists' decision-making on choosing a volunteer tourism holiday. As evidence by the findings, word of mouth (offline and online) is the most effective marketing communication channel used by volunteer tourism organizations, and it has the major impacts on volunteer tourists' decision-making on choosing a volunteer tourism holiday. Therefore, volunteer tourism organization's marketing communication strategy should focus on word of mouth marketing communication channels including both traditional WOM (offline) and e-WOM (online). More specifically, volunteer tourism organizations can provide incentives or discounts in order to encourage volunteer tourists to share their volunteer tourism experience with their friends and families. Simultaneously, volunteer tourism organizations should encourage volunteer tourists to post reviews on social media such as Instagram or Facebook and third party review websites such as TripAdvisor, in turns, increase authenticity and trust perceptions. With regard to marketing communication content, the findings from this research reveal that videos play an important role as the most effective marketing communication content used by volunteer tourism organizations. Therefore, volunteer tourism organizations should create more videos online on social media and their official websites to grab potential volunteer tourists' attentions, and provide them insights of volunteer tourism organizations and projects in the effective and efficient way. Moreover, volunteer tourism organizations should encourage volunteer tourists to share videos about their travelling experience on social media in order to create awareness of volunteer tourism projects, and increase the credibility of information. This research is constrained by some limitations, which are avenues for further research. This research only focuses on marketing communication channels and content used by volunteer tourism organizations influencing need recognition and information search stages, however, marketing communication channels and content experienced by volunteer tourists in their other decision-making stages are not addressed in this research. Future research should investigate the impacts of marketing communication channels and content on volunteer tourists' decision making. The central question is which marketing communication channels (offline/online) and content (visual/verbal) have the major impact on volunteer tourists' decision making? Moreover, as evidenced by the findings, volunteer tourists use various marketing communication channels and content to make their decisions on their holidays. More options mean more opportunities for volunteer tourism organizations to connect and engage with their potential volunteer tourists. Keeping interactions consistent across multiple channels and ensuring a seamless experience for volunteer tourists are the new challenges. This research is limited in evaluating whether those marketing communication channels and content provide a seamless purchasing experience for volunteer tourists, which is an area the further research can investigate. Moreover, although the new emerging topics of multi-channels and omnichannel occur (Verhoef, Kannan, & Inman, 2015), their definitions and extents are unclear to investigate at this stage. Therefore this research does not cover those topics specifically. Future research can extend to cover these two new topics if necessary. Apart from that, further studies may also apply the AIDA (attention, interest, desire, action) model in details. However, this research focuses on marketing communication channels and content used by volunteer tourism organizations.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Acknowledgement**

Earlier version of this paper was presented at the 8<sup>th</sup> Advances in Hospitality and Tourism Marketing and Management (AHTMM) Conference, in Bangkok, Thailand, June 25 -29, 2018 and was published in the conference proceedings.

