The Role of Social Media in Selecting Touristic Destinations – A COVID-19 Context

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Abstract

Social media has been occupying much of our lives lately and that is because of the availability of nearly anything only one click away, and, sometimes even a little bit more. Due to its significant spread into people's lives, why not using social media in a positive way, such as spotting different touristic destinations. In this respect, the hereby research paper is aiming to gather data and analyze specific factors that have influenced the tourism industry in the last years, in particular how social media and the existent technologies have disrupted the normal flow of choosing a destination and the way it is now seen through the help of other travelers that are revealing their thoughts, feelings, and opinions trough their pictures, videos and posts over the social media platforms. In doing do, we have distributed a questionnaire by means of social media by using a non-probability sampling method. The main findings indicate that there have been changes in the behavior of tourists when considering traveling in the context of a pandemic, and even though safety might have been the most prominent factor when choosing a travel destination, the quality of the services provided outranked safety. For businesses, the findings of the paper hint towards fully integrating social media with the other elements of the marketing in order to assure a successful use of the value-added technology.

Keywords

social media, tourism, travel destinations, COVID-19.

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Introduction

Because we wanted to capture how people's experiences are surfing worldwide in a fast pace, changing one's decision and shifting their ideas with what we can call "perceptions", we consider it important to know something about how it all started. This is why, our paper will be organized in three main parts, with the purpose to show similarities between past times and now and to demonstrate that even though the tourism industry is such a large sector (Rasool et al., 2021), it can grow and find new opportunities every day, nonetheless it is still very fragile and can get easily impacted by the mere evolution of social-economic factors (Kronenberg and Fuchs, 2021).

The first part of the paper we will introduce the reader to some theoretical aspects about how tourism functions and the challenges brought to the world and its people along the time. It will also present travelers' purposes to explore and what motivated them to travel and in which way. The second part will be focused on the data found on the United Nations agency of World Tourism Organization or shortly UNWTO (2020), that shows how intense the traffic in terms of arrivals around the world is, from all the airports and what is influencing their choices to fly and where. The last part will be analyzing the findings of the research conducted in this paper, shedding light onto how people are organizing their trips in the pandemic context and what is more important having in mind the new health regulations that we all have to follow. However, we must take into account the fact that the effects over the destination image will be visible only after a

more in-depth analysis made over specific areas or localizations of the most important cities. After all, this study will help the readers to understand more about the role of social media in the tourism industry by addressing more questions regarding the travelers' behavior and expectations corresponding to their final destination when planning a trip.

1. Review of the scientific literature: social media, tourism and crises

The pressing desire of having permanent touch into the *pre*-digital world started in 1844 when someone started to tap arranged dots that would eventually make sense, into a telegraph machine. Later on, in 1969, the existence of what we call now internet was proved through the American program ARPANET - Advanced Research Projects Agency Network, a well-developed communication system. The very first social media platform is called Six Degrees and was founded in 1997 with the purpose of keeping contacts close to one's self, by registering with an email address and setting up a simple, basic account. (Anon., 2020). The diversity of social network represents a whole type of movement for teenagers, young adults and elderly too. Nowadays, it is so propagated into our daily lives and we cannot imagine a scenario from where this precious tool is missing.

Stepaniuk (2015) found that an emotional connection is strongly related with the content of the network sites which triggers the users how to act and project their values and beliefs into the online world of tourism when thinking about what activities are chosen for the sake of the photographs and videos that are meant to be shared over the internet using different types of sources such as: social media platforms, blogs, travelling websites, guidebooks and tourist events. The stimulation varies, depending on the individual, from the benefit of getting more likes and comments and evolving in the social popularity to the simple fact as keeping images and videos as sweet memories, in a virtual journal (Fotis, Buhalis and Rossides, 2012). The impact of the content will help users in choosing their destination just by reading other's opinions, thoughts and impressions related to similar events that also happen to them or to a very close person such as relatives which will lead to a positive or negative destination image. Controversial stories or funny moments are having a huge influence over one's opinion just by the simple fact that they can easily make the connection that somehow an individual can experience the same thing in that specific destination so, electronic word of mouth (Buhalis and Law, 2008) and recommendations represent two important factors in choosing one's place to go, being empowered by details such as traditions, local cultures and cuisines, local products and businesses, sustainability, people and religion.

