

**An exploratory study of international students'  
perceptions of social media marketing and impacts on  
purchasing intention of adventure tourism in New  
Zealand after COVID-19**

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## **Abstract**

In the world of e-commerce, the role and application of social media has been shown to have significant impacts on tourists' decision-making and tourism management and operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study is to investigate international students' online searching behaviours and the impacts of social media content on their purchase intentions towards adventure tourism products in New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 international students in Auckland, New Zealand. Results showed that both types of social media content (i.e. firm-generated content and user generated content) have significant impacts on purchase intention. Specifically, informative firm generated content and persuasive user generated content were found to be influential in travellers' trip-planning processes. This research finding contributes to the academic literature and practice by demonstrating customer behaviour changes and the strategic importance of social media marketing for tourism competitiveness.

**Keywords:** social media content, firm-generated content, user-generated content, adventure tourism, attitude, purchase intention, COVID-19.

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## **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

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Date: 16 June 2021

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# **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

This research considered issues around social media marketing and impacts on the purchasing intention of adventure tourists in New Zealand, specifically for international students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter provides an overview of the research by providing a background discussion of the general impacts of COVID-19, the significance of the study, and an explanation of the purpose of the research. This is followed by a presentation of the research aims and the research questions that the study aimed to answer. Lastly, the structure of the dissertation is explained.

## **1.1. Research background**

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has erupted in a deleterious and unprecedented global crisis, resulting in drastic financial losses along with rigorous travel restrictions and country lockdowns implemented to halt the coronavirus spread (Matiza, 2020). The impact of the pandemic on tourism has been unavoidable, irrespective of nationality or region (Wen et al., 2020). For instance, The Centre for Asia Pacific Aviation (CAPA) estimated that half of the world's airlines (approximately 800 companies) would be closed without financial help from governments, and the hotel industry across the world collapsed or properties transformed into public spaces (Gavira, 2020). Furthermore, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) predicted a 20% to 30% decrease in international tourist arrivals due to the pandemic. The magnitude of this drop is unprecedented, even compared to past crises such as the global economic crisis in 2007 and 2008, which caused only a 4% of decline in arrivals, and the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak from 2002 to 2004, with a drop of 0.4% in international arrivals (UNWTO, 2020).

While all types of tourism are facing dire challenges, adventure tourism is a major sufferer in the COVID-19 crisis (Matiza, 2020). New Zealand has long been renowned for adventure tourism, particularly in Queenstown in the South Island (Bentley et al., 2000). According to Tourism New Zealand (2013), over 500,000 international tourists participated in adventure activities when visiting New Zealand. These adventure tourists represented 52% of the tourism market in New Zealand and resulted in a total of NZ\$1.6 billion tourists' expenditure on adventure tourism products. Unfortunately, the industry was severely affected by COVID-19, but the impacts on adventure tourism in New Zealand are yet to be discovered.

After every catastrophe, tourism recovery is concentrated on assessing public perceptions through information and communication channels (Chemli et al., 2020). Prior literature has validated that media play a crucial role in tourists' visit intentions and destination image (Gartner & Shen, 1992; Mason et. al., 2021). Even though the tourism and hospitality businesses are experiencing a downturn, scholars have revealed a direct correlation between tourism decision-making and increased social media searches during the pandemic (Naeem, 2020). Plessis and Fabricius (2020) discovered that people are spending 29% more time on social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram in the post-coronavirus world. Cooper (2021) added that 87% of millennials used Facebook for travel inspiration and predicted that social media use will increase to about 3.1 billion people globally in the next two years. Mason et. al. (2021) collected 327 surveys in the United States of America (USA), examining the impacts of COVID-19 on customers' social media marketing behaviours, and found increased utilisation of social media as a vital tool for decision-making behaviours in terms of identifying products, searching for product information, evaluating alternatives, and making purchase decisions. Additionally, the World Travel Market (2020) found that 43% of social media users had shown actual purchase behaviour by "liking" a photo on Facebook, Twitter, or Pinterest. It is apparent that consumers have shifted their reliance to online information for purchase decision-making (Wen et al., 2020). Thus, it is essential for marketers to create social media presences to establish and promote their brands on the internet, especially during this challenging time of COVID-19, while social distancing is common practice (Mason et. al., 2021).

## **1.2. Purpose and the significance of the study**

By introducing travel restrictions during the pandemic, social media became a decisive channel for encouraging preventive measures with accurate information to reduce misinformation and public anxiety (UNWTO, 2020). Travel and tourism companies are now focusing more than ever before on social media and digital channels, to connect directly with their customers as part of their marketing strategy. Sullivan (2020) predicted that digital advertising budgets would increase by up to 78% by the end of 2021, as businesses try to communicate to consumers the best way, during the pandemic. Social media platforms will become increasingly crucial in terms of firms' product promotion, as well as assisting consumers' information searches associated with travel during the COVID-19 era (Naeem,

2020). As such, it is crucial to investigate the influence of social media coverage on potential tourists' attitudes to tourism consumption during the crisis (Chemli et al., 2020).

While the influential and thriving usage of social media has attracted both scholars' and industry practitioners' interests in research, the COVID-19 pandemic is a recent global phenomenon and the understanding of its impact on social media marketing is still in its infancy. As the pandemic has precipitated behavioural changes such as consumer consumption patterns and decision-making behaviours, it is vital to predict future trends and development in tourism during the COVID-19 crisis (Wen et al., 2020). With this in mind, this study attempted to identify international tourists' online searching behaviours and investigate social media advertising content that can predict purchase intentions in relation to adventure tourism products in New Zealand. The study aimed to answer the following questions:

- (1) What are international students' awareness and searching behaviours of social media marketing content, in relation to New Zealand's adventure tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- (2) How can social media marketing content influence the purchasing intention of adventure tourism products?

The two objectives of this research were:

- (1) to identify international students' information searching behaviours for adventure tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- (2) to investigate the impacts of firm generated content and user generated content on participants' purchase intentions in relation to adventure tourism products in New Zealand after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Using a qualitative methodology, the study targeted 12 international students in New Zealand with semi-structured interviews for data collection. The empirical data were analysed using thematic analysis techniques, to identify the answers to the research questions. This study intended to contribute to social media marketing literature and provide some initial insights for tourism practitioners, to help them competitively tailor their social media strategies for the post-COVID-19 recovery period.

### **1.3. Dissertation structure**

This dissertation is structured as follows: Chapter 1 introduces the background and significance of the research. Chapter 2 reviews related literature on social media marketing, attitudes, purchase intentions, and adventure tourism. Data collection and analysis are discussed in Chapter 3, and Chapter 4 presents the empirical results generated from the thematic analysis. Chapter 5 summarises and discusses the research findings, and Chapter 6 provides the conclusions of the study, with research implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 2 – Literature Review

### 2.1. Introduction

In order to answer the research questions and achieve the research objectives, a comprehensive understanding of social media marketing and adventure tourism was sought through a literature review. Therefore, this chapter first defines and describes the usage of social media marketing, then introduces the subcategories of social media marketing content, which are firm-generated content (FGC) and user-generated content (UGC). Then, explanations of tourists' attitudes and the interrelation of attitudes and purchase intentions are reviewed. Thirdly, this chapter provides a background to adventure tourism and addresses the relationship between adventure tourism and social media marketing. Lastly, the conceptual framework constructed to guide the research project is presented.

### 2.2. Social media marketing

The emergence of social media brought a revolution in consumer purchasing habits and a dynamic market structure, which reformed not just conventional communication devices and their content, but also the relationships in business to consumer (B2C) and consumer to consumer (C2C) communications (Bai & Yan, 2020). *Social media* refers to any online platforms, media, and applications that facilitate interaction, cooperation, and information sharing through videos, texts, and pictures (Erkan & Evans, 2016). This effortless and instant nature of communication has been recognised as an effective mechanism for firms' marketing, assisting with product sales promotions, brand image improvement, marketing costs reduction, brand loyalty, and brand awareness enhancement. Social media interactions also allow marketers to investigate consumers' perceptions of and attitudes to a company (Alalwan et al., 2017; Wan & Ren, 2017). Such firm applications in social platforms can be defined as *social media marketing*. This refers to the utilisation of an online community, or fan or brand pages on networking sites such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, to create and exchange product-related content that provides value for all organisation stakeholders (Tuten et al., 2015).

Social media marketing is a strategy to fulfil the purposes of firm's product promotions and customer relationship management (Bai & Yan, 2020). It has long been deemed to be the newest generation of corporate marketing, as it provides updated information in real-time to

achieve maximal marketing results (Bianchi & Andrews, 2015). It also offers the opportunity for information transmission, as users post and share their experiences online. Customers consider credible social media user-generated content platforms before making their purchase decisions (Leung et al., 2019). A feature of social media communications is that it allows enterprises to form social comparisons, as they can create social pressures on customers with social media content, against which they can evaluate their own behaviours (Allcott, 2011). Scholars have proven the effectiveness of social media marketing on customer behaviours. Hynes and Wilson (2016) observed that viral marketing has positive impacts on individuals' purchase intentions. Bai and Yan (2020) found that firm marketing behaviours such as information receptivity, intensity, and richness, positively affect customers' purchasing attention. Xie and Lee (2015) collected data from 12-months of brand purchase records and fan pages on Facebook and discovered that brand-related activities on social media have significant influences on enhancing customers' likelihood to purchase a product. In addition, Tuten et al. (2015) found that social media marketing can serve as a type of persuasion to consumers, and advertising content can be further divided into firm-generated content (FGC) and user-generated content (UGC).

### **2.3. Firm-generated content (FGC)**

Given the importance of positive customer experience creation, marketers are sensitive to their communication content and reactions from the message receivers. The flexibility of social media allows firms to create and disseminate content in any form through different platforms; such content is known as "firm-generated content." This refers to all firm-initiated information presenting certain products on the internet with the expectation of enhancing brand visibility and awareness (Kumar et al., 2016). Bai and Yan (2020) analysed the impact of FGC at the firm level and individual level and discovered that FGC positively fostered customer engagement and purchase intention of a brand at the individual level. Bronner and Hoog (2010) concluded that FGC can act as an authoritative information source for consumers' decision-making processes. Liaukonyte et al. (2015) further proposed that FGC can be classified as informative and persuasive.

#### ***2.3.1. Informative firm-generated content***

*Informative firm-generated content* refers to any factual information on the functions and nature of certain products that could lower consumers' uncertainty (Gaber & Wright, 2014).

Informative firm-generated content mainly mentions product performance or attributes that are useful for consumer purchase decisions, for instance, product details, prices, and usability (Wan & Ren, 2017). Tuten et al. (2015) stressed the importance of publishing appropriate and plentiful product-related content that can satisfy customers' information needs and thereby trigger their confidence and desire to purchase. Hence, an understanding of different types of informative content is necessary for marketers to generate effective advertising content.

Recent research conducted by Bai and Yan (2020) summarised the trends and usage of firm-generated content from 53,840 posts on Sina Microblog, and categorised six types of informative content: *product mention* addresses the descriptions of specific products including their name and characteristics; *product location* provides information about where consumers can obtain the product, such as a physical store or internet link; *brand mention* presents the background or story related to the organisation's name; *deal* illustrates all price-related information, including free products or discounts; *target* refers to all other messages intended for the targeted audience; and *sponsorship* introduces information related to partnerships or patronage of the product. The research further noted that brand, product (mention and location), and target, are frequently used by firms as effective informative advertising content. Anand and Shachar (2011) observed that informative advertisements match consumers with products, and boosts actual purchases, thus creating positive net product sales. Wan and Ren (2017) added that informative content is more influential for stimulating product sales than is persuasive content, especially in relation to sales of high-involvement products. Consumers tend to make more information searches when purchasing high-involvement products because of their high risk or value, such as in tourism products. Tourism products are intangible services that cannot be consumed or experienced prior to purchase (Andereck, 2016). Thus, information related to product or service features are undoubtedly crucial for tourists in their decision-making processes. Since customers are largely reliant on advertising content for information, informative FGC is particularly important in successful social media marketing, especially in the field of tourism and hospitality.

### **2.3.2. Persuasive firm-generated content**

While informative FGC tends to be product-oriented information, persuasive FGC is more brand-personality oriented (Bai & Yan, 2020). *Persuasive firm-generated content* is the information that highlights the positive and favourable features of products to instil a pleasant

attitude and enhance evaluations in consumers, thereby encouraging final purchase expenditure (Wu et al., 2009). Persuasive FGC presumes consumers with prior product knowledge but yet to be convinced by the product benefits or be able to distinguish it from market alternatives (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

Since the number of likes on social media represent consumers' attitudes and the popularity of products in the internet world, marketers need to interpret relevant marketing content to advance consumer engagement, because frequent interaction could provide opportunities for future product sales (Lee et al., 2018). Notably, Goh et al. (2013) proved that brand-personality related content can promote a high intensity of consumer engagement and reinforce a close relationship with consumers as compared to informative content. Cvijikj and Michahelles (2013) confirmed the importance of persuasive content as a determinant in increasing the number of comments, likes, and retweets, on social media content, and that such interaction can generate a sense of identification and existence in consumers (Bai & Yan, 2020). Hence, the inclusion of persuasive content is a prerequisite for corporate advertising on social media.

