

THE IMMEDIATE IMPACT OF INSTAGRAM POSTS ON CHANGING THE VIEWERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS TRAVEL DESTINATIONS

Saleh Shuqair ^a, Philip Cragg ^b

^{ab} Bahrain Polytechnic, Manama, Bahrain

Corresponding email: saleh.shuqair@polytechnic.bh

Abstract

This study aims to measure the immediate impact of User- Generated- Contents (UGC) in forms of Instagram images on changing the viewer's perceptions towards a travel destination.

By using an experimental design and subsequent *t*-Test in SPSS, the viewers' perceptions of a destination (Lebanon) pre- and post-exposure to selected Instagram images were investigated.

The findings show that Instagram posts were effective in changing the viewers' perceptions and it can influence viewers' behavioural intentions during the pre-visitation stage. The study discusses implications for the strategic place of UGC in promotional strategies for destinations by means of Instagram, but equally will assert – where appropriate – more general guidelines and areas for future research towards the use of other social media in this context. The research around destination image formation have been focusing on Destination –Marketing -Organization (DMO) marketing activities, therefore, this is one of the few studies that have addressed the impact of Instagram images on changing the viewers' perceptions towards travel destinations.

Keywords: Destination –Marketing -Organization (DMO), Destination Image (DI), User Generated Contents (UGC), Instagram, Lebanon.

1. Introduction

Destination Image (DI) has been widely discussed in the literature yet, in spite of the considerable amount of studies around DI, the studies around the impact of User-Generated-Content (UGC) on DI formation is still limited and would benefit from further exploration. The process of DI formation has shifted since the arrival of the digital era and is no longer controlled solely by Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO) as today's internet users are exposed to a wide range of posts in various forms of videos, images, texts and stories, particularly posts around vacation and holiday experience from Social Network Sites (SNS) users. As a result, companies and scholars alike have observed that SNSs are not simply used as interaction or communication tools but also as an active component in the DI formation process (Fatanti & Suyadnya, 2015). The literature presents strong evidence around the ability of marketing messages on the DI formation, all be it that different information sources influence tourists' perceptions to a different degree, this warrants the need for further investigation into the role of UGC on DI formation (Beerli & Martin, 2004).

Instagram images/posts and UGC are commonly used on an interchangeable basis as they are often used in the same context and for the purposes of this research they shall be considered to have the same generalised meaning and as such should be considered as interchangeable.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Users Generated Contents in Tourism

There is a growing body of literature around the impact of UGC on the travel decision process, yet the relative importance of each social media platform on travellers' purchase decisions still has scope for further investigation (Leung, et al., 2013).

The term UGC was defined as “*any form of content being generated online by platform users*” (Moens , Li & Chua,2014). The arrival of SNSs has challenged companies as sole creators of marketing messages (Hautz, et al., 2014) as the marketing messages are no longer exclusively generated by organizations but equally by users, highlighting the potential relative impact of UGC towards DI formation in a travel or tourism context (Munar, 2011). In an online context, information sources available to an audience can furthermore be divided into formal sources, for example, paid advertising (Frías, et al., 2011) and informal sources of information, such as friends, family and relatives (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Crompton, 1979). UGC is considered as a third party on SNSs in a form of “text, images and videos etc.” In a DI context, Instagram has been identified as an important social media platform towards building an image about tourist destinations (Fatanti & Suyadnya, 2015). Some researchers further stressed the value of Instagram as an effective communication medium for tour operators and travel agents to promote a destination (Hanna & Puitit, 2014). Not only has Instagram has become a vital tool in the promotion strategies for many destinations (Bath, 2015) but one of the most recently emerging marketing practices by DMO's is their formal engagement of travel bloggers and social media influencers in tourism promotion strategies, e.g. Dubai, Jordan, Scotland & Australia, etc. For example, it was stated in an interview that was conducted by Go future Media with high profile Instagram influencer Lauren Bath in 2015, “Instagram is a very important part of the strategy because there is a whole generation of people who are using social media who aren't reading the paper anymore and Instagram is a great place to reach them as it's such a hot platform right now” (Holly, 2015). This has become a growing practice within the travel and tourism industry, with companies like Turkish Airline launching a campaign using 10 famous YouTubers and National Geographic working closely with many professional photographers in order to engage a larger audience (Delevingne, 2016) and using bloggers to promote Japan to new target markets (Frary, 2015). All this further emphasizes the power of SNSs in travel and tourism marketing and their perceived influence upon consumer behavior.

