AN APPROACH TO DIGITAL MARKETING IN THE TOURISM SECTOR: AN ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GENERATION Y AND Z CONSUMERS

UNA APROXIMACIÓN AL MARKETING DIGITAL EN EL SECTOR TURÍSTICO: UN ANÁLISIS DESDE LA PERSPECTIVA DE LOS CONSUMIDORES DE LAS GENERACIONES Y Y Z

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Abstract

As the tourism sector is characterised by its strong connection between its operators and consumers, and this connection has adapted in line with the technological improvements that have been made, there is currently a great deal of influence from the ntire digital environment that surrounds today's society. With the latest digital transformations, consumers have become more informed, demanding and have a digital purchasing behaviour, using digital media more frequently at all stages of their decision-making and purchasing process. Tourism has therefore recognised this opportunity and has increasingly begun to integrate the various digital platforms into its business strategies, particularly its marketing strategies. Against this backdrop, this study aims to achieve the general objective of understanding the perception of Generation Y and Z tourism portugueses consumers in relation to the digital tools and strategies used by tour operators. To this end, the methodology used consisted of questionnaires to individuals

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belonging to Generations Y and Z, living in Portugal, from which a sample of 251 respondents was obtained. Given the results, it can be seen that the Portuguese tourism consumer has a positive but demanding perspective on tour operators' digital strategies, especially Generation Z.

Keywords: digital marketing, tourist experience, marketing strategies, generation Y and Z.

JEL Classification: M31

Resumen

El sector turístico se caracteriza por una fuerte conexión entre sus operadores y los consumidores, y esta conexión se ha ido adaptando en función de las mejoras tecnológicas que se han ido produciendo, por lo que actualmente existe una gran influencia de todo el entorno digital que rodea a la sociedad actual. Con las últimas transformaciones digitales, los consumidores se han vuelto más informados, exigentes y tienen un comportamiento de compra digital, utilizando con mayor frecuencia los medios digitales en todas las fases de su proceso de decisión y compra. Por ello, el turismo ha reconocido esta oportunidad y ha comenzado a integrar cada vez más las distintas plataformas digitales en sus estrategias empresariales, en particular en sus estrategias de marketing. En este contexto, el presente estudio pretende alcanzar el objetivo general de conocer la percepción de los consumidores turísticos de las generaciones Y y Z en relación con las herramientas y estrategias digitales utilizadas por los operadores turísticos. Para ello, la metodología utilizada consistió en la realización de cuestionarios a individuos portugueses pertenecientes a las Generaciones Y y Z, residentes en Portugal, de los que se obtuvo una muestra de 251 encuestados. A la vista de los resultados, se observa que el consumidor turístico portugués tiene una perspectiva positiva pero exigente sobre las estrategias digitales de los touroperadores, especialmente la Generación Z.

Palabras clave: marketing digital, experiencia turística, estrategias de marketing, generación Y y Z.

Clasificación JEL: M31

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the tourism sector has been one of the economic sectors that most contributes to the development of a country and its society, boosting its modernisation and competitive positioning in international markets (Agostinho *et al.*, 2022). In Portugal, tourism has seen its relevance increase and due to the peculiarities, that are associated with other dimensions of the economic scenario (such as real estate, agro and viniculture, transport, trade, among others) it is distinctly provided with tools that help the development and overall growth of the Portuguese economy (Coelho, 2022; Perinotto and Siqueira, 2018).

In a post-pandemic environment and alongside the constant evolution of the factors that influence the sector and that the sector influences (economy, trade, trends, climate, characteristics of the tourist consumers themselves, etc.), tourism has had to move into a more digital era (Pereira, 2022). In this sense, digital marketing has allowed tourism organisations and companies to recover and grow by integrating it as a tool in their processes and thus enabling more direct contact between the tourist and the tourist destination, despite the physical distance between the two (Abrantes and Sousa, 2021), as well as keeping up with and making use of an abundance of information shared via the internet (Pereira, 2022).

Currently, growth depends on various factors related to the digital world, such as tour operators' capacity for innovation, the creation and improvement of new products, personalisation of service to their audience and the ability to optimise travel experiences, among others (Bizinelli *et al.*, 2018; Biz *et al.*, 2014).

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A tourist experience is an individual, subjective and unrepeatable occurrence, made up of activities and events that provide high emotional significance for the individual, through the consumption of products and services from a particular tourist destination (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Novo, 2020). As an innovative and constantly evolving market, digitalisation has enabled transformations that make the tourism product tangible through multimedia content (photos, videos, news), which anticipates the sensations expected from a given tourism experience and creates closer communication and greater trust between companies and tourists through social networks and other digital tools (Perinotto and Siqueira, 2018).

Generation Y (or Millennials), Generation Z and even Generation Alpha are segments that are already very familiar with the use and terminology of the digital world, making them a favourable target audience for new digital marketing strategies (Munsch, 2021). According to Kerdpitak (2021), the younger generations are increasingly adapted to this new digital age, representing a highly relevant factor that must be prioritised in order to boost the tourism sector and its associated sectors. Existing studies on this topic in tourism only explore emerging trends and social implications related to the new generations in tourism, highlighting how digitalisation shapes their experiences (Monaco, 2018) and investigate the disruptive behaviour of Generation Z in tourism, focusing on the impact of social media platforms and digital trends such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence (Baltescu, 2019). In this sense, we can see that there are gaps in the understanding of how younger generations interact digitally in the tourism sector.

In order to help fill the gap in scientific-academic knowledge on the subject of tourism marketing and consumer perception, this research aims to understand the perception of Generation Y and Z tourism consumers in relation to the digital tools and strategies used by tour operators, with the application of a questionnaire to these portuguese generations. Taking into account the above considerations and the defined objective, this research seeks to answer the following research questions:

Q1. How do tourism consumers from Generations Y and Z perceive digital marketing strategies?

