

DIGITAL MARKETING IN RURAL TOURISM: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

***Momčilović Oliver⁵,
Radosavac Andriana⁶
Nikolić Gordana⁷***

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the role and significance of social media in the marketing and promotion of rural tourism offerings in the Republic of Serbia, with a particular focus on their impact on consumer behavior and business performance. The research was conducted through a survey of 304 respondents who actively use the internet and social media. The questionnaire included demographic characteristics of the respondents, as well as a series of statements regarding the informational, promotional, and economic role of social media in rural tourism. The results indicate that respondents largely recognize social media as an effective promotional channel, a significant source of information, and an important factor in decision-making regarding visits to rural tourism destinations. Statistical analysis confirmed that social media positively influence the number of visitors, the profit of providers, and the formation of the reputation of rural tourism offerings. It is concluded that social media represent a key tool for the contemporary and sustainable development of rural tourism.

Keywords: social media, rural tourism, tourism offerings, marketing, reputation
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⁵ Faculty of Applied Management, Economics and Finance, Belgrade, University Business Academy in Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia, e-mail: oliver.momcilovic@mef.edu.rs

⁶ Faculty of Applied Management, Economics and Finance, Belgrade, University Business Academy in Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia, e-mail: adrianaradosavac@gmail.com

⁷ PAR, University of Applied Sciences, Rijeka, Croatia, e-mail: gnikolic@par.hr

INTRODUCTION

In the context of the contemporary digital environment, social media have become one of the central factors in the development and modernization of electronic business, with particular importance for the tourism sector. For entities operating in rural tourism, which often face challenges such as low market visibility, geographical isolation, and limited financial resources, a presence on social media represents an effective mechanism for overcoming these constraints. Through digital communication channels, rural tourism enterprises can establish direct relationships with potential and existing visitors, enhance promotional activities, and achieve improved business performance.

By using platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, as well as specialized blogs, tourism operators in rural areas gain the opportunity to significantly increase their visibility in the digital space. These platforms do not serve solely as advertising tools, but also as spaces for storytelling about the destination, its values, lifestyle, and authentic tourist experiences. In this way, digital presence can directly influence an increase in the number of visitors, as well as revenue growth and profitability. Instagram, as a platform largely based on visual communication, enables rural tourism households and enterprises to convey the atmosphere of the location, natural beauty, and specific features of the local offer through photographs and short video content. Continuous profile management and interaction with the audience contribute to the formation of a follower community, while user-generated content further enhances the authenticity and credibility of promotion. Such forms of communication positively affect trust levels and significantly shape tourists' decision-making processes.

Pinterest stands out as a platform that encourages inspiration and long-term travel planning. The ability to save and categorize content allows users to more easily identify destinations of interest, while rural tourism entities can use this network for targeted messaging and offer personalization. This approach often results in increased interest, a higher number of inquiries, and growth in bookings. YouTube, as the dominant video platform, provides space for more detailed presentations of tourism products, services, and experiences. Video content allows audiences to gain a more realistic insight into a destination, thereby strengthening emotional connection and positive perception. Higher levels of user engagement often lead to a greater willingness to make visitation decisions. Blogs, as a form of textual and multimedia communication, play an important role in building trust and facilitating the exchange of experiences

between tourists and service providers. Publishing relevant and informative content contributes to a sense of authenticity and transparency, which directly affects the selection of tourism offers and the economic outcomes of business operations.

Through the integration of these platforms, rural tourism enterprises can develop a comprehensive digital marketing strategy that enables market expansion, a stable inflow of guests, and reduced dependence on traditional forms of advertising. In addition, social media allow for faster adaptation of offerings to market demands and more efficient management of customer relationships. Social media can therefore be viewed as a strategic resource that significantly influences the development of e-business in rural tourism by enhancing marketing activities, consumer communication, and the overall economic sustainability of tourism entities.

SOCIAL MEDIA & TOURISM

The intensive development of information and communication technologies, particularly the rapid expansion of social media, has fundamentally transformed the functioning of the tourism industry. Although natural resources, cultural heritage, and hospitality remain the foundation of the tourism offer, digital presence through social media has become one of the key elements of competitiveness, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises in rural areas.

