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The Influence of User-Generated Content on TikTok on Gen Z's Travel Intention in Viet Nam: The Moderating Role of Sponsored Ads

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Abstract

In the context of rapidly developing social media, TikTok has become the most popular short-video platform among Vietnamese youth, especially Generation Z. User-generated content (UGC) on TikTok not only serves entertainment purposes but also plays a significant role in shaping viewers' attitudes, trust, and travel intentions. This study aims to identify and measure the influence of TikTok UGC on the travel intentions of Gen Z in Viet Nam, while also examining the moderating role of sponsored advertising. A quantitative research method was employed through an online survey targeting Gen Z users of TikTok. The study applies the S-O-R theoretical framework, and the data were

analyzed using statistical techniques such as Cronbach's Alpha, EFA, CFA, and SEM to validate the measurement scales and test the research hypotheses. The moderating variable—Sponsored Advertising—is examined as a factor that alters the strength of UGC's influence on mediating constructs. This research not only contributes theoretically by expanding the understanding of travel behavior in the digital media era but also provides practical implications for tourism businesses and platform managers in effectively integrating user-generated content with sponsored advertisements.

Keywords: Sponsored Ads, TikTok, Travel Intention, User-Generated Content

1. Introduction

According to Statista (2025) ^[46], as of February 2025, there were 5.56 billion Internet users worldwide and 5.24 billion social media users. According to the We Are Social (2025) ^[50] report, in early 2025, Vietnam had 79.8 million Internet users, of which the online access rate reached 78.8% of the population and 76.2 million social media user accounts, equivalent to 75.2% of the population. TikTok is a fast-growing social network with a higher engagement rate compared to other platforms. The strong development of the Internet and technology has brought people great convenience, thereby increasing the influence of User-Generated Content, especially in online marketing and communication (Ayeh *et al.*, 2013) ^[6]. In particular, TikTok, with its short video format, has quickly attracted millions of users worldwide thanks to its intuitive, vibrant, and highly shareable format. According to the We Are Social (2025) ^[50], Vietnam has up to 40.9 million Tiktok accounts, with an average monthly time spent by Vietnamese people using Tiktok of 41 hours and 45 minutes per month. Content on TikTok is mostly created by users, reflecting real-life experiences and personal feelings, thereby creating a great influence on the awareness and behavior of the community.

In the field of tourism, UGC - specifically experience videos, vlogs, personal reviews - are commonly consulted before travelers make destination or travel-related decisions. For young people, especially Gen Z, accessing short travel videos on TikTok has gradually become the main "source of travel inspiration".

In addition, sponsored ads are increasingly appearing on TikTok in many forms: suggested videos, interstitial ads, and pre-display ads. When these ads appear next to UGC videos, they can interrupt the experience, reduce authenticity, or cause skepticism among viewers. This raises the question: do sponsored ads change (increase or decrease) the impact of UGC on

travel attitudes and intentions?

In the context of Viet Nam - a large urban area, economic center, where a large number of Gen Z people are concentrated, understanding the mechanism through which UGC and sponsored ads influence travel intentions is extremely important. Not only does it help content creators and tourism businesses optimize their strategies, but it also helps the TikTok platform improve user experience and balance between advertising and personal content.

2. Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses

2.1 Theoretical Background

S–O–R Theory (Stimulus – Organism – Response)

The S-O-R model is a psychological approach that explains how people respond to environmental stimuli, which is made up of three main elements: Stimulus, Organism, and Response. Stimulus refers to external cues that are capable of generating initial perceptions and emotions in the recipient. Organism represents the internal psychological state, where cognitive and emotional states are formed when an individual receives external stimuli. Response reflects the behavior or behavioral intention that results from the individual's processing. In the context of studying the travel behavior of the young generation, the S-O-R model is applied by viewing user-generated content (UGC) on TikTok as an important as a key external stimulus, creating cognitive and emotional impressions related to the travel destination. Internal psychological responses – such as how young people form attitudes, perceive destination images, or trust in destinations – are considered important intermediate steps in the UGC adoption process. Finally, travel intentions are considered behavioral responses, representing the final outcome of the stimulus–organism–response sequence. The S-O-R approach helps the study better explain how UGC on TikTok influences young people's cognitions and emotions, before transforming into travel intentions; and also allows for the analysis to be extended by considering the moderating role of other environmental factors, such as sponsored advertising, in altering the strength of the stimulus–organism linkage on psychological and behavioral responses.

