



Digital Technologies and Social Media in Tourism

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[Doi:10.19044/esj.2022.v18n10p28](https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2022.v18n10p28)

Submitted: 08 February 2022

Accepted: 17 March 2022

Published: 31 March 2022

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Cite As:

Gvaramadze A. (2022). *Digital Technologies and Social Media in Tourism*. European Scientific Journal, ESJ, 18 (10), 28. <https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2022.v18n10p28>

Abstract

Computer-mediated technologies allow individuals, companies, nongovernmental organizations, governments, and other organizations to view, create, and share information, ideas, career interests in virtual communities and networks. For the tourism industry it is essential to create interesting content on social media at all stages of the journey. The aim of the paper was to highlight the role of social media in the tourism industry, to reveal how mobile applications affect tourism, and how tourists benefit from using social networks while traveling. The purpose was to show the best practices in promoting consumer relations through social media and social media channels, and what role social media plays in many aspects of tourism, especially in terms of information retrieval and decision making. The research revealed which search engine Georgian tourists use to get information throughout their travel and whether they usually use social media platforms to buy a tourism product. Using qualitative and quantitative (population-based) methods, the results of the study showed that travellers in Georgia actively use social media for ideas and inspiration, at the same time to buy tourism products. Social media is not just about disseminating information, it can also influence tourists' expectations and decisions. The research shows the importance of an online tourism domain in the context of travel planning through a search engine. Therefore, stakeholders in the tourism industry should pay attention to the impact of social media to improve the reliability of their information and services.

Keywords: Mobile communications, social media, tourism products, region of Georgia

Introduction

Influence of technology has changed the way human activities are performed, the mobilization of tangible and intangible resources, the creation and acquisition of business opportunities. The widespread use of the Internet and the rapid technological evolution have revolutionized all the industries of the world, especially tourism. Nowadays, the tourism platform is becoming more and more boundless on the Internet, which is essential because tourism is an information-based industry. Travelers gather a lot of information about the tourist product and the characteristics of the trip. In addition, proper information about the chosen destination can improve travellers' confidence in the decision-making process, help them make the best decision and at the same time increase the quality of the trip. Technological advances have forced communities to use social media, which offers websites and online applications that allow users to take advantage of various social media features such as communication, sharing, collaboration, publishing and more. Social media includes social networks, customer reviews, various content sites, internet forums, and more. Social media has emerged as a new way for people to socialize with each other, through information and communication technologies such as mobile and internet-based technologies. It's actually more than just a new way of communicating. It is a whole online environment built on the relationship and integration of participants. In many countries, social media is considered as an important tool for popularizing the tourism industry and therefore it is thought that the importance of social media and its impact should be taken into account by any sector in the tourism industry. Social media offers new ways for tourism organizations to implement their business models and operations. Nowadays tourists use social media to get information and this should be taken into account by individuals working in the tourism sector to take advantage of the positive aspects of social media and create an appropriate image.

Literature Review

Tourism, as a service industry, has discovered the impact of information on tourism experiences. The tourism industry has always embraced the growth of new technologies, such as computer booking systems (CRS), global distribution systems (GDS), and the Internet. The dynamic structure of the industry allows both manufacturers and consumers to respond immediately to events. "Experience" and "value" are two special concepts for the modern tourism industry. According to a decision-making study, the buying process consists of five stages: need identification, information retrieval, evaluation of alternatives, purchasing decision, and post-purchase behaviour. Tourism companies try to combine different marketing techniques and realize the importance of sending the right messages through the proper

media channels. (Živković, 2014) Launching of modern internet technologies have redefined the marketing rules around the world. It develops and maintains long-term relationships with different parties in the market. One of the main reasons for the success of digital marketing vs. traditional marketing is the fact that the former allows businesses to track user behaviour in real-time. Every campaign launched digitally can be tracked in terms of its reach, engagement and conversion. This has given a whole new meaning to the marketing research to understand the needs of the customers like never before. (Kaur, 2017)

Travel planning begins with identifying needs that may arise from internal and external stimuli. Therefore, previous experience pushes the customer towards a specific product. Moreover, other people's suggestions, advertisements or other marketing incentives can affect the user in identifying which activities may meet this need.

