USING INSTAGRAM FOR DESTINATION MARKETING: CREATING THE PERCEPTION OF A TOURISM DESTINATION EXPERIENCE AND INFLUENCING THE TRAVEL DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

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Abstract

Nowadays Instagram has a big influence on the tourism sector. A large number of travelers are using Instagram to post pictures, videos and stories, during and after their holidays, for experience sharing and travel tips. Travelers love to share their impressions of the places they have discovered with their friends and the wider travel community. This type of user-generated content is generally more trusted than official tourism websites and advertising and it is used to discover new travel ideas. Therefore, Instagram plays an important role in shaping the image of a tourism destination and in presenting the destination experiences. This article aims to evaluate how can Instagram influence the viewers' perceptions towards travel destinations and to identify how Instagram posts are influencing the travel decision-making process. The article also discusses the implications of using Instagram in promotional strategies for destinations, since now conventional tourism promotion is not enough for presenting the travelers experiences. Overall, the travel decision-making process is a complex and multifaceted process that can be influenced by a wide range of factors. By understanding these factors and keeping up with emerging trends and changes in the travel market, businesses in the tourism industry can develop more effective strategies and offerings that resonate with travelers and help them make informed decisions about their travel plans.

Keywords: *destination branding, destination experience, destination marketing, social media, Instagram.*

1. Introduction

Destination marketing is the process of promoting a particular destination to attract visitors, increase tourism revenues, and enhance the overall reputation and brand image of the destination. The aim of destination marketing is to create awareness and interest among potential travelers, and to motivate them to choose the destination as their preferred travel destination. Destination marketing plays a critical role in the tourism industry, helping to promote destinations and attract visitors, while supporting economic growth and sustainable tourism development.

Effective destination marketing requires a deep understanding of the target market and their travel preferences and motivations. Destination marketing organizations and other stakeholders in the tourism industry must identify the needs, interests, and behaviors of potential travelers, and to develop marketing messages and strategies that resonate with them. Destination marketing typically involves a range of activities and strategies, including advertising campaigns, public relations and media outreach, social media and digital marketing, tourism trade shows and exhibitions, and partnerships with other businesses and organizations in the tourism industry. Social media has proven to be an effective method for destination branding according to numerous previous studies, leading to its increased utilization in marketing and promoting destinations to boost tourist numbers[1].

Nowadays social media plays a crucial role in developing an effective destination marketing strategy. Social media platforms provide a powerful tool for destinations to present their unique offerings, promote their attractions, reach new audiences, engage with potential visitors, and build their brand image. Social media can be utilized for destination marketing in numerous ways, but the most important advantages are being offered by the visual and interactive nature of these platforms. Social media platforms "are not simply used as interaction

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[1] A. Basit, A.D. Nurlukman, A. Kosasih, *The effect of social media destination branding: the use of Facebook and Instagram*, in Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, 2019, vol. 439.

or communication tools but also as an active component in the destination image formation process"[2]. Social media provides an opportunity to present the destination's attractions in a visually appealing way through pictures and videos.

A tourism destination image refers to the perceptions that potential tourists have about a certain destination. In order for a destination's image to be effective, it must include attributes that satisfy the needs of tourists and differentiate it from competitors. The image of the destination has two main functions in consumer behavior: to influence tourists' decision-making processes and to have an impact on their intention to visit or recommend the destination again[3].

Social media allows destinations to connect with visitors and locals and create online communities where people can share their experiences, photos, and opinions. Social media can be also used to encourage visitors to share their experiences and photos, creating user-generated content that can be further used to promote the destination, reach new audiences and showcase the offerings to a wider audience.

