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STUDY LEADER: DR ALBERT NELMAPIUS

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QUALIFICATION: BACHELOR OF COMMERCE HONOURS

TITLE OF PROJECT: **AN ANALYSIS OF THE USE AND GRATIFICATIONS SOUGHT BY ONLINE ACCOMMODATION SEEKERS, USING THE REVIEW PLATFORM, BOOKING.COM IN THE EASTERN CAPE.**

DECLARATION:

In accordance with Rule G5.6.3, I hereby declare that the above-mentioned treatise/dissertation/thesis is my own work and that I have not previously been submitted to another University or for another qualification

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- Dr Albert Nelmapius

ABSTRACT

This study delves into the motivations and gratifications of online accommodation seekers in the Eastern Cape, utilising Booking.com as the primary review platform. Employing the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), the research analysed 19,387 user reviews, revealing a diverse demographic profile with varied accommodation preferences. Key determinants influencing user choices include cleanliness, location, amenities, and staff hospitality. While Booking.com was the main source, users often cross-referenced their choices with other platforms, emphasizing the interconnected digital accommodation landscape. The findings underscore the significant influence of online reviews on user behaviour, offering valuable insights for the tourism industry's stakeholders in the Eastern Cape.

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1   INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1   INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution in the travel and tourism industry has transformed the way people plan, book, and experience their trips. Online travel agencies, travel blogs, and social media have made it easier for consumers to research and compare prices, while mobile apps and virtual reality technology have enabled them to book and experience their trips on the go. This has led to a significant shift in the way tourism is marketed, sold, and experienced, with a greater emphasis on personalisation and immersive experiences (Pencarelli, 2020: 455-476). One of the most evident manifestations of this transformation is the emergence and dominance of online accommodation booking platforms (Arzoumanidis, Petti & Raggi, 2022: 1), such as Booking.com. These platforms have not only revolutionized the booking process but have also offered unparalleled convenience to both accommodation providers and seekers (Abdullah, Jayaraman & Kamal, 2016: 172). Specifically, these platforms provide real-time booking, attractive call-to-action features, integration with social media, visual calendars, a plethora of options, comparative pricing, and location maps, all of which contribute to a seamless user experience (Bisschoff & Joubert, 2020). However, as with any technological advancement, there are inherent challenges. The reliance on online reviews, for instance, can significantly influence consumers' purchasing decisions, sometimes leading to information overload or even potential misinformation (Chen, Samaranayake, Cen, Qi & Lan, 2022: 2). In this context, the Eastern Cape region of South Africa, with its rich cultural heritage and diverse wildlife, provides a unique setting to explore the implications of this digital transition on the tourism industry (Acha-Anyi, 2020: 500-514). The proliferation of online booking platforms has considerably influenced the tourism dynamics in the region, presenting both opportunities and challenges for local stakeholders. This paper proposes to explore these dynamics further, focusing on the motivations, preferences, and expectations of online travellers and how these impact their satisfaction and loyalty towards these platforms.

Online booking platforms for accommodations have brought about significant changes in how individuals find and book places to stay during their travels. This shift is particularly noticeable in areas like the Eastern Cape in South Africa. The introduction of these online platforms has not only simplified the reservation processes such as payments and reporting processes for travellers (West, Carblanc & Ferguson, 2018: 55), but has also been instrumental in boosting the local tourism industry (Bisschoff & Joubert, 2020: 1).

Bisschoff and Joubert (2020: 1) highlight that these platforms, with their varied features and capabilities, such as real-time booking and availability, attractive call to action, social media integration, online visual calendar, multiple options to choose from, comparative pricing, location maps, and online reviews enable tourists to discover accommodations that align with their specific preferences and budgetary constraints. However, the motivations and expectations of online travellers are complex (Buhalis & Law, 2008). As a result, it's crucial for those in the tourism and hospitality industries to understand the factors influencing online booking decisions. By gaining this understanding, they can enhance their platforms and services, leading to increased user engagement and satisfaction.

In the realm of online booking behaviour, several theoretical frameworks have been proposed to understand the motivations and actions of consumers. These range from the Social Influence Theory, which emphasizes the role of societal pressures and norms, to the Decision Support System Theory, which focuses on how information is processed, and decisions are made in online environments. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) is another notable theory that posits willingness of individuals to adopt and use a technology is influenced by perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Davis, 1989: 319-340). Marangunić & Granić (2015), suggest that perceived usefulness and ease of use are primary determinants of technology adoption.

However, when looking into the specific context of online reviews and their influence on booking behaviours, the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) emerges as particularly relevant, such that individuals interact with specific media forms in anticipation of deriving certain gratifications or satisfactions from such engagements. This theory has been extensively applied across various media studies, making it a robust and well-established framework (Chen, *et al.*, 2022: 115).

In the context of online accommodation booking, UGT offers a nuanced lens through which we can comprehend how these platforms cater to users' intrinsic and extrinsic needs. By leveraging UGT, we can unearth insights into how the fulfilment (or lack thereof) of these needs impacts user satisfaction, loyalty, and the propensity to share reviews. Given its comprehensive nature and its proven applicability in similar domains, UGT stands out as the most fitting theoretical framework for this study, even when juxtaposed against other prominent theories (Chen, *et al.*, 2022: 117).

1.2   BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The digital revolution, marked by the rapid development and widespread use of the internet, has brought about significant changes across various industries as broadly stated by Pencarelli (2020). In the Tourism and Hospitality sector, the manner in which individuals search for and book accommodations has been transformed. Platforms such as Booking.com and Airbnb have risen to prominence, providing users with an array of choices and reviews to make well-informed decisions. Notably, in regions like the Eastern Cape in South Africa, these online platforms have become the primary means for tourists to locate suitable lodgings (Chen, *et al.,* 2022: 7). The Retail industry has witnessed a shift from physical retail outlets to online outlets with the advent of e-commerce platforms like Amazon and Alibaba. The allure of convenience, diverse options, and often more competitive prices has made online shopping a preferred choice for many. This trend has further spurred the growth of online payment systems and digital wallets to ease transactions (Bisschoff & Joubert, 2020: 12). In the Banking and Finance domain, the rise of digital banking platforms and fintech startups has been evident. They offer a range of services, from online banking to digital wallets and investment avenues. This has compelled traditional banks to enhance their online offerings and improve their digital platforms to maintain their clientele (Kaur & Singh, 2021: 15). The Entertainment industry has been reshaped by streaming platforms like Netflix and Spotify, leading to a decline in traditional cable TV and radio as the audience gravitates towards on-demand content accessible at their convenience (Vinney, 2022). Lastly, the Education sector has seen a surge in online education and e-learning, facilitated by platforms like Coursera and Udemy. Educational institutions are increasingly offering online courses, and the popularity of virtual classrooms has skyrocketed, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020: 159).

Online booking sites, like Booking.com, have emerged as facilitators of this lodging search, improving the travel experience with their large selection of features, and services. However, there is a significant amount of variation in the reasons, tastes, and expectations of these internet travellers looking for accommodations.

Platforms, like Booking.com, have made it easier for tourists to find accommodations tailored to their preferences and budget. Online reviews, as highlighted by Venkatesh & Morris (2000: 13) significantly influence consumer choices. Kaur & Singh (2021), explored why consumers write reviews, noting motivations like reciprocity and self-efficacy.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) can shed light on online accommodation seekers' behaviour. It suggests that people use media, like booking platforms, based on expected benefits (Moon & An, 2022: 1). However, research on UGT in this context is limited, especially in the Eastern Cape. This study aims to fill that gap, exploring how digital platforms impact tourism in the region.

Understanding this digital shift is essential for tourism stakeholders in the Eastern Cape. It can guide business strategies, inform policies, and promote sustainable growth in the digital age. This research also extends the academic discussion on UGT, exploring the motivations of online accommodation seekers. Insights from this study can help platform designers better cater to user needs, enhancing satisfaction and competitiveness.

In essence, this research seeks to understand the motivations, preferences, and expectations of online accommodation seekers in the Eastern Cape using the UGT framework. The findings can benefit both the academic community and industry stakeholders, offering a deeper understanding of the digital transformation in tourism.

1.3   PROBLEM STATEMENT

The digital revolution has ushered in a new era of innovation and adaptation across various sectors, and the tourism industry stands as a testament to this evolution. Platforms like Booking.com have redefined the way accommodations are sought and provided, streamlining the process for both providers and seekers. Yet, with these advancements come new complexities, such as navigating the vast amount of information, ensuring transactional security, and meeting the ever-evolving expectations of users (Bisschoff & Joubert, 2020: 1). For instance, data analytics can help businesses identify trends and patterns in customer behaviour, which can be used to tailor marketing campaigns and improve customer experiences as broadly mentioned by Buhalis & Law (2008).

Despite the benefits, there is a significant variation in the motivations, preferences, and expectations of online travellers seeking accommodations. Therefore, it is crucial for stakeholders in the tourism and hospitality industries to understand the factors influencing online booking behaviours to optimise their platforms and services, thereby enhancing customer engagement and satisfaction (Bisschoff & Joubert, 2020: 2; Park, *et al*., 2019: 5).

Online reviews have emerged as a significant factor influencing online booking behaviour. These reviews offer potential users' valuable insights into the experiences of previous

customers, aiding others in making informed decisions (Kaur & Singh, 2021; Chen*, et al*., 2022: 7).

Vinney (2022) states that the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding the behaviour of online accommodation seekers. However, research applying UGT to the realm of online accommodation booking remains limited. Therefore, a study focusing on the uses and gratifications of online accommodation seekers in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, could provide invaluable insights and contribute significantly to the extant literature on UGT.

The problem statement of this study, therefore, is to investigate the motivations, preferences, and expectations of online accommodation seekers in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, and how people behave when they book accommodations online. The study will also explore the role of online reviews in the context of influencing online booking decisions and preferences and apply the Uses and Gratifications Theory to understand the behaviour of these online accommodation seekers. This research aims to fill the existing gaps in the literature and provide a more nuanced understanding of online accommodation booking behaviour in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.

1.4 PRIMARY OBJECTIVES

1.4.1 Primary Objective

The investigation's primary objective is to discern the priorities of online accommodation seekers in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, when selecting accommodations, by further delving into their uses and gratifications within the realm of online booking platforms. By studying online reviews, the study seeks to identify the attributes and features most valued by these seekers. Grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), it is posited that individuals actively interact with media, including online booking platforms, to meet their specific needs and achieve desired gratifications (Park, et al., 2019: 1).

