
Impact of Social Media on Tourism Traffic on the Example of the West Pomeranian Province

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Abstract:

Purpose: The aim of this article is to analyze the influence of social media on tourism in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship..

Sedigne/Methodology/Approche: When communicating the voivodeship on social media, it is important to bear in mind that the content posted there touches on different topics and reaches different audiences. The research hypothesis was defined as follows: Building the voivodeship's communication in social media by, among other things, analyzing what they are most interested in and following trends, creates an opportunity to interest tourists in different content. The following research methods were used in the study: content analysis of documents and materials, analysis of secondary research carried out by the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, own research - analysis of social media.

Findings: Without a proper social media strategy, but also without following trends, content and the popularity of individual media, it will not be possible to attract tourists. Only the synchronization of all these elements makes it possible to run social media attractively in the voivodeship.

Practical implications: The activities presented in the article can serve as a guideline for other provinces, but also for tourism operators.

Oryginal/value: The article has practical applications. The analysis of the results of the study can be used by other players in the tourism industry who treat social media as an important channel of communication with tourists.

Keywords: Social media, promotion of municipalities, tourism.

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1. Introduction

The rapid growth of social media in recent decades has revolutionized the way people communicate with each other, while also influencing the functioning of numerous industries, including tourism. Social media, for example Facebook, Instagram, TikTok or YouTube, have become key tools for promoting tourist destinations and influencing the decisions of potential tourists.

The West Pomeranian Voivodeship is the fifth largest region in Poland and is located in the heart of Europe, in north-western Poland. Western Pomerania is a diverse region that offers attractions for different groups of tourists. On the one hand, there are seaside resorts, on the other numerous lakes and rivers, which boast a rich infrastructure prepared for lovers of canoeing, windsurfing, water skiing or diving. Beautiful forests and hills create an ideal space for walkers. Cyclists will be pleased with the numerous and varied trails. West Pomeranian cities are characterized by a remarkable wealth of architectural, technical and military monuments. Tourists are also attracted by interesting sport and cultural events. (Western Pomerania - tourist attractions of the region)

As numerous studies have shown, modern tourists base their decisions largely on information and inspiration from the Internet. Photos of spectacular landscapes, travel accounts or recommendations from other users make specific destinations popular almost immediately.

Social media not only support the promotion of tourist destinations, but also influence the way they are perceived. Recommendations by influencers, promotional campaigns by local tourism organizations or content generated by users themselves create the image of a region and shape the expectations of potential visitors. This phenomenon has important consequences for the tourism industry of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, as it makes it possible to reach a wide audience without having to engage significant financial resources in traditional forms of advertising.

The aim of this article is to analyze the impact of social media on tourism in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship.

Addressing this topic is important from the perspective of tourism management at the local and regional level. The development of digital technologies and the growing popularity of social media present a challenge and an opportunity for those involved in promoting the region.

The results of the analysis may contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms of the influence of social media on tourism, which will consequently allow for a more effective use of these tools in the marketing strategies of the Western Pomerania Voivodeship.

2. Promoting Tourism on Social Media

Consumer behaviour in the market is constantly being studied by many researchers, but also by companies, which would like to know, on the one hand, what influences consumers to purchase their products/services, what they know about them, where and how they got their information. Decisions made by consumers who are considering a tourist trip relate to the direction of travel, communication, places to stay, places to eat, facilities to visit and various tourist attractions to enjoy.

Consumers use the Internet passively (reading other people's opinions), but also actively by participating in community forums, making personal contact with service providers and giving their own opinions. The development of technology allows the consumer to strengthen his/her position, he/she is beginning to be perceived as an intelligent and organized individual, who increasingly trusts his/her own opinion and that of fellow web users (Karpniski, 2005) The entire decision-making process, from awareness of the need, to the search for information, assessment of possibilities, purchase can take place through social media.

The modern tourism consumer is increasingly striving for personalized experiences, conscious and sustainable consumption and the use of modern technologies and resource sharing models. Analyzing the literature, it is possible to identify the most common emerging trends in consumption affecting the tourism consumer (Hendel, 2019):

- Dematerializations of consumption- the increasing importance of intangibles (e.g., knowledge, experiences) at the expense of material goods. Consumers in tourism focus on collecting experiences, which fits in with the postmodern model of consumption. Example: experience tourism, seeking social and spiritual benefits.
- The individualization of consumption - the transfer of consumption to the home, realized, among other things, through the construction of 'second homes', the purchase of yachts and independent travel planning. Promotes a balance between consumption and quality of life. Example: growing popularity of private tourist properties and individual trips.
- The virtualization of consumption - the dynamic development of information and communication technologies is influencing the tourism market, enabling virtual travel planning, booking and experiencing. Example: virtual tours, digital itinerary planning and e-tourism services.
- Homogenization and heterogenization of consumption. On the one hand, there is a trend towards homogenization of consumer behavior and tastes as a result of globalization and mass tourism, while on the other hand there is a trend towards diversification of consumption resulting from the need for individualization and the preservation of local identities. Example: mass tourism vs. the search for authentic local experiences.

