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DOI: 10.5937/turpos0-47099

UDK: 38.48-6:7/8(497.11)
004.738.5:316.472.4

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND DESTINATIONS OF CULTURAL TOURISM IN SERBIA

DRUŠTVENE MREŽE I DESTINACIJE KULTURNOG TURIZMA U SRBIJI

Abstract: Travel and tourism are the most promising industries in the world, and information is critical to their success. Social networks represent a significant source of information that can strongly influence tourist plans and the choice of tourist destinations. The use of social networks in tourism is growing rapidly, becoming an important marketing tool for tourism entrepreneurs. Serbia has great potential in the form of cultural tourism destinations, but so far, it has not been investigated how social networks can influence the process of selecting these destinations. Therefore, the goal of the research was to explore the habits of social network usage among tourists visiting cultural tourism destinations in Serbia, as well as to find out which destinations are the most visited. In order to achieve this, a survey was conducted among 400 respondents who live in Serbia and use social networks. The results showed that respondents most often visit cities and old city centers, use social networks several times a day and that photos have the most significant influence when choosing a cultural tourism destination.

Keywords: social networks, influence, cultural tourism, Serbia, destination choice

Apstrakt: Putovanja i turizam su industrije koje najviše obećavaju u svetu i informacije su ključne za njihov uspeh. Društvene mreže predstavljaju značajan izvor informacija koji mogu snažno uticati na turističke planove i izbor turističkih destinacija. Upotreba društvenih mreža u turizmu ubrzano raste, postajući važan marketinški alat za turističke preduzetnike. Srbija ima veliki potencijal u vidu destinacija kulturnog turizma, ali do sada nije istraživano kako društvene mreže mogu uticati na proces odabira ovih destinacija. Stoga je cilj istraživanja bio da se ispituju navike korišćenja društvenih mreža kod turista koji posećuju destinacije kulturnog turizma u Srbiji, kao i da se sazna koje su destinacije najposećenije. Da bi se to postiglo, sprovedeno je istraživanje među 400 ispitanika koji žive u Srbiji i koriste društvene mreže. Rezultati su pokazali da ispitanici najčešće posećuju gradove i stare gradske jezgre, da više puta dnevno koriste društvene mreže i da fotografije imaju najveći uticaj na odabir destinacije kulturnog turizma koju će posetiti.

Ključne reči: društvene mreže, uticaj, kulturni turizam, Srbija, izbor destinacije



Introduction

Tourists want to experience something new, so the destination management organization adapts to new trends, creating new tourist products that make the experience of tourists during their stay at the destination unforgettable to achieve their satisfaction (de Souza & Machado, 2017; Zlatanov & Popescu, 2019). Social network research in the context of tourism is an important area because it can significantly contribute to the tourism industry to develop several new opportunities based on the preferences and opinions of tourists. The impact of social networks on tourists' choice of travel destinations has also been covered by previous authors (Amaro & Duarte, 2017; Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Tham et al., 2013; Paul et al., 2019; Shu & Scott, 2014; Kavoura & Stavrianeas, 2015; Huang et al., 2017; Osei et al., 2018; Tham et al., 2020).

New generations of tourists visiting cultural tourism destinations will be increasingly interested in new communication technologies, which tourism decision-makers must be aware of (Surugiu & Surugiu, 2015). In recent years, much attention has been paid to the role of social networks in selecting tourist destinations, including those of cultural tourism. Although numerous studies analyze the impact of social networks on tourism in general, fewer deal with the impact of social networks on specific forms of tourism, such as cultural tourism (Bozdo, 2018; Ly, 2020; Wachyuni & Wiweka, 2019).

