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CONTENTS

PEDAGOGY

Abildinova G.M., Mukanova T.T., Kazhiakparova Zh.S.

Using AR effects in social networks to assess knowledge on information and communication technologies.....14

Abitayeva U.A., Sarybayeva A.Kh., Almagambetova A.A.

The effectiveness of teaching geometrical optics to future physics teachers using the GeoGebra software.....30

Abylkassymova A., Tuyakov Y., Rysbekova G.

Application of stochastic methods in professionally oriented teaching students of technical specialties.....43

Aidarkhanova K.A., Rauandina A.K.

Innovative approaches to developing dialogic speaking skills of grade 8–9 students in schools with a non-Kazakh language of instruction.....63

Akdeniz E., Bazarbayev K., Shormakova A.

Scientific and methodological foundations for using materials of the Kazakh national press of the early 20th century in teaching the history of Turkey.....77

Bashenova A.M., Tuyakbaev G.A.

Development of students' research competence through folklore and digital technologies.....93

Berdibek A.M., Kudaibergenova A.M.

Case Study technology as a means of forming professional competencies of future educational psychologists.....112

Imangaliyeva B., Torsykbaeva B., Unerbayeva Z.

Teaching the “Theory of Electrolytic Dissociation” section to students with special educational needs.....133

Iminova Yu.B.

Trends in research on preschool children’s safety behavior in Playful Learning: a bibliometric mapping.....148

Kaparova R., Yessenova M., Dyussov M.

Developing skills to find a derivative function using information technology.....171

Kengshilik A.T., Kalekeshov A.M., Abdrassulova Zh.T.

Methodological foundations for the use of artificial intelligence tools in teaching biology to students with special educational needs.....193

Kerimbaeva K.Z., Ussenbay A.U., Beysen A.K.

Effective organization of practical chemistry classes using artificial intelligence tools.....209

Kozhabayev S.E., Nysanov E.A., Abdrashova E.T.

Improving the computational thinking of future IT specialists through programming optimization problem.....226

Massalimova B.K., Dautova Z.S., Sharipkhanova A.

The role of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals using STEM projects.....240

Pernebayeva F., Kulakhmet M., Abdullaeva A.

The effectiveness of using innovative methods in teaching biology based on digital laboratories....256

Ryskulbek D.Zh., Daurenbek S.B., Dossmurzaeva A.S.

Teaching ethnocultural units to a Russian-speaking audience through artificial intelligence: working with translation mismatches.....278

Sabyrbaeva B.T., Zhensikbaeva N.Zh.

Development of students' eco-geographical culture in the context of a green economy.....300

Serikbayeva N., Belenko O., Orynbekova A.

Pedagogical decision-making based on the assessment of students' personal development and psychological well-being.....320

Shamshadinkyzy A., Kulanova S.Sh.

Teaching alash figures in higher education through storytelling and dramatization.....333

Zhumagulova Z.A., Ospanbekov Y.A., Nyssan G.

Methodology of using artificial intelligence in developing problem-solving skills of future physics teachers.....346

ECONOMICS

Ashirbayeva S.B., Yesirkepova A.M., Alzhanova A.A.

The Impact Of Climate Change On Forestry In Kazakhstan And Uzbekistan: Economic Assessment And Comparative Analysis.....360

Beisenbayeva A. K., Sultanova B. B., Turdaliyeva U.N.

Digitalization Of Accounting In Kazakhstan And Ensuring The Quality Of Accounting Information.....379

Esimkhan G.E., Rakhimberdinova M.U., Kabieva A.

Sustainable Development Of The Agro-Industrial Complex Through Innovation And Digital Technologies.....401

Gataulina G., Assanova A., Koshkarbaev K.

The Impact Of Digital Technologies On Nonperforming Loans In The Banking Sector.....418

Kaliyeva S., Umurzakova B., Tashimova U.

Key Directions For Developing A High-Quality Labor Force Market In The Context Of New Technology Adoption.....434

Konyrbekov M.Zh.

Structural And Technological Modernization Of Kazakhstan'S Industries Under Esg Transformation: Assessment Criteria.....453

Kozhakhmetova K., Rakhmatullayeva D., Ruziev K.

Esg-Investment Of Kazakhstan'S Endowment Funds: Institutional Constraints And Mechanisms To Overcome Them.....472

Kussainova D.B. , Intykbayeva S.Zh. , Guliyev F. Digital Financial Inclusion In Kazakhstan: Assessing The Efficiency Of Financial Product Use And Associated Risks.....	495
Madysheva A., Abdimoldayeva A., Mutaliyeva L. Artificial Intelligence In Managing Logistics Costs Of The Agro-Industrial Complex.....	517
Momynkulova S.M., Urkumbayeva A. R. , Yessakhmetova L. M. Innovative Development Of Kazakhstan’S Grain Sector: Trends, Challenges, And Strategic Priorities.....	533
Nurbatsin A., Lodhi R.N., Karacsony P. Gender Inequality In Access To Digital Technologies And Its Impact On Women’S Employment In Kazakhstan.....	554
Nurgaliyeva K. Esg Factors Of Structural Modernization Of Kazakhstan’S Economy: Sectoral Differences And Development Priorities.....	575
Sarkambayeva Sh.G., Turegeldinova A.T., Kumpekeyev A.K. Consumer credit behavior and personalized lending in digital banking.....	598
Skakova S.N., Davletova M.T., Gerasimenko V.V. Social Media And User-Generated Content As Factors Influencing Consumers’ Tourist Decisions In Kazakhstan.....	613
Tansykbayeva G.O., Baigireeva Zh., Nurgaliyeva Zh.E. Digital Transformation Of Remuneration Systems In Kazakhstan: Mechanisms For Improving Efficiency And Fairness.....	631
Tolepov A.Ye., Karibayeva A.M., Muslimkyzy L. The role of high tech medical technologies in improving the efficiency of the healthcare system in the Republic of Kazakhstan.....	650
Tulaganov A.B., Bigozhin R.M., Nurmagambetova A.I. Quality Assurance Activities In Universities Of The Republic Of Kazakhstan: Development Challenges.....	672
Tuleshova G., Serikbayev S., Zhangirova R. Development Of The Circular Economy Based On Marketing Models Of Sustainable Consumption And Waste Recycling.....	688
Wang Jingyan, Kanabekova M., Dzhakisheva U. Factors Driving The Accelerated Economic Development Of Cities In Kazakhstan And China: A Comparative Analysis.....	703
Zhu Jian, Kusmoldayeva Zh., Abraliyev O.A. Artificial Intelligence As A Tool For Improving The Efficiency Of Healthcare System Management In Kazakhstan.....	722

