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**TOURISM  
IN FUNCTION OF DEVELOPMENT  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA**

Tourism product as a factor of competitiveness of  
the Serbian economy and experiences of other countries



**THEMATIC  
PROCEEDINGS**

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**UNIVERSITY OF KRAGUJEVAC  
FACULTY OF HOTEL MANAGEMENT  
AND TOURISM IN VRNJAČKA BANJA**



## TRIPADVISOR IN ORGANISING A VACATION: TOURISTS' CHARACTERISTICS AND TYPES OF INFORMATION

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### **Abstract**

*For decades printed information sources have been used in information gathering process in tourism and personal contact with tourism providers in the process of organizing a vacation was needed. This trend began to change with the introduction of computers, in particular with the development of Internet and social networking web sites. Internet can be used for many different purposes that include promotion of tourism destination, creation of tourism destination image, but it is also an excellent tool in organising a vacation. The main purpose of this paper is to examine the characteristics of tourists who visited Istria County, Croatia in 2016 from the aspect of using TripAdvisor as a tool in organising their vacation. Data was collected through self-complete questionnaire on a sample of tourists staying in hotels and camping sites in nine tourism towns. This study was conducted from July through September in 2016. A total of 1554 responders were taken into analysis. Based on the descriptive results a little bit less than 30% of responders used TripAdvisor for organising their vacation. First time visitors relayed more on TripAdvisor compared to repeat visitors and country of origin also played important part in using TripAdvisor for organising vacation. Information about beaches, cultural heritage and restaurants in Istria County, Croatia were the most commonly searched types of information about the destination.*

**Key words:** *tourists' characteristics, types of information, TripAdvisor, vacation organisation*

**JEL classification:** *Z31*

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## Introduction

The number of Internet users is constantly increasing. Currently it is estimated that more than 3 billion people use Internet and it is forecasted that more than 4 billion people will use Internet in 2020. ICT and Internet are becoming a part of our everyday life (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Internet is used for many different activities like entertainment, on-line sales, and information collection. In marketing, Internet can be used for many different purposes: promotion of different commodities and services, creating company image, public relations, e-sales (Ozretić Došen & Previšić Škare, 2003). Currently, Internet and social networking web sites present a great opportunity for promotion and sales of goods and services (Kotler & Caslione, 2009) because they enable direct contact with customer. Through Internet and especially social networking web sites customers obtain information in an easy and quick manner. They can also find different types of information, see their occupancy, book services, write their comments and desires, make payments etc.

Social networking websites are becoming more and more popular in recent years. In 2009 the social networking web sites with the highest number of users were: Facebook (123 million), YouTube (85.1 million), MySpace (54 million) (Hollensen, 2011). In 2015 Facebook is still number one regarding active users (The Statistics Portal, 2016) with 1.550 millions of users. In general the number of social networking web sites users increased from 0.97 billion in 2010 to 1.96 billion in 2015 and further growth is projected to 2.44 billion in 2018 (The Statistics Portal, 2016).

Through different tool, social networking web sites connect different individuals that have common interests forming a certain type of community. These virtual communities connect their users in different manners. Virtual communities like Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Google +, Instagram, Tumblr, VK, Flickr, Vine, Meetup Netlog, MySpice.com and Twiter offer different connection and types of information that are shared on them. Different manners of communications are available like messages, discussion forums, photographs, videos, blogs etc. Users can easily become a part of the community and share their experiences. This is especially important for tourism because the main focus of tourism lies on the creation of experiences (Andersson, 2007).

