

Societal Snapshots: Navigating the Social Media and Tourist Motivations

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Abstract

This paper examines social media's role and contribution in shaping motivations for choosing a tourist destination using theories from sociology. The literature review investigates how tourists' motivation is formed, using symbolic interaction and motivational theories adapted to the tourism context. The results reveal the role of social media in modern tourists' decision-making in choosing a destination. Finally, conclusions suggest practical proposals for tourism enterprises and future research recommendations.

Key-words: Symbolic Interaction, Social Media, Tourist Motivation, Destination.

1. Introduction

In the era of postmodernity, characterized by a fragmentation of grand narratives and an emphasis on pluralism, communication plays a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of various societal domains, including tourism. Postmodernity challenges traditional notions of identity, space, and time, influencing how people perceive and engage with the world. The advent of digital technologies has been a pivotal force shaping communication in postmodernity. The ubiquity of the internet, social media platforms, and instant messaging services has democratized information dissemination, enabling individuals to engage in multi-directional communication (Castells, 2010).

The history of communication was marked by three revolutions: the transition from the spoken to the written word, the invention of printing, and the digital revolution. In a short time, the digital revolution has changed every aspect of life, including the tourism experience. In fact, Poulaki et al. (2023) postulate that “the rapid increase in technology has affected most aspects of people’s daily lives and lifestyles”, while in the latest years the combination of technological possibilities and constant travel is noted as a risen development. The most significant change, however, was brought about by the extensive use of social media. People create their ideal identities on social media based on how they want others to see them.



The advent of digital communication technologies has significantly transformed the tourism landscape in postmodernity. The ubiquity of smartphones and the internet has facilitated instant access to information, enabling travelers to make informed decisions and share their experiences in real time. As Castells (2000) notes, the rise of the network society has led to increased global connectivity, blurring the boundaries between local and global contexts. Social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, serve as powerful tools for tourist communication in postmodernity. Tourists actively engage in creating and disseminating narratives about their experiences, contributing to the construction of a collective tourist identity (Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2014). These online narratives influence individual travel choices and shape destination perceptions on a broader scale.

Postmodern tourism is marked by hyperreality, where the distinction between the real and the simulated becomes blurred (Baudrillard, 1981). Communication, mainly through digital media, contributes to creating hyperreal tourist experiences. Destination marketing often involves selecting attractions and creating a hyperreal image that may differ from the lived experience. Postmodernity's hyperreal aspect of communication challenges tourists to navigate between representations and lived realities.

This study explores the intricate relationship between communication in postmodernity and its effects on the tourism industry, emphasizing the way that social media motivates users to travel to a specific place.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The symbolic interaction in social media*

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective that focuses on how individuals create and interpret symbols to communicate and make sense of their social world. When applied to social media, symbolic interactionism provides insights into how people engage in online interactions, construct meaning, and develop shared understandings.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, social media have been the dominant mode of communication, facilitating the unprecedented growth of human interaction (Faria & Elliot, 2012). Due to their widespread use and the power they have acquired through the direct communication and dissemination of information, they now play a decisive role in how people perceive the social position of others, their role in society and their social habits. Within the social media environment, symbols come either from status posts or the photos and videos of users.

The structure on which social media is designed affects the way people interact with each other. How they determine user behaviour provides evidence for an interaction. This dynamic process, in turn, defines how social media affects individuals and, by extension, determines their social behaviour (Aral et al., 2013).

Since there is no face-to-face interaction here, individuals more easily avoid revealing their "backstage self," as Goffman (2006) defined it, and social media acts as a protective window for individuals and helps them create an even more idealized "frontline self". Social media users interact with each other many times without knowing each other's identity, gender and social status. They can and do create through this "distance" the idealized image they want others to have of them. However, individuals pressure themselves intensely to construct the ideal image and avoid inconsistent behaviours. This includes projecting their life and the trip process and posting it on social media (Liu et al., 2022).



2.2. Social media

Social media now play a decisive role in shaping the behavior of individuals. Kang & Schuett (2013), describing the theory of social influence, point out that individuals change or follow specific behaviour driven by factors:

- a. of internalization: the behaviour adopted is in line with the values and beliefs of individuals, and through social media, they can find people with corresponding values and beliefs with them,
- b. of identification: On social media, people feel that they belong to a social group in which everyone shares their travel experiences,
- c. of adaptation: which has to do with the positive reaction that individuals expect from those who influence them.

