



## **Gender Differences in the Perception of Selected Aspects of Social Media as Part of Ecommerce Activities during a Pandemic**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Objective** - In the current time of pandemic crisis, social media is one of the most effective tools for ecommerce to keep in touch with customers. One of the most affected segments worldwide is undoubtedly the tourist segment. Our goal was to examine the perception of selected aspects of social media in the light of gender differences during a pandemic in the tourist segment, when these can convince or discourage the customer to buy.

**Methodology/Technique** - Data collection took place from the beginning of 2021 and lasted 3 months. It was an online questionnaire and focused on customers of travel agencies. A total of 723 valid responses were collected. These were analyzed for statistical significance of gender differences using SPSS software.

**Findings** – The results identified significant differences in perceptions between men and women in some of the areas examined. The best forms of content that work best on these platforms have been identified. Attitudes towards communication through social media for marketing purposes were also identified. These were perceived positively in order to support purchasing decisions. We also identified a great need for personalization in communication via social media in a given tourist segment.

**Novelty** - All findings show great implication potential for both theory and practice. The pandemic situation has changed market conditions and many of these changes will persist beyond. There is therefore a need to examine these contexts in the future. Managers in the tourism segment are able to incorporate the identified results into the way they manage their online activities and manage their social media.

**Type of Paper:** Empirical

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**Keywords:** Social Media; Ecommerce; Tourism; Pandemic; Differences; Analysis.

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### **1. Introduction**

Social media have a huge impact on the tourism segment. Consumers communicate with social networking sites when planning their trips, making shopping decisions and sharing their personal experiences with a specific travel agency, hotel, restaurant, or airline. These overlaps of social media and business has become much more noticeable during the pandemic. Social media allows businesses active in tourism to interact directly with customers and monitor their attitudes and service ratings. The onset of social media marketing has drastically changed the status quo in tourism as it offers insights into different parts of the world while inspiring people to travel.

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However, the onset of the pandemic changed what is perceived as suitable social media content and what is not. There has been a jump in the average time spent by customers on social media (Statista, 2021). The tourism segment has been affected by the pandemic the most. Due to WHO recommendations, the movement of people was limited, tourist attractions were closed and business activities in the tourism industry plummeted (UNWTO, 2021). Potential tourists were not able to visit destinations and tourist attractions around the world (Bae & Chang, 2021). The effects of proactive measures imposed by governments on this segment have negatively affected tourism worldwide. One of the few communication paths that has remained open to the tourist segment is social media. According to the (UNWTO, 2021), international tourism and its closely related industries suffered an estimated loss of \$ 2.4 trillion in 2020 due to the direct and indirect consequences of a sharp decline in the influx of international tourists. Thus, the aim of the paper is to bring a theoretical overview of the latest state of research in the field and to examine the perception of selected aspects of social media in the tourist segment during the pandemic from the point of view of gender differences.

## 2. Literature Review and State of Research

Social media marketing involves various disciplines. (Mirzaalian & Halpenny, 2019) stated that most studies on tourism used social media to examine the image and identity of the destination. Similar research was performed by (Költringer & Dickinger, 2015). (Miah et al., 2017) examined the use of social media analytics to predict the rate of visits. (Pantano et al., 2017) measured the performance and accuracy of analytical methods available on social media. The study by (Kelemen et al., 2019) also tackles the issue. Research into tourism involves numerous analytical methods of social media. However, these should not be limited to text forms, as clustering, spatial analysis, sentiment analysis (Mirzaalian & Halpenny, 2019) ; (Hunter & Taylor, 2020) as well as online reputation are also available (Stefko, R., & Pollak, 2018) ; (Liu & Bakici, 2019). (Mirzaalian & Halpenny, 2021) studied destination loyalty using the social media analysis in the environment of nature tourism. (Li et al., 2020) studied customer relationship and brand loyalty in the social media with regard to tourism by analyzing brand attachment and customer trust. (Berhanu & Raj, 2020) revealed that visitors perceive travel information sources on social networks positively. (Teles da Mota & Pickering, 2020) emphasize the importance of social media as an additional source of data to traditional monitoring of tourism traffic. The importance and demand of the public for personalized communication was identified by (Aheleroff et al., 2019). (Gregoriades et al., 2021) introduced an approach to machine learning that includes electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to support destination marketing campaigns with an emphasis on optimizing the critical aspect of content marketing campaigns. (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019) have developed a digital content marketing framework that addresses key consumer-based drivers and outcomes. The study by (Wang et al., 2019) have shown that content marketing activities has a positive effect on the generation of potential customers. The importance of an individual approach to male and female customers was pointed out by (So, 2021). According to them, men and women shop differently and do not analyze a product or service in the same way, and their motives for shopping can differ significantly. (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021) examined the direct effects of content and platform types on passive and active user behavior in interaction and evaluated the impact of content context on the link between each content type (rational, emotional and transactional content) and user engagement. (Scheinbaum et al., 2017) showed that visual type of content (image and video) used in a marketing message significantly increases interest in the product. (Annamalai et al., 2021) analyzed social media content strategies of sports clubs to support fan engagement. They found that content featuring images showed high potential in that regard.

