

The Influence of Visual Elements of Social Media on the Behavior of Generation Z Tourists

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Abstract

In today's online world, where all information is available to users with just one click, it is challenging to determine their credibility. Given the fact that there are almost 5 billion social media users, it is safe to say that social media has become an essential part of everyday life for many users, especially members of Generation Z. When filtering the pool of information, visual elements play a significant role in the decision-making process for users. Generation Z is composed of young people born between 1995 and 2005. They are considered the originators of social media and the virtual world, and spend the most time analysing content in the form of photographs or videos. The main reason why Generation Z members prioritise visual elements more than textual ones stems from the higher degree of reliability and trust that this type of content displays. To analyse how photos and videos influence the trust of members of Generation Z in online recommendations, a survey was conducted in the territory of the Republic of Serbia, in which the Pearson correlation test was applied. The research lasted from February to March 2024. Moreover, a study was conducted on a sample of 305 respondents, where the sample was convenience, and the obtained data were tested using the IBM SPSS Statistics platform. The main findings indicate how visual elements of social media, such as photos and videos, influence a greater degree of trust in credibility among Generation Z.

Introduction

Considering that different types of information are now available to social media users with just one click, most potential tourists are using them when planning their trip. Their credibility is of crucial importance when making the final travel decision. Content on social media can attract the attention of users in different ways. Visual elements of content, such as photos and videos, best convey the experience of previous visitors and allow others to experience the same emotions as the content creators. Online recommendations posted by users on

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social media can cause suspicion among potential tourists, since online reviews can result from paid collaborations. Also, their veracity is questioned because today the Internet is a place where it is possible to post a review or share an experience that results from the attitude or opinion of unknown people. Most often, members of Generation Z, which is also considered the bearers of the online world, appear as the leading content creators in the field of tourism. They are the present of this industry, but also its future. The research aims to analyse how photos and videos affect the trust of Generation Z in the field of online recommendations. The research subject is electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) with a special focus on the behaviour of Generation Z consumers. The research problem is related to distrust in online recommendations. Further, special attention is paid to the credibility of online recommendations in visual formats, that is, photos and videos, and their influence on members of Generation Z in tourism. The literature review includes trust in social media and information posted on them. The emphasis is on content formats that provide a vivid description of destinations and the experiences of previous tourists with a particular destination. The second part of the paper refers to the research conducted by the authors, in which the Pearson correlation test was used to examine the strength and presence of the correlation between the observed variables.

Literature Review

Social media can be described as a type of digital media that allows users to share content, interact, provide feedback, and facilitate easier communication (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The significance of their presence in the service sector is shown by the information that social media represents one of the most important data sources in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Kang & Schuett, 2013). Social media can be classified into three categories: the first refers to collaborative projects; the second category is blogs and content-creating communities; and the third category is represented by social media, virtual games, and social worlds (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Since the tourism industry is considered unpredictable, individuals gather additional information to determine whether a particular service or product will meet their needs. For this reason, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has become one of the most important tools for users when searching for accurate information, but also important for hospitality service providers (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2018). Social media can influence users when it comes to choosing a destination,

since tourists use it as a means of communication (Paul, Roy & Mia, 2019). In the service sector, such as tourism, the available information is a significant factor influencing the behaviour of consumers or users.

WOM conveys information about user interactions with the post-purchase experience (Marić, Leković & Džever, 2024). According to Berhanu and Raj (2020), online interpersonal recommendations or eWOM are a significant source of information when future tourists plan to make a travel decision. Although the credibility of data and information available in the virtual world is often questioned, users still find online recommendations and reviews to instil a higher degree of trust than conventional sources of information. Content on social media should be considered reliable, provided that individuals with expertise and experience in the specific field being marketed are involved in its creation and promotion (Berhanu & Raj, 2020). Through content posted in blogs, shared experiences of previous visitors, and electronic recommendations, tourists can collect the necessary information about a particular tourist destination and create their image even before visiting it. According to the authors Királová and Pavlíčka (2015), the tourism industry relies heavily on the use of the Internet. Through social media, tourism has been raised to a higher level; tourists no longer only collect information about destinations, but also the experiences of previous visitors. Social media has accumulated a significant base of information; however, not all information is a significant source for decision-making. Most of the information does not attract enough attention from the user. It is possible to see that among potential tourists, the lowest degree of trust is caused by information that focuses only on the advantages of the destination and those that emphasise its peculiarities (Királová & Pavlíčka, 2015).

Internet users prefer information related to personal experience, which is creative, innovative, and encourages communication. Social media can help promote different tourist destinations if the posted information contains the aforementioned elements (Királová & Pavlíčka, 2015). Since electronic recommendations result from the opinions and attitudes of unknown people on the Internet, their reliability is questionable. When searching for information related to products and services, social media users doubt the credibility of eWOM; therefore, they accept only those recommendations they consider credible. Sometimes these recommendations can be crucial when making the final purchase decision, since they influence users'

opinions and behaviour (Cheung et al., 2009).

