



Hochschule Neu-Ulm
University of Applied Sciences

Master Thesis in the Master Program
International Corporate Communication and Media Management
At University of Applied Sciences Neu-Ulm

**The Impact of Content Source: A Comparative Analysis of How UGC
and CBC Videos Shape Visual Attention, Emotions, and Brand
Perception in the Hospitality Industry**

1st examiner: Prof. Dr. Barbara Brandstetter

2nd examiner: Prof. Dr. Judith Mayer

Author: Julia Sylvia Brunner (Matrikel-Nr.: 282093)

Date of Registration: 27th October 2025

Date of Submission: 6th February 2026

Abstract

Digital storytelling is essential for hospitality marketing, yet empirical comparisons between User-Generated Content (UGC) and Curated Branded Content (CBC) regarding physiological and psychological responses remain scarce. This thesis investigates how UGC and CBC differ in shaping visual attention, emotional response, and brand perception for boutique hotels. A multi-method experiment (n=27) combined eye-tracking and facial expression analysis (joy, engagement) with post-exposure surveys. Findings reveal a "roller coaster" of emotions for UGC, which outperformed CBC in authenticity and overall preference (70.4%). While CBC attracted exploratory visual attention through aesthetic clarity, it suffered "processing pain" and subsequent emotional drops following scene changes. These fluctuations suggest that unexpected transitions to complex visual stimuli in professional content can disrupt the narrative flow. Surprisingly, professional CBC offered no significant advantage in perceived brand quality or credibility over UGC. For boutique hotels, authenticity effectively substitutes for high production budgets. A "UGC-first" strategy is recommended to bypass advertising defense mechanisms and foster deeper emotional immersion.

Content

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Abstract | 2 |
| List of Figures | 6 |
| List of Tables..... | 7 |
| 1 Introduction..... | 1 |
| 1.1 Relevance and Problem Statement..... | 1 |
| 1.2 Aim and Approach | 4 |
| 1.3 Research Questions and Contributions..... | 4 |
| 1.4 Structure | 5 |
| 2 Theoretical Framework | 6 |
| 2.1 Basic Concepts & Context | 6 |
| 2.1.1 Marketing Formats..... | 7 |
| 2.1.2 Scope and Research Relevance | 9 |
| 2.2 Emotional Impact and Affective Processing | 10 |
| 2.2.1 Russell’s Valence-Arousal Model | 10 |
| 2.3 Brand Perception in the Hospitality Context..... | 11 |
| 2.3.1 Definition and Relevance of Brand Perception | 12 |
| 2.3.2 Dimensions of Brand Perception (Authenticity, Credibility, Perceived Quality, Booking Intention)..... | 13 |
| 2.4 Theoretical Models of Information Processing | 14 |
| 2.4.1 Cognitive Processing Dimensions (Comprehensibility & Memory) | 14 |
| 2.4.2 Elaboration Likelihood Model in the Context of UGC/CBC | 15 |
| 2.4.3 Dual Coding Theory in the Context of UGC/CBC | 17 |
| 2.5 Social Influence and Source Effects..... | 18 |
| 2.5.1 Source Credibility Theory in the Context of UGC/CBC | 18 |
| 2.5.2 Persuasion Knowledge Model in the Context of UGC/CBC | 19 |
| 2.6 The Role of Recipient Involvement | 20 |
| 2.6.1 Narrative Transportation Theory | 21 |
| 2.7 Derivation of the Conceptual Model | 22 |
| 3 Hypotheses and Measurement Concepts..... | 24 |
| 3.1 Research Questions..... | 24 |
| 3.2 Measurement Concepts | 25 |
| 3.3 Hypothesis | 26 |
| 4 Methodology | 27 |
| 4.1 Study Design (UGC vs. CBC) | 27 |
| 4.2 Experimental Stimuli and Pretest | 28 |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| 4.3 Sampling, Recruitment, Ethics | 29 |
| 4.4 Survey Measures (Brand Perception and Booking Intention)..... | 30 |
| 4.4.1 Data Analysis Strategy for RQ3 | 33 |
| 4.5 Eye-Tracking Measures (Visual Perception) | 33 |
| 4.5.1 Definition of Areas of Interest (AOIs) | 33 |
| 4.5.2 Data Analysis Strategy for RQ1 | 34 |
| 4.6 Emotion Analysis (Affective Responses)..... | 35 |
| 4.6.1 Data Analysis Strategy for RQ2 | 35 |
| 4.7 Interpretation Framework for Video- and Brand-Related Measures | 36 |
| 5 Results and Interpretation | 36 |
| 5.1 Descriptive Results and Manipulation Check | 36 |
| 5.2 Visual Attention: Results and Interpretation (RQ1)..... | 37 |
| 5.2.1 Description of Content Clusters - CBC | 37 |
| 5.2.2 Overall Distribution of Visual Attention - CBC | 38 |
| 5.2.3 Persons vs. Spatial Content - CBC..... | 39 |
| 5.2.4 Spatial Content vs. Atmospheric Elements - CBC | 40 |
| 5.2.5 The Role of Human Presence in Service and Gastronomy Scenes - CBC | 41 |
| 5.2.6 Description of Content Clusters - UGC..... | 43 |
| 5.2.7 Overall Distribution of Visual Attention - UGC..... | 43 |
| 5.2.8 Persons vs. Spatial Content in UGC Context | 44 |
| 5.2.9 Spatial Content vs. Atmospheric Elements - UGC..... | 47 |
| 5.2.10 Interpretation of Results in Relation to RQ1 | 49 |
| 5.3 Emotional Responses: Results and Interpretation (RQ2)..... | 51 |
| 5.3.1 Joy - CBC Video | 51 |
| 5.3.2 Engagement - CBC Video | 52 |
| 5.3.3 Comparison of Joy and Engagement - CBC Video..... | 53 |
| 5.3.4 Joy - UGC Video..... | 54 |
| 5.3.5 Engagement - UGC Video | 55 |
| 5.3.6 Comparison of Joy and Engagement - UGC video..... | 56 |
| 5.3.7 Interpretation of Results in Relation to RQ2 | 57 |
| 5.4 Brand Perception: Results and Interpretation (RQ3 + H1) | 61 |
| 5.4.1 Brand Evaluations: Credibility, Authenticity, and Likeability | 61 |
| 5.4.2 Perceived Quality | 62 |
| 5.4.3 Booking Intention..... | 62 |
| 5.4.4 Recall of Visual Elements..... | 62 |
| 5.4.5 Results for Advertising Recognition and Source Perception..... | 65 |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| 5.4.6 Interpretation of Results in Relation to RQ2 and H1 | 66 |
| 5.4.7 Comparison Questionnaire - UGC vs. CBC..... | 67 |
| 6 Discussion | 68 |
| 6.1 Interpretation of Findings and Triangulation | 68 |
| 6.1.1 Halo Effects and Affective Anchoring in UGC Introductions..... | 68 |
| 6.1.2 Source Perception, Advertising Recognition, and Authenticity | 69 |
| 6.1.3 Visual Orientation and Social Trust in UGC | 70 |
| 6.1.4 The CBC Buffet Paradox: Recall versus Emotional Valence | 71 |
| 6.1.5 Divergent Emotional Paths to Similar Likeability..... | 71 |
| 6.1.6 Conscious Evaluation vs. Affective Experience | 71 |
| 6.1.7 Booking Intention in Relation to Emotional Preference..... | 72 |
| 6.1.8 Emotional Peaks in CBC: Spatial Discovery and Aesthetic Clarity | 72 |
| 6.1.9 Relationships between Advertising Recognition, Source Perception, and Credibility..... | 74 |
| 6.2 Theoretical Implications | 75 |
| 6.2.1 Cognitive Processing and Memory Performance (DCT)..... | 75 |
| 6.2.2 Persuasiveness and Attitude Formation (ELM & PKM) | 76 |
| 6.2.3 Immersion and Credibility (Narrative Transportation & Source Credibility)..... | 76 |
| 6.2.4 Classification within the Valence-Arousal Model..... | 78 |
| 6.3 Practical Implications for Boutique Hotels | 79 |
| 6.3.1 The “Efficiency Gap”: Authenticity as a Substitute for Quality..... | 79 |
| 6.3.2 Avoiding Visual Overload and Increasing Interaction..... | 80 |
| 6.3.4 Recommendation: “UGC-first, CBC-second” | 80 |
| 6.4 Limitations and Future Research | 81 |
| 6.5 Conclusion | 81 |
| 7 References | 83 |
| 8 List of Used Tools and Declaration of Authorship..... | 88 |

List of Figures

| | |
|---|----|
| Figure 1. Own Illustration based on Russell (1980), A Circumplex Model of Affect, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 39(6), 1161–1178. | 11 |
| Figure 2. Own Illustration based on Petty and Cacioppo (1986a) | 16 |
| Figure 3. Conceptual model illustrating the sequential effects of UGC/CBC. Own Illustration. | 23 |
| Figure 4. Heatmaps - Facial Regions in Person-centered Scenes vs. Spatial Content Scenes (CBC) | 40 |
| Figure 5. Heatmaps - Gaze Distribution in a Gastronomic Scene with Human Presence (CBC) | 42 |
| Figure 6. Heatmaps - Gaze Distribution in a Gastronomic Scene without Human Presence (CBC) | 42 |
| Figure 7. Heatmaps - Gaze Distribution of Person in Spatial Content (back view vs. frontal view), (UGC) | 45 |
| Figure 8. Heatmap - Gaze Distribution of Spatial Content (UGC) | 46 |
| Figure 9. Heatmap - Gaze Distribution of Active Person in Spatial Content (UGC) | 47 |
| Figure 10. Heatmap of Gaze Distribution of Human Presence in Atmospheric Elements (UGC) | 49 |
| Figure 11. Temporal Progression of Emotion Joy (CBC) | 52 |
| Figure 12. Temporal Progression of Emotion Engagement (CBC) | 53 |
| Figure 13. Temporal Progression of Emotion Joy (UGC) | 55 |
| Figure 14. Temporal Progression of Emotion Engagement (UGC) | 56 |
| Figure 15. Multidimensional Emotion Timelines for the Emotions Joy, Engagement, and Positive Valence. (CBC) | 60 |
| Figure 16. Multidimensional Emotion Timelines for the Emotions Joy, Engagement, and Positive Valence. (UGC) | 60 |

List of Tables

| | |
|---|----|
| Table 1. Overview of Content Clusters (CBC Video) | 38 |
| Table 2. Overview of Content Clusters (UGC Video) | 43 |
| Table 3 Comparative Analysis of Emotional Dynamics | 59 |
| Table 4. Recall of visual elements by content format | 63 |
| Table 5. Source Perception and Advertising Recognition UGC/CBC (n=27) | 65 |
| Table 6. Brand Perception and Booking Intention UGC/CBC (n = 27) | 66 |
| Table 7. Comparison of theoretical expectations and empirical findings UGC/CBC | 69 |
| Table 8. Advertising Recognition, Source Perception, and Credibility Results UGC/CBC | 74 |

1 Introduction

1.1 Relevance and Problem Statement

Purchasing decisions are rarely fully rational or based solely on the hard facts. Especially in the hotel industry, first impressions often exert a surprisingly strong influence on consumer choice. Even before consumers examine price lists or compare reviews, an initial impression of the atmosphere often emerges, shaping subtle expectations (Dong et al., 2025). Images and other visual impressions in particular have a particularly strong effect at the very beginning of the decision-making process (Gouda & Halim, 2025). These impressions shape an internal image of a destination. This mental process begins with visual cues in the environment, as individuals focus on certain elements while at the same time forming emotional impressions that influence their evaluations later on. Notably, such impressions often emerge long before individuals engage with detailed information (Calderón-Fajardo et al., 2024).

Whereas in the past, perhaps a glance at a travel agency window or a holiday brochure was enough to spark our wanderlust, today we are constantly bombarded with images (Ke et al., 2025). In this continuous stream of visual stimuli, that is where social media becomes the new starting point for our travel dreams (Kitsios et al., 2022). Social media is now one of the most important points of contact between brands and potential customers (Pakhalov & Piont, 2021). Content on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok functions less as a static showcase but more as an emotional arena in which affective impressions are formed within the first seconds. This mechanism is particularly relevant in hospitality, where decision-making typically starts with feelings of anticipation, imagined experiences, and expectations of rest and enjoyment (Wang & Iahad, 2025). After this initial emotional response, factual factors such as price, location, or amenities gain relevance and help structure the preference already developed (Pakhalov & Piont, 2021).

This mechanism distinguishes travel accommodations from many tangible goods (such as cars, kitchens, or electronics), where rational product attributes enter the decision-

making process much earlier and emotions play a more accompanying role. Although there are clear price and quality differences in the hotel industry, quality distinctions in physical goods are typically easier and more transparent to assess through verifiable performance features - such as engine power, materials, or equipment. In contrast, the perceived value of an accommodation within the same segment often emerges only through subjective experience (Dong et al., 2025). This means that among hotels within a similar category, the decisive difference often emerges only through impressions and personal experiences on site. Whether a price difference among hotels within a similar category is perceived as justified becomes most apparent during the actual stay. Visual cues therefore serve as an initial and essential information base for reducing uncertainty in the marketing context. They support consumer decision-making, particularly for experience goods. This type of content helps consumers who feel uncertain by providing an emotional basis. Especially in the hotel context, these cues let us feel as if we are “already there” for a moment, forming the emotional basis for later, more rational evaluations (Dong et al., 2025). Because the qualities of the experience - such as staff friendliness or cleanliness - require subjective evaluation (Dong et al., 2025), authentic accounts and reviews from real guests gain particular importance (Donaghy, 2025). Honest reviews of any kind are perceived as more personal and more credible than brand-produced content, as they stem from the experiences of other consumers and are considered as unbiased (Van Dat et al., 2025).

On social media platforms and in company feeds, user-generated content (UGC) - whose importance is continuously growing due to its perceived authenticity and credibility - and content created by companies, referred to in this paper as curated branded content (CBC), play a crucial role (Mikalef et al., 2021). Whereas curated branded content (CBC) is strategically planned and produced by the company or an external agency, user-generated Content (UGC) differs fundamentally in that it originates from users. UGC refers to digital content voluntarily created by consumers and is markedly distinct from traditional marketing communication generated and disseminated by brands (Gouda & Halim, 2025). The term UGC originally describes genuine content created by users themselves, without professional production and without brand control. (Van Dat et al., 2025). When guests share moments from their

stay - such as a sunset from the balcony, a relaxed scene by the pool, or even their pet making itself comfortable in the hotel room - they are doing more than simply remembering their trip. They are helping to tell the hotel's unfiltered story. Against the backdrop of a decision-making process that is driven more by feelings than by hard facts, the voice of real guests carries far greater persuasive power. This is user-generated content (UGC), which consists primarily of photos, videos, and the honest reviews that emerge from them (Donaghy, 2025). These impressions are considered as authentic, spontaneous and trustworthy; they create social proof and reduce psychological distances (Santos et al., 2024; Van Dat et al., 2025).

CBC, on the other hand, follows a more brand-led approach: deliberately composed, with a focus on atmosphere, aesthetics and spatial staging. These clips are characterised more by aesthetic curation and clear brand management (Antony et al., n.d.). Most of them are usually produced by external agencies and/or professional videographers. (Nkosana, 2022).

Problemdefinition

Against this backdrop, a specific problem of competition and trust arises in the hotel industry: chain hotels benefit from quality promises and already established brand trust (Keller, 1993). At the same time, there are small, independent boutique hotels that can often offer the same or even a better experience for a comparable price. For them, effective, credible marketing is crucial for gaining visibility, trust and preference (Nkosana, 2022). For establishments without large, permanent production budgets, it is strategically crucial in the world of social media to know which content is more effective in the initial brand contact - UGC or CBC. Therefore this study therefore focuses explicitly on smaller hotels.

While prior studies provide valuable contributions, the evidence regarding social media hotel video content is still emerging. Most research has examined individual components such as consumer reviews, static visuals, or traditional advertising approaches, often based on self-report data. Comparative studies that integrate measures of visual attention, emotional response, and brand-related outcomes appear

to be relatively underrepresented. This leaves a gap for smaller hospitality providers with limited empirical guidance when deciding how to prioritise content formats and allocate marketing resources strategically.

1.2 Aim and Approach

The aim of this study is to examine the effect of user-generated content (UGC) and curated branded content (CBC) on visual attention, emotional response, and brand-related outcomes. In addition to survey evaluation dimensions such as authenticity, credibility, perceived quality and likeability, preconscious emotional reactions and eye movements are also taken into account in order to comprehensively map the underlying mechanisms of cognitive processing while watching the stimuli. Participants view a UGC and a CBC reel of two comparable hotels while their visual attention and initial emotional reactions are recorded. Immediately afterwards, a short survey is conducted to determine how they rate the respective hotel in terms of the named dimensions.

1.3 Research Questions and Contributions

RQ: How does curated branded content (CBC) and user-generated content (UGC) differ in terms of affective response and visual perception, as well as conscious brand perception?

The following sub-questions are operationalised for the precise examination of the research question:

RQ1 - Visual perception: Do attention patterns differ between CBC and UGC?

Indicators (Eye-Tracking): fixation duration/number, dwell time, time to first fixation (TTFF) and gaze path metrics on areas of interest (AOIs).

RQ2 - Affective response: Do the formats elicit different affective responses?

Indicators (Emotion Analysis): valence/arousal, intensity and latency of emotional peaks, frequency and course of emotional expressions.

RQ3 - Brand perception: Do the formats lead to different brand judgements and intentions?

Indicators (Surveys): authenticity, perceived quality, credibility, likeability, booking intention, etc.

Methodologically, the study combines objective measurement methods (eye tracking and emotion analysis) with immediate short surveys after each clip in a first touchpoint setting. The design, which features two comparable but different hotels (one used for UGC production, one for CBC production), allows for clear identification of the format effect on first impressions. Standardised stimuli (length, sequence, resolution) ensure internal validity without sacrificing ecological validity. 27 participants will take part in the study.

In practical terms, this work aims to provide guidance for selecting and prioritising different video formats for initial brand contact within social media. The focus is not on recommending a single format, but on understanding the conditions. This should provide a manageable basis for decision-making, especially for small, independent boutique hotels that neither produce professional content on a continuous basis nor can rely entirely on UGC: What type of video is worthwhile for what purpose, how can limited resources be used strategically, and how can trust be built in the initial digital contact.