Earlier studies have focused on the impact of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) on travel decisions or image formation, however, specific websites in the travel context, such as Trip Advisor, formed the basis of these studies (Miguéns, et al., 2008; O'Connor, 2008). Most of their findings revealed that users of SNSs collaborate in generating online content about several tourism products and in shaping images about destinations through the information they provide based on data relevance provided during the travel planning process. Yet, the attention to Instagram is limited (Miguéns, et al., 2008). The work of Fatanti & Suyadnya, (2015) contends the process of promotion through Instagram to be complex and different from other SNS sites. Marchiori & Cantoni, (2015) found that UGC is more likely to alter DI formation in the case of exposure to users who haven't visited a particular destination or have little to no prior knowledge in contrast to those who have had a real experience with the destination. It was also noted by Frías, et al, (2008) that the influence of the web on DI is negative and less effective compared to the DI formation by viewers who gathered the travel information from both the travel agents and the internet. Earlier findings were also observed in the study by Govers, et al, (2007) which indicated that the tourism promotion from marketers does always have a major impact on viewers' perceptions and that other sources of information such as WOM, television and travel agents have a much greater influence on DI formation. Mercille, (2005) therefore recommends travelers to evaluate both UGC and DMO messages before travelling in order to avoid any sort of communication or perception gaps. A further complication with Instagram is that its users tend to edit the images by means of filters in order to make their posts more visually appealing, unique and engaging to their

audience (Bakhshi, *et al*, 2015) This was further outlined by the founder of the Instagram account 'beautiful destination' Jauncey as the tapping into specific visual elements that make the photos on Instagram more appealing (Avakian, 2016) raising important questions i.e. Are Instagram posts biased? Is its content appeal enjoying trustworthiness issues such as those of DMO's? Frías, *et al*, (2011) noted that the use of the internet to research a destination taints the DI since the information available on the internet might be associated with the above highlighted risk, although in contrast many scholars stated that UGC is a trustworthy source of information (Marchiori & Cantoni,2015; Bastida & Huan 2014; Fernández-Cavia, *et al.*, 2014 ;Lueng, *et al*, 2013; Qiang, Ye *et al*, 2011) and furthermore tends to enrich SNSs users' perceptions towards travel destinations. Burgess, *et al* (2009), for example, found that UGC can be subjective as it builds trust on the basis of real travellers sharing real experiences, yet some UGC creation has been generated by fake (robot) accounts or by users who have vested interest in the destination, therefore, bringing into question the trustworthiness of such contents.

Destination Image (DI): is widely accepted as an important aspect in successful tourism development and destination marketing Tasci & Denizci, (2009) and it is defined as an attitudinal concept constituting the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a tourist holds of a destination (Ankomah & Crompton, 1993). DI should be considered a multi-dimensional phenomenon integrated by several cognitive and affective dimensions (Martín & Bosque, 2008). The cognitive image components of destination image are the beliefs, impressions, ideas, perceptions and knowledge that people hold with respect to different objects (Crompton ,1979) whereas the affective components of DI are the physiological feelings toward the destination (Uysal, 2002; Kim & Richardson, 2003). Martín & Bosque, (2008) suggested that measuring destination image should consider a multi-dimensional phenomenon that consists of both cognitive and affective attributes by considering the individual's feelings toward the tourist destination. Several scholars stressed the importance of DI in reducing the perceived risks, creating awareness and increasing knowledge i.g. (Gartner and Konecnik, 2011,) moreover the strong positive images of destination influence visitors travel choices, particularly when they have limited knowledge or experience of a destination (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991).

