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Youness Chebli, Cynthia Assaf, Pierre Valette-Florence, Varsha Jain

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Enhancing User Engagement on Destination Brand Facebook Pages

Chebli YOUNESS, University of Lorraine, France, Chebli.youness@univ-lorraine.fr

Cynthia ASSAF*, ESSCA School of Management, France, cynthia.assaf@essca.fr

Pierre VALETTE-FLORENCE, University of Grenoble Alpes, p.valette-florence@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr

Varsha JAIN, MICA, India, varsha.jain@micamail.in

ABSTRACT

There is an emerging tendency among businesses to actively engage with audiences by integrating widely used social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram in their communication strategy. Most cities acknowledge the importance of sustaining a robust presence on social media platforms, including social media in their promotional strategy targeted towards current and prospective visitors. The primary objective of this study is to examine the content shared by destination businesses on social media channels, specifically focusing on Facebook. The study conducts a comparative analysis of this material concerning different modes of user participation, including metrics such as likes, comments, and shares. The Facebook data were acquired using Buzzsumo, an online artificial intelligence platform. A total of 250 posts were subjected to analysis. The data was analysed using a latent class analysis (LCA) and ANOVA. Segments 1 and 2 favor semantic and expressive emoticons in the presence of engagement. For the third group of tourists, when the content mentions emoticons that evoke emotions related to aesthetic content and are user-generated with the images, the engagement is enhanced.

Keywords: User Engagement, Content-Type, Hashtags, Emoji, Posting Day, Media Richness, User Generated Content, LCA

INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic landscape of tourism, the symbiotic relationship between international travel trends and social media engagement takes center stage. According to the World Tourism Organization¹, the first quarter of 2023 witnessed 235 million international tourists, generating over 1 trillion US dollars. Europe, the perennial epicenter of global tourism, continues attracting both international and Europeans. According to the World Tourism Organization, most of these visitors and those from United States are intraregional travelers. This monumental wave of global tourism converges with the omnipresence of social media. As of 2023, 4.2² billion individuals worldwide are active on these platforms, with an unprecedented 75% penetration rate in both worldwide and an impressive 75% penetration rate in Europe and the United States (Statista, 2023). Facebook leads as the world's number one social network,

¹ <https://www.unwto.org/fr/news/la-reprise-complete-du-tourisme-est-en-vue>

² <https://fr.statista.com/themes/9141/les-reseaux-sociaux/#topicOverview>

with 2.958³ billion users who access it at least once a month (Statista, 2023). Social media platforms facilitate travel and destination choices (Bakr and Ali, 2013) and profoundly impact the tourism industry, particularly tourist behavior (Huerta-Alvarez et al., 2020). This shift in behavior shapes the various stages of the travel purchasing process, starting with destination research and continuing through shared experiences before, during, and after the journey (Book et al., 2018). Beyond influencing tourist behavior significantly, these platforms enable destinations to communicate with their target audience at a lower cost (Kumpu et al., 2021).

Establishing a presence on social media platforms can significantly enhance the competitiveness of a tourist destination. It enables the creation of global destination awareness (Kiralova and Pavliceka, 2015), the formation of a distinct destination brand (Huerta-Alvarez et al., 2020), and effective destination promotion (Mao et al., 2019). Compared to traditional media platforms, social media offers many advantages to tourist destinations, encompassing engagement with the community, in-depth behavior analysis, and efficient reception of valuable feedback. According to Gruen et al. (2006), consumers increasingly rely on online word-of-mouth when seeking information for their decision-making processes, eclipsing the role of traditional media.

