



THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE ON TOURISM DESTINATION COMPETITIVENESS: THE CASE OF SERBIA AND DEFINED COMPETITIVENESS SET

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Abstract:

The emergence of the Internet and new technologies application is noticeable in all business areas today. New technologies, if properly implemented, can significantly improve the user experience because they ensure the availability of information when the user needs it. The use of the Internet and new technologies leads to easier comparison of alternatives and decision-making while reducing time and energy costs. On the other hand, from the company's point of view, the Internet and new technologies bring many new challenges. Companies should monitor the changes that occur and appropriately react to them. The popularity of different platforms is reflected in the constant increase in the number of active users on them. Social media presents new ways of promoting tourism destinations and tourism products. Nowadays social media have a crucial role in encouraging tourists to visit a tourist destination. Consequently, NTOs actively use the advantages of social media in the promotion of tourism destinations. The aim of this paper is to analyze the competitiveness of Serbia and selected countries of the competitive set from the point of view of their presence on different platforms and social media. For the purposes of the research, a set of competitor countries was selected, and defined as competitors to Serbia as a tourism destination. The countries were defined within the Republic of Serbia's Tourism Development Strategy for the period 2019-2025. The analysis included the presence of national tourism organizations (NTO) on social networks and platforms and was compared with the tourist arrivals and overnight stays of domestic and foreign tourists.

Keywords:

social media, national tourism organization, digital marketing, tourism competitiveness, tourist arrivals.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the rapid development of technology, tourism companies are forced to constantly analyze the market and competitors and to implement innovations in their business. Without adapting to new conditions, it is difficult to maintain a position on the market. Digitization has enabled faster growing and created the opportunity to be noticed by a larger number of people, and all this with significantly less investment than was the case before the advent of the Internet. Social media brings several advantages such as two-way communication and lower costs, and in today's world it is a necessary item in all outreach plans and strategies.

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The implementation of new technologies is particularly important in the field of tourism and hospitality, as it serves to promote tourist destinations and attract new tourists. From the perspective of tourists, using the internet and new technologies has made it easy to plan a trip, seek for information about the destination, book a reservation and share travel experiences.

Social media platforms today are an important meeting point between companies and consumers. Given the steadily rising number of social network users in recent years, marketing and communication strategies for businesses in the tourism industry should give major consideration to their social media presence. Consumers and businesses may express their uniqueness and establish more contact thanks to the Internet. In the past, businesses advertised their messages in magazines, newsletters, and traditional media. Personalized content can now be sent, and customers themselves can customize it even more. (Kotler & Keller, 2006) Today, it is clear that digital communication methods predominate. We are social and Hootsuite have been creating global reports and analyses of social networks in the world for years. New technologies are evolving and they are quickly implemented in everyday business and life. According to report on the growth of the Internet and information technologies, data from January 2022 show that of the approximately 7.91 billion people on Earth, 62.5% (4.95 billion) are Internet users, while the number of active social network users is slightly lower than Internet users (4.62 billion). (We are social, Hootsuite, 2022)

Social media are web and mobile-based tools that allow people to produce and distribute information. Social networks, which are a subset of social media, are the fundamental platforms for communication in the modern digital world. They make it easy for people to connect and communicate with each other, as well as with the businesses. They provide a useful method for real-time marketing, i.e. timely communication, on the appropriate platform. Businesses generally use social networks to connect with their target audience. Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok, LinkedIn, and other widely used social media platforms have all seen a significant growth in recent years and are frequently used in communication strategy.

The objective of this paper is to examine the social media presence of NTO Serbia and competitor countries that were identified in accordance with the Republic of Serbia's tourism development strategy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of the Internet has changed the way travelers communicate and interact with destinations. Today's tourists, however, have altered their behavior and now rely on social networks for real-time information that affects their trip plans. They use social networks in all phases of their travel: before the trip (for collecting the information), during the trip (for making posts about the trip and communication), and after the trip (for leaving feedback).

