

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ADVERTISING TOURISM SERVICES (IN THE EXAMPLE OF BULGARIA)

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Abstract: This article aims to provide an in-depth review of current literature related to the rapid and inevitable spread of social networks as a source of information influencing consumer opinion. To achieve this, it looks at how internet platforms are becoming an invariable part of the user's daily life. The main trends showing the place and role of social networks such as advertising tools in the tourism industry are revealed. It also examines their impact on the end user, tourist preferences, how they change and comply with new understandings. Two hypotheses are put forward for proof. In the course of the research, the following scientific methods were used: analysis, synthesis, graphical and systems approach.

Keywords: tourism, social media, impact, trends, digitalization, sustainability.

JEL: L83, Q56, Z32.

Introduction

Tourism in Bulgaria occupies an important part for the development of the country. In 2021, the tourism sector generates revenues of BGN 3.7 billion, and for every eleven people, one is employed in the field of tourism (World travel and & tourism council, 2022).

Globalization and developing technologies put tourist destinations in a position of constant advertising. Consumer attitudes are changing with the advent of new technologies and tourism businesses must quickly position and change their new business models (Pedrosa, Millan - Celis, Iglesias – Sanchez & Jambrino – Maldonado, 2020).

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The rapid progress of Internet technologies and the abundance of economic activity formed in their wake form and develop a distinct network economy. It's all wrapped up in multiple networks, software applications, and the all-important human capital that makes it all work together (Ianeva, 2018).

At the very beginning of the XXI century a large number of entrepreneurs and tourism organizations used the Internet as a means of one-way information. They were able to successfully apply their traditional marketing concepts (Agresta & Bonin, 2010; Berthon, Pitt, Plangger & Shapiro, 2012). Now, thanks to social networks, marketing strategies have changed fundamentally. Content is created to attract users' attention and ads encourage tourists to leave their feedback. To a large extent, it can be considered that social media succeeds in upgrading the quality of services offered in the tourism industry. Their widespread distribution and the freely distributed information about each object or product prompts tourism enterprises to strive more and more to satisfy the end user (Debski, Krawczyk & Dworak, 2019; Xiang, Magnini & Fesenmaier, 2015).

Over the last 2 years the use of social networks has become even more tangible. With the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 and the distancing of people from each other, social media has become our primary means of communication. This, of course, allowed users to build trust in the platforms they used and begin to trust the information on them (Pedrosa, Millan - Celis, Iglesias – Sanchez, & Jambrino – Maldonado, 2020).

The crisis that was caused by Covid 19 made the tourism sector one of the most affected sectors in the economy. The authors Bozhinova, Ilieva and Todorova examine in their research the impact of Covid 19 on tourist demand and manage to reach the conclusions that the difference compared to the previous year 2019 is close to 80% (Ilieva, Bozhinova, & Todorova, 2021).

The economic efficiency of "virtual consumption in the tourism industry according to Sushenko, Dekhtyar, and Bozhinova determine the modern profile of the average tourist and that it is associated with the use of various social networks (Sushchenko, Dekhtyar, & Bozhinova, 2021).

In their research, the authors Sushchenko O., Kasenkova K. and Sushenko S. conclude that the rate of innovation development accelerates almost twice under the pressure of changes in tourist behavior and large-scale technological mutations (Sushchenko, O., Kasenkova, K. & Sushchenko, S., 2022).

Revolutionary developments in information and communication technologies allow travel consumers to search more easily and reach their desired final destinations around the world (Sigala, Christou, & Gretzel,

2021). Increasingly, a large number of consumers do not find it necessary to be physically present in a travel agency office in order to seek information or inspiration for their trip. Arranging a trip can happen by visiting their social media, internet sites or other type of promotional newsletters. This, in turn, reveals new tourist needs that must be covered by the tourist offer. In the development of tourism demand, many enterprises in the tourism industry are experiencing difficulties in exercising their activity on the Internet and their services are at a basic level, which hides its risks (Ekinci, 2003).

With the development of information and digital technologies in the last more than 25 years, they continue to occupy an increasingly permanent part of our lives. From the beginning of the XXI century there is a tendentious transforming effect on the communication relations between people thanks to developing technologies (Nikolov, Lyubomirova, & Tanakov, 2021). This, in turn, invariably leaves its mark on the communication strategies of tourism enterprises. A number of authors such as P. Kotler, Wei Wei, U. Gretzel, describe in their scientific researches the Internet as a powerful marketing tool, affecting directly the economic aspect of the tourism industry. The possibilities provided by the Internet space are considered a valuable tool in the dissemination of information, and the maintenance of a corporate website, as well as active profiles in social networks, become fundamental methods of brand recognition (Buhalis, 2000).

