



TRUST IN USER-GENERATED CONTENT FOR SMART TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYSIA

Murni Yusoff¹, Wan Norhaniza Wan Hasan²

*^{1,2} Centre for Islamic Development Management Studies,
UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA*

Abstract

The increasing use of digital platforms has transformed the tourism industry, with user-generated content (UGC) becoming a key source of information for tourists. As tourists increasingly rely on online reviews, social media, and shared experiences, trust has emerged as a critical factor in decision-making and destination perception. This study aims to examine the significance of trust in UGC for smart tourism development in Malaysia, particularly in shaping tourists' perceptions, behaviour, and engagement within digital environments. Adopting a qualitative approach through document analysis, this study reviews relevant literature on UGC, trust, and smart tourism to identify key themes and relationships. The findings reveal three key insights. First, a trust deficit exists in UGC, where the abundance of digital information does not necessarily translate into user confidence, given concerns about credibility and reliability. Second, trust acts as a mediating mechanism, determining whether UGC is accepted and utilised in tourist decision-making. Third, trust plays a critical role in supporting the effectiveness of smart tourism systems, as it influences user engagement, information utilisation, and overall system performance. The study highlights that while digital technologies are essential in smart tourism development, their effectiveness depends largely on the trustworthiness of information shared among users. Strengthening trust in UGC is therefore crucial for supporting informed decision-making, enhancing the tourist experience, and ensuring sustainable tourism development. This study contributes by offering a clearer understanding of how trust shapes the relationship between digital information and smart tourism outcomes, particularly within the Malaysian context.

Keywords: User-Generated Content, Trust, Trust Deficit, Tourism Development, Smart Tourism

² Corresponding author. Email: wanhaniza@usm.my

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has significantly transformed the tourism industry by revolutionising tourism initiatives, products, experiences, business ecosystems, and destinations, as well as changing interaction practices (Gutierriz et al., 2025). Particularly through the emergence of smart tourism, information and communication technologies are integrated to enhance tourist experiences and improve destination management. This process generates large volumes of data, often referred to as Big Data, which can be analysed to better understand tourist behaviour and preferences. By leveraging such data, smart tourism destinations can deliver more personalised services that align with visitors' needs and expectations. Understanding these preferences is increasingly important for enhancing tourist experiences and maintaining destination competitiveness (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015).

Smart tourism development is driven by the integration of digital technologies that enable real-time data collection, exchange, and analysis to enhance tourism experiences. Through interconnected systems and advanced data processing, destinations can deliver more personalised and efficient services that align with tourists' preferences. This capability is increasingly important for improving destination competitiveness and the overall visitor experience (Gretzel et al., 2015).

The tourism industry in Malaysia is currently facing stagnation due to remaining in its comfort zone and an over-reliance on traditional marketing and promotion. This situation has left Malaysia behind its ASEAN neighbours in adopting smart tourism (MOTAC, 2020). To address this issue and elevate Malaysia to a top-ten global tourism destination, embracing smart tourism has been identified as a key strategy in the National Tourism Policy 2020-2030.

To this end, Malaysia is committed to embarking on a comprehensive digitalisation journey to transform its tourism industry toward smart tourism. The strategy involves optimising e-marketing through smart partnerships between the government and the tourism industry, encouraging innovation within the sharing economy, utilising Big Data analytics for planning and management, and consolidating the visitor economy across the tourism value chain (MOTAC, 2020). While the document does not explicitly mention User-Generated Content (UGC), the acknowledgement that current promotional strategies rely too heavily on traditional marketing indicates a clear gap in optimising UGC to boost tourism in Malaysia.

The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies has significantly transformed tourism marketing, shifting tourists from passive consumers of information to active content creators. Within this environment, UGC, such as online reviews, social media posts, and shared travel experiences, has become a major source of influence in shaping destination image and travel decisions. Compared to traditional marketing, UGC is often perceived as more authentic and relatable,

making it a trusted source of information for travellers. As a result, tourism marketing has evolved into a more interactive and participatory process, in which tourists play an active role in creating and sharing destination narratives (Sujatmiko et al., 2025).

While UGC provides valuable information and enhances decision-making, it also presents both benefits and challenges for tourism consumers. On the one hand, UGC is perceived as credible because it reflects real experiences shared by independent users, making it more trustworthy than traditional promotional content. On the other hand, concerns about reliability persist, particularly due to the risk of fake reviews, biased opinions, or commercially motivated content. This dual nature of UGC highlights the importance of trust in determining whether such content is accepted and used in travel decision-making (Burgess et.al., 2009).

