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THE INFLUENCE OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES ON CHOOSING A TRAVEL DESTINATION FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Master (MSc) in Erasmus Mundus in Tourism Development & Culture

Supervisor:
Professor Álvaro Lopes Dias, Assistant Professor, ISCTE Business School,
Department of Marketing, Operations and General Management

August, 2023

BUSINESS SCHOOL

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Resumo

O surgimento das tecnologias digitais transformou a indústria do turismo e o conteúdo gerado pelo utilizador (CGU) desempenhou um papel crucial nesse processo. O CGU, caracterizado por pessoas que partilham as suas opiniões e experiências online, serve como uma fonte crítica de informação para a tomada de decisões no turismo, alterando a dinâmica do mercado e a relação entre clientes e provedores. Assim, o principal objetivo desta dissertação é investigar de que forma a utilização de sites de CGU pode influenciar as decisões de viagem dos estudantes universitários em Portugal e Espanha. Para responder a este objetivo, o autor utiliza um questionário online baseado num modelo concetual criado especificamente para este estudo. Os resultados do questionário são processados através da análise qualitativa comparativa e aos conjuntos Fuzzy (fsQCA), identificando cinco configurações principais, duas das quais explicam a elevada intenção de visita, e três das quais – a baixa intenção de visita do grupo investigado, e relativamente aos principais factores: utilização de sítios de CGU dependendo da fase do processo de planeamento da viagem, a importância do CGU para as decisões de viagem, a necessidade de informação, a familiaridade com o destino e a complexidade do planeamento. Além disso, apesar de alguns resultados demonstrarem que os factores utilizados na dissertação podem levar a uma intenção de visita elevada, os motivos que levam os representantes do grupo-alvo a utilizar o CGU para tomar decisões de viagem podem ser diferentes, dependendo dos antecedentes e das preferências pessoais dos estudantes. Por isso, os resultados fornecem informações valiosas para futuras investigações e empresas de turismo. Em relação à investigação futura, é aconselhável obter uma amostra mais extensa e diversificada, por exemplo, incluindo mais universidades e dados demográficos dos estudantes, incluindo mais países ou considerando a comparação das diferenças culturais entre os estudantes. Por último, as empresas de turismo devem reconhecer o impacto do CGU e fornecer conteúdos credíveis e informativos nas plataformas de CGU, uma vez que podem afetar significativamente a intenção de visita dos turistas.

Palavras-chave: Conteúdo gerado pelo utilizador (CGU); Intenção de visita; Tomada de decisão; Sites de redes sociais.

Classificações JEL: Z32 Turismo e Desenvolvimento; Z33 Marketing e Finanças; M31 Marketing.

Abstract

The appearance of digital technologies has transformed the tourism industry, and user-generated content (UGC) has played a crucial role in this. UGC, characterised by people sharing their opinions and experiences online, serves as a critical source of information for tourism decision-making, changing market dynamics, and the relationship between customers and suppliers. Thus, the main objective of this dissertation is to investigate how the use of UGC sites may influence travel decisions among university students in Portugal and Spain. The author uses an online questionnaire based on a conceptual model created for this study to address this objective. The results of the questionnaire are analysed using Fuzzy Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA), identifying five main configurations, two of which explain high visit intention, and three of which – low visit intention of the researched group, and concerning the main factors: usage of UGC sites depending on the stage of the trip planning process, the importance of UGC for travel decisions, need for information, destination familiarity and planning complexity. In addition, although some results demonstrate that the factors used in the thesis may lead to high visit intention, the drivers of representatives from the target group towards UGC for travel decisions may differ, depending on students' backgrounds and personal preferences. Therefore, the findings provide valuable insights for future research and tourism businesses. As for future research, it is advisable to obtain a more extensive and diverse sample, for example, encompassing more universities and student demographics, including more countries or considering comparing cultural differences between students. Finally, tourism businesses should recognise UGC's impact and provide credible and informative content on UGC platforms because it can significantly impact tourists' visit intention.

Keywords: User-Generated content (UGC); Visit Intention; Decision-Making; Social Networking Sites (SNNs).

JEL Classifications: Z32 Tourism and Development; Z33 Marketing and Finance; M31 Marketing.

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1. Introduction

The development and broad use of digital technology in recent years have revolutionised the travel sector (Hojeghan & Esfangareh, 2011). One of the most significant changes has been the rise of user-generated content (UGC), which refers to the online content created and shared by individuals about their experiences, opinions, and recommendations (Roma & Aloini, 2019b). As it provides potential visitors authentic and numerous views into locations, housing, activities, and services, UGC is considered as an important source of information for decision-making in the tourism industry (Bernardino et al., 2020). UGC has also impacted the relationships between tourist service providers and customers since it enables the latter to have a bigger impact on the market by sharing their experiences and influencing others' decisions (Litvin et al., 2008).

The concept of UGC has been examined in various studies. Scholars suggest that the nature of social networking sites (SNSs), such as their interactive and participatory features, fosters social interactions and the exchange of information between users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). This exchange of information is facilitated by UGC, which is perceived as more authentic, reliable, and trustworthy than traditional marketing messages (Xiang et al., 2017). As a result, tourists are increasingly turning to SNSs to seek recommendations, read reviews, and share their experiences with other users. It was also investigated that young people are among the most significant users who actively engage with UGC (Micheli, 2015). According to previous research, young people are more likely to use UGC sites than any other age group (Ortiz-Ospina, 2023).

Despite the growing interest in the research on the influence of UGC on SNSs in the tourism industry, there are still some research gaps that need to be addressed. Firstly, most of the research has focused on general SNSs, such as Facebook and Twitter, and little attention has been paid to emerging platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok or Pinterest, which are becoming increasingly popular among tourists (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Kaosiri et al., 2019). Secondly, many studies examined the possible factors that influence the use of UGC sites in the tourism industry and how positively they can influence the visit intention among tourists. However, fewer researchers paid attention to the constraints related to the information published on UGC sites that may decrease the visit intention (Wang et al., 2022). Additionally, the use of UGC sites related to the visit intention is usually explored in the context of Asian travellers, while

research on European tourists and particular European countries is scarce (Jorge-Acain, 2022; Yuan et al., 2022).

To fill these gaps, the present research examines the influence of user-generated content on social networking sites on choosing a travel destination for university students in Portugal and Spain. Therefore, the research posits the following research questions: (1) What factors may influence visit intention among university students in the selected countries? (2) Are there any constraints that negatively affect the visit intention? (3) Do all groups of target travellers perceive the use of UGC sites as important as the others?

Hence, this research has the main objective: to investigate how the use of UGC sites may influence travel decision among university students in selected countries. Therefore, the following specific objectives were elaborated: (1) To identify the main factors that may lead to the visit intention, (2) To verify if they have a positive or negative impact on university students.

To achieve the objectives, a conceptual model was elaborated based on the literature review; the hypotheses were proposed and used for the online questionnaire. Consequently, the results of the questionnaire were analysed using fsQCA. The main findings bring a new perspective into the research of decision-making towards the visit intention, as they show that each of the selected variables, in combination with others, can lead to both high and low visit intention. Also, the results from the questionnaire indicate that nowadays, students use many social networking sites to search for relevant UGC and are not limited to Facebook or Twitter, as before. Moreover, the contributions of this study can be relevant for other tourism stakeholders too, for example, tourism businesses focusing on students as a target group.

The present dissertation is divided into nine chapters. The first is an introduction with proposed research questions and objectives for the study. The second chapter is a literature review summarising the main concepts relevant to the investigation and for future parts. The following third chapter introduces the conceptual model designed for the dissertation and the hypotheses, and in the fourth chapter, the dissertation's methodology is presented and explained. The fourth chapter presents data analysis and the results, and the next, the sixth chapter, is a discussion part. The seventh chapter is the conclusion of the research, its theoretical and practical implications, and the limitations and recommendations for future research. The last two chapters contain references and appendixes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 User-generated content and the tourism industry

User-generated content, or UGC, is defined as media content produced or created by the general public or internet users instead of paid experts and is mostly shared online (Daugherty et al., 2008). Even though nowadays exist many definitions of this concept, they all are similar since they define the internet content that was created for non-profit reasons.

Research on UGC has been ongoing since the concept gained popularity in the 1990s and has a connection to the rise of the Web 2.0 (Naab & Sehl, 2016). However, the focus of this research has shifted over time as the popularity and importance of UGC have grown. At first, the research on UGC focused primarily on users' motivations for creating and sharing content online. Studies examined factors like self-expression, social interaction, and identity formation as drivers of UGC (Park & Lee, 2021). Researchers also explored the role of UGC in building online communities and fostering social connections (Roma & Aloini, 2019b).

The concept's popularity in media and cultural studies is frequently credited to authors like Henry Jenkins (2006), who emphasizes media users' usage of digital social media platforms in his book *Convergence Culture* (Bolin, 2021). It is worth mentioning that the author refers to the concept of UGC, although uses other definitions like “audience-generated content” or “consumer-generated content.” Another early study on UGC was conducted by German-Australian researcher Axel Bruns (2006), who has gained fame for his research on social media and UGC. Bruns has written extensively on how people and groups use, exchange, and produce UGC online. Bruns' notion of "produsage," which characterizes the participatory and collaborative nature of content production on the internet, is one of his most important contributions to the area of UGC. According to Bruns, produsage entails users actively participating in producing and distributing material and contributing continuously to its continuing growth and evolution. Bruns has also investigated how UGC affects public opinion, media, and politics. He believes the rise of social networking sites has established news media business models by enabling individuals to produce and distribute news information in novel and significant ways (Bruns, 2006).

As social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram became more popular in the late 2000s and early 2010s, research on UGC shifted and focused more on the impact of social

media on consumer behaviour. Studies examined how UGC influences consumer decision-making and purchasing behaviour and how brands can leverage UGC to build brand awareness and loyalty (Naem & Okafor, 2019).