The vast amount of information freely available on the Internet allows users to freely and thoroughly research their desired destination, as well as through various platforms they can come into contact with people who have already benefited from given offers. New opportunities allow end users to fully control the "decision making" process, which puts tourism businesses in a situation where they must manage to offer conditions and products attractive enough to satisfy tourist demand.

The current article aims to investigate the change of consumer demand in conditions of a high degree of digitalization of tourist services in Bulgaria. The author sets himself the main task of analyzing the opinion of different age groups in relation to the opportunities offered in social media and the feedback on trips taken.

The author puts forward two main hypotheses in his research:

Hypothesis 1 - The consequences of the high degree of digitalization in communication technologies provide an opportunity for the end user to freely express their opinion in various information platforms, which can directly affect the tourist demand of a given object.

Hypothesis 2 - Social media can be successfully used as a strong marketing tool due to its ability to be effective among a large number of users, with relatively low advertising costs and the possibilities of flexible segmentation of target groups of users.

Literature review

The development of Web 2.0 technologies has strengthened the importance of social media in people's lives. They have become a powerful communication and information channel and have allowed many companies to put their marketing skills into practice on the net (Song & Yoo, 2016). The reliability and broad verifiability of the information that is shared contributes greatly to the power and sustainable use of social media (Leung, Law, Van Hoof, et al., 2013). One of the pioneers in social network research was Cox, as well as Burgess and Sellito, who raised the topic of the role of social media. Their research is based on an online survey, but manages to outline the already existing frameworks from the literature of the time without setting new boundaries for the development of social networks (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, et al., 2009). With the development of social media, the tourism environment is undergoing changes, including consumers and the business sector (UNWTO, 2020a). Since the Internet started to become popular among tourists, the travel industry has become an industry that is extremely information sensitive, as any information regarding the services can be easily and quickly verified (K.H. Yoo, 2009). The main advantages that tourist users accept and most often use in social media is the huge amount of information that is combined with user opinion, emotions or recommendations for certain destinations. Users often share moments, photos, videos or even entire vlogs of their vacations, thus allowing potential vacationers to get a first-hand look at their desired destination (Q. Luo, D. Zhong, 2015).

In the last 5 years, the influence of social networks on tourism supply and demand has reached new dimensions. The author of the current article reviews the main social networks used in Bulgaria and the general flow of users in them.

Social media like Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, Youtube, Twitter have succeeded in digitizing human communication. Nowadays, people manage to create more friendships and maintain them through these media. The positive development of this type of communication inevitably leads to a decrease in live contact or face-to-face communication (Rathonyi, 2013).

Facebook started in 2003, and in the beginning the platform was for storing photos, and now it is the largest free social network in the world, as of March 2021 the active users are 2.85 billion. This is the most widespread social network in Bulgaria, with users from our country amounting to 4.4 million profiles, with the largest share in the age group between 25 and 34 years of age.

Instagram is a photo and short video sharing app. It was created in 2010, and by 2021 the active users are 1.21 billion. In Bulgaria, it is the second most popular social media, managing to collect 1.6 million profiles, with the largest number of users between the ages of 18 and 24.

YouTube is an internet platform for video hosting. It was founded in 2005, purchased by Google in 2006 and in the last year it has seen 2 billion visitors. The platform is visited by 122 million people per day. In Bulgaria, this is the most common video hosting platform, with 4.32 million profiles on it, according to Google data.

In her research, Pandzherova concludes that info-marketing is a tool that in itself requires constant training and the ability to handle modern information technologies (Pencheva, 2016).

Xuerui Liu, Fuad Mehraliyev, Chun Liu, Markus Schuckert in their study in 2020 perform a quantitative analysis on the role of social networks in tourists' decision-making. They highlight some fundamental properties of social networks. Part of the conclusions they make in their scientific work is that social networks play an important role in the conditions of decision-making both during the selection of a destination and during the trip itself. Social media is defined as a guide and source of information that surpasses paper brochures. An important factor for the sustainable influence of social networks on tourism is the constant development of mobile Internet access technologies. The ever-increasing number of mobile devices and applications help tourists take advantage of the possibilities of their chosen destination (Liu X., Mehraliyev, F., Liu C., Schuckert, M., 2020).

