

User-Generated Content and Responsible Tourism Destination Branding: A Conceptual Framework for Kerala

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Abstract

User-generated content (UGC) has restructured how destination brands are formed, but the tourism-marketing literature has largely theorised this shift in the context of mainstream, high-volume destinations, leaving the branding dynamics of responsible tourism (RT) destinations under-conceptualised. This paper addresses that omission by developing an integrative conceptual framework explaining how UGC contributes to destination branding in Kerala's RT destinations. Rather than treating relevant theories in isolation, the framework fuses Source Credibility Theory, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) theory, destination branding theory, and brand co-creation theory into a single explanatory chain. It positions UGC credibility and UGC authenticity as the qualities that make peer-generated eWOM persuasive; it treats responsible tourism attributes — community participation, cultural authenticity, environmental sustainability, local products, and ethical tourism practices — as the contextual brand meanings that credible, authentic content renders believable in a domain otherwise vulnerable to greenwashing scepticism; and it models destination brand image as the mediating asset that converts co-created content into travel intention. Six propositions specify the relationships among these constructs and are justified through the integrated theoretical logic. The paper contributes a theory-grounded account of how tourist-authored content co-creates a responsible destination brand, extends credibility and co-creation reasoning into the sustainability domain, and offers destination management organisations guidance on curating authentic advocacy rather than manufacturing it.

Keywords: User-Generated Content, Electronic Word-Of-Mouth, Destination Branding, Brand Co-Creation, Responsible Tourism, Destination Brand Image, Kerala

1. INTRODUCTION

The authority to define a destination brand has migrated from destination management organisations (DMOs) to travellers. Where brand meaning was once broadcast through curated campaigns, it is now assembled from the photographs, reviews, and narratives that visitors publish across review platforms and social media. Lund, Cohen, and Scarles (2018) capture the consequence bluntly: destination brands are increasingly the product of people's shared stories rather than of marketing strategy. For most destinations this is a communication challenge; for responsible tourism (RT) destinations it is an existential one, because the very qualities such destinations trade on — fair community benefit, cultural integrity, ecological care — are credence attributes that a prospective visitor cannot verify before arrival and often cannot fully verify even after.

Kerala is an instructive setting for this problem. The state adopted responsible tourism as its principal tourism-development strategy and piloted it at four destinations — Kumarakom, Kovalam, Thekkady, and Wayanad — with Kumarakom subsequently recognised nationally as a model initiative built on local sourcing, community enterprise, and participatory governance (Chettiparamb & Kokkranikkal, 2012). Kerala's long-running “God's Own Country” positioning has given the state unusual brand equity, yet the responsible-tourism layer of that brand depends on claims about how tourism is conducted rather than merely on what is seen. When such claims are communicated by the destination itself, they invite the scepticism that now attaches to sustainability marketing generally. When they are communicated, credibly and authentically, by fellow travellers, they acquire an evidential quality that official messaging cannot manufacture.

This asymmetry motivates the study's central question: how does user-generated content contribute to destination branding in Kerala's responsible tourism destinations? Answering it requires more than importing existing UGC–destination-image models. Those models were developed to explain attraction and revisit behaviour at conventional destinations and rarely engage the specific communicative burden of responsibility claims. This paper argues that a satisfactory account must integrate four theoretical traditions that are usually invoked separately: Source Credibility Theory, which explains why peer sources persuade; eWOM theory, which explains how their messages circulate and are adopted; destination branding theory, which specifies the brand asset being built and its behavioural payoff; and brand co-creation theory, which reframes the tourist from message recipient to brand producer. The contribution is not a survey of these traditions but their synthesis into one framework in which UGC credibility and authenticity feed perceptions of responsible tourism attributes, those perceptions shape destination brand image, and brand image drives travel intention.

