

User-Generated Content in Tourism: Could it Impact Brand Equity and Intention to Visit?

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Abstract. The Internet has changed communication and created significant challenges for the tourism and hospitality sectors. Due to the abundance of tourist destinations available, competition is fierce. Therefore, destinations must devise strategies to set themselves apart and strengthen customer brand equity by providing informative and engaging content on digital platforms, specifically social media, with millions of users. Web 2.0 allows users to generate and distribute information through user-generated content and e-word-of-mouth as trustworthy sources for tourist information that can significantly influence travellers' decision-making process. Therefore, businesses must share pertinent information and incentivize online customer feedback on social media platforms where ideas and opinions are highly valued. These can influence a potential tourist's decision to visit, which makes them critical to destination promotion. Effective communication is essential in shaping consumer opinion and fostering strong customer relationships. This study analyses whether user-generated content impacts brand equity and visitation intentions. It utilized a quantitative approach, using a survey to collect data from tourists and potential tourists of Portugal's Central Region. The sample size consisted of 515 participants. The collected data was then analyzed statistically with the assistance of Smart PLS 3.3.2 software. Based on the results, it was found that user-generated content has an impact on destination awareness, perceived quality, and intention to visit.

Keywords: User-Generated content, Brand equity, Intention to visit, Tourism

1. Introduction

Incorporating technology into our everyday lives has led to businesses seamlessly transitioning online, enhancing customer interactions. This shift towards novel communication avenues enabled by technological developments has facilitated new social connections. Marketers and customers can effortlessly connect on digital platforms, and companies must comprehend their client's needs to maintain a strategic online presence that caters to personalized content suggestions or guidance. The Internet has significantly impacted tourism, with digital marketing influencing customer decisions. Travellers use online and offline resources to plan trips, making it easier than ever to select and book hotels or vacation packages through online platforms and social media.

Nowadays, users exhibit a critical and opinionated attitude towards brands, products, services, and experiences. The trust in fellow travellers' reviews is high, emphasizing the importance for businesses to share pertinent information while encouraging user-generated content. Individuals can now create their digital footprint by writing reviews of restaurants, lodgings, or airlines and sharing text, images, and videos about their experiences. Such information is deemed more credible than that supplied by the corporation due to its authenticity and impartiality. This enables potential travellers to make informed decisions through insights gained from others' feedback and recommendations. Positive customer opinion creates consumer-based brand equity (CBBE), adding value to goods/services (Cervova & Vavrova, 2021). The destination's communication, from both entities and tourists, influences the consumer's perception and intention to visit (Fu et al., 2016). Therefore, tourism organizations should disseminate compelling material that is pertinent and stimulate user sharing. Due to the participative nature of consumers on social networks and the significance of opinion-sharing in tourism, it was vital to investigate if user-generated content impacts brand equity and visitation intentions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 User-Generated Content

User-generated content (UGC) is defined as user-generated material distributed to a large audience through social media or other channels (Tirunillai & Tellis, 2012). Because it presents an unbiased perspective and has no immediate financial interest to the provider, user-generated content is frequently seen as more reliable than corporate-produced content (Cheong & Morrison, 2008). This type of content is only considered accurate, truthful, and genuine when not controlled by a corporation (Sawaftah et al., 2021). Both consumers and businesses can benefit from using user-generated material. It offers precise consumer data and can be utilized

to determine what people desire (Timoshenko & Hauser, 2019). Companies frequently encounter UGC regarding their products and services online as more people use the digital world, and many support its spread (Yang et al., 2019). This indicates that businesses value user-generated content (UGC) and embrace receiving positive and negative customer feedback. Companies can incorporate it into their marketing strategies to realize their full potential.

User comments, reviews, opinions on blog posts or online articles, text submissions, and user-created audio, photos, and videos are some of the many forms of UGC (Naab & Sehl, 2016). UGC can be shared through several platforms, including websites, blogs, and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube (Ana & Istudor, 2013). Information on products, services, events, and businesses is sometimes given to educate people. Dedeoğlu et al. (2020) assert that it might also be motivated by the desire to sate hedonistic urges.

