



**Research Publishing
Academy (RPA)**
London, United Kingdom (UK)

JIBM

Journal of International Business and Management (JIBM)
Journal Homepage: <https://rpajournals.com/jibm>

Mediating Role of Trust in Hotel between Social Network Marketing and Star-Rated Hotel Bookings' Intention in Yunnan, China

Li Zhang^{1*}

Alireza Mohammadi²

Sadia Mehboob³

City Graduate School, City University Malaysia, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia^{1,2,3}

Abstract

This article delves into the crucial mediating role of trust in hotels within the relationship between social network marketing (SNM) and star-rated hotel bookings' intention in Yunnan, China. By integrating theoretical frameworks from marketing and consumer behavior research, along with empirical evidence from the local hospitality industry, the study explores how SNM strategies influence trust building, and how trust, in turn, impacts consumers' booking intentions. Through a comprehensive analysis, practical implications for hotels in Yunnan are proposed, aiming to enhance their marketing effectiveness and competitiveness in the highly competitive tourism market. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between digital marketing, trust, and consumer decision-making in the context of the Chinese hospitality sector.

Keywords: Trust in hotel, Social network marketing, Star-rated hotel booking intention

Corresponding Author*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37227/jibm-2025-10-7172>

Introduction

Yunnan, a province located in the southwestern part of China, is a globally renowned tourism destination celebrated for its rich ethnic diversity, stunning natural landscapes, and profound historical and cultural heritages. With iconic locations such as the ancient town of Lijiang, the enchanting Shangri-La, and the tropical paradise of Xishuangbanna, Yunnan attracts an astonishing annual influx of over 800 million domestic and international tourists. This thriving tourism industry has given rise to a vibrant star-rated hotel sector, which plays a pivotal role in the regional economy, contributing significantly to employment generation, revenue growth, and the overall enhancement of tourism experience.

In the digital age, the rapid development of social media platforms has revolutionized the marketing landscape, and the hospitality industry in Yunnan is no exception. Social network marketing (SNM) has emerged as the primary means for star-rated hotels to reach and engage potential guests. Platforms like WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu have become integral to the travel planning process for many consumers, serving as key sources of information, inspiration, and recommendations. Hotels in Yunnan are increasingly leveraging these platforms to showcase their unique features, services, and experiences, interact with customers in real-time, and build brand awareness. However, despite the extensive reach and visibility provided by SNM, there remains a

significant gap between the high levels of marketing exposure and the actual conversion of bookings. This disparity highlights the need to identify the key factors that influence consumers' decision-making processes and drive them to choose a particular hotel.

Trust, a fundamental concept in marketing and consumer behavior research, has long been recognized as a critical determinant of consumer decisions in the hospitality industry. It acts as a bridge between marketing efforts and consumer actions, influencing how consumers perceive, evaluate, and ultimately select products and services. In the context of Yunnan's star-rated hotels, where consumers are presented with a plethora of options and often face uncertainties about the quality and reliability of services, trust becomes even more crucial. This article aims to explore the mediating role of trust in the relationship between social network marketing and star-rated hotel bookings' intention in Yunnan. By understanding how trust is formed, nurtured, and influences consumers' booking decisions, this study seeks to provide valuable insights for hotels and marketers, enabling them to develop more effective marketing strategies and enhance their competitiveness in the market.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Social Network Marketing in Yunnan's Hospitality Context

Social network marketing in Yunnan's hotel sector has evolved to take full advantage of the unique characteristics and capabilities of various digital platforms. Three core elements have emerged as the driving forces behind effective SNM strategies in this context: user-generated content (UGC), key opinion leader (KOL) collaboration, and real-time interaction.

Xiaohongshu, often referred to as China's "lifestyle bible," has become a vast repository of travel information for Chinese consumers. With millions of users actively sharing their travel experiences, detailed reviews, and practical tips, the platform has created a powerful form of grassroots credibility that traditional advertising struggles to match. In the realm of Yunnan's star-rated hotels, Xiaohongshu is filled with rich and diverse content. Travelers share their personal stories of staying at these hotels, highlighting aspects such as the quality of accommodation, the friendliness of staff, and the unique cultural experiences offered. For example, a user might post a detailed review of a boutique hotel in Dali, praising its traditional Bai architecture, the delicious local cuisine served at the hotel's restaurant, and the stunning views of Erhai Lake from the room. Such UGC not only provides valuable information for potential guests but also serves as social proof, building trust and credibility for the hotels. Research by Wang and Zhang (2024) has shown that UGC has a significant impact on hotel booking intention, as consumers tend to trust the opinions and experiences of their peers more than brand-generated content.

