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THE IMPACT OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT ON SOCIAL NETWORKS ON TOURISTS' DESTINATION CHOICE

KRISTINA, MEJERYTE-NARKEVICIENE¹ARNAS, RIMDEIKA²HALINA, HARBAR³

Abstract

The article analyzes the significance of user-generated content (UGC) and its impact on modern tourist decision-making processes in the social media environment. The relevance of the study is based on the rapidly changing tourism industry, in which social media is becoming not only a means of disseminating information, but also a powerful tool that shapes the image of a travel destination, consumer expectations and the value of the travel destination itself. Given that modern travelers increasingly rely on real consumer experiences, authentic reviews and visual recommendations, UGC research is becoming an integral part of tourism science and consumer behavior analysis. **The aim of this study is to determine how user-generated content on social networks affects tourists' decisions when choosing a travel destination.** To achieve this goal, the tasks set include clarifying the forms and characteristics of UGC, identifying the factors determining their reliability and analyzing the impact of UGC on decision-making. **Methodology.** To achieve the research objective, a quantitative study was conducted using a literature review and a questionnaire survey. These methods allowed us to assess both theoretical concepts of UGC and empirical manifestations and their influence on travel decision-making. The questionnaire was designed to assess respondents' awareness of CGC, its use and evaluation, as well as its perceived impact on travel destination choice. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the collected data. **The results** reveal that user-generated content has a dual impact on travelers like informational and emotional. Respondents emphasized the importance of authentic information, which they believe is often more reliable than traditional advertising. It was found that positive visual stories and personal experiences can encourage both the emergence of new travel ideas and the adjustment of planned routes. Meanwhile, negative reviews can have a deterrent effect and lead to the cancellation of a trip. **Main conclusions.** The results show that UGC functions as a significant catalyst for decision-making, providing travelers with not only information, but also an emotional basis for evaluating a travel destination. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of social networks in the tourism sector and emphasizes the need for tourism organizations to strategically manage their digital image in a dynamic media space.

Key words: user-generated content; tourists destination; social networks.

Introduction. The relevance of the research lies in the growing influence of user-generated content on social media platforms in shaping travel destination choices within the modern tourism industry. Social media has transformed the ways information is gathered and accelerated decision-making processes by enabling tourists to rely on authentic experiences and recommendations shared by real users (Fernando, 2023). Scholars emphasize that social platforms enhance tourists' trust in user-generated content due to its perceived authenticity, which strongly encourages destination choice (Liu et al., 2020; Utama Dewayani, Nahar, Nugroho, 2023). User-generated content and social media significantly impacts tour-

ist behavior and destination selection by shaping travel preferences and contributing to destination brand value, thereby improving a country's image and the perceived quality of services (Stojanovic, Andreu, Curras-Perez, 2022). As tourists increasingly use these platforms to gather information, share experiences, and interact with other travelers, social media tools such as Instagram, Twitter, and various travel review websites help facilitate more effective travel-related decision making. Content creators on these platforms also play a crucial role in shaping tourist expectations and stimulating motivation to visit specific destinations (Utama Dewayani, Nahar, Nugroho, 2023). Contextual factors such as user engagement, destination awareness, or the complexity of trip planning further enhance the influence of social media (Jorge-Acain, 2022). These insights indicate that tourism agencies must strategically utilize social media to showcase travel planning opportunities and adapt them to consumer needs. Scientific research also confirms that social media is a signifi-

¹ Lithuanian Sports University (Kaunas, Lithuania)

E-mail: kristina.mejeryte@lsu.lt

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0629-3265>

² Lithuanian Sports University (Kaunas, Lithuania)

E-mail: arnas.rimdeika@stud.lsu.lt

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7653-0334>

³ Mykolaiv National Agrarian University (Mykolaiv, Ukraine)

E-mail: garbargalina12@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4750-3361>

cant tool in tourism (Zorlu, Candan, 2023; Stojanovic, Andreu, Curras-Perez, 2022). This tool notably affects destination choices among travellers of different generations. Studies show that the credibility, quality, and engagement of user-generated content positively influence destination image and tourists' intentions to visit a particular country (Omeish et al., 2024). **The aim of the research** was to determine the influence of user-generated content on social media on tourists' travel destination choice. **Tasks.** To present the attributes and forms of user-generated content in the consumer decision-making process; to reveal the forms, purposes, and reliability indicators of user-generated content in social networks; to identify the impact of user-generated content in social networks on the decision-making process of the consumer and on the choice of the destination of the tourist.