Two central questions guide this research. The first pertains to the insights online reviews offer about the specific factors influencing the needs and gratifications of online accommodation seekers in the Eastern Cape. The second question probes how the motivations, preferences, and expectations of these seekers shape their satisfaction with their chosen accommodations. Addressing these queries not only aims to fill the gaps in academic literature but also has practical implications for various stakeholders in the tourism sector. Empirical findings from prior research underscore the significant role of online reviews in shaping user behaviours,

such as purchase intention, satisfaction, and loyalty (Bisschoff & Joubert, 2020: 3). These reviews further mould user behaviour processes, including needs and gratifications (Park, *et al.,* 2019: 335).

To achieve these objectives, a blend of qualitative and quantitative research methods will be employed. The analysis will predominantly focus on user reviews from accommodation establishments in the Eastern Cape, sourced from the prominent online platform, Booking.com. A detailed thematic analysis is envisioned to discern and report patterns or themes within the data.

Ensuring the research's robustness and applicability requires adherence to stringent evaluation criteria, guaranteeing the findings' validity, reliability, and transferability across varied contexts. The evolving digital landscape of the tourism sector, especially in online accommodation booking, accentuates the relevance of this study. By delving into the motivations and expectations of online travellers in the Eastern Cape, the research aims to shed light on how these platforms cater to user needs, influencing their overall satisfaction and loyalty.

1.4.2 Secondary Objective

To support the primary objective of this study, which is to understand what online accommodation seekers in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, prioritise when searching for accommodations based on their online reviews, the following secondary research objectives have been formulated:

- Conduct a literature review on online accommodation booking evolution, uses and gratifications theory, user behaviour, and gaps in current research. This review will offer background, theoretical frameworks, and insights, comparing the uses and gratifications theory with theories like the technology acceptance model.
- To select an appropriate research methodology and research methods for the study. The research methodology and research methods will justify and explain the choice of a qualitative research design that involves analysing user reviews from various accommodation properties in Eastern Cape, South Africa. The research methodology and research methods will also discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using a qualitative research design and how they relate to the research question and objectives of this study.

- To develop a research instrument and describe the dataset. The research instrument will describe and demonstrate the tool used to collect the data, which is an Excel spreadsheet that records and organises user reviews. This dataset comprises 19,387 user reviews collected from various towns and cities within the Eastern Cape, representing a comprehensive collection of online accommodation feedback from the region. The data collection method employed a purposive technique, selecting user reviews based on specific criteria or purposes.

- To collect and analyse primary data. The data collection will describe and report the process of collecting user reviews from a leading online accommodation booking platform, Booking.com. The data collection will also discuss the ethical considerations involved in collecting user reviews from Booking.com. The data analysis will describe and demonstrate the process of analysing user reviews using a thematic analysis approach, which is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within data. The data analysis will also discuss the criteria used to evaluate the quality and accuracy of the data analysis.

1.4.3   Research Questions

Understanding what online accommodation seekers look for in accommodations in Eastern Cape, South Africa, is the key driving force behind this study. The central research question emerges as: What do online reviews reveal about the preferences and priorities of online accommodation seekers in Eastern Cape, South Africa? This question is both clear and concise, and its relevancy, originality, and significance make it answerable through qualitative and quantitative research methods. This approach aligns with the methodology adopted by (Ye, Law, Gu & Chen, 2011), in their study on online streaming technologies, emphasizing the importance of understanding user motivations and preferences through qualitative analysis.

Grounded in the primary objective of the study and the theoretical framework provided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), the central research question is expanded upon by a set of sub-questions that closely align with the secondary objectives and the data analysis procedure. These sub-questions include:

- What are the primary preferences and priorities expressed by online accommodation seekers in their reviews?

- How do the identified preferences and priorities align with the constructs of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)?

- Do these preferences and priorities vary based on the type of accommodation or the specific online booking platform used by the seekers?

Exploring these sub-questions along with the primary and secondary objectives through a thematic analysis approach, allows for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns or themes within the data.

By examining the motivations, preferences, and expectations of online travellers, their satisfaction and loyalty towards online booking platforms, and the role of online reviews in this process, these questions offer a comprehensive exploration of the context. Using the UGT framework, these questions will provide a deeper understanding of user behaviour within the realm of online accommodation booking.

1.5   SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research contributes to the existing body of literature on UGT and the digital transformation of the tourism industry. Moreover, it offers crucial insights into the behaviour and satisfaction of a specific group of travellers in a developing region. The findings of this study can offer practical insights for various stakeholders, including accommodation providers, platform designers, tourism operators, and policymakers in the Eastern Cape. By understanding the motivations and behaviours of online accommodation seekers, stakeholders can optimise the use of digital tools, enhance customer satisfaction, and craft strategic initiatives that foster sustainable growth in the tourism sector.

This also aims to further our understanding of consumer behaviour within the context of online accommodation booking, with a specific focus on the South African tourism industry. Grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), the research provides an in-depth view of what motivates and gratifies consumers when they interact with online accommodation platforms.

Theoretically, this work expands on the existing knowledge of digital consumer behaviour, extending the applications of UGT to the domain of online accommodation booking. By identifying specific consumer gratifications in the context of interaction with online accommodation providers, we gain a more nuanced understanding of the UGT in the digital era.

Practically, the findings derived from this research have substantial implications for various stakeholders in the tourism industry. From business managers to platform designers and

policymakers, understanding the driving factors of consumer behaviour can guide more effective strategies and policies. For instance, insights into the significance of cleanliness, staff friendliness, and quality of breakfast to customers can enable accommodation providers to enhance their service quality and satisfaction.

1.5.1 Study's Impact on the South African Tourism Industry

According to a report by Statista indicates that travel and tourism contributed nearly 3.2% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of South Africa in 2021 (Cowling, 2023). Given the vital role of the tourism industry in South Africa's economy and the transformative influence of online booking platforms, understanding consumer behaviour in this context is of significant value. The insights derived from this study can stimulate industry growth and contribute to the country's economic development.

1.5.2 Extension of Previous Study's Findings

This research aligns with the prior findings while contributing new perspectives and practical implications for researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and tourism industry stakeholders. The study applies the UGT to understand how online reviews affect online accommodation seekers' needs and gratifications in Eastern Cape, South Africa. This work not only extends UGT's application to online platforms and specific users, but also provides valuable information for accommodation providers, platform operators, and authorities in improving their services and strategies.

1.5.3 Themes and Patterns in User Reviews

A notable aspect of the study is the exploration of the main themes and subthemes that emerged from user reviews. These themes reflect the diverse and complex needs and gratifications of online accommodation seekers, providing critical insights into their preferences and expectations. Additionally, the comparison and contrast of these themes across different types of accommodation properties and online platforms reveal user similarities and differences.

1.5.4 Practical Implications of the Study

By gaining a deeper understanding of the impact of online reviews on users' needs and gratifications, online platform operators can design and manage their platforms to enhance user engagement and satisfaction. Furthermore, valuable information about trends and patterns of online accommodation booking in Eastern Cape, South Africa can assist tourism authorities in developing and implementing policies and strategies that promote and regulate the industry.

In summary, the study's significant theoretical and practical contributions enrich our understanding of consumer behaviour in the context of online accommodation booking. This research offers valuable insights for various stakeholders in the tourism industry, thereby supporting the economic development of South Africa.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   INTRODUCTION

The digital age has brought about significant change in various sectors, with the tourism industry being no exception (Pencarelli, 2020: 455-476). The emergence of online accommodation booking platforms has revolutionised the way travellers search for and reserve accommodations, thereby significantly altering the dynamics of the tourism industry (Guttentag & Smith, 2017: 3). It is particularly evident in unique locales such as the Eastern Cape, South Africa, where the advent of online booking platforms has opened up new opportunities and reshaped the tourism landscape.

The development of online booking platforms in the late 1980's and early 2000s (Khristina Ridge, 2021) paralleled the rapid advancement and widespread adoption of the internet (Leiner, Cerf, Clark, Kahn, Kleinrock, Lynch, Postel, Roberts & Wolff, 2017: 3.). In their infancy, these platforms primarily functioned as informational portals, enabling potential travellers to sift through and compare lodging options based on various parameters such as price, rating, location, and amenities (Choi *et al*., 2016: 8). Instead of facilitating direct bookings, these nascent platforms often redirected users to the official websites of hotels or other intermediaries. This era marked the evolution of the digital landscape, with these platforms' main objective being the aggregation and presentation of information in a user-centric manner. The direct booking feature that is now ubiquitous only surfaced later, propelled by technological advancements and the mutual recognition by consumers and service providers of the advantages of simplifying the reservation process (Ye, *et al*., 2011).

The landscape experienced a shift in the mid-2000s when platforms began to offer direct booking services. This development enabled travellers to reserve and pay for their accommodations online, eliminating the need for direct interaction with accommodation providers. To enhance the user experience and inform decision-making processes, platforms introduced features such as reviews, ratings, photos, videos, maps, and filters. Examples of such platforms include Booking.com, Agoda.com, and Hotels.com (Choi, Fowler, Gao, & Yuan, 2016: 9). These features were based on the use of data and technology to provide information and convenience to users. However, as the online booking market became more competitive and user expectations increased, platforms needed to adopt more advanced technologies to differentiate themselves and offer more value to users. One of these

technologies was Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Bulchand-Gidumal, William Secin, O'Connor & Buhalis, 2023: 1-18).

According Bulchand-Gidumal, *et al.,* (2023), Artificial Intelligence (AI) was employed in various ways across industries, including the tourism and hospitality sectors. One of the notable uses of AI was in the form of chatbots on booking platforms. These chatbots, powered by AI, were designed to interact with users in real-time, answering queries, providing recommendations, and assisting in the booking process. Additionally, AI-driven algorithms were used to analyse vast amounts of data from user interactions, reviews, and feedback. This data analysis allowed platforms to offer personalised recommendations to users, enhancing the user experience by suggesting accommodations and travel experiences tailored to individual preferences. Machine learning, a subset of AI, was also used to predict user behaviour, helping platforms anticipate user needs and adjust their offerings accordingly. This level of personalisation and predictive analysis was instrumental in enhancing user engagement and satisfaction on online booking platforms (Bulchand-Gidumal, *et al.,* 2023: 1)

The transformation of online accommodation booking has been particularly impactful in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, where the implementation of new technologies have allowed access to more accommodation options has empowered consumers and stimulated competition within the local hospitality industry (Mofokeng, Giampiccoli & Jugmohan, 2018: 1). The increasing visibility and accessibility of a range of housing alternatives, from five-star hotels to cheap guesthouses, has led to an increase in tourism in the area (Chia & Muiz, 2021: 2).

