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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Digital Marketing and Social Media Influence on Tourist Behaviour and Destination Selection: An Integrative Review

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ABSTRACT

Social media now influences how people visualize, select, and evaluate the places they visit. This paper reflects current understanding of how digital marketing and social media shape tourist behaviour and destination choice, and synthesises the evidence into a single model. It draws on published tourism research and recent tourism data from UN Tourism, DataReportal, and operator surveys. Their influence occurs in five ways: through a search for information, the formation of a destination image, through trust and risk reduction, as a result of social proof from another tourist, and through inspiration that generates demand in the absence of a search for information. These mechanisms are not equally effective across all stages of a trip. Social media is most effective in the inspiration and evaluation stages, while search engines and booking websites remain the main drivers of the final decision. The impact also varies among travellers, with much greater influence on younger travellers than older ones, and different content can elicit very different reactions in different markets. The paper proposes a model of the travel journey based on seven stages and eight propositions to test it, and outlines the types of expectations destination managers can have of social media. It asserts that most of the existing evidence is based on survey data of intent to use, not actual use, and most of these surveys are conducted in individual countries; and that it is this lack of evidence of behaviour and not a paucity of studies, which is what restricts what this field can claim.

Keywords: *digital marketing, social media, tourist behaviour, tourist destination selection, tourist destination image, electronic word of mouth and tourist decision-making.*

INTRODUCTION

When people started deciding where to go on holiday, they began with a brochure, a guidebook, or a discussion with a travel agent. For most visitors, it now starts with a display screen. In a short video, people discover a place and, after saving it to their phone, compare it with other places, read reviews, etc., and then research flights and hotels. Social media is now in the very beginning of the game; that's where preferences are framed, not just adopted.

It's hard to overstate how big the change is. With its 5.56 billion users in 2025, the internet is still by far the largest media platform, and a combined 5.24 billion identities of the world's inhabitants are defined as users of social media, which is approximately 64 per cent of the world's population; social media accounts have increased by 206 million users or 4.1 per cent, in the year before (Kemp, 2025).

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Meanwhile, international tourism has bounced back to pre-pandemic levels, with approximately 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals in 2024 (UN Tourism, 2025). Increasingly, people spend multiple hours a day connected, which shapes many travel decisions.

Pastel alleys were an early insight in tourism research. Buhalis and Law (2008) conducted a review of past research in information technology in tourism over the last twenty years and suggested that the internet did not simply augment and layer the existing tourism structure, but modified it. Moreover, Xiang and Gretzel (2010) found that social media comprised a significant proportion of search engine results for travel-related queries, so travellers could encounter this information even when they were not searching for it. We reviewed the literature up to 2011, and Leung, Law, van Hoof and Buhalis (2013) labeled social media a "mega trend" that impacted travelers and suppliers. A subsequent literature review of 152 research papers revealed how quickly the research body had expanded and found that the research questions had remained fairly consistent over the last few years of social media research (Zarezadeh et al., 2018). Platforms have since evolved extensively, and the dominant content has shifted to short video, replacing much of the text and photo content, but not the main questions.

Three questions remain. Firstly, the mechanisms of influence are rather vague. There are a number of different processes that can be termed "social media influence" that operate in different ways and therefore can be measured differently. Second, the reported impact is often assumed to be homogeneous, yet the evidence points to a highly age-specific effect, with certain platforms, travel types, or trip modes. Third, and most importantly, most studies examine intention to act rather than actual behavior, making it difficult to determine the effect's magnitude. This paper pursues four aims. It identifies the mechanisms through which digital marketing and social media influence such tourists. It correlates and maps those mechanisms in the stages of the travel journey. It integrates both into one structure and formulates testable statements. It clearly lays out the current evidence and what it can and cannot definitively support. The paper serves two purposes: first, to provide a structured description of the field for researchers; second, to give destination managers a sense of what can reasonably be expected from a social media budget.

2. Scope and Method

This is a meeting of the "whole". Unlike other review types that pool multiple studies to estimate one effect size, an integrative review aims to create or further develop a framework. It is appropriate for a situation where the measurements cannot be compared sufficiently to be pooled, which is the case here.

Both direct and indirect sources were utilized - three. The first is peer-reviewed tourism and marketing research in social media and electronic word of mouth, destination image, and travel decision-making. The second is industry research, where, unlike academic research, behaviour can be identified at a scale seldom achieved in academic research and surveys, such as those conducted annually on a global level by travel operators through their digital surveys. The third is official tourism statistics from UN Tourism that are used to determine the size and shape of the market on which the marketing acts. Care is taken in handling industry data, and it is always labelled as such. These surveys can be useful because they are large, recent, and close to actual purchase behaviour. However, they have limitations: sampling is often not fully described, the questions are not written with a research purpose, and the organisation publishing the results often has an interest in them. For every industry-specific figure mentioned in this paper, the source, date, and countries are indicated to allow the reader to judge the figure. No industry data are treated a peer-reviewed findings.

