

# **The Influence of User-Generated Content on Tourism Organizations - The Case of Portuguese Center Region**

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Data 14 de julho de 2023



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Maria de Almeida Vasconcelos

## **Projeto**

Mestrado em Comunicação Aplicada

Trabalho efetuado sob a orientação de:

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Data 14 de julho de 2023



## DECLARAÇÃO DE INTEGRIDADE CIENTÍFICA

Maria de Almeida Vasconcelos n. ° 23756, do curso de Mestrado em Comunicação Aplicada - Ramo Comunicação Estratégica, declara sob compromisso de honra, que o Projeto de Mestrado é inédito e foi especialmente escrito para este efeito.

Viseu, 2023

O(A) aluno(a), Maria de Almeida Vasconcelos



## **Dedication**

À memória do meu avô António Carlos.



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I write these acknowledgements with a sense of satisfaction and goals achieved. I am grateful that I did not get here alone, but rather with people I admire, love and miss.

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## Resumo

A Internet alterou o panorama da comunicação e levantou desafios significativos em várias áreas de atividade, incluindo a do turismo e hospitalidade. Devido à abundância de destinos turísticos disponíveis atualmente, a competição é notória. Por conseguinte, os destinos turísticos devem conceber estratégias para se destacarem, construírem, e reforçarem a familiaridade e ligação do cliente com a marca. As plataformas digitais, especialmente as redes sociais, são hoje veículos eficazes para a comunicação, atingindo milhões de utilizadores. Como tal, é fundamental que os conteúdos partilhados sejam relevantes e educativos. Além disso, o advento da Web 2.0 proporcionou aos utilizadores a oportunidade de se transformarem de espectadores passivos para criadores, facilitando a troca de pensamentos e conteúdos com outros utilizadores. Conceitos como “conteúdo gerado pelo utilizador” e “boca a boca *online*” são particularmente significativos neste contexto. Estes são muitas vezes reconhecidos pelos turistas como fontes de informação fiáveis e fidedignas, por vezes mais do que conteúdo criado pela empresa. Estes podem influenciar a decisão de visita de um potencial turista, o que os torna fundamentais para os destinos.

Este estudo assume como orientação metodológica a investigação correlacional, com abordagem mista, quanto à natureza dos dados. Como parte do método qualitativo, foi realizado um inquérito por entrevista com a Chefe do Núcleo Comunicação, Imagem e Relações Públicas do Turismo Centro de Portugal, Adriana Rodrigues. Adicionalmente, foi realizado um *focus group* para melhor compreender a opinião dos turistas da Região Centro de Portugal relativamente às variáveis estudadas nesta investigação. No âmbito da abordagem quantitativa, foi aplicado um inquérito por

questionário aos turistas e potenciais turistas da Região Centro de Portugal, constituindo-se uma amostra de 515 participantes. Os dados recolhidos foram submetidos a análise estatística utilizando para este propósito o *software* Smart PLS

3.3.2. Os resultados obtidos sugerem a influência do conteúdo gerado pelos utilizadores na perceção e na qualidade percebida do destino, bem como na intenção de visita. Esta última, por sua vez, influencia o envolvimento dos turistas nas redes sociais. Este estudo demonstrou também que o boca-a-boca *online* influencia todas as dimensões do valor da marca do destino.

**Palavras-chave:** Conteúdo Gerado Pelo Utilizador; Valor Da Marca; *E-Word Of Mouth*; Envolvimento Das Redes Sociais; Turismo

## **Abstract**

The Internet has changed the communication landscape and posed significant challenges to various areas of activity, including tourism and hospitality. Due to the abundance of tourist destinations available today, rivalry is fierce. Therefore, locations need to devise strategies to set themselves apart, build, and strengthen customer brand equity. It is vital that relevant and enlightening content is shared on today's digital platforms because they are effective vehicles for communication, especially social media because it reaches millions of individuals. Furthermore, the advent of Web 2.0 has provided users with the opportunity to transform from consumers to creators, facilitating the exchange of thoughts and content with other users. Concepts such as user-generated content and e-word of mouth are particularly significant within this context since these are seen as reliable and trustworthy sources of information by tourists, who often trust it more than content created by the company. These can influence a potential tourist's decision to visit, which renders them crucial for destinations.

The methodology used was a mixed approach. As part of the qualitative method, an interview was conducted with the Turismo Centro de Portugal's Head of Division of Communication, Image and Public Relations, Adriana Rodrigues. Additionally, a focus group was held to better understand the opinion of Portuguese central region's tourists regarding the variables studied in this research. Under the quantitative approach, a questionnaire was applied to tourists and potential tourists of the Portuguese central region, yielding a sample size of 515 people. The gathered findings were submitted to statistical analysis using for this purpose the Smart PLS 3.3.2 software. The results

obtained suggest the influence of user-generated content on destination awareness and perceived quality, as well as on intention to visit. The latter, in turn, influences tourists' social media engagement. It was also proved that the electronic word of mouth influences all the dimensions of destination brand equity.

**Keywords:** User-Generated Content; Brand Equity; E-Word of Mouth; Social Media Engagement; Tourism

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### **List of Abbreviations**

**ICTs** – Information and Communication Technologies

**DCM** – Digital Content Marketing

**UGC** – User Generated Content

**eWOM** – Electronic Word of Mouth

**CBBE** – Consumer-Based Brand Equity

**BE** – Brand Equity

**TCP** – Turismo Centro de Portugal

**FGC** – Firm-Generated Content

**B2C** – Business-to-Consumer

**CGC** – Consumer-Generated Content

**Q&A** – Questions and Answers

**CBBETD** – Customer-Based Brand Equity for a Tourism Destination

**WoM** – Word of Mouth

**PLS - SEM** – Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modeling

**SEO** – Search Engine Optimization



## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Context**

Technologies have naturally blended into our daily lives, prompting businesses to incorporate themselves on the Internet alongside their customers. The emergence of new forms of communication facilitated by technological advances has paved the way for developing new social ties. The advent of Web 2.0 reflects how the dynamic technological environment has spawned new and different communication techniques. Customers and marketers now have a location where they can connect and express themselves. In order to remain connected with the customer and stay relevant in his mind, it is essential to understand where they are most engaged and how they make their purchasing choices. To achieve this, businesses must maintain a consistent and strategic presence on online digital platforms providing guidance, recommendations, and content tailored to their target market.

The Internet has had a major impact on the tourism industry in recent years. Nowadays, the constant updating of increasingly innovative digital marketing strategies has influenced the purchasing decisions of potential customers and tourists. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) today play a significant part in defining the competitiveness of the travel sector by delivering tools that facilitate the dissemination of deals on the worldwide market along with customer engagement (Liberato et al., 2018). Today, travelers autonomously and intelligently plan their trips using various online and offline resources and platforms that help them discover, select, customize, and purchase tourism-related items. This allows them to select and book their ideal hotel or vacation package more easily than ever before, thanks to the growth

of online booking platforms, the spread of information on social media, and travel blogs. Travelers are increasingly prioritizing other travelers' comments since they view them as more trustworthy and sincere. Therefore, it is now more crucial than ever for businesses to share information and content that is pertinent to tourists while also encouraging and rewarding travelers for posting their thoughts and other content online.

Today, the Internet phenomenon allows the sharing of a massive amount of knowledge online, which makes capturing the consumers' attention a challenge. Given the intense rivalry and constantly changing communication landscape, tourism companies must implement cutting-edge marketing strategies (Mathew & Soliman, 2020); digital content marketing (DCM) is one tactic to achieve this. Instead of overtly promoting purchases, this kind of content is known to provide instructional value. Users view it as being more pertinent and relevant since it adds something valuable to their life. Shared content typically reflects the brand's personality and core beliefs (Du Plessis, 2017), allowing customers to connect with it. Thus, customers will become more brand conscious and loyal (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). A particularly prized type of DCM on social media, in addition to content published by companies, is user-generated content (UGC). Today's online platforms enable not just the viewing of content, but also the spread of ideas, opinions, and information. Thus, UGC has emerged. Today, everyone may leave their digital imprint by writing a review of a restaurant, hotel, or airline as well as by posting text, images, and videos about their experiences. As a result of their sincerity and objectivity, the readers find these information to be considerably more reliable than that provided by the corporation. With the assistance of recommendations

and feedback from others, the potential traveler can gather knowledge to build sensible judgments and conclusions.

The user has developed a critical and opinionated attitude toward brands, products, services and experiences, frequently voicing such viewpoint online, creating electronic word of mouth (eWOM). Moreover, they now consider not just the information provided to them by institutions, but also that provided by fellow shoppers through internet interactions. Such communication is considered honest and trustworthy, being highly relevant in the tourism industry. Therefore, eWOM produced by travelers has a great impact on how potential tourists view certain tourist destinations, affecting their decisions and intentions to visit (Pektaş & Hassan, 2020). Companies can portray an image of excellence, trustworthiness, and professionalism through their content and related content, which will cause consumers to anticipate these qualities in their products and services (Cervova & Vavrova, 2021). Thus, when a customer has a positive, solid, and distinctive opinion of the brand, consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) is created, which is seen as the value that adds to the good or service. Tourism services are distinguished from other offerings by being unforeseeable. As visitors are not sure what they will experience, the intention to travel to a tourist destination is linked to making a high-risk investment (Chen et al., 2014). The communication of the destination, whether by entities or tourists, will impact the image formed in the consumer's mind, thus affecting the intention to visit (Fu et al., 2016). For this reason, tourism-related organizations must distribute engaging, interesting, and relevant material, while encouraging users to share those as well.

Given the increasingly participative consumer scenario in social networks and the importance of sharing opinions in the tourism sector, it was considered important to understand whether user-generated content contributes to the creation of brand equity, and tourist visit intention. Given this, the present dissertation poses the following research question: "Does user-generated content and e-word of mouth contribute to brand equity (BE) development and visitation intention in tourism organizations?". Additionally, it was sought to analyze how the intention to visit influences the tourist's social media engagement. For this purpose, a mixed methodology was employed. For the quantitative approach, a questionnaire was designed to understand the relationship between the constructs mentioned above. Besides this, for the qualitative approach, an interview with Adriana Rodrigues, Head of Division of Communication, Image and Public Relations was held and a focus group with Portuguese central region's tourists was conducted to obtain a better comprehension of the studied matter.

### **Research Relevance**

This study contributes to our understanding of user-generated content in the tourism industry, raises several questions for future research, and encourages new research topics that will help address the dearth of studies concerning the still-developing topic of digital content marketing, particularly its user-generated content component.

Although the digital content marketing (DCM) is becoming increasingly significant, the understanding in this area is still behind the date. After conducting a keyword search for "digital content marketing" on the Web of Science and Scopus platforms, it was found that there are only 53 studies on this topic (Rowley, 2008;

Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Only six are tourism-related (Mathew & Soliman, 2020; Bu, Parkinson & Thaichon, 2021). The predominant fields of research associated with this theme are "Business, Management, and Accounting" (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019), "Computer Science" (Nixon, 2020), and "Social Sciences" (Bowden & Mirzaei, 2021). The investigations found are all relatively recent; therefore, it is possible to verify that this theme is current.

Despite the influence of DCM in encouraging consumer engagement, trust, and value (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019), the role of UGC in brand equity lacks empirical attention with respect to the tourism sector. Some authors have explored the effects of user-generated content on brand equity dimensions (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015), but never from a tourism perspective. Hollebeek and Macky (2019) claim that more research is needed on how DCM communications are designed, implemented, and diffused to improve brand equity. Hesse et al. (2021) showed that empathetic social media content can help build brand equity, however according to the authors this study focuses solely on communication of product brands, and research is needed in the area of services, such as the tourism industry. The relationship between these two concepts in the context of the travel industry has received little to no examination.

Several previous studies have attempted to show the impact of UGC on consumer attitudes and travel-related behavior (Liu et al., 2020; Nguyen & Tong, 2022), but none have analyzed it from a Portuguese region perspective. Therefore, it was thought important to comprehend how the UGC diffusion about Portuguese central region affected travelers' intentions to travel.

Over the past ten years, customer engagement has attracted significant interest from academics and practitioners. Social media facilitates customer engagement, yet neither of these phenomena has been thoroughly studied in the tourism industry. Liu et al. (2020) assert that social media channels allow brands in the tourism industry to not only attract tourists through online brand interaction but also to cultivate a positive brand perception. Schivinski et al. (2021) state that consumer content generation on social media is triggered by their connection to and knowledge about a brand. Given this it is essential to understand how customers interpret all the information they receive through different means of communication and how they react to it. It is also important to understand how tourists' intention to visit relates to their social media engagement, as to the author's knowledge there are no studies in the tourism field linking these two concepts.

The Center of Portugal is a remarkably rich region that has won several awards for its gastronomy and diversity. Turismo Centro de Portugal (TCP) is a tourist entity reference, having received multiple honors for its communication initiatives. Since TCP had never been linked from the UGC perspective nor of the other variables analyzed, this study can be considered as a contribution to fill the existing gaps.

### **Project Aims and Goals**

This study aims to analyze whether user-generated content (UGC) and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) contributes to the development of brand equity and intention to visit, and how the latter contributes to tourists' social media engagement, featuring Portuguese central region as a case study.

The following specific objectives were set to address the general objective:

- Analyze the impact of UGC on Customer-Based Brand Equity for a Tourism Destination (Awareness; Image; Perceived Quality and Loyalty);
- Determining if UGC affects a tourist's Intention to Visit;
- Highlighting the role that eWOM plays in Customer-Based Brand Equity for a Tourism Destination (Awareness; Image; Perceived Quality and Loyalty).
- Systematizing the eWOM impact on the tourist's Intention to Visit.
- Describing the influence of Customer-Based Brand Equity for a Tourism Destination (Awareness, Image, Perceived Quality and Loyalty) on the Intention to Visit.
- Understanding the link between Intention to Visit and Social Media Engagement (Contribution; Consumption and Creation).

### **Methodological Approach**

This study is a correlational investigation and employs a mixed methodological approach, using as data collection instruments the questionnaire survey, interview survey and focus group.

The exploratory character of the qualitative approach is carried out through a bibliographic review, which involves the search, gathering, and analysis of pertinent references to the subject and in line with the study objectives. This insightful evaluation is crucial for demonstrating the information's relevance and contextual support while also affirming its correctness and reliability. An interview will also be conducted with Adriana Rodrigues, the Communication Director of Portugal's Tourist Center, to complement the qualitative approach. This interview aims to gain a thorough knowledge of how user-generated content impacts the entity. As a result, it will be possible to

compile more data, assess the replies, and contrast the various results. In addition to the previously mentioned approach, a focus group was conducted to learn more about the participants' perspectives on the Portuguese central region.

As a quantitative methodology, an online questionnaire will be carried out among all tourists or potential tourists in the Portuguese central region. The questionnaire's main objective is to gain a better understanding of how user-generated content and e-word of mouth affects tourists' destination perception and their visit intentions, while also seeking to understand how visit intentions influence tourists' social media engagement.

### **Dissertation Structure**

This dissertation is divided into five parts. Firstly, the **Introduction**, presents the dissertation topic, its context and relevance, the research objectives and a summary of the methodologies adopted.

Chapter 1, entitled **Literature Review**, includes the literature review, addressing and explaining the central themes of the research. A brief explanation of the concept of marketing is given, followed by the explanation about the relevance and importance of digital content marketing (DCM). Here the influence of this concept on consumer behavior is analyzed, and its application in media, explaining the formats of this construct. Next, the topic of user-generated content is analyzed, and its usefulness in the tourism industry and its influence on consumer decision is exposed. Additionally, the variables of this study are discussed in depth - brand equity and its dimensions, electronic word of mouth, intention to visit and social media engagement. Still in this

chapter, tourism in Portugal is characterized, and the entity Turismo Centro de Portugal is analyzed along with its communication.

In Chapter 2, entitled as **Methodology Approach**, the formulated hypotheses of the study as well as the proposed conceptual model are presented. Then, the research methods used in this study are presented. The sample employed, the criteria for its selection and the data collection instrument are described in this section.

Chapter 3, entitled **Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion** is reserved for discussion and analysis of the results obtained. The statistical analysis of the sample is presented, as well as its characterization. This will be followed by the analysis of the results obtained and validation or not of the hypotheses formulated.

Lastly, **Conclusions** outlines the findings, practical and theoretical implications of the study as well as its limitations, and recommendations for future studies. This topic will be followed by references and appendices.

## **CHAPTER 1. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter, which reviews the existing literature, seeks to define and systematize a set of key concepts and studies that have been produced within the research area of this master's thesis.

### **1.1. Digital Content Marketing (DCM)**

The development and growth of marketing followed the concomitant advancements in technology and society. To keep pace with the expansion, this sector has undergone several alterations and adjustments. Overcoming the primary focus on the product, interactive and bidirectional tactics began to be deployed centered on the user and the purchasing process. Nowadays, owing to the rise of digital marketing and technological advancements, businesses must exhibit a thorough and continuous presence on digital platforms. This gives access to a wider variety of markets and customers, resulting in advantages for the company.

The widespread availability of informative and relevant digital content is changing how customers find and interact with information. Due to the Internet and mobile information technology's rapid evolution, more and more people are accessing information and making final decisions online (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). Nowadays, the customer is more demanding, selective, and critical. Moreover, they are becoming increasingly distrustful of advertising and other traditional marketing communications, opening the door for the emergence of digital content marketing (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Thus, traditional advertising methods have been increasingly overlooked by companies, which are now turning to more digital channels. These channels allow for

more direct and personalized communication with the consumer, benefiting the consumer-company relationship. Therefore, new and innovative methods to capture customers' attention are required in the digital sphere.

Content marketing has steadily evolved into a successful strategy nowadays. The concept of 'content' was initially introduced in the publishing industry, whether in newspapers, magazines, television, or radio channels, where the information produced needs to be engaging and relevant to the reader to be regularly consumed (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). From a digital marketing perspective, Handley and Chapman (2012) define online content as the development and uploading of all the elements found on a website, such as images, text, and other elements. Although these definitions describe the content in general or within a digital environment, "content marketing" still needs further study. This strategy has constantly evolved to become a must-have technique for companies, regardless of their field of activity. Given its growing relevance and application in modern communication strategies, many authors have researched this concept, being aware of its complexity and feel that it merits in-depth investigation (Du Plessis, 2017; Hoellebeck & Macky, 2019). The definitions considered most relevant to this concept were compiled and are presented in Table 1:

*Table 1 - Content Marketing Definitions*

<b>AUTHORS</b>	<b>DEFINITION</b>
<b>Rowley (2008, p.522)</b>	"Digital content marketing is the management process responsible for profitably identifying, anticipating, and satisfying customer requirements in the context of digital content or bit-based objects distributed through electronic channels."

AUTHORS	DEFINITION
<b>Pulizzi (2012)</b>	“Content marketing is the creation of valuable, relevant and compelling content by the brand itself consistently, used to generate a positive behavior from a customer or prospect of the brand.”
<b>Content Marketing Institute (2012)</b>	"Content marketing is a strategic approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience — and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action."
<b>Rahim and Clemens (2012, p. 897)</b>	“The premise behind content marketing is creating and publishing unique and interesting content that focuses on prospects or customers. It educates them, helps them solve problems, and invites them to engage with a company’s brand.”
<b>Holliman and Rowley (2014, p. 285)</b>	“B2B digital content marketing involves creating, distributing and sharing relevant, compelling and timely content to engage customers at the appropriate point in their buying consideration processes, such that it encourages them to convert to a business building outcome.”
<b>Du Plessis (2015, p.128)</b>	"Content marketing is a strategic brand storytelling technique aimed at changing consumer's inactive behavior through unobtrusive, engaging brand conversations in earned media."
<b>Gurjar et al. (2018, p. 295)</b>	“Content marketing is a marketing practice in which consumers are not directly persuaded to buy a product or service; instead, valuable content in the form of solution to the issues faced by consumers provided which in turn creates the awareness about the product or service through media which may or may not be digital.”
<b>Hollebeek and Macky (2019, p.30)</b>	“DCM denotes the creation and dissemination of relevant, valuable brand-related content to current or prospective customers on digital platforms to develop their favorable brand engagement, trust, and relationships (vs. directly persuading consumers to purchase).”

Source: Own Development

DCM needs to exhibit a specific set of qualities to be truly appealing to consumers. In 2004, Koiso-Kanttila described digital content as "bit-based objects distributed over electronic channels" (p. 46). More recently, several authors have defined

digital content marketing as the production and dissemination of compelling (Pulizzi, 2012), brand-related (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019), valuable, relevant, and free content (Li et al., 2022). This approach, when employed appropriately, can increase brand awareness, loyalty, and engagement, as well as generate new sales (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). As such, DCM aims to forge a solid connection with customers through continuous communication in order to progressively convert their leads (Li et al., 2022). According to Du Plessis (2017), shared content should often include brand stories that can convey the brand's values in order to maintain interest and increase consumer trust. Brand narratives thoughtfully crafted to mirror the company's brand identity are commonly employed kinds of brand-related content that successfully capture consumers' attention and interest, allowing them to emotionally connect and identify with the brand.

Initially, digital content marketing was predominantly disseminated via e-newsletters, quizzes, white papers, and infographics (Bu et al., 2021). However, as social networks and mobile apps have developed and emerged, these are the platforms where DCM is now mostly and more frequently seen (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Reaching a larger audience is achievable through these platforms, and since the essential tools are free, any business can use them. Nowadays, new and original forms of DCM can be seen, such as "business magazines, newsletters, blog posts, videos, webinars, podcasts, and even fully functional social media websites" (Pulizzi, 2012, p.116). There are multiple platforms where this type of content can be distributed, such as websites, blogs, and social media, from both a company perspective (FGC) and a consumer perspective (UGC) (Sawaftah et al., 2021).

Therefore, to gain a foothold in consumers' minds, businesses must offer content in one of the above formats, depending on which format best suits the brand and the consumer's preferences. By producing and distributing this content, the company's primary goal is to entertain and educate customers, create e-conversations (Li et al., 2022), and strengthen their brand fidelity rather than profit from the content directly (Pulizzi, 2012). As a result, the customer begins to believe in the brand and its current, up-to-date, and trendy information, preferring it to its rivals. When publishing, consistency must be maintained, which entails delivering information frequently (Pulizzi, 2012). The information should also assist the reader in resolving any issues or questions they may have (Rahim & Clemens, 2012). Moreover, it should be interesting and captivating, which is related to the quality and clarity of the supplied information (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). However, the content must constantly be relevant without overwhelming the user. Delivering content merely for the sake of doing so is pointless.

Digital content marketing is focused on establishing, improving, and preserving customer relationships by adding value to their lives, as opposed to advertising, which aims to persuade consumers to purchase targeted products (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016). As the consumer perceives himself as learning something from the content, this approach is more advantageous. It is less intrusive, more natural for the customer, and less expensive for the companies (Li et al., 2022). Due to these factors, this tactic produces more leads over time than the alternative methods (Li et al., 2022). The consumer knows that the business provides the means to expand his knowledge.

Today, digital content marketing is increasingly being incorporated into business communication strategies. According to the report "B2C Content Marketing 2022:

Benchmarks, Budgets, and Trends," in 2022, 70% of respondents in a business-to-consumer (B2C) setting adopted Content Marketing as a strategy (Rose, 2022). This demonstrates the openness of companies to adapt to changing times by implementing DCM into their marketing strategies. Therefore, the travel and tourism industry must understand how this fast-changing knowledge and information-sharing trend, especially in social media, will change how communication occurs to remain relevant.

## **1.2. User-Generated Content (UGC)<sup>1</sup>**

User-generated content (UGC) or consumer-generated content (CGC) is defined as consumer-produced content regarding a specific brand that is shared on social media or other channels with a general audience (Tirunillai & Tellis, 2012). Naab and Sehl (2016) state that three essential elements must be present for content to be considered UGC: (1) it must include individual and personal engagement; (2) it must be available and shared on public social media platforms; (3) and it must not be affected by professionals. In addition, the authors consider that simple content reception, transmission, and comparable actions do not constitute UGC.

Since it contains an unbiased perspective and has no personal gain for the individual providing it, UGC is typically viewed as more dependable than the content produced by companies (Cheong & Morrison, 2008). However, there is a chance that the content posted is fraudulent, and that a for-profit company is involved (Dedeođlu et al., 2020a). The company can occasionally share favorable information by pretending to be a regular customer. As a result, it enhances its reputation while misleading or lying to

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<sup>1</sup> A section of this topic has been submitted to the Digicom Conference 2023.

users who read its reviews. Therefore, this type of content is only considered valid, honest, and authentic when it is not subject to corporate control (Sawaftah et al., 2021).

