

YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR IMPACT ON BULGARIAN TOURISM SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING AND PROMOTION

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ABSTRACT— *The current study aims to establish the influence of young people and the social networks used by them to improve the online marketing of the Bulgarian youth tourism product. Based on a study of the essential characteristics of Generations Y, Z and Alpha and a research of the attitude of young people towards sustainable development, a model for improving the online presence of destination Bulgaria in social media was proposed.*

Keywords: Bulgaria, Generation Alpha, Generation Y, Generation Z, social media, youth

1. INTRODUCTUON

Today, generations Y, Z and Alpha form that part of the world's population that we identify with the term “youth”. In the context of European social policy, the Youth Act of the Republic of Bulgaria defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 29. The same limit is fixed in the National Youth Strategy 2010-2020. Despite the position stated in the preamble to adhere to the segment 15-29 years, the voted and then adopted National Youth Strategy for the period 2010-2020 applies a differentiated approach and in certain cases goes as far as respecting persons aged 34 as youths (MYS, 2016). Young people are the main driver of all important processes in today's modern times. We can only surmise how the behavior of children today will affect the socio-economic status of our country in the next few decades. As an integral part of the Bulgarian economy, the tourism sector is extremely dependent on the behavior of modern generations and is highly vulnerable to changes in their needs and motives for undertaking travel. Undoubtedly, Generations Y, Z and Alpha have certain characteristics in common which largely shape today's market for youth tourism products and services. However, we can also point out some essential differences that will trace the path of development of tourism marketing in the future. Social networks and virtual communication in general will be of vital importance for the development of Bulgarian tourism. With each passing day, the role of information and communication technologies increases and creates immense opportunities for entering new markets and developing niche innovative products.

The aim of the current study is to propose ways to improve the marketing mix of destination Bulgaria by analyzing and evaluating the characteristics of generations Y, Z and Alpha. The subject of research is the behavior, motivation for travel and the psychological characteristics of young people, and the object of research is the possibilities for improving the marketing of the destination Bulgaria, with a focus on social networks and real-time interaction. On the basis of the achieved results, a model for improving the marketing of the youth tourism product in our country has been developed.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present work offers a comparative characterization of the studied generations. A review of the existing literature regarding the psychological characteristics of the studied generations has been made and the main features of social networks as a tool for the development of modern tourism have been brought out (Ragab, 2022; Amalia & Hanika, 2021; Ketter, 2021; Liu et al., 2021; Prisgunanto, 2020; Hysa et al., 2021). Based on the analysis of the obtained results, a model of a marketing concept for the development of tourism in Bulgaria, oriented towards the offer of youth tourism products and services, is presented. Due to the high public commitment of the Y and Z generations to the problems of sustainable development, a short survey was proposed to young people between the ages of 20 and 32 regarding the problems related to the sustainable development of Bulgaria and the ways they can be partially resolved by the influence of social media. The survey was conducted in the period 1 October 2022 – 22 December 2022 among 102 students, both employed in tourism and users of a youth tourism product. The respondents were offered 4 open-ended questions, implying an independent answer in free text, concerning the following main positions: Problems in environmental protection; Obstacles in the preservation of cultural heritage; Proposals to increase the competitiveness of the tourist product of destination Bulgaria; Innovative approaches to improve the marketing mix of Bulgaria as a destination for youth tourism.

The main conclusion of the conducted research is that the environment of Bulgarian youth tourism is strongly affected by a number of factors and circumstances of a complex and contradictory nature. The development of youth tourism in our country is influenced by external factors over which the state and its society have no control or can hardly influence. This includes changes in the environment and climate, social phenomena such as national protests, refugee waves, diseases, etc. and economic events such as financial crisis, inflation, currency board, etc. These factors have a serious impact on young people, considered one of the social groups with the highest degree of vulnerability, and the strength and frequency of these processes play an important role in the choice of a tourist destination. Technological innovations and digitization are influencing the ways in which potential youth tourists find out about the destination, plan their trip and book their stay. Social networks are a tool that allows tracking information in real time. All this brings to the forefront the need for flexibility of the sector and the taking of proactive measures to stimulate youth tourist trips in our country.

