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Digital marketing in tourism: the role of social media and online platforms in shaping tourist flows

The article is devoted to the study of problematic issues in the development of digital marketing in tourism, in particular the role of social media and digital platforms in shaping tourist flows. The paper analyzes the impact of the war on the global tourism landscape and identifies indicators of «overtourism» in some European countries.

The key challenge of modern tourism policy lies in achieving a balance between benefits and sustainable flow management. The authors characterize the influence of digital platforms on tourism-related decisions and analyze the sources of information used by travelers when choosing destinations.

The findings suggest that the promotion of tourism services through digital marketing is carried out using the following main digital tools: social media marketing (SMM); blogs and Internet forums; video advertising; search engine marketing (SEM); search engine optimization (SEO); digital content marketing; e-mail marketing; press releases in online media; push notifications; mobile applications; crowdsourcing platforms, among others. Artificial intelligence algorithms are applied to process large datasets, which makes it possible to provide personalized recommendations for tourists. The use of such algorithms enables the identification of individual preferences of consumers of tourism services and the creation of optimized routes, thus enhancing the quality and uniqueness of the tourism experience.

It has been established that social media platforms allow for the creation of personalized offers, which increases tourist satisfaction and fosters loyalty. As a result, digital marketing in social media has become a powerful tool for the strategic management of tourist flows.

Keywords: tourism; digital marketing; destinations; social media; digital platforms; tourist flows; travel planning

Relevance of the topic. The quality of customer service is an important aspect of the tourism industry, but much has changed thanks to social networks, since at the current stage of development of society, the tourism industry is one of the most dependent on digital technologies and online communications. For the tourism industry, the era of brochures and billboards is over. The key to success in business is the collection of distributions in social networks, positive user reviews and customer satisfaction in social networks. Social media and digital platforms are shaping new approaches to choosing destinations, planning trips and consuming tourism services. The post-war reconstruction of Ukraine and the restoration of the tourism sector will directly depend on the effectiveness of using digital tools in the activities of tourism industry entities. Therefore, the topic of the study is relevant.

Analysis of recent research and publications. Many scientists are engaged in the study of digital marketing in tourism, such as: N.Babko, D.Hrynyuk, Yu.Kurudzhi, I.Stepanets, N.Savytska, I.Tyshchuk, O.Ilyina, G.Kholodny, Yu.Kholodna, N. Flint and others.

Kurudzhi Yu.V. together with a group of authors in their article note that: «digital marketing technologies are able to attract interest in relevant services, increase the efficiency of functioning and competitiveness not only of this sphere, but also stimulate the development of related industries. Today, leading tourism companies from different countries of the world have significant experience in implementing digital marketing tools, and a number of such practices are of interest to the domestic industry» [1].

Stepanets I., Hryniuk D., Savytska N. note that social networks are one of the key tools for attracting the attention of tourists, in particular citizens of other countries, which, in turn, develops the tourist brand of both Ukraine as a whole and its individual regions, and increases the tourist attractiveness of destinations [2].

Tyshchuk I., Ilyina O. studied the impact of digital technologies on data analysis and decision-making in the tourism business, noting that the large amount of information generated by digital channels allows the company to improve strategies and forecast demand. The importance of adapting tourism companies to the digital environment was also confirmed, which in turn will quickly increase the efficiency and competitiveness of the tourism business [3].

Interesting are the studies of scientists Abdelrehim Awad and Bshayr Alharti, who analyzed the impact of digital marketing strategies, namely: marketing in social networks, electronic «word of mouth» (e-WOM) and online advertising on brand awareness and tourists' intentions to visit destinations. The researchers concluded that digital marketing has become a central driver in the promotion of tourism, changing the way destinations interact with potential visitors and noted that given the growing reliance on digital tools in travel planning, tourism marketers should prioritize the development of integrated digital marketing strategies to maximize reach and engagement with target audiences [4].

The role of social media influencers in the digital co-creation of destination image has been studied by J.- M.Dorta-Prin and A.Santana-Talavera. They argue that influencer posts are likely to contribute to the formation of the perceived image of a destination, as well as its co-creation through interaction, which is consistent with the existing literature. Moreover, the admiration that users feel for influencers goes hand in hand with their role as role models for their followers [5].