User-generated content helps not only the consumer, but also companies improve its offerings, delivers real insight about consumers, and is a viable source to effectively identify their demands (Timoshenko & Hauser, 2019). Reviews and opinions are just two examples of the many UGC formats that exist; not all are qualitative (Müller & Christandl, 2019). Other formats include user comments on online posts or blogs, text uploads, photos, videos, and audio created by the user (Naab & Sehl, 2016). UGC can be carried out through several channels, including Q&A websites, blogs, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube (Ana & Istudor, 2019). Sharing such content about products, services, events or companies may not be done purely to enlighten others. Often, it may also be motivated by an underlying motivation to satisfy personal desires related to pleasure and enjoyment (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020a). In other words, people may spread information to feel appreciated, included, and accepted, elevate their social status, or exert influence.

Businesses frequently see UGC regarding their products and services made available online as more people utilize digital environments, and many encourage its proliferation (Yang et al., 2019). Companies like Walmart, for instance, encourage customers to leave positive or negative feedback; Etsy also uses a system that bases a user's reputation on comments from buyers and sellers (Eastin et al., 2010). This demonstrates that businesses emphasize UGC and like to hear both positive and negative customer feedback. To maximize its potential, they incorporate it into their ongoing marketing strategies.

### **1.2.1. UGC in the Tourism Sector**

Nowadays, sharing information related to tourism has become widespread, whether with vlogs on YouTube, posts on Instagram, or reviews on TripAdvisor. The evolution of technology and the emergence of digital social networks and platforms have encouraged sharing experiences and opinions about destinations and travel, not only in text format but in more appealing formats such as images, videos, among others (Nguyen & Tong, 2022). These formats that feature some movement, color, and interactivity tend to be more attractive and persuasive (de Vries et al., 2012). Since this information can provide accurate and up-to-date information on popular tourist destinations as well as helpful travel advice, this type of material has thrived in the tourism industry as a valuable resource (Xu et al., 2021, Nguyen & Tong, 2022).

Such content helps not only potential tourists but also tourism organizations. UGC allows tourism organizations to air genuine opinions and is better suited for this purpose than customer surveys. These limit the tourists' ability to express themselves freely due to their preset and fixed inquiries (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2014). This strategy has a great impact on travelers' decisions and the management of tourism businesses (Xu et al., 2021). Evidence of this is that the UGC tourism market was predicted to reach \$184 million by the end of 2022 and is projected to reach \$744 million by 2032, according to Future Marketing Insights (2022).

According to Santos, Vasconcelos and Ferreira (2023)<sup>2</sup>, UGC-containing posts from the official Facebook account of Turismo Centro de Portugal receive higher

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<sup>2</sup>The article was written within the scope of this master's work and was published in the Proceedings of the ICTR 2023 Conference.

interaction than the other DCM posts. Since most of these postings include enticing images of locations in Centro de Portugal, residents and admirers frequently like, comment on, and share them to display the pride and belonging they feel towards the destination. Additionally, it offers a truthful portrayal of the area, piquing interest in travel and motivating for further journeys. This emphasizes the significance of the tourists sharing and exchanging content.

UGC's rise has benefited customers, travelers, and businesses. It assists potential travelers in making decisions, reducing their concerns and uncertainties. In addition, it allows companies to understand the genuine opinions of consumers to improve and better meet their expectations and demands. Also, it may have an impact on potential tourists' choices. They can relate to other users by the material they provide and wish to emulate their behavior or follow their advice. Given its features and qualities, it is a tool that is currently in widespread use.

### **1.2.2. UGC and Tourists' Decision Making-Process**

DCM enables businesses to establish strong customer connections, boosting audience interaction and brand recognition. Today, many tourists use DCM resources to make decisions and evaluate possibilities, including "videos and animations, social media posts, infographics, images, e-books or shorter customer guides, texts, and blogs" (Mathew & Soliman, 2020, p.70). Besides consulting and consuming digital content, nowadays they also create it, fostering the spread of UGC.

Consumers' high level of familiarity, awareness, and loyalty will increase their propensity to engage with and respond favorably to brand communications, including UGC. The destination brand's broadcast of trustworthy and pertinent information will

speed up and improve the accuracy of the decision-making process while reducing the perceived risk of the purchase (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Making informed and wise judgments will be made easier for the potential customer if useful, amusing, and educational information is shared, whether it comes from the business or the consumer. When the consumer has sufficient knowledge on his side, he may assess his options and select the one he prefers.

Because travel and tourism-related events are frequently regarded as identity symbols and social prestige, travelers are highly driven to share their experiences through images, blog entries, videos, reviews, and so on. By promoting a destination brand through their digital platform shares, they become co-creators and co-marketers (Gurjar et al., 2018). Reviews and user-generated content (UGC), in general, carry much weight in the travel and hospitality industries because they represent the genuine opinions of visitors. Since it is more authoritative and professional, firm-generated material also has some effect; yet these messages might be deceptive and an illusion to draw more visitors to the site. User-generated material is thereby shared, adding to and complementing the prior content shared by businesses and contributing to better inform potential tourists.

### **1.3. Brand Equity (BE)<sup>3</sup>**

A well-established brand, along with effective brand management, holds considerable importance in shaping a company's marketing strategies. As a result, organizations have been maximizing the use of this resource. The American Marketing

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<sup>3</sup> A section of this topic has been submitted to the Digicom Conference.

Association (2022) defines the term "brand" as a "name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or service as distinct from those of other sellers. The International Organization for Standardization (2019) further confirms that brands assist in "creating distinctive images and associations in the minds of stakeholders, thereby generating economic benefit/values," helping the companies differentiate themselves from others. The company attracts value through its brand, which is known as brand equity (Keller & Lehmann, 2006).

Authors researching this notion over time have primarily adhered to the financial and consumer-based schools of thinking (Lassar et al., 1995). The first seeks to estimate the potential economic value of the brand to the company by offering measures such as cash flows, savings, and value (Tasci, 2020). This has been the subject of significant development and testing since the 1980s by numerous authors (Farquhar, 1989; Simon & Sullivan, 1993). The emphasis then shifted to consumer-based brand equity.

Companies that project an image of quality, reliability, and competence allow customers to anticipate similar attributes in their products and services (Cervova & Vavrova, 2021). This behavior is referred to as customer-based brand equity (CBBE) and, according to Keller (1993), can be defined as the "differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to brand marketing" (p. 2). CBBE is further described as what customers "have learned, felt, seen, and heard about the brand as a result of their experiences over time" (Keller, 2013, p.69). Given this, brand equity is considered the value added to the product/service when the consumer has a positive, powerful, and distinctive opinion about the brand. It will depend on what is in their minds. Thus, it will influence how they react to the companies' marketing strategies. If it is positive,

consumers will be more willing to pay attention to the companies' promotional actions and be less sensitive to price increases and changes in communication channels (Keller, 2013). Customer-based brand equity likewise enhances the company's financial gains (Lassar et al., 1995), as a customer who has a positive brand perception is more likely to buy the company's products or require its services. Multiple attempts have been made to condense brand equity metrics by approaching the concept from various angles. The most widely agreed-upon dimensions are illustrated in Table 2 below (Almeyda & George, 2020).

*Table 2 - Brand Equity Dimensions according to Several Authors*

<b>Aaker (1991)</b>	<b>Keller (1993, 1998, 2003)</b>	<b>Lassar et al. (1995)</b>	<b>Yoo et al. (2000)</b>	<b>Konecnik &amp; Gartner (2007)</b>	<b>Xu &amp; Chan (2010)</b>	<b>San Martin et al. (2018)</b>
Brand Awareness	Brand Salience	Performance	Brand Awareness	Destination Awareness	Brand Awareness	Destination Awareness
Brand Perceived Quality	Brand Performance Brand Imagery	Social Image	Perceived Quality	Destination Perceived Quality	Quality of Experience	Destination Quality
Brand Association	Brand Judgments Brand Feelings	Price/Value Trustworthiness	Brand Associations	Destination Image	Brand Associations	Destination Image Destination Satisfaction
Brand Loyalty	Brand Resonance	Identification/ Attachment	Brand Loyalty	Destination Loyalty	Brand Loyalty	Destination Loyalty

Source: Adapted from Almeyda and George (2020)

When analyzing customer-based brand equity, four variables are commonly employed: brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand image, and brand quality (Gartner & Konecnik, 2007; Saeed & Shafique, 2019). This investigation will focus on customer-based brand equity, considering that assessing destination brand equity's effectiveness

has recently drawn more interest in tourism. Since these dimensions can be pertinently applied to various sectors and markets, they vary due to the specificities of products and services, especially in tourism (Tasci, 2020). Having that said, some authors have been analyzing these constructs from a hospitality perspective, such as Konecnik and Gartner (2007), Xu and Chan (2010), and San Martin et al. (2018). Thus, models regarding customer-based brand equity for a tourism destination (CBBETD) have been developed and validated. This issue will be addressed in the following section.

### **1.3.1. Customer-Based Brand Equity for a Tourism Destination**

There are notable differences between product brands and destination brands. The vast marketing literature suggests that services do not directly benefit from product branding principles (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2003). Product brands are characterized by being stable and predictable (Almeyda & George, 2017), as consumers can see, feel and evaluate the product before buying it. On the other hand, tourism destinations are changeable and unpredictable, always dependent on seasonality and climate (Gartner & Ruzzier, 2010). Products are usually associated with a low purchase risk as they have tangible characteristics that can be evaluated before purchase.

Moreover, they can usually be returned or exchanged in case of dissatisfaction (Almeyda & George, 2017). Tourist travels are expensive, non-refundable, experimental, and different for each tourist (Gartner, 2014), therefore associated with a high purchase risk. The complex decision-making and buying processes of visitors, who are paying a premium price for a service marked by some degree of uncertainty, are another differentiating characteristic of destination brands (Almeyda & George, 2017). Despite some of their differences, they share some similarities. Both products and destinations

aim to provide a service/experience that differentiates them from competitors. According to Gartner and Ruzzier (2010), "brand equity increases for a product or destination the more it is differentiated, by the market, as superior to its closest competitors" (p.473). However, it is not sufficient to merely state that the destination differs from its rivals; rather, it must be so, lest the consumer's expectations are dashed by reality.

Over the years, some scholars have questioned the similarity of these concepts. Ooi (2004) pointed out that while researchers often ignore the distinctions between brands of goods and services, the similarities between them are noteworthy. Konecnik and Gartner (2007) have developed further research to discover whether the customer-based brand equity approach can be extended to destinations. Thus, destination studies consider that the brand concept must be applied to tourist traits and destination qualities (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007).

The academic interest regarding destination brands has only emerged recently. Currently, there is limited available literature that discusses the various elements of destination brands and offers recommendations on how to effectively monitor them (Boo et al., 2009). Konecnik and Gartner (2007) developed a customer-based brand equity model of a tourist destination, where it was ascertained that the four dimensions of destination awareness, perceived destination quality, destination image, and destination loyalty affect CBBETD. These will be exposed and explained in the next topic.

### **1.3.2. CBBETD Dimensions for Tourism Destinations**

#### ***Destination Awareness***

Brand awareness is a significant element often used in measuring CBBETD in the tourism industry, particularly in the context of travel destinations (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Boo et al., 2009). Brand awareness, which can range from a relatively basic level of brand recognition to an extremely in-depth level of collected comprehensive knowledge (Hoyer & Brown, 1990), displays how knowledgeable and familiarized individuals are with a good or service (Keller, 1993). In other words, the tourism sector refers to it as the travelers' ability to recognize and distinguish a destination they have already heard of. Once a traveler begins to research and learn about a destination, brand awareness begins to develop (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020), and it is essential for tourists' high preference for a destination compared to competing ones (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020b). Thus, to attract more tourists, destination brands must first raise awareness and then create a destination's favorable image (Cervova & Vavrova, 2021).

Destination perception tends to be more positive when tourists are aware of and familiar with its qualities, i.e., when destination awareness is high. Tourists' judgments, however, can be negatively affected by low destination awareness as they are unaware of the site's valences and attributes, increasing the perceived risk of the trip (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020b). That said, tourists' awareness of the destination will influence their behaviors, decisions, satisfaction, and loyalty toward the destination.

Thus, anything that increases consumer awareness enhances the possibility of tourists choosing a specific destination (Vila et al., 2021). Today, it is imperative to be accessible on the numerous digital platforms regularly used by consumers, especially

tourists. Publishing engaging, relevant, informative, and enticing information is the first step to capturing the consumer's attention. This will make it simpler to establish a presence in the potential travelers' minds and allow them to develop solid brand awareness from the beginning. Thus, tourists will have the destination in their minds, thereby recognizing and choosing it more promptly when faced with competing offers.

### ***Destination Image***

Image destination is considered the most relevant and crucial dimension of the CBBETD model. According to Chiu et al. (2013), destination image "is defined as a set of qualities, attributes, and benefits that visitors have about the destination" (p. 877), which can be decisive for tourists to differentiate a place from others. When favorable, this image encourages travelers to visit, revisit and recommend a location (Cervova & Vavrova, 2021). Given its relevance, many models in the tourism sector encompass this CBBETD component (Cai, 2002; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; San Martín et al., 2018).

There are three distinct perspectives regarding this dimension. The first is the cognitive level perspective. The authors advocate this view and believe that a visitor's beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions about a tourist site compose the destination image (Crompton, 1979; Kotler et al., 1993). Some scholars have expanded this perspective to include not just the cognitive but also the affective level. The affective level refers to the impact of the visitor's feelings toward the location in the image-creation process (San Martín & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2008). The confluence of the two elements can provide a more precise explanation of how a tourist perceives a place, which is not based solely on its physical attributes. Finally, there are researchers, such as Gartner (1994), who

assert that the destination image is comprised of three parts—cognitive, emotional, and conative (see figure 1).

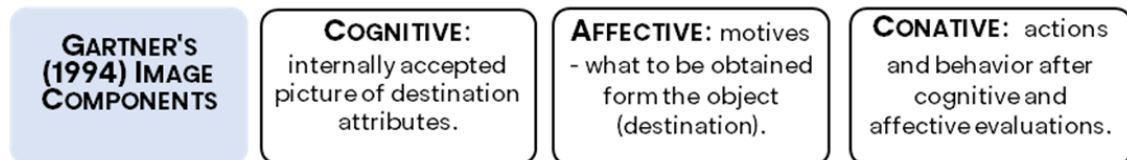


Figure 1 - Gartner's (1994) Destination Image Components.

Source: (Cai, 2002).

According to the same author, the destination image is often based on subjective interpretations and perceptions rather than facts since it is impossible to pre-test the tourism product. The destination has its own identity that may be interpreted differently by both visitors and the organization managing it. Thus, the visitor may feel a discrepancy between what was expected and the reality (Marine-Roig, 2021). As a result, the construction of the destination image will be influenced by the individual opinions and feelings of the tourist towards the location.

Opinions and thoughts can be created through an image transmitted by the tourist entity (corporate image) and through WoM and eWOM (Ferrer-Rosell & Marine-Roig, 2020). Thus, it is crucial that the brand positioning is communicated honestly and truthfully. This way, the visitor's expectations will be close to what is conveyed. It can change completely when their information is spread about the destination image by WoM or eWOM (eWOM Image). Each tourist has different opinions, expectations, and experiences and maybe communicate something different from other tourists' reality. Thus, it will influence their perception, distorting the truth and distancing the alignment of expectations with reality. According to Marine-Roig (2021), it is usual for these

perceptions to exist, but the experience contributes most when an image is created. This means that all preconceived ideas may not correspond to reality. Thus, the tourist only gets to know the true destination image when he or she visits the destination.

Therefore, as shown in Figure 2, the image that the tourist has both before and after the experience will constitute the brand image of the destination (Manhas et al., 2016). The before-experience destination image is the preconceived ideas that the tourist has about the place, which will be determined by the image that the tourism industry advertises (corporate image) and by the opinions of other visitors (eWOM and UGC). The after-experience destination image is constituted by the real experience of the tourist when visiting the destination. This will generate positive/negative feedback and determine the intention to revisit. Thus, destination image significantly affects tourist behavior, particularly at the assessment and choice stages (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). As such, this component of CBBETD affects the success of a location, as those with a strong brand image are more likely to be visited and generate good reviews.

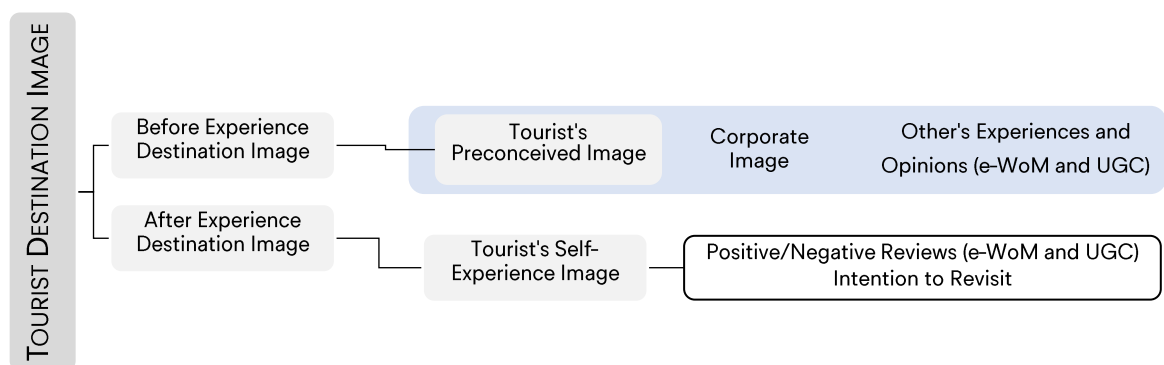


Figure 2 - Construction of Tourist Destination Image.

Source: Own Development.

### *Destination Perceived Quality*

Perceived destination quality is defined by Aaker (1991) as "the customer's perception of the overall quality or superiority of a product or service concerning its intended purpose, relative to alternatives" (p. 85). According to Saeed and Shafique (2019), constructing perceived quality begins with evaluating price. It progresses to evaluating services, facilities, and other factors of a similar nature made available by the destination. This aspect of the CBBETD is notoriously challenging to measure since it requires examining travelers' opinions and assessments of products and services and their experiences while traveling to the destination (Cervova & Vavrova, 2021). Additionally, the measurements must be aligned with accepted criteria for evaluating destinations. Nevertheless, this is a crucial and central factor in assessing a tourism destination's customer-based brand equity.

The literature discusses several views when examining destination quality, which can be handled from the conventional standpoint or from the consumer's perspective. The traditional approach claims that this dimension is the ability to meet certain specific standards (Dedeođlu et al., 2020b), while the second suggests that destination quality can be measured by its effectiveness in meeting tourists' travel-related expectations and demands (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). These requirements can refer to accommodation and attraction infrastructures, tourist facilities, amenities, and other services (Tran et al., 2019). However, because each guest is unique, their demands and expectations vary, making this measure of service quality not entirely objective (Dedeođlu et al., 2020b). Everyone will have their own expectations, which will be impacted by past experiences, previously obtained information, and other circumstances, which may or may not be met

by the journey. Nevertheless, rather than relying solely on standardized measurements, it is critical to consider customer preferences and requirements when developing a scale for gauging service quality since tourists constitute the majority of the sector's interested parties (Dedeođlu et al., 2020b).

While service quality can be controlled by tourism entities, destinations' natural quality depends on location, culture, and nature (Tosun et al., 2015). The inherent characteristics of a location are hardly changeable and duplicable, serving as differentiating and important factors for visitors when choosing a destination (Dedeođlu et al., 2020b). The general level of visitor satisfaction will depend on the destination's overall quality, which includes the environment experienced on-site, the nature and cultures present, the lodging experience, and other connected activities. Previous research has shown that favorable perceptions of quality positively impact tourist behavior (Saeed & Shafique, 2019). Therefore, to attract tourists and fulfill their requirements and expectations, tourism organizations should pay close attention to the quality of their hospitality services and amenities.

### ***Destination Loyalty***

CBBETD is also built around destination loyalty. When a visitor enjoys the experience and connects/identifies with the destination, it is natural to remain loyal to it. Oliver (1999) defines loyalty as "a deeply held commitment to consistently rebuy or patronize a preferred product/service in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same-brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior." (p. 34). Therefore, in tourism, destination loyalty is the likelihood that travelers will return and suggest a particular

location to others (Mechinda et al., 2009). This idea is generally divided into two components: attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Jeong & Kim, 2019).

According to Konecnik and Gartner (2007), behavioral loyalty represents actual consumer behavior. It denotes how familiarity and first-hand knowledge of the destination will affect the traveler's decision-making in the future, reflecting whether or not the tourist is likely to revisit the place (Jeong & Kim, 2019). Because many places rely on repeat visits, hospitality entities must retain tourist loyalty by keeping the quality and character of the destination. Attitudinal loyalty considers the strength of affection a person displays towards a destination (Mechinda et al., 2009). When a person has a positive opinion about a place, even though there is no momentary intention to return there, it can culminate in creating and disseminating e-words and beneficial recommendations. However, beyond this, it can also lead to the intention to revisit (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). This dimension is significant since, nowadays, tourists highly value recommendations and opinions from acquaintances and trusted people. Both views should be used together to better assess destination loyalty (Jeong & Kim, 2019).

In this increasingly competitive era, employing all available means to obtain and maintain brand loyalty is essential. For this reason, the quality of the tourism product or service must be consistent (Lassar et al., 1995). The tourist will consolidate his expectations based on his travel experiences; if the quality of services deteriorates, the tourist will be disappointed in future visits. This will decrease the tourists' commitment and loyalty to the destination, and they may be persuaded to look for alternative options among the competition.

### **1.3.3. Impact of UGC on Customer-Based Brand Equity**

The emergence of Web 2.0 opened up the possibility of quicker and more direct consumer communication which is essential for creating a solid and lasting relationship with consumers. Therefore, according to Rodríguez-Molina et al. (2019), it is crucial to comprehend how customers and tourists interpret and absorb the information they receive through various digital platforms and how it influences how they view brand equity. Among the most effective ways to foster a connection of trust, favorable feelings, attention, and ongoing communication between customers and businesses is through content marketing, with its undeniable influence on BE (Grubor & Milovanov, 2016). DCM, intended to establish, build and maintain connections with customers and prospects, can be leveraged to promote brand awareness, involvement, and trust and to aid customer loyalty growth (Hollebeck & Macky, 2019).

Everyone has access to social media in today's digital environment, making it an indisputable aspect of daily life. Consequently, sharing content on social media is essential today, whether done by a consumer or a business. The online world emerged as a major communication channel, where ideas, facts and content are exchanged. Users believe that the user-generated content, a DCM element, is more trustworthy than the one shared by the firm. Therefore, UGC, because it is considered sincere and unbiased content, strengthens the brand's credibility, expands the overall viewers and enhances the customer's confidence and authenticity (Abboud, 2020). Thus, as UGC is shared by the user, it will reach out to their followers, making it easier to acquire new potential customers to the brand. Being that it is a heartfelt content, it will be of much more relevance and usefulness to those who consume it, increasing the consumer's trust in

the product/service or company. Furthermore, since it is information seen as meaningful to users, it is likely to increase their engagement with the topic of the content (Dedeođlu et al., 2020a). As a result, customers search for it frequently, which ultimately increases their brand awareness of the specific product or service.

#### **1.4. Electronic Word of Mouth in Tourism**

The 1950s saw the emergence of word of mouth (WOM) as a popular topic in the literature, with researchers continuing to take a keen interest in the subject today (Baber et al., 2022). WOM quickly established itself as a decisive factor in influencing customer choices (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), but was exclusively conducted face-to-face by close or well-known individuals about the acquisition, utilization, experience, and qualities of a good, service, or company (Chen & Law, 2016). As time passed and technology advanced, communication altered and developed, and WOM took on a new dimension: one accessible to millions of people online.

The advent of digital platforms and social media has facilitated the exchange of consumption-related opinions online, thus encouraging the emergence of e-word of mouth (eWOM). According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), eWOM is defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (p.39). The growing use of mobile devices, particularly smartphones, has aided and inspired the creation of UGC and eWOM (Chen & Law, 2016). Today, consumers can access information about products and services through various sources. They often acquire it not only from brand platforms and advertisements but also, increasingly, through online conversations and feedback from fellow buyers in the

form of "online notifications, reviews, opinions, and recommendations" (Al-Gasawneh & Al-Adamat, 2020, p. 1702). The adaptability, simplicity, convenience, rapid spread and resilience of eWOM play a significant role in its distinct ability to shape customer opinions (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). Due to the possibility that other brand materials may only be meant to boost sales or build brand recognition, consumers view eWOM as being more reliable than other information (Choi, 2020).

The traditional WOM and the current online WOM differ in various aspects (see table 3). The anonymity associated with eWOM is among the main differences, making it more difficult to judge the reliability of information since the source is unknown (Park & Lee, 2009). The sender of the message, which used to be identifiable but may now be anonymous. However, when making decisions, Internet users take these views into account. Next, the reach that information obtains is also a notable distinction between offline and online opinion distribution. Online word of mouth reaches everyone who wants to read it and has the means to do so, as opposed to traditional word of mouth, which only reaches friends, family, and, at most, acquaintances (Chen & Law, 2016). People are relieved from societal pressures and the fear of judgment when they are anonymous (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). Thus, users feel safe by freely sharing their feedback on the Internet, which increases the likelihood that these ideas are genuine.