Douyin, on the other hand, has gained immense popularity for its short-video and live-streaming features, making it an ideal platform for hotels to showcase their facilities and services in an engaging and dynamic way. Live streams, in particular, have become a powerful marketing tool. Hotels in Yunnan use Douyin live streams to offer virtual tours of their properties, allowing potential guests to get a real-time glimpse of the rooms, amenities, and the overall ambiance. For instance, a 5-star hotel in Lijiang might host a live stream during which the host takes the viewers on a tour of the luxurious suites, demonstrates the state-of-the-art fitness center, and showcases the traditional Naxi ethnic performances held at the hotel. These live streams not only increase engagement but also create a sense of authenticity and immediacy, making potential guests feel more connected to the hotel and increasing their interest in booking. According to Alqahtani and Algharabali (2025), live streaming characteristics, such as interactivity and entertainment value, have a positive impact on consumers' trust and booking intention.

WeChat, with its extensive user base and diverse range of functions, serves as a comprehensive communication and marketing platform for hotels. Official WeChat accounts are used by hotels to share detailed information about their offers, including room types, pricing, special promotions, and local travel guides. Hotels also engage with customers through WeChat by responding to inquiries, providing personalized recommendations, and building customer communities. For example, a hotel in Kunming might use its WeChat account to send targeted messages to customers who have previously shown interest in the hotel, offering exclusive discounts

or packages. This personalized approach helps to build stronger relationships with customers and increases the likelihood of booking.

Overall, these interactive and content-driven SNM strategies enable hotels in Yunnan to target specific customer segments more effectively, reduce information asymmetry, and enhance brand awareness. By leveraging the power of these platforms, hotels can reach a wider audience, engage with potential guests in a more meaningful way, and ultimately drive bookings.

2.2 Trust as a Mediator in Consumer Decision-Making

Trust is a complex and multi-dimensional construct that plays a central role in consumer decision-making, especially in the hospitality industry. In the context of hotels, trust can be defined as consumers' belief in a hotel's ability to fulfill its service promises, including aspects such as reliability, quality of service, safety, and value for money. It encompasses both cognitive and affective components, with consumers' rational assessment of a hotel's capabilities being intertwined with their emotional feelings of confidence and security.

A review of tourism trust research by Denizci Guillet (2014) highlights the crucial role of trust in mitigating perceived risk, which is a significant barrier to travel decisions. When consumers are planning a trip and choosing a hotel, they often face uncertainties about various aspects, such as the actual condition of the hotel, the quality of the food, and the level of service they will receive. Trust helps to alleviate these concerns by providing consumers with a sense of assurance that the hotel will meet or exceed their expectations. By aligning marketing messages with the actual experiences consumers can expect, trust reduces the perceived risk associated with booking a hotel, making consumers more willing to make a reservation.

In the case of Yunnan's star-rated hotels, trust becomes even more critical due to the unique characteristics of the destination. Yunnan is known for its diverse ethnic cultures, remote and sometimes less-developed areas, and a wide range of accommodation options. Tourists visiting Yunnan, especially those from outside the region or abroad, may have limited knowledge about the local hotels and may be more cautious when making a booking decision. They rely heavily on the information they find on social media platforms to assess the credibility of a hotel. Positive reviews, transparent communication, and a good reputation on social media can significantly enhance a hotel's trustworthiness in the eyes of potential guests.

Previous studies have also shown that trust has a positive impact on various aspects of consumer behavior in the hospitality industry, including customer satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth recommendations. When consumers trust a hotel, they are more likely to have a positive attitude towards the brand, be satisfied with their stay, and recommend the hotel to others. This, in turn, can lead to increased bookings and long-term success for the hotel.

Conceptual Model Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework and literature review, this study proposes a conceptual model to explore the relationship between social network marketing, trust in hotels, and star-rated hotel bookings' intention in Yunnan. The model is grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, which posits that external stimuli (in this case, social network marketing) influence an organism's internal state (trust), which then affects its response (booking intention).

H1: Effective social network marketing positively influences trust in Yunnan's star-rated hotels.

Effective SNM strategies, such as leveraging UGC, collaborating with KOLs, and engaging in real-time interaction on platforms like WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu, are expected to enhance the credibility and reliability of hotels in the eyes of consumers. By providing valuable and relevant content, demonstrating transparency, and building a positive online reputation, hotels can increase consumers' trust in their brand.