Literature review. UGC is defined in the scientific literature as content created voluntarily, non-professionally and publicly by ordinary social network users, which aims to share experiences, opinions or creative results (Naab, Sehl, 2017; Ukpabi, Karjaluoto, 2018). Researchers (McKenzie et al., 2012, Naab and Sehl, 2017; Walsh et al., 2024; Yamagishi et al., 2024) agree that the uniqueness of UGC is defined by the following main features: voluntariness, creativity, diversity of channels, interactivity, authenticity, personal contribution, publicity, non-professionalism.

User-generated content has established itself in the modern tourism market as one of the most significant sources of information shaping travelers' decisions and travel destination choices. Digital platforms enable travelers to actively share their experiences, and this content is becoming an important alternative to traditional advertising or professional communication. Research consistently emphasizes that tourists often trust the experiences of other users more than commercial sources, therefore UGC has a direct, empirically confirmed influence on the travel planning process (Ghaly, 2023; Yamagishi et al., 2024).

One of the most important aspects explaining the impact of UGC on travel destination choice is content authenticity. According to Ghaly (2023), young travelers and especially Generation Z, tend to critically evaluate promotional and influencer-generated content, often identifying it as commercially motivated. As a result, UGC is perceived as a more trustworthy and natural source of information. Ghaly (2023) found that as many as 74.6% of Gen Z travelers choose their destination based on user-generated

content, whereas only 53.1% rely on influencer recommendations. These findings indicate that authentic, non-commercial experiences have a stronger impact on travel decision-making than professional marketing messages. The importance of authenticity is further confirmed by Yamagishi et al. (2024), who argue that real travel stories and personal experiences increase travel intention by 1.5 times compared to traditional advertising content. The authors emphasize that the impact of UGC stems not only from its informational value but also from the user's emotional engagement. When exposed to such content, travellers can more easily imagine their future experience, which strengthens their motivation to visit a specific destination.

Studies also show that the influence of UGC on destination choice is not uniform, it depends on the type of platform and the format of the content. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have different yet clearly identifiable effects on user behaviour. Fernando (2023) highlights Facebook as a platform where users value detailed advice, discussions, and well-reasoned narratives. It becomes a type of consultative space where users exchange practical travel tips, and community-driven content is considered up to 25% more trustworthy than official advertising.

Instagram, in turn, influences travelers through visual impression. Aesthetically appealing images create the so-called FOMO (fear of missing out) effect, which encourages spontaneous travel decisions (Fan & Zhang, 2023). Studies reveal that content seen on Instagram often becomes the primary source of travel inspiration, and destinations that become "Instagram-worthy" experience significant increases in tourist flows (Liu et al., 2020).

Twitter's influence is based on the immediacy of information. Users share real-time tips, service recommendations, and relevant updates about travel conditions, which is particularly important for spontaneous decision-making (Ćurlin, Jaković & Miloloža, 2019). Such messages help travellers decide quickly, especially when limited-time offers or discounts appear.

TikTok stands out as one of the fastest-growing platforms with a major impact on young travellers' decision-making. Zhou, Sotiriadis and Shen (2023) note that aesthetically pleasing, dynamic, and easily shareable videos can increase the attractiveness of a destination by up to 25%, while viral content often triggers sudden surges in tourist interest. The platform's structure enables users to become not only

information receivers but also active creators, reinforcing emerging travel trends.

Video-sharing platforms, especially YouTube, influence travel choices through detailed, informative, and experiential content. Briciu and Briciu (2020) argue that travel vlogs, guides, and personal stories can increase interest in a destination by 20–30% because they allow viewers to “experience” the location virtually before visiting. Such videos help reduce uncertainty: viewers see real situations, service quality, cultural context, and logistical details.

Specialized review platforms such as TripAdvisor have a direct impact on travel planning decisions. User reviews are among the most important factors when choosing a hotel, restaurant, or activity. Positive reviews enhance a location’s attractiveness, while negative ones deter potential visitors. The reliability of authentic reviews is particularly crucial: Chatzopoulou and Travers (2020) highlight that users actively verify review authenticity, as it determines their final decision.

