

TITLE: “Impact of Social Media Marketing on Consumer Behavior: The Context of Tourism Industry”

Author: Komal Frank

Abstract

This study examines how social media marketing influences tourism consumer decision-making across the staged yet nonlinear travel journey within the United States. Building on tourism decision-stage perspectives and digital consumer behavior theory, the research proposes an integrated framework linking social media marketing stimuli—platform exposure, influencer communication, and user-generated content—to internal psychological mechanisms (trust, perceived authenticity, emotional engagement, and destination attitude) and behavioral outcomes (inspiration, planning, booking intention and booking behavior, on-site engagement, and post-trip sharing). The framework is grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model and complemented by elements of the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Technology Acceptance Model to capture cognitive, affective, and social influence pathways. Methodologically, the study adopts an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The quantitative phase uses a structured survey of U.S. tourism consumers to test direct and mediated relationships among the proposed constructs using structural equation modeling, while the qualitative phase follows with semi-structured interviews to explain key quantitative patterns, explore platform-specific decision pathways, and elaborate how travelers form trust and assess authenticity across stages and platforms. The study contributes by offering a stage-sensitive, multi-platform account of social-media-driven tourism behavior and by generating practical guidance for designing platform-appropriate, credibility-centered social media strategies across the travel journey.

Keywords

Social media marketing; tourism consumer behavior; user-generated content; trust; authenticity; mixed methods; S-O-R model; United States

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Contemporary Context

The contemporary digital environment has significantly transformed marketing communication, with social media emerging as a dominant channel through which consumers discover, evaluate, and share travel experiences. Traditional promotional approaches—mass media campaigns, printed brochures, and one-directional brand messaging—are increasingly being supplemented or replaced by interactive, user-driven digital ecosystems that prioritize visual storytelling, peer validation, and real-time engagement (Hudson et al., 2015; Gretzel, 2021). As consumer attention shifts toward mobile devices and networked platforms, marketing influence is no longer controlled solely by organizations but is co-created through social interaction and user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Tourism is where this shift is felt most acutely. Travel decisions are experiential, intangible, and emotionally driven, making them highly susceptible to visual persuasion, peer recommendations, and narrative-based influence disseminated through social media (Litvin et al., 2008). Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and TripAdvisor now function not merely as communication channels but as decision-support environments where consumers seek inspiration, validate choices, and share post-travel experiences (Xiang et al., 2015; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Empirical research confirms that social media engagement plays a central role in destination discovery, itinerary planning, and booking behavior, reinforcing its strategic importance within tourism marketing practice (Gretzel et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2025).

Over 5.24 billion people now use social media globally, representing approximately 63.9% of the world's population (We Are Social, 2025). Within tourism contexts, platform-specific engagement patterns further suggest that different platforms shape distinct phases of the travel journey: visually oriented platforms such as Instagram and TikTok tend to drive early-stage inspiration, while review-based platforms such as TripAdvisor and Facebook communities play a stronger role during evaluation, booking, and post-trip reflection (Fotis et al., 2011; Leung et al., 2013).

Despite widespread recognition of social media's influence, existing marketing and consumer behavior models struggle to capture the cyclical, nonlinear, and socially mediated nature of contemporary travel decision-making. Traditional linear frameworks—such as AIDA or stage-based decision models—do not account for the iterative feedback loops created by digital engagement, where consumers move repeatedly between inspiration, evaluation, and validation through online communities. This study is situated within the United States tourism context, where high social media penetration and digitally mediated travel planning make these dynamics particularly pronounced.

1.2 Problem Statement

Tourism products are inherently intangible and experiential, requiring consumers to rely on external information sources, peer reviews, and visual content to reduce perceived risk and build confidence before committing to travel decisions (Middleton et al., 2009). Social media platforms address this need directly, enabling travelers to observe vicarious experiences, compare destinations, and validate choices through user-generated content and influencer narratives (Litvin et al., 2008; Yoo & Gretzel, 2011).

Although a growing body of research has explored the influence of platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok on destination awareness and booking intention, fewer studies examine how social media marketing operates across the full arc of tourism consumption—from initial inspiration and planning through to booking, on-site experience, and post-trip sharing (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). There remains, moreover, limited empirical modeling of how platform-specific engagement patterns interact with trust in user-generated content and peer influence to shape behavioral outcomes at each stage (Harrigan et al., 2020).

This fragmentation constrains both theoretical understanding and practical application. Tourism marketers invest heavily in social media campaigns, influencer partnerships, and digital engagement strategies, yet often lack integrated frameworks that clarify

when and how specific platforms influence consumer behavior. A more holistic examination of social media marketing as a multi-stage, multi-platform influence process is therefore needed.

