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MANAGING DIGITAL MARKETING VISIBILITY OF ECOTOURISM, SUSTAINABLE AND GREEN TOURISM

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Abstract

Since tourism businesses are expected to survive and flourish in today's market, much effort was put into finding a well-adjusted business model. Modern business models are primarily digital marketing based and driven by technological development that facilitates communication. Due to the hyper-competitive market, the main issue remains to find the audience for presenting a product's value, which is the type of marketing that best suits the current habits of environmentally conscious tourists. This scientific study compared expert evaluations of ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and green tourism with user search interests on social media and search engines to improve marketing strategies for these environmentally conscious travel options. The research was conducted using worldwide data between 2021 and 2023. Results have shown significant differences in marketing trends, mainly based on region rankings derived from articles, social media, and search engines.

Key Words: digital marketing, ecotourism, sustainable tourism, green tourism

JEL classification: *M31, Z33, Q57*

Introduction

Tourism, the fourth largest industry globally, holds considerable economic significance alongside manufacturing, agriculture, construction, and technology sectors. Its rapid growth generates substantial revenue, especially in developing nations, yet it is a complex sector influenced by economic, political, geographic, and recreational factors (Dessai, 2023). While offering advantages for development, it also poses environmental

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risks due to unregulated practices, leading to pollution, habitat loss, and resource depletion (Dessai, 2023). Despite relying on environmental stability, tourism can paradoxically contribute to its degradation. Consequently, sustainability has gained prominence in tourism planning and management, and it has been endorsed by international bodies like the UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization) and governments since the early 1990s. However, its adoption has not entirely mitigated adverse impacts (Hall, 2015). Thus, there is a shift towards long-term ecological approaches, giving rise to subfields such as ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and green tourism. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, distinguishing them is crucial, particularly for marketing purposes. The tourism and hospitality sectors experienced significant growth and innovation until the COVID-19 pandemic struck, causing economic turmoil worldwide. While adapting to pandemic restrictions, the industry embraced digital marketing, leveraging websites, emails, and social media to replace traditional channels like television and print media (Aljić & Đurić Pađen, 2022). This shift to digital platforms helped sustain businesses during the crisis and facilitated more precise marketing targeting, particularly for socially responsible activities. Against this backdrop, this paper explores the interplay of terms associated with responsible tourism, comparative advertising strategies, and audience responses to digital content, drawing on global data from 2021 to 2023.

Defining ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and green tourism

Sustainable tourism conserves natural and cultural heritage while maximizing long-term economic value (Bitsani & Kavoura, 2014). Ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and green tourism represent three ethical approaches to ecologically sensitive tourism.

Ecotourism lacks a universal definition (Voza & Fedajev, 2020) but is more precisely defined than sustainable and green tourism, focusing on nature tourism and emphasizing tourist behavior rather than accommodation. It contrasts mass tourism by prioritizing conservation and offers a responsible and immersive nature experience (Khan et al., 2022). According to the International Ecotourism Society (IES), ecotourism aims to balance environmental protection, community support, and responsible travel practices, requiring (Meler & Ham, 2012): Economic benefits for locals and tourism; Direct benefits for conservation and positive experiences; Environmentally low-impact design,

construction, and operations; Acknowledgment of local rights, beliefs, and partnerships for awareness; and Reduced ecological impacts across various aspects. While ecotourism holds promise, it does not guarantee sustainability. For it to flourish and contribute to a sustainable future, it needs to achieve a three-pronged balance: economic viability, environmental responsibility, and social and cultural acceptance (Meler & Ham, 2012) by the greater public.

Sustainable tourism, broader than ecotourism and green tourism, encompasses the holistic development process of tourism, considering environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects. It requires stakeholder participation in creating an ecologically focused political environment. Fully defined, sustainable tourism prioritizes responsible resource management to meet present and future economic, social, and cultural needs, ensuring the preservation of cultural heritage, essential ecological processes, diverse ecosystems, and life's foundation (Dessai, 2023). According to Dessai (2023), sustainable tourism aims to: 'Make optimal use of environmental resources; Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of the host communities; and Ensure viable, long-term economic operations provide socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders' (p. 190). An example and one of the central areas of sustainable tourism is water conservation. Sustainable water systems are crucial for delivering water that meets qualitative and quantitative demands for designated purposes. This system should function without jeopardizing the long-term capacity to maintain this level of service (Dessai, 2023).

