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THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL MARKETING ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA

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Abstract

The tremendous growth of tourism in Albania in recent decades, made important the understanding of the role that digital marketing and mobile technology is playing in this field. Tourism in Albania is one of the most important economic sectors of the country, and is growing year after year. It is emphasized that digitalization is a new form of communication between producers and consumers of tourism services, becoming a source of competitive advantages for tourism organizations. The main goal of the study is to give us a clear overview of the use of the Internet, information technologies and digital marketing in Albania. For the realization of this study, we used a methodology that combines primary data with secondary ones. The research was conducted through questionnaires that were sent to Albanian travel agencies via email. The questionnaire contains 17 questions, and was sent to 150 travel agencies, of which 102 agencies responded. Regarding the study, digital marketing plays an important role in improving the image of Albanian tourism throughout the world. It has created facilities in the way of doing marketing and reducing the costs of businesses. Through digital marketing, travel agencies have managed to promote our country online, personalize services and, above all, be closer to customers. The research found that the most effective digital marketing tools used by the agencies are Instagram and Facebook.

Keywords: Marketing, Digital Marketing, Travel Agency, Costumer, Promotion, Albania

1. Introduction

The development of the economy in the modern world is closely linked to the digitalization of all its activities. Like any field of economy, tourism has been affected by digitalization. The purpose of the thesis is to investigate how digital marketing has influenced the development of the tourism industry of the Republic of Albania.

The tourism industry is one of the largest service industries, which plays an important role in boosting the country's economy. According to Malik *et al.* (2010), in many countries, the tourism industry remains an important source for the generation of employment and income in

formal and informal sectors. The use of new technologies in this sector is constantly expanding and becoming accessible to all. Social networks are a platform used to have social exposure, develop an awareness of the website, are vehicles for the implementation of marketing campaigns and frequent interaction with consumers (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Rawat and Divekar, 2014). Adapting technologies as part of marketing activities has been an important step for tourism businesses to stay in the market. Motivated by this goal, through this research we want to understand the current situation in Albania regarding this adaptation. Albania is culturally rich, has a great historical heritage, diverse culture, which attracts tourists. In recent years, many different digital tools are being used in the travel industry to analyze budgets, explore places and bookings. The use of electronic media such as web, email and wireless media have facilitated the management of digital marketing. Potential customers can be reached with the use of advanced electronic devices and platforms. Interactive communication channels have been introduced which have influenced marketing strategies. This has a major impact on the growth of the tourism industry. Noti and Trebicka (2016) emphasized that entrepreneurs/managers do a very good job for the creation of new services via the Internet; also they significantly support the use of ICT-s to sell their services.

In terms of digital marketing in tourism in Albania, the country is considered a nation with a rapidly growing number of internet users recently. Realizing the potential, the results show that many companies have taken advantage of opportunities by rapidly investing in digital marketing and internet marketing to promote their products and services.

Seeing the rapid growth of digital marketing and the transformation of the way of doing marketing, it is important to research the role, importance and benefits of digital marketing. The main goal is for this research to give us a clear overview of the use of the Internet, information technologies and digital marketing by tourist agencies in Albania. The paper aims to investigate how the digital transformation has been in recent years, which has grown strongly, especially digital marketing and how it affects the tourism industry in Albania.

Since Albania has the resources to have a highly developed tourism industry, and every day more and more technology is becoming a part of our lives, it will certainly have a great weight in the development of tourist agencies. So, looking at the latest digitization trends, doing a research about the impact it has on tourism is presented as the main motive for us. Another connection that forces the implementation of digital marketing to travel agencies was undoubtedly the capture of the COVID-19 pandemic that hit the world. According to Shah (2021), there was a complete digital transformation in business overnight during Covid-19.

The research was conducted through questionnaires that were sent to Albanian travel agencies via email. About 150 questionnaires were sent which contained 17 questions. According to the findings, we can see that various activities have been developed through digital marketing to promote the national brand in tourism by travel agencies. This has facilitated the access of interested consumers to the desired information.