Forum and community platforms such as Reddit are characterized by detailed discussions, niche advice, and abundant personal stories. Information shared there is often considered more practical and sincere than that found in official tourism sources (de Oliveira, 2022; Nilsson Vestola, 2023). Community members share experiences about alternative routes, cultural nuances, or travel strategies, and these discussions often encourage travelers to choose lesser-known destinations.

Empirical research shows that even passive exposure to UGC can increase travel intention. Nguyen and Tong (2022) found that even incidental content exposure significantly increases the desire to visit the destination shown ($\beta = 0.320$), which directly affects the travel decision ($\beta = 0.409$).

In summary, UGC influences destination choice through several interrelated mechanisms: authenticity fosters trust, visual impressions generate emotional impulses, and detailed user experiences reduce uncertainty and support informed decision-making. The findings of the analyzed studies show that UGC not only increases the visibility of tourist destinations but also directly shapes consumer behavior, making it one of the most important sources of travel information in modern tourism.

Methodology of investigation. The research employs a quantitative approach to determine the influence of user-generated content on social media on tourists’ travel destination choice. The methodology comprises the following methods:

Literature Analysis. An extensive review of scientific literature was conducted to examine the concept, characteristics, forms, and typologies of user-generated content (UGC) on social media. The analysis also explored the main platforms used for distributing UGC and their influence on the tourism sector. Furthermore, scholarly sources were reviewed to determine how UGC shared on social networks affects tourists’ destination choice.

Questionnaire survey. A questionnaire survey was designed to gather primary data from users of UGC. The survey consisted of 12 questions, including open-ended, close-ended, and Likert-scale questions, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the main platforms used for distributing UGC and their influence on the tourism sector. A structured survey was designed to collect data from respondents, focusing on demographic data, awareness and use of user-generated content, recognition and evaluation of user-generated content, and the impact of user-generated content on travel decisions.

Statistical Analysis. The survey data were analyzed using SPSS 25.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). However, the analysis included only descriptive statistics.

The study was conducted in February and March of 2025. The survey targeted independent travelers, who are genuinely interested in travel or at least plan trips several times a year. A total of 406 individuals participated in the study, meeting the required confidence level of 95% with a margin of error of 5%. In research there was 54% females and 39% males and others 7%, the majority of respondents were between 18 and 25 years old. More than 46 % of respondents travelled 2-3 times per year. The survey was conducted online via the website www.apklausa.lt. Respondents accessed it through dedicated links shared on social media platforms focused on travel.

Analysis and discussion. The study data revealed that most respondents travel moderately 46% travel 2–3 times per year, and another 26% travel only once a year or less. Frequent travelers (7 or more trips per year) accounted for only 13% of the sample. This indicates that the study participants are not intensive travelers, yet traveling is a fairly common activity for them.

The concept of UGC is generally familiar to respondents: almost half (49%) clearly understand the meaning of the term, 35% have heard it but are unsure about its exact definition, and 17% have never heard of UGC. These findings show that the understanding of user-generated content is still not uniformly established within society.

Analyzing how often respondents use UGC for travel planning, it was found that 31% always rely on it, 19% do so often, and 39% sometimes. Only 11% stated that they do not use UGC at all, which indicates that this source of information is widely used. This confirms that UGC is an important source of information in the travel planning process.

Evaluating the platforms where respondents most often search for travel-related UGC, the highest averages were given to video-based platforms YouTube ($M=4.15$) and Facebook ($M=4.12$). Slightly lower scores were given to TikTok ($M=4.00$) and Instagram ($M=3.86$). Specialized review sites (TripAdvisor, Booking) were rated moderately ($M=3.48$), while forums and Reddit received the lowest evaluations ($M=2.81$). This indicates that visually appealing and easily consumable platforms dominate as sources of travel information.

Respondents also evaluated the UGC formats they find most acceptable. Video content received the highest approval ($M=4.13$), followed by photos ($M=4.01$) and text-based stories ($M=4.00$). Audio formats ($M=3.78$) and interactive content ($M=3.68$) received lower evaluations. Memes and GIFs were considered the least suitable for gathering travel information ($M=3.03$). These results confirm the trend that travel-related content is perceived as a serious information source rather than entertainment.

Regarding the ability to distinguish UGC from influencer-generated content, half of the respondents (50%) reported that they can usually differentiate commercial content, 32% can do so without difficulties, and 17% stated that such differentiation is difficult or that they do not think about it at all.

