

How Destination Familiarity Impacts on Word of Mouth of Tourist Destinations: The Moderation Effects of Social Media Engagement

Sara Santos¹, Sónia Ferreira², Luísa Augusto³, Pedro Espírito Santo⁴ and Luciana Pessoa⁵

^{1,3} Research Centre in Digital Services (CISeD) – Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, Viseu, Portugal

²Center for Studies in Education and Innovation, ESEV – Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, Viseu, Portugal

⁴Centre of Applied Research in Management and Economics (CARME), Instituto Politécnico de Leiria, Leiria, Portugal

⁵ESEV – Instituto Politécnico de Viseu, Viseu, Portugal

ssantos@esev.ipv.pt

sonia.ferreira@esev.ipv.pt

laugusto@esev.ipv.pt

pedro.m.santo@ipleiria.pt

pv20624@esev.ipv.pt

Abstract: With the advent of the Internet, communication has changed, and new concepts have emerged, especially in tourism. Today, there are many tourist destinations, so competition is increasing. However, cities must find an effective method of differentiating themselves and demonstrating the value of their brand through social media posts since almost everyone is active in the digital world. Using social media, citizens can create and send content or choose word-of-mouth to pass on information about touristic destinations. Communication is vital for marketing and building a close relationship with the customer. Familiarity with the destination is essential because tourists should be prepared for what they will find when visiting a country. This article aims to study the effects of familiarity on the acceptance of tourist destinations moderated by engagement in social media. A quantitative approach was used, and a questionnaire was used to conduct the research. Using literature-tested scales, this study collected data from a sample of 915 individuals, which was analysed using SMART PLS software. The results identified that social media engagement is vital in moderating the relationship between familiarity with the destination, advertising stimulation and word of mouth.

Keywords: Familiarity with the Destination, Advertising Stimulation, WOM, Social Media Engagement

1. Introduction

Tourism is a critical factor in the lives of all citizens, as people want to travel and enjoy themselves. It is a broad concept, so when a person goes on a trip and enjoys it, it can already be a reason to influence someone else to go, too. It has been proven that if people go to a destination they already know and have been to, i.e. a destination that is familiar to them, it feels like home. The risks seem more significant when individuals go somewhere they do not know. Baloglu (2001, p.128) states that "familiarity with a destination can be increased through experience or information from previous trips".

Advertising stimulation causes a person interested in a product to look at an advertisement in the media. It influences people to buy, depending on the type of advertising in question. According to Moorman, Neijens and Smit (2002), social media platforms and advertising are associated with the likelihood of ad reviews becoming increasingly positive.

WOM can also be used to disseminate content among family or friends. According to several authors (Choi et al., 2007; O'Reilly, 2006; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), WOM is vital to the tourism sector to inform visitors about the destination they intend to visit. In this way, Word-of-Mouth helps to transmit and gather information.

Finally, social media engagement is a crucial factor to consider, as it is through posts and interactions that many individuals perceive the quality of travel destinations and are influenced in their decisions to visit them.

This is relevant to society, as it analyses the effects of familiarity on the choice of a particular tourist destination, moderated by engagement in social media. The shortcoming of this research is the low number of scientific documents found and the number of authors writing on the subject and its variables.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Familiarity with the Destination

In tourism, familiarity is crucial in revealing the differences in people's behaviour, whether they are tourists or not (Baloglu, 2001 & Gursoy, 2011). Familiarity also reflects a person's direct experience of the destination (Vogt & Andereck, 2003). This approach, considered measurement, needs to fully cover the concept of familiarity, which is seen as the experience of individuals. A high level of knowledge can be an asset to a reasonable term construction. Information from social networks, books and contact with others helps create familiarity (Gursoy, 2011; Terzidou et al., 2018). Thus, informational familiarity refers to the extent of the information that has been used; self-rated to the level of familiarity that tourists believe they have about the place chosen for the trip and experiential familiarity, as the name suggests, has to do with previous travel experiences (Baloglu, 2001).