In general, it is known that reputation is extremely important in promoting competitiveness (Pechlaner *et al.*, 2002). De Moya & Jain (2013) pointed out that this reputation partly explains final competitiveness and argued that competitiveness and reputation mutually impact one another. Finally, different authors such as Gallarza *et al.* (2002) and Zhang *et al.* (2014) conducted literature reviews on the reputation of tourist destinations, highlighting the relevance of this reputation to tourist satisfaction and destination competitiveness.

Within the tourism sector, reputation is crucial. The relevance of a destination's online presence has grown significantly as a result of the advancement of information and communication technologies in the tourist industry. The Internet has emerged as the most significant platform for the marketing and sales efforts of destination management organizations and, at the same time, it has taken the lead as the main source of information for travelers looking to plan their vacations.

Technological progress and the rapid development of social media have influenced new ways when it comes to services and their providing. Organizations that used traditional methods and provided services through personal selling and direct contact with consumer can now provide services through social media without any physical contact between the two parties. (Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2019)

Thota (Thota, 2018) states that organizations use social media to attract consumers and create their needs by communicating positive aspects of products or services and shaping their brand perception. Having recognized a need, customers begin their search for information in order to choose the best option. In this stage of decision-making, brands compete with competitors and offer product and service information (Mason *et al.*, 2021).



With the ultimate goal of creating a relationship for brand growth and development, social media provides an excellent chance for the hospitality industry to build stronger relations with its customers (Buted *et al.*, 2014). Tourists, when traveling, are actively using the social media for various reasons: when researching the destination, upon the arrival on the destination to inform, during the stay to share the experience but also (dis)satisfaction after they leave the destination. Because of the above-mentioned reasons, it is important to emphasize that social media have become an irreplaceable channel of communication when it comes to travel decisions, which has had a significant impact on business in the tourism and hotel industry (Leung *et. al.*, 2013). Furthermore, many studies have shown that tourists, especially young people, are more likely to trust and rely on social media channels to make decisions. (Pop *et al.*, 2021; Zeng & Gerritsen 2014; Zlatanov *et al.*, 2021). As a digital natives, the younger generations did not learn to use new technologies – they are part of their everyday life from early age. In addition, it should be taken into consideration that people spend an average of about two hours and a half on a daily basis using social networks with a tendency to increase this time (Statista, 2022). This means that tourism destinations as well as other providers of tourist services have every day the opportunity to attract potential users, advertise, and sell a product or service through social networks.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this paper is to analyze the competitiveness of Serbia and selected countries of the competitive set from the point of their presence on various platforms and social networks, with a comparison to the number of overnight stays and tourist traffic of competitor countries. For the purposes of the research, the authors selected a set of competitor countries that were defined within the Republic of Serbia's Tourism Development Strategy (in further text abbreviated as Strategy) for the period 2019-2025. The European market is divided into several geographical entities. According to the Strategy, the main competitors in the area of Southern/Mediterranean Europe, which includes the Republic of Serbia, are defined as Slovenia, Croatia, Albania and Montenegro, together with the border countries Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria (Government of the Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications, 2016). The analysis included the presence of National tourism organizations on social networks and platforms and was compared with the achieved tourist traffic and the number of overnight stays. For research purposes, data were collected from the following networks/platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Youtube, and TikTok. It also included information on whether the National tourism organization has its own website.

Finding out whether national tourism organizations have their websites was the initial stage in the data collection. The information on the social networks on which National tourism organizations are present was then obtained (for the majority of social networks) from the NTOs' official websites, which contain links to their accounts on various social networks. The following information was retrieved from the sites and social networks under observation:

- Facebook – number of page likes
- Instagram – number of followers and number of posts
- Twitter – number of followers
- Youtube – number of subscribers and views
- Tik Tok – whether NTOs are present (yes/no) and number of followers and likes

One of the initial hypotheses is that there is a relation between the volume of tourism and NTO activities on social media, i.e., that NTOs that are active and present on the aforementioned platforms perform better in terms of the volume of tourism and the number of overnight stays.

