

An Integrated Theoretical Framework for User-Generated Content Adoption in the Tourist Decision-Making Process

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Abstract: User-generated content (UGC) has emerged as an important source of travel information and it impacts tourists' perceptions, destination assessment and decision-making. Previous research has used different theoretical lenses to explain the adoption of UGC, but the literature is fragmented as each theory focuses on a particular aspect of tourist behaviour (e.g. technology acceptance, information evaluation, social influence, motivation, decision making). Thus, there is a lack of an integrated theoretical framework that explains UGC adoption along the whole tourist decision-making process. The paper fills this theoretical gap by developing an integrated conceptual framework that synthesises Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Information Adoption Model (IAM), Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Consumer Decision-Making Theory. This paper provide a narrative literature review to demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of these theories and to identify opportunities for theoretical integration. This synthesis provides the basis for the proposed framework that explains the interaction of perceived usefulness, trustworthiness, social influence and hedonic motivation in influencing tourists' adoption of UGC and consequently sequential stages of travel decision-making including need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase behaviour. The paper also develops a set of theoretical propositions to guide future empirical research. This study contributes to the existing literature in tourism and hospitality by combining different theoretical perspectives into a comprehensive framework and hence provides a more complete understanding of tourists' interactions with UGC and a basis for future research using structural equation modelling and similar analytical techniques.

Keywords: User-Generated Content (UGC); Tourist Decision-Making; Social Media; Technology Acceptance Model (TAM); Information Adoption Model (IAM); Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM); Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT); Conceptual Framework; Digital Tourism; Tourism Behaviour.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of social media has changed the way people plan and experience travel. Before the digital revolution tourists mainly depended on travel agencies, brochures, and official tourism websites for travel information. Today, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TripAdvisor, and Google Reviews has become important sources of travel information. Tourists read online reviews, watch travel videos, and view photographs before planning a trip. They also learn from the experiences of other travellers. This has created a digital environment where tourists not only consume information but also share their own travel experiences (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

User-generated content (UGC) has become one of the most trusted sources among the different types of online information because it is based on the real experience of travelers (OECD, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). User generated content(UGC) refers to online reviews, ratings, photos, videos, blogs, travel recommendations that people post on social media platforms. Several studies have found UGC useful for tourists in destination choice, travel option comparison, booking decisions and sharing experiences after travel (Filieri et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2023). For hotels and tourism businesses, it's very helpful as it helps them improve brand awareness, customer engagement, online reputation, and overall business performance (Assaker et al., 2020; Harrigan et al., 2017). Understanding why tourists use UGC

and how it influences their decision-making is an important part of tourism research.

Although many researchers have studied UGC, there is no single theory that explains the entire process of UGC adoption and its influence on tourist decision-making. Most studies use one theory, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Information Adoption Model (IAM), Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), or Consumer Decision-Making Theory. Each of these theories explains only one part of tourists' behaviour, such as technology adoption, information credibility, motivation, or decision-making. As a result, the existing literature remains fragmented and do not provide a complete understanding of tourists' use of UGC (Filieri, 2023; Kitsios et al., 2022).

Therefore, this paper aims to develop an integrated theoretical framework by combining the major theories used in UGC research. The proposed framework combines TAM, IAM, eWOM Theory, UGT, and Consumer Decision-Making Theory to explain how tourists adopt and use UGC during the travel decision-making process. It brings together the main ideas from these theories into one framework. This framework can serve as a useful guide for future research and help researchers understand tourist behaviour in the digital tourism environment.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT ADOPTION IN TOURISM

Research on content created by users (UGC) in tourism has increased rapidly over the last decade. Different theories have been used to explain tourists' uses of the user generated material and its effect on their travel decisions. But all theory is focused on only one aspect of tourist behaviour. Therefore, no single theory can fully explain UGC adoption and its influence on the travel decision-making process. The next section briefly talks about the major theories commonly used in UGC research (Kitsios et al., 2022; Filieri, 2023).

➤ *The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)*

One of the most widely used theories for explaining technology adoption is the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) developed by Davis (1989). TAM proposes that users are more likely to adopt a system if they believe that it is useful and easy to use. In tourism research, perceived usefulness has received greater attention, because tourists mainly use social media and UGC to get useful information to plan their trips. UGC is useful if it provides reliable travel experiences, destination information and practical suggestions that support better travel decisions (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Some studies have shown that perceived usefulness positively affects tourists' intention to use UGC in travel planning. But TAM largely explains the adoption of technology and not the way tourists evaluate information or how UGC impacts later stages of the decision-making

process. So, TAM alone cannot give a complete understanding of tourist behaviour (Filieri et al., 2021).

