

# Travel with Xiaohongshu App: The Influence of User-Generated Content in Generation Z's travel expectations

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**Abstract.** The tourism industry is undergoing a transition because of quick technological developments. Tourists are utilising smart technologies to enhance their shopping experiences and remain competitive. Therefore, the most significant challenge for tourism marketing in the future is to comprehend Generation Z, as they exhibit different consumer behaviours and are more focused on innovation. This study aims at discussing tourism expectations as well as experiences for Generation Z travelers. How does social media user-generated content affect tourism expectations? Our goal is to learn how sensitive this Zhuhai and Guangzhou tourist segment is to the concept of user-generated content by using Xiaohongshu apps as an example. Through the method of convenient sampling, an offline questionnaire survey was conducted on the Gen Zers' who used in this app. Totally 324 valid questionnaires were returned. The collected data were analyzed and tested with SPSS Statistic 26.0 and SmartPLS 4.0.9.9. The results show that all the hypotheses are supported. The Trust in UGC of GenZ to tourist expectations: Core Resources in Zhuhai and Guangzhou has a positive effect, and the trust in UGC owner also present a significant effect on tourist expectations through supporting factors respectively. Finally, this study gives the tourism industry some practical enlightenment and direction guidance for future research. Social media App like Xiaohongshu really effects on Gen Z' travel behavior.

**Keywords.** User- Generated Content, Generation Z's, travel expectations, Xiaohongshu App.

## 1 Introduction

The emergence of the "Gen Z" concept is attributed to the influence of digital technologies, online platforms, and social media, leading to a new sociological categorization. Since this is a hyper-connected generation <sup>[1]</sup>. Generation Z also refers to all individuals born between the late 1997s and the before 2012s, and they differ from previous generations in their long-term goals, have a greater perception of environmental concern and social responsibility, and are more globally focused and open-minded <sup>[2] [3]</sup>. Due to the fact that this generation is highly interconnected and has unique travel preferences and requirements <sup>[1]</sup>, it presents a significant challenge for both academic researchers and professionals in the tourism industry to study their motivations, expectations, purchasing decisions, and understanding of tourist behavior.

Since the majority of daily activities have become conducted online, more tourists tend to rely on social media reviews as a viable and authentic database to gather information. Previous research has shown that marketing on social media platforms is more effective at influencing tourists' behaviour and purchase intention <sup>[4]</sup>. As a result, tourists are more willing to share their tourism notes through social media, motivated by the desire to interact with their fans, to get a like or making more followers, which creates a positive feedback loop as more consumers share their opinions and feedback and interact with others. It is clear that social media is one of the factors which drives the tourism sector to develop <sup>[5]</sup>. The function of social media is becoming a platform for shaping customers' brand experiences and sharing opinions is increasingly focused on one-person marketing, such as user-generated content (UGC). Presently, travellers depend on UGC websites and travel review platforms, including Trip Advisor, Booking.com, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu, in order to gather information and make travel decisions <sup>[6]</sup> <sup>[7]</sup>. The rationale behind selecting the users of Xiaohongshu as the research scope, rather than opting for a comparative analysis across multiple social media platforms, needs to be clarified as following.

Xiaohongshu is a social media UGC platform widely used by Mainland China's Generation Z's travelers. Xiaohongshu's mission is to "Inspire Lives to share and discover the wonders of the world", which attracts youngsters most. Users can record life through short videos, pictures and other forms, share lifestyle, and form interaction based on interest. As of October 2019, the monthly active users of Xiaohongshu have passed 100 million, of which 70% are the post-90s, and continue to grow rapidly. It is popular among young users, so it is typical to choose it as a representative of social media. Photographs can be used to record personal travel experiences and are a common way of conveying impressions of a destination <sup>[8]</sup>. One of the functions in the APPs is to share a visitor's personal location and the places they visit has also opened up new forms of motivation for Generation Z to share their experiences of a destination. Furthermore, tourist motivations whether connected to users' attitudes, targets, and needs some of the push factors that motivate them to go out for a trip or to build up an attractive destination image (pull factors), are the primary decision-making ways <sup>[9]</sup>. Such research is becoming more important in understanding tourist behavior as tourists' expectations and motivations become more complex, while the variety of options and tourism destinations expands.

