

How Social Media Impacts Tourist Destination Choices: Case study Korca ,Albania

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Abstract: In today's information-driven environment, online communication between people, corporations, and groups is a simple, common, and everyday solution. Today, more than half of the world's population uses social media. The remarkable growth of social media applications, which characterize modern online communication systems, encourages more and more individuals and organizations to utilize them for information gathering and dissemination, as well as for promoting or criticizing goods and services. Although while using social media applications to advertise a company's goods or services may seem very effective, affordable, and simple to do so, there is a significant risk of failure involved. Social media is present in the tourism industry, and businesses operating in present and advertise their services online. This study is being carried out while taking into account the growing importance of the tourism industry in Albania, particularly the growing interest of tourists in visiting to the Korca region and its attractions. The aim of this study is to investigate the opinions of social network users regarding their perceptions of social network use, social network communication, and social network information that influence the decision-making process of potential tourists when choosing a destination. One of the biggest changes in tourism, not just in Korca, is related to social networks' growing influence on travel demand as well as on the supply and promotion of tourist places.

Key Words: Tourism ,social media ,online communication, visitor behavior

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of social networks and their inclusion in integrated marketing strategies is becoming increasingly important as users spend more time communicating through social media channels (Chaffey, 2022; Matikiti-Manyevere and Kruger, 2019; Hanaysha and Momani, 2021). By focusing on the audiences that use a particular social network the most, companies and social media creators were the first to introduce advertising, which became much more important than pure advertising in WEB 2.0 and social networks based on two-way communication with all interested stakeholders (Sigala, 2012; Gupta 2019; Firoz et al., 2021). It is also important to investigate which social media are more important from the users' perspective (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014) and more effective as a communication channel (Leung et al., 2013; Hudson and Thal, 2013). Munar and Jacobsen (2013; 2014) found that travellers' preferred social media is Facebook to post pictures, videos, and comments from their trips. Parra-López et al. (2011) show that intention to use social media is directly influenced by perceived benefits and usage (functional, psychological, hedonistic, and social), while cost is not a factor (Parra-López et al., 2011). Arya et al. (2018) underlined that tourists' attitude as a complementary mediation are positively impacting on the significant relationship of destination motivators and destination attachment. Munar and Jacobsen (2013) found that communication about travel experiences on social media is contextualised with personal data. However, social media is increasingly replacing

traditional word of mouth and becoming electronic word of mouth (eWOM), which has a much stronger influence than before due to the nature of the media itself (Kim et al., 2015).

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

To achieve the research objectives, an empirical study was conducted using a structured questionnaire with 20 questions. In this study, we thought of surveying 50 domestic tourists , since we didn't have a very long time to process the data, and Korca is a destination that also faces seasonality. The conducted primary research included respondents who stated they were social network users, a precondition to participation in the survey. These questionnaires were completed in the months of February - March in several hotels in the city of Korca and tourists were surveyed face to face. The questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first part addresses respondents' socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education and employment, and social media use. The second part of the questionnaire is about the importance of social network use, social network communication, social network information and decision making.

The research questions will be as follows;

- i. What are the effects of social media on the tourism industry in Korca ?
- ii. What is the effect of social media on Consumer behaviour in Korca ?

- iii. What is the relationship between Social Media and Consumer Behaviour in the Tourism Industry in Korca ?
- iv. What Media tools are used in the Tourism Industry in Albania ?
- v. What challenges are associated with the use of Social media in the tourism industry in Korca ?

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Communication on social networks

The oldest Internet communication tool is communication via websites and electronic mail (Paul et al., 2019). The problem with communication via the Internet and social media compared to conventional communication channels is the continuous and very rapid evolution of technology and changes in trends and tactics that need to be implemented as quickly as possible in corporate marketing (Gretzel et al., 2008; Buhalis and Law, 2008; Buhalis, 1998).

Communication through social networks is transmitted through different channels and between different members, and the geographic reach of information is very fast. The initiator of communication can be an individual or a group of individuals who transmit information to a specific, selected person or who are only interested in disseminating information without selecting a specific person to transmit information (Hvass 4

and Munar, 2012). Posting stories on Instagram, commenting on television shows on Twitter, sharing experiences on forums with people of similar liking, expressing joy about visits to national parks via Facebook, or posting new entries on your blog: these are just a few examples of the many ways social network users communicate with other users via social media (Carr and Hayes, 2015). Nowadays, as social media has become the most popular form of social communication and interaction, marketing on social networks is about businesses or destinations creating profiles on different social networks with the widest possible spectrum and managing these social networks by posting written and visual content on the profiles they create (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Toufaily et al., 2016).

