



Research article

From likes to luggage: The role of social media content in attracting tourists

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Social media content
Tourist inflow
Tourist engagement
Content creators
Tourism industry

ABSTRACT

The tourism industry has become increasingly information-driven where tourists need reliable information to make their travel decisions. Social media content creators have emerged as prominent figures in disseminating authentic and credible information about tourist destinations worldwide. However, scant attention has been paid to explore the role of social media content in influencing tourist inflows and tourist engagement with tourism-related content on social media. To fill this gap, the present study utilized three social media analytic tools: VidIQ, TubeBuddy, and Social Blade, to collect data pertaining to tourism-related content across six tourist destinations in the Arabian Gulf region. The results indicate that these six tourist destinations collectively attracted 47 million visitors in a single year while garnering 158 million views on YouTube. Our findings indicate that tourists' consumption of tourism-related content on YouTube directly relates to the number of tourists visiting a destination. In addition, the present study also finds that destination popularity leads to higher number of video views on YouTube as well as higher numbers of tourists to the destination. Furthermore, the current study delineates the role of content creator characteristics in influencing user engagement with tourism-related content. The present study offers valuable insights for destination management organizations, tourism operators, tourism industry stakeholders, content creators, social media marketing managers and destination brand managers.

1. Introduction

The tourism industry is characterized by a high degree of information dependency, as travelers carefully research potential destinations before making a final decision [1]. Traditionally, the main sources for customers' travel and tourism related information were predominantly controlled by actors within the tourism industry. These resources tend to largely portray the bright side of destinations and experiences yet accompanied inherited bias [2,3]. Many of these resources are still managed and operated by the tourism and travel industry stakeholders such as destination management organizations (DMO), hotels, tourism operators, and airlines that makes it difficult for the tourists to discern the authenticity from the promotional content. In recent years, information sources in the tourism sector have greatly transformed from traditional to digital media as tourists increasingly rely on a myriad of digital resources and channels. Through various platforms the tourists can make informed decisions while they explore global destinations, plan their

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e38914>

Received 28 May 2024; Received in revised form 18 September 2024; Accepted 2 October 2024

Available online 3 October 2024

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journeys, and manage bookings.

The rise of digital technologies, particularly social media, has empowered tourists to gather unbiased information to make their travel decisions [1,4]. Social media has been instrumental in reforming the tourism industry by providing novel and creative approaches of communication, information propagation, and information sharing [5,6]. An increasing number of organizations in the tourism industry utilize these platforms to engage with the tourists and influence their purchase decisions. Social media platforms are being used actively by hotels, travel agencies, and hospitality companies to share information, recommendations, and opinions to pursue competitive advantage. Social media platforms have become instrumental for tourists to know more about other tourists' travel experiences and ascertain authentic information about tourist destinations. Popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube are the mainstay of tourism-related content which provide affordable, effective, and authentic information to potential tourists across the globe [7].

YouTube is considered as one of the most effective platforms for content creation and consumption [1,4]. YouTube is a leading social media platform that hosts millions of videos and has been a popular source for tourism related content for people across the globe. Celebrities, tourism related businesses, ministries, and independent content creators have been sharing videos on various tourism themes, including cultural exploration, local cuisine, historical landmarks, eco-tourism, wildlife safaris, and backpacking adventures. Particularly, YouTube provides ample opportunities to independent content creators and travel vloggers who travel to different places and offer their reviews for other tourists. In fact, independent content creators are now considered the most authentic source of travel and tourism related information [8,9]. These content creators actively create and promote credible content and persuasive information pertaining to tourism places and destinations which play a significant role in promoting tourism, attracting tourists and influencing the travel decisions of their followers [10,11]. The rise of independent content creators and travel vloggers has yielded multiple benefits Firstly, content creation has emerged as a viable and legitimate career option in the rapidly growing creator economy which enables individuals to turn their passion for travel and storytelling into a profession [1]. Social media platforms allow content creators and travel vloggers to monetize their channels which has become a new career option. Secondly, social media content creators offer a potentially unique perspective, perceived as less susceptible to the sway of corporate agendas, marketing messages, and promotional narratives. That is why customers are increasingly relying on these content creators in making travel and tourism related decisions [12,13].

Research on the impact of social media in the tourism sector is growing yet still in its infancy. A number of studies have examined user satisfaction with tourism related content on YouTube and other social media platforms [14]. Studies have also been conducted to understand the behavioral intentions against the YouTube tourism content [15]. Another stream of research has also examined critical aspects that influence tourist behavior and decision making such as online reviews, influencer marketing, and virtual experiences [12, 16]. However, these studies mainly focus on understanding tourists' intentions while overlooking the impact of tourism-related content on the actual number of tourists visiting a destination. Similarly, the relationship between tourists' behavioral engagement with social media content and actual number of tourists visiting a destination has not been studied. Although consumer engagement has garnered significant research attention, the majority of studies have focused on cognitive and emotional engagement (e.g., Refs. [17,18]), leaving behavioral engagement as a relatively underexplored domain. However, on social media platforms like YouTube, behavioral engagement takes precedence, and its direct measurement through metrics such as views, likes, and comments offers a more nuanced understanding. Unlike retrospective measures commonly employed in marketing and tourism research, direct measurement enables researchers to capture actual behavior which provides a more accurate representation of engagement. In addition, extant literature also lacks evidence on the relationship of tourists' inflow and content creators' characteristics such as gender, language and country of origin. To fill these gaps, the present study aims to examine the relationship between the number of tourists visiting a destination with the consumption of tourism-related content on YouTube. Additionally, the present study also attempts to delineate the association between content creator characteristics and consumption of tourism-related content. For this purpose, the present study follows a more pragmatic approach by measuring the consumption of tourism-related content in the form of views, likes and comments on YouTube and gathering the data about actual number of tourists visiting six tourist destinations in the Arabian Gulf region i.e., Bahrain, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization [19], Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) destinations welcomed more than 47 million tourists in 2022. This immense popularity positions the Gulf region as a prime candidate for research on social media content creation within the tourism sector.

The present study provides in-depth understanding on the role of social media content consumption on tourist inflow to tourist destinations which has potential implications. In doing so, the present study enhances the body of knowledge in the realm of travel and tourism marketing, tourist engagement, creator economy, content creation and consumption, and social media marketing. For instance, this study distinguishes from traditional approaches that rely on retrospective methods by utilizing real-time engagement metrics such as video views, likes, and comments to offer a more realistic understanding of tourists' engagement with tourism-related content on YouTube. This study highlights the growing importance of content creators in the tourism industry. It emphasizes how these creators are becoming key influencers who engage tourists with tourism-related content in a way similar to how traditional brands use products and services to attract tourists. The current study documents evidence across six tourist destinations and offers valuable insights for DMOs, destination brand managers, social media marketing professionals and tourism industry stakeholders.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social media content creation and tourism

Tourists' decision towards a destination is highly influenced by individuals (such as influencers) or organizations while they search for the information on social media [20]. It is evident in the literature that digital content marketing in the social media platform has a meaningful impact on electronic word-of-mouth behavior [5]. In fact, as a means of interactive platform, social media users utilize YouTube, TripAdvisor, Instagram, Facebook, and Booking.com for sharing their experiences related to travel and tourism. Hence, different social media platforms offer gateways for the influencers to endorse a particular travel destination and promote it among the targeted communities. As pointed out by Xu and Pratt [21], the content creators can have an impact on the decision of destination travelers by creating content on social media, such as YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, etc. The level of tourists' satisfaction as well as their intention to visit the place again or positively recommend visiting the same to others (such as friends, relatives, peer groups) are the function of viewed contents created and shared on myriad social media platforms [21,22].

