

Temporal Validity of User-Generated Content: Reassessing the Role of Review Recency in Hotel Booking Decisions

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study investigates the mechanisms through which the recency of User-Generated Content (UGC) influences information credibility, persuasiveness, and hotel booking intentions. Specifically, it tests competing theoretical perspectives—the peripheral reliance on chronological heuristics (Temporal Construal Theory) versus the central-route processing of review substance (Elaboration Likelihood Model) under conditions of digital information saturation.

Design/methodology/approach: Utilizing an experimental, within-subjects survey design, primary data was collected from 220 consumers evaluating hotel UGC. The data was analyzed using paired-samples *t*-tests and Hayes' PROCESS macro to evaluate proposed parallel mediation pathways, assessing both the direct and indirect effects of review recency on booking decisions.

Findings: The empirical results reveal no significant direct effect of review recency on perceived credibility or persuasiveness, and no significant indirect effects through the proposed mediating pathways. While a modest difference was observed in booking intentions between recent and older reviews, the overall pattern of findings suggests that travellers place greater emphasis on the substantive quality of review content than on chronological recency when evaluating hotel-related UGC.

Practical implications: Hotel managers and tourism marketers should pivot their strategies away from the continuous solicitation of "fresh" reviews. Instead, resources should be reallocated to encourage detailed, context-rich UGC, as the substantive depth of a review holds permanent persuasive value regardless of its posting date. Furthermore, booking platforms should prioritize algorithmic sorting by review "helpfulness" rather than strict chronological order.

Originality/value: This research updates existing eWOM literature by empirically demonstrating the boundary conditions of recency effects. It provides critical evidence that the contemporary, saturated architecture of digital travel platforms has catalyzed a consumer shift from peripheral temporal cues to active central-route processing.

Keywords: User-Generated Content (UGC), eWOM, Content Age, Temporal Validity, Elaboration Likelihood Model, Hotel Booking Intentions.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Technological advancements—particularly the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies—have fundamentally reshaped consumer lifestyles, with profound implications for purchasing behaviours. These digital innovations have transformed traditional shopping paradigms, redirecting consumer preferences toward online platforms. Prominent global social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Pinterest, along with diverse blogging platforms, have played a pivotal role in facilitating this digital transition. Today, a significant proportion of consumers

maintain multiple accounts on these platforms, using them not only to strengthen social connections but also to actively engage through features like likes, comments, and content sharing.

Within the travel and hospitality sector, the integration of Web 2.0 tools has shifted the industry from a producer-centric to a consumer-driven market orientation. Among the most influential drivers of this transformation is customer-generated content—reviews, ratings, blogs, photos, and videos shared by travellers themselves—collectively known as user-generated content (UGC). Unlike traditional marketing communications, UGC is perceived as more authentic, current, and grounded in actual customer experiences, serving as a highly influential source of information that shapes travellers' decisions (Cox et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2011). Trusted for its peer-to-peer nature, UGC often impacts consumer behaviour more significantly than traditional marketer-generated content, redefining power dynamics within the hospitality sector (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Filieri, 2015).

Prior research has extensively investigated the factors influencing UGC effectiveness, including content valence, length, modality, and source credibility (Ayeh et al., 2013; Assaker et al., 2019). For instance, longer reviews have been found to enhance trust and visiting intentions—especially when written by perceived amateurs rather than influencers—mediated by advertising suspicion (Huang et al., 2025). Moreover, Assaker et al. (2020) extended the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) incorporating credibility theory, showing that perceived usefulness and trustworthiness vary across gender and age, ultimately influencing UGC adoption by travellers.

Despite extensive research on the determinants of User-Generated Content (UGC) effectiveness, existing studies have primarily focused on source credibility, message quality, review valence, and platform characteristics. While review recency is frequently presented as a visible platform cue, the literature has largely assumed rather than empirically demonstrated that newer content possesses greater informational value. Consequently, an important conceptual distinction remains unexplored: whether temporal validity is truly determined by chronological recency or by the enduring relevance and substantive quality of the information itself. In digitally mature environments characterized by information abundance and increasing consumer familiarity with online reviews, travellers may no longer equate freshness with usefulness. This raises an important theoretical question regarding whether temporal cues continue to function as meaningful heuristics in hotel booking decisions or whether consumers increasingly rely on central-route evaluation of review content. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the role of temporal validity in hotel-related UGC and examines whether review recency remains a significant determinant of credibility, persuasiveness, and booking intentions.

To address this gap, the present study examines whether the temporal validity of hotel-related User-Generated Content (UGC) is primarily determined by chronological recency or by the substantive value of the information conveyed. While Temporal Construal Theory suggests that more recent reviews may be perceived as more relevant, credible, and actionable, the Elaboration Likelihood Model proposes that consumers engaged in high-involvement decisions may rely less on temporal cues and more on the quality of review content itself. Accordingly, this study investigates whether review recency continues to function as a meaningful heuristic in hotel booking decisions or whether contemporary consumers evaluate UGC through more deliberate, content-based processing. Using an experimental design in which participants evaluate matched hotel reviews that differ only in posting date, the study examines the effects of review age on perceived credibility, perceived persuasiveness, and booking intentions.

A quantitative, within-subject experimental design is employed, wherein respondents assess two matched hotel reviews differing only in posting date. This design enables direct comparison of perceptions and booking intentions within the same participants, thereby controlling for individual

differences and enhancing internal validity. Using paired-samples *t*-tests and parallel mediation regression analyses, the study investigates: (a) whether content age influences the perceived credibility and persuasiveness of hotel-related UGC, and (b) the consequent direct and indirect effects on travellers' booking intentions.

