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ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

Social Media and Millennials' Tourism Experiences: A Bibliometric and Systematic Review of Digital Behaviour, Co-Creation, and Destination Engagement

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Abstract— Social media has become integral to tourism experiences, shaping how Millennials search for information, construct expectations, engage with destinations, share experiences, and influence other travelers. However, research on these processes remains fragmented across tourism, marketing, consumer behavior, and media studies. This study traces the intellectual, conceptual, and thematic evolution of research on social media and Millennials' tourism experiences across 5 core areas: Digital behavior, Experience co-creation, Engagement with destinations, User-generated content, and Post-experience advocacy. A hybrid bibliometric and systematic literature review was performed, and the data were collected from 204 peer-reviewed articles published from 2011 to 2025 in Scopus and Web of Science Core Collection. We conducted a bibliometric analysis using PRISMA 2020 to examine publication characteristics, co-authorship, keyword co-occurrence, and thematic evolution, followed by a systematic thematic synthesis to interpret the behavior and theories associated with the identified research streams. The findings reveal six interconnected conceptual clusters and three broader mechanisms shaping Millennials' digitally mediated tourism experiences. First, social media serves as an experiential and affective space where tourists co-create value. Second, destination image formation is increasingly influenced by peer-generated and socially validated content rather than solely by destination-controlled communication. Third, user-generated content functions within a recursive experience–eWOM process in which consumed content shapes expectations and experiences, while post-trip sharing influences future tourists. The review further indicates a shift from information-oriented research toward interactive, affective, and technology-enabled perspectives. The study integrates fragmented research into a behavioral framework linking motivations, digital engagement, user-generated content, co-creation, cognitive-affective responses, and behavioral outcomes. The findings position social media beyond its promotional function as an infrastructure for tourism experience formation and provide implications for destination managers seeking to strengthen engagement, trust, and post-trip advocacy among Millennial travelers.

Index Terms— Millennials, Social media, Tourism experience, Digital consumer behaviour, Experience co-creation

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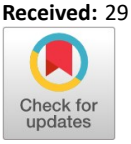

Introduction

Social media is central to modern tourism consumption, shaping how travelers search for information, evaluate points of interest, plan trips, consume tourism products, and share experiences. It is not simply a tool for providing information, but a means through which travelers create, share, and/or interpret tourism-related content throughout the travel process. As a result, User-Generated Content (UGC), online reviews, and social networking platforms affect individual travel decisions and collective representations of travel destinations (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Xiang

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& Gretzel, 2010). These developments have also changed the relationship between tourists and tourism providers because tourists can now more actively create and share tourism experiences. As a consequence, tourism value is increasingly shaped by interactions among tourists, destinations, local service providers, and digital communities (Campos et al., 2018; Sigala, 2016).

Indeed, Millennials (often dubbed Generation Y) provide a valuable backdrop for this investigation, as their travel patterns emerged alongside the growth of social media and mobile digital communications. Past studies suggest that Millennials utilize digital spaces to both gain travel knowledge and express identity, assess others' travel experiences, build travel expectations, and describe their own experiences (Ek Styvén & Foster, 2018; Leask et al., 2013b; Veiga et al., 2017). Social media can thus have a lasting impact across the tourist experience, from pre-trip information search to destination evaluation, on-site use, and post-trip sharing. This is a two-way interaction, and digital content is used to set expectations and make decisions, while tourism experiences, in turn, foster reviews, images, narratives, and Electronic Word-Of-Mouth (eWOM) that can be used by other tourists to make their own choices (Narangajavana et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2019).

Previous studies have explored various aspects of this relationship, such as motivations for sharing tourism experiences (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014), digital engagement and behavioral intentions (Harrigan et al., 2018), and the impact of social media information on destination image, trust, self-congruity, and travel intention (Molinillo et al., 2018; Wang & Yan, 2022). Other studies have associated digitally mediated experiences with future travel decisions (Wong et al., 2019) co-creation of experiences (Calderón-Fajardo et al., 2025), authenticity (Orts-Cardador et al., 2025), sustainability (Calderón-Fajardo et al., 2025), and emerging digital environments (Orts-Cardador et al., 2025). Overall, this literature shows that cognitive, affective, social, and behavioral processes are interwoven in social media and tourism.

Despite this growing body of research, conceptual development remains fragmented. The relationship between social media use and UGC, destination image, engagement, experience co-creation, trust, satisfaction, and eWOM is studied individually. It is not examined as an interrelated set of components in the tourism experience formation process. This fragmentation also applies to the theoretical approaches used. While the existing reviews have contributed to the understanding of tourism experience sharing on social media (Lin & Rasoolimanesh, 2022), and bibliometric studies have provided a map of tourism-related fields, including smart tourism destinations Ercan (2023) and tourism co-creation (Orts-Cardador et al., 2025), an integrated understanding of the intellectual and conceptual development of social media and Millennials' tourism experiences is limited.

This study adopts a hybrid approach, combining bibliometric and systematic literature review methods to analyze research published from 2011 to 2025. Content analysis is a literature-based technique that combines bibliometric analysis, which identifies the field's development, collaborative structure, and conceptual organization, with systematic synthesis, which interprets the behavioral and theoretical relationships represented in the literature. The study has three research questions:

• RQ1. How has research on social media and Millennials' tourism experiences evolved in terms of publication, collaboration, and knowledge structure?

• RQ2. What dominant conceptual themes and relationships characterize this research domain?

• RQ3. How can the fragmented literature be integrated to explain digitally mediated Millennial tourism experiences, and what theoretical, managerial, and future research implications emerge?

These questions bring together a structured account of this research domain and synthesize the previously scattered literature on social media motivations, digital engagement, user-generated content, co-creation of experience, cognitive-affective responses, and behavioral outcomes. The study also provides an analytical foundation for understanding social media's role in tourism experience causation and communication, bridging the gap between consumption behavior in digital spaces and destination management and tourism marketing.

Theoretical Background

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) conceptualizes media audiences as active and goal-oriented, with individuals selecting and using media to meet specific psychological and social needs and seek particular gratifications (Katz et al., 1973; Ruggiero, 2000). Common tourism needs include seeking information, entertainment, social interaction, self-expression, and sharing experiences. Social media expands these gratifications by letting tourists seamlessly shift from consuming to actively participating throughout the travel process. This engagement can affect destination evaluation, travel planning, and the sharing of tourism experiences among Millennials (Narangajavana et al., 2017; Whiting & Williams, 2013). UGT therefore provides a theoretical underpinning for understanding the rationale behind Millennials' interactions with social media before, during, and after traveling.

Consumer online brand-related activities

The former (UGT) explains motives for using social media, while the latter (COBRA) delineates various types of online brand-related activities. COBRA sees engagement as a continuum of three increasingly active behaviors: consumption, contribution, and creation (Muntinga et al., 2011; Schivinski et al., 2016). Consumption involves viewing destination posts, reviews, photos, or videos without adding content. Contribution can include comments, shares, ratings, or responses to pre-existing content, while creation can include new reviews, photos, videos, or travel writing.

