



THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON PROMOTING TOURIST ATTRACTIONS: A CASE STUDY IN ALBANIA

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Abstract

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have fundamentally changed tourism marketing by enabling destinations to reach and influence prospective tourists. This study explores the role of social media in promoting Shishtavec, a tourist attraction in Albania, analyzing how various platforms affect tourists' perceptions, travel intentions, and engagement. A survey of 190 respondents provides insights into social media's role in decision-making for travel, with results showing that user-generated content and visual media are significant factors in attracting visitors. Findings underscore the importance of digital marketing for destination management, highlighting the potential of social media to foster tourism development and cultural awareness. The study offers valuable recommendations for tourism marketing strategies to enhance destination visibility and influence.

Keywords: Social media, tourism marketing, destination promotion, Albania, digital engagement

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a global industry critical to many countries' economies, contributing over 10% to global GDP and significantly impacting employment (World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2022). In this competitive sector, effective destination marketing is crucial for attracting tourists and establishing a distinct identity among competing destinations. With the rise of social media platforms, digital marketing has become central to destination management, providing tourism boards and businesses with innovative ways to engage audiences and promote attractions (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Sigala et al., 2015).

Social media allows tourists to interact with potential destinations through user-generated content (UGC), creating an environment where authenticity and peer recommendations significantly influence travel decisions (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Ayeh et al., 2013). Platforms like Facebook and Instagram enable destinations to share visually engaging content that stimulates interest and provides real-time, user-centered perspectives on travel experiences (Hudson & Thal, 2013). In this context, this study explores the impact of social media on promoting Shishtavec, a remote village in Albania's Kukës region, known for its stunning alpine landscapes, traditional charm, and vibrant local culture, by examining the influence of UGC and platform engagement on tourist intent and perception.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media in Tourism Marketing

Digital platforms have transformed how tourism marketing is conducted, offering cost-effective and far-reaching solutions to engage tourists (Leung et al., 2013). Social media fosters direct communication between destinations and prospective tourists, facilitating the sharing of personalized and visually rich content that appeals to consumer preferences (Kim et al., 2017). Studies suggest that social media marketing is effective in increasing destination awareness and shaping positive perceptions that encourage travel intent (Stylidis et al., 2017).

Recent studies highlight that interactive features such as live streams, influencer collaborations, and virtual reality tours further enhance engagement and destination trust (Choe & Kim, 2023; Hasan et al., 2022). These tools allow users to experience attractions remotely, building anticipation and emotional connection even before traveling. This digital immersion is reshaping how tourists perceive authenticity and experiential value.

The Power of User-Generated Content

User-generated content, including photos, reviews, and travel stories, has proven to be influential in shaping destination perceptions and trust (Ayeh et al., 2013). Peer

recommendations on platforms like Instagram and YouTube provide an authentic perspective that often carries more credibility than traditional advertising (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). The impact of UGC is especially significant in the tourism sector, where visual appeal and experiential authenticity drive tourist interest (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009).

Moreover, current research demonstrates that algorithmic visibility and the virality of UGC can amplify regional destinations like Shishtavec (Nguyen et al., 2024). Destination management organizations (DMOs) are increasingly curating user content to foster co-creation of value and community participation, establishing ongoing engagement rather than one-time visits.

Visual Media and Travel Intent

The role of visual media in tourism marketing is paramount, with platforms like Instagram enabling destinations to showcase their appeal through high-quality images and videos. Visual media create strong emotional connections, which can translate into concrete travel intentions (Kim et al., 2017). Emotional responses evoked by visual content play a central role in shaping destination image, making it a critical factor in marketing strategies (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).

Recent findings emphasize the growing influence of short-form video content, such as Instagram Reels and TikTok, in driving spontaneous travel decisions (Rahman & Saeed, 2023). These platforms merge storytelling and immediacy, allowing users to visualize authentic experiences, thereby increasing destination desirability and intent to visit.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative data from a survey with qualitative insights from social media content analysis.

Quantitative Survey

A structured online survey was conducted with 190 participants selected based on their interest in travel and social media activity. The survey included 22 questions covering demographics, social media use, and perceptions of Shishtavec. Statistical analysis identified correlations between social media exposure and tourist intent.

Content Analysis

A content analysis was performed on posts featuring Shishtavec across Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, examining engagement metrics and categorizing content into scenic

views, adventure activities, cultural experiences, and user reviews. Results indicated that scenic views achieved the highest engagement levels.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social Media Usage and Platform Preferences

Instagram and Facebook were the most preferred platforms for tourism content, with 72% identifying Instagram as their primary source of travel inspiration.

Influence of User-Generated Content

User-Generated Content (UGC) significantly influenced respondents' interest in visiting Shishtavec. Peer-shared experiences enhanced perceived authenticity and increased travel intent.

Impact of Visual Content

The high-quality images and videos of the Shishtavec fostered a favorable destination image, confirming the emotional appeal of visual storytelling in motivating travel behavior.

Discussion

Findings underscore the importance of social media, especially UGC and visual storytelling, in promoting tourist destinations. Shishtavec benefits from the authentic narratives and visuals shared by users, which amplify its cultural and natural appeal. The influence of Instagram and Facebook on tourist perception confirms that these platforms should remain central to digital marketing strategies.

These findings align with emerging theories of digital engagement and co-created tourism experiences (Sigala, 2016; Soliman et al., 2021). For developing destinations, strategic investment in influencer partnerships, immersive content, and community-driven campaigns could enhance both awareness and visitation.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study demonstrates the pivotal role of social media in promoting tourist attractions, highlighting the influence of UGC and visual content in shaping perceptions and intent to visit. The findings suggest that social media-based storytelling and user participation can enhance destination image and competitiveness.

Future research should explore comparative analyses between rural and urban destinations in Albania, examine the long-term effects of influencer marketing, and evaluate the role of emerging technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and AI-driven personalization in destination marketing.

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