

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN TOURISM PROMOTION. EVOLUTION AND TRENDS

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Abstract: *The present article investigates the impact of social networks in the tourism industry, highlighting their transition from simple social platforms to marketing tools. The paper focuses on analyzing the impact of digitalization on consumer behavior in tourism, proposing strategies for optimizing tourism marketing in the current digital context. Moreover, the article is part of a broader research that primarily employs literature review as its research method. At the same time, it paves the way for further in-depth analyses. The introduction emphasizes the changes that digitalization has brought to tourism with a focus on social networks. It discusses the importance of two-way communication as well as the influence of user-generated content and the role of emerging technologies. The chronological analysis of social networks from Myspace to Instagram and TikTok highlights the fact that academic literature was examined to illustrate how technology adaptation has improved over time and can be enhanced. The section on budget allocation and performance evaluation details the importance of adaptable strategies for maximizing ROI and underscores the importance of a complex approach based on quantitative and qualitative metrics. As part of extensive research, the paper contributes by encouraging the development of new strategies for digital tourism promotion adapted to the rapidity of changes.*

Keywords: *social media; tourism; digital promotion tool; literature review*

JEL Classification: *M37; Z32*

1. Introduction

Digital transformation, accelerated by the proliferation of social networks, has fundamentally changed the tourism industry in recent years. Thus, social networks are no longer just spaces for interaction between people but have become marketing tools. These marketing tools are used to disseminate information, contributing to consumers' decision-making processes. Due to these changes, researchers have begun to explore in depth the impact of social networks on tourism. In this regard, they have highlighted their importance and role in building a brand image and maintaining images, in promoting tourist destinations or any businesses in the tourism field.

Recently, researchers such as Huang et al. (2020) have highlighted the ability of social networks to create bidirectional communication between tourism companies and consumers, being a means of exchanging personalized information. This interaction not only increases the visibility of destinations but also consolidates consumers' trust and loyalty. Smith and Xu (2020) continued the research, analyzing in depth how user-generated content can influence potential visitors' perceptions. On the other hand, Kim and Kim (2020)

explored the role of short videos in tourism marketing and capturing public attention. This highlights the importance of adapting marketing strategies to emerging trends. Another study, conducted by Chen and Xie (2021), demonstrates how social media platforms such as Instagram or TikTok have become essential nowadays in stimulating interest, arguing the crucial role of attractive visual content. Li et al. (2022) mark the interest in using artificial intelligence and big data analysis for personalizing user experiences on social networks. Therefore, in the current context marked by rapid changes and the adoption of advanced technologies, social networks offer significant opportunities for innovation and adaptation in the tourism industry. Their importance transcends simple promotion and in this way, they become essential for engagement, personalization, and sustainability.

The article aims to explore the use and impact of social media platforms in the tourism industry, focusing on theoretical analysis and a comprehensive review of the specialist literature. I will investigate how these digital channels influence the behavior of tourism consumers and how they can be exploited by tourism brands to improve their marketing strategies. In this context, the article will critically evaluate existing empirical studies, providing a synthesis of current knowledge and identifying research gaps that could be addressed in future studies.

The realization of promotion through social networks has evolved from simple strategies to much more complex and multidimensional approaches. Within the strategies of promotion using social networks, analyzing the specialist literature, I have synthesized a series of pillars. The first pillar is the creation of authentic content, which is paramount for gaining trust and interest. Tussyadiah and Pesonen (2018) emphasize the importance of user-generated content in tourism, exemplifying the role of authentic reviews and photographs on the decision-making perception. Another pillar of strategies is community engagement. In this context, Munar and Jacobsen (2014) discuss the importance of engaging communities in this field, suggesting that tourism companies should use customer feedback to adjust their offers. Also, other strategies found in the literature address the strategic use of influencers. Among the pillars, there are also identifying relevant keywords to improve online visibility. Studies, belonging to Li et al., (2020) talk about the efficient use of hashtags and keywords in increasing the audience. Last but not least is the personalization and segmentation of the audience, which is among the fundamental principles in using social networks in tourism. Innovative companies such as Airbnb constantly use social networks to increase their visibility, promoting unique experiences on Instagram, Smith, and Zook (2020) also illustrate how New Zealand applies effective promotion strategies through social networks, launching a campaign on Tiktok to inspire domestic tourism.