1.3 Rationale for the Study

The problem outlined above calls not simply for more research on social media in tourism, but for research designed differently. Most existing studies examine either a single platform in isolation or a single stage of the consumer journey. What is missing is a framework that treats the tourism decision process as a whole—one sensitive to how platform influence, trust formation, and behavioral responses shift as travelers move from dreaming about a destination to sharing their experiences afterward.

This study responds to that gap by proposing a stage-sensitive examination of social media marketing within tourism behavior. Consumers today engage with branded content, influencer endorsements, peer reviews, and travel blogs at different points in their journey, and the evidence suggests that these influences are both stage-dependent and platform-specific (Leung et al., 2013; Harrigan et al., 2020). Understanding that variation—rather than averaging across it—is what will allow marketers and researchers alike to develop more precise, effective strategies. Beyond its scholarly contribution, this study is grounded in practical relevance. U.S. tourism marketers and destination management organizations need actionable, evidence-based guidance on which platforms to prioritize, and when, across the consumer journey. This research aims to provide exactly that.

1.4 Aims and Objectives

Research Aim:

This research aims to examine how social media marketing influences tourism consumer behavior across the full decision-making journey within the United States, with particular attention to platform-specific influences, trust formation, and behavioral outcomes.

Objectives:

1. **To examine how social media marketing influences tourism consumer decision-making across key stages of the travel journey** (inspiration, planning, booking, experience, and post-travel sharing) within the U.S. context.
2. **To analyze the role of trust, authenticity, and user-generated content** in shaping tourism consumption behavior in contemporary digital environments.
3. **To identify platform-specific differences** in how consumers engage with tourism-related content across major platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and review-based ecosystems.

4. **To develop an integrated conceptual framework** that connects behavioral theory and digital marketing perspectives in explaining social-media-driven tourism decisions.
5. **To generate managerial insights** for tourism marketers seeking to design effective, stage-specific social media strategies in the U.S. tourism sector.

1.5 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

Primary Research Question

PRQ:

How does social media marketing influence tourism consumer decision-making across the travel journey within the United States?

Supporting Research Questions

SRQ1:

How do different social media platforms influence tourism inspiration, planning, and booking behavior?

SRQ2:

What role do trust, authenticity, and user-generated content play in shaping tourism consumption behavior?

SRQ3:

How do consumers cognitively and emotionally process tourism-related social media content when forming travel decisions?

SRQ4:

How can tourism marketers strategically leverage platform-specific content to influence consumer behavior?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to both academic and managerial understanding of social media marketing within tourism. Academically, it addresses a gap in existing research by proposing an integrated, stage-based perspective on platform influence across the tourism decision journey—one that accounts for the recursive, multi-platform nature of how travelers actually engage with digital content. Managerially, the findings aim to equip tourism marketers and destination managers with platform-specific insights capable of informing more targeted digital strategies, enhancing consumer engagement, and improving conversion outcomes.

With a specific focus on the U.S. tourism market, the study seeks to generate insights that are relevant to destinations, tourism marketers, and digital campaign strategists operating within highly networked consumer environments. Its core contributions can be summarized as follows: it offers a stage-sensitive explanation of how social media marketing shapes tourism decision-making; it integrates behavioral and digital marketing theory into a unified analytical framework; it positions trust and authenticity as mediating mechanisms rather than peripheral considerations; and it provides U.S.-focused managerial guidance for platform-specific tourism strategies.

2. Literature and Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Social Media Marketing and Tourism Decision-Making

The contemporary tourism marketplace is increasingly shaped by social media marketing, where travelers use platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and TripAdvisor not only as information sources but as decision-support ecosystems influencing how destinations are discovered, evaluated, selected, and shared (Hudson et al., 2015; Todua & Danelia, 2025; Katsoni & Costa, 2025). Unlike traditional marketing channels, social media environments enable interactive communication, user participation, and peer validation, shifting influence from brand-controlled messaging toward socially co-created content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

This matters more in tourism than in almost any other consumer category because travel decisions are experiential, intangible, and high-involvement. Consumers cannot fully evaluate destinations before purchase and must therefore rely on symbolic cues, reviews, narratives, and visual representations to reduce perceived risk and build decision confidence (Kotler et al., 2021; Kam Fung So et al., 2015). Empirical studies increasingly demonstrate that social media engagement shapes destination image formation, travel intention, and booking behavior, reinforcing the strategic importance of social media marketing in tourism contexts (Gretzel et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2025). Despite this growth, existing scholarship remains fragmented. Many studies focus on individual platforms or examine singular outcomes such as destination intention or electronic word-of-mouth, without situating these effects within the broader tourism decision process (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014; Antczak, 2024). This limits our understanding of how social media marketing operates across the full travel journey—a gap this study seeks to address, particularly within the digitally mature U.S. context, where multi-platform usage and influencer-led discovery are deeply embedded in consumer behavior.