This study contributes to the growing literature on User-Generated Content by advancing the discussion of temporal validity in online consumer decision-making. Rather than assuming that review recency automatically enhances informational value, the study examines whether consumers equate chronological freshness with relevance when evaluating hotel-related UGC. In doing so, it extends existing research by distinguishing temporal validity from simple review age and by testing whether temporal cues continue to function as influential heuristics in digitally mature environments. The study further contributes to theory by examining the competing predictions of Temporal Construal Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model, thereby identifying the conditions under which consumers rely on temporal signals versus substantive review content. From a managerial perspective, the findings offer insights for hotel marketers and online travel platforms regarding the relative importance of review freshness and information quality in shaping consumer decision-making.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Evolution of User-Generated Content in Tourism

User-Generated Content (UGC), or User-Created Content (UCC), encompasses the vast array of textual, graphic, videographic, and audio-visual media created and shared by individuals on digital platforms. The adaptability of UGC transcends its basic uses for advertising, entertainment, gossip, problem-solving, and information. Technological advances have enabled UGC to become a valuable tool for news, research, and consumers. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2007) originally defined UGC as content made publicly available that reflects creative effort generated outside of professional routines. Building on this, Daugherty, Eastin, and Bright (2008) and Jonas (2010) emphasized the non-commercial origins of UGC, while Cheong and Morrison (2008) and Krishnamurthy and Dou (2010) highlighted how it fundamentally alters consumption trends by directly influencing peer behaviour and online trust.

Today, UGC is defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2011) as "the total of all activities which individuals undertake using the web." It operates as a highly pervasive form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) that broadens immediate communication across online platforms (Manap & Adzharudin, 2013). Consequently, UGC exerts a profound influence on brand perception, peer-to-peer trust, and social proof (Presi, Saridakis, & Hartmans, 2014), serving as a crucial tool for AI-driven consumer analysis and authentic brand-user engagement (IEEE, 2024; Saura et al., 2022).

Within the travel and hospitality sector, platforms such as MakeMyTrip, TripAdvisor, IgoUgo, VirtualTourist, Booking.com, and LonelyPlanet allow users to evaluate destinations during the planning process. The significance of UGC here is driven by three factors: (I) tourism is a special, high-involvement activity, making tourists highly sensible when selecting trips based on previous clients' comments; (II) because travel cannot be fully experienced or comprehensively advertised in advance, consumers depend entirely on prior travellers' experiences; and (III) the opinions of previous consumers are considered genuine and truthful, strongly influencing potential buyers. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) demonstrated that such peer-posted content is actively sought out as relevant travel information. Industry data from TripAdvisor illustrates this reliance: to gather the "wisdom of the crowd," users seek helpful and descriptive reviews (70%), accuracy of content (62%), and comprehensiveness (62%). Ultimately, 81% of participating travellers indicate they always or frequently read reviews when

choosing accommodations, with 78% paying close attention to the most recent posts (TripAdvisor, n.d.).

2.2. Drivers of Credibility in Travel UGC

The persuasive effectiveness of UGC is fundamentally anchored in perceived credibility. Drawing on Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1991), Ayeh et al. (2013) surveyed 661 travellers and demonstrated that a reviewer's perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and perceptual homophily significantly shape positive attitudes toward UGC.

Beyond reviewer identity, message quality plays a decisive role. Filieri et al. (2016) identified review consistency, balance, valence, and writing style as key determinants of trustworthiness. This was further conceptualized by Fotis et al. (2021) and Filieri's CONCEPT model, which integrates platform reputation, reviewer identity, message quality (e.g., readability, tone), and consumer attitudes (e.g., sincerity) to holistically explain trust. Platform context also matters; empirical research shows reviews on dedicated travel platforms are regarded as more trustworthy than generic social media due to perceived platform expertise and specialized moderation (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Demographics further moderate these perceptions; Assaker et al. (2019) found that males are driven by perceived usefulness, whereas females and older consumers rely more heavily on credibility cues and ease of use. Furthermore, research published in *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022) shows that trust mediates the relationship between information quality and intentions to visit, largely through mechanisms like self-congruity.

2.3. Persuasiveness and Behavioural Impact in Hotel Contexts

A robust body of research demonstrates that credible UGC serves as a powerful mediator linking information quality to actual booking intentions (Lopes, 2018), particularly when messages feature two-sided reviews presenting both pros and cons (Chakraborty, 2023). In hotel contexts, Lo and Yao (2019) revealed that reviewer expertise and rating consistency significantly interact to shape credibility, noting interestingly that negative reviews written by perceived experts often enhance trust due to perceived balance and authenticity. Visual elements amplify this effect; Li et al. (2021) analyzed over a million hotel reviews and found that user-generated photos (UGPs) actively contribute to a review's persuasive power, particularly for budget accommodations and even for negatively valenced reviews. A comparative study supports this, demonstrating that format metrics—including image count, text length, and storytelling style—make the narrative-focused Xiaohongshu notably more persuasive for Chinese Millennials than Weibo. Similarly, research on Airbnb influencer videos demonstrated that faster, visually attractive audiovisual cues enhance perceived credibility and prompt engagement behaviors.

