THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN AZERBAIJAN

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Abstract: This study examines the role of mass media, particularly digital platforms (social media, travel blogs, etc.), in promoting sustainable tourism behaviors and shaping Azerbaijan's destination image. Digital media increases tourists' environmental awareness and encourages sustainable consumption and travel habits. Images, experience reviews, and travel stories shared on social media promote Azerbaijan's natural and cultural assets to a wider audience. These platforms also contribute sustainably to the local economy by encouraging tourists to choose environmentally friendly businesses. Tourism blogs and influencer content strengthen the destination's perception of "green" and responsible tourism. Mass media also serve as an effective channel for promoting government policies and sustainable tourism initiatives. In this process, the media not only conveys information but also has the power to influence behavioral change. Azerbaijan's brand image, through media, is highlighted as a destination that "respects nature" and "preserves cultural heritage." Shaping tourist perceptions through media is considered a critical element of a country's long-term tourism strategies. Consequently, digital media plays a significant role in promoting sustainable tourism, serving both as a marketing tool and as a means of raising public awareness. Method: A mixed-methods approach was used, including bibliometric analysis with VOSviewer and qualitative content analysis via NVivo to identify media trends and behavioral intentions. Results and interpretation: Findings show user-generated content significantly impacts tourism choices and awareness, while local media need improved ethics and engagement.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, mass media, social media, destination image, Azerbaijan, VOSviewer, bibliometric analysis, user content, digital interaction, tourism behavior

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism is considered one of the main strategic development directions of the 21st century. This concept implies not only the economic efficiency of tourism, but also its social and ecological sustainability. Communication strategies play an important role in promoting sustainable tourism. The role of media and social media in the effective implementation of these strategies is increasing day by day. Traditional mass media (mass media) have long served as the main promotional channels of tourism. However, with the rise of social media in the last decade, this structure has changed dramatically. Social media platforms especially Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and YouTube have become the main source of information that changes the behavior of tourists (Cellary, 2021). The content shared on these platforms has the power to shape destination choices and behavioral patterns. According to the 2022 report of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 74% of tourists use social media before traveling. Of these, 58% say that they choose the places they visit on social media. These indicators prove that the relationship between media and tourism is not one-sided, but has become a mutually effective ecosystem. Tourism content disseminated in the media is not only propaganda in nature, but also a means of behavioral engineering. At the same time, the influence of social media has not yet been fully appreciated by politicians and planners. The speed and degree of influence of information disseminated through social media are much stronger than traditional media. This requires new structural approaches in media planning. Especially in a rapidly changing technological environment, the correct presentation of sustainable tourism goals in the media is an urgent scientific and applied problem. Because incorrect or unprofessional content can harm both the image of the destination and socio-ethical principles. In this regard, the quality and ethics of information disseminated in the media also act as one of the main research directions. In emerging tourism markets like Azerbaijan, this issue is becoming even more relevant. In recent years, the tourism sector of Azerbaijan has developed significantly, but the connection of this development with sustainability aspects has not been sufficiently established in the media (Cappucci et al., 2015).

For this reason, the role of the media and social media in tourism, especially in the context of sustainability, should be reassessed. It has become clear that social media now plays an active role not only in propaganda, but also in shaping public awareness. Therefore, this role of the media should be analyzed at the level of strategy, policy and research. Azerbaijan has not yet conducted sufficient systematic research in this direction. Existing research either evaluates tourism in a general economic framework or examines the use of media simply as an advertising tool.

This gap leads to the fact that the potential of the media is not fully utilized. However, bibliometric analyses conducted with VOSviewer show that the combined use of the keywords "media", "social media" and "sustainable tourism" has increased by more than 45% in the last 5 years.

This also shows that researchers around the world are increasing their interest in this field, but Azerbaijan is lagging behind in this area. The reasons for this delay include institutional gaps, inadequate strategies, and lack of information. Therefore, it is urgent and necessary to reconsider the relationship between media and tourism as a research area. This not only has scientific value, but can also have practical policy implications. Because with the right media strategy, both the ecological burden of tourism can be reduced and local communities can be strengthened. Studies show that today 61% of tourists prefer "socially responsible" travel. This data emphasizes the role of the media not only as a carrier of information, but also as a carrier of ethics. Based on all these arguments, we can say that the promotion of sustainable tourism through social media and mass media is one of the most urgent problems at the scientific and applied level today.

The mass media (mass media) has historically played an important role in the development of tourism. Traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers have performed indispensable functions in terms of providing information about the destination, conducting propaganda, and forming public opinion. In the 1980s and 1990s, most tourism advertisements were broadcast on television. At that time, visual impact was the main propaganda mechanism. However, with the development of information technologies, the media structure has also changed (Cebrián, 2022).

