

The Impact of Social Media on the Destination Image Formation and Tourist Behavior

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Abstract

Social Media is becoming more important in the daily lives of consumers and can play a major role in forming impressions about tourism destinations. This is especially true during the current pandemic, when traveling is restricted and people increase the time they spend online. Social media can play a distinguished role in searching for and sharing travel information. Moreover, social media also impacts travel decisions regarding which destination to select. Therefore it is particularly important for the tourism industry, where competition to attract tourists is the biggest concern. The purpose of this study is to find out the influence of social media on the destination image and impact on the visit decision.

Keywords: social media, image, destination, tourist behaviour, visit intention

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Introduction

The development of information technology and access to the Internet has changed the available information regarding tourism, as well as affected the way people plan and make travel decisions. For the tourism business, Internet offers the opportunity to make information and reservations available to a large number of tourists at relatively low costs, (Ilieva, G., 2015). The constant advancement of the Internet has influenced the development of social media websites such as blogs, forums, social networks, and YouTube, which have become a reliable source of information and have gained huge popularity among tourists (Pan, MacLaurin, & Crotts, 2007). Travelers post and share comments, opinions, and experiences related to their travels and the destination on these platforms, including during the trip, which ultimately provides valuable information for others..

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lengthy quarantines have temporarily halted and restricted tourism; however, tourists still crave and desire to travel. As a result, they turn to social media to revisit traveling and to get travel inspirations. This digital revolution is considerably influencing tourism-related industries (Benckendorff et al., 2014; Law et al., 2014). The adoption of social media and engagement on these platforms are growing worldwide. A report by eMarketer shows that the number of active social media users across the globe exceeds 4.2 billion and more than 49 per cent of the population used social media platforms regularly in 2021 (eMarketer, 2022). Proneness to use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, etc. removed borders and restrictions on access to information dissemination.

Social media and networks play an increasingly important role in the process of creating the image of destinations and enterprises and of connecting consumers to their brands (Marinov, S. 2015). The travel and tourism industry is gaining a relatively large social media presence compared to other sectors of society. The many-to-many nature of social media is the advantage that effectively transforms the processes of advertising and subsequent consumption. The claim is proven by the way consumers create an image or mental picture of what the destination and its tourism products will look like even before the visit. (Ilieva I., Spring Han 2022). Tourism products have intangible characteristics because the consumer cannot evaluate them without traveling. Thus, online suggestions/recommendations can be used as evidence before booking travel products and be factored into decisions, to reduce the risk involved in the process.

To determine the best options for travel, consumers use social media to seek out information about possible destinations, visualize images, and access postings about others' previous tourist experiences (Sicilia & Ruiz, 2010). The information source has been identified as the key factor

contributing to destination image formation. Moreover, social media also impacts travel decisions regarding which destination to select. It extremely affects consumer behavior and their decision-making processes and later, the ways that companies need to interact, develop relations with and provide services to their customers. That is why to achieve better relation with their customers, companies need to enhance the visibility of the destination through an adequate online and social media presence. The purpose of this study is to understand the effect of social media on tourists' perception of a destination as well as the direct and indirect influence it has on behavioral intention.

1. The role of Social Media

The number of social media users globally grew from 4.2 billion in January 2021 to 4.62 billion in January 2022, equating to 59.3 percent of the total global population. Social media user numbers have continued to grow over the past 11 months too, with 190 million new users joining social media since this time last year. That compares to annualised growth of 4.2 percent, at an average rate of 6 new users every single second. (Global Media Statistics, Datareportal)

Now in double-digits, social growth in 2021-22 is notably higher than the pre-pandemic drop which is seen in 2018 -2020, with new platforms and innovations contributing to the upward trend. Continued social media growth gives digital marketers even more opportunities to connect with new audiences in new ways. Social media platforms today are evolving and developing to meet an ever wider variety of consumer wants and needs.

Facebook remains the world's most widely used social media platform, but there are now six social media platforms that each claim one billion or more monthly active users.

