

The Effect of Social Media Marketing on Consumer Behavior of Tourism Destinations

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Abstract: The article shows the role of social media marketing in developing tourist destinations. It is emphasized that using social media marketing tools helps tourist destinations manage relations with customers. The paper focuses on the use of social media marketing in tourist destinations. Here listed the reasons that prevent the development of social media marketing activities in Georgian tourist destinations. Considering this, marketing research was conducted, through which the attitude of tourists towards social media marketing activities provided by Georgian tourist destinations was studied. Here, customer interest, Engagement and satisfaction with such activities are also established. Statistically significant values have been obtained, which reflect the impact of social media marketing on the consumer behaviour of tourist destinations.

Key words: social media marketing, tourism destinations, consumer behavior, marketing research

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Introduction

The global network, the Internet, is socializing at a rapid pace, which is one of the main trends of the modern online system. According to the data of analytical agency We Are Social and social media management platform Hootsuite, by 2022, the number of Internet users in the world increased by 4% compared to the previous year and amounted to 4.95 billion, and the social media audience approached 4.62 billion people, which is 10.1% higher than the corresponding indicator of last year (DataReportal, 2022a). Such growth is due to the fact that today social media has gone beyond the sphere of youth entertainment and it is a platform of communication, learning and activity in which

people of different ages of the society are actively involved.

Social media is actively used in various marketing activities, such as sales promotion, customer relationship development, and more (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). This tool helps companies actively communicate with customers through social media and build close relationships with them (Kelly et al., 2010). That's why social media marketing has become an important component of digital marketing and has proven to be quite effective for targeting the target audience by companies (Atshaya & Rungta, 2016). Social media marketing applications and platforms facilitate user interaction, collaboration, and content sharing (Richter & Koch, 2007). In addition, social media, compared to

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traditional media, allows integrated marketing activities to be implemented with less effort and expense (Kim & Ko, 2012). Consequently, social media creates two-way connections that help organizations better understand their customers' demands and respond to them effectively (Parveen et al., 2016). However, the rapidly growing digital environment and the effectiveness of social media have a colossal impact on marketing, purchasing behavior and e-business practices (Shin et al., 2015).

In recent times, researchers have paid much attention to social media technologies used for communication between tourist destinations and their customers. This is why social media activities are becoming an essential component of modern destination marketing. The main element of touristic system is the territory attracting the tourists for travel, where they spend certain time (Pike, 2008). World Tourism Organization regards touristic destination as the main component of touristic products formation and delivery process (WTO, 2007). Touristic destination, as a complex phenomenon, basically includes touristic attractions, tourist infrastructure and accompanying services (Pike and Page, 2014). Researchers regard touristic destination conception as part of wider, destination marketing conception. In this respect, destination, as a geographic unit, visited by the tourist is regarded as a touristic product (Alhroot, 2014). Hence, place or destination could be conceptualized as a product that is consumed (Hausteinova, 2013; Nguyen, 2014). In this context it requires marketing approaches to package it in such a manner that could match the consumers' requirements (Benckendorff and Black, 2005).

The concept of social media marketing is actively used by successful Georgian companies. This is due to the fact that the number of Internet users in Georgia has increased significantly in recent years. In particular, in Georgia in 2022, the number of Internet users reached 2.88 million (72.5% of

the total population), and the number of social media users amounted to 3.35 million (84.3% of the total population), which compared to the corresponding indicators of 2021 It is 8.1% more (DataReportal, 2022b). It should also be noted that tourism, which is one of the fastest growing industries in the country, plays a major role in the development of Georgia's economy. In the pre-pandemic period, the number of international tourists in Georgia and the income received from them increased every year. The year 2019 was the most impressive in the tourism industry of Georgia, when the number of visits by international travelers was about 9.3 million, including the number of tourists - about 5 million. In 2019, Georgia received 3.2 billion USD from tourism, and the tourism sector accounted for 8.4% of GDP (Geostat, 2022). Due to the pandemic, the tourism sector has been significantly affected, especially in 2020, when severe restrictions related to the pandemic resulted in the virtual paralysis of international tourism, and a sharp decrease in domestic tourism. By 2021, the number of international travelers' visits to Georgia amounted to approximately 1.9 million (a 5-fold decrease compared to 2019), and the number of tourist visits - 1.6 million (a 3.2-fold decrease). By 2022, the situation will improve. The number of international tourist visits in 8 months of 2022 amounted to 1.7 million, which is +162% more compared to the same period last year. In the month of January-August 2022, Georgia received 2.1 billion dollars in income from international travel (tourism), which is a 94.6% recovery of the 2019 figure and, considering the pandemic, is an encouraging statistic (National Tourism Administration of Georgia, 2022).