3. UNDERSTANDING MILLENNIALS, GEN Z AND GENERATION ALPHA

There is a range of research on generational differences worldwide. Some of the previously defended concepts about the psychology of different generations have changed or been supplemented by the COVID-19. Apart from the prolonged isolation during the pandemic crisis, the main factor that clearly shows the differences in the three generations is the technology innovation. Generation Y came of age with the rise of the Internet, Generation Z was marked by the computer revolution, and the youngest generation grew up in the conditions of an unprecedented information war, in which the television, the Internet and the Smartphone were part of their lives from the very beginning (Table 1). A good knowledge of generational differences will allow predicting trends in the development of the tourist market. Social media is part of the daily life of the three generations studied in this research. Young people are inextricably connected to the Internet, and this determines their increased degree of receptivity to information of different types and content, which also affects their consumer behavior in the tourist market. This is how society 5.0, (e.g. “Smart society”) is formed. It takes advantage of information technology to achieve maximum satisfaction with purchased products and services (Hysa et al., 2021).

Despite the uncertain times in which they grew up, **Millennials** remain optimistic about the future development of the economy. They like to maintain a balance between personal life and work (Manly & Thomas, 2009). It is a myth that they are lazy. They are characterized by the so-called

"perpetual youth" - tend to postpone marriage and the creation of a offspring (Askari & Rankin, 2004). They value their personal freedom and are considered the most influential and educated generation that has ever existed. Some of them are characterized by high self-esteem, nurtured by parents from the earliest childhood, reinforcing the thinking that they are at the center of the universe (PrincetonOne, 2021). In the scientific literature they are described as "tremendous consumers" (Merritt & Neville, 2002).

Table 1. Comparative characteristics of Generations Y, Z and Alpha

Criteria	Millennials	Generation Z	Generation Alpha
Born	1980-1994	1995-2009	2010-2024
Nicknames	Gen Y; Net Generation, Echo Boomers, Peter Pan Generation	The iGeneration; Post-Millennials, Digital natives	Mini Millennials, The next generation; Millennials on steroids
Self nature	Confident, curious, questioning	Ambitious, digital, confident	Extremely digital, hyper connected, independent
Psychology	Open minded, optimists, unsure	Pragmatists, realists, overstressed	Anxious, sporadic, lack of concentration
Life-changing events	11 September 2001	Financial crisis 2008; Justin Bieber's arrest; Coming of age	Brexit; COVID-19; D. Trump becoming president
Source of stress	Work and financial concerns, the dilemma of choice	Parting with the mobile phone, gun violence, unemployment, climate change	Constantly being connected, lack of options for entertainment and interaction with friends
Lifestyle	Interactive	Multi-modal	Virtual
Family	Different lives than their parents, becoming friends with their children	Genderless families, multi-cultural families, modern families	Strong influence on the behaviour of their parents
Work	Skill development is crucial for their careers; Money, security and time-off	Aspiring to work in tech; Failure helps them to learn and grow; Job security	Entrepreneurship
Technology orientation	Sensitive to innovation and frequent changes	"Dot com kids", The first to grow with smartphones	Have a digital footprint before they can even talk

Source: the author

Gen Z are real individualists and are rarely considered a homogenous group. They can be characterized by five main terms: "digital", "global", "social", "mobile" and "visual" (McCrindle & Fell, 2019). Generation Z shares some of the values of Millennials, but at the same time differs from them in various aspects. Entrepreneurially minded, they look for an early career push and start working while still studying (Cameron & Pagnattaro, 2017; Christensen et al., 2018; Chillakuri, 2020). As Deloitte Organization states "*Gen Zers are tech-dependent; they want to experience new adventures, not just buy things; and they're less loyal to brands. As the first digitally native generation, it's touted they prefer digital communication to avoid face-to-face interaction, they're harder to reach because of their short, "eight second" attention span and they're focused on authenticity in a brand*" (Gomez et al., 2022).