*Table 3 - Distinctions between WOM and eWOM.*

	<b>WOM</b>	<b>EWOM</b>
REACH	The presence of the receiver of the message is required, and information is usually only given once. Information is slowly disseminated.	The information is quickly and conveniently shared on the Internet and available to view at any time.

	<b>WOM</b>	<b>eWOM</b>
RELIABILITY	The information is passed on the spot through interpersonal conversation. The person is known, so the information is more credible and reliable.	Information is spread on the Internet, where anyone can share material. This deteriorates the information's sense of trust and reliability.
SOURCE	The information is shared by someone known (friend, family member, etc.), which means that the receiver knows the source.	Information is shared online by a possibly unknown and anonymous person, and the source is undisclosed.

Source: Own Development.

The motivations for WOM communication also differ from those for eWOM, although the latter is derived from the former. Several motivations lead people to spread WOM, such as self-improvement, consideration for other customers, assisting the firm, financial incentives, and social advantages (Shen et al., 2016). Therefore, WOM is produced when a consumer has favorable or unfavorable thoughts about a product, service, or organization. This information sharing could be aimed at helping other customers by providing helpful feedback. This way, the consumer feels approved, inserted, and accepted in a community.

It might also be an effort to support or undermine the producing company. Additionally, it could be a means of easing concerns or uncertainties about making a purchase, or resolving any doubts associated with it. As for the motivations for spreading opinions and feedback online, according to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), these are economic incentives, concern for other consumers, positive self-enhancement, and social benefits. Thus, consumers like to share their successful purchases because it makes them happy and assists other consumers in making judgments. Customers also value the opportunities for interaction with others and the benefits of reviewing

products. Users not only provide feedback, but they also seek it. There are several reasons for them to do so, such as getting information quickly, reducing their risk, getting pre-purchase information, and securing lower prices (Eastin et al., 2010).

This theme has recently been associated with the tourism and hospitality sector (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Chen & Law, 2016; Pourfakhimi et al., 2020; Bu et al., 2021). Nowadays, especially in the tourism industry, sharing experiences through e-word of mouth is crucial. Pre-consumption evaluation is highly challenging because tourism is mostly about notoriously intangible experiences (Chen & Law, 2016). With the support of recommendations and feedback from other individuals, the potential tourist can acquire information to make informed judgments and decisions. When tourists have a favorable experience and identify with the destination, they are likelier to spread good reviews of the company's goods or services. Negative feedback can help improve services and other aspects.

It is essential to remember that while eWOM undoubtedly has a substantial impact on the tourism industry, it can also result in consumer confusion and information overload (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). Due to the abundance of reviews posted on websites explicitly created for this purpose, like TripAdvisor, the prospective traveler may feel disoriented by the sheer number of reviews and end up eliminating the destination from their list of options. Moreover, there is always the possibility that the dissemination and interpretation of eWOM are biased and inaccurate. Based on various factors, the feedback writer may consciously or unconsciously alter his input, including whether they have read other reviews or has formed opinions before the event (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the eWOM significantly impacts the tourist's decisions and

influences the intention to visit the destination (Pektaş & Hassan, 2020). The advent of new communication channels has enhanced the likelihood of a reputational breakdown occurring, since inquiries and complaints submitted through eWOM have the potential to exert a disastrous influence on CBBE (Ji et al., 2017).

### **1.5. Intention to Visit Tourist Destinations**

Ajzen (1991) defines intention as "how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behavior" (p. 181). This intention is known as visiting a particular place in the tourism and hospitality industry. Tourist behavior can be divided into three phases: pre-visit, during the visit, and post-visit, according to the consumption process (Pool et al., 2016). The intention to visit is what outlines the initial phase.

The unpredictability and unexpectedness of tourist services distinguish these from other products. Due to the visitor's uncertainty regarding their experience, having the intention to visit is consequently connected with a high-risk investment (Chen et al., 2014). Albarq (2013) assert that eWOM can favor passengers' opinions of certain locations and plans to travel there. Therefore, a favorable opinion or feedback received by eWOM can influence the consumer's decision and, consequently, the intention to visit. Therefore, potential tourists can rely on the perspectives of other travelers and other online information, such as the dissemination of relevant and real information by the entity (FGC) and the opinions of other tourists (UGC and eWOM). This data will be used to develop and shape the destination's image, which can positively influence the intention to visit (Fu et al., 2016).

Tourists' intentions can thus be influenced and predicted by destination image, created by cognitive and emotional variables (de la Hoz-Correa & Muñoz-Leiva, 2018), destination value, and quality (Ranjbarian & Pool, 2015). This perception is formed through various online and offline information sources, which also significantly influence visitors' intentions to travel (de la Hoz-Correa & Muñoz-Leiva, 2018). Additional factors may further affect visit intention, including novelty, cost/benefit analysis (Chen et al., 2014), destination self-concept and personality, perceived experience, and level of satisfaction among tourists (Pool et al., 2016). A decisive element in the decision to travel is the perception of the destination and brand equity in general. It is natural to be motivated to travel to a place if a visitor thinks highly of a destination and has heard nothing but positive points about it. Along with the affordability of the place, the degree of identification with the destination also affects the decision.

### **1.6. Social Media Engagement**

The active pursuit of strategies to promote consumer engagement beyond transactions has been one of the most difficult challenges in service brand management over the past ten years (So et al., 2021). Customer engagement is defined by Harrigan et al. (2017) as the “repeated interactions between a customer and an organization that strengthen the emotional, psychological or physical investment a customer has in the brand and the organization” (p.598). Since social media are excellent platforms facilitating two-way communication, they are now the main stage of consumer engagement, allowing brands to quantify consumer engagement on social media in their brand-related posts. Schivinski et al. (2016) defined consumers' online brand-related activities as “a set of online activities on the part of the consumer that are related to a

brand, and which vary in the levels of interaction and engagement with the consumption, contribution and creation of media content” (p.5). Tourism-related companies are increasingly implementing strategies to engage their clientele beyond the service exchange (So et al., 2021). The tourism industry is unique in cultivating customer engagement because tourists' travel experiences are heavily dependent on information and content generated by other travelers. Therefore, because travel is an exciting, enjoyable, and visually stimulating process, it is bound to trigger consumer engagement (Zhou & Yu, 2022).

Because each person is unique and has a distinctive relationship with social networks, everyone's perceptions, emotions, interactions, and behaviors on these platforms vary. Therefore, three separate and different aspects which denote distinctive consumer engagement behaviors are involved social media engagement. Less engaged consumers merely see and consume material produced by businesses, producers, or other users – **consumption**. This form of brand-related consumer behavior has been determined to be the most prevalent (Muntinga et al., 2011). The simple act of seeing photographs, videos, and advertisements on social media is an example of a person engaged in brand-related activity (Mishra, 2019).

Users with medium participation share their opinions by participating in interactions such as liking, commenting, and sharing the publications that are already available, made either by the company or other users – **contribution**. These activities have become increasingly popular over time among academics and practitioners due to their participatory nature (Schivinski et al., 2016).

Users who actively participate contribute original material that they themselves create and publish – **creation**. The consumer-generated material might serve as a catalyst for additional consumers to use and contribute to social media (Schivinski et al., 2016). This is the highest degree of brand-related customer engagement online (Muntinga et al., 2011). Examples of this creation include a person publishing a photo of his destination of choice on social media.

This indicates that a user can be a consumer, a contributor, and a creator depending on the brand, content, message, and other triggers, whereby the same person can only consume material for one brand and be a creator for another (Schivinski et al., 2016; Mishra, 2019; Davcik et al., 2021). Malthouse et al. (2016) categorizes both contribution and creation as types of UGC.

Muntinga et al. (2011) revealed that information and entertainment were among the top reasons for online engagement with brand-related material. Informative posts on social media can serve various functions, such as alerting the consumer of a product's unique and specific features or its launch date. Customers are thus more inclined to interact with and use the product (de Vries et al., 2012). These articles provide readers with pertinent information that will ultimately aid them in making a purchase decision (Muntinga et al., 2011). Images, videos about brand-related or unrelated, calls to action, and content regarding celebration dates can all fall under this category (Kim et al., 2015).

De Vries et al. (2012) examined how social media activity is triggered by content creation. The authors begin by classifying the content according to vividness, interactivity, information, and entertainment attributes. Vividness can stimulate one or more senses, for example, through animations and colour contrast (Fortin & Dholakia,

2005). Content must be distinctive and appealing to the user's senses to be called vivid. Therefore, posts such as videos receive more engagement than photos. Interactivity, according to Goldfarb and Tucker (2011), is a two-way communication that can be accomplished by a question or a call to action (de Vries et al., 2012). Interactivity allows users to have active involvement in the process of creating content, improving and refining it, which leads to emotional connection and attachment, and ultimately engagement.

Nowadays, understanding how customers process all the information they receive through various communication channels and its impact on how they experience brand equity becomes crucial (Rodríguez-Molina et al., 2019). The user's responsiveness and involvement with the available content will always depend on the message's underlying meaning and attractiveness, as well as on the way each individual uses social media. These traits and motivations are unique to each and every person. Due to the multiple opportunities that social media channels offer firms for developing customer interactions, the impact of such channels on CBBE is rapidly evolving (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020).

Customers can become passionate and involved with a brand and commit to it by participating in brand engagement activities, developing strong and lasting connections (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020). Moreover, through this engagement they experience greater brand attachment, have increased trust and loyalty, and are more invested in their preferred brands (Harrigan et al., 2017). Therefore, aside from purchase decisions, engagement drives connections.

Digital content marketing especially that shared on social media is popular in today's digital environment. It allows companies to establish a solid and engaging relationship with customers. Furthermore, a clear and concrete approach to DCM will allow companies to increase user engagement on social media, increasing exposure and revenue (Nieves-Casanovas & Lozada-Contreras, 2020). Typically, digital content marketing has a high level of shareability, and positive and emotionally engaging content is also more likely to be shared (Vinerean, 2017). After content is shared with users, they determine whether it is interesting, valuable, and relevant to share with others. Thus, the information presents the possibility of diffusion to many users, being seen and interacted with by different people.

## **1.7. Tourism and Marketing**

### **1.7.1. Digital Environment in the Tourism Sector**

Social media's influence on trip planning has been the subject of many recent studies (Țuclea et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2022). The advancement of new tourism trends and changing tourist behavior requires mandatory changes in the tourism industry. This sector must adjust to a more complicated, dynamic, and independent market as the Internet becomes increasingly important for information gathering, choosing preferred places, and purchasing all related services. In addition, hotels and other tourism entities need to differentiate themselves in a competitive setting by participating in the technological environment (Sharma, 2016).

The development of digital platforms and technological progress has given the travel and hospitality sectors essential capabilities. These allow people to obtain a wide range of information about hotels and tourist attractions, often free of charge and with

no time or place restrictions. According to Future Marketing Insights (2022), 85% of tourists begin their travel planning by searching information online. Today's ease of information discovery is mainly due to the emergence of smartphones and the built-in apps on those devices (Wang & Xiang, 2012). This enables travelers to get information to help them plan their journey instantly. The process has become so straightforward that tourists are motivated to travel and see various cultures and places. Moreover, the substantial rise in tourism-related social media in recent years, including websites such as Tripadvisor and Yelp, demonstrates the evolution of communication and information-seeking practices in this industry (Xiang et al., 2014). As a result, travelers now use the Internet to organize their trips because of its simplicity and convenience.

Besides allowing users to perform research, the Internet also provides them with the opportunity to share information related to tourist destinations and trips that are relevant to their experiences, according to Vu et al. (2015). By taking advantage of different platforms available in the digital world, tourists will be able to exchange their thoughts, opinions, photos, and videos throughout the course of their trip. Considering these factors, it is clear that the tourism industry must keep up with the digital landscape and adapt and develop at a rapid rate in order to survive.

### **1.7.2. Online Communication Importance for the Tourist Destinations<sup>4</sup>**

Tourism is a vital industry nowadays, both socially and economically. As a result, there is greater competition in this sector and the tourism product is given greater importance. Hence, some travel locations are now seen as brands, used as

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<sup>4</sup> A section of this topic has been submitted to the Digicom Conference 2023.

differentiating and competitive factors for countries (Saeed & Shafique, 2019). The tourism sector has several singularities, one of the most significant being that the acquisition of the tourism product occurs before direct contact with it. Thus, it becomes increasingly important to approach tourist locations as brands and implement promotional strategies (IPDT, 2023).

More and more, the content shared by others on social networks is the potential tourist's primary point of contact with the tourism product they intend to purchase. Content that inspires individuals to daydream and piques their interest in traveling to the location. Therefore, the branding used is essential to seduce the potential tourist and differentiate the destination from others (IPDT, 2023). Social media and destination promotion are fundamental driving forces in the travel industry regarding influencing visitor behavior. These channels enable cross-border communication and the exchange of knowledge on travel-related issues, such as destinations, hotels, activities, travel agencies, airlines, etc. The ease with which potential tourists and travelers have come to embrace the information available on the Internet (websites, social media, eWOM, apps, etc.) is attributable to the intangibility of the tourism/hospitality industry (Cox et al., 2009). Travelers naturally wish to receive as much information as possible before visiting a new location, especially considering that travel is usually associated with high prices. In this way, they can prepare in advance and make the best decisions, using all sources that allow them speed and convenience. Prior to the emergence of social media, there was little information available regarding potential places and travel. Brochures and travel consultants from tourism-related organizations provided the most practical means of gathering data for making decisions (Saeed & Shafique, 2019). Today, these

channels have been mainly replaced by digital channels, where travel-related information reaches users expediently and conveniently. Travel agencies and tour operators are no longer seen as trustworthy and neutral as they once were because their recommendations can sometimes be profit-driven. The widespread use of these platforms allows potential tourists to research destinations and communicate with businesses before, during, and after their trips.

According to Truyols (2022) from Hotelmize, 85% of millennials, those born between 1981 and 1996, utilize social networks to arrange their travel. The same source claims that 74% of tourists use social media when traveling, and that 43% of tourists would not go on vacation if they couldn't post about their experience on these digital platforms. In addition, 34% of people who book a hotel do so after learning about it from other people on social media. Hence, having a comprehensive understanding of social media in the realm of communication is paramount. Not only does it serve as a crucial tool for promoting destinations and boosting tourism, but also plays an integral role within this context.

## **1.8. Portuguese Central Region**

### **1.8.1. The Digital Era in Portuguese Tourism**

#### *Tourism in Portugal*

Tourism is an engine for social and global growth. Portugal has always been recognized as a nation of exceptional interest and focus on diverse civilizations. The pioneering steps in the Portuguese tourism sector were taken during the Age of Discovery when Portugal experienced a period of massive maritime expansion (Ramos & Costa, 2017, p.25). Nowadays, Portugal is widely acknowledged as a reputable and prestigious tourism destination. The country's differentiating and eye-catching factors are diverse cultural heritage and distinctive traditions. Together with its hospitality, gastronomy, and mild climate, Portugal is regarded by many as a top travel destination (Ramos & Costa, 2017, p. 32). The national tourism sector has undergone considerable growth and progress in recent years (Turismo de Portugal, 2022b). Therefore, it represents a vital economic activity for Portuguese wealth and employment growth. According to the Instituto Nacional de Estatísticas (2022), the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on the tourism industry remained to be seen in 2021, despite an overall increase from the previous year. Domestic residents' travel for pleasure climbed by 20.2% in 2021, yet it remained low compared to pre-pandemic years. In 2022, the tourism industry saw a surge of more than 85% in overnight stays, exceeding those experienced in 2019, before to the epidemic (Tiago, 2023). Compared to the homologous period, the tourist accommodation industry recorded a significant increase at the beginning of 2023, with 1.5 million visitors and 3.5 million overnight stays (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2023).

The regulatory entity for the tourism sector in Portugal is Turismo de Portugal, which is responsible for promoting, enhancing, and sustainably growing the country's tourism industry (Turismo de Portugal, 2018). Five Regional Tourism Entities are linked with Turismo de Portugal. Among them is Turismo Centro de Portugal (TCP), which oversees managing and expanding tourism in the central region.

In 2020, Portugal was distinguished in the Marketing Meios & Publicidade 2021 Awards, winning five awards. The “Unwanted Shapes - Covid Edition” campaign won two gold medals in the Sustainability and Activations & Sponsorships categories. The “Time to Be” campaign also received gold in the International Markets category (Prémios M&P Marketing 2021, 2022). In the 2022 World Awards Travel, Portugal won over 30 awards in various categories and was distinguished as Europe's Leading Tourism Destination in 2022 (Turismo de Portugal, 2022a). These awards distinguish Portugal as a remarkable destination to visit, encouraging the reinforcement of ongoing efforts to promote the growth and notoriety of Portugal’s tourism.

### ***Digital Marketing in Portugal's Tourism***

In 2021, based on the findings of the "Attitudes of Europeans toward Tourism" survey, Europeans identified the Internet as the third most relevant when questioned about the most crucial source of information when arranging a vacation. Only recommendations from acquaintances and personal experience ranked higher. The Portuguese see the Internet as the second most important source of information (European Commission, Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship, and SMEs, 2022). This data reveals how fundamental the tourism industry's online presence is, transforming how customers obtain travel and tourism

information and services. Since 2013, Turismo de Portugal has adopted mostly electronic strategies and campaigns to promote tourism, leaving the earlier-used conventional marketing in the background (Pincha, 2017). According to Turismo Centro de Portugal, the responsible entity of the Centro region's tourism, encouraging actions that include the public and generate spontaneous material produced by them can have tremendous potential. User-generated content has become increasingly popular on Turismo de Portugal's social networks, establishing itself as a favored approach for promoting tourism in Portugal.

### **1.8.2. Turismo Centro de Portugal Entity**

#### ***The Turismo Centro de Portugal Brand***

Portugal's central region offers various products, resources, and activities and is the country's largest and most diverse tourist destination. With 17 parks and nature reserves and protected landscapes, 189 national monuments, five wine regions, and 700km of hiking trails is considered by many to be the destination of choice. These and many more factors give it immense potential for tourism growth and development. It represents about 31% of Portuguese territory, with 100 municipalities (Turismo Centro de Portugal, 2020). By valuing variety as something differentiating, the brand Turismo Centro de Portugal seeks to improve the attractiveness of Centro de Portugal.

TCP is the winner of various communication-related honors. In 2018, the entity was recognized internationally for its "Turismo Centro Portugal - Visitar e Ficar é Ajudar" campaign, winning the Gold Award for "Best National Tourism Board Campaign/Destination Marketing Organization" at the annual International Travel &

Tourism Awards. Most recently, in 2022, the campaign "Centro de Portugal, Um Destino e Tanto" earned three awards in the categories of "Digital - Branded Content on the Web," "Digital - Film for Web," and "Production - Best Editing" of the Prémios Lusófonos da Criatividade. Furthermore, it was awarded the Melhor Região Nacional de Turismo award at the 2022 Publituris Portugal Travel Awards (Turismo Centro Portugal, 2021). In 2023, the promotional film "Centro de Portugal, Um Destino e Tanto" developed by Turismo Centro de Portugal won the Silver Prize at Japan's 5th International Tourism Film Festival. This festival had 418 films from over 100 nations in competition, with TCP winning 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the Tourist Region category (Pinheiro, 2023).

### ***The Online Communication of the Turismo Centro de Portugal Brand***

The tourism sector is undergoing rapid technological advancement, which led TCP to develop a digital marketing-oriented communication strategy. The Regional Tourism entity is active across several digital platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Spotify, and LinkedIn. Additionally, TCP also owns a website.

In its latest Marketing Plan (Turismo Centro de Portugal, 2020), TCP focuses mainly on actions carried out on the Website, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. These platforms are great tools for capturing consumers' attention and obtaining information about their preferences. Using this data, it is possible to produce pertinent, valuable, helpful, and informative content that meets the target audience's expectations. Thus, generating more involvement. TCP's social channels are also used to increase destination awareness and promotion. In addition to organic advertising, the entity invests in sponsored publications for this purpose. Consequently, reaching a wider range of visitors interested in the central region's charms. Engaging with online influencers has

also become an essential approach to broaden the region's attractiveness. This is because these influencers are now widely regarded as a standard for consumers (Turismo Centro de Portugal, 2020).

Regarding the Website, Search Engine Optimization (SEO) strategies are used to make it search engine friendly. This ensures that the customer experience is maximized. TCP sends a regular newsletter with details about the Centro Region to those who are subscribed (Turismo Centro de Portugal, 2020). With 151000 Facebook fans and 47000 Instagram followers, the entity exhibits more involvement and popularity on these two social media platforms. TCP also has 13000 Twitter followers, 11000 LinkedIn connections, and 3000 YouTube subscribers. In 2021, a Spotify account was created to share its podcast "Aqui Entre Nós", which features information on news, events, locations to visit, and activities to do in the Center Region.

## **CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY APPROACH**

This chapter's main aim is to explain and support the methodological choices made for the present research. The hypothesis and conceptual model are provided along with a description of the methods and instruments used for data collection.

### **3.1. Research Model and Hypotheses**

Following the identification of the theoretical framework, it is now necessary to create the model that enables understanding of the relationship between the various constructs analyzed in this study.

#### **3.1.1. Research Hypotheses**

Aside from some important exceptions in the tourism destination frameworks (Rodríguez-Molina et al., 2019), there has not been extensive research to date on the effect of user-generated content (UGC) on customer-based brand equity (CBBE). Bruhn et al. (2012) argue that online social media communications greatly influence brand image. In their research, Dedeođlu et al. (2020b) analyze the importance of sharing content on social media from a tourism industry perspective, paying particular attention to how it influences brand awareness and quality. The results of Huerta-Álvarez et al. (2020) suggest that spontaneous and genuine information sources produced by travelers have a greater impact on the destination image construction than information sources produced by companies. According to Schivinski and Dabrowski (2015), user-generated content (UGC) on social media affects brand awareness, brand loyalty, and perceived brand quality. Both brand equity and brand attitude were found to be favourably impacted by user-generated content (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016).

Hence, the following hypotheses are formulated:

**H1: UGC influences Brand Equity through the variables:**

H1a – Destination Awareness;

H1b – Destination Image;

H1c – Destination Perceived Quality;

H1d – Destination Loyalty.

Exposure to information related to travel has the power to inspire individuals and create a desire within them to visit the same destination. This phenomenon, known as benign envy, was explored by Latif et al. (2020), who found that when people are exposed to information about travel destinations, they develop an aspirational mindset towards visiting those locations. According Nguyen and Tong (2022), exposure to UGC about a specific destination can significantly impact one's attitude towards visiting it and may even influence their intention of traveling there.

Based on these findings, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H2: UGC influences tourists' Intention to Visit.**

Various authors analyze the relationship between eWOM and brand equity development (Augusto & Torres, 2018; Tardin & Pelissari, 2021), some in the tourism and hospitality sector (Sijoria et al., 2018). Severi et al. (2014) and Dhewi and Kurnianto (2023) affirm that eWOM significantly impacts brand awareness. Online experience exchanges and interactions between consumers, according to Godey et al. (2016), contribute positively to brand equity, with eWOM being influential in the development of any brand's image (Abubakar et al., 2016). In tourism, Sijoria et al. (2018) assessed the impact of eWOM on brand equity. Their findings show that eWOM and tourist satisfaction are

determining elements in brand equity development. This research also revealed that satisfaction, loyalty, and trust in online feedback boost CBBE generation.

The following hypothesis investigates the relationship between eWOM and CBBE:

**H3: eWOM affects Brand Equity through the variables:**

H3a – Destination Awareness;

H3b – Destination Image;

H3c – Destination Perceived Quality;

H3d – Destination Loyalty.

Tourists are more likely to revisit a destination and spread a positive eWOM when having a pleasant purchase experience (Albarq, 2013). Furthermore, tourists are more prone to visit a destination with good feedback. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how significant eWOM is to customers when making destination decisions (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). The relevance of other customers' WOM in consumers' decision processes was emphasized by Goldenberg et al. (2001). Gretzel and Yoo (2008) also discovered that users frequently believe that reviews written by other travelers are more agreeable, updated, and reliable than information from tourism entities. According to Albarq (2013), eWOM can positively affect travelers' perceptions, attitudes, and intentions to visit particular destinations. Nabila et al. (2021) recent findings further support the notion that eWOM strongly predicts visit intention.

Thus, the following hypothesis based on the literature is proposed:

**H4: eWOM affects Intention to Visit.**

According to Ranjbarian & Pool (2015) and de la Hoz-Correa & Muñoz-Leiva (2018), the destination's image, value, and quality can affect and predict tourists' intentions. Stylos and Bellou (2019) affirm that destination loyalty influences significantly tourists' travel intentions. According to a study by Kumail et al. (2021), destination brand

equity has a strong correlation with travel intentions, claiming that brand awareness enables the desire to revisit the destination.

