DIGITAL COMMUNICATION – CONVENIENCE OR NECESSITY OF MODERN TOURISM?

Abstract: The paper deals with the role of digital communication in the tourism sector. The aim is to determine whether the use of digital communications is only an available opportunity or a necessity imposed by a new generation of travelers (the so-called Millennials and Generation Z) and new circumstances caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Communication and today digital communication are an important aspect of our lives. People use the Internet to do business, socialize, inform, share their impressions, to shop. The way people travel is changing as well. They look for information about touristic destination and products online, assess impressions of those who have already visited destinations or happenings and stayed in specific accommodation. Then they book transportation and accommodation online via websites and platforms. The tourism sector is information intensive and this is why digital communication is important for this sector. Some quickly got used to the new reality and began to use all the opportunities provided by the new digital technology, while some found it harder to accept. Until the beginning of 2020, tourism became one of the fastest-growing economic sectors in the world, and steady growth would certainly continue but coronavirus pandemic happened and everything has stopped. The coronavirus pandemic has set new requirements for the tourism sector and is already dictating new ways of doing business.

Through various statistical and other data used in the paper, we will see that at the beginning the usage of digital technology and digital communication in the tourism sector was something that existed as a possibility but today this is a necessity of modern business.

Keywords: Communication, tourism, digital technologies, pandemic, Covid19.
1. INTRODUCTION

“As the world continues to move into the digital space, new communication channels and advanced data platforms have created opportunities for organisations to improve their customers’ experience and adapt to new ways of doing business”.¹

“The digital economy is transforming the process of communicating with tourists and marketing tourism services, and opening up new and highly creative ways of delivering tourism services and enhancing the visitor experience. It is changing the way work is organized, services delivered and also present opportunities to take advantage of digital advancements to handle transactions, capture and process information and data on tourism supply and demand, and improve and connect operations along tourism value chains and ecosystems”.² In this sense, we can talk about the opportunities or conveniences provided by new digital technologies, primarily in the field of communication.

Many companies and individuals finally have begun to embrace digital technologies with the changes and limitations in movement and behavior, that occurred in 2020. Changes in the tourism sector today are the result of the impact of the Covid19 pandemic on the movement and travel of people around the world. “Travel restrictions spread out from the Wuhan region epicenter (local lockdown beginning 23 January) to most countries by the end of March 2020. First case in Serbia, reported on 6 March 2020”.³

“It can be estimated that over 90% of the world’s population are in countries with some level of international travel restrictions and many of these countries also have some degree of restrictions on internal movement, including limited air travel and stay at home orders”.⁴ In this situation, digital communication technologies are gaining even more importance, they are becoming necessity, because many activities and businesses are moving into the digital sphere, on internet. Many people are on-line, many do work from home, order products online or search for content that is important to them due to work or pleasure. They spend a lot of time using different applications, messenger platforms and browsers. Businesses started to notice how easy it is to connect with customers through mobile platforms and applications and COVID-19 accelerated the need for that remote communication.

³ https://covid19.rs (22.02.2021.)
The tourism sector uses a lot of information and we can say that it is “information intensive”. “Understanding digital uptake by tourism SMEs is particularly relevant as around 85% of those enterprises with a major role in the delivery of tourism services in OECD countries are SMEs (e.g. accommodation and food services, travel agencies, tour operators), compared to roughly two-thirds for the wider economy. Although they constitute the majority of tourism businesses, SMEs and micro-companies face more difficulties to vertically integrate than larger companies (such as hotel chains in the accommodation sub-sector) and to reach potential customers”.

2. COMMUNICATION AND DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Communication is the process of exchanging information between the sender and the recipient of a message. The key thing is understanding, because communication was good when the sender and the receiver understood the information in the same way.

In business communication “it is necessary to pay attention to the overall context in which the communication takes place, as well as to all changes in the behavior and communication of the interlocutor during the communication process”. This becomes especially difficult and important in situations when the recipient and the sender of the message do not see each other or when there is no direct face to face communication. Another problem is when they come from different cultures or have a different cultural background. Therefore, in order to get accurate and clear information today, people look for information from several different sources, from several different sides. New IC technology also provides such opportunities. “However, the meaning of being “ICT ready” continues to evolve rapidly, causing many organizations, companies and countries to spend time rethinking their “service delivery”, integrating constant connectivity into the experience”.