According to the UNWTO and Saseanu et al. (2020), 'green tourism is a form of sustainable tourism characterized by the fact that it involves the protection of nature, the use of local human resources, and the minimization of negative impacts on the natural, cultural, and social environment' (p. 3). It involves recreation in ecologically clean natural areas or regions and visits to scientific, educational, cultural, and cognitive places and activities (Gryshchenko et al., 2022). While a type of sustainable tourism, green tourism resembles ecotourism, yet it uniquely targets urban populations, portraying rural retreats as an escape from daily stress into nature (Meler & Ham, 2012). It emphasizes a location's natural environment, cultural heritage, and environmentally friendly practices (Gryshchenko et al., 2022). Since its inception in the 1980s, green tourism has evolved from focusing solely on environmental impact reduction to sometimes being used as a marketing tactic. The „green“ label often indicates environmentally friendly practices, even if minimal, such as

waste segregation, allowing organizations to promote themselves as eco-friendly (Gryshchenko et al., 2022).

Marketing ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and green tourism

Tourism marketing currently prioritizes commercial interests, maximizing visitors and economic returns. However, there is an increasing acknowledgment of sustainability's importance, leading to a shift in marketing strategies (Hall, 2015). While ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and green tourism are often used interchangeably in real-life conversations and media, they have distinct marketing purposes despite intertwined definitions.

Currently, ecotourism marketing emphasizes a delicate balance, ensuring guest satisfaction, environmental protection, and the well-being of local communities (Meler & Ham, 2012). Ecotourism behavior is evaluated based on three dimensions: environmental conservation, education, and community development (Khan et al., 2022). Tourist activities are influenced by the perceived image of a destination, which comprises beliefs, ideas, and impressions (Khan et al., 2022). These perceptions are often shared online, so search engines and social media have become vital platforms for travelers exploring and comparing options. They are also crucial channels for hospitality businesses to engage with their target audience (Khan et al., 2022).

Tourism marketing faces challenges in effectively segmenting markets, particularly with small groups interested in sustainable tourism, often exploratory rather than repeat visitors, yielding limited economic value (Gilmore & Simmons, 2007). Consequently, enterprises continuously seek new population segments for targeting. Internet marketing has emerged as the most effective tool for promoting sustainable tourism. Embracing the Internet as the primary channel for tourism advertising, enterprises increasingly focus on emotional and cognitive appeals. Emotional appeals evoke positive responses from potential tourists, while rational appeals emphasize the tourism experience and operations (Hui et al., 2020). In the sensible approach, sustainability contributes to pleasure rather than merely a means to justify a sustainable approach, as in the emotional approach. Thus, as a marketing tool, the Internet exerts the most significant influence on tourism, making tourism enterprise websites and social media crucial communication channels for marketing strategies (Andreopoulou et al., 2014).

Green tourism, accounting for 7-20% of tourist services globally (Plotnikova, 2018), is a significant economic driver, particularly for developing nations like Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Nepal (Gryshchenko et al., 2022). This practice emphasizes responsible land management, ecological awareness, and economic benefits for local communities (Meler & Ham, 2012). Marketing for green tourism focuses on fostering environmental consciousness among tourists, encouraging responsible choices in destination selection and travel behavior (Meler & Ham, 2012). This approach is particularly relevant considering the growing influence of millennials and Gen Z, the most enthusiastic supporters of green tourism practices (Saseanu et al., 2020).

Analytical data regarding the search interest of potential tourists

As there is no precise method to gauge sustainability in tourism, potential tourists rely on informative media channels and marketing for information (Cyrus, 2023). Web searches are heavily relied upon for discovering rankings of regions, cities, or attractions, with Forbes, a renowned media company, annually producing one of the most popular rankings. This print and web-based business magazine employs a scoring system comprising six categories to rank countries ideal for ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and green tourism experiences worldwide (Cyrus, 2023). The scoring system considers the following data points: biodiversity, conservation efforts, global recognition, environmental quality, and carbon footprint (CO₂ emissions). Following the scoring system mentioned above, the same media company has created a country ranking of the best locations for various types of tourism, including the period between 2021 and 2023 (Table 1).

Table 1: *Best-ranked locations for ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and green tourism (2021-2023)*

Rank	Ecotourism	Sustainable tourism	Green tourism
1	Brazil	Sweden	Austria
2	Mexico	Finland	Costa Rica
3	Australia	Austria	Denmark
4	Ecuador	Estonia	France
5	Costa Rica	Norway	Latvia
6	Bhutan	Slovakia	New Zealand
7	Peru	Slovenia	Peru
8	Indonesia	Iceland	Romania
9	Panama	Latvia	Slovenia
10	Tanzania	Switzerland	Philippines

Source: *OECDiLibrary, 2022; Cyrus, 2023.*

Influential rankings like these offer concise presentations and transparent methodologies (Cyrus, 2023). Despite unique rankings for each term, there is the overlapping; for example, Peru appears in both ecotourism and green tourism rankings, while Austria, Slovenia, and Latvia are featured in both sustainable and green tourism rankings. Primary tourism information and recommendation sources include search engines and social media platforms such as Google, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Analytical data from these platforms was used to create a comparable ranking, with Google Trends employed to analyze search query popularity. This tool allows users to assess term popularity geographically and across various social media platforms over specific periods. „Search interest“ values range from 0 to 100, indicating popularity relative to total searches in a location, with 50 representing half the popularity and 0 indicating negligible popularity. Facebook will be the first social media platform to be analyzed for search interest in ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and green tourism (Table 2).

