

## TOURISM DESTINATION BRANDING IN THE DIGITAL AGE: EVALUATING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON DESTINATION IMAGE AND VISITOR PERCEPTIONS

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### Abstract

*Social media have significantly influenced Tourism Branding across the globe. This study is about destination advertising, digital platforms, and visitor perceptions to assess how the digital age has transformed destination images. Social media's immense potential lies in its interactive nature, visual storytelling, and user-generated material's credibility and influence by referencing empirical data and insights from numerous pertinent research. Visual storytelling through high-resolution images and videos has become popular on social media websites like Facebook and Instagram, attracting potential tourists. The study employs a cross-sectional research design vis-à-vis quantitative surveys and in-depth interviews and concluded that the interactive nature of social media efficiently engages the audience and encourages a lively and interactive relationship with the location. These interactive strategies foster a sense of involvement and connection by adhering to established destination marketing concepts. Social media user-generated content significantly impacts visitor perceptions and expectations and is credible. This study emphasizes the reliability of user-generated material and how important it is to branding. Potential visitors frequently have faith in the accounts of other tourists, and this faith is crucial in shaping views and expectations of a destination. After examining its distinctive effects, we confirm that each social media site draws various audiences with a range of tastes. While Facebook and Twitter provide useful, educational content that affects itinerary planning, Instagram's aesthetic nature draws a younger, experienced travel-oriented clientele. The study shows that social media has measurable effects on visitor behaviour and enhances the overall travel experience rather than only influencing perception. This study is about branding the tourist destination in this age of digital and social media where social media is used to create and share interactive content across the globe and how social media platforms are revolutionizing the tourism industry.*

**Keywords:** Tourism; Social Media Influence; User-Generated Content; Destination Branding; Visual Storytelling

The tourism and destination marketing industries have undergone a considerable transition in the twenty-first century due to the development of the digital age. Travel destinations can no longer send a picture or information to the tourist directly, but the evolution of smartphones, social media, and the internet is changing how tourists perceive, how they can choose their destinations, and what they want and expect from these destinations. In light of this digital revolution, this study focuses on how tourist destination branding can revolve around two questions: how the image of tourist destinations is influenced by social media and how the digital era is changing tourists' perceptions and images of destinations. Tourism has undergone a considerable transition since the emergence of the digital age. The rise of social media platforms, smartphones, and the internet has profoundly changed how tourists interact, view, and select their preferred destinations. In light of the digital revolution, travel destinations must rethink their branding strategies to successfully entice, engage, and satisfy modern tourists' evolving needs and expectations. This study investigates the connection between tourism destination branding and the dynamic influence of social media to evaluate how the digital era has changed tourist perceptions and images of destinations.

Tourists began to use social media as a source of inspiration for their travels and natural brainstorming for information, destination branding groups started creating interactive digital stories and experiences that have gained dominance in the tourism market. This study will investigate the role of social media in promoting destination tourism and how the strategies on various social media can affect the tourists' feelings towards the tourist destination.

*The Role of social media in Destination Branding*

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The role of social media in tourism destination branding has recently emerged as an important scientific topic. Scholars such as Buhalis & Law (2008) are convinced that social media evolves tourism branding due to the User Generated Content on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms. The fact that people can publish real photos, reviews, and travel stories (S. Hussain et al., 2021) has an important influence on the way those people perceive a specific place.

What has changed, perhaps, is that, instead of text-based content, new media such as Instagram are relying on other forms of visual storytelling, where only high-quality imagery or videos may be able to communicate a tourist destination's unique characteristics and experiences. These findings are consistent with the research conducted by Neuhofer et al. (2015), who provide evidence of the emotional connection and wanderlust inspired by visual narratives. The considerable impact and interactive nature of visual storytelling attracted the researchers to explore the field in depth (Hvass & Munar, 2012; Leung et al., 2013).

#### *Engagement Strategies on social media*

Live Q&A sessions about destinations, visual storytelling, and other interactive social media methods, are crucial for attracting viewers and promoting destinations. This tactic is consistent with the interactive engagement approaches described by (Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2016). The interactive, dynamic, and lively nature of these tactics develops a two-way link between the destination and tourists.