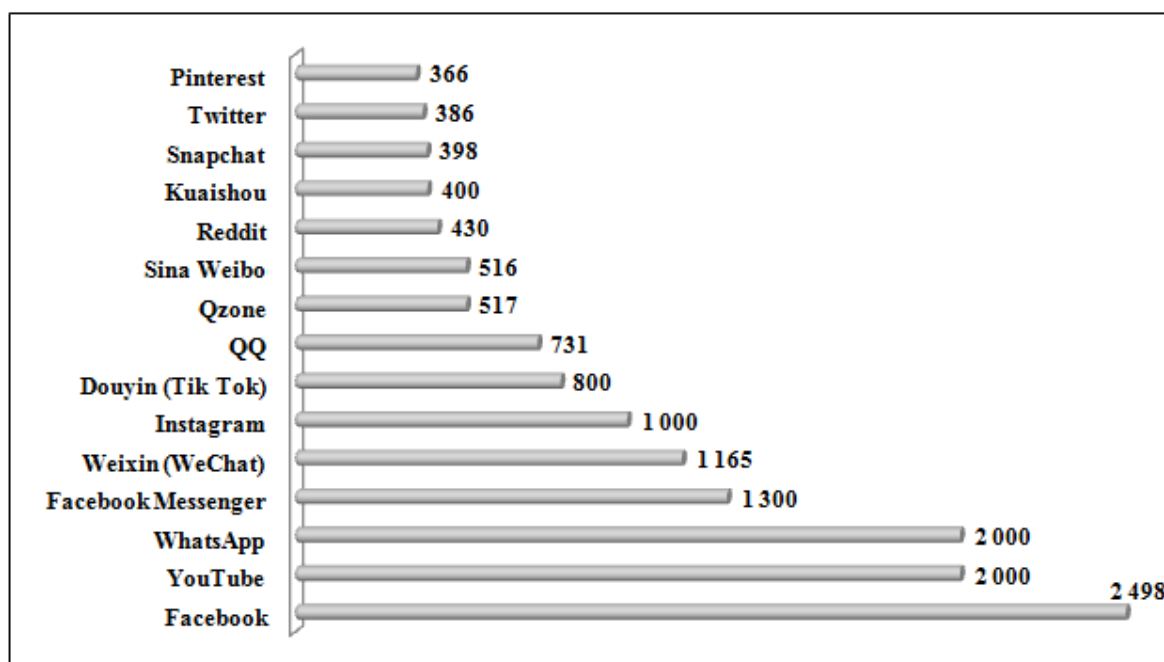
Generation Alpha are considered the future of the global market. Their desires today strongly influence the behavior of their parents (the majority of whom are representatives of generation Y) and in the future will form new trends in socio-economic life worldwide (McCrindle & Fell, 2020). This is the generation that will be most sensitive to sharing personal information on social networks. They will always be present online, but under different identities and in different social or consumer roles (Turk, 2021). From their earliest years, they interact more with Cortana, Siri and Alexa (the voice assistants at Microsoft, Amazon and Apple) than with their parents (Jha, 2020). This means

that the risk of untimely adaptation to the ever-digitalizing world for them is slim to none. Known as the “thriving generation” or the “succeeding generation”, Alphas are quite different from the preceding generations, as they grow in an unprecedented time of change and innovations (Ziatdinov & Cilliers, 2021).

4. UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MARKETING TOOL

As of April 2020, the most popular social network in the world remains Facebook, followed by YouTube, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Social network users as of April 2020 (in million people)



Source: Clement, 2020

2019 has seen the most significant change in the demographic profile of Facebook users. The Silent generation, whose representatives were born between 1924 and 1945, is increasing its average share of presence in network from 26% in 2018 to nearly 40% in 2019. In contrast, Baby Boomers (1946-1964) and Millennials (Generation Y, 1980-1994) are increasing their consumption with only 2% (Aboulhosn, 2020). Covid-19 has greatly increased the online presence levels of all generations who use a computer or a phone. However, the whole period of isolation is excluded from the comparative characteristics in the study, due to the unprecedented conditions in which the world's population spent their daily lives.

