



International Conference on Industry Sciences and Computer Science Innovation

The Role of User-Generated Content on Brand Equity and Intention to Visit

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Abstract

The emergence of the Internet has revolutionized communication and posed notable obstacles for the tourism and hospitality industries. Intense competition among numerous tourist destinations necessitates the development of distinct strategies to enhance customer brand loyalty by delivering informative and compelling content on digital platforms, mainly social media, which boasts millions of users. Effective communication is crucial in shaping consumer perceptions and nurturing robust customer connections. Businesses must disseminate relevant information and encourage online customer feedback on social media platforms where thoughts and viewpoints hold considerable weight. Web 2.0 enables individuals to create and share information through user-generated content and electronic word-of-mouth, serving as reliable sources for tourist-related details that significantly influence travellers' decision-making processes. These inputs can sway potential tourists' decisions to visit, making them pivotal in destination marketing efforts. A qualitative methodology was employed during a focus group session to gauge participants' views regarding user-generated content's impact on various dimensions of brand equity and their inclination to visit. A case study was conducted in the Central Region of Portugal and focused on Turismo Centro de Portugal. The results revealed that individuals who engage with user-generated content and follow the Tourism Center of Portugal on social media demonstrate increased brand equity and a greater intention to visit. Additionally, those originating from the Portuguese Central Region exhibit a deeper connection and sense of belonging to it.

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Peer review under the responsibility of the scientific committee of the International Conference on Industry Sciences and Computer Science Innovation

Keywords: User-Generated Content; Brand Equity; Intention to Visit; Tourism

1. Introduction

Incorporating technology into people's everyday routines has prompted businesses to shift towards online platforms, enhancing client engagement seamlessly. This move towards innovative communication channels, facilitated by technological progress, has nurtured revitalized social connections. Marketing professionals and consumers can easily engage on digital interfaces, requiring companies to understand their customers' preferences to maintain a strategic online presence that offers tailored content recommendations or assistance. The Internet has substantially impacted the tourism industry, with digital marketing influencing traveller choices. Tourists use online and offline sources to plan their trips, making choosing and reserving accommodations or vacation packages more convenient through various online platforms and social media outlets. Nowadays, consumers hold strong and subjective views about brands, products, services, and experiences. There is a high reliance on fellow travellers' reviews, highlighting the need for businesses to provide relevant information while promoting user-generated content. Individuals can now establish their online presence by reviewing restaurants, accommodations, or airlines and sharing text, images, and videos of their experiences. Such content is considered more trustworthy than that provided by companies due to its genuine and unbiased nature. This allows potential travellers to make well-informed decisions based on insights from others' feedback and recommendations. Positive customer sentiment contributes to consumer-based brand equity, increasing the value of goods/services. The communication between organizations and tourists impacts consumers' perceptions and their intention to visit (Fu et al., 2016). Therefore, tourism entities should distribute relevant and compelling material and prioritize stimulating user engagement.

The engagement of consumers on social media and the importance of sharing opinions in the tourism industry made it necessary to study the influence of user-generated content on brand equity and intentions to visit.

2. Literature Review

2.1 User-Generated Content

User-generated content refers to user-generated material shared with a broad audience via social media or other platforms. Because it comes from an impartial standpoint and is not driven by immediate financial interests, user-generated content is often considered more trustworthy than corporate-generated content. Authenticity, truthfulness, and genuineness (Sawaftah et al., 2021) are only attributed to this content independent of corporate control (Cheong & Morrison, 2008). Both consumers and businesses can gain valuable insights from using user-generated materials. It provides accurate consumer data and helps identify popular preferences (Timoshenko et al., 2019). With the increasing use of digital platforms, companies frequently come across UGC related to their products and services online, with many embracing its proliferation (Yang et al., 2019). This demonstrates that businesses value user-generated content as they welcome positive and negative customer feedback. Businesses can integrate it into their marketing strategies to fully leverage its potential.

User-generated content includes comments, reviews, opinions on blog posts or online articles, text submissions, and audio-visual material (Naab & Sehl, 2016). UGC is distributed through multiple channels, including websites, blogs, and popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube (Ana & Istudor, 2019). This content often provides information about products, services, events and businesses to inform or satisfy hedonistic desires, as Dedeoğlu et al. (2020) suggested.

