

EXAMINING THE ROLE OF FAMILIARITY IN THE DESTINATION WORD-OF-MOUTH

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Abstract

After the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism has grown enormously; this growth has been even more significant in Portugal. The dissemination of experiences by tourists who have already visited a region significantly impacts the interest aroused by other tourists. It is increasingly common for tourists to analyse the experiences of others before they travel. In this sense, word-of-mouth by tourists is a factor to be considered in tourism. Since tourism is based on experiences and familiarity with destinations is reinforced by accumulated experiences, studying the effects of familiarity on tourists' intention to word-of-mouth would be relevant. Furthermore, given that the attitude towards the region visited comprises cognitive and affective dimensions, it would be relevant to analyse the effects of the attitude towards the region on the intention to word-of-mouth.

In this sense, this study sought to analyse the determining factors of word-of-mouth in tourism. To this end, a quantitative, cross-sectional survey was carried out, for which data was collected through a questionnaire from a sample of 906 tourists using the Smart PLS software. The results showed that familiarity with the region and attitudes towards the region is essential in tourists' intention to WOM. Therefore, this study supports the idea that tourist destinations should welcome tourists in the best way possible by providing them with greater familiarity with the region so that, through the word-of-mouth generated, it is possible to attract more tourists.

Keywords: word-of-mouth, attitude towards the region, place familiarity; tourism; destinations

1 INTRODUCTION

The perception and behaviour of visitors towards a given location play a key role in its overall popularity. Portugal's tourism sector has seen considerable growth and progress, playing a pivotal role in the country's economic and social advancement. Portugal's distinct traditions and warm atmosphere make it a captivating tourist destination. Additionally, the country's culinary offerings and overall delightful environment contribute to its appeal among visitors (Ramos & Costa, 2017). Turismo de Portugal (2022) states that this industry is essential for creating prosperity and job prospects. Portugal has become a well-known tourist destination with its diverse cultures and abundant heritage.

In modern society, there is an intense desire for visually engaging information formats such as videos. These formats offer vivid insights and appeal to potential tourists and destinations. Short videos have gained popularity and hold significant marketing potential for tourism, providing immersive experiences that resonate with viewers on an emotional level (Cao et al., 2021). Additionally, consumer preferences in choosing brands, products, or services have become more complex due to the varied attitudes shaped by factors such as destination advertising effectiveness and word of mouth communication from other consumers (Ray et al., 2021). To meet these evolving demands effectively, advertising communication should focus on connecting the brand and its consumers (Covaleski, 2010). Familiarity with a destination is crucial to tourists' attitudes towards the location and consumption intentions (Milman & Pizam, 1995). Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has strongly influenced travellers' decisions, aiding in informed decision-making (Bui et al., 2022). Travellers actively share their experiences and seek guidance on online platforms, powerfully shaping their perceptions of various destinations (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). This significantly influences shaping individuals' opinions about the appeal of places.

However, the link between attitude towards the region and word-of-mouth has yet to be sufficiently studied in the current literature. Therefore, this study aims to examine the impact of familiarity on tourists' attitudes toward the region and analyse how this influence the intention to WOM. The study presents a conceptual model within this framework that establishes connections between familiarity with the region, attitude towards the region, and word-of-mouth in promotional tourism videos. Extensive research was conducted to examine and confirm these relationships using the SMART-PLS program and PLS-SEM approach. The perceptions of 916 individuals who engaged with promotional videos were analysed. The results contribute to ongoing research into tourists' behaviour towards regions and underline the importance of using word-of-mouth promotion to attract more tourists.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Word-of-Mouth

WOM, as described by Westbrook (1987), "entails the informal sharing of opinions among consumers about the ownership, use, or features of specific goods, services, or their sellers" (p. 261). More recently and according to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004, p. 39), eWOM is characterised as "any favourable or unfavourable comment made by potential, current, or past customers about a product or company, which is accessible to numerous individuals and institutions through the internet". In recent years, consumers have obtained information from brand promotions, ads, online discussions, and input from other purchasers in the form of "online notifications, reviews, opinions, and recommendations" (Al-Gasawneh & Al-Adamat, 2020, p. 1702). In travel, this communication is vital in influencing attitudes toward destinations and facilitating the exchange of experiences among tourists (Bui et al., 2022). The considerable impact of online word-of-mouth holds undeniable importance in the contemporary digital era. Individuals sharing insights and perspectives online profoundly shape their decision-making patterns (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). In the era of expanding social media dominance, an increasing number of prospective travellers are sharing their travel experiences online, aiming to make well-informed decisions and helping others to do so.