## 3. Research Methodology and Research Sample

The paper studies how several aspects of social media issues in the tourism sector were perceived during the pandemic – the time in which the sector was most severely hit. The aim was clear: to examine the perception

of selected aspects of social media issues in the tourism sector with regard to gender differences. The three research hypotheses were proposed:

H1: There is a statistically significant difference in the perception of the importance of selected aspects of the communication of business entities active in tourism on social media between men and women.

H2: There is a statistically significant difference in the perception of the importance of content marketing employed by business entities active in tourism on social media between men and women.

H3: There is a statistically significant difference in the perception of the attractiveness of selected types of content published by business entities active in tourism on social media between men and women.

To obtain data, an online questionnaire was drawn up and sent out via several social platforms. Given the research goal, the online questionnaire aimed at customers of travel agencies and affiliated institutions. Data was collected during the first three months of 2021 (723 filled-in questionnaires). The responses were analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistic version 26. In order to analyze the significance of the differences, the Mann-Whitney U test at a significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$  was applied.

From the demographic point of view, 55.7% (N = 403) of respondents were men and 44.3% (N = 320) women. The respondents were divided into 4 age groups, namely respondents under the age of 25 (accounted for 27.1% (N = 196) of cases), respondents under 35 years of age (accounted for 35.6% (N = 257) of cases), respondents under 45 years of age (accounted for 23.9% (N = 173) of cases) and older than 45 years (accounted for 13.4% (N = 97) of cases). With regard to the popularity of social networks, Facebook was the most preferred choice for 83.8% of respondents (N = 606 cases), followed by YouTube with 76.8% (N = 555 cases), followed by Instagram - 73.2% (N = 529 cases), Pinterest - 17.3% (N = 125 cases), and LinkedIn with 11.9% (N = 86 cases). We do not present these cases cumulatively, as respondents were able to choose more than one network, not just the most preferred one. The questionnaire also inquired about frequency of use of the tourism product (holiday) in the horizon of the last 5 years. 11.6% (N = 84) of respondents used at least one such product, 57.3% (N = 414) of respondents used two such products, 26.7% (N = 193) of respondents used three products and four or more such products were identified by 4.4% (N = 32) of respondents. These data are also shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Research sample

Characteristics	Frequency (%)
Gender	
Male	403 (55.7%)
Female	320 (44.3%)
Age	
Up to 25 years of age	196 (27.1%)
Up to 35 years of age	257 (35.6%)
Up to 45 years of age	173 (23.9%)
Older than 45	97 (13.4%)
Preferred social networks	
Facebook	606 (83.8%)
Youtube	555 (76.8%)
Instagram	529 (73.2%)
Pinterest	125 (17.3%)
LinkedIn	86 (11.9%)
Use of tourism product (holiday)	
One	84 (11.6%)
Two	414 (57.3%)
Three	193 (26.7%)
Four and more	32 (4.4%)

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section discusses the main and most important findings of our research. These relate to the communication of the business entity active in tourism on social media platforms and specifics of such communication, the use of content marketing on these platforms and the attractiveness of individual types of content with reference to possible significant gender differences in attitudes to the issues in question. The results are also accompanied by a short comment on the current state of knowledge in the field.

### 4.1 Marketing communication via social media as a factor in purchasing decisions

When analyzing the use of social media platforms for the purpose of brand communication in the tourism segment, it was found that respondents perceived it is a very important aspect. In addition, we have observed a significant difference in attitudes to this issue between men

( $\bar{x} = 3.77$ ;  $\tilde{x} = 4.0$ ) and women ( $\bar{x} = 4.01$ ;  $\tilde{x} = 4.0$ ). Thus, it could be expected that the importance of communication through these channels is more important for women than for men. However, in the case of the specifics of such communication, such differences were confirmed in only one case. Although the factor of personalization of such communication was perceived as relatively important, no significant difference between men and women was demonstrated. However, we observed a significant difference in the credibility factor in such communication. Here, too, this factor was assessed as generally very important, with the highest rating of the analyzed factors ( $\bar{x} = 4.23$ ;  $\tilde{x} = 5.0$ ). In the case of women this rating was significantly higher ( $\bar{x} = 4.33$ ;  $\tilde{x} = 5.0$ ) than in men ( $\bar{x} = 4.10$ ;  $\tilde{x} = 4.0$ ). Thus, the hypothesis H1 about the existence of a significant difference in the perception of the importance of selected aspects of communication of the business entity active in tourism via social media between men and women will be accepted.