Flint N. notes: «Tourism enterprises need to constantly and actively encourage and motivate travelers to share content and their sincere impressions. This is the main SMM marketing strategy of any tourism enterprise – to be as close as possible to their audience and know it» [6].

«Digital technologies have made it possible to automate booking processes, simplifying users' access to hotels, restaurants, and travel services through online platforms and mobile applications; thanks to Big Data and AI, personalized service has become widely popular, helping hotels and restaurants analyze consumer behavior and offer them individual services, increasing guest satisfaction», a group of Ukrainian researchers argued in their study [7].

The aim of the article is to investigate the role and characteristics of the choice of tourist destinations using social media and online platforms and their use in shaping tourist flows.

Presentation of the main material. The tourism industry is one of the first to introduce new technologies and solutions. Social networks have allowed this sector to improve various processes and provide a better experience for travelers around the world.

People from all over the world continue to use social networks to talk about their travels. In fact, 74 % of people who travel use social networks during their vacation. According to recent studies, social networks have become a vital part of the strategic operations of travel companies during the pandemic, and consumption has increased by 72 % [8]. International centers for tourism research found that 88 % of travel companies actively use social networks to promote destinations and offers, as well as to understand consumer attitudes [8]. According to data from Influencer Marketing Hub, 70 % of travel brands use influencer marketing. A combination of factors makes it so influential. Statistics show that 75 % of travelers were inspired to visit a certain destination after hearing about it on social media [9].

The conflict in Ukraine has fundamentally changed the global tourism landscape, extending its impact far beyond the immediate battlefields. The war has not simply caused a temporary setback; it has triggered a fundamental structural transformation of the global tourism ecosystem, forcing a reassessment of traditional market dependencies and risk management strategies. As of February 2024, the total estimated cost of physical damage to Ukraine's cultural and tourism sectors has reached almost \$3.5 billion, a 40 % increase over 2023 estimates. This significant damage includes \$2.41 billion to heritage sites, \$161 million to artworks and collections, \$262 million to buildings and workshops in the cultural and creative industries, and \$650 million to tourism facilities. Kharkiv region was the worst affected, accounting for almost 25 % of the reported losses, followed by Donetsk region with 14.7 % and Odesa region with 7.6 % [10].

However, there is a factor of overtourism in Europe. Among the reasons contributing to the record figures are cheap flights, social networks, the ease of planning trips with the help of artificial intelligence, and what UN tourism officials call strong economic prospects for many wealthy countries that send tourists, despite some geopolitical and economic tensions. In some of Europe's most visited destinations, the number of tourists often exceeds the country's population (tab. 1).

Table 1

Indicators of «excessive» tourism in some European countries

Country	Resident population, million people	Tourist visitors, million people	Number of visitors per 100 inhabitants of countries, persons
Netherlands	18	21	118
Italy	59	74	126
France	66	100	152
Portugal	11	19	181
Spain	49	94	193
Greece	10	41	391

Source: according to [11]

Excessive tourism, in addition to its positive aspects, especially the increase in income from tourism activities, often has negative features, in particular: an increase in tourist capacity, the emergence of social tension among the population due to discomfort, environmental pressure due to the destruction of natural landscapes, pollution, and economic distortions (tab. 2).

Table 2

Positive and negative impacts of tourism

The sphere of society	Positive consequences	Challenges and negative consequences
Economic sphere	Growth in income from activities due to increased tourist flows, increased jobs, and development of small businesses	Expanding housing demand, economy's dependence on tourism, inflationary pressure on goods and services
Social sphere	Strengthening intercultural exchange, increasing the number of educational and educational-cultural programs, expanding destinations and increasing their prestige	Conflicts with the local population, overpopulation in tourist areas, possible loss of authenticity of the cultural environment
Ecology	Financing healthcare through tourism. Raising the level of environmental awareness among tourists	Environmental pollution, landscape destruction
Infrastructure	Development of tourism infrastructure	Overcrowding of infrastructure and public transport
Digitalization and social networks	Expanding the promotion of destinations, making it easier for tourists to choose tourist destinations	The emergence of uneven tourist flows, a decrease in the role of travel agencies in independent tour booking