On social networking web sites, tourists can express and share their tendencies for certain tourist destinations, opinions, preferences and experiences. More and more people join social networking web sites daily, so these sites are fast gaining on importance and should be explored and used in marketing tourist destinations. Social networking websites provide tourist destinations and enterprises with a very efficient way for promoting their products and services compared to “classic” communication channels. They also enable direct promotion and may decrease promotion costs. Tourists that had a satisfactory and fulfilling experience with a tourist destination may become powerful promoters of the tourist destination and its services and products. On the other hand, Internet and social networking web sites may provide different benefits to tourism enterprises especially in the form of cost reduction. Rumours and bad experiences shared through social networking web sites spread very quickly to other users and may have bad influence on tourist destinations and tourism enterprises. There are different web sites related to travel and tourism. TripAdvisor is one of the most popular and largest travel sites. It enables travellers to plan and book their trip by offering advices from different travellers. This site covers more than 5.2 million accommodations, restaurants, and attractions in more than 26,000 destinations and operates in 47 countries worldwide (TripAdvisor, 2015). It is in part similar to a social networking web sites, a virtual community and a blog, its primary function is collecting and disseminating user-generated content about travel, including comments, ratings (reviews), photos and videos (Limberger et al., 2010). Previous research is mostly focused on examining TripAdvisor taking into consideration different aspects related to their users like ranking (Jeacle & Carter, 2011), satisfaction (Limberger et al., 2010), reviews (Tuominen, 2011) etc. The main purpose of this paper is to examine the characteristics of tourists who visited Istria County, Croatia in 2015 from the aspect of using TripAdvisor as a tool in organising their vacation.

### **What are Social Networks**

The Social Network is a theoretical construct that is useful for applying in social sciences to study the relationships between individuals, groups, organizations, or entire societies (social units) (Danah, 2007). This term is used to describe a social structure that is determined by social interactions, and the relationships are referred to in the structure as nodes. Nodes that connects any social unit represents the convergence of different contacts and social units. More types of these relationships can

form a network between such nodes and thus get social networks. This approach is needed to model and clarify more social phenomena but this can be achieved by other means of modeling as a system approach. In order to understand social interactions, it is important that this social phenomenon is explored through the relationship of relationships between and within the units themselves instead to explore the settings of these units. In social sciences this area includes, but is not limited to, anthropology, biology, communication science, sociology and sociolinguistics, geography, economics, information science, organization of science and psychology.

### **Chronology of Social Network Development**

In today's world of weak links and serious differences between the layers of society, widely available technologies and techniques are needed to make it easy to get in touch with the rest of the world and engage in interactive conversations. Social media use digital and often mobile technology and Internet applications to exchange information and create conversations, in other words, social media are the media for interaction. At present, social media are an integral part of modern society, and social networking sites are a very large industry. With a virtually instantaneous response to any queries in social media, social networks (Web sites) are a great marketing tool. Historically, there have been many technologies that have created conversations, and only a great number of innovations in this sector have emerged in the last 40 years. People have only recently used digital media for networking, socializing and gathering information. There are currently social networking sites for the Internet for any area of interest in photography, cooking, traveling, etc. There are websites for sharing photos, sharing videos, getting friends to know about various activities, getting to know new people, and re-connecting with old friends. Similarly, it is easier to keep track of messages and movements of celebrities through these websites as they put new posts on them. Social media can be useful for building a social authority, individuals or organizations can be established as experts in their areas and can begin to influence those areas. Accordingly, one of the basic concepts of social media is that through social media, one person can not completely influence the other message, but it can also contribute to the conversation about it. Social media have moved far beyond its origins in IRC channels, and are still developing. Below you will see the emergence of the first social media as follows (Adams, 2012).