As for the data on tourist traffic and the number of overnight stays, they are taken from the republican statistical institutes of individual countries and refer to the last available calendar year (2021). Data on tourist traffic and the number of overnight stays were observed from the perspective of two categories of tourists - domestic and foreign tourists - whose values are shown in absolute amount and their percentage share in the total tourist traffic, i.e. the number of overnight stays. Certain data that are not publicly available and for that reason could not be included in the analysis are marked as N/A (not available). As part of the results of the conducted research, a table overview of the observed set of competitors in all the listed categories will be shown, with accompanying discussion and conclusions.



RESULTS

The most significant results of the conducted research are highlighted below. The first segment included in the analysis was related to whether the national tourism organizations of the countries selected within the defined set have their own official website. Out of a total of 8 competitor countries that make up the selected set, all 8 countries (100%) have their own website. Given that tourists today actively use the Internet when making travel decisions, the existence of a website is particularly important from the point of presence in the online world. The foregoing may mean that NTOs have recognized the importance of having a website as a place to present a country's offer. Regarding social media and the results of the research, the data are presented in the following tables.

Table 1 shows an overview of NTO presence on selected platforms. When it comes to Instagram, the categories referring to the number of followers and number of posts were observed. When the number of followers is taken as a criterion, NTO Croatia is in first place with a total of 444,085 followers. NTO Serbia is in third place with a total of 143,285 followers, which is three times less than the country that occupies the leading place on the list. When the number of posts is chosen as a criterion, NTO Croatia is still in first place, while the distribution of the other observed countries changes to a certain extent. According to the above criteria, NTO Serbia has more than five times less posts than NTO Croatia, the number of posts being 2,076 and 11,600 respectively.

When it comes to Facebook, the category of number of page likes was observed. Results show that NTO Croatia is in first place with a total of 1,684,907 page likes. NTO Serbia is in fourth place with a total of 263,020 likes.

When it comes to Twitter, the number of followers was observed. According to results, NTO Hungary is in first place with the total of 280,400 followers. NTO Serbia has 108,386 followers and is the country that follows NTO Hungary on the list. This is the only platform where NTO Croatia does not occupy a leading place in the number of followers.

Youtube, as a video platform, was also observed and analyzed in terms of the number of subscribers and views. When the number of subscribers is taken as criterion, NTO Croatia has the highest number of subscribers. NTO Serbia is in third place according to the mentioned criterion. If the criterion is the number of views, results are almost identical – leading positions do not change.

LinkedIn, as an older platform that was launched in 2003 primarily for professional networking and career development, has not really become popular as a means of promoting tourism of the countries under study. This is corroborated by the information that just 5 of the 8 countries under study have a LinkedIn profile.

The establishment of TikTok social network accounts is a great example of how to present an offer to younger tourists. As a new platform, it has not been used to its full potential yet. From total of 8 observed countries within the defined set, only two countries have an official NTO account on TikTok. NTO Slovenia is in the leading position with 224,500 likes, which is almost 6 times more likes than second-placed NTO Croatia.

Table 1. The presence of ntos on observed platforms

	Instagram		Facebook		Twitter	Youtube		Linkedin	TikTok	
	followers	posts	page like	page followers	followers	subscribers	views	followers	followers	likes
NTO Serbia	143,285	2,076	263,020	267,598	108,386	10,100	24,776,578	2,973	/	/
NTO Hungary	36,639	1,421	789,399	789,639	280,400	17,500	37,249,160	/	113	65
NTO Montenegro	60,447	2,873	121,000	612	7,447	2,650	3,361,289	/	/	/
NTO Croatia	444,085	11,600	1,684,907	1,696,341	2,965	20,500	374,108,172	24,023	3,516	37,800
NTO Albania	38,573	4,676	/	54,000	7,790	1,650	576,116	/	/	/
NTO Slovenia	252,260	4,532	580,492	591,005	5,331	6,720	19,787,854	16,356	6,380	224,500
NTO Romania	1,733	58	21,744	23,231	31,631	1,050	246,388	/	/	/
NTO Bulgaria	35,912	1,430	35,835	37,841	848	2,510	14,449,265	/	0	0

