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Influence of social media on shaping tourists' preferences

Abstract. The aim of this article is to present the role of social media and influencers (being an inseparable element of these media) in shaping tourists' preferences. The research was conducted from March to May 2021. The method of research was a diagnostic survey with the use of the questionnaire technique. The answers were obtained from 127 adults. Based on the results, it can be concluded that social media are a popular and willingly used source of inspiration when planning a tourist trip and play a significant role in creating the image of a tourist destination. Influencers significantly contribute to the growth of interest in the destinations they promote. However, they are not treated as a source of reliable and credible information.

Key words: social media, influencers, tourism, tourists' preferences, influence

Introduction

The multidimensionality, interdisciplinarity, and connection of tourism with many areas of socio-economic life translate into numerous conditions for developing tourism demand. UNWTO indicated over 130 determinants of this type (Uglis and Krysińska, 2012; Zawadka, 2017). In the literature on the subject, you can find many ways of grouping variables that affect the size and structure of tourism demand. For example, V. Middleton (1996) divides the main determinants of tourism demand into six groups: economic, demographic, geographic, legal and political, psychosocial factors, and the influence of the media. Among the latter, social media has been of great importance in recent years (Bradbury, 2011; Tham, Croy and Mair, 2013; Hudson and Thal, 2013; Kachniewska, 2015; Amaro, Duarte and Henriques, 2016; Zajadacz, 2017; Gulati, 2021; Yuan et al., 2022). The aim of the article is to present the role of social media and influencers (an inseparable element of these media) in shaping tourists' preferences. Research issues are reflected in the following research questions:

- Do tourists look for inspiration in choosing a destination on social media before the trip, and are they susceptible to influencer's suggestions in this regard?

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- What is the effectiveness of social media in promoting a given place as attractive to tourists?
- Do tourists consider influencers reliable sources of information, and what features influence their perception as trustworthy content creators on social media?

The essence and genesis of social media

The Internet was first used for communication in 1971 when R. Tomilson sent the first email (Internet Society, 2019). The first discussion groups, where interesting articles and observations were shared, started in 1978–1979. Since 1995, the Classmates.com website has been operating in the USA, which is used to find old friends from school. Its Polish counterpart, launched ten years later, was called Nasza-Klasa. SixDegrees.com, established in 1997, is considered the first social networking site (Garwol, 2017). The breakthrough moment in the development of global social media was 2004 when the undisputed “king” of social media was created – Facebook (only since 2008 has this portal had a Polish version). In 2005, YouTube was established as the most popular place for sharing video resources. A year later, Twitter appeared, in 2010, Instagram, and in 2018, TikTok. The image below shows the creation dates of the more important social media (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Dates of the creation of major social media

Source: Rozwój mediów społecznościowych. Pobrano z: <https://rysujefejsbuki.pl/wpis/rozwoj-mediow-spolesnosciochwych/> (access: 30.06.2022).

Social media (SM or online social network OSN) are network applications based on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and characterized by a high degree of interactivity. The essence of their use is the ability to create and exchange user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Therefore, they can be seen as a communication channel that ensures two-way communication. They contrast to traditional channels, such as television, radio, or press, where the message is transmitted only one way – to the client (Raport Social Media, 2010). Therefore, social media are all kinds of websites that, apart from communicating with their other users, enable active cooperation, e.g., publishing various types of content, opinions about products and services, playing network games, joint buying, or looking for favorable price offers. Importantly, as M. Popiolek (2015) notes, the basis here is the ability to communicate with other people, regardless of their physical distance. Social media can therefore be seen as interactions between people in creating and sharing information and ideas in virtual communities (Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014).

Three components of social media are essential: communities, content, and Web 2.0. According to T. Ahlqvist et al. (2008), these three elements constitute social media. This compilation can be called a social media triangle (Fig. 2).

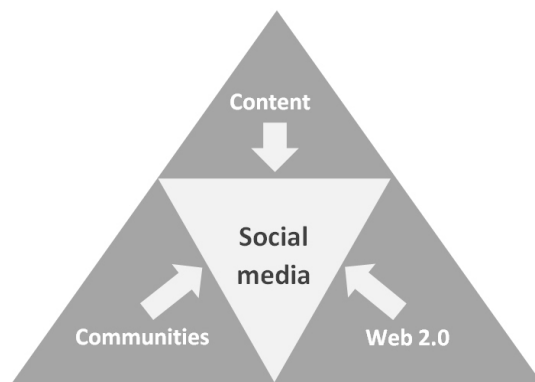


Figure 2. Social media triangle

Source: own elaboration based on Ahlqvist et al. (2008).