2. The Evolution of Social Networks in Tourism

The last two decades have been when social networks began to dominate the modern communication landscape. They have influenced numerous sectors and industries, including the tourism industry. Thus, this chapter aims to explore the evolutionary trajectory of social networks and how they have reshaped tourism. Figure 1 illustrates this aspect. Starting with the first platforms, namely Myspace and Flickr, which paved the way for the expression of personal experiences online, and continuing with the current dynamism of platforms such as Instagram or TikTok, social networks have played a pivotal role in transforming the way businesses and tourist destinations are promoted and perceived by tourists. The existing research in the field marks the important stages in understanding this phenomenon. Boyd and Ellison (2007) were the ones who defined the concept of social network, Kietzmann and Canhoto (2013) were pioneers in analyzing the impact of the Instagram network in the tourism landscape, while Jin and Phua (2014) examined the influence of influencer

marketing. These authors and many others have significantly contributed to the academic body of knowledge.

2003-2004: The Emergence and First Uses	• Myspace (2003) and Flickr (2004) introduce the concept of sharing personal experiences, including travel.
2006-2010: Expansion and Diversification	• Facebook (2006) begins to be widely adopted, becoming an essential tool for tourism promotion. • Twitter (2006) provides a platform for quick updates and direct interaction with consumers. • YouTube (2006, acquired by Google) becomes the main channel for travel videos and destination showcases.
2010-2015: The Era of Visuals and Influencer	• Instagram (2010) revolutionizes tourism with its emphasis on high-quality photos and visual storytelling. • The emergence of travel influencers, who collaborate with destinations and brands to reach wide audiences.
2015-2020: Technological Innovations	• Augmented reality and 360° videos begin to be integrated into online travel experiences. • TikTok (2016) and Pinterest gain popularity as platforms for travel inspiration and fresh ideas.
2020-Present: The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact	• Rapid adaptation to changes in consumer behavior, focusing on sustainability and responsible tourism. • The launch of new technologies such as ClubHouse, BeReal, Lemon8.

Figure 1: The Evolution of Social Media Use in the Tourism Industry

Source: Created by the author

Initially, platforms like Myspace and Flickr introduced the opportunity to post photos and share experiences. However, the emergence of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube broadened the spectrum of social media in tourism. These platforms facilitated not just content sharing but also direct interaction with companies. The entrance of Instagram (Kietzmann & Canhoto, 2013) transformed travel photography into a powerful promotional tool, and the role of travel influencers became more pronounced, starting to collaborate with various destinations and brands (Jin & Phua, 2014). As technology evolved and social networks adapted, integrating augmented reality, 360° videos, and other innovations improved the virtual experience. Emerging platforms like TikTok began to capture public interest. The role of social media was highlighted with the COVID-19 pandemic, and since then, these platforms have become a vital channel for promotion in tourism (Gossling et al., 2020).