Therefore, in today's digital landscape, there is a growing trend among brands to actively participate in online conversations by integrating popular social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram into their communication strategies. Furthermore, most cities recognize the critical significance of maintaining a strong social media presence and include social media in their communication strategies aimed at existing and potential tourists. When conveying information through these platforms, destination brands have a plethora of formats at their disposal, ranging from text and video to images, links, and even interactive contests. Moreover, numerous researchers have emphasized the significance of content marketing and its influence on consumer behavior (Chong et al., 2018; Voorveld et al., 2018). To optimize consumer engagement, brands employ various elements within their social media content, including textual content, hashtags, links, images, videos, emojis, photo credits, and calls to action. The research of Suh et al. (2021) underscores the critical importance of identifying specific content elements for sharing on social media platforms to enhance user engagement effectively. Researchers have explored the potential effects of various post characteristics on user behavior (Dhaoui and Webster, 2021; Fournier and Avery, 2011; Schulze, Scholer, and Skiera, 2014; Molina et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023). However, the outcomes of these studies can be sector-dependent. To our knowledge, none of these studies have comprehensively examined all the elements of posts for tourism brands and their impact on the engagement of current and potential tourists.

The primary goal of this research is to analyze the content shared by destination brands on social media platforms, with a particular focus on Facebook. We aim to compare this content with various forms of engagement, encompassing metrics such as likes, comments, and shares. More specifically, we will examine the impact of multiple elements of a post (emojis type, content type, posting day, media richness, hashtags, user-generated content, ...) on user engagement. Our contribution to the existing body of tourism literature manifests in two distinct ways. First, we harness the potential of artificial intelligence to offer insights and recommendations about content length, timing, and preferred publication formats. Second, we

³ <https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/570930/reseaux-sociaux-mondiaux-classes-par-nombre-d-utilisateurs/>

employ more conventional approaches by conducting statistical analysis and delving into implications for user engagement.

To fulfill our research objectives, we will structure the research as follows. First, we will examine the concept of customer engagement and the impact of the different characteristics of a post. Subsequently, we will provide a comprehensive discussion of our research methodology, accompanied by a detailed examination of our data analysis procedures. Finally, we underscore our contributions to the field and outline potential avenues for future research.

BACKGROUND

The Impact of User Engagement in the Tourism Industry

Customer engagement is «a consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interaction» (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p.154). This multifaceted process comprises cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects (Giakoumaki and Krepapa, 2020). Customer engagement is characterized by repeated interactions between a customer and a brand that enhance the customer's emotional, psychological, or physical investment in the brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Cognitive engagement involves consumers engaging in mental activities triggered by browsing or interacting with social media posts (Bazi et al., 2023). The emotional dimension refers to the extent of positive emotional attachment a consumer experiences during a particular interaction with a brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014), while the behavioral dimension measures the level of energy, effort, and time a consumer dedicates to a specific interaction with a brand (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Recent research has shown a growing interest in the study of consumer engagement (Bazi et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Mainolfi et al., 2022). This concept has garnered attention from academics and practitioners across B2B, B2C, and C2C markets (Santos et al., 2022; Bazi et al., 2020). In the context of social media, consumer engagement has become increasingly significant (Lim and Rasul, 2022). Social media data provides practitioners and academics valuable insights into internet users' behaviors, allowing them to identify and analyze comments, likes, shares, and other metrics. Some researchers, such as Lee, Hosanagar et Nair (2018), assess engagement by tracking the number of likes, comments, and shares. Nevertheless, giving a like is perceived as the least significant form of engagement because it merely requires a single user click and is effortless and unconscious (Swani et al., 2017). Conversely, commenting demands more significant effort and cognitive reflection (Labrecque et al., 2020). In contrast, sharing represents a heightened level of engagement compared to leaving a comment (Labrecque et al., 2020). In the context of tourism destinations, tourists' cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement significantly enhances their experiences and intentions to revisit (Rather et al., 2022). Brubaker and Wilson (2018) suggest that consumer engagement is often used to evaluate the effectiveness of tourism brand communication on social media platforms. This increases customer trust and loyalty toward tourism destination brands (Harrigan et al., 2017).

