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The Comparison of Strategies of Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO's) and User-Generated Content (UGC) on Instagram

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Introduction | Social media has proven effective for destination branding, allowing destinations to present unique offerings, reach new audiences, engage with potential visitors, and build their brand image. Different types of social media are used for communication purposes. Among all social media platforms, Instagram is the most popular social media platform used in tourism and significantly impacts the travel industry, as users create the image of a destination by sharing stories and photos (Platon, 2023). Platon's (2003) research investigates the features of the Instagram, and how these features are used for tourism purposes, developing strategies and tactics for promoting destinations. Instagram is mentioned as the popular platform for the destination marketing for many scholars (e.g. Yoon and Yoo, 2023, Wacker and Groth, 2020, Platon, 2023). The reason is explained with (i) its destination image properties they contain (Yoon and Yoo, 2023) – including Publicly visible Instagram posts, likes, photos, videos, stories, hashtag

and location matching (Guarda et al. 2019), (ii) the content of photos and unbiased source of information that is shared on Instagram to influence and inspire the tourists (Hauser et al., 2022, Wacker and Groth, 2020, Guarda et al. 2019). These mentioned opportunities make Instagram a popular platform for tourists to share their experiences and travel advice, forming a trusting community of friends and followers (Platon, 2023). Therefore, the content shared on Instagram by customers (user-generated content (UGC)) is found to be trustworthy because the users express both negative and positive views regarding the products they test (Silva and Brito, 2020).

Instagram significantly impacts the travel industry and destination marketing by allowing users to share images and videos, contributing to the overall impression of a destination (Hauser et al., 2022, Wacker and Groth, 2020, Guarda et al. 2019). Destination marketing is essential for increasing tourists and enhancing the destination's reputation and brand image. Image-based communication on social media like Instagram can effectively promote travel locations, attracting more tourists through user-generated content shared by various sources (Guarda et al. 2019, Silva and Brito, 2020).

The aim of this exploratory paper is to investigate the ways in which DMO's draw on UGC and to categorise their strategies for digital engagement (e.g. role of intermediaries, competitions, etc.). This aim unfolds in the following research objectives:

- To equate the different forms of user-generated content by DMO's
- To develop a typology of strategies for digital engagement about destination promotion utilising UGC

Since the Internet has revolutionised the methods by which prospective tourists plan and reserve travel-related activities, obtain information, and exchange content about their destination (Jorge et al., 2020), they significantly impact the tourism industry. Therefore, being more affordable and effective than traditional marketing methods makes the Internet and social media a growing promotional channel for travel and tourist businesses.

Theoretical background | Destination marketing typically aims to attract visitors, increase tourism revenues, and improve the destination's reputation as well as brand image (Platon, 2023). Clear destination image is needed to differentiate vacation destinations from other destination and manage visitor expectations (e.g. adventure holiday destination vs. family holidays). After all, the satisfied vacationers are more likely to recommend their holiday destination to their friends. Today, such recommendations often take place in the form on

social media posts. Some tourists also attach hashtags to their posts and make their posts publicly available, thus reaching far wider audience than before.

Social media plays a crucial role in promoting travel destinations (Jorge et al., 2020) and shaping the image of a destination (Epper et al., 2022). Visitors' and tourists' decision-making process is greatly influenced by how these platforms are used and content posted (Jorge et al., 2020). Social media has proven effective for destination branding, because of (I) allowing destinations to present unique offerings, (ii) reach new audiences, (iii) engage with potential visitors, (iv) build their brand image (v) connecting with visitors and locals, (vi) creating online communities, and (vii) encouraging visitors to share experiences and photos (Tuten and Solomon, 2015).

Hence, social media campaigns can be developed to interact with the public and customers by encouraging them to share cocreated content by posting images and using hashtags (Mele, Filieri, and De, 2023). Such "user-generated content" (UGC) has been produced as a result of tourists' empowerment on social media (Femenia-Serra, and Gretzel, 2020). Prospective tourists like to search their locations online since UGC offers an unbiased source of information reflecting travellers' perspectives (Wacker and Groth, 2020). Therefore, the UGC content shared on social media (specifically in Instagram) is found to be trustworthy because the users express both negative and positive views regarding the products they test (Silva & Brito, 2020). Thus UGC is crucial in presenting travel experiences and shaping destination perceptions.

