VILNIUS UNIVERSITY
BUSINESS SCHOOL

DIGITAL MARKETING PROGRAM

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MASTER THESIS

TITLE IN LITHUANIAN	TITLE IN ENGLISH
Vartotojų sukurto turinio (VST) įtaka klientų pasitikėjimui ir pasaulinio prekės ženklo suvokimui turizmo apgyvendinimo sektoriuje.	**The Influence of User-Generated Content (UGC) on Customer Trust and Global Brand Perception in the Tourism Accommodation Sector.**

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Supervisor   Prof. Dr. Sunil Sahadev

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Summary

VILNIUS UNIVERSITY BUSINESS SCHOOL

DIGITAL MARKETING

MD TAREQ AZIZ SHOTEJ

THE INFLUENCE OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT (UGC) ON CUSTOMER TRUST AND GLOBAL BRAND PERCEPTION IN THE TOURISM ACCOMMODATION SECTOR.

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Sunil Sahadev

Place and Year: Vilnius, 2025

Scope of the thesis: 57 pages.

Number of tables: 5 Pcs.

Number of figures: 5 Pcs.

Number of references: 50 Pcs.

The Final Master's thesis described in brief

The rapid growth of digital platforms has increased the importance of user-generated content (UGC) as a key information source in tourism accommodation decision-making. Travelers increasingly rely on online reviews, photos, and videos created by other consumers when evaluating accommodation providers in conditions of high uncertainty.

Problem, objective, and tasks of the Final Master's thesis

The research problem addresses how perceived credibility of UGC influences customer trust and global brand perception, and whether customer trust acts as a mediating mechanism. The objective of the study is to examine the relationships between UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector.

Research methods used in the Final Master's thesis

A quantitative research design was applied using an online survey administered to international travelers. Data from 272 valid responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and regression-based mediation analysis with PROCESS macro (Model 4) in SPSS.

Results obtained from Research

The results show that UGC credibility has a strong positive effect on customer trust (β = 0.755, $p < 0.001$) and a significant direct effect on global brand perception (β = 0.395, $p < 0.001$). Customer trust partially mediates the relationship between UGC credibility and global brand perception (indirect effect β = 0.304).

Conclusions of the Final Master's thesis

Credible user-generated content significantly enhances customer trust and global brand perception, confirming trust as a key psychological mechanism in digital tourism branding.

Information about the publication of Final Master's thesis results or adaptation for publication

The findings may be applied in tourism marketing and brand management practices.

SANTRAUKA
VILNIAUS UNIVERSITETAS VERSLO MOKYKLA
SKAITMENINĖS RINKODAROS PROGRAMA
MD TAREQ AZIZ SHOTEJ

Vartotojų sukurto turinio (VST) įtaka klientų pasitikėjimui ir pasaulinio prekės ženklo suvokimui turizmo apgyvendinimo sektoriuje.

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Magistro darbas (projektas) parengtas Vilniuje, 2025 m.

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Baigiamojo magistro darbo trumpas aprašymas

Spartus skaitmeninių platformų augimas padidino naudotojų kuriamo turinio (angl. *user-generated content*, UGC) svarbą kaip pagrindinį informacijos šaltinį priimant sprendimus dėl apgyvendinimo paslaugų turizmo sektoriuje. Keliautojai vis dažniau remiasi kitų vartotojų sukurtomis internetinėmis apžvalgomis, nuotraukomis ir vaizdo įrašais vertindami apgyvendinimo paslaugų teikėjus didelio neapibrėžtumo sąlygomis.

Baigiamojo magistro darbo problema, tikslas ir uždaviniai

Tyrimo problema siejama su tuo, kaip suvokiamas naudotojų kuriamo turinio patikimumas veikia vartotojų pasitikėjimą ir globalų prekės ženklo suvokimą, bei ar vartotojų pasitikėjimas veikia kaip tarpinis (mediacinis) mechanizmas šiame ryšyje. Tyrimo tikslas – ištirti ryšius tarp naudotojų kuriamo turinio patikimumo, vartotojų pasitikėjimo ir globalaus prekės ženklo suvokimo turizmo apgyvendinimo sektoriuje.

Baigiamajame magistro darbe taikyti tyrimo metodai

Tyrime taikytas kiekybinis tyrimo dizainas, naudojant internetinę apklausą, skirtą tarptautiniams keliautojams. Analizei panaudoti 272 tinkami respondentų atsakymai. Duomenys analizuoti taikant aprašomąją statistiką, Pearsono koreliacijos analizę, daugybinę regresinę analizę bei regresija pagrįstą mediacijos analizę, naudojant PROCESS makrokomandą (4 modelis) SPSS programoje.

Tyrimo uždaviniai

Tyrimo rezultatai parodė, kad naudotojų kuriamo turinio patikimumas turi stiprų teigiamą poveikį vartotojų pasitikėjimui ($\beta = 0{,}755$, $p < 0{,}001$) bei reikšmingą tiesioginį poveikį globaliam prekės ženklo suvokimui ($\beta = 0{,}395$, $p < 0{,}001$). Nustatyta, kad vartotojų pasitikėjimas iš dalies tarpininkauja ryšiui tarp naudotojų kuriamo turinio patikimumo ir globalaus prekės ženklo suvokimo (netiesioginis poveikis $\beta = 0{,}304$).

Baigiamojo magistro darbo išvados

Patikimas naudotojų kuriamas turinys reikšmingai didina vartotojų pasitikėjimą ir gerina globalų prekės ženklo suvokimą, patvirtindamas pasitikėjimą kaip svarbų psichologinį mechanizmą skaitmeninio turizmo prekės ženklų formavimo kontekste.

Informacija apie baigiamojo magistro darbo rezultatų publikavimą ar pritaikymą publikavimui

Tyrimo rezultatai gali būti taikomi turizmo rinkodaros ir prekės ženklų valdymo praktikoje.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI – Artificial Intelligence

CI – Confidence Interval

eWOM – Electronic Word of Mouth

M – Mean

N – Sample size

p – Significance level

PROCESS – PROCESS macro for mediation analysis in SPSS

SD – Standard Deviation

SPSS – Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

UGC – User-Generated Content

VIF – Variance Inflation Factor

β – Standardized regression coefficient

INTRODUCTION

In digital tourism markets, user-generated content (UGC) such as reviews, photos, and videos has become a crucial information source shaping how travelers evaluate accommodation providers. This study examines whether perceived credibility of UGC influences (1) customer trust and (2) global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector, and whether trust mediates the relationship between UGC credibility and global brand perception. A quantitative approach was employed here using survey data collected from international travelers who regularly engage with UGC on major travel and social platforms. Data were then analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, regression, and mediation analysis (Hayes, 2017; Pourfakhimi et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2021; Filieri et al., 2015). The findings contribute empirical insight into the role of UGC in trust formation and brand-level evaluations, offering implications for both theory and managerial practice in tourism accommodation branding.

Relevance of the Topic

Tourism accommodation decisions are increasingly shaped by digital information environments, in which travelers evaluate service providers before making a purchase, without direct inspection. In this context, user-generated content (UGC), including previous travelers' ratings, written reviews, and traveler-generated visuals, has become a dominant input in decision-making. Compared with firm-controlled advertising, UGC is commonly perceived as more credible, experience-based, and trustworthy, thus making it highly influential in trust formation and brand evaluation within tourism services (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020; Yoo & Choi, 2022; Filieri et al., 2015; Sparks & Browning, 2011).

For accommodation brands operating across markets, the importance of UGC goes beyond individual booking decisions. UGC can influence broader perceptions of credibility, reputation, and international appeal through aggregated traveler narratives across platforms. Empirical evidence indicates that UGC is associated with hospitality outcomes and plays a measurable role in shaping consumer responses and business performance, bringing attention to its strategic relevance in the sector (Niu, 2025; Sigala & Gretzel, 2017; Xiang et al., 2022).

Novelty of the Research

Although UGC has received considerable attention in tourism and hospitality research, gaps remain in empirically clarifying how UGC credibility translates into brand-level outcomes and the role of trust as an explanatory mechanism. Recent marketing scholars emphasize that consumer trust in digital environments forms the effectiveness of user-generated information and can operate as a key pathway linking UGC to consumer and firm outcomes (Hochstein et al., 2023; Yoo & Choi, 2022; Leung et al., 2021; Pavlou, 2003; McKnight et al., 2002).

This study contributes by testing a focused explanatory model in which UGC credibility predicts customer trust and global brand perception, with customer trust examined as a mediating variable. This approach provides a clearer account of the mechanism connecting peer-generated information to global brand evaluation in the tourism accommodation context.

Scope of the Thesis

This thesis explores the effect of UGC on customer trust and global brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector from the consumer perspective. In this study, global brand perception refers to respondents' overall evaluation of tourism accommodation brands in terms of credibility, reputation, and international appeal, rather than perceptions tied to a specific destination or country. The research focuses on travelers who use online platforms to search, consume, and interact with UGC related to accommodation services. The study is limited to consumer perceptions and does not assess organizational-level UGC management practices or algorithmic approaches to UGC analysis, which have been addressed in prior research using machine learning techniques (Mustak et al., 2024).

The research design is quantitative and cross-sectional, using survey responses to measure key constructs and test the proposed relationships. The study does not test customer journey stages, service quality, or generational/cross-cultural group differences as separate hypotheses; these issues are considered only for contextual interpretation and future research direction.

Aim of the Thesis

This research aims to examine how user-generated content credibility influences customer trust and global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector, and whether customer trust mediates the relationship between UGC credibility and global brand perception.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between perceived credibility of user-generated content and customer trust in tourism accommodation brands.
2. To analyze the effect of user-generated content on global brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector.
3. To examine the mediating role of customer trust in the relationship between user-generated content and global brand perception.
4. To offer practical recommendations for tourism brands on how to strategically leverage UGC to foster trust and strengthen brand reputation in the competitive digital marketplace.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between perceived UGC credibility and customer trust in tourism accommodation brands?

2. How does perceived UGC credibility influence global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector?
3. Does customer trust mediate the relationship between perceived UGC credibility and global brand perception?

Research Methods

This study adopts a quantitative research approach to examine how user-generated content influences customer trust and global brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector. Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire administered to international travelers who actively engage with UGC on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and TripAdvisor etc. The study employed purposive sampling to target respondents with prior exposure to UGC related to accommodation decisions.

The survey measured perceived UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception using validated Likert-scale items. Statistical techniques, including descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, multiple regression, and mediation analysis, were employed to examine the relationships among the study variables and to test the proposed hypotheses.

Structure of the Thesis

This master's thesis is structured into an introduction, three main analytical chapters, and a concluding section.

- The **Introduction** presents the research background, relevance of the topic, research problem, aim, objectives, research questions, methodology overview, and the overall structure of the thesis.
- **Chapter One** provides a critical analysis of the scientific literature related to user-generated content, customer trust, and global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector. This chapter reviews key theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, credibility dimensions, and platform-related differences, and concludes with the development of the conceptual framework and research hypotheses.
- **Chapter Two** outlines the empirical research methodology adopted in the study. It describes the research design and approach, population and sampling procedure, data collection instrument, measurement of variables, data analysis techniques, reliability and validity testing, and ethical considerations.
- **Chapter Three** presents and analyzes the empirical research results. This chapter includes data screening and preparation, descriptive analysis, reliability and validity assessment, hypothesis testing using correlation, regression, and mediation analysis, and a discussion of the findings in relation to the conceptual framework and prior literature.

- The **Conclusions and Recommendations** section summarizes the key findings of the study, presents theoretical and practical recommendations, discusses study limitations, and proposes directions for future research.

1 ANALYSIS OF SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE

The strategic use of user-generated content (UGC) has transformed how tourism brands engage with their consumers, foster trust, and shape brand perceptions in digital markets. In the tourism accommodation sector, UGC increasingly functions as both a marketing and relational asset, supporting authenticity and consumer resonance through peer-to-peer communication in online environments. This literature review synthesizes relevant scholarly discourse, focusing on three interrelated areas:

1. customer trust and perceptions of UGC,
2. theoretical foundations of digital trust, and
3. trust formation within social networking platforms and tourism services.

1.1 Customer Trust and Perceptions of UGC

Trust is a critical element in tourism accommodation, because travelers often make purchase decisions under uncertainty and cannot evaluate service quality before consumption. In such situations, UGC is frequently positioned as a credibility-enhancing information source because it reflects consumer experiences rather than firm-created claims. A key insight in tourism research is that trust formation in digital environments depends not only on content itself, but also on perceived credibility, authenticity cues, and the broader platform context in which content is encountered (Yoo & Choi, 2022; Gefen et al., 2003; Kim et al., 2008).

Trust in UGC is also shaped by how consumers evaluate informational value and trustworthiness signals within online content. For example, research on traveler-generated content demonstrates that large-scale online reviews and consumer narratives can be systematically analyzed to understand how tourists form destination-related beliefs and impressions, reinforcing the role of UGC as a trust-relevant input in tourism decision-making. (Marine-Roig, 2019; Kitsios et al., 2022; Yoo & Choi, 2022).

1.1.1 Theoretical Foundations of Digital Trust in UGC

The role of trust in UGC has been increasingly conceptualized within digital marketing scholarship, particularly about how trust operates as a mechanism that explains why UGC can influence consumer decisions. Evidence from marketing research shows that digital trust can strengthen the effectiveness of UGC and can function as an explanatory mechanism linking user-generated information to consumer outcomes. (Hochstein et al., 2023).

Building on this perspective, tourism and hospitality research suggests that trust is strengthened when user-generated information is perceived as honest, useful, and produced without strong commercial bias, which increases its diagnostic value compared to firm-controlled messaging (Yoo & Choi, 2022).

1.1.2 Trust in Social Networking and Tourism Services

Trust in UGC is further shaped by the structural characteristics of social networking platforms and digital tourism services. Empirical evidence indicates that perceived reliability and perceived usefulness of online platforms play a central role in shaping information trust within digital tourism contexts, which reinforces the credibility of user-generated information encountered by travelers (Kitsios et al., 2022).

Platform-level design features such as content visibility, social proof cues (e.g., likes and comments), and transparency mechanisms also influence how trustworthy UGC is perceived to be. As a result, trust effects associated with UGC are driven not only by message content, but also by how platforms structure interaction, prioritize information, and amplify certain consumer voices (Kitsios et al., 2022).

1.1.3 Meta-Analyses and Systematic Reviews

Recent systematic and integrative literature reviews demonstrate robust evidence of the relationship between user-generated content (UGC), consumer trust, and tourism marketing outcomes. A comprehensive systematic review by Sujatmiko et al. (2025) synthesizes findings across tourism marketing studies and demonstrates that UGC consistently enhances trust, engagement, and decision-making confidence by offering experiential, peer-based information that consumers perceive as more credible than firm-controlled communication. Complementary review evidence further confirms that trust operates as a central mediating mechanism through which UGC influences attitudes, booking intentions, and brand-related outcomes in tourism contexts (Filieri et al., 2015). Collectively, this body of review-based research positions consumer trust as a key explanatory pathway linking UGC exposure with tourism marketing effectiveness.

Focusing specifically on visual formats, Polat et al. (2023) systematically review user-generated video content in hospitality and tourism and identify visual authenticity cues such as amateur aesthetics, unfiltered experiences, and spontaneous storytelling as key drivers of perceived credibility and trust. Their findings demonstrate that UGC videos foster emotional connection and trust precisely because they convey realism and human presence, reinforcing UGC's trust-building function in digital tourism environments.