Table 1: *Chronology of Social Network Development*

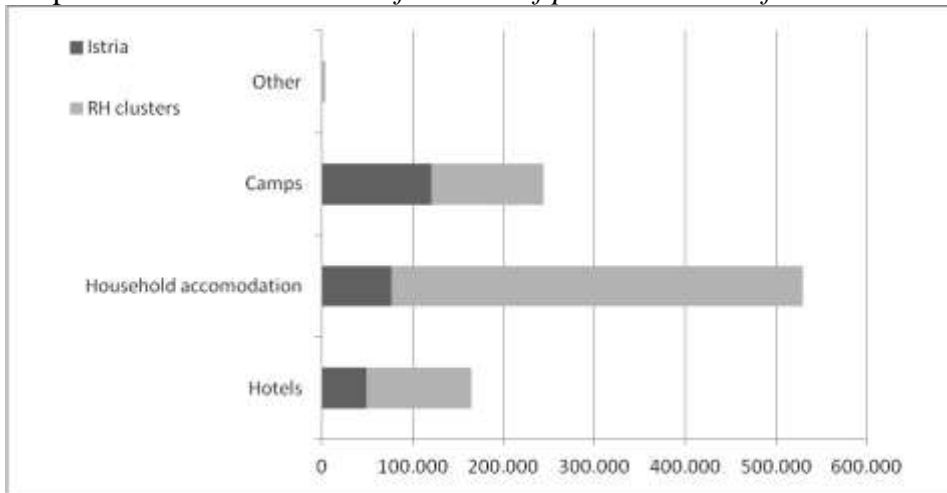
BBS (Buletin Bord System)	The first BBSs appeared in the late 70s of 20th centuries They were set up on personal computers and users had to dial the user modem number
Usenet (news grupe)	Allows users to submit articles or announce news These are the first true attempts on the Internet
Online usluge	These are the first true attempts on the Internet
IRC ICO	Developed in 1988. It is considered to be the beginning of instant messaging. Six Degrees This page was launched in 1997
Six Degrees	This page was launched in 1997
AsianAvenue	These are the sites that followed the popularity of Six Degrees, which are formed between 1997 and 2001. Allows you to create profiles and add friends.
Live Journal	This site started in 1999, allowing users to create their own network around refreshed blogs
Word of Warcraft	This game is featured by the most famous MPMORPG representative where its players participate in the game world and communicate in forums
Friendster	Friendster was the first modern online tree + grid network. It was established in 2002
HIS	This social network was established in 2003 and currently has over 6 million users
LinkedIN	LinkedIN was established in 2003. One of the first networks dedicated to business.
MySpace	MYSpace was founded in 2003 and 2006 has grown to the most popular social network in the world. Unlike the competition, it allows its users to completely adjust the look of their profiles. Video submissions can also be sent
Facebook	Facebook page was launched in 2004. Originally conceived as a Harvard network that later spread to other faculties, schools. Facebook has become the most popular web site for social networking. Facebook allows users to put video content, images.
Twiter	Twiter was created in 2006. There is limited communication with other users. And only through private networks

Source: *Adams (2012)*

## Some indicators of tourism in Istria

Istria County is the county with the most developed tourism industry in Croatia. The main characteristics of this development are presented below.

Graph 1: *Istria share in total of number of permanent beds for 2015*



Source: Croatian national tourist board, 2016

In Croatia there are three major categories of accommodation facilities: household accommodation, camps and hotels. Household accommodation is the largest category with the most number of permanent beds (Graph 1). When considering Istria, camps are the most important type of accommodation facility, because they account to almost 50% of total number of beds in Croatia for this type of accommodation facilities.

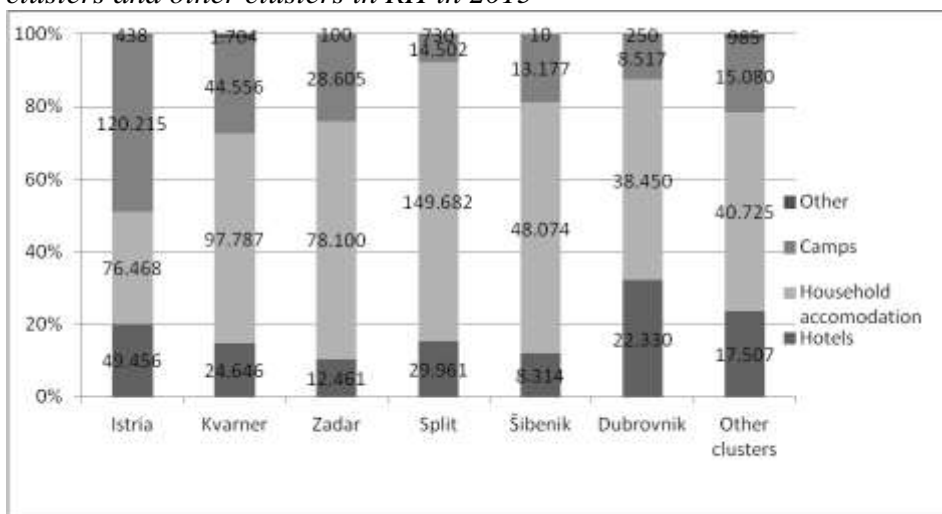
Compared to other coastal clusters, in Istria cluster camps are also the most predominant type of accommodation (Graph 2). Based on the data obtained from Croatian Ministry of Tourism (2017), in Istria there are 104 hotels (28.675 beds), 18 resorts (10.743 beds), 20 residences (8.829 beds) and 53 camps (116.578 accommodation capacity) with approximately 2/3 of those capacities being owned by seven large tourism companies. Household accommodation is in the second place and accounts for 31% of total accommodation facilities, which is a bit less than Croatian level. On the level of Croatia, this type of accommodation accounts for about 50% of total accommodation capacity. However, there are same variations among other Croatian counties as well, e.g. in Split this type of

accommodation is the most predominant type of accommodation (76%). The main characteristics of this type of accommodation are: a large amount of providers and small capacity per provider (in average 8 beds).