The widespread use of social media creates promising advertising niches for various business representatives. The successful combination of the advantages provided by Facebook and Instagram allow the implementation of marketing campaigns at relatively low levels of investment and with the potential to reach a huge number of users with different demographic and sociocultural characteristics. 95% of Millennials use networks like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp to share photos and reviews while traveling. Facebook has been proven to have the strongest influence on individuals in the age range of 25-34 years and especially those of the male gender (Fletcher, 2017).

The main advantages of Facebook and Instagram lie in their quantitative and qualitative characteristics (Table 2).

For a successful marketing campaign on social networks, and Facebook in particular, the following recommendations are proposed (Tien & Aynsley, 2019; Read, 2020; Lincoln, 2020):

✓ Although there is no generally accepted time to upload posts, the most accessible to users are posts made between 1:00 PM and 3:00 PM during the work week, as well as on Saturdays (for Facebook) and 12:00 PM - 1:00 PM Monday through Friday (for Instagram). The studies are also detailed according to the type of brand (see Figure 2):

Table 2. Main characteristics of the social networks Facebook and Instagram

Characteristics:	Facebook	Instagram
Number of monthly active users	2 400 000 000 people	1 000 000 000 people
Number of daily active users	1 600 000 000 people	600 000 000 people
Number of photos daily shared	300 000 000	95 000 000
Percentage of users under 34	30%	32%
Advertising potential	up to 1 900 000 000 people	up to 849 000 000 people
Average daily stay on the web	58 minutes	28 minutes
Cost per Click – CPC	\$ 1.72	\$ 0.50 - \$ 1.00

Source: Stout, 2020

Figure 2. Time range for social media posting



Source: Tien & Aynsley, 2019

✓ Focus is placed on generating short content with strong messages. The ad campaign specification suggests that the ad vision should contain no more than 20% text, the headline should be up to 25 characters, and the ad text should be up to 90 characters. Photos should be of good resolution, preferably professional or original;

✓ Supported pages to have an administrator, editor, moderator and analyst. This function can be performed by one or several people, and the purpose is to periodically do research on the effects of the marketing campaign and the behavior of the users it has reached;

✓ The site's pages created in social networks should be linked to its website. Links to the pages should be added in the e-mail signatures.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey among young people between the ages of 20 and 32 (representatives of generations Y and Z) brought to the forefront several main conclusions. The use of social networks, especially Facebook and Instagram, is a major competitive advantage for all representatives of the tourism business (hoteliers, restaurateurs, tour operators, travel agents, entertainers, etc.) Young consumers are looking for fast and easy communication - at any time of the day, seven days a week. The

merchant's inability to respond immediately is partially offset by automated messages in Messenger or chatbots offering standard responses based on keywords found in the question. 86 people of those surveyed (over 84%) stated that such an answer would temporarily satisfy their curiosity.

100% of surveyed young people additionally seek attention from the seller, even after finalizing the purchase. Thus, the service provider demonstrates interest and commitment to its customers. The proposals here are specified in the following directions:

- **Online prize surveys:** For the consumer, this is an opportunity to obtain additional consumer value. Rewards can be different: a percentage discount on the next booking; a gift of a free night/free dinner on the next visit to the site; free access to otherwise paid areas (thermal and mineral pools, museums, cinemas, theaters). For the seller, the main idea of surveys is that the page administrator has a higher degree of control over the distribution of the advertising message, since there is an option a window to pop up on the device to share the game in a personal profile, after the user fills out the survey. In practice, this is how the seller reaches other potential users, with similar interests and of a similar age. This is especially suitable for attracting the young segment;

