

SOFIA CITY TOURIST IMAGE IN SELECTED SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract: The pandemic situation greatly changed the entire tourism sector and influenced the digital search and importance of the tourist destination image and presence in social media. Moreover, the virtual trips, open galleries and museums for virtual tours are expected to generate future interest and enhance the tourist arrivals in post-pandemic era. At the same time the identification of recognizable image-making attractions at destination level is complex process and difficult measure and manage. The purpose of the study is to identify and evaluate the presence of major tourist attractions in different digital channels – social media and platforms, as recognizable image-making sites about capital city. The methodology is primary data analysis of freely shared digital content based on key words and hashtags used in social media such as Instagram, Pinterest, Flickr. The data was gathered manually from 15th Apr 2015-15th May 2021 and 17000 posts in total were analysed for this study. The impact of the content was evaluated by type of pictures, major attractions and number of likes, comments and shares on the post. The results showed that there is limited number of digital contents related to the selected specific key words. There is no clear image of the Sofia city in the analysed social channels.

Kew words: attractions, Sofia, destination, Instagram, Pinterest, Flickr, social media.

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Introduction

Destinations are faced with immerse competition at global level, aggressive marketing campaigns and commercial brands. Destination images are not solely based on Tourism attractiveness, but on wide and complex factors, based on media, popularity, leisure products (e.g. movies,

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books), sportsmen achievements, etc. (Stefanov & Stefanova, 2012; Stefanov & Stefanova, 2013). From marketing and strategic development perspective the destinations should be able to identify the most powerful determinants contribution to its image and coordinate, promote in a competitive and sustainable way. Important to stress is that many of the associated images are uncontrollable and subject to external microenvironment influences, inclusively geo-political, mass media, political, societal and other factors (Georgieva-Trifonova & Stefanov, 2015).

From the supply side, the destination image is not easily branded due to the complex and different attributes which are difficult to be evaluated and properly managed. This is because the destination's image is based on inclusion and consideration of all stakeholders involved, and there is often shortage of clear links and cooperation between them (Destination Management Organization, accommodation sector, transport companies, NGOs, etc.). Within the current paper, the research is limited on attractions as the main and most recognizable symbols of a destination, evaluated from the visitor's perspective.

From the demand side, the visitors perceive the destination image based on multiple channels and communication messages. Attractions are associated with the destination, and in the context of tourism, these are usually places, sites, landmarks (natural) and others that underlie the attraction, desire and motivation to see. In fact, attractions can be natural, such as natural attractions, or created, such as anthropogenic attractions, and in a narrower sense, purposefully created and constructed, such as theme and attraction parks. Another difficulty is that before registering interest and affection we cannot consider the resources as attraction, but rather as potential tourist resources. Depending on the degree of preservation, socialization is defined by the readiness to meet tourists or plan such activities for investment, socialization or marketing in order to turn them into attractions. Next, it is the tourist interest that determines whether a resource can be considered a potential attraction. Some attractions exist with their history and purpose beyond tourism, such as urban agglomerations, squares and parks, but nevertheless, they are of interest and are extremely visited by tourists. Strategic plans for development frequently start with a detailed list and inventory of available tourist resources at the destination level, which does not necessarily mean that they can become an attraction. On the contrary, attractions that are associated with negative impacts repel tourists and create a negative image of the destination (such as Rio de Janeiro - crime levels, or Beijing and Delhi as cities with high level of air pollution).

Theoretical background - attractions as resources for destination image

The destination image analysis is limited to the attractions as part of tourism product offering. There are different image formation models (Pike, 2002) (Govers R., Go F., Kumar K., 2007), which are partially considered, taking into account only the attractions as factors for image formation.

For the tourism destination identity (anchor) level, the attraction is the visible part of authentic, historic heritage, related to culture, religion and natural environment.

For the tourism offering level, attractions are the core part together with the amenities, access, ancillary services at the destination.