The use of social networks in tourism has made significant progress over time, with 24% used for holiday travel (Jacobsen and Munar, 2012) and 69% after some time (Gururain, 2015), while 34% were used for destination attraction selection and 35% for resort selection, with Facebook being the most commonly used social media site by travellers. Mieli and Zillinger (2020) made a critical observation for

tourism service providers regarding online information causing decisions to be postponed just before consumption, which can be challenging for service providers and planning. Arya et al. (2021) analysis indicates that brand consumer-based brand equity through social networking sites is high when a brand's communication on social media platforms is positive. Liu et al. (2020) acknowledge that social media has an indirect impact on daily users as it is an important source that influences travel decisions and serves as a reminder. Direct impacts exist in the area of information seeking before, during, and after travel; they also noted that social media has replaced old sources of communication. Even in Europe, there is considerable research effort on social media use, although Facebook seems to have been neglected recently (Teles da Mota and Pickering, 2020).

Thus, social media communication has a positive impact on the decision-making process when choosing a destination.

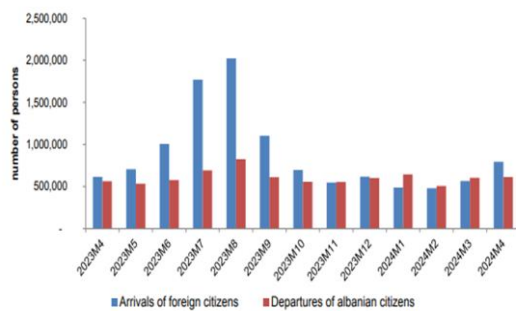
3.2. Tourism in Albania

The beauty of Albania's scenery, the warm hospitality of its people, and the affordable prices made it a must-visit destination. In 2023, the tourism industry reached new heights with an estimated 7.2 million visitors in the first nine months of the year. The tourism sector is a vital contributor to the Albanian economy, and an increase in tourist numbers means more revenue and job opportunities. Besides the short-term benefits nationally, this rise in tourism numbers serves mostly the Albanian society and its communities in the long run, by overcoming some decade sold stereotypes. Albania has reached the goal on welcoming an impressive 10 million tourists in 2023. In the first months of 2024, tourism has significantly increased, garnering attention from national and international media outlets across the globe, from the United States to Italy, France to Germany, Spain to China, and more. From the mesmerizing coastline to the majestic mountains and everything in between, Albania has it all, and in the summer of 2023, visitors from around the world were able to witness its wonders firsthand making it a tourist hotspot. The diversity and intensity of tourists have never been higher before, deserving the title of a "tourist boom".

In the first six months of this year, the number of visitors entering the country increased exponentially compared to the previous year. This created a buzz on mainstream media and social media alike, anticipating an influx of visitors, but no one expected the sheer number of tourists that

arrived during the summer. September and december also recorded some of the highest numbers ever witnessed; indicating that the tourist season is far from over. Arrivals of Albanian and foreign citizens to the territory of Albania, in April 2024 are 1,403,480. Compared to April 2023, this indicator increased by 20.8 %. Albanian and foreign citizen’s departures from the territory of Albania during April 2024 are 1,402,260 marking an increase by 22.2 %, compared to the same period of the previous year. Citizen’s arrivals In April 2024, arrivals of Albanian citizens to the territory of Albania are 609,351. Compared to April 2023, this number increased by 11.3 %. Arrivals of foreign citizens to the territory of Albania are 794,129. Compared to the same period of 2023, this number increased by 29.3 % (fig.1).

Fig. 1 Movements of citizens in Albania, March 2023-March 2024



Source: General Directorate of State's Police, INSTAT calculations

In April 2024 compared to April 2023. the arrivals of foreign citizens mark:

- Increase,for personal purposes by 28.8 %;
- Increase, for vacation purposes. visiting relatives. etc. by 30.6 %;
- Increase, for business and professional purposes by 57.4 % .(tab2

Tab. 3 Arrivals of foreign citizens by purpose

Period	April 2023	April 2024	Annual change (%)	January - April 2023	January - April 2024	Annual change (%)
Arrivals foreign citizens	614,256	794,129	29.3	1,684,820	2,329,242	38.2
1. Personal	604,116	778,167	28.8	1,648,725	2,287,291	37.7
1. Holidays, visit to relatives etc.	572,670	747,992	30.6	1,566,134	2,171,458	38.7
2. Health treatment	15	76	406.7	195	255	30.8
3. Religious	43	23	-46.5	123	121	-1.6
4. Transit	31,388	30,076	-4.2	80,273	95,457	18.9
5. Business and professional	18,140	15,962	-57.4	38,085	61,951	62.8