Two Boundaries apply

It is not about business travel or hotels and airlines; rather, it's about leisure travel and destination selection. But it doesn't concern the impact of the content on travellers; that's a different literature on using social media data to predict demand.

3. Digital and Analog Approaches: Scale, Channels, and Discovery

All discussion of digital influence must be grounded in people's use of digital media. Figure 1 provides headline figures for early 2025. Of the global population of 8.20 billion people, 5.78 billion use a mobile phone, 5.56 billion use the internet, and 5.24 billion have a social media account; adult internet users spend an average of six hours and thirty-eight minutes online per day (Kemp, 2025).

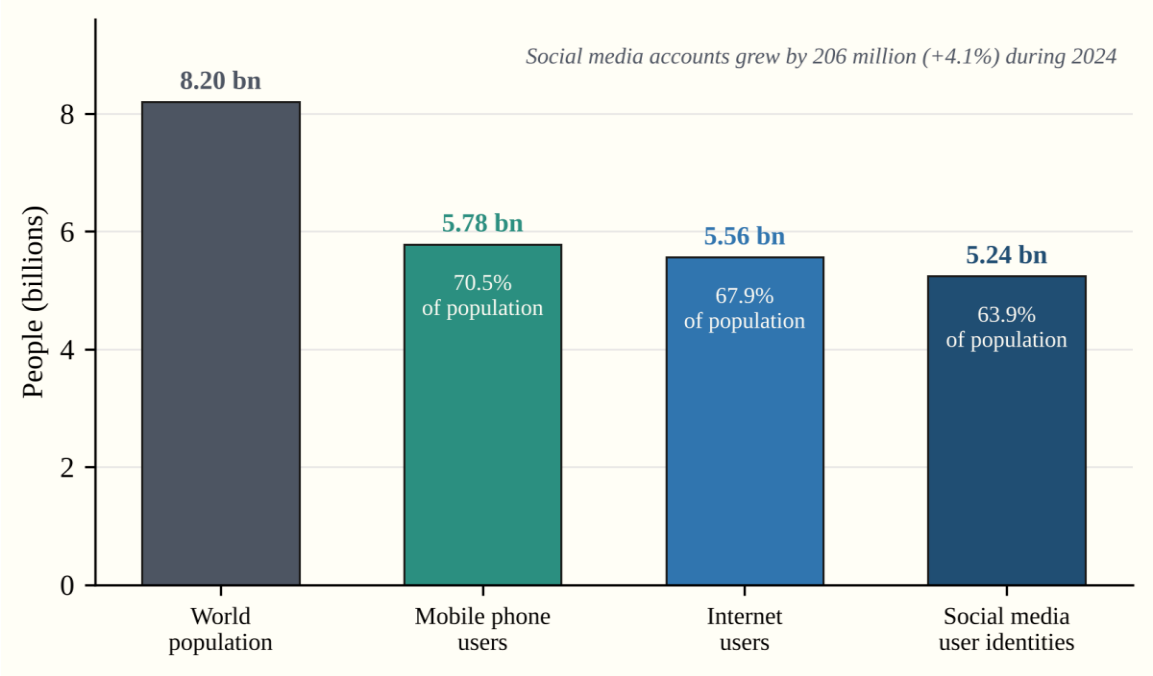

Fig. 1. Global digital adoption at the start of 2025. Social media reaches about two-thirds of the world's population, and almost everyone who uses social media also uses the internet on a mobile device. Source: Compiled by the author from Kemp (2025).

These numbers relate to reach, NOT influence. For a channel to be relevant, people need a place to discover new things. This is a sobering fact that much marketing writing complains about. Even though the average person mentions 5.8 sources to discover new brands and products, 32.8 per cent point to search engines, 32.3 per cent point to TV advertising, just under 30 per cent point to word of mouth and 29.7 per cent point to social media advertising, and approximately 73 per cent still discover brands through traditional advertising (Kemp, 2025). Discovery is not in one channel, it's in a number of channels (Fig 2).