**REFERENCES**

- Aaker, D., Kumar, V., Leone, R., & Day, G. (Eds.). (2016). *Marketing Research*. US: John Wiley & Sons.
- Arturo, M., & Agueda, E. (2006). Tourism brochures: Usefulness and image. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 33(4), 1036-1056.
- Azim, T. S. A. (2010). Evaluating the Relationship between Socio-demographic Variables, Travel Experience and Probability to return to Destination. *TOURISMOS: An International Multidisciplinary Refereed Journal of Tourism*, 5(1), 111-129.
- Beddows, E. (2008). The Methodological Issues Associated With Internet-Based Research. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies & Society*, 6(2).
- Berg, B. L., & Lune, H. (2012). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (8 ed.). Boston, US: Pearson Education.
- Bieger, T., & Laesser, C. (2004). Information Sources for Travel Decisions: Toward a Source Process Model. *Journal of Travel Research*, 42(4), 357-371. doi: 10.1177/0047287504263030
- Blaga, R. L. (2013). Establishing the communication mix of tourism organisations by the objectives communication, through gradually knowledge of the customer profile. *Economic Series*, 23(4), 29-40.
- Brown, S. (2005). Travelling with a Purpose: Understanding the Motives and Benefits of Volunteer Vacationers. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 8(6), 479-496. doi: 10.1080/13683500508668232
- Butcher, J., & Smith, P. (2015). 'Making a Difference': Volunteer Tourism and Development. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 35(1), 27-36. doi: 10.1080/02508281.2010.11081616
- Chen, C.-H., Nguyen, B., Klaus, P. P., & Wu, M.-S. (2015). Exploring Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) in The Consumer Purchase Decision-Making Process: The Case of Online Holidays – Evidence from United Kingdom (UK) Consumers. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 32(8), 953-970. doi: 10.1080/10548408.2014.956165
- Chiou, W.-B., Wan, C.-S., & Lee, H.-Y. (2008). Virtual experience vs. brochures in the advertisement of scenic spots: How cognitive preferences and order effects influence advertising effects on consumers. *Tourism Management*, 29(1), 146-150. doi: 10.1016/j.tourman.2007.03.016
- Chitty, B., Luck, E., Barker, N., Valos, M., & Shimp, T. A. (2015). *Integrated Marketing Communications* (4th ed.). South Melbourne, Victoria Cengage Learning Australia Pty Limited
- Clisbee, M. (2003). Using N-vivo for literature analysis: Strategies in qualitative research: Methodological issues and practices using QSR NVivo and NUD\* IST. University of London, London.
- Coghlan, A. (2007). Towards an Integrated Image-based Typology of Volunteer Tourism Organisations. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 15(3), 267-287. doi: 10.2167/jost628.0

- Crowley, C., Harré, R., & Tagg, C. (2002). Qualitative research and computing: methodological issues and practices in using QSR NVivo and NUD\* IST. *International journal of social research methodology*, 5(3), 193-197.
- Dholakia, U. M., Kahn, B. E., Reeves, R., Rindfleisch, A., Stewart, D., & Taylor, E. (2010). Consumer behavior in a multichannel, multimedia retailing environment. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 24(2), 86-95.
- Diaconu, M., Oancea, O., & Brinzea, M. (2016). Integrated Marketing Communication, instrument of modern organisations development in terms of sustainability. *ECOFORUM*, 5(2), 270-277.
- Downe-Wamboldt, B. (1992). Content analysis: method, applications, and issues. *Health care for women international*, 13(3), 313-321.
- Filieri, R., Alguezaui, S., & McLeay, F. (2015). Why do travelers trust TripAdvisor? Antecedents of trust towards consumer-generated media and its influence on recommendation adoption and word of mouth. *Tourism Management*, 51(Supplement C), 174-185. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2015.05.007>
- Fodness, D., & Murray, B. (1997). Tourist information search. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 24(3), 503-523.
- Francesco, R., & Wietsma, R. T. A. (2006). Product Reviews in Travel Decision Making. Paper presented at the Information and communication technologies in tourism, Lausanne, Switzerland
- Govers, R., & Go, F. M. (2004). Projected destination image online: Website content analysis of pictures and text. *Information Technology & Tourism*, 7(2), 73-89.
- Griffin, T. (2013). Gap Year Volunteer Tourism Stories: Sharing More Than Memories. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 22(8), 851-874. doi: 10.1080/19368623.2013.734223
- Grimm, K. E., & Needham, M. D. (2012). Internet promotional material and conservation volunteer tourist motivations: A case study of selecting organizations and projects. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 1, 17-27. doi: 10.1016/j.tmp.2011.12.007
- Hawkins, D. I., Mothersbaugh, D. L., & Best, R. J. (2013). *Consumer behavior: Building marketing strategy*. New York, US: McGraw-Hill Irwin.
- Hays, S., Page, S. J., & Buhalis, D. (2013). Social media as a destination marketing tool: its use by national tourism organisations. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 16(3), 211-239.
- Healy, M., & Perry, C. (2000). Comprehensive criteria to judge validity and reliability of qualitative research within the realism paradigm. *Qualitative market research: An international journal*, 3(3), 118-126.
- Hippner, V. H. S. H. H. (2013). An experimental study on the effect of video in e-mail marketing on selected constructs of consumer behaviour. *Marketing-ZVP*, 1(1), 51-78.
- Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative health research*, 15(9), 1277-1288.

