



Decoding Tourist Decisions: Exploring the Role of Social Media Marketing in Shaping Destination Choice through Attitude Mediation

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Abstract

The mediating role of traveler attitude in selecting tourist destinations in Saudi outbound tourism as a social media marketing (SMM) is analyzed to determine the effects of the SMM on the tourist destination choice. CFA and SEM were used to analyze the data of 219 Saudi tourists by using the validated measurement model (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.72-0.87$; CR = 0.70–0.82). The model fit was also strong (CFI = 0.954; TLI = 0.947; RMSEA = 0.049) which provides evidence of its structural soundness. Tourist attitude was significantly influenced by destination image ($\beta = 0.34, p < 0.01$), SMM effectiveness ($\beta = 0.31, p < 0.01$) and tourist motivation ($\beta = 0.24, p < 0.01$) but not perceived value ($\beta = 0.05, p = 0.59$). However, the relationship between attitudes also provided significant partial mediation in all indirect relationships, such as SMM $\rightarrow$ Attitude $\rightarrow$ Destination Choice ($\beta = 0.18, p < 0.01$). Fornell–Larcker criteria were used to confirm the discriminant validity and AVE values were satisfying (0.50-0.57). This study combines the elements of psychology with the digital marketing indicators in the form of an empirical unanimous framework that clarify the manner in which the online stimuli-eWOM, user-generated content and destination images are turned into real travel choices. It provides practical recommendations to digital tourism marketing, particularly in the fast-growing markets such as Saudi Arabia.

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Introduction

Tourism behavior in the digital age has undergone a dramatic transformation with social media emerging as a dominant force in shaping travel preferences. Travelers no longer rely solely on official brochures or travel agencies instead they engage with peer's Influencers and branded content through platforms like Instagram, YouTube and TikTok and other social media platforms. In Saudi Arabia where outbound tourism is rapidly growing post-pandemic understanding the factors influencing tourist destination choice is essential. This study explores how social media marketing dimensions including (eWOM) Influence-generated content and visual storytelling affect destination choice with tourist attitude as a mediating variable.

In April 2019, the utilization of virtual entertainment stages reached 802 million (Kemp, 2019)^[88] implying that the global population of internet-based on the entertainment users is over 3.5 billion individuals and considered the fourth largest internet user population in the world. Traveling organizations are using online entertainment platforms extensively to increase brand exposure and equity (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011)^[55].

Social media networks' large user bases make this especially true. Additionally, social media marketing strategies may include paid advertising on these platforms to help organizations reach more customers and achieve their goals. Using many social media channels to promote a business, product or service is called "social media marketing". Facebook, Instagram, X and LinkedIn are examples. One of the most fiercely disputed themes in the travel business is how social media will affect tourism practices and destination selections. Trustworthy friends' social media opinions have grown in importance and demand (Awaritefe, 2004) ^[12]. The tourist business is increasingly benefiting from social media (Nguyen, Mac, Nguyen, & Bui, 2024) ^[75]. However, social media's drawbacks, particularly its ability to amplify consumer concerns, are becoming more apparent. Service-centric research and social practice theory suggest that tourist complaints about social media are value-building (Usui, Wei, & Funck, 2018) ^[103]. Social marketing's ability to change opinions, emotions and experiences drives its growth (Alsoud *et al.*, 2023) ^[6]. Moreover, social marketing is a great resource for trip planning due to this capacity and social media marketing also influences tourist destination choices since it provides information about locations, activities and experiences on many platforms (Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi, & Algharabat, 2024) ^[2]. In addition, there are inherent dangers and perils associated with the act of traveling. Scholars have conducted research into the examination of destination safety perceptions, safety atmospheres and the relevance of safety as a sub-dimension of the image of the destination (Zhou & Yu, 2022) ^[113]. While Influencer marketing has similarly demonstrated positive effects (Chen & Rahman, 2024; Chen & Rahman, 2024; Jin, Lee, & Lee, 2015) ^[20, 20, 49] individuals' decisions may be influenced by their knowledge of the area's attractions. Despite the lack of study on safety hazards in tourism safety the literature on tourist danger appears to be linked to it (Xie, Zhang, & Morrison, 2021) ^[69]. Remember that danger and safety are opposing extremes of a continuum. The causes of an individual's safety perception are unknown (Valentea & Pertegasb, 2018) [Note: verify Ref]. It is unclear if it stems from criminal worries or a general sense of unease caused by societal distrust. Both options are viable. Xie *et al.*, (2021) ^[69] examined tourists' perceptions regarding safety in diverse settings. The authors propose that visitors' perceptions of a place's safety are a higher-level construct with five sub dimensions. In addition, sub-dimensions were produced from the accident system and safety system theory particularly using the 4Ms framework (material, method, machine and man). (Yen, Tsaur, & Tsai, 2021) ^[26] utilized a similar strategy to create a safety climate rating scale. Despite tourists seeking thrills, people evaluate safety based on their subjective perception of the likelihood of being in an accident being injured, or dying (Rossello, Becken, & Santana-Gallego, 2020) [Note: verify Ref]. Even though social media receives a great amount of attention from the previous research articles, and these research articles indicate inconclusive findings about its influence on the destinations that visitors choose to visit. Tham, Mair, & Croy (2020) ^[98] there is a persistent notion that social media has a substantial influence on making decisions about destination selection. It is usual for tourists to utilize social media to satisfy their information needs and alleviate post-purchase dissonance. However, the background of the tourist's choice of place has been generally neglected and, in some cases, it has even been purposely