Credibility can be defined as the degree to which the user perceives the recommendation as reliable and trustworthy (Cheung et al., 2009). Also, when it comes to assumed credibility, it depends on how the individuals perceive it (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). The decision to buy will be easier for the user if they accept the online review as credible. On the other hand, if the reader believes the recommendation is unreliable, they will want to avoid the potential risk and will not adopt the recommendation. The most important three components of the communication process are the source, the message, and the recipient of the message for evaluating a recommendation. Also, the reputation of the individual leaving the review can significantly affect the credibility of the recommendation. If the recommendation does not follow the attitudes and beliefs, the message's recipient will be prone to doubt. People tend to accept and trust information similar to their attitudes (Cheung et al., 2009).

Visual elements such as graphics, text, videos, and their combination play a crucial role in facilitating the participation of individuals in conversations within online communities (Adami & Jewitt, 2016). According to the authors Manap & Adzharudin (2013), the development of technology has led to the increasing obsolescence of traditional advertising. Digital experiences that users create on their travels and share through social media in the form of videos are a form of eWOM. Currently, the most popular source of information for tourism users is user-generated content (UGC), where posts in the form of text, video, and photos can be posted on social media to convey their travel experience to potential travellers.

Photos are an important form of content created and shared on social media (Adami & Jewitt, 2016). Photographic content posted by tourists on social media was used to discover interesting and attractive destinations (Figueredo et al., 2017). Photos posted on social media are considered the subject of analysis of Big Data, using metadata (time, place, and tag of publication) (Adami & Jewitt, 2016). Mobile phones significantly facilitate the process of content creation; they represent a way of connecting the lived experience through photos and videos. Photographed events are considered significant in today's online environment, and the reason for this is their private and personal resonance (David, 2010). To satisfy the need for information sharing and seeking attention from others,

tourists decide to share photos via social media (Pera, Quinton & Baima, 2020). In tourism, users try to convey their own emotions and memories to other users with photos. Social media users who share photos with other members of online communities want to convey the value of a specific destination and thus contribute to the perception of the broader social community (David, 2010).

Also, with the transformation of mobile technology, the increasing importance of video content comes to the fore. Videos are important because they show the experiences of previous visitors, convey emotions, and facilitate communication (Huertas, Míguez-González & Lozano-Monterrubio, 2017). Content created in high-quality video format that showcases nature, tourist attractions, and landmarks aims to encourage tourists to visit a particular destination (Liu, Wang & Chang, 2023). In tourism, videos are a better means of connecting to an emotional experience than photographs because they show the activities of tourists at a given moment. With the help of videos, the brand and image of a particular destination are improved (Huertas, 2018). Videos were quickly integrated into people's daily lives and were soon used in tourism. Sharing information in video format adds a new way to disseminate tourism information and make tourism more popular (Zhao, Shen & Zhang, 2022). According to the authors Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009), videos recorded on a trip create greater satisfaction for users who follow them and contribute to realising their fantasies regarding travel. In this way, video content allows people to engage in the experience (Huertas, 2018). The increasing popularity of user-generated content, especially in video format, contributes significantly to the tourism sector because it represents a genuine tourist experience (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016).

For members of Generation Z, social media is a means of inspiration when planning a trip, and mobile devices make it easier for them to search for information. Generation Z prioritises relaxation and cultural experiences. Due to their characteristics and significant contribution to online communities, Generation Z members are highly interested in tourism (Pricope Vancia et al., 2023). Considering that Generation Z members, representing the primary bearers of the online world, are the most common tourists, it is necessary to understand their preferences when choosing a travel destination (Akin & Şener, 2024). It is important to address that social media significantly influences the formation of travellers' attitudes and opinions towards

specific tourist destinations.