Apart from the main strategic players and stakeholders, the destination image is exteriorly projected thanks to the media, communication. Movie industry, narratives and visuals create meanings linked to the destination. Increased with the personal experience and intermediaries' imagination for art, popular culture, literature, etc. the destination image is additionally shaped from a tourist's perspective.

For the destination image management, the main features of the attractions are:

- Attractiveness (effect, benefits and specificity) evaluated and sought by tourists;
- Capacity to load (for example, visitors to a museum, a square, a festival, a stadium, etc.);
- Stativity (territorially bound) and dynamics (events, performances, exhibitions, etc.);
- Subject-material and/or ideological-spiritual and aesthetic character, responsible for the quality of the experience and the pleasure of touching / watching / visiting, etc.

Sometimes the attraction can be synonymous to the destination (e.g. going to the sea, beach, etc.) In the widest context, attractions at destination level can be anything that has the potential and the power to attract tourists, to be socialized, promoted and offered as a product/service or experience.

According to the national legislation and the Bulgarian Tourism Act (2016), "Tourist Attraction" is a natural, cultural or purposefully created site of tourist interest, most often related to a natural, tangible or intangible cultural heritage and/or historical event, or an artificially created recreational site, providing cognitive or educational services and/or recreational or entertainment opportunities. From a destination management perspective, the main factors influencing the long-term viability of tourist attractions and their potential to be branded are:

- Size and scale of international importance such as UNESCO sites, national or local sites;
- Uniqueness and attractiveness (authenticity);
- Significance and value;
- Management model, including form of ownership and management;
- Ability to retain tourists' interest;
- Location (concentrated, dispersed, even distribution) for the tour development;
- Condition (conservation/preservation);
- Competition, alternative attractions;
- Tourist products around and near attractions (concentration and grouping in ensembles);
- Specific target market segments (current) and potential to attract visitors;
- Hours of operation (year-round, seasonally limited, for a limited period - for events)
- Distance and accessibility (location, transport infrastructure)
- Security, security for visitors;
- Cost: free, paid or a combination of both (for example, through a voluntary donation).

In the analysis and study of tourist attractions, different approaches can be applied, the most important of which are:

- Chronological, mainly applicable to cultural and historical attractions and architectural sites, depending on the historical period to which they relate. Examples of this are the different historical styles characteristic of particular periods (Renaissance, Baroque, Classicism, Postmodernism, Neoclassicism, etc.).
- Typological - based on specific characteristics that allow the attraction of the attractions and the possibility of integrating them with different types of tourism - cultural, rural, adventure, etc.
- Spatial - based on territorial distribution, location, area, destination, hierarchy, rank (of global importance, national, local);
- Aesthetic evaluation (uniqueness) - psychological, emotional and aesthetic impact, which has a very subjective character of manifestation.

According to (Benckendorff, 2006), the *core resources of tourist attractions* are natural and cultural, and whether they are related to a place or an event or in other words, permanently existent or temporary. Cultural

resources are tangible and intangible, mainly related to different types of events and creative activities. From a *static/dynamic perspective*, all of the resources can be also classified based on their existence. If limited, that means, from a market perspective, scarce and respectively intense in peaks of demand, tourist concentration and capacity, and security concerns. The various types of events have always been part of the historical development of society. All significant moments, nationwide celebrations, celebration of holidays and customs can be seen as events, some of which follow a certain ritual, ceremony or protocol. In practice, cultural (festive, folklore) and religious calendars contain events of different types, nature, purpose and significance.

The attractions are vital for the destination image and are approached as determinants for destination strategic management, inclusively to be integrated and properly promoted in media and different communication channels.

