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“User-generated content and consumer brand engagement in the South African tourism industry”

by
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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in Strategic Marketing

Wits Business School
2025

Abstract

The digital landscape has fundamentally transformed how consumers engage with brands, with User-Generated Content (UGC) becoming a dominant force in shaping perceptions and behaviours. While existing research has established a link between UGC and consumer engagement in developed markets, a significant gap remains in understanding the specific psychological mechanisms that underpin this relationship. Crucially, the role of perceived authenticity as a central mediating variable between UGC exposure and multi-dimensional Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE) has not been sufficiently empirically examined.

This study investigates the impact of UGC on Cognitive, Affective/Emotional, and Behavioural Brand Engagement through the mediating lens of perceived authenticity. A quantitative, cross-sectional design was adopted, using a snowballing online survey method to collect data from 277 South African domestic tourists.. The data was analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) via SmartPLS 4 to test a comprehensive theoretical model comprising thirteen hypotheses.

The results indicate that all thirteen hypothesised relationships were statistically supported. The study found that both Visual UGC and Peer-Generated UGC are significant positive antecedents of perceived authenticity. Furthermore, perceived authenticity demonstrated a strong, significant influence on all three dimensions of CBE, with its greatest impact on affective engagement. The analysis confirmed that perceived authenticity acts as a full mediator, meaning the influence of UGC types on engagement is fundamentally channelled through the consumer's assessment of its genuineness and credibility.

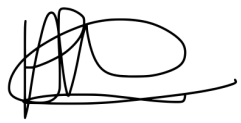
The theoretical implications of this study contribute substantially to marketing literature by providing a validated model that expands on the critical mediating role of authenticity. It advances theories of source credibility, eWOM, and CBE by specifying the cognitive process that explains how UGC builds brand relationships. The findings underscore the imperative for marketers to prioritise authentic, peer-generated visual content and to strategise for different platforms based on their distinct roles in the consumer journey. The study concludes that in an increasingly saturated digital ecosystem, authenticity is not an enhancer but the essential mechanism through which UGC achieves its power to engage.

Keywords

user-generated content (UGC), consumer brand engagement (CBE), perceived authenticity, South African tourism, social influence theory and electronic word-of-mouth.

Declaration

I, Lesedi Modiakgotla Mokoena, student number 1364124, hereby declare that the work presented in this research paper titled “User-Generated Content and consumer brand engagement in the South African tourism industry” is entirely my own. Any external sources utilised have been duly acknowledged and referenced. I affirm that this paper has not been submitted for any other academic assessment, and all data, information, or materials obtained from other works are appropriately cited.



Lesedi Modiakgotla Mokoena

Signed at Fourways, Johannesburg on the 14th day of September 2025.

Dedication

This report is dedicated to my loving parents, Thabo and Lerato Mokoena, who willed me on to achieve this feat. I am the man I am today because of your love, support and guidance.

Acknowledgements

I would like to give all praise to the lord almighty without whom this would not have been possible. Thank you for instilling in me a drive to make a difference in this world.

To my fellow syndicate group 4 members: Nthabiseng Moloi, Unathi Nomlala, Reabetswe Kekana and Hlobile Jele - thank you. Each person's experience and perspective enriched the learning process and made this journey so easy and enjoyable.

To my research supervisor - Dr Yvonne K Saini - thank you for your guidance throughout the research process.

To my employers over this period - Mr. Kgaugelo Maphai and Mr. Mark Bradford - thank you for your understanding and patience during this period.

To my parents, mama and papa, your unending support throughout my life has made this period of my life a breeze. I thank you for affording me this opportunity to follow my dreams.

To my older sister, Thato Mokoena, thank you for showing me that it is possible and shining the light to further my education.

To my younger sister, Rorisang Mokoena, your drive and excellence continue to inspire me - thank you.

To all my friends, family, colleagues and strangers who supported me, shared and completed my questionnaire - your contribution is deeply appreciated.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

UGC	User-Generated Content
CBE	Consumer Brand Engagement
SEM	Structural Equation Modelling
B2C	Business-to-Consumer
B2B	Business-to-Business
WOM	Word of Mouth
eWOM	Electronic Word-of-Mouth
Stats SA	Statistics South Africa
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
S-D	Service-Dominant

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the study

This study addresses a gap in understanding how specific forms of user-generated content (UGC) influence multidimensional Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE) through the mediating role of perceived authenticity within the South African tourism context (Rather et al., 2022). In an increasingly digital environment, consumers rely heavily on peer-generated information to inform their decision-making, particularly when evaluating experiential offerings such as tourism destinations and services.

UGC has emerged as a central feature of this digital landscape. Commonly referred to as content created and shared by consumers rather than brands, UGC includes online reviews, social media posts, videos, and travel blogs, often described as electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) (Burgess et al., 2009; Demba, 2016). Unlike traditional advertising, UGC is generally perceived as more credible and authentic because it reflects real user experiences. However, the rapid growth of influencer marketing has increasingly blurred the distinction between organic UGC and commercially driven content, raising important questions about trust and authenticity in digital communication (Belanche et al., 2021; Casaló et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020).

Consumer Brand Engagement refers to the interactions and connections consumers develop with brands through digital platforms such as social media, websites, and online review forums (Sibanda, 2023). These interactions range from passive behaviours, such as viewing content, to more active forms of engagement, including commenting, sharing, reviewing, and content creation. Understanding online CBE is particularly important in contemporary marketing, as consumers increasingly rely on digital platforms to research brands, compare alternatives, and make purchasing decisions (Ayeh et al., 2013; Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020). Meaningful engagement has been linked to stronger brand relationships, increased loyalty, advocacy, and long-term customer value (Chitadze, 2023).

Within the South African tourism industry, these dynamics are especially relevant. Tourism is a highly competitive and experience-driven sector comprising accommodation providers, transport services, travel agencies, attractions, and destination brands. In recent years, the industry has faced significant challenges, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic volatility, and infrastructure constraints, all of which have contributed to a decline in

tourism's contribution to national GDP. Against this backdrop, UGC has emerged as a potentially powerful mechanism through which tourism brands can rebuild trust, visibility, and engagement in a constrained marketing environment (Ayeh et al., 2013; Bandinelli, 2020; Demba, 2016).

Despite growing international research on UGC and brand engagement, relatively little empirical work has examined these relationships within the South African tourism context. Existing studies tend to focus on developed markets, limiting the applicability of their findings to emerging economies characterised by different cultural, social, and digital dynamics. This lack of context-specific evidence highlights the need for focused research that examines how South African consumers interpret UGC, assess its authenticity, and translate it into engagement behaviour.

By investigating the relationship between UGC, perceived authenticity, and CBE, this study seeks to address this gap and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of digital engagement within South African tourism. The findings aim to offer practical insights for tourism marketers seeking to leverage UGC more effectively, while also contributing to the broader academic discourse on authenticity and engagement in emerging market contexts.

Building on this background, the following section situates the study within the specific contextual realities of the South African tourism industry, outlining the environmental, digital, and market conditions that shape how user-generated content is produced, perceived as authentic, and translated into consumer brand engagement.

1.2. Context of the Study

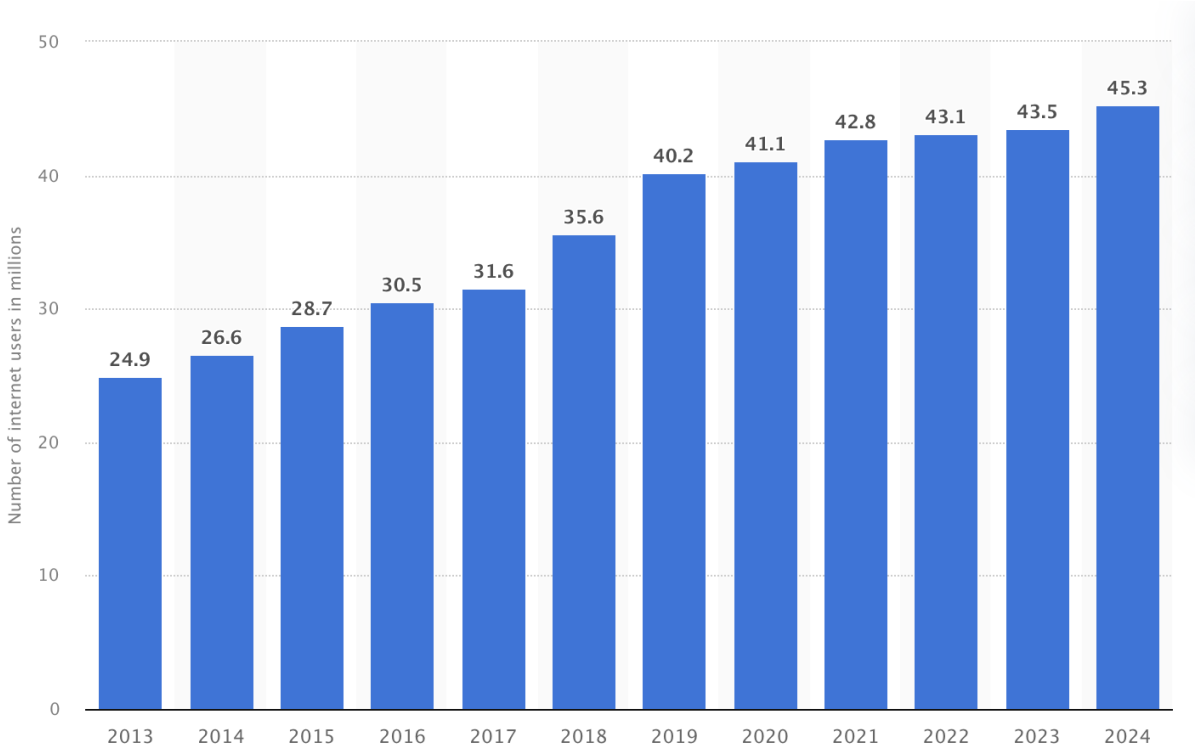
The study takes place within the dynamic and evolving landscape of South African marketing and consumer behaviour in the digital era. South Africa, as one of the largest economies in Africa, is experiencing significant growth in internet penetration, mobile device usage, and social media adoption, making it a critical context to investigate the opportunities and challenges of leveraging UGC for enhanced customer engagement.

South Africa

South Africa, as a dynamic and an increasingly digitally connected nation, provides a relevant context for studying the influence of UGC and consumer engagement. With a substantial number of internet users and a significant social media presence, South Africa offers an ideal

setting to explore the relationship between UGC and consumer behaviour (Statista Research Department, 2024).

Figure 1: Number of internet users in South Africa from 2013 to 2024



Source: Statista Research Department (2024)

The significant rise in internet users in South Africa between 2013 and 2023 is evident in figure 1 above. Statistics indicate a 74.7% increase in internet users during this decade, suggesting an improvement in connectivity within the country (Statista Research Department, 2024). Furthermore, as of January 2023, South Africa ranked third among African nations in terms of internet users, following only Nigeria (122.5 million) and Egypt (80.75 million) (Statista Research Department, 2024). The Statista Research Department (2024) further predicts that internet users in South Africa will reach 45.3 million by 2024. This burgeoning internet user base creates an ideal environment to explore brand engagement in the era of online connectivity.

In terms of social media usage, South Africa boasted 25.8 million social media users as of January 2023, indicating a substantial presence of individuals actively engaging on digital

platforms (Kemp, 2023). This number of social media users at the start of 2023 was equivalent to 42.9 percent of the total population. However, it is important to note that in this context “social media users” may not represent unique individuals.

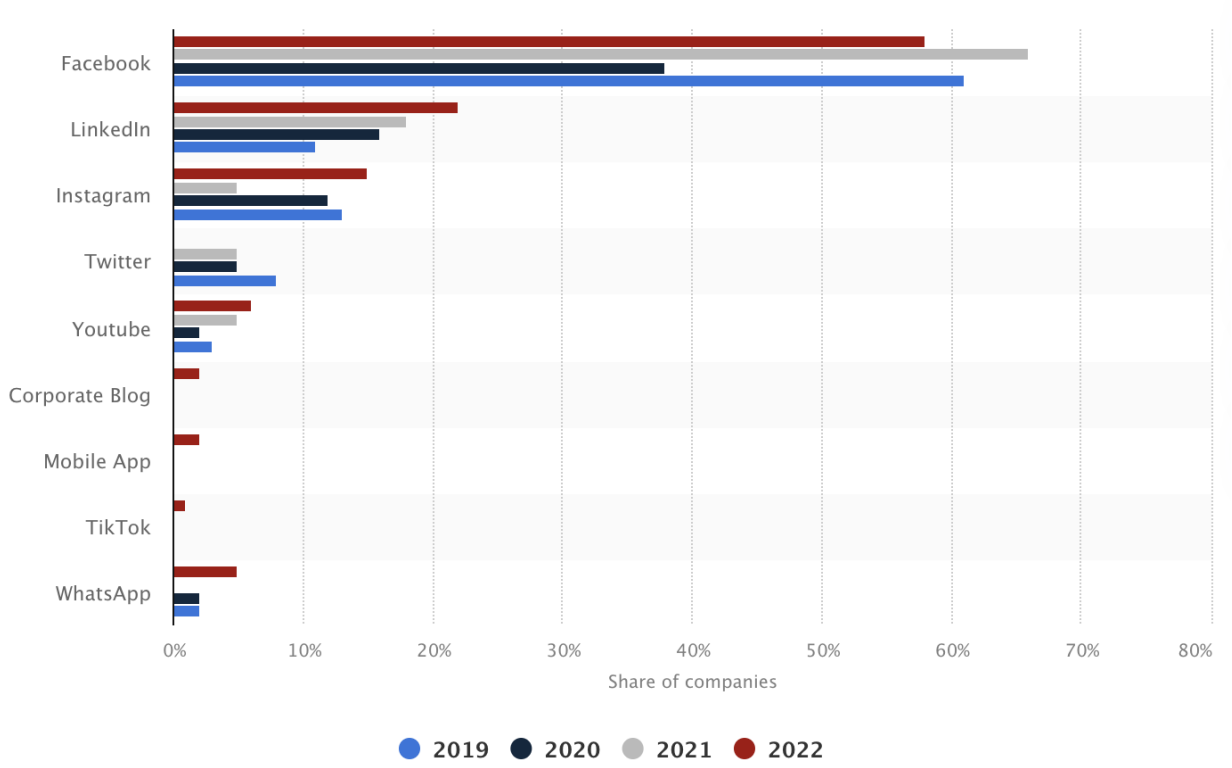
Notably, YouTube and Facebook emerged as the most popular platforms, with 25.8 million and 22.5 million users, respectively (Kemp, 2023). These platforms serve as significant channels for the creation, sharing, and consumption of UGC, making them pivotal in understanding its influence on consumer engagement.

By exploring the South African context, this study contributes to the broader understanding of UGC's impact on consumer behaviour in an increasingly digitally connected society. South Africa's high internet penetration and significant social media usage provide an opportune environment to investigate the dynamics of UGC and its influence on consumer attitudes, perceptions, and decision-making processes.

Understanding the role of UGC in shaping consumer engagement in South Africa can have broader implications for businesses and marketers across various industries. It can shed light on effective strategies for leveraging UGC to enhance brand-consumer interactions, build brand loyalty, and drive positive consumer behaviours.

In conclusion, South Africa's substantial internet user rate, internet penetration and active social media usage make it a pertinent context for studying the influence of UGC on consumer engagement. Exploring this context offers valuable insights into the digital landscape and consumer behaviours, enabling businesses to develop effective marketing strategies that resonate with South African consumers and drive brand success in the digital era.

Figure 2: Advertising budget spent on social media platforms by companies in South Africa from 2019 to 2022



Source: Statista Research Department & Cowling (2023)

While data on specific advertising budgets allocated to UGC platforms in South Africa's tourism industry might be limited, insights gleaned from broader social media advertising trends can still be valuable for UGC's impact on CBE.

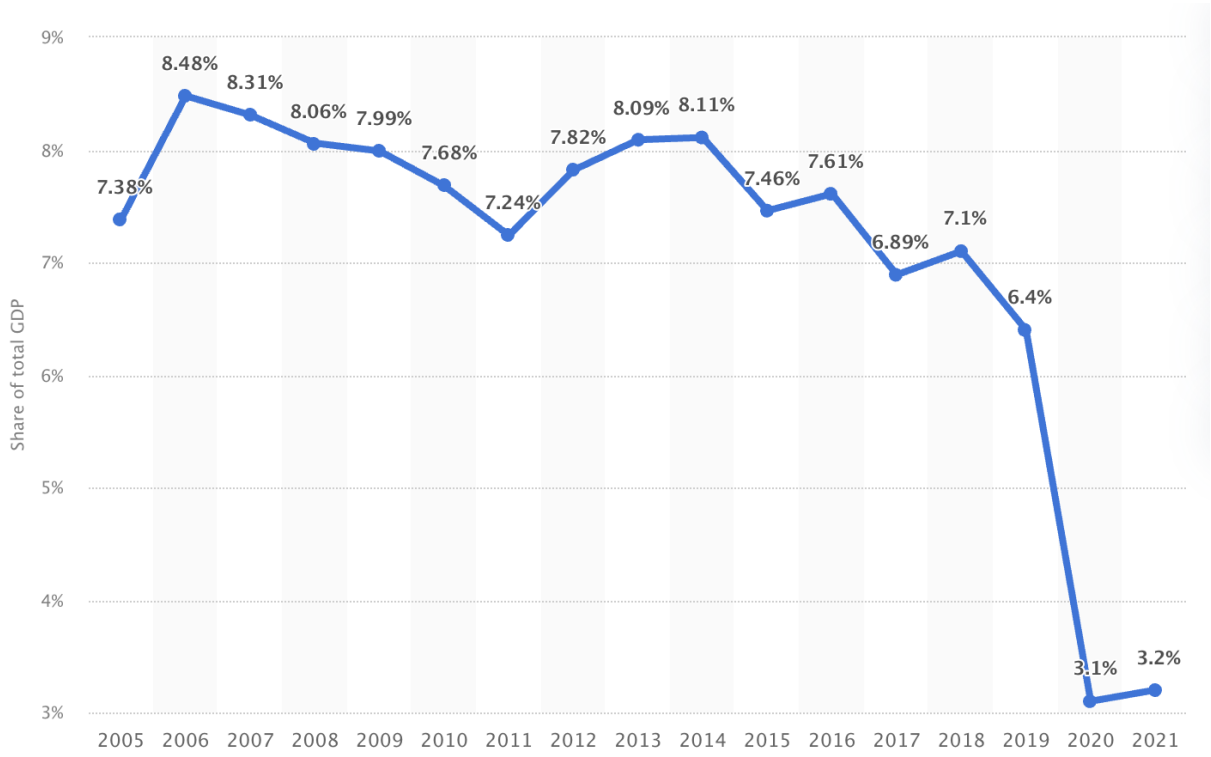
According to the IAB South Africa/PwC SA Online AdSpend Report (2023) and Statisa Research (2023), digital advertising spending in South Africa has witnessed consistent growth, with social media emerging as a key contributor (BizCommunity, 2023b; Statista Research Department & Cowling, 2023). This suggests a growing recognition by brands of the power of social media engagement. Furthermore, the report highlights the dominance of Meta (formerly Facebook) within the South African social media advertising landscape (BizCommunity, 2023b; Statista Research Department & Cowling, 2023). These findings point towards the potential significance of Facebook and Instagram, platforms known for fostering UGC creation and sharing, in influencing CBE within the tourism industry.

South African Tourism Industry

The South African tourism industry, once a thriving sector, has faced significant challenges in recent years, including a decline in performance even before the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic - see figure 3 below (Statista Research Department, 2022). The industry plays a crucial role in the country's economy, contributing to job creation, foreign exchange earnings, and overall economic growth. However, various factors have contributed to the industry's decline, requiring new and improved strategies to revitalise and bolster the ailing sector, particularly in a post-COVID era.

Prior to the pandemic, the industry was already experiencing a slowdown dropping from 7.1% of total GDP in 2019 to 6.4% of total GDP the following year (Statista Research Department, 2022). Global economic fluctuations, safety and security concerns, political uncertainties, exchange rate fluctuations, regulatory constraints, and infrastructure limitations have all impacted the industry's growth and attractiveness as a tourist destination (Vollmer, 2024). These challenges have resulted in a decrease in foreign tourist arrivals, spending, and overall contribution to the country's GDP.

Figure 3: Contribution of travel and tourism to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in South Africa



Source: Statista Research Department (2022)

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the industry's struggles, with travel restrictions, lockdown measures, and health concerns severely impacting international and domestic travel. In 2019 there were 42 770 000 travellers in transit in South Africa, this number dropped drastically to 12 296 000 in 2020 and then increased to 92 332 000 in 2021 (Stats SA, 2023). According to Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) the number of travellers in transit is yet to rebound to pre-covid levels as it was sitting at 22 409 000 in 2022 (Stats SA, 2023). This performance saw the industry suffer massive losses in revenue, widespread job losses, and closures of businesses, leaving a significant void in the sector.

To address these issues and rejuvenate the South African tourism industry, there is a need to explore new and improved ways of operating in the post-COVID era. This includes implementing comprehensive health and safety measures, rethinking marketing and promotion strategies, leveraging technology for enhanced visitor experiences, developing sustainable tourism practices, and fostering collaborations between industry stakeholders. By identifying

and implementing innovative solutions, the industry can strive to regain its momentum, attract tourists, create employment opportunities, and contribute to the overall economic recovery of South Africa. Research therefore suggests that leveraging insights within this study could aid certain structures within the tourism industry to improve performance.

These statistics and insights emphasise the need to further study the South African tourism industry and highlight the critical role that UGC could play in shaping brand-consumer relationships. Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by offering specific insights and recommendations tailored to the South African tourism industry, supporting marketers in their efforts to leverage UGC for enhanced customer engagement and brand success.

1.3. Problem Statement

The problem statement is an important component of research as it serves as the foundation of a research study by identifying the research problem, objectives, and guiding the research design. This study's problem statement is as follows:

The digital landscape has fundamentally reshaped how tourists evaluate destinations, with UGC emerging as a pivotal and highly influential source of information that often holds more sway than traditional marketing (Leung et al., 2013; Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). Existing literature has firmly established a positive correlation between UGC exposure and general consumer decision-making (Cox et al., 2009; Ayeh et al., 2013) and has simultaneously outlined the growing consumer demand for authenticity in experiential industries like tourism (Napoli et al., 2014; Morhart et al., 2015). However, a significant gap persists in understanding the precise mechanisms that translate exposure to UGC into deep, multi-faceted brand engagement. The current body of work often treats UGC as a monolithic construct and engagement as a unitary outcome, thereby failing to capture the complexity of these phenomena and offering limited strategic value to marketers (Hollebeek et al., 2016; Naem & Okafor, 2019).

The first gap is the lack of a model linking specific UGC type (such as visual and peer-generated content) to the cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of CBE (Brodie et

al., 2013; Vivek et al., 2012). This leaves marketers unsure which UGC forms are most effective.

Secondly, while perceived authenticity is often assumed to mediate UGC's impact, its role has not been rigorously tested as the central mechanism in this process (Bandinelli, 2020; Rather et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2021). This study addresses this by proposing and testing a model where authenticity is the key mediator (Hair et al., 2013; Ringle et al., 2024; Sarstedt et al., 2022).

Finally, these relationships are under-explored in emerging markets like South Africa, where the internet user base is substantial and ever-growing and tourism relies on authentic experiences (Guliwe, 2024; Kemp, 2023; Statista Research Department, 2024).The lack of local research limits evidence-based strategies for tourism marketers.

By addressing these gaps in existing literature, this study can provide valuable insights for marketers seeking to develop effective UGC strategies that enhance CBE.

1.3.1. Theoretical Constructs

UGC

This construct refers to content (text, images, videos, etc.) created by consumers and shared online through various platforms (social media, blogs, review sites). Unlike traditional advertising, UGC is perceived as more credible and authentic due to its grassroots nature (Bandinelli, 2020; Demba, 2016; Ngwenya, 2021; Tripathi, 2020). In the context of this study, and the South African tourism industry, UGC includes travel photos, videos, reviews of attractions, and personal stories relating to travel experiences.

Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE)

This construct encompasses the level of a consumer's psychological and behavioural involvement with a brand. It reflects the extent to which consumers are emotionally connected to the brand, actively interact with it online and offline, and are willing to advocate for it. In the tourism industry, this includes activities such as liking, commenting, and sharing content related to tourism brands, as well as developing brand loyalty, equity and advocacy (Cox et al., 2009; Creevey et al., 2019; Ngwenya, 2021).

Perceived Authenticity

This construct captures the degree to which UGC is perceived as genuine, credible, and trustworthy by consumers. Authenticity in UGC can be influenced by factors such as the sincerity of the content, the absence of commercial motives, and consistency with personal experiences or expectations (Belanche et al., 2021; Casaló et al., 2020; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014, 2016; Singh et al., 2020). High perceived authenticity can in turn enhance the persuasive power of UGC (Bandinelli, 2020; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014, 2016).

By providing a quantitative understanding of the link between UGC and brand engagement in the South African context, this research has the potential to contribute significantly to the industry's post-pandemic recovery by harnessing the power of UGC. This research equips South African tourism brands with actionable insights based on statistically robust data, empowering them to develop data-driven content strategies that leverage UGC to optimise brand engagement and foster deeper consumer connections. This ultimately allows these brands to allocate resources and budget effectively and identify the most impactful types of UGC for their specific target audience, contributing to the industry's post-pandemic recovery.

1.4. Research Objectives

The following research objectives have been derived from the research problem and are closely linked to the following research questions, and hypotheses development sections to come:

Research Objective 1: To examine the direct impact of Visual UGC and Peer-Generated UGC on Perceived Authenticity.

- This objective directly tests the foundational paths in the structural model (H1, H2).

Research Objective 2: To analyse the direct influence of Perceived Authenticity on the cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of CBE.

- This objective assesses the core outcome of the structural model's mediator (H3, H4, H5).

Research Objective 3: To determine the direct effects of user-based UGC exposure (Active UGC exposure and Passive UGC exposure) on Cognitive CBE.

- This objective aims to test the alternative pathways in the study's structural model (H6, H7).

Research Objective 4: To investigate the mediating role of Perceived Authenticity in the relationships between UGC types (Visual and Peer-Generated) and the three dimensions of CBE.

- This is the key objective that establishes the study's theoretical contribution. It tests the indirect effects (H8-H13).

1.5. Research Questions

Based on the above-mentioned research problem and research objectives this study seeks to explore and answer the following questions:

Research Question 1: To what extent do Visual UGC and Peer-Generated UGC directly influence Perceived Authenticity?

- This question directly probes the first part of the conceptual model seen below (H1, H2).

Research Question 2: What is the direct impact of Perceived Authenticity on the affective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions of CBE?

- This question addresses the core outcomes of the structural model (H3, H4, H5).

Research Question 3: What are the direct effects of active (AUF) and passive (PUF) UGC exposure experiences on Cognitive CBE?

- This question investigates the alternative pathways in the structural model (H6, H7).

Research Question 4: Does Perceived Authenticity mediate the relationship between UGC types (Visual and Peer-Generated) and the dimensions of CBE?

- Ultimately, this is the pivotal question of this study, testing the proposed mediating mechanism (H8-H13).

1.6. Significance of the Study

1.6.1. Contribution to Marketing Theory

This research makes a significant contribution to marketing theory by advancing the conceptual understanding of the relationship between UGC, perceived authenticity, and CBE. It addresses a critical gap in the literature by proposing and empirically validating a model that positions perceived authenticity not merely as an outcome, but as the pivotal mediating mechanism through which UGC exerts its influence on cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2016; Rather et al., 2022).

The study also contributes by integrating these three core constructs into a cohesive theoretical framework. While existing literature has often examined these elements in isolation or in paired relationships, this research provides a more holistic view. It demonstrates that the power of UGC is not direct but is fundamentally channeled through the consumer's assessment of its authenticity. This nuanced understanding refines theories of source credibility and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) by specifying the cognitive and evaluative process that explains why and how UGC, particularly visual and peer-generated content, is so effective in fostering deep brand connections.

Furthermore, this investigation challenges and refines the theoretical assumptions of CBE by demonstrating that its three dimensions are not equally activated by the same stimuli. The findings illustrate that authenticity serves as a critical catalyst, with its strongest effect on the affective dimension of engagement, thereby enriching our understanding of the emotional drivers within the CBE framework. This provides a more granular theoretical explanation for how brand relationships are built and sustained in a digital environment saturated with user-generated narratives.

Methodologically, the study strengthens marketing theory by employing a robust quantitative approach to test a complex mediating model. This provides statistically validated evidence for

the proposed relationships, moving beyond conceptual or qualitative assertions that have dominated parts of this discourse. The empirical support for the full mediation model sets a benchmark for future research and enhances the credibility of theoretical propositions concerning the role of authenticity in digital marketing.

Ultimately, by expanding on the mediating role of perceived authenticity, this research provides a more sophisticated theoretical lens through which to view digital consumer engagement. It lays a foundation for future scholarly inquiry into the boundary conditions of this relationship, encouraging its application and testing across different industries, platforms, and consumer segments. This contribution enables a more robust, evidence-based understanding of how to achieve meaningful brand engagement in the contemporary marketing landscape.

1.7. Delimitations of The Study

The delimitations of the study refer to the specific boundaries or limitations set by the researcher that define the scope and focus of the research (Simon & Goes, 2018; Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). These boundaries are determined by various factors such as time, resources, population, geographic location, and specific variables of interest (Simon & Goes, 2018; Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). It is important to clearly define and communicate these delimitations in the research study to provide transparency and manage the expectations of the readers and stakeholders. In the context of this study, some delimitations experienced include the following.

Geographical Focus

The study is delimited to the South African context, focusing exclusively on the tourism industry within this region. The findings may not be directly applicable to other countries or regions, as the cultural, economic, and social factors specific to South Africa may influence consumer behaviours and brand engagement differently.

Sample Size and Representativeness

The study employs a sample size of 277 participants, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. The results may not fully capture the diverse perspectives and experiences of the

entire population of South African travellers and tourists (Hooper et al., 2007). Caution should be exercised when extending the findings beyond the selected sample.

Time Constraints

The study is conducted within a specific time frame, which may restrict the examination of temporal changes or long-term trends in UGC and CBE. The dynamic nature of UGC and consumer behaviour may not be fully captured within the limited time period of the study.

This study's delimitations - geographical focus, sample size, and time constraints - define its scope while acknowledging inherent boundaries. By concentrating exclusively on South Africa's tourism industry, the research offers targeted insights into UGC's local impact but limits direct applicability to other cultural or economic contexts. The sample of 277 participants, though statistically robust for SEM analysis, may not fully represent the diversity of South African travellers, necessitating cautious generalisation (Hooper et al., 2007). Additionally, the cross-sectional design captures a snapshot of UGC's influence, precluding longitudinal analysis of evolving consumer behaviours. These delimitations, while structuring a manageable study, highlight opportunities for future research to expand geographical, demographic, and temporal dimensions.

1.8. Concluding Remarks

This introductory chapter has established the critical role of UGC in shaping CBE within South Africa's tourism industry - a sector grappling with post-pandemic recovery and digital transformation. Against the backdrop of rising internet penetration (Statista Research Department, 2024) and the industry's declining GDP contribution (Stats SA, 2023), the study's focus on UGC's authenticity and its mediating effect on engagement addresses a pressing theoretical and practical gap by testing a model where authenticity is not merely an outcome but the critical mediating pathway through which UGC exerts its influence. By delimiting the scope to South Africa's unique socio-digital context, the research aims to yield actionable insights for tourism brands while acknowledging boundaries in generalisability and time-related dynamics.

As the foundation for this inquiry, the subsequent literature review will systematically examine existing theories and empirical studies on UGC, authenticity, and CBE. It will critically evaluate global perspectives while highlighting contextual gaps in the South African tourism landscape, thereby bridging the discourse between international scholarship and localised consumer behaviour. This theoretical scaffolding will inform the study's hypotheses and methodological choices, ensuring alignment with the appropriate framework introduced in the following chapters.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the theoretical and conceptual foundations underpinning the study, with a specific focus on the relationship between UGC and CBE. It begins by exploring the relevant theoretical frameworks that inform the study, drawing on established theories in marketing, communication, and consumer behaviour. These theories provide the necessary lens through which the relationship between UGC and CBE can be understood and analysed. Following this, the section delves into an empirical review of the literature, examining key themes related to the independent, mediating, and dependent variables. This review synthesises existing research to identify gaps, contradictions, and emerging trends in the field. Building on this foundation, the section then outlines the study's hypotheses, which are grounded in the theoretical and empirical insights discussed. Finally, the conceptual framework of the study is presented, illustrating the relationships between the variables and highlighting the significance of the research in advancing understanding of UGC's role in shaping consumer-brand interactions. By integrating theoretical insights with empirical evidence, this section sets the stage for a rigorous and meaningful exploration of the research problem.

2.2. Theoretical Underpinnings

This study leans heavily on service-dominant logic, relationship marketing, social influence theory, social presence theory, signalling theory and source credibility theory as key frameworks that link UGC dimensions with CBE. The section below expands on the key theoretical frameworks explored.

2.2.1. Service-Dominant (S-D) Logic

Service-Dominant Logic reframes value creation as a co-created process emerging from interactions among multiple actors rather than being embedded in products alone (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2017). This perspective is particularly relevant to tourism, where experiences are intangible, subjective, and shaped by consumer participation. Within digital tourism ecosystems, UGC functions as a key operant resource, enabling tourists to actively

shape destination meanings through shared photos, reviews, and narratives (Rather et al., 2022; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020).

From this perspective, tourists are not passive recipients of marketing messages but contributors to value creation, aligning with Hollebeek's (2016) multidimensional view of CBE. UGC therefore facilitates cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement by enabling consumers to both consume and co-create brand meaning. While S-D Logic highlights the transformative potential of UGC, its application in African tourism contexts remains underexplored, particularly in relation to unequal digital access and culturally embedded storytelling practices, which this study seeks to acknowledge rather than resolve.