The paper begins by showing the importance of digital marketing, through literature reviews. Next, we provide some insights into issues and trends in digital marketing, focusing on the impact that digital marketing has and how it should be integrated with tourism. Then, we have an overview of tourism in Albania and the impact that the development of marketing has had on the progress of tourism. We conclude by providing some findings on how stakeholders are able to benefit from digital marketing in tourism.

2. Literature review

In the literature review section, we want to define the key terms related to digital marketing, its importance, benefits and the impact it has on tourism. According to Chaffey and Chadwick (2016), digital marketing can be defined as achieving marketing objectives through the application of digital technologies and media. According to the Wymbs (2011), digital marketing is the use of digital technology to create an integrated, targeted and measurable communication that helps win, retain, and build deeper relationships with customers. Digital marketing is also known as internet marketing and e-marketing involves many different approaches and methods.

Some of the most popular and widely used methods are online advertising, email marketing, affiliate marketing, social media marketing, and viral marketing (Barak, 2017).

Furthermore, Royle and Laing (2014) emphasize that the use of digital marketing should be effective in promoting products or services; it includes intellectual strategies and excellent communication. According to Sharisha (2018), in the USA, online marketing is very widespread, in Italy it is referred to as internet marketing, but in the UK and around the world, digital marketing has become the most common term. There are many reasons to move towards digital marketing. It is a more affordable way to reach a wider audience and engage with them directly. You can also gather valuable insights from digital marketing campaigns in order to make better decisions (Thomas, 2021).

The benefits of digital marketing are huge. Some of them are low price, high return on investment, easy to measure, easy to adjust, brand development, easy to share, accurate targeting, segmentation, high commitment, etc. The application of digital marketing allows companies to be flexible and adaptable to changes in the external environment, to build effective relationships with their customers, and to be more responsive to their needs and understandings (Ali, 2016).

Digital marketing has a great impact on the development of tourism around the world and in Albania as well. Promoting a destination is not an easy task. Its challenges and difficulties stem from the many characteristics of the destination on the one hand and from a non-homogeneous demand of travelers on the other (Dhamo, 2020).

The Republic of Albania is a country, which lies in the south-western part of the Balkan Peninsula. It is a small country, but with great natural resources, with high tourist, historical and cultural attractions as well. With a very good geographical positioning, near the Adriatic Sea and the Ionian Sea, Albania is considered as one of the places that should definitely be visited. In Albania you will undoubtedly find unparalleled hospitality, good people, colorful costumes, rich and healthy food, magnificent peaks and transparent beaches (Xhemani Baba, 2019).

2.1. The impact of digital marketing on tourism

The activities of the tourism sector have a major impact on the economy through the employment, creation and development of tourism companies. We add that tourism is an activity sector with a progressively increasing level of importance and value for national and regional economies, developed radically through the provision of services arising from the needs, expectations, demands and wishes of tourism customers in relation to the activities that take place in the respective destination. In essence, tourism is generally seen as a harbinger of economic and social benefits to a rural community, especially through the revenue and infrastructure development it brings to border communities and generally to poorer and less economically developed areas (Nicolaidis, 2020).

Moreover, tourism is one of the industries most influenced by the era of digital transformation. As reported by the Sale Cycle, the global online travel market was around \$ 629 billion in 2017 and was projected to approach approximately \$ 818 billion by the end of 2020. The two most influential factors are transportation and accommodation when millions of applications and sites are created for internet users to book their travel itinerary. At the moment, it is much easier that people can just buy a ticket online and check in at the airport with a barcode or QR code, this not only helps customers reduce time, but also reduce their workload, airport ticket control staff. Both the transportation issue and the accommodation problem are easily addressed with online booking. Customers do not need to call in advance or worry that this hotel is full, everything is well prepared before the trip, just a few touch phones (Saraçini, 2020).