A tourism destination experience refers to the overall experience that a traveler has when visiting a certain destination. A tourism destination experience can be influenced by a wide range of factors, including the natural and built environment, the availability and quality of accommodations, transportation and infrastructure, the local culture and traditions, and the activities and attractions that are available. In order to create a positive tourism destination experience, destination managers and businesses in the tourism industry need to focus on creating an environment that is welcoming, authentic, and memorable and on developing and promoting unique experiences. Travelers are increasingly seeking out experiences that are unique, authentic, and connected to the local culture and traditions. Destination managers and tourism businesses can develop and promote these experiences by working with local communities, cultural organizations, and other businesses to showcase the best that the destination has to offer. Thus, social media can be a powerful tool for promoting a tourism destination experience, enabling destinations to reach new audiences and engage with visitors in a way that is both interactive and immersive.

One of the most popular social media platforms is currently Instagram. By leveraging the facilities offered by Instagram, destinations and travel brands can create a compelling and engaging presence on the platform, which can influence the travel decision-making process of their target audience and ultimately lead to increased bookings and visits. Instagram offers a variety of tools and features that can be utilized by destinations to build a strong online presence and connect with potential visitors. Some of the key features include Instagram Stories, IGTV, Instagram Reels, and Instagram Live, which allow brands to share engaging and interactive content with their audience. By using these features, destinations and travel brands can showcase their unique offerings, share behind-the-scenes experiences, and highlight the best aspects of their destination, creating a powerful visual narrative that resonates with their target audience. Additionally, Instagram provides a platform for user-generated content, enabling destinations and travel brands to feature content from their visitors and followers, which can serve as authentic and trustworthy endorsements for the destination.

This paper aims to highlight the ways in which Instagram can be used for destination marketing, and more precisely for creating the perception of a tourism destination experience and influencing the travel decision-making process. Overall, influencing the travel decision-making process through social media can prove to be very useful for a destination. Social media can increase a destination's visibility, engagement, reputation, competitive advantage, and revenue, and it can help to stay competitive in the fast-paced and ever-evolving tourism market. This article aims to review all the features and tools offered by Instagram and to highlight how these features of the platform can be used for destination marketing strategies and tactics. The existent specialized literature has devoted increased attention to this subject in recent years, but the field is evolving, new solutions are emerging and they deserve to be highlighted. While various research papers have emphasized the significance of social media in promoting tourist destinations, the existing literature still lacks studies that specifically explore the impact of Instagram content on a destination's image and on the perception of a tourism destination experience.

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[2] S. Shuqair, P. Cragg, *The immediate impact of Instagram posts on changing the viewers' perceptions towards travel destinations*, in Asia Pacific Journal of Advanced Business and Social Studies, 2017, vol. 3, issue 2.

[3] R. Antolín-Prieto, J.R. Sarmiento-Guede, A. Antonovica, *Instagram as a value co-creation tool for the image of tourist destination. Analysis of the case of Spain during Covid-19: the Balearic and the Canary Islands*, Revista Espacios, 2021, vol. 42, issue 12.

2. Key aspects regarding the travel decision-making process

The travel decision-making process refers to the series of steps that a person goes through when making a decision about where to go on vacation, which activities to do, and how to get there. This process can be broken down into several stages, including:

- Inspiration: This stage involves the initial spark that triggers a desire to travel, such as seeing an advertisement, hearing about a friend's trip, or browsing through social media;
- Research: Once a person has been inspired to travel, they will begin to research potential destinations, activities, and accommodations. This stage involves gathering information from various sources, including travel websites, guidebooks, and social media;
- Planning: After conducting research, the traveler will begin to plan the details of their trip, such as selecting dates, booking flights and accommodations, and making reservations for activities and tours;
- Booking: This stage involves making final reservations and purchases for the trip, including flights, hotels, rental cars, and tours;
- Experience: Finally, the traveler experiences the trip itself, which includes the various activities and experiences that they have planned and booked.

Besides understanding the stages of the travel decision-making process, it is also important to recognize the factors that can influence a person's decision. These can include personal preferences and interests, budget, travel history, cultural background, and the influence of family, friends or other persons. Understanding the travel decision-making process is essential for businesses in the tourism industry, as it allows them to tailor their marketing strategies and offerings to meet the needs and preferences of their target audience at each stage of the process.

