

The Impact of Social Networks on the Choice of Tourist Destinations

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Abstract. *The travel industry has grown significantly in recent years due to the advancement of social media and technology. Nowadays, there is a vast array of tourism-related goods and services available to consumers, making it challenging to select the ideal travel location. In these circumstances, it is critical to comprehend the driving forces behind consumer decision-making regarding travel destinations or on traveler choice. Our travel habits have evolved as a result of the digital world, particularly social media. Research in this field, particularly in the areas of content and influence marketing, can be very helpful in comprehending and evaluating the most recent practices and trends employed in the travel and tourism sector. Based on the questionnaire results, this study analyze how platforms, social networks, and influencers affect travelers' preferences for travel, as well as how tourists choose travel destinations based on user behavior, perceptions, and content. A total of 306 respondents from different age and income groups and geographical areas filled out the questionnaire. The study is based on the quantitative approach, and SPSS was used to statistically interpret the results. Due to the inductive reasoning and our study findings we can affirm that in a world that is increasingly digitally connected, there still is a lot of room for research and innovation in this area. The online environment presents distinctive marketing prospects. Content marketing and influence marketing will continue to lead social media marketing trends.*

Keywords: social networks, content marketing, influence marketing, tourist destination, travel choice

Introduction

The number of tourists and revenue generated by the tourism industry are consistently rising, making it one of the most significant and dynamic industries in the world. In this regard, industry experts are particularly interested in the reasons behind consumer decisions to select particular travel-related goods and services as well as the influence of social media on traveler choice.

One of the major determinants of travel decisions is motivation. The need that drives someone to take certain acts that have a high chance of providing satisfaction is referred to as motivation. People's decision-making is influenced by a variety of motivating factors. These factors may significantly influence each person's choice of vacation type, length, and destination, as well as whether to opt for travelling or not. Analyzing the reasons behind people's choice of tourist

destinations we find that external factors like friends' recommendations, advertisements, travel agents, information from the media, and social networks influence these touristic choices really often, whether or not people are fully aware of them.

Nowadays, influence and content marketing are two crucial strategic approaches that are interdependent rather than totally independent. They both center on engaging your audience in a meaningful and genuine way. While content marketing aims to establish brand credibility and win over audience trust, influence marketing reaches a larger and new audience. Personalized recommendations and services can be offered to match the needs of each individual customer by analyzing data on their behavior and preferences, but it's also critical to take data security and privacy concerns into account.

All this direct and quick approach to the consumer, as well as easy interaction between organizations-consumer, but also between consumer-consumer was enormously facilitated by the existence of social networks. Due to their ability to facilitate consumer interaction with travel industry operators, exchange traveler experiences, and provide destination information, social networks have grown to be of utmost importance to the travel industry. Customers can share information about hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions on social media platforms, upload pictures and reviews, and get recommendations from other users who have had comparable experiences.

Literature review

The use of social media

The use of social media has completely changed people's lives. It is now a constant source of information that we have progressively incorporated into our daily lives (Mukherjee & Nagabhushanam, 2016). There are various methods for defining this relatively recent phenomenon. Blossom (2009), for example, views social media as a tool that facilitates communication with people on both an individual and a group level. Likewise, according to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61), social media refers to a collection of web-based programs that support user-generated content creation and exchange. A similar definition is provided by Abrahams et al. (2012, p. 88), who state that "it is online services that allows for social interaction, creating personal contents, non-centralized applications with free membership". The ability to access information from a variety of electronic devices at any time has become second nature to people, and tablets and mobile phones account for an increasing share of global internet traffic.

Since the 1990s, the number of web portals and, of course, the number of users has expanded significantly, contributing to the tremendous growth of internet usage as a medium and essential component of social media. There were 5.35 billion internet users globally as of January 2024, or 66.2 percent of the world's population. Of the Figure 1, 5.04 billion people, or 62.3 percent of the global populace, used social media (Statista, 2024).

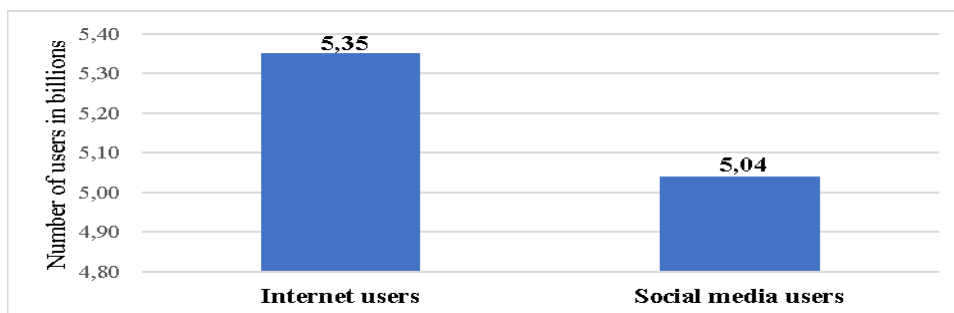


Figure 1. Number of internet and social media users worldwide as of January 2024

Source: www.statista.com.

Among the most common online activities is the use of social media. The global social media user base was estimated to be over 4.59 billion in 2022 and is expected to grow to nearly six billion by 2027, as can be seen in Figure 2. Everyday internet use includes social media. It is evident that social media will remain a part of consumers' daily lives, as the increased use of mobile devices is primarily responsible for the global expansion of social media. Internet users now spend an average of 151 minutes a day on messaging and social media platforms, which is 40 more minutes than in 2015.