- Greening of consumption- the formation of environmentally friendly attitudes in tourism, expressed in conscious and sustainable consumer behavior. Example: green travel choices, such as low-carbon travel, sustainable tourism.
- A model based on resource sharing (e.g., lending, exchange, barter) that is growing rapidly in the tourism sector. Case in point: platforms such as Airbnb and Uber are playing a key role in shaping a new consumption model.
- The servitization of consumption-the growing importance of the service sector in the economy, with a particular focus on tourism. Tourism services are becoming the dominant form of consumption. Example: development of tourist services personalized to customers' needs.

Social media is considered a major communication channel for sharing information, opinions, social networking opportunities, influencing decisions and business promotion. Social networks influence users' perceptions and choices regarding their activity planning. (Karatsoli and Nathanail, 2020) Identifying unique city attractions and ranking them, can be memorable signals or triggers of shared memorable experiences for tourists on social media.(Yu and Ko, 2021).

Social media is used in a way that shapes users' preferences for travel, entertainment and shopping, creating a need to participate in activities shared by their online friends or people they feel. Although social media allows for communication where physical presence is not necessary, reviews, photos and videos shared through them motivate other users to visit a place, attend an event or purchase a product (Esztergár-Kiss and Tettamanti, 2019) From tourists to travel and business organizations and tourism regulators, social media is a functional resource for connecting with and accessing information about travel trends and offers. (Jiang, Rao, Balaji, and Xu, 2020).

Increasing time spent on social media and interactions with friends and online observers have dramatically changed the way users view social relationships. Social media plays an important role not only in expanding social connections, but also in influencing users' decisions (Yamagishi, Saito, and Keda, 2016) The quality of social media information positively influences travel plans and self-preparation, and trust mediates the relationship between the quality of social media information and travel intention. In addition, the study found that tourists' prior knowledge negatively modifies the relationship between information quality and self-accessibility. The study investigated the mechanism of the influence of tourist-generated content quality on consumer travel intention, which benefits destination management and content marketing (Wang and Yan, 2022).

Karatsoli and Nathanail analyzed the results of studies relayed by researchers from around the world, from which the following conclusions are drawn (Karatsoli and Nathanail, 2020):

- Social media is a significant part of search results, indicating that search engines direct travelers to social media sites,
- Social media are an important source of information for travelers, most of whom trust their content. Survey results indicate that travelers' personalities influence perceived barriers to content creation and engagement with generated content,
- Among those with access to the Internet who frequently go on vacation, mostly young people plan their trips using social media. Millennials are more likely to use smartphones to plan trips, and see an increase in travel performance due to smartphone use.
- Users' trust in social media content is strongly linked to who shares it, and they are willing to share that information with others if it comes from an account they trust.

Other researchers conducted a study linking the extant literature on tourism, social media and economic prosperity. The results suggest that governments and policymakers can increase the economic well-being of destination countries through tourism development; social media, on the other hand, can also promote economic well-being. In order to make significant progress in increasing economic prosperity in these countries, concerted efforts are needed to develop the tourism sector.

Destination countries should prioritize tourism in their domestic policies and carefully choose social media-based approaches that promote tourism expansion and thus economic prosperity. An increase in the number of tourists visiting destinations bolstered by social media will positively affect workers' wages, employment in tourism centers, education of relevant stakeholders and reduction of income inequality (Adeola, Evans, Okafor, 2023).

3. Analysis of Tourist Traffic in the West Pomeranian Province with Consideration of the Influence of Social Media Activity: Research Results 2023

The West Pomeranian Voivodeship commissions a study of tourist traffic in its area every few years. In 2024, a study of tourist traffic in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship was commissioned for 2023, based on historical data, of the BIG DATA type on a sample of min. 3.8 million people and determining the number of participants in domestic and foreign tourist traffic in each month of the year in the region, broken down by counties and subregions defined by municipalities.