After getting to know their needs, people try to find information about goods and services that can meet their needs. Users typically use both personal and non-personal sources to get thorough information about personal information coming face to face (WOM), which is disseminated by family, friends, neighbours, colleagues and other resources.

Collecting information online is possible from users who post and share their experiences directly on their social media, or simply from other people's profiles (friends, bloggers), corporate websites, blogs, or social media pages. Therefore, online information can be obtained by firms on the pages of their corporate websites, blogs, social media. For instance, online ads published on TripAdvisor, the content, messages posted on a travel blog, or various types of content (textual, visual) that companies publish on online channels. With the spread of social media, firms can also communicate with users directly through their personal profiles on social media. For example, Facebook users who "like" a brand page will receive posts directly containing specific information, which in turn can be shared with their network of friends (featured messages). In this case, the information provided by the firm can engage users who have a desire to share it, and it can already become the personal information of friends, as this action is reflected on their personal page. In addition, social media offers the opportunity to advertise to different target markets. Finally, online information can come from associations, travel clubs and third-party travel guides that offer official ratings, hotel information, destination and attraction descriptions, and more. (e.g., Forbes Travel Guide, American Automobile Association-AAA, Lonely Planet, etc.).

After evaluating the various alternatives, the consumer decides whether or not to purchase a particular product. Sometimes purchasing goals can be influenced by other factors that are not controlled by the company: the attitude of others and the situational surprises can influence the final decision

of the purchase. Such as, the behaviour of other family members may influence a vacation decision, or an unexpected expense may influence a vacation decision, or simply a choice of destination. Also, in the case of a real purchase decision, the risk may be retained as the customer generally books or buys the service in relation to the actual vacation period. In this case, especially when there is a certain time between the order / purchase action and the actual consumption, the post-purchase behaviour plays an important role, as the customer can try to find items that will be able to make sure of the decision made.

Given this characteristic of travel services, post-purchase behaviours can be divided into post-decision and post-consumption behaviours (Kotler, Armstrong, 2001). This distinction is particularly important because the influence of other sources of information or situational factors may influence the subsequent decision-making process. After the completion of the consumer procurement process, a further stage of consumption takes place, in which the quality of service is evaluated. In particular, consumers compare expectations and perceptions as a progressive process, starting from the first stage of the booking process, and make a final decision that takes into account perceived service quality, price paid, personal factors and situational factors. Based on satisfaction and dissatisfaction assessments, consumers can disseminate positive or negative information and decide whether to become loyal. In case of cognitive dissonance, which comes from the infallibility caused by the post-purchase conflict, the customer may stop buying the product or express dissatisfaction and take steps to reduce the dissonance. (Kotler, Armstrong, 2001)

Thus, given the impact that social media has on tourism and tourism products in general, it is also an effective digital marketing tool. Representatives of the tourism industry should consider all five stages discussed above and decide how the traveller behaves at each stage.

Increased mobility has gone hand in hand with the immediacy of information now routinely available via digital media. Through online travel agencies (OTA) such as booking.com and Trivago, and on peer-to-peer booking sites such as Airbnb, we can curate our travel experiences anywhere in the world at a click of a mouse, or tap on a smartphone. We can search for package deals, make travel reservations with airlines, train and ferry operators, search out nearby points of interest, check the current weather conditions, and read up on the local news. (Nuenen, Scarles, 2021)

In Georgia, social media started to develop through online chats. This was followed by the popularization of forums where people were already writing their opinions openly and it was possible for others to read it, it was already allowing users to share their experiences with each other. Various social media have been gradually developed in Georgia as well as around the

world. At the same time, social media marketing is constantly evolving and it is an important factor for companies to make appropriate choices. Consequently, social media allows opportunities for advertising, so organizations need to thoroughly research the target market before launching an active advertising campaign.