This distinction matters to the tourism industry, as visitors may move between these engagement levels during their trips. UGC may be first seen when evaluating a destination, partaken in when planning or traveling, or created based on their own experiences by millennials. COBRA therefore helps clarify the links between different degrees of social-media engagement, tourists, and the broader digital tourism landscape.

User-generated content and tourism experience formation

These engagement behaviors operate through the informational and communicative content UGC provides. It includes reviews, photos, videos, ratings, stories, and other user-generated and shared tourism content not created by destination entities. Past research has shown UGC's effects on information search, destination image, expectations, trust, and travel decisions (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Narangajavana et al., 2017). Its importance lies not only in pre-trip decision-making, but also in tourists creating new digital content based on their own experiences. UGC therefore plays a dual role in tourism consumption. Existing content offers a socially produced resource that can influence expectations and destination evaluations before travel. Tourists' experiences created during and after travel become new UGC and eWOM information resources for future tourists. This two-in-one position also links digital information consumption to experience evaluation and subsequent communication.

Experience co-creation and theoretical integration

Co-creation offers a necessary experience-based perspective to describe how digital participation shapes value creation in tourism. Co-creation is a way of thinking that sees tourists not as passive objects of service provision, but as participants in a process in which value is created in interaction with consumers, service providers, destinations, technologies, and other actors (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). In tourism, digital platforms expand these interactions by letting travelers customize information, share experiences, join online communities, and communicate their evaluations to others (Sigala, 2016). The four perspectives therefore perform complementary analytical functions. UGT explains the motivations underlying social-media engagement; COBRA differentiates the forms and intensity of participation; UGC represents the content through which tourists consume and communicate tourism-related information; and co-creation explains how such participation can contribute to experiential value. Together, they provide an analytical sequence linking motivation, digital engagement, UGC interaction, experience formation and evaluation, and subsequent content generation. This sequence is not treated as a predetermined causal model. Instead, it provides a theoretical basis for interpreting the conceptual structures and recurring relationships identified through the bibliometric and systematic review.

Methodology

Review design

This study employed a hybrid bibliometric and Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine the development, conceptual structure, and theoretical characteristics of research on social media and Millennials' tourism experiences. The two approaches served complementary purposes. Bibliometric analysis was used to identify publication patterns, collaboration structures, conceptual relationships, and thematic development within the literature. In contrast, systematic synthesis was used to interpret recurring theoretical concepts and behavioral relationships across the selected studies. These approaches helped the review not only map the research field structurally, but also offer a deeper interpretation of how digitally mediated tourism experiences are experienced.

The review followed the PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021) to provide a transparent process for identifying studies, screening them, and selecting those included in the review. To ensure consistency between the quantitative mapping and the qualitative interpretation, we used the same final corpus for both the bibliometric work and the systematic synthesis.

Search strategy and study selection

Bibliographic data were retrieved from Scopus and the Web of Science Core Collection (WoS) for publications from 2011 to 2025. The search combined three components: generation ("Millennial", "Generation Y"), tourism experience ("tourism experience", "travel experience", "experience co-creation"), and digital media ("social media", "UGC", "influencer"). Searches used the ALL field in Scopus and Topic (TS) in WoS and were restricted to peer-reviewed English-language journal articles in relevant tourism and social-science fields. Full search strings, filters, and screening procedures are presented in Figure II.

The search yielded 1,709 records (Scopus = 1,605; WoS = 104). Technical and disciplinary filtering retained 343 records; removing 26 duplicates in Zotero left 317 unique documents. We screened titles and abstracts, supplemented by full-text assessment where necessary, for substantive relevance to Millennials, tourism experiences, and social media. After excluding 113 records, the final analytical corpus comprised 204 peer-reviewed articles.

Eligibility assessment considered topical relevance, document type, peer-review status, and alignment with the review scope. No separate formal risk-of-bias or methodological quality assessment was conducted because the review aimed to map and synthesize a heterogeneous

research field rather than estimate pooled effects. Consequently, the synthesis identifies recurring relationships without weighting findings by methodological quality.

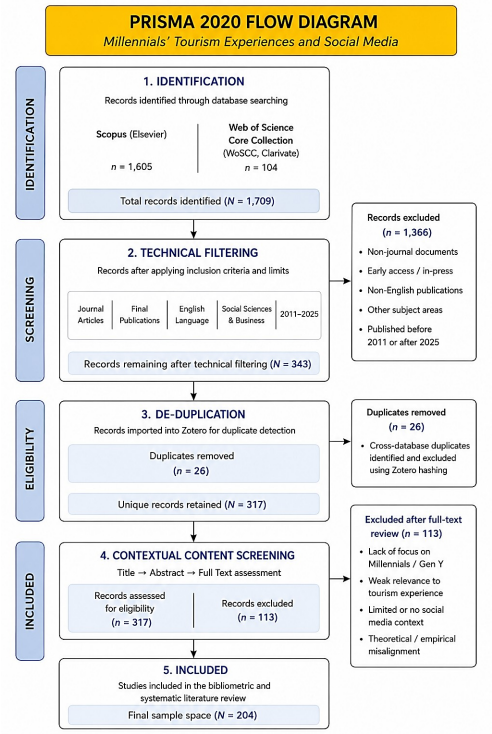

Fig. 1 *PRISMA flow diagram of the document screening and selection process (Source: Author's analysis)*

Figure 1 summarizes the numerical progression of document selection, whereas Figure 2 presents the search logic, database coverage, and review protocol.

PRISMA PROTOCOL & SEARCH QUERY

No.	Parameter	Scopus Operationalization	Web of Science (WoS) Operationalization	Operational Goal & Yield
1	Core Search String	ALL (("Millennial" OR "Generation Y") AND ("tourism experience" OR "travel experience" OR "experience co-creation") AND ("social media" OR UGC OR influencer))	TS = (("Millennial" OR "Generation Y") AND ("tourism experience" OR "travel experience" OR "experience co-creation") AND ("social media" OR UGC OR influencer))	Captures the intersection of target cohort, tourist experience, and social media platforms. **Total Raw Yield: 1,709 (Scopus: 1,605; WoS: 104)**
2	Initial Technical Controls	• SRCTYPE, "j" (Journal) • PUBSTAGE, "final" • DOCTYPE, "ar" (Article) • LANGUAGE, "English"	• Document Types: Articles • Exclude: Early Access • Languages: English	Restricts the sample space to completed, high-quality, peer-reviewed primary research articles (Basheer et al., 2025).
3	Disciplinary Bounding	LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA, "SOCI")	Subject Categories: Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism; Social Sciences, Interdisciplinary	Isolates behavioral and sociological perspectives; purges technological or computational outliers.
4	Temporal Range	PUBYEAR > 2010 AND PUBYEAR < 2025	Publication Years: 2011–2025	Binds the study to 2011–2025, tracking the rise of visual social apps (e.g., Instagram) and Millennial disposable income. **Post-filtering Yield: 343.**
5	Software Reconciliation	Executed via Zotero reference manager platform	Executed via Zotero reference manager platform	Eliminates cross-database indexing overlap. **Duplicates Removed: 26 Post-deduplication Yield: 317.**
6	Manual Filtering	Contextual reading of Title → Abstract → Full Text	Contextual reading of Title → Abstract → Full Text	Excludes papers lacking core thematic focus. **Manual Exclusions: 113 Final Sample Space: 204.**
7	Analytical Engine	–	–	Exported to VOSviewer v1.6.21 for advanced network layout visualizations (van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

