

FACTORS AFFECTING THE USER-GENERATED CONTENT ON THE TOURISTS' DECISION-MAKING BEHAVIOR OF FOOD TOURISTS

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Abstract This study aims to 1) establish the direct impact mechanism of UGC core elements on the decision-making of food tourists; 2) identify the mediating role of psychological perception in the influence of UGC on decision-making; 3) analyze and validate an integrated model of UGC influence on decision-making in food tourism; 4) establish a decision support strategy framework driven by UGC optimization. This study employed an online survey survey to collect empirical data from 435 food tourists in China who had traveled to Liuzhou and relied on user-generated content (UGC) in their decision-making process. A purposive sampling method was adopted to select participants who had demonstrably engaged with UGC platforms—such as Rednote, Weibo, and other tourism. Then, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to process the data. The findings reveal that the core elements of user-generated content (UGC)—namely, information quality, visual cues, content creator expertise, and platform professionalism—exert significant positive effects on food tourists' decision-making behavior, with platform professionalism emerging as the most salient predictor. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that all three psychological perception factors—perceived value, perceived trust, and perceived experience—serve as mediators in the relationship between UGC elements and decision-making behavior, with particular emphasis on the critical role of perceived experience in bridging platform-related cues and tourist actions. These findings offer practical insights for stakeholders in the food tourism sector, underscoring the necessity of targeted interventions aimed at strengthening the linkage between UGC and psychological perception, enhancing tourists' awareness of credible information sources, and ultimately improving decision-making outcomes in food tourism contexts.

Keywords: User-Generated Content; Food travel decision behavior; Quality of information; Visual Cues for Information; Professionalism of content creators; Professionalism of the UGC platform; perceived value; perceived trust; perceived experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

Food tourism has emerged as a significant niche within the broader tourism industry, driven by tourists' increasing desire for authentic, immersive, and culturally enriched experiences. While tourists often express strong intentions to engage with local food culture, an intention–behavior gap frequently arises due to factors such as limited information, time constraints, or unfamiliarity with local dining norms (Park & Widyanta, 2022; Soltani et al., 2021). Addressing this discrepancy, heritage food consumption has been shown to significantly contribute to the formation of a destination's image and enhance tourists' behavioral intentions, particularly when coupled with high experiential value. Expanding on this perspective, food consumption experiences can shape emotional and cognitive evaluations that ultimately influence revisit and recommendation behaviors (Lin et al., 2023). In addition, the growing influence of digital media has brought food tourism vloggers to the forefront; the narrative style, language characteristics, and cultural positioning of vlogger-entrepreneurs can critically impact viewers' perceived authenticity and travel

intentions (Hutchinson et al., 2024).

User-Generated Content (UGC) has become a pivotal element of the digital landscape, reshaping the way information is produced, disseminated, and consumed in contemporary society. Initially regarded as a broad category encompassing all content voluntarily created by users, recent research emphasizes the need for a more refined definition that accounts for evolving social media dynamics, algorithmic mediation, and blurred lines between personal expression and commercial influence (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2021). In the marketing and public health contexts, UGC has been shown to play a critical role in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors, particularly in domains such as e-cigarette promotion, where peer-created content and influencer endorsements dominate platforms like YouTube and Instagram (Marti-Ochoa et al., 2024). From a branding perspective, meta-analytical findings indicate that UGC generally exerts a stronger influence on brand loyalty than firm-generated content, largely due to its perceived authenticity and trustworthiness (Tyrväinen et al., 2023). Moreover, UGC functions not only as a source of information but also as a behavioral signal in travel-related decision-making processes, such as destination selection among digital nomads, where online narratives and shared experiences significantly shape mobility patterns (Saini et al., 2025). Even in emerging financial ecosystems like decentralized finance (DeFi), UGC on social media correlates with asset volatility and investor sentiment, indicating its broader impact across sectors beyond traditional tourism or marketing (Piñeiro-Chousa et al., 2022).

Liuzhou, a prefecture-level city located in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of southern China, has emerged as a notable example of integrating local cultural identity with innovative food tourism strategies. Known for its distinctive culinary offerings—most famously **luosifen** (river snail rice noodles)—Liuzhou has leveraged its unique gastronomic heritage to position itself as a vibrant destination for domestic and international food tourists (Chen et al., 2024). Beyond its culinary reputation, Liuzhou also benefits from its rich ethnic diversity, industrial heritage, and growing digital infrastructure, all of which contribute to its appeal among younger travelers and social media users (Ma & Guo, 2024). In recent years, the city has embraced digital platforms to amplify its tourism branding, with user-generated content on platforms such as Douyin (TikTok China) and Rednote playing a critical role in shaping the destination image. This strategic integration of cultural heritage, local food identity, and digital communication technologies has enabled Liuzhou to bridge traditional narratives with contemporary tourism practices, thereby enhancing both its visibility and emotional resonance with target audiences.

Despite the growing interest in food tourism across China, a notable gap persists between digital engagement and actual visitation behavior, particularly in emerging destinations like Liuzhou, known for its distinctive **luosifen** cuisine. While user-generated content (UGC) plays a vital role in shaping tourists' online perceptions, the psychological mechanisms through which UGC affects food tourism decision-making have not been comprehensively examined (Uthaisar et al., 2023). To address this issue, the present study employs the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model in conjunction with the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), conceptualizing UGC as the external stimulus, psychological perception—including perceived value, trust, and experiential perception—as the organismic state, and food tourism decision-making as the response behavior. Although prior research has explored UGC in the context of branding and consumption (Naeem & Ozuem, 2021; Yu & Ko, 2021), few studies have analyzed how it activates multiple dimensions of psychological

perception that subsequently mediate behavioral intentions in food-related tourism. This gap is particularly evident in second-tier urban contexts like Liuzhou, which increasingly rely on digital storytelling to construct culinary identity. By bridging digital media influence and tourist psychology, this study provides an integrated theoretical model that contributes to both tourism literature and media effects research. It also offers actionable insights for destination marketers seeking to transform digital visibility into sustained tourism flow through targeted psychological engagement strategies.