According to Oskam & Boswijk (2016), digital platforms have revolutionised the way businesses operate, offering a significant boost in visibility. Through platforms like Airbnb, smaller establishments now have the opportunity to showcase their offerings alongside major industry giants. The democratization of the hotel industry has improved the overall client experience by levelling the playing field for competitors and encouraging firms to raise their service standards. The broader economic and cultural implications of this transition are profound. The surge in tourism, significantly influenced by online platforms like Airbnb, has been a driving force behind economic expansion in the Eastern Cape. This growth has not only created job opportunities but has also invigorated related industries such as food and beverage, transportation, and retail. While some argue that platforms like Airbnb might be detrimental to traditional hotels, there's a general consensus that they are beneficial for tourism as a whole. Approximately 70% of Airbnb's offerings are located outside central hotel districts, suggesting that they cater to a different market segment. Moreover, the Eastern Cape's cultural interactions

and global prominence have been enhanced, leading to a richer appreciation of its distinctive heritage and scenic wonders. However, this rapid growth also poses some challenges for the region, especially in terms of managing its online reputation and ensuring sustainable tourism practices.

The digital transition towards online booking has ushered in both opportunities and challenges. For businesses in the Eastern Cape and comparable regions, the management of their online reputation has become paramount. A single negative review can significantly impact bookings and the overall brand image. This sentiment is echoed by Oskam & Boswijk (2016) and Phillips, Barnes, Zigan & Schegg (2017), who both highlight the power of peer reviews in shaping consumer decisions. Furthermore, the increased accessibility and visibility brought about by online platforms might lead to over-tourism. Such a surge in visitors can strain local resources and potentially disturb the harmony of local communities. This phenomenon underscores the need for meticulous planning and management by both local authorities and businesses to ensure sustainable tourism practices. Therefore, the Eastern Cape needs to leverage the benefits of online platforms while mitigating their risks, creating a balanced and resilient tourism ecosystem.

As the global online travel market continues to expand, it is projected to reach unprecedented heights, with projecting a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of over 10% from 2021 to 2030 (Projection Mapping Market Size & Projection Mapping Market Size, Share & Trends Analysis Report By Dimension Report Overview, n.d.). This continued growth will inevitably fuel competition, prompting platform providers to continually innovate to better meet the needs and expectations of their users. The evolving landscape may bring both opportunities and challenges to diverse regions such as the Eastern Cape, requiring stakeholders to adapt to and navigate the changing dynamics of the tourism industry. One of the key innovations that may shape the future of the industry is Artificial Intelligence (AI), which has been employed in various ways across sectors, including the tourism and hospitality sectors.

Delving into the potential impact of AI on the marketing function of hospitality and tourism, this study offers insights into how the sector may evolve as a result of AI integration. The research identifies key trends and themes, emphasizing the importance of data access, hyper-personalized experiences, augmented workers, and the potential link between AI and sustainability in the industry. Such insights are crucial for various stakeholders, including policymakers, tourism operators, and platform designers, as they navigate the rapidly changing landscape of the tourism industry (Bulchand-Gidumal, *et al*., 2023: 13)

The intentions, expectations, and behaviours of users of these platforms must be better understood as we go into the future. A deeper understanding can help shape business strategies, policies, and initiatives to support sustainable growth in the tourism industry and enhance user satisfaction and engagement in the digital age. Further research is thus paramount, as it provides practical implications for providers and managers of online accommodation platforms, enabling the development of products and services that improve customer experience and retention.

2.2   DEFINITIONS

- **Online Accommodation Booking:** A digital process allowing travellers to reserve lodgings, such as hotels, guesthouses, or bed and breakfasts, through internet platforms. This method has transformed the tourism industry, offering a more streamlined and efficient way for travellers to secure their accommodations, especially in regions like the Eastern Cape.

- **Online Reviews:** Feedback or opinions shared by users on digital platforms about a product, service, or experience. In the tourism sector, these reviews significantly influence travellers' choices and satisfaction levels.

- **Eastern Cape:** A province located in South Africa, known for its diverse landscapes and rich cultural heritage. In the context of this research, it serves as a focal point to understand the impact of online accommodation booking on regional tourism.

- **Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT):** A theoretical framework suggesting that media users actively select specific media sources to fulfil particular needs or desires. In the realm of online booking, UGT can help decipher why consumers opt for certain platforms over others.

- **User Behaviour:** The actions and interactions of users on digital platforms. In the context of online reviews, it's the foundation upon which feedback is built, influenced by various factors like user characteristics, motivations, and societal norms.

- **Stickiness:** In the digital context, it refers to the ability of a website or online platform to retain user attention and encourage prolonged engagement. A 'sticky' site effectively keeps users engaged, reducing the likelihood they'll quickly leave or 'bounce.'

- **Sustainability:** The practice of meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. In the context of tourism, it emphasizes the balance between environmental protection, economic benefits, and social equity.

Important terms for this research have been defined. This will help follow the arguments and explanations. Each term will help to understand the details of the study. By making sure that the writing is clear and easy to read as the research delves deeper into the topic.

2.3   DEFICIENCIES WITHIN THE EXISTING BODY OF SCHOLARLY WORKS

In the wake of the digital revolution, the tourism industry has witnessed significant transformations, with online accommodation booking platforms at the helm. While the existing literature is extensive, it falls short in examining specific aspects, such as the precise preferences of online accommodation seekers when choosing properties. This research intends to address these spaces, offering a comprehensive insight into the mindset of these users.

Historical studies, such as those by Arzoumanidis, *et al.* (2022), have highlighted the role of online booking platforms in promoting sustainable tourism. However, these studies also point to a significant gap: the incomplete integration of sustainability principles on these platforms. This gap, further widened by the shift from sustainability to health and safety concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic, has created confusion for potential clients. The often-unclear sustainability filters and labels on these platforms can be misleading, potentially dissuading users from more eco-friendly choices.

In addition to the aforementioned studies, Jahan & Kim (2021) delved into the relationship between participation in online travel communities and travel satisfaction, using the uses and gratifications theory as a foundational framework. Similarly, Ding, Choo, Ng, Ng & Song (2021) explored the determinants influencing accommodation choices among Airbnb users, integrating both the theory of planned behaviour and the uses and gratifications theory into their research. Zhang *et al*., (2021) also contributed to the discourse by investigating the impact of online reviews on accommodation booking intentions, employing both the elaboration likelihood model and the uses and gratifications theory.

Taking a step further from the groundwork laid by Arzoumanidis*, et al*., (2022), this research endeavours to explore the specific factors prioritised by online accommodation seekers when selecting properties. By employing a meticulous analysis of user reviews, we aim to offer a detailed understanding of the uses and gratifications of these seekers. Such an approach is poised to enrich the current literature by providing empirical data on an area that has been marginally addressed in prior research.

Simultaneously, the literature review has demonstrated that online accommodation booking is a burgeoning and relevant phenomenon in South African tourism, necessitating further exploration. However, there are noteworthy gaps in the existing research, particularly concerning how online accommodation seekers in South Africa use these platforms to fulfil their needs and desires (Park, *et al*., 2019: 2). The majority of studies have taken a utilitarian approach to online hotel booking, focusing on the rational and functional aspects of user behaviour and hardly ever considering the pleasure-seeking and emotional aspects, as suggested by the uses and gratifications theory.

The majority of studies have focused on behavioural outcomes, such as purchase intention, contentment, or loyalty, therefore, there is a lack of research evaluating how online reviews impact the wants and gratifications of online accommodation searchers in South Africa (Bisschoff and Joubert, 2020: 15).

By conducting a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the impact of online reviews on online accommodation seekers' needs and gratifications in South Africa, this research seeks to address these gaps in the literature. Using a qualitative method involving the analysis of other journal articles and user reviews, our research is set to contribute to the theory and practice of online accommodation booking by providing new insights and implications for researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and stakeholders in the tourism industry.

2.4   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Navigating the digital realm of the tourism industry requires an understanding of the theoretical underpinnings that guide consumer behaviour. The section delves into the intricate tapestry of theories that highlight the motivations and choices of online accommodation seekers. While the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) offers insight into the specific desires and needs of users, other frameworks like the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Social Influence Process (SIP), and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) provide complementary perspectives. These theories, rather than being in contention, collectively show the multifaceted nature of online consumer behaviour.

The digital transformation has ushered in a new era of consumer behaviour, especially in sectors like hospitality. As Zsarnoczky (2018) points out, the rise of online accommodation booking platforms, particularly in regions such as the Eastern Cape in South Africa, has been a game-changer. These platforms have democratized the booking process, offering a wide range of choices and fostering competition.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) provides a lens through which we can understand these changes. UGT suggests that consumers actively choose specific types of media based on the expected fulfilment of certain needs or desires (Bryant & Zillmann, 2009: 528). In the context of online accommodation booking, these platforms can be seen as a type of media that offers various gratifications. These include providing information, facilitating social interaction, and offering entertainment, among others (Huang, 2008: 6).

2.4.1   Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

Another significant theory in understanding digital consumer behaviour is the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). As described by Camilleri & Falzon (2021), TAM suggests that the acceptance and use of technology by users are primarily influenced by its perceived usefulness and ease of use. This means that if consumers find an online booking platform easy to use and beneficial, they are more likely to use it.

2.4.2   Social Influence Process (SIP)

The Social Influence Process (SIP) offers another perspective. It emphasizes the role of social influence in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviours. According to Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz & Power (1987: 1), media use in organizations is influenced by how individuals perceive their peers and superiors view the utility of the media. In the context of online booking, this could mean that if a particular platform is popular within a social circle, individuals are more likely to use it.

2.4.3   Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is also noteworthy. It focuses on individual intention, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control as predictors of behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). This theory can help explain why some consumers might choose one platform over another, based on their intentions and perceptions.

