

# Analyse Visitor Experiences Through User-Generated Content Based on TripAdvisor Reviews: A Case Study of Three Emblematic Attractions in Porto

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## Please cite this paper as:

Galdón Jiménez, J., Albuquerque, H., & Matos Silva, F. (2026). Analyse Visitor Experiences Through User-Generated Content Based on TripAdvisor Reviews: A Case Study of Three Emblematic Attractions in Porto. In C. Vasiliu, D.-C. Dabiş, A. Tziner, D. Pleşea, & V. Dinu (Eds.), *Proceedings of BASIQ International Conference on New Trends in Sustainable Business and Consumption, 12th Edition* (pp. 562-569). Editura ASE.

DOI 10.24818/BASIQ/2026/12/081

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## Abstract

User-generated content has become an increasingly relevant source of evidence for understanding visitor experiences in urban destinations. Although online reviews are widely used by tourists when making decisions, their potential as a strategic tool for destination and attraction management remains underexplored, particularly in heritage-rich cities facing growing tourism pressure. This paper analyses TripAdvisor reviews of three emblematic attractions in Porto, Portugal: Livraria Lello, Mercado do Bolhão and Torre dos Clérigos. The study is based on 150 reviews, with 50 reviews selected for each attraction, and combines descriptive quantitative analysis with qualitative thematic coding. The results show that each attraction presents a distinct experiential profile. Livraria Lello is marked by a strong tension between architectural admiration and dissatisfaction related to overcrowding, queuing, prices and perceived loss of authenticity. Mercado do Bolhão receives predominantly positive evaluations associated with food, atmosphere, renovation quality and sensory appeal, although some comments express concerns about touristification. Torre dos Clérigos is valued mainly for its panoramic views and symbolic role in the city, while the physical effort of the climb is both a constraint and part of the experience. The paper argues that user-generated content can function as a strategic diagnostic tool, helping managers identify gaps between projected destination images and lived visitor experiences. The findings provide practical insights for visitor flow management, perceived value and the preservation of accessibility and authenticity in urban tourism attractions.

## Keywords

User-generated content; visitor experience; TripAdvisor; urban tourism; heritage attractions; Porto; strategic management

DOI: 10.24818/BASIQ/2026/12/081

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## Introduction

Urban tourism destinations are increasingly shaped by the interaction between cultural heritage, visitor expectations, digital representations and management decisions. In historic cities, emblematic attractions are not only places of consumption or sightseeing; they are also symbolic spaces through which visitors interpret the identity, atmosphere and value of the destination. This makes visitor experience management a strategic concern, particularly in cities where cultural heritage, tourism pressure and commercialisation intersect.

At the same time, tourists now actively participate in the production and circulation of destination images. Through platforms such as TripAdvisor, visitors publicly evaluate attractions, describe the positive and

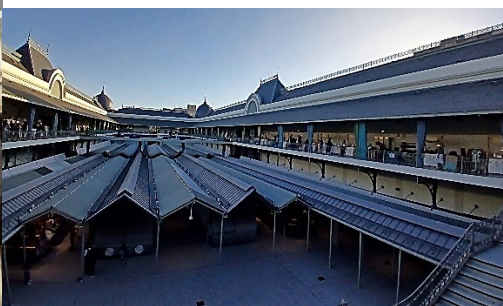
negative aspects of their experiences, and shape future tourists' expectations. These reviews constitute a relevant form of user-generated content (UGC), offering a continuous and relatively accessible source of information on visitor perceptions, satisfaction, complaints and emerging tensions. In this sense, UGC can complement traditional visitor surveys and official monitoring systems by capturing spontaneous evaluations produced shortly after the experience.

Despite the growing relevance of digital reviews in tourism research, their use in strategic visitor experience management remains uneven. Many studies examine online reviews mainly as indicators of satisfaction, reputation or consumer behaviour. Less attention has been given to their practical value as diagnostic evidence for attraction management, especially in urban heritage contexts where visitor experience is shaped by issues such as overcrowding, authenticity, accessibility, waiting times and perceived value. This gap is particularly relevant for destinations such as Porto, where iconic attractions are central to the city's tourism image but are also exposed to intense visitor demand (Silva et al., 2023).

