

## **DIGITAL MARKETING OF TOURISM ORGANIZATIONS IN FUNCTION OF TOURISM PROMOTION IN SERBIA**

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### **Abstract**

*The globalization process has had an influence on tourism business, which is reflected in an ever-increasing competition between countries, cities, destinations, organizations and brands. Digital marketing is an opportunity for all actors in the tourism sector on the global hypercompetitive market. The focus of the research study is the application of the content marketing of tourism organizations. A case study was applied. The National Tourism Organization of Serbia's (TOS) official website and its Facebook and Instagram accounts were chosen. The following research findings stand out: first, tourism organizations' websites and social-network accounts are important digital media, which makes digital marketing 'a must'; second, digital media content is even more important, including texts, photos, videos and links; third, engaging online users is the most important. Content is co-created by both tourism organizations and online users. Digital content marketing is in function of tourism promotion in Serbia.*

**Key Words:** *digital marketing, tourism organization, tourism, promotion, Serbia, content marketing*

**JEL classification:** *M31*

### **Introduction**

"International tourism continues to outpace the global economy. Tourism has seen continued expansion over time, despite occasional shocks, demonstrating the sector's strength and resilience" (UNWTO, 2019, p. 2). "Tourism grows faster than merchandise trade. Tourism generates USD 5 billion a day in exports. Tourism is the world's third largest export category

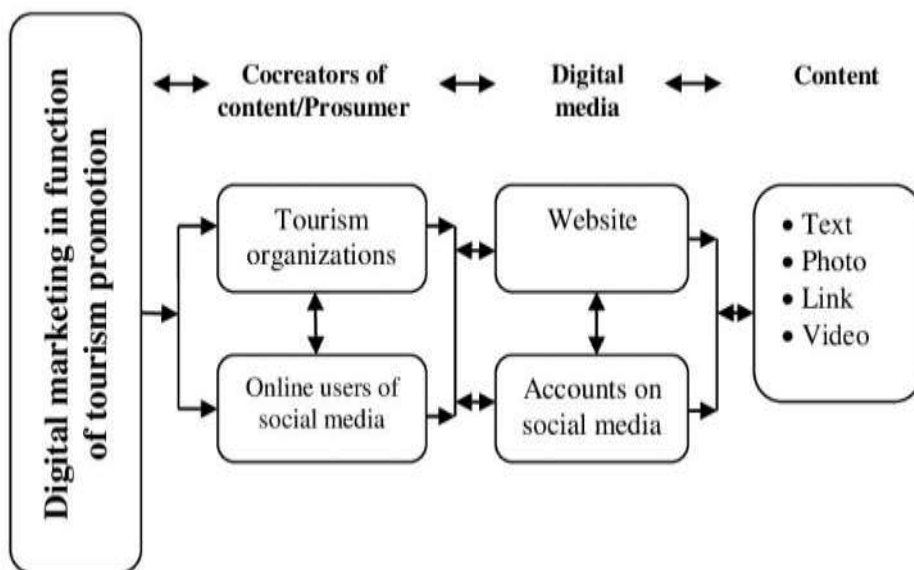
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after chemicals and fuels, and ahead of automotive products and food" (UNWTO, 2019, p. 8). Countries and regions, tourism organizations and companies promote themselves and reach a national and international audience (Wu, 2018). Competition among tourism destinations is escalating (Mariani, et al., 2014; Mariani, et al., 2018). Tourism organizations use new media to promote themselves on the global hypercompetitive market (Mariani, et al., 2018). Tourism organizations follow digital marketing trends and use digital media. This paper is focused on the digital marketing of tourism organizations in function of tourism promotion in Serbia. Figure 1 is a graphical presentation of the text.

Figure 1: *Digital marketing in function of tourism promotion*



Source: *Authors*

### **Digital marketing of tourism organizations**

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have influenced the expansion of industry worldwide (Mariani, et al., 2018) and online (i.e. digital) destination marketing (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015; Fesenmaier, et al., 2003; Gretzel, et al., 2000; Mariani, et al., 2014a, 2014b; Mariani, et al., 2018; Marine-Roig & Anton Clavé, 2015; Rakić & Rakić, 2015; Zhou, 2014). "We live and work in the digital context. The digital world calls for digital marketing and digital business" (Rakić & Rakić, 2017a, p. 57).

