

The Role of Public Relations in Promoting Rural Tourism in Armenia

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to identify the communication need areas of Public Relations for the promotion of rural tourism in the country. This paper argues that Public Relations could play a more significant role in promoting rural tourism in Armenia, and contributing its long-term growth. This work shows that Public Relations could be used to effectively promote rural tourism. The lack of relevant studies in this field hinders growth of the industry. This study is the first attempt to understand the effects of Public Relations strategies in rural tourism for Armenia. The methodology includes interviews with tour companies, residents of rural areas, as well as online and face-to-face surveys with tourists. The study examines the current gaps in communication for promotion of the services and travel products in the market for rural tourism. The findings support the hypothesis that Public Relations could play a more significant role in successful promotion of rural tourism and its continuous growth.

Key Words: Public Relations, Tourism, Armenia, Rural Tourism, Promotion

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	- 4 -
LITERATURE REVIEW	- 6 -
METHODOLOGY	- 11 -
RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS	- 14 -
1. <i>The analysis of interviews with tour company representatives</i>	- 14 -
2. <i>The analysis of interviews with villagers and local governing bodies</i>	- 19 -
3. <i>The Case of Kalavan village</i>	- 22 -
4. <i>The analysis of surveys with tourists</i>	- 25 -
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION- LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH	- 27 -
<i>Discussion and Conclusion</i>	- 27 -
<i>Limitations and Avenues for Further Research</i>	- 28 -
BIBLIOGRAPHY	- 29 -
APPENDIX 1	- 32 -
APPENDIX 2	- 32 -
APPENDIX 3	- 32 -
APPENDIX 4	- 33 -

Introduction

Tourism is one of the rapidly growing industries during the past decades around the world based on the statistics of World Tourism Organization (2017). Armenia or the Republic of Armenia, a small country hidden in the mountains of Armenian Highland, has become a lovely destination for many visitors. The reason why tourists come to Armenia is various. In an article by EVN Report, Hakob Hakobyan, the chairperson of Armenian Hotel Association, states, “In general, people are satisfied with entertainment center visits in the capital and the local brandy and food tasting. In addition to tours to churches and cultural sites, the tourists are also offered adventure and rural tourism” as cited by Kristen Bayrakdarian (2017). Although Hakobyan stresses the touristic opportunities in Armenia by stating so, his ideas are not claimed with facts. Thus, some people are fond of visiting ancient churches and fortresses, some-to enjoy the magnificent landscapes of the mountainous country. For example, the tourists from Philippines may visit Armenia for the value that Armenia is the first Christian state in the world. Meanwhile the tourists from the Islamic Republic of Iran may visit Armenia mainly to celebrate Nowruz or the Persian New Year in March (Bayrakdarian, 2017).

Despite having a huge cultural and architectural legacy, such as churches, monasteries, fortresses, as well as beautiful landscapes and breathtaking views, Armenian touristic market should ensure variety of services to appeal more visitors and tourists to country. As it is stated in a government data, Armenia “adopts a strategy for tourism promotion which highlights the different areas of tourism within Armenia including recreational, rural, spiritual, and cultural” (Export.gov, 2017). Recently there has been a tendency for visitors and tourists to look more for visits to villages and provinces rather to metropolises and major cities. A new branch of tourism, called rural tourism is developing. According to UNWTO definition, rural tourism is “a type of tourism activity in which the visitor’s experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle / culture, angling and sightseeing” (2018). Armenian villages combined with sightseeing places placed nearby, availability of

delicious food and beautiful nature are forming an effective product for the visitors of the country. However, there is no clear research stating about the overall situation of rural tourism in Armenia. The aim of this research is to better understand the sphere and the current situation of rural tourism in Armenia and identify ways of developing it more effectively.

To ensure more than the organic growth in the tourism market, it needs some stimulus to operate. The overall promotion of the country may influence the promotion of several categories of tourism. Hence, there is a need to understand what role public relations can play in the promotion of rural tourism. As it is stated in a research titled *Public relations in the tourism industry: the growing role of social media*, “Social media have become a major part of most communication strategy plans for major organizations within the travel industry. This is justified by the results of both research, and market analysis social media are one of the most effective, cost reasonable and creative tools for PR in the tourism industry” (Dimitrakopoulou, 2015). Thus, it is significant to understand what tools of public relations could be used to achieve to the most effective way of promotion.

The basic communications model is about the sender-message-receiver. However, sometimes it happens that the innovations do not get to their target groups. The diffusion theory of communications explains, “Diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system” (Everett Roger, 1961). For the innovation to be accepted it passes through several phases. First, the receiver gets knowledge about the innovation. Then, the receiver shows some interest towards it, which is followed by decision-making and the implementation. After that, the receiver confirms and uses the innovation entirely. In this sense, rural tours should be first presented to the receiver, and it will take some time for the receiver to accept and use it. For the development of rural tourism, there is need to target the promotional tactics towards the sphere of rural tourism in Armenia. This paper argues that the promotion of rural tourism in Armenia would better be done using the techniques of public relations to assert the long-term and sustainable growth.

Literature Review

Tourism has great potential to become the leading industry in many developing countries. Armenia, having a variety of choices to organize vacation, may be able to fully develop many branches of tourism sector. In our days, the socio-political developments of Armenia promise more popularity for our small country. According to *Sputnik Armenia*, an online news site, the number of tourists to Armenia in 2017 was 1 million 260 thousand (Mkrtchyan, 2017). Apart from being a destination for cultural tourism or adventure and hiking, Armenia has potential for developing rural tourism. According to the book called *Rural Tourism and Its Sustainable Development*, rural tourism is more than just tourism in countryside (Bramwell & Lane, 1994). It could be understood as countryside, farm-based or resort-based tourism, the inseparable part of rural tourism is rurality. As Armenia is new in developing rural tourism, the main pitfall of the field is the lack of research and availability of sources.