Q2. Which marketing digital tools do Generation Y and Z consumers use most in their tourist experience?

Q3. What are the reasons that lead Generations Y and Z to use digital media in their tourist experience?

Q4. Which social networks do Generations Y and Z use most for their tourist experience?

This research aims to contribute to the body of theory on the subject of digital marketing and the online behaviour of generations Y and Z in tourism, thus contributing new evidence to scientific knowledge from an interdisciplinary perspective, through inputs for tourism and marketing in general and for the management of tourist destinations in particular.

To this end, a theoretical framework will initially be provided on the topics covered in the research, such as the tourism sector, digital marketing in tourism and the Digital Native Generation, followed by a presentation of the methodology, analysis and discussion of the results and, finally, the conclusions of the study.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Tourism and digital marketing

The tourism sector is considered a key element in a country's socio-economic development, with a major influence on economic growth and establishing itself as one of, if not the largest,

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exporting economic activity (Coelho, 2022). The same author mentions that tourism works with a set of elements that motivate travel and thus generate demand, which are associated with the production of goods or services for travelling, activities, accommodation and other amenities in the desired destinations, which are called tourism products. According to the UNWTO (2019), some of the trends among tourism consumers include: capturing moments in places that are attractive on social media; looking for places and activities that emphasise well-being and a healthier lifestyle; travelling solo or with multigenerational groups; increasing awareness of environmental issues and sustainability policies; and looking for more authentic and transformative experiences on an emotional and spiritual level. The positive impact of social trends on tourism also includes learning about different cultures, increasing tolerance and inclusion of minorities, investing in art and culture, as well as valuing diverse communities and their particularities (Shankar, 2021).

Along with technological evolution, the tourism sector has reached an era that can be called Tourism 4.0, where high-tech ecological systems are valued for the production of services and where there is an orientation according to certain principles, such as: digitalisation, decentralisation of processes, collection and analysis of data in real time, orientation of services towards customers, interoperability of communication and flexibility in adapting to changes in strategic models. The concept of Tourism 4.0 thus refers to new digital technologies, which are associated with variables such as connectivity, digitalisation processes, augmented and virtual reality, artificial intelligence, digital presence, innovation, among others (Pencarelli, 2020).

Today, the virtual and the real, as well as the analogue and the digital, are merging in people's daily lives and with the aim of making brands a relevant part of their lives, companies are looking to apply marketing strategies with greater involvement, more consumer-centric and measurable, through digital marketing which makes it possible to personalise the offer and information while sending it out en masse, according to previously defined marketing objectives (Armstrong and Kotler, 2012; Calhariz, 2019).

Searching for tourist information on the internet is an extremely common action and has been transforming the way people find out about, plan and consume tourist experiences (Bizinelli *et al.*, 2018) and digital marketing has thus contributed to the management and execution of marketing, through electronic means together with digital data, on the characteristics and behaviour of customers (Chaffey and Smith, 2012). In this way, digital marketing in tourism has become a means of strengthening tour operators' links with the local community and with current and potential tourists, who in turn purchase tourism products and services online with great ease, comparing them with each other and globally (Almeida 2021; Bizinelli *et al.*, 2018).

Some of the advantages for both companies and consumers associated with the application of digital marketing in the tourism sector are (Abrantes and Sousa, 2021; Baeshen and Rahmoun, 2021; Shankar, 2021; Perinotto and Siqueira, 2018): greater consumer engagement; personalisation of the tourist experience; exposure in search engine results; high influence of social networks in the tourism industry; possibility of analysing the content and perception generated by tourists; saving time/convenience; access to and dissemination of a wide variety of tourism products anytime, anywhere; and creation of stable market positioning.

Some of the most significant trends involving tourism and digital marketing reported by Gelter (2017) focus on a more informed and experienced global consumer; on combining the authenticity of real experiences with digital and augmented reality experiences; on the spread of new customs and new values; on the almost constant sharing of moments experienced on social media; on the transparency of communication channels; and on the change from producer-generated content to user-generated content.

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In the tourism sector, there are digital intermediaries (online platforms) that help tour operators and tourism consumers establish a network of connections and overcome moments of mistrust by providing feedback and testimonials from previous consumers (Casais *et al.*, 2020). The same authors report this potential for involvement in the co-creation process facilitates the creation of satisfaction and loyalty on the part of consumers, as they feel like active and valued participants in the production of their tourist experience. Whether or not tour operators are able to take advantage of the full potential of the digital transformation does not depend on their access to or ability to own these media, but rather on their ability to keep up with this development and improve their skills in utilising the online resources available (Flynn *et al.*, 2021).

It is therefore important for them to know which digital tools to apply to their business model, because through them it is possible to learn about, analyse, promote and sell a company's products/services, taking into account the objectives defined by the business. Some of these tools are: website, CRM, Email Marketing, Mobile Marketing, Social Media, Content Marketing, Search Marketing, Marketing Analytics (measuring results) (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick *et al.* 2009; Kirtiş and Karahan, 2011; Ryan *et al.*, 2017).

On the other hand, the application of digital marketing in the tourism sector provides greater consumer involvement, personalisation of the tourist experience, exposure in search engine results, the high influence of social networks in the tourism industry, the possibility of analysing the content and perception of tourists, time savings/convenience, access to and dissemination of a wide variety of tourism products, anytime and anywhere and the creation of a stable position in the market (Abrantes and Sousa, 2021; Baeshen and Rahmoun, 2021; Shankar, 2021; Perinotto and Siqueira, 2018).