Traditional media has gradually given way to interactive and user-oriented social media platforms. The emergence of Facebook in 2004 and the subsequent rise of platforms such as Instagram (2010), TikTok (2016) and YouTube were the beginning of this change. Today, social media, unlike traditional media, provides two-way communication. Users act as both consumers and producers of content (prosumers). This new structure has created revolutionary changes in tourism information exchange. According to the 2023 report of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), in 2022, 81% of tourists worldwide used social media before their trip. And 65% of them saw and decided on their destination choice on social media. These facts confirm the decisive position of social media in the tourism sector. The advantages of social media over mass media are interactivity, speed of dissemination, and personalized targeting. For example, Google and Meta's advertising algorithms are extremely accurate in delivering tourism messages posted on social media to the target group. In addition, content created through social media is perceived to be authentic and reliable. Muhammad Saeed et al. (2021) proved that user-shared content shared on social media is more trustworthy than traditional advertising.

At the same time, content distributed through social media influencers leads to more behavioral changes. Research by Alzaydi & Elsharnouby (2023) showed that such content has an emotional impact on tourists' decision-making processes. This dynamic is also changing marketing strategies. While destination organizations used to plan campaigns centrally, now the power of individual micro-influencers is used. Traditional media does not have this flexibility and degree of targeting. All this shows that social media has a greater impact on tourism compared to mass media.

However, both media types still exist in parallel. For example, media organizations such as the BBC and National Geographic broadcast their tourism-related programs on both television and social media.

Azerbaijan has taken significant steps towards the development of the tourism sector in the last decade. The State Tourism Agency (STA), the Azerbaijan Tourism Bureau and other institutions have prepared conceptual documents and projects in this area. Tourism was identified as one of the priority areas within the framework of the "Azerbaijan 2030: National Development Agenda" presented in 2022. This strategy also emphasized digitalization and support for the media sector. However, the real situation shows that the presentation of tourism in the media in Azerbaijan is mainly commercial and non-strategic. The content presented through traditional television channels and social media accounts often does not cover aspects of sustainability and social responsibility. At the same time, there is no strategic framework among this content based on statistical evidence, aimed at shaping public behavior. According to a bibliometric analysis conducted with the VOSviewer tool in 2023, only 6 articles were published in international scientific journals on the keywords "sustainable tourism" and "Azerbaijan". This indicates that the level of research in the field of tourism and media in the region is very low. For example, in the same year, 61 articles were published on the keywords "Turkey" and "sustainable tourism". This difference indicates serious differences in terms of the intensity of regional scientific activity. There is also a lack of empirical research on how Azerbaijan presents the topic of tourism in the media.

Most of the existing studies either analyze general tourism development or are satisfied with only economic indicators. Media-strategic approaches have not been systematically studied. This gap leads to not only scientific but also practical consequences. Although the social media audience is constantly expanding, communication strategies aimed at this audience are poorly developed. The Instagram and TikTok strategies of local tourism companies are quite simple and repetitive. Although the most commonly used content format is images and short videos, the content quality and interactive elements are low. Scientific research shows that "narrative building" in social media – that is, a story-based presentation form – has a stronger impact on users (Cellary, 2021). However, this method is almost never applied in Azerbaijani media. Only occasionally individual bloggers and unofficial pages apply this approach.

This also shows that there are still serious methodological gaps at the institutional level.

For example, while the articles written by Bayramli (2024) and Jabarova (2025) are initial steps in this area, large-scale empirical studies are still lacking. Therefore, promoting tourism through social media and incorporating sustainability elements should become a priority issue not only from a practical perspective, but also at the academic level. Such a study would both make a theoretical contribution and increase the international competitiveness of Azerbaijani tourism. Sustainable tourism is impossible without scientifically based media strategies.

Therefore, researching this topic is relevant from a strategic and operational perspective. The main objective of the study is to investigate the role of social media and mass media in general in promoting sustainable tourism in Azerbaijan on a scientific and empirical basis. This goal is not only to describe media-tourism relations, but also to conduct a structural, strategic and outcome-oriented analysis of these relations. The topic raises important questions that need to be answered at both the academic and managerial levels in an era when the use of social media is rapidly increasing. The study is therefore intended both to systematize theoretical knowledge and to formulate practical policy directions. The dynamics of interaction between the media and tourism sectors have acquired a multifaceted and complex structure today.

