

The Influence of TikTok User-Generated Content on Destination Image and Visit Intention: Evidence from Whale Shark Tourism in Sumbawa

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of TikTok User-Generated Content (UGC) on destination image and visitation intentions for whale shark tourism in Sumbawa, with destination image as the mediating variable. Based on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) theory, this study investigates how TikTok tourism content influences tourists' perceptions and behavioral intentions. A quantitative explanatory approach was used in this study. Data were collected via an online questionnaire from 100 active TikTok users who had viewed Sumbawa Whale Shark content. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). The findings indicate that TikTok UGC has a positive and significant influence on destination image and visit intention. Destination image also positively and significantly influences visit intention and acts as a mediator in the relationship between UGC and visit intention. These results indicate that authentic and visually appealing tourism content on TikTok can effectively shape positive perceptions of the destination and drive visitation intent. This study further confirms the relevance of the S-O-R framework in explaining digital tourist behavior. This research contributes to the tourism marketing literature by expanding the application of TikTok-based UGC in shaping destination image and tourist behavioral intent, particularly among Generation Z travelers.

Keywords: UGC; Destination Image; Visit Intention

Jel Codes: M31, Z32, L83, D83, O33

1. Introduction

The tourism sector is a strategic sector that makes a significant contribution to a country's economic growth. Tourism not only increases local revenue and national foreign exchange earnings but also creates jobs, encourages investment, and supports sustainable regional development. In Indonesia, the tourism sector is a priority for national development because it has great potential to boost local economies and improve community well-being. This is reflected in the performance achievements of the national tourism sector, which have shown a

positive trend in recent years. According to the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Indonesia's report, international tourist arrivals in 2025 reached approximately 15.39 million, while domestic tourist trips reached approximately 1.2 billion, exceeding the Government Work Plan target of 1.08 billion trips. In addition, the tourism sector contributes approximately 3.97% to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and could reach around 4.80% when indirect impacts on related sectors are accounted for. This indicates that the tourism sector plays a crucial role as a key driver of national economic growth.

Advances in digital technology have brought about significant changes in the tourism industry, particularly in how travelers obtain information and make travel decisions. The advent of the internet and social media allows travelers to quickly access a wide range of information about tourist destinations, compare travel experiences, and share their travel experiences with a broad audience. In this context, social media serves not only as a communication tool but also as a primary source of information that influences travelers' perceptions and decisions regarding which destinations to visit. This digital transformation has shifted the promotion of travel destinations from conventional approaches to more interactive, participatory digital ones.

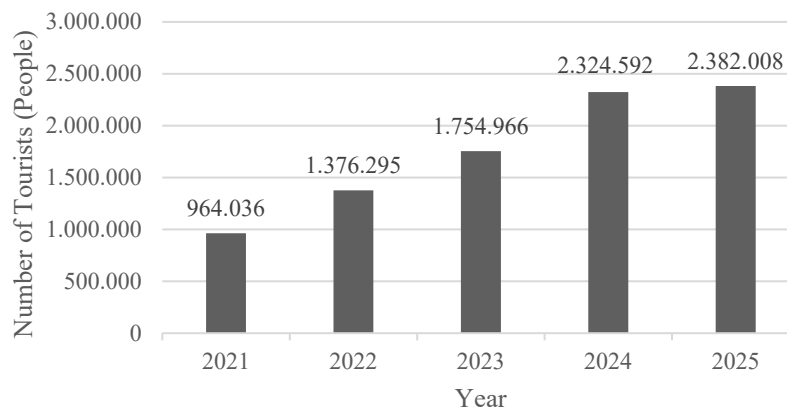
One phenomenon emerging in digital tourism marketing is the growing role of user-generated content (UGC). UGC refers to content created and shared by internet users, such as photos, videos, reviews, and travel experiences, published across various social media platforms. Unlike official promotions by destination managers or tourism agencies, UGC is considered more credible because it stems from travelers' real-life experiences. This user-generated content can shape travelers' perceptions of a destination, influence the destination's image, and encourage travelers' interest in visiting. Previous research indicates that UGC has a significant influence on the formation of a destination's image and can ultimately affect travelers' visit intentions ([Aboalghanam et al., 2025](#)).

In addition to UGC, another key factor influencing travelers' decisions is destination image. Destination image refers to the perceptions, impressions, and evaluations formed in travelers' minds regarding a tourist destination based on the information they receive and the experiences they gain. A positive destination image can enhance a destination's appeal because travellers tend to choose places they consider attractive, safe, and capable of providing an enjoyable travel experience. Various studies indicate that destination image plays a crucial role in influencing travelers' visit intentions and can serve as a mediating variable between the effects of digital stimuli, such as social media marketing and user-generated content and travelers' visit intentions ([Nadiastuti et al., 2025](#)).

With the rise of social media, short-form video platforms like TikTok have become an increasingly popular medium for promoting tourist destinations. TikTok allows users to share their travel experiences through brief, engaging visual content that is easily accessible to other users. The platform's algorithm, which is capable of widely disseminating content, makes it effective in boosting a tourist destination's exposure. TikTok's popularity is also growing, particularly among Generation Z, a demographic born in the digital age with high levels of social media activity. Generation Z is known to rely heavily on social media for information, including when seeking travel destination recommendations. Consequently, travel content shared on TikTok holds significant potential to shape travelers' perceptions and influence young people's interest in visiting a particular destination.

In Indonesia, the tourism sector is not only growing in major tourist destinations but is also beginning to develop in various regions with unique natural and cultural tourism potential. One

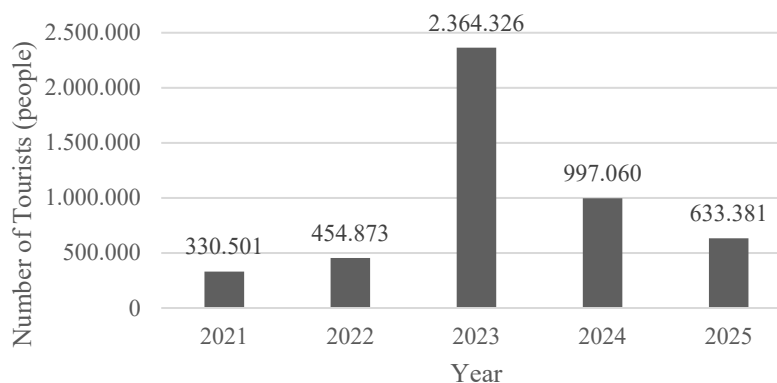
province with significant tourism potential is West Nusa Tenggara (NTB). This province is known for its premier tourist destinations, including Mount Rinjani, the Mandalika Special Economic Zone, Gili Trawangan, and other marine tourism destinations. In general, the tourism sector in NTB shows a trend of increasing tourist visits year over year. However, this growth has not been evenly distributed across the entire province. Lombok Island remains the primary destination for tourists, while Sumbawa Island still lags in terms of tourist visitation.