You Tube, as a specific platform of social media, plays a significant role to shape up the tourists' behavior. If the visitors find the travel vlogs on YouTube entertaining, relaxing, and trustworthy, they are attracted to visit the place with enormous motivation [23]. Huertas et al. [8] conducted a study on Spanish tourists to see how YouTube can efficiently and successfully promote and establish a destination as a brand. They pointed out that content created and shared on YouTube generates knowledge regarding the destination and creates favorable images among visitors that inspire them to visit that destination.

2.2. Destination popularity on YouTube and tourist engagement

The word 'engagement' has been conceptualized as "a user-initiated action" [17], that drives involvement and value co-creation [24–26]. Hollebeek [18] operationalized it as the function of cognitive, conative, and action (behavioral) perspective. This study views online consumer engagement from an interactive perspective, aligned with the study of Khan [4] and Ksiazek, Peer, and Lessard [27]. However, most of these studies measure user engagement with retrospective measures and do not exactly measure behavior engagement. Particularly, the degree of consumer engagement with online platforms, specifically YouTube, can be demonstrated in the form of consumption, participation, and production [28]. Users are considered as engaged with the contents in terms of consumption if they watch the video, like or dislike it and post comments as well as read comments posted by others [1,4].

Since the inception of Web 2.0 in 2004, the Internet users' roles have been changed dramatically and eventually from submissive readers to active and dynamic creators [29]. Content can be generated by users in numerous forms such as videos published on YouTube, reels on Instagram and Facebook, tweets on X platform, and consumer reviews on travel websites e.g., TripAdvisor and Booking.com. Travelers are not only exposed to the content in terms of texts, images, or videos they also find them attractive, memorable, and engaging [30]. After watching videos on YouTube regarding a particular destination through which people came to know about that place as well as gather necessary information that in turn creates emotional bonding with them. Hence, visitors have become more engaged with the content creators of such videos. Compared to other categories of travel content, Travel vlogs have become more popular and four times more powerful in engaging viewers [31,32]. In fact, independent content creators are favored more by the audience and they love to establish relationships with independent vloggers. As the main video streaming platform, YouTube provides co-creation opportunities that convert consumers to prosumers [33]. Simultaneous creation (content production) and consumption facility enables the viewers to engage more with YouTube platform and it is quite relevant to the case of destination. From the supply side perspective, popular and attractive destinations usually get more attention from the YouTube content creators [34]. Both professional and independent vloggers found YouTube as the most suitable channel to embark their video content. From the demand perspective, YouTube has proven as a "travel-hack hub" for the visitors, particularly who are at the planning phase of their visit.

During the planning phases tourists visit YouTube and search content pertaining to destinations they want to visit. Tourists' search activities make that destination more popular on YouTube in the form of higher volume of keyword searches. Keyword search volume represents destinations' popularity on YouTube. However, the extant literature paid scant attention to investigate how destination popularity relates with tourists' engagement. In this regard, Kim and Kim [35] concluded that destination authenticity and popularity enhance travelers' satisfaction and attachment towards that destination and as a result boosts up their level of engagement in terms of liking and commenting on social media. However, tourists' engagement in the form of video consumption on YouTube remains un-addressed. Against this backdrop, the present study raises following research question.

Research Question RQ1. Does destination popularity relate with more views of tourism-related content on YouTube?

2.3. Destination popularity on YouTube and tourist inflow

YouTube has emerged as a pivotal platform for both content creators and viewers. Because the source of information is clearly identified on YouTube, viewers perceive it as a trustworthy source for a wide range of information. In the tourism industry, travel vlogs on YouTube are particularly influential in shaping travelers' behavior. In this regard, Cheng, Wei, and Zhang [36] demonstrated that visitors' engagement with travel destinations is strongly influenced by source credibility which ultimately strengthens their visit intention. Hence, by serving as a credible source of information, tourism-related content on YouTube may play a remarkable role in increasing the inflow of tourists towards a destination. Online travel magazine Drift [37] reported Expedia survey which revealed that

majority of the travelers (59 %) who are under 35 years of age acknowledge YouTube travel videos as game changers for their travel decisions. Tourists watch videos about popular tourist destinations by searching for such videos. Tourists' search activities can make a destination trendy on YouTube, reflected in a higher volume of keyword searches. Consequently, tourists' decisions to visit a destination are increasingly influenced by the content they consume and reviews from content creators on YouTube. However, the link between a destination's popularity on YouTube and actual tourist inflow to that location remains understudied. Therefore, the present study aims to answer the following question.

Research Question RQ2. Does destination popularity link to the higher number of tourists visiting a destination?

2.4. Tourist engagement on YouTube and tourist inflow to destination

Number of video views is one of the indicators of popularity of the video contents on YouTube channels and such popularity of video vlogs has become a vital metric for the content creators as well as destinations as a brand [38]. In addition to likes, comments, and shares as a part of post-view engagement behavior, number of video views has become an integral part of the evaluation of popularity and quality of the video posted. Tafesse [39] claimed that viewers' attitude formation and purchase intention towards a brand (such as destination) is highly functional to the number of views of such brand on the YouTube channel. It indicates that if a travel vlog is popular about a particular destination in terms of number of views, it has the capacity to appeal the viewers to be engaged more through demonstrating likes, shares, and comments, which, as a consequence, influence their visit intention. In this connection, it is expected that more the number of views of a travel vlog about a specific destination on YouTube, greater the possibility of viewers to visit the destination. Thus, the present study endeavors to understand if the number of travel video views on YouTube enhances the number of inflow of tourists towards a destination.

Research Question RQ3. Does number of video views relate to higher number of tourists to a destination?

Travel vlogs on YouTube draw viewers in by showing real-life experiences at tourist destinations [40]. When presented with engaging and informative content about a desired destination, potential travelers are more likely to interact with the vlog. This engagement, measured by likes, comments, and watch time, can translate into a stronger pull towards the destination, potentially leading to increased viewership for similar travel vlogs. Since the video vloggers on YouTube demonstrate clear picture and overall views of a destination [41], audiences are more attracted to visit those places [42]. In this connection, Peralta [43] argued that as an outcome of their capacity to demonstrate travel insights and real-life experiences, travel vlogs on YouTube are expected to fascinate tourists. To what extent tourists are likely to be attracted to a destination through YouTube vlogs is the function of their level of engagement with respect to reading, writing or sharing comments, and watching or sharing videos [44]. Yoo, Kim, and Lee [45] revealed that the higher the level of engagement in terms of like, comment, and running time of watching videos, the greater the number of views of the vlog on YouTube. To be entertained through watching travel related amusing videos on YouTube, tourists get more engaged with the video contents [41], which, as a consequence, drives them to visit the watched destination. Thus, viewers' engagement with the travel video content on YouTube in the form of like, comment, and share may have profound impact on their visit decision, which may enhance the inflow of visitors towards a particular destination.