Unfortunately, it should also be said that many Georgian tourism companies implement the wrong policy of social media marketing, which hinders their development. There are many factors that prevent the development of social media marketing in Georgian

destinations. These are: high prices for tourism products, low professionalism of employees in the field of tourism and lack of monitoring to determine the level of customer satisfaction in social media. In addition, it should be emphasized that the lack of understanding of the social media platform in Georgia and its connection with the tourism industry is particularly significant. One of the reasons for this is that proper marketing research in Georgia's tourism industry is at a low level. Based on the above, studying the role of social media marketing is one of the current problems of the Georgian tourism business. Although some works have been done in the direction of consumer behavior in Georgia recently (Apil, et al., 2009; Jashi and Todua, 2013; Todua et al., 2013; Todua and Dotchviri, 2015a; Todua and Dotchviri, 2015 b; Todua et al., 2015; Todua and Jashi, 2016; Todua et al., 2016; Mghebrishvili and Urotadze, 2016; Todua, 2017a; Todua, 2017b; Seturi and Urotadze, 2017; Matin et al., 2022). To date, the issues of consumer behavior in Georgian tourist destinations have not been studied much, which requires proper scientific processing. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct research to facilitate the improvement of relations with tourists based on an effective social media marketing platform. Based on the above, the aim of this paper was to determine the attitude of consumers towards social media marketing activities provided by Georgian tourist destinations.

Literature review

Destination marketing, as a conception is increasingly used by the governments of many countries and touristic organizations (Howie, 2003). Different countries, taking into consideration significance of tourism in the economy, make attempts to show themselves at world tourism market as the best touristic destinations (Fyall et al., 2009). Strengthening of globalization processes in late 20th century made destination marketing a quite complex

sphere that causes particular interest of modern researchers (Baker and Cameron, 2008). One of the outcomes of active development of tourism all over the world is increase of number of destinations available for tourists, making competition between the tourist companies increasingly severe (Kotler et al., 2002). Destination marketing provides promotion of certain country or city as a competitive place compared with the other places offering similar products or services (Mutinda, 2013). Therefore, destination marketing could be regarded as the means of improvement of touristic destination competitiveness and its holistic development (Wanjala, 2015).

At the modern stage, the development of destinations is unthinkable without social media. Today, consumers spend more and more time on social networks and receive most of their information through them (Khan and Jan, 2015). That's why social media is a powerful tool for companies to attract customers and compete (Safko, 2010). As the social media space expands, so do marketing opportunities (Lee, 2010). Consequently, it becomes necessary for businesses to develop social media marketing strategies that ensure the delivery of information to the target audience at minimal costs (Barker et al., 2012). It should be noted that the marketing potential of social media has been widely studied (Safko, 2010; Zeng and Geristen, 2014). Social networking issues focus on both organizations and users. However, it is clear that the main subject of social media marketing is the consumer. Therefore, in developing a successful social media communication strategy, researchers pay special attention to listening, understanding, engaging and interacting with users (Sweeney and Craig, 2011).

The use of social media marketing is particularly popular in the tourism industry (Zeng and Geristen, 2014; Evangelos, 2012). Current technological changes in mass media

enable the rapid dissemination of information in the field of tourism (Zarella, 2013). Wise use of social media in tourism requires creative marketing approaches that ensure maximum coverage of the target audience (Zeng and Geristen, 2014). Social media websites are becoming increasingly popular in the tourism industry and are likely to become the primary source of information for management of destination organizations (Jalilvand et al., 2012). Such organizations perceive the social media space as a new marketing mechanism that allows tourists to learn more about the destination (Boulin, 2008). However, it should be noted that the functional attributes of tourist destinations alone no longer help destinations attract travelers, as the similarity and interchangeability of destination products is gradually increasing (Pike and Ryan, 2004; Usakli and Baloglu, 2011). Therefore positioning of destination based on its ability to offer visitors unique experiences, relationships and self-expression represents a strong competitive advantage (Papadimitriou et al., 2013). This requires a complex approach to understanding the emotional experience of tourists (Garcia et al., 2012; Blain et al., 2005).