Apart from the aforementioned usage of informative content, Bai and Yan (2020) also proposed seven types of persuasive FGC: a *remark fact* highlights the prominence and remarkable facts of the product; *emotion* relates to content consistent with the brand image rather than the product itself, and is often distributed daily with a specific theme; an *emoticon* illustrates a non-word form of content, such as internet slang or emojis (pictograms used in social media content); a *holiday mention* serves as a reminder for public holidays and occasions; *philanthropic* content shows activist and charitable messages; *interaction* conducts interactive activities with users, for example, Q&A (questions and answers) and polls; and *friendly reminders* distribute warm messages to users to show the appearance of a brand or product. Additionally, their study results indicated that emotion, sponsorship, and friendly reminders, are the top three persuasive forms of content implemented by firms. *Emotion* refers to the interactive content used according to a firm's culture and characteristics, to connect consumers at an emotional and spiritual level. A *friendly reminder* expresses a humanistic concern and offers a warm companionship with consumers. While "sponsorship" demonstrates the extent of a firm's enthusiasm for social or business activities, it was found that selecting appropriate sponsorship practices can easily gain consumers' recognition and consequently encourage their purchase intentions (Bai & Yan, 2020). Efficacious persuasive



content can establish a positive corporate image, provoke consumers' emotion, increase the sense of intimacy, and convince purchase intention, thereby increasing product sales (Liaukonyte et al., 2015). Thus, further to informative FGC, persuasive FGC also plays a prominent role in social media marketing,

Even though each type of FGC information generates marketing effects, it is important to embrace both types in corporate advertising strategies. All types of content have been proven to have significant impacts on customers' purchase behaviours and firms' financial return (Lee et al., 2018). For instance, Goh et al. (2013) examined the effect of FGC at individual customer level by analysing qualitative data from customer transaction records and brand communities on Facebook and Twitter. Their research found that both informative and persuasive content have a significant influence on consumers' actual purchase behaviour. Scholars have also proven a solid relationship between informative and persuasive information. On the one hand, informative content assures consumers' confidence in products, encouraging feedback and reinforcing their trust in the persuasive content (Abernethy & Franke, 1996). On the other hand, persuasive content enhances the relationship between consumers and firms, strengthening the positive effects of informative data on consumer engagement (Goh et al., 2013). In other words, consumers can not only obtain relevant product knowledge and timely information of newly developed products via online marketing content but are also instilled with a positive attitude while firms maintain positive consumer relations and present corporate social responsibility (Bai & Yan, 2020). Hence, informative and persuasive information are inseparable in maximising the effect of social media marketing.

While prior literature on marketing content has discovered that informative content has less sales effectiveness than does persuasive content on traditional media platforms such as magazines and television, no consistent conclusion has been drawn on the effect of both communication types on new media platforms, either in practice or theory (Bai & Yan, 2020; Holmes & Desselle, 2004). For example, Tucker (2015) found that profitable product sales were generated via persuasive advertising content, whereas Lee et al. (2018) and Goh et al. (2013) claimed that the effectiveness of digital marketing content on sales was generally more informative rather than persuasive. Despite the fact that there is a substantial body of literature verifying the impact of FGC on consumer behaviour and firm performance, investigations in the tourism industry are relatively few. For instance, Hernández-Ortega et

al. (2020) examined the influence of FGC on popularity in a tourism destination and discovered that the day of publication, the vividness and elaborateness of FGC moderated the power of affective image on the popularity of content posted by a destination marketing organisation (DMO). Liang et al. (2020) collected secondary data from the Airbnb holiday rental company in Hong Kong to analyse the influences of FGC on tourists' decisions to post reviews and found that detailed and comprehensive FGC related to the accommodation, increased the volume of reviews. In the airline industry, Pasupa and Cheramakara (2019) investigated the activity and purpose of three low-cost carriers in Thailand using FGC on social media and reported that sales generation and brand image building were the main reasons to actively engage in FGC. Despite discussions on the usage of FGC in different contexts of the tourism and hospitality industry, no research has investigated tourists' purchase intentions of tourism products, and in particular, studies in an adventure tourism context are insufficient. Using the extant literature as a framework, this research attempts to update and finalise results on the effects of marketing content on social media platforms, by separating informative and persuasive firm-generated content and applying it to the concept of adventure tourism in New Zealand during the COVID-19 crisis.

#### **2.4. User-generated content (UGC)**

While firms are devoted to promoting their brand, consumers are also interested in value creation (Schuckert et al., 2015). Customers can now conveniently and immediately post plentiful information on social networking sites such as forums, review sites and blogs (Liu et al., 2013). Social media networks have created neutral and user-friendly platforms where consumers can independently contribute to commercial communication; the messages distributed on these platforms are called "user-generated content" (Kirtis & Karahan, 2011). *User-generated content* is defined as media impressions produced by the general public, which include any form of information that is consumed, circulated, and created by former customers (Kim & Johnson, 2016). User-generated contents are marketing strategies perceived as authentic and overcoming mistrust in FGC marketing, consequently enhancing consumers' intentions to purchase and further recommend the products (Kirtis & Karahan, 2011).

Consumptions in the tourism industry are largely subject to asymmetric information and product uncertainty due to the impossibility of generating direct experience with the tourism service, meaning that the perceived benefits and quality of tourism products can barely be

evaluated prior to consumption (Liu & Park, 2015; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008). Consistent with the nature of high-priced, well-differentiated and high-involvement tourism products, tourists are generally able to source travel information to overcome any perceived risks in their trip-planning process (Jeng & Fesenmaier, 2002; Kim & Johnson, 2016). Of all the communication tools, word-of-mouth (WOM) has been deemed as the paramount external information channel for trip planning due to its high perceived authenticity and credibility (Schuckert et al., 2015). From the consumers' perspectives, WOM is considered to be a trustworthy and useful information source because of its independence of subjective commercial interests from official websites (Kirtis & Karahan, 2011). User-generated content, also named "electronic word-of-mouth" (eWOM), is an advanced type of WOM that appears when consumers provide feedback or referrals for a brand or product on the internet; prevalent forms of eWOM are online ratings and reviews (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). The major difference between traditional WOM and eWOM is that electronic referrals offer an easy and comprehensive information access that goes beyond the boundaries of social circles (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In summary, tourists can acquire detailed, non-commercial, and experiential travel information around the world instead of being limited to information from their friends and relatives (Yoo & Gretzel, 2011).

It is apparent that UGC is a vigorous information source influencing consumers' purchase evaluation (Browning et al., 2013). In the tourism context, Leung et al. (2013) confirmed the significant role of UGC on social media in the three phases of travel-planning process: the pre-trip phase, during-trip phase and after-trip phase. In the pre-trip phase, UGC functions to satisfy tourists' needs for information and recognition. Huang et al. (2010) posited that collecting relevant travel information is the primary motivation for tourists to use UGC on social media. Because of the aforementioned nature of uncertainty and intangibility in tourism and hospitality products, UGC is ideal for equipping tourists with comprehensive knowledge and assurance of specific tourism products (Liu & Park, 2015). An online survey of 1,500 TripAdvisor users was conducted by Gretzel and Yoo (2008) revealed that the most frequently used source of information was that of comments from other travellers on travel review sites. Similarly, Zhu and Zhang (2010) discovered that 89% of millennials plan travel activities based on the online content posted by their peers, validating the importance of UGC in travellers' trip-planning processes.

In the during-trip planning stage, the role of UGC serves to evaluate alternatives and help make purchasing decisions for tourists (Leung et al., 2013). Several studies have affirmed the impact of UGC in travel-related purchases. For instance, McCarthy et al. (2010) confirmed the influence of UGC on evolving tourist preferences in making hotel choices. Similarly, Schuckert et al. (2015) found that 70% of travellers perceived UGC as vital information sources for their holiday plans and that favourable online reviews increase travellers' likelihood to book the reviewed hotel. Schuckert et al. (2015) stated that stories can encourage the targeted audience to visualise a product or service consumption, and Tussyadiah et al. (2011) suggested that UGC on social media helps consumers obtain relevant information by realising the coherence in the story, which generates motivations and tendencies to choose the tourism destination in the story. In other words, UGC can effectively trigger tourists' visit or purchase intentions towards tourism destinations or products. Leung et al. (2013) claimed that purchase intentions would be established when tourists recognise that the present consumption can generate positive outcomes similar to their past purchase experience. Self-identification when reviewing and reading others' travel stories were found to be forceful in affecting tourists' intentions to consume tourism products (Tussyadiah et al., 2011).

In the post-trip sharing phase, UGC on social media sites is used for post-purchase behaviour (Leung et al., 2013). Since social media platforms are not static, but rather interactive and collaborative, consumers can actively engage in the creation and enhancement of content (Kirtis & Karahan, 2011). Fotis et al. (2011) studied 346 Russian internet users and found that social media are extensively used for sharing travel-related UGC after holidays. Furthermore, Carnoy (2017) claimed that 97% of millennials will share pictures and videos of their tour experiences online, which can build an influential web of peer-to-peer content to inspire potential consumers. In addition, travel-related UGC postings after holidays were found effective in enriching the whole trip experience (Kim & Tussyadiah, 2013). In summary, a close connection exists between tourists and social media platforms. While tourists generate UGC to share their travel experiences and satisfaction with tourism products on social media networks, UGC posted by other users affects tourists' attitudes, purchase intentions and thereby their decision-making behaviours (Leung et al., 2019).

This voluntary behaviour of customers not only provides free information to assist others' travel planning processes, but also encourages hospitality firms to improve and strengthen

their products' quality (Chen & Xie, 2008). Recent secondary research by Nisar et al. (2020) examined the impact of eWOM on firm reputation and found that UGC is crucial for facilitating consumer engagement and firm performance. The results showed that not only does an information-rich referral community have greater likelihood for consumers to share their feelings with each other, but this UGC also offers reputation benefits for firms, as it synthesises information related to a company's actions, intentions, and behaviours, from the consumers' points of view (Leung et al., 2019). In summary, UGC plays a vital role in the way businesses are managed and is reflected in a firm's reputation and image building, consumer acquisition and retention, quality assurance, and product development (Nisar et al., 2020).

As tourists are now largely reliant on UGC as their main source of information, studies to date have stressed the impacts of UGC adoption. However, research on the effectiveness of UGC in the field of adventure tourism is still insufficient, given its importance in the tourism sector.

## **2.5. Tourists' attitude towards social media marketing**

Evaluating the effects of attitude to understand consumer behaviour, is an essential aspect of service marketing (Jayawardhena, 2004). *Attitude* has been widely defined as an individual's subjective evaluations of and behavioural beliefs in toured objects in which a favourable or unfavourable judgement determines subsequent behaviours (Klopping et al., 2004). From a marketing perspective, attitude serves as a knowledge function, which means it is formed when consumers organise their beliefs and values towards a brand or product and thereby induce a corresponding purchase reaction (Grewal et al., 2000). *Brand attitude* is built from exposure to a product and refers to the consumers' knowledge of the brand's symbolic and functional attributes via the physical product experience or designed marketing content (Wang et al., 2019a).

The emergence of social media has changed in every aspect of life, especially in the area of online marketing practices in relation to consuming habits (Adila et al., 2020). Indeed, various studies have addressed the effect of social media marketing on consumers' perceptions, as these effects are induced by a positive attitude is fundamental to the actual purchase decision (Talih et al., 2017). For example, e-WOM as one of the user-generated content forms in social media communication, was found to effectively influence consumers'

attitudes. Recent research by Adila et al. (2020) analysed 300 questionnaires in Indonesia and confirmed that e-WOM for obtaining fashion product information on Instagram positively affected consumers' brand attitudes toward e-commerce. Likewise, Thomas (2020) investigated the significance of UGC in brand management to the functions of pioneering, informing, co-creating, and co-communicating, by reaching 118 Instagram users. The research result indicated a strong and positive correlation between UGC and consumers' brand attitudes. In a tourism context, Sharif and Mura (2019) analysed 120 surveys from six Iranian travel communities on Facebook and found that users' Facebook stories and online page popularity could create positive attitudes and intentions towards visiting Iran. Despite the extant research, studies of adventure travellers' attitudes toward social media marketing during the coronavirus pandemic are still lacking.

Notwithstanding the fact that previous studies have generally explored the influence of UGC on consumers' attitudes, limited attention has been given to the FGC perspective. Previous research on the impact of FGC has concentrated on corporate social responsibility (Badenes-Rocha et al., 2019; Dunn & Harness, 2019), customer relationship management (Meire et al., 2019; Nisar & Prabhakar, 2018), sponsorship effectiveness (Human et al., 2018), consumer spending, profitability, and cross-buying (Kumar et al., 2016; Rishika et al., 2013), and firm reputation and performance (Bai & Yan, 2020; Nisar et al., 2020; Swain & Cao, 2014), however, research on the relationship between FGC and consumer attitudes has yet to be undertaken. While online advertising is advised as a form of persuasion, consumers' attitudes towards marketing content become a principal component in the persuasive communication process and marketers should be clear about the determinants of such interactions that induce a positive attitude (Human et al., 2018). Therefore, this study identifies what marketing contents (FGC or/and UGC) affect consumers' attitudes to participating in adventure tourism in New Zealand.

## **2.6. Attitude and purchase intention**

*Purchase intention* can be defined as the psychological state of a consumer's desire to purchase a certain product or service (Lee & Olafsson, 2009), and reflects the possibility and probability of an actual buying reaction (Ochi et al., 2010). Previous studies have affirmed that a favourable consumer's attitude towards a brand can significantly influence their buying purpose and readiness to offer a premium price (Kim et al., 2009; Kudeshia & Kumar, 2017; Lee, 2009; Lin & Lu, 2000; Wu & Wang, 2011). In the virtual environment, consumer

involvement with a brand's social media can inherently form a positive brand attitude in consumers, which in turn affects future purchase intentions. However, the involvement itself does not have a direct impact on their intention to choose a brand (McClure & Seock, 2020; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2013; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). That is to say, brand attitude is regarded as an indicator of behavioural intentions (Keller & Lehmann, 2006).