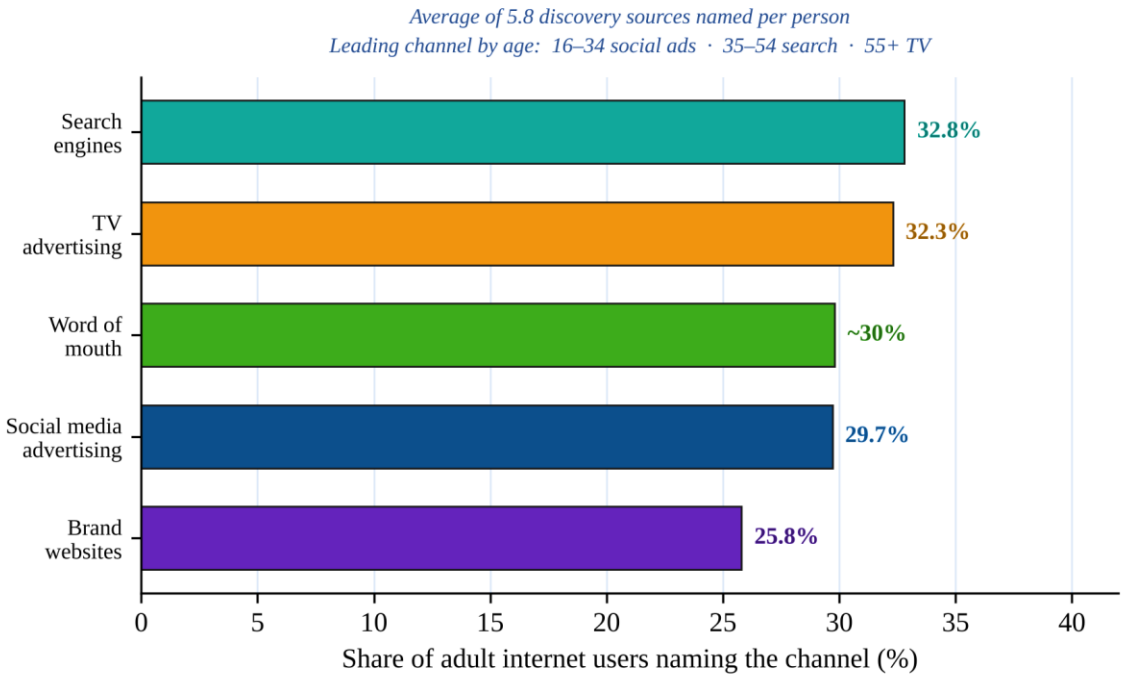

Fig. 2. How adult internet users say they discover new brands and products. No single channel dominates, and the ranking reverses with age: social media advertising leads among those aged 16 to 34, search leads among those aged 35 to 54, and television advertising leads among those aged 55 and above. Source: Compiled by the author from Kemp (2025).

The age pattern in that figure matters more to tourism than the rank. Internet users aged 16 to 34 are most likely to be a lead for social media advertising; search advertising leads for those aged 35 to 54, while television advertising leads for the over-55 crowd (Kemp, 2025). A multi-age destination marketing organisation is no longer choosing between channels, but running multiple campaigns for different ages with different discovery habits. Destinations can transmit messages to travellers through a series of channels, each with its own assigned function (Table 1). It helps to categorize them by who controls the message. Paid channels are purchased from and managed by the destination. The destination owns, builds, and controls its channels. Earned channels are nonexpendable, uncontrolled and what others say. Most of the challenges of destination marketing lie in the mix between earned and managed content – which is the most compelling and most difficult.

Table 1. Digital marketing channels used by destinations, by degree of control.

Channel	Control	Main function	Typical measure	Main limitation
Search advertising	Paid	Captures demand that already exists	Click-through rate; cost per click	Does not create demand; competes on price for the same query
Social media advertising	Paid	Creates awareness; targets by interest and age	Reach; video completion; cost per thousand	Attention is brief; effect on booking is hard to attribute
Destination website	Owned	Converts interest into enquiry or booking	Sessions; conversion rate	Only reaches people who already know the destination
Official social accounts	Owned	Builds image and ongoing contact	Followers; engagement rate	Engagement often reflects existing visitors, not prospects
Email and customer data	Owned	Retains past visitors; prompts repeat visits	Open and click rates; repeat visit rate	Requires a data base most destinations do not hold
Influencer partnerships	Paid, appears earned	Borrows a creator's credibility and audience	Reach; engagement; referral traffic	Credibility falls when the commercial relationship is visible
Online reviews	Earned	Reduces perceived risk before booking	Rating; review volume and recency	Cannot be controlled; vulnerable to manipulation
User-generated content	Earned	Supplies social proof and realistic expectations	Mentions; shares; hashtag volume	Highlights photogenic sites and may distort the destination's image

Source: Compiled by the author from Leung et al. (2013), Litvin et al. (2008, 2018), Xiang and Gretzel (2010) and the channel literature cited in this section.

