

DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AND THE IMPACT OF ONLINE REVIEW PLATFORMS ON VISITING BEHAVIOR

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Abstract: *This paper explores tourists' attitudes toward the TripAdvisor review platform based on a quantitative survey. The study aims to assess the influence of online reviews on travel decision making, evaluating variables such as perceived usefulness, credibility, user satisfaction, and intention to continue using the platform. Results from a questionnaire administered to 103 participants reveal a generally favourable perception of TripAdvisor, supporting its influential role in shaping tourist behaviour. These findings confirm that review platforms have a significant impact on how travellers select destinations and services.*

Key words: *Tripadvisor, online reviews, decision making, e-WOM*

1. Introduction

Studying how digital platforms influence consumer behaviour has become a key research direction in tourism and communication studies. While some scholars have focused primarily on the role of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) in shaping tourist preferences (Doosti et al., 2016; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hernández-Méndez et al., 2015), others have examined the psychological mechanisms behind trust and credibility in user-generated content (Bahtar, A. Z., & Muda, M., 2016; Kennell, S., & Rushton, A. M., 2015). However, although studies such as Filieri et al. (2021) have explored how perceived credibility and informational value influence the adoption of online reviews, there is still limited empirical research focused specifically on how these perceptions translate into behavioural intentions among tourists. Most existing research addresses either the technological affordances of platforms or general patterns of user engagement, without offering a detailed view of user attitudes across multiple dimensions such as trust, satisfaction, and intention to reuse. This gap highlights the need for integrated analyses that quantify user perspectives and their role in the travel decision making process.

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The purpose of this paper is to present a quantitative study exploring users' perceptions of TripAdvisor, one of the most influential online review platforms in global tourism. Based on a questionnaire administered to 103 respondents, the research analyses the perceived credibility, usefulness, and usability of the platform, alongside user satisfaction and intention to continue using it. The findings reveal a consistent trust in the platform and support the idea that review websites function as informal yet persuasive agents in guiding travel decisions. The study contributes to existing literature by offering concrete data that tourism stakeholders can use to optimize digital engagement strategies.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Travel decision making process and the factors behind it

The decision-making process is a structured yet flexible mechanism through which individuals or organizations identify and select alternatives to achieve specific goals. Scholars such as Lunenburg (2010) describe it as a sequence of stages involving problem identification, information gathering, evaluation of options, and final choice. Elbanna (2006) distinguishes between rational and intuitive decision-making approaches, noting that combining both logic and instinct can lead to more effective outcomes.

In the context of tourism, decision making is dynamic, multi-dimensional, and often sequential. Early models (Dellaert, Bogers, & Timmermans, 1997) emphasized economic and destination specific factors, treating tourist choices as static. In contrast, later approaches (Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002) conceptualize decision making as a hierarchical and context-dependent process influenced by both internal (psychological and cognitive) and external factors.

Key psychological elements, such as attitudes, perceived risk, intentions, and values play a crucial role in travel choices. Tourists rely on various information sources, including online reviews, peer recommendations, and promotional content, to evaluate alternatives. They may eliminate unsatisfactory options or make decisions based on criteria such as price or popularity.

The choice of a travel destination is influenced by a variety of internal and external factors, and understanding these determinants is crucial for tourism operators aiming to better respond to consumer needs (Djeri, 2007). Internal motivations include the desire for escape, relaxation, prestige, health, adventure, and social interaction (Seyidov, 2016). These reflect deeper emotional, psychological, and social needs often linked to concepts such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where travel becomes a means of self-fulfilment or recovery from everyday stress.

Hsu (2009) proposed a hierarchical model that structures these decision factors into layers, ranging from internal psychological needs to contextual external conditions. External forces are further divided into tangible (infrastructure, safety, affordability and service quality) and intangible (destination image, perceived experience and social influence). Marketing campaigns, online reviews, and prior experiences significantly shape tourists' perceptions and expectations, which in turn affect their satisfaction and likelihood to return.

In today's context, digital tools, especially review platforms and social media add a new dimension to this hierarchy, acting as powerful external stimuli that guide destination selection. Therefore, the integration of traditional motivational models with technology-driven informational influences offers a more comprehensive view of tourist decision making.

2.2. The influence of social media and e-WOM on travel decision-making process

The internet has become a fundamental pillar of contemporary life, reshaping the ways individuals communicate, gather information, and make decisions, including those related to travel. In the digital age, tourists no longer rely exclusively on traditional travel guides or personal recommendations; instead, they turn to a wide array of online sources such as social media platforms, user-generated content (UGC), and specialized review sites. These tools offer real-time, diverse, and interactive information that plays a central role in shaping travel intentions and behaviours.

