

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT IN TRAVELER DECISIONS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the role of social media and user-generated content (UGC) in influencing traveler decision-making processes in the digital era. Using a qualitative approach through a literature review method, this research systematically analyzes studies published in the last ten years sourced from Scopus and Google Scholar databases. Specific keywords such as “social media and tourist decision-making,” “user-generated content and travel behavior,” and “digital word of mouth and tourism” were used to collect relevant literature. The findings reveal that social media and UGC play a significant role across three stages of the travel process: pre-trip, during the trip, and post-trip. In the pre-trip stage, UGC serves as a primary source of inspiration and information, forming travelers’ initial perceptions of destinations. During the trip, travelers rely on real-time content to make decisions, while post-trip experiences shared online influence the future choices of other travelers. Factors such as perceived risk, content credibility, self-actualization, and social validation further strengthen UGC’s impact. Overall, the study concludes that UGC and social media are not just supplementary sources but central elements in modern travel decision-making. Understanding their role is crucial for stakeholders to develop effective and sustainable digital tourism strategies

KEYWORDS

Social Media, Traveler Decisions, User-Generated Content (UGC)

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has been marked by rapid advancements in information technology, particularly in the field of digital communication (Mojaye & Aondover, 2022). This digital transformation has revolutionized various aspects of human life, including how individuals seek information, interact socially, and make consumption decisions (Islam & Bhuiyan, 2022; Van Veldhoven & Vanthienen, 2022). One of the most prominent phenomena in the past two decades is the rising use of social media as a primary platform for sharing, searching, and obtaining information (Zimba & Gasparyan, 2021). In the context of tourism, social media has become the main channel through which travelers explore new destinations, compare experiences, and make travel decisions (Christou & Chatzigeorgiou, 2020). The popularity of platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube, as well as review forums like TripAdvisor and Google Review, has transformed the dynamics of tourism information from a one-way, formal delivery to a more interactive, participatory, and user-driven model. This is referred to as user-generated content (UGC), which now plays a significant role in shaping tourists’ perceptions, expectations, and preferences.

This phenomenon did not occur by chance. There are several strong reasons why social media and UGC have become dominant in influencing tourists’ decision-making in the digital era. First, the behavioral shift of consumers towards becoming increasingly digital-savvy encourages information-seeking behavior to be conducted online and in real time. Modern travelers, particularly millennials and Gen Z, place more trust in firsthand experiences shared by fellow users than in promotional materials from formal institutions such as travel agents or official brochures (Moodley & Machela, 2022). They are more drawn to authentic stories, real photos, and honest reviews shared by everyday individuals than to advertisements that often appear contrived. This shift in trust has moved the authority of information from professional institutions to regular users with genuine experiences, thereby strengthening the role of UGC as a primary source of tourism information. Second, the ease of access to social media through mobile devices has made the process of searching for and sharing information faster and broader (Chen et al., 2022). Nearly everyone now owns a smartphone connected to the internet, enabling them to access various social media platforms anytime and anywhere. This not only allows tourists to obtain information instantly but also empowers them to contribute new information that others can access. This cycle creates an ever-evolving and mutually reinforcing information ecosystem, where every user is both a consumer and producer of tourism content. Third, the global tendency toward seeking authentic and personalized experiences in tourism

activities further drives the use of UGC in decision-making processes (Y. Zhang et al., 2021). Today's tourists are no longer just interested in visiting popular destinations; they are more attracted to unique experiences and personal stories that they can, in turn, share on social media. UGC provides a more humanized and contextual narrative of a destination, unlike the formal, uniform narratives found in conventional promotional materials. Experiences shared in the form of videos, photos, or personal travel stories evoke stronger emotional engagement and relatability among prospective tourists, which indirectly shapes their image and expectations of a destination. As such, social media and UGC have become essential components in the social construction of travel destinations.

This phenomenon has attracted the attention of academics and researchers who aim to examine how UGC influences tourist behavior in various aspects. Previous studies have shown that social media and UGC play significant roles in forming visit intentions, risk perceptions, travel satisfaction, and even loyalty to a destination. Research by (Oshriyeh et al., (2022) for instance, revealed that online information-seeking by travelers is heavily influenced by content produced by other users rather than by official destination websites. Furthermore, H. Zhang et al., (2022) discovered that tourists are primarily motivated to share their experiences on social media as a way to contribute to the community and as a form of self-actualization. Additionally, Kfoury (2024) highlighted the importance of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in the tourism industry. They stated that eWOM originating from UGC exerts a strong influence on destination image and tourist preferences because it is perceived as more credible, relevant, and contextual than information provided by tourism service providers. This research emphasized the value of user-generated credibility as a key factor in shaping tourists' decisions, especially in situations where official information is limited or considered biased.