Nowadays, it can be said that using social media is a choice but also an obligation to a certain extent. It allows users to be constantly involved in the news, with the opportunity to use various social media tools at any time. In today's world there are online platforms without which it is virtually impossible to plan a trip. The development of technology directly allows the customer to plan the trip themselves. The development of modern digital technologies not only makes travel convenient, but also plays an essential role in the development of tourism business. Developments based on digital technologies are expanding the boundaries of the new world with unique features and dynamics. The ability of a company to survive in such an environment and to meet the needs and expectations of its customers depends on understanding the rules of the digital world and acting accordingly. In other words, companies that know the impact of rapidly evolving social media networks and mobile devices on consumers' lifestyles, consumption habits, and consumer behaviour should also be aware that they need to periodically review strategies to keep pace with such global developments.

Technological development has brought innovations to the tourism industry, just as it does in all other industries. Mobile communication is becoming a part of everyday life. The tourism industry, like all other industries, is influenced by the achievements of modern mobile communication. In today's world, airlines, travel agencies, tour operators and hosting businesses are developing mobile apps and new business processes that leverage mobile technologies. The popularity of mobile personal communication devices in the tourism industry has responded in the form of programs and services to move traditional tourism services to the mobile domain. All these developments have led to the widespread use of mobile communication devices instead of computers in the field of tourism. Nowadays the consumers' intention to adopt mobile applications (m-apps) as another means in purchasing tourism-related products and services via their mobile devices is huge. (Tan, Lee, Lin, Ooi, 2017)

There are different types of mobile apps for smartphones, tablets, as well as apps created for Android and iOS systems. The mobile app also makes a big contribution to growing a company's image, attracting new customers or selling products. This is the latest technology that makes it as comfortable as possible to receive information and use a product or service. One of the goals of the app is its commerciality, which increases the sales rate, as well as increases the number of users, as convenience for some users is a priority. In

addition, mobile applications allow us to collect user data, for certain services the system asks the user to enter personal data, which is used for further analysis and further personal offers.

Currently mobile communication is a concept that is fundamentally important for tourists and the tourism business. Through mobile apps, today's tourists have the opportunity to meet needs that were previously needed from travel agencies, guides or print guides or maps. Using mobile devices, they can book hotels, purchase tickets to events, and conduct guided tours to various destinations, as well as many travel services that traditionally require human relationships. This is convenient for the tourism business as a lower cost and, ultimately, better quality cooperation can be found for both parties. One of the biggest benefits of the mobile internet is that tourists can exchange information when they want to access the information they need during the trip. Also, with the integration of artificial intelligence into mobile computing, tourists and tourism businesses have gained advantages in all processes of traveling. (Türkmenbaş, 2022)

Mobile communications have created a dynamic and stimulus for new and unique transformations in the context of social media. In today's world, the sustainability of the tourism business depends on adapting to mobile communications to meet the needs and expectations of consumers. In other words, a business that fails to adapt to the new world through processes and strategies will face greater challenges in the future. The new virtual environment created by these technologies is no longer considered a simple simulation of the real world, but rather becomes an alternative place of interaction in the real world. (Sezgin and Aktas, 2016) Businesses that want to take their place in this new world must constantly monitor and adapt to developments and innovations in the field of mobile communications. Therefore, all participants in the mobile communications value chain need to better understand their roles and positions.

