

The Influence of Social Media Viral Content On Tourists' Visiting Decisions Toward Tourism Destinations in The Digital Tourism era: A Descriptive Quantitative Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of viral social media content on tourists' visiting decisions in the digital era of tourism. The rapid growth of short-form video platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, has transformed tourism promotion by enabling destinations to gain popularity through viral exposure. This study employed a quantitative descriptive approach using a cross-sectional survey method. Data were collected from 278 respondents who were active social media users and had been exposed to tourism-related viral content on social media. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression to examine the effects of viral content dimensions on tourists' visiting decisions. The results indicate that viral social media content significantly influences tourists' decisions to visit. Among the tested variables, emotional appeal had the strongest effect, followed by entertainment value, credibility, informativeness, and influencer attractiveness. These findings suggest that emotionally engaging and visually appealing content distributed through credible influencers and user-generated sources can effectively stimulate travel intentions and encourage actual visitation behavior. This study highlights the importance of optimizing short-form video marketing strategies and adopting data-driven tourism promotion to enhance destination competitiveness. This study contributes to the literature on digital tourism marketing by providing quantitative evidence of how viral content characteristics shape tourist behavior, particularly in developing countries.

Keywords: Viral Content, Social Media Marketing, Short-Form Video, Tiktok Tourism, Influencer Marketing, User-Generated Content, Tourists' Visiting Decision, Digital Tourism Marketing.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the rapid advancement of digital technology and widespread adoption of social media platforms have fundamentally reshaped the global tourism industry, transforming how destinations are marketed and experienced (Xu & Liang, 2025; research reviewed by Meneses Martins et al., 2025). As information and communication technologies evolve, tourists increasingly rely on digital channels not only for planning trips but also for discovering novel experiences, with social media becoming a primary source of travel information and inspiration (ResearchGate analysis 2024). Within the digital tourism era, the emergence of short-form viral content formats, such as videos circulated on platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, has introduced a powerful promotional medium that can rapidly increase destination visibility and engagement (Meneses Martins et al., 2025). These platforms enable influencers, travel vloggers, and ordinary users to generate user-generated content (UGC) that contributes significantly to shaping destination image and attractiveness, often exerting greater influence on potential visitors than traditional advertising (Sarifiyono et al., 2024; social media influence studies, 2026). Indeed, multiple instances have been documented in which previously lesser-known tourist sites have surged in popularity after being featured in viral social media posts, illustrating the profound impact of digital word-of-mouth on travel behavior (Meneses Martins et al., 2025). Given this context, it is crucial to investigate how viral social media content influences tourists' decision-making processes and travel intentions, as understanding these dynamics has significant implications for both academic research and practical destination management in the contemporary tourism landscape.

The rapid development of social media platforms has intensified the role of viral content in shaping tourism trends and influencing tourists' decision-making processes. Viral videos and posts that circulate widely through TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts often create strong emotional appeal, curiosity, and urgency among viewers, which can ultimately encourage them to visit specific destinations. However, although viral tourism content has become increasingly dominant in digital promotion, the mechanism through which it influences tourists' visiting decisions remains unclear. In

particular, it is still uncertain which dimensions of viral content, such as entertainment value, credibility, informativeness, or visual attractiveness, have the strongest influence on tourist behavior. Therefore, this study addresses the urgent need to explore how viral social media exposure shapes tourists' visiting decisions and determines which content factors contribute most significantly to destination attractiveness in the digital tourism era (Leung et al., 2022; Mariani & Borghi, 2023).

This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the role of viral social media content in shaping tourists' behavioral intentions and their travel decisions. Specifically, the first objective was to analyze the influence of viral tourism-related content on tourists' visiting decisions for certain destinations. The second objective is to identify the dominant factors of viral content that significantly increase destination attractiveness, such as emotional engagement, perceived authenticity, and persuasive storytelling. The third objective is to examine the relationship between digital engagement, such as likes, comments, shares, and saving content, and tourists' behavioral intentions, including their willingness to visit, recommend, or revisit a destination. Through these objectives, this study is expected to generate empirical insights into the dynamics of digital tourism marketing and tourist decision-making behavior (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; Mariani & Borghi, 2023).