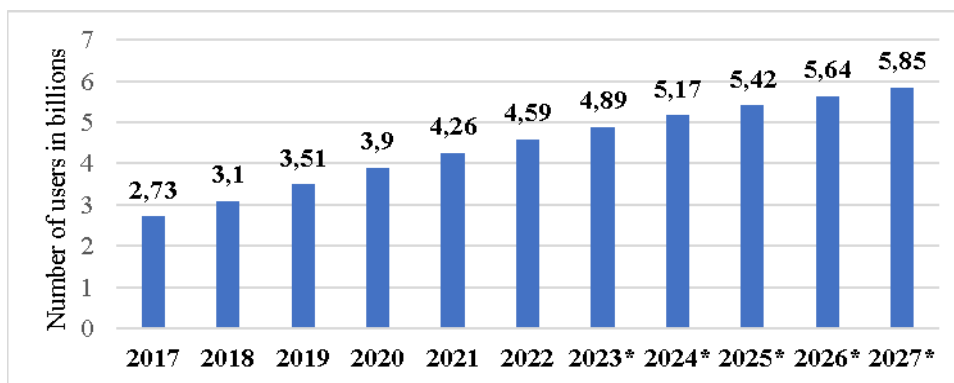


Figure 2. Number of social media users worldwide from 2017 to 2027

Source: www.statista.com.

Based on the analysis of Figure 3, which lists the top ten social media platforms, Meta Platforms is the owner of four of the biggest platforms, Facebook (the main platform), WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook Messenger, each with over one billion monthly active users. Regarding the most downloaded mobile app worldwide, TikTok generated 672 million downloads in 2022, making it the most downloaded mobile app globally, followed by Instagram and WhatsApp with 548 million and 424 million downloads, respectively (Statista, 2024).

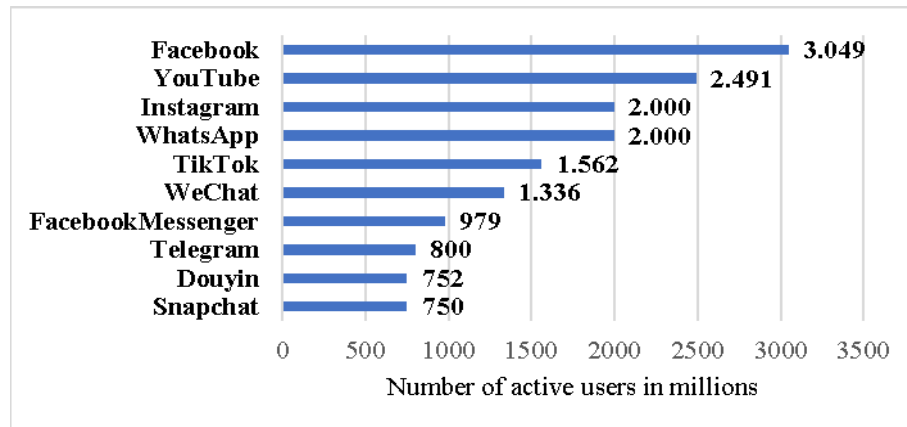


Figure 3. Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2024, ranked by number of monthly active users

Source: www.statista.com.

These figures unmistakably show how consumers are becoming more and more reliant on social media, which presents for travel industry enormous potential for social media marketing opportunities across the globe.

Social networks and tourists' choices

Tourists' choices are influenced by a variety of external and internal factors, including situational factors, marketing mix, destination attractiveness, constraints, and the nature of the trip. Internal factors include motivation, attitudes, values, and personal traits, as well as affective variables that, on the other hand, refer to the mood and feelings experienced during the trip (Liu et al., 2020).

Studies conducted over the last 15 years reveal a phenomenal rise in the travel and tourism industry in terms of both the number of visitors and the amount spent on travel (Sigala et al., 2012). Customers can now access a range of travel-related information and choices via social media sites, travel forums, and social networks. Via reviews, comments, and photos, these platforms can affect consumers' decisions to buy and where to travel. Also, social media platforms facilitate the use of targeted advertising to reach and segment a certain group of audience, thereby connecting with potential customers who are probably interested in what travel brands offer.

Travelers have embraced social media to search, organize, share, and annotate their travel experiences through online communities, blogs, forums, social knowledge sharing sites etc. in a cooperative manner (Hays et al., 2013; Leung et al., 2013). In particular, social networks enable travelers to communicate about their travel experiences via text, photos, and videos at any time and location. According to Milano et al. (2011), travelers' travel experiences are formed through three stages of experiences: pre-travel, on-travel, and post-travel on social media platforms. Online images and videos are now a significant component of user-generated content, assisting users in visualizing their trip and imagining themselves visiting a specific location, ultimately influencing their decision to travel. Their rise has facilitated the growth of mutually beneficial relationships between past and future travelers (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020). In the current digital era, users are no longer only passive viewers of online content; they are now actively involved in its production and dissemination (Shao, 2009).

In order to spot trends and patterns in customer behavior, social media analytics entails tracking and examining user-generated content on social media platforms, such as posts,

comments, reviews, and feedback. Utilizing this data, customized marketing campaigns and product and service offerings that cater to the travel needs of customers can be developed. By tracking and analyzing user behavior such as content engagement, likes, and shares, marketers can use social platform data analysis to measure campaign success and assess its effect on sales and brand. Finally, new products and services can be developed or marketing strategies can be modified in response to feedback.