Furthermore, social media have tremendously affected the way that people communicate (Manginas et al., 2020), while seven functional sections of social networks are identified including identity, conversations, sharing exchanges of views and ideas, presence, relationships, reputations and groups. To this direction, Chatzopoulou et al. (2022) acknowledge the efforts of tourism businesses to communicate and define their target customer personas through social media, while the phenomenon of influencers and their affection on followers' behaviour based on a verbal, human-to-human communication between a receiver and a transmitter, in the context of word of mouth (WOM) as considered by Aristotle (Arsenis and Chatzopoulou, 2020).

2.2.1. Social media in shaping the modern tourist

Social media have created a category of users, the influencers, who are characterized by the ability to reshape the attitudes of their audience. Their influence, whether experts or not, has also increased due to the reach of many people on social media platforms (Belanche et al., 2021). The characteristic of their success is building relationships with their followers (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Using simple language, they share information and advice with their followers on specific topics of mutual interest, thus establishing closer relationships with them (Belanche et al., 2021). They also share extremely subtle personal issues with their followers, creating strong psychological bonds with them, and in this way, they seem closer to them and more accurate (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). This process makes them something between friends and celebrities. As they have been "born" through social networks and are active there, they can easily influence their followers' thoughts, attitudes and behaviours (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). As they build strong bonds with followers, they appear as a community with shared interests and informally take on the position of their mentor. Every post counts and has a particular weight for followers. When they feel they belong to the community, individuals tend to take ownership of the information they receive (Tafesse & Wood, 2021).

Except for influencers, travelers look to social media for suggestions, recommendations and information when planning a trip. The most typical example is the social networking platform Trip Advisor, where posts by millions of users offer information about every possible destination (Oliveira et al., 2020). The information may be related to the situations they experienced, the prices, the service, their opinion about the specific destination, or the unpleasant situations they encountered during their trip. Especially for Trip Advisor, the user can also search for anything that may be of interest for a trip, such as articles on the best beaches, the best hotels, and the most favourite destinations of the users for the specific period (information from the website navigation).



Millennials are the driving force of the tourism industry (Sofronov, 2018). As they are the generation between 1980 and 2000, they are now the largest population group, and the use of social media is part of their lives. On the one hand, they are the first generation to search for information and organize trips through social media, and on the other hand, they use their mobile phones during trips to take photos and post them on social media (Han & Chen, 2022). As Dixon (2022) reported, active Facebook users amount to 1.98 billion, 71.8% of all social media users.

2.3. Travel motivation – a theoretical review

Travel motivations and their relation to the choice of destination are considered very important for the travel industry. "Without the desire and incentive to travel, no tourism system or industry exist" (Holden, 2008: 105). Indeed, motivations are the trigger for travel. The reasons and motivations for which people travel are many and different, shaping in this way many different forms of tourism. According to Mill and Morrison, as Varvaressos and Sotiriadis (2002) mentioned, a person is motivated when he wants to satisfy a need; in other words, motivation means a need (Jang & Cai, 2009).

The person will first try to fulfil the most basic needs and then move on to a higher level. However, it is not considered necessary to fulfil every need completely for the person to move on to the next one; partial fulfilment is also sufficient. Dann (1981) considered that the motivation factors for travel are the push and pull factors. Implicit in the push factors are concepts of lawlessness and ego empowerment. Lawlessness in the sense of the tourist's escape from his reality. Ego enhancement is the sense of pretending to be a tourist's personality, both during his stay at the travel destination and by using the travel experience upon his return to upgrade himself socially. The driving factors concern the traveller's desire to escape from his environment and his inner desires, such as the need for rest. Pull factors have to do with how attractive a destination is, such as the beaches, the friendliness of the locals, etc. However, for pull factors to apply, push factors must have already led to the decision to travel (Holden, 2008).

Crompton extended Dann's theory and delineated nine motivations, which are divided into push and pull factors (Varvaressos & Sotiriadis, 2002):

- a. The seven are classified as socio-psychological or push motives: escape from an unpleasant environment, exploration, relaxation, prestige, return to roots, tightening relationships and facilitation of a social process.
- b. The other two are cultural or pull factors: innovation or neoterism and education.