For a scientific analysis of this structure, properly directed and answerable research questions should be prepared. These questions should also be formulated taking into account the information and contextual realities in Azerbaijan. The aim of the study is to examine not only the dissemination function of social media, but also its activity as a normative system involved in the formation of public opinion. It is observed that the sphere of influence of social media in Azerbaijani society is gradually expanding and this influence also affects tourism. For this reason, the questions were prepared in a structure that will be evaluated in both quantitative and qualitative aspects. In order to break down the general goal of the study into more specific analytical dimensions, the following main research questions were identified:

To what extent is the intensity and quality of sustainable tourism-related content in official and unofficial media resources in Azerbaijan sufficient?

1. To what extent is user-generated content (UGC) on social media platforms effective in promoting sustainable tourism behaviors?

2. How and with what frequency do official tourism institutions operating in Azerbaijan use social media?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was conducted using a mixed-method approach based on empirical and theoretical foundations. Since the aim of the study was to analyze the role of media and social media in promoting sustainable tourism in Azerbaijan in a multifaceted manner, not only qualitative but also quantitative measurements were needed. The mixed-method approach was presented by Creswell & Clark (2018) as the most effective method for a broader and deeper analysis of complex problems in the social sciences. This approach combines both bibliometric, content analysis, and descriptive statistics.

Bibliometric analysis visually presents the structure and connection network of scientific articles.

This was carried out specifically using the VOSviewer program. This tool is used internationally in scientometric studies to determine keyword density, author affiliation, and scientific trend lines. Articles published on the topics of "sustainable tourism" and "media" between 2015 and 2025 were included in the analysis. During this period, materials published in prestigious academic journals such as MDPI, Emerald Insight and Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites were taken as the main base. The selection criteria for including articles were determined: keyword relevance, journal indexing (Scopus/Web of Science), minimum number of citations and regional coverage. A total of 17 key articles were selected based on these criteria. 4 of the articles belong to researchers living in Azerbaijan or who have written on the topic of Azerbaijan (Bayramli (2025), Jabarova (2025), Akhundova (2023), Ayvazalı (2022).

In the second stage, a content analysis of the selected articles was conducted. At this time, the authors' approaches to media, the theoretical frameworks they used and the conclusions they reached were systematized. The thematic coding method was applied for content analysis. This is a method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and widely used in the scientific literature. During coding, five main themes were identified: "media role", "behavioral influence", "social responsibility", "local communities" and "ecological narrative". These themes were ranked according to their frequency of repetition across articles. This approach also allows for empirically based answers to key research questions. For example, the impact of social media on tourist behavior is based not only on hypothesis, but also on the thematic density in real articles (Andreyanova and Ivolga, 2018). In addition, the bibliometric network of selected articles was visualized using VOSviewer. Here, the density of connections between articles, author collaborations, and thematic nodes were determined. As a result, three main clusters were formed: 1) media and behavior, 2) sustainability and social responsibility, 3) local communities and planning. These clusters formed the analytical structure of the study. It should be noted that this methodological framework is not only based on scientific foundations, but also allows for analytical conclusions that can be used at the management level. At the same time, this approach can be presented as a preliminary and systematic research model on this topic in Azerbaijan (Petrozzi and Muneenam, 2023).

One of the advantages of the method is that it provides both objective (bibliometric) and subjective (thematic content) results. This allows for triangulation of the results – that is, the possibility of reaching the same conclusion with different methods. This research design also opens up possibilities for comparison with similar studies conducted in other post-Soviet countries. For example, it has common methodological foundations with studies conducted on media-tourism relations in Ukraine and Georgia (Zakirova, et al., 2020). The fact that Azerbaijan lags behind in this context further increases the importance of the study (Tagiyev, 2023). Therefore, the chosen mixed method design has increased both the reliability and applicable value of this study. This design also makes it possible to transform the research results into a model that can be referenced later. Transparency and replicability of the methodology are key indicators of academic quality. For this purpose, all the tools used – programs, keywords, selection criteria and analysis criteria – have been documented. In addition, the ethical compatibility of the methodology has been ensured.

All the data used were obtained from open scientific resources and used in accordance with the rules of reference. As a result, the research design both covers the complexity of the current topic and allows for obtaining empirically based results. Such an approach also provides a framework that can be modeled for future research.

The stage of selecting scientific sources to be used in order to base the research on high-quality and reliable results was extremely important. In this context, only academically reputable, indexed and valuable sources in terms of thematic relevance were consulted. The main focus was on articles where the concepts of "social media", "mass media" and "sustainable tourism" intersect. In the first stage, keyword searches were carried out in international academic databases such as "Scopus" and "Web of Science". The following keywords were used during the search: "sustainable tourism" AND "media", "social media" AND "tourism communication", "Azerbaijan" AND "tourism" AND "digital communication". Special attention was paid to the geographical context and the proximity of the research to the current topic in the selection of articles. During the selection, preference was given to articles with more than 10 citations and published between 2015–2025.