1.4 Structure

This paper first presents the key theoretical principles that explain the relationship between social media content and brand perception in the hotel context. It examines both emotional and cognitive mechanisms of action as well as the influence of the source and type of information processing. Subsequently, the derived hypotheses and measurement approaches are explained and the methodological procedure used to

empirically investigate the effect of user-generated content and branded content is described. This is followed by the presentation, evaluation and interpretation of the results, before the triangulation is discussed.

2 Theoretical Framework

This chapter develops the theoretical framework of the thesis and classifies key terms, concepts and formats of digital hotel communication. To this end, it first explains the basics of brand perception and the differences between UGC, CBC and traditional advertising, followed by theoretical models for emotional and cognitive mechanisms.

2.1 Basic Concepts & Context

A hotel can have the most beautiful rooms or a perfect location – often it is the brand character that determines whether people decide to stay there or not. Brands act like personalities: they can appear trustworthy, elegant, down-to-earth or inspiring. In an environment where many hotels promise similar services, this brand personality can become the most important intangible asset (Paiva Neto et al., 2020).

A hotel brand is also shaped by what guests expect from service as well as how they experience it. Important characteristics are the quality of the staff service, the cleanliness of the facilities and the amenities. Analysis of customer reviews confirm that the hotel room is a dominant touchpoint, with aspects such as cleanliness and amenities being highlighted in the reports (Piriyakul et al., 2024). Unlike tangible goods, whose characteristics are mostly clearly specified and therefore reliably comparable, the actual differences in quality between hotels and their services are difficult to assess before purchase. This creates a higher level of uncertainty for travellers, which can be reduced to some extent by experience reporting offered in several formats (Hotelchamp Team, 2023). Managers also use these guest reviews to gain precise insights into pain and satisfaction touchpoints, thereby improving brand value. (Piriyakul et al., 2024). This shows that authentic testimonials are not only increasingly relevant for operational quality management, but also for hotel brands in the digital

marketing business having to reach their target audience through multiple social media content, which vary from each other (Hotelchamp Team, 2023).

2.1.1 Marketing Formats

- User-generated content (UGC): UGC includes content, like text, videos, pictures, reviews and comments, which is voluntarily created and shared by users and customers themselves, instead of by the brand (Aboalghanam et al., 2025). This type of content is perceived as authentic, unbiased and more credible than content originating from the company itself (Gouda & Halim, 2025). Original UGC is apparently based on the 'real' experiences of guests, as the content comes from independent third parties and does not appear to serve any immediate commercial purpose (Elkins & Webster, 2019).

The growing success and high credibility of UGC in the hospitality industry is more and more motivating hotel brands to actively integrate this format into their marketing strategies. From spontaneous, unadulterated reviews to specifically solicited or paid contributions (Hotelchamp Team, 2023).

1. Organic Generation by Guests: Hotels use their active social media presence to encourage guests to voluntarily create content. This is often done by using branded hashtags or asking guests to tag the hotel page in their posts (Hotelchamp Team, 2023). Hotels may also use their email or post-stay survey to solicit online reviews or testimonials and engage guests to share experiences (Donaghy, 2025).

2. Targeted Promotion (Incentives): In order to control and increase the quantity and quality of content, hotels more often offer targeted incentives to content creators and some guests. Paid UGC creators are showing to have main benefits for hotels, as they are able to "share authentic content," while the hotel is enjoying more control over what gets shown in the content (Hotelchamp Team, 2023). Alternatively, guests can be motivated to create content through small incentives or competitions, such as a free drink or a public shout-out for the best photo. Guests often don't need a big prize for this - just a reason to get involved. Although such incentives are not the same as a

professional, paid UGC collaboration, they are no longer completely organic content, but a slightly stimulated form of user-generated content (Donaghy, 2025).

This increasingly blurs the line between organic testimonials and sponsored brand communication - not only in terms of how the content is produced, but also from the perspective of the recipients (Elkins & Webster, 2019). Research shows that the recognition of sponsorship can lead to a decrease of perceived authenticity (Boerman et al., 2017); however, when viewers are aware that a guest has been incentivized, many of the stylistic characteristics associated with UGC - such as personal narration, everyday aesthetics as well as a non-corporate tone - remain effective and continue to shape their evaluation (Hotelchamp Team, 2023). This aligns with the Persuasion Knowledge Model, which indicates that once consumers recognize a persuasive intent, they change their views but do not automatically reject the message if its stylistic features remain consistent with the correct communication. In such cases, the message is not interpreted as an intrusive attempt to influence or as a threat to one's freedom of choice, but rather as an acceptable and contextually appropriate piece of content (Beckert, 2024; Friestad und Wright, 1994).

As a result, transparent marked incentivized UGC is typically perceived as less “genuine” than purely organic UGC, but still less formal and overtly commercial than fully curated branded content (CBC) (Aboalghanam et al., 2025; Antony et al., n.d.; Boerman et al., 2017). Therefore UGC increasingly acts as a kind of “hybrid form of advertising” that contains promotional elements but, thanks to its communicative style, remains close to the recipients' experiences (Donaghy, 2025).

- Curated Branded Content (CBC): This refers to content that is created, managed, or curated directly by the company, its marketing team or its appointed agency. It is planned and produced to accurately reflect for example the brand’s image, key messages, and range of products or services (Gouda & Halim, 2025). CBC is professionally created to strengthen brand identity and credibility, and allows the brand a high degree of control over the message and quality (Hotelchamp Team, 2023). CBC can include content such as infographics, photos or videos (Gouda & Halim, 2025).

- Classic advertising: Traditional media such as TV commercials, banners or print ads follow a clear sales or campaign logic (Gouda & Halim, 2025).

Unlike traditional advertising, eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth), a combination of homophily with technology, has been considered to be more effective than traditional advertising (Paiva Neto et al., 2020). UGC, which is closely linked to eWOM, is even perceived as 2.4 times more authentic and trustworthy than branded content such as curated branded content (CBC) in social media and traditional advertising in the form of TV commercials, banners and print ads (Hotelchamp Team, 2023). In tourism, validation from like-minded people and emotional resonance over traditional marketing leads to significant shifts in choices, especially for Generation Z travellers (Wang & lahad, 2025). This preference for aestheticised and shareable experiences reflects the fact that Gen Z is active in tourism as creators by providing content, reviews and visual narratives online, thereby continuously helping to shape brand perception and the image of destinations. (Wang & lahad, 2025).

2.1.2 Scope and Research Relevance

As the industry faces high competition, hotels increasingly depend on leveraging both content worlds - UGC and CBC (Gouda & Halim, 2025), to retain and attract customers (Santos et al., 2024). Previous studies confirm that UGC in general has a significant positive influence on crucial variables and tourists' purchase intent (Santos et al., 2024). Although both CBC and UGC have a significant and positive impact on customer loyalty, UGC is often considered more credible than corporate statements due to its authenticity (Gouda & Halim, 2025). Therefore UGC is also a significant factor of the consumers' decision-making process because it helps in reducing the perceived risk of purchase (Mikalef et al., 2021; Paiva Neto et al., 2020).

These findings are relevant for this study, as we consider the approaches of UGC and CBC in hotel industry impact visual attention, along with brand perception, emotions and behavioural intentions afterwards. Neuroscientific methods are used to precisely record the mechanisms of action, namely eye tracking (ET) and emotional response measurements, which are considered psychophysiological methods (Calderón-

Fajardo et al., 2024). These techniques enable objective measurement of visual attention and emotional arousal, thereby providing detailed insights into consumers' cognitive and emotional processes (Calderón-Fajardo et al., 2024). Complemented by a brief survey following each video viewed, as well as a final survey to compare both, in order to capture consciously perceived variables of brand perception.

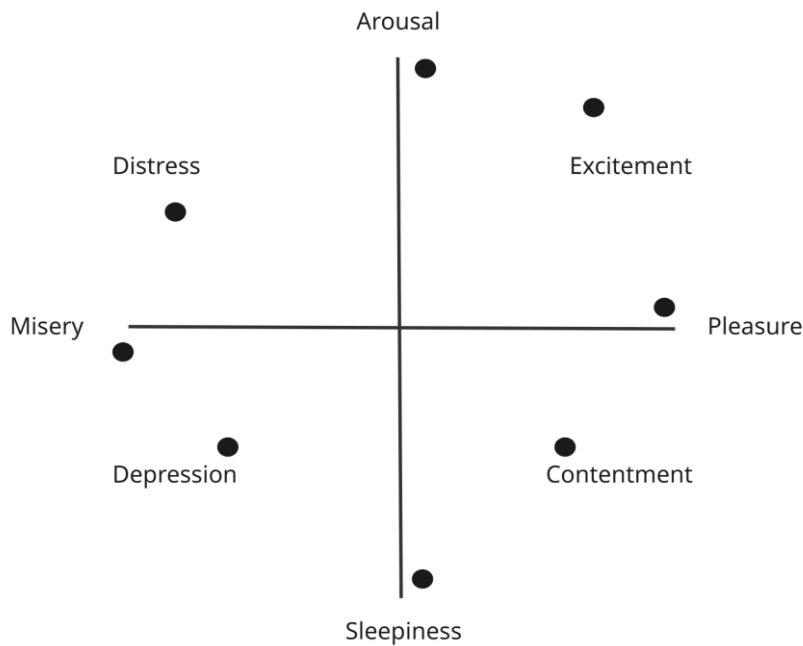
2.2 Emotional Impact and Affective Processing

2.2.1 Russell's Valence-Arousal Model

The valence-arousal model of emotions (Russell, 1980) offers a reductive but scientifically recognised theory of how individuals express emotional responses in response to media. It assumes that every emotion can be captured using two central dimensions. Valence (how pleasant or unpleasant a stimulus is perceived) and Arousal (how activating or calming it is). For instance, "joy" can be classified as positive and activating (high valence, high arousal), while "contentment" is also positive but less activating (high valence, low arousal). Conversely, "fear" would be negative and activating, while "sadness" would be negative and more calm. By understanding emotions in this two-dimensional context we can distinguish between emotional effects of various stimuli and make them comparable (Russell, 1980). Emotions are key here because they affect attention and evaluative judgments.

In the context of this study, Russell's (1980) circumplex model is therefore particularly relevant, as it can provide a structured basis for interpreting emotional effects in our shown stimuli. By classifying the emotional reactions recorded by the data collection and analysis platform along the dimensions of valence and arousal, it is possible to examine in which way the UGC and CBC videos, used in the study, differ in terms of their emotional impact.

Figure 1. Own Illustration based on Russell (1980), *A Circumplex Model of Affect*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39(6), 1161–1178.



Russell's (1980) circumplex model of emotions forms part of the theoretical framework of this study, as it provides a structured and empirically sound basis for understanding and interpreting emotional responses not as isolated categories, but as a combination of the two basic dimensions of valence (pleasant-unpleasant) and arousal (activating-calming).

2.3 Brand Perception in the Hospitality Context

In this study, brand perception is understood as a multidimensional construct comprising key evaluation-relevant components such as credibility, authenticity, likeability and perceived quality. These dimensions are assessed with standardised questionnaire items immediately after viewing the stimulus videos. This enables us to assess the direct impact of UGC and CBC content on participants' brand-related perceptions.

2.3.1 Definition and Relevance of Brand Perception

Especially in digital environments, visual content acts as a central stimulus, shaping consumers' expectations of the brand (Ke et al., 2025). The resulting brand perception acts as an interpretative filter: it influences how subsequent communication content is received and what conclusions consumers draw from it (Keller, 1993).

Based on Keller's conceptual model (1993) of customer-based brand equity (CBBE), brand perception is understood as the brand knowledge anchored in the memory, which in turn determines how consumers respond to a brand. This brand knowledge consists of brand awareness and brand image. The latter evolves the totality of impressions, associations and evaluations that are formed from various touchpoints of contact with the brand (Keller, 1993). For the present study, the dimensions measured represent key evaluative components that can be used to understand the impression a brand leaves after a specific communication situation. By asking about these aspects immediately after viewing the stimuli, the goal is to examine how UGC and CBC influence the participants' brand-related perceptions.

As already mentioned, subjective perceptions are particularly important in the hotel context, as many of a hotel's performance characteristics can only be experienced at the place of stay itself (Santos et al., 2024). In the absence of direct experience, potential guests therefore rely heavily on impressions to form an opinion of the brand (Hotelchamp Team, 2023). The perception of credibility, authenticity, likeability and perceived quality (Ke et al., 2025), serves as a key guide for assessing a potential experience, reducing uncertainty and thereby significantly and positively influencing consumers' booking intentions. (Van Dat et al., 2025).

Against this background, the present study seeks to explore perception-related dimensions that have been discussed in previous research as possible determinants of brand perception and subsequent purchase or booking intentions. A more detailed explanation of these dimensions is provided in the following section.

2.3.2 Dimensions of Brand Perception (Authenticity, Credibility, Perceived Quality, Booking Intention)

In simple words, brand perception is defined as brand knowledge comprising brand awareness and brand image (Keller, 1993). The psychological dimensions of such constructs provide guidance and help guide conscious evaluation of the potential experience by consumers (Mikalef et al., 2021).

In the context of this study, five perception dimensions of different constructs were selected for the investigation, which are well suited for the evaluation of short video formats and enable a differentiated assessment of the hotels shown: authenticity, credibility, perceived quality, likeability and the resulting booking intention (Keller, 1993; Nabih & Alhosseiny, 2024; Van Dat et al., 2025). The dimensions covered in this study relate to the immediate perception triggered by the stimulus videos. They thus reflect situational impressions rather than long-term constructs such as enduring brand trust, which only develops through repeated brand experiences. These dimensions are defined below. This approach aligns with established research designs in previous brand perception studies, where these dimensions are assessed immediately after exposure to visual stimuli as central components of brand-related evaluations (Moulard et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2021).

Authenticity

Authenticity depicts the feeling that a representation is perceived as “genuine”, unenhanced, and is in accordance with the brand. (Calderón-Fajardo et al., 2024). The perception of authenticity is closely linked to trust, as it reflects the extent to which others believe a message is real and trustworthy (Gouda & Halim, 2025).

Credibility/Trust

Credibility is perceived as the extent to which individuals trust that a brand’s ability to honour its anticipated obligations and promises. It is defined as the degree to which users perceive a brand as honest and safe, arising when consumers feel that the company is not different from how it appears and that potential risks are limited (Antony et al., n.d.). The nature of services such as hotels, which are so-called experiential goods whose quality is difficult to assess in advance, creates an information

asymmetry that forces travellers to rely on reviews, when searching for information (Santos et al., 2024). In this context, trust in the credibility of this eWOM information plays an important role, as it acts as a decisive risk reducer and thus significantly influences the intention to purchase or book (Ke et al., 2025).

Likeability

Brand likeability refers to how sincere and approachable a brand feels. In the hotel industry, this is often reflected in positive human traits such as friendliness and warmth. (Paiva Neto et al., 2020).

Perceived Quality

Perceived quality assesses the perceived superiority of a service in relation to its purpose and alternatives (Santos et al., 2024). In the hotel industry, this assessment is based particularly strongly on visual and aesthetic features of the online presentation (Dong et al., 2025) .

Booking Intention

In the context of hotel services, booking intent is defined as the probability that a potential guest will purchase a specific hotel product or service. (Ke et al., 2025).

2.4 Theoretical Models of Information Processing

The following section presents some of the core theoretical information processing models that explain the cognitive and affective processing with focus on mediated content.

2.4.1 Cognitive Processing Dimensions (Comprehensibility & Memory)

The impact of the visual content comes from a coexistence of cognitive and affective impressions (Nabih & Alhosseiny, 2024). Cognition encompasses processes such as memory, attention and language processing (Pessoa, 2008), while overall evaluation and the full impact of the things seen represents a combination of cognition and

emotion in an evaluative act (Banytè et al., 2025). To evaluate a message, recipients must first process the message cognitively (Keller, 1993).

This background highlights that comprehensibility and recall are both central cognitive levels of impact, which become particularly relevant to the present work (Sadoski & Paivio, 2013). The relevance becomes even clearer when it's considered that different content formats lead to varying information processing (Mikalef et al., 2021). These differences can theoretically be classified using the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which explains how deeply information is processed. Subsequently, Dual Coding Theory provides a cognitive psychological basis for explaining why and how visual content can have varying effects on comprehensibility and memory.

2.4.2 Elaboration Likelihood Model in the Context of UGC/CBC

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is a general theory about attitude change. It describes two main routes through which persuasive information is processed: the central route and the peripheral route. Which route is used depends on a person's motivation and ability to evaluate the presented communication. (Petty & Cacioppo, n.d.).

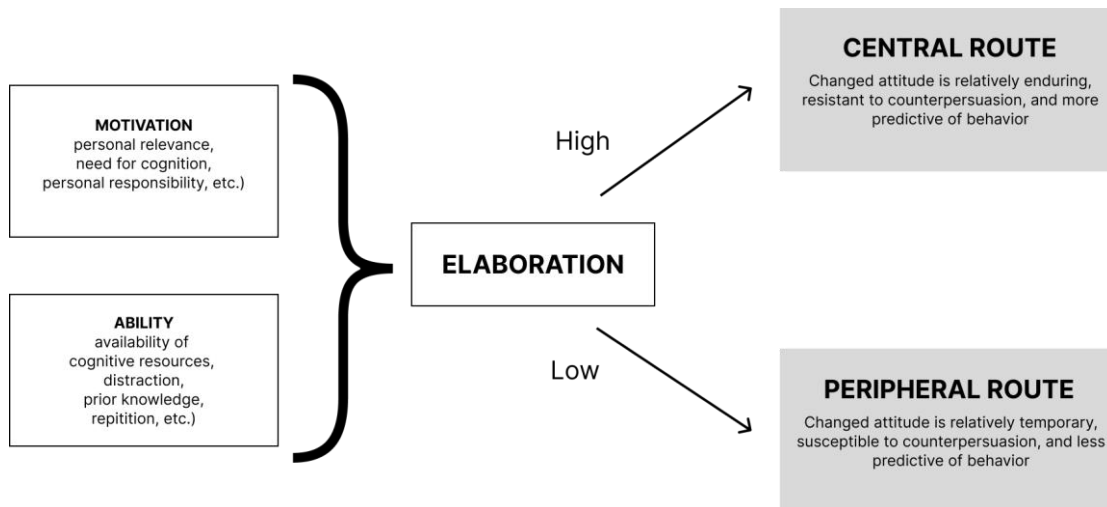
Central Route

When involvement is high and cognitive capacity is sufficient, recipients engage intensively with the content. If conditions promote a person's motivation and ability to engage in topic-relevant thinking, the "probability of elaboration" is considered high. The central route occurs when the motivation and ability to examine topic-relevant arguments are relatively high (Petty & Cacioppo, n.d.).

