

Influencing Travel Decisions: Social Media's Role in Destination Perception and Visit Intentions

Abstract

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This study explores the influential factors shaping tourists' perceptions and intentions toward destinations in the context of contemporary tourism management and marketing strategies. Employing Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the research examines the relationships among destination credibility, user-generated content (UGC), engagement and interaction on social media, influencer endorsements, tourist destination perception, and intentions to visit. The study collected data from 982 respondents, predominantly from Generation Z and Millennials, through online surveys distributed on social media platforms. The findings reveal that destination credibility significantly affects tourist perceptions, underscoring the importance of trust and transparency in destination marketing. Similarly, UGC and engagement on social media platforms play crucial roles in shaping perceptions, highlighting the democratization of travel information and the influence of peer-generated content. Influencer endorsements emerged as potent drivers of destination perception, reflecting their role as credible sources of information and opinion in travel decision-making. These findings contribute theoretically by expanding knowledge on the dynamics of tourist decision-making and practically by offering insights for destination marketers to enhance visitor experiences and competitiveness. This study underscores the evolving landscape of destination marketing in the digital age, emphasizing the critical roles of credibility, user-generated content, social media engagement, and influencer endorsements in shaping tourist perceptions and behaviours. Future research could delve deeper into the emotional and psychological dimensions of tourist decision-making and explore emerging trends in digital communication channels to refine destination marketing strategies further.

Keywords: Destination credibility, engagement, influencer endorsement, tourist perceptions, user-generated content

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Introduction

Tourism has undergone a profound transformation with the widespread adoption of social media platforms, fundamentally altering how travellers discover, share, and engage with destinations. The interactive nature of social media fosters engagement, facilitates peer-to-peer recommendations, and shapes perceptions of destinations. Social media significantly influences tourists' decisions by providing inspiration, information, social validation, and direct access to travel experiences (Sujatha, 2023). This impact on travel decision-making underscores its effectiveness in destination promotion (Jayawardena et al., 2023) and has yielded economic benefits by fostering domestic tourism activities (Al-Badi et al., 2017). Social media platforms are crucial in shaping destination narratives and influencing public perceptions (Bilderback, 2024; Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2021), playing a pivotal role in destination promotion by offering travellers. As of 2024, the global social media landscape shows significant user engagement across various platforms. Facebook remains the leading platform with approximately 3.06 billion monthly active users, followed by Instagram with over 2 billion monthly active users, and TikTok with around 1 billion monthly active users, continuing its rapid growth. YouTube maintains a strong presence with over 2.5 billion users, while Snapchat and Twitter have around 750 million and 450 million monthly active users, respectively (Bagadiya, 2024; DemandSage, 2024; Larson, 2024).

Regarding regional distribution, East Asia leads with approximately 1.25 billion users, South Asia with about 962 million users, and Southeast Asia with around 527 million users. Globally, social media penetration is high, with about 62.3% of the world's population actively using social networks. Northern Europe has the highest penetration rate at 81.7%, while regions like Eastern and Middle Africa have the lowest penetration rates around 10% (DemandSage, 2024). The tourism industry has witnessed substantial changes due to social media's widespread adoption, emphasizing the importance of effective digital marketing strategies in promoting tourism and enhancing engagement (Haedar, 2023). The transformative role of social media, A.I., and big data in reshaping tourism marketing paradigms (Awaloedin et al., 2024) makes these platforms indispensable tools for tourism marketing (Shahzad et al., 2024). Tourism organizations increasingly utilize social media as a destination marketing tool, highlighting the need for robust social media strategies (Hays et al., 2013). These strategies contribute to developing online communities that shape new spatial cultures and practices in tourism (Conti & Heldt Cassel, 2020). Effective social media campaigns can create powerful narratives around destinations, attracting more visitors and enhancing their overall experience.

Several factors within social media significantly shape visitor behaviour, including the credibility of information, user-generated content, engagement, and influencer endorsements. The credibility of information shared on social media platforms plays a crucial role in how potential tourists perceive and decide on destinations. The credibility of social media platforms is bolstered by their ability to shape travellers' decision-making processes (Ma et al., 2020). User-generated content, such as