Aware of the fact that more than 80% of the world's tourists start their journey on the Internet, Serbia has begun to use its cultural potential in promoting the country as a destination with an vibrant culture and cultural heritage, which in some localities and places has not only local and regional but also world tourism value. The value of cultural tourism in Serbia is evidenced by the fact that 2,634 immovable cultural assets are currently registered in the central register of the Republic Institute for the Protection of Cultural Monuments, of which 2,266 are cultural monuments, 93 spatial cultural-historical entities,

196 archaeological sites and 79 memorable places (Republički zavod za zaštitu spomenika kulture, 2023). In Serbia, the topic of social networks and media has been investigated from the perspective of destination marketing organizations (Popescu, 2014), national tourism organizations (Zlatanov et al., 2021), the influence of Instagram on the choice of destination (Tešin et al., 2022), the sphere of hotel management (Kalinić & Vujčić, 2019; Mašić & Kosar, 2016), and gastronomy (Vukolić et al., 2022). However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the connection between social networks and cultural tourism destinations in Serbia. The influence that social media has on the promotion of domestic cultural tourism destinations in Serbia has not been sufficiently investigated.

Although social networks are increasingly present and important in the tourism industry, and although there is a need to compensate for the gap in the existing literature on this topic in Serbia, the goals of this research are to investigate the connection between the frequency of using social networks and making a decision about choosing a cultural tourism destination in Serbia, considering the available data and the results of the conducted research. Also, this study aims to find out what the habits in using social networks are and what factors lead tourists to visit cultural tourism destinations in Serbia, as well as find out which destinations are the most common. Likewise, the aim is to investigate whether these factors differ in the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Literature review

The use of social media today represents one of the most popular activities practiced by 3.6 billion people worldwide, while the number of users is predicted to reach 4.4 billion by 2025 (Clement, 2020). Social media generally refers to web applications that allow users to post and share content. Common social media applications include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+, Pinterest, Instagram, etc. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). With their appearance on the Internet, social

networks bring changes that can significantly affect the tourism industry (Hjalager, 2010; Sigala, 2007; Stankov et al., 2010). Tourists consult social networks about travel arrangements during and after the trip (Book et al., 2018). Social media play a relevant role in shaping travelers' preferences and choices through three stages that include information seeking, information processing, and decision making (Tham et al., 2020). Tourists plan trips and gather information using social networks, gather advice from friends and other virtual contacts, and social networks significantly influence their decisions (Richards, 2011). Tourists can currently give reviews, comment, and present different perceptions of a destination, which can be read in different parts of the world through social networks (Månsson, 2011). Over time, tourists have become consumers on social networks and have become involved in the promotion of tourism products and packages (Surugiu & Surugiu, 2015). Using social networks, people become promoters of the places they have visited, or where they live, in real-time they can share their experiences and recommend destinations at no cost and with great credibility. Also, if used appropriately, i.e. actively, social networks reach numerous potential users in a short time and with much less invested funds, can be used for tourist services, shopping, influences, and the intention of sharing travel experiences (Icoz et al., 2018).

There are numerous studies on the impact of social networks on the tourism sector, which has become dependent on social networks, due to which tourists have changed their behavior at all stages of travel. The nature of social media still provides researchers with considerable room for investigation. Some of them processed the first theoretical aspects and studied social media trends (Lee, 2013; Fotis et al., 2011; Guerreiro et al., 2019; Xiang et al., 2015; Živković et al., 2014). Culture and history are among the most essential resources for a destination to attract visitors, and both fall within the purview of cultural tourism (Timothy, 2011). Likewise, tourism based on culture and cultural heritage tends

to grow over the years (Surugiu & Surugiu, 2015). Researchers and practitioners argue that to capture the attention and interest of the general public, marketers must connect cultural attractions with an exciting story, using social networks to present their content and move tourists to make a decision (Egberts & Bosma, 2014). However, despite the relevance of cultural attractions to tourism destinations (UNWTO, 2018), there is a surprising lack of cross-cultural research related to their online promotion, not to mention social media marketing (Mele et al., 2021). Although numerous studies analyze the impact of social networks on tourism in general, fewer deal with the impact of social networks on specific forms of tourism, such as cultural tourism (Bozdo, 2018; Ly, 2020; Wachyuni & Wiweka, 2019).