Content marketing and influence marketing in tourism industry

Information and communication technology development impacts a wide range of industries, but new studies show a strong correlation between social media marketing and service sectors, particularly travel and tourism. Social media has a particularly strong influence on consumer decision-making in leisure and the online shopping domains of travel (Minazzi, 2015). Given the intense competition in the tourism sector, it is critical for businesses to embrace and effectively implement new marketing strategies.

Consumers have access to a greater variety of information sources through social media, including blogs and tweets, which can provide readers with both positive and negative product impressions. Information sources become more significant as travel distances increase, according to Bieger and Laesser (2004). Travelers are more likely to obtain information from multiple sources due to the high degree of uncertainty and unfamiliarity associated with expensive travel to remote locations. Therefore, before the decision stage, information sources are crucial in shaping travelers' perceptions of a specific destination. Customers will cultivate positive opinions of places if they feel satisfied with them (Szentesi et al., 2021), but also vice versa, they will object if they were not delighted with what they experienced. In this situation, a prospective customer's motivation to make a choice will come from sources that offer clear and trustworthy content. Additionally, studies have shown that consumers are more likely to believe information from personal rather than commercial sources (Hu & Wei, 2013). Also, studies have indicated that people from different socioeconomic backgrounds may have different level of trust towards technology. More precisely, people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds may value individualism and rely more on institutional trust, whereas people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may value community and rely more on interpersonal trust (Rad et al., 2023). There is no doubt that this factor affects how people approach social networks.

Due to its explosive growth, social media has become a cost-effective digital platform for promoting tourism-related goods and services by interacting directly with consumers (Styven & Wallstrom, 2017). Social media marketing entails much more than just concentrating on and pursuing user interaction, likes, and shares. A more and more significant aspect of the business environment is the idea of digital content marketing, or product marketing in which the entity and the product delivery are both digital. Creating and disseminating pertinent and helpful content that speaks to the needs and interests of audiences is the main goal of content marketing. Gaining the trust of your audience, influencing their decisions to buy, and attracting and engaging them are the objectives of content marketing (Pulizzi & Barrett, 2009). A crucial element for content creators is incorporating just the appropriate level of sensationalism into the information they post, fact that can only be carried out if it is known whether the content's goal is to attract the audience or to develop a trustworthy message for readers (Pelau et al., 2023). The travel and tourism user-generated content market is expected to reach US\$ 744.38 million by 2032, at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 15%, from US\$ 184 million in 2022 to US\$ 744.38 million in 2032, according to recently released data by Future Market Insights (FMI).

The most popular and useful social media platforms for marketing in the travel and tourism sector are Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. The most common kinds of content released by these platforms are short videos like those found on YouTube, IGTV, TikTok, Instagram Stories, and live streams. The transition from desktop to mobile has been one of the biggest technological trends of the last ten years, and TikTok's enormous popularity reflects this trend. Shorter attention spans are one of the recent behavioral changes observed in internet users, which highlights the growing significance of short-form video platforms. According to a June 2022 survey of global marketers, short-form video not only achieved the highest return on investment but also generated high engagement among online users (Statista, 2023).

Another significant component of user-generated content is reviews, which offer an insight into other travelers' experiences in a particular location or in connection with a particular travel product. Reviews can reveal details about the standard of amenities, costs, services, and overall ambience of a travel destination or travel-related product. Customers frequently consult reviews before booking a trip, and a favorable or negative review may influence the choice of travel destination or tourism offering.

Influencer marketing has a significant impact on tourism. Influencers are frequently used in the tourism industry to promote travel destinations, which helps to foster a positive attitude among tourists (Pop et al., 2021). When considering their options, users who trust influencers and are compelled to visit a place they recommend are more likely to look for the information they offer and to choose that location over others. Influencer recommendations that are relevant to their needs can help consumers modify their current travel plans (Gross & Wangenheim, 2018). Nowadays, consumers are more interested in people and their perspectives than in travel brand advertisements. Influencers are regarded as opinion leaders who have the power to spread information to others. They are also seen as mini-celebrities on social media (Gaenssle & Budzinski, 2020). Almost every consumer has at least one celebrity that they admire, and these celebrities have the power to affect their purchasing decisions (Kondort et al., 2023). Without the voice of a reliable source, in this case the influencer, content cannot produce the intended effects on its own. A brand's content might be excellent, but it wouldn't reach its audience as effectively as if it came from a reliable source (Small Business Trends, 2023). Therefore, influence marketing can be understood as a collaboration between brands and content producers who use their personalities to personalize products or services and spread the word about them to the general public.

Methodology

The data for this research study was gathered using a structured questionnaire in order to obtain a more thorough knowledge through the answers received from the respondents in what concerns four main topics: the variables influencing participants' travel decisions, the ways in which social media and networks impact the process of choosing a tourist destination, the type of social media content that influences the consumer the most, the influencers impact on tourists' decisions by promoting destinations.

A sample of individuals from a range of age groups, educational backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, and geographic locations received the questionnaire in December 2023. A total of 306 respondents filled out the questionnaire. To comprehend the sample and gain a better understanding of its characteristics, the socio-demographic data of the 306 respondents must be presented.