reviews and travel experiences shared by other travellers, provides authentic insights that can influence travel decisions. User-generated content on these platforms is perceived as more reliable than traditional sources like official tourism websites, travel agents, and mass media (Fotis et al., 2012). Engagement through interactive content and direct communication with potential visitors helps build a connection and trust. Influencer endorsements can boost a destination's visibility and attractiveness, leveraging their followers' trust and admiration to drive interest and visits. These elements allegedly collectively enhance the influence of social media in shaping travel behaviour and preferences. Despite the significant impact of social media on tourism, a notable gap persists in understanding how specific factors within social media environments influence tourists' perceptions and behavioural intentions towards destinations. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), engagement metrics and influencer endorsements serve as peripheral cues, indirectly shaping tourists' perceptions. In contrast, user-generated content (UGC) and destination credibility act as central cues, leading to deeper processing and stronger intentions to visit a destination (Petty & Briñol, 2012; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) further emphasizes that social media platforms' perceived usefulness and ease of use moulding tourists' attitudes and intentions toward destinations (Davis, 1989). Social influence theories, such as Social Proof and Social Exchange Theory, underscore how influencers leverage credibility and social proof to influence tourists' perceptions and intentions (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Information Processing Theory elucidates that engagement metrics on social media, such as likes and shares, indicate information relevance and popularity, influencing tourists' perceptions of destination desirability and likelihood to visit (Chaiken, 1980). Trust and credibility theories highlight how tourists evaluate the reliability of UGC and influencer endorsements, shaping their perceptions and intentions to visit destinations (Fogg et al., 2003; Mayer et al., 1995).

Integrating these theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted dynamics of social media in tourism and underscores the need for targeted research to bridge existing knowledge gaps and inform effective destination marketing strategies in the digital era. The study aims to elucidate the multifaceted impact of social media on tourists' perceptions and behavioural intentions towards destinations through four distinct objectives. Firstly, it investigates how destination credibility portrayed on social media platforms influences tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness, reliability, and authenticity, drawing upon theoretical frameworks such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model. Secondly, the research analyses how UGC and engagement metrics—such as likes, shares, and comments—shape tourists' perceptions and decision-making processes, highlighting their role as critical factors in persuasion. Thirdly, the study explores the effectiveness of influencer endorsements in leveraging credibility and social influence to shape tourists' perceptions and intentions to visit specific destinations, aligned with theories like Social Proof. Lastly, the research examines the mediating role of tourist perceptions of destinations in the relationship between social media factors—destination credibility, UGC, engagement, and influencer endorsements—and their visitation intentions. By integrating these objectives, the study aims to comprehensively understand how social media environments shape tourists' decision-making processes and contribute to the broader discourse on digital marketing strategies in the tourism industry. This study anticipates offering valuable insights into how social media platforms can be strategically utilised in destination marketing efforts. By understanding the complex interplay of credibility, UGC, engagement, and influencer endorsements, tourism stakeholders can optimise their digital strategies to engage with potential visitors and enhance destination competitiveness in the global tourism landscape.

Literature review

Destination credibility and destination perception

Credibility refers to the perceived reliability, trustworthiness, and authenticity of information about a destination, which influences tourists' evaluations and expectations (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Hovland & Weiss, 1951). In tourism, where intangible aspects such as reputation and perception heavily influence consumer behaviour, destination credibility is crucial in shaping tourists' perceptions and intentions to visit. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) provides a theoretical framework to understand how destination credibility impacts tourists' perceptions. According to ELM, tourists use two routes to process information: central and peripheral. In the central route, tourists carefully evaluate destination-related information, such as reviews, recommendations, and promotional content, based on its credibility and relevance (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). High destination credibility enhances the persuasiveness of destination-related messages, leading to favourable attitudes and perceptions among tourists. Empirical studies highlight several dimensions of destination credibility that influence tourists' perceptions. These dimensions include the destination's reputation, information transparency, consistency between promotional messages and actual experiences, and endorsements from credible sources (María Munar, 2011). For instance, tourists perceive destinations with a positive reputation for safety, hospitality, and cultural authenticity as more credible and trustworthy (Beerli & Martín, 2004). Such perceptions enhance destination attractiveness and mitigate perceived risks associated with travel, encouraging tourists to consider the destination for their travel plans. Moreover, destination credibility is intricately linked with the authenticity of tourist experiences. Authenticity represents the degree to which the destination offers genuine, unique, and culturally enriching experiences that align with tourists' expectations (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011). Tourists seek authentic experiences that resonate with their values and interests, and destination credibility is pivotal in delivering these experiences. Destinations that effectively communicate their authenticity through transparent and reliable information sources foster stronger emotional connections and positive perceptions among tourists. Based on this logic, a hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Destination credibility has a significant effect on destination perception



