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From Clicks to Conversions: The Impact of Viral Marketing on Tourism Branding

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Abstract

This article examines the significance of viral marketing and its impact on tourism branding, as well as its influence on travelers' behaviors, from clicks to trips. It employs three themes: destination image, traveler engagement, authenticity, and their influence on travel intention. A qualitative approach is used to uncover insights, while a thematic analysis is used to look for patterns that emerge from the data. The results reveal that strategic use of social media platforms and user-generated content (UGC) of destinations can craft authentic and compelling narratives that resonate with travelers, enhancing destinations' visibility and appeal. The research also highlights the dual nature of viral marketing; while it can significantly boost a destination's desirability by showcasing cultural attractions and positive visitor experiences, it also presents risks, as poorly managed campaigns can lead to negative publicity and damage a destination's reputation. Some examples of viral campaigns illustrate the potential benefits and challenges of viral marketing. The study concludes that successful viral marketing requires a careful balance of authenticity, emotional engagement, and consistent information, enabling tourism brands to build lasting relationships with visitors. However, as viral content continues to shape perceptions, destinations must manage their online reputation effectively to ensure their brand promise is consistently upheld.

Keywords: viral marketing, tourism branding, clicks, conversions

INTORDUCTION

The tourism industry has a profound impact on the worldwide economy. The tourism industry has experienced an exceptional upswing, leading to a significant increase in economic growth (Gegung & Panggabean, 2025; Khemraj et.al, 2024). This claim is further corroborated by the World Travel & Tourism Council (2024) in its latest annual report, mentioning that the travel & tourism industry contributed almost a tenth (9.1%) to the global GDP and provided new job opportunities at around 27 million. Undeniably, many destinations offer a unique and attractive image designed to attract a targeted market (Fjelldal et al., 2022; Abodeeb et al., 2015; Shah, 2017). This results in the consideration of emphasizing the destination image. The focus has been made on how various image-building factors can be utilized to influence the perception of a destination, with an increasing emphasis on the role of social media in this process (Fjelldal et.al., 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the outcome of social media marketing on a destination image. According to Ibrahim and Tager (2024), today's digital age has transformed marketing strategies. Businesses now have a plethora of incredible tools to market their products and services. The significant transformation from conventional to contemporary has led to another perspective in the tourism marketing dimension. One that should be noticed is viral marketing or viral campaigns. As stated by Sitorus et al. (2021); Taufik et al. (2022), viral marketing has emerged as a highly effective and influential strategy, enabling the engagement and mobilization of global audiences. As this marketing technique makes use of social media and offline ones, such as word of mouth, to spread a message and encourage individuals to share content with others, generating rapid growth in visibility and increasing users' purchase decisions (Ibrahim & Tager, 2024).

A considerable amount of research has been carried out in the area of viral marketing and tourism. Research conducted by Fjelldal et al. (2022 discussed *Profanity in viral tourism marketing: a conceptual model of destination image reinforcement*. This article focused on image formation agents that can be used to build destination images with the consideration of social media emerging. The purpose of this article is to investigate how a viral marketing campaign that uses profanity influences the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of destination image. A case study was conducted using an unofficial viral social media campaign in Australia. The findings showed that respondents had overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward the campaign. They viewed the use of profanity as an innovative approach to increasing destination awareness. While profanity did help raise awareness and reinforce certain stereotypes about the destination, there was little evidence that it influenced the respondents' intention to visit. The article also presents a conceptual model for reinforcing destination image. However, the shortcomings of this article are in examining both the advantages and potential risks of using profanity in social media campaigns, along with the broader implications for destination image (Fjelldal et al., 2022).

Furthermore, another research done by Ibrahim & Tager (2024) "*The impact of viral marketing on consumers' perceived value and purchase decision in the hotels of Luxor and Aswan*". This research examines the impact of viral marketing on consumers' perceived value and purchase decisions, focusing on hotels in Luxor and Aswan. To achieve the research objectives, a quantitative approach was employed through a questionnaire, distributed to a random sample of 391 tourists. The findings reveal a positive effect of viral marketing on both consumers' perceived value and their purchase decisions. Based on these results, the study recommends that hotels in Luxor and Aswan prioritize the development and implementation of effective viral marketing strategies to enhance customer perception of value and influence their purchasing choices. However, the limitation of this study does not fully cover the long-term effects of viral marketing on customer behavior and hotel performance metrics, and how viral marketing impacts on social and economic aspects of the local inhabitants (Ibrahim & Tager, 2024). Different research conducted by Sarpal & Ying (2022) "*The impact of viral marketing in the tourism industry in Malaysia post COVID-19 Pandemic*". The objective of this article is to examine the influence of viral marketing, or electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), on tourism destination selection following the COVID-19 pandemic, using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The study seeks to explore potential adaptive marketing strategies and approaches during the endemic phase of COVID-19. This