Digital technology is transforming most industries and creates new challenges and opportunities for companies. In tourism sector, internet enables locals and travellers to connect and communicate directly. “Tourism, as a socio-economic phenomenon, represents the movement of people in order to meet

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7 World Economic Forum: Which are the most tourist-friendly countries?, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/04/which-are-the-most-tourist-friendly-countries/(12.03.2021.)
tourist needs”\textsuperscript{8} “The application of digital technologies and their further evaluation are profoundly changing the way people live and work. But the speed of digitalization is under the influence of range of factors such as social and demographic characteristics; the political context; legal frameworks; geophysical environments; availability of, access to, and awareness of different technologies; the economic conditions that shape confidence, investment and so on; what is happening in competitor environments; and influences on the marketplace”\textsuperscript{9}. 

![Factors influencing the uptake of digitalization](image)

**Figure 1: Factors influencing the uptake of digitalization**\textsuperscript{10}

The push to adopt digital technologies was driven by new technologies and globalization but now it is accelerated by Covid19 pandemic.

Digital technologies made revolution in communication today. In order to stay competitive and to take advantages of those new technologies, tourism sector and destinations, will have to start applying it intensively and more widely.


\textsuperscript{9} Dredge Diannet. et al. (2018): Digitalisation in Tourism: In-depth analysis of challenges and opportunities. Low Value procedure. SME-17-C- 091-A for EASME, Virtual Tourism Observatory. Aalborg University, Copenhagen, 11.

\textsuperscript{10} Dredge Diann et. al.(2018): Digitalisation in Tourism: In-depth analysis of challenges and opportunities. Low Value procedure. SME-17-C- 091-A for EASME, Virtual Tourism Observatory. Aalborg University, Copenhagen, 11.
3. DIGITAL COMMUNICATION IN TOURISM SECTOR AS CONVENIENCE

There are a growing number of connected people around the world. The internet enables a lot of information, communication and sharing experience, reservations and many other things.

Being competitive means being digital. Countries and organizations try to be competitive by integrating technology in business and enhancing their connectivity, they increase investments in the telecommunications infrastructure.

Addressing the challenges that tourism businesses face in their digitalisation journey can vary significantly depending on:

- "Type, size and characteristics of the tourism business, and the subsector they belong to (e.g. transport, accommodation, personal services),
- Access to technologies, information, expertise, advice, mentoring and other resources and support,
- Management and strategy-making capabilities, which shape the extent to which business owners sense opportunity, perceive risk and are motivated to seize opportunities
- Location of the business, the social and economic context, and the access and availability of digital technologies".11

According to Xiang and Fesenmaier three key phases of technology development can be identified in tourism:

1. "Phase 1 - Sales and marketing - the introduction of the Internet enabled businesses to harness technology as a marketing tool. Websites began to replace paper-based marketing materials, web-based reservation systems started to facilitate business transactions etc.

2. Phase 2 - Digital business ecosystems - the Internet consolidated its place as the key source of information for travellers, and advances in Internet technologies enabled a virtual marketplace where products and services could be searched, compared, and transacted (i.e. purchases, shared, swapped, etc.) online. Suppliers became increasingly interested in customising products and developing personal connections with their customers. Innovative online intermediaries emerged such as Expedia and growth of review sites like TripAdvisor put the customer in control of their purchases but also gave them an influential role in the decision making of future consumers. Tourists increasingly booked and completed electronic transactions online, which in turn facilitated the expansion of global markets.

3. Phase 3 – Integration of systems - Advances such as cloud computing, mobile and wearable technologies, augmented and virtual reality, GPS, and increased integration and interoperability of digital systems have facilitated

interconnectivities between digital and physical worlds. Combined with collaborative social media platforms and Web 2.0 that facilitates user-generated content, these advances have opened up new and innovative product development opportunities that have accelerated the global reach of tourism enterprises.12

Today consumers are using digital technologies to search, plan and book travel.