In Vayots Dzor province in Armenia, the rural areas are part of quite well developed tourism with their wineries, vineyards and ordinary village houses. According to Harutyunyan and Loseby, “The wine, culture and tourist sectors are complementary to each other” (Harutyunyan & Loseby, 2011). This idea goes beyond the fact that winemaking is part of a nation’s culture and its proper representation to tourists might be quite interesting. The key point of the research is that Armenia, in particular Vayots Dzor province, is considered the origin of wine making and grape growing (Harutyunyan & Loseby, 2011). Apart from Vayots Dzor region, some other projects are on the level of implementation in Armenia. According to travel news portal, the UN Nations Development program undertook the initiative to develop rural areas of Armenia (Slate, 2016). Based on this program, the development of rural tourism will promote the economic flourishing of the entire country.

According to the study titled *The prospects for wine tourism as a tool for rural development in Armenia - The Case of Vayots Dzor Marz*, “...until the infrastructure ...of these rural regions

improves, tourism will probably remain a very small part of the rural economy and visitors may miss the historical and cultural attractions they offer” (Harutyunyan & Loseby, 2011). Indeed, before the promotion of tourism, basic infrastructure should be developed. The statement points out the pitfalls for promoting tourism in Vayots Dzor province. The province needs to be developed in basic infrastructure, such as clean toilets, food services, affordable accommodations and B&B's. Apart from infrastructure development, skills development of villagers is also an issue to address. For instance, a study by Lucy Kaplan in South Africa titled *Skills development in tourism: South Africa's tourism-led development strategy*, later turned into steps to promote tourism in the region. There was a specific strategy developed, which has targeted the south of Africa. The aim of the strategy was to develop the skills of villagers in the sphere of tourism (Kaplan, 2004). Besides the gap in skills of South African villages, the sources considers that tourism skill development is a key concern for developing countries (Kaplan, 2004).

Another study conducted by Rasoolimanesh et al. examines the differences between rural and urban conceptions of tourism. According to the study titled *Urban vs. rural destinations: Residents' perceptions, community participation and support for tourism development*, “The study is particularly valuable given the comparison between urban and rural World Heritage Sites (WHS) communities in the developing world, there being a paucity of resident perception studies” (Rasoolimanesh, 2017). In the research method section, the author states that they have chosen a specific research area (George Town and Lenggong Valley in Northern Malaysia). For the data collection, they have formed questionnaire “to measure the negative and positive perceptions, community participation and support for tourism development” (Rasoolimanesh, 2017). The results of the analysis come to prove that the people from Lenggong Valley seemed to be more supportive towards tourism than the people in George Town based on the positive perceptions, the willingness to participate by community members and the overall support. This type of researches allows to better understand which rural communities are more prone to developments of tourism sector in their regions.

In different parts of the world, rural tourism has already gone under some development. For example, the research project *Andalusian Women and Their Participation in Rural Tourist Trade* is an analysis and evaluation of number of interviews with the women, who are engaged in rural tourist trade in Andalusia's Mediterranean mountains (Velasco, 1999). Based on the development project of rural areas in Andalusia, women are taking part in tourist trade. Furthermore, the study examines three issues, decision processes, prospects for alternative jobs, and job vs mother-wife role agreement. It also stated, "The good example of qualitative and quantitative importance is the proliferation of associations" (Velasco, 1999). These associations are engaged in helping the community with seaside tourism, farm tourism, and organization of lodgings, gastronomy and folk activities. This research shows that women can be helpful in alternative jobs related to tourism apart from accomplishing their roles as mothers and wives.

Another example of promoting rural tourism is China. The research done by Gao and Wu is a case study, focused on China's Yuanjia Village in Shaanxi Province. The research has qualitative approach, including field observation and investigations, interviews with leaders of the groups and the villagers. According to this study, the revitalization of traditional villages is a step towards promoting rural tourism (Gao & Wu, 2017). In this sense, the development of rural tourism needs a basis. Thus, before trying to launch rural tourism, the necessary steps should be taken beforehand. Besides revitalizing the villages, or constructing basic infrastructure, or even ensuring skill development activities for the villagers seems not enough for promoting rural tourism. There is an important factor to consider, too. It is trust building and being trustworthy.

According to a multi-case study in Ireland, USA and Canada, "Trust in tourism business relationships is a key factor in network relationships" (Kellihera et al, 2018). The study has used interpretive case approach and applied social exchange theory. According to the study, "Trust is viewed as an outcome of repeated positive interactions in which trust relationships develop gradually between network members" (Kellihera et al, 2018). Within the scope of the research interviews, round-table discussions, reflective diaries, field observation and documentary were

conducted. According to study, successful social exchanges build up trust in both sides based on positive interactions (Kellihera et al, 2018). Therefore, the inclusion of trust in the steps to develop rural tourism in Armenia is an important factor to consider to.

Indeed, building trust is very important, especially in case of tourism. The sphere is all related to human factor, where the social interactions are at the frontal part. It is vital to be trustworthy. According to Al Galin, "...you may be able to build a solid brand without integrating trust into the message, but it's tough to build a great one without it" (Harris & Whalen, 2006). Be it a brand, company or a whole sphere, trust plays important role in human interaction. Definitely, if promoting rural tourism is the plan, steps towards building trust between villagers, investors, intermediary companies and/or tourists is a priority. These steps should not only be implemented in daily cooperation, but also throughout the strategy planning of promotion. According to Nedelea, "In tourism, public relations aim at maintaining a favorable image of a destination and at establishing connections with different types of audience able to develop and improve the touristic offer" (Arionesei & Ivan, 2012). For example, the Bucovina case, where the professionals used promotional tools to raise the popularity of this sight in Romania resulted in drastic improvement of tourism sector in Romania. This paradigm shift in Romania was both on governmental basis, as well as with the full integration of tourism stakeholders. According to Arionesei and Ivan, the success of the promotion was the Bucovina Tourism Forum and the Info trip "Rediscover Bucovina". Upon the well-organized events, the media coverage of those events by journalists and opinion makers ensured that larger audiences get aware of Bucovina (Arionesei & Ivan, 2012).