Based on the above, the following hypothesis is formulated:

**H5: Brand Equity influences Intention to Visit.**

H5a – Destination Awareness influences Intention to Visit;

H5b – Destination Image influences Intention to Visit;

H5c – Destination Perceived Quality influences Intention to Visit;

H5d – Destination Loyalty influences Intention to Visit.

Tourism marketers and tourists actively distribute information regarding their travel offerings and experiences, such as the destinations' captivating aspects. The details shared through various social network platforms have the potential to entice and engage social media users (Camilleri & Kozak, 2022). Confidence in achieving an expected goal (De Mello et al., 2007), passion and hope (Stavros et al., 2014), are motivations for users to engage with posts. Moreover, travel-related activities are captivating, pleasurable, and visually invigorating experience that can stimulate consumer involvement (Zhou & Yu, 2022). It is considered that visit intention can influence user engagement with destination-related posts.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H6: Intention to Visit influences Social Media Engagement through:**

H6a - Consumption;

H6b - Contribution;

H6c - Creation.

### 3.1.2. Proposed Conceptual Framework

The conceptual model based on the literature review and hypothesis proposal is illustrated in Figure 3.

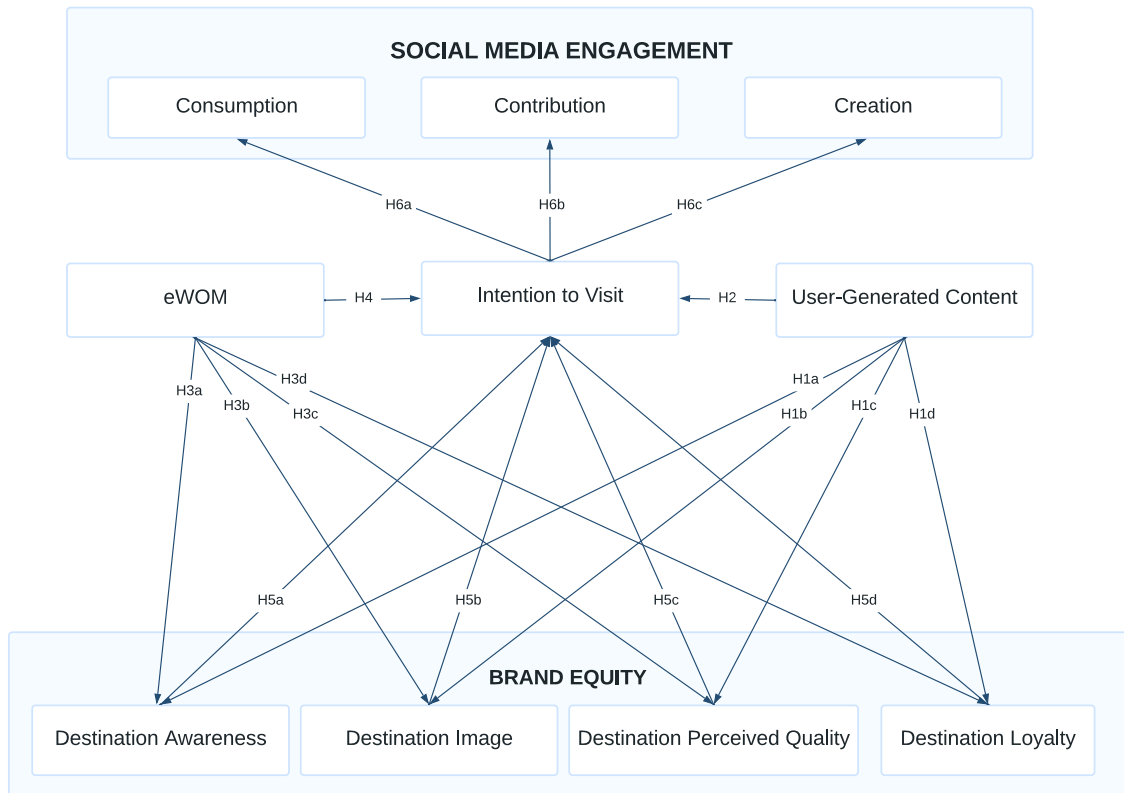


Figure 3 - Proposed Conceptual Model

### **3.2. Methodological Options**

To enhance both the correlational investigation's research process and findings, a mixed methodology that uses both a qualitative and quantitative approach is employed.

The qualitative method, of exploratory nature, is carried out through a bibliographic review, which entails the search, collection and analysis of pertinent references to the topic and in accordance with the study goals. This informative assessment is essential to provide the relevance and contextual support of the information, endorsing the accuracy and credibility of the displayed information. To supplement the qualitative approach, a structured interview will also be held with Adriana Rodrigues, Head of Division of Communication, Image and Public Relations. In-depth understanding of how user-generated material affects the entity will be the goal of this interview. As a consequence, it will be feasible to gather additional information, evaluate the responses, and compare the various outcomes.

As a quantitative methodology, a survey by questionnaire will be carried out among all tourists or potential tourists in the Central Region of Portugal. The questionnaire main purpose is to understand the impact of user-generated content and electronic word-of-mouth on tourists' perception of destinations and their intentions to visit. Additionally, it was aimed to investigate how these intentions influence tourists' engagement with social media platforms. People who were willing to cooperate with the research would be inquired, with the aim of surveying as many people as possible in order to obtain a representative sample of society.

### **3.2.1. Quantitative Methodology**

Considering the hypotheses formulated based on the existing literature, it was imperative to employ a quantitative methodology to test these hypotheses and compare them with the observed and collected data. The research method considered to be the most appropriate for this investigation was the questionnaire survey.

Quantitative research is a methodical gathering of measurable facts and events which happen independently of the researcher. According to Allen et al. (2008), the main purpose of quantitative research is to "create, expand, and refine theory by systematically observing hypothetical connections between variables (p.4). This approach yields quantifiable data that can be converted into information, which is then subjected to statistical analysis and classification (Freixo, 2011).

The use of quantitative methodologies in tourism studies has grown as a result of the globalization of the hospitality sector and the requirement for concrete data collection (Dwyer et al., 2012). Experimental research is employed since the factors linked to the topic of study are directly controlled by the researcher, allowing for the investigation of the connection between the causes and effects of a given event.

#### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire survey approach has enabled significant progress in a variety of fields, being considered a systematic series of questions used to collect data from respondents (Malhotra, 2006). The written questions might be open-ended, closed-ended, or mixed. They are designed to elicit information on attitudes, beliefs, sentiments, interests, expectations, and other factors (Gil, 2008). The main goal of this research method is to convert the information requirements of the researcher into a

series of precise questions that the participants are disposed and capable of answering (Malhotra, 2006). This methodology ensures the confidentiality of the answers and mainly protects the participants from the researcher's influence, who is typically not present while the questionnaire is being completed (Gil, 2008).

Although this approach has some drawbacks, it is feasible to improve the validity of the study and the degree of representation of the sample by distributing the questionnaire to as many individuals and in as many different geographic locations as possible. Conclusions can be drawn more quickly and easily, since the questionnaire is structured and uniform, allowing for comparison of responses (Gürbüz, 2017). In order to validate the suggested hypotheses for the current investigation, a structured questionnaire with solely closed-ended questions was used.

### **Sample Selection Criteria**

A non-probabilistic method was employed to choose the sample since submitting the questionnaire online does not ensure that every member of the population will complete it. Therefore, the sample selection was made by convenience. Convenience sampling is conducted on those who can meet certain requirements, such as being easily accessible, being available at a specific time, and being willing to cooperate (Etikan et al., 2016). Hence, people with Internet access and registered in the social networks where the questionnaire was released, available to access the site and answer the questionnaire were considered as the sample. As a non-probabilistic methodology was used, an effort was made to gather as many responses as feasible to improve the sample's level of representation and the statistical analysis accuracy.

## **Questionnaire Development**

To develop the questionnaire, a literature review of similar investigations that studied the same variables as the present study was conducted. Based on these, scales that best fit the study were analyzed and collected, always bearing in mind that the goal would be to employ measuring scales that had already been approved by other authors, in order to guarantee the study's reliability and validity. From the information collected and the measurement scales, the questions that would be asked in the questionnaire were defined. Closed-ended questions were preferred.

Scales are utilized for assessing characteristics such as "attitudes, values, opinions, and other characteristics that are not easily measured by tests or other measuring instruments" (Ary et al., 2010, p. 208), therefore assisting researchers in statistically cataloguing sentiments, actions, and other behaviors in order to produce measurable variables. To evaluate beliefs, opinions, and the level of agreement or disagreement of the participants regarding some statements, a five-point Likert scale was applied, ranging from: 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree (see table 4). Likert scales can range from two-point to eleven-point; however, the literature suggests (Bouranta et al., 2009) that a five-point scale is more user-friendly and less confusing, and according to Prentice (1998), more suitable for European surveys. The purpose of this multi-item attitude scale is to gauge how much the respondent agrees or disagrees with several statements related to a certain subject (Taherdoost, 2019). According to the same author, the Likert scale is easy to construct and is likely to yield a highly accurate and trustworthy scale.

Table 4 - Five-point Likert Scale

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

After reviewing the literature, selecting measurement scales, and analyzing the information obtained in the various pre-test phases, it was determined that the questionnaire would be divided into 11 parts. The topic of the questionnaire is briefly explained in the first section, so that the participants can situate themselves and be ready to answer. The brand equity variable and its dimensions are addressed in the following four parts. The goal is to understand people's beliefs, feelings, perceptions, and loyalty to the Portuguese central region. This is followed by the section on user-generated content, aiming to determine whether tourists seek information about the region on social media and their opinion on the usefulness of user-generated content. The seventh block examines travel intention, seeking to determine whether current or potential visitors intend to return to or visit the Portuguese central region. This is followed by the eWOM section, where the goal is to determine if participants intend to discuss, suggest, share, and urge others to travel to the place in question in a digital environment. In section 9, a filter question was used to determine who does or does not follow the entity "Turismo Centro de Portugal" on social media. If the participant selects "yes", they will be taken to a section where they must provide information about their involvement in the organization's social networks. If "no", they will be taken to section 11, which concerns sociodemographic information.

Information on such as gender, age, place of residence, education, and employment status were evaluated in the sociodemographic data. Regarding gender, the options "female", "male", "prefer not to say" and "other" were available. The gaps assigned to age were decided based on Dimock's (2019) study, which considers that the generations are divided into Silent (1928-1945), Boomers (1946-1964), Gen X (1965-1980), Millennials (1981-1996) and Gen Z (1997-2012). Regarding the residence location, all Portuguese districts were available for choice, and the option "other" was added so that participants from Portuguese speaking countries (such as Brazilians, for example) could answer the questionnaire. In the questionnaire translated into English, there was an open field for the participants to enter their country of residence. The academic qualifications were based on the qualification's framework developed by the DGES (Direção-Geral do Ensino Superior, 2016).

### **Data Collection Instrument**

To help ensure validity and reliability issues, the variables utilized in the study were adapted from scales that had already been validated by other writers, as can be seen in table 5. The scales used were adapted to better serve the requirements and goals of the present investigation.

The user-generated content scale was adapted from Khan et al (2021). The scale used to measure the four destination brand equity dimensions was adapted from Boo et al. (2009). Several authors have adopted and adapted this scale in their studies to be able to measure destination awareness (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2020), destination image (Hyun and Kim, 2019, Chi et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2020), perceived destination quality (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2016; Chi et al., 2020), and destination loyalty

(Xu et al., 2020; Chi et al., 2020). The e-word of mouth measuring scale was adapted from Moliner-Velázquez et al. (2015), which was subsequently used in the studies by Gallarza et al. (2016) and Moliner-Velázquez et al. (2019). Travel intention was measured based on the scale by Gong et al. (2020), which was further used in the study by Su et al. (2021). To measure user engagement with Turismo Centro de Portugal social media posts, Schivinski et al. (2016) scale was applied, allowing to assess consumption, contribution and creation. However, this was adapted to the context of social networks, and therefore only the items that referred to them were used. This scale was later employed in the study by Vander Schee et al. (2020).

Table 5 - Conceptual Model Constructs and Proposed Items

CONSTRUCTS AND ITEMS	AUTHORS	
<b>Destination Awareness</b>		
<p>DA1. The Portuguese central region has a good reputation and name.</p> <p>DA2. The Portuguese central region is well known.</p> <p>DA3. The Portuguese central region has characteristics that I remember easily.</p> <p>DA4. When I am thinking of traveling, the Portuguese central region immediately comes to mind.</p>		
<b>Destination Image</b>		
<p>DI1. The Portuguese central region is a destination that fits my personality.</p> <p>DI2. If I was visiting the Portuguese central region, my friends would think very highly of me.</p> <p>DI3. The image of Portuguese central region is consistent with my own self-image.</p> <p>DI4. Visiting the Portuguese central region reflects who I am.</p>	(Boo et al., 2009)	
<b>Destination Perceived Quality</b>		
<p>DPQ1. The Portuguese central region provides tourism offerings of consistent quality.</p> <p>DPQ2. The Portuguese central region provides quality experiences.</p> <p>DPQ3. From Portuguese central region's offerings, I can expect superior performance.</p> <p>DPQ4. The Portuguese central region performs better than other national regions.</p>		
<b>Destination Loyalty</b>		
<p>DL1. I enjoy visiting the Portuguese central region.</p> <p>DL2. The Portuguese central region would be my preferred choice for a vacation.</p> <p>DL3. Overall, I am loyal to the Portuguese central region.</p> <p>DL4. I would advise other people to visit the Portuguese central region.</p>		
<b>User-Generated Content</b>		
<p>UGC1. I seek advice on Portuguese central region through content shared on social media by other users.</p> <p>UGC2. I enjoy reading other users' opinions about Portuguese central region via social media.</p> <p>UGC3. I feel more comfortable making decisions when I have explored other users' opinions about Portuguese central region.</p> <p>UGC4. I often gather information on social media before making a decision related to Portuguese central region.</p> <p>UGC5. I mostly agree with the general opinion of the comments on social media about Portuguese central region.</p>	(Khan et al., 2021)	

CONSTRUCTS AND ITEMS	AUTHORS	
<b>EWOM</b>		
<p>EWOM1. I intend to tell other people on the Internet about the positive aspects of Portuguese central region.</p> <p>EWOM2. I intend to recommend Portuguese central region to other people through the Internet.</p> <p>EWOM3. I will make positive comments about Portuguese central region to other people.</p> <p>EWOM4. I will recommend Portuguese central region to people who ask my advice.</p> <p>EWOM5. I will encourage my friends and family to go to Portuguese central region.</p>	(Moliner-Velázquez et al., 2015)	
<b>Intention to Visit</b>		
<p>ITV1. I expect that I will visit the Portuguese central region in the future.</p> <p>ITV2. I prefer to visit the Portuguese central region relative to other portuguese regions.</p> <p>ITV3. If everything is as I expected, I will plan to travel to the Portuguese central region.</p> <p>ITV4. I may visit the Portuguese central region during the next year.</p> <p>ITV5. I really want to visit the Portuguese central region.</p>	(Gong et al., 2020)	
<b>Social Media Engagement: Consumption</b>		
<p>Cons1. I often see Turismo Centro de Portugal posts on social networks.</p> <p>Cons2. I often read the posts and comments about Turismo Centro de Portugal posted by other users on social media.</p>	(Schivinski et al., 2016)	
<b>Social Media Engagement: Contribution</b>		
<p>Cont1. I often interact with Turismo Centro de Portugal posts.</p> <p>Cont2. I often comment Turismo Centro de Portugal posts.</p> <p>Cont3. I often share Turismo Centro de Portugal posts.</p>		
<b>Social Media Engagement: Creation</b>		
<p>Creat1. I make Turismo Centro de Portugal related posts in my feed.</p> <p>Creat2. I have already written reviews and positive entity-related opinions about Turismo Centro de Portugal on social media.</p>		

### Questionnaire Pre-Test

With the final goal of attaining all the objectives outlined in this research, the questionnaire underwent certain alterations and revisions to guarantee that its structure was appropriate and the questions were clear and pertinent. After a careful selection of

the measurement scales that best suited the study, the first phase of the process was the creation of a draft questionnaire based on the literature review. Then, the questionnaire was created using the *Google Forms* tool after the modifications.

A statistical expert reviewed the questionnaire before to determine if the questions were organized in a way that would facilitate analysis. Subsequently, a pre-test was conducted before the questionnaire's debut to assess the measurement scales, aiding in preventing and minimizing any possible mistakes. The goal was to verify that the participants thoroughly comprehended the items, as well as to determine whether the question sequence was properly implemented and if the answers corresponded to the intended information. Thus, members of a tourism-related Facebook group were invited to answer the questionnaire and share their opinions and difficulties. In addition, in order to further refine and improve the questionnaire, it was also given to colleagues and acquaintances for completion and feedback. The questionnaire pre-test included 30 participants. These insights were taken into consideration for the questionnaire's final version.

### **Questionnaire Application**

The questionnaire application was conducted from March 10<sup>th</sup> 2023 to March 31<sup>st</sup> 2023 and it was distributed in 45 travel-related Facebook groups and on other social media platforms, including WhatsApp and Twitter and shared with 295 travelers and travel couples on Instagram, in order to maximize response collection. It should be mentioned that, in general, the request to assist with the study was positively accepted by persons, who subsequently expressed interest in participating and provided positive

feedback about the survey and the research issue. Aside from urging others in their community to reply, they also requested access to the findings of the study. The questionnaire is in its entirety in Appendix 1.

### **3.2.2. Qualitative Methodology**

Qualitative research emphasizes an interpretive and naturalistic approach to its subject and involves the collection of descriptive data from the direct interaction of the researcher with the circumstance under investigation. In this approach, a variety of empirical materials are used and collected that offer insights and understanding of the context of the problem (Malhotra, 2006), depicting common events and meanings in people's lives (Outhwaite & Turner, 2007). Exploratory research is used in this study as it draws on previously published material and aims to put the researcher in direct contact with existing knowledge (Barros, 2021).

Because the Portuguese central region is this research's focus, information had to be gathered through a person with practical competence to understand the subject of study and its unique characteristics more fully. The quantitative research model can therefore be enhanced while the study can be changed to better reflect the current situation. Hence, it was deemed convenient to speak and discuss with Adriana Rodrigues, the Head of Division of Communication, Image and Public Relations. In addition to the above-described strategy, a focus group was convened to better understand the participants' experiences, thoughts, and feelings towards Portuguese central region.

## *Interview*

The interview, along with most qualitative techniques, is particularly well suited when the research concerned demands both thoroughness and detail (Dwyer et al., 2012). This method is seen as a method of acquiring information, where it is passed from one person to another. This approach allows the interviewee to reflect, while learning more about their own knowledge, emotions, and opinions.

An interview technique encompasses a wide variety of methods, ranging from strictly organized, prearranged, closed-ended queries to free and open-ended discussions (Dwyer et al., 2012). The semi-structured interview entails planned questioning supported by themes defined in a methodical and consistent manner, interspersed with queries intended to elicit more in-depth answers (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Because it is adaptable, simple to understand, this interview type is very useful and effective, since it aids in gaining insight into the ways in which managers interpret and construct meanings regarding their roles and environments (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

Due to the relative youth of the tourism sector and the lack of accurate, focused, quantifiable data to evaluate it, the interview technique is beneficial in this field (Dwyer et al., 2012). Some researchers utilize it as their only way of research, while others combine it using diverse qualitative and quantitative methods, having already been employed by various studies in the current literature within the tourist industry (Hatipoglu et al., 2019; Kronenberg & Fuchs, 2021) as a method to acquire findings and established conclusions.

### **Interview Script**

A script for the interviews was first developed and prepared. The preceding literature analysis served as the foundation for the formulated questions. It was designed to learn in-depth information regarding the effects of digital content marketing—more especially, user-generated content—on visitors and potential visitors to Portuguese central region. More particularly, how it affects their perception, image and feelings regarding this region, their willingness to suggest and become a loyal visitor, as well as, how they behave and interact on social media before, during and after their trip. The interview guide has 24 questions.

### **Interview Procedure**

Following considerable deliberation, it was determined that Adriana Rodrigues, Head of Division of Communication, Image and Public Relations, was the most appropriate and suitable person to respond and address the questions. Therefore, an interview was requested via e-mail, where the theme presentation and the research contextualization were explained. After accepting the invitation, a document was sent on December 10, 2022, again by e-mail, with the questions in writing, to which she responded on December 19, 2022 also virtually, in order to facilitate and streamline the process. The interview is in its entirety in Appendix 2. This interview made a significant contribution to the knowledge of the topic's applicability. Therefore, the new insights were essential to improving the subjects addressed and the further methodological techniques. Moreover, it has likewise enhanced the clarity and understandability of the findings and conclusions.

## **Focus Group**

The focus group is a qualitative method that seeks to moderate a group conversation (Morgan,1997) on particular issues and is facilitated by a moderator. These allow the researcher to closely examine a small number of participants' opinions and thus gain insight into what end users think and feel (Obrist et al., 2007), but only began to be employed in the field of tourism in the 1990s (Dwyer et al., 2012). In addition, they can be used to discuss a variety of issues with a wide range of people from different fields and locations, at all stages of life, and with a variety of viewpoints and thoughts.

This extremely flexible data collection instrument has several advantages (Silva et al., 2014). It allows the highlighting of a number of important issues that might otherwise be overlooked. This method prioritizes seeing and documenting participants' experiences and reactions, as opposed to approaches like participant observation, individual interviews, or surveys.

Simple questions are typically presented to the group, and the objective is to create a space where participants can voice their opinions. Although there is a predetermined theme that guides the debate, the researcher has a considerable amount of autonomy to allow space to unanticipated queries. The researcher directs the more active participants so that they do not dominate the talk and encourages the more passive people to join in the discourse (Preece, Rogers & Sharp, 2005 cited in Ferreira, 2013). This approach use will allow a better understanding of the participants' thoughts and feelings towards the Portuguese central region, since it allows their reactions and expressions' observation, which by other methods would not be possible.

## Focus Group Design

After analyzing the answers to the questionnaire, the most critical questions, which generated the most discontent, were collected. All questions that, after analyzing the results, had an average response of less than or equal to 3.5 were considered in need of further study. Thus, this approach's objective was to clarify and better explain the respondents' answers. The questions are shown in Table 6. In addition to these, some introductory and transitional questions will be asked. When necessary, the questions will either be closed-ended to encourage more objective responses or open-ended to enable creative answers. There will be opportunity for comments, suggestions, up until the moderator determines that the topic has been fully discussed. Each person will take a turn responding.

Table 6 - Focus Group Questions

CONSTRUCT	ITEMS	AUTHOR
<b>Destination Awareness</b>	1. When I am thinking of traveling, the Portuguese central region immediately comes to mind.	(Boo et al., 2009)
<b>Destination Image</b>	2. Visiting the Portuguese central region reflects who I am.	
<b>Destination Perceived Quality</b>	3. From Portuguese central region's offerings, I can expect superior performance. 4. The Portuguese central region performs better than other national regions.	
<b>Destination Loyalty</b>	5. The Portuguese central region would be my preferred choice for a vacation.	
<b>Intention to Visit</b>	6. I prefer to visit the Portuguese central region relative to other portuguese regions.	
<b>Social Media Engagement</b>	7. I often comment Turismo Centro de Portugal posts. 8. I often share Turismo Centro de Portugal posts. 9. I make Turismo Centro de Portugal related posts in my feed. 10. I have already written reviews and positive entity-related opinions about Turismo Centro de Portugal on social media.	(Schivinski et al., 2016)

### **Sample Selection Criteria**

The selection criteria of the participants, focused on the fact that individuals have already visited a district in the Portuguese central region. By getting honest comments from those who have already experienced the region's tourism offerings, it is feasible to gather accurate opinions. The focus group members were profiled in the data analysis chapter. The data obtained from the focus group was examined as it was interpreted and grouped using the topics that were developed and explained in the results analysis chapter.

### **Focus Group Realization**

The focus group, held on April 15, at 10:00am via videoconference at Zoom, had 8 participants and lasted approximately 1 hour. To make the most of the time and avoid overwhelming the participants, the sociodemographic data were gathered prior to the focus group reunion. The moderator gave an introduction before outlining the focus group agenda. After that, the theme was contextualized and the goals were briefly summarized. An introductory question was asked to ensure prior experience in Portugal's Central Region. It was important to examine participants' perceptions of user-generated content, so various formats were shown. In conclusion, the moderator summarized what was said and asked for attendees' agreement, other ideas, or additional comments. The conversation was recorded and transcribed (Appendix 3). To ensure their anonymity, each participant was assigned a number (from 1 to 8), being named as P1, P2, P3 and so on until reaching P8.

## **CHAPTER 4. DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1. Statistical Data Analysis**




The next stage in the research process is data analysis, which follows data collection. Therefore, as a first step, the data obtained from the online questionnaire were inputted into statistical software, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). During this initial phase, a preliminary analysis was conducted by examining and describing various variables of interest using measures of distribution. This stage facilitated a comprehensive examination of both our sample and the constructs being investigated. The database was then uploaded to Smart PLS 3.3.2 for modeling purposes. This software is known for its ability to provide reliable and valid measures through rigorous analyzes of convergent validity, factorial validity and discriminant validity. Finally, structural models were created specifying relationships between latent variables based on the representation of hypotheses (Marôco, 2014). Subsequently, the focus group and interview analyze will be carried out.