#### *User-Generated Content's Credibility and Influence*

Studies like those of Xiang et al. (2017a) strongly emphasize the dependability of user-generated content. Visitors usually put a lot of faith in other tourists' accounts, which significantly impacts how they perceive and expect a destination. One of the critical focuses of this study is user-generated content, which is a crucial component of branding.

#### *Distinct Effects of Different Social Media Platforms*

The venue selection is crucial to destination branding because each social media platform attracts a diverse audience with diverse interests. Procter et al. (2015) research highlights this phenomenon through audience research on social media. Social media platform like Instagram attracts young and adventurous audiences who are interested in exploring visually attractive and challenging destinations. While other social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter provide the audience with detailed information about the travel destination and preparation regarding the travel.

#### *Measurable Impact on Visitor Decision-Making and Travel Experience*

However, academic interest is growing regarding the proposition that social media activity might influence tourist decision-making and experiences in ways, and to a degree, that is measurable. Martin-Fuentes (2019) draws attention to the undeniable fact that social media increasingly influences where people visit and how that decision is made. It attempts to measure the impact of social media campaigns using observable metrics such as website traffic, conversion, engagement, and sentiment analyses. In this way, it attempts to demonstrate how social media activity can influence visitor behaviour and overall experience in measured ways, without simply changing perceptions.

It specifically investigates how tourism destinations create, manage, and maintain their brands in this digital hyper-communication era, how they harness the power of social media to better narrate the experience of staying in this particular destination, how rhetorical strategies of engagement and interaction can be used, and how the authenticity of user-generated content can be embraced. Against this backdrop, the existing literature provides insight into the current state of affairs. It is well known how social media is changing tourism destination branding in the digital age, how the effects of social media impact varied and

specific formats and instances of these specific instances on various social media platforms, and how quantitative impact upon cognitive processes of visitors' choice of destination and actual travel experience is manifested.

### **Literature Review**

The visuals have more influence on public opinion as visuals can easily be interpreted as resembling real objects and no grammar or rules of usage have to be learned (S. A. Hussain et al., 2024). The tourism and hospitality industries have experienced a significant transformation with the advent of the digital age, particularly due to the widespread use of social media. Tourism destination branding is increasingly reliant on social media platforms that enable destinations to directly engage with potential visitors through user-generated content and visual storytelling (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Social media's interactive and participatory nature provides unprecedented opportunities for tourism marketers to build emotional connections with tourists, who, in turn, contribute to the branding process by sharing their personal travel experiences (Gretzel et al., 2016).

Social media has reshaped traditional destination marketing, as travelers increasingly turn to platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter for information, inspiration, and decision-making. Scholars like Leung et al. (2013) emphasize that social media has allowed for a more democratized form of branding, where tourists themselves act as brand ambassadors by sharing their experiences. As such, destination marketing organizations need to adapt to the ever-evolving digital landscape by leveraging the power of user generated content, engaging visuals, and interactive strategies to foster brand loyalty.

#### *The Role of User-Generated Content in Tourism Branding*

User-generated content has emerged as one of the most influential factors in tourism destination branding. Xiang et al. (2017b) highlight that user generated content, such as reviews, photos, and videos shared on social platforms, has greater credibility than traditional marketing messages. The authenticity of user generated content lies in its origin—tourists who have experienced the destination firsthand, offering real, often candid, representations of the place. Narangajavana Kaosiri et al. (2019) argue that user generated content significantly influences tourists' perceptions and expectations, and it is increasingly shaping the branding of tourist destinations.

The findings of Hussain et al. (2021) align with this view, as they found that tourists place substantial trust in the experiences and recommendations of their peers on social media platforms. The reliance on user-generated content is particularly pronounced in the tourism industry, where prospective travelers seek real-world validation of a destination's image before making travel decisions. Studies by Manap & Adzharudin (2013) further reinforce the idea that positive user generated content fosters excitement and anticipation, while negative user-generated content may lead to hesitation or avoidance.

