

Influence of Social Networks on the Choice of Cultural Tourism Destination. Case study of Novi Sad and Rijeka as European Capitals of Culture

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ABSTRACT The emergence of social networks has brought significant changes to the tourism industry. Today, social networks are increasingly becoming alternatives to traditional media in the process of travel planning and travel decisions. The purpose of this research is to examine whether respondents believe that social networks facilitate communication and help simplify the process of gathering information when choosing a cultural tourism destination,

and whether they believe that the collected information is useful and relevant when choosing a destination. Likewise, a principal component analysis of exploratory factors (EFA) was conducted to identify social media factors that influence tourists' decisions on destination choice. The questionnaire was conducted among visitors to Rijeka and Novi Sad, as cities with a rich culture that were European Capitals of Culture in 2020 and 2022. A total of 208 citizens of Croatia and Serbia participated in the research. The research indicated that the respondents were partially satisfied with the information obtained on the official ECoC communication channels and with the content that attracted them to visit these destinations. The biggest difference was found regarding the source of information on social networks. The tourists who visited Novi Sad largely used Instagram as a source of information, which was not the case with visitors to Rijeka.

Key words: social networks, cultural tourism, European Capitals of Culture, Rijeka, Novi Sad.

1. Introduction

Travel and tourism are the most promising industries in the world, and information is crucial for their success. Social networks in the context of tourism are very important areas of research that help tourists and the tourism industry develop numerous new opportunities for travel plans and choices of tourist destinations (Čuić Tanković et al., 2022; Tham et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2020). Social networks allow users to connect with each other around the world, users have the opportunity to enjoy numerous benefits when it comes to choosing a tourist destination. In recent years, much attention has been given to the role of social networks in the selection of tourist destinations, including those of cultural tourism. Researchers around the world have focused their attention on this phenomenon by studying and analyzing in which ways and with what effects social networks shape the decisions of potential tourists in their choice of tourist destination (Tham, 2019; Süli and Martyin-Csamangó, 2020; Agyapong and Yuan, 2022).

Furthermore, researchers have shown that the hedonic, social, psychological, monetary and functional benefits of social networks have a significant positive impact on tourists' travel choices. The constant active presence of tourism practitioners on social networks is important, and through various tools such as blogs, videos, photos, virtual products and publishing information attracts potential tourists to the destinations (Čuić Tanković et al., 2022; Varga and Gabor, 2021; Alkier and Perić, 2021; Agyapong and Yuan, 2022). Using social networks, people become promoters of places they have visited or they live in, they can share their experiences in real time and recommend destinations without cost and with great credibility. Also, social networks, if they are used in appropriate ways, i.e. actively, reach a lot of potential users in a short time and with much less invested funds. Thus, they can be used for tourist services, purchases, influencing and sharing travel experiences (Icoz et al., 2018).

This paper will determine the importance of social networks for one of the most important European projects in the field of culture - the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) on the example of two cities: Rijeka in Croatia and Novi Sad in Serbia. The project has developed over the years and was initially presented as an “extended summer festival”, while today the activities take place throughout the year. The project aims to stimulate local cultural production with the help of cultural activities, revitalize the whole city, initiate the improvement of the city’s image, establish links between various regional structures and significantly improve the overall economy. The European Capital of Culture project has had a strong influence on cultural tourism in Europe, while producing an extraordinary and long-term effect. The programmes include activities in the fields of: visual arts, music arts, theatre arts, street parades and outdoor events, cultural heritage, international projects related to sports, gastronomy and the environment (Hadžić, 2018; Pivac et al., 2022).

Rijeka was designated as the European Capital of Culture 2020 in 2016. Rijeka is the first Croatian European Capital of Culture. This gave the city international attention, which would spread throughout the Western Balkans. Novi Sad was chosen as the European Capital of Culture for the year 2021 in 2016. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the title year was postponed to 2022. Novi Sad is the first city among the EU candidate countries to win a prestigious title.

These two cities were taken as an example because they were designated as European Capitals of Culture in two succeeding years, and the data, that is, the memories of the visitors, have still remained relatively fresh.

The main goals/research questions of the paper are the following:

- What are the social and demographic characteristics of tourists who visited Novi Sad and Rijeka?
- Which social networks are the primary and most reliable source of information in investigating Novi Sad and Rijeka as the European Capital of Culture?
- Which factors influence tourists’ decisions about choosing the destinations of Novi Sad and Rijeka?
- What differences exist between the perceptions of tourists visiting Rijeka and Novi Sad?

2. Literature review

The appearance of social networks has led to major changes in the tourism industry, as numerous online platforms, due to their popularity and ubiquity, have become inevitable tools in all stages of travel, including travel organization, time during the trip, and after. Social networks have not only transformed consumer communication, but have also simplified information accessibility at any time. Social networks are becom-

ing an increasingly significant part of how travellers look for information and make decisions since they are a great source of information about customer wants, requests, and reviews of goods and services (Marinakou et al., 2015; Yoo et al., 2011).