literature review investigates the effectiveness of viral marketing in promoting tourist destinations in Malaysia, focusing on how viral content impacts tourist decision-making. However, the limitation of this article is in the framework used, which covers a limited scope. As this research was carried out in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry in Malaysia (Rakesh & Yeoh, 2022).

Some would argue that social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, provide potential online marketing for a campaign to go viral. It allows tourism brands to engage potential travelers in ways that are more personal, authentic, and far-reaching. From breathtaking destination videos to user-generated content, viral marketing taps into the emotional triggers that inspire individuals to explore new destinations. However, is it true that user-generated content can significantly enhance tourism branding? Therefore, this article will outline the significance of viral marketing and how it can impact tourism branding and affect travelers' behaviors from clicks to trips, using three themes including destination image, traveler engagement, authenticity, and influence of travel intention.

METHODOLOGY

This article used a qualitative approach. Qualitative method helps to understand and uncover insights that may not be fully captured by quantitative research alone (Hollstein, 2011). The data collected involved gathering secondary data. This means pre-existing data were collected from numerous sources that offer useful insights related to the above topic. These sources of secondary data range from academic journals and research papers, social media content and posts, tourism and marketing reports, case studies, or document campaigns, and online reviews. Once the data collection was completed then a thematic analysis was used to look for patterns that emerge from the data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). These themes include destination image, travelers' engagement, and perceived authenticity. This thematic analysis assists in identifying the main factors in how viral marketing affects tourism branding and encourages travelers' behaviors from clicks to conversions. This research was carried out in November 2024.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
General Description of Viral Marketing

The term viral marketing was first coined in 1996 by Harvard Business School professor Jeffrey Rayport who used the term "the virus of marketing" to describe a marketing technique that leverages the power of networks to encourage individuals to share a marketing message with others, thereby creating exponential growth in exposure (Ramadhan et al., 2024). Microsoft's Hotmail campaign, which involved adding the tagline "Get your free email at Hotmail" at the bottom of outgoing emails, is often considered one of the first and most successful examples of viral marketing. It helped the company gain millions of users within a short period, demonstrating how viral marketing could be a cost-effective and powerful tool in reaching large audiences through word-of-mouth and social sharing (Ramadhan et al., 2024).

Viral marketing has a range of meanings that share common ground. Viral marketing is the way content creators encourage consumers to share messages with others and create a viral loop by making a product become widely recognized through online sharing and social media engagement (Fjelldal, 2022; Rabidas & Bowen, 2019; Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). The origins of the term "viral marketing" are as diverse as its various interpretations. It has been referred to in different ways, including word-of-mouth, electronic word-of-mouth, buzz marketing, and viral advertising. Many academic works support the definition proposed by Jurvetson and Draper as cited in Rabidas & Bowen (2019), who describe viral marketing as a form of online word-of-mouth that is amplified through networks. Earlier studies have revealed several significant factors that affect viral marketing and influence consumer purchase intentions. For example, the usefulness of information, its credibility, and its quality of sharing information (Rabidas & Bowen, 2019). Traditional consumer purchase behavior involves activities like gathering information, making orders, and obtaining and using products or services, which are influenced by factors like time, money, and culture. In the online environment, purchase

intentions are similarly shaped by complex factors such as peer influence, reference groups, context, and blog reviews (Rabidas & Bowen, 2019; Dessart et al., 2015; Grifoni et.al., 2013).

Similarly, as stated by Ecklor & Bolls (2011), consumer purchase behavior, preferences, and recommendations are often studied from a psychological perspective, taking into account both internal and external factors, including age, gender, location, socio-political context, and influences from reference and peer groups. The success of viral campaigns largely relies on consumers, who post the ads on their social media accounts and engage with the content. Its primary goal is to encourage people to share the message, especially with their friends, for entertainment and enjoyment (Pressgrove et al., 2018; Salam et al., 2023). One of the major advantages of viral marketing is that it does not require substantial investments in broadcasting, print, or distribution, making it more cost-effective than traditional advertising methods. The younger generation, which actively uses social media platforms, tends to distrust conventional ways of advertising products/ services and favor ads that are seen as more authentic and influential (Salam et al., 2023; Sawaftah et al., 2020).