➤ *Information Adoption Model (IAM)*

Sussman and Siegal (2003) developed the Information Adoption Model (IAM) to describe the process of how people adopt and use information available on the internet. The model suggests that information quality and source credibility are the two major factors influencing information adoption. Tourists in tourism tend to depend on online reviews, travel blogs and social media posts to determine whether they can trust the information or not.

Information Adoption Model helps to explain why some UGC is more trusted than the others. Detailed, balanced reviews written by experienced travellers are generally seen as more credible (Ayeh et al., 2013; Filieri & McLeay, 2014). In addition to explaining how tourists evaluate online information, IAM focuses on information quality and credibility. It pays less attention to motivational factors and the entire travel decision-making process (Liu & Park, 2024).

➤ *Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)*

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Theory (Litvin et al., 2008) explains the opinions and experiences of consumers that influence other consumers' decisions. Tourists easily share reviews, ratings, photos and suggestions on online platforms, so UGC is often considered as a form of eWOM in tourism.

Previous studies have demonstrated the powerful influence of eWOM on destination image, travel intentions and booking decisions as tourists tend to listen to the experiences of other tourists rather than promotional ads (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Filieri, 2023). But eWOM is mainly explaining communication between consumers and not clearly explaining how technology adoption, motivation and decision-making work together.

➤ *Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)*

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Blumler & Katz, 1974) explains why people actively seek out various media to gratify their needs. In tourism, tourists use social media for information gathering, but also for entertainment, social interaction and travel inspiration. Some people like to watch travel videos or photographs because they are interesting and fun, and some people use social media to get useful travel knowledge (Manap & Adzharudin, 2013).

UGT emphasises the value of motivation by the use of UGC. But it mostly talks about why people engage with media and does not fully explain how engagement leads to travel decisions or post travel behaviour (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

➤ *Consumer Decision-Making Theories*

Consumer Decision-Making Theory (Engel et al., 1995) talks about the steps consumers go thru before and after buying something. In tourism these stages are need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post purchase behaviour. UGC is a tool

for providing information, reducing uncertainty and helping tourists to compare different travel options in each of these stages (Middleton et al., 2009).

But this theory explains the whole process of decision making but not why tourists choose to use UGC in the first place. It also pays limited attention on variables like perceived usefulness, trust and motivation which influence UGC adoption (Chen, 2025).

Altogether these theories cover different aspects of tourists' engagement with UGC. TAM describes technology adoption, IAM describes information credibility, e-WOM describes peer communication, UGT describes user motivation, Consumer Decision-Making Theory describes the stages of travel decisions. While each theory provides valuable insights, none of them accounts for the whole process of UGC adoption and its impact on tourist decision-making. This limitation points to the need for an integrated theoretical framework that integrates the strengths of these theories into one model.

III. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Table 1 Theoretical Foundations of the Study

Theory	Main Focus	Strength	Limitation
Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)	Technology adoption through perceived usefulness and ease of use	Explains why tourists adopt UGC and digital platforms	<i>Does not explain trust, motivation, or the complete decision-making process</i>
Information Adoption Model (IAM)	Information quality and source credibility	Explains how tourists evaluate and trust online information	<i>Focuses mainly on information adoption and ignores user motivation and behavioural outcomes</i>
Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Theory	Online reviews and peer communication	Explains the influence of peer recommendations on tourist decisions	<i>Does not explain technology adoption or the psychological factors behind UGC use</i>
Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)	User motivation and media usage	Explains why tourists engage with UGC and social media	<i>Does not explain how engagement leads to purchase decisions or post-purchase behaviour</i>
Consumer Decision-Making Theory	Stages of consumer decision-making	Explains the sequential stages of travel decisions	<i>Does not explain why tourists adopt UGC or the factors influencing its use</i>

Source: Developed by the author based on Davis (1989), Sussman and Siegal (2003), Litvin et al. (2008), Blumler and Katz (1974), and Engel et al. (1995).

