ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF PROMOTION THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKS ON THE EXAMPLE OF TOURIST ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the importance of social networks as a means of promoting the tourist offer of destinations, carried out by tourist organizations on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. The aim of the paper is to indicate the importance of promotion through social networks in the context of strong competition between tourism destinations in order to survive on the tourism market and attract more tourists. The paper presents the results of empirical research on a sample of 42 local tourist organizations about the types of social networks and the ways of their use in order to effectively promote tourism destinations and their offer.

Key Words: *promotion, social networks, tourist organization, Republic Serbia, tourism destinations*
JEL classification: *L83, M31, M29*

Introduction

Modern trends in the tourism market point to the necessity of applying modern information technologies to the tourism industry. At a time of complex change, technological innovations are the leading driver of economic growth and the development of the economies of all countries (Nestorović & Petrović, 2019, p. 675). The advantages conferred by these technologies to creators and vendors of tourism services have heralded changes in the way enterprises conduct business and helped facilitate cooperation with other entities in the tourism industry (Jovanović-Tončev & Podovac, 2016, p. 78). Innovation has the key role as a driver of

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economic growth and prosperity (Milenković et al., 2019). In conditions of intensive competition in the tourism market, management of tourist destinations tends to identify and use the most optimal means of promotion, which will enable them to present their offer to a great number of tourists and to motivate them to visit a certain destination, with lower costs. Due to continuous development and improvement of modern information technology, traditional ways of communication with the target market lose their significance. The speed of information exchange and the possibility of changing the content of tourist offer with the usage of visual effects offer the destinations a possibility to differentiate themselves in comparison to their competitors. Social networks are classified as all types of platforms where you can find *on-line* communities, which are used by the people from different parts of the world in order to communicate (Martin-Fuentes & Ramon, 2014, p. 37). They provide a great number of possibilities to interact for the users, from a simple conversation, through multiple video conferences up to the exchange of messages and participation in blogs and groups for discussion. Social networks enable the people to be in contact with the other people, to connect themselves to the friends and the possibility to give recommendations for different objects or activities (Miguéns, et al., 2008, p. 1). In addition to the fact that their application is wide in daily life, social networks are also significant for the development of the tourism industry. Social networks have a significant role both in the aspect of tourist demand and tourist offer because they provide a destination a way to have a direct interaction with tourists through Internet platforms, as well as the possibility to review and react to the opinions of other tourists and the level of satisfaction with service quality (Kiráľová & Pavlíčeka, 2015).

According to the Law on Tourism of the Republic of Serbia (Law on Tourism of the Republic of Serbia, 2015), local tourist organizations perform the tasks from the domain of promotion, which refer to: the promotion and development of tourism in the unit of local self-government; coordination of activities and cooperation between economic and other subjects in tourism, which directly and indirectly affect the improvement of development and promotion of tourism; providing an improvement of informative and propaganda material, which promotes tourist sights of the local self-government unit; collection and publishing of the information on overall tourist offer on their own territory, as well as other tasks significant for tourism promotion. Local tourist organizations are significant not only because of the promotion of tourist

offer, but also due to the fact that they coordinate the activities of individual carriers of tourist offer. In this paper, the role and significance of social networks in the promotion of tourist offer of destinations were analyzed, which is mainly the task of tourist organizations. In order to obtain an insight into the manner of their application, there was an empirical study performed, in which the employees in local tourist organizations of the Republic of Serbia participated. The goals of this paper imply pointing out to the significance of social networks in the promotion of tourist offer of destinations and empirical study of the manner of their application in practice. According to that, local tourist organizations were identified as the target audience, i.e. their employees. Respondents were asked the questions regarding the manners of using social networks, types of social networks, which are used in promotion and manners of measuring the results achieved through their usage in the promotion of tourist offer.