2.2 Tourism Consumption as a Staged Yet Nonlinear Journey

Tourism consumption behavior is frequently conceptualized as a staged process consisting of inspiration, planning, booking, on-site experience, and post-trip engagement (Pan et al., 2007; Law, 2006). Each stage reflects distinct informational and behavioral tasks: awareness and desire formation during inspiration; information search and comparison during planning; transaction and commitment during booking; experiential evaluation on-site; and reflection and content sharing afterward.



Figure 1: Stages of the Tourism Consumption Journey

While analytically useful, this model should not be interpreted as strictly linear. Contemporary digital environments introduce iterative feedback loops through algorithmic discovery, peer interaction, influencer narratives, and user-generated content. Consumers frequently revisit earlier stages when new content reshapes perceived value, authenticity, or risk (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Kim et al., 2022). A traveler might, for example, be deep in the planning stage when a TikTok video

re-ignites inspiration for an entirely different destination, or encounter a flood of negative reviews that unravels a near-final booking decision.

In a social-media-driven ecosystem, the tourism journey is therefore best understood as staged yet dynamically recursive. The five-stage framework retains conceptual value because it allows systematic examination of how different platforms exert influence at specific decision points; it should simply not be mistaken for a description of how travelers actually progress.

2.3 Platform-Specific Influence Across Decision Stages

Platform effects are not uniform. Different platforms tend to dominate at different decision stages because of their content format, user motivations, and perceived credibility. Visual-first platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are most strongly associated with early-stage inspiration, where aspirational imagery and short-form video stimulate destination awareness and emotional engagement (Sharif et al., 2024; Polat et al., 2023). Review-driven platforms such as TripAdvisor and Facebook communities, by contrast, come into their own during evaluation and booking, where consumers rely on ratings and peer-generated reviews to reduce uncertainty before committing to travel decisions (Schuckert et al., 2015; Bhinder, 2025). Long-form content platforms—YouTube travel vlogs and blogs—support immersive planning and comparative evaluation by providing detailed narratives and experiential simulation (Fotis et al., 2011; Chung et al., 2025).

In digitally advanced markets such as the United States, these platforms rarely operate in isolation. A typical pathway might involve discovering a destination on TikTok, validating options through YouTube or travel blogs, confirming credibility via TripAdvisor, booking, and then sharing the experience on Instagram—after which that shared content feeds back into the discovery feeds of others. This multi-platform circularity underscores the need for integrated analysis rather than platform-specific examination.

2.4 Trust, Authenticity, and Social Influence Mechanisms

Across platforms, trust in user-generated content emerges as the central mechanism linking exposure to behavioral outcomes. For high-involvement decisions such as travel, perceived authenticity and credibility strongly mediate the relationship between content engagement and purchase intention (Susanto et al., 2023; Gök & Baltacı, 2023). Without trust, exposure does not reliably translate into action—a traveler who sees compelling content but doubts its authenticity is unlikely to book.

Several behavioral frameworks help explain these mechanisms. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) suggests that social media content shapes attitudes toward destinations, influences perceived social norms, and affects perceived behavioral control, thereby shaping travel intention (Ajzen, 1991; Meng & Choi, 2015). Social Influence Theory clarifies how compliance, identification, and internalization occur through influencer credibility and peer validation (Kelman, 1958; Chu & Kim, 2015). Uses and Gratifications theory adds a motivational dimension by explaining why consumers actively select specific platforms to fulfill needs such as inspiration, information-seeking, entertainment, or social integration during travel planning (Katz et al., 1973; Moon & An, 2022).

2.5 Theoretical Positioning and Research Gap

Classical consumer decision models such as AIDA assume sequential progression from attention to action. Contemporary tourism decision-making, however, involves recursive interactions, peer validation loops, and algorithmic content exposure that these linear frameworks cannot accommodate (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Existing literature acknowledges the influence of social media on tourism behavior, yet few studies provide an integrated explanation that simultaneously accounts for stage-wise variation across the tourism journey, platform-specific influence patterns, trust and authenticity as mediating mechanisms, and the combined cognitive, emotional, and social pathways driving behavior.

This gap is especially consequential within the United States tourism market, where high social media penetration and multi-platform usage create complex digital pathways from inspiration to post-trip sharing. This study therefore advances current understanding by offering a stage-sensitive and platform-integrated account of how social media marketing influences tourism consumer behavior—linking behavioral theory with platform dynamics in a way that contributes both theoretically and managerially to contemporary tourism marketing scholarship.