2.2 Research Hypotheses and Proposed Model

2.2.1 User-Generated Content (UGC)

Previous studies have shown that UGC influences tourists' attitudes towards destinations. Tourists tend to prefer destinations with positive reviews over negative ones (Nguyen Thao Thanh Thi & Tong, 2023) [33]. UGC enhances online trust (Burgess *et al.*, 2009) [8]. Many previous studies have also found that UGC positively influences Muslim tourists' attitudes towards tourist destinations (Liu *et al.*, 2018; Söderlund & Rosengren, 2007) [27, 43].

H1a: UGC on TikTok positively influences destination attitude

Crompton (1979) [10] defines DI as a composite of tourists' beliefs, ideas, and impressions about a destination. Tourists' perceptions of a destination's image can be significantly influenced by information posted on social media about other travelers' travel stories. It can be influenced by various sources such as marketing communications on diverse communication channels, as well as word of mouth (WOM) (Andriani *et al.*, 2019) [5]. Previous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of user-generated content (UGC) in shaping destination image (Nguyen Thao Thanh

Thi & Tong, 2023; Skinner, 2022) [33, 42]. The reputation of a tourist destination deeply influences tourists' perceptions (Marchiori *et al.*, 2011; Micera & Crispino, 2017) [28, 30], with this reputation being largely shaped by customers' online reviews on platforms such as TripAdvisor, travel blogs, and various social media channels.

H1b: UGC on TikTok positively influences destination image

Destination trust refers to tourists' willingness to believe in a tourist destination's ability to perform its advertised functions. Online reviews are considered an important source of information that influences tourists' destination choices (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012) [22]. Positive online reviews can eliminate uncertainty and increase destination trust. When tourists find reviews that match their expectations, destination trust is formed and increases (Yerizal & Abror, 2019) [52].

H1c: UGC on TikTok positively influences destination trust

Effendy and Bakhri (2022) [13] argue that social media is now considered a trustworthy source, especially for tourism-related content. High-quality and reputable information can influence customers' information choices and can enhance tourists' intentions. In addition, some studies have shown that UGC has a positive impact on tourist behavior, including destination loyalty, visit intention, and destination knowledge (Wijaya *et al.*, 2025) [51]. UGC can positively influence intentions because it provides customers with detailed information about the product or service they are interested in. In addition, Goldsmith and Horowitz (2006) [16] conducted an observational study and found that consumers seek opinions from other consumers to avoid the risk of bias. In the tourism context, tourists increasingly rely on online reviews to reduce risk and uncertainty, which directly affects their booking decisions and intentions (Tsao *et al.*, 2015) [49]. Consumers generally perceive online reviews as more informative than product information from marketers or experts in terms of credibility and relevance.

H1d: UGC on TikTok positively influences Travel Intention

2.2.2 Destination Attitude

According to Passafaro (2020) [35], attitude refers to tourists' tendency to evaluate a destination, an experience, or a travel behavior positively or negatively. Tourists' attitudes describe their psychological tendency, expressed through their positive or negative evaluations when they engage in certain behaviors (Ajzen, 1991) [2]. Attitude is a core factor in the formation of behavioral intentions, including travel intentions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977) [3]. Positive attitudes toward a destination increase the likelihood of generating travel intentions (Jalilvand *et al.*, 2012) [23].

H2: Destination attitude positively influences travel intention

2.2.3 Destination Image

The relationship between destination image and travel intention is a fundamental aspect of tourism research. Destination image is defined by an individual's perception and the overall combination of functional and psychological characteristics (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991) [12]. Destination image is formed from cognitive and emotional perceptions that have a positive relationship. Destination image is often defined as the overall perception of tourists about a particular destination (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991) [14]. Destination image refers to the beliefs, opinions, and

impressions a person holds when choosing a destination (Crompton, 1979) ^[10], which describes the totality of impressions, beliefs, ideas, expectations and feelings accumulated towards a place over time (Kim & Richardson, 2003) ^[25]. Destination image strongly influences the intention to visit a particular destination (Khan *et al.*, 2017; Rizky *et al.*, 2017) ^[26, 37].