Originally, WOM encompassed face-to-face exchanges among trusted individuals sharing their encounters with products or services (Chen & Law, 2016). Given the evolution of technology, communication methods have transformed. Today, millions can participate in and access online conversations regarding various products and services through eWOM. However, traditional word-of-mouth and current online word-of-mouth differ in various ways. The need for identifiable sources in eWOM poses a significant difference, posing

challenges in assessing the credibility of information (Park & Lee, 2009). Once transparent and now potentially anonymous, the sender's identity complicates the evaluation process. People find a sense of liberation from social expectations and the fear of criticism when they can remain anonymous. As a result, users feel more comfortable sharing their feedback on the Internet, leading to an increased authenticity of these expressions (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). Moreover, electronic word-of-mouth can reach a wider audience than traditional, typically limited to friends, family, and acquaintances (Chen & Law, 2016).

Engaging in WOM is driven by various motivations, including personal growth, consideration for others' experiences, allegiance to a brand, financial incentives, and social benefits (Shen et al., 2016). Consequently, WOM arises when a consumer harbours positive or negative sentiments about a product, service, or organisation. Sharing such information often stems from a willingness to aid fellow consumers by providing valuable insights.

Nowadays, sharing travel experiences through electronic word of mouth is essential, especially in tourism. Evaluating destinations before visiting them is difficult due to the intangible nature of many travel experiences (Chen & Law, 2016). Thus, with the help of advice and input from other individuals, prospective travellers can gather information to make well-informed choices and decisions. However, the dissemination and interpretation of eWOM may need to be revised. Due to different elements, the reviewer might intentionally or unintentionally modify their feedback, such as whether they have already read other reviews or have developed opinions prior to the experience (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the impact of this type of communication on tourists' decisions and their intention to visit a destination is substantial (Pektaş & Hassan, 2020).

2.2 Familiarity and Attitudes towards Region

The tourism sector is experiencing swift technological advancements, prompting marketing managers to devise a communication approach primarily centred on digital marketing (Bhat & Shah, 2014). This involves utilising platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. Furthermore, reaching final decisions about services, especially in the tourism industry, has become more intricate due to market fragmentation and the diversity of consumer dynamics. Consequently, travellers actively seek strategies to reduce the risks of making destination-related decisions (Bianchi et al., 2017). The rise of YouTube as a platform for marketing videos has transformed how businesses seek to drive online traffic and advertise their products while altering how consumers engage with and respond to tourism offerings (Roy et al., 2020). This is evident in the increasing challenges tourism marketing faces in capturing market dynamics.

Familiarity is an essential consideration in service selection and has implications for risk perceptions, decision-making, destination image, tourist behaviour, and consumption intentions (Milman & Pizam, 1995). According to the same author, destination familiarity encompasses tourists' impressions and perceptions of a specific tourist area. It may be shaped by previous travel experiences or information about the destination (Baloglu, 2001). Hernández et al. (2007) describe place familiarity perceptions as an individual's positive or negative emotional bond regarding a specific location. Moreover, place familiarity also affects tourists' behaviour, such as their loyalty to the locals and intention to visit again.

Chen et al. (2023, p. 4) define destination familiarity or place attachment as "tourists' emotional sustenance and functional dependence on a destination". Scholars have different opinions regarding the components of place attachment. Place identity and place reliance are two commonly accepted dimensions in studies on place attachment across different settings (Lee et al., 2012). Place identity refers to the level of identity tourists have about a location they find exclusive, which aligns with their own identity (Proshansky et al., 1983). Place dependence focuses on the physical characteristics of a destination and associated activities (Williams & Vaske, 2003). It refers to the attachment the tourist develops, which is more profound when the destination fulfils its needs (Moore & Graefe, 1994). Travellers familiar with locations have favourable impressions of the destination's attributes and foster positive attitudes towards the place, unlike when visiting unfamiliar places (Xue et al., 2022).

Moreover, incorporating well-known locations into brand promotions can significantly enhance consumer responses to the destination's placement, as suggested by Jung and Childs (2019). Furthermore, as per Milman and Pizam (1995), individuals with a deeper understanding of a destination tend to rely more on external sources of information than those who are less familiar. Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forward:

H1: Familiarity with the region influences Tourist Attitude towards the Region.

