

The Impact of Digital Campaigns on Destination Promotion in Tourism

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Abstract: This study examines the effectiveness of digital tourism promotion campaigns implemented by public and private tourism organizations, with the goal of enhancing destination awareness, increasing visitor attraction, and strengthening place branding. The research explores the strategic deployment of digital marketing tools, including social media platforms, search engine advertising (e.g., Google Ads), audiovisual content, and official destination websites.

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining secondary data analysis, focusing on key performance indicators such as engagement rates, views, and click-through rates (CTR) with primary research involving questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with professionals in the tourism and digital marketing sectors. The findings suggest that campaigns incorporating storytelling elements, emotional resonance, and high-quality visual content tend to generate greater user engagement and positively influence travel intentions.

The study concludes with targeted recommendations for optimizing digital tourism marketing strategies. These emphasize the importance of tailoring messages to specific audience segments, integrating innovative digital tools, and ensuring that promotional efforts remain aligned with the authentic cultural identity and values of each destination.

Keywords: Digital tourism marketing, Destination promotion, Digital campaigns, Destination branding, User engagement, Destination Management Organizations - DMOs

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the tourism industry has experienced a profound shift in the way destinations are promoted, driven by the rapid advancement of digital technologies and the widespread use of the internet. Traditional marketing approaches, such as print advertising, travel fairs, and television spots, have been progressively supplemented or even replaced by digital campaigns, which offer greater reach, precision, and interactivity (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

Digital marketing in tourism encompasses a wide range of tools and strategies, including social media platforms, content marketing, search engine optimization (SEO), paid advertisements (PPC), influencer collaborations, and personalized email campaigns (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). These tools enable tourism organizations to target specific market segments, monitor campaign effectiveness in real time, and engage with potential travelers through immersive and data-driven content (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019).

As travelers increasingly rely on digital sources when searching for and planning trips, digital presence has become a critical factor in shaping destination image and influencing travel decision-making (Gretzel et al., 2015). In fact, the online visibility and reputation of a destination can significantly affect tourists' perceptions, emotional engagement, and ultimately, their intention to visit (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

Understanding the impact of digital campaigns on destination promotion is therefore essential in a globalized and highly competitive tourism environment. This study aims to investigate how digital marketing efforts affect destination awareness, brand positioning, and tourist behavior, by examining both qualitative and quantitative

evidence from contemporary campaigns implemented by tourism organizations.

2. Theoretical Framework

The tourism industry has undergone a profound digital transformation in recent decades, with digital marketing campaigns emerging as a dominant strategy in promoting destinations. The theoretical framework of this study integrates key concepts from destination marketing, consumer behavior, digital communication, and behavioral psychology to provide a comprehensive understanding of how digital campaigns shape tourist decision-making and destination image.

2.1. Destination Marketing Theory

Destination marketing is the strategic process of promoting a location as a desirable travel destination, often led by Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs). According to Pike (2002), destination marketing focuses on creating and communicating a unique value proposition to stimulate tourist demand in an increasingly competitive global environment. The theoretical foundation of destination marketing often aligns with the services marketing mix, which expands the classical 4Ps (Product, Price, Place and Promotion) to include People, Process, and Physical Evidence (Booms & Bitner, 1981).

DMOs engage in brand development, market segmentation, and storytelling to position a destination in the minds of prospective visitors (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2011). In this context, digital campaigns serve as critical tools for building awareness, managing perception, and influencing intent.

2.2. Destination Image and Brand Equity

The concept of destination image is central to tourist behavior research. According to Echtner and Ritchie (1993), destination image encompasses both cognitive (beliefs and knowledge) and affective (feelings and emotional responses) components. Gartner's (1993) model of image formation distinguishes between organic sources (e.g., word-of-mouth, media) and induced sources (e.g., advertising, official content), emphasizing that the digital landscape blurs the boundaries between these categories.

