



Impact of User-Generated Content in Shaping Destination Brand Identity of Olumo Rock, Abeokuta, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: User-Generated Content (UGC) has become a powerful tool in digital media for shaping perceptions and branding of tourism destinations in the contemporary digital era. In Nigeria, where heritage sites such as Olumo Rock in Abeokuta hold deep cultural and historical significance, online user contributions play a crucial role in influencing public perception, cultural storytelling, and destination appeal.

Objective: This study examined the impact of User-Generated Content on the destination brand identity of Olumo Rock, Abeokuta, Nigeria. It explored how social media users employ visual and textual content to narrate experiences, promote cultural heritage, and construct personal and collective identities associated with the site.

Method: Adopting a qualitative research design, the study analysed 31 social media posts purposively selected from Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube between 2022 and 2024. Posts were screened based on relevance, engagement, and direct reference to Olumo Rock. Data were organized and coded using KoboToolbox, and subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and symbolic representations.

Results: Findings showed that User-Generated Content portrays Olumo Rock as a symbol of cultural pride, historical identity, and tourism attraction. Instagram and TikTok posts highlighted emotional and aesthetic appeal through short visuals, while YouTube videos offered longer narratives that blended storytelling with historical context. However, recurring concerns about site maintenance and accessibility revealed branding weaknesses.

Conclusion: The research demonstrates that User-Generated Content shapes tourist perceptions and simultaneously develops the symbolic value of destinations. The value of UGC remains underutilized by Nigerian tourism institutions, indicating a need for strategic digital storytelling approaches in official branding initiatives.

Unique Contribution: This study provides practical insight into how user-created digital narratives influence destination branding in Nigeria. It underscores the importance of integrating UGC into official tourism promotion strategies to strengthen authenticity and cultural storytelling.

Key Recommendation: Tourism boards and cultural institutions should collaborate with digital creators, improve site experiences, and monitor online content to ensure consistent and positive destination imagery that sustains long-term brand value.

Keywords: User-Generated Content, Destination Branding, Digital Tourism, Cultural Heritage, Social Media Marketing, Nigeria



INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, the ways destinations are marketed and perceived have undergone significant transformation. Traditional branding approaches once dominated by tourism boards and travel agencies are increasingly being reshaped and, in some cases, overtaken by content created and shared by ordinary tourists across various social media platforms. This form of content, referred to as User-Generated Content (UGC), has emerged as a dominant force in shaping destination image and identity globally (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). With platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and TripAdvisor, tourists have become active co-creators of destination narratives, influencing how potential visitors perceive, evaluate, and choose destinations (Munar, 2011).

Destination branding involves the deliberate creation and communication of a unique, appealing, and credible image for a place that distinguishes it from others and attracts specific target groups (Pike, 2005). UGC contributes to this process by offering authentic, real-time portrayals of destinations through personal photos, videos, and reviews. Such content often captures emotional and experiential aspects that are missing in official promotional materials, thereby enhancing credibility and audience engagement (Akehurst, 2009). Hanna and Rowley (2011) further emphasize that digital branding has evolved into a collaborative process between marketers and consumers, where social media serves as the arena for storytelling, identity construction, and dialogue.

Despite the growing influence of UGC in global tourism, limited empirical studies have focused on its role in shaping destination brand identity within the Nigerian context. Most existing research has centred on popular destinations in developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and parts of Asia (e.g., Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Munar, 2011; Akehurst, 2009). In Africa, few studies have explored UGC in relation to cultural or heritage tourism, and even fewer have examined its impact on specific Nigerian destinations. This creates a geographical and methodological gap, as earlier studies often relied on quantitative surveys or content audits of global tourist platforms, with limited qualitative exploration of how local destinations are represented by users' digital narratives.

Olumo Rock, located in Abeokuta, Ogun State, stands as one of Nigeria's most iconic heritage sites. It symbolizes cultural identity, resilience, and historical continuity, attracting both local and international visitors. However, the narratives surrounding Olumo Rock in online spaces especially those created by visitors remain underutilized by tourism agencies. The absence of systematic research on how such user-generated narratives influence its brand identity constitutes a key knowledge gap this study aimed to fill.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What types of user-generated content are most commonly associated with Olumo Rock on digital platforms?
2. How does user-generated content contribute to the construction of Olumo Rock's destination brand identity?
3. In what ways does UGC influence the perceptions and expectations of potential tourists regarding Olumo Rock?
4. What are the strategic implications of UGC for enhancing destination branding within Nigeria's tourism sector?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the Destination Image Formation Theory proposed by Gartner (1993), which explains how individuals develop perceptions of a destination. According to Gartner, destination image consists of three key components: the cognitive (what individuals know about a place), the affective (how they feel about it), and the conative (their intentions or behavioral responses). These perceptions are influenced by various information sources, including organic sources such as personal experiences and word-of-mouth; induced sources like advertisements and promotional materials; and autonomous sources such as news reports and documentaries.