Familiarity delimits the components of the image, emphasising that the central role is essential for the positive construction of the so-called "cognitive image". On the other hand, they have failed on the affective side (Smith et al., 2015; Vogt & Andereck, 2003). Familiarity is responsible for highlighting the components of a particular image, bearing in mind that a specific function may positively influence the construction of the cognitive image (Smith et al., 2015; Vogt & Andereck, 2003).

2.2 Advertising Stimulation

The senses are activated by the human body and are known as the five senses (tactile, olfactory, hearing, taste and visual). These are central to behavioural intention, or so-called 'real' behaviour (Biswas, 2019; Yoon & Park, 2012). Human beings can create images linked to the environment and acquire a sense of presence, making available sensory information that has already been acquired and prompting judgements or decisions (Alyahya & McLean, 2021; Yoon & Park, 2012).

Sensory marketing emphasises the role of the human body, which is very important in the cognitive process of users. This type of marketing 'influences consumer perceptions and judgements, involving consumer behaviour' (Krishna, 2010, p. 333). It also can offer a new point of view on the marketing of tourist destinations, and both types are related and compatible. On the one hand, tourism can be understood as a typical experiential product, but it can only be experienced after a purchase is made or before arriving at a destination (Fodness & Murray, 1997). Thus, when advertising information is passed on, it also includes what are known as multisensory experiences. These can help to create a sense of virtual presence and competent pre-experience and even design a tourist destination that is attractive to consumers (Flavian et al., 2019; Hyun & O'Keefe, 2012; Lee et al., 2010).

Therefore, the tourist experience also includes the process of sensory stimulation using the senses (Fakfare et al., 2021).

This concept has been explored in two areas: tourism and hospitality. However, sensory information in adverts has also been worked on to stimulate customers' senses. Therefore, in order to perfect consumers' senses, the studies carried out cover topics such as new technologies in sensory marketing, such as augmented reality and the Internet of things, among others (Alyahya & McLean, 2021; Laukkanen et al., 2021; Pelet et al., 2021). Other studies have also been concerned with studying the mechanisms that underlie the advertising of tourist destinations, such as the sensory advertising of the destination, which is interlinked with consumer behaviour. Following the example of Laukkaden et al. (2021) of Stimulus-Organism-Response, the effects of sensory stimuli on behaviour were investigated using emotion, affective experience and eudaemonism. Eudaemonism is "the ethical theory according to which the good life for a human being, 'eudaemonia', is the ultimate moral standard" (Atwater, 1984, p. 55).

However, Alyahya and McLean (2021) have shown that sensory content, if used in virtual reality, can have the capacity to improve the cognitive process and the quality of the images created through the mind. Moreover, it could improve the sense of presence and influence the attitude and willingness to visit a destination.

Therefore, the first hypothesis is:

H1: Familiarity influences Advertising Stimulation.

2.3 WOM (Word-of-Mouth)

WOM is "informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, use or characteristics of certain goods and services and/or their sellers" (Westbrook, 1987, p.261). With the advance of social media, WOM has come to influence consumers' purchasing decisions more than other communication methods encompassed in marketing since they have built a place where marketers volunteer and transmit content using their social media (Goh et al., 2013; Kimmel & Kitchen, 2014). Regarding face-to-face or online interaction, WOM is a necessary foundation since communication occurs between peer consumers, and the intention is not to receive any reward for the communication.

Researchers studying the motivations behind consumers' intentions to share content (WOM) have shown that emotion is a crucial aspect because it is preponderant and influential (Heath et al., 2001). Also, Berger and Milkman (2013) emphasise the importance of attractive content and suggest using good content because it is more efficient than taking opinion leaders to spread the word. Therefore, customers are willing to pass on content if it arouses their emotions (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

Meinselmann (2015) defends the importance of the most recent and current studies on positive emotions since research has been high. This is because there is a hypothesis that positive emotion is linked to relationships with WOM in so-called promotional advertising. Botha and Reyneke (2013) argue that consumers who harbour positive emotional reactions to the broadcast audiovisual content will easily share it. When going through a decision-making process, "the emotional connection" with the information is seen as an essential aspect for viewers to share (p.168).