#### *Visual Storytelling and Emotional Engagement*

A key component of social media's influence on tourism destination branding is visual storytelling. Visual content, especially high-quality images and videos, plays a critical role in capturing the attention of potential tourists and evoking emotions that inspire travel (Neuhofer et al., 2015). According to Gretzel et al. (2016), visual content on platforms like Instagram can create a powerful emotional connection between tourists and destinations, often invoking a sense of wanderlust that motivates users to explore new places.

Studies by Hvass & Munar (2012) show that visual storytelling on social media transcends mere marketing; it creates immersive experiences that invite tourists to envision themselves in the destination. This shift from traditional text-based content to visual narratives has

fundamentally altered how destinations are branded. As a result, DMOs have increasingly adopted strategies that prioritize visually appealing content, particularly on platforms like Instagram, where aesthetics drive engagement (Lund et al., 2018).

#### *Social Media Engagement Strategies*

Effective destination branding in the digital age requires more than just visual content; it also involves interactive and engaging strategies that foster two-way communication between DMOs and tourists. Chatzigeorgiou & Christou (2016) emphasize that engagement strategies such as live Q&A sessions, quizzes, polls, and interactive videos not only capture the attention of potential visitors but also build a sense of involvement and connection with the destination. The interactive nature of social media facilitates the development of a community around a destination, where tourists feel more engaged and personally invested in their travel decisions.

Research by Kavoura & Stavrianeas (2015) highlights how social media platforms encourage tourists to participate in shaping a destination's image by sharing their own experiences, often through hashtags and location tags. This interactive dynamic is crucial in creating a sense of authenticity and community, which in turn strengthens brand loyalty. By employing such engagement strategies, DMOs can foster a deeper emotional connection with tourists, ultimately influencing their travel choices.

#### *Platform-Specific Branding Approaches*

Different social media platforms offer varied opportunities for destination branding, as they attract different audiences and utilize distinct content formats. Instagram, for example, is visually driven and appeals primarily to younger, adventure-seeking tourists who are drawn to destinations with aesthetic appeal (Gumpo et al., 2020). In contrast, Facebook and Twitter are more suited for educational content that aids in travel planning, such as itineraries, travel tips, and detailed descriptions of attractions (Huang & Su, 2018).

Scholars like Procter et al. (2015) argue that effective destination branding requires a platform-specific approach, where DMOs tailor their content to the characteristics and preferences of the platform's user base. For instance, Instagram users respond well to immersive visuals that highlight unique experiences, while Facebook users may be more inclined to engage with informational posts and reviews. This platform-specific branding approach is supported by research from Živković et al. (2014), who found that tailoring content to the platform's audience leads to higher engagement and a more positive perception of the destination.

#### *Measuring the Impact of Social Media on Decision-Making*

The influence of social media on tourist decision-making has become an increasingly studied area (Aslam et al., 2020; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Dwityas & Briandana, 2017; Keegan & Rowley, 2017; Schroeder & Pennington-Gray, 2015). Martin-Fuentes (2019) emphasizes that the impact of social media can be measured through various metrics, such as engagement rates, website traffic, and conversion rates, which provide insights into how social media campaigns affect tourist behavior. Studies by Gohil (2015) show that tourists who are frequent social media users are more likely to make travel decisions based on the content they encounter on these platforms. This underscores the importance of social media as a tool not only for shaping perceptions but also for influencing concrete decisions, such as destination selection and activity planning.

Karim (2018) highlights that social media engagement often translates into real-world actions, such as booking a trip or visiting a specific attraction. This measurable impact suggests that social media campaigns can directly influence tourist behavior, making it essential for DMOs to invest in effective social media strategies that drive engagement and

conversion. Sentiment analysis, as noted by Liu & Huang (2020), is another valuable tool for gauging the impact of social media on destination branding, as it provides insights into how tourists feel about a destination based on the content they engage with.

Beyond influencing decision-making, social media also enhances the overall travel experience by providing tourists with real-time information, personalized recommendations, and opportunities for social interaction. Studies by Magno & Cassia (2018) show that tourists who engage with social media before and during their trip are more likely to seek out unique experiences and attractions that align with their interests. This ability to tailor the travel experience through social media content is a powerful tool for DMOs, as it allows them to create more personalized and memorable experiences for tourists.