Based on the current research gap, we empirically verified 1) the direct and indirect impacts of user-generated content and psychological perception (including perceived value, trust, and experiential perception) on food tourism decision-making, highlighting the critical mediating role of psychological perception in translating digital stimuli into actionable travel intentions; 2) the importance of developing targeted engagement strategies that enhance tourists' psychological responses to UGC, especially in the context of emerging food tourism destinations such as Liuzhou; and 3) valuable insights for stakeholders aiming to design effective communication and branding interventions, emphasizing the necessity of increasing tourists' perceived experiential and emotional connections to destination narratives in order to foster stronger behavioral intentions. These findings offer both theoretical and practical contributions to understanding the cognitive-emotional mechanisms through which digital content drives real-world tourism behavior.

2. Literature Review

The Information Adoption Model (IAM) has been widely applied to explore how individuals evaluate and internalize digital information. IAM emphasizes the influence of source credibility and argument quality in shaping users' acceptance of information. IAM has been utilized to examine mobile users' information adoption by incorporating trust and emotional evaluations (Elwalda et al., 2022). Similarly, a meta-analytic structural equation modeling study confirmed that perceived usefulness significantly mediates the relationship between electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and behavioral intentions (Verma et al., 2023). Dedeoğlu et al. (2021) further extended IAM by integrating it with the Elaboration Likelihood Model to understand how eWOM influences consumers' purchase decisions, showing that user-generated content (UGC) exerts both central and peripheral persuasive effects. In the technological domain, IAM has also guided the development of augmented reality adoption frameworks, underscoring the importance of trust and psychological readiness (Alam et al., 2024). Drawing on these insights, the present study adopts the IAM to examine how UGC influences food tourism decision-making, with a particular focus on the mediating role of psychological perception. Perceived value, trust, and experiential perception are conceptualized as key psychological mechanisms that mediate the relationship between UGC and behavioral intentions.

Contemporary research on consumer behavior highlights the multidimensional and dynamic nature of decision-making processes, especially in digital and experiential contexts. Consumer behavior in social commerce is significantly influenced by social interaction, trust, and peer recommendations, underscoring the psychological mechanisms that shape online purchasing decisions (Zhao et al., 2023). In the context of sustainable fashion, emotional engagement, perceived value, and ethical considerations are identified as key determinants of consumer behavior, suggesting that value-driven perceptions are central to behavioral intention (Essiz & Senyuz, 2024). The growing role of social influence and digital word-of-mouth in shaping consumer

decisions, particularly through platforms that facilitate peer-to-peer communication, has also been emphasized (Belhadi et al., 2023). In the African food sector, consumers' trust in traditional food sources and experiential familiarity are shown to strongly predict purchase intentions (Han et al., 2023). A comprehensive review of consumer behavior trends further identifies trust, experience, and value perception as recurring constructs that demand integrated theoretical treatment (Zhang & Chang, 2021). This study investigates how user-generated content (UGC) influences behavioral intention in food tourism, emphasizing the mediating roles of perceived value, trust, and experiential perception. These variables encapsulate essential components of consumer behavior theory—where decision-making is not merely rational, but shaped by emotional and social cues derived from digital content.

Information behavior theory offers a robust framework for understanding how individuals seek, evaluate, and utilize information in dynamic and evolving environments. From an organizational lens, information behavior is also influenced by behavioral agency, suggesting that perceived value and risk shape how firms and individuals engage with technology-based information sources (Orrensalo et al., 2024). In the context of digital platforms, individual actions are shaped by the shared informational environment, especially through digital media and user-generated content. Moreover, individual decision-making is embedded within a broader network of content, platforms, and social norms, highlighting the ecological interdependence between digital actors and informational systems (Hafferty et al., 2024; Santos, 2022). This study adopts an information behavior perspective to examine how food tourists process and respond to user-generated content (UGC). Specifically, it explores how perceived information quality shapes psychological perception variables such as trust, perceived value, and experiential perception, which in turn influence behavioral intention.

Based on the above literature research, we have the following hypothesis:

H1: The information quality of UGC has a positive effect on the decision-making of food tourism.

H2: UGC visual cues have a positive effect on food tourism decision making.

H3: The professionalism of UGC creators has a positive effect on food tourism decisions.

H4: The professionalism of UGC's publishing platform has a positive effect on food tourism decision-making.

H5: The information quality of user-generated content has a positive impact on the perceived value of food tourists.

H6: The visual cues of user generated content have a positive effect on the perceived value of food tourists.

H7: The professionalism of user-generated content publishers has a positive impact on the perceived value of food tourists.

H8: The professionalism of user-generated content publishing platform has a positive impact on the perceived value of food tourists.

H9: The psychological perceived value of food tourists has a positive effect on the decision-making of food tourism.

H10: The mediating role of perceived usefulness in the relationship between user-generated content and food tourism decision-making behavior.

H11: The information quality of user-generated content has a positive effect on the perceived trust of food tourists.

H12: User-generated content visual cues have a positive effect on the perceived

trust of food tourists.

H13: The professionalism of user-generated content publishers has a positive impact on the perceived trust of food tourists.

H14: The professionalism of user-generated content publishing platform has a positive impact on the perceived trust of food tourists.

H15: The psychological perception trust of food tourists has a positive effect on food tourism decision-making.

H16: Perceived trust plays an intermediary role in the relationship between user-generated content and food tourism decision making.

H17: The information quality of user-generated content has a positive effect on the perception and experience of food tourists.

H18: User-generated content visual cues have a positive impact on the perception and experience of food tourists.

H19: The professionalism of user-generated content publishers has a positive impact on the perception and experience of food tourists.

H20: The professionalism of user-generated content publishing platform has a positive impact on the perception and experience of food tourists.