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**Figure 2. Examples of digital technologies transforming tourism**13

According to Arnould, Price, and Zinkhan, the tourism experience is the sum of four distinctive phases pre-consumption experience, purchase experience, core consumption, and nostalgia experience.14

Digital technologies have important implications for tourism businesses of all sizes and for the sector as a whole. OECD (2019) data show that on average 77% of the accommodation and food and beverage service businesses in OECD countries have a website or homepage and 70% use social media. The tourism sector has embraced e-commerce, as online platforms and payment systems have changed the way people buy travel products.15 So, this is the reality in which the tourism sector operates, but these are also the benefits, the conveniences it has from using new technologies.

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13 Dredge Dianne et. al.(2018): Digitalisation in Tourism: In-depth analysis of challenges and opportunities. Low Value procedure. SME-17-C-091-A for EASME, Virtual Tourism Observatory. Aalborg University, Copenhagen, p. 10
4. DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AS NECESSITY OF MODERN TOURISM

As already said, we are in the third phase of the application of ICT in tourism, in which digital communications are becoming a necessity.

Transfer from traditional players to new digital competitors is driven primarily “by the consumption habits of Millennials (born in the early-1980s to mid-1990s) and Generation Z (born in the late-1990s to early-2010s), who along with other emerging generations will comprise the bulk of domestic and international tourists by 2040”.16 They want quick and direct access to information, enabled primarily by digital technology.

“In tourism industry it means increased use of online sources and mobile platforms to source information in the planning stage (e.g. websites, social media), combined with decreasing use of offline sources (e.g. visitor information centres, print media, hotel concierge); a propensity to stay online/connected in the destination to search and explore, share experiences and get updates in real time; and an increase in the use of e-commerce payment methods over the use of cash.”17

The second reason why it is necessity is the pandemic, the whole world is facing it. The Coronavirus pandemic has made travel more complicated than ever. Many countries in Europe rushed to close their borders in order to prevent transmission of COVID-19. The tourism as we know is destined to disappear, and there are many changes that will affect it: from travel, to hotels and the experience at the destination.

New data showing an 87% fall in international tourist arrivals in January 2021 as compared to 2020.

“With 32% of destinations worldwide showing complete border closures in early February and another 34% with partial closure, UNWTO expects international tourist arrivals to be down about 85% in the first quarter of 2021 over the same period of 2019. This would represent a loss of some 260 million international arrivals when compared to pre-pandemic levels.”18

Ruiz Guevara said that „The post-COVID tourist will have an even more digital profile, looking for alternatives for their vacations via various online platforms “.19 She stated that the first transformation of tourism will begin in transportation companies who will have to make the traveler’s experience safe and comfortable as possible and to include many safety protocols which will slow down a trip. All necessary information should be found on line. Tourists will look

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for more flexible bookings as well as safer and more personalized hotels that will in the future probably more depend on apps. Automation, less personal contact, delivery of room service and online reservations of everything - from the place by the pool to the table in the restaurant, as well as the quality of the internet connection, will be on the price.

Figure 3: International Tourist Arrivals (Change %)²⁰

With the closure of borders as a basic measure to prevent the spread of the infection, many countries are turning to domestic tourists. Many events and meetings are switched to the network and they have become virtual or we have hybrid solutions. Some hotels and resorts have turned to the live streaming. As travellers need to stay constantly informed about the latest travel guidelines, detailed and timely information sharing became important.

“Within the leisure travel market, tourism digitization plays an essential role. Revenues of Booking Holdings and the Expedia Group – the biggest two online travel agencies (OTAs) worldwide – more than doubled between 2013 and

2019, while evaluating services on travel review websites, such as TripAdvisor, became an important part of the overall tourism experience. As the COVID-19 pandemic turned the travel industry upside down, digital innovation, together with new hygiene measures, domestic destinations, and sustainability will likely lead the way in the new era of leisure travel”.21

“Up to 89% of young people book their vacations based on suggestions they find on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, based on comments from people they consider authoritative in one way or another. Not only the very young are influenced, but the percentages are significant: between 30% and 40% of tourists admit having changed their travel plans after reading negative comments. According to a survey by the vertical portal of the Antevenio group, the most popular sites and applications for Italian tourists are TripAdvisor (33%), Booking (26%), Google (16%), Trivago (12%), Edreams & Expedia (6%) and finally airline websites (5%)”.22

More than ever, people are on the internet now. The pandemic has forced many people to work from home. For companies became very important to discover which mobile platforms their customers are on, and finding ways to reach them on those platforms.

