

**THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN CHOOSING AND PROMOTING
CROSS-BORDER TOURIST DESTINATIONS. CASE STUDY: SOUTH DOBROGEA
TOURIST DESTINATION - THE CADRILATER (ROMANIA-BULGARIA)**

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Abstract

Since the 2000s, social media platforms have begun to actively develop and increase the coefficient of marketing activities in the tourism sector. Over time, these platforms have played a key role in stimulating the user's confidence in choosing a tourist destination. This indicates that the early 2000s managed to shape a certain dependence on these platforms regarding the choice of destination both for existing tourists, and for potential ones. This article aims to conduct a research study on the influence of the most popular social platforms in choosing cross-border tourist destinations, with a focus on the destination of South Dobrogea - The Cadrilater. To achieve this, the research adopted a hybrid approach. Initially, an analysis of the specialty literature was performed, followed by the application of a questionnaire on a sample of 200 respondents.

Keywords: *tourism promotion, social media platforms, South Dobrogea, Cadrilater.*

JEL code: L83, L86, Z32

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms are web applications that provide user-uploaded content, becoming a real tool in promoting the tourism industry (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) due to the fact that they can shape the image of a tourist destination and ultimately manage to influence the decision of tourists (Yoo and Kim, 2013). Daily and constant internet browsing has led to the creation of social media platforms that over time have formed a network which led to the creation and gradual improvement of productivity in the tourism sector, becoming a reliable source of information related to travel and holidays. From a perspective of tourism marketing, these platforms are used to increase customer

loyalty, in market research in order to generate new services and products, as well as to increase the level of brand awareness (Mustățea-Pavel and Surugiu, 2020).

Prior to the emergence of these platforms, the main source of knowledge and information on tourist destinations was the media (magazines, newspapers, radio and TV) (Tham et al., 2013). In the early 2000s, social networks were initially created as a communication platform between users, now reaching a wide range of uses through which you can create and share your own photo and video content (Pearce, et.al, 2005, p. 51).

Regarding the tourist sphere, it is normal that the choice of the tourist destination depends on the purpose and motivation of the trip in a certain area and in a certain calendar period. Over time, users have begun to share their opinions, experiences and impressions on

these social platforms, unwittingly becoming a credible source of information for other potential tourists looking for similar experiences in that particular destination. The potential tourist will use the platforms in question during various stages of the trip; namely at the beginning, so as to form an impression of the tourist destination, during the trip by posting photos and videos of that destination and finally by comments and reviews that will influence other potential tourists of the destination (Varkaris and Neuhofer, 2017, p.4). On these networks, tourists not only make positive but also negative reviews, which is why the administrators of these platforms must pay attention to the level of satisfaction offered to tourists (Alonso, et al., 2013). Because of these, social media platforms have begun to play an important role in choosing tourist destinations.

The current level of digitization of contemporary society forces us to adopt new forms of interaction between producer and consumer, including in the tourism industry (Cherevichko and Temjakova, 2019, pp. 59-64). In order to remain competitive in the current tourism market, tourism service providers need to adapt to these new digital technologies, thus forming the concept of digital tourism, which, over time, will generate the digital economy.

Although there is no clear definition of digital tourism in the specialty literature, it develops spontaneously among users, influencing web services and tourism brands that form the image of an innovative tourism product (Raimbault, 2019). Digital tourism or smart tourism is defined as a convergence between the physical world and the digital world, a parallel driven by sensors that collect data from the interaction between tourists and the environment (Navío-Marco et al., 2018).

According to INS (National Statistics Institute) in Romania and NSI (National Statistical Institute) in Bulgaria, approximately 65% and respectively 80% of users are looking for information on tourism products, offers and services, which shows that the choice of travel is dominated by online tools. As a result, it can be stated that cross-border tourist destinations also compete through these innovative means, increasing the attraction of tourists and the visibility of cities on the borders by using social networks. With regard to cross-border tourist destinations, it is not enough to use social platforms to promote themselves, these must also learn how the framework parties (member countries)

contribute to the promotion of the destination and its national brand image (Buhalis, et al., 2008).