In recent years, User-Generated Content (UGC) has emerged as one of the most influential forms of organic information in shaping destination image. Tourists now share their experiences through photographs, videos, travel blogs, and social media updates, all of which contribute to the process through which potential visitors perceive and emotionally connect with a destination.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

User-Generated Content (UGC):

UGC refers to any type of content such as text, images, movies, or reviews created and uploaded by individuals other than institutional entities. UGC in travel typically is composed of travel narratives uploaded on a website such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and TripAdvisor by tourists that can either become an influence or a reference source for potential holiday-makers (Munar, 2011; Akehurst, 2009).

Destination Branding

Destination branding involves the creation of a unique and attractive brand for a geographic destination that seeks to differentiate itself from its competitors and be appealing to its potential tourist markets. Destination branding employs logos and taglines, stories and experiences to create an image for a place (Pike, 2005; Hanna & Rowley, 2011).



Destination Brand Identity

These are the collective images and attributes tangible and intangible that together define how a destination wants to be perceived by its identified publics. These include the visual attractiveness, cultural symbols, histories, and visitor experience that comprise a destination's unique allure (Tasci & Kozak, 2006).

Digital Tourism Marketing:

Digital tourism advertising employs the amenities and assets of the web to promote destinations, communicate with tourists, and increase brand awareness. Social media advertising, influencer partnerships, and content dissemination are a part of it with a greater emphasis on interaction and co-creation (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

For this study, a qualitative research approach was employed, and secondary data sources were used to gain comprehensive insights into how digital user-generated content (UGC) contributes to shaping the brand identity of Olumo Rock.

Study Area: Olumo Rock, Abeokuta, Nigeria

Olumo Rock is a renowned granite outcrop at Abeokuta, the capital city of Ogun State located in southwest Nigeria. Olumo Rock is amongst the most renowned natural monuments in Nigeria since it towers approximately 137 meters above sea level and accommodates the history of shelter provision as well as its role as a cultural icon for the Egba nation. Its significance is not only in its geologic features but also spiritual, political, and socio-cultural ones.

Olumo is a Yoruba place name that consists of “Olu” and “mo”, that is “the rock moulded by God” or “God has moulded it” (Oduyoye, 2001). We can recognize here the deep religious sanctity that the local population attributes to the place. Olumo Rock is thus perceived not just as a piece of rock but as a creation sacred at the very center of Egba ethnic identity and the very origin of the city of Abeokuta itself whose meaning is “under the rock” in Yoruba.

Previously, Olumo Rock played a strategic role against the inter-tribal wars that plagued the 19th century, specifically in the migration and resettlement process of the Egba people following the destruction of the Oyo Empire. Its caves and upper observer sites provided shelter and vigilance against the battles and helped the Egba in repelling foreign attacks and consolidating their society under its canopy (Adepegba, 1995). Oral histories and local traditions validate the story with emphasis upon the rock as a spiritual sanctuary and fortress.

Today, the Olumo Rock is not only a site of historical and religious importance but also Nigeria's leading tourism destination. Infrastructural developments such as staircases, a lift, a museum,



and an art gallery have been added to the rock by the Ogun State government in a bid to improve accessibility and tourism experience. The rock is also inhabited by cultural festivals such as the Lisabi Festival and is a center of traditional worship with shrines that are regularly maintained by local custodians (Ojo, 2016).

Over the past years, Olumo Rock became increasingly accessible through the digital medium. Social content (UGC) through Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and TripAdvisor provides evidence of tourist experience, cultural narratives, and landscape imagery with the site. These digital manifestations are integral to the creation of public opinion and are a key contributory factor to the destination's dynamic brand image. The selection of Olumo Rock as the study area is chosen because of its dual significance as both a historically site and a digitally represented tourism brand.

FIGURE 1: OLUMO ROCK



Hardeski. (2019). *The Olumo Rock of Abeokuta, Nigeria* [Photograph]. Steemit.