Role and significance of social networks in the promotion of tourist destinations

The development of information technology and the Internet has largely changed and improved the functioning of modern society. The daily life of humanity cannot be imagined without the Internet. To support this, we have information that 3.9 billion of people, i.e. 51.2 % of the global population, in 2018 used the Internet (International Communication Union: Statistics, 2019). In addition, the number of smart phone users will increase from 2.6 billion registered in 2014, to 6.1 billion people, which is 70% of the global population up to the year 2020 (*Digital trends: The number of smartphone users in the world is expected to reach a giant 6.1 billion by 2020*). Expansion of the smart phones enables people to be online and on different social networks during the entire day, and to share content and communicate with other people. Globally observed, the greatest part of global population uses the Internet on daily basis as means of shopping, communication, sharing different content, collecting information and in that manner, they save time and money, and they also entertain themselves by using different sites, applications and social networks. It was inevitable for technological achievements to change previous lifestyle, as well as a manner of business performance of big systems. In order to be efficient and competitive, the companies continuously innovate their business operations by advanced information systems and software solutions. Extension of business at the global level

is conditioned by the advancement of information-communication infrastructure.

Social networks are an inevitable segment of communication in all spheres of the economy and society. They are primarily a phenomenon, which is globally present. Social networks are used for data collection, and are inevitable in the process of making decisions on the purchase of products and services, as communication means and as means of collecting information and recommendations for travelling (Cheng & Edwards, 2015). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 63), by the term social networks imply applications which enable the users to connect by creating the profile with personal data enabling friends and colleagues the access to those profiles, sending *e-mails* and messages.

Leonardi et.al. (2013), dealing with social networks from the aspect of their significance as the tools for communication between the employees in an organization, point out that they enable the employees to: communicate with other employees through messages; to explicitly point to or implicitly reveal certain cooperatives as adequate partners in communication; publish and edit texts and files, which are shared with other people and to review messages, contacts, texts and files, which were published and edited by someone of the employees in an organization at any time and by their own choice. Social networks can also be defined as new forms of the media, which are based on technologies, facilitate interactivity and enable development and exchange of contents, which are generated by the users within or between organizations (teams, management bodies, agencies, etc.) or individuals (e.g. consumers) (Filo et al., 2015.). Although social networks in academic circles are defined in different manners, their main function is reflected in providing the possibility to the people and enterprises to communicate in a simple and efficient manner and to achieve their goals through sharing the information and content.

Social networks represent a complex subject of the study, which includes different approaches, tools and techniques, where it is possible to identify a greater number of different types of social networks, i.e. media (Minazzi, 2015, p. 5-6):
  - Common projects, within which the users can add, remove and change textual content (e.g. Wikipedia);
  - Virtual community, where people can share information, content (textual, audio and video) (e.g Twitter), and their attitudes regarding

specific themes, as well as to write their own impressions (e.g. Tripadvisor, Virtual Tourist), or to keep diaries (personal blogs).

- Communities, within which different content is shared in the form of texts, images, videos, etc., (BookCrossing, Youtube, Flickr, Pinterest, Instagram etc.).
- Social networks sites, (SNSs), which enable people to create their profiles with personal information and share those and other contents with friends and colleagues. People who use this type of networks are engaged in communication with other people through their e-mail addresses and through instant messages (Facebook, Linkedin etc.).
- Platforms for virtual games, where the users can appear in a form of an avatar and interact with other users as they do in the real world (online games such as Sony Playstation or sites such as Second Life).

The process of globalization and change in tourist offer, as well as in tourist demand, have conditioned the changes in the manner of communication between the users and providers of tourist services (Jovanović-Tončev & Podovac, 2018). Tourism contributes to meeting different cultures, lifestyles, and consequently better understanding of different people (Podovac et al., 2019). Modern development of tourism is characterized by the necessity of continuous adaptation of tourist offer to the needs and habits of tourists, whose IT literacy is at a high level. Social networks have brough about the revolution to the communication process in the tourist industry (Nezakati et al., 2015; Sotiriadis & Van Zyl, 2013). According to that, it is inevitable for tourists today to possess a great deal of information before travelling, due to which it is important to use modern means in communication with potential tourist demand. Specifics of modern touristic demand point to the existence of diverse and multiple travel motives, as well as different ways to meet them (Jovanović Tončev, Podovac, 2016, p. 123). The advent of Internet-based social media technologies has enabled travelers to quickly and conveniently share their travel experiences. Shared information on social media sites is recognized as an important information source which may influence travel decision making for potential travelers (Kang & Schuett, 2013, p.93).

