

SOCIAL NETWORKS INFLUENCE IN CHOOSING A TOURIST DESTINATION

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ABSTRACT

The use of social media is having an increasingly positive impact on tourism activities and the information available on social networks. The aim of this study is to investigate the opinions of social network users regarding their perceptions of social network use, social network communication, and social network information that influence the decision-making process of potential tourists when choosing a destination. The survey was conducted using an online questionnaire and the collected data was processed using the PLS-SEM method. The results show that the use of social networks, communication, and search for information in social networks influence the decision-making process when choosing a destination.

Keywords: communication on social networks; social networks usage; information on social networks; decision-making process; tourism destination

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has transformed all aspects of people's lives (Jamal & Habib, 2020), especially the travel industry (Ryu et al., 2021, Sharma, 2021), with advanced interactive applications (Toulson & Wilmshurst, 2016) and technological innovations (Xiang et al., 2015). Thanks to technology (Mokhtarian & Tal, 2013), online tools have become the main source of information in travel planning (Qi & Leung, 2018) and have transformed communication, relationships, and business with customers (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Gummerus et al., 2012). Today, more than half of the world's population uses social media, 58.4% (Chaffey, 2022). To some extent, the reasons for joining social networks may be to have fun or share information (Cenamor et al., 2017), gather information (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Lucas et al., 2013), close deals or improve business operations (Chu, 2011), or be connected to the brand through online communities (Arya et al., 2019).

The pressure to make the right marketing decision-whether selecting the most appropriate channel or identifying the most effective message-can be daunting, especially considering that both tourism and technology are characterised by dynamism and constant change (Benckendorff et al., 2019). While tourists may use multiple channels simultaneously, often the same messages are not communicated across all channels (Key & Czaplewski, 2017; jain et al., 2021; Jhamb et al., 2021).

Many researchers have studied social media in tourism from different perspectives, such as the perceived benefits and risks of using social media (Parra-Lopez et al., 2011; Kang, 2011), with traveller engagement in social media positively related to motivation and opportunity (Leung & Bai, 2013). A variety of information is gathered before travel and shared after travel (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014), especially for unfamiliar destinations (Lee &

Gretzel, 2014). The relationship between social media and purchase decisions is underscored by the fact that nearly 78% of travellers use social media for travel purposes (Murphy & Chen, 2016). Social media has been analysed because of its important role in the communication process (Pennington-Gray et al., 2011; Habeeb et al., 2021). However, quantitative measurement tools for social media are quite limited (Leung et al., 2013), as the decision-making process influenced by social networks has been mainly analysed through qualitative research (Gupta, 2019; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017; Dwityas & Briandana, 2017; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

Therefore, considering the recent significant technological developments and increase in communication, it is argued that previous research cannot fully reflect the new environment of social media for travel planning decision making. The subject of this study is the influence of social network use in communication and information search on travel destination choice. Accordingly, the study aims to determine the degree of ease in obtaining the required information through social networks and to investigate the usefulness of social networks for tourists in searching for information about a destination. The study aims to understand social network users' perceptions of social network use, communication, and information gathering via social networks that influence the decision-making process in selecting a travel destination.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1. Use of social networks in the tourism industry

The use of social networks and their inclusion in integrated marketing strategies is becoming increasingly important as users spend more time communicating through social media channels (Chaffey, 2022; Matikiti-Manyevere & Kruger, 2019; Hanaysha & Momani, 2021). By focusing on the audiences that use a particular social network the most, companies and social media creators were the first to introduce advertising, which became much more important than pure advertising in WEB 2.0 and social networks based on two-way communication with all interested stakeholders (Sigala, 2012; Gupta 2019; Firoz et al., 2021). It is also important to investigate

which social media are more important from the users' perspective (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) and more effective as a communication channel (Leung et al., 2013; Hudson & Thal, 2013).