Emotional resonance and impartiality also dictate behavioral outcomes. Xu et al. (2023) found that exposure to traveler visual content and reviews positively influences satisfaction, revisit intentions, word-of-mouth, and cognitive/affective destination imagery. Ambarin and Kusumawati (2024) confirmed that perceived reliability, information quality, homophily, and perceived usefulness are significant predictors of purchase decisions on Traveloka. Furthermore, research on heritage tourism in Indonesia reveals that emotional UGC significantly strengthens destination image and visit intentions compared to strictly factual posts. Generational differences also play a role; a study from Suez Canal University (2023) found that Generation Z places greater trust in peer UGC than influencer content, while a study published by MDPI (2023) explored how TikTok UGC is perceived as non-commercial and impartial, significantly influencing Millennial and Centennial purchase intentions. Ultimately, travellers perceive peer-generated reviews as more trustworthy than official hotel websites or traditional travel agents due to platform independence, perceived authenticity, sincerity, and experiential grounding (Filieri, 2016). In practice, over 70% of travellers actively consult online

reviews before booking, with negative UGC significantly reducing booking likelihood (ResearchGate, 2023).

2.4. The Theoretical Gap: Content Age and Temporal Validity

While source trustworthiness, message quality, and visual richness have been extensively mapped, one critical dimension remains largely overlooked: the temporal validity, or age, of the content. As platforms accumulate years of data, older reviews may lose relevance. Emerging evidence suggests content recency plays a subtle but influential role. Jin et al. (2021) demonstrated that travellers systematically prioritize recent reviews when planning imminent trips, a preference that intensifies under conditions of spatial proximity or time pressure. However, Fodness and Murray (2018) argued that for recency to enhance credibility, the content must convey topical relevance, such as mentioning updated safety protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, Wang and Lehto (2024) observed the influence of temporal distance in marketer-generated destination content, yet this dynamic has not been fully explored regarding peer-generated hotel reviews.

To address this empirical gap, this study leverages Temporal Construal Theory, which posits that temporally proximal information is processed more concretely and viewed as more actionable (Trope & Liberman, 2010). However, this study tests that assumption against the central-route processing framework of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). By systematically comparing recent versus older UGC, this research aims to empirically determine whether content age functions as a peripheral heuristic that automatically dictates credibility, or whether substantive message quality overrides chronological timestamps in modern hotel booking decisions.

3. RESEARCH GAPS

Although extensive scholarship has established the pivotal role of credibility in enhancing the persuasive influence of travel-related UGC, several important gaps remain that this study seeks to address:

- **Conceptual ambiguity between review recency and temporal validity**

Prior research has predominantly examined who authors the UGC (source credibility), what is conveyed (message quality, valence), and where it is shared (platform reputation) as key predictors of consumer trust and behavioural intentions (Ayeh et al., 2013; Fotis et al., 2021; Assaker et al., 2019). Although review recency is frequently presented as an indicator of informational relevance on digital platforms, the literature has largely assumed rather than empirically verified that newer reviews possess greater decision-making value. Consequently, the distinction between chronological recency and temporal validity remains insufficiently understood. Within hotel booking contexts, where consumers are exposed to large volumes of information, it remains unclear whether travellers interpret newer reviews as inherently more valuable or whether relevance is derived primarily from the substantive quality of the content itself.

- **Unexplored interaction between recency and substantive message quality**

Emerging evidence suggests that recency alone may not dictate persuasiveness, particularly in high-involvement contexts. While early frameworks suggest consumers rely on timestamps, theories such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) propose that consumers facing information overload may prioritize substantive review depth over chronological age. Tourism research has not empirically tested this interaction to determine whether modern consumers prioritize recent UGC, or if they evaluate older but richer, central-route content as equally or more credible.

- **Need for empirical testing of Temporal Construal Theory limits in peer-generated UGC**
While Temporal Construal Theory has been used in destination marketing to explain responses to marketer-generated messages (e.g., Wang & Lehto, 2024), its limits within peer-generated hotel UGC remain untested. Specifically, no studies have directly tested whether temporally proximal UGC is genuinely processed more concretely by modern tourists, or if the static nature of hotel accommodations neutralizes these temporal effects. Testing this boundary condition represents a critical opportunity to theoretically extend the UGC literature.
- **Demographic moderation of recency effects remains unstudied**
Prior work by Assaker et al. (2019) has shown that demographic variables such as age and gender can moderate trust and credibility perceptions, with older and female consumers tending to rely more on heuristic trust cues. Yet, it remains unclear whether these demographic differences also extend to how travellers evaluate the persuasiveness of recent versus older hotel UGC. This gap suggests the need to explore whether content age exerts a uniform effect across traveller segments or whether its impact is contingent on demographic characteristics.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Drawing on the theoretical tension between Temporal Construal Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), this study aims to fill identified gaps by empirically testing how the age of hotel-related user-generated content (UGC) influences modern consumer perceptions and booking intentions. The specific objectives are:

- To examine whether the age of hotel-related User-Generated Content (UGC) (recent vs. older) significantly influences travellers' perceptions of content credibility.
- To evaluate whether the chronological age of hotel-related UGC influences its perceived persuasiveness in hotel booking decisions.
- To analyse the impact of UGC content age on travellers' hotel booking intentions

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The relationship between the age of user-generated content (UGC) and its persuasive effect on consumer decisions can be conceptually grounded in several complementary theories from psychology and communication. This study primarily draws on Temporal Construal Theory, supported by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the cue diagnosticity framework, to explain why recent UGC is likely perceived as more credible and persuasive.

Temporal Construal Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) proposes that people perceive and process information differently depending on its temporal distance. Information that is temporally proximate—such as recently posted reviews—is construed more concretely and is perceived as more vivid, detailed, and actionable. Conversely, information that is temporally distant—such as older reviews—is processed more abstractly and is often seen as less relevant for immediate decisions. In the context of travel planning, this means that travelers may view recent hotel reviews as offering fresher and more actionable insights, thereby exerting greater influence on booking intentions.