As shown in Table 1, each of the theories can explain only one dimension of tourists' interaction with UGC. TAM explains technology adoption, IAM explains information credibility, eWOM explains peer communication, UGT explains user motivation and Consumer Decision-Making Theory describes the stages of travel decisions. However, no single theory has integrated all these dimensions into one framework. This theoretical gap underscores the need for an integrated model that can capitalise on the strengths of these theories to offer a more holistic understanding of UGC adoption and its influence on tourist decision-making.

➤ Proposed Integrated Framework

Given the limitations of the existing theories, this paper proposes an integrated theoretical framework to explain tourists' adoption and user generated content (UGC) in the travel decision-making process. The framework synthesises the core ideas of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Information Adoption Model (IAM), Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Consumer Decision-Making Theory rather than relying on a single theory. The proposed framework combines these theories to give a more holistic explanation of tourist behaviour in the digital tourism environment (Davis, 1989; Sussman & Siegal, 2003; Litvin et al., 2008; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Engel et al., 1995).

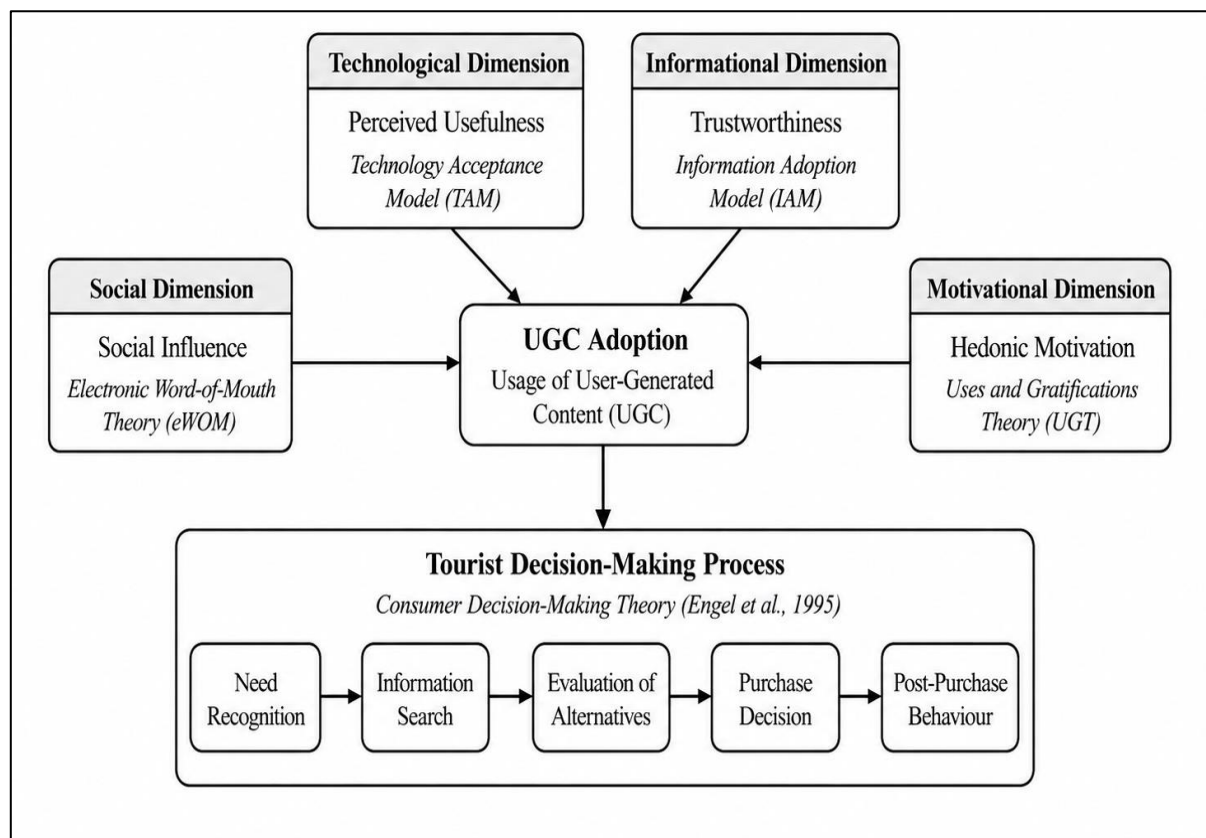


Fig 1 Proposed Integrated Theoretical Framework for User-Generated Content Adoption and Tourist Decision-Making
Source: Developed by the author based on Davis (1989), Sussman and Siegal (2003), Litvin et al. (2008), Blumler and Katz (1974), and Engel et al. (1995).