Munar and Jacobsen (2013; 2014) found that travellers' preferred social media is Facebook to post pictures, videos, and comments from their trips. Parra-López et al. (2011) show that intention to use social media is directly influenced by perceived benefits and usage (functional, psychological, hedonistic, and social), while cost is not a factor (Parra-López et al., 2011). Arya et al. (2018) underlined that tourists' attitude as a complementary mediation are positively impacting on the significant relationship of destination motivators and destination attachment. Munar and Jacobsen (2013) found that communication about travel experiences on social media is contextualised with personal data. However, social media is increasingly replacing traditional word of mouth and becoming electronic word of mouth (eWOM), which has a much stronger influence than before due to the nature of the media itself (Kim et al., 2015). Considering the importance of social network use, the first hypothesis is:

H1: Social network usage is positively related to the decision-making process of choosing a travel destination.

2.2 Communication on social networks

The oldest Internet communication tool is communication via websites and electronic mail (Paul et al., 2019). The problem with communication via the Internet and social media compared to conventional communication channels is the continuous and very rapid evolution of technology and changes in trends and tactics that need to be implemented as quickly as possible in corporate marketing (Gretzel et al., 2008; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Buhalis, 1998).

Communication through social networks is transmitted through different channels and between different members, and the geographic reach of information is very fast. The initiator of communication can be an individual or a group of individuals who transmit information to a specific, selected person or who are only interested in disseminating information without selecting a specific person to transmit information (Hvass

& Munar, 2012). Posting stories on Instagram, commenting on television shows on Twitter, sharing experiences on forums with people of similar liking, expressing joy about visits to national parks via Facebook, or posting new entries on your blog: these are just a few examples of the many ways social network users communicate with other users via social media (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Nowadays, as social media has become the most popular form of social communication and interaction, marketing on social networks is about businesses or destinations creating profiles on different social networks with the widest possible spectrum and managing these social networks by posting written and visual content on the profiles they create (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Toufaily et al., 2016).

The use of social networks in tourism has made significant progress over time, with 24% used for holiday travel (Jacobsen & Munar, 2012) and 69% after some time (Gururain, 2015), while 34% were used for destination attraction selection and 35% for resort selection, with Facebook being the most commonly used social media site by travellers. Mieli & Zillinger (2020) made a critical observation for tourism service providers regarding online information causing decisions to be postponed just before consumption, which can be challenging for service providers and planning. Arya et al. (2021) analysis indicates that brand consumer-based brand equity through social networking sites is high when a brand's communication on social media platforms is positive. Liu et al. (2020) acknowledge that social media has an indirect impact on daily users as it is an important source that influences travel decisions and serves as a reminder. Direct impacts exist in the area of information seeking before, during, and after travel; they also noted that social media has replaced old sources of communication. Even in Europe, there is considerable research effort on social media use, although Facebook seems to have been neglected recently (Teles da Mota & Pickering, 2020).

Thus, social media communication has a positive impact on the decision-making process when choosing a destination:

H2. Communication in social networks is positively related to the decision-making process when choosing a travel destination.

2.3 Information on social networks

The Internet is an inevitable channel for searching information (Qi & Leung, 2018) or purchasing tourism services (Ryu et al., 2021). Social networks are becoming more influential in tourism as consumers tend to trust other users more than service providers (Weathers et al., 2007; Naumovska, 2017). Consumers are connected to brand communities and destinations because they like them and feel loyal to them, which is reinforced by social media (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Gummerus et al., 2012; Arya et al. 2019).

Social media can be useful for gathering information from customers for future strategies and products (Howland et al., 2003), as an accessible and price-wise way to communicate (Kim and Hardin, 2010; Tajpour & Hosseini, 2021). In addition, previous studies have confirmed that social networks can provide tourism businesses with strategic information for product improvement and development, but they have overlooked the downside of social media proliferation such as the loss of control over customer evaluation (Chua & Banerjee, 2013). They allow consumers to share information about a particular product, exchange opinions and experiences with consumers, and this helps companies to easily connect with consumers so that they can adapt more quickly to the market and its needs (Jayasingh & Venkatesh, 2015).

The way companies behave and respond to negative comments is extremely important. Responses should be immediate, constructive, and help build and maintain followers' trust in a company or destination (Schmallegger & Carson, 2008).