Defining the problem: Sofia city tourist image in selected social media

Many attractions cannot exist without additional or ancillary services aimed at socializing the site and servicing the visitor, and are vital for the tourist experience and added value. ***The significance*** of the attractions as a major motive for travel, and supply, respectively, subject of increased interest in investments, innovation, changing business environment and prerequisites for competitive advantage. **Attractions, when socialized, adequately managed, “grow” by offering additional and accompanying activities that build upon them, enhance the experience for tourists, which turns them from a resource into a tourist attraction.** That is why the development and management of tourist attractions are aimed at meeting the tourist needs - entertainment, recreation, education, new knowledge / skills, motor activities, contact with nature, etc. It is no accident that when defining a tourist product, its core is a set of accommodation, food and transportation and attractions, responsible tourist selection and preference of a destination. Attractions are at the heart of creating preconceived notions, expectations, curiosity, which, in turn, becomes a factor in satisfaction with the experience. Attractions are not just services such as entry fee collection, they must be value added, socialized, educated or "fascinate" the visitor. Different types of attractions attract different segments of tourists, which additionally has a social, economic impact on the development of the tourist destination. Attraction development is the object of targeted tourism policy and investment, precisely because it is at the heart of marketing policy and market positioning. Thus, for example, investments in golf

courses, sophisticated technology facilities for observation/sites or buildings predetermine potential demand, and vice versa, the search for special attractions (such as theme parks) affects the supply-side instinct. Attractions, especially created in response to tourist demand, create jobs, activate the economy and entrepreneurship in the destination. Potential negative effects include the cost of maintaining a name, managing tourist flows and potential environmental problems.

There is a direct correlation between the presence, creation and management of attractions and the development of the destination. These are the attractions, often the main associations, recognizable sites and places to visit, widely popularized in various forms and means. It is interesting to note that, historically, none of these clearly recognizable attractions have been created for tourist purposes, but at the same time they are the strongest attraction points for tourists. On the contrary, there are examples of objects designed to become a symbol of the city (such as the statue of Saint Sofia in Sofia), but were unsuccessful or with contradictory results. The largest and most successfully developing destinations have clearly identified attractions that are vital to tourism, the image of the destination and 'mandatory' for tourist visit. Sometimes, UNESCO sites are among the top attractions in different destinations. Some attractions are subject to certification or compliance with specific requirements for their operation and maintenance. In general, these are requirements related to the sustainable development, preservation and preservation of the local culture and identity (the role of interpretation, animation, and ecological service), environmental sustainability and nature conservation.

The digital presence and recognition are very important and shape the overall image of the destination. The image of Sofia city is evaluated in different digital channels – social media and published, shared digital content by tourists.

The tourist's information search is among the most important, widely studies research areas, and of vital importance for DMO and tourism providers. Understanding of the information search before the trip in the process of planning shapes the choice of destination, providers, attraction mix and other functional motives (Lexhagen, 2004) (Gretzel, U., Fesenmaier, D. R., Formica, S., & O'Leary, J. T. , 2006), (Hyde, 2008) , (Pan, B., & Fesenmaier, D. R. , 2006); (Xiang, Z., & Gretzel, U., 2010); (Kim, D. Y., Lehto, X. Y., & Morrison, A. M., 2007).

Generally, the information search can be divided into traditional, as described in the suggested taxonomy of Gartner (Gartner, 1993) and online,

accessing different types of websites and social media. The COVID-19 focused increasingly on digital content and access to almost unlimited sources of information, extended by social media and other shared communities' information. The search and accumulation of information online for travel purposes follows three different stages: pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip (Hjalager, A. M., & Jensen, J. M., 2012). The current paper limits the research on the period that occurs before the trip (planning), responsible for the creation of reliable own expectations, generation and selection of attractions and places to be visited, evaluation, comparison and selection of alternatives (Xiang, Z., & Gretzel, U., 2010), (Jeong, C., Holland, S., Jun, S. H., & Gibson, H., 2012).

Sofia city major tourist attractions presence on selected social media: research methodology and results

The capital cities have always attracted the major tourist flows. Sofia has officially adopted "Sofia Development Strategy as a Tourist Destination 2017-2030". In the mid-2019, for the first time in history, the establishment of Sofia Destination Organization (destination management organization) was officially launched. It is vital for the strategic development of the destination to identify and have a clear vision of major tourist attraction and how to approach them for effective management and promotion. Last year a new Communication strategy of Sofia as a tourist destination 2023-2027ⁱ was officially published.