Methodology

The research was conducted from May to July 2021. A questionnaire was created in Google Forms and distributed via social networks (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn) and e-mail. The study was conducted in the Republic of Serbia on a sample of 400 respondents. The participants in the research are citizens of Serbia who use social networks, and the only condition for participation was precisely that.

Research instrument - The questionnaire consists of 15 questions divided into three groups. The first group of questions consists of socio-demographic questions to determine the respondents' characteristics. The second segment consisted of questions aimed to determine whether respondents use social networks, which social networks they use, how often and for which purposes. As the research is related to the choice of cultural tourism destinations based on social media, in this segment, it was necessary to examine how respondents search for information about potential destinations and whether they use social networks for these purposes. A structured questionnaire was developed to suit the aim of the study and formed based on previous literature dealing with the influence of social networks on the choice of a tour-



ist destination. The questions were formed in accordance with previous research dealing with the topics of the frequency of using social networks (Tanković et al., 2022), the decision process before, during and after the trip (Yuan et al., 2022), the influence of comments and online reviews (Broneer & Hoog, 2011; Kakirala & Singh, 2020) and photos (Paul et al., 2019) on destination selection process. In the last segment, the respondents agreed with the statements offered on a five-point Likert scale, intending to determine the extent of their familiarity with cultural tourism destinations and whether photos and comments on social networks influence their decision to visit some destination.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze all three question segments in order to

obtain a detailed description of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents and their habits in using social networks. In addition, T-test and Anova test were conducted to explore potential differences in respondents' attitudes according to their socio-demographic characteristics. While the correlation analysis was conducted to examine the connection between the factors that influence the choice of a cultural tourism destination and certain habits in the use of social networks. Data collected by the research were processed via IBM SPSS 23.

Results

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the 400 respondents and the frequency of their use of social media.

Table 1: *The socio-demographic characteristics*

		N (400)	%
1. Gender	Male:	100	25
	Female:	300	75
2. Age	< 20	27	6.8
	21 -30	243	60.8
	31 - 40	35	8.8
	41 – 50	42	10.5
	> 51	53	13.3
3. Level of Education	Primary school	1	0.3
	High school	101	25.3
	Bachelor degree	211	52.8
	Bachelor professional degree	71	17.8
	Master degree	16	4.0
	PhD degree	1	0.3
4. Place of residence	Village	42	10.5
	Small city (less than 10000 inhabitants)	27	6.8
	A medium-sized city (between 10000 and 100.000 inhabitants)	87	21.8
	Big city (more than 100.000 inhabitants)	244	61.0
5. How often do you use social media?	Once a week or less	1	0.3
	Few times a week	12	3.0
	Once a day	25	6.3
	Few times a day	362	90.5