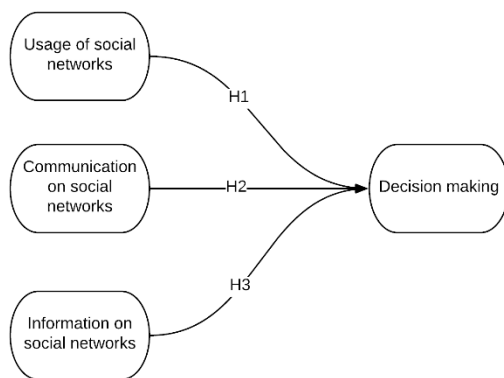
Social networks are influential in all stages of travel (Mariani et al., 2019, Mohanan & Shekhar, 2021) as they facilitate information gathering, contacting, and travel decision-making (Stepchenkova et al., 2007). Customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction with any segment of an offering can spread very easily, as social networks can quickly disseminate this information to the entire digital environment. While many active users use the Internet and social media to get information about destinations, a part of tourists believe that searching for certain information takes too much time (Semerádová and Vávrová, 2016).

The reason for the great popularity of social media among companies is the fast dissemination of reliable information via the Internet, as it is much faster than other media (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2013). However, the most important thing is building customer relationships, not just providing information (Jayasingh & Venkatesh, 2015) or reminding them of a goal (Liu et al., 2020). It follows that information from social networks has a positive impact on the decision-making process.

H3. Information on social networks is positively related to the decision-making process of choosing a destination.

Regarding the three above-mentioned hypotheses, the research model is as follows (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The research model



3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research is to find out the extent to which communication through social networks can influence the destination selection process and the importance of communication for potential tourists. To achieve the research objectives, an empirical study was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire. The research instrument was a structured online questionnaire that was developed based on previous literature and the questions were adapted to meet the needs of the study (Sharma et al., 2021, 2022a). The questionnaire is divided into two parts. The first part refers to the importance of social network use (Fotis et al., 2012), social network communication (Soares et al., 2012), social network information (Soares et al., 2012; Toufaily et al., 2016) and decision making (Toufaily et al., 2016). The purpose is to investigate whether

respondents believe that social networks facilitate communication and help to simplify the process of gathering information when choosing a destination, and whether they consider the information gathered to be useful and relevant when choosing a destination. This part also includes questions about the importance of timely information and up-to-date destination profiles. The second part of the questionnaire addresses respondents' sociodemographic characteristics such as age, gender, education and employment, and social media use (Mantau et al., 2019).

The survey was conducted online from March to June 2018 using Google Forms, and the questionnaire was shared through various social media groups and travel forums (Sharma et al., 2022c). A convenience sample was used for the study, consisting of people in Croatia who use social networks (Sharma et al., 2022b). A total of 404 fully and correctly completed questionnaires were collected, which is considered sufficient for PLS-based analysis (Kristensen & Eskildsen, 2010). It was important that the sample consists of online users who use social media, so that the sample is homogeneous (Hanaysha et al., 2021; Rashid et al., 2022). Considering that the study tests the theory of perceptions of social network use, social network communication, and social network information, the use of maximally homogeneous samples is justified (Calder and Tybout, 1999; Sharma et al., 2022b).

Partial Least Squares Structural Equations Modelling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 3 software was used to analyse the collected data. PLS-SEM was applied because it allows the simultaneous analysis of the interrelation of several latent variables. In this way, the analysis of complex models with many manifest variables and theoretical constructs is possible, with no requirements on the distribution of manifest variables.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1. Sample profile

The conducted primary research included 404 respondents who stated they were social network users, a precondition to participation in the survey. The structure of respondents (Table 1) shows that 76.5% were female and 23.5% were male, while 73.8% are up to 30 years of age.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

Features		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	309	76.5
	Male	95	23.5
Age	up to 20	17	4.2
	21-30	204	50.5
	31-40	96	23.8
	41-50	46	11.4
	51 and over	42	10.1
Educational level	Primary school	4	1
	High school	146	36.1
	Undergraduate study/ College education	30	7.4
	Graduate study/ Higher education	204	50.5
	Scientific master's degree/ MBA/ PhD	20	5
Employment status	Employed	261	64.6
	Student	91	22.5
	Unemployed	52	12.9
Frequency of social networks usage	Once a week or less	3	0.7
	Several times a week	9	2.2
	Once a day	26	6.4
	Several times a day	366	90.6
Social networks used	Facebook	395	97.8
	Instagram	215	53.2
	Google +	88	21.8
	Pinterest	91	22.5
	Twitter	19	4.7
	YouTube	309	76.5
	LinkedIn	59	14.6

By educational level, respondents with a university degree were the most numerous (50.5%), followed by those with a secondary school degree (36.1%), while those with an elementary school degree were the least numerous (1%). Most of the respondents are employed (64.6%), while 22.5% are studying.

