



THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON TOURIST PURCHASE CHOICES

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Abstract:

Social media are increasingly present in the daily lives of modern people in different ways. More and more information, from daily news to finding different contents of services, entertainment, activities and travel can be found on social networks. In this paper, we will deal with the influence of social networks on the decision-making process when choosing a tourist trip. The goal of the work is to show how and in what way something that we see and read on social networks can play a role in creating our opinion about something, and even the final decision. Through the survey we conducted, we will analyze the answers of the respondents, primarily to what extent social networks are used in creating our image of a product; in this case we focus on tourist trips. Through this work, we also come to answering the question of how important it is nowadays to be on social networks for anyone who wants to market one of their services or products.

Keywords:

social media, decisions, consumers, tourism industry, internet marketing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Let's start with the fact that tourism needs are classified as supplementary needs, being satisfied after basic needs and, essentially, they are not necessary for human survival (Ilić & Stefanović, 2019). The fact is that in recent years, and even decades, with the increase in tourism movements globally, we can say that tourism needs are increasingly approaching basic needs, at least for a certain number of people (Sofronov, 2018). Fulfilling the need for travel, with the intention of relaxation, unwinding, learning something new, contributes to the restoration of psycho-physical health and enhances productivity at work and in an individual's overall life (Popesku & Gajić, 2020).

The exchange of information within the tourism sector is very specific and represents a significant marketing activity. There is a special relationship between the seller and the buyer here, in the sense of the service creator and the service user (Burgess et al., 2011; Pencarelli, 2020). In this regard, we can conclude that technological changes and changes in overall communication, from the advent of the internet, through various forms of communication, to social networks, are crucial for the survival of every individual offering some form of tourism service on the market.

In recent years, we have witnessed the fact that most people own smartphones, and an increasing number of people are joining social networks, using them as a way to get information and share various content. The development of technology has led to the possibility of spreading a large amount of information on social networks, as well as providing a very fast way of communication, both between service providers and users, and among the users themselves.

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These changes have made it essential for those who create and offer tourism services to be seriously involved in new communication trends, to be accessible and present on social networks in order to remain competitive in the market (Kádár & Gede, 2021; Seok et al., 2021; Živković et al., 2016).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE INTERNET AND CONSUMERS IN TOURISM

Today's concept of marketing activities in tourism is primarily focused on consumers, i.e., tourists. The main goal is to meet all consumer needs, and besides creating a good and high-quality product, in this case, a complete tourism service, great attention is paid to the needs and desires of tourists through building personal relationships and good communication (Živković & Brdar, 2018).

Information and communication technology, at the beginning of its emergence and application in tourism activities, was primarily used for the collection, storage, and analysis of information within companies. Subsequently, communication technology expanded to the relationship between businesses and their partners, facilitating the spread of information and easier communication. Eventually, new technologies began to be used between companies and end-users of services. Today, advanced forms of technology and communication have led to a connection between consumers, or users of tourism services, allowing for easier transfer of information and content (Bastidas-Manzano et al., 2021; Gössling, 2020; Pencarelli, 2020). Technological advancements and rapid movements in the global market have resulted in very dynamic changes in tourism, enabling improved service quality, more efficient communication, easier creation of new products, and better satisfaction of consumer needs, i.e., tourists (Njeguš, 2021). The advantages of using the internet for consumers in tourism primarily include the ability to thoroughly review offers, compare prices, and learn about details and experiences of others by following reviews, comments, tourism blogs, and articles. These possibilities contribute to reducing intermediaries in tourism, as service users can access their desired accommodations, modes of transportation, and other services at the destination directly (Chaw & Tang, 2019).

The internet is now intertwined with all aspects of life and work. For this reason, it is impossible to imagine work in tourism without the use of the internet and presence on social media (Brdar, 2023). Service providers present their tourism products online, sharing information and content to reach as many clients, in this case tourists, as possible (Opute et al., 2020). Communication with tour-

ists allows service providers to gain insight into their desires and needs, enabling faster action and the creation of new services that will meet constant market changes and attract new users of tourism services (Labanauskaitė et al., 2020). The availability of excessive information, as well as issues with false information and online fraud, can be confusing and stressful for consumers. As a result, even consumers of tourism services who have taken advantage of new technologies sometimes revert to direct communication with service providers (travel agencies, accommodation facilities, etc.) outside the internet to avoid unpleasant experiences (Fedeli, 2020; Popesku & Gajić, 2020). The advancement of technology and mobile devices has led to direct communication among people and the exchange of content from travel locations. This can have both positive and negative effects on tourism. Images from destinations, hotels, and restaurants are exchanged rapidly and in real-time, along with ratings, reviews, and comments that can be both favorable and unfavorable.