The research methodology consists of preliminary inventory analysis of existent official secondary data based on the available and public accessible data from:

- Ministry of Tourism's Accession Registerⁱⁱ;
- Data from the official tourist site of Sofiaⁱⁱⁱ;
- Public rankings on the Internet, based on visitors' evaluations – on selected sites such as TripAdvisor, Lonely Planet, Google search, etc.

The main goal is to compare the major tourist attractions from a destination management perspective, along with the visitor's evaluations. The intended result is to identify the major attractions in Sofia city.

According to the National Tourist Register^{iv} Sofia as administrative identity and Municipality has a total of 145 attractions, represented by type and number as follows:

Table 1.
Sofia tourist attractions included in the National Tourist Register

Attraction	No.
Undefined	3
Museum	19
Temple	9
Architectural and historical significance of national importance	1
Architectural, construction and art of national importance	5
Architectural, historical and artistic of national importance	4
Architectural, historical, archaeological and artistic of national importance	1
Basilica	1
Gallery	7
The garden	1
City Garden	2
Lake	2
Cathedral	1
Museum House	8
Monastery	15
A real cultural monument	46
Park	8
Natural object	5
Other	7

The analysis of the data shows that over 71% of the attractions in Sofia, according to the National Tourist Register of Attractions, consist of immovable cultural monuments (32%), museums (13%), monasteries (10.4%), house museums (5.5%), parks (5.5%), galleries (4.9%). It is immediately apparent that the list of attractions lacks a wide range of other categories of attractions. That is why the survey continues with the analysis of the published data and information on the official site of Sofia as a tourist destination, maintained by the municipally owned company "Tourism" through its official website www.visitsofia.bg in the category "What to visit". The information is structured into the following categories:

- museums
- galleries and exhibition halls,
- temples,
- monasteries (Sofia Mount Athos),
- archaeological monuments,
- architectural monuments,
- monuments,
- streets, squares and bridges
- Green Sofia
- balneology

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This structure reflects a different approach to tourist attractions. However, the detailed analysis reveals a mixture of categories, for example Green Sofia includes fountains, rivers, lakes, parks, mountains including Nature park "Vitosha". The category "Wellness" includes entire neighbourhoods of Sofia such as Ovcha Kupel, Pancharevo, Bankya, Gorna Banya.

Further analysis of data used in websites, such as TripAdvisor, shows different approach to structuring the attractions. The category "Attractions" includes a relatively wider variety of sites (see Table 2).

Table 2.

Sofia city major tourist attractions included on the TripAdvisor

Attraction categories and attractions	Number	Gaining traction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sights & landmarks - Religious and holy places - Points of interest - Architectural buildings - Monuments - Historic sites - Government buildings 	66	Boyana Church, St. Sofia, St. Al. Nevsky cathedral St. Nikolay (Russian Church), The Slaveikov Statue, St. Petka Samardzhiyska Blvd. Vitosha The Rotunda, Al. Nevski, National Assembly, Holy Sunday
Tours (trips)	65	
Nature, parks	16	Vrana Park, Boyana Waterfall, Vitosha Mountain, Boris Garden
Food, drinks, nightlife	106	
Outdoor entertainment	41	
Museums	35	Ethnographic Museum, National History Museum, Earth and People Museum, National Polytechnic Museum
Shopping places	79	
Water sports, boats and walks	11	
Concerts, performances	16	
Play fun	70	
Spa and wellness	32	
Zoos, aquariums	1	
Casinos	9	
Day trips	22	Rila Monastery, Plovdiv Plovdiv and Koprivshitsa Bulgaria and Macedonia
Transportation	19	
Water parks and amusement parks	2	

Based on the analysis of the leading attractions (attractions) on Tripadvisor, Lonely Planet and Google as search engines - as a source of information for tourists and visitors, ten attractions are selected as most important and emblematic for Sofia city from a tourist's perspective (see Table 3).