Technological progressions and the rise of online social networks and platforms have prompted the exchange of travel-related ideas and experiences in written form and visually appealing media such as images and videos, which tend to be more persuasive. This trend has resulted in the widespread sharing of tourism-related content through Instagram photos and YouTube vlogs (Nguyen & Tong, 2022). These platforms have become a crucial resource in the tourism industry by providing accurate, current information about popular tourist destinations and practical travel advice. They alleviate concerns and doubts while aiding prospective travellers in decision-making, making them an extensively used tool due to their attributes.

2.2 Brand Equity

The perceived value that potential tourists place on a specific tourism site or service is referred to as tourism brand equity. This value includes physical aspects like the area's architectural environment, natural beauty, and intangible aspects like the traveller's emotional connection with a specific spot. Cervova and Vavrova (2021) assert that

customers might anticipate similar qualities in a company's goods and services if it presents an image of excellence, dependability, and competence. Consequently, when customers positively perceive a destination, it enhances the worth conferred upon its product or service, which impacts their reactions to corporate advertising strategies. Destination loyalty, awareness, image and quality are commonly studied when examining customer-based brand equity in tourism (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007).

Destination Awareness - in the tourism industry, particularly about travel destinations, is a critical factor that is frequently used to quantify customer-based brand equity for a tourism destination (CBBETD) (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Boo et al., 2009). People's awareness and familiarity with a good or service are reflected in this dimension (Keller, 1993). It is defined in the tourist sector as a visitor's ability to identify and differentiate a location they have heard about previously. Once a traveller learns about a destination, their brand awareness increases (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020), and they must firmly favour one place over rivals (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020). They were accessible on the various digital platforms that customers, primarily travellers, regularly utilize, which is essential in today's world.

Destination Image - The most relevant and essential dimension of the CBBETD model is believed to be the image destination. According to Chiu et al. (2013), a destination's image is a "set of qualities, attributes, and benefits that visitors have about the destination" (p. 877), which may be important information for travellers to distinguish between different places. Ferrer-Rosell and Marine-Roig (2020) assert that perceptions and ideas can be shaped by how a travel agency presents itself to the public and travellers' sharing of opinions (e.g., e-word of mouth). For the visitor's expectations to align with the communication, the brand positioning needs to be delivered honestly and genuinely. When seen positively, this picture encourages travellers to go there, come back, and tell their friends about it (Cervova & Vavrova, 2021).

Destination Loyalty - Another essential element of CBBETD. In tourism, destination loyalty refers to the likelihood of guests returning and suggesting a particular location to others (Mechinda et al., 2009). Remaining faithful and returning later is expected when a tourist finds the encounter enjoyable and resonates with the location. Using every instrument at your disposal to develop and maintain brand loyalty during this fiercely competitive time is critical. As a result, products and services associated with tourism must maintain a constant level of quality (Lassar et al., 1995). The traveller will establish expectations based on past travel experiences, which he will later up-hold; if the level of services drops, the visitor will become unsatisfied on further trips.

Destination Perceived Quality - As stated by Aaker (1991), perceived destination quality is "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). Saeed and Shafique (2019) define perceived quality as evaluating the price, amenities, and other comparable features the place offers. Because it requires examining visitors' opinions of the products and services and their travel experiences, this CBBETD component is quite simple to evaluate (Cervova & Vavrova, 2021). A lot goes into determining how satisfied a visitor will be, including the destination's surroundings, cultural and natural attractions, hotel facilities, and tourist-accessible activities.

2.3 Intention To Visit

Tourism services are unique among products since they are unexpected and unpredictable. Because travellers are still shaping their experiences, planning to visit is consequently linked to a high-risk investment (Chen et al., 2014). Albarq (2013) asserts that eWOM may affect travellers' opinions of specific locations and itineraries. Positive comments or evaluations that eWOM receives can influence the consumer's decision and, consequently, their intention to visit. As a result, prospective tourists can rely on the opinions of other travellers as well as other online material, including the FGC's broadcast of relevant and reliable information, as well as other visitors' comments (UGC and eWOM). This information will construct and shape the destination's image, which may encourage travellers to visit there (Fu et al., 2016). Travellers' intents may, therefore, be influenced and predicted by the destination image, which is shaped by cognitive and emotional elements (De la Hoz-Correa & Muoz-Leiva, 2018) as well as the destination quality and worth (Ranjbarian & Pool, 2025). De la Hoz-Correa and Muoz-Leiva (2018) claim that this view is formed by various online and offline data sources, which also significantly influence travellers' desire to travel.