Istria is also the cluster with the most number of tourist arrivals (Graph 3) and achieves the largest number of tourist nights (Graph 4). The previously mention structure of accommodation facilities in Istria also reflects on number of tourist nights, thus, the most number of night is achieved in camps (Graph 5). This fact is probably linked to the fact that for the last 10 years, average length of stay in Istria was 6.8 days (Tourist board of Istria 2007-2016), with average number of nights in camp being 7.9 (Hrvatska turistička zajednica, 2016).

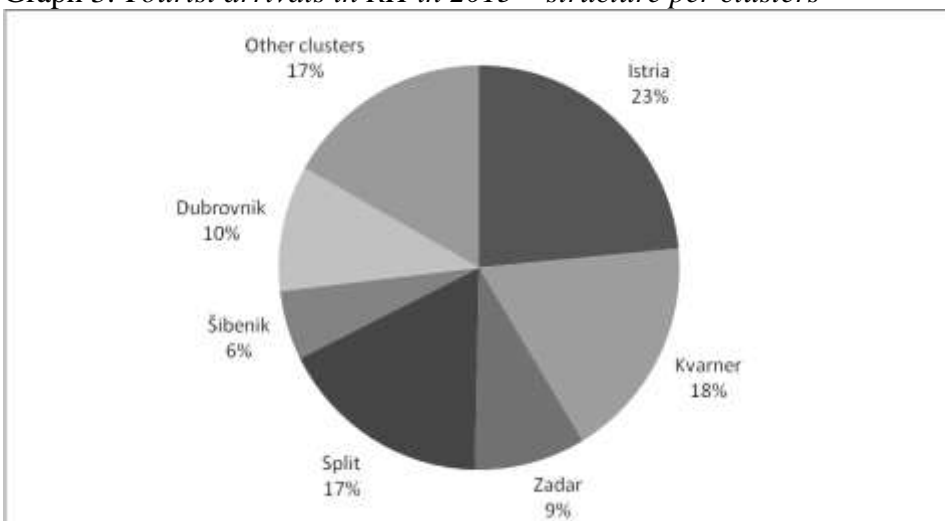
However, when it comes to the number of tourist arrivals, the situation is slightly different. Namely, the most number of tourist arrivals is achieved in hotels (Graph 6) though tourist stay there for only 5.1 days (Croatian national tourist board 2016), but they are probably open longer than other types of accommodation.

Graph 2: *Structure of accommodation facilities in Istria, other coastal clusters and other clusters in RH in 2015*



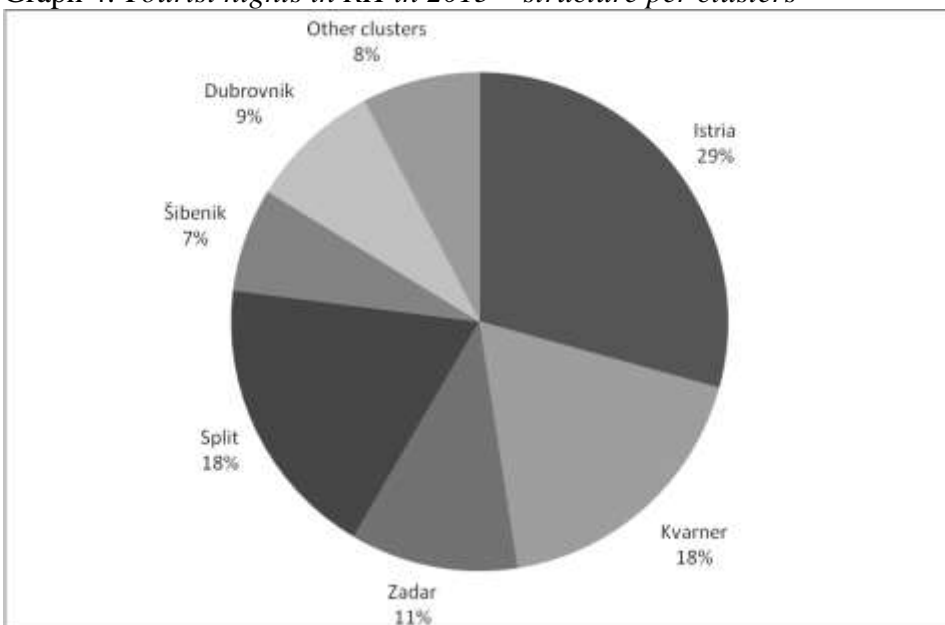
Source: *Croatian national tourist board (2016)*