In the field of tourism, word-of-mouth communication begins with the dissemination of experiences to other people through tourists who are adventurers. WOM stands out in tourism since travellers depend on online information to make decisions, help gather content, and use electronic word-of-mouth communication (Choi et al., 2007; O'Reilly, 2006; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Traditional and electronic word-of-mouth interactions have some similarities and aspects of their own. In traditional word-of-mouth marketing, credibility comes from consumers and not from the sellers of a particular product.

This method helps with customers' purchasing decisions, choices and intentions (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Thus, the second hypothesis is:

H2: Advertising Stimulation influences WOM.

2.4 Social Media Engagement

Defining engagement is a challenge for both the brand and the consumer. There are many different ways to define this concept (Hollebeek, 2011). According to the authors Calder, Isaac, and Malthouse (2016), engagement is "a multilevel and multidimensional construct that emerges from thoughts and feelings about one or more rich experiences involved in achieving a personal goal" (p. 40). This type of involvement is integrated into various situations and differs according to the respective brands and products (Calder et al., 2009).

Many studies have been conducted to understand the media's usefulness through specific experiences, such as information, transportation, interaction, identification and pastime (Neijens et al., 2006; Malthouse et al., 2007).

Social media is "a tool that can increase civic engagement, offering a cost-effective means of promoting inclusion, broad reach and fostering deeper interactions" (Tai et al., 2020, p.280). Platforms have the advantage of reducing the barriers to interaction between users and content creators (Wachhaus, 2017).

Digital engagement, as defined above, stands out through actions centred on likes, comments, and sharing of content already obtained (Yoon et al., 2018).

People are expected to use social networks and be familiar with the different platforms, considering their characteristics, functions, content and interaction. As such, media can be seen as "a group of Internet-based applications based on the ideological principles and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.61). This means many social media types, such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, LinkedIn, Google and Pinterest. Each has its working format and defined rules (Djick, 2013).

According to Muntinga et al. (2011), COBRA's model reflects the behaviours that exist about a customer in the online format, separating them into the various users who exhibit specific behaviours. The first level of this method is the minimum, also known as the "consumption", where people dedicate themselves to online tasks

linked to the brand. In other words, consumers are present with the brand but do not actively contribute or focus on creating content. The medium activity level is “contribution” and relates to the brand, where there is user-content and user-user interaction. Finally, the highest level is the “creation”. In this method, consumers are already actively producing and publishing content.

In addition, social media should also have the functionality to include different types of communication, such as one-to-one interaction, with the help of instant messaging, one-to-many interactions, as the case with blogs, and many-to-many interactions, as is the case with wikis (Zyl, 2009). Thus, it brought about the emergence of new technologies and a change in human communication (Sirait, 2020).

Tourists use social media in three stages: before a trip to research and save information about destinations and tourist services, during the trip to post photos, videos, etc. and finally to highlight the positive and negative aspects of the trip (Tsiotsou, 2019). This is to help potential travellers with their decisions (Tsiotsou, 2022). Therefore, social networks can be used to search for information about a destination and be considered an opportunity for sharing and an e-WOM channel (Tsiotsou, 2022). This channel type is known for being dynamic and interactive, allowing information to circulate (Ducoffe, 1996). Thus:

H3: Social Media Engagement moderates the relationship between familiarity and Advertising Stimulation.

Social media should also include different types of communication, such as one-to-one interaction with the help of instant messaging, one-to-many interaction, such as blogs, and many-to-many interaction, such as wikis (Zyl, 2009). This has brought about the emergence of new technologies and a change in human communication (Sirait, 2020). In this way, tourists use social networks in three stages: before travelling to learn more about destinations, when they arrive in the country to learn about the various services and during the trip to share audiovisual content. This helps tourists make their own decisions (Tsiotsou, 2022). In this way, social networks can help find relevant information about a tourist destination and can be considered a new form of sharing and an e-WOM channel (Tsiotsou, 2022). This channel is easily recognisable, as it is dynamic and interactive, with the advantage of allowing information to circulate (Ducoffe, 1996). Therefore:

H4: Social Media Engagement moderates the relationship between Advertising Stimulation and WOM.

