

The Influence of Digital Marketing on Youth in Albania When Choosing Tourist Destinations

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of digital marketing on travel decision-making among Albanian youth, focusing on individuals aged 18–24—a demographic characterized by high levels of digital engagement. In the context of Albania’s growing tourism sector, the research aims to understand how platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Google shape destination perception and choice. Primary data were collected through a structured online survey, yielding 77 valid responses. The findings reveal that visual and interactive digital content significantly impacts travel behavior, with 62.4% of participants reporting they have considered a destination after encountering digital advertisements. Influencers, user-generated content, and consistent exposure to online promotions emerged as key drivers of engagement and decision-making. Trust in digital marketing was found to be moderate to high, particularly when content was perceived as authentic and transparent. Notably, domestic tourism promotion proved especially effective, with 76.6% of respondents influenced to travel within Albania. Preferences leaned heavily toward beach and relaxation trips, followed by nature-based and budget-friendly options. These insights underscore the strategic importance of tailoring digital tourism campaigns to the expectations and behaviors of digitally native youth. The study contributes to the broader discourse on youth travel in the digital age and offers practical implications for tourism marketers and policymakers aiming to position Albania as a competitive and youth-friendly destination.

Keywords: Digital marketing, tourism, Albania, youth, social media, travel behavior

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, digital marketing has emerged as a cornerstone of global tourism promotion, fundamentally reshaping how destinations are marketed and perceived by potential travelers. The proliferation of mobile technology, the widespread adoption of social media platforms, and the growing use of data-driven, personalized advertising have revolutionized the ways in which tourism experiences are presented and consumed. Through immersive visuals, real-time engagement, and targeted content delivery, digital marketing now offers destination management organizations (DMOs) and tourism stakeholders unprecedented tools to influence consumer preferences and decision-making processes.

In the Albanian context, this transformation is particularly significant. As one of the emerging destinations in Southeastern Europe, Albania has witnessed steady growth in its tourism sector, contributing to both economic development and international visibility. The country's diverse landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and relatively low-cost travel experiences position it as an attractive option for regional and international tourists alike. Parallel to this growth is the increasing digital engagement of Albania's youth population, particularly those aged 18 to 24, who represent a digitally native cohort highly responsive to online content. Understanding the interaction between digital marketing and the travel behavior of young Albanians is crucial for both policymakers and industry practitioners. This demographic group not only represents a substantial share of current travelers but also plays a vital role in shaping tourism trends through content creation, peer influence, and online reviews. Their digital habits offer a valuable lens through which to examine evolving tourism consumption patterns.

Moreover, digital marketing extends beyond basic promotional activities; it facilitates emotional storytelling, peer-to-peer influence, and the co-creation of destination image—elements that deeply resonate with younger audiences. As Albania aspires to strengthen its position as a competitive and sustainable tourism destination within the Balkans and the broader European region, embracing digital-first marketing strategies becomes imperative. Effective use of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Google not only enhances destination visibility but also fosters inclusive and participatory engagement with prospective travelers.

Furthermore, digital marketing has the potential to promote responsible tourism behaviors, diversify tourist flows, and support community-based tourism initiatives.

Existing studies highlight the growing importance of digital marketing in influencing travel behavior, particularly for young people aged 18 to 24, who frequently rely on social media and online platforms to gather travel ideas and information (Mariani, Borghi, & Cappa, 2021). These platforms have changed how travel decisions are made and how tourism is promoted. In Albania, where tourism is expanding, it is essential to understand how digital marketing shapes the travel behavior of young people. Online content has played a key role in improving the image of Albania as a travel destination and in making it more popular among both local and international travelers (Duro & Elmazi, 2022). Young people, in particular, are highly active online and are influenced by posts, videos, reviews, and travel offers they encounter on digital platforms.

Research shows that people tend to trust online content—especially reviews and personal stories—more than traditional advertisements (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Additionally, digital tools enable more personalized and interactive experiences for travelers, which younger users often prefer (Buhalis & Law, 2008). However, there remains a gap in the literature on how these global trends specifically apply to young people in Albania.