Graph 1. Number of Tourist Visits to West Nusa Tenggara Province, 2021–2025

Source: Dinas Pariwisata Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Barat (2025)

According to the report [Dinas Pariwisata Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Barat \(2025\)](#) This disparity is evident in the data on domestic tourist trips in Sumbawa Regency for the 2021–2025 period, which shows an unstable trend. After experiencing a significant increase to reach approximately 2.3 million trips in 2023, the number of domestic tourist trips in Sumbawa Regency declined in 2024 and 2025. This situation indicates that the tourism potential in the region has not been optimally utilised and still requires more effective promotional strategies to enhance the appeal of tourist destinations.



Graph 2. Number of Domestic Trips by Tourists in Sumbawa Regency, 2021–2025

Source: Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Barat (2025)

According to [Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Barat \(2025\)](#) Sumbawa Island itself possesses immense natural tourism potential and is beginning to emerge as an alternative tourist destination in West Nusa Tenggara Province. The island offers various natural tourist destinations that remain relatively untouched and are not yet overcrowded with tourists, such

as Mount Tambora, Moyo Island, and various marine tourism destinations, each with its own unique charm. One marine tourism destination attracting growing attention is the Whale Shark tour in Saleh Bay, Sumbawa. This destination offers a unique travel experience, as tourists can snorkel or dive to observe whale sharks in their natural habitat. This uniqueness positions Sumbawa's Whale Shark destination as well positioned to become a premier tourist destination, particularly in marine and ecotourism.

Although it has great tourism potential, the Whale Shark tourist destination in Saleh Bay is still not as well known among tourists as other popular destinations in Indonesia. One factor that can influence a destination's popularity is how information about it is disseminated through digital media, particularly through content shared by tourists on social media. In this context, user-generated content shared on platforms like TikTok has great potential to increase a destination's exposure and shape its image in the minds of prospective tourists.

Although previous studies have examined the relationships among user-generated content, destination image, and visit intention in tourism, most have focused primarily on Instagram, Facebook, and travel review platforms. Empirical studies investigating TikTok-based UGC in marine tourism destinations remain limited, particularly in the Indonesian tourism context. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to the behavioral characteristics of Generation Z tourists within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, despite Generation Z being one of the most active social media user groups. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the influence of TikTok User-Generated Content on destination image and visit intention toward Whale Shark tourism in Sumbawa.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Grand Theory

The *Stimulus–Organism–Response* (S-O-R) theory, first introduced by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) in environmental psychology, explains how environmental stimuli can influence an individual's internal state, which in turn produces a behavioral response. This model explains that a stimulus (S), an external environmental cue, influences an individual's internal state or organism (O), such as perceptions, emotions, and attitudes, which, in turn, produces a response (R) in the form of specific behavior or actions. In explaining marketing frameworks and consumer behavior, the S-O-R theory is often used to describe how different forms of information or digital content can influence consumer perceptions and prompt specific decisions. In this study, the S-O-R theory is used to explain the relationship between User-Generated Content (UGC), destination image, and visit intention among Generation Z, where UGC shared via the TikTok platform acts as a stimulus that provides travel information and experiences to social media users, which subsequently influences individuals' cognitive processes in forming a destination image as the organism, and ultimately drives the emergence of visit intention as the response that is, tourists' intention to visit the Whale Shark Sumbawa destination.

2.2 User-Generated Content (UGC)

User-Generated Content (UGC) is content created by users and shared with the public through social media and various other digital platforms. This content can take the form of text, images, videos, reviews, or other types of media that reflect an individual's experiences, opinions, or creativity. UGC is becoming increasingly important because the information it conveys comes from a relatively neutral user perspective and is not driven by commercial interests. Therefore,

UGC tends to be considered more trustworthy compared to promotions released directly by destination managers or companies ([Santos & Vasconcelos, 2025](#)). In this study, the User-Generated Content variable is measured using three main indicators from [Aboalghanam et al. \(2025\)](#), namely content information richness, content valence, and content trustworthiness.

2.3 Destination Image

The image of a tourist destination is a key factor in attracting visitors. A destination's image can be shaped through various information sources, including official promotions from the government or tourism authorities, media coverage, and travelers' experiences shared on social media ([Nurhidayanti, 2026](#)). If a destination has a positive image on social media, it can increase travelers' interest in visiting. Conversely, a negative image circulating on social media can also influence public perception and reduce interest in visiting.

[Baloglu & McCleary \(1999\)](#) classify the destination image into two main dimensions to measure how that image is formed. The first dimension is the cognitive image, which focuses on destination attributes (scenery, attractions, accommodation, tourism activities, value for money). The second dimension is the affective image, which focuses on tourists' emotional responses (relaxing–distressing, pleasant–unpleasant, exciting–gloomy, arousing–sleepy).

2.4 Visit Intention

Visit Intention refers to a person's desire or interest in visiting a place considered attractive. [Pramesti & Sholahuddin \(2024\)](#) Describe visit intention as a tourist's desire to explore a managed tourist attraction through services provided by destination managers or tourism authorities. This intention is also a form of consumer decision to choose or decide to visit a tourist attraction based on their previous travel experiences ([Nugraha & Mawo, 2023](#)). The measurement of visit intention in this study refers to the concept proposed by [Zhao et al. \(2024\)](#). This concept divides visit intention into five indicators, namely imaginative intention, cognitive consideration, behavioural intention, information-seeking intention, and preference intention.