reduced. Lee *et al.* (2018) ^[61]; Marder *et al.* (2019) ^[68]; & McCabe *et al.* (2016) ^[69] mentioned that the effect of social media on decision-making will differ depending on the environment in which the decision is being made. This is supported by research that investigates destination choice. As a result, this study will empirically determine what, when and why certain contextual features permit or restrict social media's impact on visitors' destination choices. This research will be a response to the gaps that have been found.

The link between the reasons why tourists go and the feelings that they have about a certain location is being investigated. Within the context of the interaction between travel motivation and visitors' sentiments about the site, the purpose of this study is to investigate the role that the image of the destination plays as an intermediate (Pereira, Gupta, & Hussain, 2022) ^[80]. Destination attitude to the destination selection is the display of positive or negative reviews of the destination experience by tourists (Lee, 2009) ^[62]. Destinations can remain competitive in a highly competitive tourism market by building their own brand by providing unique tourism experiences (Hanna & Rowley, 2019) ^[42]. To ensure that the visitors have memorable experience and make them come back, the destinations will be providing them with activities like walks, heritage tours and friendliness of locals. Consequently, a better understanding of the way tourists experience actual or perceived features of a destination is important in the destination positioning and competitive differentiation and is relevant to both theory and practice in marketing.

The study goal is to reveal the effect of social media marketing on tourist destination selection as well as exploring the way in which social media marketing will affect the destination selection process of tourists. The research endeavors to ascertain the correlation between the efficacy of social media marketing and the following independent variables: tourist motivation (TM), perceived value (PV), tourist destination image (TDI) and social media marketing effectiveness (SMME). The influence of these independent variables on the attitudes and preferences of visitors toward various destinations is crucial.

There is a noticeable lack of expertise when it comes to understanding the senior tourism sector. The main objective of this study is to enhance our comprehension of the motivation and psychological processes that drive intentions and decision-making when it comes to tourist destinations. The aim is to make a valuable contribution to the advancement of knowledge in the field of tourism psychological research (Pestana, Parreira & Moutinho, 2020) ^[82]. While the increasing prevalence of online purchasing and service provider websites has highlighted the significance of home delivery services and travel destination recommendations provided by delivery personnel or websites to ensure client satisfaction. Several variables influence the level of satisfaction that individuals experience such as timely delivery, enhanced service, perceived value by the consumer and confidence in the service provider (Uzir, Al Halbusi, Thurasamy, Hock, Aljaberi, Hasan, & Hamid, 2021) ^[102].

According to Afshardoost and Eshaghi (2020) ^[8], they discovered that the behavioral intention is influenced by affective images, then cognitive images. The image of the destination holds the greatest sway on intention to recommend all the behavioral intention dimensions. Moreover, it is very well known that social media is a critical

source of information which has substantial influence on the choices of travellers towards the travel itinerary. However, there is a shortage of qualitative and quantitative research that uses an inductive technique to study the functions of social media by analyzing its impact on travel choices which is a significant gap in the existing body of knowledge (Liu, Mehraliyev, & Schuckert, 2020) ^[57].

1.1. Digital Era Characteristics as Tourist Destination Choice

Social media has greatly influenced the tourism industry by making it easier for individuals to access information about tourist destinations through digital technologies. The social media which includes websites, twitter, Facebook, entertainment gateways, and different travel applications provides different offers of a wealth of geographic information for travelers. The extensive availability of digital resources allows tourists to conduct thorough research on different destinations, equate choices, and make thriving up-to-date decisions based on their specific preferences and interests.

Social media has significantly influenced by the tourists' preferences for vacation destinations largely due to the extensive use of User-Generated Content (UGC) comes in many forms including images, videos, reviews and now a days in blogs and X as well or even a podcast. The very real-life stories of others in the related travel industries are progressively impacting a tourist, enabling him to make more informed choices regarding destinations and introduce a social validation aspect to the decision-making process.

Digital technologies can allow setting a high level of customization and individualization of websites and applications in the travel industry. Through the application of data analysis and algorithms it is possible to customize recommendations to users in terms of their preferences, behavior and previous interactions. Such individualism makes sure that the unique interests of every visitor are fulfilled and this makes the travel alternatives even more relevant and interesting.

The social media websites are known as web-based digital entertainment and learning applications whereby people can have firsthand direct contact with the tourists, destinations and the tourism societies. The continuous sharing of documents and research in the digital marketing network positively impacts many areas of report about tourists which allows making informed decisions. On the one hand, by being an active presence on social media the explorers can access a wide range of information and advice that will allow them to make informed decisions and develop faith in their journey options. The complexity of relaying information and ideas is fundamental in determining the entire experience of the people which eventually influences their participation in the online travel sector.

