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**Article**

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**SOCIAL MEDIA ADVERTISING TRENDS IN TOURISM**

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**Abstract**

Advertising in our days is moving to the social media since consumers are spending more and more time on such platforms that offer very customized information for each user. Facebook, for example, is trying to bring each person the most meaningful content, which means the advertising is ultra-customized based on the user activity and preferences, but this kind of personalisation can easily have an unpleasant side effect.

The advertising for touristic destinations can become very complex by using fine-tuned campaigns triggered by user consumption patterns revealed in the digital world.

By adding a button like “buy now”, the social media apps can easily integrate important e-commerce features, so the advertising of today is not only about presenting the content but also about instantly buying products and services.

This paper highlights the way in which advertising messages emerging social media can quickly have a greatly improved success rate.

Research methodology took as its starting point the findings of scientific studies published in the literature, the obtained results being interpreted from the perspective of the authors' personal considerations on the topic of the paper.

The conclusions highlight the main trends related to increasing the success rate of advertisements in tourism by using social media and by choosing the most appropriate platforms, advertising methods and buying tools such as augmented and/or virtual reality that allow to experiment in advance a travel package, placing of advertising messages on the platforms with the greatest impact and including the direct purchase options inside the add, so that viewing the message can be immediately followed by the acquisition of the promoted services.

**Keywords:** social media, tourism services, advertising, online reputation, intrinsic and extrinsic influence factors.

**JEL Classification:** D12, D22, M10, M30.

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## **Introduction**

Like any media product, even if it is in the online environment, information, the message that is transmitted through the social media is addressed to an audience. The advantage of the social media is that the audience is alive, responding immediately to the message, so business organizations can more quickly adapt their message to its requirements. At the same time, data on consumer behaviour, needs and habits are more relevant and easier to obtain (Safko, 2012).

For organizations and for the success of their promotional actions, the audience to be addressed needs to be well targeted. The audience may be internal (own employees and shareholders) or external (consumers, investors, customers, distributors, suppliers). (Kitchen and Schultz, 2001)

In the same time, social networks are considered collaborative platforms in which users exchange information, impressions, knowledge and create virtual communities. (Archer-Brown, 2014) For this reason, there is a high potential for obtaining competitive and tactical advantages, both by educating consumers by offering relevant information about existing tourist attractions in a given geographical area, and by promoting your own offers.

Online platforms, such as social networks, blogs, video, audio, or knowledge sharing platforms, are considered as marketing tools because they offer both the possibility to promote products and services and also to obtain precious information about the needs and behaviour of consumers. However, once consumers have been aware of this, the efficiency of these channels has declined in terms of marketing potential, the purpose and effect of the information sent to them is not as strong as a few years ago. (Netimperative, 2018; Sutton, 2018)

The use of communication channels provided by social media platforms is not just a marketing decision. (Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011) Although the cost of using the online environment to promote products or services is lower, if the message does not reach its goal, or if the target audience does not primarily use the online environment, then the effect is not the one expected, and the time and money losses can be significant.

### **1. Modalities to promote services**

A consumer classification based on purchasing behavior may be the following (Balbi, 2017):

- Susceptible, those who are not thinking about buying but could do it;
- Prospectors, those who think they should buy;
- Those who buy for the first time;
- Those who have bought;
- Those who never buy.

How the consumers behave depends on certain values and perceptions of them, on the basis of which they buy or not. All of these will ultimately lead to their attitude toward purchasing habits. Values depend on the level of education, the culture they come from, the

environment in which they live, but perceptions can be both subjective and objective, and depend on previous experience, a particularity of the subject, or previous experiences. (Kelsey, 2010)

In the decision-making process of purchasing tourist services (visiting tourist attractions, accommodation, etc.) perceptions are those that can be influenced by the experiences of other people. These are found in online reviews, friend's advice, advertisements they have been exposed to or information from other media, all of which can tilt the balance in favour of or against the purchase of a product or service.

The social media provides to the tour operators a multitude of tools through which they can influence consumer perceptions, tools that are easy to use, have low costs but can at the same time, if not properly used to negatively affect consumers.

Those who need to be convinced to buy this kind of services those who are looking for information about a certain type of tourist product, but are not determined where to buy and what brand they are, and those who buy for the first time.