Complementing this, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) proposes that individuals evaluate persuasive messages through either a central route—careful, analytical processing of message arguments—or a peripheral route, which relies on simple cues and mental shortcuts. In online travel planning, where consumers often face cognitive overload and time pressure, reviews are frequently processed via the peripheral route. Under such conditions, recency functions as a salient

peripheral cue: a recent posting date signals that the content reflects current conditions, thereby enhancing its perceived credibility and persuasive impact.

This effect aligns closely with the cue diagnosticity framework (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989; Sundar, 2008). According to this perspective, users depend on system-generated cues—such as posting date, number of likes, or verified badges—to judge the credibility and usefulness of online content. Recency, as a highly visible system-generated cue on platforms like TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and Google Reviews, is often interpreted by consumers as a marker of freshness and topical relevance, thereby functioning as a diagnostic peripheral cue that enhances message diagnosticity.

Together, these theories provide competing perspectives on the role of temporal validity in online consumer decision-making. Temporal Construal Theory and cue diagnosticity approaches suggest that review recency may enhance perceived credibility and persuasiveness by signalling informational relevance and freshness. However, the Elaboration Likelihood Model indicates that in high-involvement decisions such as hotel bookings, consumers may place greater emphasis on substantive message content than on temporal cues. Consequently, whether chronological recency functions as a meaningful indicator of temporal validity remains an open empirical question. By examining this issue within the context of hotel-related UGC, the present study seeks to determine whether consumers continue to rely on review freshness as a heuristic cue or whether temporal validity is assessed through deeper evaluation of review content.

Taken together, these perspectives provide the theoretical basis for the competing hypotheses advanced in this study. Temporal Construal Theory, combined with the peripheral route of the Elaboration Likelihood Model, suggests that the recency of hotel-related UGC should enhance perceived credibility and persuasiveness because temporally proximal, up-to-date reviews are construed more concretely and serve as salient peripheral cues (H1a, H4a). At the same time, the central-route logic of ELM implies that when travellers carefully scrutinize review arguments—attending to depth, coherence, and diagnostic detail—the influence of simple temporal cues may be attenuated, leading to the possibility that recency exerts little or no direct effect once substantive message quality is considered (H1b, H4b). Finally, the cue diagnosticity framework reinforces the notion that posting date operates as a system-generated signal of informational value, helping to explain how credibility and persuasiveness can transmit any initial recency effects onto travellers' hotel booking intentions (H2, H3).

6. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Based on the contrasting predictions of Temporal Construal Theory and dual-process perspectives derived from the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) under conditions of modern information saturation, this study posits competing hypotheses regarding the initial role of UGC recency:

- **H1a (Peripheral Route Hypothesis):** The recency of hotel-related User-Generated Content exerts significant, positive direct effects on perceived credibility and perceived persuasiveness.
- **H1b (Central Route Hypothesis):** In hotel booking decisions, travellers rely primarily on substantive evaluation of review content rather than review recency; consequently, chronological age is expected to exert limited influence on perceived credibility and perceived persuasiveness.

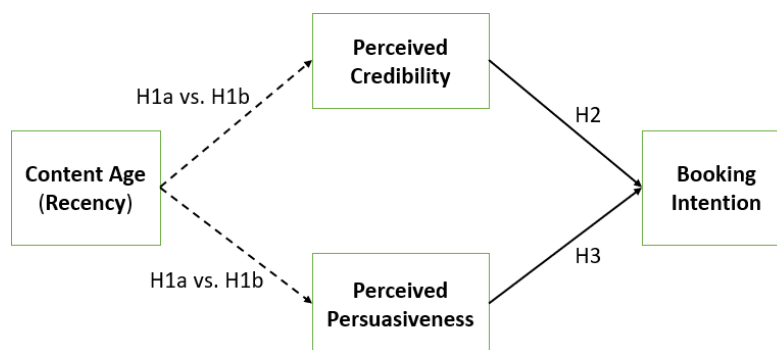
While the role of recency is theoretically contested, the subsequent pathways driving consumer decision-making are well-established. Consistent with prior literature on trust and behavioral outcomes in tourism contexts, this study hypothesizes the following for the mediating variables:

- **H2:** Perceived credibility of hotel-related User-Generated Content positively and significantly influences travellers' hotel booking intentions.
- **H3:** Perceived persuasiveness of hotel-related User-Generated Content positively and significantly influences travellers' hotel booking intentions.

Finally, to test the complete parallel mediation framework suggested by the conceptual model, this study posits competing hypotheses regarding the indirect (mediated) effect of recency on the final booking decision:

- **H4a:** Perceived credibility and perceived persuasiveness positively mediate the relationship between UGC recency and travellers' hotel booking intentions.
- **H4b:** In high-involvement hotel booking contexts, the influence of review recency on booking intentions is expected to be attenuated because consumers evaluate reviews through central-route processing, reducing the role of temporal cues in shaping credibility and persuasiveness.

7. CONCEPTUAL MODEL



The proposed conceptual model is structured as a parallel mediation framework designed to evaluate how travellers assess the temporal validity of User-Generated Content (UGC) and how such evaluations influence hotel booking decisions.

The framework consists of one independent variable, two parallel mediating variables, and one dependent variable:

- **Independent Variable (IV): Content Age (Recency):** This variable serves as the primary temporal cue examined in the study and is used as an observable indicator through which the temporal validity of UGC is assessed. UGC is categorized as either “recent” (e.g., posted within the last two weeks) or “older” (e.g., posted two years ago).
- **Parallel Mediating Variables (M1 & M2):** Perceived Credibility and Perceived Persuasiveness: These variables represent the cognitive and affective evaluations made by the consumer after exposure to the UGC. The model tests whether the independent variable (Content Age) significantly alters these perceptions.
- **Dependent Variable (DV):** Booking Intentions: This represents the final behavioral outcome—the consumer’s stated likelihood of booking the hotel based on their evaluation of the UGC.