The development of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies in the global environment is transforming the way individuals search and select the most suitable vacation spots. VR and AR packages provide the tourists with an opportunity to freely explore the destinations prior to an individual deciding on travelling. These virtual mechanisms give people an eye view of what the destination has to offer, which gives them confidence and enthusiasm towards visiting them. To put it more simply, tourists can do

research, compare prices, concentrate on reviews and make reservations with the help of only a few clicks. The unity of online experience in such facilities allows you to make decisions very easily and the experience of travelling. In the global word now a days the digital technologies are becoming essential tools that enable visitors to choose destinations that are fun to travel for every individual and also well-informed about the destination. These tools range from virtual exploration and tailored information accessibility to customization and personalized travel experiences.

2. Literature Review

In the previous study of (Alalwan *et al.*, 2024) ^[2] and (Rahman & Musa, 2025) ^[20] emphasizes the importance of social media as a strategic communication tool in tourism as well as Influences credibility aesthetic appeal and information richness have been shown to shape tourists' cognitive and emotional responses. Moreover, face-book, twitter, TikTok, google, Wikipedia and Linked-in are among the most prominent examples of notable social media networks. The decision-making process may benefit from the inclusion of these social media outlets as informed and influencing sources of resources. Other potential tourists' judgments on which place to visit might be influenced by the travel experiences, images, videos and other items that are published on social media.

2.1. Literature and hypothesis

Tourists' attitudes towards a destination are largely influenced by their perceptions of its image which are often shaped by marketing efforts, word-of-mouth recommendations, media portrayals, and personal experiences. (Li, 2020) ^[58] found that destination attractiveness particularly the services and sightseeing experience positively influences tourists' environmentally responsible behavior. Morando, (2022) ^[66] identified a strong bond between potential tourists and a destination brand with this "Destination Brand Love" mediating the relationship between various factors and behavioral intentions. A destination with a positive image is likely to elicit favorable attitudes among tourists leading to a higher likelihood of visitation and positive word-of-mouth endorsements. Mohamad, (2022) ^[67] highlighted the impact of positive experiences shared on social media and subjective norms on tourists' destination choices. Conversely, destinations with negative or unfavorable images may struggle to attract tourists despite possessing valuable assets or attractions. Moreover, the tourist destination image is an important point of reference that the tourists use to make their travel decisions that affect their expectations, motivations, and behavior. The tourists tend to visit destinations that match their interests, preferences, and desired experiences presented in the image of the destination. Zhou (2022) ^[113] also revealed that there is positive direct relationship between tourist engagement and destination loyalty, which is mediated by functional and emotional value but not social value.

According to (Baloglu *et al.*, 1999) ^[18] there is a critical aspect of the perceptions of the tourists towards a destination which is the image that the destination gives out. This theory focuses on the role of the perception of tourists concerning the destinations in relation to their overall perceptions about themselves. An example of this is that a destination that

boasts of clean beaches and nightlife might be an attraction to leisure travelers who want to relax and enjoy a good nightlife whereas a destination with a lot of historical sites and festivals might be an attraction to cultural-minded and history lovers.

H1: Tourist destination image significantly influences Tourist Attitude towards the Destination.

As demonstrated in earlier articles, the effectiveness of the advertising works of social media influences the attitude of tourists towards certain destinations colossally. The studies indicate that social media marketing plays a significant role in the attitudes that tourists have towards the destinations (Jorge-Acain, 2022; Nzeku, 2021) ^[48, 76]. This idea underscores the role played by an understanding in how well-crafted social media advertising and marketing strategies can also influence the attitudes and the perception of tourist destinations that they are planning to visit (Tussyadiah *et al*, 2009) ^[101].

Unlike other theories used before that dwell on aspects such as perceived cost, and the motivating factor by traveler, this concept explains the direct effect of social media marketing effectiveness on the development of criticisms. This influence finds its way in how the travelers make destination decisions, cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes, and brand equity perceptions. The tourist attractions that use social media as a marketing tool have been found to positively influence these attitudes, particularly among some demographic and usage attributes (Nzeku, 2021) ^[76]. The understanding of the effects of social media advertisements on attitudes can also enable the marketers to modify their strategies to promote favorable perceptions and attitudes towards places. Moreover, it has been established that social media marketing can improve the destination brand equity that in turn can impact the behavior of the traveler's (Hadianfar, 2021) ^[5].

H2: Social media marketing effectiveness significantly influences to Tourist Attitude towards the Destination.

Research has consistently shown that tourist motivation significantly influences their attitude towards a destination. Altruistic motivation such as the desire to be a better person has been found to positively impact tourism support behavior (Douglas, 2023) ^[29]. This speculation highlights the significance of tourist purpose in affecting attitudes in comparison to the prior speculation about perceived value influencing attitudes. Similarly, cultural motivations can influence the activities tourists engage in and their destination choices (Douglas, 2023) ^[29]. Marketers may additionally regulate their approaches to in shape the reasons of site visitors with the aid of knowing how those motivations influence attitudes which may have a power on vacationers' opinions and selections approximately in which to move. These motivations, in turn, can be influenced by factors such as perceived travel risks and destination image (Wattanacharoensil, 2023) ^[41]. The influence of destination image and tourist satisfaction on destination loyalty further underscores the importance of these factors in shaping tourist attitudes (Reyes, 2023) ^[47]. The motivations at the back of tourists' visits to a region significantly influence how they sense approximately it.

