The Impact of UGC Perception on Tourist Travel Intentions in Yunnan: The Mediating Role of Trust and Implications for Sustainable Digital Tourism Marketing

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Abstract. The proliferation of user generated content (UGC) on social media platforms has fundamentally transformed tourist information search and destination decision making. This study investigates the impact of UGC perception on tourist travel intentions in Yunnan Province, China, with a focus on the mediating role of trust. Drawing upon the Stimulus Organism Response (S-O-R) framework and Source Credibility Theory, we propose that tourists' perceptions of UGC, encompassing information quality, source credibility, and emotional appeal，influence travel intentions through trust. A cross sectional survey was administered to 342 tourists who used social media for travel planning. Structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to test the hypothesized relationships. Findings reveal that UGC perception significantly influences travel intentions, and this relationship is partially mediated by trust (VAF = 47.8%). The study offers practical implications for sustainable digital tourism marketing, suggesting that destination marketers should cultivate trustworthy UGC ecosystems to promote long term sustainability of Yunnan's tourism industry.

Keywords: UGC Perception, Tourist Travel Intentions, Sustainable Digital Tourism Marketing.

1 Introduction

The digital revolution has profoundly reshaped the tourism landscape, with social media platforms emerging as indispensable tools for travel information seeking and destination decision making (Keelson et al., 2024). User generated content (UGC), including travel reviews, photos, videos, and blog posts created by ordinary travelers, has become a primary information source for modern tourists. Unlike traditional marketing communications, UGC is perceived as more authentic, credible, and trustworthy, making it particularly influential in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors (Armutcu et al., 2023).

© The Author(s) 2026
B. P. Siba et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2026 5th International Conference on Public Service, Economic Management and Sustainable Development (PESD 2026)*, Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research 411,
https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6239-825-2_50

Yunnan Province, located in southwestern China, represents a compelling context for examining this relationship. Renowned for its ethnic diversity, natural landscapes, and cultural heritage, Yunnan has witnessed a dramatic surge in social media driven tourism. Platforms such as Xiaohongshu (RED), Douyin (TikTok), and Weibo play pivotal roles in destination promotion (Tran & Rudolf, 2022). The "One Kind of Life Called Yunnan" campaign has generated over 33.86 billion views across social media platforms as of April 2024, underscoring the power of digital content in shaping destination perceptions.

Despite growing recognition of UGC's importance, several research gaps remain. First, the psychological mechanisms underlying the UGC travel intention relationship, particularly the role of trust, remain insufficiently understood. Second, existing research predominantly focuses on Western contexts, with limited empirical evidence from emerging tourism markets such as China. Third, implications of UGC driven tourism for sustainable destination development have received scant attention.

This study aims to address these gaps by investigating the following research questions:

RQ1: How does UGC perception influence tourist travel intentions in Yunnan?

RQ2: Does trust mediate the relationship between UGC perception and travel intentions?

RQ3: What are the implications of these findings for sustainable digital tourism marketing?

2 Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 User Generated Content in Tourism

UGC refers to any content, text, images, videos, reviews, or ratings, created and shared by users on digital platforms. In tourism, UGC encompasses travel reviews on platforms such as Trip Advisor and Ctrip, photos and videos on Instagram and Douyin, blog posts, and social media travel content. Research has identified key attributes of UGC that influence tourist perceptions: information quality (accuracy, relevance, timeliness), source credibility (trustworthiness and expertise of creators), and emotional appeal (affective responses evoked by content) (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020).

2.2 Trust in the Tourism Context

Trust refers to tourists' willingness to rely on destination related information based on expectations of reliability, integrity, and competence. In the digital tourism context, trust encompasses both trust in UGC content and trust in the destination itself. Tourists who perceive UGC as trustworthy are more likely to develop positive destination images and express stronger travel intentions. Trust reduces perceived risk and uncertainty in travel decisions. Recent studies have demonstrated that trust mediates relationships between digital stimuli and tourist behavioral outcomes.

2.3 Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

This study integrates the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework with Source Credibility Theory. The S-O-R framework posits that environmental stimuli (S) trigger internal psychological states (O), which produce behavioral responses (R) (Chen et al., 2019; Yamagishi et al., 2024). Source Credibility Theory emphasizes the role of perceived trustworthiness and expertise in information acceptance. In our model, UGC perception serves as the stimulus (S), trust as the organism (O), and travel intentions as the response (R).

Prior research established positive relationships between UGC and travel intentions. Yamagishi et al. (2024) demonstrated that UGC significantly influences visit intentions through direct and indirect pathways. Information quality and source credibility are consistently linked to trust and behavioral outcomes.

H1: UGC perception positively influences tourist travel intentions.

H2: UGC perception positively influences trust.

H3: Trust positively influences tourist travel intentions.