"Digital technologies are shaping traveller's experience. Artificial Intelligence is transforming tourism, from virtual assistants to companies being able to offer hyper-personalized customer experiences and improve business performance. An increasing number of destinations are measuring tourism in real time for a better management of visitor flows" (UNWTO, 2019, p. 4). Marketing tourism products used to be based on traditional advertising tools, such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television, billboards, pamphlets, catalogues, brochures, and flyers. With the enhancement of mobile technologies and the acceptance of social networking sites, a new advertising platform has emerged. Mobile social-media advertising implies the use of social networking sites on mobile devices in order to advertise tourism products and services (Tan et al., 2018).

In the digital world, digital media are used by tourism organizations, tourists and all other actors in tourism. Tourism organizations' websites and social-network accounts are the most important digital media (Chiou, et al., 2011; Law, et al., 2010; Lee & Gretzel, 2012; Mariani, et al., 2018; Wu, 2018).

Tourism websites, both commercial and government tourism websites, "can provide a huge amount of information, convey an image of the place, permit useful ways of interacting with users and also operate as a point of sale" (DeVasto-Terrientes, et al., 2015; Wu, 2018).

Tourists read online content on websites in order to make a decision on destinations (Zhang, et al., 2015; Wu, 2018), imagine a destination (Jack & Phipps, 2005; Wu, 2018), and inform and prepare themselves before arriving at the destination (Wu, 2018).

Tourism organizations' social-media accounts can play a crucial role in the effective promotion and marketing of a tourism destination in a global, highly competitive context (Baggio, et al., 2014; Mariani & Baggio, 2012; Mariani, et al., 2018). "Social media plays a significant role in many aspects of tourism, especially in information search and decision-making behaviours, tourism promotion and in focusing on best practices for interacting with consumers" (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014)

Facebook as "an open and always available Book of Faces" (Rakić & Rakić, 2017b, p. 48) can be observed as an updated database of consumers' and organizations' behaviour. Organizations can use Facebook database

("Book of Faces") in order to do research into consumer behaviour, customer relationship marketing (CRM), marketing communications and applications. Organizations may carry out their personalised communications with their fans in real time, as well as initiate communications between their fans and the creation of the user generated content (UGC) about the organization (by uploading positive comments, photos and so on). On the basis of Facebook applications, organizations inform their fans and other interested users on Facebook about their products and events, encourage the engagement of fans (e.g. by organizing sweepstakes) for the purpose of creating the UGC and viral communications (Rakić & Rakić, 2017b). "For instance, Brand USA has significantly invested in digital initiatives including a further development of their Facebook presence with the original Facebook account named 'Discover America' transformed into 'Visit the USA'" (Mariani, et al., 2018).

"Individuals become prosumers (producers and consumers) in the process of prosumption (production and consumption)" (Rakić & Rakić, 2017a, p. 47). On social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc., and on review sites, such as Trip Advisor, tourists can be prosumers (producers and consumers of content). Tourists can collect information, build and develop relationships, make travel-related decisions, co-create content, share their travel experiences, and eventually rate tourist services and providers (Ayeh, et al., 2013; Mariani, et al., 2018; Stepchenkova, et al., 2007; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004; Wang, et al., 2002). Tourists co-create tourist-generated content – TGC (or consumer-generated content – CGC, or user-generated content – UGC), those media thus becoming tourist-generated media – TGM (or consumer-generated media – CGM, or user-generated media – UGM). Online travelers write texts, upload and present photos and videos, comment, like and share the content of the other users of social networks and online travelers (Sigala, et al., 2012; Mariani, et al., 2018; Wenger, 2008).

Online travelers are active and may have an influence on the image of tourism organizations and brands (Bilgihan, et al., 2016; Dijkmans, et al., 2015; Gretzel, 2006; Mariani, et al., 2018; Schegg, et al. 2008; Sigala, et al., 2012; Shea, et al., 2004; Wenger, 2008; White & White, 2007). Tourism organizations can encourage "viral marketing – the process of creating, receiving, sending and forwarding "virus" –marketing messages" (Rakić & Rakić, 2014, p. 179). Viral messages can be created by both the representatives of an organization and tourists (like individuals or in

communities), but they are being passed on by tourists. When an organization creates a viral message, it is "only" necessary to create "the right marketing message" (with the right content) - with a viral potential – virus and pass it on to the "right users-consumers" in the "right context". Since the users of digital media and/or tourists also create and pass on messages, organizations have to check and "direct" all viral communications (related to the company) in a desired direction (Rakić & Rakić, 2014).