In a tourism and hospitality context, previous studies have also demonstrated the indivisible relationship between attitudes to social media applications, and behavioural intention. For instance, the extant literature has found the effectiveness of social networking sites affects tourists' attitudes to choose a particular tourism destination (Lim et al., 2017; Narangajavana et al., 2017), and the influences of social media factors on tourists' attitudes to rural tourism (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; San Martin & Herrero, 2012). There is also considerable research on travellers' purchase intentions that based on different destinations, such as Malaysia (Hua et al., 2017), Vietnam (Khuong & Huong, 2016), Greece (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017) and Jordan (Alghizzawi et al., 2018; Alnsour et al., 2018). Nevertheless, there is absent literature focusing on the impact of social media marketing on purchase intentions in an adventure tourism context, especially in relation to the behavioural changes of tourists during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, there is a need for relevant research to contribute to both theory and tourism practice.

## **2.7. Adventure tourism**

*Adventure travel* refers to a leisure trip with outdoor activities, often associated with high levels of personal challenges and emotional arousals involving controlled danger or perceived risk in an exotic, wilderness, or remote destination (Williams & Soutar, 2009). This form of tourism contains the three fundamental elements of physical activity, cultural exchange, and nature engagement, and these constitute the entire travel experience (Adventure Travel Trade Association, 2020). Adventure tourism can be categorised as either soft or hard. Soft adventure travel involves low-risk adventure activities with no prior experience and knowledge required, such as birdwatching, canoeing, and camping. In contrast, hard adventure travel offers high-risk adventure sports that require laborious physical exertion, specialised safety equipment, skills, and knowledge, and includes trekking, scuba diving, ice or rock climbing, and caving (Gardiner & Kwek, 2017). Due to hard adventure tourists'

tendency to explore untraversed areas that are distinct from mainstream destinations, they are deemed the pathfinders for the prosperity of adventure tourism (Rantala et al., 2018).

Adventure tourists are mostly motivated by goals such as challenge, wellness, and transformation. They tend to be affluent, well-educated, young, and active thrill seekers willing to spend money on adventure sports (Swarbrooke et al., 2003). Williams and Soutar (2009) argued that adventure tourists are often discerning and demanding consumers keen to visit extreme and remote areas to satisfy their needs for excitement, emotional highs, challenge, novelty, and risk. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of their socio-psychological consumption and decision-making processes can help regional governments and tourism businesses with their future development plans.

According to the *Global report on adventure tourism* (UNWTO, 2014), adventure tourism is a renowned subset of the tourism industry, and the demand is likely to grow continually as outbound travel increases. A variety of adventure tourism products and destinations have evolved to cater to the needs of adventure travellers. For instance, the adventure tourism in Queenstown, has given it the reputation of being the adventure capital of the world. As the home of bungee jumping and Shotover Jet, Queenstown has more than 300 registered adventure activity businesses (Bentley et al., 2000; Worksafe, 2010). According to the *Adventure tourism development index* published by the Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) (2012), adventure tourism has an important role in the marketing image of “100% Pure New Zealand” and is ranked as the second most sustainable market in the success of New Zealand’s tourism industry. Similarly, recent research conducted by the ATTA (2020) found that New Zealand still has strong potential for adventure tourism competitiveness. New Zealand’s adventure tourism is now ranked third in the world, with the first being the east Asia and Pacific region. With such development potential, it is important to conduct more studies on adventure tourism in New Zealand.

A considerable number of studies have been conducted on adventure tourism, on various topics, such as safety and risk management in adventure travel (Bentley et al., 2001; Buckley, 2012; Cater, 2006; Morgan, 2000; Wang et al., 2019b). Buckley (2020) and Clough et al. (2016) also discussed adventure tourism from mental health and well-being perspectives, and Palmer (2002) and Varley (2006) addressed wilderness and nature in adventure tourism from a commodification perspective. In spite of this, knowledge of social media adoption and consumer perceptions of adventure tourism in New Zealand is lacking. Furthermore, most



adventure tourism research was undertaken with a quantitative approach which Gardiner and Kwek (2017) further proposed that more qualitative studies should be conducted in relation to the consumer psychology of participating in adventure travel. Hence, this study adopts a qualitative approach, using interviews to identify how international students perceive the influence of social media content on their purchase intentions towards adventure travel.

## **2.8. Adventure tourism and social media usage**

The utilisation of social media in tourism is inevitable, because tourism is an information-intensive sector. Previous research has validated the relationship between social media involvement and tourism knowledge. For example, recent research by Bui and Kiatkawsin (2020) collected 441 surveys with data from Vietnamese adventure tourists, to investigate their level of engagement with adventure travel. Social media networks were found to be the preferred and favourable platform for adventure tourists wanting to share their personal experiences and opinions widely, rather than just sharing with close friends or families. Furthermore, secondary research by Sand and Gross (2019) found that adventure tourists search online during their trip planning and then post recommendations on social media sites after their trip. Tourists with a high level of product knowledge tend to have a positive attitude towards an offering or brand and are more likely to perceive a product as a necessity (Somasundaram, 1993). Bui and Kiatkawsin (2020) further suggested that community engagement and product announcements related to adventure activities should be actively integrated into social media outlets instead of traditional marketing channels, as tourists are dependent on them for information. Schott (2007) noted that while adventure tours' distribution channels are similar to those of cultural and heritage recreation, the adoption of the internet is indispensable for seeking and booking a destination. Hence, social media as a new mainstream outlet has a dominant role in the growth of adventure tourism.

As information exchange on social media dominates communications between sellers and buyers, the types of content available to consumers are crucial in this interaction. In an adventure tourism context, content with imagery is more influential for promoting adventures in destinations (Sand & Gross, 2019). In addition, it is now a popular trend for adventure tourists to post their participation experiences on Facebook and Instagram, so their pictures and videos becomes an important marketing medium for adventure tourism businesses (Buckley, 2010). This is in consistence with tourists' needs to gain understandings of the natural surroundings or geographical areas where adventure activities take place (Sand &

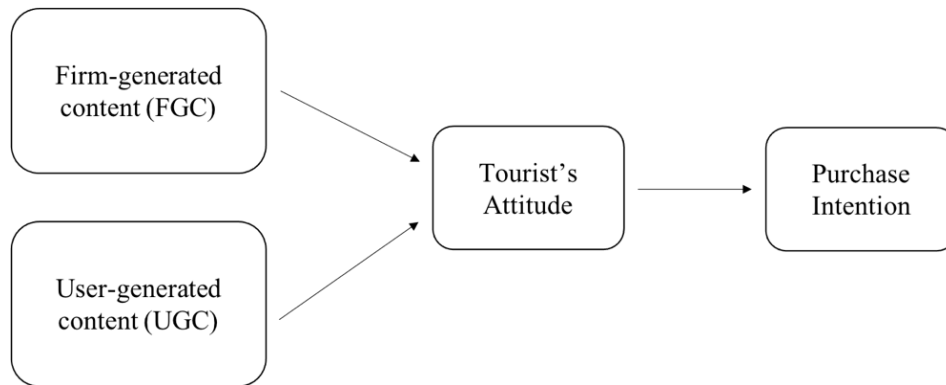
Gross, 2019). Despite the growth of empirical studies on the effectiveness of social media content in adventure tourism promotion, most studies have not differentiated firm-generated social media content and user-generated content, or their impacts on tourists' purchase intentions towards adventure products. Thus, this study attempts to investigate the marketing effects of FGC and UGC on tourists' attitudes to participation in adventure tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **2.9. Conceptual framework for this study**

Based on the review of literature on social media and its impacts on tourists' perceptions and decision-making, a conceptual model was designed to show the theoretical framework for this research (Figure 1). The conceptual model consists of the four key variables of firm-generated content, user-generated content, tourists' attitudes, and purchase intention. From a business perspective, social media sites have been extensively used for marketing purposes, therefore, FGC on social media should be carefully managed in order to maximise the effects of social media marketing. However, from the users' perspectives, consumers are actively engaged in creating, reading, and replying to UGCs on social media, so UGC is particularly influential on their purchase behaviours.

Due to the influence of FGC and UGC on decision-making behaviours, social media marketing content is examined separately, to explore the understandings and perceptions of the research participants. In summary, firm-generated content and user-generated content are considered leading influences on tourists' attitudes, which affect their purchase intentions of adventure tourism products. This study was designed to answer its research questions by collecting valuable insights from interviewees on their awareness of current FGC and UGC on adventure tourism, as well as their interpretations of social media postings and purchase intentions towards adventure products in New Zealand.

**Figure 1. Conceptual Model**



## 2.10. Chapter summary

This chapter reviewed the extant literature related to the research topic. Prior studies have highlighted the critical role of social media content on individuals' attitudes and purchase intentions. It is evident that attitude is a complex and multifaceted subject and has a prominent role in understanding consumer behaviours. While the literature on social media content has confirmed its impact on consumers' attitudes, and generally focused on analysing the effects and usages of UGC, particularly the application of WOM and eWOM (e.g., Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; Kirtis & Karahan, 2011; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), there is limited research exploring the relationship between consumers' attitudes and FGC. Given the importance of the sustainable development of adventure tourism in New Zealand, a comprehensive study in this influential subset will make a significant contribution to tourism research. Consistent with the purpose of this study, it is important to understand the purchase behaviours in adventure tourism products by analysing the awareness and impacts of social media content on customers' attitudes and purchase intentions in relation to adventure travel while under the effects of COVID-19. This comprehensive review of literature has provided guidance for the conceptual framework. The next chapter discusses the methodology employed in this study.

## Chapter 3 – Methodology

### 3.1. Introduction

This chapter elucidates the rationale and protocol for the application of the selected research methodology. First, it explains the research paradigm underpinning the selection of the methodological approach. A qualitative method was adopted in this study to ensure a thorough description of tourists' perceptions and behaviours in relation to the impacts of social media content on adventure tourism participation in New Zealand. The chapter then explains the processes of data collection and data analysis, including participant recruitment and interview procedures. Issues around research ethics and trustworthiness of results are addressed at the end of the chapter.

### 3.2. Research paradigm

A *research paradigm* is defined as a set of philosophical orientations that shape a research investigation and actions (Mittwede, 2012). It inherently reflects a researcher's principles, beliefs, and interpretations of the world, and determines methodological aspects of a research project, for example, by identifying the choice of techniques and meanings ingrained in the research data (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). There are four different types of research paradigms - positivist, post-positivist, critical theory, and interpretivist – which can be generated from four basic elements: ontology, methodology, epistemology, and axiology (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

Positivists advocate that reality exists as a natural object independent of human senses. In nature, the ontological position of a positivist is that that cause-and-effect relationships between social phenomena are analytically separable and distinguishable and can be quantified and guided by theories (Mittwede, 2012). A derivative of positivism has emerged, called “post-positivism.” Post-positivists accept that social reality is apprehended imperfectly, and that the truth is probable but not absolute (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). While the positivist maintains the belief that truth is waiting to be uncovered and captured, the post-positivist steadfastly believes that even though reality exists independently from the observer, it remains impossible to fully understand the truth, because of the intricacy of social phenomena; at best, it can only be approximated (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Interpretivism focuses on understanding the subjective reality of human experiences. Interpretivists believe

that external reality is multiple and socially constructed by different individuals' concepts, angles, backgrounds, interpretations, and worldviews (Jacob, 1987). They believe that names and meanings of social phenomena are ascribed when people interact with society and other individuals (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Likewise, critical theorists hold that reality is shaped by powers, such as political, cultural, religious, gender, and ethnic factors, from which human interaction can generate a social system. Nevertheless, the ultimate aim of critical research is not simply to understand or explain society, but also to transform or change a situation (Callaghan, 2016). While scientific and objective methods are favourable for investigating natural objects, they are unsuccessful practices for social phenomena research (Hammersley, 1992). Given the research characteristics and objectives of this study, the interpretivist paradigm was adopted.

### ***3.2.1. Interpretivist paradigm***

Social realities are mind-dependent, and cannot be free from people's values, purposes, interests, or beliefs (Putnam, 1982). Interpretivists believe that reality and truth are created, rather than discovered. The interpretive paradigm advocates that reality cannot be directly approachable without being contaminated by human senses. In addition, individuals' perspectives on social phenomena vary according to their different personal experiences and backgrounds (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). As Flick (2004) stated, perception is the product of active constructive processes, and not a representation of a passive receptive process. The purpose of an interpretive study is to attempt to understand individuals' interpretations of phenomena they engage with, rather than to discover universal, value free contexts and knowledge (Grix, 2018). No one absolute interpretation of a particular social phenomenon is preferred or chosen over others' interpretations as the correct or perfect one. Therefore, interpretivist researchers need to acknowledge the existence of multiple understandings and recognise that different people have different viewpoints of the same issue (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

Considering the interpretative foundation of individuals' behavioural intentions, a qualitative methodology is most appropriate for investigating personal interpretations and perceptions (Slevitch, 2011). Given that the present study is to explore tourists' attitudes and purchase intentions towards adventure tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic, an interpretivist paradigm with a qualitative research strategy was considered an appropriate approach for

acquiring in-depth descriptions of different participants' perspectives of this new sociocultural phenomenon.