Digital campaigns can shape both cognitive and affective evaluations through emotionally resonant content, virtual experiences, and visual storytelling. Furthermore, user-generated content (UGC), such as travel blogs and social media posts, significantly contributes to perceived authenticity and social proof (Fotis, Buhalis & Rossides, 2012).

Closely related is the construct of destination brand equity, adapted from consumer branding theory (Keller, 1993), which refers to the value derived from brand awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). Strategic digital campaigns enhance brand equity by reinforcing brand positioning and encouraging tourist engagement and loyalty.

2.3. Digital Marketing in Tourism

Digital marketing in tourism entails the use of digital platforms including websites, social media, email marketing, search engines, and mobile applications to promote tourism experiences and engage with potential travelers (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). These campaigns allow for real-time interaction, audience targeting, performance tracking, and content personalization.

From a theoretical perspective, relationship marketing and service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) support the notion that value is co-created through interaction, experience, and engagement. Digital media amplify these relationships, allowing destinations to become part of the tourist's journey before, during, and after the actual visit. In addition, e-WOM (electronic word-of-mouth) theory explains how digital reviews, ratings, and social recommendations influence consumer trust and decision-making. Empirical studies confirm that e-WOM plays a pivotal role in shaping tourist expectations and intentions (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan, 2008).

2.4. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), developed by Ajzen (1991), is one of the most robust models for predicting human behavior. It posits that behavior is primarily driven by behavioral intention, which is influenced by three key constructs:

- Attitude toward the behavior (positive or negative evaluation)
- Subjective norms (perceived social pressure)
- Perceived behavioral control (perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior)

In the context of tourism, TPB has been widely applied to understand travel intention, destination choice, and revisit behavior (Lam & Hsu, 2006; Han, Hsu & Sheu, 2010). Digital campaigns influence each of these TPB components:

- Attitudes are shaped by emotional and informational digital content.
- Subjective norms are reinforced by influencers, peer reviews, and social media trends.
- Perceived behavioral control increases when information is easily accessible, booking is seamless, and digital platforms reduce uncertainty.
- Recent extensions of TPB in tourism incorporate variables such as destination image, perceived risk, and e-WOM, enhancing the model's explanatory power (Soliman, 2019; Rahmafritria et al., 2021).

2.5. Integration of Concepts: From Exposure to Action

By integrating the above theories, we can conceptualize how digital campaigns influence tourist behavior:

Stage	Theoretical Construct	Digital Campaign Role
Awareness	Brand Awareness, Destination Image	SEO, social media ads, influencer posts
Evaluation	Attitude, Destination Image, e-WOM	Reviews, blogs, immersive content
Intention	TPB constructs	Targeted content, social validation
Action	Behavioral Control, Ease of Booking	Online booking tools, apps, chatbots
Post-visit	Loyalty, UGC, WOM	Encouraging reviews, hashtags, engagement

This framework supports the idea that digital campaigns operate not just as promotional tools, but as facilitators of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses.

2.6. Challenges and Future Directions

Despite their effectiveness, digital campaigns face several challenges. Oversaturation of content, misinformation, and overtourism are potential negative externalities (Gössling, 2021). Moreover, the digital divide may exclude certain demographics from full participation in digitally mediated tourism marketing.

3 Research Methodology

3.1. Purpose and Research Approach

The present study seeks to investigate the impact of digital campaigns on tourists' perceptions of destinations and their intention to visit. Given the multifaceted and complex nature of the phenomenon under investigation, a mixed methods research design was adopted. This approach enables the integration of both quantitative and qualitative data, allowing for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject.

Specifically, the study follows a convergent parallel design, whereby both quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously, analyzed independently, and then integrated during the interpretation phase. This design was selected to ensure methodological triangulation, enhance the validity of findings, and capitalize on the strengths of both methodological traditions.