Therefore, destination marketing organisations (DMOs) can utilise this cocreated content for their marketing strategies because DMOs can focus on designing distinctive experiences (Gon, 2020). Social media, especially Instagram with its visual features, is becoming increasingly crucial in DMO marketing plans for various reasons. Firstly, Instagram allows customers to create user-generated-content (Silva and Brito, 2020). Secondly, Instagram has been one of the most often used social media platform for destination marketing (Yoon and Yoo, 2023, Wacker and Groth, 2020, Platon, 2023). Thirdly, Instagram offers a variety of capabilities, including Instagram stories, hashtag and location matching, as well as photo and video publishing, which can be used for social media marketing and branding (Guarda et al. 2019). Fourthly, Instagram posts, likes, photos or videos, are visible to followers or public users, allowing users to see others' posts, potentially finding inspiration from them or be influenced by them. These opportunities make Instagram a popular platform for tourists to share their experiences and travel advice, forming a trusting community of friends and followers (Platon, 2023, Yoon and Yoo, 2023). Therefore, this research focus is

on Instagram and how UGC on Instagram is used by DMO's to build destination marketing strategies.

Methodology | This research aims to understand how UGC in Instagram can be used to promote tourism destinations. To understand how UGC is used for promoting destination marketing, the commercialization of UGC by DMOs - an organisation offering destination marketing services to tourism locations – will be analysed. To achieve this aim, a case study (including interviews with DMOs) will be used to gauge the best content for destination marketing and their engagement levels. The following research objectives are determined to achieve this aim:

1. To examine the theories of user experience, social media marketing and destination marketing
2. To examine the engagement levels for this user-generated content.
3. To identify the different forms of user-generated content utilized by DMO's, the variables that may generate the most engagement, the trendy topics, keywords, and hashtags
4. To understand how to develop a strategy for user-generated-content to promote tourism destinations and reach more customers.

Three capital cities—Amsterdam, Helsinki, and Lisbon - which represent South, North, and Central Europe—will be the focus of this exploratory study. The number of cities are limited to three because of time and resource limitations of the researchers. These cities were chosen mainly four purposes: (i) they are capital cities chosen in different regions of Europe - South, North, and Central Europe, (ii) with active official Instagram pages with millions of folllowers and numerous Instagram posts, engagement and interaction, (iii) User genrated content can be separated from DMO authored content for comparison, and (iv) the researchers have ties to these cities because of their affiliation, thus enabling deeper meaning for analysis. Images and text from official Instagram accounts will be analyzed using thematic/content analysis. Results will be verified by a combination of AI and human coding. The following software will be used: ATLAS-Ti for clustering, Python, and Cloud Vision for image processing.

Findings | The expected outcomes should demonstrate the best practices of destination marketing via Instagram and the development of social media strategies to boost customer engagement and interaction.

Contributions and implications | This research provides some theoretical and practical contributions. It contributes to literature on social media research, more precisely the impact of social media and user generated content, particularly via Instagram, upon tourism. It also contributes to advancing knowledge on how DMOs can utilize Instagram posts to promote a destination and destination image. The promotion of destination marketing will be evaluated from both sides – UGC and DMO's Instagram posts. Finally, this study contributes to the set of qualitative methodological approaches and destination marketing that can be used in tourism management and/in social media through relevant analytics. From the practical view, the study aims to enhance customer engagement and interaction through the creation of social media content and strategies utilizing user-generated content and destination marketing organizations.

Conclusion | Benefitting from Instagram for destination marketing is an emerging topic. User-Generated-Content (UGC) that tourists share on their social media pages is an efficient way to influence potential visitors positively or negatively because these user experience posts come from unbiased and real users' perspectives. User-Generated-Content is not only used by tourists for their decision-making process but also the organisations that try to promote the tourism destinations benefit from these UGC. This research results should display the most efficient strategies of DMOs in terms of benefitting UGC.

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