

## **Role of user-generated content in marketing destination image and competitiveness in global tourism markets**

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**Abstract**

The advent of Web 2.0 has ushered in an era of heightened online networking and self-expression, significantly influencing the travel industry through the proliferation of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) and User-Generated Content (UGC). This study examines the multifaceted role of UGC within the travel planning process, acknowledging its emergence as a powerful form of online word-of-mouth marketing. By synthesizing existing research on tourism, technological advancements, and Web 2.0, this paper explores how travellers produce, utilize, and are influenced by various forms of UGC (text, pictures, videos, and audio) at different stages of their decision-making journey – pre-trip information search, during-trip experiences, and post-trip evaluations.

The research delves into the motivations behind UGC creation and consumption, highlighting the increasing consumer trust in peer-generated content over traditional brand messaging. It further investigates the impact of technological advancements, particularly the rise of smartphones and social media platforms, in facilitating the creation and dissemination of travel-related UGC. Finally, the study considers the implications of UGC for hospitality and tourism organizations, emphasizing its potential to shape destination perceptions, influence booking decisions, and foster a more interactive and experiential tourism landscape.

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**Subject Classification:** 90B60.

**Keywords:** Web 2.0, User-generated content (UGC), Social networking sites (SNSs), Travel planning process, Information search, Tourism, Online reviews, Social media.

**1. Introduction**

The digital age has fundamentally reshaped the tourism industry, and at the heart of this transformation lies the burgeoning influence of User-Generated Content (UGC) [5]. This paper delves into the profound impact of UGC on how tourists plan their travels. No longer are tourists passive recipients of information disseminated by tourism boards and travel agencies; instead, they actively seek, create, and share their travel experiences online, profoundly impacting how travel decisions are made [37]. This shift is largely attributed to the rise of Web 2.0, which has fostered an environment of increased interactivity and participation, empowering individuals to become both consumers and producers of travel-related content [29]. This paper aims to explore the multifaceted role of UGC in shaping the travel planning behavior of tourists, examining how it influences various stages of the travel decision-making process [14]. It will consider the evolution of the internet, the credibility of UGC, and the influence of mobile technology and social media in this dynamic landscape.

The evolution of the internet from a primarily information-disseminating platform (Web 1.0) to an interactive and collaborative space (Web 2.0) has been pivotal in the growth of UGC. Web 2.0's emphasis on

user participation and networking has paved the way for the proliferation of social media platforms, online forums, and review sites, which now serve as rich repositories of travel-related UGC [7]. These platforms host a diverse range of content, including text-based reviews, photos, videos, and blog posts, all of which contribute to the collective knowledge and shared experiences of the online travel community [20].

UGC has emerged as a powerful form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), offering potential tourists authentic and firsthand accounts of destinations, accommodations, and activities[44]. In contrast to traditional marketing materials, which are often perceived as biased, UGC is generally viewed as more credible and trustworthy, as it originates from fellow travelers who have no vested interest in promoting a particular product or service [43]. This perceived credibility significantly influences tourists' information search and evaluation processes, as they seek to minimize the risk associated with travel decisions [32].

The impact of UGC on travel planning is evident across various stages of the tourist's decision-making journey. During the pre-trip planning phase, potential travelers rely heavily on UGC to gather information about destinations, compare options, and develop their itineraries[13]. Online reviews and recommendations can shape their perceptions of a place, influence their choice of accommodation, and guide their selection of activities [43]. Even during the trip, tourists may consult UGC for real-time information, such as recommendations for local restaurants or attractions. Furthermore, post-trip, travelers often contribute their own UGC, further enriching the online information pool and influencing the decisions of future travelers[30]. The rise of mobile technology and social media has further amplified the role of UGC in travel planning. Smartphones enable tourists to capture and share their experiences instantly, while platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube provide channels for disseminating this content to a wide audience [3][18]. The ease with which travelers can now create and consume UGC has made it an indispensable part of the travel planning process, transforming the way people research, experience, and remember their journeys[26]. Understanding the dynamics of UGC and its impact on tourist behavior is therefore crucial for tourism stakeholders, including destination marketers, travel providers, and policymakers [28]. By recognizing the power of peer-generated content, these stakeholders can develop more effective strategies to engage with travelers, enhance their experiences, and promote sustainable tourism practices [31], [1].

