

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING IN TRAVEL DECISIONS

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ABSTRACT

The way individuals connect with one another around the world has changed as a result of globalization and the rapid evolution of communication technologies. As a technology that enables businesses and customers to communicate without being present physically, social media has risen in popularity in recent years. Because of this, companies across a range of industries are using social media marketing (SMM) to increase customer interactions, word-of-mouth marketing and sales, brand value and recognition. However, the use of SMM is influenced by certain socioeconomic and cultural factors in a given area. The rise in social media usage in Uzbekistan as a result of the development of social media technology gives the tourism and hospitality industry the chance to use SMM to make significant progress in this country. Determining how SMM may affect consumer purchase decisions in Uzbekistan tourism industry is the goal of the current research article. As the most suitable research methodology, a narrative literature review was used in the current study. The study's findings indicate that social media usage has increased and that travelers now use social networks in the process of decision making. SMM has a lot of potential for tourism companies to increase their brand value, identity, awareness and word-of-mouth.

Keywords: *Buying Decision Process, Digital Marketing, Digital Tourism, Social Media Marketing, Social Media in Tourism.*

INTRODUCTION

This study looks at the evolution of social media marketing (SMM), the gaps in the empirical literature and social media use in Uzbekistan tourism. The way individuals connect with one another around the world has changed as a result of globalization and the rapid advancement of communication technologies. As a tool that allows businesses and their customers to connect without being present in person, social media has gained high popularity in recent years (Tuten, 2020).

Because of benefits like increased internet speed, easier use and growing number of internet users, corporations have come to appreciate the importance of social media and have started comprising social media platforms into their marketing strategies.

SMM is the development, transmission, promotion and trade of an organization's services using social media networks, tools and technology in order to increase business awareness and value (Tuten and Solomon, 2017). Through SMM, customers may easily stay in touch with brands, retailers and organizations, enabling them to give enterprises regular feedback (Tuten, 2020).

Travel companies have embraced social media to promote their brands widely as they have come to realize that it may help them stay connected to their customers as the use of social media and its benefits for marketing have increased (Kim and Ko, 2012; Koivisto and Mattila, 2018).

Understanding how businesses could use social media to influence and engage their customers is crucial (Evans et al., 2021). Although there is a plenty of literature on the use of social media to influence consumer buying intentions in the tourism market, there hasn't been much research on how SMM can affect customers' actual purchase decisions. The current study seeks to fill this research gap by evaluating the impact of SMM on traveler`s actual purchase decisions and to determine whether SMM strategy's adoption affects consumer decision-making in Uzbekistan tourism industry. The following are the fundamental goals:

- 1) to look at the size and reach of SMM;
- 2) to evaluate the situation of SMM at the moment in Uzbek travel industry;
- 3) examine how SMM affects consumers' purchasing choices;
- 4) to make suggestions on how industry may use SMM to expand the reach and penetration of its services.

The main concepts of the study, methodologies, findings, discussions and closing remarks will all be covered in the following sections.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media

During Web 1.0 era, people could only use the Internet as a straightforward information source. The web has changed significantly after the emergence of Web 2.0. In this new phase, individuals can now create and share their original content online. Thanks to Web 2.0 technology, social media terminology came into literature. According to Safko and Brake (2009), social media is the term described as “activities, practices and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media”. Whereas opinion according to Wahyu Dian (2017) explains social media marketing as a form of promotion with the help of digital media. Additionally, social media makes it simple for people to communicate with one another whenever and wherever they desire.

Social networks have a significant impact on the rise of internet commerce and the alteration of customer purchasing habits. According to studies, people frequently utilize social media to do their research before making decisions about what to buy.

Social networks enable the gathering of groups of customers to discuss and to exchange opinions on specific products or services. This is one of the most significant roles that these platforms play in consumer purchasing decisions. According to a study on how Facebook likes affect users' purchasing decisions, the tendency of suggesting and buying a certain product from a website that is linked to Facebook is directly related to the number of likes of that product on Facebook. Other studies have also shown that the quantity of likes, the expression of subjectivity in online reviews, online recommendations, other users' ratings and influencer endorsements all have a favorable impact on customers' intention to make purchases on social networks. According to earlier research, there are a number of crucial factors that can affect customer purchasing

behavior, including the caliber of product or service information, emotional experiences, emotional engagement, brand trust, brand community and brand awareness (Tuten, 2020).