The essence and foundation of the functioning of social media is precisely their social character. Creating, uploading, and participating is interesting when other people do the same. In social media, communities focus on specific content, creating, sharing, modifying, and commenting on it. It may be photos, pictures, or videos, but it also presents information, tags, reviews, and playlists. The third element of social media is the technical aspect that underlies the development of technology. It is Web 2.0, the essence of which is the ability to generate and share various content by users. This, in turn, is necessary for further interaction of community members and for the exchange and commenting of this content in virtual communities and networks (Toivonen, 2007). It should also be mentioned here that the concept of Web 2.0 is contrasted with the idea of Web 1.0, which refers

to the original form of the Internet, when content, like in traditional media, was mainly received and not co-created by users (Kaznowski, 2008). Therefore, when talking about Web 2.0, one should bear in mind its essential elements: individual production and user-generated content, harnessing the power of the crowd, data on an epic scale, architecture of participation, network effects, and openness (Anderson, 2007).

It is also worth mentioning that social media are usually associated only with social networks and blogs. However, they also take many other forms. A. Kaplan and M. Haenlein (2010) classified the media based on two criteria: self-presentation/self-disclosure and social presence/media richness. On this basis, they distinguished six types of media, which are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of social media by social presence/media richness and self-presentation/self-disclosure

		Social presence/media richness		
		low	medium	high
Self-presentation/ /self-disclosure	high	blogs and vlogs	social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter)	virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life)
	low	collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia)	content communities (e.g., YouTube, TikTok)	virtual game worlds (e.g., Fortnite, Minecraft)

Source: own elaboration based on Kaplan and Haenlein (2010).

For social presence and media richness, applications such as collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), blogs, and vlogs score lowest, as they are often text-based and hence only allow for a relatively simple exchange. On the next level are content communities (e.g., YouTube, TikTok) and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) which, in addition to text-based communication, enable the sharing of pictures, videos, and other forms of media. On the highest level are virtual games and social worlds (e.g., Fortnite, Minecraft, Second Life), which try to replicate all dimensions of face-to-face interactions in a virtual environment. Regarding self-presentation and self-disclosure, blogs usually score higher than collaborative projects, as the latter tend to be focused on specific content domains. Similarly, social networking sites allow for more self-disclosure than content communities. Finally, virtual social worlds require a higher level of self-disclosure than virtual game worlds, as the latter is ruled by strict guidelines that force users to behave in a certain way (e.g., as warriors in an imaginary land; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

The platform with the most significant number of active users worldwide was Facebook in 2021, which was used by almost three billion people (Digital 2022: Global...). YouTube came second (two and a half billion users), and WhatsApp was third (two billion users). Details are presented in Figure 3.

Social networks can be divided into two primary groups. The first are those with an established position that has been on the market for many years (e.g., Facebook, YouTube). The second is the dynamically developing media. TikTok deserves special attention

