

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON TRAVEL CHOICES

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Abstract: *In the modern digital era, social media has had a significant impact on various aspects of daily life, including travel decisions. This study explores how platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok influence individuals' travel choices. By examining user-generated content, influencer marketing, and travel-related posts, the research seeks to understand how social media shapes perceptions, drives travel behavior, and affects destination selection. Using a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey data and qualitative interview insights, the study offers a comprehensive perspective on the topic. The findings reveal that social media is not only a major source of travel inspiration but also plays a critical role in shaping travelers' preferences and expectations. Furthermore, the study explores the influence of social media influencers in promoting destinations and setting travel trends. The research concludes that social media is a potent tool in the tourism industry, providing valuable insights into consumer behavior and underscoring the importance of strategic digital marketing in tourism. This study enhances the understanding of digital influence on travel, offering meaningful implications for marketers, travel agencies, and policymakers.*

Keywords: *social media, marketing, tourism industry, tourist choices.*

Аннотация. *В современную цифровую эпоху социальные сети оказали значительное влияние на различные аспекты повседневной жизни, включая решения о путешествиях. В этом исследовании изучается, как такие платформы, как Instagram, Facebook и TikTok, влияют на выбор путешествий людьми. Изучая пользовательский контент, маркетинг*

влиятельных лиц и посты, связанные с путешествиями, исследование стремится понять, как социальные сети формируют восприятие, движут поведением во время путешествий и влияют на выбор места назначения. Используя подход смешанных методов, объединяющий количественные данные опросов и качественные данные интервью, исследование предлагает всестороннюю перспективу по этой теме. Результаты показывают, что социальные сети являются не только основным источником вдохновения для путешествий, но и играют важную роль в формировании предпочтений и ожиданий путешественников. Кроме того, в исследовании изучается влияние влиятельных лиц в социальных сетях на продвижение направлений и установление тенденций в сфере путешествий. Исследование приходит к выводу, что социальные сети являются мощным инструментом в индустрии туризма, предоставляя ценную информацию о поведении потребителей и подчеркивая важность стратегического цифрового маркетинга в туризме. Это исследование улучшает понимание цифрового влияния на путешествия, предлагая значимые выводы для маркетологов, туристических агентств и политиков.

Ключевые слова: *Социальные сети, решения о путешествиях, маркетинг, индустрия туризма.*

Introduction: Social networks have become our virtual worlds, where we share impressions, photos, ideas and, of course, travel plans. As it turns out, their role in the tourism industry today is huge. Previously, the choice of vacation was often limited to travel agent brochures and stories from friends. Now, thanks to social networks, we can learn about the experiences of other travelers, see real photos of hotels and attractions, and communicate with locals before the trip. Each of us seems to become a blogger who shares reviews of their own travels. Instagram, in particular, has become a real source of inspiration for tourists. Looking through photos of beaches, mountains and abandoned castles, we not only dream, but also begin to plan our next trips. But what real changes does

Instagram bring? It really changes the way we perceive vacations, making them more visual, personalized and exciting. However, it is important to remember that attractive images can hide distorted ideas, and you need to be able to distinguish mass trends from personal preferences.

Also Social media has become our indispensable companion when we travel across the vast expanses of the Internet. And who would have thought that it would have such an impact on our choice of vacation destinations in real life? Social media not only allows us to stay in touch with friends and share vacation photos, but also plays an important role in deciding where to go on our next trip. Social media helps us visualize our future trip, creating an emotional attachment and a strong desire to go on an unforgettable adventure. Thus, choosing a vacation destination becomes not only logical, but also emotionally charged thanks to social media.

In addition, communication on social media allows us to receive valuable advice from those who have already been to the places we are going to visit. We can learn about the best excursions, interesting locations and hidden attractions that will not be mentioned in tourist brochures. Thus, social media not only inspires new trips, but also enriches our experience, making it more vivid and exciting. The influence of social media on travel destinations is like a beam of light that illuminates the path to the most exciting and memorable places on earth.

We can see on photo the overview of the adoption and use of connected devices and services: Total population in 2024 January was 8.08 billion, and from this population are unique mobile phone subscribers about 5.61 billion. Also, 5.35 billion are individuals using the internet, from 2 hours to 4 or 6 hours per day.

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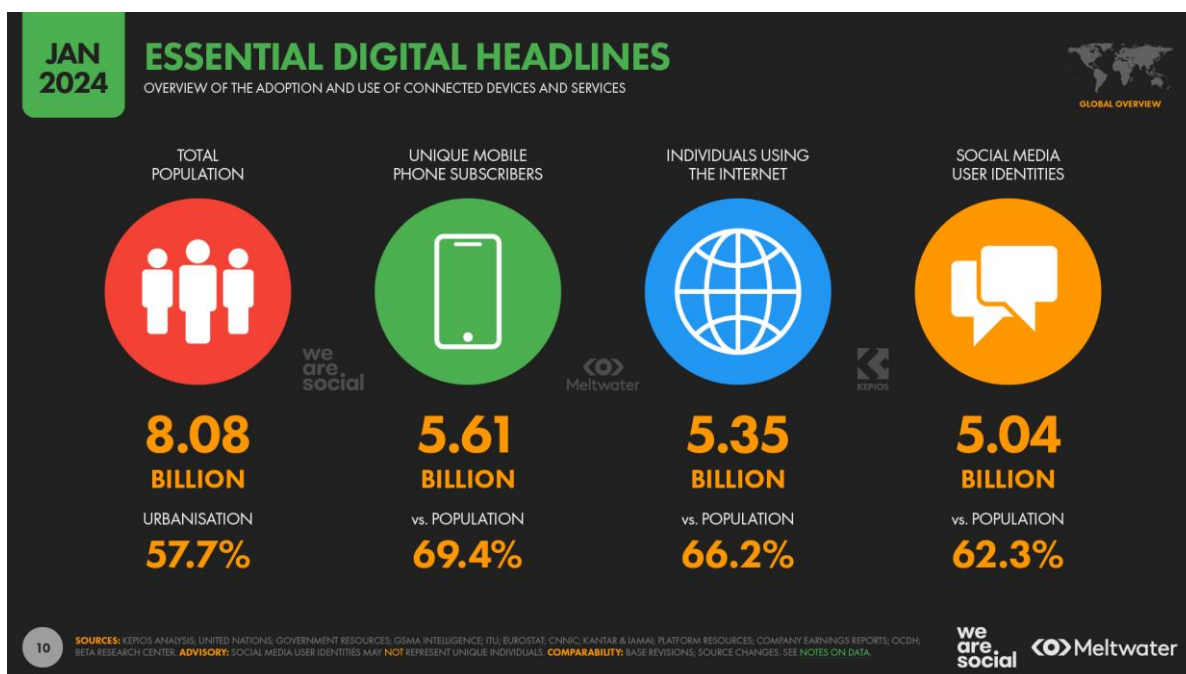
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Results and Discussion