Source: compiled by the authors based on research results

Tourism has enormous potential for economic and cultural development, but uncontrolled flows create risks. The challenge of modern tourism policy is to achieve a balance between benefits and sustainable management of flows. Social networks, in particular Instagram and TikTok, are exacerbating the phenomenon of overtourism, creating so-called «Instagram-friendly» locations. Visual content stimulates demand, often without taking into account the real potential of destinations. This is a challenge for European cities and resorts, where the balance between economic benefits and the quality of life of the local population is becoming a central issue in strategic tourism management.

Digital platforms benefit both travelers and businesses. Market leader Facebook was the first social network to surpass one billion registered accounts and now has over three billion monthly active users. Meta Platforms owns the four largest social media platforms, each with over one billion monthly active users: Facebook (the main platform), WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram [12]. According to a GWI survey for Q1 2025, 56.6 % of adult internet users aged 16 and over reported using Facebook in the past month, 1.3 percentage points ahead of its closest competitor. YouTube comes in second with 55.3 % of GWI survey respondents saying they used Google's video platform in the past month, while Instagram comes in third with 54.5 %. And Meta platforms also occupy the remaining spots in the top five, with 54 percent of adult internet users reporting that they use WhatsApp monthly, and 40 percent saying they have used Messenger at least once in the past 30 days [12].

An analysis of digital platforms revealed that different tools have different impacts on the stages of a tourist journey. In particular, social networks (e.g. Instagram, TikTok) form initial demand, creating the so-called image and place of travel and stimulating impulsive decisions regarding the choice of destinations. Video content and deeper conviction are provided by YouTube. The booking stage is carried out overwhelmingly through digital platforms, and therefore 72 % of travelers use Booking.com, Airbnb, studying offers and reviews, which affects the determination of tourist flow routes. The final stage is mainly controlled by Booking.com, Airbnb, Google Maps and local digital services. Thus, in the modern model of tourist behavior, digital platforms act as a single chain of influence: from inspiration to experience, shaping not only the choice of destination, but also the nature of the trip itself (tab. 3).