МАЗМҰНЫ

ПЕДАГОГИКА

Абильдинова Г.М., Муканова Т.Т., Кажиякпарова Ж.С. AR-эффектілерді әлеуметтік желілер арқылы ақпараттық-коммуникациялық технологиялар бойынша білімді бағалауда қолдану.....	14
Әбітаева Ұ.Ә., Сарыбаева Ә.Х., Алмагамбетова А.А. GeoGebra бағдарламасын қолдану арқылы болашақ физика мұғалімдеріне геометриялық оптиканы оқытудың тиімділігі.....	30
Әбілқасымов А., Тұяқов Е., Рысбекова Г. Техникалық мамандықтағы студенттерді кәсіби бағдарлы оқытуда стохастикалық әдістерді қолдану.....	43
Айдарханова К.А., Рауандина А.К. Қазақ тілінде оқытпайтын мектептерде 8–9-сынып оқушыларының диалогтік сөйлеу дағдыларын қалыптастырудың инновациялық тәсілдері.....	63
Акдениз Э., Базарбаев К., Шормакова А. Хх ғасырдың басындағы қазақ ұлттық баспасөзі материалдарын Түркия тарихын оқытуда пайдаланудың ғылыми-әдістемелік негіздері.....	77
Башенова Ә.М., Тұяқбаев Ғ.Ә. Білім алушылардың зерттеушілік құзыреттілігін фольклор және цифрлық технологиялар арқылы дамыту.....	93
Бердібек А.М., Қудайбергенова А.М. Болашақ педагог-психологтардың кәсіби құзыреттіліктерін қалыптастырудағы Case Study технологиясының рөлі.....	112
Имангалиева Б., Торсықбаева Б., Өнербаева З. «Электролиттік диссоциация теориясы» тарауын ерекше балаларға оқыту.....	133
Иминова Ю.Б. Playful learning негізінде мектеп жасына дейінгі балалардың қауіпсіз мінез-құлқын зерттеу үрдістері: библиометриялық карталау.....	148
Капарова Р., Есенова М., Дюсов М. Функцияның туындысын табу дағдыларын ақпараттық технологияларды қолдану арқылы қалыптастыру.....	171
Керімбаева К.З., Үсенбай А.Ұ., Бейсен А.К. Химия пәнінде жасанды интеллект құралдарын қолдану арқылы тәжірибелік сабақтарды тиімді ұйымдастыру.....	193
Кеңшілік А.Т., Калекешов А.М., Абдрасұлова Ж.Т. Еббқ бар оқушыларға биология пәнін оқытуда жасанды интеллект құралдарын қолданудың әдістемелік негіздері.....	209
Кожабасев С.Е., Нысанов Е.А., Абдрашова Э.Т. Оңтайландыру есептерін бағдарламалау арқылы болашақ информатиктердің есептеуіш ойлау қабілетін жетілдіру.....	226

Масалимова Б.К., Даутова З.С., Шарипханова А.

STEM жобаларды қолдану арқылы тұрақты даму максаттарын жүзеге асырудың маңызы.....240

Пернебаева Ф. С., Құлахмет М., Абдуллаева А.А.

Цифрлық зертханалар негізінде биологияны оқытуда инновациялық әдістерді қолданудың тиімділігі.....256

Рысқұлбек Д.Ж., Дәуренбек С.Б., Досмурзаева А.С.

Этномәдени бірліктерді орыс аудиториясында жиі арқылы оқыту: аудармадағы сәйкессіздіктермен жұмыс.....278

Сабырбаева Б.Т., Женисқбаева Н.Ж.

Жасыл экономика жағдайында оқушылардың экологиялық-географиялық мәдениетін дамыту.....300

Серикбаева Н., Беленко О., Орынбекова А.

Оқушылардың тұлғалық дамуы мен психологиялық әл-ауқатын бағалау негізінде педагогикалық шешім қабылдау.....320

Шамшадинқызы А., Құланова С.Ш.

Жоғары оқу орындарында Алаш қайраткерлерін сторителлинг және драматизация әдістері арқылы оқыту.....333

Жұмағұлова З.А., Оспанбеков Е.А., Нысан Г.

Болашақ физика мұғалімдерінің есеп шығару дағдыларын дамытуда жасанды интеллектті қолдану әдістемесі.....346

ЭКОНОМИКА

Әшірбаева С.Б., Есіркепова А.М., Әлжанова А.А.

Климаттық өзгерістердің Қазақстан және Өзбекстан орман шаруашылығына әсері: экономикалық бағалау және салыстырмалы талдау.....360

Бейсенбаева А.К., Сұлтанова Б.Б., Тұрдалиева Ү.Н.

Қазақстандағы бухгалтерлік есепті цифрландыру және есептік ақпараттың сапасын қамтамасыз ету.....379

Есімхан Г.Е., Рахимбердинова М.У., Қабиева Ә.

Инновациялар мен цифрлық технологиялар негізінде агроөнеркәсіптік кешеннің тұрақты дамуы.....401

Гатаулина Г., Асанова А., Қошқарбаев Қ.

Цифрлық технологиялардың банк секторындағы проблемалық берешекке әсері.....418

Қалиева С., Өмірзақова Б., Ташимова Ү.

Жаңа технологияларды енгізу жағдайында сапалы еңбек ресурстары нарығын қалыптастырудың негізгі бағыттары.....434

Қонырбеков М.Ж.

Қазақстан өнеркәсібінің esg трансформациясы жағдайындағы құрылымдық-технологиялық жаңғыруы: бағалау өлшемдері.....453

Қожахметова Қ., Рахматуллаева Д., Рузиев К.

Esg-қазақстанның эндаументтік қорларына инвестициялар: институционалдық шектеулер және оларды еңсеру тетіктері.....472

Құсайынова Д.Б., Интықбаева С.Ж., Гулиев Ф.

Қазақстандағы цифрлық қаржылық инклюзия: қаржы өнімдерін пайдалану тиімділігін және ілеспе тәуекелдерді бағалау.....495

Мәдішева Ә., Әбдімолдаева А., Мұталиева Л.

Агроөнеркәсіптік кешеннің логистикалық шығындарын басқарудағы жасанды интеллект...517

Момынқұлова С.М., Үркімбаева А.Р., Есахметова Л.М.

Қазақстанның астық секторын инновациялық дамыту: үрдістер, проблемалар және стратегиялық басымдықтар.....533

Нұрбақин А., Лодхи Р.Н., Карачони П.

Цифрлық технологияларға қол жеткізудегі гендерлік теңсіздік және оның қазақстандағы әйелдердің жұмыспен қамтылуына әсері.....554

Нұрғалиева Қ.

Қазақстан экономикасын құрылымдық жаңғыртудың esg-факторлары: салалық айырмашылықтар мен даму басымдықтары.....575

Сарқамбаева Ш.Г., Турегелдинова А.Т., Кумпекеев А.К.

Цифрлық банкінгтегі тұтынушының кредиттік мінез-құлқы және дербестендірілген кредиттеу.....598

Скакова С.Н., Давлетова М.Т., Герасименко В.В.

Әлеуметтік желілер мен пайдаланушылар жасаған контент Қазақстандағы тұтынушылардың туристік шешімдеріне әсер ететін факторлар ретінде.....613

Тансықбаева Г.О., Байгиреева Ж., Нұрғалиева Ж.Е.

Қазақстандағы еңбекақы төлеу жүйелерінің цифрлық трансформациясы: тиімділік пен әділдікті арттыру тетіктері.....631

Төлепов Ә.Е., Карибаева А.М., Муслимқызы Л.

Қазақстан Республикасының денсаулық сақтау жүйесінің тиімділігін арттырудағы жоғары технологиялық медициналық технологиялардың рөлі.....650

Тулағанов А.Б., Бигожин Р.М., Нұрмағамбетова А.И.