While reliance on UGC continues to grow in tourism, concerns about its credibility, consistency, and potential bias have created a trust deficit in digital information environments. This highlights that while information is increasingly abundant and accessible, it is not always perceived as reliable by tourists. In the context of smart tourism, where digital platforms and real-time information play a central role, the effectiveness of UGC depends largely on the level of trust users place in it. Therefore, understanding how trust in UGC is formed and how it influences tourist behaviour becomes essential in supporting smart tourism development. This study aims to examine the significance of trust in UGC for smart tourism development in Malaysia, particularly in shaping tourists' perceptions, decision-making, and engagement within digital environments. The following section reviews relevant literature to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between UGC, trust, and smart tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Trust in UGC

Previous research has highlighted the growing importance of trust and credibility in shaping how tourists interpret and use online information. Rather than merely serving as a passive backdrop, trust functions as a critical psychological filter that determines the effectiveness of UGC. When users encounter digital content, they engage in continuous cognitive risk assessment. Trust acts as the mechanism that mitigates this perceived risk by validating the authenticity of the information, thereby transforming passive reading into active behavioural intentions (Filieri, 2016).

In the context of online consumer reviews, Filieri (2016) examines how users assess the trustworthiness of digital content, particularly in environments where deceptive or promotional reviews may be present. The study finds that users rely heavily on message-related cues such as specificity, internal consistency, plausibility, and tone when evaluating credibility. In addition,

individual factors such as prior experience and level of involvement, as well as the type of platform hosting the content, influence how these cues are interpreted. Importantly, reviews perceived as untrustworthy tend to be discounted in decision-making, reinforcing the central role of trust in digital information use.

Alshamayleh et al. (2025) analyse how social media marketing, destination attributes, technological integration, and sustainability practices influence tourists' visit intentions in Malaysia. Their findings indicate that trust and credibility function as key mediating mechanisms that translate these factors into behavioural outcomes. In particular, transparent communication and a strong destination image are shown to enhance trust, which in turn strengthens tourists' intention to visit. However, the study does not differentiate between various forms of UGC or examine how authenticity cues at the platform level may shape trust formation.

Tiwari (2025) examines consumer trust in verified versus non-verified online reviews within a broader e-commerce context. The findings show that verified reviews are associated with higher levels of trust and stronger purchase intentions, suggesting that verification mechanisms serve as important credibility signals. Such signals function as both central and peripheral cues, reducing perceived risk and enhancing confidence in decision-making. While the study offers useful insights into the role of verification in strengthening trust, it is not tourism-specific and adopts a descriptive approach, limiting its ability to capture deeper behavioural dynamics.

Tourism Development

Tourism has grown as one of the largest global economic sectors and a significant contributor to many national and local economies, with tremendous growth in both domestic and international tourism. Tourism development encompasses various efforts to improve tourism infrastructure, services, and destination management to support sustainable tourism growth while bringing positive economic and social benefits to the community (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2012). Traditionally, tourism development is affected by factors such as political globalisation and stability, economic growth, environmental factors such as environmental taxes and natural disasters, social factors such as safety and holiday, and technological factors such as transportation and infrastructure (Degirmenci et al., 2026; Scott & Gossling, 2015).

Tourism development in the digital era is increasingly influenced by the role of information and communication technologies (ICT), particularly the digital platforms in shaping tourist experiences and decision-making. The ICT involves mobile reservation, automation and robotics in service delivery, marketing systems, and expansion of informal tourism provision (Scott & Gossling, 2015).

Digital media, particularly social network sites (SNS) such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, have been found to be effective tools for promoting destinations and increasing awareness, although their ability to translate engagement into actual tourist participation remains limited (Yanti et al., 2023). Similarly, in cultural and religious tourism, the use of interpretive tools such as signage and digital media enhances visitors' understanding and engagement; however, limitations in content depth, accessibility, and interactivity may reduce their overall effectiveness (Raja Othman et al., 2025).

Beyond information delivery, tourism is also shaped by broader contextual and structural factors. Seasonal variations influenced by climate, institutional schedules, and socio-economic conditions continue to affect tourism demand, highlighting the need for strategic planning and diversification (Momani et al., 2023). At the same time, community-based tourism has the potential to support local economic development, though issues of unequal benefit distribution suggest the need for more inclusive and transparent practices (Amir et al., 2017).