This paper addresses this issue by analysing TripAdvisor reviews of three emblematic attractions in Porto: Livraria Lello (Picture no. 1), Mercado do Bolhão (Picture no. 2), and Torre dos Clérigos (Picture no. 3). These attractions were selected because they represent different dimensions of urban tourism in the city. Livraria Lello combines literary heritage, architectural value and global tourist visibility; Mercado do Bolhão represents the relationship between food culture, local commerce, architectural and cultural renovation and urban identity; and Torre dos Clérigos is one of Porto's most recognisable heritage landmarks, strongly associated with panoramic views and the historic skyline. Together, they provide a useful comparative basis for understanding how visitors evaluate different types of urban attractions within the same destination.



**Picture no. 1. Livraria Lello**



**Picture no. 2. Mercado do Bolhão**



**Picture no. 3. Torre dos Clérigos**

The main objective of this study is to examine how user-generated content can support strategic visitor-experience management in urban tourist attractions. More specifically, the paper aims to: (1) identify the main experiential themes emerging from TripAdvisor reviews of the three attractions; (2) compare the dominant positive and negative dimensions of visitor experience across the selected sites; and (3) discuss how these insights can inform management decisions related to visitor flows, perceived value, authenticity and accessibility.

Methodologically, the study adopts an exploratory mixed-methods approach based on 150 TripAdvisor reviews, with 50 reviews collected for each attraction. The analysis combines descriptive quantitative procedures, focused on sentiment, visitor origin and travel companion, with qualitative thematic coding of the most recurrent experiential dimensions. This design allows the paper to move beyond general satisfaction scores and examine the specific aspects that visitors associate with each attraction.

The paper's contribution is twofold. First, it provides empirical evidence on how visitors experience three major attractions in Porto, highlighting differences between architectural admiration, sensory enjoyment,

symbolic value and management-related dissatisfaction. Second, it proposes UGC analysis as a practical diagnostic tool for tourism planning and attraction management. By identifying recurring patterns in visitor discourse, online reviews can help managers detect tensions that may not be fully visible in promotional narratives or official strategic plans.

The paper is structured as follows. After this introduction, the next section reviews the literature on UGC, visitor experience and strategic management in urban tourism. The methodology section explains the data collection and coding procedures. The results and discussion section presents the comparative analysis of the three attractions and discusses their implications for visitor experience management. The final section summarises the main conclusions, limitations and future research directions.

## 1. Literature review

The digitalisation of tourism has transformed the way destinations are perceived, evaluated and managed. User-generated content (UGC), including online reviews, photographs and travel narratives, has become a central source of tourism information, influencing how visitors search for destinations, compare alternatives and form expectations before travelling (Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2015; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Online reviews are particularly relevant because they are perceived as experience-based, peer-produced and relatively independent from official promotional discourse.

Tourists rely on peer-generated information not only to gather factual knowledge but also to anticipate emotional and experiential aspects of a destination (Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2015; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). This means that UGC contributes to both the cognitive and affective dimensions of destination image, shaping what tourists expect to see, feel and value during the visit (Hernández-Méndez et al., 2015; Guo et al., 2017; Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2015). In this sense, online reviews are not merely post-visit comments; they contribute to the ongoing construction of destination meanings.

UGC is also relevant for understanding visitor experience because it captures spontaneous evaluations of attractions, services and places. Unlike traditional surveys, which are often designed around predefined questions, online reviews allow visitors to emphasise the aspects they consider most significant, including satisfaction, dissatisfaction, perceived value, authenticity, accessibility and crowding (Fang et al., 2016; Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Nawawi et al., 2024). This makes UGC especially useful for analysing complex tourism experiences, where emotional, functional and symbolic dimensions interact.

In urban tourism, these insights are particularly valuable. Historic cities concentrate multiple attractions, symbolic spaces, commercial activities and visitor flows within limited areas. This creates opportunities for cultural consumption and place-based experiences, but also generates management challenges related to congestion, visitor pressure, commodification and tensions between tourism use and local identity (European Parliament, 2018; Foronda-Robles et al., 2025; Van der Zee & Bertocchi, 2018). In this context, UGC can help identify how visitors perceive these tensions at the scale of specific attractions, rather than only at the broader destination level.

Previous studies have shown that TripAdvisor and other online platforms can be used to analyse tourist behaviour, spatial patterns and destination image. Van der Zee and Bertocchi (2018), for example, demonstrate the value of TripAdvisor reviews for identifying patterns in urban tourist behaviour through social network analysis. Marine-Roig and Clavé (2015) show how large volumes of online travel reviews and travel blogs can support tourism analytics and destination image analysis in Barcelona. More recently, research has also used online reviews to examine the impacts of overtourism, congestion and visitor dissatisfaction in urban heritage contexts (Foronda-Robles et al., 2025).