#### **4.1.1. Questionnaire**

##### ***Sample Characterization***






In all, 530 questionnaire responses were gathered; however, 15 were not validated because they were submitted by tourists who resided outside of Portugal. Therefore, in total 515 responses were analyzed.

Table 7 - Sample Characterization by Gender

GENDER	GRAPH	FREQUENCIES	%
Female		357	69.3%
Male		153	29.7%
I'd Rather Not Say		5	1.0%
Total		515	100%

Gender-wise (Table 7), there was an uneven distribution of respondents, with 69.3% being female and 29.7% being male. In addition, 1% preferred not to say.

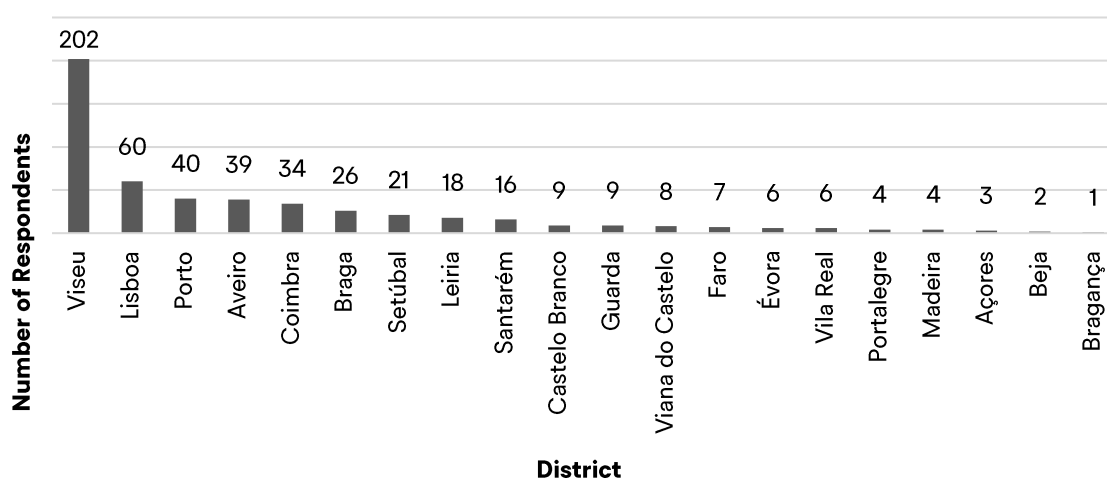
Table 8 - Sample Characterization by Age

AGE	GRAPH	FREQUENCIES	%
≤22		110	21.4%
23-38		299	58.1%
39-54		78	15.1%
55-73		25	4.9%
≥74		3	0.6%
Total		515	100%

Regarding age (Table 8), 21.4% of respondents are under the age of 22, and 58.1% are between the ages of 23 and 38, making up 79.4% of the sample. The prevalence of younger age categories, specifically the Gen Z and Millennials, can be attributed to the distribution of the questionnaire via the Internet. The older age groups, however, remain substantial, with respondents aged 39 to 54 representing 15.1%, 55 to 73 representing 4.9% and 74 and over representing 0.6%.



Concerning professional status (Table 10), individuals with employment (49.5%), students (23.1%), and working students (12.4%) make up most of the respondents. 1.4% are retired, and 9.5% are self-employed. It should be mentioned that 3.3% of respondents are unemployed, and 0.8% are involved in another activity than those mentioned in the questionnaire options.



Graphic 1 - Sample Characterization by District of Residence

As for the respondents' district of residence (Graphic 1), most respondents reside in the districts of Viseu (39.2%), Lisboa (11.7%), Porto (7.8%), Aveiro (7.6%), Coimbra (6.6%) and Braga (5.0%). It should be mentioned that 1.4% of respondents belong to the islands, with 0.8% belonging to the Autonomous Region of Madeira and 0.6% to the Autonomous Region of the Azores. Therefore, it is safe to state that the respondents (63.5%) primarily reside in Portuguese central region. The Lisbon Area and the Portuguese North Region are next with both accounting for 15.7% of the respondents. Finally, 2.3% and 1.4% of the participants are from the Alentejo and Algarve Regions, respectively.

### **Descriptive Analysis of Results**

Data descriptive analysis was carried out after data collection and sample characterization. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program was used to enter the information gathered through the online questionnaire.

To assess data consistency, descriptive statistics for mean (M), standard deviation (SD), maximum (Max), and minimum (Min) were studied. In addition, the percentage of responses given to each option, for each item, is detailed. Moreover, utilizing distribution metrics like skewness (*Sk*) and kurtosis (*Ku*), the normality of the study variables was examined as to whether these had a regular distribution. According to Marôco (2014), the assumption of normalcy is demonstrated if the skewness is less than 3 and kurtosis is less than 7. Therefore, it was found that the values do not differ from normality in any construct.

*Table 11 - Percentage of Responses to Destination Awareness Items*

<b>DESTINATION AWARENESS</b>	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
DA1 - In my opinion, Portuguese central region has a good reputation and name.	1.0%	4,5%	9.7%	59.6%	25.2%
DA2 - In my opinion, Portuguese central region is well known.	1.4%	17.1%	15.1%	50.7%	15.7%
DA3 - In my opinion, Portuguese central region has characteristics that I remember easily.	1.0%	6.4%	8.5%	56.5%	27.6%
DA4 - In my opinion, Portuguese central region immediately comes to mind when I'm thinking about taking a trip.	5.8%	32.8%	25.0%	27.0%	9.3%

When it comes to Destination Awareness, Table 11 shows that the participants mostly agreed with the first three statements (DA1, DA2 and DA3), therefore, one can conclude that the participants believe the region displays a positive image and easy-to-remember features. On the contrary, more "disagree" responses were given to the fourth question (DA4), demonstrating that the majority of participants do not prioritize traveling to this region.

Table 12 - Destination Awareness Construct Descriptive Analysis

DESTINATION AWARENESS	M	DP	Sk	Ku	MIN.	MAX.
DA1	4.04	0,784	-1.109	2.133	1	5
DA2	3.62	0.987	-0.602	-0.426	1	5
DA3	4.03	0.840	-1.111	1.579	1	5
DA4	3.01	1.098	0.136	-0.919	1	5

The average response to this question (DA4) is "neither agree nor disagree," emphasizing once again the participants' ambiguity (Table 12). As a result, it may be inferred that this destination is not the participants' top choice for a travel trip.

Table 13 - Percentage of Responses to Destination Image Items

DESTINATION IMAGE	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
D11 - I consider that the Portuguese central region is a destination that fits my personality.	2.3%	9.7%	16.7%	49.5%	21.7%
D12 - I consider if I was visiting the Portuguese central region, my friends would think very highly of me.	1.4%	6.0%	30.5%	41.2%	21.0%
D13 - I consider that image of Portuguese central region is consistent with my own self-image.	2.1%	7.6%	21.7%	45.4%	23.1%
D14 - I consider that visiting the Portuguese central region reflects who I am.	3.5%	13.4%	29.3%	36.9%	16.9%

Regarding Destination Image, the participants believed that the Central Region's characteristics matched their personalities and self-image, and that visiting this location would be good for their reputation, based on the frequency with which the response "agree" was given in response to the items of the Destination Image construct (Table 13).

Table 14 - Destination Image Construct Descriptive Analysis

DESTINATION IMAGE	M	DP	SK	KU	MIN.	MAX.
DI1	3.79	0.969	-0.824	0.353	1	5
DI2	3.74	0.902	-0.415	-0.040	1	5
DI3	3.80	0.951	-0.717	0.292	1	5
DI4	3.50	1,033	-0.390	-0.398	1	5

Considering the average, however, it is noticeable that in question DI4 the participants showed some indecision (Table 14). Therefore, according to the data, the participants are unsure of how accurately this site reflects who they are.

Table 15 - Percentage of Responses to Destination Perceived Quality Items

DESTINATION PERCEIVED QUALITY	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
DPQ1 - In my opinion, the Portuguese central region provides tourism offerings of consistent quality.	1.4%	7.4%	16.7%	53.0%	21.6%
DPQ2 - In my opinion, the Portuguese central region provides quality experiences.	0.8%	2.3%	8.3%	59.6%	28.9%
DPQ3 - In my opinion, the Portuguese central region presents offers with superior performance.	1.4%	8.0%	30.7%	41.7%	18.3%
DPQ4 - In my opinion, the Portuguese central region performs better than other national regions.	5.4%	23.9%	40.4%	21.0%	9.3%

Upon being questioned about their thoughts regarding the Destination Perceived Quality, in particular, tourism experiences and offerings in the Central Region, many participants revealed that they held an exceedingly positive outlook (Table 15).

Table 16 - Destination Perceived Quality Construct Descriptive Analysis

<b>DESTINATION PERCEIVED QUALITY</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>DP</b>	<b>Sk</b>	<b>Ku</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
DPQ1	3.89	0.884	-0.842	0.710	1	5
DPQ2	4.14	0.720	-1.088	2.777	1	5
DPQ3	3.68	0.909	-0.390	-0.118	1	5
DPQ4	3.05	1.019	0.124	-0.414	1	5

Yet, when asked how they compare its performance to other Portuguese regions (DPQ4), the most usual response was "neither agree nor disagree" (average 3.05) which indicated some uncertainty (Table 16). It is therefore feasible to draw the conclusion that while the participants deem the Centro Region's experiences and offers to be positive, they also concur that the region's performance is either inferior to or on par with that of the other Portuguese regions.

Table 17 - Percentage of Responses to Destination Loyalty Items

<b>DESTINATION LOYALTY</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither Disagree nor Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
DL1 - I enjoy visiting the Portuguese central region.	0.8%	1.7%	7.8%	53.2%	36.5%
DL2 - I would choose the Portuguese central region as my preferred choice for a vacation.	7.4%	38.4%	26.4%	21.4%	6.4%
DL3 - I usually choose the Portuguese central region as one of my destination options.	7.4%	31.8%	21.6%	30.3%	8.9%
DL4 - I would advise other people to visit the Portuguese central region.	1.2%	4.5%	8.2%	48.9%	37.3%

When it comes to Destination Loyalty (Table 17), while contemplating about an ideal vacation spot, it is interesting to note that most individuals seem to prefer regions other than the Portuguese central region, "disagreeing" that this region is their top choice for a vacation (DL2). Moreover, with a more in-depth reflection, it becomes evident that they harbor certain reservations when it comes to admitting the central region as one of their top choices for leisure retreats (DL3).

*Table 18 - Destination Loyalty Construct Descriptive Analysis*

<b>DESTINATION LOYALTY</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>DP</b>	<b>Sk</b>	<b>Ku</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
DL1	4.23	0.729	-1.140	2.675	1	5
DL2	2.81	1.056	0.336	-0.687	1	5
DL3	3.02	1.130	0.034	-1.009	1	5
DL4	4.17	0.843	-1.242	1.966	1	5

Upon analyzing the responses provided for questions DL1 and DL4, it has become evident that not only do the participants relish visiting this region thoroughly but also have favorable feelings about encouraging others to do the same. When carefully analyzing and scrutinizing the observed averages (Table 18), it can be asserted that they strongly support and confirm the information stated previously, with those in statements DL2 and DL3 being the lowest, and DL1 and DL4 being the highest.

Table 19 - Percentage of Responses to User-Generated Content Items

<b>USER-GENERATED CONTENT</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither Disagree nor Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
UGC1 - I seek advice on Portuguese central region through content shared on social media by other users.	1.7%	6.8%	13.4%	52.6%	25.4%
UGC2 - I enjoy reading other users' opinions about Portuguese central region via social media.	1.6%	4.9%	10.1%	56.3%	27.2%
UGC3 - I feel more comfortable making decisions when I have explored other users' opinions about Portuguese central region.	1.7%	6.0%	13.0%	53.2%	26.0%
UGC4 - I often gather information on social media before making a decision related to Portuguese central region.	3.3%	10.5%	15.0%	48.7%	22.5%
UGC5 - I mostly agree with the general opinion of the comments on social media about Portuguese central region.	1.2%	5.6%	35.9%	47.8%	9.5%

When examining the data in Table 19, there is broad and unwavering consumer consensus regarding the value of User-Generated Content. This realization shows that participants not only actively seek out content generated by other users, but also enjoy doing so. In addition to assurance, the information gives them a greater sense of confidence about their travel choices (UGC3), particularly in relation to the Portuguese central region.

Table 20 - User-Generated Content Construct Descriptive Analysis

<b>USER-GENERATED CONTENT</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>DP</b>	<b>Sk</b>	<b>Ku</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
UGC1	3.93	0.902	-0.998	1.064	1	5
UGC2	4.03	0.841	-1.174	2.006	1	5
UGC3	3.96	0.888	-1.039	1.287	1	5
UGC4	3.77	1.019	0.871	0.298	1	5
UGC5	3.59	0.785	-0.416	0.496	1	5

When the data from question UGC5 are analyzed, it becomes clear that the participants did show some degree of reluctance when expressing their agreement with the opinions of other users (Table 20).

Table 21 - Percentage of Responses to E-Word of Mouth Items

<b>E-WORD OF MOUTH</b>	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
EWOM1 - In a digital context I intend to tell other people about the positive aspects of Portuguese central region.	2.3%	9.9%	19.4%	45.4%	22.9%
EWOM2 - In a digital context I intend to recommend Portuguese central region to other people.	2.1%	8.5%	20.8%	42.7%	25.8%
EWOM3 - In a digital context, I will make positive comments about Portuguese central region to other people.	2.5%	6.8%	16.7%	48.2%	25.8%
EWOM4 - In a digital context, I will recommend Portuguese central region to people who ask my advice.	1.7%	3.3%	11.7%	52.0%	31.3%
EWOM5 - In a digital context I will encourage my friends and family to go to Portuguese central region.	1.4%	3.5%	13.0%	50.1%	32.0%

Participants in the survey went beyond merely acknowledging the Portuguese central region's Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) and showed a remarkable desire to promote it as a tourist destination. According to Table 21, respondents "agreed" that they not only intend on recommending (EWOM4), but also actively encouraging their friends and family (EWOM5) to pay a visit.

Table 22 - eWOM Construct Descriptive Analysis

<b>EWOM</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>DP</b>	<b>Sk</b>	<b>Ku</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
EWOM1	3.77	0.988	-0.721	0.095	1	5
EWOM2	3.82	0.984	-0.707	0.090	1	5
EWOM3	3.88	0.955	-0.929	0.753	1	5
EWOM4	4.08	0.845	-1.178	2.088	1	5
EWOM5	4.08	0.841	-1.057	1.604	1	5

Additionally, the averages presented in Table 22 show that these people expressed moderately high levels of agreement with regards to participating in online discussions about the area (EWOM1), offering advice based on personal experience (EWOM2), and conversing with others about recent visits to the area or potential future travel plans (EWOM3). These results indicate that consumers have a generally favorable opinion of the eWOM related to this location.

Table 23 - Percentage of Responses to Intention to Visit Items

<b>INTENTION TO VISIT</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither Disagree nor Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
ITV1 - I expect that I will visit the Portuguese central region in the future.	1.0%	2.1%	12.4%	49.7%	34.8%
ITV2 - I prefer to visit the Portuguese central region relative to other Portuguese regions.	5.8%	25.0%	40.8%	22.7%	5.6%
ITV3 - If everything is as I expected, I will plan to travel to the Portuguese central region.	1.2%	3.7%	17.9%	55.1%	22.1%
ITV4 - I may visit the Portuguese central region during the next year.	1.0%	3.9%	17.7%	49.5%	28.0%
ITV5 - I really want to visit the Portuguese central region.	1.4%	6.6%	20.6%	45.4%	26.0%

There is a high level of attraction to this specific place when reviewing the data on participants' Intention to Visit, showing interest in booking a vacation in this location again. However, a more complex picture emerges when one looks closely at Table 23



and the responses supplied in ITV2. While some people show great enthusiasm to visit this place, others have doubts when compared to other areas in Portugal.

*Table 24 - Intention to Visit Construct Descriptive Analysis*

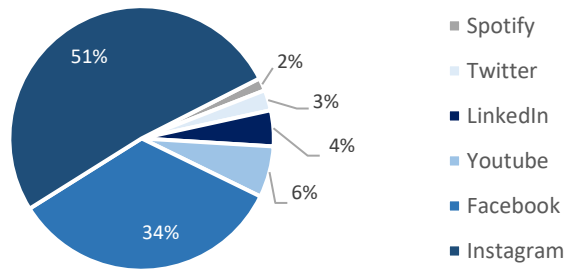
<b>INTENTION TO VISIT</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>DP</b>	<b>Sk</b>	<b>Ku</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
ITV1	4.15	0.789	-1.014	1.722	1	5
ITV2	2.97	0.968	0.042	-0.350	1	5
ITV3	3.93	0.806	-0.843	1.313	1	5
ITV4	4.00	0.837	-0.792	0.820	1	5
ITV5	3.88	0.917	-0.707	0.281	1	5

These results suggest that, despite the potential tourists' desire in visiting this region, there may be some circumstances that cause them to hesitate or be undecided, once again showing reluctance to admit that this region would be the preferred destination choice (Table 24).

*Table 25 - Number of Respondents Following/Not Following Turismo Centro de Portugal Social Networks*

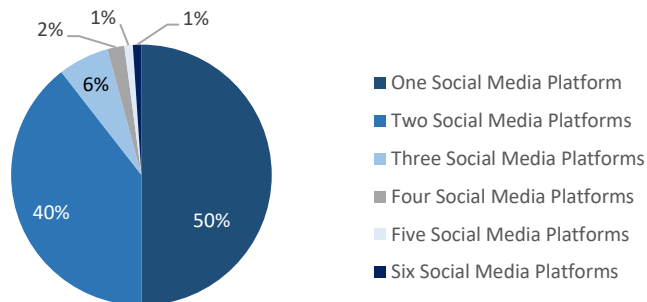
<b>TCP'S FOLLOWERS</b>	<b>GRAPH</b>	<b>FREQUENCIES</b>	<b>%</b>
Not Follow		325	63,1%
Follow		190	36,9%
Total		515	100%

Of the 515 respondents to the questionnaire, 190 follow one or several social networks of the Turismo Centro de Portugal entity (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, Youtube and Spotify). 325 stated that they do not follow any (Table 25).



*Graphic 2- Social Networks Followed by Questionnaire Participants*

In Graphic 2 it is possible to observe that Instagram is the most followed social network by the respondents (51%), followed by Facebook (34%). 6% of the participants follow TCP's YouTube.



*Graphic 3- Number of Social Networks Followed by each Questionnaire Participant*

These are followed by LinkedIn (4%), Twitter (3%) and Spotify (2%). Half of the respondents follow only one social network (Graphic 3). The remaining participants follow two (40%) or more platforms.

Table 26 - Percentage of Responses to Social Media Engagement Items

<b>SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT</b>	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<b>CONSUMPTION</b>					
Cons1 - I see "Turismo Centro de Portugal" posts on social media.	2.6%	3.2%	5.8%	57.4%	31.1%
Cons2 - I read the posts and comments about "Turismo Centro de Portugal" posted by other users on social media.	1.6%	7.4%	13.2%	55.8%	22.1%
<b>CONTRIBUTION</b>					
Cont1 - I interact with "Turismo Centro de Portugal" posts.	6.3%	26.3%	20.5%	32.6%	14.2%
Cont2 - I comment "Turismo Centro de Portugal" posts.	13.2%	35.3%	22.6%	20.0%	8.9%
Cont3 - I share "Turismo Centro de Portugal" posts.	11.1%	24.2%	21.6%	32.6%	10.5%
<b>CREATION</b>					
Creat1 - I make "Turismo Centro de Portugal" related posts in my social media feed.	9.5%	21.6%	21.1%	32.6%	15.3%
Creat2 - I have written reviews and opinions about "Turismo Centro de Portugal" on social media.	14.2%	24.7%	19.5%	27.9%	13.7%

In this section 190 responses were collected from participants who follow Turismo Centro de Portugal' social media. Concerning Social Media Engagement Table 26 shows that participants not only admitted to consuming content but also exhibited a certain degree of reluctance in regard to contributing and creating such material.

Table 27 - Social Media Engagement Construct Descriptive Analysis

<b>SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>DP</b>	<b>Sk</b>	<b>Ku</b>	<b>Min.</b>	<b>Max.</b>
<b>CONSUMPTION</b>						
Cons1	4.11	0.850	-1.570	3.644	1	5
Cons2	3.89	0.885	-0.997	1.142	1	5
<b>CONTRIBUTION</b>						
Cont1	3.22	1.170	-0.139	-1.018	1	5
Cont2	2.76	1.178	0.314	-0.840	1	5
Cont3	3.07	1.197	-0.162	-1.001	1	5
<b>CREATION</b>						
Creat1	3.23	1.220	-0.248	-0.966	1	5
Creat2	3.02	1.285	-0.055	-1.145	1	5

After analyzing the data present in Table 27 it can be inferred that users are actively consuming and reading the content shared by Turismo Centro de Portugal as indicated by their high average scores in Cons1 and Cons2. However, there is a lack of participation observed among the participants when it comes to contributing through interacting with posts (Cont1), adding comments (Cont2) or sharing posts (Cont3). Furthermore, they seem less willing to create original material related to TCP or provide feedback regarding its services through publishing their own content (Creat1) and giving suggestions/feedbacks respectively.

### ***Partial Least Squares (PLS - SEM)***

Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) is a commonly used analytical approach in empirical research in social sciences, particularly in domains such as marketing and management (Hair et al., 2011) for its capacity to substantially deepen data analysis. According to Schubring et al. (2016), the major objective of this strategy is to find intricate correlations or cause-and-effect relationships between several variables that may be challenging to analyze. Similarly, it focuses on elucidating dissimilarities in how the dependence of one construct on others varies across the research study in question (Hair et al., 2011).

Thus, for validating and testing the conceptual model under study, Smart PLS 3.3.2 statistical software was used. A major characteristic of this program is the ability to simultaneously analyze all pathways in a structural model, rather than examining them individually. Additionally, it can establish connections between multiple dependent variables within the same research model (Gefen et al., 2000). Furthermore, the same software was used to perform an additional data analysis that focused on the application of Bootstrapping, a sampling technique. This method is non-parametric and aims to assess the statistical importance of both loadings and structural path coefficients (Achjari, 2004). Thus, as part of this procedure, random subsamples are generated from the original dataset. To enhance the accuracy of outcomes in this process, 5000 subsamples were selected based on the software recommendations.

## Measurement Model

### Item Validity and Convergent Validity

Item reliability is determined by examining the items' simple correlations (loadings) with their respective constructs (Barclay, Higgins, & Thompson, 1995). According to Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Barclay, Higgins and Thompson (1995), the minimum acceptable value for item reliability is 0.707.

Table 28 - Item Loadings

ITEM	$\lambda$	ITEM	$\lambda$	ITEM	$\lambda$
DA1	0.786	DL1	0.845	eWOM5	0.896
DA2	0.724	DL2	0.751	ITV1	0.844
DA3	0.775	DL3	0.797	ITV2	0.653
DA4	0.741	DL4	0.823	ITV3	0.888
DI1	0.876	UGC1	0.837	ITV4	0.846
DI2	0.755	UGC2	0.859	ITV5	0.903
DI3	0.908	UGC3	0.786	Cons1	0.922
DI4	0.878	UGC4	0.807	Cons2	0.889
DPQ1	0.867	UGC5	0.714	Cont1	0.890
DPQ2	0.839	eWOM1	0.827	Cont2	0.906
DPQ3	0.862	eWOM2	0.847	Cont3	0.777
DPQ4	0.733	eWOM3	0.829	Creat1	0.908
		eWOM4	0.878	Creat2	0.871

Thus, one item was removed: ITV2 - "I prefer to visit the Portuguese central region relative to other Portuguese regions", which presented 0.653 loadings. The remaining values are within conformity and are present in Table 28. The structural models are shown in Appendix 4.

Table 29 - Convergent Validity

<b>CONSTRUCT</b>	<b>CRONBACH'S ALPHA</b>	<b>COMPOSITE RELIABILITY</b>	<b>AVERAGE VARIANCE EXTRATED (AVE)</b>
<b>DA</b>	0.756	0.843	0.573
<b>DI</b>	0.877	0.916	0.733
<b>DL</b>	0.822	0.880	0.648
<b>DPQ</b>	0.845	0.896	0.684
<b>UGC</b>	0.861	0.900	0.644
<b>eWOM</b>	0.909	0.932	0.733
<b>ITV</b>	0.893	0.926	0.758
<b>Consumption</b>	0.782	0.901	0.820
<b>Contribution</b>	0.823	0.894	0.738
<b>Creation</b>	0.782	0.883	0.791

The Cronbach's Alpha is employed to evaluate internal consistency and demonstrates how closely the items on a particular scale are related to the same concept. The range of values is 0 to 1, and the accepted threshold for satisfactory reliability is often more than 0.7 (Cheung et al., 2023). The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient evaluation table from Pestana and Gageiro (2014) shows that destination awareness, destination image, destination perceived quality, destination loyalty, user-generated content, intention to visit and social media engagement, show reasonable-good consistency. E-word of mouth, on the other hand, shows very good consistency.