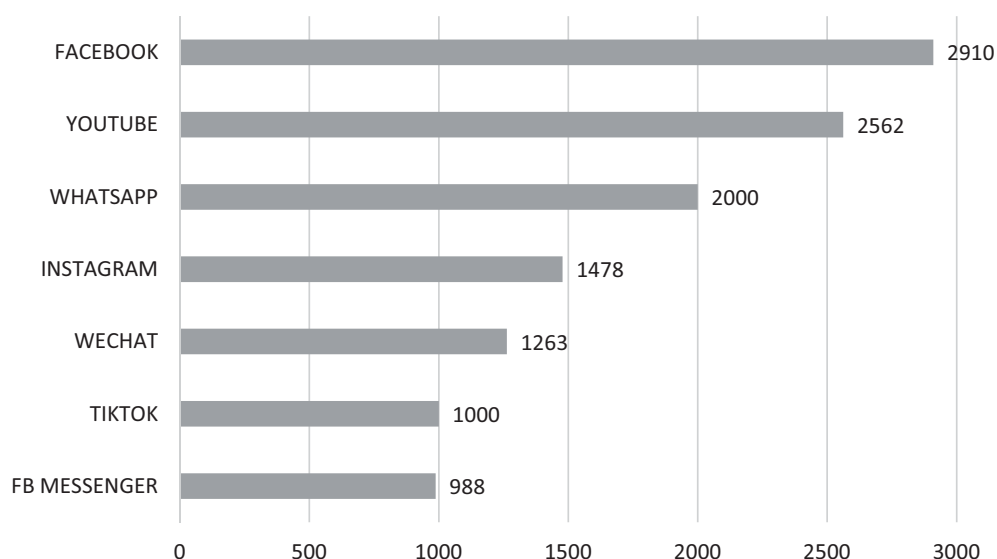


Figure 3. The world's most-used social media platforms (active user figures in millions)

Source: own elaboration based on Digital 2022: Global Overview Report.

here, for which in 2020, the active user base increased by 60%, and in 2021 by over 40%. It is also worth pointing out that the average social media user in 2021 spent an average of 2.5 hours daily on them. The leaders here were YouTube (23.7 hours/month) and Facebook (19.6 hours/month) (Digital 2022: Global...).

At the end of this part, it is worth pointing out that social media play an increasingly important role in the lives of many of us from year to year, and there is no indication that this will change. Globally, in 2021, there were over 4.2 billion of their users, which means that more than half of humanity uses them.

Research methods

The realization of the aim of the study was possible thanks to empirical research of a quantitative nature. The research was conducted from March to May 2021. The method of research was a diagnostic survey with the use of the questionnaire technique. According to the developed questionnaire, the study was carried out among adult residents of Poland. The questionnaire was disseminated on Facebook and Instagram. Correctly completed questionnaires were obtained from 127 adult people.

Characteristics of the respondents

The respondents were dominated by women, who constituted 85.8%. The vast majority of the respondents were young – 92.9% were under 30 years of age (most of which were not more than 24 years old). How the research was conducted could have contributed to it – the link to the questionnaire was disseminated on social media. In this case,

the age of the respondents had an impact on their education level (57.5% had secondary education, 41.7% higher, and 0.8% vocational or lower) and their professional situation (55.9% studied, and almost 30% were doing intellectual work). Inhabitants of cities (mainly large cities with over 100,000 inhabitants) constituted 81.1% of the respondents. The respondents positively assessed their financial situation – 59.8% described it as good, 23.6% as tolerable, and 14.2% as very good.

Research results

Social media is a popular, easily accessible, and willingly used source of knowledge about goods and services both for the supply side (Kubiak, 2017) and their users (Kachniewska, 2013). They are also a significant source of inspiration in choosing the direction of travel for most of their observers (Delińska, 2018). This is also confirmed by the results of the research carried out for this study. More than half of the respondents (51.2%) stated that when planning tourist trips, they looked for inspiration on this type of portals. The opposite opinion was expressed by 26.0% of the respondents, and 22.8% said it was “hard to say”. Moreover, as many as 73.2% of respondents expressed the opinion that social media have a significant impact on the perception of a given place as attractive by tourists. Only 2.4% of the respondents had the opposite opinion, and the rest (24.4%) found it difficult to express an opinion on this subject.

An inseparable element of most social media are influencers, i.e., famous people who can effectively influence the opinion of others, and their recognition and positive recommendation are sometimes worth more than a high-budget advertising campaign (Kuczamer-Kłopotowska and Piekarska, 2018). This opinion also seems to be confirmed by the research results. Approximately half of the respondents declared that the reports of influencers from various places made them want to visit these destinations and acquire or broaden their knowledge about them. About 1/3 of the respondents did not declare such an impact, and the rest found it difficult to express an opinion on this subject (Fig. 4).

