

A Study on the Influence Mechanism of User-Generated Content on College Students' Travel Decisions: Evidence from 220 Surveys

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Abstract. With the widespread popularity of Internet technology and mobile devices, user-generated content has become an important source of travel information. At the same time, China's huge group of college students has also formed a huge tourism consumption market. It is of great practical significance to study the impact of user-generated content on their decision-making behavior. Based on the theoretical model of information adoption, this study aims to explore how the quality of user-generated content information affects college students' travel decision-making through the intermediary path of perceived usefulness and perceived credibility. Through the analysis of the intermediary effect of 220 valid questionnaires, the study found that the quality of user-generated content information not only has a direct positive impact on tourism decision-making, but also has an indirect impact through two intermediary paths—the perceived credibility of information sources and the perceived usefulness of information. The direct effect is 0.3232, and the indirect effect reaches 0.1045, accounting for 24.43% of the total effect. The credibility of the information source is more important than the quality of the information itself, which shows that UGC has become an important information channel for college students' travel decision-making. This study extends the information adoption model to the travel decision-making situation, which provides theoretical support for understanding the specific information processing mechanism of college students. It also provides practical guidance for tourism platforms to optimize content quality and build credibility.

Keywords: User-generated content, college student, travel decision-making, influence mechanism

1. Introduction

With the widespread popularity of Internet technology and mobile devices, social media has gradually become an indispensable part of human daily life. User-generated content (UGC) is booming in this social media ecosystem. The traditional one-way information consumption mode has been replaced by a multi-way interaction mode. Through social media platforms, people can obtain a large amount of user-generated content and integrate fragmented information into long-term consumption concepts and lifestyle models [1]. According to the Statistical Bulletin of National

Education Development in 2024 issued by the Ministry of Education of China, the total number of students in Chinese colleges and universities is about 43.008 million. Economic and social development, coupled with the popularization of higher education, has laid a solid foundation for the rise of the tourism market for college students. In this era dominated by social media, travel experience has become an important social capital for college students. College students show excellent discrimination in online information consumption, and can quickly distinguish between marketing content and real sharing. At the same time, they actively participate in content creation and dissemination, and fully integrate into the digital ecosystem. Therefore, in-depth study of the tourism behavior of college students can help predict the future tourism consumption trend and explore the direction of industry innovation [2].

This study focuses on the use of information adoption model to reveal the potential mechanism of user-generated content affecting college students' tourism decision-making. As a key independent variable, the information quality of UGC does not directly affect students' travel decision-making, but indirectly affects their decision-making through the psychological intermediary path of perceived usefulness and credibility. Although significant progress has been made in studying the impact of user-generated content on travel decision-making, the existing research mainly examines its direct impact and focuses on the public decision-making model. This ignores the extension for specific situations, thus limiting the universality of the research results. This study extends the information adoption model to the field of tourism, emphasizing the characteristics of high experience and participation. Focus on analyzing the unique behavioral characteristics of college students, and use the information adoption model to reveal the potential mechanism of user-generated content affecting travel decision-making. This research provides targeted marketing suggestions for tourism enterprises, destinations and content creators for college students, while improves the efficiency of college students' travel decision-making, ultimately promotes the development of the tourism market, and improves the experience of travel consumers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research related to user-generated content (UGC)

User-generated content refers to text, images, audio, videos and other materials posted by users in any form on the Internet. In the Internet era, the network operates in an open and participatory mode, relying heavily on the participation, leadership and contribution of users [3]. On one hand, the smart travel platform based on user-generated content provides travelers with rich personalized needs, which are characterized by large amount of information, wide coverage and diverse products. People are increasingly accustomed to obtaining information and evaluating products through social platforms, thus reducing potential uncertainty in purchasing decisions [4]. Research also shows that online reviews help reduce the cognitive burden of potential travelers, enhance their awareness, and ultimately promote sales [5]. Against the background of consumers' increasing pursuit of personalized itineraries, online travel service providers based on user-generated content (UGC) represented by Ctrip, Mafengwo and TripAdvisor have occupied a key position in the field of travel services [6]. On the other hand, research on UGC production motivations indicates these can be systematically categorized into external motivation, internalized motivation, and intrinsic motivation. Traditional media primarily exhibit control-oriented external motivation and internalized motivation, while online media predominantly feature autonomy-driven intrinsic motivation and internalized motivation [7]. Users can get emotional relaxation by creating content and sharing life experiences with others, while creating a new income model [8]. Due to the low access threshold,