Tourists were to be divided according to their travel profile (tourists - people spending at least one night outside the county of their permanent residence; visitors - people traveling outside the county of their permanent residence without using accommodation), place of residence of the tourist, length of stay, frequency of travel to the region, gender, age, travel style, method of reaching the region. In addition, the survey was to include the determination of a ranking of the most frequently

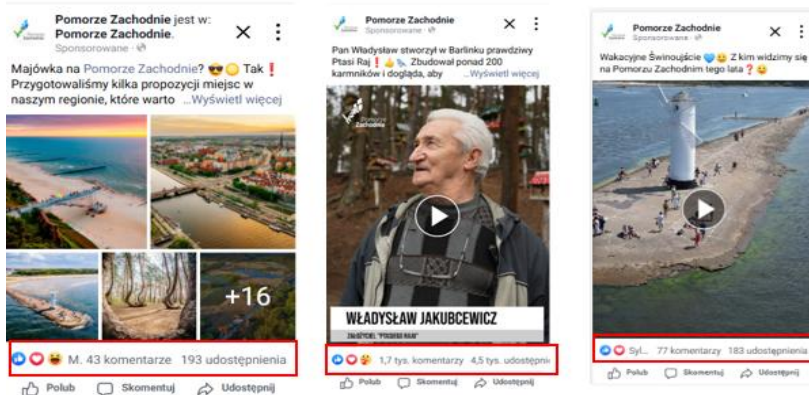
visited tourist attractions and destinations, an analysis of the travel paths of visitors to the region, an analysis of the travel paths of cyclists visiting specific places at specific times, a full survey of tourist traffic on a designated canoe trail, and a survey of participants in selected events. (Tourist Traffic Survey)

The analysis of tourist traffic in the West Pomeranian Voivodeship in 2023, in the context of the region's promotion strategy, reveals several key findings that point to the direct impact of social media activity on the increase in the number of tourists, as well as changes in the structure of tourist preferences.

In 2023, the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, using social media, especially the PomZachodnie Facebook profile, implemented an effective campaign to promote the region as an attractive tourist destination. Thanks to the voivodeship's prepared social media strategy, which emphasized regularity of posts, photos, videos and live reports of various events, tourism in the region became more visible, which had a direct impact on increasing the number of visitors (in 2022 the West Pomeranian Voivodeship was visited by 9165813 people 18+, and in 2023 by 9647396 people 18+; while as for all visitors, including minors, in 2022 - 10394319 and in 2023 - 11074717).

As an example, the “West Pomeranian Summer” social media campaign, which showcased both traditional tourist attractions such as the beaches of Kołobrzeg and Świnoujście, as well as lesser-known but equally attractive destinations such as Wolin Island, attracted the attention of tourists seeking quieter destinations outside the main season. Posts promoting hiking in Wolin National Park and biking trails in West Pomerania reached new audiences, especially active tourists, which translated into an increase in the number of visitors to the region. Figure 1 shows graphics of sample posts posted on West Pomerania's profile to showcase the charms of the province, where noteworthy are the interactions obtained under each post.

Figure 1. Sample posts placed on Facebook

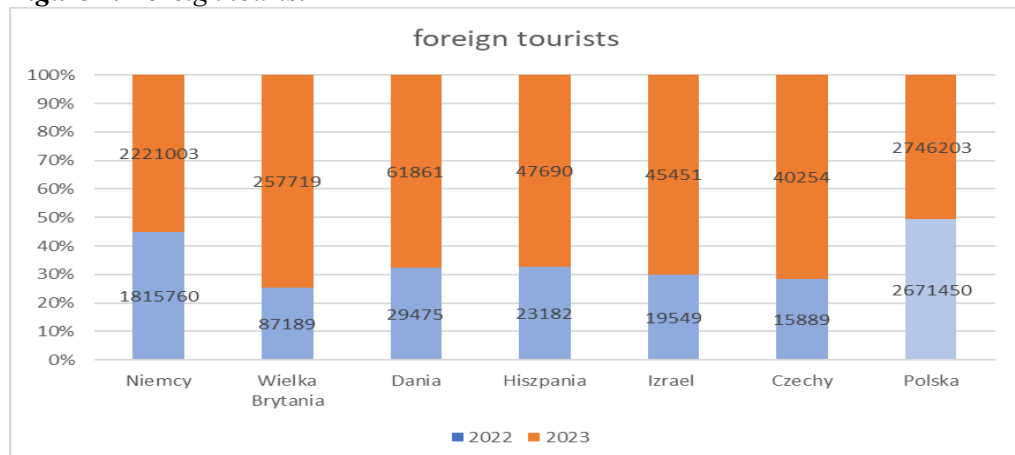


Source: Own Study

The West Pomeranian region has seen an increase in the number of foreign tourists, primarily from Germany, Scandinavia, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands (Figure 2 shows this in detail). The use of social media has made it possible to reach these groups, which is particularly important in the context of the post-pandemic increase in interest in international tourism.