2.2.2. Signalling Theory

Signalling Theory explains how consumers interpret observable cues to reduce uncertainty in high-risk decision contexts (Spence, 1973). Tourism decisions are inherently risky due to their experiential and intangible nature, making travellers particularly reliant on signals such as peer reviews, visual content, and travel narratives. UGC serves as a powerful market signal because it is perceived to involve personal effort and lived experience, which enhances its credibility relative to brand-generated communication (Ramayah et al., 2020).

Within this study, perceived authenticity functions as the key interpretive lens through which UGC signals are evaluated. When UGC appears genuine and consistent with real experiences, it reduces scepticism and increases engagement potential. However, the growing commercialisation of UGC and the rise of synthetic content complicate this signalling process, reinforcing the need to empirically examine authenticity as a mediating mechanism rather than assuming its presence.

2.2.3. Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory posits that message effectiveness depends on the perceived trustworthiness and expertise of the source (Hovland et al., 1953; Metzger et al., 2003). In digital tourism environments, peer-generated content is often perceived as more credible than brand messaging because it lacks overt commercial intent and reflects experiential knowledge (Ayeh et al., 2013).

This theory provides a direct theoretical foundation for positioning perceived authenticity as central to engagement outcomes. When UGC is viewed as credible and sincere, it enhances information processing, emotional connection, and behavioural intention. Rather than treating credibility and authenticity as interchangeable concepts, this study positions authenticity as the perceptual outcome of credible UGC exposure, particularly relevant in tourism contexts where consumers rely on others' experiences as proxies for firsthand knowledge.

Supporting Theories

2.2.4. Relationship Marketing Theory

Relationship Marketing Theory emphasises long-term value creation through trust-based, ongoing interactions between brands and consumers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In tourism, UGC supports relationship building by facilitating dialogue, responsiveness, and emotional investment beyond the point of purchase. Engagement with UGC—such as sharing experiences or receiving brand acknowledgment—strengthens relational bonds and encourages repeat interaction (Hollebeek et al., 2016).

2.2.5. Social Influence Theory

Social Influence Theory explains how individuals' attitudes and behaviours are shaped by others through processes of compliance, identification, and internalisation (Kelman, 1961). In tourism, peer-generated UGC exerts influence by normalising destinations, validating choices, and reinforcing social belonging. While global studies confirm these mechanisms, their operation within South Africa's culturally diverse tourism landscape remains insufficiently examined, supporting the contextual relevance of this study.

2.2.6. Social Presence Theory

Social Presence Theory addresses how digitally mediated environments create perceptions of human warmth and interpersonal connection (Short et al., 1976; Gunawardena, 1995). Visually rich UGC formats, such as videos and live content, enhance social presence by simulating face-to-face interaction, which in turn increases emotional engagement and perceived credibility (Gefen & Straub, 2004; Cyr et al., 2007). This theory supports the study's emphasis on visual UGC as a particularly influential engagement driver in tourism marketing.

2.2.7. Concluding Remarks

Collectively, these theories provide a cohesive framework for understanding how UGC influences CBE through perceived authenticity in tourism. Core theories explain value co-creation, uncertainty reduction, and credibility assessment, while supporting theories clarify how trust, social influence, and mediated presence translate UGC exposure into engagement. Importantly, the integration of these frameworks allows the study to examine engagement mechanisms without overstating generalisability, acknowledging the contextual specificity of South African tourism and the exploratory nature of the research model.

2.3. Empirical Literature Review

The following section leans heavily on existing literature, frameworks and marketing principles that this study lends from.

2.3.1. Marketing's Evolution in Tourism

In tourism marketing, the discipline encompasses strategic efforts to create, communicate, and deliver value to both domestic and international travellers (Steenkamp, 2024). The Covid-19 pandemic catalysed a fundamental restructuring of tourism marketing, with digital channels assuming primacy over traditional media (Belanche et al., 2021). Contemporary strategies now prioritise two-way engagement (brand and consumer) over one-way promotion, reflecting broader industry recognition of consumer co-creation's value (Li et al., 2022). This paradigm aligns with the service-dominant logic discussed above, where marketing operates as an ongoing dialogue rather than a transactional broadcast (Vargo & Lusch, 2017; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Furthermore, the tourism sector's unique characteristics - namely its experiential nature and high-involvement purchase decisions - make it particularly receptive to these evolved approaches (Demba, 2016; Moloi et al., 2022). In this evolving tourism marketing environment, UGC has become a primary vehicle through which consumers assess authenticity, which in turn shapes the depth of their cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement with tourism brands.

2.3.2. Changing Promotions Landscape

In tourism marketing, promotions refer to tactical communications designed to stimulate demand, traditionally through advertising or special offers (Mariani, 2020; Stokes, 2018; Zhang et al., 2022). Modern tourism promotions have become increasingly embedded within digital ecosystems, with UGC displacing brand-created messaging as the dominant form of social proof (Mariani 2020; Moloi et al. 2022). This transition reflects changing consumer trust patterns, where peer recommendations now carry more weight than official brand communications (Moloi et al., 2022). Platform architecture also plays a crucial mediating role - algorithmic feeds on visual-first networks like Instagram privilege organic discovery over deliberate search, fundamentally altering promotion effectiveness metrics (Belanche et al., 2021; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Casaló et al., 2020). In emerging markets, these effects are

amplified by mobile-first internet access patterns and the cultural capital associated with social media participation (Kemp, 2022; Kemp, 2023). These shifts in promotional dynamics position UGC as a key authenticity signal that mediates how promotional exposure translates into consumer brand engagement.

2.3.3. Digital Marketing Decision-Making Role

Digital marketing is the promotion of a product or service using various techniques and strategies online where brands aim to connect with their target audience while providing a solution to a challenge they are facing (Moloi, 2022; Steenkamp, 2024; Zhang et al., 2022). As mentioned above, digital marketing channels have become the central nervous system of tourist decision journeys, serving simultaneously as information sources, social validation tools, and emotional triggers (Chitadze, 2023). The tourism sector presents unique digital marketing challenges due to its intangible service nature, requiring strategies that can simulate experiential attributes through mediated interactions (Uzoka, 2020; S. L. Vargo & Lusch, 2017; S. Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Verhoef et al., 2010). This gap underscores the importance of examining how UGC exposure, filtered through perceived authenticity, contributes to cognitive engagement in the South African tourism sector.

2.3.4. Social Media's Visual Influence

In tourism, social media refers to platform-based interactions that shape destination discovery and evaluation (Enberg, 2024; Ghaly, 2023; Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; WU, 2020). The recent boost of virtual communities, driven by the rapid expansion of social media and digital platforms, has fundamentally transformed consumer behaviour and reshaped online business strategies (Müller & Christandl, 2019). These virtual communities have been shaped by the ascendancy of visual social platforms which have fundamentally reconfigured tourism marketing's sensory landscape (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Fredericks, 2025; Gan et al., 2023; Joseph et al., 2024; Li et al., 2022). Neuroscientific research confirms that visual stimuli process 60,000 times faster than text, with emotionally charged images creating stronger memory imprints (Joseph et al., 2024). Platform algorithms compound this effect through preferential weighting of video content - TikTok's recommendation system, for

instance, increases reach for videos demonstrating high "rewatch" rates (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). For destination marketing organizations, this necessitates a strategic reorientation toward snackable, platform-native visual storytelling that can capitalise on these architectural biases (Mariani, 2020; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020; Steenkamp, 2024). The challenges are particularly acute for resource-constrained emerging market operators competing for attention in global digital spaces (Steenkamp, 2024). The dominance of visual social media therefore strengthens the role of visual UGC as an authenticity cue that can intensify affective and behavioural dimensions of consumer brand engagement.

2.3.5. User-generated content - UGC

Although UGC has been extensively examined in global tourism research, comparatively fewer studies have empirically explored how South African tourists interpret UGC authenticity and translate it into engagement outcomes. At the core of the recent digital evolution is UGC - a dynamic and influential form of consumer-driven media that encompasses online reviews, social media posts, travel blogs, and user-shared multimedia. Unlike traditional marketing content created by brands, UGC is voluntarily produced by consumers, often carrying a higher degree of perceived authenticity and trustworthiness (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Demba, 2016).

UGC represents tourism marketing's most potent asset and its most significant challenge (Mariani, 2020). While UGC delivers unparalleled authenticity and social proof (Bandinelli, 2020; Lou et al., 2023; Napoli et al., 2014), its participatory nature creates inherent tensions - most notably the well-documented "participation inequality" where 90% of users consume without contributing (Harrigan et al., 2018). Financial risk perception appears to be a key differentiator in engagement depth, with high stakes purchases like accommodation and travel driving more active UGC verification behaviours (Ayeh, 2013). Conversely, experiential decisions like activity selection show persistent reliance on professional advice, suggesting enduring limitations to UGC's category applicability (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Accordingly, UGC is conceptualised in this study as a foundational antecedent whose influence on engagement is contingent on perceived authenticity.

2.3.6. Branding in the Digital Tourism Ecosystem

Modern tourism branding is a dynamic, digitally mediated process where customers co-create meaning through UGC and platform interactions, going beyond conventional logo-and-slogan techniques (Bugrova, 2023; Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020). This change is especially noticeable globally, where algorithmic platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are redefining control over brand narratives (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Fredericks, 2025). Instead of dictating their image, destinations now have to negotiate it amid a deluge of user-generated images and reviews (Fredericks, 2025). Brand recognition, image, equity, and engagement are increasingly influenced by algorithmic favoritism (Demba, 2016; Naem & Okafor, 2019) and organic UGC visibility, as the digital ecosystem has democratized branding and made it a participatory endeavour. In this participatory branding environment, UGC functions as a key mechanism through which authenticity perceptions are formed and subsequently expressed through consumer brand engagement.

Brand Awareness in Digital Environments

Brand awareness in tourism measures consumer recognition and recall of destination offerings (Thompson & Malaviya, 2013). The shift from search-based to recommendation-driven discovery has profound implications for brand awareness building (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Algorithmically curated feeds privilege content demonstrating high engagement velocity, creating a "rich get richer" dynamic for tourism brands that master platform-specific virality triggers (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022). This represents both opportunity and threat - while organic reach potential has never been higher, the barriers to achieving cut-through have similarly escalated (Thompson & Malaviya, 2013). Brand awareness generated through UGC exposure thus represents an early cognitive engagement outcome shaped by authenticity assessments.

Brand Image Co-Creation

Brand image represents consumer perceptions shaped through cumulative marketing interactions (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020). Contemporary brand image formation has become a collaborative process between organizations and consumers (Harrigan et al., 2018). UGC's

authenticity makes it particularly influential in shaping destination perceptions, often overriding official marketing narratives (Asyraff et al., 2024; Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020). However, this co-creation is inherently unstable as platform algorithms may amplify unrepresentative content, while cultural differences in expression styles can distort brand image across markets (Mariani, 2020). These co-creation processes highlight how authentic peer-generated content influences affective and cognitive engagement with tourism brands.

Brand Equity in Digital Contexts

Brand equity quantifies the added value derived from consumer-brand relationships (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Digital engagement metrics are increasingly recognised as leading indicators of brand equity in tourism (Rather et al., 2024). The challenge lies in converting short-lived interactions into enduring value - a process requiring consistent experience delivery across both digital and physical touchpoints (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2010). Emerging market brands face additional hurdles in this translation, particularly when competing against global players with superior resource endowments (Burgess et al., 2009). From an engagement perspective, brand equity accumulation is strengthened when authentic UGC encourages repeated cognitive, emotional, and behavioural interactions.

Brand Engagement

Brand engagement captures the depth of consumer-brand interactions beyond transactional metrics (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2016; Naem & Okafor, 2019; Rather et al., 2022; Verhoef et al., 2010). Modern brand engagement transcends simple metrics like likes or shares, instead representing a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions (Harrigan et al., 2018). The tourism sector's unique characteristics - particularly the lag between inspiration and consumption - create distinctive engagement patterns that require specialised measurement approaches (Li et al., 2022). Platform architecture further mediates these relationships, with different social networks fostering distinct engagement cultures (Mariani, 2020). This study therefore adopts a multidimensional view of CBE to capture how authentic UGC influences cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement in tourism.

Synthesising the reviewed literature, this chapter establishes UGC as a primary engagement stimulus, perceived authenticity as the central evaluative mechanism, and consumer brand engagement as the multidimensional outcome, thereby providing a coherent theoretical and empirical foundation for the conceptual model tested in this study.

2.4. Conceptualisation of Key Constructs

The following section leans heavily on existing literature to expand on the themes presented above and present a deeper dive into the study's main constructs namely UGC, CBE, and perceived authenticity.

2.4.1. Independent Variable: User-Generated Content (UGC)

Given its pivotal role in shaping brand perceptions and influencing purchasing decisions, UGC has become an essential area of study in digital marketing and consumer engagement research (Stokes, 2018). The increasing reliance on peer-generated recommendations and experiential narratives has altered how consumers interact with brands, particularly in experience-based industries such as tourism (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Stokes, 2018). However, the extent to which exposure to UGC directly affects CBE remains an area that requires deeper empirical exploration. Understanding the mechanisms through which UGC exposure is linked to cognitive, emotional/affective, and behavioural engagement with brands is crucial for businesses aiming to optimise their digital strategies.

This chapter critically examines the empirical literature on UGC, assessing its impact on consumer engagement within the South African tourism sector. It explores key theoretical underpinnings, empirical findings, and methodological approaches that have been used to study UGC's role in shaping consumer interactions with brands. By reviewing existing studies, this section aims to provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding the relationship between UGC exposure and brand engagement, while also identifying gaps that this study seeks to address. In this study, UGC is therefore conceptualised as the primary antecedent that initiates engagement processes, whose influence on consumer brand engagement is mediated through perceived authenticity.

<u>Defining UGC</u>

UGC refers to content created and shared online by users, as opposed to professional content creators (Bandinelli, 2020; Demba, 2016; Ngwenya, 2021; Tripathi, 2020). It encompasses various formats, including text-based content on blogs and forums, visual content like photos and videos shared on social media platforms, and more (Müller & Christandl, 2019). Essentially, UGC represents a form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) that carries

significant weight in online communication (Jalilvand et al., 2013; Morhart et al., 2015; Pourfakhimi et al., 2020).

For the purpose of this paper UGC is specifically defined as non-commercial content (photos, videos, reviews) created by tourists and shared on digital platforms (e.g., Instagram, TripAdvisor). Furthermore, the study refers to UGC as visual, textual, or video content created by non-commercial users and categorised below:

- Photos (in this context) is used to refer to static images shared on (but not exclusive to) Instagram or Facebook.
- Videos (in this context) is used to refer to short clips posted on (but not exclusive to) Instagram, Facebook, TikTok or YouTube.
- And finally, 'reviews' is used to refer to text-based evaluations on (but not exclusive to) TripAdvisor or Google Reviews.

The Power of UGC

The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies transformed internet users from passive consumers to active creators (Mariani, 2020; Minnaert, 2014). This shift empowered users to generate and share information, making them valuable sources of online content. Research suggests that consumers often perceive UGC as more objective and trustworthy than professionally produced content, attributing greater influence to recommendations and experiences shared by peers (Mariani, 2020; Minnaert, 2014). As social media platforms continue to expand, UGC has become a primary source of information for consumers making decisions, impacting everything from purchasing choices to travel planning and hotel selections (Dong et al., 2023).

Social Media and UGC

Social media platforms, particularly social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, have become powerful channels for UGC and brand-related information (Bertot et al., 2012; Demba, 2016). These sites allow individuals to connect, share experiences, and learn from each other's interactions with brands. For businesses, the significance of UGC lies in its ability to shape consumer perceptions through word-of-mouth and social influence (Demba, 2016). Consumers often trust peer recommendations and content marketing more than traditional advertising, making UGC a valuable tool for building brand relationships and fostering customer loyalty.

Word-of-Mouth Marketing

Word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing, traditionally defined as personal communication between consumers about products or services, has long been recognised as a powerful marketing tool (Wetzer et al., 2007). In the digital age, this concept has evolved into electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), encompassing online reviews, social media discussions, and online brand communities (Jalilvand et al., 2013; Pourfakhimi et al., 2020; Wetzer et al., 2007). Research consistently highlights the significant influence of WOM, both positive and negative on consumer decision-making (Jalilvand et al., 2013; Wetzer et al., 2007). Consumers often perceive WOM as more credible and trustworthy than traditional advertising, as it represents the unfiltered opinions and experiences of peers (Pourfakhimi et al., 2020).

Recent research delves deeper into the nuances of WOM in the digital landscape. Studies by Pourfakhimi et al., (2020) explore the role of social media marketing in fostering WOM and building stronger customer relationships. Additionally, Liu et al., (2020) emphasises the importance of WOM valence, highlighting the impact of both positive and negative online sentiment on brand perception. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for businesses to leverage the power of WOM effectively.

Source Credibility

Credibility, according to O'Keefe (2002), is determined by perceivers' assessments of the communicators' plausibility. In the case of the study, the credibility “trustworthiness” and “expertise” are the most relevant dimensions (Ayeh et al., 2013). The trustworthiness of a source is related to its ability to communicate assertions they regard as “most valid [true],” while expertise refers to the extent to which UGC contributors are perceived as “sources of valid assertions [truth]” (Hovland et al., 1953). Placing “trustworthiness” and “expertise” as key dimensions of credibility allows research to explore how influential users or reputable platforms can influence CBE.

According to Metzger et al. (2003), there are three distinct ways to approach the concept of credibility; medium credibility, message credibility, and source credibility. Furthermore, medium credibility refers to the degree of trustworthiness that people attach to a particular communication medium, such as the internet, television, or newspapers. Credibility of a message is defined as an individual's assessment of the message's correctness and quality. Last

but not least, the perceived competence or dependability of the source to provide reliable information defines its credibility.

Content Quality

Content quality refers to the inherent characteristics and attributes of UGC, such as its relevance, accuracy, comprehensiveness, and presentation (To & Lai, 2015). High-quality UGC is characterised by informative, well-written, and visually appealing content that provides valuable insights and guidance to consumers. The significance of studying content quality lies in understanding how the quality of UGC affects consumer engagement with tourism brands. By assessing content quality, the study can examine the role of UGC characteristics in shaping CBE within the South African tourism industry.

In addition to studying source credibility, including perceived authenticity and content quality as variables in this study, bolsters the research's contribution to the understanding of how UGC influences CBE. Examining perceived authenticity helps to determine the extent to which consumers trust and rely on UGC in their engagement with tourism brands. Assessing content quality provides insights into the factors that make UGC valuable and influential in driving consumer engagement. By understanding these variables, the study can identify strategies for tourism brands in South Africa to optimise the authenticity and quality of UGC, ultimately enhancing CBE and fostering positive brand-consumer relationships.

2.4.2. Dependent Variable/Outcome Variable: Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE)

As a result of a literature search that focused on engagement behaviour in tourism specifically on social media, the study's contextual contribution was strengthened by including relevant studies that incorporate social media marketing in hospitality, as well as general consumer engagement. Adopting this approach ensured relevant literature published in other specialist fields was not overlooked; for example engagement behaviour research within a general strategic marketing journal. Based on the surveyed literature there seems to be a lack of consensus regarding the appropriate definition, forms and operationalisation.

For the purposes of this study the researcher refers to Vivek's definition of consumer engagement as "The intensity of an individual's participation and connection with the organisation's offerings and activities initiated by either the customer or the organisation"

(Vivek et al., 2012). This all-encompassing term with various dimensions, can be further split into elements such as brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand advocacy, and consumer interaction with the brand through behaviours such as likes, sharing, website visits, commenting, and recommending (Vivek et al., 2012). For the purposes of this study, research focuses on online consumer interaction behaviours as the most relevant dimension of consumer engagement. Visual UGC is thus positioned as a key authenticity signal that strengthens affective, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions of consumer brand engagement.

Online and Offline Brand Engagement

The rise of the digital landscape has fundamentally reshaped how consumers interact with brands. While traditional offline brand engagement relied heavily on in-person interactions and physical touchpoints, online engagement leverages the power of the internet to foster connections. Understanding the key differences between these two spheres is crucial for tourism brands in South Africa to develop holistic strategies that cater to diverse consumer preferences.

Offline interactions often involve face-to-face communication with salespeople or customer service representatives. This allows for personalised service, building rapport, and addressing specific needs in real-time (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). However, online engagement can sometimes lack this level of personalisation. While chatbots and virtual assistants are becoming increasingly sophisticated, they may not always replicate the warmth and human connection of an offline interaction (Demmers et al., 2020).

Online platforms provide a wealth of information readily available to consumers. Websites, social media pages, and online reviews offer detailed descriptions of products and services, allowing for convenient research and comparison shopping (Sibanda, 2023). Conversely, offline information provision often relies on brochures, pamphlets, or interactions with salespeople. While these resources can be valuable, they may be limited in scope compared to the vast amount of information available online.

Online shopping offers a convenient and efficient buying experience. Consumers can browse products from the comfort of their homes and complete transactions with a few clicks. However, this can lack the sensory experience associated with offline shopping. Consumers

cannot physically examine products or experience the ambience of a store (Lee et al., 2022; Sibanda, 2023).

The abundance of information online can be overwhelming for consumers, leading to analysis paralysis and difficulty making decisions (Sibanda, 2023). Conversely, offline interactions with salespeople can provide guidance and recommendations, simplifying the decision-making process. Additionally, consumers are increasingly concerned about online privacy and security risks associated with sharing personal information or engaging in online transactions. Conversely, offline interactions often provide a greater sense of security as data exchange can be more controlled.

Online platforms foster the creation of virtual communities around brands, allowing consumers to connect with each other, share experiences, and build a sense of belonging (Demmers et al., 2020). Offline communities can be established through loyalty programs or in-person events, though their reach may be more limited compared to online communities (Demmers et al., 2020).

Business-to-Consumer and Business-to-Business

Understanding the fundamental differences between Business-to-Consumer (B2C) and Business-to-Business (B2B) markets is crucial when exploring relationship marketing strategies in the tourism industry. This section delves into existing literature highlighting these distinctions across key themes.

B2C markets cater directly to individual consumers, offering products and services for personal use (Lee et al., 2022; Sibanda, 2023). Tourism products like accommodation, tours, and experiences fall under this category. In contrast, B2B markets involve transactions between businesses (Sibanda, 2023). Within tourism, this could encompass airline partnerships with hotels or travel agencies collaborating with tour operators. B2B products are often complex, requiring more technical specifications and longer sales cycles.

Relationship marketing strategies differ based on the target audience. B2C marketing focuses on building relationships with individual consumers, often appealing to emotions and personal needs (Sibanda, 2023). Tourism brands leverage UGC and emotional storytelling to connect with potential travellers. Conversely, B2B marketing targets businesses with a focus on logic,

rational decision-making, and long-term partnerships (Sibanda, 2023). Tourism brands engaging with B2B partners may emphasise cost-effectiveness, reliability, and the ability to deliver a seamless experience for their clients.

B2C purchase journeys tend to be shorter and more impulsive, influenced by emotions and social proof (Demmers et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2010). Online travel platforms and user reviews significantly impact B2C tourism decisions. B2B purchase journeys are often more complex and formalised, involving multiple decision-makers, extensive research, and cost-benefit analyses (Sibanda, 2023). Agreements between airlines and hotels, for instance, might involve lengthy negotiations and detailed service level agreements.

Social media plays a significant role in both B2C and B2B relationship marketing, but with distinct applications. In B2C tourism, social media is a powerful tool for customer engagement, brand storytelling, and influencer marketing (Cheng et al., 2021; Naem & Okafor, 2019). Consumers actively research destinations and brands through social media platforms. Furthermore, In the B2C context, social media research largely focuses on examining the external market voice (e.g., UGC) from consumer sentiment perspectives (Cheng et al., 2021). On the other hand, B2B social media usage focuses on building industry relationships, generating leads, and showcasing expertise (Cheng et al., 2021; Creevey et al., 2019; Sibanda, 2023). Tourism brands may use LinkedIn to connect with travel agencies or industry partners.

Finally, B2C advertising in tourism often utilises emotional appeals, visual imagery, and persuasive storytelling to capture consumer attention (Creevey et al., 2019). Travel brands leverage various advertising channels like television, social media, and travel websites to reach potential customers. B2B advertising is more targeted and information-driven, focusing on industry publications, trade shows, and specialised online platforms (Sibanda, 2023). For example, tourism brands might advertise in travel trade magazines to reach potential B2B partners.

Business-to-Consumer (B2C)

Consumers today have unprecedented access to information and choices. Online platforms allow them to research products, compare prices, and read reviews before making purchasing decisions (Sibanda, 2023). Focusing on B2C engagement empowers brands to connect directly with consumers, influencing their perceptions and purchase behaviour.

Effective B2C online engagement goes beyond simply selling products. It fosters emotional connections with consumers, building brand loyalty and advocacy. By creating interactive experiences, responding to feedback, and fostering a sense of community, brands can cultivate a loyal customer base that is linked to repeat business and positive word-of-mouth marketing (Sibanda, 2023).

Social media platforms have created vibrant online communities around various interests and product categories. B2C engagement allows brands to participate in these communities, leveraging UGC for social proof and building trust with potential customers (Sibanda, 2023). Engaging with consumers in these online spaces allows brands to understand their needs and preferences better, ultimately informing product development and marketing strategies.

B2C online engagement strategies enable businesses to collect valuable consumer data on preferences, online behaviour, and past purchases. This data can be used to personalise marketing campaigns, tailor product recommendations, and deliver targeted messaging that resonates with individual consumers (Demmers et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2010). By fostering B2C engagement, brands can create a more relevant and enriching customer experience, leading to increased conversions and customer satisfaction.

Brand and Branding

A central theme in understanding consumer engagement is the concept of brand. Keller & Swaminathan (2020) defines a brand as a "name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of these, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors." Simply put, a brand is a recognisable entity that embodies the product or service a company offers.

Beyond simple identification, brands hold significant value for both businesses and consumers. A strong brand can command premium prices, attract and retain customers, and foster brand loyalty (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020; Sibanda, 2023). Furthermore, a positive brand image can lead to increased brand advocacy, where consumers actively recommend the brand to others (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020; Sibanda, 2023). For consumers, strong brands provide a sense of trust, quality assurance, and a consistent experience.

A key element of branding is the brand promise. This refers to the specific value proposition a brand communicates to its target audience (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). The brand promise outlines what the brand stands for, the benefits it delivers, and the overall experience consumers can expect. A strong brand promise is clear, consistent, and resonates with the target audience's needs and aspirations.

Brand equity refers to the intangible value associated with a brand. It encompasses consumer perceptions, brand loyalty, and the overall positive associations consumers have with the brand (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Strong brand equity can be a significant competitive advantage, allowing brands to charge premium prices, attract top talent, and expand into new markets. Building brand equity requires a consistent and long-term approach to branding that delivers on the brand promise.

In conclusion, understanding the concept of brand and its various components - brand value, brand promise, and brand equity - is crucial for businesses to develop effective marketing strategies and foster meaningful customer engagement.

Consumer Engagement

Consumer engagement is a core concept within relationship marketing, focusing on building long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with consumers (Pop et al., 2022). It goes beyond simply making a sale; it's about creating a positive and interactive experience that fosters brand loyalty and advocacy.

Consumer engagement is not a one-time event; it's an ongoing process that unfolds throughout the customer journey. Scholars (Demmers et al., 2020; Eslami et al., 2022; Malthouse et al., 2016; Vivek et al., 2012) often categorise this process into the following three stages.

1. Pre-purchase Engagement

This stage involves activities that build brand awareness, generate interest, and educate consumers about the brand's offerings. Examples include social media interactions, informative blog posts, and engaging content marketing campaigns.

2. Purchase Engagement

This stage focuses on facilitating a smooth and positive buying experience. This may involve offering helpful customer service, providing personalised recommendations, and ensuring a seamless checkout process.

3. Post-purchase Engagement

The relationship doesn't end after the purchase. Building loyalty requires continued engagement through post-purchase activities like loyalty programs, feedback surveys, and personalised email marketing campaigns.

The concept of the consumer engagement cycle illustrates this ongoing process. Visualised as a circular model, it emphasises the cyclical nature of engagement, where each stage influences the next. Positive experiences at each touchpoint can lead to increased engagement and ultimately drive customer loyalty and advocacy.

Consumer engagement is fundamentally multifaceted, encompassing various aspects of the consumer experience. First and foremost, Behavioural engagement, this refers to observable actions consumers take that demonstrate their involvement with the brand (Demmers et al., 2020; Pop et al., 2022). Examples include visiting a brand's website, participating in online communities, or making repeat purchases. Secondly there is emotional engagement, this dimension focuses on the emotional connection consumers have with the brand. Positive emotions like trust, excitement, and brand love can lead to deeper engagement and loyalty. Finally, there is cognitive engagement, this refers to the mental processing consumers undertake when interacting with a brand. This includes actively seeking information about the brand, evaluating product features, and forming brand perceptions.

Understanding these different dimensions allows brands to develop more holistic engagement strategies that cater to the various aspects of the consumer experience. By fostering a continuous cycle of engagement across these stages and dimensions, brands can build stronger relationships with consumers, drive customer loyalty, and achieve long-term success.

Consumer Brand Engagement

CBE is a critical concept for businesses navigating the digital landscape. Hollebeek's framework (2016) offers a valuable lens for examining this multifaceted phenomenon

(Hollebeek et al., 2016). It extends beyond traditional Customer Engagement (CE) by specifically focusing on the brand itself and the emotional connection consumers form with it (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2016).

Hollebeek's framework identifies three key dimensions driving CBE: cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement. Cognitive engagement involves the intellectual processing consumers undertake when interacting with a brand, including information seeking, brand evaluation, and belief formation (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2016). Online platforms like brand websites and informative blog posts play a significant role in facilitating this dimension. Emotional engagement emphasises the emotional connection consumers have with the brand. Social media marketing strategies that leverage UGC and emotional storytelling can cultivate deeper brand connections in the online sphere. Finally, behavioural engagement refers to observable actions that demonstrate consumer involvement with the brand (Hollebeek et al., 2016). Online CBE manifests through website visits, social media interactions, online reviews, and ultimately, online purchases (Malthouse et al., 2016). Brands can encourage this dimension through interactive website features, loyalty programs rewarding online activity, and social media campaigns incentivising user participation.

CBE vs. CE: A Distinction

While related, CBE differs from traditional consumer engagement. Consumer engagement focuses on the overall customer experience across all touchpoints, including interactions with salespeople, product quality, and customer service. In contrast, CBE specifically emphasises the brand itself and the emotional connection consumers form with it.

The Online Landscape and CBE

The digital landscape offers unique opportunities for fostering CBE. Here's how Hollebeek's framework applies to online brand engagement:

In the digital landscape, various platforms contribute to CBE. Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, for example, enable two-way communication, fostering emotional connections through brand storytelling, UGC campaigns, and community building. Websites also play a role by facilitating cognitive engagement (Brodie et al., 2013; Duh & Mayayise, 2023; Hollebeek et al., 2016; Pereira et al., 2022). A well-designed website with informative content, clear navigation, and interactive features can influence brand perceptions by allowing

consumers to easily find the information they need and engage with the brand in a meaningful way. Finally, online brand communities create a space for social interaction and emotional engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2016). Brands can leverage these communities to build trust, address concerns, and foster a sense of belonging among consumers. By utilising these different online avenues, brands can create a more holistic and engaging CBE experience.

By understanding the online dimensions of CBE and leveraging the affordances of digital platforms, brands can create a more holistic and engaging online customer experience, ultimately driving brand loyalty and business growth.

Illusion of Familiarity and Consumer Brand Engagement

Whittlesea's (1993) seminal work on the illusion of familiarity demonstrates that consumers often mistake repeated exposure to a stimulus for genuine familiarity. This cognitive bias has significant implications for understanding CBE in tourism marketing, particularly in how UGC shapes traveller perceptions and behaviors. The theory suggests that people are more likely to engage with brands or destinations they perceive as familiar, yet this familiarity often stems from mere repeated exposure rather than actual prior experience (Whittlesea, 1993).

In the context of UGC and tourism, this illusion helps explain why frequent encounters with travel-related content can foster a false sense of familiarity with a destination. When consumers are repeatedly exposed to visual UGC such as travel photos or destination videos, they begin to feel acquainted with locations they have never visited (Brodie et al., 2013). This illusory familiarity can translate into stronger emotional connections, as consumers develop affective responses to what they believe they already "know" (Lee et al., 2022). The effect is particularly pronounced when the content comes from peer sources rather than commercial entities, as peer-generated material is typically perceived as more authentic and trustworthy (Moloi, 2023).

The psychological mechanism behind this phenomenon suggests that perceived authenticity plays a crucial mediating role in the relationship between UGC exposure and consumer engagement. When travellers encounter relatable content from fellow tourists - such as personal blogs or unfiltered reviews - they are more likely to internalize the information as credible, further reinforcing the illusion of familiarity. Over time, this perception of authenticity can reduce psychological barriers to engagement, making consumers more inclined

to interact with content, seek additional information, or consider visiting the destinations portrayed (Herzberg, 1966).

For tourism marketers, these insights highlight the importance of strategic UGC distribution in building consumer engagement. The illusion of familiarity created through repeated exposure to visually rich, peer-generated content can effectively drive engagement behaviours, even among consumers with no direct experience of a destination. However, it is important to recognise that such engagement may reflect cognitive biases rather than deep brand loyalty. Understanding these psychological mechanisms provides valuable insight into how UGC influences consumer perceptions and behaviours in the digital tourism landscape.

Concluding Remarks

This research investigates CBE in South Africa's tourism industry, focusing on online interactions. The study defines CBE as the intensity of a consumer's online connection with a brand, measured through website visits, social media activity, and online reviews.

The research explores the multifaceted nature of CBE, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions. Cognitive engagement involves information processing through websites, while emotional engagement is fostered by social media strategies that leverage storytelling and UGC. Finally, behavioural engagement is reflected in online interactions and purchases, encouraged by interactive websites, loyalty programs, and social media campaigns (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2016). Understanding these online dimensions of CBE is crucial for tourism brands seeking to build stronger relationships with consumers and drive business growth in the digital age.