In agreement with Fornell and Larcker (1981) the composite reliability coefficient ( $fc$ ) is recommended to be equal or greater than 0.7, falling within the range of  $0.7 \leq fc \leq 1$ . Data shown in Table 29 confirms composite reliability existence.

Convergent validity was assessed through the average variance extracted (AVE) analysis. It should be noted that the values corresponding to this indicator should be equal to or greater than 0.5 (Hair et al., 2017). As it is possible to see in Table 29, the values indicate the existence of convergent validity in all variables.

In conclusion, the constructs show reliability and convergent validity.

### **Discriminant Validity**

Discriminant validity relates to the degree to which various concepts in the same model differ from one another (Barclay, Higgins, & Thompson, 1995). Therefore, it aims to determine whether the measurement scale accurately captures the intended notions (Marôco, 2014). Thus, discriminant validity denotes that the concept is distinct and encompasses additional phenomena not included in the constructs of the studied model, according to Hair et al. (2017). For this purpose, three criteria were analyzed: the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) (Henseler et al., 2014), the Fornell and Larcker (1981) Criterion, followed by the Cross Loadings analysis (Hair et al., 2011).

The analysis began with the Heterotrait-Monotrait Correlation Ratio (HTMT) statistical test, which compares the correlations of indicators within a concept to the correlations of indicators across constructs measuring distinct phenomena (Henseler et al., 2014). Gold et al. (2001) state that this value should be below 0.9 to confirm discriminant validity existence. Through Table 31, it is possible to confirm that discriminant validity is confirmed considering this criterion.

*Table 30 - Discriminant Validity: Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)*

	<b>Cons</b>	<b>Cont</b>	<b>Creat</b>	<b>DA</b>	<b>DI</b>	<b>DL</b>	<b>DPQ</b>	<b>UGC</b>	<b>eWOM</b>	<b>ITV</b>
<b>Cons</b>										
<b>Cont</b>	0.688									
<b>Creat</b>	0.506	0.836								
<b>DA</b>	0.411	0.236	0.170							
<b>DI</b>	0.272	0.135	0.089	0.688						
<b>DL</b>	0.351	0.241	0.207	0.742	0.818					
<b>DPQ</b>	0.415	0.263	0.241	0.723	0.550	0.722				
<b>UGC</b>	0.370	0.264	0.221	0.306	0.307	0.344	0.329			

	<b>Cons</b>	<b>Cont</b>	<b>Creat</b>	<b>DA</b>	<b>DI</b>	<b>DL</b>	<b>DPQ</b>	<b>UGC</b>	<b>eWOM</b>	<b>ITV</b>
<b>eWOM</b>	0.341	0.222	0.260	0.485	0.571	0.678	0.459	0.437		
<b>ITV</b>	0.388	0.221	0.173	0.575	0.651	0.813	0.543	0.418	0.648	

Then, the Fornell and Larcker Criterion analysis was performed where the square root of the average variance extracted ( $\sqrt{AVE}$ ) is contrasted with the correlation among latent constructs. Hence, it is expected that each construct's  $\sqrt{AVE}$  would surpass its correlations to other latent constructs (Hair et al., 2016). Table 31 suggests that all pairs of concepts meets Fornell and Larcker's criterion for discriminant validity.

Table 31 - Discriminant Validity: Fornell e Larcker

	<b>Cons</b>	<b>Cont</b>	<b>Creat</b>	<b>DA</b>	<b>DI</b>	<b>DL</b>	<b>DPQ</b>	<b>UGC</b>	<b>eWOM</b>	<b>ITV</b>
<b>Cons</b>	0.905									
<b>Cont</b>	0.552	0.859								
<b>Creat</b>	0.449	0.660	0.890							
<b>DA</b>	0.314	0.193	0.154	0.756						
<b>DI</b>	0.228	0.112	0.084	0.585	0.856					
<b>DL</b>	0.292	0.192	0.189	0.621	0.704	0.805				
<b>DPQ</b>	0.343	0.217	0.220	0.579	0.475	0.605	0.827			
<b>UGC</b>	0.302	0.229	0.163	0.259	0.271	0.271	0.476	0.802		
<b>eWOM</b>	0.291	0.186	0.206	0.427	0.517	0.622	0.415	0.389	0.856	
<b>ITV</b>	0.326	0.193	0.244	0.493	0.271	0.711	0.476	0.374	0.597	0.871

Subsequently, the analysis of discriminant validity using Cross-Loadings Criterion was performed, Table 32 shows that the items with higher loadings align closely with their respective concepts (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Therefore, it can be concluded that the concepts possess discriminant validity.

Table 32 - Discriminant Validity: Cross Loadings Criterion

	CONS	CONT	CREAT	DA	DI	DL	DPQ	ITV	UGC	EWOM
<b>DA1</b>	0.278	0.128	0.089	0.785	0.394	0.421	0.479	0.348	0.245	0.327
<b>DA2</b>	0.253	0.159	0.082	0.724	0.283	0.307	0.451	0.256	0.160	0.189
<b>DA3</b>	0.229	0.101	0.136	0.775	0.455	0.424	0.390	0.366	0.158	0.343
<b>DA4</b>	0.206	0.191	0.143	0.741	0.563	0.640	0.441	0.466	0.205	0.379
<b>DI1</b>	0.188	0.083	0.051	0.512	0.876	0.658	0.427	0.553	0.202	0.438
<b>DI2</b>	0.207	0.141	0.063	0.489	0.755	0.494	0.427	0.403	0.251	0.415
<b>DI3</b>	0.177	0.057	0.079	0.512	0.908	0.621	0.384	0.519	0.235	0.453
<b>DI4</b>	0.213	0.112	0.093	0.484	0.878	0.626	0.389	0.498	0.241	0.461
<b>DL1</b>	0.298	0.145	0.160	0.558	0.622	0.845	0.545	0.676	0.308	0.571
<b>DL2</b>	0.171	0.201	0.117	0.464	0.516	0.751	0.463	0.469	0.178	0.353
<b>DL3</b>	0.226	0.202	0.185	0.499	0.515	0.797	0.457	0.525	0.223	0.372
<b>DL4</b>	0.225	0.099	0.145	0.466	0.596	0.823	0.476	0.585	0.249	0.633
<b>DPQ1</b>	0.297	0.196	0.233	0.485	0.341	0.474	0.867	0.358	0.244	0.328
<b>DPQ2</b>	0.302	0.125	0.153	0.495	0.451	0.536	0.839	0.459	0.287	0.395
<b>DPQ3</b>	0.279	0.200	0.209	0.523	0.414	0.489	0.862	0.376	0.228	0.353
<b>DPQ4</b>	0.251	0.214	0.137	0.406	0.349	0.498	0.733	0.367	0.180	0.277
<b>EWOM1</b>	0.244	0.215	0.203	0.364	0.414	0.471	0.321	0.456	0.379	0.827
<b>EWOM2</b>	0.245	0.193	0.214	0.347	0.394	0.476	0.308	0.420	0.352	0.847
<b>EWOM3</b>	0.222	0.168	0.251	0.278	0.368	0.414	0.278	0.421	0.326	0.829
<b>EWOM4</b>	0.258	0.103	0.183	0.398	0.507	0.617	0.419	0.598	0.310	0.878
<b>EWOM5</b>	0.268	0.141	0.210	0.407	0.496	0.624	0.409	0.608	0.310	0.896
<b>ITV1</b>	0.268	0.162	0.160	0.451	0.534	0.623	0.429	0.844	0.340	0.499
<b>ITV3</b>	0.286	0.174	0.138	0.407	0.494	0.611	0.414	0.888	0.306	0.505
<b>ITV4</b>	0.300	0.180	0.143	0.418	0.469	0.573	0.389	0.846	0.317	0.504
<b>ITV5</b>	0.283	0.156	0.129	0.432	0.516	0.664	0.420	0.903	0.333	0.564
<b>Cons1</b>	0.922	0.471	0.435	0.315	0.251	0.304	0.361	0.318	0.264	0.287
<b>Cons2</b>	0.889	0.536	0.375	0.251	0.155	0.218	0.251	0.269	0.286	0.235
<b>Cont1</b>	0.524	0.890	0.532	0.202	0.110	0.190	0.223	0.194	0.231	0.163
<b>Cont2</b>	0.455	0.906	0.590	0.156	0.086	0.156	0.158	0.159	0.176	0.163
<b>Cont3</b>	0.436	0.777	0.601	0.128	0.094	0.145	0.175	0.135	0.172	0.157
<b>Creat1</b>	0.449	0.660	0.908	0.154	0.084	0.189	0.220	0.163	0.206	0.244
<b>Creat2</b>	0.354	0.663	0.871	0.109	0.058	0.146	0.156	0.140	0.210	0.199
<b>UGC1</b>	0.247	0.188	0.186	0.215	0.180	0.215	0.266	0.271	0.837	0.316
<b>UGC2</b>	0.239	0.183	0.201	0.229	0.236	0.274	0.261	0.338	0.859	0.335
<b>UGC3</b>	0.260	0.169	0.164	0.110	0.159	0.167	0.212	0.258	0.786	0.246
<b>UGC4</b>	0.228	0.151	0.134	0.215	0.225	0.224	0.146	0.267	0.807	0.316
<b>UGC5</b>	0.239	0.213	0.134	0.237	0.260	0.310	0.250	0.336	0.714	0.326

To summarize, the comprehensive measurement model successfully aligns with the data. Moreover, the indicators used in this analysis are sufficiently reliable and effective as measures of their corresponding latent variables.

According to the literature review, a total of 38 items were initially used in the study to measure 10 different concepts. To enhance the reliability, validity, and consistency of the scale, purification procedures were employed which ultimately resulted in reducing the number of items to 37 while still measuring these same 10 concepts. These concepts include destination awareness, destination image, destination perceived quality, destination loyalty as well as user-generated content and e-word-of-mouth. Additionally, social media engagement is measured across three dimensions: consumption, contribution and creation. After carrying out this analysis and obtaining positive results, the conceptual model examination and hypothesis testing will be performed.

### ***Research Hypothesis Validation***

After examining and analyzing the model's validity, the research technique focused on testing the study hypotheses. To progress in assessing the structural model, it is necessary to analyze the values of the standardized path coefficients ( $\beta$ ), *t-values*, *p-values*, present in Table 34 and the  $R^2$  coefficient present in Table 33.

### **R<sup>2</sup> Coefficient**

The  $R^2$  Coefficient signifies how much of the total variance among variables used in each structural equation can be explained by the model (Barclay, Higgins & Thompson, 1995). Falk and Miller (1992) suggest that an  $R^2$  value greater than 0.1 is

necessary, as lower values provide minimal information. Thus, this model shows that the dependent variables under study explain 56.5% of Intention to Visit, 39.0% of Destination Loyalty, 27.3% of Destination Image, 19.3% of Destination Awareness as well as Destination Perceived Quality, 10.6% of Consumption, 3.7% and 2.9% of Contribution and Creation, respectively (Table 33). Therefore, the model is considered globally valid.

Table 33 - R<sup>2</sup> coefficient

	<b>R-SQUARE</b>	<b>R-SQUARE ADJUSTED</b>
<b>DA</b>	0.193	0.190
<b>DI</b>	0.273	0.270
<b>DL</b>	0.392	0.390
<b>DPQ</b>	0.191	0.188
<b>ITV</b>	0.565	0.560
<b>Consumption</b>	0.106	0.105
<b>Contribution</b>	0.037	0.035
<b>Creation</b>	0.029	0.027

### **Structural Model Total Effects**

The acquired standardized path coefficients ( $\beta$ ) were analysed. According to Chin (1998), relationships between constructs that have structural coefficients approximately equal to 0.2 could be regarded as being strong and reliable. To validate the suggested hypotheses, the *t-value* was examined. This metric provides information about the *p-value* and consequently indicates the statistical probability of the proposed hypothesis being valid or not. As can be seen in Table 34, of the total 17 hypotheses formulated, it can be noted that 13 of them were verified and supported.

Table 34 - Structural Model Testing

	$\beta$	T-VALUE	P-VALUE	RESULT
<b>H1a</b> User-Generated Content → Destination Awareness	0.109	2.016	0.044	Accepted
<b>H1b</b> User-Generated Content → Destination Image	0.082	1.658	0.097	Rejected
<b>H1c</b> User-Generated Content → Destination Perceived Quality	0.150	2.744	0.006	Accepted
<b>H1d</b> User-Generated Content → Destination Loyalty	0.076	1.498	0.134	Rejected
<b>H2</b> User-Generated Content → Intention to Visit	0.117	3.270	0.001	Accepted
<b>H3a</b> eWord of Mouth → Destination Awareness	0.383	8.347	0.000	Accepted
<b>H3b</b> eWord of Mouth → Destination Image	0.486	11.534	0.000	Accepted
<b>H3c</b> eWord of Mouth → Destination Perceived Quality	0.355	7.144	0.000	Accepted
<b>H3d</b> eWord of Mouth → Destination Loyalty	0.591	14.683	0.000	Accepted
<b>H4</b> eWord of Mouth → Intention to Visit	0.200	12.670	0.000	Accepted
<b>H5a</b> Destination Awareness → Intention to Visit	0.025	0.611	0.541	Rejected
<b>H5b</b> Destination Image → Intention to Visit	0.102	2.196	0.028	Accepted
<b>H5c</b> Destination Perceived Quality → Intention to Visit	0.024	0.612	0.540	Rejected
<b>H5d</b> Destination Loyalty → Intention to Visit	0.405	9.155	0.000	Accepted
<b>H6a</b> Intention to Visit → Consumption	0.326	4.819	0.000	Accepted
<b>H6b</b> Intention to Visit → Contribution	0.193	3.784	0.000	Accepted
<b>H6c</b> Intention to Visit → Creation	0.163	2.960	0.003	Accepted

### Results Description and Analysis

Each of the research hypotheses was examined in isolation with the objective of evaluating the importance of the cause-and-effect connections between the constructs being investigated. The *p-value* was assessed by considering a relationship to exist among the constructs if it is less than 0.05 (at a confidence level of 95%) or less than 0.01 (at a confidence level of 99%). To ensure increased precision, the validity of the research hypotheses was confirmed by verifying the *t-values* that met or surpassed a threshold of 1.96 ( $p < 0.05$ ) and 2.58 ( $p < 0.01$ ).

#### H1a - User-Generated Content → Destination Awareness

With regard to Hypothesis 1a, this was corroborated ( $p=0.044$ ;  $p<0.05$ ), being accepted at 95% confidence level. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the user-generated content (UGC) influences brand equity through the variable Destination Awareness, confirming what is argued in the literature, namely by Schivinski and Dabrowski (2015), which states that the user-generated social media brand communication influences positively on brand awareness. Additionally, as stated by Dedeğolu et al. (2020b), destination awareness is impacted by user-generated content on social media platforms that incorporate organizations. Thus, regarding the hypothesis under study, its corroboration is in accordance with the literature, and it is possible to infer that UGC helps Portuguese central region tourists develop destination awareness.

#### H1b - User-Generated Content → Destination Image

The aim of testing this hypothesis was to verify if the user-generated content has an influence on the creation of the destination image, so this variable has a *p-value* above 0.05 ( $p=0.097$ ) so it was not validated. In other words, we can conclude that for the respondents their destination image creation process is not influenced by the content generated by other tourists on social networks. The non-validation of this variable may be rationalized by the possibility that, following adaption by other authors cited in the literature, the items used in the questionnaire do not accurately reflect the concept of behaviour in the Portuguese context. Furthermore, this could be because the UGC associated with Portuguese central region is not particularly impressive or lacks sufficient information to create a positive perception in the tourists' mind. Similarly,

Nguyen and Tong (2022) likewise discovered that there was no notable impact on destination image through passive exposure to travel-related user-generated content.

#### H1c - User-Generated Content → Destination Perceived Quality

In relation to Hypothesis 1c, this was confirmed ( $p=0.006$ ;  $p<0.01$ ), being endorsed with a confidence level of 99%. Hence, it can be deduced that user-generated content has an impact on brand equity through the factor of destination perceived quality, supporting previous findings in literature. Schivinski and Dabrowski (2015) also propose that brand perceived quality is positively affected by user-generated content. In the same line, Stojanovic et al. (2022) conclude that user-generated content positively affects tourist behaviour, showing its relevance in improving destination perceived quality and value. Hence, it can be inferred that the respondents' perceived quality of the Portuguese central region is influenced by content generated by other tourists.

#### H1d - User-Generated Content → Destination Loyalty

The purpose of testing this hypothesis was to confirm whether user-generated content affects destination loyalty development. However, since the *p-value* for this variable is greater than 0.05 ( $p=0.134$ ), it did not reach statistical significance and cannot be deemed as conclusive evidence. Thus, it can be concluded that the respondents' destination loyalty establishment is unaffected by content created by fellow tourists on social networks. There exists a significant disparity between the two factors associated with this connection, especially in terms of tourism. Nonetheless, upon examination within different settings and domains, Hermaren and Achyar (2018) suggest that there is

no substantial impact between brand loyalty and user-created content in the cosmetics industry. Nevertheless, the findings go against the conclusions reached by Schivinski and Dabrowski (2015), who noted a substantial correlation between user-generated content and brand loyalty. The lack of validation for this variable can be accounted for by the possibility that, after modifying the scales, the items included in the survey may not accurately represent the concepts within the Portuguese central region. The constraints of this study might contribute to insignificant findings when evaluating user-generated content's impact on brand loyalty.

#### H2 - User-Generated Content → Intention to Visit

Regarding Hypothesis 2, it was proven valid ( $p=0.000$ ;  $p<0.01$ ), with a significant level of confidence at 99%. Therefore, it can be concluded that user-generated content plays a role in impacting tourists' inclination to visit, supporting previous research outcomes. Latif et al. (2020) claim that exposure to travel-related posts on Facebook motivates individuals' desire to visit the same destination. Similarly, Nguyen and Tong (2022) examined the influence of user-created content on individuals' inclination to choose a particular travel location. The findings revealed that simply having access to travel-related user-generated content had a significant positive impact on the intention to choose and desire to visit a specific travel destination. It can be concluded that the UGC has an influence on tourists' intention to visit the Portuguese central region.

### H3a – eWord of Mouth → Destination Awareness

In relation to Hypothesis 3a, it has been verified as accurate ( $p=0.000$ ;  $p<0.01$ ), displaying a high level of confidence at 99%. The statistical significance of this hypothesis is notably high. As a result, one can infer that electronic word of mouth contributes to destination awareness and reinforces the findings of prior studies. There is a substantial gap between the two variables involved in this relationship, particularly with regard to tourism. However, when analysed in other contexts and areas, the authors point out that there is a positive and verified relationship. According to Severi et al. (2014) eWOM significantly impacted the brand awareness. More recently, Dhewi and Kurnianto (2023) affirm that sharing positive experiences can enhance a positive brand perception. Hence, it can be deduced that the information conveyed online about the Portuguese central region has an impact on how tourists perceive this region.

### H3b – eWord of Mouth → Destination Image

Regarding Hypothesis 3b, it has been confirmed with a high level of certainty ( $p=0.000$ ;  $p<0.01$ ), indicating a strong confidence at the 99% level. The statistical significance of this hypothesis is remarkably strong. Consequently, one can deduce that electronic word of mouth plays a role in shaping destination image and supports previous research findings. Setiawan et al. (2014) found that eWOM has a direct and significant influence towards destination image. In a more recent study, Nanggong and Mohammad (2020) argue that the perception of cultural tourism objects by tourists is improved through electronic information received through social media. Consequently,

it can be inferred that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) plays a significant role in shaping the Portuguese central region tourists' destination image.

### H3c – eWord of Mouth → Destination Perceived Quality

In relation to Hypothesis 3c, this was confirmed ( $p=0.000$ ;  $p<0.01$ ), being endorsed with a confidence level of 99%. This hypothesis is of notable statistical significance. Hence, it can be deduced that e-word of mouth (eWOM) has an impact on brand equity through the factor of destination perceived quality, supporting previous findings in literature. There is a limited amount of research examining this correlation within the field of tourism, however, Susilowati and Sugandini (2018) comprehended through their study that eWOM has influence on destination perceived quality. Similarly, according to the results of Evgeniy et al. (2019) in the automotive field, it can be concluded that the quantity, quality and credibility of electronic word-of-mouth have a positive impact on how consumers perceive quality. Therefore, it can be concluded that eWOM has an impact on perceived quality for tourists visiting Portugal's Central Region.

### H3d – eWord of Mouth → Destination Loyalty

Regarding Hypothesis 3d, it was proven true ( $p=0.000$ ;  $p<0.01$ ), with a significant level of confidence at 99%. The statistical significance of this hypothesis is notably robust. Therefore, it can be concluded that electronic word of mouth (eWOM) plays a role in impacting tourists' destination loyalty, supporting previous research outcomes. The results of this study are in line with those of Hussain et al. (2023), in the tourism field, which corroborates the significant relationship between eWOM and destination loyalty.

Therefore, the information retained by eWOM will impact the loyalty development to the Portuguese central region.

#### H4 – eWord of Mouth → Intention to Visit

Concerning Hypothesis 4, it has been validated with a high level of certainty ( $p=0.000$ ;  $p<0.01$ ), indicating a strong confidence at the percentile of 99%. The statistical significance of this hypothesis is high. Consequently, one can deduce that electronic word of mouth plays a role in increasing intention to visit and corroborates previous research findings. Authors such as Doosti et al. (2016) and Setiawan et al. (2021) likewise state there is a positive relationship between these two concepts. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that eWOM is a reliable source for tourists in the Portuguese central region, with online content shared by fellow travellers serves as useful information which tourists rely on.

#### H5a – Destination Awareness → Intention to Visit

This hypothesis aim was to determine if tourists' perception of the Portuguese central region impacts their intention to visit. However, since the *p-value* for this variable is not statistically significant ( $p=0.541$ ;  $p>0.05$ ), we cannot consider it conclusive evidence. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that respondents' destination awareness does not impact their intention to visit. However, the findings go against the conclusions reached by Kumail et al. (2021) who noted a substantial correlation between destination awareness and intention to visit. Perhaps this could be attributed to the fact that the

sample consisted solely of individuals residing in Portugal and was focused specifically in the Portuguese Central Region.

#### H5b – Destination Image → Intention to Visit

With regard to Hypothesis 5b, this was corroborated ( $p=0.028$ ;  $p<0.05$ ), being accepted at 95% confidence level. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the destination image influences intention to visit, confirming what is argued in the literature, namely by Kumail et al. (2021), who states that there is a significant relationship between these two concepts. Similarly, Nguyen and Tong (2022) affirm that the destination image significantly influenced the desire, attitude, and intention to choose a travel destination. Therefore, it can be concluded that destination image has an impact on tourists' Portugal's Central Region visiting intentions.

#### H5c – Destination Perceived Quality → Intention to Visit

This hypothesis was intended to verify if tourists' Centro Region quality perception affects their decision to travel there. However, since the p-value for this variable is not statistically significant ( $p=0.540$ ;  $p>0.05$ ), we cannot consider it valid. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the respondents' quality perception of the destination has no influence on their travel intentions. This topic is not yet widely studied in the tourism field, so there seem to be different and diverging conclusions. Lee et al. (2008) state that perceived quality is not the most important determinant of behavioural intention for both festival repeat visitors and newcomers. However, Horng et al. (2012) finds that perceived quality has a significant indirect relationship with intention to visit.

#### H5d – Destination Loyalty → Intention to Visit

In reference to Hypothesis 5d, the results supported this statement with a statistical significance level of  $p < 0.01$  ( $p = 0.000$ ) and a confidence level of 99%. The statistical significance of this hypothesis is strong. Therefore, it can be inferred that tourists' loyalty to a particular destination influences their intentions to visit, aligning with previous research studies. According to Stylos and Bellou (2019), it is suggested that destination loyalty plays a substantial role in influencing the intention to revisit a particular destination. In similarity, Kumail et al. (2021) discovered a statistically meaningful link between destination brand equity, specifically destination loyalty, and intentions of visiting. Hence, it can be inferred that tourists' intentions to visit Portugal's Central Region are influenced by their loyalty towards the destination.

#### H6: Intention to Visit influences Social Media Engagement through:

H6a - Consumption;

H6b - Contribution;

H6c - Creation.

Regarding Hypothesis 6, all its sub-hypotheses were valid since the results support this statement with a statistical significance level of  $p < 0.01$  ( $p = 0.000$ ) and a confidence level of 99%. Thus, it can be inferred that the intention to visit a certain destination influences users social media engagement (consumption, contribution and creation). While there is limited research available on this topic, the results show that intention to visit a destination will lead the tourist to see, read, interact and create content about it.