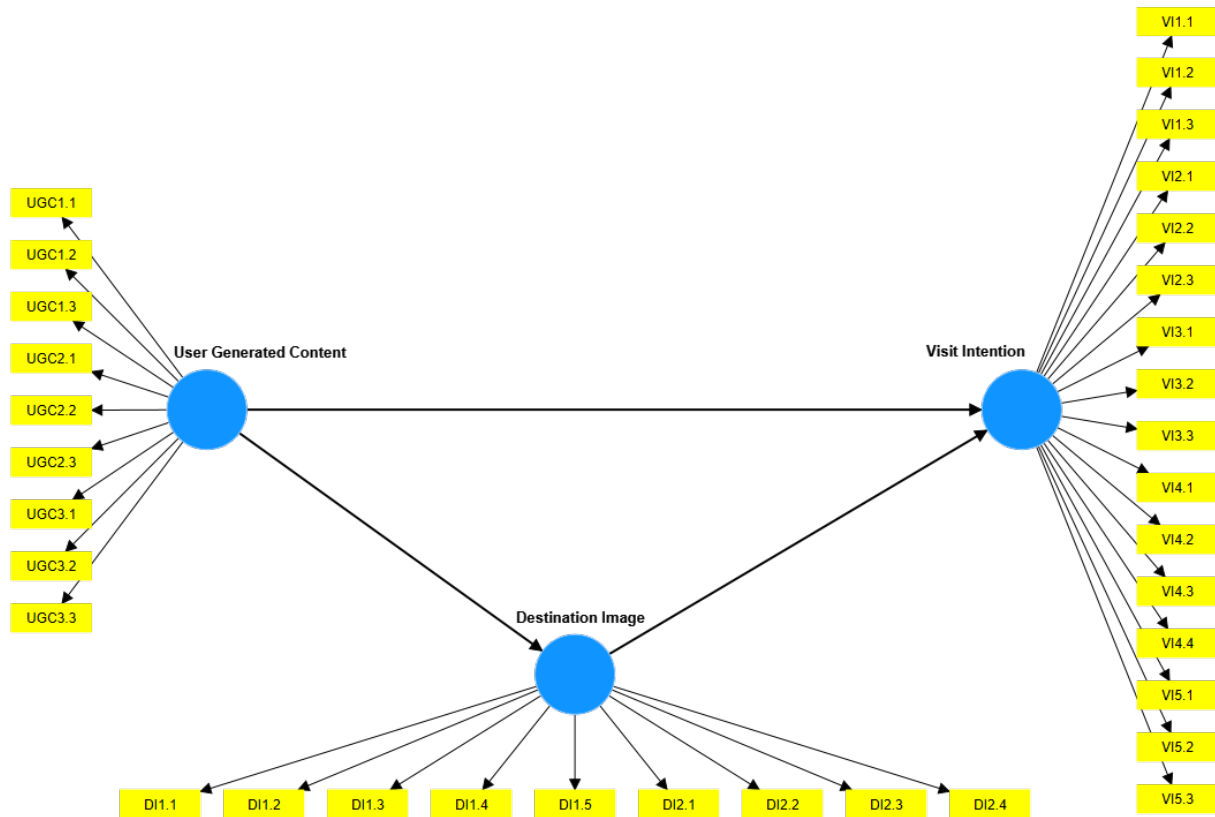
3. Research Method

This study employs a quantitative approach to examine the influence of *User-Generated Content* (UGC) on TikTok on the formation of *Destination Image* and *Visit Intention* toward the Whale Shark tourism destination in Sumbawa. The data used in this study consists of primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected via a Google Form using a 4-point Likert scale, distributed via social media. Meanwhile, secondary data were obtained from official reports of the Central Statistics Agency of West Nusa Tenggara Province and from various previous studies related to tourism to supplement the necessary information.

The population in this study consists of TikTok users who have viewed content related to the Whale Shark Sumbawa tourist attraction. The sampling technique used was non-probability purposive sampling. The sample size for this study was 100 respondents. The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM).

The variables in this study consist of one independent variable, namely User-Generated Content (UGC); one intervening variable, namely Destination Image (DI); and one dependent variable, namely Visit Intention (VI). Based on a literature review and previous studies, the research model below was developed to illustrate the relationships among these variables.

Figure 1. Research Model



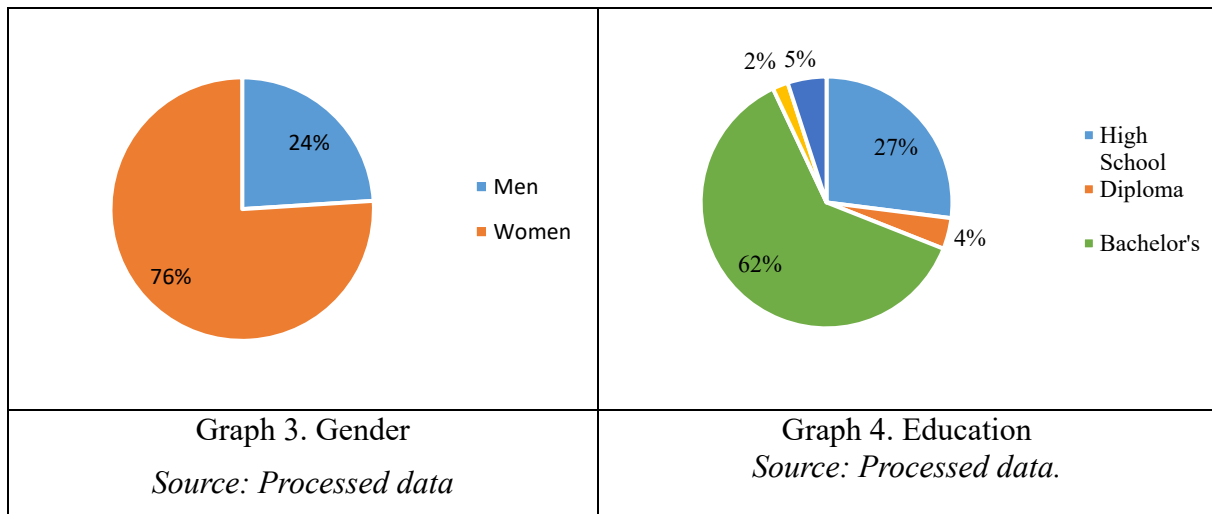
Based on the research model that has been designed, the hypotheses for this study are as follows:

- H1 : User-Generated Content (UGC) has a positive and significant effect on Destination Image (DI).
- H2 : Destination Image (DI) has a positive and significant effect on Visit Intention (VI).
- H3 : User-Generated Content (UGC) has a positive and significant effect on Visit Intention (VI).
- H4 : Destination Image (DI) mediates the effect of User-Generated Content (UGC) on Visit Intention (VI).

4. Findings and Discussions

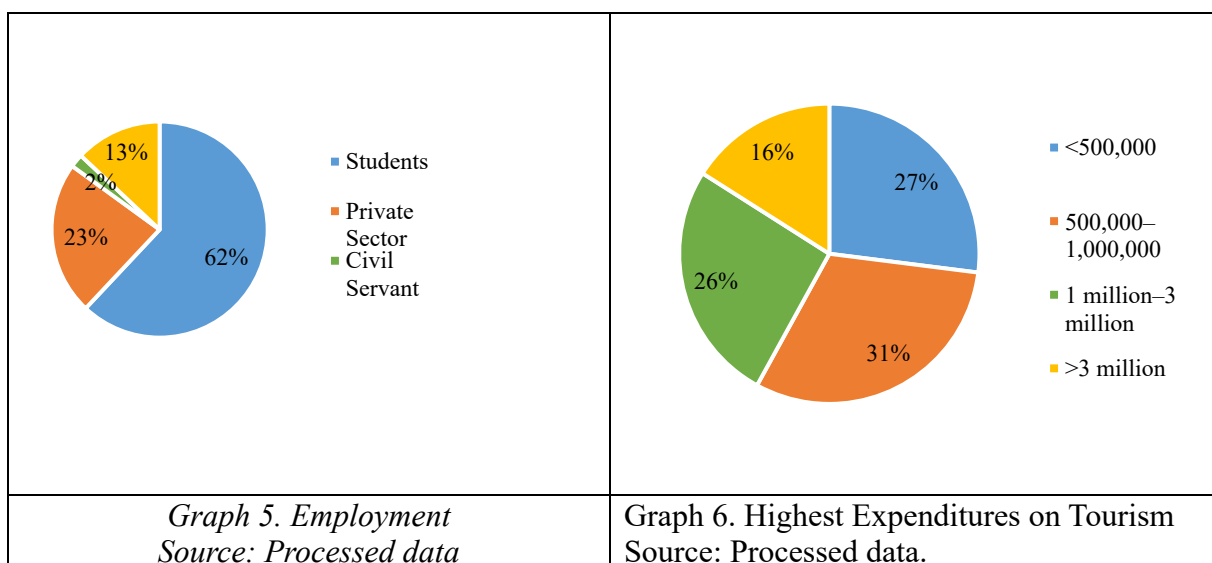
4.1 Respondent Characteristics

Respondent specifications were obtained from respondents who completed the researcher's questionnaire. A questionnaire is a series of written questions used to collect information from respondents regarding personal matters or other relevant details in accordance with the survey's objectives. The primary purpose of creating the questionnaire was to obtain information relevant to the survey's objectives. This information was collected from selected respondents' responses to a series of questions posed by the researcher. An overview of the respondents in this study can be seen in the graph and table below:



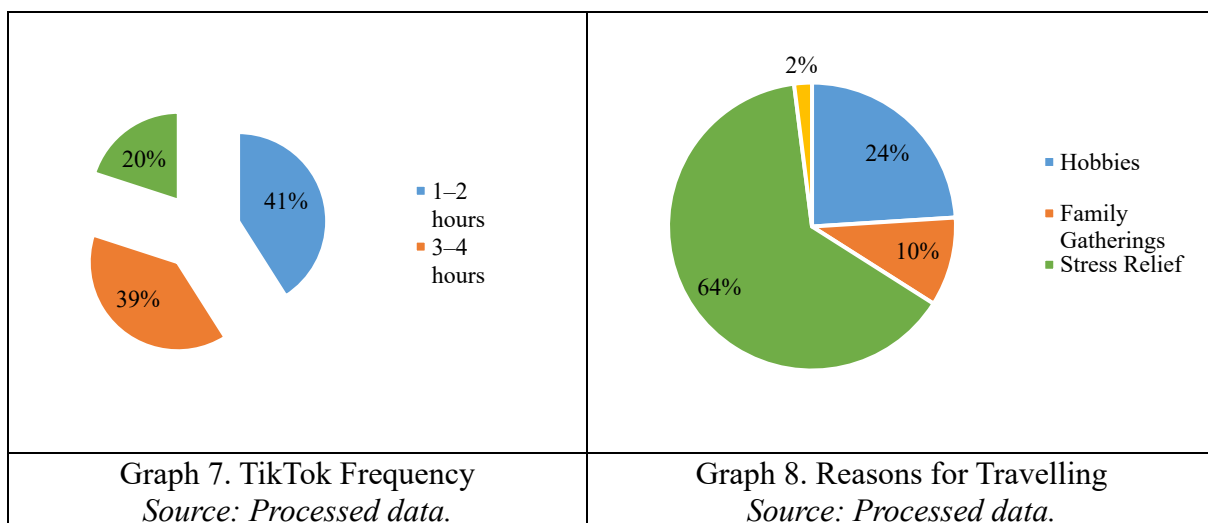
Based on Graph 3, the majority of respondents in this study were female (76%), while male respondents accounted for 24%. The predominance of female respondents indicates that women are more active in seeking travel information, viewing travel content on social media, and showing greater interest in travel activities and travel experiences. Meanwhile, although the number of male respondents was smaller, this still indicates that men also share an interest in tourism. This finding indicates that women more frequently use social media as a reference when deciding whether to visit a tourist destination.

Based on Graph 4, the respondents' educational levels were dominated by bachelor's degree holders at 62%, followed by high school graduates at 27%, diploma holders at 4%, those with other educational backgrounds at 5%, and master's degree holders at 2%. The dominance of respondents with a bachelor's degree indicates that the majority have a relatively high level of education and are active users of social media to obtain tourism information. Respondents with a college education are generally more open to digital information, find it easier to access reviews and travel content, and are more likely to consider a destination's image before deciding to visit.



Based on Graph 5, the majority of respondents in this study were students (62%), followed by private-sector employees (23%), other occupational categories (13%), and civil servants (2%). The predominance of students indicates that the young working-age population is more actively engaged in tourism activities and social media use. This group actively follows trends in tourist destinations, seeks travel recommendations through digital content, and is interested in visiting places that are currently popular on social media. Meanwhile, respondents who are already working generally use tourism as a form of entertainment and to unwind from daily activities. This situation indicates that social media plays a significant role in influencing the desire to visit, particularly among young people who are familiar with developments in digital technology.

According to Graph 6, respondents' spending on tourism activities was predominantly in the range of Rp500,000–Rp1 million, accounting for 31% of the total, followed by spending under Rp500,000 at 27%, Rp1–3 million at 26%, and over Rp3 million at 16%. This distribution indicates that most tourists tend to adjust their travel spending to their financial capabilities while still maintaining an interest in taking trips. The dominance of mid-range spending also indicates that tourism is not always synonymous with high costs, but is rather driven by the desire for experiences and entertainment. Additionally, the presence of respondents with higher spending suggests that a destination's appeal and the tourism image shaped through social media can encourage travelers to spend more to achieve the desired travel experience.



Based on Graph 7, the frequency of TikTok use among respondents was dominated by 1–2 hours per day (41%), followed by 3–4 hours (39%), and more than 5 hours (20%). The high intensity of TikTok use indicates that the platform has become part of respondents' daily activities, particularly in seeking entertainment and information. This relatively long usage duration also suggests that respondents have significant opportunities to encounter various tourism-related content, such as destination videos, travel reviews, and recommendations for tourist spots from other users. This indicates that TikTok plays a strong role in shaping tourists' perceptions and interest in visiting destinations by disseminating engaging content.

Based on Graph 8, the respondents' primary reason for traveling was the desire to relieve stress, accounting for 64% of the total, followed by hobbies at 24%, family gatherings at 10%, and other reasons at 2%. The predominance of stress relief as a reason indicates that travel is now viewed not only as a recreational activity but also as a way to recharge the mind from the

demands of daily life. On the other hand, respondents who view travel as a hobby demonstrate an interest in new experiences, exploring places, and activities that provide personal satisfaction. Meanwhile, some respondents use travel as an opportunity to strengthen their bonds with family.

Table 1. Geographic Distribution of Respondents

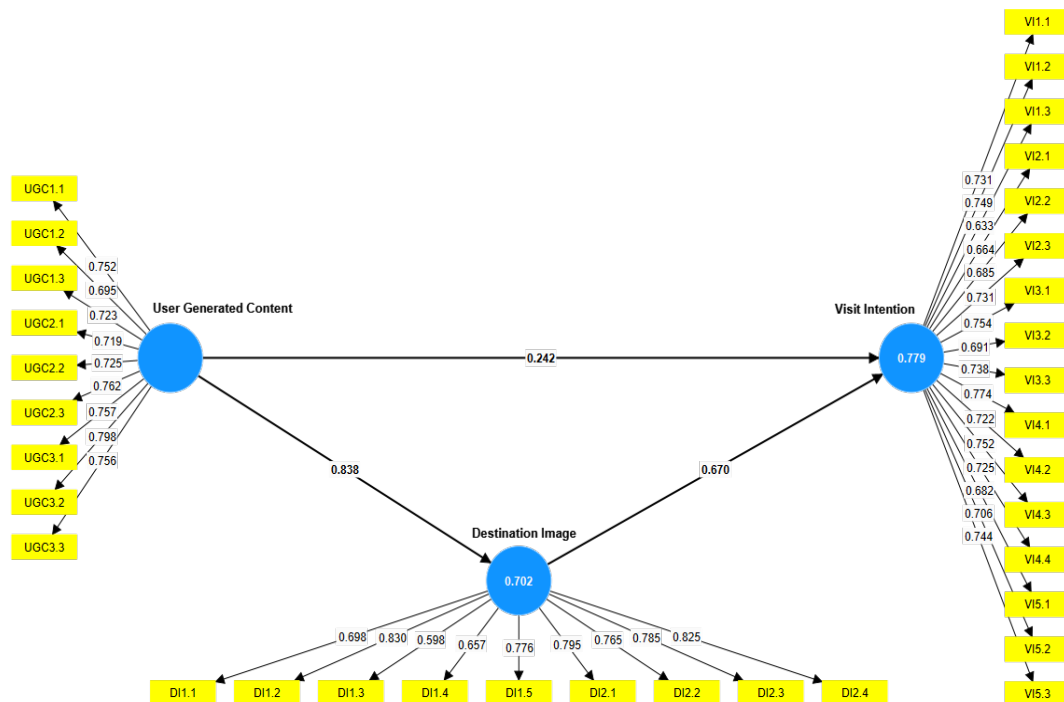
No	Name of Regency/City	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1	Mataram City	20	20
2	West Lombok	4	4%
3	Central Lombok	1	1%
4	East Lombok	3	3%
5	North Lombok	2	2%
6	Sumbawa	17	17%
7	West Sumbawa	13	13%
8	Dompu	2	2%
9	Bima	5	5%
10	Outside NTB	33	33%
Total	23 Regencies/Cities	100	100%

