

# Social Media as a Tool for Promoting the Šarganska Osmica Museum-Tourist Complex

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**Abstract**— This paper explores the role of social media in the promotion of the Šarganska Osmica museum-tourist complex, located in Mokra Gora, Serbia. Through a quantitative analysis of data from Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, combined with a qualitative assessment of content and user interaction, the study examines the significance of digital communication in enhancing the visibility and business performance of the complex. Special emphasis is placed on evaluating promotional practices and their contribution to brand development and the destination's tourism image. The results indicate that social media represents a key and cost-effective tool for improving marketing and attracting visitors. Based on the findings, a strategic framework for digital marketing is proposed to strengthen the complex's online presence further.

**Keywords**—digital marketing, social media, tourism promotion, sustainable tourism, Šarganska Osmica

## I. INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of society and the rapid development of information and communication technologies have fundamentally changed how various industries operate, including tourism [1], [2]. Thanks to mobile devices, internet accessibility, and the ubiquity of social media, consumers today have access to vast amounts of information that directly influence their travel decisions and choice of destinations. According to the International Telecommunication Union, over 4.9 billion people used the internet in 2021, representing a 3.8 billion increase from 2008 and a 900 million increase from the previous year. This figure confirms the growing importance of the internet as a global sphere for exchanging and promoting tourism-related content<sup>1</sup>.

In this context, social media is among the most influential and dynamic tools of modern digital marketing. Their role in the tourism sector is multifaceted: in addition to information sharing, they allow users to post personal experiences, leave comments and reviews, and directly influence other users' decisions [3], [4]. Consumers often choose destinations based on social media content, as confirmed by a study involving 110 respondents who used social media to inform their travel decisions [5]. A study by Sahin and Sengün (2015), conducted among students in Turkey, also highlights

the strong impact of user comments on social media when making travel decisions [6].

## II. BACKGROUND

Numerous practical examples confirm the effectiveness of social media as a promotional channel. At the European level, the Greek program Regio Gnosis reached over 4.5 million people through social media campaigns [7]. National tourism organizations in Chile, the USA, Portugal, and the Netherlands successfully use social media to promote cultural tourism, with communication strategies shown to be closely tied to the cultural characteristics of the target markets [8]. The Portuguese example further demonstrates how all wine-producing regions use social media to promote cultural heritage, events, and tourism offers [9].

In the Asian context, Santi and Fadjar (2020) indicate that Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become essential tools for promoting tourist destinations in Indonesia, allowing users to share their experiences with wide audiences [10]. Djumrianti (2018) confirms the crucial role of social media in promoting cultural events in Jakarta, Bandung, and Bali—especially among younger populations [11]. Similarly, @TheLodgeMaribaya uses Instagram to promote tourism in West Java [12]. Venkatesh and Suresh (2016) emphasize that social media have become an essential tourism promotion tool in India, while Indonesia's Poyalisa Island has specifically targeted millennials through social platforms [13], [14].

In the Philippines, Yamagishi et al. (2021) showed that digital campaigns via social media contribute to the sustainable development of tourism, as demonstrated in the case of Kalanggaman Island [15]. A similar conclusion is found in the case of the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, where a successful campaign was launched in Queensland [16].

In Latin America, research on social media usage in destination promotion by Ibero-American governments shows that, despite platform activity (e.g., Twitter), there is often a lack of a strategic approach necessary for long-term destination image building [17]. Likewise, the study by Tugores-Ques and colleagues (2023), based on Madrid and Barcelona, points to the importance of content customization to achieve maximum user engagement [18].

<sup>1</sup> International Telecommunication Union, Measuring digital development Facts and figures 2021

Despite the many positive examples, research also warns of potential downsides to social media promotion. Kim and Jang (2021), analyzing U.S. accommodation companies, identify that poorly managed campaigns can negatively impact business performance, especially when lacking a clear communication strategy [19].

In the context of Serbia, studies highlight the growing use of social media in tourism promotion but also note certain challenges. Podovac and Petrović (2019), who analyzed 42 local tourism organizations in Serbia, conclude that social networks are becoming an essential promotional channel, although there remains a need for capacity building and strategic improvement [20].

All these studies indicate that social media is an indispensable part of modern promotional strategies in tourism. However, a research gap remains in systematically analyzing the effects of social media on the promotion of smaller, specialized destinations, such as railway or museum tourism. Accordingly, this paper seeks to answer the following question: To what extent do social media contribute to the visibility, recognition, and business performance of the Šarganska Osmica museum-tourist complex in Serbia?