H2: Trust in hotels positively predicts star-rated hotel bookings' intention in Yunnan.

When consumers trust a hotel, they are more likely to have a positive attitude towards booking the hotel. Trust reduces the perceived risk associated with the booking decision, making consumers feel

more confident in choosing the hotel. As a result, higher levels of trust are expected to lead to a stronger intention to book.

H3: Trust mediates the relationship between social network marketing and star-rated hotel bookings' intention in Yunnan.

This hypothesis suggests that the effect of SNM on booking intention is partially or fully mediated by trust. In other words, SNM influences booking intention indirectly through its impact on trust. By building trust with potential guests through effective SNM, hotels can increase the likelihood of conversion and drive bookings.

The Mediating Mechanism of Trust: Evidence from Yunnan

How SNM Shapes Hotel Trust

Yunnan's star-rated hotels employ a variety of strategies through SNM to signal trustworthiness and build trust with potential guests. These strategies can be categorized into three main pathways: transparent information dissemination, UGC validation, and interactive responsiveness.

Transparent Information Dissemination: One of the keyways hotels build trust through SNM is by providing transparent and accurate information about their offerings. On WeChat, hotels use their official accounts to publish detailed descriptions of room types, including the size, layout, and amenities of each room. They also clearly state the pricing structure, including any additional charges such as service fees or taxes, and the cancellation policies. For example, a hotel in Xishuangbanna might use its WeChat account to post a comprehensive guide to its room categories, with high-quality photos and virtual tours of each room type, allowing potential guests to make an informed decision. Douyin is also used as a platform for transparent information dissemination. Hotels conduct live streams to showcase behind-the-scenes aspects of their operations, such as the food preparation process in the kitchen, the cleaning and maintenance of the rooms, and the training of staff. This "unfiltered" look at the hotel's operations helps to build trust by demonstrating the hotel's commitment to quality and hygiene. A 4-star hotel in Dali might host a live stream during which the chef shows how the local specialty dishes are prepared using fresh, local ingredients, giving potential guests a sense of the hotel's focus on quality and authenticity.

UGC Validation

User-generated content plays a crucial role in building trust for hotels in Yunnan. Hotels actively encourage guests to share their experiences on platforms like Xiaohongshu by offering incentives such as discounts on future stays or free souvenirs. They then post the positive UGC on their own official accounts, using it as social proof of the quality of their services. For instance, a hotel in Lijiang might feature a guest's Xiaohongshu post that raves about the hotel's warm hospitality, comfortable rooms, and convenient location near the ancient town. By showcasing these real-life experiences, hotels can build credibility and trust with potential guests who are more likely to trust the opinions of their peers.

In addition to reposting positive reviews, hotels also respond to UGC, both positive and negative, in a timely and professional manner. A prompt and sincere response to a negative review shows that the hotel takes customer feedback seriously and is committed to improving, which can help to rebuild trust. For example, if a guest posts a negative review on Xiaohongshu about a delay in check-in, the hotel might respond publicly, apologizing for the inconvenience, explaining the reason for the delay, and offering a complimentary upgrade or a discount on the next stay as a gesture of goodwill.

Interactive Responsiveness

Interactive responsiveness is another important aspect of building trust through SNM. Hotels in Yunnan actively engage with potential guests on social media platforms by promptly responding to comments, messages, and inquiries. On Douyin, hotels reply to comments on their videos, answering questions about the hotel's facilities, services, and local attractions. For example, if a user comments

on a hotel's Douyin video asking about the availability of a shuttle service to the airport, the hotel's social media team will respond promptly with the relevant information.

WeChat is also used for in-depth interaction with customers. Hotels create customer communities on WeChat, where they can share exclusive content, offer personalized recommendations, and address customer concerns in a more private and personalized setting. For instance, a hotel in Kunming might have a WeChat group for its frequent guests, where the hotel staff regularly shares travel tips, upcoming events in the city, and special promotions. This level of interaction helps to build a sense of community and loyalty, as well as trust in the hotel brand.

Trust Translates to Booking Intention

Trust acts as a crucial intermediary in translating the interest generated by SNM into actual booking intention. When consumers are exposed to SNM content from a hotel, such as an enticing Douyin video or a detailed Xiaohongshu review, they may develop an initial interest in the hotel. However, this interest alone is not sufficient to drive a booking decision. Trust is needed to bridge the gap between interest and intention.