2.2. Digital networks in tourism

In the tourism sector, social networks have provided a wide range of resources for companies, enabling them to increase their ability to communicate and interact with their followers, promote their business, inform their customers and boost the internationalisation of their brand (Agostinho *et al.*, 2022). For these authors the digital platforms are used by tour operators as an instrument for fluid communication with all their partners (suppliers, vendors, consumers) and, through social networks, customers become part of the creation of the value chain, exercising greater authority in the decisions, connection and commercialisation of products. The application of social networks in tourism promotes relationships between all tourism stakeholders, boosts the dissemination of promotional material through multimedia content, aids the creation of promotional texts and images of tourist experiences and facilitates the real-time dissemination of information about tourist destinations (Alves, 2010; Kerdpitak, 2022).

Tourism consumers are actively looking for inspiration and to learn about the experiences of other users, so the incorporation of images and texts into social media becomes an important factor in influencing tourist satisfaction and future behaviour (Ferrer-Rosell *et al.*, 2022). According to Hysa *et al.* (2021), some of the behaviours observed by tourist consumers on social media are based on planning the trip, understanding the history and culture of the place to visit, looking for possible obstacles to visiting certain destinations, establishing relationships with the local community, checking opinions about the tourist destination, looking for accommodation and making decisions based on positive or negative reviews of the place. The data obtained on consumers through social media allows profiles of potential customers to be created, making promotional messages more effective and reaching potential consumers, encouraging them to visit a certain destination (Hysa *et al.*, 2021).

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2.3. Digital consumer behaviour in tourism

Consumer behaviour is an object of study that is of great importance to the success of any strategy, whether it be in terms of communication, marketing, management or business, and consists of much more than just understanding the consumer's act of purchase, as there is a need to understand what motivates them in the pre-purchase process and what caused them to feel (un)satisfied after the purchase (Cline *et al.*, 2011). Over time, consumer behaviour has changed as a result of the economic, social, environmental, cultural and many other developments that have taken place around them. As a result, the consumer is no longer a passive element in the purchasing process, but an active element, co-author of a non-linear dialogue and the bearer of consumer confidence that is horizontal and not vertical as before (Barbosa and Medaglia, 2019; Kartajaya *et al.*, 2017). Applied to the tourism sector, consumer behaviour has certain specificities which, according to Juvan *et al.* (2017), allow us to establish a certain pattern of behaviour characterised by 9 key concepts such as purchasing decision; motivation; self-concept; expectations; attitude; perception; satisfaction; trust and loyalty.

On the other hand, some of the most significant trends involving tourism and digital marketing reported by Gelter (2017) focus on a more informed and experienced global consumer; on combining the authenticity of real experiences with digital and augmented reality experiences; on the spread of new customs and new values; on the almost constant sharing of moments experienced on social networks; on the transparency of communication channels; and on the change from producer-generated content to user-generated content. Thus, the digital environment has provided a means in which consumers can validate and confirm the experiences of others with a certain product, the reputation of a certain organisation and assess the general satisfaction of users (Akel *et al.*, 2019). According to Kerdpitak (2021), feedback, whether positive or negative, creates a certain image in the consumer's mind, generating a sense of familiarity with the product, attracts information seekers, reduces the uncertainty or risk of purchasing something and thus leads to a positive relationship between the volume of reviews and business performance. With the help of online reviews, managers and marketers can keep track of the changing opinions and behaviour of their audience, as well as the increase or decrease in their satisfaction, adapting decisions and implementing favourable actions for the company and the satisfaction of its consumers (Kerdpitak, 2021).

With the advent of digital transformations, consumers have taken on the ability to direct their own purchasing decision journey as tourists, highlighting the connection between their digital behaviour and the factors to which they are exposed, such as sociodemographic characteristics, knowledge about apps and the internet, technological use habits, among others (Carvalho *et al.*, 2022).

The digital behaviour of the tourist consumer, represented by digital nomads, presents different needs and motivations from the average consumer, and as Castro and Gosling (2022) point out, this leads to places that are interested in attracting them offering differentiated and authentic activities and experiences, since in addition to enjoying tourist services. In this way, this new type of tourist seeks to create a greater connection with the destination visited, utilising local services and enabling greater cultural and economic benefits for the destination in question.

2.4. Digital natives

A digital native is an individual born after the diffusion, popularisation and adoption of digital technologies in the daily lives of societies, and is not a concept referring to a single specific Generation (Solomon, 2017). Digital natives are characterised by having grown up

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with technological developments such as computers, mobile devices and the internet, which have a major influence on their day-to-day lives and, for this reason, two of the Generations that make up practically all digital natives are Generation Y or Millennials and Generation Z (Munsch, 2021).

Generation Y is made up of individuals born between the early 1980s and the late 1990s, who value the ability to use information and communication technologies in their lives, and are governed by values such as: independence, creativity, innovation, respect for ethics and multiculturalism and awareness of social problems (Hysa *et al.*, 2021). According to Expedia Group Media Solutions (2019), Millennials are considered to be the generation that makes the most trips each year and have a strong need to use the opportunities created by the internet and social networks when planning and sharing their experiences, during and after travelling (Hysa *et al.*, 2021).

Generation Z, on the other hand, is made up of people born between the start of the new millennium and around 2010 who have not experienced a world without technology. This generation is seen as being multifunctional, open to the world and new experiences, with one of their main means of communication being social media (Expedia Group Media Solutions, 2018; Hysa *et al.*, 2021).

3. HYPOTHESES

As tourism is a sector marked by dynamism, constant change and a high level of competitiveness, it is essential that it adopts the use of new technologies, as well as new digital marketing strategies, where digital tools have become a priority for direct, clear and authentic communication with tourism consumers (Abrantes and Sousa, 2021; Coelho, 2022). According to Abranja *et al.* (2022), digital marketing has the ability to provide new opportunities for tourism companies to present their services or products in a faster, more accessible, efficient and creative way. Considering the diversity of tools available for the development of digital strategies by tour operators, the first hypothesis is defined:

H1: Generation Z has a more positive perception of tour operators' digital marketing strategies than Generation Y - Associated questionnaire question: "In general, how do you rate the digital strategies used by tour operators?"