H3: Destination image positively influences travel intention

2.2.4 Destination Trust

Destination trust is defined as tourists' belief that a place can reliably deliver its promised functions (Han & Hyun, 2015) ^[20]. Destination trust is also defined as tourists' confidence and certainty about the products, services, and activities of a tourist destination (Marinao *et al.*, 2012) ^[29]. Tourists tend to visit destinations that they perceive as trustworthy which therefore affects their willingness to visit the destination (Ha Nam Khanh Giao, 2022) ^[17]. Han and Hyun (2015) ^[20] study showed that international tourists tend to visit destinations that they trust more. In their study, Karami, Bozbay, and Arghashi (2018) ^[24] demonstrated that trust in social media information increases travel intention. Trust is an effective means to reduce perceptions of risk and uncertainty (Han & Hyun, 2013; Pavlou *et al.*, 2007) ^[19, 36].

H4: Destination trust positively influences travel intention

2.2.5 Sponsored Ads

According to the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, UGC on TikTok acts as a stimulus (Stimulus, S), influencing users' internal responses such as attitude, destination image, trust (Organism, O), and thus leading to travel intention (Response, R). In this context, sponsored ads can be considered an external factor, which has the ability to change the level of influence of UGC on mediating variables and ultimately affect behavioral intention.

For example, Shetu (2023) ^[41] found that sponsored ads can enhance the impact of UGC on search intention and shopping behavior. This implies that sponsored ads do not work independently, but often act as an amplification mechanism, helping users to receive more UGC information.

In terms of moderation theory, sponsored advertising may exert either a positive or negative moderating effect:

If sponsored advertising is perceived as providing added value (e.g., advertising that provides useful information or links to services), it may enhance the impact of UGC on attitude, image, trust, and intention.

On the contrary, if sponsored advertising is perceived as lacking authenticity or as interrupting the UGC viewing experience, it may weaken the impact of UGC on the mediating variables, i.e., negative moderation.

Although no previous model has directly examined the moderating role of SA in the UGC → ATT/DI/TR relationship, that sponsored advertising is likely to influence the effect of UGC on tourists' cognitive evaluations of destinations.

H5a: Sponsored ads moderates the relationship between UGC and destination attitude.

H5b: Sponsored ads moderates the relationship between UGC and destination image.

H5c: Sponsored ads moderates the relationship between UGC and destination trust.

H5d: Sponsored ads moderates the relationship between UGC and travel intention.

2.2.6 Travel Intention

According to Ajzen and Fishbein (1977) ^[3], attitude is an individual's positive or negative evaluation of a particular behavior. Research has demonstrated that attitude significantly influences how individuals perceive and evaluate the attractiveness of advertisements, acting as a criterion for forming intentions toward the stimuli presented in advertisements (Nguyen Cuong Hung *et al.*, 2023) ^[32]. Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016) ^[39] found that positive brand attitudes and higher purchase intentions were associated with positive evaluations of brand social media posts. Research by Jalilvand, Samiei, Dini, and Manzar (2012) ^[23] confirms that eWOM influences the image and attitude, and in turn, destination attitude influence travel intention.

H6a: Destination attitude play a mediating role in the relationship between UGC and travel intention

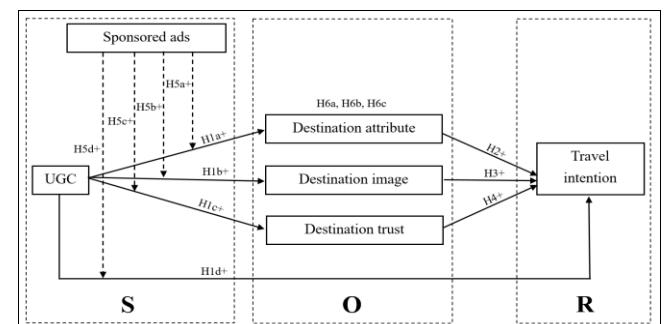
Destination image significantly influences tourists' decision-making process when choosing a destination (Cai, 2002) ^[9]. Tasci and Gartner (2007) ^[48] argue that destination image plays a key mediating role between travel intentions and other information sources. Studies have shown that social media engagement positively influences tourists' intentions and perceptions of a destination (Al-Gasawneh & Al-Adamat, 2020 ^[4]; Bernkopf & Nixon, 2018), often with a more pronounced effect than information sourced directly from the destination's official website. Molinillo *et al.* (2017) ^[31] argue that the social media platforms that tourists use to gather information about a destination play a key role in shaping their perceptions of that destination and, subsequently, influencing their travel intentions.