Based on the identified research problem and objectives, this study is guided by several research questions that focus on the influence of viral tourism content in social media environments. The first question investigates whether viral social media content significantly affects tourists' decisions to visit tourism destinations. The second question explores which aspects of viral content, such as attractiveness, informativeness, credibility, or entertainment value, most strongly shape tourists' interest and intention to visit. Furthermore, recognizing that tourists are not a homogeneous group, the third question examines whether demographic factors such as age, gender, education level, and travel experience moderate tourists' responses to viral tourism content. These questions are designed to provide a structured understanding of how digital viral trends translate into real travel behavior (Leung et al., 2022; Tussyadiah, 2020).

The significance of this study can be viewed from both theoretical and practical perspectives. From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital tourism marketing by expanding the knowledge of how tourists form perceptions and make travel decisions in the era of social media. It also strengthens the understanding of consumer behavior in tourism contexts by highlighting the role of viral digital communication as a modern form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Additionally, the findings are expected to enrich social media communication theory by offering evidence of how engagement-driven content dissemination influences tourist behavioral intention and destination image formation (Mariani & Borghi, 2023; Tussyadiah, 2020).

From a practical perspective, this study provides valuable insights for tourism boards, destination marketers, and tourism-related businesses to develop effective promotional strategies. By identifying the viral content dimensions that most strongly influence tourist interest, stakeholders can design marketing campaigns that align with audience preferences and maximize their digital reach. Furthermore, understanding the role of engagement and demographic responses will assist tourism businesses in tailoring promotional content more strategically, ultimately enhancing destination competitiveness and supporting sustainable tourism development in the digital era (Leung et al., 2022; Sigala, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media in the Tourism Industry

Social media refers to digital platforms that enable individuals and communities to create, share, and exchange information, ideas, and multimedia content through online networking. The evolution of social media has shifted communication patterns from one-way information delivery to interactive and participatory communication, where users are no longer passive consumers but active content creators. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have become essential channels for social interaction, information exchange, and digital marketing activities. In the tourism industry, this transformation has significantly influenced how destinations are promoted and perceived, as social media allows tourism stakeholders to communicate directly with potential tourists through visual storytelling, real-time engagement and interactive promotional campaigns (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Sigala, 2023).

In tourism communication, social media plays a strategic role in strengthening destination branding by shaping tourists' perceptions and influencing the formation of destination images. Destination branding is increasingly built through digital narratives created not only by official tourism boards but also by travelers through user-generated content (UGC), such as travel reviews, photographs, and short videos. These online interactions contribute to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which is widely recognized as a highly influential factor in travel planning and decision-making. Unlike traditional advertising, eWOM is perceived as more credible because it reflects real tourist experiences and authentic recommendations (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Leung et al., 2022). Destinations that successfully build a strong online presence through social media often gain a competitive advantage in attracting visitors and increasing tourism demand. Current digital tourism trends highlight the growing dominance of mobile technology, short-form video content, influencer marketing, and algorithm-driven content distribution. Tourists increasingly rely on digital platforms to search for information, seek inspiration, compare destinations, and evaluate travel experiences through online engagement. The rise of TikTok tourism trends, Instagram reels, and YouTube travel shorts demonstrates how digital tourism marketing has shifted toward visual- and entertainment-driven content that can quickly reach a global audience. This trend has also strengthened the role of digital engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, and comments, as indicators of destination attractiveness and tourist interest (Mariani & Borghi, 2023; Sigala, 2023). Therefore, social media has become a dominant force in shaping tourism behavior, influencing how tourists discover destinations and make visiting decisions in the contemporary tourism era.

Viral Content Theory

Viral content refers to digital material, such as videos, images, or messages, that spreads rapidly and widely across online platforms through user sharing and algorithmic amplification. The term “viral” is derived from the concept of biological virus transmission, where content is distributed exponentially from one user to another, often within a short period of time. In digital marketing and communication studies, viral content is considered a powerful promotional tool because it allows messages to reach massive audiences without relying heavily on paid advertisements. Viral content is particularly significant in tourism because it can expose destinations to global audiences and create sudden tourism demand, sometimes leading to the phenomenon of “viral tourism” where destinations become popular almost overnight (Berger, 2016; Khamis et al., 2017).