Peripheral Route

The peripheral route occurs when motivation and/or the ability to examine topic-relevant arguments are relatively low. Decisions and judgements are then based more strongly on peripheral cues such as attractiveness, sympathy, visual aesthetics, heuristics or social signals. (Petty & Cacioppo, n.d.).

Figure 2. Own Illustration based on Petty and Cacioppo (1986a)



Theoretical classification of the processing routes of UGC and CBC

From the perspective of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), the effect of messages depends on the type of processed cues and the depth of elaboration. Against this background, it can be theoretically argued that professionally produced, curated brand content (CBC) has qualities referred to in the ELM as quality indicators regarding central arguments - structural clarity, information density. If recipients have adequate motivation and cognitive resources for processing, the model is more likely to provoke the central engagement with the communicated content.

In contrast, it can be theoretically assumed that user-generated content (UGC), with its generally lower production intentionality, everyday perspective and lack of curatorial refinement, activates other types of cues. In the ELM, these characteristics correspond to more peripheral cues, such as heuristics of authenticity, social proximity or spontaneity. Such cues can also influence attitudes because they do not rely on complex argument processing, but rather draw on easily accessible cognitive and affective heuristics (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

In theory, this does not lead to the assumption that CBC or UGC are “stronger” or “more effective” per se, but rather that both formats prefer different routes of processing probability. While centrally processed arguments are linked to more stable and

resistant attitudes in the ELM, peripheral cues may be particularly relevant for initial attention, affective accessibility and early attitude activation (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

Applied to digital hotel communication, this suggests that UGC may function as a low-threshold early touchpoint, potentially enabling an initial positive anchor without necessarily requiring extensive and deep elaboration. CBC, by contrast, may contribute more strongly to the development of more stable and well-founded attitudes, assuming that the conditions for reception and processing are favorable.

For this study, this means that the central and peripheral routes of the ELM have not been directly measured but rather, different empirically measurable indicators are utilized. The eye tracking data serves as an indicator of visual information intake. In addition, emotion analysis captures affective responses. Perceptual dimensions such as authenticity, credibility or quality judgements reflect evaluative reactions, while booking intention is operationalised as a behavioural effect. Together, these variables provide an empirical method to explore the cognitive, affective and evaluative processes proposed in the model.

2.4.3 Dual Coding Theory in the Context of UGC/CBC

Dual Coding Theory (DCT) is an established theory to explain cognitive processing. It assumes that information is processed and mentally represented through two independent but interconnected systems - one verbal and the other nonverbal (Sadoski & Paivio, 2013). The Dual Coding Theory distinguishes between a verbal system for processing linguistic information and a visual system for processing non-linguistic content. The simultaneous use of both systems (dual coding) improves the storage and retrieval of information and increases its durability and influence on behaviour (Sadoski & Paivio, 2013).

The dual coding theory is particularly relevant to this study because the two video formats differ in verbal and non-verbal and can therefore theoretically be a part of addressing different cognitive approaches. The UGC video contains a spoken voice-over as well as text and subtitles that structure the content linguistically. From the

perspective of DCT, this parallel activation of verbal and visual codes could influence comprehensibility and memory performance, as both coding systems are addressed simultaneously. The CBC video, on the other hand, dispenses with spoken language and relies on elements such as background music.

Depending on the motivation and attention of the recipients, such differences could be associated with different requirements for information processing, viewing behaviour and memory formation. In the later chapters DCT therefore becomes relevant as an interpretative framework for contextualising possible differences (e.g. recall) between the two formats.

2.5 Social Influence and Source Effects

In addition to the content, the person who sends a message also plays a role, as the source perception influences the credibility of the message, as the social signals it conveys (Eisend, 2006).

2.5.1 Source Credibility Theory in the Context of UGC/CBC

The Source Credibility Theory assumes that the credibility of a source arises primarily from three dimensions: competence, trustworthiness and goodwill. Competence describes the perceived expertise and professionalism of the source, trustworthiness refers to honesty and the absence of manipulative intentions, and goodwill encompasses the perceived closeness to the audience of the person, who is sending the message (Eisend, 2006).

In the context of social media, these dimensions can theoretically be applied differently to UGC and CBC: Professionally curated branded content (CBC) may tend to convey stronger signals of competence through its higher production and clear brand management (Gouda & Halim, 2025). UGC, on the other hand, appeals more strongly to goodwill and trustworthiness, especially when told from an everyday, personal perspective (Antony et al., n.d.). At the same time, UGC is evolving and is no longer automatically associated with organic communication, as creators are increasingly

involved in paid content productions (Hotelchamp Team, 2023). This theoretical framework focuses less on where the content actually comes from and more on how UGC and CBC appear to the audience. Both formats thus have the potential to build credibility - but through different cues.

2.5.2 Persuasion Knowledge Model in the Context of UGC/CBC

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) developed by Friestad and Wright (1994) explains how an individual builds its own knowledge base from daily attempts over time to persuade in an effort to recognize and deal with sales or influence attempts (Beckert, 2024). This information, referred to as persuasion knowledge, is attached to goals and methods of marketers and how persuasion works (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022). One of the primary roles of this knowledge is identifying attempts at persuasion specifically and using coping behaviours in response (Beckert, 2024).

One of the central mechanisms in PKM is therefore “advertising recognition” as the first step of activation (Boerman et al., 2017). As soon as consumers identify content as commercially motivated, cognitive defense reactions increase - such as skepticism. (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022). This correlation has been empirically confirmed: Boerman et al. (2017), for example, show that the note “this post is sponsored” on Facebook posts immediately triggers persuasion knowledge, thereby worsening both: the evaluation of the content and the attitude towards the brand. So Eisend et al. (2020) show in a meta-analysis that advertising notices make people fundamentally more skeptical.

In the context of social media, UGC is becoming a focus as a special form of communication, since advertising is not necessarily seen or recognized here. Content created and shared by consumers themselves is not primarily perceived as advertising messages, at least in its classic form (Ramos & Ramos, 2025). Mayrhofer et al. (2020) show in their study that UGC activates significantly less persuasion knowledge than brand-owned posts. As a result, the typical defense mechanisms of the PKM are hardly triggered, and UGC in its original form elicits fewer negative feelings towards the content and actually leads to a significantly higher purchase intention compared to brand content (Mayrhofer et al., 2020).

Curated branded content (CBC) is usually clearly recognizable as content produced by a company. In line with the Persuasion Knowledge Model, it is therefore to be expected that such brand content - similar to the brand posts in Mayrhofer et al. (2020) - will tend to be classified as advertising and activate persuasion knowledge accordingly.

At the same time, current research indicates that the boundaries between authentic UGC and commercialized forms of social media content are becoming increasingly blurred together (Boerman et al., 2017). The growing popularity of social commerce has blurred the lines between free social interaction and commercial transactions (Van Dat et al., 2025). Sponsored content is intended to look similar to content produced by friends/followers and is embedded among normal posts in the news feed, making it more difficult for consumers to distinguish commercial content from non-commercial content (Boerman et al., 2017). Studies show that obviously staged content also triggers increased persuasive knowledge activation in the UGC environment. The realization that the creator shared the post for commercial reasons and not out of genuine affection therefore triggers critical thinking (Boerman et al., 2017).

So, it is important to define UGC in a specific way for the current study - such as non-sponsored, authentic-looking content created by hotel guests on their own initiative. This form of UGC aligns most with findings of literature demonstrating that low advertising recognition, high credibility, and emotional impact have been directly linked (Elkins & Webster, 2019). The PKM therefore provides a suitable mechanism for understanding why UGC can be more effective than curated brand content in the first brand contact (Mayrhofer et al., 2020).

2.6 The Role of Recipient Involvement

We now turn our attention to why individuals view this content in the first place. This chapter therefore supplements the theoretical framework with the reception side.

2.6.1 Narrative Transportation Theory

Narrative Transportation Theory describes how recipients are “drawn into” a narrative world (Irimiás et al., 2021) and in doing so undergo cognitive and affective processes that influence their experiences and assessments (Frank & Falzone, 2021). Transported individuals show less critical counterarguing, develop stronger attachments to characters, and more frequently adopt implicit interpretations of the story (Frank & Falzone, 2021; Green 2021). Transportation is a gradual process consisting of three key components (Green & Brock, 2000):

- (1) Attention, i.e., focused immersion in the plot;
- (2) mental imagery, i.e., visualization of the story world;
- (3) affective reactions that enhance the narrative experience.

If these elements are strong, recipients temporarily easier lose touch with their surroundings and perceive the narrative as a coherent and quasi-experiential closed room (Green & Brock, 2000). Experiments by Green and Brock (2000) already show that people who are strongly transported tend to develop story-consistent attitudes, evaluate protagonists more positively, and perceive fewer contradictions in the story. The distinction between fact and fiction also hardly played any role in their studies - the biggest factor was subjective involvement. Transportation can thus be understood as a mechanism of narrative persuasion that complements and, in some cases, may replaces classic elaboration processes (Frank & Falzone, 2021; Green 2021).

Research shows that transportation not only occurs in formats such as novels or series, but also in short media formats such as advertisements, short videos, or social media clips. The decisive factor is not so much the length, but rather the coherence of the story and its ability to trigger vivid mental images or emotional responses. This makes the theory suitable for dynamic, quickly consumed formats (Frank & Falzone, 2021; Green 2021).

The theory of narrative transportation is relevant to this study because UGC and CBC often contain narrative elements (Aboalghanam et al., 2025; Edson Escalas, 2004). Transportation provides a theoretical framework for partly explaining why certain clips

might attract more or elicit more intense emotional responses. Irimias et al. (2021) show that transportation is a stepwise process: media use first leads to escapism and immersion, which then foster emotional bonds and behavioral intentions. This suggests that transportation acts as a mediating mechanism and a principle that can be applied to social media marketing.

Although transportation itself is not directly measured in this study, this theory forms a link between visual attention, emotional responses, and the design of narrative elements (Banytè et al., 2025; Edson Escalas, 2004; Frank & Falzone, 2021).

2.7 Derivation of the Conceptual Model

Based on these theoretical perspectives, an integrative conceptual impact model is proposed that brings together parts of processes in the context of this thesis.

The model begins with the content format, which sends different cues to the audience. As previously theoretically demonstrated, using the Persuasion Knowledge Model and Source Credibility Theory, due to the format, UGC is typically associated with authenticity, and social closeness, while CBC is more closely associated with professionalism, but a stronger perception of commercial intentions. In this context, format-specific cues become increasingly important.

The first level of effect of the model encompasses attention and emotion. These are recorded in the experimental design using eye tracking (e.g., fixation counts, dwell time, time to first fixation, etc.) and emotional responses such as engagement and joy, and are operationalized also through valence-arousal measurements. Attention and emotional activation thus function as central process variables through which the format influences further processing steps.

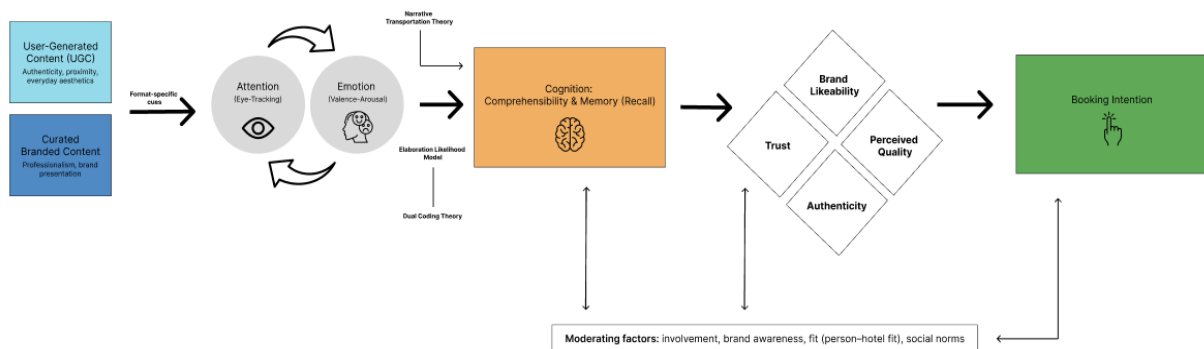
Building on this, the model addresses cognitive processing, understood as comprehensibility and subsequent recall. The Elaboration Likelihood Model explains that information is processed to varying degrees depending on motivation and cognitive capacity. The Dual Coding Theory complements this perspective by

emphasizing that visual and verbal codes can be activated to varying degrees - a particularly relevant aspect, as the UGC video contains linguistic elements, while the CBC video is more image-based. From both approaches, it can be theoretically deduced that attention and emotion influence the depth of processing, which can lead to differences.

The final level of impact encompasses dimensions for example brand perception, consisting of authenticity, credibility (trust), perceived quality, and likeability. These evaluative judgments form the basis for booking intent as a behavior-related outcome variable.

The model assumes that brand judgments right after watching the stimuli are shaped by a combination of emotional reactions and cognitive processing. The model also takes into account moderating factors such as involvement, brand awareness, perceived fit, and social norms which were not measured. These background variables can theoretically influence the strength of the individual paths. The model is only based on the theoretical perspectives discussed previously and therefore does not reflect every potentially relevant mechanism of action.

Figure 3. Conceptual model illustrating the sequential effects of UGC/CBC. Own Illustration.



This framework structures the empirical study and enables a theory-driven interpretation of the following chapters.

3 Hypotheses and Measurement Concepts

This chapter defines the central measurement concepts of the study and derives the hypotheses, as well as the three underlying research questions.

3.1 Research Questions

The study examines how UGC and CBC differ in the context of digital hotel communication and how these differences in visual attention, emotional/affective responses, brand perception evaluations and intentions behave after the exposure of each video. To operationalize this, three research questions are formulated:

RQ1 – Visual perception:

Do attention patterns differ between CBC and UGC?

Indicators (eye tracking): dwell time on predefined Areas of Interest (AOIs; e.g., person vs. room/interior), time to first fixation (TTFF), fixation counts, and heatmaps

To allow for a meaningful comparison across videos with different scene structures, individual Areas of Interest (AOIs) were grouped into higher-order clusters. This clustering approach enables an analysis at the level of content categories rather than isolated scenes, while the specific implementation is described in detail in Chapter 4.

RQ2 – Emotional impact:

Do the formats elicit different affective responses?

Indicators (emotion analysis): joy, engagement, intensity and latency of the emotional peaks, and temporal dynamics of emotional expressions.

RQ3 – Brand perception:

Do UGC and CBC lead to different brand-related evaluations?

Indicators (survey): perceived authenticity, credibility, likeability, appeal, perceived quality, and booking intention. These constructs are assessed using standardized survey items related to the brands NOTO and Vaeshartelt

3.2 Measurement Concepts

The study integrates three complementary measurement approaches: eye tracking, emotion analysis and surveys to provide a comprehensive assessment of both, preconscious and consciously perceived effects of the two video formats.

Visual Attention (Eye Tracking)

Visual attention here is conceptualized as the allocation of gaze towards specific visual elements within the videos. Eye tracking is used to capture fine-grained attentional patterns and includes the following indicators:

- Fixation Count, normalized as fixations per second to account for differences in video length
- Dwell time on predefined Areas of Interest (AOIs)
- Time to first fixation (TTFF) on AOIs
- Gaze paths and aggregated heat maps

Together, these indicators provide insights into how attention is distributed across different content categories.

Emotional responses here are conceptualized as affective reactions elicited during video exposure. The analysis focuses on the temporal dynamics of emotional responses during the reception of UGC and CBC video formats.

The following emotional dimensions are considered:

- Joy, representing the positive emotional reaction (valenz)
- Engagement, indicating the level of emotional activation (arousal)
- Positive Valence, reflecting the overall positive emotional tone of the viewing experience

The analysis emphasizes the temporal progression and relative changes of these dimensions over the course of each video.

Brand Perception (Surveys)

Brand perception here is conceptualized as the overall evaluation of the hotel brand following exposure to the stimuli. It is assessed using multi-item survey scales capturing all the followed evaluative dimensions:

- Authenticity, referring to the extent to which the brand is perceived as genuine/authentic
- Credibility, reflecting confidence in the brand and its communication
- Likeability, capturing the general affective evaluation of the brand
- Perceived Quality, indicating judgments of the overall quality of the hotel offering
- Booking Intention, capturing the likelihood of considering a booking

The same questionnaire was administered after each video exposure, followed by a final comparative questionnaire in which participants directly evaluated and compared the two formats.

In addition to brand-related variables, several stimulus-related variables were included to ensure the validity. These measures were not conceptualized as the main components of brand perception for the hypothesis.

3.3 Hypothesis

One overarching hypothesis is formulated that reflects the expected impact of the two content formats.

H1: Ambivalent effect of UGC and CBC

“User-generated content (UGC) leads to higher perceived brand authenticity, credibility, and likeability than curated branded content (CBC), whereas CBC results in a higher booking intention.”

This hypothesis reflects the assumption that UGC and CBC differ in their strengths and therefore exert different effects. Given the potential of UGC and the informational strengths of CBC, this study hypothesizes that company-based content exerts a positive influence on booking intention. By testing this hypothesis, the study examines to what extent the theoretical assumptions and commonly attributed advantages of the two formats are reflected in the present empirical context.

4 Methodology

This chapter describes the experimental procedure of the study. The central objective is to measure the differences in impact between user-generated content (UGC) and curated branded content (CBC) in terms of visual attention, emotional/affective response and brand perception, as well as behaviour intentions such as booking intent. To ensure this, the study employs a within-subjects design and uses two stimulus videos. Data is collected using eye-tracking measures, emotion analysis, and standardized questionnaires.

4.1 Study Design (UGC vs. CBC)

The independent variable is the video format (UGC vs. CBC).

The dependent variables to answer the research questions and H1 include:

- visual attention (eye tracking: fixations, dwell time, gazing paths, heatmaps),
- emotional responses (valence, arousal, emotional peaks),
- brand perception (authenticity, credibility, likeability, perceived quality),
- and booking intention.

The study design is therefore multi-methodological, combining objective measurement methods (eye tracking, emotion analysis) with subjective self-reports (surveys) in order to obtain a complete picture of the perception and evaluation processes.

4.2 Experimental Stimuli and Pretest

Two stimulus videos were used for the study, each representing a prototypical example of the two communication formats being compared. The UGC video was recorded at the Hotel Vaeshartelt and is based on the style and aesthetics of typical user-generated social media clips: smartphone filming, selfie perspective and a personal approach. This design is intended to reflect the characteristics typical of UGC.