However, the managerial use of UGC remains uneven. Much of the literature focuses on marketing, reputation, destination image and consumer decision-making, while fewer studies explicitly connect UGC analysis with strategic visitor experience management. This is an important gap because online reviews can reveal mismatches between the image destinations promoted and the experiences visitors actually have. They can also help identify recurring problems that require operational responses, such as long queues, unclear access systems, overcrowding, inadequate facilities, pricing dissatisfaction or perceived loss of authenticity (Fang et al., 2016; Nawawi et al., 2024; Van der Zee & Bertocchi, 2018).

The concept of visitor experience management is therefore central to this study. Managing the visitor experience involves more than increasing satisfaction; it requires understanding how visitors interpret the place, how they move through it, which elements they value, and which aspects generate frustration or reduce perceived quality. In heritage-based urban attractions, this management challenge is intensified by

the need to balance tourism demand, conservation, accessibility, commercial viability and authenticity (Coimbra et al., 2025; European Parliament, 2018; Foronda-Robles et al., 2025; Ramazanov et al., 2024).

UGC can also be framed within an open innovation perspective. Destinations and attractions increasingly operate as knowledge ecosystems in which visitors, residents, businesses and institutions contribute to the production of information and value. From this perspective, online reviews provide external knowledge that can support service improvement, product adaptation and strategic decision-making (Del Vecchio, Mele et al., 2018; Gu, 2023; Lam et al., 2020). Instead of treating reviews solely as reputational indicators, managers can use them as diagnostic evidence to improve the visitor experience.

Despite these advantages, UGC analysis also presents limitations. Online reviews are not statistically representative of all visitors, and results may be influenced by language, platform bias, self-selection and differences in digital participation. Moreover, reviews tend to reflect particularly positive or negative experiences, which can affect the balance of interpretations (Fang et al., 2016; Marine-Roig & Clavé, 2015; Stopp, 2021). For this reason, UGC should not replace other research methods, but it can complement them by offering timely, experience-rich and visitor-centred evidence.

Based on this framework, the present study positions UGC as a strategic diagnostic tool for visitor experience management in urban tourism attractions. By analysing TripAdvisor reviews of Livraria Lello, Mercado do Bolhão and Torre dos Clérigos, the paper explores how visitor-generated narratives can reveal attraction-specific strengths and weaknesses. The study contributes to the literature by linking digital visitor feedback with practical management challenges related to crowding, authenticity, perceived value and accessibility in a heritage-rich urban destination.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory mixed-methods approach to analyse visitor experiences at three emblematic urban attractions in Porto: Livraria Lello, Mercado do Bolhão and Torre dos Clérigos. This design is particularly suitable given the need to combine structured insights into visitor characteristics with a deeper understanding of the qualitative dimensions of experience (Sharpley, 2018; Teeroovengadum & Nunkoo 2018). User-generated content (UGC) from TripAdvisor was selected as the primary data source, as it provides access to spontaneous, experience-based evaluations expressed in natural language, while also offering structured information such as reviewer profiles and ratings.

The empirical dataset consists of 150 TripAdvisor reviews, with 50 reviews collected for each attraction. Reviews were selected based on their relevance and informational richness, prioritising recent contributions and those containing meaningful descriptions of the visitor experience. Reviews written in languages other than English were translated to ensure consistency in analysis. However, variables such as reviewer origin and travel companion type were recorded only when explicitly available, reflecting the inherent limitations of publicly accessible UGC data.

All reviews were organised into a structured analytical database, where each review was treated as a unit of analysis. The database integrates both descriptive and analytical variables, allowing the combination of quantitative and qualitative procedures within a coherent framework (Creswell, 2008). The dataset was organised in a structured analytical database specifically developed for this study, ensuring consistency and traceability of the coding process. The structure of this analytical database is presented in Table no. 1.