Today, many platforms exist on the web where individuals can communicate with one another, create original content and share it with others (Fischer and Reuber, 2011). In July 2022, according to research by Kepios, 4.70 billion or 59 percent of the world's population were identified as social media users. It's also important to keep in mind that, comparing social media users to population statistics may understate the true degree of social media use because most social media platforms only allow users of the age 13 and older to use their platforms. For reference, it should be noted that according to the most recent data, more than 75% of the world's eligible population now uses social media.

According to GWI data, the average social media user spends close to 2½ hours per day actively visiting and using an average of 7.4 different social sites each month. These most recent data imply that people spend about 15% of their waking hours on social media, assuming that people sleep for between 7 and 8 hours each day. Globally, people use social media platforms for more than 10 billion hours every day, which is roughly 1.2 million years of human life.

Although Facebook continues to be the most popular social media site worldwide, there are currently seven others that each claim to have more than one billion monthly active members (Figure 1). Meta owns four of these seven platforms. Additionally, in July 2022, 17 social media networks had at least 300 million active users.

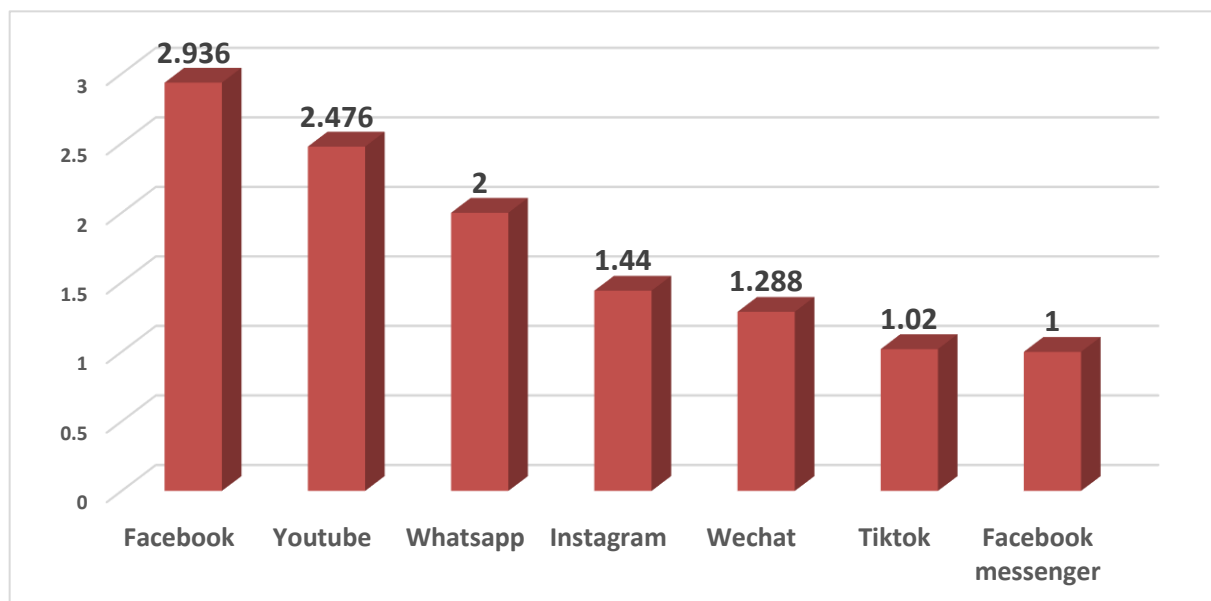


Figure 1. Social media with over one billion monthly active users

The number of social media users in Uzbekistan is also growing day by day, at the beginning of 2022, the number reached to 6.25 million users of social media which is equal to 18.3% of the entire population.

During the visit of Meta company representatives in Uzbekistan, company officials publicized statistics of social media usage of the country stating that more than 10 million people use Facebook and Instagram as for September 2022.