Population and Sample

The population of this study comprises digital content related to Olumo Rock posted by users on social media platforms. These include: Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok.

Using purposive sampling, the study selected items of content that directly mentioned or visually represented Olumo Rock. Criteria for inclusion included focus and visibility i.e public posts on Olumo Rock and post not more than 5years.



Data Collection

Data were collected in June 2025 using keyword and hashtag searches such as #*OlumoRock*, #*VisitOlumoRock*, #*OlumoRockAbeokuta*, and #*OlumoRockNigeria*. Each relevant post was captured as a screenshot or video clip, including captions, comments, and engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and views.

Data Analysis

The user-generated contents (UGC) were analysed using thematic content analysis to understand the patterns and messages across different platforms. The process involved open coding of both text and images, followed by grouping the data into themes such as cultural and heritage representation, tourist experiences and emotions, visual branding elements (like scenic views and drone shots), and symbols of authenticity or spirituality. These themes were then interpreted to understand how they shape the brand identity of Olumo Rock, using the KoboToolBox Analysis Application.

Limitations of the Methodology

The study was limited to the analysis of publicly available UGC, which may not fully capture private narratives or culturally implied expressions not shared online. Additionally, platform-specific algorithms may influence which content is more visible or popular, potentially introducing bias. Despite these limitations, the approach provides valuable insights into the organic formation of brand identity for Nigerian tourist destinations in the digital space.

DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

Thematic Coding Distribution

The thematic coding revealed six major themes across the selected UGC entries. These themes included Cultural Identity and Heritage, Nature/Heritage, Tourism Promotion, Entertainment, Local Economy, and Accessibility.

Cultural Identity and Heritage (100%)

Every analyzed post talks about Olumo Rock's cultural significance, particularly its role in the historical identity of the Egba people. These narratives frequently highlighted the site as a symbol of pride and heritage. One post explicitly captured this with the caption: "*Olumo Rock remains a symbol of unity for the Egba people*".

Nature and Heritage (100%)

Descriptions of the site's natural features appeared in all posts. Many mentioned the rock's height (approximately 137 meters), its hollowed caves, and the ancient staircases carved into the



rock face. These physical attributes served as anchors for both aesthetic appreciation and heritage storytelling, creating a tangible link between environment and history.

Tourism Promotion (90.3%)

A large number of posts actively promoted tourism to Olumo Rock, either directly or indirectly. This was especially common in travel vlogs and visual reels accompanied by phrases like “*Day trip to Abeokuta featuring Olumo Rock*”. These posts often included hashtags and tagging of tourism agencies, suggesting deliberate or semi-professional efforts to promote the destination.

Entertainment (83.9%)

UGC also depicted visitors engaging in leisure and recreational activities at the site. Captions like “*Climbing had my leg muscles tingling*” reflected the practical and playful aspect of the visit. These forms of representation often helped to lighten the historical tone, making the destination appear approachable and fun for younger audiences.

Local Economy (51.6%)

Several users mentioned encounters with local artisans and traders, particularly those involved in the sale of Adire textiles and souvenir items. Tour packages and on-site economic activity were also noted, suggesting that tourism at Olumo Rock has a visible connection to community livelihoods. This theme provides insight into the economic ecosystem that surrounds heritage tourism.

Accessibility (41.9%)

Posts also touched on the site’s accessibility, with references to escalators, stairways, and general ease of movement for visitors. Some highlighted improvements in infrastructure, while others expressed concerns or curiosity about the effort required to ascend the rock.

Theme	Prevalence	Example Extract
Cultural Identity & Heritage	100%	<i>Olumo Rock remains a symbol of unity for the Egba people.</i>
Nature/Geological Features	100%	<i>Mentions of 137m elevation, caves, and rock formations</i>
Tourism Promotion	90.3%	<i>Day Trip to Abeokuta featuring Olumo Rock.</i>
Entertainment & Experience	83.9%	<i>Climbing had my leg muscles tingling</i>
Local Economy	51.6%	<i>Mentions of Adire sales, guided tours, and vendors.</i>
Accessibility	41.9%	<i>References to escalators, staircases, and ease of movement</i>



TABLE 1: THEMATIC CODING DISTRIBUTION

Theme Co-Occurrence Analysis

Thematic clusters were frequent, suggesting that users rarely posted about a single aspect of the site. Rather, their narratives combined multiple elements of the destination experience. The most frequent cluster Tourism + Culture + Nature + Entertainment indicates a common narrative pattern where users showcased a mix of recreational enjoyment and cultural reverence. The inclusion of economy and accessibility in the remaining clusters further underscores the site’s multifaceted appeal and socio-economic significance