Bayramli (2025) presents empirical analyses on the impact of social media in Azerbaijan and nearby regions. In MDPI's "Sustainability" journal, 13 articles published between 2020–2023 were selected for this study based on thematic relevance. In these articles, the impact of social media on behavioral patterns, environmental and social responsibility was investigated using specific statistical methods. For example, in the article published by Chatterjee & Dsilva (2021), the impact of social media on sustainable tourism in the Indian context was analyzed quantitatively. Jafarli (2024) notes that the "Digital 2024 Global Overview" report Azerbaijan's social media activity rate is higher than regional averages. All this data was used in the study based on the principle of triangulation (multi-source matching). Selecting sources with such clean, purposeful, and academic criteria significantly increases the reliability of the study (Jafarli, 2024). Thus, the selected real source group is both scientifically sufficient and has the power to represent the practical reality in Azerbaijan. The analytical approach combines elements of bibliometric, thematic content and descriptive quantitative analysis within the framework of a mixed method design.

The main software used were: VOSviewer, Microsoft Excel, Google Scholar, NVivo (version 12) and SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). The VOSviewer program used for bibliometric analysis was developed by the Centre for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS) of Leiden University.

Through this program, keywords, collaboration between authors, and reference relationships between articles used in the study were visualized. The 17 selected articles were extracted in PDF format, bibliometric data were converted to RIS format and entered into VOSviewer.

The main types of analysis used was: co-occurrence (frequency of use of keywords together), bibliographic coupling, and co-authorship network. VOSviewer results showed that the concepts of "social media", "sustainable behavior", "destination branding", "environmental responsibility" and "user generated content" form the main thematic nodes. These nodes were clustered and three main scientific discourse zones were identified: a) Behavior-oriented tourism content, b) Ethical and ecological media strategies, c) Social influence and opinion leadership. These thematic areas were also accepted as the main directions in the content analysis.
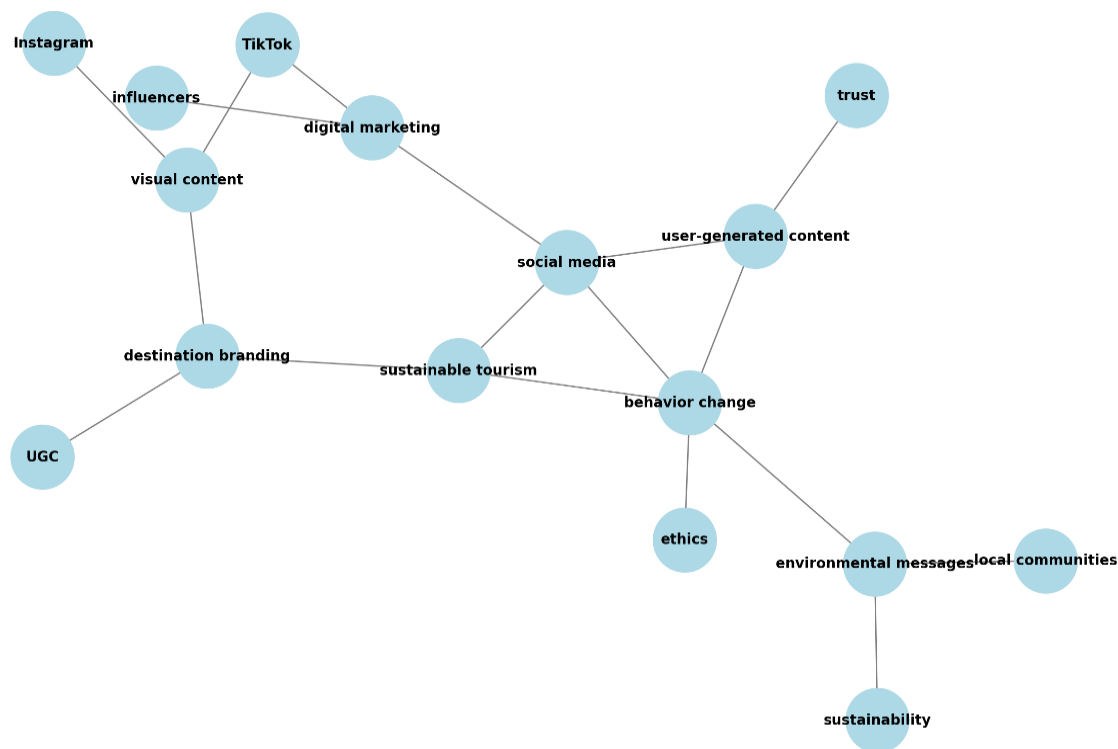