In the travel industry, research on UGC has also evolved. Early studies focused on the impact of online travel reviews on consumer behaviour. At the same time, more recent research has explored the role of UGC in destination marketing and the impact of UGC on travel behaviour (Assaker et al., 2019). Some studies also highlighted the benefits of UGC compared to traditional sources of information. Among many of them are authenticity, engagement and personalization (Ana & Istudor, 2019). As for authenticity, UGC offers tourists a genuine, unfiltered overview of destinations, accommodations, and attractions. As this information is produced by real people who have visited these locations, it is frequently more reliable and trustworthy than traditional advertising or marketing materials. Speaking of engagement, UGC is quite engaging and may give travellers a feeling of belonging to a community. Conversations may be sparked, and tourists can be inspired to offer their own advice and experiences by looking at images, videos, and user reviews. Finally, individual travellers can use UGC to personalize their trip experiences by looking for information specific to their unique needs and interests. Over time, this may result in more satisfied and loyal consumers.

Overall, research on UGC continues to evolve as technology and user behaviour change. As UGC becomes increasingly crucial in shaping consumer behaviour and perceptions, researchers are likely to continue to explore its impact across a wide range of industries and contexts.

2.2 Social networking sites

Social networking sites (SNSs) are online platforms that allow individuals to create personal profiles, connect with others, and share content such as photos, videos, and messages (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). They have a recent but significant history; the early social networking sites were launched from the late 1990s to the early 2000s and were primarily focused on creating online connections between individuals (Liu & Ying, 2010).

The first social media platform was launched in 1997 by Andrew Weinreich, who is known as the father of social networking. Weinreich applied for the first social networking patent, describing a networking database that connected individuals by defined relationships. The website was called Six Degrees, named after the "six degrees of separation" theory that suggests everyone is connected by no more than six degrees of separation (Burns, 2017). Although Six

Degrees was short-lived and expired in 2001, its concept set the foundation for the future rapid evolution of social media, and it paved the way for developing subsequent social networking sites, like Friendster, MySpace, LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter.

One of the earliest social networking sites to gain significant recognition was Friendster, launched in 2002. By using this SNSs, people could create profiles, interact with each other, and meet new friends online. Friendster was particularly popular in Asia and the Philippines, credited with introducing the concept of social networking to that region (Bhowmik et al., 2021). A year later, in 2003, two other popular SNSs were introduced: MySpace and LinkedIn. As for MySpace, it allowed users to create personalised profiles, connect with friends and share music. It became especially widely used among artists and musicians who used the platform to promote their work. At its peak, MySpace reached around 25 million users and became the USA's most popular social networking site in 2006 (Timilsina, 2017). Speaking of LinkedIn, it was launched for professional purposes, to help people make professional connections and look for job opportunities. Even nowadays, it is still widely used worldwide and has over 700 million users (Chang et al., 2017).

One more early social networking site mentioned above is Facebook, which was launched in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg. Like MySpace or Friendster, Facebook allows users to create personal profiles, connect with friends and family, and share different user-generated content. It was first used as a social networking site for Harvard University students. Still, after it gained popularity among them, Facebook expanded its membership to students from other universities and eventually to anyone with an email address. The platform quickly became a global phenomenon, with millions of users worldwide. In 2012, Facebook went public with a valuation of $104 billion, making it one of the largest tech IPOs in history (Hoffmann et al., 2018).

Finally, there is Twitter, a microblogging site which became public in 2006. Twitter quickly gained popularity among journalists, politicians, and celebrities, who used the platform to connect with their audiences and share news and information. The platform's use of hashtags and mentions made it easy for users to join in on conversations and connect with others who shared similar interests. Over the years, Twitter has evolved and added new features, such as the function of sharing photos, videos, and live streams (Araujo & Van Der Meer, 2020).

In general, early social networking sites were essential to creating the social media landscape we know today. They introduced the concept of social networking worldwide, showed how

social media can be used for communication, creativity, and self-expression, and laid the foundations for creating more advanced and sophisticated social media platforms. Even though these early platforms had several difficulties and issues, they still affect how we interact today.

2.2.1 Social networking sites in the tourism industry

Social networking sites may be used in the tourism industry by both tourism organizations and other stakeholders whose goal is to provide a tourism experience and by tourists who aspire to receive such an experience. Tham et al. (2020) mention that the extensive outreach of social media and its capacity to customise information have facilitated more active participation of tourists on social media platforms. Moreover, such platforms facilitate travel and the selection of tourist destinations (Bakr & Ali, 2013).

These platforms are used during all stages of the trip planning process, including the pre-trip, trip and post-trip stages. They also significantly impact tourists' preferences and decisions (Book, Tanford, Montgomery, & Love, 2018). Specifically, tourists use social networking sites during the pre-trip stage to quickly gather tourism-related information and speed up the information search process (Liu, Norman, & Pennington-Gray, 2013). Using SNSs may also help individuals justify their decisions and decrease dissonance after purchases, such as the decision on a location (Tussyadiah et al., 2018). Destination choices are especially prone to dissonance for two main reasons. So, first of all, consumption doesn't always follow a purchase decision (Jalilvand et al., 2012). Second, decisions on where to go are usually made without the opportunity to see them in advance in real life (Ráthonyi, 2013).

During the second trip stage, which is the actual trip, SNSs are used by tourists to share their travel experience. According to some experts, this is done so other users can experience the destination virtually (Wu & Pearce, 2017). Others believe social media has broadened the ideal social self-image, and the travel experiences shared on SNSs can change how people are seen (Osei et al., 2018). It is also suggested that social media is being used to update others on the tourist's location while travelling due to the increased concern for safety and security (Hernandez-Mendez et al., 2013).

In the last post-trip stage, tourists use social media to store their tourism experiences. Discuss forums and photography repositories often feature numerous submissions from different tourists, providing reviews and comments of what they liked and did not like during their travels (Fakharyan et al., 2012). Some tourists engage in this activity for altruistic reasons, offering

helpful tips to others planning their trips (Lee et al., 2014). Meanwhile, other tourists use SNSs in the post-trip stage to reflect on their experiences.

As for other uses of SNSs in the tourism industry, have also become a crucial tool for companies and organizations to interact with clients and advertise their goods and services (Voorveld et al., 2018). They use these platforms to promote their destinations, products, and services to potential customers by creating social media profiles and pages to engage with their audience and showcase their brand's personality. Moreover, SNSs allow tourist businesses to engage with clients in real-time, replying to their questions and concerns while sharing crucial information like travel tips and updates (Neuhofer et al., 2015). Businesses may also utilize social media analytics tools to learn more about the preferences and habits of their consumers, allowing them to target their services better (Buhalis, 2019).

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter are popular choices for tourism organizations and companies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Still, other sites such as TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Google Reviews are also essential in the sector because they offer customers a platform to share their opinions and provide input about their travel experiences. Businesses may use this feedback to improve their product and service.

In summary, SNSs are used by tourists, tourism organizations, and other stakeholders in all stages of the trip planning process, including pre-trip, trip, and post-trip stages. It helps tourists gather information about destinations quickly and justifies their decisions. Businesses use it to advertise their services, engage with clients, and obtain feedback to improve their products and services. Also, social media has become an essential tool in the tourism industry, impacting tourists' preferences and decisions.

2.2.2 Social networking sites versus traditional sources of travel information

Social networking sites have significantly impacted traditional sources of travel information. In the past, people typically relied on travel guides, brochures, and recommendations from travel agencies to plan their trips (Choi et al., 2018). However, due to the growing popularity of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TripAdvisor, travellers now have access to a wealth of information that is often more up-to-date, personalized, and trustworthy than traditional sources.

One way in which social networking sites have impacted traditional sources of travel information is by offering tourists a place to share reviews, opinions, and experiences with other visitors. Travellers may share their pictures and stories on social media sites like Instagram and Facebook with friends and followers, giving others useful insights into their experiences and helping in the planning of their own journeys. Similarly, as Filieri et al. (2020) mention, review websites like TripAdvisor have become go-to sites for tourists looking for recommendations and guidance from other travellers. Secondly, social networking sites have impacted traditional sources of travel information by enabling travellers to connect directly with locals and other travellers. Travellers may connect with like-minded people and locals who can offer helpful insights on the top places to see, eat, and stay in their destination through social media groups (Jorge-Acain, 2022). This encourages tourists to travel more to lesser-known destinations and discover hidden gems they might never visit or learn about because of the limited tourist information sources.

Finally, social networking sites have also impacted how travel companies market their services. Magno and Cassia (2018) commented in their work that with the rise of influencer marketing, travel companies are increasingly collaborating with popular social media influencers to promote their products and services. Some agencies also actively involve UGC, such as comments from past customers, including their photo or video reviews, to promote their services (Mellinas & Reino, 2019). All this has led to many in the travel business preferring online platforms, which have moved on and have many advantages over traditional sources of information. Therefore, companies rely more on social media to reach their target audience and build brand awareness.

Taking everything into consideration, social networking sites have fundamentally changed the way how travel agencies and other tourism stakeholders market their services and communicate with customers. Nowadays, more and more tourism companies and organizations prefer using online sources of travel information instead of traditional ones. Therefore, this work will focus on social networking sites for choosing a travel destination without considering traditional sources of travel information. The following SNSs will be mentioned in the next chapters of this master's thesis: Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Tiktok, Youtube, and Pinterest, among others.

2.3 Complexity theory

Complexity theory is best known for the work of David Byrne, who studied this theory in the social sciences, emphasizing its relevance to understanding the complex dynamics of human interactions and cultural phenomena. In his view, complexity theory provides a framework for studying how small interactions and behaviours can combine to produce complex social patterns. Byrne emphasizes that this perspective allows us to move away from reductionist approaches and recognize social systems' emergent and unpredictable nature.

The author believes that complexity theory encourages researchers to accept the messiness and nonlinearity of human interactions by arguing that traditional linear models cannot capture all the nuances of the complex real world, in which small changes in initial conditions can lead to very different outcomes. In the social sciences, this concept emphasises that small changes in individual behaviour can have far-reaching consequences for group dynamics, public opinion, and cultural trends (Byrne, 2022). Moreover, the researcher argues that complexity theory supports the idea that interpretations and meanings of cultural artefacts and phenomena are shaped by individual experience and social context. The complexity theory is seen as a way of explaining the diverse and sometimes contradictory ways people interact and interpret different aspects of culture. It is consistent with the view that emergent patterns in complex systems are determined not only by their components but also by the interactions and interdependencies between them. Including an explanation of complexity theory in this work is related to interpreting the results in later chapters.