In order to interpret the respondents' answers to the items, and since the variables included in the questionnaire are predominantly of a qualitative type, the correlation coefficient chosen for analyzing the links between the variables is the coefficient of Spearman for correlation of items with related sample variables relating to age, education, and income. Thus, because the number of bivariate correlations analyzed using the correlation coefficient Spearman is a very large one, we ignored the insignificant correlations from the statistically point of view (those for which $p \geq 0.05$). Also, we highlighted the answers received to some of the questions with the help of absolute frequencies, as well as with the most important indicators of the trend centers, mean and median. As for determining the respondents' appreciation of certain aspects of the present research, the Likert scaling technique was used for some of the items. Respondents were asked to evaluate the degree to which they agree with the statements included in the questionnaire by giving an answer on a scale of 1 to 5, with the following meaning: 1 meaning not at all (being the lowest), 5 very much (being the highest)

Results and discussions

The questionnaire's results are being presented in a structured manner, beginning with the participants' sociodemographic data, followed by the descriptive, and correlative analyses of the data gathered under the main questions. We focused on being able to determine the influence of social media and networks on traveler choices, as well as to gain a deeper understanding of participant travel habits and preferences through the examination of these data. The tourism sector and the creation of marketing strategies for the advertising and promotion of travel destinations in the digital era of social media platforms and networks may benefit from this understanding.

Table 1 displays the distribution of all respondents according to their sociodemographic characteristics.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent %	Nationality	Frequency	Percent %
Female	208	68	Romanian	245	80,1
Male	96	31,4	Other	61	19,9
No answer	2	0,6			
Total	306	100	Total	306	100
Age	Frequency	Percent %	Education	Frequency	Percent %
18-25	127	41,5	Secondary	86	28,1
26-35	108	35,3	Higher	138	45,1
36-45	37	12,1	Postgraduate	75	24,5
46-56	32	10,5	No answer	7	2,3
>56	2	0,6			
Total	306	100	Total	306	100
Marital status	Frequency	Percent %	Occupation	Frequency	Percent %
Single	142	46,4	Employed	170	55,6
Married	98	32	Self employed	23	7,5
Partners	53	17,3	Entrepreneur	21	6,8
Divorced	6	2	Unemployed	12	3,9
Widower	2	0,6	Student	66	21,6
No answer	5	1,7	Retired	3	1
			Other	11	3,6
Total	306	100	Total	306	100

Gender	Frequency	Percent %	Nationality	Frequency	Percent %
Income (RON)	Frequency	Percent %	Income (EUR)	Frequency	Percent %
No income	27	8,8	No income	9	2,9
<2000	41	13,4	<700	11	3,6
2001-3000	42	13,8	701-1500	17	5,6
3001-4000	38	12,4	1501-2500	9	2,9
4001-5000	34	11,1	2501-3500	7	2,3
>5000	47	15,4	>3500	3	1
No answer	16	5,2	No answer	5	1,6
Total	245	80,1	Total	61	19,9

Source: Authors' own research.

Using the most significant trend center indicators, mean, and median, we examined the responses to the question about the main reason for travel. As can be seen in Figure 4, following the analysis, it was found that the most important travel motivations are those with a median of 5, such as enjoying the natural landscape, spending time with family, experiencing new and different places and having fun, all with a mean between 4.34 to 4.50, indicating a clear trend towards higher motivation in these categories. Next in importance are pursuing self-interested activities, socializing and meeting new people, escaping from the usual responsibilities and daily routine, and learning about art and culture. All of these correspond to the median of 4, with mean ranging from 3.79 to 4.19, which means that participants agree with the importance of these categories and indicate moderate to high motivation during their travels. Spending time alone has a mean of 3.07 and a median of 3, suggesting that half of the participants show lower motivation in traveling alone.

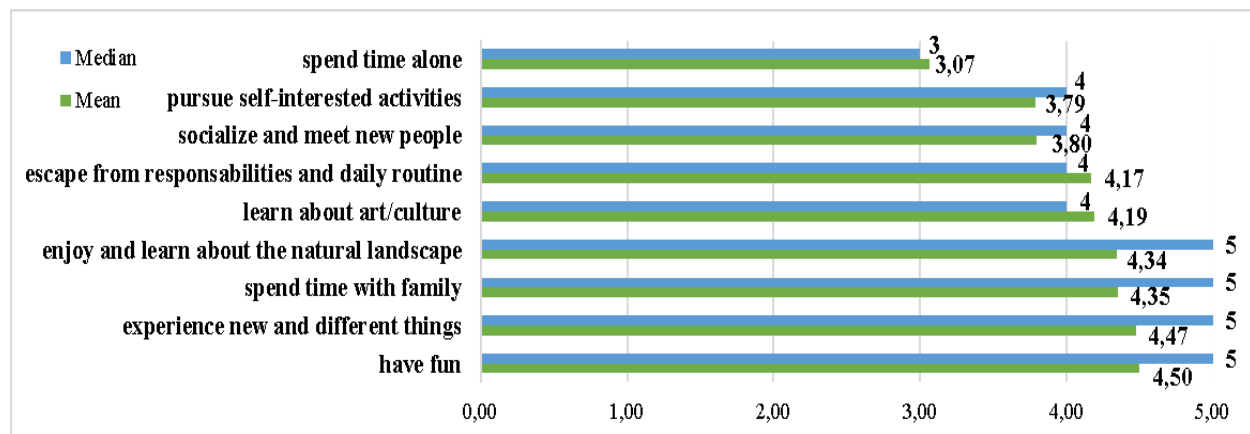


Figure 4. The trend center indicators of the main motivation to travel options

Source: Authors' own research.