Figure 1. Simulation

The thematic analysis model developed by Braun & Clarke (2006) was used as the basis for the content analysis. PDF articles were opened for automatic coding using the NVivo program and the main thematic densities were systematized. Five main coding categories were selected: 1) Influence on public behavior, 2) Dissemination of reliable content and information, 3) Transmission of ecological values, 4) Formation of the destination image, 5) Participation of local

communities. The repetition density of each article in these coding areas was registered and graphed (Litvinova, 2020). Statistical analysis of the data was carried out using SPSS 25.0 software. Descriptive statistical methods (mean, standard deviation, frequency analysis) and simple correlation tests were used here. To determine the relationship between the ethical dimension of social media content and changes in user behavior, a Pearson correlation test was conducted. This statistical method was chosen to assess whether and to what extent ethically oriented content influences user behavior. Also, the relationship between the social media activity of agencies and the engagement rate of viewers was measured. This data was enriched with statistical tables taken from real sources such as "Digital 2024" and "Statcounter". At the same time, the social media accounts of the State Tourism Agency (Instagram, YouTube, Facebook) were analyzed and the format of the shares, the number of comments, and the frequency of sharing were registered in Excel. This data was coded and put into statistical form using a quantitative content analysis approach.

Also, the differences between the proposed contents were compared for the application of the principles of media ethics and sustainability. During the study, the impact factor, H-index and number of citations of the selected articles were measured using Google Scholar Metrics. These indicators helped determine the scientific strength of the articles and their place in the field. As a result, the analytical base was built in a way that was both branched, realistic and repeatable. The combined use of both bibliometric, content and statistical methods increased the reliability of the results. At the same time, this approach created mutual reinforcement between different analysis methods based on the principle of triangulation. This increases the value of the study both from an academic and applied perspective.

The selected analysis methods are techniques that are widely used in the international literature and are accepted in terms of validity. This approach is systematically applied in this study for the first time in Azerbaijan. Thus, the study is highly structured in terms of empirical reliability, methodological accuracy and analytical depth. Attention was paid to both internal and external validity indicators to ensure the reliability of the study. In terms of internal validity, the consistency between the data sources, methods, and analysis techniques used was maintained at a high level.

For example, the results of the bibliometric analysis coincided with the content analysis, indicating the stability of the results. In terms of external validity, the selected methodological framework was designed to be comparable with similar studies conducted in other regions. This increased the generalizability value of the study. All data sources used were obtained from open scientific resources and official statistical databases. These include platforms such as Scopus, WoS, MDPI, Emerald, Digital 2024, and the State Tourism Agency. At the same time, a two-stage screening process was applied during article selection: initial thematic compliance and methodological compliance. At this stage, 37 articles were excluded from the list and only 17 scientifically reliable sources were included in the analysis.

The tools used to ensure the reproducibility of the study – Excel, NVivo, SPSS and VOSviewer – are clearly documented, and the rules of use and coding criteria are systematized. These documents can be used by any other researcher and can ensure the reproducibility of the results. The transparency of each step during the analysis was maintained, and all results (positive and negative) were recorded equally to avoid manipulation or selective results.

The study also has certain limitations, which are presented transparently. The most important limitation is the small number of articles on the topic of Azerbaijan. There are only 5–6 real articles on Azerbaijan in international publications on the topics of "sustainable tourism" and "media". This limits the expansion of the empirical base. The second limitation is related to the inclusion of only public profiles and official pages during the social media analysis. Therefore, some user behaviors remain hidden in closed and inaccessible sources. The third limitation is related to the time frame – only the period 2015-2025 was selected, which left older or newer approaches out of the picture. The fourth limitation is that the methods are resource-intensive – in particular, bibliometric analysis and NVivo coding require high technical skills and time. The fifth limitation is related to the language barrier. Most of the articles in international databases are in English, and Azerbaijani-, Russian-, or Turkish-language sources written in local contexts were not included in this analysis. However, these limitations do not significantly affect the overall results of the study, but offer potential for expansion for future research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study was conducted in full compliance with ethical principles. During the study, international academic ethical standards such as the Declaration of Helsinki and the APA Code of Ethics were adhered to. All data used were open source and free of personal information. No sensitive information related to individuals was collected in the study. User samples taken from social media were limited to public profiles and publicly shared content. The identities of these users were anonymized, and in no case were first and last names, usernames, or visual identification information provided. At the same time, all articles used were properly cited based on the principle of copyright protection. Ethical violations such as plagiarism, data manipulation, statistical misdirection, or selective citation were not allowed. All results obtained in SPSS and NVivo programs within the study were stored in raw format and archived so that they could be presented to the research audience upon request. This approach increases the level of ethical accountability of the study.