To address this gap, this paper investigates how digital marketing influences the travel decision-making processes of Albanian youth aged 18–24. It focuses on four key areas: (1) the frequency and channels of exposure to digital marketing; (2) the perceived credibility and influence of digital content; (3) the psychological and behavioral responses to digital promotional material; and (4) the potential of digital trends to support sustainable tourism development. Based on primary data collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 77 respondents within this age group, the study provides empirical insights into the digital behaviors of young Albanian travelers. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on youth tourism, digital engagement, and strategic tourism marketing, offering practical implications for national and regional tourism development.

Finally, the dissemination of these findings through publication in professional journals—which typically do not provide financial remuneration but publish for specialist audiences—can offer numerous benefits to researchers. Such publications can enhance career advancement, expand professional networks, and provide valuable feedback on research ideas (Singh et al., 2002). However, submitting to academic journals requires not only high-quality research but also a strong focus on presentation, as many papers are rejected or returned with substantial revision requests. This underscores the dual importance of research rigor and clear presentation for impactful dissemination.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design, which is commonly used to collect factual data and identify patterns in behavior, preferences, and attitudes (Creswell, 2014). A structured online questionnaire was chosen as the data collection tool, particularly effective for reaching young, digitally active populations (Bryman, 2016). This method aligns with the research objective of exploring how digital marketing affects the travel decisions of Albanian youth aged 18–24. The survey was designed and administered using Google Forms and distributed through popular social media platforms, including Instagram and Facebook. These channels were purposefully selected to ensure access to respondents who actively engage with digital content, reflecting findings that digital natives are more responsive to online questionnaires disseminated through the same platforms they use for information and social interaction (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The questionnaire included a mix of multiple-choice, multiple-response, and five-point Likert scale items to capture a broad range of data—from digital media habits to perceptions of trust and influence. This structure enabled a standardized, measurable assessment of attitudes, in line with recommendations for survey-based research in the social sciences (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014).

The survey was conducted in April 2025 and yielded 77 valid responses. Participants were predominantly aged between 18 and 24 years, representing a digitally native cohort with high levels of engagement with online platforms. Data were collected anonymously to

encourage honest responses and minimize potential biases, following standard practices in behavioral research (Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000).

2.2. Sample

A total of 77 participants aged between 18 and 24 completed the survey. This age group corresponds with Generation Z, a cohort characterized by high digital literacy and daily engagement with social media and other online platforms (Williams et al., 2012). The sample included both university students and employed youth from various regions of Albania, reflecting diversity in socioeconomic backgrounds and lifestyle preferences. All respondents had encountered travel-related digital content, even if only occasionally, making them suitable for this research. As Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2016) highlight, the key to effective sampling in exploratory studies is to ensure that participants are relevant to the research topic and can provide a range of experiences. Using purposive sampling via social media helped the study reach the most digitally active segment of the youth population in Albania, where digital marketing exerts the greatest influence (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

2.3. Data Processing and Analysis

The collected data were prepared for analysis through standard data cleaning procedures, including removal of duplicate entries and correction of formatting inconsistencies. Quantitative responses were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, which are particularly suited for summarizing data and identifying trends in social science research (Field, 2013). Frequency distributions and percentages were used to interpret and present the survey findings. Multiple-choice responses that allowed for multiple selections (e.g., digital platforms used or factors of influence) were processed using dummy coding, a common technique for handling categorical variables in survey analysis (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2018). These coded variables were then aggregated and visualized to identify the dominant trends in platform use and behavioral influence. The results were interpreted in light of existing literature on digital marketing and youth travel behavior. This comparative approach strengthened the analysis by connecting the study's findings to broader patterns observed in international contexts (Bryman, 2016). Furthermore, it enhances the validity of the insights by grounding them in established theoretical frameworks and previous empirical work.