Sabate et al. (2014) demonstrated in their paper that there is a correlation between the posted images and the number of comments, all resulting in a positive outcome. With all the technology and continuous advancements that are everyday elevating the customer's satisfaction along with their needs and wants, the competition in the tourism sector in fierce and definitely social media has one of the most important roles in promoting destinations to its travelers. And this is what Nag and Gilitwala (2019) have succeed to demonstrate through their research having as target market the country of Thailand, a poor and not so well economically endowed country, but with an extremely blossoming tourism. They have showed a link between motivational factors, destination image and social media that is affecting one's decision of where to travel.

When it comes to the people who travel, the types of tourists are divided into four main categories by their purpose of traveling: *for recreational activities* - here we can include all the nature based tourism, the resorts and those geographic areas where one can find a peaceful environment, music festivals or hobbies based tourism, *for cultural purposes* – here we can include dark tourism for example or destinations full of historical traces, places where religions, traditions and cultures are unique, preserved well from the obstacles that might jeopardize its values and importance and that can only flourish as time goes by, *for adventure purposes* – here we can include the backpackers, the nomads or wildlife seekers, and *for business purposes*.

Seabra, Reis and Abrantes (2020) states that Portugal is one of the most chosen country as a destination recording a high tourism demand, in the same time being a terrorism-free country where peace dominates among its people (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2021). Although terrorist events from Spain seam to impact the overall perspective over Portugal's image, tourists coming from France, UK or Germany might have a deeper sense of safety in a country like Portugal and that is because the three of them share the same type of tourism market.

The sudden slowdown in business has, for the previously presented reasons, led companies to seek (primarily financial) support from Member States and the Union to get through the crisis; only that the granting of aid has begun to be conditional: relocate production to the country, or at least to the territory of the Union. The European Union has once again been able to see how dependent it is on the freedom of transport within the Union and to what extent it is based on the tourism industry and its horizons. The Covid crisis shows it with a peak and, moreover, raises great signs of concern for the future of tourism in Europe,

because the new normality indicates in the most optimistic scenario, somewhere around 2022, a turnover in European tourism to reach somewhere at most 80-85% of the level of 2018-2019 (Wall Street, 2020).

It is not unusual that, when talking about a specific destination, our brain already defines that place with certain details that has been seen and interpreted along a period of time through the social media platforms, slowly transforming the beliefs and interpretations into a stereotype, attached to a region, city but most likely country. This process is called COI image or country of origin image (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020) and it is manifested through the hallo effect which projects the visions of certain people over a whole destination by attributing an element, a story or a tourist site which over time becomes a brand image for that specific place. Brand awareness and destination quality perception are two factors that influences directly the COI image showing a positive destination response. Choosing from all the existing traveling alternatives it is not an easy task to do but in order to select the best destination choice suited for one's own preferences, the decision making will be done based on the highest emotional and desirable needs to make sure one will enjoy and have a unique life experience (Tham, Croy and Mair, 2013).

When it comes to disasters, in 2003, there was a SARS crisis when everything in China crashed and its population was severely affected and that eventually led to sudden changes in each possible domains, among which, tourism was one of the most impacted. The thing is, so much uncertainty could never be fully coped with in means that we are aware of. It will be about how we can manage stress in this catastrophic environment so we can save as many lives as possible by giving and using all: routines, frameworks, rules of the system and organizations. It will be challenging, tedious and one above the other, with no fully chances of warranty (Škare, Soriano and Porada-Rochoń, 2021).