Marketing strategies are based on consumer behavior (Rakić & Rakić, 2005; Rakić & Rakić, 2007). Tourism organizations' digital content should follow tourists' wishes and trends. "Consumer travel trends are:

- Travel 'to change' - Live like a local, quest for authenticity and transformation.
- Travel 'to show' - 'Instagramable' moments, experiences and destinations.
- Pursuit of a healthy life - Walking, wellness and sports tourism.
- Rise of the 'access' economy - Solo travel & multigenerational travel as a result of aging population and single households.
- Rising awareness on sustainability - zero plastic and climate change" (UNWTO, 2019, p. 5).

Sustainability is imperative (Rakić & Rakić, 2018). "The survival of actors depends on the sustainability orientation" (Rakić & Rakić, 2017c, p. 6). "Sustainability is a key part of tourism policies in 101 UNWTO member states surveyed. Sustainability and competitiveness go hand in hand as destinations and businesses can become more competitive through the efficient use of resources, the promotion of biodiversity conservation and actions to tackle climate change" (UNWTO, 2019, p. 5).

### **Research method**

A case study was applied in this paper. The TOS' official website and its Facebook and Instagram accounts were opted for. The TOS has accounts on the following social networks: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest and Trip Advisor. The Facebook and Instagram accounts were opted for because of the number of followers.

The official website of the TOS is [www.srbija.travel](http://www.srbija.travel). The content is available in Serbian and in 8 foreign-language versions: English, French,

Russian, Italian, Spanish, German, Japanese and Chinese. The paper analyzes the English version of the content.

Facebook is the biggest social network worldwide. Total number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide is 2.41 billion. Total number of mobile active Facebook users worldwide is 2.2 billion. Total number of desktop active Facebook users worldwide is 1.47 billion (Omnicores, 2020a). Serbia Travel is the official Facebook page of the TOS. The TOS has more than 115,000 followers on Facebook. The content on Facebook is in English (Facebook, 2020a).

Total number of monthly active Instagram users worldwide is more than 1 billion. Total number of daily active Instagram users worldwide is more than 500 million (Omnicores, 2020b). Serbia Travel (@serbiatourism) is the TOS' official Instagram account. The TOS has over 116,000 followers on Instagram. The Instagram content is in both English and Serbian (in the order listed). The posts in English are accompanied by the hashtag #seeserbia, while the posts in Serbian are accompanied by the hashtag #vidisrbiju (Instagram, 2020).

A qualitative content analysis of the TOS' website was conducted. Digital content marketing is essential in today's digital environment. The focus of the website research and analysis was on the content presented on the website, based on traits such as informative, relevant, the length, a visual appeal, expertise, originality, readability, usefulness, shareability and the engagement of the website visitors.

The framework questions were: What is the content? Who creates the content? Is the website just a TOS' monologue? Do the site users have an opportunity to create the content? Do online users create the content? The content created by the TOS was analyzed. The content created by the website visitors and tourists was also analyzed.

The contents of the posts on the TOS' Facebook page and Instagram account were analyzed by using the measures adapted from Hays, et al., 2013; Mariani, et al., 2016; Mariani, et al., 2018; TOS' content on Facebook and Instagram presented in Figure 2 was analyzed between 1<sup>st</sup> January and 1<sup>st</sup> February 2020.

Figure 2: *The list of the measures used for the analysis of the TOS' content on its Facebook page and Instagram account*

Overall number of followers for the page
Overall number of likes for the page
Overall number of posts for the account
Number of posts*
Type of posts* (Text, Photo, Video, Link to a website, Status)
Number of likes*
Number of comments*
Number of shares*

*\*For posts between 1<sup>st</sup> January and 1<sup>st</sup> February 2020.*

Source: *Adapted from Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013; Mariani, Di Felice & Mura, 2016; Mariani, Mura & Felice, 2018*

### **TOS' website and social-network accounts as tourism marketing media**

The TOS' website [www.srbija.travel](http://www.srbija.travel) (the English version) consists of the eight main parts – webpages: About Serbia, Destinations, Culture, Nature, Activities, Accommodation, Useful info, What do other say? There are four additional webpages: Newsletter, Multimedia, Calendar and Route Planning. The special sections are: News, Press corner, Friends and Public tendering.

On the 'About Serbia' webpage, potential tourists can be informed about: general facts, society (population, language and alphabet, currency and tax, state symbols, the political system, safety, opening times and holidays), history, people (Contemporaries), and typically Serbian (food, national customs and mini dictionary).