Based on the above, social media contributes to the development of marketing in the tourism industry. The analysis of literature sources shows that travel service users usually trust online information and visit forums and online reviews as well as specialized blogs before planning their trip (Evangelos, 2012). Most of today's consumers rely on social media sites to gain information and learn more about new travel destinations to help them make travel planning decisions. A large number of users believe that there is a strong relationship between social media site engagement and changes in user behavior (Minazzi, 2015). Online reviews of travel and booking sites are becoming increasingly popular for travel planning. From the point of view of some travel agencies, it is quite important to measure the impact of social

media on customer satisfaction, in which the effectiveness and sustainability of each social channel will be considered (Schaefer, 2014).

The technological development and globalization of the media create new opportunities that provide information exchange between tourism consumers through blogs, web pages or destination sites (Zarella, 2013). Destinations need creative and strong social media marketing strategies to attract potential visitors. Social media enables destinations to communicate with visitors at a relatively low cost and with a higher level of effectiveness than can be achieved through traditional communication methods (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social media as a stimulation tool is used for interactive marketing, but it is worth noting the fact that in recent times the number of visitors who use social media applications is constantly increasing, which creates new challenges for the tourism industry as a whole (Schmallegger and Carson, 2008; Heinonen, 2011; Carr and Hayes, 2015). Based on the review of literature review, we can formulate the following hypotheses:

- H1 Interest in social media marketing activities provided by Georgian tourist destinations has a positive effect on tourists' satisfaction;
- H2 Engagement in social media marketing activities provided by Georgian tourist destinations has a positive effect on tourists' satisfaction;
- H3 Credibility towards social media marketing activities provided by Georgian tourist destinations has a positive effect on tourists' satisfaction;
- H4 Satisfaction with the social media marketing activity provided by Georgian tourist destinations has a positive effect on the buying behavior of tourists.

Methodology

The research was carried out in two stages, which was based on qualitative and

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quantitative research methods. In the first stage, qualitative research was conducted using the focus group method (Malhotra, 2010). Focus group participants were selected to cover different categories of tourism product users. At this stage, the research design was introduced, research questions were formulated and priorities for further research were determined. In the second stage, we used the customer survey method, and as a research tool we selected a questionnaire consisting of several structured questions. The questionnaire included information on respondent consent and confidentiality, as well as an explanation of the study and instructions for completion. The research used measures taken based on relevant literature and selected for their reliability and validity. In particular, the study measured 4 items of Interest (Savitri et al., 2022; Juliana et al., 2022), 4 items of Engagement (Pansari

& Kumar, 2017; Tafesse & Wien, 2018), 4 items of Credibility (Chiguvi et al., 2019), 2 items of Satisfaction (Van Dolen et al., 2007) and 3 items of Buying behavior (Jamil et al., 2022). A five-point scale is used in the questionnaire. The survey was conducted by face-to-face interview method. We formed the sample in such a way that it was representative. Duration of interview was 15-20 minutes. Selection was provided so that it was representative. Area of the survey was Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia, where the respondents were selected randomly. Considering a 95% reliable probability and a 4% margin of error, a total of 600 foreign tourists were interviewed who were accommodated in different hotels in Tbilisi. 43 hotels located in Tbilisi were selected as the research object. The obtained results were processed by the statistical software SPSS -22

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Characteristics	Percent (%)	Characteristics	Percent (%)
Age		Profession	
18-24	16.7	Owner/Entrepreneur	13.4
25-34	26.8	Manager	27.8
35-44	22.3	Employee	39.4
45-54	18.7	Student	12.7
55-64	12.0	Other	6.7
65 or above	3.5	Marital status	
Gender		Single	41.4
Female	56.8	Married	58.6
Male	43.2	Stay	
Education		1-3 days	29.8
Pre high school	12.0	4-5 days	34.6
Vocational	21.5	1 week	21.2
Bachelor degree	29.3	>1 week	14.4
Master degree	34.1	Personal monthly income	
Ph.D.	3.1	Below 1000 USD	5.6
Visitation		1001 – 2000 USD	8.7
First time visitor	51.0	2001 – 3000 USD	23.8
Repeat visitor	49.0	3001 – 4000 USD	17.4
Travel party		4001 – 5000 USD	13.9
Alone	19.5	Over 5000 USD	12.1
Couple	34.8	Private (n/a)	18.5
Family	5.7		
Friends	26.7		
Colleagues	13.3		