Social networking sites come in a variety of forms these days; some examples are Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Flickr, MySpace, Wikipedia, Google+, Second Life, Pinterest, LinkedIn, etc. which offers reviews of travel-related content. Social networking has altered consumer behaviour so that many travel agencies and suppliers now operate online to cater to these online shoppers who are looking for information and may even purchase travel-related items. Since the internet and social networks provide an efficient means of communication, the more these communities grow, the more opportunity there is for tourism businesses and destinations to profit. The amount of time people spend on social networks platforms has increased as a result of a daily increase in the number of users on these sites (Koçyiğit and Küçükcivil, 2022; Macarthy, 2015)

Research done by Čuić Tanković et al. (2022) has confirmed that social networks have an extremely positive influence on tourist activities and the information available on them, and that social networks, communication through them and searching for information on them greatly influence decisions in the process of choosing a tourist destination. In one research, researchers focused on studying the use of and trust in social networks in the process of travel preparation (before the trip, during the trip, and after the trip), while exploring which of them was the most effective for marketing purposes in the tourism industry (Matikiti-Manyever and Hattingh, 2020; Dwityas and Briandana, 2017; Varga and Gabor, 2021). One such research is about the influence of social networks on the way Chinese tourists plan travelling, considering the specificity and accessibility of social networks in China, and the use of Internet platforms and mobile applications, especially in terms of the power of social networks in the development and sustainability of tourism and the creation of tourist destinations (Yuan et al., 2022). Tešin et al. (2022) have determined in their research that Instagram, as the most used social network, is a very important source of information and inspiration when choosing a destination, and that travel-related content is the most followed content greatly increasing the users' interest in visiting certain destinations. Due to their prevalence and easy accessibility, social networks have a significant impact on the decision to choose a tourist destination in the population of college students, who learn about destinations on social networks. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for tourist destinations to use social networks as elements of marketing strategies to be competitive (Barman and Sharma, 2021). Similar is the research on how young generations, especially those of college students in South Africa, use social networks, which are easy to use, useful, and produce satisfaction among users, in choosing holiday tourism destinations. This research has shown that the mentioned features of social networks have a positive effect on the behaviour of their users, giving direction to the creators of social networks to develop websites that are credibly informative, attractive, fun,

and exciting, and that can easily attract the attention of young generations (Matikiti-Manyevere and Hattingh, 2020). Scientific research on the impact of social networks on tourism in Croatia has been intensified in recent years, and the explored topics are consistent with those examined around the world. One such research problematizes the relation of social networks, as a modern means of transmitting information, and deciding about choosing a tourist destination among the student population. In other words, it explores the ways in which the student population uses social networks to choose a holiday destination, the differences in inputs of social networks when deciding upon choosing a tourist destination with regard to age and financial status, and the practice of sharing experiences with other users (Anđelić and Grmuša, 2017). There is an interesting research showing in which ways tourists use social networks when travelling, i.e. whether they use them exclusively before the trip or after the trip, which is important for designing marketing strategies, as in the example of tourists from Portugal and the United Kingdom (Amaro and Duarte, 2017).

Several research studies on the impact of social networks on the tourism sector, refer to the evaluation of the impact of social networks on the choice of destinations of their users in the example of Algerian tourists (Merabet, 2020), Australian decision-makers (Tham et al., 2019) or those coming from China (Liu et al., 2020). The relationship between social networks, digital influencers and potential tourists was established in a research concluding that users of social networks use the networks mostly for travel planning and much less for sharing their own experiences with other tourists. Furthermore, it was shown that digital influencers do not have a significant impact on the decisions of potential tourists, but their followers show the intention of evaluating their recommendations of which destinations to visit, and share their experiences about it mostly on Instagram (Guerreiro et al., 2019). Further on, a study measuring the use and influence of social networks during the planning of a tourist trip and the level of trust that tourists attach to online tools compared to other available information has confirmed the very large, widespread use of social networks in all stages of planning a tourist trip. It also recognized social networks as the most reliable source of information, immediately after official tourist sites and recommendations from relatives and friends (de Souza and Machado, 2017).

Social media platforms can facilitate information exchange, help cultural and heritage organizations market and sell their products, and improve the experience for visitors. Information on events and activities is available to visitors on a regular basis. Additionally, various interpretations of objects might be provided by cultural institutions. Social networks can thereby boost visitor engagement and interaction (Karaca and Polat 2022).

Although numerous research studies discuss and analyze the impact of social networks on tourism in general, there are fewer that deal with the impact of social networks on specific forms of tourism. The influence that social networks have on festival tourism,

in which they are used as search tools, is presented in the paper by Ngenyung and Wu (2020). Bozdo (2018) analyzed the relationship between heritage tourism, i.e. cultural heritage and social networks, or the question of how nations, states, regions and cities transmit knowledge about their cultural heritage through social networks. The latter play an important role in searching for information, making decisions and promoting tourism, in an attempt to attract tourists, meet their expectations and provide them with a unique experience.