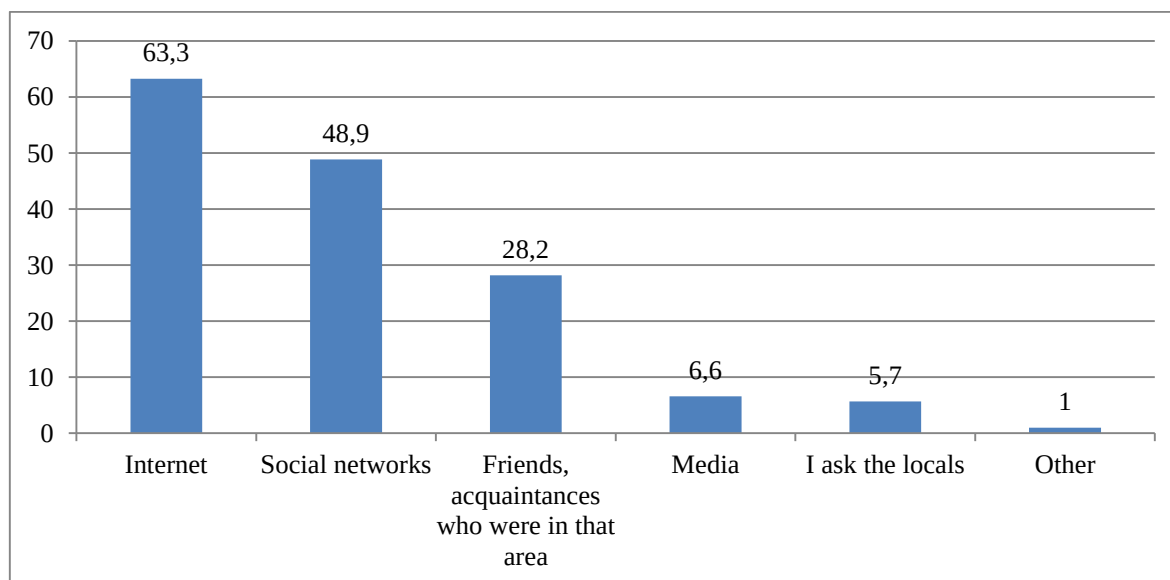
Table 3

The impact of digital platforms on tourism decisions

Platform name	Main impact	Features and impact statistics	Importance for tourism
Instagram	Promotion of tourist destinations, visual inspiration	High role of User-Generated Content. 85 % of millennials in the US recognize the influence of social media on their travel choices	Shapes trends in tourism, creates images of destinations
TikTok	Video content, promotion of tourist destinations	Increased engagement after views, 32 % booked accommodation after views on the platform	Promotion of little-known and new destinations, «viral marketing»
YouTube	Detailed video reviews, influencer marketing	After watching videos of tourist destinations, 59 % of young tourists choose them	Building trust through deeper content
Booking.com	Online hotel and accommodation booking, quick access to prices and reviews	Approximately 65 % of travel bookings go through the platform	One of the main vacation rental booking platforms
Airbnb	Alternative housing	The share of platform users is gradually increasing	Stimulates the development of alternative places of residence, forms individual experience

Source: compiled by the authors based on [12]

So, Instagram and TikTok are platforms where demand and opinion about destinations are formed, YouTube is a channel of deep influence and trust formation, Booking and Airbnb are not just platforms for booking accommodation, they fix the main routes of tourists. To choose interesting places and learn more about travel, tourists use various sources of information (fig. 1).



Source: compiled by the authors based on [13]

Fig. 1. Sources of information used by tourists when choosing travel, % of total respondents

Technology has made travel easier, mainly thanks to travel apps, online travel platforms, and blogs. Millennials and Generation Z have also played a crucial role in driving technological innovation in the travel industry – they love to travel and love technology. Travelers use travel planning apps, messengers with chatbots. Artificial intelligence chatbots can provide immediate answers, without having to search for answers in FAQs or spend time talking to customer service agents. For travel companies, chatbot technology reduces manual work and the cost of hiring more employees as customer service agents [14]. Promotion of travel services using digital

marketing is carried out using the following main digital tools: social networks (SMM); blogs, Internet forums; video advertising; search engine marketing (SEM); search engine optimization (SEO); digital content marketing; e-mail marketing; press releases in online media; push notifications; mobile applications; crowdsourcing platforms, etc. [15].

One of the important steps in the development of domestic tourism is the signing of a memorandum of cooperation between the State Agency for Tourism Development and the Ukrainian project Virtual Ukraine – virtualukraine.travel with the aim of creating virtual 3D tours and combining efforts aimed at promoting the cultural and historical potential of Ukraine. Virtual Ukraine in the format of a digital map allows you to view online presentations of cultural and historical, infrastructure and industrial sites, as well as sites that were destroyed as a result of the aggression of the Russian Federation, on a smartphone, computer and in virtual reality glasses. It is planned to expand digital projects with an emphasis on VR360 content in the tourism industry, namely directly tourist locations: natural, cultural and historical, as well as tourist infrastructure sites – hotels, tourist complexes, campsites, motels, restaurants, as well as destroyed tourist and cultural destinations that suffered as a result of the aggression of the Russian Federation [16].

Those working in the tourism sector can increase direct bookings through digital marketing, thus reducing their dependence on disintermediation platforms. To fully exploit the potential of digital marketing, it is necessary to develop strategies adapted to the specific needs of the organization. Through influencer marketing, it is possible to establish collaborations with influential figures in the sector to increase the visibility of the structure or improve its perception. It is also worth mentioning email marketing campaigns, i.e. sending personalized messages to maintain contact with past customers and encourage new bookings.

To improve operational efficiency, many hotel businesses use technological tools such as channel managers, property management systems (PMS) and booking systems. These tools help you manage reservations, synchronize calendars and optimize prices.