Research Question RQ4. Does higher engagement (likes and comments) on YouTube videos associate with a higher number of tourists to a destination?

2.5. Characteristics of content creators and tourist engagement

Khan [4] suggests a gender difference in YouTube video engagement. The study found that males may be more likely to express disapproval through dislikes, while females tend to share videos more frequently. From the content creators' perspective, Le and Hancer [46] found that female vloggers are perceived physically attractive compared to male creators, whereas male vloggers are considered credible compared to females. The finding highlights the potential influence of content creators' characteristics on viewer engagement. In the tourism context specifically, characteristics like gender, language, and country of origin of the creator may influence how tourists engage with travel-related content. However, the existing literature lacks sufficient evidence on this specific impact. Therefore, this study aims to address the following question.

Research Question RQ5. Do tourism content creators' characteristics (gender, language and country of origin) influence tourists' engagement on YouTube?

3. Methodology

This study presents a unique and pragmatic approach to collecting and analyzing tourism-related video content from YouTube. We employed three social media analytics tools: Social Blade, VidIQ, and Tubebuddy, to gather data from YouTube [47]. Tubebuddy's search rank tracking option provides a list of the top 20 videos for a single keyword. It utilizes various metrics like user engagement (views, likes, and comments), click-through rate, watch time, and video history. Similarly, VidIQ offers details on video metrics such as views, likes, comments, video duration, subscriber count, and search tags. Social Blade focuses on YouTube channel details, including country of origin, top videos, and subscriber count. Using these tools and a set of keywords, we collected data. We began our search with the following keywords.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of content creators and channel characteristics.

Factor		Bahrain	KSA	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	UAE	Total
Total Videos		49	72	47	68	58	72	366
Channel Subscribers	Total	21,160,599	73,385,080	31,633,894	50,560,532	35,338,360	14,821,131	226,899,596
	Average	431,849	1,019,237	673,062	743,537	609,282	205,849	NA
	Minimum	358	2300	134	792	1330	881	NA
	Maximum	3,140,000	15,100,000	7,870,000	9,570,000	4,580,000	2,060,000	NA
Channel Country of Origin	USA	5	23	11	17	18	14	88
	UK	9	10	5	12	9	7	52
	India	7	7	8	9	1	14	46
	Germany	3	2	3	7	4	1	20
	Pakistan	2	1	1	3	2	0	9
	Bahrain	4	0	0	0	0	0	4
	Kuwait	0	0	4	1	1	0	6
	KSA	4	5	2	0	2	0	13
	Oman	0	0	1	1	1	0	3
	Qatar	0	0	0	0	7	0	7
	UAE	2	1	0	3	0	17	23
Others	13	23	12	15	16	19	98	
Video Created by	Male	28	48	33	25	34	36	204
	Female	14	18	6	24	16	22	100
	Group/Other	7	6	8	19	8	14	62
Video Language	English	31	57	28	49	42	53	260
	Others	18	15	19	19	16	19	106

Source: Prepared by authors

Table 2
Statistics of video views, engagement, keyword volume and tourist inflow.

Factor		Bahrain	KSA	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	UAE
Video Views	Total	8,854,917	44,903,223	17,367,736	23,164,048	25,312,800	38,026,075
	Average	180,713	623,656	369,526	340,648	436,428	528,140
	Minimum	5445	22,007	427	782	23,425	354
	Maximum	1,261,804	6,129,214	3,649,189	5,200,000	8,468,563	5,685,715
Video Likes	Total	231,306	1,095,510	408,295	279,850	384,657	428,073
	Average	4721	15,215	8687	4115	6632	5945
	Minimum	131	185	20	38	0	7
	Maximum	55,600	138,000	72,100	41,900	71,600	70,100
Video Comments	Total	18144	125,816	33,687	33,151	34,723	22478
	Average	370	1747	717	488	599	312
	Minimum	8	1	4	1	1	0
	Maximum	3208	24,417	6429	9329	5923	3621
Duration (Minutes)	Total	705	1132	633	1065.86	1057	1013
	Average	14.38	15.72	13.46	15.67	18.22	14.06
	Minimum	4	1	2	1	1	2
	Maximum	56	48	37	43	54	52
Keyword Search Volume	Total	770,732	7,200,375	175,721	10,804,463	22,812,502	59,033,786
	Average	77,073	720,038	17,572	1,080,446	2,281,250	5,903,379
	Minimum	5087	22,905	2721	18,226	31,342	143,228
	Maximum	433,567	1,913,823	85,600	7,206,488	16,006,852	30,591,336
Tourist Inflow*	Total	3,700,000	16,600,000	100,000**	2,100,000	2,600,000	22,700,000

*2022, **2021.

Source: Prepared by authors

- Tourist attractions in (country name)
- Tourist places in (country name)
- Places to visit in (country name)
- Things to do in (country name)
- Travel to (country name)

Based on these keywords, we identified search tags used by content creators for each video (available through VidIQ and Tube-buddy). We then tracked search rankings for these keywords and compiled a list of the top 20 videos for each one. This process allowed us to collect 366 videos across six tourist destinations in the Gulf region. Details of the videos for each country and their corresponding engagement metrics are provided in [Tables 1 and 2](#).

This study gathers data about travel and tourism content on YouTube published pertaining to six tourism destinations in the Gulf