H3: Tourist motivation significantly influences Tourist Attitude towards the Destination.

In the previous research, emesis's on and consistently shown that tourist motivation significantly influences their attitude towards a destination. In the article of (Omo-Obas, 2022) [not in your list, reference missing] it found that cognitive-affective-motivation factors such as destination attractiveness, satisfaction and attachment play a key role in international visitors' loyalty. In addition, hypothesis highlights the importance of perceived value as an important factor in the impact of tourist attitudes toward places unlike previous views on how tourist motivations affect attitudes. Similarly, (Xue, 2022) [not in your list, reference missing] highlighted the impact of tourist experience on tourist inspiration with destination familiarity moderating this relationship. This will ultimately affect travelers' behavior and destination decisions. Reyes, (2023) ^[47] further emphasized the influence of destination image and tourist satisfaction on destination loyalty. Lastly (Tang, 2023) ^[96] identified the effects of motivation destination image and satisfaction on rural tourism tourists' willingness to revisit. Moreover, a tourist's perception of a destination greatly influences how they feel about that particular place. These studies collectively underscore the importance of understanding and catering to tourists' motivations in shaping their attitudes towards a destination.

H4: Perceived value significantly influences to Tourist Attitude towards the Destination.

Todua, (2023) ^[97] emphasized the role of social media marketing in managing customer relations and its impact on consumer behavior in tourist destinations. Asyaff, (2023) ^[7] found that user-generated content on social media significantly affects destination image which in turn influences tourists' behavioral intentions. Pradhani, (2023) ^[79] found that attractive and trustworthy photos on Instagram significantly affect tourists' destination choice. Ultimately, this will influence tourist behavior and decisions about where to vacation. Social media marketing effectiveness influences tourist destination choice through the mediating role of tourist attitude towards the destination. Zhu, (2023) ^[112] found that attachment to social media influencers mediates the relationship between authenticity and travel intention. This theory highlights the importance of understanding the variables that motivate travelers to choose a particular destination and how these factors influence perceptions of the region.

H4a: Tourist Attitude towards the Destination mediates the relationship between Social Media Marketing Effectiveness and Tourist Destination Choice.

The attitude of tourists towards an area is fully influence on whether they will visit it or not, mostly depending on the way they perceive it. Jebbouri (2022) ^[47] found out that the formation of the destination image (DIF) positively influenced tourist satisfaction (TS) and tourist trust (TT), meaning that positive attitude to the destination may be a consequence of a positive destination image. In decision-making related to tourism, such an attitude brings out the relationships between attitudes, perception of places and traveling decisions. Adding to the evidence of the mediating role of the concept of satisfaction in the correlation between destination image and tourist behavior, Çevrimkaya (2023) ^[21] also found out that destination image had a positive influence on tourist satisfaction and intention to recommend. Mehedi (2022) ^[65] found out that destination image had a

significant positive influence on revisit intention, meaning that the positive image of a destination could influence the choice of a traveler. Marketers may also control their social media strategies to control the perceptions and criticisms of visitors about locations, which would influence tour choices sooner or later through understanding and the application of this relationship. Furthermore, according to the meta-analysis by Afshardoost (2020) ^[8], a destination image is a largely effective predictor of the behavioral intentions of the tourists, with the most significant influence of the affective and cognitive images.

H4b: Tourist attitude towards the destination mediates the relationship between tourist destination image and tourist destination choice.

It has been investigated that the factors of tourist motivation, attitude and destination choice that the impact of cultural tourism incentives on tourists' engagement in specific cultural activities and subsequent destination choices has been explored by (Douglas, 2023) ^[29]. Furthermore, the study conducted by (Olivar, 2023) ^[37] failed to address the research inquiry. While (Conti, 2023) ^[22] conducted a study that revealed a clear correlation between the perception of municipal sustainability and tourist behavior. Tang, (2023) ^[96] revealed that brand connection quality modulates the effect of destination brand experience on tourist citizenship behavior. Overall, these publications imply that tourist destination attitude mediates visitor motivation and destination choice. The articles also imply that tourist attitude modulates the association between tourism motivation and location choice. Pereira, (2022) ^[80] discovered that destination image mediates travel motivation and visitors' destination opinions.

H4c: Tourist Attitude towards the Destination mediates the relationship between Tourist motivation and Tourist Destination Choice.

According to past studies the tourist attitude mediates the association between perceived value and destination choice. Perceived sustainability directly affected travel behavior which affected the desire to suggest and revisit a location (Conti, 2023) ^[22]. Moreover, (Kim and Fesenmaier, 2017) ^[52] tourists' opinions regarding a location have a significant effect on how they perceive the area which in turn influences their choice of destinations. Regalado-Pezúa, (2023) ^[86] found that emotional and social values in coastal places are the most significant indicators of satisfaction and loyalty. In the context of tourist decision-making this hypothesis highlights the interdependence of attitudes, perceived value and destination preferences. Çevrimkaya, (2023) ^[21] discovered that destination image enhances tourist satisfaction, memorable experiences and recommendation intentions. Zhou (2022) ^[113] found that tourist engagement has indirect positive effects on destination loyalty through functional value and emotional value which in turn promotes tourist satisfaction towards the destination (Moon, 2018) ^[70] found that perceived value is a stronger mediator between tourist involvement and satisfaction than perceived price reasonableness. Marketers may enhance their social media tactics to impact visitors' attitudes and impressions of locations eventually affecting their travel decisions by comprehending and using this link.