Another important factor to take into account is that the public relations activities may have a longer lasting impact than doing advertising instead. Moreover, doing public relations has several benefits compared to advertising. While huge place was given to organizing expensive events in Romania, in the journal article titled *A public relations strategy for the promotion of South Africa as a tourist destination in a non-user country*, Berendien Lubbe brings forward the strategy based on the processes of adoption and diffusion. According to Lubbe, the process of destination image

development includes awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, desired induced image and the adoption. In case of negative image, the process starts from the initial stage of existing destination image. Apparently, all of the state stages of the process deal with the channels of communication using to the tolls to influence the public (through mass media, biased interested parties, unbiased third parties, and significant others) (Lubbe, 2007). Indeed, the line between communication and public relations is sometimes intertwined one serving to another.

According to the book titled *Perfect PR*, “Public Relations’ tactics are normally addressed to the media rather than direct to the ultimate audience-target customers” (Maitland, 1999). Apart from the power of media, the power of Internet Public Relations is significant. In our days, Internet and social media are also means for news (Saffir, 2000). They are also leading promotional tools. In the book, titled *Power Public Relations*, is stated “The Internet is the most amazing communications tool ever invented” (Saffir, 2000). Apparently, in our days, Internet plays significant role in both launching public relations’ activities and doing advertising. As a part of Internet usage, social media serves to the development and promotion of a specific field. Through a well-designed Internet PR, one can reach to the desired popularity, yet ensure sustainability. “Blogging, social networks, online forums, and other forms of social media are taking the traditional influence of news or information gatherer” (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). According to the book, titled *Putting the public back in public relations: how social media is reinventing the aging business of PR*, social media is a new world of influence.

Based on the research done, building trust and using public relations’ tactics could be applied to Armenia and its needs. This research aims to examine other experiences in tourism sector to come up better suggestions and recommendations. It is important to be more careful in case of developing rural tourism. It is important to maintain the rurality of the region, as well as ensure that basic infrastructure and skill developments are available there. Taking into account the successful experience of Andalusian women, for alternative jobs women in villages should also be targeted. It is also important to consider the modern tendencies while promoting rural tourism.

Those include Internet PR, Social Media, and blogging. Aiming long-term benefits, the promotion of rural tourism in Armenia should be done using well-designed public relations' tactics considering the trust factor as a priority.

Research question:

1. What role could Public Relations play in promoting rural tourism in Armenia?

Methodology

Tourism is a rapidly growing branch of industry. On the way of its growth, it needs to overcome several challenges and adopt new solutions. People have been traveling to different countries to visit famous museums, cities or architectural structures for quite a long time. Innovations are welcomed in every sphere, and the innovations of our times in tourism are rural tours and extreme activities.

To understand whether rural tours are necessary innovation in Armenia, the study used qualitative and quantitative approaches. This research was two-sided. Its main target was the potential tourists and visitors to Armenia, who might be interested in visiting rural villages. On the other hand, the local market should also be taken into account as the main supplier of the services. The research methodology included interviews and surveys with designed questionnaires.

Interviews were conducted with the representatives of Central Tour, Best Travel, Luxury Voyage, Barev Armenia, and Spinnaker Travel. The aim of these interviews was to reveal the needs of tourists based on their experience. Apart from that, the main destinations for rural tourism in Armenia were discovered upon the delivery of precise questions. During the interviews, the representatives of the companies, tour managers, heads of inbound tourism, or the company owners were asked the following questions:

1. Which countries does your company have most tourists?
2. What are they mainly interested in?

3. Have you ever met a tourist willing to visit rural villages?
4. If yes, what suggestions did you come up with?
5. If not, will you suggest the tourist such service?
6. If yes, where and what would you suggest?
7. If not, what will hinder you to do so?
8. What are the main three obstacles to include rural tourism in your tour packages?

The research gathered initial data from these interviews. The researcher will analyze the data through content analysis and ground analysis to understand the social context.

Apart from understanding what the tour companies' options are to suggest the tourists, the potential of villagers will also be studied. Thus, two examples of villages will be taken: one already having successful rural tourism developed, second- not having. The reason to take successful rural villages is to reveal the key to their success. The village to explore is Agarakadzor (or more get be another one revealed through the interviews with tour companies). Agarakadzor is relatively small village in Vayots Dzor province. The owners of tourism-related businesses in the village will be asked the following ones:

1. How do you get your customers?
2. What amenities or services are lacking?
3. What is the strength of the location?
4. What is that hinders the development of the village?
5. What were the motives to launch that business?

The aim is to get the perspective of villagers already having some kind of tourism-related businesses in their villages to understand the gains and pitfalls available in the sphere. Moreover, this research will tackle the promotional side linking the available capacity with the promotional tools.

Apart from the existing successful examples in the sphere, there is also need to understand the vision of other villagers not having developed rural tourism. Interviews will be accomplished with the villagers of Gnishik village, little far from the village of Agarakadzor hidden in the mountains. The questions in the interview will be the following ones:

1. Would you like to have developed tourism in you village?
2. What are the strengths of your village or location?
3. What can you suggest to your visitors?
4. What might interest your visitors?
5. What can you introduce your village to a newcomer?

When gained the data, an analysis will be followed. The aim of it is to acknowledge the available examples of rural tourism in Armenia, notice the strengths and weaknesses of those, understand the ways of improving the gaps and pitfalls, coming up with the best suggestions for perspective villagers to be included in potential rural development.

After the analysis of the local target group, a survey was conducted with tourists who were in Armenia at that moment (ex. approaching random tourists in Republic Square). Online surveys were conducted with tourists who had previously visited Armenia during the past two years, whom the researcher had the experience to guide in Armenia. As the researcher had their contacts, the surveys were conducted through either mail or Facebook. The questionnaire of the survey is attached in Appendix 3. All the questions of the survey had options to choose from, or prefer not to say, or suggest own options.