The effectiveness of viral tourism content is strongly influenced by several key characteristics. First, emotional appeal plays an important role because content that evokes strong emotions such as excitement, admiration, humor, or even surprise tends to motivate audiences to engage and share with others. Second, entertainment value enhances the likelihood of virality because short videos that are enjoyable and visually engaging are more likely to capture attention in crowded social media feeds. Third, authenticity is a critical factor, as tourism audiences often prefer content that appears genuine and reflects real experiences rather than overly commercial advertisements. Fourth, relatability strengthens engagement because tourists are more likely to respond positively to content that connects with their personal interests, lifestyle, or travel aspirations. Lastly, shareability is essential, as viral content must be easily accessible, short, and simple to distribute, allowing users to share it quickly across platforms (Berger, 2016; De Veirman et al., 2017). These characteristics collectively explain why certain tourism videos gain massive popularity and become influential in shaping destination image and tourist interest.

In addition, viral content is closely linked to the concept of viral marketing, which refers to a marketing strategy that encourages individuals to voluntarily spread promotional messages through digital networks. Viral marketing leverages social influence and network effects, making the audience active participants in content distribution. In the tourism context, viral marketing is often amplified through influencers, travel vloggers, and UGC creators who shape public perception and stimulate travel intentions through persuasive storytelling and engaging visuals. The widespread sharing of viral tourism content also strengthens electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which is one of the most influential forms of marketing communication in modern tourism. Therefore, viral content theory provides a relevant framework for understanding how digital engagement and social sharing behaviors contribute to tourists’ visiting decisions and destination popularity (Leung et al., 2022; Mariani & Borghi, 2023).

Tourist Visiting Decision

A tourist-visiting decision refers to the final determination made by an individual to travel to a particular destination after evaluating various alternatives and considering personal motivations, constraints, and available information. In tourism studies, the visiting decision is commonly understood as a behavioral outcome that reflects tourists’ willingness to select, plan, and undertake a trip to a specific place. This decision is influenced by tourists’ perceptions of destination attractiveness, expected satisfaction, perceived risks, and the value of travel experiences offered by the destination (Kotler et al., 2017; Solomon, 2020). In the digital tourism era, visiting decisions are increasingly shaped by online exposure and social media information, where tourists rely heavily on digital content in their travel planning process.

The consumer decision-making process in tourism generally follows several stages, including problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decisions, and post-visit evaluation. In the tourism context, problem recognition occurs when individuals develop a desire to travel, often motivated by leisure needs, lifestyle, or social influence. Tourists then engage in an information search stage, where they seek destination-related information from multiple sources, such as online travel agencies, tourism websites, and social media platforms. The evaluation of alternatives involves comparing destinations based on factors such as cost, accessibility, safety and perceived uniqueness. Once a destination is selected, tourists proceed to the decision stage, which includes booking accommodation, transportation and travel activities. Finally, post-visit evaluations influence tourists’ future intentions, such as revisiting or recommending the destination through reviews and social media posts, which further contributes to the cycle of eWOM influence (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Solomon, 2020).

Tourists’ visiting intentions and decisions are affected by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include motivation, personal preferences, attitudes, prior travel experience, lifestyle, and demographic characteristics, such as age and income. External factors include destination image, cultural influence, marketing communication, peer recommendations, and social media exposure. In recent years, viral tourism content has emerged as a powerful external factor, shaping perceptions and stimulating desire through attractive visuals, emotional narratives, and influencer-driven endorsements. Therefore, understanding visiting decisions requires an analysis of the interaction between internal psychological motivations and external digital influences that shape tourists’ intention to travel (Kotler et al., 2017; Sigala, 2023).

Influencer and User-Generated Content (UGC)

Influencers and user-generated content (UGC) have become central elements of destination marketing strategies in the digital era. Influencers are individuals who possess social media popularity and the ability to affect followers’ attitudes and behaviors through their content, lifestyle representation, and perceived expertise. In tourism marketing, influencers play a significant role in promoting destinations by creating engaging travel content that combines entertainment,

storytelling and personal experiences. Their recommendations are often viewed as more persuasive than official tourism advertisements because they appear relatable and authentic. As a result, influencer marketing has become an effective promotional approach for tourism stakeholders seeking to increase destination visibility and stimulate travel interest (De Veirman et al., 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

In addition to influencers, UGC such as tourist photos, travel vlogs, reviews, and short videos posted by ordinary travelers have strongly influenced shaping destination image and credibility. UGC is considered highly valuable because it reflects real travel experiences that can enhance trust among potential tourists. Compared to commercial promotional content, UGC is perceived as more credible and less biased, which strengthens its impact on consumer decision-making. Trust and credibility in UGC are particularly important in tourism because tourists often face uncertainty regarding destination quality and travel risks. Therefore, online reviews and viral content created by travelers can reduce perceived risk and increase tourists' confidence in making visiting decisions (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Filieri et al., 2021).