The research conducted by Kavoura & Stavrianeas (2015) further supports the idea that social media enhances the travel experience by enabling tourists to share their experiences in real time, often influencing their peers to visit the same destination. This ripple effect highlights the broader implications of social media engagement, as each tourist's experience contributes to the overall branding of the destination.

The credibility of user-generated content, the emotional impact of visual content, and the interactive nature of social media all contribute to a more personalized and engaging form of destination branding. By leveraging these elements, DMOs can create powerful connections with tourists, ultimately shaping their perceptions and influencing their travel decisions. As highlighted by scholars like Buhalis & Law (2008) and Gretzel et al. (2016), the digital age presents new challenges and opportunities for destination branding, requiring DMOs to adapt their strategies to the preferences of a digitally savvy and visually driven audience.

#### **Research Objectives:**

This study is an analysis of how destination marketing organizations and industry professionals utilize the immense branding potential of social media geographies, and how particular destinations harness the power of user-generated content, narrative, and digital techniques to connect with their target audiences. The fundamental question posed by this study is what role social media geographies play in the ongoing development and evolution of destination imagery, a question that demands a fine-grained attention to the visual aesthetics of destination imagery on social media, a fine-grained attention to the narrative aesthetics of digital storytelling, and finally a fine-grained sympathy with the undeniable power of user-generated content over the perceptions and expectations of potential tourists who seek new emotional connections within their journeys to place.

This study further aims to understand how the extensive use of social media influences travelers' opinions, attitudes, and decision-making processes. It aims to comprehend the complex ways that recommendations from friends, social media platforms, and the visually captivating stories they post influence travelers' decisions at every stage of the trip, from selecting a destination to booking a ticket.

#### **Research Questions:**

1. How do tourism destinations utilize social media platforms for branding, and what strategies are most effective in shaping destination images in the digital age?
2. What is the role of user-generated content in shaping destination image, and to what extent does it influence visitor perceptions and expectations?

3. How do different social media platforms impact destination branding, and are there distinct effects on visitor perceptions, if so, what are the key differentiators between platforms?
4. What is the measurable impact of social media on visitor decision-making processes when selecting a travel destination, and how does this influence their overall travel experiences?

**Methodology**

This study employs a cross-sectional research design vis-à-vis mixed-methods approach, combining content analysis, surveys, and in-depth interviews. A sample of tourist destinations was selected to analyse the branding on social media pages, considering the visual storytelling, interaction, and information-sharing techniques about these destinations on social media websites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter for tourists. Tourists and potential visitors were given an online survey to assess and understand how they are influenced by social media while deciding to visit a tourist destination and what information-seeking sources they prefer considering them reliable. After analysing the collected data through an online survey, next we interviewed the stakeholders, including travel agents, social media influencers, travel vloggers, and tourists. Participants with experience in social media marketing destination branding and visitors with various travel backgrounds were chosen through purposeful sampling.

**Data Analysis:**

**Table 1: Regression Analysis and Measurable Impact Results**

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Beta Coefficient	p-value	Conclusion
Social Media Usage	Impact on Perception	0.45	<0.01	Frequent and always users have significantly more positive perceptions of destinations.
Social Media Usage	Impact on Decision-Making	0.63	<0.01	Frequent and always users are significantly more likely to make travel decisions based on social media content.
Measurable Impact	Metrics and Indicators	Results		Conclusion
Social Media Impact Metrics	Engagement rates	+15%		Social media content resulted in a 15% increase in engagement rates for destinations.
	Website traffic	+20%		Social media campaigns led to a 20% increase in website traffic.
	Conversion rates	+10%		Destination-specific conversion rates improved by 10% due to effective social media campaigns.
	Sentiment analysis	Positive impact		Sentiment analysis showed a consistently positive impact on destination image and visitor perceptions.

**Table 2: Qualitative Data Analysis Findings**

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Qualitative Findings</b>
<b>Research Question 1</b>	Visual elements, high-quality photos and videos. Storytelling, adventure, discovery, and cultural immersion. Interactive quizzes, audience engagement. User-generated content, authenticity.
<b>Research Question 2</b>	- User-generated content is considered highly credible and authentic. - Positive user-generated content creates excitement and anticipation. - Negative content can lead to doubts and hesitations.
<b>Research Question 3</b>	- Instagram emphasizes visual content, younger audiences, experiential and adventure travel, informative content, travel planning. - Tailoring branding strategies to platform characteristics and audience preferences are crucial.
<b>Research Question 4</b>	- Frequent social media users, travel decisions and social media. Social media influenced destination selection, activity planning, and overall travel experiences.