2.2. Digital marketing methods

2.2.1. Advertising on the Internet

Perhaps the most popular online marketing tactic is digital advertising. Unlike television advertising, Internet advertising does not force the consumer to pay attention to the advertising

content, but aims to persuade or inspire to do so, as it is placed alongside or among other non-marketing materials (Barak, 2017).

2.2.2. Email marketing

Email marketing can attract new customers and create a meaningful relationship with existing customers and a community of loyal subscribers. According to Stokes (2011), email marketing is one of the oldest and most effective forms of direct marketing that uses electronic ways to deliver different messages, such as commercial, promotional, and educational, to potential and existing customers. Waldow and Falls (2013), defined email marketing as a marketing channel which allows companies to communicate en masse with their customers, prospects, fans, and subscribers.

Since the internet has become more accessible globally, the number of emails sent and received has increased proportionally. While roughly 306.4 billion emails were estimated to have been sent and received each day in 2020, this figure is expected to increase to over 376.4 billion daily emails by 2025 (Raj, 2021).

2.2.3. Social media marketing

One of the most popular types of digital marketing is social media marketing. The rise of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube and many other platforms have created a growing market where businesses can connect with audiences. Social networks are now an essential part of any marketing strategy, and the benefits of using social media are so great that anyone who does not implement this cost-effective resource is missing a tremendous marketing opportunity (Krpic *et al.* 2017).

2.3. The impact of digital marketing on the development of tourism in Albania

Albania is one of the countries that had a rapid growth in the number of Internet users in recent years. The total population of Albania is 2.8 million inhabitants, where 25% are urban citizens. 69.7% of the population can use the internet, which is about 1.9 million users. The development of smartphones and other modern technological devices with a wide range of prices has made more people with different economic incomes have a chance to access the Internet. As a developing country, these figures show that Albania's potential in the digital marketing industry is quite large. In addition, the rapid growth in digitalization is playing a key role in attracting more foreign investors to our country (Dhamo, 2020).

According to the InStat (2020), Albanians typically spend 3 hours and 9 minutes surfing the internet every day, ranking 18th in Europe. Albanians spend 2 hours on social networks, 1 hour and 9 minutes watching broadcasts and videos, or listening to music online. It means that people have internet access every day through different devices. The huge increase in the number of internet users makes digital marketing the best channel of disseminating information.

In Albania, from May 2017, the application of the National Tourism Strategy has started. In addition to extending the duration of the tourist season, increasing accommodation facilities, beach safety or infrastructure, this strategy in some points includes tourism marketing. In Albania, work is being done on the New Tourism Strategy and Marketing Strategy. Recent years have seen the development of information technology as a means of promoting tourist destinations (Klosi, 2019).

Hypotheses specify the characteristics and possible outcomes that may exist between several variables to be studied. Considering the importance of digital marketing in the tourism sector, the essential issues that this study aims to answer are expressed in the form of the following research questions: Does digital marketing positively affect the development of tourism? Travel agencies that use more electronic services are more efficient and achieve higher results.

3. Research methodology

For this study, we used a methodology that combines primary and secondary data. Contacts with agencies and consumers are realized through online questionnaires. In the case of our study, we used closed questionnaires and the answers were predetermined in the form of alternatives.

The main objective of the research is to provide data on the experience of tourist agencies in Albania, their presence on the Internet, their adaptation to digital marketing. In order to ensure the best quality of data, maximum efforts were made to obtain information mainly from managers of tourist agencies. According to the MTE (2019), at the end of 2019 in Albania, there are 195 tourist agencies that have an online presence (website); 143 tourist agencies that only have an electronic address and 40 tourist agencies that have neither an online presence nor an electronic address, but only a physical address and telephone and fax numbers. The total number of tourist agencies is 378 (MTE, 2019).

The research was conducted through questionnaires that were sent to Albanian travel agencies via email between September 2020 and March 2021. Approximately 150 questionnaires were sent via email to the travel agencies of the Republic of Albania of which 102 agencies responded. The questionnaire consisted of 17 questions, all closed, with alternatives. It was compiled based on several questionnaire models for similar previous studies.