General Description of Tourism Branding

The term branding in tourism may be perceived as a strategic process used by destinations, regions, or countries to create a distinct identity that appeals to prospective tourists. The goal of tourism branding is to establish a unique image or perception in the minds of travelers that differentiates a destination from others, drives visitation, and enhances the economic benefits of tourism. The concept of branding in tourism is not limited to traditional advertising but encompasses various elements such as destination image, visitor experience, emotional connections, and communication strategies to create a distinct and lasting identity that is easily recognizable and memorable. Tourism branding can be defined as the process of developing and managing a destination's identity to influence tourists' perceptions and choices (Morgan, 2002; Ritchie & Ritchie, 1998). This involves the creation of a unique, compelling image that reflects the destination's attributes, such as culture, natural beauty, hospitality, and experiences. Branding aims to create a unique identity that resonates emotionally with potential visitors, thereby influencing their travel decisions and behaviors (Hankinson, 2004).

The effectiveness of tourism branding can be measured in various ways, including increased tourist arrivals, increased travelers' satisfaction, prolonged stays, and subsequent visits. When tourists form a strong emotional attachment to a destination, it can lead to repeat visits and loyalty. Effective branding strengthens this bond and encourages return tourism, especially when the experience matches the brand promise (Keller, 2008). This statement is sustained by a study that mentioned strong tourism branding can also help generate economic benefits by attracting not only leisure travelers but also business travelers, international students, travelers with a purpose to visit friends and families, or for other reasons such as medical check-ups (Kotler et al., 2002). Furthermore, tourism branding can directly contribute to a destination's economic growth by boosting visitor numbers, increasing spending, and generating employment opportunities. Successful branding strategies can attract investment and support the development of infrastructure to accommodate growing tourist demand (Pike, 2008).

The impact of viral marketing in shaping destination image and its influence on travel intention.

Fjelldal et al. (2022) mentioned that the image of a destination has been influenced by multiple factors, one of which is induced agents, which are then divided into two types: overt and covert agents of image information (Fjelldal et al., 2022; Marine-Roig and Ferrer-Rosell, 2018). Overt inducement agents are controlled by destination marketing organizations. These manage official websites and various forms of marketing activities. Meanwhile, covert induced agents are considered as factors that are not directly controlled by destination marketing organizations, and these tend to influence visitors' perception. According to Pasquinelli and Trunfio (2020), the use of covert induced agents could be unofficial social media campaigns that present a promising area for further exploration of destination images through the creation of potential viral content on social media platforms. According to Leung et al. (2013), social media platforms have increasingly become a crucial part of tourism branding strategies. Social media allows destinations to directly interact with

potential tourists and encourage user-generated content, such as photos, reviews, and videos. These platforms provide valuable, real-time feedback that helps refine branding strategies and promote the destination more authentically.

The influence of user-generated content (USG) plays a significant role in shaping and refining the perceived image of a destination. This may potentially influence tourists' perceptions and decision-making processes. For instance, travelers often share their vacation experiences on Instagram or YouTube, which can significantly impact their followers' perceptions of a destination (Fjelldal et al., 2022; Kaosiri et al., 2019). Most UGC sources influence tourist expectations (Kaosiri et al., 2019). Numerous studies have shown that consumers are more likely to be resistant to conventional ways of marketing, such as the use of television or newspaper advertisements. Therefore, marketers have now shifted to digital marketing strategies used for shaping the destination image (Van Laer et al., 2019). Furthermore, research has shown that the use of hashtags (#) in social media platforms has a profound effect on influencing tourists' images of a destination and upcoming travel plans. Similarly, as stated by Manap and Adzharudin (2013), consumers tend to be more persuaded by the recommendations of people who have already tested a product than by a product search. One example is Semarang city, where viral marketing has had a positive impact on destination images. According to a study done by Jatmiko (2022), there is a significant and positive correlation between viral marketing in enhancing the destination image and the intention of tourists to visit the city of Semarang. The data collected from a sample of 100 respondents reveal a compelling correlation: as tourists' perceptions of a destination's image improve, their propensity to visit increases proportionally (Jatmiko, 2022). The viral nature of products or tourist destinations on social media platforms generates curiosity and interest among netizens, prompting them to explore destinations that have gained popularity within online communities. As Lu et al. (2015) mentioned, Destination image may influence tourists' subjective perception, consequent behavior, and decision to visit a destination.