2.4.3. Mediating Variable: Perceived Authenticity

Perceived authenticity is a critical factor influencing how consumers interpret and engage with UGC. It encompasses consumers' subjective evaluations of the genuineness and credibility of the content they encounter (Jabado, 2023; Mathur et al., 2022; Morhart et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2021). Understanding its dimensions and influence is essential for comprehending how UGC affects CBE. Perceived authenticity is therefore positioned as the

central mediating mechanism through which UGC exposure is translated into cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement.

Defining Perceived Authenticity

Perceived brand authenticity refers to consumers' subjective evaluation of the genuineness and credibility of UGC, influencing their trust in and engagement with a brand (Morhart et al., 2015; Lariba, 2023). It is a multidimensional construct encompassing four key dimensions: credibility, integrity, symbolism, and continuity.

Credibility is a cornerstone of perceived authenticity in UGC, as it pertains to the believability and trustworthiness of the content. For UGC to be perceived as authentic, it must be seen as unbiased and representative of real consumer experiences rather than manipulated or fabricated marketing messages. This is particularly important in an era where consumers are increasingly sceptical of traditional advertising and seek genuine, peer-driven insights. Research by Flanagin and Metzger (2008) highlights that credibility is often assessed through the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the source, as well as the transparency of the content's origins. When UGC is perceived as credible, it fosters trust among consumers, enhancing its influence on their decision-making processes. For instance, reviews and testimonials that appear genuine and free from corporate influence are more likely to resonate with audiences, as they align with the consumer's desire for unfiltered, real-world perspectives (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Thus, credibility ensures that UGC is not only consumed but also valued as a reliable source of information.

Integrity plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of authenticity, as it reflects the consistency between the content and the values it conveys. Authentic UGC must align with consumer expectations and ethical standards, ensuring that the content does not deviate from the principles it claims to uphold. This alignment is critical in maintaining consumer trust, as any perceived discrepancy between the content and the brand's stated values can lead to accusations of inauthenticity or even deception. According to Beverland et al. (2008), brands that demonstrate integrity in their communications are more likely to build long-term relationships with consumers, as they are seen as honest and principled. For example, when UGC reflects a brand's commitment to sustainability or social responsibility, it reinforces the

brand's ethical stance and resonates with like-minded consumers (Demba, 2016; Morhart et al., 2015). Integrity, therefore, serves as a bridge between the brand's identity and the consumer's values, fostering a sense of shared purpose and mutual respect.

Symbolism is a key dimension of perceived authenticity, as it relates to how well the content represents the brand's identity and ethos. Authentic UGC often serves as a symbolic representation of the brand, reinforcing emotional connections between the consumer and the brand. This symbolic alignment is crucial in creating a cohesive brand narrative that resonates with consumers on a deeper, more personal level. As noted by Lou et al. (2023), symbolism in UGC can evoke powerful emotional responses, as it taps into the consumer's desire for meaningful and relatable content. For instance, when UGC showcases real-life experiences that embody the brand's core values - such as adventure for an outdoor apparel brand or creativity for a design platform - it strengthens the brand's identity and fosters a sense of community among its audience. Symbolism, therefore, transforms UGC from mere content into a powerful tool for brand storytelling and emotional engagement.

Finally, continuity is essential for maintaining perceived authenticity over time, as it speaks to the brand's ability to ensure that its messaging and consumer interactions remain coherent and aligned with its established identity. Authenticity is not a static attribute but rather a dynamic process that requires consistent effort to uphold. Brands must ensure that their UGC reflects a continuous and evolving narrative that stays true to their core values and identity, even as consumer preferences and market trends change (Napoli et al., 2014). According to Napoli et al. (2014 & 2016), continuity in brand messaging fosters a sense of reliability and predictability, which are key to building and maintaining consumer trust. For example, a brand that consistently promotes inclusivity and diversity in its UGC over time will be perceived as more authentic than one that sporadically adopts such themes (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014, Napoli et al., 2016). Continuity, therefore, ensures that the brand's authenticity is not only established but also sustained, creating a lasting impression on consumers (Napoli et al., 2014, 2016).

These dimensions collectively shape consumer perceptions of authenticity, influencing their willingness to engage with and advocate for a brand. In digital marketing and tourism contexts,

perceived authenticity plays a critical role in mediating how UGC affects consumer-brand engagement (Park et al., 2021). Studies suggest that higher perceived authenticity enhances consumer trust, strengthens emotional bonds, and increases the likelihood of brand loyalty (Park et al., 2021). Given the proliferation of UGC across social media and online review platforms, brands must actively manage authenticity by fostering genuine consumer interactions, encouraging transparent storytelling, and maintaining consistency in their digital presence.

Perceived Authenticity in Digital Marketing and Social Media

In the digital marketing era, perceived authenticity has emerged as a crucial determinant of consumer attitudes and behaviours toward brands. Consumers are increasingly sceptical of brand-created content and tend to place greater trust in peer-generated reviews, testimonials, and visual content shared on social media platforms (Lariba, 2023; Naem & Okafor, 2019; Ramayah et al., 2020; Sukontip et al., 2024). Studies show that perceived authenticity significantly influences eWOM credibility and purchase intention (Liu et al., 2020; Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). Moreover, the algorithmic curation of social media content can either enhance or undermine authenticity, depending on how organic and transparent the content appears to users (Liu et al., 2020).

Psychological Mechanisms of Perceived Authenticity

Perceived authenticity moderates the effect of UGC on CBE through various psychological mechanisms. One key mechanism is cognitive trust, where consumers assess the realism and credibility of UGC before forming an emotional attachment to the brand (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Another is emotional resonance, which occurs when consumers relate to UGC on a personal level, fostering deeper engagement (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Additionally, self-congruence theory suggests that consumers engage more with brands whose UGC aligns with their self-identity and personal values (Rivera et al., 2019).

Comparisons with Other Emerging Markets

Perceived authenticity significantly influences UGC and its impact on consumer behaviour across various global tourism markets. Research indicates that cultural context, information quality, and source credibility are pivotal in shaping these perceptions.

In Latin America, the local cultural context heavily influences the perceived authenticity of UGC (Barredo-Ibáñez et al., 2020; Lariba, 2023). Content that resonates with regional traditions and societal norms tends to be perceived as more authentic, thereby enhancing consumer trust and engagement (Barredo-Ibáñez et al., 2020; Lariba, 2023). This underscores the importance for brands to tailor their UGC strategies to align with the cultural nuances of their target audiences.

Furthermore, In Southeast Asia (particularly Malaysia) the quality of information in UGC plays a crucial role in shaping destination image and influencing tourist behaviour (Asyraff et al., 2024). A study examining UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Malaysia found that both factual and emotional content in UGC positively affected tourists' perceptions and loyalty behaviours (Asyraff et al., 2024). Notably, emotional content had a more substantial impact, highlighting the power of storytelling and personal experiences in conveying authenticity (Xu et al., 2023).

In Egypt, the credibility of social media travel influencers significantly affects Generation Z's intention to visit a destination (Ghaly, 2023). However, this demographic considers UGC more credible than influencer-generated content, suggesting a preference for peer reviews and authentic experiences over potentially sponsored content. This finding emphasises the need for brands to encourage genuine customer reviews and interactions to build trust with younger audiences (Ghaly, 2023).

Beyond emerging markets, similar patterns emerge. In China, research on a cultural World Heritage Site revealed that UGC indirectly influences tourist loyalty by affecting destination image and satisfaction. Both factual and emotional UGC positively impacted tourists' perceived value of the destination, with emotional content having a greater influence. This underscores the universal importance of authenticity in UGC across diverse markets (Xu et al., 2023).

These insights highlight that while perceived authenticity is universally vital, its determinants - such as cultural alignment, information quality, and source credibility - vary across different

markets. Brands must consider these factors when developing UGC strategies to effectively engage

Practical Implications for Tourism and Marketing

Understanding perceived authenticity has significant practical implications for tourism brands and marketers. To enhance authenticity, brands should encourage user storytelling rather than overt promotional messaging, ensuring that UGC aligns with real consumer experiences (Chitadze, 2023). Additionally, brands must maintain transparency in influencer partnerships to avoid perceived inauthenticity that could damage credibility. Incorporating AI-driven authenticity verification mechanisms may further help in maintaining trustworthiness in UGC-based marketing campaigns (Chitadze, 2023; Sukontip et al., 2024).

Challenges in Maintaining Perceived Authenticity

Despite its advantages, maintaining perceived authenticity presents several challenges. The commodification of authenticity, where brands attempt to manufacture "real" experiences, can lead to consumer scepticism and reduced engagement (Ramayah et al., 2020; Sukontip et al., 2024). Additionally, the proliferation of deepfake technology and AI-generated content raises ethical concerns about the manipulation of authenticity (Okolie, 2023). As consumer awareness grows, brands must adopt ethical content curation strategies to sustain authenticity over time.

Future Research

Future research on perceived authenticity could explore its evolving role in the context of AI-generated content and virtual influencers (Okolie, 2023). Additionally, longitudinal studies could examine how authenticity perceptions shift over time and how they impact long-term brand loyalty. Further exploration into the interplay between perceived authenticity and different UGC formats (short-form videos vs. written reviews) would provide valuable insights into optimising engagement strategies.

Concluding Remarks

This subsection points out how important perceived authenticity is for engaging consumers with UGC in South Africa's tourism industry. This section touched on four main aspects: credibility, integrity, symbolism, and continuity. Together, these factors help build consumer trust, emotional connections, and loyalty to brands. Authentic UGC connects better with consumers by matching their expectations, supporting ethical brand values, and keeping a consistent brand message over time.

Perceived authenticity isn't just talk; it offers practical tips for tourism marketers. Encouraging real stories from consumers, being open about influencer partnerships, and using AI to check for authenticity can boost trust and engagement. That said, there are challenges, like the commercialisation of authenticity and the threat of 'deepfake' technology, which means marketers need solid ethical strategies to keep consumer trust.

While this research gives a good starting point for understanding perceived authenticity, there are still gaps. Future studies should look into how views on authenticity change over time, how AI-generated content affects things, and how different types of UGC can keep consumers engaged. Tackling these issues will improve marketing strategies in a digital world where consumers are more sceptical.

Ultimately, perceived authenticity is key to successful content marketing. Brands that focus on real interactions with consumers and remain transparent will build trust and gain an edge in South Africa's busy tourism market. As the digital landscape changes, authenticity will keep playing a vital role in creating meaningful and long-lasting relationships between consumers and brands.

Section 2.5. and figure 4 below depict the conceptual model with the hypothesised relationships.

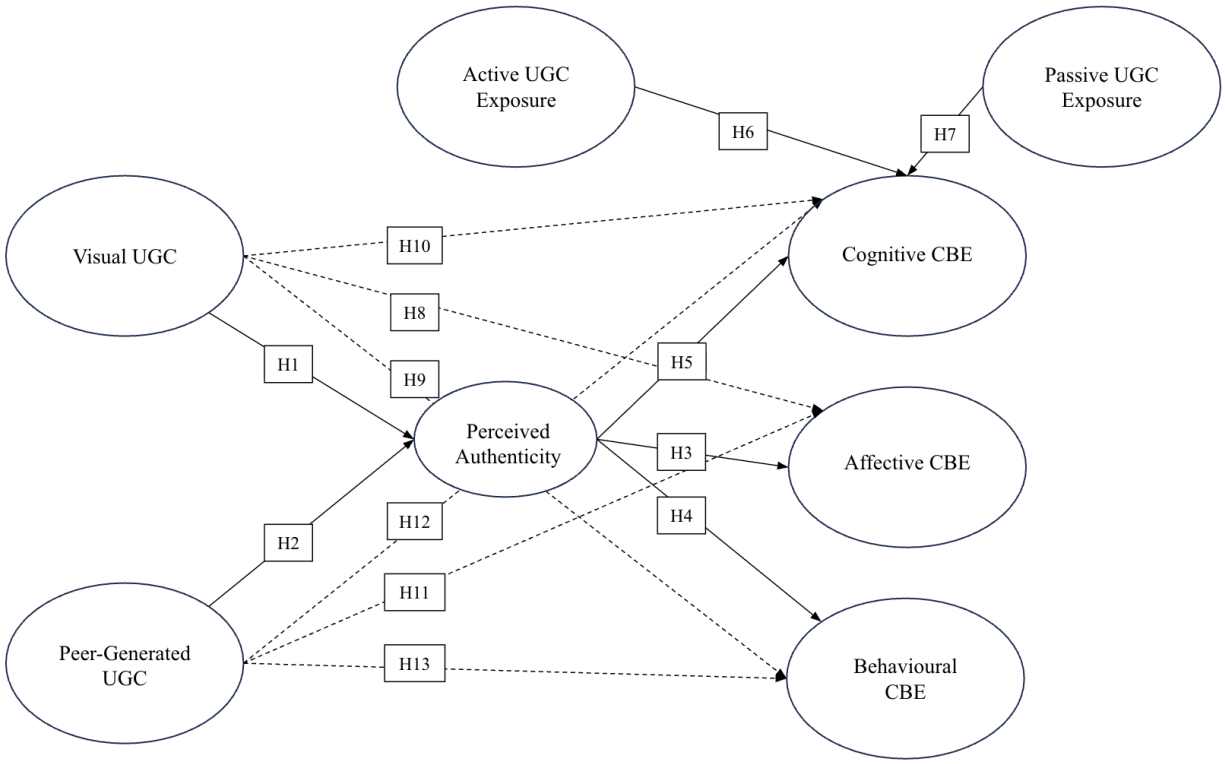
2.5. Conceptual Framework

Serving as the foundation for any research study, a conceptual framework illustrates the expected relationships between key variables and provides a structured lens through which the research questions can be addressed (Keller, 1993; Swaen & George, 2022). It defines the

relevant objectives of the research process and maps out how these objectives interrelate to draw coherent and meaningful conclusions (Swaen & George, 2022). In the context of this study, a robust conceptual framework is particularly critical because the tourism industry is inherently complex, with multiple stakeholders, diverse consumer behaviours, and a growing reliance on digital platforms for marketing and communication. Without a well-defined conceptual framework, the study risks becoming fragmented, making it difficult to isolate the specific dynamics between UGC and CBE or to generalise findings effectively. Moreover, a robust conceptual framework ensures that the study remains focused and methodologically sound. It guides the selection of appropriate research methods, data collection techniques, and analytical tools, ensuring that the study's findings are both valid and reliable. In the South African context, where tourism is a significant contributor to the economy, understanding how UGC influences CBE can provide actionable insights for tourism marketers and policymakers.

Figure 4: Conceptual Framework

Source: Adapted from Ayeh et al., (2013); Bandinelli (2020); Bryant & Karasek (2012); Cox et al., (2009); Davcik et al., (2022); Demba (2016); Hollebeek et al. (2016); Malthouse et al., (2016); Metzger et al., (2003); Moloi et al., (2022); Morhart et al., (2015); Naem & Okafor (2019); Ngwenya (2021); Park et al., (2021); Ruiz-Real et al., (2020); Spence (1973); Statista



Research Department (2022); Statista Research Department (2023); Sweeney & Soutar, (2001); Thompson & Malaviya (2013); Tripathi (2020); Tsiakali (2018) and Verhoef et al., (2010).

The conceptual framework for the research study is structured around three key variables: the independent variable being UGC; the mediating variable being perceived authenticity; and the dependent variable CBE. As depicted in figure 4 above UGC is further characterised as:

1. Active UGC Exposure
2. Passive UGC Exposure
3. Visual UGC
4. Peer-Generated UGC

Furthermore, the paper filters CBE into the following buckets (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2016):

1. Cognitive CBE
2. Affective or Emotional CBE
3. Behavioural CBE

Below the directional paths indicated in figure 4 above are expanded upon:

Direct Paths

The direct paths in the model represent relationships where one construct has an immediate, unmediated effect on another.

- The direct arrow from Visual UGC to Perceived Authenticity represents H1, indicating the hypothesised positive relationship whereby visual content enhances perceptions of authenticity, as explained in depth in section 2.6.
- The direct arrow from Peer-Generated UGC to Perceived Authenticity represents H2, indicating the hypothesised positive relationship whereby content from peers builds credibility and genuineness, as explained in depth in section 2.6.
- The direct arrow from Perceived Authenticity to Affective CBE represents H3, indicating the hypothesised positive relationship whereby authenticity fosters an emotional connection to the brand, as explained in depth in section 2.6.
- The direct arrow from Perceived Authenticity to Behavioural CBE represents H4, indicating the hypothesised positive relationship whereby authenticity motivates active behaviours like sharing and purchasing, as explained in depth in section 2.6.
- The direct arrow from Perceived Authenticity to Cognitive CBE represents H5, indicating the hypothesised positive relationship whereby authenticity captures mental attention and brand-related thinking, as explained in depth in section 2.6.
- The direct arrow from Active UGC Exposure to Cognitive CBE represents H6, indicating the hypothesised positive relationship whereby active engagement with UGC directly stimulates cognitive processing, as explained in depth in section 2.6.
- The direct arrow from Passive UGC Exposure to Cognitive CBE represents H7, indicating the hypothesised positive relationship whereby passive exposure to UGC enhances familiarity and cognitive engagement, as explained in depth in section 2.6.

Indirect Paths

The indirect paths in the model represent the proposed mediating role of Perceived Authenticity. These dashed arrows illustrate the hypothesis that UGC influences CBE by first creating a sense of authenticity.

- The indirect arrow from Visual UGC to Affective CBE (via Perceived Authenticity) represents H8, indicating that the effect of visual content on emotional engagement is mediated by authenticity, as explained in depth in section 2.6.
- The indirect arrow from Visual UGC to Behavioural CBE (via Perceived Authenticity) represents H9, indicating that the effect of visual content on active behaviours is mediated by authenticity, as explained in depth in section 2.6.
- The indirect arrow from Visual UGC to Cognitive CBE (via Perceived Authenticity) represents H10, indicating that the effect of visual content on mental engagement is mediated by authenticity, as explained in depth in section 2.6.
- The indirect arrow from Peer-Generated UGC to Affective CBE (via Perceived Authenticity) represents H11, indicating that the effect of peer content on emotional engagement is mediated by authenticity, as explained in depth in section 2.6.
- The indirect arrow from Peer-Generated UGC to Behavioural CBE (via Perceived Authenticity) represents H12, indicating that the effect of peer content on active behaviours is mediated by authenticity, as explained in depth in section 2.6.
- The indirect arrow from Peer-Generated UGC to Cognitive CBE (via Perceived Authenticity) represents H13, indicating that the effect of peer content on mental engagement is mediated by authenticity, as explained in depth in section 2.6.

As discussed above UGC refers to any form of content, such as images, videos, text, and reviews, created and shared by consumers rather than brands themselves. In the context of this study research focuses on the power of visual UGC such as travel photos, video reviews of tourist attractions, and personal stories about travel experiences posted on social media or travel websites. This content plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and providing potential travellers with firsthand insights and experiences from fellow consumers, which are often perceived as more relatable and trustworthy than traditional marketing materials (Gan et al., 2023; Joseph et al., 2024). Furthermore, peer-generated content created by non-commercial users (e.g., personal travel blogs, Reddit posts, or Facebook reviews). Peer-generated content is

distinguished as another UGC dimension explored. This type of UGC is rooted in source credibility theory which helps to explain that peer-generated content is perceived as more trustworthy than branded content (Demba 2019; Moloi, 2023). And that this content can mirror "real" consumer experiences (e.g., budget travel tips or candid cultural interactions).

Perceived authenticity acts as a mediating variable in this framework. Authenticity refers to the degree to which the content is perceived as genuine, credible, and trustworthy by consumers (Bandinelli, 2020; Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014, 2016). In the context of UGC, perceived authenticity can be influenced by various factors such as the sincerity of the content, the absence of commercial motives, and the consistency with the user's personal experiences or expectations. When UGC is perceived as authentic, it can significantly enhance its persuasive power, making it more likely to influence consumer attitudes and behaviours (Napoli et al., 2014, 2016).

The dependent variable, CBE, encompasses the various ways consumers interact with a brand. This includes cognitive, affective/emotional, and behavioural dimensions of engagement, such as liking, commenting, sharing content, participating in brand-related conversations, and developing a sense of loyalty or advocacy towards the brand (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2016). In the tourism industry, high levels of brand engagement can translate to increased interest in visiting destinations, positive word-of-mouth, and ultimately, higher visitation rates.

The connection between these variables is central to understanding the dynamics of digital marketing in the tourism sector. UGC serves as a primary source of information and inspiration for potential tourists. When such content is perceived as authentic, it enhances the credibility and attractiveness of the information presented, leading to a higher likelihood of consumer engagement with the brand and/or content. Therefore, perceived authenticity moderates the impact of UGC on CBE, amplifying or diminishing the effect based on how genuine the content appears to the audience.

In summary, the framework posits that UGC significantly influences CBE in the South African tourism industry, and this relationship is moderated by the perceived authenticity of the content. UGC dimensions are divided into UGC exposure frequency, visual UGC, and peer-generated UGC. Whereas CBE is divided into cognitive CBE, affective/emotional CBE, and behavioural CBE. By understanding these connections, tourism marketers can better strategise

their campaigns, leveraging authentic UGC to foster deeper and more meaningful engagement with their audience.

2.6. Hypotheses Development

This section outlines the theoretical foundations and hypotheses guiding the study, which explores the relationship between UGC, perceived authenticity, and CBE in the South African tourism industry. Drawing on Hollebeek's CBE Theory, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Frameworks, Social Influence Theory, and Source Credibility Theory, this study proposes thirteen hypotheses that address how UGC influences CBE and how perceived authenticity indirectly mediates this relationship. These hypotheses are grounded in established theoretical frameworks discussed below.

2.6.1. Theoretical Underpinnings

The study is anchored in four key theoretical frameworks (discussed below), each of which provides a unique lens for understanding the relationship between UGC, perceived authenticity, and CBE. These theories are explicitly tied to the proposed hypotheses, ensuring a robust theoretical foundation for the research.

Hollebeek's theory posits that consumer engagement encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions, which are influenced by interactions between consumers and brands (Hollebeek et al., 2016). In the context of this study, UGC serves as a catalyst for fostering deeper connections between consumers and tourism brands. By providing relatable and immersive content, UGC stimulates cognitive processing - for example thinking about a destination - emotional responses (e.g., feeling inspired or connected), and behavioural actions (e.g., liking, sharing, or commenting on content). This theory directly supports hypotheses discussed below.

Furthermore, eWOM frameworks emphasise the role of peer-to-peer communication in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviours (Jalilvand et al., 2013; Morhart et al., 2015; Pourfakhimi et al., 2020). UGC, as a form of eWOM, provides first hand insights and experiences that are often perceived as more trustworthy and relatable than brand-generated content. This framework supports hypotheses discussed below by explaining how UGC exposure frequency influences consumer engagement. Additionally, this eWOM aids this research when exploring

the relationship between UGC and CBE through the dissemination of authentic, visual and peer-endorsed information.

As discussed above, social influence theory highlights the power of peer-endorsed content in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviours (Friedkin, 1998; Kelman, 1961; Liu et al., 2020) . In the context of UGC, consumers are more likely to engage with content that reflects the experiences and opinions of their peers. This theory especially reinforces the hypotheses discussed below by explaining how peer-generated UGC leverages social influence to drive engagement.

Finally, source credibility theory underscores the importance of perceived authenticity in enhancing the persuasiveness of communication (Ayeh et al., 2013; Demba, 2016; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Metzger et al., 2003). When UGC is perceived as genuine and credible, it amplifies its impact on consumer engagement. This theory directly supports the hypotheses development which posits that perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between visual UGC and affective CBE, as well as the relationship between peer-generated UGC and behavioural CBE.

All these theoretical frameworks work in tandem to provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation for understanding how UGC is linked to CBE in South African tourism. Hollebeek's multidimensional engagement theory establishes the cognitive, affective/emotional, and behavioural pathways through which UGC fosters connections between consumers and brands. eWOM frameworks explain how peer-generated content enhances trust and relatability, while social influence theory explains the mechanisms by which UGC leverages peer endorsement to shape attitudes and behaviours. Finally, source credibility theory underscores the pivotal role of perceived authenticity in amplifying UGC's persuasive power, providing critical support for hypotheses discussed below.

Together, these theories not only validate the hypothesised relationships but also contextualise them within the unique dynamics of tourism consumption, where experiential decision-making heightens reliance on authentic, visually rich and socially validated content.

Having touched on the theoretical underpinnings that anchor this research the paper will now build robust hypotheses to be tested in the study.

2.6.2. Hypotheses Development

Building on the theoretical foundations outlined above, this study proposes the following hypotheses.

Direct Effects

H1: Visual UGC and Perceived Authenticity

It is hypothesised that visual UGC (e.g., photos, videos) directly influences perceptions of authenticity. The null hypothesis (H_0) posits that no significant relationship exists between visual UGC and perceived authenticity. Conversely, the alternative hypothesis (H_1) proposes that dynamic, user-generated visual content amplifies perceived authenticity by providing realistic, unfiltered, and credible depictions of tourism experiences, which are paramount for destination evaluation (Joseph et al., 2024).

H2: Peer-Generated UGC and Perceived Authenticity

Peer-generated UGC (e.g., reviews, blogs from non-influencers) is theorised to directly enhance perceived authenticity. Against H_0 (no significant effect), H_1 contends that content created by peers heightens perceived authenticity due to its inherently non-commercial, unbiased, and relatable nature, fostering a level of trust that branded content cannot replicate (Demba, 2016).

H3: Perceived Authenticity and Affective CBE

Perceived authenticity is expected to directly drive affective engagement. H_0 assumes no significant link, while H_1 states that heightened perceived authenticity intensifies emotional connections (e.g., enjoyment, passion, enthusiasm) with a tourism destination. This aligns with arguments that authenticity is a key driver of emotional resonance in experiential consumption contexts (Napoli et al., 2014; 2016).

H4: Perceived Authenticity and Behavioural CBE

A direct causal pathway is proposed from perceived authenticity to behavioural engagement. Whereas H_0 implies no significant relationship, H_1 maintains that authenticity increases

behavioural intentions (e.g., sharing content, writing reviews, booking trips) by reducing perceived risk and acting as a psychological enabler for concrete actions (Herzberg, 1966).

H5: Perceived Authenticity and Cognitive CBE

It is hypothesised that perceived authenticity directly influences cognitive consumer brand engagement. Prior studies indicate that authentic content enhances consumers' attention, information elaboration, and brand-related thinking, as individuals are more likely to cognitively process information they perceive as credible and genuine (Napoli et al., 2014; Hollebeek et al., 2016). In digital tourism contexts, authenticity has been shown to strengthen mental involvement and brand learning (Rather et al., 2022).

H6: AUF_UGCExp and Cognitive CBE

It is hypothesised that active exposure to UGC directly influences cognitive CBE. Empirical research suggests that deliberate information-seeking behaviours -such as actively searching for reviews, photos, or travel experiences - encourage deeper cognitive processing and greater brand-related knowledge acquisition (Ayeh et al., 2013; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Active engagement with UGC has also been linked to higher levels of brand-related reflection and evaluation (Harrigan et al., 2018).

H7: PUF_UGCExp and Cognitive CBE

It is hypothesised that passive exposure to UGC directly influences cognitive CBE. Although passive consumption involves lower intentional effort, repeated incidental exposure through algorithmic feeds has been shown to enhance brand familiarity and awareness over time (Verhoef et al., 2010). In tourism contexts, visually rich and frequently encountered UGC can subtly stimulate destination-related thinking even in the absence of deliberate search behaviour (Mariani, 2020; Casaló et al., 2020).

Indirect Effects

The model further proposes that Perceived Authenticity serves as a critical mediating mechanism, translating exposure to UGC into active brand engagement.

H8: Visual UGC → Authenticity → Affective CBE

It is hypothesised that perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between visual UGC and affective CBE. Visual UGC has been shown to evoke strong emotional responses, particularly when images or videos are perceived as genuine representations of lived

experiences (Joseph et al., 2024; Li et al., 2022). Empirical studies demonstrate that authenticity enhances emotional attachment, excitement, and affective engagement with tourism brands (Rather et al., 2022).

H9: Visual UGC → Authenticity → Behavioural CBE

It is hypothesised that perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between visual UGC and behavioural CBE. Authentic visual content has been found to increase behavioural intentions such as sharing, commenting, booking, and recommendation (Casaló et al., 2020). When visual UGC is perceived as authentic, consumers are more likely to translate emotional reactions into action-oriented engagement behaviours (Rather et al., 2022).

H10: Visual UGC → Authenticity → Cognitive CBE

It is hypothesised that perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between visual UGC and cognitive CBE. Visual stimuli increase attention and memory retention (Joseph et al., 2024), while authenticity enhances message elaboration and brand-related cognition (Napoli et al., 2014). In tourism settings, authentic visual content has been shown to stimulate destination learning and evaluative thinking (Li et al., 2022).

H11: Peer-Generated UGC → Authenticity → Affective CBE

It is hypothesised that perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between peer-generated UGC and affective CBE. Peer content is widely regarded as more trustworthy and emotionally resonant than brand-generated messages (Ayeh et al., 2013; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). When peer-generated UGC is perceived as authentic, it has been shown to strengthen emotional attachment and affective engagement with tourism destinations (Rather et al., 2022).

H12: Peer-Generated UGC → Authenticity → Behavioural CBE

It is hypothesised that perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between peer-generated UGC and behavioural CBE. Empirical studies show that trustworthy peer reviews and shared experiences significantly influence booking intentions, recommendations, and content-sharing behaviours (Lou et al., 2023). Authenticity strengthens this effect by reducing perceived risk and increasing behavioural confidence (Rather et al., 2022).

H13: Peer-Generated UGC → Authenticity → Cognitive CBE

It is hypothesised that perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between peer-generated UGC and cognitive CBE. Peer-generated content encourages reflective thinking, comparison,

and destination evaluation, particularly when perceived as credible and sincere (Ayeh et al., 2013; Harrigan et al., 2018). Authentic peer narratives enhance brand-related learning and mental engagement in tourism decision-making (Napoli et al., 2014; Rather et al., 2022).

2.6.3. Concluding Remarks

By integrating Hollebeek's CBE Theory, eWOM Frameworks, Social Influence Theory, and Source Credibility Theory, this study provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding the relationship between UGC dimensions, perceived authenticity, and CBE. The 13 proposed hypotheses not only address critical gaps in the literature but also offer practical insights for marketers seeking to leverage UGC to foster deeper and more meaningful engagement with their audience.

2.7. Concluding Remarks

By exploring these theoretical foundations on which this study is built, this research gains a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between UGC dimensions, perceived authenticity and CBE. Hollebeek's CBE Theory, eWOM Frameworks, Social Influence Theory, and Source Credibility Theory provide a solid background to explore the relationship between UGC and CBE, contributing to a deeper understanding of consumer behaviour and engagement with tourism brands in the digital era.

By examining the above-mentioned mediating variable, this research aims to gain a deeper understanding of how individual and situational factors can influence the relationship between UGC exposure frequency, visual UGC and peer-generated UGC as well as brand engagement among South African tourists and tourism consumers. This knowledge can empower the industry to develop targeted strategies to leverage UGC effectively and cultivate deeper customer connections in various consumer segments within the local tourism industry.

The following chapter will explore the methodological approach used to investigate the relationship between UGC dimensions, perceived authenticity and CBE.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter details the methodology employed to investigate the relationship between UGC and CBE in South Africa's tourism industry. The study is guided by Saunders et al.'s (2019) *Research Onion*, a framework that structures methodological decisions across six layers: (1) research philosophy, (2) research approach, (3) research strategy, (4) methodological choices, (5) time horizon, and (6) techniques and procedures. By aligning with this framework, the research ensures methodological rigor, transparency, and coherence all rooted in existing literature.

3.1.1. Research Onion Framework

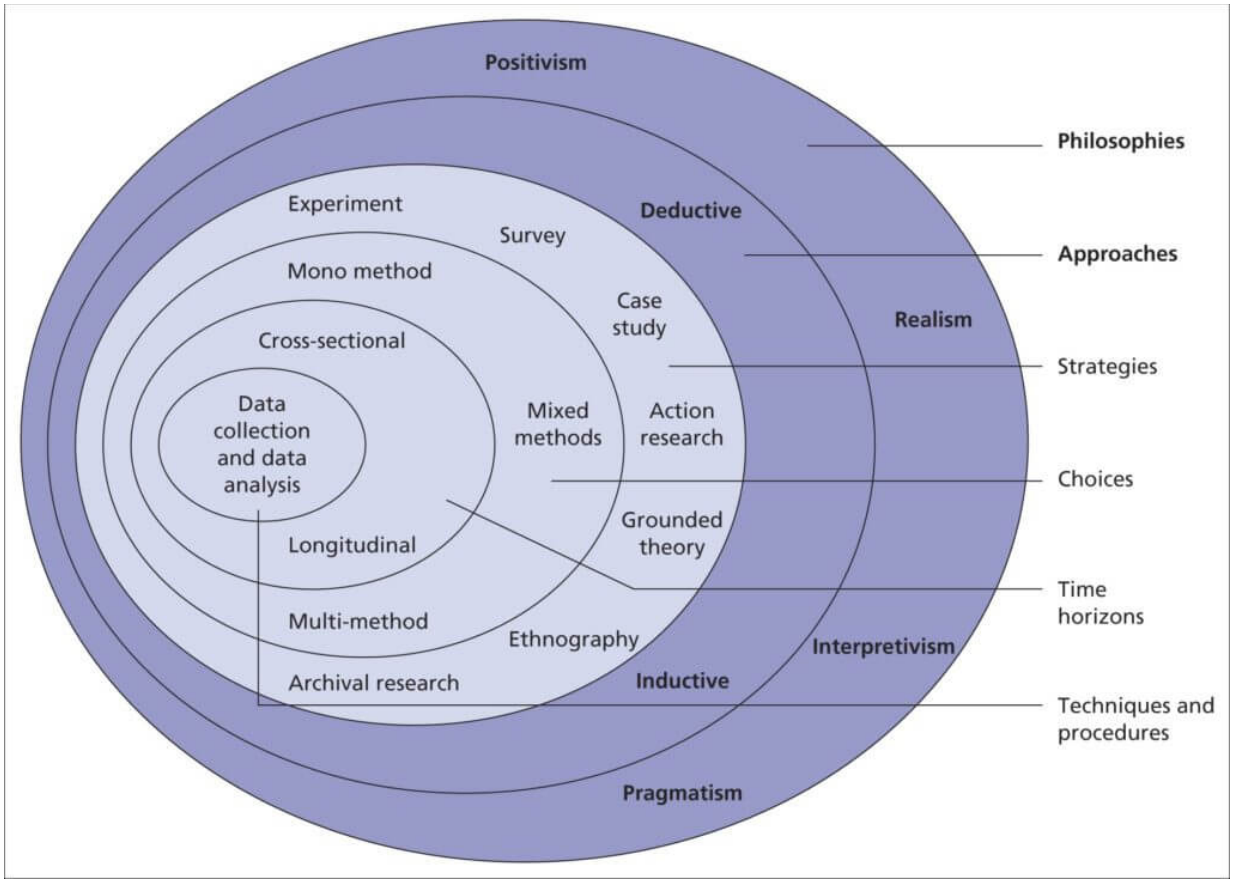
Saunders' Research Onion (2019) provides a systematic process for designing research methodologies. Each layer informs subsequent decisions, ensuring alignment between the study's objectives and its execution.