### III. METHODOLOGY

This research applies a mixed-methods approach that includes both quantitative analysis of social media presence indicators and qualitative analysis of communication content. The goal is to assess the impact of digital promotional activities on the business performance of the Šarganska Osmica museum-tourist complex.

The subject of the research is how the complex is promoted via social media and how this type of digital communication contributes to its visibility, branding, and overall operational efficiency. Special attention is given to Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok as the dominant promotion platforms during the observed period.

The research aims to:

- Identify key indicators of presence and user engagement (number of posts, comments, views, and followers);
- Analyze the content of posts and dominant communication themes.
- Establish correlations between social media activities and business indicators (visitor numbers, reputation, international recognition, ratings on travel portals).

The quantitative part includes an analysis of available statistical data from the official Šarganska Osmica social media accounts, as of Jun 29, 2025. Data collected includes the number of posts, followers, comments, reactions, and video views (reels).

The qualitative analysis includes the interpretation of post content, user comments, and the structure of promotional narratives, in order to understand the messages conveyed to the public and how the destination's image is shaped. Additionally, internal communication with employees was analyzed to understand how feedback from social media affects organizational practices.

In addition to secondary data from social networks, the research is based on:

- Internal reports and plans of the Šarganska Osmica complex for the period 2017–2024;
- Tourist ratings from specialized platforms (e.g., Booking.com);
- Publicly available data on tourist numbers, visitor demographics, and national/international awards.

Although no formal surveys or interviews were conducted in this study, the data were analyzed according to the principles of descriptive and interpretative analysis to avoid subjectivity and to allow an objective evaluation of the advertising effects.

Limitations of the study include the fact that digital measures do not encompass all dimensions of business success and that the impact of social media advertising may be indirectly influenced by other factors that were not directly considered in the research (e.g., seasonality, pandemic effects, and digital literacy of the target audience).

### IV. CASE STUDY: THE MUSEUM AND TOURIST COMPLEX “ŠARGANSKA OSMICA”

#### A. Destination Description

The museum and tourist complex Šarganska Osmica, located in Mokra Gora, is a unique attraction in Serbia, combining elements of railway, cultural, and historical tourism. Reconstructed and opened to visitors on September 1, 2003, the complex represents a modern fusion of tradition, natural beauty, and cultural heritage.

The centerpiece of the complex is a restored narrow-gauge railway, 15.5 kilometers long and 760 mm wide, connecting Mokra Gora station with Šargan Viti. Designed in the shape of the number eight, the railway overcomes a 300-meter elevation difference within a relatively short distance. The track includes five bridges and 22 tunnels, with a total tunnel length of 5.5 kilometers. Among them, the longest is the “Alexander I” tunnel, which spans nearly 1,700 meters.



Fig. 1: Bungalows within the Šarganska Osmica complex

The line is operated by the museum-tourist train *Nostalgija*, styled after the trains from the interwar period, featuring wooden benches and an authentic historical travel

atmosphere. The ride lasts approximately two and a half hours, offering visitors a unique experience through the scenic landscapes of the Mokra Gora and Kremna valleys, nestled between the Zlatibor, Tara, and Zlatar mountain ranges.

Beyond the railway, the complex includes various facilities: accommodation with over 100 beds, restaurants, a museum hall, an underground pedestrian passage displaying railway exhibits, a multimedia room with elements of folk art, and multiple stations along the route. One of the most notable attractions is the Golubići station, a filming location for Emir Kusturica's movie „Život je čudo“, with the nearby Drvengrad ethno-village further enriching the tourist offer [21].

The Šarganska Osmica combines several elements that contribute to its appeal: natural setting, technical and cultural heritage, historical narrative, and developed tourist infrastructure. As such, it transcends the role of a simple excursion site and positions itself as a complex cultural-tourist destination with international potential.

## *B. Organizational Framework and Challenges*

Despite its significant tourism potential, the operation of the *Šarganska Osmica* complex faces certain organizational and institutional limitations that directly affect the planning and implementation of promotional activities.

Firstly, as part of the state-owned company, the Infrastructure of Serbian Railways, the complex is subject to public sector regulations and administrative procedures. This includes specific rules for procurement, budget allocation, and advertising, which often hinder the flexibility required to respond to market dynamics. Promotional budgets are not specifically allocated to the complex but are managed at the company level, further restricting the possibility of targeted marketing efforts.