Technological advancements and the advent of online social networks and platforms have encouraged exchanging travel-related ideas and experiences in written form and more visually attractive media like images and videos. These formats usually have more visual appeal and persuasiveness. This has led to the widespread sharing of tourism-related information via Instagram photographs and YouTube vlogs (Nguyen & Tong, 2022). Since it provides accurate and up-to-date information about popular tourist destinations and practical travel advice, it has flourished as an essential resource in the tourism industry. It lessens their concerns and doubts while assisting future tourists in making decisions. Because of its traits and features, it is an extensively utilized tool.

2.2 Brand Equity

Tourism brand equity alludes to the perceived value of a particular tourism destination or service among prospective tourists. This value encompasses intangible elements, such as a traveller's emotional bond with a specific location, and tangible components, such as its built environment and natural beauty. According to Cervova and Vavrova (2021), if a company projects an image of excellence, reliability, and proficiency, its clients can expect comparable features in both its products and services. As stated by Keller (1993), the conduct being referred to is recognized as customer-based brand equity (CBBE) and characterized as the "differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to brand marketing" (p. 2). Consequently, brand equity is acknowledged as an increase in worth conferred upon a product or service when customers possess a positive, robust, and distinguishing perception of the destination; this will ultimately impact how they react towards corporations' advertising strategies. Destination loyalty, destination awareness, destination image and quality are frequently employed when researching customer-based brand equity in tourism (Konečnik & Gartner, 2007).

Destination Awareness - Brand awareness is a significant component regularly used to measure customer-based brand equity for a tourism destination (CBBETD) in the tourism sector, particularly regarding travel destinations (Konečnik & Gartner, 2007; Boo et al., 2009). This dimension reflects how aware and acquainted people are with a good or service (Keller, 1993). In the tourism industry, it is described as a traveller's capacity to recognize and distinguish a place they have heard about before. A traveller's brand awareness grows once they begin learning about a destination (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020), and they must strongly prefer one location over competitors (Dedeoğlu et al., 2019). Today, it is crucial to be reachable across the many digital platforms that consumers, mainly tourists, frequently use. The first step in grabbing customers' attention is publishing interesting, pertinent, instructive, and alluring content.

Destination Image - The CBBETD model's image destination is considered its most pertinent and vital dimension. Destination image, as defined by Chiu et al. (2013), is a "set of qualities, attributes, and benefits that visitors have about the destination" (p. 877), which might be crucial for travellers to differentiate one location from another. When positive, this image motivates visitors to visit, return, and suggest the destination to acquaintances (Červová & Vávrová, 2021). According to Ferrer-Rosell and Mariné-Roig (2020), opinions and thoughts can be formed through the corporate image communicated by the tourism company and through sharing opinions by other tourists (e.g., e-word of mouth). The brand positioning must be expressed honestly and truthfully so that the visitor's expectations will be near what is communicated. This CBBETD factor influences a destination's success since those with a positive brand image are more likely to be visited and receive favourable evaluations.

Destination Loyalty - Destination loyalty is another critical component of CBBETD. Destination loyalty in tourism refers to the possibility that visitors will return and recommend a specific site to others (Mechinda et al., 2009). When a visitor enjoys the experience and connects with the place, staying loyal and returning later is natural.

Using all available tools to build and retain brand loyalty in this highly competitive period is crucial. Because of this, a continuous level of quality in tourism-related products or services is required (Lassar et al., 1995). Based on previous travel experiences, the tourist will set expectations that he will then maintain; if the quality of the services declines, the tourist will be dissatisfied on subsequent visits. The tourists' commitment and devotion to the location would decrease, and they might be enticed to hunt for alternatives among the rivals.

Destination Perceived Quality - According to Aaker (1991), perceived destination quality refers to "the customer's perception of the overall quality or superiority of a product or service relative to its intended purpose, relative to alternatives" (p. 85). According to Saeed and Shafique (2019), the construct of perceived quality entails assessing the cost, amenities, and other similar aspects the destination provides. This CBBETD component is relatively easy to determine because it calls for analyzing visitors' perceptions of the goods and services and their experiences while going to the destination (Červová & Vávrová, 2021). A destination's overall quality, which includes its surroundings, natural and cultural attractions, hotel amenities, and activities accessible to tourists, is a significant factor in deciding how satisfied it will be. Tourism organizations must prioritize the standard of their hospitality services to draw tourists and meet their expectations effectively.