So, all effects are reflected also upon tourism market which probably was the most affected, from the hotels and other accommodation providers like Airbnb or Booking.com, to the airline agencies, trains or public transportation and much more. Speed of recovery depends on the type of response mechanism and ways to manage efficiently the crisis' flows in order to integrate new and ideal solutions that can work on the moment with the existent resources, both for businesses and for people (Gössling, Scott and Hall, 2020). On the other hand, there can be different crises having repercussions over this soft industry called tourism. Because of the last 20 years full of events of terrorists' attacks or unexpected riots that happen, tourists are becoming more and more flexible when choosing their final destination just to be able to skip and avoid all the risk that is threating their lives and could switch their beautiful vacation into the worst nightmare. So, they become highly sensitive to everything that moves around them and any possibly sign of destruction can affect their whole decision making and because of interdependency, if an event happens in point A it will most likely have an impact in point B as well, this phenomenon being known also as spillover effect which transforms some destinations into unwanted choices. Due to this, different countries' economies can be severely affected, as well as negative spillovers can affect the social-cultural environment. It is critical to find the strength, translated in the strategy and action plan, and necessary resources to help those countries deal with the disruptions in the tourism field.

In 1950's top 5 worldwide destinations were USA, France, Italy, Switzerland and Canada (Drew, 2021) that welcomed more than 70% of the tourists, followed by a decline of 20% because more and more countries were selected as their destination for recreational time or business leisure. Tourism was fast becoming an important factor for growth and job opportunities, offering support to emerging countries in different fields such as education, technology, science and more. In 1967, UN declared that year to be "The International Tourism Year" having as motto "Tourism: a passport to peace". United Nations agency of World Tourism Organization or shortly UNWTO went through major transformations starting with 2003 and 2004 and opened their gates to the digital world so it can bring even more close the people traveling by offering support through their social media platforms. In 2012, the number of arrivals passed 1 billion putting tourism in the spotlight for building a better world and giving hopes for people who didn't even dare to dream about having one. Five years later, was the year of "International Year of Sustainable tourism for Development" with a number of 1.3 billion international tourists just to reach 1.5 billion in 2019.

Tourism is not about just one part of the society but about all of them, people stepped up in the battle against climate change, racism, safety and diversity across the globe. Facing the pandemic in 2020 motivated people to come closer and share their innovative ideas in order to survive and make life easier to bear when the closest ones were not where they were supposed to be (Qiu et al., 2020). As a basic human need, safety is one of the key factors that defines the tourism industry and helps in maintaining the balance when concerns are becoming too high to keep the mind risk-free and aware of the perceptions, sometimes misinterpreted. Risk perception refers to the possibility that something bad might happen and as an outcome one could suffer from it and affect its life in a negative way. Not to forget to mention there are still usual risks that a tourist should consider before planning such as health issues or specific diseases that a country is known

for, political incidents and orientations that might provoke violence and the most common but still to take into consideration: language limitations and cultural barriers.

Previous researches showed that people are intimidated by the risk of a potential terrorist attack due to the fact that one cannot have full control or knowledge if and when or where will some event like this occur, putting their lives in the hands of destiny. Related to the destination, past attacks are also related in one's decision, memories bringing back all the negativity about a specific place and attributing details heard from others that are in correlation with an already designed scenario. Here also intervenes a generalization behavior, judging neighbor places by just one unfortunate, passion over the fear and anxiety. Although these memories will not stay for too long in one's mind, their effects will be a controverted point in changing the destination with a less unstable environment (Lutz and Lutz, 2020).