Prior tourism research indicates that user-generated content influences multiple stages of the travel planning process, including inspiration, evaluation, and final decision-making (Rathore, 2020). Their review shows that UGC often serves as an initial source of information, while more structured and credibility-focused content (such as detailed reviews) becomes increasingly influential during evaluation and choice stages. These temporal dynamics underscore that trust in UGC is not static but develops as consumers progress through the decision journey, emphasizing the importance of consistent trust signals across digital touchpoints for tourism accommodation brands (Cheung et al., 2022).

1.1.4 Generational and Cross-Cultural Perspectives

Trust in UGC varies across generational and cultural contexts. In collectivist cultures, tourists tend to rely more heavily on consensus-based peer recommendations, whereas in individualistic cultures, greater emphasis is placed on personal judgment and selective trust in digital information sources. These cultural differences help explain variations in how UGC influences accommodation and destination choices across markets (Correia et al., 2025).

Across generations, visual and experiential forms of user-generated content are particularly influential among younger travelers, who tend to place greater trust in peer-shared photos and videos than in text-based reviews (Ramos & Ramos, 2025; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Similarly, Yoo and Choi (2022) observe that in e-tourism contexts, trust in UGC functions both as an antecedent that drives initial engagement and therefore reinforces satisfaction and loyalty. While such generational and cultural differences are not empirically tested in the present study, they provide important contextual insights and directions for future research.

1.1.5 From Trust to Brand Perception

While trust in UGC has traditionally been examined at the individual decision-making level, growing research suggests that it also has broader implications for brand perception and reputation. Trust in digital environments functions as a form of reputational currency that tourism firms can leverage to strengthen global brand positioning. Hochstein et al. (2023) demonstrate that consumer trust in UGC amplifies its effectiveness by mediating perceptions of credibility and authenticity, thereby contributing to more favorable brand evaluations. This perspective is consistent with established branding theory, which emphasizes trust as a core antecedent of positive brand associations and perceived brand value (Aaker, 1997; Keller, 2016).

Trust cultivated through user-generated content (UGC) reduces perceived risk and increases confidence in brand promises, particularly in situations where travelers lack prior experience with an accommodation provider or destination. Peer-generated reviews and shared experiences help travelers evaluate service quality under conditions of uncertainty, making UGC a critical trust-building mechanism in tourism decision-making (Sujatmiko et al., 2025). Empirical research further demonstrates that trust derived from UGC not only shapes brand evaluations but also strengthens long-term relational outcomes such as tourist loyalty, especially in culturally significant tourism contexts (Xu et al., 2023).

The influence of UGC-driven trust on global brand perception has also been observed across digital platforms. Leung et al. (2021) confirm that accommodation providers experience stronger performance outcomes when UGC enhances perceived authenticity and credibility. Similarly, Sigala and Gretzel (2017) show that trust in peer-generated content enriches the experiential and emotional dimensions of tourism brands. Recent research further indicates

that consistent trust cues embedded in user-generated narratives contribute to stronger brand perceptions by reinforcing reliability and credibility in digital tourism contexts (Niu, 2025).

Taken together, these studies indicate that customer trust in UGC functions as a bridge between micro-level travel decisions and macro-level brand positioning. Authentic UGC not only informs and reassures individual travelers but also signals to global audiences that a tourism accommodation brand is credible, transparent, and community driven. As such, cultivating trust through consumer-generated reviews, visuals, and narratives represents a strategic pathway for enhancing long-term brand equity and global brand perception (Mathur et al., 2022; Correia et al., 2025).

1.2 UGC in Operational Practices of Top Tourism Brands

While the marketing implications of user-generated content (UGC) are well established, recent literature increasingly recognizes its relevance for the operational practices of tourism accommodation brands, particularly in relation to trust building and brand perception. In digital tourism environments, accommodation providers do not merely host UGC on external platforms but actively engage with consumer-generated reviews, images, and narratives as part of broader brand and reputation management practices (Yamagishi et al., 2024).

Tourism research suggests that UGC has become embedded in how accommodation brands manage visibility, credibility, and consumer relationships across digital touchpoints, directly shaping brand perception in digital communication environments (Lariba, 2023).

1.2.1 Integration into Brand Strategies

Tourism accommodation brands increasingly acknowledge that traditional top-down communication strategies are less effective in digital environments where travelers rely heavily on peer-shared experiences. Sigala and Gretzel (2017) describe this shift as a move toward value co-creation, in which consumers actively participate in shaping brand narratives through their shared experiences. In practice, accommodation brands select and promote selected user-generated reviews, photos, and videos alongside professionally produced content to signal authenticity and transparency.

Evidence from the Handbook of e-Tourism further indicates that this integration is not accidental but reflects deliberate strategic choices supported by organizational policies and digital infrastructures. Xiang et al. (2022) document how tourism organizations systematically incorporate UGC into communication strategies to strengthen credibility and align brand messaging with consumer perceptions. These practices illustrate how UGC has become an operational input into brand communication rather than an external or uncontrolled phenomenon.

1.2.2 UGC and Reputation Management Frameworks

Beyond communication strategy, user-generated content (UGC) plays an essential role in reputation management within the tourism accommodation sector. Recent tourism research conceptualizes UGC as a decentralized reputational resource, where brand image and trust are continuously shaped through ongoing consumer interactions across digital platforms rather than being fully controlled by firms. This shift reflects the growing importance of peer-generated evaluations in influencing how accommodation brands are perceived in online environments (Lariba, 2023; Tarmidzi et al., 2024).

Online reviews and traveler-generated visuals function as trust-relevant signals that guide future guest expectations and evaluations of accommodation providers. Consequently, effective reputation management increasingly involves actively monitoring, responding to, and learning from UGC in order to sustain credibility and trust across digital touchpoints, particularly under conditions of information asymmetry common in tourism services (Regitz et al., 2024).

1.2.3 Performance Outcomes and Brand Perception

Empirical research also indicates that UGC is associated with measurable performance outcomes in the accommodation sector. In addition, prior findings indicate that UGC-based trust cues are strongly associated with customer satisfaction and post-consumption evaluations in tourism accommodation contexts (Regitz et al., 2024).

While the present study does not examine operational performance directly, these findings support the argument that UGC influences brand perception at an aggregate level. By shaping expectations and trust before purchase, UGC contributes indirectly to brand reputation and competitive positioning in the tourism accommodation market.

1.2.4 Cross-Cultural Brand Positioning

Given the global nature of tourism, UGC also influences how accommodation brands are perceived across markets, and prior eWOM research in tourism highlights that consumer responses to online peer content (including trust-related judgments) can vary by context and audience characteristics, implying that standardized UGC strategies may not produce consistent outcomes across all markets (Dang & Nguyen, 2023).

Although cross-cultural differences are not empirically tested in the present study, the literature suggests that culturally adaptive engagement with UGC is important for maintaining coherent brand perception and trust across international audiences.

1.2.5 Critical Review of Operational UGC Literature

The scientific literature reveals that the operational use of UGC by tourism brands operates along four key dimensions (strategic integration, reputation management, performance outcomes, and cross-cultural positioning). While much of the existing research documents the positive effect of UGC, critical gaps persist. First, the majority of empirical

studies focus on hospitality (mainly hotels), leaving airlines and destination marketing organizations less researched.

Second, while analyses (Leung et al., 2021) provide strong evidence of performance effect, there is limited work that systematically and comparatively examines the relative effectiveness of UGC across different platforms, such as Instagram versus TikTok. Finally, cross-cultural studies, while offering valuable insights, remain fragmented and context-specific. This calls for more longitudinal analyses that ascertain how UGC-driven brand perceptions and trust evolve over time across different cultural markets.

To sum up, UGC emerges not as a peripheral or supplementary branding tactic but as a central operational asset. Its integration into strategies, its role in managing reputation, its capacity to improve business performance, and its significance in cross-cultural contexts collectively highlight its pivotal role in building consumer trust and strengthening global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector.

1.3 UGC as a Strategic Marketing Tool

User-generated content (UGC) functions as a strategic marketing tool in the tourism accommodation sector by enabling brands to influence consumer perceptions through authentic, consumer-created communication rather than firm-controlled promotional messaging. In digital tourism contexts, UGC supports marketing objectives by providing experiential and peer-based information that prospective travelers use to evaluate accommodation options and reduce perceived uncertainty before booking decisions (Rathore, 2020).

From a strategic marketing perspective, UGC operates as a form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) that shapes consumer attitudes toward tourism offerings. Prior research consistently demonstrates that content created and shared by other travelers is perceived as more credible and relevant than traditional advertising, thereby increasing its persuasive value in tourism marketing environments (Rathore, 2020). As a result, UGC plays a central role in influencing how consumers form expectations and judgments about accommodation brands.

UGC also contributes to strategic brand positioning by shaping destination and accommodation brand images. Visual and textual UGC shared on social media and review platforms influences both cognitive and affective components of brand perception, affecting how destinations and hospitality brands are mentally represented by potential tourists. Empirical evidence indicates that traveler-generated reviews and narratives significantly shape perceived destination image, positioning UGC as a strategic input for brand evaluation and positioning decisions in tourism marketing (Marine-Roig, 2019).

In addition, UGC enables cost-efficient consumer engagement and brand co-creation. Rather than relying exclusively on professionally produced campaigns, tourism

accommodation brands increasingly integrate user-generated reviews, photos, and stories into their digital communication to extend reach, stimulate interaction, and reinforce perceived authenticity. This strategic integration allows brands to enhance visibility and engagement while maintaining credibility within consumer-driven digital environments (Sigala & Gretzel, 2017).

Overall, contemporary tourism literature conceptualizes user-generated content (UGC) as a strategic marketing resource that supports trust formation, enhances brand perception, and influences consumer decision-making in digital tourism environments. Through its deliberate incorporation into digital marketing strategies, UGC enables tourism accommodation brands to shape market perceptions, reduce decision uncertainty, and sustain competitiveness in increasingly experience-oriented online markets (Sigala & Gretzel, 2017).

1.3.1 Systematic Evidence from Tourism Research

Systematic reviews and integrative studies further reinforce the strategic relevance of UGC in tourism marketing. Leung et al. (2021) demonstrate that UGC influences multiple stages of tourist decision-making by informing awareness, evaluation, and post-consumption engagement, thereby reinforcing co-created marketing narratives. Although the present study does not empirically test these stages, such findings highlight why UGC is strategically important for shaping consumer perceptions and expectations.

Similarly, Polat et al. (2023), in their systematic review of tourism-related video content, identify authenticity cues such as spontaneity and non-professional aesthetics as key drivers of credibility and trust. These insights support the view that UGC's strategic value lies in its perceived authenticity rather than in polished promotional presentation.

1.3.2 Platform-Specific Influences

The strategic impact of UGC is also mediated by the digital platforms through which it is shared. Social media platforms and review websites differ in how content is created, displayed, and evaluated, influencing how UGC contributes to trust and brand perception. Review platforms such as TripAdvisor and Booking.com provide structured evaluation systems that facilitate comparative judgment, while visual platforms such as Instagram and YouTube emphasize experiential storytelling (Zhuang et al., 2025).

Platform features such as visibility mechanisms, user feedback indicators (e.g., likes, ratings, and comments), and content organization significantly shape how user-generated content is interpreted and trusted by consumers. Research in digital tourism contexts shows that trust in UGC is influenced not only by the message itself but also by platform affordances that signal credibility and usefulness to users. Consequently, understanding UGC as a strategic marketing tool requires attention not only to content creation but also to the digital environments that mediate its visibility, credibility, and reach (Kitsios et al., 2022).

1.3.3 Shifts in Tourism Marketing Strategies

The rise of UGC has contributed to a shift in tourism marketing strategies from predominantly unidirectional, firm-controlled communication toward more participatory and co-created forms of brand storytelling. Tourism research indicates that travelers increasingly rely on peer-generated reviews, images, and narratives when evaluating accommodation options, as such content is perceived as more authentic and less commercially biased than traditional advertising (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020).

As a result, tourism accommodation brands increasingly adopt hybrid strategies that combine professional marketing with curated consumer-generated content. This approach allows brands to maintain message reach while reinforcing trust through peer validation, aligning marketing communication with contemporary consumer expectations without relinquishing strategic oversight (Sigala & Gretzel, 2017).

1.3.4 Brand Perception and Global Positioning

The most critical strategic function of UGC lies in its ability to shape brand perception and foster consumer trust across international markets. By reflecting diverse traveler experiences, UGC contributes to how accommodation brands are perceived beyond local contexts, reinforcing authenticity and credibility through aggregated peer narratives (Marine-Roig, 2019). However, because interpretations of UGC may vary across cultural contexts, tourism brands must remain attentive to how consumer-generated content influences brand meaning in different markets (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020).

1.3.5 Critical Review of Strategic Marketing Literature

The reviewed literature underscores UGC as a cornerstone of contemporary tourism marketing (dynamic, technology-driven, and inherently participatory). Its strategic use extends beyond content sharing; it serves as the foundation of reputation building, trust formation, and cross-cultural brand positioning. Nevertheless, challenges persist in balancing authenticity and brand control, particularly in algorithmically mediated environments where consumer narratives evolve organically. As AI-driven curation intensifies, UGC will become even more central to the marketing strategies of global tourism accommodation brands, defining how trust, credibility, and brand perception are constructed in an increasingly digital and interconnected marketplace (Zhuang et al., 2025; Mustak et al., 2024).

1.4 UGC and Consumer Trust Formation

Trust is a central construct in the digital tourism environment, particularly in the accommodation sector, where consumers rely heavily on online information prior to purchase decisions. In this context, user-generated content functions not merely as a communication tool but as a trust-building mechanism that shapes perceptions of credibility, authenticity, and brand reliability. The literature consistently emphasizes that consumers perceive peer-created

and socially mediated content as more genuine and trustworthy than firm-generated messages, largely due to the absence of overt commercial intent and the presence of perceived brand authenticity in hospitality contexts (Qing et al., 2024).

1.4.1 UGC as a Mechanism of Trust Transfer

Trust in digital environments is frequently conceptualized as a transferable attribute, whereby credibility associated with one actor, such as a peer reviewer or content creator, is extended to the brand or service being discussed. This logic aligns with trust transfer theory, which explains how trust formed toward an information source can be transferred to a related object, such as a tourism accommodation brand (Yamagishi et al., 2024).

In the context of tourism accommodation, when travelers engage with authentic reviews or peer-generated visuals, they infer brand trustworthiness through social validation mechanisms. Prior tourism research demonstrates that detailed, experience-based UGC enhances confidence in booking decisions by reducing perceived risk and information asymmetry (Yoo & Choi, 2022; Stewart, 2003).

Authenticity plays a decisive role in this process. UGC that appears spontaneous, experience-based, and non-commercial is more likely to stimulate emotional trust by reducing skepticism toward brand-related claims. This is particularly important in hospitality contexts, where consumers cannot physically verify service quality prior to consumption (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020).

1.4.2 Social Proof and Peer Endorsement

Social proof theory provides an additional lens through which to understand how UGC contributes to trust formation. In digital tourism environments, indicators such as review volume, consistency of ratings, and visible peer endorsement serve as credibility signals that influence how trustworthy content is perceived. Research consistently shows that such peer-generated cues enhance confidence in accommodation brands and increase reliance on UGC during decision-making (Yoo & Choi, 2022).

