THE INFLUENCE MECHANISMS OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

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Abstract. The rapid development of the digital economy has fundamentally transformed the tourism industry by changing the ways consumers search for information, evaluate tourism products, make purchasing decisions, and share their travel experiences. Digital platforms and social media have become essential components of the tourism ecosystem, significantly influencing consumer behaviour through online booking systems, user-generated content, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), personalised recommendations, and interactive communication. This study aims to examine the theoretical mechanisms through which digital platforms and social media networks shape consumer behaviour in the tourism industry.

The research is based on a comprehensive review and synthesis of existing literature on digital tourism, consumer behaviour, social media marketing, and online decision-making. Comparative analysis, systematic analysis, descriptive analysis, and document analysis were employed to identify the principal factors influencing tourists' purchasing decisions within the digital environment. The findings indicate that digital platforms reduce information asymmetry, increase transparency, strengthen consumer trust through online reviews and ratings, and facilitate more informed tourism decisions. Social media further influences travel motivation, destination image formation, and purchasing intentions by enabling consumers to exchange authentic experiences through electronic word-of-mouth and visual content. The study also demonstrates that the integration of digital platforms and social media enhances the collection and analysis of consumer data, creating opportunities for personalised marketing, service optimisation, and evidence-based strategic decision-making in tourism. The findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of digital consumer behaviour and provide a scientific basis for future empirical research and the development of consumer-oriented digital strategies in the tourism industry.

Keywords. Digital platforms; social media; consumer behaviour; digital tourism; tourism marketing; electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM); online reviews; tourism decision-making; digital economy; tourism services.

In the context of the digital economy, the development of the tourism industry has significantly expanded the influence of digital platforms and social media networks, establishing them as key factors in shaping consumer behaviour. The traditional decision-making process, which relied on conventional information sources, has been replaced by a dynamic, interactive, multi-source digital information environment. Consequently, tourists' travel-related decisions are increasingly influenced by platform algorithms and social media content. This transformation underscores the necessity of a scientific examination of the interconnected mechanisms through which digital platforms and social media influence consumer behaviour within the tourism sector.

Digital platforms have centralised the processes of searching for, comparing and purchasing tourism services, thereby transforming the relationships between consumers and tourism service providers. Online booking systems, aggregators and digital marketplaces provide greater transparency of information, dynamic pricing mechanisms and personalised offers, all of which directly affect the speed at which consumers make decisions and their choice preferences. Furthermore, the rating systems, customer reviews and recommendation features available on these platforms foster trust among consumers and are important in influencing demand for tourism services.

social media networks represent an informal yet highly effective communication channel that influences consumer behaviour in the tourism industry. Personal experiences, visual content and information disseminated by bloggers and influencers play a key role in inspiring travel and influencing consumers' preferences and aspirations. In this context, social proof, perceived similarity, and social influence are important psychological mechanisms that affect consumers' travel-related decisions.

Integrating digital platforms and social media strengthens information flows within the tourism ecosystem, expanding opportunities for analysing and predicting consumer behaviour. Combining the large volumes of data generated by digital platforms with user activity on social media makes it possible to identify consumer preferences, purchasing patterns, and tourism behaviour scenarios more accurately. Consequently, this integration provides a valuable scientific and practical basis for strategic decision-making, service optimisation, and developing consumer-oriented, innovative solutions in digital tourism.

An analysis of the various definitions of digital platforms proposed by scholars and researchers demonstrates a broad consensus on the concept. Most authors define digital platforms as internet-based environments that allow users

to create, access and share information, opinions and experiences relating to products and services. Digital platforms are widely considered to be a new generation of online media, characterised by features such as participation, openness, communication, community and connectivity.

According to the Global Digital Statshot 2025 report, the global digital population continues to grow steadily. Worldwide, 5.76 billion people (70.0%) use mobile phones, 5.65 billion (68.7%) are active internet users and 5.41 billion (65.7%) actively use social media platforms. These figures highlight the growing importance of understanding consumer behaviour in the digital environment, particularly in establishing mutually beneficial relationships between tourism service providers and consumers.