Furthermore, 17 social media platforms have at least 300 million active users in October 2022: . (Global Media Statistics, Datareportal)

1. Facebook has 2.934 billion monthly active users
2. YouTube's potential advertising reach is 2.515 billion(a)
3. WhatsApp has at least 2 billion monthly active users
4. Instagram's potential advertising reach is 1.386 billion(a) (see more Instagram stats here)
5. WeChat (inc. Weixin 微信) has 1.299 billion monthly active users
6. TikTok has 1 billion monthly active users (see more TikTok stats here)
7. Facebook Messenger's potential advertising reach is 976 million(a) (see more Facebook Messenger stats here)
8. Telegram has 700 million monthly active users
9. Douyin (抖音) has 613 million(c) daily active users (note: monthly active users may be higher)
10. Kuaishou (快手) has 587 million monthly active users
11. Sina Weibo (新浪微博) has 582 million monthly active users
12. Snapchat's potential advertising reach is 576 million
13. QQ (腾讯QQ) has 569 million monthly active users.
14. Twitter's potential advertising reach is roughly 544 million(a)
15. Pinterest has 433 million monthly active users
16. Reddit has around 430 million monthly active users
17. Quora has around 300 million monthly active users (Global Social Media statistics 2022)

There is a wide variation of social media penetration concerning regional use of social media as well: (2022 analysis of regional use of social media)

- 78% in North America
- 78% in Southern America
- 84 and 83% in Northern and Western Europe respectively.
- This falls to 45% in Southern Asia, 16% in Western Africa, and 9% in Middle Africa. However, some of these countries may have more social media usage in 2022, which would

increase the global total.

Roughly 69% of the worldwide population uses social media platforms for travel-related needs.

About 52% of travelers decided to visit a specific destination after seeing its image/video from friends, family, or peers on social media.

Over half of vacationers (60%) post photos on social media while away. When it comes to Millennials specifically, that number rises to 97%.

Over half of travelers (55%) spend between 30 and 120 minutes daily on social media.

About 76% of people who scroll social media for travel say it's made them want to travel more.

And almost 86% have grown interested in traveling to a specific destination after seeing its images in their feeds. (Woolf, M.,2022)

Consumer involvement with the internet, especially social media, has become an interesting phenomenon for researchers, particularly in the field of tourism marketing (Constantinides, 2014).

Social Media is changing how consumers see destinations, especially those who haven't visited in person yet. Destination image is important because a stronger positive destination image makes it more likely that a person will choose to visit that destination (Echtner, 2003; Frías, 2007). Consumers' increased time spent on social media means that more of their "beliefs, ideas and impressions" about destinations are mediated by the posts, images and videos they consume online (Xiang, 2010; Bizirgianni, 2013). Particularly, visual representations are seen as more communicative online than text since "processing pictures requires fewer cognitive resources and they sometimes say much more than words" (Frías, 2007). Driven by a shift to mobile devices and on-the-go consumption, the Visual Web refers to the increasingly image-centred nature of many online Websites and applications, including social networks (Flickr, Tumblr, Pinterest, Instagram, not to mention the increased usage of photos in Twitter and Facebook).

All these features show that the tourists change the way they search, disseminate information, personalize destination image, and finally make a decision where to travel. Furthermore, with the available sources of information on different social media platforms, marketers do not have complete control of affecting the travelers and manipulating their destination decision.

Social media platforms facilitate collaboration, interaction, and sharing of content among users (Palmer,A.,2009), hence allowing tourists to shape their pre-expectations based on the information they receive regardless of who is the creator that shares that information. If they are fully confident in the publisher's source, they will partially shape their perception of the destination (Narangajavana, Y,2017)

The effectiveness and impact of social media and its influence on reshaping the image can be seen especially in tourism, as this industry "is an experiential product and that consumers tend to store information about experiences in memory in story format" (Govers, R,2017)

This is reveal in the way consumers/tourists "create an image" or "mental portrayal or prototype" (Govers, R,2017) of what the destination and its tourism products might resemble. Image formation is no longer a one-way 'push' process of mass communication, but a dynamic one of selecting, reflecting, sharing, and experiencing" (Govers, R,2017).

Moreover, social media also impacts travel decisions regarding which destination to select. Social media can be considered a significant, widely explored and reviewed source, supporting and improving information from traditional sources such as friends and acquaintances, commercial agents, destination marketing organizations, advertising, mass media, guide books, or document. Social media content can influence a traveler's overall image in the selection of sustainable destinations. The information source has been identified as the key factor contributing to destination image formation. Furthermore, social media information sources contribute to the creation of new opportunities for tourism businesses, through which they can better explore and exploit the destination image.