Despite the tourism industry's contribution of about 25% to world GDP, there are few studies, articles and research that have been conducted in order to determine how the platforms influence this sector (Sabanaeva, 2017). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore the role that social media platforms carry in the decision-making process of travelling to the cross-border tourist destination of South Dobrogea-Cadrilater (Romania-Bulgaria), as well as the process of further promotion of this destination for future tourists.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This section will look at how social platforms influence the tourism industry and the various global and cross-border tourist destinations, as well as the fact that tourists consider them as essential tools that have the power to decide the choice of a destination. Based on this, the current section will evaluate and analyze previous research by consulting the specialty literature on the role of these tools in the tourism industry and how different destinations are based on social networks.

Before reviewing this specialty literature on how these platforms influence the decision of tourists, it is necessary to analyze how social media influences the behavior of consumers regarding the decision of choosing a certain destination.

Leung et al., (2012, p. 3) noted that the role of these platforms continues to draw the attention of researchers and decision makers in the tourism industry due to them representing both a modern and a critical trend for tourists.

According to Zeng and Gerritsen (2014, pp.1-2), social media platforms are an essential tool that blends perfectly with the economic and social aspects of life. These networks are constantly evolving and have been defined in several forms, including "apps", "communication channels", "communities and individuals" or "form of virtual community", all of which have average to high influence on human behavior and their real life.

The Internet has been and will be one of the biggest technologies that has left its mark on the development of this period, and researchers agree that it has significantly changed the tourism industry (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010, p. 179). In this field, the platforms

managed to promote the destinations by searching for information and posting them on different profiles or pages, for example through the Facebook platform (Narangajavana et al., 2017, p.1). According to Hajli (2014), the Facebook platform has played and still plays a key role in trusting or rejecting tourist services or products, with users paying close attention to other tourists' posts about tourist services in a particular destination. With this, the platforms have also started to influence this sector through easier ways to make reservations in different accommodation databases with tourist functions, for example the Booking.com and Direct Booking platforms. All these aspects related to the field of technology are called social media networks. Social media networks have helped modernize the way tourists form their opinion; in the past, they were guided by magazines, the opinions of friends and family about a certain place or from advertisements. Currently, these networks have managed to shape the dependence of tourists on social platforms in order to provide impressions about different tourist destinations, which means that the platforms have become a reliable source for global users (Scaife, 2014).

Sotiriadis (2017, p.11) argues that the impact of social media platforms on the tourism industry can be felt from three different perspectives, namely from the position of the consumer, the supplier and the content analysis. From a consumer point of view, they are influenced by the impact of motivational factors and from the potential effect of online reviews on future consumers. From the supplier's perspective, there is a clear direct impact of the reviews on tourism, and from the point of view of the analysis, there is a level of expectation that is created for future consumers, through the experiences of other tourists in that destination (podcasts, photos, blogs). Karl et.al., (2015) also claim that these perspectives involved in promoting the destination are very important, while Keshavarzian and Wu, (2017) argue that making these decisions in order to

promote the destination is multidimensional and manifests itself both while choosing the destination and during the trip and after its completion.

Other sources of information used in the planning and decision-making process include travel sites, government-funded tourism development programs, advertisements, travel agencies, and other types of travel sites.

On the other hand, Schroeden and Pennington-Gray (2014, p.4) uphold the fact that potential tourists of the destination collect information from these sources listed above in order to form a collective knowledge base about the desired destination.

Another perspective involves the impact of these platforms on the tourism market, as they manage to create and shape a tourist image and influence users in the decision-making process (Munar and Jacobsen, 2013, p.3). From the perspective of the tourism market, the brand concept is very important in the hospitality industry because it influences tourist destinations. In order to keep up with this, companies are forced to deal with all forms of communication channels, including social media ones, thus encouraging the increase of purchasing costs (Moro and Rita, 2018). This fact was also supported by the research conducted by Kataria (2017), which showed that after applying a questionnaire, 53% of respondents stated that before buying a package or tourist service, they first checked the reviews on social platforms about brand, price, features or trends.

III: METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

From the point of view of geographical location and territorial limits, the cross-border tourist destination of South Dobrogea - Cadrilater spans over the territory of two states, Romania and Bulgaria (fig.1).