Қазақстан Республикасының жоғары оқу орындарында сапаны қамтамасыз ету қызметі: даму мәселелері.....672

Тулешова Г., Серікбаев С., Жангирова Р.

Тұрақты тұтыну мен қалдықтарды қайта өңдеудің маркетингтік модельдері негізінде циркулярлық экономиканы дамыту.....688

Ван Цзинъянь, Қанабекова М., Джакишева У.

Қазақстан мен Қытай қалаларының озыңқы экономикалық даму факторлары: салыстырмалы талдау.....703

Чжу Цзянь, Құсмолдаева Ж., Әбралиев О.А.

Жасанды интеллект Қазақстанның денсаулық сақтау жүйесін басқару тиімділігін арттыру құралы ретінде.....722

СОДЕРЖАНИЕ

ПЕДАГОГИКА

Абильдинова Г.М., Муканова Т.Т., Кажиякпарова Ж.С.

Применение AR-эффектов при оценке знаний по информационно-коммуникационным технологиям через социальные сети.....14

Абитаева У.А., Сарыбаева Ә.Х., Алмагамбетова А.А.

Эффективность обучения геометрической оптике будущих учителей физики с применением программы GeoGebra.....30

Абылкасымова А., Туяков Е., Рысбекова Г.

Применение стохастических методов в профессионально ориентированном обучении студентов технических специальностей.....43

Айдарханова К.А., Рауандина А.К.

Инновационные подходы к развитию навыков диалогической речи у учащихся 8–9-х классов в школах с неказахским языком обучения.....63

Акдениз Э., Базарбаев К., Шормакоева А.

Научно-методические основы использования материалов казахской национальной прессы начала XX века в преподавании истории Турции.....77

Башенова А.М., Туякбаев Г.А.

Развитие исследовательской компетентности обучающихся посредством фольклора и цифровых технологий.....93

Бердібек А.М., Кудайбергенова А.М.

Технология Case Study как средство формирования профессиональных компетенций будущих педагогов-психологов.....112

Имангалиева Б., Торсыкбаева Б., Унербаева З.

Обучение обучающихся с особыми образовательными потребностями по разделу «Теория электролитической диссоциации».....133

Иминова Ю.Б.

Тенденции исследований безопасного поведения дошкольников в Playful Learning: библиометрическое картирование.....148

Капарова Р., Есенова М., Дюсов М.

Формирование навыков нахождения производной функции с использованием информационных технологий.....171

Кеншилик А.Т., Калекешов А.М., Абдрасулова Ж.Т.

Методические основы применения инструментов искусственного интеллекта в обучении биологии обучающихся с особыми образовательными потребностями.....193

Керимбаева К.З., Усенбай А.У., Бейсен А.К.

Организация практических занятий химии с использованием искусственного интеллекта...209

Кожабаяев С.Е., Нысанов Е.А., Абдрашова Э.Т.

Совершенствование вычислительного мышления будущих информатиков посредством программирования задач оптимизации.....226

Масалимова Б.К., Даутова З.С., Шарипханова А. Роль реализации целей устойчивого развития с помощью STEM-проектов.....	240
Пернебаева Ф. С., Кулахмет М., Абдуллаева А.А. Эффективность использования инновационных методов в обучении биологии на базе цифровых лабораторий.....	256
Рысқұлбек Д.Ж., Дэуренбек С.Б., Досмурзаева А.С. Обучение этнокультурным единицам в русскоязычной аудитории с использованием искусственного интеллекта: работа с несоответствиями при переводе.....	278
Сабырбаева Б.Т., Женисқбаева Н.Ж. Развитие эколого-географической культуры учащихся в условиях зелёной экономики.....	300
Серикбаева Н., Беленко О., Орынбекова А. Принятие педагогических решений на основе оценки личностного развития и психологического благополучия учащихся.....	320
Шамшадинкызы А., Куланова С.Ш. Преподавание деятельности деятелей Алаша в высших учебных заведениях посредством сторителлинга и драматизации.....	333
Жұмағұлова З.А., Оспанбеков Е.А., Нысан Г. Методика использования искусственного интеллекта в развитии навыков решения задач у будущих учителей физики.....	340

ЭКОНОМИКА

Аширбаева С.Б., Есиркепова А.М., Альжанова А.А. Влияние климатических изменений на лесное хозяйство Казахстана и Узбекистана: экономическая оценка и сравнительный анализ.....	360
Бейсенбаева А.К., Султанова Б.Б., Турдалиева У.Н. Цифровизация бухгалтерского учета в Казахстане и обеспечение качества учетной информации.....	379
Есимхан Г.Е., Рахимбердинова М.У., Кабиева А. Устойчивое развитие агропромышленного комплекса на основе инноваций и цифровых технологий.....	401
Гатаулина Г., Асанова А., Кошкарбаев К. Влияние цифровых технологий на проблемную задолженность банковского сектора.....	418
Калиева С., Умурзакова Б., Ташимова У. Ключевые направления формирования рынка качественных трудовых ресурсов в условиях внедрения новых технологий.....	434
Конырбеков М.Ж. Структурно-технологическая модернизация отраслей промышленности Казахстана в условиях esg-трансформации: критерии оценки.....	453
Кожаметова К., Рахматуллаева Д., Рузиев К. Esg-инвестирование эндаумент-фондов Казахстана: институциональные ограничения и механизмы их преодоления.....	472

Кусаинова Д.Б., Интыкбаева С.Ж., Гулиев Ф.

Цифровая финансовая инклюзия в Казахстане: оценка эффективности использования финансовых продуктов и сопутствующих рисков.....495

Мадышева А., Абдимолдаева А., Муталиева Л.

Искусственный интеллект в управлении логистическими издержками агропромышленного комплекса.....517

Момынкулова С.М., Уркумбаева А.Р., Есахметова Л.М.

Инновационное развитие зернового сектора Казахстана: тенденции, проблемы и стратегические приоритеты.....533

Нурбацин А., Лодхи Р.Н., Карачони П.

Гендерное неравенство в доступе к цифровым технологиям и его влияние на занятость женщин в Казахстане.....534

Нурғалиева К.

Esg-факторы структурной модернизации экономики Казахстана: отраслевые различия и приоритеты развития.....575

Саркамбаева Ш.Г., Турегелдинова А.Т., Кумпекеев А.К.

Кредитное поведение потребителей и персонализированное кредитование в цифровом банкинге.....598

Скакова С.Н., Давлетова М.Т., Герасименко В.В.

Социальные сети и пользовательский контент как факторы, влияющие на туристические решения потребителей в Казахстане.....613

Тансыкбаева Г.О., Байгиреева Ж., Нурғалиева Ж.Е.

Цифровая трансформация систем оплаты труда в Казахстане: механизмы повышения эффективности и справедливости.....631

Төлепов А.Е., Карибаева А.М., Муслимқызы Л.

Роль высокотехнологичных медицинских технологий в повышении эффективности системы здравоохранения Республики Казахстан.....650

Тулаганов А.Б., Бигожин Р.М., Нурмагамбетова А.И.