#### **4.1.2. Interview**

Adriana Rodrigues has a degree in Psychology, having taken a post-graduate course in Corporate Communication. Works in Turismo Centro de Portugal as Head of Communication, Image and Public Relations. With exceptional communication skills and an unwavering determination, she demonstrated her effective leadership abilities and ability to work collaboratively. Through her tireless commitment and relentless drive, she successfully established herself as an invaluable asset in fulfilling her professional responsibilities.

#### ***Interview Analysis***

The interview started with some more general questions about tourism in Centro de Portugal. Turismo Centro de Portugal targets both domestic and foreign tourists through various marketing strategies, with the national market being their primary focus. According to the Director of Communication, when asked about what sets tourism in Centro de Portugal apart from other destinations, the region's diversity emerges as its prime characteristic. With 100 municipalities housed under this region's ambit, it boasts a multitude of offerings regarding attractions and activities that surpass those available at various other regional locations. Tourists visiting this region can indulge in an array of cultural experiences, beautiful views along with interesting itineraries, making Centro de Portugal an alluring travel destination for people seeking versatile fusions during their vacation.

Adriana Rodrigues affirms that social media and online platforms serve as beneficial resources for increasing visibility, fostering customer engagement, and solidifying the brand identity of Centro de Portugal. These tools are active in reaching

out to target audiences and luring potential visitors, as also stated by Liu et al. (2020). With these paths at its disposal, Turismo Centro de Portugal can expand its reach beyond boundaries – national or otherwise – promoting what makes this region uniquely attractive. Furthermore, she states that these platforms play a crucial role in promoting interaction through engaging content. By sharing interesting and relevant materials such as images, videos, narratives, and interactive elements, can establish connections between the audience and the region, inspiring them to explore its tourism possibilities. This approach also plays an essential part in enhancing brand awareness and equity, as Hollebeck and Macky (2019) discovered, while elevating Centro's prominence among other destinations. Moreover, Adriana reports that social media content is essential to building consumer loyalty. Gastronomic tourism, including food photos, and cycling initiatives generates the most effective engagement on their networks indicating its strong appeal in the region and ability to build loyalty among their target audience. Given this, TCP strengthens their brand-consumer relationship and fosters consumer loyalty by creating social media content tailored to the preferences and interests of their audience.

Content marketing is considered a key strategy at TCP. The creation of new statements, films and creative content is important to consistently feed all communication pieces that reflect the brand's identity throughout the year - both online and offline - to build brand recognition, establish lasting loyalty and capture consumer interest and trust, as also stated by Du Plessis (2017). For these reasons, the annual marketing campaigns carried out by Turismo Centro de Portugal are crucial, as they increase brand awareness, having a positive impact on consumers. Concerning UGC,

the Director acknowledges the immense potential and benefits of UGC. Turismo Centro de Portugal can leverage this power by promoting active engagement with the public, encouraging them to produce content voluntarily. This dynamic fosters a sense of community and inspires loyalty towards tourism in Portugal's central region. Turismo Centro de Portugal's focus on consumer-generated content on Instagram is a key part of their strategy to drive engagement and attract new users. Reviews submitted by visitors through social media, email, and other channels are highly valued by the organization as they help build an authentic reputation for the destination. Similar to Abboud (2020), who claims that UGC boosts brand credibility, expands viewers generally, and increases customer trust and authenticity because it is seen as sincere and unbiased information. Positive reviews are particularly important in attracting future tourists and can notably impact its success, according to Adriana Rodrigues.

Turismo Centro de Portugal aims to promote an authentic and easily accessible destination of high quality. They endeavor to ensure that visitors' actual experiences match their expectations by maintaining a commitment to excellence throughout the region. By exceeding their guests' expectations, they hope to encourage brand loyalty and repeat visits. Similarly, Jeong and Kim (2019) state that destination quality and tourist satisfaction significantly affect destination loyalty. Adriana recognizes the significance of customer retention as it is more efficient and cost-effective than acquiring new customers for future progress.

On a concluding note, Adriana Rodrigues stresses the importance of keeping up with advancing technology for future trends in digital tourism marketing. One key tool that will continue to play a significant role is content marketing due to its effectiveness

in raising awareness and promoting customer loyalty, as already stated by Hollebeek and Macky (2019).

#### **4.1.3. Focus Group**

##### ***Sample Characterization***

The focus group was composed of five women and three men. Regarding age, six participants are between 23 and 38, and two are between 39 and 54. As far as employment status is concerned, six of the participants are employed and two are students. As for the district of residence, three people belong to Viseu, while Lisbon, Faro, Leiria, Aveiro and Braga count with one person each. Concerning academic qualifications, one of the participants has Upper Secondary Education, six have a bachelor's degree and one has a master's degree.

##### ***Focus Group Analysis<sup>5</sup>***

When asked about their visits to Portugal's Central Region, all respondents indicated that they had already traveled to various districts within the region. These districts included Aveiro, Coimbra, Leiria, and Castelo Branco. Additionally, every participant stated that they had visited these places in the recent past, stating comments such "I went to Viseu about two weeks ago," "I went to Vila Real last month," and "Aveiro I visited recently...".

When inquired if the Central Region was a popular choice for them to include in their travel plans, most of the participants (specifically seven individuals) responded positively. They stated that its diversity and variety were compelling reasons for

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<sup>5</sup> These results have been submitted to the Digicom Conference 2023.

considering it as an ideal destination, praising it as "very rich region, it has beautiful landscapes, culture, historical monuments, excellent gastronomy" (P1) and "especially the coastal area which has very good beaches" (P8). certain participants expressed their strong preference for this particular area (P2) and mentioned it as the favored vacation destination for their families (P5). In contrast, another participant (P6) indicated that their opinion on the matter varies depending on the circumstances but did not consider this region to be their top choice. Given his residence in the northern part of the country, he elaborates that his choices "are mostly focused either on the North region, or if it implies more distance, the South region". Nevertheless, when contemplating a shorter duration trip with reduced transportation and travel expenses as factors to consider, opting for such an endeavor could indeed be affirmative. Hence, when undertaking a lengthy journey, this individual prefers heading straight to the South region. However, he does mention that if it is a shorter trip, opting for the Central Region could be considered.

Six participants agreed that the Centro Region accurately reflected their personal traits. Some individuals also drew parallels between their characteristics and those specific to the region, using terms like "eclectic" (P7), "quiet and history" (P2), "calm" and "connected to nature" (P3) to characterize it. Others responded affirmatively, saying "it will always be part of who I am" (P4) because they were born and raised in this area. A participant who has "no emotional or affective connection to the Centro region" (P6) disagrees with this assertion, and the remaining participants claim they are unable to "associate a geographical region with my personality" (P5). One can note that the individuals who currently or previously lived in this area are the ones who possess the strongest sense of connection to it.

Given that there are "many activities to do and enriching experiences to have," (P8) seven individuals expressed confidence in receiving better opportunities when queried regarding the quality of tourism services available in this region. There remains room for enhancement or refinement, according to two of the participants, in areas like "the information available about the places... more specifically, where there are historical monuments" (P1), according to one of them, doing so would make the journey more intuitive. One of the participants states that "it depends on the seasonality of the offer" (P6), and in winter he considers that yes, but not in summer.

There was a broader range of opinions regarding the consensus on whether this region has better offerings compared to other regions in Portugal. In total, four participants acknowledged that the Centro Region provides a greater variety of options when compared to other Portuguese regions, because it is "calmer, less saturated in terms of tourism and population density" (P5) and because its characteristics are more in line with their interests. The other participants agree that "regions like the Algarve and Lisbon have much more potential for tourism, both nationally and internationally, which makes them more developed in this respect" (P7).

When questioned about their inclination to visit this particular area compared to others, three respondents expressed a preference for visiting this location over others since they can "visit at different times of the year, there are always many things to do, in the summer there is a beach, in the winter it has snow and mountains". However, three participants affirm that being residents in this region they "prefer other regions to spend their vacations" (P3) or they like "to visit all the regions" (P5), having no preference for any of them. The remaining two participants state that it depends on factors such as "state

of mind and the need to visit" (P7) or seasonality, emphasizing that "in winter, Serra da Estrela is a more attractive destination, because of the snow that is not found elsewhere in the country" (P6).

Five individuals name the Central Region as their preferred holiday spot, citing its "calm setting" (P5), "tranquility and peace" (P8), and "sea, mountain, and countryside" (P7) as well as its "typically warm and stable weather during the summer months" (P5). It is significant to note that participant P5 stated that this area "presents, more and more, valuable offers at the tourist level". Nevertheless, one participant asserts that when discussing things from a global perspective, they would rather explore different locales. This could be attributed to their distant residence location or the belief that other areas are equally captivating as the Central Region. Consequently, two individuals do not consider it to be their preferred travel destination. One participant claims not to have preferences for certain places and says it depends on what he wants to "visit on this trip" but that "due to the great diversity of supply presented in the central region, this is always an option to consider" (P3).

When considering the value of user-generated content, it is important to highlight that there was generally a widespread agreement regarding its usefulness. This notion is well-substantiated by scholars such as Xu et al. (2021) and Nguyen and Tong (2022), who posit that this form of content has flourished in the tourism sector due to its significant role as a crucial resource, exerting considerable influence on tourists' decision-making process when it comes to travel-related matters, according to Hollebeek and Macky (2019). There was only one participant who showed some criticism,

stating that he does not look for guidance in this type of contents, as he prefers to “go on discovery” (P8).

The consensus among all participants is that these contents are agreed upon, although some argue that it varies depending on the type of information. Three out of a group follow Turismo Centro de Portugal's social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. However, only one person claims to engage with the posts by liking them, while no one comments or frequently shares unless it directly relates to their city or relevant information. Moreover, none of the participants contribute any content nor provide feedback on Turismo Centro de Portugal.

Given this, it can be inferred that overall, participants in this study had a favorable impression of the destination and recognized its value and reputation. However, by analyzing their responses, it is apparent that individuals who actively engage with social networks have higher brand equity compared to those who do not. These participants hold a positive perception and opinion of the Portuguese central region. This finding aligns with previous research conducted by Abboud (2020), which indicates that user-generated content enhances brand equity.

The individuals who are following TCP on social media have shown a greater interest in visiting the central region of Portugal. As per Liu et al. (2020), users actively utilize social media to research and acquire information about their upcoming trips. Consequently, social media acts as a guiding tool and plays an important role in influencing travel intentions. Therefore, the findings of this study align with those of author mentioned above.

## **CONCLUSION**

The final chapter of this research work presents a comprehensive summary of the findings, contributions, and limitations. Additionally, it offers suggestions for future studies in the field. The main objective of this research was to gain a more extensive understanding of user-generated content, destination brand equity, e-word of mouth, intention to visit, and social media engagement. Researchers have shown significant interest on these concepts. Nevertheless, there remains a dearth of studies specifically examining the associations between various topics covered in this study and tourism.

This study has served to fill several gaps in the literature regarding current issues of academic interest, sougning to focus on several fields, namely, the field of digital communication, consumer behaviour and tourism, striving to understand their interconnection. Through the latter, attention was given to topics such as user-generated content, e-word of mouth, brand equity, intention to visit and social media engagement.

As mentioned throughout this study, the focus on digital content marketing has attracted growing interest from researchers in the field. However, studies on user-generated content specifically linked to the various dimensions of brand equity and intention to visit are still scarce. In addition, it was also intended to find the relationship between the electronic word of mouth and the variables already mentioned. Finally, it was also sought to highlight the connection between intention to visit and social media engagement, a topic barely mentioned in the literature. Thus, a conceptual model was built to analyse the causal relationships to verify their validity.

The study made significant theoretical contributions by presenting and validating the conceptual model. This has undoubtedly benefited the scientific community by improving subject understanding. Significant effort was put into adapting and testing scales to measure latent variables. It should be noted that these measures performed well and were able to provide accurate results. Consequently, it can be concluded that the scales used in this research show high levels of consistency and validity, affirming their effectiveness in explaining key concepts.

Concerning the results, both the focus group and questionnaire participants displayed a strong enthusiasm for user-generated content, highlighting its current significance. This strategy proved to be important in creating perceptions by tourists, namely destination awareness and perceived quality. In turn, destination image and loyalty proved to be influential in tourists' intention to visit.

This study has contributed to the understanding of the topic of electronic word-of-mouth, showing that it has significant power when it comes to shaping the destination's brand value. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that online recommendations from satisfied travelers can have a great impact on how a location is perceived by potential visitors. Moreover, this concept, together with user-generated content, has also been shown to influence the intention of tourists to visit, showing how important the opinion of fellow tourists is in the visit intentions of potential tourists, regardless of the format (text, video, image, etc.).

Furthermore, this study has shown that tourists' visit intention influences how they communicate on social media. This was a novel finding since, to the extent of the author's knowledge, this connection has never been made in the literature. Through it, it

is possible to conclude that tourists' visit intentions contribute to the consumption, contribution and creation of destination-related content.

This investigation work's findings offer practical suggestions for marketing professionals and managers of tourism destinations. Nowadays, it has become imperative for tourism brands and marketers to prioritize social media as a cornerstone of their marketing strategy. Leveraging social media platforms and online resources can yield numerous advantages for businesses such as increasing visibility, fostering meaningful customer engagement, and ultimately establishing a strong brand identity. By proactively utilizing these channels effectively, organizations can successfully take advantage of these opportunities to promote themselves in the highly competitive tourism industry.

User-generated content has proven to be an extremely effective and versatile strategy in the realm of tourism marketing, as mentioned by Adrina Rodrigues. Businesses can benefit greatly from incorporating user-generated content into their promotional efforts as it provides them with an abundant source of authentic and captivating material that connects well with potential customers. By embracing the influence of user-created content, companies operating in tourism can build a lively community centered around their brand while enhancing their overall marketing campaigns. The results show that user-generated content influences the destination perceptions that tourists hold, specifically awareness and perceived quality. Secondly, this study demonstrated that the intention of potential tourists to visit a particular travel destination is greatly influenced by travel-related user-generated content. Therefore, these findings show that marketers must come up with effective ways to get tourists to

create and share user-generated content with attractive landscapes and elements. This will not only increase the destination's brand value but also capture the attention, intention and desire of potential tourists to visit that destination.

To effectively engage with their audiences and maximize electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), brands must go beyond simply creating shareable content. It is crucial that they develop meaningful connections with their target market through highly engaging content that resonates with the audience on a deeper level. Furthermore, consistently delivering exceptional services and tourism offerings is essential for any brand that wants to exceed customer expectations. By continuously striving to meet or exceed these expectations, brands can build strong relationships with customers based on trust and satisfaction. This will not only help retain current customers, preserve and enhance brand equity, but also attract new customers through positive recommendations from satisfied customers. In short, investing efforts in creating compelling content that makes emotional connections, combined with excellent service delivery, are key strategies for destination brands to have nowadays.

Lastly, an individual's desire to visit a particular destination can have a significant impact on their interactions with social media. When someone has the intention of traveling, they are often motivated to research and gather information about their desired location. This exploration may involve reading articles or blog posts, watching videos, interacting with online communities, and even creating content themselves to share their excitement with others. Tourism destination companies should, therefore, disseminate alluring and attractive content so that users feel more encouraged to engage with the publications. In addition, they should pay attention to the content

shared about their destinations by tourists, as well as their engagement. If UGC shared about a destination is pleasing and attractive, potential tourists are more likely to engage, thus organizations should be vigilant to see if the UGC is representative of the destination and be aware of its engagement because it may be representative of potential tourists.

Regarding Turismo Centro de Portugal, the findings indicated that individuals who follow Turismo Centro de Portugal on social media platforms and engage with user-generated content tend to have higher brand value perception and intention to visit. Moreover, natives and residents from the Central region of Portugal exhibit stronger affinity and identification towards it compared to participants from other regions such as South or North who do not demonstrate a similar connection nor choose to follow Turismo Centro de Portugal on social networks.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study's shortcomings, which affected the outcomes, were discovered throughout the research process, making it prudent to exercise caution when generalizing the findings. The scales' adaptation, translation, and context-specific adaptation to other research may have also had an impact on how people interpreted the questions, which in turn affected the results.

The sample collected in this study included individuals aged between 22 and 38 years. These sociodemographic traits could have been a constraint that prevented some hypotheses from being validated. Individuals primarily resided in central Portugal's districts such as Viseu, Aveiro, and Coimbra, which may be seen as a limitation in terms of geography. We therefore propose the use of the models investigated in more varied

samples, including participants whose ages are more evenly distributed across all age groups and who reside in various geographic locations, nationally and internationally. Furthermore, apply this research to a foreign target audience to better understand how foreign visitors view the Portuguese central region. Moreover, it is advised to employ these models in various domestic and foreign contexts since this study solely considers the Central region of Portugal.

This study focuses only on user-generated content. It is suggested to conduct the same study on other dimensions of digital content marketing, such as firm-generated content.

### **Scientific Contribution**

The research findings have resulted in significant scientific progress, which has been shared through publishing papers or presenting them at conferences within the specific field. These contributions help shape future research by highlighting current trends and identifying areas for further exploration.

This research gave rise to two articles related to tourism. The article "Tourists' Engagement on Tourism Organizations' Facebook Pages: The Role of User-Generated Content" (Santos, Vasconcelos and Ferreira, 2023) was submitted and presented at the International Conference on Tourism Research 2023 (ICTR 2023) and published in the Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Tourism Research, indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. It aimed to understand the importance of using user-generated content in a social media communication strategy for tourism organisations.

The article "The Role of User-Generated Content on Brand Equity and Intention to Visit" was submitted to Digicom - 7th International Conference on Digital Design and Communication. The findings revealed that individuals who actively follow Turismo Centro de Portugal on social media platforms and engage with user-generated content demonstrate a stronger connection to the brand and an increased desire to visit. Moreover, residents who were born and raised in the Central region of Portugal exhibit a heightened sense of affinity and identification with their place of origin.

In addition, the article called "Event Tourism and Social Media Communication: Influencer-Generated Content on Fashion Weeks" is being developed and is planned to be submitted to the Journal of Tourism Futures. This research aims to understand the impact of communication generated by fashion influencers on the engagement and visit intention of their followers.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1 – Final Questionnaire

#### **A Influência do Conteúdo Online Gerado pelos Utilizadores no Turismo da Região Centro de Portugal**

Este inquérito por questionário está a ser realizado âmbito do Mestrado de Comunicação Aplicada, ramo da Comunicação Estratégica, da Escola Superior de Educação de Viseu. A duração aproximada é de 5 minutos. As respostas são confidenciais e anónimas, e serão utilizadas apenas em contexto académico.

O objetivo é analisar o papel do conteúdo online gerado pelo consumidor no turismo da Região Centro de Portugal. A Região Centro é dividida entre as seguintes oito sub-regiões: Região de Aveiro, Coimbra, Leiria, Viseu Dão-Lafões, Beira Baixa, Beiras e Serra da Estrela, Oeste e Médio Tejo. Estas compreendem municípios como Aveiro, Coimbra, Lousã, Leiria, Viseu, Castelo Branco, Guarda, Óbidos, Torres Vedras e Tomar.

Agradece-se, desde já, a disponibilidade e consideração.

Com os melhores cumprimentos,

Maria Vasconcelos - pv23756@esev.ipv.pt

#### **1. Na minha opinião, a Região Centro de Portugal...**

Por favor, indique o seu grau de concordância com as seguintes afirmações.\*

	Discordo Totalmente	Discordo	Não concordo nem discordo	Concordo	Concordo Totalmente
1. Apresenta boa reputação e renome.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. É bastante reconhecida.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Tem características que recorde facilmente.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Surge imediatamente no meu pensamento quando estou a pensar fazer uma viagem.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 2. Considero que...

Por favor, indique o seu grau de concordância com as seguintes afirmações.\*

	Discordo Totalmente	Discordo	Não concordo nem discordo	Concordo	Concordo Totalmente
1. A Região Centro de Portugal é um destino que se adequa à minha personalidade.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Visitar a Região Centro de Portugal causaria uma boa impressão nos meus amigos.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. A imagem da Região Centro de Portugal é compatível com a minha própria identidade.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Visitar a Região Centro de Portugal reflete quem eu sou.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 3. Na minha opinião, a Região Centro de Portugal...

Por favor, indique o seu grau de concordância com as seguintes afirmações.\*

	Discordo Totalmente	Discordo	Não concordo nem discordo	Concordo	Concordo Totalmente
1. Apresenta ofertas turísticas de qualidade consistente.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Proporciona experiências de qualidade.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Proporciona ofertas turísticas de qualidade superior.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Apresenta melhores ofertas turísticas do que outras regiões portuguesas.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 4. Eu...

Por favor, indique o seu grau de concordância com as seguintes afirmações.\*

	Discordo Totalmente	Discordo	Não concordo nem discordo	Concordo	Concordo Totalmente
1. Apresenta ofertas turísticas de qualidade consistente.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Proporciona experiências de qualidade.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Proporciona ofertas turísticas de qualidade superior.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Apresenta melhores ofertas turísticas do que outras regiões portuguesas.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 5. Sobre a Região Centro de Portugal nas redes sociais...

Por favor, indique o seu grau de concordância com as seguintes afirmações.\*

	Discordo Totalmente	Discordo	Não concordo nem discordo	Concordo	Concordo Totalmente
1. Procuo aconselhar-me através de conteúdos partilhados por outros utilizadores.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Gosto de ler a opinião de outros internautas.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Sinto-me mais confortável a tomar decisões quando explorei as opiniões de outros utilizadores.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Recolho frequentemente informação nas redes sociais antes de tomar uma decisão relacionada com a Região Centro de Portugal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Concordo, em grande parte, com os comentários.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 6. No futuro...

Por favor, indique o seu grau de concordância com as seguintes afirmações.\*

	Discordo Totalmente	Discordo	Não concordo nem discordo	Concordo	Concordo Totalmente
1. Espero visitar a Região Centro de Portugal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Prefiro visitar a Região Centro de Portugal em relação a outras regiões portuguesas.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Correndo tudo como esperado, tenciono visitar a Região Centro de Portugal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Poderei visitar a Região Centro de Portugal, no próximo ano.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Quero realmente visitar a Região Centro de Portugal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 7. Em contexto digital, tenciono...

Por favor, indique o seu grau de concordância com as seguintes afirmações.\*

	Discordo Totalmente	Discordo	Não concordo nem discordo	Concordo	Concordo Totalmente
1. Falar com outras pessoas sobre os aspetos positivos da Região Centro de Portugal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Recomendar a Região Centro Portugal a outras pessoas através da Internet.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Partilhar comentários positivos sobre a Região Centro de Portugal a outras pessoas.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Se me pedirem conselhos, recomendar a Região Centro de Portugal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Encorajar os meus amigos e familiares a irem à Região Centro de Portugal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 8. Turismo Centro de Portugal

1. Segue alguma rede social do Turismo Centro de Portugal?\*

- Sim
- Não

## 9. Envolvimento nas Redes Sociais do Turismo Centro de Portugal

Quais das redes sociais do Turismo Centro de Portugal mencionadas abaixo segue?\*

- Instagram
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Youtube
- Spotify
- LinkedIn

## Nas redes sociais, eu...

Por favor, indique o seu grau de concordância com as seguintes afirmações.\*

	Discordo Totalmente	Discordo	Não concordo nem discordo	Concordo	Concordo Totalmente
1. Costumo ver as publicações do Turismo do Centro de Portugal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Costumo ler as publicações e comentários sobre o Turismo Centro de Portugal colocados por outros utilizadores.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Interaço com as publicações do Turismo do Centro de Portugal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Costumo comentar publicações do Turismo do Centro de Portugal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Costumo partilhar as publicações do Turismo Centro de Portugal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. Publico conteúdos relacionados com o Turismo Centro de Portugal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. Já escrevi críticas e opiniões positivas relacionadas com o Turismo Centro de Portugal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 10. Dados Sociodemográficos

### 1. Género\*

Feminino

Masculino

Prefiro Não Dizer

Outra: \_\_\_\_\_

### 2. Idade\*

≤22

23-38

39-54

55-73

≥74

### 3. Distrito de Residência\*

- Aveiro
  - Beja
  - Braga
  - Bragança
  - Castelo Branco
  - Coimbra
  - Évora
  - Faro
  - Guarda
  - Leiria
  - Lisboa
  - Portalegre
  - Porto
  - Santarém
  - Setúbal
  - Viana do Castelo
  - Vila Real
  - Viseu
  - Região Autónoma dos Açores
  - Região Autónoma da Madeira
- Outra: \_\_\_\_\_

#### 4. Habilitações Académicas\*

- Inferior ao 2º Ciclo de Ensino Básico
- 2.º Ciclo do Ensino Básico (6º ano)
- 3.º ciclo do Ensino Básico (9º ano)
- Ensino Secundário (12º ano)
- Licenciatura
- Mestrado
- Doutoramento

#### 5. Situação Profissional\*

- Desempregado (a)
- Estudante
- Trabalhador(a)-Estudante
- Empregado (a)
- Trabalhador (a) Independente
- Reformado (a)
- Outra

## Appendix 2 – Interview Script

### 1. Portugal, mais especificamente o Centro, é conhecido como um grande destino turístico. Quais acha que são as nossas maiores valências? O que é que nos torna especiais?