**Figure 4. Most popular global mobile messenger apps as of January 2021, based on number of monthly active users (in millions)**23

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21 https://www.statista.com/markets/420/topic/493/leisure-travel/#overview (01.05.2021.)
As of October 2020, two billion users access WhatsApp on a monthly basis, followed by Facebook Messenger (1.3 billion monthly users) and WeChat (1.2 billion monthly users). Thus, the tourism sector and travel companies need to be focused on discovering which mobile platforms their customers are on, and finding ways to reach them on those platforms. Digital communication became necessity of modern tourism.

5. DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AND TOURISM SECTOR IN SERBIA

According to The Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 81% of households have an Internet connection, which is an increase of 0.9% compared to 2019, and 8.1% compared to 2018. The prevalence of this type of internet connection is highest in Belgrade (93.9%), followed by Vojvodina (74.7%), Sumadija and Western Serbia (77.5%) and Southern and Eastern Serbia (77.3%).

![Figure 5: Percentage of households who have access to the Internet at home](image)

As well, 80.8% of households have a broadband internet connection, which represent an increase of 1.2% compared to 2019 and 8.3% compared to 2018. In Serbia about five % of the total number of household does not have the possibility of fixed internet access, so construction of a broadband network in rural areas in Serbia, which is currently being worked on, should reduce that gap between urban and rural areas.

![Figure 6: Percentage of households with broadband internet connection](image)


In the Republic of Serbia in 2019, 99.8% of companies have an Internet connection and the website 83.6% of companies, while in 2000 this number was 100% for companies that have Internet access, while the website had 84.4% companies. In that percentage of 84.4%, the companies that offer accommodation and food services participate with 82.8%, while in 2020, 18.6% of the companies paid for cloud services.

This is important information, because it is a prerequisite for the use of digital communications with both foreign and domestic tourists. Although the number of foreign tourists has increased faster than domestic ones in recent years, the number of domestic tourists and their overnight stays in Serbia has remained significant.

![Figure 7: Tourist overnight stay, quarterly indices (%)
(Comparison with the same period of the previous year)](image)

During the Covid-19, restrictions on travel and border closure were between the first measures. This has affected the tourism sector significantly, so removal of such restrictions would be integral part of tourism recovery.

Over January-September 2020, domestic tourists represented the majority of visitors in Serbia, i.e. 80.8% of the total number of overnight stays. This is in line with the claim of European Travel Commission that “recovery will be led by domestic and short-haul travel”.

With the relaxation of measures, the number of domestic tourists and overnight stays began to grow. With the summer and vacations in August and September it not just returned to the level of 2019 but we have even an increase compared to 2019 while at the same time, the number of foreign tourists and their overnight stays also increased, but slightly.

Tatjana Matić, Minister of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications in the Republic of Serbia said in an interview that “There are many challenges that await tourism in the so-called new reality. One of the first tasks is to rebrand Serbia as a tourist destination that can offer attractive and authentic content to both domestic and foreign tourists. The Government of Serbia has already adopted a program of subsidies for projects in tourism, and more than 600 million dinars.

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are intended for development infrastructure projects and 115 million dinars for promotion and education. The digitalization of the tourist offer and service is also planned, and 500 million dinars have been set aside for the first 100,000 vouchers for subsidized holidays in Serbia”. However, she also said that “the introduction of 5G networks in Serbia is postponed as one of the economic consequences of a corona virus pandemic”.

Figure 8: Tourist overnight stays Nov. 2019. – Nov. 2020

Technologies of 5G are introduced to improve the system quality but we have to do on information quality and service quality as well.

According to Lau Arthur „Live-stream promotion and live-stream conference are introduced to primarily improve information quality, while 5G technology and Wi-Fi 6 are installed to enhance the system quality. Facial recognition, AI, and Robots are integrated to the daily operations to enhance service quality“.

„System quality refers to the desired features of a typical information system, including usability, availability, reliability, response time (e.g., download time), and adaptability. During the pandemic, live-stream conferencing and remote working becoming more common for both hotels and their guests. According to the interviewees, the improvement of system quality is one of the key factors for operation efficiency and guest satisfaction. Technologies of 5G and Wi-Fi 6 are introduced to improve the system quality.