Moreover, parasocial interaction is a key concept that explains why influencers strongly affect tourist engagement. Parasocial interaction refers to the one-sided psychological relationship that audiences develop with media personalities, including influencers, in which followers feel emotionally connected despite the lack of real interpersonal interaction. Through frequent exposure to influencers' daily travel experiences and storytelling, followers may perceive them as trustworthy friends or role models. This emotional connection strengthens engagement behaviors, such as liking, commenting, sharing, and adopting travel recommendations. In the tourism context, parasocial relationships can enhance destination interest and shape behavioral intention, as followers may desire to imitate influencers' travel lifestyles and experiences (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Labrecque, 2014). Consequently, influencer marketing and UGC have become powerful forces in tourism promotion, particularly on short-video platforms that intensify emotional engagement and content virality.

Previous Studies

A growing body of empirical research has examined the relationship between viral marketing and tourist behavior, emphasizing the importance of social media in influencing travel decision-making. Previous studies have highlighted that viral marketing strategies, particularly those involving visually appealing and emotionally engaging content, can significantly enhance destination awareness and strengthen tourists' intention to visit. Viral content has also been found to accelerate the spread of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which plays a crucial role in shaping destination image and influencing tourists' trust in travel-related information (Berger, 2016; Leung et al., 2022). Furthermore, tourism behavior research consistently demonstrates that social media exposure influences tourists' motivation, travel planning, and purchase decisions, particularly among younger generations who actively engage with digital platforms (Sigala, 2023; Mariani & Borghi, 2023).

In addition, studies on social media influence indicate that influencer endorsements and UGC strongly contribute to tourists' behavioral intentions. Research suggests that the credibility, authenticity, and perceived expertise of influencers significantly affect tourist trust and willingness to visit recommended destinations. Similarly, UGC has been found to shape destination image more effectively than traditional advertising because of its perceived realism and experiential value (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Filieri et al., 2021). These findings confirm that tourism promotion is increasingly shaped by digital communication patterns and engagement-driven marketing strategies.

However, despite the increasing number of studies on tourism and social media, several research gaps persist. First, limited research specifically focuses on short-video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, even though these platforms are currently among the most influential in shaping viral tourism trends. Second, there is still a lack of quantitative empirical evidence from developing countries, where tourism development is expanding rapidly and digital marketing strategies are increasingly being applied. Third, many existing studies discuss viral marketing conceptually, yet limited research integrates virality metrics such as views, likes, shares, and comments into quantitative models to explain tourists' visiting decisions. Therefore, further investigation is required to provide empirical evidence of how viral short-video content affects tourist behavior and destination attractiveness, particularly in developing tourism markets (Mariani & Borghi, 2023; Sigala, 2023).

Conceptual Framework

This study proposes a conceptual framework that explains the influence of viral social media content on tourists' visit decisions. The framework positions tourists' visiting decisions as the dependent variable (Y), which reflects their behavioral intention to visit a destination after exposure to viral tourism content. The independent variables (X) are derived from viral content characteristics and influencer marketing theory. The variables included entertainment, informativeness, credibility, emotional appeal, and influencer attractiveness.

Entertainment refers to the degree to which viral content provides enjoyment and captures attention through engaging visuals and a creative narrative. Informativeness refers to the extent to which the content provides useful travel-related information, such as location details, accessibility, cost, and activities. Credibility reflects the perceived trustworthiness and reliability of the information presented in content. Emotional appeal refers to the ability of the content to evoke strong feelings, such as excitement, curiosity, admiration, or the desire to travel. Finally, influencer attractiveness reflects the persuasive power of influencers based on their personality, appearance, lifestyle, and perceived similarity to followers. These factors are expected to shape tourists' perceptions and stimulate travel intentions, ultimately leading to a visiting decision (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Thus, the framework suggests that viral content dimensions and

influencer-related factors play a significant role in influencing tourists' decision-making behavior, particularly through engagement mechanisms such as sharing, commenting, and imitating influencer experiences.