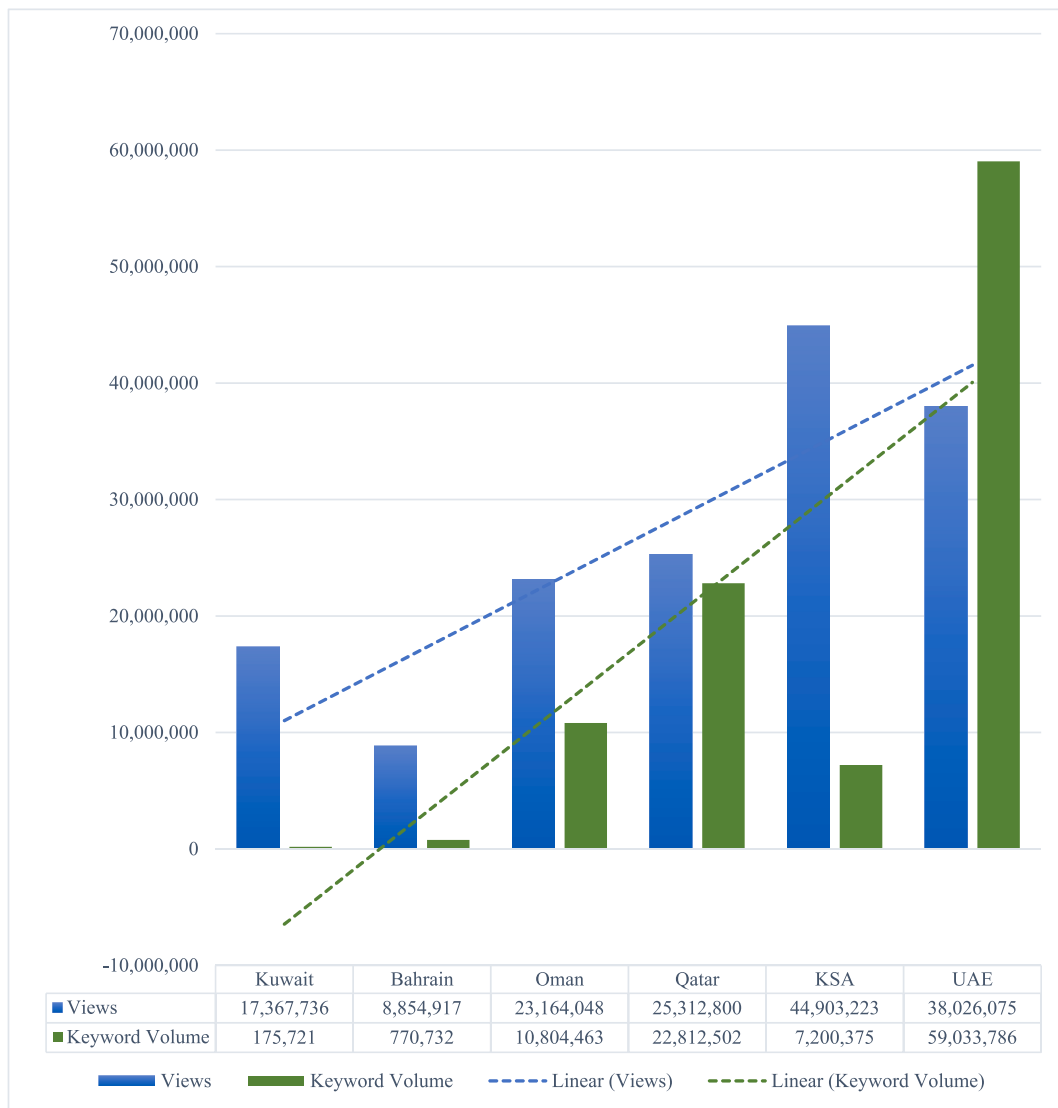


Fig. 1. Relationship of destination popularity (keyword volume) with video views.
 Source: Prepared by authors

region for several reasons. The Gulf region is a group of six member countries of the GCC. The Gulf region comprises Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. These countries have become renowned tourist destinations, attracting millions of visitors annually. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization [19], GCC destinations welcomed more than 47 million tourists in 2022. This immense popularity positions the Gulf region as a prime candidate for research on social media content creation within the tourism sector. To ensure our analysis aligns with the study’s goals and scope, we employed a judgmental sampling approach [48]. This method allowed us to carefully select video content that relates with our research objectives. We used following criteria to select tourism-related video content on YouTube.

- Thematic Relevance: Content must directly relate to the hospitality and tourism industry.
- Geographic Focus: Content must showcase tourist destinations within GCC countries.
- Video Format: Content must be presented as a full-length YouTube video, excluding YouTube Shorts.
- Title Accuracy: The video title must accurately reflect the content it presents.
- Search Ranking: Videos must rank among the top 20 results for relevant keywords on TubeBuddy.
- Public Availability: Videos must be publicly accessible on the YouTube platform.

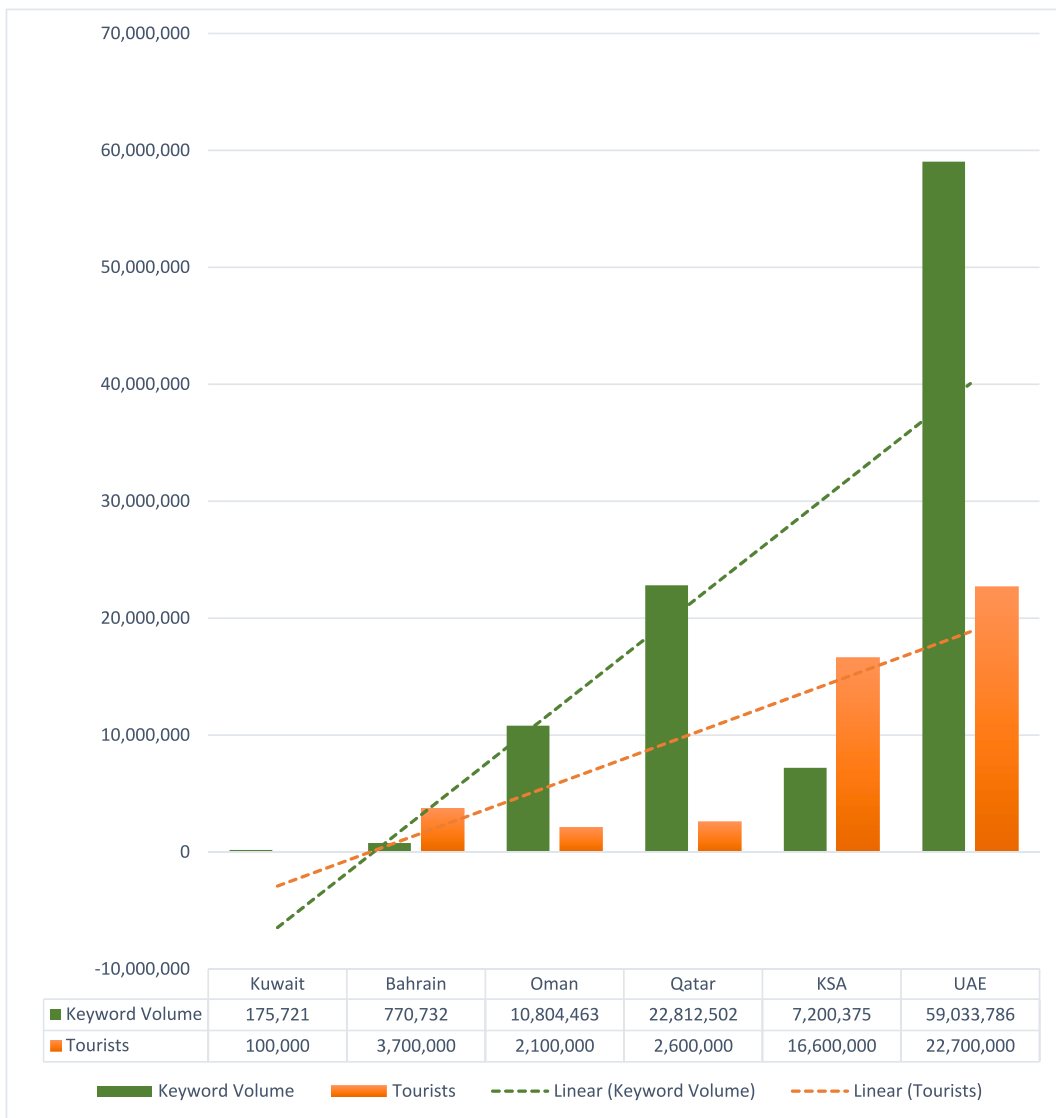


Fig. 2. Relationship of destination popularity (keyword volume) with tourist inflow.
Source: Prepared by authors

4. Results

The data about tourist inflow, tourism related video content and tourism content creators' characteristics across six tourist destinations in the Gulf region were organized and analyzed in several phases. First, we present descriptive statistics of content creator and channel characteristics in [Table 1](#). The table indicates that KSA, UAE and Oman have the most videos in the top ranked videos on the searched keywords. Similarly, table shows that the content creators who created content about KSA have the highest number of subscribers followed by Oman and Qatar. Most of the channels are registered in the United States of America (88 channels) followed by United Kingdom (52 channels) and India (46 channels). Fifty-five percent of video content was created by male creators while female creators only produced 27 percent of the videos. Finally, English remains the dominant language as 71 percent videos were published in English language.