The growing impact of generations made up of digital natives has influenced the demographic and behavioural profile of internet users, making it the main source of information and support for tourist experiences (Gelter, 2017). When planning their experiences, tools such as blogs, social networks, podcasts and others, based on user-generated content, end up having a major influence on the consumer and the expectations they create about a particular tourist destination (Gelter, 2017).

From the beginning to the end of the consumer journey, today's tourist includes various digital marketing tools in their decision-making, which stimulate desire and motivation for the destination or tourism product, as well as providing them with all the information they need to make the purchase (Almeida, 2021; Shankar, 2021; Coelho, 2022). Taking into account the diversity of existing digital marketing tools, but considering the most used ones from the user's perspective considering the main ones to be the search engine, blogs, social networks emails, newsletters, eWOM and digital advertising, the following hypothesis is structured:

H2: There is a more positive influence of digital marketing tools on the consumer's tourist experience for Generation Z than for Generation Y - Associated questionnaire question: 'How often do you use digital tools in your tourist experience?'

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The spread of the internet and digital technologies has led to significant changes in social relations, as well as in the structure of individuals' norms and values, and so the behaviour of actors in interactions is changing significantly (Tolstikova *et al.*, 2021).

Digital interaction content, which includes up-to-date, accurate and accessible experiences, plays an essential element in tourists' decision-making phase about services and products (Liu and Park, 2015). In turn, tourists' level of satisfaction with their first visits to the destination and the digital marketing interaction channels through which they share their experiences can positively affect their repeat visits/behavioural intentions of other tourists (Armutcu *et al.*, 2023).

H3: Gen Z's motivations differ from Gen Y in using digital media in their tourism experience - Associated questionnaire question: "How do you prioritise the following objectives for the use of digital media in your tourist experience?"

Over the years, the evolution of social networks has changed the processes of creating information and communication, influencing the construction of the value chain, affecting marketing strategies, brand reputation and image and consumer behaviour (Agostinho *et al.*, 2022; Ferrer-Rosell *et al.*, 2022).

In a society that is increasingly relying on technology, it is therefore imperative that organisations and companies adapt and reinvent their communication strategies, particularly on social media, where most of their consumers are present. According to Barreiro *et al.* (2019), social networks are currently increasingly important in publicising tourist destinations. Kim, Li and Breymer (2016) reinforce this idea by stating that the revolutions and advances of the Internet have played a central role in the success and development of businesses. Tajvidi and Karami (2021) emphasise the importance of social media and state that the potential to develop relationships and trust with customers, suppliers and potential partners is something that companies should take into consideration. Given the importance of social media in the implementation of tour operators' communication strategies, the third hypothesis is based on this:

H4: Generation Z uses social networks more frequently in their tourist experience than Generation Y – Associated questionnaire question: "How often do you use the following social networks for this purpose?"

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Population and sample

In this research, individuals from Generations Y and Z were considered, as they are more familiar with the current digital age. As there is still no unanimous consensus among the various authors as to the specific years in which these two Generations begin and end, for the purposes of this research we considered the determination made by the author Hysa *et al.* (2021), in which Generation Y is presented as belonging to the years 1981 to 1994 and Generation Z from 1995 to 2010.

Thus, the population considered is characterised by individuals between the ages of 18 and 42 (covered only from the age of majority, i.e. 2005, for ethical and legal reasons), living in mainland Portugal and the islands, who have access to the internet and have planned and/or carried out national tourist experiences in the period after January 2022 (inclusive).

The sampling technique applied consists of convenience sampling, which is characterised by the fact that it is a non-probabilistic technique that creates a sample according to the ease of access and willingness of individuals to cooperate with the research.

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4.2. Data collection

This research was based on the collection of primary data through a questionnaire, created with the help of the *Google Forms* platform and distributed over a period of 6 months (between May and September 2023) via the internet and social networks (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and LinkedIn), ensuring the confidentiality of the respondents' data and ensuring that they were aware of the objectives of this study.

The questionnaire was structured with closed, scale and multiple-choice questions and *Likert scales* were applied and adapted, namely scales for frequency of use, level of influence, priority, satisfaction, agreement and efficiency.

The questions were designed taking into account the proposed objectives and based on the literature review (Casais *et al.*, 2020; Hysa *et al.*, 2021; Kerdpitak, 2021; Perinotto and Siqueira, 2018; Shankar, 2021; Calhariz, 2019; Coelho, 2022; Correia *et al.*, 2021a, 2021b; Faustino, 2021; Hysa *et al.*, 2021; Munsch, 2021).

After completing the questionnaire, a total of 251 responses were obtained, and the data was analysed using SPSS Statistics Version 27.

## 5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The following are the results obtained from the 251 respondents collected in total, and on which non-parametric tests were applied as a result of the unequal size of the samples representing Generation Y (n=88) and Generation Z (n=163) and the nature of the scales involved (Likert scales).

The scores obtained on the question "In general, how do you rate the digital strategies used by tour operators?" were compared according to the generation of respondents. It can be seen that Generation Z tends to rate digital strategies carried out via social networks more positively, followed by search engines and Google Ads (figure 1). This result is common to both generations. The Mann-Whitney test revealed statistically significant differences for Search Engines (p=0.018) and Social Media (p<0.001), with Generation Z tending to value these digital strategies more highly.