Nguyen et al. (2017) used visitor locations to geotag a collection of images from Flickr and Instagram that showed cultural heritage sites in Vietnam and Korea. They then produced a dataset based on the geotagged photos. According to the findings, people may extract far more valuable information from media data when combined with semantic tags to enhance their cultural travel experiences.

Within the context of cultural tourism resources, Peco-Torres et al. (2021) sought to identify the impact of social media use on customer brand loyalty, and examine how it affected brand personality perception. At this point, an analysis was conducted on the active Facebook and Twitter profiles of Alhambra, one of Spain's most significant landmarks. They came to the conclusion that consumer brand engagement was positively impacted by brand personality, and that social media use positively impacted brand perception.

According to the data of the CBI Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021), more and more young people participate in cultural tourism movements. Social media platforms should undoubtedly help cultural tourism businesses, particularly in terms of bringing young people's attention to the industry. For this group, social media has become an essential aspect of daily life and a great source of information (Kowalczyk-Anioł and Nowacki, 2020). According to a survey by Koçyiğit (2016), people in the 25–38 age range view social networks and the Internet as valuable resources of knowledge about cultural tourism, and as a means of inspiring them to travel.

The importance of social networks is shown by the data on their use in some of the previous European Capitals of Culture.

Table 1.
Use of certain social networks by the European capitals of culture

ECoC	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	LinkedIn
Arhus (2017)	73.728	5.653	/	1.654
Valletta (2018)	40.553	7.511	6.200	/
Matera (2019)	86.376	19.544	29.656	/

Sources: <https://valletta2018.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Final-Report-2018.pdf>; <https://valletta2018.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Final-Report-2018.pdf>; <https://hal.science/hal-03867391/document>

3. Methodology

The research was conducted from January to July, 2023. This study is mainly based on primary data collected by a structured questionnaire. The survey was conducted online via Google Form. The questionnaires were collected through the social networks Facebook and Instagram, and were sent to email addresses. The research participants were Croatian and Serbian citizens who visited Novi Sad or Rijeka as the European Capitals of Culture. The data collection was carried out using the method of simple random sampling, and 110 respondents who visited Novi Sad and 98 respondents who visited Rijeka took part in the research.

The questionnaire used in the research consists of 28 closed questions, which are divided into segments. The first segment contained 4 questions and was based on sociodemographic characteristics. The second segment contained 5 questions and was created by the authors in order to find out which social networks the respondents use, and how often. Also, the authors formed questions about which social networks the respondents were using to get information about Rijeka and Novi Sad as ECoC, to what extent they were satisfied with the information they received and which social network provided them with the best information. The third segment contained 19 questions about the population's views on the importance of social networks. This segment was formed based on earlier research that dealt with the same topic (Amaro and Duarte, 2017; Paul et al., 2019; Čuić Tanković et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2022).

The respondents expressed their views on a five-point Likert scale, choosing among the statements: 1. Absolutely disagree, 2. Partially disagree, 3. I have no opinion / I do not know, 4. Partially agree 5. Completely agree. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic profile of the respondents. Principal component exploratory factor analysis (EFA) has been applied to identify the factors of social media that influence tourists' destination selection decision. The EFA was carried out with the aim of grouping factors about information on social networks and to compare the views of respondents in two European capitals, and their possible differences. Likewise, descriptive analyses were conducted to show which social networks respondents used most often to get information about Novi Sad and Rijeka as cultural capitals, as well as which social networks were most useful to them. The data collected by the research were processed via IBM SPSS 23.

4. Results

In Table 1, it can be noticed that the majority of respondents for the city of Novi Sad are female (75.5%), between the ages of 21 and 30 (49.1%), with a bachelor (36.4%) and master's education (33.6%). Most respondents are employed (69.1%) and use social networks several times a day (84.5%). Among the respondents for the city of

Rijeka, it is noted that a higher number of respondents are also female (65.3%), older than 51 years (34.7%) and in the 31-40 category (29.6%). Most respondents have acquired a university graduate degree (35.7%) and PhD education (35.7%). Of the total respondents, 87.8% are employed, and 78.6% use social networks a few times a day.

Table 2.

Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (Novi Sad: n=110; Rijeka: n=98).