4. Five Mechanisms of Influence

At least five processes lie behind the phrase "social media influences tourists". Separating them helps because each predicts something different, is measured differently, and a destination can be strong on one factor and weak on another (Table 2).

Information search: The first, and original, means relates to purely social media and travellers seeking facts. In Xiang and Gretzel (2010), the findings indicate that search engines guide travellers to UGC, meaning social media are part of the information environment even for travellers who do not start using social media. Search behaviour is a goal-directed action. A travelling person has a question, and content provides the answer.

Destination image formation. Photographs and video of the environment create a "mental picture" of a place before travelling there. For a long time, destination image has been regarded as one of the most important determinants of destination choice and, since the advent of social media, it has been constructed in a different way: the picture is composed not only of a few traditional actors, but multiple ones who are not official representatives. It is purposeful and an effect over time. The traveler who has seen a hundred morsels of the seashore has an impression of it, but has never been looking out to find any part of that coast.

Trust and reduction of risk. The tourism product cannot be

checked before purchasing. The traveller is liable to pay and will only know afterwards, which in turn creates an unusually high potential risk. But EWoM would become a force in its own right because it allows a potential buyer to leverage the insight of others that have already made the same change (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008), and 10 years later the authors concurred that the prediction had been realized (Litvin et al., 2018). Reviews and comments don't so much persuade, they reassure.

Social Proof & Identity. Travellers also use the destination to communicate something about themselves. When a traveller sees the same location in the feed of many other people, he or she considers it his/her own; then it automatically becomes a place worth going to – not only in terms of the intrinsic value, but also because of its social value. There is evidence to suggest that this is significant – 37 per cent of travellers reported that they prefer to visit Instagram-famous places at least on a regular basis over lesser-known places, while 39 per cent said they visited a location primarily to take a photograph or record a video and 37 per cent felt that they were under pressure to make a trip 'look exciting' on social media and that figure rose to 45 per cent among generation Z respondents, in an Appinio survey on behalf of TUI Musement, conducted in January 2026 across Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom.

Motivation and demand developers. The most recent and least understood is applied to the pre-search process. When a traveller without an action plan sees something, he develops a wish. This is important as it alters the nature of what marketing is for: a marketing channel that drives demand is different from a marketing channel that captures demand. In this study, 43 per cent reported that they have booked a trip or activity as a result of seeing a viral post or video, with 52 per cent of millennials and 50 per cent of Gen Z stating they follow travel content creators when choosing their destination or activity, and 27 per cent said they have changed their destination or activity because of a creator (TUI Musement, 2026).

Table 2. Five mechanisms through which digital marketing and social media affect tourists.

Mechanism	**What it does**	**How it is usually measured**	**Where it acts most strongly**
Information search	Supplies facts in answer to a question the traveller already has	Search queries; time on page; information source surveys	Evaluation and planning
Destination image formation	Builds a mental picture of a place through repeated exposure	Image attribute scales; content analysis of posts	Awareness and evaluation
Trust and risk reduction	Lowers perceived risk by drawing on others' experience	Review ratings and volume; trust and perceived-risk scales	Evaluation and booking
Social proof and identity	Makes a place socially valuable to visit and to be seen visiting	Stated preference; sharing behaviour; hashtag volume	Choice and post-trip sharing
Inspiration and demand creation	Creates a wish to travel where none existed	Recall of inspiration source; unprompted brand awareness	Before search begins

Source: Compiled by the author from Xiang and Gretzel (2010), Leung et al. (2013), Litvin et al. (2008, 2018) and TUI Musement (2026).

The following is a practical use of this table. Do not have to cover the same content for the 5 mechanisms. In information search, rewards include accuracy and completeness. Consistency and repetition help to form images. Provide lots of independent evidence, and prioritize the most recent. Social proof is a mechanism that compels action through people like the viewer—a visible proof encourages action. Inspiration pays off when it's new and strikes an emotion. Focusing a single campaign on boosting each of these typically will not perform well on the others, and that's part of why destination marketing campaigns don't always perform so well.

The students will examine how social media impacts the travel experience, from planning to arrival. Tourism decisions are not a single decision, but a series of decisions. A useful simplification has five stages: inspiration, consideration, booking, experience and sharing. Not all of these social media have the same impact (see Figure 3).