Allies of organizations are those who have bought, and who can give details of what they have bought. They can be attracted by the organization in the hard core, those who can defend the organization, intervene when negative remarks or denigration campaigns appear. Also, those who just do the tricks and search for new products or services to purchase can be attracted to this group. Although they have not yet acquired, through their information, they can positively influence the image of the organization.

In order to determine consumers' perceptions, their values and the way they relate to them, some of the most effective tools are those provided by the social media. Also, blogs, discussion forums, and especially social networks, have become more effective than other marketing methods to promote the organization's work. In the business activity of an organization, social media involves communicating with consumers, collaborating within the organization and with customers, educating consumers and employees, and providing apps and information in the form of entertainment (Safko, 2012).

Depending on the audience addressing the form, the content and the environment through which the messages are transmitted differ quite a bit. For example, for the internal environment, organization policies, memos with meeting invitations, training sessions, etc. are generally reported, which are generally not of interest to the public. Instead, if a change is announced in the organization's leadership, the launch of a new product or the annual balance sheet, they are information that interests the general public, and then they will be transmitted to the external environment. Of course, such information is important, and also influences the internal environment of the organization, but it is public information, so it is intended for the external environment.

Regardless of the environment in which the audience originates, it has certain features that can help to structure and conceive the message, can influence the success or failure of correctly receiving the information transmitted, and at the same time the characteristics of the audience can help determine the tools and platforms through which the message is transmitted.

In order to identify the audience correctly, to segment it according to their interest in the tourist offer we are proposing, it is good to look at the following issues (Safko, 2012):

- Behaviour demonstrated, presented, determined, verified, noticed;
- Self-declared behaviour;
- Attitudes, values, perceptions;
- Needs and preferences;
- Demographics data;
- Social, professional and organizational affiliation;
- Inclusion in the category of promoters of the organization or those who can influence the audience;
- Establishing behavioural prototypes.

Through social media, consumer behaviour can be identified by tracking consumer habits in the online environment, through the way they make their decision to purchase travel services immediately or after lengthy searches, or through the frequency of search for products and services.

The online environment offers a very good analysis of purchasing habits, how often a particular destination or accommodation unit has been searched for, whether they have read or not read impressions and reviews about them. Companies can have a more accurate picture of these features if users create an account on the organization's website or on the platform that provides tourist services. This makes it possible to make a very accurate profile of those who visiting the web page, whether it is on a site, blog or Facebook page.

Organizations can have a more accurate picture of these features, and users are asked to create an account on their organization's website, so they can get a very accurate profile of those who visit that website, whether it's the site, the blog or for example, the organization's Facebook page.

Any message, in any form - a picture, video, - transmitted by a member of a virtual community is part of a communication process. If the message involves a brand or the activity of a business organization, whether it comes from the organization or comes from consumers, it can have an effect on the activity of that organization, whether positive or negative.

Although in the literature, social media is defined as a communication tool or channel through which content is generated through user-friendliness (Laine and Frahwirth, 2010), in media business environment the social is considered more as an environment in which users spend their free time, make pleasant things than as an environment in which users can retrieve useful information on which to inform and make the purchase decision. Awareness of this aspect, that the online environment is a valuable and easy source of information, has not yet matured in Romanian society. The number of people who report online is significant. According to a Daedalus study in 2013, showed that "66% of Romanians are planning their holidays looking for sites, blogs, forums or Facebook" (Evensys, 2013), which shows that the potential offered by the online environment can be used with success in this industry.

Social media is viewed by users as an environment in which they socialize, allowing them to view movies, images, or play games in collaboration with other members of the community they are part of. Although at first glance these activities seem to not facilitate the development of businesses or can help to increase attractiveness among consumers, either of which allows the development of new business models or the extraction of useful information to improve the service offered. Through these platforms and tools, businesses can get to the public more easily, can better emphasize the qualities and facilities they offer, thus increasing their awareness. Thus, through apps and content offered to the public, business organizations can easily educate consumers or attract them to the tourist products and services offered.

## **2. Research methodology**

In economic terms, rational consumer choice is based on the anticipation of benefits to be obtained by fulfilling a need. When discussing about tourism being promoted through social media, the advertising campaigns are crucial in influencing the consumer's decision for choosing a particular destination, simply because it is not about products but services, they cannot be tested in advance, so the choice is solely based on the symbolic expectations illustrated through advertisements that have to be very effective since most ads actually go unnoticed by the users (Nikjoo and Ketabi, 2015).