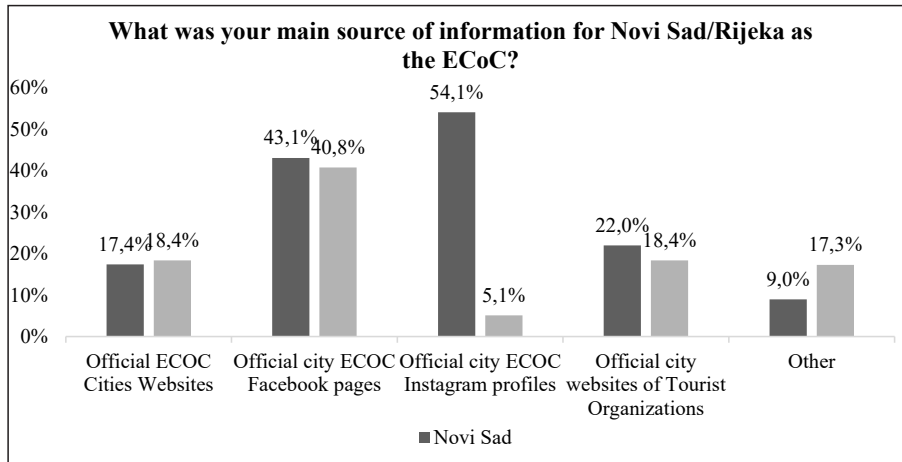
	NOVI SAD			RIJEKA		
		N	%		N	%
1. Gender	Male:	27	24.5	Male:	34	34.7
	Female:	83	75.5	Female:	64	65.3
2. Age	< 20	4	3.6	< 20	-	-
	21 -30	54	49.1	21 -30	9	9.2
	31 - 40	30	27.3	31 - 40	29	29.6
	41 – 50	13	11.8	41 – 50	26	26.5
	> 51	9	8.2	> 51	34	34.7
3. Level of Education	High school	20	18.2	High school	10	10.2
	Faculty degree	43	39.1	Faculty degree	47	48
	MSc/PhD degree	47	42.7	MSc/PhD degree	41	41.8
4. What is your employment status?	Employed	76	69.1	Employed	86	87.8
	Unemployed	6	5.4	Unemployed	6	6.1
	Student	28	25.5	Student	2	2.0
	Retired	-	-	Retired	4	4.1
5. How often do you use social media?	Once a week or less	3	2.7	Once a week or less	9	9.2
	A few times a week	6	5.5	A few times a week	4	4.1
	Once a day	8	7.3	Once a day	8	8.2
	A few times a day	93	84.5	A few times a day	77	78.6

Source: prepared by the authors, 2024

Based on the analysis of the obtained data, it is observed that respondents from the survey for the city of Novi Sad use Instagram, Facebook and YouTube to the greatest extent (each network is used by 80.7% of the respondents). Other social networks (LinkedIn; Pinterest; Twitter; etc.) are used to a lesser extent. Respondents from the survey for the city of Rijeka mostly use Facebook (86.7%), YouTube (69.4%) and Instagram (57.1%). Other networks (LinkedIn, TripAdvisor; Twitter; etc.) are used to a lesser extent.

Graph 1.

Source of information for Novi Sad and Rijeka as the ECoC

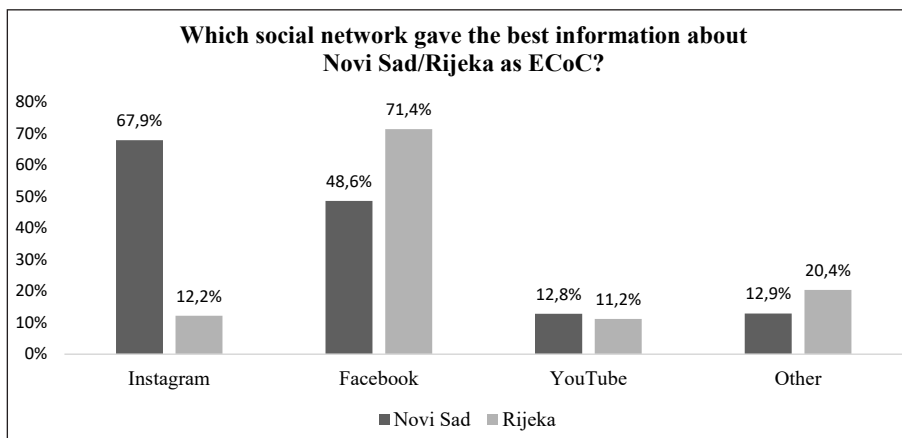


Source: prepared by the authors, 2024

Graph 1 shows the primary sources of information about the European Capital of Culture, Novi Sad and Rijeka. The respondents mostly used the same social networks as a source of information to a similar extent. However, a significant difference is observed in using Instagram as an informational social network, whereby the respondents for Novi Sad use it significantly more.

Graph 2.

Information about Novi Sad and Rijeka as ECoC



Source: prepared by the authors, 2024

Graph 2 shows the difference in respondents' answers, whereby the respondents for Novi Sad, to a greater extent, consider that Instagram provided more helpful information. In contrast, the respondents for Rijeka believe they received more significant information on Facebook.