H6b: Destination image plays a mediating role in the relationship between UGC and travel intention

Jaitip, Sawang, and Shoosanuk (2024) ^[21] found that eWOM has a positive influence on destination trust, and this trust plays a mediating role in the relationship between eWOM and intention to revisit eco-destinations. Setiawan, Purbadharmaja, Widanta, and Hayashi (2021) ^[40] also tested the mediating role of destination trust in the relationship between eWOM and visit intention.

H6c: Destination trust plays a mediating role in the relationship between UGC and travel intention

2.2.7 Research Model



Source: Author (2025)

Fig 1: Research Model

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Data Collection and Research Sample

The research model of the authors has 33 observed variables corresponding to 6 scales. In this study, the determination of

sample size is carried out according to the method of Hair (2014) [18], the minimum sample size is from 5:1 to 20:1 for the ratio of the number of observations on an analyzed variable. The survey has 33 questions using 5-level Likert and is used for EFA analysis, applying the ratio of 5:1, the minimum sample size is $33 \times 5 = 165$. In this study, the authors use the quota sampling method based on pre-determining the criteria of age, gender, occupation or frequency of using social networking platforms, then allocating the number of samples to be collected for each group according to a certain ratio. From the above data, the author considered and selected the appropriate sampling method for his research according to Tabachnick and Fidell (2007) [47], the specific sample size is 362 responses, on the other hand, this size is not beyond the author's capacity. After eliminating 14 invalid samples, the remaining 348 samples were retained for analysis.

Data were collected from the Gen Z age group living in Viet Nam. To ensure the suitability of the study, the questionnaire added a screening question to determine whether the respondent is living in Viet Nam, is in the Gen

Z age group and uses Tiktok or not. Only those who answered "Yes" to this question will continue to do the next parts of the survey. This is to ensure that the collected information accurately reflects the current state of UGC on Tiktok to travel intention. By conducting an online survey using Google Form, the author collected 362 observations. After checking and eliminating invalid observations, the author obtained 348 valid observations, ensuring information and proceeding to include the observations in the analysis and evaluation.

3.2 Research Measurement Scales

The scales of factors affecting Gen Z's travel intention in Viet Nam are adapted from the research articles of Shetu (2023) [41] with the SA scale including 5 observed variables; the ATT scale of Song *et al.* (2012) [44] with 4 observed variables; the DI scale of Souiden *et al.* (2017) [45] with 8 observed variables; the UGC scale of Shetu (2023) [41] with 5 observed variables; the TR scale of Abubakar *et al.* (2017) [1] with 8 observed variables; the TI scale of Nguyen Van Dat *et al.* (2025) [34] with 3 observed variables.