The content on the website is mostly textual, providing a lot of useful information. The content could be supplemented with pictures, video content or links to the content on the website (a newsletter, multimedia – a photo gallery, a video, brochures and posters) and links to the video content on YouTube).

The following four destinations are highlighted: cities and municipalities, villages, spas and health resorts, and mountain resorts. The content in the three sections, i.e. Cities and Municipalities, Spas and Health Resorts, and Mountain Resorts can be supplemented with a text, images, video content

and links to specific multimedia. The text on the ‘Villages’ webpage emphasizes the hospitality and warmth of hosts; ecological oases; the smells, sounds and tastes of the village; the rhythm of nature and, in brief, village tourism. On the webpage <http://selo.rs/en>, the online user can book a place for a rest in Serbia. Popular destinations are presented and suggestions for a weekend are given. While reading the text, the online user enjoys the smells, sounds and tastes of the village. The stories of satisfied tourists could also be added here.

Serbia’s culture is presented through the following nine sections: the cultural route, UNESCO lists, archaeological sites, monasteries, religious buildings, museums and galleries, folk architecture, manor houses, fortresses and fortified towns. The content can be supplemented with a text, images, video content and links to multimedia. Interesting stories on all cultural pages could further present Serbia’s culture.

On the TOS’ website, a potential tourist can become familiar with Serbia’s nature in the following nine sections: national parks, nature parks, protected landscapes, nature reserves, Ramsar sites, natural monuments, caves, rivers and lakes. The content could be supplemented with a text, stories, pictures, video content and links to the other web pages.

The following three activities are highlighted on the website: sport and recreation (walking and hiking, skiing, bicycling, sailing and rowing, horse riding, sailing), adventure (flying, caving, orienteering, log rafting and white-water rafting, freeclimbing) and fauna of Serbia (hunting, fishing, bird watching). The activities are clearly divided. The content can be supplemented with a text, stories, pictures, video content and links to specific multimedia.

On the ‘Accommodation’ webpage, a potential tourist can search, find and book an accommodation.

Potential tourists have useful information about, for example, formalities, the arrival, tourist offices and agencies, and communication on a special website.

Users can write comments at the ‘What do others say?’ webpage. This is the web page where online users may create content. From 17th March 2017 to 3rd December 2019, a total of 26 comments were written. This webpage is the website users’ monologue. A monologue on a website can

be replaced with a dialogue. It is recommended that TOS representatives should communicate with online users on this webpage. A greater engagement of tourists on the TOS' website is possible with incentives for tourists.

The web design (the website and the web pages) is simple and navigation is easy. Online users can quickly find the information they need. The content includes the text, images, video and links. The text is a combination of the traditional and the contemporary.

The content on the site is primarily created by the TOS. The content is created for potential tourists and general public. The website is both the medium and channel of communication. The website is dominated by the TOS' monologue. Although there is a possibility for online users to write a comment (in the section called 'What do others say?'), they are very scarcely engaged. Only 26 comments have been written since March 2017. There is no dialogue between the TOS and online users, or any such dialogue between online users, either.

The recommendations for the TOS' website are as follows:

- add a text on the pages where there is little text,
- storytelling,
- **links to the other pages on the website,**
- links in the text to the multimedia content – photos from photo galleries, videos, brochures and posters,
- links on each webpage to social networks for content sharing,
- links to virtual experience for the website visitors and potential visitors, e.g. seeserbia.rs,
- listening to the 'voice' of the website visitors,
- a dialogue with the website visitors,
- the engagement of the website visitors,
- encouraging more active engagement of the website visitors (e.g. a call to action),
- landing pages, and
- **regular updates.**

A comparative analysis of the content on the TOS' Facebook page and Instagram account was carried out (Table 1).

Table 1: *Engaging followers on the TOS' Facebook page and Instagram account*

<b>The measures used for content analysis</b>	<b>Facebook page Serbia Travel</b>	<b>Instagram account @serbiatourism</b>
Overall number of followers for the page	115,697	116,000
Overall number of likes for the page	109,624	/
Overall number of posts for the account	/	1,188
Number of posts*	31	26
Number of likes*	31,772	59,230**
Number of comments*	436	226
Number of shares*	2,366	/

\*For posts between 1<sup>st</sup> January and 1<sup>st</sup> February 2020.

