

THE ROLE OF TRAVEL INFLUENCERS IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Tourism, as one of the main industries at the global level, can provide many benefits, primarily economic, however the growing trend of tourist travel has begun to cause incalculable damage to the environment, cultural heritage and to affect the lifestyle of the local population of tourist destinations. In recent years, sustainable development in tourism has emerged as a necessity, but in order for such processes to be adequately completed, it is necessary to reprogram people's awareness of environmental protection, consumption of sustainable products, healthy lifestyles and preservation of tourist destinations. The rapidly evolving digital environment has become an indispensable tool for marketing professionals. It is possible to communicate more efficiently with the target market through internet-based platforms. Influencers have played a major role in influencing other members of society even before the advent of digital technologies. However, electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM), as a form of word-of-mouth communication in the digital environment, can be a very successful tool for influencing consumer attitudes, including attitudes towards sustainable tourism development. Today, travel influencers play a particularly important role on social networks. If the influencers are focused on a healthy lifestyle, environmental protection and the development of sustainable tourism, there is a good chance that their followers will adopt such behavior. Given that eWOM communication can have a viral effect, it is very likely that such positive information will continue to spread exponentially in the virtual space, continuing its uncontrolled influence.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism development, Travel Influencers, Digital environment, Electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM)

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INTRODUCTION

Internet users expect immediate and detailed coverage of events from the media, and the Internet has raised these expectations to an even higher level and enabled the public to react and express their views on various issues, ie to share with others whether they like what they learned or not [1]. Digital media, with their interactive function, enable their users to produce and reproduce content [2]. Along with digital development, new technologies have created an opportunity for digital influencers to take over the marketing space from brands through electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM) [3].

Tourism is an economically very important branch at the global and local level that is constantly evolving. It is of vital economic, cultural and social importance and offers realistic prospects for inclusive and sustainable development [4]. It is necessary to carefully plan the development of tourism, in order to exploit and prolong its life cycle [5]. There is a growing need to use digital technologies in tourism [6].

Sustainable tourism development is not only necessary due to the increase in the number of tourists worldwide, but also due to the protection and long-term balance of environmental and socio-cultural aspects [7]. Social media is extremely popular and is widely used to gather relevant information provided by potential and/or current users of tourism services [8]. In tourism, social media is used to create and strengthen the image of a destination chosen by tourists [9], to promote the destination, but also to develop effective communication strategies [10], and finally, to analyze tourism moods [11].

Influencers are people who are opinion leaders on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Due to the high level of social presence on social networks, they have a strong influence on their audience [12]. According to De Veirman [13], they often post their messages on social media and regularly update their followers. This type of communication is considered to be electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM). eWOM has also been tested in the hotel industry and it has been found that this communication has a strong impact on online hotel reservations for consumers of all ages [14]. Influencers represent a new type of leaders who shape an audience's attitudes by creating content and sharing it on social media channels [15].

That the importance of digital influencers is growing every day is confirmed by companies who invest larger sums of money for this form of marketing activities. The use of influencers in marketing activities of organizations is constantly increasing, and according to a report published by Influencer Marketing Benchmark in 2020, the value of influencer marketing is projected to rise to over 10 billion US dollars, while in 2016 it was less than 2 billion [16]. On the other hand, the data from the report prepared by Business Insider Intelligence show even better forecasts, according to which the value of this industry will reach 15 billion dollars in 2022 [17]. Marketing experts have recognized the potential of influencer marketing, because it generates better returns than traditional advertising, and began to use it intensively [18].

The healthy lifestyle of influencers can have a positive effect on the followers who would adopt such thinking, as well as on the environment and tourist destinations, which are currently burdened with a large number of tourists, who burn fossil fuels during transport and leave garbage, thus disturbing the fragile natural balance. The only problem with this type of communication is that consumers are aware that most influencers are paid to promote products and services and that companies often prepare in advance the content they want to be shared in the digital environment. This raises doubts and casts a shadow on the credibility of the information and recommendations shared by influencers.

TRAVEL INFLUENCER MARKETING

In creating social attitudes, the digital environment is slowly taking precedence over traditional media. They satisfy consumer's needs for information and communication, as well as for conflicting opinions with others on social networks [19]. The business world is well aware of the opportunities that social networks have. Thanks to them, communication with consumers is much faster and more efficient. However, in order to convey the message even more effectively to the target market (about the value of brands), companies hire social media influencers, who are considered modern opinion makers in the digital environment [20].