### ***3.2.2. Qualitative methodology***

Qualitative methodologies dominate in human and social sciences research and are primarily concerned with exploring and describing the participants' social and personal experiences and capturing the meanings of specific social phenomena (Katz, 2015). An attempt is generally made to provide detailed, rich, narrative reports of the perceptions, accounts, and understandings of participants, instead of testing preconceived hypotheses and generating statistical numeric results. The analysis process of qualitative methods involves the understanding of verbal material, such as that from field notes or interview transcripts (Smith, 1996). A qualitative analysis is inductive, so qualitative researchers seek to identify patterns in data that are collapsed into broad themes, to help them understand a situation and generate new theory (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

Qualitative inquiry techniques have earned acceptance in the social sciences and market research. This methodological approach has also made significant advances in tourism research. The acceptance and usage of qualitative methods has assisted the industry to gain a deep understanding of the political, cultural, and social connectivity of and within the tourism field (Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015). The encouragement of qualitative approaches is evident in the large number of tourism journals publishing research utilising such methodologies. For example, the Hospitality and Society Journal publishes research in hospitality and tourism that views this field as social phenomenon that can be studied using an interpretivist research design. Approximately 70% of tourism studies published in the Annals of Tourism Research embrace a qualitative approach (Tribe & Xiao, 2011). This implies the increasing need for and significance of qualitative methodologies in exploratory research into tourism. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed travellers' purchase behaviours and travel patterns significantly, and therefore a qualitative research approach was considered most appropriate in this exploratory study, to understand the changing attitudes and behaviours of tourists.

### 3.3. Research design

This study targeted international students' to identify their perceptions of social media marketing and its impacts on purchasing intentions of adventure tourism products after COVID-19 in New Zealand. The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are international students' awareness and searching behaviours of social media marketing content, in relation to New Zealand's adventure tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2) How can social media marketing content influence the purchasing intention of adventure tourism products?

Two objectives for this research were also established:

- 1) to identify international students' information searching behaviours for adventure tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- 2) to investigate the impacts of firm generated content and user generated content on participants' purchase intentions in relation to adventure tourism products in New Zealand after the COVID-19 pandemic

#### 3.3.1. Sampling strategy

This research applied a convenience sampling technique to collect data from international students living in Auckland. *Convenience sampling* is defined as a form of non-probability sampling in which potential participants from the sample population, meet certain practical requirements, such as geographical proximity, willingness to participate, availability at the selected time, and easy accessibility (Etikan et al., 2016). The convenience sampling method was chosen due to its simplicity for participant recruitment in terms of time and research budget.

Participants were international students selected according to three criteria: (1) currently living in Auckland due to COVID-19; (2) use social media to search for travel-related information; (3) are aged 18 to 35 years old. International students were considered the most likely future travellers because of their significant spending power, and desire to travel after COVID-19. A recent study found that more than a third of people in New Zealand were still keen to travel after the COVID-19 pandemic, as the lockdown created pressures and tensions from being constantly at home (Lake, 2020). Furthermore, research has also shown that tourism within

New Zealand is increasingly appealing to overseas travellers due to their purchasing power and the high demand for travel in New Zealand (Thornber, 2020). Hence, international students represent an important market in New Zealand's tourism industry and were thereby an appropriate choice as the target population for this study. The sampling process began by posting research participation advertisements on the Auckland University of Technology's international student community on Facebook (see Appendix A). Respondents were representative of the study's population, since they were recruited from a precise sample pool. The direct connection to the group of international students that met the criteria for selection stated on the advertisement, effectively shortened the screening process of the study. An incentive of a coffee voucher was offered in appreciation of the participants' time and input.

### ***3.3.2. In-depth interviews***

Semi-structured in-depth interviews with open-ended questions were used for data collection. An in-depth interview is designed to elicit and visualise a vivid picture of a respondent's perceptions in a research project. It is an ideal technique for accessing individuals' personal feelings, attitudes, experiences, and opinions (Milena et al., 2008). The interview method offers an excellent opportunity to obtain valuable insights into peoples' interpretations and worldviews, which are incapable of being observed directly, as in survey-based approaches (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

An in-depth interview is not merely the asking of topic-related questions, but systematically documenting and recording the responses, to probe for richer understandings and deeper meanings (Milena et al., 2008). It is an effective qualitative method when the research topic is complex and requires lengthy explanation, particularly when it involves describing the process by which a phenomenon occurs, such as decision-making behaviour. In order to understand these complicated processes, dialogue exchanges with respondents are needed to thoroughly investigate the phenomena (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). As the purpose of this research was to explore tourists' purchase intentions and behaviours in relation to adventure tourism products in New Zealand, dialogue discussions were held to generate detailed explanations from the participants. Research shows that interviews are a suitable approach where there are limited secondary data available in the related field (Christou & Chatzigeorgiou, 2020; Fontana & Frey, 1994). Therefore, in-depth interviews were an ideal method for data collection in this exploratory research to discover the possible impacts of social media marketing on tourists' intentions to participate in adventure tourism in New Zealand.



Guion et al. (2011) stated that an interview guide can formalise the primary focus of an interview, maintain consistency across different interviews with different participants, and effectively guide the whole interview process. Kvale (1996) proposed three basic elements of a successful interview: the fact-sheet, the interview questions, and the post-interview comments sheet. First, a fact-sheet was used for recording the demographic data of interviewees, the place, date, and time of each interviews, and any special circumstances or conditions that affected the interview process. Second, 15 indicative interview questions were asked in each of the interviews. These questions were then categorised into two main parts: participants' knowledge and awareness of the available FGC and UGC on adventure tourism in New Zealand. Questions included:

- 1) Have you searched online for adventure tourism products during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2) What types of information about adventure tourism products do you usually seek?
- 3) Do you prefer to visit a firm's official website or other users' reviews to collect information about adventure tourism?

The second category of questions was related to participants' reflections on how FGC and UGC had affected their travel decision-making after the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions included:

- 4) Did you make any actual bookings for adventure tourism products after reading information online?
- 5) Are you willing to book or purchase adventure tourism products after reading information online?

A post-interview comment sheet was also used to make notes by the researcher after each interview, such as on the comments and feelings that arose while interviewing.

### **3.3.3. Data collection**

A sample of 12 international students aged 18 to 35 and who had used social media for travel-related information searches during the COVID-19 pandemic was selected. The interviews started in late April 2020 and lasted for three weeks. All interviews were audio-recorded to help with data analysis. Each interview lasted for 40 to 60 minutes and was divided into three

parts. The first section began with general questions around participants' overall attitudes towards social media, followed by questions on their knowledge and awareness of the available FGC and UGC on adventure tourism in New Zealand. In the third part, participants were asked how (and why) they perceived such social media content in their travel decision-making processes.

### 3.4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed as the data analysis strategy in this research. *Thematic analysis* is an effective data analysis approach to capture individuals' experiences, values, and views, as it can flexibly and tangibly divide large databases into groups and from these, easily extract meanings and concepts (Cho & Sagynov, 2015; Javadi & Zarea, 2016). Six steps were followed for the thematic analysis used in this research (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** *Thematic Analysis Procedures*

Steps	Description of the analysis	Application in this research
1. Familiarisation	Transcribing, reading data, and taking initial notes	Transcribing audio-recordings and taking notes while re-reading data
2. Coding	Generating succinct labels that identified the important features of the data	Highlighting relevant data and labelling initial codes, for example: when asked about the reasons for participants' preferences for FGC and UGC, "reliable," "insufficient information," and "mistrust of FGC" were created based on the repeated pattern of answers occurring in the data
3. Generating themes	Examining the codes and identifying significant broad patterns of meaning, and potential themes	Identifying and marking emerging themes. For example, once the "reliable," "insufficient information," and "mistrust of FGC" themes were identified, the theme of "reliability" was also identified.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking the themes against the dataset and ensuring themes	Ensuring each code falls into the correct theme. For example, the theme of "reliability" reflected that UGC

Steps	Description of the analysis	Application in this research
	reflected meaning underpinned by a central concept or idea	offered objectivity and confidence in peers' reviews but it could not be generalised that FGC is unreliable, because FGC was also a dependable informative information source. UGC was unspecific in terms of the participants' needs for information and reassurance of product quality.
5. Defining and naming themes	Developing a detailed analysis and deciding on an informative name for each theme	Summarising findings, naming themes, and developing explanations for each theme. For example, the new themes of "high credibility," "information needs," and "reassurance needs" emerged as the final themes.
6. Finalising and writing up	Weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts, compare the similarity and dissimilarity to previous literatures, contextualising the analysis	Generating research results without discussing the data. For example, the narratives first introduced and summarised the overall answers about choosing UGC. After that, themes of "high credibility," "information needs," and "reassurance needs" were explained, with quotations from participants as evidence.

In the first step of the data analysis, audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher then noted down the significance of potential codes while reading through the transcripts and carefully observing the meanings and patterns that appeared across the data set.

Secondly, after checking the raw data, a set of initial codes that represented the meanings and patterns showing the important features of the data, was created. For example, in response to the question about the reasons for participants' preferences for FGC and UGC, respondents' feelings from their actual experience, positive feedback about the company, and the importance of word-of-mouth emerged repeatedly. Therefore, the code "reliable" was created. Furthermore, participants mentioned that they could not find other people's comments in official websites and believed that adventure companies only promoted

positive information about themselves; accordingly, the codes of “insufficient information” and “mistrust of FGC” were formed as initial labels.

Thirdly, the codes were collated and examined to identify broader patterns and potential themes. For example, after the codes of “reliable,” “insufficient information,” and “mistrust of FGC” were identified, the pattern of “reliability” emerged under the broader theme of “benefits of UGC and FGC.”

After generating the initial set of themes, a review and revision of themes against the data was conducted to consider merging similar themes and removing irrelevant or incorrect themes that had insufficient data to support the central ideas. During the review of initial themes, various corrections were made. For example, the theme of “reliability” explained that UGC is dependable and objective as it offers an opportunity for comparisons of an activity’s quality, and the authority of word-of-mouth recommendations. However, it did not adequately reflect the low reliability of FGC because participants agreed that FGC served as a trustworthy source of informative information about an activity. Therefore, this theme was considered too cursory and imprecise to capture participants’ needs for accurate information and overcome the mistrust of persuasive FGC.

The names of themes were then decided with a detailed analysis structure. After reviewing the initial themes and noting inconsistencies between the themes, the new themes were summarised and decided on as the final interpretation. They were: “high credibility,” “information needs,” and “reassurance needs.” These were developed based on the participants’ perception that UGC demonstrated the feature of high credibility. Furthermore, participants mentioned that there were not always enough comments or feedback from other customers, and they needed to determine if a company’s information was accurate. This revealed the insufficiency of FGC and could be further interpreted as a need for adequate information about and reassurances of the quality of products.

In the final step of the analysis, similarities and differences to findings in previous studies were identified and narratives written with relevant examples from the data. According to Braun et al., (2016), narratives should go beyond merely describing the data, and should include interpretive analysis, but without an in-depth exploration of the meanings and reasons behind the findings. For example, a similarity was found in the previous literature, in that tourism products are subject to product uncertainty and asymmetric information, as they cannot be

experienced prior to purchase, which is consistent with the participants' perceived risk in misinformation from FGC. This finding was identified during the analysis and is examined further in the discussion chapter.

### **3.5. Research ethics**

As this research involved primary data collection, research ethics were important for both the researcher and participants. Ethical concepts such as confidentiality, consent, and anonymity were addressed in a full explanation on a participant information sheet (see Appendix C) and consent form (see Appendix D) prior to the interviews. The researcher was mindful of the relevant ethical issues involved in this study. For example, in the process of recruitment, only participants' personal identifiers were collected, such as their age and nationality, to ensure they were qualified to join the study. Another example was in the data collection process; since the interview might include questions related to their employment status and financial situation during COVID-19, participants were informed that they had the right to skip questions or withdraw from the study at any stage if they felt discomfort. In order to maintain confidentiality of participants, no names or personal information were included in the presentation of the results. All information provided from participants remained confidential. As part of addressing ethical issues in the study, an ethics application was submitted to the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) and approved before the data collection began (AUTEC reference 21/34) (see Appendix B).

### **3.6. Trustworthiness of the study**

The trustworthiness of qualitative research has been criticised by positivists for lacking frameworks that address the validity and reliability of the results (Kornbluh, 2015). *Trustworthiness* refers to the level of confidence in the data, methods, and interpretations used to assure the quality of findings (Shenton, 2004). As trustworthiness reflects the validity and reliability in qualitative research, generalisability and the quality of the data collection and data analysis process are therefore important (Golafshani, 2003). Four determinants of trustworthy research were proposed by Guba (1981): credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

*Credibility* refers to the investigator's representation of the findings, and whether they correspond to the intended results generated by participants (Shenton, 2004). There are several

strategies to meet this criterion, such as prolonged engagement, triangulation, persistent observation, and member checks (Connelly, 2016). As Korstjens and Moser (2018) stated, there are no absolute strategies suitable for all research, therefore, member checks were implemented to address the credibility of data. A *member check* refers to the interview transcripts and data interpretations that are sent to the participants for feedback or correction (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The transcribed interview data were sent to participants by email, which offered them the opportunity to check their statements and make corrections to avoid any misunderstandings in the results.

*Dependability* is related to the stability of the results over time and the conditions of research, in terms of enabling it to be repeated in the future (Shenton, 2004). In other words, the methodological descriptions of the data analysis and findings need to be bolstered by evidence from previous studies with similar results to the present research (Kornbluh, 2015). The themes collected in this study summarise the usage and impacts of social media content on tourists' attitudes and purchase intentions that were studied in other research. Furthermore, the research steps and data were clearly described in the study and supported with quotations from the raw data.