For example, consider a traveler who sees a Douyin video of a luxurious 5-star hotel in Shangri-La, featuring breathtaking views of the Himalayas, a world-class spa, and elegant dining options. While the video may capture the traveler's attention and generate interest, the traveler may still have doubts about the actual quality of the services, the accuracy of the marketing claims, and the value for money. It is only when the traveler sees a large number of positive UGC reviews on Xiaohongshu, reads detailed and transparent information about the hotel on WeChat, and receives prompt and helpful responses to their inquiries from the hotel's social media team that they begin to trust the hotel. This trust then converts the initial interest into a strong booking intention, as the traveler feels confident that the hotel will deliver an experience that meets or exceeds their expectations.

A survey conducted among tourists visiting Yunnan found that 72% of respondents cited "trust in hotel claims" as the top reason for booking a star-rated hotel, compared to 28% who prioritized price alone. This clearly demonstrates the significant role that trust plays in the booking decision-making process. When consumers trust a hotel, they are more likely to overlook minor price differences and choose the hotel based on their confidence in the brand's ability to provide a satisfactory experience.

Moreover, trust's mediation effect helps to resolve potential inefficiencies in SNM. In a highly competitive market like Yunnan's hospitality industry, where many hotels are using similar SNM strategies to attract customers, trust becomes a key differentiator. A 2022 study in Indonesia found that the mediating effect of trust was non-significant only when hotels had inherent brand superiority. In the case of Yunnan's star-rated hotels, which often lack the national brand recognition of international hotel chains, building trust through SNM is essential for driving bookings. By focusing on building trust, hotels can stand out from the competition, increase customer loyalty, and ultimately drive business growth.

Practical Implications for Yunnan's Star-Rated Hotels

Optimize SNM Content for Trust Signaling

To build trust through SNM, hotels in Yunnan should focus on creating high-quality, informative, and authentic content. Instead of relying solely on promotional and polished advertisements, hotels should aim to provide valuable and relevant information that meets the needs and interests of potential guests. For example, a hotel in Dali could partner with local travel bloggers or KOLs to create "a day in life" videos that showcase the hotel's unique features and the local experiences available to guests. These videos could include activities such as a morning yoga session by the lake, a visit to a local market to buy fresh ingredients for a cooking class at the hotel, and an evening cultural performance. This type of content not only shows the hotel's offerings but also provides potential guests with a realistic and engaging view of what it would be like to stay at the hotel.

In addition, hotels should ensure that their SNM content is consistent with their brand values and promises. If a hotel positions itself as a sustainable and eco-friendly property, its SNM content

should reflect this by highlighting its green initiatives, such as energy-saving measures, waste reduction programs, and support for local environmental conservation efforts. By being transparent and authentic in their content, hotels can build a strong brand image and increase trust among consumers.

Leverage Platform-Specific Trust-Building Tools

Each social media platform has its own unique features and capabilities that hotels can leverage to build trust with potential guests.

Xiaohongshu: On Xiaohongshu, hotels can launch "guest takeover" campaigns, where recent guests are invited to take over the hotel's official account for a day and share their real-time experiences. This gives potential guests an unfiltered and authentic view of the hotel from the perspective of actual guests. Hotels can also encourage guests to use specific hashtags when sharing their experiences on Xiaohongshu, making it easier for the hotel to curate and showcase the best UGC. Additionally, hotels can engage with users by commenting on their posts, answering their questions, and showing appreciation for their feedback.

Douyin: Douyin offers various tools for hotels to build trust through interactive content. Hotels can host regular Q&A live streams with hotel managers or staff, where they can address common concerns and questions from potential guests. For example, a hotel in Lijiang could hold a live stream to answer questions about the best time to visit, the availability of different room types.

Integrate Trust Metrics into SNM Evaluation

To accurately measure the success of their SNM efforts in building trust, hotels should incorporate trust - related metrics into their evaluation framework. While traditional metrics such as views, likes, and shares provide valuable insights into the reach and engagement of the content, they do not directly measure the level of trust generated. Here are some specific trust metrics that hotels can adopt and how they can be utilized for a more comprehensive evaluation:

UGC Mention Rate of "Trustworthy" and Related Terms

Hotels can monitor the frequency at which user - generated content (UGC) on platforms like Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and WeChat mentions terms related to trustworthiness, such as "reliable," "credible," "trust - worthy," or "dependable" when referring to the hotel. This can be achieved through the use of social media listening tools. For example, a hotel could set up alerts in these tools to track any UGC that contains these keywords. A higher UGC mention rate of such terms indicates that the hotel is being perceived as more trustworthy by its customers.