Graph 3: *Tourist arrivals in RH in 2015 – structure per clusters*



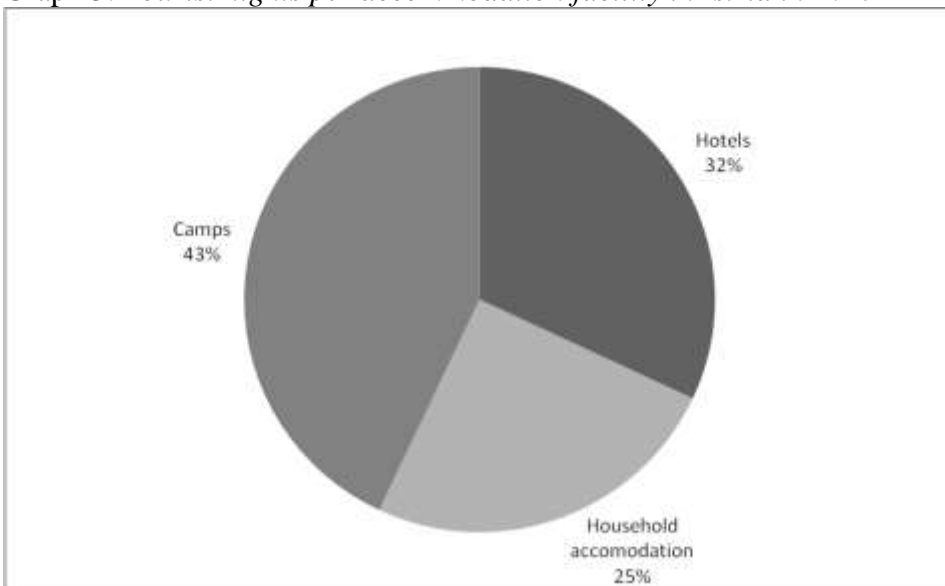
Source: *Croatian national tourist board, 2016*

Graph 4: *Tourist nights in RH in 2015 – structure per clusters*



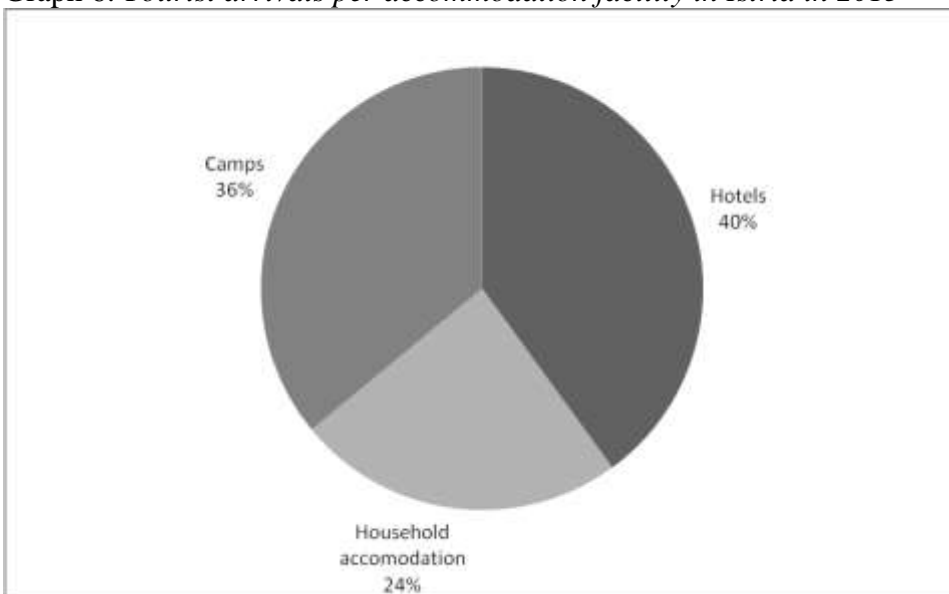
Source: *Croatian national tourist board (2016)*