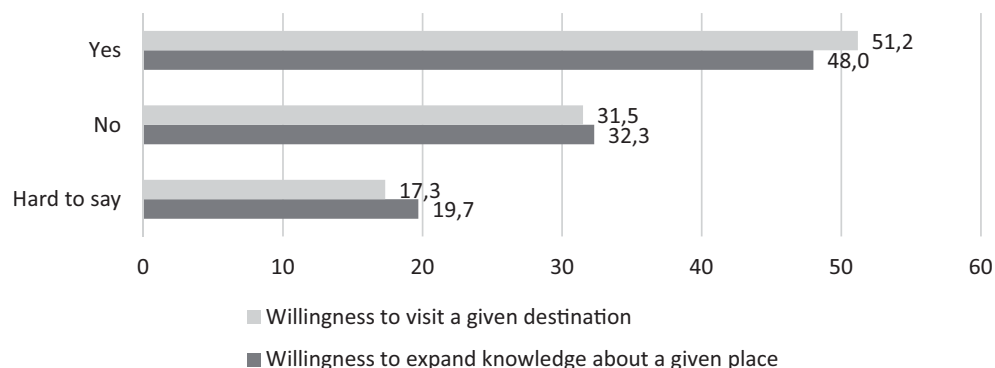


Figure 4. The impact of influencers on the willingness to expand knowledge and visit the places they promote on social media, as assessed by respondents [%]

Source: own research.

The important role of influencers is reflected in “influencer marketing”, which can be defined as searching for famous and influential people in a given field and working with them on the promotion of a brand or product thanks to the use of the community organized around this person (Jaska, Gomola and Werenowska, 2019). To create a good atmosphere around the brand, it seems more effective to “smuggle” a product in posts or videos than to overwhelm observers with advertising (Mamta and Deep-ti, 2014). As noted by Kuczamer-Kłopotowska and Piekarska (2018), in the context of the specificity of the consumer behavior profile of young people (which includes the vast majority of respondents), the use of an influencer as a kind of intermediary between the company/brand and the consumer seems to be a right and effective action. Influencers, as shown by these and other studies, significantly influence the purchasing decisions of young consumers (Woods, 2016; Stopczyńska, 2018). It should be noted, however, that even though influencers often influenced the choice of a tourist destination, they were rarely perceived by the respondents as a reliable and credible source of information. Such an opinion was expressed by only a few percent of respondents (Fig. 5).

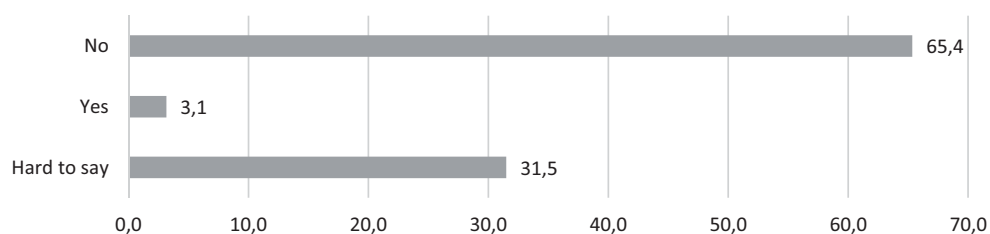


Figure 5. Influencers as a reliable source of information in the assessment of the respondents [%]

Source: own research.

Most respondents were critical and conscious recipients of the content published by influencers on social media. They approached the information provided by these people with a great distance, not trusting them significantly. Therefore, it can be assumed that the respondents felt a high degree of manipulation of the information provided on social media. This issue was analyzed more broadly in the publication by Klimasz (2019).

The respondents were also asked to indicate the characteristics of influencers and ways of their behavior that make them seem more trustworthy. The most frequently indicated features were honesty and objectivity, the manner of expression, and the nature of the companies with which they cooperate (Fig. 6).

For a large part of the respondents, the fact that such people did not get involved in various types of quarrels and verbal scuffles on the Internet, did not initiate scandals, did not succumb to provocations, and did not often establish cooperation with sponsors, was of great importance. The age of the influencer, the number of his followers,