H21: The psychological perception and experience of food tourists have a positive effect on the decision-making of food tourism.

H22: The perception and experience of food tourists play an intermediary role between user-generated content and travel decision making.

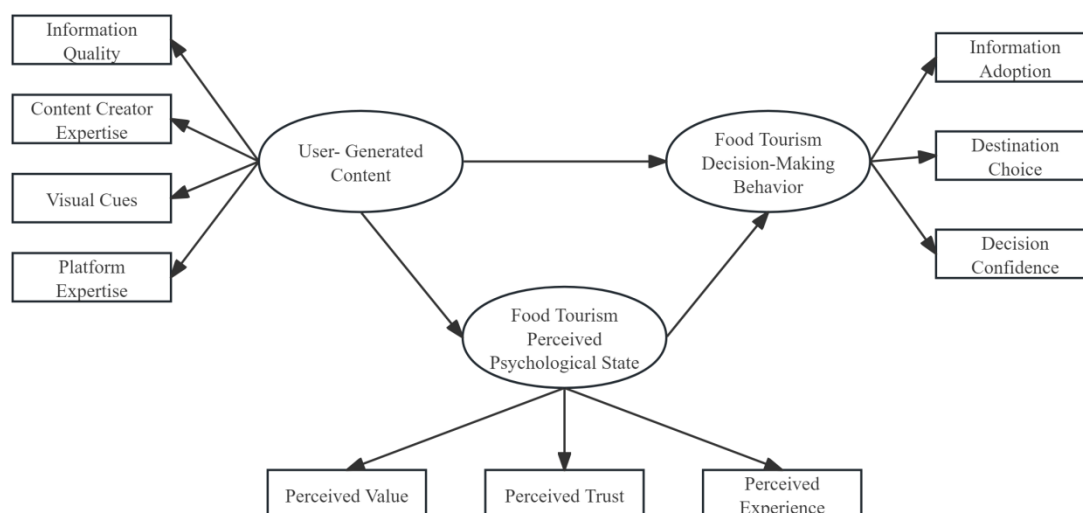


Figure 1. The empirical framework of the study

3. Research Method

In this study, a structured online questionnaire was distributed via platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Weibo, and food tourism-related forums. The target population comprised individuals who had participated in food tourism activities in Liuzhou and had been exposed to user-generated content (UGC) during their travel decision-making process. Over a period of 10 days, 500 questionnaires were distributed, yielding 435 valid responses. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure the relevance of participants to the research objectives and to reduce selection bias. This approach enabled the collection of data from respondents with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation, thereby enhancing the accuracy and generalizability of the findings (Campbell et al., 2020).

The questionnaire consists of four sections, covering basic demographic information, User-Generated Content (UGC), Tourist Perceived Psychology (TPP) (including perceived value, trust, and experience), and Food Tourism Decision-Making Behavior (DMB). This comprehensive structure ensures the ability to systematically capture the multifaceted factors influencing tourists' decision-making processes, particularly the mediating roles of psychological perceptions in the relationship between UGC and behavioral outcomes.

The first part of the questionnaire collects the demographic profile of the respondents, revealing a relatively balanced gender distribution, with females slightly outnumbering males (50.57% vs. 49.43%). The majority of participants were aged between 31 and 40 (38.85%), followed by those aged 21 – 30 (26.21%). Most respondents held an undergraduate degree (33.79%) and were employed as company staff (46.9%). Regarding income, 35.63% reported a monthly income between 4,001 and 6,000 yuan. These results suggest that UGC-based food tourism planning is primarily favored by economically capable, educated, middle-aged, and young adults employed in corporate settings.

Table 1 Essential Information

Item	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
Gender:	male	215	49.43	49.43
	female	220	50.57	100.00
Age:	Under 20 years old	36	8.28	8.28
	21-30 years old	114	26.21	34.48
	31-40 years old	169	38.85	73.33
	41-50 years old	77	17.70	91.03
	51-60 years old	22	5.06	96.09
	Age 60 +	17	3.91	100.00
Education level:	Junior high school and below	41	9.43	9.43
	High school/technical/technical school	102	23.45	32.87
	Junior college	129	29.66	62.53
	Undergraduate	147	33.79	96.32
	Graduate and above	16	3.68	100.00
	Student	36	8.28	8.28
Occupation:	Party and government organs and institutions staff enterprises	92	21.15	29.43
	Company staff	204	46.90	76.32
	Self-employed/freelancers	67	15.40	91.72

Item	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
Average monthly income:	Retired people	17	3.91	95.63
	other	19	4.37	100.00
	2,000 yuan and below	65	14.94	14.94
	2001-4,000 yuan	65	14.94	29.89
	4001-6000 yuan	155	35.63	65.52
	6001-8000 yuan	117	26.90	92.41
	More than 8,000 yuan	33	7.59	100.00
	Total	435	100.0	100.0

The second section measures User-Generated Content (UGC), including information quality, perceived usefulness, and source credibility, to capture respondents' evaluations of digital content encountered during the travel planning process. The third section assesses Tourist Perceived Psychology (TPP), encompassing perceived value, trust, and experiential perception, thereby elucidating the psychological mechanisms through which UGC influences behavioral intention. The fourth section evaluates Food Tourism Decision-Making Behavior (DMB), capturing respondents' actions before, during, and after food-related travel. This section aims to reflect how psychological and perceptual factors, shaped by UGC, ultimately influence concrete tourism decisions.

All items in the survey were organized using a five-point Likert scale to ensure comprehensive data collection, thereby enabling a nuanced exploration of the research variables. The Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) procedure was employed to evaluate the alignment between each item and its intended construct, thereby affirming the content validity and reliability of the questionnaire and ensuring its conceptual rigor and relevance.