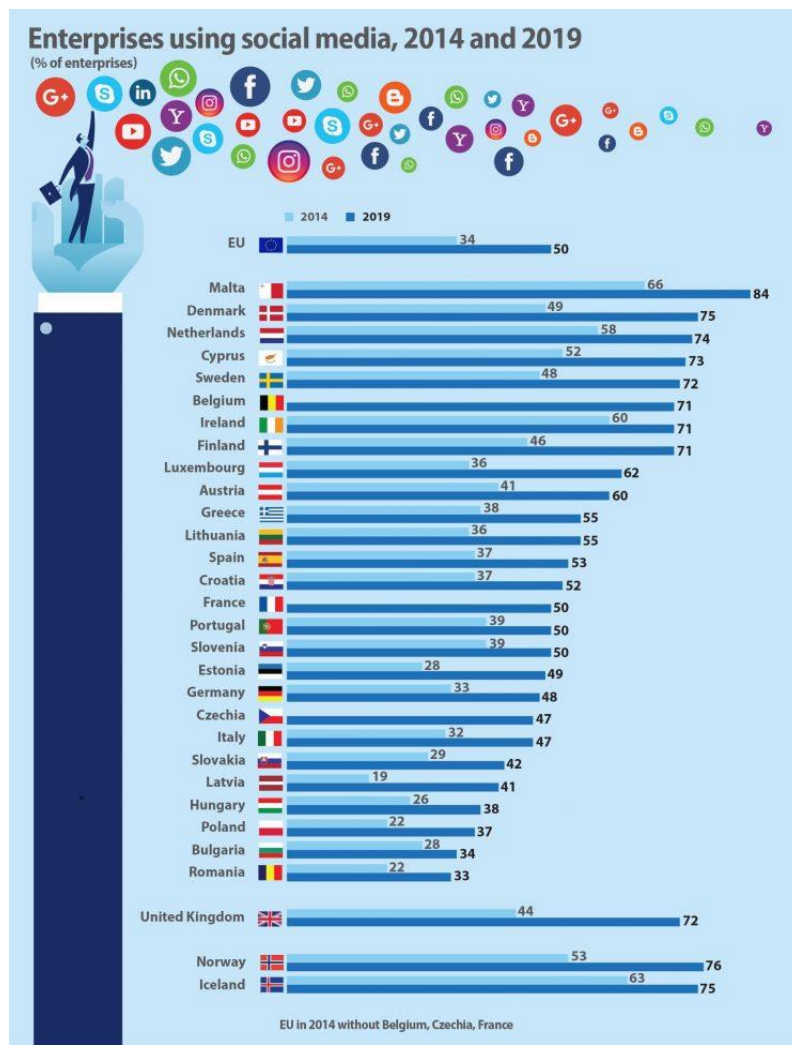
3. Analysis of Social Media Platforms in Tourism

In the current context of the European Union, it is observed that half of the companies use social networks. Contrary to this general trend, Romanian companies do not follow this practice.

At the top of the ranking is Malta, where 84% of businesses use social networks as a means of communication with customers, followed by Denmark with 75% and the Netherlands with 74%. In the last position is Romania, with a percentage of only 33%, as is shown in Figure 2.

Compared to 2014, an important increase in the adoption of socialization recipes was noted, the greatest progress being registered in Denmark and Luxembourg, while the smallest increases in Romania, Slovenia, Ireland and Portugal.

The reluctance of the Romanian business environment is surprising because many studies have shown that more than 53% of the inhabitants of urban areas in Romania use social media recipes every day, early in the morning.



ec.europa.eu/eurostat

Figure2.Companies using social media for marketing by countries

Source:<https://transylvanianow.com/company-use-of-social-media-lowest-in-romania-eurostat/>

Following the chronological exploration of the evolution of social networks and their significant impact on the tourism industry, understanding how they are integrated into tourism marketing strategies becomes essential. Choosing the right platform is both a tactical and strategic decision that can directly influence the success of a promotional campaign. The choice of appropriate platforms involves a deep understanding of the company's objectives and the audience's profile. Thus, there are significant differences regarding consumer preferences and tourists from one region to another. Another important criterion is the age of the audience. While Instagram and TikTok are ideal for campaigns aimed at a younger audience, Facebook provides information for a much broader and diverse audience. This can also be seen in the available reports and analyses.

Globally, social media platforms have become essential in planning and sharing travel experiences. One of the most recent reports available from We are Social (2022) illustrates the landscape of social media use in the tourism industry, according to Figure 3.