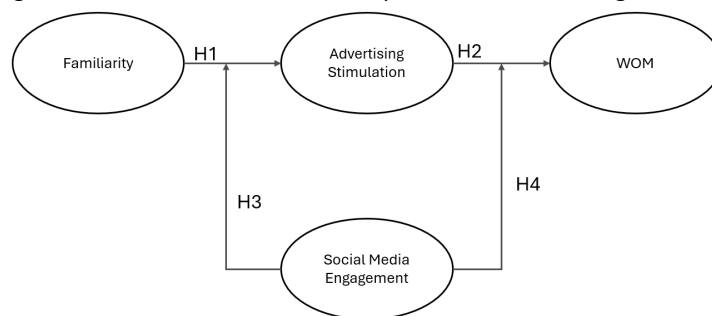


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

3. Methodology

The study used a cross-sectional quantitative approach with closed-ended questions to obtain homogeneous and comparable data. The data collection method was a self-administered questionnaire applied to the general population. This choice was justified because people value experiences and often express their preferences in travel choices. A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the study constructs, with options ranging from (1) “Strongly Disagree” to (5) “Strongly Agree”. The items were adapted from validated scales widely used in scientific literature, namely: Familiarity with the Destination four items adapted from Bianchi et al. (2017); Advertising Stimulation four items were used based on the study by Voorveld et al. (2018); Word of Mouth we adapted three items from Kang et al. (2020); and Social Media Engagement used the six items from Ferreira et al. (2021). Adapting the scales made it possible to ensure suitability for the study context, enabling accurate measurement of the relevant variables. Therefore, the measurement items were critically evaluated before the definitive data collection. Following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2018), the questionnaire was reviewed by three academics and five professionals with experience in the area of communication and marketing research. To ensure the clarity and adequacy of the questions, a pre-test was carried out with 12 tourists from different regions of Portugal, selected because they had prior knowledge of the regions under study. The final items used were the following.

Advertising Stimulation (Voorveld et al., 2018)

I was excited about this promotional film.
 This promotional film seduced me.
 This promotional film is original and unique.
 With this promotional film, I was informed about this region.
 This promotional film gave me something new.

Destination Familiarity (Bianchi et al., 2017):

I know this region well.
 I am aware of the attractions this region has to offer tourists.
 I often look for information about this region.
 I know this region better than my friends and family do.

Social Media Engagement (Ferreira et al., 2021)

I know this region's website.
 I frequently visit this region's website.
 I know the Facebook/Instagram pages of this region.
 I will follow/I follow this region's Facebook/Instagram pages.
 I want to comment on content from this region on its Facebook/Instagram page.
 I frequently share content from this region on Facebook/Instagram.

Word of mouth (Kang et al., 2020)

I will talk to friends about this video.
 I recommend that my friends and family watch this video.
 I will talk about this region with my friends and family.

The sampling technique used was non-probabilistic for convenience, a common approach in marketing studies to test theories and especially appropriate in the context of this research. Data collection was conducted by the researchers responsible for this study. Respondents were contacted online, mainly through social networks, and directed to a promotional video about a tourist region in Portugal. After watching the video, they were asked to answer the questionnaire. All participants were approached under identical conditions, and the purpose and objectives of the study were duly explained to minimise response errors. The sample of this study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Characterisation

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	68,3
	Male	31,3
Age	≤ 22 years	47,6
	23 to 38 years	23,8
	39 to 54 years	21,5
	55 to 73 years	7,0
	≥ 74 years	0,1

To ensure the minimisation of common method bias (CMV), preventive (ex-ante) and corrective (ex-post) measures were adopted as recommended by Podsakoff et al. (2003). Before applying the questionnaire, it was ensured that respondents were unaware of the research model, reducing the possibility of a direct link between the items. The questionnaire was carefully structured to prevent participants from reviewing previous responses. Additionally, respondents could not proceed to subsequent sections without fully answering the questions in each section. It was also emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers, guaranteeing the anonymity of participants and creating an environment conducive to honest and impartial answers. After data collection, ex-post strategies were applied to verify the presence of CMV. Harman's single-factor test revealed that the first factor explained only 24.88% of the variance, a value much lower than the critical threshold of 50%. This result indicates that common method bias is not a relevant problem.