The model is defined by two primary pathways. The first pathway (represented by dashed lines) examines the influence of Content Age on the mediating variables of perceived credibility and perceived persuasiveness. This pathway is informed by competing theoretical predictions. Temporal Construal Theory suggests that recent reviews should enhance perceived credibility and persuasiveness

through temporal proximity and informational freshness, supporting H1a. In contrast, the Elaboration Likelihood Model proposes that travellers engaged in central-route processing may place greater emphasis on substantive review content than on temporal cues, supporting H1b.

The second pathway (represented by solid lines) reflects the established relationships between the evaluative mediators and the final behavioural outcome. Specifically, perceived credibility and perceived persuasiveness are expected to positively influence travellers' hotel booking intentions, corresponding to H2 and H3, respectively.

Finally, the model examines the indirect influence of Content Age on Booking Intentions through the parallel mediating roles of perceived credibility and perceived persuasiveness. This pathway tests the competing mediation hypotheses (H4a and H4b), determining whether review recency exerts influence through these evaluative mechanisms or whether its role is diminished when consumers engage in substantive assessment of review content.

8. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

8.1 Research Philosophy and Experimental Design

This study adopts a positivist research philosophy and a deductive approach to empirically examine competing theoretical explanations of temporal validity in hotel-related User-Generated Content (UGC). To achieve this, a quantitative experimental survey design incorporating a repeated-measures structure was employed. Participants evaluated both a recent and an older hotel review, allowing direct comparison of perceptions across temporal conditions within the same respondent. To control for potential order and primacy effects, two counterbalanced questionnaire versions (Form A and Form B) were administered. Form A presented the recent review first followed by the older review, whereas Form B reversed the presentation sequence. The two forms were distributed to separate participant groups, thereby introducing a between-subject counterbalancing component while maintaining repeated-measures evaluation of review age.

To rigorously control for order bias and primacy effects—cognitive biases wherein respondents disproportionately weight the first piece of information encountered—the presentation order was counterbalanced across the instruments. Specifically, Form A presented the "recent" hotel review first followed by the "older" review, whereas Form B reversed this sequence.

8.2 Stimuli Development and Control

To ensure high ecological validity, the experimental stimuli were designed to closely mimic the visual interface of popular contemporary travel booking platforms. Furthermore, to isolate the specific effect of the temporal cue (the posting timestamp), all other substantive elements of the mock reviews were strictly controlled. Review length, emotional valence (maintaining a positive tone), syntax, and visual formatting were held constant across both temporal conditions. This rigorous control mechanism ensured that any variance in perceived credibility, perceived persuasiveness, or booking intentions could be attributed solely to the manipulation of the review's chronological age, effectively neutralizing potential confounding variables related to central-route message quality.

8.3 Sampling Strategy and Ethical Considerations

Data were collected using a purposive and convenience sampling strategy through structured online questionnaires administered via Google Forms. The sampling frame targeted active consumers aged between 18 and 60 years residing in the Delhi–National Capital Region (NCR), India. This demographic was strategically selected because of its relatively high digital literacy, smartphone

penetration, and engagement with online travel planning, making it an appropriate population for examining online hotel booking behaviour.

Prior to data collection, standard ethical guidelines for research involving human participants were followed. Participants were provided with an informed consent statement outlining the academic purpose of the study and assuring anonymity, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation.

To maintain the integrity of the counterbalancing procedure, the two questionnaire versions were distributed to mutually exclusive participant pools. This ensured that respondents were exposed to only one presentation sequence while allowing the study to control for potential order and primacy effects.

A total of 220 valid responses were collected (Form A: $n = 103$; Form B: $n = 117$). This sample size was considered adequate for comparative group analysis and regression-based path modelling within the context of the present study.

8.4 Survey Instrument and Bias Mitigation

To ensure that respondents possessed the requisite baseline experience, the survey instrument included preliminary screening questions. Before exposure to the experimental stimuli, participants answered dichotomous (Yes/No) questions regarding their prior use of hotel reviews, specifically whether they had previously consulted online user reviews before booking accommodation and whether such reviews had influenced their booking decisions. This step helped ensure that the final dataset comprised participants who were meaningfully engaged in digital travel planning.

Prior to final distribution, a brief pre-test of the questionnaire was conducted with a small group of academic peers to assess face validity, clarity of the stimuli, and estimated completion time. In addition, procedural remedies were implemented to reduce the likelihood of Common Method Bias (CMB), including separating predictor and criterion variables within the survey flow to reduce response consistency effects and socially desirable answering patterns.

8.5 Measurement Variables

The focal constructs—perceived credibility, perceived persuasiveness, and hotel booking intentions—were assessed immediately following exposure to the respective stimuli. Because participants evaluated both a recent review and an older review within the same questionnaire, separate post-exposure evaluations were obtained for each temporal condition.

To allow for precise quantification of respondent attitudes while minimizing respondent fatigue, each construct was operationalized using a single-item global measure. All items were anchored on a standardized 5-point Likert-type scale. Perceived credibility was measured from 1 (“Not at all credible”) to 5 (“Very credible”), perceived persuasiveness from 1 (“Not at all convincing”) to 5 (“Very convincing”), and booking intentions from 1 (“Not at all likely”) to 5 (“Very likely”). This standardized response format supported direct comparability across the two review conditions and facilitated subsequent inferential analysis. At the conclusion of the survey, a manipulation check question asked respondents to identify the difference between the two reviews to ensure they had noticed the temporal cue.