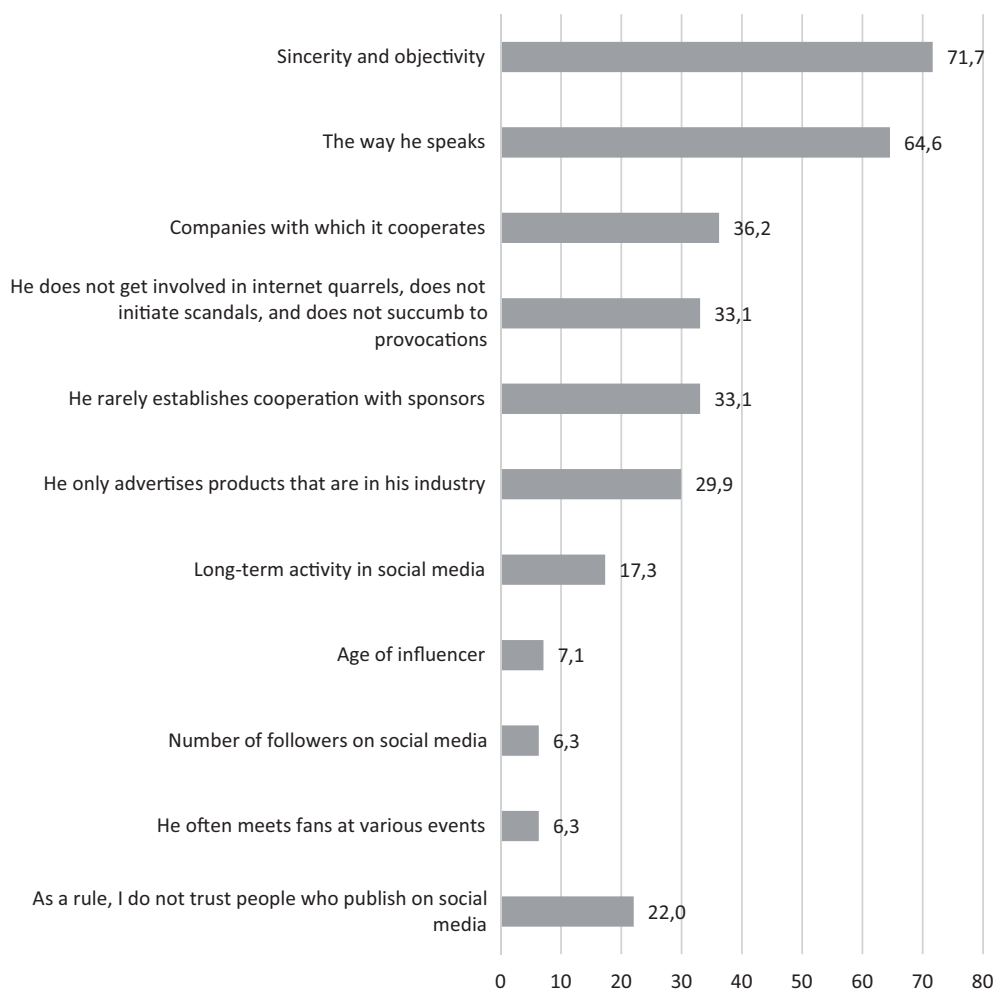


Figure 6. Features and factors that inspire confidence in the creator of content in social media* [%]

*Respondents could indicate more than one answer.

Source: own research.

and the high frequency of meeting fans at various events were of little importance. It should also be noted that almost a quarter of the respondents indicated that, as a rule, they do not trust people who publish on social media.

Conclusions

Today, social media is not only a place to communicate with friends and share photos and videos with them but also an essential and effective marketing tool, especially influencer marketing. On the other hand, influencers have a very high opinion-forming

power and influence the preferences and behavior of a significant part of society in many areas of modern life. One of them is also tourism. The conducted research allowed for the formulation of the following conclusions:

- Social media became a popular and willingly used source of inspiration for the respondents when planning a tourist trip. These media also played a significant role in creating the image of the tourist destination promoted in them as an attractive and worth visiting place.
- Influencers, through their reports from various places, significantly contribute to the growth of interest in these places and arouse the desire to visit and acquire or expand knowledge about them.
- It should be noted, however, that even though influencers greatly influenced the choice of a tourist destination, they were rarely treated by the respondents as a source of reliable and credible information. It can therefore be concluded that these people are seldom trusted.
- The features and factors that increase this trust and the level of their credibility were mainly honesty and objectivity, an appropriate manner of expression, and the nature of the companies with which they cooperate.

The constantly growing popularity of social media and the growing number of influencers with a significant reach means that these people will have an increasing influence on the preferences and behavior of many tourists, as well as on shaping tourism trends. Therefore, conducting broader and more in-depth research in this area seems reasonable. Their results may improve one of the most powerful tools of modern marketing, influencer marketing.

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