Social media platforms enable rural tourism stakeholders to maintain continuous and direct communication with target groups. Visual and narrative content, including photographs, short video formats, blogs, and online reviews, serve as tools for conveying authenticity, natural beauty, gastronomic offerings, and a distinctive way of life. As emphasized by Jević et al. (2021), “the advantages of social media lie in interactivity, real-time communication, and the ability to build relationships with audiences, which is of particular importance for entities with limited resources for traditional forms of advertising.”

Through platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, rural destinations become more accessible and visually appealing to urban tourists seeking escapes from city environments. The emergence of trends such as “Instagrammable” places or the concept of a “return to nature,” often influenced by bloggers and micro-influencers, significantly contributes to the popularization of lesser-known rural areas. Such content is perceived as credible because it is based on the personal experiences of other travelers.

In addition to their promotional function, social media also serve as an important source of feedback. Comments, ratings, and reviews enable tourism entities to identify guests' needs and expectations and to improve service quality accordingly. At the same time, the possibility of direct bookings through digital platforms reduces dependence on intermediaries and has a positive impact on financial performance.

Rural tourism is often based on family-owned businesses and local communities, which, with the support of social media, can build a recognizable brand and establish contact with international markets. Platforms such as TripAdvisor, as well as thematic blogging networks, provide additional opportunities for visibility and positioning within the segment of sustainable and culturally oriented tourism. However, the digital environment also entails certain risks. The emergence of inauthentic reviews, inaccurate information, or negative comments may threaten business reputation, while constant exposure requires active reputation management. As noted by Krishna (2017), "distorted images of destinations may arise due to 'public gaps,' which underscores the need for responsible and critical content management."

Despite these challenges, the strategic use of social media in rural tourism demonstrates numerous positive effects, including an increase in direct bookings, a reduction in marketing costs, and the strengthening of relationships with tourists. In this way, social media become an important instrument for sustainable development and the revitalization of rural areas.

INTEGRATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN RURAL TOURISM

Business development in the contemporary tourism sector, including rural tourism, is increasingly conditioned by the application of advanced information and communication technologies. In this context, virtual social networks occupy a significant position in the process of digital transformation, as they enable the rationalization of business processes, improvement of communication with customers, and more efficient promotion of tourism products and destinations. Their importance is particularly evident in rural areas, where these channels often represent the most accessible and sometimes the only form of direct market connection.

Research conducted by Alves et al. (2020) indicates "that the key elements of electronic business information exchange, customer communication, and transaction execution are realized precisely through digital platforms and technological innovations, contributing to reduced operational costs and increased overall efficiency." From the perspective of rural tourism, this means

that agricultural holdings, family households, and local communities can present their tourism offerings at an international level without the need to engage intermediaries or make significant financial investments in traditional marketing channels.

Social media also function as spaces for interaction, experience sharing, and recommendation exchange, thereby becoming an important source of inspiration for contemporary tourists. Travelers increasingly post photographs, videos, and personal impressions from their trips on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, or Pinterest, and such content directly influences perceptions and destination choices. This form of communication is particularly important for attracting visitors who seek authentic experiences, tranquil environments, and destinations aligned with the principles of sustainable and environmentally responsible tourism. Although social media offer numerous opportunities, Jević et al. (2021) warn that “it is necessary to take into account the potential risks of their use. Among the most significant are the spread of inaccurate information, negative comments, the emergence of online fraud, and the misuse of influence by certain users.” These challenges are especially pronounced for rural destinations that are still positioning themselves in the tourism market and whose reputations are sensitive to public opinion in the digital space.

Effective use of social media in rural tourism requires the active engagement of various stakeholders, including tourism organizations, hospitality establishments, family households, and other participants in the tourism supply. Created content does not serve solely as a means of visual representation of the destination, but also plays an important role in shaping image and building a recognizable brand. Presentations of local landscapes, gastronomic traditions, cultural heritage, and activities such as hiking tours, agrotourism workshops, or ethno-events possess significant promotional potential and can contribute to offer differentiation. In addition, social media enable direct communication between tourists and service providers through questions, requests for additional information, and post-visit comments, thereby fostering mutual trust and allowing real-time service quality improvement. Some rural tourism entities also use live streaming formats, such as Facebook Live or Instagram Live, to present festivals, local events, or everyday activities, further increasing audience interest and destination visibility.