Moreover, a study by Bandinelli (2020) found that tourists' perceptions of the credibility and authenticity of online reviews directly influence their decision to purchase tourism services. They concluded that trust in UGC is a key mediating element between digital information and tourists' actual behavior. This study underscores the importance of building trust in digital tourism communication, most of which is delivered through social media and online review platforms.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that social media and user-generated content are not merely supplementary sources of information; they have become integral to tourists' decision-making processes. They influence perceptions before a visit, experiences during the trip, and evaluations and sharing of experiences afterward. This process is cyclical and self-sustaining, showing that tourist behavior in the digital age is heavily influenced by the narratives and experiences circulating online.

Based on this background, the present study aims to conduct a comprehensive literature review on the role of social media and user-generated content in influencing tourist decision-making. The main focus of this research is to explore various findings from previous studies in order to understand the patterns, mechanisms, and implications of using social media in the tourism decision-making process. Through an exploratory approach, this study seeks to contribute both theoretically and practically to the field of tourism communication, particularly in understanding the new dynamics that arise from the integration of digital technology into daily life. This study is also expected to serve as a foundation for future research that may explore specific platforms, demographic segments of digital travelers, or the psychological impact of consuming UGC on tourist risk perception and expectations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a literature review method. This approach is used to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of social media and user-generated content (UGC) in influencing traveler decisions. The literature review method is chosen for its relevance in examining and synthesizing previous research that discusses the digital transformation of information in the tourism industry, particularly through social media. The data in this study were obtained from scientific articles sourced from two main academic databases, namely Scopus and Google Scholar. The literature search was conducted systematically using specific keywords aligned with the focus of the research. Several keywords used in the search process included "social media and tourist decision-making," "user-generated content and travel behavior," "UGC and tourism industry," "social media marketing and travel," "influence of social media on travel decisions," "digital word of mouth and tourism," and "online reviews and destination image." The selection of these keywords aimed to reach a broad range of studies that explore the relationship between social media platforms, traveler perceptions, and decision-making processes in the travel context. The inclusion criteria applied in this

study consisted of scientific articles published within the last ten years, specifically from 2015 to 2025. The included articles were written in either English or Indonesian, available in full-text format, and explicitly discussed the role of social media and UGC in the context of tourism or traveler behavior. The literature selected was based on credibility and methodological clarity, sourced from peer-reviewed journals with strong academic relevance to the focus of this research. On the other hand, the exclusion criteria involved articles that were not relevant to the main topic of the study, such as those that did not discuss UGC or social media in the tourism context, opinion pieces lacking a strong scientific basis, and publications released before 2015. Articles that were not available in full text or came from questionable sources were also excluded from the analysis. After the literature selection process, the collected data were analyzed descriptively and qualitatively using a thematic approach. The analysis was carried out to identify common patterns, key findings, as well as theoretical and practical trends from the various reviewed studies. The results of this analysis are expected to provide a comprehensive overview of how social media and UGC shape traveler behavior, while also contributing to the development of theoretical understanding and practical implications in the field of digital tourism communication.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Dynamics of Tourist Behavior Change in the Digital Era

The development of digital technology over the past two decades has brought profound transformation to various aspects of human life (Pencarelli, 2020). One of the most affected areas is tourist behavior, which has significantly changed in how people search for information, evaluate options, and make travel decisions. Amid this wave of digital revolution, social media has emerged as a dominant platform, not only functioning as a communication channel but also serving as a source of information, inspiration, and even social validation within the tourism context (Allam, 2020). This shift marks a paradigm change in the global tourism ecosystem, where the power of information is no longer centralized in official institutions but widely distributed among everyday users who share their experiences through digital content.

Before the rise of social media, travelers heavily relied on information provided by travel agencies, promotional brochures, print catalogs, and official websites of tourism authorities (Mustaqim&Saputro, 2023). Such information was typically one-directional, centrally produced, and curated for promotional purposes. Travelers had little room to critically evaluate destinations since the narrative was dominated by institutional discourse. However, the emergence of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok has entirely transformed this landscape (Khadijah, 2024). Today, anyone can become an “information producer” simply by uploading travel stories, photos, videos, or reviews of their tourism experiences.

In this context, the rise of user-generated content (UGC) has been a key driver of this change (Y. Zhang et al., 2021). UGC refers to all forms of content created by users—rather than institutions or official industry players—and publicly shared through social media or other digital platforms. This content can take the form of travel vlogs, destination photos, restaurant reviews, or trip itineraries. UGC provides an alternative narrative that is more authentic, unfiltered by commercial logic, and often considered more honest and relevant to prospective travelers (Nasser, 2023).

Recent literature shows that modern travelers, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, tend to rely heavily on UGC when planning their trips (Hudson, 2024). They place more trust in real experiences shared by other users than in official information from tourism service providers. This phenomenon also reflects a growing distrust in traditional media and a stronger trust in online communities perceived as more independent. Authenticity has become a core value in contemporary tourist consideration, and UGC offers a space where such value can be expressed and consumed.