Research Findings and Analysis

The analysis of interviews with tour company representatives

To gather primary data about the rural tourism in Armenia, five interviews were conducted with tour company representatives and inbound tour managers. The tour operators and agencies are the Best Travel, Spinnaker Travel - Armenia DMC, Luxury Voyage by Infinity Group, Armenian Travel Bureau and Barev Armenia travel agency. The aim of the interviews was to understand the demand of rural tours by tourists while planning their visits to Armenia. The main purpose of the interviews was to reveal whether they receive requests from tourists willing to have overnight in a village at villagers' houses, experience rural activities or not. It was also important to understand whether the tour companies are ready to offer such services to their tourists or not, and if yes, where do they lead them. The tour company representatives were asked several questions, which related to their main targets, the interests of their tourists, the experiences of rural tour requests and their opinion about the main obstacles for rural tourism development in Armenia.

The tour agencies have quite wide span of target groups, stretching from The USA and European countries to Asian countries and the Middle East. The tourists coming from different countries may have variety of differences in their interests. For example, according to Ms. Eniza Kosyan from Barev Armenia tour company, "For some part of Russians Armenia is perfect for its tasty food and drinks, and those are what they are looking for. Another part of Russians is interested in culture, history and architecture, and they enjoy trips to sightseeing places and like to give numerous questions to the guide". As for the young visitors from Russia, Ms Kosyan states that "they want to have everything from the country, both leisure and sightseeing". She claims that "the guests from the USA, Canada and Europe are now mainly interested in the visits to Nagorno Karabagh and compared to Russian tourists they form huge percentage". "The European tourists are also interested in history, cultural places, and sometimes it appears that they form their itineraries on their own", adds Ms. Kosyan. In addition, Ms. Anika Yazichyan, a representative of Best Travel tour company, states, "The main interests of their guests are to have leisure in the

country for a few days or for the weekend”. According to Ms. Yazichyan, the reason of the second or third visits by the same tourists to Armenia is to see the country during different seasons and enjoy different views. Meanwhile, Ms. Lilly Safaryan, the head of inbound tourism department for Travel Armenia tour company states that “GCC countries, including UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and some others, are usually interested in nature, cuisine, water areas, and looking for things, which they do not have in their countries”. Similar opinion shares the founder of Armenian Travel Bureau, Hovhannes Margaryan, who states that “Europeans highly value the cultural heritage, architecture, and why not the local cuisine”. He also adds that the tourists from Canada mainly like the landscapes, experience of nature”. From the above statements, it can be brought that the interests of people differ. However, it is also important to state that Armenia has a variety of opportunities to satisfy the interests of tourists. According to Hovhannes Margaryan, the CEO of Armenian Travel Bureau, “Armenia has beautiful landscapes, natural monuments, architectural and cultural sightseeing places, tasty food, high quality brandy and wine, hospitable people and variety of services”.

Rural tourism may be the innovative solutions in the sphere of tourism. The interviewees agreed on the idea that rural tours are triggering more interest and emotions. According to Ms. Raya Bakanyan, an incoming tour manager of Spinnaker Travel, “One may think that the villages in Armenia are poor, and the living conditions are not sufficient for hosting tourists, but we had successful experiences”. Ms. Bakanyan also considers that tourists look for friendly, cozy atmosphere, basic and simple interactions and communications. Ms. Bakanyan adds about their experience when Arab families, living luxurious life, visited Armenia, they wanted to see things they have never seen before. According to Ms. Safaryan, “The interest from Europe is the rural tourism”. She says that Europeans like to help the house owners and do activities in the villager’s house. “These type of requests come from Croatia, Poland, and Slovenia wishing to have a homestay in a village and help them there”, specifies Ms. Safaryan. Alongside with the above-mentioned ideas, Mr. Margaryan stresses that there is a small segment of people who want to stay

2-3 days at villages and get acquainted with the real culture of Armenia. They also had the experience of guests willing to participate in rural activities, including harvesting, lavash baking, and cooking traditional dishes. In comparison with the experiences of these tour companies, Ms. Yazichyan and Ms. Kosyan have different perspectives and ideas about rural tours. According to Ms. Kosyan, there is no need for separating rural tourism, as every trip out of Yerevan has a contingent of rurality. However, Ms. Anika Yazichyan states that their company, based on their identity and goals, have never had an experience of a customer to wish an experience of rural tourism in Armenia. She adds that if a tourist wants to pick an apricot from the tree, the bus will stop, and with the permission of the garden owner, they will pick it and continue their drive. The statements prove that there is demand for rural tours, as several tour companies had experienced so. It is also important to notice the targets of each interviewed company, as some of them reach to wealthy targets and some to budgetary tourists. Nevertheless, the low level of the demand for companies already experiencing rural tours suggests that there is at least one obstacle.

The obstacles against rural tourism development vary a lot. Those issues can be related to infrastructure, social conditions or cultural differences, or the improper communications between the several circles of the chain. The main understanding expressed by Ms. Yazichyan is that the infrastructure is not developed in rural areas. She adds, “The primary obstacles to refuse taking tourists to rural areas are the bad roads, the low development of infrastructure in the villages, social conditions”. As an addition, Mr. Margaryan adds, “Unfortunately, the lack of proper infrastructure sometimes hinders them to include variety of itineraries in their packages”. Moreover, Ms. Kosyan says that they had fears that minimum standards of services might not be suggested to their guests, and after all their guests might leave the country unsatisfied. She also considers that the villagers’ overall mentality of hosting guests is to receive the maximum of their visit and not think for the long-term basis. According to her, the problems include not well-developed infrastructure, lack of toilets and clean areas to stop and enjoy views. The other tour managers had quite different concerns. For example, Ms. Safaryan states that the number of places is few to suggest as a rural

tourism locations or maybe they exist, but they are not aware of those. Alongside, Ms. Kosyan shares the view that “There is a lack of sufficient places for such homestays”. As for Ms. Bakanyan, “The only point necessary to promote tourism is just a devoted person”. She also considers that the villagers have fears about taking risks, and they need someone from within, who they will rely and trust in launching new businesses. Generally, the tour managers bring forward variety of issues, but the significant one is the villagers’ mentality. Here we deal with the basic rules of communications. The villagers need to clearly understand what they want to reach and what the means are for that. Most probably, it is important to have “own person” from their community, who the villagers will trust. On the other side, that one person should carry the principles of effective communications with both the villagers and the main target of their services. In this way, the issue of thinking about short-term benefits and building trust will be solved. There is a need to raise awareness about the rural areas, which offer such services, as the tour companies are the ones who ensure the sales.