H4d: Tourist Attitude towards the Destination mediates the relationship between perceived values and Tourist Destination Choice.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

Research has shown a strong relationship between tourists' perceptions of a destination and their subsequent choice of destination. Huaman-Ramirez (2021) found that a destination's personality traits influence tourists' self-perception, with compatibility acting as a mediator in this relationship. Similarly, Hassan (2021) provided evidence that tourist attitudes mediate the relationship between destination evaluation variables and behavioral intentions, such as revisit intention and word-of-mouth promotion, particularly in beach tourism contexts. Ćulić (2021) demonstrated that destination attractiveness directly affects satisfaction, destination image, and return intention, with satisfaction mediating the relationship between these factors and revisit decisions. Leo (2021) highlighted the role of experience and satisfaction in fostering tourist loyalty to agritourism attractions, with motivational factors exerting indirect effects.

Several studies have explored the link between travelers' emotions and destination preferences. Li (2023) found that destination attractiveness, particularly the quality of services and overall tourism experience, positively affects tourists' environmentally responsible behaviors. Morando (2022) identified a strong relationship between potential visitors and destination branding as a mediator, while Mohammed (2022) highlighted the influence of positive experiences and personal beliefs shared on social media on tourists' destination choices. Zhou (2022) reported that tourist engagement directly influences destination loyalty, with functional and emotional values serving as moderators, whereas social value does not. Collectively, these findings suggest that positive attitudes toward a destination—shaped by multiple factors—significantly influence tourists' destination choices.

The relationship between tourists' mindsets toward a destination and their selection of that destination is complex, as it is influenced by multiple variables. Nguyen (2024) observed that perceptions of utility, ease of use, and compatibility shape attitudes toward e-tax systems, which in turn affect continued use. Alqahtani (2024) found that knowledge about health risks influences attitudes toward alcohol consumption, and Aljermawi (2024) noted that enforced flipped learning during COVID-19 positively affected students' attitudes toward learning, influencing educational outcomes.

Chon (1989) emphasized that Maslow's hierarchy of needs—including physiological, safety, belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization—motivates travel. Beyond these, aesthetic and informational needs are also valued by tourists. Mill and Morrison (1985) explained that needs such as belonging, safety, and physiology alleviate tension, whereas needs for knowledge, beauty, self-actualization, and self-esteem create inductive arousal. Wu (2015) suggested that individuals travel for relaxation, sightseeing, admiration of natural beauty, and acquisition of new knowledge. Push factors, or internal forces, drive individuals to travel based on intrinsic human needs (Mutinda & Mayaka, 2012; Awaritefe, 2004), while pull factors, or external forces, attract tourists to

destinations through tangible and intangible assets (Hsu, Tsai, & Wu, 2009; Baloglu & Uysal, 1996). Push factors explain travel tendencies, whereas pull factors explain destination selection.

Tourism destination image refers to tourists' perceptions of a location's infrastructure, hospitality, and cultural attractions (Cardoso *et al.*, 2019; Chen & Tsai, 2007). This image can be conceptualized as comprising both induced and organic components: organic images are formed through sources such as newspapers, books, films, academic courses, and personal or social interactions, while induced images are created by marketing and promotional activities. Tourists rely on both organic and induced information to make destination choices (Bjork & Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2017; Ozek & Ferraris, 2018).

Perceptions of a destination's offerings and quality influence tourists' decisions (Bresciani, Thrassou, & Vrontis, 2015; Moutinho, 1987; Sanchez Cañizares & Castillo-Canalejo, 2015). The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991)

provides a framework for understanding how tourists' psychological inclinations manifest as positive or negative evaluations of behavior. According to this theory, perceived behavioral control and intention directly predict behavioral outcomes. An individual's perception of an action depends on its anticipated benefits and costs (Foster, 2014). Attitudes encompass cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components: cognitive reactions involve evaluating the destination using knowledge and information; emotional reactions involve feelings toward the destination (Vincent & Thompson, 2002; Seo & Yun, 2015; Toudert & Bringas-Rábago, 2019); and behavioral reactions involve tourists' verbal or reported responses to their experiences (Akdag, Guler, Dalgic, Benli, & Cakici, 2018). Ultimately, tourists' attitudes—shaped by cognition and emotion—influence their actions and evaluations, including judgments of enjoyment, positivity, fun, pleasantness, and overall favorability toward a destination (Lee, 2007; Sparks, 2007).