The remainder of the paper reviews the relevant literature critically, articulates the integrated theoretical foundation, identifies the specific gap the framework fills, presents the framework and a detailed account of each relationship, advances six propositions, and closes with theoretical contributions, practical implications, and directions for empirical work.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 User-generated content and eWOM in tourism

User-generated content — reviews, ratings, images, and travel narratives produced by consumers rather than firms — has become a primary input to pre-trip decision-making, functioning as a contemporary form of electronic word-of-mouth (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Its influence rests on a perceived independence from commercial interest: because peer authors are assumed to lack a selling motive, their testimony is treated as more diagnostic than sponsor-controlled communication (Filieri & McLeay, 2014).

Yet the literature has grown increasingly cautious about treating all UGC as uniformly persuasive. The proliferation of fake and incentivised reviews has made credibility a contested and consequential judgement rather than a default assumption (Filieri, 2016), and empirical work shows that only content perceived as trustworthy is adopted, while suspect content is discounted (Filieri, Alguezaui, & McLeay, 2015).

Two evaluative qualities recur as the pivotal antecedents of UGC influence. The first is credibility — the perceived believability of the content and its source, typically decomposed into expertise and trustworthiness. The second is authenticity — the sense that the content reflects genuine, first-hand, unmanufactured experience. Kim and Kim (2020) demonstrate that the perceived authenticity of online reviews drives trust both in the platform and in the destination, positioning authenticity as an antecedent of, rather than a synonym for, credibility. These constructs are related but distinct: a review may be authentic (evidently sincere) yet judged low in credibility (the author lacks relevant expertise), or credible in form yet suspected of being staged. The present framework therefore treats UGC credibility and UGC authenticity as separate independent constructs rather than collapsing them.

2.2 UGC, destination image, and travel intention

A substantial stream links UGC to destination image and downstream behaviour. The consistent finding is that UGC shapes the cognitive and affective components of destination image, which in turn influence behavioural intentions (Filieri & McLeay, 2014). Afshardoost and Eshaghi's (2020) meta-analysis confirms destination image as a robust and sizeable predictor of behavioural intentions across studies, establishing image as the central mediating asset between information exposure and travel decisions. Country- and destination-image research reaches the same conclusion for cross-border travel intention (Chaulagain, Wiitala, & Fu, 2019), and eWOM specifically has been shown to build destination trust that translates into intention to travel (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016).

What this stream has largely not examined is which brand meanings UGC transmits. It typically models image at a generic level — favourable versus unfavourable, cognitive versus affective — without asking whether UGC is equally capable of communicating experiential and ethical brand content such as sustainability or community benefit. This is a meaningful silence, because responsibility attributes are precisely the meanings most difficult to convey through official channels and most dependent on peer verification.

2.3 Destination branding and brand co-creation

Destination branding theory holds that a destination brand is a bundle of associations and perceived value that differentiates a place and shapes expectations (Cai, 2002; Blain, Levy, & Ritchie, 2005), with destination image operating as the perceptual core of brand equity (Qu, Kim, & Im, 2011). Classical accounts of image formation emphasised the interplay of organic (uncontrolled), induced (marketer-controlled), and autonomous information sources (Gartner, 1994; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). UGC disrupts this taxonomy: it is neither the DMO's induced messaging nor a wholly independent news source, but a hybrid that is simultaneously organic in origin and brand-constituting in effect.

Brand co-creation theory provides the vocabulary for that hybridity. Building on the shift from firm-centred value creation to interactive, experience-based value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) and the service-dominant logic in which value is co-created with, not delivered to, the customer (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), tourism scholars have shown that value and brand meaning are co-produced on destination online platforms (Zhang, Gordon, Buhalis, & Ding, 2018). Lund, Scarles, and Cohen (2020) extend this by demonstrating that co-creation is double-edged: the same storytelling mechanisms that build brand value

can dismantle it through co-destruction, making the governance of co-created content a strategic concern. Social-media sharing has likewise been shown to raise destination brand awareness and perceived quality, though the effect is conditional on the type of sharing (Dedeoğlu, van Niekerk, Küçükergin, De Martino, & Okumus, 2020). Together these studies establish that UGC does not merely inform an externally fixed brand; it partly constitutes the brand.

