

## **HOW SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES TRAVEL DECISIONS: THE EFFECT OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT, VISUAL APPEAL, AND STORYTELLING ON DESTINATION INTENTIONS**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Tourist destinations can achieve competitive advantages in the global tourism market through various strategic approaches, and in today's digital era, social media has emerged as a pivotal tool for destination branding. It has fundamentally transformed the way potential tourists perceive and select their travel destinations. Unlike traditional forms of marketing, social media offers a dynamic platform for promoting destinations through diverse and engaging content, which can reach a global audience directly. Research has shown that social media is primarily used during the pre-trip phase of travel planning, allowing the elements of user-generated content (UGC), destination storytelling, and visually appealing content to significantly shape travel intentions.

As social media has become increasingly widespread, internet users have shifted from passive consumers to active creators and sharers of content. UGC, in particular, encompasses a range of materials such as social media posts, YouTube videos, and online reviews. The growing importance of UGC in the tourism industry has transformed how travel-related information is accessed and shared, offering potential tourists authentic and impartial perspectives. This type of content is often seen as more reliable than traditional advertising, as it provides real-life experiences and firsthand accounts, which help travelers imagine what a destination will be like. Storytelling, an inherently human activity, has undergone a transformation with the rise of social media. Destination storytelling involves the strategic narration of a destination's unique qualities, culture, and experiences. These stories evoke emotional responses that strengthen the destination's appeal and increase its memorability. The role of storytelling in tourism research has gained significant attention, as it fosters an emotional connection between destinations and potential tourists.

Visual content is a key factor in capturing the attention of social media users, as the sense of sight is the fastest and most impactful sensory channel. Visually appealing content-

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comprising high-quality images and videos-has the power to engage tourists by sparking emotions and fuelling wanderlust. Research has shown that visually compelling content enhances the overall perception of a destination, making it more attractive to potential visitors. High-quality visual content has been found to influence tourists' decisions positively, even motivating repeat visits. Studies suggest that destinations with strong visual appeal are more likely to influence tourists' decisions and encourage them to choose the destination for their travels. Social media remains a central component of destination marketing, emphasizing the importance of understanding how UGC, storytelling, and visual content contribute to the intention to visit a destination. By exploring the individual and combined effects of these factors, this study aims to provide valuable insights into effective destination branding on social media. The findings will guide tourism marketers and destination managers in optimizing their social media strategies to attract more visitors.

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW:**

##### **User-Generated Content (UGC).**

User-generated content (UGC) refers to media created by individuals, not professionals, and shared online (Santos, 2022). It is characterized by personal contributions, public sharing, and non-professional production (Naab & Sehl, 2017). In tourism, UGC provides valuable insights and recommendations from personal experiences, influencing travel decisions such as destinations, attractions, and accommodations (Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2013; Chiappa & Alarcón-del-Amo, 2015). UGC plays a significant role in shaping tourists' decisions, especially through reviews and recommendations from fellow travelers (Huang, 2012). Travelers rely on UGC for authentic, personal insights since they can't physically experience tourism products before purchasing (van der Veen, 2023). UGC also impacts decisions made during travel, such as accommodations and dining (Liu et al., 2013). Rather than replacing other information, UGC complements existing resources, reinforcing the intention to visit certain destinations (Cox et al., 2009). Integrated social media platforms, especially mobile apps, have become more influential than traditional travel websites, inspiring travel planning (Wang et al., 2022). Passively encountering travel-related user-generated content boosts the desire to visit a destination, shapes attitudes toward visiting it, and triggers feelings of envy, all of which ultimately influence the intention to select that particular travel destination (Nguyen & Tong, 2023). UGC influences pre-trip decisions about destinations, accommodations, dining, and attractions.

##### **Visual Appealing Contents.**

Perceived visual appeal refers to the extent to which a user finds a destination visually attractive (van der Heijden, 2003). Advancements in technology make it easier to present

destinations attractively, with tourism visuals categorized as site-centric (specific locations) or activity-centric (experiences) (Ye & Tussyadiah, 2011). Approximately 75% of consumers in the tourism sector rely on visual cues for decision-making (Lee & Gretzel, 2012), encompassing aesthetics, natural beauty, and attractions. Factors such as color, texture, and landscape elements contribute to visual appeal (Kirillova et al., 2014), while high-quality, professional photos evoke stronger consumer responses (Lohse & Rosen, 2001; Marder et al., 2021). Social media visuals, inducing envy and engagement, influence destination choice (Kuchinke et al., 2009). Visually appealing virtual content inspires real-world visits (Marasco et al., 2018), immersing users in realistic scenarios that enhance intentions to travel (Godovykh et al., 2022). Scenic views, recreational activities, and innovative visual elements positively impact tourists' decisions (Carneiro et al., 2015). Tourists depend on creative, high-quality media portrayals of destinations for pre-trip decisions (Van Dyk, 2018). Stories have the capacity to make a destination unique and visible to the users, the social media holds a major share of creating this compared traditional ways (Hsu et al., 2009). Visual appeal remains a crucial determinant in destination selection.