In the digitalization era, social networks represent one of the inevitable means in the promotion of the offer of tourist destinations. Having in mind the changes in needs and behavior manner of modern tourists, one of the preconditions for a successful development of tourist destinations is the implementation of social networks in their promotional policy.

Having in mind that tourist destinations are, according to Buhalis's definition (2000, p. 97), *amalgams of tourist products, which offer an integrated experience to consumers,* the application of social networks in their promotion enables a more efficient, simpler and visually more attractive presentation of their tourist offer. Social networks enable the destinations to contact tourists at relatively low costs and at a higher efficiency level than it would be achieved by traditional communication tools (Kiráľová & Pavlíčeka, 2015, p. 359). Tourist organizations, as carriers of the promotion of tourist offer of destinations, must use social networks in their promotional activities and in contacts with potential tourists. The main reason for the application of social networks in the promotion of tourist destinations and their offer is the establishment of communication with potential tourists, which should result in a desire of a tourist to visit the destination. Tourists use social networks as a source of information in three phases: before, during and after the travel (Amaro et al., 2016). Continuous usage of social networks by the tourists enables the carriers of tourist offer to update new content on their profiles and thus be present in the mind of tourists.

In relevant literature, there are many studies that describe the research carried out regarding the application of different social networks in performance of promotion functions by tourist organizations. The fact is that tourist organizations can use social networks primarily to make contact with potential tourists, but also that they pay attention when choosing social networks and their efficiency in presentation of tourist sights of a particular destination. Dwivedi et al. (2011), analyzed the range of social networks usage in their study on a sample of 195 organizations. The results of their study have shown that 81 tourist organization of the total number uses at least one social network, i.e. 41,5%. In addition, they have found that the greatest part of 81 tourist organizations, which use at least one social network, use Facebook (64 organizations, i.e. 79%), Twitter (50 organizations or 61.73%) and Youtube (48 organizations or 59.26%). By analyzing the usage of Facebook by European tourist organizations, Zouganeli et al. (2011), have determined that among 49 official web pages of European tourist organizations, only 32 organizations are connected to their Facebook account. In the paper, the authors have pointed out that European tourist organizations are found before a challenge to establish an interactive communication with potential tourists and that they did not understand the crucial role of feedback for sustainability of their account on social

network Facebook. Hruška and Pásková (2018), analyzed the manner in which national tourist organizations in countries with a great number of foreign tourists use social networks in their marketing. Their conclusion is that Facebook is a widely used social network, as well as Twitter and Instagram. Instagram is a social network, which shows great potential for a systematic approach to the marketing of tourist destinations, but it is not dominant as much as Facebook. Although by using Facebook we can obtain a great number of followers, there are rules that limit the publishing of the content. The results show that although tourist organizations have fewer followers on Instagram in relation to Facebook, the number of responses to posts on Instagram is higher.

Research methodology

The analysis of the attitudes of the employees in local tourist organizations of the Republic of Serbia on the significance of social networks in promotion tourist destinations and their offer was carried out in the period from 28 April 2016 to 20 February 2018 by sending *on-line* questionnaire to the official *e-mail* addresses of local tourist organizations. The study included 42 local tourist organizations where the questionnaire was filled in by their employees. The primary goal of the research was to study the attitudes of employees in local tourist organizations on the territory of the Republic of Serbia on the manners and effects of using social networks in the promotion of the offer of tourist destinations. The primary function of local tourist organizations is the promotion of tourist offer of a certain destination in order to attract tourist demand and building a recognizable image on the market, because of which the employees in tourist organizations are selected to be the respondents in this study. A questionnaire has got three parts, within which there are 12 questions defined. The first part of the questionnaire refers to basic information on tourist organization and employees, who have filled the questionnaire in (length of the existence of tourist organization, length of the years of service and work position of the employees, length of using social networks for promotion, significance of social networks for the promotion of the offer of tourist destination). The second part of the questionnaire contains questions, which refer to: the advantages of social networks and manners of using social networks in the promotion of tourist offer of a certain destination, frequency of updating contents and the employees who take part in this activity and types of contents that are published. The third part of a questionnaire refers to the questions on: the types of social networks, which are used in

promotion and the level of their usage, as well as measurement of the effects of promotion of the destination's offer through social networks. The primary goal of this study is to point to the significant role of social networks in the promotion of the offer of tourist destinations, which is performed by local tourist organizations in the Republic of Serbia.