Table 1: Proposed Measurement Scales

Code	Measurement Scale	Reference Source
User-generated content		
UGC1	UGC helps me find information about tourist destinations when I need it	Shetu (2023) [41]
UGC2	UGC reduces my effort when searching for travel information	
UGC3	UGC increases the quality of information related to tourism	
UGC4	UGC helps me compare the quality between tourist destinations	
UGC5	UGC helps me expand the list of destinations I consider	
Destination attitude		
ATT1	I think that visiting the introduced tourist destination is a positive behavior	Song <i>et al.</i> (2012) [44]
ATT2	I think that visiting the introduced tourist destination is a valuable behavior	
ATT3	I think that visiting the introduced tourist destination is a beneficial behavior	
ATT4	I think that visiting the introduced tourist destination is necessary for the experience	
Destination image		
DI1	I think the tourist destination is a beautiful place	Souiden <i>et al.</i> (2017) [45]
DI2	I think the tourist destination has a good infrastructure (roads, communication services, etc.)	
DI3	I think the tourist destination is a suitable place for relaxation and exploration	
DI4	I think the tourist destination has a well-developed tourism industry	
DI5	I think the tourist destination is a safe place for tourists	
DI6	I think the tourist destination has standard of services	
DI7	I think the tourist destination offers enjoyable entertainment activities	
DI8	I think the tourist destination is socially and culturally diverse	
Destination trust		
TR1	I believe the tourist destination meets my expectations	Abubakar <i>et al.</i> (2017) [1]
TR2	I believe confident in the tourism services at this destination	
TR3	I believe I will not be disappointed when traveling to this destination	
TR4	I believe this tourist destination guarantee satisfaction to visitors	
TR5	I believe that service providers at this destination would be honest and sincere in addressing my concerns	
TR6	I believe that service providers at this destination will resolve tourists' issues well	
TR7	I believe that providers at this destination always make any effort to satisfy me	
TR8	I believe this destination would compensate me in some way in case of injuries after service	
Travel intention		
TI1	I am likely to visit the tourist destination through this social commerce platform in the future	Nguyen Van Dat <i>et al.</i> (2025) [34]
TI2	I intend to recommend the tourist destination to my friends and family	
TI3	I would consider this social commerce platform for my upcoming trips	
Sponsored ads		
SA1	I usually click on the first of the sponsored ads	Shetu (2023) [41]
SA2	I usually click on the top result, whether an advertisement or an organic result	
SA3	I usually scroll the page to skip the ads and click on the organic results	
SA4	Sponsored ads motivate me to search more about the mentioned tourist destination	
SA5	Sponsored ads motivate me to interested in that destination	

Source: Author (2025)

3.3 Data Analysis

For secondary data, the author searched for articles related to the research topic, the author systematically read and screened information about related theories and concepts in a specific chronological order. Then, the author evaluated and analyzed information closely related to the topic to develop arguments aligned with the research problem and objectives.

For primary data, after completing data collection, the author screened and checked to eliminate invalid answers. Valid responses were then entered into SPSS and SmartPLS 4 software to perform model testing and analysis.

4. Research Results and Discussion

4.1 Research Results

4.1.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics Results

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
13 - 19 years old	72	20,7
20 - 24 years old	176	50,6
25 - 28 years old	100	28,7
Gender		
Male	165	47,4
Female	183	52,6
Occupation		
Student	105	30,2
Office employee	164	47,1
Self-employed	33	9,5
Other	46	13,2
Income		
Below 3 million VND	39	11,2
3 to under 7 million VND	151	43,4
7 to under 15 million VND	115	33,0
Above 15 million VND	43	12,4
Daily TikTok Usage Duration		
Below 30 minutes	10	2,9
30 minutes – 1 hour	55	15,8
1 – 2 hours	206	59,2
More than 2 hours	77	22,1

Source: Author (2025)

Of the total 348 survey participants, female respondents accounted for a higher proportion with 183 people (52.6%), while while male respondents accounted for 47.4%. In terms of age, people aged 20 to 24 accounted for the highest proportion (50.6%), followed by the 25-28 age group (28.7%).

In terms of occupation, the majority of participants were office workers (47.1%), followed by students (30.2%). In terms of income level, the group earning 3 to under 7 million VND per month accounted for the largest proportion with 43.4%, followed by the group from 7 to under 15 million VND/month (33%).

In terms of frequency of TikTok usage, the majority of respondents spent 1-2 hours per day on the platform (59.2%), while 22.1% used it for more than 2 hours per day, indicating a relatively high level of TikTok usage among the survey participants.