Carlos de las Heras-Pedrosa, Elena Millan-Celis, Patricia P. Iglesias-Sánchez and Carmen Jambrino-Maldonado address the topic of photo content in social networks, its impact on the end user and distribution, and the positives tourism businesses receive from photo sharing from tourists (Pedrosa, Millan - Celis, Iglesias – Sanchez & Jambrino – Maldonado, 2020).

Ioanna Bizirgioanni and Pagaiota Dionysopoulou manage to consider in their research that the tourism sector is beginning to acquire an appearance that would appeal to users on social networks to become recognizable and desired by them. They outline a niche towards which the tourism sector will work in the coming years (Bizirgianni, Dionysopoulou,

2013). If a tourist destination wishes to sustainably establish itself in a highly competitive market, it must differentiate itself from its competition (Porter, 1996). With the imposition of social media this is easily achievable, because the lower levels of costs and higher efficiency allow higher results compared to traditional means of communication (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The change in consumer demand will lead to a change in corporate behaviour as well, and will also structurally affect tourism enterprises (Tsonev, 2014).

For the needs of current scientific work, the author also touches on the topic of generations. The main focus will be on Generation Y, who were born between 1981 and 1996, who are between the ages of 26 and 34, and also to Generation Z, who were born between 1997 and 2012.

In 2013, Wood in his research assumes that there are points of contact between generation Y and generation Z. The basis of this statement is similarities in the opportunities of both generations to join globalization and their work with new technologies (Wodd, 2013).

A number of studies prove the superiority of Generation Z in relation to their future professional development opportunities. Comparing Generation Y, whose main feature was their ability to multitask, Generation Z surpasses them by many times due to the fact that from an early age they have access to the Internet, social media and have developed their ability to perceive a large amount of information (Addor, 2011).

In his article, Jacob Lolarga manages to make a comparative analysis of the differences between Generation Y and Generation Z.

Table.1.
Differences between Generation Y and Z.

Gen Y	Gen Z
Tech savvy: 2 screens	Tech innate: 5 screens
Think in 3D	Think in 4D
Collaborative	Pragmatic & cautious
Radical transparency: share all	Judiciously share (GeoLoco off)
Slacktivists	Active volunteers
Multicultural	Blended (race & gender)
Tolerance	Togetherness
Immature	Mature
Communicate with text	Communicate with images
Share stuff	Make stuff
Have low confidence	Have humility
Now focused	Future focused
Optimists	Realists
Want to be discovered	Want to work for success
Team orientation	Collective conscience

Note: (Lolarga, 2016)

Despite the claims and the clear similarities and points of contact between the two generations, the author notes the main points that tourism businesses should keep in mind:

1. The main quality of Generation Z is their sense of free expression of their opinion. Defined as active volunteers, this generation manages to maintain an opinion on various issues and is not afraid to stand up for it.
2. Their communication is carried out with pictures, videos, stories or other types of photographic material. In this way, they manage to share their moments in a moment of joy or disappointment.
3. Their thoughts are directed towards future development. This quality of theirs, with the support of the technologies at their disposal, can be a major weapon for the development of new markets and services.

Methodology

The author chooses for the needs of the present article to use a survey that aims to show the percentage of end users using social networks and whether the information in them influences them in the process of "making a decision".

According to Robert M. Groves, Floyd J. Fowler, Jr., Mick P. Couper, James M. Lepkowski, Eleanor Singer, Roger Tourangeau *"A survey is a systematic method of gathering information from respondents for the purpose of creating a constructive quantitative description of the needs of the respondents selected by the author"* (Groves, Fowler, Couper, Lepkowski, Singer & Tourangeau, 2009).

J. M. Converse believes that survey research contains two main characteristics. First, the variables of interest are measured using questionnaires or interviews and the second characteristic he outlines is the desire of researchers to study large random groups of people for a more representative sample (Converse, 1987).