In regards to promotion of rural tours, Ms. Kosyan suggests that each region should have a distinguishing feature, which will be appealing, and tour operators can surely contact them knowing that their guests would be happy to see something unique there which they have not seen before. She also states, “Tourists rely on their suggestions where to stay, eat or visit, and if the managers are aware of developed places in rural areas, they will include those places in their suggestions”. In this way, the relations between the villagers and the tour companies will be settled. Ms. Kosyan considers that all the means of the media, TV, Radio, social platforms, and info trips should be implemented to get the desired outcome. Some of the tour managers value the joint steps by each level of governance to reach the goal. Ms. Safaryan stresses, “The government should be more open to help the local businesses in promoting tourism at all, including the rural tours, too, in sense that the overall awareness about the country should be raised”. For example, Spinnaker travel representatives participate in festivals, forums, sales calls, use several tactics of marketing, Internet and apply numerous steps to promote Armenia. On the other hand, Best Travel tour

company considers that the issues stated should be mainly solved on governmental basis, which will enable further development of the regions. According to Mr. Hovhannes Margaryan, the solution of such problems should be found in thoroughly developed strategies for the regions. From the variety of statements by the interviewed tour company representatives, it can be borrowed, that the solutions of the issues should include every single person, which has even slight interference with the sphere. Both the government and regional governing bodies, villagers and tour companies, with effective communications and well-designed ways of strategies, should all have their input in the process to ensure the high possibility in realization of the goal.

The result of the interviews reveals important information about the current situation of rural tourism in Armenia. Moreover, it also presents the viewpoint of tour companies towards the sector. In case of Best Travel company, rural tourism is not their interest. Moreover, they consider that Armenian villages are not designed for hosting tourists. To contradict this idea, Spinnaker Travel has had guests who craved for more than classic tours and wished to spend days in the accompany of villagers. These two views seem to be the two opposite edges of one line, so it is already beyond the target groups of each company. To assist the pro-views of rural tourism in Armenia, Travel Armenia and Barev Armenia companies state that if there is a relative service or activity, they are prone to sell those. They also add that if such services exist, they need to make proper steps to raise awareness about their existence. Despite the few cases of rural tourism, the CEO of Armenian Travel Bureau is certain that there is no way to refuse the development of rural activities as tourists are getting bored of basic cultural tours and they need more than just visits to churches and fortresses. The interviews also share information on already existing successful villages, where the villagers are hosting tourists and offering several services. Such villages include Kalavan, Garni, Byurakan, Tatev, Areni, Yeghegis, and some others. The case of Kalavan is exceptional, about which the researcher will present in a separate section. The interviews with tour companies enabled the researcher to go for more discoveries and visit some of the villages to understand the situation and mentality on the spot.

The analysis of interviews with villagers and local governing bodies

The second set of interviews was with the service producers –the villagers, as well as the people who have some responsibilities with the touristic sphere in the villages. The aim of the interviews was to discover the level of development of villages, which already have some concept of rural tourism and have done some work in the sphere. For that purpose, the researcher participated in a forum called “The perspective of Agro Tourism Development in Armenia” organized by a local tour operator on February 6, 2019, where the villagers having tourism-related businesses were also taking part in and presenting their services. After the event, the researcher interviewed Mr. Hovhannes Margaryan, a representative of Kotayk province’s regional administration. With the leadership of Mr. Margaryan, the responsible body with the use of villagers’ power are on the way to develop tourism in Lernanist village. The interviewee was asked several questions related to the strength of the location, the motives to start the process, the obstacles they face, and the means by which they reach their customers. According to Mr. Margaryan, the villagers are willing to host guests in their village. Despite the fact that there are no rivers or forests, the village has geographically good location. Though it is ten months they are involved in it, they have already received approximately 1000 guests. There are three to four houses which can host about thirty guests and offer services like harvesting, masterclasses on how to prepare local dishes, help the villagers in variety of rural work, like honey making or grass mowing. They are planning to have 5-year development plan, and now are on the phase of investigating the resources of the village. On the territory of the village, tourists can hike and enjoy different views of the mountains. The main obstacle of the village is that there is no drinking water. Despite that fact, the roads leading to the village are in proper conditions and the village is accessible in each season of the year. The main motive for the community of Lernanist and Mr. Margaryan to launch such activities was to increase the financial level of the village and use the potential of the villagers. He says, “Although we would be happy to get investments of private sector and the help of the government, we desire to involve the villagers in the process, but not

one or two major businessmen”. In this way, the village will have variety of workplaces and the villagers will not leave the village for work. For the promotion of the image of Lernanist, Mr. Margaryan invited two bloggers to write about Lernanist. He uses the Facebook platform, and the villagers share immediately every article about their village. They also work with local tour companies and the latter brings groups. He says, “Some visitors come, as they have heard about the village from Facebook”. It is also worth noting that having a development plan and wisely implementing it is a key factor towards development. Moreover, there is necessity to consider uniqueness of the location and appeal the guests for that. Obviously, the use of blogging, social media platforms are effective communication ways to raise awareness about the village, as well as direct cooperation with tour companies to promote the village for the tourists.