Thus, according to the results found, Generation Z has a more positive perception of the performance of digital strategies promoted by tour operators when compared to Generation Y, with greater emphasis on social networks, search engines and Google Ads. It should be noted that the eWOM (digital word of mouth) strategy is valued equally by generation Z and Y in the tourist experience, making it the 4th most important for the former. For Generation Y, the fourth most important tools are blogs and email marketing. These results seem to show that Generation Z is more demanding and seeks more information for decision-making (Perinotto and Siqueira, 2018; Gelter, 2017). Overall, these results corroborate Hysa *et. al* (2021), who state that these generations show a strong need to take advantage of the opportunities created by the internet and social networks. Thus, H1 can be considered supported, emphasising the importance of investing in the various constituent elements of digital marketing strategies, since tourism consumers are indeed present in *online* environments and use it for their tourism planning.
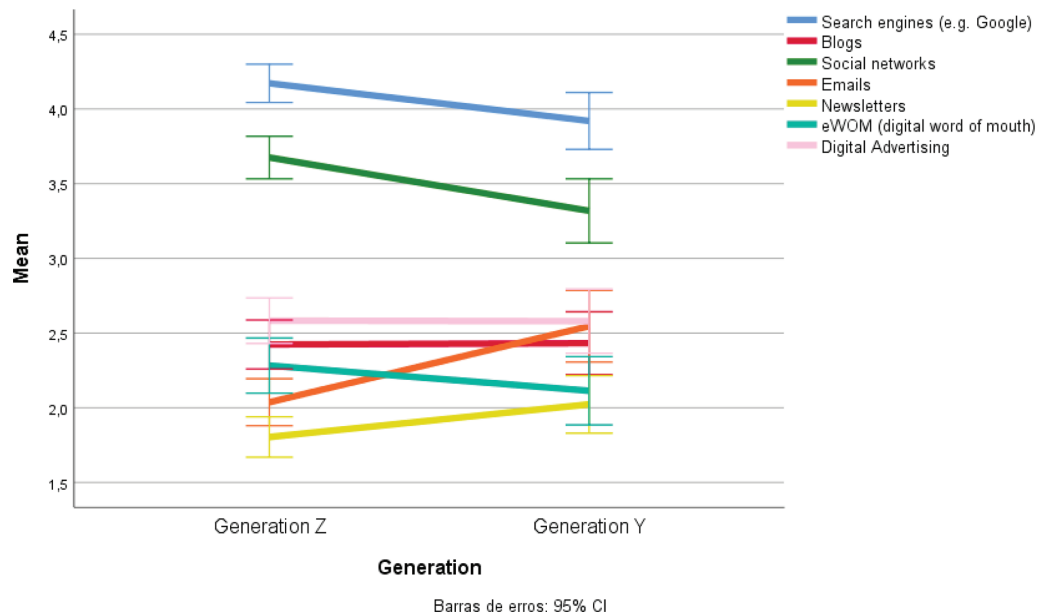
The questions analysed focused on the frequency of use of certain digital tools (figure 2). The Mann-Whitney test revealed statistically significant differences for Search Engines (p=0.030), Social Networks (p=0.005), Emails (p<0.001) and Newsletters (p=0.040). It can be seen that Generation Z tends to value Search Engines and Social Networks more, while Emails and Newsletters are more valued by Generation Y.

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**FIGURE 1. AVERAGE SCORES OBTAINED AND ERROR BARS FOR
"IN GENERAL, HOW DO YOU RATE THE DIGITAL STRATEGIES
USED BY TOUR OPERATORS?" ACCORDING TO THE GENERATION
OF RESPONDENTS**
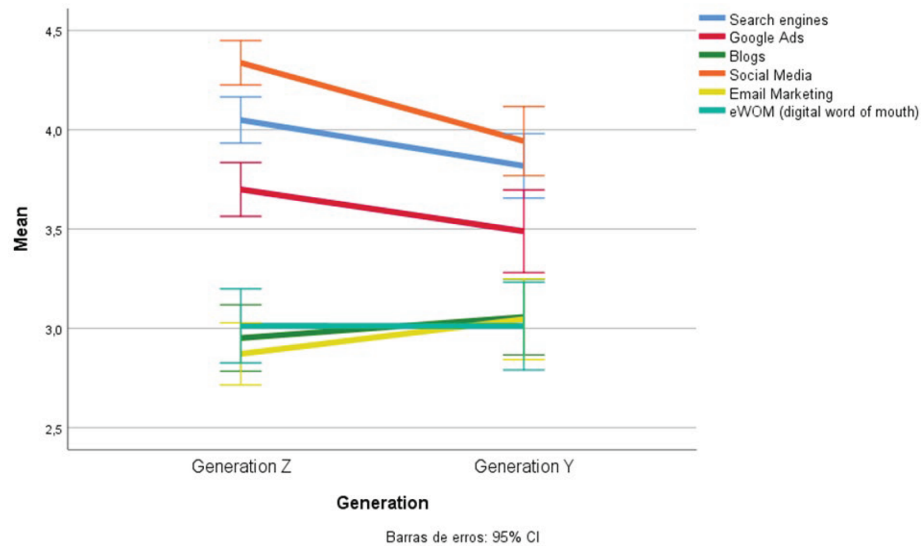
Source: Own elaboration.