2.4 Responsible tourism and its communicative problem

Responsible tourism is best understood not as a fixed product category but as a discourse and practice oriented to minimising negative impacts and maximising local benefit, sitting close to but distinguishable from sustainable tourism (Goodwin & Francis, 2003; Mihalič, 2016). Its operative attributes are experiential and relational: community participation and empowerment (Scheyvens, 1999), cultural authenticity, environmental stewardship, the sourcing and consumption of local products, and ethical conduct toward hosts. Kerala's model gives these attributes concrete form — local vegetable supply chains, community enterprise groups, and participatory local governance were built into the Kumarakom initiative (Chettiparamb & Kokkranikkal, 2012).

The communicative problem is that each of these is a credence attribute. A visitor cannot inspect “fair community benefit” the way they inspect a beach. Authenticity theory clarifies why this matters and why it is contested: authenticity in tourism is not a simple property of objects but is variously object-related, constructed, and existential (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999), and consumers' judgements of it are actively negotiated rather than passively received (Kolar & Žabkar, 2010). Local food, for instance, functions as a carrier of destination authenticity precisely because it is read as a genuine expression of place (Sims, 2009). When responsibility attributes are asserted by the marketer, audiences may treat them as constructed for consumption — the essence of greenwashing suspicion. When they are evidenced in credible, authentic peer content, they can be read as object-related or existential authenticity that the audience discovers rather than is sold. This is the hinge on which the proposed framework turns.

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: AN INTEGRATED LOGIC

The framework's premise is that no single theory explains the UGC–RT-branding relationship, but that four theories, read together, form a continuous explanatory logic. They are integrated here rather than reviewed in parallel.

- **Source Credibility Theory** originates in persuasion research showing that message acceptance depends on the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the source (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), later operationalised as a multidimensional credibility construct (Ohanian, 1990). In the UGC setting the “source” is a fellow traveller, and credibility is inferred from cues such as demonstrated experience, detail, and the absence of commercial motive (Filieri, 2016). Source Credibility Theory thus supplies the micro-mechanism — it explains why some peer content persuades and other content does not. But it stops at persuasion; it does not explain circulation or brand accumulation.
- **eWOM theory** supplies the channel and process. It models how consumer-authored evaluations are produced, motivated, and diffused across platforms, and how they are adopted or rejected by readers (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Crucially, eWOM theory positions credibility and authenticity not as ends but as the properties that determine whether a message is adopted and passed on (Filieri et al., 2015; Kim & Kim, 2020). Source Credibility Theory and eWOM theory therefore interlock: credibility is the quality, eWOM is the system through which that quality produces influence at scale.
- **Destination branding theory** supplies the outcome architecture. It identifies the asset that adopted eWOM builds — a structured set of brand associations whose perceptual core is destination image

— and specifies the behavioural payoff, travel intention, that a favourable image generates (Cai, 2002; Qu et al., 2011; Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). This tradition tells us what is being accumulated when credible eWOM is adopted, but in its classical form it treated the brand as marketer-owned, leaving unexplained how consumer content becomes brand content.

- **Brand co-creation theory** closes that gap and binds the others together. By recasting value and meaning as co-produced through interaction (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Zhang et al., 2018), it reframes credible, authentic eWOM not as information about a pre-existing brand but as an input into the brand itself — with the corollary that unmanaged content can co-destroy as readily as co-create it (Lund et al., 2020). Co-creation theory is what allows the framework to claim that tourists brand the destination, not merely that they influence perceptions of it.

The integration can be stated as a single sentence: Source Credibility Theory explains why peer content persuades; eWOM theory explains how that persuasion diffuses and is adopted; brand co-creation theory explains how adopted content becomes part of the brand; and destination branding theory explains how the resulting brand image converts into travel intention. Responsible tourism attributes enter this logic as the content domain — the specific, credence-laden brand meanings whose communication is uniquely dependent on the credibility and authenticity that the first three theories govern.