2.4 Tourist Destination Online Communication

Tourism is an essential sector in both the social and economic spheres. Consequently, this market has more competition and a greater focus on the tourism offering. Because of this, some travel locations are starting to be seen as brands that enable nations to differentiate themselves and compete (Saeed & Shafique, 2019). The fact that the tourist product is purchased before contact with it is one of the industry's most notable quirks. Therefore, it is becoming

increasingly critical to approach tourist locations as brands and use promotional strategies (IPDT, 2023). More and more, the content that people publish on social media is the first point of contact between potential visitors and the tourist attraction they plan to buy. Users' value in social media often leads them to spend more time browsing, where they not only locate the information they seek but also encounter unexpected and engaging content. Through images and authentic reviews from other travellers, users gain a deeper understanding of potential destinations, which can influence their decision-making process and spark a desire to visit (Hien & Thong, 2024). This experience often leads them to share their newfound travel plans and experiences with others.

As a result, promotion is essential to draw in new visitors and distinguish the location from others (IPDT, 2023). The two primary factors in the tourism industry that drive behaviour change among travellers are destination advertising and social media. Tourism Economics (2023) believes that the younger generation's inclination towards using social media will continue to increase. According to data from Hotelmize (2023), 34% of guests make hotel reservations after learning about them via friends on social media. Therefore, it is critical to understand social media as a tool for place promotion and tourism within marketing and communication.

2.5 Turismo Centro de Portugal

Travel is a significant factor in both social and economic progress worldwide. Many different cultures have long seen Portugal as a nation of great attention and concentration, and it is currently recognized as a reputable and well-liked travel destination. The country is unique and fascinating because of its rich cultural legacy and distinctive customs. Portugal is a popular tourist destination due to its friendliness, cuisine, and relaxing atmosphere (Ramos & Costa, 2017). The Central Region's tourism industry is expanding thanks to Turismo Centro de Portugal (TCP).

Portugal's standing as a leading tourism destination has increased thanks to the numerous communications honours this organization has received. Numerous communication awards have been given to Turismo Centro de Portugal (TCP) for their efforts to advance Portuguese travel. TCP has prioritized digital channels, including the company's website, Facebook, Instagram, and X platforms, for their latest marketing efforts due to the industry's rapid technological improvements. They also employ various internet tactics, such as using user-generated material in their social networks. TCP hopes to establish closer ties and engage clients by understanding their preferences using various internet tools.

3 Methodology approach

This study's preferred methodological approach with qualitative characteristics is the focus group. A focus group is a structured conversation about subjects facilitated by a leader. The focus group is a qualitative method that seeks to moderate a group conversation, claims Morgan (1997). Focus groups enable the researcher to thoroughly examine a small number of participants' opinions and gain insight into what end users think and feel (Obriest et al., 2007). In contrast to procedures like participant observation, individual interviews, or surveys, this method prioritizes observing and documenting participants' experiences and responses. A focus group highlights several essential questions that might otherwise be overlooked (Ferreira, 2013). Participants in these meetings were asked questions to conclude the influence of user-generated material on destination-associated awareness and loyalty, as well as the intention to visit. As seen in Table 1, 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). Travel intention was measured based on the scale by Gong et al. (2020).

Table 1. Proposed Constructs, Scales and Authors

Construct	Authors
User-Generated Content	[34]
Brand Equity	Destination Awareness Destination Image Destination Loyalty Destination Perceived Quality
Intention to Visit	[14]
	[35]

3.1 Participants and Procedures

One focus group was held during April 2023, and its intended audience was Portuguese travellers between 23 and 54.

The session took approximately 90 minutes. Participants were chosen based on two criteria: participation in a tourism trip at least once in the six months preceding the study and awareness of various kinds and features of social media. 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.