2.4 Trip planning process

According to Pan and Fesenmaier (2006), the trip planning process involves pre-determining a course of action to achieve a desired goal. That means that tourists plan their trips extensively to reduce uncertainty and perceived risk of travelling. They also evaluate choices and make high-risk decisions regarding attractions, transport, accommodation, and other related issues.

There are several stages involved in the trip planning process, and travellers may spend different amounts of time in each stage depending on their personal preferences, the complexity of their trip and some other factors. In the existing literature (Ana & Istudor, 2019; Yuan et al., 2022) are usually mentioned three main stages of the trip planning process: pre-trip, trip and post-trip. Below are provided some details about each of them.

The first stage, which is the pre-trip planning, refers to the initial stage of travel preparation when travellers do their research and prepare for their trip. Many activities are involved in this stage, including choosing a location and accommodation, organizing activities, and making transportation arrangements. In the case of travelling to another country, travellers also learn about entry requirements, like visa-related issues or any other documents that they may need to cross the border. Moreover, individuals may explore a variety of information sources during this stage to learn more about their destination, including travel guides, websites, social media, and recommendations from friends and relatives (Yuan et al., 2022). They may also use travel agents or internet booking sites to book accommodation, flights, and other travel-related services. To guarantee a successful and enjoyable journey, pre-trip planning is crucial. People may reduce uncertainty and perception of risk, increase anticipation and enthusiasm, and improve the whole experience by thoroughly preparing for their trip.

The second stage, also known as the trip stage, is where the travel happens. It is where all the plans and reservations made during the previous stages are implemented. This stage includes activities such as booking transportation, accommodations, and activities, as well as packing and preparing for the trip. It's important to ensure that all the necessary arrangements have been made and everything is in order before embarking on the trip (Ana & Istudor, 2019).

Finally, the post-trip planning stage which takes place after the trip ends. This stage is often overlooked, but it can be just as important as the pre-trip and trip planning stages in maximizing the benefits of the trip and preparing for future travel. During this stage, travelers should spend time reflecting on their experiences and evaluate the efficacy of their trip. This might entail looking through their travel plans, evaluating how well they worked, and discussing the highlights and challenges of the vacation (Ana & Istudor, 2019; Yuan et al., 2022). Also, at this stage, travellers can collect their trip-related memories and documents, including photos, videos, and receipts. In addition, the post-trip planning stage is an opportunity to debrief with travel companions and share experiences with friends, family, or colleagues who may benefit from the insights gained during the trip. This can also help build relationships and foster a sense of community among fellow travellers. In summary, each stage of the trip planning process is important and requires careful consideration to ensure a successful and enjoyable travel experience.

2.5 Need for information in the tourism industry

Information is a crucial factor in the tourism industry, as it enables tourists to make informed decisions about their travel experiences. In the context of tourism, information can refer to various aspects, such as destination information, travel planning, accommodation options, transportation, attractions, and activities (Silaban et al., 2023).

According to various studies (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Leong et al., 2021), the need for information in tourism arises due to several reasons: the lack of familiarity, the complexity of travel, changing preferences, safety and security issues, and sustainability. As for the lack of familiarity, that means that visitors may need to become more familiar with the place they are visiting. Thus, information is needed to help them arrange their vacation efficiently. They may need local lifestyle, culture, language, traditions and currency information. Speaking of increasing complexity of travel, it should be said that as travel options become more complex, tourists may need the information to choose the best available alternatives, such as flight schedules, transportation and accommodation options. The next reason, changing preferences, explains that tourists' preferences and expectations may change over time and require updated information to make informed decisions that align with their preferences. As for safety and security, travellers consider safety and security measures related to trust issues. But they also need information about them while planning to visit a certain destination to ensure they can make the right decisions about their travel plans. Finally, tourists may need information on eco-friendly travel alternatives, sustainable hotels, and sustainable tourism practices, as sustainability plays a major role in the tourism industry (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Leong et al., 2021). Therefore, providing relevant and accurate information to tourists is essential for the tourism industry as it can improve the quality of the tourism experience, increase customer satisfaction, and ultimately contribute to the industry's growth.

2.6 Destination familiarity

Destination familiarity refers to the level of knowledge and experience that tourists have with a particular travel destination. Familiarity with a destination can influence tourists' travel decisions, including their destination choice, transportation mode, accommodation, and activities (Tham et al., 2020). Tourists who are familiar with a destination may have a higher level of comfort and confidence when planning their trip, as they better understand the local culture, language, customs, and attractions. They may also have an established network of contacts, such as friends or family, who can provide insider information about the destination

(Szubert et al., 2021). On the other hand, tourists who are unfamiliar with a destination may experience greater uncertainty and anxiety when planning their trip, as they lack the knowledge and experience necessary to make informed decisions (Karl, 2018). They may rely more heavily on information sources such as travel guides, online reviews, and recommendations from friends and family.

Destination familiarity can also affect tourists' behaviour while on vacation. Tourists who are familiar with a destination may have a more authentic and immersive travel experience, as they may be more likely to venture off the beaten path and explore the destination more meaningfully. In contrast, tourists who are less familiar with a destination may be more likely to stick to popular tourist attractions and activities (Paulauskaite et al., 2017).

In conclusion, destination familiarity plays an important role in the tourism industry. Tourists who are familiar with a destination can have a more enjoyable and authentic travel experience, which can lead to repeat business and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. Providing accurate and relevant information to tourists can help to increase their familiarity with a destination and ultimately contribute to the growth of the tourism industry.

2.7 Planning complexity

Planning complexity in the trip process refers to the level of difficulty and challenges that a traveller may encounter when planning a trip. Planning a trip can be a complex and time-consuming process involving various steps, including researching destinations, determining entry requirements, booking flights and accommodations, arranging transportation, and planning activities and tours (Tham et al., 2020). Understanding the various stages of the trip planning process and the difficulties involved with each stage will help better to explain the planning complexity in the trip process.

As mentioned in one of the previous subsections of the literature review, the stages of trip planning can be divided into three main categories: pre-trip, trip, and post-trip. Therefore, considering those three stages, all challenges and issues related to the trip planning process should be examined. The analysis of some academic sources (Biswas et al., 2020; Mancini-Cross et al., 2009; Saxena and Lamest, 2018) related to this issue made it possible to highlight the main challenges that an average tourist faces when planning a trip.

1. Pre-trip planning. In this stage, travellers decide on destinations, research for more information on booking flights and accommodations, and plan activities and tours. The challenges associated with this stage can include:

- Information overload: with so much information on the internet, finding accurate and relevant information about a destination can be challenging.
- Lack of information: it can also be an issue, particularly when a traveller considers visiting an unpopular among tourists destination.
- Decision-making: with so many options available for flights, accommodations, and activities, it can take time to make informed decisions.
- Time-consuming: pre-trip planning can be time-consuming, especially for travellers planning a complex trip with multiple destinations and activities.

2. Trip planning. This stage involves coordinating transportation, accommodations, and activities while on the trip. The challenges associated with trip planning can include:

- Language barriers: travelling to a destination without speaking a local language can make communicating with locals, solving possible problems and arranging transportation and activities challenging.
- Unforeseen circumstances: unforeseen circumstances, such as flight delays, weather disruptions, and health emergencies, can disrupt trip planning and cause stress for travellers. Moreover, they cannot be predicted, which influences the stress level of the travellers.
- Cultural differences: cultural differences can affect how travellers navigate a destination, including transportation, food, and customs.

3. Post-trip planning. The last stage involves reflecting on the trip and planning for future travel. The challenges associated with post-trip planning can include:

- Time constraints: travellers may have limited time to reflect on their trip and plan for future travel, especially when they have a very tight travel schedule. As a result, the possible enjoyment and satisfaction of the trip are not perceived.
- Budget constraints: Travelers may need to consider their budget when planning for future travel, which can limit their options. However, it can be irrelevant for those travelling no more than once or twice a year.

In the end, planning complexity in the trip process can be challenging for travellers at each stage of the trip planning process. Understanding the challenges associated with each stage can help travellers prepare for their trip and manage the complexity of trip planning. To manage the complexity of trip planning, travellers can use various tools and resources, such as travel guides, UGS sites, official websites of the destination and travel apps. These tools can help to simplify the planning process and provide travellers with accurate and up-to-date information to make informed decisions.

2.8 Visit intention

Visit intention refers to a traveller's intention to visit a destination or attraction for a particular purpose or reason (Molinillo et al., 2018). It is an important concept in tourism and travel research as it provides insights into the motivations and travellers' behaviour.

According to Silaban et al. (2023) and Tsiakali (2018), visit intention can be influenced by a wide range of factors. Firstly, their personal interests and motivations can significantly impact their visit intention. For instance, a traveler who is interested in history and culture is more likely to visit a destination with significant cultural and historical attractions. Secondly, accessibility and convenience of the destination, its amenities, and the convenience of travel arrangements can also play a role. If a destination is easily accessible by various types of transportation and has convenient accommodations and desirable facilities, travelers may be more likely to visit. Thirdly, the perception of a destination can influence a traveler's visit intention. Positive perceptions of a destination, such as safety, cleanliness, and attractiveness, can increase visit intention. Fourthly, social and cultural factors, such as family and peer influence, can impact visit intention. For example, a traveler may be more likely to visit a destination if it is recommended by friends or family members. Fifthly, economic factors such as the cost of travel and accommodation, or visa fees if applicable, can impact visit intention. Travelers may be more likely to visit destinations that offer good value for money. Sixthly, demographic factors such as age, gender, and income can also affect visit intention. For instance, younger travelers may be more interested in destinations with active nightlife and adventure activities, while older travelers may prefer cultural attractions and relaxation. Finally, special events and promotions, such as festivals, concerts, and discounts, can increase visit intention by creating a sense of urgency and excitement.