Given the experimental nature of the study, respondents were required to evaluate multiple review conditions within a single survey session. To minimise respondent fatigue and reduce potential carry-over effects between evaluations, the focal constructs were measured using single-item global assessments. Such measures are considered appropriate when capturing immediate post-exposure perceptions and overall evaluations of experimental stimuli, particularly when the constructs being assessed are concrete and unambiguous in nature.

8.6 Data Analysis Strategy

Following data collection, responses were exported, screened for missing values, and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics software. The analytical procedure was executed in sequential phases. First, descriptive statistics were generated to profile the demographic characteristics of the sample.

To test the main effect of review age on the dependent variables, a within-subjects analysis approach was adopted. Paired-samples t-tests were executed to compare each respondent's evaluation of the recent review against their evaluation of the older review. Additionally, independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare mean scores between Form A and Form B to confirm that the counterbalancing successfully mitigated any order or primacy effects. Finally, to evaluate the complex pathways within the conceptual model, Hayes' PROCESS Macro for SPSS was utilized to test the parallel mediating roles of perceived credibility and persuasiveness in the relationship between UGC age and hotel booking intentions, generating 95% confidence intervals via a 5,000-sample bootstrap procedure.

8.7 Sample Profile and Screening

Primary data was collected via an online survey distributed through Google Forms, yielding a final sample of 220 valid participants (Form A: $n = 103$; Form B: $n = 117$). The two survey links were distributed to mutually exclusive participant pools, ensuring no individual completed both forms. The demographic profile of the respondents indicated a predominantly young adult sample, with 45.9% of participants aged 18–24 and 45.0% aged 25–34, representing a combined 90.9% of the sample under the age of 35. In terms of gender distribution, 64.5% of respondents identified as male, 34.5% identified as female, and 0.9% preferred not to say.

To establish the sample's validity for the context of tourism and digital marketing research, participants were asked about their prior engagement with user-generated content. A vast majority (94.1%) indicated they had previously consulted online user reviews before booking a hotel. Furthermore, 92.3% of the sample confirmed that online user reviews have actively influenced their decision to book or avoid a hotel in the past. This high level of prior engagement confirms the sample's excellent relevance and suitability for testing the experimental variables in the current study.

9. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Demographic Profile:

Table 1: Demographic and Screening profile of Respondents (N=220)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	142	64.5
	Female	76	34.5
	Prefer not to say	2	0.9
Age Group	18–24 years	101	45.9
	25–34 years	99	45.0
	35–44 years	14	6.4
	45–54 years	4	1.8

	55–60 years	2	0.9
Prior UGC Usage	Yes (Has checked reviews)	207	94.1
	No	13	5.9
Review Influence	Yes (Reviews influence booking)	203	92.3
	No	17	7.7
Experimental Group	Form A (Recent review first)	103	46.8
	Form B (Older review first)	117	53.2

The final dataset comprised 220 valid responses. The sample demonstrated a strong skew toward younger, digitally native demographics, which aligns with the primary user base of online travel booking platforms. Specifically, 45.9% of respondents were aged 18–24, and 45.0% were aged 25–34, cumulatively representing 90.9% of the sample. The remaining participants were distributed across the 35–44 (6.4%), 45–54 (1.8%), and 55–60 (0.9%) age groups. In terms of gender distribution, 64.5% identified as male, 34.5% as female, and 0.9% preferred not to say.

Table 2. Independent Samples *t*-test for Presentation Order Effects

Construct	Form A (Recent First) Mean (SD)	Form B (Older First) Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
Credibility	3.94 (1.02)	3.71 (0.99)	2.32	0.021*
Persuasiveness	3.87 (1.06)	3.68 (1.01)	1.96	0.051
Booking Intentions	3.96 (1.08)	3.64 (1.05)	3.15	0.002**

Note: $p < 0.05$, $*p < 0.01$. Means reflect aggregate construct scores. Significant order effects were observed for credibility and booking intentions, supporting the use of a counterbalanced design to minimise potential order-related bias in aggregated responses.

Table 3. Paired Samples *t*-test for main effects of UGC Recency ($N=220$)

Construct	Recent Review Mean (Variance)	Older Review Mean (Variance)	t-value	p-value (2-tailed)
Perceived Credibility	3.88 (1.06)	3.76 (0.99)	1.858	0.064
Perceived Persuasiveness	3.78 (1.04)	3.76 (1.12)	0.359	0.720
Booking Intentions	3.86 (1.19)	3.72 (1.10)	2.411	0.017

Post-Hoc Analysis: The Role of Cue Recognition

To further investigate this phenomenon, a post-hoc analysis was conducted to separate respondents who actively recognized the posting date difference ($n=117$) from those who did not ($n=103$).

Group	Count (n)	Credibility Effect (Mean Difference)	Persuasiveness Effect (Mean Difference)	Booking Effect (Mean Difference)
Noticed Date	117	+0.197	+0.128	+0.145
Did Not Notice	103	+0.029	-0.097	+0.146
Net Difference		0.168	0.225	-0.001

As shown in Table 4, participants who explicitly noticed the temporal cue exhibited a stronger cognitive response, reflected in larger mean differences for both credibility (+0.197) and persuasiveness (+0.128) compared to those who did not notice it. However, this heightened cognitive evaluation did not lead to a meaningful difference in final booking intentions, with the net difference remaining negligible (-0.001). These findings further support the central-route hypothesis. Even when the peripheral cue (recency) is consciously recognized, the identical core message—the substantive review content—appears to standardize the final behavioural outcome

Measurement Reliability and Correlation Analysis (H2 & H3)

Construct	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Initial Evaluation (Recency)	3.81	1.01	1		
2. Perceived Credibility	3.82	1.01	-0.096	1	
3. Perceived Persuasiveness	3.77	1.04	-0.011	0.688**	1
4. Booking Intentions	3.79	1.07	-0.096	0.498**	0.550**

*Note: N = 440 evaluations (from 220 participants). SD = Standard Deviation. Single-item measures were utilized for the main constructs, precluding Cronbach's alpha calculation. ** indicates correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

Pearson correlation analyses were then conducted to evaluate the relationships between the mediating and dependent variables. Perceived credibility demonstrated a strong, positive correlation with hotel booking intentions ($r = 0.498$). Similarly, perceived persuasiveness exhibited a strong positive correlation with booking intentions ($r = 0.550$). These structural relationships remained consistent across both recent and older review segments. Consequently, **H2 and H3 are strongly supported**, confirming that credibility and persuasiveness are critical determinants of consumer booking behavior.