**FIGURE 2. AVERAGE SCORES OBTAINED AND ERROR BARS
FOR "HOW OFTEN DO YOU USE DIGITAL TOOLS IN YOUR
TOURIST EXPERIENCE?" ACCORDING TO THE GENERATION
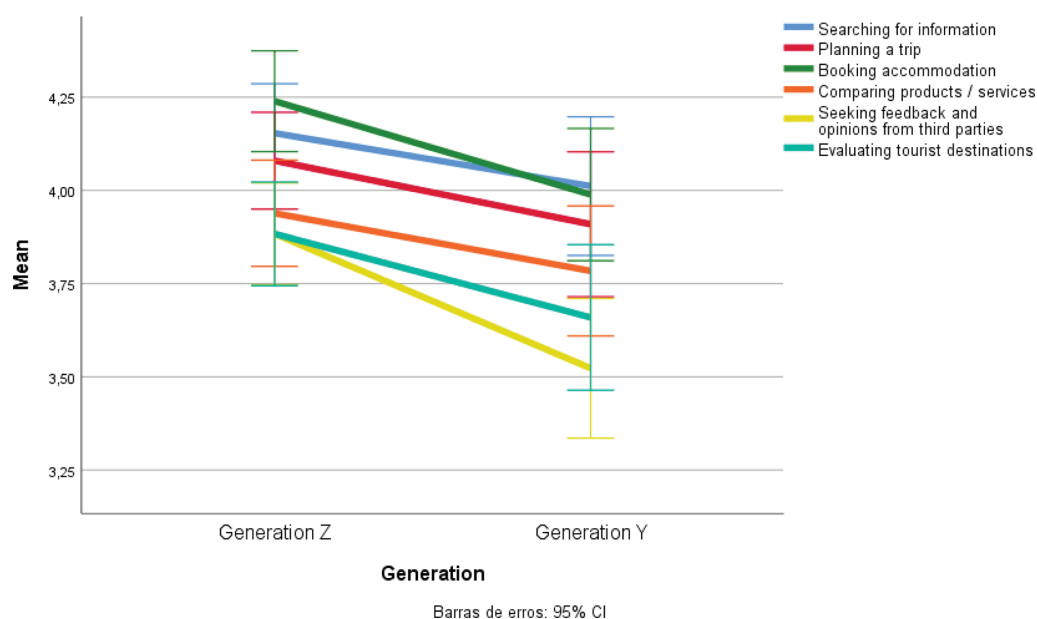OF RESPONDENTES**

Source: Own elaboration.

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We can see from the figure above that although Generation Z gives higher scores than Generation Y to two tools - search engines and social media - this evidence is common to both generations. Magano and Cunha (2020) consider that social media and website optimisation are essential for promoting tourist destinations, reducing costs and increasing the reach of communication with tourists. Also noteworthy is the use of email, which is most appreciated by Generation Y. According to Gurunathan and Lakshmi (2023) and Deak (2023), Generation Z considers this digital marketing tool to be outdated, particularly for personal use. The digital tool eWoM (Digital Word of Mouth) has a greater influence on Generation Z, albeit insignificant compared to Generation Y. Marketers encourage Generation Z consumers to eWOM in emerging markets by sharing content on social networks in order to encourage love for a brand (Pillay, 2021). On the other hand, in general, satisfaction and digital marketing interactions are important determinants of the intention to visit a tourist destination and of eWOM intentions (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016). Thus, H2 was supported.

When comparing the average scores obtained for the question "How do you prioritise the following objectives for the use of digital media in your tourist experience?" according to the Generation of respondents, it can be seen that Generation Z tends to value all the defined objectives more highly (figure 3). The Mann-Whitney test detected statistically significant differences for Booking accommodation (p=0.011) and Seeking feedback and opinions from third parties (p=0.002), with Generation Z tending to value these objectives more, as well as all the others.

It can also be seen that the objectives most valued by respondents from both generations are "Booking accommodation" and "Searching for information", with Generation Y showing a slight concern, firstly for "Searching for information", while Generation Z has "Booking accommodation" as its first objective.

FIGURE 3. AVERAGE SCORES OBTAINED AND ERROR BARS FOR "HOW DO YOU PRIORITISE THE FOLLOWING OBJECTIVES FOR THE USE OF DIGITAL MEDIA IN YOUR TOURIST EXPERIENCE?" ACCORDING TO THE GENERATION OF RESPONDENTES

Source: Own elaboration.

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After analysing the results obtained for the questions presented above, we can see that the results obtained in the studies by Agostinho *et al.* (2022), Almeida (2021) and Correia *et al.* (2021a) are reinforced, indicating that among the main digital marketing tools that should be applied are SEO and SEM and Google Ads (which are correlated with search engines) and social networks.

In view of the large number of people using digital media, it was found that the purpose of using digital tools most valued by Generation Z is to book accommodation and, on the other hand, Generation Y most values the quality of the content provided. This result is in line with Carvalho *et al.* (2022) who recognise that the use of digital platforms enables greater personalisation of content, agility and transparency of the information available, favouring the demand for quality in the content published by a more powerful and demanding consumer (Perinotto and Siqueira, 2018; Gelter, 2017).

For both generations, the main objectives for the use of digital media in the tourist experience consist of searching for information, booking accommodation, planning a trip and comparing products and services, which have a higher level of priority for Generation Z respondents compared to Generation Y respondents. This evidence is in line with the study by Hysa *et al.* (2021), who state that these are extremely mobile generations, who attach great importance to information and communication technologies, using them from the start of their tourism planning journey. In this way, H3 was supported.

When comparing the average scores obtained for the question "How often do you use the following social networks for this purpose?" according to the respondents' generation, there is a variety of opinions on the use of all the social networks considered between generations Z and Y (figure 4). It can be seen, however, that in both generations, the most valued networks are Instagram, Booking and TripAdvisor. The Mann-Whitney test detected statistically significant differences for Facebook ($p=0.004$), Instagram ($p=0.001$), Twitter ($p=0.005$), Youtube ($p<0.001$) and TikTok ($p<0.001$). It can be seen that Generation Z tends to value Instagram, Youtube and TikTok more, while Facebook is more valued by Generation Y.