Research result

The employees of 42 local tourist organizations in the Republic of Serbia took place in the survey research on the significance of social networks in the promotion of the offer of tourist destinations.

Table 1: *Basic information about respondents*

	Answers	N	(%)	Mean	St.dev.
The length of tourist organization's existence	5-10 years	15	35.7	2.00	.937
	11-16 years	15	35.7		
	17-22 years	9	21.4		
	More than 23 years	3	7.1		
Working position of the respondents	Management	8	19.0	3.10	1.265
	Employees in the tourist info center	3	7.1		
	Employees on administrative affairs	12	28.6		
	Employees in tourism improvement and promotion activities	15	35.7		
	Employees on the tasks of planning, finances and marketing	4	9.5		
Years of working engagement of respondents	1-5 years	17	40.5	2.02	1.093
	6-11 years	12	28.6		
	12-17 years	10	23.8		
	18-23 years	1	2.4		
	More than 24 years	2	4.8		
The length of applying social networks in the promotion of tourist offer	1-3 years	20	47.6	1.98	1.259
	4-6 years	12	28.6		
	7-10 years	5	11.9		
	More than 10 years	1	2.4		

Source: *Research results*

As for the question regarding the length of tourist organization's existence, the most widely present are the organizations that record the tradition of work from 5 to 10 and from 11 to 16 years, i.e. 15 organizations each, or 35.7 %, while the least present are those organizations, which have existed for more than 23 years, those are three organizations (7.1 %). The greatest number of respondents, i.e. 15 (35.7 %) of them were engaged on the tasks of tourism promotion, which is

especially important having in mind the subject of the study. 12 respondents, i.e. 28.6 % perform administrative tasks, while 8 respondents or 19% are at management positions. The least share in the sample have the employees in tourist info-center (3 respondents or 7.1 %) and employees on the tasks of planning, finances and marketing (4 respondents or 9.5 %).

As for the question regarding the length of the years of service, the greatest number of respondents, i.e. 17 of them or 40.5 % have declared that they work in a tourist organization from 1 to 5 years, while 12 of them are employed in tourist organization from 6 to 11 years. 10 respondents, i.e. 23.8 % work in a tourist organization from 12 to 17 years. The least share have the respondents who work in a tourist organization from 18 to 13 years (1 respondent or 2.4 %) and more than 24 years (2 respondents or 4.8).

Regarding the question on the length of applying social networks in the promotion of tourist offer of the destinations, where they perform their activity, 20 respondents, i.e. 47.6 % have declared that in their tourist organization social networks are used from 1 to 3 years, while 12 respondents or 28.6 % have declared that they use social networks in promotion from 4 to 6 years. The least share is recorded by those organizations, where social networks are used from 7 to 10 years and for more than 10 years. As for the question *Are the social networks important for the promotion of tourist destinations*?, all the respondents have answered affirmatively.

Table 2: *The advantages of the application of social networks in the promotion of tourist offer of destination*

Answers	N	%
Higher coverage of the market	26	61.9
Low costs of promotion	30	71.4
Strengthening the destination's image	16	38.1
Direct contact with the target group of tourists	22	52.4
Loyalty of tourists	3	7.1
Increase of tourist consumption	13	31
Increase in the number of tourists	7	16.7
Possibility to measure and observe the results of promotion	13	31
Monitoring the competition	3	7.1

Source: *Research results*

Respondents were asked a question regarding the advantages of the application of social networks in the promotion of tourist offer of destination where they had the chance to choose up to three answers from nine given. Due to the possibility of giving more answers and the fact that the respondents have also given fewer numbers than the number allowed, the statistical package SPSS recognized the missing data. In most cases, respondents have declared that the advantages of using social networks in the promotion of tourist offer of destinations are: *low costs of promotion, higher coverage of the market, strengthening the destination's image, an increase of tourist consumption and a possibility to measure and observe the results of promotion.*

Table 3: *Answers of respondents about using social networks in promoting tourist offer by tourist organizations*