Additionally, a multicollinearity analysis was applied using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), with values ranging between 1.213 and 4.338, confirming that there are no significant concerns with multicollinearity since the values are below the limit of 5.0 recommended by Hair et al. (2018). Based on the results obtained by both ex-ante and ex-post procedures, it is concluded that the probability of standard method bias is reduced, ensuring the robustness and quality of the data collected. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to evaluate the validity and reliability of the measurement model, consisting of 4 latent variables and a total of 15 items that revealed loadings above 0.7, as recommended in the literature (Hair et al., 2018).

Convergent validity (Table 2) was confirmed with the factor loadings of all items exceeding the minimum value of 0.70, suggesting a good ability of the items to measure the latent variables to which they belong. The average variance extracted (AVE) presented values between 0.660 and 0.820, further reinforcing the convergent validity of the constructs. The composite reliability was between 0.894 and 0.931, guaranteeing the results' consistency.

Table 2: Reliability and Validity of Constructs

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
ADST	0,870	0,906	0,660
ENG	0,912	0,931	0,692
FAM	0,844	0,894	0,679
WOM	0,889	0,932	0,820

Notes: ADST: Advertising Stimulation; WOM: Word of Mouth; ENG: Social Media Brand Engagement; FAM: Familiarity with the Destination

The results obtained confirmed the adequacy of the model to the data collected. Internal consistency was verified using Cronbach's Alpha, with values between 0.844 and 0.912, all higher than the threshold of 0.70 recommended by Hair et al. (2018). These values demonstrate the high reliability of the constructs. Discriminant validity was checked using the Fornell-Larcker (1981) criterion, where the AVE of each construct exceeded the squared correlations between the constructs. This result proves that each variable measured is distinct from the others in the model, avoiding conceptual overlaps. Additionally, the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio presented values below the critical limit of 0.9, as Henseler et al. (2015) suggested, reinforcing the discriminant validity of the assessed constructs.

Table 3: Fornell and Larcker criterion (1981)

	ADST	ENG	FAM	WOM
ADST	0,812			
ENG	0,398	0,832		
FAM	0,270	0,529	0,824	
WOM	0,602	0,595	0,372	0,905

Notes: ADST: Advertising Stimulation; WOM: Word of Mouth; ENG: Social Media Brand Engagement; FAM: Familiarity with the Destination

Table 4: HTMT – Henseler Ratio (2015)

	ADST	ENG	FAM	WOM
ADST				
ENG	0,429			
FAM	0,308	0,593		
WOM	0,677	0,642	0,421	

Notes: ADST: Advertising Stimulation; WOM: Word of Mouth; ENG: Social Media Brand Engagement; FAM: Familiarity with the Destination

Thus, the results obtained in the confirmatory factor analysis demonstrate that the proposed model presents satisfactory levels of reliability and validity, both convergent and discriminant, guaranteeing the robustness and precision of the measurements used in the study. Following this, the research hypotheses were tested, the results of which are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Hypotheses Test

Hypotheses	β	p Values	Result
H1: FAM → ADST	0,084	0,047	Corroborated
H2: ADST → WOM	0,425	0,000	Corroborated
H3: ENG x FAM → ADST	0,008	0,829	Not Corroborated

Hypotheses	β	p Values	Result
H4:ENG x ADST → WOM	-0,067	0,003	Corroborated

Notes: ADST: Advertising Stimulation; WOM: Word of Mouth; ENG: Social Media Brand Engagement; FAM: Familiarity with the Destination

4. Results Discussion

Hypothesis testing revealed that four of the five research hypotheses were corroborated. Therefore, each of the hypotheses is discussed below. The relationship between destination familiarity and advertising stimulation, corroborated in H1, suggests that familiarity with the destination positively influences advertising stimulation. This is supported by the literature, which explores the importance of prior knowledge and experience in perceiving destination stimuli. Baloglu (2001) argue that familiarity, acquired through previous experiences, information or proximity, facilitates the cognitive processing of advertising, making it more relevant and impactful.