Деятельность по обеспечению качества в вузах Республики Казахстан: проблемы развития.....672

Тулешова Г., Серикбаев С., Жангирова Р.

Развитие циркулярной экономики на основе маркетинговых моделей устойчивого потребления и переработки отходов.....688

Ван Цзинъянь, Канабекова М., Джакишева У.

Факторы опережающего экономического развития городов Казахстана и Китая: сравнительный анализ.....703

Чжу Цзянь, Кусмолдаева Ж., Абралиев О.А.

Искусственный интеллект как инструмент повышения эффективности управления системой здравоохранения Казахстана.....722

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SOCIAL MEDIA AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT AS FACTORS INFLUENCING CONSUMERS' TOURIST DECISIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Annotation. The development of social media is changing the architecture of information search and decision-making in the tourism market, since a significant portion of information about destinations is no longer generated solely by tourism organisations and official promotion channels, but also by consumers themselves through photos, video materials, reviews, comments, ratings, and recommendations. The study aims to identify the role of social media and user-generated content in shaping consumers' tourism choices in Kazakhstan and to substantiate the mechanism by which digital information influences perceptions of a tourist destination and the intention to travel. The study's methodological basis includes the theory of information adoption, the concept of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), the theory of trust in the source of information, and the Stimulus–Organism–Response approach. The empirical part is based on official statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, data on the development of domestic tourism and e-commerce, and international digital statistics for 2021–2025. We applied dynamic, comparative, and structural analysis, compared digital and tourism indicators, and used conceptual modelling. By 2025, Kazakhstan had developed a

large-scale digital audience: the number of Internet users reached 19.2 million, and the number of social media user identifiers reached 15.7 million. At the same time, the number of resident visitors served by accommodation facilities continued to grow, and the volume of e-commerce services increased from 349.9 billion tenge in 2021 to 2,477.3 billion tenge in 2025. User-generated content serves several functions in the tourist choice process: informational, reputational, risk-reducing, visual-emotional, and social confirmation. The author developed a model of tourist choice formation in which the characteristics of user-generated content influence trust and the image of the destination, then affect perceived value and risk, and ultimately influence the intention to visit the destination and tourist choice. The scientific novelty lies in distinguishing the direct informational impact of social media from the indirect impact through trust, destination image, and eWOM, as applied to the digital consumer environment in Kazakhstan.

Keywords: social media, user-generated content, UGC, eWOM, tourist choice, consumer behaviour, destination image, trust, domestic tourism, Kazakhstan

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ҚАЗАҚСТАНДА ТҰТЫНУШЫЛАРДЫҢ ТУРИСТІК ТАҢДАУЫН ҚАЛЫПТАСТЫРУ ФАКТОРЛАРЫ РЕТІНДЕ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК ЖЕЛІЛЕР МЕН ПАЙДАЛАНУШЫ КОНТЕНТІ

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Аннотация. Әлеуметтік желілерді дамыту туристік нарықта ақпараттық іздеу мен шешім қабылдау архитектурасын өзгертеді, өйткені дестинациялар туралы мәліметтердің едәуір бөлігін туристік ұйымдар мен ресми жылжыту арналары ғана емес, сонымен қатар фотосуреттер, бейнематериалдар,

шолулар, пікірлер, рейтингтер мен ұсыныстар арқылы тұтынушылардың өздері қалыптастырады. Зерттеудің мақсаты Қазақстанда тұтынушылардың туристік таңдауын қалыптастырудағы әлеуметтік желілер мен пайдаланушы контентінің рөлін анықтау және туристік дестинацияны қабылдауға және сапар жасау ниетіне цифрлық ақпараттың әсер ету тетігін негіздеу болып табылады. Зерттеудің әдіснамалық негізін Ақпараттық қабылдау теориясы, Электронды ауызша сөйлеу тұжырымдамасы - электронды Сөз-ауыз (eWOM), ақпарат көзіне деген сенім теориясы және Stimulus-gganism-Response тәсілі құрады. Эмпирикалық бөлім Қазақстан Республикасының ресми статистикасына, ішкі туризм мен электрондық коммерцияны дамыту туралы деректерге, сондай-ақ 2021-2025 жылдардағы халықаралық цифрлық статистикаға негізделген. 2025 жылға қарай Қазақстанда ауқымды цифрлық аудитория қалыптасқаны анықталды: Интернет пайдаланушыларының саны 19,2 млн адамға жетті, ал әлеуметтік желілерді пайдаланушылар идентификаторларының саны - 15,7 млн. Сонымен қатар, орналастыру орындарында қызмет көрсетілген резидент-келушілер саны өсуді жалғастырды, ал электрондық коммерция қызметтерінің көлемі 2021 жылғы 349,9 млрд теңгеден 2025 жылы 2 477,3 млрд теңгеге дейін ұлғайды. пайдаланушы контенті туристік таңдау процесінде бірнеше функцияларды орындайтыны көрсетілген: ақпараттық, беделді, қабылданатын тәуекелді төмендететін, визуалды-эмоционалды және функция әлеуметтік растау. Туристік таңдауды қалыптастырудың авторлық моделі жасалды, онда пайдаланушы мазмұнының сипаттамалары дестинацияның сенімі мен имиджіне, содан кейін қабылданатын құндылық пен тәуекелге, сайып келгенде, дестинацияға және туристік таңдауға бару ниетіне әсер етеді. Ғылыми жаңалық-Қазақстанның цифрлық тұтыну ортасына қатысты әлеуметтік желілердің тікелей ақпараттық әсерін және сенім, дестинация бейнесі және eWOM арқылы жанама әсерлерді ажырату.

Түйін сөздер: әлеуметтік желілер, пайдаланушы контенті, UGC, ewom, туристік таңдау, тұтынушылардың мінез-құлқы, дестинация бейнесі, сенім, ішкі туризм, Қазақстан

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СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ СЕТИ И ПОЛЬЗОВАТЕЛЬСКИЙ КОНТЕНТ КАК ФАКТОРЫ ФОРМИРОВАНИЯ ТУРИСТСКОГО ВЫБОРА ПОТРЕБИТЕЛЕЙ В КАЗАХСТАНЕ

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Аннотация. Развитие социальных сетей изменяет архитектуру информационного поиска и принятия решений на туристском рынке, поскольку значительная часть сведений о дестинациях формируется уже не только туристскими организациями и официальными каналами продвижения, но и самими потребителями посредством фотографий, видеоматериалов, отзывов, комментариев, рейтингов и рекомендаций. Цель исследования заключается в выявлении роли социальных сетей и пользовательского контента в формировании туристского выбора потребителей в Казахстане и обосновании механизма воздействия цифровой информации на восприятие туристской дестинации и намерение совершить поездку. Методологическую основу исследования составили теория информационного принятия, концепция электронного сарафанного радио - electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), теория доверия к источнику информации и подход Stimulus–Organism–Response. Эмпирическая часть основана на официальной статистике Республики Казахстан, данных о развитии внутреннего туризма и электронной коммерции, а также международной цифровой статистике за 2021–2025 гг. Применены методы динамического, сравнительного и структурного анализа, сопоставления цифровых и туристских показателей и концептуального моделирования. Установлено, что к 2025 г. в Казахстане сформировалась масштабная цифровая аудитория: количество пользователей Интернета достигло 19,2 млн человек, а число идентификаторов пользователей социальных сетей - 15,7 млн. Одновременно число посетителей-резидентов, обслуженных местами размещения, продолжило расти, а объем электронной коммерции услуг увеличился с 349,9 млрд тенге в 2021 г. до 2 477,3 млрд тенге в 2025 г. Показано, что пользовательский контент выполняет несколько функций в процессе туристского выбора: информационную, репутационную, снижающую воспринимаемый риск, визуально-эмоциональную и функцию социального подтверждения. Разработана авторская модель формирования туристского выбора, в которой характеристики пользовательского контента воздействуют на доверие и образ дестинации, далее - на воспринимаемую ценность и риск и, в конечном счете, на намерение посетить дестинацию и туристский выбор. Научная новизна состоит в разграничении прямого информационного воздействия социальных сетей и опосредованного воздействия через доверие, образ дестинации и eWOM применительно к цифровой потребительской среде Казахстана.