The evolution of the internet, from the static Web 1.0 to the participatory Web 2.0 and the intelligent, personalized environment of Web 3.0 has significantly altered consumer behaviour. Social media, emblematic of Web 2.0, enables users to generate and disseminate content, influencing peers' perceptions and decisions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Dwityas, 2017). Today, over two-thirds of the global population is online, with nearly 64% actively using social media platforms (Data Reportal, 2025). These channels enhance consumer confidence by reducing uncertainty and perceived risk through personalized content based on user preferences and prior searches (Varga, 2021).

Closely tied to social media is the phenomenon of electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), the digital exchange of opinions and experiences between consumers (Doosti et al., 2016). Unlike traditional word of mouth, e-WOM enables wide and rapid dissemination of content through platforms such as TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Google Reviews, and various social networks. Tourists perceive e-WOM as more credible and authentic than traditional advertising, making it a critical factor in their decision-making process.

e-WOM holds several advantages over conventional communication forms: it is persistent, widely visible, interactive, and highly influential. Online reviews remain accessible long-term, can be commented on or shared, and frequently go viral. A single review, positive or negative, can dramatically impact public perception and directly affect booking outcomes (Sparks, 2011; Litvin, 2008).

Both social media and e-WOM influence every stage of the tourism decision-making journey (Hernández-Méndez, 2015). Dwityas (2017) creates a model that explains decision making in tourism through the use of social media. He divides the process into three stages. The first one, the pre-travel phase, users are inspired by UGC, seek detailed information, evaluate alternatives, and finalize decisions. The second one, during travel, tourists continue to consult digital platforms and share their real-time experiences. The last one, the post-travel phase, they reflect on their journeys, contributes reviews, and thereby influence future travellers' decisions. This cyclical dynamic ensures that consumer-generated content continually shapes the tourism ecosystem.

Given its transformative power, the strategic management of e-WOM has become essential for tourism businesses. Encouraging authentic positive feedback and actively responding to online reviews are now core practices in digital reputation management. As trust, transparency, and digital engagement become increasingly critical to consumer behaviour, social media and e-WOM will continue to define how tourism experiences are perceived, evaluated, and chosen.

2.3. Tripadvisor and the influence of user-generated content on tourism decisions

Tripadvisor is one of the most influential digital platforms dedicated to tourism, playing a central role in informing travelers and helping them make their decisions. Launched in 2000 as a travel search engine, the platform has rapidly evolved into an interactive space that integrates reviews, ratings, guides, maps, price comparison options and booking functionalities (Alaimo, 2020). The defining element of Tripadvisor is User-Generated Content (UGC), an essential component of e-WOM communication that profoundly influences the behaviour of other users (Litvin et al., 2008; Bahtar & Muda, 2016).

Tourists access the platform to read the opinions of other travellers, which they perceive as more authentic and credible than the promotional materials of tourism service providers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Baka, 2016). Tripadvisor's rating system which allows for giving scores, reviews and uploading images, provides users with access to detailed information about destinations, accommodations and tourist attractions, helping to reduce uncertainty and increase confidence in the decision-making process (Mukherjee & Jansen, 2013; Filieri, 2021).

The credibility of reviews is influenced by several factors, such as author profile, perceived expertise, consistency of ratings, and message quality. The CONCEPT model (Guzzo et al., 2022) shows that the trustworthiness of reviews is determined by four pillars: source quality, message quality, platform reputation, and receiver attitude. Tripadvisor supports these principles through an automated system to filter out fake and suspicious reviews, maintaining a positive perception of content authenticity.

3. Study Objectives and Hypotheses

This study aims to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of tourists towards the Tripadvisor platform and how it influences their travel decision-making behaviour. The study was built based on two main hypotheses: (1) foreign tourists use the Tripadvisor platform to a greater extent than Romanian tourists, and (2) there is a positive correlation between the frequency of travel and the frequency of using the Tripadvisor platform in the process of documenting and choosing tourist services.

4. Data collection method

The research instrument was constructed based on the scale validated by Filieri (2021), which measures users' attitudes towards the Tripadvisor review platform. Two

additional questions were added to this scale regarding the frequency of travel and use of the platform, as well as socio-demographic questions necessary to characterize the sample.