4. RESEARCH GAP

Three limitations in the existing literature jointly define the space this framework occupies.

- First, the UGC–branding literature has been developed predominantly in the context of mainstream, high-throughput destinations, where the marketing problem is attraction and differentiation among comparable places. The models, measures, and managerial prescriptions produced in that context (e.g., Filieri & McLeay, 2014; Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020) do not obviously transfer to destinations whose value proposition is defined by how tourism is conducted. The branding dynamics of responsible-tourism destinations remain conceptually underspecified.
- Second, UGC research and responsible/sustainable-tourism research have largely proceeded on separate tracks. The former asks how peer content shapes image and intention but treats brand content generically; the latter asks how destinations can be made more responsible (Goodwin & Francis, 2003; Mihalič, 2016; Chettiparamb & Kokkranikkal, 2012) but rarely theorises how responsibility is communicated to prospective visitors through peer channels. Their intersection — the co-creation of a responsible destination brand through UGC — has attracted little integrative theory.
- Third, and most specifically, the field has overlooked the distinctive communicative work that authentic, tourist-created content performs for responsibility claims. Because responsible-tourism attributes are credence qualities exposed to greenwashing scepticism, they are precisely the meanings that official messaging communicates least credibly and that credible peer content communicates best. No existing framework explains this substitution effect — that authentic UGC can carry responsibility values that marketer-controlled communication cannot — nor situates it within an integrated credibility–eWOM–co-creation–branding logic.

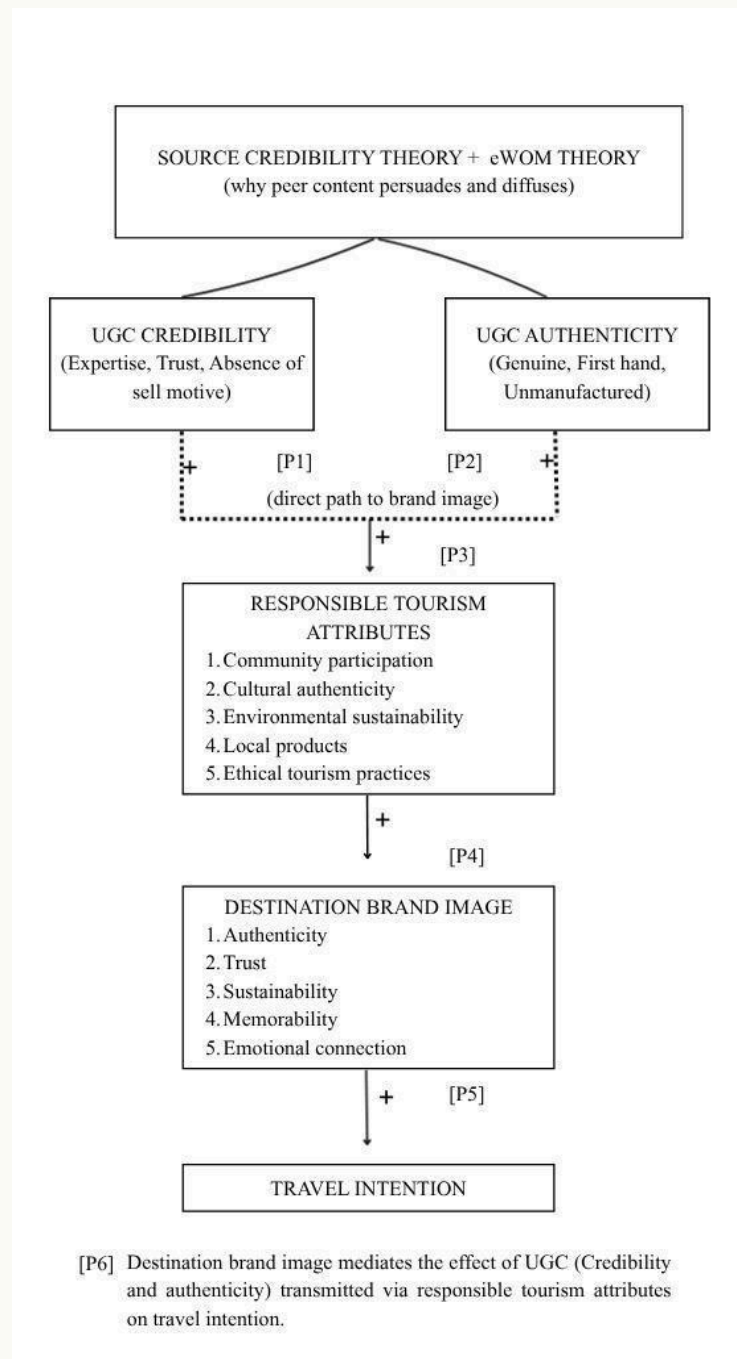
The framework below is proposed to close these three gaps simultaneously, using Kerala's RT destinations as the substantive setting.

5. PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The framework arranges five constructs into a mediated chain. UGC credibility and UGC authenticity are

the independent constructs. Responsible tourism attributes constitute the contextual construct — the specific brand-meaning domain communicated by the content. Destination brand image is the mediating construct, comprising the dimensions of authenticity, trust, sustainability, memorability, and emotional connection. Travel intention is the outcome. The text-based framework is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.



Mechanism: BRAND CO-CREATION THEORY - credible, authentic UGC is not merely information about the brand but an input that co-creates it; DESTINATION BRANDING THEORY - brand image is the accumulated asset that converts into intention.

The vertical spine reproduces the linear sequence UGC credibility and authenticity → responsible tourism attributes → destination brand image → travel intention, while the annotations make explicit that credibility/eWOM logic governs the top of the chain and co-creation/branding logic governs the bottom. The two independent constructs are modelled as parallel inputs (not sequential) that

operate both directly on brand image (P1, P2) and indirectly through responsible tourism attributes (P3, P4).

6. DETAILED EXPLANATION OF EVERY RELATIONSHIP

- **UGC credibility → destination brand image (direct).** Under Source Credibility Theory, content from a source judged expert and trustworthy is more likely to be accepted, and eWOM theory establishes that accepted content is what updates the reader's evaluative beliefs (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Cheung & Thadani, 2012). When credible peer content is adopted, its associations accrete to the destination's image; through the co-creation lens these accreted associations are not external commentary but brand substance (Zhang et al., 2018). Credibility thus has a direct route to brand image independent of the specific content conveyed.
- **UGC authenticity → destination brand image (direct).** Authenticity operates through a partly distinct mechanism. Where credibility governs whether content is believed, authenticity governs how it is experienced — as sincere, lived testimony rather than performance. Kim and Kim (2020) show authenticity building trust toward the destination itself, and authenticity theory holds that perceived genuineness is what audiences seek and reward in tourism representation (Wang, 1999; Kolar & Žabkar, 2010). Authentic UGC therefore feeds the authenticity, trust, and emotional-connection dimensions of brand image directly.
- **UGC credibility and authenticity → responsible tourism attributes (the contextual path).** This is the framework's distinctive claim. Responsible-tourism attributes are credence qualities that audiences cannot easily verify and are primed to doubt when asserted by interested parties. Credible, authentic peer content resolves this by providing the evidentiary and experiential warrant that marketer messaging lacks — a visitor's photograph of a community enterprise, a first-hand account of local sourcing, or a narrative of ethical host interaction transmits responsibility values as discovered rather than sold authenticity (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999; Sims, 2009). Kerala's community-benefit and local-sourcing practices (Chettiparamb & Kokkranikkal, 2012) are exactly the kind of attributes whose believable communication depends on this peer-verification effect.
- **Responsible tourism attributes → destination brand image.** Perceived responsibility attributes are not free-floating; they populate specific brand-image dimensions. Community participation and ethical practice feed trust; cultural authenticity and local products feed the authenticity dimension; environmental care feeds the sustainability dimension; and the affective resonance of encountering these attributes feeds emotional connection and memorability (Kim, 2018). Responsibility attributes are thus the substantive content that gives the RT destination brand its differentiated image, distinguishing it from a conventionally attractive place.
- **Destination brand image → travel intention.** This relationship is the most firmly established in the literature: favourable destination image is a strong and consistent antecedent of behavioural intention (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Chaulagain et al., 2019). Within the framework, image is the accumulated brand asset through which all upstream effects are realised as intention.
- **Mediation.** Because the upstream constructs act on intention through their contribution to image, destination brand image is modelled as the mediating mechanism, with responsibility attributes functioning as an intervening content layer between UGC qualities and image.