From a behavioural perspective, tourist decisions are shaped by perceptions, expectations, motivations, and prior experiences, which are often influenced by information obtained from various media and social platforms (Asbollah et al., 2017). However, while the importance of information is widely recognised across these studies, limited attention has been given to its credibility, trustworthiness, and ethical dimensions. The development of the tourism sector has contributed significantly to the growth of UGC in digital environments. Kitsios et al. (2022) mentioned that as tourism activities become increasingly digitalised, tourists actively share their travel experiences, opinions, photographs, videos, and recommendations through social media platforms, review websites, blogs, and video-sharing applications.

Consequently, UGC has emerged as an important source of tourism information that influences destination image and tourist decision-making, and has become integral to the tourism ecosystem, reflecting the increasing reliance on peer-generated content in tourism communication and engagement. Studies show that the development of UGC on SNS has undoubtedly affected the whole travel process, i.e., before, during, and after their travel (Kitsios et al., 2022). This indicates that existing tourism research tends to focus on the availability and impact of information rather than on how trust in information, particularly in UGC, can be strengthened, thereby highlighting an important gap for further exploration.

Smart Tourism

Smart tourism is characterised by the integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that support the collection, exchange, and intelligent use of large volumes of data. These technologies enable the

transformation of data into valuable insights that enhance tourism experiences through personalisation, real-time interaction, and context-aware services. In this context, tourists are no longer passive consumers but active participants who contribute to data creation and value co-creation within the tourism ecosystem. The effectiveness of smart tourism, therefore, depends on the interconnectedness of stakeholders, technological infrastructure, and the ability to utilise data to support decision-making and service innovation (Gretzel et al., 2015).

Azmadi et al. (2023) examine how tourists engage with smart tourism technologies, particularly QR codes, in Kuala Lumpur, integrating perspectives on technology adoption and sustainability. The findings show that tourists' habitual use of technology and their sustainability attitudes significantly influence satisfaction and behavioural intention, whereas perceived risk and hedonic motivation are not significant predictors.

Amir et al. (2020) examine the challenges of implementing smart tourism in Malaysia, particularly in eco-tourism destinations such as Langkawi and Cameron Highlands. The findings reveal that key challenges include low awareness, limited digital infrastructure, the high cost of devices, and concerns about security and privacy, which collectively hinder the effective adoption of smart tourism technologies. The findings suggest that while digitalisation offers significant potential for tourism development, issues related to accessibility, trust, and stakeholder readiness remain critical barriers.

Despite the increasing availability of UGC in tourism, concerns regarding credibility, inconsistency, and potential bias have contributed to a growing trust deficit in digital information environments. This suggests that while information is abundant, it is not always perceived as reliable, limiting its effectiveness in supporting tourist decision-making. While existing studies have provided valuable insights into UGC, tourism development, and smart tourism, these areas are often examined in isolation. Research on UGC emphasises its influence on credibility and decision-making, whereas tourism studies focus more on information delivery, behaviour, and destination performance. At the same time, smart tourism research highlights the role of digital technologies and data-driven systems in enhancing tourism experiences.

However, limited attention has been given to how trust in UGC connects these domains, particularly in shaping the effectiveness of digital information within smart tourism environments. This gap is further reinforced by a trust deficit, where the abundance of information does not necessarily lead to user confidence or meaningful engagement. Therefore, a more integrated understanding of how trust in UGC influences tourist behaviour and supports smart tourism development is required. To address this gap, the present study adopts a document analysis approach, as discussed in the following section.