Furthermore, Vogt and Andereck (2003) point out that consumers familiar with a destination demonstrate greater ease in associating advertising stimuli with positive memories and feelings, intensifying the effectiveness of promotional campaigns. Thus, familiarity is a facilitator that enhances the reception and response to advertising stimulation, making it more persuasive and emotionally engaging, especially in tourism, where trust and previous experience are crucial factors in influencing future decisions. Hypothesis H2, which sought to test the effects of advertising stimulation on word of mouth, was corroborated, indicating that advertising stimulation positively influences word of mouth. This result is in line with existing literature, which highlights the central role of advertising in creating perceptions and stimuli that lead consumers to share information. Berger and Milkman (2012) argue that effective advertising content, which arouses positive emotions, is more likely to be transmitted through WOM, functioning as a catalyst for message dissemination. Thus, advertising influences individual decisions and stimulates informal communication between consumers, an essential element in tourism, as advocated by Choi et al. (2007) and Xiang & Gretzel (2010), given the role of WOM in credibility and the travel decision process. Hypothesis H3 was not corroborated, indicating that the moderating effects of engagement on social networks and familiarity with the destination do not significantly influence advertising stimulation. Although the literature suggests that digital engagement and familiarity can amplify advertising reception (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Baloglu, 2001), the results suggest that the interaction between these two factors does not generate a relevant combined effect.

Furthermore, Hollebeek (2011) argues that digital engagement is more effective in contexts with low familiarity, as it creates new connections and insights. Thus, when consumers are already familiar with the destination, engagement on social networks may not add significant value to advertising. This suggests exploring other mechanisms or contexts where this moderation manifests more significantly. Hypothesis H4 was corroborated, demonstrating that the moderating effects of engagement on social networks strengthen the relationship between advertising stimulation and word of mouth (WOM). This result aligns with studies that highlight the amplifying role of social networks in disseminating advertising content. Berger and Milkman (2012) suggest that content that arouses positive emotions is more likely to be shared, and digital engagement enhances this dynamic by facilitating interaction and visibility among tourists (Yoon et al., 2018).

Furthermore, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) highlight that social platforms facilitate e-WOM, allowing advertising messages to reach broad audiences more quickly and efficiently. The interaction between advertising stimulation and engagement creates an environment where consumers absorb the message and amplify it through sharing, as Xiang and Gretzel (2010) advocate. Thus, engagement on social media strengthens the influence of advertising, converting it into more robust and effective WOM, which is essential for promoting tourist destinations and authentic experiences.

5. Conclusions

This study's theoretical contributions are the exploration of the relationships between familiarity with the destination, advertising stimulation, engagement on social networks and word of mouth (WOM), expanding the understanding of the factors that influence consumer behaviour in the context of tourism. The validation of hypotheses, such as the moderating factors of engagement in the relationship between advertising stimulation and word of mouth, reinforces theories about the impact of social media engagement and advertising on the dissemination of information through word of mouth. For business practice, the results provide interesting

contributions as companies can leverage engagement and advertising strategies to increase the visibility and attractiveness of tourist destinations, emphasising the critical role of social networks in amplifying WOM and building positive experiences for customers. Consumers. Although the conclusions are relevant, one of the main limitations of this study is the focus on a specific tourism context, which may restrict the generalisation of the results to other sectors or markets.

Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow for robust causal inferences, limiting understanding of effects over time. Therefore, future investigations can expand the scope of this study, exploring other cultural contexts and sectors beyond tourism to verify the robustness of the observed relationships. Longitudinal studies could be carried out to capture the evolution of digital engagement and its impact on WOM over time. Furthermore, it would be valuable to investigate the role of emerging technologies such as virtual and augmented reality in strengthening advertising stimulation and engagement and exploring mediating variables such as emotions and trust that may influence the identified dynamics.

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