Munar and Jacobsen managed to do a similar study for Scandinavian tourists by including in their study 405 completed questionnaires, and the survey was conducted on 6 different days of the week. With this research, they aim to investigate the influence of social networks on information

sharing by tourists. With their research, they were able to analyze the means of communication and ways of sharing information of tourists (Munar & Jacobsen, 2013). Živković, Gajić, Brdar conducted their own survey in 2014 with 4,600 respondents that aims to prove the influence of social networks on tourism. In their research, they emphasize the influence on travel decision making (Živković, Gajić & Brdar, 2014). Hysa, Karasek and Zdonek, in their study in 2020, reach 397 respondents and in their research aim to prove the frequency of social media use across generations (Hysa, Karasek, & Zdonek, 2021). Sterev, Kisimov, Stoyanova and Andonov make a study of business social networks (BSN) by considering social networks as part of the supply chain in the economy by analyzing social networks and business communications in them (Sterev, Kisimov, Stoyanova & Andonov, 2018).

The use of this method aims to be widespread and, in the fastest way, to realize feedback from the respondents on the extent to which they use social networks and whether they themselves manage to draw information from other users on social media that is widely popular. The current survey is of a direct type, with the end users themselves filling in their information. The reason for using this type of survey is its wide recognition among users and ease of completion. Surveys are considered a method that can be used daily to reach end users to measure their satisfaction.

The current survey was prepared in an electronic version in order to minimize the risks of making mistakes that would affect the final results of the survey. The topicality of the topic positively influenced the survey and facilitated reaching a wide number of respondents. The survey was conducted during the period from May 3, 2022 to August 3, 2022, and the specific number of those who completed the survey is 317 people. They include users from different age groups, respectively - 71.8% are between the ages of 18 and 30, 10.7% are between the ages of 31 and 40 years, 7.4% - between 41 and 50 years, 8.1% - between 51 and 60 years. and 2% over 60. The conducted survey included 28 (twenty-eight) questions that manage to track the things important to consumers during their chosen holiday - whether they use social networks during their travels, use booking sites, have experience with tourist agencies, etc.

The results of the conducted research are presented in graphs, through which the final results of the research can be analyzed.

Results and discussion

Which of the following sources of information did you use to plan your last trip?

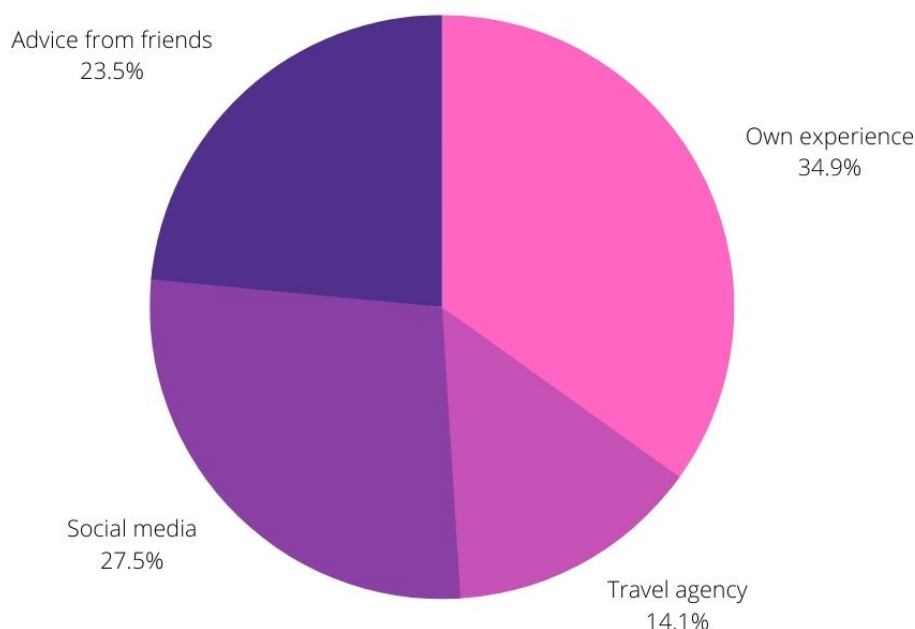


Fig. 1. Tourist's source of information for their last trip.

The result from Fig. 1 show that most users trust their own experience when they start organizing their trip. Social networks and advice from acquaintances are also preferred over consulting travel agencies. This clearly outlines the change in the attitudes of consumers in relation to their search. The Internet has a direct impact on the work of tourism enterprises and sets new boundaries in the development of advertising and dissemination of information. Based on the presented results, the author believes that the end users will continue to be independent in their choice of destinations in the future, trusting more the information shared on digital platforms than asking travel agencies.