4.1.2 Reliability Assessment Using Cronbach's Alpha

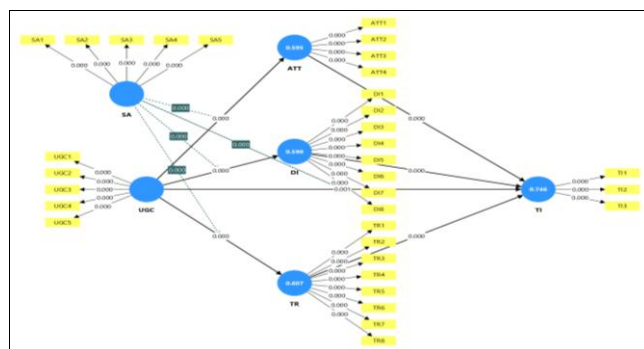
Table 3: Cronbach's Alpha Values

No.	Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Quantity	Reliable observed variables	Unreliable observed variables
1	User-generated content	0.883	5	UGC1, UGC2, UGC3, UGC4, UGC5	0
2	Sponsored ads	0.916	5	SA1, SA2, SA3, SA4, SA5	0
3	Destination attitude	0.886	4	ATT1, ATT2, ATT3, ATT4	0
4	Destination image	0.924	8	DI1, DI2, DI3, DI4, DI5, DI6, DI7, DI8	0
5	Destination trust	0.926	8	TR1, TR2, TR3, TR4, TR5, TR6, TR7, TR8	0
6	Travel intention	0.876	3	TI1, TI2, TI3	0

Source: Author (2025)

4.1.3. Structural Model Assessment

The relationships in the model after conducting PLS-SEM analysis are shown in Fig 2.



Source: Author (2025)

Fig 2: PLS-SEM Structural Model Analysis Results

Direct effects testing

The test results of the direct-effect hypotheses presented in Table 5 show that all hypotheses were statistically significant, confirming that the research factors significantly influence the dependent variables. Among them, the relationship UGC -> TR (O = 0.628, T = 19.044, P < 0.001) has the strongest impact, clearly showing the influence of user-generated content on destination trust. The remaining hypotheses were also accepted.

Table 5: Test results of direct effects testing

Relationship	Hypothesis	Standardized path coefficient (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T-value	P-value	Conclusion
ATT -> TI	H2	0.200	0.199	0.045	4.425	0.000	Accepted
DI -> TI	H3	0.212	0.212	0.043	4.898	0.000	Accepted
TR -> TI	H4	0.195	0.195	0.048	4.035	0.000	Accepted
UGC -> ATT	H1a	0.579	0.579	0.036	16.042	0.000	Accepted
UGC -> DI	H1b	0.617	0.616	0.036	17.164	0.000	Accepted
UGC -> TR	H1c	0.628	0.627	0.033	19.044	0.000	Accepted
UGC -> TI	H1d	0.183	0.183	0.057	3.213	0.001	Accepted

Source: Author (2025)

Table 6: Test results of indirect effects testing

Relationship	Hypothesis	Standardized path coefficient (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T-value	P-value	Conclusion	Type of mediation
UGC -> TR -> TI	H6c	0.122	0.122	0.031	3.937	0.000	Accepted	Partial mediation
UGC -> DI -> TI	H6b	0.131	0.130	0.028	4.703	0.000	Accepted	Partial mediation
UGC -> ATT -> TI	H6a	0.116	0.116	0.028	4.164	0.000	Accepted	Partial mediation

Source: Author (2025)

Table 7: Test Results of the Moderation-Effect Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standardized path coefficient (O)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T-value	P-value	Conclusion
H5a	UGC -> ATT	0.579	0.036	16.042	0.000	Accepted
	SA -> ATT	0.265	0.039	6.767	0.000	
	SA x UGC -> ATT	0.150	0.032	4.638	0.000	
H5b	UGC -> DI	0.617	0.036	17.164	0.000	Accepted
	SA -> DI	0.203	0.040	5.104	0.000	
	SA x UGC -> DI	0.173	0.031	5.511	0.000	
H5c	UGC -> TR	0.628	0.033	19.044	0.000	Accepted
	SA -> TR	0.206	0.042	4.892	0.000	
	SA x UGC -> TR	0.168	0.032	5.213	0.000	
H5d	UGC -> TI	0.183	0.057	3.213	0.001	Accepted
	SA -> TI	0.194	0.035	5.573	0.000	
	SA x UGC -> TI	0.142	0.029	4.955	0.000	

Source: Author (2025)

Indirect effects testing

The results of testing the indirect-effect hypotheses presented in Table 6 show that all the mediating hypotheses were accepted p-values were less than 0.05.

Moderation Effects Testing

Table 7 show Hypothesis H5a ($\beta=0.150$), H5b ($\beta=0.173$), H5c ($\beta=0.168$) and H5d ($\beta=0.142$) were all supported at the 5% significance level (p-value < 0.001), indicating that sponsored advertising (SA) plays a moderating role, strengthening the relationship between user-generated content (UGC) and destination trust (TR), destination image (DI), destination attitude (ATT) and travel intention (TI).