Fig. 2 *PRISMA protocol and search query (Source: Author's analysis)*

Data harmonization and preprocessing

Because Scopus and WoS used different field structures and metadata conventions, merging the two databases required bibliographic harmonization. We standardized the merged files to a common field structure and preprocessed them using a Python-based procedure to support bibliometric analysis. Author-name format, source information, keyword representation, and author-related information were handled during the procedure. We placed special emphasis on author and keyword normalization, as varying label representations could unnecessarily fragment the bibliometric networks. Synonyms and nuances were grouped using a custom-made thesaurus. For instance, we harmonized "Generation Y", "Millennial", and "Millennials" to ensure they were not treated as separate conceptual nodes. After harmonization, the combined Scopus–Web of Science dataset was prepared for bibliometric analysis in VOSviewer without changing the substantive bibliographic content of the records.

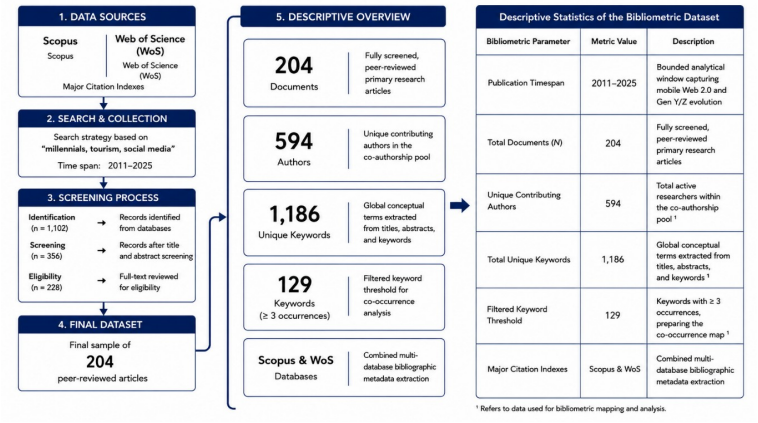

Fig. 3 *Data harmonization and analytical workflow for the integrated scopus-web of science dataset (Source: Author's analysis)*

Bibliometric analysis

To analyze the structural and conceptual properties of the final corpus, bibliometric analysis of the integrated Scopus-Web of Science dataset was carried out using VOSviewer (van Eck & Waltman, 2009). Of the 204 publications selected, 594 authors and 1,186 keywords were analyzed. We analyzed geographical distribution and international collaboration, author co-authorship, keyword co-occurrence, and temporal thematic development.

To analyze co-authorship and network connectivity, an author co-authorship analysis was performed. To reveal the literature's conceptual organization, we performed a keyword co-occurrence analysis. A minimum occurrence threshold of three was applied, retaining 129 of the 1,186 keywords. To normalize the relationship between keywords, the Association Strength method was used to aid network visualization and cluster identification. Network outputs were understood with reference to node occurrence, node relationships, and cluster membership, as well as temporal distribution. The overlay visualization was also used to analyze changes in thematic prominence over time. The patterns were interpreted as indicators of the bibliometric structure, not as causal relationships.

Systematic thematic synthesis and analytical integration

The SLR concurrently analyzed common theoretical ideas and behavioral variations depicted in the chosen literature. The synthesis areas of interest were: social-media motivations, digital engagement, UGC, tourism experiences, destination image, experience co-creation, trust, satisfaction, and behavioral responses. The focus was not only on how often each concept appeared in the studies but also on how these concepts interacted.

Thematic synthesis results were contrasted with the concept clusters obtained through keyword co-occurrence. As outlined in Section 2, the theoretical background provided an analytical lens that linked social-media motivations, digital engagement, UGC, experience formation, cognitive-affective responses, and behavioral outcomes. This lens allowed for interpretation, but was not viewed as a causal model in itself.

Bibliometric results and systematic review results were merged at the final analytical stage. The structure and temporal evolution of the research field were revealed by bibliometric analysis, and systematic synthesis was used to interpret recurring relationships to capture the essence of the patterns. This integration formed the basis for the conceptual mechanisms and integrated synthesis reported in the results section. The resulting mechanisms were therefore interpreted as recurring conceptual and behavioral patterns across the reviewed literature rather than as quality-weighted estimates of evidential strength.

Result

Descriptive analytics and performance of publication channels

The final corpus consisted of 204 peer-reviewed articles from 2011 to 2025 by 594 authors, containing 1,186 extracted keywords. Of these, 129 met the threshold of 3, which filtered out less frequently mentioned keywords, and were used for subsequent conceptual network analysis. These characteristics provide anempirical vbasis for analyzingthe geographical, collaborative, and conceptual structure of tesearch on social media and Millennials' tourism experiences.

Research production is fairly concentrated geographically. The top three countries were China (58 publications; 28.4%), the United States (32; 15.7%), and Spain (24; 11.8%). Indonesia (18; 8.8%), the United Kingdom (15; 7.4%), and Vietnam (12; 5.9%) had the next largest numbers of publications. The other 18 documents (8.8%) were published in other countries included in the corpus, such as Italy (10), Australia (9), and Portugal (8).

Table I
Top 10 geographical distribution of research by country/territory

Rank	Country/Territory	Number of Documents	%
1	China	58	28.4%
2	USA	32	15.7%
3	Spain	24	11.8%
4	Indonesia	18	8.8%
5	UK	15	7.4%
6	Vietnam	12	5.9%
7	Italy	10	4.9%
8	Australia	9	4.4%
9	Portugal	8	3.9%
10	Others (Poland, Iran, etc.)	18	8.8%
Total		204	100%

Publications were unevenly distributed across countries, with more than half of the reviewed publications coming from China, the United States, and Spain. Meanwhile, the inclusion of Indonesia and Vietnam among the more represented countries indicates that this research is not limited to North America or Europe. These figures reflect representation in a survey of a portion of the corpus and are not necessarily interpreted as measures of national research quality and/or intellectual influence. Figure 4 adds value to the publication counts by illustrating the international collaborative relations of the countries in the dataset. The network shows cross-national relationships of various strengths, allowing a distinction to be made between research and international collaboration.