In the end, understanding these factors is essential for destination marketers and other tourism stakeholders as it may influence marketing and promotional activities, product development, and infrastructure investments. Visit intention can be affected by various factors, and by understanding the motivations and preferences of travellers, tourism stakeholders can develop products and services that meet their needs and enhance their experiences.

3. Conceptual Model and Research Hypotheses

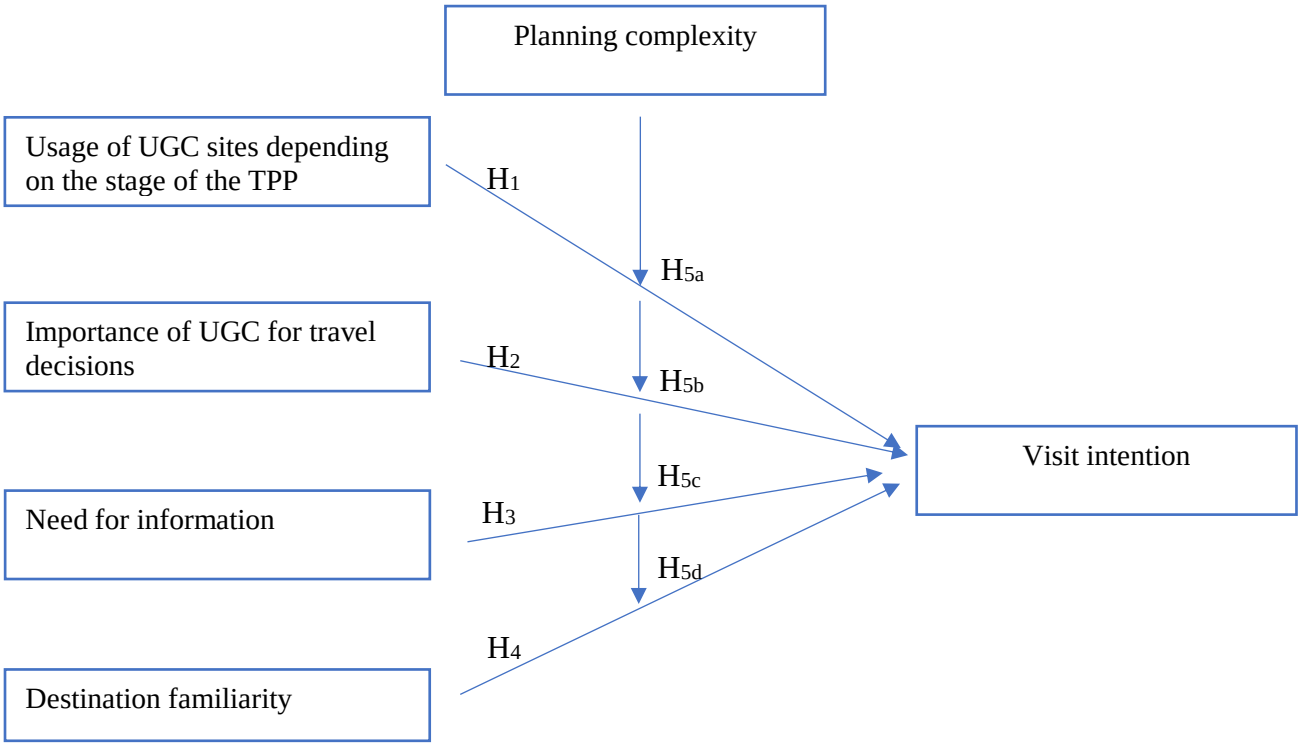
This chapter aims to demonstrate and explain the conceptual model developed to comprehend the correlation among the identified variables. After that, six hypotheses are presented based on the previous research analysis and the proposed conceptual model.

3.1 The proposed conceptual model

Based on the literature review and the relevant scientific and academic papers, six variables were identified that directly or indirectly influence the seventh one. Particularly, the conceptual model defines them as follows:

Independent variables: Usage of UGC sites depending on the stage of the TPP, Importance of UGC for travel decisions, Need for information, and Destination familiarity.
Dependent variable: Visit intention.
Moderating variable: Planning complexity.

Figure 3.1 – The proposed conceptual model for this study



3.2 Hypotheses

As Ana & Istudor (2019) point out in their research, many tourists tend to use UGC sites to make a visit decision; therefore, we consider that it can be a relevant variable for our work too. We assume a positive relationship exists between the usage of UGC sites during different stages of the trip planning process and the visit intention. This means that travellers who have a visit intention are likely to use UGC sites during the trip planning process and, ultimately, choose a destination to visit it.

The positive correlation between the usage of UGC sites and the visit intention can be explained by the fact that travellers with a clear intention have specific needs and preferences for their trip. To meet such needs, they are more likely to search for recommendations and ideas from other travellers. UGC provides platforms for travellers to share their insights, opinions, and recommendations with others, making them a useful source for visitors looking for details on specific locations, activities, and accommodations (Tussyadiah et al., 2011). Therefore, the abovementioned information leads to the following hypothesis:

H1. There will be a positive association between the Usage of UGC sites depending on the stage of the trip planning process and the visit intention.

As said before, many travellers prefer using UGC sites for trip planning. It may be due to the fact that certain groups of travellers may not experience trust issues while using online resources of travel information.

Williams and Baláž (2021) affirm that the vast majority of definitions of trust focus on beliefs and expectations, trusting behaviors and intentions, and there is widespread agreement that trust refers to vulnerability, hope, interdependence and positive expectations. For example, Rousseau et al. (1998) define trust as a psychological condition that is characterised by the intention to embrace vulnerability based on optimistic beliefs about another person's intentions or actions. On the other hand, Gambetta (2000) says that trust is a specific degree of subjective probability. It is when a person believes that someone else will take a specific action before this person can monitor that action, and in a situation where it will affect their action.

Some studies like Muda and Hamzah (2021) and Wang et al. (2017) comment that people trust UGC and perceive it as a credible and trustworthy source of travel information. Moreover, the abovementioned study published by Ana & Istudor (2019) has demonstrated that certain groups

of travellers tend to trust UGC sites more than traditional sources of travel information. Therefore, we suppose that our target group also likely trusts more UGC sites than traditional sources of information, that is why the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. The perceived importance of UGC for travel decisions positively impacts visit intention.

Based on the study of Erkan & Evans (2016), we can assume that the need for information makes travellers use the SNSs to look for relevant for them UGC, which can positively impact the visit intention. Additionally, Silaban et al. (2023) mention that the information that future travellers can find on the SNSs may influence their behaviour and travel decision. Furthermore, the availability and quality of information can also positively impact the visit intention. When travellers can access accurate, relevant, and up-to-date information about a destination, they are more likely to have a positive perception of the destination and be more confident in their travel plans. Moreover, we can deduce that the need for information can inspire travellers as they seek out new and exciting destinations and activities to add to their itineraries. Therefore, we can propose the next hypothesis:

H3. The need for information, leading to the usage of social networking sites, positively impacts the visit intention.

Some studies, like Tham et al. (2020), mentioned the concept of destination familiarity. It is believed that destination familiarity can enhance tourists' visit intention by reducing uncertainty and increasing confidence in the travel decision-making process. When tourists are familiar with a destination, they are more likely to have a positive perception of the destination, be more confident in their travel plans, and be more likely to follow through with their travel plans. Moreover, travellers may consider a known location to be more desirable or appealing than a location they are unfamiliar with, which might enhance the perceived value of the trip. Additionally, by creating an emotional connection and attachment with the destination, such familiarity with the place might help increase tourists' desire to come. Tourists may have pleasant memories and experiences related to a destination they are familiar with, which may encourage them to visit the place again (Tang et al., 2022). Hence, one more hypothesis was proposed:

H4. The destination familiarity enhances tourists' visit intention.

In the previous chapter, we have discussed that the complexity may occur in different stages of the TPP. Some examples of such complexity can be the lack of information or information overload, the language barrier, or unforeseen circumstances. Therefore, we assume that the planning complexity may affect any selected independent variables, changing the tourists' behaviour regarding visit intention.

Also, the study by Tham et al. (2020) has proven that the complexity happening during the pre-trip, trip or post-trip stages of the TPP may somehow influence tourists' satisfaction with the destination or the trip experience in general. Moreover, it can change the visit intention and make the traveller choose an alternative, which is why we consider this variable important for our study. Therefore, based on this information, the last hypothesis was elaborated:

H5. The planning complexity with a combination of each independent variable can have a moderator effect on visit intention.

Finally, we have also discussed that the complexity may occur in different stages of the TPP. Some examples of such complexity can be the lack of information or information overload, the language barrier, or unforeseen circumstances. Therefore, we assume that the planning complexity may affect any selected independent variables, changing the tourists' behaviour regarding visit intention.

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4. Methodology

The present chapter of the study includes information about the research design, the sampling procedures, the data collection and the questionnaire structure.

4.1 Research design

As for the research strategy, the descriptive research type was chosen as it is considered standard for tourism and leisure industry research. This research is designed to methodically and objectively explain many phenomena, such as traveller behaviour, preferred destinations for holidays, or the impact of tourism on regional communities. Descriptive research offers the reader an in-depth understanding of the subject by collecting and analysing data from various sources, such as surveys or observations. Descriptive research additionally enables analysis of trends, patterns, and relationships in the tourism sector, allowing researchers to identify essential elements and variables influencing travellers' decisions and experiences (Veal, 2017). In the first chapter of this dissertation, it was said that the objective is to investigate how the use of UGC sites may influence travel decisions among university students in Portugal and Spain. Moreover, as the intention is to identify the traveller's behaviour regarding this topic, the descriptive research strategy is the most adequate.

In order to proceed with the research, a quantitative research method was selected. One of its benefits is that large-scale, numerical data may be collected, which makes statistical analysis more manageable and gives a comprehensive understanding of associations, patterns and trends (Williams, 2011). Moreover, this study approach permits examining various variables connected to travel decision-making, such as destination preferences, financial concerns, information sources, and social effects, by using surveys and questionnaires, which is the case.