User-generated content (UGC) and destination perception

User-generated content (UGC) has significantly influenced tourists' perceptions and decision-making processes regarding travel destinations. UGC encompasses a wide range of content created and shared by tourists, including reviews, photos, videos, and personal narratives, primarily on social media platforms (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Unlike traditional destination marketing materials, which are often perceived as biased and promotional, UGC is valued for its authenticity, reliability, and relevance to potential tourists (Litvin et al., 2008). In destination perception, UGC is crucial in shaping how tourists perceive destinations. According to Social Influence Theory, individuals are more likely to be influenced by the opinions and experiences of their peers than by traditional advertising messages (Cheung et al., 2008). Tourists increasingly rely on UGC to gather information, make travel decisions, and form destination expectations. Positive UGC highlights authentic and favourable experiences and enhances destinations' perceived attractiveness and desirability (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). The research underscores several mechanisms through which UGC influences destination perception. Firstly, UGC provides potential tourists first hand insights into destination attributes, such as scenic beauty, cultural experiences, accommodations, and local cuisine. These authentic representations resonate more strongly with tourists as they offer a glimpse into real-life experiences rather than idealized marketing depictions (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Secondly, UGC fosters a sense of trust and credibility among potential tourists. Reviews and recommendations from fellow travellers are perceived as more genuine and unbiased, influencing tourists' perceptions of destination reliability and trustworthiness (Litvin et al., 2008). Moreover, the interactive nature of UGC on social media platforms facilitates engagement and interaction among users. Tourists can actively participate in discussions, ask questions, and share their experiences, creating a dynamic community centred around destination exploration (Cheung et al., 2008). Positive interactions among users further validate destination-related information and enhance its persuasive impact on potential tourists. Destination marketers increasingly recognize the value of UGC in enhancing destination perception and influencing travel decisions. By encouraging and leveraging positive UGC, destinations can effectively enhance their online presence, engage with potential tourists, and build a favourable destination image (Hays et al., 2013). Thus:

H2: User-generated content (UGC) has a significant effect on destination perception

Engagement and interaction and destination perception

In the era of digital connectivity, engagement and interaction on social media platforms play a pivotal role in shaping tourists' perceptions of destinations. Engagement refers to the level of involvement, interaction, and participation of users with destination-related content, while interaction involves the exchange of comments, likes, shares, and recommendations among users (Hays et al., 2013). Both metrics indicate the popularity, relevance, and resonance of destination-related information online. Tourists increasingly rely on engagement and interaction metrics to signal destination attractiveness and credibility. According to Communication Theory, particularly the Uses and Gratifications Approach, tourists actively seek out and engage with destination-related content that aligns with their interests, preferences, and travel aspirations (Katz et al., 1973). High levels of engagement, such as numerous likes, shares, and comments on destination-related posts, suggest a positive reception and endorsement of the content by users. This social validation enhances the perceived reliability and trustworthiness of destination-related information, influencing tourists' perceptions and intentions to visit (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Research highlights several mechanisms through which engagement and interaction positively influence destination perception. Firstly, engagement metrics amplify the reach and visibility of destination-related content, increasing its exposure to a broader audience of potential tourists (Hudson et al., 2016). Positive engagement signals the content's relevance and appeal, attracting attention and generating interest among users seeking travel inspiration and information. Secondly, user interaction fosters community and social validation regarding destination experiences. Tourists actively participate in discussions, share insights, and exchange recommendations, creating a vibrant virtual community centred around destination exploration (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Moreover, engagement and interaction facilitate direct communication between destination marketers and potential tourists. Marketers can leverage engagement metrics to gauge audience preferences, monitor sentiment, and tailor promotional strategies accordingly (Hays et al., 2013). By fostering meaningful interactions and responding to user queries or feedback, destinations can enhance transparency, build trust, and address potential concerns or misconceptions among tourists. Destination marketers increasingly recognize the strategic value of engagement and interaction in destination marketing efforts. By fostering a dynamic online presence and encouraging positive interactions among users, destinations can cultivate a favourable destination image and influence tourists' perceptions positively (Hudson et al., 2016). Thus:

H3: Engagement and interaction have a significant effect on destination perception