At its core, the framework begins with research philosophy, which establishes the epistemological assumptions underpinning the study (Saunders et al., 2019). For instance, a positivist philosophy, as adopted in this research, emphasises observable, measurable evidence and aligns with the objective of quantifying relationships between variables. Moving outward, the research approach determines whether the study follows deductive or inductive reasoning. A deductive approach, as employed here, tests predefined hypotheses derived from existing theory, ensuring a structured and theory-driven investigation.

The next layer, research strategy, involves selecting the most appropriate methods for data collection, such as surveys, case studies, or experiments (Saunders et al., 2019). In this study, a cross-sectional survey strategy was chosen to efficiently gather quantitative data from a broad sample, facilitating statistical generalisation. The methodological choices layer then refines this strategy by deciding between mono-method, mixed-method, or multi-method designs. This research adopts a mono-method quantitative design, prioritising numerical data to maintain consistency with its positivist foundations.

Subsequently, the time horizon defines whether the study is cross-sectional, capturing data at a single point in time, or longitudinal, tracking changes over an extended period (Saunders et al., 2019). Given the focus on analysing UGC's immediate impact on CBE, a cross-sectional approach was deemed most suitable. Finally, the outermost layer, techniques and procedures, specifies the practical tools and processes for data collection and analysis. This includes the use of structured online surveys, statistical software such as SmartPLS 4 and SPSS, and pilot testing to ensure instrument reliability (Ringle et al., 2024). By adhering to this framework (see table 1 below) the study ensures methodological coherence, transparency, and rigour, while providing clear justifications for each decision within the research design (Saunders et al., 2019).

Figure 5: The Research Onion Model



Source: Saunders et al. (2019)

Table 1: Adapted Research Onion for This Study

Research Layer	This Study's Adaptation	Justification
Philosophy	Positivism	Ensures objective, empirical analysis
Approach	Deductive	Tests hypotheses from existing theory
Strategy	Cross-sectional survey	Balances scale and efficiency
Choices	Mono-method	Aligns with positivist principles
Time Horizon	Cross-sectional	Fits SA post-pandemic UGC-CBE snapshot
Techniques/Procedures	Online survey, pilot study, SEM	Ensures reliability and statistical rigor

Source: Saunders et al. (2019)

3.2. Research Philosophy

As indicated in Table 1, this study is underpinned by a positivist research philosophy. Positivism emphasises the use of objective, observable, and measurable data to generate knowledge through systematic empirical inquiry (Saunders et al., 2019). Within this paradigm, phenomena are examined using structured methods that allow for statistical analysis and hypothesis testing, enabling researchers to identify patterns and relationships within data (Weber, 2004).

The nature of the research problem and objectives supports the adoption of positivism in this study. Specifically, the study seeks to examine the relationships between user-generated content (UGC), perceived authenticity, and consumer brand engagement (CBE) within the South African tourism context. A positivist approach is therefore appropriate, as it facilitates the testing of theoretically derived hypotheses using quantitative data and allows for the examination of associations between constructs in a systematic and replicable manner.

In line with this philosophical stance, the study employs a structured survey instrument to collect quantifiable data from tourism consumers and applies statistical modelling techniques to analyse these relationships. Rather than exploring subjective meanings or individual narratives, the research focuses on identifying measurable patterns in how different forms of UGC exposure are associated with perceived authenticity and the cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of engagement. This aligns with positivism's emphasis on empirical observation and theory testing.

The use of statistical analysis within a positivist framework enables the study to assess the strength and significance of relationships between variables, thereby contributing empirical evidence to the existing literature on digital tourism marketing (Malthouse et al., 2016). While the findings do not imply causality, they provide valuable insight into how UGC-related factors are associated with engagement outcomes within the study context.

Benefits of Using Positivism

The adoption of positivism offers several advantages for this research. First, its emphasis on objectivity supports the generation of reliable and consistent findings, which is particularly important when examining marketing phenomena that inform managerial decision-making (Saunders et al., 2019). Second, positivism's focus on measurability enables the quantification

of key constructs such as authenticity perceptions and engagement dimensions, allowing relationships to be tested using established statistical techniques. Finally, although constrained by sampling and contextual factors, a positivist approach allows the findings to offer indicative insights that may be relevant to similar tourism settings within South Africa.

Limitations of Positivism

Despite these advantages, positivism also presents limitations in the context of this study. Its focus on objective measurement limits the ability to capture the subjective meanings and emotional nuances through which consumers interpret UGC (Saunders et al., 2019). Additionally, the reliance on self-reported survey data may not fully reflect the depth of individual experiences or the cultural complexities that shape engagement behaviour in diverse tourism contexts such as South Africa. These limitations suggest that complementary qualitative approaches could provide richer interpretive insights in future research.

In summary, the positivist paradigm provides a coherent philosophical foundation for the study's quantitative, hypothesis-driven design. It directly informs the choice of survey methodology, measurement instruments, and statistical analysis techniques employed in this research. Accordingly, the following section outlines the methodological procedures adopted to operationalise this philosophical stance and empirically examine the proposed relationships between UGC, perceived authenticity, and consumer brand engagement

3.3. Research Methodology/Paradigm

As mentioned above, this study adopts a mono-method quantitative research methodology to empirically examine the relationships between UGC and CBE in the South African tourism industry (Saunders et al., 2019). Rooted in a positivist paradigm, the research emphasises objectivity, generalisability, and hypothesis testing through structured data collection and statistical analysis. This aligns with the study's goal of identifying causal relationships and patterns in UGC-driven engagement, while adhering to principles of measurable, replicable inquiry (Hair et al., 2013).

Research Paradigm

The research follows a deductive approach, beginning with hypotheses about UGC's influence on CBE. These hypotheses are tested using SEM, a robust statistical technique that evaluates complex relationships between observed and latent variables (Kline, 2015). SEM is particularly suited to this study, as it allows for simultaneous testing of multiple pathways - such as direct and indirect effects of UGC on cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement - while accounting for measurement error (Akinremi, 2024; Hair et al., 2013; Sarstedt et al., 2022).

The methodology unfolds systematically across four key stages to ensure rigorous investigation of the relationship between UGC and CBE. First, the hypotheses formulation establishes the theoretical foundation by proposing specific relationships between UGC dimensions (authenticity, volume, frequency, platform etc.) and CBE components, as conceptualised by Hollebeek et al. (2016). This stage anchors the study in existing literature, ensuring testable predictions about how UGC influences cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement.

Next, data collection involves administering a structured online survey to a sample of tourists across South Africa. The survey employs validated scales to measure participants' UGC consumption habits and engagement behaviours, ensuring reliability and comparability with prior research. This phase prioritises methodological precision, using standardised instruments to capture quantitative data reflective of real-world UGC interactions.

The third stage, data analysis, applies SEM to empirically test the hypothesised relationships. Analytical procedures include assessments to measure the validity and reliability of constructs and path analysis to assess direct and indirect effects between UGC and CBE. Advanced

statistical techniques, such as evaluation of model fit indices ensure robustness in identifying significant pathways.

Finally, interpretation synthesises the analytical outcomes to draw theoretically and practically meaningful conclusions. By contextualising statistical findings - such as the strength and direction of UGC's impact - within Hollebeek's (2016) engagement framework, the study clarifies how specific UGC features drive brand engagement.

This stage bridges empirical results with managerial implications, offering actionable insights for tourism marketers while advancing academic discourse on UGC's role in consumer behaviour.

Strengths of the Proposed Methodology and Paradigm

This research harnesses the strengths of a quantitative approach to ensure objectivity, measurability, generalisability, and hypothesis testing, all crucial aspects for generating reliable and impactful findings.

Objectivity is achieved using structured data collection and analysis techniques, minimising the influence of personal biases and enhancing the trustworthiness of the research findings. This objectivity is particularly valuable when investigating complex human behaviour, as it reduces the risk of subjective interpretations swaying the research conclusions (Hair et al., 2013). Furthermore, the focus on measurable data allows for a clear and quantifiable assessment of UGC's impact on brand engagement. By employing metrics like website traffic, social media interactions, or purchase intentions, the research can translate the influence of UGC into concrete numbers, enabling a precise evaluation of its effectiveness in driving brand engagement.

The research also benefits from the generalisability inherent in the deductive approach and statistical methods (Kline, 2015). By following a structured framework and employing robust statistical analysis, the research findings transcend the specific sample studied and can be applied to a broader context within the South African tourism industry. This broader applicability allows the researcher to make a more significant contribution to the field by informing strategies and practices across a wider range of tourism brands.

Finally, the hypothesis-driven approach provides a clear roadmap for investigating the causal relationship between UGC and brand engagement. By formulating specific hypotheses about the expected influence of UGC, the research can systematically test these relationships and draw conclusions about cause and effect. This structured approach ensures a focused and rigorous investigation, leading to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which UGC shapes CBE in the South African tourism industry.

Limitations of the Proposed Methodology and Paradigm

While a positivist quantitative study offers a structured and rigorous approach, this research acknowledges its limitations to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between UGC and CBE in the South African tourism industry.

One potential limitation lies in the overemphasis on quantifiable data (Hair et al., 2013; Sarstedt et al., 2022) This focus, while providing valuable insights, may overlook the subjective aspects of consumer behaviour and perceptions related to UGC. Consumers may have nuanced emotional responses, cultural influences, and personal experiences that influence their engagement with UGC, which might not be fully captured by solely quantitative methods.

Furthermore, the deductive approach inherent in positivism might not fully capture the nuances of UGC's influence within the specific context of the South African tourism industry (Saunders et al., 2019; Weber, 2004). The industry operates within a unique cultural, social, and technological landscape that can shape how consumers interact with and respond to UGC. A purely deductive approach might miss these contextual factors, potentially leading to findings that are not fully generalisable within the South African context.

Finally, the reliance on statistical analysis can potentially oversimplify complex social phenomena (Creswell, 2009). While statistical methods provide valuable insights into trends and relationships, they might miss the subtle interactions and influences that play out in real-world scenarios. Consumers' engagement with UGC can be influenced by a multitude of factors, some of which may be difficult to capture or quantify through statistical analysis alone.

To address these limitations and enhance the overall research process, the following recommendations are suggested.

Mixed methods approach

Exploring a mixed-method approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods would provide a more comprehensive understanding of UGC's influence (Creswell, 2009). This may allow for the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research to be leveraged, painting a more nuanced picture of the relationship between UGC and brand engagement (Creswell, 2009). Due to resource and time constraints research however sticks to a strictly quantitative approach. Further research would do well to conduct a mixed method approach.

Contextual analysis

Conducting a thorough analysis of the South African tourism industry's cultural, social, and technological factors can help contextualise the findings. By understanding the broader context within which consumers engage with UGC, the research can provide insights that are more relevant and applicable to the specific industry (Saunders et al., 2019). Research does a good job at exploring the in the context of the study section above. However, there is room for further research on this topic to explore a deeper dive into the cultural, social and technological context of the South African tourism industry.

By acknowledging the limitations of positivism and incorporating the suggested recommendations, the research can strive towards a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the influence of UGC on CBE in the South African tourism industry. This will ultimately lead to richer insights and more actionable strategies for tourism brands seeking to leverage the power of UGC in the post-pandemic era.

Alignment with Research Objectives

Finally, the adoption of SEM aligns robustly with the study’s objectives by enabling a systematic and nuanced exploration of the interplay between UGC and CBE. First, SEM provides the methodological rigor to test a comprehensive theoretical model that links specific UGC features - such as authenticity, volume, and platform type - to Hollebeek’s (2016) multidimensional CBE framework (cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement). By operationalising these constructs as latent variables, SEM accounts for measurement error and

validates the hypothesised relationships, ensuring the model's theoretical soundness (Akinremi, 2024; Hair et al., 2013).

Secondly, SEM's capacity to quantify mediation pathways allows the study to dissect complex causal mechanisms. For instance, it can empirically assess how social influence (e.g., peer recommendations) mediates UGC's impact on behavioural engagement, such as booking decisions or social media sharing, thereby clarifying the "how" behind observed effects.

Finally, SEM generates actionable insights for tourism brands by producing empirically validated relationships between UGC strategies and engagement outcomes. These findings, grounded in robust statistical evidence (Sarstedt et al., 2022), can inform targeted marketing interventions - such as optimising UGC campaigns to amplify affective engagement or leveraging influencer partnerships to strengthen cognitive resonance.

Collectively, SEM's ability to model intricate relationships, test moderation, and yield practical recommendations ensures the study not only advances academic understanding but also delivers tangible value to industry stakeholders in South Africa's dynamic tourism landscape.

3.4. Research Design

When considering the research design for this study, there are various research designs to consider. One relevant research design that is suitable for this study is a cross-sectional survey design.

A cross-sectional survey design involves collecting data from a sample of participants at a specific point in time (Saunders et al., 2019). It aims to gather information about the variables of interest and examine their relationships within the sample population (Creswell, 2009). In the context of this study, a cross-sectional survey design would be applicable for several reasons.

This survey design allows for the collection of data from a relatively large and diverse sample within a defined timeframe (Saunders et al., 2019). This design enables efficient data collection and provides a snapshot of the current status of UGC and CBE in the South African tourism

industry. Furthermore, the study aims to examine the influence of UGC on CBE. A cross-sectional survey design allows for the measurement of multiple variables related to UGC (such as content type, platform usage, and credibility) and CBE (including brand awareness, attitudes, loyalty, and advocacy) (Saunders et al., 2019). This design allows for the exploration of the relationships between these variables within the South African context. It is also believed that a cross-sectional survey design provides an opportunity to generalise the findings to a larger population (Creswell, 2009). By selecting a representative sample of participants from the target population of South African travellers and tourists, the study can make inferences about the broader population's UGC consumption behaviour and its impact on CBE in the tourism industry. Finally, the cross-sectional survey design generates quantitative data, which is well-suited for statistical analysis (Saunders et al., 2019). It enables the use of statistical techniques to examine associations, correlations, and patterns between UGC variables and CBE outcomes. The data analysis can provide valuable insights into the strength and direction of relationships, helping to identify significant factors and opportunities for South African tourism brands.

While a cross-sectional survey design offers valuable insights for this study, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. This design captures a snapshot in time, and causal relationships unfortunately cannot be established (Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases or inaccuracies. However, given the study's focus, a cross-sectional survey design allows for a comprehensive understanding of the relationships between variables in a large and diverse sample, contributing to the broader understanding of the research topic.

3.5. Population and Sample

The population for this study comprises individuals aged 18 years and older residing across the nine provinces of South Africa. The study sought to capture a broad range of perspectives by avoiding deliberate gender-based exclusion and by allowing participation from respondents with varying levels of exposure to tourism-related user-generated content (UGC). While the intention was to reflect diversity within the population, it is acknowledged that the sample does not constitute a statistically representative cross-section of all South African tourists.

From a methodological standpoint, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) requires an adequate sample size to ensure sufficient statistical power and model stability. Prior research suggests a minimum threshold of 200 cases, with larger samples improving the reliability of parameter estimates, particularly in complex models (Henseler et al., 2009; Hooper et al., 2007; Kline, 2015). Accordingly, this study achieved a final sample of 307 respondents, which was deemed appropriate given the number of constructs and relationships specified in the UGC–CBE model.

In terms of sampling approach, the study employed non-probability sampling methods, specifically convenience sampling and snowball sampling. These methods were selected due to practical considerations, including accessibility, time constraints, and the online nature of the data collection process (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020). Convenience sampling enabled efficient recruitment of respondents who were readily available, while snowball sampling facilitated access to additional participants through referral, particularly those with relevant tourism and digital media experiences.

While these non-probability techniques allowed for the collection of a diverse dataset, they also introduce important limitations. Because participants were self-selected and recruited online, the sample may overrepresent digitally active individuals and underrepresent tourists with limited internet access or lower engagement with online platforms. As a result, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than fully generalisable to the broader population of South African tourists (Hossan et al., 2023; Pallant, 2020). Furthermore, reliance on self-reported data raises the possibility of response and recall bias, as participants' reported behaviours and perceptions may not perfectly reflect actual engagement practices.

Despite these limitations, the chosen sampling strategy is considered appropriate for the exploratory and theory-testing objectives of the study. The sample size and diversity provide a sufficient basis for examining relationships between UGC exposure, perceived authenticity, and consumer brand engagement within a South African tourism context. However, caution is required when extending the findings beyond this specific sample, and future research employing probability-based sampling or mixed-method approaches is recommended to enhance generalisability.

In summary, the population and sampling approach adopted in this study aligns with the positivist, quantitative design and supports the use of SEM to test the proposed UGC–

authenticity–CBE relationships, while simultaneously underscoring the contextual and methodological boundaries within which the findings should be interpreted.

3.6. The Research Instrument

Research instruments are tools used for data collection once the boundaries of the sample are determined (Ragab & Arisha, 2017). Although there exist various instruments such as interviews and focus groups, in the case of quantitative studies, the instruments are typically designed to measure specific variables therefore the use of a survey questionnaire makes the most sense.

This research makes use of surveys as they involve the use of structured questionnaires to collect data from participants (Ragab & Arisha, 2017). The use of an online survey in the research process provides a systematic way to gather quantitative data on participants' perceptions, behaviours, and experiences related to UGC exposure and CBE. Furthermore, surveys allow for efficient data collection from a relatively large sample size, providing statistical insights and allowing for comparisons between different variables (Babin et al., 2012; Creswell, 2009; Ragab & Arisha, 2017).

In order to ensure ease of use for participants this study makes specific use of a 5-point likert scale as a form of survey instrument (Babin et al., 2012; Creswell, 2009; Ragab & Arisha, 2017). The online survey does not exceed 12 minutes completion time and utilises the following sections; introduction, cover letter, demographics, control variables, UCG exposure, CBE, perceived authenticity of UGC and conclusion.

3.7. Procedure for Data Collection

Data collection procedures refer to the methods and processes used to collect data from research participants. There are different data collection procedures available, including face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, online surveys, and self-administered questionnaires (Babin et al., 2012; Creswell, 2009; Ragab & Arisha, 2017). In the case of this study, the chosen data collection procedure is self-administered questionnaires.

Self-administered questionnaires involve providing participants with a questionnaire or survey instrument to complete on their own without direct involvement from the researcher. Participants are typically provided with a paper-based questionnaire or an online survey link, and they are responsible for reading and responding to the questions independently. Self-administered data collection is suitable for several reasons in this study. Self-administered questionnaires provide flexibility in terms of timing and location for participants (Saunders et al., 2019). They can complete the questionnaire at their convenience, whether at home, work, or any other preferred setting. Additionally, with self-administered questionnaires the researcher's presence is minimised, reducing the potential for researcher bias or influence on participant responses (Saunders et al., 2019). Participants have the freedom to express their genuine opinions and experiences without external influence, promoting more honest and unbiased responses. Self-administered questionnaires ensure greater confidentiality and anonymity for participants (Babin et al., 2012). They can feel more comfortable providing sensitive or personal information since their responses are not directly linked to their identity. Self-administered questionnaires offer a cost-effective and efficient method of data collection, particularly for resource-constrained research studies. Unlike face-to-face or telephone interviews, self-administered questionnaires eliminate the need for interviewer training, travel expenses, and scheduling complexities, significantly reducing the financial burden associated with data collection. This cost-effectiveness made self-administered questionnaires a practical choice for researchers operating within limited budgets.

Furthermore, self-administered questionnaires enable the collection of data from a geographically dispersed and diverse sample population. By circumventing the constraints of physical location, researchers can reach participants remotely and simultaneously, expanding the potential pool of respondents. This broader reach increases the likelihood of securing a larger and more representative sample, thereby enhancing the statistical power and generalisability of the study's findings (Ragab & Arisha, 2017).

In essence, self-administered questionnaires offer a combination of cost-efficiency and reach, making them an attractive option for researchers seeking to gather comprehensive and reliable data within resource constraints.

3.8. Data Analysis and Interpretation

This study employs a quantitative methodology to rigorously test hypotheses (H1, H2) about the relationship between UGC and CBE in the South African tourism industry. Data cleaning, coding, and analysis is conducted using SmartPLS 4 (for SEM, descriptive and inferential statistics) (Akinremi, 2024; Hair et al., 2013; Henseler et al., 2009; Hooper et al., 2007; Kline, 2015; Pallant, 2020; Sarstedt et al., 2022)

Data Preparation

Before analysis, the dataset underwent two critical preparation steps to ensure accuracy and reliability. First, data cleaning aimed to identify and correct errors such as duplicate entries or responses outside the valid range (e.g.,values exceeding a 5-point Likert scale). Missing data in Likert-scale responses has been addressed using multiple imputation in SPSS, a technique that estimates missing values based on observed patterns to minimise bias. Outliers, which may distort results, have been flagged using Mahalanobis distance in SmartPLS 4, a measure of multivariate normality (Ringle et al., 2024). Second, coding assigns numerical values to Likert-scale responses (e.g., 1 = “Strongly Disagree” to 5 = “Strongly Agree”) to facilitate statistical analysis.

Quantitative Analysis

The analysis begins with descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) to summarise key variables, including demographic variables (age and geographic location), UGC exposure (passive and active UGC exposure), perceived authenticity dimensions (credibility of reviews and content), and CBE metrics (social media interactions). This step provides a foundational understanding of the dataset and participant behaviours.

Next, the reliability and validity of measurement scales is assessed. Internal consistency of constructs, such as Morhart et al.’s (2015) authenticity dimensions, are tested using Cronbach’s alpha (α), with values above 0.7 indicating acceptable reliability. Convergent validity, which ensures that items measuring the same construct are closely related, have been confirmed if average variance extracted (AVE) exceeds 0.5. Discriminant validity, which confirms that constructs are distinct from one another, were evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, where the square root of AVE for each construct should exceed its correlations with other constructs.

To test H1 - which posits a relationship between UGC exposure and multidimensional CBE (cognitive, affective, behavioural) - the study employs Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4 (Ringle et al., 2024). PLS-SEM is chosen for its ability to handle complex models with multiple latent variables (e.g., "authenticity" or "trust") and its robustness to smaller sample sizes, making it ideal for exploratory research. A target sample of 307 respondents aligns with the "10-times rule," ensuring sufficient power to test the model's parameters (Akinremi, 2024; Hair et al., 2013). H2, which examines the mediating impact of perceived authenticity on the UGC-engagement relationship, was also analysed in SmartPLS 4 (Ringle et al., 2024).

Interpretation of Results

Statistical significance of relationships in H1 are determined using path coefficients (β) and p-values in SmartPLS 4 (Ringle et al., 2024). For example, a significant positive path between "UGC photo exposure" and "affective engagement" would indicate that visual content is linked to emotional connections. Moderation effects in H2 are interpreted through changes in R^2 (explained variance) and beta coefficients, with effect sizes (f^2) quantifying the practical importance of authenticity's role. Large effect sizes ($f^2 \geq 0.35$) would suggest tourism brands should prioritise authentic UGC in campaigns.

Theoretical and Practical Alignment

Results are contextualised within Morhart et al.'s (2015) authenticity framework and Hollebeek et al.'s (2016) brand engagement theory. For instance, if symbolic authenticity (UGC reflecting South Africa's tourist locations) strongly predicts behavioural engagement, this finding is linked to Signalling Theory, where authentic content acts as a trust signal (Bryant & Karasek, 2012; Spence, 1973). Practical implications will highlight strategies for South African destination marketing organisations, such as leveraging local content and authenticity to enhance credibility or optimising platform-specific UGC. An example of this would be Instagram videos for younger tourists and written reviews for older more traditional tourists.

By integrating advanced statistical methods, thematic insights, and contextual depth, this analysis provides a rigorous, theory-driven exploration of UGC's impact on brand engagement in South Africa's unique tourism landscape.

3.9. Limitations of the Study

While this study provides meaningful insights into the relationship between UGC and CBE in the South African tourism industry, it is essential to recognise its methodological constraints.

Firstly, the cross-sectional research design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between UGC exposure and brand engagement. Although PLS-SEM allows for the analysis of complex relationships, it does not inherently resolve endogeneity issues, meaning unmeasured variables may influence the observed effects (Hair et al., 2013; Henseler et al., 2009; Sarstedt et al., 2022). A longitudinal design could strengthen causal inferences in future research.

Secondly, self-reported data collection introduces potential common method bias and social desirability bias, where participants may overstate their engagement with tourism brands or inaccurately assess their exposure to UGC. Although procedural remedies (e.g., assuring anonymity and randomising question order) mitigate some of these risks, they cannot be fully eliminated.

Thirdly, the online survey format presents sampling limitations. Individuals without reliable internet access or those less inclined to participate in digital surveys may be underrepresented, leading to sampling bias (Hossan et al., 2023; Pallant, 2020). Additionally, the study focuses exclusively on South African domestic tourists (aged 18 and older), limiting the generalisability of findings to international tourists or younger audiences who engage differently with UGC.

Another limitation concerns measurement validity. The construct of perceived authenticity is inherently subjective, varying based on individual experiences and cultural perspectives. Additionally, while Hollebeek's (2016) CBE framework comprehensively captures cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement, self-reported engagement may not always translate into actual consumer behaviour such as bookings, visits, or brand advocacy.

Despite these limitations, this research contributes valuable insights into the role of UGC in shaping consumer engagement in the South African tourism sector. Future studies could address these concerns by employing longitudinal approaches, multi-method data collection (e.g., qualitative insights or experimental designs), and broader sampling strategies to enhance generalisability.

3.10. Validity

Validity ensures that a study accurately measures its intended constructs while minimising systematic error. This study incorporates multiple validity checks to enhance the robustness of findings, addressing construct, content, internal, and external validity through established methodological frameworks.

Construct Validity

Construct validity ensures that the measurement scales used accurately capture the theoretical constructs. This study employs well-established scales to measure key variables. Perceived authenticity was assessed using Morhart et al. (2015)'s four-dimensional scale, which includes credibility, integrity, symbolism, and continuity. This scale has been validated in tourism contexts, ensuring alignment with consumer perceptions of authentic travel experiences. Similarly, CBE was measured using items adapted from various authors, incorporating cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions, consistent with Hollebeek et al. 's (2016) engagement framework.

To validate these constructs, the reliability and validity measurements were assessed (Ringle et al., 2024). The results established convergent validity, as all Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50, ensuring that the items measured their respective constructs effectively. Additionally, discriminant validity was confirmed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios, where HTMT values remained below the threshold of 0.90, indicating that constructs were empirically distinct (Babin et al., 2012; Ringle et al., 2024; Saunders et al., 2019). By employing these validated measurement tools and conducting rigorous statistical testing, this study strengthens construct validity and reduces potential measurement errors. Additionally, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to measure the degree to which constructs genuinely separate from other constructions within the model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Content Validity

To ensure content validity, a structured pre-test and expert review process were implemented. A pilot study with 17 South African tourists was conducted to assess the clarity and relevance of survey items. Based on participant feedback, certain terms were refined to enhance contextual understanding. For instance, the term "UGC exposure" was clarified with platform-

specific references such as “TravelGround reviews” and “Instagram travel posts” to better reflect how South African tourists tend to interact with UGC.

In addition to the pilot study, a tourism and marketing expert reviewed the questionnaire to evaluate its conceptual relevance. This expert evaluation ensured that the survey items were aligned with South African consumer behaviour and accurately captured the intended constructs. By incorporating participant feedback and expert validation, the study enhanced the comprehensiveness and contextual relevance of its measurement instruments.

Internal Validity

Internal validity was strengthened by implementing measures to minimise biases and control for confounding variables. Social desirability bias was mitigated through anonymous data collection and neutral response framing. Instead of binary agreement statements, frequency-based scales were used to reduce the likelihood of participants providing socially desirable responses. For example, instead of asking, “Do you agree that UGC influences your travel decisions?” The survey employed a more neutral format, such as “How often do you consider UGC when making travel plans?

To account for potential confounding effects, control variables such as age, location, and platform type were included in the PLS-SEM model. These variables were selected based on prior studies (Hollebeek et al., 2016; Morhart et al., 2015), which suggest that demographic factors and the type of online platform used can influence CBE responses. Furthermore, to address common method bias, Harman’s single-factor test was conducted. The results indicated that a single factor did not account for the majority of the variance, confirming that common method bias was not a significant concern. By implementing these methodological safeguards, the study enhances the credibility of its causal inferences.

External Validity

External validity determines the extent to which the findings can be generalised beyond the study sample. While this research focuses on South African domestic tourists, the theoretical framework, which incorporates Social Influence Theory and Signaling Theory, allows cautious extension to similar emerging markets with comparable digital and tourism landscapes (Bryant & Karasek, 2012; Spence, 1973). Countries such as Kenya, Brazil, and Thailand share several characteristics with South Africa, including high smartphone penetration, a strong reliance on

social media for travel planning, and a growing domestic tourism industry that heavily engages with online travel reviews. These similarities suggest that the study's insights may be applicable to other markets where UGC plays a critical role in influencing travel decisions.

To further enhance generalisability, future research could expand the scope of analysis by conducting cross-market comparisons in Africa, Latin America, or Southeast Asia. Additionally, employing longitudinal study designs could provide deeper insights into how the impact of UGC evolves over time. Incorporating multimodal data collection methods, such as qualitative interviews or behavioural analytics, could further validate and extend the study's findings. By recognising these external validity considerations, this research offers valuable insights into UGC-driven consumer engagement while also outlining directions for future studies.

By transparently addressing potential validity threats and implementing rigorous quantitative testing, this study ensures that its insights into UGC's role in consumer engagement are both methodologically sound and practically relevant. The combination of validated scales, statistical testing, expert validation, and bias mitigation strategies enhances the reliability and trustworthiness of the research findings.

3.11. Reliability

Ensuring reliable and statistically robust findings is crucial for this study. To achieve this, the research employs several strategies. Firstly, the use of pre-tested and validated scales for travel motivations and brand engagement provides a foundation for consistent measurement. These scales have undergone rigorous testing to guarantee reliable assessment of the targeted constructs across diverse participants.

Secondly, conducting a pilot test with a small representative sample allows for the identification and rectification of any ambiguities or inconsistencies within the questionnaire. This iterative process helps refine the instrument and ensure it consistently measures the intended constructs across participants, minimising measurement error. Furthermore, the research implements standardised data collection procedures. This involves consistent administration of the survey, ensuring all participants encounter the questions and response

options in the same way, thereby minimising the influence of potential biases introduced by variations in presentation or administration.

Additionally, utilising validated scales with established internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) helps ensure the reliability of the measurement within the survey itself (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012; Kline, 2015). These scales are designed to assess a single underlying construct consistently, leading to dependable and reliable scores. While the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish test-retest reliability, the employed strategies aim to ensure that the observed relationships between variables are statistically reliable, reflecting a true association within the South African tourism population. In addition to Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (rho_a and rho_c) are also used to assess reliability of the constructs (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012; Kline, 2015).

By prioritising consistency in measurement and data collection, the research strives to produce trustworthy findings that offer meaningful interpretations about the relationship between UGC exposure and brand engagement. Even though limitations exist, the study prioritises reliability by utilising established tools and procedures, ensuring the results represent a consistent and dependable representation of the targeted population.

3.12. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are essential to safeguard the well-being, rights, and privacy of participants in research. In the methodology section of this study, several ethical considerations should be addressed.

Firstly, informed consent has been obtained from participants, providing comprehensive information about the study's purpose, potential risks and benefits, data collection procedures, and participants' rights to voluntary participation, confidentiality, and withdrawal. Participants must provide their informed consent before their involvement in the study. Secondly, privacy and confidentiality must be ensured (Gajjar, 2013). Measures were implemented to protect participants' personal information, and data has been stored securely. Any identifiable information has been anonymised or pseudonymised to maintain confidentiality (Creswell, 2009; Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018).

Voluntary participation is crucial, and participants have been given the freedom to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any time without facing negative consequences. Coercion or pressure has been strictly avoided (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). The researcher followed ethical guidelines for data protection and handling. Data was collected and handled in a secure manner, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of participants. Clear procedures were outlined for data retention and disposal. The researcher maintained the highest standards of integrity, objectivity, and professionalism. The researcher also avoided conflicts of interest, biases, or selective reporting of findings that could compromise the study's integrity (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). Furthermore, transparency is essential, and the researcher clearly disclosed their affiliations, funding sources, and potential conflicts of interest (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). Their roles and responsibilities were clearly defined, and participants were informed of their involvement.