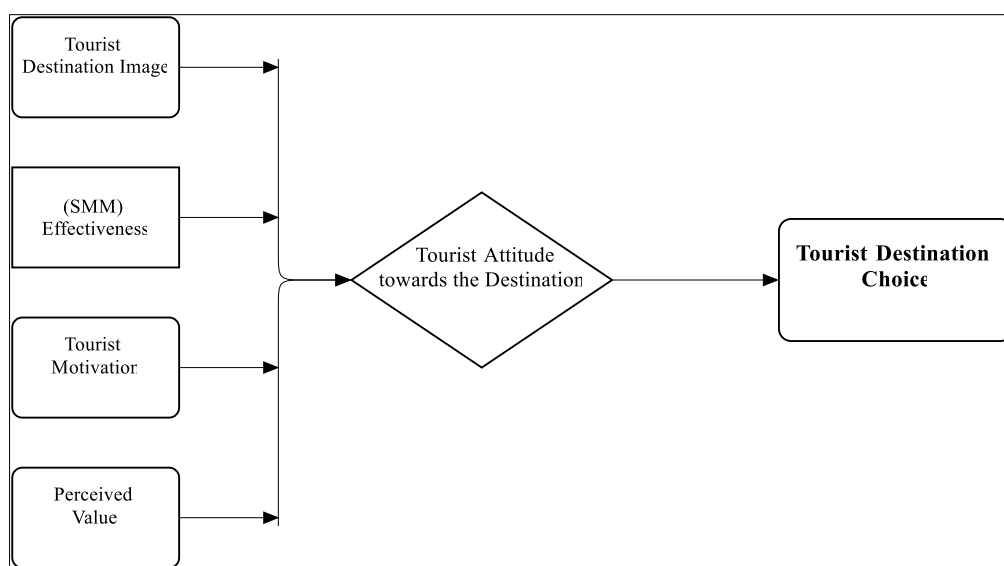


Fig 1:

3. Methodology

The proposed research design is well-structured, and it covered essential aspects of understanding the influence of social media marketing on tourists' destination choices.

For survey design of calculating the effectiveness of social media marketing assessed the impact of social media posts, advertisements and recommendations. The Likert scale questions to measure the perceived influence of social media on decision-making. It also included Likert scale items on attractiveness, uniqueness, safety and overall appeal.

3.1. Sampling Data Collection and Analysis

The study adopts a quantitative approach using a structured questionnaire and theories measured using validated items adapted from prior studies (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2023; Algharabat *et al.*, 2024). The sample consisted of 400 Saudi tourists who had recently traveled or planned to travel in the next six months. Data was analyzed using AMOS 26. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess validity and reliability followed by SEM to test hypothesized

relationships. Initially 400 questionnaires were distributed out of which 245 were successfully received from respondents. After data cleaning phase author has used a total of 219 questionnaires that were used for final statistical analysis. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with Smart-PLS version 3 were used to analyze the gathered data. Using SEM firstly reliability and validity of the scales were measured following with evaluating measurement and structural model fit. At the end hypotheses were tested considering t-value and p-values to draw statistical results.

3.2. Hypothesis Testing:

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used for direct hypotheses testing and mediation hypotheses. We also conducted separate SEM analyses for each hypothesis (H1, H2, H3, H4). Moreover, factors affecting the success of social media marketing, visitor attitudes and travel destinations were also considered.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Measurement Model Assessment

Table 1: Reliability and Convergent Validity

Variable	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Tourist Destination Image	0.86	0.82	0.49
SMM Effectiveness	0.87	0.80	0.50
Tourist Motivation	0.74	0.70	0.557
Perceived Values	0.72	0.70	0.53
Tourist Attitude towards the Destination	0.73	0.71	0.54
Tourist Destination Choice	0.81	0.76	0.50

Table 1 presents the results of reliability and convergent validity for the measurement model constructs including tourist destination image, social media marketing (SMM) effectiveness, tourist motivation, perceived values, tourist attitude toward the destination and destination choice. All constructs demonstrate good internal consistency as indicated by Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the 0.70 threshold.

Composite reliability (CR) values are also above 0.70, confirming the consistency of the constructions. Most AVE values exceed the 0.50 benchmark indicating acceptable convergent validity although the AVE for tourist destination image (0.49) falls slightly below. Given the strong reliability metrics this minor deviation is considered acceptable (Hair *et al.*, 2021) and model is considered as valid and reliable.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
Tourist Destination Image	1					
SMM Effectiveness	0.44	1				
Tourist Motivation	0.50	0.43	1			
Perceived Values	0.49	0.67	0.48	1		
Tourist Attitude towards the Destination	0.53	0.52	0.51	0.43	1	
Tourist Destination Choice	0.64	0.50	0.39	0.28	0.46	1

Note: In the diagonal, the bold numbers represent the square roots of the variables' AVEs. The off-diagonal numbers represent the correlations between variables.

Table 2 presents the discriminated validity of the measurement model using by the "Fornell–Larcker criterion". The diagonal elements intend the square roots of the AVEs, that are higher than the inter-construct correlations (off-diagonal values) positive that each construct is distinct

from the others. No correlations exceed the 0.70 threshold, indicating that multidisciplinary is not a concern. These results confirm that each variable represents a unique construct, and the measurement model demonstrates appropriate discriminant validity.