This comprehensive analytical process is crucial for uncovering the psychological mechanisms that mediate the influence of user-generated content (UGC) on food tourism decision-making behavior. By enabling the simultaneous assessment of multiple latent constructs and their interrelationships, the combined use of SEM and CFA ensures a rigorous examination of the proposed theoretical model. It allows for the validation of construct reliability, convergent and discriminant validity, and the testing of mediation effects, thereby enhancing the explanatory power of the research framework. Ultimately, this process provides a solid empirical foundation for theoretical advancement and practical application in the fields of digital communication, consumer psychology, and tourism behavior.

4. Results

The reliability analysis results presented in Table 2 demonstrate strong internal consistency across all measured constructs, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.80. Each construct—Information Quality, Visual Cues, Professionalism of Content Creators, Professionalism of UGC Platforms, Perceived Value, Perceived Trust, Perceived Experience, and Food Travel Decision Behavior—exhibited high corrected item-total correlations (CITC), ranging from 0.65 to 0.74, indicating that individual items were well aligned with their

respective dimensions. These findings confirm that the scale items are reliable and valid for evaluating the relationships among user-generated content attributes, tourists' psychological perceptions, and decision-making behaviors in the context of food tourism.

Table 2 Reliability Statistics

Variables	ID	item	CITC	α coefficient after deleting the item	Kronbach α coefficient
Quality of information	IQ1	IQ1: User-generated content provides a comprehensive overview of food tourism destinations, such as attractions, local culture.	0.732	0.842	0.875
	IQ2	IQ2: User-generated content provides comprehensive, practical details on local cuisine, accommodation, transportation, traditional clothing, plus shopping experiences.	0.672	0.857	
	IQ3	IQ3: User-generated content offers timely reflections of the latest trends shaping culinary travel destinations.	0.715	0.846	
	IQ4	IQ4: User-generated content presents vivid descriptions, enhancing the appeal of the food travel experience for readers.	0.717	0.846	
	IQ5	IQ5: User-generated content features clear writing, offering easy-to-understand information for visitors exploring food options.	0.686	0.853	
Visual Cues for Information	VC1	VC1: The overall visual layout design of user-generated content shows a well-organized structure.	0.715	0.805	0.853
	VC2	VC2: User-generated content in captivating visual formats, such as high-quality text, photos, short videos, live broadcasts, interactive media, etc.	0.693	0.815	
	VC3	VC3: The visual cues in user-generated content are attractive, such as highlighting the appeal of food, the atmosphere of the restaurant, the	0.698	0.812	

		dining experience.			
	VC4	VC4: The visual representation in user-generated content offers realistic depictions, accurately reflecting dishes, restaurant settings, along with the surrounding environment.	0.675	0.822	
	CCE1	CCE1: User-generated content creators gain recognition as food tourism experts—travel influencers, bloggers, or key opinion leaders, for example.	0.712	0.856	
	CCE2	CCE2: Content creators often interact with their followers to enhance the credibility of their content. For example, interact with followers through methods such as comments, Q&A, social media interaction..	0.728	0.852	
Professionalism of content creators	CCE3	CCE3: Content creators demonstrate an in-depth understanding of local food culture, such as providing detailed, professional, culturally contextualized descriptions of cooking practices.	0.699	0.859	0.881
	CCE4	CCE4: The content creator has rich travel experience	0.723	0.853	
	CCE5	CCE5: Content creators offer reliable travel information, such as restaurant recommendations, prices, transportation, cultural etiquette, etc.	0.709	0.856	
	PE1	PE1: User-generated content platforms serve as popular tools for sharing information on food-related tourism destinations.	0.683	0.837	
Professionalism of the UGC platform	PE2	PE2: Platforms offer user-friendly features enabling travelers to easily find food-related recommendations, such as category tags, search filters, integrated maps.	0.674	0.84	0.865
	PE3	PE3: The platform facilitates interactive engagement between users and content creators, such	0.711	0.83	

		as liking, commenting, and asking for local food advice.			
	PE4	PE4: This platform frequently offers up-to-date content on food and travel.	0.684	0.837	
	PE5	PE5: The platform has a powerful content review mechanism to minimize false line information to the greatest extent.	0.677	0.839	
	PV1	PV1: User-generated content facilitates a deeper understanding of information related to food tourism, such as local culinary culture, cooking traditions, and dining environments at destinations.	0.726	0.82	
Perceived value	PV2	PV2: User-generated content provides practical guidance for planning food travel routes, such as restaurant selection and food streets.	0.714	0.825	0.863
	PV3	PV3: User-generated content increases confidence in food tourism decision-making.	0.704	0.829	
	PV4	PV4: User-generated content assists in simplifying food tourism planning through the suggestions provided.	0.702	0.83	
	PT1	PT1: Food tourists perceive that user-generated content platforms operate independently, such as not being manipulated by commercial tourism merchants to promote misleading food-related information.	0.683	0.845	
Perceived Trust	PT2	PT2: Food travelers perceive that the platform protects the integrity of user reviews, such as not tampering with, filtering, or maliciously deleting genuine food travel experiences.	0.702	0.84	0.869
	PT3	PT3: Food tourists perceive that content creators aim to help other travelers make informed decisions by providing experience-based food-related information.	0.684	0.844	

Perceived Experience	PT4	PT4: Food tourists perceive that user-generated content truly reflects the experience of food tourism, rather than being paid endorsements.	0.7	0.84	0.860
	PT5	PT5: As a food traveler, user-generated content is regarded as reflecting genuine experiences with food, restaurants, and destinations, rather than paid endorsements.	0.698	0.841	
	PEE1	PEE1: User-generated content stimulates people's interest in food travel by presenting attractive food travel experiences.	0.678	0.834	
	PEE2	PEE2: User-generated content stimulates readers' strong desire, such as tasting dishes in person and visiting the places introduced in the user-generated content.	0.74	0.808	
	PEE3	PEE3: User-generated content enriches the food travel experience by providing immersive visual effects, making the travel feel more meaningful.	0.717	0.818	
	PEE4	PEE4: User-generated content enhances the emotional satisfaction derived from food tourism experiences.	0.695	0.827	
	IA1	IA1: The food information provided by UGC stimulates interest in food experiences.	0.703	0.787	
	DC1	DC1: User-generated content, such as food reviews and travel guides, serves as a primary reference for making destination decisions during trips.	0.669	0.802	
	DC2	DC2: The experience of food travel influences the choice of food destinations.	0.675	0.799	
	DCC1	DCC1: User-generated content enhances people's confidence in decisions related to food tourism, such as choosing restaurants or planning travel routes.	0.653	0.808	
Food travel decision behavior					0.841