Impact of Emoji Usage and Content-Type on User Engagement in Tourism Marketing

In recent years, the use of emojis in digital communication has witnessed remarkable growth, particularly within the tourism sector. Emojis have proven to be highly effective in conveying messages and prompting user responses (Basoda et al., 2022). Bezirgan and Kaya (2019) have highlighted the tourism and hospitality industry as a standout sector for the extensive use of emojis. Emojis introduces an entertaining and friendly interactive dimension when engaging with online audiences (Bezirgan & Kaya, 2019), creating an impact that extends to decisions related to destination choices (Basoda et al., 2022) and heightened purchase intentions

(Manganari et al., 2020). Emojis come in various forms, encompassing emotional representations like facial expressions (e.g., 😊, 😡, 😱) and semantic symbols depicting objects, food items, or locations (e.g., 🍷, 🇮🇹, ✈️). Among the diverse categories of emojis, those related to 'Travel and Places,' 'Food and Drinks,' and 'Activities' are prominently featured in posts linked to tourism (Bezirgan and Kaya, 2019).

The strategic use of emojis empowers brands within the tourism sector to emphasize their ideas and emotions, fostering entertaining interactions with tourists (Luangrath et al., 2017). In this research, we aim to explore the impact of emojis on user engagement across the Facebook pages of ten European tourist destinations. In cases where emojis are present, our investigation extends to discerning the distinctions between emotional emojis and semantic ones, elucidating their respective effects on user engagement with content disseminated by destination brands on their Facebook pages.

Furthermore, our research aims to determine whether this impact varies depending on the type of content (McShane et al., 2021). In social media, content can be generated by customers or brands; however, our study focuses on the latter category. Following the definition provided by Meire et al. (2019), brand-generated communication refers to content disseminated through a brand's social networks. Two dominant content types emerge: aesthetic experiences and promotional content (Kim et al., 2021). Aesthetic experience content typically entails passive engagement, focusing on product-related experiences and attributes (Kim and Song, 2018), which may include visual elements like a photograph of St. Stephen's Cathedral in Metz. In contrast, promotional content conveys factual information, such as invitations to city events. In 2020, Molina et al. conducted a study examining the structure of Facebook pages and found that the content with emotional appeal generated more significant interactions than posts containing primarily informational content.

Moreover, Wang et al. (2023) research on Twitter revealed compelling insights. Their study demonstrates that when semantic emoji accompany promotional content, it enhances the perception of credibility. In contrast, when aesthetic content is paired with emotional emojis, it exerts influence by evoking a sense of enjoyment and excitement among users. This research endeavors to provide insights into the intricate interplay between emoji usage and content type in tourism marketing. Therefore, we posit the following hypothesis: user engagement is influenced by both the presence of emojis and the content type. More precisely, emotional emojis associated with aesthetic content enhance user engagement, while semantic emojis associated with promotional content also enhance user engagement (**H1**).

The Pivotal Role of Hashtags in Enhancing Engagement

Hashtags are textual or numerical elements following the # symbol. Their role is highlighted in enhancing the user experience by organizing and monitoring the content on social media platforms. However, brands use hashtags for customer engagement to communicate their values through various communication channels, such as websites and social networks (Stathopoulou et al., 2017). The use of hashtags in communication can significantly enhance visibility and customer engagement (Stathopoulou et al., 2017), target the potential audience, and transmit the brand image (Celuch, 2021). This practice captures the attention of online users and fosters increased levels of interaction with the content (Cheng et al., 2020). Kumar et al. (2022) emphasize the pivotal role of hashtags in enhancing engagement across social networks. The inclusion of hashtags in social media advertisements, notably platforms like Facebook, is an implicit incentive to encourage Internet users to share these ads within their networks (Stathopoulou et al., 2017). Cox (2015) offers additional insights, demonstrating that the inclusion of branded hashtags in advertisements results in increased shares for those

advertisements. One of the significant advantages of hashtags is their ability to enable any Internet user to follow and search for specific hashtags, such as #visitbrussels, thereby gaining access to content posted by other Internet users or brands who may not be within their immediate networks. When enough Internet users promote a hashtag, it can attain the status of a "trend", subsequently attracting a broader audience to the discussion. Therefore, we posit the following hypothesis: User engagement is positively impacted by the presence of hashtags (**H2**).