almost anyone can express their views and experiences on social platforms [9], thus generating more universally applicable information. It must be emphasized that although user-generated content (UGC) can bring traffic to the website, it also shows the characteristics of randomness and fragmentation, and the quality of content is uneven [10]. The diversity of user-generated content stems from users' different cultural backgrounds and personal preferences, which will affect the recipient's understanding of the generated content. Regarding the influence mechanism, Wei Zhuang and others found that both content characteristics and creator characteristics have a positive impact on the usefulness of user-generated content. Although the interactivity of creators does not significantly adjust the impact of content details and readability, it will enhance the impact of content objectivity and weaken the positive impact of social recognition and popularity on the usefulness of user-generated content [11]. Although users of travel applications pay more attention to beautiful content such as pictures and videos than traditional travel websites, their attention to practical text information and motivational visual information in travel applications is not much different [12].

2.2. Travel decision-making process

With the growth of China's national strength, tourism consumption decision-making has become an important part of people's daily consumption choices. The relevant research emphasizes the following points. First of all, previous studies have used a variety of theories to explain consumers' purchasing decisions, but these theories can be roughly summarized into three perspectives: personal selection process, information search, and group or family decision-making [13]. In the process of travel decision-making, budget-driven decision-making and impulse-driven decision-making are intertwined. The more specific the travel scenario is, the more obvious the characteristics of impulse-driven decision-making [14]. Other studies deconstruct the destination decision-making process from the perspective of constructivism, and regard tourism decision-making as a complex process constructed by travelers. They identified two intertwined but completely different decision-making scenarios: destination-driven decision-making and opportunity-driven decision-making. This shows that opportunity-driven decision-making may be the most prominent feature of outbound destination selection [15]. Secondly, scholars regard tourism consumption decision-making as a multifaceted and highly interrelated behavioral process. The formation of decision-making is a process of continuous exploration, consultation and compromise. Decision-makers will constantly respond to various situational challenges. The main factors affecting the environment of tourist destinations include perceived environment, the principle of maximum interest and travel preferences: the perceived environment plays a role through domestic intermediaries, has a hierarchical inheritance relationship with the domestic environmental perception of tourists, and is affected by customer source market evaluation or promotional activities. In the early study of consumer perception decision-making, consumer decision-making was regarded as a rational behavior based on utility maximization perception [16]. Early tourism decision-making is also seen as the result of travelers maximizing the perceived benefits of the destination under economic and time constraints [17]. Travel preference refers to the degree of interest and willingness to consume various tourism products under the condition of unlimited income, which represents an intuitive concept. Third, perceived risk is a variable that consumers often use to explain the risks in the surrounding environment. The whole travel decision-making process includes travelers' search, receipt and processing of information. Obtaining more comprehensive and accurate information helps to balance the information asymmetry between travelers and travel product operators, so that travelers can form a more objective risk perception [18].

2.3. Research on the mechanism of UGC's influence on travel decision-making

Scholars divide tourists into traditional tourists, overdependent tourists and online tourists according to their preferences for information technology [19]. Travelers' evaluation of online information can be summarized into three dimensions: information quality, information channels and information presentation. The evaluation of network information will affect their participation in network information activities, which in turn will affect their travel decision-making; these evaluations will also directly affect the role of network information in their travel decision-making [20]. In addition, combining text content with visual elements such as images, graphics, videos and audio can more effectively convey and shape the image of the destination, thus becoming a key factor affecting the travel willingness and decision-making of tourists [21,22]. Perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are decisive factors affecting the attitude of tourists towards the use of tourism information technology, which in turn affects their willingness to use relevant services through mobile devices [23]. Specifically, the perceived usefulness of content plays the most important role in the positive impact of mobile tourism information service experience on the quality of travel decision-making. At the same time, the perceived ease of use of technology indirectly affects the quality of travel decision-making through the intermediary role of content perception usefulness and use willingness attitude. However, in the process of travel decision-making, various formal or informal relationships established for information exchange, conflict resolution, goal coordination and resource sharing connect stakeholders into nodes to jointly weave a multifaceted and complex tourism planning decision-making network. Different stakeholders have an impact on the formulation and implementation of decision-making, and they have both cooperation and competition in the development of tourism [24]. Scholars suggest that travelers have gradually adapted to this information environment, diminishing their comparative perception of technological usability experiences [25]. Compared to the past, today's potential travelers face richer, more vivid information and convenient channels, making them more susceptible to impulsive triggers and leading to increased impulsive travel decisions [26].