Based on Table 1, the geographical distribution of respondents shows that the majority of respondents 33% come from outside NTB, including West Sulawesi, South Tangerang, Palu, Yogyakarta, Bekasi City, Bogor City, Samarinda, Labuan Bajo, Jambi, North Lampung, Serang, and Sukabumi, followed by Mataram City at 20%, Sumbawa Regency at 17%, West Sumbawa Regency at 13%, Bima Regency at 5%, West Lombok at 4%, East Lombok at 3%, and Dompu and North Lombok at 2% each, while Central Lombok accounted for 1%. The fairly wide distribution of respondents indicates that information regarding tourist destinations not only reaches local communities but also attracts the attention of people from outside the region. This suggests that social media can accelerate and broaden the dissemination of tourism information, without being constrained by geographical boundaries. Additionally, the high number of respondents from outside NTB also indicates that tourism content circulating on social media has appeal in generating interest among tourists from various regions in visiting NTB.

4.2 Outer Model

Outer model testing aims to evaluate the correlation between scores or indicators and their construct scores, indicating the validity of a statement item. We conduct outer-model testing based on the results of a questionnaire pilot test conducted for all research variables. There are three criteria for using data analysis techniques to assess the external model: Composite Reliability, Convergent Validity, and Discriminant Validity. Within the SEM-PLS analytical framework, this test is conducted by monitoring the outer loading values, with a minimum requirement of 0.70 for each questionnaire item. The magnitude of these outer loading values reflects the extent to which the indicators contribute to describing the research variables. The following are the results of the PLS model estimation:

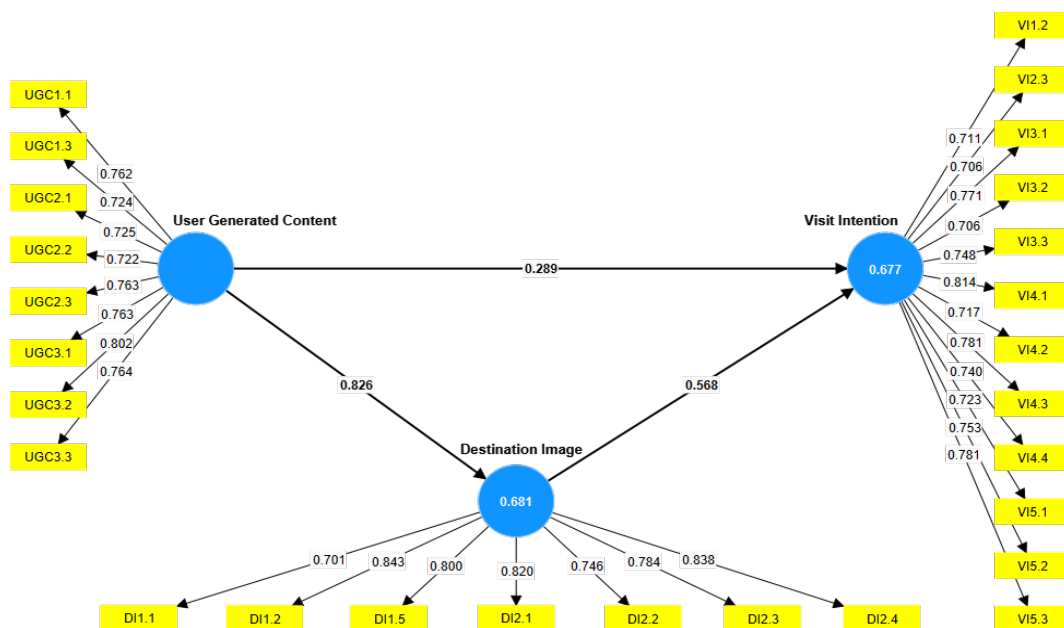
Figure 2. Stage 1 Output Loading Factor



Source: SmartPLS Report

Based on the analysis results in the figure above, several indicators with *loading factors* below 0.70 are identified; these are therefore deemed invalid and must be dropped from the model. The model estimation results after the invalid indicators were dropped from the model are as follows:

Figure 3. Stage 2 Factor Loadings



Source: SmartPLS Report

Based on the results of the PLS model estimation shown in the figure above, all indicators have outer loadings above 0.70; thus, the model meets the criteria for convergent validity, and it can be concluded that all indicators meet the criteria for reliability.

4.2.1 Convergent Validity

To facilitate the interpretation of the measurement model, the questionnaire items corresponding to each indicator code used in this study are presented in Table 2. These items serve as references for the indicator codes employed in the subsequent validity analysis.

Table 2. Items Utilized to Measure the Constructs

Indicator	Constructs	Items	Reference
User Generated Content			
Content information richness	UGC1.1	Tourist content on TikTok captures the real atmosphere at Whale Shark Sumbawa.	Aboalganam et al. (2025)
	UGC1.2	Travel content on TikTok helps me fully understand travel routes and available amenities.	
	UGC1.3	Travel content on TikTok provides clear information about estimated costs during a trip.	
Content Valence	UGC2.1	Most TikTok content about the Sumbawa whale shark highlights its positive aspects.	
	UGC2.2	The TikTok content I've seen gives the impression that the tour guides at Whale Shark Sumbawa are very helpful and friendly.	
	UGC2.3	Most TikTok reviews indicate that tourists are satisfied with their interactions with whale sharks in Sumbawa.	
Content Trustworthiness	UGC3.1	The TikTok content about the Sumbawa whale shark feels genuine and not contrived.	
	UGC3.2	The information in the TikTok content about the Sumbawa whale shark seems convincing.	
	UGC3.3	I can rely on TikTok content as a reference before visiting.	
Destination Image			
Cognitive Destination Image	DI1.1	The water clarity and underwater conditions at Whale Shark Sumbawa are stunning.	Baloglu & McCleary (1999)
	DI1.2	The presence of whale sharks makes this destination unique compared to other marine tourism sites.	
	DI1.3	There are a variety of accommodation options available near the Sumbawa Whale Shark tourist site that are suitable and adequate for tourists.	
	DI1.4	The activities on offer (such as snorkeling and glass-bottom boat tours) are really fun to do.	
	DI1.5	The cost of seeing whale sharks in Sumbawa is well worth the experience.	
Affective Destination Image	DI2.1	The atmosphere at Whale Shark Sumbawa is peaceful and relaxing.	