2.2 Research Questions

The research around the influence of UGC on DI formation needs further exploration (Mariussen, 2014). Therefore; this research aims to answer the following question: To what extent does UGC through Instagram change the viewer's perceptions towards a travel destination?

2.3 Methodology

The objective of this research was to measure the immediate impacts of UGC through Instagram on viewers' perceptions on DI formation towards a travel destination. We used the Hash Tag #Visitlebanon in order to search for images on Instagram by authentic users and to avoid any projected images by DMO. Thirty images were selected of the most important touristic attractions and sites of Lebanon including; Cities, Beaches, Hotels, Restaurants, Night Markets, Churches, Historical Sites, Restaurants, Natural Scenery, Local Architecture and Cultural attractions etc. These reflected the different aspects of Lebanon destinations attributes. A research announcement was sent via e-mail to Bahrain Polytechnic staff and students inviting them to participate in an experimental research, the announcement were also shared on SNSs. The only criteria for selecting the respondents being they must not have visited Lebanon before, the experiment took place in October 2016 inside Bahrain Polytechnic campus.

By using an experimental design that measures a respondent's perception of a destination pre-exposure and post-exposure to selected Instagram posts/images relating specifically to Lebanon. The respondents were asked to rank 38 image items on a 7 point Likert Scale adapted from (Hudson, *et al.*, 2011; Gong & Tung, 2016). Both studies have used the same

scale which was appropriate for South America, but for this research we have customized and adjusted a few of the survey questions items to make them appropriate fit with Lebanon's unique attributes.

The procedure: during the pre exposure survey the respondents were asked to rank the survey items, once completed the respondents moved to the exposure stage of the experiment.

The exposure: during this stage, the participants were exposed to 30 pre -selected images relating to Lebanon. The exposure took place over a period of 5 minutes and the participants were informed that these images are generated by SNSs users. The post exposure survey was implemented immediately after the exposure stage, the respondents were asked to rank the same survey questions

Participants: A simple random sampling, where respondents were recruited through a direct e-mail and SNS posts, total of (151) participants participated in this experiment. Nearly 57% of respondents are females and nearly 43% males. Half of respondents are from young age groups: 50% are aged 18–25, 14% are aged 26–34 years old, 25% are aged from 35-44 and 11% are above 45 years old. Nearly 60% of the respondents are from Kingdom of Bahrain, 15% are Irish, 5% from Greece, 13% from the UK and 8% are from other nationalities.

Measurement: The survey utilised 7-point Likert scale ranging from 7 (Strongly Agree) to 1 (Strongly Disagree) with 4 as a midpoint (Neutral). This scale was utilised as it helps to increase the variance in the measurement and leads to greater differentiation in the judgments made (Krosnick & Pressers, 2009).

3. Results

Table 1. Results of factor loading, paired sample *t*-test and reliability test for destination image change

Image Scale Item	Factor loading	Mean pre exposure	Mean Post exposure	t	d.f	Sig. (2-tailed)	Alpha (Pre - Post)
Factor 1: Tourist facilitation							
Good tourist information is readily available	.787	4.77	4.97	-1.603	147	.111	
Tours and excursions are readily available	.784	4.59	4.99	-2.911	148	.004	
Many packaged vacations available to Lebanon	.733	4.45	4.66	-1.430	147	.155	
Tourists attractions are well known and famous	.555	4.90	5.21	-2.093	147	.038	
Composite Mean		4.51	5.23	-3.865	592	.000	.832/.852
Factor 2: Safety							
Lebanon is a safe place to visit	.697	4.32	4.52	-1.411	145	.160	