2.4.4   Comparison with UGT and Motivation for Choosing UGT

While all the aforementioned theories offer valuable insights into online consumer behaviour, UGT stands out for its focus on user motivations and gratifications. The other theories, such as TAM and SIP, provide complementary insights, but UGT delves deeper into understanding why consumers make specific choices. It seeks to understand the motivations behind media consumption, making it particularly relevant for studying why consumers choose certain online accommodation booking platforms.

In the evolving landscape of online accommodation booking, understanding user motivations is crucial. Platforms need to know what drives users to choose them over competitors. UGT, with its emphasis on user motivations and gratifications, provides the perfect framework for this. By focusing on what users hope to gain from using a platform, be it information, entertainment, or social interaction, UGT offers a more comprehensive understanding of consumer behaviour in the digital age.

While theories like TAM, SIP, and TPB offer valuable insights into different facets of online consumer behaviour, it's UGT that resonates most with the study's focus. By choosing UGT as the primary theoretical framework, we can delve deep into the motivations and gratifications sought by users, providing a richer understanding of their choices in the digital era of accommodation booking.

2.4.5   Online Accommodation Booking in South Africa

The digital revolution has significantly changed the travel and tourism industry. Traveller planning has fundamentally altered as a result of the emergence of online accommodation reservation systems, becoming easier, more efficient, and more personalised. South Africa, a nation renowned for its extensive natural beauty and rich cultural legacy, has seen this shift particularly clearly. Due to the simplicity and convenience of online booking, tourism to the Eastern Cape, one of the nation's most popular provinces, has significantly increased (Statistics South Africa, 2020).

Online lodging booking systems were first proposed in the late 1990s and early 2000s, at a time when the Internet was expanding quickly. These websites, like Booking.com, act as middlemen, connecting travellers with a variety of lodging options. They stimulate two-way feedback and provide a range of advantages, such as ease, accessibility, variety, transparency, and personalisation. The ability to evaluate and book lodgings based on many factors, including location, price, rating, and amenities, has profoundly altered how travellers make decisions (Park, *et al.*, 2019: 5).

In the Eastern Cape, online booking platforms have "democratised" access, meaning they have made it easier and more accessible for everyone, regardless of their background or resources, to explore a wide range of accommodation options. This has levelled the playing field, allowing local businesses to compete more effectively, thereby boosting tourism and driving economic growth. However, the integration of sustainability into these platforms remains a challenge. As Arzoumanidis, *et al.,* (2022: 4) noted, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted priorities from

sustainability to health and safety. Nevertheless, opportunities to champion sustainable tourism in the post-pandemic era are still ripe for exploration.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) provides a useful framework for understanding consumer behaviour in the context of online accommodation booking. According to UGT, consumers actively select certain types of media based on the expected fulfilment of specific needs or desires (Lin & Chen, 2017). Bisschoff and Joubert (2020) applied UGT to investigate the factors influencing consumers' intent to use online accommodation booking platforms in South Africa. They found that perceived usefulness, ease of use, trustworthiness, enjoyment, social influence, and facilitating conditions were significant predictors of this intent.

The evolution of online accommodation booking platforms has significantly transformed the tourism landscape in South Africa, particularly in the Eastern Cape (Goga Sha'ista, 2020). As the market continues to evolve, it is incumbent upon stakeholders to strategically leverage these benefits while concurrently managing potential drawbacks. Further research is needed to integrate sustainability into these platforms and to extend the application of UGT to understand more granular aspects of online consumer behaviour in accommodation booking. This exploration can provide actionable insights to optimise platform design, foster user satisfaction, and drive brand loyalty.

2.4.6   User Behaviour and Online Reviews

In the contemporary digital ecosystem, user-generated content in the form of online reviews has emerged as an influential component shaping consumer behaviours and decision-making processes (Oskam & Boswijk, 2016: 5). Online reviews, extending across a large number of online platforms such as e-commerce websites, social media, and online travel agencies, serve as a credible source of information, assisting consumers in mitigating uncertainties and risks associated with their purchase decisions (West, *et al.,* 2018: 89) In the tourism industry, the significance of online reviews is notably evident as they play a major factor in shaping travellers' destination choices, accommodation preferences, satisfaction levels, and their intent to remain loyal to the services as broadly mentioned by Bisschoff & Joubert (2020).

Online reviews, stemming from the actions and interactions of users on digital platforms, play a pivotal role in influencing consumer behaviours as broadly mentioned by Chen et al., (2022). These behaviours, shaped by a myriad of factors such as individual characteristics, motivations, and societal norms, contribute to the richness and diversity of online reviews. Such reviews, as

highlighted by Park et al., (2019: 334-348), serve as invaluable sources of information, guiding and influencing the decisions of other users on the platform.

Multiple theoretical perspectives can elucidate how internet reviews influence user behaviour. These theories include the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), the social cognitive theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986), and the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) (Lin & Chen, 2017). Collectively, these theories suggest that user behaviour is shaped by a combination of personal factors, environmental influences, past experiences, and the perceived usefulness of the behaviour.

The motivations prompting users to write online reviews are isolated into intrinsic motivations, derived from internal rewards or satisfaction, and extrinsic motivations, received from external rewards or incentives (Kaur & Singh, 2021: 14). The impact of online reviews on the tourism industry can be quantified using indicators such as sales performance, quality perception, and customer loyalty, especially for accommodation providers (Arzoumanidis et al., 2022: 19).

The intertwined relationship between the role of online reviews in user behaviour, user motivations for writing reviews, and their impact on the tourism industry are crucial to understanding the digital consumer landscape. A study by Cheung and Thadani (2012) suggests that the perceived usefulness and ease of use of online reviews play a significant role in shaping user behaviour in e-commerce. Intrinsic factors such as enjoyment and self-expression, in addition to external rewards, motivate users to write online reviews (Arzoumanidis et al., 2022: 8). Moreover, Ye, *et al*. (2011) have indicated that online reviews have a profound impact on the tourism industry by significantly influencing consumers' perceptions and travel intentions.

Investigating details of user behaviour and online reviews is crucial. We now live in a time where user-generated material, particularly online reviews, has a significant influence on consumer behaviour and decision-making processes as we move across the digital world. This effect is particularly noticeable in the tourism sector, where internet evaluations have a considerable impact on travellers' preferences for trip destinations and lodging as well as their intention to continue using the services (Choi, Fowler, Goh & Yuan, 2016: 6).

The motivations prompting users to write online reviews are multifaceted, often separated into intrinsic motivations, derived from internal rewards or satisfaction, and extrinsic motivations, received from external rewards or incentives (Bryant & Zillmann, 2009: 128). These motivations are influenced by a diverse range of factors such as user characteristics,

expectations, attitudes, beliefs, and prevailing social norms, which directly impact the quality and volume of online reviews (Bryant & Zillmann, 2009: 126).

In the digital realm, 'stickiness' is a term often used to describe the ability of a website or online platform to retain user attention and encourage prolonged engagement. It's a measure of a site's effectiveness in keeping users 'stuck' or engaged, rather than having them bounce off after a brief visit. In the context of online travel communities, stickiness, or the impact of stickiness on consumer interactive behaviour, is revealed to be a significant factor. This concept of stickiness extends and adapts to the online travel communities' context, enriching the theoretical understanding of stickiness. This explains a significant percentage of the variance of continuance intention to create user-generated content, stickiness, and eWOM review adoption (Marine-Roig, 2021: 1)

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) suggests that media use is motivated by needs and goals. In the context of online reviews, these needs and goals can be seen as the gratifications users seek from writing reviews. For instance, users may write reviews for the purpose of information sharing, self-expression, or even entertainment. These gratifications have been found to have a significant impact on stickiness and sharing information behaviour, and the relationships between these factors are verified by UGT and motivation theory (Chavez et al., 2020: 16).

The influence of online reviews on the tourism sector can be measured through metrics such as sales metrics, perceived quality, and company reputation (Chen et al., 2022: 5). Research by Cheung & Thadani (2012: 461-470), highlights that the perceived value and user-friendliness of online reviews significantly influence consumer behaviour in online shopping. Factors like personal enjoyment, self-expression, and external rewards drive users to post online reviews (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004: 38-52). Additionally, Ye et al., (2011) emphasize that online reviews greatly shape consumer perceptions and intentions to travel.

Understanding the intricate connection between the influence of online reviews on consumer actions, the reasons users post reviews, and their overarching effect on the tourism sector is vital for grasping the nuances of digital consumer behaviour. Grasping these connections offers valuable insights for tourism businesses, enabling them to better align with customer desires and expectations.

2.5   SUMMARY

The dawn of the digital age has ushered in a transformative era for the tourism industry, primarily through the emergence of online accommodation booking platforms. This technological advancement has not only revolutionized the process of reserving accommodations but has also significantly redefined the overall dynamics of the tourism sector (Guttentag & Smith, 2017).

The evolution of online booking platforms has been intrinsically linked with the rapid expansion and adoption of the internet. Initially conceived as informational hubs, these platforms gradually transitioned into facilitating direct bookings and transactions. This pivotal shift was accompanied by the integration of features such as reviews, ratings, and personalized recommendations, significantly enhancing the overall user experience (Choi, *et al*., 2016; Ye, *et al*., 2011). The utilization of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning has played an instrumental role in enabling predictive analysis and personalization, thereby augmenting user engagement and satisfaction (Bulchand-Gidumal, *et al*., 2023).

In the specific context of the Eastern Cape in South Africa, the advent of online booking platforms has led to the democratization of access to accommodations, which, in turn, has propelled an upsurge in tourism activities (Mofokeng, *et al.,* 2018; Chia & Muiz, 2021). Notably, platforms like Airbnb have empowered local businesses by providing them with a level playing field alongside industry giants, contributing to economic growth (Oskam & Boswijk, 2016). Nevertheless, challenges related to managing online reputation and addressing potential over-tourism have emerged, highlighting the need for strategic planning (Phillips, Barnes, Zigan & Schegg, 2017).

According to a report by IMARC Group, the global online travel market size reached US$ 459.7 Billion in 2022 and is expected to reach US$ 942.3 Billion by 2028, exhibiting a growth rate (CAGR) of 11.5% during 2023-2028 ("Online Travel Market: Global Industry Trends, Share, Size, Growth, Opportunity and Forecast 2023-2028", n.d.). As the market continues to expand, competition among platform providers intensifies, necessitating continuous innovation to meet evolving user expectations. Incorporating sustainability considerations into these platforms remains a critical challenge, requiring a balance between economic growth and responsible tourism practices (Arzoumanidis *et al.,* 2022).