The data analysis reveals various techniques of tourist destination branding on social media platforms. The natural landscape, cultural experiences, and distinctive features of the tourism destinations are usually highlighted through visual components, such as high-quality images and videos, to increase the interest of potential tourists and to enhance the natural landscape through the use of technology. Interactive techniques, including live sessions with the tourists, along with online facilitation regarding services related to tourism. Additionally, user-generated content is used to boost authenticity regarding tourism destinations. The data reveals that destination branding is being done through the use of multiple visual storytelling and user engagement techniques on social media to share effective and attractive destination images in the digital sphere.

Evaluations made in the data analysis part reveal that user content plays a crucial role in the formation of destination perceptions. Visitor perception and expectation are mostly influenced by user-created content since it is credible and original to tourists. Positive user-generated material has also been established to create interest and anticipation among potential consumers, while destructive content may cause questions and concern. This shows the ability that user-generated content to influence a destination’s perception and very strongly influences the viewpoint of visitors to the destination as suggested by the previous studies (Manap & Adzharudin, 2013; Narangajavana Kaosiri et al., 2019).

The research shows that every social media platform influences destination branding differently as can be seen from the results of the analysis. For instance, it is revealed that Instagram prefers more graphic content and attracts the young generation eager to explore new places. On the other hand, Facebook and Twitter do contain more educational values in terms of the functional aspects of travel planning, specifically; recommended itineraries and travel tips (Gumpo et al., 2020; Huang & Su, 2018). The survey shows that to be effective, branding needs to be aligned with the features of social media platforms and the users. The key differences are what kind of content is posted, who it is posted for, and what engagement strategies are used.

The quantitative research results prove the hypothesis that social media plays a decisive role in the tourist decision-making process in selecting a holiday destination. The

current/recurrent active social media users are far more disposed to make travel choices based on information obtained from these platforms. In addition to a decision to avoid certain destinations, this effect is seen in other aspects of the travel experience. Thus, talking about such parameters as higher rates of interaction, website traffic, conversion, as well as positive sentiment analytical data can help measure the impact of social media (Gumpo et al., 2020; Huang & Su, 2018). This study demonstrates why social media is important in deciding on a tourist destination or enhancing its overall tourist experience.

In conclusion, the results provide comprehensive insights into the utilization of social media by tourism destinations, the role of user-generated content, the impact of different social media platforms, and the measurable influence of social media on visitor decision-making processes and travel experiences in the digital age.

### **Discussion**

Indeed, the internet's ever-expanding use has dramatically changed how tourist places market and communicate with prospective visitors. The review shows that social media platforms are inevitable features of destinations' digital marketing and destination branding. Following prior research problems, this discussion considers the implications of the study findings.

Numerous studies highlight social media's expanding importance in destination branding (Lange-Faria & Elliot, 2012; Lund et al., 2018; Tran & Rudolf, 2022). For instance, Buhalis & Law (2008) emphasize how crucial user-generated material on social media platforms is to create a positive perception of a place. Their study demonstrates how the shared experiences, images, and reviews of travellers influence the perception of a place.

The study's conclusions are consistent with those of studies like Gretzel et al. (2016), highlighting the importance of visual storytelling on social media sites like Instagram. High-quality photographs and videos that are part of visual content are essential in destination branding. Visual information not only grabs potential tourists' attention but also stirs feelings and a desire to travel (Neuhofer et al., 2015). Additionally, the study found that engagement tactics originated in past studies. The value of interactive engagement strategies in destination marketing is that they encourage connection and participation (Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2016). The study's conclusion that interactive features like quizzes and competitions effectively increase audience engagement is consistent with these long-held guidelines.

The credibility of user-generated material and its impact on visitors' perceptions and expectations are supported by research like those by Xiang et al. (2017b). Their study demonstrates how strongly user-generated content affects destination image. The results of this study support how user-generated content influences tourists' expectations and decisions by fostering trust and authenticity.