[Table 2](#) provides statistics of video views, likes and comments as well as keyword search volume and tourist inflow across six destinations. The table shows that KSA received highest number of video views followed by UAE and Qatar. Video duration remains similar across countries. However, there is a considerable difference in keyword search volume across six tourism destinations which indicates destination popularity. Keyword search volume represents the number of viewers searching tourist places pertaining to a particular tourism destination on YouTube during the past month. According to keyword search volume UAE emerges as the most popular destination followed by Qatar and Oman. Similarly, UAE attracted most of number of tourists followed by KSA and Bahrain.

[Fig. 1](#) portrays the relationship of destination popularity (keyword volume) with number of video views of tourism-related content

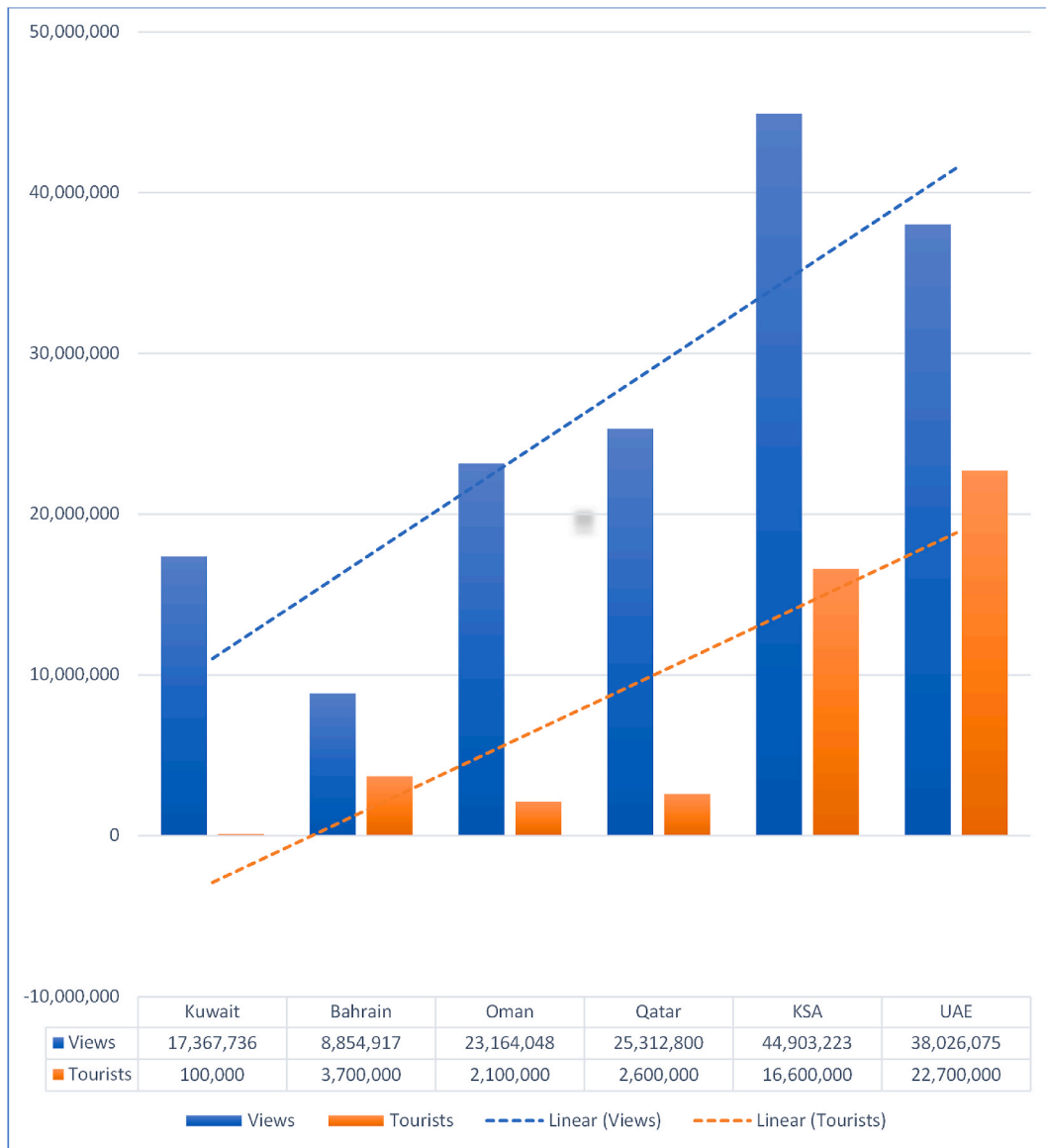


Fig. 3. Relationship of video views with tourist inflow.
Source: Prepared by authors

on YouTube. The graph reveals that the higher number of video views on YouTube relates to higher keyword volume which answers our research question RQ1. The trend lines divulge a linear and steep relationship among consumers’ search activities and video views. It implies that popular tourism destinations attract more viewers on YouTube who consume tourism-related content about tourist places pertaining to that particular destination.

Similarly, Fig. 2 illustrates the relationship of destination popularity (keyword volume) with the number of tourists visiting a particular tourist destination. The graph shows that the higher keyword volume relates with higher number of tourists visiting a destination which answers our research question RQ2. The trend lines reveal a linear and steep relationship among consumers’ search activities and tourist inflow. It indicates that popular tourism destinations attract more tourists who visit that particular destination.

Fig. 3 dives deeper into the relationship between tourist arrivals and online video views on YouTube. As the figure shows, tourist destinations with more YouTube video views attract a larger number of tourists. This aligns perfectly with our research question (RQ3). We can infer that there is a positive association between tourists’ consumption of online content and their decision to visit a destination.