4.2 Discussion

The results of the SEM testing show that UGC on TikTok has a significant impact on many psychological and cognitive factors of tourists. Specifically, hypotheses H1a–H1d (UGC → ATT, DI, TR, TI) were all accepted, confirming that UGC not only improves destination attitude, destination image, and trust, but also directly affects travel intention. This emphasizes the important role of UGC as a source of authentic and highly persuasive information in the travel behavior of the younger generation. This result is consistent with previous studies such as Firdaus *et al.* (2024) [15] and Nguyen Van Dat *et al.* (2025) [34]. In addition, hypotheses H2–H4 (ATT, DI, TR → TI) continued to be

accepted, showing that attitude, destination image, and trust all play a role as strong influencing factors on travel intention. This result reinforces previous theoretical models and shows that positive feelings about the destination are the foundation for shaping the travel decisions of TikTok users. This result is consistent with Wijaya *et al.* (2025) [51] who found that attitude towards the destination has a positive and significant impact on travel intention. Trust also showed an important role, similar to the findings of Setiawan *et al.* (2021) [40] who found that eWOM has a positive impact on destination trust and the conclusion of Nguyen Van Dat *et al.* (2025) [34] that trust increases behavioral intention. Destination image positively influences travel intention, consistent with the results of Firdaus *et al.* (2024) [15].

In the moderation hypothesis group, hypotheses H5a–H5d (SA × UGC → ATT, DI, TR, TI) were all accepted, demonstrating that sponsored advertising has a significant moderating effect on the relationship between UGC and the variables of attitude, destination image, trust, and travel intention. As the exposure to sponsored advertising increases, the influence of UGC on these factors becomes stronger, suggesting the supporting role of advertising in increasing the effectiveness of UGC diffusion on TikTok. It is noteworthy that SA did not weaken UGC, but rather enhanced the effectiveness of UGC, especially in the context of TikTok – a platform where advertising and UGC are

naturally intertwined. This is consistent with the findings of De Veirman and Hudders (2020) [11] and Saternus *et al.* (2022) [38] who argued that paid content, when presented alongside authentic experience content, can increase users' perceived attention, persuasiveness, and trustworthiness. The combination of UGC and SA creates a stronger communication effect than UGC alone, thereby reinforcing positive perceptions of the destination and indirectly promoting travel intention.

Finally, the mediation hypotheses H6a–H6c (ATT, DI, TR play a mediating role) were all accepted, confirming that destination attitude, destination image, and destination trust are all important mediating mechanisms in the relationship between UGC and travel intentions. This implies that UGC affects travel intention not only directly, but also indirectly through improving destination cognition, emotion, and trust. These results are similar to the assertions in the studies of Wijaya *et al.* (2025) [51] and Nguyen Thao Thanh Thi and Tong (2023) [33].

Overall, the SEM model shows that UGC on TikTok, combined with sponsored advertising and psychological mediators, explains users' travel intention well. This result suggests that destination managers and tourism businesses should focus on exploiting UGC, and combine appropriate advertising to increase persuasiveness, improve destination image and strengthen the destination trust of young tourists.

5. Conclusion and Implications

5.1 Conclusion

The results of PLS-SEM analysis show that the research model of the impact of user-generated content (UGC) and sponsored advertising (SA) on travel intention through three mediating psychological variables—attitude toward destination (ATT), destination image (DI), and destination trust (TR) was strongly supported by the survey data. All hypotheses H1a–H1d were accepted ($\beta = 0.579$, $\beta = 0.617$, $\beta = 0.628$, $\beta = 0.183$, p value < 0.001), confirming that UGC on TikTok has a positive influence on tourists' perceptions, emotions, and expectations toward the destination.

At the same time, the three mediating variables ATT, DI and TR all have a significant impact on travel intention (TI) ($\beta = 0.116$, $\beta = 0.131$, $\beta = 0.122$, p value < 0.001). This confirms that travel intention is not formed from mere information, but is the result of an individual's emotional - cognitive - belief evaluation process.