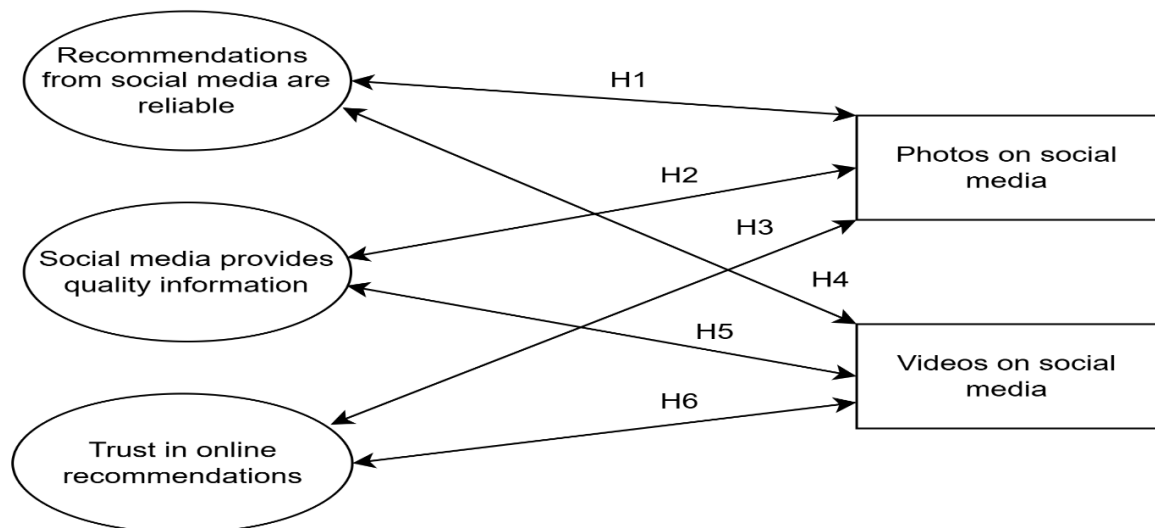
For members of Generation Z, the most important factor when searching is the truthfulness of the information. Moreover, because of the search for truthful information, they have a sense of complete freedom when expressing themselves, even encouraging others to be open and more empathetic to understand different perspectives (Pricope Vancia et al., 2023). Currently, members of Generation Z have a dominant role in the further development of tourism (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019). When it comes to tourism, today, it is easier for tourists to create and post content on social media. Most travellers use mobile phones for easier communication, but also to create and post content for other members of the online community (Lalicic & Weismayer, 2016). Mobile devices allow them to take photos and record videos that they later share with their followers in the online world to share their own experience and relive it (Pricope Vancia et al., 2023).

Methodology

A convenience sample of 305 respondents was used to test the hypotheses. The sample consisted of 80.7% women and 19.3% men, all born between 1995 and 2005. The majority of respondents are single (52.8%), have a high school education (50.8%), and are currently students (86.9%). They most often decide to travel for 5 to 10 days (71.1%) for vacation (67.5%). The research was conducted on the territory of the Republic of Serbia and lasted from February to March 2024. Data were collected by filling out a research questionnaire that contained 31 questions and was divided into two sections. The first section of the survey contained socio-demographic questions, whose results give valuable insights into consumers' socio-demographic profiles. Questions were related to age, gender, relationship status, educational level, and occupation. The second section of the survey contained statements about the reliability of recommendations, quality, and trust in photos and videos on social media.

Figure 1

Statistical framework



Source: Author's research

The 5-point Likert scale was used as it is considered one of the most fundamental tools for marketing research. The questionnaire was distributed through social media (Facebook and Instagram).

The following hypotheses (Figure 1) were set:

H₁: There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between the reliability of recommendations

from social media and photos on social media.

H₂: There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between the quality of information on social media and photos on social media.

H₃: There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between trust in the online recommendations and photos on social media.

H₄: There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between the reliability of recommendations from social media and videos on social media.

H₅: There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between the quality of information on social media and videos on social media.

H₆: There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between trust in the online recommendations and videos on social media.

In order to analyse and process the collected data, IBM SPSS Statistics software was used. The Pearson correlation test was used to analyse the correlation between the observed variables.

Results and Discussion

To test the initial hypotheses that were defined and assess the extent to which there is a correlation between the observed variables, the estimated Pearson's correlation coefficients are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Research results

Photos on social media are a significant source of information.				
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	N	Correlation
Recommendations from social media are reliable.	0.457**	0.000	305	Statistically significant and positive correlation between variables
Social media provides quality information.	0.565**	0.000		
Trust in the online recommendations.	0.541**	0.000		
Videos on social media are a significant source of information.				
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	N	Correlation
Recommendations from social media are reliable.	0.442**	0.000	305	Statistically significant and positive correlation between variables
Social media provides quality information.	0.623**	0.000		
Trust in the online recommendations.	0.532**	0.000		

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Author's research

Analysing the data, a statistically significant correlation is observed between all variables, given that $p = 0.000$, which is lower than the limit $p < 0.01$, indicating an

extremely low probability that the correlation is the result of chance. A medium-strong correlation with a positive sign is observed in H₁, H₂, H₃, H₄, and H₆. On the other hand, in H₅, the intensity of the correlation is strong and has a positive sign. With a positive sign in all tested variables, it is possible to confirm that the increase of one variable affects the increase of other variables. Based on the research results, it is concluded that the defined hypotheses H₁ (There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between the reliability of recommendations from social media and photos on social media), H₂ (There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between the quality of information on social media and photos on social media), H₃ (There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between trust in the online recommendations and photos on social media), H₄ (There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between reliability of recommendations from social media and videos on social media), H₅ (There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between the quality of information on social media and videos on social media) and H₆ (There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between trust in the online recommendations and videos on social media) have been confirmed.