The main objectives of the research are related to highlighting the most successful ways to promote tourism through the social media, as following:

- Individualization of the main factors influencing the decision to go on holiday;
- Understanding the mechanisms determining the travellers to choose the desired destination over the other possible places to go;
- Recognizing the important role that advertising plays in this complex mechanism of decision-making by tourists;
- Choosing the most suitable social platforms for successful tourism advertising;
- Identify how to increase the effectiveness of advertising campaigns by influencing as many potential tourists as possible.

The research methodology is mainly based on the results of studies in the field of tourism advertising, in conjunction with the authors' own findings. So, starting with papers covering the more general domain of tourism advertising, we have identified the most influential directions and factors related to the online tourism, and based on these we have outlined the main current trends in online tourism advertising.

## **3. The potential target audience of the tourism industry's advertising campaigns - the most successful social networks in terms of visitors**

Facebook just announced 2.01 billion monthly active users as of June 27, 2017. The official message states that “As of this morning, the Facebook community is now officially

2 billion people! We're making progress connecting the world, and now let's bring the world closer together.” (Zuckerberg, 2017)

Also taking into consideration Instagram (owned by Facebook, as well, since 2012), Facebook has a greater number of monthly visitors than all the other social networks together, as illustrated in figure no. 1. (Kallas, 2018) The next position is occupied by YouTube having less than half of the Facebook visitors.

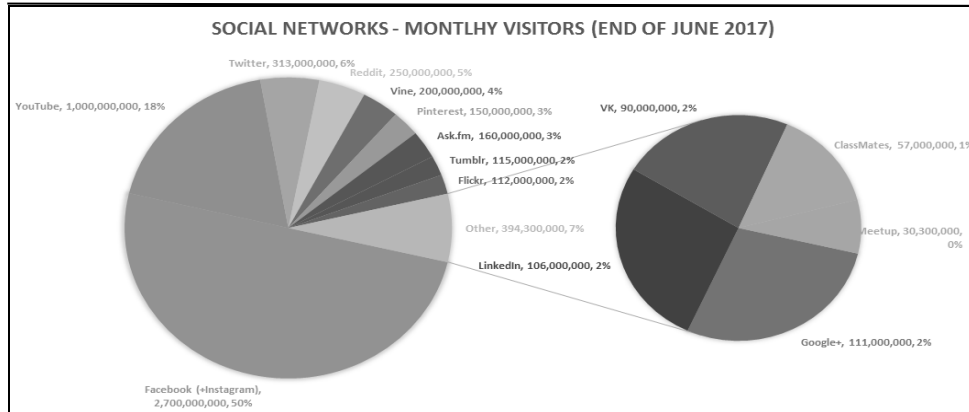


Figure no. 1: Top social networking platforms

Source: Kallas, 2018

Messaging apps are another important source of information, the popularity being bigger day by day, as presented in figure no. 2. (Kallas, 2018) The Facebook domination is clear while Google is not having any product in the list. An important competitor for Facebook is the Chinese company Tencent that owns almost 40% of active monthly users by the 3 main applications – WeChat, QQ and Q Zone. Tencent applications are very popular in China where Facebook messenger apps are rarely used.

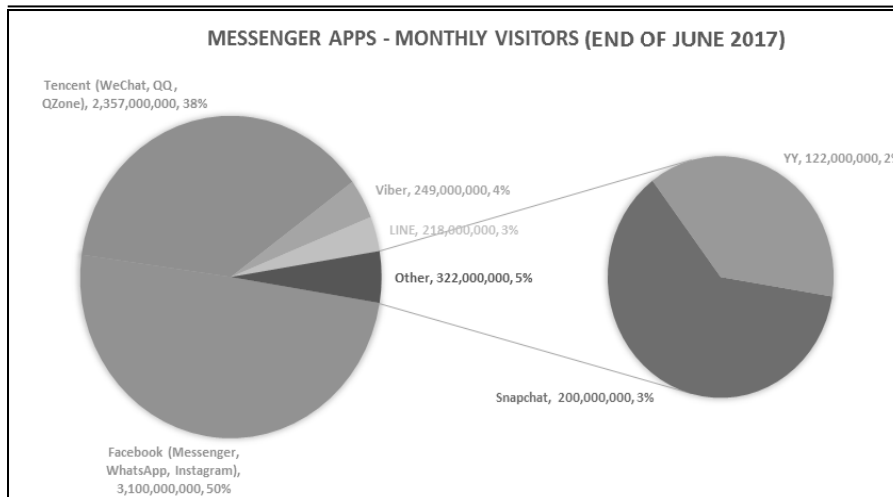


Figure no. 2: Top social network messenger apps

Source: Kallas, 2018

The main benefits of social media advertising are related to the costs, anyone can create an account for free and start posting about any points of interest so in some cases the audience can be targeted with minimum investments. Being viral, the social networks can rapidly spread the information to a large number of people by simply sharing the original content.