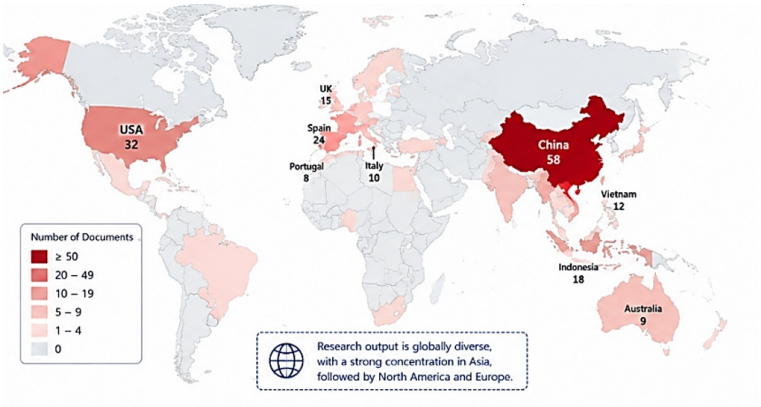

Fig. 4 *Geographical distribution and international collaboration network of research on Millennials' tourism experiences and social media (Source: Author's analysis of the integrated Scopus-Web of Science dataset using VOSviewer, 06/2026)*

The corpus is concentrated in established tourism and hospitality journals. Table II reports five leading journals together with their Journal Impact Factor, CiteScore, SCImago Journal Rank, and major subject classifications. Tourism Management, Journal of Travel Research, International Journal of Hospitality Management, Annals of Tourism Research, and Tourism Management Perspectives represent the dataset's principal publication channels.

Table II
Performance and classification of leading academic journals

Ranking	Journal	JCR Impact Factor (JIF)	Scopus CiteScore	SCImago Journal Rank (SJR)	Major Subject Categories (Scopus/WoS)
1	Tourism Management	ca. 12.4	16.88	4.146	Development; Strategy and Management; Tourism, Leisure and Hospitality Management; Transportation
2	Journal of Travel Research	14.08	10.90	3.100	Geography, Planning and Development; Tourism, Leisure and Hospitality Management; Transportation
3	International Journal of Hospitality Management	8.30	13.30	2.731	Strategy and Management; Tourism, Leisure and Hospitality Management
4	Annals of Tourism Research	7.80	7.86	2.461	Business and International Management; Development; Marketing; Tourism, Leisure and Hospitality Management
5	Tourism Management Perspectives	6.90	5.50	1.186	Tourism, Leisure and Hospitality Management

These journals' subject classifications place the reviewed literature at the intersection of tourism management, hospitality management, marketing, development, and allied social science fields. JIF, CiteScore, and SJR are calculated from different databases and using different procedures and are used to describe the nature of the publications they refer to, rather than to define an explicit hierarchy of journal quality. Overall, the descriptive results show that the research domain is geographically varied, unevenly distributed, and focused on existing publication venues for tourism- or hospitality-related research.

Collaboration structure and network topography

The study analyzed the field's collaborative organization through co-authorship analysis. Co-authorship networks are formal scholarly collaborations among researchers who co-produce papers (Newman, 2004). In total, 594 authors appeared in the corpus, and the main VOSviewer network consisted of four clusters of cooperating authors, totaling 17 authors.

Table III lists the most important authors based on publication frequency and Total Link Strength (TLS). The number of documents recorded by C. Michael Hall was 4, with the highest TLS being 13, and Torabi, Z.-A. was 2, with the highest TLS being 9. The TLS value of 9 was also obtained by Agapito, Guerreiro, Martins, Matos, Pereira, Pinto, Ramos, and others. These results show that publication productivity and collaborative connectivity are separate aspects of a researcher's involvement: A researcher can be relatively unproductive yet have strong network connectivity due to repeated and/or multiple collaborative connections.

Table III
Leading authors in co-authorship networks by link strength and productivity

No.	Authors	Documents	Total Link Strength
1	Hall, C.M.	4	13
2	Torabi, Z.-A.	2	9
3	Agapito, D	1	9
4	Golestaneh, H	1	9
5	Guerreiro, M	1	9
6	Martins, R	1	9
7	Matos, N	1	9
8	Pereira, Ln	1	9
9	Pinto, P	1	9
10	Ramos, Cmq	1	9

The four collaborative clusters are classified, as shown in Figure 5. Allam, Ghaderi, Khavarian-Garmsir, Murgante, Shalbafian, and Torabi are in cluster 1, which is related to research on smart tourism technologies, memorable tourism experiences, satisfaction, and revisit intention (Torabi et al., 2022, 2023). Cluster 2 comprises Seyfi, Sharifi-Tehrani, Sojasi Qeidari, Vo-Thanh, and Zaman and addresses socio-political and ethical dimensions of digital consumer behavior, including political consumerism and social-media representations of destinations (Seyfi et al., 2025; Sojasi Qeidari et al., 2023). Cluster 3 includes Baird, Castka, and Hall and is associated with sustainability-oriented tourism research, including

wine tourism, environmental practices, and eco-labeling (Baird et al., 2018). Cluster 4 comprises Javidi, Pourtaheri, and Sharifi and focuses on spatial applications of smart tourism technologies, including rural and smaller destination contexts (Torabi et al., 2022, 2023).

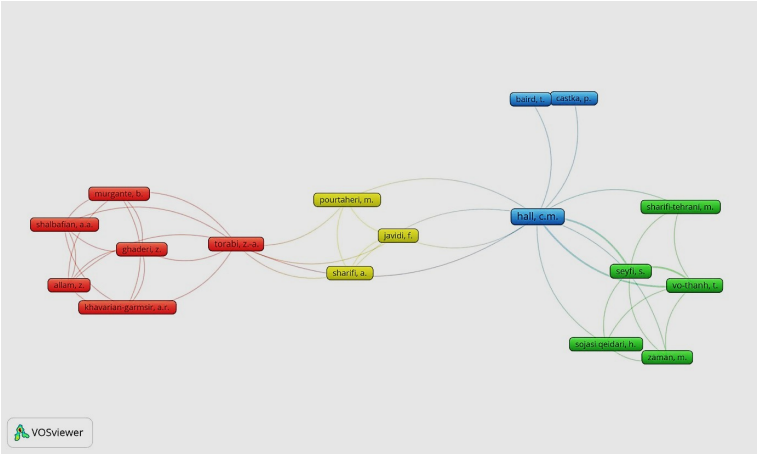

Fig. 5 *Collaborative network of authors with research topic articles (Source: Author's analysis of the integrated Scopus-Web of Science dataset using VOSviewer, 06/2026)*

The network also contains two comparatively cohesive collaborative sub-networks. The first includes Agapito, Guerreiro, Martins, Matos, Pereira, Pinto, Ramos, Sequeira, and Wijkesjoe, whose members record TLS values of 9 and are associated with research on online destination image and user-generated social-media content (Guerreiro et al., 2024). The second includes Abror, Achmad, Aujirapongpan, Engriani, and Gaffar, with a TLS of 8, related to halal destination attributes, digital literacy, tourist satisfaction, and revisit behavior (Abror et al., 2025).

The co-authorship network is visualized in terms of density in Figure 6. The higher the density of the visualization, the stronger and more concentrated the collaborative relationships of the authors. As shown, Hall is located in the most clustered area, consistent with the higher TLS reported in Table III. This pattern can be said to represent a high degree of collaborative connectivity within the selected network. It should not be understood as a measure of intellectual influence or theoretical importance.