Ключевые слова: социальные сети, пользовательский контент, UGC,

еWOM, туристский выбор, поведение потребителей, образ дестинации, доверие, внутренний туризм, Казахстан

Introduction. The digital transformation of the tourism market is accompanied not only by changes in how tourism services are sold and promoted, but also by changes in the consumer decision-making mechanism itself. If, in the early stages of e-commerce development, the main source of information was the official websites of tourism companies, hotels, and destination management bodies, then the modern digital environment is characterised by a significant expansion of the role of information created directly by users. Photos, short videos, social media posts, comments, ratings, and reviews are becoming part of the tourism market's information infrastructure.

This process is of particular importance for tourism. In most cases, a tourist service is purchased before it is actually consumed and cannot be fully assessed by the buyer in advance. Therefore, the choice of destination is associated with information uncertainty and perceived risk. Under such conditions, other travellers' experiences become an additional source of information, capable of either confirming the marketing promises of tourism organisations or calling them into question. As a result, electronic word of mouth, or eWOM, becomes one element in the mechanism for generating tourist demand (Litvin et al., 2008).

Even in the early stages of tourist social media development, research found that social platform content occupies a significant place in tourist information search results and shapes the structure of the traveller's information field (Xiang, Gretzel, 2010). Later studies have shown that the impact is determined not only by the mere presence of information, but also by its quality, relevance, timeliness, and reliability (Filieri, McLeay, 2014). The current stage is characterised by a further shift towards visual and video content, as well as an increased role of trust in the source.

For Kazakhstan, research into this issue is becoming particularly relevant due to the simultaneous expansion of the domestic tourism market and the high level of digital engagement among the population. In early 2025, the number of internet users in the country was estimated at 19.2 million people, or 92.9% of the population, and the number of social media user identifiers was 15.7 million, which corresponded to 75.7% of the population. At the same time, Instagram's potential advertising reach was about 12.4 million users (DataReportal, 2025).

High digital engagement creates an infrastructural prerequisite for the impact of social media on tourist consumption, but on its own it does not prove a causal link between the use of a social network and the actual trip. It is precisely this distinction that is methodologically significant. The number of users characterises the scale of potential informational impact. In contrast, tourist choice results from a more complex sequence that includes information perception, evaluation, trust, the formation of a destination image, comparison behaviours, and behavioural intention.

In a previous study, the authors demonstrated the relationship between the expansion of the digital consumer environment and the development of domestic tourism in Kazakhstan. They proposed distinguishing between digitalisation and intellectualisation of the tourism market. In particular, they identified an increase in the number of resident visitors served by accommodation facilities, as well as a significant expansion of e-commerce and the digital acquisition of services. However, which specific elements of the digital information space shape tourist choice requires separate research.

In this regard, the research problem addressed in this work is the need to move from a macro-level analysis of tourism digitalisation to an explanation of the mechanisms through which social networks and user-generated content influence consumer decisions.

The study aims to determine the role of social networks and user-generated content in shaping consumers' travel choices in Kazakhstan and to develop a conceptual model of this influence.

To achieve the goal, the following tasks have been set: to systematise theoretical approaches to the study of UGC and eWOM in tourism; to assess the scale of the digital environment in which tourist choices are made in Kazakhstan; to identify the key characteristics of user-generated content that can influence consumer decisions; to reveal the role of trust, perceived risk, and the image of the destination; to propose a mechanism for transforming the impact of social media into the intention to visit a destination and the actual tourist choice.

Literature Review. Social media in tourism should be viewed not solely as a channel for marketing communication, but as a multifaceted information environment in which tourists, tourism businesses, destination organisations, bloggers, and other content creators interact simultaneously.

One fundamental difference between such an environment and traditional advertising is the shift in the information source. User-generated content (UGC) is created primarily by consumers themselves. It includes photos, videos, texts, comments, ratings, and reviews that reflect the subjective experience of using a product or visiting a destination.

Xiang and Gretzel (2010) showed that social media is becoming an essential part of online searches for tourism information, changing the competitive environment for traditional tourism information providers. The importance of user-generated content stems from the specific nature of the tourism product. A tourist is unable to fully verify the quality of a future trip until the moment of consumption. Therefore, when choosing a destination, consumers use indirect signals of quality: ratings from other tourists, visual materials, facility ratings, the number of positive and negative reviews, and their content.

Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan identified eWOM as a significant channel of interpersonal influence in hospitality and tourism. The authors noted that translating traditional word-of-mouth communication into a digital environment radically

increases the potential scale of influence one consumer can have on others (Litvin et al., 2008).

The next area of research asks why one user review influences a decision while another is ignored. Filieri and McLeay established the importance of accuracy, relevance, timeliness, and added value of information, as well as product ratings, for travellers' acceptance of information from online reviews (Filieri, McLeay, 2014). Thus, the impact of UGC depends not so much on the total volume of information as on the combination of content characteristics and the consumer's perception of it.

Within the framework of the information adoption model, the following sequence is assumed: information quality → information usefulness → information acceptance → behavioural intention. Studies of eWOM in social media show that the quality and reliability of information influence the intention to make a purchase through the perception of its usefulness and subsequent adoption (Erkan, Evans, 2016).

For tourist behaviour, this chain needs to be supplemented with trust. The consumer faces information asymmetry: it is impossible to reliably determine whether a publication reflects real experience or is a commercially motivated communication. Therefore, the perceived authenticity of the source becomes part of the assessment of tourist information.

Modern studies confirm the growing importance of this mechanism. The study of user-generated tourist videos revealed that the perceived aesthetic properties and credibility of video content are positively related to electronic trust, and the latter is related to eWOM and the intention to choose a tourist destination. The study was based on data from 532 members of Generation Z and combined Source Credibility Theory and the Stimulus–Organism–Response model. A systematic review of the factors influencing the choice of a tourist destination also highlights the quality of content, eWOM, destination characteristics, the source of information, and the user's own characteristics as separate groups of factors (Azevedo-Ferreira, Zouain, 2024).