- Hsu, C., Killion, L., Brown, G., J.Gross, M., & Huang, S. (2008). *Tourism Marketing Milton*: John Wiley & Sons Australia Ltd.
- Hun, T. K., & Yazdanifard, R. (2014). The Impact of Proper Marketing Communication Channels on Consumer's Behavior and Segmentation Consumers. *Asian Journal of Business and Management*, 2(2).
- Jeng, J., & Fesenmaier, D. R. (2002). Conceptualizing the travel decision-making hierarchy: A review of recent developments. *Tourism Analysis*, 7(1), 15-32.
- Keller, K. L. (2001). Mastering the Marketing Communications Mix: Micro and Macro Perspectives on Integrated Marketing Communication Programs. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 17(7-8), 819-847.
- Kitchen, P. J., & Schultz, D. E. (1999). A multi-country comparison of the drive for IMC. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 39(1), 21-21.
- Klein, L. R. (1998). Evaluating the potential of interactive media through a new lens: Search versus experience goods. *Journal of Business Research*, 41(3), 195-203.
- Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. New York, US: Sage Publication.
- Leung, D., Law, R., Van Hoof, H., & Buhalis, D. (2013). Social media in tourism and hospitality: A literature review. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 30(1-2), 3-22.
- Malhotra, N. K. (2007). *Marketing research an applied orientation*: Pearson Education India.
- Maurer, C., & Wiegmann, R. (2011). Effectiveness of advertising on social network sites: a case study on Facebook. Paper presented at the Department of Tourism and Leisure Management, IMC FH Krems University of Applied Sciences.
- Michale, J. (2007). *Using Software to Analyse Qualitative Data*. School of Management, Operations and Marketing, Faculty of Business, University of Wollongong.
- Mihaela, O. O. E. (2015). The Influence of the Integrated Marketing Communication on the Consumer Buying Behaviour. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 23, 1446-1450. doi: 10.1016/s2212-5671(15)00446-3
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. New York, US: Sage Publication.
- Morgan, D. L. (1993). Qualitative content analysis: a guide to paths not taken. *Qualitative health research*, 3(1), 112-121.
- Morrison, A. M. (2013). *Marketing and managing tourism destinations* New York, US: Routledge.
- Morse, J. M. (1995). *Qualitative research methods for health professionals*. New York, US: SAGE Publications.
- Olsen, J., Alexander, J., & Roberts, S. (1986). The impact of the visual content of advertisements upon the perceived vacation experience. Paper presented at the Tourism services marketing: advances in theory and practice. Special conference series.