2.2. DECISION MAKING ABOUT TRAVEL AND SOCIAL MEDIA

One of the fundamental characteristics of services is their intangibility, meaning that there is no way to verify or consume the service before purchasing (Qiu et al., 2022). This poses an additional challenge in creating service marketing and increases the risk associated with purchasing. For this reason, consumers primarily rely on personal impressions, making recommendations from other users and word-of-mouth communication very important (Cuic et al., 2023). Value for consumers represents a critical point in the purchasing decision, meaning that consumers consider all the characteristics of the service provider. In addition to the quality of the product/service offered, the attitude of employees, their dedication, knowledge, and accessibility are also very important (Smaliukiene et al., 2015). The goal of every company, as in all other sectors, including tourism, is to secure customer loyalty and favor by providing greater value for consumers (Hadianfar, 2021). Every tourist aims to make the best possible purchasing decision, reducing the risk of making a wrong choice and having a negative experience during their travels or at the destination (Chen et al., 2021). Throughout the purchasing decision process, consumers go through several phases, which can be summarized as follows: recognizing needs, seeking information, evaluating alternatives, making a purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior (Živković & Brdar, 2018).

With the development of the internet and new technologies, social media has emerged, which is now very prevalent in people's daily lives. Social media represents a virtual space used as a means for communication and the exchange of various textual and video content. This provides a new way for people to connect socially using mo-



bile devices and internet-related technologies. They can be divided into two groups: the first group includes websites, blogs, and other services based on specific themes, while the second group consists of social networks that were primarily designed for connecting users with their friends and sharing everyday content (Abou-Shouk & Hewedi, 2016; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Čerović et al., 2022). The increase in the number of social media users in recent years has made it essential for tourism businesses to establish a presence on these platforms. Creating content for social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc.) has become a routine part of promoting services for a large number of tourism enterprises. Additionally, through comments and direct messages, a special connection and relationship is formed with each consumer/tourist. This includes both loyal customers eager for new information and content, as well as opportunities to attract new users of the offered services (Živković et al., 2014). There are many similar or nearly identical tourism products in the market, whether it's trips sold by travel agencies or accommodation options at a particular destination, making the relationship, communication, and trust that the customer builds with the tourism enterprise one of the key factors in their purchasing decision (Li et al., 2020).

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

For the purposes of writing this paper, a survey was conducted to demonstrate the extent to which social media is used to create an image of a product, with a focus on tourism services in this case. The survey was conducted in September 2024, using a Google Forms questionnaire consisting of 15 closed-ended questions. A total of 160 respondents participated in the study.

The first part of the survey pertains to socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, employment status). In this section, we see that the majority of respondents were women (62.5%), and the age structure is diverse, with the predominant group being individuals aged 31 to 40 years, representing 45.6% of the survey. The highest percentage of respondents has a higher education degree. The last question in this segment relates to employment status, where we see that the majority of respondents are employed (86.3%).

The survey is divided into three groups: The Role of Social Media Before Travel, The Role of Social Media During Travel, and The Role of Social Media After Travel. Before the questions in these three groups, respondents were asked whether they use social media daily. We can say that this question is the cornerstone of the entire survey, and 142 respondents (88.8%) answered affirmatively, indicating that the majority of them use social media on a daily basis. This positive response supports the survey, as the focus is on understanding the extent to which social media influences decisions when choosing tourism services.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics.

| Socio-demographic characteristics | No. Of respondents | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| Sex | Male | 60 (37,5%) |
| | Female | 100 (62,5%) |
| Age | 18-30 | 31 (19,4%) |
| | 31-41 | 73 (45,6%) |
| | 41-50 | 22 (13,8%) |
| | 51 and more | 34 (21,3%) |
| Education | High School | 30 (18,8%) |
| | College | 48 (30%) |
| | University | 48 (30%) |
| | Postgraduate Studies | 34 (21,3%) |
| Employment status | Student | 6 (3,8%) |
| | Employed | 138 (86,3%) |
| | Unemployed | 6 (3,7%) |
| | Retired | 10 (6,3%) |

Source: Authors' data.



The first group of questions related to the role of social media before travel consists of five questions. To the question, "When choosing a travel destination, do you seek information through social media?" the majority of responses were affirmative - 118 respondents (73.8%).

Several questions in the survey were presented as a scale with statements that respondents had to agree or disagree with. Each scale consisted of five statements, marked with numbers representing: 1 – Strongly disagree, 2 – Mostly disagree, 3 – Neutral, 4 – Mostly agree, 5 – Strongly agree.