Only 12.9% of the respondents who participated in the survey were unemployed.

When asked how often they use social networks, only 3 of the respondents answered "once a week or less" (0.7%). Fully 90.6% of respondents reported using social networks several times a day, 6.4% once a day, but only 2.2% reported using social networks several times a week. In a day, only 3.5% of respondents spend 15 minutes or less on social networks, 33.7% spend more than 2 hours, and 38.6% spend 1-2 hours, while 22.8% of respondents use social networks for about half an hour a day.

The largest number of respondents connect to social networks through their cell phones: 46% said they always do so and 19.1% frequently. Most respondents said they never use a tablet (65.3%) or desktop computer (50.5%) to connect to social networks.

Respondents were asked to select the networks they use. The collected responses show that, as expected, Facebook is the social network used by the largest number of respondents, 97.8%. It is followed by YouTube, used by 76.5% of respondents, and Instagram, on which 53.2% of respondents have a profile. Since the question allowed respondents to name a social network other than the one indicated, less than 1% mentioned Snapchat, Tumblr, Xing, 9gag and Dots.

In addition, the results show that most respondents reported using Facebook most often, always (33.2%), and often (31.7%). Most respondents indicated that they never use Twitter (88.1%), LinkedIn (75%), or Pinterest (62.6%). Although 76.5% of respondents said that YouTube is one of the social networks they use, they mostly use YouTube only occasionally (40.6%).

4.2. Evaluation of the model

Prior to testing the convergent and discriminant validity of the reflective measurement models, the internal consistency of reliability was evaluated first. Table 2 presents the values of outer loadings, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, the composite reliability indicator (C.R.), and the average variance extracted indicator (AVE).

Table 2: Measurement model analysis, construct reliability and validity

Indicators	Items	Code	Outer Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	C.R.	AVE
Social networks usage	I use social networks to get ideas about which destination to choose	USE1	0.893	0.931	0.948	0.784
	I use social networks when I want to make a shortlist of the destinations I would like to visit	USE2	0.915			
	I use social networks when I want to make sure that I have chosen the right destination	USE3	0.886			
	I use social networks when I am looking for ideas and information about accommodation opportunities	USE4	0.868			
	I use social networks when I am looking for ideas and information about excursions and other activities available in the destination	USE5	0.865			
Communication on social networks	Using social networks helps me to communicate faster	COM1	0.868	0.831	0.898	0.734
	Using social networks makes communication easier for me	COM2	0.844			
	Communication via social networks has helped me improve my knowledge about a destination	COM3	0.858			
Information on social networks	Using social networks makes me more efficient in gathering information	INF1	0.839	0.920	0.937	0.679
	On social networks I can get information that can't be found elsewhere	INF2	0.813			
	It is easier to find information on social networks than from other sources	INF3	0.827			
	The use of social networks increases the quality of gathered information	INF4	0.795			
	Using social networks makes it easier for me to gather the information I want/need	INF5	0.913			
	The information I need is available to me at the right time	INF6	0.860			
	It is important to me that data on social networks is kept up to date	INF7	0.708			
Decision making	The information I gathered will influence my final choice	DEC1	0.895	0.931	0.898	0.784
	Communication via social networks has helped me make a decision concerning travelling	DEC2	0.912			
	I feel that my participation in social networks is beneficial	DEC3	0.779			

No indicator variable has outer loadings smaller than 0.7, so no indicator was rejected (Hair et al., 2017). Using a bootstrap procedure based on 5000 sub-samples, the outer loadings of all indicator variables are statistically significant at the 5% level.