To further validate the association between a destination’s popularity (keyword volume), video views, and tourist arrivals, we plotted the data on a line graph (see Fig. 4). The graph shows a clear upward trend where popular tourism destinations (i.e., higher keyword volume) garner higher number video views on YouTube. This trend validates the earlier findings and answers our research

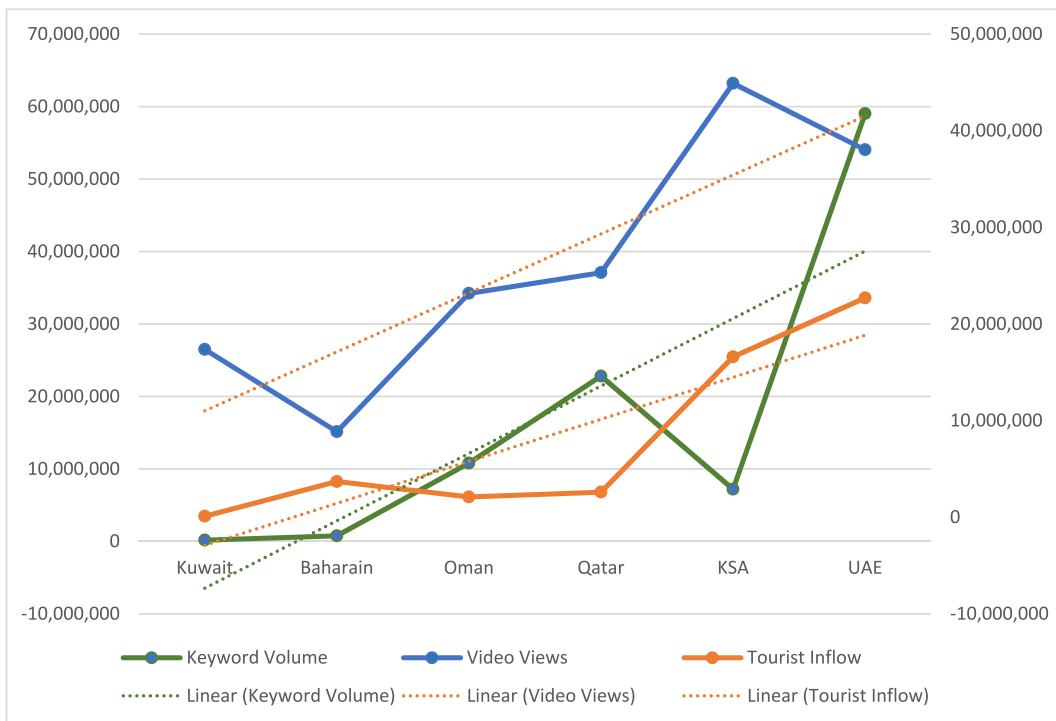


Fig. 4. Relationship of keyword volume with video views and tourist inflow. Source: Prepared by authors

question RQ1. Similarly, a positive link exists between a destination’s popularity and tourist numbers which substantiates the findings of RQ2. Finally, destinations with more YouTube video views tend to see a corresponding increase in tourist arrivals which validates our research question RQ3.

Fig. 5 outlines the relationship of tourists’ engagement (likes and comments) on YouTube with tourist inflow to a tourism destination. The graph reveals a linear relationship between tourists’ engagement and tourist inflow which addresses our research question RQ4. The linear relationship suggests that if tourists like and engage with tourism-related content they are more likely to visit the respective destination.

The findings of content creators’ characteristics and tourists’ engagement with tourism-related content on YouTube are presented in Table 3. The table indicates that content creators’ gender plays a key role in garnering tourists’ engagement. For instance, male content creators produced 56 percent of the total videos, but they received 71 percent views, 79 percent likes and 76 percent comments. It is pertinent to note that male content creators also have 79 percent subscribers. In contrast, female content creators produced 27 percent of the videos and managed to garner 21 percent of the views. Interestingly, female content creators have only 15 percent subscribers. It can be inferred that female content creators’ videos may have attracted views from the audience who are not their subscribers. Fig. 6 graphically represents gender-based content and tourists’ engagement which addresses our research question RQ5.

The language of tourism-related content seems to have minimal impact on viewership as 71 percent of the videos were produced in English which have received 70 percent views while 29 percent videos produced in other languages have garnered 30 percent of the views. Though English language enhances global reach, but content produced in local languages is equally effective in attracting tourists’ engagement with the content. We also investigated the relationship between YouTube channel origin and viewer engagement. Interestingly, no significant difference was found. Most channels received views proportional to the number of videos they produced. This implies that the location of your YouTube channel is less important than the relevance and quality of your content for attracting tourists.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The present study provides a comprehensive overview of the current landscape of social media content creation and tourist engagement within Gulf regions’ tourism sector. The current study finds that destination popularity on social media directly relates with tourist inflow. Similarly, destination popularity is also associated with increased tourist engagement with tourism-related content. This finding aligns with Arora and Lata’s [34] assertion that popular destinations get higher attention of tourists on YouTube. Furthermore, our study reveals that tourists’ engagement with tourism-related content also relates to increased tourist inflow to the tourist destinations. This finding corroborates earlier research which contends that tourists engage with travel vloggers on the internet which motivates them to visit the destination recommended by the vloggers [49]. Tourists search activities enhance destinations’

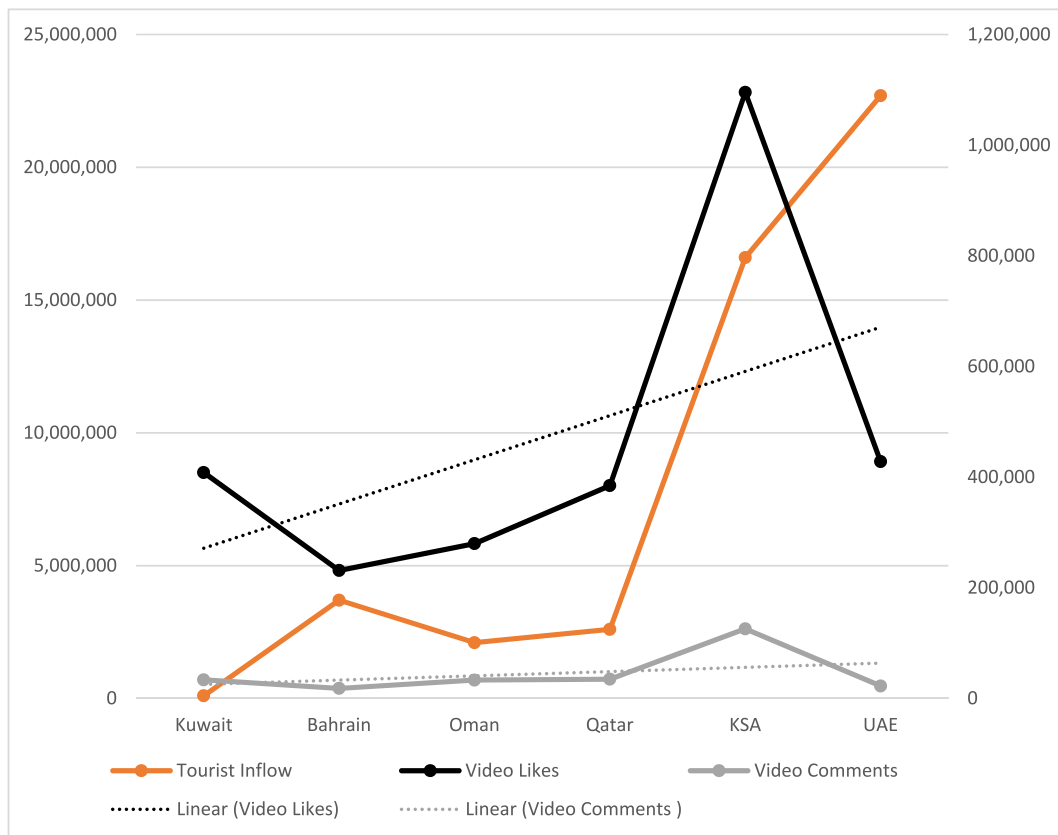


Fig. 5. Relationship of tourist engagement (likes and comments) with tourist inflow.
Source: Prepared by authors