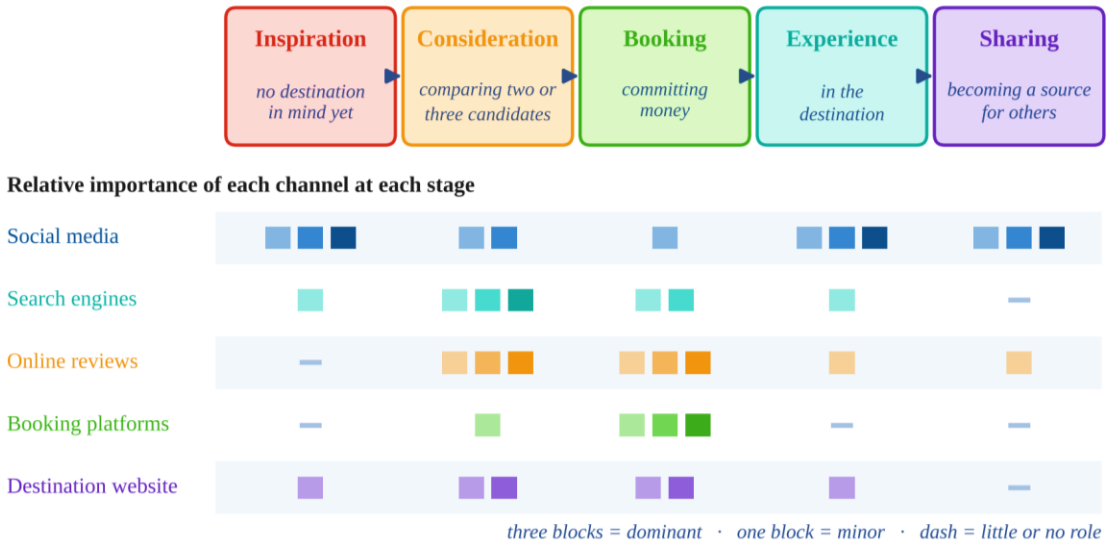

Fig. 3. The travel journey and the role of each channel at each stage. Social media is strongest at the ends of the journey — inspiration and sharing — while search engines and booking platforms dominate the middle, where the traveller is comparing specific options and committing money. Source: Original figure prepared by the author.

During the inspiration stage, the traveller hasn't yet decided where he or she wants to go. Content doesn't necessarily have to be useful – it must linger. This is where social media has gone furthest, and short video has outdone other channels in particular. There is a notable generational difference as well, with a considerably higher percentage of Travellers in the three markets surveyed (Europe) being from Generation Z, who require recommendations from family and friends less so than search engines: 48 per cent of Generation Z people named TikTok as their primary source of inspiration for travelling, whereas for all respondents search engines were named by 42 per cent and family and friends by 41 per cent (TUI Musement, 2026).

The traveller is at the consideration stage where he will have two or three places in mind to choose from. The action is now more goal-focused, and the queries are more to the point – how much will it cost, is it safe, the weather, what can be done. Search engines and review websites do most of this work, while social media contributes little as an inspirational source and more as an independent validator. Money is pledged when travelling is booked. Social media plays only a minor role. But that contribution orients it indirectly and at an earlier stage – into the consideration set – and reduces the perception of risk sufficiently to encourage a decision to be made. Experience: Traveller is in the destination, and social media influences what they are doing there. The proof is solid, and some of it is downright uncomfortable. Almost 40% of Arctic tourists surveyed for the TUI Musement study came to the tourist destination primarily to take a photo or make a video. (TUI Musement 2026). When content focuses on only a handful of places attractive to photographers, it can increase visitor numbers at those locations while leaving the rest of the area untouched. The traveller shares with others, thus becoming a source. This study also found that 73% said they share at least some of their holidays on social media, while 26% said they share only with a small number (TUI Musement, 2026). It is at this stage that a gap in the circle is filled: what today's visitor gives is the seed of tomorrow's visitors as destinations are increasingly turning to visitor-produced content as a marketing breeze.

The industry evidence, using the above figures, is summarised in Figure 4 to show the role social media plays at each stage. Involvement is high across the pattern, and there is a progression of the behaviour from wishing to checking, performing, and recounting.