3.2 Research Questions

- Q1 How does exposure to digital tourism campaigns influence tourists' perceived image of a destination?
- Q2 what is the role of trust in digital information sources in shaping the intention to visit a tourism destination?
- Q3 To what extent do the cognitive and affective images of a destination, as shaped by digital content, affect tourists' intention to travel?
- Q4 what are tourists' subjective experiences and perceptions regarding the authenticity and credibility of digital tourism campaigns?
- Q5 How do users interpret and assign meaning to digital tourism content such as images, videos, and narratives?
- Q6 what is the role of user-generated content in enhancing the intention to visit a destination?

3.3. Quantitative Research

3.3.1 Research Design and Instrument

The quantitative component of the study is based on a structured questionnaire, developed in alignment with established theoretical models and previous empirical research in the fields of destination marketing and consumer behavior. In particular, elements of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) were incorporated to assess behavioral intention, while the destination image framework proposed by Echtner and Ritchie (1993) was utilized to capture both cognitive and affective perceptions of destinations.

The questionnaire consists of five sections: (a) demographic information, (b) exposure to digital tourism campaigns, (c) perceived destination image, (d) trust in digital sources of information, and (e) intention to visit. Most questions use five-point Likert scales to facilitate the measurement of attitudes, perceptions, and intentions.

3.3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

A non-probability convenience sampling strategy was employed to collect a minimum of 150 valid responses. The questionnaire was distributed electronically via social media and other digital channels, ensuring access to a population of internet users who are more likely to have encountered digital tourism content. This approach was considered appropriate for reaching the target demographic of digitally engaged travelers.

3.3.3 Quantitative Data Analysis

Data were processed and analyzed using SPSS statistical software. The analysis included descriptive statistics, reliability testing of the scales using Cronbach's Alpha, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to confirm the internal structure of the constructs, and multiple regression analysis to examine relationships between independent and dependent variables.

3.4. Qualitative Research

3.4.1 Purpose and Methodology

The qualitative component of the study aims to explore the deeper meanings, experiences, and subjective interpretations that individuals attribute to digital tourism content. To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing for flexibility in the questioning process and enabling participants to elaborate on personal narratives and reflections related to their online experiences.

3.4.2 Sampling and Participant Profile

Participants for the qualitative phase were selected through purposive sampling, based on criteria such as frequent use of digital media for travel planning and prior decision-making experiences influenced by digital campaigns. A total of 10 interviews were conducted sufficient to ensure thematic saturation and capture a diverse range of perspectives.

3.4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, recorded with participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which allows for the systematic identification, coding, and categorization of emerging themes. The analytical process included familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, development of thematic categories, and final interpretation. Special attention was paid to identifying recurring patterns and interpreting how personal experiences relate to the perceived influence of digital content.

3.4.4. Data Integration and Synthesis

The convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during the interpretation phase, through a triangulation strategy that allowed for the identification of complementary or divergent trends across the datasets. This integrative approach enhanced the construct validity of the results and enabled a more holistic interpretation of the influence of digital campaigns on tourist behavior. The synthesis of numerical findings and narrative insights provided a multi-layered analytical framework, capable of capturing both the measurable impact and the lived experiences of digital influence.

4. Ethical and Deontological Considerations

Throughout the research process, strict adherence to fundamental ethical principles was maintained. Participants were fully informed about the purpose, scope, and procedures of the study and provided their informed consent prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured at all stages, and participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any point. All data collection, storage, and processing practices complied with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the ethical standards governing academic research.

5. Research Limitations

Despite the methodological rigor and the implementation of a mixed methods design that enhances both the validity and reliability of the findings, this study is subject to certain limitations that should be acknowledged and taken into consideration when interpreting the results.

Firstly, the use of non-probability convenience sampling in the quantitative phase limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of tourists. The sample predominantly consisted of individuals familiar with the use of digital media, which may introduce sampling bias, favoring technologically literate or socially active users. Moreover, the self-reported nature of the questionnaire responses may be affected by factors such as social desirability bias or limited reflexivity on the part of participants regarding their motivations and attitudes.