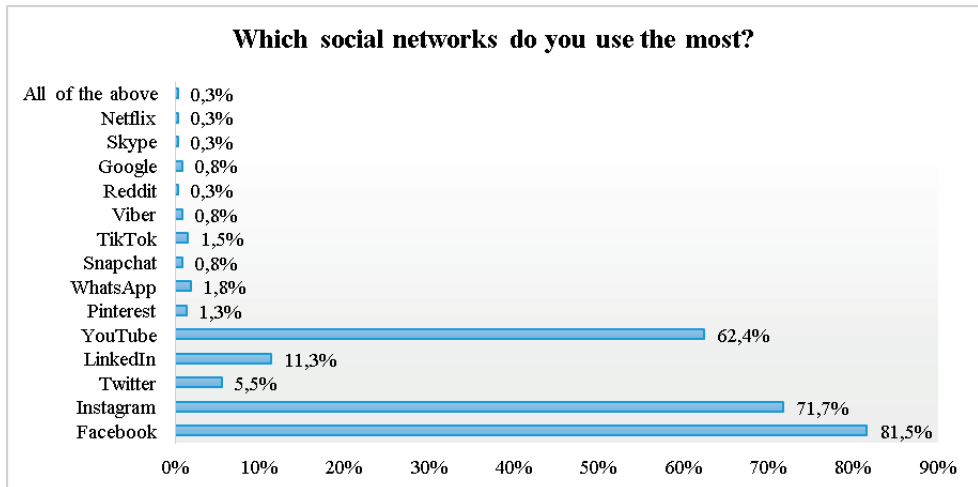
Source: Made by authors

A significant difference is observed between the respondents' genders, with 75% of the respondents being women and only 25% of the respondents being men. The significant difference in the number of respondents' genders can represent one of the limitations of this research. According to Saleh and Bista (2017), the answers depend to the greatest extent on the respondents' interest, but male respondents will usually participate after several reminders of the research. When we look at the age of the respondents, it is noticeable that the highest number of respondents in the age category is between 21 and 30 years old (60.8%), with 52.8% of respondents having completed bachelor studies and 25.3% high school. Most respondents (61%) live in a large city with over 100.000 inhabitants. According to

the results, 90.5% of respondents use their social networks several times a day.

The development of social networks has changed how people search for information and make tourist decisions, with the growth of virtual communities that enable the sharing of ideas and interests (Tran & Rudolf, 2022). Nowadays, social networks play a key role in promoting a destination and forming a destination image as their development has changed how tourists search for, plan and experience their trip (Kakirala & Singh, 2020). Graph 1 shows the social networks used by the respondents, and it is noted that the respondents mostly use Facebook (81.5%), Instagram (71.7%) and YouTube (62.4%). Other social networks are used to a lesser extent. Respondents could give several answers at the same time.

Graph 1: Social networks used by respondents



Source: Made by authors

*Table 2: The purpose for using social networks*

For what purpose do you most often use social networks?			
	Responses		Percent of Cases
	N	Percent	
Leisure/entertainment	222	40.1%	55.5%
Work	25	4.5%	6.3%
Research/Information	152	27.4%	38.0%
Communication	125	22.6%	31.3%
Education	19	3.4%	4.8%
Inspiration	7	1.3%	1.8%
Online shopping	4	.7%	1.0%
Total	554	100.0%	138.5%

Source: Made by authors

For this research, it was significant to determine which cultural tourism destinations respondents choose most often. Of all respondents, 70.3% most often choose cities and old towns. Other offered answers were selected to a lesser extent, with Cultural events being selected in 10.5% of cases, Museums and Galleries in 6.3%, Religious objects in 5.3% and Archaeological sites in 4.8%.

Results of descriptive statistical analysis

In the third segment, by introducing a five-point Likert-scale, the authors examined respondents' attitudes toward the essential factors and the motives that encourage respondents to make travel decisions in cultural tourism destinations in Serbia.

Respondents graded the statements on a scale of 1-5 (1 - I do not agree, 2 - I partially do not agree, 3 - I am not sure, 4 - I partially agree, 5 - I fully agree). The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Results of descriptive statistical analysis

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
I am familiar with cultural tourism destinations in Serbia	3.46	1.068
Social networks helped me to find out about new cultural tourism destinations in Serbia that I did not know about	3.75	1.143
Thanks to the photos on social media, the desire to visit a destination was awakened	4.13	1.098
Positive comments from other people on social media help me decide to visit a destination	3.85	1.074
Negative comments about the destination I have decided to visit may influence me to cancel the trip	3.08	1.122

Source: Made by authors

Table 3 shows a descriptive statistical analysis of factors related to the influence of social networks on the decision to visit a destination of cultural tourism in Serbia. Respondents mostly agree with the statement “Thanks to the photos on social media, the desire to visit a destination was awakened” ($M=4.13$; $SD= 1.098$). In contrast, they least agree with the statement “Negative comments about the destination I have decided to visit may influence me to cancel the trip” ($M=3.08$; $SD=1.122$). According to Dolan et al. (2019), social networks significantly impact the process of sharing information thanks to interactive communication between users. Descriptive statistical analysis confirmed that photos on social networks have a powerful impact on awakening the desire to visit a particular destination, which is in line with the research of the authors Ana and Istudor (2019), whereby the results indicate that photos of friends on social networks inspire users when choosing tourist destinations.