The CBC video was created as part of a media production within an actual collaboration with NOTO Hotels in June 2025 - a small group of three boutique hotels in the same sicilian city, managed by the same structure and owner. Although NOTO Hotels is formally organised as a small hotel group, each location acts as an individual boutique character. The CBC video is characterised by staging, curated image sequences, and controlled camera work. The content production was planned according to predefined brand priorities, developed in close coordination with the hotel management and marketing department.

The two stimuli are from different hotels. This contrast is methodologically unproblematic, as the study is not comparing the hotels themselves but considering the role of two presentation formats (UGC vs. CBC). Located in a small, privately owned boutique hotel field, both facilities will easily be similar in structure. However, it cannot be entirely ruled out that there was a partial influence of personal preferences directed toward certain locations, or hotel attributes on participant evaluations. No formal content pretest was performed. Instead, comprehension and recognition of the video content were measured within the surveys to ensure that participants processed the stimuli as intended. The pretest has been restricted to the technical aspects only in order to provide accurate data results.

- Checking the eye tracking calibration,
- Ensuring sufficient brightness and visual contrast for AOI definitions,
- Checking the frame rate and image quality,
- and checking that the stimulus player is running smoothly.

As the videos do not contain any abrupt or significant fluctuations in brightness or any distracting auditory elements, they could be incorporated into the study without further adjustments.

4.3 Sampling, Recruitment, Ethics

A total of 27 people took part in the study. The sample was heterogeneous by gender and its participants were aged 19 to 55 years, with the majority of participants between the ages of 25 and 30. The heterogeneous composition reflects typical user groups of digital hotel communication. Recruitment took place through personal contact in the social environment, in a professional context and in the Founders Space innovation and work space at Neu-Ulm University of Applied Sciences. It was therefore a convenience sample. No remuneration was paid.

Before the study began, all participants were given comprehensive information about its objectives, procedure and data collection. All participants signed a standardized written consent form issued by Neu-Ulm University of Applied Sciences, covering data collection and processing, including video recordings and basic sociodemographic information (age and gender). The data was processed in anonymised form.

Exclusion criteria were defined to ensure measurement quality. People with reduced visual acuity, highly reflective glasses or technically inadequate eye tracking (tracking rate < approx. 70%, automatically reported by iMotions) could not be included in the analysis. This applies to some glasses wearers, where the reflection of the lenses prevented accurate eye tracking data collection.

Data collection took place in distraction-free rooms. The seating distance was standardised for all participants and ranged from 60 to 70 cm from the screen and participants were instructed to sit as still as possible during stimulus presentation to avoid motion artefacts in the eye tracking data.

4.4 Survey Measures (Brand Perception and Booking Intention)

The subjective perception of the two stimulus videos was recorded using online questionnaires in Google Forms in German. After each video, the participants answered the same set of questions so that all stimulus-related judgements could be compared as directly as possible. Finally, a third questionnaire, comparing both formats, recorded preference judgements.

The selected constructs (credibility, authenticity, likeability, perceived quality and booking intention) align with existing dimensions of brand perception in terms of brand and consumer research (Keller, 1993). Credibility and therefore trust have been identified as significant factors for persuasive effect (Eisend, 2006) and play a particularly important role in the context of user-generated content, where the perception of the source is especially relevant (Van Dat, 2025; Wang et al., 2022). Authenticity and perceived quality of the brand are two strong drivers of brand perception in the tourism sector due to their influence on credibility as well as aesthetic and functional value assessment (Keller, 2003). The dimension of perceived quality functions as a central attribute of value that significantly influences the overall evaluation of a hotel and has been confirmed as a relevant influencing factor in numerous studies of hotel and destination research. Booking intentions are as well regularly used in current tourism and hospitality research as behaviour-related outcome variables, as they are considered key indicators of actual decision-making behaviour (Guan, 2023; Fu, 2024; Santos et al., 2024).

It should be noted that dimensions of brand perception often overlap or influence each other in research. In this study, however, these constructs were handled separated in order to be able to analyse their respective contributions to brand perception in a differentiated manner.

Dimensions of Brand Perception

Each stimulus-related survey, which is assessed after each video, covers the following dimensions (Likert scale 1-5):

(1) Credibility

“I trust this brand.”

“The brand appears reliable.”

(2) Authenticity

“The brand appears authentic.”

“The brand seems genuine and credible.”

(3) Likeability

“I like the brand.”

“The brand evokes positive feelings.”

(4) Perceived Quality

“The hotel seems high-quality.”

(5) Booking Intention

“I can imagine making a booking at this hotel.”

Cognitive Processing & Understanding

Since cognitive clarity plays an important role in the processing of visual content, the following items were also included and measured on a Likert scale of 1-5:

“The message of the video was clear and understandable to me.”

Recall

In order to determine which elements of the videos were particularly salient, an item on recall was included. Participants were asked to indicate which element they remembered most strongly, selecting one of the given answer options:

- Presentation of the hotel rooms
- Food & drinks
- People in the video
- Emotional atmosphere
- Hotel surroundings & location

This item captures which visual elements of the video are most memorable, without requiring participants to provide open-text responses.

Source Perception & Ad Recognition

Since differences in perceived motivation and source perception potentially influence brand judgements, the following items were also surveyed (Likert scale 1-5):

“The video seems to come from someone I could trust.”

“The video seems like classic advertising.”

Final Questionnaire

The third questionnaire recorded comparative overall assessments between the two formats, including:

- which video was more convincing overall,
- which video would be more likely to be shared,
- which video was more likely to motivate a booking,
- final brand ratings for NOTO Hotel and Vaeshartelt Hotel.

This questionnaire aims to capture conscious preferences and highlights possible differences between immediate evaluations after each video and direct comparative judgments. Here, respondents had to choose one of the two options.

4.4.1 Data Analysis Strategy for RQ3

To answer RQ3 and test H1, the questionnaire-based data was first evaluated descriptively. Differences between user-generated content (UGC) and curated branded content (CBC) were then analysed using paired t-tests.

The analyses to answer RQ3 covers the dimensions of credibility, authenticity, likeability, perceived quality and booking intention. A significance level of $\alpha = .05$ is used for all inferential statistical tests. In addition, other perception-related dimensions, including recall, ad recognition, and source perception are explored to get a broader frame of the field. These additional analyses serve to provide a more in-depth classification of the results and are not hypothesis-testing in nature.

4.5 Eye-Tracking Measures (Visual Perception)

The eye-tracking platform “iMotions” was used to record visual attention. The aim is to reveal objective differences in gaze distribution between the two stimulus videos. A standardised calibration was performed before each measurement round. Data sets with insufficient tracking quality (tracking rate < approx. 70%) were removed from the analysis in accordance with the exclusion criteria. During the stimulus presentation, constant environmental conditions was ensured (seat distance, lighting, screen position) in order to create comparable measurement conditions for all participants.

4.5.1 Definition of Areas of Interest (AOIs)

Areas of interest (AOIs) are defined to systematically analyse visual attention, representing the central visual content of the two video formats. The AOIs are based on content-related functional categories of the hotel presentation. The following visual areas are framed together as AOIs:

- Person
- Room & Sanitary

- Infrastructure
- Gastronomy
- Atmospheric Elements

In service-related scenes of the CBC video in which gastronomic content is presented together with a person, a large AOI (gastronomy + person) is additionally defined in order to capture the visual processing of the service context as a whole. In scenes from the UGC video in which both, people and spatial content, are visible simultaneously, separate AOIs are defined for people and spatial elements to allow for a differentiated analysis of gaze distribution between competing visual elements.

Across both videos, AOIs representing atmospheric elements, spatial- or service-related content are defined to cover the full screen whenever the respective scene is visually centered on a specific area (e.g., buffet, bedsheets, minibar). In contrast, persons are consistently defined using contour-based AOIs that closely followed the body and facial regions.

For the evaluation, some AOIs are subsequently aggregated into higher-level content clusters, to enable a comparable analysis at the category level.

4.5.2 Data Analysis Strategy for RQ1

Established gaze metrics are used to analyse the eye-tracking data, enabling conclusions to be drawn about the intensity, distribution and temporal structure of visual attention. These include:

- Fixation count,
- Dwell time per AOI as a measure of the proportion of attention within defined image areas,
- Time to first fixation (TTFF) as an indicator of initial visual salience,
- Gaze paths and heat maps for qualitative visualisation of gaze paths and attention concentrations.

These metrics are used to answer research question RQ1.

4.6 Emotion Analysis (Affective Responses)

Emotions were as well evaluated using facial expression analysis (FEA) within the iMotions platform. The aim was to record temporal patterns of emotional responses during the reception of the video formats UGC and CBC. The analysis serves to answer research question RQ2, which deals with differences in emotional responses to the two content formats.

To reduce measurement noise, the emotion data was processed using thresholding and temporal aggregation. Only emotion values that exceeded a predefined intensity threshold and remained stable over several consecutive frames were taken into account. The results are presented accordingly as aggregated temporal curves.

4.6.1 Data Analysis Strategy for RQ2

The dimensions of joy, engagement and positive valence were used for the evaluation. Joy was used as a emotional dimension (valence) to identify specific positive emotional reactions. While engagement served as an indicator of emotional arousal and joy served as an indicator of valence, the aggregated positive valence reflected the general emotional tone of the reception. Negative emotional dimensions were not analysed further in this context due to their low prevalence.

As a first step, the temporal courses of joy and engagement were considered separately for the UGC video and then compared within the format to identify correlations. In the second step, the same procedure was applied to the CBC video. On this basis, the emotion patterns of both formats were then compared with each other.

The focus was on scene-dependent changes, relative increases and decreases, and differences within the emotions and between the two video formats. No direct quantitative or statistical comparative analysis of emotion intensities was performed.

Russell's valence-arousal model was afterwards used to classify the results theoretically, with positive valence classified as valence and engagement as arousal serving as interpretative reference values.

4.7 Interpretation Framework for Video- and Brand-Related Measures

In the following, statements on the participants' reception often refer to the video, even if individual questionnaire items are formulated in relation to the brand. Since the brand was communicated exclusively via the video stimulus within the study design, this assignment is methodologically justified. Brand-related evaluations are interpreted accordingly as the result of video reception, since the video was the sole framework for perception and evaluation of the brand.

5 Results and Interpretation

Due to the need to explain the relationships between the measures, the results are in some cases described and interpreted descriptively already in the following to ensure their relevance for the respective research questions is clearly understood. A broader theoretical interpretation and integration of the findings is provided in the discussion section.

5.1 Descriptive Results and Manipulation Check

Before addressing the research questions, descriptive information on the sample, data quality, and the experimental manipulation is provided.

A total of 27 participants took part in the study. Prior to the analysis, the eye-tracking data was screened. All participants watched both video stimuli and completed a short survey immediately after each clip. The data collection proceeded without technical issues, and complete datasets were available for all variables included in the analyses.

To also verify the experimental manipulation, perceived advertising character was assessed using the item “The video appears like advertising.”

As expected, the CBC video was perceived as significantly more advertising-like than the UGC video. This result indicates that participants clearly distinguished between the two content formats, confirming that the manipulation was successful and that subsequent analyses can be attributed to format-related differences.

In addition, participants reported a high level of message comprehension for the NOTO Hotel ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.89$) as well as for the Vaeshartelt Hotel ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 0.56$) videos, indicating that the content was generally well understood and that differences in subsequent evaluations are unlikely to be driven by comprehension issues.

5.2 Visual Attention: Results and Interpretation (RQ1)

“Do attention patterns differ between UGC and CBC?”

5.2.1 Description of Content Clusters - CBC

To analyse visual attention, the individual areas of interest (AOIs) were grouped into clusters with related content representing different aspects of the hotel presentation. These clusters are used for the assessment of eye-tracking data. It should be noted that all clusters, except “Persons”, were operationalized as full-screen AOIs. Consequently, Dwell-Time refers to continuous visual exposure rather than selective attention, while the “Persons” cluster represents a more narrowly focused and spatially limited measure of visual attention. Table 1 summarizes the clusters, their content classification, and the visual content captured in each case.

Table 1. Overview of Content Clusters (CBC Video)

| Cluster | Classification | Content in CBC Video |
|----------------------|--|--|
| Persons | Social and Human Attention | People in different settings (e.g., platform, outdoor area) |
| Room & Sanitary | Private, Functional Use | Hotel room, bed, minibar, bathroom, and sanitary facilities |
| Infrastructure | Orientation & Transitional Spaces | Areas outside the room, including hallways, elevator, and breakfast room |
| Gastronomy | Services & Offerings | Presentation of the breakfast buffet and gastronomic offerings without visible people |
| Gastronomy +Person | Services & Offerings with Social Performance and Interaction | Bar area and bartender preparing drinks, as well as person eating at the breakfast table |
| Atmospheric Elements | Experience & Atmosphere | Atmospheric close-ups, e.g., lemons in the garden |

5.2.2 Overall Distribution of Visual Attention - CBC

Analysis of the eye-tracking data shows a largely and well-distributed visual attention across the various content clusters of the CBC video. Regardless of the content category, all clusters accounted for high proportions of dwell time within a relatively small range of values. Due to the broad AOIs, the dwell time values should not be interpreted as an expression of selective attention, but rather show that the video was predominantly followed visually with hardly any signs of looking away, distraction, or visual fatigue. Comparable high dwell-time values showed hotel areas such as Room & Sanitary ($M = 82.43\%$), Gastro ($M = 82.9\%$), and Infrastructure ($M = 82.1\%$). These dimensions are further grouped and presented with a named attribute “spatial content”.

High dwell-time levels were also observed for scenes with a social context, particularly Gastronomy + Person ($M = 83.3\%$), as well as for atmospheric content ($M = 82.8\%$). In contrast, the Persons cluster showed the lowest dwell-time value ($M = 56.6\%$). This lower value should be interpreted in light of the narrow AOI definition: despite the smaller AOI size, the Persons cluster still achieved a relatively high dwell-time share compared to other clusters, indicating active visual attention toward these elements.

5.2.3 Persons vs. Spatial Content - CBC

The dwell-time results indicate that persons in the CBC video play a visually salient role but do not function as dominant focal points within the scenes. A direct comparison of Time to First Fixation (TFFF) values is therefore not appropriate, as person-related AOIs required active visual orientation within the scene, whereas spatial AOIs were located directly within the viewer's field of vision when the scene changes.

To further interpret the quantitative results, heatmaps were used as a suitable complement (see *Figure 4*). The heatmaps show that person-centered scenes produce a highly focused gaze pattern, with attention mainly directed toward the face of the person shown. This focus remains spatially limited and rarely extends to the surrounding area.

In contrast, heatmaps of spatial content display a broader and more exploratory gaze pattern. Attention is distributed across several elements of the scene, such as furniture and architectural features, indicating an active visual exploration of the location.

Figure 4. Heatmaps - Facial Regions in Person-centered Scenes vs. Spatial Content Scenes (CBC)



The heatmaps indicate where attention is repeatedly directed, while dwell time reflects how long attention remains there. In person-centered scenes, viewers repeatedly return to the face, but do not maintain continuous fixation, resulting in high spatial salience but moderate dwell-time values. Spatial content sustains visual engagement through continuous and exploratory viewing, resulting in higher dwell-time values despite a more diffuse gaze distribution.

5.2.4 Spatial Content vs. Atmospheric Elements - CBC

A comparison of the two clusters shows that atmosphere elements reached a fixation rate of 2.6 fixations per second, whereas spatial content exhibited a slightly higher rate of 3.0 fixations per second. a slight divergence in viewing behaviour rather than distinct processing modes. The higher fixation rate observed for the spatial content (60.4 fixations over approximately 20.4 s) may indicate a more dynamic scanning of multiple spatial elements, while the lower rate for atmosphere elements points to somewhat longer individual fixations.

Despite the shorter overall viewing time of atmosphere-related content (approximately 8.8 s), the occurrence of 23 fixations suggests a focused engagement with selected visual details. Overall, the findings indicate that spatial content supports orientation, while atmospheric elements mainly enrich the visual impression.

Although spatial content makes up the majority of the video and serves as a guide, the atmospheric elements, which are only shown briefly, may manage to “calm” the viewer's gaze and enable a more intense (because slower/more focused) viewing experience.

5.2.5 The Role of Human Presence in Service and Gastronomy Scenes - CBC

In a further step, it was examined whether scene composition (Gastronomy vs. Gastronomy + Person) influenced the overall viewing experience. Since the AOIs were defined to fill the screen in both scene types, the metrics of TFFF and dwell time and their equal results here serve as an indicator of general scene acceptance.

The following heatmaps illustrate differences in gaze distribution. As shown in *Figure 5*, gastronomic scenes including human presence exhibit a sequential viewing pattern, with initial attention directed towards the product, brief shifts towards the person during the preparation process, and a subsequent return to the product. This brief social monitoring of the face followed by a re-focusing on the manual task suggests that the human element serves as a narrative guide rather than a distraction. The viewers prioritize the “process of creation”, where the human presence validates the craftsmanship while the beverage remains the primary object of interest

Figure 5. Heatmaps - Gaze Distribution in a Gastronomic Scene with Human Presence (CBC)



In contrast, purely gastronomic scenes show a more exploratory gaze distribution across multiple food items around the room (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Heatmaps - Gaze Distribution in a Gastronomic Scene without Human Presence (CBC)



5.2.6 Description of Content Clusters - UGC

To analyze visual attention in the UGC video, the individual AOIs were also grouped into content-defined clusters for this video, reflecting social, functional, and atmospheric aspects of the hotel presentation. See *Table 2*.

Table 2. Overview of Content Clusters (UGC Video)

| Cluster | Classification | Content included in UGC Video |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Persons | Social and Human Attention | Creator, including face and upper body, e.g., mirror shots, or interactions |
| Room & Sanitary | Private, Functional Use | Hotel room, bed, bathroom, and sanitary facilities |
| Infrastructure | Orientation and Functional Spatial Elements | Hotel entrance, logo, lobby, corridors, information materials, etc. |
| Gastronomy | Services & Offerings | Restaurant and bar areas, food and consuming of beverages, |
| Atmospheric Elements | Experience and Atmosphere | Exterior views of the hotel, garden areas, architectural highlights, and detail shots |

In the UGC video, people and spatial content were consistently recorded separately. This approach was chosen because this video is more person-centered. Separate recording allowed for a more differentiated analysis of the distribution of gaze between human presence and other content clusters.

