

Place branding in the digital age. TikTok's influence on regional Italian tourism.

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Abstract: This study addresses the understanding of social media platforms as a pivotal factor for creating innovative dynamics in consumer-brand interactions for the tourist sector. By analyzing 12 TikTok videos and 5,635 users' comments across relevant hashtags, we explored the "PugliaTok" phenomenon. Findings reveal that TikTok enhances place visibility by facilitating active user participation and co-creation of content, highlighting TikTok's role in shaping destinations' perceptions across social media brand communities.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Social Media, PugliaTok, Tourism, Value Co-Creation

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Introduction: Social media are changing how touristic destinations are narrated and perceived in the digital age, enabling brand communities to co-create value through user-generated content (Goh et al., 2013). As tourism becomes increasingly digital, platforms like TikTok are not just tools for promotion but key arenas for consumer engagement and brand community building. Over time, persistent stereotypes and emerging digital narratives have influenced the Italian tourist industry. Historically, these preconceptions have affected consumer perceptions and behaviours (Liu & Tung, 2017). However, the rise of social media has created an opportunity for a digital and co-participatory culture to destination branding. In this realm, users are actively contributing to places' narratives through content creation and stimulation of value co-creation rather than destruction (Pencarelli et al., 2020; Sigala, 2016). This research focuses on the Puglia region, placed among the top Italian regions for tourism activity, with over 10 million presences and 2 million arrivals in 2022 (Puglia Promozione, 2022). The region has seen significant efforts in brand communication, mainly through the global campaign #WeAreinPuglia, launched in 2013 by leveraging social media to promote the Puglia Brand (Puglia Promozione, 2013a, 2019b). Social media brand communities, consisting of people with similar interests, have taken center stage in this process. According to Carlson et al. (2019), these communities encourage greater consumer participation, boosting brand awareness and creative thinking for marketing goals. Platforms like TikTok have become effective instruments for influencing traveler experiences due to influencer marketing and user-generated content (Bokunewicz & Shulman, 2017). Value co-creation is critical in understanding customers' active role in the brand's narrative, involving multiple stakeholders, including tourists, brands, and local communities, all contributing to the experiential offering of a destination (Binkhorst, 2006). Social media, especially TikTok, enhances this process by enabling real-time interactions and content sharing, with a relevant impact on consumer attitudes and behaviors (Montag et al., 2021; Saura et al., 2019).

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Consumer engagement is an interactive, co-creative process where customers shape brand value (Hollebeek, 2011; Bowden, 2018). It can boost brand loyalty and create unique experiences. Studies show that engagement drives value co-creation. Siddique et al. (2015) explored its effects on web services, while Alexander and Jaakkola (2015) highlighted its impact on co-creation outcomes. Digital platforms like TikTok enhance consumer engagement through real-time content sharing and influence perceptions (Montag et al., 2021; Saura et al., 2019). TikTok's customizable algorithms and user-generated content shape attitudes towards brands and destinations, with interactions such as likes and shares creating dynamic feedback (Zuo & Wang, 2019). The platform's short-form videos enable rapid global dissemination, amplifying the impact of sentiments and driving trends in the tourism industry through viral content and influencer marketing (Weimann & Masri, 2020; Bokuniewicz & Shulman, 2017). Existing literature underscores the role of social media in forming destination branding through value co-creation, affecting a participatory approach to branding where users actively enhance value co-creation (Pencarelli et al., 2020; Sigala, 2016) and consumer engagement in building brand loyalty (Hollebeek, 2011; Bowden et al., 2018). However, there is a need to better explore how TikTok determine value co-creation for the touristic sector. We address this gap by analyzing users' engagement, their sentiment polarization and narrative patterns for the "PugliaTok" phenomenon. Thus, we propose:

R.Q.1. What is the scope of users' engagement within the co-creation process in social media communities related to touristic destination content?

R.Q.2. What is the polarization of users' sentiments within the co-creation process in social media communities related to touristic destination content?

R.Q.3. What are the main communication patterns within the co-creation process in social media communities related to touristic destination content?

Methodology: This study employed an immersive observation of user behaviors on social media (Kozinets, 2006). We identified nine TikTok hashtag categories via the platform's algorithm, excluded five, and retained four final categories. A sample of twelve TikTok videos across these four categories was selected. Using web scraping, we collected 5,635 user comments, then performed a manual content analysis and sentiment analysis (SA) with Python's VADER lexicon (Devi & Kamalakkannan, 2020) and calculated engagement scores.

Results: First, by observing hashtags' time distribution, it emerges that the "PugliaTok" phenomenon is still in the recent development stage (years: 2021-2024). Second, content analysis findings indicated an overall positive attitude of social media users (i.e. brand love toward Puglia, see video 3c, 3d); a narration about specific destinations related to aesthetics of Puglia (1a, 2a, 3b, 3d); and a positive attitude toward the food culture (video 1b, 2c, 1d) (Table 1). Results indicate an appreciation for sharing personal travel experiences, exploring locations and places, and describing food culture and events. From engagement scores, data revealed a high level of engagement rate (5.38%) above the platform average (4.24%, Cucu, 2024), evidencing a strong involvement with Puglia brand content, reinforced by the number of comments, signaling substantial efforts from users (Tenenboim, 2022). From sentiment analysis (Table 2), findings show a high average positive sentiment for

most of the sample (video: 2a, 2b, 3b, 1c, 2c, 3c, 1d, 2d, 3d), indicating positive sentiments toward “Puglia” co-created content, indicating general positive attitudes. In contrast, three videos (1a, 3a, 1b) resulted in a higher negative sentiment, suggesting that content creators, when promoting a distinct travel destination or food experience, may engage with users from other cultures who may not entirely understand a specific place identity or culture. The "PugliaTok" trend suggests that high engagement on TikTok, driven by user-generated content and hashtags, offers valuable opportunities for Place Branding. Thus, managers should collaborate with TikTok creators to promote Puglia’s attractions and culture, enhancing the region’s visibility and authenticity. By managing social media interactions effectively and aligning brand strategies with community values, Puglia can enhance its tourism appeal and foster a stronger connection with users.