Table 3: Measurement Model Fit Indices

Fit Indices	Overall Model Score	Value	Acceptable Threshold Value
CFI	0.954	0.90	≥ 0.90
AGFI	0.90	0.81	≥ 0.80
RMSEA	0.049	0.057	≤ 0.10
CMIN/df	1.01	1.97	< 3
TLI	0.947	0.92	≥ 0.89
IFI	0.94	0.90	≥ 0.90

Table 3 summarizes the model fit indices obtained through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The values of CFI = 0.954, TLI = 0.947 and RMSEA = 0.049 indicate an excellent model fit. All indices meet or exceed accepted thresholds

(CFI and TLI > 0.90 ; RMSEA < 0.08) and the CMIN/df value of 1.01 is well below the cutoff of 3. These results support the adequacy of the measurement model and validate its structural integrity.

Table 4 :Model Fitness

Fit Indices	Overall Model Score	Value	Acceptable Threshold Value
CFI	0.92	0.90	≥ 0.90
AGFI	0.85	0.81	≥ 0.80
RMSEA	0.027	0.041	≤ 0.10
CMIN/df	1.94	2.09	< 3
TLI	0.95	0.93	≥ 0.89
IFI	0.96	0.92	≥ 0.90

Table 4 presents the fit indices for the structural model. The results further confirm model adequacy, with values such as CFI = 0.92, AGFI = 0.85, RMSEA = 0.027, TLI = 0.95 and IFI = 0.96 all indicating excellent fit. The CMIN/df value of

1.94 is within the acceptable range reaffirming that the model appropriately represents the data structure and supports hypothesis testing.

Table 5 Direct Hypotheses Testing

Hypo	Relationship	β Value	T-value	P-value	Decision
H1	Tourist Destination Image $\rightarrow$ Tourist Attitude towards Destination (TDC)	0.34	4.67	0.010	Supported
H2	SMM Effectiveness $\rightarrow$ Tourist Attitude towards Destination (TDC)	0.31	4.97	0.021	Supported
H3	Tourist Motivation $\rightarrow$ Tourist Attitude towards Destination (TDC)	0.24	3.95	0.022	Supported
H4	Perceived Values $\rightarrow$ Tourist Attitude towards Destination (TDC)	0.05	1.04	0.590	Not Supported
H4a	Tourist Destination Image $\rightarrow$ Tourist Attitude towards Destination (TDC) $\rightarrow$ Tourist Destination Choice	0.19	2.07	0.001	Supported
H4b	SMM Effectiveness $\rightarrow$ Tourist Attitude towards Destination (TDC) $\rightarrow$ Tourist Destination Choice	0.18	3.01	0.025	Supported
H4c	Tourist Motivation $\rightarrow$ Tourist Attitude towards Destination (TDC) $\rightarrow$ Tourist Destination Choice	0.21	4.01	0.020	Supported
H4d	Perceived Values $\rightarrow$ Tourist Attitude towards Destination (TDC) $\rightarrow$ Tourist Destination Choice	0.17	3.01	0.040	Supported

Table 5 reports the results of direct and indirect hypo testing. Hypo H1, H2 and H3 are supported with statistically significant path coefficients (H1: $\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$; H2: $\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$; H3: $\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$) confirming that tourist destination image, SMM effectiveness and motivation all significantly influence tourist attitudes. However, H4, which posited a relationship between perceived values and tourist attitude is not supported ($\beta = 0.05$, $p = 0.59$).

For indirect paths the mediation effects H4a, H4b, H4c and H4d are all statistically significant confirming partial mediation through tourist attitude. These include: H4a ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$), H4b ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$), H4c ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$) and H4d ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$). These findings reveal that while perceived values may not directly influence attitude, they still exert an indirect effect on destination choice via attitude. This supports the central role of tourist attitude as a mediating factor aligning with theoretical expectations based on the Theory of Reasoned Action.

5. Findings Conclusion & Discussion

The findings support all four hypotheses and are consistent with previous research highlighting the persuasive power of digital platforms in tourism marketing. Social media strategies, especially influence-generated content and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), play a key role in shaping tourists' positive attitudes toward destinations. The mediating role of attitude is confirmed by the way these positive attitudes impact their choices of final destinations. In this study, the importance of emotional and cognitive involvement in online destination promotion is emphasized and is aligned with other studies that were conducted before (Chen and Rahman, 2024)^[20]; (Juhari *et al.*, 2025)^[46]. The partial mediation and the study imply that social media can have a direct impact on the decisions of the tourists, but the creation of a positive attitude enhances the impact of the former. Social aspect of networking has played a significant role in the selection of the destination of trips by travelers. This discussion examines the manner in which perceptions and destinations selection of travelers are shaped by complex interrelationships among diverse elements.

The attitude of the tourist towards the destination is influenced by the image of the tourist destination, the social media marketing effectiveness (SMM), motivation of the tourist and the perceived values which eventually influence the decision of the travel destination.

Tourist destination image is vital to their attitudes, and it includes destination appeal, safety, cultural richness and more. User-generated content on social media molds and reinforces these images. Tourist Attitude towards Destination can be improved by positive social media photos. Negative or false portrayals can repel tourists. Social media marketing is crucial to tourist sentiments. Successful SMM efforts can build excitement, trust and curiosity. Engaging material, user-generated reviews, and tourist organizations' social media responsiveness can improve Tourist Attitude towards Destination. Poorly handled SMM might cause skepticism and hesitancy.