Digital influencers, such as celebrities, active members of virtual communities, bloggers, use digital media channels to support brands, products, or services and to encourage consumer purchasing decisions [21]. The development and spread of the Internet has expanded consumers' ability to gather information about products and services, including comments and reviews from other consumers published on the Internet. The Internet has also, with the inclusion of eWOM, provided an opportunity for consumers to offer their consumption advice [22]. eWOM belongs to the category of viral marketing, which describes any strategy that encourages individuals to spread the message, thus creating the potential for exponential growth of influence [23]. Thanks to the increase in the number of influencers from social networks who share tourist content and their experiences, consumers are less experiencing travel as a privilege reserved only for selected people. Honest criticism, advice and suggestions for the best location, which influencers share with their followers, have significantly reduced people's fear of the unknown. Advances in technology have helped drive a growing travel trend as it has made it easier for people to plan more efficiently. Another advantage of the digital environment is that travelers have become more confident and are increasingly giving up travel agents and planning their own trips [24]. According to available information, content generated by online users, ie. social media sites and blogs, has resulted in more than

\$10 billion in travel bookings in the digital environment, and as more people travel each year, it is estimated that this number will grow [25]. Researchers, using the perspective of self-congruence theory, examined consumer reactions to tourist destinations recommended by influencers on social media. It was found that there is a significant positive impact on the intention of followers to visit these destinations in situations where the perceived image of the influencer and the ideal self-image of the consumer coincide [12]. Tourists are increasingly using social media when planning a trip. These tools, especially in the pre-travel phase, increasingly guide and shape consumer behavior and perception in tourism industry, and finally influence the choice of tourist destinations [26].

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND FACTORS INFLUENCING CHANGES IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainable development is difficult to define precisely due to the lack of consensus on the real meaning of this term. Perhaps the most precise definition is that sustainable development is one that meets the needs of the current generation without disrupting the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. [27]. Tourism as one of the most important economic branches at the world is constantly evolving. It is of vital economic, social and cultural importance and offers realistic prospects for sustainable development. [4]. The World Tourism Organization defines sustainable tourism as tourism that guides the management of all resources in a way that social, economic and aesthetic needs can be met while maintaining cultural integrity, biodiversity, essential ecological processes and life support systems [28].

Over the next few decades, the travel and tourism industry could be threatened by several factors, such as political instability that could lead to the loss of potential new tourist destinations and loss of landscape and wildlife that could cause a decrease in tourist satisfaction, and thus less propensities to travel to some areas. Also, higher fuel prices may lead to a reduction in the number of passengers in price-sensitive markets. On the other hand, among the positive factors that can affect tourism is the fact that global awareness of environmental protection is developing rapidly and it is assumed that environmental lobbies will exert increasing pressure to develop good environmental practices that will influence people to achieve beneficial effects on the environment [29].

In 2019, there were more than 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals globally [4]. This trend is expected to continue to grow, however it is difficult to make accurate predictions due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic [30].

In his study, in the context of tourism sustainability, Akintunde has proven a link between attitudes and behaviors [31]. Mohaidin et al [32] concluded that attitudes towards ecology are positively correlated with the intention to choose sustainable tourist destinations. It has also been proven that environmentally conscious tourists are willing to engage in environmentally responsible behavior. Several research studies suggest that the ecological attitudes of tourists are directly related to the type of activity and the type of destination they visit. In that sense, it has been shown that the degree of ecological commitment of tourists, who visit, for example, nature parks, is significantly higher than the degree of those who visit tourist places such as beaches [33]. Ecologically responsible behavior within a destination is influenced by ecological attitudes, attachment to a specific place, level of commitment to the environment, means of transportation, ecological education and knowledge, as well as ecological behavior learned and applied at home [34].

The green concern of influencers, which is a personal factor, has the potential to shape the green attitude of followers, meaning that when influencers express their feeling and concerns about environmental issues, the followers will have a positive evaluation and point of view about green consumption behaviour. It is suggested that influencers' role is a worthwhile topic for further studies. This topic is particularly critical to train and raise awareness about environmental issues and green consumption behaviour [35]. Research has shown that the younger generations are the target group that is considered to have a greater interest in sustainable products in terms of their purchasing behavior. The development and growth of digital technologies has enabled them to develop a better understanding of the ethical issues that have shaped their consumer habits [36]. Sustainable influencers can be used to increase consumer awareness and knowledge of sustainability issues and influence them to build environmentally friendly behavior. Moreover, followers do not necessarily have to be interested in caring for the environment in order to become susceptible to awareness of sustainability transmitted by the influencer [37].

CONCLUSION

Modern society, which is increasingly aware of the consequences of global warming, is trying to adapt its lifestyle to environmentally sound, but also business to sustainable development. The tourism industry has been particularly affected by mass tourism, with reports showing that it has been expanding in recent years. Fortunately, the sustainable development of tourist destinations could contribute to the preservation of nature, but also to a more normal functioning of life of local citizens by reducing tourist visits. Experts in the field of marketing communications are aware of the potential of influencers, ie creators of public opinion in both real and digital environments. By their example, but also by sharing audio-visual content on social media that promote healthy living habits, and suggest the importance of nature conservation, consumption of sustainable products or by promoting of sustainable tourist destinations, they have the power to reshape behavior of their followers. Studies have shown that consumers of younger generations are most prone to such sustainable attitudes. They are most vulnerable to electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM), and are often willing to share such views with other Internet users, often triggering a viral effect. Sustainable tourism development is the only possible right path for humanity. And as the very definition of sustainability dictates, responsible behavior must leave the planet in its most perfect form to future generations. Along the way, great support can be provided by social media, which will communicate true values with everyone who is ready to hear.

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