In contrast, one might argue that viral marketing may also affect the destination image perceived by tourists and perhaps reduce the intention to visit the area. This is because viral marketing can be considered negative if it is driven by outrage and protest rather than positive promotion. While viral campaigns can boost awareness and bring attention to issues, they can also lead to unintended consequences if the destination's image is tarnished by problematic events. A case in point is the #BoycottMurree campaign. Murree was the most popular tourist site in Pakistan. It attracts millions of domestic tourists all over Pakistan every year (Yousaf et al., 2021). However, due to weak regulation and uncontrollable demand leading tourism players to taking advantage of tourists. Subsequently, in early 2018, the #BoycottMuree campaign was initiated on social media and quickly gained attention, which consequently caused a dramatic decline in business of around 70 percent for the first time during the summer season (peak season) in 2018 (Yousaf et al., 2021). Undeniably, backlash-driven viral marketing can swiftly damage a destination's reputation, prompting travelers to rethink or abandon their travel plans.

Engagement and connection: The key role of social media in travel decisions.

According to Van Doorn Et al. (2010) as cited in Pilgrimiene et al. (2015), customer engagement is the manifestation of behavior towards a particular brand or a company. This refers to the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral connections that customers develop with a brand over time. Includes activities such as liking, sharing, commenting on social media posts, participating in brand-related conversations, joining loyalty programs, writing reviews, or recommending the brand to others. Customer engagement signifies an ongoing relationship with the brand that goes beyond transactional interactions, fostering long-term loyalty and advocacy. The concept of consumer engagement can be interpreted in various ways, with several common explanations emerging. These include: Psychological process leading to loyalty. This strengthens the bond between the consumer and the brand, fostering brand loyalty (Pilgrimiene et al., 2015). Customer engagement, as defined by Hollebeek et al. (2014), refers to the time, effort, and attention customers invest in brands. Campaigns that go viral may increase consumers' familiarity with a destination, which in turn influences their behavior (Arora & Lata, 2020, as cited in Roy & Attri, 2024).

Additionally, social media interactions, expressed through likes, shares, and comments, reflect how tourists feel a sense of warmth and connection with a destination. Consumers feel personally connected to the destination when they share their experiences on social media. In this context, Mariani et al. (2019); Roy & Attri (2024) found that viral marketing can boost brand awareness and impact travel-related behaviors, shaping how consumers make decisions about where to travel. A case in point is the Visit Scotland campaign. This campaign was launched by VisitScotland in collaboration with social media influencers and travel bloggers. The campaign combined some elements, such as user-generated content, where customers are involved in generating value through co-creation (Bandinelli, 2020). Travelers and tourists who visited Scotland shared their own experiences. Including interactive hashtags. The campaign not only attracted attention but also sparked conversations, with users commenting, liking, and sharing content related to the destination. This engagement helped potential tourists feel more connected to the idea of visiting. Social media influencers and interactive hashtags, generating significant engagement and interest in Scotland as a travel destination. The campaign is credited with increasing tourism to Scotland (Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere, 2024; Nguyen, 2022; Boothby, 2008). According to statistical data, in 2023, there were around 4 million international visitors who made a trip to Scotland. The proportion of these visitors visiting Scotland experienced a significant increase of more than a fifth (23%), and also the amount spent by visitors grew than that of 2022 at around 13 percent (VisitScotland n.d.). International visitors, particularly from markets like the US and Europe. This viral campaign has driven more visitors to explore various regions, attractions, and experiences that were promoted through the campaign (VisitScotland n.d.).

Perceived authenticity and how viral marketing sparks travel intentions.