*Transferability* is the extent to whether findings are applicable to other settings, such as similar phenomena, environments, populations and situations (Shenton, 2004). In this research, the interview data were collected from participants of different social backgrounds. This was because (for example), participants with different financial situations would have different motivations and behaviours in their purchase intentions.

*Confirmability* addresses the neutrality or extent of the findings that emerge from the data and that are free from investigator's predispositions (Shenton, 2004). The results of this study were generated from participants' own opinions as captured with audio recordings, which provided evidence of their views.

### **3.7. Chapter summary**

This chapter summarised the methodological approaches to the study. In order to answer the research questions and meet the research objectives, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted to explore international students' awareness and perceptions of social media content in relation to adventure tourism in New Zealand after the COVID-19 pandemic. After transcribing the

interview data, a thematic analysis was performed to identify and generate relevant themes related to the research purpose. In terms of ethics and quality issues of the study, an explanation of the ethics process and approval by AUTECH, and the criteria of trustworthiness were provided in the last section. The next chapter presents the research findings on the international students' knowledge and attitudes towards FGC and UGC, and their purchase intentions of adventure tourism products.

## Chapter 4 – Research Results

### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the sample's profile and research findings of the thematic analysis conducted in this study. Following the research questions, the results are presented in two parts: participants' knowledge of adventure tourism and their searching behaviours; and perceptions of firm-generated content and user-generated content, and influence on their purchase intentions in relation to adventure tourism products after COVID-19. Each section discusses the sub-themes generated from the interview data.

### 4.2. Participants' profile

A total of 12 international students were interviewed between 28 April and 16 May 2021. In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, age, gender and nationality balances were considered during the data collection. The interviewees were aged between 18 to 32 and came from Australia, China, South Korea, Taiwan, Dubai, Russia, Malaysia, and Hong Kong. Table 2 presents the relevant sample characteristics of age, gender, country of origin, and level of education. With the aim of protect respondents' privacy and identity, names have been replaced with numbers.

*Table 2. Participants' Profile*

	Age	Gender	Origin	Education
P1	25	Male	Taiwan	Graduate Diploma in International Tourism Management
P2	18	Male	Australia	Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery
P3	28	Female	China	Master of Nursing
P4	24	Female	Russia	Master of International Tourism Management
P5	27	Male	Dubai	Master of Engineering
P6	26	Male	Hong Kong	Master of Marketing
P7	22	Female	Taiwan	Bachelor of Nursing
P8	21	Female	Australia	Master of International Tourism Management
P9	18	Female	Malaysia	Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery
P10	32	Male	China	Postgraduate Diploma in International Tourism Management
P11	23	Female	China	Bachelor of Education
P12	28	Male	Korea	Postgraduate Certificate in Business Management



### **4.3. Knowledge and searching habits**

The first set of analyses introduced the international students' understanding and experience of participating in adventure tourism, and their online searching habits on the available FGC and UGC in adventure tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic. The types of content and frequency of searching for adventure activities are explained in the following subsections.

#### ***4.3.1. Knowledge and experience in adventure tourism***

All participants recognised the prominence of adventure tourism in New Zealand, and acknowledged that skydiving, bungee jumping, and rafting were representative adventure activities. In terms of adventure participation, most participants had experienced adventure tourism activities during their stay in New Zealand as students. Participants showed most interest in ziplining and bungee jumping, followed by rafting, then mountain biking. However, two participants had never participated in adventure tourism but had shown an interest in adventure activities. The participants considered Taupo and Queenstown as the most popular adventure tourism destinations in New Zealand.

#### ***4.3.2. Searching habits on social media content of adventure tourism***

As the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated three lockdowns in New Zealand, the majority of participants indicated that they had searched for adventure activities and opportunities to travel after the pandemic was over. Two participants searched for travel information online towards the end of the lockdowns as a result of the extra time they had. Nevertheless, three did not search for adventure activities with purpose, but were aware of some adventure tourism information from simply scrolling through social media platforms. When participants were asked about the frequency of searching, half commented that they would search online for adventure activities information occasionally, and usually without specific purpose, but not always, depending on their free time and holiday plans. The other half of the participants demonstrated patterns in online searching, with four having searched once or twice in a month and two searching once or twice weekly.

Most participants sought trip-related information, such as prices, locations, distance, and other users' reviews (UGC). These extracts show the necessity of including UGC as part of information searches.

I would read through other people's comments on the experience after they joined the activity, so that I can get to know the actual feeling from a user. (P11)

(I like) reading reviews of certain places, as many people like a lot of enthusiasts, would describe really well...what the experience is like, how friendly the staff is and the location and pricing and is it easy to get there or not, so those are really important for me to research on. (P12)

Notably, some participants stressed that they preferred video to general text messages and would purposively search for postings on vlogs (video blogs) when looking for adventure information. As one interviewee said:

Vlogs usually is on YouTube and they will basically film the whole trip or one day of their trip and then edit into a short video, and I will take it as a reference when I arrange adventure activity for my trip. (P1)

Aside from the aforementioned information types, other responses to this question included other relevant adventure activities information, such as transport, discounts, safety procedures, difficulty levels, and any accommodation near the adventure activity. Based on the current available social media information, most of the participants did not pay much attention to updates or special offers posted online. However, a small number were aware of the discount rates for certain adventure tourism activities during their searches in the COVID-19 period.

#### **4.4. Perceptions of social media content and purchase intentions for adventure tourism**

This section presents the international students' interpretations and perceptions of the FGC and UGC related to adventure tourism and examines the marketing effects of this social media content on purchase intentions for adventure activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. This section also addresses the importance of different searching platforms and methods, then discusses two types of factors that could affect participants' purchase intentions. It also explains the impacts of the COVID-19 on their online searching habits.

##### ***4.4.1. Preferences for firm-generated content and user-generated content***

When participants were asked to indicate their preferences when collecting adventure travel information (i.e. from FGC or UGC), nearly all chose to obtain information from both types of content. However, two stated that they used UGC exclusively, and only one individual considered only FGC when information searching. Three major reasons for selecting UGC in the travel planning process were identified. Firstly, participants considered UGC as a high

credible source of information. A variety of perspectives were expressed, primarily, that UGC is reliable and objective because it is not based on direct reactions to an actual experience by users. Some participants alluded to the influence of eWOM valence, and were reliant on this, expressing the belief that UGC provided opportunities for comparison on the positive and negative aspects of an adventure activity, especially when the activity or company was relatively new. As some interviewees explained:

I choose the other tourists' feedback because it's basically the word-of-mouth, it's more believable compared to the website description. (P7)

If it's an adventure tourism activity that I haven't done before, or a company that I haven't heard of or used before, I'll look into other people's reviews to see how they found it, to see if there are any positive or negative comments. (P8)

Apart from the advantage of high trustworthiness, participants adopted UGC to compensate for deficient FGC. The themes of "information needs," and "reassurance needs" recurred throughout the dataset; the following comment shows tourists' needs for adequate and in-depth information from UGC.

I think other people's reviews are also quite important to me because I couldn't find comments or feedback from other customer in the official website. Yeah, and like sometimes they have a small section for photo sharing, but I think there's just not enough (space) for more information. (P6)

Besides the need for a variety and depth of information, most participants also demonstrated a need for reassurance due to the uncertainty and risk of asymmetric information in FGC. When talking about this issue, two respondents mentioned:

Company's website...they usually write the positive things, and you can barely see any negative description like saying this activity is really bad or something like that, so I would rather choose other people's comments and it's more like how they actually feel about it. (P1)

I would also look at other peoples' reviews, so that I can get a better idea of how the activity is and whether it's good as advertised by the company or not. (P5)

Although FGC was considered a disadvantage by some participants, FGC was important in the travel planning process; a common view amongst interviewees was that FGC provided the most detailed and updated information on adventure activities. On the one hand, FGC usually contained all the essential information needed regarding product details, such as prices, locations, instruction, requirements, and frequently asked questions. However, some

participants felt that FGC gave the fastest and latest information, which UGC cannot offer, such as information about safety measures during COVID-19, or today's offers or discounts. As one explained:

They provide the latest COVID updates and all the prices in the combos are up there, and the steps to hire all the gears, how to make the booking, and then any sort of restriction that the participant would have to be aware of. (P6)

I think in terms of just like prices, everything's there and because sometimes for users' reviews, it could be from like 2015 or something older, and then the prices could have changed now, so it's just easier to go to the official website because it's the most updated. (P9)

The majority of those who discussed their preference between FGC and UGC, felt that both information sources were crucial and could not be separated when seeking comprehensive knowledge on a selected adventure activity. As some interviewees stated:

I go for both because the official website has the details of the pricing and other details, but other users' reviews, they mostly consist of how they feel, and you can know like what's good and what's bad. (P2)

Sometimes you can find all the basic information about the activity but don't have any reviews and then you think...um... maybe something's wrong (P4)

Interestingly, another interviewee agreed that both sources were reliable, and argued that sometimes the UGC did not thoroughly represent the authenticity of the adventure tourism product:

Some people might have a bad time so that they may write a bad review, so bad review doesn't mean the activity is actually bad, but a lot of times when people actually put five out of five stars, they mean what they say right there. It is actually useful to have both (types of) information instead of just listen to other people's words because sometimes you have to have a look at the company website and say, um... maybe this is not for me. (P12)

Together these responses provided important insights into international tourists' preferences and perceptions of FGC and UGC on adventure tourism. While the two information sources contributed different benefits and characteristics, they complemented each other by compensating for insufficiencies between them, indicating the importance of embracing both FGC and UGC in the trip-planning process.

#### ***4.4.2. Behaviours in online searching***

A range of responses was elicited in response to the question about what platforms and methods were used for social media content searching. The majority showed a strong tendency to search on Instagram and Facebook for both FGC and UGC, for example, a company's Facebook or Instagram page (FGC), other tourists' posts on community groups (UGC), and personal accounts or comments on official social media pages (UGC). One participant commented:

(I search on) social media, generally on Instagram...um... their official page on Instagram just to get other people's views and opinions on the company. They have people's comments under their social media posts. I'll look at that as well. (P8)

Whilst the majority mentioned the substantial usage of Instagram and Facebook, some participants indicated that they chose Instagram over Facebook as they considered it more widespread and universal than is Facebook. Participants also indicated that YouTube and TripAdvisor were popular platforms for UGC searches, whereas official websites were the first priority when searching for FGC. Noticeably, results showed the usage and popularity of social media apps and travel websites in mainland China, such as Weibo, Redbook, Qianyou.com and Mafengwo.com. When participants were asked to explain the reasons for choosing certain online platforms, the themes of reputation and usefulness of platforms emerged as the main influences on online platform selection. For example, participants used Facebook and Instagram because of their reliability of peers' reviews and the ease of use for searching and comparing comments. Those who preferred videos over text messages visited YouTube for other tourists' vlogs, and those who were influenced by the high volume and strong reputation of traditional tourism platforms, chose TripAdvisor. Responses on this topic demonstrated the effectiveness of a firm's advertisement on third-party platforms, as the following quotations demonstrate.

I choose TripAdvisor because I think it collected the most reviews and information on it since it's a platform made for tourism. (P11)

Sometimes they would put some offers on it. I mean the company itself used the third-party to advertise for them with offers. Yeah... so this is the kind of thing that attracts customers. So sometimes when I saw the advertisement in Facebook and then I was like, okay, I need to see other people's review, I need to see the actual video. So, I usually went into TripAdvisor and YouTube as well, then after I saw the comments, I was like, oh, wow, okay, it looks like it's going to pump the adrenaline in my body and the activity seems nice. (P5)

While official websites played a significant role in online searching processes by providing comprehensive and exclusive information related to the adventure activities, the results also revealed an inseparable relationship between the official websites and social media apps:

Usually the company have certain information at their website but don't have it in social media, so it's better to look on both platforms. (P4)

So usually, I go on through their official website first and then just collect all the 'must have' information, then I go to social media to see other people's reviews, just to compare the information that I get. (P6)

I mostly go through Instagram to the official website...so like, okay, it seems interesting, I just follow this Instagram page and sometimes I just scroll my land and like... oh, okay, maybe I should go to their official website and see what they offer, and so on. (P8)

These responses explained the importance of marketing management on official websites, as well as on social media apps. In terms of searching methods, most participants used keywords and hashtag key searches for adventure travel information on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. However, one participant found that official websites often provided lists of information in categories from the adventure tourism company. Notably, some also mentioned the new function of the location tag in social media, which shows the location of an activity on a map. One participant mentioned another appealing feature on social media found during information searching, called the "feedpage":

It's an algorithm thing on social media, so they will collect all the data that you have been viewing and searching for, it will show up on your feed page... so once you have searched for travel information like travelling in New Zealand, you will receive more related information on your social media even if you didn't search for it on purpose. It just feeds you...it's like feeding you with the information you want. (P1)

Taken together, these results introduce the current searching behaviours of participants and demonstrate the unique features and characteristics of each online platform and methods. Primarily, the results reveal the importance of selecting effective platforms and methods for adventure product promotion.