Moreover, the perceived similarity and experiential relevance of content creators play an important role in shaping consumer trust in user-generated content. When travelers encounter reviews, photos, or videos created by individuals whose experiences appear relatable or comparable to their own travel context, the content is more likely to be evaluated as credible and trustworthy. Recent tourism marketing literature highlights that UGC derives much of its persuasive power from its experiential nature, as it reflects real usage, firsthand encounters, and practical insights that consumers cannot obtain from firm-controlled promotional messages. As a result, trust in UGC is strengthened through perceived authenticity, usefulness, and experiential alignment between content creators and information seekers, reinforcing the relational dimension of trust in tourism accommodation decision-making (Sujatmiko et al., 2025).

1.4.3 Algorithmic Mediation and Trust Biases

While digital platforms increase the visibility and accessibility of UGC, algorithmic content ranking can also influence which narratives are most prominently displayed. Research suggests that algorithmic amplification may shape trust indirectly by prioritizing highly engaged or popular content, potentially reinforcing selective exposure rather than content accuracy (Leung et al., 2021).

From a tourism branding perspective, this underscores that trust formation is not driven solely by content quality, but also by platform dynamics and brand responsiveness. When accommodation brands actively acknowledge and respond to UGC, they reinforce perceptions of transparency and relational trust. Conversely, limited engagement with consumer feedback may weaken trust signals and reduce perceived credibility (Sigala & Gretzel, 2017).

1.4.4 Cross-Cultural Dimensions of Trust Formation

Trust formation through UGC varies across cultural contexts, as cultural orientations influence how consumers interpret credibility and authenticity cues in online reviews. Tourism research indicates that consumers from different cultural backgrounds may prioritize distinct trust signals when interpreting user-generated content, as cultural norms shape how credibility, authenticity, and brand meaning are constructed in digital tourism environments (Tarmidzi et al., 2024).

Although cross-cultural differences are not empirically tested in the present study, these insights provide important contextual understanding of how UGC-driven trust may operate differently across international markets. Accordingly, such perspectives are used to frame the findings and identify opportunities for future research rather than serving as explanatory variables in the current analysis (Yamagishi et al., 2024).

1.4.5 Critical Review of Trust Formation Literature

The existing literature highlights the relevance of cultural context in shaping how trust cues embedded in user-generated content are interpreted across tourism markets. However, empirical research directly examining cross-cultural variation in UGC credibility and trust formation remains limited and fragmented. This gap suggests a need for future comparative or multi-country studies to systematically assess how cultural factors moderate the relationship between UGC, customer trust, and brand perception in tourism contexts.

1.5 Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

Based on the synthesis of prior literature reviewed in Chapter 1, this study proposes a conceptual framework to explain how user-generated content (UGC) influences customer trust and global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector. Existing research indicates that credible and authentic UGC plays a critical role in shaping consumer evaluations of tourism brands by reducing information asymmetry and enhancing perceived trustworthiness

in digital environments (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). Furthermore, trust has been identified as a key psychological mechanism through which UGC translates into broader brand-related outcomes, particularly in experience-based services such as tourism accommodation, where consumers rely heavily on peer-generated information prior to purchase (Yoo & Choi, 2022). Accordingly, this study conceptualizes customer trust as a mediating variable in the relationship between perceived UGC credibility and global brand perception.

Figure 1.1: Conceptual Research Model

Conceptual Model of UGC Influence on Customer Trust and Global Brand Perception
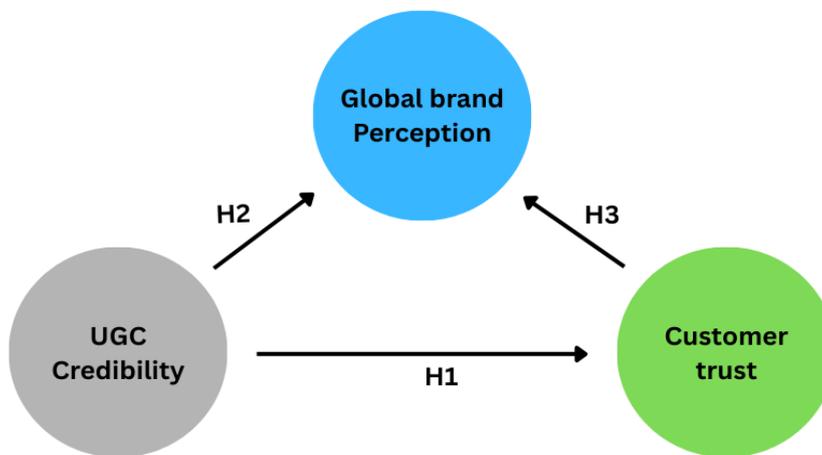
H4: Customer trust mediates the relationship between user-generated content credibility and global brand perception.

Figure 1.1 presents the conceptual research model illustrating the proposed relationships between UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception.

Hypotheses Development

H1: User-generated content credibility has a positive effect on customer trust in tourism accommodation brands.

H2: User-generated content credibility has a positive effect on global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector.

H3: Customer trust has a positive effect on global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector.

H4: Customer trust mediates the relationship between user-generated content credibility and global brand perception.

1.6 UGC Credibility Dimensions and Credibility Cues

User-generated content credibility is a multidimensional construct that reflects consumers' perceptions of the trustworthiness, usefulness, and authenticity of peer-generated information. Prior research suggests that credibility judgments are not formed solely based on

message content, but also through a combination of cognitive and heuristic cues embedded within digital platforms (Cheung et al., 2022; Hochstein et al., 2023).

In the tourism accommodation context, UGC credibility is commonly evaluated through several key dimensions. These include perceived authenticity (the extent to which content appears genuine and experience-based), informativeness (the degree to which content provides useful and detailed information), consistency (alignment between different reviews and visual content), and source trustworthiness (perceived honesty and expertise of the content creator). Visual elements such as photographs and videos further reinforce credibility by reducing information asymmetry and increasing experiential realism.

Credibility cues also operate through platform-specific signals, including reviewer history, rating distributions, verification badges, and the balance between positive and negative feedback. Research indicates that balanced or moderately critical reviews are often perceived as more credible than uniformly positive content, as they signal authenticity rather than promotional intent. These credibility cues play a critical role in shaping initial trust perceptions and subsequent brand evaluations in digital tourism environments.

Understanding these dimensions is essential for explaining how UGC credibility functions as a precursor to customer trust and brand-level outcomes, providing a theoretical foundation for the relationships examined in this study.

1.6.1 Cognitive and Heuristic Processing of UGC Credibility

Consumer evaluations of user-generated content credibility are shaped by both cognitive and heuristic information-processing mechanisms. Dual-process theories of information processing suggest that individuals rely on systematic evaluation when motivation and cognitive capacity are high, while heuristic processing dominates under conditions of time pressure or information overload (Cheung et al., 2022; Filieri et al., 2015).

Cognitive processing of UGC credibility involves deliberate assessment of informational quality, argument strength, and content consistency. In tourism accommodation contexts, travelers engaging in cognitive evaluation compare multiple reviews, assess detail richness, and evaluate alignment between textual and visual information. High-quality, balanced, and experience-based UGC is therefore more likely to foster trust through cognitive routes, particularly for high-involvement booking decisions characterized by financial and experiential risk (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020; Yoo & Choi, 2022).

Heuristic processing relies on simplified credibility cues that enable rapid judgment without extensive analysis. Common heuristic cues in UGC include review volume, star ratings, reviewer history, verification indicators, and visible peer endorsement. Visual authenticity cues, such as amateur aesthetics and spontaneous storytelling, further function as heuristics that signal realism and trustworthiness (Polat et al., 2023).

The coexistence of cognitive and heuristic processing helps explain why UGC credibility exerts both direct and indirect effects on global brand perception. Heuristic cues may trigger immediate affective responses and brand impressions, while cognitive evaluation contributes to deeper trust formation. This dual-processing perspective provides theoretical grounding for the mediating role of customer trust identified in this study and aligns with prior tourism research linking credibility assessment to trust-based brand evaluation (Hochstein et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2021).

Recognizing the interaction between cognitive and heuristic processing reinforces the conceptualization of UGC credibility as a dynamic and multi-layered perception. This perspective strengthens the theoretical foundation of the study and supports the examination of UGC credibility as a key antecedent of customer trust and global brand perception in digital tourism environments.

1.7 Platform Differences and Format Effects

The influence of user-generated content credibility is further shaped by platform characteristics and content format. Different digital platforms emphasize distinct interaction mechanisms, content structures, and credibility signals, which affect how users interpret and evaluate UGC. For example, review-based platforms such as Booking.com or TripAdvisor prioritize textual reviews and rating aggregates, whereas social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube rely heavily on visual and video-based storytelling.

Prior research suggests that text-based reviews are particularly effective for conveying detailed evaluative information and supporting rational decision-making, as they allow consumers to assess argument quality, informational depth, and consistency across multiple reviews (Filieri et al., 2015). In contrast, visual and video-based user-generated content enhances emotional engagement and perceived authenticity by conveying experiential realism and human presence, which are especially influential in tourism contexts (Polat et al., 2023). Short-form video platforms, in particular, intensify experiential cues through immediacy and storytelling but may also introduce concerns related to content saturation or performative authenticity, potentially affecting credibility judgments (Guerreiro et al., 2024). As a result, credibility assessments may vary depending on whether user-generated content is encountered in review-centric or socially driven digital environments.

These platform and format differences imply that UGC credibility does not operate uniformly across digital touchpoints. Instead, credibility judgments emerge from the interaction between content characteristics, platform affordances, and user expectations. Recognizing this variation provides important context for interpreting how UGC credibility translates into trust formation and global brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector.

Based on the reviewed literature, credibility dimensions, and platform-specific considerations discussed above, the following conceptual framework illustrates the hypothesized relationships examined in this study.

2 THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a deductive research approach, as it is grounded in existing theories and prior empirical research on user-generated content, customer trust, and brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector. Based on the synthesis of the literature reviewed in Chapter 1, a conceptual framework and a set of testable hypotheses were developed (see Section 1.5). These hypotheses specify the expected direct and mediating relationships between UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception. Following deductive logic, the study empirically tests the proposed hypotheses using quantitative data collected through a structured survey.

A deductive reasoning approach supports the study, beginning with theoretically derived assumptions regarding the relationships between perceived UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception. In alignment with this approach, the research seeks to empirically examine the direction and strength of these relationships across a sample of tourism consumers. The study is explanatory in nature, as it aims to determine not only whether relationships exist between the variables, but also the extent to which UGC credibility predicts trust and brand perception outcomes (Mathur et al., 2022).

Following established methodological guidance in quantitative research, this study employs a survey-based research strategy, which is appropriate for collecting standardized data from a relatively large number of respondents. Survey methods enable the systematic measurement of perceptions and attitudes related to engagement with user-generated content and trust in tourism accommodation brands, making them well suited for hypothesis testing within deductive research designs (Hossan et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the quantitative design enhances methodological rigor and replicability, as the collected data can be statistically analyzed using correlation, regression, and mediation techniques. The cross-sectional nature of the study allows for comparisons across respondent characteristics, such as age and travel behavior, which is consistent with quantitative survey-based approaches commonly applied in tourism research examining social media and UGC effects (Wibisono & Lale, 2024).

2.2 Population and Sampling Procedure

The target population for this study comprised tourists and travelers who actively use online platforms (e.g., TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Instagram, and TikTok) to search for, review, or share experiences related to accommodation services. This population is particularly relevant because digitally engaged tourists interact directly with user-generated content (UGC), which has been consistently identified as a key information source influencing trust

formation and brand perception in tourism decision-making processes. Recent tourism marketing literature emphasizes that consumers rely on peer-generated reviews and experiential content to reduce uncertainty and evaluate accommodation options in digital environments (Sujatmiko et al., 2025).

To ensure methodological relevance, the sampling frame included individuals who had stayed in tourism accommodation (e.g., hotels, resorts, or lodges) within the previous 12 months and had engaged with online content related to their accommodation choice. Focusing on digitally active travelers is appropriate in contemporary tourism research, as platform-based studies demonstrate that online travel platform users exhibit distinct and analyzable behavior patterns relevant to tourism decision-making processes (Salem et al., 2025).

Given the nature of online tourism research, the study employed a non-probability purposive sampling technique, enabling the deliberate selection of participants who met predefined inclusion criteria (i.e., prior exposure to UGC before making accommodation decisions and recent accommodation experience). Purposive sampling is appropriate when the objective is to obtain information-rich cases rather than statistically representative samples (Hossan et al., 2023). To enhance diversity, the final sample included respondents from multiple age groups and national backgrounds, reflecting the international scope of tourism accommodation markets.

The target sample size was determined based on established guidelines for quantitative survey research, which indicate that samples of approximately 200 or more respondents are generally adequate for correlation, regression, and mediation analyses in social science research. Such sample sizes are generally considered adequate for detecting meaningful relationships in correlation, regression, and mediation analyses while maintaining analytical precision and reliability. The final usable sample of 272 respondents therefore exceeds these recommended thresholds and is considered appropriate for the statistical techniques applied in this study (Clark et al., 2021; Black & Babin, 2019).

2.3 Data Collection Instrument

The primary instrument for data collection in this study was a structured questionnaire designed to measure the key constructs of interest: user-generated content (UGC) credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector. The use of a structured questionnaire is consistent with the quantitative research design adopted in this study, as it enables standardized data collection and facilitates subsequent statistical analysis of relationships among variables (Clark et al., 2021).

2.3.1 Instrument Design

The final questionnaire consisted of 16 measurement items, excluding demographic questions. All construct items were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 =

Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree, allowing respondents to indicate the extent of their agreement with each statement.

The questionnaire was organized into three sections, corresponding to the study's core constructs:

a. UGC Credibility (9 items)

This section measured respondents' perceptions of the credibility of user-generated content related to tourism accommodation. The nine items captured evaluations of online reviews, photos, and videos in terms of trustworthiness, usefulness, accuracy, and informativeness when making accommodation-related decisions. Although the items reflect different aspects of credibility, UGC credibility was treated as a single composite construct, operationalized using the mean score of all UGC items (UGC_M) in the empirical analysis.

b. Customer Trust (3 items)

Customer trust was measured using three items capturing respondents' confidence in the reliability and honesty of tourism accommodation brands as inferred from user-generated content. In line with the study's analytical approach, customer trust was operationalized as a unidimensional construct, represented by the mean of the trust items (Trust_M).

c. Global Brand Perception (4 items)

Global brand perception was measured using four items reflecting respondents' behavioral and perceptual evaluations of accommodation brands, including booking intention, brand credibility, brand choice, and avoidance behavior. These items collectively captured how exposure to user-generated content shapes brand-level perceptions. The construct was treated as a single composite measure, calculated using the mean score of all brand-related items (Brand_M).

Example items included statements such as:

- "I find online reviews about this accommodation trustworthy."
- "User-generated photos and videos help me form a positive impression of this brand."

2.3.2 Pretesting and Refinement

Before full-scale data collection, the questionnaire was pilot tested with 20 respondents who met the study's inclusion criteria. The purpose of the pilot test was to assess item clarity, wording, scale comprehension, completion time, and potential response bias. Participants were encouraged to provide feedback on any confusing or ambiguous items, as well as on the overall structure and flow of the questionnaire.

Based on the pilot feedback, minor revisions were made to improve clarity and readability. These revisions included rephrasing ambiguous statements, ensuring consistent terminology across constructs, and improving item sequencing. Pilot testing and preliminary

instrument checks are widely recommended in survey-based research to improve clarity, assess reliability, and ensure that measurement items accurately capture the intended constructs before full-scale data collection (Ganesha & Aithal, 2022).