A concrete example of this can be found on the YouTube channel *The Endless Adventure*, which uploaded a video titled “How to Spend the BEST 24 Hours in Ubud Bali”(White, 2022). The video, which has garnered over one million views, shows a couple exploring unique spots in Ubud, offering honest reviews and useful tips. Content like this serves as a trusted reference for global travelers planning to visit Bali, as it offers direct insight from personal experience rather than promotional narratives.

Major changes also occur in the decision-making process. Travelers today make choices based on various forms of UGC they consume—ranging from Instagram stories to Google Reviews. A study by A found that travel decisions are more influenced by digital content from other users than by official destination websites (Dramićanin&Sančanin, 2020). This shows that persuasive power has

shifted from institutions to individuals, from formal authority to peer communities. This behavioral transformation is further reinforced by a shift in tourism values. Today's travelers are not just looking for beautiful or famous places they crave experiences that are unique, personal, and shareable. They want to *feel* a destination, not just see it. They seek engagement with local culture, authentic experiences, and narratives they can construct themselves. In this regard, UGC serves not only as a source of reference but also as a tool for shaping and expressing personal identity.

One of the most striking examples of this is the global trend of #VanLife, which has gone viral on Instagram and YouTube. Travelers from the U.S. and Europe, such as @divineontheroad, document their lives in converted vans, sharing stunning views, daily routines, and emotional stories from the road. This lifestyle has become aspirational for many and has expanded the definition of "travel" into an existential journey.

This transformation is also linked to social validation mechanisms. Travelers now seek not only meaningful experiences but also social acknowledgment of those experiences. The more engaging their content whether in terms of aesthetics, storytelling, or virality the more likely they are to receive digital validation through likes, comments, or shares (Castellani et al., 2020). This creates a new incentive to continuously share experiences, reinforcing the role of social media as an integral part of the travel process, not merely a post-trip documentation tool.

However, this behavioral shift also presents challenges. Not all UGC can be guaranteed for accuracy (Liang et al., 2024). Some content may be exaggerated, misleading, or even manipulated for personal or commercial gain. Additionally, sudden popularity due to viral content can lead to overtourism in destinations that are unprepared in terms of infrastructure or community resilience. Therefore, strong digital literacy is necessary for both travelers and destination managers to ensure that the information consumed and produced is used responsibly. Ultimately, the dynamics of tourist behavior in the digital era result from a combination of technological innovation, social evolution, and new values in human experience. Social media and UGC do not merely change how we plan our trips, but also how we understand places, build connections, and celebrate experiences. They are part of a new "travel ritual" that involves global digital communities.

This chapter affirms that tourist behavior in the digital age is inseparable from the media ecosystem and the narratives circulating within it (Katsoni&Spyriadis, 2020). To fully understand this phenomenon, an interdisciplinary approach is needed, involving communication technology, tourism psychology, and digital ethics. Amid increasing globalization and hyper-connectivity, UGC has become a major actor in shaping the new face of global tourism—one that is participatory, decentralized, and community-driven.

2. The Role of Social Media and User-Generated Content in Travel Decision-Making

In today's rapidly evolving digital era, travel decision-making is no longer solely dependent on promotional materials or recommendations from travel agents (PricopeVancia et al., 2023). Instead, travelers increasingly rely on information they discover through social media and content created by ordinary users commonly referred to as *user-generated content* (UGC) (Kitsios et al., 2022). This shift impacts every stage of the travel journey, including the pre-trip phase, the experience during the trip, and the post-trip reflections. Social media and UGC play a vital role in shaping perceptions, generating interest, guiding destination choices, and influencing both satisfaction and long-term loyalty.

Academic literature identifies the primary strength of UGC as its ability to form initial perceptions of a destination. A study by Karaiskou(2025) reveals that online reviews, Instagram photos, and YouTube or TikTok videos create strong visual and emotional impressions for potential travelers. These early impressions are crucial in determining whether a person becomes interested in learning more or considers visiting a destination. Content showcasing natural beauty, local cultural uniqueness, or personal experiences such as community interaction is far more effective in drawing interest than generic, commercially driven advertisements.

During the pre-trip phase, travelers use social media as an exploration tool. They search for inspiration, compare destinations, and construct mental images of places they might visit. According to Smith (2021) many travelers begin their planning process on visual platforms like Instagram, where attractive content becomes a primary driver of interest.

A concrete example of this can be seen in viral TikTok travel content. A video posted by user @swissglobetraveller featuring Lake Blausee in Switzerland attracted millions of viewers and sparked a noticeable increase in visits to the area. This spontaneous, personal content proved far more effective than official tourism promotions from local governments. In the digital context, credibility is no

longer anchored in institutional authority but rather in the perceived authenticity and relatability of peer experiences.