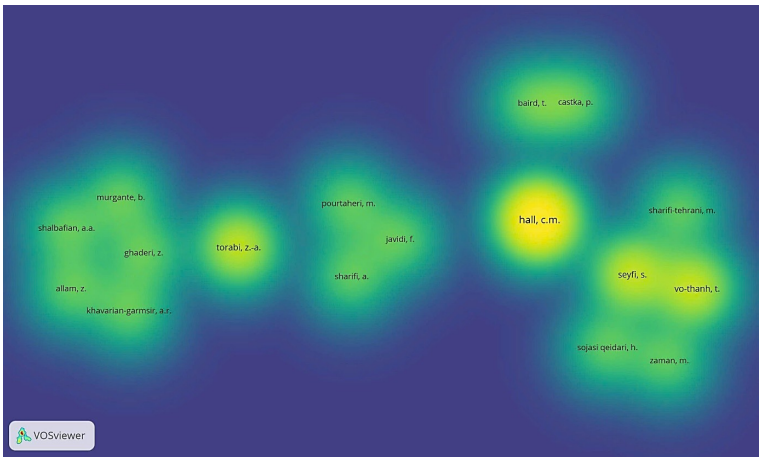

Fig. 6 *Density visualization of the author co-authorship network (Source: Author's analysis of the integrated Scopus-Web of Science dataset using VOSviewer, 06/2026)*

Figure 7 adds a temporal dimension by representing authors according to the average publication timing of their contributions. Earlier activity is associated with authors such as Hall and Torabi, while more recent periods show the increasing presence of Seyfi, Vo-Thanh, Zaman, and Sharifi-Tehrani. Their publications address digital consumer behavior, social-media representations, sustainability, and emerging technological contexts (Juliana et al., 2025; Pérez et al., 2024; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Seyfi et al., 2025; Sojasi Qeidari et al., 2023; SUASAPHA, 2025; Torabi et al., 2022, 2023)

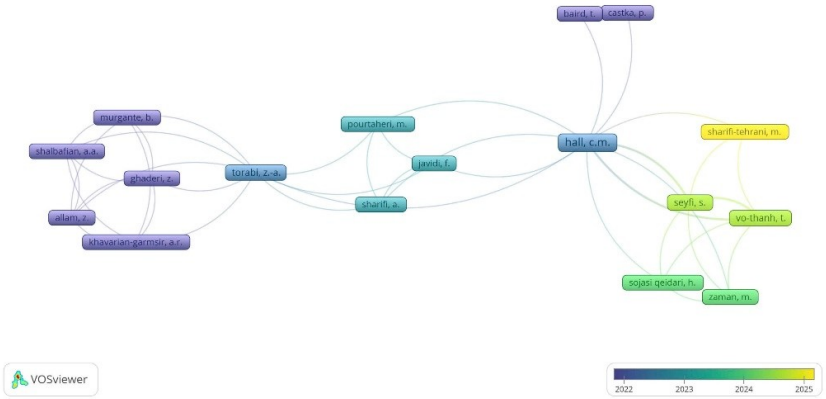

Fig. 7 *Density visualization of the author co-authorship network (Source: Author's analysis of the integrated Scopus-Web of Science dataset using VOSviewer, 06/2026)*

The temporal overlay indicates changes in the authors and collaborative groups represented between approximately 2022 and 2025. We interpret it as evidence of the timing of collaborative activity rather than distinct theoretical stages. The thematic evolution of the field is examined separately through keyword-based analysis in the following sections.

Conceptual structure and cluster decomposition

Keyword co-occurrence analysis was conducted to examine the conceptual structure of research on social media and Millennials' tourism experiences. Co-occurrence relationships indicate how frequently concepts appear together within bibliographic records and thereby reveal the principal thematic concentrations and connections within a research field (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). From the 1,186 keywords extracted from the 204 documents, 129 met the minimum occurrence threshold of three and were included in the network analysis.

Relationships between conceptual nodes were normalized using the Association Strength method, expressed as follows:

sij = $\frac{cij}{wiwj}$

where cij represents the number of co-occurrences between keyword i and keyword j, while wi and wj denote the total occurrences (or total link strengths) of the respective nodes. The underlying logic of this normalisation is to take into account the frequency of the co-occurring terms so that different relationships can be represented in the same network structure.

This network identified 129 keywords across six thematic clusters with 42, 36, 23, 17, seven, and four concepts, respectively. The number of terms associated with each thematic grouping, cluster size, is not meant to be a direct measure of the theoretical importance of the grouping. Table IV summarizes the six clusters and their principal semantic identifiers, while Figure 8 visualizes their relationships.

Table IV
Conceptual clusters identified through keyword co-occurrence analysis

Cluster / Color	Conceptual Title	Node Share (*n*)	Key Semantic Identifiers & Bibliometric Anchors
Cluster 1 / Red	Cognitive-Affective Mechanisms and Experiential Outcomes	42 concepts	co-creation, memorable tourism experience, satisfaction, trust, loyalty, instagram, delight, self-image congruency
Cluster 2 / Green	Generational Profiles & Eco-Sustainability	36 concepts	millennials, generation z, sustainable tourism, ecotourism, green image, environmental awareness
Cluster 3 / Blue	Digital Interfaces & Quantitative Modeling	23 concepts	user-generated content, facebook, SOR framework, website quality, attitude, purchase decision
Cluster 4 / Yellow	Constructive Authenticity & Niche Sectors	17 concepts	authenticity, cultural heritage, digitalization, wine tourism, perception, content analysis
Cluster 5 / Purple	Operational Servicescape & Involvement	7 concepts	service quality, value co-creation, tourist engagement, customer journey, servicescape
Cluster 6 / Cyan	Content Marketing & eWOM Segmentation	4 concepts	social media marketing, ewom, segmentation, Destination Marketing Organization (DMO)

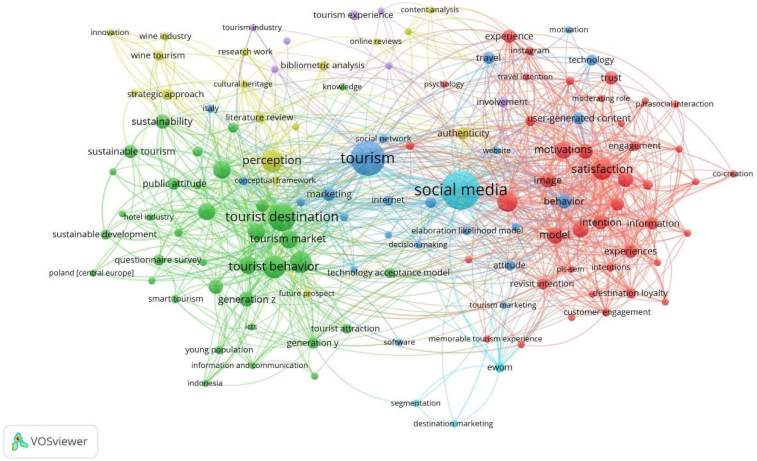

Fig. 8 *Network visualization of keyword co-occurrence analysis (Source: Author's analysis of the integrated Scopus-Web of Science dataset using VOSviewer, 06/2026)*

Cluster 1, Cognitive-Affective Mechanisms and Experiential Outcomes, is the largest grouping with 42 concepts. Key terms include co-creation, customer engagement, destination image, loyalty, Instagram, memorable tourism experience, motivation, parasocial interaction, place attachment, revisit intention, satisfaction, trust, and word-of-mouth. This cluster links digital engagement and tourism experiences to psychological evaluations and post-experience behavioral responses. Studies in this stream particularly link memorable tourism experiences to satisfaction, trust, loyalty, and behavioral intentions (Gupta et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2019).