Validation and Reliability Procedures
1. Content validity was addressed by aligning all questionnaire items with established theoretical dimensions of the constructs identified in the literature review. Items were adapted and refined to ensure conceptual consistency with UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception.
2. In addition, the questionnaire was reviewed by academic peers with expertise in tourism marketing and digital consumer behavior to confirm the relevance and adequacy of the items in capturing the intended constructs.
3. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each construct during data analysis. Values exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 were considered indicative of satisfactory reliability (Clark et al., 2021).

Administration

The questionnaire was administered online to a geographically diverse sample of international travelers who were familiar with digital platforms such as TripAdvisor, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained prior to survey completion.

Link to Full Instrument

The complete questionnaire, including all sections and items, is provided in Appendix A. This ensures transparency, allows replication, and provides detailed insight into the operationalization of the study variables.

Overall, this systematic instrument development process ensured that the data collected were reliable, valid, and directly aligned with the study's hypotheses and research objectives. The structured questionnaire format supported the application of quantitative analysis techniques, including correlation, regression, and regression-based mediation analysis, enabling a robust examination of the relationships between UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector.

2.4 Measurement of Variables

The measurement of variables in this study was grounded in established empirical and statistical principles to ensure accuracy, reliability, and theoretical coherence. Quantitative research commonly operationalizes latent constructs with multi-item scales that collectively represent the underlying construct and demonstrate internal consistency, thereby allowing complex psychological constructs to be measured indirectly through observable indicators (Clark et al., 2021). Accordingly, each variable in this study was conceptualized as a latent

construct and measured indirectly through multiple observable indicators, which were combined into composite scale scores for analysis.

2.4.1 User-Generated Content Credibility

User-generated content (UGC) credibility was measured using nine items capturing respondents' overall evaluations of peer-generated content related to tourism accommodation. The items assessed perceptions of trustworthiness, usefulness, and informational clarity of online reviews, photos, and videos encountered during accommodation decision-making.

Prior tourism research consistently conceptualizes UGC credibility as a multidimensional perception encompassing trustworthiness, usefulness, and informational value of peer-generated content in digital tourism environments (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020; Sujatmiko et al., 2025). In the present study, UGC credibility was treated as a single composite construct, reflecting respondents' overall credibility judgments rather than distinct sub-dimensions. This approach is appropriate for regression-based analysis, where the focus is on overall perceived credibility rather than on testing measurement sub-structures. Higher scores indicated stronger perceptions of UGC credibility when evaluating accommodation options.

2.4.2 Customer Trust

Customer trust was measured using three items reflecting respondents' overall level of trust in tourism accommodation brands as inferred from user-generated content. The items captured general confidence in the reliability and honesty of accommodation brands based on peer-generated information encountered online.

In digital tourism contexts, customer trust is commonly operationalized as an overall evaluative judgment formed prior to purchase, based on perceived credibility and authenticity of online information (Yoo & Choi, 2022). Consistent with prior tourism research, customer trust in this study was operationalized as a unidimensional latent construct, capturing respondents' aggregated trust perceptions rather than separating trust into multiple theoretical components. This approach aligns with studies examining trust as a central explanatory mechanism in online travel decision-making and UGC-driven evaluations (Niu, 2025).

2.4.3 Global Brand Perception

Global brand perception was measured using four items assessing respondents' overall evaluations of tourism accommodation brands at a global level. The items reflected perceptions of brand credibility, reputation, and international appeal as shaped by exposure to user-generated content.

Rather than distinguishing between multiple brand image dimensions, global brand perception was treated as a single composite construct representing respondents' holistic brand-level assessments. This operationalization aligns with the study's objective of

examining how UGC credibility and customer trust influence overall global brand perception rather than specific brand image attributes (Ozuem et al., 2024).

2.4.4 Scale Format and Measurement Quality

All construct items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree, enabling the application of parametric statistical techniques. Composite scale scores were calculated for each construct and used in correlation, regression, and mediation analyses.

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each construct, with all values exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory reliability. Construct validity was supported through strong theoretical grounding of the measurement items and their consistent alignment with constructs defined in the literature review, alongside the expected pattern of relationships observed in the empirical analyses (Clark et al., 2021).

By applying these measurement standards, the study ensured empirical robustness and that each construct accurately reflected its conceptual foundation. This approach provided a reliable basis for testing the hypothesized relationships and for generating meaningful insights into how user-generated content shapes customer trust and global brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector.

2.5 Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis process involved a sequence of quantitative statistical procedures designed to empirically test the hypothesized relationships among user-generated content (UGC) credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception. The analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics and followed a structured progression from data screening and descriptive analysis to inferential testing of direct and mediating effects, consistent with the study's conceptual framework.

2.5.1 Data Preparation and Screening

Before inferential analysis, the dataset was screened to ensure suitability for parametric statistical testing. Responses were examined for completeness, eligibility, and internal consistency. Cases that did not meet the predefined inclusion criteria were excluded from further analysis. Diagnostic checks were conducted to assess key assumptions, including approximate normality of construct distributions, linearity of relationships, and absence of problematic multicollinearity among predictors. These procedures are consistent with recommended best practices for regression-based analysis in applied social research (Field, 2024) and enhanced the robustness and interpretability of subsequent results.

2.5.2 Data Coding and Preparation

Before statistical analysis, all survey responses were coded numerically to facilitate data processing in SPSS. Categorical demographic variables such as country of residence, education level, gender, and travel frequency were assigned numerical codes (e.g., 1, 2, 3) for analytical purposes. These numerical values functioned solely as labels and did not imply any ordinal or quantitative meaning unless conceptually justified (e.g., Likert-scale items).

Likert-scale responses measuring UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception were already numeric by design and required no transformation. All coding procedures were applied consistently across variables to ensure accuracy, minimize data-entry errors, and support reliable statistical analysis.

2.5.3 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the demographic profile of respondents (e.g., age, travel frequency, and geographic background) and to provide an overview of respondents' perceptions of UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception. Measures of central tendency (means) and dispersion (standard deviations), along with frequency distributions for categorical variables, were used to contextualize the sample and establish baseline patterns in the data. These descriptive results served as a foundation for interpreting the inferential analyses that followed.

2.5.4 Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength and direction of associations among the main study variables: UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception. This step provided an initial assessment of whether statistically significant relationships existed among the constructs, thereby justifying further hypothesis testing using regression-based techniques.

2.5.5 Regression and Mediation Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was employed to test the direct hypothesized relationships. Specifically, regression models were estimated to examine:

- The effect of UGC credibility on customer trust (H1),
- The effect of UGC credibility on global brand perception (H2), and
- The effect of customer trust on global brand perception (H3).

Standardized regression coefficients (β), associated t-values, and significance levels ($p < 0.05$) were used to evaluate the magnitude and statistical significance of these effects.

To test the mediating role of customer trust (H4), mediation analysis was conducted using a regression-based approach following Hayes' (2017) PROCESS macro (Model 4). This approach allowed for the estimation of direct, indirect, and total effects without relying on structural equation modeling. The significance of the indirect effect of UGC credibility on global

brand perception through customer trust was assessed using bootstrapped confidence intervals, providing a robust test of mediation.

2.5.6 Interpretation of Results

The findings from the descriptive, correlation, regression, and mediation analyses were interpreted in relation to the study's hypotheses and conceptual framework. This integrated analytical approach enabled a comprehensive examination of both direct and indirect relationships, offering empirical insight into how perceived credibility of user-generated content influences customer trust and how trust, in turn, shapes global brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector.

2.6 Reliability and Validity Testing

Ensuring the reliability and validity of measurement instruments is essential for maintaining the credibility and accuracy of quantitative research findings. As this study examines latent constructs user-generated content (UGC) credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception it is necessary to confirm that the survey instrument consistently and accurately measures the intended concepts. The procedures employed in this study follow established methodological guidance for survey-based quantitative research and measurement evaluation (Clark et al., 2021; Hayes, 2017).

2.6.1 Reliability Testing

Reliability refers to the degree to which measurement items consistently capture the same underlying construct. In this study, internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each construct. Cronbach's alpha values of 0.70 or above are widely accepted as indicating satisfactory internal consistency in quantitative social research, demonstrating that items within each scale reliably measure the intended concept (Clark et al., 2021).

Given the cross-sectional design of the study and the use of a single online survey administration, test–retest reliability was not assessed. However, the questionnaire underwent pilot testing prior to full-scale data collection. Feedback from pilot respondents was used to refine item wording, enhance clarity, and eliminate ambiguity, thereby improving the consistency and stability of the measurement instrument across respondents.

2.6.2 Validity Testing

Validity refers to the extent to which the instrument accurately measures the constructs it is intended to assess. In line with the study's quantitative design and analytical approach, three forms of validity were addressed: content validity, construct validity, and criterion-related validity.

Content Validity

Content validity was ensured through a thorough review of existing literature and the adaptation of measurement items from previously validated scales in tourism and digital marketing research. In addition, the questionnaire was reviewed by academic peers with expertise in tourism marketing and consumer behavior to confirm that the items adequately represented the conceptual dimensions of UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception.

Construct Validity

Construct validity was supported theoretically by aligning each measurement item with well-established conceptual definitions identified in the literature review, and empirically through the expected pattern of relationships observed in the correlation and regression analyses, consistent with theoretical expectations. This approach is appropriate in regression-based research designs where structural equation modeling is not employed (Clark et al., 2021).

Criterion-related Validity

Criterion-related validity was assessed by examining the relationships between UGC credibility and theoretically related outcome variables, namely customer trust and global brand perception. Statistically significant and directionally consistent correlations and regression coefficients provided empirical support that the measurement items performed as expected, in line with prior tourism research identifying UGC as a determinant of trust and brand evaluation (Leung et al., 2021).

2.6.3 Ensuring Overall Measurement Quality

By combining internal consistency testing, theoretical grounding of constructs, pilot refinement, and empirical validation through correlation, regression, and mediation analysis, this study ensured adequate measurement quality. These procedures provided a reliable and valid foundation for testing the proposed hypotheses and for drawing conclusions about the influence of user-generated content credibility on customer trust and global brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector.

2.7 Ethical Considerations and Research Integrity

Ethical integrity guided all stages of this research, from study design and data collection to data analysis and reporting. The study adhered to widely recognized ethical principles for social science research involving human participants, including respect for persons, informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and responsible data management. These principles are consistent with established ethical standards for quantitative research design and survey-based studies (Takona, 2024).

As the research involved human participants responding to an online questionnaire, ethical compliance was essential to protect participant rights, ensure transparency, and maintain the credibility and integrity of the research process.

2.7.1 Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation

Prior to participation, respondents were provided with a detailed information statement outlining the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, the voluntary character of involvement, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Informed consent was obtained electronically before participants proceeded to the survey questions. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were free to discontinue the survey at any stage.

No incentives were offered, and no form of coercion was used, ensuring that participation was based solely on informed and autonomous decision-making.

2.7.2 Anonymity and Confidentiality

To protect participant privacy, the survey was designed to be fully anonymous. No personal identifiers such as names, email addresses, IP addresses, or account information were collected or stored. Only non-identifiable demographic information required for analytical purposes (e.g., age group, travel frequency) was collected.

All responses were coded numerically and reported only in aggregate form. This ensured that individual participants could not be identified in the thesis or in any subsequent academic dissemination. These procedures reflect best practices for maintaining confidentiality and anonymity in quantitative social research (Takona, 2024).

2.7.3 Data Integrity and Secure Handling

All data collected were used exclusively for academic research purposes. Survey data were stored in password-protected digital files accessible only to the researcher. Data analysis and reporting were conducted in a manner that preserved accuracy, transparency, and academic integrity.

In accordance with institutional research guidelines, the dataset will be securely archived or deleted following completion of the research project and thesis evaluation. Proper citation and acknowledgment of all secondary sources were maintained throughout the study to prevent plagiarism and to uphold standards of scholarly integrity.

2.7.4 Ethical Use of User-Generated Content Context

Although this study focuses on user-generated content (UGC), it did not involve the collection, reproduction, or analysis of identifiable UGC from online platforms. Instead, the research examined participants' perceptions of UGC through anonymized survey responses. As a result, no copyrighted materials, personal posts, or platform-specific data were directly accessed or analyzed.

All references to UGC in this study are conceptual and aggregated in nature, ensuring that no individual content creator or platform user can be identified. The research design

adheres to fundamental ethical principles of anonymity, non-intrusiveness, and responsible data handling in social science research (Takona, 2024).

2.7.5 Institutional Review and Approval

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards and research guidelines of the host institution. As the study involved an anonymous, low-risk online survey, the research was conducted in line with institutional ethical principles, including informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and responsible data handling.

2.8 Summary of Methodology

This chapter outlined the methodological framework adopted to examine the influence of user-generated content (UGC) credibility on customer trust and global brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector. A quantitative research design was employed to enable the systematic measurement and statistical analysis of relationships among the key study constructs. Consistent with established principles of quantitative social research, the study followed a deductive approach in which hypotheses derived from existing theory were empirically tested using structured survey data (Clark et al., 2021).

The target population comprised consumers who actively engage with digital tourism accommodation platforms, including booking websites and social media channels. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that respondents had relevant experience with user-generated content prior to making accommodation decisions. Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire developed from validated measurement scales used in prior tourism and digital marketing research. Likert-type items were used to capture perceptions of UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception. Pilot testing was conducted to refine item clarity and ensure the reliability and appropriateness of the survey instrument.

Measurement of variables followed established psychometric standards for survey-based research. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, while construct validity was supported through theoretical alignment with existing literature and empirical consistency observed in correlation and regression analyses. Descriptive statistics were first used to summarize respondent characteristics and key variables, followed by Pearson's correlation analysis to examine associations among constructs.

Hypothesis testing was conducted using multiple regression analysis to assess direct relationships between UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception. In addition, regression-based mediation analysis was employed to examine the indirect effect of UGC credibility on global brand perception through customer trust, following the procedures outlined by Hayes (2017). This analytical approach was appropriate for testing mediation

relationships without the use of structural equation modeling, ensuring consistency with the study's analytical strategy.

Comprehensive reliability and validity procedures, together with rigorous data screening and ethical safeguards including informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and responsible data management, ensured methodological rigor and research integrity. Collectively, these methodological choices ensured that the study remained empirically robust, ethically compliant, and closely aligned with its core objective of examining how user-generated content credibility shapes customer trust and global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector.

3 THE EMPIRICAL RESULTS ANALYSIS

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and interprets the empirical results obtained from the quantitative research conducted to examine the influence of user-generated content (UGC) credibility on customer trust and global brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector. The primary objective of this chapter is to transform the data collected through the structured survey instrument into meaningful analytical insights that directly address the research questions and hypotheses formulated earlier in the study.

The analysis focuses on identifying the nature, strength, and direction of the relationships between UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception, thereby empirically evaluating the conceptual framework developed in literature review.

The chapter begins with an overview of the data screening and preparation procedures, ensuring that the dataset is complete, reliable, and suitable for parametric statistical analysis. This is followed by descriptive statistics summarizing respondents' demographic characteristics and the distribution of responses across the main study constructs. Reliability and validity assessments are then reported, focusing on internal consistency and theoretical construct alignment to confirm the suitability of the measurement scales for inferential analysis.