Table 3 shows the results of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity, indicating that the dataset is well-suited for factor analysis. The KMO value of 0.930 exceeds the recommended threshold of 0.90, suggesting excellent sampling adequacy. Furthermore, Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant ($\chi^2 = 823.271$, $df = 630$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix and that the variables exhibit sufficient correlations to justify the application of exploratory factor analysis. These results confirm the appropriateness of proceeding with further dimensional reduction techniques.

Table 3 KMO and Bartlett's Test

KMO measure of suitability for sampling		0.930
Bartlett sphericity test	Approximate	823.271
	Chi-square	
	Degrees of Freedom	630
	Salience	0.000

Table 4 discusses the exploratory factor analysis results presented in the table demonstrate a well-structured factor solution, with eight distinct components extracted based on principal component analysis with varimax rotation. Each item loads strongly on its respective factor (loadings > 0.7 in most cases), indicating clear construct separation and robust convergent validity. The cumulative variance explained after rotation reaches 68.477%, which exceeds the acceptable threshold of 60%, supporting the adequacy of the factor structure. Factor 1 primarily represents information quality (IQ), while Factor 2 corresponds to the professionalism of content creators (CCE), and subsequent factors align with visual cues (VC), platform professionalism (PE), perceived value (PV), perceived trust (PT), perceived experience (PEE), and food tourism decision-making behavior (DMB), respectively. The high communalities across items (mostly above 0.6) confirm strong shared variance, validating the reliability and factorability of the measurement model.

Table 4 Convergence Validity

item	Factor load coefficient								Commonal ity (common factor variance)
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8	

IQ1:									
User-generated									
content									
provides a									
comprehensive									
overview of	0.772	0.124	0.085	0.082	0.103	0.084	0.182	0.168	0.705
food tourism									
destinations,									
such as									
attractions,									
local culture.									
IQ2:									
User-generated	0.732	0.141	0.131	0.130	0.088	0.076	0.111	0.115	0.629
content									

item	Factor load coefficient								Commonality (common factor variance)
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8	
provides comprehensive, practical details on local cuisine, accommodation, transportation, traditional clothing, plus shopping experiences.									
IQ3: User-generated content offers timely reflections of the latest trends shaping culinary travel destinations.									
IQ4: User-generated content presents vivid descriptions, enhancing the appeal of the food travel experience for readers.	0.770	0.158	0.067	0.158	0.039	0.053	0.164	0.084	0.686
IQ5: User-generated content features clear writing, offering easy-to-understand information for visitors exploring food options.	0.785	0.141	0.109	0.069	0.070	0.028	0.105	0.151	0.692
	0.743	0.115	0.092	0.175	0.089	0.145	0.118	0.076	0.654

item	Factor load coefficient								Commonality (common factor variance)
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8	
VC1: The overall visual layout design of user-generated content shows a well-organized structure.	0.111	0.056	0.087	0.119	0.037	0.817	0.062	0.102	0.720
VC2: User-generated content in captivating visual formats, such as high-quality text, photos, short videos, live broadcasts, interactive media, etc.	0.067	0.075	0.098	0.162	0.085	0.800	0.065	0.050	0.700
VC3: The visual cues in user-generated content are attractive, such as highlighting the appeal of food, the atmosphere of the restaurant, the dining experience.	0.063	0.116	0.088	0.078	0.086	0.800	0.041	0.146	0.701
VC4: The visual representation in user-generated content offers realistic depictions, accurately reflecting dishes,	0.091	0.154	0.096	0.023	0.104	0.769	0.183	0.102	0.687

item	Factor load coefficient								Commonality (common factor variance)
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8	
restaurant settings, along with the surrounding environment. CCE1: User-generated content creators gain recognition as food tourism experts—travel influencers, bloggers, or key opinion leaders, for example. CCE2: Content creators often interact with their followers to enhance the credibility of their content. For example, interact with followers through methods such as comments, Q&A, social media interaction.. CCE3: Content creators demonstrate an in-depth understanding of local food culture, such as providing detailed, professional, culturally	0.122	0.722	0.144	0.203	0.161	0.102	0.127	0.143	0.671
	0.147	0.761	0.165	0.210	0.087	0.080	0.095	0.073	0.700
	0.158	0.743	0.053	0.158	0.083	0.064	0.148	0.163	0.664

item	Factor load coefficient								Commonality (common factor variance)
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8	
contextualized descriptions of cooking practices.									
CCE4: The content creator has rich travel experience	0.180	0.767	0.086	0.192	0.049	0.112	0.078	0.087	0.693
CCE5: Content creators offer reliable travel information, such as restaurant recommendations, prices, transportation, cultural etiquette, etc.	0.109	0.775	0.072	0.138	0.088	0.114	0.089	0.140	0.684
PE1: User-generated content platforms serve as popular tools for sharing information on food-related tourism destinations.	0.186	0.193	0.093	0.731	0.046	0.144	0.038	0.132	0.657
PE2: Platforms offer user-friendly features enabling travelers to easily find food-related recommendations, such as category tags, search filters, integrated maps.	0.098	0.208	0.118	0.731	0.142	0.007	0.169	0.074	0.655