On a five-point Likert scale, the respondents had to express to what extent they were satisfied with the information they could find on social networks about Novi Sad and Rijeka as European Capitals of Culture. The results show that the respondents in both cases are partially satisfied with the information received, 35.5% for the city of Rijeka and slightly more from the Novi Sad part of the survey (40.9%).

Principal component exploratory factor analysis (EFA)

The scale that indicated the use of social networks in the case of choosing Novi Sad as a destination for a visit showed high significance ($\alpha=.9.19$). In order to isolate the factors of social media that influence the decision of tourists to choose a destination, Principal component exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted, with Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalization. The Kaiser-Meier-Olkin (KMO) sampling adequacy measure was satisfactory 0.875 and the Bartlett test confirmed the adequacy of the factor analysis ($\chi^2=1511.5$, $df=171$, $p<0.01$). Such results indicate that factor analysis is suitable for these data (Tabachnick et al., 2013).

Three significant factors stood out with a total of 66.48% of the variance explained. Factor 1 (10 items) refers to obtaining information about the destination through social networks. Factor 2 (5 items) related to the factors that influenced tourists to make a decision to visit Novi Sad, while Factor 3 (4 items) related to the transfer of information and experiences on social networks after the trip (Table 2).

Table 3.
Principal component exploratory factor analysis (EFA) – Novi Sad

Items	Search for information	Decision making	Social media word of mouth
	$\alpha = 0.924$	$\alpha = 0.874$	$\alpha = 0.877$
Through social networks, I found out about Novi Sad as ECoC	0.843		
Through social networks, I received information about Novi Sad as ECoC that I could not find anywhere else	0.864		
Through social networks, I found the information I was looking for about Novi Sad faster than with other sources	0.802		
The information I needed was available at the right time	0.729		
Social networks are an easier way to get information than other sources	0.559		
Social networks provided the necessary information about the destination's culture and heritage, and contributed to a better understanding	0.569		
Through social networks, I researched all the destinations/locations that I want to visit in Novi Sad as an ECoC	0.847		
Social networks helped me to learn more about cultural routes in Novi Sad as ECoC	0.881		
The information I gathered through social networks influenced my final choice to visit Novi Sad	0.691		
During the trip, I searched for information about attractions and activities in Novi Sad	0.495		
Other people's 'tour reviews' on social media helped me choose a destination		0.663	
The photos of the tourist spot shared on social media attracted me to visit this place		0.902	
The videos shared on social media influenced me to choose this destination		0.95	
Social networks helped me choose the right time to visit this destination		0.596	
I posted photos on the social networks I use			0.653
I posted the video on social networks			0.74
I wrote reviews and comments for visited places and/or monuments			0.88
I wrote comments and reviews on social networks for the activities I experienced			0.937
I shared my thoughts and experiences after the trip on social networks			0.864

Source: prepared by the authors, 2024

The scale that indicated the use of social networks in the case of choosing Rijeka as a destination for a visit also showed high significance ($\alpha=.938$). As with the scale related to Novi Sad, Principal component exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted, with Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalization. The Kaiser-Meier-Olkin (KMO) sampling adequacy measure was satisfactory 0.834 and the Bartlett test confirmed the adequacy of the factor analysis ($\chi^2=1899.2$, $df=171$, $p<0.01$). Such results indicate that factor analysis is suitable for these data (Tabachnick et al., 2013).

In the case of the questionnaire conducted among respondents in Rijeka, two significant factors stood out with a total of 60.08% of explained variance (Table 3). Factor 1 (14 items) connects Factor 1 and Factor 2 extracted from the questionnaire conducted in Novi Sad, more specifically, obtaining information about the destination through social networks and factors related to the factors that influenced tourists to make a decision to visit the destination. Factor 2 (5 items) is identical to Factor 3 from the previous scale, and also refers to sharing information and experiences on social networks after the trip.

Table 4.
Principal component exploratory factor analysis (EFA) – Rijeka

Items	Search for information and decision making	Social media word of mouth
	$\alpha = .954$	$\alpha = .914$
Through social networks, I found out about Rijeka as ECoC	.788	
Through social networks, I received information about Rijeka as an ECoC that I could not find anywhere else	.772	
Through social networks, I found the information I was looking for about Rijeka faster than with other sources	.782	
The information I needed was available at the right time	.577	
Social networks are an easier way to get information than other sources	.840	
Other people's 'tour reviews' on social media helped me choose a destination	.750	
The photos of the tourist spot shared on social media attracted me to visit this place	.783	
The videos shared on social media influenced me to choose this destination	.835	
Social networks helped me choose the right time to visit this destination	.827	