In the contemporary digital environment, marketing based on collaboration with influential individuals is gaining increasing importance. Influencers, through personal stories and authentic representations, promote rural destinations in an emotionally engaging manner that is closer to potential tourists. At the same

time, encouraging visitors to share their experiences using destination-related hashtags contributes to organic marketing and strengthens the sense of community belonging.

Stojković (2013) emphasizes that “digital communication on social media must be guided by clear rules: the tone should be professional but not overly formal, while content must be informative, relevant, linguistically accurate, and stylistically aligned with the brand identity.” In the context of rural tourism, this implies presenting genuine values of the local community without excessive idealization or compromising authenticity. Although entry into digital marketing through social media is relatively affordable, achieving concrete results requires systematic planning, continuous monitoring, and strategy adjustments based on data analysis. Vasileva (2024) highlights “the importance of social media analytics as a tool for evaluating the effectiveness of promotional activities and identifying new trends in tourism demand.”

Rural tourism, as a form of sustainable development, gains additional importance when promotional activities incorporate user-generated content. Such authentic representations function as a form of social proof and can significantly influence potential visitors’ decisions. Through cooperation with local entrepreneurs and communities, rural destinations can enhance their competitive position and visibility in the digital market. As noted by Jević et al. (2011), “the role of social media in tourism is reflected not only in image and brand building, but also in the direct shaping of the tourism experience.” These experiences, shared through digital platforms, have a decisive impact on destination reputation and the destination choice process. It is therefore of crucial importance that communication on social media be consistent, credible, and aligned with the values promoted by rural tourism, such as closeness to nature, preservation of cultural heritage, and a sustainable way of life.

THE APPLICATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE MARKETING AND SALES OF TOURISM PRODUCTS IN RURAL TOURISM

In contemporary society, travel increasingly goes beyond its primary recreational and educational functions and takes on the characteristics of a symbol of social status. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in environments where tourism culture is not fully developed, so travel motives are often not based solely on the desire for rest or learning about other cultures, but rather on the need for social recognition and the confirmation of an individual’s economic and symbolic position.

Social networks such as Facebook and Instagram play an exceptionally important role in this process. Posting photographs from globally recognizable tourist landmarks, such as the Eiffel Tower or Niagara Falls, functions as a form of virtual validation of personal success and belonging to an international travel culture. The visual dimension of digital self-presentation is of particular importance, as users most often choose to display only those moments that reflect positive emotions, an attractive appearance, and aesthetically pleasing environments. In this way, a carefully curated and often idealized image of personal travel experience is constructed. Such content selection and pronounced self-promotion have a strong influence on the audience following these posts. Continuous exposure to content depicting “successful” and “happy” travels of others can create a feeling among observers that they are excluded from similar experiences. As a result, an intense psychological motivation to travel emerges, which is not necessarily based on a genuine need for rest, but rather represents a reaction to perceived social disparity and a desire for one’s own digital representation of pleasure and freedom.

This phenomenon opens significant opportunities for the development of rural tourism. Contemporary tourists increasingly seek not merely accommodation or standardized tourism products, but authentic experiences that are visually attractive and suitable for sharing on social media. Therefore, rural destinations can offer a range of unique experiences, such as stays in traditional rural households, meals prepared from local products, direct interaction with hosts, or participation in activities such as horseback riding, collecting medicinal herbs, or producing homemade food products. A key element of these experiences is the possibility of creating “shareable moments,” that is, visually and emotionally striking scenes that simultaneously highlight the uniqueness and exclusivity of the experience. Accordingly, when designing marketing activities on social media, special attention must be paid to the visual component of communication. The content disseminated must possess aesthetic value as well as a strong emotional dimension. Instead of merely providing information, it is desirable to create a narrative that conveys the story of the experience, authenticity, connection with nature, and the preservation of traditional values. In an optimal scenario, tourists themselves become promoters of rural destinations by sharing their impressions and photographs, thereby stimulating the interest of other potential visitors.