Regarding employment status, six of the participants are employed, and two are students. As for the district of residence, three people belong to Viseu, while Lisboa, Faro, Leiria, Aveiro and Braga count one person each. Concerning academic qualifications, one of the participants has an upper secondary education, six have a bachelor’s degree, and one has a master’s degree (table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis of Focus Group Participants

Participants				
Age	Gender	Professional Status	District of Residence	Academic Qualifications
[23-38] 6	♂ 3	Student 2	Viseu 3	Upper Secondary Education 1
[39-54] 2	♀ 5	Employed 6	Lisboa 1	Bachelor’s Degree 6
			Braga 1	Master’s Degree 1
			Faro 1	
Total	8	8	8	8

4 Results

When asked about visiting Portugal's Central Region, all respondents said they had already visited some districts, like Aveiro, Coimbra, Leiria, and Castelo Branco. In addition, each participant indicated that they had visited there recently, saying things like "I visited Vila Real last month," "I visited Viseu about two weeks ago," and "I recently visited Aveiro."

When asked if the Central Region was a prominent destination for them to visit when making travel plans, the majority of participants (7 out of 9) gave an affirmative response, citing the region's diversity and praising it for being a "vibrant region, it has beautiful landscapes, culture, historical monuments, excellent gastronomy" (P1) and "especially the coastal area which has very good beaches" (P8). Furthermore, a few people highlighted that this is their family's preferred vacation destination (P5) and their favourite Region (P2). Although P6, the lone participant, says it varies depending on the circumstances, he does not consider it his preferred region. Given that he resides in the North, he clarifies that his choices "are mostly focused either on the North region or, if it implies more distance, the South region". Nevertheless, "for a trip of shorter duration, and since it would imply lower transportation and travel costs, the answer could be yes". As a result, this participant likes to travel immediately to the South on a lengthy journey. However, the Central Region might be chosen if the journey is shorter.

Six out of the participants agreed that the Centro Region reflected their qualities. Some drew comparisons between their characteristics and those of the region, characterizing it with adjectives like "eclectic" (P7), "quiet and history" (P2), and "calm places and connected to nature" (P3). Others born and reared in this region responded positively, stating, "It will always be part of who I am" (P4). This claim is disputed by a participant stating they have "no emotional or affective connection to the Centro region" (P6). The other participants contend they cannot "associate a geographical region with my personality" (P5). Those who have lived in this region in the past or present identify with it the most.

When asked about the quality of tourism products in this area, seven participants said they might expect superior offers because there are "many activities to do and enriching experiences to have" (P8). Two participants feel there is still room for development in areas like "the information available about the places... more specifically, where there are historical monuments" (P1). One of them thinks that by doing so, the journey would become more intuitive. According to one participant, "It depends on the seasonality of the offer" (P6); in the winter, he believes so, but not in the summer. Regarding the agreement that this region offers better offerings than other Portuguese regions, opinions were more divided. Because the Centro Region is "calmer, less saturated in terms of tourism and population density"

(P5) and its features suit their interests, four participants concur that it offers more possibilities than other Portuguese areas. The other participants agree that "regions like the Algarve and Lisbon have much more potential for tourism nationally and internationally, making them more developed in this respect" (P7).

Three participants said that they would instead visit this region than others when asked, citing the fact that 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." Nonetheless, as residents of this region, three participants stated that they "like to visit all the regions" (P5) or "prefer other regions to spend their vacations" (P3), indicating that they have no preference for any particular region. The other two participants expressed that it relies on elements like seasonality, highlighting that "in winter, Serra da Estrela is a more attractive destination because of the snow that is not found elsewhere in the country" (P6), or "state of mind and the need to visit" (P7).

Five people indicate that the Central Region is their favourite place to vacation because of its "tranquillity and peace" (P8), "sea, mountain, and countryside" (P7), and "calm setting" (P5). They also mention its "typically warm and stable weather during the summer months" (P5). Participant P5 states that this place "presents, more and more, valuable offers at the tourist level," which is noteworthy. On the other hand, one participant said he would rather travel to different areas if his options included international destinations. Two people said they do not think the Central Region is their preferred travel destination because of their remote living situation or because they think other places are equally as fascinating as the Central Region. A participant states that he is unsure about his preferences and that it will depend on what he wants to "visit on this trip." However, he adds that "this is always an option to consider due to the great diversity of supply in the central region" (P3).