Table 1. Video sample and hashtags

N.	Publisher	Date	Description
			Popularity: 2.2B views
1a	@ireneercolani_	16-4-2024	"Itinerario prima volta in Puglia #puglia #mare #salento #lecce #ottranto #alberobello #casteldelmonte #gallipoli #polignanoamare #itinerary #itinerario #ireneercolani #itinerarytravel #itinerariodiviaggio #traveltips #salentotiktok #traveling"
2a	@donatellads74	31-7-2022	"#torredellorso #puglia #salento #duesorelle"
3a	@soloviaggiuili	28-1-2021	"La Puglia in 15 secondi ☘️#consiglidiviaggio #perte #consigliuili #inviaggio #travelcouple #italia #puglia"
			Popularity: 145.5M views
1b	@i.magista	12-1-2022	"KING PANZEROTTO! 🤩 #imparacontiktok #foryou #ricetta #ricette #panzerotti #puglia #tiktokpuglia"
2b	@whereyouneedto be	3-7-2021	"Avevi pensato per caso alla Puglia per questa estate? 🇮🇹🇮🇹 seguimi per altri consigli #TikTokPuglia #tiraccontolitalia #puglia"
3b	@fattidiviaggi	26-8-2021	"Vi piace Trani? ☐ #trani #puglia #tiktokpuglia #pugliamia #tiktokviaggi #perte"
			Popularity: 12.5M views
1c	@visit	24-5-2024	"more-Have you ever had dinner inside a cave? In Italy's region ☐ #Puglia travelers can have a unique and memorable dining experience at #GrottaPalazzese 🤩"
2c	@italianlife	1-8-2022	"more Early summer sundays in puglia mean raw seafood, mozzarella di bufala, wine, cards and friends ☐"
3c	@ciarainitaly	6-3-2024	"more - My favourite place in Italy and it need to be on your Italian travel list for 2023! Puglia is a stunning region in the south of Italy with so many beautiful places to see! ☐ ☐ #expatinitaly #lifeinitaly #puglia #ottranto #alberobello #polignanoamare #summerinitaly #placetoseeinitaly #puglia_mylove #alberobellotrulli #trulli #moveabroad #visititaly #visitpuglia #italydestinations #irishabroad #travel2023"
			Popularity: 45.8 M views
1d	@pugliainviaggio	9-1-2024	"more - È stato amore a prima vista 🤩 Vi salutiamo così ☐ ☐ TETTA DELLA MONACA ☐ @filodolio vieste #pugliainviaggio #puglia #food #pugliagram #pugliamia #weareinpuglia #italy #foodblogger #volgopuglia #apulia #pugliavers #tettadellamonaca #instafood #saporidipuglia"
2d	@lavestesene	8-5-2024	"more La pizzica e Lu Core ☐ ☐ #santamariadimerino #festepatronali #tarantellavieste#folkinpuglia#garganofolk #folk #folklore #tarantella #arteitaliana #pugliafolk #tradizione #vieste #musicafolk"
3d	@manuelavitulli	4-8-2023	"Uno dei borghi più belli di tutta la Puglia: RUFFANO. Lo conoscevate? #salento #tiktokpuglia #tiraccontolitalia #weareinpuglia"

Source: Own elaboration

Table 2. Sentiment and Engagement scores

Video	Comments	Engagement Rate	SA (pos)	SA (neg)
Video n.1a	580	2,04%	.206	.207
Video n.2a	530	6,11%	.223	.211
Video n.3a	621	6,98%	.218	.220
Video n.1b	1069	8,71%	.214	.228
Video n.2b	663	9,65%	.213	.210
Video n.3b	71	3,68%	.225	.208
Video n.1c	862	4,76%	.272	.208
Video n.2c	160	6,75%	.293	.219
Video n.3c	72	3,30%	.292	.203
Video n.1d	645	2,11%	.220	.213
Video n.2d	251	5,92%	.216	.206
Video n.3d	111	4,44%	.213	.209
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Total average</i>		
	5635	5.38		

Source: Python Programming with Google Colab

Conclusions: This research pursued the main objective of performing a preliminary investigation of consumers' sentiments and their involvement with the co-creation of content for place branding promotion. Findings from this study offer critical implications as we expand the theoretical understanding of community-driven regional branding within the co-creation of value framework when leveraging digital engagement across social media users. The "PugliaTok" phenomenon highlights the potential for managers to leverage social media channels for enhancing brand reach as a touristic destination. By partnering with content creators, managers can effectively promote the region's attractions, culture, and experiences, as well as foster a sense of community and belonging among users. The high engagement rate suggests an opportunity to strength the relationships with users through active moderation and targeted interactions. Finally, aligning brand strategies with shared community values can lead to more authentic and resonant content, reinforcing the connection between Puglia's brand and its social media audience. A novelty characterizes the research since it explores a digital marketing phenomenon, revealing how user-generated content can significantly impact place branding. Finally, this is a preliminary study where the sample size was limited. In the full paper, we will expand the sample and explore the key themes behind consumer behavior on social media and value co-creation through a thematic analysis. Finally, while we focused on one social media platform, future studies might explore a more comprehensive sample with longitudinal data having a multi-platform approach to examine the phenomenon over time.

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