The following sections present hypothesis testing results using inferential statistical techniques, including Pearson's correlation analysis, multiple regression analysis, and regression-based mediation analysis. These methods are employed to test the hypothesized direct effects of UGC credibility on customer trust and global brand perception, as well as the indirect effect of UGC credibility on global brand perception through customer trust.

The latter part of the chapter integrates the statistical findings with theoretical perspectives and prior empirical studies discussed in the literature review. This interpretive approach ensures that the results are not only statistically meaningful but also theoretically grounded and managerially relevant. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key empirical findings and a transition to Conclusions and Recommendations section, which discusses the implications, conclusions, and recommendations derived from the study.

Through this structured approach, the chapter demonstrates methodological rigor and analytical coherence, ensuring that each empirical step aligns with the overall research objective of understanding how user-generated content credibility influences customer trust and global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector.

3.2 Data Screening, Preparation, and Sample Description

Before hypothesis testing, the dataset was screened to ensure that responses were complete, met the inclusion criteria, and were suitable for parametric statistical analysis, following standard data preparation procedures commonly applied in quantitative research using SPSS (Field, 2024).

3.2.1 Data collection and sample scope

The questionnaire was administered online using Google Forms in English to international travelers who interact with UGC on accommodation and social platforms (e.g., TripAdvisor, Booking.com, Airbnb, Instagram, TikTok). Data were collected over 15 days, from 1 December 2025 to 15 December 2025, which was sufficient to achieve the targeted sample size and collect an adequate number of usable responses for the statistical analyses employed, as indicated by the survey timestamp records.

3.2.2 Response count and usable sample

The survey received a total of 309 submissions. Following eligibility screening and data preparation, 272 responses were retained for inferential statistical analysis. Responses were excluded primarily because some participants did not meet the inclusion criterion of having stayed in a hotel or short-term rental accommodation within the previous 12 months. Any remaining minor item-level missing data were handled using listwise deletion within relevant analyses.

Initial screening questions were used to verify respondents' recent accommodation experience and familiarity with user-generated content. Responses that did not meet these criteria were excluded before inferential analysis. After eligibility screening and routine data preparation, the final analytical dataset in SPSS comprised 272 valid cases.

Because the survey link was distributed online via open recruitment, a traditional response rate based on "distributed versus returned" questionnaires could not be calculated accurately. Instead, a usable-case rate is reported, which is appropriate for online survey research designs. Based on this approach, the usable-case rate was 88.0% (272/309).

3.2.3 Data Screening procedures

The data screening process involved several steps to ensure the integrity, accuracy, and suitability of the dataset for regression-based statistical analysis:

Missing data and completeness

No cases exceeded commonly accepted thresholds for high missingness (e.g., more than 10% missing across survey items). Minor item-level missing values were minimal and were handled using listwise deletion within relevant procedures, which did not materially affect the analytical results.

Eligibility screening (inclusion criteria)

Eligibility screening was conducted using a preliminary filter question to confirm that respondents had stayed in a hotel or short-term rental accommodation within the previous 12 months. Only responses meeting this criterion were included prior to dataset export, resulting in a final analytical sample of n = 272.

Outlier and quality checks

Data were inspected for inconsistent patterns and extreme values. Because the study variables are measured on bounded Likert scales, outlier evaluation focused on detecting unusual response patterns rather than extreme continuous values. No problematic cases were identified.

Normality assessment (skewness and kurtosis reported)

Normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis statistics of the composite scale means, supported by visual inspection of histograms. The results indicated approximate normality and acceptable distributional characteristics for regression-based analysis (Field, 2024).

- **UGC credibility (scale mean):** skewness = −1.26, kurtosis = 2.07
- **Customer trust (scale mean):** skewness = −1.40, kurtosis = 2.73
- **Global brand perception (scale mean):** skewness = −1.35, kurtosis = 3.15

Overall, the observed skewness and kurtosis values fall within commonly accepted thresholds (|skewness| < 2; |kurtosis| < 7), indicating acceptable distributional characteristics for parametric analysis. Given the sample size (n = 272), the Central Limit Theorem further supports the use of parametric techniques, and regression-based mediation with bootstrapping is robust to moderate deviations from normality (Field, 2024; Hayes, 2017).

3.2.4 Demographic profile of survey respondents (n = 309)

This subsection presents the demographic characteristics of all survey respondents (n = 309) before eligibility screening. These descriptive statistics provide contextual insight into the overall composition of the respondent pool. It is important to note that demographic distributions are reported based on the full dataset, whereas all inferential statistical analyses in subsequent sections are conducted using the final valid sample (n = 272) that met the inclusion criteria.
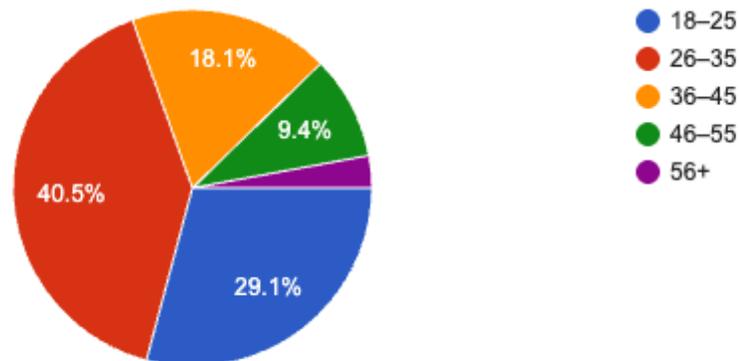
Age distribution

The age profile indicated in Figure 1.2, that the largest proportion of respondents belonged to the 26–35 age group (40.5%), followed by the 18–25 age group (29.1%) and the 36–45 age group (18.1%). Smaller proportions were represented by respondents aged 46–55 (9.4%) and 56 years and above (2.9%). This distribution reflects a predominance of

economically active and digitally engaged travelers, which aligns well with the study's focus on user-generated content consumption.

Figure 1.2 Age distribution of survey respondents (n = 309)

1. Age *(Multiple choice)*

309 responses

Source: Author's own survey data collected via Google Forms (2025).

Gender distribution

In terms of gender, 54.7% of respondents identified as female, 43.7% as male, and 1.6% preferred not to disclose their gender. The relatively balanced gender distribution enhances the descriptive representativeness of the sample and reduces the likelihood of gender-related bias.

Educational background

The majority of respondents reported holding a Bachelor's degree (55.7%), followed by a Master's degree (27.8%). Smaller shares reported a High School qualification (9.4%) or a Doctorate (7.1%). This indicates a well-educated sample, which is particularly relevant given that higher educational attainment is often associated with active online information search and critical evaluation of digital content.

Travel frequency

Regarding travel behavior, 58.6% of respondents reported traveling 1–2 times per year, while 25.9% traveled 3–5 times per year. A smaller proportion traveled more than five times annually (8.7%), and 6.8% traveled less than once per year. This pattern confirms that most respondents have regular travel experience, supporting the relevance of their evaluations of accommodation-related user-generated content.

Figure 1.3 Annual travel frequency of survey respondents (n = 309)

5. How often do you travel per year? (for leisure or accommodation purposes)

309 responses
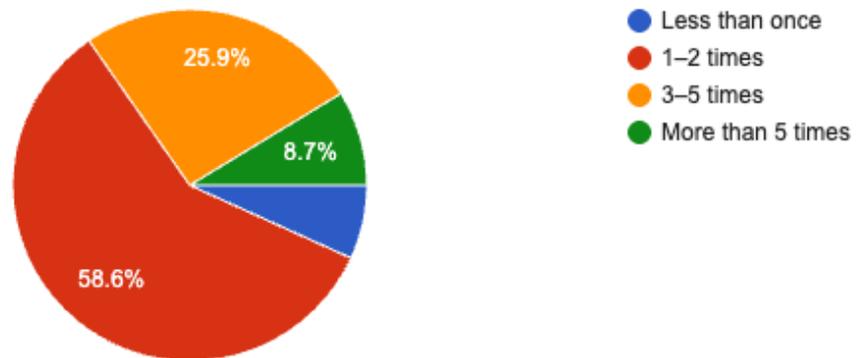
Source: Author's own survey data collected via Google Forms (2025).

Overall, the demographic profile reflects a sample composed primarily of frequent, digitally active, and well-educated travelers, which is appropriate for examining perceptions of UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector.

3.2.4.1 Implications of Sample Composition for the Study Context

The demographic composition of the respondent pool provides important contextual insight for interpreting the empirical findings of this study. The predominance of respondents aged between 18 and 35 years reflects a cohort that is digitally active and highly engaged with online platforms where user-generated content plays a central role in accommodation decision-making. Prior tourism research consistently indicates that younger and economically active travelers rely more heavily on peer-generated reviews, photos, and videos due to higher digital literacy and frequent platform usage (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Pourfakhimi et al., 2020).

The relatively balanced gender distribution enhances the descriptive robustness of the sample and reduces the likelihood that the observed relationships are driven by gender-specific bias. Previous tourism studies suggest that while gender may influence content preferences, the trust-building function of credible UGC operates similarly across genders in accommodation decision contexts (Yoo & Choi, 2022).

Educational attainment among respondents was notably high, with the majority holding at least a bachelor's degree. Higher education levels are commonly associated with more active information search behavior and greater ability to critically evaluate digital information sources. As noted by Filieri et al. (2015), well-educated travelers tend to place greater

emphasis on informational quality and credibility cues when evaluating online reviews, reinforcing the relevance of UGC credibility as a key explanatory variable in this study.

Travel frequency results further indicate that most respondents have regular exposure to tourism accommodation services. Frequent travelers are more likely to compare multiple accommodation options and rely on accumulated experience when interpreting user-generated content, which strengthens the validity of their trust and brand evaluations (Sujatmiko et al., 2025). Repeated engagement with UGC across booking decisions enhances consumers' ability to assess authenticity and credibility signals embedded in online content.

Taken together, the demographic profile suggests that the sample is composed of digitally engaged, experienced, and well-informed travelers. This strengthens the internal relevance of the findings for contemporary digital tourism markets. At the same time, it implies that the results are most applicable to consumer segments that actively rely on online information sources, a limitation that is consistent with prior platform-based tourism research (Dang & Nguyen, 2023).

3.2.4.2 Demographic Variables as Contextual Controls

The inclusion of demographic variables in this study serves a contextual and methodological purpose rather than a hypothesis-testing function. Variables such as age, gender, education level, and travel frequency were collected to provide a comprehensive profile of the respondent pool and to ensure that the observed relationships between UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception were not incorrectly driven by background differences among respondents.

In line with established quantitative research practice, demographic characteristics were incorporated as control variables in the mediation analysis rather than treated as focal predictors. This approach is widely recommended when the primary objective is explanatory and when prior literature does not consistently demonstrate stable moderation effects of demographic variables on trust-based mechanisms in digital tourism contexts (Hayes, 2017; Field, 2024). Controlling for demographic factors enhances internal validity by isolating the explanatory effect of UGC credibility on trust and brand perception.

Age distribution within the sample reflects a concentration of respondents in the 18–35 and 26–45 age groups, cohorts widely recognized as digitally active and highly engaged with online travel platforms. Prior tourism research indicates that younger and economically active travelers rely more heavily on user-generated content when evaluating accommodation options due to higher platform familiarity and frequent digital information search behavior (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Pourfakhimi et al., 2020).

Gender was included as a control variable to account for potential differences in content interpretation styles. While some studies suggest gender-based variation in content preferences, prior evidence indicates that the trust-building function of credible UGC operates

consistently across genders in accommodation decision-making contexts (Yoo & Choi, 2022). The relatively balanced gender distribution in the sample further reduces the likelihood that the observed effects are driven by gender-related bias.

Educational attainment was also considered an important contextual variable. Higher education levels are commonly associated with more active information search behavior and greater emphasis on informational quality and credibility cues when evaluating online reviews (Filieri et al., 2015). The predominance of respondents holding bachelor's and master's degrees therefore reinforces the relevance of UGC credibility as a central explanatory construct in this study.

Travel frequency was included as a behavioral control variable, as repeated travel experience may shape how consumers interpret and trust user-generated content. Frequent travelers are more likely to compare accommodation options across platforms and develop heuristics for identifying credible content, which influences trust formation and brand evaluation (Sujatmiko et al., 2025).

Overall, the use of demographic variables as contextual controls strengthens the methodological rigor of the study without fragmenting the analysis into subgroup comparisons. This approach preserves analytical clarity while ensuring that the core relationships examined remain robust across a diverse and digitally engaged respondent base.

3.2.5 Geographic background

Respondents were internationally distributed across approximately 20 countries, with Lithuania, Bangladesh, and India reported most frequently, followed by several other European and Asian countries. This diversity reflects the global nature of tourism accommodation consumption.

Figure 1.4 Geographic Distribution of Survey Respondents
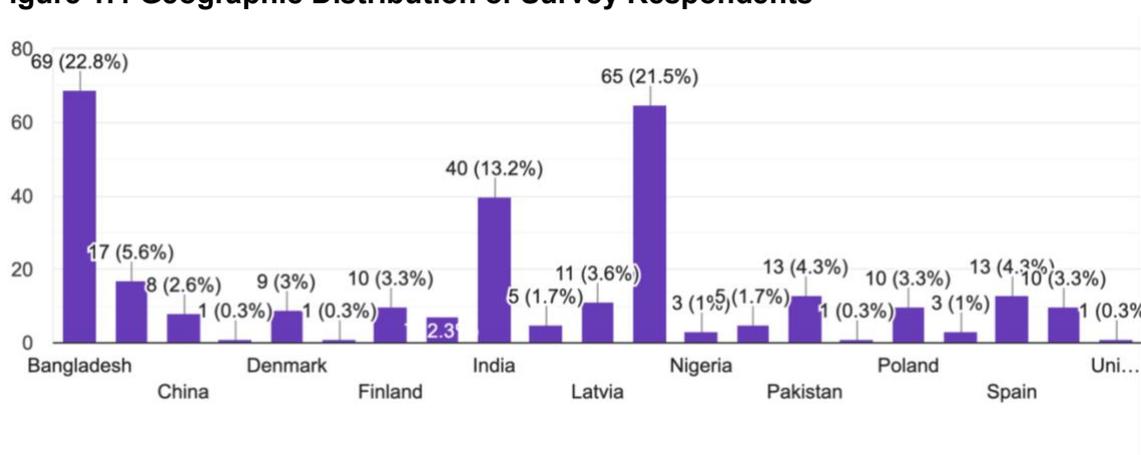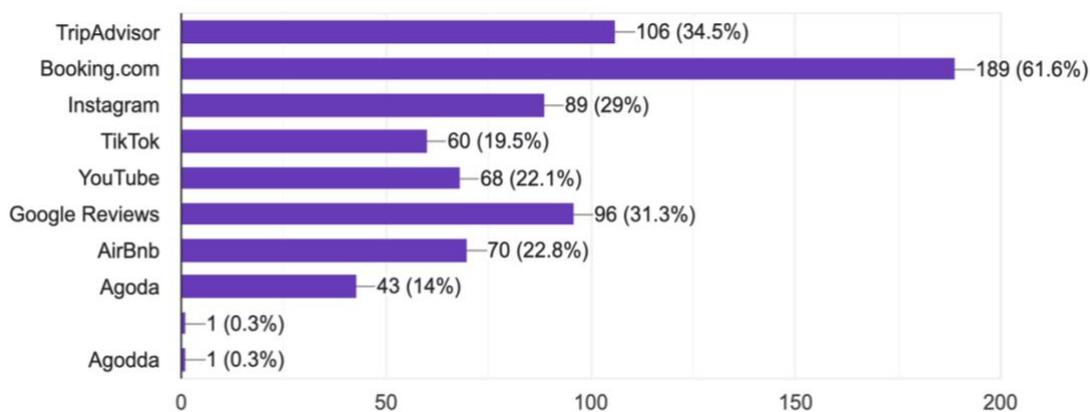

Source: Author's own survey data collected via Google Forms (2025).