The proposed framework argues that the first evaluation tourists make is about the usefulness of user created content based on Technology Acceptance Model. Tourists who perceive UGC as a useful and valuable source for their travel planning are more likely to use it (Davis, 1989). But usefulness alone isn't enough. The Information Adoption Model explains that tourists do not accept the information on the internet at face value, but also assess the credibility and trustworthiness of the information (Sussman & Siegal, 2003).

Furthermore, the framework suggests that tourists are influenced by online reviews, recommendations and experiences of other travellers thru electronic word-of-mouth (Litvin et al., 2008). Tourists are also encouraged to interact with UGC thru social influence from friends, family, influencers and online communities. Many tourists also use social media because they like to watch travel photos, videos and stories, which shows the role of hedonic motivation as explained by Uses and Gratifications Theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974).

Finally, when tourists accept UGC, the information affects all phases of the travel decision-making process, namely need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behaviour. The integrated framework thus combines the strengths of different theories into a single model which offers a more comprehensive explanation of tourists' behaviour than any one theory.

IV. THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS

The proposed integrated framework suggests that user-generated material (UGC) adoption is determined by several technological, informational, social and motivational factors. These factors together affect the decision-making process of tourists' travel. The following theoretical propositions are proposed for future research that will be built upon the integration of the five theories discussed earlier.

➤ Proposition 1 (P1)

Perceived usefulness positively affects tourists' adoption and usage of content created by users in trip planning.

➤ Proposition 2 (P2):

The trustworthiness of user created content has a positive influence on tourists' willingness to rely on online travel information.

➤ Proposition 3 (P3):

Social influence of friends, family, online communities and travel influencers positively affects tourists' adoption of user created content.

➤ Proposition 4 (P4):

Hedonic motivation positively influences tourists' participation in content created by users on social media platforms.

➤ *Proposition 5 (P5):*

Content created by users has a positive impact on each of the stages of the tourist decision-making process: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase behaviour.

Theoretical basis for future empirical studies is provided by these propositions. Researchers can investigate the hypothesised relationships using various quantitative techniques such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), or multi-group analysis in different tourism contexts. The propositions can also be tested in different countries, tourism destinations and demographic groups to enhance the generalisability of the proposed framework.

➤ *Implications and Future Research*

The proposed integrated framework has some theoretical and practical implications for tourism and hospitality research. Theoretically, the framework overcomes the limitation of applying a theory to explain tourists' use and adoption of content created by users (UGC). The present study proposes an integrated model based on the core concepts of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Information Adoption Model (IAM), Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), and Consumer Decision-Making Theory. The integration of the model offers a more complete understanding of the interaction of technological, informational, social and motivational factors influencing tourist behaviour. As well, the framework can be a basis for future conceptual and empirical research related to digital tourism and social media.

From a practical viewpoint, the suggested framework can assist tourism organisations, destination marketers and hospitality firms in gaining better insights into the factors that motivate tourists to use UGC. businesses should focus on the creation of useful, trustworthy and engaging content online and the encouragement of customers to share their travel experiences. By staying active on social media and responding to customer reviews, tourism businesses can build customer trust, improve engagement, and boost their online reputation. The framework can also help digital marketers to design more effective social media strategies to support tourist decision making.

However, the proposed framework explains comprehensively about UGC adoption but it is not empirically tested. Future research can test the proposed relationships using quantitative research methods such as Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) or Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The framework can also be tested in other tourism destinations, countries and demographic groups to determine whether the proposed relationships are invariant across different contexts. Other variables can be added to extend the framework, e.g. destination image, perceived risk, artificial intelligence or cultural differences.

V. CONCLUSION

The tourism industry has identified content created by users as a valuable source of information and an important factor in tourists' travel decision-making process. While previous studies have explained different aspects of UGC from different theoretical perspectives, no single theory explains the tourist behaviour in the digital tourism environment completely. The paper discussed the main theories used in UGC research and highlighted their strengths and limitations.

This paper proposes an integrated theoretical framework that integrates TAM, IAM, eWOM Theory, UGT and Consumer Decision-Making Theory according to this review. The framework gives a more complete understanding of how tourists adopt and use UGC in the travel decision making process. It also provides a useful basis for future research and practical uses in tourism and hospitality. The proposed framework contributes to the growing literature on digital tourism by integrating the strengths of different theories and provides direction for future empirical studies.

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