popularity in terms of keyword search volume and engagement with tourism content creators [36,49]. Cheng, Wei and Zhang [36] affirm that tourism-related content and creator credibility enhance tourists’ visit intention to the destination. It is pertinent to note that the existing research examines tourists’ motivations and visit intentions while our study follows a more pragmatic approach by relating tourists’ real-time engagement (views, likes and comments) and actual search activities (keyword search volume) with the number of tourists who visited a particular destination.

In doing so, this study underscores the critical role of social media content in influencing tourist destination choices. Notably, YouTube has accumulated an impressive 157 million views for content related to tourist attractions in the Gulf region. These findings resonate with contemporary literature [1] which confirms that social media content creation fosters increased user engagement. The sizeable viewership and engagement metrics associated with Gulf region tourism content suggest a promising avenue for future tourist influx. Recognizing tourism as an information-intensive industry, where prospective visitors actively seek and consume significant information before travel decisions, this study emphasizes the importance of providing relevant and engaging content. The effective dissemination of such content emerges as a strategic approach to fostering the development of the region’s tourism sector which will lead to increased tourist interest and activity. Simply put, this study underscores the pivotal role of social media content in developing tourism in the digital era. However, the intensity of the role is based on the actors involved in it such as the content creators, tourists and digital media platforms. Notably, the number of tourists visiting a destination is identified as a key indicator of successful tourism development.

The present study enhances academicians’ understanding of social media contents’ role by categorizing YouTube video content into six factors: thematic relevance, geographic focus, video format, title accuracy, search ranking, and public availability. Thematic relevance was ensured by selecting content solely related to tourism and hospitality. Geographically, the study focused on six GCC countries in the Arabian Gulf. Video content was further categorized based on format, with only full-length videos considered, excluding YouTube shorts. Title accuracy was established by matching video titles with keywords and only relevant videos shortlisted for analysis. The study also considered search ranking by selecting videos appearing in the top twenty results for further analysis. Finally, public availability was a key requirement for video inclusion. The findings indicate that video content aligns with the dimensions of tourism destination development, namely awareness, attractiveness, accessibility, availability, appearance, and activities. This alignment demonstrates that social media content significantly supports tourism destination development by attracting potential tourists’ attention, particularly when created by innovative and creative content creators.

The present study contributes to the body of knowledge in several ways. First, the current study marks the first attempt to delineate

Table 3
Content creators' characteristics and tourists' engagement with tourism-related content.

Creator Characteristics		No. of Subscribers	No. of Videos	Views	Likes	Comments
Gender	Male	179,845,615 (79 %)	204 (56 %)	111,868,720 (71 %)	2,230,046 (79 %)	202788 (76 %)
	Female	33,816,268 (15 %)	100 (27 %)	33,530,965 (21 %)	421,246 (15 %)	48200 (18 %)
	Both/Others	13,237,713 (6 %)	62 (17 %)	12,229,114 (8 %)	176399 (6 %)	17011 (6 %)
Language	English	147,706,589 (65 %)	260 (71 %)	110,501,139 (70 %)	1,562,718 (55 %)	184678 (69 %)
	Others	79,193,007 (35 %)	106 (29 %)	47,127,660 (30 %)	1,264,973 (45 %)	83321 (31 %)
Country of Origin	USA	82,897,820 (37 %)	88 (24 %)	43,169,501 (27 %)	762,409 (27 %)	100557 (38 %)
	UK	19,771,030 (9 %)	52 (14 %)	13,526,409 (9 %)	223,439 (8 %)	25785 (10 %)
	India	39,347,947 (17 %)	46 (13 %)	21,667,743 (14 %)	540,525 (19 %)	32569 (12 %)
	Germany	16,180,760 (7 %)	20 (5 %)	7,718,331 (5 %)	241,230 (9 %)	17,047 (6 %)
	Pakistan	4,600,020 (2 %)	09 (2 %)	3,511,193 (2 %)	64016 (2 %)	2999 (1 %)
	Bahrain	177,637 (< 1 %)	04 (1 %)	264,871 (< 1 %)	3399 (< 1 %)	290 (< 1 %)
	KSA	11,345,500 (5 %)	13 (4 %)	6,714,567 (4 %)	150,982 (5 %)	10008 (4 %)
	Kuwait	1,521,000 (1 %)	07 (2 %)	781,279 (< 1 %)	18,335 (1 %)	2042 (< 1 %)
	Oman	2,762,820 (1 %)	03 (< 1 %)	5,733,360 (4 %)	97,959 (3 %)	2761 (1 %)
	Qatar	665,700 (< 1 %)	07 (2 %)	1,360,218 (1 %)	16,010 (1 %)	1220 (< 1 %)
	UAE	13,858,091 (6 %)	23 (6 %)	17,241,681 (11 %)	267,023 (9 %)	19164 (7 %)
	GCC	30,330,755 (13 %)	57 (16 %)	32,095,985 (20 %)	553,718 (20 %)	3549 (13 %)
	Others	33,771,271 (15 %)	94 (26 %)	35,939,646 (23 %)	442,364 (16 %)	53557 (20 %)
	Total		226,899,596	366	157,628,799	2,827,691

the association of tourist inflow with destination popularity and tourism-related social media content using actual measures of number of tourists, keyword search volume, video views, likes and comments. The present study is unique in its measures because the extant literature predominately used retrospective measures to examine the role of social media in tourists' intentions to visit a tourist destination. Second, the present study is the pioneering study that examines content creators' characteristics in relation to tourists' engagement on social media as the extant literature does not provide sufficient evidence on how content creators' characteristics relate with tourist engagement. Third, the present study encapsulates tourism-related content and tourist engagement across six tourist destinations in the Gulf region which provides in depth insights in the realm of tourism marketing and social media marketing.

5.1. Managerial implications

This study offers actionable insights for key players in the Gulf region's tourism industry, including DMOs, tourism operators, hotels, restaurants, airlines, and local content creators. For instance, social media presents ample opportunities for tourism sector organizations such as hotels, restaurants, airlines, and tourism operators to strategically position their services within tourism-related videos. This presents a means to elevate brand awareness and boost the sales of their products and services. In particular, these organizations can leverage tourism influencers/travel Vloggers to market their offerings, as tourists often follow influencers and consume their content in advance of visiting a destination. Furthermore, these entities can employ sales promotions, packages, and incentives within tourism-related content to attract tourists, thereby fostering increased engagement and patronage. Such strategic measures not only contribute to the growth of individual businesses but also play a role in bolstering the overall tourism sector and its economic impact.