item	Factor load coefficient								Commonality (common factor variance)
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8	
PE3: The platform facilitates interactive engagement between users and content creators, such as liking, commenting, and asking for local food advice.	0.141	0.190	0.105	0.735	0.096	0.117	0.104	0.193	0.679
PE4: This platform frequently offers up-to-date content on food and travel.	0.165	0.139	0.050	0.744	0.144	0.165	0.112	0.087	0.670
PE5: The platform has a powerful content review mechanism to minimize false information to the greatest extent.	0.064	0.179	0.165	0.724	0.043	0.043	0.178	0.161	0.649
PV1: User-generated content facilitates a deeper understanding of information related to food tourism, such as local culinary culture, cooking traditions, and	0.109	0.128	0.113	0.114	0.815	0.184	0.081	0.012	0.759

item	Factor load coefficient								Commonality (common factor variance)
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8	
dining environments at destinations. PV2: User-generated content provides practical guidance for planning food travel routes, such as restaurant selection and food streets. PV3: User-generated content increases confidence in food tourism decision-making. PV4: User-generated content assists in simplifying food tourism planning through the suggestions provided. PT1: Food tourists perceive that user-generated content platforms operate independently, such as not being manipulated by commercial	0.081	0.091	0.178	0.096	0.782	0.062	0.116	0.168	0.713
	0.094	0.103	0.156	0.099	0.789	0.015	0.108	0.132	0.705
	0.072	0.086	0.143	0.100	0.768	0.079	0.179	0.150	0.694
	0.087	0.087	0.763	0.092	0.079	0.113	0.091	0.099	0.643

item	Factor load coefficient								Commonality (common factor variance)
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8	
tourism merchants to promote misleading food-related information. PT2: Food travelers perceive that the platform protects the integrity of user reviews, such as not tampering with, filtering, or maliciously deleting genuine food travel experiences.	0.086	0.122	0.765	0.105	0.188	0.080	0.098	0.059	0.674
PT3: Food tourists perceive that content creators aim to help other travelers make informed decisions by providing experience-based food-related information.	0.099	0.107	0.745	0.095	0.137	0.063	0.112	0.141	0.641
PT4: Food tourists perceive that user-generated content truly reflects the experience of food tourism, rather than being paid	0.142	0.081	0.741	0.150	0.149	0.048	0.114	0.160	0.662

item	Factor load coefficient								Commonality (common factor variance)
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8	
endorsements.									
PT5: As a food traveler, user-generated content is regarded as reflecting genuine experiences with food, restaurants, and destinations, rather than paid endorsements.									
PEE1: User-generated content stimulates people's interest in food travel by presenting attractive food travel experiences.									
PEE2: User-generated content stimulates readers' strong desire, such as tasting dishes in person and visiting the places introduced in the user-generated content.									
PEE3: User-generated content enriches the									
	0.060	0.070	0.806	0.045	0.062	0.095	0.092	0.096	0.691
	0.217	0.092	0.202	0.145	0.100	0.102	0.735	0.064	0.682
	0.146	0.120	0.125	0.130	0.149	0.117	0.790	0.127	0.744
	0.179	0.147	0.125	0.180	0.138	0.079	0.753	0.151	0.716

item	Factor load coefficient								Commonal ity (common factor variance)
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8	
food travel experience by providing immersive visual effects, making the travel feel more meaningful. PEE4: User-generated content enhances the emotional satisfaction derived from food tourism experiences. IA1: The food information provided by UGC stimulates interest in food experiences. DC1: User-generated content, such as food reviews and travel guides, serves as a primary reference for making destination decisions during trips. DC2: The experience of food travel influences the choice of food destinations. DCC1: User-generated	0.159	0.157	0.091	0.119	0.138	0.094	0.751	0.170	0.693
	0.133	0.255	0.143	0.141	0.149	0.104	0.172	0.726	0.713
	0.160	0.168	0.199	0.225	0.086	0.155	0.135	0.687	0.666
	0.174	0.179	0.174	0.139	0.118	0.097	0.103	0.737	0.689
	0.187	0.056	0.124	0.169	0.187	0.153	0.146	0.713	0.670

item	Factor load coefficient								Commonality (common factor variance)
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	Factor 8	
content enhances people's confidence in decisions related to food tourism, such as choosing restaurants or planning travel routes.									
Feature root value (before rotation)□	11.345	2.566	2.202	2.090	1.892	1.648	1.525	1.385	-
Variance interpretation rate %(before rotation)□	31.514	7.127	6.116	5.806	5.255	4.577	4.236	3.847	-
Cumulative variance interpretation rate %(before rotation)□	31.514	38.641	44.757	50.562	55.818	60.395	64.630	68.477	-
Characteristic root value (post-rotation)□	3.440	3.433	3.408	3.281	2.888	2.870	2.777	2.554	-
Variance interpretation rate %(after rotation)□	9.557	9.535	9.467	9.115	8.023	7.971	7.714	7.094	-
Cumulative variance Explanation rate %(after rotation)□	9.557	19.092	28.559	37.674	45.697	53.668	61.383	68.477	-

Note: Blue indicates that the absolute value of the load factor is greater than 0.4.
Open Source:Yang et al. (2023)

Table5 presents the results of discriminant validity testing through the Fornell - Larcker criterion, with diagonal elements representing the square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct. These values (ranging from 0.75 to 0.783) exceed the inter-construct correlation coefficients in their respective rows and columns, confirming that each construct shares more variance with its own indicators

than with other constructs. For instance, the square root of AVE for Information Quality (IQ) is 0.765, higher than its correlations with other variables (e.g., 0.319 with VC and 0.484 with CCE). Similarly, Food Tourism Decision-Making Behavior (DMB) demonstrates strong discriminant validity with an AVE square root of 0.756, surpassing its correlations with all other constructs. These results validate that the constructs are conceptually distinct and statistically independent, supporting the measurement model's reliability and discriminant validity.