3. Results

3.1 Demographic Profile

The survey sample consisted of 77 valid responses, with the demographic data reflecting a population segment that is highly representative of Albania's digitally active youth. Notably, 79.2% of respondents fell within the 18–24 age group, confirming a focus on the digital-native generation. In terms of gender distribution, 62.3% were female, while 37.7% were male. Regarding employment status, 44.2% identified as students who are also employed, and an additional 39.0% were full-time students without employment. Only a small proportion (10.4%) were employed but not engaged in formal education. This demographic composition suggests that the respondents are not only technologically literate but also highly engaged with digital media and social platforms—factors that are essential in shaping modern travel behaviors and preferences.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

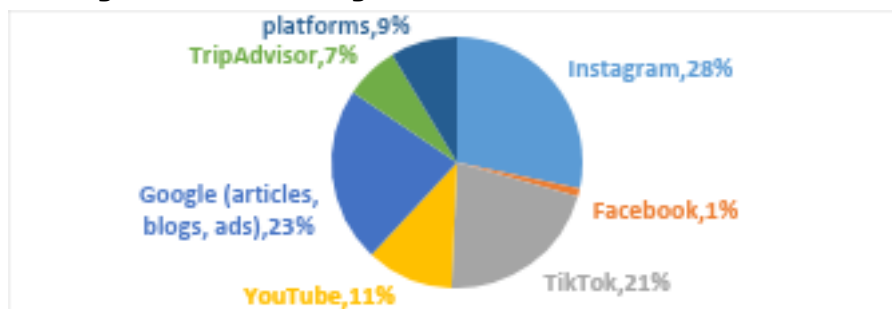
Variable	Percentage (%)
Age group (18–24)	79.2
Female	62.3
Male	37.7
Employed Students	44.2
Full-time Students	39.0
Employed (not students)	10.4

Source : Survey conducted by the researchers

3.2 Usage of Digital Platforms

The data reveal a strong inclination toward visual and interactive digital platforms when it comes to travel information sourcing. Instagram emerged as the most influential platform (28%), followed by TikTok (21%) and a variety of Google-related services (collectively representing 34% when including Google search, blogs, advertisements and Youtube). Respondents appreciated Instagram for its visually immersive content, the accessibility of destination tags, and influencer recommendations. TikTok was particularly valued for short-form, engaging videos that offered travel tips and real-life experiences. Meanwhile, Google remained a fundamental tool for accessing travel blogs, price comparisons, and user reviews. Notably, respondents often used multiple platforms simultaneously, underscoring the importance of cross-platform engagement in shaping travel decisions.

Figure 1. Preferred Digital Platforms for Travel Information



Source: Survey conducted by the researchers

3.3 Frequency and Nature of Exposure

Participants reported a high frequency of exposure to travel-related digital content. Approximately 26.0% encountered such advertisements daily, while 48.1% reported seeing them several times per week. Digital advertisements appeared in diverse formats, including influencer content, sponsored posts, and web banners on travel-related websites. Importantly, interaction with these ads was common—many respondents reported clicking on advertisements, saving them for later reference, or sharing them with peers. This repeated and interactive exposure demonstrates how digital marketing stimuli maintain a consistent presence in the digital ecosystem of youth, reinforcing message retention and interest in promoted destinations.

Table 2. Frequency of Exposure to Digital Travel Advertisements

Frequency	Percentage	Approximate Count (out of 77)
Every day	26%	20
Several times a week	48.1%	37
Several times a month	19.5%	15
Rarely or never	6.5%	5