### **1.1 Study Objectives**

For the beginning, section one of this article explains the relative concepts, providing a basis understanding of them. Despite its popularity in the media, the term "Generation Z" has seemed to have received little attention from academic researchers. This study identifies the characteristics of this generation and clarifies how they relate to the notion of tourist expectations regarding trust in UGC providers in the literature review. The methodological choices are presented in the second part of the paper. After discussing these findings, conclusions would be made about the study's difficulties and limitations, as well as its implications for future research.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

The main objective of the research is to look into the tourist expectations and experiences of Generation Z tourists via UGC content or providers. The research questions are as follows:

How does user-generated content on social media affect Generation Z tourism expectations?

- a) To what extent are tourists familiar with the concepts of UGC and UGC providers in social media?
- b) What are the expectations of tourists and how do they evaluate their experiences, ultimately influencing their willingness to recommend the Xiaohongshu app?
- c) What is the current "UGC," and how well does it match the motivations and expectations of Generation Z tourists?

## **2 Literature Reviews and Hypotheses**

### **2.1 Gen Z and Tourist's Motivation**

Gen Z individuals are increasingly considering social media as an important part of their daily lives due to their frequent interactions in the virtual world. They are living in an era of highly smart connections, with the emergence of smart cities, smart lifestyles, and smart tourism <sup>[10]</sup>. Previous studies have focused on social media and its impact on visitors' behaviour and perception. Various studies have indicated how information sources make sense to travel motivation. Tourist motivation is a concept that has been debated by researchers in psychology, anthropology, and sociology <sup>[12]</sup>. Hence, we might discuss the following hypotheses:

H1: The motive of receiving user-generated content (UGC) in Xiaohongshu, relating to their travel experiences, has a significant positive impact on the tourist's trust in its contents.

H2: The motive of receiving user-generated content (UGC) in Xiaohongshu, relating to their travel experiences, has a significant positive impact on the tourist's trust in its providers.

### **2.2 Studies related to User-Generated Content Sources with tourists' expectations**

Expectations have long been identified as a significant influence in explaining individual behaviour, particularly economic behaviour. As know, expectation is the degree to which some consequences will follow from a belief in a behaviour. Tourist expectation is a change in belief. A traveller's expectation is a preconceived perception of the outcome of a trip, and most people travel for enjoyment to meet one or more expectations <sup>[11]</sup>. Previous research has pointed out that UGC has a positive relationship with the tourists' expectations. Social media platforms have become the hub of information for travellers when it comes to planning and booking their travels <sup>[12]</sup>. Generation Z's travel expectations are created before purchasing products or travel services, based on dis-confirmation theory. The motivation behind UGC content as a source for tourists is to help them make informed decisions and generate expectations for their next trip. To achieve the research objectives regarding the influence of UGC content via social media on Generation Z's expectations of destination characteristics, our hypotheses are proposed like:

H3: The motive of receiving UGC in Xiaohongshu, related to their travel experiences, has a significant positive effect on the tourist's expectations about the core resources at the destination.

H4: The motive of receiving UGC in Xiaohongshu, related to their travel experiences, has a significant positive effect on the tourist's expectations about the supporting factors at the destination.

### 2.3 The mediators' effect of trust in UGC and its providers

Gen Z are more willing to use social media to get more information and it thus increases their intention to visit for an impressive tourism experience [12]. Yu and Zou (2015) studied the credibility of posts related to tourism influences consumers' purchase intentions, and found that the higher the credibility of the UGC, the greater expectations there will be [14]. Therefore, trust in UGC and its providers would influence on tourists, so that they would use social media to plan their trip and make a decision with more contents in social media. Thus, they can have a higher level of trust, since they can bring their travel expectations closer to reality [13] [14]. Regarding to these reasons, we put the following hypotheses:

H5: Tourist's trust in UGC mediates the relationship of the motive of receiving UGC in Xiaohongshu and tourist's expectations about the core resources at the destination.