Social networks, viewed through the lens of social comparison mechanisms, visual self-promotion, and attention management, can be considered powerful instruments in shaping tourism demand. This is particularly relevant for rural tourism, which inherently offers what contemporary users value most—authentic experiences, direct contact with nature, and aesthetically appealing

moments worth sharing in the digital space. Virtual social networks occupy a significant place in modern digital marketing, and their role is especially pronounced in rural tourism, where they enable more effective positioning and promotion of tourism offerings. They function as media channels for establishing connections with potential tourists, presenting tourism products and services, and building long-term relationships with target market segments.

According to research by Marasak et al. (2018), “social networks enable precise targeting of marketing activities toward specific demographic groups and user interest profiles.” In this way, promotional messages can be directed precisely to individuals who express interest in active holidays, cultural heritage, agrotourism activities, or stays in natural environments. By using targeted advertising tools on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, rural tourism entities can deliver content to users who have already shown interest in particular regions or forms of rural tourism.

A strategic approach to digital presence and the consistent use of social media represent key factors in building loyalty among existing guests as well as attracting new users of tourism services. As noted by Matevska Perovska (2021), “tourism stakeholders have the opportunity to create and distribute creative and visually appealing content, including photographs, video materials, blog posts, and professional texts related to local attractions, gastronomy, tradition, and the specific characteristics of rural destinations.” By providing high-quality, informative, and inspiring content, not only is the interest of potential tourists encouraged, but a reputation for expertise in the field of rural tourism is simultaneously built.

Influencers individuals with a significant number of followers hold particular importance in digital marketing, as their recommendations can greatly influence the visibility and credibility of tourism offerings. Cooperation with bloggers and content creators focused on travel, nature, and sustainable lifestyles enables tourism entities to reach wider audiences through authentic experiences and to influence travel decision-making processes. In addition, encouraging users to independently create and share content in the form of photographs, comments, and recommendations contributes to building trust among potential visitors and represents a form of digital word-of-mouth marketing. Such content is especially valuable, as it testifies to the authenticity and uniqueness of experiences in rural environments.

At the same time, social networks enable direct and two-way communication between tourism entities and users. Timely responses to comments, questions,

or potential complaints contribute to building a positive image and can significantly influence the level of guest satisfaction and loyalty.

Through the organization of various digital promotional activities, such as contests, special offers, or time-limited discounts, rural tourism organizations can encourage greater user engagement, expand the reach of their posts, and increase destination recognition. For example, offering a free weekend stay or discounts on seasonal packages can act as strong incentives for interaction and content sharing.

Taking all these aspects into account, it can be concluded that virtual social networks offer an exceptionally wide range of opportunities for the marketing and sale of tourism products in rural tourism. Through their thoughtful and strategic application, tourism entities can significantly enhance the visibility of their offerings, strengthen interaction with target audiences, stimulate sales, and build stable, long-term relationships with the market.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Problem

The impact of social networks on electronic business in the field of rural tourism represents a significant research problem, particularly in the context of developing tourism offerings in Serbia. More intensive use of the Internet and social networks for promotional purposes enables access to a wide range of potential tourists and represents a more efficient and financially affordable advertising model compared to traditional marketing channels. In contemporary business conditions, where profit generation is one of the key objectives, digital tools are becoming an indispensable element of the rural tourism sector as well. Municipalities and providers of rural tourism services have the opportunity to achieve significant economic effects within a relatively short period by using virtual social networks to promote their products and services, thereby simultaneously contributing to the sustainable development of local communities. Today, social networks have a pronounced influence on everyday life and business activities and represent an important source of information for potential tourists when choosing rural destinations. The attractiveness and recognizability of rural tourism offers can not only be predicted but also actively shaped through the appropriate use of social networks. Therefore, it is necessary for rural tourism enterprises, local governments, and other stakeholders to be integrated into a digitally connected communication system. In the practice of developed countries, engaging specialized agencies to manage digital presence has proven to be an effective approach to enhancing the promotion of tourism

potential. In the digital environment, the absence of an online and social media presence significantly reduces opportunities for development, profitability, and the preservation of a competitive market position.