Influencer endorsement and destination perception

Influencer endorsement has emerged as a powerful tool in destination marketing, significantly shaping tourists' perceptions and intentions to visit specific destinations (Tobias-Mamina et al., 2020). Influencers who possess credibility, expertise, or a large following within particular niches can sway consumer behaviour through their recommendations and endorsements on social media platforms (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015). This phenomenon is grounded in Social Influence Theory, which posits that individuals are likelier to adopt attitudes and behaviours endorsed by credible and trustworthy sources (Cialdini, 2009). In the context of destination perception, influencer endorsements enhance destinations' perceived attractiveness and desirability among potential tourists. Influencers share their travel experiences, recommendations, and insights through compelling content formats such as photos, videos, and personal narratives (Litvin et al., 2008). The authenticity and relatability of these

endorsements resonate strongly with followers, who perceive influencers as peers sharing genuine experiences rather than traditional marketers promoting destinations (Choi & Rifon, 2002). The research underscores several mechanisms through which influencer endorsements positively influence destination perception. Influencers often specialize in specific travel niches or themes, such as adventure travel, luxury tourism, or cultural exploration. Their targeted content resonates with niche audiences interested in particular travel experiences, effectively highlighting destination attributes that align with audience interests and preferences (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015). Secondly, influencers' endorsements convey social proof and credibility, particularly when accompanied by personal anecdotes, recommendations, and endorsements from fellow travellers (Litvin et al., 2008). Followers perceive influencer recommendations as reliable and trustworthy, influencing their perceptions of destination reliability and appeal. Moreover, influencer collaborations with destination marketing organizations or brands amplify the reach and visibility of destination-related content. Influencers often partner with destinations to create sponsored content, participate in promotional campaigns, or host influencer-led tours, thereby exposing destinations to broader audiences and enhancing brand awareness (Hudson et al., 2016). These collaborations increase the visibility of destinations and position them as trendy, aspirational, and worthy of visitation in the eyes of potential tourists. Furthermore, influencer marketing facilitates direct engagement between influencers and followers, fostering interactive dialogues and discussions about destinations. Followers actively participate in conversations, seek travel advice, and share their travel experiences, creating a dynamic community centred around destination exploration (Choi & Rifon, 2002). This engagement strengthens the emotional connection between influencers, destinations, and their audiences, reinforcing positive destination perceptions and intentions to visit. Thus:

H4: Influencer endorsement has a significant effect on destination perception

Destination perception and visit intentions

Destination perception influences tourists' intentions to visit specific destinations (Goeltom et al., 2023). Perception refers to tourists' subjective evaluations, beliefs, and impressions about a destination's attributes, characteristics, and overall appeal (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). These perceptions are shaped by various factors, including destination marketing efforts, word-of-mouth recommendations, media portrayals, and personal experiences shared by others (Litvin et al., 2008). Tourists' perceptions of a destination encompass multiple dimensions, such as its cultural richness, natural beauty, safety, hospitality, authenticity, and overall appeal. Positive destination perceptions create favourable attitudes and expectations among tourists, influencing their decision-making processes and intentions to visit (Pike & Ryan, 2004). According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), individuals' behavioural intentions, such as visitation intentions, are influenced by their attitudes toward the behaviour (in this case, visiting the destination), subjective norms (social influences), and perceived behavioral control (perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behaviour). Empirical research underscores several mechanisms through which destination perception positively influences visit intentions. Firstly, tourists' favourable perceptions of destination attributes, such as cultural heritage, natural landscapes, and unique experiences, enhance their desire to explore and experience the destination first hand (Litvin et al., 2008). Positive destination attributes evoke emotional responses and aspirations among tourists, motivating them to plan and travel to the destination. Secondly, destination perception is a crucial predictor of tourists' perceived value and satisfaction with the travel experience. Tourists perceive destinations offering unique, enriching experiences as valuable and rewarding, influencing their willingness to invest time, effort, and resources in visiting the destination (Pike & Ryan, 2004). Positive destination perceptions reduce perceived risks associated with travel and increase tourists' confidence in their decision to visit, fostering a more significant commitment to travel plans. Moreover, marketers leverage positive destination perceptions to shape tourists' perceptions of comparative advantages over competing destinations. By highlighting unique selling propositions and distinctive attributes, destinations differentiate themselves in the competitive tourism marketplace, attracting tourists seeking memorable and fulfilling travel experiences (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Thus:

H5: Destination perception has a significant effect on visit intentions

Based on this logic, a research model is proposed, as presented in Figure 1.