4.2 Sampling procedures

This dissertation chose a convenience sample that helped achieve the study's objective. This sample is known for using voluntary participation, which some studies claim to be important as there is a high chance that only those who associate themselves with the study topic will participate (Boswell et al., 2004). Moreover, it is more accessible and affordable, requiring less time to select the potential participants (Michael et al., 2019).

Furthermore, as it is studied the influence of user-generated content on social networking sites on choosing a travel destination for university students in the Iberian Peninsula, the study's

target population is students of Portugal and Spain who use social media sites and like travelling. It should be mentioned that were targeted students of any nationality, not only the Portuguese and the Spaniards, as the purpose was not to analyse the cultural differences but the general tendency of people studying in those two countries. Also, when the convenience sampling was done, it was followed by snowball sampling, where participants shared the questionnaire with those they believed could also be the target population.

In addition, the sample included students who were older than 18 years old, belonging to generations Z (born between 1997 and 2010) and Y (born between 1980 and 1996), also called Zoomers and Millennials, receiving higher education in universities of Portugal and Spain, and using UGC sites (Richards & Morrill, 2020).

4.3 Data collection

An online questionnaire was designed to collect a large amount of information, which later helped test the previously built hypotheses. The questionnaire was built in Google Forms in English, and before starting to send it out, it was pre-tested with five volunteers to verify if they could understand all the questions and give the required information. Some items were removed or changed then because the previous ones were problematic or sounded ambiguous to the respondents.

After the questionnaire was ready, it was distributed between the 23rd of March of 2023 and the 15th of May of 2023 through the following sources: some social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, VK and LinkedIn, and several relevant WhatsApp and Telegram chats. In order to catch the attention of potential respondents, the link to the questionnaire was followed by a short text explaining the dissertation's topic, the research's objective and target audience. It was also highlighted that the responses would be registered anonymously, so there was no need to mention personal information.

4.4 Questionnaire Structure

The questionnaire designed for the present study consists of eight sections (see Appendix A). The first section explains the aim of the questionnaire and the research, providing some definitions for the following parts that may cause difficulties comprehending. It then gives information about the structure of the questionnaire and some directions on how to reply to the questions. Finally, the respondents are informed that their answers will be kept confidential and

that they will not be identified. It must also be mentioned that after this part, all respondents are asked if they study in Portugal or Spain. If a student responds positively, then the next section opens. Otherwise, the questionnaire will be closed.

The next part of the questionnaire is named *Part 1. The introduction* contains multiple-choice and checkbox questions, for example, related to age, gender, and level of education. There are also many questions about the travel preferences of respondents and their use of UGC sites since this information is crucial for the study.

The rest of the questions are divided into sections related to different variables and the hypotheses presented in the previous chapter. These questions are made in the form of statements which should be responded to using the five-point scale that ranges from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Each section has statements related to only one variable. For example, all the statements from the third section, which is named Part 3, are about the usage of UGC sites depending on the stage of the trip planning process.

The statements or items used in the questionnaire were taken from previous studies, although some were adapted to the work's context. Also, during the pre-test stage, some items that turned out to be irrelevant or abundant were removed from the final version of the questionnaire. Therefore, the table 4.1 (see Appendix A) demonstrates the constructs, the adapted items used in the questionnaire and the sources of this information.

4.5 Sociodemographic Characteristics

There was a recorded number of 138 responses from the Google Forms questionnaire in total. The data obtained by the end of the research shows that most participants are students from Portugal. Speaking of the highest level of education a respondent has received, most possess a bachelor's degree (66.7%). In comparison, two other groups confirmed having a higher school diploma (23.9%) and a completed master's degree (9.4%). Regarding age, most respondents belong to the 23-26 age group (49.3%), followed by the 27-35 age group (26.8%) and the 18-22 age group (23.2%). The remaining participants belong to the 36-42 age group (0.7%). As for the gender question, almost three-quarters of the respondents identify as female (75.4%), while 24.6% belong to the male group (Appendix B, table 4.2).

5. Data Analysis and Results

The present chapter includes the data collected from the questionnaire, the approach used for the data analysis, and the main results and findings.

5.1 Travel preferences and the use of SNSs

Regarding travel preferences, almost half of the students say they travel locally and abroad, followed by those who prefer travelling only locally in the country of studies (37%), and the smallest group of respondents prefer travelling abroad (11.6%). Also, 49.3% of participants usually consider travelling alone or with someone else (for example, a group of friends or family). In comparison, 30.4% avoid travelling alone, preferring trips with someone else, and 20.3% usually travel alone. The results differ a lot in the number of trips made in the past year. For example, 41.3% of students had from 4 to 6 trips, around 21.7% travelled from 1 to 3 times, 18.8% made more than nine trips, and 17.4% travelled 7-8 times. One person also pointed out that they did not have any trips in the past year, contributing to the 0.8% of all respondents. Finally, regarding the use of different SNSs, most students use Instagram (89.9%) when it comes to planning a trip, followed by YouTube (73.9%), Facebook (68.1%), Pinterest (37%), TikTok (35.5%) and Twitter (24.6%). Also, 11.6% of participants use some other SNSs besides the abovementioned ones (Appendix B, table 5.1).

5.2 Observations from other sections of the questionnaire

There are specific trends in Part 2 of the questionnaire related to the Usage of UGC sites depending on the stage of the trip planning process. To go into more detail, most participants agreed with all the statements except the one that says, "I use UGC sites during the trip when I try to find out information about specific attractions/activities". As for Part 3, more than 90% of respondents agreed with all three statements about the importance of UGC sites for travel decisions, saying that they consider photos and videos posted by real travellers on SNSs and independent travellers' blogs/channels/accounts essential to make a travel decision. Speaking of the next part, *Part 4. Need for Information*, more than 60% of students agreed with all the statements, proving that the need for information influences their use of SNSs. When in to comes to *Part 5. Destination familiarity*, the statement that resonated more with the respondents, is the first one that says that discount availability influences the visit intention for a particular destination. As for other items, the participants do not consider them essential to make a visit decision.

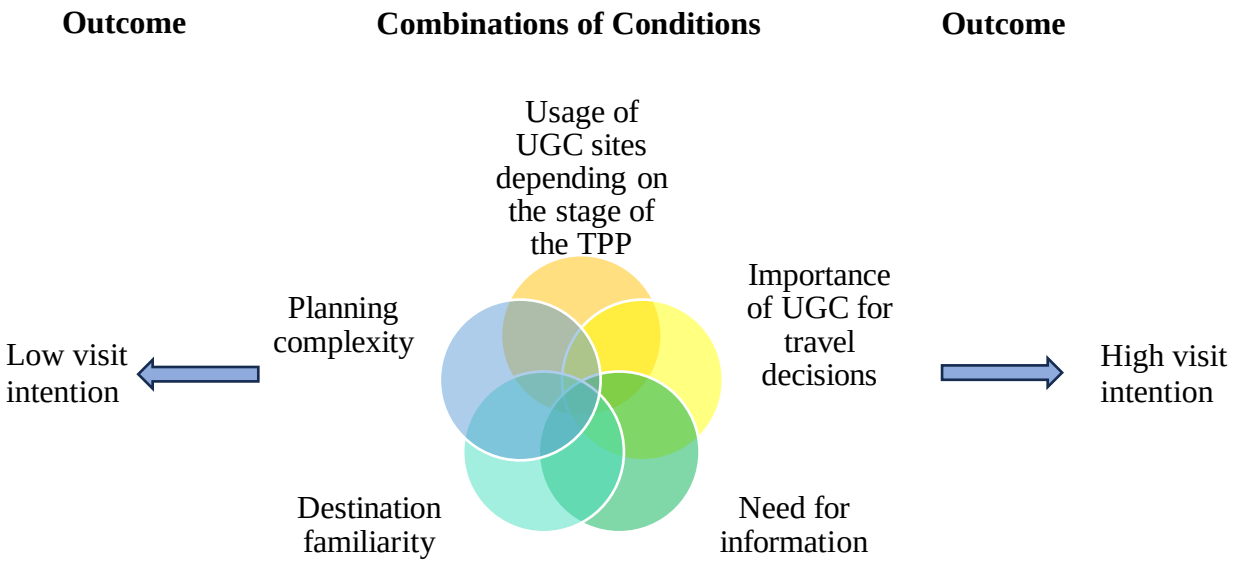
Additionally, the Part 6. Planning complexity shows that the most significant criteria for university travellers are affordable accommodation in the desired destination. However, the need to arrange a visa, the type of transport available at the destination and the location of the destination are no less important. Such travellers are least concerned about the need for more helpful information about the destination on the internet and the weather conditions. Finally, the results from *Part 7. Visit intention* demonstrate that the visit intention is likely to depend on recommendations posted on SNSs, especially when a traveller has little experience travelling to a destination or on photos other users post online. In contrast, the least positive responses were collected to the statement "As soon as I learn about the destination, I decide to visit it", making it clear that our target audience is not strongly prone to spontaneous decisions.

5.3 Fuzzy Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA)

To better understand and interpret the results from the questionnaire, specifically from Part 2 to Part 7, the empirical analysis was applied, which was performed using fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA). The use of fsQCA offers many benefits in comparison to traditional methods of analysis (Pappas & Woodside, 2021). For instance, the tourism industry is highly context-dependent, and fsQCA considers the various contextual conditions that influence outcomes, helping researchers better understand when and why certain factors lead to specific outcomes. Also, fsQCA may interpret non-linear and asymmetric relationships, which are not used in traditional statistical methods, but are common in tourism studies where diverse factors interact in intricate ways.