H2: Familiarity with the region influences Word-of-Mouth dissemination.

In turn, as per Pereira et al. (2019), attitude is an acquired and experiential inclination that influences individuals' steady reactions to something, whether positive or negative. In tourism, attitude relates to tourists' emotions and predispositions towards holiday destinations and the amenities provided by these locations (Bresciani et al., 2015). It is essential to consider the unique elements of a region's culture, customs, practices, and geographical features. These elements, combined with human behaviour and local assets, make the region's attractions distinct and set them apart from others (Charton-Vachet et al., 2020). According to Andereck et al. (2005), locals also play an essential role in supporting tourism and shaping perceptions of tourists. Actions promoting regional branding could impact a region's view, ultimately shaping tourists' attitudes and choices regarding that destination (Charton-Vachet et al., 2020). When customers hold a positive view of the brand and have good experiences and a solid emotional connection, they develop brand affection (Karjaluoto et al., 2016). According to the same author, this emotional bond ultimately leads to positive WOM and eWOM. That said, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H3: Tourist Attitude towards the Region influences WOM.

The hypotheses put forward in this study have developed a theoretical framework, illustrated in Figure 1. This framework aims to demonstrate the connections and links between different variables under investigation.

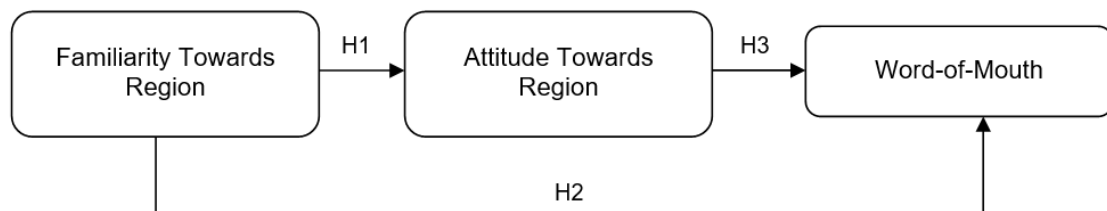


Image 1 - Conceptual Model

3 METHODOLOGY

This research uses a quantitative approach, using a questionnaire. The questions in the questionnaire were based on studies by other authors and were adapted to fit the context of this study better. They were shown a video advertisement to collect the data and then given a direct link to the questionnaire. After viewing the video, the individuals answered the questionnaire using an electronic device. Thus, the attitude towards the region scale was adapted from Carlson et al. (2020), the familiarity with the region scale was adapted from Bianchi et al. (2017), and the WOM scale was adapted from Kang et al. (2020). The questionnaire answers were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). This allowed respondents to express their degree of agreement or disagreement. The study sample included 906 individuals living mainly in the central region of Portugal (70.3%). In addition, approximately 70% of the respondents were female, and nearly 50% were under 22 (Table 1).

Table 1 - Sample Characterisation

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	284	31.3
	Female	619	68.3
	Other	3	0.33
Age	≤22	431	47.6
	23-38	216	23.8

Variable	Category	N	%
	39-54	195	21.5
	55-73	63	7.0
	≥74	1	0.1
Academic Qualifications	Primary Education	71	7.8
	Secondary Education	416	45.9
	Bachelor Degree	342	37.7
	Master's Degree	70	7.7
	PhD	7	0.8
Occupation	Student	381	42.0
	Worker-Student	79	8.7
	Employed	401	44.2
	Unemployed	25	2.8
	Retired	20	2.2
Residence	North of Portugal	122	13.5
	Center of Portugal	638	70.4
	Lisbon Region	48	5.3
	Alentejo Region	63	7.0
	Algarve Region	13	1.4
	Açores	3	0.3
	Madeira	3	0.3
	Out of Portugal	16	1.8

4 RESULTS

In order to measure the validity and reliability of the measurement model, Smart PLS 3.3.2. the software was used. Subsequently, the structural model was analysed to assess the constructs' correlations and the hypotheses' validity. Table 2 shows the results of the measurement model, including Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient, t-values, p-values and average variance extracted (AVE). The variance between the constructs is considered satisfactory, with the AVE ranging from 0.680 to 0.816. The validity of all standardised coefficients for the items is confirmed, as they meet the minimum acceptable value of 0.7 recommended by