#### **4.4.3. Purchase intentions**

Overall responses to the question about the impacts of social media content on purchase intention were very positive. All of the participants had significant intentions to purchase adventure tourism products after seeing other tourists' reviews and vlogs, because their peers'

reviews created confidence and attractiveness that assisted participants' decision-making, as exemplified by this interviewee:

I think people's reviews is kind of important to me, more convincing, more reliable, more attractive and authentic compared to FGC. It would definitely motivate me or push me to get out. Usually after I saw people's comments, I was like oh, this seems nice, I have to try. (P5)

While the UGC was proven to be influential on participants' purchase intentions, conversely, none of them had a purchase intention after seeing only FGC, but instead were triggered to purchase after combining both the UGC and FGC. As one commented:

Company's information...they are more like the game rules to me, like what knowledge or background information you need to know first, and usually the advertisement that I saw from them, they would just provide discounts to attract your attention. So basically, I think it is the general information. (P6)

In other words, FGC itself is insufficient to affect individuals' purchase intentions, however, while it contained essential information about adventure activities, the purchase intentions were induced after combining both FGC and UGC for some participants. Notwithstanding the significant value of UGC on purchase intention, the effectiveness of FGC cannot be neglected. Thus, participants were asked whether the informative FGC or persuasive FGC most affected their purchase intention, to examine the decisive influence of this factor on purchase intention.

#### ***4.4.4. Influences of informative and persuasive information on purchase intention***

As the review of the literature demonstrated, FGC can be categorised as informative and persuasive, hence, participants were asked to indicate whether they could be convinced by each type or both types of FGC. The result that emerged from the analysis was unexpected. Firstly, all participants perceived that both types of information affected their purchase intentions, especially explanatory information, which was reassuring, because it offered the most detailed descriptions of adventure activities. For example:

I feel like the information from company can better affect the intention because I can know enough about the place, then I will be more prepared to do that. (P7)

Informative information is important because these are the adventure activities. They need a lot of practical information, like how do you play, what's the safety procedure, what's the opening time, and what things you know beforehand, also things like what to wear. (P11)

In terms of information from tour companies, one participant stressed the necessity of informative information and expressed that informative information is another form of persuasion. As this interviewee explained:

All that prices, details, are much more important than persuasion because detail itself is a persuasion. You're trying to convince people by giving them information that they want to know in order to get your product selling. There's no reason to be persuasive because if people get enough info, they get persuaded by the information. Yeah, more information is always better. Transparency is always the right way. (P12)

In spite of the considerable influence of informative information on purchase intention, the majority of participants agreed that persuasive information must come from other tourist' reviews, being UGC instead of FGC. In other words, both informative and persuasive types of information are influential on individuals' purchase intentions, however, the informative type should be sourced from FGC and the persuasive type derived from UGC. As these comments demonstrate:

I think people's emotional reviews and a company's basic information together triggers something inside of me, like I wanted to do it. (P4)

So informative is important to me. Okay, but if we say that other people's reviews are persuasive, I will say probably persuasive is kind of more important to me, because every company would definitely try to advertise and say good stuff about them, but informative is the kind of thing that I'm looking for about the location, price, these stuffs are sort of important as well. (P5)

I usually compare the skill level from other peoples' experience, like are they similar to mine? If yes, so that I know that I can do it too. I don't think the company's advertisement would affect (me) much because I think they are more commercial and it would definitely talk more about the good side, so I tend to buy other people's comments. (P11)

Participants were presumably persuaded by both informative FGC and persuasive UGC. Apart from informative and persuasive types of information, there were other factors that affect purchase intentions for adventure activities. Therefore, the next section further explores the constraints and expectations that could affect individuals' purchase intentions.

#### ***4.4.5. Influences of constraints and expectations on purchase intention***

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was foreseeable that the majority of participants perceived COVID as the main constraint on their intention to purchase, since the pandemic and several



lockdowns had caused financial difficulty for participants. For example, as two interviewees stated:

Due to COVID, my salary has been reduced, so I would rather save up instead of travelling at this moment. (P1)

Financially... just becomes slightly harder to enjoy what you normally would enjoy just because you don't have the means to. I mean, you wouldn't just pop into your savings just to enjoy your thrills now, right? (P12)

Aside from the affected travel budgets, participants were also concerned about safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. A number expressed their anxiety about the spread of the disease, as at the time of the study the pandemic was continuing, and certain adventure activities required hiring equipment and close interaction with other people:

I would say probably if we talk about the current period, not much intention now because of the COVID pandemic. You don't know about when it's going to happen, whether I can go or not or is there any risk or is that place safe or not. (P5)

I would say from the COVID because for zorb it would require close interaction with people, so like usually it would be a group of two or three in one rolling ball, (so) I'm a little bit concerned with the cleanliness of the equipment. (P6)

Financial constraints and the potential risks of COVID became obstacles to purchase intentions, along with personal schedules and prices of the activities, which also affected the intentions to book an adventure activity. Remarkably, some participants mentioned that lacking sufficient information would affect their purchase intention, as this interviewee explained:

If I don't see any photos of the activity before I go, I can't picture what the place would be like, then I wouldn't go. I want more pictures and more information before I do it. (P7)

The majority of participants expected that information should include detailed descriptions of the products, such as prices, discounts, transport, instructions and requirements, as well as safety and risk management, such as protection procedures during COVID-19. Risk analyses for an activity can be categorised as informative information related to adventure tours. Further to this, participants also indicated their expectations of seeing other tourists' reviews on official websites, as this would inspire confidence to book, and it would be convenient to collect both FGC and UGC in one search. For example:

I think the company has some internal links to ‘book now,’ or like... ‘look at our reviews’ sort of thing, for example, links to TripAdvisor, (to) let us see the reviews. (P8)

#### ***4.4.6. Impacts of COVID-19 on online searching habits***

A question was asked to examine the possible impacts of COVID-19 on participants’ online searching habits. The results showed significant changes in terms of the frequency and content of searches. Participants indicated that they had searched frequently during lockdowns because there was generally more free time, and they could not go anywhere. Therefore, they spent more time searching for travel options domestically, as no international travel was permitted. Responses confirmed that COVID-19 created tension and stress for participants, as they searched more information relating to safety issues and available places and activities for travel during the pandemic. As these comments demonstrated:

I kept on searching more and more because like, you know now any short or long weekend you want to go out and get all your own time. There's too much stress and the kids just want to kick away and enjoying their time. (P5)

I was looking at places to go because I kind of wanted to go, like for the end of year treat, you know. So I was searching at places like Queenstown and Wellington for these activities because a lot of my friends were going to Queenstown and really fun, but in the end, I didn't really follow through with that because the COVID started to get a bit shaky and you don't know how things are going to change. (P9)

In summary, these results supported the significant role that UGC played in tourists’ purchase intentions, as peer reviews generated a sense of attractiveness and participation intention. However, COVID-19 affected participants’ purchase intentions, and caused behavioural changes in their searching habits, in terms of the frequency and content of searched for domestic travel options.

#### **4.5. Chapter summary**

The results in this chapter introduced participants’ characteristics and their understandings and perceptions of social media content on adventure tourism products during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first part of the data analysis indicated that most participants were experienced adventure tourists and were interested in adventure tourism, since they had attempted to search for information online about adventure travel. In terms of participants’ awareness and knowledge of available FGC and UGC on adventure tourism, results indicated that the

participants searched for trip related information such as location, price, distance, and packages. However, only a few noticed updates and offers online about the activities. The second part of the data analysis identified participants' interpretations and the influences of social media content on their purchase intentions. The results showed that participants had a strong tendency to embrace both FGC and UGC in their decision-making processes as FGC provided up-to-date and detailed information, whereas UGC met information and reassurance needs for participants due to their belief in its credibility and trustworthiness. The results further showed that both the official websites and social media apps were crucial as the main searching platforms, with keywords and hashtag searches being the dominant searching methods. Lastly, COVID-19 was found to be the main obstacle to participants' purchase intentions and changes in information searching behaviours. The next chapter discusses the meanings of the findings in relation to those of previous studies.

## **Chapter 5 – Discussion**

### **5.1. Introduction**

This research aimed to assess international students' online information searching behaviours and the influence of social media content on their purchase intentions for adventure tourism products during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, this chapter explains the perceived knowledge and awareness of adventure tourism information in New Zealand and explores participants' preferences and behaviours when using social media for seeking adventure travel information. It also reflects on the marketing effects of current FGC and UGC available on the internet. Second, the preferred social media content is discussed to identify the benefits and values attached to FGC and UGC. Frequently used online searching platforms and methods are presented to provide guidance for social media marketers. Third, the factors that influence individuals' purchase intentions are also addressed, including informative FGC and persuasive UGC, and perceived risks and expectations of adventure tourism marketing. Lastly, the impact of COVID-19 on the searching frequency and content are also illustrated to determine if behavioural changes were observed in previous research. These are all combined into a revised conceptual framework to demonstrate the role of informative FGC and persuasive UGC in tourists' attitudes and purchase intentions. By modifying the conceptual model, the contribution of this study to the tourism literatures is highlighted.

### **5.2. Perceived knowledge and effectiveness of adventure tourism information**

The aim of this sub-question was to examine the effectiveness and capability of the available social media content on message delivery and receptivity by international tourists.

#### ***5.2.1. Knowledge of adventure tourism, and characteristics of using social media***

Adventure tourism was recognised as the renowned market in tourists' 100% Pure New Zealand experience (UNWTO, 2014). The participants in this study showed adequate understanding of and interest in participating in adventure activities in New Zealand, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the results showed that the popular adventure destinations were primarily located in Taupo and Queenstown, which is not surprising, because Queenstown has long been considered the birthplace of adventure tourism and the

world's adventure capital (Bentley et al., 2000), whereas Taupo is still establishing its prestige in the ranking. However, there are still opportunities for future expansion of the adventure tourism market in New Zealand. This study also found that participants showed influential online searching behaviours on adventure information during the lockdowns. This finding is consistent with the existing research, which confirmed that the COVID-19 pandemic had an influential impact on social media utilisation and found increasing numbers of people relied on social media platforms to search for information and assist their tourism decision-making (Naeem, 2020; Mason et. al. 2021; Plessis & Fabricius, 2020). In particular, the results indicated a pattern of random information searching in regard to personal holiday schedules, offering a valuable opportunity for adventure tourism marketers to foster social media marketing and offer promotions before or during public holidays.

### ***5.2.2. Usefulness and trust in social media content***

The types of information sought during the pandemic were mostly informative trip-related information, such as prices, locations, distance, transport, safety procedures, or the difficulty level of adventure tourism activities. Moreover, the results also demonstrated the usefulness and trustworthiness of UGC when arranging adventure travel and showed an intensive reliance on other tourists' travel vlogs, as participants tended to prefer videos and pictures over text information. *Travel vlogs* are travel blogs in a video format and filmed by tourists who record and share their travel experiences online (Jain, 2019). The identified usefulness of vlogs matches research by Jensen (2020), who found that travel vlogs had been established as a new source of tourism information source or research method to collect destination information. This finding has important implications for developing or including other adventure tourists' vlogs in the promotion of adventure tourism products, as tourists have demonstrated a willingness to receive UGC. Nevertheless, based on the current social media content available online, participants in this study did not notice the latest updates or special offers that adventure tourism companies posted online. A possible explanation for this might be that FGC did not draw the attention of tourists, suggesting a lower effectiveness of FGC on message delivery than that of UGC.

### 5.3. Preferences for social media content and searching behaviours

The purpose of this sub-question was to examine the international tourists' preferences for embracing FGC or UGC, and different types of online searching platforms and methods used, along with their reasons.

#### 5.3.1. *Values and benefits of FGC and UGC*

The most interesting finding was that tourists have a tendency to embrace both FGC and UGC when searching for adventure travel information, instead of choosing just one information source. In particular, this phenomenon revealed manifested the values and benefits of both FGC and UGC. For UGC, three major reasons for use were identified: high credibility and meeting the need for information and reassurance. First, *high credibility* refers to a sense of the reliability and objectivity of other tourists' reviews, because UGC are direct reactions from the actual experiences of tourists. The results also alluded to the importance of eWOM on customer purchase behaviours. This result was consistent with the research findings of Talih et al. (2017), who observed that eWOM was considered as one of UGC's influences on customers' attitudes. In particular, the results showed a reliance on the valence of eWOM, as tourists can compare positive and negative comments on adventure activities themselves. This finding was similar to Dung's (2017) study of eWOM valence, which showed that contradictory experiences and feedback on whether a product was favourable or unfavourable (i.e., both positive and negative eWOM) still influenced consumers' purchase intentions.

Second, information and reassurance needs were met by compensations for deficiencies in FGC. *Information needs* refers to the tourists' needs for abundant and varied information that was absent on official websites, whereas *reassurance needs* refer to the need to have the risk of asymmetric information about tourism products reduced, as tourists perceived that tourism companies would only offer positive descriptions about their brands. Therefore, there is a need for involving UGC in travel decision-making to compensate for any false content generated by firms. Leung et al. (2013) validated the significance of UGC in satisfying tourists' needs. In the travel-planning process, UGC serves a crucial role in fulfilling tourists' needs for recognition and information during the pre-trip stage. Huang et al. (2010) and Liu and Park (2015) also supported the usage and importance of UGC in equipping tourists with comprehensive trip-related information and building assurance in tourism products.

Another interesting finding from this study was that UGC cannot fully represent the authenticity of adventure tourism products, because tourists' reviews can be affected by subjective factors, such as their personal emotions or constraints. In other words, negative reviews do not necessarily indicate substandard quality of adventure products because they can arise from negative personal sentiments while participating in the activity. Therefore, FGC became crucial in the evaluation of product quality. FGC also played a significant role in the travel planning process, as it offered faster and more up-to-date and detailed information than UGC can offer, such as updated safety procedures for COVID-19, today's offers, detailed descriptions of instructions for an adventure tourism activity, requirements, and frequently asked questions that can answer all tourists' enquiries. Overall, both FGC and UGC contribute distinctive values and counterbalance each other's insufficiencies; consequently, both FGC and UGC are significant information sources for tourists' decision-making processes.