Given the growing importance of social media within the tourism industry, this topic has become an increasingly relevant area of academic research. A literature review identified around 270 publications focusing on the use of digital platforms in tourism, with the first studies being published in 2007. Existing research has primarily examined the influence of digital platforms on tourism-related decision-making. This includes the impact of online reviews on potential tourists, motivations for using digital platforms and how digital platforms are applied by tourism enterprises, hospitality businesses and destination marketing organisations.

Digital platforms play a significant role in people's daily lives and social interactions, and have also become an integral component of modern tourism. Studies investigating digital platforms as tools for searching for and sharing information indicate that consumers increasingly prefer to share their travel experiences through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). This user-generated content is now one of the most influential sources of information affecting travel planning, destination selection, and purchasing decisions within the digital tourism environment.

In the business environment, digital platforms have emerged as electronic tools that not only transform traditional marketing and advertising processes, but also connect a wide range of stakeholders. In the tourism and hospitality industry, the most widely used platforms are TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Trivago, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter (X), Myspace and Flickr. Recent tourism studies have broadened our understanding of consumer behaviour by examining microblogging platforms (e.g. Twitter/X), consumer review and rating websites (e.g. TripAdvisor) and online discussion forums, many of which are highly relevant to tourism services.

Digital platforms significantly influence consumers' pre-travel purchasing decisions. While friends and relatives are often considered the most reliable sources of travel information, consumers generally trust online information based on three key factors: the quality of the information in the reviews, the credibility and quality of the platform on which the reviews are published, and the experiences of other customers. The impact of service ratings, information accuracy, details regarding value-added services, relevance and timeliness of published information on tourists' decision-making based on online reviews is substantial.

Before making travel decisions such as selecting a destination, airline or accommodation provider, tourists actively search for information. Compared with most other goods and services, tourism products require considerably more information because purchasing tourism services is perceived as being relatively risky. Travellers leave their familiar environment and visit destinations they have often never experienced before, so they make their decisions based primarily on descriptions, photographs, reviews, and recommendations. Furthermore, as tourism products cannot be tested or experienced prior to purchase, it is difficult for consumers to evaluate service quality and determine whether the price accurately reflects the expected value. In this context, the search for information plays a crucial role in reducing the uncertainty associated with tourism purchases, thereby contributing to improved tourist confidence, satisfaction and the overall quality of their travel experience.

Conclusion. The findings of this study demonstrate that digital platforms and social media have fundamentally transformed consumer behaviour within the tourism industry by reshaping the ways in which tourists search for information, evaluate alternatives, make purchasing decisions and share their travel experiences. The transition from traditional information sources to interactive digital environments has increased the importance of online booking platforms, user-generated content, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and social media communication in influencing tourism-related decision-making.

The theoretical analysis indicates that digital platforms function not only as technological infrastructures for delivering tourism services but also as interactive ecosystems that facilitate communication, trust-building and value co-creation between tourism businesses and consumers. Platform characteristics including information quality, transparency, personalised recommendations, customer reviews, ratings and secure digital transactions significantly influence consumer confidence and purchasing intentions. Likewise, social media platforms

contribute to destination image formation and travel motivation by enabling consumers to exchange authentic experiences through visual and interactive content.

The study further confirms that tourism products possess unique characteristics, including intangibility, high perceived risk and the impossibility of pre-purchase evaluation, making information search an essential stage of the consumer decision-making process. In this context, digital platforms effectively reduce uncertainty by providing reliable information, comparative evaluations and peer recommendations, thereby improving consumers' confidence and the overall quality of tourism decisions.

The rapid growth of global digital technologies and social media usage further highlights the strategic importance of understanding digital consumer behaviour in tourism. As consumers become increasingly dependent on digital information throughout the entire travel journey, tourism organisations must strengthen their digital marketing capabilities, improve customer engagement strategies and effectively manage user-generated content to remain competitive in the digital economy.

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