H4: Trust mediates the relationship between UGC perception and tourist travel intentions.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Context

Yunnan Province was selected due to its status as a premier tourist destination, substantial growth in social media driven tourism, and significant sustainability challenges including overtourism in popular destina-

tions such as Lijiang and Dali.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

Data were collected through an online survey on a Chinese platform between January and March 2026. The target population comprised Chinese tourists who had used social media for travel planning in the past 12 months and had visited or intended to visit Yunnan. A total of 412 responses were received; after screening, 342 valid responses remained (83.0% response rate), exceeding the minimum requirements for PLS-SEM.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0. PLS-SEM was selected due to its suitability for complex models with multiple constructs and its robustness with non-normal data. The analysis proceeded in two stages: assessment of the measurement model, including reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity; and evaluation of the structural model, including hypothesis testing and mediation analysis.

4 Results

4.1 Sample Characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics. The sample comprised 58.2% female and 41.8% male respondents. The majority (62.3%) were aged 18-35 years, reflecting the predominance of younger generations in social media driven tourism. 71.9% held a bachelor's degree or higher. 43.9% had visited Yunnan previously, while 56.1% expressed intentions to visit. Xiaohongshu (67.5%) and Douyin (58.8%) were the most frequently used platforms.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	143	41.8%
	Female	199	58.2%
Age	18-25	98	28.7%

	26-35	115	33.6%
	36-45	72	21.1%
	46+	57	16.7%
Education	High school or below	96	28.1%
	Bachelor's degree	163	47.7%
	Master's degree or higher	83	24.3%
Previous Visit	Yes	150	43.9%
	No	192	56.1%
Platform Used	Xiaohongshu	231	67.5%
	Douyin/TikTok	201	58.8%
	Weibo	134	39.2%
	Ctrip or Trip.com	118	34.5%
	Other	67	19.6%

4.2 Measurement Model Assessment

All constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.812 to 0.891, exceeding the 0.70 threshold. Composite reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.845 to 0.912. Average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.612 to 0.724, surpassing the 0.50 threshold, confirming convergent validity (Table 2). Discriminant validity was confirmed via the Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT ratios (all below 0.85).

Table 2. Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
UGC Perception	0.891	0.912	0.724
Trust	0.845	0.878	0.658
Travel Intentions	0.812	0.845	0.612

4.3 Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model demonstrated good fit. As shown in Table 3, all hypotheses were supported.

Table 3. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	t-value	p-value
H1	4.873	<0.001
H2	10.245	<0.001
H3	6.321	<0.001

4.4 Mediation Analysis

Mediation analysis using bootstrap with 5,000 resamples revealed: direct effect ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$), indirect effect through trust ($\beta = 0.286$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.214, 0.358]), and total effect ($\beta = 0.598$, $p < 0.001$). H4 was supported.

5 Discussion

5.1 Key Findings

This study yields several important findings. First, UGC perception significantly and positively influences travel intentions, aligning with prior research demonstrating the persuasive power of UGC (Yamagishi et al., 2024). Second, UGC perception strongly predicts trust ($\beta = 0.688$), consistent with Source Credibility Theory emphasizing trust-building through perceived quality and credibility. Third, trust significantly drives travel intentions, corroborating its established role as a key behavioral determinant. Fourth, trust partially mediates the UGC perception-travel intention relationship (VAF = 47.8%), demonstrating that approximately half of UGC's influence operates through psychological trust mechanisms.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions. It extends the S-O-R framework to the UGC context, demonstrating how digital information stimuli shape tourist responses through trust. By integrating Source Credibility Theory, it highlights the importance of perceived credibility in tourist information processing. Identifying trust as a partial mediator elucidates the psychological mechanisms underlying UGC influence. It provides empirical evidence from the Chinese tourism market, addressing the gap in emerging tourism contexts.

5.3 Implications for Sustainable Digital Tourism Marketing

The findings offer practical implications. First, destination marketers should cultivate trustworthy UGC ecosystems by encouraging authentic, high-quality content from credible sources. Second, leveraging emotional UGC through storytelling approaches can enhance trust and trav-

el intentions. Third, UGC can promote sustainable tourism by encouraging content highlighting eco-tourism, cultural immersion, and community-based experiences, helping distribute tourist flows away from overcrowded hotspots. Fourth, addressing information quality concerns through monitoring and responding to misinformation is essential. Fifth, targeted strategies for younger generations on platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin should emphasize authenticity and emotional appeal.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design limits causal inferences; longitudinal research is needed. The sample was limited to Chinese tourists, restricting generalizability to international tourists. The study focused on UGC perception holistically; future research could examine differential effects of specific UGC dimensions. Potential moderators such as tourist experience and platform type warrant investigation. Finally, while sustainable tourism implications were discussed, direct measurement of sustainable tourism outcomes was not included.

6 Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of UGC perception on tourist travel intentions in Yunnan Province, with a focus on the mediating role of trust. Drawing on the S-O-R framework and Source Credibility Theory, we developed and tested a conceptual model linking UGC perception to travel intentions through trust. The findings provide robust empirical support: UGC perception significantly influences both trust and travel intentions, with trust partially mediating this relationship (VAF = 47.8%). The study makes theoretical contributions by extending established frameworks to the UGC context and providing empirical evidence from China. Practically, it offers actionable insights for destination marketers to leverage UGC for sustainable tourism development through cultivating trustworthy ecosystems, promoting emotional content, and targeting younger generations strategically. As digital platforms continue to evolve, understanding the mechanisms through which UGC influences travel behavior remains critical for tourism researchers and practitioners alike.

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