The theoretical lens of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) offers valuable insights into the intricacies of user behaviour on these platforms. UGT emphasizes the motivations and

gratifications that underlie users' choices, and this understanding is enriched by the perspectives of Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Social Influence Process (SIP), and Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), providing a comprehensive understanding of technology adoption and behaviour (Camilleri & Falzon, 2021; Chavez, *et al*., 2020).

Online reviews, a cornerstone of user-generated content, wield considerable influence over user behaviour and decision-making (Oskam & Boswijk, 2016). These reviews, embedded in the broader concept of user behaviour, wield substantial influence over consumer choices within the tourism sector (Bisschoff & Joubert, 2020). The symbiotic relationship between online reviews, user behaviour, and their impact on the tourism industry underscores the importance of understanding and leveraging these dynamics for platform optimization and overall industry growth (Ye, *et al*., 2011).

Conclusion: The literature review elucidates how online accommodation booking platforms have ushered in a transformative era in the tourism sector, reshaping consumer behaviour, leveraging AI, and redefining user experiences. The context of the Eastern Cape exemplifies how these platforms empower local economies but also pose challenges. As the sector continues to evolve, a nuanced understanding of user behaviour, reviews, and theoretical frameworks becomes essential for sustainable growth and enhanced user satisfaction.

3   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3.1   INTRODUCTION

Research design serves as the blueprint for academic investigations, ensuring that the research process is systematic, coherent, and valid. In the realm of consumer behaviour, especially within the context of online accommodation booking, the interplay between qualitative and quantitative research methods becomes crucial (Thomsen & Jeong, 2021: 4). Each approach offers unique strengths, with qualitative methods delving deep into motivations and behaviours, and quantitative methods providing empirical robustness and generalisability.

This study, set against the dynamic backdrop of the tourism industry in Eastern Cape, South Africa, harnesses the strengths of both methodologies. It employs a qualitative approach to probe into the intricate details of user reviews from Booking.com, a platform with significant global influence. Simultaneously, quantitative methods are utilised to provide a broader perspective, capturing trends, patterns, and statistical relationships.

The choice of a combined research approach is driven by the study's objective to capture both the depth and breadth of online accommodation seekers' experiences. While qualitative research offers a rich, detailed understanding of motivations, preferences, and experiences, quantitative research complements it by offering empirical evidence and broader patterns (Menon, 2022). The thematic analysis approach further enriches the qualitative aspect of the study, ensuring a nuanced understanding of user gratifications.

In an era dominated by digital data, a robust, multi-faceted research design is paramount. It not only ensures methodological soundness but also yields findings that are comprehensive, credible, and actionable. This section will delve deeper into the intricacies of the chosen research design, offering a rationale for its selection, and contrasting it against potential alternatives.

3.2   RESEARCH POPULATION AND SAMPLING

The research population refers to the entire group of individuals or entities that the study aims to understand or draw conclusions about. In the context of this study, the research population comprises online accommodation seekers who have used Booking.com to find lodgings in Eastern Cape, South Africa (Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha, Jefferies Bay, East London, St. Francis Bay, Hogsback, and Port Alfred). These towns/cities were selected because they are not only highly populated but also offer a diverse range of accommodation options, from luxury hotels

to quaint bed and breakfasts. Their prominence as popular tourist destinations in the Eastern Cape ensures a comprehensive representation of user reviews, capturing a wide spectrum of accommodation experiences in the region. Given the vast number of users on this platform, it becomes imperative to narrow down the population to a manageable subset for detailed analysis (Liu & Shih, 2021: 14).

3.2.1   Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select user reviews that met specific criteria. This non-probability sampling method is particularly suited for studies where specific criteria need to be met, and the researcher's judgment plays a pivotal role in selecting the sample (Guttentag & Smith, 2017: 5). Probability sampling ensures that each member of the population has an equal and known chance of being selected, while non-probability sampling does not. Probability sampling allows the researcher to make statistical inferences about the population based on the sample, while non-probability sampling does not (Surbhi, 2022).

Criteria for Selection:

- Review Language: Only reviews written in English were considered to ensure consistency in analysis and interpretation.

- Review Period: Reviews posted between 22 June 2022 and 24 May 2023 were selected to ensure the data's contemporaneity.

- Rating Scores: A diverse range of rating scores also represented by a star rating system on Booking.com's platform was considered to capture both positive and negative user experiences.

- A total of 19,387 user reviews were collected and analysed as a population of accommodation users in the Eastern Cape. The sample size was determined through a meticulous process of iterative analysis, adhering to the principle of data saturation. This principle signifies a point at which no new themes or insights emerge from the data, ensuring the comprehensiveness and robustness of the findings.

- Variety in Accommodation Types: To ensure a comprehensive understanding, reviews from various accommodation types, such as hotels, bed and breakfasts, and vacation rentals, were included.

- Diversity of Online Platforms: While Booking.com was the primary source, consideration of multiple platforms would have provided a more holistic view. However, for the scope of this study, the focus remained on Booking.com.

3.2.2   Justification for Sampling Technique

The sampling method and criteria were meticulously designed to ensure a comprehensive, yet focused exploration of online accommodation seekers' experiences in Eastern Cape, South Africa. The chosen sample not only represents the diversity and richness of user experiences but also aligns with the study's objectives and research questions. To achieve this, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select user reviews that met specific criteria. The non-probability sampling method is particularly suited for studies where specific criteria need to be met, and the researcher's judgment plays a pivotal role in selecting the sample (Guttentag & Smith, 2017: 5). Given the study's qualitative nature, it was essential to capture diverse experiences and insights, which this method facilitated. While random sampling could have provided broader generalisability, the specific nuances and intricacies that purposive sampling offers, especially in the context of online reviews, made it the preferred choice (Kaur & Singh, 2021: 4).

3.3   DATA COLLECTION

Data collection serves as the foundation upon which empirical research is built, ensuring that the findings and conclusions drawn are rooted in evidence (Sutton & Austin, 2015:226-231). The methodology for data collection in this study was bifurcated into primary and secondary sources, each serving a distinct purpose.

3.3.1   Secondary Data Collection

The secondary data collection phase involved an extensive review of existing literature. This encompassed academic articles, reports, and other scholarly publications related to online accommodation booking, the dynamics of online reviews, and the theoretical framework of the uses and gratifications theory. Such a comprehensive review not only provided a theoretical underpinning for the study but also highlighted gaps in the existing body of knowledge, thereby justifying the need for this research (Unachukwu, Kalu & Ibiam, 2018: 53-63).

3.3.2   Primary Data Collection

The primary data for this study was sourced directly from user-generated reviews on Booking.com. These reviews, penned by accommodation seekers from Eastern Cape, South Africa, offered firsthand accounts of their experiences, preferences, and grievances. The selection of these reviews was not arbitrary. A purposive sampling technique was employed, ensuring that the reviews met specific criteria, such as being written in English, falling within

a designated review period, and spanning a range of rating scores. This meticulous selection process ensured that the data was both representative and comprehensive.

3.3.3   Saturation in Data Collection

An essential principle in qualitative research is the concept of data saturation. This refers to the point in data collection when no new or relevant information emerges, indicating that the dataset is comprehensive in addressing the research questions (Kaur & Singh, 2021). For this study, the number of user reviews, 19,387, was determined by applying specific criteria such as review language, review period, and rating scores. The collection continued until no new themes or insights were identified, ensuring a thorough and robust dataset. This point of saturation was reached after the analysis of 19,387 user reviews, ensuring the comprehensiveness and depth of the research findings.

3.3.4   Research Instrument

An Excel spreadsheet served as the primary research instrument for data organization. This tool was invaluable in categorising, filtering, and conducting preliminary analyses of the vast amount of data. Excel's functionalities, such as sorting and filtering, enabled a systematic approach to data handling, ensuring accuracy and consistency in the subsequent analysis stages. Atlas.ti was also utilised. The software program is designed for qualitative data analysis. It offers a wide range of functions and tools for organizing, coding, and analysing large datasets. The program is commonly used in social sciences, psychology, and market research to analyse textual data, interview transcripts, and other qualitative data sources (Atlas.ti, 2023). Atlas.ti assisted in identifying key words and phrases used by accommodation users.

To collect the user reviews from Booking.com, a web scraping technique was employed. Web scraping is a method of extracting data from websites using automated software tools or scripts (Dwivedi, Ismagilova, Hughes, Carlson, Filieri, Jacobson, Jain, Karjaluoto, Kefi, Krishen, Kumar, Rahman, Raman, Rauschnabel, Rowley, Salo, Tran & Wang, 2021). Web scraping can help researchers to access large amounts of data from various sources in a fast and efficient manner (Chen *et al.,* 2018: 2) . For this study, a web scraping tool called Scrapy was used. Scrapy is an open-source framework for web crawling and scraping, written in Python. Scrapy allows users to create spiders, which are programs that can follow links and extract data from web pages (Scrapy, 2023).

3.3.5   The web scraping process involved the following steps

First, the target website (Booking.com) was identified and accessed using Scrapy's built-in functions. Second, the search criteria were specified, such as the destination (Eastern Cape, South Africa), the dates (January 1, 2023 to March 31, 2023), and the number of guests (at least one guest). Third, the spider was programmed to follow the links to each accommodation listing that matched the search criteria and extract the relevant information, such as the name, location, price, rating, and number of reviews of each property. Fourth, the spider was also programmed to follow the links to each user review page and extract the text of each review, along with the reviewer's name, nationality, date of stay, and overall score. Fifth, the spider was configured to store the extracted data in a CSV file format, which can be easily imported into Excel for further processing.

The web scraping process resulted in a total of 19,387 user reviews from 181 accommodation properties in Eastern Cape, South Africa (Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha, Jefferies Bay, East London, St. Francis Bay, Hogsback, and Port Alfred). These reviews were then imported into Excel for data organization and preliminary analysis. The reviews were also imported into Atlas.ti for qualitative data analysis using text mining techniques. Text mining is a process of extracting meaningful information from unstructured textual data using natural language processing (NLP) methods. Text mining can help researchers to identify patterns, themes, sentiments, and opinions in large text corpora (Stedman Craig, 2023). Atlas.ti assisted in identifying keywords and phrases used by accommodation users, which helped to understand what they were looking for in their accommodation choices.

The data collection process was rigorous, systematic, and aligned with the study's objectives. The combination of secondary and primary data ensured a holistic understanding of the research problem, laying a robust foundation for the subsequent stages of analysis and interpretation.