Secondly, although functioning as a single tourist destination, the Šarganska Osmica is organizationally divided between two railway companies: the operation of the Nostalgija train falls under the Srbijavoz, while the infrastructure—including hospitality and accommodation facilities—is managed by the Infrastructure of Serbian Railways. While this division is invisible to end users, it presents challenges in coordinating promotional activities and conducting integrated campaigns.

Despite these challenges, the limitations in resources and organizational complexity underscore the importance of digital platforms and social media as essential tools for promotion, enabling efficient, targeted, and cost-effective communication of the tourism offer.

## V. RESEARCH RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

#### *A. The Beginnings of Digital Promotion in Railway Tourism*

The development of internet communications in the early 21st century enabled the Serbian Railway companies to improve their communication with service users and the general public. The first official website of the Serbian Railways was launched in 2006 and recorded around 1.5 million visits annually, which represented a significant reach at the time. With the establishment of new railway

companies, such as the Infrastructure of Serbian Railways, official Facebook profiles and a website were created in 2015, followed by Instagram and Twitter accounts in 2019, further expanding the possibilities for digital communication [22].

As early as 2011, the first academic paper was published addressing the role of the internet in improving public relations in railways, showing that as much as 75% of PR activities were based on online communication [23]. Subsequent research confirmed that internet media play a key role in shaping public opinion about railway services [24].

### *B. The Presence of Šarganska Osmica on Social Media*

Despite having no budget for traditional media campaigns, the promotion of the Šarganska Osmica complex through social media has proven to be an effective and sustainable communication model with both domestic and foreign tourists.

The complex maintains active accounts on three social media platforms:

- Facebook (current profile since 2022),
- Instagram (since December 2020),
- TikTok (since 2025).

As of Jun 29, 2025, the following activity indicators were recorded:

Table I: Šarganska Osmica on social media

Social Media Platform	Number of Posts	Number of Followers
Fejsbuk	114	4.300
Instagram	293	4.468
Tiktok	7	26

By that date, a total of 293 posts had been published on Instagram, including 62 reels viewed by a total of 761,873 users, along with 615 published photos. On the Facebook page, 96% of the 221 users who left a review expressed a positive opinion of the complex, with only 2 negative comments out of 562 interactions.

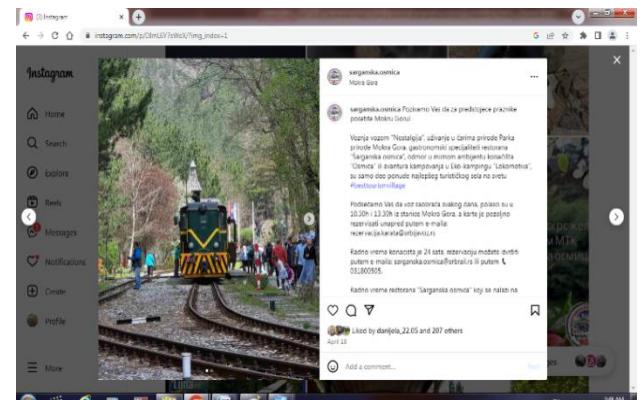


Fig. Šarganska Osmica on Instagram

The TikTok account is still in its early development stage, with limited content, but plans are in place to

increase activity, especially considering the platform's popularity among younger audiences.

### C. Content Analysis and Promotional Practices

Across all platforms, posts most commonly feature:

- rides on the Nostalgija train,
- accommodation and hospitality services,
- natural beauty of Mokra Gora,
- cultural events and celebrations held at the complex,
- comments and impressions from visitors.

The value of the promotion lies in its authenticity: content is most often created by the employees themselves, making communication more personal. Active collaboration with travel influencers also contributes to the international visibility of the destination.

Positive comments from users are shared in an internal Viber group of employees—not only as feedback but also as a motivational tool. Negative comments are immediately analyzed and forwarded to responsible personnel to enable timely corrective action.

The Konačište Osmica lodging facility has been rated 8.8 (excellent) on Booking.com, based on 652 reviews, confirming a high level of user satisfaction and the contribution of social media to the overall user experience [34].

### D. Content Analysis and Promotional Practices

Without traditional media campaigns and with a limited budget, the Šarganska Osmica relies almost exclusively on social media promotion. Nevertheless, the results affirm the success of this approach:

- approximately 300,000 visitors annually,
- about 65,000 guests ride the Nostalgija train,
- 60% of tourists are foreign visitors (from Poland, China, the UK, Austria, Spain, Switzerland, Scandinavia, the USA, Canada, India, and others).