Conceptual Framework

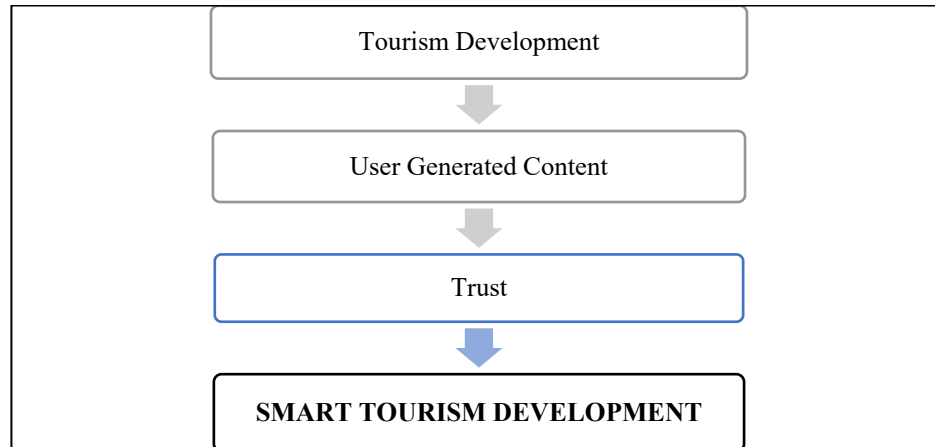


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Smart Tourism Development

The proposed conceptual framework explains the relationship between tourism development, UGC, trust, and smart tourism development. As tourism development becomes increasingly digitalised, tourists rely more heavily on UGC as a source of information and travel guidance. However, the effectiveness of UGC depends largely on the level of trust users place in the information shared online. Trust, therefore, functions as a mediating mechanism that influences the acceptance and utilisation of digital tourism information. Higher levels of trust contribute to more effective smart tourism development by enhancing tourist engagement, informed decision-making, and the development of digital tourism ecosystems.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a document analysis approach to examine the role of trust in UGC for smart tourism development in Malaysia. Document analysis refers to a systematic approach to examining and evaluating documents in various forms, including both printed and electronic materials. The process involves an initial review of the content, followed by a more detailed reading, and ultimately the interpretation of the information to derive meaningful insights (Bowen, 2009).

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The data for this study were derived from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and selected policy-related

documents relevant to tourism, digital platforms, and UGC. The selection of documents was guided by specific inclusion criteria, namely relevance to key constructs such as trust, UGC, and smart tourism; publication in recognised academic outlets; and contribution to theoretical or empirical discussions within the tourism domain.

Data Extraction and Analysis

The selected documents were analysed using thematic analysis, which enables the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns across the data. Thematic analysis involves systematically examining datasets, such as interviews, focus groups, or textual materials, to identify recurring patterns of meaning. The form and outcomes of thematic analysis may vary depending on the research context and objectives. Therefore, it is important for researchers to carefully consider the analytical approach and guiding questions throughout the process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, the analysis was conducted in several stages. First, the documents were reviewed to become familiar with their content. Second, relevant concepts related to trust, information credibility, and tourism development were coded. Third, these codes were grouped into three broader themes: trust deficit in UGC; trust as a mediating mechanism in decision-making; and the roles of trust in smart tourism development. These themes were then interpreted to develop a coherent understanding of how trust influences the effectiveness of UGC within digital tourism environments.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This study explores how trust in UGC shapes the trajectory of Malaysia's smart tourism ecosystem. The findings are organised into three main themes that explain the role of trust in UGC within smart tourism development. The themes are trust deficit in UGC; trust as a mediating mechanism in tourist decision-making; and the roles of trust in enhancing smart tourism development.

Trust Deficit in UGC

This trust deficit occurs because digital tourism ecosystems are inherently plagued by information asymmetry. When tourists encounter fake positive feedback or conflicting reviews, they do not simply abandon the platform; instead, they employ active cognitive-management strategies. By cross-referencing multiple platforms, analysing the internal consistency of reviews, and seeking peripheral verification cues, tourists actively attempt to reconstruct reliability. Therefore, the 'trust deficit' is not just a lack of confidence, but a psychological catalyst that forces tourists to engage in more complex, multi-layered information processing before arriving at a decision.

In practice, this means tourists are more likely to compare multiple reviews, seek confirmation across platforms, or rely on personal judgment before

making decisions. While this behaviour reflects a more careful evaluation process, it also indicates that UGC alone is not always sufficient to support confident decision-making.

The UGC reviews as a means to reduce information asymmetry may, in some cases, introduce new forms of uncertainty. Tourists often rely heavily on platforms such as TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, and online travel agency websites when making travel decisions. However, the credibility of such reviews is frequently questioned due to fake positive feedback, unverified negative comments, and a lack of contextual information. This situation can lead tourists to form unrealistic expectations based on exaggerated recommendations, which may ultimately result in dissatisfaction when actual experiences do not align with what was anticipated. From this perspective, information asymmetry remains a persistent issue in digital tourism environments, shaping how tourists evaluate and interpret available information. While UGC is intended to reduce uncertainty, it may also create confusion and risk when the quality of the information is inconsistent. This indicates that information asymmetry alone does not fully explain tourist satisfaction, as the process also involves how individuals assess credibility, manage uncertainty, and compare expectations with actual experiences (Elshaer et al., 2025).