As can be seen from Fig. 2, more than 65% of respondents indicate that they do not use tour operators or travel agencies. This confirms the analysis from the previous diagram and can be a signal for tourism businesses in relation to their work with end users and their way of reaching them.

Do you use information offices of tour operators or travel agencies when taking a trip?

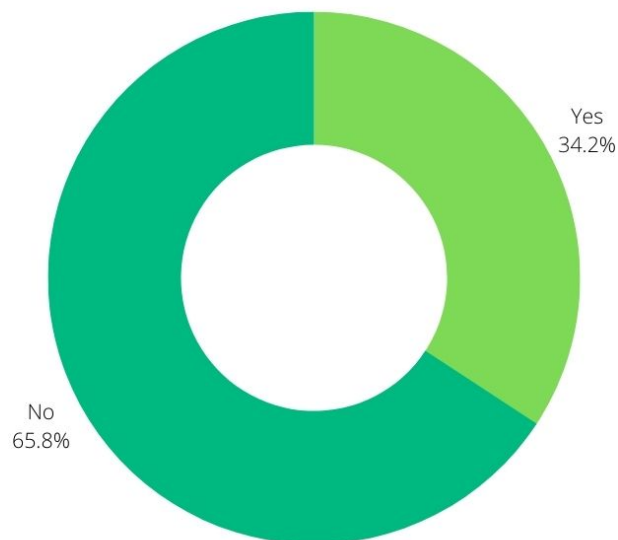


Fig. 2. Tour operators and travel agencies as a source of information

Do you consider social networks to be a reliable source of information for taking a trip on a par with the information desks for travel agencies and operators?

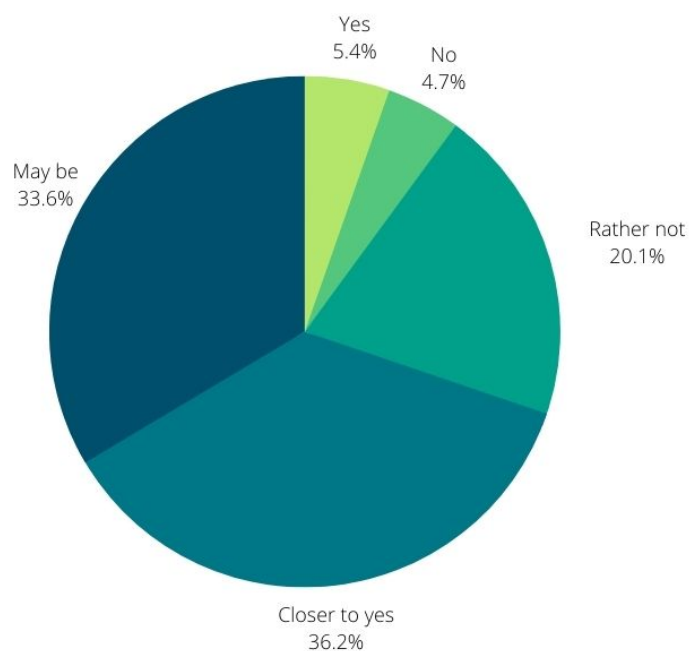


Fig. 3. Social networks as a reliable source of information.

In Fig. 3 it is possible to trace the attitudes of the surveyed users. In general, it can be seen that social networks cannot be clearly defined as a reliable source of information. It is important to note, however, that the positive user attitudes outweigh the negative. This is precisely due to the increased use of social networks and Internet services when undertaking a tourist trip.