- **A game of badges:** In addition to the automatically generated Facebook “Top Fan” badge, other badges can be developed to be uploaded to the service supplier's page and the prize winners to be tagged. The main purpose of the badges is to testify the personal commitment of the site to its users and followers. Similar can be given to real and regular users of a tourist service: “Special Guest”; “Loyal Guest”; “Funniest Guest”, as well as potential guests: “Cool Fan”; “Valued Commenter”; “Top influencer”; “Top follower” etc. For the young user, this is an additional stimulus and commitment to the one from whom he purchased the service. The main benefits for the seller are: generating more visits to the site, more clicks on links, and an opportunity to generate loyal customers without any investment;

- **Instagram contests:** Instagram contests are not uncommon in the modern world. They are similar to Facebook games, emphasizing the lifestyle the user would like to have. Similar contests can be linked by uploading photos and short descriptive texts to them. The benefits for the user are related to receiving a certain prize and the benefits for the creator of the contest - generating comments and likes, clicking on hyperlinks, reaching a large audience, generating new followers.

- **Posts with quotes:** Over 50% of respondents say they read more easily business posts that include quotes from their favorite books, movies, series and games. The benefit for the user is to access important information for him, and for the offerer - to increase sales opportunities or at least to generate likes on his page.

Respondents were unanimous in their concerns regarding sustainable development. Everyone agreed with the fact that in Bulgaria there are still problems related to the protection of the environment, the conservation of cultural heritage, the impossibility of leading a completely healthy lifestyle, etc. Millennials, who today are parents of the Alpha generation, share that they choose destinations and sites that are healthy enough for their children.

- 64% of respondents said they would choose accommodation or dining establishments that offer discounts or free services for children;

- 88% of the respondents declared that they would choose to eat in restaurants where homemade or organic products are offered. In this regard, more than 90% of respondents would like more information about food and beverages on social networks;

- Nearly 60% of the youth would participate in unguided tours of galleries and museums if Internet of Things (IoT) devices were installed in the halls and exhibit information could be accessed in the virtual environment;

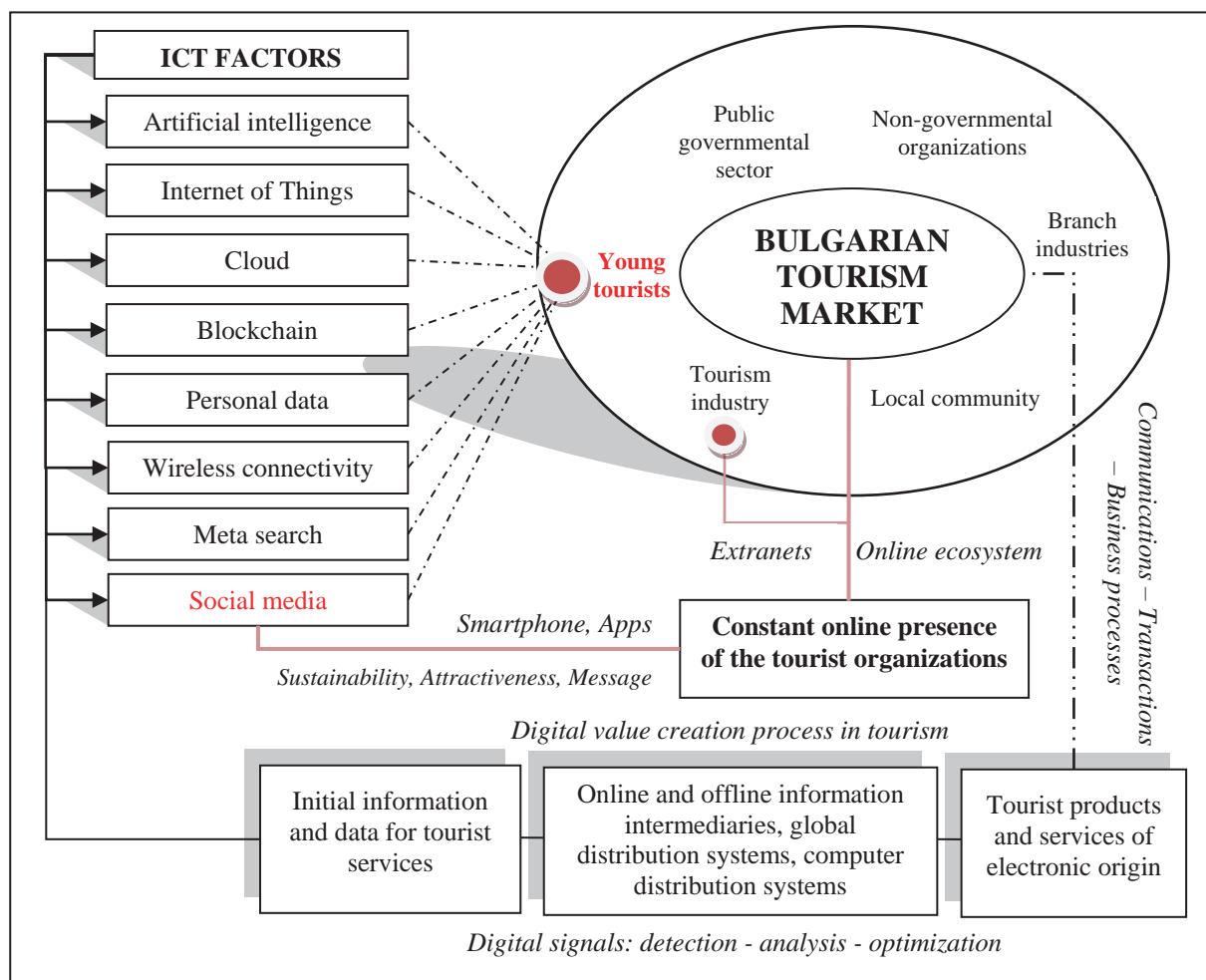
- 47% of respondents would prefer a place of accommodation or a restaurant if the sites have published interior videos or 360-degree photos on their website.