There is political stability in Lebanon	.673	3.48	3.87	-2.407	147	.017	
Lebanon is a modern country	.636	5.12	5.49	-2.927	149	.004	
The environment in Lebanon is clean and tidy	.558	4.59	5.17	-3.408	148	.001	
Lebanon is an ideal place to visit	.548	5.23	5.54	-1.928	146	.056	
Composite Mean		4.55	4.92	-4.752	739	.000	.772/ .759
Factor 3: Comfort							
Lebanon offers good quality restaurants	.672	5.76	5.95	-1.682	148	.095	
Lebanon offers a good choice of food	.634	6.24	5.46	6.005	148	.000	
Lebanon offers a good choice of music	.603	5.22	5.26	-.233	149	.816	
It is easy to get good service in restaurants and hotels	.501	4.99	5.21	-1.720	148	.088	
It's easy to travel around Lebanon	.490	4.71	5.06	-2.441	149	.016	
Composite Mean		4.74	5.54	-3.450	745	.001	.746/ .719
Factor 4: Interest/adventure							
A holiday in Lebanon is adventurous	.792	5.04	5.40	-2.359	149	.020	
Lebanon has plenty of places to get away from the crowd	.674	4.85	5.23	-2.733	148	.007	
Lebanon offers a luxury holiday	.514	4.85	5.27	-3.239	146	.001	
In Lebanon, everything is different and fascinating	.510	4.50	5.02	-3.690	149	.000	
Cities in Lebanon are attractive	.474	5.28	5.77	-3.969	148	.000	
Composite Mean		5.14	5.36	-8.140	744	.000	.767/ .850
Factor 5: Affordability							

Prices are low in Lebanon	.774	3.96	4.10	-1.168	147	.245	
Lebanon offers affordable activities	.632	4.82	4.96	-1.082	149	.281	
Goods and services are affordable in Lebanon	.579	4.78	5.02	-1.807	147	.073	
Lebanon offers a wide choice of budget accommodation	.503	4.49	4.83	-2.873	145	.005	
Composite Mean		4.51	4.72	-3.453	591	.001	.697/ .762
Factor 6: Attractions and Entertainment							
Lebanon has a rich culture	.780	5.46	5.80	-2.908	148	.004	
Lebanon is a good destination for a learning and educational experience	.647	4.57	4.86	-2.051	147	.042	
Composite Mean		4.55	5.00	-3.444	296	.001	.610/ .559
Factor 7: Atmosphere							
Lebanon has a good night life	.727	5.61	3.78	8.504	147	.000	
Lebanon has a pleasant weather	.692	5.77	5.84	-.605	146	.546	
Lebanon has natural attractions	.634	5.97	6.26	-2.488	149	.014	
Composite Mean		5.79	6.00	-3.100	444	.002	.651/ .741
Factor 8: Sightseeing and Activities							
There are many places of interests in Lebanon	.572	5.28	5.57	-2.191	148	.030	
Lebanon provides interesting sporting events	.535	4.31	4.77	-3.619	147	.000	
Composite Mean		3.54	5.17	-3.355	296	.001	.646/ .598
Factor 9: Cultural similarity							
Lifestyle and customs are similar to us	.715	4.03	4.37	-2.209	147	.029	
Local architectural styles are similar to us	.715	4.05	4.44	-2.353	146	.020	
Composite Mean		4.04	4.41	-3.233	294	.001	.535/ .470

Table one reports factor loading for 38 survey items, Confirmatory Factor Analysis utilising Varimax rotation was performed to group 38 DI scale items into correlated dimensions, among 38 image scale items, 32 survey items were loaded cleanly into nine core DI factors including; Tourist facilitation, Safety, Comfort, Interest/adventure, Affordability, Tourist Varieties, Atmosphere, Attractions and Entertainment, Sightseeing and Activities, Cultural Similarity. The findings were supported by the literature, particularity studies around the immediate impact of information sources on changing the viewers' perceptions (Hudson, et al., 2011; Gong & Tung, 2016). As reported in Table 1, The reliability test Cronbach's Alpha was performed on both surveys in order to support the structure, the post exposure survey shows improvement in Cronbach's Alpha in the following factors "tourist facilitation" from .832 to .852 . "Interest and adventure" from .767to .850 "affordability" from .697 to .762 "atmosphere" from .651 to .741 and "cultural similarity".535 to .773. Alpha score of the following factors "tourist facilitation", "safety", "comfort", "adventure" and "affordability" were reported a score above .70 which is quite acceptable (Churchill, 1995; Nunnally, 1978) and it was close to .70 in the following factors, "Sightseeing and Activities", "atmosphere" and reported below .50 in the cultural similarity factor. In order to test the sampling adequacy KMO test was performed on survey items. The KMO value obtained was .735 which is above the acceptable level of value (George & Mallery, 2001).