The results show that Generation Z generally uses social media more often for their tourist experiences, despite Generation Y being the generation that travels the most (Hysa *et al.*, 2021). Both generations favour the use of the social networks Instagram, Booking and TripAdvisor, although Generation Z uses the first social network more. Generation Z young people use Instagram to build digital identities, express creativity and maintain social connections, emphasising their preference for this platform over other social networks. Booking is Generation Y's favourite, followed by Instagram and Facebook (with the same degree of appreciation). This result is in line with the contributions of Agostinho *et al.* (2022) and Carvalho *et al.* (2022), who show that Instagram is one of the social networks that is growing in the context of tourism marketing and that TripAdvisor is one of the most valued networks for collecting *feedback* from tourism consumers. In generation Z, the fourth and fifth most used social networks are Youtube and Facebook. This evidence seems to reinforce the idea that Generation Z tends to be more mobile-orientated and prefers applications that offer a faster and more visually appealing experience (Seemiller and Grace, 2017).

It should be emphasised that while Facebook is the third most valued tool for Generation Y, it is the fifth most valued tool for Generation Z. It can also be seen that the social network Snapchat is not widely used by these generations in their tourist experience and is therefore probably not a very effective tool for promoting tourist experiences to tourist consumers.

Given the frequency with which Generations Y and Z use social networks, it can be seen that they are an advantageous tool for tour operators, as they provide a wide range of resources

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FIGURE 4. AVERAGE SCORES AND ERROR BARS FOR "HOW OFTEN DO YOU USE THE FOLLOWING SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR THIS PURPOSE?" ACCORDING TO THE GENERATION OF RESPONDENTES
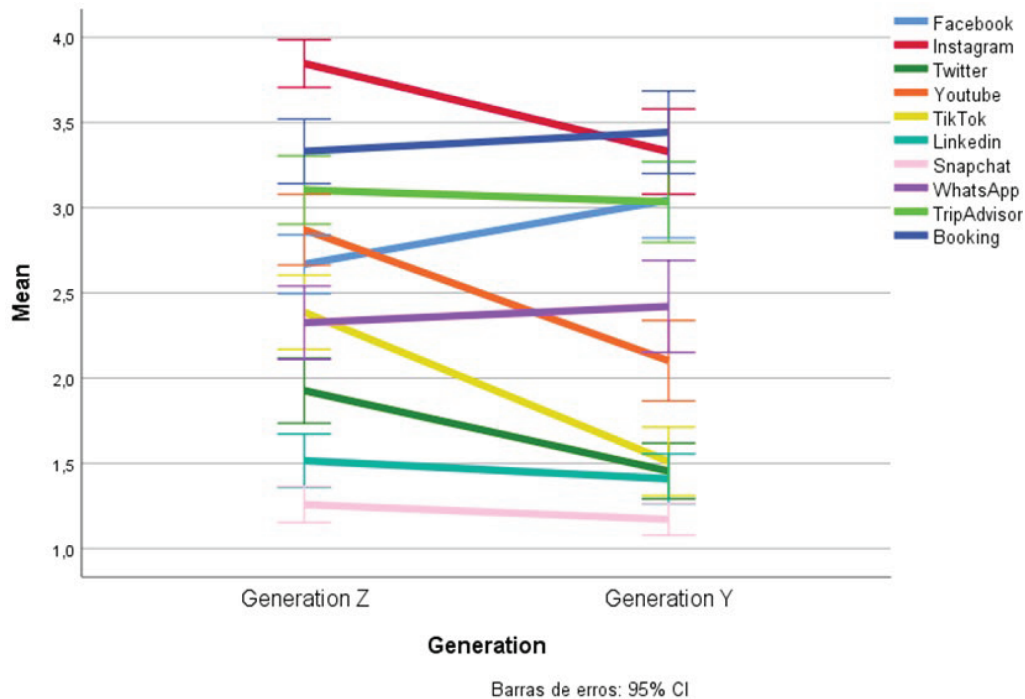
Source: Own elaboration.

for companies to increase their ability to communicate and interact with their followers, promote their business, inform their customers and boost the internationalisation of their brand (Agostinho *et al.*, 2022). This supported H4.

Having analysed and discussed the results, it is possible to present the results of the research hypotheses in Table 1.

TABLE 1. RESULTS OF THE HYPOTHESES

	Hypotheses	Results
H1	Generation Z has a more positive perception of tour operators' digital marketing strategies than Generation Y.	Supported
H2	There is a more positive influence of digital marketing tools on the consumer's tourist experience for Generation Z than for Generation Y.	Supported
H3	Gen Z's motivations differ from Gen Y in using digital media in their tourism experience	Supported
H4	Generation Z uses social networks more frequently in their holiday experience than Generation Y.	Supported

Source: Own elaboration.

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6. CONCLUSIONS

In view of the results found, it can be seen that the portuguese tourism consumer has a positive but demanding perspective on tour operators' digital strategies, especially Generation Z. Compared to Generation Y, Generation Z generally had a higher frequency of use and perception of the strategies, which may be a reflection of the fact that Generation Z was born and raised in a digital environment, where mobile Internet access is predominant.

By analysing and discussing the results, we were able to answer the research questions raised:

Q1. *How do tourism consumers from Generations Y and Z perceive digital marketing strategies?*

In view of the various digital marketing strategies to which they are subjected, it is safe to say that most Generation Z respondents have a more positive perception of the performance of tour operators' digital strategies, with greater evidence in the strategies developed through social networks, search engines and Google Ads. eWOM (digital word of mouth) plays a fundamental role in the lives of Generations Z and Y, influencing their purchasing decisions, opinions and digital identities through *feedback* and *reviews*. Generation Y, on the other hand, considers strategies realised through *blogs* and email marketing to have an impact on their decisions.

Generation Z is more demanding and dependent on digital information in the decision-making process. Generation Y, on the other hand, places greater value on tools such as blogs and email marketing, showing different preferences. Overall, both generations have a positive but demanding outlook on digital strategies.