This research prioritised data privacy, protection, and distortion considerations throughout the research endeavours. To safeguard privacy, this researcher pseudonymised data, implemented strict access controls, and stored data securely (Babin et al., 2012; Creswell, 2009; Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). Data protection measures include; obtaining informed consent, minimising data collection, and adhering to purpose limitation principles. To prevent data distortion, this researcher employed differential privacy mechanisms, and secure data analysis techniques. Additional considerations included establishing data breach reporting procedures, securely destroying unnecessary data, and maintaining transparency about data handling practices. By implementing these measures, this research upholds ethical data management practices and protects the privacy of its participants in the context of the research on the influence of UGC on CBE in the South African tourism industry.

The researcher sought ethical review and approval from the University of Witwatersrand’s ethics committee. This ensured compliance with ethical guidelines and safeguards the welfare, anonymity and rights of participants. By addressing these ethical considerations, the researcher was granted approval to conduct the study in an ethical and responsible manner, fostering trustworthiness and credibility in the research findings while respecting the rights and well-being of the participants involved.

3.13. Pilot Study

3.13.1. Introduction

A pilot study was conducted prior to the main data collection phase to evaluate the clarity, reliability, and overall suitability of the survey instrument. Pilot studies serve as preliminary tests that help identify potential issues related to question wording, structure, and respondent interpretation before full-scale deployment (Pallant, 2020). In this study, the pilot phase focused specifically on assessing whether respondents could easily understand and complete the questionnaire as intended, as well as whether the instrument functioned effectively within an online survey environment.

The pilot study involved a purposive sample of 17 respondents, consistent with recommendations for preliminary testing of survey instruments (Hossan et al., 2023; Pallant, 2020). The results indicated acceptable internal consistency across the measurement items, suggesting that the instrument was sufficiently reliable for use in the main study. On this basis, the questionnaire was deemed suitable for full-scale data collection, subject to minor refinements informed by participant feedback.

3.13.2 Feedback and Refinement

Feedback from pilot study participants was used to refine the questionnaire and improve its alignment with the study's objectives. Respondents were encouraged to highlight any items they found unclear, ambiguous, or difficult to answer. In addition to this qualitative feedback, the researcher reviewed response patterns to identify questions that may have caused hesitation or inconsistent interpretation.

Based on this process, several refinements were made to improve focus and coherence. Items that were overly complex, repetitive, or weakly aligned with the research objectives were revised or removed. Particular care was taken to ensure that each retained item mapped clearly onto one of the study's core constructs: user-generated content (UGC), perceived authenticity, or consumer brand engagement (CBE), in line with the hypotheses developed earlier in the study.

One notable refinement involved the removal of the open-ended question included in the initial draft of the questionnaire. This adjustment shifted the instrument to a fully quantitative format, allowing for greater consistency in responses and improved suitability for statistical analysis. While this reduced the exploratory depth of the instrument, it strengthened its methodological alignment with the study's positivist and hypothesis-testing design.

Overall, the pilot study played a critical role in refining the survey instrument, ensuring clarity, construct alignment, and reliability, thereby supporting the robustness of the data collection process used to examine the proposed relationships between UGC, perceived authenticity, and consumer brand engagement.

3.14. Concluding Remarks

This chapter has provided a detailed overview of the methodological framework and procedures employed in conducting this research. The study adopts a positivist, quantitative, and descriptive approach, aiming to systematically explore and analyse the research problem. A sample of 307 randomly selected individuals from South Africa was chosen to ensure a representative and unbiased dataset. The use of random sampling enhances the generalisability of the findings, allowing for broader insights into the population under investigation.

Data collection was carried-out through a self-administered online questionnaire, utilising a 5-point Likert scale to measure respondents' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours. This method was selected for its efficiency, scalability, and ability to generate quantifiable data, which is essential for statistical analysis. Prior to the main data collection phase, a pilot study involving 17 respondents was conducted to assess the reliability and validity of the research instrument. The pilot study yielded favourable results, indicating a satisfactory level of reliability; however, adjustments were made to refine the final questionnaire and ensure clarity and precision in the questions posed.

The methodological approach outlined in this chapter underscores the rigor and systematic nature of the research process. By adhering to established principles of quantitative research, this study aims to produce credible, replicable, and meaningful findings. The next chapter will present the analysis and interpretation of the data collected, providing insights into the research questions and contributing to the broader academic discourse on the topic.

4. Results Discussion & Interpretation

4.1. Introduction

The results of this research are presented in this chapter. SmartPLS 4 was used to clean and analyse the data in accordance with the procedures described in the above Chapter 3. First, a profile of survey respondents is given by the researcher. Their age and geographic location are listed in this profile. The mean and standard deviation are then displayed along with the descriptive statistics. Lastly, SEM is employed, which comprises construct score, construct validity, construct reliability, and overall validity which are all explored later in the chapter.

4.2. Sample Characteristics & Response Rate

This study followed a quantitative approach utilising an online questionnaire to collect relevant data. The questionnaire was circulated to local tourists over the age of 18 through online platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and emails during an 8-week period. Upon completion of data collection, the researcher received 307 responses with 305 consenting to partake in the research. With that, the researcher was left with 277 valid responses resulting in a valid response rate of 89.6%. However, drop-outs were experienced throughout the data collection process (namely past the passive UGC encounter stage) which left the researcher with a final usable sample size for SEM analysis (with no missing data) of 238. This sample size was consistent with previous related studies and provides a statistically robust base for SEM analysis (Demba, 2016; Hair et al., 2013., Hooper et al., 2007; & Sarstedt et al., 2022).

4.3. Demographics & Control Variables

To gain a deeper understanding of the sample population the research uses descriptive statistics to measure the demographics of the respondents. These variables will be discussed in detail below.

4.3.1. Respondents Age Category

The age profile of the respondents (n=277) provides essential context for understanding the sample's demographic composition relevant to UGC engagement in the South African tourism sector. Figure 6 below presents the distribution of respondents across six age categories.

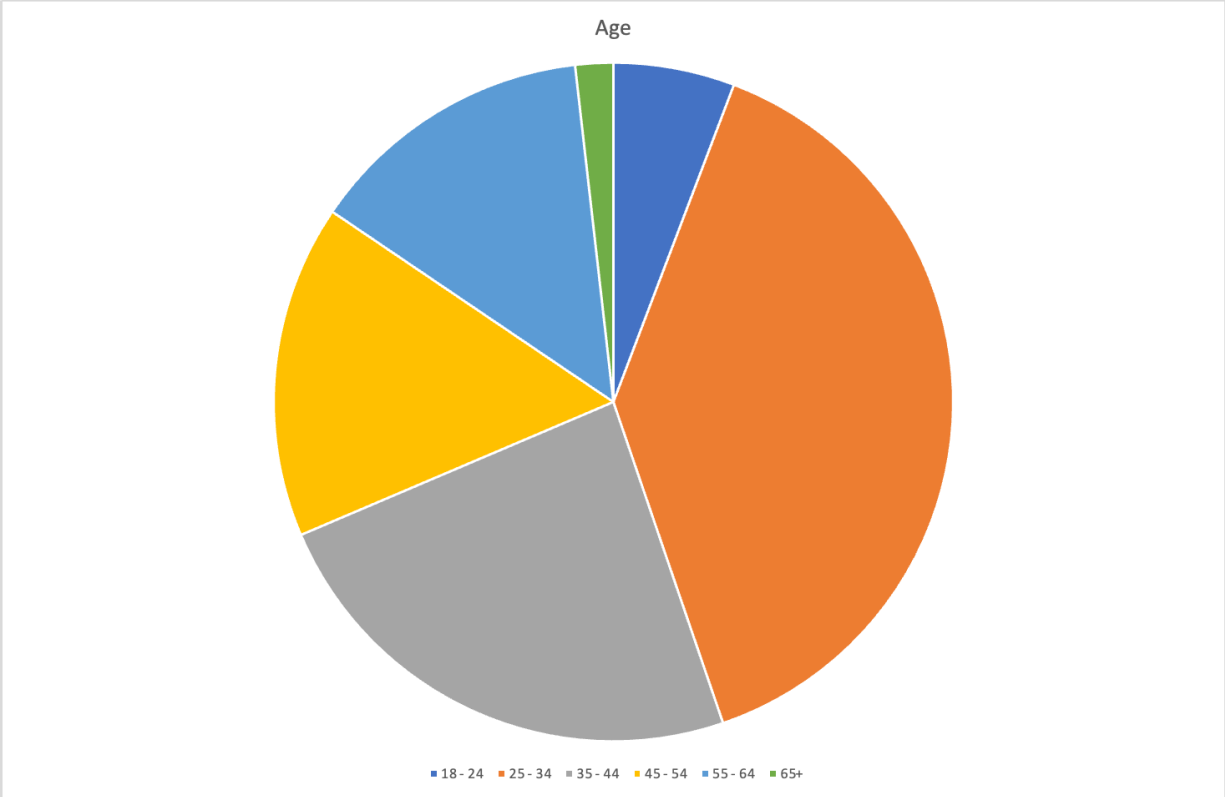
The sample was predominantly comprised of younger and middle-aged adults. The largest cohort was respondents aged 25–34 years, representing 108 individuals or 38.99% of the total

sample. This was followed closely by the 35-44 years group, constituting 66 respondents (23.83%). Together, these two age brackets accounted for 62.82% of all participants, forming a clear majority. The 45-54 years category represented 44 respondents (15.88%), while the 55–64 years group comprised 38 respondents (13.72%). Younger adults aged 18–24 years constituted 16 respondents (5.78%), and respondents aged 65 years and above were the smallest group, with only 5 individuals (1.81%).

The median age category of the sample falls within the 35-44 years bracket. This indicates that half of the respondents were aged 44 years or younger, reinforcing the concentration of the sample in the younger to middle-aged adult segments.

This age distribution aligns broadly with patterns of internet and social media adoption in South Africa. National data indicates the highest internet penetration and smartphone usage occurs among individuals aged 15-34 years, followed by the 35-44 cohort (Kemp, 2023; Statista Research Department, 2023b). The over-representation of the 25-44 age groups (62.82%) and under-representation of the 18-24 (5.78%) and 65+ (1.81%) brackets in this sample is consistent with the demographic profile of active digital content consumers in the region.

Figure 6: Respondents Age Group



The data indicates the findings of this study regarding UGC engagement and its relationship with CBE are primarily reflective of the perceptions and behaviours of South African tourism consumers aged between 25 and 44 years. While valuable insights are drawn from the full sample, the significant proportion of respondents within these prime working-age and digitally active cohorts suggests the core results are particularly representative of this demographic segment.

4.3.2. Respondents Geographic Location

The geographic distribution of respondents (n=277) offers critical insight into the regional representation within the sample studying UGC and CBE in South African tourism. Figure 7 below illustrates the provincial distribution of participants.

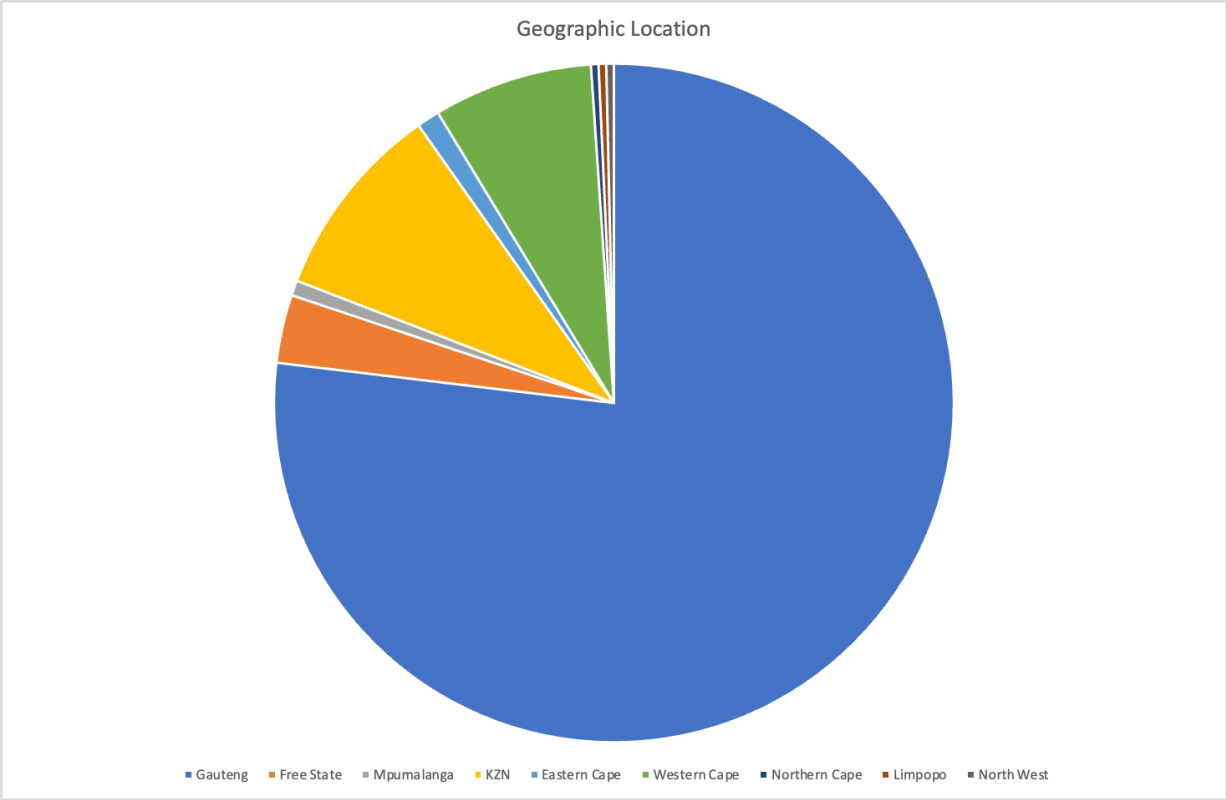
The sample exhibited a pronounced concentration in specific provinces. The overwhelming majority of respondents resided in Gauteng, accounting for 213 individuals or 76.90% of the

total sample. This dominance far exceeded representation from other provinces. The second-largest group was located in KwaZulu-Natal, with 26 respondents (9.39%), followed by the Western Cape with 21 respondents (7.58%). Together, these three provinces accounted for 93.87% of all participants. Representation from other provinces was markedly lower: the Free State contributed 9 respondents (3.25%), the Eastern Cape 3 respondents (1.08%), and Mpumalanga 2 respondents (0.72%). The provinces of Limpopo, North West, and the Northern Cape each had minimal representation, with only 1 respondent (0.36%) respectively.

Gauteng emerged unequivocally as the dominant geographic origin of respondents, reflecting its status as South Africa's economic hub and most populous province. This distribution aligns partially with South Africa's population density and economic activity, where Gauteng holds the largest share (Kemp, 2023; Statista Research Department, 2023b, 2024). However, the sample's representation is significantly skewed towards Gauteng compared to its actual population proportion (approximately 26% of the national population). The representation of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa's second-most populous province) and the Western Cape (notably urbanised and a major tourism destination) aligns more closely with their demographic and tourism significance, though still overshadowed by Gauteng's dominance in this sample. The very low representation from other provinces, particularly rural and less economically developed regions like Limpopo, the Northern Cape, North West, and Mpumalanga, reflects known disparities in internet access and digital participation across the country (Kemp, 2023; Statista Research Department, 2023b).

Consequently, the geographic findings of this study regarding UGC engagement are predominantly reflective of perspectives from consumers residing in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and the Western Cape, with a very strong emphasis on Gauteng. While valuable insights are drawn from the national sample, the extreme concentration of respondents in Gauteng means the core results are heavily weighted towards the experiences and behaviours of tourism consumers in this specific province. The limited representation from other regions, especially rural provinces, necessitates caution in generalising the findings across the entirety of South Africa's diverse geographic landscape.

Figure 7: Respondents Geographic Location



4.4. UGC Exposure

4.4.1. Prior Familiarity with UGC Concept

Respondents' prior familiarity with the concept of UGC is a crucial demographic factor for interpreting their engagement patterns in the South African tourism context. Figure 8 below illustrates the distribution of self-reported UGC familiarity levels among participants (n=277).

The sample demonstrated considerable diversity in familiarity levels with UGC concepts. Analysis revealed that the largest proportion of respondents, representing 27.08 percent of the sample or 75 individuals, identified as being very familiar with UGC. Following this, 23.10 percent or 64 respondents reported being slightly familiar, while 22.74 percent or 63 participants indicated moderate familiarity. At the lower end of the familiarity spectrum, 14.08 percent or 39 respondents stated they were not familiar at all with UGC concepts, and a smaller segment of 13.00 percent or 36 individuals considered themselves extremely familiar. This

distribution illustrates a broad range of awareness and understanding of UGC among participants, with the majority falling within the moderate to very familiar categories.

A significant majority of respondents (85.92%) reported at least some baseline familiarity ("Slightly familiar" to "Extremely familiar"). Conversely, only 14.08% claimed no familiarity. Notably, 62.82% of the sample (combining "Moderately," "Very," and "Extremely" familiar categories) demonstrated moderate-to-advanced familiarity with UGC concepts.

The modal (most frequent) response was "Very familiar" (27.08%), while the median familiarity category falls within "Moderately familiar". This indicates UGC awareness is well-established across most respondents, with the typical participant having moderate-to-strong conceptual understanding.

The high proportion of respondents with moderate-to-advanced UGC familiarity (62.82%) suggests findings regarding UGC engagement and brand interactions are primarily informed by participants who already understand the nature and value of UGC. While the perspectives of less familiar respondents (37.18%) remain valuable, the sample skews toward digitally literate consumers who actively recognise and potentially contribute to UGC. This familiarity profile supports the relevance of the study's core constructs to the sample and provides confidence in respondents' ability to meaningfully evaluate UGC-related engagement (Demba, 2016; Ngwenya, 2021).

4.4.2. Preferred Platform for Tourism UGC

Analysis of platform preferences reveals significant patterns in how respondents engage with tourism-related UGC. As illustrated in Figure 9 (n=277, multiple responses permitted), visual and video-centric platforms dominate consumption behaviours, demonstrating clear hierarchical preferences among participants.

The data shows Instagram as the predominant platform, selected by 61.73% of respondents (n=171). TikTok follows as the secondary preference with 42.96% adoption (n=119). This strong preference for image and short-form video platforms establishes them as the primary channels for tourism UGC engagement. The combined selection rate exceeding 100% indicates widespread multi-platform usage, with these two platforms serving as core content sources.

Mid-tier platforms demonstrate more moderate engagement levels. Facebook shows 22.74% adoption, followed closely by YouTube at 21.66% and TripAdvisor at 20.94%. While these platforms maintain relevance, their substantially lower selection rates compared to market leaders suggest more specialised or supplementary usage patterns among tourism consumers.

Niche platforms exhibit markedly limited adoption. Twitter/X registers only 9.03% engagement, with Pinterest and TravelGround showing even lower selection rates at 7.94% and 7.22% respectively. These findings confirm their peripheral status in tourism-related UGC consumption within the sample.

This hierarchy suggests three key drivers of platform preference. First, visually immersive content formats (photos and short videos) appear most effective for tourism engagement (Belanche et al., 2021; Chitadze, 2023; Li et al., 2022; Marwick, 2015). Second, algorithm-driven discovery mechanisms inherent to leading platforms significantly influence content visibility and consumption (Belanche et al., 2021; Casaló et al., 2020; Marwick, 2015). Third, mobile-first design characteristics align with contemporary digital consumption behaviours, particularly for travel planning and inspiration.

This platform categorisation has important implications for understanding how tourism-related UGC circulates and gains traction in digital ecosystems. The dominance of Instagram and TikTok underscores the growing importance of visual storytelling and algorithmic personalisation in shaping travel decisions, while the more limited adoption of traditional platforms suggests evolving patterns in how consumers seek and value tourism information (Belanche et al., 2021; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Brooks et al., 2022; Conti & Lexhagen, 2020; Marwick, 2015).

Figure 8: Prior Familiarity with UGC Concept

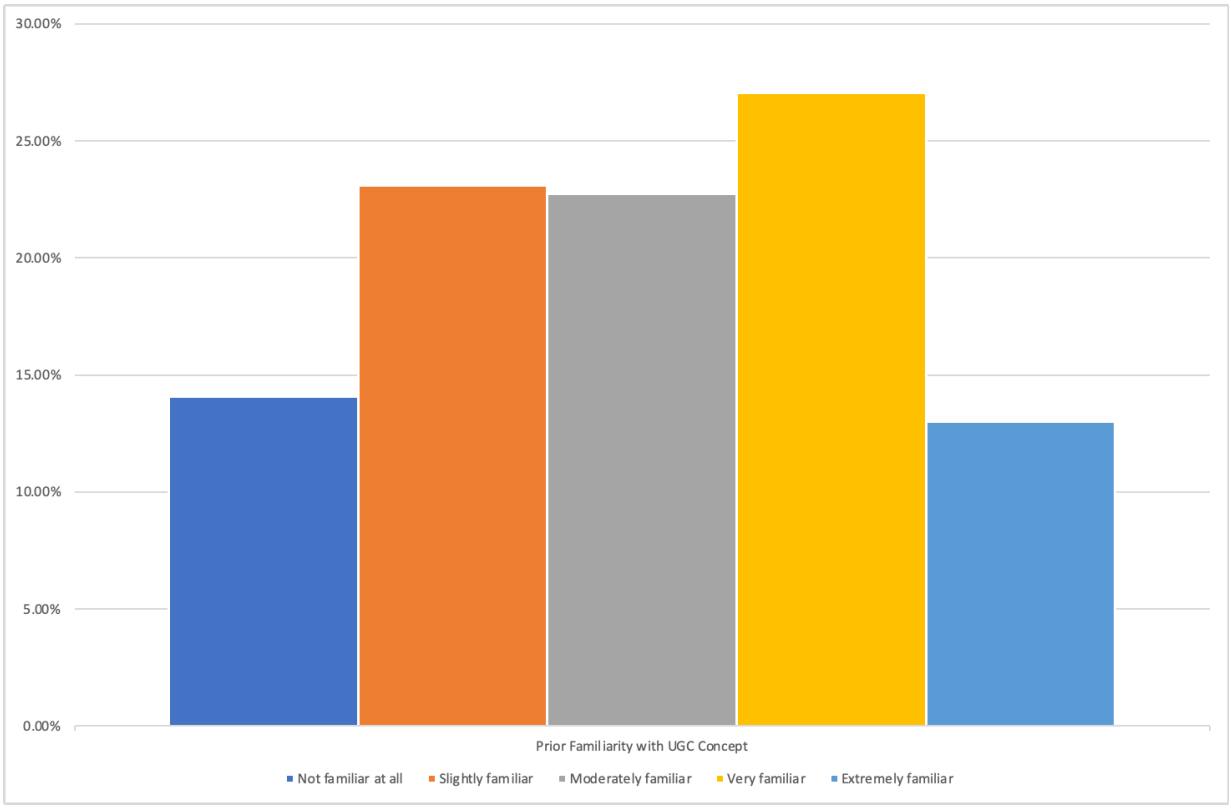
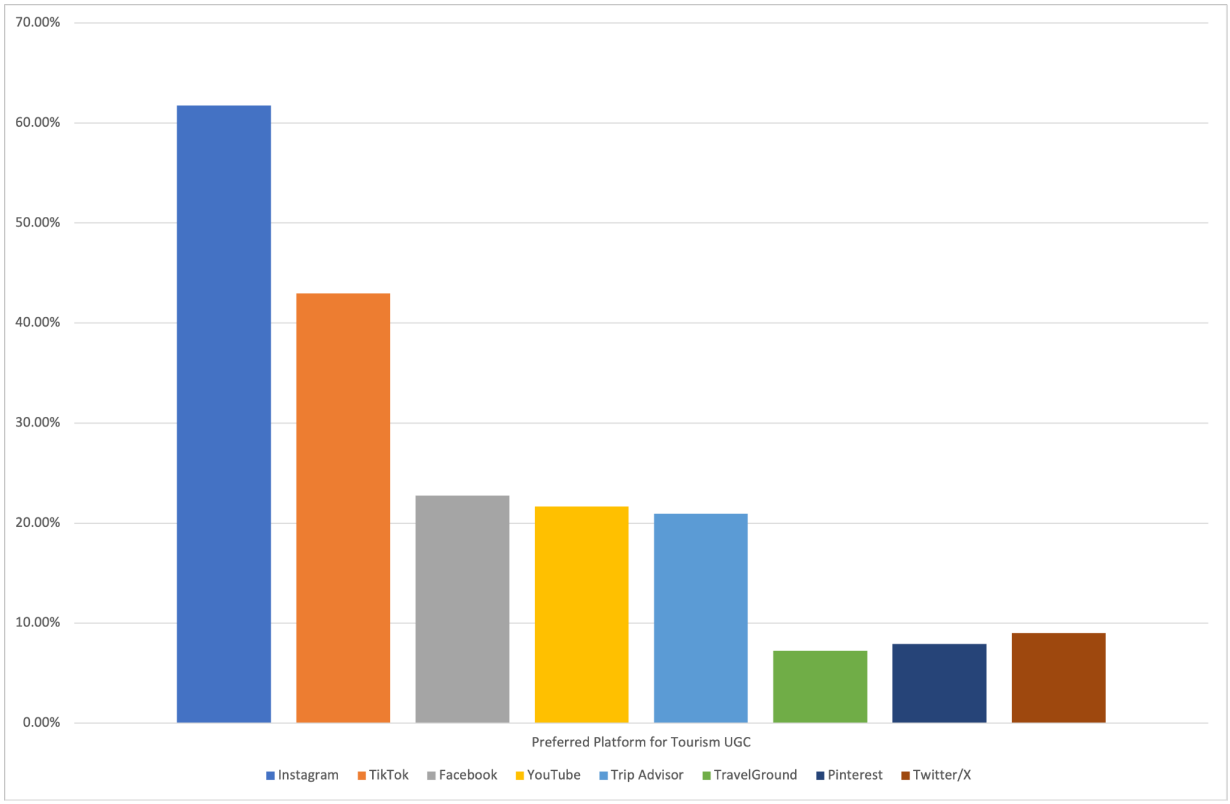


Figure 9: Preferred Platform for Tourism UGC



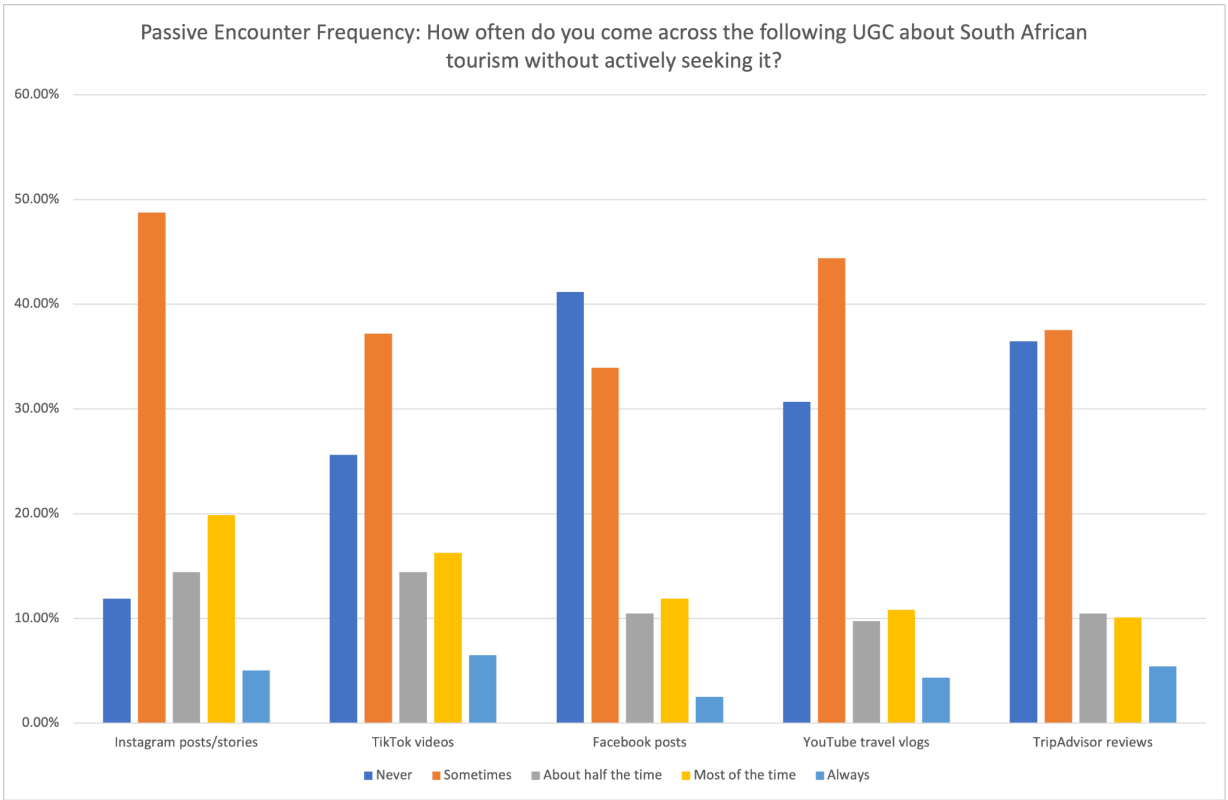
4.4.3. Passive Encounter Frequency

Analysis of passive encounter frequency, defined as incidental exposure to tourism-related UGC without active seeking, reveals critical patterns in algorithmic content discovery across platforms as illustrated in Figure 10 (n=277). Platform-specific data demonstrates pronounced disparities. Instagram dominates passive exposure, with only 11.91% of respondents never encountering content. Nearly half, 48.74%, report encounters sometimes, while 25.91% experience regular exposure, meaning most of the time or always. TikTok shows similarly high passive reach, with 74.37% encountering content at least sometimes. This includes 37.18% reporting occasional and 22.75% regular exposure. Conversely, Facebook exhibits limited passive penetration. Forty-one percent, specifically 41.16%, never encounter content passively. Only 33.94% do so sometimes, and a mere 14.44% regularly. YouTube and TripAdvisor follow this pattern. YouTube sees 30.69% non-exposure, 44.40% occasional exposure, and 15.16% regular exposure. TripAdvisor shows 36.46% non-exposure, 37.55% occasional exposure, and 15.53% regular exposure.

Three key observations emerge from the results. First, algorithm-driven platforms Instagram and TikTok seem to generate significantly higher passive visibility than traditional platforms Facebook, YouTube, and TripAdvisor (Belanche et al., 2021; Casaló et al., 2020; Duh & Mayayise, 2023; Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020; Marwick, 2015). This is evidenced by two to three times lower non-exposure rates and approximately twice as high regular exposure. Second, the response category "sometimes" represents the most common frequency for all platforms except Instagram, where it remains frequent but coexists with stronger regular exposure. Third, the combined regular passive exposure for Instagram and TikTok accounts for 48.66% of all reported regular encounters, underscoring their disproportionate role in incidental tourism content discovery.

These patterns suggest tourism UGC consumption in South Africa is increasingly mediated by algorithmic curation and visual, short-form formats (Luca & Zervas, 2016). This shift diminishes the passive relevance of text-centric or review-based platforms. The dominance of Instagram and TikTok implies platform architecture itself, beyond user intent, shapes content discovery (Belanche et al., 2021; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Casaló et al., 2020). This dynamic aligns with the literature discussed in chapter 2 and may influence consumer destination perceptions through organic content delivery.

Figure 10: Passive Encounter Frequency



4.4.4. Active Use Frequency

Analysis of active UGC engagement reveals significant variations across travel planning functions among respondents. Figure 11 illustrates how frequently participants deliberately seek UGC for four specific purposes, with minor exclusions accounting for approximately 4.3 percent of responses per question.

Accommodation comparison demonstrates the strongest UGC integration. Nearly half of respondents, specifically 47.20 percent, regularly consult peer reviews when evaluating lodging options. This purpose also records the highest single engagement frequency, with 31.84 percent actively using platforms like TripAdvisor most of the time. Only 16.10 percent completely avoid UGC for this function.

Itinerary planning shows polarised adoption. While 35.85 percent frequently use Instagram posts or similar content to design travel routes, 23.40 percent never engage with UGC for this purpose. The most common behaviour is using UGC most of the time, reported by 25.66 percent. Activity selection faces greater scepticism. Over one-quarter of respondents, 26.97

percent, never watch vlogs or related content to choose experiences like safaris. Only 31.84 percent do so regularly, with occasional usage peaking at 23.97 percent.

Information verification exhibits balanced distribution. Approximately one-quarter, 23.60 percent, never use Facebook groups or equivalent sources to confirm travel details, while 33.34 percent do so regularly. The dominant frequency is occasional use, cited by 26.22 percent.

These patterns indicate UGC's functional value depends critically on planning context. Accommodation research shows the deepest adoption, likely due to financial risk considerations (Ayeh et al., 2013). Activity planning reveals notable resistance, suggesting preferences for professional advice in experiential decisions (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Munar & Jacobsen (2014) go on to explain that there is higher trust in professional advice for experiential activities (e.g., safaris) due to UGC's perceived lack of expertise. Traditional platforms retain relevance for deliberate searches despite limited passive exposure. Tourism marketers should note these purpose-driven disparities when developing content strategies.