Social media can impact tourist motivation whether it's relaxation, adventure, culture or other aspects. Instagram, Facebook and Trip Advisor material typically has specific intentions. Tourist Attitude towards Destination may be influenced by destinations that suit their interests. Social media influences tourist destination values like cost, experiences and cultural authenticity. What tourists see and hear online often determines whether to visit a place. They may actively research a destination's cultural, historical and environmental features via social media and other sources. The destination choice depends on education level and attitude. Social media marketing influences tourist destination choice in the digital era (Rahman and Musa, 2025)^[85]. Tourist destination image, SMM effectiveness, tourist motivation and perceived values influence travelers' destination choices. Tourism organizations and marketers must understand these complex relationships to attract tourists and keep a competitive business.

The research has a contribution to the digital tourism literature considering that it verifies the core position of the tourist attitude in mediating the impact of social media marketing on destination choices. As a manager, destination marketers ought to invest in real storytelling to seek the

power of causing by traveling and encourage user-generated calm to create positive attitudes towards tourists. Policies enabling influences, cooperation and responsible use of digital can further improve tourism performance particularly in emerging outbound markets such as Saudi Arabia (Alqahtani *et al.*, 2024) ^[1].

The findings corroborated the theory relationship between social media marketing and vacationers' destination of choice via a moderating effect of vacationers' attitudes towards the location. This data demonstrates that social media marketing may influence tourists' impressions of potential destinations. Using this data tourism professionals may better understand the impact of social media advertising along visitors' impressions of a direction.

Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is not valid due to visitors' opinions of a place affecting the relationship between the destination's image and its popularity. How people feel about a place depends on what they know about its character, quality and general picture. It's possible that this study will shed light on how a place's image attracts tourists and how social media marketing affects how visitors feel about that place.

Hypothesis 3 is supported by the study and expresses that how people feel about a place affects their choice to visit that place in a roundabout way. This shows how visitors' opinions about a place can change depending on the things they think about when choosing where to go. Tourism managers need to know a lot about their target group to reach them effectively. According to the study's hypothesis H4, how some tourists feel about their planned location affects the relationship between perceived worth and destination choice. This theory says that tourists' feelings about a place might be affected by how valuable they think it is, which in turn can affect their decision to visit that place. This study shows how promotion on social media can change tourists' opinions about a place and how important it is for bringing people there.

Social media marketing has positive impact on visitors' opinions and decisions according to the study's findings. This study has the potential to help the tourism industry better understand and cater to the needs, wants and passions of its target audience. Tourism marketers would benefit from a deeper understanding of the interplay between tourist demographics and the effects of social media marketing on destination choice if they could more precisely target certain groups with their efforts.

5.1. Theoretical Implications & Practical Implications

The relationship between social media marketing and tourists' perceptions of the destination and their traveling choices is strained to explained in this study it has an important theoretical implication. Furthermore, the results show the social media marketing can be a valuable tactic to impact on the perceptions of prospective tourists about their future destination as well as their travel arrangements, which can be applicable to vacation industry. Moreover, it would be much more significant if the people working within the tourism sector should prioritize the development of social media advertisement activities that would address the needs, value, and reputation of their target demographics. Another thing that marketers can keep in mind is the demographics of visitors to their sites, which allows the marketer to control the methods.

Furthermore, this appearance also demonstrates the efficiency of advertising through social media in bringing tourists closer and provides guidelines on how to develop this campaign to capture the ideals, values, and motivation of vacationers.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Outcomes of the study cannot be generalized to other cultural settings since they are limited to a sample of Saudi Arabia. In future research, the way social media use and travelers behavior are culturally different may be examined. In addition, longitudinal designs may be more helpful in terms of the changing impacts of the digital trends on tourist intentions. The future of models could be enhanced by investigating such factors as the trust of platforms, short-form video content, and AI-generated recommendations (Silva *et al.*, 2025) ^[87].

By analyzing the outcome of online tourism marketing on destination choices, highlights a gap in the literature by not considering other factors that could play a role in tourism marketing such as "Personal preferences, financial constraints and geographical limitations" and that should also be considered as it has a significant influence towards the tourists' destination choices. Moreover, it is also important to identify these influencing factors which have a significant impact on social media marketing and can be considered in future research. Additionally, self-reported data may be influenced by response bias and social media attractions which are hidden limitations of this research article. To address these limitations in future research the use of observational studies or experimental methods are recommended.

The investigation turned new insights into how social media and advertisement impact the travel destination choices of tourists. To improve marketing techniques and better understand tourist behavior promoters in the travel industry should consider the limitations of this study and explore other factors that may influence tourists' choices. Overall, the review gives new insights into the significance of online entertainment and advertising in shaping visitors' final destination decisions.

Finally, the purpose of tourist attitude toward the area as a mediator among the success of social media marketing tourist's impressions of the destination, their motivation, the significance they vicinity on traveling and their very last preference of vocational spot is the only variable that this study explores. Future research may study other possible mediators including accept as true with, delight, and perceived threat.

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