Table 2: *Comparison of worldwide Facebook search interest (2021-2023)*

Rank	Ecotourism	Sustainable tourism	Green tourism
1	Thailand	Greece	Lithuania
2	Dominican Republic	Romania	Bosnia & Herzegovina
3	Hong Kong	Sweden	Egypt
4	Turkey	Philippines	Ireland
5	Croatia	Japan	Slovakia
6	Bosnia & Herzegovina	Réunion Island	Tunisia
7	Portugal	Trinidad & Tobago	Slovenia
8	Austria	Italy	United Kingdom
9	Spain	Portugal	Czech Republic
10	Belgium	New Zealand	Finland

Source: *Google Trends, 2024.*

Each term has a unique ranking, yet it overlaps with the original Forbes ranking. Sustainable tourism rankings include Sweden, while green tourism rankings include Slovenia. Among the three Facebook rankings, ecotourism and sustainable tourism share Portugal, while ecotourism and green tourism share Bosnia & Herzegovina. The average worldwide interest for the three terms showed no noticeable differences over time. Instagram will be the second social media platform to be analyzed for search interest in ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and green tourism (Table 3).

Table 3: *Comparison of worldwide Instagram search interest (2021-2023)*

Rank	Ecotourism	Sustainable tourism	Green tourism
1	Vietnam	Finland	Spain
2	Malaysia	South Africa	Panama
3	Hong Kong	Philippines	United Arab Emirates
4	Bangladesh	Denmark	Austria
5	India	Greece	Serbia
6	Poland	Croatia	Brazil
7	Chile	Bosnia & Herzegovina	Switzerland
8	Sweden	United Arab Emirates	Dominican Republic
9	Netherlands	Portugal	Germany
10	Tunisia	Argentina	Slovakia

Source: *Google Trends, 2024.*

Again, some overlappings exist with the original Forbes ranking - sustainable tourism rankings share one country (Finland). Between the three Instagram rankings, sustainable and green tourism share one country (United Arab Emirates). The average worldwide overtime interest between the three terms did not show noticeable differences for the set period. TikTok will be the third social media platform to be analyzed for search interest in ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and green tourism (Table 4).

Table 4: *Comparison of worldwide TikTok search interest (2021-2023)*

Rank	Ecotourism	Sustainable tourism	Green tourism
1	India	Mauritius	United Arab Emirates
2	Ghana	Tanzania	Indonesia
3	Bangladesh	South Africa	Peru
4	Iran	Philippines	El Salvador
5	Kenya	Nepal	Netherlands
6	Cambodia	South Korea	Ecuador
7	Hong Kong	Maldives	United States
8	Malaysia	Sri Lanka	Guatemala
9	Saudi Arabia	Kenya	Turkey
10	Egypt	New Zealand	Bolivia

Source: *Google Trends, 2024.*

Even though each term has a unique ranking, there is some overlapping with the original Forbes ranking – green tourism rankings share one country (Peru). Between the three TikTok rankings, ecotourism and

sustainable tourism share one country (Kenya). The average worldwide overtime interest between the three terms did not show noticeable differences for the set period. Google search will be the fourth group of search results presented (Table 5).

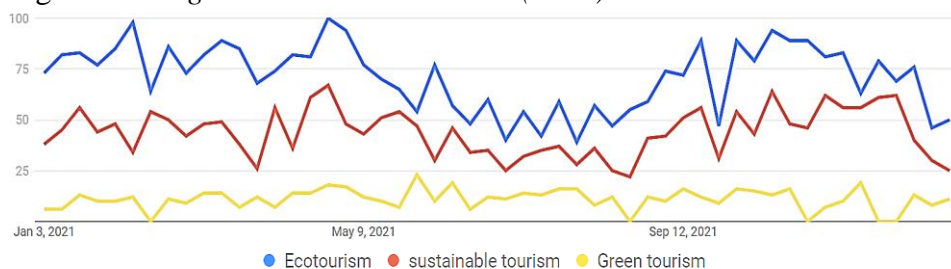
Table 5: *Google search interest (2021-2023)*