### **Destination Storytelling (DS).**

Storytelling is an effective marketing tool that creates emotional connections with audiences by narrating stories about a destination's culture, history, and unique experiences. By engaging tourists through captivating narratives, destinations can evoke curiosity and foster a deeper connection with potential visitors (Chronis, 2005). Research has demonstrated that storytelling enhances the meaning of a destination's physical environment, creating a distinct identity for the place (Van Dijk, 2011). Studies also show that storytelling can influence tourists' behavior and their intention to visit a destination, with narratives often making a destination stand out in the minds of potential visitors (Woodside et al., 2007). Storytelling can enhance the meaning of the surrounding physical environment and bolster a region's unique identity by uncovering hidden histories and weaving narratives based on cultural backgrounds or historical events (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Research also validates that storytelling can have a favourable impact on tourists' word-of-mouth recommendations and their intentions to visit (Akgün et al., 2015).

### **Intention to Visit Destinations.**

The intention to visit a destination is a complex process influenced by multiple factors. Destination marketers aim to shape travellers' decisions, and this has been extensively studied in tourism research (Chaulagain et al., 2021). A key motivator for travel is the intention to explore new destinations (Woodside & Lysonski, 1989). The internet has transformed how destinations share information and engage with potential travellers (Xiang

et al., 2015). High-quality, authentic, and relevant information, such as online reviews, significantly enhances consumer attitudes and travel intentions (Park et al., 2007; Sparks et al., 2013). Social media content, including posts, pictures, and videos, can greatly influence decision-making, either positively or negatively (Carneiro et al., 2015). Factors such as social media usage, attitudes, subjective norms, and personal preferences are pivotal in shaping the intention to visit a destination (Cheunkamon et al., 2020; Wijaya et al., 2024)

## **METHODS**

This study aims to explore the key elements of destination branding on social media, focusing on user-generated content (UGC), visually appealing content (VAC), and destination storytelling (DS). It examines how these factors impact tourists' intention to visit destinations and provides strategic recommendations for improving social media marketing. The hypotheses test whether UGC, VAC, and DS significantly influence tourists' travel decisions, with alternative hypotheses suggesting a positive relationship between each factor and the intention to visit a destination. The research design for this study employs a quantitative approach to test hypotheses and examine the relationship between social media branding elements-user-generated content (UGC), visually appealing content (VAC), and destination storytelling (DS)-and tourists' intention to visit destinations. A causal research approach is used to establish cause-and-effect relationships, with statistical techniques, such as tables, applied for analysis. Data collection involves both primary and secondary sources. Primary data is collected through a structured questionnaire based on insights from previous studies, which is then analysed using SPSS software. Secondary data is gathered from research papers, journals, websites, and other relevant sources to support the study's empirical analysis. The target population for the study consists of individuals from the Ernakulam District, and the sampling technique used is non-probability sampling, where participants are selected based on subjective judgment. A total of 150 respondents are included, with questionnaires distributed through online platform. The primary research instrument is a structured questionnaire, which provides a convenient and systematic way to collect data directly from respondents. The questions, adapted from previous studies, are designed in clear, plain English to ensure ease of understanding and accurate responses. The construct measurement for UGC, VAC, and DS is based on established scales from previous studies, capturing participants' perceptions of social media content. These constructs are used to measure the influence of UGC, the visual appeal of content, and destination storytelling on tourists' intention to visit, with sources including works by Nguyen & Tong (2023), Filieri et al. (2021), and Abdillah et al. (2022).

**RESULTS**

**Demographic Characteristics.**

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	male	55	38
	female	95	63
	Prefer not to say	0	0
Age	18-25	80	53
	26-35	30	20
	36-45	25	17
	Above45	15	10
Employment Status	Employed	79	53
	Not employed	71	47

The survey sample shows a higher representation of females (63.3%) compared to males (36.7%), with no respondents preferring not to disclose their gender. The majority of respondents fall within the 18-25 age range (53.3%), followed by those aged 26-35 years (20%). There is a decreasing trend in respondent numbers as age increases beyond 35 years. Slightly more than half of the respondents are employed (52.7%), while nearly half are not currently employed (47.3%). This demographic profile suggests insights into the preferences, behaviours, and perspectives of young adults, particularly those who are employed.