*Table 3.
Top attractions of Sofia on the Internet*

	Goole search "TOP Sofia attractions"	Lonely Planet	TripAdvisor
1	National History Museum	Alexander Nevsky	Vitosha
2	Ivan Vazov National Theatre	Church of Saint Sofia	Alexander Nevsky
3	Central mineral bath	Boyanska church	Ivan Vazov National Theatre
4	National Art Gallery	Archaeological Museum	Church of St. Nicholas (Russian Church)
5	National Museum of Natural History	St. George's Church (Rotunda)	National Archaeological Museum
6	Orlov Bridge	Museum of Sofia	Holy Sunday Church
7	National Gallery of Foreign Art	Muzeiko	National Military History Museum
8	Sofia Zoo	Museum of Socialist Art	Saint Sofia Church
9	National Museum of Military History	Ancient Serdica – The Largo	Boyanska church
10	Museum of Socialist Art	The Synagogue of Sofia	St. George Church (Rotunda)

Based on comparative analysis, the following 10 major tourist attractions are selected: Vitosha mountain, Alexander Nevski, Ivan Vazov National Theatre, St. Nicholas Church (Russian Church), National archaeological Museum, Church "Sveta Nedelya", National Museum of Military History, Church "St. Sofia", Boyana Church (in UNESCO list), The Church of Saint George (Rotunda), Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". These are included in the conducted survey.

The conducted survey focuses on three main social media, considered as most popular among tourists for sharing pictures and images such as Instagram, Pinterest and Flickr. The data was gathered manually in the period April 15 2015 - May 15 2021 and 17,000 posts in total were analysed for this study. The impact of the content was evaluated by type of pictures, major attractions and number of likes, comments and post shares.

The key words for search with hashtag were **#sofiabulgaria**, **#visitsofia**, **#sofiacity**, **#discoversofia**, **#exploresofia**, **#sofiabg**, **#sofiatravel**, **#sofiatourism**. The idea was to combine the destination and visit with the name of the capital city - Sofia. The results are presented as follows:

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Table 4.
Top attractions in Sofia on selected social media

Hashtag	Instagram	Pinterest	Flickr
#sofiabulgaria	149, 000 Landscapes, places Food and commercial establishments	Mainly publications travel guides and advice Same as Instagram	2,397 Landscapes and also outside the content
#visitsofia	117, 000 Sea view pictures, professional photos	Mainly commercial advertisements and same foods shared on Instagram	4,429 Cars and streets in Sofia
#sofiacity	17, 600 Food and landscape	Blogs and others not related to the city	184 Concerts and cultural events
#discoversofia	Over 1,000 Tourist attractions	Not related to the destination Sofia	Only 1
#exploresofia	Over 1,000 Tourist attractions	Limited	n/a

The detailed analysis reveals some differences in the searched social media:

- Instagram: leading role; cultural and heritage, and culinary
- Pinterest: advice, guides
- Flickr: professional photos, popular for USA and Western Europe

Compared to the preliminary identified top attractions in the social media the results are as follows:

Table 5.
Top attractions of Sofia by types

Media	1	2	3	4	5
Instagram	Al. Nevski cathedral	Restaurants	Streets, houses, architecture	National Theater	National Palace of Culture
Pinterest	Al. Nevski cathedral	National Palace of Culture			
Flickr	Al. Nevski cathedral	National Theater and Largo	Streets, houses, architecture	Restaurants	

It is important to outline that the municipal enterprise “Tourism”, responsible for the development of Sofia as a tourist destination regularly updates only the official page in Facebook^{vi}, while the Instagram profile^{vii} has not been active since 2019 as the channel in YouTube and LinkedIn^{viii}. The content analysis, despite the applied hashtags, reveals that there are plenty of additional shared content on Instagram, reflecting mostly the individual experiences from visited places. The content shows the city at micro level, reflecting specific spots.