**How often do you share information on your social networks
(photos, video content, stories, etc.)**

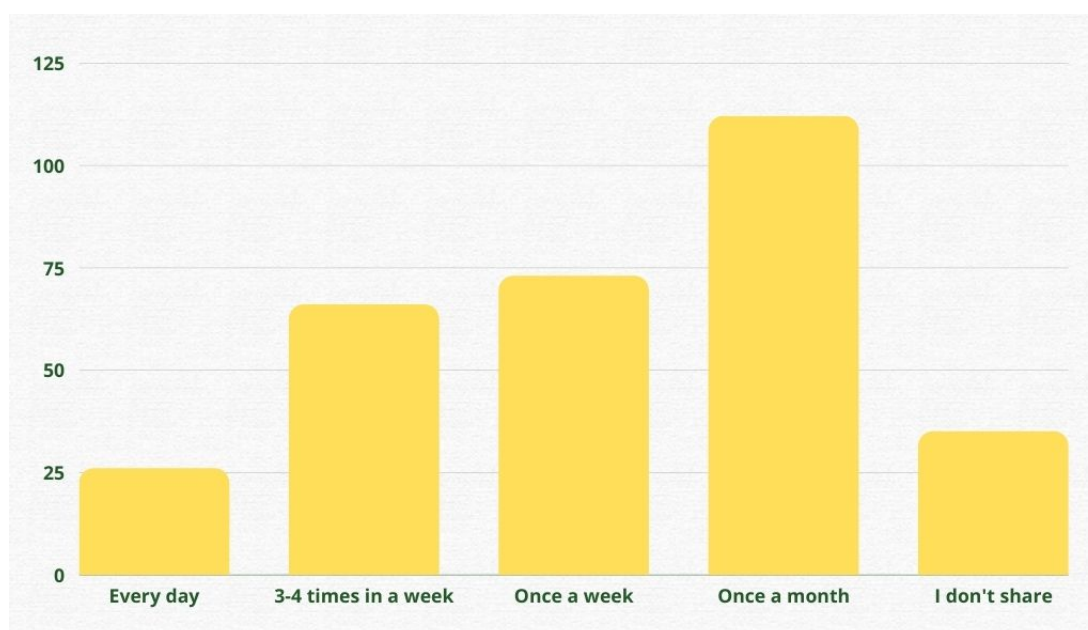


Fig. 4. Frequency of tourist's sharing

The answer to this question confirms that a relatively small number of users did not share any information in their social networks - 35 people. The high degree of people who are active participants in social networks with different frequency of sharing materials in their media is also due to the average age of the respondents. More than 70% of the participants are between the ages of 18 and 30, and they fall within the boundaries of Generation Z, which is distinguished by the fact that it actively participates in the Internet and social networks. This, in turn, presents tourism businesses with the challenge of being an active part of social media if they wish to expand their markets and, through their offer, satisfy the needs of their consumers.

When traveling, do you share your experiences on social networks?

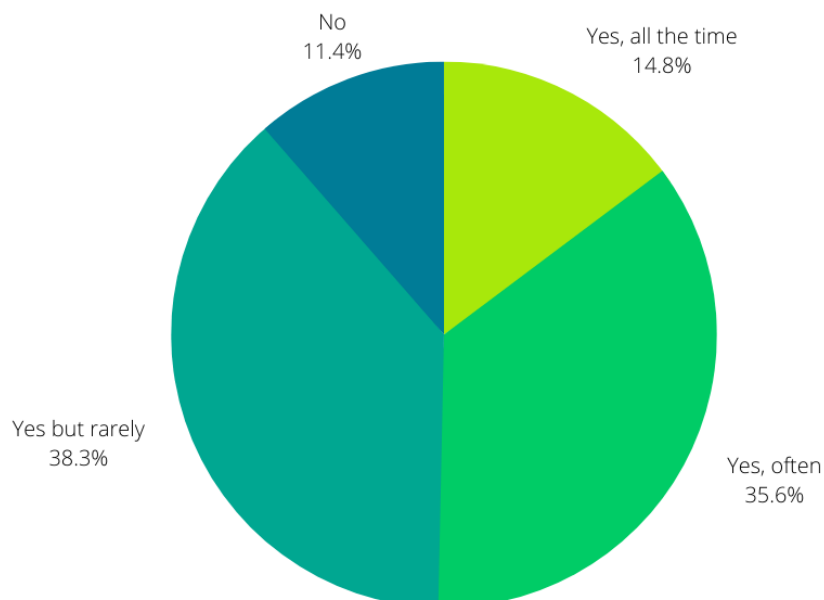


Fig. 5. Tourist's social network information while they're traveling

Figure 5 shows that nearly 90% of respondents use their social networks and share various materials about their vacation. This can be both beneficial and detrimental to tourism businesses. Negative information freely shared on the Internet can reach an unlimited number of users and cause permanent damage to the demand of the tourist site. In this regard, tourism enterprises must begin to monitor more and more strictly the quality of their products or services if they want to remain competitive on the market for a long time. The relationship between tourism and social networks will become stronger and more tangible, and tourism businesses must support this lasting trend.