A região Centro de Portugal é a maior e mais diversa região turística nacional, reunindo 100 municípios e oito comunidades intermunicipais. É nesta diversidade que reside a nossa maior valência e nos diferencia de outros destinos regionais.

### 2. O Turismo Centro de Portugal tem mais turistas e visitantes internacionais ou portugueses? No que é que diferem as estratégias de marketing para cada um deles?

A promoção externa é feita pela Agência Regional de Promoção Turística do Centro de Portugal ([visitcenterofportugal.com](http://visitcenterofportugal.com)). A Turismo Centro de Portugal apenas faz a promoção interna, ou seja, para o mercado interno (portuguesa). Mas o mercado interno continua a ser o principal mercado de turistas do Centro de Portugal e de Portugal.

### 3. De que maneira pensa que as redes sociais e website permitem atingir ao público-alvo do TCP e atrair possíveis turistas para o Centro?

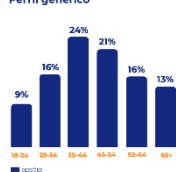
As redes sociais e o site permitem gerar *awareness*; a criação de *engagement* através de conteúdo; e afirmação de *branding* e imagem de marca.

### 4. Como é o perfil do consumidor do TCP no mundo digital? Que canais digitais ele prefere?

Partilhamos abaixo o perfil do consumidor da TCP no mundo digital, em particular, no que respeita à nossa última campanha “Centro de Portugal, um destino e tanto” (a decorrer desde junho 2022). A diversidade de canais nos quais a campanha está ativa

Com poder de compra e muito diversificado o target dos 35 aos 54 é o que mais nos visita.

#### Perfil genérico



PERFIL  
Mulher 90%  
35 - 54 anos (45%)  
Lisboa e Porto (27%)

INTERESSES  
Ciclismo, Corrida, Turismo



INTENÇÃO DE COMPRA  
Viagens - Hotéis  
Alugamentos - Carros  
Instalações turísticas  
Restaurantes de Turismo

Analisámos os interesses dos visitantes globais do site TCP e ficámos a par dos seus interesses e pesquisas.

#### Estas são as principais conclusões:



#### Desporto

- Cycling  
- Sky  
- Running



#### Viagens

- Aventura  
- Inverno  
- Praia



#### Gastronomia

- Cozinhar  
- Vinho  
- Soremesas

#### Também têm muito interesse sobre:



- Viagens em Família  
- Cruzeiros  
- Parques temáticos

A campanha “Um Destino e Tanto”, presente numa grande diversidade de meios, está a ter um impacto bastante relevante.

+18 milhões de impressões em canais digitais

Resultados que se devem ao facto de sermos um destino e tanto, com uma campanha e tanto.

#### Alguns dos principais meios:

- Display
- Email Marketing
- Search
- Social
- YouTube

gera um grande número de impressões e visibilidade. Isto traduz-se em *awareness* para a Região dado um elevado número de utilizadores ter sido impactado com a campanha.

### 5. Considera que os conteúdos publicados nas redes sociais são um fator importante para fidelizar os consumidores? De que forma?

Os dados que retiramos das nossas redes sociais permitem-nos concluir que os conteúdos que geram mais *engagement* são os relacionados com o turismo gastronómico, potenciado pela partilha de fotos de comida, que continua a ser o prato forte do Centro. Criar dinâmicas com base em *User Generated Content* - ações que envolvam o público e gerem conteúdos por eles criados de forma espontânea, pode ser uma grande oportunidade. Atividades relacionadas com Ciclismo têm uma grande recetividade que mostra uma aposta ganha pelo Centro neste tipo de atividades.

### 6. Como são implementadas as estratégias de marketing nas Redes Sociais de forma a promover os serviços e o turismo no Centro?

A estratégia de marketing da TCP assenta em 3 canais distintos:

→ Estratégia baseada em alinhar 3 canais distintos:



### 7. De que forma surgiu a utilização de estratégias de marketing de conteúdo?

Considera que os seguidores das redes sociais da TCP alteraram o seu comportamento e *engagement* a partir da implementação dessa estratégia?

O marketing de conteúdo tem-se revelado um instrumento muito importante para gerar *awareness* e *engagement* do destino Centro de Portugal, como revelam todos os dados das leituras das nossas campanhas. Temos mais utilizadores a visitar o site, durante mais tempo, consultando outras páginas, e uma menor redução da taxa de rejeição.

**8. Que formato de marketing de conteúdo considera ser o preferido dos seguidores?**

Sobretudo os nossos vídeos (premiados nacional e internacionalmente) e, a ganhar cada vez mais adeptos, o nosso podcast “Aqui, entre nós”.

**9. Porquê a estratégia de utilizar maioritariamente conteúdo gerado pelo consumidor para criar o conteúdo no Instagram da TCP? Qual a importância desse tipo de conteúdo, quando comparado com o conteúdo gerado pela própria entidade?**

Claramente, porque são os conteúdos que geram mais *engagement* (gostos, comentários e partilhas). Só partilhamos conteúdos de grande qualidade, que evidenciam a experiência pessoal e mais orgânica no Centro de Portugal. Isso poderá ser um dos elementos que mais atrai outros utilizadores. Funcionam como *referrals* ou WOM positivos.

**10. Como é que os visitantes podem deixar o seu feedback sobre o destino? A partir de que plataformas? Considera que as reviews dos visitantes são essenciais para atrair mais turistas futuramente?**

Podem fazê-lo nas nossas redes sociais (Linkedin, Twitter, Facebook e Instagram), no Google My Business, por email, ou em resposta às nossas newsletters. As boas *reviews* são fundamentais, porque são orgânicas e geram *engagement*.

**11. As estratégias e campanhas de marketing do TCP são sempre elaboradas de forma a despertar interesse e curiosidade na mente do consumidor, pensa que estas são essenciais para criar um lugar na mente do consumidor e fidelizá-lo?**

Anualmente, procuramos ter uma nova campanha de comunicação e marketing, que seja impactante, disruptiva, e muitas vezes, que esteja alinhada com os pressupostos de responsabilidade social que todas as marcas devem obedecer. Isso é, cada vez mais, fundamental para ajudar a criar a notoriedade da marca, impactando positivamente o consumidor. É isso que pretendemos quando criamos um novo statement, um novo

filme, e todas as criatividades para alimentar, de forma coerente, e ao longo de todo o ano, todas as peças de comunicação da TCP, seja para online para para offline.

**12. Pensa que a utilização de marketing de conteúdo, para além das outras estratégias, contribui também para a consciência da marca e para a fidelização à mesma?**

Sim, é o marketing de conteúdo contribui de sobremaneira para esse efeito, e é esse o objetivo primordial do Centro de Portugal: gerar *awareness* do destino e que este seja uma opção, no *mindset* consumidor, quando tiver de optar por um destino de férias, de fim-de-semana ou uma visita.

**13. Considera que a imagem passada pela entidade é leal à realidade? Sente que os destinos vão de encontro às expectativas dos turistas?**

A nossa estratégia é mostrar que somos um destino autêntico e real, próximo e facilmente acessível, capacitado e de qualidade. É fulcral que a visita corresponda a esta imagem, e acreditamos que os empresários e os municípios do Centro de Portugal, estão alinhados com a importância de que não se defraudem as expectativas de quem nos visita. Mas, sim, que os possamos fidelizar para próximas visitas. Porque é muito mais fácil e económico fidelizar um cliente do que captar novos.

**14. Quais considera ser as tendências futuras na área do marketing turístico digital? O marketing de conteúdo continuará a ser relevante?**

O Marketing Digital é um mundo em permanente evolução, que nos obriga a estar permanentemente atentos, e capazes de acompanhar as novas tendências. Todos os dias surgem novas ferramentas, e se pretendemos estar na linha da frente da promoção e comunicação turística, temos de saber ler e antecipar essas tendências. Recorremos a diversos instrumentos de marketing de conteúdo, desde os vídeos, aos podcasts, aos infográficos, ..., são instrumentos muito eficazes na geração de *awareness* e na fidelização dos turistas. Porque, se forem usados de forma inteligente, permitem uma conexão com o consumidor, uma ligação emocional, fidelizam o turista. Por tudo isto, consideramos que o marketing de conteúdo continuará a ser um instrumento fulcral e dificilmente substituído num futuro próximo.

## Appendix 3 - Focus Group Transcription

**Moderador:** Bom dia. Antes de mais, gostaria de agradecer a todos por contribuírem para esta investigação. Este grupo de discussão ajudará na investigação da minha dissertação de Mestrado em Comunicação Aplicada na Escola Superior de Educação de Viseu (ESEV). Com o objetivo de recolher os pensamentos e opiniões mais orgânicos e espontâneos, as vossas respostas devem refletir pontos de vista individuais reais. Neste sentido, não existe uma resposta certa ou errada. É necessário o vosso consentimento para gravar esta sessão para análise posterior e extração de resultados. Todos os dados e informações recolhidos serão mantidos em privado e utilizados apenas para investigação académica. Alguém tem alguma pergunta que eu possa esclarecer antes de começarmos?

Todos: Não.

**Moderador:** Muito bem, vamos então avançar. O objetivo deste *focus group* será analisar o papel do conteúdo online gerado pelo consumidor no turismo da Região Centro de Portugal. A Região Centro é dividida entre as seguintes oito sub-regiões: Região de Aveiro, Coimbra, Leiria, Viseu Dão-Lafões, Beira Baixa, Beiras e Serra da Estrela, Oeste e Médio Tejo. Estas compreendem municípios como Aveiro, Coimbra, Lousã, Leiria, Viseu, Castelo Branco, Guarda, Óbidos, Torres Vedras e Tomar. Após esta breve explicação, vamos dar início às questões.

**Moderador: Já visitaram algum distrito da Região Centro de Portugal?**

P2 – Sim.

P1 – Sim, já visitei alguns.

P3 – Sim.

P4 – Sim, eu também.

P5 – Sim, cerca de uns 5 ou 6.

P6 – Sim, alguns também.

P7 – Sim, já visitei algumas regiões.

P8 – Sim, alguns.

**Moderador: Todos já visitaram a Região Centro, ótimo! E quais são os distritos que já visitaram?**

P1 – Gosto mais dos distritos do interior como Aveiro, Coimbra, Lousã, Guarda e Óbidos.

P2 - Coimbra, Guarda e Castelo Branco.

P4 – Visitei Aveiro, Coimbra, Leiria, Viseu, Castelo Branco e Guarda.

P3 - Viseu, Vila Real, Coimbra, Guarda, Leiria e Aveiro.

P7 – Visitei Aveiro, Coimbra, Leiria, Viseu, alguns distritos das Beiras e também Serra da Estrela.

P6 – Já fui a Aveiro, Castelo Branco, Coimbra e também à Serra da Estrela.

P5 – Eu também já fui a Aveiro, Viseu, Coimbra, Leiria, Castelo Branco.

P8 – Já visitei a Aveiro, Coimbra, Viseu, Guarda.

**Moderador: E há quanto tempo visitaram o último a que foram?**

P4 – Fui a Viseu há cerca de 2 semanas. Tenho lá família, foi onde cresci.

P1 – Visitei vários durante o último ano, o último foi Aveiro há cerca de um mês.

P8 – Há cerca de um mês também visitei Aveiro.

P2 – Durante o ano de 2022 fui a vários. O último foi Coimbra em Novembro.

P5 – Eu fui Viseu, em março.

P3 – Fui a Vila Real no mês passado.

P6 – Aveiro visitei recentemente, Castelo Branco e Coimbra no verão do ano passado e à Serra da Estrela já não me recordo precisamente, mas talvez em 2021.

P7 – Recentemente também, fui a Leiria no último mês.

**Moderador: Sendo que todos já visitaram bastantes distritos da Região Centro, quando pensam em fazer uma viagem, esta região é uma opção óbvia para vocês? Porquê?**

P7 – Eu diria que sim, porque abrange determinados pontos turísticos e de lazer que vão de encontro aos meus gostos.

P2 – Sim. É uma das minhas regiões preferidas.

P1 – Sim, acho que é uma região muito rica, tem paisagens bonitas, cultura, monumentos históricos, excelente gastronomia... Tudo o que me atrai numa região turística.

P4 – Sim, concordo plenamente. A região centro tem imensos lugares para visitar, como museus, hotéis, restaurantes, come-se mesmo muito bem onde quer que vamos. Existem sempre coisas novas para explorar.

P3 - Sim, devido à diversidade de ofertas que esta região apresenta.

P8 - Sim, tem muitos lugares para explorar, principalmente a zona litoral que tem praias boas.

P5 - É um local de eleição de férias para a minha família, tradicionalmente. Costumo ir lá todos os anos nas férias de verão.

P6 - Depende da ocasião. De modo geral, não. Caso seja uma viagem de maior duração, por exemplo, férias de verão, a resposta é não. A minha primeira opção para viajar no Verão é a região sul. Para uma viagem de menor duração, e visto que implicaria menor custo de transporte e deslocação, a resposta poderia ser sim. No entanto, de um modo geral, as minhas opções focam-se ou na região Norte, ou caso implicasse maior deslocação a região Sul.

**Moderador: E consideram que a Região Centro reflete a vossa personalidade e a pessoa que são? Porquê?**

P1 - Sim, porque é a região onde vivo e com a qual me identifico.

P4 - Sim, eu também acho, é a região onde cresci e vai fazer sempre parte de quem eu sou.

P8 - Também foi a região onde cresci, por isso identifico-me.

P2 - Eu também, pelo sossego e história.

P3 - Sim, porque é uma região caracterizada por locais calmos e ligados à natureza.

P7 - Sim, eu considero que sim, porque é uma região eclética e que vai de encontro aos meus gostos e necessidades.

P5 - Eu pessoalmente não consigo bem associar uma região geográfica à minha personalidade.

P6 - Não. Não tenho qualquer ligação emocional ou afetiva à região Centro.

**Moderador: Na vossa opinião, podem esperar ofertas turísticas superiores desta Região?**

P7 - Sim.

P8 - Sim. Na minha opinião há muitas atividades e experiências enriquecedoras para se ter.

P1 - Sim, no entanto, há coisas que podem sempre melhorar, como por exemplo a informação disponível acerca dos locais. Mais especificamente, onde existe monumentos históricos, onde as explicações poderiam ser por exemplo em formato áudio em vez de suporte escrito, para a viagem ser mais intuitiva.

P5 – Sim, mas concordo que há sempre espaço para melhorar.

P2 – Sim.

P4 - Sim, completamente.

P3 – Considero que sim.

P6 – Depende da sazonalidade da oferta. No inverno sim, no verão não.

**Moderador: E acham que apresenta uma qualidade superior às outras, como Lisboa e Algarve?**

P1 – Sim, de acordo com os meus interesses sim. Porque eu prefiro o interior ao litoral. Gosto e conheço melhor a região centro. Sinto-me em casa onde quer que viaje.

P8 – Sim.

P2 – Não.

P3 – Também não. Essas regiões vivem muito do turismo estando mais preparadas e focadas.

P7 – Concordo. Zonas como o Algarve e Lisboa estão muito mais potencializadas para o turismo, fazendo assim com que sejam mais desenvolvidas nesse aspeto.

P4 - Sim.

P5 – Na minha opinião sim, no sentido de ser uma região mais calma, menos saturada a nível de turismo e densidade populacional. No entanto, nalgumas zonas da Região Centro, principalmente no interior, que têm acesso dificultado a certos serviços e oportunidades de trabalho, o que acaba também por culminar numa menor qualidade de vida, nesses aspetos. Penso que depende das prioridades de cada um.

P6 – Eu pessoalmente acho que não.

**Moderador: Por essas razões, preferem visitá-la em vez de outras regiões portuguesas?**

P1 – Sim.

P2 – Não.

P3 – Também não. Sendo residente na Região Centro dou preferência a outras regiões para passar férias.

P4 – Sim. Por ser uma região com atividades diversificadas, tem um pouco de tudo, como locais com muita história e também tem praia e montanha e ótima gastronomia.

P5 – Não. Gosto de visitar todas as regiões, acho que são todas muito ricas à sua maneira.

P6 – Depende da ocasião, no verão não, mas no inverno talvez. No inverno, a Serra da Estrela é um destino mais atrativo, pela neve que não se encontra noutra local do país e eliminando qualquer barreira na decisão.

P7 – Depende também. Irá depender do estado de espírito e da necessidade da visita.

P8 – Sim. Porque posso visitar em diversas alturas do ano, tem sempre muitas coisas para fazer, no verão praia, no inverno neve e montanha. E ao longo do ano tem outras coisas para ver.

**Moderador: Consideram-na o vosso destino preferido para umas férias? Porquê?**

P1 – Sim. Porque fica perto de casa e eu gosto de sentir essa proximidade.

P8 – Eu considero que sim. Porque transmite-me tranquilidade e paz, sem grandes confusões e existe muitos locais para passear e descansar.

P5 – Eu concordo. É um sítio calmo, onde geralmente, nos meses de verão o tempo é quente e estável. Apresenta, cada vez mais, ofertas de valor a nível turístico.

P4 – Eu também acho, pela diversidade de locais para explorar, existe um pouco de tudo para fazer e para visitar. No entanto, se falarmos em termos internacionais, prefiro visitar outros destinos turísticos.

P2 – Não. Embora a Região Centro seja um destino agradável, há outras com muito interesse.

P7 – Sim. Para além de estar perto de casa, é uma zona em tem mar, montanha e campo.

P3 – Eu pessoalmente não tenho preferência nas regiões, depende muito do que quero ver ou visitar nessa viagem, sendo que devido à grande diversidade de oferta apresentada na região centro, esta é sempre uma opção a ter em conta.

P6 – Não. Habitando na região Norte, quando se trata de uma deslocação que implicaria maior tempo e custo o Sul é normalmente a primeira opção.

**Moderador: Gostariam de visitá-la nas próximas férias?**

P7 – Sim.

P1 – Sim, eventualmente. Se fizer férias, vou para a região centro certamente.

P8 – Sim.

P4 – Eu também.

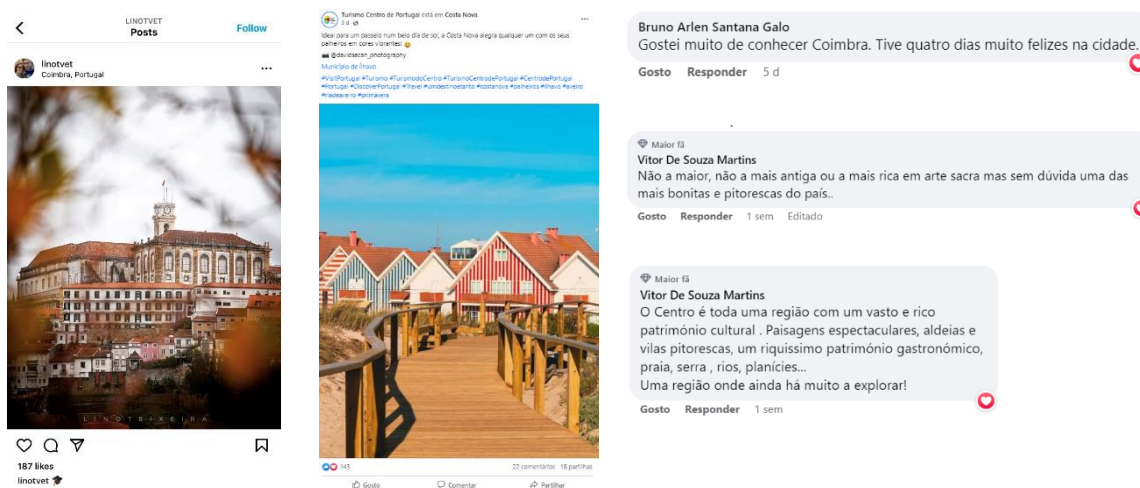
P2 – Sim.

P5 – Sim.

P3 – Sim.

P6 – De verão, não. De inverno, talvez.

**Moderador: Vou-vos agora mostrar algumas fotografias retiradas do Facebook do Turismo Centro de Portugal, que consistem em fotografias, feedback e comentários fornecidos por outros turistas. Costumam procurar conselhos e orientação neste tipo de conteúdo?**



P1 – Sim, gosto de saber informação de antemão para ir preparada e ter a viagem organizada. Assim sei os pontos de interesse.

P2 – Sim.

P3 – Sim.

P4 – Sim.

P5 – Sim, é sempre bom saber opiniões de outros turistas antes de fazer a minha viagem.

P6 – Sim.

P7 – Eu também costumo.

P8 – Pessoalmente, não costumo. Gosto de ir à descoberta.

**Moderador: À medida que vão consultando este tipo de conteúdo, sentem que concordam com as informações publicadas pelos outros turistas?**

P1 – Geralmente, sim. Principalmente com as positivas.

P2 – Sim, os que leio.

P3 - Nem sempre. Há sempre opiniões contrárias neste tipo de publicação.

P4 – A maioria das vezes, sim.

P5 – Eu diria que sim.

P6 – Uma vez adquirida a informação para validar a minha decisão, não tenho por hábito comparar a minha experiência com as dos outros utilizadores.

P7 – Sim.

P8 – Pelo o que vejo, por vezes sim.

**Moderador: Algum de vocês segue alguma rede social do Turismo Centro de Portugal? Qual?**

P1 – Sim. O Facebook.

P2 – Não.

P3 – Também não.

P4 – Sim. Sigo o Instagram.

P5 – Também sigo o Instagram.

P6 – Não.

P7 – Não.

P8 – Não sigo nenhuma.

**Moderador: Costumam interagir com as publicações?**

P1 – Habitualmente, coloco like.

P4 – Não.

P5 – Normalmente não.

**Moderador: Comentam? Ou partilham?**

P1 – Não comento. Partilho esporadicamente. Quando são posts que considero relevantes ou da minha cidade.

P4 – Não, nem uma nem outra.

P5 – Comentar, não comento. Se partilhar é porque a publicação é sobre a minha cidade.

**Moderador: Costumam criar conteúdos próprios ou deixar feedbacks online relacionados com o Turismo Centro de Portugal?**

P1 – Não.

P2 – Não.

P3 – Não.

P4 – Também não.

P5 – Não.

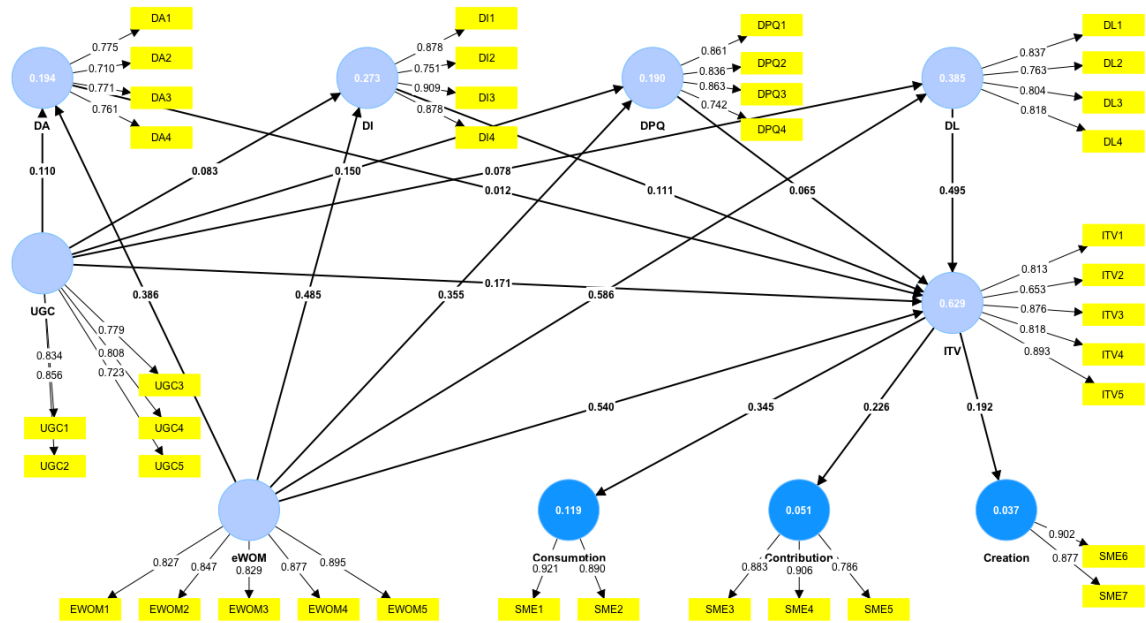
P6 – Não.

P7 – Não.

P8 – Também não.

# Appendix 4 - Structural Model: Path Coefficients

## Analysis 1



## Analysis 2