Social media has long been a driving force for previously obscure places to suddenly become popular. The number and variety of social media platforms grow exponentially each year, and their importance as sources of data for research and marketing continues to grow. For example, the number of social media users worldwide has increased from 1.9 billion to 4.2 billion from 2014 to 2021 (Figure 1).

The average social media user spends about 2 hours and 25 minutes on social media every day. Filipinos remain the leaders among social media users, spending an average of 4 hours and 15 minutes per day, half an hour more than Colombians, who rank second. In Russia, users spend 2 hours and 28 minutes per day on social media. Although in Japan, people claim to spend less than an hour per day on social media, the current figure of 51 minutes is still 13% higher than last year.

Tourists often adopt the image of other travelers who are users of social networks, regardless of whether they have their own idea of the chosen destination or not. The extent of this social influence depends on the characteristics of the social networks themselves.

In addition, social networks have facilitated more spontaneous travel decisions, thanks to constant publications about new destinations. Ratings and reviews are crucial when choosing a holiday destination, as users are more willing to trust a brand if it is highly rated by others. Photos of tourist destinations promoted by national tourism organizations are considered artificial communication, as they are created by marketers with the aim of stimulating target consumption. Advertising often uses edited images, which usually increase the saturation of colors, making the picture brighter and more attractive. However, such photos are important not only for advertising purposes - they also play a significant role for the tourists themselves. Travelers take photos to preserve tangible memories of their trips, and now many of them actively share these photos with others in the virtual space. Photos of destinations created and shared by travelers are called organic communication, as they are distributed through independent sources that do not aim to stimulate consumption of tourism services.

The Power of Visual Content and Aesthetic Appeal

Travel is an inherently visual experience, and influencers are masters at capturing and sharing stunning visuals that evoke emotions. Instagram, in particular, has become a hub for travel influencers who curate their feeds to showcase beautiful landscapes, breathtaking architecture, and the vibrant cultures they encounter. The visual nature of social media enables influencers to turn a simple destination into a visual story that feels both aspirational and accessible. A single well-composed photograph can create a sense of yearning for a destination, prompting followers to consider it for their next trip. These images are often enhanced with personal narratives or tips that make the destination feel relatable and within reach. This ability to present travel in such an appealing way has made influencers key drivers of travel trends and consumer interest in specific locations.

Brand Partnerships and Strategic Collaborations

The growing influence of social media personalities has not gone unnoticed by tourism boards, travel companies, and brands. Many tourism

destinations now partner with influencers to create sponsored content that promotes specific locations, hotels, or activities. These partnerships allow brands to leverage the trust and reach of influencers to directly target potential travelers. Whether it's a sponsored post, a travel vlog, or a branded Instagram story, these collaborations offer followers a unique opportunity to access exclusive offers, discounts, or travel packages. These partnerships often feel more organic than traditional advertisements because the content is tailored to the influencer's personal style and audience, making it more likely to resonate with followers. Additionally, influencers are instrumental in bringing attention to lesser-known destinations, helping to diversify tourism and spread economic benefits across a wider range of locations.

Short SWOT - analysis

Social media has dramatically changed how people select destinations, plan their trips, and share experiences. Its impact on the tourism industry is vast and multifaceted, with both positive and negative effects. Social media has significantly shaped travel choices by providing a platform for global inspiration and real-time feedback. Its strengths include a wide reach, authentic user-generated content, and the power of influencers to drive tourism trends. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok allow travelers to visualize destinations, fostering excitement and engagement. However, social media also has drawbacks, such as the over-commercialization of destinations, biased representations through edited photos, and the pressure to conform to trends, leading to overcrowding. While it opens opportunities for targeted marketing and user engagement, it can also contribute to issues like over-tourism and environmental damage. To harness the full potential of social media, the tourism industry must balance promotion with authenticity, ensuring sustainable practices and addressing the risks of misinformation and over-tourism.

In conclusion, social media has revolutionized the way we make travel decisions by offering vast opportunities for inspiration, real-time feedback, and global connection. It allows travelers to explore destinations visually, share

experiences, and rely on authentic user-generated content. However, the impact of social media on travel also presents challenges, such as the over-commercialization of destinations, unrealistic portrayals, and the pressures of conforming to popular trends. While it can drive tourism and foster meaningful connections, it also risks causing over-tourism, environmental damage, and misinformation. For the tourism industry, the key to success lies in leveraging social media strategically—promoting destinations authentically, engaging with travelers in a meaningful way, and encouraging sustainable travel practices to ensure long-term positive outcomes for both the industry and local communities.

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