Graph 5: *Tourist nights per accommodation facility in Istria in 2015*



Source: *Croatian national tourist board (2016)*

Graph 6: *Tourist arrivals per accommodation facility in Istria in 2015*



Source: *Croatian national tourist board (2016)*

## Methodology

A study focused on tourists' usage of Internet and social networking web sites in tourism context was conducted from July to September. In this study the target population included those tourists who visited nine seaside tourist resorts in the Istria tourist destination: Umag, Novigrad, Poreč, Vrsar, Funtana, Rovinj, Pula, Medulin and Rabac. The survey was carried out in 20 hotels and six camping sites through a self-completed questionnaire. Tourists were approached by trained researchers and asked to participate in the survey. The researcher explained the purpose of the survey, said that the survey was anonymous and handed out a questionnaire in the appropriate language. In the process of on-site data collection in hotels, researchers were stationary while responders were mobile while in the case of camping sites researchers were mobile while responders were stationary (Veal, 2006). A convenient sample was used. Hotels and camping sites were preselected based on location i.e. they were located in seaside tourists resorts and hotels' capacity was from 100 to 500 rooms while camping sites' capacity varied between 1,000 and 5,000 people.

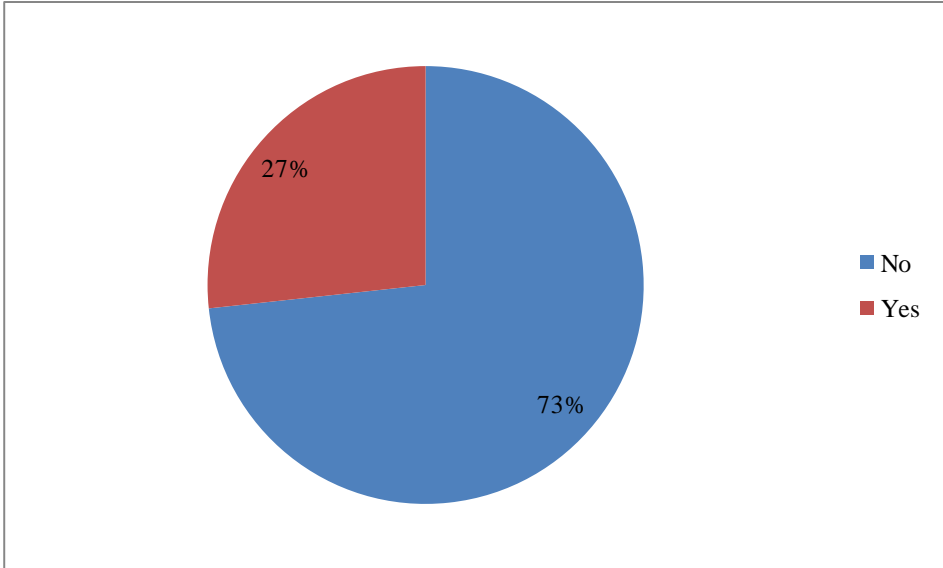
For the purpose of data gathering, the questionnaire was constructed. It consisted of 16 questions which were divided into six sections: 1) general usage of Internet, tourist web sites and social networking web sites, 2) usage of Internet and social networking web sites for the purpose of organising vacation, 3) benefits and obstacle in using social networking web sites for tourism purposes, 4) usage of Internet and social networking web sites during vacation, 5) usual usage of Internet and social networking web sites after returning home and 6) respondents' socio-demographic characteristics (country of origin, age, gender, income level, occupation, size of settlement, travelling party) and trip characteristics (number of visits, length of stay and sources of information). It was originally designed in Croatian and then translated into the following languages: English, German, Italian and Slovene.