In contrast to the push and pull theory, Iso-Ahola proposed two motivational factors for leisure travel: seeking and escaping. These factors include personal and interpersonal elements (Jang & Cai, 2009). These factors are not mutually exclusive but can operate simultaneously (Snepenger et al., 2006). The theory's starting point is "optimal stimulation", according to which individuals seek a level of interaction with their environment that maintains their psychological balance (Holden, 2008). Essentially, Snepenger et al. (2006) combine motivational factors with personal and interpersonal elements, and therefore four dimensions emerge:

- a. Personal escape: from the environment, the routine of everyday life and personal bad mood.
- b. Interpersonal escape: avoiding annoying people and stressful social interactions.
- c. Personal seeking: so they have new stories to tell and discover new things about their personality to feel better about themselves.



d. Interpersonal seeking: to get in touch with new people of common interests and to get closer to people, friends, and family.

Plog categorized tourists based on the psychographic theory of motivation, which concerns the individual's personality traits, lifestyle, and personal values (Simkova & Holzner, 2014). He differentiated them from allocentric at one extreme to mesocentric and psychocentric at the other. Allocentrics are characterized as highly self-confident, adventurous people who seek new experiences. Psychocentrics are the opposite; they are people with lower self-confidence who desire the security and companionship of family (Heitmann, 2011). Finally, the middle-aged make up the majority of tourists, are more flexible and are between the previous two categories (Simkova & Holzner, 2014).

Further to the aforementioned, it is worth referring the -derived from psychology-concept of attachment which is considered as vital for tourists' motivation and focuses on relationships among people (Poulaki et al., 2024), while "place attachment is defined as an emotional bond of an individual to a place based on affective, cognitive, and functional elements which act as ties between tourists and a destination" (Chatzopoulou and Tsogas, 2022).

3. Methodology

The present study is an initial literature review attempt to study the role of social media in shaping travelers' motivation. The authors involve a systematic literature review approach on a specific topic to understand the current state of knowledge, identify gaps and synthesize relevant information. Scientific articles, books and other academic publications that contribute significantly to the understanding of the research topic were studied. The selected literature's quality, reliability and timeliness are critical criteria (Bryman, 2016).

The study focused on the school of symbolic interaction as the most appropriate for shaping the communicative context between the traveller and digital information. The role of social media in shaping the tourist's motivation was then considered.

The critical analysis of the sources and their correlation led to the initial synthesis of existing knowledge and, at the same time, to the formation of a study framework and reflection, which constitutes a challenge for further study and research.

4. Results

According to Maslow, people are motivated to define their societal role with the ultimate goal of self-fulfillment. Social media is a way for individuals to convey to others the image they want to have of themselves, thus achieving self-fulfillment (Oliveira et al., 2020).

Social media applies to the push and pull factors of Dann's theory because, on the one hand, they present travel as an easy way to escape from reality. On the other hand, they strengthen their ego by projecting their trip.

Applying Crompton's theory (Varvaressos & Sotiriadis, 2002) of motivation in the case of social media, it is concluded that all motivations can be activated by using social media, depending on the experiences and needs of each user.

Additionally, the motivational factors for leisure travel suggested by Iso-Ahola (Jang & Cai, 2009) are applied to social media as seeking and escape are components of social media content. The constant search for new destinations and experiences, escaping from the ordinary and promoting them on social media, elevates the person in the eyes of others to something higher, adds prestige to him and pushes him to realize the above through imitation.



From Plog's (Šimková & Holzner, 2014) categorization of tourists, the middle-aged are the most likely to be influenced by social media. Mesocentric tourists are greatly influenced by allocentric, who are most likely to discover new destinations or aspects of the already known. Publishing their experiences attracts people from other types of tourists.

The above is also confirmed by the "bandwagon effect" theory, which analyzes how individuals tend to imitate the choices and behaviours of individuals or groups that shape fashion (Lagos, 2018). The research of Boto-García & Baños-Pino (2022) proved that the bandwagon effect essentially pushes non-travellers to want to travel and already travellers to desire trips to international destinations.

People share photos of their travels on social media, thus promoting their lifestyle. By posting these photos, they expect to receive feedback from their online friends and followers, such as likes and comments, which are crucial to their psychological well-being (Zhang et al., 2022).

Individuals in online groups seek support, respect, recognition, admiration and sometimes reward from these groups. This motivates them to travel so that they have new stories to share and gain the admiration of the members by completing a long journey. Similarly, joining travel-related groups and taking trips by users make them feel like they belong by doing what the rest of the group members do. Posting photos is the easiest way to share this information and confirm the deed.