For reporting clarity, individual countries were grouped into broader geographic regions (Asia, Europe, Africa, and North America) during data preparation; however, regional comparisons were not included in hypothesis testing.

3.2.6 Platforms checked before booking

Respondents were allowed to select multiple platforms.

Figure 1.5 User-Generated Content Platforms Consulted Before Accommodation Booking

Source: Author's own survey data collected via Google Forms (2025).

The most frequently reported sources of UGC prior to accommodation booking are shown in Figure 1.5 and summarized below:

- TripAdvisor (106 mentions)
- Booking.com (189)
- Instagram (89)
- Google reviews (96)
- Airbnb (70)
- TikTok (60)
- YouTube (68)
- Agoda (43)

This profile supports the study's focus on digitally engaged travelers who actively consume UGC when making accommodation decisions.

3.3 Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive analysis was conducted to summarize respondents' overall perceptions of user-generated content (UGC) credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector. This analysis provides an initial overview of the central

tendencies and variability of the main study constructs and establishes a foundation for subsequent correlation and hypothesis testing.

3.3.1 Measurement Structure

Although each construct was originally measured using multiple items reflecting different conceptual facets (e.g., credibility, relevance, usefulness for UGC; reliability and honesty for trust), the items demonstrated strong internal consistency (see Section 3.4.1). Therefore, scale mean scores were computed for each construct and used in the descriptive and inferential analyses. This approach is appropriate in regression-based research and allows for a parsimonious representation of each latent concept.

3.3.2 Descriptive Statistics of Main Constructs

Table 1.1 Descriptive Statistics of Main Constructs

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
UGC_M	272	1.67	5.00	4.2000	.64781
Trust_M	272	1.00	5.00	4.3156	.70215
Brand_M	272	1.00	5.00	4.1869	.71292
Valid N (listwise)	272				

Source: Author's calculations using SPSS (2025)

The results indicate that respondents generally reported high perceptions across all three constructs. UGC credibility recorded a mean score of 4.20 (SD = 0.65), suggesting that respondents perceived online reviews, photos, and videos as credible and useful sources of information when making accommodation decisions. Customer trust exhibited the highest mean value (M = 4.32, SD = 0.70), indicating strong confidence in accommodation brands based on exposure to peer-generated content. Global brand perception also received a high mean score (M = 4.19, SD = 0.71), reflecting favorable evaluations of brand reputation and credibility at an international level.

The relatively low standard deviations across constructs indicate moderate variability, suggesting consistent perceptions among respondents.

3.3.3 Correlation Analysis

To examine the relationships between the main study variables, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. The results are presented below.

Table 1.2 Pearson Correlation Matrix of Study Variables (SPSS Output)

Correlations

		UGC_M	Trust_M	Brand_M
UGC_M	Pearson Correlation	1	.697***	.635***
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	<.001
	N	272	272	272
Trust_M	Pearson Correlation	.697***	1	.647***
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001		<.001
	N	272	272	272
Brand_M	Pearson Correlation	.635***	.647***	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	
	N	272	272	272

***. Correlation at 0.001(2-tailed)

Source: Author's own calculations using SPSS.

The correlation results reveal moderate to strong positive relationships among all three variables. UGC credibility is strongly associated with customer trust ($r = .697$, $p < .001$) and moderately associated with global brand perception ($r = .635$, $p < .001$). Customer trust also shows a strong positive relationship with global brand perception ($r = .647$, $p < .001$).

These findings provide preliminary empirical support for the hypothesized relationships proposed in the conceptual framework and justify proceeding to regression and mediation analyses in the subsequent sections. For statistical transparency, a detailed correlation table including significance levels and sample size is reported separately in Table 1.4.

3.4 Reliability and Validity Assessment

Ensuring the reliability and validity of measurement instruments is essential for drawing accurate and credible conclusions in quantitative research. As this study employed a regression-based analytical approach using SPSS, reliability and validity were assessed using procedures appropriate for non-SEM designs, with particular emphasis on internal consistency and theoretically expected relationships among variables (Hayes, 2017).

3.4.1 Reliability Analysis of Study Constructs

Internal consistency reliability of the study constructs was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, which measures the extent to which items within a scale consistently capture the same underlying concept. Cronbach's alpha values of 0.70 or higher are generally considered acceptable in social science research (Field, 2024).

Table 1.3 Reliability Analysis of Study Constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
UGC Credibility	9	0.861	Excellent
Customer Trust	3	0.826	Very good
Global Brand Perception	4	0.766	Acceptable–Very good

Source: Author's own calculations using SPSS.

The results indicate strong internal consistency across all constructs. This confirms that the survey items reliably measure perceptions of user-generated content credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception within the tourism accommodation context.

3.4.2 Validity Assessment

Given the regression-based research design and absence of structural equation modeling, validity was assessed using content validity, theoretical construct validity, and criterion-related validity, which are appropriate and commonly accepted approaches for survey-based mediation studies (Hayes, 2017).

a) Content Validity

Content validity was ensured during the questionnaire development phase. Measurement items were adapted from established studies in tourism, digital marketing, and consumer behavior literature. The items were designed to comprehensively reflect the conceptual domains of UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception.

Additionally, the questionnaire was reviewed for clarity, relevance, and conceptual coverage before data collection, ensuring that each item appropriately represented the construct it was intended to measure.

b) Construct Validity

Construct validity was supported theoretically and empirically. Each construct was defined based on well-established conceptual frameworks identified in the literature review, and items were grouped accordingly during scale construction.

Empirically, construct validity was supported by:

- statistically significant correlations between theoretically related constructs, and
- consistent directional relationships observed in regression and mediation analyses.

These findings align with prior research indicating that UGC credibility is positively associated with customer trust and brand-related evaluations, supporting the validity of the measurement structure used in this study.

Given that the study employed a regression-based analytical approach to examine relationships among observed variables, construct validity was evaluated through theoretical alignment and empirical associations rather than through confirmatory factor analysis. This approach is appropriate for mediation studies using regression techniques, where the primary focus is on the direction and strength of relationships between constructs rather than on latent variable modeling (Hayes, 2017).

c) Criterion-Related Validity

Criterion-related validity was assessed by examining whether UGC credibility significantly predicted customer trust and global brand perception, as theoretically expected. The regression results demonstrate that UGC credibility is a significant predictor of customer trust and brand perception, and that customer trust, in turn, predicts global brand perception.

These statistically significant relationships provide empirical evidence that the measurement instruments perform as expected in relation to relevant outcome variables, consistent with previous tourism research (Yoo & Choi, 2022).

3.4.3 Summary of Measurement Quality

Overall, the reliability and validity assessments indicate that the measurement instruments used in this study are statistically sound and methodologically appropriate. Strong internal consistency reliability, combined with theoretical grounding and empirical validation through correlation and regression analyses, confirms that the constructs are measured accurately and consistently.

These results provide a robust foundation for subsequent hypothesis testing and support the credibility of the empirical findings related to the influence of user-generated content credibility on customer trust and global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector

3.5 Hypothesis Testing and Inferential Statistics

This section examines the hypothesized relationships between User-Generated Content (UGC) credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector. Hypotheses were tested using correlation analysis and regression-based mediation analysis conducted with the PROCESS macro (Model 4) in SPSS. This approach allows for the simultaneous estimation of direct and indirect effects while controlling for relevant demographic variables and is appropriate for mediation testing in survey-based research (Hayes, 2017).

3.5.1 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the strength and direction of associations between the main constructs. The results are summarized in Table 1.4 below.

Table 1.4 Simplified Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

Variables	UGC Credibility	Customer Trust	Global Brand Perception
UGC Credibility	1	0.697**	0.635**
Customer Trust	0.697**	1	0.647**
Global Brand Perception	0.635**	0.647**	1

Source: Author's own calculations using SPSS.

*Note: **p < .001 (2-tailed), N=272*

Interpretation

The correlation analysis indicates strong and positive associations among all three constructs. UGC credibility shows a strong positive correlation with customer trust ($r = 0.697$, $p < .001$) and a moderately strong positive correlation with global brand perception ($r = 0.635$, $p < .001$). Customer trust is also strongly correlated with global brand perception ($r = 0.647$, $p < .001$). These findings provide preliminary support for the hypothesized relationships and justify proceeding with mediation analysis.

3.5.2 Multicollinearity Assessment

Before conducting regression-based mediation analysis, multicollinearity was assessed to ensure that the predictor variables did not exhibit excessive overlap. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were examined for all predictors included in the model.

All VIF values were below the commonly accepted threshold of 5, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern and that the regression coefficients could be interpreted reliably (Field, 2024).

3.5.3 Mediation Analysis Using PROCESS Macro

To test the hypothesized mediation effect, a regression-based mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4) developed by Hayes (2017). UGC credibility was specified as the independent variable, customer trust as the mediator, and global brand perception as the dependent variable.

To improve model robustness, demographic variables (age group, gender, and travel frequency) were included as control variables in the PROCESS model. This ensured that the estimated relationships were not attributable to demographic differences among respondents.

Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was applied to estimate the indirect effect and generate bias-corrected confidence intervals, which is recommended for mediation testing as it does not assume normality of indirect effects (Hayes, 2017).

Direct and Indirect Effects

The mediation analysis produced the following results:

- **Effect of UGC credibility on customer trust:**

$\beta = 0.755$, $p < 0.001$

- **Effect of customer trust on global brand perception:**

$\beta = 0.403$, $p < 0.001$

- **Direct effect of UGC credibility on global brand perception (controlling for trust):**

$\beta = 0.395$, $p < 0.001$

- **Indirect effect via customer trust:**

$\beta = 0.304$, 95% CI [0.174, 0.445]

Because the confidence interval for the indirect effect does not include zero, the mediating effect of customer trust is statistically significant.

Type of Mediation

The results indicate partial mediation. While customer trust significantly mediates the relationship between UGC credibility and global brand perception, the direct effect of UGC credibility on global brand perception remains statistically significant even after accounting for trust.

This suggests that UGC credibility influences global brand perception both directly and indirectly through customer trust. In other words, trust explains a substantial portion of the relationship, but UGC also contributes independently to brand perception.

3.5.4 Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 1.5 Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Evidence	Supported?
H1: UGC credibility → Customer Trust	$\beta = 0.755$, $p < 0.001$	Yes
H2: UGC credibility → Global Brand Perception (Direct effect)	$\beta = 0.395$, $p < 0.001$	Yes
H3: Customer Trust → Global Brand Perception	$\beta = 0.403$, $p < 0.001$	Yes
H4: Customer Trust mediates the relationship between UGC credibility and global brand perception	Indirect effect $\beta = 0.304$, 95% CI [0.174, 0.445]	Yes (Partial mediation)

Source: Author's own calculations using PROCESS macro (Model 4) in SPSS (Hayes, 2017).

The inferential analyses provide strong empirical support for the proposed conceptual framework. UGC credibility significantly enhances customer trust and global brand perception, and customer trust partially mediates this relationship. These findings confirm the central role of trust as a psychological mechanism through which user-generated content shapes brand-level evaluations in the tourism accommodation sector.

3.6 Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the empirical findings presented in Sections 3.3 to 3.5 by integrating them with the literature reviewed in Chapter 1 and the conceptual framework outlined earlier in the study. The discussion focuses on explaining how user-generated content (UGC) credibility influences customer trust and global brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector, as well as the mediating role of trust identified in this study.

3.6.1 UGC Credibility and Customer Trust

The results demonstrate a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between UGC credibility and customer trust ($\beta = 0.755$, $p < 0.001$). This finding confirms that travelers who perceive user-generated content as credible are more likely to trust tourism accommodation brands. This result is consistent with recent tourism marketing research, which shows that peer-generated reviews and experiential content are commonly perceived as more authentic, trustworthy, and informative than firm-controlled promotional messages, particularly in high-uncertainty service contexts such as tourism accommodation (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020; Sujatmiko et al., 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, this finding supports social proof theory and digital trust formation models, which suggest that individuals rely on peers' experiences and evaluations when making decisions under uncertainty. In the context of tourism accommodation, where services are intangible and cannot be evaluated before consumption, UGC serves as a critical informational cue that reduces perceived risk and enhances confidence in decision-making (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020; Cialdini, 2009). The strength of the observed relationship underscores the importance of credibility signals embedded in user-generated content for trust formation in digital tourism environments.

3.6.2 UGC Credibility and Global Brand Perception

The findings also reveal a significant direct effect of UGC credibility on global brand perception ($\beta = 0.395$, $p < 0.001$ when controlling for trust), indicating that credible UGC enhances consumers' evaluations of a brand's reputation, authenticity, and overall appeal. This result is consistent with prior research highlighting UGC as a strategic marketing resource that contributes to brand image formation in tourism contexts (Xiang et al., 2022; Polat et al., 2023).

The results suggest that UGC functions not only as informational input for individual booking decisions but also as a broader reputational signal that shapes how brands are perceived across digital platforms. By reflecting real consumer experiences, UGC contributes to transparency and credibility, which are essential components of positive brand perception in global tourism markets. This reinforces the view that consumer-generated narratives play a substantive role in shaping brand meaning beyond transactional decision-making.

This finding is consistent with recent evidence demonstrating that user-generated content on social media significantly shapes online destination image and enhances tourist engagement, thereby influencing brand- and destination-level evaluations at an aggregate level (Guerreiro et al., 2024). The study by Guerreiro et al. (2024) further supports the argument that UGC operates as a strategic branding signal, extending its impact beyond individual trust judgments to broader perceptions of reputation and international appeal.

3.6.3 The Mediating Role of Customer Trust

The mediation analysis conducted using the PROCESS macro confirms that customer trust partially mediates the relationship between user-generated content (UGC) credibility and global brand perception (indirect effect β = 0.304, 95% CI [0.174, 0.445]). While UGC credibility exerts a significant direct effect on global brand perception, a substantial proportion of its influence operates indirectly through customer trust. This result empirically demonstrates that trust serves as an important psychological mechanism through which credible peer-generated information is translated into favorable brand-level evaluations.

This finding reinforces theoretical arguments in digital marketing and tourism research that position trust as a central mediating construct linking peer-generated information to brand-related outcomes. Credible UGC enhances consumers' trust in accommodation providers by reducing perceived risk and uncertainty, which in turn positively shapes evaluations of brand reputation, authenticity, and global appeal. Similar conclusions have been drawn in prior hospitality and tourism research, which consistently identifies trust as a key explanatory variable in digital branding and reputation formation processes (Leung et al., 2021).

However, recent qualitative evidence suggests that the trust-building effect of UGC is not unlimited. Petersson and Nilsen (2025) indicate that excessive or overly frequent exposure to user-generated content may weaken perceived authenticity, thereby disrupting trust formation when credibility cues become diluted or appear strategically manufactured. This highlights that the mediating role of trust is contingent not only on the presence of UGC, but also on its perceived authenticity and balance.