3. Destination Image Formation and its components

Image is a construct that is commonly applied in marketing and expresses people's "perceptions of products, objects, behaviors and events driven by beliefs, feelings, and impressions" (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997). Destination image plays an essential role in marketing tourist destinations and is still among the most widespread research topics in tourism. Destination image has become an essential element of destination marketing strategies and an important field of research due to its intrinsic multidimensionality (Hunter, 2008). It is regarded by marketing and tourism researchers as a valuable and influential factor in consumers' destination selection process (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Due to its multidimensionality, several authors have come up with definitions to describe it. Crompton (1979) defines destination image as a concept comprised of the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a tourist has of a destination. This definition relates to the individual, whereas other definitions acknowledge that images can be shared by groups of people. From a marketing perspective, it is essential to understand those aspects of image that are shared with other members of a particular group. This understanding aids the segmentation of markets and helps to formulate marketing strategies. Therefore, Lawson and Baud Bovy' definition (1977), which incorporates both the personal impression and the stereotyped ideas shared by groups, can be chosen as one of the most traditional definitions for the concept. They define destination image as "the expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imaginations, and emotional thoughts an individual or group might have of a particular place".

Several scholars consider destination image to be a multidimensional construct (Hosany, Ekinci, & Uysal, 2006). This view is also backed up by Blain, Levy, and Ritchie (2005), who further observed that the image of a destination is intended to express the overall idea or experience that the travelers can expect at the destination.

These conceptualizations infer that destination image is complex in nature, containing many aspects that eventually add to the formation of the total image in the mind of the visitors (Govers et al., 2007). However, recently quite a few researches have studied the main factors that impact destination image formation. Several empirical studies claim that there is a strong and direct connection between travelers' perceived image of the destination and their destination choice (G. H. Lee, O'Leary, & Hong, 2002). Other authors (Alhemoud & Armstrong, 1996) similarly stated that destinations with better and more positive images have a higher possibility of being selected by the potential visitor. The way a person depicts a certain tourist destination creates an image that distinguishes that destination from others, which significantly affects the decision-making and planning process and the tourists' behavior and attitudes (Lu et al., 2015).

Destination image components

There are three dimensions of destination image, cognitive image, affective image and conative image (Gartner, 1994). The first dimension is the cognitive component. It is a key element, derived from fact and a set of perceptual evaluations that people hold in mind when thinking about a destination. This reflects people's perceptions, beliefs and attitudes towards a destination (Martin & Bosque, 2008). According to Bigne et al., (2009) cognitive image is the collection of beliefs and knowledge, which creates an assessment of the perceived characteristics of the destination (Bigne, Sanchez & Sanz, 2009). External information received about the destination is important in forming cognitive image, so it is highly related to the amount of received information or channels where people get information (Boulding, 1961; Gartner, 1994). Within the existing literature, cognitive destination image is measured by several attributes and dimensions (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Kim & Park, 2015). Cognitive attributes can be functional/tangible (such as landscape and cultural sites) or psychological/abstract (such as feelings of belonging and atmosphere) (Martin & Bosque, 2008). However, most empirical studies have exclusively analyzed cognitive image by focusing on the tangible factors such as "environment", "cultural heritage" or "tourist infrastructures" (Court & Lupton, 1997; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993).

Secondly, the affective component is an important element when people are making decisions about tourist destination (Goodall, 1991). Affective image refers to the feelings a tourist

has about a destination (Lin, Morais, Kerstetter, & Hou, 2007). This component deals with feelings or emotions, such as pleasure, excitement or hate. It is related to motives which determine what people wish to obtain from the travel and will affect tourist's valuation about the destination (Boulding, 1961). Klenosky (2002) states that before making their travel decision, tourists form a more positive affective destination image, when the emotions imposed by the destination corresponds with their motives and pursued benefits. In Goodall's model, affective component takes place at the stage of destination selection. They are more willing to give high value on those affective components, which meet their needs and help them to make their traveling destination decision (Goodall, 1991). Existing evidence of the significance of affective image on a destination's attractiveness justify a closer examination of the emotional components of image, perhaps even separately from the cognitive component (Russell and Pratt 1980). In addition, affective assessment of a place can be formed not only after visiting but also before visiting a destination, which subsequently implies that the overall image of a destination can be formed even without prior visitation (Russell and Snodgrass 1987).