3. Conceptual Framework

3.1 Integrating Social Media and Tourism Decision-Making

To address the gap identified in the literature, this study develops an integrated conceptual framework explaining how social media marketing influences tourism consumer behavior across the staged yet nonlinear travel journey. As established in section 2, social media platforms function as environments where travelers encounter destination content, peer reviews, influencer narratives, and visual storytelling that shape perceptions and behavioral responses (Hudson et al., 2015; Gretzel et al., 2015). The framework organizes these dynamics around the five-stage tourism journey—inspiration, planning, booking, on-site experience, and post-trip sharing—while explicitly acknowledging that digital engagement makes this journey recursive rather than linear. New content, reviews, and recommendations can reshape destination perceptions at any stage, pulling consumers backward or forward through the journey in ways that linear models cannot represent (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Cheng, 2024). The framework integrates platform exposure, trust formation, and behavioral outcomes into a unified model that reflects this reality.

3.2 Theoretical Foundations

The framework is anchored in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), widely applied in digital consumer behavior research. In tourism contexts, social media content functions as a stimulus that shapes internal psychological states—trust, emotional engagement, and perceived authenticity—which then drive behavioral responses such as destination choice and booking decisions (Kim et al., 2022; Serrano-Malebran et al., 2025).

Elements of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) complement this by explaining how perceived usefulness and credibility of social media platforms

influence reliance on digital information during travel planning. When travelers find social media content informative and trustworthy, they are more likely to integrate it into their decision-making (Leung et al., 2013). The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) adds a further dimension, recognizing that attitudes, perceived norms, and perceived control shape behavioral intentions—and that peer reviews, influencer endorsements, and user-generated content can shift all three (Meng & Choi, 2015; Mariani & Borghi, 2021).

Together, these theoretical perspectives explain how social media exposure influences tourism behavior through cognitive, emotional, and social pathways—not through a simple exposure-to-action sequence.

3.3 Stage-Sensitive Influence Across the Tourism Journey

As noted earlier, the tourism decision journey is best understood as staged but dynamically recursive. Travelers may discover destinations on TikTok, evaluate options on YouTube or travel blogs, confirm credibility through TripAdvisor, share experiences on Instagram, and have that shared content enter others' discovery feeds—creating multi-platform feedback loops that blur stage boundaries (Cheng, 2024; Bhinder, 2025). The conceptual framework retains the five-stage structure for analytical clarity while building in this recursive logic. Visual platforms are expected to exert stronger influence during inspiration; review-based platforms during evaluation and booking; and post-trip sharing feeds new content back into the ecosystem, influencing future travelers and restarting the cycle (Polat et al., 2023; Sujatmiko et al., 2025). Trust in user-generated content is expected to moderate the strength of platform effects across stages—a hypothesis that the empirical phases of this study are designed to test.

3.4 Conceptual Model Overview

Based on literature and theoretical positioning, the proposed conceptual framework can be summarized as follows:

Stimuli:

Social media marketing content, influencer communication, platform features, and user-generated content.

Organism (Internal Responses):

Trust in content, perceived authenticity, emotional engagement, destination attitude, and perceived credibility.

Responses (Behavioral Outcomes):

Destination interest, planning activity, booking intention, travel experience engagement, and post-trip sharing behavior.

These relationships are examined across the five stages of the tourism consumption journey, with the expectation that platform influence and trust formation will vary meaningfully by stage and platform type. The framework does not assume a strictly linear pathway but instead conceptualizes tourism decision-making as a dynamic, socially mediated process shaped by multiple digital touchpoints.

3.5 Contribution of the Framework

By integrating behavioral theory with platform-based digital marketing dynamics, the proposed framework advances tourism and marketing scholarship in three principal

ways. First, it offers a stage-sensitive explanation of how social media marketing influences tourism decision-making across the full travel journey, rather than isolating specific platforms or outcomes. Second, it positions trust and authenticity as central mediating mechanisms linking social media exposure to behavioral responses—extending existing digital tourism research that typically treats engagement as a direct predictor of intention. Third, it acknowledges the multi-platform, nonlinear nature of contemporary travel decision processes, particularly within digitally mature markets such as the United States.

These contributions provide a theoretically grounded and practically relevant foundation for the empirical phases of the study, to which the research design section now turns.

3.6 Proposed Hypotheses

Hypotheses

H1: Exposure to social media marketing content positively influences perceived trust and authenticity toward tourism destinations.

H2: Trust in social media content positively influences tourism decision-making intention.

H3: Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between social media exposure and tourism decision intention.

H4: Platform type moderates the relationship between social media exposure and tourism decision-making across stages of the travel journey.

H5: Social media engagement positively influences booking intention and destination selection.