Additional empirical support for mediation-based explanations is provided by recent tourism research demonstrating that UGC influences behavioral outcomes through intermediate perceptual mechanisms. For example, Aboalganam et al. (2025) show that user-generated content affects tourists' visit intentions indirectly through destination image

perceptions, reinforcing the broader logic that UGC operates through psychological mediators rather than solely through direct effects. Collectively, these findings strengthen the validity of customer trust as a mediating mechanism in the present study.

Importantly, the presence of partial mediation indicates that UGC credibility retains an independent influence on global brand perception beyond trust alone. This suggests that UGC contributes to brand evaluations through multiple pathways, including informational value, emotional resonance, and perceived experiential realism. Consequently, the findings highlight the multifaceted role of UGC in tourism brand construction, where trust represents a central but not exclusive mechanism linking credible consumer-generated content to global brand perception.

3.6.4 Contextual Interpretation

Although this study did not empirically test cultural or generational differences, the international composition of the sample provides contextual support for interpreting the findings within a global tourism environment. Prior systematic reviews indicate that the influence of user-generated content and associated trust cues can vary depending on contextual and market characteristics in digital tourism settings (Dang & Nguyen, 2023). While such differences were not examined statistically in the present study, they highlight meaningful directions for future research.

3.6.5 Comparison with Previous Literature

Overall, the findings of this study are consistent with and extend recent research emphasizing the strategic role of user-generated content in shaping consumer trust and brand-related evaluations in tourism contexts (Deb & Mallik, 2023).

The strong positive relationship observed between UGC credibility and customer trust supports prior evidence that consumers perceive peer-generated content as more authentic and trustworthy than firm-controlled communication when making travel-related decisions (Hochstein et al., 2023).

The significant effect of UGC credibility on global brand perception aligns with existing tourism literature, demonstrating that consumer-generated content contributes directly to brand image formation and perceived brand value in digital tourism markets (Niu, 2025). Importantly, this study extends prior conceptual work by empirically demonstrating customer trust as a mediating mechanism linking UGC credibility to global brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector (Leung et al., 2021).

By applying regression-based mediation analysis, the study provides empirical clarity on how UGC functions simultaneously as an informational resource and a relational trust-building mechanism in tourism marketing environments (Hayes, 2017).

3.6.6 Theoretical and Managerial Implications

From a theoretical perspective, the findings validate social proof and digital trust formation theories within the tourism accommodation context by empirically confirming customer trust as a mediating mechanism between UGC credibility and global brand perception. The results also contribute to branding literature by linking micro-level consumer perceptions derived from UGC to macro-level brand evaluations in digital tourism markets.

From a managerial standpoint, the findings indicate that UGC should be viewed as a strategic asset embedded within trust formation and brand perception processes rather than as a peripheral communication tool. The discussion highlights the relevance of authenticity, transparency, and responsiveness in digital environments, setting the foundation for the practical recommendations presented in the concluding chapter.

The discussion reinforces that user-generated content credibility is a critical driver of customer trust and global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector. Customer trust partially mediates this relationship, highlighting its central role in translating authentic consumer experiences into positive brand evaluations. These findings align with existing literature and provide a coherent bridge between the empirical results and the conclusions and recommendations presented in the final chapter.

3.6.7 Explanation of Effect Sizes and Practical Meaning

Beyond statistical significance, the magnitude of the observed effects provides important insight into the practical relevance of the study's findings. The strong standardized coefficient linking UGC credibility to customer trust ($\beta = 0.755$) indicates that credibility perceptions account for a substantial proportion of variance in trust formation. This suggests that credibility-related evaluations are not marginal influences, but central determinants of how consumers assess tourism accommodation providers in digital environments.

The indirect effect size ($\beta = 0.304$) further demonstrates that customer trust explains a meaningful portion of the relationship between UGC credibility and global brand perception. While partial mediation indicates the presence of additional pathways, the strength of the indirect effect highlights trust as a key psychological mechanism translating peer-generated information into brand-level outcomes.

From a practical standpoint, these effect sizes imply that even incremental improvements in perceived UGC credibility, such as enhancing authenticity cues or improving review transparency, can yield tangible gains in customer trust and brand perception. This reinforces the managerial importance of credibility-focused digital strategies rather than purely volume-driven UGC generation.

3.6.8 Managerial Interpretation by Platform Touchpoint

The findings of this study carry distinct managerial implications across different digital platform touchpoints. On review-centric platforms, such as Booking.com and TripAdvisor,

credibility is largely shaped by informational quality, consistency of reviews, and transparency of rating systems. Managers operating within these environments should prioritize accurate property representation, timely responses to reviews, and the facilitation of balanced customer feedback to reinforce trust and brand credibility.

In contrast, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube emphasize experiential storytelling and visual authenticity. Here, credibility is closely linked to perceived realism, spontaneity, and alignment between user experiences and brand messaging. Managers should therefore avoid overly scripted or promotional content and instead encourage organic, experience-based user contributions that preserve authenticity.

Importantly, the partial mediation observed in this study suggests that while trust is a critical pathway, UGC also shapes brand perception directly through emotional resonance and experiential imagery. This implies that managers should adopt a platform-sensitive UGC strategy, recognizing that credibility cues, trust formation, and brand meaning vary across digital environments rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach.

3.6.9 Theoretical Implications for Digital Trust and Branding Theory

Beyond its empirical contributions, this study offers important theoretical implications for digital trust formation and branding theory within the tourism accommodation context. The findings empirically support social proof theory and trust transfer theory by demonstrating that perceived credibility of peer-generated content functions as a primary antecedent of customer trust, which subsequently influences global brand perception (Cialdini, 2009; McKnight et al., 2002; Yoo & Choi, 2022).

The identification of partial mediation refines existing theoretical perspectives by indicating that trust, while central, does not fully account for the influence of UGC credibility on brand perception. This aligns with recent tourism branding research suggesting that UGC also shapes brand evaluations through affective and experiential mechanisms, such as emotional resonance, perceived realism, and narrative engagement (Polat et al., 2023; Guerreiro et al., 2024).

From a branding theory perspective, the findings reinforce the view that global brand perception in tourism is increasingly co-created through decentralized, consumer-driven communication rather than solely through firm-controlled messaging. User-generated content operates as a reputational signal that aggregates individual trust judgments into broader brand meaning across digital platforms (Keller, 2016; Leung et al., 2021). This positions trust not only as a psychological outcome, but as a relational asset embedded within digital branding ecosystems.

Collectively, these theoretical insights extend existing tourism and digital marketing literature by empirically linking micro-level credibility perceptions derived from UGC to macro-level brand evaluations. The study thereby contributes to a more integrated understanding of

how credibility, trust, and brand perception interact in experience-based service industries characterized by high uncertainty and digital intermediation.

3.6.10 Boundary Conditions of Trust-Based Mediation

While the findings of this study confirm customer trust as a significant mediating mechanism between UGC credibility and global brand perception, prior research suggests that the trust-building effect of user-generated content may be subject to certain boundary conditions. Trust formation in digital environments is not unlimited and may vary depending on content saturation, perceived authenticity, and platform-level dynamics (Leung et al., 2021; Hochstein et al., 2023).

One key boundary condition relates to content volume and overexposure. As the quantity of user-generated content increases across platforms, consumers may experience information overload or skepticism, particularly when reviews appear excessively positive or repetitive. In such cases, perceived authenticity may weaken, reducing the trust-enhancing effect of UGC despite nominal credibility cues. This aligns with emerging qualitative evidence indicating that excessive UGC frequency can dilute authenticity and disrupt trust formation (Petersson & Nilsen, 2025).

A second boundary condition concerns platform-mediated visibility and algorithmic curation. Digital platforms often prioritize content based on engagement metrics, which can amplify selective narratives and shape consumer exposure. Research suggests that algorithmic amplification may indirectly influence trust by prioritizing popularity over informational accuracy, potentially biasing credibility judgments (Leung et al., 2021). As a result, trust formation is influenced not only by UGC content quality but also by the technological infrastructure through which content is encountered.

Additionally, the strength of trust-based mediation may vary depending on prior brand familiarity. For globally recognized accommodation brands, credible UGC may reinforce existing brand perceptions rather than function as the primary source of trust. In contrast, for lesser-known brands, UGC credibility may play a more decisive role in initial trust formation. Although brand familiarity was not explicitly measured in this study, prior tourism research highlights its relevance in shaping how consumers interpret trust signals in digital environments (Niu, 2025).

Importantly, these boundary conditions do not contradict the present findings but provide contextual nuance. The identification of partial mediation indicates that trust is a central but not exclusive pathway through which UGC credibility influences global brand perception. Emotional resonance, narrative engagement, and experiential realism may continue to shape brand evaluations even when trust effects weaken (Polat et al., 2023; Guerreiro et al., 2024). Recognizing these conditions supports a more nuanced interpretation of UGC effectiveness in complex digital tourism ecosystems.

3.7 Summary of Findings

This section provides a concise overview of the key empirical findings presented in Chapter Three, summarizing how the results address the study's research objectives and hypotheses.

1. UGC Credibility and Customer Trust

The results indicate a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between UGC credibility and customer trust ($\beta = 0.755$, $p < 0.001$). Respondents consistently reported that credible, authentic, and relevant user-generated content increases their confidence in tourism accommodation providers. This finding supports Hypothesis 1 (H1) and confirms that customer trust in the tourism accommodation sector is strongly influenced by perceptions of peer-generated content.

2. UGC Credibility and Global Brand Perception

The findings further demonstrate that UGC credibility has a significant positive direct effect on global brand perception ($\beta = 0.395$, $p < 0.001$), supporting Hypothesis 2 (H2). This suggests that exposure to credible UGC contributes positively to consumers' evaluations of accommodation brands, including perceptions of reputation, authenticity, and international appeal.

3. Mediating Role of Customer Trust

Mediation analysis revealed that customer trust partially mediates the relationship between UGC credibility and global brand perception. The indirect effect of UGC credibility on global brand perception through customer trust was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.304$, 95% CI [0.174, 0.445]), while the direct effect remained significant. This finding supports Hypothesis 4 (H4) and indicates that UGC influences brand perception both directly and indirectly through trust.

4. Descriptive Insights

Descriptive analysis showed that respondents generally perceive user-generated content as credible, relevant, and useful when making accommodation-related decisions. Overall levels of customer trust and global brand perception were high, providing contextual support for the inferential findings and confirming the practical relevance of UGC in digital tourism environments.

5. Contextual Observations

While the study did not formally test cultural or demographic differences, the internationally diverse sample suggests that perceptions of UGC and trust are relevant across multiple geographic contexts. These observations are consistent with existing tourism literature and are discussed as contextual insights rather than statistically tested effects.

In summary, the empirical findings validate the conceptual framework proposed in this study. UGC credibility emerged as a significant predictor of both customer trust and global

brand perception, with customer trust acting as a partial mediating mechanism. These results provide strong empirical evidence that tourism accommodation providers can strategically leverage credible user-generated content to enhance customer confidence and strengthen global brand perception. The findings form a solid foundation for the implications and recommendations presented in Conclusions and Recommendations section.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter concludes the master's thesis by synthesizing the empirical findings and presenting conclusions and recommendations derived from the research objectives and results. Building on the statistical analyses reported in Chapter Three, the chapter evaluates how perceived credibility of user-generated content (UGC) influences customer trust and global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector.

The primary purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, it formulates clear and evidence-based conclusions that directly correspond to the research objectives and tested hypotheses. Second, it provides research-grounded recommendations that address both theoretical development and practical application in tourism marketing and branding. Third, it acknowledges the methodological and contextual limitations of the study and outlines directions for future research.

By integrating empirical evidence with academic literature and practical considerations, this chapter ensures that the findings are interpreted responsibly and translated into meaningful insights for both scholars and tourism industry stakeholders.

Conclusions

The conclusions presented below are derived directly from the empirical results of the study and are aligned with the objectives formulated in the introduction. The conclusions are evidence-based, numbered, and do not contain visual material.

1. The study confirms that perceived credibility of user-generated content has a strong and statistically significant positive effect on customer trust in the tourism accommodation sector ($\beta = 0.755$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that travelers place substantial confidence in accommodation providers when peer-generated content is perceived as authentic, relevant, and trustworthy.

2. The findings demonstrate that UGC credibility has a significant direct positive effect on global brand perception ($\beta = 0.395$, $p < 0.001$). Exposure to credible user-generated content enhances consumers' evaluations of brand reputation, authenticity, and international appeal, confirming the strategic role of UGC in global brand positioning.

3. Customer trust was found to partially mediate the relationship between UGC credibility and global brand perception (indirect effect $\beta = 0.304$, 95% CI [0.174, 0.445]). This indicates that UGC influences brand perception both directly and indirectly through trust, highlighting trust as a key psychological mechanism linking peer-generated content to brand-level evaluations.

4. Descriptive analysis revealed that respondents generally perceive user-generated content as credible, relevant, and useful when making accommodation-related

decisions. High overall levels of customer trust and global brand perception reinforce the practical relevance of UGC in digital tourism environments.

5. Although cultural and demographic moderation effects were not statistically tested, the international composition of the sample suggests that perceptions of UGC credibility, trust, and brand perception are relevant across diverse geographic contexts. These findings provide contextual support for the global applicability of UGC-based trust formation in tourism accommodation markets.

Recommendations

The recommendations presented below are grounded in the study's empirical findings and formulated in a discrete, non-categorical manner, in accordance with Vilnius University guidelines.

Theoretical Recommendations

Future research should further examine the mediating role of customer trust in digital tourism contexts using alternative research designs, such as longitudinal or experimental approaches, to better capture causal dynamics over time. Scholars are encouraged to explore cultural and generational moderation effects to refine understanding of how UGC credibility operates across diverse market contexts. Additionally, future studies may apply advanced analytical techniques, such as structural equation modeling, to examine the dimensional structure of trust and brand perception constructs in greater depth.

Practical Recommendations

Tourism accommodation providers should actively encourage the creation and visibility of credible user-generated content by facilitating honest customer reviews and authentic visual contributions. Integrating UGC strategically into official digital touchpoints, such as booking platforms, brand websites, and social media channels, can enhance transparency and reduce perceived risk during pre-booking decision-making.

Managers are advised to engage consistently and professionally with user-generated feedback, as responsiveness and accountability signal reliability and strengthen customer trust. Given the direct and indirect effects of UGC credibility on global brand perception, trust-building practices should be prioritized as part of broader brand and reputation management strategies.

Tourism brands may benefit from adopting platform-specific UGC strategies, recognizing that visually driven platforms and review-based platforms influence consumer perceptions through different mechanisms. Showcasing diverse traveler experiences can also support relevance and authenticity for international audiences.

Limitations of the Study

Despite providing robust empirical insights, this study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

I. First, the study employed a cross-sectional research design, which captures perceptions at a single point in time. While appropriate for examining relationships among variables, this design limits causal inference and does not account for changes in trust or brand perception over time.

II. Second, the use of self-reported survey data introduces the possibility of common method bias, social desirability bias, or recall inaccuracies. Although anonymity was ensured to mitigate these effects, respondents stated perceptions may not fully reflect actual behaviour.

III. Third, the sample consisted of digitally engaged international travellers. While this aligns with the study's objectives, the findings may not be fully generalizable to travellers with limited digital engagement or to other tourism subsectors.

IV. Fourth, UGC was examined as an aggregated construct across multiple platforms. Platform-specific differences in content format, credibility cues, and algorithmic visibility were not isolated and may warrant separate examination.

V. Finally, the study adopted a quantitative-only approach. While suitable for hypothesis testing, this approach does not capture the deeper motivations and interpretations underlying consumer engagement with UGC.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several directions for future research are proposed.