H6: Tourist's trust in UGC mediates the relationship of the motive of receiving UGC in Xiaohongshu and tourist's expectations about the supporting factors at the destination.

H7: Trust in UGC's provider mediates the relationship of the motive of receiving UGC in Xiaohongshu and tourist's expectations about the core resources at the destination.

H8: Trust in UGC's provider the relationship of the motive of receiving UGC in Xiaohongshu and tourist's expectations about the supporting factors at the destination.

### 2.4 Research Model

Here our research objective is to analyse the influence of user-generated content (UGC) sources on the travel expectations of Generation Z. For further study, the research focus on both the pre- and post-travel periods. Referring to the pre-travel period, Narangajavana et al.'s empirical study examined the relationship between UGC received on social media and tourist expectations. But the specific UGC sources would not be considered in this study [15][16]. As a result, our research focused on the influences of UGC sources on Generation Z's travel expectations by category UGC sources into two groups (Zhuhai and Guangzhou) using the Xiaohongshu app. The study also looked at the impact on tourist expectations of two types of tourist destinations: core resources and supporting factors. The relationships between the tourists' motivation, expectations, and perceptions were examined. Standing on above, our research model is seen in Figure 1.

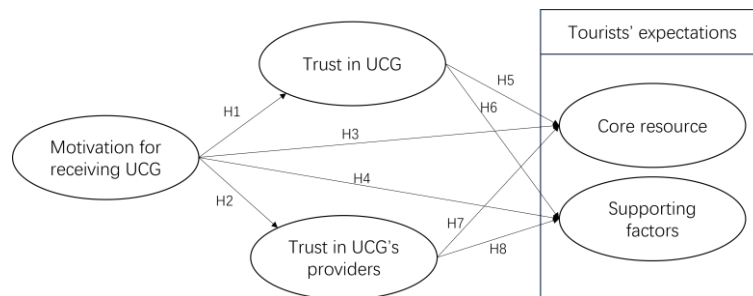


Figure 1. Research Model of this study

Source: Modified from Narangajavana (2017)

### **3 Research Method**

#### **3.1 In-depth interview**

Before a survey, an in-depth interview was done to give a deeper understanding of Generation Z tourists to reveal their true thoughts and feelings when they travel following information from Xiaohongshu. In the process of interview, seven college students were invited in conducting this in-depth interview. They were interviewed one by one, with mainly seven questions, including when and how often they use Xiaohongshu in their daily life, what UGC in Xiaohongshu influence on their travel decision and their travel experience.

For in-depth interview, we found that:

- a) UGC from Xiaohongshu are more diversified, in the form of text, pictures and videos, and most Gen Z are willing to get travel information from it.
- b) The travel information in Xiaohongshu, which is considered by most people to be more authentic, provides help and enhances their travel experience.
- c) In Xiaohongshu, if a well-known blogger recommended a tourist destination with very good scenery and good local facilities, and they are more looking forward to the tourist destination.

#### **3.2 Questionnaire design**

Based on the in-depth interview, the questionnaire was designed. The questionnaire includes two sections, part one is about respondents' demographic information and the intensity of their usage (Table 1), part two is focused on the motivation, trust and exception on Xiaohongshu (Table 2). The questionnaire's ratings in Table 2 began from "strongly disagree (marked as 1)" to "strongly agree (marked as 5)" on a Likert 5-point scale. These quantifiable questions were originally prepared in English, but they would be translated into Chinese by a translation who was proficient in both languages. Before the formal survey, the Pilot test's related questionnaire was designed and checked by 4 PhD students from the Faculty of BITM at City University of Macao. To match the topic, two Xiaohongshu KOL invited to review and provide professional comments for the questionnaire. In the pilot test, 30 samples were carried out by non-random sampling in Zhuhai, Guangdong province, at November 2022 to guarantee content validity. After the screening, four invalid questionnaires excluded due to incorrect and incomplete answers returned from participants. These were not reasonable in the study. The findings of the pilot test led to several changes being made.

