

THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA ON MOTIVATING YOUNG PEOPLE TO EXPLORE DOMESTIC TOURIST DESTINATIONS

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of digital transformation and social media, with a particular focus on TikTok and Instagram, on the creation of tourism demand among Generation Z, in North Macedonia. The study analyzes the shift from mass to alternative and rural tourism, while determining the role of short video formats and user-generated content (UGC) in motivating young people to explore domestic touristic destinations. For the purposes of the paper, an online survey was conducted on respondents aged from 18 to 26. The results indicate that visual content, especially short videos, has a dominant influence on travel decisions, while text sources have a significantly smaller role. In addition, the strong influence of digital recommendations and the FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) effect among young people is confirmed. We can conclude that the tourism sector needs to adapt its marketing strategies towards visual and authentic digital content to harness the potential for the development of domestic tourism.

Keywords: Generation Z, digital transformation, tourism demand, touristic destination

Introduction

The development of technology and simplified digital communication have led to significant changes in the economy, especially in tourism. In the modern market, there is an increasing demand for destinations that offer authenticity, preserved tradition and contact with nature. For the successful positioning of any tourist destination, precise market segmentation is essential. The identification of new generations, such as Generation Z, as a distinct market segment requires a complete revision of traditional communication channels. Promotion in the 21st century must integrate digital tools in order to create awareness and build a destination image that corresponds to the values of the new digital consumer.

This generation shows a strong affinity for experiential tourism. Instead of classic and standardized hotel accommodations, they increasingly seek authentic experiences, such as staying in smaller and more remote areas, direct contact with local communities, and exposure to traditional ways of life. This need for an “unfiltered” reality aligns with their desire to support small local businesses. For them, travel represents a form of self-expression, which is why the destination must have a certain visual aesthetic that can easily be shared in their digital area. They prefer local experiences and “undiscovered” destinations over mass tourism. Their aim is to find something unique worth sharing on social media. Travel decisions are often based on sustainability considerations. They choose eco-friendly accommodations and green modes of transport. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z prioritizes health over entertainment. So-called “dry holidays” (alcohol-free) and wellness retreats are particularly popular.

Characteristics of the “New” Tourist – Generation Z

Generation Z, which includes individuals born from the late 1990s to the early 2010s, represents a demographic group with significantly different consumption habits compared to previous generations (Millennials or Generation X). In 2026, its members are between 14 and 30 years old, meaning that a large portion are students or young professionals who are still building their economic power. These consumers are the first true “digital natives,” for whom technology and the internet are not just tools, but an integral part of their social ecosystem. They use technology at every stage — from inspiration on TikTok to booking through mobile applications. In decision-making processes, they are characterized by a reduced attention span, fast processing of visual information, and a high level of critical thinking toward traditional marketing messages. Generation Z prefers to receive information through visual content rather than long written texts or videos. In addition to their different form, the content also differs in duration, including short videos or images through which only a single piece of information is conveyed.

This generation is redefining tourism toward experiences over luxury, digital integration (AI, TikTok), and sustainability. They seek authenticity, local culture, “Instagrammable” destinations, and “destination dupes” (cheaper alternatives), preferring direct online bookings instead of travel agencies. They use travel as a means of mental well-being and social validation. Although they have smaller budgets, they are willing to save on everyday expenses in order to afford unique travel experiences.

Social Media as a Driver of Tourism Demand

While traditional search engines such as Google have dominated the way users gather travel information through keywords and websites for years, younger generations are introducing a new trend. TikTok is transforming from an entertainment platform into a powerful visual search engine. According to current digital trends, a significant proportion of Generation Z prefers to use TikTok and Instagram as primary tools for searching information about restaurants, accommodation, and tourist attractions. The algorithms of these platforms deliver personalized visual content that enables fast and dynamic exploration of locations, providing a more realistic representation compared to traditional text-based results.

Unlike traditional marketing based on carefully planned and expensive campaigns, social media rewards authenticity. In the context of tourism, short travel vlogs across North Macedonia — whether showcasing hiking, rural homestays, or local food experiences — generate significant interest. These content creators act as informal ambassadors of destinations. This phenomenon of peer-to-peer digital recommendation creates a high level of trust among potential tourists, as it is perceived as more objective and realistic than commercial offers from travel agencies.

In response to these behavioral changes, social media platforms are also developing specialized tools for the tourism industry. Platforms are introducing advanced AI-based formats that connect users directly with destinations and hotels already during the inspiration phase. These automated systems allow tourism providers to target users who are in the planning stage of their trips, offering interactive cards and catalogs for direct booking. This represents a significant shift in tourism marketing, as it shortens the consumer journey from destination discovery to final booking, merging inspiration and conversion in one place.

Survey Questionnaire

For the purposes of this research, an online survey questionnaire was created and conducted. The questionnaire is divided into three logical sections in order to examine social media usage habits, their

influence on destination choice, and the level of trust in different information sources. Respondents rated the provided options using a unified scale: Always, Often, Rarely, Never.

Part 1: Social Media Use and Inspiration

1. Which of the following social media platforms do you use most frequently during the day?
 - Instagram
 - TikTok
 - Facebook
 - Twitter (X)
2. How often do you use social media as a source of inspiration for your travels?