As a part of research, interviews were conducted in Vayots Dzor province in Armenia and the researcher participated in a homestay in one the villager’s house. The house was in Agarakadzor village, which is quite close to Yeghegnadzor city, the administrative center of Vayots Dzor province. The researcher interviewed the house owner, Vigen Aleksanyan, who is a graduate student of Armenian State University of Economics (ASUE) and went back to his birthplace after graduation. The interviewee was asked several questions, like how they decided to start a business like this, what are the strengths and the weaknesses of their village, and how they aim to reach their customers. As Mr. Aleksanyan explains, his approach towards tourism is a business approach, in sense that he consumes tourism to be a source of money. According to him, every village out of Yerevan can do such business. His first steps in the field was as a program writer for eco tours, tours in caves, to receive help from the government, which did not work. Since then he decided to work on his own. He started to contact with tour companies, which included their village as a destination, and had lunches for tourists in the village. As Mr. Aleksanyan states, “This was successful”. It was necessary for him to learn English, as he did not know the language. Perhaps, this is one of the weaknesses of the village, as not many people possess language skills there. Yet another important weakness stated by Mr. Aleksanyan is that the majority of houses do

not have proper toilets and bathrooms, which is causing inconveniences for the guests. He says, “Now we are trying to solve the issue of toilets, because it is the basic comfortability for the guests”. Afterwards, he stresses the strengths of the village, which are the geographical good location and the availability of variety of services. Mr. Aleksanyan states that there are many sightseeing places, beautiful landscapes near the village and the village is just two kilometers away from the main highway. As a compound tour package, they can not only offer bed and breakfast, but also horse riding in the fields, fishing in the river, clay making in the village and many other services. To promote their village and particularly their B&B Mr. Aleksanyan cooperates with tour companies in Armenia, will use the means of social media platforms, and will place billboards on highway to show the location of the B&B. The key outcome from the interviews, is that an educated person, well knowing the details of the sphere, and studied the strengths and weaknesses of the village, makes steps to improve the pitfalls of the village. It is also notable, that Mr. Aleksanyan enjoys respect and love among the villagers, and the other villagers follow his strategies. Even if just one person has the imagination of what he is doing, the feeling of achievement and a big desire, the success is unavoidable.

From the village of Agarakadzor, only 15 kilometers away exists another village called Gnishik. The researcher had a short visit to the village to talk to villagers and gather data. It was surprising to know that only two families were living in the village at that time. During a short talk with one of the villagers, Maro Sargsyan, it was revealed that the majority of the villages leaves the village during winter, and come back in summer. Ms. Sargsyan herself was prone to leave the village. Compared to the other villager’s interviewed for the research, Ms. Sargsyan suggested other side of the coin, stating that there is no uniqueness of the location, or food, to appeal the guests. Moreover, though they had renovated their houses, she was not interested in hosting foreigners or offering catering facilities to them. Ms. Sargsyan states that there is no specific dish to prepare in the region, and she was not enthusiastic even about the financial benefits. This interview shows that not everyone in the village possesses information about tourism, or the

benefits it can have, yet, people are even unaware of the strengths of their village. Gnishik is a wonderful location for observing wild goats- Bezoar goats occupying the mountains and hills near the village. The researcher is in favor of the idea that if the village of Gnishik had one devoted villager having necessary skills, the overall mentality of the villagers to accept guests would have positive paradigm shifts.

From the interviews, it can be understood that there are several key factors for the promotion of rural tourism in Armenia. The main component of it is a villager, who is respected individual by the community, like an opinion maker in the village, knowledgeable, devoted and a goal-oriented person. The other components are developed roads, infrastructure, as well as meaningful activities of communications to appeal tour companies and tourists.

The Case of Kalavan village

The name Kalavan has become one of the most used words when talking about rural tourism. The researcher knew about the village of Kalavan long time ago, but never had the chance to know more about it. During the forum, the researcher had the opportunity to meet and interview the *living hero* of the village. Robert Ghukasyan (as he likes to call himself- Robert of Kalavan) has a huge background in archaeology, had travelled number of countries in Middle East and Europe and taught in some universities. From his childhood, he was interested in history and archaeology. “When I was back from the travel, I saw that people are cutting the trees, and they are complaining,” says Mr. Ghukasyan. There was a family having three kids in the village, who wanted to leave the village, but the villagers hold them back, because if not the school will be closed, and if the school is closed the village will shut down, too. The number of villagers from 350 diminished to 95. Mr. Ghukasyan’s children did not want to leave their village, as they liked it very much. To try himself and save the life of the village, he leaves the world of the science, and concentrates on the issues of the village. He says, “At that time, I had no clue what is tourism, and even till now I do not know the meanings of some terms in tourism, which does not really matter”, he adds.

In 2013, he decided to get busy with the problems of the village. Then they gave a product of experimental archaeology, from where students from universities visited the village and had experience in the excavations. After a week, the number of interested people with the educational program increased, and even Mr. Ghukasyan received an invitation to lecture in Sharjah University. As a devoted person to his work and village, he decided to stay and continue the development of the village. He stresses that his aim is not to develop specific spheres, but the entire village.

On the way to success, there was a big issue. Neither the villagers, nor his family members had belief towards his plans. “When already we received 500-600 guests, I faced many difficulties and problems”, says Mr. Ghukasyan. He continues, “Everybody litters the nature, cars with cut trees on them stand on the ways, the local governance does everything to fail it and so on, which resulted in the cease of the movement”, he adds. According to him, if you want to develop one branch, the other branches should be developed equally. If a neighbor drops litter, the renovated house one owns will not cover the negative activities of your neighbor. There was necessity to plan a development strategy for the village, including investigations of the available resources, concentrating rather what the village had, but not what it did not. Even a negative resource, can be turned into a positive one, if one wants it. They started to design adventure tours, doing off roads to the village and using the cars of the villagers, which got payed for that. “My aim is to show the villagers that they can”, stresses Mr. Ghukasyan.