The word authenticity signifies a sense of genuine, real, or originality that cannot be changed (Bandinelli, 2020), but it may also be connected to identity and tradition. Authenticity may also talk about how people rediscover their identity and what they aspire to become (Bandinelli, 2020). While authenticity in tourism can be seen at the different degrees such as objective, constructive and existential authenticity (Wang 1999, as cited in Bandinelli 2020). The first one is objective authenticity, which occurs when visitors look at authenticity as a fundamental characteristic whose criterion is absolute and objective in the product or service that they purchase or consume, for example, historical sites or historical artifacts. The second one is constructive authenticity. On the flip side, different depending on the type of visitors. Since it is perceived based on an individual's expectations, beliefs, personal experiences, and preferences and it cannot be objectively measured. For instance, a constructive authenticity of Disneyland that creating theme environments through the combination of blending fictional elements and cultural values (Cheung & McCarthy, 2019). Finally, existential authenticity. It is achieved through activities and experiences that individuals engage in to renew an identity that has been lost in modern society.

Based on a study done by Javed & Awan (2020) it was found that existential authenticity has a beneficial effect on tourists' intention to visit and recommend the destination. This then leads to the importance of user-generated content. Indeed, viral marketing often relies on user-generated content (UGC), such as travelers' photos, videos, graphics or testimonials shared on social media. When these posts highlight genuine, raw experiences, they can enhance the perceived authenticity of a destination.

According to Ramkisssoon & Uysal (2018), the creation of authenticity in tourism experiences is fundamentally shaped by the interactive roles of tourists as consumers, the destination setting, and service providers as producers or facilitators within the co-creation process. The active involvement of tourists in tourism-related activities plays a pivotal role in enhancing the overall value, as it enriches the experience and fosters a deeper connection between the consumer and the service provided (Daif & Elsayed, 2019.

One example of tourists' perceived authenticity in tourism is the historic site Litchi Bay in China. The selection of this tourism site is mainly for the conservation of essential attributes of Chinese culture and historical districts, adding authenticity values for tourists who are seeking the real thing and originality in experiencing tourism products (Lu et al., 2015). Visitors find it recognizable and meaningful as the tourism site

offers products in a way that fulfills the emotional and cultural expectations of visitors. Through the sharing of personal experiences by travelers on social media, the site's authenticity is continuously reinforced, attracting more visitors who seek to connect with the genuine heritage of the location.

CONCLUSION

This article explored tourism marketing and the increasingly significant role of viral marketing in shaping destination images, influencing travel intentions, and fostering deeper connections with prospective visitors. Destinations can create authentic narratives that resonate emotionally with travelers through the strategic use of social media platforms and user-generated content (UGC). This research demonstrates, viral marketing can substantially enhance the visibility and desirability of a destination, whether through positive campaigns that highlight cultural attractions and local experiences, or through the amplification of visitor experiences shared on social media. The impact of viral marketing on tourism branding is significant. On one hand, it helps craft a unique and memorable destination image that encourages travel decisions and creates lasting impressions. On the other hand, if not carefully managed, viral campaigns can backfire, leading to negative publicity that tarnishes a destination's reputation and diminishes visitors' intentions. The case of Semarang city illustrates the potential of viral marketing to boost a destination's image and increase travel intentions, whereas the #BoycottMurree campaign records the risks of negative viral content that can decline or slow down tourism activities. In terms of travelers' engagement, viral marketing plays a significant role in influencing tourists' decisions to visit a site, and social media interactions, expressed through likes, shares, and comments, reflect how tourists feel a sense of warmth and connection with a destination. Similarly, perceived authenticity remains crucial for visitors. A destination like Litchi Bay in China shows that preserving cultural heritage adds to the emotional sense of the location, and the use of social media may continually reinforce the authenticity of the sites. Viral marketing offers both immense potential and considerable challenges for destination branding. The key to leveraging this power lies in crafting authentic, engaging, and consistent messaging that aligns with tourists' expectations and experiences. By satisfying both emotional engagement and authenticity, tourism brands can build a lasting connection with potential visitors, which visitors may recommend to their friends or relatives, while contributing to the economic growth of the destination. However, as the power of viral content grows, destinations must be aware of managing their online reputation, ensuring that their brand promise is consistently met and not undermined by negative campaigns. This study underscores the need for further exploration into the mechanisms through which viral marketing influences travel behavior, particularly in different cultural and demographic contexts. Future research can examine the long-term effects of viral content on brand loyalty and revisit intention. It also calls for more empirical studies on crisis management strategies in tourism marketing to better understand how destinations can recover from negative viral campaigns. Additionally, investigating the role of influencers, content creators, and digital storytelling techniques in enhancing perceived authenticity can offer valuable insights for both academics and practitioners in the tourism and marketing fields.

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