#### **3.3 Measures**

Previous research was used to develop the scales for appraising all variables in the questionnaire. The framework of this questionnaire based on Narangajavana et al. <sup>[19]</sup>. Motives for receiving UGC in Xiaohongshu were improved from previous scholars <sup>[17][18]</sup>, as well as five items were modified from Kang's studied on trust in UGC <sup>[19]</sup>, four items on trust in a UGC provider were revised from former studies <sup>[20]</sup>, and six items to measure tourist expectations were recomposed from Crouch (2011) <sup>[21]</sup> and Vengesai <sup>[22]</sup>.

**Table 1.** The measurements of five constructs.

Construct	Items	Source
Motivation for receiving UGC (MFR)	4 items	Jalilvand and Samiei (2012), Ayeh et al. (2013)
Trust in UGC (TIU)	5 items	Kang (2011)
Trust in UGC's providers (TIUP)	4 items	Chow and Chan (2008)
Expectations (Core Resources) (ECR)	3 items	Crouch (2011) and Vengesai (2008)
Expectations (Supporting Factors) (ESF)	3 items	Crouch (2011) and Vengesai (2008)

### 3.4 Data collection

Data collection was carried on in two online channels, one of which was Wechat group, and the other one was from Credamo. Firstly, the online questionnaire link was sent to college students in Guangzhou and Zhuhai through Wechat group, and red packet were distributed to attract college students to take the initiative to fill out the questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed over a period of one week, starting on November 5, 2022. There were 130 questionnaires in this way. Then, in following one week, the questionnaire was put on the platform Credamo, and 200 pieces of questionnaires were collected. Credamo provided a wider platform to achieve respondents from different areas, to enhance representativeness and diversity of samples. Finally, the total number of questionnaires collected was 330. After excluding 6 cases where a similar rating was provided, 324 responses were retained for data analysis.

### 3.5 Data analysis

To investigate the causal relationship of motives for receiving UGC in Xiaohongshu, trust and expectation, the SmartPLS 4.0.8.5 software was applied. Instead of replicating the empirical covariance matrix, we applied PLS-SEM because it can optimize the variance of the dependent variable as interpreted by independent variables<sup>[23][24]</sup>. Furthermore, PLS-SEM is suitable for exploratory studies because it imposes fewer constraints on the data's normal distribution. The Cronbach's alpha is reflected in the scale internal consistency. Generally, Cronbach's alpha is need to be higher than 0.6<sup>[25]</sup>. According to Fornel & Larcker (1981) research on convergence validity evaluation in the standard method, the load of standardized project factors is mainly close to or exceeds 0.5, and the average variation in the number extraction value (AVE) is mainly close to or exceeds 0.5. If the (CR) combined reliability is higher than 0.7, which indicates that the questionnaire has high convergent validity<sup>[26]</sup>.

## 4 Results and Discussion

Among 324 respondents, the respondents were more female (66.986%) than male students (33.02%). And most of respondents having the Dipoma or Bachelor's degree (88.27%). There are 24.69% respondents using the xiaohognshu several times a week, 30.86% using it daily, and 29.01% using it several times a day. There are 28.40% respondents spend less than 1 hour per

week on Xiaohongshu, and 45.68% spend 1-5h. In other words, Gen Z rely so much on UCG from Xiaohongshu in daily.