Table 5 Discriminant validity test

	IQ	VC	CCE	PE	PV	PT	PEE	DMB
IQ	0.765							
VC	0.319	0.771						
CCE	0.484	0.364	0.772					
PE	0.47	0.377	0.596	0.75				
PV	0.344	0.319	0.384	0.397	0.783			
PT	0.367	0.324	0.388	0.403	0.456	0.756		
PEE	0.528	0.362	0.465	0.502	0.461	0.441	0.78	
DMB	0.529	0.436	0.554	0.575	0.485	0.507	0.549	0.756

Table 6 shows the model fit indices presented in the table indicate an excellent fit of the structural equation model to the data. The chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (CMIN/DF) is 1.098, well below the recommended threshold of 3, suggesting minimal discrepancy between the model and the observed data. All incremental fit indices—NFI (0.927), RFI (0.918), IFI (0.993), TLI (0.992), and CFI (0.993)—exceed the recommended value of 0.90, confirming strong model adequacy. The GFI value of 0.930 also indicates good model fit. Importantly, the RMSEA value of 0.015 is far below the threshold of 0.08, reflecting a very low level of approximation error. Collectively, these indicators confirm that the model is statistically robust and well-specified.

Table 6 Model fitting for confirmatory factor analysis

Model fitting	CMI N	D F	CMIN/ DF	NFI	RFI	IFI	TLI	CFI	GFI	RMS EA
Fitting results	621.38	566	1.098	0.927	0.918	0.993	0.992	0.993	0.930	0.015
Suggested values			<3	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	<0.08

The hypothesis testing results presented in the table 7 indicate comprehensive empirical support for all proposed relationships within the research model. Specifically, the quality of information, visual cues, and the professionalism of both content creators and platforms significantly and positively influence food tourism decision-making (H1 – H4), as well as the three dimensions of tourist psychological perception: perceived value (H5 – H8), perceived trust (H11 – H14), and perceived experience (H17 – H20). These psychological constructs, in turn, exert significant positive effects on food tourism decision-making (H9, H15, H21). Moreover, the mediating roles of perceived value (H10), perceived trust (H16), and perceived experience (H22) are also confirmed, underscoring the critical function of tourist psychological perception in translating UGC characteristics into behavioral intentions.

These findings provide robust empirical validation for the integrated model and highlight the multi-dimensional mechanisms through which UGC shapes food tourism decisions.

Figure 2 shows the structural equation model (SEM) diagram visually represents the relationships between user-generated content (UGC) characteristics and food tourism decision-making behavior (DMB), mediated by tourist psychological perception constructs. Four exogenous latent variables—Information Quality (IQ), Visual Cues (VC), Content Creator Expertise (CCE), and Platform Expertise (PE)—positively influence three mediating endogenous variables: Perceived Value (PV), Perceived Trust (PT), and Perceived Experience (PEE). These mediators, in turn, significantly affect the endogenous outcome variable, DMB. Notably, the direct paths from UGC variables to DMB (e.g., PE → DMB at .24 and CCE → DMB at .19) indicate that UGC features exert both direct and indirect effects on tourists' decision-making. The standardized path coefficients shown on each arrow reflect the strength of these relationships, with higher values suggesting stronger effects. The measurement model also confirms the validity of the latent constructs through robust factor loadings of the observed indicators. Overall, the model provides empirical support for the hypothesized framework, emphasizing the pivotal role of perceived psychological value, trust, and experience in translating UGC into actionable food tourism behaviors.

Table 7 Structural equation model path test

Hypothesis	Hypothetical content	Results
H1	The information quality of UGC has a positive effect on the decision-making of food tourism	Accepted
H2	Visual cues of UGC have a positive effect on food tourism decision-making	Accepted
H3	The professionalism of UGC creators has a positive impact on food tourism decisions	Accepted
H4	The professionalism of UGC's publishing platform has a positive impact on food tourism decisions	Accepted
H5	The information quality of user generated content has a positive effect on the perceived value of food tourists	Accepted
H6	The visual cues of user generated content have a positive effect on the perceived value of food tourists	Accepted
H7	The professionalism of user-generated content publishers has a positive impact on the perceived value of food tourists	Accepted
H8	The professionalism of the user-generated content publishing platform has a positive impact on the perceived value of food tourists	Accepted
H9	The psychological perceived value of food tourists has a positive effect on the decision-making of food tourism	Accepted
H10	The mediating role of perceived usefulness in the relationship between user-generated content and decision-making behavior in gourmet tourism	Accepted
H11	The information quality of user generated content has a positive effect on the perceived trust of food tourists	Accepted
H12	User-generated content visual cues have a positive effect on	Accepted

	the perceived trust of food tourists	
H13	The professionalism of user-generated content publishers has a positive impact on the perceived trust of food tourists	Accepted
H14	The professionalism of the user-generated content publishing platform has a positive impact on the perceived trust of food tourists	Accepted
H15	The psychological perception trust of food tourists has a positive effect on food tourism decision-making	Accepted
H16	Perceived trust plays a mediating role in the relationship between user-generated content and food tourism decisions	Accepted
H17	The information quality of user generated content has a positive impact on the perceived experience of food tourists	Accepted
H18	User-generated content visual cues have a positive effect on the perceived experience of food tourists	Accepted
H19	The professionalism of user-generated content publishers has a positive impact on the perception and experience of food tourists	Accepted
H20	The professionalism of user generated content publishing platform has a positive impact on the perception and experience of food tourists	Accepted
H21	The psychological perception and experience of food tourists have a positive effect on food tourism decision-making	Accepted
H22	The perceived experience of food tourists plays an intermediary role between user-generated content and travel decisions	Accepted