Another data research from Datareportal online platform shows that Instagram is widely used social network by users in Uzbekistan. Currently, the number of users of this network is more

than 4.8 million and 34.4% of users are women. The majority of users are young people between the age 18 and 35 years old.

The following is a list of the top messengers in Uzbekistan:

- Telegram - 80% of users;
- WhatsApp - 22% of users;
- Facebook Messenger – 6% of users.

Purchasing Decision Process and the Consumer Journey Cycle

Making travel decisions entails making numerous decisions regarding the different parts of the vacation plan, some of which are decided before departure and others while at the destination (Choi et al., 2012). Consumers today have an abundance of options, and choosing what to buy is becoming a much more difficult process. Consumers also do not necessarily make decisions based on logic. Additionally, even frequent and returning visitors may not always make well-planned judgments (Pike, 2020).

According to Kotler (2003), when making a purchase choice, clients go through five stages of the purchasing decision process. These include the steps of:

- need identification
- information search
- evaluation
- purchase
- decision and post-purchase decision

According to this concept, the "information search" phase is the most crucial for modern clients. However, the process of purchasing tourism products is more complicated due to the complexity and interrelated nature of tourism as it varies greatly by individual, by excursion and by time of year.

In tourism, the consumer journey cycle, often known as the decision-making process, is predicated on the idea that customers go through a number of push and pull factors or stages before and after completing a purchase. The six stages of the customer journey cycle are shown in Figure 2.

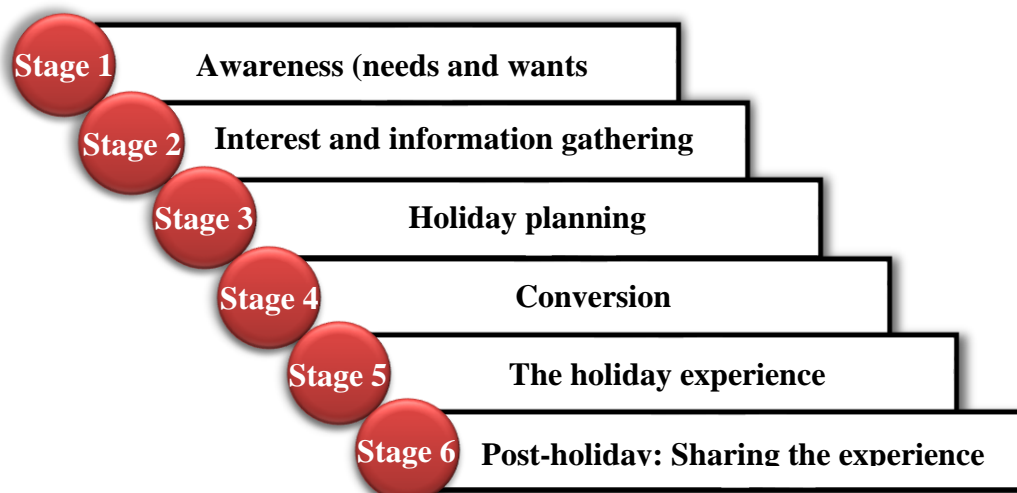


Figure 2. The consumer journey cycle. (Source: Author's creation)

METHODS

A narrative literature review was used in the research as a method of analysis. The literature review uses an approach that is classified as mixed-method. A traditional function of the literature review is to offer a current summary of the body of research on a particular topic. It is a thorough process of carefully reading, considering and classifying numerous sources of scientific significance. It seeks to identify the fundamental characteristics of the subject being studied. It aids researchers by providing a helpful framework for their more focused and empirically based questions. Given that the research problem involves the junction of scientific knowledge from the fields of marketing, business strategy and media and communications, it was the right path to go. The narrative literature review has methodological merit in that it makes it easier to map out overlapping themes (Snyder, 2019). Thematic analysis is the research strategy used in the paper which is a versatile and effective qualitative research technique that allows researchers to examine pre-existing knowledge patterns on a given topic from a variety of sources. It is a technique for finding, examining, classifying and reporting themes that are present in a data set (Nowell et al., 2017). It also facilitates the exploration of findings and implications throughout the entire dataset or the study of a single particular feature of phenomenon in a greater detail and identifying common themes. It enables the use of an inductive method and lets the topics develop naturally from the data.