Figure 5 emphasizes the responses to the question about the importance of the characteristics of a tourist destination using the most significant trend center indicators, mean, and median.

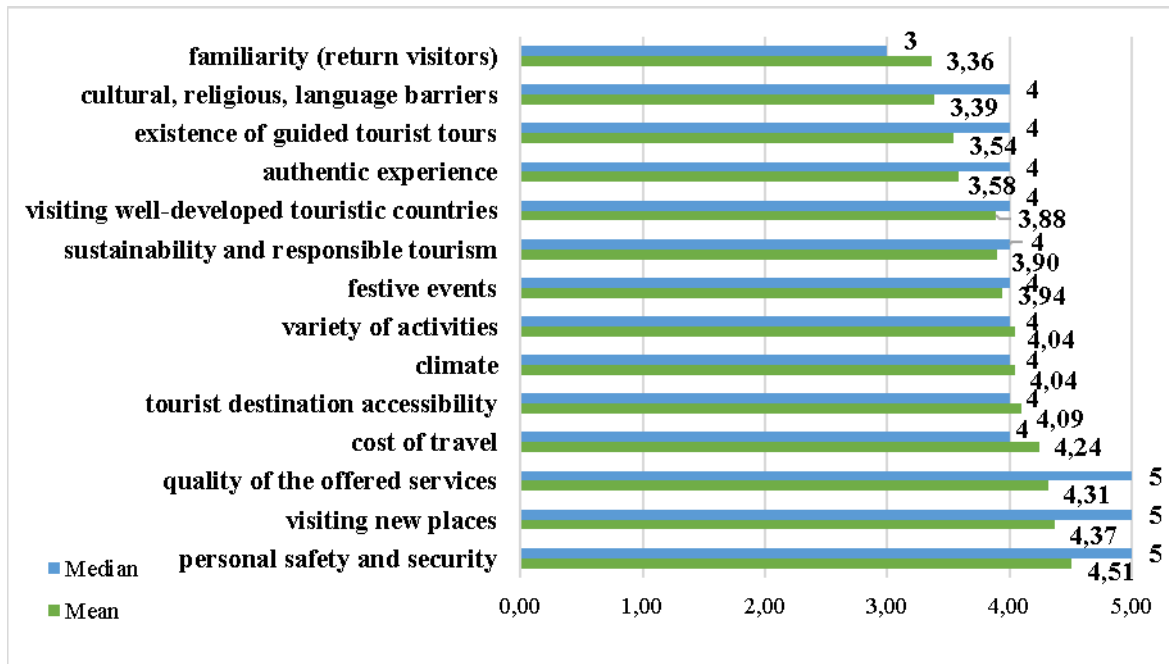


Figure 5. The trend center indicators of the importance of the characteristics of a tourist destination
Source: Authors' own research.

The next step in the research was to identify any potential statistical correlations that may exist between the variables. The degree of association between variables is expressed numerically by correlation. To the extent that one variable's variation affects the other's variation, two variables are associated.

First, we analyzed the answers to the questions that refer to the travel preferences and interests of tourists and their behavior towards the choice of tourist destinations, finding correlation of items with related sample variables relating to age, education, and income. As can be observed in Table 2 and Table 3, from the analysis of the values of the identified Spearman correlation coefficients we can extract some conclusions. In general, reduced level correlations were identified, the coefficient values being placed in range (0.1-0.3), which means that the variables influence each other, but not to a radical extent. Most of the correlations are reverse / negative, just a few correlations were identified as being direct / positive.

Regarding the main motivation for travel, a positive ($\rho=0.161$; $p=0.005$) and a negative ($\rho=-0.131$; $p=0.022$) correlation was identified in relation to age. This means that young people prefer less to spend time with family during their travel, but prefer more to pursue self-interested activities. Certainly, the desire to be surrounded by family and to do activities together during vacations is a motivation to travel for the elderly. Also, a very weak negative correlation was noticed ($\rho=-0.133$; $p=0.021$) between the level of education and spending time with family as the main motivation for travel, which means that people with a higher level of education may place less importance on spending time with family during their travels. Another negative correlation was registered between the level of income and the desire for socializing and meeting new people ($\rho=-0.119$; $p=0.044$). More precisely, people with lower incomes prefer to socialize and meet new people in their travels.

Table 2. Significant correlations identified using the Spearman correlation coefficient for the items regarding - The main motivation for travel

Variables	Spearman's coefficient	Variables		
Item		Age	Education	Income
<i>The main motivation for travel</i>				
spend time with family	rho	.161**	-.133*	-,115
	p	,005	,021	,052
socialize and meet new people	rho	,033	-,056	-.119*
	p	,570	,332	,044
escape from the usual responsibilities and daily routine	rho	-,028	,005	,043
	p	,629	,935	,472
spend time alone	rho	-,096	,028	,031
	p	,095	,630	,601
persue self-interested activities	rho	-.131*	-,044	,060
	p	,022	,453	,310
learn about art/culture	rho	,060	-,059	,046
	p	,295	,305	,438
enjoy and learn about the natural landscape	rho	,061	-,027	,005
	p	,288	,644	,932
experience new and different things	rho	,036	-,050	-,002
	p	,529	,393	,979
have fun	rho	-,034	-,016	,103
	p	,553	,782	,082

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Authors' own research.