2. Research methodology

This part of the paper presents the way the data was collected and put it all together in order to allow interpretations and analysis of the found information used to reach the objective set for this study. We are using a quantitative research method, more specifically, survey research based on questionnaire. In this sense, we have defined three suitable research questions for study: 1) Does social media influence people's choices when it comes to the tourism destination? 2) Which are the factors involved in the decision making of travelers? 3) Is traveling an actual option having in mind the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic? Sample size and research instrument - As for finding proper evidence for the research questions we have formulated a 14-question questionnaire which was distributed by means of social media by using a non-probability sampling method: convenience sample. In order to have meaningful data to be further analyzed a questionnaire must be completed by 30 people at least (Messick, 1995). The questionnaire was structured as follows: the first section would provide information about the demographic data; the second section would give a perspective on the type of tourism each person embraces and the last section offers information about the adaptability of the travelers during COVID pandemic. It used closed-ended questions including Likert-scale type of questions having 5 options, starting from SD and ending with SA, where SD is strongly disagree, D is disagree, N is neutral, A is agree and SA is strongly agree. There were also ranking questions rated from 1 to 5, where 1 represents a least considered factor and 5 represents the most considered one. Some of the questions were also designed to be as check boxes in order to facilitate user's time and willing of completion.

3. Results and discussion

When closing the questionnaire, we were able to collect 114 answers which were analyzed by using SPSS. Given the space limitations, we are not able to illustrate all the questions, but we will be providing the results as explanations derived from the processing of the data In terms of the demographics, we had 65 females and 49 males with an age distribution pertaining to the following cohorts: 72 respondents (1996-2003), 39 (1977-1995), and 3 respondents (1965-1976), these results reflect also the age distribution of social media users. Education level is defined by those who successfully finished their bachelor degree (47 people), followed by those with a master degree (38 people) and high school (25 people) and only 3 with a vocational/technical school. In terms of employment, 78% of the sampled persons were listed with a labor contract.

When it comes to the variable time invested in traveling, while 2.6 % of the respondents say that they are not taking any free time to travel, the rest of them who are traveling at least 1 time/year (20.2%) or even 2-3 times/ year (30.7%) are almost equally distributed with those going into trips more than 3 times/year (46.5%).

Table no. 1. Time invested in traveling

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2-3 times	35	30.7	30.7	30.7
	At least 1 time	23	20.2	20.2	50.9
	More than 3 times	53	46.5	46.5	97.4
	None	3	2.6	2.6	100.0
	Total	114	100.0	100.0	

Following to the information regarding the time invested in traveling, the next section comprises questions concerning the impact of social media in each person's life when planning a trip or while they are already traveling. Digital marketing tools refer to the available websites and mobile phone applications with sufficient resources in the means of free information and content suitable for searching traveling destination, tourist recommendations, reviews and pieces of advice from previous travelers, public prices and regulations to the places, policies that need to be followed etc.

As social media had a powerful boom in the past years, we can observe that respondents prefer to get inspired from *Instagram* (67.5%) where they can see exactly how the places are looking like, including secret spots or accommodation facilities and utilities. They can get a better sense of how it will be for them in person to visit the location and from there they can start the selection and switching between the available options by favoring one of the critical elements when arriving at the destination such as location, in-house facilities, transportation and ways of access, local restaurants or shops, depending on traveler's interest and purpose of the trip. After Instagram, *traveling blogs or websites* are the most popular (62.3%) for their accessibility to one's personal story and experience, where unique details and different point of views are projected into stories with character and exposed feelings supported by personal pictures and videos that will best express and show the past situation, one from many others. On the third position we identified *Facebook* with a 47.4% which is attributed to the daily feed that people are distributing because their application is easy to access and use, with a friendly design and well organized for all age categories.