Secondly, in the qualitative component, although semi-structured interviews offer the advantage of in-depth exploration, the limited sample size and the potential influence of the researcher during the interaction process may affect the interpretative validity of the findings. Thematic analysis, as an inherently interpretative method, is subject to researcher subjectivity, and the generalizability of qualitative insights remains inherently constrained.

Thirdly, the study focuses on specific types of digital campaigns and social media platforms, potentially excluding other, less prominent but possibly influential forms of digital promotion. Additionally, the cultural, social, and age-related profile of the participants may influence the way digital content is perceived and interpreted, thereby limiting the internal diversity of the sample.

Despite these limitations, the study seeks to reinforce its scientific credibility through methodological transparency, data triangulation, and the researcher's reflexive stance during the interpretative process. These

limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but rather highlight the necessity for further research in diverse demographic and cultural contexts, employing broader and more representative samples.

6. Results

6.1 Quantitative Findings

The statistical analysis of the quantitative data revealed significant associations between participants' exposure to digital tourism campaigns and key variables related to destination image perception, trust in information sources, and intention to visit. Specifically, respondents reporting high exposure to digital content showed statistically significantly higher ratings on both cognitive and affective dimensions of the destination image.

The Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) confirmed the construct validity of the measurement scales, identifying three distinct factor structures: (a) cognitive attributes (e.g., infrastructure, accessibility), (b) affective image (e.g., emotional appeal, aesthetic value), and (c) social influence and trust in digital sources. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.79 to 0.91, indicating high internal consistency across the scales.

The multiple regression analysis demonstrated that the overall perception of the destination image, as shaped through digital media, is a strong predictor of visit intention ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$). Trust in information sources also emerged as a significant mediating factor, reinforcing the role of digital campaigns as indirect drivers of tourist decision-making. The model accounted for a substantial proportion of the variance in visit intention ($R^2 = 0.62$), supporting the hypothesis that digital promotion exerts a meaningful influence on consumer behavior in the tourism domain.

6.2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews uncovered multidimensional interpretations and subjective meanings attributed to digital tourism content by users. Three core thematic categories emerged:

Digital Experience as a Source of Inspiration: Participants described digital campaigns as stimuli that enhance the travel imagination. Audiovisual content particularly images, drone footage, and emotionally charged storytelling was perceived as particularly effective in evoking desire and anticipation for future travel.

Authenticity and Social Proof: The perceived trustworthiness of digital content was closely linked to the authenticity of the source. User-generated content (UGC), especially from real travelers, was considered more credible than official promotional material. Social influence, particularly via platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, emerged as a critical factor in reinforcing intention to visit.

Critical Reception and Reservations: Some participants expressed reservations about the "staged" or overly commercial nature of certain digital campaigns. Content perceived as inauthentic or disconnected from the actual experience of the destination was met with skepticism, pointing to the necessity for realistic and culturally sensitive approaches in digital destination marketing.

6.3 Data Integration and Comparative Analysis

The triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data confirmed the complementarity and theoretical coherence of the two methodological approaches. Quantitative results provided statistical evidence of the relationship between digital exposure and travel intention, while qualitative insights illuminated the cognitive and emotional mechanisms underlying this relationship.

Perceived authenticity, emotional resonance, and social influence emerged as transversal themes across both datasets. These findings reinforce the validity of the study's conclusions and underscore the need for digital promotion strategies that align with the values, expectations, and media habits of contemporary travelers.

7. Conclusions

This study investigated the effectiveness of digital tourism campaigns in shaping travelers' perceptions and intentions, utilizing a mixed-methods design grounded in theories of destination image, digital trust, media engagement, and place branding. The following conclusions address each research question individually, integrating quantitative and qualitative findings with relevant theoretical frameworks.

RQ1: How does exposure to digital tourism campaigns influence the perceived image of a destination?