Testing Direct Effects (H1a vs. H1b)

To test the competing hypotheses regarding the initial role of UGC recency, independent samples t-tests and regression analyses were executed. The analysis compared consumer evaluations to determine if the temporal manipulation (recent vs. older) yielded a direct difference in consumer ratings. The t-test revealed no statistically significant difference in baseline evaluations between the groups ($t(219) = 1.85, p = 0.0645$). Furthermore, regression outputs indicated that the chronological age of the review did not exert a statistically significant direct effect on credibility, persuasiveness, or final booking intentions ($\beta = -0.0961, p = 0.1160$). Therefore, the data leads us to **reject H1a (Peripheral Route) and support H1b (Central Route)**, indicating that modern consumers do not heuristically rely on recency as a standalone proxy for quality.

Parallel Mediation Analysis (H4a vs. H4b)

To test the complete conceptual model, a parallel mediation analysis was conducted using Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 4). The indirect effects were tested via a 5,000-resample bootstrapping procedure.

Standardized Indirect Effects of UGC Recency on Hotel Booking Intentions (PROCESS Model 4):

Mediating Pathway (Indirect Effect)	Effect Size (Point Estimate)	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI	Decision
Recency → Credibility → Booking	-0.0363	0.0312	-0.1013	0.0222	Not Supported
Recency → Persuasiveness → Booking	-0.0131	0.0576	-0.1295	0.0967	Not Supported

Note: N = 220. Bootstrap sample size = 5,000. BootSE = Bootstrapped Standard Error; BootLLCI = Lower Limit Confidence Interval; BootULCI = Upper Limit Confidence Interval. Indirect effects are considered statistically significant if the 95% confidence interval does not contain zero.

- **Indirect Effect via Perceived Credibility:** The pathway from UGC recency to booking intentions through perceived credibility was not statistically significant. The point estimate was -0.0363, with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval ranging from an LLCI of -0.1013 to a ULCI of 0.0222. Because zero is contained within this interval, credibility does not mediate the relationship.
- **Indirect Effect via Perceived Persuasiveness:** The indirect pathway through persuasiveness was similarly non-significant (Estimate = -0.0131; 95% CI: LLCI = -0.1295 to ULCI = 0.0967).

Because both confidence intervals contain zero, the data leads us to **reject H4a and support H4b**. The temporal cue of recency is entirely overridden by central-route evaluations of the content itself.

Summary of Hypotheses Testing:

10. DISCUSSIONS AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study was designed to address a critical empirical void in tourism marketing by testing the boundaries of Temporal Construal Theory against the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) in the

Hypothesis	Theoretical Alignment	Pathway Description	Decision
H1a	Temporal Construal	Recency has a positive direct effect on credibility/persuasiveness.	Rejected
H1b	ELM (Central Route)	Recency has no significant direct effect; consumers use substantive processing.	Supported
H2	Established Literature	Perceived credibility positively influences booking intentions.	Supported
H3	Established Literature	Perceived persuasiveness positively influences booking intentions.	Supported
H4a	Temporal Construal	Credibility and persuasiveness positively mediate the recency-booking relationship.	Rejected
H4b	ELM (Central Route)	No mediation occurs; the temporal cue is overridden by central-route evaluation.	Supported

context of hotel user-generated content. The findings provide profound theoretical implications for how modern travelers process digital information.

Historically, digital media literature has treated review recency as an important heuristic cue that signals informational relevance and credibility. However, the present findings suggest a more nuanced interpretation of temporal validity in hotel-related User-Generated Content. Rather than automatically equating chronological freshness with informational value, travellers appear to evaluate UGC based on the substantive quality and relevance of the information provided. In doing so, the study extends existing literature by suggesting that temporal validity should not be viewed solely as a function of review age. Instead, consumers appear capable of distinguishing between chronological recency and informational usefulness when making hotel booking decisions. These findings provide support for the central-route perspective of the Elaboration Likelihood Model and identify an important boundary condition for Temporal Construal Theory in high-involvement tourism contexts.

Instead, consumers immediately engage in central-route processing. They prioritize the substantive depth, contextual relevance, and intrinsic quality of the review over its chronological timestamp. As proven by the strong support for H2 and H3, credibility and persuasiveness dictate booking intentions, but these constructs are earned through message quality, not mere recency. Crucially, the data revealed that review age only influenced perceptions when participants *actively noticed* the posting date, further

proving that temporal validity is not an automatic peripheral trigger, but rather a central evaluative criterion that requires active cognitive involvement.

10.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three primary theoretical contributions to the literature on User-Generated Content and online consumer decision-making. First, it advances the emerging concept of temporal validity by demonstrating that consumers do not automatically infer informational value from chronological recency. The findings suggest that temporal validity is more complex than review age alone and is influenced by how consumers evaluate the relevance and usefulness of review content.