Items	Search for information and decision making	Social media word of mouth
Social networks provided the necessary information about the destination's culture and heritage, and contributed to a better understanding	.884	
Through social networks, I researched all the destinations/locations that I want to visit in Rijeka as an ECoC	.820	
Social networks helped me to learn more about cultural routes in Rijeka like ECoC	.850	
The information I gathered through social networks influenced my final choice to visit Rijeka	.823	
During the trip, I searched for information about attractions and activities in Rijeka	.703	
I posted photos on the social networks I use		.785
I posted the video on social networks		.837
I wrote reviews and comments for visited places and/or monuments		.902
I wrote comments and reviews on social networks for the activities I experienced		.918
I shared my thoughts and experiences after the trip on social networks		.872

Source: prepared by the authors, 2024

The obtained results show that the influences on the destination selection process of Novi Sad and Rijeka as European capitals of culture can be classified into two or three categories. It is about information that potential tourists can find through social networks and comments and reviews of other travellers who have visited the destinations before. Also, as an important factor, the time after the trip that tourists set aside to convey their experience from the destination by sharing content and comments on their social networks, thereby significantly contributing to the promotion of the destination, stands out. The factors identified in both destinations in this research coincide with earlier research (Paul et al., 2019; Čuić Tanković et al., 2022).

Table 5.
Comparative mean values of all variables Novi Sad/Rijeka

Items	Novi Sad		Rijeka	
	M	SD	M	SD
Through social networks, I found out about destinations like ECoC	3.4	1.5360	2.8	1.5442
Through social networks, I got information about destinations like ECoC that I could not find anywhere else	3.3	1.4406	2.9	1.3384
Through social networks, I found the information I was looking for about destinations faster compared to other sources	4	1.2295	3.3	1.3050
The information I needed was available at the right time	3.8	1.2280	3.5	1.1947
Social networks are an easier way to get information than other sources	4.2	1.0063	3.8	1.0843
Social networks provided the necessary information about the destination's culture and heritage, and contributed to a better understanding	3.5	1.2611	3.3	1.2485
Through social networks, I researched all the destinations/locations I want to visit in the city as an ECoC	3.6	1.1916	3.1	1.3384
Social networks helped me to learn more about cultural routes in the city like ECoC	3.6	1.2983	3.1	1.2834
The information I gathered through social media influenced my final choice of destinations to visit	3.4	1.2949	2.9	1.3969
During the trip, I searched for information about attractions and activities in the city	3.9	1.1521	3.5	1.3023
Other people's 'tour reviews' on social media helped me choose a destination	3.8	1.2280	3.4	1.3166
The photos of the tourist spot shared on social media attracted me to visit this place	4.1	1.0095	3.5	1.3412
The videos shared on social media influenced me to choose this destination	4	.9626	3.3	1.3664
Social networks helped me choose the right time to visit this destination	3.7	1.1344	3.3	1.3340
I posted photos on the social networks I use	3.1	1.5308	2.8	1.6749
I posted the video on social networks	2.4	1.4936	2.1	1.4775
I wrote reviews and comments for visited places and/or monuments	2	1.2671	1.9	1.3245
I wrote comments and reviews on social networks for the activities I experienced	2	1.2883	1.9	1.3384
I shared my thoughts and experiences after the trip on social networks	2.3	1.4255	2.4	1.5077

Source: prepared by the authors, 2024

From the previous table (Table 4), it can be concluded that the respondents who visited both cities are satisfied with the information they received through social networks and the content that attracted them to visit these destinations (Factor 1 and 2 Novi Sad, Factor 1 Rijeka), taking into account that for the mentioned factors, all mean values are over 2.5. Somewhat lower values are reflected in the degree of agreement of respondents in both cities that after the visit they will share their experiences and comments on social networks related to their trip (Factor 3 Novi Sad, Factor 2 Rijeka).

All the mean values stated by the respondents who visited Novi Sad are higher than the values stated by the respondents who visited Rijeka. Only in the segment related to sharing experiences and comments after the trip (Factor 2 Novi Sad, Factor 3 Rijeka), the respondents from both destinations have similar attitudes, and the mean values for these statements are similar. The biggest difference in the attitudes of the respondents was observed in the statements related to whether they learned about the destination as ECoC through social networks (Novi Sad, $M= 3.4$; Rijeka, $M=2.8$), as well as the opinion that information can be obtained faster through social networks compared to other sources (Novi Sad, $M= 4$; Rijeka, $M=3.3$). Also, the respondents' opinion differed regarding the content on social networks attracting them to visit the destination. Thus, the respondents who visited Novi Sad stated more often that the photos (Novi Sad, $M= 4.1$; Rijeka, $M=3.5$) and video recordings (Novi Sad, $M= 4$; Rijeka, $M=3.3$) motivated them to visit these two cities as destinations that are European capitals of culture.

5. Discussion

The study examined the connection between the use of social networks and the decision to travel to a cultural tourism destination. As Rijeka and Novi Sad were ECoC in 2020 and 2022, a questionnaire was formed based on existing literature to analyze to what extent respondents consider that social networks ease communication and information gathering. Furthermore, it was important to examine whether social networks directly influenced people to visit one of these two cities as a city of rich culture and the European capital of culture.