To overcome the barrier to get the villagers trust, he needed to imagine himself in their shoes. Only in this way, his mission would be successful. Gradually, their community reached to the point, where they have 10 guesthouses, one organic honey production, and many other villagers are joining their movement. Talking about the rural tourism, he states that it is good to remind the guests of the history of Armenia, but the nowadays’ Armenia is also something to admire to. That is the reason that in Kalavan they put the stress on the living people, their traditions, their deeds, and friendly relations. Their strategy is the reason that they get requests to host about 1000 guests

form Israel, but because of the few opportunities to place them, they refused. Now, the villagers are a lot motivated, but there should be someone to hold them back from wrong investments and risks.

Planning is a key component for development. People should now in advance what is going to happen within the next five or ten years. The other segments of the business should know what products would be available. There should be priority of actions and steps to reach the desired goal. For example, the tour guide or tour operator should know 3 years in advance what services or products will be available in the touristic market. Unpredictability is one of the key issues. “People do not know what to expect and this issue is mainly to be solved by the government”, says Mr. Ghukasyan. He considers that the biggest enemy of their village is the time. Mr. Ghukasyan explains that now the villagers want to start new businesses or enlarge what they already have, but his aim is to maintain security of their businesses, as not well-thought steps can be risky and harmful. He also states that they have the development, but the villagers are not ready, so this slows down the development as both the villager and the development should have harmonic movement.

The case of Kalavan village is unique, because it shows how just one person can change the fate of the entire village. He was one of the villagers, which gave him advantage to gather people around him. Yet, Mr. Ghukasyan places the villager at first place, giving him freedom to think and act. With this strategy, villagers are empowered. Mr. Ghukasyan ensures that the village walk in accordance to the plan designed for the village. The plan is formed after the studies of the resources of the village, its strengths and weaknesses, which enables them to operate properly. Year by year the village becomes richer, which ensures that every family in the village has a good life. This is the aim of the committed person. The fame of Kalavan has travelled beyond the boundaries of Kalavan. It reached to other parts of Armenia, and even out of it. Ms. Raya Bakanyan, an incoming tour manager of Spinnaker Travel, proudly brought the example of Kalavan and stressed the influencing factor of Mr. Ghukasyan in the development of the village.

“The case of Kalavan is just phenomenal”, she said. Ms. Bakanyan adds, “I wish each village had one Robert”. It is also important to state that Mr. Ghukasyan is open to help other villages too, so he is now planning a strategy for Lernanist village to promote the village based on rural tourism.

The analysis of surveys with tourists

The surveys were accomplished in two ways: Face-to-face and online. The researcher targeted the tourists who were in Armenia at that moment, and those, who have once visited the country before. The aim of the surveys is to understand whether the tourists have interest towards rural tourism in Armenia, and how they get information about Armenia. Having the given time, the face-to-face surveys include 25 people, while the online surveys –10 people. The face-to-face surveys were accomplished with tourists to Armenia, whom the researcher did not know. The 10 people filled in the online survey once were the guests of the researcher.

The key outcome of the face-to-face surveys is that 64% of surveyed people would not mind to spend 3-5 days in Armenian villages and do hiking, horse riding, or preparing homemade food and alcoholic drinks. 68% of surveyed people had previously had the experience of rural tourism in many countries, such as Cyprus, India, Georgia. 76% of surveyed people have visited Armenia just once, but four people have visited three and three+ times. The main reason of their visits have been for leisure (76%) and for business (20%). It is interesting to state, that 52% of surveyed people heard of Armenia from relatives and friends. Only 28% of surveyed people learnt about Armenia from Internet sources, while the other 8% –from business associates. Yet, 60% of surveyed people would extremely recommend Armenia for a visit to their friends, 20% –very, 16% –moderate.

If considered the nationalities of surveyed people, three Russians, one Austrian, one Iranian, six Pilipino, and five Indians would like to experience rural tours in Armenia, while the other three Russians, one Austrian, one Pilipino, one Polish, three Indians would not. It is also

notable, that the travelling interests of the tourists mainly included visits to historical sightseeing places, nature and landscapes, as well as medical tourism.

As for the online surveys, 80% of surveyed people were interested in rural tours. Particularly they were interested in getting familiar with local culture, preparing traditional dishes and making wine and vodka. The other interests included horse riding, hiking, fishing and others. 90% of surveyed people stated that their traveling interest to Armenia was historical places, while 10% visited Armenia to discover it. Moreover, for 80 % of surveyed people the visit to Armenia was for leisure. 70% of surveyed people have been to Armenia once, 20 % –two times, and 10% –three times. It is interesting to state that 70% of surveyed people heard of Armenia from their friends and relatives, while only 20% knew about the country from Internet and social networks. 50% of surveyed people would extremely and the other 50% would very much recommend Armenia to a friend for a visit.

To sum up the results of the surveys, the number of tourists willing to have rural tours in Armenia is higher (68.57% of all surveyed tourists). People come here mainly for historical places, nature and landscapes. They are higher than average satisfied with the country and either extremely or very much recommend the country. The big issue revealed because of the surveys is that the tourist mainly learn about the country from their friends or relatives. 57.14 % of all surveyed tourists heard of Armenia from a friend, while 25.71 % of all surveyed tourists knew about Armenia from Internet sources. This may indicate that Armenia is not well promoted online and through the means of social media.

Discussion and Conclusion- Limitations and Avenues for Further Research

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the project is to better understand what role public relations could play in promoting rural tourism in Armenia. Rural tourism is a newly developing branch of tourism, and accordingly, rural tours are innovations among standard cultural tour packages. Thus, the importance of the study on rural tourism in Armenia was necessary, as there is no other previous study about it. The secondary research enabled to study the available experiences of rural tourism and its promotion worldwide. The primary research helped to understand the situation in Armenia. The results indicate the overall interest towards rural tours in Armenia. Both the interviews with the tour company representatives, as well as the online and face-to-face surveys with tourists reflected this. The research aims to discover the obstacles of rural tourism promotion from the perspectives of communication.