Theme Combination	Frequency
Tourism + Culture + Nature + Entertainment	10
Tourism + Culture + Nature + Economy + Accessibility	9
Tourism + Culture + Nature + Entertainment + Economy	4

TABLE 2- THEME CO-OCCURRENCE ANALYSIS

Platform-Specific Trends

The UGC was distributed across three platforms with differing emphases:

Platform	% of Posts	Dominant Themes
Instagram	(14)45.2%	Tourism, Culture, Entertainment
TikTok	(11)35.5%	Culture, Nature, Entertainment
YouTube	19.4%	Deep cultural narratives, historical storytelling

TABLE 3- PLATFORM-SPECIFIC TREND

Instagram had the highest volume of posts and leaned heavily toward promotional and recreational content. highlighting visual appeal, selfies, scenic views, and travel captions. TikTok focused more on visual aesthetics and entertainment, aligning with its youthful demographic, often using music, humor, and traditional dance. YouTube, although fewer in entries, offered the most in-depth cultural and historical insights, often through mini-documentaries and narration-heavy videos. This differences indicates that the type of content platform directly influences how Olumo Rock is portrayed and, by extension, how potential visitors interpret it.



Textual and Sentiment Analysis

KEYWORD	FREQUENCY
olumorock	28
abeokuta	22
tourism	15
culture	12
travel	10
heritage	9
explore	8
history	7
adventure	6
rock	5

TABLE FOUR

Sentiment Overview

Notably, 100% of analyzed posts conveyed a positive tone, with strong emotional expressions such as excitement, pride, and cultural connection. This aligns with Gartner's (1993) theory of affective image formation and further strengthens Olumo Rock's brand equity through emotional branding.

Visual and Narrative Synthesis

Images and videos commonly featured were Climbers in traditional attire (adire), Camera shots from the highest peak of the rock, Symbolic references to Yoruba culture and spirituality, and Visual differences between modern accessibility (e.g., escalators) and ancient structures.

RESULTS

What Types of User-Generated Content Are Most Commonly Associated with Olumo Rock?

The most common content type of UGC associated with Olumo Rock are photos, short-form videos, and vlogs. Instagram, which contributed 45.2% of the data, featured reels, photos, and captions that emphasized scenic views, traditional dress, and personal experiences. TikTok, representing 35.5% of the dataset, was particularly entertainment-driven, often using trending



sounds, dances, and comedic elements to dramatize the tourist experience. YouTube, which constituted 19.4% of the content, offered longer vlogs and travel commentaries, focusing more on storytelling and historical framing.

This agrees with findings in Munar (2011), who argued that tourist-generated content typically leans toward performative and aesthetic dimensions, particularly on visual platforms. Hashtags such as #OlumoRock, #VisitNigeria, and #ExploreAfrica were frequently used to enhance visibility and search ability. The imagery and captions were majorly positive, suggesting that visitors see their experience at Olumo Rock as both memorable and culturally significant.

How Does User-Generated Content Contribute to the Construction of Olumo Rock's Destination Brand Identity?

UGC plays a role through which destination identity is shaped by personal experiences and cultural narratives. Across all platforms, references to Olumo Rock's **cultural and historical significance** were consistent with most of the reviewed posts referencing either its historical, spiritual, or ethnic connections. The Egba heritage, references to pre-colonial wars, and expressions of pride in Yoruba tradition all contribute to framing Olumo Rock as more than just a geological formation, it becomes a cultural icon.

As Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) notes, place branding is deeply interwoven with identity narratives, and UGC provides a grassroots mechanism for reinforcing those narratives. Tourists often posted themselves wearing adire, narrating the origin of Abeokuta or exploring shrines located within the rock's structure. These user performances build what Hanna and Rowley (2011) call a "co-created brand," where meaning emerges from a convergence of public storytelling and individual experience. These cultural codes serve as identity markers. UGC not only reflects but also points this branding through content that emphasizes spirituality, ancestry, and Yoruba heritage.

In What Ways Does UGC Influence the Perceptions and Expectations of Potential Tourists Regarding Olumo Rock?