	DI2.2	The tourist destinations featured in the content seem comfortable and enjoyable to visit.
	DI2.3	Interacting directly with whale sharks in Sumbawa looks exciting and challenging
	DI2.4	Other people's travel experiences at that location have inspired me to go on an adventure.
Visit Intention		
Imaginative Intention	VI1.1	The visuals in the TikTok video helped me vividly imagine what it would be like to interact with a whale shark in person.
	VI1.2	The descriptions of tourist attractions featured in the TikTok content made it easy for me to imagine the experiences I'll have during my trip.
	VI1.3	The TikTok videos helped me picture the atmosphere and conditions at the whale shark tourist spot.
Cognitive Consideration	VI2.1	I compared the Sumbawa Whale Shark destination with other tourist destinations before deciding where to go.
	VI2.2	After watching the TikTok video, I'm considering the Sumbawa Whale Shark as one of my potential travel destinations.
	VI2.3	I evaluated the quality of the tourist experience and the ease of access to Whale Shark Sumbawa based on the information presented in the TikTok video.
Behavioral Intention	VI3.1	I plan to visit the Sumbawa Whale Shark destination in the future.
	VI3.2	Reviews posted by creators on TikTok inspired me to book an open trip package for my visit to Whale Shark Sumbawa.
	VI3.3	TikTok content showcasing exciting experiences inspired me to immediately set a date for my visit to Whale Shark Sumbawa.
Information Seeking Intention	VI4.1	I am actively looking for information about the Whale Shark Sumbawa tourist destination.
	VI4.2	I watched various vlogs about experiences visiting Whale Shark Sumbawa on various social media platforms.
	VI4.3	I'm looking for information about the cost of a trip to Whale Shark Sumbawa.
	VI4.4	I'm looking for information about tour guides or open-trip packages that offer trips to the Sumbawa Whale Shark.
Preference Intention	VI5.1	I consider the Sumbawa Whale Shark a more attractive tourist destination than other destinations.
	VI5.2	I prefer visiting Whale Shark Sumbawa

[Zhao et al. \(2024\)](#)

	because it's more affordable than similar whale shark destinations elsewhere.
VI5.3	I chose Whale Shark Sumbawa as my top vacation destination over other options because of the challenging experience it offers.

The Convergent Validity Test was conducted to ensure that each construct can be clearly distinguished from the others. This test was performed by evaluating the outer loading values for each indicator and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for each variable. An indicator is considered valid if it has a strong relationship or high correlation with the construct it measures. The results of the Outer Loading Convergent Validity Test are shown in the table below:

Table 3. Results of the Outer Loading Convergent Validity Test

	Code	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T-statistics (O/STDEV)	P-values	Notes
Destination Image	DI1.1	0.701	0.687	0.091	7.704	0.000	Valid
	DI1.2	0.843	0.837	0.044	19.227	0.000	Valid
	DI1.5	0.800	0.795	0.049	16.211	0.000	Valid
	DI2.1	0.820	0.812	0.048	17.169	0.000	Valid
	DI2.2	0.746	0.736	0.072	10.381	0.000	Valid
	DI2.3	0.784	0.783	0.053	14.809	0.000	Valid
	DI2.4	0.838	0.832	0.046	18.148	0.000	Valid
User-Generated Content	UGC1.1	0.762	0.753	0.079	9,658	0.000	Valid
	UGC1.3	0.724	0.718	0.064	11.274	0.000	Valid
	UGC2.1	0.725	0.710	0.079	9.125	0.000	Valid
	UGC2.2	0.722	0.719	0.060	11.954	0.000	Valid
	UGC2.3	0.763	0.752	0.076	10.064	0.000	Valid
	UGC3.1	0.763	0.764	0.053	14.449	0.000	Valid
	UGC3.2	0.802	0.792	0.054	14.965	0.000	Valid
	UGC3.3	0.764	0.752	0.074	10.317	0.000	Valid
Visit Intention	VI1.2	0.711	0.710	0.064	11.074	0.000	Valid
	VI2.3	0.706	0.705	0.075	9.425	0.000	Valid
	VI3.1	0.771	0.768	0.050	15.528	0.000	Valid
	VI3.2	0.706	0.702	0.074	9.593	0.000	Valid
	VI3.3	0.748	0.740	0.066	11.322	0.000	Valid
	VI4.1	0.814	0.812	0.040	20.412	0.000	Valid
	VI4.2	0.717	0.721	0.076	9.459	0.000	Valid
	VI4.3	0.781	0.776	0.048	16.382	0.000	Valid
	VI4.4	0.740	0.737	0.053	14.059	0.000	Valid
	VI5.1	0.723	0.719	0.061	11.794	0.000	Valid

VI5.2	0.753	0.750	0.050	14.996	0.000	Valid
VI5.3	0.781	0.780	0.039	19.811	0.000	Valid

Source: Data processed in 2026

Based on the results of the convergent validity test in Table 3, all indicators for the variables Destination Image (DI), User-Generated Content (UGC), and Visit Intention (VI) have outer loadings above 0.70. An outer loading value above 0.70 indicates strong validity and shows that an indicator adequately represents its construct, meeting the criterion for convergent validity. The highest outer loading value is found in indicator DI1.2 at 0.843, while the lowest value is found in indicator DI1.1 at 0.701. Thus, all indicators meet the criteria for convergent validity because their factor loadings are > 0.70 , thereby effectively reflecting the latent construct being measured.

In addition, the bootstrapping results show that all indicators have T-statistics greater than 1.96 and p-values of 0.000 or less than 0.05. This indicates that the relationship between the indicators and their constructs is statistically significant. Thus, all indicators in this study are deemed valid and suitable for further analysis.

4.2.2 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity aims to ensure that each construct within a latent variable is clearly distinct from constructs in other variables. In data analysis using SmartPLS, this refers to the calculation of cross-loading values. According to the rule of thumb, an indicator is considered valid if its cross-loading value exceeds 0.7 for its own construct. The results of the cross-loading test for discriminant validity can be seen in the table below:

Table 4. Results of the Discriminant Validity Cross-Loading Test

	Destination Image	User-Generated Content	Visit Intention
DI1.1	0.701	0.625	0.480
DI1.2	0.843	0.695	0.686
DI1.5	0.800	0.607	0.687
DI2.1	0.820	0.684	0.598
DI2.2	0.746	0.643	0.620
DI2.3	0.784	0.660	0.674
DI2.4	0.838	0.663	0.702
UGC1.1	0.608	0.762	0.536
UGC1.3	0.604	0.724	0.558
UGC2.1	0.588	0.725	0.490
UGC2.2	0.649	0.722	0.587
UGC2.3	0.571	0.763	0.539
UGC3.1	0.653	0.763	0.679
UGC3.2	0.635	0.802	0.591
UGC3.3	0.654	0.764	0.563
VI1.2	0.705	0.679	0.711
VI2.3	0.597	0.577	0.706
VI3.1	0.718	0.657	0.771
VI3.2	0.480	0.510	0.706
VI3.3	0.556	0.602	0.748
VI4.1	0.589	0.575	0.814

VI4.2	0.570	0.585	0.717
VI4.3	0.629	0.531	0.781
VI4.4	0.558	0.540	0.740
VI5.1	0.586	0.461	0.723
VI5.2	0.577	0.474	0.753
VI5.3	0.591	0.534	0.781

Source: Data processed in 2026

Based on the cross-loading results presented in Table 4, all indicators exhibited the highest loading values on their respective constructs compared to other constructs, fulfilling the minimum criterion for discriminant validity, which requires each indicator to have a higher loading on its intended construct than on any other construct. For example, indicator DI1.2 had the highest loading value on the Destination Image construct (0.843), exceeding those on the User-Generated Content (0.695) and Visit Intention (0.686) constructs. This indicates that each indicator is more strongly associated with its intended latent variable than with other latent variables, thereby satisfying the discriminant validity criterion. Consequently, the measurement model demonstrates adequate discriminant validity, confirming that the constructs are empirically distinct.