Subject of the Research

The subject of this research is the analysis of the impact of social networks on electronic business in rural tourism, based on an empirical study conducted on a representative sample. The focus of the paper is on examining the role and effects of social networks as contemporary digital tools in the functioning and development of rural tourism in Serbia. The research seeks to determine how communication, promotion, and information exchange through social networks influence tourist behavior, starting from the information and interest formation stage, through the decision-making process regarding travel, to the assessment of satisfaction and willingness to provide recommendations. Particular attention is paid to the analysis of users' attitudes and perceptions, as well as the ways in which digital content shapes their expectations and engagement. In addition, the subject of the research includes an analysis of how rural tourism providers use social networks to promote services, build image, and increase market visibility. The quality of digital content is also considered as a factor of competitiveness in relation to other forms of tourism. The paper addresses the potential of social networks as instruments of digital transformation in rural tourism and their contribution to the economic and social development of rural areas. Given the insufficiently systematized digital approach in this field in Serbia, the research aims to highlight the importance of strategic social media presence in building the reputation and recognizability of rural tourism destinations.

Research Objectives and Tasks

The primary objective of the research is to analyze the attitudes and opinions of potential users of rural tourism services regarding the importance, role, and impact of social networks as a key factor in the development of electronic business in rural tourism. The purpose of the research is to determine how social networks influence tourists' perceptions and interest, as well as their role in increasing the visibility and attractiveness of rural tourism offers. Particular emphasis is placed on the importance of these platforms in the decision-making process related to the selection of destinations, products, or services. The analysis examines the effectiveness of different marketing approaches and techniques applied on social networks, as well as their contribution to the development and promotion of rural tourism destinations. The research tasks include: determining whether social networks affect the profit of rural tourism service providers; examining the impact of social networks on increasing the

number of users of rural tourism offers; and analyzing the role of social networks in shaping the reputation of rural tourism offers.

Research Hypotheses

Based on the defined subject and objectives of the research, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- **H1:** Social networks do not affect the profit of rural tourism services.
- **Ha1:** Social networks affect the profit of rural tourism services.
- **H2:** Social networks do not increase the number of visitors to rural tourism offers.
- **Ha2:** Social networks increase the number of visitors to rural tourism offers.
- **H3:** Social networks do not influence the formation of the reputation of rural tourism offers.
- **Ha3:** Social networks influence the shaping of the reputation of rural tourism offers.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The empirical research was conducted using a survey method among social media users, with the aim of analyzing the impact of social networks on rural tourism offerings in Serbia. Data collection was carried out between 1 March 2025 and 1 May 2025, through field surveys and an online questionnaire distributed via the social network Facebook. The survey was conducted on a sample of 304 respondents, and the instrument was structured into three sections. The first, eliminatory section included two binary (yes/no) questions related to the daily use of the Internet and social networks. The second section contained questions on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (gender, age category, and level of education) and was completed only by respondents who answered the eliminatory questions positively. The third and key section of the research consisted of 30 statements examining respondents' attitudes toward the role of social networks in information provision, promotion, image, reputation, number of visitors, and profit of rural tourism offerings. Respondents evaluated their level of agreement with the statements using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from complete disagreement to complete agreement. All 304 respondents were included in the final analysis, i.e., those who regularly use the Internet and social networks. The sample size was considered statistically sufficient and relevant for the purposes of the research. The collected data were entered, processed, and analyzed using the JMP Pro 18 software.

The analysis of the respondents' profiles shows that the sample is relatively balanced by gender, with a slightly higher proportion of men (54.27%) compared to women (45.73%), which allows for a relevant assessment of attitudes of both genders within the study. The age structure of respondents indicates the dominance of younger and middle age groups, with the largest share of respondents aged 18 to 26 (31.25%), while the least represented group consists of respondents older than 62 years (6.91%). This distribution reflects a greater participation of the population that is more active in using the Internet and social networks, which is consistent with the subject of the research. The educational structure of the sample shows that the majority of respondents have completed primary or secondary education (69.08%), while a smaller proportion of the sample has higher education (30.92%). These data indicate that respondents with diverse educational backgrounds were included in the research, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of attitudes toward the role of social networks in rural tourism. Overall, the sample structure can be considered adequate and representative for analyzing the impact of social networks on rural tourism offerings.