Hypothesis Development

Based on the conceptual framework and supported by relevant theories in digital marketing and tourism consumer behavior, this study formulates the following hypotheses: Viral social media content is expected to positively influence tourists' visiting decisions, as viral exposure increases destination awareness, strengthens interest, and shapes a favorable destination image. Emotional appeal is predicted to be one of the most influential dimensions because tourism decisions are often driven by feelings, imagination, and experiential expectations. In addition, influencer credibility is a crucial determinant because trust in content creators significantly affects tourists' confidence in destination recommendations. When tourists perceive influencers as credible and authentic, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward the destination and stronger intention (Berger, 2016; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Therefore, the hypotheses proposed in this study are as follows:

H1: Viral social media content positively influences tourists' visiting decisions.

H2: Emotional appeal significantly affects tourists' visiting intentions.

H3: Influencer credibility positively impacts tourist trust and destination interest.

H4: Entertainment value positively influences tourists' visiting decisions.

H5: The informativeness of viral tourism content positively affects tourists' visiting decisions.

H6: Influencer attractiveness positively influences tourists' visiting intentions.

These hypotheses provide a structured basis for quantitative testing and are expected to generate empirical evidence regarding the relationship between viral content characteristics and tourists' behavioral intentions in the context of digital tourism marketing.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research approach to investigate the influence of viral social media content on tourists' visiting decisions. The research was designed using a cross-sectional survey method, which means that data were collected only once within a specific time period. This approach was selected to capture respondents' current perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions toward tourism destinations that gained popularity through viral short-video content on social media platforms.

The study population consisted of social media users who had been exposed to tourism-related viral content, particularly on TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. To determine the research participants, this study applied a purposive sampling technique, in which respondents were intentionally selected based on criteria relevant to the research objectives. The respondents were required to be active social media users who frequently interacted with digital tourism content and had either visited or intended to visit a tourism destination after being influenced by viral tourism videos, influencer recommendations, or user-generated travel posts. The sample size was determined by considering the minimum requirement for quantitative statistical analysis, particularly multiple regression testing, to ensure sufficient data for accurate interpretation and hypothesis testing.

Data collection in this study was conducted using an online questionnaire distributed through Google Forms or other similar online survey platforms. The questionnaire link was shared across multiple social media channels, such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp groups, and Twitter/X communities. This distribution strategy was chosen to effectively reach respondents who matched the sampling criteria while ensuring that the data collection process remained efficient, accessible, and aligned with the characteristics of the study population, namely, digital and active social media users.

The instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire containing a set of statements designed to measure the independent and dependent variables. The questionnaire responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire indicators were divided into two main variables. The independent variable, viral social media content (X), was measured using indicators such as interesting visuals, emotional engagement, authenticity, informative value, and shareability. Meanwhile, the dependent variable, tourists' visiting decision (Y), was measured using indicators such as intention to visit, travel planning, recommendation behavior, and actual visitation behavior. These indicators were developed to assess respondents' perceptions of viral tourism content and to determine how strongly such content influenced their decision-making process.

To ensure the quality of the research instrument, validity testing was conducted using Pearson's product-moment correlation method. Each questionnaire item was considered valid if the obtained correlation value (r -count) exceeded the critical correlation value (r -table) at a significance level of 0.05. Reliability testing was performed using Cronbach's alpha to evaluate the internal consistency of the instrument. A variable was categorized as reliable if the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was greater than 0.70, indicating that the questionnaire items consistently measured the intended constructs and produced stable results.

The data collected from the respondents were processed and analyzed using statistical software such as SPSS or similar programs. The analysis included descriptive statistics to summarize the respondents' demographics and describe the overall distribution of responses for each variable. Correlation analysis was applied to identify the strength and direction of the relationship between the viral content variables and tourists' visiting decisions. Furthermore, multiple linear regression analysis was used to determine the extent to which viral social media content dimensions influenced tourists' visiting decisions. Hypothesis testing was conducted using the t -test to evaluate the partial influence of each independent

variable and the F-test to assess the simultaneous influence of all independent variables on the dependent variable. Finally, the coefficient of determination (R^2) was calculated to measure the variance in tourists' visiting decisions that could be explained by the viral social media content factors included in the regression model.