4.2.3 Reliability Test

Reliability testing was conducted by analyzing Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability to assess the instrument's overall reliability. A high reliability score indicates strong consistency among the items in accurately and precisely measuring each variable. Generally, a range of 0.60-0.70 is considered acceptable, while 0.70-0.90 falls into the satisfactory category. The results of the reliability test can be seen in the table below:

Table 5. Reliability Test Results

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho a)	Composite reliability (rho c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Destination Image	0.900	0.903	0.921	0.627
User-Generated Content	0.891	0.892	0.913	0.568
Visit Intention	0.928	0.930	0.938	0.558

Based on the test results in Table 5, all research variables exhibit adequate reliability, as they exceed 0.60. This finding demonstrates that each construct accurately explains the variance in its indicators; thus, it can be concluded that all instruments in this study are reliable and meet the criteria for convergent validity. Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all variables also met the requirements as they were above 0.5.

4.3 Structural Model

Structural equation modeling was conducted to examine the hypothesized relationships among the constructs. This analysis included testing the significance of direct and indirect effects and measuring the magnitude of the exogenous variables' influence on the endogenous variables, using the bootstrap technique. The evaluation process included an R-squared test, significance tests, model fit tests, and hypothesis tests.

4.3.1 R-squared Test (R^2)

The R-squared (R^2) test reflects the extent to which independent variables can explain the variation in the dependent variable. A low R^2 value indicates that the independent variables have only a limited influence on explaining changes in the dependent variable. Conversely, a high R^2 value indicates that the independent variables are able to explain the variation in the dependent variable well, meaning that the model used has strong predictive power. The results of the R-Square test can be seen in the table below:

Table 6. R-Square Test Results

	R-Square	Adjusted R-Square
Destination Image	0.681	0.678
Visit Intention	0.677	0.670

Source: Data processed in 2026

Based on Table 6, the R-squared value for Destination Image is 0.681, which means that the independent variables explain the Destination Image variable by 68.1%. In comparison, the remaining 31.9% is explained by other variables not discussed in this study. Meanwhile, the R-Square value for Visit Intention is 0.677, indicating that the independent variables explain 67.7% of the Visit Intention, with the remaining 32.3% explained by other variables not discussed in this study. The higher the R-Square value, the greater the ability of the exogenous constructs to explain the endogenous variables, and thus the better the resulting structural equation model.

4.3.2 Significance Test

Significance tests were conducted to determine whether the proposed hypothesis was accepted or rejected. The results of the R-squared test can be seen in the table below:

Table 7. Results of the Significance Test

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T-statistics (O/STDEV)	P-values
Destination Image -> Visit Intention	0.568	0.562	0.125	4.541	0.000
User-Generated Content -> Destination Image	0.826	0.821	0.055	15.077	0.000
User-Generated Content -> Visit Intention	0.289	0.306	0.126	2.283	0.022

Table 7 shows that the T-statistics for all paths are above 1.96, specifically 15.077, 4.541, and 2.283, respectively; thus, all relationships between the variables are significant. Additionally, all path coefficients (original sample) are positive, indicating that the relationships between variables are unidirectional. Thus, it can be concluded that all independent variables have a significant influence on the dependent variable. This indicates that the main-effect assumption has been met, allowing further testing of mediation effects.

4.3.3 Model Fit Test

A model fit test was conducted to determine whether the research model developed is valid, appropriate, and capable of adequately explaining the research data. The results of the model

fit test are shown in the table below:

Table 8. Model Fit Test Results

	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.072	0.072
d_ ULS	1.970	1.970
d_ G	1.709	1,709
Chi-square	733.012	733.012
NFI	0.669	0.669

Source: Data processed in 2026

Based on the test results shown in Table 8, it can be seen that the SRMR value is 0.072, which meets the fit criteria because it is below the maximum threshold of < 0.08 . Further statistical support is evident from the d_ ULS value of 1.970 and the d_ G value of 1.709, indicating that this research model adequately explains the structure of the primary data used. Additionally, the Chi-square value was recorded at 733.012. In contrast, the NFI value reached 0.669, indicating that the model falls into the “adequate” or “marginal fit” category but remains acceptable for further analysis. Overall, the results of these tests indicate that the research model demonstrates a good level of fit and can be considered a good fit.

4.3.4 Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesis test examines the extent of the user-generated content variable's influence on destination image and visit intention. The results of the hypothesis test can be seen in the table below:

Table 9. Hypothesis Test Results

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T-statistics ((O/STDEV))	P-values
Destination Image -> Visit Intention	0.568	0.562	0.125	4.541	0.000
User-Generated Content -> Destination Image	0.826	0.821	0.055	15,077	0.000
User-Generated Content -> Visit Intention	0.758	0.767	0.050	15,105	0.000

Source: Data processed in 2026

Based on the results of the hypothesis testing in Table 9, it can be seen that all paths of relationship between variables have a very strong level of significance, with P-values of 0.000, which are below the 0.05 threshold. Furthermore, statistical support is also evident from the T-statistic values for all variable relationships, which are above 1.96, confirming that User-Generated Content has a positive and significant effect on Destination Image and Visit Intention. A similar pattern is observed in the influence of Destination Image on Visit Intention, yielding positive, significant results; thus, all three hypotheses proposed in this study are accepted.

4.4. Discussion

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The study's results indicate that User-Generated Content (UGC) on the TikTok platform has a positive, significant impact on Sumbawa's Whale Shark tourism destination image. These findings suggest that content generated by social media users can shape tourists' perceptions of a destination by presenting authentic, engaging, and easily accessible visual experiences. In the context of digital tourism, UGC serves not only as a medium for sharing experiences but also as a source of information that influences prospective tourists' assessments of a destination's quality and appeal.

The results of this study align with the findings of [Nadiastuti et al. \(2025\)](#), which states that user-generated social media content can effectively build a destination's image because it is perceived as more authentic and non-commercial. TikTok videos showcasing experiences swimming with whale sharks, panoramic views of Saleh Bay, and the destination's unspoiled natural ambience create positive associations in the audience's minds regarding Whale Shark Sumbawa as a unique and appealing marine tourism destination. Additionally, [Nguyen & Tong \(2022\)](#) emphasise that UGC possesses a higher level of credibility compared to formal promotions because it stems from travelers' real-life experiences. The high level of trust in user-generated content makes it easier for the audience to accept the information presented and use it as a reference in forming their perception of the destination. Thus, the more positive the tourism content circulating on TikTok, the stronger the destination's positive image in potential tourists' minds.