### ***5.3.2. Preferred searching platforms and methods***

This study found that companies' official websites, travel-related websites, and social media sites such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, are the major online platforms for adventure travel information searching. In terms of social media platforms, tourists search for FGC on a company's official social media account and search for UGC from other tourists' postings on their personal accounts, adventurers' community groups, or the public comments sections on the company's official pages on social media. The reputation and usefulness of content were the main reasons for browsing social media platforms, because Facebook and Instagram contained reliable peer reviews and ease of use for searching with keywords and comparing feedback. Interestingly, a strong preference for utilising Instagram instead of Facebook was identified in several comments due to the popularity of Instagram and tourists' interest in video and pictures. This finding supported research results from recent studies by Mese and Aydin (2019) and Masciantonio et al. (2021), who recognised the phenomena of active usage on Instagram and passive usage on Facebook by Generation Y. Consequently, these findings can provide useful advice to adventure tourism marketers to focus on Instagram to maximise their marketing effects.

As a tourism website, TripAdvisor was found to be a definitive example for those who desired a large quantity of tourists' reviews and the favourable reputation of a traditional tourism website. The results reflected the effectiveness of firms' advertisements on

TripAdvisor, which successfully draws the attention of tourists who are checking on peers' reviews, demonstrating an opportunity for third-party platforms to effectively advertise and promote adventure tourism products.

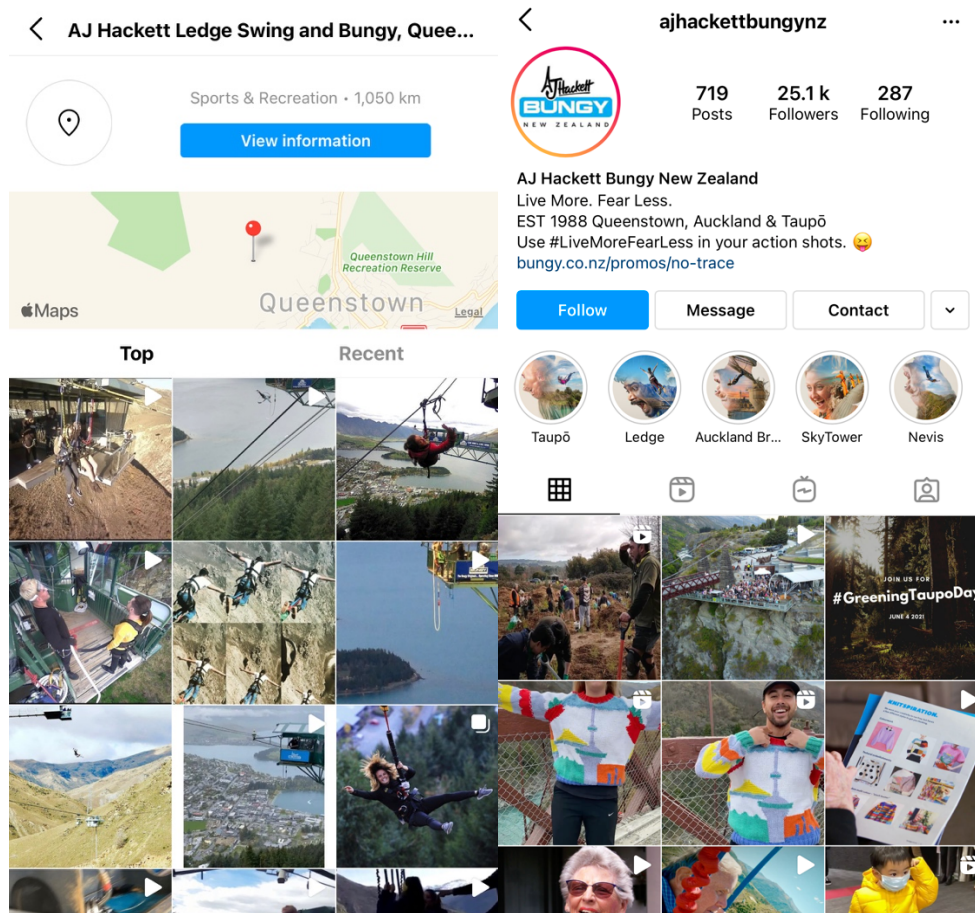
The most important finding was the emerging social media apps and tourism websites from mainland China, such as Weibo, Redbook, Qianyou.com and Mafengwo.com. As mainland China was the second-largest inbound market for New Zealand pre-COVID-19, many online Chinese still found New Zealand appealing as a holiday destination during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tourism New Zealand, 2020). Thus, good use of these social media apps and travel websites could create an expansion in the Chinese adventure tourism market.

Participants showed a significant preference for searching official websites for comprehensive and informative information and demonstrated a formidable dependency on searching both the official company websites and social media sites.

In terms of searching methods, hashtags and keywords were the main preferred searching techniques on the online platforms. Interestingly, Feedpage and location tags were found to be the new searching functions prevalent among the research participants. *Feedpage* refers to a social media page that offers relevant information based on keywords that were used earlier. For example, after using the keywords "adventure activities" on social media search engines, the social media apps automatically provide more adventure related information on the user's social media page based on their searching history. Furthermore, participants showed significant usage of information searching through a location tag. A location tag provides the precise latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates of physical locations displayed on a map that can be added to Instagram or Facebook posts. These are the locations identified by the GPS (global positioning system) on a mobile device and can be used to promote a business, for example, an adventure tourism company that offers a bungy jumping activity in Queenstown (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Location Tag and Official Instagram Page**



*Note.* This example shows the usage of a location tag from an adventure tourism company. From The AJ Hackett Ledge Swing and Bungy, by AJ Hackett Bungy New Zealand, n.d., Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/ajhackettbungynz/>). In the public domain.

Previous research by Osman (2020) identified three benefits of utilising location tags for businesses: increasing brand awareness, encouraging engagement, and driving social proof. The study found that the tagged location in UGC can increase a company's content library. Hence, adventure tourism marketers are advised to tag the locations of adventure activities, and type in precise keywords and hashtags in every social media posting to increase business visibility on the social media feed page and foster communication with their target audiences.

#### 5.4. Perceived impacts on purchase intentions

One of the research questions in this study aimed to examine the factors that influence international students' purchase intentions, such as social media content, the two types of

FGC, and the perceived risks and expectations of adventure tourism. The findings generated from the data analysis are presented in the following sections.

#### ***5.4.1. Impact of FGC and UGC on purchase intention***

There is a significant impact of both FGC and UGC on individuals' purchase intentions, however, no purchase intention was found when embracing just FGC. This may be because FGC and UGC should be combined in the tourists' information searching process in order to influence their purchase intention. This may be attributed to the characteristics of FGC when it provides only basic information for adventure activity, which is insufficient to trigger purchase intention by itself. Alternatively, UGC serves as an emotional motivator by displaying the excitement and joy of participating in adventure activities, especially in vlogs, which can produce more conversions and memorable recalls than can any other content. In addition, the high credibility of UGC gives confidence and reassurance to tourists in making their travel decisions. These results supported the research findings of Tussyadiah et al. (2011), who mentioned that self-identification while reviewing other tourists' stories was found to be an influential factor on purchase intention. Another possible explanation for the need of UGC is that adventure activities are relatively high-risk tourism products in terms of the activities themselves, and the related information provided on the internet. The results of this study supported the research findings of Liu and Park (2015) which indicated the nature of uncertainty and asymmetric information in tourism consumption, and therefore, more trip-related information was needed to reduce tourists' perceived risk. As a result, FGC and UGC can enrich tourists' knowledge about adventure travel; both information sources were influential on individuals' purchase intentions, but only when they were embraced together in the information search.

#### ***5.4.2. Impact of informative and persuasive information on purchase intention***

The results showed that informative FGC and persuasive UGC had significant impacts on purchase intentions. This finding was unexpected, in that the persuasive type of UGC was found to be influential instead of the persuasive FGC. This was in contrast to the findings of previous researchers who argued that FGC is informative and persuasive which are authoritative sources of information and crucial in customers' decision-making process. Firm-generated content was found to positively enhance customer purchase intentions

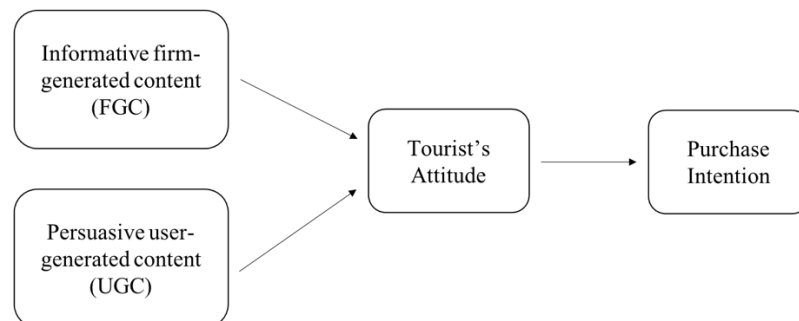
towards a brand at the individual level (Bai & Yan, 2020; Bronner & Hoog, 2010; Liaukonyte et al., 2015).

There are several explanations for this result. First, it confirms that informative FGC is a forceful influence on purchase intention because it secures tourists' confidence and trustworthiness in a company by providing comprehensive descriptions about a brand or product, and information such as a detailed company background, an activity's location, safety procedures and ride requirements. One possible explanation for this finding is that informative information is considered a form of persuasion to tourists, since adventure activities require plenty of practical information. Informative information also serves as a reassurance when tourists are equipped with adequate basic knowledge of an adventure activity. This is consistent with the findings of a study by Tuten et al. (2015) which found that publishing significant product-related information can satisfy customers' needs for information and therefore improve their confidence and desire to purchase. Consistent with another study by Bai and Yan (2020), the preferred types of informative messages for participants in this research matched the aforementioned types of informative information, which are product mention, location mention and brand mention. Thus, this research has provided guidance on the different types of informative content for adventure tourism companies to use in effective advertising messages.

Second, persuasive UGC was found to be influential on purchase intention, instead of the influence of persuasive FGC. This was in contrast to the findings of Bai and Yan (2020) and Liaukonyte et al. (2015), who stated that persuasive FGC can provoke customers' emotions, trigger purchase intention, and thereby directly affect a firm's performance. However, the findings of the current research did not support those of previous studies. This inconsistency is possibly due to the participants' competency in overcoming mistrust of FGC, as persuasive FGC is perceived as commercialised content that contains solely positive information about a product in a firm's advertisement. Thus, UGC is an effective persuasive information type affecting tourists' purchase intentions. Similarly, Kirtis and Karahan (2011) claimed that UGC can overcome apprehension in FGC marketing material and can eventually encourage purchase intention. This new discovery has important implications for adventure tourism organisations for emphasising informative information instead of pushing persuasive content, which may negatively affect tourists' intentions to purchase an activity. As a result of this finding, a revised conceptual framework was proposed to demonstrate the role of informative

FGC and persuasive UGC in affecting tourists' purchase intentions in relation to adventure tourism products (See Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** *The Conceptual framework of Online Marketing Communication for adventure tourism*



#### ***5.4.3. Impact of perceived risks and expectations of online marketing on purchase intention***

The influences of the COVID-19 pandemic and insufficient information were identified by participants as perceived risks that affected their purchase intentions towards adventure tourism products. First, COVID-19 created financial and psychological pressures on the participants. The results of the study revealed diminished travel budgets due to job losses and salaries reductions. Furthermore, the fear of infection remained in prospective tourists' minds during the pandemic, particularly in relation to certain adventure activities that involve close human interactions and hired equipment that needs to be shared with other members of the public.

Apart from the risk of COVID-19, the lack of information about an adventure activity also affects tourists' purchase intentions negatively. One possible explanation for this may be that insufficient information could create insecurity in tourists' minds, because an adventure activity is an intangible product, and like other tourism consumptions, mostly dynamic, intangible, and subjective. It is impossible to appraise a tourist's experience of performing an activity when the intangibility of its characteristics mean that the services are inherently based on promises that can be only evaluated during or after use, but not before (Reisinger et al., 2001). According to Williams and Soutar (2000), the inseparability, variability, and intangibility of services may cause higher levels of perceived risk, as a result of which, customers may rely on more subjective evaluations of the advantages and disadvantages provided. As adventure activity is considered an intangible tourism service, tourists generally

need detailed and relevant information before making their purchase decisions. Similar to the findings of Wan and Ren (2017), informative messages were found to be more influential on product sales than was persuasive information when purchasing a high-involvement product, such as a tourism product. Owing to the nature of high risk and value, customers generally need to make extensive information searches. Somasundaram (1993) noted that tourists with high levels of product knowledge have more positive attitudes towards the brand offerings and are those most likely to proceed with a purchase. Consequently, the results of this study emphasise the importance of adequate informative information in tourists' purchase intentions. Similarly, this finding also related to tourists' expectations of information that could affect their purchase intention.

The findings showed that informative messages and other tourists' reviews of adventure tours were the information expected to be included on official websites. In particular, informative information such as detailed product descriptions, safety and risk processes (e.g., COVID-19 safety procedures), and risk analyses of the adventure activity. Interestingly, the findings also showed that these international students preferred to travel with a group of friends or families; therefore, it is suggested that adventure tourism companies offer group discounts to attract the attention and interest of groups purchasing adventure tourism products. Notably, the findings of expected UGC in the companies' official websites signalled the importance for tourism marketers to improve their websites by cooperating with multi-media channels that link to tourists' reviews about their company or activity. Participants suggested to include a "book now" button on websites, as this provides a fast and convenient method for collecting information and making payments.