Most of the marketers are participating to the social media and the results can be clearly and quickly noticed by the revenue increase contributing to the overall business improvement.

Messaging apps are very popular for young people using smartphones. Facebook, for example, is already advertising through the messenger.

#### **4. Social media impact on tourism**

Travel industry is a huge market of multi-billion dollars involving several components like traveling, tours, activities, adventures, new experiences away from home and business tourists.

Today, social media has a significant impact over the tourism industry, most of the time the user generated content is most of the time more important than any official information, so it's crucial for any company to develop a solid and effective social media strategy (Nikjoo and Ketabi, 2015).

Social media fast development is generating a huge and growing pool of potential customers, so now the tourism offers are not anymore locally targeted but globally. Hashtags and geo-location details can be easily used for meta-data searches, so now, by the use of social media, the touristic destinations are now even easier to be discovered than before by anyone (Prayag and Ryan, 2011).

By simply clicking on a picture from Bali, the social app can suggest destinations, hotels and related services to the user. Similarly, the campaign may work in the opposite way, by viewing holiday pictures from Greece the social media app will show some destinations from other countries, like Turkey.

Social media marketing is a more powerful tool than the classical one, the real-time and two-way communication between the customers and consumers helps to establish a lasting long-term collaboration.

Influencer marketing, based on a combination of individual reputation, popularity and expertise, is a very effective way to promote touristic destinations to a world-wide audience so the social media platforms are now a launching ramp for sharing great individual experiences. Also, thanks to social media platforms and their very easy access, just about anyone can become not necessarily a celebrity but at least an influencer.

Customers often use social media to find destinations and related services and to share their individual experiences to others in a totally authentic and credible way. This is why we can say the social media is actually dominating the tourism industry because the user generated content is most of the time more important than any official information. Reviews are a very powerful weapon, bad ratings may severe damage small businesses.



Mobile compatible apps and sites are a must in our days since the mobile devices are now seen as an extension of an individual. If these applications are already able to integrate with the most popular messaging apps, we can say they are ready for tomorrow.

Social media platforms for tourism are characterized by a high degree of interactivity, users being welcome to share experiences, photos, comments and discussions by using mobile devices most of the time. eMarketer (2016) considers the ad spending in social network will be around 20% of all digital ad spending worldwide.

In our days, social media is one of the strongest decision influencers in hotel booking, so the hoteliers need to take all the possible advantages by using pages especially customized and optimized for social media.

Paid social media ads can be used to target audience by using options like ad format, user interests, geography or demographics. Next, *Facebook Audience Insights* tool can be used to generate more relevant content.

*Facebook Dynamic Ads for Travel* is a relative new ad product dedicated to tourism involving direct and personalized advertisements at lower costs per booking. According to Facebook, "Whether someone has browsed hotels, but didn't book, or bought a flight, but didn't make a hotel reservation, Facebook dynamic adverts for travel let you target that person with relevant adverts based on the specific dates, destination and other details about the trip." (Facebook Business, 2018)

Most social media platforms implement native analytics that make possible social media tracking of efforts and optimization of results.

Being a 100% visual product, Instagram is a perfect choice for hotels by posting different pictures about the property, facilities, food and so on. Because Instagram is also using Facebook's Ad Manager, Instagram and Facebook campaigns can be easily aligned.

Social media is not only about Facebook, but its great market penetration makes Facebook the most attractive platform for touristic advertising since it can accommodate presentation pages, pictures, messaging and collaboration. Pictures and movie clips posted by other people are influencing a lot the decision of booking for hotel or related services.

The brochures that once were the main tourism drivers are now almost completely replaced by Instagram snaps from around the world. There are images (and videos) coming from multiple sources (like regular users, influencers and travel brands) and working together in the benefit of tourism powered by social media specific tools.