Part 2: Influence on Destination Choice

3. How often do the following content formats motivate you to visit a specific place in North Macedonia?
 - Aesthetic photographs (Instagram posts)
 - Short videos / vlogs (TikTok, Instagram Reels)
 - Textual reviews and blogs
 - Official advertisements from travel agencies
4. How often do you visit a specific location in the country solely because you saw it in a viral video or post?
5. How often do you discover and feel motivated via social media to visit the following types of domestic destinations?
 - Traditional lake resorts (Ohrid, Dojran, Prespa)
 - Mountain resorts and ski centers (Popova Šapka, Mavrovo)
 - Rural tourism and ethno-villages (Galičnik, Brajčino, local wineries, etc.)
 - Urban city breaks (Skopje, Bitola, and others)

Part 3: Trust and Behavior

6. How often do you trust and rely on travel recommendations from the following sources?
 - Influencers and celebrities
 - Experiences shared by ordinary users (peers/friends)
 - Official profiles of hotels/municipalities
 - Offers and advertisements from travel agencies
7. How often do you feel a strong desire to travel somewhere after seeing your peers posting pictures from interesting locations (the so-called FOMO effect)?

Results of the survey questionnaire

Table 1: Results of the questionnaire

Question 1	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
Instagram	15	20	15	0
Tiktok	35	15	0	0
Facebook	0	0	5	45
Twitter	0	0	0	50
Question 2	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
	30	15	5	0
Question 3	Always	Often	Rarely	Never

Aesthetic photographs	20	25	5	0
Short videos	35	10	5	0
Text reviews and blogs	0	15	25	10
Official advertisements from TAs	0	15	35	0
Question 4	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
	25	15	10	0
Question 5	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
Traditional lake resorts	40	10	0	0
Mountain resorts and ski centers	20	20	10	0
Rural tourism and ethno villages	30	20	0	0
Urban city breaks	5	25	10	10
Question 6	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
Influencers and celebrities	25	10	10	5
Experiences shared by ordinary users	35	10	5	0
Official profiles of hotels and municipalities	5	10	20	15
Offers and advertisements from TAs	5	15	20	10
Question 7	Always	Often	Rarely	Never
	30	10	5	5

Source: Autor

Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted based on data from 50 respondents aged between 18 and 26 years, as shown in Table 1. The aim was to determine the influence of digital content and social media on the selection of tourist destinations.

The results indicate a dominance of visual formats as the primary motivator for travel. A total of 70% of respondents stated that short-form videos (TikTok and Instagram Reels) “always” motivate them to visit a specific location. Additionally, another 20% answered “often,” meaning that a total of 90% of young people are strongly influenced by this format.

Aesthetic photographs on Instagram also have a significant impact, with 40% of respondents answering “always” and 50% “often.” This indicates that 90% of young people are inspired by visual photographic content.

In contrast, textual reviews and blogs have a significantly lower influence. As many as 70% of respondents stated that they “rarely” or “never” influence their decisions, while only 30% use them occasionally.

Regarding social influence, the results show a strong FOMO effect. A total of 80% of respondents stated that they “always” or “often” feel the need to travel after seeing posts from their peers, confirming the significant role of social media in shaping tourism demand.

When it comes to destination types, the highest interest is observed in traditional lake resorts, where 100% of respondents expressed a positive attitude (80% “always” and 20% “often”). A similar trend is observed in rural tourism, which also recorded 100% positive responses, indicating high development potential in this segment.

Mountain destinations show moderately high attractiveness (80% positive responses), while urban weekend destinations show lower interest, with only 60% positive responses and a significant share of respondents (40%) who rarely or never feel inspired by them.

In terms of trust, the highest level of trust is observed in content created by ordinary users, where 90% of respondents answered “always” or “often.” Influencers have a moderately high level of influence (70%), while trust in official profiles and travel agencies is significantly lower, indicating a preference for authentic and informal content.

Conclusion

Based on the data obtained from the empirical research, it can be concluded that the stated hypothesis is confirmed. Specifically, visual content on social media represents the primary motivator in the selection of domestic tourist destinations among young people. The analysis of Generation Z preferences indicates that the decision-making process regarding travel in contemporary conditions is predominantly based on rapid visual impressions.

The dominance of short-form video content (such as TikTok and Instagram Reels), which motivates as many as 70% of respondents, clearly suggests that traditional textual and commercial marketing tools are losing their influence within this demographic group. Furthermore, the presence of a strong FOMO effect (Fear of Missing Out) among over 80% of respondents, triggered by peer and influencer posts promoting hidden local destinations, highlights the power of user-generated content (UGC) and peer-to-peer digital recommendations. This positions TikTok not only as an entertainment platform but also as a relevant tool for tourism inspiration and search.

These findings indicate that the tourism market must urgently adapt its offer and marketing strategies to these new digital habits. The integration of tourism offerings with social media algorithms—by reducing the steps between inspiration and direct conversion (booking)—represents a new paradigmatic approach. Instead of traditional promotional campaigns, stakeholders in the tourism sector should focus on authenticity, spontaneity, and the creation of visually appealing short-form content favored by algorithms.

The shift in young people’s attention toward domestic destinations, driven by social media, opens significant potential for sustainable tourism. With appropriate utilization of these digital trends, less developed regions in the country gain opportunities for increased mobilization of rural labor, economic strengthening, and innovative promotion of cultural and natural heritage to new generations of tourists. It can be concluded that it would be highly beneficial to invest in the creation of short video content and collaboration with influencers in order to improve the positioning of domestic tourist destinations.

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