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

In what concerns recognizing the significance of the characteristics of a travel destination, two positive and two negative correlations were identified in relation to age. It appears that younger respondents are less likely to travel to familiar destinations or return to ones they have already visited ($\rho=0.145$; $p=0.011$), and are less inclined to seek out environmentally sustainable and responsible tourism ($\rho=0.129$; $p=0.024$). These two characteristics of a tourist destinations being more appreciated with advancing age. On the other hand, the younger respondents prefer the tourist destinations where festive events are organized ($\rho=-0.121$; $p=0.034$) and where they can experience the locals' authentic living, shelter, food and customs sharing ($\rho=-0.114$; $p=0.046$).

Table 3. Significant correlations identified using the Spearman correlation coefficient for the items regarding – The importance of the characteristics of a tourist destination

Variables	Spearman's coefficient	Variables		
Item		Age	Education	Income
<i>The importance of the characteristics of a tourist destination</i>				
personal safety and security	rho	,017	-,047	-,069
	p	,767	,418	,247
tourist destination accessibility	rho	,026	-,073	-,113
	p	,648	,208	,056
variety of activities within the tourist destination	rho	-,039	-.121*	-.117*
	p	,502	,036	,048
quality of the offered services	rho	,078	-,043	-.180**
	p	,175	,454	,002
visiting new places	rho	-,109	-,005	-,020
	p	,056	,935	,738
festive events at the tourist destination	rho	-.121*	-,033	-,048
	p	,034	,565	,419
cost of travel	rho	,036	-,107	-.128*
	p	,535	,065	,031
cultural or religion barriers / language difficulties	rho	-,062	-.116*	-.171**
	p	,283	,046	,004
climate	rho	-,090	-.150**	-,046
	p	,118	,009	,439
existence of guided tourist tours at the destination	rho	-,012	-,020	.250**
	p	,838	,733	,000
visiting well-developed touristic countries	rho	,016	-.126*	-.182**
	p	,781	,029	,002
familiarity of the tourist destination (return visitors)	rho	.145*	-,096	-,088
	p	,011	,097	,140
authentic experience and choose to live like the locals, sharing shelter, food and customs	rho	-.114*	-,067	-,057
	p	,046	,246	,335
possibility of permanent assistance from the travel agency during the tourist visit	rho	,065	-,089	-.129*
	p	,254	,125	,029
environmental sustainability and responsible tourism	rho	.129*	-,096	-.136*
	p	,024	,096	,022

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Authors' own research.

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

In relation to education level, four negative correlations were noted. These statistically significant negative correlations of very weak intensity suggest that as the level of education increase, the lower become the preference to travel to tourist destinations where a variety of activities could be ventured ($\rho = -0.121$; $p = 0.036$), or where cultural, religion or language barriers must be overcome ($\rho = -0.116$; $p = 0.046$), or to countries that have a specific climate ($\rho = -0.150$; $p = 0.009$) or that have well-developed tourism industries ($\rho = -0.126$; $p = 0.029$). Probably, when people have a higher education level prefer more authentic destinations, more chill, not being so crowded and not so well-developed touristic countries. In the case of the income level and the decision not to take a guided tour during a trip abroad, a positive correlation of weak intensity,

statistically significant though, was observed ($\rho=0.250$; $p=0.000$). This suggests that an increased income level enable people to choose to take a guided tour during their trips to foreign countries. This can be explained by the fact that people with higher income may have sufficient financial resources, fact that doesn't oblige them to manage on their own and explore destinations independently without resorting to the services of a guided tour. The rest of the statistically significant correlations established in connection with the level of income are negative. This means that as lower the level of income is, as more attractive are the tourist destinations where a variety of activities could be enjoined ($\rho=-0.117$; $p=0.048$), quality tourist services are offered ($\rho=-0.180$; $p=0.002$), cost of the travel matters ($\rho=-0.128$; $p=0.031$), where cultural, religion or language barriers must be overcome ($\rho=-0.171$; $p=0.004$), that have well-developed tourism industries ($\rho=-0.181$; $p=0.002$), possibility of permanent assistance from the travel agency could be received ($\rho=-0.129$; $p=0.029$) or where environmental sustainability and responsible tourism is persuaded ($\rho=-0.136$; $p=0.022$).

Secondly, we analyzed the answers of the questions that refer to social networks and their importance on the influence of the consumer's decision in the selection of the tourist destination.

Figure 6 shows the results regarding how frequently respondents find products or services related to tourism on social networks.

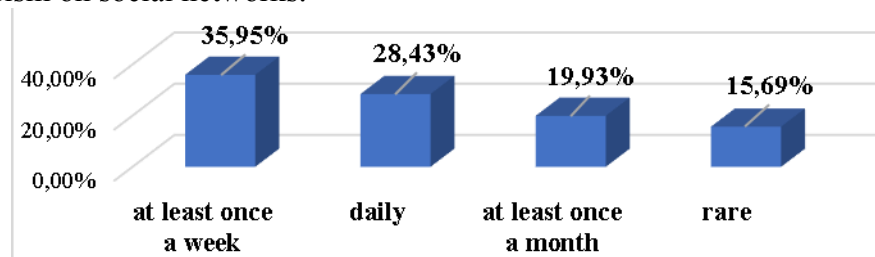


Figure 6. Frequency of finding products or services related to tourism on social networks

Source: Authors' own research.