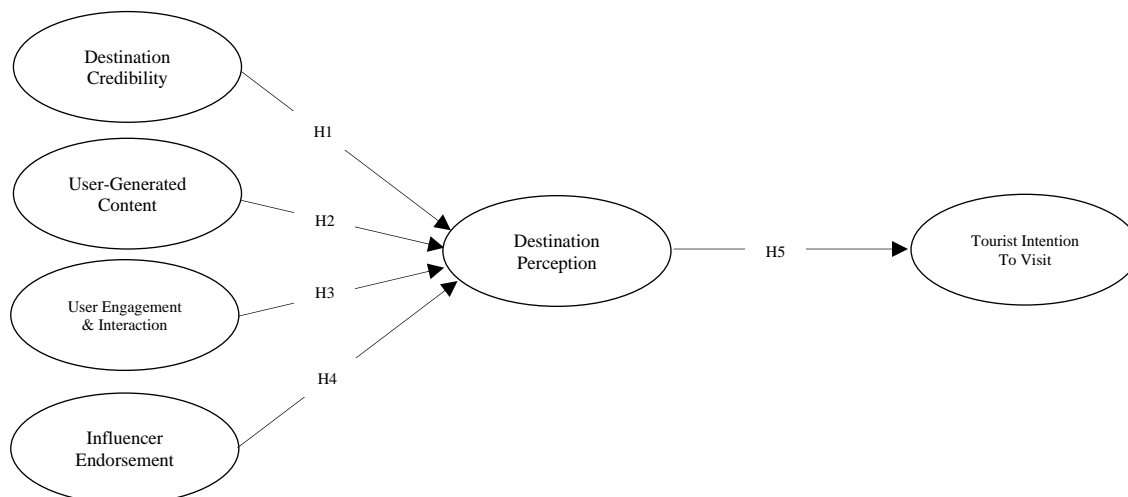


Figure 1. Proposed framework

Methods

This study employs a quantitative research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to investigate the relationships between destination credibility, user-generated content (UGC), engagement and interaction, influencer endorsement, and destination perception and how these perceptions influence tourists' visit intentions. The target population consists of active social media users who interact with destination-related content, ensuring participants have relevant experience with social media content that could influence their travel perceptions and decisions. The sample size, determined based on the requirements for structural equation modelling (SEM), includes a minimum of 200 respondents to ensure sufficient statistical power. Data is collected through a survey distributed via social media and travel forums from May – July 2024. The questionnaire includes validated measurement scales adapted from previous studies to assess the constructs of destination credibility, UGC, engagement and interaction, influencer endorsement, destination perception, and visit intentions. These constructs are measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Destination credibility is assessed through reputation, information transparency, consistency, and endorsements from credible sources. UGC is measured by the authenticity, reliability, and relevance of tourists' reviews, photos, videos, and personal narratives (Litvin et al., 2008; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Wulandari et al., 2023). Engagement and interaction are evaluated based on the level of involvement, interaction, and participation with destination-related content, including metrics like likes, shares, and comments (Hays et al., 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Influencer endorsement is measured by influencers' perceived credibility, expertise, and reach within specific travel niches (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015; Cialdini, 2009). Tourist destination perception is assessed through tourists' evaluations of destination attributes such as cultural richness, natural beauty, safety, hospitality, and authenticity (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991; Pike & Ryan, 2004). Visit intentions are measured by the likelihood and willingness of tourists to visit the destination based on their perceptions (Ajzen, 1991). The collected data is analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This method is chosen for its ability to handle complex models with multiple constructs and indicators and its suitability for exploratory research. The analysis involves two main stages: measurement model assessment, which evaluates the reliability and validity of the constructs, and structural model assessment, which tests the hypothesized relationships between constructs using path coefficients and determines the significance of these relationships through bootstrapping procedures.

Results

Profile of respondent

This study gathered data from a sample of 982 respondents, reflecting a diverse demographic profile. The distribution by age groups indicates that Generation Z constitutes the most significant segment at 50.7% (497 respondents), followed by Generation Millennials at 37.6% (370 respondents), Generation X at 9.8% (96 respondents), and Baby Boomers at 1.9% (19 respondents). Regarding occupation, most respondents identified as students, comprising 68.9% (677 respondents) of the sample. Other occupations included entrepreneurs (15.4%, 151 respondents), private sector employees (7.2%, 71 respondents), government employees (5.4%, 53 respondents), and professionals (3.3%, 32 respondents). In terms of educational background, 58.1% (571 respondents) held a Diploma or Bachelor's degree, 35.4% (348 respondents) had completed high school, 4.2% (41 respondents) had pursued postgraduate studies, and 2.2% (22 respondents) had professional degrees. When examining social media influence on travel decisions, Instagram emerged as the predominant platform at 52.9% (520 respondents), followed by TikTok (19.8%, 195 respondents), Facebook (17.7%, 174 respondents), and other platforms (9.6%, 94 respondents). The data holds significant meaning in understanding respondents' diverse demographic composition and preferences regarding travel destinations and social media influence. It provides insights into generational differences, with Generation Z and Millennials comprising the majority, reflecting their predominant influence on travel trends. The prevalence of students highlights their role as a critical demographic in shaping tourism behaviours. The educational and occupational diversity also underscores varying levels of travel engagement and decision-making processes. The popularity of Instagram as the leading platform suggests its pivotal role in influencing perceptions and travel intentions among respondents, highlighting the growing impact of social media on destination marketing strategies. This comprehensive profile is crucial for devising targeted marketing strategies and enhancing engagement with diverse audience segments in the tourism industry.