Methods

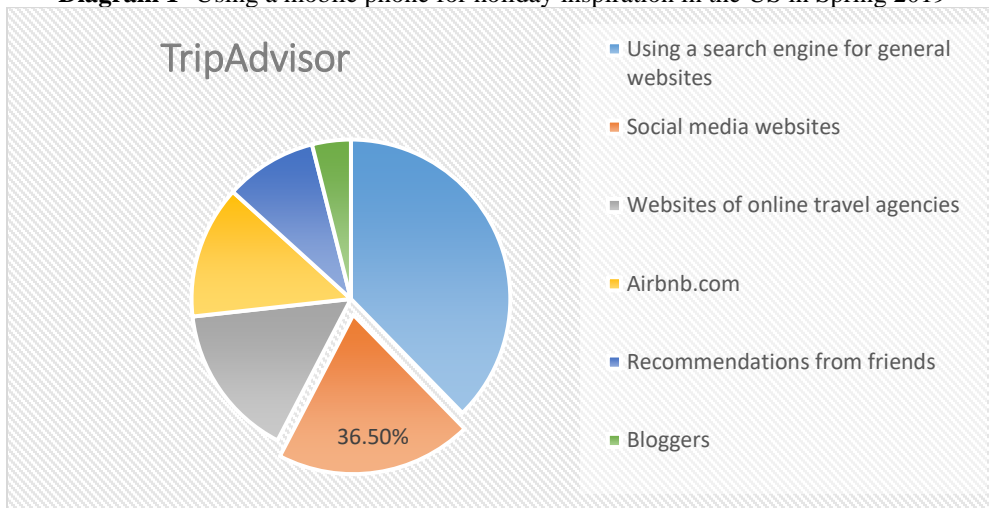
Qualitative research methods and review of scientific literature were considered necessary to reveal the main features of mobile applications and communications in tourism, including the steps of the buying process that customers experience. The use of secondary sources and statistics became necessary for the analysis of quantitative research conducted by TripAdvisor, because it is a very popular website in the world and a lot of tourists use the information spread by the website. Finally, a quantitative, population-based survey was conducted to identify Georgian travelers' behaviour while purchasing tourism products through social media channels. The survey was spread by social media, the questionnaire was uploaded to the group on Facebook called "Traveller's Club", which unites up to 170,000 users. About

five hundred people participated voluntarily in the survey. The survey was conducted in January 2021 and the questionnaire consisted of only three questions, where respondents had to express their preferences on the listed issues. These issues were about using social media and mobile apps when travelers are planning a vacation.

Results and Discussion

TripAdvisor is the world's largest travel platform headquartered in Massachusetts. TripAdvisor's branded sites and forums operate as online travel guides that offer users a free overview of travel-related content. Founded in 2000, TripAdvisor has become one of the most popular travel and accommodation websites in the United States. In 2018, the website already had approximately 730 million user reviews and opinions, which included a list of more than eight million restaurants, hotels, rentals and tourist attractions. Due to the growing number and variety of global internet users who publish reviews online, many modern travellers now use TripAdvisor to choose a vacation home and get travel related tips. TripAdvisor conducted a quantitative online survey of 2025 users over the age of 18 in the spring of 2019. The subject of research interest was the use of mobile phones by consumers to get travel ideas and inspirations. 36.5 percent of respondents said they used social media websites for travel inspiration or ideas. In addition to social media, what ways do travellers use to obtain information is shown in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1- Using a mobile phone for holiday inspiration in the US in Spring 2019

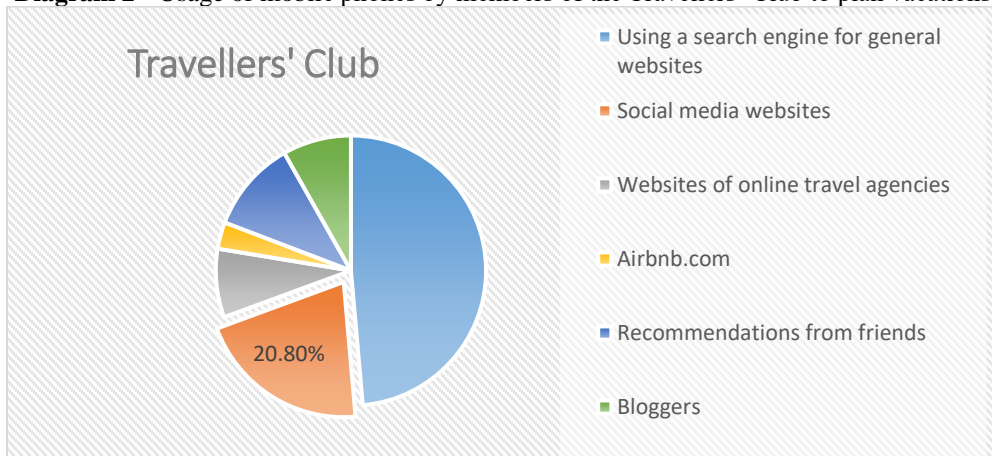


Source: <https://www.statista.com/topics/3443/tripadvisor/>

Naturally, Georgian travellers also use various online means when planning a trip and getting information. There is a popular group on Facebook called "Travelers Club", which unites up to 170,000 users. This group is an

opportunity to share cheap travel information and not only with each other. We tried to conduct a small-scale online survey like TripAdvisor. A population-based research methodological approach was used for the research. According to the quantitative research, it should have revealed the ways in which Georgian tourists search for information when planning a trip via mobile phone. And also, whether they have purchased any travel product using any of the social media platforms. Five hundred people over the age of 18 participated in the online study. The survey found that 20.8 percent use social media for travel inspiration or ideas. It was also interesting to see what other options Georgian travellers use to obtain the information they want, as shown in the diagram 2.