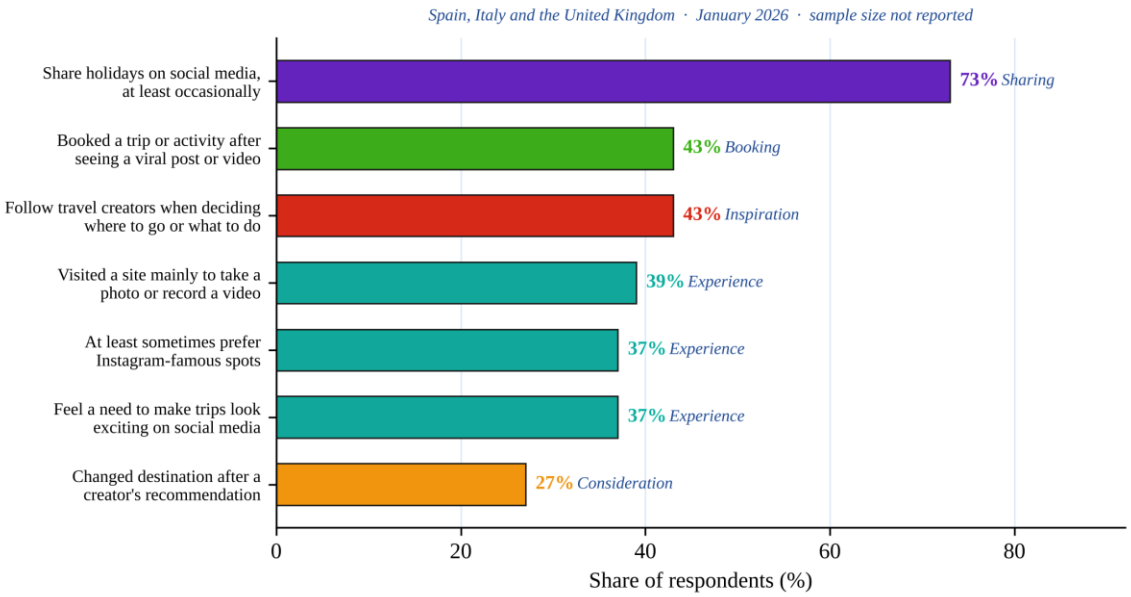

Fig. 4. Reported social media behaviour at different stages of the travel journey, from a study of travellers in Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom. The figures describe stated behaviour in three European markets and should not be read as global values. Source: Compiled by the author from TUI Musement (2026).

It's important to note a caution: Each number shown above comes from declared behaviour at a single stage in the European markets at a given moment. They assume that the effect is there, and is not a "small effect. Together with other parts of the world, they don't ensure it 'sets' anything else in the other, and they do not ensure that it has an influence on rationalisation, because a traveller who saw something on social media and later booked it can give it credit for something that maybe other parts of the circumstances additionally drove them to.

5. Market Context: what the Marketing Acts On

The size and distribution of a market make its marketing effects easier to interpret. International tourist arrivals in 2024 totalled approximately 1.4 billion (+11 per cent on 2023 and around 99 per cent of 2019 figures), with estimated international tourism receipts of around USD 1.6 trillion (UN Tourism, 2025). There were regional variations in recovery (Fig. 5). Europe (+1 per cent to 747 million), Asia and the Pacific (growing 33 per cent to reach 316 million, about 87 per cent of the pre-pandemic level), the Americas (-3 per cent to 213 million), the Middle East (+32 per cent to 95 million) and Africa (+7 per cent to 74 million) all saw international arrivals in 2024 (UN Tourism, 2025).

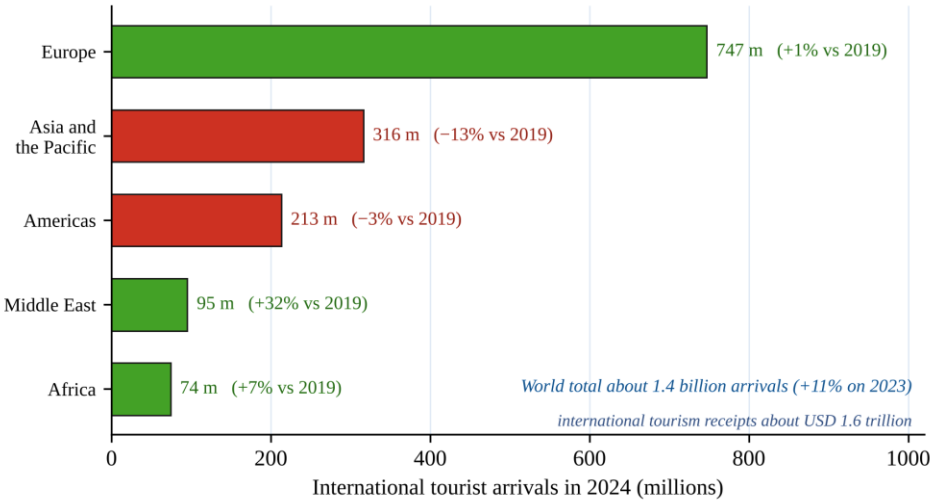

Fig. 5. International tourist arrivals by region in 2024, with each region's position relative to 2019. Europe remains the largest destination region by a wide margin, while the Middle East has grown furthest beyond its pre-pandemic level and Asia and the Pacific has the most ground still to recover. Source: Compiled by the author from UN Tourism (2025).