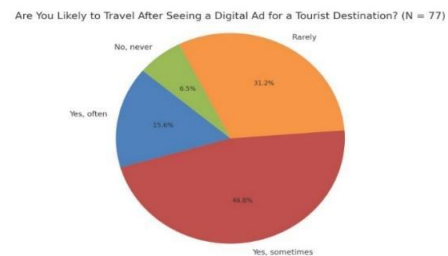
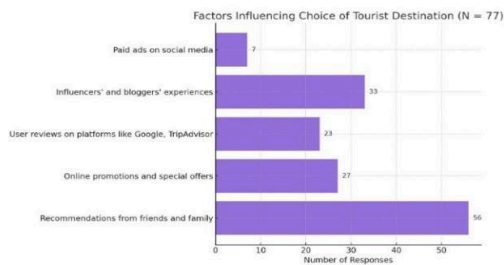
Source Survey conducted by the researchers

3.4 Behavioral Responses to Digital Ads

The survey revealed that digital advertisements do more than capture attention—they also influence behavior. A combined 62.4% of respondents stated that they either frequently or occasionally considered traveling to a destination after encountering a digital ad. Following initial exposure, respondents often sought further information by watching related YouTube or TikTok content, conducting independent Google searches, or consulting with friends and online communities. A notable behavior was the act of bookmarking or saving destinations for future reference, which suggests that digital marketing does not merely generate curiosity but also fosters long-term engagement with potential travelers.

Figure 3 Likelihood of Traveling After Viewing a Digital Ad

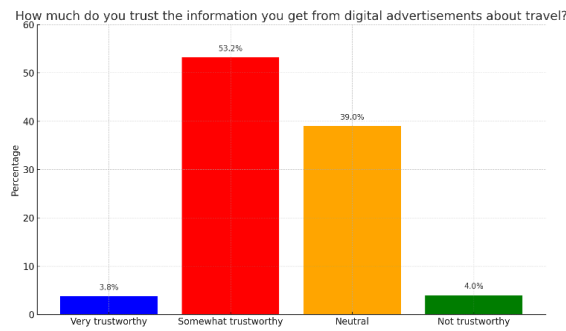
Figure 4 Factors Influencing Choice of Tourist Destination



3.5 Trust in Digital Marketing Content

Trust emerged as a multifaceted factor in evaluating digital marketing content. While 53.2% of respondents described their trust in digital ads as moderate, 39.0% remained neutral, and only 2.6% expressed high trust. Influencer marketing, in particular, played a significant role—respondents indicated greater trust in content produced by influencers who were perceived as authentic and relatable. Key trust-enhancing elements included transparent pricing, user-generated reviews, and personal storytelling. Conversely, respondents expressed skepticism toward content that appeared excessively commercial or exaggerated. These findings highlight the importance of credibility and perceived authenticity in the effectiveness of digital marketing efforts.

Figure 5 Level of Trust in Digital Travel Advertisements

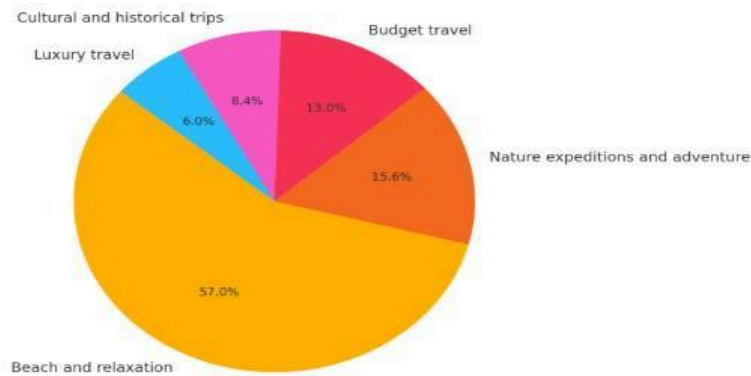


3.6 Preferences in Travel Choices

Digital marketing content appeared to significantly influence the types of trips that appealed to young people. Budget-friendly travel options were the most favored (13.0%), likely due to the economic constraints typical among students and young adults. The most popular travel category, however, was beach and relaxation trips (57.1%), followed by nature and adventure travel (15.6%), and cultural or historical tourism (7.8%). These preferences correlate closely with the visual and narrative styles prevalent on Instagram and TikTok, where users frequently share photogenic landscapes, cultural sites, and experiential travel. Thus, youth appear to prefer travel experiences that are memorable, affordable, visually appealing, and suitable for sharing on social media.