Cronbach's alpha coefficient values range from 0.831 to 0.931, indicating good internal

consistency for Communication on social networks, and excellent internal consistency for the three indicators of Social networks usage, Information on Social networks, and Decision making. The C.R. values are above the recommended 0.7, and range from 0.898 to 0.948. The AVE values are all above 0.5, and range from 0.679 to 0.784. In this way, the internal consistency of reliability and

convergent validity were tested (Hair et al., 2017). Direct inference statistical tests of model fit and model parameters are not presented because there is still no consensus in the scientific literature which indexes should be used to assess the quality of models, as well as the ways of calculating such indexes or the size of cut off values to assess the model quality (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 3 provides the discriminant validity of the measurement model, assessed by the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). On the diagonal, the square roots of the AVE values of the indicators are greater than the values below the diagonal, the correlations of the indicators to each other. Therefore, the Fornell-Larcker criterion is met and the model has a satisfactory level of discriminant validity.

Therefore, Social networks usage has a statistically significant positive effect on Decision making, as do Communication on social networks and Information on social networks. The construct Decision making is jointly explained by 72.8%, which is considered substantial. In explaining the construct Decision making, the f^2 effect size of Social networks usage is considered large (0.428), while Communication on social networks (0.051) and Information on social networks (0.088) both have small effect sizes.

The results of the structural model evaluation show that the construct Social network usage has significant, positive and direct effects on Decision making ($\beta=0.469$; $p<0.05$), while Communication on social networks ($\beta=0.199$; $p<0.05$), and Information on social networks has a weak direct effect on Decision making

Table 3: Fornell-Larcker criterion

	Social networks usage	Communication on social networks	Information on social networks	Decision making
Social networks usage	0.885			
Communication on social networks	0.593	0.857		
Information on social networks	0.682	0.804	0.824	
Decision making	0.782	0.593	0.767	0.864

4.3. Hypotheses testing

The structural model was examined using path coefficients (beta), t-values, the coefficient of determination (R^2), and the effect size (f^2). The structural model analysis has proven that all the hypotheses cannot be rejected at the 0.1% level (Table 4).

($\beta=0.288$; $p<0.05$).

The results of the testing confirm the acceptance of all three hypotheses from this research.

5. DISCUSSION

The aim of this work was to study the

Table 4: Analysis of the structural model

	Structural relationships	Original sample-standardized coefficient (β)	t-values	R^2	f^2 - effect size	Hypotheses tested
H1	Social networks usage → Decision making	0.469	8.990	0.728	0.428	Supported*
H2	Communication on social networks → Decision making	0.199	3.724		0.051	Supported*
H3	Information on social networks → Decision making	0.288	4.398		0.088	Supported*

* $p<0.001$

decision-making process of choosing a destination influenced by the use of social networks, communication in social networks and information in social networks. The conducted study on the perceptions of tourists shows that the use, communication and information in social networks, which arise from the usefulness of the social network community, influence the decision-making process in choosing a destination. Respondents confirmed that they spend on average about one hour per day on social networks and very often more than two hours per day, and that they use social networks to learn about destinations that interest them and how they use social networks to plan their trips. This study shows that social media platforms have a significant impact on consumer decision making. By confirming the *H1: Social network usage is positively related to the decision-making process of choosing a travel destination* it is proven that social media usage have a statistically significant positive direct effect on travel destination choice. According to the model of tourist behavior, it is common to do research before visiting a destination, and so it is not surprising that social networks are the place and platform where tourists do their initial research before choosing a destination.

When communicating through social networks, users can share their opinions, attitudes and experiences, they can also explore and learn about new aspects, get information, understand others' thoughts and share experiences. The hypothesis *H2: Communication in social networks is positively related to the decision-making process when choosing a travel destination* indicates the strong effect of the communication type for choosing the destination. Social networks allow interactive communication, which creates advantageous conditions for both sides. In addition to easier and faster access to information, tourists can directly ask a question to be answered in the shortest possible time, and also get a better and more accurate picture of the object of study by communicating with other users of social networks. On the other hand, destinations receive feedback from users, existing and potential tourists, and can get information faster and easier, based on which they can work on their own improvement. This plays a

very important role for destinations, and future tourists, too.