For the question, "Is the most relevant information about a destination or a hotel found on social media?" nearly half (49.4%) answered affirmatively, while around 30% of respondents indicated that they were neutral. The next question confirmed this with 81 respondents (50.6%) stating that they communicate through social media with providers of tourism content (travel agencies, hotels, restaurants, etc.). However, it is important to note that nearly half of the respondents do not communicate with service providers via social media. The following question, presented as a statement, "Communication through social media with providers of tourism content is easier than making a direct phone call or visiting a travel agency in person", showed that the largest number of respondents (48, or 30%) mostly agreed, 41 (25.6%) were neutral, while 29 (18.1%) strongly disagreed with this statement. The last question in this group was, "Have you ever made a reservation for a tourist trip or accommodation at a destination through social media?" The majority response was "No" - 106 respondents (66.3%), while 54 (33.8%) answered "Yes".

The second group of questions related to the role of social media during travel consists of three questions. To the question, "Do you post about your travels on your social media?" the majority of respondents answered "Yes" - 109 (68.1%), while 52 (31.9%) answered, "No". The next question was formulated as a scale with the statement, "Photos and comments from tourist destinations (as well as showcasing content from destinations) that we post on social media can be useful to our friends and inspire their travels". Here, the largest number of respondents agreed - 132 (82.5%), while the number of neutral respondents and those who disagreed was very small. Additionally, the following question was also in the form of a scale with the statement, "If something on my trip is not as expected or if the destination or hotel does not meet my expectations, I will immediately post about it on my social media". With this statement, 90 respondents (56.2%) disagreed, while a slightly smaller number - 39 (24.4%) were neutral.

The third and final group of questions pertains to the role of social media after travel and consists of two questions. To the question, "Do you leave reviews on social media after returning from a trip?", the majority of re-

sponses were, "No" - 106 (66.3%), while 54 (33.8%) answered "Yes". The last question in this survey was, "Do you think it's better to post a negative review on social media to inform others or to address the service provider directly about not meeting your expectations?". For this question, we had two responses:

1. It's better to post on social media so that service providers take the criticism more seriously.
2. No, it's better to address the service provider directly and point out the shortcomings.

The largest number of respondents chose the second option - 97 (60.6%), while 63 (39.4%) opted for the first response.

By analyzing all the responses, we conclude that the majority of people use social media daily, and they enjoy gathering information and collecting data about tourist destinations, hotels, restaurants, etc., on social media. Additionally, the conclusion is that respondents are quite indecisive when it comes to communicating and directly addressing tourism providers through social media, and that most respondents have never made a reservation this way. The second group of questions, which focused on the role of social media during travel, reveals that people mostly post their photos and content from vacations and trips on their profiles, and they believe that this can inspire their friends to travel or visit a particular destination. However, negative experiences are generally not shared on social media. Finally, from the third group of questions, we see that people are not inclined to leave reviews on social media, and when it comes to negative experiences, they prefer to address tourism service providers directly rather than posting about them on social media.

4. CONCLUSION

The theoretical part of this paper confirms that the internet and social media today represent the largest sources of personal experiences and information; so users of tourism services primarily inform themselves through these channels. The widespread availability of information and content (text, images, videos) on the internet offers a simpler way and assistance for a certain number of tourists when making travel decisions and purchasing tourism products. These changes have also led to the fact that it is almost essential and unimaginable in today's world for any tourism business (travel agency, hotel, restaurant, etc.) to lack a presence on social media. For every tourism enterprise, one of the most important aspects is consumer satisfaction, in this case, that is the tourist, and achieving this goal relies heavily on effective communication. Today's communication is increasingly shifting to social media, which means that participants in the tourism industry must understand all possible ways to operate on



these platforms and the potential they offer for fostering good relationships with existing clients, as well as for finding new service users.

From the conducted survey, we determined that potential tourists gather information about new trips on social media and share their travels with friends, but usually only in a positive context. This behavior of tourists on social media is very favorable for service providers, as they can gain free advertising through the content that tourists share on their profiles. Conversely, if negative experiences occur, they are mostly not posted on social media. Additionally, this could be a potentially good opportunity for service providers if they have a habit of communicating with their clients after the service is rendered, finding ways to address negative situations and dissatisfaction, as well as making adjustments in their operations to prevent such issues from recurring in the future if they wish to maintain a long and successful presence in tourism.

The research conducted in this paper can confirm previous theoretical insights on these topics and serve participants in the tourism industry in decision-making related to meeting tourist needs through a better understanding of tourist behavior based on their online activities. It is important to note that the limitations of this study include a smaller number of respondents and an uneven gender and age distribution. Opportunities for further research lie in expanding the survey to a larger geographical area, allowing us to gain a broader perspective and obtain results that would be clearer and more precise.

5. LITERATURE

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