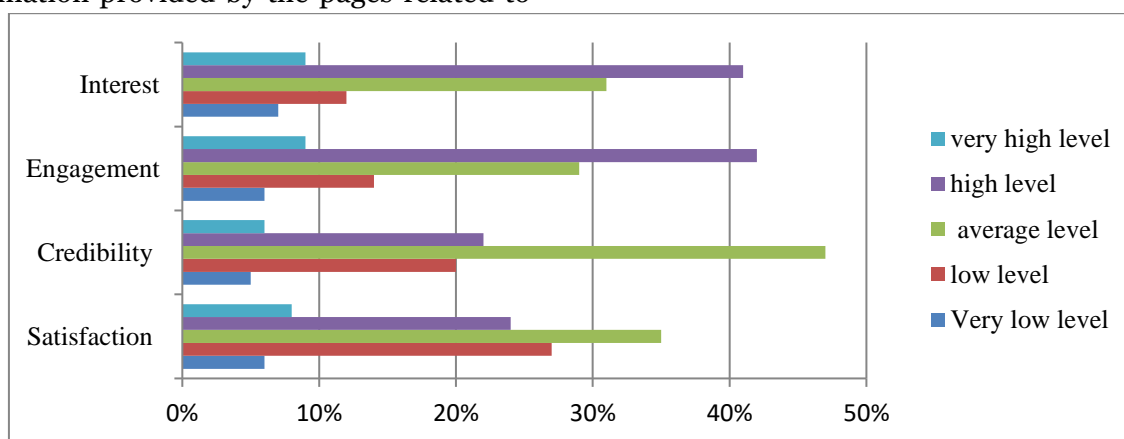
Source: own elaboration

The research showed that among the social media platforms, Facebook is the most

popular among foreign tourists who come to Georgia. It is consumed by 85.1% of the

respondents. This is followed by YouTube (54.7%), Instagram (32.4%), Google+ (31.1%), LinkedIn (29.9%), Twitter (27.2%) and MySpace (15.5%). Other social networks (Pinterest, Tumblr, Flickr, Reddit, Ask.fm, V Kontakte, Odnoklassniki) are used by 14% of respondents. The research revealed the interest, engagement, credibility and satisfaction of the respondents towards the information provided by the pages related to

the tourist destinations of Georgia. The respondents presented their evaluations using a five-point Likert scale. They recorded scores from 1 to 5 in ascending order of importance (see Fig. 1). The analysis reveals that the respondents are more or less satisfied with the social media marketing offered by the tourist destinations of Georgia, however, they show quite a lot of interest.



Source: own elaboration

Figure 1: Levels of Foreign Tourists' Interest, Engagement, Credibility and Satisfaction with Social Media Marketing provided by Georgian Tourist Destinations

Table 2: Mean score of interest, engagement, credibility, satisfaction and buying behavior

Construct and scale items	Mean	SD
1. interest (5-point scales anchored from very low to high level) 1= very low level; 5= very high level		
1.1. context	3.88	1.19
1.2. communication	3.29	1.14
1.3. collaboration	4.30	0.91
1.4. connection	4.06	1.09
2. Engagement (5-point scales anchored by strongly disagree and strongly agree) 1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree		
2.1. Tourist destinations encourage consumers to interact with them in social media	3.27	1.13
2.2. Tourist destinations create engaging content to stimulate consumer engagement	3.36	1.11
2.3. Tourist destinations actively respond to consumer comments and questions	4.12	1.04
2.4. Tourist destinations acknowledge and reward consumers who engage with them	4.31	0.89
3. Credibility (5-point scales anchored by strongly disagree and strongly agree) 1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree		
3.1. I trust the information provided by tourist destinations	4.47	0.82
3.2. Tourist destinations offer enough information to make decisions	4.02	1.15
3.3. I use social media to find information about tourist destinations	4.31	0.91
3.4. I use social media to get feedback from other users about travel destinations	3.44	1.14
4. Satisfaction (5-point scales anchored by strongly disagree and strongly agree) 1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree		
4.1. I am satisfied with the way of social media marketing activities provided by tourist destinations	4.10	1.18
4.2. Based on my experience, I am satisfied with the social media marketing activities provided by tourist destinations	4.33	0.93
5. Buying behavior (5-point scales anchored by strongly disagree and strongly agree) 1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree		