The findings of our study offer valuable insights for both national and regional DMOs in the GCC countries. To capitalize on these insights and leverage social media for increased tourist engagement, DMOs across GCC countries may play an active role in harnessing the power of social media content and uplifting tourist inflow to the Gulf region. For instance, the DMOs in the region may establish partnerships with social media content creators, travel Vloggers or engage social media influencers to produce tourism-related content showcasing their regions. This strategic approach aims to raise awareness among potential tourists about the diverse attractions within these countries, ultimately driving an increase in tourist visits. This, in turn, can contribute to the economic growth of local businesses

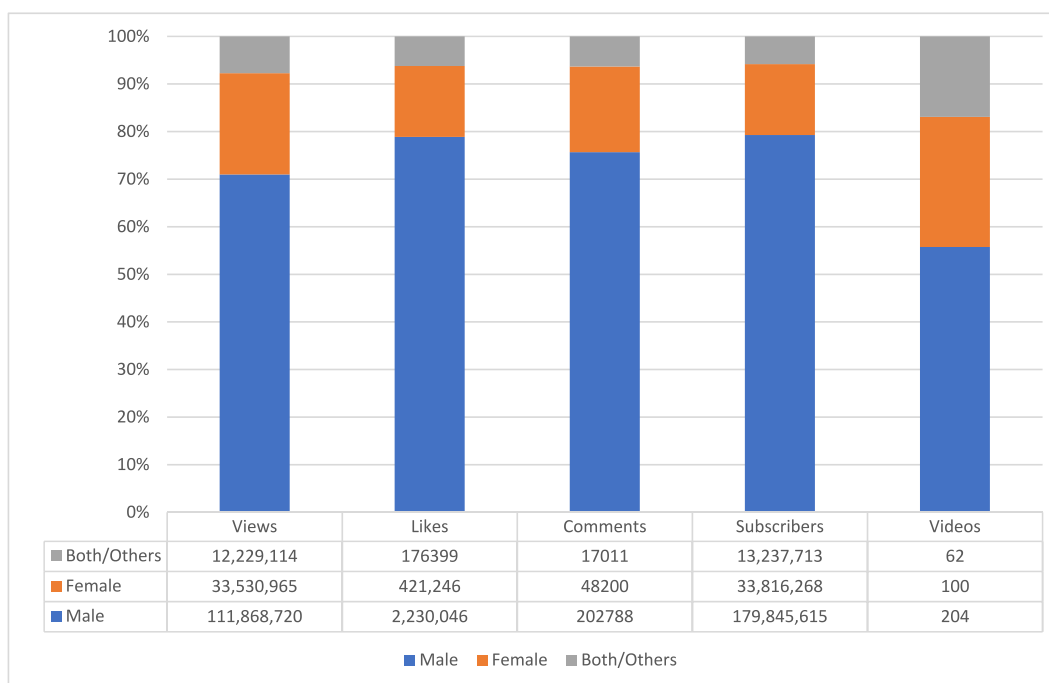


Fig. 6. Content creators' gender and tourist engagement (i.e., views, likes and comments).

Source: Prepared by authors

and communities in these areas. Additionally, DMOs may establish their own YouTube channels and commence sharing videos highlighting the tourist attractions within their respective regions. This proactive step will enable the DMOs to leverage the extensive reach and influence of YouTube. This will also help DMOs in effectively promoting their local attractions and fostering greater engagement with potential tourists across the globe. The national and regional DMOs can enhance their impact by generating comprehensive content that provides information on tourist attractions, visa and travel document requirements, and other pertinent details about the destination. By offering a wealth of relevant information, these DMOs may facilitate and streamline the trip-planning process for tourists considering a visit to the region. This approach ensures that potential visitors have easy access to the information they need which will ultimately contribute to more informed decision-making and smoother travel experiences.

The majority of tourism-related videos are currently produced in English that caters to a global audience. However, considering significant markets such as China, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Japan, Germany, France, and Turkey, where local language content holds greater appeal, DMOs should diversify by creating content in these languages. This strategic approach aims to resonate more effectively with potential tourists from these highly populated countries. To further enhance outreach, DMOs can also collaborate with tourism influencers and travel vloggers from these regions. By engaging influencers who can create and share content about region's tourist attractions, DMOs can tap into the local nuances and preferences of these target markets, influencing potential visitors to choose the region as their destination. Taking China as an example, being the world's largest outbound tourist market, where 154 million Chinese people traveled across the world for tourism in 2019. While Oman only received 2.5 million tourists in the whole year. If we take it as a reference and Oman manages to attract only 2 percent (3 million) of Chinese tourists, it will be higher than the rest of the world's tourist arrivals to Oman. The same applies to other GCC countries like Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar. Therefore, producing content in other languages and sharing on the relevant local platforms is critical to increase tourist inflow.

One notable finding of the study is the limited presence of registered YouTube channels in the GCC countries. This presents a significant opportunity for local content creators to enter the rapidly growing economic sector of content creation, specifically in the realm of tourism-related content. The potential impact of local content creation is twofold: firstly, it provides a lucrative source of income for GCC countries' burgeoning young population, and secondly, it has the potential to augment tourist inflow to GCC countries, thereby enhancing the tourism sector's contribution to the overall economy. Another finding is that male content creators are still dominating the tourism-related content in the Gulf region. However, female content creators garnered higher number of views relative to number of subscribers which presents an opportunity for female content creators to produce tourism-related content. Interestingly, the present study does not find considerable association between YouTube channels' country of origin and user engagement. This shows that the origin of the content creators' channel does not matter if viewers are finding their content relevant and engaging, they will consume the content. Therefore, content creators across the globe have equal opportunity to create relevant content and increase their channel engagement.

6. Limitations of the study and future research direction

The present study also has some limitations. First, the present study examines social media content pertaining to the Gulf region to provide deeper insights for the specific region. The future research may investigate tourism-related content across other regions like European Union, North America, South America, sub-continent (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives etc.), Eastern Asia and Africa. Second, the present study gathered tourism-related content from YouTube while other social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook and TikTok may also provide interesting insights. Third, the current study focuses on the content produced for a particular region while future research may select specific content creators who produce content about different tourism destinations and analyze that how change of tourism destination influences user engagement with the same content creator. Finally, the present study only examined the relationship of tourism-related content with number of tourists visiting a destination but did not consider length of the visit, amount of money spent during the visit and the constructive feedback given by the tourists due to unavailability of the data. Future research may consider incorporating these factors to further enrich our understanding of the role of social media content in explaining tourist behavior, specifically in relation to length of stay, expenditure during the visit, and constructive feedback.

Data availability statement

Data will be available on a reasonable request.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Khalid Hussain: Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Mirza Mohammad Didarul Alam:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Aqdas Malik:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Ali Tarhini:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Maha Khamis Al Balushi:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgments

This research project received funding from Sultan Qaboos University's internal grant Ref. No. IG/EPS/MRKT/23/01.

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