The questionnaire, created using the Google Forms platform, was structured in three sections and included a total of 29 questions. The first section included two introductory questions: a filtering question, which allowed the selection of respondents according to their use or non-use of Tripadvisor, and a question on the frequency of travel. The second section was dedicated to measuring the relevant dimensions of perception of the platform, such as: ease of use, credibility of reviews, usefulness of rankings, usefulness of reviews, overall satisfaction and intention to use the platform in the future. The items of these dimensions were rated on a 7 step Likert scale, where 1 corresponds to the "Strongly Disagree" level and 7 to the "Strongly Agree" level. In the third section, the socio-demographic data of the participants were collected: gender, age, educational level, occupation, income and nationality.

In order to ensure accessibility to an international audience, the questionnaire was drafted in both Romanian and English and distributed between May 5-22 on various online channels such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Reddit. The distribution took place in thematic travel groups (dedicated to itineraries, reviews and travel ideas), as well as in groups with a predominant population of students or people in personal networks.

To increase the visibility of the survey among international tourists, a QR code poster was strategically placed in Bran, a destination that almost all international tourists to Romania include on their first trip wish list because of Bran Castel, best known as Dracula's Castle. Ranked as the country's second most attractive tourism asset overall, Dracula's Castle plays a central role in shaping international perceptions, though Romania's image cannot be reduced solely to this association (Candrea et al., 2016).

5. Results

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics, based on the 103 valid responses collected. In terms of gender distribution, the majority of the respondents are female (68.9%), followed by male (29.1%), and a small percentage (1.9%) chose not to answer this question.

The distribution by age group shows that most respondents (68%) are within the range of 17-24 years old, 17.5% are between 25 and 40, and 12.6% are over 40. In terms of nationality, 60.2% of the respondents are Romanian and 39.8% are foreigners. The level of education is varied: 57.3% of the respondents have a bachelor's degree, 22.3% a high school degree, 11.7% have a master's degree, 5.8% have a post-secondary degree and 2.9% have a doctorate.

In terms of occupation, the respondents are predominantly students (64.1%), followed by full-time employees (22.3%) and self-employed (6.8%). The other categories, part-time employees, unemployed, retired or other are represented in a small proportion.

Regarding the monthly income, 25.2% of the respondents declared an income below 2000 RON, 23.3% preferred not to answer and 20.4% between 2000 and 4000 RON. Other categories include: 14.6% with an income between 4000-6000 RON, 11.7% over

8000 RON, and 4.9% between 6000-8000 RON.

The first part of the questionnaire focused on travel frequency and use of Tripadvisor. The majority of respondents (48.5%) travel 2-3 times a year for recreational purposes, 31.1% once a year, 17.5% 4-6 times a year and 2.9% travel more frequently. In terms of Tripadvisor usage, 39.8% have never used the platform, 32% have used it rarely, 22.3% occasionally, and only 5.8% use it frequently.

Index variables were constructed (Mesesan-Schmitz & Coman, 2020) for each dimension of the Tripadvisor attitude scale (ease of use, credibility of reviews, usefulness of rankings and reviews, satisfaction, and intention to continue), all of which had a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of over 0.7, indicating good internal consistency. Most of the means recorded for these dimensions are above 5 (on a scale of 1 to 7) (Tabel 1), with the exception of the dimension 'intention to continue', which had a mean value of 4.90. This suggests a generally positive attitude towards the platform and coefficients of variation below 40% which result in a homogeneous series, so respondents do not have diametrically opposed opinions.

Table 1

*Descriptive indicators for the dimensions of the scale measuring attitudes towards
Tripadvisor*

Scale Dimensions	Mean	Standard deviation	Coefficient of variation
Ease of use ($\alpha=0.91$)	5.14	1.24	24.12
Credibility of reviews ($\alpha=0.94$)	5.21	1.38	26.49
The usefulness of platform rankings ($\alpha=0.86$)	5.23	1.18	22.56
The usefulness of reviews ($\alpha=0.88$)	5.57	1.26	22.62
User satisfaction ($\alpha=0.90$)	5.36	1.23	22.95
The intention of continuity ($\alpha=0.78$)	4.90	1.43	29.18

Detailed analysis of each item within the scale also shows mean scores above 5 for most statements. Exceptions are the items on ease of use for travel planning ($M = 4.95$) and intention to use Tripadvisor exclusively over other sources ($M = 4.35$). The latter item of scale (I would be willing to use Tripadvisor again in the future) showed a coefficient of variation of more than 40, indicating diverging opinions among respondents and suggesting a preference for the combined use of multiple sources of information.