3.4   DESIGN OF THE MEASURING INSTRUMENT

The design of the measuring instrument is pivotal in ensuring the validity and reliability of the data collected. It serves as a structured mechanism to capture, organize, and interpret data in a manner that aligns with the research objectives (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2017).

3.4.1   Instrument Selection

For this study, an Excel spreadsheet was chosen as the primary measuring instrument. Excel is a versatile tool that offers a range of functionalities suitable for handling large datasets, such as the 19,387 user reviews collected from Booking.com. Its capabilities extend beyond plain data storage, allowing for categorisation, filtering, and preliminary analyses, which are essential for qualitative research.

3.4.2   Design Considerations

The Excel spreadsheet was meticulously structured to ensure both clarity and precision in data collection and analysis. Data was systematically categorised based on parameters such as review date, rating score, type of accommodation, and available user demographics. This categorisation facilitated a streamlined approach to data analysis, allowing for easy identification of patterns and trends. The spreadsheet's design also incorporated features for filtering and sorting data, which was pivotal in pinpointing specific patterns or anomalies. Furthermore, a dedicated section for keyword analysis was integrated, enabling the extraction of recurring keywords or phrases, thereby highlighting prevalent themes within the reviews. To bolster the accuracy of the data, validation rules were implemented, reducing potential data entry errors and enhancing the overall reliability of the dataset. Reliability, a crucial aspect of any research, was maintained through consistent data entry and analysis procedures. Regular checks were instituted to ensure accurate and consistent data recording. As for validity, it is the measure of how well an instrument captures what it aims to measure (Middleton, 2023). In this study, validity was upheld by ensuring the Excel spreadsheet's design and the systematic approach to data categorisation and analysis truly reflected the study's objectives. In essence, the data collected was not only relevant but also a genuine representation of the research goals, ensuring the study's validity.

3.4.3   Instrument Structure

The spreadsheet was structured with multiple columns, each representing a specific attribute of the reviews. These columns included:

- Review ID: A unique identifier for each review, ensuring traceability.
- Reviewer Name: While names were captured, they were anonymised in subsequent analyses to maintain confidentiality.
- Date of Review: This helped in filtering reviews based on the specified time frame.

- Accommodation Name: The specific property being reviewed.

- Location: This was pivotal, as the study focused on reviews from specific towns and cities in the Eastern Cape, such as Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha, Jefferies Bay, East London, St. Francis Bay, Hogsback, and Port Alfred. As these locations served populated towns and cities, they included locations that are attractive to tourists and would provide an abundance of user reviews.

- Rating Score: The numerical rating given by the reviewer.

- Review Text: The detailed textual review provided by the user.

- Keywords: Post-analysis, this column was populated with significant keywords identified using Atlas.ti.

The design of the measuring instrument was meticulously crafted to ensure that it was fit for purpose. Its structured and systematic approach facilitated a comprehensive and accurate analysis of the user reviews, laying the groundwork for meaningful insights and conclusions.

3.5   DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis is the systematic process of inspecting, cleaning, transforming, and interpreting data to uncover valuable insights, which aids in informed decision-making. It involves various methods and techniques to process raw data and extract meaningful information. In the context of businesses, data analysis is crucial as it helps organizations understand their customers, improve sales, target their audience effectively, reduce costs, and devise better problem-solving strategies. The article from (Karin Kelley, 2023) highlights that data analysis can be likened to assembling a puzzle, where each piece of data contributes to the bigger picture. By analysing data, businesses can make data-driven decisions, identify patterns, and extract valuable information that can be instrumental in optimizing processes and solving problems.

3.5.1   Thematic Analysis

The cornerstone of this study was thematic analysis, a method renowned for its prowess in revealing rich, detailed, and multifaceted patterns within data. The thematic analysis approach also helps to organise and describe an in-rich data set. Specifically, the approach identifies, analyses and reports patterns within data as broadly mentioned by Braun & Clarke (2006). The initial phase involved immersing oneself in the data, and repeatedly perusing the user reviews to gain a comprehensive understanding.

3.5.2   Steps Involved

The first step was familiarisation, which involved skimming through the data, noting initial impressions, and earmarking intriguing sections (Camilleri & Falzon, 2021). This helped gain a general sense of the data and identify potential areas of interest. The second step was theme identification, where similar codes were clustered, giving rise to potential themes. The dynamism of this stage saw themes evolving, merging, or occasionally dissolving based on their robustness. The third step was reviewing and refining, where themes were critically evaluated to ensure they possessed both breadth (data support) and depth (analytical significance). The fourth step was defining and naming, where each theme was simplified and given a clear name and definition. This made sure the themes were both based on data and conceptually clear. The fifth step was narrative construction, where the themes were connected into a clear story, relating them to the wider research and goals. The sixth step was software utilisation, where specialised software was used to assist the analysis process. For this study, Atlas.ti was employed, particularly for its advanced keyword identification capabilities. Atlas.ti, with its sophisticated coding and visualisation tools, augmented the precision and efficiency of the analysis process.

3.5.3   Challenges and Reflexivity

Data analysis is not devoid of challenges. The sheer volume of data, coupled with its qualitative nature, occasionally presented uncertainties.

Reflexivity is the researcher's recognition of their influence on the research subject and how it, in turn, affects the research process and results. It's essentially the research reflecting on itself (Pedler, 2012: 83-87) (Hubbell, Clegg, Hardy & Nord, 1997: 475) describe it as a perspective that mirrors and influences existing viewpoints. It's a continuous mutual interaction between the researcher and the subject during the research (Pedler, 2012: 83-87). Essentially, reflexivity is the researcher's introspection on the evolution of their understanding and its impact on their work. Reflexivity was maintained throughout, ensuring that personal biases and preconceptions did not overshadow the analysis. Regular consultations with peers and mentors infused fresh perspectives, ensuring the analysis remained grounded (Haynes, 2012: 1).

The data analysis was a voyage of discovery, interspersed with moments of revelation and perplexity. It oscillated between the structured and the intuitive, the familiar and the uncharted, ultimately leading to a profound understanding of online accommodation seekers' behaviour in the South African context.

3.6   ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Beyond the technicalities of research design and data analysis, the importance of adhering to ethical guidelines in the research process cannot be overstated. The ethical considerations for this study were robust, ensuring privacy, confidentiality, and integrity throughout the data collection process. Before the commencement of the study, ethical clearance was obtained from Nelson Mandela University (NMU). This step is a crucial part of the research process, ensuring that the study's design, objectives, and methods meet established ethical standards. Ethical approval provides an assurance to participants and the academic community that the research follows recognised principles of good practice.

Particular attention was given to ensuring that no personal or sensitive information of users was collected or disclosed, as this would infringe upon the users' right to privacy. Equally important was the preservation of Booking.com's interests, ensuring no harm or damage was caused during data extraction.

3.7   SUMMARY

This study carefully outlines its method to look into how people behave when they book accommodations online in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. It uses two approaches: a qualitative one, which looks into the details of individual user reviews on Booking.com, and a quantitative one, which looks at broader trends and numbers. Together, these methods help provide a well-rounded understanding of what's going on.

To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the overarching context, the study employs purposive sampling to select a distinct subset of reviews from Booking.com. This method helps choose reviews that meet certain criteria such as the language of the review, the time it was posted, and the rating score given. By doing this, the study can focus on a set of 19,387 reviews that provide a varied yet detailed view of users' experiences.

The process of collecting information for the study is split into two parts. The first part gathers primary data directly from the reviews on Booking.com. This is done using a tool called Scrapy to automatically collect reviews from the website, which are then organised and looked at initially using Excel, and later more deeply with a program called Atlas.ti. The second part of the data collection involves looking at existing research and writings on the topic to get a good understanding of what has already been discovered.

When it comes to analysing the data, the study follows a method known as thematic analysis to find and explore themes in the reviews. It's a step-by-step process that starts with getting familiar with the data, identifying themes, refining them, defining them clearly, constructing a clear story out of them, and then using software to help with the analysis. The process has its challenges, but by staying open to different perspectives and checking in with others, the study ensures a fair and thorough analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018: 807-815).

Ethical considerations are also a big part of this study. Before starting, it got ethical clearance from Nelson Mandela University to ensure that the research would be conducted in a right and fair manner. It's careful not to collect or share any personal or sensitive information from the reviews to respect users' privacy and also makes sure not to harm Booking.com in the process of collecting data.

In summary, this study takes a well-planned, ethical, and thorough approach to understanding how people behave when booking accommodations online in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. By combining two different methods and following a clear process of collecting and analysing data, the study aims to provide a deep understanding of online accommodation seekers' experiences, which could be useful for the tourism industry in the region.

4   FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

4.1   INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving world of online accommodation booking, understanding why users make choices, what they anticipate, and how they perceive their experiences remains a crucial endeavour. Set against the vibrant backdrop of the Eastern Cape in South Africa, renowned for its diverse range of tourist destinations, this chapter embarks on a thorough exploration into the realm of online reviews. These digital evaluations have progressively taken on a pivotal role in shaping the viewpoints and decisions of contemporary travellers. The focal point of this study is an extensive collection of 19,387 user reviews meticulously collected from the online booking platform, Booking.com. These reviews encapsulate the narratives of individuals who journeyed through cities and towns like Port Elizabeth/Gqeberha, Jefferies Bay, East London, St. Francis Bay, Hogsback, and Port Alfred, offering us a panoramic view of the online accommodation booking landscape across the Eastern Cape.

Central to the methodology is the thematic analysis approach, adeptly used to convert raw data into meaningful insights. Grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), this methodology illuminates the reasons for users' media interactions and the gratifications they

obtain. The UGT framework aids in interpreting the complexities within user reviews. The study's results emphasize the significant role of online reviews in influencing user behaviour in online accommodation booking. While echoing prior research on the impact of reviews, this study offers new insights specific to the Eastern Cape's tourism context.

The chapter will delve into the primary themes and subthemes arising from the user reviews, all under the umbrella of UGT. Each theme, enriched with its subthemes, highlights the broader implications for user behaviour and provides actionable insights for tourism stakeholders. It serves as a crucial intersection of inquiry and understanding. It emphasizes the significant influence of online reviews on accommodation booking within the Eastern Cape's tourism context. As the user experience aligns with UGT principles, we gain insights that can drive transformative changes in the tourism sector. The chapter sets the foundation for deeper discussions in subsequent sections.