#### 4.1 Reliability, validity, and correlation

Reliability is measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. According to Hair <sup>[25]</sup>, the reliability test helped to assess the internal consistency of the five constructs. It is needed that values of Cronbach's Alpha for all components exceeded 0.7. The formula is (1):

$$\alpha = \frac{K}{K-1} \left( 1 - \frac{\sum_{i=1}^K \sigma_{y_i}^2}{\sigma_x^2} \right) \quad (1)$$

To assess construct validity, the factor loadings in the research model must be not lower than 0.7. Additionally, AVE values must exceed 0.5, as well as CR values must exceed 0.7. These results, as shown in Table 2, indicate that the study's reliability and validity are satisfactory. As shown in Table 2 and Table 3, the square-root of the construct's AVE was greater than its correlations with other constructs. Most of the heterotrait-monotrait ratios (Table 4) were lower than 0.85, but the TIU and TIUP were higher than 0.85 <sup>[24]</sup>.

**Table 2.** Reliability and validity of the constructs

Name	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha	AVE	CR
ECR		0.704	0.629	0.835
ECR1	0.807			
ECR2	0.717			
ECR3	0.85			
ESF		0.736	0.655	0.85
ESF1	0.847			
ESF2	0.756			
ESF3	0.822			
MFR		0.693	0.619	0.83
MFR1	0.788			
MFR2	0.752			
MFR3	0.819			
TIU		0.853	0.632	0.895
TIU1	0.832			
TIU2	0.796			
TIU3	0.691			
TIU4	0.834			
TIU5	0.812			
TIUP		0.821	0.651	0.882
TIUP1	0.807			
TIUP2	0.817			
TIUP3	0.829			
TIUP4	0.772			

**Table 3.** Latent variable correlations

	ECR	ESF	MFR	TIU	TIUP
ECR	1	0.654	0.64	0.606	0.588
ESF	0.654	1	0.558	0.591	0.557
MFR	0.64	0.558	1	0.62	0.587
TIU	0.606	0.591	0.62	1	0.791
TIUP	0.588	0.557	0.587	0.791	1

**Table 4.** Discriminant Validity

Fornell–Larcker criterion						Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT)					
	ECR	ESF	MFR	TIU	TIUP		ECR	ESF	MFR	TIU	TIUP
ECR	0.793					ECR					
ESF	0.654	0.809				ESF	0.904				
MFR	0.64	0.558	0.787			MFR	0.905	0.778			
TIU	0.606	0.591	0.62	0.795		TIU	0.77	0.738	0.794		
TIUP	0.588	0.557	0.587	0.791	0.807	TIUP	0.77	0.713	0.774	0.952	

## 4.2 Results of PLS analysis

The utilization of the multiple regression method is recommended for testing the association between independent variables and the dependent variable. The correlation coefficients between all measures need to be calculated by Smart PLS. And significant correlations would be highlight,  $p < 0.1$ ,  $p < 0.5$  and  $p < 0.01$ . The statistical model is like (2):

$$Y = a + \beta_i X_i + \varepsilon \quad (2)$$

Here, Y is the dependent variable,  $X_i$  are various independent variables, a and  $\beta_i$  are constants, and  $\varepsilon$  is the error.

Table 5 presents the path co-efficients and significance outcome of the model. Such results illustrate that: Motives for receiving UGC in Xiaohongshu (t-statistic =15.49, p-value <0.001), and trust in Xiaohongshu's UGC (t-statistic =16.401, p-value<0.01) are greatly influencing on expectations of core resources. H1 and H2 are supported. The direct effects of motives for receiving UGC in Xiaohongshu to expectations of core resources (t-statistic =6.403, p-value <0.001) and expectations of supporting factors (t-statistic =4.496, p-value <0.001) are supported. Thus, H3 and H4 are also supported. The indirect effects of trust in UGC and trust in UGC's providers are significant. H5, H6, H7, H8 are supported, show in above Table 5. The total outcomes are shown in following Figure 2.