The respondents' characteristics also reinforce the influence of UGC on destination image in this study. The majority of respondents were women (76%) and young adults with relatively high levels of education. These characteristics indicate that the respondents are active social media users with strong digital literacy. This group tends to be more responsive to visual content that is aesthetically pleasing, emotional, and based on personal experiences. Therefore, exposure to travel videos on TikTok more easily influences their perceptions of a tourist destination.

The results of the study show that User-Generated Content (UGC) has a positive and significant effect on tourists' intention to visit the Sumbawa Whale Shark destination. These findings indicate that tourism content shared on TikTok can actually encourage tourists to visit the destination. The more engaging, informative, and authentic the content is to the audience, the greater their interest in visiting the destination.

The findings of this study align with the research by [Aboalghanam et al. \(2025\)](#), which states that UGC has a significant influence on tourists' visitation intentions. In the context of digital consumer behaviour, social media content serves as a primary source of reference before individuals make travel decisions. Videos showcasing tourists' firsthand experiences are considered capable of reducing information uncertainty while simultaneously increasing prospective tourists' confidence in the quality of the travel experience they will receive. [Santos & Vasconcelos \(2025\)](#) also explain that user engagement in creating and sharing visual content can transform the audience's curiosity into a behavioural drive to visit. This occurs because the audience not only views information about the destination but also shares in the emotional experience depicted through the video content.

The influence of UGC on visit intention in this study is further reinforced by the high frequency of TikTok use among respondents. Most respondents use TikTok for 1–4 hours per day, and approximately 20% use it for more than 5 hours per day. This high frequency of use indicates that respondents have a high level of exposure to various digital tourism content. The more

frequently individuals are exposed to content about tourism destinations, the greater the likelihood of developing an interest and a psychological drive to visit.

This situation aligns with TikTok's characteristics as a social media platform with a highly sophisticated personalization algorithm that can foster intensive, even addictive, use. Research by [Yang et al.\(2025\)](#) found that users showing signs of TikTok addiction tend to spend more time on the app and keep returning to TikTok throughout the day. TikTok's algorithm has also been shown to amplify content exposure based on user interests, thereby increasing the likelihood of forming specific perceptions and images of an object or destination.

The results of the study indicate that Destination Image has a positive and significant effect on tourists' Visit Intention. These findings suggest that the more positive a destination's image is in tourists' minds, the greater their tendency to visit it. A positive destination image fosters perceptions of comfort, uniqueness, safety, and the quality of the travel experience that tourists will have. These research results align with the study [Farhan et al. \(2025\)](#), which found that destination image has a significant influence on tourists' visit intention. In the context of tourism, destination image is a key factor in the decision-making process because tourists tend to choose destinations perceived as capable of delivering positive experiences that align with their expectations. In this study, the positive image of Whale Shark Sumbawa is formed through the visualization of TikTok content, which showcases the beauty of the ocean, a tranquil natural atmosphere, and the unique experience of interacting directly with whale sharks. This content builds an emotional perception of Whale Shark Sumbawa as a tourist destination that offers relaxation, adventure, and healing experiences.

These findings are reinforced by respondents' characteristics: 64% cite stress relief as their primary reason for traveling. This indicates that modern travelers are not only seeking entertainment but also emotional and psychological experiences that provide peace of mind and personal fulfillment. Therefore, a destination's image that highlights a natural, soothing atmosphere has great potential to increase tourist interest. Additionally, the distribution of respondents' places of residence across various regions, both within and outside West Nusa Tenggara, indicates that the positive image of Whale Shark Sumbawa has reached a broader audience. This demonstrates that social media can expand a tourist destination's exposure beyond geographic boundaries and help build its reputation at both the regional and national levels.

The results of the study indicate that Destination Image mediates the effect of User-Generated Content on Visit Intention. These findings suggest that UGC does not directly influence tourists' intention to visit, but rather first shapes the destination image in the audience's mind before ultimately prompting the desire to visit. This finding supports the research titled [Aboalganam et al. \(2025\)](#), which states that destination image acts as a mediating variable in the relationship between UGC and visit intention. Tourism content shared on social media can create positive perceptions of the destination, which subsequently develop into an interest in making a tourist visit.

From the perspective of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) theory, UGC on TikTok serves as a stimulus for individuals through exposure to digital content. This stimulus influences the individual's internal state by shaping a destination image as the “organism,” which in turn generates a behavioral response in the form of visit intention. Thus, the S-O-R theory in this study proves relevant for explaining tourist behavior in the digital era, particularly in the context of using social media as a tourism marketing medium. This study also indicates that Generation

Z, as an active group of TikTok users, exhibits a strong tendency to use social media as a source of travel information. The generation's affinity for digital technology makes them more susceptible to viral, interactive visual content rooted in real-life experiences. Consequently, TikTok can be viewed as a highly effective promotional medium for building destination imagery while simultaneously increasing tourists' interest in visiting the Whale Shark Sumbawa.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the effect of TikTok User-Generated Content (UGC) on destination image and visit intention toward Whale Shark tourism in Sumbawa, using the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework. The findings reveal that TikTok-based UGC has a positive and significant effect on both destination image and visit intention. In addition, destination image was found to positively influence tourists' intention to visit and successfully mediate the relationship between UGC and visit intention.

These findings indicate that authentic, visually engaging tourism content shared on TikTok can effectively shape positive perceptions of a destination and encourage tourists' behavioral intentions. The study also demonstrates that social media platforms, particularly TikTok, have become important digital marketing channels for increasing tourism destination exposure and attracting potential visitors, especially among Generation Z travelers who actively use social media for travel information and inspiration.

From a theoretical perspective, this study strengthens the relevance of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) theory in explaining tourist behavior within the digital tourism context. User-Generated Content serves as a stimulus that influences tourists' internal perceptions of the destination image, which subsequently generates behavioral responses, such as visit intention.

Practically, the findings suggest that tourism stakeholders in Sumbawa should optimize TikTok-based tourism promotion strategies by encouraging tourists and content creators to share authentic travel experiences related to Whale Shark tourism. Strengthening digital engagement through interactive and experience-based content may help improve destination image and increase tourist visits in a sustainable manner.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively limited and dominated by Generation Z respondents, which may restrict the generalisability of the findings to broader demographic groups. Second, this study focused only on TikTok as the primary social media platform, while tourists may also obtain travel information from other digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. Third, the study employed a cross-sectional research design, which only captures respondents' perceptions and behavioral intentions at a single point in time.

In addition, this research specifically examined Whale Shark tourism in Sumbawa, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other tourism destinations or tourism categories. Therefore, future studies are recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples, compare multiple social media platforms, and investigate different tourism destinations to improve the generalisability of the findings. Future research may also incorporate additional variables such as electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), tourist trust, perceived value, or travel motivation to develop a more comprehensive understanding of tourists' behavioural intentions in the digital tourism context.

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