Hair et al. (2017). High levels of internal consistency are seen within each construct, as indicated by composite reliability values ranging from 0.946 to 0.895, which surpass literature recommendations (CR > 0.7), thereby ensuring the strength and validity of the constructs (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 2 - Measurement Model

Latent Variable	λ	CF	AVE
ATT	0,924	0,946	0,814
FAM	0,844	0,895	0,680
WOM	0,889	0,930	0,816

To assess the measurement model, discriminant validity was evaluated. The Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion was employed to evaluate whether the square root of the average variance extracted from each construct exceeds its correlations with other latent constructs (Hair et al., 2017), as depicted in Table 3. These findings indicate a distinction among the constructs, validating discriminant validity.

Table 3 - Discriminant Validity - Fornell and Larcker Criterion (1981)

	ATT	FAM	WOM
ATT	0,902		
FAM	0,354	0,825	
WOM	0,378	0,383	0,903

The correlation between these variables was analysed after verifying the measurement model's coherence. The results provide solid evidence for all the hypotheses tested (Table 4).

Table 4 - Direct Effects - Hypothesis Validation

Hypothesis	Trajectory	β	t-values	p-values	Validation
H1	FAM → ATT	0,355	11,036	0,000	Corroborated
H2	FAM → WOM	0,285	8,369	0,000	Corroborated
H3	ATT → WOM	0,278	8,434	0,000	Corroborated

5 DISCUSSION

Prayag et al. (2017) suggest maintaining a positive attitude towards a place can increase attachment. Shen et al. (2019) observed that residents' more positive attitudes toward tourism were linked to higher levels of destination attachment. More research is needed regarding Hypothesis 1. The present study validates this hypothesis ($\beta_{FAM \rightarrow ATT} = 0,355$; $p < 0.01$), contributing to the literature. Thus, it is concluded that familiarity with

the destination influences the attitude towards the region.

The acquaintance level significantly impacts behaviours such as sharing information with others, as demonstrated in this study. According to Prayag et al. (2017), attachment and reliance on a specific place influence intentions to recommend the destination, indicating that individuals with stronger attachments are more inclined to advocate for the destination. Likewise, according to Beldad et al. (2016), familiarity with the destination will affect the intention to spread WOM recommendations, supporting H2 ($\beta_{FAM \rightarrow WOM} = 0,285$; $p < 0.01$).

Hypothesis 3 was corroborated ($\beta_{ATT \rightarrow WOM} = 0,278$; $p < 0.01$), aligning with the perspectives of researchers like Karjaluoto et al. (2016) and Charton-Vachet et al. (2020). Influential factors such as local customs, gastronomy, interactions with residents and marketing efforts shape tourists' awareness of the destination. This influences their attitudes and preferences regarding that location (Charton-Vachet et al., 2020). Tourists' relationship with the destination ultimately results in positive recommendations through various channels, including digital ones (Karjaluoto et al., 2016).

6 CONCLUSION

This study explored how familiarity influences tourists' perceptions of the region and its impact on their intentions. The findings of this research confirm the critical role of familiarity in influencing tourists' perceptions of a destination. The favourable effect of familiarity on perception emphasises the significance of establishing connections between prospective travellers and the areas they are interested in. This study has demonstrated that a greater knowledge of a destination nurtures positive perceptions, encouraging a feeling of attachment.

Additionally, the research shows a strong connection between familiarity and the desire to engage in word-of-mouth communication. Travellers who are more acquainted with a destination tend to share their experiences and actively contribute towards promoting the area through positive word-of-mouth communication. This is consistent with findings from Prayag et al. (2017) and Beldad et al. (2016), highlighting the importance of familiarity in influencing favourable recommendations. This study also determines the direct impact of attitudes on word-of-mouth. A favourable perspective toward a location contributes to tourists' tendency to share their experiences. This discovery aligns with scholars' viewpoints, such as Karjaluoto et al. (2016) and Charton-Vachet et al. (2020), highlighting the complex connection between tourist views, attitudes, and subsequent endorsements. Thus, this study backs the notion that tourist destinations should warmly receive visitors, offering them more knowledge about the area to attract a more significant influx of tourists potentially through generated word-of-mouth.

For future studies, we suggest investigating how electronic word-of-mouth's familiarity, attitude, and dynamics vary between different cultural contexts. In addition, explore whether the effectiveness of promotional videos and eWOM differs based on cultural nuances and preferences.

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