Source: General Directorate of State's Police, INSTAT calculations

3.3 Tourism in Korca

Korca is located on the south-eastern of Albania, a country in Europe. It is close to Greece and North Macedonia. Korca is only a three-hour drive from Tirana and a breathtaking spot for tourists from all over the world. Is recognized for its architectural significance which dates back to the 13th century.From beautiful churches, mosques, museums and walkways, there is a lot to see and explore and interesting things to do in Korca city. For the year 2022 (January - December period), there are about 96,940 local and foreign visitors .The city of Korça continues to attract more and more local and foreign visitors, who find the climate, beauty and cultural heritage of this city in the southeast of Albania very attractive. Korça has become one of the most frequented tourist destinations in Albania. that welcomes the influx of visitors to the city and its surroundings. This has brought about the need to increase the accommodation capacity, thus creating a trend in the construction of guesthouses and hotels which are positioned mainly in the characteristic areas of the city. It is the citizens of Korça themselves who have turned the characteristic Korça apartments into guest houses for tourists. Investments in the field of construction, mainly for touristic purposes, have been transferred to Korça in recent years. There is even an unexpected appetite to build hotels and tourism facilities in the southeastern city. According to statistical data, in recent years, Korça has exceeded in the number of constructions and construction permits even the coastal areas or the capital.

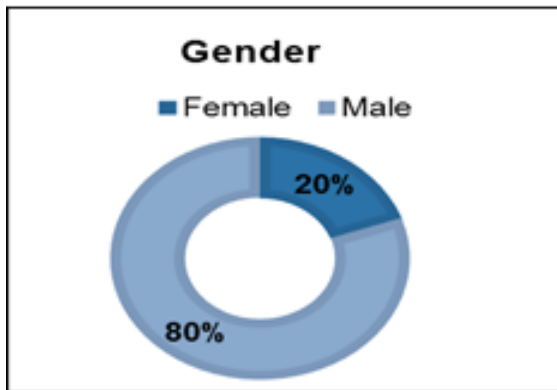


According to the data in the Municipality of Korça, 125 accommodation structures operate, of which 84 are hotels and 41 guesthouses)leading to an increase in the maximum capacity of accommodated persons (3170 capacity persons of these 682 in tourist villages and 2488 persons in city accommodation structures). of the number of beds in the accommodation structures of Korça Municipality is currently 3357 out of 3200 beds for

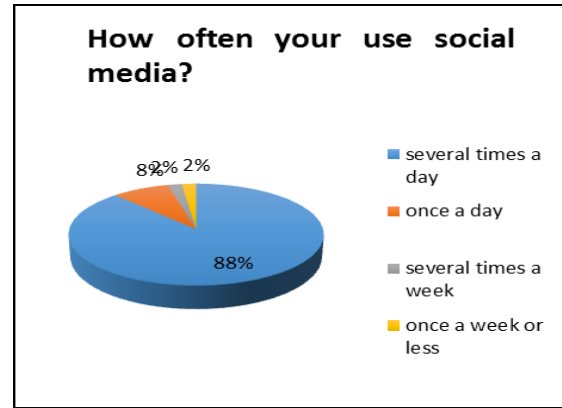
the year 2022. There are 3300 people employed in the hotel-tourism sector, a figure that is considered low compared to the demands that the southeastern city has had in recent years. The significant increase in the number of domestic and foreign visitors compared to the previous year is also visible in the cultural attractions in the city (around 40% more than last year) the various local events organized by the Korça Municipality and especially in the months of August coincides with the organization of the Beer festival last year resulted in a participation like no other year of foreign and local visitors, attracting a high number of those who closely follow the event during the 5 days. The main place this year is occupied by Greek tourists (about 5,000 visitors per night, culminating on Saturday with 8,000 visitors). For the year 2022 (January - December period), there are about 96,940 local and foreign visitors who are accommodated in the accommodation structures located in the city and in tourist destinations such as Dardhe ,Voskopoje, etc.

4.RESULTS

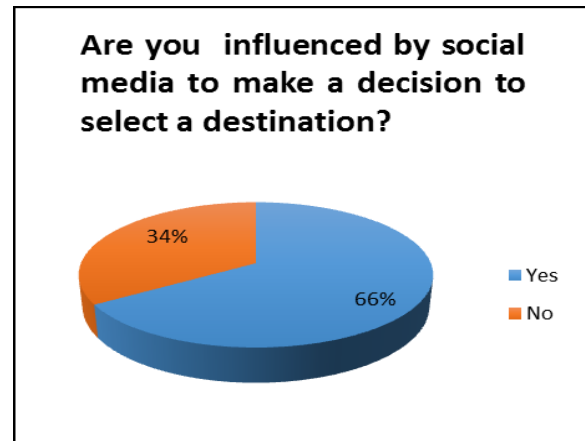
Korca is a tourist destination in Albania, which in recent years, thanks to numerous investments, has become a very frequented and popular destination for foreign and domestic tourists.