5.2.7 Overall Distribution of Visual Attention - UGC

The analysis reveals a differentiated distribution of visual attention. While the clusters Room & Sanitary ($M = 81.5\%$), Gastronomy ($M = 79.5\%$), and Infrastructure ($M =$

80.0%) show Dwell Time values comparable to Atmosphere Elements ($M = 81.1\%$), the Persons cluster exhibits a substantially lower Dwell Time ($M = 52.7\%$).

This pattern is consistent with the CBC video ($M = 56\%$), where persons were likewise defined as separate, body-contour AOs. The reduced Dwell Time for persons therefore does not indicate lower interest but rather reflects a different mode of visual processing: in both formats persons function as dynamic attention cues that temporarily attract gaze and subsequently redirect it toward the surrounding context.

So, functional and atmospheric content in the UGC video generates stable baseline attention, whereas persons primarily serve an orienting and guiding role within the visual exploration process.

5.2.8 Persons vs. Spatial Content in UGC Context

The comparison between the spatial content and the person clusters in the UGC video shows a functional division of labor in visual processing.

The person AOs reveal a much greater dynamic in the focus of attention. The range of dwell time values (between approx. 13% and 80%) indicates highly context-dependent visual processing. This indicates that people are not continuously in focus, but rather attract attention depending on the situation: in interactive moments, they function as primary visual anchors, while in scenes with the focus on spatial content, or in explanatory sequences, they recede into the background in favor of the environment shown.

The following heatmaps (*Figure 7*) illustrate how the attention changes within a scene in the UGC video. At the beginning of the scene shown, in which the person is initially seen from behind, not interacting, the gaze is distributed relatively broadly across the room. At this moment, attention is not clearly focused on the person, but encompasses various spatial elements such as architecture, surroundings, and text overlays. As soon as the person turns and faces the camera, the distribution of attention changes significantly. The heat map now clearly focuses on the person's face. This shows that the face functions as a particularly relevant visual element and briefly concentrates attention. At this moment, the person takes on the role of a central anchor of attention. This is further evidenced by the person's gestures (pointing): While the face remains

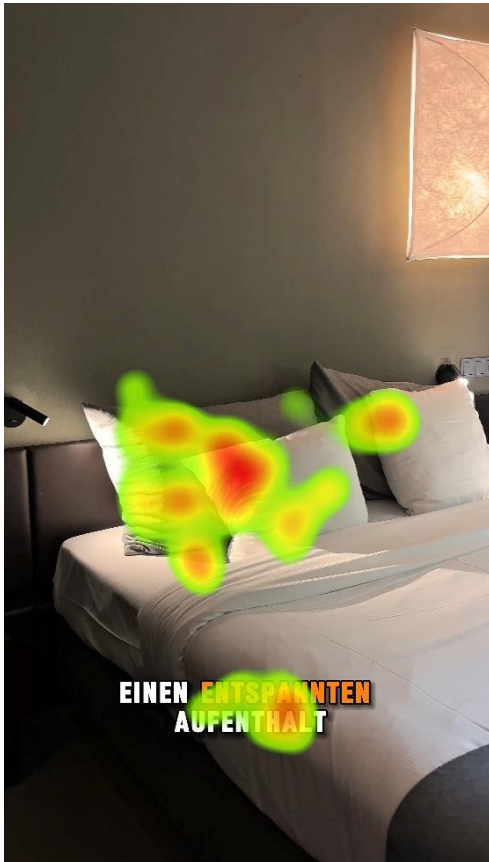
the primary attractor, the pointing gesture effectively triggers a subtle gaze shift toward the indicated object. Although the heatmap shows only light intensity at the target location, it confirms that the human element acts as a visual guide, successfully initiating a “path of interest” without losing the viewer’s overall engagement with the protagonist.

Figure 7. Heatmaps - Gaze Distribution of Person in Spatial Content (back view vs. frontal view), (UGC)



A similar pattern emerges when comparing scenes that show only spatial content with scenes in which a person is actively involved in the scene. When the room is shown without people, the gaze is distributed evenly across the elements depicted, such as the bed, pillows, or light sources. The following heatmaps (Figure 8) show an distribution of gaze, which serves to explore the space.

Figure 8. Heatmap - Gaze Distribution of Spatial Content (UGC)



However, as soon as a person enters the room and performs a action - dynamic movement such as jumping on the bed - attention shifts significantly (*Figure 9*). In these moments, the gaze clearly focuses on the person performing the action, while the room recedes into the background. In relation to other scenes, these heatmaps show that it is not only the presence of a person, but also their movement and actions that determine whether attention is focused. Among other things, it is striking that this also

has an impact on the subtitles. These are also given higher priority when the person in the image is not present due to the circumstances mentioned above.:

Figure 9. Heatmap - Gaze Distribution of Active Person in Spatial Content (UGC)



5.2.9 Spatial Content vs. Atmospheric Elements - UGC

A comparison of these clusters shows that atmospheric elements achieved an average fixation rate of 2.68 fixations per second, while spatial content had a significantly higher frequency of 3.03 fixations per second. This difference highlights different reception patterns within the scene: While the higher fixation rate in the spatial content area suggests a systematic, exploratory orientation within the environment, the lower rate for the atmospheric elements indicates a longer fixation duration and so a more calm observing behaviour.

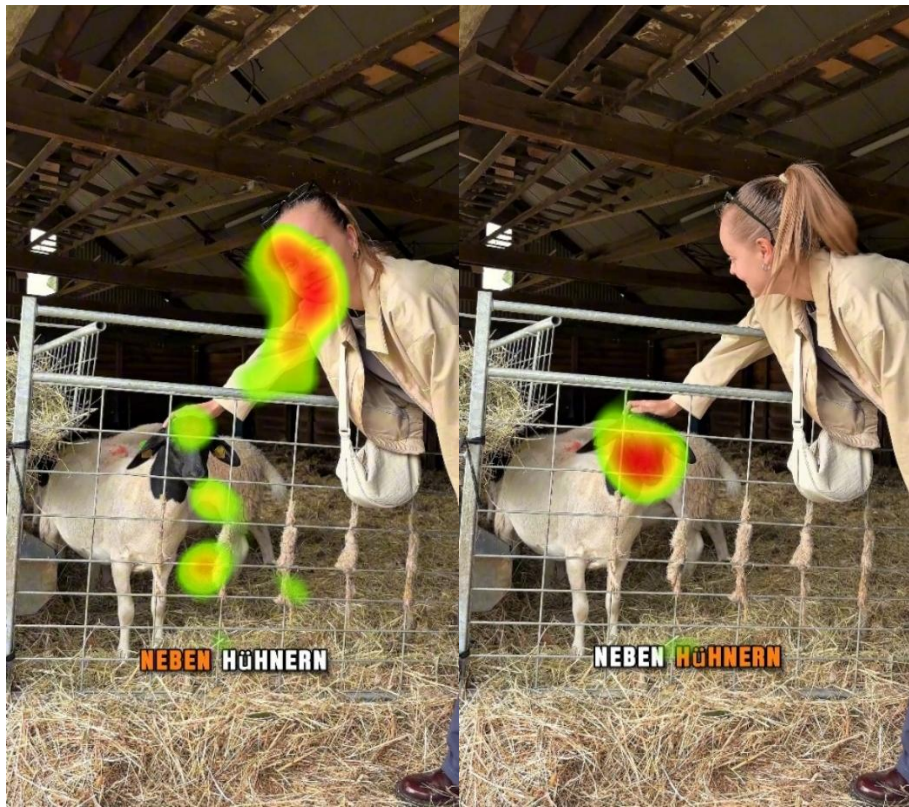
Although the atmospheric content lags behind the spatial focus in terms of total perception time (approx. 23.66 seconds), the distribution of a total of 63.37 fixations

indicates a more intense visual engagement with aesthetic details. This suggests, as well as in the UGC video, that atmospheric stimuli can trigger a more focused, lingering observation, whereas functional spatial content (especially gastronomy and infrastructure) promotes efficient information.

Overall, the results suggest that both content categories perform complementary functions in the visual communication of the scene: spatial content serves to quickly structure and identify user values, while atmospheric details enhance visual depth and emotional engagement.

In addition, a scene, (see *Figure 10*) in which atmospheric elements are seen together with a person, shows a particularly attention pattern. In the first few seconds of the scene, visual attention is clearly focused on the person's face, with only a slight outbreak to the sheep, even though the animal may function as an emotionally appealing stimulus. The focus on the face remains stable and is only broken when the person looks away and towards the sheep. At this point, the visual attention captured by the heatmap shifts toward the sheep. This pattern confirms that faces hold a high visual priority, overriding both spatial and atmospheric stimuli. Consequently, social cues appear to be a stronger driver of attention than the objective salience of individual image elements.

Figure 10. Heatmap of Gaze Distribution of Human Presence in Atmospheric Elements (UGC)



5.2.10 Interpretation of Results in Relation to RQ1

The investigation of the research question “*Do attention patterns differ between CBC and UGC?*” synthesizes the findings from both, the CBC and UGC analyses. While quantitative metrics such as Dwell Time and Fixation Rates are remarkably similar across both formats, qualitative gaze patterns reveal distinct differences in how viewers process curated branded content versus user-generated content.

The data reveals a high degree of consistency in how viewers perceive hotel environments, regardless of the producer:

- **Spatial Exploration:** In both formats, spatial content (room & sanitary, gastronomy, infrastructure) elicits the highest visual activity, with a fixation rate of approximately 3.0 fix/s. This suggests a systematic scanning behavior, where viewers actively “inspect” the hotel's features and layout to may build a mental map of the environment.

- **The Atmospheric Calm:** In contrast, atmospheric close-ups appear to induce a "visual calm." The fixation rate decreases to approximately 2.6 fix/s in both formats. This descriptive trend indicates that aesthetic and more non-functional shots facilitate a more slow gaze, potentially allowing deeper emotional engagement.
- **Human Saliency & Narrative Guidance:** In both formats, faces act as the visual priority, capturing high attention and function as a "social anchor." However, this effect was often observed as transitory and narrative.

While the numbers are similar, the heatmaps may reveal a functional difference in how people are perceived:

- **CBC: Person as context.** In the CBC format, during the cocktail preparation, the viewer's focus remains consistently on the pouring process, which takes part in the center of the screen, rather than the bartender's face. So it can be assumed that, when a manual task is centrally positioned and involves movement, the process itself may claim higher visual priority, relegating the face to a supportive, "accompanying" role.
- **UGC: Person as anchor.** In the UGC video, where the creator is the primary attention cue, the gaze is more dynamic and reactive. Attention shifts between the creator's face and their actions (e.g., jumping on the bed). When the creator is frontal present, they become a central anchor that briefly obscures the surrounding environment.

Excurs: The Universality of Perception Patterns

The analysis reveals a noteworthy yet modest pattern: cognitive processing rates were largely comparable across CBC and UGC formats. Spatial content attracted around 3.0 fixations per second in both video types, whereas atmospheric elements showed slightly lower fixation rates (2.6 - 2.7). Although these differences are small, the consistency across formats may indicate that our basic visual scanning mechanisms operate similarly regardless of whether content is curated branded content or user-

generated. This suggests that "Spatial Content" and "Atmospheric Elements" are distinct categories that viewers may further process consistently, regardless of who produced the video.

5.3 Emotional Responses: Results and Interpretation (RQ2)

"Do the formats elicit different affective responses?"

To address RQ2, the emotional responses to UGC and CBC are now analyzed in detail. The temporal progressions of "Joy" and "Engagement" are first examined separately for each format and subsequently compared within and across formats.

5.3.1 Joy - CBC Video

The temporal pattern of joy-related facial expressions in the CBC video is clearly scene-dependent (see *Figure 11*). During the introduction, when the brands' logo appears accompanied by background music, joy reaches a comparatively elevated level. After a few seconds, this initial response fades, and joy stabilizes at a moderate level throughout the presentation of corridors and rooms. A further increase is observable in later sequences, particularly during the presentation of sanitary areas and when the logo again appears in connection with the lift.

The highest joy value across the entire CBC video occurs during the presentation of the chairs in the breakfast/buffet room. Notably, joy drops sharply immediately afterward during the visually elaborate buffet presentation and continues to decline as this sequence progresses, ultimately reaching the lowest level of the video. This low level persists across several subsequent scenes, with only minor short-term fluctuations. Neither the continued presentation of gastronomic content nor the brief appearance of a person leads to a noticeable increase in joy. A slight recovery in joy is only observed with the introduction of an atmospheric outdoor motif, specifically the close-up of a lemon. In the following scenes, joy decreases again but stabilizes at a moderate level above its minimum. Toward the end of the video, joy rises moderately, particularly during the scene in which a bartender prepares drinks. In the final sequence, showing a person holding a drink, joy remains at a mildly elevated and stable level.

Overall, joy responses in the CBC video appear to be triggered by specific visual moments rather than sustained across longer sequences. While initial branding elements and selected atmospheric or interactive scenes elicit noticeable increases in joy, extended presentations - especially of detailed buffet content - are associated with a gradual decline in positive affect.

Figure 11. Temporal Progression of Emotion Joy (CBC)

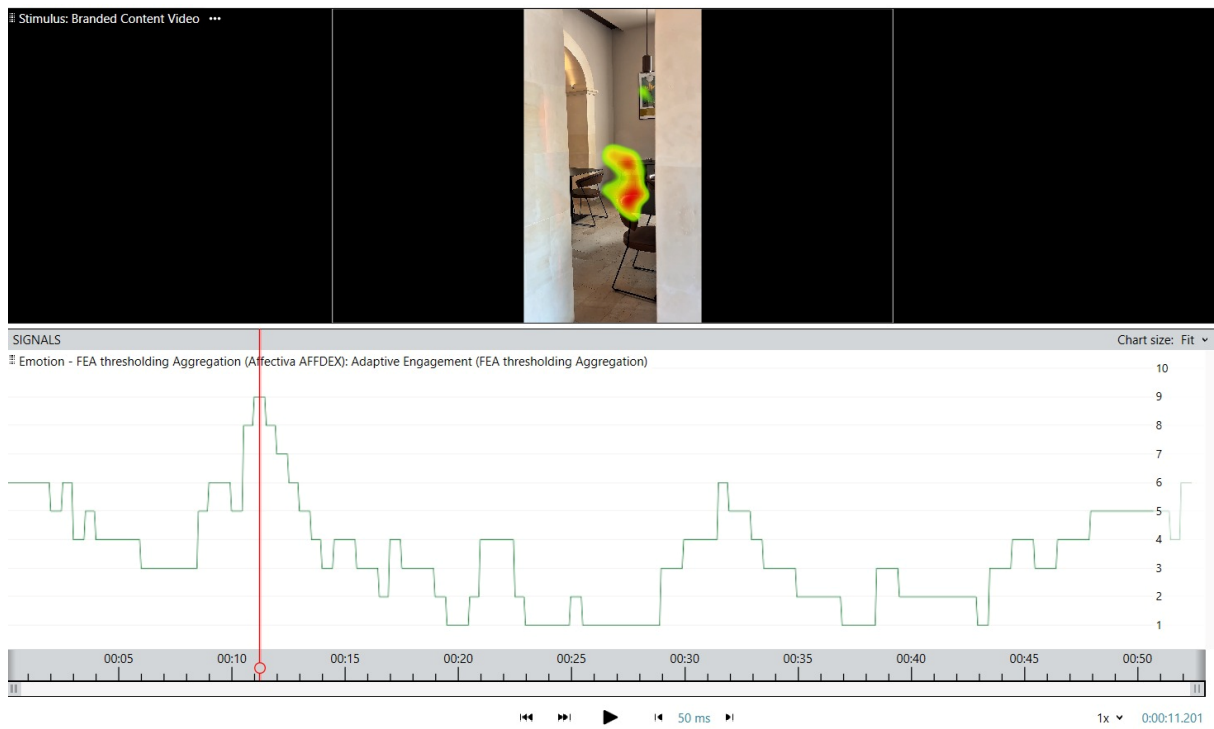


5.3.2 Engagement - CBC Video

The temporal progression of engagement in the CBC video shows a pronounced scene-dependent dynamic (see Figure 12). At the beginning of the video, when the brands logo is presented, engagement is at a moderate level and decreases slightly during the initial room presentation. A moderate rise in engagement occurs during the transition to the lift, followed by a steep increase during the presentation of the chairs and the interior of the breakfast room. In this sequence, engagement reaches its highest level across the entire video and clearly exceeds all other peaks. This increase coincides with a slow camera movement and a spatially framed view, which appears to encourage visual exploration.

Immediately after this peak, engagement drops sharply within the beginning of the breakfast presentation and reaches its lowest level. A brief increase can be observed when spatial interior elements reappear, but this effect is short-lived. Engagement remains low during subsequent scenes, including the presentation of people. A further moderate increase in engagement is associated with atmospheric close-up elements, particularly the depiction of a lemon. Later scenes showing the roof terrace, bartender, and drinks are again accompanied by decreasing engagement. Only toward the end of the video does engagement recover slightly to a moderate level.

Figure 12. Temporal Progression of Emotion Engagement (CBC)



5.3.3 Comparison of Joy and Engagement - CBC Video

A comparison of the temporal progression of joy and engagement in the CBC video shows that, unexpectedly, both dimensions drop significantly during the presentation of the breakfast buffet, reaching their first lowest value in this section.

The divergence between the anticipation phase (chair scenes) and the subsequent product presentation (buffet) is striking. While the minimalistic architecture induced a

high level of joy and engagement, the immediate drop of both metrics when the buffet appeared indicates a possible visual overload. The diffuse distribution of gaze (heat map analysis) suggests that the high visual complexity of the scene may be leading to rapid information saturation without establishing a new emotional anchor point. The data suggests that the visual complexity of the buffet contrasted with the previous aesthetic calm of the room, leading to the seen break in both dimensions (Reber et al., 2004).

It is also striking that people in the further course of the CBC video do not have a strong influence on engagement. In the joy curve, on the other hand, it can be seen that although human presence does not trigger pronounced peaks, it does at least contribute to a slight increase in joy-related reactions.

Overall, following the major decrease in the breakfast area, the CBC video shows a more fragmented engagement pattern. The irregular fluctuations observed in the engagement timeline suggest a more exploratory, but less focused and motivated, reception. The emotional valence in the form of joy remains comparatively subdued and only rises moderately again towards the end of the video, corresponding to a positive resolution.

5.3.4 Joy - UGC Video

The temporal progression of joy in the UGC video shows a clearly scene-dependent pattern (see *Figure 13*). The highest joy value occurs within the first seconds of the video, coinciding with the initial exterior shot of the hotel and the on-screen text overlay. As the video transitions to interior scenes such as the lobby, joy levels decrease rapidly and remain low.