An interesting trend of our days is the online video approach and its huge storytelling potential that makes the social media users to wish to enjoy powerful experiences like the ones expressed by the video content presenting genuine local feel. (Peltier, 2017)

Facebook Live seems to be the best way by far to make people react to video content and to reach wider audiences with small additional costs.

LinkedIn is having strong capabilities to target the audience by using tools like in Mail, Sponsored Posts or Banners.

Twitter is offering the concept of sponsored posts that appear first. Also, targeting the competition followers is a great Twitter feature successfully useful in tourism.

From a user's perspective, the online reputation is an important aspect when choosing touristic destinations and services, most of the tourists making bookings only after reading online reviews. Summarized reviews are the best because they are time efficient.

In this context, building a strong online identity is crucial. Users are demanding for online booking systems optimized for mobile devices since a lot of tourists are doing reservations in the day they arrive by the help of the mobile phone.

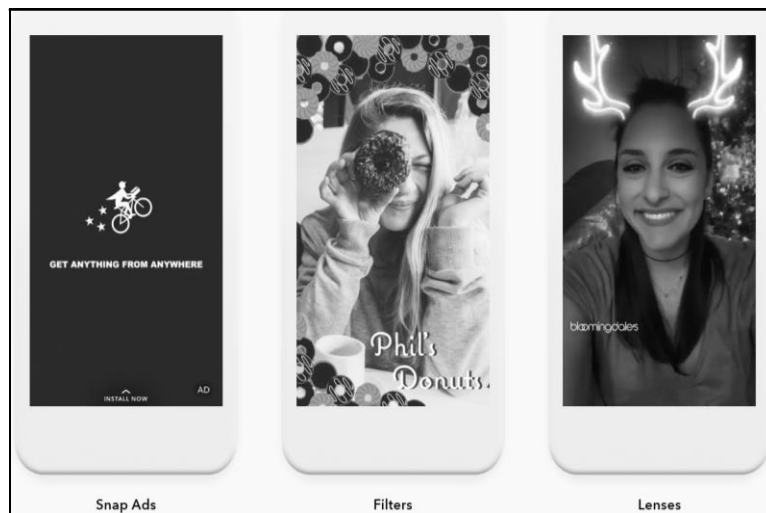
This is why the online reputation management is considered to be a very important aspect for tourism industry, people not only share personal experiences but also wait for quick feedback, so a dedicated online engagement is required.

Today, social media is by far the number one reputation management channel. Social media is also a big forum where users can share their personal experiences by posting comments and reviews that may influence other customers' decision but also may improve quality of the services provided.

**5. Trends for social media tourism advertising**

Augmented reality and social media are already working together for a better user experience. A lot of touristic brands already experienced Snapchat advertising.

Snapchat is offering a wide range of choices for brand advertising (figure no. 3), from Snap Ads (vertical video ads with sound that may include attachments) to Filters (sponsor created geo-filters added over the photos indicating user's location – also called coined snaps) and finally to Lenses that are able to generate a massive scale impact over the community by being interactive (SnapChat, 2017).



**Figure no. 3: Snapchat choices for brand advertising**

*Source: SnapChat, 2017*

For any touristic brand targeting millennials, the presence on the Snapchat is a must even if it is very complicated to discuss about true user engagement, as we can see on the other

social media platforms, simply because the users do not have the possibility to like, comment or share the continuous ephemeral stream of content. On the other hand, we have to underline the Snapchat advertising is quite expensive and the content is temporary.

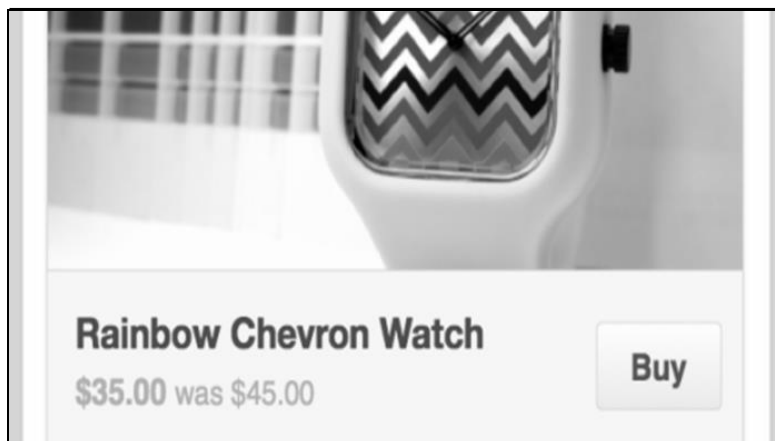
In the near future it is considered also the Bitmojis (SnapChat, 2017) will be a choice for brand advertising with Snapchat.