Social media also play an essential role in creating a desire to visit other places and get to know different cultures. By promoting these destinations in online groups, people discover new places they did not know existed, their unique beauty or other dimensions of destinations they have already visited and are motivated to visit them.

More and more users are using social media to share tourist information. The tourism experiences they share are usually related to altruistic motivations, which concern the individual's desire to help others make a wise choice. In contrast, personal self-fulfillment and self-actualization motives concern the individual's desire for promotion (Oliveira et al., 2020).

4.1. Social media motivation for destination choice

Travel influencers are considered "experts" in travel. The instant communication that social media provides, the explosively emotional posts, make followers feel part of the influencer's experience and journey. This process makes users believe this is a real experience, not an advertisement.

Many applications and social media make searching for information even more accessible. An Instagram hashtag with the word travel currently has 657 million posts; the word tourism has 46.7 million posts, tourist has 36.2 million posts, and traveller has 50.5 million. Searching for just one of the above words shows the user the corresponding number of photos, usually accompanied by a particularly inspiring text about the specific place (information from navigation on the page). For influencers, it may also contain a link to a hotel website for booking a room, with the corresponding inspirational presentation of the accommodation and additional photos from the stay there.

According to the interview research by Liu et al. (2020), the respondents answered that their choice of travel destination was primarily influenced by the characteristics of the destination, such as scenery, atmosphere, culture, etc., who identified them through specific photos and posts from daily social media use. The fact that they were impressed and liked the posts and photos they found on social media gave rise to their interest in visiting the specific destination at some point. Also important is their supporting role in the final decision to travel



to a destination they already had on their 'list' by seeing other users go there. This view is also confirmed by the study conducted by Smith and Johnson (2020), which was found that 75% of respondents reported using social media as a source of travel inspiration. The study highlighted the impact of visually rich content and personal narratives in motivating individuals to plan and undertake trips. Social media's ability to create a sense of connection and community among like-minded travelers enhances the motivational aspect, fostering a desire to be part of the global travel community.

Beautiful and semi-professional photos of users on social media motivate prospective tourists to visit the specific destination. The manifestation of the need to visit a specific destination can be born at an unsuspected time and take place later when other factors are involved in making the trip (Liu et al., 2020). Also, the desire to visit the destination may have pre-existed and manifested again by promoting the specific area on social media. Images of tourist destinations can activate motivations to lead the user to choose the specific destination.

Another interesting study conducted by Song and Schuett (2023), regarding the relationship of social media users' motivation and place attachment, indicates that social motivation is a significant predictor of place attachment. The authors postulate that individuals' participation in a destination's online community -prior to and after their travel-exchanging photos, videos and experiences, enhance their bonds with the destination as place with which individuals can identify themselves.

5. Conclusions

This paper investigates social media's role in motivating users to travel to a specific destination. The above analysis showed that the way social media influences users' reactions can be interpreted based on the symbolic interaction theory. Specifically, through social media, how individuals perceive the social status of others and interpret their behaviour from how they present their lives on digital platforms, for example, Instagram and Facebook, is now determined. In addition, the way social media is used and how posts are made depends on how individuals judge that others will evaluate them. Additionally, social media plays a crucial role in shaping motivation. Through the interaction in online groups and the influence exerted by influencers on their followers, social media has the potential to motivate and motivate its users. This specific analysis examines the motivations regarding the choice of tourist destination. The exchange of information about the trips they have already made the presentation of landscapes and destinations and the unique personal experience of each user can create the desire in the first stage and the motivation in the second to visit the specific destination.

Like modern people, the modern tourist is formed through social media, and most of their choices result from the use, contact, and interaction carried out within these platforms.

Many questions and interest for further study arose during the study, which could not be developed in this work. A survey of how hotels and tourism businesses benefit from social media would be of interest. In addition, research on how influencers have commercialized the promotion of their daily life, the way they travel and choose a destination and specific accommodations is of interest. Another equally exciting study would be to investigate in depth why it is so important for users to post their travel experiences. Finally, it would be interesting to study the behaviour of Millennials in the tourism sector.

As social media continues to evolve, its influence on motivation and tourism is expected to grow. Integrating augmented reality, virtual reality, and interactive content further



enhances the user experience, making travel aspirations more vivid and attainable. However, it is essential for users to critically evaluate the authenticity of information and manage the potential impact of social media on their expectations, as acknowledged by Jones et al. (2021) in their research on the role of social media in shaping travel motivations and perceptions.

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