**Table no. 1. Structure of the analytical database**

| Variable         | Description                                             |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| Review ID        | Unique identifier assigned to each review               |
| Attraction       | Livraria Lello / Mercado do Bolhão / Torre dos Clérigos |
| Date             | Year of publication                                     |
| Reviewer Origin  | Country of residence (when available)                   |
| Language         | Original language of the review                         |
| Travel Companion | Solo, couple, family, friends, unknown                  |
| Sentiment        | Positive, neutral or negative                           |
| Text Content     | Full review text (translated when necessary)            |
| Keywords/Notes   | Key descriptive terms identified                        |

The quantitative component of the study is based on descriptive analysis, focusing on three key variables: initial sentiment, type of travel companion and reviewer origin. Frequency distributions and percentage values were calculated to identify general patterns and enable comparison across the three attractions. This

stage does not aim at statistical generalisation but provides a structured overview of visitor profiles and evaluation trends, supporting the interpretation of qualitative findings.

The qualitative analysis was conducted through a systematic thematic coding process. Each review was examined and coded according to the presence of recurring experiential dimensions identified through iterative reading. For each attraction, a set of core themes was developed from the most frequent keywords and expressions in the reviews. These themes include, among others, architectural and aesthetic value, crowding, access and queue management, perceived value, authenticity, atmosphere, infrastructure and spatial organisation. Given the multidimensional nature of visitor experience, individual reviews were often associated with multiple codes. The frequency of each code was subsequently calculated to identify dominant experiential patterns and to support the comparative analysis across attractions.

Although UGC provides rich, experience-based insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. Online reviews are not statistically representative of all visitors and may reflect self-selection bias, with a tendency to emphasise extreme experiences. In addition, the availability of contextual information varies across reviews. Despite these constraints, UGC constitutes a valuable exploratory data source, enabling the identification of recurring issues and experiential patterns highly relevant to visitor experience management in urban tourism contexts.

### 3. Results and discussion

The analysis of TripAdvisor reviews reveals that visitor experiences across Porto's emblematic attractions are structured around distinct but interrelated experiential dimensions. Rather than reflecting a uniform perception of the destination, the findings point to differentiated experiential configurations shaped by the nature of each attraction, its functional role within the urban tourism system and its exposure to visitor pressure (Albuquerque et al., 2024; Quintela et al., 2023).

A first key pattern concerns the distribution of positive and negative perceptions across the three attractions. Mercado do Bolhão is predominantly associated with positive sentiment, Livraria Lello presents a markedly ambivalent profile, and Torre dos Clérigos occupies an intermediate position. This distribution suggests that visitor satisfaction is not determined solely by the intrinsic value of the attraction, but by the relationship between attractiveness, accessibility and management effectiveness.

To synthesise these patterns, Table no. 2 presents a comparative overview of the dominant experiential dimensions identified in the analysis.

**Table no. 2. Comparative experiential profile of the three attractions**

| Dimension                       | Livraria Lello | Mercado do Bolhão | Torre dos Clérigos |
|---------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| Aesthetic / Heritage Value      | High           | Moderate          | High               |
| Atmosphere / Sensory Experience | Moderate       | Very High         | Moderate           |
| Crowding / Visitor Pressure     | Very High      | Moderate          | Low                |
| Queues / Access Management      | Very High      | Low               | Moderate           |
| Value for Money                 | Low            | High              | Moderate           |
| Authenticity Perception         | Low            | Moderate          | High               |
| Physical Effort / Accessibility | Low relevance  | Low relevance     | High relevance     |

The table highlights structural differences in how visitor experience is constructed across the three attractions. Livraria Lello is characterised by a strong imbalance between high symbolic and aesthetic value and negative operational conditions. Mercado do Bolhão presents a more coherent experiential profile, with strong positive dimensions and limited negative pressures. Torre dos Clérigos shows a relatively balanced configuration, where constraints are integrated into the experience itself.

Livraria Lello emerges as the most critical case, revealing a clear tension between attractiveness and capacity. While visitors consistently emphasise the architectural beauty and iconic status of the space, these positive perceptions are systematically offset by dissatisfaction related to overcrowding, long queues and pricing. This configuration suggests a structural mismatch between demand and the attraction's experiential capacity. From a management perspective, this pattern reflects dynamics commonly associated with overtourism, in which symbolic value attracts visitor flows that exceed operational capacity. In this case, UGC functions as a precise diagnostic tool, identifying not only dissatisfaction but also its underlying operational causes.

In contrast, Mercado do Bolhão demonstrates a high level of experiential coherence. The market is consistently perceived as vibrant, authentic and sensorially engaging, with gastronomy playing a central role in shaping visitor satisfaction (Silva et al., 2025). The recent renovation appears to have enhanced both

functional and experiential dimensions, particularly in terms of cleanliness, organisation and accessibility. Nevertheless, the emergence of comments referring to touristification suggests that this balance is not static. UGC, therefore, acts as an early signal of potential shifts in perception, allowing managers to anticipate and address emerging tensions.