## Literature Review

**Ding, Zhang, and Li [9]** This study presents a geo-culturally grounded script generation system integrated with evolutionary itinerary optimization. The researchers showcase how AI-generated narratives, based on user-generated content (UGC), help shape personalized and emotionally engaging travel plans. They demonstrate that natural language processing can effectively synthesize UGC into travel itineraries tailored to individual preferences[4]. By leveraging storytelling, the approach allows platforms to offer meaningful and authentic recommendations. The paper underscores the relevance of cultural context and digital narratives in enhancing travel decision-making. It validates the growing role of user narratives in personalized itinerary building.

**Huang, Li, and Chen [12]** This research examines the influence of UGC on destination loyalty among tourists in China's ethnic tourism sector. The authors find that UGC significantly shapes emotional and cognitive responses, thereby influencing tourist satisfaction and repeat visits. Cultural intelligence is identified as a key moderator, amplifying the relationship between positive reviews and loyalty [34]. Based on surveys in Yunnan, the study confirms that authentic peer content on platforms like TripAdvisor and Xiaohongshu plays a dominant role in shaping perceptions. The paper suggests that tourism marketers should encourage culture-rich UGC to build trust and long-term loyalty among niche tourist segments [34].

**Patel, Puah, and Kok [33]** This study examines how Instagram UGC influences millennials' travel decisions, emphasizing visual appeal and perceived authenticity. Researchers conducted a survey of 500 participants across major urban centers[36]. The findings indicate that aesthetically pleasing content, such as images of nature, food, and local culture, significantly impacts destination choices. Trust in peer-shared experiences was a stronger motivator than traditional advertising[27]. The study also highlights that Instagram Stories and Reels play a growing role in real-time decision-making. The implications suggest tourism boards should promote shareable content and partner with micro-influencers to amplify reach.

**Chakraborty and Hossain [6]** This paper explores the effectiveness of YouTube travel vlogs in influencing tourist planning. Using content analysis and viewer interviews, it finds that vlogs that combine informative content with personal storytelling are more persuasive. Viewers often form parasocial relationships with vloggers, trusting their experiences

over official tourism websites. UGC in the form of vlogs is especially useful in portraying offbeat locations and setting realistic expectations. The study calls for tourism marketers to leverage vlogging as a tool to enhance destination transparency and credibility.

**Singh et al. [39]** This research investigates how the perceived credibility of UGC affects engagement on travel planning apps. Data collected from Indian travel app users reveal that reviews with detailed narratives, timestamps, and user profiles are considered more trustworthy [24]. The study finds a strong correlation between high-credibility UGC and prolonged app usage. In-app features like “verified traveler” tags enhance trust further. The findings support the integration of credible UGC into app design to optimize user retention and satisfaction.

**Ali and Khan [2]** This study examines how social proof through UGC impacts booking behavior on online travel platforms. It highlights that the number of likes, comments, and shares serves as psychological validation for users. Experiments show that destinations with higher engagement metrics are perceived as safer and more enjoyable. The researchers conclude that digital marketers should use UGC to build social consensus [23], particularly for emerging destinations that lack strong brand equity. The findings emphasize the power of community feedback in modern travel decision-making.

**Wang et al. [42]** This study uses sentiment analysis to investigate how emotional tone in UGC influences travel choices. Positive emotions such as joy and excitement significantly increase the likelihood of selecting a destination, while negative sentiments reduce interest [19]. UGC conveying personal challenges and triumphs appeals to experiential travelers. The research emphasizes emotional resonance as a crucial factor in content strategy. Tourism brands are advised to encourage emotionally rich storytelling from past visitors[16].