The literature analysis reveals a trust deficit in UGC within digital tourism environments. Although tourists are increasingly exposed to large volumes of information through online reviews, social media, and digital platforms, this abundance does not necessarily translate into higher levels of trust. Concerns related to credibility, inconsistency, and potential bias in UGC contribute to uncertainty among tourists when evaluating information.

Trust as A Mediating Mechanism in Tourist Decision-Making

Trust acts as a mediating mechanism, influencing how tourists interpret and utilise UGC. In other words, the impact of UGC on decision-making depends on whether the information is perceived as credible and trustworthy.

The findings further indicate that trust serves as a mediating factor in the relationship between UGC and tourist decision-making. While UGC provides valuable information, its influence on behaviour depends largely on whether it is perceived as credible and trustworthy. In this context, trust acts as a filter through which tourists interpret and evaluate information before making travel-related decisions.

Studies on tourism behaviour suggest that perceptions and expectations are shaped by information obtained from various sources, including digital platforms (Asbollah et. al., 2017). However, the present analysis extends this understanding by highlighting that information alone is insufficient to influence behaviour unless it is trusted. When trust is present, tourists are more likely to rely on UGC for planning and decision-making. Conversely, when trust is

lacking, such content is often disregarded, regardless of its accessibility. This indicates that trust is not merely an outcome of information use but a critical mechanism that determines whether information is accepted and utilised. As such, strengthening trust in UGC is essential to enhance its effectiveness in influencing tourist behaviour.

The Roles of Trust in Enhancing Smart Tourism Development

In smart tourism, trust emerges as a fundamental element that supports the effectiveness of digital systems and platforms. Smart tourism relies heavily on real-time information, user interaction, and digital connectivity, all of which are largely driven by UGC. However, the findings suggest that the success of these systems is closely linked to the level of trust users place in the information provided.

Existing research highlights that while technological adoption and digital infrastructure are important in supporting smart tourism initiatives, challenges such as limited user confidence, security concerns, and low engagement continue to hinder their effectiveness (Amir et al., 2020; Azmadi et al., 2023). These challenges can be partly explained by trust issues, where users may hesitate to fully engage with digital platforms due to uncertainty about the reliability of information.

Therefore, trust plays a dual role in smart tourism development. Trust extends beyond individual cognitive processing to dictate the macro-level efficiency of smart tourism ecosystems. When users perceive digital platforms as reliable sources of information, their engagement shifts from passive consumption to active value co-creation, such as leaving accurate reviews, interacting with prompts, and sharing location-based data. This reciprocal trust-building loop feeds high-quality data back into the smart tourism infrastructure, thereby improving algorithmic recommendations, enhancing real-time service personalisation, and driving the long-term sustainability of the destination.

In the context of smart tourism, this trust deficit becomes particularly significant, as digital platforms depend heavily on user-generated information to function effectively. When trust is lacking, the potential of smart tourism systems to support informed decision-making and enhance user experience is consequently reduced.

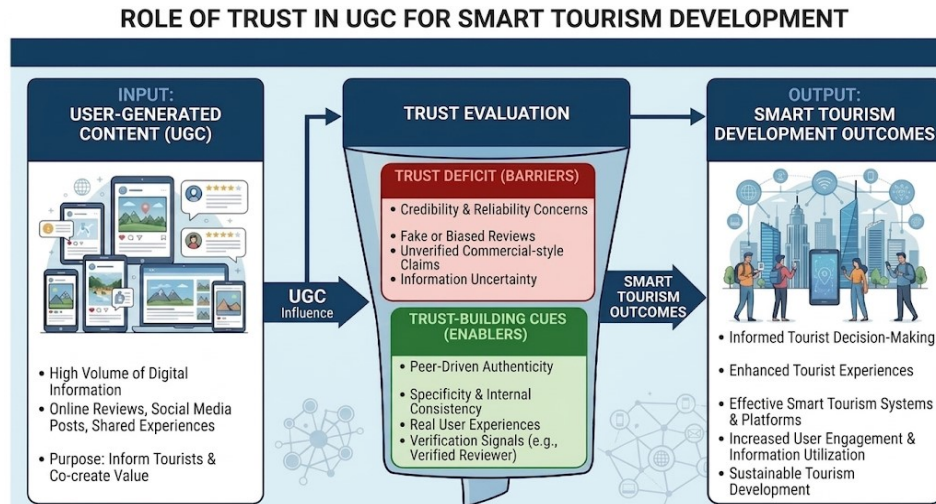


Figure 2: Role of Trust in UGC for Smart Tourism Development

Source: Original model by the authors, generated with Gemini.