In addition to the stages and factors that influence the travel decision-making process, there are also some emerging trends and changes that are affecting the way people make travel decisions. Some of these trends include the increasing importance of social media and user-generated content. The rise of social media and online reviews has given travelers access to more information and options than ever before, which can influence the decision-making process. Social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube are increasingly shaping the way people discover and research travel destinations, and user-generated content like photos and reviews are becoming more influential in the decision-making process.

By keeping up with these trends and understanding the changing needs and preferences of travelers, businesses in the tourism industry can stay ahead of the curve and develop strategies that resonate with their target audience. For example, during the inspiration stage, a travel company might use social media influencers or targeted ads to spark the traveler's interest in a particular destination. During the research stage, they might use social media to offer detailed information about the destination and highlight the unique experiences that are available. During the booking stage, they might use social media to promote certain hotels or flights and offer discounts or special packages to encourage the travelers to make a reservation. Overall, social media can play a significant role in the travel decision-making process, providing inspiration, research, recommendations, engagement, and user-generated content that can influence a traveler's destination choice and travel planning.

3. Using Instagram for destination marketing

''Instagram is the most popular type of social media used in tourism''[4]. Instagram is a powerful tool for generating and sharing content that can help create the perception of a tourism destination experience. Overall, Instagram's visual nature and community-driven content can play a significant role in influencing users' travel decisions and inspiring them to explore new destinations and experiences. By leveraging a series of facilities offered by Instagram, destinations and travel brands can create a strong presence on the platform and influence the travel decision-making process of their target audience.

Destination image is not solely established by destination marketing organizations, social media users now play a significant role in co-creating the image of a destination by sharing stories and photos that display their

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[4] Iglesias-Sánchez, P. Patricia, Correia, B. Marisol, Jambrino-Maldonado, Carmen, C. de las Heras-Pedrosa, *Instagram as a Co-Creation Space for Tourist Destination Image-Building: Algarve and Costa del Sol Case Studies*, Sustainability, 2020, vol. 12.

experience with the destination's offerings[5]. Additionally, travelers are using social media to express their opinions and emotions about destinations, accommodations, restaurants and their general experience.

Thus, Instagram can be used for destination marketing in the following ways:

• Inspiration: Instagram is a visual platform that displays beautiful images and videos of destinations and experiences. By browsing Instagram, users can be inspired by stunning imagery and get ideas for their next travel destination or activity;

• Authenticity: Instagram allows users to see real-life experiences shared by other travelers, giving them an authentic look at what a destination has to offer. This can help users make more informed decisions about where to travel and what to do when they get there;

• Recommendations: Influencers and other users on Instagram often share recommendations and reviews of destinations and experiences, which can influence users' travel decisions. Seeing positive reviews and recommendations from others can increase users' confidence in their decision to visit a certain destination or try a certain activity;

• Personalization: Instagram's algorithm uses users' activity and interests to personalize their feed, showing them content that is relevant and interesting to them. This can help users discover new destinations and experiences that align with their interests and preferences;

• Convenience: Instagram's booking and shopping features make it easy for users to book accommodations, tours, and experiences directly through the app. This convenience can make the travel decision-making process more streamlined and efficient for users;

• Branding: Instagram allows destinations and travel brands to showcase their unique brand identity and personality through their content. This can help users connect with a destination or brand on a deeper level and influence their decision to visit;

• Social proof: Seeing friends, family members, or influencers visiting a destination or trying an activity on Instagram can provide social proof and influence users' travel decisions. Users are more likely to trust recommendations and reviews from people they know or admire;

• Accessibility: Instagram's accessibility features, such as alt text and closed captions, make it possible for users to fully engage with the platform's content. This inclusivity can help more people discover and consider travel destinations and experiences;