Similar research was conducted by the authors Berhanu & Raj (2020), as well as by the authors Akin & Şener (2024). The authors of the papers also analysed the importance of visual elements, such as videos and photos, to potential tourists and their decisions in tourism. In addition to the importance of visual elements, the impact and credibility of online recommendations were also analysed. Similar findings were confirmed by authors Akin & Şener (2024); they confirmed that younger users (18-35 years) consider social media and content posted on them to be a reliable source of information, and they prefer review sites or sites for sharing photos and multimedia content. At the same time, the authors Berhanu & Raj (2020) proved that among the members of Generation Z, there is a strong correlation between the choice of destination and the elements of social media that include photos and videos.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Photos, videos, and recommendations from online social media users significantly contribute to the information of potential tourists. Members of Generation Z make their decisions about choosing a tourist destination based on what they consider to be honest content. Although the sincerity of online content is often doubted, it is easier for users to assess its truthfulness if visual formats

accompany it. Based on the conducted research, the obtained results proved that the defined hypotheses: H₁ (There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between the reliability of recommendations from social media and photos on social media), H₂ (There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between the quality of information on social media and photos on social media), H₃ (There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between trust in the online recommendations and photos on social media), H₄ (There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between the reliability of recommendations from social media and videos on social media), H₅ (There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between the quality of information on social media and videos on social media) and H₆ (There is a statistically significant and positive correlation between trust in the online recommendations and videos on social media) have been confirmed.

Based on the research carried out in this paper, it is possible to see that members of Generation Z consider photos, videos, and online recommendations as a significant source of information that can be characterised as quality, reliable, and trustworthy. Also, it is necessary to point out the existing limitations related to the sample size. As stated, the research was conducted only on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. In the future, the research could be conducted outside the borders of the Republic of Serbia, which could lead to

different results, considering that the behaviour of the respondents may differ depending on the environment and culture.

The following limitation refers to the sample of respondents, considering that it is a convenience sample whose focus is on members of Generation Z, this limitation can represent a starting point for future research where the sample could refer to one of the remaining generations. Despite the highlighted limitations, the research results can be a starting point for further research on the influence of different content formats on social media on the trust and decisions of Generation Z in tourism.

Based on research results, in the future, travel companies should pay special attention to adding visual elements to their content to contribute to creating a positive experience and further developing the tourism sector in the digital environment. Tourists gain a sense of credibility through visual elements and consider them a quality source of information. The role of social media can be seen as important when potential tourists see it as a significant source of information in tourism-related processes, especially when choosing a destination (Da Mota & Pickering, 2020). Although information is created and provided by various sources, it results from previous travellers' experiences and is used in choosing a destination and guiding the decision-making process (Akin & Şener, 2024).

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Vpliv vizualnih elementov družabnih medijev na vedenje turistov generacije Z

Izvleček

V današnjem spletnem svetu, kjer so vse informacije na voljo uporabnikom z enim samim klikom, je izredno težko ugotoviti njihovo verodostojnost. Glede na to, da je skoraj 5 milijard uporabnikov družabnih medijev, lahko z gotovostjo trdimo, da so družabni mediji postali bistveni del vsakdanjega življenja mnogih uporabnikov, zlasti članov generacije Z. Pri filtriranju zbirk informacij vizualni elementi igrajo pomembno vlogo v procesu odločanja uporabnikov. Generacija Z je sestavljena iz mladih, rojenih med letoma 1995 in 2005. Veljajo za ustvarjalce družabnih medijev in virtualnega sveta, največ časa pa preživijo z analiziranjem vsebin v obliki fotografij ali videov. Glavni razlog, zakaj člani generacije Z dajejo večjo prednost vizualnim elementom kot besedilnim, izhaja iz večje stopnje zanesljivosti in zaupanja, ki jo ta vrsta vsebin izraža. Da bi analizirali, kako fotografije in videi vplivajo na zaupanje članov generacije Z v spletna priporočila, je bila na ozemlju Republike Srbije izvedena anketa, na osnovi katere je bil uporabljen Pearsonov korelacijski koeficient. Raziskava je trajala od februarja do marca 2024 in je bila izvedena na vzorcu 305 anketirancev, pri čemer je bil vzorec primeren, pridobljeni podatki pa so bili analizirani z uporabo platforme IBM SPSS Statistics. Glavni rezultati kažejo, kako vizualni elementi družabnih medijev, kot so fotografije in videi, vplivajo na večjo stopnjo zaupanja v verodostojnost med generacijo Z.

Ključne besede: turizem, generacija Z, odločanje, eWOM (elektronsko ustno izročilo), verodostojnost, vizualni elementi.