How Posting Day Impacts User Engagement on Social Media

Publication scheduling plays a pivotal role in shaping engagement levels and user interactions across social media, as Kumar et al. (2006) highlighted. Recent insights from a survey conducted by HubSpot 2022, encompassing a diverse sample of 1000 marketers across various industries, have shed light on the optimal timing for posting content. Their findings point to Friday as the optimal day for posting content. Notably, the study highlights that on the Facebook platform, both Fridays and Saturdays are the most favorable days for posting, particularly during time slots from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. and 12 p.m. to 3 p.m. It is advisable to avoid Sundays, as this day exhibits the lowest user engagement.

Furthermore, a recent investigation by Sprout Social in 2023, encompassing 34,000 customers, has reaffirmed the prime days for posting on Facebook to be Monday through Thursday. This reaffirms the findings of HubSpot and underlines Sunday's inadvisability for content dissemination on Facebook. Consequently, we posit hypothesis (**H3**) asserting that the most advantageous days for fostering user engagement are Fridays and Saturdays, outperforming other days.

The Impact of Media Richness on User Engagement

Media richness, also known as vividness, refers to how brand communications are structured. It comprises two fundamental components: breadth, which involves engaging multiple senses through the message, and depth, which relates to the quality of the presentation (Steuer, 1992). Steuer (1992) defines vividness as the representational richness in media, which includes stimuli designed for various human senses, such as videos, colors, and sounds. Incorporating these elements in a message is expected to attract a larger audience (Coyle et Thorson, 2001). Among rich media formats, audio-visual posts, dynamic animations, and videos engage the most senses due to visual and auditory cues, encouraging visual and aural cues, both visual and auditory signals and systematic and heuristic information processing capabilities (Steuer, 1992). Visual content can assist a brand in distinguishing itself and attracting the user's interest. Research has shown that images foster greater interactivity and, therefore, higher engagement than other types of posts (Dhaoui and Webster, 2021). Users are more inclined to like and share a post that contains images (Li and Xi, 2020). In light of these developments, we argue that consumers are likelier to engage with content presented in image formats. Consequently, we posit (**H4**) those image formats will lead to higher levels of user engagement compared to videos or links.

The Impact of User-Generated Content on User Engagement

User-generated content (UGC), where brands credit photos taken by others, is a valuable strategy for promoting products. For instance, renowned brands like Apple have effectively leveraged UGC in their marketing strategies. In the tourism industry, word-of-mouth and the shared experiences of travelers play a significant role in destination choice, diminishing

perceived risks (Lehto et al., 2004). Similarly, UGC empowers consumers to gain insights into user opinions regarding products and brands. Consequently, UGC is regarded as a more trustworthy and cost-effective informational source (Christodoulides et al., 2012). Companies increasingly focus on UGC instead of brand-generated content (BGC). This is mainly due to the persuasiveness of a post when incorporating customer testimonials including positive comments and supportive conversations about the brand's products or services (Xu et al., 2023). Prior research has demonstrated that consumers consider product reviews written by customers as more helpful than those written by experts (Li et al., 2013). Consequently, we posit **(H5)**: UGC increases user engagement more effectively than BGC.

METHODOLOGY

Facebook Pages and Data Extraction

The Facebook data were obtained through Buzzsumo, an online platform with artificial intelligence technology. The research examines the effect of various elements of posts impacting followers' engagement on the official Facebook pages found on tourism sites of 10 destination brands in European cities. These cities are Brussels, Luxembourg City, Bern, Bruges, Strasbourg, Frankfurt, Munich, Trier, Lille, and Metz (Table 1). The dataset was gathered from the last 12 months (September 2022 to September 2023). In total, 250 posts were analyzed.