• User-generated content: User-generated content, such as photos and videos shared by travelers on Instagram, can provide an authentic and relatable perspective on a destination or experience. This type of content can influence users' travel decisions and encourage them to try new things;

• User engagement: Engaging with users on Instagram can help build a sense of community and loyalty around a destination or travel brand. Responding to comments and messages, reposting user-generated content, and hosting Instagram contests or giveaways can all help increase user engagement and influence travel decisions;

• Interactive features: Instagram's interactive features, such as polls, questions, and quizzes, can engage users and provide valuable feedback for destinations and travel brands. This two-way communication can help build a stronger relationship between the brand and its audience, ultimately influencing travel decisions;

• Hashtags: Hashtags on Instagram can help users discover and explore content related to a specific destination or travel experience. Destinations and travel brands can use relevant hashtags to make their content more discoverable to users who are interested in those topics;

• Location tagging: Location tagging on Instagram allows users to see content related to a specific location or landmark. Destinations and travel brands can use location tags to make their content more discoverable to users who are exploring a certain destination or region;

• Stories: Instagram Stories can provide a behind-the-scenes look at a destination or travel experience, allowing users to see a more personal and authentic perspective. Destinations and travel brands can use Stories to display unique experiences, share travel tips, and engage with their audience in real-time;

• Reels: Instagram Reels can be used to exhibit short-form video content that highlights a destination or travel experience. Reels can be a great way to capture the attention of users who are scrolling through their feed and looking for quick, engaging content;

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[5] R. Filieri, D.A. Yen, Q. Yu, *#ILoveLondon: An exploration of the declaration of love towards a destination on Instagram*, Tourism Management, 2021, vol. 85.

• Instagram Ads: Instagram Ads can be targeted to specific demographics, interests, and behaviors, making them a powerful tool for reaching users who are interested in travel. Ads can be used to promote a destination, experience, or travel brand, and can be customized to fit a variety of marketing objectives;

• Instagram Guides: Instagram Guides allow users to create curated lists of content related to a specific topic, such as a destination or travel experience. Destinations and travel brands can use Guides to showcase the best things to do, see, and eat in a certain location, providing valuable travel recommendations to their audience;

• Influencer marketing: Influencer marketing on Instagram can be a powerful tool for destinations and travel brands to reach a wider audience and promote their offerings. Influencers with a large following and a strong engagement rate can present a destination or experience to their followers, who may be inspired to visit based on the influencer's recommendation;

• Influencer takeovers: Destinations and travel brands can invite influencers to take over their Instagram account for a day or week, sharing their experiences and recommendations with the brand's followers. This can provide a fresh perspective on a destination or travel experience and encourage users to consider visiting;

• Analytics: Instagram's analytics tools allow destinations and travel brands to track their performance on the platform and optimize their content and strategy accordingly. By analyzing engagement rates, follower growth, and other metrics, destinations and travel brands can better understand their audience and create more effective content that influences travel decisions.

4. Instagram tactics for promoting a travel destination

As mentioned above, Instagram is a powerful social media platform that can be an effective tool for destination marketing. The following tactics can be used to promote a travel destination and to create the perception of a tourism destination experience via Instagram:

1. Create a business account: To make the most of Instagram for destination marketing, create a business account. This will give you access to features like Instagram Insights, which can provide valuable analytics on your followers and the performance of your posts.

2. Post consistently: Consistency is key on Instagram. Regularly posting high-quality content can help keep your audience engaged and interested in your destination. Create a content calendar and plan out your posts in advance to ensure you are consistently sharing compelling content.

3. Use high-quality visuals: Instagram is a visual platform, so it is important to use high-quality photos and videos that display the best aspects of your destination. This can include scenic views, local landmarks, cultural events, and activities. Make sure the images are well-lit, well-composed, and visually appealing.

4. Engage with your audience: Engaging with your audience is key to building a loyal community of engaged travelers. Respond to comments and messages in a timely and professional manner, encourage your followers to share their own experiences and thoughts, and actively seek out opportunities to connect with potential visitors. This can help build trust and create a sense of community around your destination, ultimately helping to attract more travelers.