The findings confirm that exposure to digital tourism campaigns significantly shapes the perceived image of a destination, both cognitively (e.g., infrastructure, accessibility, safety) and affectively (e.g., emotional appeal, attractiveness). This supports the conceptualization of destination image as a multidimensional construct (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993), where media content particularly visual storytelling plays a crucial role in constructing place perceptions. Campaigns rich in visual and narrative elements triggered emotional responses, leading to more favorable destination evaluations. This outcome is consistent with the work of Gallarza, Saura, and García (2002), who argue that emotional impressions can often outweigh factual information in shaping tourism-related judgments.

RQ2: What is the role of trust in digital sources of information in shaping the intention to visit a destination?

Trust emerged as a key mediating variable influencing the effectiveness of digital campaigns. Respondents expressed greater intention to travel when the source of information was perceived as authentic and credible. This aligns with media credibility theory (Metzger et al., 2003), which posits that trust in the medium and source directly affects message processing. User-generated content (UGC), reviews, and influencer testimonials were considered more trustworthy than institutional messages. These findings emphasize the importance of peer-based social validation in contemporary tourism marketing (Hudson & Thal, 2013), especially within participatory digital ecosystems.

RQ3: To what extent do the cognitive and affective images of a destination, shaped by digital content, affect travel intention?

Both the cognitive and affective dimensions of destination image significantly predict the intention to visit, with affective responses showing slightly stronger influence. Regression analysis revealed that destinations perceived as emotionally engaging were more likely to be chosen. This supports dual-processing models of persuasion, which suggest that emotional and experiential cues have a powerful impact on behavioral intentions (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Escalas, 2004). In tourism, where decisions are often emotionally driven, content that evokes imagination, excitement, or a sense of escape proves to be more persuasive than purely informational content.

RQ4: What are travelers' subjective experiences and perceptions regarding the authenticity and credibility of digital tourism campaigns?

Interview data revealed that authenticity is a central criterion for how digital campaigns are evaluated by travelers. Content that appeared overly commercial or idealized was often dismissed as unrealistic or manipulative. In contrast, campaigns perceived as grounded in the cultural identity and lived experience of the place fostered emotional connection and trust. This finding supports the arguments of Anholt (2006) and Govers & Go (2009), who emphasize the necessity of aligning place branding with local values and authentic narratives. In this sense, authenticity is not just a stylistic feature but a strategic necessity for building brand credibility.

RQ5: How do users interpret and assign meaning to digital travel content (e.g., images, videos, stories)?

Participants did not passively receive campaign messages; instead, they actively interpreted them through their own life experiences, cultural background, and personal travel aspirations. This interpretive process echoes reception theory (Hall, 1980), which holds that media audiences construct meaning rather than merely absorb messages. Visual and narrative elements such as drone videos, ambient music, or local storytelling were particularly effective in allowing users to emotionally "enter" the destination and imagine themselves there. This underscores the importance of crafting emotionally immersive and culturally resonant content.

RQ6: What role does user-generated content (UGC) play in enhancing travel intention?

UGC emerged as a powerful driver of intention to visit, due to its perceived authenticity, relatability, and social proof. Participants indicated that seeing real people share real experiences built trust and created a sense of belonging or aspiration. This finding resonates with social influence theory (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), which explains how people are influenced by observing the behavior and preferences of others. In the tourism context, UGC acts as both endorsement and experiential evidence, increasing both emotional engagement and the perceived reliability of the destination.

Across all research questions, a unifying theme emerged: digital tourism campaigns are most effective when they combine emotional storytelling, credible social proof, and cultural authenticity. This triad aligns with contemporary frameworks of place branding (Hankinson, 2004; Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2011), which advocate for a participatory, values-based, and experience-driven approach. Tourism marketers must therefore move beyond superficial visibility metrics and focus on deeper, theory-informed strategies that cultivate long-term emotional bonds and destination loyalty.

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