Figure 11: Active Use Frequency

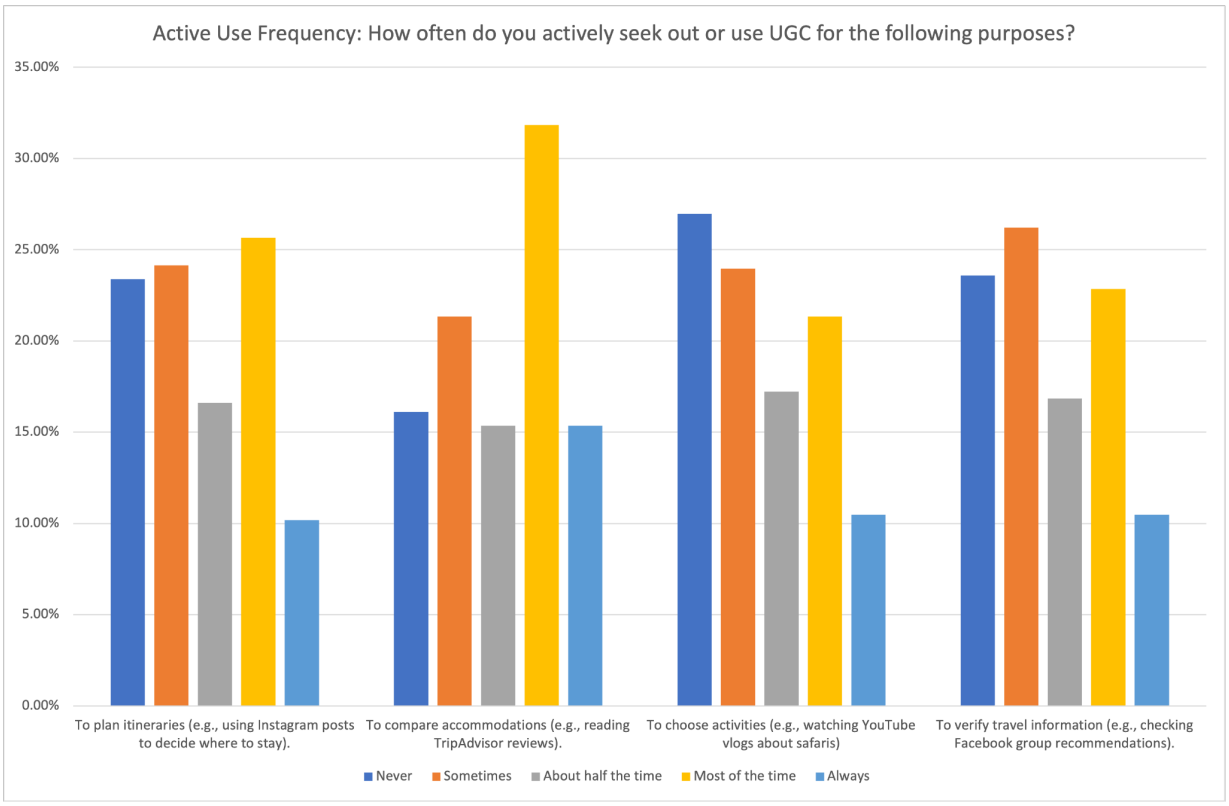
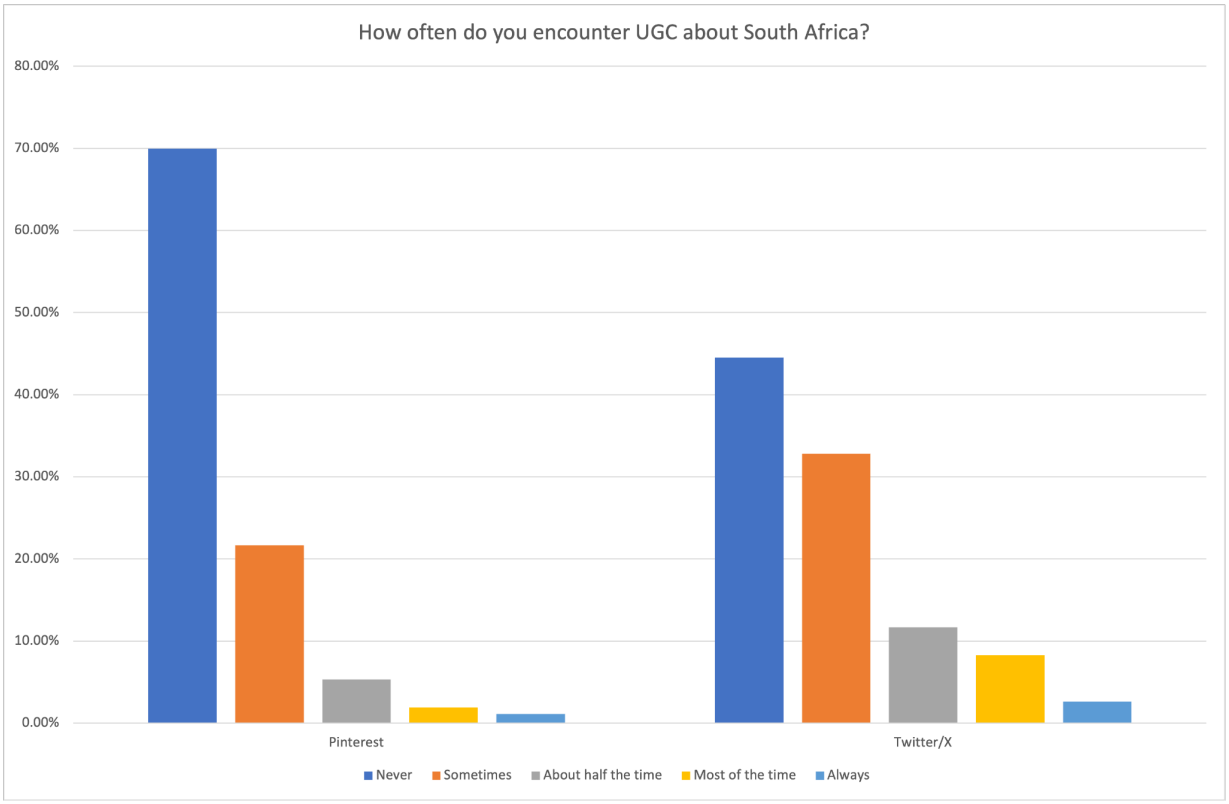


Figure 12: South African UGC Encounters



4.4.5. South African UGC Encounters

Platform-specific exposure patterns reveal stark contrasts in how frequently respondents encounter South African tourism UGC on Pinterest and Twitter/X (see Figure 12). Valid responses totalled 263 for Pinterest and 265 for Twitter/X, with minor exclusions under five percent per platform.

Pinterest demonstrates exceptionally limited reach for South African tourism content. Nearly seven in ten respondents, specifically 69.96 percent, never encounter relevant UGC on this platform. Occasional encounters are reported by 21.67 percent, while consistent exposure is negligible: only 3.04 percent engage most of the time or always.

Twitter/X exhibits moderately higher visibility despite its niche status. Less than half of respondents, 44.53 percent, report no exposure to tourism UGC. Occasional encounters represent the modal frequency at 32.83 percent. Notably, 10.94 percent experience regular exposure, defined as most of the time or always, suggesting a specialised utility for real-time information dissemination.

These findings reinforce the platform hierarchy observed earlier. Pinterest's minimal penetration aligns with its low preference ranking, functioning primarily as a niche supplementary visual discovery tool. Twitter/X's comparatively stronger exposure, particularly for regular users, indicates residual value for news-driven or written conversational tourism content despite its declining mainstream relevance. Both platforms remain peripheral to Instagram and TikTok's dominance but demonstrate distinct contextual roles in South Africa's digital tourism ecosystem (Joseph et al., 2024). These findings are in line with Joseph et al., (2024) who state that visual content is a key factor in capturing the attention of social media users, as the sense of sight is the fastest and most impactful sensory channel.

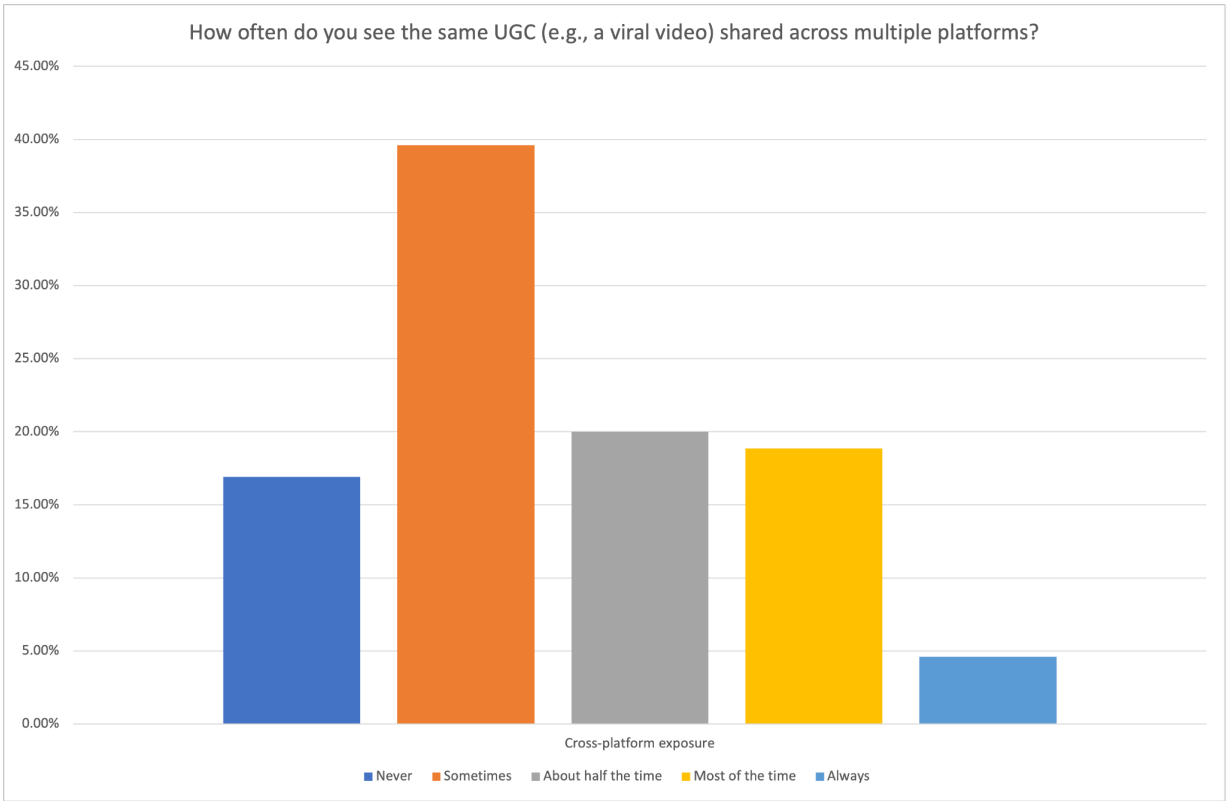
4.4.6. Cross-platform Exposure

Respondent experiences with multi-platform UGC dissemination reveal significant content replication patterns in South Africa's digital tourism landscape. As illustrated in Figure 13, 260 valid responses indicate that cross-platform UGC exposure occurs with notable frequency. Minor exclusions represented 6.1 percent of the sample.

A minority of respondents, 16.92 percent, never observe identical UGC across multiple platforms. Conversely, 39.62 percent encounter such content sometimes, while 20.00 percent experience it about half the time. More notably, nearly one-quarter of respondents, specifically 23.47 percent, report frequent exposure, encountering replicated content most of the time or always.

This cross-pollination reinforces the dominance of visual-first platforms while highlighting tourism marketers' need for cohesive multi-channel strategies (Gan et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022).

Figure 13: Cross-platform Exposure



4.5. Consumer Brand Engagement

4.5.1. Cognitive, Affective & Behavioural CBE

Analysis of cognitive, affective and behavioural CBE reveals distinct patterns in how UGC influences perceptions and behaviours toward South African tourism. Valid responses ranged from 251 to 258 per statement (90.6–92.8% response rate), with minor exclusions (7.2–9.4%) noted in Figure 14 below.

A strong majority of respondents, 65.89 percent, agree they spend time researching destinations after encountering UGC, with 22.09 percent strongly endorsing this behaviour. Conversely, attitudes toward comparing UGC with official tourism websites show polarisation in that 48.24 percent agree such comparisons occur, while 36.57 percent disagree. This suggests UGC serves more frequently as an initial inspiration trigger than a standalone information source (Demba, 2016).

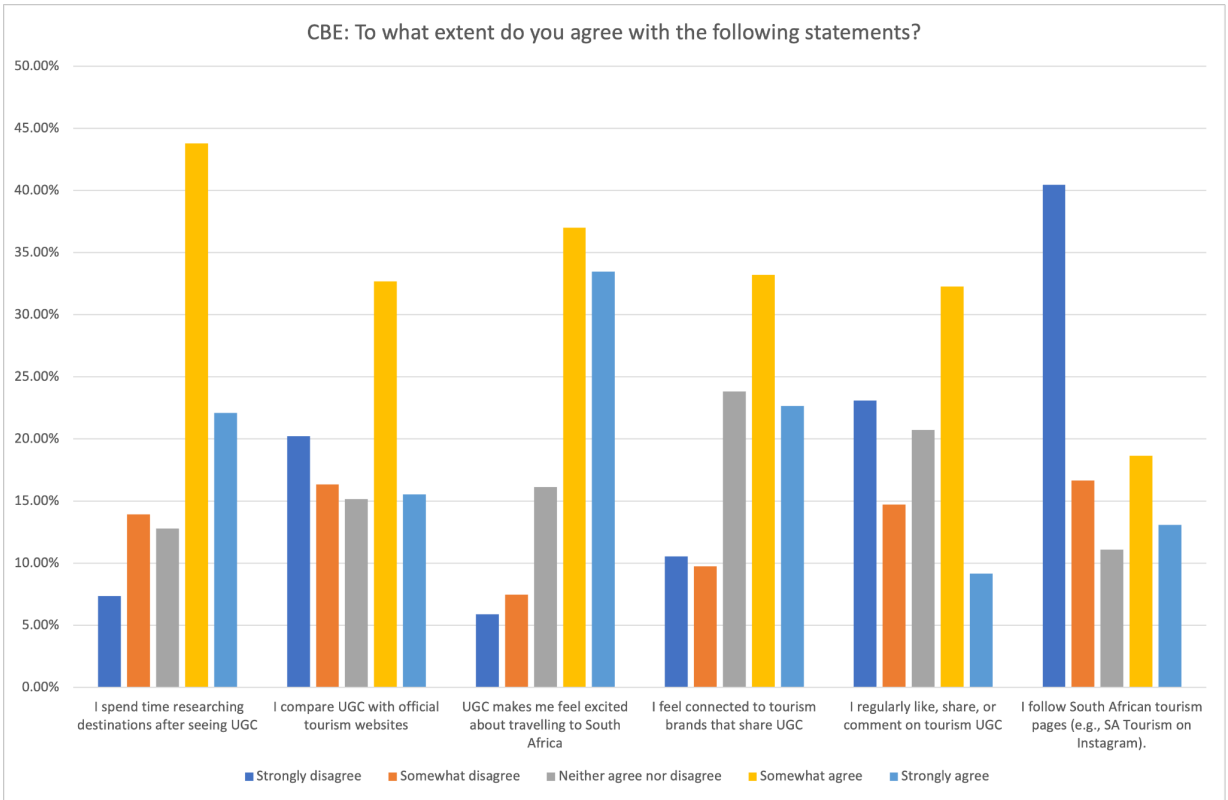
UGC demonstrates significant emotional influence, with 70.47 percent agreeing it generates excitement about visiting South Africa. Notably, 33.46 percent strongly agree, indicating profound inspirational impact. Additionally, 55.86 percent report feeling connected to tourism brands that share UGC, confirming its relational value in brand-customer dynamics.

Active interaction with tourism UGC remains moderate: 41.43 percent regularly like, share, or comment on content, though only 9.16 percent do so strongly. Following official tourism pages shows notably lower adoption, with just 31.75 percent agreeing they follow accounts like SA Tourism on Instagram. Critically, 40.48 percent strongly disagree with this behaviour, revealing a substantial engagement gap between organic UGC consumption and formal brand affiliation.

Three key insights emerge from these results. Firstly, UGC's primary strength lies in the ability to excite potential visitors and foster brand connections rather than functional utility for verification (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Rather et al., 2022). Second, the high research initiation rate confirms UGC's role as a discovery catalyst, though its supplementary use alongside official channels warrants further investigation. Third, the behavioural metrics expose a participation paradox: while consumers derive emotional value from UGC, most refrain from active content interaction (likes, shares and comments) or formal brand followership/advocacy (Harrigan et al., 2018). This is supported by Harrigan et al (2018) who explain how psychological barriers (e.g., "free-rider effect") can be linked to low UGC participation despite

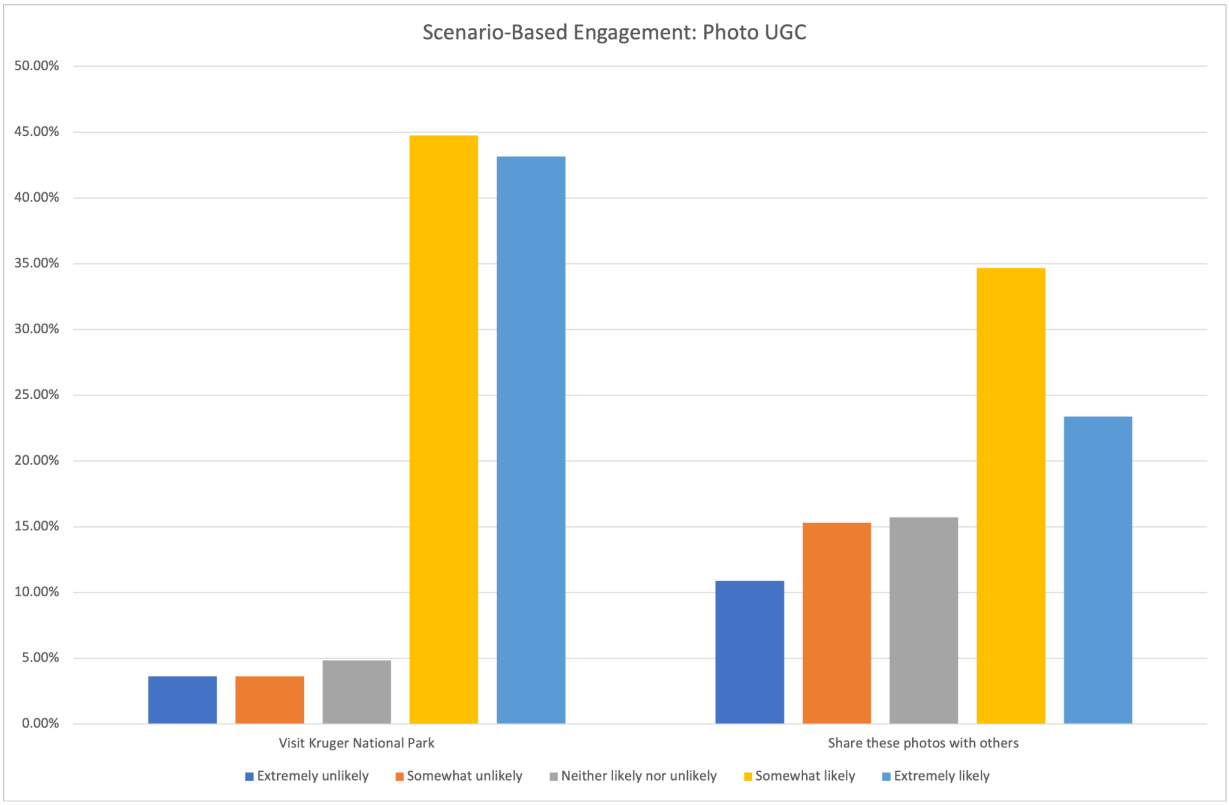
high enjoyment. This suggests tourism marketers must bridge the gap between UGC-inspired enthusiasm and tangible behavioural engagement.

Figure 14: Cognitive, Affective & Behavioural CBE



4.5.2. Scenario-Based Engagement

Figure 15: Scenario-Based Engagement (UGC Photography)



Respondent reactions to a hypothetical scenario involving friend-shared wildlife photography demonstrate UGC's persuasive potential in tourism decision-making (see figure 15 above) . Participants were presented with the following situation: *You see photos on your friend's Facebook page from their recent trip to a local national park, featuring stunning wildlife and landscape imagery.* and were asked "how likely would you be to:" Valid responses totalled 248 for both behavioural outcomes (89.5% response rate), with 29 exclusions.

The scenario reveals exceptionally strong influence on visitation intentions. An overwhelming 87.91 percent of respondents indicated they would be likely to visit Kruger National Park after exposure to such content, comprising 44.76 percent somewhat likely and 43.15 percent extremely likely. Only 7.26 percent expressed reluctance.

Conversely, photo-sharing intentions showed moderate adoption. While 58.07 percent reported likelihood to reshare the content, the distribution leaned toward tentative engagement: 34.68 percent somewhat likely versus 23.39 percent extremely likely. Notably, 26.21 percent expressed active reluctance to reshare.

Three critical findings emerge from this scenario. First, authentic peer-shared photography demonstrates persuasive power for destination consideration, with nearly nine in ten respondents indicating heightened visitation interest (Demba, 2016). Second, the sharing-passivity paradox persists despite high emotional engagement, as respondents exhibit greater willingness to act upon content personally than to amplify it socially. Third, the significant gap between visitation intent and sharing behaviour suggests users perceive UGC as valuable experiential inspiration but not necessarily as social currency worth redistributing. These patterns reinforce UGC's primary role as an affective catalyst rather than a participatory trigger in South Africa's tourism context.

The 10.5 percent non-response rate indicates minor participant disengagement with hypothetical scenarios but does not diminish the statistical significance of observed trends.

4.6. Perceived Authenticity of UGC

Perceived authenticity was measured through a series of questions and broken up into authenticity assessments, authenticity across UGC types, impact of authenticity, and review of authenticity. The results will be discussed below.

4.6.1. Authenticity Assessment

Respondent evaluations of UGC authenticity reveal critical insights into trust formation mechanisms within South Africa's tourism sector. Four dimensions were assessed across 238–240 valid responses (credibility, integrity, continuity, and trustworthiness), with exclusions averaging 13.7% (see figure 15 below).

Content truthfulness perception showed moderate endorsement. Less than half of respondents, 48.74 percent, agree that tourism UGC is unbiased and truthful, while 19.75 percent actively disagree. The predominant stance remains neutral at 31.51 percent, indicating widespread scepticism about content objectivity.

Experiential sincerity received stronger validation. Nearly two-thirds of respondents, 64.59 percent, agree that shared experiences feel authentic, with 52.92 percent somewhat agreeing. Only 16.67 percent express doubt about content integrity, suggesting peer narratives resonate as credible reflections of actual travel experiences.

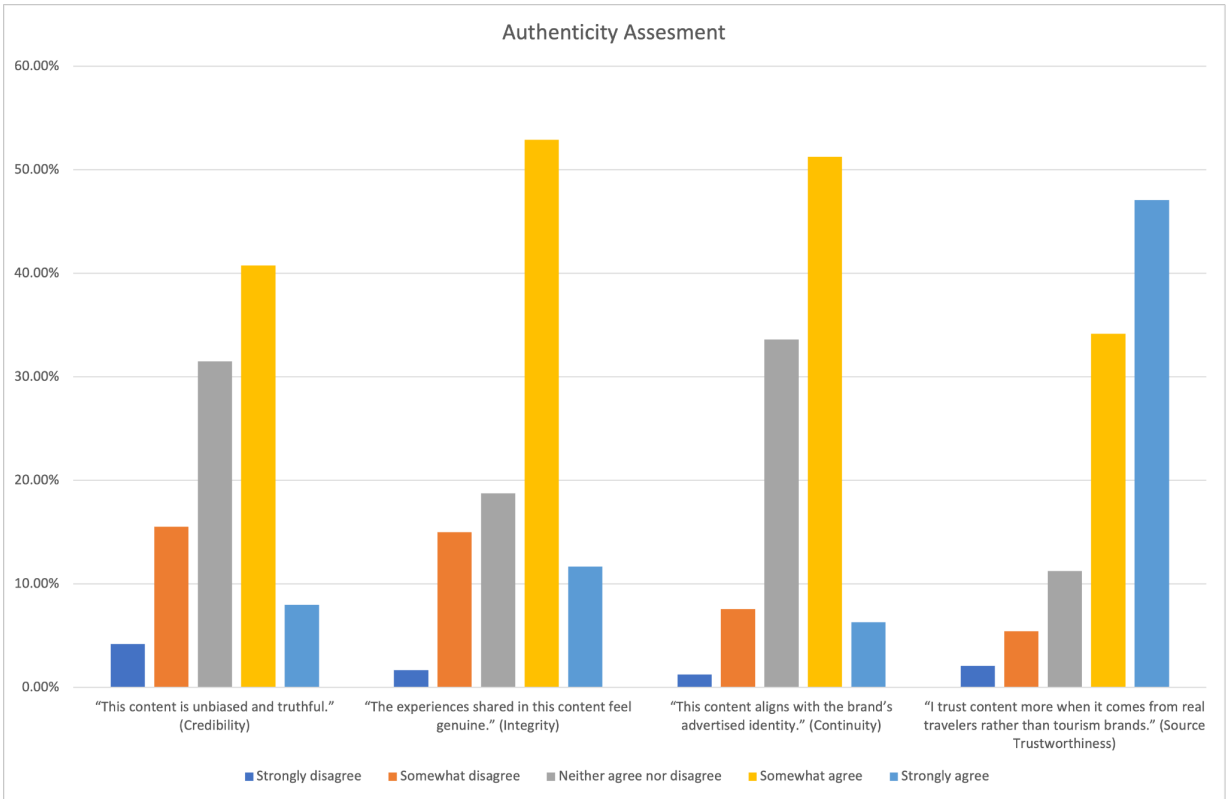
Consistency with brand identity demonstrated high agreement. Over half of participants, 57.56 percent, acknowledge alignment between UGC and official tourism branding, though merely

6.30 percent strongly endorse this continuity. The significant neutral cohort at 33.61 percent implies many perceive UGC as complementary rather than directly reflective of brand messaging.

Peer-originated content exhibits overwhelming preference. A striking 81.25 percent of respondents trust traveller-generated content more than brand-produced material, with 47.08 percent strongly endorsing this position. The minimal disagreement at 7.50 percent confirms UGC's superior perceived authenticity when sourced from real travellers.

Some key patterns emerge from these authenticity dimensions. First, while UGC experiences are perceived as genuinely lived, significant scepticism persists regarding content objectivity and neutrality (Ayeh et al., 2013; Chitadze, 2023; Demba, 2016). Second, the strong trust differential favouring peer sources underscores consumers' prioritisation of organic perspectives over curated brand narratives (Demba, 2016). Participants also tend to value UGC's experiential authenticity while remaining mindful of potential biases. These nuanced perceptions highlight UGC's dual role as both inspirational catalyst and object of consumer scepticism within South Africa's tourism landscape.

Figure 16: Authenticity Assessment



4.6.2. Authenticity Across UGC Types

Analysis of trust levels across different UGC formats reveals significant variations in perceived authenticity among South African tourism consumers. Valid responses ranged from 237 to 238 participants per content type, representing 85.6 to 85.9 percent response rates (see figure 16 below). Respondents were asked to rate how much they trust the following UGC types; travel blogger reviews, friends vacation photos, hotel guest videos, and tourist attraction reviews.

Friends' vacation photographs demonstrate the highest authenticity perception, with 84.88 percent of respondents indicating moderate to complete trust in such content. This includes 40.34 percent who mostly trust and another 40.34 percent who completely trust personal vacation imagery. Travel blogger reviews and tourist attraction reviews show similar trust patterns, with 77.31 percent and 74.93 percent respectively expressing moderate to complete trust. Hotel guest videos occupy a middle ground, trusted moderately or completely by 75.81 percent of respondents.

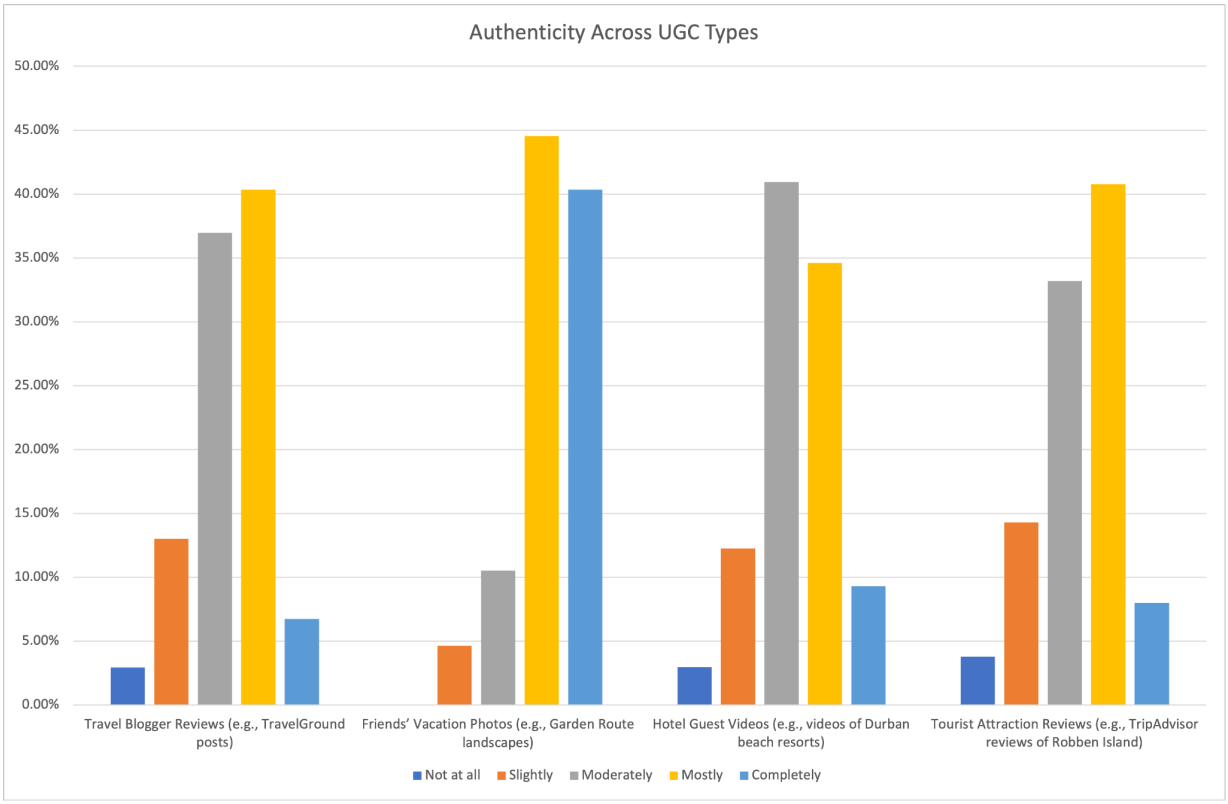
The data reveals three distinct trust tiers. Personal content from friends maintains clear superiority in perceived authenticity. Professionally adjacent content, including travel blogger reviews and tourist attraction reviews, achieves strong but comparatively lower trust levels.

Hotel guest videos, while still trusted by most, show slightly reduced confidence, potentially due to concerns about commercial influence or production quality. These findings align with Tsiakali's (2018) assertions that personality influences all the travel decision-making phases.

Notably, complete trust remains relatively rare across all categories, peaking at 40.34 percent for friends' photos. This suggests consumers maintain healthy scepticism even toward preferred content types. The consistency in moderate trust levels across professional and commercial UGC indicates users apply similar authenticity filters to both influencer-generated and platform-hosted content.

These patterns confirm that personal connections and organic presentation tend to enhance perceived authenticity (Burgess et al., 2009; Napoli et al., 2016; Tsiakali, 2018). However, it must be noted that the strong performance of professionally created UGC demonstrates that source type alone does not determine trustworthiness. Rather, content format and context interact to shape authenticity perceptions in South Africa's tourism sector.

Figure 17: Authenticity Across UGC Types



4.6.3. Impact of Authenticity

The influence of perceived authenticity on tourism decision-making demonstrates compelling effects across three behavioural dimensions, with 237-238 valid responses (85.6-85.9% response rate) revealing consistent patterns seen in figure 17 below.

An overwhelming majority of respondents, 75.63 percent, report increased trust in tourism brands that share authentic UGC. This includes 43.70 percent who somewhat agree and 31.93 percent who strongly agree with this statement. Only 7.14 percent express scepticism about authenticity's trust-building potential.

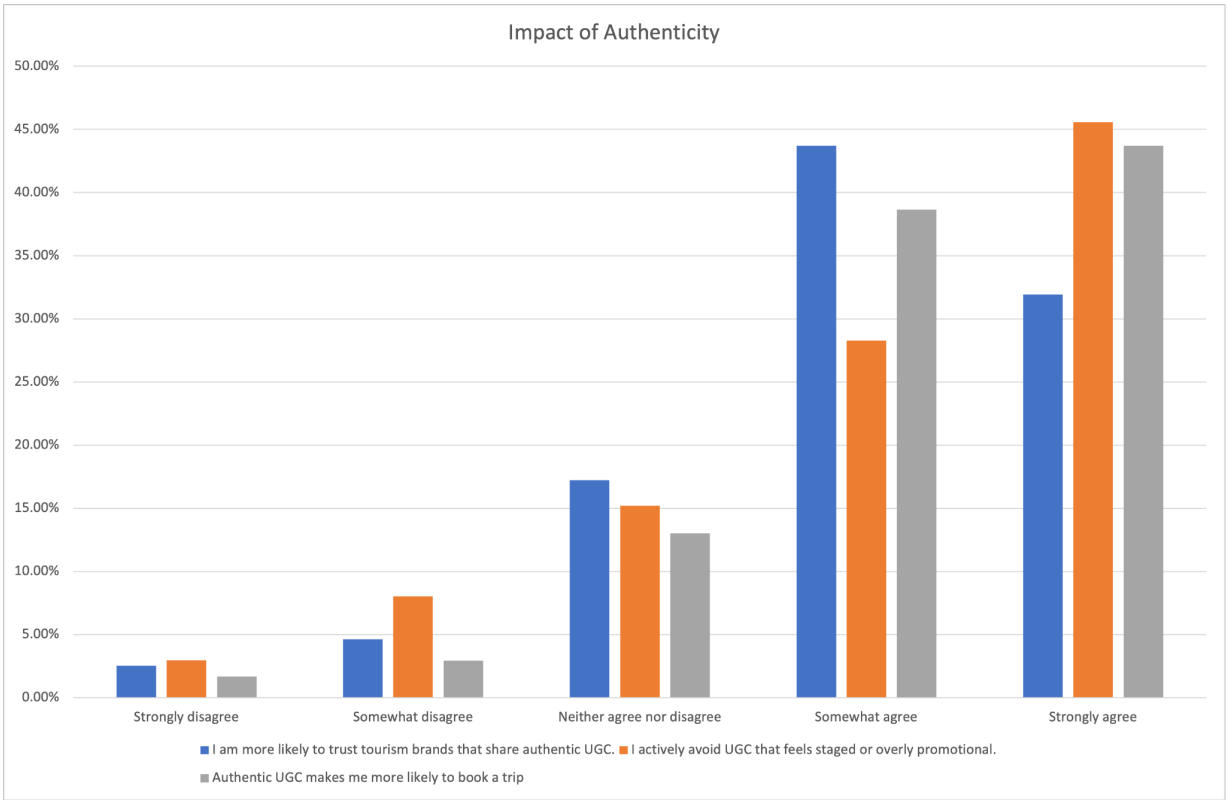
Consumer resistance to inauthentic content proves even more pronounced. Nearly three-quarters of participants, 73.84 percent, actively avoid UGC perceived as staged or promotional, with 45.57 percent strongly endorsing this avoidance behaviour. The minimal disagreement at 10.97 percent confirms widespread consumer aversion to manufactured content.