RESULTS, DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After thoroughly studying, observing and analyzing the consumer journey cycle, following points were brought into discussion based on the six stage cycle of decision process.

Stage 1. As soon as a consumer realizes they want to go on vacation, the consumer journey cycle starts. Weighing the benefits and drawbacks of that ambition in relation to the time and resources they have. The needs of consumers are not always obvious. When they are conscious of their demands, the tourism marketer must persuade them to purchase the services and products being offered. Otherwise, the marketer must aid them in realizing their need for a travel or tourist offering. To make potential customers want a vacation, for instance, a marketer might employ promotions. Potential visitors who are in this phase watch inspiring content like travel videos on YouTube, Instagram Stories and TV documentaries without any conversion goals. Word-of-mouth recommendations, online information searches like reading travel blogs or review websites, user-generated content on social media sites like Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest could all be used to spread awareness.

Stage 2. Consumers who are inspired to take action become decision makers (Pike, 2018). There are choices to be made regarding where to travel, when to visit, how to go there, where to stay and what to do once they get to the destination. According to Pike (2018), these choices are made in the "black box" of the consumer's head. Customers are aware of the destination already and begin to think about it more actively, searching for details on what they can see and do there. In this stage of travel, businesses strive to connect with customers on social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and etc. (posting images, tips, tricks and check lists).

When compared to researching most other consumer products, planning holiday travel is likely to take more time and require the use of more information sources. Online users search for inexpensive airfares. According to research, some travelers start their planning process

primarily on the availability of cheap flights rather than the amenities of the destination. They research destinations by reading travel brochures and advertisements, watching travel-related television shows and channels like the National Geographic Channel or the Discovery Channel, asking fellow travelers for advice on social media platforms like Instagram and surfing travel websites (for example, travel review websites and blogs like Wikitravel and TripAdvisor). Most travelers use reviews to assist them narrow down their options at the beginning of the holiday planning process. Positive reviews boost self-assurance and lower risk.

Stage 3. Travelers frequently find this to be a highly exciting stage of the decision-making process. Potential holidaymakers start to look forward to the trip at this point. A consumer decision is the outcome of a mental process when one option is deliberately chosen from a list of accessible alternatives (Moutinho, 1987). The customer chooses a set of criteria based on price (customers frequently use price as a degree of quality), convenience, travel time, location, accommodation, activities tailored to their interests, attractions (such as heritage, wildlife, beaches and so on), season and the weather, health and safety concerns and other factors. When ranking the choices in terms of preference, the customer takes into account the information at their disposal. When ranking the choices in terms of preference, the customer takes into account the information at their disposal.

Stage 4. For any travel brand, this is the most important time since it marks the transition from inspiration to purchase. Consumers are committed to their plan during this phase and are prepared to pay for things like travel, experiences, accommodation and attraction tickets.

Stage 5. When a consumer travels to a destination, they genuinely experience the vacation. At this point, the decision-making procedure is frequently repeated as tourists make additional purchases such as going to sites, dining at restaurants and appreciate tourist activities.

Stage 6. The vacation is over and the travelers have gone back home. At this point, individuals share their experiences with their loved ones, close friends and online readers. They blog about their journey, upload pictures and videos and leave reviews. They may already be considering returning to the destination in the future. In this stage, social networking, travel blogs and review websites are normally used. The significance of this step of the decision-making process is frequently underrated.

CONCLUSIONS

As the number of people using social media websites is growing day by day, it is also effecting their decision making process in all spheres of life including in tourism industry. Starting from “purchasing decision process” to “consumer journey cycle”, today`s travellers rush to social media resources and platforms to help them make better decisions.

Tourism businesses in Uzbekistan often neglect the importance of SMM or underrate the power of it. There are several tour companies that are successful in attracting tourists with the help of SMM but the number is very small in relation to the total number of companies in tourism sphere.

There is a big gap and a great opportunity for all tourism startups and companies to make smart use of social media in their marketing program in order to increase the number of their leads and clients thus to result in an increased revenue. It is suggested to carefully study and make plans on how to influence potential travellers in each stage of “consumer journey cycle”.

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