In terms of differences by socio-demographic variables on the dimensions analyzed, no significant differences by gender, age or level of education were found. However, the analysis by nationality indicates a more positive attitude of the Romanian respondents compared to those of other nationalities in terms of: credibility of the reviews, where people from Romania ($M = 5.68$, $SD = 1.32$) and people from other countries ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.27$, $t(60) = 3.141$, $p = 0.003$), for the dimension measuring the usefulness of the

reviews people from Romania ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 1.05$) and people of foreign origin ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.28$, $t(60) = 3.378$, $p = 0.001$) and for the dimension about user satisfaction where people from Romania ($M = 5.71$, $SD = 1.31$) and people from other countries ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 0.97$, $t(60) = 2.619$, $p = 0.011$).

The next socio-demographic variable on which significant differences were found was respondents' income. A one-way ANOVA showed a significant effect of income on the perceived usefulness of platform rankings, $F(5,56) = 4.012$, $p = 0.004$. Participants with a monthly income below 2000 RON ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 0.75$) rated the usefulness of the rankings significantly higher than those with a monthly income above 8000 RON ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.43$). Similarly, income had a significant effect on the intention to continue using the Tripadvisor platform, $F(5,56) = 3.924$, $p = 0.004$. Respondents with a monthly income below 2000 RON ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 1.03$) reported a stronger intention to continue using the platform compared to those with a monthly income above 8000 RON ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.59$).

Regarding the research hypotheses, the first hypothesis that foreign users use Tripadvisor more frequently than Romanians is not confirmed, so there are no differences between respondents of Romanian origin ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 0.95$) and respondents of other origin ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 0.87$, $t(101) = -0.734$, $p = 0.465$). On the other hand, the second hypothesis regarding the correlation between frequency of travel and frequency of use of the Tripadvisor platform is confirmed, the correlation coefficient Spearman has a small value, implying a weak relationship ($r_s = 0.221$, $p = 0.000$), so people who travel more often tend to use the online review platform slightly more.

6. Discussion

The results indicate a generally positive attitude among respondents toward the Tripadvisor platform. The dimensions analysed, such as ease of use, credibility of reviews, usefulness of rankings, and overall satisfaction, scored above 5 on a scale of 1 to 7, confirming users' favourable perception. However, the intention to use Tripadvisor as the sole source of information scored lower, suggesting that tourists prefer to combine multiple channels and platforms to make more informed travel decisions.

This result reflects the tendency of consumers in the digital age to validate information by consulting multiple sources, a phenomenon that reduces uncertainty and supports more informed decision making. At the same time, the differences identified according to socio-demographic characteristics highlight the fact that the perception and use of review platforms are not uniform. Respondents with lower incomes show a higher level of trust in Tripadvisor and a greater intention to continue using the platform, while those with higher incomes tend to be more critical and rely on alternative sources. In terms of nationality, Romanian users rated dimensions such as credibility and satisfaction more favourably than foreign respondents, suggesting possible cultural differences in the perception of online reviews.

Furthermore, the correlational analysis confirms the existence of a positive but weak link between travel frequency and Tripadvisor usage. This finding indicates that active

tourists who travel more often are more likely to use digital platforms to inform their decisions, although the strength of the relationship is not strong.

Overall, the data supports the idea that Tripadvisor is perceived as a valuable tool in the decision-making process, but not powerful enough to replace other sources of information. This conclusion is in line with the literature, which highlights that e-WOM, although influential, is integrated into a broader ecosystem of information sources used by tourists.

7. Conclusions

The study highlighted the importance of online review platforms, with a focus on Tripadvisor, in the decision-making process of tourists. The results show that users appreciate the platform for its credibility and usefulness, but do not consider it an exclusive source of information, preferring a combination of digital channels for travel planning.

The differences identified based on income and nationality underscore the fact that Tripadvisor's impact is not uniform and depends on the socio-demographic profile of users. People with lower incomes rely more on reviews and express their intention to continue using the platform, while people with higher incomes prefer to supplement the information with additional sources. Romanian respondents also tend to perceive the platform more favourably than those of other nationalities.

However, the research has some limitations, in particular the relatively small sample size and its structure dominated by young people, which makes it difficult to generalize the results to the entire tourist population. In the future, expanding the sample to include more diverse socio-demographic categories would allow for more robust results and a better understanding of how online reviews influence travel decisions.

In conclusion, Tripadvisor remains an important benchmark in the digital tourism industry, but its role must be understood as complementary to other sources of information. Effective review management and the active involvement of tourism service providers in responding to reviews can strengthen user confidence and transform the platform into a strategic tool for destination development and promotion.

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