The development of information and communication technologies (ICT) can increase the quality of youth life and serve as an enabler for smart destinations, especially attractive to the youth market segment (Popova & Malcheva, 2020). The products and services offered as a result of the

digitization process contain new added value. Generational changes alter the value system, behavior and decision-making for travel and vacation purchases. The main driving force in omnichannel distribution are the Millennials, which means that the efforts of the travel business (real or virtual) should be focused on learning their needs (Kazandzhieva, 2021).

Based on the analysis above, we can propose a model for optimizing the marketing of destination Bulgaria through social networks (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Model of online presence of the Bulgarian tourism business



Source: The model was compiled by the author based on materials by Popova & Malcheva, 2020 and Kazandzhieva, 2021

In order to maintain competitiveness, the Bulgarian tourist market should strive for continuous online presence. Businesses can use all the advantages of the factors and tools of information and communication technologies: virtual reality, robotics and artificial intelligence, Internet of Things devices, metasearch engines, Google keywords, etc. Probably the easiest to manage and the most user-oriented are social networks, to which today's youth have the fastest and easiest access from various devices: desktop computers, laptops, tablets and smartphones. In addition to the extranets of the various online travel agencies and wholesalers, the tourist organizations can be developed very successfully by creating their own online ecosystem - company sites and pages on the social networks Facebook, Instagram, Tik-Tok and LinkedIn. These platforms imply different models of

communication - business to business (B2B) and business to consumer (B2C), thus practically forming a specific communication network, providing advantages such as fast, easy and real-time promotion and distribution of a specific tourist service. Social networks and marketing approaches to their management can send messages specialized to specific market segments, which in the end are the main motivator for making a travel decision. Young people are looking for messages that communicate key factors for purchasing a tourism product, such as sustainability, attractiveness, value for money, additional consumer value.