Cluster 2, Generational Profiles and Sustainability, contains 36 concepts, including Millennials, Generation Y, Generation Z, sustainable tourism, ecotourism, technology acceptance, smart tourism, tourist behavior, and environmental awareness. Their co-occurrence connects generational tourism behavior with environmental and sustainability concerns (Nowacki et al., 2023; Schönherr & Pikkemaat, 2023). Generation Z appears as an empirically occurring keyword because comparative and adjacent generational studies are represented in the corpus; however, Millennials remain the principal population examined in this review.

Cluster 3, Digital Interfaces and Quantitative Modeling, comprises 23 concepts, including Facebook, UGC, websites, technology, attitude, decision making, visit intention, and structural equation modeling. This configuration links digital interfaces with behavioral constructs and model-based analytical approaches. Studies within this stream use frameworks such as Stimulus-Organism-Response to examine relationships between digital stimuli, consumer evaluations, and tourism behavior (AL-SAAD et al., 2024; Bilgihan et al., 2016).

Cluster 4, Authenticity, Cultural Heritage and Niche Tourism, includes 17 concepts related to authenticity, cultural heritage, marketing, innovation, reviews, perception, the sharing economy, wine tourism, and the wine industry. This cluster involves digital communication, representation, and evaluation of culturally distinct and specialized tourism products (Leask et al., 2013a; H. Liu & Li, 2021; Rahman et al., 2014). Tourism of drinks and culinary delights also highlights the overlap between digital communication, place-specificity, and specialized experiences (Alonso et al., 2022; Rickly, 2022).

Cluster 5, Service Quality and Value Co-creation, consists of seven concepts about destination management, involvement, service quality, tourism experience, tourism industry, and value co-creation. Although its scope is limited to smaller dimensions, it takes into account the tourists' involvement in the construction of their experiences (Orts-Cardador et al., 2025; Silitonga et al., 2025) and focuses on service delivery.

Cluster 6, Social Media Marketing and eWOM, contains four closely related concepts: destination marketing, eWOM, segmentation, and social media. This cluster refers to studies that analyzed social-media communication, segmentation, and tourism-related behavioral reactions (Ek Styvén & Foster, 2018; Molinillo et al., 2018; Sánchez-Fernández et al., 2020; Song et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2020).

Together with the six clusters, it is seen that the field is not limited to social media as a communication channel. It has a conceptual framework linking digital involvement to tourism experience, affective assessment, sustainability, authenticity, co-creation, destination marketing, and behavioral outcomes. The following section analyzes intersections across clusters through temporal and systematic synthesis, guided by the network relationships between them.

Temporal evolution of research themes

This temporal overlay of the keyword network shows a shift in thematic emphasis over time (2011-2025) from information use and platform adoption to interaction, affective response, co-creation, and emerging technology-enabled tourism settings. This development is summarized in Figure 9 in three general time periods. These periods are an interpretive categorization of temporal keyword patterns, not automatically generated by VOSviewer.

Fig. 9 *Thematic evolution framework of Millennials' tourism research across three broad periods (Source: Author's synthesis based on the temporal keyword analysis)*

From 2011 to 2019, research was predominantly information-oriented. Studies focused on websites, online information, social-media platforms, destination expectations, and technology-related attitudes, particularly how digital information influences destination perceptions and travel decisions (Bae & Han, 2020; Han & Bae, 2022; Narangajavana et al., 2017; Zavodna & Zavodny Pospisil, 2018). Social media was already present, but information acquisition and technology use received greater attention than experiential and affective processes.

From 2020 to 2022, the literature became more interactive and affective. Engagement, memorable tourism experiences, trust, destination image, social interaction, Instagram, YouTube, influencers, and peer-generated content became more prominent. Studies increasingly examined how digital interactions influenced emotional responses, destination evaluations, and behavioral intentions (Harrigan et al., 2018; Neuhofer et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2022). Greater attention was also given to social influence, experience sharing, parasocial interaction, and social comparison (Damanik et al., 2022; Kilipiri et al., 2023).

From 2023 to 2025, research increasingly incorporated value co-creation, artificial intelligence, ChatGPT, immersive environments, metaverse applications, sustainability, and digitally mediated experiences. These topics indicate an expansion beyond conventional social-media platforms toward technological environments emphasizing personalization, interactivity, and digital experience design (Duong et al., 2024; Inmor et al., 2025; SUASAPHA, 2025). Behavioural intentions and technology adoption remain important but are increasingly examined alongside co-creation, immersive experiences, sustainability, and advanced digital technologies (Ahmad et al., 2025; Zou et al., 2024).

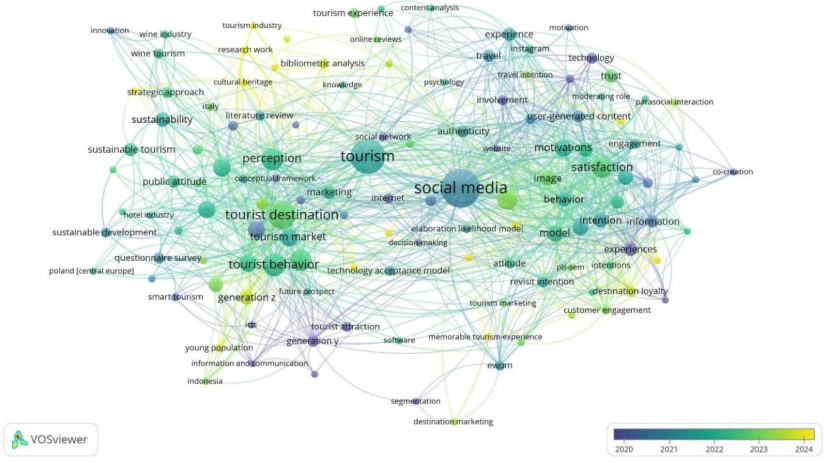

Fig. 10 *Overlay visualization of keyword co-occurrence analysis by publication year (Source: Author's analysis of the integrated Scopus-Web of Science dataset using VOSviewer, 06/2026)*

Figure 10 provides the bibliometric basis for the temporal interpretation summarized in Figure 9. The overlay visualization indicates differences in the average publication years associated with individual keywords, allowing earlier and more recent research topics to be distinguished visually. The terms for conventional websites and online information and also the early perspectives about technology-use appear more in the earlier part of the temporal spectrum; the terms related to engagement, co-creation, sustainability, artificial intelligence, and immersive technologies appear more in the later part of the temporal spectrum.