For this paper, there are two implications. First, it's a European destination competing in a market of 747 million arrivals, making it more important to differentiate and highlight unique content. Second, regions recovering and regions that have surpassed 2019 require different marketing tasks. The first group needs rebuilt awareness and reduced perceived risk, while the second needs demand management. Both groups use the same channel, but the material and the means of success differ.

6. An Integrative Framework and Propositions

All these elements can be combined (Fig. 6). Digital marketing and social media content operate through the 5 mechanisms in Section 4. Those mechanisms are based, however, on a set of intermediate states within the traveller's mind, namely destination awareness, destination image, perceived risk, trust and travel inspiration, which in turn influence the destination selection of the traveller. The relationship is not static but depends on the traveller's age and generation, the platform, the type of trip, and the traveller's previous knowledge/pre-existing representation of the destination.

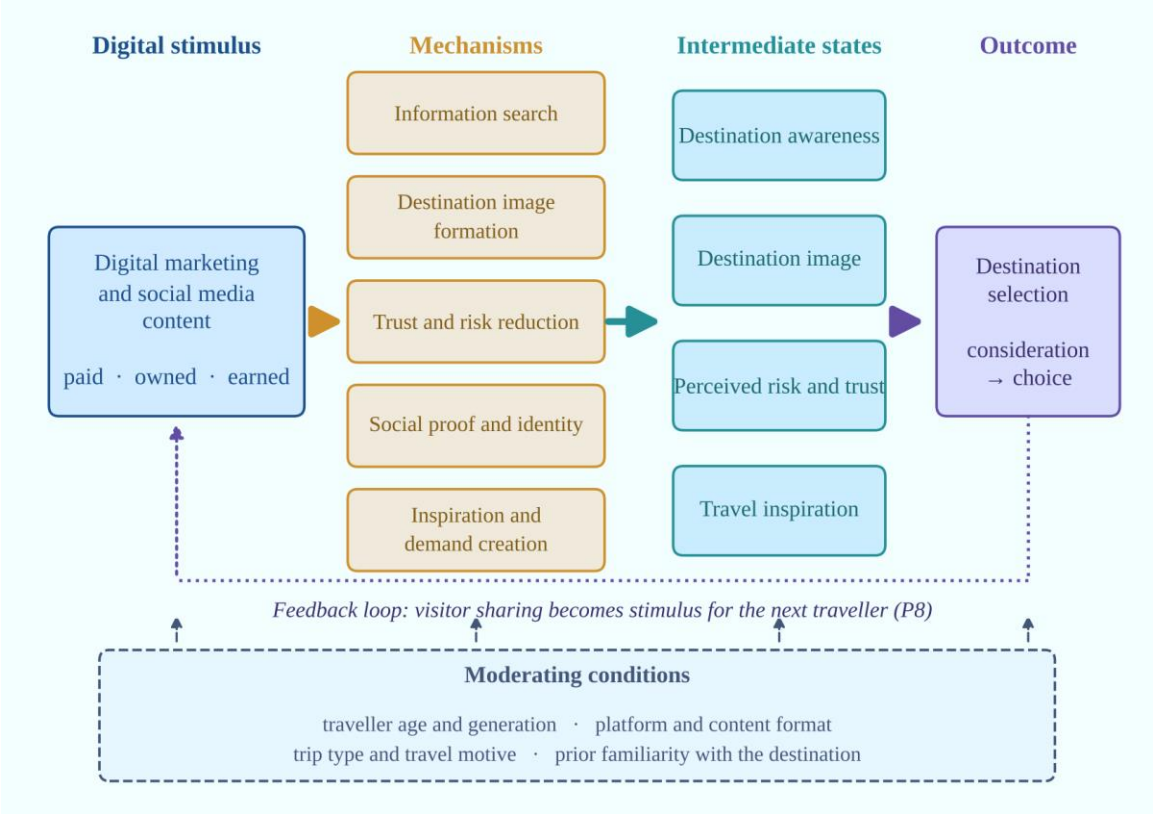

Fig. 6. An integrative framework linking digital marketing and social media to destination selection. Content acts through five mechanisms on four intermediate states; the strength of each path depends on the moderating conditions shown below. Source: Original figure prepared by the author.

Eight propositions follow. They're declared in such a way that each may be examined and – importantly – may fail.

P1. Search is preceded by inspiration effects. When exposed to destination information via social media, the likelihood that a destination will start to be considered, even if the traveller chooses not to complete a search later.