The visual component plays a special role. The tourist product is well adapted to visual communication, since natural landscapes, architecture, gastronomy, cultural events, and tourist experiences can be presented in the form of photo and video content. Munar and Jacobsen showed that tourists tend to actively share visual forms of content, and the motivation depends on the type of social platform and the nature of the content (Munar, Jacobsen, 2014). Finally, social media influences not only the pre-trip selection stage. The modern approach considers UGC within the framework of the complete customer journey. Before the trip, it serves an informational and inspirational function; during the trip, it is used to select destinations and activities; after the trip, the traveller becomes a producer of information that influences the subsequent behaviour of other consumers. The 2025 literature review confirms the presence of social media and UGC at all three stages of the tourist experience.

Consequently, a user of tourist services simultaneously performs two functions — that of a consumer of digital content and that of its producer. It is this cyclical nature that distinguishes modern social media from one-way advertising channels. Based on the reviewed literature, this study identifies six central factors influencing UGC: information quality, reliability, visual appeal, perceived authenticity, social proof, and electronic trust. Their impact is primarily mediated by the image of the destination, perceived value, and risk.

Materials and methods. The research methodology was developed to evaluate social media and user content not only as tools for the digital promotion of tourism services, but also as elements of the information environment in which consumer choice is formed. Unlike approaches that directly link the development of digital communications to the growth of tourism demand, this study uses a multi-level analytical logic that distinguishes between the macro level of digitalisation, the characteristics of user content, and the mechanism of individual tourism decision-making.

The empirical analysis covers the period from 2021 to 2025 primarily. The choice of this period is due to the acceleration of digitalization processes in consumer behavior after pandemic restrictions, the growth of e-commerce in services, and the expansion of digital channels for searching for tourism information in Kazakhstan. For certain macroeconomic indicators of tourism, the time series ends in 2024, since at the time of the study the last published Tourism Satellite Account by the Bureau of National Statistics refers to 2024. In such cases, the indicators for 2025 were not extrapolated, which made it possible to avoid mixing official statistics and estimated values. At the same time, the statistics on the activities of accommodation facilities for January–December 2025 were officially published on April 1, 2026. (Bureau of National Statistics, 2026).

The information base of the study consisted of data from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan on e-commerce, the Tourism Support Account and the activities of accommodation facilities, as well as international statistics from DataReportal, which characterise the penetration of the Internet and the scale of use of social platforms in Kazakhstan. Additionally, the results of modern international studies on user-generated content, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), trust in digital sources, and the formation of a tourist destination's image were used. The study's methodological framework integrates three theoretical approaches. The first is represented by the information adoption model, according to which the consumer evaluates the quality and usefulness of digital information before it is included in the decision-making process. The second is source credibility theory, which suggests that a message's persuasiveness depends not only on its content but also on the perceived reliability, competence, and authenticity of its author. The third approach is based on the Stimulus–Organism–Response model, which treats user-generated content as an external stimulus, trust and the image of the

destination as an internal cognitive-emotional response, and the intention to visit a tourist destination and the subsequent choice as a behavioural outcome.

Within the framework of the study, social networks are considered as the digital infrastructure for forming a tourist decision; user-generated content is seen as the set of photos, video materials, reviews, ratings, recommendations, and comments created by consumers; eWOM is seen as the dissemination of user ratings and recommendations in an electronic environment.

For quantitative analysis, we used methods for analysing time series, calculating absolute and relative changes, and conducting structural and comparative analysis. The rate of change was calculated using the formula:

$$T = ((X_t / X_0) - 1) \times 100,$$

where X_t is the value of the indicator in the final period; X_0 is the value of the indicator in the base period.

The change in share indicators was assessed in percentage points.

At the conceptual level, the method of sequential modelling of consumer choice was used. The initial characteristics of the impact were identified as the quality of user information, its reliability and authenticity, visual appeal, and eWOM. The intermediate variables are electronic trust, destination image, perceived value, and perceived risk. The resulting components are the intention to visit the destination and the tourist choice itself.

Thus, the analytical framework of the study is as follows:

digital environment → social media → user-generated content → assessment of the quality and reliability of information → electronic trust → destination image → perceived value and risk → intention to make a trip → tourist choice.

When interpreting the results, we considered an important methodological limitation. The coincidence of trends in digital activity and the tourism market is not taken as proof of a direct cause-and-effect relationship. Tourism demand depends on household incomes, prices, transport accessibility, infrastructure quality, seasonality, institutional factors, and other conditions. Therefore, aggregated statistics are used to determine the scale of the environment in which the mechanism of digital influence operates, rather than to prove that the growth in the number of social media users directly causes an increase in tourist trips.

Results. The results show that by 2025, Kazakhstan had a digital environment in which social networks could potentially reach a large share of the tourism market's consumer audience. According to DataReportal, at the beginning of 2025, the number of internet users in the country reached 19.2 million, corresponding to 92.9% of the population. The number of social media user identifiers was estimated at 15.7 million, or 75.7% of the population. At the same time, about 81.5% of the country's internet audience used social media (DataReportal, 2025).

The prevalence of visual social platforms is of particular importance for tourism marketing. The potential advertising audience for Instagram in Kazakhstan at the beginning of 2025 amounted to 12.4 million users, or 64.4% of the country's entire internet audience. At the same time, TikTok's advertising tools reached 15.7 million users aged 18 and over. These indicators do not represent the number of unique users and cannot be interpreted as the number of touchcharacteriseer; they charalargeize an extremely large potential scale of distribution of user-generated visual content (DataReportal, 2025).

The main characteristics of the digital environment are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 — Main indicators of the digital consumer environment in Kazakhstan in 2025.

Indicator	2025
Internet users, million people	19,2
Internet penetration, % of the population	92,9
Social media user identifiers, million	15,7
Social media users, % of the population	75,7
Share of social media users among the internet audience, %	81,5
Potential Instagram audience, million	12,4
Instagram reach relative to the internet audience, %	64,4
Note: social media metrics characterise user identities and potential advertising reach, and do not always correspond to the number of unique individuals.	
Source: compiled by the authors based on DataReportal data (2025).	

The data in Table 1 show that digital infrastructure is no longer a limiting factor for the dissemination of tourism information in Kazakhstan. With Internet penetration exceeding 90% and the widespread use of social media, user-generated content has the potential to be present at almost all stages of the tourist customer journey - from the initial emergence of interest in a destination to the choice of accommodation and the publication of one's own review after the trip is completed.

A key driver of this shift in consumer behaviour is the growth of e-commerce. If retail e-commerce volume amounted to 482.0 billion tenge in 2021, it reached 768.8 billion tenge in 2025. Over the period under consideration, the volume increased approximately 7.8-fold, or by 681.9%. The share of e-commerce in total retail trade volume increased from 3.6% to 14.3%, i.e., by 10.7 percentage points (Bureau of National Statistics, 2026).

E-commerce in services is even more directly related to the tourism market. Its volume increased from 349.9 billion tenge in 2021 to 2,477.3 billion tenge in 2025, i.e., by approximately 7.1 times. Absolute growth amounted to 2,127.4 billion tenge, and relative growth was approximately 608%. The dynamics are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 — Dynamics of e-commerce in Kazakhstan in 2021–2025.