Service quality refers to the overall support delivered by the service provider, which applies regardless of whether the support is delivered by the IS

28 https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/470734/Srbija-nastavlja-rad-na-razvoju-5G-mreze (23.03.2021.)
department or a new organizational unit or is outsourced to other service providers. During the pandemic, hotels are employing AI technology and Robots to improve their service quality.31

It can be said that the quality of the system is a prerequisite for the service quality, but that there is no quality of the service without the quality of the information.

Information quality refers to quality of content, that should be relevant and easy to understand.

In The Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2016 to 2025 is recognized that „Changes in tourists’ behaviour and habits will require an adequate segmentation of consumers and the consequent market segmentation of tourism and hospitality products and services, keeping in mind the gender, age, marital status, motivational, and all other important tourist segmentations, as well as the constant need for adjustments to the domestic offer. This shows that the structure of tourists today is very complex and that the secret to successful marketing in tourism lies in the ability to understand trends and satisfy all market niches. In this regard, three groups of new trends should be given special attention:

1. New trends in promotion and booking;
2. New accommodation types;
3. Modern motives for travelling in the world tourist market”.32

The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019, showed that: “tourism service infrastructure (77th) needs to become more accommodating; in particular, its online branding strategy (133rd) should be given more attention. Serbia also needs to continue reducing travel barriers by entering into more air service (97th) and trade agreements (77th)”.33

Evidently, in tourism sector in Serbia, we need to work more on prerequisites, but as well on other elements: on quality service and quality information. There is need to adopt new trends in tourism, in operating and promoting – in digital communication with customers.

Communication is a matter of human nature. People as a social beings, must communicate, receive and send information about how they feel, what they think, what makes them happy or scared, to find out what is happening in their environment, arrange to hang out with friends or the next business activities. However, people also like to travel, gain new experiences, get to know new cultures. In that sense, modern technology offers great opportunities for information, but also new ways of doing business.

The tourism sector is becoming increasingly important in the world. „Between 2009 and 2019, real growth in international tourism receipts (54%) exceeded growth in world GDP (44%) “.34 Until the beginning of 2020, tourism has experienced continued expansion and diversification and become one of the largest and fastest-growing economic sectors in the world. „Tourism, consisting of both inbound and domestic tourism represents a major part of gross domestic product for many economies around the world. This proportion is largest in Macao (China) where tourism accounts for 48% of GDP. In Jordan, Spain, Croatia and Mauritius, tourism accounts for 10% or more of those countries’ GDP. In France, the world’s top tourism destination, tourism represents 7% of GDP “.35 In Serbia “from 2014 an expansive growth of the tourism activity started, which lasted till March 2020”.36

The restrictions imposed by the coronavirus pandemic, at the beginning of 2020 disrupted this constant growth. New reality is that „According to the UNWTO World Tourism Barometer (January 2021), international tourist arrivals have fallen by 74 percent from almost 1.5 billion arrivals 2020 to around 381 million in 2019. “.37

The beginning of the recovery many see in the greater and better use of digital communications and through close communication with domestic tourists first. Digital communication maybe start as convenience but with time and pandemics it become necessity of modern tourism.

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- https://covid19.rs (22.02.2021.)
- https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/470734/Srbija-nastavlja-rad-na-razvoju-5G-mreze (23.03.2021.)
• World Economic Forum: Which are the most tourist-friendly countries? https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/04/which-are-the-most-tourist-friendly-countries/(12.03.2021.)
DIGITALNA KOMUNIKACIJA – POGODNOST ILI NEOPHODNOST MODERNOG TURIZMA?

Apstrakt: Rad se bavi ulogom koju digitalna komunikacija ima u turističkom sektoru. Cilj je utvrditi da li je upotreba digitalnih komunikacija samo raspoloživa mogućnost ili neophodnost koju nameću nova generacija putnika (takozi vni milenijalci i generacija Z), kao i nove okolnosti uzrokovane pandemijom korona virusom.


Kroz različite statističke i druge podatke korišćene u radu, videćemo da je u početku primena digitalne tehnologije i digitalnih komunikacija u turističkom sektoru bila nešto što je postojalo kao mogućnost ali da je danasto neophodnost savremenog poslovanja.

Ključne reči: Komunikacija, turizam, digitalne tehnologije, pandemija, Kovid19.