

# “I came, I saw and I Instagrammed”: How Instagram influences tourists’ choices on Hainan Island

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## Abstract

Despite growing research on tourists’ information search for destination choices, there is a comparative paucity in islands tourism research on tourist information search in Instagram. This mixed-method study used 87 surveys and netnographic data (comprised of ten Hainan-related Instagram accounts and nine hashtags) to explore the self-reported impacts of Instagram on tourists’ choices on Hainan Island. Findings reveal that Hainan’s Instagram content is mainly provided by tourists who come to the island to see attractions and Instagram about them. Five themes include 1) scenic spots, 2) beaches and activities, 3) accommodation and food, 4) personal recommendations and impressions, and 5) news. These key themes highlighted that Hainan’s tourists rely on the visual content on Instagram from fellow tourists as travel content from official sources is scant. Furthermore, we propose recommendations for regional government, destination management organisations and marketers to co-create a Hainan tourism marketing strategy on Instagram. Finally, we provide a virtual mind map of Hainan’s Instagram presence, recommendations for policymakers and outline future research areas.

## Keywords

Hainan Island  
Social media marketing  
User-generated content  
Destination choice  
Instagram

## Background

A visual experience and the ‘tourist gaze’ are among the most important components of travel (Urry, 1990). Previous researchers emphasised the significance of visual communication (for example, text, pictures, and videos) in tourism (Rathore et al., 2017) and its influence on travel planning (Terttunen, 2017). Images can significantly impact consumers’ purchasing behaviour because they allow them to visually study the products before the purchase (Tuckman, 2012). Tourists consider ‘word of mouth’ (WOM) sources to be more reliable (Allsop et al., 2007), however in times of Web 2.0, not only family and friends but also social media are used as ‘word of mouth’ channels for inspiration, evaluation and comparison of different tourist destinations (Gretzel et al., 2012). Recent studies highlighted that social media platforms containing user-generated content (UGC) become a crucial trusted tool for travellers when making travel decisions (Horner & Swarbrooke, 2016; Müller & Christandl, 2019).

Instagram is one of the largest and most active social media platforms that focus on visual communication. It has become an essential part of the tourism industry as a marketing tool and a travel diary that allows users to get inspired by impressions of ‘real’ tourists, discover new places and plan trips (Gretzel, 2017; Terttunen, 2017). Yet, some destinations, including Hainan Island (China), lack representation in the international tourism market. Among problems slowing down international tourism development of Hainan, poor social media marketing and representation was identified as a critical deficit (Fu et al., 2016). The lack of research on Instagram’s influence on tourists’ choice in Hainan is connected to the censorship of the internet in China (which limits the use of specific social media channels).

Remarkably, China’s news platforms and official departments, including the National Tourist Office, have their official Instagram accounts. However, Hainan specific content from official organisations is still limited. Underpinned by the conceptual framework based on consumer behaviour theory, UGC and Instagram tourism marketing, this study aimed to understand if UGC affects the Instagram users’ travel destination choices. No previous study has investigated the Hainan travel content on Instagram and its effects on the inbound tourists. Thus, this research aims to discuss the role of images and UGC in choosing a travel destination and uncover the most common channels promoting Hainan as a tourism destination. Findings present the tourists’ usage of Instagram and their evaluation of Hainan-related information on Instagram. Finally, we provide a virtual mind map of Hainan’s Instagram presence and recommendations for policymakers.

## Method

This mixed-methods research is underpinned by the netnographic epistemology by applying the inductive and deductive methods. For the quantitative part, we used online surveys among Hainan’s international tourists; 87 valid surveys were collected, but the findings are reported elsewhere. The qualitative part used netnography (Kozinets, 2010) to collect data from Instagram. We identified ten Hainan-related Instagram accounts and nine hashtags used by tourists and organisations over 1 million times. We applied content analysis to determine the characteristics of Hainan’s travel-related content on Instagram, including the most commonly used hashtags, geolocation, and identify Hainan focused Instagram accounts that helped us understand the search habits of Hainan’s inbound tourists.

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## Findings and discussion

International tourists who come to Hainan travel abroad at least once a year; their main travel companions are friends, and the most popular sources of information were Instagram, WOM, TripAdvisor and travel blogs. These findings confirm the importance of WOM and UGC in terms of travel destination choice (Pedersen et al., 2014). In terms of travel content, tourists mostly considered photos and videos of travel destinations posted by real travels. In terms of visual content, tourists mostly searched for interesting places to visit, tourist sights and things to do, hotels/accommodation pictures and photos of restaurants, food and drinks were also popular among them.