The features that most clearly indicate authentic user-generated content include a natural communication style ($M=3.63$), the absence of advertising labels ($M=3.61$), undisclosed partnerships ($M=3.54$), and less professional visual quality ($M=3.48$). This supports findings by Walsh et al. (2024) and Yamagishi et al. (2024), which show that UGC is perceived as “more real” and more authentic, mainly because it usually lacks direct commercial motivation. However, this assumption of authenticity also raises a challenge: the responses in this study revealed that nearly one-third of participants do not always recognize when content is commercial and when it is not. According to studies by Naab and Sehl (2017), Puspitasari and Aruan (2023), and Ghaly (2023), there are hybrid content forms in which the boundaries between non-professional and commercial motives blur, which may explain why respondents

find it difficult to distinguish between the two. In theory, it is already being discussed that platform algorithms and users themselves could have more tools to indicate whether content is commercial (Zaim et al., 2024). On the one hand, mandatory labeling (#ad, #sponsored, etc.) increases transparency, but it also raises the question of whether it may disrupt the natural community culture. A plausible compromise is to encourage influencers and businesses to follow stricter labeling rules, while motivating users to report questionable cases, thus supporting community self-regulation.

Finally, assessing the influence of social media content on travel destination choice (see Table 1), the strongest effects were attributed to positive reviews and appealing traveler photos ($M=4.13$). Negative comments also exert a strong influence ($M=4.04$), while personal recommendations are considered important ($M=4.00$). This corresponds to Filieri et al. (2021), who noted that even a few critical reviews, if they appear authentic, can negatively affect respondents' perceptions of a destination. This may be problematic for lesser-known destinations, as they lack abundant positive feedback. Consequently, just a few negative comments can disproportionately influence overall perception. Respondents also reported that they are accustomed to checking social media content before traveling ($M=3.94$) and consider UGC more trustworthy than official advertisements ($M=3.91$). Detailed vlogs and blog posts likewise help shape travel decisions ($M=3.87$). Short videos or memes often spark curiosity ($M(SD)=3.65 \pm 1.38$). Authentic, non-commercial-looking information has a moderate influence ($M(SD)=3.29 \pm 1.47$). After reading about other travelers' experiences, some respondents tend to adjust their travel plans ($M(SD)=3.41 \pm 1.44$). The standard deviations (1.12–1.47) indicate considerable variation in opinions; however, all mean scores exceed the scale midpoint, confirming that social media content significantly influences travel decisions overall.

Despite the many statements with which respondents clearly agreed, a noticeable percentage selected neutral responses. More than one-fifth of participants most often chose “neither agree nor disagree,” for example, regarding content authenticity or changing travel plans after viewing such content.

This may indicate several things. First, social media may still not be the primary source of information for some travelers and they may rely on other sources such as travel agency offers or recommendations from their close social circle. Second, neutral responses

Table 1

Influence of social media content on travelers' destination choice (scores)

Statement	Mean	Standard deviation
It is important for me to receive personal recommendations from other people (ordinary travelers) when choosing a travel destination	4	1,16
I often review content posted on social networks (photos, reviews, videos) before deciding on a trip	3,94	1,17
I consider user-generated content more trustworthy than official advertising or influencer-promoted places	3,91	1,25
The fact that the content appears authentic (not adjusted for commercial purposes) significantly influences my decision to travel to a particular place	3,29	1,47
After viewing travelers' experiences or advice on social networks, I more often change or adjust my travel plans	3,41	1,44
Different platforms (e.g., Instagram, YouTube, TripAdvisor) provide enough variety and help create a comprehensive impression of a place	3,68	1,37
Short videos or memes (TikTok-style) often spark my curiosity and encourage me to explore new travel destinations	3,65	1,38
Longer videos or detailed blog entries (e.g., vlogs, comprehensive travel reviews) significantly help me decide where to travel	3,87	1,22
Negative reviews posted by other users in forums or on specialized websites (e.g., TripAdvisor) can significantly reduce my desire to visit a place	4,04	1,15
When I find many good reviews or see appealing traveler photos, I am likely to visit a place that I had not planned to visit before	4,13	1,12

may reflect doubts about the credibility of the content and even if it appears appealing, users may hesitate to fully trust that it reflects reality. Third, the high proportion of neutral responses suggests that some respondents simply do not have a clear opinion, perhaps because they have not reflected on the influence of such content or do not consciously feel its impact.