Future studies may adopt longitudinal designs to examine how the influence of UGC on customer trust and brand perception evolves across different stages of the travel decision-making process. Platform-specific analyses are also recommended to assess how different types of UGC content shape trust and brand evaluations.

Incorporating qualitative or mixed-methods approaches could enrich understanding of the psychological and emotional processes underlying perceptions of credibility and authenticity. Cross-cultural comparative studies would further clarify how cultural context influences trust formation and brand perception in global tourism markets.

Finally, future research may explore the role of technological and algorithmic factors, such as AI-driven content curation and recommendation systems, in shaping the visibility and perceived credibility of user-generated content.

SUMMARY

This master's thesis examines the influence of User-Generated Content (UGC) on customer trust and global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector. In the contemporary digital tourism environment, peer-generated content has become a pivotal factor in shaping travelers' decisions, perceptions, and loyalty. The study aims to investigate how UGC impacts consumer trust, the mechanisms through which trust mediates brand perception, and the practical implications for global tourism accommodation providers. The research objectives include assessing the direct effects of UGC on trust and brand perception, examining the mediating role of customer trust, and acknowledging cross-cultural considerations that may contextualize these relationships without being empirically tested.

The study adopts a quantitative research design grounded in a positivist, deductive approach. Structured surveys were employed as the primary data collection instrument, targeting internationally diverse travelers familiar with digital platforms and online reviews. Measurement scales for UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception were adapted from established studies and refined through pre-testing to ensure validity and reliability. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, multiple regression analysis, and regression-based mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro. These techniques were applied to test direct and indirect relationships between user-generated content credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception, in line with established quantitative procedures for mediation analysis in tourism and digital marketing research (Hayes, 2017; Field, 2024). Ethical considerations, including informed consent and data confidentiality, were strictly adhered to throughout the research process.

Empirical results indicate that UGC has a significant positive effect on both customer trust and global brand perception. Credible and authentic user-generated content was shown to enhance consumers' confidence in accommodation providers, while also positively shaping perceptions of brand reputation, authenticity, and international appeal. Customer trust was found to partially mediate the relationship between UGC and global brand perception, highlighting its role as a mechanism through which peer content influences brand evaluations. Although cultural and demographic differences were not statistically tested, the international composition of the sample provides contextual support for interpreting the findings within a global tourism environment. Such contextual observations are discussed in line with prior tourism research as indicative insights rather than empirically tested effects (Dang & Nguyen, 2023; Correia et al., 2025).

The study concludes that UGC is a strategic asset rather than merely supplementary content. Its integration into marketing, operational, and digital strategies can significantly enhance consumer trust, brand positioning, and long-term loyalty. The research contributes

theoretically by extending social proof and trust formation frameworks within the digital tourism context, and practically by providing actionable insights for accommodation providers on UGC curation, platform-specific strategies, and culturally sensitive engagement. Recommendations for future research include longitudinal studies, platform-specific analyses, and qualitative investigations to deepen understanding of UGC's evolving role in tourism marketing.

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DECLARATION ON THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Artificial intelligence tools (ChatGPT by OpenAI) were used as an assistance tool during the preparation of this Final Master's Thesis to support language refinement, academic writing clarity, and structural consistency.

The AI tool was not used to generate original research ideas, research design, data collection instruments, data analysis, or interpretation of empirical results. All statistical analyses, findings, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this thesis are the author's own work and responsibility.

The use of artificial intelligence complied with Vilnius University guidelines on the responsible use of AI tools in academic work.

ANNEXES

Appendix A

Questionnaire

Title: The Influence of User-Generated Content (UGC) on Customer Trust and Global Brand Perception in the Tourism Accommodation Sector

Instructions:

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking part in this survey. This questionnaire aims to understand your experiences with user-generated content (UGC) and how it shapes trust and brand perception within the tourism accommodation sector.

All responses are confidential and will be used exclusively for academic research.

Thanks a million!! 🧡

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. **Age:**

☐ 18–25

☐ 26–35

☐ 36–45

☐ 46–55

☐ 56+

2. **Gender:**

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Prefer not to say

3. **Place of Residence:**

☐ _____

4. **Highest Level of Education:**

☐ High School

☐ Bachelor's Degree

☐ Master's Degree

☐ Doctorate

☐ Other: _____

5. **Frequency of Travel (for leisure or accommodation purposes)**

☐ Less than once a year

☐ 1–2 times a year

☐ 3–5 times a year

☐ More than 5 times a year

6. Have you stayed in any hotel/airbnb in the last 12 months?

☐ Yes

☐ No

7. Which platforms do you usually check before booking? (Select all)

☐ TripAdvisor

☐ Booking.com

☐ Instagram

☐ TikTok

☐ YouTube

☐ Google Reviews

☐ AirBnb

☐ Other: _____

Section 2: User-Generated Content Exposure
Scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree   2 = Disagree   3 = Neutral   4 = Agree   5 = Strongly Agree

8. I usually check online reviews before choosing accommodation.

9. Photos or videos posted by other travelers influence my choices.

10. UGC feels more authentic than official brand posts.

11. Likes, comments, and shares make UGC feel more trustworthy.

12. I prefer content created by real travelers rather than influencers.

13. I consider UGC relevant when planning my stay.

Section 3: UGC Influence on Travel Decision-Making
Scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree   2 = Disagree   3 = Neutral   4 = Agree   5 = Strongly Agree

14. UGC feels more genuine than official hotel marketing.

15. Customer photos and videos give me a realistic view of the hotel.

16. UGC helps me understand what the hotel experience is truly like.

17. UGC increases my trust in a hotel brand.

18. I trust hotels more when UGC aligns with official descriptions.

19. Verified or credible customer reviews increase my confidence in the hotel.

20. Positive UGC increases my likelihood of booking a hotel.

21. Negative UGC discourages me from booking.

22. UGC influences my final hotel choice more than traditional advertising.

23. UGC shared by major brands (e.g., Marriott, Hilton) enhances their credibility.

Thank You

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Your responses are valuable for understanding how user-generated content influences customer trust and global brand perception in the tourism accommodation sector. All responses are anonymous and will be used solely for academic research purposes.

Appendix B

List of tables

Table 1.1 Descriptive Statistics of Main Constructs

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
UGC_M	272	1.67	5.00	4.2000	.64781
Trust_M	272	1.00	5.00	4.3156	.70215
Brand_M	272	1.00	5.00	4.1869	.71292
Valid N (listwise)	272				

Source: Author's calculations using SPSS (2025)

Table 1.2 Pearson Correlation Matrix of Study Variables (SPSS Output)

Correlations

		UGC_M	Trust_M	Brand_M
UGC_M	Pearson Correlation	1	.697***	.635***
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	<.001
	N	272	272	272
Trust_M	Pearson Correlation	.697***	1	.647***
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001		<.001
	N	272	272	272
Brand_M	Pearson Correlation	.635***	.647***	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	
	N	272	272	272

***. Correlation at 0.001(2-tailed)

Source: Author's own calculations using SPSS.

Table 1.3 Reliability Analysis of Study Constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
UGC Credibility	9	0.861	Excellent
Customer Trust	3	0.826	Very good
Global Brand Perception	4	0.766	Acceptable–Very good

Source: Author's own calculations using SPSS.

Table 1.4 Simplified Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

Variables	UGC Credibility	Customer Trust	Global Brand Perception
UGC Credibility	1	0.697**	0.635**
Customer Trust	0.697**	1	0.647**
Global Brand Perception	0.635**	0.647**	1

Source: Author's own calculations using SPSS.

*Note: **p < .001 (2-tailed), N=272*
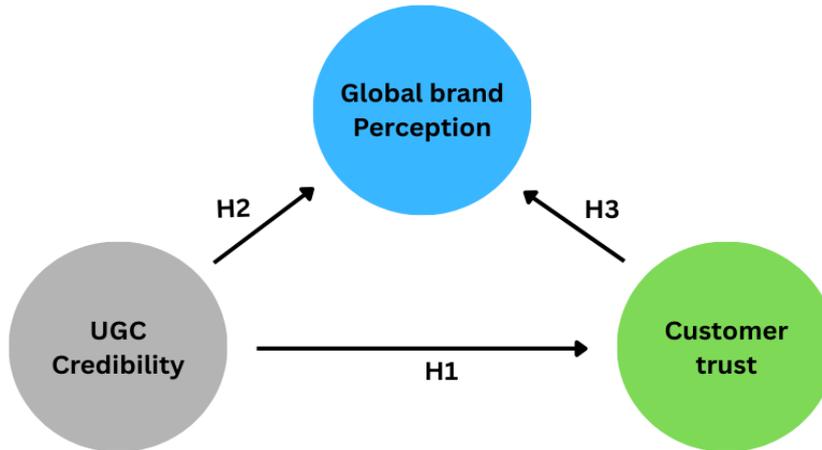
Table 1.5 Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Evidence	Supported?
H1: UGC credibility → Customer Trust	β = 0.755, p < 0.001	Yes
H2: UGC credibility → Global Brand Perception (Direct effect)	β = 0.395, p < 0.001	Yes
H3: Customer Trust → Global Brand Perception	β = 0.403, p < 0.001	Yes
H4: Customer Trust mediates the relationship between UGC credibility and global brand perception	Indirect effect β = 0.304, 95% CI [0.174, 0.445]	Yes (Partial mediation)

Source: Author's own calculations using PROCESS macro (Model 4) in SPSS (Hayes, 2017).

List of figures

Figure 1.1 Conceptual Research Model

## Conceptual Model of UGC Influence on Customer Trust and Global Brand Perception

H4: Customer trust mediates the relationship between user-generated content credibility and global brand perception.

Figure 1.1 presents the conceptual research model illustrating the proposed relationships between UGC credibility, customer trust, and global brand perception.

Figure 1.2 Age distribution of survey respondents (n = 309)
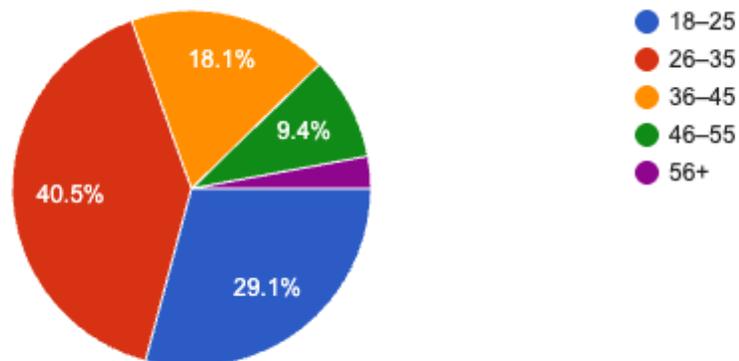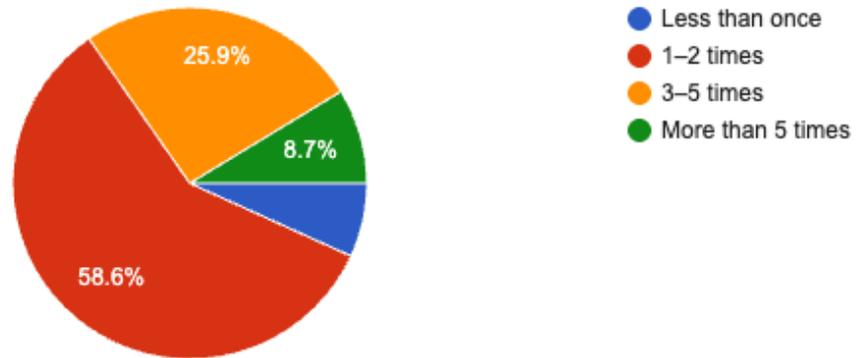

Source: Author's own survey data collected via Google Forms (2025).

Figure 1.3 Annual travel frequency of survey respondents (n = 309)
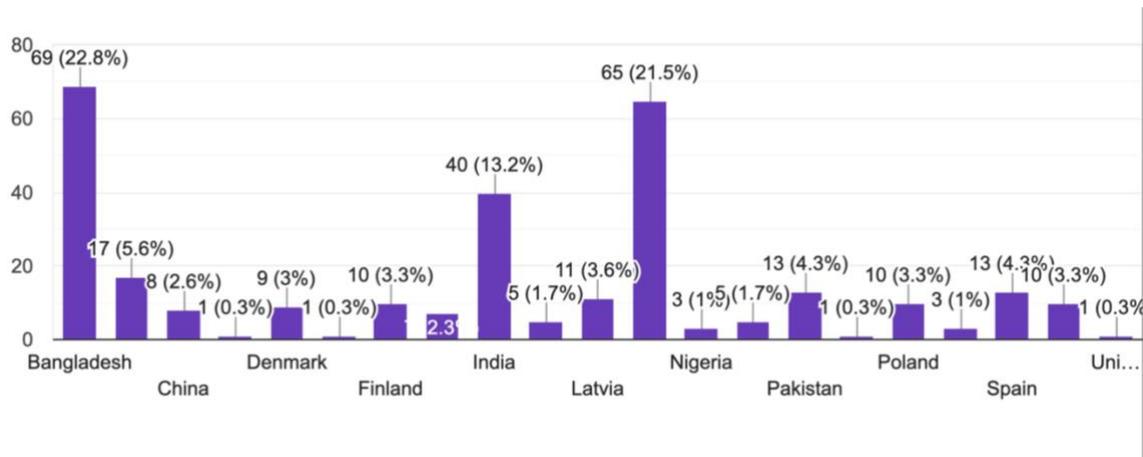

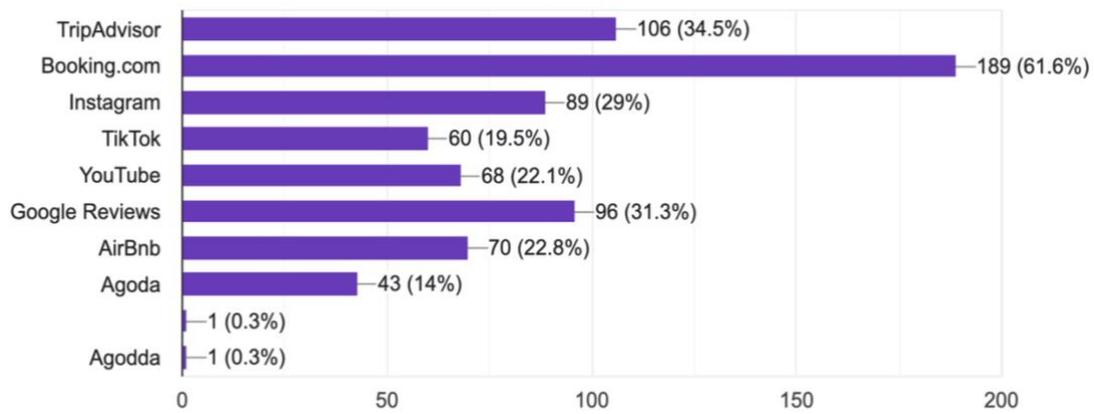5. How often do you travel per year? (for leisure or accommodation purposes)

309 responses

- Less than once
- 1–2 times
- 3–5 times
- More than 5 times

25.9%

8.7%

58.6%

Source: Author's own survey data collected via Google Forms (2025).

Figure 1.4 Geographic Distribution of Survey Respondents

Source: Author's own survey data collected via Google Forms (2025).

Figure 1.5 User-Generated Content Platforms Consulted Before Booking

Source: Author's own survey data collected via Google Forms (2025).