The primary purpose of using Instagram was to share photos and experiences with others, and many tourists have learned about new tourist attractions through Instagram posts. Although travel destination websites were a common channel for tourists to obtain information, most Hainan travel websites are mainly Chinese; only some are in English and Russian but not sufficient travel information. Therefore, WOM and Instagram UGC have become one of the most influencing informational channels affecting tourists' travel choices. Quantitative part of our study highlighted that Instagram information did not meet tourists' search requirements, though they try to search for information, and it proves the necessity of further qualitative analysis to understand the situation of Hainan tourism related information on Instagram.

Based on the qualitative component of our study, Hainan's travel-related information on Instagram can be categorised into five key themes. They are 1) scenic spots, 2) beaches and

activities, 3) accommodation and food, 4) personal recommendations and impressions, and 5) news. The most commonly used Hainan-related hashtags include #sanya (369 893 times), #hainan (366 181 times), #хайнань (335 102 times), #haikou (67 528 times), #hainannesechickenrice (56 369 times), #hainanisland (30 494 times), #nanshan (27 680 times), #yalongbay (19 567 times), #dadonghai (18 644 times). Through the more profound analysis of each thematic group, we understood which tourist attractions are more popular among foreign tourists. These attractions mainly included places in Sanya and Haikou (see table 01).

Furthermore, the analysis of the most popular hashtags uncovered four events that attracted Instagram users' attention. First, ISY Sanya International Music Festival with hashtag #ISYmusicfestival used in 1195 posts. The electronic music festival has an official Instagram account, and its fans reach 4331 people. The second event is Hainan International Film Festival. The hashtag #hainaninternationalfilmfestival of has 1119 posts, but there is no official account. Other related tags include #hainanfilmfestival (201 posts). The third event is a Cycling Tour. The event has an official account (@tourofhainan) which 564 users follow. Overall, #tourofhainan was used under 1312 posts. Finally, "Fall in Love with Hainan" initiative was the fourth popular event. The hashtags #fallinlovewithhainan has 526 posts, Russian version #хайнаньлюбвьмоя has 154 posts, Chinese #爱上海南 has 43 posts.

The below table represents Hainan-related Instagram accounts and the number of posts, the number of followers, the average number of likes and comments (See table 02).

**Table 1.** Popular tourist attractions

Most popular places in Sanya	Most popular places in Haikou	Other popular places	Activities	Coastal beaches
Atlantis	Haikou Mission Hills Movie Town	Hainan Yanoda Rainforest Cultural Tourism Zone	Beach Activities	Clear Water Bay,
Seven Trees hotel and Park	Qilou Old Street, Haikou Wildlife Park	Hainan Penang Valley Limiao Cultural Tourism Zone	Sports (golf, surfing)	Dadonghai Bay
Sanya Nanshan Complex	Wugong Temple	Monkey Island, Asia Forum International Conference Center in Boao	Museum and Park Visits	Yalong Bay.
Yalong Bay Paradise Forest Park	Volcano Group Geological Park	Boao Temple		
Xiaodongtian	Ever-Green park	Sun Moon Bay		
Tianya Haijiao	Haikou volcanic hot springs			
Wuzhizhou Island				
Luhuitou Peak Park				
Phoenix Island				
Rice National Park				

Table 2. Hainan-related Instagram accounts

Name of the account	Number of posts	Number of followers	Average number of likes	Average number of comments	Comments
@hainanlife	800	4200	200 - 300	3 - 10	Focus on activities, news, tourist attractions
@hainan_sanya_blog	107	2856	200 - 300	15 - 25	Activities, events, tourist attractions
@hainantravel	693	42,000	150 - 200	30 - 40	Travel advice
@visit_hainan	394	14,000	400 - 500	20 - 30	Tourist attractions, seaside
@pro_hainan	73	17,000	1100 - 1200	90 - 100	Hotels, food, tourist attractions
@hainan_hilltop.fun	76	878	190 - 200	10 - 20	Travel advice
@hainan.promo	20	283	40 - 50	5 - 10	Events
@visithaikou	177	98	5 - 10	0 - 1	Haikou Tourism Development Commission
@hellosanya_official	759	33,000	300 - 400	5 - 10	Tourist attractions, seaside
@visit_sanya	1931	29,000	10 - 20	0 - 3	Sanya Tourism's official account, beaches, tourist attractions, hotels, activities.

Significantly the number of posts is not necessarily related to the number of followers, likes and comments. The number of posts by the @visit\_sanya account is the biggest, but the reach, impressions and likes are not extensive. In contrast, the @pro\_hainan account with less than 100 posts has more than 1000 likes and comments indicating the activity and interaction of the account. The @hainantravel has the most followers, and the content mainly provides travel advice. Some posts of @hainanlife have 60-70 likes, while others reach 400-500 likes. This table also proves that holding an event and making its promotion through Instagram increases the popularity of the account, respectively, promoting the tourism place. Official Hainan's Instagram accounts represent different stakeholders. For example, travel companies (@hainantravel), travel bloggers (@hainan\_sanya.blog), cultural communication companies (@hellosanya\_official), Tourism Bureau official account (@visit\_sanya).