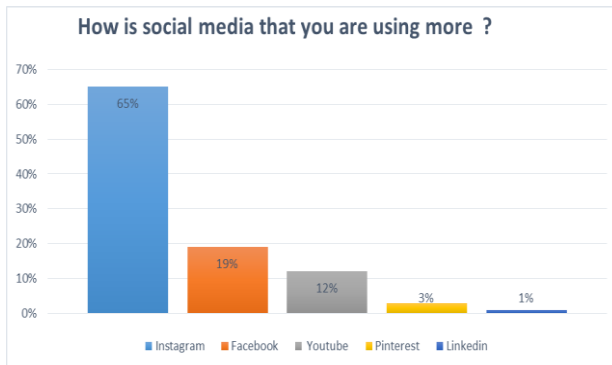
The structure of respondents shows that 78% were female and 22% were male, while 74% are up to 30 years of age. By educational level, respondents with a university degree were the most numerous 64%, followed by those with a secondary school degree (34%), while those with an elementary school degree were the least numerous (2%). Most of the respondents are employed 76%, while 20% are studying. Only 4% of the respondents who participated in the survey were unemployed.



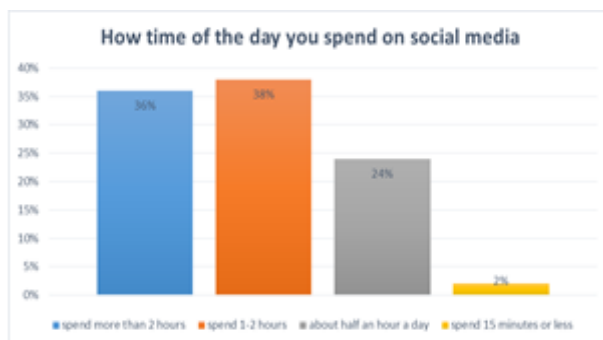
When asked how often they use social networks, only 1 of the respondents answered "once a week or less" (2%). Fully 88% of respondents reported using social networks several times a day, 8% once a day, but only 2% reported using social networks several times a week. In a day, only 2% of respondents spend 15 minutes or less on social networks, 36% spend more than 2 hours, and 38% spend 1-2 hours, while 24% of respondents use social networks for about half an hour a day.



When the respondents were asked which social network they followed, their answer was that 65% followed Instagram, 19% followed Facebook, 12% followed Youtube and 3% Pinterest and 1% LinkedIn. In addition, the results show that most respondents reported using Instagram most often , always (34%), and often (32%). Most respondents indicated that they never use Twitter (87%), LinkedIn (74%), or Pinterest (62%). Although 74% of respondents said that YouTube is one of the social networks they use according to the information about the tourist destination .



From the responses of the respondents, we understood that 98% followed more than two social networks and 2% were focused on one to two social networks. The largest number of respondents connect to social networks through their cell phones: 45% said they always do so and 22 % frequently. Most respondents said they never use a tablet (67%) or desktop computer (54%) to connect to social networks. When we asked tourists if they were influenced by social media to make a decision to select a destination, it turned out that 66% were influenced and 34% were not influenced by social media.



5. CONCLUSION

This study is a preliminary study to better understand the studied relationships between the use of social networks, communication in social networks and information in social networks that influence the decision-making process of potential tourists when choosing a destination. According to collected data we can conclude that decision-making process of choosing a destination influenced by the use of social networks, communication in social networks and information in social networks. The conducted study on the perceptions of tourists shows that the use, communication and information in social networks, which arise from the usefulness of the social network community, influence the decision-making process in choosing a destination. Respondents confirmed that they spend on average about one hour per day on social networks and very often more than two hours per

day, and that they use social networks to learn about destinations that interest them and how they use social networks to plan their trips. Related to the age group of tourists who use social media, we are almost dealing with an age group over 30 years old who are more involved in making the decision to travel to destinations such as Korca . Korca is a destination which, due to its exposure and promotion on social networks, has recently gained popularity as a destination because according to tourists, there they can confront the information of social networks with reality. Social networks allow interactive communication, which creates advantageous conditions for both sides. In addition to easier and faster access to information, tourists can directly ask a question to be answered in the shortest possible time, and also get a better and more accurate picture of the object of study by communicating with other users of social networks. On the other hand, destinations receive feedback from users, existing and potential tourist, and can get information faster and easier, based on which they can work on their own improvement. This plays a very important role for destinations, and future tourists, too. The information gathered on social networks gives an insight into the perception of potential tourists, and the results obtained for destinations underline the importance of having a profile on social networks and keeping it up to date. As can be seen from the research, information on social networks is positively related to the decision-making process of choosing a destination.

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