So, in today's digital technology environment, innovative tools are being actively implemented in Ukraine, in particular virtual and augmented reality, as well as artificial intelligence systems. Virtual and augmented reality provide new opportunities for creating interactive tours and presentations of tourist attractions, helping to increase the level of visitor engagement. Such technologies allow you to visualize the historical transformations of cultural heritage in different historical periods. Artificial intelligence algorithms are used to process large data sets, which allows you to form personalized recommendations for tourists. The use of such algorithms allows you to identify individual preferences of consumers of tourist services and offer optimized routes, which increases the quality and uniqueness of the tourist experience.

Therefore, the importance of digital marketing in tourism, especially in social networks, is extremely important, since it is these platforms that form new communication mechanisms between tourism companies, destinations and potential consumers.

Firstly, social networks act as a key channel for promoting tourism services and destination brands, as they provide direct contact with the target audience. Thanks to visual content (photos, videos, virtual tours), the emotional appeal of the tourism product is created, which significantly influences the decision-making process regarding travel.

Secondly, social networks contribute to the development of the electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) effect. Reviews, comments and publications of tourists form the reputation of tourist attractions, and trust in user-generated content (UGC) is usually higher than in traditional advertising. This strengthens the role of social networks in creating a positive image and stimulating demand.

Thirdly, the use of analytical tools of social networks makes it possible to segment the audience, study its preferences and effectively configure targeted advertising. This not only saves marketing resources, but also increases the level of user engagement. In addition, social networks allow you to create personalized offers, which increases tourist satisfaction and contributes to the formation of loyalty. As a result, digital marketing in social media turns into a powerful tool for strategic management of tourist flows, shaping the competitiveness of destinations both at the national and global levels.

Conclusions and prospects for further research. Thus, digital marketing in social networks plays a decisive role in the transformation of the tourism industry, since it is these platforms that provide a new level of interaction between tourists and destinations. The use of social media allows not only to increase the recognition of tourism products, but also to form stable trusting relationships with the target audience through user-generated content.

The analysis shows that social networks are an effective tool for personalizing the tourist experience, stimulating customer loyalty and managing tourist flows. Their ability to collect data and analytics creates conditions for developing adaptive promotion strategies, which is especially important in conditions of high competition and global challenges.

Thus, the integration of digital marketing into the tourism sector, in particular through social media, is of strategic importance for the sustainable development of the industry, the formation of a positive image of destinations and strengthening their competitive positions in the global market.

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**Цифровий маркетинг у туризмі: роль соціальних медіа та онлайн-платформ
у формуванні туристичних потоків**

Стаття присвячена дослідженню проблемних питань розвитку цифрового маркетингу в туризмі, зокрема в частині визначення ролі соціальних медіа та цифрових платформ у формуванні туристичних потоків. У статті проаналізовано вплив війни на світовий туристичний ландшафт, визначено показники «надмірного» туризму в деяких країнах Європи.

Виклик сучасної туристичної політики полягає у досягненні балансу між вигодами та сталим управлінням потоками. Авторами охарактеризовано вплив цифрових платформ на туристичні рішення та проаналізовано джерела інформації, якими користуються туристи при виборі подорожей.

За результатами дослідження зроблено висновок, що просування туристичних послуг із застосуванням цифрового маркетингу здійснюється за допомогою таких основних цифрових інструментів: соціальні мережі (SMM); блоги, інтернет-форуми; відеореєклами; пошуковий маркетинг (SEM); пошукова оптимізація (SEO); цифровий контент маркетинг; e-mail маркетинг; пресрелізи в онлайн-медіа; push-повідомлення; мобільні додатки; краудсорсингові платформи та інше. Алгоритми штучного інтелекту застосовується для опрацювання значних масивів даних, що дає змогу формувати персоналізовані рекомендації для туристів. Використання таких алгоритмів дозволяє ідентифікувати індивідуальні переваги споживачів туристичних послуг та пропонувати оптимізовані маршрути, що підвищує якість та унікальність туристичного досвіду.

Встановлено, що соціальні мережі дозволяють створювати персоналізовані пропозиції, що підвищує задоволеність туристів і сприяє формуванню лояльності. У результаті цифровий маркетинг у соціальних медіа перетворюється на потужний інструмент стратегічного управління туристичними потоками.

Ключові слова: туризм; цифровий маркетинг; дестинації; соціальні мережі; цифрові платформи; туристичні потоки; планування подорожей.

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