The temporal analysis as a whole suggests a gradual expansion of the research agenda. Literature evolved from a focus on digital information and technology use to a focus on interaction, affective response, co-creation, and emerging intelligent technologies. This development should not be understood as a replacement of one linear model of theoretical orientations. Instead, the evidence suggests an accumulation of research concerns in which newer experiential and technological themes increasingly coexist with established topics, such as destination image, trust, behavioural intention, and online information use.

The temporal findings also provide an important transition to the subsequent synthesis. While Figures 9 and 10 show when particular thematic concerns became more prominent, temporal mapping alone does not explain how these concepts are connected within Millennials' digitally mediated tourism experiences.

Deep content synthesis of the research field

Bibliometric mapping identifies the thematic structure and temporal development of the field, while systematic content synthesis reveals recurring relationships across these themes. Three mechanisms are particularly evident: Experiential and affective co-creation, peer-mediated destination image formation, and the recursive experience-eWOM process. These mechanisms intersect across several bibliometric clusters rather than corresponding directly to individual clusters.

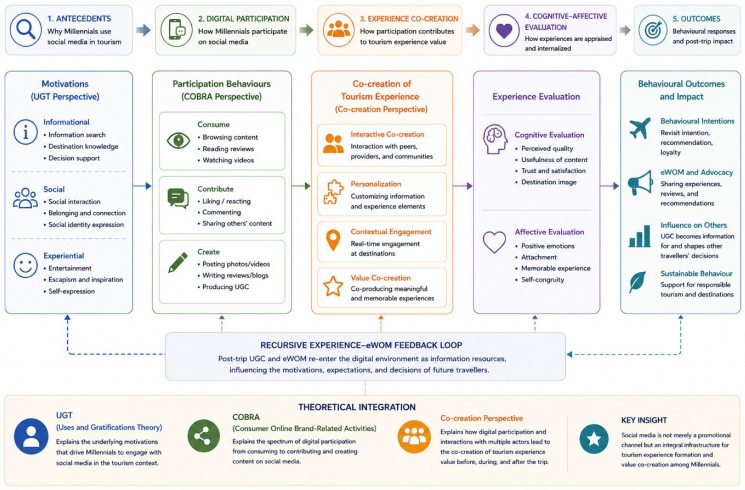

Fig. 11 *A three-layer integrated framework combining bibliometrics and Systematic Literature Review (SLR) on digital tourist experiences (Source: Author's synthesis based on the bibliometric and systematic review findings)*

Experiential and affective co-creation

The first mechanism concerns the relationship between digital engagement, experience co-creation, and subsequent affective and behavioural responses. Studies represented particularly within Clusters 1 and 5 indicate that tourism experiences increasingly develop through interactions between travelers and digital touchpoints rather than exclusively through encounters occurring at the destination. Silitonga et al. (2025) identify surfing involvement as an important component of online travelers' participation in experiential value co-creation. This relationship suggests that cognitive and emotional involvement while engaging with digital travel content can become part of the broader process through which tourism value is experienced and evaluated.

The literature reviewed also establishes links between digital participation and co-creation of the experience, such as customisation of itinerary, interactive content, virtuality tourism environments, and sharing of experiences (Sigala, 2016). Within this process, tourists participate in producing and interpreting experiential value rather than functioning only as recipients of destination-generated information. Co-created experiences are subsequently associated with affective evaluations, including tourist delight and self-image congruence (Gozen et al., 2023; Silitonga et al., 2025). These responses, in turn, are connected with behavioural outcomes such as visit or revisit intentions, recommendations, and positive eWOM (Juliana et al., 2025).

The synthesis therefore identifies a recurring sequence in the literature in which digital involvement is associated with participation in experience formation, followed by cognitive-affective evaluation and subsequent behavioural responses. This sequence is consistent with the concentration of co-creation, memorable tourism experience, satisfaction, trust, loyalty, and word-of-mouth identified in Cluster 1 and the service quality, involvement, tourism experience, and value co-creation terms represented in Cluster 5.

Peer-mediated destination image formation

The second mechanism concerns socially mediated destination information. UGC, online reviews, and visual social-media content contribute to how prospective tourists form expectations, evaluate destinations, and assess tourism-related information. This process is particularly relevant where destination perceptions involve uncertainty or risk. Martínez-Sala et al. (2024) associate crisis and resilience communication with destination image and tourist behaviour, while Dragin-Jensen et al. (2024) examine hotel-generated and user-generated Instagram content. H. Liu et al. (2019) further demonstrate how tourism experience sharing on social networking sites can influence Millennials' aspirational consumption.

In all of these studies, socially mediated information is linked to credibility and trust judgments, destination evaluations, affective reactions, and intentions to act. This relationship corresponds to concepts of destination image, trust, UGC, social media, eWOM, and behavioural intention, which are spread over Clusters 1, 3, and 6.

UGC and the recursive experience–eWOM process

The third mechanism concerns the duality of UGC. Pre-travel UGC influences destination image, expectations, and intentions to visit (Aboalganam et al., 2025; Guerreiro et al., 2024). Tourists create new reviews, images, stories, recommendations, and other forms of eWOM during and after traveling due to their experiences. These outputs, in turn become information for other travellers. The process is linked with cognitive and affective outcomes and experiences, such as trust and place attachment, and with outcomes, such as loyalty and eWOM in the studies represented in the corpus (AL-SAAD et al., 2024; Silitonga et al., 2025).

The pattern of the relationship can be written as:

"Existing UGC → expectations and destination perceptions → tourism experience → cognitive-affective evaluation → eWOM/new UGC → subsequent travelers' information environment".

UGC thus coexists as a pre-experiential setting prior to the development of tourism experience, but also as a result of experience evaluation related to Cluster 3 (digital-interface themes), Cluster 1 and Cluster 5 (experiential and co-creation themes), and Cluster 6 (eWOM-related themes).

Emerging generational boundary

Generation Z is also emerging in research beyond the Millennial literature. Millennial-centered research focuses on topics like authenticity, content quality, tourism experience, and eWOM behaviour (Canavan, 2018a, 2018b; Leask et al., 2013a, 2013b; Song et al., 2024; Wang & Yan, 2022), while comparative and Generation Z-oriented studies delve into short-form visual content, immersive environments, influencers, sustainability, and new technologies (Calderón-Fajardo et al., 2025; J. Liu et al., 2023; J. Liu et al., 2024; Nowacki et al., 2023; Seyfi et al., 2025).

These patterns are not considered to be a systematic comparison of the two cohorts, as the population of Generation Z was not identified in the review protocol as a focus population. Instead, its appearance signals the rise of a new frontier where research on the Millennial generation is starting to overlap with other generational studies.