Researchers have looked into how different social media sites affect people differently and how people utilize social media websites to get an outside world view as well as to present themselves. Živković et al. (2014) for instance, contend that various platforms draw various audiences with varied preferences. Instagram attracts a younger audience interested in adventurous travel because it is frequently connected with highly visual material. Facebook and Twitter, on the other hand, Facebook and Twitter act as educational resources that impact practical aspects of travel preparation. These observations are supported by the study's findings on the effects of various platforms, which emphasize the need for specialized approaches.

Scholarly interest has been drawn to the quantifiable influence of social media on visitor decision-making. Martin-Fuentes (2019) draws attention to the significant impact that social



media has on how people decide where to visit. The study's conclusions support this by showing that those who use social media frequently and constantly are more inclined to base their travel decisions on the information they discover there.

Scholars have researched the idea that social media could improve the travel experience. Visitors who interact with content on social media platforms are more likely to look for certain attractions and partake in distinctive cultural backgrounds, which has a beneficial effect on their overall travel experiences (Gohil, 2015; Karim, 2018; Kavoura & Stavrianeas, 2015; Magno & Cassia, 2018). The study's findings support this by showing that the influence of social media goes beyond decision-making to enhance the complete travel experience.

### **Conclusion**

Internet and social media have emerged as critical communication platforms in the branding and marketing of tourism destinations in the advanced world. Discussing the findings of the study, such key points as user-generated material, visual content, storytelling, engagement approaches, and destination branding are revealed. Thus, unique effects and tangible changes in distinct social media platforms and their contribution to the decision-making and experience of tourists unravel the paradigm shift in the marketing of destinations in a new age of digital setting. The above findings assist destination marketing organizations in generating techniques that can capture modern high-technology passengers.

As it has been disclosed, tourism destination branding is currently undergoing an extensive transition against the backdrop of the beginnings of the digital age, wherein social media has a rapidly rising importance. This paper aimed to find out how social media alters the perception and methods of destinations and tourists. As a result of analyzing the data collected and the literature review, several important conclusions concerning destination marketing and tourists' attentiveness were made.

Thus, we find congruity with the social media reformative impacts on how people perceive a travel destination. Users of various social media websites such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, for instance, can portray a given place as reliable and this passes the true word to potential tourists. Destination branding is no exception, and the importance of the use of visual storytelling has become more important. Affordable top-notch visuals effectively capture the attention of people who may become tourists through creating passion and desire.

Interactive sessions on social media, live question and answer sessions, and relevant information prompt the audience to a sense of involvement with the destination. Such an exciting and active engagement builds a unique relationship between the destination and prospective visitors with the ability to alter perceptions and decision finalization. The proportion of user-generated content is extremely high and has a highly trusted effect on whether visitors are satisfied or dissatisfied. Analysing the nature of the different social media outlets and their different outcomes also supports our hypothesis that each of the forums attracts a different group of people with different preferences. While Facebook and Twitter focus on educational content that affects practical parts of travel preparation, Instagram concentrates on highly visual content. It caters to a younger generation interested in experiencing travel.

Most importantly it was found that social media advertising had an impact in terms of concrete variables. Measures such as sentiment analysis, Website traffic, conversion, and engagement rates were handy means of gauging the level of concern about how social media was affecting behaviour among visitors. The findings from the research confirmed the reasons established in the hypotheses, which are that social media initiatives create impressions beyond the perception of the tourists, influence the decision-making processes of the tourists, and enhance the general travel experience.

Therefore, our work underscores the interconnectedness of the digital age and tourism destination branding. The effectiveness in the formulation of suiting narratives for the society, fostering interactive associations, and embracing originality of account from social media is achieved. This understanding of how social media is changing the branding of destinations can be seen from the effects noted for many social media platforms and translates to tangible changes in visitor behaviour. Thus, the knowledge that this study offers would allow destination marketing organizations to orient themselves in the rapidly evolving field of destination branding in the context of the active usage of digital platforms. This research lays the foundation for further research and application in destination marketing as the advancement of the digital era progresses.

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