Rank	Ecotourism	Sustainable tourism	Green tourism
1	Papua New Guinea	Switzerland	United Arab Emirates
2	Ivory Coast	Jamaica	Uzbekistan
3	Ecuador	Italy	Hungary
4	Iran	New Zealand	United Kingdom
5	Tunisia	Portugal	Myanmar
6	Malaysia	Nepal	Ukraine
7	Costa Rica	Sri Lanka	India
8	United States	Uganda	Singapore
9	Ethiopia	South Korea	Egypt
10	Saudi Arabia	Netherlands	Thailand

Source: *Google Trends, 2024.*

In this case, there is also a noted overlapping - ecotourism rankings share two countries (Ecuador and Costa Rica), while sustainable tourism rankings share one country (Switzerland). Between the three Google rankings, ecotourism and sustainable tourism share one country (Kenya). The average worldwide overtime interest via Google search between the three terms showed noticeable differences between trends from 2021 to 2023 (Figure 1, 2, and 3).

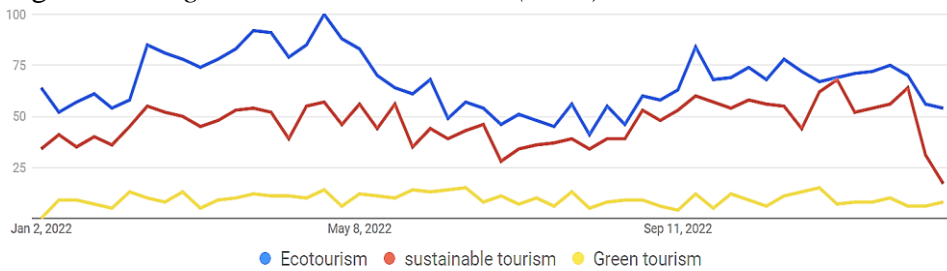
Figure 1: *Google search interest trends (2021)*



Source: *Google Trends, 2024.*

The average 2021 worldwide interest over time for the term „Ecotourism“ was 71, while „Sustainable tourism“ gained 44, and „Green tourism“ had 11.

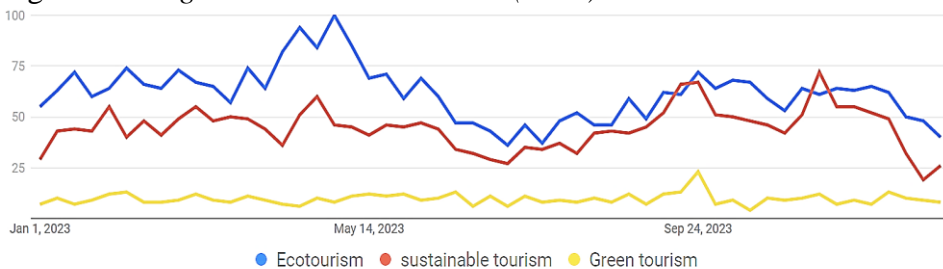
Figure 2: *Google search interest trends (2022)*



Source: *Google Trends, 2024.*

The average 2022 worldwide interest over time for the term „Ecotourism“ was 67, while „Sustainable tourism“ had 47, and „Green tourism“ had 9.

Figure 3: *Google search interest trends (2023)*



Source: *Google Trends, 2024.*

The average 2023 worldwide interest over time for the term „Ecotourism“ was 62, while „Sustainable tourism“ had 45, and „Green tourism“ had 10.

Conclusion

Though lacking an official formula, the Forbes tourism ranking demonstrates the possibility of well-researched and transparent articles (Cyrus, 2023). Similarly, rankings from social media and search engine data also provide valuable insights. Despite the interchangeability of terms like ecotourism, sustainable tourism, and green tourism, country rankings exhibit little similarity across different searches. Comparisons between tourism terms within the same social media or search engine and with Forbes's rankings reveal discrepancies. Only Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok searches displayed interchangeable marketing terms, while Google search consistently prioritized ecotourism (62 to 71 search interests), followed by sustainable tourism (44 to 47) and green tourism (9 to 11). These discrepancies in social media results are unsurprising, given

that marketing algorithms are often driven by user or content creator preferences. Search engine results vary more due to factors like SEO and PSA, resulting in a broader range of results. Despite technical nuances, misrepresentation of responsible tourism persists, whether due to ignorance or greenwashing attempts. Amid these efforts to attract attention and profit, there is a risk of losing sight of the original meaning of responsible tourism, particularly eco, sustainable, and green tourism.

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