In this thesis, it is supposed that all variables (Usage of UGC sites depending on the stage of the TPP, Importance of UGC for travel decisions, Need for information, Destination familiarity and Planning complexity) can be used and combined in different ways and to demonstrate it better the following Venn diagram was build (Figure 1). As Dias and Silva (2021) state, fsQCA assumes causal asymmetry, which means that the impact of a condition on the outcome is not the same across all cases; it varies based on the combination of other conditions present in each case. This concept highlights the complex and non-linear nature of causality in specific contexts, where the relationships between variables are not uniform and can exhibit variations based on the overall configuration of conditions. Therefore, this study examined the combinations of conditions of the five variables mentioned above that lead to low and high visit intention.

Figure 5.9 – Venn diagram of the combination of conditions.



5.3.1 Calibration

Calibration in fsQCA involves assigning numerical membership values to qualitative data to make it compatible with quantitative analysis. It is usually done using a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 means the condition is entirely absent and 1 means the condition is completely present. Intermediate values reflect degrees of presence or absence. In our study, following the recommendations of the recent research, we use the concept of full membership, which covered 95% of the data values; the cross-point covered 50% of the values and full non-membership, which covered only 5% of the data values (Dias & Silva, 2021).

5.3.2 Analysis of Sufficient Conditions for Visit Intention

The truth table was built to analyse sufficient conditions, a comprehensive matrix listing all possible conditions combinations and associated outcomes. This table indicates whether the outcome is present or absent for each combination of condition values and covers all possible configurations of conditions, making it an exhaustive exploration of the causal space (Llopis-Albert et al., 2021). The types of solutions the truth table produces are complex, parsimonious and intermediate. The last one excels above parsimonious and complex solutions and is the most frequently considered solution in management research (Hervas-Oliver et al., 2015). The intermediate solution combines conditions that fall between the basic (minimal) and complex solutions and acknowledges varying degrees of condition membership in explaining the outcome.

In order to interpret the results from the truth table, the solutions mentioned above were analysed, identifying the "core" or "peripheral" conditions and then providing the fuzzy-set intermediate solution for both outcomes (high and low visit intention). Lastly, the "core" and "peripheral" conditions were distinguished, and the table below (Table 5.1) demonstrates the fuzzy set intermediate solution for high and low visit intention.

Table 5.2 Configurations for high and low visit intention

	High Visit Intention (vt)		**Low Visit Intention (~vt)**		
Configuration	**C1**	**C2**	**C3**	**C4**	**C5**
Usage TPP		●	⊗	⊗	
Importance of UGC sites	●	•		•	⊗
Need for Information		•	⊗	⊗	⊗
Destination familiarity	⊗		•		•
Planning Complexity	•	•		⊗	•
Consistency	0.86	0.89	0.75	0.81	0.79
Raw coverage	0.47	0.43	0.47	0.28	0.41
Unique coverage	0.12	0.07	0.05	0.03	0.05
Overall solution consistency	0.85		0.72		
Overall solution coverage	0.55		0.64		

The table contains five configurations, the first two of which (C1 and C2) are related to the high visit intention (vt) and the rest three of them (C3, C4 and C5) – to low visit intention (~vt). Large circles ("●") indicate core conditions, while small circles ("•") show peripheral ones. In addition, black circles also refer to the presence of a condition, the cross-out circles indicate the negation of the condition ("⊗"), and blank spaces indicate the conditions that do not care.

The adequacy of the solution's fit could be assessed using a pair of metrics: coverage and consistency. The first refers to cases uniquely associated with a particular outcome or configuration of conditions. It is crucial for the research because it helps identify distinct pathways that lead to a specific outcome, enhancing our understanding of complex relationships between variables. Table 5.1 demonstrates that the unique coverage for all configurations was higher than zero. Therefore, all of them were relevant to the research. In addition, consistency

shows the degree to which a particular set of conditions consistently leads to a specific outcome across cases. For example, higher consistency suggests that the identified conditions are consistently present (or absent) when the outcome occurs, strengthening the validity of the findings and providing more confidence in the conclusions drawn from the analysis. Because the consistency scores for all configurations and the overall solution consistency exceeded 0.7, all configurations are sufficient for vt (Pappas & Woodside, 2021b).

The analysis and examination of the intermediate solution for visit intention show that although all five configurations are different, there are some similarities. For example, the planning complexity of a peripheral condition for the C1, C2 and C5, or the usage of UGC sites, represents the negation of the condition for C3 and C4. The in-depth analysis of all five configurations separately states that the high importance of UGC sites with the high planning complexity and low destination familiarity led to a high visit intention in the first configuration. The second configuration indicated that a high level of usage of UGC sites with high importance of UGC sites, a high need for information and high planning complexity could also lead to a high visit intention.

As previously mentioned, fsQCA applies the concept of causal asymmetry, indicating that configurations leading to a high visit intention are not always the opposite reflections of configurations predicting a low visit intention. In this case, three configurations led to low visit intention (~vt). Hence, the third configuration indicates that high destination familiarity with low usage of UGC sites and low need for information led to low visit intention. The fourth one shows that the high importance of UGC sites with low usage of UGC sites, low need for information and low planning complexity led to low visit intention. Finally, the fifth configuration demonstrates that high destination familiarity with high planning complexity, low importance of UGC sites, and low need for information can also lead to low visit intention.

6. Discussion

This dissertation examined the influence of user-generated content on social networking sites on choosing a travel destination for university students. In order to achieve the objectives, a conceptual model was built, and some hypotheses were proposed and tested later. The research results were obtained and analysed after the questionnaire was designed and the responses were collected from the potential participants. The information gathered from the analysis makes it possible to say that the results support some studies in this field that had been used in the literature review and contribute to the literature.

Overall, the fsQCA analysis helps conclude that although there are some clear tendencies and some results support the information gathered from the previous research, all travellers are different, and they have different motivations or a combination of motivations towards the visit intention. It was confirmed that using UGC sites may influence visit intention (Assaker et al., 2019; Tussyadiah et al., 2018). For example, as it was demonstrated in Table 5.1 and mentioned in the previous chapter, one group of people (C1) values more the importance of UGC sites and thinks of the planning complexity when choosing a travel destination, which was already said by Ana & Istudor (2019) and Tham et al. (2019). Moreover, the literature review suggested that usage of UGC sites depending on the stage of the TPP can also be a driver for a visit intention, which is confirmed by the results of the second group of people who represented C2 (Ana & Istudor, 2019). Additionally, two groups of respondents (C2 and C3) proved the need for information, which refers to the information about the destination, travel planning, accommodation and transportation options, and destination familiarity, also to be crucial to decide on visiting a particular destination, which was highlighted in the literature by Silaban et al. (2023) and Tham et al. (2019) respectively. So, these are the research results that contribute to the existing literature. As mentioned before, many researchers examined the impact of different factors or motivations on a visit intention, which can be seen from the study results. One thing to mention here is that many of the studies mentioned above also affirm that the used in the study factors or motivations may have a significant impact on visit intention. In contrast, the fsQCA analysis performed in this study demonstrates that some drivers may be positive but not very significant (like planning complexity in C1 or C2).

However, the results also show that there needs to be an investigation in the opposite direction of studies; in other words, how low motivation leads to low visit intention or what are the constraints that can lead to low visit intention (Wang et al., 2022). To be more specific, it was

confirmed by analysing the causal asymmetry in three groups of respondents (from C3 to C5 in Table 5.1). The results from C3 indicate that low usage of UGC sites depending on the stage of the TPP and low need for information, leads to low visit intention, which does not contradict the studies from the literature review, rather than complements them. Alternatively, the low need for information and low planning complexity can also lead to low visit intention, as shown in C4. However, some sources from the literature review, like Paulauskaite et al. (2017), say that low destination familiarity can lead to high visit intention to popular tourist attractions and activities, contradicting the analysis performed in this study. Also, the study by Tham et al. (2019) demonstrates that the experience of having travelled to a particular destination will impact travellers' future visits to the same destination; on the contrary, this thesis demonstrated the opposite results, showing that it can be important, but not likely influence visit intention.

In a broader context, the conclusions drawn from the research revealed an evident trend where specific variables have been determined to hold relevance for particular groups of respondents. Interestingly, several factors within the same group exhibited diminished importance or even unimportance. However, it is essential to remember that such findings do not automatically negate or assume the efficiency of certain variables. Instead, they highlight an impressive range of traveller interests and preferences. What one group of travellers might perceive as essential may be viewed as irrelevant by another, highlighting the contextual relativity of value among various tourist groups.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Theoretical implications

This master's dissertation contributes to the existing literature within the field of the tourism industry by introducing fresh perspectives into the discourse, thereby enriching the scholarly dialogue on the nexus between the use of UGC and travel destination choices. Having addressed the objectives presented in the introduction, the research investigated how the use of UGC sites may influence travel decisions among university students. It also identified the main factors that may lead to visit intention and verified if any can negatively impact it.

A distinctive feature of the study is its purposeful focus on a previously understudied demographic group – university students from Europe. This strategic choice allows for a specific perspective and a complete understanding of the role of UGC in shaping the travel decisions of this specific group of travellers. The introduction also highlighted that the previous research focused on alternative target groups, mainly Asian travellers.

In addition, the current study advances the existing knowledge in using different SNSs in tourist behaviour. As mentioned in the introduction of the thesis, many studies have researched the influence of using Facebook and Twitter on visit intention and have yet to consider many other popular platforms nowadays. Specifically, the results from the questionnaire showed that many students use platforms like Instagram, TikTok or YouTube to gather information about the destination, search for UGC and decide on a destination visit.

Finally, a novel aspect of this study is examining the factors influencing high and low visit intentions. While the existing literature predominantly examines the factors underlying high intentions to visit, our study delves deeper by identifying factors contributing to low intentions to visit. This subtle investigation captures the complex relationship between user-generated content and destination choice by examining both ends of the spectrum and thus enhances the comprehensiveness of the theoretical contribution.

7.2 Managerial implications

Drawing exclusively from the study's outcomes, this section aims to offer actionable insights for entrepreneurs, managers, and public decision-makers, particularly those operating in Spain and Portugal. For example, the study shows the critical role of using UGC in shaping travel decisions. Businesses should recognise UGC's impact, proactively build a positive online

reputation, and optimise their online presence. Providing credible and informative content on user-generated platforms can significantly impact the perception of potential travellers, subsequently leading to an increase in their desire to visit a destination.