In general, the existing research mainly emphasizes the general travel decision-making model, and lacks in-depth research on the tourism decision-making of college students, a group with unique behavioral characteristics. Therefore, this study takes college students as the research object and uses the theory of information adoption to reveal how the information quality of user-generated content affects their travel decision-making through the intermediary paths of perceived usefulness and credibility. It aims to fill the gap in the existing research on the depth of group specificity and mechanism analysis.

3. Theoretical framework

Davis put forward two core concepts: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Perceived usefulness refers to the degree to which users subjectively believe that information can be used to improve decision-making performance or task completion. Data analysis shows that perceived usefulness is the most effective predictive indicator of use behavior, while perceived ease of use indirectly affects use behavior by affecting perception usefulness [27]. Sussman and Siegal proposed the Information Acceptance Model (IAM), which combines the Technical Acceptance Model and the Fine Processing Model. It studies how information workers receive information under the influence of the intermediary environment. IAM defines the credibility of the information source as the recipient's perception of the expertise, credibility and goodwill of the information provider. The core of information acquisition and management (IAM) is to perceive usefulness as an intermediary

variable, which links the impact of argumentative quality and the credibility of information sources (as independent variables) on information adoption [28]. Cheung et al. refined the information quality dimensions in the original information adoption model into four specific and measurable dimensions: relevance, timeliness, accuracy and comprehensiveness. They examined the impact of quality on perceived usefulness and believed that quality is not a single concept, and the influence of its internal dimension will vary depending on the specific situation. Relevance and comprehensiveness are the strongest drivers of perceived usefulness of information. They also introduced a boundary condition: the anonymity of network platforms weakens the influence of the credibility of information sources [29]. In the past decade, the information adoption model has been widely used to explain how travelers adopt online comments, pictures and texts shared by users and other content in the process of information collection. Ayeh et al. confirmed that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are still powerful predictors of information usage attitudes and intentions. However, in the context of using consumer-generated media for travel plans, perceived fun has the greatest impact on behavioral intentions, even exceeding the traditional perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. This shows that travelers not only use user-generated media to collect practical information, but also enjoy the process of collecting information. Interest similarity has the greatest impact on perceived credibility, which means that travelers tend to trust content sharers who are similar to themselves [30]. Zeng Huan confirmed that the reputation of the website also has a positive impact on the perceived usefulness of travelers and the trust in online comments, thus affecting the willingness to adopt. In the information adoption model, the quality of information and the credibility of the information source are closely related to the input of information. Through the psychological processing of perceived usefulness, they provide evaluation criteria for analyzing college students' travel decisions.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

This study conducted a descriptive statistical analysis of 220 valid questionnaires, and preliminarily examined the basic characteristics of the sample and the data distribution of core variables. The specific analysis results are shown in Table 1. Regarding the variable "whether to use UGC", the average value is 0.88 and the standard deviation is 0.329. This shows that 88.0% of the respondents had experience in using travel user-generated content, reflecting the strong practical basis for selecting user-generated content as the core research variables of this study. In terms of demographic characteristics, the gender distribution is relatively balanced, and the education level is mainly bachelor's degree and associate's degree, indicating that the educational background of the sample is homogeneous. In addition, the respondents traveled 2.44 times a year on average, which shows that the sample represents a group with a high degree of participation in travel. The group has a solid cognitive foundation and travel decision-making experience, which improves the effectiveness of their questionnaire answers. The analysis results show that the average of "perceived information quality" ($M=3.73$, $SD=0.916$, representing the attributes of the information itself) and "perceive source credibility" ($M=3.84$, $SD=0.910$, representing the attributes of the information source) are significantly higher than the theoretical median 3. This shows that the respondents generally recognize the overall value of the content generated by users in the tourism industry. In addition, the average score of source credibility is slightly higher than the average score of information quality, which indicates that users may initially attach more importance to the credibility of the information publisher than the content itself when evaluating user-generated content. At the level of

psychological and behavioral intention, "perceived information usefulness" (M=3.86, SD=0.906) and "information adoption intention" (M=3.86, SD=0.995) have the highest scores among all variables, and the standard deviation is relatively small. This shows that users are generally aware of the practical value of user-generated content and show a strong tendency to use it, which provides preliminary support for the applicability of the information adoption model in this study. In addition, the average value of "impact on travel decision-making behavior" is 3.71, and the standard deviation is large, indicating that there are significant individual differences in the impact of user-generated content on travel decision-making. Some travelers rely heavily on user-generated content (UGC) to make decisions, while others take a more cautious approach.

