
Systematic Literature Review of International Research on Social Network Engagement and Tourism

Abstract: *This study views engagement as a multidimensional construct that seeks to foster users' commitment to a tourism destination. It presents a systematic literature review to examine existing research on engagement and social media in the tourism sector. The findings underscore the importance of incorporating social media into communication strategies, using these platforms to maximise interaction and promote genuine commitment. The literature emphasises the need to focus on both formats and content, especially that generated by other users..*

Key words: Social Media, Engagement, Tourism, Literature Review

Track: Operational Innovations

Focus of paper: Theoretical/Academic

1. Introduction

The relationship between tourism and social media is a phenomenon that has gained increasing importance in recent years, driving changes in tourism promotion policies (Bonilla-Quijada et al., 2021). Organisations, in general, and tourism organisations in particular, have long utilised websites as communication channels, although this has not always been done strategically (Foot & Schneider, 2006; Gandía, 2011; Rodríguez et al., 2012; Saxton & Guo, 2011; Stein, 2009). Tourism organisations operate across multiple platforms on the Internet to build relationships with their audiences, yet they rely heavily on their websites and also use digital social networks (Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín & Caba-Pérez, 2018; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012) to complement certain dialogue functions that are limited on websites. In many cases, however, the use of digital social networks by tourism stakeholders remains limited. The mere presence of profiles on platforms such as Facebook or Instagram does not guarantee their appropriate use or effective integration into a communication strategy.

According to Carrillo and García (2020b), engagement on social media should be understood as a multidimensional construct comprising three consecutive dimensions that require clear understanding: engagement as dialogue (based on behaviours and social interactions), engagement as interest in the organisation and its content, and engagement as affective commitment rooted in feelings towards the organisation. Engagement goes beyond interactivity; it involves an “affective, cognitive, and behavioural state” (Dhanesh, 2017). From this perspective, the study argues that tourism organisations should optimise their use of social media to generate the highest possible level of engagement. The need to reach tourists has led organisations to adopt digital channels to generate the desired engagement (Fujita et al., 2017). However, this communication often lacks a strategy that is specifically targeted at distinct audiences to achieve clear objectives (Grunig, 2013).

Despite the evident importance of digital social media, tourism destinations continue to demonstrate a limited strategic vision in their communication efforts, often failing to address the full range of potential dimensions (Jeong and Shin, 2019). Moreover, tourism institutions typically rely on only a few digital channels to engage with tourists, who are frequently viewed as the sole stakeholders of interest. It is essential for organisations to acknowledge the diversity of stakeholders within the sector and to communicate with them effectively. From a strategic perspective, social media enables organisations to monitor both audiences and competitors, build brand identity and reputation, expand influence, foster follower loyalty (Mehrabi, Islami & Aghajani, 2014), and develop consistent relationships with key stakeholders (González-Fernández-Villavicencio, 2015: 23). However, without a strategic communication approach that enhances the capacity of actions to generate engagement and assesses their impact, social media is unlikely to deliver a meaningful return on investment (ROI).

In this context, the study assumes that social media platforms used by tourism destinations play a key role in achieving high levels of engagement (Carrera-Calderón & Vega-Falcón, 2017), as they complement official websites by offering a degree of interactivity that is difficult to achieve through websites alone (Waters & Feneley, 2013). This underscores the need for a deeper examination of the academic literature to better understand the frequency and scope of social media use in the tourism sector. Furthermore, this paper focuses on the literature concerning the management of engagement on tourism destinations' social media, considering these platforms as strategic tools within digital communication. Given that engagement has been extensively studied as a construct, this study seeks to contribute to the consolidation of the theoretical framework and to identify potential directions for future research in the context of the tourism sector.

2. Methodology

The literature review is a well-established and recognised method for mapping and analysing the relevant scientific literature on a given topic and its findings. It also helps to identify potential gaps and research opportunities that may contribute to the advancement of knowledge. This study conducted a systematic review of the literature indexed in the Web of Science database, completing the stages of search and selection, analysis, and synthesis.