Research has shown that respondents rely heavily on social networks in all spheres of life, using them a few times a day, which is no exception when planning a trip. Social networks are significant before, during and after a trip (Cohen et al., 2014), as they play a key role, from the travel impulse awakening after viewing a picture or video on social media, to trip realization and the further sharing of their experiences. The obtained results are in line with previous studies (Matikiti-Manyevere and Kruger, 2019; Paul et al., 2019; Salamzadeh et al., 2022; Čuić Tanković et al., 2022; Abbasi et al., 2023) in terms of social media influence on the decision-making process.

Social networks are part of everyday life, considering that 84.5% of respondents from Novi Sad use them several times a day. In comparison, 78.6% of respondents from Rijeka use networks several times a day. Himangshu et al. (2019) point out that social networks are becoming integral to life since they are used for private and social purposes, whereby being a key factor when choosing a destination (Matikiti-Manyevere and Kruger, 2019). This fact contributes to the result that respondents used social networks as the primary source of information in the case of choosing Novi Sad or Rijeka as a destination for a visit. Tourists use social networks as a tool in their decision-making process. It is assumed that social networks have a more significant influence when it comes to a less known and still unvisited destination. In contrast, social networks mostly do not have a more significant influence on people for inexpensive short trips to familiar destinations (Tham et al., 2020). Mobile social media (MSM) like Instagram and Snapchat allow tourists to instantaneously, with a high level of expressivity, share their travel experience, thanks to the ability to access networks almost anytime and anywhere (Chen et al., 2023). Thanks to the numerous posts by other users on social networks about Novi Sad and Rijeka as ECoC, photos (Novi Sad, $M = 4.1$; Rijeka, $M = 3.5$) and videos (Novi Sad, $M = 4.0$; Rijeka, $M = 3.3$) influenced respondents to visit these destinations.

Electronic Word of Mouth (EWoM) includes online reviews as a trusted source of product information (Litvin et al., 2008), which deliver user-oriented information about products and services to potential consumers, as positive or negative recommendations, and have a strong influence on their decision-making process (Sotiriadis, 2017). Travel websites and social media allow travellers to share their experiences in an interactive platform, which has a significant influence on destination image, as they have changed the way people buy and consume travel products (Ilieva, 2022). Although online reviews are vital for the decision-making process nowadays, the research showed that they partially influence the respondents during the decision-making process (Novi Sad, $M = 3.8$; Rijeka, $M = 3.4$), despite the fact they do not have the habit of leaving reviews directly for the visited places (Novi Sad, $M = 2$; Rijeka, $M = 1.9$), nor on social networks (Novi Sad, $M = 2$; Rijeka, $M = 1.9$). Mitić (2020) attributes the habit of leaving comments to a lesser extent by residents of Serbia and Croatia to the fact that these are the countries, according to Hofstede's dimension, belonging to the cluster of collectivism within the group, which is characterized by less frequent initiation of eWoM and leaving reviews, with less trust in them, opposed to the states that belong to the cluster in individualism within the group.

In the city of Matera (Italy), during the 2019 - ECoC year, the expression "Matera ChangeMakers" appeared, which refers to persons whose task is to support cultural projects from the logistical side, through communication with the public, primarily through social networks (Rotolo, 2022). This supports the claim that social networks are essential for informing the public. Although social networks are one of the primary

sources of information, respondents used social networks to a lesser extent as the only source of information (Novi Sad, $M = 3.3$; Rijeka, $M = 2.9$), but in this manner, they obtained the necessary information faster (Novi Sad, $M = 4$; Rijeka, $M = 3.3$).

The European Capital of Culture project has numerous advantages, but there are also some disadvantages. Liverpool was the ECoC in 2008, which led to numerous negative comments and feelings from the inhabitants, where the inaccurate representation of the city and the manipulation of actual data were highlighted (Boland, 2010). Anyone can post on social networks, so it is necessary to check the accuracy of the available information. At the same time, the positive thing is that the obtained results show that respondents stated that besides the official websites of the ECoC and Tourism Organizations, they also use social networks, where complete information can be acquired. In this way, the spreading of false information can be prevented.

6. Conclusion

Tourism represents the most promising industry in the world, and social networks, as an important source of information (de Souza and Machado, 2017), have become a significant factor influencing the plans and intentions of tourists during the choice of tourist destinations. In recent years, much attention has been paid to the role of social networks in the selection of tourist destinations, including those of cultural tourism. Although numerous studies deal with analyzing the impact of social networks on tourism in general, there are fewer that deal with the impact of social networks on specific forms of tourism such as cultural tourism (Bozdo, 2018; Ly and Ly, 2020; Wachyuni and Wiweka, 2019).