### **5.5. Impact of COVID-19 on online searching behaviours**

Consistent with previous research, this study found changes in online searching behaviours in terms of the frequency and content. As Plessis and Fabricius (2020) and Mason et. al. (2021) observed, people have spent more time browsing social media platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic, so these have become increasingly influential on customers' decision-making processes. Cooper (2021) found that social media are commonly used for travel purposes. The results of this study showed that the frequency of searching was significantly increased during lockdowns, as these provided extra leisure time and restrictions on international travel. Furthermore, the content searched during the pandemic was different, as prospective tourists tended to search for information related to the COVID-19 situation and travel places and

options that were available during or after the pandemic. Nevertheless, international students still showed eagerness and interest in domestic travel and adventure tourism. This finding provided an important implication for adventure tourism marketers who need to emphasise social media's ability to offer more relevant information, such as that on COVID-19 protection procedures, domestic offers, or group discounts to encourage tourists' purchase intention.

## **5.6. Chapter summary**

This chapter summarised the findings and presented a revised conceptual framework. The findings demonstrated the importance for adventure tourism organisations to have comprehensive understandings of tourists' perceptions and searching behaviours on social media for information related to their purchase intention. Firm-generated content and user-generated content were found to be effective and convincing communication platforms on official company websites. The limitations of the study and recommendations for future research are presented in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6 – Conclusion

This chapter first addresses the research findings that answered the research questions, then explains the practical implications of these findings. The limitations and recommendation for future research work are also presented.

### 6.1. Research contributions

This study extends our knowledge of the impact and implications of social media marketing in the adventure tourism field in New Zealand. The objectives of the study were designed to identify international students' online searching behaviours in relation to adventure tourism information during the COVID-19 pandemic and determine the effects of social media content on international students' purchase intentions towards adventure tourism products during and after the pandemic. In particular, the research purpose was divided into two sub-questions, which are presented with the corresponding research summary of results.

- (1) What are international students' awareness and searching behaviours of social media marketing content, in relation to New Zealand's adventure tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic?

As highlighted in the discussion chapter (see Section 5.2), this study revealed the significant effectiveness of UGC and informative FGC on international students' knowledge and awareness of adventure tourism in New Zealand. International students tend to seek informative information about adventure travel products and searched on random bases during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is suggested that tourism marketers' social media marketing promote products and services prior to public holidays, because prospective tourists often search for adventure travel inspirations in relation to their holiday opportunities. While the participants in this study had fundamental understandings of adventure tourism in New Zealand, they were not aware of updated FGC among the information posted online. The findings also revealed that international students preferred to collect both FGC and UGC during their information searches for adventure travel. The reasons for choosing UGC were due to its high credibility, and information and reassurance needs for adventure tourism participation. While the FGC reduced the potential risk of misrepresentation and out of date information, it also offered the fastest and detailed updates, which UGC could not provide; it was therefore found necessary to embrace both information sources in the decision-making

process. Furthermore, various categories of social media platforms, travel websites and companies' official websites were identified as trendy online platforms for information searching, and included Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and WeChat from China, which also highlighted an opportunity for adventure business expansion in the Chinese market. Hashtags and keywords were the major searching tools used on these online platforms; specifically, the use of Feedpage and location tags were proposed for social media marketing promotion.

(2) How can social media marketing content influence the purchasing intention of adventure tourism products?

One of the significant findings to emerge from this research was that all the international students in the study showed a positive attitude towards the influence of both FGC and UGC in general, but only FGC was found to lack influence over their purchase intentions (see Section 5.4.1). Notably, all participants indicated strong preferences for informative FGC and persuasive UGC when experiencing a lack of persuasive FGC. This finding was a new contribution to this area of research and differed from the outcome in prior research (as discussed in Section 5.4.2). Hence, a revised conceptual framework was proposed based on the research findings (Figure 2).

Further to the investigation into purchase intentions, the findings also explained that the threat of COVID-19 and a lack of information generally, were the main constraints on purchase intention and suggested that informative information and other tourists' reviews about an adventure activity would best encourage purchase intention; this also indicates that both FGC and UGC are essential in affecting tourists' purchase intentions. Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic was found to influence international students' searching behaviours, as they searched more frequently than before, and targeted travel information on social media platforms. This implied an opportunity for adventure tourism companies and their products to be promoted to audiences interested in adventure tourism. In summary, the research gap on the influence of FGC and UGC on international students' purchase intentions towards adventure tourism in New Zealand under the COVID-19 pandemic has been addressed.

## **6.2. Practical implications**

The findings of this research have provided practical implications for social media marketing and maximising the marketing effects on adventure tourists' purchase intentions.



The empirical results offer guidance and a reference for adventure tourism companies to use to manage and develop strategies for their social media marketing. First, the evidence from the study has proven the necessity and significance of corporate social media marketing in the COVID-19 era. As a result of the threat of the pandemic, usage and reliance on social media platforms became intensive. The social media content produced by firms and users are therefore influential on tourists' decision-making. While FGC and UGC act as vital marketing channels, it is necessary to understand their characteristics and impacts on tourists' decision-making processes. Hence, this research has provided a comprehensive investigation into the possible factors that could induce tourists' purchase intention. Second, by understanding tourists' online information searching habits on the various types of platforms, methods, patterns, and content, tourism marketers can formulate new social media marketing strategies in line with the target audiences' preferences and their own business objectives, to trigger tourists' purchase intentions.

### **6.3. Theoretical implications**

This study explored the concepts of FGC and UGC in adventure tourism and their impacts on purchase intention. Through a thematic analysis of the interview data, the specific functions of FGC and UGC were identified as influencing tourists' attitudes and eventually affecting their purchase intentions. The revised conceptual framework discussed in Section 5.4.2. provides insights for researchers examining the core elements and effectiveness of FGC and UGC. Previous studies have examined the usefulness of FGC and UGC in general, but limited findings were available on the application of FGC and UGC to international students in the context of adventure tourism. The findings on online searching behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic also revealed changes in tourists' information searching behaviours and travel inspirations.

### **6.4. Limitations and future research**

Although the research findings contributed valuable insights into the understanding of social media in a marketing context, especially on the impacts of social media content on tourists' purchase intentions, there are several limitations to this study that offer avenues and directions for future work.

First, this research was conducted only in New Zealand, which had a significant influence on both the research methodology and research results. Second, the available resources for this study did not allow the researcher to extend data collection beyond the Auckland region; the sample was taken only from universities in Auckland in New Zealand, so the findings are not necessarily applicable to other international tourists in New Zealand. That is, the students interviewed may not be representative of other international students in New Zealand. Hence, future studies conducted on the basis of these research findings should be in different areas and contexts. Future research could also focus on the investigation of both international and domestic students, which could enrich understandings of how social media content influences purchase intention. Third, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a global phenomenon. Therefore, it would be interesting to explore whether the research findings differ in a different period of time. Nevertheless, the strength of this research lies in its focus on the influence of social media marketing on purchasing intention and its sole focus on international students, adventure tourism and COVID-19. This filled the research gap and enhanced the transferability of research findings, contributing to the literature on social media and tourism marketing.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Online advertisement



We are looking for

# Research Participants !!

An interview on social media marketing & participation in adventure tourism

If you are:

- International student
- Aged 18 -35 years old
- Used social media for travel information

**Contact Me!**

If you are interested, please contact me at 021 199 5627 or  
email: [chonghoitung.13@gmail.com](mailto:chonghoitung.13@gmail.com)

**AUT**  
NEW ZEALAND

  
**\$10 Starbucks Coffee  
Gift Card**  
for each participation

## Appendix B. Ethics Approval Letter



16 March 2021

Claire Liu  
Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Claire

Re Ethics Application: **21/34 An exploratory study of international tourists' perception of social media marketing and impacts on purchasing intention of domestic travel after COVID-19**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 16 March 2024.

### Non-Standard Conditions of Approval

Non-standard conditions must be completed before commencing your study. Non-standard conditions do not need to be submitted to or reviewed by AUTC before commencing your study.

### Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.

AUTC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz). The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTC Secretariat  
**Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee**

Cc: , chonghoitung.13@gmail.com

## Appendix C. Participant Information Sheet



### Participant Information Sheet

#### Date Information Sheet Produced:

14 January 2021

#### Project Title

An exploratory study of International students' perception of social media marketing and impacts on purchasing intention of adventure tourism in New Zealand after the COVID-19

**Name of Supervisor:** Dr. Claire Liu

**Name of Student Researcher:** Hoi Tung Chong (Master Candidate)

#### An Invitation

You are invited to take part in a research which is part of my Postgraduate study for the degree of Master of International Tourism Management at Auckland University of Technology. Participation in the study is voluntary. This Participant Information Sheet will help you decide if you'd like to take part. It sets out why we are doing the study, what your participation would involve, what the benefits and risks might be, and what would happen after the study ends. I will go through this information with you and answer any questions you may have. Your agreement to take part in this study would be greatly appreciated.

#### What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this research is to investigate tourists' perception of tourism social media content and its impacts on their purchase intention toward adventure tourism products under the COVID-19 pandemic. As the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, there is a significant use of social media and behavioural change of travellers. According to the latest report from Plessis and Fabricius (2020), people are spending 29% more time on social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, there is a need to investigate the influence of the tourism sector's social media on their target customers' behaviour under the new COVID-19 world. The findings of this research will be used for the completion of my Master dissertation and future academic publications.

#### How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have been invited to take part in this study because you are meeting the requirement of sample selection for this study. I am looking for the international students who are aged between 18 to 35 years old and have used social media to search for travel-related information in New Zealand to answer the research question.

#### How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you have decided to participate, you can contact me by texting to 021 199 5627 or emailing to [chonghoitung.13@gmail.com](mailto:chonghoitung.13@gmail.com). Given that data collection needs to commence before certain date, please express your interest within two weeks. A text reminder will be sent to you if I have not received responses from you.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign the Consent Form at the end of this document. You will be given a copy of both the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Forms to keep. Once confirmed participation, an appointment for the interview will be made.

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

**What will happen in this research?**

In the interview, you will be asked to answer 15 indicative questions about your own experience in adventure tourism and perception of the tourism sectors' social media marketing in the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the interview, I will ask you for the permission to voice record the interview as a record for future data analysis. After that, I will give assurance on ethical concepts such as confidentiality, consent, and anonymity by offering you a consent form. The interview questions will be divided into two parts, the first part will identify your knowledge and awareness of the available Firm Generated Content (FGC) and User Generated Content (UGC) on adventure tourism in New Zealand, and the second part will further discuss how and why you interpret such social media content on your travel decision making after COVID-19. Lastly, you will be asked if there are anything to add or address back. At the end of the interview, incentives will be given to thank you for participating in the research. The interview will take place at an agreed location in Auckland City where quality audio-recordings can be made or at a location that is suitable for you.

**What are the discomforts and risks?**

You will not have any physical or psychological risks in this research. However, you may experience discomfort when being asked about your employment and financial situation during the COVID-19.

**How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

If you have discomfort answering certain questions, you have the right to skip or refuse to answer at any stage. You have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time prior to or during the interview session without providing a reason.

**What are the benefits?**

You will have the opportunity to share your views on social media marketing and adventure tourism in New Zealand. This research will assist the researcher gaining Master's degree and the finding of the research will benefits to both the academic and tourism field by demonstrating consumer behaviour changes and the strategic importance of social media for tourism competitiveness, especially during this challenging time of COVID-19.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

High level of confidentiality is committed in this research. A consent form will secure an equal relationship between researcher and participants. No names or personal information of the participants will be identifiable from the presentation of the results. The research will only collect your personal information that are absolutely necessary (such as your age group and nationality to ensure the qualification for the interview as the research targets are international students, your age and nationality represent that you are qualified for the participating the research). Any information obtained in connection with this research project that can identify you will remain confidential and



will only be used for the purpose of this research project. The information collected will be labelled with a unique code instead of your name. All the hard copy research records, such as handwritten interview notes and printed transcripts will be stored in a locked file cabinet and destroyed after the research is completed.

**What are the costs of participating in this research?**

Participation in this study is free. However, it may cost you 40 to 50 minutes for the interview and 10 to 20 minutes for transcript review after the interview. It may also cost your transportation time and fee to reach to the interview location.

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

You are given one week's time to respond to the invitation to participate in this research. You can contact me by email or mobile phone.

**Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

Yes, if you are interested in the result of research, a summary of the findings will be emailed to you after the research completion.

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr Claire Liu, Email: [claire.liu@aut.ac.nz](mailto:claire.liu@aut.ac.nz), Mobile: 027 389 9895.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTC, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz), (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?**

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

***Researcher Contact Details:***

Name: Hoi Tung Chong, Hailey

Email: [chonghoitung.13@gmail.com](mailto:chonghoitung.13@gmail.com)

Phone: 021 199 5627

***Project Supervisor Contact Details:***

Name: Claire Liu

Email: [claire.liu@aut.ac.nz](mailto:claire.liu@aut.ac.nz)

Phone: 027 389 9895

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 16 March 2021, AUTC Reference number 21/34.

## Appendix D. Consent Form



### Consent Form

For use when interviews are involved.

*Project title: An exploratory study of international students' perception of social media marketing and impacts on purchasing intention of adventure tourism in New Zealand after the COVID-19*

*Project Supervisor: Claire Liu*

*Researcher: Hoi Tung Chong*

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 14 January 2021.
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature : .....

Participant's name: .....

Participant's Contact Details and Email Address for receiving the research summary:

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Date:

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 16 March 2021 AUTEC Reference number 21/34**

*Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.*