4. Data analysis

This section presents the results of the conducted questionnaire in order to see the responses regarding the raised questions of this research paper and interpret the results of each question individually. For data processing, we used statistical processing of data through tables for the clarity of the information obtained.

The services provided by the agencies are of different natures, and over the years, the number of these services is growing significantly. Agencies are becoming more inclusive in the services they provide. What makes the difference in providing services are the largest travel agencies, which also have the largest number of services. The agencies mainly offer tours or vacations and do not leave aside the ticketing function. As we can see from the Table 1, about 42% with ticket and vacation organization, 31% with ticket office, 8% vacation and tour organization, 4% food service and 15% with all.

Table 1. What services do you offer?

| | Answers received |
|--|------------------|
| Tickets | 31% |
| Organization of vacations and tours | 8% |
| Ticket office and holiday organization | 42% |
| Food service | 4% |
| All | 15% |

Source: Authors' own preparation

Until 2017, marketing was not given due importance in companies and businesses in general. In the last three years, there has been a significant increase in the use of marketing across companies. Many companies, including travel agencies, focused only on physical sales. Marketing was only thought of as a way to advertise oneself, but in recent years, there has been a shift in the views of companies and agencies. This is also noticed in the answers in Table 2, received in the questionnaire, in which 75% of Travel Agencies see marketing in multiple ways, i.e. they see its real dimensions, and since often, their work depends directly on effective marketing efforts of the company. 15% of travel agencies use it as a means to attract customers.

Table 2. What does marketing mean for your company?

| | Answers received |
|--|------------------|
| A tool to attract customers | 15% |
| A way of communicating with the public | 1% |
| A way to advertise yourself | 0% |
| All of the above | 75% |
| Other | 10% |

Source: Authors' own preparation

Advertising is one of the tools that companies use to disseminate information to as many people as possible. Publicity helps companies build credibility and position their businesses in the market. Recent surveys have shown that Albanian consumers are very sensitive to publicity and mainly to publicity displayed on television media. This is also related to the fact that there are a large number of retirees or housewives, which are greatly influenced by television advertising. The answers given indicate a use only during the holiday seasons, respectively during the summer and at the end of the year, as these are the periods during which people also travel more. This is considered as a method of making marketing quite effective and economical. According to the Table 3, about 10% of the agencies have never used publicity; this may be due to the fact that they consider it very costly because until the last three years it was focused only on television advertising. About 40% of agencies sometimes use it, I think in cases where these agencies deem it necessary for their growth.

Table 3. Have you ever used publicity?

| | Answers received |
|--------------------|------------------|
| Never | 10% |
| Sometimes | 40% |
| During the seasons | 50% |

Source: Authors' own preparation

As we can see in the Table 4, the reasons why agencies use publicity are varied. About 41% of agencies use publicity mainly at the beginning of the activity, people say a good start to half the work. The beginnings are always very difficult, a large part of the companies find it very difficult to penetrate the market. The fierce competition caused many companies to go bankrupt from the very beginning. These are some of the problems that push companies and travel agencies mainly towards publicity. Publicity gives them a boost and helps them stay in the market. 32% of travel agencies surveyed use publicity when offering new services or products. Offering a new service has a great risk that accompanies it from behind. The reason why a large part of the agencies accompany the provision of a new service with publicity is to provide the most accurate information and obtain feedback for this service. 23% have used it in other cases and 4% when there has been a decrease in clientele.

Table 4. If you used publicity, why did you use it?

| | Answers received |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|
| In the initial phase of activity | 41% |
| When you have had a drop in clientele | 4% |
| When you offered a new service | 32% |
| Other | 23% |

Source: Authors' own preparation

According to Table 5, most travel agencies have the same reason for not using publicity. 81% of agencies do not use publicity because of its costs. It comes from the fact that most of the agencies that have answered this question are very small and low-income businesses. These businesses have 1 or 2 employees and in most of them the management, marketing and most of the work is done by the owner of the agency. In the Republic of Albania, most of the agencies have this status and a large number of them cannot survive the market

and competition especially after the passage of the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a direct impact on tourism. 20% of agencies did not use publicity for other reasons not mentioned above.