2.3 Intention to Visit

The unexpectedness and unpredictability of tourism services set them apart from other products. Therefore, the intention to come is associated with a high-risk investment since visitors still determine their experiences (Chen et al., 2014). According to Albarq (2013), eWOM might influence travellers' perceptions of places and travel plans. As a result, positive feedback or opinions that eWOM receives can affect the consumer's choice and, as a result, the intention to visit. Therefore, potential tourists can trust other travellers' viewpoints and other online information, such as the Firm Generated Content's broadcast of accurate and pertinent information and the opinions of other visitors (UGC and eWOM). The destination's image will be developed and shaped using this data, which can favour travellers' intentions to travel there (Fu et al., 2016). Therefore, the destination image, shaped by cognitive and emotional factors (De La Hoz-Correa & Muñoz-Leiva, 2018) and the destination value and quality (Ranjbarian & Pool, 2015), might affect and predict travellers' intentions. According to de la Hoz-Correa and Muñoz-Leiva (2018), this perception is developed through various online and offline information sources, significantly impacting travellers' intent to travel.

2.4 Tourist Destination Online Communication

Nowadays, both socially and economically, tourism is a significant sector. As a result, this industry has more competition, and a more substantial emphasis is placed on the tourism product. As a result, some vacation destinations are increasingly viewed as brands that help countries stand out and compete (Saeed & Shafique, 2019). One of the most significant peculiarities of the tourism industry is that purchasing the tourism product occurs before contact with it. Hence, approaching tourism destinations as brands and implementing promotional techniques becomes increasingly crucial (IPDT, 2023). The primary point of contact for prospective tourists with the tourism product they intend to purchase is increasingly the material others share on social media.

Consequently, advertising is crucial to entice potential tourists and set the place apart from others (IPDT, 2023). Social media and destination promotion are the main driving forces influencing tourist behaviour. The younger generation's predisposition to use social media will only grow, according to Tourism Economics (2019). Hotelmize (Truyols, 2022) figures show that 34% of customers who book a hotel do so after hearing about it from others on social media. Hence, it is essential to comprehend social media in the framework of marketing and communication and use it to promote locations and boost tourism.

2.5 Turismo Centro de Portugal

Global economic growth and social advancement are fueled by tourism. Portugal has always been viewed as a country of considerable interest and focus for various cultures, and it is today accepted as a reliable and well-known tourism destination. The nation's distinct traditions and rich cultural heritage make it intriguing and one of a kind. In addition to its friendliness, gastronomy, and pleasant ambience, many people consider Portugal a preferred vacation spot (Ramos & Costa, 2017). Turismo Centro de Portugal (TCP) is responsible for growing tourism in the Central Region. This organization has garnered several communications honours, enhancing Portugal's position as a top travel destination.

Turismo Centro de Portugal (TCP) has been recognized with various communication accolades for promoting Portuguese tourism. The fast-paced technological advancements within the industry have prompted TCP to

prioritize digital channels such as its website and Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter platforms for its latest marketing efforts. In addition, they use a variety of online strategies, namely user-generated content in their social networks. By utilizing these online tools effectively, TCP aims to engage customers by understanding their preferences and fostering stronger relationships.

3. Methodology Approach

A quantitative approach was employed to examine and compare the proposed hypotheses with the observed and collected data. A questionnaire survey was deemed the most suitable research method for this investigation. The survey was conducted among individuals who visited or considered visiting the Central Region of Portugal. The survey's primary objective is to understand how electronic word-of-mouth influences tourists' perceptions of destinations and their intentions to see them. Scales that other authors had already verified were employed to address concerns regarding the accuracy and consistency of the present study. The scales suffered from some adjustments to meet our research's specific needs and objectives. The measurement scale for the four dimensions of destination brand equity was adapted from Boo et al. (2009) study. The scaling used to measure electronic word-of-mouth was derived from the research conducted by Velázquez et al. (2015), while the scale for measuring travel intention was based on the work of Su et al. (2020). All the items on the questionnaire were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to agree strongly. This questionnaire sample constituted 515 individuals living in Portugal, of whom 69.3% are female and 29.7% are male (Table 1).