7. CONCEPTUAL PROPOSITIONS

- **P1: UGC credibility positively influences destination brand image.** Source Credibility Theory predicts that expert, trustworthy sources produce message acceptance (Hovland & Weiss, 1951;

Ohanian, 1990), and eWOM research confirms that only credible content is adopted while suspect content is discounted (Filieri, 2016; Filieri et al., 2015). Co-creation theory then holds that adopted peer content becomes an input to the brand rather than mere commentary on it (Zhang et al., 2018). It follows that as the credibility of UGC about a Kerala RT destination rises, the associations it carries are more likely to be accepted and integrated into the destination's brand image.

- **P2: UGC authenticity positively influences destination brand image.** Authenticity is the quality that renders peer testimony experientially genuine, and perceived authenticity of reviews has been shown to build trust in the destination (Kim & Kim, 2020). Because authenticity is what tourism audiences actively seek (Wang, 1999; Kolar & Žabkar, 2010), authentic UGC feeds the authenticity, trust, and emotional-connection dimensions of brand image directly, independent of the source's expertise. A more authentic UGC therefore strengthens the destination brand image.
- **P3: UGC credibility and authenticity positively shape perceptions of responsible tourism attributes.** Responsibility attributes are credence qualities exposed to greenwashing scepticism; assertions by the destination itself are prone to discounting. Credible, authentic peer content supplies the evidentiary and experiential warrant that official messaging cannot, allowing responsibility claims to be read as discovered rather than constructed authenticity (MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999; Sims, 2009). Hence the more credible and authentic the UGC, the more strongly audiences will perceive Kerala RT destinations as delivering community participation, cultural authenticity, environmental sustainability, local products, and ethical practice.
- **P4: Perceived responsible tourism attributes positively influence destination brand image.** Responsibility attributes are the substantive meanings that differentiate an RT brand. They map onto brand-image dimensions — participation and ethics onto trust, cultural authenticity and local products onto authenticity, environmental care onto sustainability, and the affective salience of these encounters onto emotional connection and memorability (Kim, 2018; Scheyvens, 1999; Mihalič, 2016). Stronger perceptions of responsibility attributes therefore produce a more favourable and more distinctively responsible destination brand image.
- **P5: Destination brand image positively influences travel intention.** Meta-analytic and cross-destination evidence establishes destination image as a robust antecedent of behavioural intention (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Chaulagain et al., 2019), consistent with intention-formation logic in which favourable evaluations precede behavioural willingness (Ajzen, 1991). A stronger destination brand image for a Kerala RT destination will therefore raise travellers' intention to visit.
- **P6: Destination brand image mediates the effect of UGC credibility and authenticity — transmitted through responsible tourism attributes — on travel intention.** Integrating P1–P5, the influence of UGC on behaviour is not direct but works by building the brand asset that drives intention (Zhang et al., 2018; Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). Credible, authentic content shapes perceptions of responsibility attributes (P3), those perceptions feed brand image (P4), and brand image converts into intention (P5). Destination brand image thus carries the upstream effects to the behavioural outcome, functioning as the mediating mechanism of the framework.

8. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The framework makes three contributions. First, it integrates four traditions that are typically deployed piecemeal into a single, continuous logic in which Source Credibility Theory, eWOM theory, brand co-creation theory, and destination branding theory each explain a consecutive link in the causal chain rather than competing accounts of the same link. This addresses a recurring weakness in UGC–branding scholarship, where credibility, diffusion, co-creation, and brand outcomes are studied in isolation.

Second, it extends credibility and co-creation reasoning into the responsibility domain by theorising a peer-verification substitution effect: authentic tourist content can communicate credence-based sustainability and community-benefit meanings that marketer-controlled messaging communicates poorly. This reframes responsible-tourism communication as a co-creation problem rather than a promotional one and connects the sustainability-tourism and digital-tourism literatures that have largely developed apart.

Third, it specifies destination brand image, disaggregated into authenticity, trust, sustainability, memorability, and emotional connection, as the mediating asset through which co-created responsibility meanings become travel intention — offering a more content-specified account of image than the generic favourable/unfavourable modelling common in the field.

9. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

For DMOs and RT destination managers in Kerala and comparable settings, the framework reframes the marketing task from producing responsibility claims to enabling credible ones. Because P3 locates the persuasive power of responsibility communication in peer credibility and authenticity, official campaigns asserting community benefit or ecological care will tend to be discounted; the higher-return strategy is to create the conditions and occasions for authentic tourist content to be generated and surfaced — for example, by designing genuine community-interaction experiences that visitors are moved to document, and by curating (without scripting) the resulting content.

The co-destruction risk identified by Lund et al. (2020) implies that RT brands are especially fragile: a credible peer account of irresponsible conduct is as brand-constituting as a positive one. Managers should therefore treat operational responsibility performance as a communication asset and monitor peer channels as brand-governance infrastructure, not merely as sentiment data. Finally, because the framework routes intention through specific image dimensions, managers can prioritise the attributes — local products, cultural authenticity, ethical host interaction — most likely to yield authentic, shareable content and the strongest affective resonance (Sims, 2009; Kim, 2018).

10. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The framework is conceptual and its propositions require empirical validation. Priority directions include: operationalising UGC credibility and UGC authenticity as distinct measured constructs and testing their separate paths (P1, P2) using survey or experimental designs with prospective visitors to Kerala RT destinations; testing the peer-verification substitution effect (P3) experimentally by contrasting responsibility claims attributed to the DMO versus to fellow travellers; and estimating the mediating role of destination brand image (P6) through structural equation modelling. Content-analytic and computational methods could examine which responsibility attributes actually appear in Kerala UGC and how they are framed, addressing the field's silence on the content of transmitted brand meaning. Comparative work across RT and mainstream destinations would establish whether the substitution effect is genuinely stronger where attributes are credence-based. Longitudinal designs could probe co-destruction dynamics, and moderators such as platform type, tourist domestic/international origin, and prior familiarity warrant inclusion as boundary conditions.

11. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to explain how user-generated content contributes to destination branding in Kerala's responsible tourism destinations, a question that existing UGC-branding models — built for mainstream destinations and largely silent on the communication of responsibility — do not adequately answer. By integrating Source Credibility Theory, eWOM theory, brand co-creation theory, and destination branding theory into a single logic, the framework positions credible and authentic UGC as the mechanism by which

credence-based responsibility attributes become believable, become brand image, and become travel intention. Its central theoretical move is the peer-verification substitution effect: authentic tourist content can carry the responsibility meanings that official messaging cannot credibly assert. The six propositions translate this logic into testable relationships. If validated, the framework would reposition responsible-tourism marketing as the governance of co-created authenticity rather than the projection of claims — a shift with direct relevance to Kerala and to responsible destinations more broadly. As a conceptual contribution, its value now depends on empirical scrutiny.

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