According to Figure 7, it is very clear that over half of the respondents are highly influenced by travel influencers, bloggers and vloggers, this underlines the importance of the content generated by them in terms of inspiration, information and recommendations for tourism destinations, services and products. Travel brand content and embedded and/or targeted advertising are next in influence, suggesting that brand-provided information online as well as personalized and tailored advertising messages are effective in capturing attention and having a strong impact on tourist choices. A much smaller percentage of respondents mention the importance of other sources that were not included in the predefined options, such as personal experiences of acquaintances, Google, Reddit, Facebook geocaching groups, or do not consider themselves influenced by the online environment.

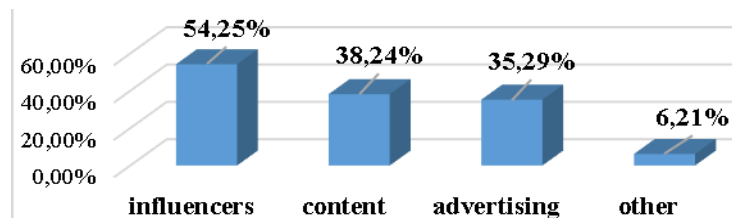


Figure 7. Social media sources that most influence travel decision-making and planning (multiple choice answers)

Source: Authors' own research.

Figure 8 shows that 78.10% of the participants are most influenced by the visually appealing content (photo and video content), and 69.28% of them by the positive user reviews (comments, shares, tags) and authentic feedback, which build trust and can influence participants' decisions. Only 29.74% chose the opinion and feedback of influencers as having a significant role in the decision-making process, which conflicts with the results shown in Figure 6, where 54.25% stated that they are highly influenced by influencers, bloggers and travel vloggers. This shows that participants perceive influencers as a source of information and inspiration, while their decisions are more frequently influenced by other factors than the opinions of content creators. Also, the respondents considered the reputation of the tourism brand and the comprehensiveness and accessibility of relevant information as less important for decision-making, with a percentage of 22.22% and 20.59%, respectively.

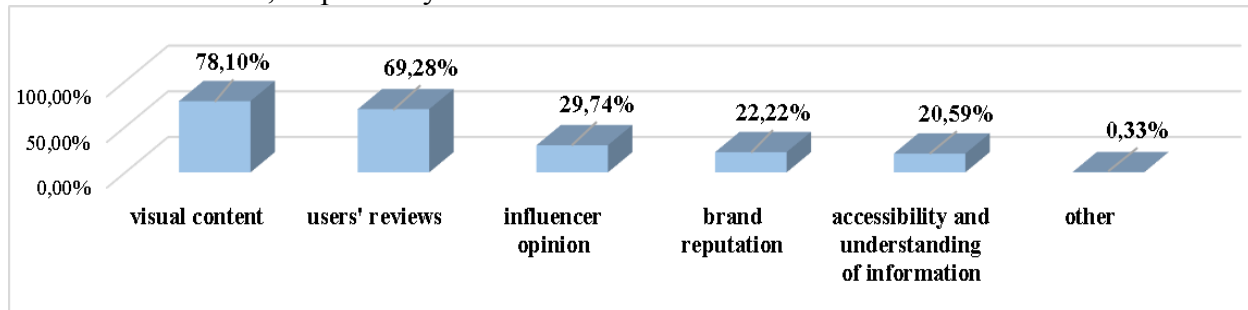


Figure 8. Social media content that influences the consumer's travel decision-making (multiple choice answers)

Source: Authors' own research.

Table 4 illustrates the correlation between items regarding some aspects about social networks and related sample variables such as age, education, and income, using the Spearman correlation coefficient.

Regarding the important attributes of an influencer needed to trust his opinion, but also regarding the users' appreciations on social networks, just negative correlations of weak intensity and statistically significant were identified in relation to the sample variables.

Table 4. Significant correlations identified using the Spearman correlation coefficient for the items regarding – Social networks

Variables	Spearman's coefficient	Variables		
Item		Age	Education	Income
<i>The important attributes of an influencer to trust his opinion</i>				
visual component (attractive photo and video content)	rho	-.168**	-,101	-.133*
	p	,003	,080	,024
authenticity of content	rho	-.117*	-,057	-,113
	p	,041	,330	,056
expertise and relevance in the field of the recommended product/service	rho	-.165**	,014	-.125*
	p	,004	,816	,036
followers' involvement (comments, reviews, etc.)	rho	-.163**	-.136*	-.158**
	p	,004	,019	,007
audience size	rho	-,079	-.123*	-.129*
	p	,167	,033	,030

Variables	Spearman's coefficient	Variables		
Item		Age	Education	Income
<i>Users' appreciations on social networks</i>				
social media is more credible compared to traditional marketing channels (TV, radio, press, etc.)	rho	-,041	-,094	-.117*
	p	,471	,104	,049
social networks are effective and powerful platforms for promoting tourism products and services	rho	-,106	,027	,001
	p	,065	,644	,993
social media content has a strong and direct influence on people's willingness to try new products, services or brands	rho	-,058	,031	,061
	p	,313	,589	,307
a person's trust in travel-related content created by influencers has a significant impact on their willingness to travel	rho	-.211**	,041	-,009
	p	,000	,477	,883

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Authors' own research.