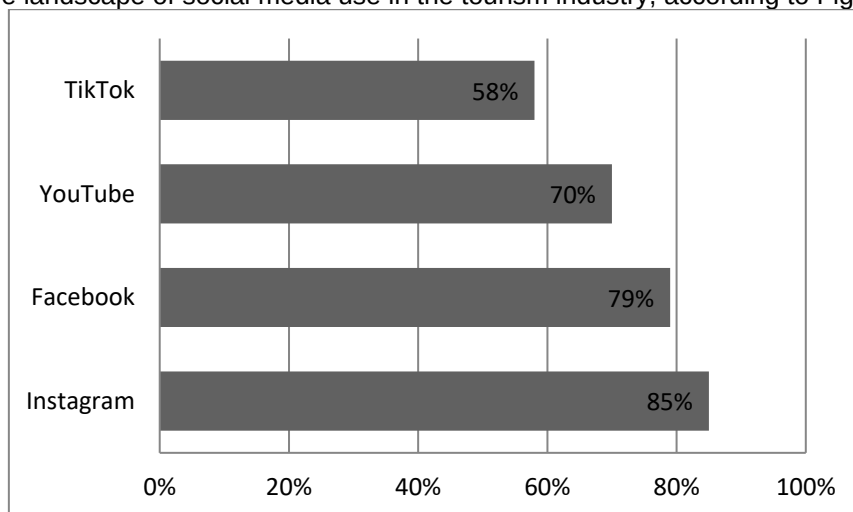


Figure 3: The use of social media platforms in the global tourism industry by companies
Source: We are social (2022)

Therefore, we observe that Instagram is the most used platform, with 85% of tourism companies turning to these networks to visually promote destinations. Facebook continues to be popular as well, recording a percentage of 79%. Moreover, 70% of companies in the tourism industry prefer detailed videos and travel guides posted on YouTube. The most interesting aspect, however, is the significant growth of TikTok, which has achieved a considerable percentage of popularity in the context of tourism promotion. In Romania, the trends are relatively similar to the global ones, but there are also some local specifics reflecting the behavior of Romanian internet users. According to the study conducted in the industry by Spark Foundry (2023) and found in the work belonging to Bădea (2023), as also illustrated by Figure 4, the dominant platform, with a usage of 91%, remains Facebook. This indicates a consistency among Romanians. This is followed by Instagram, with a percentage of 59%. This fact indicates a strong preference for visual content among potential tourists. In third place in Romania is TikTok, also experiencing rapid growth with a usage of 47%.

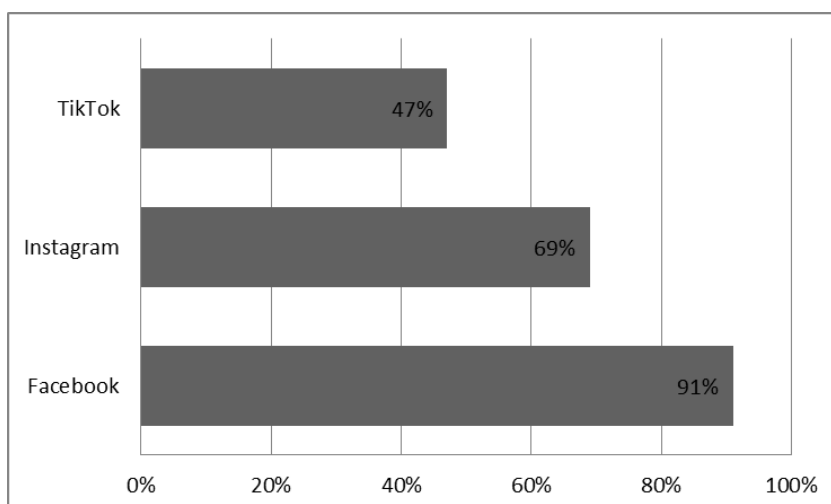


Figure 4: The use of social media platforms in the Romania
Source: Bâdea, (2023)

Comparing global data with that from Romania, it is noticeable that trends in our country align with the global dynamics, highlighting the specificity that the Romanian market rapidly adopts new platforms. Facebook, one of the oldest and most omnipresent social media platforms, plays a crucial role in the tourism industry, being the top choice in Romania and second globally. It is widely used due to its ability to reach a vast audience, with over two billion active users. Specialized works in the field emphasize the reasons for using Facebook in this industry, highlighting precise targeting, content diversity, and the platform's support for a variety of content types, from text and image posts to videos and stories. Moreover, it benefits from detailed statistical analyses provided by Facebook Insights. There are also a series of limits and disadvantages synthesized in the literature, mentioning market saturation and frequent changes found in Facebook's algorithm, which affect the organic visibility of content. Upon analysis, Facebook's use is predominantly for promoting destinations, managing customer relationships, and company-influencer collaboration.