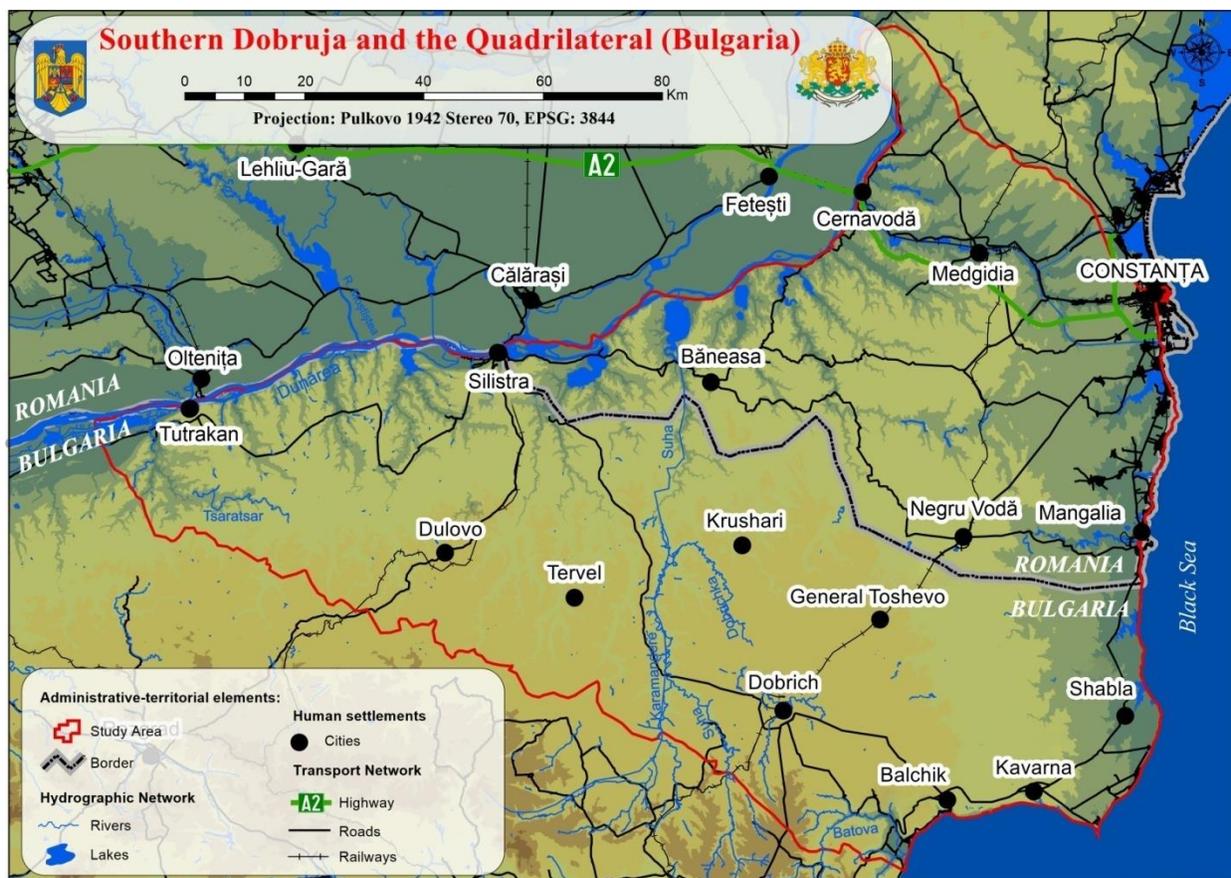


Figure. 1 Geographical location of the cross-border tourist destination of South Dobrogea - Cadrilater

The Romanian part, South Dobrogea, is found in the south-eastern extremity of Romania, within the relief unit of the South Dobrogea Plateau (Posea, 2005). With regard to the southern part of the border, it should be noted from the outset that the name "Cadrilater" does not exist in geographical terms, although in certain historical circumstances with a cartographic, military or even political context, it has been classified as a name of a geographical region. The Bulgarian part of the cross-border region is located in the north-eastern part of Bulgaria, in the Ludogorie Plateau, bounded in the northwestern part by the Danube, in the east, by the Black Sea, in the north by the South Dobrogea Plateau (Romanian border), and in the southern part it is bounded by the Beli Lom and Kamchiya rivers (Nicoară, 2009).

The purpose of the research was to identify the role of these social platforms in making the decision to travel to the cross-border tourist destination of South Dobrogea - Cadrilater. We chose to conduct this research because with every passing year, there has been

a significant increase in both the need of global users for social media platforms and their dependence on such platforms. Statistics show that by 2020, the Twitter platform recorded about 700 million tweets per day, which translates into roughly 7,900 tweets per second. By December 2019, the Facebook platform showed 1.50 billion active users per month, out of which 950 million were mobile users. The LinkedIn network, which primarily targets employers, jobs and various job opportunities, had about 330 million members by the end of 2017, while Instagram had an average of about 200 million users by the end of 2019, which indicates a 20% increase in the number of users over a period of two months.