Thus, social media content has a significant influence on travelers' decisions. However, at the same time, a notable proportion of people remain undecided about this aspect. This suggests that the impact is not absolute. The overall dynamic reflects both the power of social media and the need to critically evaluate what we see online.

Conclusions. The results revealed that user-generated content is an important factor in the process of choosing a travel destination. First, most respondents

indicated that other travelers' personal experiences matter to them, as they tend to perceive such experiences as more trustworthy than commercially driven advertising.

Second, a considerable number of respondents admitted to changing their already planned trips or spontaneously considering entirely new destinations after encountering appealing user-generated content. Third, the study showed that UGC can also create a negative impression of a destination, almost half of the respondents stated they would cancel a trip or lose interest after seeing negative reviews from other travelers.

Overall, it can be concluded that user-generated content on social media influences tourists both informationally and emotionally, encouraging them to discover new destinations while also discouraging visits to places associated with negative feedback.

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КРИСТИНА, МЕЙЕРИТЄ-НАРКЕВІЧЕНЕ – викладачка

Литовського університету спорту (Каунас, Литва)

E-mail: kristina.mejeryte@lsu.lt

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0629-3265>

АРНАС, РІМДЕЙКА – магістр Литовського Університету Спорту (Каунас, Литва)

E-mail: arnas.rimdeika@stud.lsu.lt

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7653-0334>

ГАЛИНА, ГАРБАР – доктор філософських наук,

професор кафедри готельно- ресторанної справи та організації бізнесу,

Миколаївський національний аграрний університет (Миколаїв, Україна)

E-mail: garbargalina12@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4750-3361>

ВПЛИВ КОНТЕНТУ, СТВОРЕНОГО КОРИСТУВАЧАМИ В СОЦІАЛЬНИХ МЕРЕЖАХ, НА ВИБІР ТУРИСТИЧНОЇ ДЕСТИНАЦІЇ

Анотація

У статті проаналізовано значення контенту, створеного користувачами (UGC), та його вплив на сучасні процеси прийняття туристичних рішень у середовищі соціальних мереж. Актуальність дослідження ґрунтується на швидких змінах у туристичній індустрії, де соціальні мережі стають не лише засобом поширення інформації, а й потужним інструментом формування іміджу туристичного напрямку, споживчих очікувань та цінності самої дестинації. Враховуючи те, що сучасні мандрівники дедалі частіше покладаються на реальний досвід споживачів, автентичні відгуки та візуальні рекомендації, вивчення UGC стає невід'ємною складовою науки про туризм та аналізу поведінки споживачів. Метою цього дослідження є визначення того, як контент, створений користувачами в соціальних мережах, впливає на рішення туристів під час вибору напрямку подорожі. Для досягнення цієї мети були **поставлені завдання**: уточнити форми та характеристики UGC, визначити чинники, що визначають його надійність, та проаналізувати вплив UGC на процес прийняття рішень. **Методологія**. Для реалізації мети дослідження було проведено кількісне дослідження, що поєднувало огляд літератури та анкетне опитування. Ці методи дали змогу оцінити як теоретичні концепції UGC, так і його емпіричні прояви та вплив на прийняття рішень щодо подорожей. Анкету було розроблено для оцінки обізнаності респондентів щодо UGC, характеру його використання й оцінювання, а також сприйманого впливу на вибір туристичної дестинації. Для аналізу зібраних даних було застосовано описову статистику. **Результати**. Отримані дані свідчать, що контент, створений користувачами, має подвійний вплив на мандрівників – інформаційний та емоційний. Респонденти наголошували на важливості автентичної інформації, яка, на їхню думку, часто є більш надійною, ніж традиційна реклама. Встановлено, що позитивні візуальні історії та особистий досвід можуть стимулювати появу нових ідей для подорожей або коригування запланованих маршрутів. Водночас негативні відгуки можуть мати стримувальний ефект і навіть спричинити відмову від поїздки. **Основні висновки**. Результати показують, що UGC функціонує як значущий каталізатор прийняття рішень, забезпечуючи мандрівників не лише інформацією, а й емоційною основою для оцінки туристичного напрямку. Дослідження робить внесок у глибше розуміння ролі соціальних мереж у туристичному секторі та підкреслює необхідність для туристичних організацій стратегічно управляти своїм цифровим іміджем у динамічному медіапросторі.

Ключові слова: контент, створений користувачами; туристична дестинація; соціальні мережі.

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