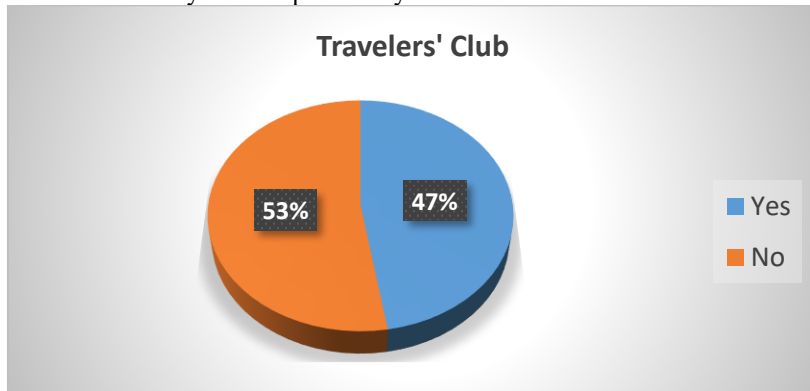
Diagram 2 - Usage of mobile phones by members of the Travellers' Club to plan vacations



Source: Author's research

As for the answer to the question, whether any of the social media platforms respondents had used to buy a tourism product, 47.4 percent agreed with the question, which is shown in the diagram 3. This once again demonstrates the importance of using social media to promote tourism products and attract customers.

Diagram 3- Usage a social media platform to buy a travel product by Travellers' Club members



Source: Author's research

Through the existing diagrams we can judge that no less Georgian traveller uses social media to plan travel compared to foreign tourists. Also, both Georgian and foreign tourists trust bloggers with almost the same percentage. (7.2% and 8.2%) As for the use of a general search engine, most Georgian and foreign tourists choose it. (69% and 48.6%)

Although this study is not large-scale, it provides a general idea of the importance of social media for Georgian tourists, as well as for companies to see why they should pay attention to social media platforms. My goal was to highlight the role and importance of social media in the field of tourism. Since today, the tourism business is virtually completely digitized, the introduction of digital marketing in Georgian companies can bring many benefits. This will affect the development of companies, enable them to easily solve problems that arise, investigate customer behavior, track and analyze customer numbers, gain information about competitors, and create a brand image that in itself will attract customers. In order to maintain the pace of tourism development in Georgia, it is necessary to focus on modern technologies and face the challenges of the world.

Conclusion

To summarize, the use of the Internet and other information and communication technologies is ushering in a new era of global economy. Social media continues to grow and has an increasing impact on many social and economic aspects of the tourism and hospitality industry. Social media fundamentally changes the way travellers and tourists search, find and trust, as well as provide the greatest information about tourism providers and tourist destinations. Social media provides new ways for tourism organizations to implement their business models and operations. Numerous studies show that tourists use social media to get information at least, and this should be taken

into account by individuals working in the tourism sector and tourism establishments, to take advantage of the positive aspects of social media and create an appropriate image. It is an important component for an online tourism domain in the context of search engine optimization. Social media fundamentally changes the ways of search, finding and trust by travellers and tourists, as well as gives us the greatest information about tourism providers and tourist destinations. The research shows how important the use of social media is in the tourism sector. Therefore, stakeholders in the tourism industry should pay attention to the impact of social media to improve the reliability of their information and services. The results of the study will be interesting for individuals or organizations working in the field of tourism who already use or plan to integrate social media into their sector. Further research should explore in depth the various models of social media and expose decision theories to gain a better travel experience. This paper was an attempt to highlight the importance of advances in information and communication technologies, the impact of social media in the field of tourism, and how it can be used to build better relationships with audiences.

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