5. Share user-generated content: User-generated content can be a powerful tool for showcasing the authentic experiences that visitors can have in your destination. Encourage travelers to share their own photos and experiences of your destination by using your unique hashtag. You can then share this content on your own Instagram account, feed and Stories, giving potential visitors an authentic glimpse into what they can expect.

6. Monitor and respond to reviews: Reviews on Instagram, as well as other platforms like TripAdvisor and Yelp, can have a big impact on a traveler's decision to visit a destination. Be sure to monitor and respond to reviews in a timely and professional manner, addressing any concerns or issues that visitors may have.

7. Showcase your destination's history and culture: Highlighting the unique history and culture of your destination can help attract visitors who are interested in learning more about the world around them. Share posts and stories that present the local cuisine, architecture, art, music, festivals, and traditions that make your destination unique. This will give your followers a glimpse of what it's like to experience the local culture and immerse themselves in the destination.

8. Highlight unique experiences: To make your destination stand out, highlight unique experiences that visitors can have there. This can include anything from local cuisine and cultural festivals to outdoor activities and off-the-beaten-path attractions.

9. Show diversity and inclusivity: Inclusivity and diversity are important values in travel, so be sure to showcase the different types of travelers and experiences that your destination can offer. This can help attract a wider audience and create a welcoming and inclusive environment.

10. Showcase sustainable and responsible tourism: Sustainable and responsible tourism are becoming increasingly important to travelers. Be sure to highlight the efforts that your destination is taking to promote sustainable and responsible tourism, such as eco-friendly initiatives and community-based tourism.

11. Share travel tips and recommendations: Sharing travel tips and recommendations can help position your destination as a helpful resource for travelers. You can share insider tips on the best places to eat, unique experiences to have, and other recommendations that can help visitors make the most of their trip.

12. Use hashtags: Hashtags can help increase the visibility of your posts and reach a wider audience. Research popular travel-related hashtags and use them in your posts. You can also create a unique hashtag for your destination and encourage travelers to use it when they share their own photos and experiences. Use relevant hashtags that relate to your destination and the type of content you are sharing.

13. Use Instagram Stories: Instagram Stories can be a great way to share behind-the-scenes glimpses of your destination and highlight events or activities in real-time. Instagram Stories offer a great way to share quick snapshots of your experience and create a sense of immediacy and authenticity. Use Stories to share updates on events, showcase local businesses, and give your audience a sense of what it's like to experience your destination in real-time. You can also use Stories to create polls, ask questions, and engage with your audience.

14. Utilize Instagram Live: Instagram Live is a real-time video feature that can be used to showcase events, Q&As, and behind-the-scenes glimpses of your destination. This can be a great way to connect with your audience in a more personal way and give them a sense of what it's like to experience your destination in real-time.

15. Use Instagram Reels: Instagram Reels is a feature that allows you to create short-form videos that are up to 60 seconds long. This can be a fun and creative way to showcase your destination and its attractions in a more dynamic way.

16. Host Instagram contests: Hosting Instagram contests can be a fun and engaging way to promote your destination and encourage user-generated content. Consider hosting a photo or video contest that encourages visitors to share their experiences in your destination, with the chance to win a prize.

17. Use Instagram Ads: Instagram Ads can help increase your reach and promote your destination to a targeted audience. You can use ads to promote specific events, offers, or activities, or simply to increase general awareness of your destination. Use targeting options like location and interests to ensure that your ads are reaching the right people.

18. Leverage user-generated content in advertising: User-generated content can be a powerful tool for advertising your destination. Consider using photos and videos shared by travelers in your advertising campaigns to showcase the authentic experiences that your destination can offer.