Based on this premise, data collection for the present research was done using an online questionnaire, active on the Google Forms platform between October 2021-January 2022 which was addressed to all users regardless of age, gender and social status. Although there are currently a multitude of social media applications, the questionnaire was only promoted on

Facebook and Instagram because these are the most popular social platforms and are aimed at users up to about 65 years old, compared to Tiktok, Snapchat, Twitter or even Pinterest that are prevalent among users up to 25-28 years old.

Out of the total of 200 responses received, data was collected and subsequently centralized and statistically processed in Microsoft Office Excel 2007.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the questionnaire that was proposed on the Facebook and Instagram networks, the respondent users provided answers to 8 questions that addressed the following issues:

- Do you currently have an active account on one or more social media platforms?
- If so, do you think that social media platforms have now come to influence and establish a travel plan?
- If so, have you ever used these platforms to search for information on destinations, accommodation and transportation when planning a holiday?
- Have you ever traveled to a city within the cross-border tourist destination of South Dobrogea - Cadrilater?
- If so, was the choice of the tourist destination of South Dobrogea - Cadrilater influenced by the promotion on social media platforms, by information received from friends / family or other sources?
- What are the most important social media platforms you have used in order to choose and make the decision to travel to the above cross-border tourist destination?
- What do you think about online reviews? Did they have an impact when making the decision to travel to the cross-border tourist destination of South Dobrogea - Cadrilater?
- Depending on the level of satisfaction with the choice of South Dobrogea - Cadrilater as your tourist destination, will the future travel choice also be influenced by social media platforms?

For the first question of the questionnaire, the majority of respondents (92%) stated that they currently have an active account on one or more social networks (fig.2).

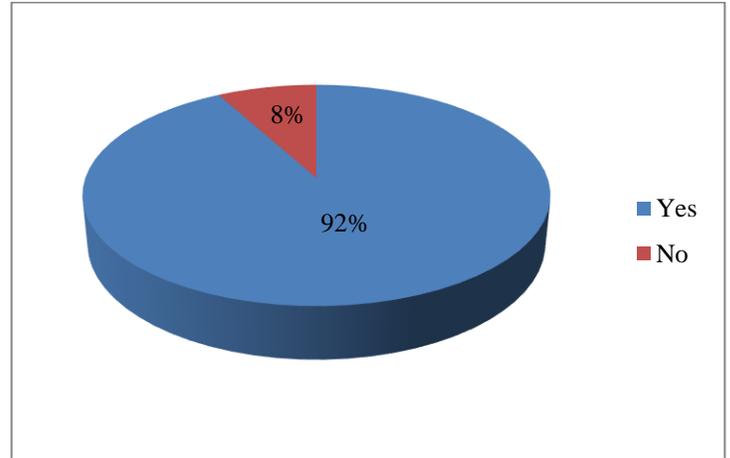


Figure.2 Share of an active account on a social platform

Regarding the second question, 42% of respondents fully agreed that these platforms influence their travel plan, 34% thought that to a moderate extent, 12% were neutral and 4% claimed that the platforms do not influence in any way their travel decision (fig.3).

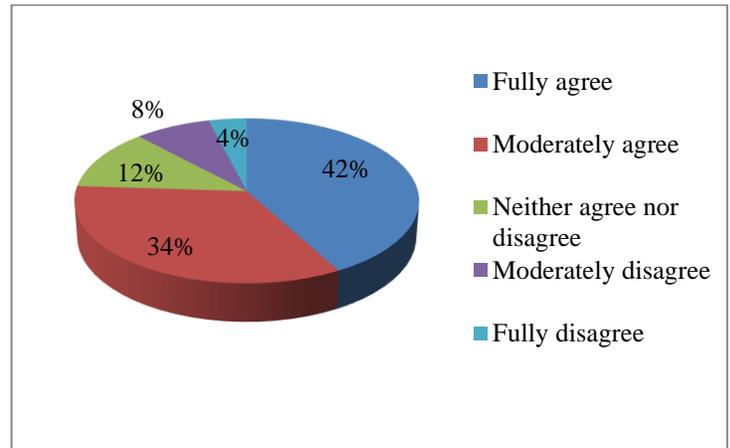


Figure.3 The influence of social media platforms in the deciding the travel plan

Most respondents who answered the second question acknowledged that they were looking for information about tourist destinations on these platforms in order to plan their holiday (fig.4).