This paper presented the importance of social networks for one of the most important European projects in the field of culture - the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) on the example of two cities: Rijeka in Croatia and Novi Sad in Serbia. Also, this study investigated whether respondents who visited Novi Sad and Rijeka, as European capitals of culture, believed that social networks facilitate communication and help to simplify the process of gathering information when choosing a cultural tourism destination, and whether they believed that the collected information is useful and relevant when choosing a destination.

The obtained results show that the influences on the process of selecting the destinations of Novi Sad and Rijeka as European capitals of culture can be classified into two or three categories. Potential tourists can find information through social networks and comments, and reviews of other travellers who have visited the destinations before. The time after the trip that tourists set aside to convey their experience of the destination by sharing content and comments on their social networks, thereby significantly contributing to the promotion of the destination, is singled out as an

important factor. The factors identified in both destinations in this research coincide with earlier research (Paul et al., 2019; Čuić Tanković et al., 2022).

The results of this paper showed that the respondents were partially satisfied with the information they received about Rijeka (35.5%) and Novi Sad (40.9%) as the European Capital of Culture (ECoC). On the other hand, looking at individual variables, it can be concluded that respondents who visited both cities were satisfied with the content that attracted them to visit these destinations. Somewhat lower values were observed in the views of respondents regarding the interaction on social networks about these destinations after the trip (sharing experiences, comments, etc.). As with the general attitude about satisfaction with information, all the mean values of the variables stated by the respondents who visited Novi Sad are higher than the values stated by the respondents who visited Rijeka. The exception is the segment related to the exchange of experiences and comments after the trip, in which respondents from both destinations have similar attitudes.

Although there is a gap in research on the importance of social media for cultural tourism in the current academic literature, especially in the case of research on cities as European cultural hubs, this work makes an exceptional contribution to both academic literature and tourism managers. So far, no research has been conducted that studies the attitudes of tourists about the use of social networks when choosing a specific destination as the European Capital of Culture. Therefore, this study provides a contribution in the form of a measurement tool that will be able to be used in further research on this topic, in other destinations that are, or will become, European Capitals of Culture. Understanding the behaviour of tourists belonging to different cultures is crucial to increasing the effectiveness of communication on social networks because online strategies can be adapted to the specific culture. It can provide a starting point for researchers interested in comparing the social uses of media for travel purposes between different cultures, as there is a limited number of works dealing with this topic. Likewise, this study provides useful insights for destination tourism planning managers and tourism service providers to understand tourists' needs and attitudes toward using social media for this purpose.

Some subsequent research can be directed toward certain age categories, because it is a fact, and this research has shown that different age categories use different ways of informing, especially in terms of social media.

Social networks in the context of tourism are very important areas of research that help tourists and the tourism industry develop numerous new opportunities.

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Ethics Statement: Our research involves humans nevertheless not as experimental research but as a part of survey research, which is anonymous and does not involve collecting any personal data of respondents. As such, this kind of research does not require special Ethical committee approval in Serbia where the research was conducted, as it is in line with the national Law on Personal Data Protection (The Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, number 97/08; further: The Law). The national Law on Personal Data Protection is aligned with the current standards of the relevant European documents, and in particular with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The Law applies to the processing of personal data in the context of the activities of an establishment of a controller or a processor in the Republic of Serbia, regardless of whether the processing takes place in the Republic of Serbia or not.

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Utjecaj društvenih mreža na izbor destinacije kulturnog turizma. Studija slučaja: Novi Sad i Rijeka kao europske prijestolnice kulture

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Sažetak

Pojava društvenih mreža donijela je značajne promjene u turističkoj industriji. Danas društvene mreže sve više postaju alternativa tradicionalnim medijima u procesu planiranja putovanja i odlučivanja o putovanju. Svrha ovog istraživanja je ispitati smatraju li ispitanici da društvene mreže olakšavaju komunikaciju i proces prikupljanja informacija pri odabiru destinacije kulturnog turizma te jesu li prikupljene informacije korisne i relevantne pri odabiru destinacije. Također, provedena je analiza glavnih komponenti istraživačkih čimbenika (EFA) kako bi se identificirali čimbenici društvenih medija koji utječu na odluke turista o izboru odredišta. Upitnik je proveden među posjetiteljima Rijeke i Novog Sada, kao gradova bogate kulture koji su bili europske prijestolnice kulture 2020. i 2022. godine. U istraživanju je ukupno sudjelovalo 208 građana Hrvatske i Srbije. Istraživanje je pokazalo da su ispitanici djelomično zadovoljni informacijama dostupnima na službenim komunikacijskim kanalima EPK i sadržajem koji ih je privukao da posjete ta odredišta. Najveća razlika odnosila se na izvor informacija na društvenim mrežama. Naime, turisti koji su posjetili Novi Sad u velikoj su mjeri koristili Instagram kao izvor informacija, što nije slučaj s posjetiteljima Rijeke.

Ključne riječi: društvene mreže, kulturni turizam, Europske prijestolnice kulture, Rijeka, Novi Sad.