Source: Authors' analysis



If the data on tourist traffic (Table 2; Table 3) is added to the data on social networks, it could be noted that there is a potential link between the presence on social networks, as one of the factors that influences the attraction of tourists, and the increased visit to tourist destinations. Analyzing the realized tourist traffic and the number of overnight stays by foreign tourists, Croatia, as the country with the most followers and posts on Instagram, was also the leader on the list of countries analyzed in terms of arrivals and overnight stays by foreign tourists.

Table 2. Number of tourist arrivals

	Arrivals - domestic and foreign tourists				
	Domestic tourists	Domestic tourists (%)	Foreign tourists	Foreign tourists (%)	Total
Croatia	2,135,000	17%	10,641,000	83%	12,776,000
Albania	3,928,030	41%	5,688,649	59%	9,616,679
Romania	8,436,100	91%	840,600	9%	9,276,700
Hungary	4,370,665	70%	1,868,335	30%	6,239,000
Slovenia	2,171,236	54%	1,832,446	46%	4,003,682
Serbia	1,720,054	66%	871,239	34%	2,591,293
Montenegro	117,321	7%	1,553,558	93%	1,670,879
Bulgaria	N/A	N/A	7,188,363	N/A	N/A

Source: Authors' analysis

Table 3. Number of tourist overnight stays

	Overnight stays - domestic and foreign tourists				
	Domestic tourists	Domestic tourists (%)	Foreign tourists	Foreign tourists (%)	Total
Croatia	7,354,000	10%	62,848,000	90%	70,202,000
Romania	18,825,000	91%	1,828,100	9%	20,653,100
Hungary	11,220,000	69%	5,071,000	31%	16,291,000
Slovenia	6,456,686	57%	4,794,472	43%	11,251,158
Montenegro	448,770	5%	9,423,803	95%	9,872,573
Serbia	5,732,833	70%	2,429,597	30%	8,162,430
Albania	1,155,185	36%	2,030,887	64%	3,186,072
Bulgaria	N/A	N/A	7,993,767	N/A	N/A

Source: Authors' analysis

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Today, social media represent a powerful tool for differentiation in relation to competitors, especially tourism destinations. Building a reputation online is crucial when developing the image of a tourism destination. Particular attention should be given to the development of a plan for NTO's presentation in the digital world. Modern tourists are actively using social media in the process of choosing a destination, so they have become primary search engine.

According to the results of the analysis, the outcomes of social media activity are directly proportional to the number of arrivals and the number of overnight stays. On practically every platform analyzed, NTO Croatia holds the top position (except Twitter). Additionally, it has a top position in terms of foreign visitor traffic.



Compared to the other countries from the set of observed competitors, NTO of Slovenia is the leader when it comes to TikTok, despite not holding the leading position on other platforms. The Slovenian NTO has made a considerable advancement by providing its offer on that platform as well, especially given that it is a new one. Success in the modern tourist market necessitates constant adaptation to the wishes and needs of tourists as well as finding new ways to market products and services. Younger generations have become interested in TikTok as a modern platform. It reflects the potential for developing a conceptual image of the destination in the minds of the youngest tourists who have not yet begun spending their own money on travel when it comes to the tourism industry.

Social networks have become an important channel of communication. They are constantly evolving, giving both multiple challenges and chances to sell goods and services. Additionally, tourists actively use social media in all phases of their travel, which significantly affects service providers in the tourism and hospitality industry. Therefore, planning and adequate implementation of social media activities in business is one of the key factors in gaining a competitive advantage and creating a positive image of the tourist destination.

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