A total of 2500 questionnaires were prepared and 1554 questionnaires were taken into analysis. Data was processed using univariate statistics (general description of sample) and bivariate statistics, namely chi square test, for determining differences between those responders who used TripAdvisor as a source of information when they organized their current vacation based on their personal characteristics.

## Results and discussion

A bit less than 30% of responders used TripAdvisor web site as a source of information when they organized their current vacation (Graph 7).

Graph 7: *Usage of TripAdvisor in organising current vacation*



Source: *Data processed by authors*

The proportion of female responders (54.0%) was slightly higher than that of male (Table 2). Most of the responders were between 35 and 54 years of age (53%). The majority of responders obtained some kind of higher education level (58%). The responders had different backgrounds and occupations, most of the responders stated that they were employees (56%), while 13% were self-employed or freelance. Most of the responders were from Austria (23%), about 18% were from Italy and 17% from Germany (Table 3). Most of the responders stated that their monthly net income was between €1,000 and €2,000 (31%). They mostly stayed in the accommodation facility for the first time (82%) but most of them have already visited Istria County as a tourist destination (52%) (Table 4).

Table 2: *Demographic characteristics of respondents (in %)*

Variable	Usage of TripAdvisor.com		Total
	No	Yes	
Gender			
Male	34,5	11,5	46,0

Female	38,1	15,9	54,0
Age (M; SD)	40,07 (12,538)	39,19 (12,075)	39,83 (12,417)
16-24	8,9	3,5	12,4
25-34	15,7	6,4	22,2
35-44	19,7	7,7	27,4
45-54	19,1	6,3	25,5
55+	9,5	3,1	12,6
Education level			
Elementary school	5,1	0,6	5,6
Secondary school	27,4	9,2	36,6
College or Bachelor's Degree	19,6	8,0	27,6
University or Master's Degree	17,2	8,6	25,7
Ph.D.	3,1	1,3	4,5
Profession			
Self-employed/freelance	9,7	3,3	13,1
Manager	7,8	3,9	11,8
Employee (full time)	33,0	12,2	45,2
Employee (part time)	8,6	2,0	10,7
Student	6,0	2,7	8,6
Retired	3,1	0,8	3,9
Other	4,7	2,1	6,8

Sources: *Data processed by authors*

Table 3: *Responders country of origin and income (in %)*

Variable	Usage of TripAdvisor.com		Total
	No	Yes	
Income			
Up to € 500	4,5	1,5	6,0
€ 500 – € 1,000	9,0	2,6	11,6
€ 1,000 – € 2,000	21,6	9,2	30,9
€ 2,000 – € 3,000	16,8	5,4	22,2
€ 3,000 – € 4,000	7,7	3,3	11,0
€ 4,000 – € 5,000	4,2	2,0	6,2
€ 5,000 – € 6,000	2,8	0,5	3,3
Over € 6,000	5,8	3,1	8,9
Country of origin			

Austria	20,9	2,6	23,5
Italy	11,5	6,9	18,4
Germany	14,0	2,9	17,0
UK	4,8	8,2	13,0
The Netherlands	4,3	1,0	5,3
Slovenia	4,1	0,7	4,8
Other	13,3	4,8	18,1

Source: *Data processed by authors*

Table 4: *First /repeat visitation (in %)*

Variable	Usage of TripAdvisor.com		Total
	No	Yes	
First/repeat visitation (accommodation)			
Repeat visitor	15,9	2,3	18,2
First time visitor	57,4	24,4	81,8
First/repeat visitation (destination)			
Repeat visitor	42,4	9,9	52,3
First time visitor	31,2	16,5	47,7

Sources: *Data processed by authors*

Education level ( $\chi^2 = 20,789$ ;  $df = 4$ ;  $sig. = 0,000$ ), first/repeat visitation (accommodation) ( $\chi^2 = 33,281$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $sig. = 0,000$ ) and first/repeat visitation (destination) ( $\chi^2 = 44,391$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $sig. = 0,000$ ) were significant related to usage of TripAdvisor for the purposes of organising their current trip. Those responders who obtained University or Master's Degree were more likely to use TripAdvisor while those with Elementary school were less likely to use TripAdvisor for the purposes of organising their current trip. The responders who visited accommodation facility for the first time were more likely to use TripAdvisor compared to repeat visitors. Likewise, those responders who previously visited Istria County were more likely not to use TripAdvisor compared to first time visitors. Information about accommodations (71%), beaches (51%) were the two types of information that responders searched for the most in general (Table 5). Information about Cultural heritage (21%), restaurants (20%) and Suggestions on one-day individual trips (20%) were of interest for about 1/5 of the responders (Table 5). Some of the responders used TripAdvisor in order to obtain this information. Although over 70% of responders searched for information about accommodation through Internet, only 1/5 of the responders used TripAdvisor for those purposes. The same pattern is present for other types of information.