Finally, the conative image component focuses on individuals, acting in a certain way toward the destination, such as "I can't wait to see the amazing scenery there". This is an action component of 'seeing the scenery' when a person is thinking about a place. It can also be called as behavioral component because it is specific behavior, that an individual is thinking about acting (Gartner, 1994). The behavioral component of destination image is similar to visitation intention, both are describing the likelihood to visit a specific place, so some studies only focus on it and apply only cognitive image and emotional image to explain the overall image of the destination in people's mind (San Martín & Del Bosque, 2008; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).

The other major issue about destination image is the formation of it. According to Court and Lupton (1997), the perception of a tourist destination is based on the information processed from different sources over time (Court & Lupton, 1997). Combining all the information that people can get from different agents, the destination image in a person's mind will be gradually formed and shaped.

4. Tourist Behaviour – intention to visit a destination

Intention is something that we want and plan to do. An individual's travel intention plays an important role in traveling destination choosing process. In the realm of tourism studies, tourists' visit intention refers to the likelihood of tourists actually visiting a particular tourism destination (Luo & Ye, 2020). There have been many discussions about tourist behavioural intentions because a visit intention can create a strong desire for a tourist to visit a destination (Koo et al., 2016). An intention is a representation of an individual's commitment to performing a behaviour (Hunter, 2006), and may become an important initial factor of one's behaviour in doing something. In support of this statement, Hallmann et al. (2015) clarified that intention to visit is a cognitive dimension of a destination image. Furthermore, tourists' intention is often divided into two phases of tourists' behaviour. The first is the intention to visit that occurs before visiting the destination, and the second is the future visit intention, which occurs after the tourists have visited the destination (González-Rodríguez et al., 2016). An earlier study by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) described the behavioural intention as the function of evaluative beliefs, normative beliefs, and situational factors that can be assumed at the time of the vacation plan or decision for purchase. In the tourism literature, tourist's behavioural intention is the tourist's planned future action (Barlas, Mantis and Koustelios 2010) and can be described as an intention to return and willingness to recommend the destination to others (Lončarić et al. 2016; Castro et al. 2007).

Choice and decision-making processes are at the root of behavioral intention; as McCormick (2016) has suggested, travelers base their decisions on social influence (the extent to which their companion approve of an individual making a particular choice) and their perception of the benefits, which a particular decision (to visit a destination or purchase a product, for example) might provide. Consideration of these factors, along with an assessment of an alternative course of

action, is essential to the decision-making process. Intentions are subject to change, however; between the choice and decision stages, unanticipated factors can influence intentions, and the likelihood of this increases the longer the process takes. According to Chu (2018) and Rizky et al. (2017), two key factors in the formation of intentions are the traveler's confidence in a destination and their reserves toward it, which can influence their behavior in ways that contradict their basic attitudes. Those intentions, which are determined by the subjective likelihood that a traveler will engage to specific actions in relation to a service or product, constitute, as Kim & Jun (2016) have pointed out, a particular type of belief, which the traveler holds regarding whether or not they will travel to a particular destination within a given timeframe.

5. Interrelationship between social media, destination image and travel intention

Destination image and social media are emerging subjects in current tourism literature, and the relationship between these two topics has recently been investigated throughout some studies (de las Heras-Pedrosa, C, 2020, Ghazali, R.M.,2013). For instance, Kim et al. documented that the tourism information quality provided by social media influences destination image formation through the 'cognitive-affective-conative' method (Kim, S, 2017). In the process of developing a destination image, social media information has affective and cognitive characteristics, which are closely linked to the affective image and the cognitive image (Garay, L,2019). Through storytelling on social media, information about the destination itself can influence the cognition of individuals; this can both stimulate brand co-creation and counter co-destruction. As a result, social media integration has become one of the most important methods for forming the image of a tourism destination (Marine-Roig, E.2021).

A comprehensive destination image "refers to the synthesis of people's perception, impression and viewpoint of tourism destination, as well as the synthesis of the cognition and idea of the society, politics, economy, life, culture, tourism development and other aspects of the destination" (Zhang, J.,2021). In relation to the above definition, the role of social media to display a true image becomes instrumental as a modern communication technology in the marketing toolkit (Ghizlane, A., 2017) which contains promotion, advertising, word of mouth (WOM), print materials etc.