Notably, sponsored advertising (SA) demonstrates a positive moderating role in the relationships between UGC and attitude variables ($\beta = 0.150$), image ($\beta = 0.173$), trust ($\beta = 0.168$) and travel intention ($\beta = 0.142$). This demonstrates that when UGC is accompanied by appropriate sponsored advertising signals, the impact on users' perceptions and behaviors will be stronger.

Overall, the study confirms that UGC on TikTok was a core factor influencing Gen Z's travel decisions, through three main mechanisms: improving attitude, enhancing destination image, and building trust. When these factors are enhanced, users' travel intentions increase significantly, helping businesses and tourism destinations to exploit the TikTok platform more effectively in their communication strategies. At the same time, the presence of sponsored advertising shows that businesses can completely intervene and enhance this impact strategically instead of just relying on organic UGC.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several important contributions to the theoretical foundation of tourist behavior in the context of the growing short video platform TikTok. First, the study extends the S–O–R model by considering user-generated content (UGC) as a salient stimulus (Stimulus) in the digital environment, influencing tourists' intermediate psychological responses including destination attitude, destination image and destination trust (Organism), which in turn lead to travel intention (Response). This approach clarifies the role of UGC as a dynamic, intuitive and experiential source of information.

Second, the study adds to the theory of travel behavior by demonstrating the role of tourists' internal psychological variables—attitude, destination image, and trust—as important mediators that transmit the impact of UGC on travel intention. This finding helps clarify the mechanism of travel intention formation in the new media environment. The fact that all three mediating variables have statistically significant effects reinforces the argument that Gen Z travelers not only receive information but also process it through the lens of emotions, low risk perception, and experience-related expectations – which is consistent with travel behavior trends.

Third, the study contributes to moderation theory by affirming that sponsored advertising (SA) can amplify the impact of UGC, rather than always diminishing or reducing authenticity as some traditional studies have suggested. This result provides empirical evidence that when advertising is deployed appropriately, paid content can enhance the informational effectiveness of UGC – opening a new direction for research on the intersection between organic and commercial content on the TikTok platform.

5.3 Practical Contributions

The study provides important contributions to destination managers, tourism businesses, and media organizations in the context of TikTok becoming a platform leading the travel trend of the young generation. The results show that UGC is a powerful source of information, directly affecting tourists' perceptions of the destination and indirectly promoting travel intention. This suggests that tourism organizations need to invest in building a sustainable UGC ecosystem: cooperating with creators, encouraging local communities to create authentic content, providing standardized information to ensure the accuracy of content, and developing storytelling forms about culture - landscape - experience. When the quality and reliability of UGC are improved, tourists will form positive attitude, perceive the destination more clearly and increase travel confidence. In addition, the study demonstrates that destination attitude, destination image, and destination trust all have a strong and statistically significant impact on Gen Z's travel intention. This suggests that travel decisions are not only based on information but also driven by emotions and expectations. Therefore, destinations need to maintain clean landscapes and environments, upgrade service experiences, ensure consistency in communication, and build promotional campaigns that reinforce positive attitude and trust of tourists.

In particular, the study shows that sponsored advertising (SA) plays an important moderating role, helping to enhance the impact of UGC on cognitive variables. This implies that

businesses and destinations should consider TikTok Ads as a complementary tool, helping to amplify the reach of high-quality UGC to the right target audience. A strategy that combines UGC and paid advertising will help increase reach, strengthen awareness and shorten the transition to travel intent – especially effective in the context of Gen Z prioritizing short, visual and authentic video content.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although the study has achieved reliable results, there are still some limitations that need to be considered. First, the short data collection period and simple moderation model cannot reflect market fluctuations, so the results only reflect consumer behavior at the time of the survey.

Second, the scope of the survey sample is limited, as the respondents are mainly Gen Z in Viet Nam - a demographic group with high technological exposure and specific TikTok usage behavior. Therefore, the results are unlikely to represent all Vietnamese tourists or other age groups and regions. Future research should expand the survey scope to more provinces or compare age groups to assess differences in UGC processing.

Third, the study focused on TikTok as a single UGC platform, whereas today's users often simultaneously consult information from multiple social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, or travel review sites. In the future, multi-platform UGC models or cross-platform comparison studies could shed light on differences in how UGC influences travel behavior, thereby providing a more comprehensive view of the role of social media in tourism.

6. References

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