One of the main outcomes of the research is the discovery of communication issues between tour companies and villagers. From the interviews it appears that tour companies have limited contacts and own few information about rural areas ready to host tourists. This information indicates that there is a communication issue between tour companies and villagers owning tourism-related businesses. Through the process of basic communication, the message by villagers is either lost or diffused until it reaches to the receiver –the tour companies. This is much related with the diffusion theory of innovation in communications, as the innovative approaches of villagers is being diffused before reaching to the target because of miscommunication with tour companies. The promotion of rural tours passes several cycles to reach its target –tourists to Armenia. The tour companies are in the middle of the cycle to connect the villagers with tourists. Thus, it is essential for the villagers to more effectively communicate with tour companies to raise awareness of their services and the image making for the village. For the promotion of the villages, the representatives could organize trips for the tour companies to their villages, where they could

present the entire potential of the village and the services offered in the villages and by the villagers. Moreover, the villagers could use social media platforms to boost the awareness of their services, run PR campaigns and appeal with promotional videos.

Another important feature to notice from primary data is related to the human factor. The interviews with tour company representatives suggest that for the promotion of rural tours a committed person from each village is necessary. The most interesting fact, perhaps, is that the previous statement is proved after the interviews with the villagers and local governmental body representatives. Both in the cases of Agarakadzor, Lernanist, as well as Kalavan villages there is one person respected and trusted by their community who leads the village towards its prosperity and development in both tourism sector and widely. Vigen Aleksanyan from Agarakadzor, Hovhannes Margaryan from Lernanist, and Robert Ghukasyan from Kalavan were born and lived in their villages and the community knows them well. The villagers respect and trust these people, thus they become leaders based on their skills, knowledge and aspiration. These experiences show the significant impact of such people in the villages and the development plan for those.

Limitations and Avenues for Further Research

The limitations for the research were related to getting primary data. Tourists often refused to fill in the surveys, which held back from gathering data of variety of nationalities and interests. The tourists either felt uncomfortable to share their experience or did not have spare time. The other limitation for the research was that the fact of travelers planning their trip on their own was not separately addressed. In case of further studies and research, this issue needs to be addressed, as tourists travelling on their own could have other needs and views towards the importance of rural tours, as well as the ways of communication to reach them. Moreover, further study could be done to come up with the best promotional steps for raising awareness and image making for the villages both targeting directly to tourists and tour companies. This research gives platform for further investigation of the rural sector of touristic market in Armenia and the public relations strategies to be used for promoting rural tourism in Armenia.

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APPENDIX 1

During the interviews, the representatives of the companies, tour managers, heads of inbound tourism, or the company owners will be asked the following questions:

- Which countries does your company have most tourists from?
- What are their main interests?
- How often do you meet a tourist willing to visit villages?
- If yes, what were your suggestions?
 - If not, will you suggest the tourist such service?
- If yes, where and what would you suggest?
 - If not, what will hinder you to do so?
- What are the main three obstacles to include rural tourism in your tour packages?

APPENDIX 2

The villagers having tourism-related businesses will be asked the following questions:

- How do you get your customers?
- Why do they visit villages?
- What amenities or services are lacking?
- What is the strength of the location/ village?
- What is that hinders the development of the village?
- What were the motives to launch that business?

APPENDIX 3

The questions in the interview with the villagers will be the following ones:

- Would you like to have developed tourism in you village?
 - If yes, why would you like to promote?
- What are the strengths of your village or location?
- What might interest your visitors?

- What can you suggest to your visitors?
- How can you introduce your village to a newcomer?
- Why should your village be interesting to a visitor?

APPENDIX 4

Survey questionnaire for tourists.

1. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Other (please specify):
- Prefer not to answer

2. What is your age?

- Under 18
- 18-30 years old
- 31-45 years old
- 46-55 years old
- 56-65 years old
- 66-75 years old
- 75+
- Prefer not to answer

3. What is your country of origin?

4. What religious family do you belong to or identify yourself most close to?

- Hindu
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Christian (Catholic protestant or any other Christian denominations)
- Other (please specify)

- I am not religious
- Prefer not to answer

5. Please specify your education level:

- No schooling completed
- High school graduate
- College credit, no degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate degree
- Other (please specify):
- Prefer not to answer

6. What is your occupation?

- Employed
- Not employed, looking for
- Retired
- Other (Please specify):
- Prefer not to answer

7. What is your annual income level?

- Less than \$12,000
- \$12,000-\$34,000
- \$34,000-\$64,000
- \$64,000-\$94,000
- Over \$94,000
- Prefer not to answer

8. How did you hear about Armenia initially?

- TV Ads
- Magazine Ads

- Newspaper
- Internet (social networks)
- Friends/Relatives
- Business Associates
- Other (please specify):

9. How many times have you been to Armenia?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 3+
- Other (please specify):

10. What are your purposes for coming to Armenia?

- For leisure
- For business
- For education
- Other (please specify):
- Prefer not to answer

11. What are your travelling interests?

- Historical places
- Extreme activities
- Medical tourism
- Other (please specify)

12. Have you experienced rural tourism in your lifetime?

- Yes
- No

13. If yes, present briefly your experience.

14. Would you be interested if offered a tour package to have a 3-5 day stay in a villager's house?

- Yes
- No

15. If yes, what activities would you like to have?

- Mainstay in Armenian Culture
- Horse riding
- Hiking
- Lavash baking
- Preparation of homemade vodka, wine
- Other (Please, specify)

16. Would you recommend a touristic visit to your friends/ relatives in Armenia?

- Extremely
- Very
- Moderate
- Slightly
- Not at all

17. Would you recommend to your friends/ relatives a touristic visit to rural areas of Armenia?

- Extremely
- Very
- Moderate
- Slightly
- Not at all