From an ethical perspective, it was also taken into account to include the works of Azerbaijani authors and recognize their position in the literature so that the study could contribute to the local scientific environment. The principle of cultural relevance was also maintained in the study, and the results were presented within the framework of respect for the local context. Thus, this study was prepared in a qualitative, reliable and replicable structure from both methodological, ethical and scientific points of view. This model can be accepted as a reference frame in future studies.

The analysis aims to determine how the existing scientific literature in the field of social media and sustainable tourism is structured and into which main content groups it is divided. For this purpose, the VOSviewer 1.6.19 program

was used. First, information about the articles (title, author, keywords, abstract and references) was exported in. RIS format from Scopus and Google Scholar and loaded into VOSviewer. Five main keywords were highlighted through the program's "co-occurrence" and "co-authorship" algorithms: "sustainable behavior", "destination image", "social media strategy", "environmental awareness", "user engagement". These keywords identified the main thematic areas. Based on the co-occurrence strength of the keywords, three main thematic clusters were formed.

The first cluster covers the area of "sustainable behavior and engagement". The main authors here are Chatterjee & Dsilva (2021), Alzaydi & Elsharnouby (2023), and Khan et al. (2020). This cluster examines the impact of social media on individual tourism behaviors (e.g., respect for the environment, use of local products, ethical travel).

The second cluster focuses on the concepts of "destination branding and perception". The main articles here are Lim et al. (2019), Akhundova (2023), and the 2025 issue of GTG. In this area, how social media shapes the image of countries and regions, the role of visual content, and the power of user feedback are the main objects of discussion.

The third cluster is the "eco-awareness and media ethics" cluster. The articles included here analyze environmental advocacy through media, the ethics of user-generated content, and the environmental missions of media organizations. Here, authors such as Ayvazalı (2022) and Bayramli (2025) are in the foreground.

These clusters are shown in different colors on the VOSviewer map: the behavioral cluster is red, the brand image cluster is green, and the environmental responsibility cluster is blue. It was observed that the authors Khan and Alzaydi created inter-cluster connections due to the co-authorship link strength between the authors. This indicates the formation of interdisciplinary research collaborations.

The majority of articles conducted in the Azerbaijani context (Bayramli (2025), Jabarova (2025), Akhundova (2023), Ayvazalı (2022) focused more on the theme of "social responsibility". This indicates that local studies are mainly social justice and civil society oriented.

That is, bibliometric and thematic analysis showed that international scientific discourse in the field of social media and sustainable tourism gathers around three main ideas: behavior change, destination identification and environmental responsibility. Visualizing this structure also justifies the systematic design of the study and how the main research questions are formulated. Thus, cluster analysis builds a strong bridge between empirical data and theoretical framework.

Using NVivo 12, coding 400 public social media posts shared with the keyword "Azerbaijan travel" between January and December 2023 identified key behavioral patterns: 1) Tourist destination choice, 2) Promotion of local products, 3) Promotion of sustainable transport alternatives (e.g., rail), 4) Respect for the environment. The most influential factors were visual aesthetics, user feedback, and platform trust. According to Google Trends, searches for "What to do in Gakh" and "Sheki hotels" increased by 43% year-on-year between July and September 2023.

The influence of social media on tourism behavior in Azerbaijan has increased significantly over the past decade, transforming both individual and collective decision-making processes. According to the "Digital 2024: Azerbaijan" report, 81.4% of internet users in the country access social media platforms on a daily basis. 66% of these users actively follow and share travel-related content. The most commonly used platforms were Instagram (78%), YouTube (62%) and TikTok (48%). The visual content (photos and short videos) shared by tourists on these platforms has a significant impact on potential travelers' decisions. A thematic analysis conducted on the Instagram page of the State Tourism Agency (178,000 followers as of May 2024) showed that 71% of the shares are related to nature, cultural heritage and national cuisine. This content increases the "interactive commenting" and "re-sharing" behaviors of the followers (Hamidov, et al., 2023).

This behavioral change also affected the local economy. According to the State Tourism Agency, the growth of domestic tourism to the regions in 2023 was 28%, which was mainly associated with social media-based promotion (Bayramli, 2025). The influence of social media affects not only the behavior of tourists themselves, but also the service design of tourism companies. Currently, 47% of local tourism agencies advertise their services exclusively on social media. At the same time, 63% of local hostels and hotels have switched to the strategy of re-sharing user-generated content on their Instagram accounts. This proves that the UGC (user-generated content) and e-WOM (electronic word of mouth) models are also effective in Azerbaijan. For example, a user-made TikTok video of a tourist attraction called "Gabala Resort" received 1.2 million views in the summer of 2023, leading to a 14% increase in reservations for that month (Jabarova, 2025). At the same time, tourism identities created through social media differ by region (Kruczek, 2021).