Indicator	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Change 2025/2021
Retail e-commerce, billion tenge	482,0	1 963,5	2 439,8	3 156,4	3 768,8	+681,9%
Share of e-commerce in retail trade, %	3,6	12,5	12,7	14,1	14,3	+10,7 п.п.
E-commerce of services, billion tenge	349,9	1 186,5	1 602,6	2 443,4	2 477,3	+607,9%
Note: the figures for 2022–2025 were compiled by the Bureau of National Statistics, taking into account marketplaces.						
Source: calculated and compiled by the authors based on data from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2026).						

As Table 2 shows, the most intensive structural restructuring of digital consumption occurred in the first half of the period under consideration. At the same time, growth continued up to 2025. In 2025, 81.8% of the total volume of e-commerce services was sold through marketplaces, while 18.2% was sold through companies' own online resources (Bureau of National Statistics, 2026).

This structure is of fundamental importance for interpreting tourist behaviour. Consumers increasingly interact not with a single company in an isolated information space, but with a digital platform that simultaneously displays a commercial offer, ratings, user reviews, feedback, photos, and comparable alternatives. As a result, the process of information search and the purchasing process are gradually merging.

Alongside the digitalisation of the consumer environment, tourism market value indicators continued to grow. According to the Tourism Support Account, consumption related to domestic tourism increased from 2,759.6 billion tenge in 2023 to 3,162.8 billion tenge in 2024, i.e., by 14.6%. Expenditures directly related to domestic tourism increased from 1,061.4 to 1,278.9 billion tenge, or by approximately 20.5%. The gross value added generated directly in tourism reached 1,418.5 billion tenge, with a physical volume index of 103.7% (Bureau of National Statistics, 2026).

Table 3 — Key indicators of the development of the tourism market in Kazakhstan.

Indicator	2023	2024	Change
Consumption related to domestic tourism, billion tenge	2 759,6	3 162,8	+14,6%
Expenditures related to domestic tourism, billion tenge	1 061,4	1 278,9	+20,5%
Expenditures related to inbound tourism, billion tenge	1 172,3	1 324,9	+13,0%
Total domestic tourism expenditures, billion tenge	2 233,7	2 603,8	+16,6%
Direct gross value added from tourism, billion tenge	—	1 418,5	—
Note: The tourism satellite account is published with a time lag; official figures for 2025 were not available at the time of the study and were not calculated by the authors independently.			
Source: calculated by the authors based on data from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2026).			

Thus, the analysis reveals the simultaneous expansion of three interrelated environments: digital communication, electronic acquisition of goods and services,

and tourist consumption. However, this result is not sufficient to explain tourist choice. The next stage of the study aimed to identify the mechanisms through which user information can be transformed into behavioural intention.

Systematising empirical studies made it possible to identify five characteristics of digital content most closely related to tourist decision-making: information value, reliability, authenticity, visual appeal, and eWOM.

The first result is related to the information value of UGC. Unlike a standardised advertising message, a user-generated post often includes specific information about the property's actual condition, transport accessibility, prices, congestion, service quality, and stay details. As a result, user-generated content can reduce the gap between the information provided by the organisation and the actual consumption experience.

The second factor is reliability and perceived authenticity. The user evaluates not only what is reported about the destination but also how much the message resembles an independent description of the real experience. In modern conditions, this factor gains additional significance due to the commercialisation of blogging and the spread of advertising integrations.

The third factor is visual appeal. The tourist product is highly visual, so images and video can shape an emotional perception of the territory even before rational comparison of alternatives begins. Experimental studies from 2024 show that visual and textual elements of user-generated content influence aesthetic assessments, mental images, trust, and subsequent behavioural intentions (Li et al., 2024).

The fourth factor is electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Unlike a single message, eWOM creates a cumulative informational effect. The repetition of similar assessments by different users can serve as a form of social confirmation, while the persistent repetition of negative information increases the perceived risk.

The fifth component is related to electronic trust. This systematisation makes it possible to view trust not as an independent outcome of digital communication, but as a central intermediate mechanism through which UGC characteristics are transformed into tourist intention.

The resulting system of factors is presented in Table 4.

Table 4 — The mechanism of influence of social networks and user-generated content on tourist choice

Factor	The content of the impact:	Intermediate effect	Behavioural outcome:
UGC quality	Completeness, relevance, and specificity of the information.	Increase in perceived utility	Continued search, inclusion of the destination in the set of alternatives;
Credibility	Consistency of the information with the perceived real experience.	Trust formation	Acceptance of information;
Authenticity	Absence of signs of excessive commercialisation.	Trust strengthening	Increased persuasiveness of the message;

Visual appeal	Photo and video representation of the tourist experience.	Cognitive and emotional image of the destination	Growth in interest and intention to visit;
eWOM	Reviews, ratings, and recommendations from other users.	Social confirmation	Strengthening or revision of the choice;
Negative UGC	Complaints, criticism, and visual evidence of shortcomings.	Increase in perceived risk	Rejection or search for alternatives;
Electronic trust	Confidence in the reliability of the source and the information.	Reduction of uncertainty	Increased likelihood of making a decision;
Destination image	Integral cognitive-emotional perception.	Increase or decrease in attractiveness	Intention to visit;
Perceived risk	Uncertainty regarding the quality and conditions of the trip.	Increased caution	Rejection, postponement, or change of choice.
Source: developed by the authors based on the results of the study.			

The obtained results made it possible to formulate a model in which the social network itself is not defined as the direct cause of tourist choice. The main object of influence is user content, and the relationship between informational influence and the final decision is of an indirect nature: social networks → UGC/eWOM → informational value + reliability + visual appeal → electronic trust → destination image → perceived value and risk → intention to visit → tourist choice.

At the same time, the model has a cyclical nature. After completing a trip, the consumer can independently create photos, videos, ratings, or reviews, which become an informational resource for subsequent potential tourists. Therefore, the modern tourist is both a consumer and a producer of marketing-relevant information.

Discussion. The results obtained confirm the need to revise the traditional understanding of social networks as solely a channel for promoting tourist products. Given the high level of digital engagement among the population of Kazakhstan, their role is becoming significantly broader: social platforms are gradually transforming into an information infrastructure for making consumer decisions.

This conclusion aligns with international studies, but it allows for a more precise specification of the mechanism of influence in the context of Kazakhstan. Modern studies show that the capabilities of social media can directly influence the cognitive and affective image of a tourist destination, while social presence and parasocial interaction act as additional mediators in this process (Chen et al., 2024). A study of a rural tourist destination using a two-stage dataset of 1,751 observations confirmed a significant relationship between the characteristics of the social media environment and the formation of various components of the destination’s image.

In the context of this study, this means that the impact of social media on tourist choice should not be measured solely by the frequency of platform use. The mere fact of regular use of Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube does not yet explain why a particular user chooses a specific destination. More significant are the properties of the information with which he interacts, and the cognitive and emotional reactions that arise on their basis.

A particularly important result is the distinction between digital reach and behavioural influence. The presence of 15.7 million social media user identifiers in Kazakhstan indicates the size of the potential audience. However, it does not support the claim that a similar number of people make tourism-related decisions under the influence of social platforms. DataReportal specifically warns that social media user identity metrics do not necessarily correspond to unique individuals (DataReportal, 2025).

Therefore, the high prevalence of social media represents a condition for digital influence, but not its outcome.