One related study has revealed how the Twitter platform can be used by destination marketing organisations to recover and improve the image of a destination after a terrorist attack crisis (Oliveira & Huertas-Roig, 2019). Similarly, social media platforms such as Facebook played an important role to help restore the destination image following an earthquake in Nepal (Ketter, 2016). Previous studies have also indicated that the process of image formation and visit intention can vary depending on the platform used by tourists (Molinillo et al., 2018). The results of those studies showed that official websites, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram were the most prominent platforms used by tourists.

Destination image is an important element to influence an individual's travel intention, and it was often regarded as the mediator between travel intentions, information sources used and travel motivation (Baloglu,2000; Kim, Hwang & Fesenmaier, 2005; Tasci & Gartner, 2007; Chen & Kerstetter, 1999; Leisen, 2001; Chon, 1990; Chen & Tsai, 2007).

The influence of destination image is not limited to the stage of destination selection, but it also affects the behavior of tourism in general. It is proved that destination image appears to have the most important effect on intention to revisit a place and the willingness to recommend the destination to others after personal travel experience (Chen & Tsai, 2007).

Apart from destination image ,the intention to visit is influenced by several other factors (García-Fernández et al., 2018) because the decision to travel is an intricate decision-making process that is affected by information publicity, social media disposition, social media use, subjective norms, attitude, and perceived behavioral control (PBC). Among others, social media disposition and social media use can be two conspicuous factors that may strongly influence intention to visit. Their role as facilitators of interaction between information publicity, social

norms, and intention to visit may unfold several subtleties of the visit decision-making process. Specifically the use of information through social media as stated by McCann (2008) occurs in a kind of interaction, collaboration and content sharing. The development of the concepts can be described in Fig 1:

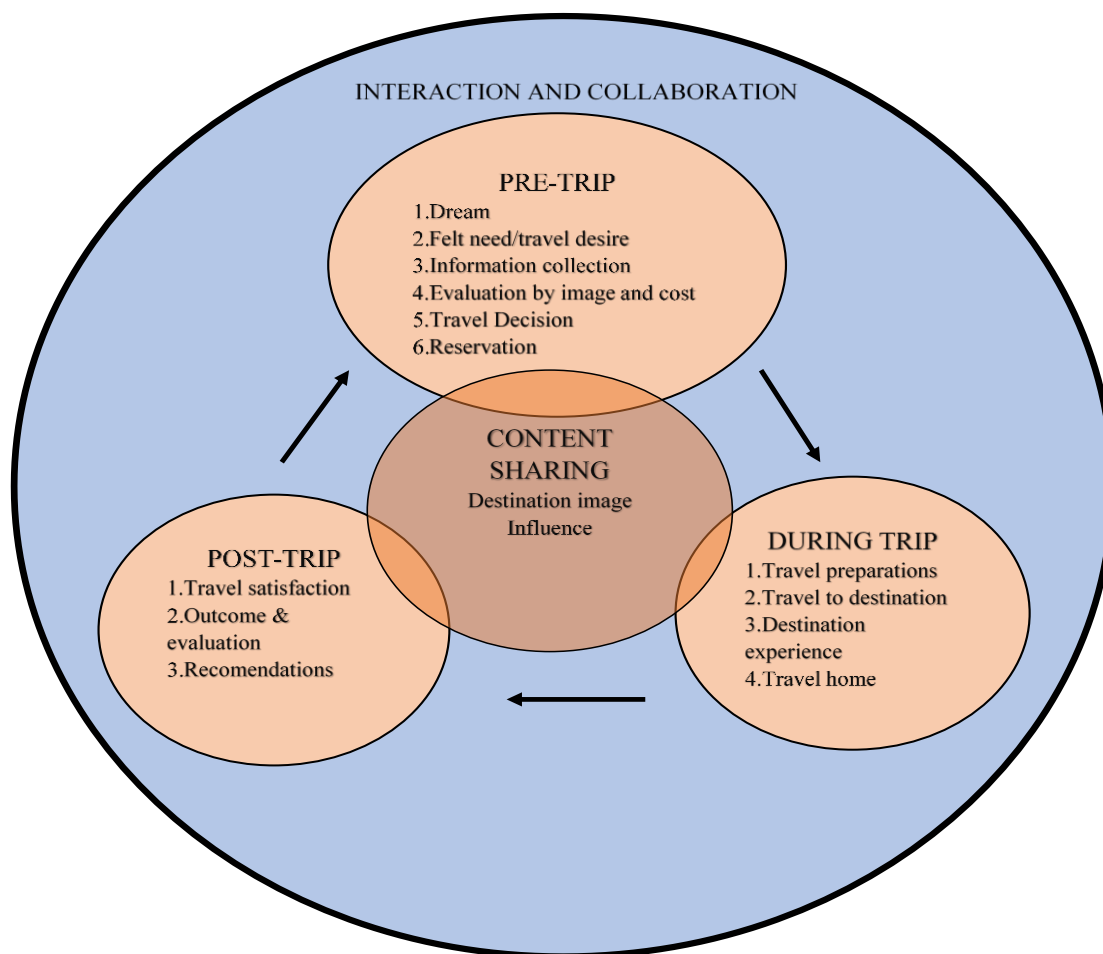


Figure 1: Social media’s Role in the tourists’ behavioral process
Source: Adapted on Nindyta Aisyah Dwityas,2017

Adapted from Travel Decision Making Model (Mathieson & Wall, 1982) and Activities of Information Use in Social Media (McCann, 2008)The model in Fig 1 describes Social Media’s role in the tourists’ behavioral process. Customer's decision making on tourism products are divided into three phases: before, when and after the travel as follows: (Dwityas,N.,2017)

- Pre-Trip Phase, i.e. the phase that someone faces before he/she does a traveling. It consists of: (1) Dreams for traveling; (2) The introduction of demands/wants to do a traveling, (3) The gathering of information and (4) evaluation on the basis of product image and tourism activities as a whole, and (5) The travel decision making, which includes the purchasing of some products that are needed before the traveling, such as (5) airline tickets, booking of hotel rooms.

- During Trip Phase, i.e. the phase that the travellers are undergoing tourism experiences and it includes preparation for travel, travel to destination, the consumption of products, such as accommodation, transportation, attraction and food and back journey. It also includes searching additional information for products and things required , when they are in one area.

- Post-Trip Phase. In short it can be stated that it is the phase when the travellers have been back home again from their travelling. In the phase their experiences are evaluated and the travellers can conclude the satisfaction rate for products, activities as a whole as well as the sources

of information that are used for decision made during the traveling process. And from the evaluation it will influence the next tourism behavior and desire to recommend the destination to others. It depends on the satisfaction rate they feel, the travellers will save the memory of their experiences to do another travel activities in future.

As tourism is an information-intensive industry, people seek information before deciding on a destination to ensure greater value for money and an enriched experience. Thus, social media play a central role in tourism decisions nowadays (Hays et al., 2012).

Several studies have argued that attitude is seen as an antecedent of behavioral intention (e.g. Chen, 2007; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2007; Wang and Ritchie, 2012). Just as when a consumer favors a certain product, his/her purchasing intention increases. The same can apply when a service or destination is marketed by a consumer's favorite influencer. Various industries have presented studies regarding influencers' impact on consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions (Bush et al., 2004; Evans et al., 2017; Lim et al., 2017). Lim et al. (2017) demonstrated that consumers' attitudes toward SoMe influencer marketing were positively associated with their purchase intention of the approved product.

In the tourism field, researchers indicated that travelers' attitudes toward user-generated content were positively related to their intention to use the information in planning their trips (Ayeh et al., 2013; Ayeh, 2015). More specifically, influencer marketing has been found to have impact on the decision-making of Millennials when choosing a tourism area as a potential destination (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017).

Conclusion

During the last few decades, traditional tourism information sources have been replaced by Internet-based travel websites and social media, which provide users with travel information and allow them to share their travel experiences in an interactive platform that influences destination image. Social media is increasingly taking up the daily time of users and becoming a major source of impressions about tourism destinations. Social media has also changed the way people plan their travel, including the way they buy and consume travel products. The role of the intermediary is also changing dramatically, which today largely overlaps with the role of the influencer. Social media influencers are now used as effective marketing tools to promote and shape the image of a tourist destination. Today's travellers are more attuned to Internet contents than to other traditional marketing media, showing the various potentials that social media marketing can bring to tourism sectors.

So in conclusion, we can say that from forming an image about the destination to the decision to visit it and even more to recommend it to a friend, social media is not only present but plays a crucial role in every single step of these processes.

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