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

According to the results, it seems that the younger respondents, in order to be able to trust the influencers, pay greater importance to the characteristics related to the visual component posted by the influencers, such as pictures, videos ($\rho=0.168$; $p=0.003$), but also to the authenticity of the content ($\rho=0.117$; $p=0.041$), influencer's experience regarding the recommended products or services ($\rho=0.165$; $p=0.004$), as well to the targeted followers' involved ($\rho=0.163$; $p=0.004$). Also, the negative correlation between a person's trust in the content created by influencers having a significant impact on their willingness to travel and age ($\rho=-0.211$; $p=0.000$) means that trust in content created by influencers decreases with age. In other words, the older a person is, the less likely they are to trust content created by influencers.

The correlations related to the level of education and aspects of social networks show us that respondents with a higher level of education are not impressed by the involved followers or the size of the audience attracted by influencers through the content published by them. Certainly, the level of education makes the difference in the selection of information that guide your choices regardless of the level or number of the supporters of that information.

Regarding the negative correlations related to the level of income, the same idea like in the case of the level of education can be detached, namely the fact that respondents with a higher level of income place a lower value on influencers' content ($\rho=-0.133$; $p=0.024$), influencers' experiences ($\rho=-0.125$; $p=0.036$), their followers' involvement ($\rho=-0.158$; $p=0.007$), or their audience size ($\rho=-0.129$; $p=0.030$), and on everything related to the influence coming from social networks ($\rho=-0.117$; $p=0.049$), since they form themselves or form in other ways the necessary opinion in order to make their own decisions.

Conclusion

The social networks paradigm has changed the way that tourism and its associated content are distributed, reach travelers, and impact decision-making processes. Online content has surpassed all other traditional marketing channels to become the primary source of information for millions of people, particularly younger generations. Influence marketing has become increasingly important in the global online business environment as a result of organizations being compelled

to pay attention to it due to the rise in popularity of influencers. All of this indicates that a new wave of marketing in the travel and tourism sector is being enabled by social media.

The study aimed to explain the ways in which social networks impact consumers' decision-making process when it comes to travel. The findings of this study, together with the statistically interpreted data, are consistent with the theories put forth in the theoretical section, beginning with the observation that social networks have profoundly changed marketing through the advent of content and influence marketing.

Regarding the first research question, “which are the variables that influence participants' travel decisions” it is important to understand that consumers' travel preferences and behaviors are diverse and based on different interests and motives. According to the analysis, it was possible to identify two major factors of interest for the motivation of the trip. The first factor may be identified as “social and cultural motivations”, related to the desire to have fun, to experience new and different things, to spend quality time with family and friends, to enjoy impressive natural landscapes, to learn about art, or to experience things out of the routine. All these reasons are appreciated by the respondents, highlighting their desire to live authentic experiences and enjoy memorable moments with their loved ones. The second factor explains the “need to be alone”, spend time alone and do self-interested activities, which represents the personal and individual reasons for travel.

At the same time, in choosing a tourist destination, three large categories of important factors could be identified. The first represents the practical factors, which highlight the importance of characteristics such as personal safety and security, visiting new places, quality of services, cost of travel, destination accessibility, climate, variety of activities in the process of selecting a travel destination. The second factor is the attractiveness of the destination, which includes aspects such events, sustainable tourism, well developed tourism countries, authentic experience, guided tours, or cultural and religious differences. The additional third factor in choosing the destination is given by the familiarity of the destination, when deciding to revisit an already known tourist destination. Is crucial for the tourism industry to capitalize on these preferences and provide authentic, engaging and safe experiences for travelers.

Social networks have a significant impact on travel decisions and the choice of tourist destinations. Most participants discover tourism services and products on social media at least once a week (36%) or even daily (28%). This highlights the importance of social networks in the process of information and exploration of tourist offers.

The second research question regarding “the ways in which social media and networks impact the process of choosing a tourist destination” is supported by the respondents' answers who indicated that social networks are credible and effective sources of travel inspiration, and trust in influencers is high (54%), as well as the content (38%).

In what concerns the third question of the study about “the type of social media content that influences the consumer the most”, respondents chose the visual content (78%), particularly the eye-catching photos and videos capture users' attention and inspire them to discover new destinations and experiences. This visual content allows potential travelers to imagine and connect emotionally with the places they want to visit. Reviews and feedback from regular users on social media are also an important factor in the decision-making process (69%) indicating that reviews influence their perception of a tourism product or service and can play a crucial role in choosing a tourist destination.

In order to answer to the fourth question of the study about “the influencers impact on tourists' decisions by promoting destinations”, it is necessary to find that content marketing is

interconnected with influence marketing, and they bring good results only when they are used simultaneously. It is vital to pay attention to it, because approximately 54% of the research respondents consider influencers and travel bloggers/vloggers as the biggest influence in the selection process of tourist destinations. Furthermore, authenticity along with relevance and expertise in the product or service that is being promoted are what marketers should be looking for in influencers for successful business purposes. Now, influencers are absolutely a marketing tool, serving as a line of contact between a brand and a potential customer.

However, it is important to note that the influence of social media can vary from person to person. Some travelers may be less influenced by social media content and prefer to rely on other sources or enjoy independent travel discovery and planning. There are also people who prefer the involvement of travel agencies in the entire travel process. This highlights the need for travel agencies and service providers to pay close attention to their social media presence and strategy. They can use engaging visual content, collaboration with travel influencers and reviews from regular users to build their credibility and influence their audience's travel decisions.

In the future, social media is expected to become even more important to the travel industry, given the evolution of technology and the increase in the number of users on these platforms. Therefore, companies must be prepared to adapt their marketing strategies and invest in their online presence in order to maintain their relevance and competitiveness.

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