4. Expected Contributions

4.1 Academic Contributions

This research contributes to the growing body of literature examining digital consumer behavior within the tourism sector by providing an integrated, stage-based perspective on social media marketing influence. While prior studies have often examined individual platforms or isolated decision stages, this study advances existing scholarship by examining how social media marketing influences tourism consumption behavior across the full decision-making journey, including inspiration, planning, booking, experience, and post-travel engagement.

The study also contributes theoretically by integrating multiple behavioral frameworks, including the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model, Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), and Social Influence Theory. This integration provides a multidimensional lens through which the cognitive, emotional, and social mechanisms of tourism decision-making can be examined within contemporary digital environments.

Additionally, by focusing on platform-specific influence and trust in user-generated content, the research extends current understanding of how digital interactions shape tourism behavior in ways that traditional linear consumer models cannot fully explain. The findings aim to support ongoing academic discussions on social media–driven consumer behavior and contribute to emerging research examining nonlinear and socially influenced tourism decision processes.

4.2 Managerial Contributions

From a managerial perspective, this research offers practical insights for tourism marketers, destination management organizations, and digital strategy professionals seeking to better understand how social media platforms influence consumer behavior across different stages of the tourism journey.

The study is expected to provide:

- Stage-specific insights into how different platforms influence inspiration, planning, and booking behavior
- Guidance on aligning platform strategies with consumer decision phases
- Insights into the role of trust and user-generated content in influencing travel decisions
- Evidence to support more targeted and data-informed digital marketing strategies

By mapping platform-specific influence across the tourism process, the research aims to help marketers design more effective and ethically grounded social media campaigns that resonate with contemporary travelers.

4.3 Societal and Industry Relevance

In today's digital-first environment, consumers increasingly rely on peer-generated content, influencer communication, and social media platforms when making travel decisions. Understanding how these influences operate is essential not only for marketers but also for policymakers, destination planners, and tourism stakeholders seeking to ensure transparent and responsible digital communication practices. This study therefore contributes to broader discussions on digital trust, consumer empowerment, and responsible marketing in tourism. By highlighting how social media shapes perceptions, expectations, and behavioral outcomes, the research supports the development of more ethical and consumer-centric digital engagement strategies within the tourism sector.

5. Research Design

5.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to develop a comprehensive explanation of how social media marketing influences tourism consumer behavior. Mixed-methods designs are well-suited to complex behavioral phenomena in which measurable relationships coexist with interpretive and socially constructed processes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Saunders et al., 2023).

Given the multidimensional nature of digital tourism decision-making—where cognitive evaluations, emotional engagement, trust formation, and social influence mechanisms operate simultaneously—a single-method approach would risk oversimplifying the

phenomenon. The study therefore employs an explanatory sequential design (QUAN → QUAL), in which quantitative analysis is conducted first to establish structural relationships, followed by qualitative inquiry to provide deeper contextual explanation and interpretive elaboration. This sequence is consistent with methodological recommendations for contemporary digital consumer research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

5.2 Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase aims to empirically test relationships derived from the conceptual framework. Specifically, it examines how exposure to social media marketing stimuli across platforms influences internal psychological mechanisms—including trust, perceived authenticity, emotional engagement, and perceived behavioral control—and how these mechanisms shape tourism behavioral outcomes across stages of the travel journey.

Data will be collected through a structured survey administered to tourism consumers within the United States. Measurement scales will be adapted from validated instruments in prior research examining social media engagement, trust in user-generated content, perceived platform credibility, and travel intention (Ajzen, 1991; Harrigan et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2022).

Statistical analyses, including regression modeling and structural equation modeling (SEM), will be used to examine direct, indirect, and mediating relationships among constructs. The quantitative phase is expected to establish:

- Stage-specific platform influence patterns
- The mediating role of trust and authenticity
- Behavioral outcomes such as booking intention and destination selection

5.3 Qualitative Phase

Following quantitative analysis, the qualitative phase will provide explanatory depth by exploring how consumers interpret and experience social media influence across the tourism journey. This phase adopts a multiple-case study approach aligned with interpretive research traditions (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with selected participants drawn from the U.S. tourism market, enabling exploration of:

- Cognitive processing of tourism-related social media content
- Trust formation in influencer and peer-generated content
- Stage-specific decision dynamics
- Multi-platform navigation within individual travel journeys

The qualitative analysis will follow thematic coding procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing identification of recurring patterns, explanatory mechanisms, and nonlinear pathways not fully captured through statistical modeling (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

5.4 Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Integration will occur at the interpretation stage, where qualitative insights will contextualize and refine quantitative findings. This sequential integration supports both triangulation and complementarity, strengthening explanatory coherence and theoretical development (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The combined evidence will inform refinement of the stage-sensitive, platform-specific framework proposed in this study and contribute to both academic theory and managerial strategy within the U.S. tourism context.