Regarding reviews on social networks, it should be highlighted that they also depend on the cultural background of the person leaving the comment, given that there are significant cultural differences among travelers (Jin, 2023). In addition, Liu et al. (2020) believe that social networks have an indirect role during destination decision-making, thanks to the numerous users’ promotion of previously unknown tourist destinations, which other users put on their “bucket list” after discovery. Many people today become interested in a particular destination based on an influencer’s posts by looking at their pictures and reading their impressions, which indicates that social networks today are one of the main tools during the decision-making process, based on which they make decisions (Kilipiri et al., 2023). According to the respondents, reviews play a significant role.

Results of the independent samples T-test

A T-test was performed to determine potential differences in responses between men and women. All the statements in the Table are compared to the answers between the genders. A statistically significant difference was found with the statement “Thanks to the photos on social media, the desire to visit a destination was awakened”, with women agreeing to a greater extent now with the atom statement ($t = -3.247$, $p = 0.001$). In addition, for the statement “I am familiar with cultural tourism destinations in Serbia”, $Sig = 0.027$ shows a statistically significant difference. However, further analysis revealed that respondents of both genders evaluated the given statement similarly, with $M = 3.46$ ($t = 0.000$, $p = 1.00$).

Results of ANOVA test

The ANOVA was based on the analysis of the differences between the respondents’ answers in relation to age, level of education, type of residence and frequency of using social networks according to the factors listed in Table 3. The analysis found no statistically significant difference between the respondents in the observed categories.

Results of correlation analysis

Correlation analysis was conducted to determine if there is a correlation in respondents’ answers in relation to the frequency of using social networks (Table 4), as well as based on the use of social networks as a source of information when choosing a destination (Table 5) with the factors that motivate tourists to visits to cultural tourism destinations in Serbia.



Table 4: Results of correlation analysis by the frequency of using social networks

Variable	Pearson correlation coefficient (r)
I am familiar with cultural tourism destinations in Serbia	-.010
Social networks helped me to find out about new cultural tourism destinations in Serbia that I did not know about	-.101*
Thanks to the photos on social media, the desire to visit a destination was awakened	-.132**
Positive comments from other people on social media help me decide to visit a destination	-.061
Negative comments about the destination I have decided to visit may influence me to cancel the trip	-.026

Source: Made by authors

* The correlation is significant at the level of $p = 0.05$

** The correlation is significant at the level of $p = 0.01$

Table 4 shows the correlation analysis comparing the displayed variables and the frequency of using social networks. The results confirm a negative correlation considering the two claims, whereby the correlation in the claim “Social networks helped me to find out about new cultural tourism destinations in Serbia that I did not know about” is significant at the $p = 0.05$ level,

and the claim “Thanks to the photos on social media, the desire to visit a destination was awakened” at the $p = 0.01$ level. The negative correlation indicates that the more frequently respondents use social networks, the less they help them discover new cultural tourism destinations in Serbia and the less desire to visit the destination based on photos.

Table 5: Results of correlation analysis by the social network as a primary source of information

Variable	Pearson correlation coefficient (r)
I am familiar with cultural tourism destinations in Serbia	-.074
Social networks helped me to find out about new cultural tourism destinations in Serbia that I did not know about	-.241**
Thanks to the photos on social media, the desire to visit a destination was awakened	-.179**
Positive comments from other people on social media help me decide to visit a destination	-.173**
Negative comments about the destination I have decided to visit may influence me to cancel the trip	-.014

Source: Made by authors

* The correlation is significant at the level of $p = 0.05$

** The correlation is significant at the level of $p = 0.01$

The correlation analysis shown in Table 5 displays to what extent social networks, as the primary source of information, influence the offered variables. A negative correlation of significance at the $p = 0.01$ level was discovered for three variables, which indicates that the more respondents use social networks as a primary source of information, the less they believe that they help them learn about new cultural tourism destinations in Serbia, the less desire there is to visit a destination based on the online photos, but also that positive comments have less impact on the decision-making process.