Instagram has rapidly evolved from a photo-sharing platform to a marketing tool. With a smaller number of active users, Instagram is another intensively researched tool that offers a vast audience and precise targeting opportunities. According to Jain and Lyons (2020), the supreme advantage of the platform is that it excels in visual storytelling, offering companies the opportunity to authentically present their products/services. Extended visibility, high engagement, and the visual format stimulating interaction and diverse content such as posts, stories, IGTV, and reels are just a few of the advantages intensely researched in specialty analyses. The limits identified in the literature highlight intense competition and the frequent necessity to bring innovative content. Instagram's impact on travel is undeniable, according to CNBCTV18, a study by the World Tourism Organization found that Instagram users are more likely to travel than non-users.

TikTok has demonstrated a remarkable ability to promote tourist destinations in a totally unexpected way (Chu et al., 2020). However, despite the considerable volume of research focused on social media, there is a need to explore TikTok's spontaneous influence in the sphere of tourism. It stands out for its ability to generate trends and attract a young audience, capturing users' attention through a visual and interactive approach. Preliminary studies and market analyses indicate that TikTok has significantly influenced travelers' behaviors. The most frequently mentioned advantages in the literature are facilitating and distributing viral content that rapidly extends, a high conversion rate, and the possibility of demographic targeting, while the main disadvantage found in all specialty works is the limitation of video length, which, in this industry, is a considerable promotion. Although TikTok is predominantly

associated with disseminating short-duration videos, recent observations from the academic body and industry specialists suggest an emerging trend of the application favoring and promoting the production of longer-duration video content, a strategy potentially aimed at positioning itself in direct competition with YouTube. By supporting the development of vlog and infotainment content categories, which have seen remarkable success on YouTube, TikTok aims to extend the average viewing duration and the total time spent by users on the app.

4. Budget Allocation and Performance Evaluation

Efficient budget allocation for campaigns carried out on social media and concrete evaluation of performance are crucial pillars in maximizing outcomes. Thus, strategic decisions regarding the distribution of financial resources and investment profitability are based on a detailed understanding of each social media network's dynamics.

The budget allocation varies according to objectives, target audience, and characteristics of each platform. In their work, Smith et al., (2021) emphasize the importance of preliminary analysis of audience behavior and subsequent preferences. Thus, they illustrate that platforms such as Instagram and TikTok may require much larger budgets to produce high-quality content, whereas Facebook campaigns might benefit from organic and promoted posts to optimize costs. A primary method used in allocating budgets is cost-benefit analysis, which compares the costs associated with each social media platform and campaign with the expected benefits, in terms of increased visibility, engagement, web traffic, and conversions.

Evaluating the investment for each platform involves not only calculating the revenues generated by campaigns but also understanding the added values in terms of brand awareness. Jones and Heffernan (2020) address the complexity of measuring ROI in social media and highlight the necessity for advanced analytical tools and methods for tracking conversions.

A clear distinction between the categories of tools used for measuring ROI can be presented according to Figure 5. Thus, we can group metrics oriented towards the activity of the tourist/client, including the number of followers, likes, shares, and on the other hand, metrics oriented towards results, such as conversion rates. Moreover, another classification in this context is made by Schee et al.,(2020), who categorizes social media metrics into volume measures (quantitative) that include the number of fans, likes, or posts, and sentiment measures considered pseudo-qualitative. Lovett (2011) advanced the idea of a more complex hierarchy. Nonetheless, experts have emphasized that, although measuring success on social media has presented challenges, there are several methods through which it can be done, the responsibility resting on managers. The challenge in defining ROI is not only technical but also discursive, as the term is often used by marketers as synonymous with any measurement tool for social media activity. Recent authors propose using a mix of quantitative and qualitative metrics to obtain a comprehensive picture of performance.