Measurement model

In this study, the measurement model utilizes Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (SEM-PLS) to rigorously assess the reliability and validity of constructs influencing tourists' perceptions and visit intentions toward destinations. Each construct, including Destination Credibility, User-generated Content (UGC), Engagement and Interaction, Influencer Endorsement, and Tourist Destination Perception, is operationalized using established scales derived from prior literature. The procedure begins with an evaluation of convergent validity, ensuring that items within each construct exhibit adequate factor loadings (>0.7), composite reliability (C.R., >0.7), and average variance extracted (AVE, recommended >0.5) (Hair et al., 2017). Discriminant validity is then assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loadings, ensuring that each



construct discriminates sufficiently from others in the model (Chin & Newsted, 1998). Furthermore, the measurement model includes an examination of item reliability through Cronbach's alpha coefficients (ideally >0.7), enhancing the robustness of construct measurement. The validated measurement model serves as a foundation for subsequent structural analysis, which explores the relationships between these constructs and their impact on tourists' visit intentions. This structured approach ensures the reliability and validity of the SEM-PLS methodology in elucidating the complex dynamics influencing destination perceptions and travel behaviours. The validated measurement model, where all thresholds are met, is presented In Tables 1 and 2. This structured approach ensures the reliability and validity of the SEM-PLS methodology in elucidating the complex dynamics influencing destination perceptions and travel behaviours.

Table 1. Loading factor test results, validity, and reliability

Construct (α , C.R., and AVE)		Loadings
<i>Destination Credibility ($\alpha = .774$; CR= .868; AVE= .687)</i>		
1. Information about the destination is easy to access and understand.		.830
2. The information about the destination is always accurate and does not change.		.847
3. The information provided about the destination is reliable and not misleading.		.809
<i>User-Generated Content ($\alpha = .822$; CR= .894; AVE= .739)</i>		
1. User-generated content about the destination feels authentic and genuine.		.892
2. User-generated content is highly relevant to my interests and travel needs.		.887
3. Content uploaded by users provides valuable information about the destination.		.795
<i>User Engagement and Interaction ($\alpha = .810$; CR= .887; AVE= .724)</i>		
1. I feel very engaged with the content shared about the destination.		.776
2. I feel connected to the online community that discusses the destination.		.894
3. I often like, share, or comment on content about the destination because the content is exciting and informative.		.877
<i>Influencer endorsement ($\alpha = .877$; CR= .924; AVE= .803)</i>		
1. I believe that the influencers who support the destination have high credibility.		.885
2. I tend to consider influencer recommendations about the destination when making travel decisions.		.900
3. I assume that the influencer has in-depth knowledge of the destination.		.903
<i>Tourist Destination Perception ($\alpha = .896$; CR= .923; AVE= .707)</i>		
1. These attributes make the destination stand out among other travel options.		.850
2. I consider the destination to be very safe to visit.		.794
3. I believe that the destination exudes a unique value of authenticity.		.890
4. This destination is predicted to provide a satisfying experience.		.843
5. I predict the destination will be a friendly and fun place to visit.		.825
<i>Tourist Intention To Visit ($\alpha = .924$; CR= .946; AVE= .814)</i>		
1. I have high intentions of visiting the destination.		.901
2. I feel very interested in exploring the destination further.		.915
3. This destination is on my priority list to visit.		.901
4. I would recommend the destination to friends and family to visit together.		.892

Table 2. Discriminant validity

	DCR	IEN	DPE	TIV	UEG	UGC
Destination Credibility (DCR)						
Influencer Endorsement (IEN)	0.547					
Tourist Destination Perception (DPE)	0.683	0.651				
Tourist Intention to Visit (TIV)	0.682	0.464	0.773			
User Engagement & Interaction (UEG)	0.762	0.614	0.753	0.662		
User-Generated Content (UGC)	0.882	0.467	0.638	0.664	0.716	

The discriminant validity was assessed using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio method, where the values calculated for each pair of constructs met the recommended threshold of 0.85 ((Henseler et al., 2009). Table 2 presents the results, indicating discriminant solid validity among the constructs. The HTMT ratios between constructs such as Destination Credibility and Influencer Endorsement (0.547), Tourist Destination Perception and Tourist Intention to Visit (0.682), User Engagement and interaction and Tourist Intention to Visit (0.662), and User-Generated Content and other constructs (ranging from 0.467 to 0.882) all fall below the threshold, demonstrating that these constructs measure distinct latent variables. These findings confirm that the measurement model effectively distinguishes between different constructs, supporting the robustness of the structural equation model in analysing the relationships influencing tourists' perceptions and intentions toward destinations.