As proven by the third hypothesis *H3. Information on social networks is positively related to the decision-making process of choosing a destination*. The information gathered on social networks gives an insight into the perception of potential tourists, and the results obtained for destinations underline the importance of having a profile on social networks and keeping it up to date.

6. THEORETICAL IMPLICATION

According to Leung et al. (2013), for the hospitality sector, it was found that consumers use a variety of social media platforms to share their travel experiences, interact with others, and purchase travel services through online platforms. The confirmation of H1, H2, and H3 proves that social media use, social media communication, and social media information have a statistically significant positive effect on travel destination choice.

The results show that the information gathered on social networks, the communication used, and the general use of social networks can guide, shape, and redirect primary and final decisions (Fotis et al., 2012). As the importance of social networks in hotel decision making is recognised (Gupta, 2019; Varkaris & Neuhofer, 2017), used when selecting a destination prior to trip planning (Mariani et al., 2019) and conceptualised for destinations (Dwityas & Briandana, 2017), this research provides some useful practical implications for tourism marketers to better understand traveller behaviour in terms of social media use, information sources, and communication in relation to the decision-making process when selecting a destination.

Social networks and the Internet have proven to be more advantageous advertising media compared to traditional one-way media: A major advantage of social networks is their ability to reach tourists (Kang, 2011). They allow interactive communication, creating favourable conditions for both sides. Not only do they provide tourists with an easier and faster way to access information, but they also allow them to make direct inquiries to which they should receive a response in the shortest possible time, and they help tourists get a better and more accurate picture of the subject

of their research through communication with other social network users.

The conclusions from this study, conducted with users of social networks, will contribute to further research of the theory and the application of recommendations in practice. Unlike the studies by Gupta (2019) and Paul et al. (2019), this work examined the decision-making process with quantitative data, as suggested by Leung et al. (2013), due to the limited scales available.

7. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

By communicating through social networks, users can share and exchange opinions, attitudes, and experiences, perceive and explore new horizons, obtain information, and learn to understand the way other people think. The many opportunities offered by social networks make them the most widely used media for marketing communication. A major disadvantage of communication and marketing through social networks is the fact that a large number of advertisements are classified as spam or are unsolicited messages that are very often ignored by users. Communication through social networks offers important benefits and requires management to enable destinations to improve communication with potential tourists through social networks in order to extend the season, increase tourist numbers, and improve business performance in general. This study offers useful practical implications for tourism marketers to better understand and communicate on social media. The raised questions prove shed a new light and knowledge on social media, especially for communication, social media use, and information sources in relation to the decision-making process when selecting a destination.

Social networks are therefore increasingly used to acquire new information; they are increasingly used to plan trips and learn about destinations. This makes it all the more important for destinations to have a presence on social networks. Marketers know that it is now essential for destinations to have profiles on social networks, as this allows them to reach a large number of users, which is growing day by day, and makes it easier for users to obtain relevant information about the destinations they are interested in. As a means of changing behaviour, bringing about change,

achieving information productivity, and reaching goals, information transfer is absolutely essential in the tourism sector. Destinations should recognise this as an opportunity for improvement and take advantage of the opportunities offered by the virtual world.

8. LIMITATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study is a preliminary study to better understand the studied relationships between the use of social networks, communication in social networks and information in social networks that influence the decision-making process of potential tourists when choosing a destination. It has some limitations that need to be taken into account: First, it focused primarily on social network users, thus limiting the sample. Because the study specifically targeted social network users, it does not provide insight into the opinions of non-users. Respondents who use social networks for personal reasons agree that they also use the networks to gather information needed to plan trips; however, there are still a certain number of respondents who do not use social networks for this purpose. The reasons why social networks are not used for information gathering need to be further explored so that specific actions can be taken to bring social networks and this market segment closer together. Research conducted via the Internet should be supplemented with surveys to include the portion of the sample that does not use the Internet or social networks and to better understand their perspective. In order for the information to be as reliable as possible, the research should be conducted over a longer period of time. For future research, it is recommended to investigate what could be the biggest problems of today's social network services that also affect the decision-making process, i.e. user protection, privacy, content protection and related issues.

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