

Impacts of the User-Generated Content on Travel Decision-Making and Destination Image: A Systematic Literature Review

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Objectives | This study aims to map the evolution of research on the role of user-generated content (UGC) in travel decision-making and destination image (DI), identifying key findings, limitations, gaps, and providing insights for future research directions and strategic practical insights for tourism stakeholders for enhancing knowledge in this field.

Methodology | The study is conducted by the systematic literature review following PRISMA model. The selection process guided by themes relevant to the study objectives such as "user-generated content," "decision," "destination" initially started with 560 records from the period 2007 to 2023 in the Scopus database. To provide the most current and impactful insights, ensuring the relevance and influence of the research, the study focused on English-language articles published in last 5 years period from 2018 to 2023 from journals ranked in the first and second quartiles (Q1/Q2) according to Scimago, with an additional criterion being a minimum of 10 citations. Ultimately, 35 articles meeting strict quality and relevance criteria were selected for detailed analysis. The study research questions divide in two main topics: the first assessing how UGC affects travel decision-making, and second, deaminating the impacts of the UGC on DI components. Additionally, the study addresses the general research question of how tourism stakeholders can leverage UGC to understand tourist perceptions of DI and its impact on travel decisions.

Main Results and Contributions |

Impacts of UGC on Travel Decision-Making.

UGC influences different stages of travel decisions from inspiration, evaluation of alternatives, final purchase to post-trip sharing (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2023; Molinillo et al., 2018). Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube stimulate travel desires and shape expectations by enabling information searches and virtual experiences. Unique characteristics of UGC like valence, style and source credibility have varying effects on travellers. Travel vlogs and influencers utilize inspiration, escapism and relationships to captivate viewers.

Regarding UGC types, ratings and reviews on sites like TripAdvisor provide quality and experience details for evaluating destinations and on-site services. Reviews reduce risk perceptions, while negative reviews are perceived as more helpful (Pahlevan Sharif & Mura, 2019). Visual UGC like Instagram and YouTube travel vlogs inspire early interest through imagery and narratives. Photos and videos drive initial interest while reviews assist final selections. Narratives in blogs, vlogs, and social media boost desire through first-person accounts (Pachucki et al., 2022). Traveler characteristics like demographic factors, social media use, destination familiarity, and personality moderate UGC effects.

Impacts of UGC on DI.

Contents from both destination management organizations (DMOs) and tourists shape cognitive and affective DI, with tourist content being more influential (Abbasi et al., 2023; Molinillo et al., 2018). Instagram excels in promoting image and visit intentions while YouTube has the lowest image value. Reviews and ratings on sites like TripAdvisor provide factual awareness. TikTok is a powerful platform shaping affective DI and creating mass tourism phenomena. Visual UGC showcases aesthetics and landscapes, shaping affective images.

Co-creation experiences on social media positively shape DI and satisfaction by enabling visitor involvement. Predictors include perceived usefulness, ease of use, and aesthetic appeal, while homophily boosts co-creation through shared interests. Emotions like joy, love and surprise contributed by social media brand communities positively shape perceived DI with love and positive surprise being more influential to co-creation intention than joy.

Positive online reviews boost DI, especially for familiar places. Perceived source expertise and credibility strengthen influence on perceptions (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2023). Negative content holds greater influence, potentially harming tourism strategies (Molinillo et al., 2018). Videos provide holistic and engaging experiences for effective image building. First-person narratives are more impactful than third-person (Pachucki et al., 2022). Entertainment, credibility and personalization contribute to image value and engagement (Abbasi et al., 2023).

Implications for DMOs.

Destinations should proactively select and share UGC to shape positive perceptions and inspire visit intention through consistent updates, interactive posts, and attractive rewards. Monitoring and analyzing UGC on review sites, social media, and blogs by using text mining and sentiment analysis techniques can help to identify crucial themes and travellers needs expressed throughout the stages of the decision journey.

Emphasis on destination familiarity, awareness and recognition of a destination are crucial for effective marketing. Incorporating emotional elements like love and positive surprise into social media brand community content enhances tourists' intentions to co-create and visit destinations.

Responding to users through homophily positively influences co-creation and satisfaction. Finally, prioritizing first-person storytellers, including locals and bloggers, increases engagement, authenticity, and perspectives, contributing to positive DI.

Limitations | The literature review focused on articles indexed in Scopus. The strict selection criteria led to a small dataset, potentially excluding some papers from 2023. However, this ensures a synthesis of significant research with strong academic impact within the past 5 years.

Conclusions | The analysis shows UGC's influence across different travel stages. Platforms and UGC types have distinct effects: reviews platforms provide valuable information for evaluating destinations, while visual content posts inspires travel desires and assists in final selections; narrative elements in blogs and vlogs engage travellers emotionally, influencing DI through storytelling and virtual transportation; factors like credibility, expertise, and emotional engagement play significant roles in shaping destination image perceptions through user-generated content. UGC effectively shapes cognitive and affective DI through co-creation. Further research can examine emerging platforms and temporal dynamics. The review provides DMOs strategic implications for leveraging UGC to influence prospective travellers.

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