**Table 5.** Hypotheses tests

Hypotheses	Path	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values	Test result
H1	MFR -> TIU	0.04	15.49	0	Support
H2	MFR -> TIUP	0.036	16.401	0	Support
H3	MFR -> ECR	0.063	6.403	0	Support
H4	MFR -> ESF	0.064	4.496	0	Support



H5	MFR -> TIU -> ECR	0.05	2.613	0.009	Support
H6	MFR -> TIU -> ESF	0.051	3.461	0.001	Support
H7	MFR -> TIUP -> ECR	0.047	2.32	0.02	Support
H8	MFR -> TIUP -> ESF	0.047	2.043	0.041	Support

Note: \*p value < 0.05, \*\*p value < 0.01, \*\*\*p value < 0.001.

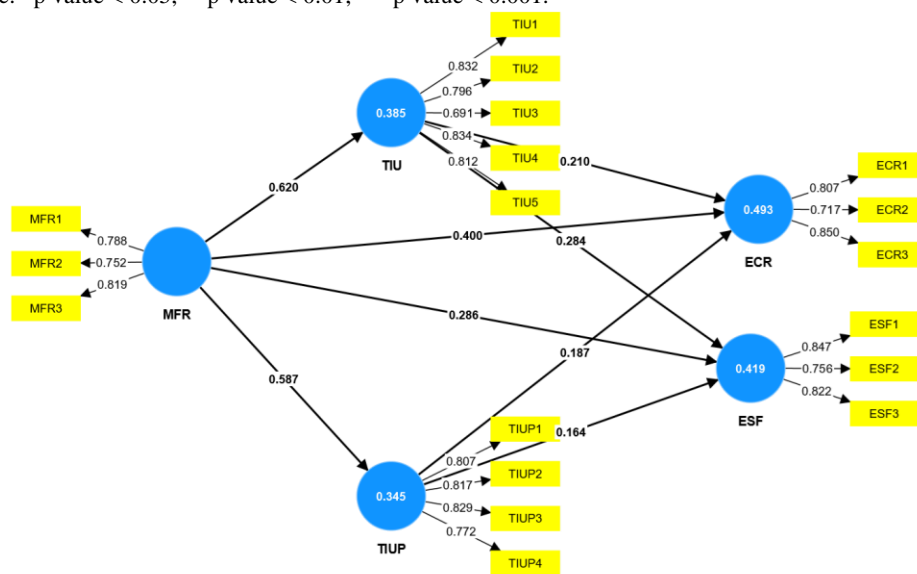


Figure 2. Results of PLS analysis

## 5 Conclusion

To conduct this research is looking into the impact of user-generated content (Xiaohongshu) on Generation Z tourism expectations. It has provided a better understanding of Gen Z tourism decision making and gaining information in social media platform like Xiaohongshu. All hypotheses were supported, providing evidence of a positive relationship among variables. The findings indicate that Gen Z like to plan their trip by referring to UCG in Xiaohongshu because they trust on UCG in Xiaohongshu and UCG provider, which are believed to provide useful information. When they are planning their trip with seeking information from Xiaohongshu really help them create a tourism expectation of tourist destination. At this perspective, it is very important for destination marketing to present positive information about their destination in social media platform, with social media APP like Xiaohongshu or Douyin. Moreover, Gen Z like to seek tourism information in Xiaohongshu, as well as they are willing to share information or personal experience, so they can co-create value for destination. To encourage them to provide positive information, is an interesting issue to future study.

Future academic or industry studies could research the factor of measurement can be to measure loyalty or intention to revisit, etc. The actual destination is not a matter of word of mouth; the model can also be adjusted by adding some the model can be further refined by adding some adjustment variables to make it more complete. All of the above assumptions are the above assumptions are based on this model, but whether or not they have realistic implications will require more research and refinement in the future. The above assumptions are based on an exploration of the model.

**Acknowledgments:** This study is funded by “2021 Guangdong Provincial General Universities Key Area Special Project of Guangdong Provincial Department of Education (Digital Economy): Research on the Digital Transformation and Innovative Development of Cultural Tourism and Performing Arts in the 5G Era” (Project Number: 2021ZDZX3005).

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