Authentic UGC's conversion power emerges clearly, with 82.36 percent indicating it increases trip booking likelihood. This includes 38.66 percent who somewhat agree and 43.70 percent who strongly agree. The negligible 4.62 percent disagreement underscores authenticity's central role in overall brand engagement.

Three critical insights emerge from these findings. First, authenticity operates as a dual-force mechanism, simultaneously building trust in transparent brands while driving rejection of perceived inauthenticity (Napoli et al., 2014, 2016). Second, the strength of avoidance behaviours toward staged content actually surpasses positive trust responses, suggesting consumers may be more motivated to reject inauthenticity than to reward authenticity (Casaló et al., 2020; Napoli et al., 2014, 2016). Third, the exceptionally high conversion potential confirms that authentic UGC doesn't merely influence brand perception but has potential to directly drive commercial outcomes in South Africa's tourism market (Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020; Ngwenya, 2021).

These results align with authenticity literature while revealing market-specific nuances. The 18.73 percentage point gap between trust-building and avoidance behaviours suggests South African consumers may employ particularly stringent authenticity filters. The near-universal booking influence indicates UGC's transition from awareness-building to decision-making tool in this market.

Figure 18: Impact of Authenticity



4.6.4. Review Authenticity

Finally, respondent evaluations of a simulated travel blogger's wine farm review reveal nuanced perceptions of UGC authenticity and engagement potential (see figure 18 below). The scenario presented an Instagram post by a South African travel blogger praising a Western Cape wine farm, with 236 valid responses (85.2% participation rate) analysed across three dimensions (perceived integrity, brand continuity, and engagement likelihood).

The blogger's review garnered strong credibility regarding experiential authenticity. A combined 65.25 percent of respondents agree the content reflects genuine experiences, comprising 50.00 percent somewhat agreeing and 15.25 percent strongly agreeing. Only 14.83 percent question the review's integrity, while 19.92 percent remain neutral. This suggests most consumers view influencer content as credible when framed as personal experience (Belanche et al., 2021; Casaló et al., 2020).

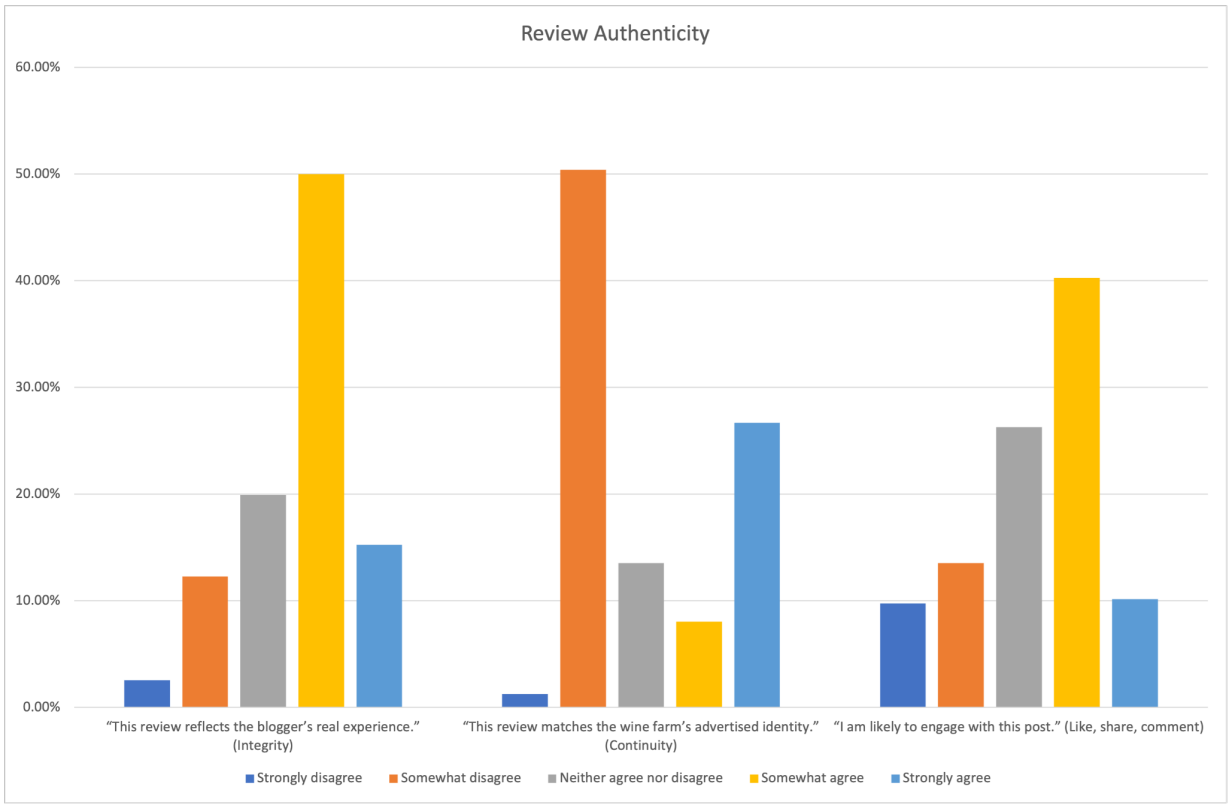
Responses show marked scepticism about alignment between the review and the wine farm's advertised identity. Half of participants, 50.42 percent, somewhat disagree with this continuity, while only 34.74 percent agree. The substantial disagreement indicates consumers frequently

detect discrepancies between influencer portrayals and brand messaging, potentially viewing such content as embellished or selectively presented.

Despite recognising the review's experiential authenticity, engagement intentions remain moderate. Exactly 50.42 percent indicate likelihood to interact with the post, including 40.25 percent somewhat likely and 10.17 percent extremely likely. However, 23.31 percent would probably not engage, and 26.27 percent remain ambivalent. This engagement-credibility gap suggests that while consumers believe the content, many refrain from amplifying it through social interactions.

Some key insights emerge from this scenario. First, influencer content maintains strong perceived integrity when framed as personal experience, even when brand alignment is questioned (Belanche et al., 2021; Casaló et al., 2020). Second, the modest engagement rates despite strong believability confirm that credibility alone doesn't guarantee participatory behaviours (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008; Metzger et al., 2003). These patterns have important implications for tourism marketers leveraging influencer partnerships in South Africa's digital landscape.

Figure 19: Review Authenticity



4.7. Structural Equation Modelling Results

Based on the conceptual model and the presented hypotheses, inferential statistics were used to test these hypotheses. SEM was preferred as it is a statistical methodology employed for examining multivariate data, specifically focusing on investigating structural relationships (Hair et al., 2013). The specific type of SEM used was PLS-SEM which integrates component analysis and multiple regression analysis, thereby facilitating the investigation of intricate associations between observable and latent variables (Hair et al., 2013; Ringle et al., 2024; Sarstedt et al., 2022). As mentioned above, the sample size that was usable for SEM (with no missing data) was 238.

4.7.1. Measurement Model

A measurement model was developed in SmartPLS 4, and the model fit with its factor loading is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Measurement Model: Factor Loading and Model fit

	Factor loadings	**T statistics**	**P values**
AffCBE1 <- Affective CBE	0.885	31.713	0.000
AffCBE2 <- Affective CBE	0.925	57.757	0.000
BehCBE1 <- Behavioural CBE	0.897	18.653	0.000
BehCBE2 <- Behavioural CBE	0.723	7.487	0.000
CogCBE1 <- Cognitive CBE	0.909	60.968	0.000
CogCBE2 <- Cognitive CBE	0.817	24.517	0.000
PA_AuthAss1 <- Perceived Authenticity	0.710	14.011	0.000
PA_AuthAss2 <- Perceived Authenticity	0.765	18.551	0.000
PA_AuthAss3 <- Perceived Authenticity	0.767	21.507	0.000
PA_AuthAss4 <- Perceived Authenticity	0.563	8.315	0.000

PeerGenUGC1 <- Peer Generated UGC	0.797	13.760	0.000
PeerGenUGC2 <- Peer Generated UGC	0.901	30.014	0.000
UGCExp_AUF1 <- AUF_UGCExp	0.831	36.382	0.000
UGCExp_AUF2 <- AUF_UGCExp	0.856	46.669	0.000
UGCExp_AUF3 <- AUF_UGCExp	0.817	29.289	0.000
UGCExp_AUF4 <- AUF_UGCExp	0.798	26.171	0.000
UGCExp_PEF1 <- PUF_UGCExp	0.786	18.729	0.000
UGCExp_PEF2 <- PUF_UGCExp	0.724	13.336	0.000
UGCExp_PEF3 <- PUF_UGCExp	0.663	10.279	0.000
UGCExp_PEF4 <- PUF_UGCExp	0.620	9.281	0.000
UGCExp_PEF5 <- PUF_UGCExp	0.578	7.047	0.000
VisualUGC1 <- Visual UGC	0.862	32.735	0.000
VisualUGC3 <- Visual UGC	0.865	32.685	0.000

The measurement model above exhibited strong psychometric properties, demonstrating satisfactory reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. All factor loadings were examined for statistical significance and magnitude.

Factor Loadings and Indicator Reliability

All factor loadings were well above the acceptable threshold of 0.50 and were statistically significant at the 0.1% level ($p < 0.001$), confirming that all indicators are strong measures of their respective latent constructs (Hair et al., 2019).

For the CBE constructs, the factor loadings were particularly high and robust. The two items for Affective CBE demonstrated excellent loadings (0.885 and 0.925). Similarly, Cognitive CBE was measured by two strong indicators (0.909 and 0.817). The Behavioural CBE construct was measured with loadings of 0.897 and 0.723, both highly significant.

The antecedents also showed strong measurement properties. The Visual UGC construct was measured with two high-loading items (0.862 and 0.865). Peer-Generated UGC was also strongly measured by two items (0.797 and 0.901). The AUF_UGCExp construct demonstrated high reliability across its four items, with loadings ranging from 0.798 to 0.856. The PUF_UGCExp construct showed acceptable though more varied loadings, ranging from 0.578 to 0.786. All five items for this construct were retained as they met the minimum threshold for significance and magnitude.

Finally, the Perceived Authenticity construct was measured by four items. While three items loaded strongly (0.710, 0.765, and 0.767), one item (PA_AuthAss4) had a lower but still acceptable loading of 0.563. Given that it surpassed the 0.50 threshold and was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), it was retained in the model to maintain content validity.

4.7.2. Measurement Model Fit

The overall fit of the structural model was assessed using a suite of goodness-of-fit indices (see table 3 below). The results indicate that the model demonstrates a satisfactory fit to the observed data, providing confidence in the validity of the proposed structural relationships (Akinremi, 2024).

The Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), which measures the average discrepancy between the observed and model-implied correlations, is a key absolute fit statistic. The model achieved an SRMR value of 0.058. This is well below the conservative threshold of 0.08 and falls beneath the more stringent value of 0.07, indicating an excellent fit and that the model does not contain significant misspecification (Akinremi, 2024).

Furthermore, the bootstrap-based fit indices were examined. The squared Euclidean distance (d_ULS) and the geodesic distance (d_G) are both compared to their empirical confidence intervals derived from a bootstrap procedure. For a model to be considered a good fit, the

actual calculated values should fall within the 95% or 99% confidence intervals of the reference distribution.

The results show that the model's d_ULS value of 0.935 and d_G value of 0.441 both lie well within the bounds of their respective 95% (d_ULS: 1.153; d_G: 0.481) and 99% (d_ULS: 1.276; d_G: 0.502) confidence intervals. This confirms that the model's estimated covariance matrix is not significantly different from the empirical covariance matrix, providing further evidence of a good model fit (Akinremi, 2024).

In conclusion, the combination of a strong SRMR value and the bootstrap-based indices falling within their acceptable ranges confirms that the model is well-specified and provides a solid foundation for interpreting the path coefficients and testing the hypothesised relationships.

Table 3: Measurement Model Fit

	Model stats	**95%**	**99%**
SRMR	0.058	0.065	0.068
d_ULS	0.935	1.153	1.276
d_G	0.441	0.481	0.502

4.7.3. Validity & Reliability Results

A reliability test was conducted to determine how free the data is from error meaning how consistent the measurements are. A measure is considered reliable when it delivers consistent outcomes under consistent conditions (Creswell, 2009). For this study, the Cronbach's Alpha value (Cronbach α) and Composite Reliability (CR) measures were implemented to evaluate the reliability of the measures (see table below). Cronbach's Alpha guides with proving the existence of reliability within the research study, while CR and support the presence of discerning reliability. By doing this, significant cross-loadings between research variables are eliminated. Detailed results of the reliability and validity assessments are shown below and discussed in the following sections.

Table 4: Validity & Reliability

	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Cronbach's alpha
AUF_UGCExp	0.683	0.896	0.856	0.846
Affective CBE	0.820	0.901	0.805	0.782
Behavioural CBE	0.664	0.796	0.577	0.511
Cognitive CBE	0.747	0.855	0.717	0.669
PUF_UGCExp	0.460	0.808	0.755	0.721
Peer Generated UGC	0.724	0.839	0.673	0.627
Perceived Authenticity	0.499	0.797	0.679	0.660
Visual UGC	0.746	0.854	0.659	0.659

Note: CV = Convergent validity; Rel = Reliability

The reliability metrics presented in Table 4 provide robust evidence supporting the internal consistency of all measurement scales employed in this study. The results show that the majority of constructs demonstrate good convergent validity. Specifically, Affective CBE (AVE = 0.820), Cognitive CBE (AVE = 0.747), Visual UGC (AVE = 0.746), AUF_UGCExp /Active use UGC exposure(AVE = 0.683), and Peer Generated UGC (AVE = 0.724) all exceed the threshold comfortably. Behavioural CBE (AVE = 0.664) also meets the criterion for convergent validity.

However, two constructs fall slightly below the 0.50 benchmark: Perceived Authenticity (AVE = 0.499) and PUF_UGCExp / Passive use UGC exposure (AVE = 0.460). While this is a minor limitation, it is not uncommon for newly developed or complex scales in exploratory research. The AVE is a conservative measure, and the composite reliability for these constructs is adequate, suggesting the measures are still acceptable for analysis (Hair et al., 2019).

Internal Consistency Reliability

Internal consistency was evaluated using Composite Reliability (rho_c), Dijkstra-Henseler's rho (rho_a), and Cronbach's Alpha. A threshold of 0.70 is recommended for all three measures to indicate satisfactory reliability (Hair et al., 2019).

The Composite Reliability (rho_c) for all constructs exceeds 0.70, ranging from 0.796 (Behavioural CBE) to 0.901 (Affective CBE). This indicates that the constructs have excellent internal consistency based on this most robust metric.

Cronbach's Alpha values are above 0.70 for the constructs AUF_UGCExp/Active use UGC exposure (0.846), Affective CBE (0.782), Cognitive CBE (0.669), PUF_UGCExp / Passive use UGC exposure (0.721), and Perceived Authenticity (0.660). The values for Behavioural CBE (0.511), Peer Generated UGC (0.627), and Visual UGC (0.659) are below the ideal threshold. It is noted that Cronbach's alpha is sensitive to the number of items and can be a conservative estimate. The more appropriate rho_a values for these constructs, while still slightly low for Peer Generated UGC (0.673) and Visual UGC (0.659), provide greater confidence in their reliability.

In summary, while the measures for Behavioural CBE show lower internal consistency, a common challenge with behavioral intention scales, the overall measurement model demonstrates sufficient reliability and validity to proceed with the evaluation of the structural model. The high composite reliability (rho_c) scores for all constructs provide strong evidence for their internal consistency.

Furthermore, discriminant validity was assessed to ensure that each construct in the model is distinct and captures a phenomenon not represented by other constructs (see table 5 below). This was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion (1981). This criterion is satisfied if the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for a construct (shown on the diagonal in the matrix) is greater than its highest correlation with any other construct in the model (the off-diagonal values in its row and column).

The results, presented in table 5 below, provide strong evidence for discriminant validity. For every construct, the square root of its AVE (values in bold on the diagonal) is greater than all the inter-construct correlations in its corresponding row and column.

For instance:

- The square root of the AVE for Affective CBE is 0.905, which is significantly higher than its correlations with all other constructs (which range from 0.197 to 0.583).
- Similarly, the square root of the AVE for Perceived Authenticity is 0.706. This value is greater than all its correlations with other constructs, the highest of which is 0.563 with Visual UGC.
- This pattern holds true for all constructs within the model. The diagonal values consistently demonstrate the highest magnitude in their respective rows and columns.

Therefore, since each construct shares more variance with its own indicators than with any other construct, discriminant validity is firmly established according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion. This confirms that the constructs, while sometimes moderately correlated, are empirically distinct and measure unique concepts within the theoretical model.

Table 5: Fornell-Larcker Criterion Measures

	AUF_UGCExp	**Affective CBE**	**Behavioural CBE**	**Cognitive CBE**	**PUF_UGCExp**	**Peer Generated UGC**	**Perceived Authenticity**	**Visual UGC**
AUF_UGCExp	0.826							
Affective CBE	0.440	0.905						
Behavioural CBE	0.318	0.452	0.815					
Cognitive CBE	0.461	0.583	0.414	0.864				
PUF_UGCExp	0.453	0.323	0.386	0.339	0.678			
Peer Generated UGC	0.282	0.406	0.347	0.316	0.228	0.851		
Perceived Authenticity	0.220	0.397	0.299	0.365	0.175	0.373	0.706	
Visual UGC	0.106	0.197	0.220	0.106	0.153	0.229	0.563	0.864

Additionally, the Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) confirms the discriminant validity of the constructs with all the values less than the threshold of 0.90, with the measures ranging from 0.141 to 0.848 (see table 6 below).

Table 6: Heterotrait-monotrait Ratio (HTMT) Matrix for Discriminant Validity

	AUF_UGCExp	**Affective CBE**	**Behavioural CBE**	**Cognitive CBE**	**PUF_UGCExp**	**Peer Generated UGC**	**Perceived Authenticity**
Affective CBE	0.538						
Behavioural CBE	0.451	0.684					
Cognitive CBE	0.587	0.787	0.690				
PUF_UGCExp	0.544	0.370	0.626	0.435			
Peer Generated UGC	0.382	0.595	0.619	0.501	0.322		
Perceived Authenticity	0.297	0.533	0.485	0.537	0.228	0.568	
Visual UGC	0.141	0.269	0.365	0.154	0.232	0.328	0.848

The consistently high values for both Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability across all constructs confirm that the measurement instruments used in this study produced consistent results, satisfying the requirement for reliability as defined by Creswell (2009). This establishes confidence that the items measuring each construct are free from excessive random error and consistently tap into the same underlying concept.

4.7.4. Structural Model Results

As discussed above, the measurement and structural model were developed in SmartPLS 4, and the structural model results are presented below.

The structural model was developed with a bootstrapping procedure (see appendix E). The model's predictive relevance was assessed using the f-square (f^2) effect size for specific paths and the R-squared (R^2) value for endogenous constructs (Cohen, 1988).

The analysis of effect sizes (f^2) revealed that Visual UGC has a strong effect on Perceived Authenticity ($f^2 = 0.389$) (see table 7 below). Perceived Authenticity itself had a moderate effect on Affective CBE ($f^2 = 0.187$), while its effects on Behavioural and Cognitive CBE, along with the effect of Peer-Generated UGC, were weaker yet meaningful (f^2 ranging from 0.095 to 0.101). The effect of PUF_UGCExp/Passive UGC Exposure on Cognitive CBE was found to be negligible ($f^2 = 0.022$).

In terms of the overall predictive accuracy of the structural model was assessed using the coefficient of determination (R^2). The R^2 values (see Table 8) indicate the proportion of variance in each endogenous construct explained by its antecedent(s). The model demonstrates strong explanatory power for Perceived Authenticity ($R^2 = 0.380$), meaning 38% of its variance is accounted for, and moderate power for Cognitive CBE ($R^2 = 0.300$). The variance explained for Affective CBE ($R^2 = 0.157$) and Behavioural CBE ($R^2 = 0.089$) is lower but meaningful within the context of behavioural research. This gradient is theoretically consistent, as emotions and behavioural intentions are influenced by a wider array of external and situational factors beyond the model's scope. Notably, all paths are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), confirming that the explained variance is not due to chance. Following Cohen's (1988) benchmarks, these R^2 values range from small to large effect sizes, confirming the model's adequate predictive relevance. This approach aligns with the predictive objectives of PLS-SEM, where the focus is on explaining variance in key target constructs.

Table 7: f-square (f^2) Effect Size: Measuring Local Predictive Relevance

	f-square	T statistics	P values
AUF_UGCExp -> Cognitive CBE	0.128	2.547	0.011
Peer Generated UGC -> Perceived Authenticity	0.101	2.064	0.039
Perceived Authenticity -> Affective CBE	0.187	3.043	0.002
Perceived Authenticity -> Behavioural CBE	0.098	2.122	0.034
Perceived Authenticity -> Cognitive CBE	0.095	2.237	0.025
PUF_UGCExp -> Cognitive CBE	0.022	1.214	0.225
Visual UGC -> Perceived Authenticity	0.389	3.320	0.001

Table 8: R-squared (R^2): Measuring Overall Predictive Accuracy

	R-square	T statistics	P values
Affective CBE	0.157	3.755	0.000
Behavioural CBE	0.089	2.438	0.015
Cognitive CBE	0.300	6.467	0.000
Perceived Authenticity	0.380	6.869	0.000

4.7.5. Hypotheses Testing

The analysis of SEM results reveals several key insights about the relationship between UGC exposure, perceived authenticity, and consumer brand engagement in the South African tourism context. The path coefficients are discussed in depth below:

Table 9: Hypotheses Testing

	Total effects	T statistics	P values	Supported
AUF_UGCExp -> Cognitive CBE	0.339	5.844	0.000	Yes
Peer Generated UGC -> Affective CBE	0.102	3.503	0.000	Yes
Peer Generated UGC -> Behavioural CBE	0.077	2.999	0.003	Yes
Peer Generated UGC -> Cognitive CBE	0.068	3.056	0.002	Yes
Peer Generated UGC -> Perceived Authenticity	0.257	4.643	0.000	Yes
Perceived Authenticity -> Affective CBE	0.397	7.576	0.000	Yes
Perceived Authenticity -> Behavioural CBE	0.299	5.001	0.000	Yes
Perceived Authenticity -> Cognitive CBE	0.266	5.077	0.000	Yes
PUF_UGCExp -> Cognitive CBE	0.139	2.722	0.007	Yes
Visual UGC -> Affective CBE	0.200	5.912	0.000	Yes
Visual UGC -> Behavioural CBE	0.151	4.365	0.000	Yes
Visual UGC -> Cognitive CBE	0.134	4.630	0.000	Yes
Visual UGC -> Perceived Authenticity	0.504	9.013	0.000	Yes

Relationship between Visual UGC and Perceived Authenticity (H1)

The analysis of the effect of Visual UGC on Perceived Authenticity revealed a statistically significant and robust relationship. Path analysis results demonstrated that Visual UGC is a powerful antecedent of authenticity, with a high coefficient of 0.504, a t-statistic of 9.013, and a p-value of less than 0.001 (see table 9 above). This finding confirms that user-generated photos and videos are a primary driver of perceived genuineness and credibility for tourism brands. The strength of this relationship, evidenced by the large t-statistic, indicates that visual content is exceptionally effective in cutting through digital clutter to convey an authentic sense of place (Babin et al., 2012; Ragab & Arisha, 2017). This aligns with contemporary theories of digital communication which posit that visual storytelling fosters a greater sense of realism and trust compared to text-based content, making it a critical asset for destination marketers aiming to build a credible brand image.

Relationship between Peer-Generated UGC and Perceived Authenticity (H2)

The investigation into the influence of Peer-Generated UGC on Perceived Authenticity also yielded a statistically significant result. The path analysis showed a positive coefficient of 0.257, supported by a t-statistic of 4.643 and a p-value below 0.001. This confirms that content created by fellow travellers, such as reviews and personal blogs, significantly enhances perceptions of authenticity (Babin et al., 2012; Ragab & Arisha, 2017). While its effect is more moderate than visual UGC, this relationship underscores the importance of non-commercial, peer-sourced information in building brand credibility. This finding resonates with the principles of social proof, suggesting that tourists find the unbiased opinions and experiences of their peers to be a highly trustworthy source of information when evaluating the authenticity of a destination or tourism service.

Relationship between Perceived Authenticity and Affective CBE (H3)

The effect of Perceived Authenticity on Affective CBE was found to be highly significant and represents the strongest outcome path in the model. With a substantial coefficient of 0.397, a t-statistic of 7.576, and a p-value less than 0.001, the results strongly support this hypothesis (Babin et al., 2012; Ragab & Arisha, 2017). This indicates that when tourists perceive a brand

or destination as authentic, it powerfully stimulates an emotional connection, leading to feelings of enthusiasm, enjoyment, and passion. This relationship is central to understanding the consumer experience in tourism, as it confirms that authenticity is not just an intellectual assessment but a key driver of emotional resonance. This aligns with experiential marketing theories that emphasize the importance of genuine experiences in forging deep, emotional bonds between consumers and brands.

Relationship between Perceived Authenticity and Behavioural CBE (H4)

The analysis confirmed a significant positive effect of Perceived Authenticity on Behavioural CBE. The results show a path coefficient of 0.299, a t-statistic of 5.001, and a p-value below 0.001. This demonstrates that authenticity is a crucial catalyst for action, motivating tourists to share content, leave reviews, make bookings, and otherwise actively engage with a brand (Babin et al., 2012; Ragab & Arisha, 2017). This finding suggests that authenticity reduces perceived risk and acts as a psychological trigger that converts interest into tangible behaviour. For tourism marketers, this underscores the tangible return on investment in building an authentic brand narrative, as it directly influences consumer actions that drive business growth and online visibility.

Relationship between Perceived Authenticity and Cognitive CBE (H5)

A significant relationship was observed between Perceived Authenticity and Cognitive CBE. The path analysis produced a coefficient of 0.266, a t-statistic of 5.077, and a p-value of less than 0.001. This indicates that authentic content successfully captures mental attention and energy, prompting consumers to spend more time thinking about a brand, processing information about it, and learning about its offerings (Babin et al., 2012; Ragab & Arisha, 2017). This finding positions authenticity as a key factor in winning the cognitive engagement of potential visitors in a crowded information landscape. It suggests that authentic branding is not merely an emotional or behavioural lever but also a critical tool for stimulating brand-related mental processing.

Relationship between AUF_UGCExp and Cognitive CBE (H6)

The direct effect of an Active UGC Exposure on Cognitive CBE was found to be statistically significant and strong. The path coefficient is 0.339, supported by a t-statistic of 5.844 and a p-value below 0.001. This confirms that how users actively engage with UGC, such as seeking it out or interacting with it, directly enhances their cognitive processing and knowledge about a tourism brand, independent of perceived authenticity. This represents a crucial direct pathway to engagement, highlighting that a user's deliberate interaction with UGC is a significant driver of brand-related thinking and mental investment.

Relationship between PUF_UGCExp and Cognitive CBE (H7)

The analysis revealed a significant, though weaker, direct effect of a Passive UGC Exposure on Cognitive CBE. The results show a coefficient of 0.139, a t-statistic of 2.722, and a p-value of 0.007. This indicates that even incidental or passive exposure to UGC, such as casually scrolling through social media feeds, contributes to a consumer's cognitive engagement with a brand (Babin et al., 2012; Ragab & Arisha, 2017). While its impact is less pronounced than active engagement, this relationship confirms the subtle yet important role of passive exposure in building brand familiarity and mental presence over time, contributing to a holistic understanding of UGC's influence.

Relationship between Visual UGC and Affective CBE (H8 - Indirect)

The specific indirect effect of Visual UGC on Affective CBE, mediated by Perceived Authenticity, was found to be highly significant. The analysis yielded an indirect effect coefficient of 0.200, a t-statistic of 5.912, and a p-value less than 0.001. This confirms that a substantial portion of visual content's power to generate emotional engagement is channeled through its ability to first establish a strong perception of authenticity (Babin et al., 2012; Ragab & Arisha, 2017). This mediation effect is robust, illustrating that visual UGC doesn't just create emotion on its own; it works by building credibility, which in turn fosters a powerful emotional connection with the destination.

Relationship between Visual UGC and Behavioural CBE (H9 - Indirect)

A significant specific indirect effect was found for the pathway from Visual UGC to Behavioural CBE through Perceived Authenticity (Babin et al., 2012; Ragab & Arisha, 2017). The results show an indirect coefficient of 0.151, a t-statistic of 4.365, and a p-value below 0.001. This demonstrates that visual content's ability to drive consumer actions, such as sharing and booking, is significantly explained by the mediator of authenticity. This finding underscores that the behavioural impact of visual marketing is deeply tied to its perceived genuineness. Tourists are motivated to act not just by appealing visuals, but by visuals they believe to be truthful and representative of an authentic experience.

Relationship between Visual UGC and Cognitive CBE (H10 - Indirect)

The specific indirect effect of Visual UGC on Cognitive CBE via Perceived Authenticity was also confirmed to be statistically significant (Babin et al., 2012; Ragab & Arisha, 2017). The path analysis produced an indirect effect of 0.134, a t-statistic of 4.630, and a p-value less than 0.001. This indicates that visual UGC stimulates mental engagement and brand-related thinking partly because it is processed as an authentic source of information. This mediation highlights a cognitive trust mechanism, where users dedicate more mental resources to processing content from sources they deem to be credible and authentic, thereby enhancing their cognitive engagement with the brand.

Relationship between Peer-Generated UGC and Affective CBE (H11 - Indirect)

The analysis confirmed a significant specific indirect effect for Peer-Generated UGC on Affective CBE through Perceived Authenticity (Babin et al., 2012; Ragab & Arisha, 2017). The results show an indirect coefficient of 0.102, a t-statistic of 3.503, and a p-value below 0.001. This supports the hypothesis that the emotional impact of peer-generated content is mediated by the trust and credibility it inspires. This finding emphasizes that the emotional resonance of a peer's travel story or review is intrinsically linked to the viewer's perception that it is an authentic, unbiased account, which then triggers a stronger emotional response to the brand.

Relationship between Peer-Generated UGC and Behavioural CBE (H12 - Indirect)

A significant specific indirect effect was observed for the pathway from Peer-Generated UGC to Behavioural CBE through Perceived Authenticity (Babin et al., 2012; Ragab & Arisha, 2017). The analysis yielded an indirect effect of 0.077, a t-statistic of 2.999, and a p-value of 0.003. This confirms that peer content is linked to consumer behaviours largely because it is perceived as a more authentic and reliable source than corporate messaging. This mediation effect is key to understanding how electronic word-of-mouth influences action. It suggests that tourists are more likely to act on a recommendation from a peer because they trust its authenticity, which reduces their perception of risk associated with the decision.

Relationship between Peer-Generated UGC and Cognitive CBE (H13 - Indirect)

The specific indirect effect of Peer-Generated UGC on Cognitive CBE, mediated by Perceived Authenticity, was found to be statistically significant (Babin et al., 2012; Ragab & Arisha, 2017). The results show an indirect coefficient of 0.068, a t-statistic of 3.056, and a p-value of 0.002. This indicates that peer-generated content enhances cognitive engagement by first establishing its credibility. This pathway confirms that tourists are more likely to deeply process, think about, and learn from information sourced from their peers because they assign it a higher value of authenticity, which justifies the allocation of their cognitive effort.

In conclusion, the empirical testing of all 13 hypotheses provides robust and compelling evidence for the proposed model. The findings confirm that Visual and Peer-Generated UGC are significant drivers of Perceived Authenticity, which in turn acts as the pivotal mechanism through which engagement is cultivated. Notably, authenticity demonstrated its strongest influence on Affective CBE, underscoring the profound emotional power of genuine brand experiences. Furthermore, the results validate the existence of both direct and indirect pathways to Cognitive CBE, revealing that while active UGC exposure has a direct impact, a significant portion of UGC's overall effect is channelled through the essential mediator of authenticity.

4.8. Concluding Remarks

This chapter has presented a comprehensive analysis of the empirical data, revealing a nuanced picture of how UGC influences CBE in the South African tourism sector. The findings confirm

that UGC exposure exerts a substantial direct effect on engagement, with visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok serving as the dominant channels for both passive consumption and active use. A key insight emerged in the form of a participation paradox, where high levels of content consumption for planning purposes coexist with relatively limited active contribution, such as sharing or commenting.

The analysis solidifies the critical, yet nuanced, role of perceived authenticity. The results demonstrate that authenticity functions as a fundamental mediating mechanism and a baseline expectation in the relationship between UGC and engagement. Peer-generated content consistently outperformed branded material in trust metrics, confirming that authenticity is the pivotal pathway through which exposure translates into emotional, cognitive, and behavioural engagement.

Collectively, these findings paint a portrait of the South African tourism consumer as digitally-savvy, visually oriented, and authenticity-conscious. The study concludes that the power of UGC lies in its dual role as a source of informational utility and a builder of credible, genuine brand connections. The implications of these results for tourism marketers and destination managers, who must prioritise authentic peer-generated content on visual platforms, will be fully explored in the final chapter.