Moreover, understanding information needs and familiarity with the destination offers companies opportunities for differentiation. Providing comprehensive information, such as visa requirements, transportation and accommodation options, can significantly reduce the perceived complexity of trip planning. By addressing these pain points, companies can provide additional benefits and amenities, improving the overall travel experience for students.

7.3 Limitations and future research

A notable limitation of this study is related to the sample size. Despite the rigorous data collection process, the relatively modest sample size may limit the generalisation of the findings to the broader population of university students. Future research should obtain a more extensive and diverse sample encompassing various universities, academic programs, and student demographics. A larger sample would increase the findings' reliability and the conclusions' validity.

In addition, another limitation is related to the small number of participating countries, which includes only Spain and Portugal. Although these countries provide valuable insights into the behaviour of Iberian Peninsula students, their representativeness may only reflect part of the picture of European students' travel. Expanding the geographical coverage to include a broader range of European countries could improve the study's comprehensiveness in future studies. Expanding the dataset to include countries with different cultural traditions, economic conditions, and educational systems would contribute to a more holistic understanding of the influence of user-generated content on travel destination choice.

Another limitation of this study is that it does not consider cultural differences among university students. Country of origin can significantly impact travel decisions, as students from different cultures may have different levels of awareness of certain travel issues, preferences for specific destinations, and different levels of comfort with certain modes of transportation. To address this limitation in future research, a more nuanced study that considers the participants' different cultural backgrounds could be conducted. It could include gathering information about participants' cultural norms, values, and preferences in their home countries and how these factors may intersect with their travel intentions and behaviours. Collaborating with experts in

cross-cultural research and utilising different qualitative methods such as focus groups or interviews can help identify the cultural nuances driving travel decisions. Recognising and incorporating these cultural nuances will allow for a more comprehensive and contextually relevant understanding of the role of UGC in influencing students' travel choices in the future.

8. References

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Appendix

Appendix A – Table 4.1 Constructs, items and authors

Constructs	Items	Authors
Usage of UGC sites depending on stage of the Trip Planning Process	– I use UGC sites pre-trip, when I search for ideas on where to travel. – I use UGC sites pre-trip, when I had already chosen where to go, but I am looking for various information about the destination. – I use UGC sites pre-trip, when I evaluate the alternatives and try to choose the destination. – I use UGC sites pre- trip, before the actual purchase decision, to confirm I had made the right destination choice. – I use UGC sites during the trip, when I try to find out information about specific attractions/activities. – I use UGC sites during the trip to share my experience with other travelers/friends. – I use UGC sites after the trip to compare my experience with those of other travelers. – I use UGC sites after the trip to share my impressions with other people.	Ana & Istudor (2019)
The importance of UGC and Non-UGC sites content for travel decisions	– I consider photos of places posted by real travellers on social networking sites important to make a decision. – I consider videos of places posted by real travellers on social networking sites important to make a decision.	Ana & Istudor (2019)

	– I consider independent travelers' blogs/channels/accounts on social networking sites important to make a decision.	
Need for Information	– Whenever I plan a trip to a destination, I use the information on social networking sites. – I frequently use the information on social networking sites when I have little experience travelling to a destination. – I usually refer to information on social networking sites to find out the most suitable alternative for me. – In order to prepare for a trip, I often collect information from social networking sites.	Silaban et al. (2023)
Planning complexity	– A need to arrange a visa may influence my travel decision. – The type of transport available for this trip may influence my travel decision. – The lack of affordable accommodation may influence my travel decision. – The lack of helpful information about the destination available on the internet may influence my travel decision. – The weather conditions at the destination may influence my travel decision. – The location of a destination is important for me.	Tham et al. (2019)
Destination familiarity	– I choose a destination if I have any discount to go there.	Tham et al. (2019)

	– I choose a destination if I have ever been there. – I choose a destination if my friends or family live there. – I choose a destination if someone whom I know has ever been there.	
Visit/purchase intention	– A need to arrange a visa may influence my travel decision. – The type of transport available for this trip may influence my travel decision. – The lack of affordable accommodation may influence my travel decision. – The lack of helpful information about the destination available on the internet may influence my travel decision. – The weather conditions at the destination may influence my travel decision. – The location of a destination is important for me.	Silaban et al. (2023), Tsiakali (2018)

Appendix B – Sample Results

Table 4.2 Demographic information

N=138	Demographic	Percentage (%)
Location	Portugal	53.6
	Spain	46.4
Leve lof education	Higher school diploma	23.9
	Bachelor's degree	66.7
	Master's degree	9.4
Age	18-22	23.2
	23-26	49.3
	27-35	26.8
	36-42	0.7
Gender	Female	75.4
	Male	24.6

Table 5.1 Travel preferences and the use of SNSs

Question	Answers	Percentage (%)
What is your travel style?	Domestic (in the country where I study)	37
	International	11.6
	Both	51.4
Are you travelling solo?	Yes, I usually go alone.	20.3
	No, I prefer travelling with someone else (friends, colleagues, family, etc).	30.4
	Both	49.3
Please indicate the number of visits/trips you made in the past one year.	1-3	21.7
	4-6	41.3
	7-8	17.4
	Above 9	18.8
	None	0.8
Please choose the social networking sites that you frequently use	Instagram	89.9
	Facebook	68.1
	Twitter	24.6
	TikTok	35.5
	YouTube	73.9
	Pinterest	37
	Other	11.6

Appendix C – Questionnaire in English

The influence of user-generated content on social networking sites on choosing a travel destination for university students in the Iberian Peninsula

The influence of user-generated content on social networking sites on choosing a travel destination for university students in the Iberian Peninsula

This questionnaire aims to conduct research on the influence of user-generated content on travel preferences for university students in Portugal and Spain. Below you can see the definitions of the concepts that are used in the questionnaire:

User-generated content (UGC) is any content — text, videos, images, reviews, etc.— created by people rather than brands.

A social networking site is an online platform that allows users to create a public profile and interact with other users. Some examples used in this questionnaire are: Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, Pinterest.

UGC sites — any above-mentioned social networking sites where people post text, videos, images, reviews, etc.

Directions: this questionnaire consists of seven (7) parts. For each statement in the questionnaire, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statement by putting a check in the box on the right side of each statement. There are no right or wrong answers. Your answers will be kept strictly confidential and you will not be identified.

The survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Are you currently a student in the Iberian Peninsula (Portugal or Spain)? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Next Clear form

Part 1. Introduction

Where is your university located? *

- ◯ Portugal
- ◯ Spain

What is the highest level of education you have completed? *

- ◯ Primary school diploma
- ◯ Secondary school diploma
- ◯ Higher school diploma
- ◯ Bachelor's degree (Note: don't confuse with the Spanish "bachillerato", which refers to secondary education/high school)
- ◯ Master's degree
- ◯ Doctorate degree
- ◯ Other

What is your age? *

- ◯ 18-22
- ◯ 23-26
- ◯ 27-35
- ◯ 36-42
- ◯ Above 42

What gender do you identify as? *

- ◯ Male
- ◯ Female
- ◯ Other
- ◯ Prefer not to say

What is your travel style? *

- ◯ Domestic (in the country where I study)
- ◯ International
- ◯ Both

Are you traveling solo? *

- ◯ Yes, I usually go alone.
- ◯ No, I prefer travelling with someone else (friends, colleagues, family, etc).
- ◯ Both

Please indicate the number of visits/trips you made in the past one year: *

- ◯ 1-3
- ◯ 4-6
- ◯ 7-8
- ◯ Above 9
- ◯ None

Please choose the social networking sites that you frequently use: *

- [ ] Instagram
- [ ] Facebook
- [ ] Twitter
- [ ] TikTok
- [ ] YouTube
- [ ] Pinterest
- [ ] Other

Back Next Clear form

Part 2. Usage of UGC sites depending on stage of the trip planning process

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statement. *

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I use UGC sites pre-trip, when I search for ideas on where to travel.	○	○	○	○	○
I use UGC sites pre-trip, when I had already chosen where to go, but I am looking for various information about the destination.	○	○	○	○	○
I use UGC sites pre-trip, when I evaluate the alternatives and try to choose the destination.	○	○	○	○	○

I use UGC sites pre-trip, before the actual purchase decision, to confirm I had made the right destination choice.	○	○	○	○	○
I use UGC sites during the trip, when I try to find out information about specific attractions/activities.	○	○	○	○	○
I use UGC sites during the trip to share my experience with other travellers/friends.	○	○	○	○	○
I use UGC sites after the trip to compare my experience with those of other travellers.	○	○	○	○	○
I use UGC sites after the trip to share my impressions with other people.	○	○	○	○	○

Back Next Clear form

Part 3. The importance of UGC sites for travel decisions

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statement. *

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I consider photos of places posted by real travellers on social networking sites important to make a decision.	○	○	○	○	○
I consider videos of places posted by real travellers on social networking sites important to make a decision.	○	○	○	○	○
I consider independent travelers' blogs/channels/accounts on social networking sites important to make a decision.	○	○	○	○	○

Back Next Clear form

Part 4. Need for Information

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statement. *

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Whenever I plan a trip to a destination, I use the information on social networking sites.	○	○	○	○	○

I frequently use the information on social networking sites when I have little experience travelling to a destination.	○	○	○	○	○
I usually refer to information on social networking sites to find out the most suitable alternative for me.	○	○	○	○	○
In order to prepare for a trip, I often collect information from social networking sites.	○	○	○	○	○

Back Next Clear form

Part 5. Destination familiarity

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statement. *

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I choose a destination if I have any discount to go there.	○	○	○	○	○
I choose a destination if I have ever been there.	○	○	○	○	○
I choose a destination if my friends or family live there.	○	○	○	○	○
I choose a destination if someone whom I know has ever been there.	○	○	○	○	○

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Part 6. Planning complexity

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statement. *

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
A need to arrange a visa may influence my travel decision.	○	○	○	○	○
The type of transport available for this trip may influence my travel decision.	○	○	○	○	○
The lack of affordable accommodation may influence my travel decision.	○	○	○	○	○
The lack of helpful information about the destination available on the internet may influence my travel decision.	○	○	○	○	○