Table 5: *Types of information-basic tourist offer (in %)*

Variable	Usage of TripAdvisor.com		Total
	No	Yes	
Accommodation			
Not searched	23,9	5,2	29,2
Searched	49,4	21,5	70,8
Restaurants			
Not searched	62,0	18,5	80,5
Searched	11,3	8,2	19,5
Beaches			
Not searched	38,4	11,1	49,4
Searched	34,9	15,6	50,6

Source: Data processed by authors

Table 6: *Types of information- additional tourist offer (in %)*

Variable	Usage of TripAdvisor.com		Total
	No	Yes	
Cultural and historical heritage			
Not searched	61,0	18,4	79,4
Searched	12,3	8,3	20,6
Natural Heritage			
Not searched	65,0	21,0	86,0
Searched	8,3	5,7	14,0
Events			
Not searched	66,0	22,1	88,1
Searched	7,3	4,6	11,9
Traditional food and drink			
Not searched	67,6	21,5	89,1
Searched	5,7	5,2	10,9
Trails (e.g. walking, cycling trails)			
Not searched	67,2	23,8	91,0
Searched	6,1	2,9	9,0
Suggestions on one-day individual trips			
Not searched	61,1	19,4	80,5
Searched	12,2	7,3	19,5

Source: *Data processed by authors*

Based on the results certain implications can be drawn. In general, only 1/3 of responder used TripAdvisor in order to obtain information about

Istria County as a tourist destination. This may be due to the age factor. Namely, tourists that stayed in Istria County were mostly older than 35 years of age, with almost 40% 45 or older. Responders who used TripAdvisor for the purposes of organising their current trip are more likely to have a higher level of education. TripAdvisor as a source of information is more likely to be used by first time visitors. First time visitors of a certain accommodation facility used TripAdvisor more frequently compared to tourists to visiting Istria County for the first time. This is probably due to the fact that TripAdvisor offers more information regarding accommodation in Istria County. This is supported by the fact that most of the tourists used Internet to find information about accommodation. Although only 1/5 of the responders used TripAdvisor for those purposes, it was still the most frequently sought information in the case of TripAdvisor. Since many tourist destinations are present on TripAdvisor, it is advisable to reinforce efforts in promoting Istria County through this site, as well as other sites.

### **Conclusion**

Internet and social networking web sites present a great opportunity for promotion of tourist destination and enterprises. They may also be a good tool in the process of planning a vacation. There are many different sites that collect and disseminate user-generated content about travel. TripAdvisor is one of such tools.

Although TripAdvisor offers information about thousands of tourist destinations and lists a few million accommodation facilities, only about 1/3 of tourists staying in Istria County have used this site to get information about the destination. This is probably related to age of tourist. Those responders that have used TripAdvisor to get information about the destination, were usually first time visitors (accommodation facility and Istria County) and have obtained higher education level. The most commonly sought information was about accommodation facilities. Information regarding beaches was of interest to one half of the tourists which is directly related to the main motive for visiting Istria County i.e. sun and sea.

There are some limitations to this study. These results are based on a sample of tourists who stayed in selected hotels and resorts and the responders either used or not used TripAdvisor for planning their vacation so the results may not be generalized to the overall Istria County's tourism market or to user of TripAdvisor in general. The sample included commercial accommodation users only, so tourists not staying in

commercial accommodation were omitted from the study. Future research regarding Internet and social networking web sites may focus on differences and similarities among different accommodation facilities. Since only 1/3 of responders used TripAdvisor in planning their vacation, future research may focus on reasons why tourists do not use TripAdvisor and similar sites while they are planning and organising their vacation.

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