Data Processing and Analysis

According to the plausible heterogeneity of the sample, we analyzed the data using a latent class regression model. This model is particularly suitable for predicting a dependent nominal variable with categorical predictor variables, while trying to find homogeneous subsets of observations to maximize the R^2 and thus account for the assumed heterogeneity. Formally, Latent Class Analysis (LCA) implies the construction of latent classes, which are unobserved latent subgroups of cases. The latent classes are constructed based on the observed manifest responses. Cases within the same latent class are homogeneous in their responses to these indicators, while cases in different latent classes differ in response patterns. In our case, the dependent variable is the level of engagement, with a latent polytomous logistic regression as the link function. In latent class regression, three points deserve full attention. First, the optimal number of hidden segments is determined according to the usual information criteria (AIC, BIC, entrap, etc.). Second, once the number of segments is chosen, parameter estimation helps to understand the profiles of these segments. Finally, a classification with additional categorical variables or an ANOVA helps to get a clearer picture of the segments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A 3-segment solution with lower AIC and BIC indices and a higher entropy measure were chosen. Overall, the R^2 s are very good (all above .9), and the model accurately predicts the two levels of commitment. Table 1 shows the parameter estimates and helps to clarify the three segments. For example, segments 1 and 2 favor semantic and expressive emoticons in the presence of engagement. Segment 1 also favors the experience of aesthetics, while Segment 2 favors promotion. the type of media, segment 1 adheres to the presence of video, segment 3 to the image, while segment 2 focuses on the presence of additional links. Although the Wald test is insignificant for days of the week, a pattern emerges where Saturday and Sunday are the choice for Segment 1, Thursday is the preference for Segment 2, and Monday and Tuesday for Segment 3. Overall, the engagement level predicted by the model clearly shows that Segment 2 has the highest level (0.881), followed by Segment 1 (0.553) and Segment 3 (0.125), confirming that this last segment tends to be disinvested.

This study highlights three different segments of online tourists. The initial segment of online tourists comprises Munich, Brussels, and Bern. The engagement levels among tourists from this segment are boosted considerably when these individuals encounter online content that combines semantic and emotional emojis and aesthetic content type (H1 partially validated). This increased engagement is particularly notable when the content includes relevant hashtags (H2 validated). Moreover, it is recommended to schedule the dissemination of these posts on Fridays (H3 validated). There is no effect of the media richness and the UGC on user engagement (H4 and H5 are not validated).

The engagement of online tourists of the second segment (Lille, Bruges, Luxembourg, and Strasbourg) is enhanced when these individuals are exposed to posts mobilizing semantic emojis and aesthetic content type (H1 not validated). The level of user engagement increases when posts are without hashtags (H2 not validated). Sharing these posts on Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday (H3 not validated) is recommended. They are more engaged when the destination brand shares links. These online tourists are more engaged when the destination brands share links instead of images or videos (H4 not validated). Moreover, UGC does not affect the engagement level (H5 is not validated).

The third segment of online tourists comprises Frankfurt, Trier, and Metz. The engagement levels among tourists from this segment are significantly boosted when these individuals encounter online content irrespective of emojis. Nevertheless, their engagement is significantly increased when the content refers to emotional emojis associated with aesthetic content type (H1 is validated). There is no effect of hashtags on user engagement (H2 not validated). Moreover, it is recommended to schedule the dissemination of these posts on Tuesday and Saturday (H3 not validated). The increased engagement is particularly notable when the content includes images (H4 validated). Finally, UGC positively impacts user engagement for online tourists of this segment (H5 is validated).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

Implications for Theory and Practice

This research exhibits commendable contributions from a theoretical perspective. This research contributes to the literature on media richness. By investigating the notion of customer engagement and exploring the influence of various elements of a post, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of engagement levels by integrating a rigorous technique. Moreover, the current study distinguishes itself from prior studies by collecting data on semantic and expressive emoticons. This study examines consumer preferences for promotional activities, the elements of post aesthetics, and the optimal day for posting content, depending on the target demographic. Therefore, we contribute to examining the explanatory effectiveness of traits related to social media posts from a dynamic standpoint.

The study's implications hold substantial value for professionals in managerial and marketing roles. The increasing interest among visitors in the information disseminated via Facebook social media activities is a focal point of our analysis. By identifying these crucial characteristics, the analysis offered in this study enables organisations to achieve a strategic advantage by effectively implementing market segmentation, targeting, and positioning posts to the target audience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study contributes to understanding online user engagement on destination brand social media handles. Enhancing a tourist destination's competitiveness may be