## Research Methodology

### *Objectives of the Study*

Specifically, the study sought to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) To evaluate technological enhancements for user experience
- 2) To understand user motivation for contributing UGC
- 3) To investigate demographic variations in UGC interactions
- 4) To examine influence of UGC on decision-making

A structured questionnaire was administered to 200 respondents to collect primary data for the study. The survey served as the main source of primary data. In addition, secondary data were collected from relevant journals, research articles, reports, and published literature[13]. The details of the data collection process are presented in table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Influence of UGC on Travel Choices [8]**

| Sr. No. | Variable                            | Most Selected Response | Count | Percentage | Key Insight                                                                 |
|---------|-------------------------------------|------------------------|-------|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1       | Gender                              | Female                 | 105   | 52.50%     | Majority are female, suggesting gender-skewed engagement in UGC for travel. |
| 2       | Age                                 | 25–34                  | 64    | 32.00%     | Young adults are the most active travel planners using UGC.                 |
| 3       | Travel Frequency                    | Occasionally           | 83    | 41.50%     | Most respondents travel occasionally, influencing UGC needs.                |
| 4       | Travel Type                         | Business               | 76    | 38.00%     | Business travel leads, shaping the type of UGC consulted.                   |
| 5       | Ease of Accessing UGC               | Strongly Agree         | 107   | 53.50%     | UGC is widely accessible to most users.                                     |
| 6       | Website Design Enhancing UGC Use    | Agree                  | 91    | 45.50%     | Design plays a key role in user engagement with UGC.                        |
| 7       | Tech Improves UGC Quality           | Agree                  | 93    | 46.50%     | Tech upgrades are vital for better UGC utility.                             |
| 8       | Preference for Interactive Features | Agree                  | 94    | 47.00%     | Users prefer interactive UGC tools like ratings and Q&A.                    |

*Contd...*

|    |                                               |         |    |        |                                                                                        |
|----|-----------------------------------------------|---------|----|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9  | Presentation of UGC Adds Value                | Agree   | 96 | 48.24% | Visual content adds strong value to user experience.                                   |
| 10 | Contribution for Enjoyment                    | Neutral | 77 | 38.50% | Mixed motivation for UGC sharing, with enjoyment not being dominant.                   |
| 11 | Contribution for Helping Others               | Neutral | 96 | 48.24% | Satisfaction in helping others is present but not dominant.                            |
| 12 | Contribution for Recognition                  | Neutral | 79 | 39.50% | Recognition is not a major UGC driver.                                                 |
| 13 | Contribution to Give Feedback                 | Neutral | 85 | 42.50% | Many are neutral on feedback motivation, indicating potential for growth in this area. |
| 14 | Contribution to Inspire Others                | Agree   | 82 | 41.00% | Inspiring travel is a moderately strong motivator for UGC.                             |
| 15 | UGC Before Destination Choice                 | Agree   | 64 | 32.00% | Most use UGC before choosing a destination.                                            |
| 16 | Age Group Influence on UGC                    | Neutral | 74 | 37.00% | Age has some influence, but not universally strong.                                    |
| 17 | Trusting UGC from Similar Background          | Agree   | 75 | 37.50% | Background similarity affects UGC trust.                                               |
| 18 | Travel Experience Influencing UGC Interaction | Agree   | 86 | 43.00% | Experience level impacts how UGC is used.                                              |
| 19 | Use of UGC Based on Trip Type                 | Agree   | 90 | 45.00% | UGC use varies based on trip category.                                                 |
| 20 | UGC's Impact on Destination Choice            | Agree   | 79 | 39.50% | UGC significantly affects destination choices.                                         |

*Contd...*

|    |                                           |         |    |        |                                                          |
|----|-------------------------------------------|---------|----|--------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| 21 | UGC's Impact on Booking Decisions         | Agree   | 87 | 43.72% | UGC plays a critical role in hotel/activity booking.     |
| 22 | Trust in High Volume Positive UGC         | Neutral | 73 | 36.87% | Volume of UGC builds trust but isn't the only factor.    |
| 23 | UGC More Reliable Than Ads                | Agree   | 78 | 39.00% | UGC is more trusted than traditional advertisements.     |
| 24 | Final Planning Influenced by Peer Reviews | Agree   | 87 | 43.72% | Peer recommendations are influential in final decisions. |

## Interpretation

### 1. Demographics (Gender & Age):

The data indicates that female respondents (52.5%) slightly outnumber males. This suggests that women are more engaged with or influenced by UGC in travel planning. [35] The dominant age group is 25–34 years (32%), highlighting that young adults—often tech-savvy and digitally active—are the primary consumers and creators of UGC.