Activities promoting seaside and health tourism, such as those offered at Kolobrzeg's spas, were regularly featured on Facebook with a focus on international audiences. Posts translated into German and English attracted the attention of foreign tourists seeking health and rehabilitation services in the region. In addition, videos promoting spa treatments or the organization of specialized tours were particularly popular among users from Germany, which boosted the number of tourists from that country.

Figure 2. Foreign tourist



Source: Own Study based on Tourism Traffic Survey

Sustainable, active and health tourism have become dominant trends. Hiking, biking, water and eco-tourism are gaining in importance, reflecting the growing environmental awareness of tourists, so promoting such forms of tourism has become one of the region's main goals in social media activities. A campaign promoting West Pomerania as a “green destination” on Facebook showed the region from the perspective of active tourism - hiking along nature trails, biking trips along the Baltic Sea, and water sports attractions such as kitesurfing near Dziwnów. Promoting “clean” attractions that not only support tourism, but also care for the environment, has attracted the attention of both domestic and foreign tourists, especially from groups with a higher environmental awareness.

One of the main challenges facing tourism in the West Pomeranian region is the high seasonality of tourism. The analysis shows that the region has successfully tried to change this trend by promoting tourism outside the summer season, including,

winter and early spring. Examples include Facebook posts that promoted the “Winter Magic Side of West Pomerania,” which included information about cultural events, festivals, Christmas markets, as well as winter natural attractions. Such initiatives, such as the organization of winter walks in the national park, music festivals in Szczecin and fairs in Swinoujście, have gained popularity among tourists looking for alternative forms of spending time in the off-season.

Social media not only allow to reach a wide audience, but also involve tourists themselves in the promotion of the region. Thanks to interactive elements - such as contests, surveys, invitations to share photos or opinions (the PomZachodnie profile) has become a platform that allows tourists to actively participate in promoting the region. The voivodeship implemented the “Zachodniopomorskie on Instagram” campaign, encouraging tourists to share their photos of their stay in the region, using the hashtag #PomZachodnie. Contests were held for the best photo from various places in the region, which increased interaction with users and encouraged further promotion of the province's tourist assets. Such activities not only result in greater visibility for the region, but also create the impression that the tourist has an impact on the promotion of their trip, which further increases engagement and loyalty to the region.

In response to growing tourist traffic, the West Pomeranian region has invested in the development of tourism infrastructure, particularly in the context of developing bicycle routes, improving the quality of accommodation services and facilitating public transportation. Social media, especially Facebook, acted as a tool to inform tourists about new facilities, which had a direct impact on the quality of their tourist experience. The implemented campaign to inform tourists about new bicycle routes in the region, which was promoted through Facebook posts, not only attracted new bicycle tourists, but also helped raise the standard of tourism in the region. From the information provided via social media, tourists learned about the new transport links and environmentally friendly means of transportation, which attracted those looking for more sustainable forms of travel.

4. Conclusions

Social media plays a key role in shaping tourism, influencing consumer behavior, enhancing marketing strategies and contributing to economic prosperity. They act as a powerful tool to promote destinations, create expectations and build brand awareness, which ultimately drives tourist arrivals and economic growth.

Numerous studies suggest that there is a significant link between social media and tourism, as social media influences travel decision-making, increases destination brand awareness and promotes tourist arrivals through improved information sharing and marketing strategies. Social media has changed the tourism industry by influencing consumer behavior, improving marketing strategies.

Social media plays a key role in influencing travelers' decisions, and trust in it is a mediating factor throughout the customer journey. Social media influences various stages of travel decision-making, including creating desires, searching for information, evaluating options, purchasing decisions and sharing post-trip impressions. Photos and videos serve as powerful tools to inspire travel plans, as visuals attract travelers more effectively than reviews and textual content. Content such as photos, videos, reviews and ratings shared by users significantly influence travel decisions, especially during the planning phase. Social media acts as a needs generator, support, guide and validator for six elements of travel: destination, transportation, lodging, food, attractions and shopping.

Social media platforms, especially Facebook, have a positive relationship with tourist arrivals as they change travel research, increase social sharing and improve customer service. Social media influencers significantly influence travel decision-making, suggesting the need for partnerships between influencers and destination marketing organizations. Social media sharing increases destination brand awareness and influences perceptions of service and natural quality.

Conclusions from the analysis of tourism in the West Pomeranian region in 2023 confirm the importance of social media activity in building regional recognition, attracting new tourists and developing sustainable and active tourism. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have played a key role in effectively promoting the region, engaging tourists and adapting the offer to changing expectations. As a result, the West Pomeranian region has increased its tourist attractiveness, which translates into an increase in the number of tourists and their involvement in promoting the region.

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