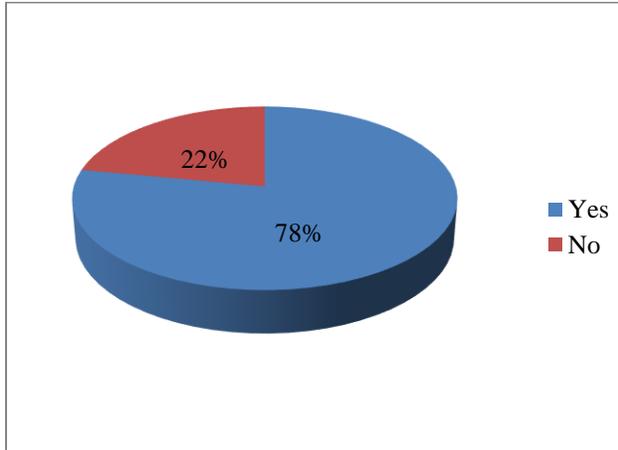


Figure.4 Share of use of social media platforms for tourist information

When asked about traveling to a city in the cross-border tourist destination of South Dobrogea-Cadrilater, a large share (95%) stated that they visited a city or town (fig.5).

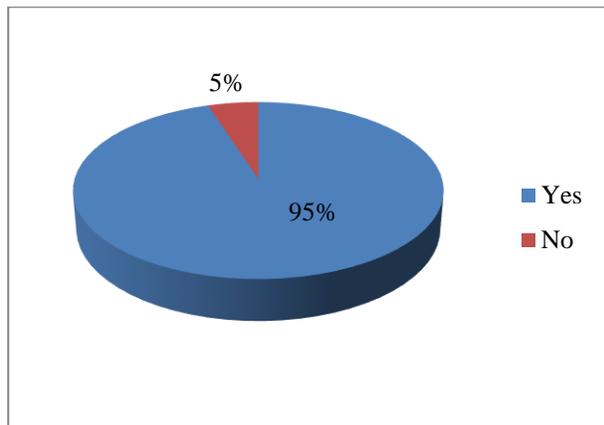


Figure.5 Share of travel to a component city of the cross-border tourist destination of South Dobrogea-Cadrilater

Regarding the choice and the reason for traveling in this area, 68% of the respondents were influenced by social networks, 26% by the opinion of family, friends or relatives, and 6% were influenced by information obtained from other sources (fig.6).

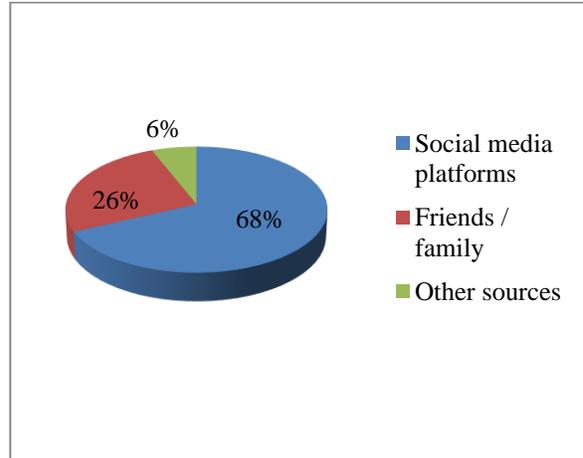


Figure.6 Planning the trip to the analyzed tourist destination

According to Figure 7, the main social networks that influenced the respondents of this questionnaire are: Facebook (31%) followed by Instagram (29%), YouTube (18%), Twitter (11%), Tik-Tok (5%), Pinterest (3%), Snapchat (2%), and 1% other platforms.

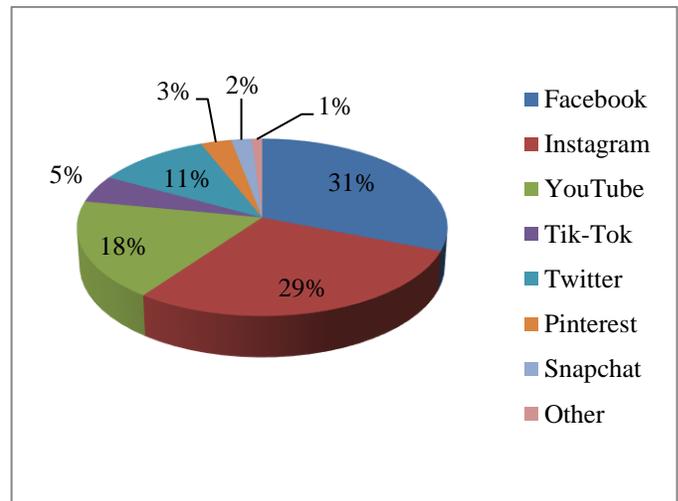


Figure.7 The importance of social platforms in making the decision to travel to South Dobrogea-Cadrilater