- Phase 1. Selection of the database:

The Web of Science (WoS) database was selected due to its scientific relevance and impact (Gregorio Chaviano, López Mesa & Limaymanta, 2022).

- Phase 2. Boolean syntax:

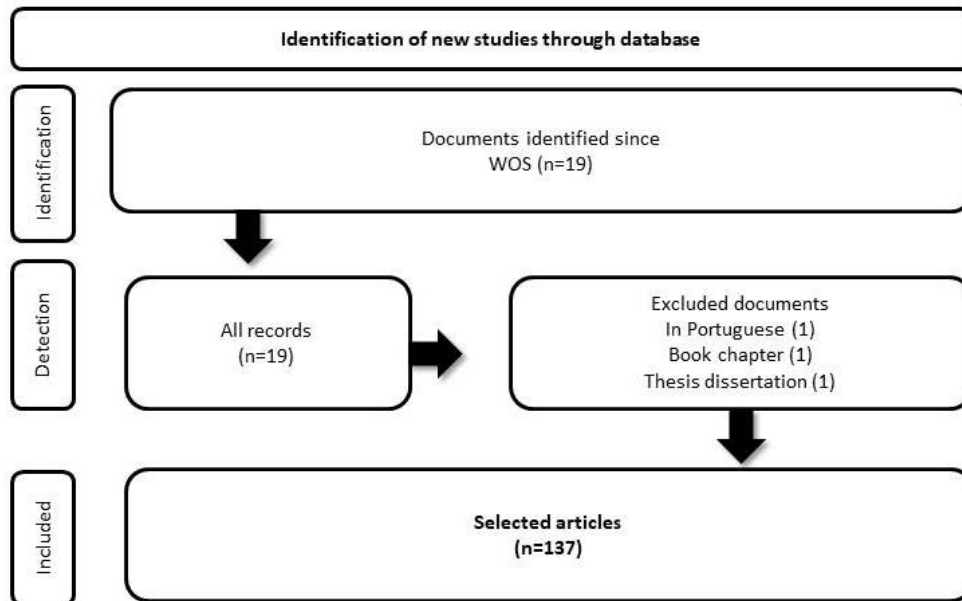
The search focused specifically on identifying academic texts that contribute to understanding what tourism destinations do to generate engagement on social media platforms. By restricting the search to the title field, the review ensured that the articles retrieved were highly relevant and explicitly focused on how engagement through social networks influences the tourism industry—an area of growing interest in digital marketing and consumer behaviour studies. Given the widespread use of the term engagement and the broad academic interest in social media, it was necessary to narrow the search parameters considerably to maintain a clear focus and avoid including tangential research areas

Accordingly, the search in the Web of Science (WoS) database employed the following query applied to the title field: “social media” AND “engagement” AND “tours”. This strategy resulted in the identification of 19 articles.

- Phases 3 to 5: Search scope and review criteria:

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the topic, 16 out of the 19 retrieved articles were selected for review, with no restriction on publication date; the earliest relevant study dates back to 2017. Three documents were excluded for reliability reasons: a dissertation, a book chapter, and one written in Portuguese. The overall search process is summarised and visually represented in Figure 1 through a PRISMA flow diagram, which outlines the stages of selection and refinement.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram

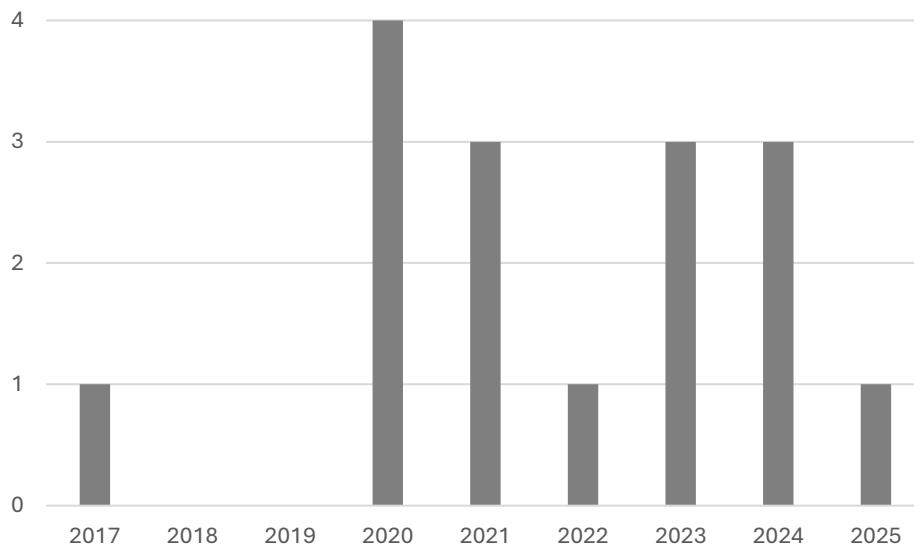


Source: developed by the authors

3. Discussion of results

Firstly, the year of publication of the reviewed studies (Figure 2) reflects both the novelty of the research topic and the emerging interest it has generated within the academic community. Of the 16 selected studies, 15 have been published since 2020.

Figure 2: publication year of the reviewed articles



Source: developed by the authors

These articles were conducted across different fields of knowledge which, although not a specific criterion of the search, clearly reveal the areas of academic interest. Only 3 of the 16 reviewed studies originate from the field of marketing, while the remaining 13 (81.25%) belong to the field of tourism. This

predominance can be explained by the understanding that tourists' decisions are strongly influenced by shared experiences, perceptions of authenticity, and community dynamics.

With regard to the methodologies applied, there is a clear preference for quantitative approaches. Given the scientific rigour of the selected studies, most of them employ multiple methods to validate their findings, and it is therefore common to find research that combines several techniques. Nonetheless, the quantitative focus is evident in the widespread use of online surveys and structural equation modelling (SEM). In fact, 12 of the studies apply SEM methodology. The use of large sample sizes is also notable, allowing for greater generalisability of the results, with an average of 487 respondents per study. Factor analysis is used in four cases, and one study applies ANOVA. In three instances, content analysis of posts published by tourism destinations is employed.

The platforms analysed are those with the highest global usage: Instagram and Facebook. In line with the main method of data collection—online surveys—most studies adopt a holistic approach, suggesting that participants were asked about social media use in general terms. Only one study focuses specifically on user behaviour on YouTube (Chung & Jeong, 2024), while four of the reviewed articles examine engagement on Instagram and Facebook. Liu & Chong (2023) highlight a strong preference for consulting Instagram over Facebook, attributing this to Instagram's popularity and tourists' interest in visual content such as videos and photos. The authors argue that focusing on Instagram is likely to maximise the impact of marketing strategies.

3.1. Strategic perspective on engagement

Regarding the findings of the reviewed articles, several key issues emerge as priorities. Firstly, most authors agree that engagement on social media should be approached from a strategic communication perspective. In other words, content planning and user interaction should stem from the destination's overall marketing strategy, rather than being treated as supplementary or incidental outcomes of other actions.

According to Bonilla-Quijada et al. (2021), engagement should not result from trial-and-error approaches; instead, it should be guided by a continuously adjusted, proactive, and interactive strategic plan. This plan should include clear strategies for the multichannel transmission of traditional, controlled communication, while also seeking credible ways to convey quality (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020). Nusair et al., (2024) argue that such strategies should promote active tourist participation and adapt to varying levels of engagement across different cultures. Focusing on CSR, Martínez-García de Leaniz et al. (2025) stress that communication strategies aiming to build a connection with the destination must be transparent and meaningful to their target audiences.