	Answers	N	%	Mean	St. dev.
Frequency of updating content	**Everyday**	22	52.4	1.67	.816
	Several times a week	13	31.0		
	Once a week	6	14.3		
	Once a month	1	2.4		
Persone, who update the contents on social networks	**Marketing**	20	47.6	2.48	1.700
	IT experts	5	11.9		
	Employees in tourism service	3	7.1		
	Employees in tourist organizations	7	16.7		
	Management	5	11.9		
	Other	2	4.8		
Importance of contents on social networks	**Publishing photos**	15	35.7	2.24	1.226
	Event announcement	11	26.2		
	Texts	10	23.8		
	Other	3	7.1		
	The answer is not valid	3	7.1		

Source: *Research results*

In Table 3, there are presented the respondents' answers to the questions regarding the manner of using social networks in the promotion of tourist offer of destinations where they perform their activity. To the question *How often do you update content on social networks?,* 22 respondents, i.e. 52.4% have responded that they update content on daily basis, while 13

respondents, i.e. 31% of the total number update their content on social networks a few times a week. The least share is recorded by respondents who have declared that they update content once a week (6 respondents or 14.3 %) and they, who update content once a month (1 respondent or 2.4 %).

Contents on social networks are mainly updated by the employees in marketing service (20 respondents or 47.6 %), IT experts (5 respondents or 11.9 %), employees in tourism service (3 respondents or 7.1 %). 7 respondents have declared that the content is updated by all the employeed in a tourist organization, while 5 respondents have declared that this activity is performed by the executive. 2 respondents, i.e. 4.8 % of the total number haven't precisely mentioned who is in charge of this activity in a tourist organization, but it depends on current circumstances. To the question *Which content do you attribute the greatest significance while creating the promotion of tourist offer?,* 15 respondents, i.e. 35.7 % have declared that they attribute greatest attention to posting photos, while 11 respondents, i.e. 26.2 % of the total number have declared that the greatest attention is paid to the announcement of events in a tourist organization.

Table 4: *The level of using certain social networks in the promotion of tourist offer by local tourist organizations*

Type of social networks	Not fully applied	Insufficient applied	Sufficiently applied	Partially applied	It is fully applied
Facebook	/	4.8	7.1	23.8	64.3
Twitter	57.1	7.1	16.1	9.5	9.5
Instagram	71.4	4.8	7.1	7.1	7.1
Foursqaure	95.2	4.8	/	/	/
Pinterest	90.5	4.8	2.4	2.4	/

Source: *Research results*

Respondents have answered the question regarding the level of using certain social networks in the promotion of tourist offer by tourist organizations giving answers on Likert scale from 1-it is not applied at all to 5-it is fully applied. According to the respondent's answers, Facebook is a social network, which is entirely applied in the promotion of tourist offer of destinations in favour of which, there is information that this was the attitude of 64,3 % respondents. The greatest number of respondents have declared that social networks Twitter (57.1%), Instagram (71.4%), Foursquare (95.2%), and Pinterest (90.5%) are not entirely applied in the

promotion of the offer of tourist destination by tourist organizations.

Figure 1: *Measuring of promotion effects through social networks*
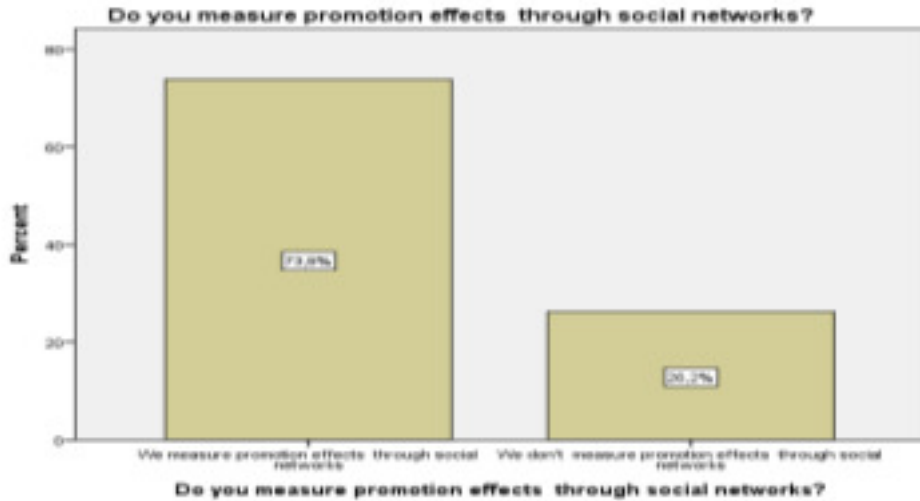
Source: *Research results*