Table 1. Descriptive statistical analysis

	Minimum value	Maximum value	Average value	Standard deviation	Measurement value
Use of User-Generated Content (UGC)	0	1	0.88	.329	220
Gender	0	1	0.50	.501	220
Educational Level	1	3	1.22	.488	220
Average Annual Travel Frequency	1	4	2.44	.817	220
Information Quality	1	5	3.73	.916	220
Perceived Credibility of Information	1	5	3.84	.910	220
Perceived Usefulness of Information	1	5	3.86	.906	220
Willingness to Adopt Information	1	5	3.86	.995	220
Influence on Travel Decision-making Behavior	1	5	3.71	1.041	220

4.2. Mediation analysis

4.2.1. Perceiving credibility of information

Based on the empirical analysis of Table 2 and Table 3, this study reveals the intermediary mechanism of information quality affecting travel decision-making by affecting the perceived credibility of information. The path coefficient analysis in Table 2 shows that the path coefficient of the impact of information quality on the perceived credibility of information is 0.3238, and the t value is 5.0866, which is statistically significant. At the same time, the path coefficient of the influence of perceived information credibility on travel decision-making is 0.3045, and the t value is 4.1583, which also shows statistical significance.

Table 2. Path coefficient analysis results of the mediated model (n=220)

Path	Dependent variable	Predictor variable	B (coffe)	SE	t	p
Path a (Quality → Credibility)	Credibility	Information Quality	0.3238	0.0636	5.0866	<.1
Path b (Credibility → Travel)	Travel decision-making	Travel decision-making	0.3045	0.0732	4.1583	<.1
Direct Effect (Quality → Travel)	Travel decision-making	Information Quality	0.3291	0.0728	4.5215	<.1

Additionally, the coefficient of direct effect of information quality on travel decision-making is 0.3291, and the t-value is 4.5215, which is also statistically significant. These data preliminarily verify the intermediary role of perceived information credibility in the relationship between information quality and travel decision-making. The effect decomposition results in Table 3 further support this intermediary mechanism. The total effect of information quality on travel decision-making is 0.4277, of which the direct effect is 0.3291, and the indirect effect through the perceived credibility of information is 0.0986, accounting for 23.05% of the total effect. The 95% confidence interval obtained through self-help sampling is 0.0370 to 0.1784, excluding zero, which confirms the statistical significance of the indirect effect. Research results show that information quality can not only directly promote travel decision-making, but also indirectly affect decision-making behavior by enhancing the perceived credibility of information, forming a dual-path mechanism.

Table 3. Decomposition of the overall effect, direct effect, and indirect effect of information quality on travel decision-making

Effect type	Effect	Boot SE	95% Boot CI lower bound	95% Boot CI upper bound
Total effect	0.4277	0.0713	/	/
Direct effect	0.3291	0.0728	/	/
Indirect effect	0.0986	0.0365	0.0370	0.1784

4.2.2. Perceived usefulness of information

The empirical analysis results in Table 4 and 5 show that the intermediary mechanism of information quality affecting travel decision-making through the perceived usefulness of information is of significant statistical significance. Path coefficient analysis shows that the standardized path coefficient of information quality for the perceived usefulness of information is 0.3421, the t value is 5.4379, and the p value is less than 0.1. This finding shows that improving the quality of information can significantly enhance users' awareness of the practical value of information. Specifically, when users encounter accurate, timely and complete travel information, they are more inclined to think that such information is of practical help to their travel decisions. On the path of perceived information usefulness affecting travel decision-making, the coefficient is 0.3055, the t value is 4.1208, and the p value is less than 0.1. This shows that users' perceived usefulness of information will directly promote their adoption and reference of such information in the actual decision-making process.