Q2. *Which digital tools do Generation Y and Z consumers use most in their tourist experience?*

As we have seen throughout this research, Generation Y and Z consumers use a variety of digital tools during their tourist experience, particularly search engines, which provide a large part of the information gathered by the consumer when planning their tourist experience, and social networks, which allow for direct and more dynamic contact between the consumer and everyone involved throughout their tourist experience. Furthermore, the digital word of mouth (eWOM) strategy influences both generations, but has a slightly greater importance for Generation Z. The study highlights that website optimization and social media are essential to reach these generations and improve communication with tourists.

It therefore seems essential for tour operators to be able to decide which digital tools and media are most suitable for their business, so that they can keep up with the constant adaptation and innovation of consumer behaviour in line with existing technological developments.

Q3. *What are the reasons that lead Generations Y and Z to use digital media in their tourist experience?*

Among the objectives that lead Generations Y and Z to use digital media in their tourist experience, the main ones are booking accommodation, looking for information and planning a trip, and these stages are part of the tourist consumer's purchasing decision process. This means that, from the beginning to the end of the process, the tourist experience takes place using digital media. Both generations consider digital media essential to personalize and simplify their tourist experiences, in line with the need for agility, transparency and convenience when planning trips. Given the significant and positive take-up of digital media by these tourist consumers, it is important for operators to know how to establish the most appropriate strategies and what type of format and language is best suited to captivating the consumer's attention and final purchasing decision.

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Q4. *Which social networks do Generations Y and Z use most for their tourist experience?*

The results showed that the social networks most used by respondents from both generations were Instagram, Booking and TripAdvisor. Instagram is a social network characterised by the sharing of multimedia content, whether in the form of *posts*, *stories* or *reels,* and for the tourist consumer it ends up being a platform that allows them to share their tourist experience, as well as viewing the experiences of others. On the other hand, Booking and TripAdvisor are platforms that help plan the tourist experience, whether it's booking accommodation, planning a trip, looking for *feedback* or just finding information about tourist destinations.

It was also found that Generation Y is still much more fond of Facebook compared to Generation Z. Snapchat is little used by both generations, indicating that it is not an effective platform for promoting tourist experiences.

The study concludes that social networks are crucial tools for communication, promotion and interaction with tourists. This research has provided a better understanding of the perception of tourism consumers belonging to Generation Y and Z regarding the application of digital marketing strategies, contributing in theoretical terms to filling gaps in the literature on the digital behaviour of Generations Y and Z, especially in the tourism sector. The approach to how these generations interact with digital marketing tools and strategies provides a detailed insight into the preferences and perceptions of native digital consumers, aligning these findings with previous studies on the impact of digitalisation on consumer behaviour. On the other hand, it highlights the relevance of social networks as primary channels of interaction and value-building between consumers and companies in the tourism sector and offers an interdisciplinary approach that relates the use of digital tools to the decision-making process and consumer satisfaction.

In practical terms, the study offers valuable insights for tour operators on which digital tools to prioritise and demonstrates the importance of adapting digital marketing strategies to the characteristics of each generation. We therefore propose that tour operators optimise their presence on search engines (SEO and SEM), ensuring that their offers are easily found; use Google Ads and sponsored campaigns on social networks to reach customers when they are looking for information; encourage reviews and recommendations through real customer testimonials (eWOM), strengthening credibility and digital influence; and personalise communication, considering that Generation Z values social networks and dynamic content more and Generation Y relies more on blogs and emails. It is also important to use platforms strategically, taking into account the type of consumer. Instagram, Booking and TripAdvisor are therefore essential for running campaigns, as they are the platforms most used by both generations. Facebook is still relevant for Generation Y, but has little uptake by Generation Z. TikTok and YouTube are effective in attracting Generation Z, which prefers more visual and interactive content. Emails and newsletters, on the other hand, are used more by Generation Y and can be used for retention and loyalty. In view of the above, it is crucial that tour operators prioritise the production of authentic and engaging content, using high-quality photos and videos; invest in digital influencers, especially on Instagram and TikTok, to increase engagement; and adapt the language according to the target audience - Generation Z responds better to short, visual messages, while Generation Y values more informative content. Finally, the use of personalisation strategies, such as artificial intelligence and remarketing, makes it possible to offer recommendations that are more in line with tourist consumer behaviour.

In this way, tour operators can align their digital strategies with consumer preferences, making their campaigns more impactful and effective in the search for a tourist destination.

These contributions aim to encourage the practical application of strategies aimed at new generations in the tourism sector, strengthening the relationship between consumers and operators in an environment that is increasingly digital, as the results show that it is increasingly

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important to invest on digital platforms that strengthen trust and increase the visibility of destinations, improving their competitiveness in the global market.

The size of the sample, even though 251 responses were obtained, which allowed for a robust statistical analysis, it is important to emphasise that in comparison to the total size of the Portuguese tourist consumer population, it is a limited figure, so it is necessary to interpret the conclusions obtained with some caution. On the other hand, the fact that the number of Generation Y and Z respondents was disproportionate between the generations meant that robust statistical techniques could not be used to confirm the hypotheses. Another limitation is the fact that a multivariate analysis was not applied, which could have enriched the research results. We therefore suggest carrying out this analysis as a future line of research, by replicating this study in order to study the perceptions of previous generations regarding the digital marketing strategies of tour operators and extending the geographical scope to other countries to see if there are significant differences.

FUNDING

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualisation: Raquel Rocha and Cristina Estevão; **Methodology**: Raquel Rocha and Sara Nunes; **Data collection**: Raquel Rocha; **Data analysis**: Sara Nunes; **Writing - Preparation of the original draft**: Raquel Rocha e Cristina Estevão; **Writing - Proofreading and editing**: Cristina Estevão, Helena Alves and Carla Pereira; **Supervision**: Cristina Estevão, Helena Alves e Carla Pereira.

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