Discussion and conclusion

The research goal was to examine the social networking habits of tourists visiting cultural tourism destinations in Serbia so that planners and managers in tourism could develop development strategies and plans for the future. Respondents who participated in this research were primarily women, and young educated people under 30 years of age, living in big cities. This data is from earlier research (Neuts et al., 2013) that identifies differences in the use of e-services about age, level of education, and income. According to them, younger tourists and those who are more educated use e-services more intensively and will continue to use them as they get older. Likewise, earlier research (Amarao & Duarte, 2017; Tanković et al., 2022) showed that women are the ones who use more and participate more often in research related to social networks. As in previous research (Süli & Martyin-Csamangó, 2020; Tešin et al., 2022), the results of this research agree that the most frequently used social networks are Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, as well as that respondents use social networks several times a day (Tanković et al., 2022). Respondents most often use social networks for fun and relaxation, while to a lesser, but not negligible degree, they serve as a source of information. This can be understood as a potential opportunity to attract tourists in the future through this type of content.

Given that the research is based on cultural tourism destinations, it is important to show that respondents are moderately familiar with cultural tourism destinations in Serbia, and they mostly choose to visit cities and old town centers as cultural tourism destinations in Serbia. When motivating and choosing these destinations, the photos they can see on social networks play the most significant role. Given that visitors prefer graphic and visual content, it is necessary to emphasize this segment in the promotion of cultural tourism destinations in Serbia. Aranburu et al. (2016) point out that cultural destination sustainability depends on policy makers and tourism developers, who must continuously research which areas attract tourists the most. It is necessary to consider what information is posted and what can be trusted, as they can potentially negatively impact social networks (Liu et al., 2022).

One of the research goals was to investigate whether there is a difference in the respondents' attitudes towards what motivates them to visit cultural tourism destinations in Serbia in relation to their socio-demographic characteristics. The results showed a statistically significant difference in the respondents' answers only in terms of gender, where women believe that photos attract them when choosing a destination. In other cases of socio-demographic characteristics, there is no statistical significance in the respondents' responses. These results do not coincide with earlier research (Nuraeni et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2011) that reports that gender, age, and personality of tourists play an important role in travel decisions.

The research results showed a negative correlation between tourists' attitudes about what makes them choose cultural tourism destinations in Serbia and the frequency of using social networks, as well as the use of social networks as a primary source of information. Namely, in the first case, the negative correlation indicates that the more often respondents use social networks, the less they help them discover new cultural tourist destinations in Serbia and the less desire



to visit the destination based on photos. Likewise, the results show that the more respondents use social networks as a primary source of information, the less they believe that they help them get to know new cultural tourism destinations in Serbia. The results are supported by earlier research showing that even though social media spreads travel information and can impact users' behavior, travelers tend to trust their friends and family more than official websites, as they find them more honest, which could have been a threat to the tourism industry. However, some companies developed platforms encouraging their customers to share their experiences. These travel information and reviews are good examples of online word-of-mouth (Oliveira et al., 2020).

There are certain research limitations regarding the measuring instrument that has not yet been created related to this topic, as well as the research sample. Future research may include a higher number of respondents, of older age, but may also explore specific cultural tourism destinations, such as cities, museums, and more. Although there is a gap in the research on the importance of social media for cultural tourism in terms of selecting cultural tourism destinations, in the current academic literature, this paper makes an outstanding contribution to both academic literature and tourism managers. The results of the research are significant in terms of discovering the habits of tourists visiting cultural destinations in Serbia in order to pay attention to which segments of marketing and promotion need attention in the future. This research can represent the beginning of research on the topic of the influence of social networks and social media on cultural tourism, both in Serbia and in general. Defining the problem and reviewing the attitudes of domestic tourists is very important to present the situation and a necessary step to overcome possible obstacles in the development of cultural tourism in Serbia.

Acknowledgement: The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia (Grant no. 451- 03-47/2023-01/200125).

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