The weather conditions at the destination may influence my travel decision.	○	○	○	○	○
The location of a destination is important for me.	○	○	○	○	○

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Part 7. Visit intention

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the statement. *

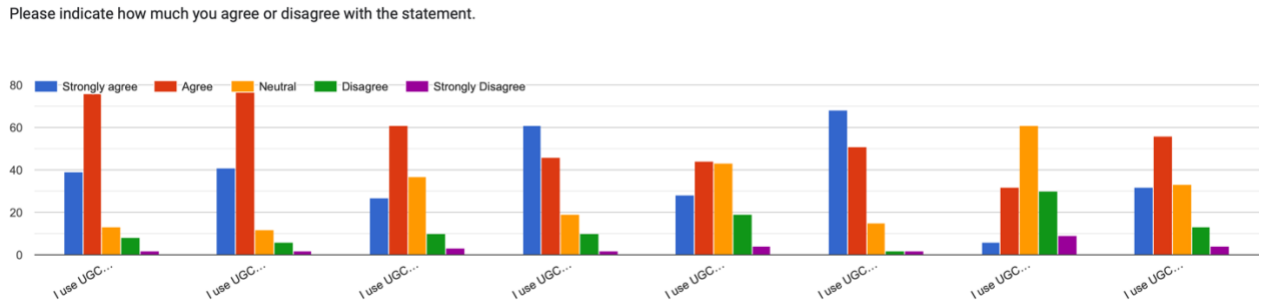
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
As soon as I learn about the destination, I decide to visit it.	○	○	○	○	○
Whenever I plan to travel, and I have little experience travelling to a destination, I will choose a recommended destination on social networking sites.	○	○	○	○	○
Photos other users post on social networking sites help me decide on a travel destination.	○	○	○	○	○

Videos other users post on social networking sites help me purchase complementary destinations/services to enrich my tourist experience.	○	○	○	○	○
Reviews other users post on social networking sites influence what to do/see at destinations.	○	○	○	○	○
Articles other users post on social networking sites help me decide on a travel destination.	○	○	○	○	○

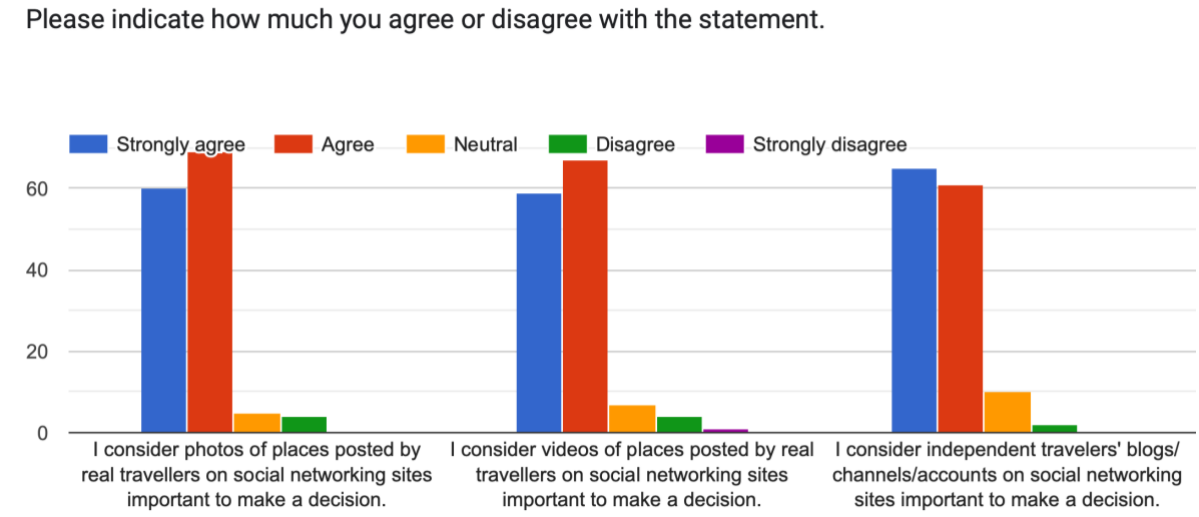
Back Submit Clear form

Appendix D – Results from the Google Forms Questionnaire

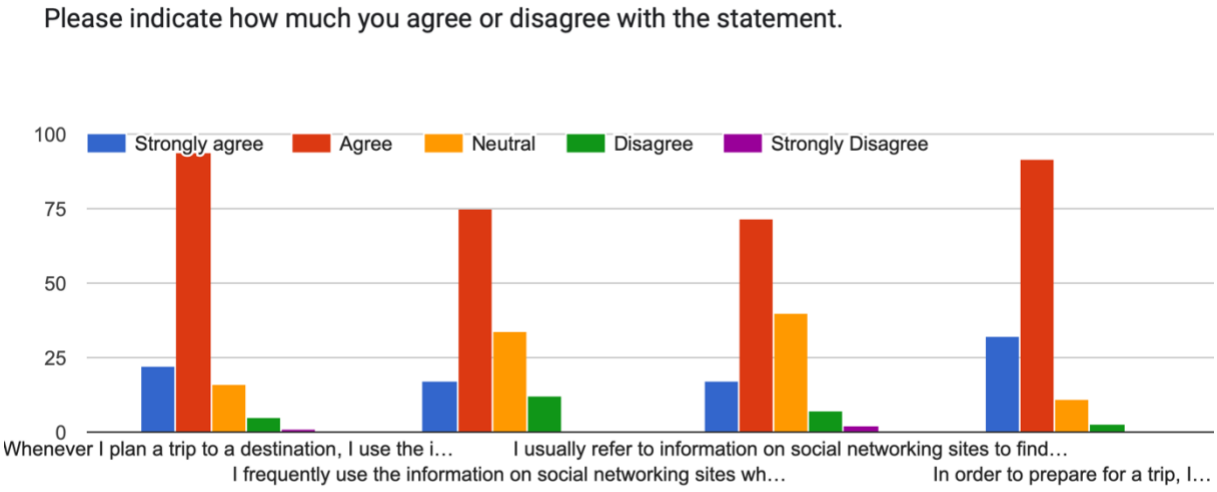
Part 2. Usage of UGC sites depending on stage of the trip planning process



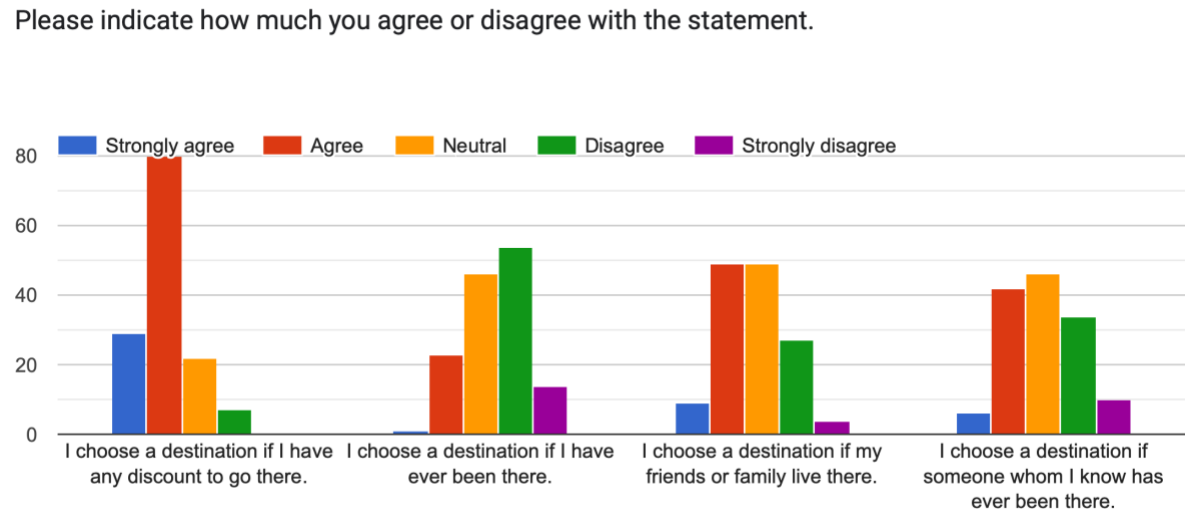
Part 3. The importance of UGC sites for travel decisions



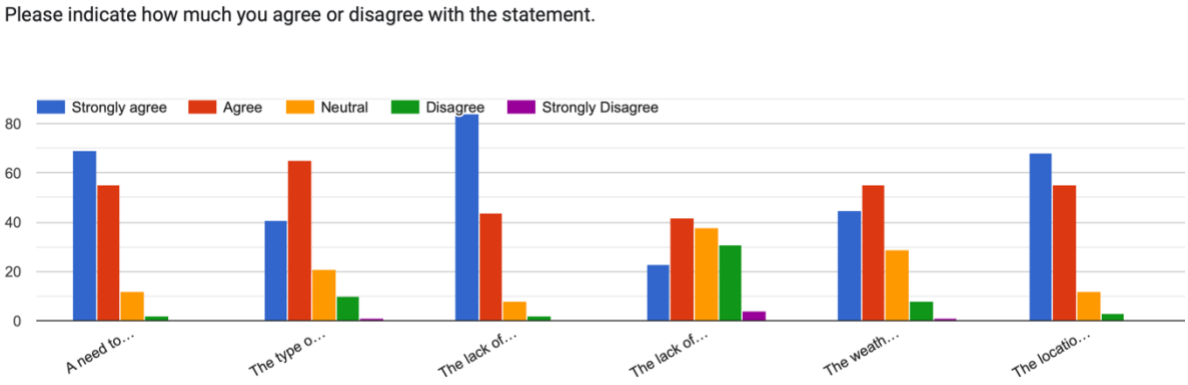
Part 4. Need for Information



Part 5. Destination familiarity



Part 6. Planning complexity



Part 7. Visit intention