The value of designing a coherent strategy that aligns with other platforms lies in its ability to influence perceived value. Digital marketing strategies—such as social media engagement and advertising—are essential for enhancing competitiveness and brand value in the tourism sector (Zhang et al., 2021), as not only the communication produced by destinations, but also that generated by users themselves, significantly influences the brand equity of tourism destinations (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020).

3.2. User profiles and psychological drivers

There is also notable academic interest in categorising user participation within the tourism context as a way to explain user behaviour in interactions with destinations on social media. For instance, So, Wei & Martin (2021) identified four distinct user categories in the context of airlines and hotels: (1) Enthusiasts – customers highly engaged with the brand; (2) Reserved – moderately engaged customers; (3) Apathetic – those with low levels of engagement; and (4) Disengaged – customers with no significant brand commitment. The authors found a significant association between these profiles and participation on social platforms. Interestingly, highly engaged customers do not necessarily engage actively in online activities; instead, they show a greater preference for traditional offline engagement.

Nusair et al. (2024) link users' level of participation to the sense of anonymity offered by social media. They distinguish three levels of participation: (1) Content consumption; (2) Content contribution; and (3) Content creation. The higher the perceived anonymity, the greater the likelihood of participation. Similarly,

Chung & Jeong (2024) identify only two categories: passive participation (limited to content consumption) and active participation (involving both contribution and creation of content). Their study reveals that active participation has a stronger impact on purchase intention, offering tourism businesses valuable insights for designing strategies that encourage direct user interaction.

A particularly noteworthy contribution is Amani's (2022) study on engagement among local residents. Unlike most studies that focus on tourists, this research centres on residents of the destination. The findings indicate that feelings of loyalty and pride towards the destination brand are associated with stronger support for tourism activities and a greater willingness to promote the destination through social media. The classification of user profiles represents a promising area for further research, as active participation on social media has proven to be a significant predictor of purchase intention (Chung & Jeong, 2024).

3.3. Content and participation strategies

Undoubtedly, one of the most frequently addressed topics in the literature concerns the factors that influence engagement. The studies reviewed examine these variables from various perspectives. On the one hand, research such as that by Harrigan, Evers, Miles & Daly (2017) focuses on behavioural factors that affect engagement, highlighting identification, enthusiasm, attention, absorption, and interaction as key elements that shape the consumer experience and help explain user behaviour on social media platforms.

Focusing on psychological aspects, studies such as Zheng et al. (2024) suggest that users are more likely to engage with content that evokes positive emotions. However, the study also reveals that beyond a certain point, further increases in emotional positivity do not lead to a proportional rise in user engagement. This indicates that while positive emotions can encourage interaction, there is a threshold after which the effect plateaus or even declines. When users perceive content as overly optimistic or unrealistic, it may reduce their perception of authenticity and, consequently, lower engagement. Abbasi et al. (2023) note that users' commitment and involvement with a destination positively influence their willingness to create and share electronic word of mouth (eWOM).

From the user's perspective, Li et al. (2020) argue that companies should strengthen emotional attachment and customer trust through their interactions on social media. Similarly, Kim and Kim (2020) highlight place attachment and destination satisfaction as key factors in predicting travellers' participation on social media. When tourists feel emotionally attached to a destination, they are more likely to express their engagement through likes and comments on posts related to that destination.

There is broad consensus on the need to encourage tourists' active participation in sharing positive messages about their destination experiences, particularly in a context so heavily shaped by the influence of social media (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020). The pursuit of this desired engagement is one of the most frequently examined issues in the reviewed studies.

Regarding the type of content that tourism destinations can offer to encourage user participation (whether tourists or not), Harrigan et al. (2017) highlight the effective use of various social media formats—such as images, videos, polls, reviews, comments, and blogs—all of which can be generated by either destinations or users. Moreover, when engaging content is shared within communities of shared interest, it can generate even greater impact (Camilleri & Kozak, 2022).