Table 4. Path coefficient analysis results of the mediated model (n=220)

Path	Dependent variable	Predictor variable	B (coffe)	SE	t	p
Path a (Quality → Usefulness)	Usefulness	Information quality	0.3421	0.0629	5.4379	< . 1
Path b (Usefulness → Travel)	Usefulness	Travel decision-making	0.3055	0.0741	4.1208	< . 1
Direct effect (Quality → Travel)	Travel decision-making	Information quality	0.3232	0.0734	4.4039	< . 1

It is worth noting that the direct impact coefficient of information quality on travel decision-making is 0.3232, the t value is 4.4039, and the p value is less than 0.1. This finding shows that the

quality of information itself has a significant direct impact on travel decision-making and has nothing to do with the intermediary role of perceived usefulness. The effect decomposition results show that the total effect value of information quality on travel decision-making is 0.4277, which reflects its overall impact on decision-making behavior. The direct effect is 0.3232, accounting for 75.57% of the total effect; the indirect effect generated by perceiving the usefulness of information is 0.1045, accounting for 24.43% of the total effect. The 95% confidence interval calculated by the Bootstrap sampling method is 0.0358 to 0.1952. Since the interval does not contain zero, it shows that the indirect effect is significant. It is worth noting that the indirect effect accounts for nearly a quarter of the total effect, which shows that the perceived usefulness of information plays an important intermediary role in the process of information quality affecting travel decision-making. All path coefficients have reached a significant level, and the Bootstrap confidence interval is within a reasonable range, indicating that the estimated results of the model have good stability and reliability.

Table 5. Decomposition of the overall effect, direct effect, and indirect effect of information quality on travel decision-making

Effect type	Effect	Boot SE	95% Boot CI lower bound	95% Boot CI upper bound
Total effect	0.4277	0.0713	/	/
Direct effect	0.3232	0.0734	/	/
Indirect effect	0.1045	0.0395	0.0358	0.1952

5. Conclusion and discussion

5.1. Conclusion

(1) This study confirms through empirical research that the information quality of user-generated content has a significant direct positive impact on the travel decision-making of college students. Research data shows that the direct impact coefficient of information quality on travel decision-making is 0.3232, which is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). This shows that high-quality user-generated content can directly promote college students' travel decisions.

(2) This study found that the quality of information not only directly affects travel decision-making, but also has a significant indirect impact by improving the perceived credibility of information sources. Specifically, when the information has high-quality characteristics, college student travelers will recognize the professionalism and reliability of the information provider more. This will enhance sense of trust then promote a more positive decision-making tendency.

(3) This study also analyzes and verifies the key intermediary role of the perceived usefulness of information between information quality and college students' travel decision-making. It proves that the quality of information significantly affects the mechanism of travel decision-making by improving the perceived usefulness of information.

(4) College students show obvious source-oriented characteristics when evaluating tourism UGC. Research shows that the average information source credibility score is higher than the average content quality score, indicating that the group attaches more importance to the reliability of the publisher than the substance of the content. The large standard deviation in the variables affecting travel decision-making indicates that there are obvious individual differences. Some students rely heavily on user-generated content to make decisions, while others maintain a cautious

attitude. In addition, 88% of the samples have experience in using UGC, which confirms that UGC has become an important information channel for college students' travel decision-making.

5.2. Discussion

(1) Research shows that high-quality user-generated content with strong relevance, accuracy and comprehensiveness can provide effective decision-making reference for college students and travelers. It significantly reduces the time cost and cognitive burden spent in the information search process. This discovery confirms the conclusion of Li Li that the quality of information directly affects the impact of online information on travel decision-making, and further supports the fundamental role of information quality in the process of travel decision-making [31].

(2) Tan Can et al. found that compared with exposure to low-credibility information, college students showed more active travel consumption decisions when exposed to high-reliability information. The credibility of information source is a key bridge between cognition and decision-making. It can help students screen valuable content in a complex information environment, reduce the uncertainty of decision-making, and thus enhance confidence in decision-making [32].

(3) Hua Chenggang et al. confirmed that the perceived usefulness of content has a significant positive impact on the quality of travel decision-making in the mobile tourism information service experience. When user-generated content has high-quality attributes, the positive evaluation of college students on the quality of user-generated content information will be transformed into a subjective cognition, that is, such information can improve decision-making efficiency, thus promoting the formation of decision-making.

(4) Based on this study, future research can expand sample diversity by covering a wider geographical area, consumer group and educational background, so as to conduct comparative studies, thereby improving the universality and representativeness of the research results. Adjusting variables such as user-generated content format, platform type and travel motivation are incorporated into the model to more accurately reveal the differences in information adoption mechanisms in different situations. Or, explore the multi-stage impact of user-generated content interaction characteristics (such as comment participation and forwarding behavior) on decision-making. Focus on the dynamic path from information contact to behavioral transformation to study how the content generated by virtual travel users predicts and affects offline travel decision-making.

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