Table 5. If publicity was not used, what were the reasons?

| | Answers received |
|------------------------------|------------------|
| It is not seen as reasonable | 0% |
| Costs are not borne | 81% |
| Its invalid | 0% |
| Other | 20% |

Source: Authors' own preparation

This question is very interesting, which also divides the agencies according to their size. Table 6 shows that 10% of them have the option of online publicity, which are also the agencies with the most income, which have managed to create their online presence through websites, a form which is considered even more expensive than others but not the most effective. Small agencies with a small number of employees and with little income have an increased care about expenses; therefore they make sure that the forms of promotion cost as little as possible and get the maximum effectiveness from them. This makes them go towards more economical, easy-to-use forms with a higher audience and visibility, such as Facebook and Instagram, which are respectively chosen by 80% of agencies. A very small part of the agencies, 3%, use you tube as one of the most effective digital marketing channels in the case of promoting tourist sites through videos. Only 5% of surveyed agencies have selected a combination of digital marketing channels as an option. This is because it requires more financial income, more commitment and specialized people in the field of marketing. 2% have chosen other forms of publicity.

Table 6. What form of publicity do you use?

| | Answers received |
|-----------------------------|------------------|
| Online advertising | 10% |
| Publicity via email | 0% |
| Advertising through Youtube | 3% |
| Advertising on Facebook | 30% |
| Advertising on Instagram | 50% |
| Combinations of them | 5% |
| Other | 2% |

Source: Authors' own preparation

The presence of the internet in our lives has become a necessity and has drastically changed the way people communicate and has opened many new doors for those people who are looking for a successful career. Human life is being affected by social networks and the information being disseminated there. It has had the same impact on marketing and the development of travel agencies in Albania. All this influence is also reflected in the responses received as most travel agents have selected social media marketing as the most effective. Table 7 shows that, in the first place, the agencies selected Instagram as the most effective, about 55% of them. In second place is Facebook with 30%, followed by publicity through the Internet, YouTube, and finally email. The changes in preferences come from the mentality, previous experiences regarding their use, the financial aspects of using any of the forms, etc.

Table 7. Which form of publicity has been most effective?

| | Answers received |
|-----------------------------|------------------|
| Internet advertising | 10% |
| Publicity via email | 0% |
| Advertising through YouTube | 5% |
| Publicity through Facebook | 30% |
| Instagram publicity | 55% |
| Combinations of them | 0% |
| Other | 0% |

Source: Authors' own preparation

Feedback is used to describe useful information or reviews about the services provided by travel agencies. Agencies can use this feedback to regulate and improve present and future actions and behaviors. There are many reasons why having feedback is important. Getting an opinion from customers helps us improve and refine agency services. In our case according to the Table 8, most agencies say that customers have very good feedback about 87% and good 23%. Receiving good and very good feedback from customers motivates agencies and employees to perform as well as possible and build good working relationships.

Table 8. What feedback do consumers have regarding the services?

| | Answers received |
|--------------|------------------|
| Very good | 87% |
| Good | 23% |
| Satisfactory | 1% |
| Bad | 1% |

Source: Authors' own preparation

Agencies with time and market experience know that service carries with it the risk of misperception that comes as a feature of service inviolability. For this reason, in order to make the service and the environment as clear as possible, the website helps, where in addition to the opportunity to advertise the activity, there is also the opportunity to interact directly with the clientele, since today the sites are interactive with booking sections and getting opinions. This is also important for those businesses that have a clientele from markets that are located geographically far away and cannot really see the services before consumption, for this the website is very helpful. The website is also a good booking tool because many payments today are preferred to be made through the debit or credit card system, which has cut the time and energy of the finance department across all businesses. The results of the questionnaire in Table 9, show an awareness and evaluation of almost all businesses regarding these problems. The part of the agencies that do not have websites on the internet is for financial reasons.