The regression model applied in this study is expressed as: $Y = a + bX + e$

Where:

Y = Tourists' visiting decision

X = Viral social media content

a = Constant

b = Regression coefficient

e = Error term

This analysis model was used to test the hypotheses and determine the statistical significance of viral social media content in influencing tourists' decisions to visit.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the demographic profiles of the respondents involved in this study. The respondents were selected based on purposive sampling criteria, namely, active social media users who had been exposed to viral tourism-related content and had either visited or intended to visit tourism destinations after watching viral content.

Table 1. Respondent Demographics

Age Group	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
17–20 years	52	18.7
21–25 years	126	45.3
26–30 years	61	21.9
31–35 years	24	8.6
>35 years	15	5.4
Total	278	100.0

The majority of respondents were aged 21–25 years (45.3%), indicating that young adults are the most dominant group exposed to viral tourism content in Indonesia.

Table 2. Gender

Gender	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Male	112	40.3
Female	166	59.7
Total	278	100.0

Female respondents dominated the sample with 59.7%, suggesting higher engagement with tourism viral content among female users.

Table 3. Social Media Usage Frequency (Daily)

Usage Frequency	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1–2 hours/day	41	14.7
3–4 hours/day	96	34.5
5–6 hours/day	84	30.2
>6 hours/day	57	20.5
Total	278	100.0

Most respondents used social media for 3–4 hours per day (34.5%), confirming their high exposure to digital content.

Table 4. Preferred Social Media Platform for Tourism Content

Platform	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
TikTok	132	47.5
Instagram Reels	88	31.7
YouTube Shorts	42	15.1
Facebook	9	3.2

Platform	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Twitter/X	7	2.5
Total	278	100.0

TikTok was the most preferred platform (47.5%) for consuming viral tourism content, followed by Instagram Reels (31.7%);

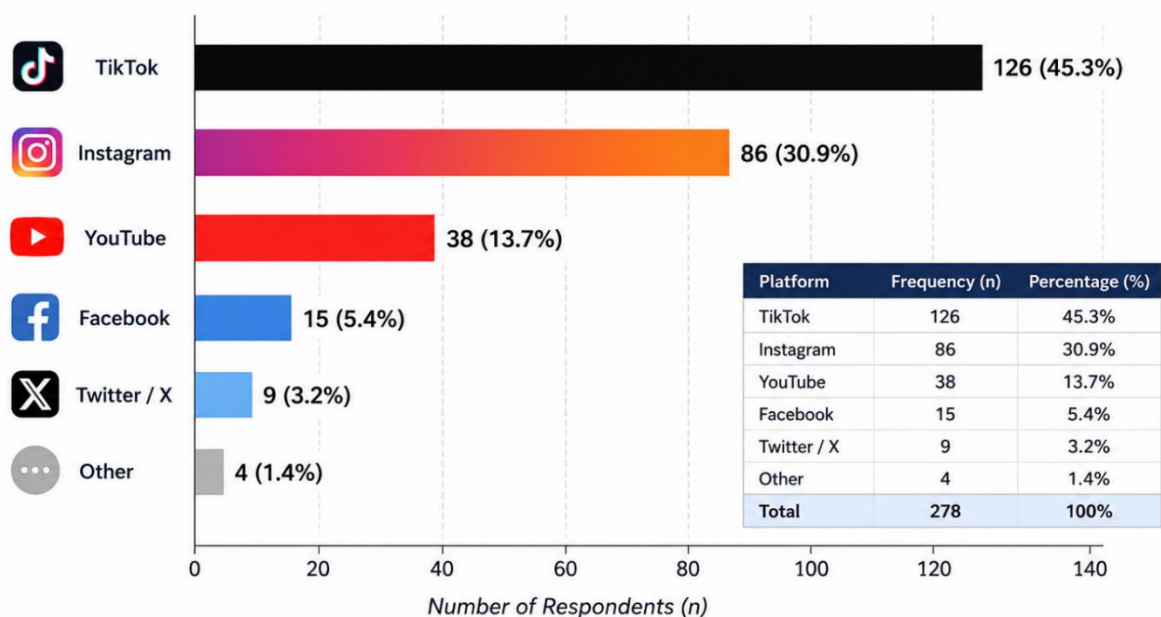
Table 5. Travel Frequency (Per Year)

Travel Frequency	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1–2 times/year	141	50.7
3–4 times/year	92	33.1
5–6 times/year	31	11.2
>6 times/year	14	5.0
Total	278	100.0

The majority of respondents traveled 1–2 times per year (50.7%), indicating moderate travel activity influenced by viral tourism.