Figure 2 presents a conceptual model illustrating the role of trust in translating UGC into effective outcomes in smart tourism development. The model maps the digital tourism ecosystem into three interconnected phases: Input, Core Filter (Trust Evaluation), and Output.

In the Input (UGC), the left panel represents the starting point of the tourist's digital journey, characterised by a high volume of digital information. This includes online reviews, social media posts, and shared travel experiences. While the primary purpose of this information is to inform other potential tourists and co-create value within the ecosystem, the abundance of information alone does not automatically drive positive tourism outcomes.

Meanwhile, in the Core Filter, the central panel of the model conceptualises Trust Evaluation as the critical filtering mechanism. Before UGC can influence tourist behaviour or the effectiveness of smart platforms, it must be cognitively evaluated. This evaluation process involves balancing two opposing forces:

- i. *Trust Deficit (Barriers)*: These are factors that hinder information acceptance, including concerns over credibility and reliability, the presence of fake or biased reviews, unverified commercial-style claims, and overall information uncertainty.
- ii. *Trust-Building Cues (Enablers)*: To overcome this deficit, tourists rely on specific cues to validate the digital content. These enablers include peer-driven authenticity, the specificity and internal consistency of the reviews, reliance on real user experiences, and the presence of verification signals (e.g., verified reviewer badges).

The model posits that the degree to which these enablers overcome the barriers dictates whether the digital information is ultimately trusted and utilised. In the Output (Smart Tourism Development Outcomes), the right panel demonstrates the behavioural and systemic outcomes that occur when UGC successfully passes through the trust evaluation filter. When trust is firmly established, it directly influences the smart tourism ecosystem by facilitating informed decision-making by tourists and enhancing the overall tourist experience. At a broader level, trusted digital information drives increased user engagement, ensures the effective utilisation of smart tourism platforms, and supports sustainable tourism development.

In summary, this model demonstrates that trust is an active filtering mechanism rather than a passive outcome. By mapping this process, the model highlights that mitigating the trust deficit and strengthening credibility cues are essential strategies for optimising smart tourism ecosystems in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the role of trust in UGC within the context of smart tourism development in Malaysia. The findings highlight that although digital platforms provide abundant, easily accessible information, their effectiveness is largely influenced by their perceived credibility and reliability. The presence of a trust deficit indicates that information availability alone is insufficient to support tourist decision-making, as users remain cautious when evaluating UGC.

The study further demonstrates that trust functions as a critical mechanism that mediates the relationship between information and tourist behaviour. UGC influences decision-making only when it is perceived as trustworthy, suggesting that trust plays a central role in determining whether digital information is accepted and utilised. In this regard, trust is not merely an outcome but a key factor that shapes how tourists interpret and engage with information in digital environments.

In smart tourism, trust becomes even more significant as digital systems rely heavily on real-time information and user interaction. The findings suggest that the effectiveness of smart tourism initiatives is closely linked to the level of trust users place in digital content and platforms. When trust is strengthened, it can enhance user engagement, improve decision-making, and support more efficient and sustainable tourism development.

Therefore, this study highlights the need to prioritise the credibility and management of UGC in digital tourism strategies. Efforts to improve the quality, consistency, and transparency of information can help reduce the trust deficit and enhance the overall effectiveness of smart tourism systems. Future research may further explore practical approaches to strengthening trust in digital tourism environments and examine their implications across different tourism contexts.

Ultimately, to overcome the current stagnation and over-reliance on traditional marketing, Malaysia must recognise that digital infrastructure alone is insufficient for achieving the goals of the National Tourism Policy 2020-2030. Policymakers, Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), and platform developers must actively design digital ecosystems that amplify trust-building cues, such as verified user experiences and transparent content moderation, to overcome the existing barriers to the trust deficit. By treating trust not just as a consumer outcome, but as a core filtering mechanism that must be strategically managed, Malaysia can successfully leverage UGC to co-create a highly engaging, competitive, and sustainable smart tourism destination.

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