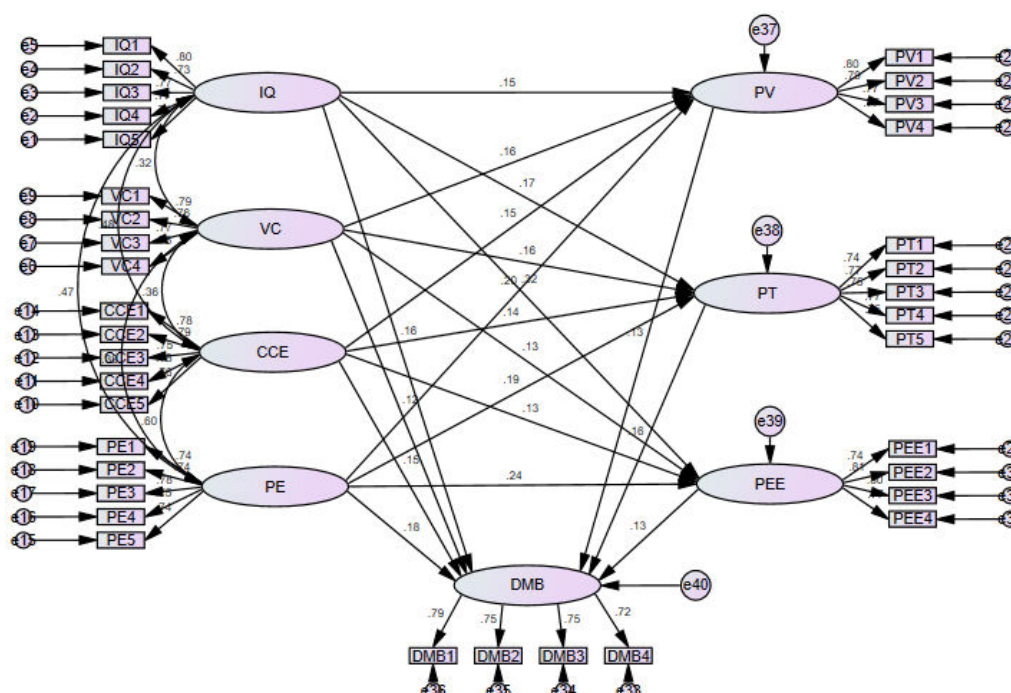


Figure 2 Structural equation

5 Discussion

This study provides robust empirical evidence for the influence of user-generated content (UGC) on food tourism decision-making, advancing theoretical insights within the domains of consumer behavior and information adoption. By constructing and validating an integrated model, the study confirms that the four core components of UGC—information quality, visual cues, content creator professionalism, and platform professionalism—exert significant direct effects on food tourism decisions. Furthermore, the mediating roles of perceived value, perceived trust, and perceived experience underscore the importance of psychological perception in bridging digital content and behavioral responses. These results enrich the theoretical framework of the Information Adoption Model (IAM) by demonstrating that UGC exerts both cognitive and affective influences on consumer decision-making processes in tourism contexts.

This study contributes to the literature by embedding multidimensional psychological perceptions into the IAM framework, thus offering a nuanced understanding of how information characteristics translate into actionable decisions. While previous research often treated psychological constructs in isolation (Hodson, 2021), this study synthesizes perceived value, trust, and experience as a triadic mediating mechanism, highlighting their collective and differentiated impacts across various UGC dimensions. Notably, platform professionalism demonstrates the strongest total effect, particularly through trust, challenging the conventional "content-first" paradigm and emphasizing the institutional credibility of UGC platforms as a determinant of consumer behavior.

The findings offer actionable strategies for tourism stakeholders. Enhancing the structural professionalism of UGC platforms—such as through content verification systems, algorithmic content curation, and trust badges—can substantially boost user confidence. Simultaneously, training content creators to produce visually engaging, culturally authentic, and emotionally resonant narratives can improve user immersion

and destination attractiveness. Destination management organizations (DMOs) may also develop collaborative mechanisms with platforms and creators to maintain content quality and cultural relevance, ultimately fostering a robust digital ecosystem that supports informed and inspired food tourism decisions.

Nevertheless, the sample is geographically limited to Liuzhou, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could broaden the scope through cross-regional or cross-cultural sampling to capture the variability in UGC use and trust across cultural settings. Second, the cross-sectional design does not account for temporal shifts in perception or behavior. Longitudinal studies could explore the evolution of consumer responses to UGC over multiple travel episodes. Third, while the current model integrates key psychological and informational dimensions, it does not consider the influence of algorithmic or AI-generated content, which has become increasingly prevalent on digital tourism platforms. Addressing these emerging factors represents a promising direction for future research.

6 Conclusion

This study aims to examine the mechanisms through which user-generated content (UGC) influences food tourism decision-making behavior (DMB), with a particular focus on the mediating role of tourist perceived psychology (TPP), encompassing perceived value, trust, and experience. Based on data from 435 valid responses collected through an online survey in Liuzhou, the study empirically tested a structural model linking key UGC attributes—such as information quality, visual cues, and source professionalism—with tourists' psychological perceptions and subsequent decision-making. The results confirm that UGC has a significant positive impact on DMB, both directly and indirectly, with TPP functioning as a critical mediating construct. Among the psychological factors, perceived experience and perceived trust demonstrate particularly strong mediation effects, emphasizing their centrality in converting digital impressions into actionable tourism behavior.

This research by incorporating perceived value, trust, and experience as psychological mediators, the study deepens our understanding of how information processing and emotional evaluation jointly influence decision-making. Unlike traditional models that emphasize purely rational cognition, our findings highlight the importance of affective and experiential dimensions in UGC engagement. This underscores the necessity of considering both informational and emotional resonance when analyzing digital influences on tourist behavior.

The results offer valuable insights for tourism marketers, digital content creators, and platform operators. Enhancing the quality and credibility of UGC—through clear, visually appealing, and authentic content—can significantly increase tourists' perceived value, trust, and emotional engagement, thereby improving decision-making outcomes. In particular, the study sheds light on the role of immersive and emotionally resonant content in fostering stronger consumer-tourism connections. These insights can inform more targeted digital marketing strategies that align with tourists' psychological preferences, ultimately supporting sustainable tourism development in emerging destinations like Liuzhou.

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