Torre dos Clérigos presents a distinct experiential logic in which physical effort and spatial constraints are not perceived as negative factors but as integral components of the experience. The climb to the top, although demanding, contributes to the attraction's perceived authenticity and symbolic value. This indicates a strong alignment between visitor expectations and the actual experience. The relatively limited number of complaints about crowding or pricing reinforces the idea that constraints are acceptable when they are consistent with the nature of the attraction.

From a comparative perspective, the findings suggest that negative evaluations are not necessarily associated with physical limitations, but rather with misalignment between expectations and experience. While overcrowding generates dissatisfaction in Livraria Lello, physical effort does not produce the same effect in Torre dos Clérigos. This distinction highlights the importance of expectation management and experience design in urban tourism contexts.

More broadly, the results confirm that UGC provides the analytical depth particularly valuable for strategic decision-making. Rather than offering generic indicators of satisfaction, online reviews reveal specific experiential tensions, operational inefficiencies and emerging risks. This reinforces the potential of UGC as a strategic diagnostic tool, capable of supporting more adaptive and evidence-based approaches to visitor experience management in complex urban tourism systems.

## Conclusions

This study set out to examine how user-generated content can be used as a strategic tool for understanding and managing visitor experience in urban tourism attractions. By analysing TripAdvisor reviews of three emblematic sites in Porto, namely Livraria Lello, Mercado do Bolhão and Torre dos Clérigos, the research demonstrates that UGC provides detailed and experience-based insights that go beyond general measures of visitor satisfaction.

The findings confirm that visitor experience is shaped not only by the intrinsic value of attractions but also by the relationship among attractiveness, capacity and management practices. The three case studies illustrate distinct experiential configurations. Livraria Lello reflects a strong imbalance between high symbolic value and negative operational conditions, particularly in terms of overcrowding, queues and perceived value. Mercado do Bolhão presents a more coherent and positive experiential profile, supported by atmosphere, gastronomy and functional improvements, although early signs of touristification are emerging. Torre dos Clérigos presents a relatively balanced configuration, in which physical constraints are integrated into the experience and contribute to its perceived authenticity.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the literature by reinforcing the role of UGC as a source of experiential knowledge and by explicitly positioning it as a diagnostic tool for visitor experience management. While previous research has largely focused on marketing, reputation and destination image, this paper demonstrates how online reviews can be used to identify specific operational issues, experiential tensions and mismatches between expectations and reality. In doing so, it supports a more integrated understanding of how digital data can inform tourism planning and management in urban contexts.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight UGC's potential to support evidence-based decision-making. For destination managers and attraction operators, online reviews offer continuous feedback that can be used to identify critical issues, prioritise interventions and monitor changes in visitor perception over time. In high-pressure attractions, such as Livraria Lello, this may involve improving visitor flow management, revising access systems and reconsidering pricing strategies. In evolving spaces such as Mercado do Bolhão, maintaining a balance between authenticity and tourism development emerges as a key challenge. In more stable attractions such as Torre dos Clérigos, the focus should be on preserving the integrity of the experience while ensuring accessibility and safety.

Despite its contributions, the study presents several limitations. The analysis is based on a relatively small sample of reviews and focuses on a single destination, which limits the generalisability of the findings. In addition, UGC reflects self-selected contributions and may overrepresent extreme experiences. The availability of contextual information is also uneven, which restricts the depth of certain analyses. These limitations suggest that UGC should be used in combination with other data sources in future research.

Future studies could expand the scope of analysis by including larger datasets, multiple destinations or longitudinal approaches that capture changes in visitor perception over time. Further research could also explore the integration of UGC with other data sources, such as mobility data or official statistics, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of visitor behaviour and destination dynamics. Finally, the application of more advanced analytical techniques, such as sentiment analysis or machine learning, may enhance the scalability and precision of UGC-based research.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that user-generated content is not only a reflection of visitor experience, but also a valuable resource for improving it. When systematically analysed, online reviews can support more responsive, adaptive and informed approaches to visitor experience management in urban tourism destinations.

### Acknowledgement

This work is funded by national funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under the Programme Contract UID/05105/2025. <https://doi.org/10.54499/UID/05105/2025>

### Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) usage statement:

ChatGPT (version 5.0) was responsibly used for language improvement. After this process, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the present article.

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