A brief increase in joy is observable during a short action performed by the creator, but this effect is not sustained. In subsequent outdoor scenes dominated by static nature elements, joy reaches its lowest level. When the creator re-enters the frame in these outdoor settings, joy increases again and culminates in the second-highest peak during a scene involving direct interaction with animals. After this interaction, joy declines to

a moderate level. Toward the end of the video, gastronomic content is accompanied by a slight increase in joy, though markedly lower than earlier peaks.

Overall, joy appears to be primarily associated with moments of interaction and visible action, whereas static interior and nature scenes elicit comparatively low emotional responses.

Figure 13. Temporal Progression of Emotion Joy (UGC)



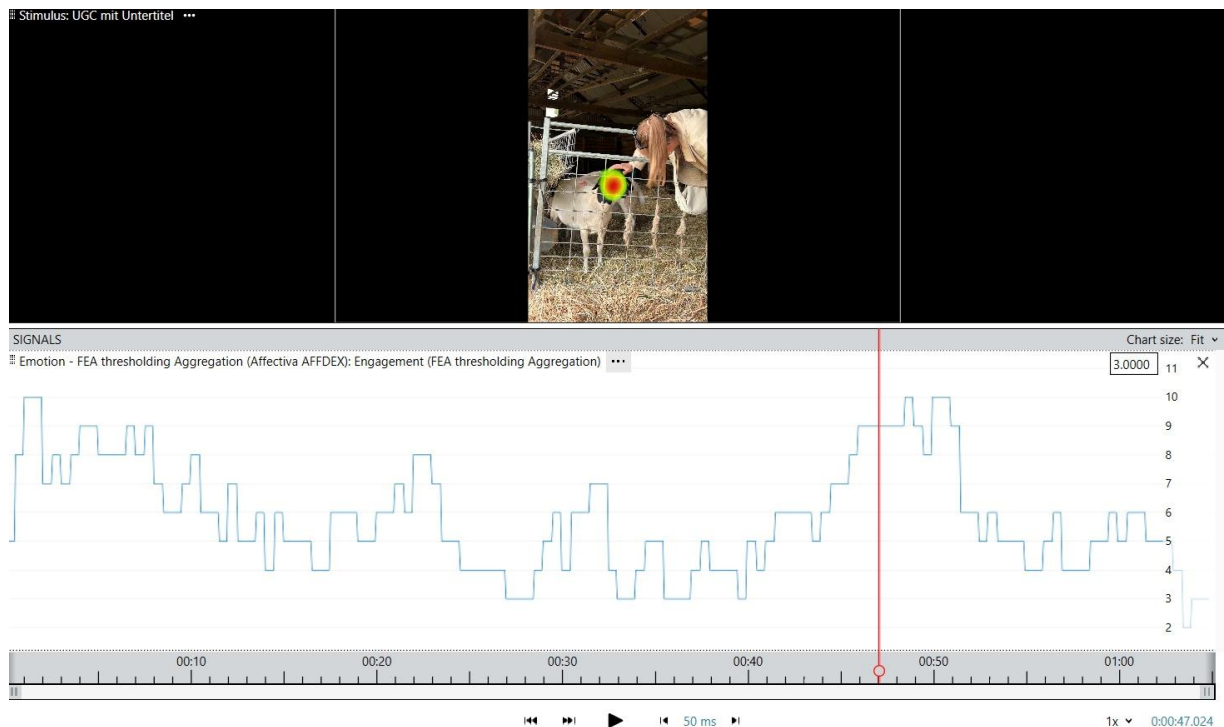
5.3.5 Engagement - UGC Video

The temporal progression of engagement in the UGC video shows three recognizable peaks of activation distributed throughout the entire video (see *Figure 14*). The first engagement peak also occurs at the beginning of the video during the introductory scene, in which the exterior view of the hotel is presented together with the title of the video. Engagement declines slightly as the video progresses, but remains relatively stable during the presentation of the lobby. A more pronounced decline can then be observed in sequences showing transitional areas such as corridors and the hotel room. With the reappearance of a person jumping on the bed, engagement rises again. However, this increase drops significantly and quickly as soon as the video transitions to exterior shots and the surroundings and expansive meadows are shown. The first

lowest engagement value of the video is reached in scenes that show static views of meadows without personal interaction.

Another encouraging spike in engagement occurs during the scene with the interaction with animals. It is striking here that engagement increases gradually over the course of this sequence, which indicates an encouraging activation effect. Immediately after this scene, engagement drops significantly again, with the subsequent presentation of gastronomic content also failing to cause any significant reactivation of engagement.

Figure 14. Temporal Progression of Emotion Engagement (UGC)



5.3.6 Comparison of Joy and Engagement - UGC video

A comparison between the metrics of joy and engagement in the UGC video reveals a differentiated reception structure. While joy occurs primarily in individual, clearly identifiable scenes and forms distinct peaks there, engagement is generally more uneven and fluctuates more frequently. As a result, engagement remains at a moderate level even over longer sequences, and even when no pronounced positive emotional reactions are visible.

It is striking that both metrics already show a marked peak in the introductory scene, even though no person is visible in this sequence. This suggests that visual dynamics and contextual introduction can already have a strong initial activation and emotionally positive effect.

In sequences involving explicit personal presence and interaction - such as jumping onto the bed or interacting with animals - joy and engagement largely run parallel. In these moments of emotional validation, the increased cognitive activation corresponds directly with joy.

In contrast, in scenes without social interaction, such as interior shots or calm outdoor scenes, engagement sometimes remains at a stable level, while joy is hardly present. This suggests that visual or content-related stimuli can continue to attract attention without necessarily triggering an affective/emotional response. In these phases, engagement primarily serves as an indicator of cognitive processing of the information presented (e.g., spatial orientation), while affective involvement (joy) is paused.

Overall, it can be assumed that the UGC video most times continuously keeps viewers at a heightened level of attention due to its dynamic nature (fast cuts, camera work). Joy-related emotional reactions, on the other hand, occur selectively and are primarily linked to scenes that are characterized either by strong visual staging or by social and interactive elements.

5.3.7 Interpretation of Results in Relation to RQ2

A joint examination of the emotional dimensions of joy and engagement reveals similarities and differences between the UGC and CBC videos, particularly with regard to the temporal coupling of engagement and joy (see *Table 3; Figures 15,16*)

UGC (Dynamic and Impulsive)

The UGC video resembles an emotional roller coaster. It is marked by sharp, synchronous peaks in Joy and Engagement. These spikes suggest that interactive or unpredictable moments trigger immediate, high-intensity activation. Unlike the branded

content, the UGC manages to maintain a higher "emotional baseline," where peaks are not just isolated incidents but build upon each other toward the end of the video.

CBC (Exploratory and Restrained)

In contrast, the CBC video appears more controlled and "quiet." The emotional curves are fragmented and return to the baseline more quickly after a stimulus. While there are isolated peaks, they lack the cumulative momentum of the UGC. The response resembles a distanced, observant exploration - the viewer remains a spectator rather than becoming emotionally immersed. Joy levels are not only more moderate but also more static.

Table 3 Comparative Analysis of Emotional Dynamics

| Phase/Feature | Similarity | Difference |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Intro (00:00 - 00:10) | Both formats successfully generate a strong initial hook, with Joy and Engagement peaking early on. | UGC: Spike is noticeably steeper and more "explosive". CBC: Rise is more gradual. |
| Mid-Section (00:15 - 00:35) | Both videos experience a "cooling off" period where joy returns towards the baseline. | CBC: Stays in a prolonged "emotional valley" with very little movement. UGC: More restless, showing several reactivation spikes during this time. |
| Signal Correlation | Major stimuli cause both Joy and Engagement to move upward in tandem. | UGC: Shows high synchronicity; the curves move like an echo of each other. CBC: Shows divergence; Engagement often "flickers" while Joy remains flat. |
| The Finale (00:45 - End) | Both videos conclude on a positive upward trend in Joy. | UGC: Reaches its sustained emotional climax just <i>before</i> the end. CBC: Features a sharp, isolated "Final Recovery" - a late surge in Joy at the very last seconds. |
| Narrative Arc | Neither video is static; both follow a wave-like emotional pattern. | UGC: Follows a "Rollercoaster Profile" with high-frequency peaks. CBC: Follows a "U-Shaped Profile" - strong before and after mid-section. |

Figure 15. Multidimensional Emotion Timelines for the Emotions Joy, Engagement, and Positive Valence. (CBC)

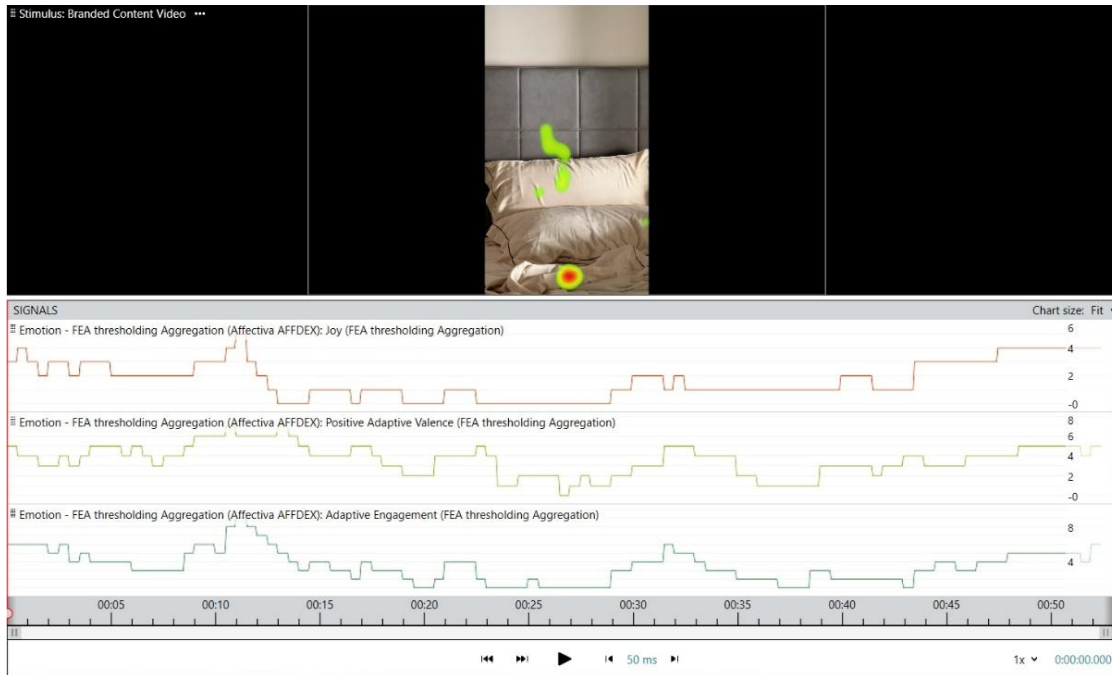
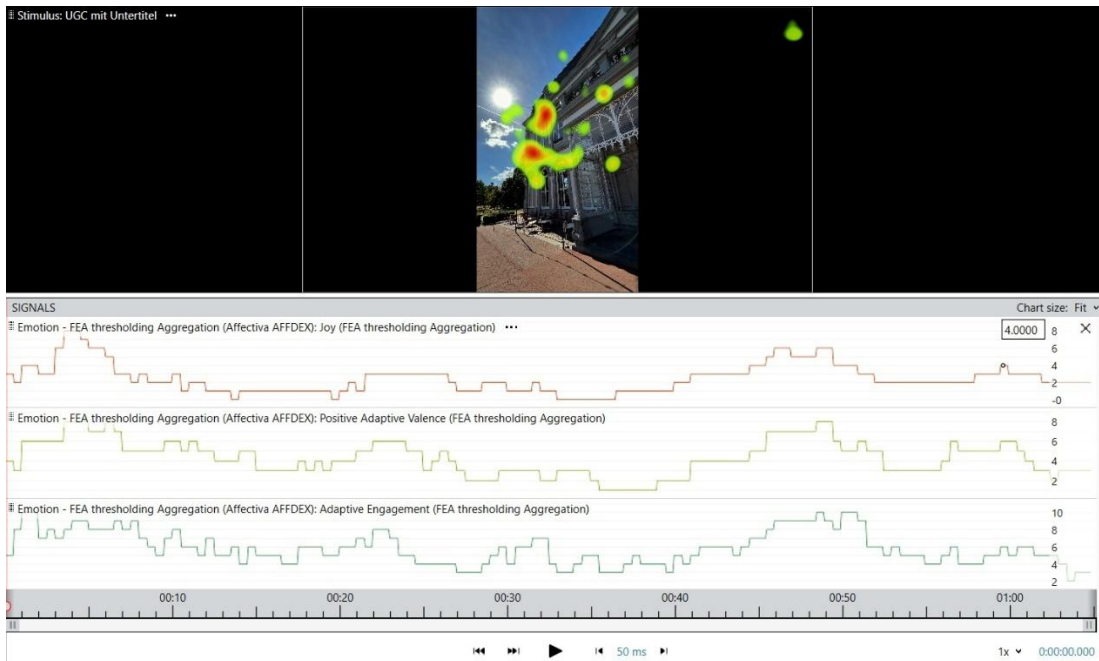


Figure 16. Multidimensional Emotion Timelines for the Emotions Joy, Engagement, and Positive Valence. (UGC)



5.4 Brand Perception: Results and Interpretation (RQ3 + H1)

The following section presents the results of the empirical analysis, comparing user-generated content (UGC) and curated branded content (CBC) across several perception dimensions

5.4.1 Brand Evaluations: Credibility, Authenticity, and Likeability

Descriptive statistics were conducted to examine the differences in perceived credibility between user-generated content (UGC) and curated branded content (CBC). The results show that UGC ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.70$) has a slightly higher mean value than CBC ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.53$), but paired t-tests show that this difference is not statistically significant ($p = .578$). Thus, no significant difference between the two content formats can be found for the dimension of credibility. Hypothesis H1, according to which UGC should lead to a more positive brand perception compared to CBC, is not confirmed for the dimension of credibility.

Another paired t-test was conducted to analyse the perceived authenticity of user-generated content (UGC) and curated branded content (CBC). The results show that UGC ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.66$) achieved significantly higher authenticity scores than CBC ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.73$), $p = .025$. This confirms hypothesis H1 for the authenticity dimension. Informal feedback from participants suggests that many viewers were aware that the user-generated content video may involve some form of compensation for the creator seen in the video. Nevertheless, this awareness did not necessarily reduce perceived authenticity, as reflected in the significantly higher authenticity ratings for UGC. In regard to the literature it can be assumed that, as long as content retains the stylistic characteristics and perceived advantages of authentic user-generated content - such as a personal, experience-based, and non-commercial tone it may still be evaluated positively. The consistently high authenticity ratings suggest that even recognizing this commercial aspect did not automatically lead to a rejection of the message.

With regard to perceived likeability, there was no significant difference between user-generated content (UGC) and curated branded content (CBC). The mean values were almost identical at $M = 4.30$ ($SD = 0.67$) for UGC and $M = 4.31$ ($SD = 0.79$) for CBC. The paired t-test revealed no significant difference ($p = .90$). Hypothesis H1 for the dimension of likeability is therefore not confirmed.

5.4.2 Perceived Quality

In terms of perceived quality, there was also no significant difference between user-generated content (UGC) and curated branded content (CBC). Although CBC had descriptively slightly higher values ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.80$) than UGC ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.75$), this difference proved to be statistically insignificant ($p = .345$). Although CBC descriptively scored higher, the absence of a significant difference is notable, as CBC typically relies on professional production and controlled framing to signal quality. This suggests that this alone may not be sufficient to clearly differentiate perceived quality from UGC in this context. Despite not being part of the formal hypotheses, perceived quality was included as it represents a central evaluative dimension.

5.4.3 Booking Intention

With regard to booking intent, there was a difference between user-generated content (UGC) and curated branded content (CBC), but it was not statistically significant. Participants reported a higher booking intent for UGC ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.99$) than for CBC ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.18$). The paired t-test yielded a p-value of .069, which means that the difference is just above the significance level. Hypothesis H1 is therefore also not confirmed for the dimension of booking intention, although a tendency in favour of UGC can be observed.

5.4.4 Recall of Visual Elements

To assess which visual elements of the videos were most salient, participants were asked to indicate which aspect of the video remained most memorable. *Table 4* summarizes the recall patterns for the UGC and CBC conditions.

Table 4. Recall of visual elements by content format

| Recall Category | UGC Video (%) | CBC Video (%) |
|------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Food & Beverages | 0 | 56 |
| Hotel Rooms | 4 | 11 |
| Hotel Environment & Location | 63 | 11 |
| Person | 22 | 4 |
| Atmosphere | 11 | 19 |

In the UGC condition, recall was dominated by the hotel environment and location, which was selected by 63% of participants. People appearing in the video accounted for 22% of responses, followed by emotional atmosphere (11%). Hotel rooms were mentioned by only one participant (4%), while food and beverage elements were not selected.

In contrast, the CBC condition showed a markedly different recall pattern. More than half of the participants (56%) reported food and beverage or enjoyment moments as the most memorable element. Emotional atmosphere accounted for 19% of responses, while hotel rooms and hotel environment/location were each mentioned by 11% of participants. People appearing in the video were least frequently recalled (4%).

Overall, the results indicate distinct recall patterns depending on the content stimuli used in this study. But it should be noted that the two stimulus videos differed in their content focus. While the CBC video visually highlighted the hotel's gastronomic offerings and cuisine in particular, the UGC video focused more on the hotel's surroundings, which were shown and commented on from the creators' perspective. In addition, the UGC video also featured animals as part of the hotel environment & location. These differences correspond to typical features of the respective content

formats and were deliberately not completely harmonised in order to ensure that the two forms of communication were perceived as realistically as possible.

The different recall patterns between UGC and CBC can be explained cautiously through the lens of Dual Coding Theory (DCT), which assumes that information is processed via two complementary systems: a visual and a verbal system. Memory performance is enhanced either when both systems are activated simultaneously or when visual stimuli are sufficiently structured to be encoded efficiently on their own.

In the UGC condition, the hotel surroundings were shown visually and continuously explained through a voice-over. The creators described the environment, told parts of the hotel's story, and explained what was shown in the images. Elements such as animals or informational signs served as concrete reference points and were verbally named and placed into context. This verbal guidance likely helped structure the visual impressions and made the surroundings easier to understand and remember, thereby supporting dual coding and enhancing recall of the hotel environment and location.