Regarding the question *Do you measure promotion effects through social networks?*, 31 respondents, i.e. 73.8% from the total number have answered affirmatively, while 11 respondents or 26.2% have answered that tourist organization does not measure the effects of promotion, which are achieved through the promotion of tourist offer through social networks. Respondents, who have declared that they measure the effects of the promotion of tourist offer of the destination, were asked about the manners in which they do it. The greatest number of respondents, i.e. 20 of them or 47.6% have answered that the effects of promotion are measured by the number of followers on social networks, while 9 respondents, i.e. 21.4 % does it based on the data on tourist circulation (a total number of tourists or a total number of nights).

Table 5: *Measures for measuring the effects of promotion of the tourist offer of the destination of destination by local tourist organizations*

Answers	N	%
Number of social media users	20	47.6
Number of tourists	9	21.4
Other	2	4.8
We do not measure the effects of promotion	11	26.2
Total	42	100.0

Source: *Research results*

Conclusions

Social networks have a significant role in the promotion of the tourist destinations offer, which is performed by local tourist organizations of the Republic of Serbia. Their role in the promotion of tourist offer is big having in mind that the tourists today mainly rely on information on the destination that can be obtained through the Internet. On the other hand, feedback that organizations obtain after ending the travel through the evaluation of tourist destination offer on social networks or sharing photos and videos is also very important. In addition, social networks have a dual function. Firstly, they enable tourist organizations to place a great number of information regarding the destination's offer with the aim to attract tourists to visit the destination. Secondly, tourist organizations can have an insight into the satisfaction level of tourists, who can evaluate service quality and motivate other people to visit the destination by sharing different content.

In this paper, the significance of social networks in the promotion of tourist offer of destinations, performed by local tourist organizations in the Republic of Serbia, was analyzed. Based on the results of the empirical study, we can conclude that social networks are present in all local tourist organizations as a means of promoting tourist offer of destination, where they operate. Mainly the employees with significant work experience in long-established local tourist organizations took place in this study. Although all the respondents have expressed the attitude regarding the fact that social networks are important in the promotion of the offer of tourist destinations, it is defeating that social networks have been in use from 1 to 3 years in most cases. Another disadvantage is reflected in the fact that activities regarding social networks are not entrusted to one or a certain number of people, who have the knowledge and experience for performing it. Therefore, it is required to solve this problem and unify the activities of promotion through social networks.

Local tourist organizations in the Republic of Serbia dedicate attention to different content, which they share on their profiles. The greatest attention is paid to the content which refers to posting photos, whose attractiveness and uniqueness should attract the tourists to visit the destination. In that regard, the greatest number of tourist organizations tend to update the content on a daily basis on their profiles so that the tourists could have updated information about the destination's offer available. The results of the study have shown that local tourist organizations mainly use

Facebook, which provides them significant advantages in the aspect of attracting a great number of followers, i.e. potential tourists and the possibility to update content and observe the reactions of followers. Local tourist organizations tend to define the effects of offer promotion through social networks in different manners where it is usually done by analyzing the number of followers on social networks and the number of tourists, i.e. number of nights in the destination.

The advantages of using social networks for promotion of tourist offer of destinations, which is performed by local tourist organizations in the Republic of Serbia, enable the destinations to be available in a wider market with significantly lower costs of promotion. On the other hand, through promotion, which is performed by local organizations, the benefits are obtained also by the individual carriers of tourist offer, whose offer is also promoted by those institutions. In order to achieve their goals, which mainly refer to attracting tourists, creating a destination image, etc, local tourist organizations should make a greater use of social networks so that they could present their offer to a wider market. Having in mind that tourists use the information on travelling they find online when making the decision on the journey, it is a challenge to local tourist destinations in the future to find a manner to continuously follow technological achievements and implement them in their promotion activities.

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