Second, the study identifies an important boundary condition of Temporal Construal Theory within high-involvement tourism contexts. While temporally proximal information is often assumed to be more influential, the present findings indicate that the persuasive value of review recency may diminish when consumers engage in careful evaluation of substantive information.

Third, the findings provide further support for the central-route perspective of the Elaboration Likelihood Model by demonstrating that credibility and persuasiveness are driven primarily by content evaluation rather than temporal cues. This suggests that contemporary consumers may rely less on simple heuristics and more on substantive information processing when making hotel booking decisions.

11. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

For hotel practitioners and digital marketers, these findings necessitate a strategic pivot. While managing online reputations, hotels frequently prioritize generating a constant stream of new reviews to maintain a "fresh" appearance on booking platforms. However, this study proves that recent, but shallow, reviews will not drive conversions.

Marketers should shift their focus from review *quantity and frequency* to review *quality*. Encouraging guests to write detailed, context-rich narratives detailing specific amenities, services, and experiences will yield significantly higher persuasive power than merely boasting a recent timestamp. Furthermore, online travel agencies (OTAs) and booking platforms (e.g., TripAdvisor, MakeMyTrip) should consider refining their default sorting algorithms to prioritize "most helpful" or "most detailed" content over strictly chronological sorting, as this aligns closer to actual consumer decision-making behavior.

12. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this research offers robust insights, certain limitations provide avenues for future exploration. First, the sample was predominantly composed of younger travelers (18–34 years old) residing in the Delhi-NCR region. While this demographic represents the core digital booking market, future studies should replicate this experimental design across older, less digitally native populations to test for demographic moderation effects.

Additionally, this study controlled for message valence by keeping the experimental mock reviews strictly positive. Future research could investigate whether negative UGC triggers different cognitive processing routes, specifically exploring whether the age of a *negative* review carries more heuristic weight and temporal decay than a positive one. Finally, testing these relationships across different sub-sectors of tourism (e.g., budget hostels versus luxury resorts) could yield further contextual insights into UGC processing.

13. CONCLUSION

As User-Generated Content (UGC) continues to shape decision-making within the hospitality industry, understanding how consumers evaluate the temporal validity of digital word-of-mouth remains increasingly important. This study contributes to tourism and consumer behaviour literature by examining whether review recency functions as a meaningful indicator of informational relevance in hotel booking decisions. Using an experimental design ($N = 220$), the findings suggest that in high-involvement contexts such as hotel bookings, travellers do not automatically equate chronological freshness with informational value.

Instead, consumers appear to evaluate UGC primarily through assessments of credibility, persuasiveness, and substantive content quality. The results indicate that temporal validity is not determined solely by review age but by the perceived relevance and usefulness of the information provided. By identifying an important boundary condition of Temporal Construal Theory and providing support for central-route processing explanations, this study demonstrates that content quality exerts a more consistent influence on booking intentions than review recency alone.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that hospitality marketers and online review platforms should prioritise the generation and visibility of detailed, informative, and context-rich reviews rather than focusing exclusively on review freshness. Ultimately, the study highlights that in contemporary digital environments, travellers appear more concerned with the enduring value of information than with the timing of its publication.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Experimental Stimuli (Mock Hotel Reviews)

Note: To prevent order bias, participants were randomly assigned to a counterbalanced survey flow (Form A presented the recent review first; Form B presented the older review first). The substantive review text and the hotel name were kept strictly identical across both conditions. Only the temporal cue (posting date) was manipulated to test for isolated recency effects.

Condition 1: Recent Review (Peripheral Cue: High Recency)

(Review A)

★ DATE POSTED: 1 WEEK AGO ★

Hotel: Sunrise Grand Hotel

"Stayed here for two nights. Great location close to the metro and restaurants. Room was clean and the bed was comfortable, though the bathroom was a bit small. Staff were friendly and helpful, and the free Wi-Fi worked well. Overall, a good value for the price – I'd stay here again."

Condition 2: Older Review (Peripheral Cue: Low Recency)

(Review B)

✕ ⋮

★ DATE POSTED: 2 YEARS AGO ★

Hotel: Sunrise Grand Hotel

"Stayed here for two nights. Great location close to the metro and restaurants. Room was clean and the bed was comfortable, though the bathroom was a bit small. Staff were friendly and helpful, and the free Wi-Fi worked well. Overall, a good value for the price – I'd stay here again."

Appendix B: Construct Measurement and Survey Items (Forms A and B)

Note: All core constructs were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Research Phase	Construct / Variable	Survey Item	Measurement Scale
Part 1: Demographic Profile	Age	What is your age group?	Categorical
	Gender	What is your gender?	Categorical
	Prior UGC Usage	Have you ever checked online user reviews before booking a hotel?	Dichotomous (Yes/No)
	Review Influence	Have online user reviews of hotels ever influenced your decision to book or avoid a hotel — even partly?	Dichotomous (Yes/No)
Part 2: Experimental Evaluation <i>(Note: These items were asked twice per respondent—once for the Recent review and once for the Older review, with the presentation order counterbalanced across Form A and Form B).</i>	Perceived Credibility	How credible (trustworthy) do you find this review?	5-point Likert Scale (1 = Not at all credible, 5 = Highly credible)
	Perceived Persuasiveness	How persuasive (convincing) is this review for you?	5-point Likert Scale (1 = Not at all persuasive, 5 = Highly persuasive)
	Booking Intentions	After reading this review, how likely are you to book this hotel?	5-point Likert Scale (1 = Highly

			unlikely, 5 = Highly likely)
Part 3: Post-Evaluation	Manipulation Check (Cue Recognition)	What difference did you notice between the two reviews? (Select all that apply)	Multiple Choice

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