In contrast, the CBC video focused on visually salient and clearly defined service-related elements, particularly food and beverage. These elements were presented through close-ups, slow-motion sequences, and aesthetic framing, as well as dynamic camera movements ranging from detailed close-ups to wider shots. The visually rich buffet scenes featured a high variety of colors, shapes, and textures, which likely enhanced perceptual distinctiveness and facilitated efficient encoding through the visual system alone. Due to their object-like structure, familiarity, and strong sensory appeal, food and beverage elements may not have required additional verbal labeling to become memorable.

An additional but important and noteworthy observation concerns the recall of people in the UGC condition. Although the creator appeared frequently and played a central role throughout the video, the person was less often selected as the most memorable element than have been expected. This suggests that the presence of a person alone does not necessarily determine recall salience. Instead, attention and memory may have been directed toward the content that was verbally explained and narratively

framed, such as the hotel environment and location, rather than toward the person as a visual element itself.

5.4.5 Results for Advertising Recognition and Source Perception

To examine differences in advertising recognition between user-generated content (UGC) and curated branded content (CBC), participants evaluated whether the video appeared to be classic advertising. The results show a significant difference between the two content formats. The CBC video was perceived as more strongly resembling classic advertising ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.31$) compared to the UGC video ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.15$). A paired-samples t -test confirmed that this difference was statistically significant, $p = .029$.

Differences in source perception were assessed by asking participants whether the videos appeared to originate from a trustworthy source. The UGC video received higher trustworthiness ratings ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.93$) than the CBC video ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.94$). However, this difference was not statistically significant, $p = .153$, (see *Table 5*). An exploratory Spearman correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between advertising recognition and perceived source credibility within the UGC condition. The analysis revealed a weak negative association ($\rho = -0.25$), which did not reach statistical significance ($p > .05$). Although a weak negative correlation was observed, indicating that increased advertising recognition tended to coincide with lower perceived source credibility, the result was not statistically significant, meaning no reliable link between these two factors could be established.

Table 5. Source Perception and Advertising Recognition UGC/CBC (n=27)

| Dimension | UGC M (SD) | CBC M (SD) | p | Result |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------|-----------------|
| Source Credibility | 4.37 (0.93) | 4.04 (0.94) | .153 | Not significant |
| Advertising Recognition | 2.59 (1.15) | 3.44 (1.31) | .029 | CBC > UGC |

Note. Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) are reported. p -values are based on paired-samples t tests (two-tailed). $n = 27$.

5.4.6 Interpretation of Results in Relation to RQ2 and H1

Table 6 summarizes the comparison of brand perception and booking intention between user-generated content (UGC) and curated branded content (CBC). Overall, the results indicate that the two formats differ only in selected perception dimensions, while several evaluations show no significant differences.

Table 6. Brand Perception and Booking Intention UGC/CBC (n = 27)

| Dimension | UGC M (SD) | CBC M (SD) | p | Result |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------|-----------------|
| Credibility | 4.02 (0.70) | 3.96 (0.53) | .578 | Not significant |
| Authenticity | 4.28 (0.66) | 3.93 (0.73) | .025 | UGC > CBC |
| Likeability | 4.30 (0.67) | 4.31 (0.79) | .900 | Not significant |
| Perceived Quality | 4.22 (0.75) | 4.41 (0.80) | .345 | Not significant |
| Booking Intention | 4.15 (0.99) | 3.63 (1.18) | .069 | Trend (UGC) |

Note. Means (*M*) and standard deviations (*SD*) are reported. *p*-values are based on paired-samples *t* tests (two-tailed). *n* = 27.

In line with H1, UGC was perceived as significantly more authentic than CBC. Participants rated authenticity higher for UGC ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.66$) than for CBC ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.73$), and this difference was statistically significant ($p = .025$). This finding supports the assumption that UGC fosters stronger perceptions of authenticity compared to professionally curated branded content.

For credibility and likeability, no significant differences were observed between the two formats. Although UGC received slightly higher mean ratings for credibility (UGC: $M = 4.02$; CBC: $M = 3.96$) these differences were not statistically significant ($p = .578$ and $p = .900$). Thus, H1 was only partially supported with regard to these dimensions.

With respect to perceived quality, CBC showed descriptively higher ratings ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.80$) than UGC ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.75$). However, this difference did not reach statistical significance ($p = .345$).

Regarding booking intention, UGC resulted in descriptively higher values ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.99$) compared to CBC ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.18$). Although this difference approached significance, it did not meet the conventional threshold ($p = .069$) and is therefore interpreted as a trend rather than a statistically significant effect.

Taken together, the findings suggest that UGC and CBC lead to partly different brand judgments, thereby addressing RQ3. While UGC appears to be particularly effective in enhancing perceived authenticity and shows a tendency toward higher booking intention, other brand-related evaluations such as credibility, likeability, and perceived quality do not differ significantly between the two formats.

5.4.7 Comparison Questionnaire - UGC vs. CBC

The following evaluations and results are purely exploratory and were not essential for answering hypotheses or research questions.

The results of the final comparison questionnaire show a clear preference pattern in favour of the UGC video. While only 8 out of 27 participants (29.6%) stated that they found the CBC video from NOTO Hotels more convincing overall, 19 participants (70.4%) chose the UGC video from the Vaeshartelt Hotel. A similar picture emerges when it comes to willingness to recommend: only 6 participants (22.2%) would be more likely to share the CBC video with friends, while 21 people (77.8%) preferred the UGC video. There was also a clear trend in favour of UGC in terms of booking motivation, with 20 participants (74.1%) stating that the UGC video motivated them more to make a booking, compared to 7 people (25.9%) for the CBC video.

After participation, the Vaeshartelt Hotel Brand, which was presented via the UGC Video, was perceived more positively overall ($M = 4.2$) than NOTO Hotels ($M = 3.7$), which was presented via the CBC Video.

It is noteworthy that the preference differences are more pronounced in the direct comparison than in the isolated evaluations of individual perception dimensions. While UGC did not consistently outperform CBC on all rating scales in the questionnaires

completed after each video, it was clearly preferred when participants directly compared the two formats and had to make a clear choice. This suggests that the persuasive effect of UGC may rely less on single evaluative judgments and more on the overall impression, which becomes especially important in comparative decision-making situations.

6 Discussion

6.1 Interpretation of Findings and Triangulation

The following analyses, independent of the research questions and hypotheses, provide additional context for the triangulation of findings by combining results from the three study designs to identify converging and complementary patterns.

6.1.1 Halo Effects and Affective Anchoring in UGC Introductions

The results suggest that the reception process in the UGC video is initiated by a strong affective impulse, which could significantly influence further brand perception in the sense of a potential halo effect. The triangulation shows that the UGC video generates a decisive advantage within the first few seconds: while eye tracking reveals an immediate focus on the combination of nature shots of the outside of the hotel and explanatory text which shows the name and location, the emotion analysis measures the highest joy peak of the entire video here. This unconscious positive reaction thus begins in parallel with the onset of the voice-over. It should be noted that the scene was also determined by a bright colour scheme, a sweeping camera movement across the hotel and the verbal assessment "this is the most beautiful hotel I've ever been to", which together shaped the overall impression of the scene. The data suggests that the high level of joy in the introduction may establish an initial positive mood anchor.

Compared to UGC, the emotional response in CBC appears more subdued.

6.1.2 Source Perception, Advertising Recognition, and Authenticity

This section brings together findings on source perception, advertising recognition, and brand authenticity. Examining these evaluative dimensions jointly allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how UGC and CBC formats are perceived beyond isolated outcome measures.

Table 7. Comparison of theoretical expectations and empirical findings UGC/CBC

| Dimension | Expected Pattern | Observed Result | Significance | Key Observation |
|-------------------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------|--|
| Advertising Recognition | CBC > UGC | CBC > UGC | ✓ | CBC is more readily recognized as advertising |
| Source Perception | UGC > CBC | UGC ≈ CBC | ✗ | Trust towards Source does not differ between formats |
| Perceived Authenticity | UGC > CBC | UGC > CBC | ✓ | UGC maintains higher authenticity ratings |
| Perceived Quality | CBC > UGC | UGC ≈ CBC | ✗ | CBC is not perceived as qualitatively inferior |

Note. Expected patterns are derived from prior literature on UGC and CBC formats

With regard to advertising recognition, perceived advertising character was rated significantly higher for CBC than for UGC. In contrast, no significant differences emerged for source perception, with trust in the person who created the video rated at comparable levels across both formats. At the same time, the UGC video was rated as significantly more authentic than CBC, while perceived brand quality did not differ significantly between conditions.

Taken together, these findings reveal a noteworthy pattern. Although CBC was more over recognized as advertising, this did not translate into lower trust in the source. Conversely, while stronger trust effects might have been expected for UGC, source perception did not differ significantly between formats.

Several interpretations may help contextualize this constellation. One possibility is that recipients distinguish between the commercial nature of the content and the credibility of the person presenting it, such that recognizing advertising does not necessarily undermine source trust. In addition, many cues of professionalism and a clear presentation may support source trust in CBC formats, even though perceived quality did not differ significantly between conditions, what actually was expected in favour of CBC. Finally, the findings may reflect a broad normalization of advertising, in which commercial intent is more and more accepted and does not automatically conflict with trust in the source.

When perceived authenticity is considered in this context, a differentiated picture emerges. Despite comparable levels of source trust and the recognizability of persuasive intent, authenticity evaluations remained significantly higher for the UGC format. This suggests that perceived authenticity may be particularly closely linked to stylistic and narrative characteristics of UGC, rather than being directly contingent on source trust or lower advertising recognition.

Overall, the combined findings highlight that advertising recognition, source perception, and perceived brand authenticity represent distinct, though interrelated, evaluative dimensions. These dimensions may coexist without directly undermining one another, underscoring the value of examining them in conjunction when comparing UGC and CBC formats.

6.1.3 Visual Orientation and Social Trust in UGC

Triangulating gaze data with questionnaire results reveals complex patterns in the perception of human presence. In the UGC video, people are quickly captured visually, especially when their faces are recognised. At the same time the gaze moves dynamically between the actor and the environment. Despite this distributed attention, UGC achieves high scores for authenticity and credibility. This suggests that a long visual fixation on the person is not necessary to generate credibility towards the brand or authenticity. In UGC, the person primarily functions as a social reference/anchor point and “medium“ that directs the gaze.

6.1.4 The CBC Buffet Paradox: Recall versus Emotional Valence

The example of the breakfast buffet in the CBC video shows a clear discrepancy between cognitive memorability and emotional acceptance. In the questionnaire, 56% of participants named the presentation of the breakfast buffet as the most memorable element. At the same time, the emotion analysis reveals a massive drop in joy and engagement in this very sequence. This contradictory effect may result from the visual design: The scene is visually extremely dominant due to detailed close-ups and duration, which promotes high recall but can also lead to overload. The sudden change from the calm and clear architecture, which represented the joy peak in the CBC video, to the “bustling”, colourful and detailed buffet could create visual overload. The brain suddenly has to process much more information. This “processing pain” can lead to a massive decrease in joy, while the cognitive load (and thus memorability) increases. (Banyté et al., 2025; Mikalef et al., 2021; Piriyaikul et al., 2024).

6.1.5 Divergent Emotional Paths to Similar Likeability

A remarkable result is the almost perfect correlation of the brands likeability scores in the questionnaire, while the emotional response paths are opposite. In the survey, UGC (M = 4.30) and CBC (M = 4.31) are statistically equal in terms of likeability ($p = .90$). However, the data shows that participants experience an “emotional roller coaster” with high peaks of joy when exposed to UGC, while CBC shows a controlled, exploratory response. Likeability thus probably represents a final state that is achieved in different ways: UGC tends to generate this through emotional intensity and social proximity. The exploratory viewing behaviour observed in CBC during eye tracking indicates a evaluation process in which recipients “check out” information and quality features (e.g. room amenities, service and performance). Especially with features such as a calm and well-maintained presentation of the sanitary facilities and the breakfast location room, there was a noticeable positive emotional response.

6.1.6 Conscious Evaluation vs. Affective Experience

The survey shows that both the UGC and CBC videos were perceived as appealing on a conscious level. Both formats achieved similarly high approval ratings for the item

“The brand triggers positive feelings in me” (UGC: M = 4.4; CBC: M = 4.5). However, the emotion data paint a more nuanced picture. While UGC repeatedly scores high and synchronous values for joy and engagement, these unconscious emotional responses are lower and less consistent for CBC overall. This suggests that consciously reported likability is not necessarily accompanied by a comparable emotional response on an comparable level. In CBC in particular, the positive experience seems to be more strongly reflected cognitively after seeing the video, while UGC triggers a more immediate emotional response.

6.1.7 Booking Intention in Relation to Emotional Preference

Finally, triangulation of the results helps explain why the booking intention in the isolated questionnaire is only recognisable as a statistical trend ($p = .069$), while a direct comparison shows a clear preference for UGC (74.1%).

Taken together, the findings indicate that UGC does not outperform CBC across all brand-related evaluation dimensions. No significant differences were found for credibility, likeability, or perceived quality, suggesting that UGC does not benefit from a general evaluative advantage over CBC, as expected.

Instead, the key distinction in participants' evaluations of the two formats lies in perceived authenticity. UGC was rated as significantly more authentic than CBC, even though participants may have been aware of its potential commercial nature. This suggests that authenticity is shaped more by how content feels than by whether it is advertising. The results further indicate that curated branded content cues alone are not sufficient to enhance perceived quality, as CBC did not achieve significantly higher ratings on this dimension. In contrast, the authenticity advantage of UGC appears to persist independently of these factors.

6.1.8 Emotional Peaks in CBC: Spatial Discovery and Aesthetic Clarity

A particularly revealing finding from the triangulation can be seen in the CBC video when the camera goes through the wall opening (the “gap”) towards the chairs in the

breakfast room. While functional scenes such as corridors and doors were processed in a rather neutral manner emotionally, the emotion analysis records the absolute peak value of joy and engagement in the entire video here.

This specific pattern could be explained by the following three party:

1. Keyhole Effect vs. Functional Scanning

In contrast to the scenes that show rather broad search behaviour in eye tracking, the camera movement through the wall opening reveals highly focused viewing behaviour. The visual narrowing indicated to look like seeking through a keyhole. This should build a expectation and curiosity about the space behind it. The fact that joy and engagement increase in parallel here suggests that the promise of discovery can be more emotionally rewarding than the presentation of finished facts.

2. The Break in the Storyline: Expectation vs. Visual Overload

The triangulation suggests that the video suffers a dramatic break at this point. The calm, centred camera work through the gap builds aesthetic tension, which culminates in the arranged chairs. However, the subsequent abrupt change to the detailed buffet interrupts this storyline. The affective results suggest that a more consistent continuation of the visual narrative was expected. Instead of aesthetically continuing the curiosity that has been built up and entering the breakfast room, the attention of the recipients is directed to a multitude of individual visual elements in the subsequent buffet scene in a relatively short time or a few cuts. This sudden increase in cognitive load may causes the recipients to switch from a mode of “enjoyment” to a mode of “information processing,” which could explain the measured drop in joy values.

3. Cognitive Recall Despite Emotional Withdrawal

Despite this emotional downturn during the buffet sequence, “Gastronomy” achieved the highest recall value in the questionnaire at 56%. This suggests that the strong visual dominance of the buffet scenes supports memory formation but does not necessarily reinforce a positive emotional connection to the brand. Short scenes

featuring other gastronomic elements, such as drinks, are accompanied by brief emotional recoveries. However, these increases are limited in both duration and also magnitude and do not offset the overall emotional decline observed during the buffet sequence.

In contrast, the architecture, clear lines, and atmospheric elements appear to function as the primary aesthetic anchor of the CBC video. The renewed increase in joy when the room is shown again after the buffet sequence further suggests that participants responded more positively to spatial exploration and visual order. This effect may also be related to the narrative flow resuming after an earlier interruption, as the continuation of the storyline coincides with the emotional recovery, whereas the buffet sequence was experienced more as visual overload.

6.1.9 Relationships between Advertising Recognition, Source Perception, and Credibility

Table 8. Advertising Recognition, Source Perception, and Credibility Results UGC/CBC

| Dimension | UGC Mean (SD) | CBC Mean (SD) | Significance (p) |
|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Ad Recognition | 2.59 (1.15) | 3.44 (1.31) | 0.029 (significant) |
| Source Perception (Person) | 4.37 (0.93) | 4.04 (0.94) | 0.153 (not sig.) |
| Credibility (Brand) | 4.02 (0.70) | 3.96 (0.53) | 0.578 (not sig.) |

An important finding of this study for the marketing practices of boutique hotels is the discrepancy between the conscious recognition of advertising and the evaluation of source trust and brands' credibility. Although the curated branded content (CBC) video was identified significantly more clearly as advertising than the user-generated content (UGC) video ($M = 3.44$, $p = .029$), this activation of persuasion knowledge did not result in a corresponding decline in trust-related evaluations.

Across both formats, source trust remained high. Moreover, UGC did not significantly outperform CBC with regard to trust in the person behind the video. Thus, the results

do not support the assumption that individuals featured in user-generated videos are necessarily perceived as more trustworthy than those appearing in branded content.

The absence of a credibility loss in the CBC condition, despite its clear classification as advertising, invites further theoretical interpretation. One possible explanation is the descriptively but not significant higher perceived quality of the CBC video. Its professional aesthetics may function as a signal of competence, thereby compensating for potential skepticism triggered by advertising recognition.

Overall, the findings suggest that, particularly at the first brand contact (first touchpoint), the recognition of advertising alone is not sufficient to undermine trust in either the perceived source or the brand. Although source trust did not differ significantly between UGC and CBC, it would be theoretically interesting to examine whether higher source trust would translate into higher brand credibility.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

This chapter classifies the empirical findings within existing communication theories in order to shed light on the psychological mechanisms behind the reception of UGC and CBC.

6.2.1 Cognitive Processing and Memory Performance (DCT)

The results show that high recall does not necessarily go hand in hand with positive emotional activation. For example, many participants remembered the breakfast buffet in the CBC video, even though there was a significant decline in joy and engagement during this section.

Against the backdrop of dual coding theory, this pattern can be interpreted to mean that highly visual representations - such as the buffet scene in the CBC video - could benefit from additional verbal structuring. This maybe could reduce the cognitive processing load, leaving more room for joy and engagement. In speechless CBC formats in particular, it seems sensible to either reduce visual complexity or introduce

complex scenes gradually in order to better maintain attention and emotional activation.