By analyzing the content associated with these mentions, hotels can also gain insights into what specific aspects of their service, facilities, or SNM efforts are contributing to this positive perception. If multiple UGC posts mention the hotel's "trustworthy service" in relation to a particular staff member or service offering, the hotel can focus on promoting and enhancing these elements further in its SNM campaigns.

Comment Sentiment Analysis about Service Credibility

Sentiment analysis of comments on social media posts can be a powerful tool to gauge the level of trust customers have in a hotel's services. Natural language processing (NLP) algorithms can be used to analyze the sentiment of comments, categorizing them as positive, negative, or neutral. For comments related to service credibility, such as those about the reliability of room service, the accuracy of information provided, or the responsiveness of the staff, a positive sentiment indicates that customers trust the hotel's service-related claims.

For instance, if a hotel posts a Douyin video about its new in - room dining service and the majority of comments expressing an opinion about the service are positive, it suggests that customers have trust in the hotel's ability to deliver on this service's promise. On the other hand, negative sentiment

in such comments highlights areas where the hotel may be falling short in building trust, allowing management to take corrective actions.

Post - Booking Satisfaction Scores

Post-booking satisfaction scores are a direct indicator of whether a hotel has lived up to the trust placed in it by customers. Hotels can collect this data through post-stay surveys sent via email, WeChat, or other communication channels. Questions in these surveys can be specifically tailored to measure trust-related aspects, such as "Did the hotel meet your expectations in terms of the services advertised on social media?" or "How confident were you in the accuracy of the information provided by the hotel on its social media platforms during your booking process?"

High post-booking satisfaction scores related to these trust-oriented questions suggest that the hotel's SNM efforts have been successful in building trust and delivering on the promised experience. Conversely, low scores can help identify areas where the hotel needs to improve its SNM messaging or service delivery to enhance trust.

Repeat Booking Rate Attributed to Trust

Hotels can track the percentage of repeat bookings and attempt to attribute a portion of this to the trust built through SNM. By analyzing customer feedback, loyalty program data, and communication with guests, hotels can identify if customers are returning because they trust the brand based on their previous positive experiences and the consistent messaging they have received through social media. For example, if a hotel notices that a significant number of repeat guests mention in surveys that they were drawn back by the hotel's transparent social media communication and the trust they have in the brand, it validates the effectiveness of its SNM in building trust and driving repeat business.

Word - of - Mouth Recommendation Rate Based on Trust

Monitoring the rate at which customers recommend the hotel to others can also be an important trust metric. Social media platforms can be used to track the number of times the hotel is mentioned in positive recommendations - related posts by customers. Additionally, hotels can ask guests in surveys if they would recommend the hotel to friends and family and if trust in the hotel played a role in this decision. A high word - of - mouth recommendation rate based on trust indicates that the hotel has successfully built a positive reputation through its SNM efforts, as satisfied customers are willing to vouch for the hotel to their peers, further enhancing the hotel's trustworthiness in the eyes of potential guests.

In conclusion, integrating these trust metrics into the SNM evaluation framework allows hotels in Yunnan to move beyond surface - level engagement metrics and gain a deeper understanding of how their social network marketing efforts are influencing trust. By continuously monitoring and analyzing these metrics, hotels can make data - driven decisions to optimize their SNM strategies, build stronger trust with their customers, and ultimately increase booking intention and overall business success.

Conclusion

In Yunnan's competitive star-rated hotel market, social network marketing alone cannot guarantee booking intention—trust acts as the critical mediator. By transforming SNM content into credible signals (via UGC, transparency, and interaction), hotels mitigate perceived risk and convert digital engagement into tangible booking willingness. This mechanism underscores why some hotels' viral Douyin campaigns drive bookings while others fail: the latter neglect trust-building.

While this article makes valuable contributions to understanding the mediating role of trust between social network marketing (SNM) and star-rated hotel booking intention in Yunnan, it has limitations. This article only uses qualitative method, fails to operationalize trust or clarify details of referenced survey findings; This article only focus on Yunnan star-rated hotels, also neglecting the dynamic evolution of SNM platforms, limiting generalizability; This article is underdeveloped, grounding analysis in the S-O-R model, other models can be tried. Future research could adopt quantitative methods (e.g., SEM analysis of survey data from Yunnan tourists) to quantify trust's

mediation effect, as done in similar hospitality studies. Longitudinal studies tracking the "Meiteng Model's" impact on trust and bookings would also fill a gap in current literature. For practitioners, investing in trust-centered SNM is not just a marketing strategy, it is a way to capitalize on Yunnan's tourism potential and build sustainable customer relationships amid market uncertainties.

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