In total, the synthesis reveals that digital engagement is present in the process of co-creating experiences, as well as in the affective evaluation process, that socially mediated information is present in the destination image formation process, and that tourism experiences later result in the creation of UGC and eWOM, which entered the information environment of other travelers. These recurring relationships link the conceptual clusters and give them the empirical support needed for their theoretical interpretation in the Discussion.

Discussion

Results show that the use of social media in tourism has surpassed the traditional role of a search tool and a promotional tool, and has become part of the tourism experiences of Millennials. The reviewed literature reveals that the digital environment has been gaining prominence to anticipate, interpret, co-create, evaluate, and communicate tourism experiences. The temporal evidence also points to a gradual shift from information-oriented and technology-adoption issues and greater focus on engagement, affective response, co-creation, and emerging digital environments over time.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) can explain this phenomenon by identifying motivations for using social media, such as informational, socia,l and experiential. Previous studies on tourism have focused on information seeking and anticipatory needs, but more recent tourism studies have demonstrated that tourists also utilize social media to communicate, express, share, and connect socially (Narangajavana et al., 2017; Whiting & Williams, 2013). For Millennials, these gratifications are not just applicable before a trip, but also when the experience is reflected upon and shared.

The COBRA perspective is a complementary explanation in that it differentiates between content consumption, contribution, and creation. This distinction is relevant to this review given that UGC is recognized as an input and output of tourism experiences. The traveler reads and watches reviews, images, videos and reads travel stories when building his or her expectations of the destination and then creates videos, pictures, and stories for others to read and watch (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Schivinski et al., 2016). Thus, content creation is not just a single action of platform use but also a product of platform use, namely UGC, that will shape the information environment faced by future travellers.

Co-creation also illuminates the process of digital participation being woven into the tourism experience formation process. The value of tourism doesn't simply come from tourism organizations, but from the interaction and relationship between tourists and providers, technologies, destinations, and other users (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Sigala, 2016). Digital activities that include browsing, interacting with information, customizing information, and sharing experiences can thus add to the experiential value both prior to and during physical travel, as well as in the aftermath. This overall interpretation of digital engagement as a form of tourism experience is reinforced by the relationships found between involvement, co-creation, memorable experiences, affective responses, and behavioural intentions.

Combined, UGT, COBRA, and co-creation offer complementary levels of explanation. UGT provides an understanding of why tourists use social media, COBRA identifies the variety of participation, and co-creation offers an understanding of how this can add to the experiential value. Their integration enables a recursive process, whereby motivations trigger digital participation, digital participation leads to the formation and evaluation of experiences, and evaluated experiences produce new UGC and eWOM, which in turn affect others. The interpretation considers social media not simply as an isolated precursor of tourism behaviour but rather as a part of a broader experience process.

The move to include Gen Z in recent publications should be taken with caution, however. Previous research indicates some distinctions between Millennials and Generation Z regarding authenticity expectations (Calderón-Fajardo et al., 2025), sustainability orientations (Nowacki et al., 2023), interaction with platforms (Singer et al., 2023) and engagement with immersive digital environments or short-form digital environments (Singer et al., 2023). The patterns highlighted, however, suggest a possible expansion of the research realm instead of a clear generational gap, as the focus of the review was on Millennials.

Overall, the study contributes to the understanding of the Millennial tourist experience in the context of digital technologies by connecting the motivation, digital participation, co-creation, cognitive-affective evaluation, and content creation of Millennial tourists in one interpretive process. The synthesis helps to explain how the previously fragmented research streams are interrelated and can be seen as parts of the current process of experience formation in tourism.

Conclusion, Implications, and Future Research

The social media and Millennials tourism experience is an integrated bibliometric and systematic review of the research from 2011-2025. The analysis, based on 204 retrieved peer-reviewed articles from Scopus and Web of Science, analyzed the geographical and collaborative structure of the literature, its conceptual organization, thematic evolution, and the behavioural relationships underlying digitally mediated tourism experiences. The results reveal that the field has progressed from its initial focus on information search and technology use to greater attention paid to digital engagement, affective responses, co-creation of experience, sustainability, and new technology-enabled tourism environments.

The study has value in terms of making a contribution to the existing literature, as it brings together research that has been scattered elsewhere, and provides a coherent interpretation of Millennials' digitally mediated experiences of tourism. From the synthesis, three mechanisms are identified: experiential and affective co-creation, peer mediated destination image formation, and the recursive experience – eWOM process. These mechanisms reflect that social media is not just an external communication or a promotional channel. Digital environments are involved in the process of forming tourism experiences before, during, and after the trip. UGC is especially significant since it serves as an informational resource that drives expectations and perceptions of destinations, as well as an outcome that conveys experienced tourism value future generations of travelers.

Theoretically, the results align with using UGT, COBRA, and co-creation in a complementary way. UGT provides insights into the reasons behind social media engagement, COBRA distinguishes between consumption, contribution, and creation behaviours, and co-creation is the way in which digital participation is integrated into experiential value. Their integration offers a more comprehensive understanding of digitally mediated tourism experiences as a process of motivation, participation, experience formation, evaluation, and content creation.

The results also have implications for destination management organisations and tourism businesses. Digital strategies need to go beyond promotional outreach and enable tourists to engage in credible UGC, meaningful interaction, personalized engagement, and experience creation and sharing. Because experiences shared online will become an information resource for other travellers, online experiences should be managed as part of a destination experience management and not as a separate promotional task.

Several limitations provide directions for future research. First, the review is bounded by the coverage and indexing practices of Scopus and Web of Science and by the specified search strategy. Second, although predefined eligibility and relevance criteria were applied during study selection, the review did not employ a separate formal study-level risk-of-bias or methodological quality assessment. The synthesis therefore identifies recurring patterns across the included literature without weighting individual findings according to methodological quality. Future reviews could incorporate structured quality-appraisal procedures to examine whether the identified relationships vary according to study design and evidential strength. Third, the focus on Millennials limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other generational

cohorts. Although Generation Z increasingly appears within the reviewed literature, the study does not constitute a systematic intergenerational comparison. Future research could therefore examine whether observed generational differences reflect cohort effects, life-stage characteristics, technological change, or their interaction. Further studies should also investigate AI-enabled and immersive tourism environments and empirically test the recursive relationships among digital engagement, experience formation, UGC, and eWOM identified through the present synthesis.

Declarations

Conflict of interest

The author declare the absence of conflicts of interest.

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Author contributions

The author was responsible for conceptualisation, methodology, data collection, data curation, formal analysis, visualisation, writing the original draft and manuscript review and editing. The author read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Ethical approval

This study is based on secondary sources and did not involve human/animal subjects. Thus, ethical approvalis not applicable.

Generative AI disclosure

Generative artificial intelligence tools were use dexclusively for grammatic and stylistic editing and manuscript formatting. The author take full responsibility for the content, interpretation, and conclusions presented in this article.

Data availability statement

Bibliographic data for this analysis was extracted from the Scopus and Web of Science databases using the conditions that are provided by these databases. The processed data used for the results in this study is made available to the author with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering legal, accounting, or other professional advice and upon further inquiry, the said author may be able to provide it.

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