P2. Mechanism specificity. Whereas content optimised for inspiration (novel, emotionally engaging, short) has less impact on perceived risk than content optimised for trust (detailed, independent, recent), the reverse is also true.

P3. Generational moderation. Short-video content has a less influence on destination consideration as age increases, whereas search and review content becomes more influential with age.

P4. Increasing lack of believability in advertising. When the audience is more aware of the commercial relationship between the influencer and the destination, it diminishes the personal appeal and the impact of influencer content on destination selection.

P5. When looking a build trust, risk reduction is a lower priority. Tying into the booking process itself, independent review evidence can have a higher impact on conversion than paid and owned social content.

P6. Photogenic concentration. The more consistently visitors are concentrated on a few sites in a destination, the higher the percentage of the destination's content on these social media

platforms will be.

P7. Expectation gap. Images curated from social media (SOC) create larger gaps between expectation and reality than images from mixed sources; while these gaps can reduce satisfaction and recommendations, the gap between SOC and reality is greater.

P8. Sharing feedback loop. This is not just a conceptual loop but, in fact, something measurable because if a visitor to a site behaves a certain way at the end of the trip, it is likely that some of his or her network will do the same when they consider traveling to the same destination.

Propositions P2, P4, P6 and P7 are the ones I've found most helpful to start with because they each challenge a typically held belief in the world of influencers: good content equates to good results for all objectives; influencer reach has clear value for a destination; any virus is good news for a destination; a strong online image is always good news for a destination.

7. Practical Recommendations, Research Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

Where DMs can reasonably expect to be asked to take them. Conclusions are few, but they are supported well enough to act on. The key, first, is that social media efforts, which are primarily in the "inspiration" phase of consumer interactions, should be evaluated based on how those interactions affect awareness and consideration, not using them as direct bookers and assuming that the number of conversions is the only metric that matters. Second, as discovery happens across a lot of channels, and ageing is with an inverted relevance ranking, the age-segmented channel mix is no longer an option; it's a must. Third, earned content is more convincing than content produced by the destination itself, including reviews and visitor posts, which is why, in fact, it's often less about investing in the content fund itself and more about the experience you offer visitors to transform into earned content. Two cautions should be weighed equally. Focusing content on a handful of photogenic places can drive viral attention, but it can also affect resident sentiment and create more congestion at the destination. At the experience level, a curated image also has a cost because travelers may expect to see what they saw and be disappointed by what they find.

Limitations

Three limits should be clearly defined. The review is integrative, and coverage of the peer-reviewed literature is ultimately indicative, with no protocol-driven database search for inclusion criteria and no inter-rater screening. Several numerical values come from industry surveys with only part of the sample size disclosed; for example, the TUI Musement industry survey covers only three European markets and does not state the sample size—indeed, TUI is a provider of tours and activities. Furthermore, the framework in Figure 6 is a combination of existing frameworks and is not tested.

Research agenda. Table 3 lists the field's greatest needs. The common thread is a shift from asking subjects “what made you do that” to observing what they did.

Table 3. Gaps in current knowledge and the research needed to close them.

Gap	Why it matters	Research needed	Priority
Stated intention stands in for behaviour	Self-reported influence is subject to recall error and rationalisation, so effect sizes may be inflated	Studies linking exposure data to observed booking or arrival data, rather than to stated intention	High
Evidence concentrated in Europe and North America	Most survey evidence comes from a few high-income markets, yet the fastest arrival growth is elsewhere	Comparative studies across Asian, African and Latin American source markets using common measures	High
Mechanisms measured as one construct	Treating “social media influence” as a single variable obscures effects that work in opposite directions	Instruments that measure the five mechanisms separately and test them against the same outcome	High
Platform effects assumed rather than tested	Short video, image and review platforms are often pooled despite very different formats	Designs that vary platform while holding content constant	Medium
Negative and distributional effects under-studied	Research attends to demand creation but rarely to crowding, expectation gaps or resident impact	Longitudinal studies of destinations after periods of viral attention	Medium
Influencer disclosure	Disclosure rules are	Experimental studies	Medium

effects unresolved	tightening but the effect on persuasion is not established	varying disclosure prominence in destination contexts	

Source: Compiled by the author from the limitations identified in the reviewed literature.

Conclusion

Tourist behaviours have changed most with digital marketing and social media as preferences develop, and least in the area of money changing hands. The real influence is there, but most print media measures it indirectly. Now that social media's impact a proven, we need to break down these processes and test them against behaviour, with evidence collected beyond the handful of markets where data is currently available.

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