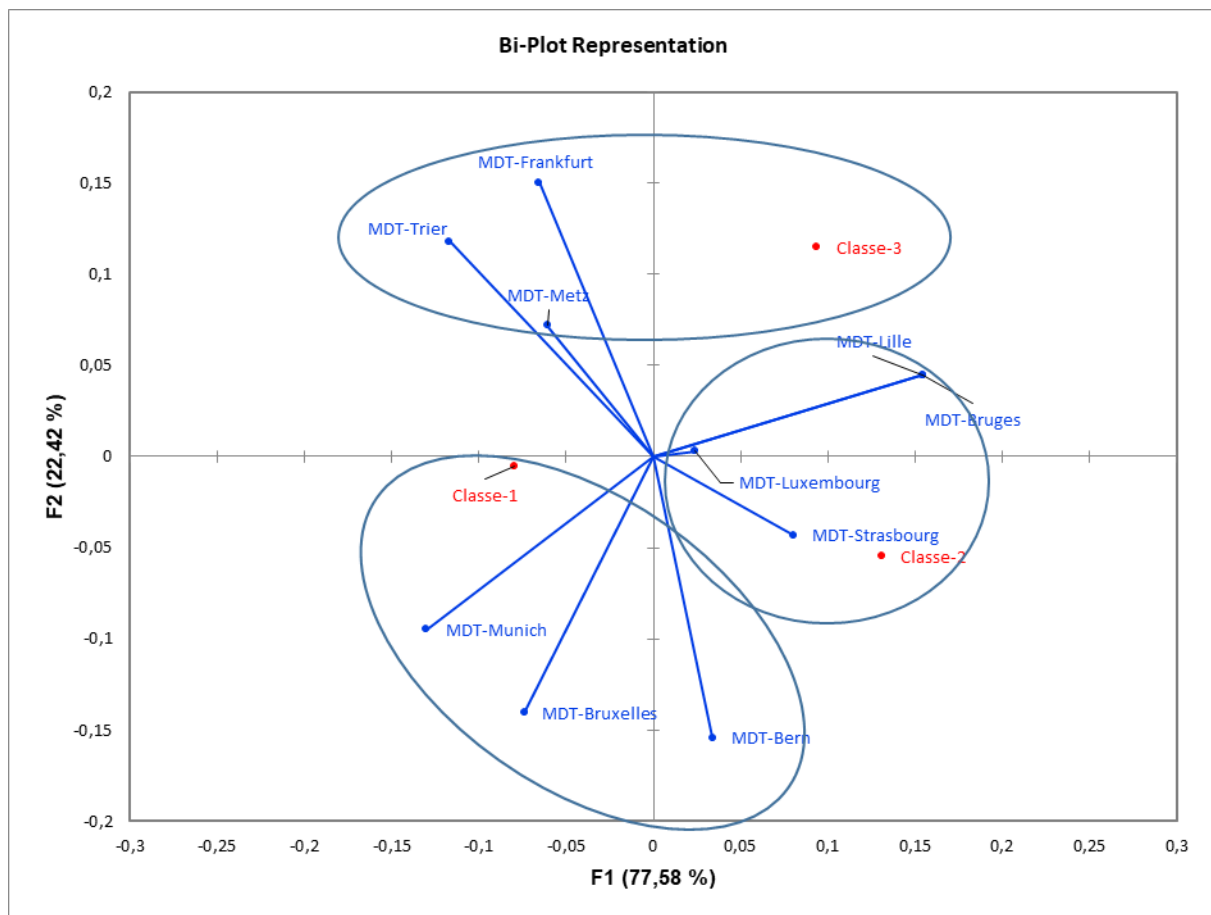
remarkably achieved via establishing a presence on various social media platforms. It facilitates the establishment of worldwide destination recognition. In contrast to conventional media platforms, social media has several benefits for tourism locations, including enhanced community participation, comprehensive behaviour analysis, and streamlined acquisition of helpful input. In contemporary society, there is a growing dependence among customers on internet word-of-mouth as a primary source of information throughout their decision-making processes, hence overshadowing the significance of conventional media. Therefore, within the contemporary digital environment, corporations have an increasingly prevalent inclination to actively engage in online dialogues by including prominent social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram in their communication tactics. This research compares interaction across different formats, including metrics such as likes, comments, and shares. In this study, we focus on analysing the effects of several factors associated with a post, such as the kind of emojis used, the type of information shared, the day of posting, the level of media richness, the presence of hashtags, and the inclusion of user-generated content. Our scholarly contribution to the current corpus of tourist literature is evident via two main avenues. Initially, we use the capabilities of artificial intelligence to provide analyses and suggestions about the optimal length, timing, and preferred forms for content sharing.