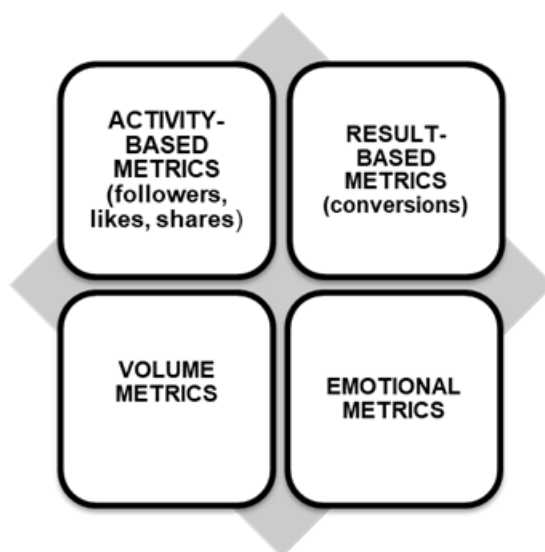


Figure 5: The use of social media platforms evaluation in the Romania
Source: Bâdea, (2023)

5. In conclusion

The article deals with the profound digital transformation in the tourism industry, which has been accelerated by the proliferation of social networks that have transcended the boundaries of personal interaction platforms and evolved as essential marketing tools. This evolution has led researchers to analyze the impact of social networks on tourism, emphasizing their essential role in building and maintaining a brand image.

Recent research such as Huang et al., (2020), Smith, Xu (2020), Chen, Xie (2021) have investigated the different spectrums of social media in tourism, from two-way communication between companies and consumers to content generated of users or even the potential of artificial intelligence.

Analyzing the evolution of social networks in tourism, a transition was observed from platforms such as Myspace and Flickr, which inaugurated the sharing of personal experiences in the online environment, to the current dynamics that are dominated by Instagram and Tiktok, which have radically transformed the way of promotion. Academic studies mark key milestones in understanding the impact of social media on tourism. The analysis of the use of social media platforms in the tourism industry expresses a pronounced preference for Instagram, globally as the main platform. This is closely followed by Facebook and YouTube, preferred for detailed videos and travel guides. TikTok is also notable for its significant growth, representing a new emerging frontier in tourism promotion. At the same time, trends in Romania reflect a similar pattern, with Facebook dominating the local scene, a fact that underlines the consistency of Romanians' preferences for visual content.

In the context of allocating budgets and evaluating the performance of campaigns on social networks, the importance of a strategic approach that takes into account the characteristics of each platform, the objectives of the campaign and the profile of the audience is noted. The existing studies on the market emphasize the need for a cost-benefit analysis and the use of advanced analytical tools, in order to determine the profitability of investments but also to guide decisions of a corporate nature. In this way, the choice of platform becomes a tactical as well as a strategic decision. Regarding the ROI for each platform, the need for an approach that goes beyond the calculation of direct revenues is highlighted, and the importance of understanding added values such as brand awareness is highlighted. The

paper illustrates the clear distinction between the categories of tools used to measure ROI and groups the aspects observed in the literature into activity-oriented, outcome-oriented, quantitative or emotional metrics.

This article is a foundation for exploring digital promotion in the tourism industry, being a critical starting point in the complex analysis of online promotion tools. This article is part of a larger research framework aiming to gain a closer understanding of the ways in which digital technology and social media contribute to the dissemination of tourism company images. This will be followed by other in-depth studies that will explore, among other things, the impact of artificial intelligence, the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns in attracting tourists and more. Therefore, the paper presents not only an assessment of the current state but also a call for further research in this vital field.

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