Some authors argue that content should not only be attractive, but also interactive—featuring multimedia functions, high-resolution images with zoom effects, and video content. The real-time conversational capabilities of social media can encourage positive user behaviour (Camilleri & Kozak, 2022). The authors note that users feel interest and curiosity when engaging with others in popular online groups, particularly in the presence of other community members. According to Martínez-García de Leaniz et al. (2025), when users fully engage with the platform's technological potential—participating in online discussions, sharing experiences, and offering feedback to businesses and fellow travellers—they demonstrate a sense of responsibility and commitment to the destination's wellbeing.

Ultimately, the adoption of virtual experiential technologies can also transform the user experience and strengthen the emotional bond between customers and tourism-related social media (Li, 2020). Nevertheless,

the findings of So et al. (2021) suggest that even highly engaged customers do not always participate actively in interactive digital activities.

With regard to content themes, Abbasi et al. (2023) argue that social media posts should be informative, entertaining, credible, and personalised in order to influence consumers' perceived value. When destination profiles provide authentic information in the form of images, they can enhance consumer trust. Bonilla-Quijada et al. (2021) suggest combining broader, more general content—such as panoramic views and popular attractions—with more specific posts that highlight unique aspects of the destination, including health and safety conditions. In any case, the publication of content related to a destination's tangible heritage is widely recognised as a driver of user interaction (Guerreiro et al., 2024). Kim & Kim (2020) emphasise that organisations should not only convey a strong sense of destination authenticity to travellers but also encourage them to share genuine information about their travel experiences on social media after their trip.

Another key issue addressed in the reviewed literature is the role of users in sharing information about destinations on social media. Liu & Chong (2023) demonstrate that both user-generated content (UGC) and firm-generated content (FGC) significantly influence tourists' decision-making. UGC stands out for its credibility and ability to build trust, particularly in adventure tourism, while FGC helps reduce misinformation and offers faster, more detailed updates. Similarly, Huerta-Álvarez et al. (2020) find that tourist-generated communication on social media surpasses that of destination management organisations (DMOs) in both volume and credibility. As Bonilla-Quijada et al. (2021) note, the general rejection of overt advertising has led to a growing consensus on the need to encourage visitors to share their experiences online. In this context, promoting user participation in eWOM can be highly beneficial for tourism destinations (Abbasi et al., 2023).

The relevance of designing content strategies that foster engagement between tourism destinations and users on social media also requires consideration of users' cultural particularities. In their study, Nusair et al. (2024) found significant cultural differences in the behaviour of tourists from the United States and China. Chinese tourists exhibited higher levels of social media engagement and stronger brand relationships compared to their American counterparts, suggesting that marketing strategies should be tailored to cultural contexts. This cultural sensitivity is crucial for designing tourism marketing campaigns that resonate with diverse audiences and enhance their overall effectiveness (Liu & Chong, 2023).

4. Conclusions

Given the tourism sector's strong reliance on visual content, images and videos are the primary means through which destinations are promoted and made appealing to travellers. Social media serves as an ideal channel for sharing this type of content, with engagement playing a crucial role in amplifying its impact. The more users interact with posts, the wider the reach of a destination's visual content, increasing the likelihood that new travellers will become interested and consider visiting. In any case, the studies predominantly define engagement as dialogue, highlighting the need to clearly conceptualise this term within the context of tourism.

The methodologies applied reveal a strong quantitative bias, aimed at understanding the user's perspective. While engagement has often been studied from the sender's point of view in communication theory, these studies seem to focus more on the consequences of decisions previously made by the sender—in this case, the tourism destination. This suggests a need to further explore the strategic planning behind communication practices. In line with this, future research could examine how tourism destinations design their communication strategies.

Although this line of inquiry aims to understand the sender's perspective, tourists remain the central focus in the reviewed studies, often overlooking other key stakeholders such as local governments or the media, who also act as catalysts in shaping the destination's image. It would be relevant to consider the perspectives of these other stakeholders in future research.

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