- Otoo, F. E. (2013). Motivations of American volunteer tourists to Ghana. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 2(4).
- Owen, R., & Humphrey, P. (2009). The structure of online marketing communication channels. *Journal of Management and Marketing Research*, 2, 1.
- Paivio, A. (1991). Dual coding theory: Retrospect and current status. *Canadian Journal of Psychology/Revue canadienne de psychologie*, 45(3), 255-287. doi: 10.1037/h0084295
- Paivio, A. (2014). *Mind and its evolution: A dual coding theoretical approach*: Psychology Press.
- Pan, B., & Fesenmaier, D. R. (2006). Online information search: vacation planning process. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 33(3), 809-832.
- Peter, J. D., & John, R. R. (2011). Comparing perceptions of marketing communication channels. *European Journal of Marketing*(1/2), 6. doi: 10.1108/03090561111095586
- Pieters, R., & Wedel, M. (2004). Attention capture and transfer in advertising: Brand, pictorial, and text-size effects. *Journal of Marketing*, 68(2), 36-50.
- Porcu, L., Barrio-García, S. d., & Kitchen, P. J. (2012). How Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) works? A theoretical review and an analysis of its main drivers and effects. *Communication and Society*, 25(1), 313-348.
- Ring, A., Tkaczynski, A., & Dolnicar, S. (2014). Word-of-Mouth Segments: Online, Offline, Visual or Verbal? *Journal of Travel Research*, 55(4), 481-492. doi: 10.1177/0047287514563165
- Ryan, R. L., Kaplan, R., & Grese, R. E. (2001). Predicting volunteer commitment in environmental stewardship programmes. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management*, 44(5), 629-648.
- Schultz, D., & Schultz, H. (2003). *IMC, The next generation: Five steps for delivering value and measuring returns using marketing communication* (1st ed.). New York, US: McGraw Hill Professional.
- Schultz, D. E. (1992). Integrated marketing communications. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 1(1), 99-104.
- Seabra, C., Abrantes, J. L., & Lages, L. F. (2007). The impact of using non-media information sources on the future use of mass media information sources: The mediating role of expectations fulfillment. *Tourism Management*, 28, 1541-1554. doi: 10.1016/j.tourman.2007.02.008
- Simpson, K. (2004). 'Doing development': The gap year, volunteer-tourists and a popular practice of development. *Journal of International Development*, 16(5), 681-692.
- Sirakaya, E., & Woodside, A. G. (2005). Building and testing theories of decision making by travellers. *Tourism Management*, 26, 815-832. doi: 10.1016/j.tourman.2004.05.004
- Smith, R. A. (1991). The Effects of Visual and Verbal Advertising Information on Consumers' Inferences. *Journal of advertising*, 20(4), 13-24.



- Söderman, N., & Snead, S. L. (2008). Opening the gap: The motivation of gap year travellers to volunteer in Latin America. *Journeys of discovery in volunteer tourism: International case study perspectives*, 118-129.
- Stancioiu, A.-F., Orzan, M., Pargaru, I., Arsene, O., & Botos, A. (2013). Integrated marketing communication in tourism an analysis. Case study: Muntenia and Oltenia. *Theoretical & Applied Economics*, 20(6), 7-34.
- Tesch, R. (2013). *Qualitative research: Analysis types and software*. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Unnava, H. R., & Burnkrant, R. E. (1991). Effects of repeating varied ad executions on brand name memory. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 406-416.
- Verhoef, P. C., Kannan, P., & Inman, J. J. (2015). From multi-channel retailing to omni-channel retailing: introduction to the special issue on multi-channel retailing. *Journal of retailing*, 91(2), 174-181.
- Voorveld, H. M., Smit, E. G., Neijens, P. C., & Bronner, A. E. (2016). Consumers' Cross-Channel Use In Online and Offline Purchases. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 56(4), 385-400. doi: 10.2501/JAR-2016-044
- Wearing, S. (2001). *Volunteer tourism: Experiences that make a difference* Wallingford, UK: CABI Publishing.
- Wearing, S. (2004). Examining best practice in volunteer tourism. *Volunteering as leisure/leisure as volunteering: An international assessment*, 209-224.
- Wearing, S., & McGehee, N. G. (2013). Volunteer tourism: A review. *Tourism Management*, 38, 120-130. doi: 10.1016/j.tourman.2013.03.002
- Wilkinson, B., McCool, J., & Bois, G. (2014). Voluntourism: an analysis of the online marketing of a fast-growing industry. *International journal of communication and health*, 4, 10-15.
- Young, D. R., & Bellezza, F. S. (1982). Encoding variability, memory organization, and the repetition effect. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 8(6), 545.
- Zeithaml, V. A., Bitner, M. J., & Gremler, D. D. (Eds). (2017). *Services marketing : integrating customer focus across the firm*. Dubuque, USA: McGraw-Hill Education,
- Zeng, B., & Gerritsen, R. (2014). What do we know about social media in tourism? A review. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 10, 27-36. doi: 10.1016/j.tmp.2014.01.001