Additionally, we apply traditional methodologies by doing rigorous statistical analyses and exploring the ramifications for user engagement. This study draws attention to the presence of an apparent trend in the level of online engagement shown by users via their use of the social media platform Facebook. The research provides estimates for the parameters and contributes to elucidating the topic. This study investigates the influence of different components of social media postings on the level of engagement shown by followers on the official Facebook pages of ten destination brands in European cities, with a specific focus on tourist sites. Destination marketing organizations will benefit extensively from this study. The study's findings signify that it is advisable to exhibit a preference for the use of semantic and expressive emoticons, experience components of aesthetics, and promotional endeavours and days to post. The outcome derived from this extensive research provides significant and vital knowledge for organizations leading the advancement and formulation of social media content targeting travelers. This research offers valuable insights for researchers and specialists in the marketing field, enhancing their comprehension of the intricate nature of social media marketing.

Table 1: Latent Class Regression Results

Paramètres (3 Classes) :							
Model for dependent	Classe	R ²	Classe1	Classe2	Classe3	Global	
			0,940	0,887	0,944	0,968	
	Constante	Wald	Estimateur	Estimateur	Estimateur	Wald	p-value
Emoji	absence	0	-2,953	-0,320	-5,226	12,277	0,050
		1	2,953	0,320	5,226		
Semantic		0	-0,038	2,113	-4,004		
		1	0,038	-2,113	4,004		
Emotional		0	0,310	-3,365	6,939		
		1	-0,310	3,365	-6,939		
Semantic and		0	4,442	0,371	-7,777		
		1	-4,442	-0,371	7,777		
Call to Action	Absence	0	-4,713	0,881	4,842	9,844	0,020
		1	4,713	-0,881	-4,842		
Presence		0	1,159	2,857	-4,317		
		1	-1,159	-2,857	4,317		
Day	Monday	0	-1,159	-2,857	4,317	13,813	0,044
		1	1,159	2,857	-4,317		
Tuesday		0	1,161	7,931	2,532		
		1	-1,161	-7,931	-2,532		
Wednesday		0	3,732	4,694	-4,511		
		1	-3,732	-4,694	4,511		
Thursday		0	-0,975	-10,608	2,616		
		1	0,975	10,608	-2,616		
Friday		0	-0,920	4,262	4,516		
		1	0,920	-4,262	-4,516		
Saturday		0	-5,112	3,957	-0,971		
		1	5,112	-3,957	0,971		
Sunday		0	2,220	-5,972	-7,472		
		1	-2,220	5,972	7,472		
Content Type	Promotion	0	-0,105	-4,263	3,289	12,283	0,006
		1	0,105	4,263	-3,289		
Aesthetic		0	4,237	3,879	3,578		
		1	-4,237	-3,879	-3,578		
Media richness	image	0	4,237	3,879	3,578	7,838	0,050
		1	-4,237	-3,879	-3,578		
video		0	-1,977	-2,031	-6,130		
		1	1,977	2,031	6,130		
link		0	1,395	2,402	1,878		
		1	-1,395	-2,402	-1,878		
Hashtags	absence	0	0,582	-0,371	4,252	10,469	0,015
		1	-0,582	0,371	-4,252		
presence		0	8,211	-2,498	2,657		
		1	-8,211	2,498	-2,657		
(UGC/BGC)	BGC	0	-8,211	2,498	-2,657	10,022	0,018
		1	8,211	-2,498	2,657		
UGC		0	-4,765	-1,327	1,692		
		1	4,765	1,327	-1,692		
UGC		0	4,765	-1,327	-1,692		
		1	-4,765	1,327	1,692		

Figure 1: Biplot Representation



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