5.5 Justification for Mixed-Methods Design

The adoption of a mixed-methods design is theoretically and practically grounded. The integrated framework combines behavioral modeling, social influence processes, and platform-specific marketing dynamics, requiring both hypothesis testing and interpretive exploration. From a managerial standpoint, tourism marketers operate in digital ecosystems where quantitative performance metrics intersect with qualitative perceptions of credibility, authenticity, and emotional resonance. A mixed-methods design, therefore, enhances both academic rigor and practical relevance, making it the appropriate methodological choice for this study.

6. Research-in-Progress Positioning

6.1 Study Context

This paper forms part of an ongoing Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) research project investigating the impact of social media marketing on tourism consumption behavior within the United States. The study focuses on digitally engaged travelers and contemporary platform ecosystems, aiming to develop a stage-sensitive and theoretically integrated understanding of how social media marketing shapes tourism decision-making across the traveler journey.

The research is situated within a digital environment characterized by multi-platform engagement, influencer-mediated discovery, and user-generated content-driven evaluation. Rather than relying on linear consumer decision frameworks, it adopts a platform-sensitive perspective that reflects how travelers actually interact with social media content during inspiration, planning, booking, and post-travel sharing. This positioning allows the study to contribute to emerging scholarship on digital tourism behavior while remaining aligned with ongoing methodological and theoretical developments in social media marketing research.

6.2 Research Design Overview

The broader dissertation adopts a mixed-methods explanatory design integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. This design is appropriate for examining complex digital consumer behavior, where observable behavioral patterns and underlying interpretive mechanisms must be studied together. The quantitative phase will examine relationships between social media marketing exposure, trust in user-generated content, perceived authenticity, and tourism decision outcomes across stages of the travel journey. The qualitative phase will then provide explanatory depth by

exploring how travelers interpret, evaluate, and respond to social media content within real decision contexts.

This sequential approach allows for both empirical modeling and interpretive insight, consistent with contemporary methodological guidance for studying digitally mediated consumer behavior. It also supports the development of a stage-sensitive conceptual model capable of explaining how platform-specific interactions translate into tourism intentions and behaviors.

6.3 Current Research Status

At the time of submission, the study is in the conceptual and design-development phase. Literature synthesis, theoretical framework development, and pilot methodological structuring have been completed. The research is now moving toward expanded data collection and empirical testing.

This research-in-progress submission serves several purposes:

- to present the study's conceptual and theoretical foundation
- to outline the integrated mixed-methods research design
- to position the proposed framework within current tourism and digital marketing scholarship
- to invite scholarly engagement and feedback during the developmental stage

The final dissertation phase will include full-scale quantitative data collection and qualitative explanatory analysis, leading to the refinement and empirical testing of a comprehensive model of social-media-driven tourism decision-making.

The present paper, therefore, represents an early but structured stage in a larger doctoral research trajectory aimed at contributing both theoretically and managerially to the understanding of social media marketing's role in contemporary tourism behavior.

7. Conclusion

Social media has become so deeply embedded in how people discover, plan, and share travel experiences that it now functions less as a marketing channel and more as the infrastructure of tourism decision-making itself. Platforms shape what destinations travelers notice, which options they consider credible, and how they reflect on and communicate their experiences afterward. Within this environment, the tourism decision journey is nonlinear, socially mediated, and sensitive to platform context in ways that traditional consumer behavior models were never designed to capture.

This research-in-progress responds to the need for a theoretically integrated and stage-sensitive understanding of how social media marketing influences tourism consumer behavior within the United States. By bringing together the S-O-R model, the Theory of Planned Behavior, and the Technology Acceptance Model, the proposed framework offers a multidimensional lens through which cognitive, emotional, and social influence pathways can be examined simultaneously. Trust and authenticity are positioned not as peripheral considerations but as the mechanisms through which social media exposure translates into behavioral outcomes.

Methodologically, the proposed mixed-methods explanatory design is well positioned to examine both structural relationships and the interpretive mechanisms underlying social-media-driven travel decisions. This approach aims to extend existing scholarship by explaining not just whether social media influences tourism behavior, but how, at which stages, and through which platforms that influence is strongest.

Theoretically, the study contributes to ongoing debates about the adequacy of linear decision models in networked digital environments. Managerially, it offers a foundation for stage-appropriate, credibility-centered social media strategies for tourism marketers operating within the highly digitized U.S. consumer market. As the research moves toward full empirical testing, the findings are expected to clarify how social media marketing functions as a strategic influence system across the entire tourism journey—rather than as a collection of disconnected promotional moments.