In order to be sufficiently appealing and attractive to young people, the marketing campaigns of the Bulgarian tourist business should be based on well-chosen means and techniques to reach personalized and general information for users of social networks:

- Photographic material - professional and even amateur;
- Application of short videos, gifs and 360° photos;
- Permanent presence on Tik-tok;
- Live streams, especially in cases where national and international conferences are held at the site, or famous personalities are welcomed (if ethics allow it);
- Sharing of texts with an ecological focus and a healthy lifestyle and the indirect linking of the information with the work of the company in the context of sustainable development;
- Hashtags - created for a special event or advertising campaign and general - commonly used, applicable to any posts;
- Creating sections on Facebook and Instagram;
- Tying trivia posts to other online and print media and partner organizations;
- Partnership with influencers;
- Creating special events (online and offline) with partner organizations, especially educational institutions and universities.

In relation to the youth audience, it is also necessary to have specific knowledge of social networks and the messages that can be addressed to them on the specific day of the week. Following the research for relevant content on each day of the week, the following plan can be made (H2C Marketing Digital Agency, 2016):

Monday is an unfavorable day for creating engaging posts. Sharing funny posts, nature pictures, etc., necessarily accompanied by wishes for a successful week;

Tuesday - the day is active and involves making challenges. Here is the time to publish a game and announce the prizes;

Wednesday - announcement of results and winners of the game. Sending messages and incentives to keep an eye on the page and when there will be a new game. Publication of an offer, a promotional campaign and a short advertising text for an element of the site's product portfolio;

Thursday - posts should be consistent with Wednesday's. If the previous ones were sufficiently aggressive and comprehensive, Thursday is the right time to introduce columns with curious and entertaining information related to the site, city or country as a tourist destination;

Friday – as a day marking the end of the work week, Friday should be used for non-committal posts that grab users' attention, but without obliging them to take action;

Saturday - the day is particularly suitable for planning the following week and for laying the foundations of subsequent marketing messages. Here it is appropriate to post videos with a thematic focus – site or product reviews; short documentaries about tourism in the country; fun amateur videos filmed at the site or its surroundings, as well as the launch of short surveys (with or without a prize fund);

Sunday - on this day posts should be extremely limited, and if there are any, they should inspire emotional support to users in connection with the start of the new work week. A suitable option is a short text to testify the readiness of the site to welcome its guests with new strength in the coming week.

Social media are characterised by a high degree of interactivity, using various and widely available

types of applications and extensive communication techniques (Hysa et. al., 2021). Moreover, while in the beginning social networks were used for advertising and connecting with consumers, today they are increasingly used as a tool for recruitment, training and education (Wolniak, 2019; Bajracharya, 2016).

At this stage, it would be very difficult to predict to what extent and exactly how social networks will influence the behavior of the Alpha generation. Probably, for them, this type of media will mediate the meeting and familiarization with the professions of the future. Given their increasing affluence and intelligence, travel businesses should focus on the motivations that would inspire today's children to travel and choose a tourist complex product in the future (Jha, 2020).

6. CONCLUSION

The distribution of the youth tourism product in the next decade will be oriented almost entirely to meta-search engines and social media. Strengthening Bulgaria's online presence as a safe, welcoming and diverse leisure destination for young tourists can contribute to this. In the next years, destination Bulgaria will probably increasingly feel the role of young people and their travels for the socio-economic development of the country. In addition, in the next few years, the tourism business should focus its efforts on the development of Bulgaria as a unique and irreplaceable destination for young people, with a marked differentiated approach for targeting the marketing segments (Marinov, 2008). Efforts will be needed to build an image of Bulgaria as a destination open to the young, by creating a unique, distinguishable and specific advertisement based on innovation, augmented and virtual reality and aimed simultaneously at non-traditional emission markets. Here, the role of the state will be fundamental to establish online advertising channels with access to a wide audience (for example, the creation of a national tourism YouTube channel funded at the national level). Probably by 2030, the modernization and improvement of the overall appearance of Bulgaria as a destination for youth tourism will be partially achieved. Digitization will be more widely advocated, but not enough for Bulgaria to acquire the full appearance of a "smart" tourist destination in the next 7-10 years. This assumption is due to the fact that the country is still at the very beginning of meeting the criteria listed in the European Smart Capitals manual.

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