UGC influences perceptions by acting digital storytelling medium that can be trusted by potential visitors. Potential tourists comes across a curated but authentic glimpse into what to expect at Olumo Rock both emotionally and practically. Emotional tones such as excitement, reflection, nostalgia, and pride were dominant across captions and commentaries. Keywords like "breathtaking," "spiritual," "magical," and "connected to my roots" were common, particularly on TikTok and Instagram.

This is in line with Gartner's (1993) model of destination image, which highlights the cognitive i.e what people know and affective i.e how people feel dimensions of perception. Visual content of friends climbing, families having fun and individuals atop the rock generates emotional resonance that is more compelling than traditional promotional material.



UGC also plays an informational role. While not formally structured, several users included tips on what to wear, the availability of guides, entry costs, and the presence of escalators or stairs. These practical insights reduce uncertainty and encourage visitation. As Aboalghanam et al. (2022) argue, user-generated narratives help form destination expectations and even substitute for official channels in trust-building.

Moreover, TikTok's entertainment-driven content provides an appealing, dynamic portrayal of the destination that calls on younger audiences. Through humor, music, and personal engagement, the rock becomes not just a heritage site, but a stage for social expression.

What Are the Strategic Implications of UGC for Enhancing Destination Branding in Nigeria's Tourism Sector?

The findings suggest several strategic lessons for tourism marketers in Nigeria. First, the abundance of culturally rich and emotionally positive UGC shows that destinations like Olumo Rock already have strong organic brand assets, they simply need to be further prctised . Tourism boards and heritage institutions can collaborate with influencers and content creators to highlight these narratives more deliberately.

Secondly, UGC offers a cost-effective way to build brand strategy. With limited funding for tourism promotion in many Nigerian states, using existing user content provides an opportunity to extend reach and visibility without heavy investment. Encouraging hashtag campaigns, influencer visits, and community storytelling competitions could strengthen Olumo Rock's brand image even further.As Hanna and Rowley (2011) note, brand co-creation requires active engagement with local communities and digital participants. Nigeria's tourism authorities can benefit from such engagement without relying entirely on expensive advertising campaigns.

Thirdly, UGC acts as real time feedback for site management. Posts that highlight accessibility, vendor interactions, or customer satisfaction offer indirect insights into tourist experience. These insights can inform stakeholders on local development strategies such as improving infrastructure or curating cultural experiences that align with visitor expectations.

Finally, UGC has the potential to reshape national tourism narratives by spotlighting lesser-known but culturally significant destinations. While international focus often gravitates toward places like Lagos or Abuja, UGC around Olumo Rock demonstrates how localized storytelling can draw attention to regional tourism assets and reinforce cultural pride.

CONCLUSION

Through a thematic analysis of UGC sourced from Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, it became clear that travelers do more than document their visits they write the story of the destination. Posts were filled with cultural references, emotional expressions, and visual markers that aligned with the rock's heritage significance. Visitors didn't simply view Olumo Rock as a tourist attraction but engaged with it as a spiritual, historical, and even personal space. These digital



traces contributed to what Munar (2011) described as the “co-construction” of place identity, where meaning arises from the interactions between place, person, and platform.

Importantly, the study revealed that UGC not only reinforces existing cultural narratives but also modernizes them. By performing local identity through visual storytelling whether via dance, dress, language, or location tags users blend tradition with contemporary social media aesthetics. This duality makes Olumo Rock accessible and relevant to both domestic and international audiences. As Gartner (1993) proposed, affective and cognitive perceptions of a destination are shaped not only by official campaigns but also by mediated experiences. This research confirmed that, especially in contexts like Nigeria where formal tourism promotion is limited, UGC serves as a powerful alternative.

Another key insight was the emotional tone of the content consistently positive, often nostalgic, and sometimes deeply nostalgic. These emotional cues are significant because they shape not only perception but also expectation. Potential tourists scrolling through these posts are likely to form impressions that influence their decision to visit. This aligns with Aboalghanam et al.’s (2022) assertion that UGC plays a mediating role between destination imagery and tourist intention.

Ethical Clearance

This study did not involve human subjects, animal experiments, or sensitive personal data collection. All user-generated content (UGC) analyzed was publicly available on social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube). Care was taken to ensure anonymity of individual users by excluding usernames or identifiable details. As such, no formal ethical approval was required.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Authors’ Contributions

Oyelami Oyebola conceptualized the study, conducted the literature review, and developed the theoretical framework and Olumuyiwa Akande reviewed the report. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication. They collectively agreed that the



corresponding author will handle communication with the editorial team, make necessary revisions, and act as guarantor for the integrity of the work.

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