Table no. 2. Crosstabulation on type of traveler and social media

		Type of traveler					Total
		Adventure traveler	**Back-packer/Nomad**	**Business traveler**	**Holidaymaker (resort-type)**	**I don't consider myself a traveler**	
Social media posts	1	3	0	1	0	3	7
	2	5	1	0	6	2	14
	3	12	1	1	6	2	22
	4	8	2	0	9	4	23
	5	31	1	0	9	7	48
Total		59	5	2	30	18	114

Further, a crosstabulation was made between the types of travelers and their preference in using and looking at the social media posts on the digital platforms that people are using them day by day to show for each type of traveler how much they prefer to use this tool to find out more about their interests in choosing their final travel destination. The main takeaway from this crosstabulation is that adventure travelers are the keenest on social media posts (31, five posts), followed by holiday-makers (9, five posts), whereas the ones that do not consider themselves travelers (7, five posts), are still using social media, nonetheless their research interests might be different.
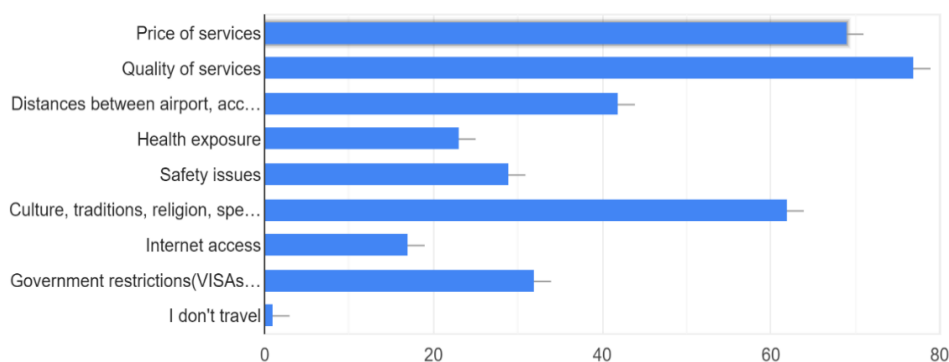

Figure no. 1. Factors influencing decision making when choosing touristic destination

According to the results from the questionnaire, when it comes to the classification of the factors that affect their decision making concerning a final travel destination, on the first place in respondents' minds is the quality of the services offered (67.5%) and only after that comes the price of the services (60.5%). The item culture, traditions, religion or the specific aspects of the chosen place comes on the third place with 54.4%.

When conducting a crosstabulation of the type of traveler and the factors that can influence their decision making, prices of services 43 of the respondents rate this factor with a high intensity of 5, quality of services 62 of the respondents rate this factor with 5, safety issues – 47 of the respondents rate this factor with an intensity of 5, culture, traditions religion – only 40 of the respondents rate this influencing factor with a high intensity of 5. Therefore, the results are unexpected or surprising in the context of the pandemic, considering we expected safety to be marked with high intensity by the majority of the respondents, case that did not happen. A consideration for this issue could stem from the fact that when choosing a trip destination, travelers expect somehow safety to be included in the quality of the services rendered. However, may infer that the sample is represented by educated customers in the sense that they do actually know for what they pay, and what they expect in return.

Conclusion

The three research questions we have formulated from the beginning of the paper have been answered and as we demonstrated previously, the age of people does not really reflect the frequency of traveling because the final decision is influenced by many factors amongst which we mention: the financial resources which some teenagers might not have it yet as well as some of the adults does not have the time to manage all of their responsibilities so they can afford some time off to explore or relax their minds and bodies. The quality of the services still remains one of the biggest factors taken into consideration when planning a trip, besides the culture and traditions that could be perceived during the travel. In terms of sources people prefer using social media platforms over traveling websites or to call on travel agencies' services to gain more information about their next destination details. The word-of-mouth is still very trusted but can manipulate people's minds at a deeper level of conscientiousness without even to notice major changes driven by the thirst of greeting the best information regarding the facilities, travel routes or any economic and social changes.

The gradual opening of the borders for sure will give new hopes to the tourism sector, where some locations are expected facing tourist booms that will help them in reconstructing the economy and give a fresh view over the world's treasures and beauties. Thus, social media must be included more by the marketing strategists so they can catch traveler's eyes through the digital channels that now can definitely change the decision making for the final destination. Of course, this implies to fully integrate social media with other elements of the marketing in order to assure a successful use of the value-added technology that can be reached in an instant with our access to the innovation and more and more to the sustainable resources.

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