The highest difference in the reported mean scores among the nine factors as reported in the table above was in "factor 8 "Sightseeing and Activities" with a mean difference of (1.63). on a 7 point Likert Scale. There were two factors that report the same mean score of (0.37) relating to "cultural similarity" and "safety". The lowest observed changes in the mean scores were reported in factor 7 "Atmosphere" with a mean difference (0.3) followed by factor 5 "Affordability" (0.21) and finally factor 3 "Interest and adventure" (0.22). The *t* test of the nine combined factors obtained a P value below (0.05). However, if we investigate these items separately through *t* test without considering factor analysis we notice a decrease in the significance levels as reported in the 9 DI attributes including; tourist information, packaged vacations, safe place, ideal place, pleasant weather, quality of services in restaurants and hotels, prices, affordable activities and prices of goods and services.

4. Discussion

In recent years we noticed a shift of customers' roles from being a passive audience to active participants in the brand experience (Pralhad & Ramasvamy, 2004). This has presented an opportunity for organisations to create closer connections with their customers, thus increasing their involvement and consequently yielding greater value for both (Agrawal, et al., 2015). As Instagram provides individuals with the opportunity to share their experience with others, several destinations collaborate with SNSs influencers as part of their promotional campaigns to create favourable DI, increase the exposure to their destinations and attract prospective travellers (Holly, 2015). Our findings imply that Instagram images were effective in changing the viewers' perceptions in some of DI aspects. The highest improvement in the mean score was reported in the eighth factor "Sightseeing and Activities" with a mean score of (1.63) on a 7 point Likert scale, interestingly, the items under this factor are "*places of interests and sporting activities*" as Instagram images provide a medium that better communicate the functional attributes of a destination and this together with a low viewers' organic perspective towards these attributes. Gunn, (1972) assists in explaining such findings. Even though the results show positive changes in all of the nine factors, the mean scores for most of the recorded changes were below (1) on a 7 point Likert scale, indicating that Instagram posts modify the viewers' image into an induced image at best. Such findings support the work of Gunn, (1972) which presents the seven stage theory of DI modification and contribute to the existing literature in regards to the effectiveness of UGC in DI formation (Marchiori & Cantoni, 2015; Alca zar, et al., 2014).

The *t* test of the nine combined factors obtained a P value below (0.05) and signified that the UGC has positively changed the viewer's perceptions. However, when the *t*-test was applied to the survey items in isolation the significance was reduced on the following items "tourist

information, packaged vacations, safe place, ideal place, pleasant weather, quality of services in restaurants and hotels, prices, affordable activities and prices of goods and services". Therefore, suggesting that one factor alone will not impact upon DI perceptions, but an accumulation of cognitive and affective impressions of a destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Although, when images are presented that represent these are viewed as a set or package they have a greater impact upon DI perception. A potential reason behind this is the intangible nature of the underlying dimensions of this factor (i.e. psychological characteristics) which are difficult to measure (Echtner, 1991). As may not be effective in modifying the image (Jenkins, 1999). This considered as a further challenge in promoting intangible DI attributes through Instagram due to the difficulty of visualizing the customer experience in advance (Lovelock, Wirtz & Chew, 2011). As the emerging trend for DMO is to integrate professional bloggers in their campaigns, however, it's safe to argue that Instagram bloggers cannot fully relay the holistic experiential aspects of DI and therefore, should not be solely relied upon to deliver DMO marketing messages.