\*\* 59,230 Likes and 62,228 Views

Source: Facebook, 2020; Instagram, 2020

Some posts are similar to each other on Facebook and Instagram, so a comparative analysis was conducted based on the foregoing list of measures. On the Instagram account, followers are invited to use the hashtags #SeeSerbia or #VidiSrbiju so as to give the TOS a permission to repost.

Based on these hashtags, the TOS reposts some users' posts in English and Serbian on Instagram, and in English on Facebook.

The number of the TOS followers is slightly higher on Instagram compared to Facebook. In a country like the USA, with a much larger population, there are 6,753,273 people who follow the USA's Facebook account: 'Visit the USA' (Facebook, 2020b). On the other hand, the number of the comments, likes and shares on the 'Visit the USA' webpage is smaller than that on the 'Serbia Travel' webpage.

Photos are published more than video content. On both Facebook and Instagram, there is a link (seeserbia.rs) to virtual experience for the website visitors and potential visitors.

Similar posts (the same image and text in English) have a different number of likes and comments on the two social networks. There are more likes

and comments on Facebook. There is a greater engagement of the followers on Facebook than on Instagram.

Some Facebook posts have over a thousand likes. For example, 11 posts have 26,300 likes.

Most likes in the given period pertain to the post with the following text: "St. George's Church's stunning mosaic is made of 40 million pieces of glass over 3,500 square meters of wall, making up one of the largest mosaics in the world". This post (the text and the image) has 7.1k likes (Facebook, 2020a).

Some of the followers' recommendations on Facebook are:

"*SerbiaTravel* is a great webpage with lots of details and great photos from the Serbian historical scenery and cuisine, which shows in great detail the wonderful hospitality of the Serbian people." One of the posts/recommendations on Facebook reads as follows: "East or West, South or North, Serbia is always charming and... ready for you to discover!"

The recommendations for the TOS' social-network accounts are as follows:

- to increase the number of followers,
- to encourage a more active engagement of followers (e.g. a call to action),
- to develop a dialogue and the co-creation of content with online users, and
- to promote other tourism organizations in Serbia.

## **Conclusion**

There are three key conclusions. First, the digital marketing of tourism organizations is 'a must'. Websites and accounts (of tourism organizations and other online users) on social networks are important digital media. In the digital world today, apart from tourism organizations, tourists and all other actors on online social networks can be the media if they wish. The online users of social networks with great number of followers are the media with a greater reach. Influencers have the biggest audience. Facebook is a social network with the largest number of online users. Tourism organizations use Facebook as a tourism marketing medium. Instagram is an important tourism marketing medium as well. Social networks provide all actors with many marketing opportunities. On the other hand, communication with online users, especially in real time,

requires a great investment of time, knowledge and energy by the social media manager.

Second, digital content marketing is ‘a must’. Content on digital media is even more important. Digital content includes texts, photos, videos and links. The digital content of the TOS and all tourism organizations should follow tourists’ wishes and trends. Digital content on websites and in social media can focus on presenting the benefits important to tourists. Content – texts, photos, videos, comments, etc. – can position Serbia as a special destination in the eyes of potential tourists. Serbia can be positioned on the basis of the destinations offering the following benefits to tourists:

- enjoying events and becoming familiar with cities (encouraging city/urban tourism),
- a healthy lifestyle, spa healing, wellness and sports activities in the ‘ambience of the spa’ (stimulating spa tourism),
- authentic rural life, in nature, with a physical activity and healthy food included (encouraging rural tourism),
- the geographical position and a possibility of visiting other countries in the region, and
- sustainable development and sustainability.

Third, engaging online users is the most important. Content is co-created by both tourism organizations and online users. Tourism organizations can create content. Online users can also create content. Website visitors and followers on social networks can like, comment on and share the content created by tourism organizations. In addition, tourists and the public can create content on other digital media. Active website visitors and followers on social networks are the most significant digital media. They produce and consume content. They are contentprosumers (producers and consumers). The social media manager’s role is to communicate with online users.

In the digital world, tourism organizations are where tourists are. Today, Facebook is a social network with the largest number of followers. Instagram is increasingly popular. In days to come, if new digital media emerge, tourism organizations and all tourism players will have to follow those trends.

As online users, tourists are not only passive listeners in a tourism organization’s monologue, which used to be the case in the past. Now, online users can be passive observers, or active content creators and digital media in real time. Tourism organizations and all the actors involved in

creating a tourist offer need to understand that the power of the online users of social networks is enormous. The online users of social networks are both co-creators and digital media in real time.

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