Discussion and conclusion

The study has not considered issues related to the hashtags in social media. Some of the issues are related to the approximate location, not accurate to the attraction itself and some other are related to the location privacy (Zhang, Y., Humbert, M., Rahman, T., Li, C. T., Pang, J., & Backes, M., 2018). Future analysis could be extended, covering in detail the content of published information – text, photo, video information and applied tags. Moreover, the information and data from social media can be linked and used for marketing goals and flexible tuning of communication. A hashtag strategy for destination promotion could be developed as an extension of Marketing and Communication strategy of Sofia city as a tourist destination for more focused, increased searchability and possibility of sharing. Also, the limitation of a hashtags as a tool for data retrieval cannot give feedback information or separation in groups by publishers, it is rather limited to the keywords. Additionally, the destination image can be enriched by selected experiential and interpersonal hashtags when promoting destination images via social media (Nautiyal, R., Albrecht, J. N., & Carr, A., 2022). A comparative analysis can add value to the study, taking into consideration the search/sharing information before and after the visits (Dorokhov, O.; Malyarets, L.; Ukrainski, K.; Petrova, M. Yevstrat, D.; Aliyeva, A., 2023). Building innovative and advanced software systems could help companies gain competitive advantages. (Stefanov et al, 2023). The digital transformation and the new digital economy allow new paths for added value and integration in the so-called digital ecosystem (DE), which can become a key source of innovation and competitiveness (Petrova, M., Popova, P., Popov, V., Shishmanov, K., Marinova, K., 2021). The digital ecosystem as an innovative organizational and business model successfully supports the sustainable development of the tourist destination. (Popova, P., Petrova, M., Popov, V., Marinova, K., Sushchenko O., 2023).

The data in Communication strategy of Sofia as a tourist destination 2023-2027 (p. 38-39) confirm that Sofia as a destination with respective hashtags is not very active, and confirm the main findings and results in the current study. The most used digital channels are Twitter and YouTube, with discussions related mostly to politics and business. Additional hashtags linked to Sofia are hashtags as: #streets, #architecture, #national history museum, #national palace of culture, #Ivan Vazov, etc. No specific slogans or logos are used. The combination of hashtags is mostly used with emojis and national flag.

In **conclusion**, it can be summarized that there is no clear differentiation between tourist attractions and Sofia as a tourist destination, in particular. This is due to the legislative approach and discrepancies in typology and classification. This in practice predetermines the inability of the attractions to be adequately managed and integrated as part of the marketing and communication efforts to establish a strong tourist destination image. The results from the conducted survey confirm that there is a lack of clear focus and group of attractions in the capital. There is a lack of clear strategy and link between the digital image of Sofia as destination and the findings in the searched social media. There is no integration of digital experience and shared content and social media management as a digital marketing tool is totally ignored. It is strongly needed to further evaluate the impact influence of different social media, especially for the tourism development. The unifying element could be an undeveloped hashtag like #SoSofia, which could turn into a recognizable and specific hashtag.

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ⁱⁱ <http://tourism.egov.bg/register/TARregister.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ www.visitsofia.bg

^{iv} <http://tourism.egov.bg/register/TARregister.aspx?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1>

^vhttps://www.google.com/destination?q=top+Sofia+attractions&newwindow=1&client=firefox-b-ab&dcr=0&site=search&output=search&dest_mid=/m/0ftjx&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiCieCYurDaAhWBBCWCBCWBCFS

^{vi} <https://www.facebook.com/VisitSofia.bg>

^{vii} https://www.instagram.com/visit__sofia/

^{viii} <https://www.linkedin.com/company/visit-sofia/>

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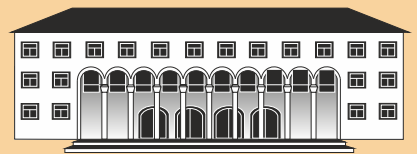
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