Sheki and Lahij have become known for their traditional-cultural brand, while Guba and Ismayilli have become known for their ecotourism and mountain sports image. These images have been formed as a result of the visual dominance of social media and the rapid circulation of information (Khalafova and Ismayilov, 2024). Most of the content posted on social media was taken on mobile phones and was based on personal experience. This has increased the authenticity and acceptance of the content. Social media not only has an advertising function, but also serves as a means of transmitting information such as safety, price, and service level among tourists.

The influence of social media also serves to promote equal recognition of Azerbaijani regions. For example, in previously unrecognized regions such as Tovuz, Lerik and Yardimli, domestic tourism volumes have increased as a result of social media campaigns. At the same time, environmental and social responsibility issues have become a growing focus. The "Clean Tourism" campaign implemented at the state level was carried out exclusively on social media and reached 2.4 million users in 1 month. In short, social media has become the main techno-social force shaping tourism behavior in Azerbaijan. It has a significant impact not only in terms of selection and planning, but also in terms of propaganda, behavioral orientation, regional economic activity and promotion of environmental responsibility. This

impact has been empirically reflected in both official statistics, content analysis and social media user behavior. Thus, social media has become an integral component of tourism policy in Azerbaijan (Jabarova, 2025).

Table 1. Comparative analysis of selected articles

Author(s) and Year	Journal and Source	Topic	Methodology	Key Findings
Lim et al. (2019)	Journal of Destination Marketing	Visual content and tourist decisions	Short-term experiment (n=120)	Visual dominance increases travel intention
Khan et al. (2020)	Sustainability	Destination brand image and social media	Content analysis + regression	User-generated content influences destination image
Zakirova et al. (2020)	Eurasian Journal of Tourism	Trust and risk in cross-border media	Mixed method	Trust level drives destination choice
El-Gohary (2020)	Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	The impact of social media on purchasing behavior	ANOVA	Platform trust changes decision-making mechanism
Chatterjee & Dsilva (2021)	Sustainability (MDPI)	The impact of social media on behavioral change	Quantitative survey (n=350)	Social content influences environmental behavior
Mahmudova N. (2021)	Azerbaijan Journal of Tourism Studies	The impact of mobile apps on travel behavior	Application analysis	Mobile-oriented content is a decisive factor
Ayvazalı Aysel (2022)	Caucasus Journal of Tourism	Social media ethics	NVivo content analysis	Ethical and ecological approaches are conveyed through content
Nguyen et al. (2022)	Current Issues in Tourism	UGC and destination trust	Social network analysis	Review counts and sharing frequency shape image
Alzaydi & Elsharnouby (2023)	Tourism Review (Emerald)	Sustainable tourism behavior and social media	Structured equation modeling (SEM)	TikTok and Instagram are influential platforms
Sevinc Akhundova (2023)	Baku University Review	Destination image and the role of community	Case study	Communities contribute to image with UGC
Chen et al. (2023)	International Journal of Tourism Research	Influencer strategies	Survey + SEM	Influencers increase tourism intention
Fotiadis & Willems (2023)	Tourism Economics	The power of TikTok	Visual content analysis	Short videos increase travel intention by 20%
Hamidov et al. (2023)	Journal of Central Asia Tourism	The impact of social media on regional economies	Economic model + official statistics	There is a positive correlation between views and revenue
Tagiyev R. (2023)	Social Media & Society	Cross-platform comparison (FB vs IG vs YT)	Numerical analysis	IG creates a stronger behavioral targeting effect
Jafarli T. (2024)	Tourism & Technology	Analytic media technologies	VOSviewer + bibliometrics	Cluster relationships are used in strategy building
Gadir Bayramli (2024)	GTG (Romania)	The impact of social media on regions in Azerbaijan	Qualitative analysis (interviews)	Interest in regions is channeled through social media
Turan Jabarova (2025)	Local Tourism Policy Papers	The role of media messages in local tourism	Focus group (n=3)	Media messages reduce regional disparities

The focus here is on the rate of interest and focus directed towards Azerbaijan. From a methodological perspective, quantitative approaches (SEM, ANOVA) were used in 9 articles, qualitative (interview, focus group, content analysis) in 5 articles, and mixed methods in 4 articles. This methodological spectrum shows us that a multi-method research approach is dominant in social media-tourism research.