Table 1: Sample Characterization

Variable	Items	Frequencies	%
Gender	Male	153	29.7
	Female	357	69.3
	Rather Not Say	5	1.0
Age	≤22	110	21.4
	23-38	299	58.1
	39-54	78	15.1
	55-73	25	4.9
	≥74	3	0.6
Academic Qualifications	Under Primary Education	0	0
	Primary Education	1	0.2
	Lower Secondary Education	10	1.9
	Upper Secondary Education	121	23.5
	Bachelor's Degree	249	48.3
	Master's Degree	127	24.7
	PhD	7	1.4
Professional Status	Employed	255	49.5
	Student	119	23.1
	Unemployed	17	3.3
	Working Student	64	12.4
	Self-Employed	49	9.5
	Retired	7	1.4
	Other	4	0.8

4. Results

The data obtained from the research were evaluated using Smart PLS 3.3.2 software. The reliability and validity of the measurement model were examined to ensure its accuracy and consistency. Afterwards, attention was focused on analyzing the structural model to determine how various constructs are interconnected and thus test for any existing hypotheses. Table 2 presents an overview of metrics that can be used to assess the performance of the measurement model. Results show that all constructs have satisfactory levels of explained

variance, reinforcing their relevance in this study (AVE>0.5). The minimum acceptable value for the standardized coefficients of the items is 0.7, according to Hair et al. (2017). Additionally, the composite reliability values ranging from 0.573 to 0.758 demonstrate an acceptable internal consistency among the items within each construct, which aligns with the commonly suggested values in literature (CR > 0.7) for ensuring the robustness and validity of constructs (Hair et al., 2017). The values for Cronbach's Alpha range from 0 to 1 (Cheung et al., 2023), with higher values indicating more excellent reliability (CA > 0.7); therefore, all values are considered acceptable.

Table 2: Measurement Model

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
DA	0.756	0.843	0.573
DI	0.877	0.916	0.733
DL	0.822	0.880	0.648
DPQ	0.845	0.896	0.684
UGC	0.861	0.900	0.644
ITV	0.893	0.926	0.758

Discriminant validity was also assessed using the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion, where the square root of the average variance extracted from each construct exceeds its correlations with other latent constructs (Hair et al., 2017). The results in Table 3 indicate a distinction between the constructs, implying discriminant validity.

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

	DA	DI	DL	DPQ	UGC	ITV
DA	0.756					
DI	0.585	0.856				
DL	0.621	0.704	0.805			
DPQ	0.579	0.475	0.605	0.827		
UGC	0.259	0.271	0.271	0.476	0.802	
ITV	0.493	0.271	0.711	0.476	0.374	0.871

As seen in Table 4, three of the five hypotheses formulated were accepted and validated, while the remaining two were not corroborated.

Table 4: Hypothesis Validation - Total Effects

		β	T-Value	P-Value	Result
H1a	User-Generated Content → Destination Awareness	0.109	2.016	0.044	Accepted
H1b	User-Generated Content → Destination Image	0.082	1.658	0.097	Rejected
H1c	User-generated content → Destination Perceived Quality	0.150	2.744	0.006	Accepted
H1d	User-generated content → Destination Loyalty	0.076	1.498	0.134	Rejected
H2	User-Generated Content → Intention to Visit	0.117	3.270	0.001	Accepted

5. Discussion

Concerning Hypothesis 1a, this was supported ($p=0.044$; $p<0.05$), validating the literature's assertion that user-generated social media brand communication has a positive impact on brand awareness, as argued by Schivinski and Dabrowski (2015). Additionally, as Dedeoğlu et al. (2020) mentioned, user-generated content on social media platforms incorporating organizations impacts destination awareness. Thus, it can be concluded that user-generated content aids in developing awareness for tourists visiting the central region of Portugal.