The analysis of respondents' attitudes toward the presented statements clearly indicates a highly positive perception of the role and importance of social networks in the marketing, promotion, and development of rural tourism offerings. In almost all statements, the responses "agree" and "strongly agree" dominate, while negative attitudes are minimal or entirely absent, confirming a high level of acceptance of social networks as a relevant marketing tool. Respondents largely recognize social networks as a useful source of information and an important factor in travel preparation, decision-making regarding visits to rural tourism destinations, and the formation of perceptions about the quality and attractiveness of the offer. The influence of friends' recommendations, comments from other users, and promotion through well-known personalities is particularly emphasized, indicating a strong effect of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in rural tourism. The results also show that respondents believe social networks promote rural tourism offerings more effectively than traditional forms of advertising, enable direct interaction between providers and users, and contribute to the creation of image, reputation, and recognizability of rural destinations. A significant number of respondents believe that social networks can influence an increase in the number of visitors and indirectly contribute to profit growth for rural tourism service providers. Although some respondents report occasionally ignoring online advertisements, the overall results unequivocally demonstrate that social networks play a key role in contemporary rural tourism, particularly in overcoming geographical barriers and enhancing the visibility of insufficiently promoted tourism offerings. In summary, the findings confirm that social networks are an indispensable and strategically

important instrument for the development, positioning, and sustainability of rural tourism.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The results of the conducted research, based on the χ^2 test, show that all three proposed hypotheses were statistically accepted at a significance level of 0.05 and with a confidence level of 95%. The obtained χ^2 values in all cases are lower than the critical tabulated value (3.841), while the levels of statistical significance exceed the established threshold, indicating that there are no grounds for rejecting the proposed hypotheses.

The first alternative hypothesis (Ha1: Social networks affect the profit of rural tourism services) confirms that the majority of respondents (85%) believe that social networks have a positive impact on the profit of providers of rural tourism offerings. This result indicates recognition of the economic importance of social networks as a marketing tool that can indirectly contribute to revenue growth through increased visibility and attractiveness of tourism offerings.

The second alternative hypothesis (Ha2: Social networks increase the number of visitors to rural tourism offerings) was also accepted, with 80% of respondents expressing the view that social networks contribute to an increase in the number of visitors to rural tourism offerings. These findings confirm the role of social networks in attracting potential tourists and influencing their decisions to visit, which is of particular importance for less developed and insufficiently promoted rural destinations.

The third alternative hypothesis (Ha3: Social networks influence the shaping of the reputation of rural tourism offerings) shows that 85% of respondents believe that social networks play a significant role in shaping the reputation of rural tourism offerings. This result highlights the importance of online presence, user comments, recommendations, and interaction in the process of building trust and a positive perception of tourism offerings.

In summary, the research results obtained from a sample of 304 respondents unequivocally confirm that social networks have a significant impact on key aspects of rural tourism profitability, the number of visitors, and the reputation of tourism offerings. The findings provide strong empirical support for the conclusion that social networks are a necessary and strategically important instrument in the contemporary management and development of rural tourism.

CONCLUSION

Based on a comprehensive analysis of respondents' profiles, attitudes, and the results of hypothesis testing, it can be concluded that social networks play an exceptionally important and multidimensional role in the contemporary development, promotion, and economic sustainability of rural tourism offerings. The structure of the sample, which includes diverse gender, age, and educational categories, provides a relevant basis for valid interpretation of the results and indicates that the obtained attitudes are broadly applicable in the context of rural tourism.

The research results demonstrate a highly positive attitude among respondents toward the use of social networks in the processes of information gathering, travel preparation, and decision-making regarding visits to rural tourism destinations. Social networks are perceived as a more efficient and influential promotional channel compared to traditional forms of advertising, with recommendations from other users, comments, and electronic word-of-mouth playing a particularly significant role. Their ability to reduce geographical barriers, increase the visibility of insufficiently promoted offerings, and enable direct interaction between providers and potential tourists is especially emphasized.

Statistical analysis using the χ^2 test further confirms that social networks positively affect providers' profitability, contribute to an increase in the number of visitors, and play a key role in shaping the reputation of rural tourism offerings. All proposed hypotheses were accepted with 95% confidence, providing clear empirical validation of the research assumptions.

Overall, social networks represent an indispensable and strategic instrument for the development of competitive, recognizable, and sustainable rural tourism. Therefore, their systematic and professional use should be a priority for providers and decision-makers in this field.

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