As travelers move into the during-trip phase, social media and UGC continue to serve important functions. Modern tourists tend to share their experiences in real-time via Instagram Stories, TikTok videos, or live streams. This activity not only serves to document personal experiences but also provides real-time guidance for others planning or undertaking similar trips. This creates a dynamic information ecosystem, where one traveler's experience immediately contributes to another's decision-making process.

A study by Lee et al., (2023) found that the primary motivation for travelers to share content during their trips is not just to gain social recognition, but also to contribute meaningfully to digital communities. Many feel that sharing information about prices, weather, facilities, or potential risks can help other travelers make better-informed choices. Here lies the social value of UGC: it functions as a collaborative medium through which travelers exchange guidance, flag potential issues, and build realistic expectations.

Credibility plays a decisive role at this stage. Travelers are more likely to trust information from peer users with no commercial affiliation than from official accounts, which may carry bias. Bandinelli(2020) emphasizes that the perception of authenticity and honesty in content is a key factor in determining whether UGC is trusted and acted upon. As such, even negative reviews or critical commentary can exert considerable influence, often viewed as more reliable due to their candid tone.

Even after the trip ends, social media remains active in the traveler's journey. During the post-trip phase, travelers often share reflections through posts, review videos, or blog articles. This process is not only a form of personal documentation but also contributes to the collective narrative of the destination. In many cases, these reflections influence the decisions of others who are just beginning their travel planning. UGC, therefore, plays a vital role in a cyclical process—where one person's experience stimulates another's travel aspirations, feeding into an ongoing network of digital influence.

Moreover, UGC helps build long-term loyalty to destinations. Travelers who feel satisfied with their trip and form emotional bonds with a place are more likely to return and recommend it to others—both directly and through social media. Loyalty in this digital age is no longer only based on services or infrastructure, but also on the ability of a destination to provide experiences that can be shared and validated within digital communities.

Another crucial aspect of travel decision-making is risk perception. In the post-pandemic context, for instance, many travelers are more cautious in choosing destinations. They seek to understand how safe a place is, how health protocols are enforced, and what the local social and economic conditions are like. UGC becomes highly valuable in this regard, offering up-to-date, on-the-ground information. Content such as cleanliness-focused hotel reviews or airport walkthrough videos provides important insights for travelers aiming to minimize risk. Social media also serves as a validation tool in the decision-making process (Çalik, 2020). Travelers frequently share their plans on social media to receive feedback or approval from their digital communities. This highlights how travel decisions are not always made independently but are often shaped by social dynamics and a desire for affirmation. This psychological motivation further amplifies the influence of UGC it allows space for participation, interaction, and social endorsement.

Thematically, the literature reviewed reveals consistent patterns regarding UGC's role in travel decision-making. First, UGC acts as an initial information source that sparks interest and shapes perceptions. Second, UGC provides practical and emotional guidance during the trip. Third, UGC becomes a channel for post-trip reflection that can influence loyalty and future travel decisions. This pattern demonstrates that UGC is not a supplemental tool in tourism information systems, but rather a core element that connects travelers to their entire tourism experience.

In conclusion, social media and UGC play a critical role in facilitating and shaping travel decisions from start to finish. They offer more contextual, personal, and relevant information than formal sources. More than that, they create participatory spaces where every traveler becomes both a contributor and consumer of information. In a world that is increasingly digitized, a deep understanding of UGC's role is essential to developing more responsive, inclusive, and sustainable tourism communication and management strategies.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTION

This study aimed to explore in depth the role of social media and user-generated content (UGC) in influencing travelers' decision-making processes in the digital era. Based on the literature review, it was found that social media has become the primary source of information for travelers when planning, experiencing, and evaluating their journeys. UGC—in the form of reviews, photos, videos, and personal stories—is considered more authentic, credible, and relevant than information provided by formal institutions. Travel decision-making is influenced by UGC across three main stages. In the pre-trip phase, travelers use social media as a tool for exploration to form initial perceptions of destinations. During the trip, they rely on UGC as a real-time guide and reference for making decisions. After the trip, travelers share their experiences, contributing to a collective digital narrative that in turn influences other potential travelers. Several factors further strengthen the influence of UGC, including perceived risk, content credibility, the need for self-actualization, and the impact of social validation through digital interactions. UGC not only serves as a medium for sharing information but also as a platform for travelers to build personal identity and engage in dynamic virtual communities. Thus, it can be concluded that UGC and social media play a strategic role in shaping the behavior of modern travelers. Both have become central elements in the contemporary tourism communication system. Therefore, understanding the mechanisms and implications of UGC use is essential for stakeholders in designing effective, inclusive, and contextually relevant promotion strategies and destination management practices that align with the dynamics of today's digital tourism landscape.

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