For the seventh question, 46% of the respondents totally agree that the reviews on these platforms greatly influence the decision to travel in the studied area, 28% think that it influences them to a moderate extent and 18% are neutral in the reviews,

while 7% express a moderate disagreement and 1% a total disagreement (fig.8).

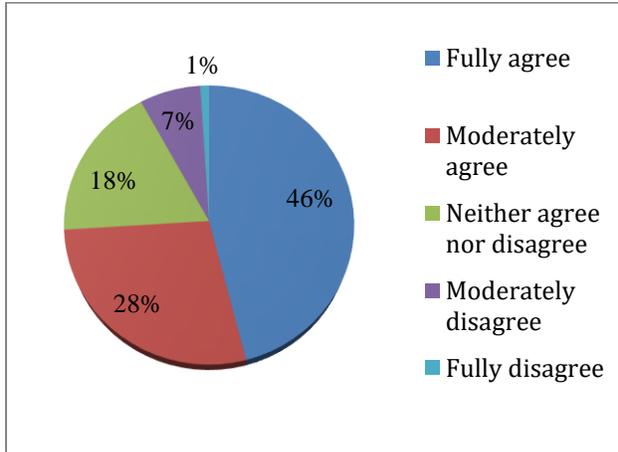


Figure. 8 The influence of online reviews on the reason for traveling in the analyzed cross-border tourist area

Regarding the level of satisfaction of this analyzed destination, 63% of the respondents stated that their future travel decision will also be influenced by social platforms, 27% answered that it will be conditioned to an average extent and 10% to a small extent (fig.9).

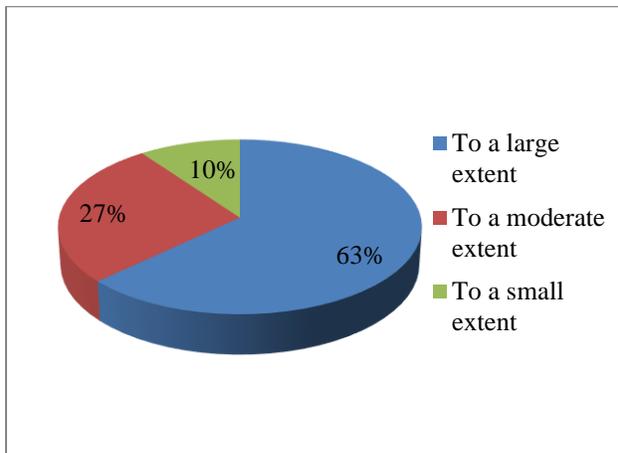


Figure. 9 The influence of social platforms on the future travel decision

V. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the present study analyzed the different ways in which social media platforms influence the choice of a tourist destination, as well as the motivation to travel to it, with emphasis on the cross-border tourist destination of South Dobrogea - Cadrilater (Romania-Bulgaria).

With the development of the Internet, the tourism industry has started to gain a lot from the content promoted on these platforms through various user posts, these having managed to influence the travel plans among tourists. Social media platforms influence all stages of the journey, starting from the choice of destination to its end, through various posts that promote tourist activities and attractions, encompassing the decision-making process, motivation to travel, satisfaction and expectations about a particular place. In this sense, social networks must constantly promote tourism products and services through user posts in order to be promoted among future tourists.

Following the questionnaire applied for the cross-border tourist destination of South Dobrogea - Cadrilater, it was validated that the majority of respondents (78%) go on these platforms to search for tourist information, and 95% of them said they have already visited a city or territory in the analyzed area. The network with most influence in this process appeared to be Facebook, with a share of 31%, followed by Instagram with a percentage of 29% and YouTube with 18%. At the same time, 63% of respondents said that their future choice of travel / holiday will also be influenced by social networks while only 10% said that they will be influenced to a small extent by them.

VI. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to thank the users of Facebook and Instagram platforms who were kind enough to answer this questionnaire and thus provide the basis for conducting this study.

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