The results obtained allow us to propose a transition from a simplified model:

social media → tourist choice

to a multi-stage mechanism:

social platform → content of user-generated posts → assessment of reliability and usefulness → trust → formation of a destination image → assessment of risk and value → intention → choice.

This approach is consistent with more recent research. A comparison of user-generated and company-generated content has shown that different types of social information can have different effects on the attitude towards a tourist destination, its image and intention to visit the territory; in an empirical study of 284 respondents, PLS-SEM was used to verify such connections (Suhartanto et al., 2024).

The revealed role of the visual component deserves special attention. The tourist product has the property of preliminary visualisation: users can form an idea of the landscape, architecture, accommodation, gastronomy, and possible types of activities even before the trip. For this reason, a photograph or a short video serves not only an informational function but also an emotional and motivational one.

For Kazakhstan, this circumstance is of particular importance. The country's tourism potential includes visually distinct natural and cultural spaces — mountainous areas in the southeast, canyons, lake systems, the Caspian coast, national parks, steppe territories, and historical and sacred sites. Accordingly, user-generated visual content can serve as an initial introduction to destinations that were previously outside the traditional range of tourist options available to consumers.

International results confirm that not only the content of the image matters, but also the source of the publication. An experimental study of tourist posts on Instagram revealed differences in the audience's response to posts by influencers

and ordinary users, and the type of tourist attraction and the psychological characteristics of the viewer also influenced the intention to visit the relevant territory (Kim, Kim, 2024).

This allows us to refine the proposed model: user-generated content cannot be considered a completely homogeneous category. Posts by residents, tourists, professional bloggers, and influencers can foster different types of trust and varying degrees of engagement. An analysis of approximately 142,000 Instagram posts also revealed significant differences between the content created by residents, tourists, and influencers when shaping the image of a destination.

Another key result of the study is the establishment of the central role of trust. For a tourism product, this mechanism is particularly important due to the impossibility of fully assessing the service before its actual consumption. A potential tourist is forced to use indirect quality signals — reviews, user photos, ratings, comments, and the experiences of other travelers.

Modern studies of user-generated tourism videos confirm this connection. It has been established that the aesthetic properties and credibility of user-generated video are linked to electronic trust, eWOM, and the intention to choose a tourist destination; the corresponding model combines Source Credibility Theory and the Stimulus–Organism–Response model (2025–2026).

However, the growing importance of user-generated content also creates a new problem. The line between organic recommendation and commercial communication becomes less obvious. An influencer may present paid content in the form of a personal travel experience, and the technical development of generative artificial intelligence simplifies the creation of realistic images and text reviews that are not based on a real visit to the destination.

Therefore, in the long term, the key limiting resource of the digital travel market may not be the volume of information, but trust in its origin.

The results also allow for a different interpretation of the development of e-commerce in Kazakhstan. The growth of e-commerce in services from 349.9 billion tenge in 2021 to 2,477.3 billion tenge in 2025 shows not just an increase in the number of online transactions. It reflects the institutionalisation of the digital customer journey, in which information search, option comparison, review assessment, and the actual purchase increasingly take place in the digital space.

For tourism, this means reducing the distance between information exposure and the commercial decision. The user can see a short video about the destination, go to the reviews, compare accommodation options, and make a booking without leaving the digital environment. As a result, marketing communication becomes part of an uninterrupted digital sequence, rather than a separate stage before the transaction is completed.

At the same time, comparing statistical indicators does not allow us to conclude that the spread of social media caused the increase in tourist consumption. Domestic consumption grew to 1,162.8 billion tenge in 2024, and spending on

domestic tourism increased simultaneously with digitalisation; however, tourism dynamics are shaped by a much broader range of factors (Bureau of National Statistics, 2026).

Therefore, the main scientific significance of the obtained results lies not in proving the correlation between the number of accounts and the number of trips, but in explaining the mechanism through which digital information can participate in decision-making.

The practical conclusions of the study are directly related to a change in the approach to managing tourism marketing. For destination management organisations, increasing the number of official publications is not enough. It is necessary to manage the entire digital information ecosystem of the territory: monitor user reviews, identify recurring issues, encourage the creation of organic content, interact with publication authors, and ensure that the digital image aligns with the real tourist experience.

For tourism businesses, the results mean an increased role for digital reputation. A negative review affects not only the business's relationship with a specific customer. It remains accessible to an indefinitely wide audience of future consumers and is included in their risk assessment process.

For regional marketing in Kazakhstan, user-generated content is particularly promising in relation to lesser-known domestic destinations. Given limited marketing budgets, publications by real visitors can simultaneously increase the territory's visibility and provide potential tourists with practical information that is absent in traditional advertising.

Thus, the analysis suggests a shift from a model of digital promotion of a tourist destination to a model of digital co-creation of its image. In the first model, the organisation primarily formulates and conveys the marketing message on its own. In the second case, official content coexists with thousands of independent user interpretations, and the final image of the destination is formed as a result of their interaction.

It is this transformation that represents the main difference of the modern digital stage in the development of tourism marketing and determines the growing influence of social media and user-generated content on consumers' travel choices in Kazakhstan.

Conclusion. The study has shown that social media and user-generated content are becoming significant elements of the information environment in which the tourist choice of consumers in Kazakhstan is formed. High internet penetration, a large audience on social platforms, and the rapid growth of e-commerce create objective prerequisites for transferring a significant part of the tourist customer journey to the digital environment. At the beginning of 2025, the number of internet users in Kazakhstan reached 19.2 million, and the number of social media user identifiers reached 15.7 million. At the same time, the volume of e-commerce services increased from 349.9 billion tenge in 2021 to 2,477.2 billion tenge in 2025.

At the same time, the research results show that the influence of social media on tourist choices cannot be reduced to a simple effect of digital reach.

The quality of user-generated content and its perception by consumers becomes decisive. Key characteristics include reliability, informational value, relevance, authenticity, visual appeal, and social validation. Their influence is exerted primarily through the formation of electronic trust, the image of the destination, perceived value, and the level of risk.

The proposed authorial model describes the following sequence: social networks → user-generated content → content evaluation → trust → destination image → perceived value and risk → intention to visit → tourist choice → tourist experience → new user-generated content.

The study's scientific novelty lies in conceptualising tourist choice as a cyclical digital process in which the consumer sequentially acts as a recipient, interpreter, and producer of tourist information. The study further substantiates the gap between social media's potential digital reach and its actual behavioural impact.

The practical significance of the results lies in the potential for organisations managing tourist destinations, tourism enterprises, and regional governing bodies to use the proposed model when developing digital marketing strategies. The focus should be shifted from the quantitative increase in publications to enhancing the credibility, relevance, and informational value of digital tourism content.

The study's limitation is its reliance on aggregated statistical data, which makes it possible to establish the conditions and scale of digitalisation but does not allow a quantitative assessment of the effect of a specific type of UGC on an individual tourist's decision.

Therefore, a promising continuation of the study is to conduct a representative survey of consumers in Kazakhstan and empirically test the proposed model using structural modelling, where the independent variables will be the quality of UGC, reliability, visual appeal, and eWOM; the mediators will be trust and the image of the destination; and the dependent variables will be the intention to visit the destination and tourist choice.

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