Descriptive statistics for intentions to visit tourist destinations

S.No	Factors	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\geq 0.7$ )	Mean	SD
1	User-Generated Content (UGC)	0.82	3.799	0.847
2	Visual Appealing Content (VAC)	0.869	3.884	0.831
3	Destination Storytelling (DS)	0.832	3.796	0.853
4	Intention to Visit (IV)	0.826	3.897	0.788
Total	All Factors	-	3.844	0.829

The analysis of the four factors-User-Generated Content (UGC), Visual Appealing Content (VAC), Destination Storytelling (DS), and Intention to Visit (IV)-indicates that all

factors are reliable, with Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.7. UGC scored an average mean of 3.799, showing a generally positive perception among respondents. VAC displayed the highest reliability ( $\alpha = 0.869$ ) and an average mean of 3.884, reflecting a favorable view of visually appealing content. DS had a mean score of 3.796, highlighting its positive influence on respondents. The IV factor achieved the highest average mean score of 3.897, demonstrating strong agreement regarding the intention to visit destinations. Overall, the findings suggest that the respondents had positive perceptions across all factors, with consistent and reliable responses.

**Correlation Analysis**

Construct	UGC	VAC	DS	IV
User Generated Contents	1			
Visual Appealing Contents	.629**	1		
Destination Storytelling	.601**	.650**	1	
Intention to Visit tourist destinations	.629**	.636**	.619**	1

\*\* Correlation in significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)

The correlation analysis examines the relationships between four constructs: User Generated Contents (UGC), Visual Appealing Contents (VAC), Destination Storytelling (DS), and Intention to Visit a Tourist Destination (IV), with Intention to Visit as the dependent variable. Intention to visit tourist destinations (IV) has positive effect with all other variables, (VAC) at strongly linked to the intention to visit, 636\*\*. UGC and IV show a correlation of .629\*\*, indicating a strong relationship where higher engagement with user-generated content is associated with a greater intention to visit a destination. The correlation between DS and IV is .619\*\*, showing that effective destination storytelling is positively associated with the intention to visit. These results imply that user-generated content, visually appealing content, and destination storytelling are all important factors that can significantly influence an individual's intention to visit a tourist destination.

**Regression.**

**Model Summary**

Model	R	R square	Adjusted square	R	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin Watson
1	.725	.525	.516		.28480	2.193



## **DISCUSSION:**

The results of this study demonstrate a significant positive relationship between social media elements-user-generated content (UGC), visually appealing content (VAC), and destination storytelling (DS)-and tourists' intention to visit a destination. For UGC (H1), the correlation coefficient ( $r = .629$ ) and p-value ( $p = 0.000$ ) indicate a strong positive relationship, suggesting that high-quality or abundant UGC increases the likelihood of visiting a destination. For VAC (H2), the analysis shows a significant positive relationship ( $r = .636$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), indicating that visually appealing content also plays a crucial role in attracting tourists. Similarly, destination storytelling (H3) was found to be positively associated with travel intentions ( $r = .619$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), suggesting that compelling narratives about a destination can enhance visitors' desire to explore it. The findings further highlight that the sample population is predominantly young and highly engaged with social media platforms, especially WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube. Nearly all respondents (98%) use social media daily, relying on it for travel planning and discovering new destinations. UGC, especially from independent travellers, is highly trusted, influencing tourists' destination choices based on the number of reviews and recommendations. Visual content, particularly of scenic landscapes, captures attention but offers less detailed information about destinations. However, destination storytelling evokes curiosity and emotional responses, making it a powerful tool for promoting cultural and historical attractions. The regression analysis confirms that all three factors-UGC, VAC, and DS-positively impact the intention to visit a destination, with UGC showing the strongest relationship ( $\beta = .297$ ) among them. This suggests that social media strategies focused on user-generated content are particularly effective in influencing tourists' travel decisions.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Social media has transformed destination branding by enabling direct interaction and communication globally. This study examines how social media strategies-user-generated content (UGC), visually appealing content (VAC), and destination storytelling (DS)-influence tourists' intention to visit a destination. Surveying 150 respondents, the findings reveal that UGC, especially reviews and experiences from independent travellers, has the greatest impact on travel intentions. Additionally, captivating visuals and compelling stories enhance a destination's appeal, competitiveness, and attractiveness. By leveraging these strategies, tourism boards can effectively boost visitor numbers, create a unique identity, and drive economic growth.



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