Table 2. Gender differences: Communication via social media and relevant features of such communication.

Variable	Overall		Men		Women		Mann-Whitney U	Z	A. Sig. (2-tailed)
	$\bar{x}$	$\tilde{x}$	$\bar{x}$	$\tilde{x}$	$\bar{x}$	$\tilde{x}$			
<b>Communication via SM channel</b>	3.90	4.0	3.77	4.0	4.01	4.0	57678.500	-2.557	<b>0.011</b>
Personalized communication	3.68	4.0	3.60	4.0	3.74	4.0	59941.500	-1.590	0.112
<b>Credibility of communication</b>	4.23	5.0	4.10	4.0	4.33	5.0	55478.5000	-3.554	<b>0.000</b>

(Used scale: 1 – Very unimportant; 2 – Not important; 3 – Cannot assess; 4 – Important; 5 – Very important)

Potential customers assessed the use of social media as communication channel by the business entities active in tourism as important. This finding is in line with several studies that link the two disciplines (Mirzaalian & Halpenny, 2021) ; Li et al., 2020). In our case, it was shown that women perceive this aspect to be more important than men do, which also supports the identified difference in patterns of behavior between men and women So (2021). This method of communication has proven to be credible in the (Berhanu & Raj, 2020). In combination with the importance of such communication studied hereunder, communication via social media seems to be a necessary part of marketing communication in the tourism segment. Information that a tourist subject communicates via social media can make a difference in purchasing decisions, as pointed out by (Teles da Mota & Pickering, 2020). In the case of women, moreover, it is noticeable that they also care about the credibility of communication. When the social media managers of business entities active in tourism

do not communicate with the public in a credible way, do not provide accurate information, if they take too much time to reply or do not reply at all, such approach can prove to be very detrimental to the business entity from a business point of view. Again, we refer to the different behavior of men and women according to Sat (2021). Based on this study, Sat claims that lax and irresponsible approach to communication via social media can cause a cascade of PR problems that will need to be addressed. Moreover, despite the insignificant difference in perceptions of personalization of communication between men and women, this aspect is also seen as a benefit. Managers should approach each query or communication thread individually and take into account the tone of the conversation. Personalized feedback has a higher chance of being assessed positively. The importance of personalization was also highlighted in the study by (Zanker et al., 2019) and (Aheleroff et al., 2019). Especially in the current pandemic, it is very important to maintain a high standard of communication via social media, as in many cases it is one of the few channels available to disseminate offers and information.

#### 4.2 Implementation of content marketing on social media to support the offer

Social media relies heavily on the content that is published there. Thus, the questions arise - is content marketing in the tourism segment perceived as important? and are there any gender differences in terms of this issue? In this respect, the use of content marketing on social media was perceived as important ( $\bar{x} = 3.64$ ;  $\tilde{x} = 4.0$ ), with a significant difference between men and women. It turned out that women evaluate this marketing strategy as more important ( $\bar{x} = 3.81$ ;  $\tilde{x} = 4.0$ ) than men ( $\bar{x} = 3.44$ ;  $\tilde{x} = 4.0$ ). Therefore, it could be stated that there is a significant gender difference in the perception of the importance of the use of content marketing by business entities active in tourism on social media. Thereby the hypothesis H2 is accepted.

Table 3. Gender differences: Content marketing.

Variable	Overall		Men		Women		Mann-Whitney U	Z	A. Sig. (2-tailed)
	$\bar{x}$	$\tilde{x}$	$\bar{x}$	$\tilde{x}$	$\bar{x}$	$\tilde{x}$			
<i>SM Content marketing</i>	3.64	4.0	3.44	4.0	3.81	4.0	54127.500	-3.841	<b>0.000</b>

(Used scale: 1 – Very unimportant; 2 – Not important; 3 – Cannot assess; 4 – Important; 5 – Very important)

The results indicating the importance of the implementation of content marketing also support the claims of (Gregoriades et al., 2021) on the importance of proper content management and messaging with regard to Cyprus as a tourist destination. Despite the fact that the difference between the perception of men and women was significant, both sexes expressed a positive attitude which could lead to their further involvement. In parallel, the study by (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019) presented a framework focusing on digital content marketing and its key consumer drivers and results. The importance identified can be extended to the findings of (Wang et al., 2019), who claim that employing content marketing activities has a positive effect on the generation of potential customers. The difference in the perception between men and women was also pointed out by so (2021) who claims that both respond differently to the way information is provided. Information studied in this research was provided through content. The implications are clear - the need to distinguish between men and women in creating a brand strategy on social media and adapt the content according to the gender specifics.