Table 9. Do you have a website on the Internet?

| | Answers received |
|-----|------------------|
| Yes | 85% |
| No | 15% |

Source: Authors' own preparation

Table 10 shows that in most agencies, about 48% sales have increased somewhat, in 37% sales have increased and in 15% they have not changed. In none of the agencies, sales have decreased after the application of social media. Businesses, regardless of size or budget, have an opportunity to increase their audience and achieve their goals through advertising on social platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Even if platforms such as Instagram are primarily oriented towards engagement and advertising, there are defined ways to increase sales on them. Most businesses are data driven, but social media is not an established science. Social media can contribute to the buyer's decision-making process. When agencies invest in an advertising campaign, they need to know who they are trying to reach and what their purpose is,

so as not to spend anything from the budget on useless advertising. The use of social media affects the stages of the sales process and brings a range of benefits to companies and social media influences the stages of the sales process by acting as an intermediary in linking these stages and the benefits identified.

Table 10. How has social media application affected your agency's sales?

| | Answers received |
|--------------------------|------------------|
| They have grown a lot | 37% |
| They have grown somewhat | 48% |
| They have not changed | 15% |
| Are reduced | 0% |

Source: Authors' own preparation

Social media platforms have quickly become an important part of marketing for businesses. When it comes to social media marketing, choosing the platform that is most appropriate for your brand is a challenge in itself. Looking at the answers from the survey, according to Table 11, the two social media, which are used the most with equal percentages, are Facebook and Instagram. Both are very easy to use, just open a simple page and we can do business advertising currently; it might be why these are the two most used media.

Table 11. In terms of internet usage, which social media do you use the most?

| | Answers received |
|-----------|------------------|
| YouTube | 0% |
| Facebook | 50% |
| Instagram | 50% |
| Other | 1% |

Source: Authors' own preparation

Even in this case, the answers are very much related to the size of the agencies. As we can see from Table 12, only 11% of agencies have a person specializing in marketing. This is due to the fact that only a part of the agencies have the financial capacity to afford one more employee. 35% of agencies assign the marketing part to the manager. In Albania, it is very normal to hire a person who does more than one job in a company. In 55% of cases marketing is handled by the business owner himself. This is due to the fact that a large number of agencies are small family businesses which are run by family members and have no outside employees.

Table 12. Who is the marketing person in your company?

| | Answers received |
|---------|------------------|
| Owner | 55% |
| Manager | 35% |
| Other | 11% |

Source: Authors' own preparation

5. Conclusion

Tourism is one of the fastest growing industries in the world in recent years. The increasing proliferation of digital channels, driven by the rapid development of information technologies, softened physical distances and caused profound changes in the way search, communication and acquisition took place. Tourism has also contributed significantly to world GDP to \$ 8.9 trillion as well as reducing the unemployment rate by providing 330 million jobs in 2019. Tourism development has had a contribution of 27.3% for 2019, with an increase of 5.2% from last year in gross domestic product. In recent years, Albania has successfully achieved a wide range of achievements such as the ranking by the Financial Time of Albania among the destinations to be visited in 2020. Also, the prestigious "Le Monde" ranks Albania among the 20 most beautiful

destinations for 2019, CNBC makes Albania part of the 52 tourist destinations of 2020 and others. In terms of digital marketing in the development of tourism in Albania, the country is considered a nation with a rapidly growing number of Internet users recently. Realizing the potential, many companies have seized the opportunity by rapidly investing in digital marketing and internet marketing to promote those products and services.

According to the results, we can conclude that various activities have been developed to promote the national brand in tourism by promoting cultural trade and peace. Also, the drastic increase of internet users is accompanied by a great lack in training and education of employees. The research found that the most effective digital marketing tools used by the agencies are Instagram, about 55% followed by Facebook, and so on. Receiving good and very good feedback from customers motivates agencies and employees to perform as well as possible and build good working relationships.

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