4.2 MOTIVATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF ONLINE ACCOMMODATION SEEKERS

This section aims to provide an insightful interpretation of data and findings from previous studies regarding online accommodation booking, primarily focusing on user reviews from various properties in Eastern Cape, South Africa. This review is geared towards comprehending the multifaceted motivations and expectations of online accommodation seekers, in alignment with the UGT.

The UGT suggests that individuals actively engage with specific media forms, including online platforms, to satisfy their unique needs and wants (Camilleri & Falzon, 2020: 1). In the context of online accommodation booking, this indicates that individuals have varied objectives when they search for and book a property online. Fundamental motivations encompass aspects such as social interaction, entertainment, convenience, and the desire for information.

Through an analysis of 19,387 user reviews from Booking.com, collected from various popular tourist destinations within Eastern Cape, distinct preferences and expectations regarding the properties were identified. Positive aspects included cleanliness, location, staff and hospitality, breakfast, and facilities, indicating that seekers value a comfortable, convenient, and enjoyable stay. These observations suggest the importance of meeting or exceeding customer expectations and minimising any inconveniences. See Figures in Annexure 3.

In terms of expectations, cleanliness emerged as a non-negotiable aspect for users. Guests gravitated towards well-kept, clean rooms, emphasizing the necessity of a sanitary, comfortable

environment, which aligns with existing literature indicating cleanliness as a key determinant of guest satisfaction.

The location of properties also played a significant role in shaping guest experiences. Accommodations located near amenities, shopping areas, and tourist attractions garnered positive reviews, highlighting the importance of geographical convenience to the users. This insight aligns with the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which posits individuals consume media forms like online booking platforms in anticipation of specific satisfactions, such as proximity to points of interest (Hajdarmataj & Paksoy, 2023: 13).

Good customer service was highly valued by online accommodation seekers. Exemplary service and hospitable hosts left a lasting impression, reinforcing the idea that staff behaviour shapes customer satisfaction significantly.

Amenities were seen as a significant factor in the decision-making process. Guests appreciated properties featuring comfortable beds, modern amenities, and appealing decor. Extras like sea views, swimming pools, and gardens were deemed as bonuses, suggesting users in the Eastern Cape have high expectations for their chosen accommodations.

This synthesis of findings offers valuable insights to various stakeholders in the tourism sector, including accommodation providers, platform designers, and policymakers in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. By understanding the motivations and behaviours of online accommodation seekers, these stakeholders can optimise their offerings, thereby enhancing customer satisfaction and fostering sustainable growth in the tourism sector (Choi et al., 2016: 1).

This analysis, while comprehensive, is based on a specific set of user reviews and might not encapsulate the entire range of expectations and motivations of all online accommodation seekers in the region. Thus, further research is recommended to validate these findings and investigate other potential factors influencing online booking behaviour.

4.3   RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH ON THE INFLUENCE OF MOTIVATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS ON SATISFACTION AND LOYALTY

In the realm of online accommodation booking, the study of user motivations and expectations is pivotal to our understanding of user satisfaction and loyalty. These core outcomes, satisfaction and loyalty, have substantial implications for the successful management and marketing of online platforms and properties (Marine-Roig, 2021: 2).

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) has been applied to interpret these motivations and expectations. According to this theory, people employ media and technology platforms to meet their specific needs and desires, which include social interaction, entertainment, information, and convenience (Vinney, 2022). When applied to the context of online accommodation booking, the theory suggests that online seekers are driven by a variety of motivations when selecting a property.

A deep-dive analysis of user reviews from the popular booking platform, Booking.com, in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa, reveals that online accommodation seekers possess distinct preferences and expectations. Prominent among their positive feedback were aspects such as cleanliness, location, staff hospitality, breakfast, and overall facilities. These elements reveal a preference for comfort, convenience, quality service, and enjoyable experiences. Conversely, unmet expectations, lack of breakfast, noisy environments, room amenity issues, and interruptions in internet and power services were the most frequent criticisms. Thus, it's evident that seekers value a peaceful atmosphere and reliable services, and dissatisfaction arises when these expectations aren't met (Figures 2 and 3 in Annexures 3).

Interestingly, some users demonstrated unique preferences associated with personal needs or special occasions, which underscores the varied and individualised nature of online accommodation seekers' motivations and desires. Personalised experiences, self-catering facilities, smoking rooms, spacious rooms, and other property-specific features were among these unique preferences.

Turning to the convenience offered by online booking platforms, it's clear this element constitutes a significant part of their appeal. The ability to compare prices, view various options, and make reservations at one's own convenience, from virtually anywhere, is indeed a major draw (Abdullah, et al., 2016: 2). This view aligns with broader e-commerce and e-business literature, underscoring convenience as a pivotal factor driving online consumer behaviour.

Online accommodation seekers in the Eastern Cape also show a strong inclination towards properties that are strategically located near beaches, shopping areas, amenities, and tourist attractions. Further, they demonstrate an appreciation for good customer service, aligning with the service quality literature that emphasizes the role of staff behaviour in shaping customer perceptions and satisfaction (Phillips, et al., 2017: 8). Lastly, the quality and availability of

amenities also emerged as significant expectations, with comments indicating a preference for well-equipped rooms, modern amenities, and appealing decor.

Refer to Figures 1, 2 and Annexure 3, which highlight the findings in a tabular and bar chart format of user reviews and keywords used.

Given this, it's clear that the satisfaction of online accommodation seekers, and subsequently their loyalty, is significantly influenced by the alignment between their motivations and expectations, and the actual services received. It is important to note that other theories, such as the expectancy disconfirmation theory (Elkhani & Bakri, n.d.), the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), and the service quality theory(Singaraj, Phil, Awasthi, India, Bhoi, Ramya & Dharanipriya, 2019), offer alternative perspectives on how online accommodation seekers form their judgments and decisions regarding their online booking behaviour.

To sum up, the motivations and expectations of online accommodation seekers in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, are complex, multifaceted, and significantly influenced by convenience, cleanliness, location, customer service, and amenities. These insights offer valuable guidance for accommodation providers, platform designers, and stakeholders in the tourism industry, helping them to better understand their customers and optimise their offerings. Nevertheless, further research is necessary to validate these findings and explore other potential factors influencing online booking behaviour. Therefore, to maintain high customer satisfaction and loyalty, industry stakeholders must have a clear understanding of these motivations and expectations, allowing them to optimise their platforms and services accordingly. Despite the findings being specifically applicable to the Eastern Cape region, additional research is required to validate these findings in other populations and contexts. Understanding the potential influence of other factors, such as individual characteristics and environmental influences, on the satisfaction and loyalty of online accommodation seekers could also be a fruitful avenue for future research.

4.4   RESULTS OF THE DEMOGRAPHICS

Incorporating a demographic analysis, though not mandatory, no cross-tabulation will be implemented but will enrich this study by providing a clearer understanding of online accommodation seekers. The demographic profile gives insights into the varied individuals who use platforms like Booking.com in the Eastern Cape. This section delves into the specific demographic characteristics, offering a detailed view of the vast spectrum of users represented

in the 19,387 reviews. By examining these demographics, a comprehensive perspective of the diverse backgrounds and preferences of those seeking accommodations online will be gained.

4.4.1   Age and Gender Distribution

The age distribution of the reviewers was varied, reflecting a broad spectrum of accommodation seekers. Specific age group data was not available therefore, age was not considered as part of the criteria. The platform exhibited a balanced distribution between male and female reviewers, underscoring the universal appeal of online accommodation platforms to various demographics. It is noteworthy to mention that, for this study, gender was not a primary concern, and its specification was not deemed essential.

4.4.2   Geographic Origin

Many reviewers explicitly mentioned their places of origin in their reviews, making it straightforward to determine their geographic backgrounds. A significant portion of the reviews were from local South African tourists. However, the Eastern Cape's appeal extends beyond local boundaries. There was a pronounced representation of international tourists, with reviewers indicating they came from countries such as Belgium, Abkhazia-Georgia, Angola, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, France, China, Germany, Israel, Ireland, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Russia, United Kingdom, Switzerland, and several others. This wide-ranging international presence highlights the Eastern Cape's stature as a globally recognized tourist destination.

4.4.3   Accommodation Preferences

The demographic profile influenced accommodation choices, with preferences ranging from luxury establishments to budget options. While Booking.com was the primary review source, many users cross-referenced with other platforms before deciding. This underscores the importance for providers to maintain a consistent online reputation across multiple platforms, reflecting the interconnected digital accommodation landscape.

In summary, the demographic results show a diverse and dynamic group of online accommodation seekers, both local and international. Their varied backgrounds, preferences, and experiences offer invaluable insights into the evolving landscape of online accommodation booking in the Eastern Cape. It is recommended that accommodation providers in the Eastern Cape should offer diverse options, keep a good online reputation, and showcase the region's attractions for online seekers.

4.5   SUMMARY

The research chapter embarked on a comprehensive exploration into the intricate world of online accommodation booking, specifically focusing on the Eastern Cape region of South Africa. The chapter's foundation was built upon a vast collection of 19,387 user reviews from Booking.com, offering a broad view of the online accommodation booking landscape in the region. The thematic analysis approach, rooted in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), was pivotal in transforming the raw data into valuable insights. This theoretical lens provided a robust framework to understand the motivations, expectations, and gratifications of online accommodation seekers. The findings underscored the significant role of online reviews in influencing user behaviour, with cleanliness, location, staff hospitality, and amenities emerging as key determinants of user satisfaction. The demographic analysis revealed a diverse array of online accommodation seekers, both in terms of age and geographic origin. The Eastern Cape's appeal was not limited to locals, with a significant international footprint evident from the reviews. This diversity was further reflected in the varied accommodation preferences and the use of multiple online platforms.

In essence, this chapter provided a holistic understanding of the motivations, expectations, and behaviours of online accommodation seekers in the Eastern Cape. The findings offer invaluable insights for stakeholders in the tourism sector, emphasizing the need to align services with user expectations to ensure satisfaction and loyalty. Understanding these dynamics becomes increasingly crucial for the sustainable growth of the tourism sector in the region.

5   CONCLUSION

In the intricate landscape of online accommodation booking within South Africa's Eastern Cape region, this study has meticulously navigated the terrain of user motivations, expectations, and behaviours. With an extensive dataset encompassing 19,387 user reviews meticulously sourced from Booking.com, a comprehensive understanding of the symbiotic relationship between online reviews, user gratifications, and the broader tourism panorama has been unveiled. Through the guiding lens of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), the analysis has unearthed multifaceted insights that reverberate beyond geographical confines.