Thanks to the overall quality of the offer and efficient digital promotion, Mokra Gora was named the Best Tourist Village in the World by UNWTO in 2021, while Šarganska Osmica received the Tourism Flower Award from the Serbian Tourism Organization in 2022 for its contribution to the development and promotion of tourism.

## VI. PROPOSED DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGY

Based on the analysis of the current promotional activities of the Šarganska Osmica, it is evident that social media represents a key communication channel for both domestic and international audiences. By relying almost exclusively on digital platforms, the complex has built a recognizable identity, significantly increased visitor numbers, and contributed to the international visibility of the destination.

Given the achieved results and identified potential, the following components are proposed for enhancing the digital marketing strategy:

### A. Strengthening Presence on Existing Platforms

For Instagram and Facebook, which have been the primary promotional channels, the following improvements are recommended:

- regular publication of multimedia content (photos, video reels, stories),
- introduction of interactive formats, such as quizzes, polls, giveaways, and user-generated reviews,
- thematic campaigns highlighting different aspects of the offer (e.g., historical background, events, gastronomy),
- planned content scheduling aligned with seasonal and promotional cycles (e.g., spring packages, holiday tourism, summer season).

### B. Diversifying Channels – TikTok and X (formerly Twitter)

To expand reach among younger audiences and international users, it is proposed to:

- increase activity on TikTok, including short-form educational and entertaining videos (e.g., "Top 3 things to do in Mokra Gora in 3 hours"),
- establish and manage a presence on X (formerly Twitter), to share quick updates and engage with foreign audiences and tourism professionals.

### C. Strengthening Presence on Existing Platforms

The planned redesign of the official website should follow modern UX/UI standards and include:

- seamless linking to social media profiles,
- direct sharing capabilities (e.g., share buttons),
- bilingual functionality (Serbian and English),
- integration of online bookings and digital tourist guides.

### D. Creation and Distribution of Digital Content

It is recommended to develop professionally designed content that can be:

- pre-prepared (visuals, promotional videos, infographics),
- distributed via social media, official Viber/WhatsApp groups, and mailing lists,
- available for download and redistribution by influencers, agencies, and partners.

### E. Internal Communication and Staff Engagement

Employees at the complex already participate actively in content creation, which is a major asset. To formalize this:

- internal communication guidelines should be introduced,

- A recognition program should be implemented for the best promotional contributions.
- Basic training in digital marketing and customer communication should be offered to staff.

#### *F. Objectives of the Improved Strategy*

By implementing the proposed strategy, the expected outcomes include:

- increased overall visitor numbers,
- stronger international brand positioning for the Šarganska Osmica,
- greater efficiency and reduced promotional costs compared to traditional media,
- more personalized, two-way communication with users,
- continuous data collection for service improvement and evaluation.

The proposed strategy is based on a sustainable digital marketing model tailored to the resources of the complex and capable of generating high promotional value with relatively low investment.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The digital transformation of tourism, driven by the development of information and communication technologies, has fundamentally changed the way tourist destinations are promoted and how users access information and make travel decisions. In this context, social media has become one of the most influential channels in modern tourism marketing, enabling fast, accessible, and interactive communication with target audiences.

This paper examined how the museum-tourist complex the Šarganska Osmica uses social media as its primary promotional channel, operating under conditions of limited budget and a complex institutional structure. Through quantitative analysis of social media data and qualitative interpretation of communication content, the research confirmed that presence on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok has a direct positive impact on brand awareness, user satisfaction, and tourist traffic.

Despite the absence of traditional media campaigns and relying almost exclusively on digital channels, Šarganska Osmica has established itself as a recognizable tourism brand, attracting several hundred thousand visitors annually, with more than 60% coming from abroad. The key success factors include authentic content, continuous user engagement, collaboration with influencers, and internally motivated communication by employees.

Based on the research findings, a digital marketing strategy has been proposed to strengthen the presence on existing and new platforms, diversify content, redesign the website, and enhance institutional support for promotional activities. This approach enables further development of the destination in a sustainable and resource-efficient manner.

Moreover, this case study highlights the need for additional research on the role of social media in promoting niche forms of tourism, such as museum and railway tourism, both in Serbia and in the broader international context. The results of this paper can serve as a foundation for developing promotion strategies for other similar destinations with high cultural and historical value but limited resources for traditional advertising.

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