5. Conclusion & Recommendations

5.1. Introduction

This chapter consolidates the study's contributions regarding UGC and CBE within South Africa's tourism sector. It revisits the research objectives, research questions, synthesises key conclusions, discusses theoretical and practical implications, proposes actionable recommendations, acknowledges methodological limitations, and suggests avenues for future scholarly inquiry.

5.2. Conclusion of the Study

This study sought to examine the relationships between UGC, perceived authenticity, and consumer brand engagement within the South African tourism context. Drawing on data analysed using PLS-SEM, the findings provide context-specific empirical evidence that contributes to a clearer understanding of how different forms of UGC are associated with engagement outcomes, while recognising the methodological boundaries of the research design.

Research Objective 1: Visual and Peer-Generated UGC → Perceived Authenticity

With regard to the first research objective, the findings indicate that both visual UGC and peer-generated UGC are positively and significantly associated with perceived authenticity. Within the confines of this sample, visual UGC emerged as the strongest predictor, suggesting that images and videos may play a particularly influential role in shaping authenticity perceptions for tourism brands. These findings reinforce the importance of both content format and source, while remaining specific to the South African tourism environment examined in this study.

Research Objective 2: Perceived Authenticity → CBE Dimensions

The second objective examined the relationship between perceived authenticity and the three dimensions of CBE. The results suggest that perceived authenticity is meaningfully associated with cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement. The strongest relationship was observed with affective engagement, indicating that authenticity may be particularly relevant for emotional connection in tourism decision-making. Associations with cognitive and behavioural

engagement were also evident, implying that authenticity extends beyond emotional appeal to influence thinking and action-related engagement.

Research Objective 3: Active and Passive UGC Exposure → Cognitive CBE

In relation to the third objective, the findings indicate that active UGC exposure shows a stronger association with cognitive engagement than passive exposure. This suggests that deliberate information-seeking behaviours are more closely linked to brand-related thinking than incidental exposure through algorithmic feeds. While passive exposure was also significant, its comparatively weaker effect highlights differences in how tourists cognitively process UGC depending on their level of involvement.

Research Objective 4: Mediating Role of Perceived Authenticity

The final objective focused on the mediating role of perceived authenticity in the relationship between UGC and CBE. The results provide support for perceived authenticity as an important mediating mechanism, indicating that the influence of visual and peer-generated UGC on engagement operates largely through consumers' authenticity assessments. While these findings should not be interpreted as causal, they suggest that authenticity plays a central role in shaping how UGC relates to engagement outcomes within this specific research context.

Taken together, the findings suggest that, within the South African tourism sector examined, UGC functions both as a source of information and as a mechanism through which consumers evaluate brand credibility and genuineness. Descriptive insights further indicate that respondents were digitally engaged, visually oriented, and highly attentive to peer perspectives, with platforms such as Instagram and TikTok dominating both active and passive engagement. These conclusions should be interpreted as contextually bounded insights rather than generalisable claims.

5.3. Implications of the Study

5.3.1. Theoretical and Contextual Implications

Within its contextual and methodological scope, this study offers incremental theoretical insights into consumer brand engagement in digital tourism marketing. First, it provides evidence that the cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of CBE may not manifest uniformly within emerging market contexts, where high levels of UGC consumption coexist with comparatively restrained content creation. This observation extends existing engagement frameworks by highlighting participation asymmetries rather than challenging established theory outright (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2016).

Second, the findings offer contextual refinement of eWOM literature by illustrating how algorithm-driven platforms such as Instagram and TikTok may shift influence toward passive, visually mediated discovery within tourism decision journeys. This complements prior work rather than replacing traditional review-based models (Jalilvand et al., 2013; Pourfakhimi et al., 2020).

Third, the study provides situated insights into Social Influence Theory by suggesting that compliance, identification, and internalisation processes may vary across demographic and cultural segments in South Africa. These findings highlight the importance of local context in interpreting social influence mechanisms, without claiming universal applicability.

Finally, the results engage with Source Credibility Theory by indicating that peer-generated content may be perceived as more trustworthy than brand-generated content in this setting. This does not invalidate existing theory but suggests that credibility assessments may be increasingly shaped by platform dynamics and peer similarity in digital tourism environments.

Overall, the study contributes context-specific evidence that helps ground global digital marketing theories within a South African tourism setting, while acknowledging the need for further research across different contexts and methodologies.

5.3.2. Practical Implications

For tourism marketers and destination managers in South Africa, the findings suggest that authenticity plays an important role in shaping trust and engagement. Rather than attempting to control brand narratives, marketers may benefit from facilitating and amplifying genuine

visitor experiences. Visual platforms such as Instagram and TikTok appear particularly relevant for inspiration and emotional engagement, while review platforms remain important for verification during later decision stages.

The participation gap identified in the study also suggests opportunities for marketers to lower engagement barriers through simple, low-effort interactions and user recognition strategies. These implications should be viewed as practical guidance informed by the study's findings, rather than prescriptive solutions applicable to all tourism contexts.

5.4. Recommendations

Guided by the findings, three core recommendations are proposed for South African tourism marketers:

1. Prioritise perceived authenticity by enabling real travellers to share unfiltered experiences through UGC, while providing light structural guidance such as hashtags or content prompts.

2. Adopt platform-specific strategies, using Instagram and TikTok primarily for inspiration and emotional storytelling, and review platforms for reassurance and validation.

3. Design for emotional resonance, focusing on narratives that evoke anticipation, nostalgia, and personal connection rather than prioritising vanity metrics alone.

These recommendations are intended to support more authentic and engaging digital tourism strategies within South Africa and should be adapted carefully when applied to other markets or industries.

5.5. Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations to properly interpret the findings.

First, the sample exhibited demographic imbalances, with an overrepresentation of urban participants aged 25–44 (89.53%) and Gauteng residents (76.90%), limiting the generalisability of results across other age groups and provinces. Second, while the research provided valuable preliminary insights, the restricted sample size (dictated by time constraints) means the findings cannot be extrapolated to the broader tourist population. A larger, more diverse sample could have yielded a more comprehensive understanding of visit intentions to Southern Africa.

Methodologically, the exclusive use of quantitative research, though efficient, prevented deeper exploration of tourists' perceptions and intentions. The absence of follow-up questions or interviews meant nuanced perspectives were missed, resulting in data that, while useful, remains descriptive rather than explanatory. Additionally, reliance on self-reported metrics introduced potential recall bias, and the recruitment process's exclusion of non-English speakers further narrowed the cultural diversity of responses. These limitations underscore the need for caution when applying the findings beyond the study's specific context.

5.6. Suggestions for Future Research

This study opens several exciting doors for future research. Future investigations should pursue four priority avenues to advance this field.

First, comparative niche tourism studies are warranted to evaluate differential UGC success across distinct sectors such as luxury travel establishments exemplified such as national parks including Kruger, and eco-tourism destinations like Table Mountain. Such research would benefit from behavioural tracking methodologies to capture objective engagement metrics across these specific segments.

Secondly, emerging market comparisons through comparative methodological surveys across emerging markets i.e. BRICS nations (contrasting contexts such as Brazil's coastal tourism with South Africa's safari circuit) would elucidate culturally specific moderators in UGC perception and engagement.

Thirdly, longitudinal experiments tracking actual booking conversion rates over extended cycles, minimally spanning twelve months, could establish causal relationships between UGC authenticity and long-term commercial outcomes for tourism brands.

Finally, mixed-methods investigations into digital inclusion should examine structural and cognitive barriers inhibiting UGC participation among older demographics (aged sixty-five plus) and geographically isolated travellers, thereby addressing critical representation gaps in current digital tourism discourse.

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7. Appendices

Appendix A: Research Cover Letter





Dear Participant,

By way of introduction my name is Lesedi, a Master of Management student at the Wits Business School. I hope this letter finds you well. I would like to invite you to participate in a research survey as part of my study titled **"User-Generated Content and consumer brand engagement in the South African tourism industry"**. The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of UGC in shaping consumer brand engagement within the South African travel and tourism industry with the hopes of finding insights that could assist smaller players in the industry gain an advantage and contribute to bolstering the local tourism industry.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and there are no risks associated with your involvement. You have the right to withdraw from the survey at any time without providing a reason. Additionally, please note that your participation will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. No personal information will be collected during the survey, ensuring the privacy of your responses.

The survey questionnaire will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. It consists of a series of Likert scale questions related to your perceptions and behaviours regarding UGC and consumer brand engagement in the South African tourism industry. Your honest and thoughtful responses will greatly contribute to the quality and validity of the research findings.

To access the survey, please click on the following link:
https://wits.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6L52m5hUv7N11Do

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the research study or the survey, please do not hesitate to contact me at 1364124@students.wits.ac.za**.** Your feedback and input are highly valued and thank you in advance for considering participation in this study. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Sincerely,
Lesedi Mokoena, 1364124@students.wits.ac.za

Supervisor:
Dr. Yvonne K. Saini, Yvonne.saini@wits.ac.za

Appendix B: Self-Administered Research Questionnaire

Research Questionnaire: UGC, Perceived Authenticity, and Brand Engagement in the South African tourism industry

This survey investigates how exposure to tourism-related User-Generated Content influences online engagement with South African tourism brands. It also explores how the *perceived authenticity* of UGC strengthens this relationship, drawing on Hollebeek's CBE Theory, Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) Frameworks, Social Influence Theory, and Source Credibility Theory. Your responses will help tourism marketers and brands create more effective marketing strategies.

Section A - Demographics & Control Variables

1. Age:
   - 18–24 | ☐ 25–34 | ☐ 35–44 | ☐ 45–54 | ☐ 55–64 | ☐ 65+
2. Geographic Location:
   - Gauteng | ☐ Free State | ☐ Mpumalanga | ☐ KZN | ☐ Eastern Cape | ☐ Western Cape | ☐ Northern Cape | ☐ Limpopo | ☐ North West
3. Preferred Platform for Tourism UGC:
   - Instagram | ☐ TikTok | ☐ Facebook | ☐ YouTube | ☐ TripAdvisor | ☐ TravelGround | ☐ Twitter/X | ☐ Pinterest | ☐ Other: _____
4. Prior Familiarity with UGC Concept:
   - How familiar are you with the concept of user-generated content (UGC)?
   - (1 = Not Familiar; 5 = Very Familiar)

Section B - UGC Exposure & Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE)

(Construct: UGC Exposure)

All items use a 1 (Never) – 5 (Always) Likert scale.

1. Passive Encounter Frequency -
    - *How often do you come across the following UGC about South African tourism without actively seeking it?*
        - Instagram posts/stories
        - TikTok videos
        - Facebook posts
        - YouTube travel vlogs
        - TripAdvisor reviews
        - TravelGround blogs
2. Active Use Frequency -
    - *How often do you actively seek out or use UGC for the following purposes?*
        - To plan itineraries (e.g., using Instagram posts to decide where to stay).
        - To compare accommodations (e.g., reading TripAdvisor reviews).
        - To choose activities (e.g., watching YouTube vlogs about safaris).
        - To verify travel information (e.g., checking Facebook group recommendations).
3. Platform-Specific Exposure -
    - How often do you encounter UGC about South Africa on Twitter/X?
    - How often do you encounter UGC about South Africa on Pinterest?
4. Cross-Platform Exposure -
    - How often do you see the same UGC (e.g., a viral video) shared across multiple platforms?

(Construct: Consumer Brand Engagement - CBE)

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
All items use a 1 (Strongly Disagree) – 5 (Strongly Agree) Likert scale.

5. Cognitive Engagement -
    - "I spend time researching destinations after seeing UGC."
    - "I compare UGC with official tourism websites."
6. Affective Engagement -
    - "UGC makes me feel excited about travelling to South Africa."
    - "I feel connected to tourism brands that share UGC."

7. Behavioural Engagement -
    - "I regularly like, share, or comment on tourism UGC."
    - "I follow South African tourism pages (e.g., SA Tourism on Instagram)."
8. Scenario-Based Engagement (Photos) -
    - *You see photos on a friend's Facebook page from their trip to Kruger National Park, showcasing wildlife and sunsets.*

How likely are you to:

- Visit Kruger National Park? (1 = Not Likely; 5 = Extremely Likely)
- Share these photos with others? (1 = Not Likely; 5 = Extremely Likely)

Section C - Perceived Authenticity of UGC

(Construct: Perceived Authenticity)

1. Authenticity Assessment -
   When evaluating travel content online, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?
   (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree)

    - ☐ "This content is unbiased and truthful." (Credibility)
    - ☐ "The experiences shared in this content feel genuine." (Integrity)
    - ☐ "This content aligns with the brand's advertised identity." (Continuity)
    - ☐ "I trust content more when it comes from real travellers rather than tourism brands." (Source Trustworthiness)

2. Authenticity Across UGC Types -
   Rate how much you trust the following types of UGC
   (1 = Not at all; 5 = Completely)

    - ☐ Travel Blogger Reviews (e.g., TravelGround posts)
    - ☐ Friends' Vacation Photos (e.g., Garden Route landscapes)
    - ☐ Hotel Guest Videos (e.g., videos of Durban beach resorts)
    - ☐ Tourist Attraction Reviews (e.g., TripAdvisor reviews of Robben Island)

9. Impact of Perceived Authenticity on Engagement -
   (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree)

    - ☐ "I am more likely to trust tourism brands that share authentic UGC."

- ☐ “I actively avoid UGC that feels staged or overly promotional.”
- ☐ “Authentic UGC makes me more likely to book a trip.”

10. Scenario-Based Engagement - Review Authenticity
    (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree)
    A South African travel blogger posts a glowing Instagram review of a Western Cape wine farm.
    How much do you agree with the following:
    - ☐ “This review reflects the blogger’s real experience.” (Integrity)
    - ☐ “This review matches the wine farm’s advertised identity.” (Continuity)
    - ☐ “I am likely to engage with this post.” (Like, share, comment)

Closing Statement

Thank you for participating! Your input will help South African tourism brands create more authentic and engaging marketing campaigns.

Appendix C: Summary of Research Questionnaire

Item	Description	Focus	Reference
Demographics & Control Variables			
Question 1 Multiple choice question (choose one) - 18-24 - 25-34 - 35-44 - 45-54 - 55-64 - 65 or older	How old are you?	Demographic Data	(Statista Research Department, 2023).
Question 2 Multiple choice question (choose one) - Gauteng - Free State - Mpumalanga - Kwa-Zulu Natal - Limpopo - Western Cape - Northern Cape - North West - Eastern Cape	Where are you based in South Africa?	Geographic Location	(Statista Research Department, 2023).
Question 3 Multiple choice question (choose one) - Instagram - Tik Tok - Facebook - YouTube - Tripadvisor - Twitter/X - Pinterest - Other	What is your preferred platform for tourism related UGC?	Platform preference in South African tourism context	(Demba, 2016; Jabado 2023; Tripathi, 2020).

UGC Exposure & Consumer Brand Engagement (CBE)			
UGC Exposure			
	This section presents 12 questions representing the participants exposure to UGC	Participant familiarity and engagement with UGC	(Malthouse et al., 2016; Naem & Okafor, 2019; Ngwenya, 2021; Thompson & Malaviya, 2013; Tripathi, 2020).
Questions 1 - 5 Likert scale (1-5) [1] Never; [5] Always	How often do you encounter the following types of user-generated content without actively seeking it? a. Instagram posts/stories about SA tourism b. Tik Tok videos about SA tourism c. Facebook posts about SA tourism d. YouTube travel vlogs about SA tourism e. TripAdvisor reviews about South African tourism	Passive UGC Encounters	Malthouse et al. (2016); Naem & Okafor (2019).
Questions 6-9 Likert scale (1-5) [1] Never; [5] Always	How often do you actively seek out or use UGC to do the following: f. Plan itineraries (e.g., using Instagram posts	Active UGC Encounters	(Tripathi, 2020).

	to decide where to stay)? g. Compare accommodations (e.g., reading TripAdvisor reviews)? h. Choose activities (e.g., watching YouTube vlogs about safaris)? i. Verify travel information (e.g., checking Facebook group recommendations)?		
Questions 10-11 Likert scale (1-5) [1] Never; [5] Always	How often do you encounter UGC about South Africa on: j. Pinterest k. X (Previously known as Twitter)	Platform Specific UGC Encounters	(Thompson & Malaviya, 2013; Tripathi, 2020).
Question 12 Likert scale (1-5) [1] Never; [5] Always	How often do you see the same UGC (e.g., a viral video) shared across multiple platforms?	Cross Platform UGC Encounters	(Malthouse et al., 2016; Naem & Okafor, 2019; Ngwenya, 2021; Thompson & Malaviya, 2013; Tripathi, 2020).
Consumer Brand Engagement			
	This section presents 6 multiple-choice questions and 2 scenario-based questions unpacking CBE.	CBE using Hollebecks Framework	Hollebeek et al. (2016)

Questions 1-2 Likert scale (1-5) [1] Strongly Disagree; [5] Strongly Agree	To what extent do you agree with the following statements? a. I spend time researching destinations after seeing UGC. b. I compare UGC with official tourism websites.	Cognitive Engagement	(Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2016; Rather et al., 2022)
Questions 3-4 Likert scale (1-5) [1] Strongly Disagree; [5] Strongly Agree	To what extent do you agree with the following statements? a. UGC makes me feel excited about travelling in South Africa. b. I feel connected to tourism brands that share UGC.	Affective Engagement	(Hollebeek et al., 2016; Verhoef et al., 2010)
Questions 5-6 Likert scale (1-5) [1] Strongly Disagree; [5] Strongly Agree	To what extent do you agree with the following statements? a. "I regularly like, share, or comment on tourism UGC." b. "I follow South African tourism pages (e.g., SA Tourism on Instagram)."	Behavioural Engagement	(Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2016; Rather et al., 2022)
Scenario 1 (Photo - Visual UGC)			

In the following scenario, please consider how you typically react to UGC you encounter on social media related to local tourism destinations or brands (e.g., photos, videos, reviews).			
Questions 7-8 Likert scale (1-5) [1] Not likely at all… [5] Extremely likely	You see photos on your friend's Facebook page from their recent trip to a local national park. They share stunning pictures of wildlife and breathtaking landscapes. a. How likely are you to consider visiting the Kruger national park based on your friend's photos? b. How likely are you to share these photos with others?	Engagement with Friends/Family Vacation Photos	(Cox et al., 2009; Hollebeek et al., 2016; Ruiz-Real et al., 2020; Tsiakali, 2018)
Perceived Authenticity of UGC			
	The next section presents 11 multiple-choice questions with 3 scenario-based questions unpacking the perceived authenticity of UGC.	Participant perception of UGC believability, helpfulness, and influence on travel decisions.	(Ayeh et al., 2013; Bandinelli, 2020; Davcik et al., 2022; Demba, 2016; Metzger et al., 2003; Moloi et al., 2022; Morhart et al., 2015; Park et al., 2021; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001)
Questions 1-4 Likert scale (1-5) [1] Strongly Disagree; [5] Strongly Agree	When evaluating travel content online to what extent do you believe that: a. This content is unbiased and truthful	Authenticity Assessment / Credibility and Truthfulness of UGC	(Ayeh et al., 2013; Metzger et al., 2003; Park et al., 2021).

	b. The experiences shared in this content feel genuine? c. This content aligns with the brand's advertised identity d. I trust content more when it comes from real travellers rather than tourism brands		
Questions 5-7 Likert scale (1-5) [1] Strongly Disagree; [5] Strongly Agree	Rate how much you trust the following types of UGC: a. Travel blogger reviews (e.g., TripAdvisor posts) b. Your friends' vacation photos (e.g., Garden Route landscapes) c. Hotel guest videos (e.g., videos of Durban beach resorts) d. Tourist attraction reviews (e.g., TripAdvisor reviews of Robben Island)	Authenticity Across UGC Types	(Ayeh et al., 2013; Davcik et al., 2022; Demba, 2016; Metzger et al., 2003; Moloi et al., 2022; Morhart et al., 2015; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001).
Questions 8-10 Likert scale (1-5)	To what extent do you agree with the following statements?	Impact of Authenticity / Trust in Tourism Brands	(Bandinelli, 2020; Demba, 2016).

[1] Strongly Disagree; [5] Strongly Agree	a. I am more likely to trust tourism brands that share authentic UGC. b. I actively avoid UGC that feels staged or fake. c. Authentic UGC makes me more likely to book a trip.	Sharing Authentic UGC	
Scenario 2 (Instagram Review - Visual UGC) In the following scenario, please consider how you would typically react to UGC you encounter on social media related to local tourism destinations or brands (e.g., photos, videos, reviews).			
Questions 11-13 Likert scale (1-5) [1] Strongly Disagree; [5] Strongly Agree	A South African travel blogger posts a glowing Instagram review of a Western Cape wine farm. How much do you agree: a. This review reflects the blogger's real experience. b. This review matches the wine farm's advertised identity. c. I am likely to engage with this post.	Authenticity of Western Cape wine farm review (Instagram) / Integrity, continuity, & engagement	(Bryant & Karasek, 2012; Morhart et al., 2015; Spence, 1973)
We thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your response has been recorded. **END.**			

Source: Adapted from Ayeh et al., (2013); Bandinelli (2020); Bryant & Karasek (2012); Brodie et al., (2013); Casaló et al., (2020); Cox et al., (2009); Davcik et al., (2022); Demba

(2016); Hollebeek et al. (2016); Jabado, (2023); Malthouse et al., (2016); Metzger et al., (2003); Moloi et al., (2022); Morhart et al., (2015); Naem & Okafor (2019); Ngwenya (2021); Park et al., (2021); Rather et al., (2022); Ruiz-Real et al., (2020); Spence (1973); Statista Research Department (2022); Statista Research Department (2023); Sweeney & Soutar, (2001); Thompson & Malaviya (2013); Tripathi (2020); Tsiakali (2018) and Verhoef et al., (2010).

Appendix D: Descriptive Statistics Tables

Demographic Information

Profile of Respondents

Variables		n	%
Age	**18 - 24**	16	5.78%
	25 - 34	108	38.99%
	35 - 44	66	23.83%
	45 - 54	44	15.88%
	55 - 64	38	13.72%
	65+	5	1.81%
Geographic Location	**Gauteng**	213	76.90%
	Free State	9	3.25%
	Mpumalanga	2	0.72%
	KZN	26	9.39%
	Eastern Cape	3	1.08%
	Western Cape	21	7.58%
	Northern Cape	1	0.36%
	Limpopo	1	0.36%
	Northwest	1	0.36%

Control Variables

"How familiar are you with the concept of User-Generated Content?"

Variables		n	%
Prior Familiarity with UGC Concept	**Not familiar at all**	39	14.08%
	Slightly familiar	64	23.10%
	Moderately familiar	63	22.74%
	Very familiar	75	27.08%
	Extremely familiar	36	13.00%

"What is your preferred platform for tourism related UGC?"

Variables		n	%
Preferred Platform for Tourism UGC	**Instagram**	171	61.73%
	TikTok	119	42.96%
	Facebook	63	22.74%
	YouTube	60	21.66%
	Trip Advisor	58	20.94%

	Travel Ground	20	7.22%
	Pinterest	22	7.94%
	Twitter/X	25	9.03%

UGC Exposure

Passive Encounter Frequency: "How often do you come across the following UGC about South African tourism without actively seeking it?"

Variables		**Never**	**Sometimes**	**About half the time**	**Most of the time**	**Always**
Instagram posts/stories	**n**	33	135	40	55	14
	%	11.91%	48.74%	14.44%	19.86%	5.05%
TikTok videos	**n**	71	103	40	45	18
	%	25.63%	37.18%	14.44%	16.25%	6.50%
Facebook posts	**n**	114	94	29	33	7
	%	41.16%	33.94%	10.47%	11.91%	2.53%
YouTube travel vlogs	**n**	85	123	27	30	12
	%	30.69%	44.40%	9.75%	10.83%	4.33%
TripAdvisor reviews	**n**	101	104	29	28	15
	%	36.46%	37.55%	10.47%	10.11%	5.42%

Active Use Frequency: "How often do you actively seek out or use UGC for the following purposes?"

Variables		**Never**	**Sometimes**	**About half the time**	**Most of the time**	**Always**
To plan itineraries (e.g., using Instagram posts to decide where to stay).	n	62	64	44	68	27
	%	23.40%	24.15 %	16.60%	25.66 %	10.19 %
To compare accommodations (e.g., reading TripAdvisor reviews).	n	43	57	41	85	41
	%	16.10%	21.35 %	15.36%	31.84 %	15.36 %
To choose activities (e.g., watching YouTube vlogs about safaris)	n	72	64	46	57	28
	%	26.97%	23.97 %	17.23%	21.35 %	10.49 %
	n	63	70	45	61	28

To verify travel information (e.g., checking Facebook group recommendations).	%	23.60%	26.22 %	16.85%	22.85 %	10.49 %

Platform Specific UGC Encounters: "How often do you encounter UGC about South Africa?"

Variables	**Pinterest**		**Twitter/X**	
	n	%	n	%
Never	184	69.96%	118	44.53%
Sometimes	57	21.67%	87	32.83%
About half the time	14	5.32%	31	11.70%
Most of the time	5	1.90%	22	8.30%
Always	3	1.14%	7	2.64%

Cross-Platform UGC Encounters: "How often do you see the same UGC (e.g., a viral video) shared across multiple platforms"

	n	**%**
Never	44	16.92%
Sometimes	103	39.62%
About half the time	52	20.00%
Most of the time	49	18.85%
Always	12	4.62%

Consumer Brand Engagement - CBE

Cognitive, Affective & Behavioural: "To what extent do you agree with the following statements?"

Variables		**Strongly disagree**	**Somewhat disagree**	**Neither agree nor disagree**	**Somewhat agree**	**Strongly agree**
I spend time researching destinations after seeing UGC	**n**	19	36	33	113	57
	%	7.36%	13.95%	12.79%	43.80%	22.09%
I compare UGC with official tourism websites	**n**	52	42	39	84	40
	%	20.23%	16.34%	15.18%	32.68%	15.56%
	n	15	19	41	94	85

UGC makes me feel excited about travelling to South Africa	**%**	5.91%	7.48%	16.14%	37.01%	33.46%
I feel connected to tourism brands that share UGC	**n**	27	25	61	85	58
	%	10.55%	9.77%	23.83%	33.20%	22.66%
I regularly like, share, or comment on tourism UGC	**n**	58	37	52	81	23
	%	23.11%	14.74%	20.72%	32.27%	9.16%
I follow South African tourism pages (e.g., SA Tourism on Instagram).	**n**	102	42	28	47	33
	%	40.48%	16.67%	11.11%	18.65%	13.10%

Scenario-based: "You see photos on your friend's Facebook page from their recent trip to a local national park. They share stunning pictures of wildlife and breathtaking landscapes."

Scenario-Based Engagement		**Visit Kruger National Park**		**Share these photos with others**	
		n	**%**	**n**	**%**
You see photos on a friend's Facebook page from their trip to Kruger National Park, showcasing wildlife and sunsets, how likely are you to:	**Extremely unlikely**	9	3.63%	27	10.89%
	Somewhat unlikely	9	3.63%	38	15.32%
	Neither likely nor unlikely	12	4.84%	39	15.73%
	Somewhat likely	111	44.76%	86	34.68%
	Extremely likely	107	43.15%	58	23.39%

Perceived Authenticity

Authenticity Assessment: "When evaluating travel content online to what extent do you believe the following?"

		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
"This content is unbiased and truthful." (Credibility)	**n**	10	37	75	97	19
	%	4.20%	15.55%	31.51%	40.76%	7.98%
"The experiences shared in this content feel genuine." (Integrity)	**n**	4	36	45	127	28
	%	1.67%	15.00%	18.75%	52.92%	11.67%
"This content aligns with the brand's advertised identity." (Continuity)	**n**	3	18	80	122	15
	%	1.26%	7.56%	33.61%	51.26%	6.30%
"I trust content more when it comes from real travellers rather than tourism brands." (Source Trustworthiness)	**n**	5	13	27	82	113
	%	2.08%	5.42%	11.25%	34.17%	47.08%

Authenticity Across UGC Types: “Rate how much you trust the following types of UGC”

		Not at all	Slightly	Moderately	Mostly	Completely
Travel Blogger Reviews (e.g., Travel Ground posts)	n	7	31	88	96	16
	%	2.94%	13.03%	36.97%	40.34 %	6.72%
Friends’ Vacation Photos (e.g., Garden Route landscapes)	n	0	11	25	106	96
	%	0.00%	4.62%	10.50%	44.54 %	40.34%
Hotel Guest Videos (e.g., videos of Durban beach resorts)	n	7	29	97	82	22
	%	2.95%	12.24%	40.93%	34.60 %	9.28%
Tourist Attraction Reviews (e.g., TripAdvisor reviews of Robben Island)	n	9	34	79	97	19
	%	3.78%	14.29%	33.19%	40.76 %	7.98%

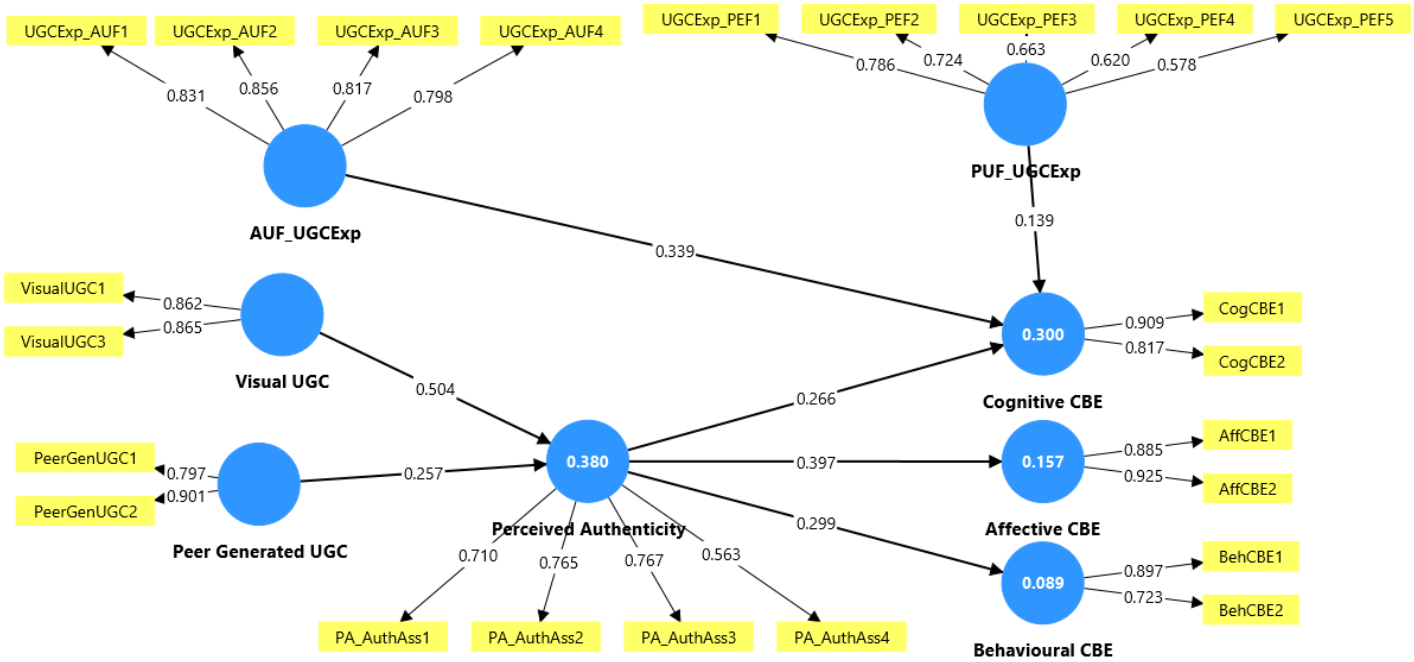
Impact of Perceived Authenticity on Engagement: “To what extent do you agree with the following statements?”

		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I am more likely to trust tourism brands that share authentic UGC.	**n**	6	11	41	104	76
	%	2.52%	4.62%	17.23%	43.70%	31.93%
I actively avoid UGC that feels staged or overly promotional.	**n**	7	19	36	67	108
	%	2.95%	8.02%	15.19%	28.27%	45.57%
Authentic UGC makes me more likely to book a trip	**n**	4	7	31	92	104
	%	1.68%	2.94%	13.03%	38.66%	43.70%

Scenario-Based: “A South African travel blogger posts a glowing Instagram review of a Western Cape wine farm. How much do you agree with the following?”

		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
“This review reflects the blogger’s real experience.” (Integrity)	**n**	6	29	47	118	36
	%	2.54%	12.29%	19.92%	50.00%	15.25%
“This review matches the wine farm’s advertised identity.” (Continuity)	**n**	3	119	32	19	63
	%	1.27%	50.42%	13.56%	8.05%	26.69%
“I am likely to engage with this post.” (Like, share, comment)	**n**	23	32	62	95	24
	%	9.75%	13.56%	26.27%	40.25%	10.17%

Appendix E: Structural Model



Appendix F: Ethics Clearance Certificate

Graduate School of Business Administration
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

Wits Business School Ethics Committee
Constituted under the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical)

Ethics Clearance Certificate

Ethics protocol number:	WBS/SM1364124/353

This certificate is only valid with a legitimate ethics protocol number and signed by the Researcher (below).

Project title	User-Generated Content and consumer brand engagement in the South African tourism industry
Investigator / Researcher	Mr. Lesedi Mokoena
Nature of Project	MM (Strategic Marketing)
Decision of the Committee	Approved, provided stakeholders and participants are guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.
Issue Date of Certificate	14/08/2024
Expiry date	Date of submission of the project / research report
Chairperson	Dr Ayanda Magida ☎ + 27 11 717 3953 ayanda.magida@wits.ac.za

Declaration by Researcher

One copy must be signed by the Researcher and returned to the Chairperson of the Wits Business School Ethics Committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Signature

17 August 2024
Date:

Appendix G: Turnitin Report