Author Note:

AI-assisted tools were used for language editing and structural organization of this manuscript. The author takes full responsibility for all content, analysis, and interpretation.

References

- Ajzen, I. (1991). The Theory of Planned Behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179-211. doi:[https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978\(91\)90020-T](https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T)
- Antczak, B. (2024, February). The Influence of Digital Marketing and Social Media Marketing on Consumer Buying Behavior. *Journal of Modern Science*, 323-325. doi:doi.org/10.13166/jms/189429
- Bhinder, H. (2025). Social Media and Its Influence on Travel Decision-Making. In C. M. Ramos, T. Costa, R. Madeira, & J. F. Rosário, *Open Innovation and Technology in Tourism and Hospitality* (pp. 205-220). IGI Global. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-8633-0.ch010>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 77-101. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: SAGE Publications. Retrieved from <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/thematic-analysis/book248481>

- Cheng, M. (2024). Social Media and Tourism Geographies: Mapping Future Research Agenda. *Tourism GeoGraphies*, 27, 579-588. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2024.2304782>
- Chu, S.-C., & Kim, Y. (2015). Determinants of Consumer Engagement in Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) in Social Networking Sites. *International Journal of Advertising*, 30(1), 47-75. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2501/IJA-30-1-047-075>
- Chung, P., Jain, V., & Budhiraja, M. (2025). From Vlogs to Voyages: A Systematic Review Of User-Generated Videos Using The ADO Framework. *Quality & Quantity*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-025-02302-8>
- Constantinides, E., & Fountain, S. (2008). Web 2.0: Conceptual Foundations And Marketing Issues. *Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice*, 231-244. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.dddmp.4350098>
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and Conducting Mixed-methods Research*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Davis, F. D. (1989). Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, and User Acceptance of Information Technology. *MIS Quarterly*, 319-340.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building Theories from Case Study Research. *The Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 532-550. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/258557>
- Fotis, J., Buhalis, D., & Rossides, N. (2011). Social Media Impact On Holiday Travel Planning: The Case Of The Russian And The FSU Markets. *International Journal of Online Marketing*, 1-19. doi:<https://doi.org/10.4018/IJOM.2011100101>
- Gök, T., & Baltacı, M. (2023). Digital Marketing and Consumer Behavior in Tourism. In M. Valeri, *Innovation Strategies and Organizational Culture in Tourism* (pp. 61-69). Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Gretzel, U. (2021). Conceptualizing the Smart Tourism Mindset: Fostering Utopian Thinking in Smart Tourism Development. *Journal of Smart Tourism*, 3-5.

- Gretzel, U., Sigala, M., Xiang, Z., & Koo, C. (2015). Smart Tourism: Foundations and Developments. *Electronic Markets*, 25, 179-188. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12525-015-0196-8>
- Harrigan, P., Miles, M. P., Fang, Y., & Roy, S. K. (2020). The Role Of Social Media In The Engagement And Information Processes Of Social CRM. *International Journal of Information Management*, 54, 102151. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102151>
- Hudson, S., Roth, M. S., Madden, T. J., & Hudson, R. (2015). The Effects Of Social Media On Emotions, Brand Relationship Quality, And Word Of Mouth: An Empirical Study Of Music Festival Attendees. *Tourism Management*, 47, 68-76. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2014.09.001>
- Kam Fung So, K., King, C., & Sparks, B. (2015). *Extending the Tourism Experience: The Role of Customer Engagement*. Taylor & Francis.
- Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users Of The World, Unite! The Challenges And Opportunities Of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59-68. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003>
- Katsoni, V., & Costa, C. (2025). *Innovation and Creativity in Tourism, Business, and Social Sciences*. Naxos: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1973). Uses and Gratifications Research. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 37(4), 509-523. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2747854>
- Kelman, H. C. (1958). Compliance, Identification, and Internalization: Three Processes Of Attitude Change. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2(1), 51-60. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/002200275800200106>
- Kemp, S. (2022). <https://datareportal.com/>. Retrieved December 10, 2024, from <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-global-overview-report>