The objective of testing this hypothesis (Hypothesis 1b) was to confirm whether user-generated content affects the formation of the destination image. As a result, this variable did not receive validation with a p-value above 0.05 ($p=0.097$). The lack of validation for this variable could be explained by the potential adaptation of

questionnaire items from other cited authors, which may not accurately capture behaviour in the Portuguese context. Nguyen and Tong (2022) also found that passive exposure to travel-related user-generated content did not significantly impact the destination image.

Hypothesis 1c has been confirmed ($p=0.006$; $p<0.01$), indicating that user-created content affects brand equity by influencing the perceived quality of the destination, in line with prior research findings in the literature (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015; Stojanovic et al., 2022). Schivinski and Dabrowski (2015) suggest that content created by users positively impacts the perceived quality of brands. Similarly, Stojanovic et al. (2022) found that user-generated content positively influences tourist behaviour, highlighting its significance in enhancing the perceived quality and value of destinations. Therefore, it can be deduced that content produced by fellow tourists shapes respondents' perceptions of the quality of the Portuguese central region.

The results indicate that the p-value for Hypothesis 1d is more significant than 0.05 ($p=0.134$), which means it did not reach statistical significance and cannot be considered conclusive evidence. Therefore, the content created by fellow tourists on social networks could be more extensive in establishing destination loyalty among respondents. There is a notorious gap in this correlation in the tourism sector. Hermaren and Achyar (2018) found no significant connection between brand loyalty and user-generated content in the cosmetics sector. This contradicts the conclusions drawn by Schivinski and Dabrowski (2015), who identified a significant correlation between user-created content and brand loyalty. The inability to confirm this hypothesis might stem from the unimpressive user-generated content related to central Portugal or a need for sufficient information to form a favourable impression among tourists.

Finally, the validation of Hypothesis 2 ($p=0.000$; $p<0.01$) enables us to assert that user-generated content significantly influences tourists' willingness to visit, corroborating earlier research results (Latif et al., 2020; Nguyen & Tong, 2022). Latif et al. (2020) state that exposure to travel-related content on Facebook can inspire people's interest in visiting the corresponding destination. Nguyen and Tong (2022) investigated the impact of user-generated content on individuals' preferences for selecting a specific travel destination. The results indicated that having access to such content significantly increased the intention to choose and the eagerness to visit a particular travel location.

6. Final Considerations

Academic research in the field has increasingly emphasized digital content marketing. Nevertheless, more studies must focus on user-generated content and its connection to brand equity dimensions and intention to visit. This study, therefore, aims to understand whether tourists' brand equity is influenced by user-generated content and, in turn, whether this influences tourists' intention to visit.

The findings indicate that the perceptions tourists hold about a destination are influenced by user-generated content, particularly regarding awareness and perceived quality. Additionally, user-generated content has demonstrated an impact on tourists' intention to visit, highlighting the significance of fellow travellers' opinions in attracting potential tourists, irrespective of the medium used (such as text, video, or images).

The findings of this research provide valuable recommendations for marketing experts and tourism destination managers. In the current landscape, tourism brands must prioritize social media as a central element of their marketing approach. Social media platforms and online resources can benefit businesses, enhancing visibility and establishing a solid brand identity. Effectively leveraging these channels allows organizations to capitalize on opportunities to promote themselves in the competitive tourism industry. Marketers must devise compelling methods to encourage tourists to generate and share content featuring appealing landscapes and elements. This approach will not only enhance the brand value of the destination but also captivate the attention and desire of potential visitors to explore the area.

The sociodemographic attributes of the participants posed a potential constraint in validating specific hypotheses. The study sample primarily comprised individuals aged 22 to 38 and mainly resided in districts such as Viseu, Aveiro, and Coimbra in central Portugal. This could be seen as a geographic limitation. To mitigate these constraints, applying the models to more diverse samples encompassing participants across all age brackets and from different geographical locations nationally and internationally is recommended. Furthermore, in future research, it is advisable to implement this study in various national and international settings, as the current research is limited to the Central region of Portugal.

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