Additionally *t*-test results show that UGC did not have a significant changing impact upon the perceptions of the items "tourist information", "safe place", "beaches", "prices", "affordable activities" and "weather". It would be safe to assume that DI attributes concerning price or holiday information might be difficult to communicate through UGC as Instagram users often tend to share more of authentic experiential moments rather than functional attributes and such posts regarding price or holiday information are usually generated by DMO. Therefore, the only viable option for DMOs is to enrich the use of the visual clues that can be directly linked to quality and price as some of the service providers use metaphors and visuals clues to help communicate the benefits of service offering (Lovelock, Wirtz & Chew, 2011). Another important aspect in this context is the degree of influence the information source has on the viewers' perceptions as discussed in the work of Beerli & Martín, (2004). This study shows that Instagram has potential as a tool for modifying the DI, yet the results show only slight influence on viewers' perceptions as Instagram images do not communicate the holistic DI. Our findings do not contradict the current literature which states that the exposure to UGC can influence the viewers' perceptions and helps in creating favourable DI for prospective tourists, in particular the role of Instagram as an viable information source for DI formation (Alcázar, et al., 2014; Munar, 2011). Our findings are consistent with previous studies (Alcázar, Piñero & Maya, 2014; Ryan & Cave, 2005; Mayo, 1973).

5. Practical Implications

Due to the positive nature of images on Instagram, tourism destinations have opportunities to benefit from this tool in their marketing strategies; therefore, it's recommended to engage SNSs users to contribute UGC on Instagram with appropriate searchable Hashtags to increase the marketing campaigns visibility. It is also recommended that DMO engage potential visitors and residents to generate UGC through Instagram, as positive UGC leads to positive image, increase the awareness on the destination as well as it provides a cost effective approach towards promoting the destinations. Its recommended for DMO to encourage potential visitors to access UGC by linking their website with SNS and use Hashtag as this will provide additional supporting images to reinforce the DMO marketing message.

6. Limitations

This study contains limitations that need to be addressed firstly, the changes in the perceptions were very slight and this brings more criticisms to adapted methodology, as the respondents may remember their rating in the pre exposure survey and provide similar ratings in the post exposure (Yang, et al, 2015) moreover, it was hard to measure some of the intangible components of the DI through images as some intangible components such as the quality of service cannot be visualised.

Our findings would not be the same if a different destination was chosen, due to the fact that Lebanon is located in the Middle East and individuals are likely to have a stronger image of a geographically close by destination (Nolan, 1976) therefore, it would be safe to assume that most of the respondents might be aware of various aspects of its tourism products and perhaps their organic image was formed through various media sources such as TV shows, SNSs, family and friends, as these sources have greater impact when a dramatic event occurred at a destination (Tasci & Gartner, 2007) and Lebanon has suffered from several terrorist attacks during the past years (Travel Risk Map, 2016).

Another cited limitation around the positive effect of UGC on DI formation might be the nature of Instagram as a SNS, as users' on this platform tend to share positive images that are related to a positive experience or attributes of a destination, perhaps unlike Trip Advisor where users tend to express their dissatisfaction or spread negative eWOM on a particular tourism products or services (Amaral, Tiago, & Tiago, 2014) thus, UGC on Instagram might appear over-promising similar to the projected images by DMO.

7. Future research

The emerging findings of this study have enlarged the research scope around the ability of UGC in DI formation, thus it's recommended to expand the research in this area by focusing on the mini UGC videos on Instagram. Furthermore, future research could benefit from comparing UGC that are generated by professional bloggers/photographers or DMO with the UGC generated by regular SNS users on SNSs as there is a need to understand the differences in the information sources around DI formation, particularly comparing the role of DMO with the UGC (Frías, *et al*, 2011). Future research could benefit by exploring the potential effects of Instagram images upon travel intentions.



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