The crux of the findings revolves around the pivotal determinants of user satisfaction. Cleanliness, location, staff hospitality, and the spectrum of amenities have emerged as linchpins in the architecture of user contentment. These findings echo the chorus of existing research while accentuating the centrality of these facets in sculpting the contours of modern travel decisions.

The research has cast a spotlight on the demographic tapestry of online accommodation seekers. From indigenous South African tourists to a diverse cavalcade of global explorers, the contributions to this narrative underscore the universal resonance of the Eastern Cape's attraction. This diversity, both local and international, illuminates the nuanced interplay of preferences that currently define the ever-evolving realm of digital booking behaviours.

The ramifications of these findings signal to stakeholders in the tourism domain with actionable directives. By aligning their offerings with the diverse gratifications sought by users, accommodation providers have the opportunity to cultivate a sense of loyalty and augment the quality of customer interactions. The cultivation of personalised services, alongside astute marketing endeavours, stands poised to transform transactional interactions into substantive engagements, echoing resonances in a digital epoch that craves experiential narratives.

This study suggests further research opportunities. Using thematic analysis and UGT, it aims to explore digital interactions and user behaviours. Future research will delve into the mix of personal attitudes and societal trends, helping us understand user choices in today's digital age.

In summary, this study provides a detailed look into online accommodation booking in the Eastern Cape, much like a detailed picture made up of many pieces. As we finish this research, it is clear that the tourism industry needs to adjust to changing traveller needs. This research encourages us to consider new viewpoints, enhancing travel stories and promising a bright future for travel.

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APPENDIX 1

ORIGINALITY REPORT

2%	2%	0%	3%
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	Submitted to Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University Student Paper	2%

Exclude quotes	On	Exclude matches	< 1%
Exclude bibliography	On		

APPENDIX 2

NELSON MANDELA

UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC SCIENCES

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADVANCED DIPLOMA/HONOURS/POSTGRADUATE

DIPLOMA FOR NON-PUBLICATION PURPOSES

INSTRUCTIONS

- This form must be completed by student with the relevant explanation by and support of the supervisor and the student.
- It must be signed off by the student, supervisor and HoD.
- Submit the completed form to Ms Lindie van Rensburg lindie.vanrensburg@mandela.ac.za.
- Please ensure that the research methodology section from the proposal is attached to this form.

Please note that by following this ethics route, the study will NOT be allocated an ethics clearance number.

SECTION A – STUDENT ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In completing this form I, _____Siddharth Ranchod___ (name and surname), acknowledge that my research project is for academic qualification purposes only. As such, the research report or any sections thereof may not be published in any publication, including an accredited journal.

I further acknowledge that my research project will be a desktop study and will only make use of publicly available documents or secondary data. No human subjects/ participants/ respondents will be involved in the study.

I understand that secondary data in this instance refers to data that was collected and processed by someone else for some other purpose but is now being used by the researcher for another reason (Tripathy, 2013). Research utilizing secondary data that both exists and has been collected in a public, academic database, for example Google Scholar, is considered desktop research and generally does not require full ethical approval (Creswell & Poth 2017).

SECTION B – STUDENT AND RESEARCH PROJECT DETAILS

Student name & surname	**Siddharth Ranchod**
Student number	220497559
Study title	
Year of registration	2023
Qualification	**Honours in Business Management**
Department	**Business & Economic Sciences**
Supervisor	**Dr Albert Nelmapius**

SECTION C – ETHICS CRITERIA

In completing my research project, I hereby acknowledge that I have read and understand the following important considerations as they apply to my study. I indicate this by placing a tick next to each statement.

I acknowledge that my study is based on the analysis of secondary data and that the following conditions apply:

1.	There are no human subjects/participants/respondents in my study and as such there will be no collection and use of data from human subjects/participants/ respondents though administering/distributing any questionnaire/survey or by holding any form of interview.	SR
2.	As there are no human subjects/participants/respondents in my study, it does not pose any risk of harm, embarrassment or offence, however slight or temporary, to any human participant, third parties or communities at large.	SR
3.	As there are no human subjects/participants/respondents in my study, it will not utilise human subjects defined as 'vulnerable' in terms of age, physical characteristics and/or disease status.	SR
4.	The secondary data that will be utilised in this study does not require the consent of any institutional or government authority established to protect vulnerable people.	SR
5.	The secondary data that will be utilised for this study does not require access to data from any existing, stored repository (e.g. school, institutional or university records) that can be linked to human subjects.	SR

It is acknowledged that both supervisor and student have given the study the necessary research ethical consideration and confirm that full ethics approval is not required.

_____   _____
SUPERVISOR(S)   **DATE**

_____   _____
HEAD OF DEPARTMENT   **DATE**

Siddharth Ranchod
_____   23 / 04 / 2023
STUDENT(S)   **DATE**

APPENDIX 3

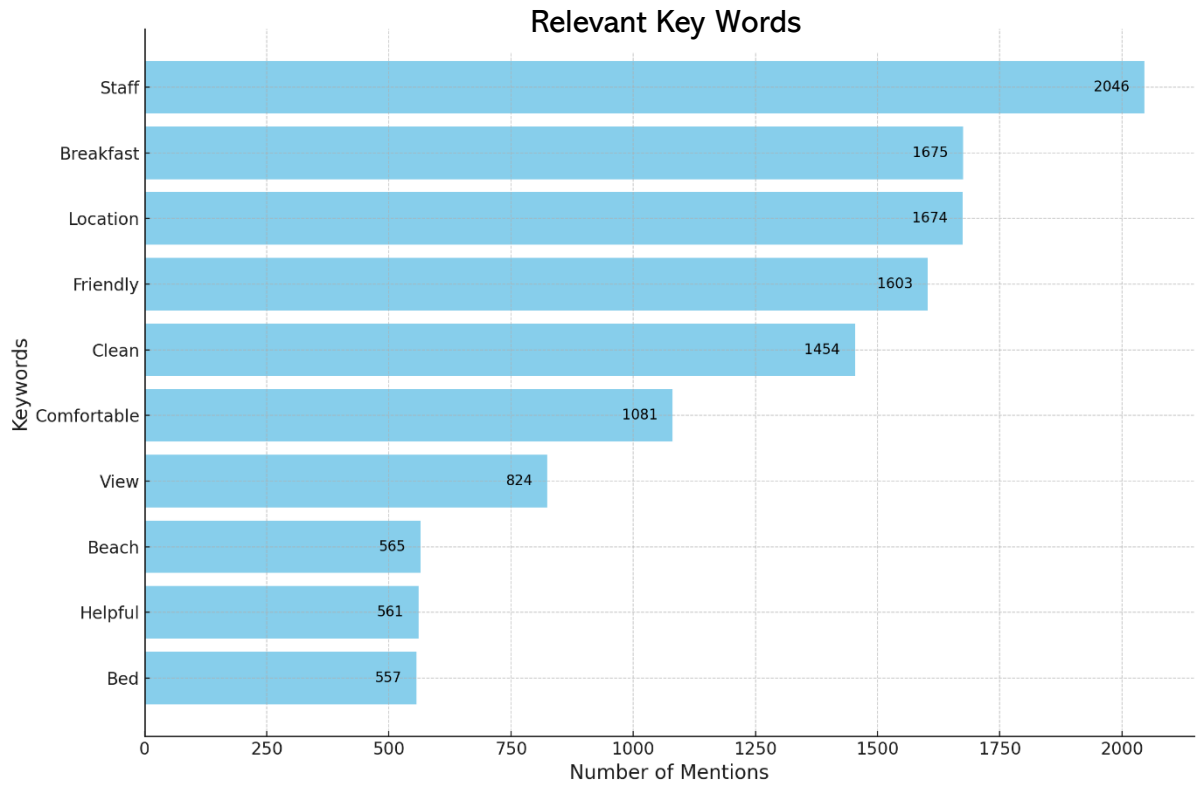| Keyword	Mentions	Description
Good	6182	This general term of approval reveals that many users found aspects of their stay satisfactory. This word was used in relation to cleanliness, location, staff, hospitality, breakfast, and facilities.
Exceptional	5536	A strong term of endorsement. This suggests that a significant number of users had experiences that exceeded their expectations.
Wonderful	2947	Yet another term indicating high levels of satisfaction.
Room	2764	This highlights the importance of the room itself in user reviews. The room's quality, amenities, and comfort are evidently crucial.
Staff	2046	Echoing our previous findings, staff interactions play a central role in user perceptions and satisfaction.
Stay	2008	General references to the overall stay indicate that users often review their experiences holistically.
Breakfast	1675	As seen before, breakfast offerings are integral to the accommodation experience.
Location	1674	The importance of a property's location, especially its proximity to attractions and amenities, is again emphasized.
Great	1605	Another term of approval, indicating positive experiences.
Friendly	1603	Friendly interactions, either with staff or with the general environment, are essential for a positive experience.

Figure 1 – Top 10 keywords

Figure 2 – Relevant Keywords

TOP 75 KEYWORDS			
Keyword	**Mentions**	**Keyword**	**Mentions**
staff	2046	towels	195
breakfast	1675	uncomfortable	91
location	1674	disappointed	85
friendly	1603	size	81
clean	1454	quality	78
comfortable	1081	receptionist	78
view	824	microwave	76
beach	565	tidy	66
helpful	561	loud	62
bed	557	options	59
service	537	tranquil	56
host	504	friendliness	55
shower	491	heater	50
spacious	444	housekeeping	43
bathroom	412	showers	42
pool	385	bathrooms	41
value	356	stove	40

reception	332	animals	39
welcoming	326	proximity	39
tv	325	affordable	38
parking	317	payment	38
quiet	316	quietness	38
wifi	312	smoking	36
facilities	306	utensils	36
restaurant	288	washing	36
neat	272	conditioner	33
views	270	seaview	33
noise	269	services	33
kitchen	251	garage	30
experience	243	cars	29
dirty	226	cupboard	26
loadshedding	217	chairs	26
cleanliness	214	accessible	25
fridge	207	expensive	25
towels	195	unfriendly	25
uncomfortable	91	assistance	18
disappointed	85	bags	18
size	81	lock	18

Figure 3 – Top 75 key words