An interesting trend is represented by virtual reality, Facebook is already having its own integrated platform called Spaces – a virtual reality space for meeting and interaction between Facebook users that can be a booster for touristic experiences even if the cost could be a significant barrier.

Social media buy buttons are the latest trend in mobile commerce and marketing adding a checkout experience in any social platform. Even Facebook, the most popular social network, implemented such a button, so the customers can book or buy additional services directly from the Facebook pages.

The buy button is a very convenient option for users since they can acquire touristic packages with a single click (one-stop shopping) without the need to leave the social platform for an external website or application. Also, the retailers can easily get a global audience by simply promoting their services on social media platforms.

While Facebook implemented the buy button to appear for sponsored posts (as illustrated in figure no. 4), Google added such a button not only for sponsored search results on mobile devices but also to the YouTube's shoppable ads.



**Figure no. 4: Facebook's buy button**

*Source: Facebook Business, 2017*

By using these buttons, booking for a hotel or for some additional services becomes very easy and convenient, without the need to leave the social media platform to go to the external resources, like the hotel website.

## 6. Research results

Related studies, such as (Nikjoo and Ketabi, 2015), identify two broad categories of factors that can largely explain consumer choices in tourism: intrinsic and extrinsic factors, as described below.

- *Individualization of the main factors influencing the decision to go on holiday.*

The motivation to go on holiday to destinations that respond to inner, emotional needs (Prayag and Ryan, 2011) is mainly influenced by intrinsic factors such as relaxation, environmental change and escape from everyday routine, self-rediscovery, behavioural liberty, the feeling of freedom, the interaction with new people, etc.

- *Understanding the mechanisms determining the travellers to choose the desired destination over the other possible places to go.*

Extrinsic factors are influencing the choice of destination, such as (Kozak, 2002) cost, landscape, sun, weather, climate, accommodation options, beaches, architecture, events, attractions and local experiences (cultural, natural, historical, urban, architectural and gastronomic), possibilities for relaxation and leisure.

Augmented and virtual reality now allow the tourists to experience and evaluate the possible destinations so choosing one of them can be done in a fully aware fashion.

- *Recognizing the important role that advertising plays in this complex mechanism of decision-making by tourists.*

As we can easily notice on the Internet and social media platforms, when holiday destinations are suggested, most of the ads mainly highlight extrinsic features (nice pictures that send a strong message).

Intrinsic dimension is often transmitted through the text accompanying the images, but this text is not as easy to notice as a visual element.

So, by combining both categories of influence factors. we can reach an increased efficiency of the advertising message by emphasizing the inner needs that are often neglected in making a decision.

- *Choosing the most suitable social platforms for successful tourism advertising.*

Given that Facebook (including Instagram) has a bigger number of users than all other platforms taken together, launching an ad campaign here can generate the highest number of views as online advertising costs are relatively small compared to the classic media channels. Since a single platform is used, the costs and efforts to launch and manage the campaign are situated at a minimum level.

- *Identify how to increase the effectiveness of advertising campaigns by influencing as many potential tourists as possible.*

By adding a "Buy Now" button to the advertising message, the acquisition stage for those services becomes very affordable since there is no need to leave the social media platform to complete the transaction.

## Conclusions

Intrinsic factors are the ones that determine the decision to travel, while the choice of destination is predominantly influenced by extrinsic factors, so advertising campaigns that combine factors in both categories have the greatest chances to influence the social media user's decision to buy the touristic packages.

The main trends highlighted by the present research are:

- Augmented reality allows the potential tourist to "verify" in advance the potential holiday destinations and to choose those places that best meet the intrinsic and extrinsic expectations;
- The best touristic advertising is achieved through the combination of Facebook and Instagram, as a maximum penetration rate is achieved through a joint campaign running on the two platforms in parallel;
- "Buy Now" buttons quickly increase the advertising messages efficiency since they remove any intermediate steps that involve leaving social platforms to other web sites that do not enjoy a good reputation, so the journey from viewing a destination to buying the touristic package becomes a very short and user-friendly one.

Such a combination between social media, advertising and e-commerce, all together mixed in a single application, could be a real booster for the future of the tourism.

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