Conclusion

After the research has been completed, several main trends can be identified:

1. Social networks will continue to be the chosen source of information, due to generational differences and needs and the evolving digital environment.

2. Tourism enterprises will be forced by the pressure of consumer demand to transform their offers into digital ones and to be the active party in the relationship between consumer and producer.
3. Tourism consumers will have the opportunity to be a major factor in shaping the quality of services offered by tourism enterprises through social networks and their comments that they leave for each service received or product used.
4. The needs of future generations exceed by far those of the main current consumers such as Baby Boomers, Generation Z, Generation X, which in less than 10 years will put tourism enterprises in front of new challenges with the change of generations.

In this article, based on a theoretical review and on the basis of the conducted survey, the interaction between social networks and the end user was analyzed and the role of these media in the tourism sector (according to the example of Bulgaria). The current research is one of the first to be conducted after the restrictions related to SARS Covid 19, and examines the relationship between social networks and tourism advertising.

Based on the reviewed literature and the research done, the author believes that social networks will play a key role in the dissemination of information related to the tourist product or services. The factors that most strongly influence this are the restrictive measures on a global scale related to the pandemic, the developing technologies that occupy an increasingly large part of our daily life, and the fact that the change of generations will play a major role. The most active tourist users at the moment are Generations X, Y and Z. Given the fact that Generation X are people born between 1965 and 1979, the author believes that the more high-tech generations such as Y, Z, and the future generation Alpha will have different future requirements for the tourist market. The author's statement is based on the comparative analysis between generation Y and Z, as well as after the survey.

The author believes that being a key factor in the dissemination of information, social media/networks manage to become a leading advertising medium as well. Based on the research conducted and the analyses made, it is noticed that a high number of users manage to be active in their social media by sharing the places they visit. This, in turn, becomes a passive advertisement for the tourist destination through the active activity of the users. Going forward, it is the author's opinion that social media/networking will continue to be a major element of active and passive marketing in the travel industry.

After the analysis of the conducted survey, the presented results confirm Hypothesis 1 made about the possibilities of the end user to express their opinion in the various digital platforms. This has been proven several times, as the presented results show that more than 90% of respondents use their social networks and share information with varying frequency. Looking at the previously made Hypothesis 2, the author believes that social media/networks are unwittingly becoming an end-user-driven marketing tool that brings positives to tourism businesses. After the customer shares about their quality experience on various digital platforms, the tourism enterprise is able to carry out passive marketing and reach the end users at no cost. The study confirms both hypotheses.

In conclusion, the author believes that tourism enterprises that quickly adapt to the changing environment and the demands of generations will be able to maintain their market share, and even expand it with proper advertising and sustainable positioning among target groups. Denying the role of social media as an active helper in tourism advertising will result in a negative effect on consumer demand and tourism enterprises will remain uncompetitive.

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CONTENTS

MANAGEMENT theory

THE EU POLICIES AS THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION TOOL TO INCREASE THE AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS EXPORTS	
Oksana Kiforenko	5

MODELS FOR MAKING DECISIONS ON PURCHASE VOLUMES DEPENDING ON THE ASSESSMENT OF UPCOMING RETAIL SALES	
Zalozhnev A. Yu., Chistov D. V.	20

INSURANCE and social security

THE NON-LIFE INSURANCE MARKET IN BULGARIA – 15 YEARS AFTER THE COUNTRY'S ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION	
Rumen Erusalimov, Ventsislav Vasilev, Aneliya Paneva	32

MANAGEMENT practice

THE AREAL AS A TOOL FOR LOCAL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND PROSUMING (A vision)	
Nikola Yankov	47

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON ADVERTISING TOURISM SERVICES (IN THE EXAMPLE OF BULGARIA)	
Angel Stoykov	64

COVID-19 AND RELATED GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS' IMPACT ON EMPLOYMENT IN GEORGIA	
Giga Abuseridze, Nino Paresashvili, Teona Maisuradze, Badri Gechbaia, Levan Gvarishvili, Janis Grasis	81

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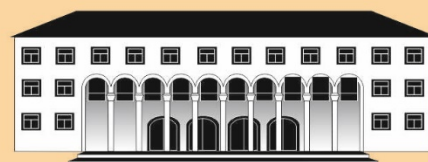
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