6.2.2 Persuasiveness and Attitude Formation (ELM & PKM)

The results can also be interpreted against the backdrop of the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM). The formal staging of the intro of the CBC video may support and activate more advertising awareness among recipients at an early stage, which could be reflected in a decline in joy-related emotional reactions already in the introductory phase. Even though individual recipients were aware that UGC formats are now also compensated or used strategically, this knowledge does not seem to fundamentally interrupt emotional engagement. Rather, the interplay of joy and engagement could indicate that UGC continues to be perceived as a personal experience report and thus triggers less of an advertising defence mechanism.

This finding can also be classified within the framework of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). Due to its information-rich and visually complex design, the CBC video tends to favour central processing, in which cognitive engagement is at the forefront. The UGC video, on the other hand, may activate more peripheral cues such as personal address, social interaction and narrative embedding, which supports more emotionally-driven processing. This classification is consistent with the results of the facial expression analysis. For the CBC video, however, the results indicate more cognitive processing, in which visual complexity and information density promote attention as well as processing but do not consistently translate into increased emotional activation.

6.2.3 Immersion and Credibility (Narrative Transportation & Source Credibility)

The superiority of the UGC format in terms of perceived brand authenticity can be explained against the backdrop of narrative transportation theory and source credibility theory.

The effectiveness of this narrative transportation can be further explained by Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (1977), according to which people learn new attitudes and behaviours primarily by observing others. Particularly effective in this regard are actors who exemplify experiences rather than merely explaining content. This approach promotes immersion in the narrative world and reduces resistance to the message (Green & Brock, 2000).

Against this background, the UGC video promotes an immersive viewing experience through the continuous active presence of a narrative protagonist who walks through the hotel, uses objects in the room, pets animals, etc., as well as through the narrative guidance provided by voice-over. In contrast, viewers of the CBC video more often remain in the role of distant observers of a staged setting. Although people are also present and sometimes active here, for example when preparing drinks or in social moments, the camera work remains observational and does not act as an accompanying perspective addressed by the person acting. The FEA results also show that the intensity of positive emotions in the CBC depends heavily on the type of action shown: the slower, simpler or more static the action performed, the lower the values for joy and engagement. More dynamic, everyday actions - even without a visible face, such as mixing a cocktail or moments of social interaction - are over all associated with higher emotional responses than calmly staged activities such as slowly gazing passively into the distance (CBC).

Against the backdrop of source credibility theory, it was to be expected that the UGC format would lead to higher trust values towards the person due to its perceived proximity and personality. However, this expectation was not confirmed. The results show no significant difference in perceived trustworthiness between UGC and CBC. Instead, the findings suggest that this perceived trust of and in the source levels off at a comparable level in both formats. While the person is in the foreground in the UGC format, the brand seems to generate trust in a similar way in the CBC format. In this sense, the person and the brand balance each other out in their effect on source perception. The findings suggest that trust in the source is not exclusively linked to personal proximity or the informal presentation, but can also arise through institutional

or professional framing. Thus, a central assumption of source credibility theory is not clearly confirmed in this context, but rather differentiated.

It is again important to note that source perception in this context refers specifically to trust in the person or individuals who created and presented the video, rather than to credibility or trust in the brand itself.

6.2.4 Classification within the Valence-Arousal Model

Russell's valence-arousal model is used to classify emotional response patterns theoretically. Aggregate positive valence is interpreted as the valence dimension, while engagement represents the dimension of emotional arousal.

UGC - Positive Valence

- fluctuates more strongly
- increases in social/interactive situations
- decreases, but recovers more quickly
- appears more emotionally lively

CBC - Positive Valence

- Overall calmer
- Fewer peaks
- Longer phases at low to medium levels
- No strong negativity, but also little dynamic

The emotional response patterns of the UGC video can be located in the valence-arousal model mainly in the range of moderate to high activation with simultaneous positive valence. Over long stretches of the video, increased engagement coincides with phases of positive valence, which indicates an emotionally activated state of reception. Although positive valence reactions do not occur continuously, they often coincide with phases of increased activation and rarely drop abruptly to a minimum. Overall, the UGC video thus exhibits a comparatively stable combination of activation and positive emotional evaluation, which suggests emotionally engaged reception.

The emotional response patterns of the CBC video show a less pronounced positive valence in the valence-arousal model, accompanied by more fluctuating activation. Although engagement shows several high peaks, these moments seldom trigger a similar rise in positive valence. Especially after the sharp drop in positive valence during the presentation of the breakfast buffet, valence remains subdued for long periods, while engagement continues to show scene-dependent peaks. This pattern indicates a stronger decoupling of activation and positive emotional evaluation.

Interpretation in the model:

UGC tends to fall within the right-hand middle to upper range of the model

→ positive & activating

CBC tends to move along the horizontal axis (neutral to slightly positive valence) with varying arousal

→ activating, but emotionally restrained

6.3 Practical Implications for Boutique Hotels

This study provides strategic insights for the marketing of boutique hotels, which often compete with established chains on limited budgets. The results show that the communicative impact depends less on technical perfection than on the functional design and narrative embedding of the content.

6.3.1 The “Efficiency Gap”: Authenticity as a Substitute for Quality

One key finding concerns the perception of brand quality. Contrary to the assumption that professionally curated content (CBC) significantly enhances the “perceived quality” of the brand, the data showed no significant differences in perceived quality between CBC (M = 4.41) and UGC (M = 4.22).

- **Marketing Budget Allocation:** The findings imply that for boutique hotels, high production quality alone is not a prerequisite for positive brand evaluation in social media marketing. Instead of prioritizing costly productions, resources may be more effectively allocated toward creating credible and authentic content.
- **Professional aesthetics as hygiene factor:** The professional aesthetics of CBC primarily serve as a hygiene factor. Although their presence is recognized as advertising, they do not lead to a proportional increase in booking intent directly after the video compared to the more cost-effective UGC.

6.3.2 Avoiding Visual Overload and Increasing Interaction

Emotion analysis highlights the risk of cognitive overload caused by overly complex scenes.

- **The buffet trap:** The largest and most detailed image, which was intended to be the highlight, led to a marked decline in enjoyment and engagement. High information density without sufficient narrative guidance seems to be counterproductive.
- **Activation through narrative:** Positive emotional peaks did not correlate with aesthetic complexity, but with interactive moments involving people (e.g. jumping on the bed, contact with animals)

6.3.4 Recommendation: “UGC-first, CBC-second”

Based on the results, a complementary division of labour between the two formats is recommended.

1. **Inspiration phase (UGC):** Due to its higher authenticity ($M = 4.28$) and clear preference in booking motivation (74.1% in direct comparison), UGC should serve as an emotional door opener in social media.

2. Information phase (CBC): According to the research results, CBC should be used specifically where visual conciseness and the detailed presentation of services (e.g. catering) are the focus. It serves to legitimise quality and provide factual orientation.

6.4 Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study was conducted in a controlled experimental setting with a specific sample, which may limit the transferability of the results to real-world booking situations. Emotional responses and content evaluations might differ under naturalistic viewing conditions.

Second, the analysis was based on a limited number of stimulus videos representing specific implementations of user-generated content and curated branded content. Accordingly, the observed effects may be influenced by characteristics of the selected boutique hotel, the creator, or the stylistic execution of the content.

Third, the study focused on short-term emotional reactions, attention patterns, and immediate preference measures, which do not allow conclusions about long-term brand effects or actual booking behavior. Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal or field-based designs.

In addition, eye-tracking comparisons between UGC and CBC should be interpreted with caution, as AOIs were defined in accordance with the formal characteristics of the specific content format in order to capture different visual and narrative processing aspects. While persons in UGC were defined as distinct AOIs, person-related content in CBC was often integrated into larger AOI. Accordingly, the analysis not only compared UGC and CBC directly.

6.5 Conclusion

Looking back, this brings us full circle to the relevance of the first digital impression described at the beginning: for independent boutique hotels, the choice of format is less a question of budget and more a question of targeted psychological impact. The

study provides insights that challenge some of the classic theoretical expectations. It is particularly surprising that technical perfection (CBC) does not offer a significant advantage in perceived brand quality over authentic UGC - a finding that clearly relativises the importance of such productions as the sole indicator of quality.

It is particularly noteworthy that, contrary to common theoretical assumptions about source credibility, user-generated content (UGC) was unable to achieve a statistically significant advantage over curated branded content (CBC) in terms of either brand credibility or source perception. Only in terms of authenticity was the UGC format able to stand out significantly. This leads to the conclusion that modern recipients have such a high level of media literacy that they already subliminally anticipate the increasing commercialisation and potential incentivisation of UGC creators. Even though the UGC format is perceived as more “authentic” in terms of style, ad recognition seems to level out the trust advantage over brand-owned content. Nevertheless, one of the key characteristic of UGC, namely authenticity, has not suffered as a result, which is also good to know for the future. Even if it becomes clearer that people are being compensated and the UGC creator industry is growing, this characteristic seems to not get lost.

Ultimately, this work shows that it is not technical brilliance but human connection and clear storytelling that are the decisive factors in the first digital brand contact.

7 References

- Aboalghanam, K. M., AlFraihat, S. F., & Tarabieh, S. (2025). The Impact of User-Generated Content on Tourist Visit Intentions: The Mediating Role of Destination Imagery. *Administrative Sciences, 15*(4), 117. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci15040117>
- Antony, J., Joseph, A., & Akhil, M. A. (n.d.). *Effect of user and firm-generated content on usage intention of sports brands across social media platforms.*
- Banyté, J., Pūkienė, I., & Dargytė, G. (2025). The role of consumers' visual attention stimuli in advertising: Traditional and neuromarketing research perspectives. *Innovative Marketing, 21*(1), 296–313. [https://doi.org/10.21511/im.21\(1\).2025.24](https://doi.org/10.21511/im.21(1).2025.24)
- Beckert, J. (2024). Friestad & Wright (1994): The Persuasion Knowledge Model. In O. Hoffjann & S. Sandhu (Eds), *Schlüsselwerke für die Strategische Kommunikationsforschung* (pp. 365–376). Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-45292-6_32
- Boerman, S. C., Willemsen, L. M., & Van Der Aa, E. P. (2017). “This Post is Sponsored” Effects of Sponsorship Disclosure on Persuasion Knowledge and Electronic Word of Mouth in the Context of Facebook. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 38*(1), 82–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2016.12.002>
- Calderón-Fajardo, V., Anaya-Sánchez, R., Rejón-Guardia, F., & Sebastian Molinillo. (2024). Neurotourism Insights: Eye Tracking and Galvanic Analysis of Tourism Destination Brand Logos and AI Visuals. *Tourism & Management Studies, 20*(3), 53–78. <https://doi.org/10.18089/tms.20240305>
- Donaghy, N. (2025, August 4). *How User-Generated Content Can Help Your Hotel.* <https://www.hospitalitynet.org/opinion/4128397.html?>
- Dong, H., Park, K. K., & Kim, J. M. (2025). The Role of Product Type in Online Review Generation and Perception: Implications for Consumer Decision-Making. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research, 20*(2), 135. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jtaer20020135>

- Edson Escalas, J. (2004). Narrative Processing: Building Consumer Connections to Brands. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 14*(1–2), 168–180.
https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp1401&2_19
- Eisend, M. (2006). *Source Credibility Dimensions in Marketing Communication – A Generalized Solution*.
- Eisend, M., & Tarrahi, F. (2022). Persuasion Knowledge in the Marketplace: A Meta-Analysis. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 32*(1), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1258>
- Elkins, D. M., & Webster, C. (2019, May). *USER-GENERATED CONTENT FOR MARKETING AND ADVERTISING* [Industry Trade Association Website].
<https://www.iab.com/>
- Frank, L. B., & Falzone, P. (Eds). (2021). *Entertainment-Education Behind the Scenes: Case Studies for Theory and Practice*. Springer International Publishing.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-63614-2>
- Gouda, R. M., & Halim, Y. T. (2025). The role of sustainable social media content in enhancing customer loyalty in the hospitality industry. *Future Business Journal, 11*(1), 130. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43093-025-00516-8>
- Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 79*(5), 701–721.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701>
- Hotelchamp Team. (2023, May 3). *How user-generated content can boost your hotel marketing strategy* [Hotel Marketing Company].
<https://www.hotelchamp.com/blog/user-generated-content-hotel-marketing-strategy?>
- Irimiás, A., Mitev, A. Z., & Michalkó, G. (2021). Narrative transportation and travel: The mediating role of escapism and immersion. *Tourism Management Perspectives, 38*, 100793. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2021.100793>
- Ke, S., Zulkiffli, W. F. B. W., Hong, L. M., & Bin, J. (2025). A meta-analysis of eWOM and booking intention: Investigation of the moderating role of platform type and research

- region. *Multidisciplinary Science Journal*, 7(12), 2025561.
<https://doi.org/10.31893/multiscience.2025561>
- Keller, K. L. (1993). Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity. *Journal of Marketing*, 57(1), 1–22.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299305700101>
- Kitsios, F., Mitsopoulou, E., Moustaka, E., & Kamariotou, M. (2022). User-Generated Content in Social Media: A Twenty-Year Bibliometric Analysis in Hospitality. *Information*, 13(12), 574. <https://doi.org/10.3390/info13120574>
- Mayrhofer, M., Matthes, J., Einwiller, S., & Naderer, B. (2020). User generated content presenting brands on social media increases young adults' purchase intention. *International Journal of Advertising*, 39(1), 166–186.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1596447>
- Mikalef, P., Sharma, K., Pappas, I. O., & Giannakos, M. (2021). Seeking Information on Social Commerce: An Examination of the Impact of User- and Marketer-generated Content Through an Eye-tracking Study. *Information Systems Frontiers*, 23(5), 1273–1286. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10796-020-10034-3>
- Moulard, J. G., Raggio, R. D., & Folse, J. A. G. (2016). Brand Authenticity: Testing the Antecedents and Outcomes of Brand Management's Passion for its Products. *Psychology & Marketing*, 33(6), 421–436. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20888>
- Nabih, A. A., & Alhosseiny, H. M. (2024). The Impact of Brand Authenticity on Purchasing Intention: The Mediating Role of Brand Trust. *The Review of Contemporary Scientific and Academic Studies*, 4(7). <https://doi.org/10.55454/rcsas.4.07.2024.008>
- Nkosana, T. (2022). *Adoption of social media for effective marketing by micro-hospitality businesses in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa* [Doctor of Philosophy in Management Sciences Specialising in Hospitality and Tourism Management, Durban University of Technology]. <https://doi.org/10.51415/10321/4723>

- Paiva Neto, A., Lopes Da Silva, E. A., Ferreira, L. V. F., & Araújo, J. F. R. (2020). Discovering the sustainable hotel brand personality on TripAdvisor. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology*, 11(2), 241–254. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JHTT-05-2019-0076>
- Pakhalov, A., & Piont, I. (2021). *Online Reviews and Generation Z's Hotel Choice: Evidence from an Eye-Tracking Study*.
- Pessoa, L. (2008). On the relationship between emotion and cognition. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 9(2), 148–158. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn2317>
- Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (n.d.). *THE ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL OF PERSUASION*.
- Piriyakul, I., Kunathikornkit, S., & Piriyakul, R. (2024). Evaluating brand equity in the hospitality industry: Insights from customer journeys and text mining. *International Journal of Information Management Data Insights*, 4(2), 100245. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijime.2024.100245>
- Ramos, E. C., & Ramos, C. M. Q. (2025). User-Generated Content and Its Impact on Purchase Intent for Tourism Products: A Comparative Analysis of Millennials and Centennials on TikTok. *Future Internet*, 17(3), 105. <https://doi.org/10.3390/fi17030105>
- Reber, R., Schwarz, N., & Winkielman, P. (2004). Processing Fluency and Aesthetic Pleasure: Is Beauty in the Perceiver's Processing Experience? *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 8(4), 364–382. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0804_3
- Russell, J. A. (1980). A circumplex model of affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39(6), 1161–1178. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0077714>
- Sadoski, M., & Paivio, A. (2013). A Dual Coding theoretical Model of reading. *D. E.*
- Santos, S., Ferreira, S., & Vasconcelos, M. (2024). User-Generated Content in Tourism: Could it impact Brand Equity and Intention to Visit? *European Conference on Social Media*, 11(1), 235–242. <https://doi.org/10.34190/ecsm.11.1.2271>

- Van Dat, N., Hoang, C. C., & Khoa, B. T. (2025). User-Generated Content, Online Trust, and Purchase Intention: An Empirical Study of Social Commerce Platforms. *Jurnal The Messenger*, 17(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.26623/themessenger.v17i1.11268>
- Wang, W., & Iahad, N. A. (2025). Gen Z and Social Media: Shaping Tourism and Hospitality Behavior: A Thematic and Bibliometric Review. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 15(6), Pages 918-936. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i6/25602>
- Yang, J., Teran, C., Battocchio, A. F., Bertellotti, E., & Wrzesinski, S. (2021). Building Brand Authenticity on Social Media: The Impact of Instagram Ad Model Genuineness and Trustworthiness on Perceived Brand Authenticity and Consumer Responses. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 21(1), 34–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2020.1860168>

8 List of Used Tools and Declaration of Authorship

List of Tools

Various IT and AI-supported writing tools were utilized in the creation of this Bachelor's thesis to enhance the efficiency, clarity, and quality of the research and drafting process. The following tools were employed:

1. ChatGPT (GPT-4o) by OpenAI (<https://chat.openai.com>): This large language model was used to obtain suggestions for clearer sentence structures, to verify spelling and grammar, and to assist in paraphrasing complex citations.
2. Turnitin via HNU (<https://hnu.turnitin.com>): To ensure the uniqueness of this thesis, the plagiarism detection tool "Turnitin" was used. It performed comprehensive similarity checks and identified potential sources of text overlaps to maintain academic integrity.
3. NotebookLM (<https://notebooklm.google.com>): This AI-powered research assistant was used to organize source material, summarize key findings from uploaded documents, and assist in synthesizing complex information during the literature review phase.
4. DeepL Translator (<https://www.deepl.com>): DeepL was utilized exclusively as a translation aid for specific technical terms and literature. No AI-based generative text features of DeepL were used; it served solely as a linguistic bridge for non-native source material.

The use of these tools was conducted in accordance with the academic guidelines and regulations of the Neu-Ulm University of Applied Sciences (HNU). Any impact of these tools on the content of the thesis was carefully reviewed, and they were used exclusively to improve the clarity and quality of the scientific research. The transparent listing of these aids ensures that the integrity and originality of this thesis are respected.

Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare that I have authored this thesis independently and used no sources or aids other than those specifically indicated. All passages taken verbatim or in spirit from literature or other sources, such as websites, have been clearly marked as citations with the appropriate source reference.