#### 4.3 Attractiveness of content published on social media platforms

By analyzing the types of content published on social media, we also identified several significant gender differences in attitudes toward attractiveness of content. Three types of content turned out to be perceived significantly different, namely “Images” were rated as very attractive by women ( $\bar{x} = 4.30$ ;  $\tilde{x} = 5.0$ ) and to the lesser extent by men ( $\bar{x} = 4.11$ ;  $\tilde{x} = 4.0$ ), “Gif” were more positively evaluated by women ( $\bar{x} = 3.30$ ;  $\tilde{x} = 4.0$ )

than by men ( $\bar{x} = 3.08$ ;  $\tilde{x} = 3.0$ ), “Links” were also more positively evaluated by women ( $\bar{x} = 2.90$ ;  $\tilde{x} = 3.0$ ) compared to men ( $\bar{x} = 2.71$ );  $\tilde{x} = 3.0$ ). We therefore state that there is a significant difference in the perception of selected types of content between men and women. Thus, we accept the hypothesis H3.

Table 4. Gender differences: Content Type.

Content type	Overall		Men		Women		Mann-Whitney U	Z	A. Sig. (2-tailed)
	$\bar{x}$	$\tilde{x}$	$\bar{x}$	$\tilde{x}$	$\bar{x}$	$\tilde{x}$			
<b>Images</b>	4.21	5.0	4.11	4.0	4.30	5.0	57604.000	-2.701	<b>0.007</b>
Videos	4.27	5.0	4.27	5.0	4.28	5.0	63676.000	-0.320	0.749
Posts	2.85	3.0	2.82	3.0	2.87	3.0	62525.000	-0.719	0.472
<b>Gif</b>	3.20	3.0	3.08	3.0	3.30	4.0	58542.000	-2.188	<b>0.029</b>
Audio	3.23	3.0	3.24	3.0	3.23	3.0	63706.500	-0.284	0.777
<b>Links</b>	2.82	3.0	2.71	3.0	2.90	3.0	58840.000	-2.072	<b>0.038</b>

(Used scale: 1 –Very unattractive; 2 – Unattractive; 3 – Cannot assess; 4 – Attractive; 5 – Very attractive)

Several studies have already pointed to differences between different types of content on social media (Zhang et al., 2019) ; (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). However, our results suggest that as the types of content themselves differ, in some cases the perceptions of content also differ between men and women. We will omit from the analysis those types which, despite a significant difference, were not assessed as very attractive. Images were rated as very attractive. This may also overlap in a more positive evaluation of tourism products, as evidenced by the findings of (Scheinbaum et al., 2017). The preference of visually dominant content is also supported by the study of (Bashirzadeh et al., 2021) and (Annamalai et al., 2021). Therefore, business entities should think before posting content online. Managers should adapt the content mix with regard to the identified perceived attractiveness of content types and take into account gender differences. Therefore, social media account managers in the tourism segment should focus on visual types of content and to invest human, financial and time capital in these activities.

## 5. Conclusion

The paper analyzed the attitudes and perceptions of respondents to the issue of social media in the tourism segment. By analyzing this issue, attitudes, gender differences and the existing state of research in the field, the aim was to examine the perception of selected aspects of social media in terms of gender differences in the segment of tourism during the pandemic. It was found that communication of business entities active in tourism via social media as well as differences in the perception of the communication credibility factor. The paper also pointed out the importance of content marketing on social media and the differences in the attractiveness of individual types of content. These findings might help managers in the tourism segment and social media managers in deciding on individual steps, strategies and communication via these platforms. As the pandemic is not over yet, the longer-term effects and paradigm shifts in social media marketing in the tourism segment are yet to be seen, and there is a need for future research in this area, in particular, the analysis of this issue by individual specific social media platforms. The limitations of our research include, in particular the current pandemic, as it is capable of changing the current situation very quickly, the limited research sample (one nationality of respondents (Slovaks) as their attitudes should be compared with other nationalities) and the general concept of social media (not taking into account specifics of individual platforms).

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