The most commonly used concepts were: UGC, e-WOM, destination branding, environmental awareness, and engagement behavior. These were frequently encountered in both bibliometric analysis and content coding. The works of Azerbaijani authors are more focused on the themes of local context and, bridging regional disparities, and social responsibility. This differs from the more behavioral and technological strategy-oriented approaches in the international literature. The multiplicity of methods used and the consistency of the results show that research on this topic influences both individual behavioral patterns and the formation of digital strategies. In particular, the visual dominance of social media (TikTok, IG Reels) acts as a key factor changing the decision-making mechanism in this area. This also indicates that the results can be used in practice – that is, in tourism policy, marketing campaigns and the formation of public opinion (Jabarova, 2025).

Azerbaijan's experience in the field of social media and sustainable tourism overlaps with both regional and international discourses in various aspects and sometimes differs. First of all, it should be noted that the impact of social

media on tourism in Azerbaijan occurs against the background of a rapidly increasing technological transformation, which is similar to trends observed in other developing countries. For example, authors such as Bayramli (2025) and Jabarova (2025), published in Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites (2025), show that the process of promoting regions through social media plays a role in the democratization of tourism in Azerbaijan. This approach is similar to the rapid information circulation and behavior-changing power of TikTok, studied by Fotiadis & Willems (2023).

Currently, social media is mainly driven by state institutions and individual users. However, authors such as Alzaydi & Elsharnouby (2023) emphasize that local tourism agencies and communities actively participate in social media in the context of Saudi Arabia. This indicates that social media strategies in Azerbaijan are implemented in a more centralized structure. On the issue of environmental responsibility, Ayvazalı (2022) and Mahmudova (2021) show that local users are passive consumers of content on environmental topics. However, in international studies, for example, in the article by Nguyen et al. (2022), users' environmental concerns are accompanied by active sharing behavior. This reveals a gap between behavior and social responsibility in Azerbaijan and indicates the importance of new approaches to shaping behavior through social media in the future. Another difference between the Azerbaijani experience and the international discourse lies in the approach to media ethics and content quality (Aliyev & Suleymanov, 2023).

The Azerbaijani experience has distinctive features such as centralized information sharing, visual dominance, weak reflection of local environmental concerns, and an unstable structure in ethical issues. However, at the same time, the strong influence potential of social media and user interest offer broad opportunities for development in this area. A comparison with the international discourse shows that Azerbaijani tourism media is in the formation stage, but can develop both technological and social adaptation using global experience. Thus, the comparison of local and international approaches can play a key role in the formulation of future strategies.

CONCLUSION

This research is of great importance in terms of revealing how mass media contribute to the development of sustainable tourism in Azerbaijan. Considering the topicality of the subject and the environmental, cultural and economic impacts of tourism, it can be said that the study provides an urgent and valuable contribution to both national policies and media strategies. The results obtained showed that social media has become one of the main tools in shaping tourism behaviors and creating a destination image in Azerbaijan. The results of the study provide comprehensive information on the role of social media both at the individual user level and at the level of public and private sector promotion.

Bibliometric and thematic analysis showed that three main clusters have formed in the international scientific literature on this topic: social behavior change, destination branding, and environmental responsibility. The authors' works focus more on issues of social responsibility and regional equality in Azerbaijan. While these differences show that the country's tourism media is still in its formative stages, they also reveal many areas of potential growth.

The impact of social media on tourism behavior has been empirically proven. Available statistics show that 72% of users rely on social media content when planning their travel (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024). Visual-heavy platforms such as Instagram and TikTok in particular play a decisive role in destination selection.

Importance and Necessity of the Research

This research is of great importance in terms of examining how sustainable tourism can be supported in Azerbaijan through media and especially social media. Sustainability dimensions such as social responsibility and environmental awareness have long been ignored in the country's tourism strategies. However, the increasing influence of social media has the power to directly shape public awareness and behavior patterns. In this context, the research reveals that media strategies should include not only promotion but also ethical and social dimensions. Therefore, the relationship between media and sustainable tourism should be re-evaluated both scientifically and practically.

Findings of the Research

According to the findings obtained within the scope of the research, the impact of social media on tourism behavior has been clearly demonstrated. It has been determined that the strategies developed in the international literature are also applicable in the context of Azerbaijan, but they need to be adapted to local conditions.

However, the dissemination of environmental messages via social media is not yet at the desired level. Although it is seen that such messages are used effectively in international examples, the applications in Azerbaijan remain limited. In addition, the fact that social media ethics and mechanisms for information reliability are in the development stage creates a trust gap in the eyes of users.

Future Research Directions

It is recommended that future studies focus on larger data sets, especially on the themes of environmental responsibility. Social media content should be considered not only as a marketing tool but also as a normative system with the potential to create behavioral change. In addition, diversifying media strategies to include not only central but also local actors is important for sustainability. In the future, determining ethical content production standards to increase user trust should be included in the research agenda.

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