The content of various accounts and the followers' engagement are different; travel bloggers' accounts have a higher response rate in comments and often use Instagram stories. Leap and Teague (2019) found that among the top 100 most attractive travel Instagram posts of American official travel accounts, 92% were reposted photos of real travellers. Remarkably, Hainan's travel accounts lack the usage of representative hashtags. Our findings reveal that only @visit\_sanya uses two authentic hashtags (#ExploreSanya and #FancySanya); this contradicts Leap and Teague's (2019) study, stated that 50 states in the USA have an official brand hashtag, such as #PureMichigan.

Overall, based on our findings, we propose five recommendations for Hainan travel-related Instagram accounts. First, it proposes tourist-oriented strategies to encourage tourists to use representative hashtags of tourist destinations, which will help users to subdivide content, creating niche hashtags that can attract more followers. 16.6% of tourists search on Instagram during travel to obtain more information about the destination and 40.2% of tourists share photos when travelling. Therefore, UGC affects the planning

stage of the travel itinerary and affects the travel process itself. Real-time images often encourage tourists to participate in activities or visit sights not planned before the trip. Encouraging tourists to share photos while travelling and providing incentives for 'best'/most liked images will promote tourist attractions.

Second, we recommend focusing on tourism bloggers and influencers. The findings showed that many Instagram users are keen to follow bloggers and influencers. Hainan tourist attractions and hotels can invite bloggers and influencers to visit tourist attractions, hotels and encourage them to publish photos and stories describing the scenic spots while sharing their lived experiences of Hainan. By collaborating with influencers and bloggers, tourist attractions can achieve significant promotion results.

Third, there is scant Hainan travel-related content from tourism stakeholders. The findings suggested that tourists (who mostly do not speak Chinese) mainly wanted to know about tourist attractions, local activities, things to do and places to visit. They were also more sensitive to the information about accommodation and restaurants. Travel marketers should pay attention to publishing content on such topics. Also, the creation of the representative hashtags will establish the image of a travel destination. Furthermore, adding geolocation to a post will make the photo appear in the search results, increasing the reach of the photo and expanding the influence on potential visitors.

Fourth, it is essential to maintain Instagram account activity regularly. As such, effective marketing includes interaction with customers. Posting content often and uploading short videos and stories are effective ways to promote travel information. Through comments, tourists' needs can be understood so that the Instagram account manager can provide the necessary information and satisfy the tourists' needs. It also helps to establish a tighter connection with tourists. Reposting visitors' content will allow more users to see the real Hainan and provide more engagement. This is also an effective way to maintain the account's activity.

Finally, stakeholders, including travel companies and DMOs could cocreate Instagram content through frequent postings. Event promotion will increase the visibility of tourist destinations and attract more tourists. When promoting events on Instagram, adding event locations and hashtags can increase posts' reach, which leads to interest in a destination.

### Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the influence of Instagram on the tourists' destination choice in the context of Hainan island. Our research emphasises that UGC plays an essential role in influencing tourists on their choice of travel destination, and to this end, Instagram has become an important online marketing platform. For instance, the most commonly used channels for Hainan inbound tourists to search for travel information are Instagram, word-of-mouth, and TripAdvisor, all of which are UGC platforms. Furthermore, photos and videos published by real tourists are the most reliable travel information for many tourists. Because of various functions of Instagram (including geolocation and hashtag search) used both by potential and actual tourists, this platform is suitable for searching and sharing different information types, becoming a must-have travel app for many tourists.

Our findings point out that the development of the Hainan travel-related content will effectively impact the tourists' destination choice. Frequently posting photos that attract tourists is vital for the travel companies or DMO's Instagram accounts because it stimulates the aspirations of potential tourists and may attract more international visitors to Hainan island and provide more information for inbound tourists, making their trip to Hainan more convenient. The evaluation of Hainan's tourism content on Instagram indicates that the Instagram accounts related to Hainan have basic travel information, the content is not rich or detailed enough; representative hashtags and geolocations are not often used. However, despite Hainan's high-quality tourism resources and the Free Trade Port promotional initiatives (which include tourism activities), Hainan remains predominantly popular among domestic tourists. Hence, Hainan tourism stakeholders (including influencers and bloggers) can co-create more travel content for Hainan and use Instagram for effective destination marketing. The study's limitations include the small sample size and its timeline as the data was collected pre-COVID-19 pandemic, and current international travel to China is minimal.

Finally, we encourage more research into the influence of restricted/censored social media (such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook) and international tourists' choices in Chinese destinations. Future research will assist tourism stakeholders, DMOs and local governments in better understanding international tourists' needs and preferences.

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