- Kim, N., Lee, S., Lee, C.-K., & Suess, C. (2022). Predicting Preventive Travel Behaviors Under The COVID-19 Pandemic Through An Integration of Health Belief Model and Value-Belief-Norm. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 9-10. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2022.100981>
- Kotler, P., Keller, K. L., & Chernev, A. (2021). *Marketing Management*. Pearson Publications.
- Law, R. (2006). The Perceived Impact of Risks on Travel Decisions. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 289-300. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/jtr.576>
- Leung, D., Law, R., Hoof, H. V., & Buhalis, D. (2013). Social Media in Tourism and Hospitality: A Literature Review. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Management*, 30(2), 3-22. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2013.750919>
- Litvin, S. W., Goldsmith, R. E., & Bing, P. (2008). Electronic Word-Of-Mouth in Hospitality and Tourism Management. *Tourism Management (Vol 29, Issue 3)*, 458-468.
- Mehrabian, A., & Russell, J. A. (1974). *An Approach to Environmental Psychology*. Michigan: M.I.T. Press.
- Meng, B., & Choi, K. (2015). Extending The Theory Of Planned Behaviour: Testing The Effects Of Authentic Perception And Environmental Concerns On The Slow-Tourist Decision-Making Process. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 528-544. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2015.1020773>
- Middleton, V., Fyall, A., Morgan, M., & Ranchhod, A. (2009). *Marketing in Travel and Tourism*. Routledge.
- Moon, J.-W., & An, Y. (2022). Uses and Gratifications Motivations and Their Effects on Attitude and e-Tourist Satisfaction: A Multilevel Approach. *Tourism & Hospitality*, 3(1), 116-136. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp3010009>
- Munar, A. M., & Jacobsen, J. K. (2014). Motivations For Sharing Tourism Experiences Through Social Media. *Tourism Management*, 43, 46-54. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2014.01.012>

- Pan, B., Maclaurin, T., & Crotts, J. C. (2007). Travel Blogs and the Implications for Destination Marketing. *Journal of Travel Research*, 35-45. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0047287507302378>
- Polat, E., Celik, F., Ibrahim, B., & Köseoglu, M. A. (2023). Unpacking The Power Of User-Generated Videos In Hospitality And Tourism: A Systematic Literature Review And Future Direction. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, 894-914. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2023.2296655>
- Saunders, M. N., & Lewis, P. T. (2023). *Research Methods for Business Students*. Pearson Publications.
- Schuckert, M., Xianwei, L., & Law, R. (2015). Hospitality and Tourism Online Reviews: Recent Trends and Future Directions. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 608-621. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2014.933154>
- Serrano-Malebran, J., Campos-Núñez, F., Vidal, C., & Veneros, D. (2025). From Search Engines To Social Influence: A Stimulus–Organism–Response Model Of Travel Influencers On TikTok. (N. Valaei, Ed.) *Frontiers in Communication*, 10, 1-14. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1649647>
- Sharif, S., Farhana, N., Idda, N., Shah, S. I., & Shah, M. (2024). TikTok's Role In Shaping Travel Destinations Among Generation Z: Exploring The Mediating Effects of Social Escapism Motivation. *International Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, (pp. 9-10).
- Sujatmiko, S., Rosanti, N., Hamdat, A., Ar, D. P., & Salam, K. N. (2025). User-Generated Content (UGC) and Its Impact on Tourism Marketing: A Systematic Literature Review. *Golden Ratio of Mapping Idea and Literature Format*, 5(2), 97-107. doi:<https://doi.org/10.52970/grmilf.v5i2.14>
- Susanto, B., Wardhani, Y. K., Muhartoyo, M., Sutiarto, M. A., & Sadjuni, N. (2023). The Role And Use Of Social Media As A Medium For Marketing Tourist Attractions And Increasing Tourist Visits. *Journal of Commerce Management and Tourism Studies*, 2(1), 48-55. doi:<https://doi.org/10.58881/jcmts.v2i1.93>

- Todua, N., & Danelia, L. (2025). The Effect of Social Media Marketing on Consumer Behavior in the Georgian Tourism Industry. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 549-560. doi:<https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90600045>
- We Are Social. (2025, February 5). <https://wearesocial.com/us/blog/2025/02/digital-2025-the-essential-guide-to-the-global-state-of-digital/>. Retrieved from <https://wearesocial.com>: <https://wearesocial.com/us/blog/2025/02/digital-2025-the-essential-guide-to-the-global-state-of-digital/>
- Xiang, Z., Magnini, V. P., & Fesenmaier, D. R. (2015). Information Technology And Consumer Behavior In Travel And Tourism: Insights From Travel Planning Using The Internet. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 244-249.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. SAGE Publications Inc.
- Yoo, K.-H., & Gretzel, U. (2011). Influence Of Personality On Travel-Related Consumer-Generated Media Creation. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 609-621. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2010.05.002>
- Yoo, K.-H., Lee, Y., Gretzel, U., & Fesenmaier, D. R. (2009). Trust in Travel-related Consumer Generated Media. *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2009*, 49-59.
- Zeng, B., & Gerritsen, R. (2014). What Do We Know About Social Media in Tourism? A Review. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 27-36. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2014.01.001>
- Zhang, Y., Sotiriadis, M., & Shen, S. (2025). Investigating the Impact of Smart Tourism Technologies on Tourists' Experiences. *Sustainability*, 14(5), 3048. doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/su14053048>