Figure 6 Preferred Types of Trips After Viewing Online Advertisements

What types of trips attract you the most after viewing online advertisements?



3.7 Domestic vs. International Travel Influence

A comparative analysis of digital marketing's influence on domestic versus international travel revealed nuanced differences. When asked about the influence of digital content on travel within Albania, 20.8% reported being strongly influenced, while 55.8% were somewhat influenced. For international travel, the influence was slightly higher, with 31.2% reporting strong influence and 57.1% indicating moderate influence. This suggests that

international travel decisions are more strongly impacted by digital content, possibly due to the greater need for information when planning foreign trips. Nonetheless, domestic campaigns promoting local heritage sites, hidden natural attractions, and regional events were also positively received, especially when disseminated through relatable and visually engaging digital formats.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this study confirm that digital marketing plays a pivotal role in shaping the travel behavior of Albanian youth. Through the strategic use of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Google, tourism stakeholders are able to influence perceptions, stimulate interest, and guide decision-making processes. The visual nature of these platforms, paired with influencer marketing and user-generated content, creates a dynamic and emotionally resonant environment where travel aspirations are born and nurtured. One of the study's most compelling insights is that digital marketing extends beyond the realm of advertising—it cultivates aspiration. Over 62% of respondents admitted that they had seriously considered visiting a destination after encountering it through digital media. This behavior is driven largely by emotionally engaging content, immersive storytelling, and authentic experiences, which resonate strongly with the 79.2% of participants aged 18–24—a generation that is both media-savvy and aspirational in its travel desires. Influencers emerged as key intermediaries in this process, not only promoting destinations but also establishing trust through perceived authenticity. Respondents demonstrated a moderate to high level of trust in digital content, especially when it was delivered by relatable influencers, backed by transparent information, and supported by user reviews. Equally important is the frequency and nature of digital exposure. Approximately 74.1% of participants reported encountering travel-related digital content at least several times per week. Interactions with such content—whether through clicks, shares, or saved posts—indicate that repeated and consistent exposure reinforces interest and can gradually lead to decision-making. However, the study also highlights a caveat: overly commercialized or exaggerated advertisements were met with skepticism, which can weaken the effectiveness of digital strategies. Therefore, tourism marketers must strike a balance between persuasive storytelling and honest, transparent communication to maintain trust and engagement. The results also point to strong potential in domestic tourism promotion. While digital marketing influenced both domestic and international travel, 76.6% of respondents stated they were influenced to travel within Albania after seeing digital content. Destinations that emphasized beach holidays (57.1%), nature-based experiences (15.6%), and cultural attractions (7.8%) were particularly appealing. Budget-friendly options emerged as the most attractive travel category, a finding consistent with the economic realities of student life, as over 83% of respondents identified as students, with many balancing part-time work. Regional tourism boards and private operators are thus encouraged to invest in localized digital campaigns that highlight accessible, culturally rich, and visually engaging destinations suited to this demographic. In conclusion, digital marketing represents a transformative force in how young Albanians discover, evaluate, and choose travel destinations. Social media platforms—especially those emphasizing visual storytelling and peer interaction—are central to this influence. The effectiveness of digital marketing lies not only in its reach but in its ability to create

authentic, aspirational narratives that inspire action. By strategically aligning their digital content with the preferences and behaviors of digitally active youth, tourism stakeholders in Albania can significantly enhance their visibility and competitiveness in both domestic and international markets. This study contributes to a growing body of literature on digital marketing and youth travel behavior, particularly within the context of emerging tourism economies like Albania. While the sample size limits broad generalizability, the findings provide valuable insights into current trends and suggest concrete avenues for tourism marketing development. Future research should consider expanding the sample and adopting longitudinal or comparative methods to further explore the evolving relationship between digital engagement and travel decisions in Albania and similar contexts.

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