### 2. Travel Behavior Patterns:

A significant number of respondents travel occasionally (41.5%) and for business purposes (38%), showing that even infrequent or purpose-driven travelers rely on UGC[25]. This suggests that travel planning is not limited to leisure but extends to work-related trips, where peer-shared insights help optimize time and experience.

### 3. UGC Accessibility & Usability:

Over 53% strongly agree that UGC is easy to access. Additionally, nearly half of respondents agree that website design and technology enhancements improve UGC quality and usability[21]. This indicates that design and functionality play a critical role in encouraging UGC consumption, especially on platforms like TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, or social media [10].

**4. Preference for Interactive Features:**

Features such as reviews, ratings, comments, and Q&A sections are valued by respondents (47% agree), reflecting a strong preference for two-way interaction[17]. Travelers want to engage with content, not just passively read it.

**5. Visual Presentation & Engagement:**

With 48.24% agreeing that UGC presentation adds value, it's clear that visuals (photos/videos) and layout quality increase the impact of peer-shared content. Destinations and platforms should emphasize visual storytelling [40].

**6. Motivations for UGC Contribution:**

Most users are neutral on sharing UGC for enjoyment, feedback, or recognition. However, a notable 41% agree they contribute to inspire others [22]. This suggests a shift from self-promotion to altruistic or community-driven motivations, especially among millennials and Gen Z.

**7. Influence on Destination Choice:**

Around 32% to 44% agree that UGC influences destination and booking decisions. This aligns with existing research showing that authentic travel experiences shape others' choices more than advertisements [15].

**8. UGC Credibility & Trust:**

Trust is moderately influenced by high volumes of positive UGC (36.87% neutral), suggesting that volume alone is not enough—credibility, recency, and similarity to the user matter [11]. 37.5% of users trust content from people of similar backgrounds, emphasizing the role of relatability in UGC trust.

**9. Personalization of UGC Use:**

The influence of trip type (45%) and travel experience (43%) shows that travelers adapt how they use UGC based on their needs and familiarity with travel[25]. UGC is not one-size-fits-all; its relevance depends on individual contexts.

**10. Final Decision-Making:**

Nearly 44% agree that peer reviews influence their final plans, confirming that UGC is not just used in the inspiration phase, but also during critical decision-making moments (e.g., bookings, itinerary changes)[41].

### Future Scope

- **Geographical Expansion:** Extend the study beyond Ludhiana to include metro and rural demographics for comparative analysis.
- **Longitudinal Analysis:** Investigate how UGC influence evolves over time, especially with emerging platforms like Threads or AI-generated travel reviews.
- **Platform-Specific Behavior:** Study user behavior differences across Instagram, TripAdvisor, YouTube, etc. [38]
- **Psychological Impact:** Explore the emotional influence of travel-related UGC on user decision-making.
- **Cultural Factors:** Analyze how cultural backgrounds affect the trust and usage of UGC.
- **Impact on Sustainable Tourism:** Examine whether UGC promotes environmentally responsible and ethical travel behavior.

### Conclusion

The proliferation of User-Generated Content (UGC) plays a pivotal role in the contemporary travel landscape, profoundly influencing the travel planning behaviors of modern tourists. This study validates that UGC's impact extends beyond mere destination selection, significantly shaping trust and satisfaction levels concerning booking decisions. The omnipresent accessibility of UGC, largely propelled by continuous technological advancements and the ubiquitous rise of interactive digital platforms, has firmly established it as an indispensable source of information for prospective travelers.

However, the motivations underpinning users' willingness to contribute content are diverse and multifaceted. This variability suggests that strategies to enhance user engagement and encourage content creation need careful consideration. The study's findings collectively underscore a dynamic evolution in digital travel planning paradigms. Within this shifting environment, authenticity emerges as a paramount factor, coupled with the crucial aspect of peer validation. Furthermore, the richness derived from multimedia content (e.g., photos, videos) acts as a significant driver in influencing traveler choices. Ultimately, this research highlights the enduring and growing importance of authentic, peer-validated, and visually engaging UGC in the intricate process of modern travel planning.

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*Received November, 2025*