19. Partner with influencers: Collaborating with Instagram influencers who have a large following in the travel niche can help increase awareness of your destination and influencers can help create a sense of credibility and authenticity for your destination. Influencer marketing can be a powerful way to reach a wider audience and promote your destination to travelers, providing an insider's perspective that can be very appealing to potential travelers. Consider partnering with influencers who align with your brand and can create high-quality content that showcases your destination.

20. Collaborate with local businesses: Partnering with local businesses, such as restaurants, hotels, and tour operators, can help you create a more comprehensive and engaging presence on Instagram. You can feature their businesses in your posts and stories, and they can do the same for you, creating a mutually beneficial relationship. Partnering with local businesses can be a great way to showcase the unique experiences and attractions that your destination has to offer.

21. Collaborate with other destinations: Partnering with other destinations can be a great way to cross-promote your destinations and attract new visitors. Consider collaborating with neighboring cities or regions to create joint campaigns or events that highlight the unique experiences that your destinations can offer.

22. Monitor your competition: It is important to keep an eye on what your competitors are doing on Instagram. Look at what is working well for them and consider how you can adapt those strategies to work for your destination. Additionally, identify any areas where you can differentiate yourself and stand out from the competition.

23. Analyze and adjust your strategy: It is important to regularly analyze the performance of your Instagram strategy and adjust as needed. Use Instagram Insights to track your performance metrics, such as engagement rates and follower growth, and make adjustments based on what is working and what is not.

By implementing these strategies, you can create a comprehensive and effective Instagram marketing strategy for your destination. By showcasing the unique experiences, culture, and attractions that your destination has to offer, you can attract more visitors and build a loyal community of engaged travelers.

5. Conclusions

The use of marketing strategies to promote tourist destinations is very useful in terms of attracting more visitors to a particular destination and even extending the length of stay, which can help to generate more tourism revenue and support the local economy. Effective destination marketing can help to build a positive reputation and brand image for the destination, which can support sustainable tourism development over the long term.

The use of online promotion and the integration of social media tools within the tourism marketing strategies of the destination can help on several levels, such as:

- Increased visibility: Social media provides a powerful platform for destinations to reach a wider audience and increase their visibility in the crowded tourism market.
- Improved engagement: Social media enables destinations to engage with potential visitors and build a relationship with them, leading to increased brand loyalty and repeat visits.
- Enhanced reputation: A positive perception of a destination can enhance its reputation and increase its appeal to potential visitors, leading to increased bookings and visits.
- Competitive advantage: By creating a unique and compelling perception of the destination experience, destinations can differentiate themselves from their competitors and gain a competitive advantage in the tourism market.
- Increased revenue: A positive perception of the destination experience can lead to increased bookings, visits, and revenue, benefiting the local economy and tourism industry.

Overall, the travel decision-making process is a complex and dynamic process that can be influenced by a wide range of factors. By understanding this process and the various factors that can affect it, businesses in the tourism industry can develop more effective marketing strategies and offerings that resonate with travelers and help them make informed decisions about their travel plans.

By leveraging the various features and tools on Instagram, destinations and travel brands can create a comprehensive and effective marketing strategy that influences the travel decision-making process of their target audience. By implementing the above-mentioned strategies and tactics, organizations can create an Instagram marketing strategy that can help attract more visitors to a destination and build a loyal community of engaged travelers.

Overall, Instagram can be a powerful tool for destination marketing when used effectively. By creating high-quality content, partnering with local businesses and influencers, and engaging with the audience, Instagram can showcase the best aspects of a destination and attract more visitors. On Instagram, the goal is to create a perception of the tourism destination experience through visual content and storytelling. By using Instagram strategically, organizations can showcase the unique experiences and attractions of the destination, and inspire potential travelers to book their next trip.

This paper aimed to highlight how the tools offered by Instagram can be used to promote a tourist destination. The limits of this article come from the fact that the approach was a theoretical one and no practical examples were analyzed. Further research work should include research on users' opinion on the effectiveness of promoting tourist destinations through Instagram.

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