Regarding user-generated content, only one participant disputes its value, saying he prefers to "go on discovery" rather than seek advice (P8). Though some participants argue that it depends on the type of information, all participants typically agree with these contents. Three participants follow Facebook and Instagram, two of the social media platforms used by Turismo Centro de Portugal. Nobody comments; only one person says they interact with the articles (like), and they only sometimes share relevant content from their city. Furthermore, Turismo Centro de Portugal has not been written or provided feedback.

5 Discussion

Almost all participants find user-generated helpful content and use it to plan their trips, agreeing with what other users share. Social media users who follow Turismo Centro de Portugal frequently engage with postings of this kind and share them if they are about their hometown or contain pertinent information.

All the participants expressed interest in this area and concurred that, depending on the season, they would choose it as a travel destination. Numerous references were made to its fantastic cuisine, culture, landscapes, and historical, electric, peaceful, and natural features. Many participants admitted that they identify with these characteristics, which are part of their personality. Serra da Estrela, an area well-known for its top-notch tourism offerings in the winter, was one of the most frequently named places. However, additional experiences and activities were also highlighted. Some participants concur that there are some areas for improvement, such as the information provided at the tourist attractions. Some attendees concur that this region offers better services than the other regions of Portugal. Others, however, asserted that areas like the Algarve and Lisbon have much greater potential for tourism than the Centro.

Given this, it is possible to conclude that, in general, the participants demonstrated a positive impression of the destination, recognizing its value and notoriety. However, it is feasible to tell that participants who follow social networks have higher brand equity than those who do not by examining their responses. They exhibit a favourable outlook and opinion of the Portuguese Central Region. This is consistent with Abboud's (2020) findings, which state that UGC boosts brand equity.

Participants strongly desired to travel to the Central Region on their next holiday and were open to the idea. While some claim they would rather visit it than other Portuguese regions, others disagree. However, the participants who follow TCP on social media expressed a more significant desire to visit the Portuguese central region. According to Liu et al. (2020), users purposefully utilize social media to explore and gather knowledge before the trip. As a result, social media is assigned the function of a guide and plays a significant part in the intention to travel. As a result, the current study's findings agree with those of the author mentioned above.

6 Final Considerations

This investigation aims to understand if user-generated content influences the perception that tourists and potential tourists have of destinations, specifically of the Portuguese Central Region, and how it influences their intention to

visit this location.

The methodological approach employed is qualitative, conducting a focus group with tourists from the Portuguese Central Region to understand their genuine opinions about the issues addressed in this research.

The participants generally showed a strong enthusiasm for the Portuguese Central Region, proving their familiarity with its characteristics and strengths. They also expressed a strong desire to return and see her. The findings, however, indicated that brand equity and visit intention are higher among those who follow Turismo Centro de Portugal on social media and take in user-generated content. Additionally, natives and residents of the Portuguese Central Region exhibit a greater affinity for and identification with it. Participants from the South and North do not have much connection to the area and choose not to follow Turismo Centro de Portugal on social media.

Although the study is considered pertinent, there are some limitations. It is suggested that the study be extended to more locations and countries. Apply this research more narrowly to a foreign target audience to better understand how foreign visitors view the Portuguese Central Region. Furthermore, the sole focus of this study is user-generated content. A comparable study should be done on other aspects of digital content marketing, like firm-generated content. This study offers practical implications. Tourism organizations should keep promoting, creating, and sharing user-generated content, as most participants find it helpful in planning their travels. Furthermore, these companies ought to focus on particular campaigns and use interaction data to provide tailored content that appeals to their interests, including showcasing the local cuisine, customs, and landscape.

Acknowledgements

This work is funded by National Funds through the FCT – Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P., within the scope of the project Ref. UIDB/05583/2020. Furthermore, we would like to thank the Research Centre in Digital Services (CISeD) and the Instituto Politécnico de Viseu for their support.

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