5.1. I intend to make buying decisions related to travel destinations use social media	4.23	0.97
5.2. My intentions are to engage with the social media offered by the tourist destinations	4.27	0.96
5.3. I intend to make buying decisions about travel destinations through social media in the near future	4.34	0.98

Source: own elaboration

Conducted an analysis of variance in order to verify the hypothesis of interest. One Way ANOVA F-Test used to understand the relation between the independent variables and the dependent variables. At first, investigated how the social media marketing activities attributes (Interest, Engagement and Credibility) provided by Georgian tourist destinations

influences on the tourists' satisfaction. The findings indicate the coefficient of the tourists' satisfaction is significant at the 5% level. This meaning social media marketing activities attributes (interest, Engagement and Credibility) are significant determinants of the tourists' satisfaction (see Table 3).

Table 3: Dispersion analysis of the impact of social media activity provided by Georgian destinations on tourist satisfaction

Independent variable	Dependent variable: Tourist satisfaction				
	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	P
Interest	6,155	4	2,052	1,930	.001
Engagement	9,930	4	1,986	1,867	.001
Credibility	8,166	4	1,633	1,316	.003
Error	868,343	817	1.063		

Source: own elaboration

One Way ANOVA F-Test has been used to check the satisfaction attributes impacts on the buying behavior of tourists (see Table 4).

Table 4: Dispersion analysis of the impact of satisfaction on tourist buying behavior of tourists

Independent variable	Dependent variable: Buying behavior of tourists				
	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	P
Satisfaction	10.608	3	3.536	3.628	.013
Error	868,343	817	1.063		

Source: own elaboration

As can be seen from conduct our analysis of variance, the level of statistical significance in all cases discussed does not exceed 0.05. Consequently, between the discussed variables statistically significant relations at the 5% level is established, thus all the above-stated hypotheses are supported.

Cronbach's coefficient alpha was used in this study to assess the reliability of the measures. Nunnally (1978) suggests a reliability coefficient of 0.60 or larger as a basis for acceptance of the measure. A

Cronbach alpha coefficient of 1 would indicate perfect uni-dimensionality within a scale. When Cronbach alpha was computed for all the twenty-three items of the scale this was found to be 0.901. This indicated the possibility that the entire scale was uni-dimensional. Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.901 can be considered a reasonably high-reliability coefficient. Based on this, it can be concluded that all 23 attributes used are measuring the attitudes of foreign tourists toward Georgian destinations (See Table 5).

Table 5: Reliability statistics

	Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
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All	0.901	17
Interest	0.902	4
Engagement	0.893	4
Credibility	0.879	4
Satisfaction	0.862	2
Buying behavior	0.828	3

Source: own elaboration

Conclusion

As a result of our marketing research, we can conclude that Georgia is an attractive destination for foreign tourists. That is why the number of people coming to Georgia for the second time is increasing every year. When choosing Georgian tourist destinations, foreign tourists are interested in information posted on social media. Despite this, foreign tourists evaluate the media marketing actions carried out by Georgian tourist companies at an average level, which indicates the inappropriate activity of local tourist companies on social networks. Therefore, based on the results of the research, it is necessary to provide foreign tourists with more information about Georgian destinations on social media. The companies employed in the tourism business of Georgia should understand the current situation and implement such social media activities for foreign tourists that will give them a higher level of satisfaction and make them want to be loyal to the respective destinations. The present study is the basis for the further study of the attraction of foreign tourists in the tourist market of Georgia and the corresponding consumer behavior. The results of the research will help people working in the tourism business of Georgia to form a global view of the attitude of consumers towards destinations, which will allow them to determine the main trends in the development of the local market.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study uses data from only one city of Tbilisi, which may not be represented in all destinations of Georgia (despite the fact that 50% of the total number of visits by foreign tourists to Georgia occur in Tbilisi). The ideal

study on this topic should be based on data from several cities and relevant destinations to determine if the results are very common for different destinations in Georgia. In the end, it may also be useful to conduct a survey using the same questionnaire in different cities of the country to get a global view. In addition, we did not investigate the attitudes of foreign tourists to different attributes of destinations of Georgia and therefore the relationship between the respective dependent variable and the independent variable was not established. We also did not explore the effects of interactions between independent variables. Future work may explore these modifications. Notwithstanding the foregoing, the results of the research will be useful for employees of the Georgian destinations and travel agencies that are planning to attract foreign tourists and win their loyalty.

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