Structural model

In evaluating the structural model, the coefficients of determination (R^2) indicate substantial explanatory power over the variables studied. Specifically, Tourist Destination Perception demonstrates an R^2 of .541, suggesting that the model's exogenous factors account for 54.1% of the variability in tourists' perceptions of destination attributes. Similarly, Tourist Intention to Visit shows an R^2 of 0.497, indicating that the model can explain 49.7% of the variance in tourists' intentions to visit destinations. These values highlight a robust capability in elucidating how Destination Credibility, User-generated Content, Engagement and Interaction, and Influencer Endorsement collectively shape tourists' perceptions and intentions. Furthermore, the predictive relevance (Q^2) values reinforce the model's efficacy in forecasting tourists' perceptions and intentions, with Q^2 values of 0.379 for Tourist Destination Perception and .402 for Tourist Intention to Visit. These findings underscore the model's reliability in anticipating tourist behaviours, providing valuable insights for destination marketers to enhance strategies to attract and engage visitors effectively. The hypotheses were tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (SEM-PLS), and the results indicate that all hypotheses were supported, confirming significant relationships as hypothesized. Destination Credibility was found to have a substantial positive effect on Destination Perception ($\beta = .145$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. This suggests that perceived credibility, including reputation and information transparency, significantly shapes how tourists perceive destinations. User-generated Content (UGC) significantly positively influenced Destination Perception ($\beta = 0.140$, $p = 0.001$), confirming H2. This underscores the importance of authentic and relevant user-generated reviews, photos, and narratives in shaping tourists' perceptions of destination attributes. Engagement and interaction on social media platforms impacted Destination Perception significantly ($\beta = 0.339$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3. This highlights



that higher levels of engagement, measured through likes, shares, and comments on destination-related content, enhance tourists' perceptions of a destination's attractiveness and appeal. Influencer Endorsement also significantly positively affected Destination Perception ($\beta = 0.276$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H4. This suggests that influencers' perceived credibility, expertise, and reach within specific travel niches influence tourists' perceptions of destination quality and desirability. Furthermore, Destination Perception influenced Visit Intentions significantly ($\beta = 0.705$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H5. This indicates that tourists' perceptions of destination attributes such as cultural richness, natural beauty, safety, hospitality, and authenticity strongly predict their intentions to visit the destination. All these findings are presented in Figure 2 and Table 3.

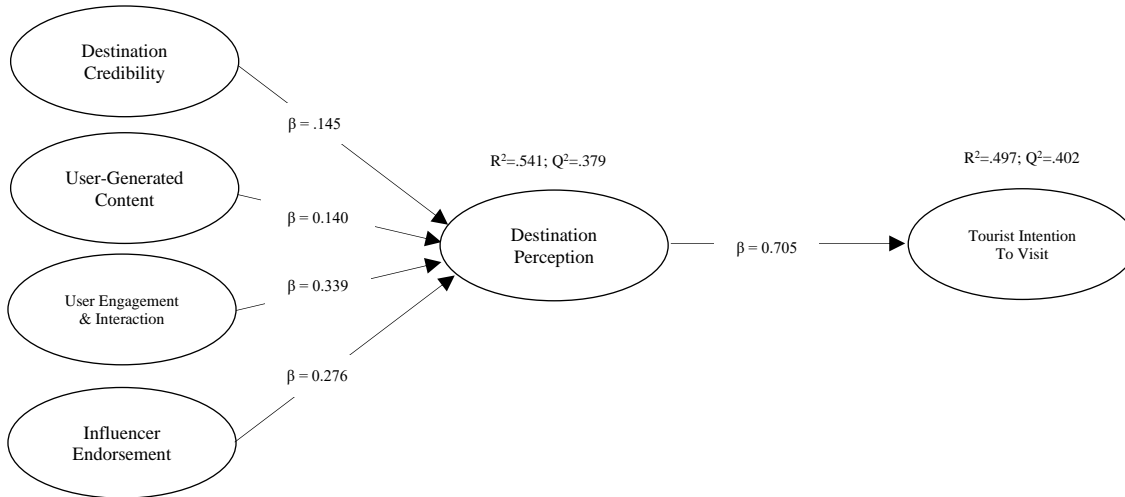


Figure 2. Model Results

Table 3. Hypothesis testing, R2, and Q2

Path	β	P-Values	Decision
H1: Destination Credibility → Destination Perception	.145	.000	Accepted
H2: User-generated Content → Destination Perception	.140	.001	Accepted
H3: Engagement and Interaction → Destination Perception	.339	.000	Accepted
H4: Influencer Endorsement → Destination Perception	.276	.000	Accepted
H5: Destination Perception → Tourist Visit Intentions	.705	.000	Accepted

Discussion

The findings of this study offer profound insights into the intricate factors that shape tourists' perceptions and intentions towards destinations, transcending mere empirical observations to uncover deeper philosophical implications. At its core, the study's robust structural model highlights the profound impact of destination credibility, underscoring how trust and transparency form the bedrock of meaningful traveller relationships with destinations (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). This echoes philosophical principles of trust in human interactions, where authenticity and reliability are fundamental to establishing enduring connections. Moreover, the significant influence of user-generated content (UGC) and social media engagement unveils a contemporary landscape where individual voices wield unprecedented power in shaping collective perceptions. This phenomenon reflects philosophical notions of social constructivism, emphasizing the co-creation of knowledge and meaning through shared experiences and interactions (Litvin et al., 2008; Litvinchev & Romanova, 2022). In the realm of tourism, UGC amplifies travellers' voices and democratizes the narrative around destinations, challenging traditional top-down marketing approaches. The study's validation through Q² values confirms its predictive strength and invites reflection on the nature of perception itself. Philosophically, perception serves as a lens through which individuals construct their reality, influenced by subjective experiences and contextual factors. By demonstrating robust predictive capabilities in anticipating tourist behaviours, the study underscores the dynamic interplay between perception and decision-making processes, reminiscent of philosophical debates on free will versus determinism in human actions. In the digital age, where social media and influencer endorsements profoundly influence consumer behaviour, the study's findings resonate deeply with philosophical inquiries into the ethics of persuasion and authenticity. Philosophically, the endorsement by credible influencers raises questions about the nature of authority and influence in contemporary society, challenging marketers to navigate the ethical implications of persuasive communication in shaping travel preferences (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Practically, these philosophical reflections equip destination marketers with ethical considerations and actionable insights to navigate modern tourism promotion's complexities responsibly. By embracing authenticity, transparency, and ethical engagement, destinations can foster genuine connections with travellers, enhancing visitor satisfaction and cultivating sustainable tourism practices. Ultimately, this study advances empirical knowledge and prompts philosophical contemplation on the ethical dimensions of marketing and perception in the evolving landscape of global tourism.

Conclusions

This study has provided comprehensive insights into the factors influencing tourists' perceptions and intentions towards destinations. The robust structural model underscores the pivotal roles of destination credibility, user-generated content (UGC),



social media engagement, and influencer endorsements in shaping tourist behaviour. These findings align with established literature emphasizing the importance of trust, transparency, and interactive engagement in destination marketing. Destination credibility emerged as a critical determinant of tourists' perceptions, highlighting its role in fostering trust and shaping positive destination images. User-generated content and engagement on social media platforms were also found to significantly influence perceptions, reflecting the democratization of travel information and the growing influence of peer recommendations. These insights are particularly pertinent in the digital age, where authenticity and meaningful interactions play pivotal roles in consumer decision-making. Furthermore, the study confirms its robust predictive capability, indicating its reliability in anticipating tourist behaviours based on perceived destination attributes. This validation contributes to theoretical advancements in tourism research and provides practical implications for destination marketers aiming to enhance visitor experiences and destination competitiveness. By understanding the nuanced dynamics of tourist perceptions and intentions, destinations can tailor their marketing strategies to resonate more effectively with diverse target audiences, fostering sustainable tourism development. Future research could explore additional dimensions of tourist decision-making, such as emotional and psychological factors, to further enrich our understanding of tourist behaviour dynamics. Moreover, investigations into the evolving role of technology and digital platforms in shaping travel preferences would offer valuable insights into the future landscape of destination marketing. By continuing to integrate theoretical insights with practical applications, researchers and practitioners alike can contribute to advancing sustainable tourism practices and enhancing visitor satisfaction worldwide.

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