PREFERRED PLATFORM

Which social media platform do you use most to view tourism-related content?
(n = 278)



Future 1. Preferred Platform

TikTok (47.5%) > Instagram Reels (31.7%) > YouTube Shorts (15.1%) > Facebook (3.2%) > X (2.5%)

This section explains respondents' perceptions of viral social media tourism content and their visiting decision behavior. The descriptive analysis was measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The mean scores were interpreted using the following category range:

Table 6. Likert Interpretation Range

Mean Range	Interpretation
1.00 – 1.80	Very Low
1.81 – 2.60	Low
2.61 – 3.40	Moderate
3.41 – 4.20	High
4.21 – 5.00	Very High

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of Viral Content Variable (X)

Indicator (Viral Content)	Mean	Std. Deviation	Category
Interesting visuals	4.32	0.61	Very High
Emotional engagement	4.18	0.67	High
Authenticity	4.05	0.70	High
Informative value	4.11	0.65	High
Shareability	4.25	0.62	Very High
Overall Mean (X)	4.18	0.65	High

The results indicate that the respondents generally perceived viral tourism content positively. The highest mean scores were obtained for interesting visuals ($M = 4.32$) and shareability ($M = 4.25$), suggesting that visually attractive and easily shareable content plays a key role in increasing tourism destination popularity.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics of Visiting Decision Variable (Y)

Indicator (Visiting Decision)	Mean	Std. Deviation	Category
Intention to visit	4.20	0.66	High
Travel planning	4.07	0.69	High
Recommendation behavior	4.10	0.71	High
Actual visitation behavior	3.88	0.74	High
Overall Mean (Y)	4.06	0.70	High

Respondents demonstrated a high level of intention to visit, influenced by viral content. The strongest indicator was intention to visit ($M = 4.20$), implying that viral tourism content successfully increases interest and motivates respondents to consider visiting the destination.

Most Influential Social Media Platform

Based on respondent preferences, TikTok was found to be the most influential platform for delivering viral tourism content, as nearly half of the respondents (47.5%) identified TikTok as their primary platform. This suggests that TikTok's algorithmic recommendation system and short-video format significantly contribute to tourism content virality and user engagement.

Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis testing was conducted using multiple linear regression analysis to determine the effect of viral content dimensions on tourists' visitation decisions. The significance level applied in this study was 0.05 ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Table 8. Regression Model Summary

Model	R	R Square (R^2)	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error
1	0.781	0.610	0.602	0.284

The coefficient of determination (R^2) shows that 61.0% of the variation in tourists' visiting decisions can be explained by viral content variables, while the remaining 39.0% is influenced by other factors not included in the model.

Table 9. ANOVA (F-test)

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	34.215	5	6.843	84.110	0.000
Residual	21.394	272	0.079		
Total	55.609	277			

The F-test result indicates that the regression model is significant ($\text{Sig.} = 0.000 < 0.05$). Therefore, all independent variables simultaneously influence tourists' decisions.

Table 10. Coefficients (T-test)

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Decision
(Constant)	0.812	0.215	—	3.776	0.000	—
Entertainment	0.184	0.052	0.201	3.538	0.000	Significant
Informativeness	0.142	0.049	0.168	2.898	0.004	Significant

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Decision
Credibility	0.167	0.056	0.179	2.982	0.003	Significant
Emotional Appeal	0.236	0.053	0.254	4.453	0.000	Significant
Influencer Attractiveness	0.115	0.047	0.132	2.447	0.015	Significant

Table 11. Hypothesis Decision Summary

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Viral content positively influences tourists' visiting decision	Accepted
H2	Emotional appeal significantly affects tourists' visiting intention	Accepted
H3	Influencer credibility positively impacts tourist trust and interest	Accepted
H4	Entertainment significantly affects tourists' visiting decision	Accepted
H5	Informativeness significantly affects tourists' visiting decision	Accepted
H6	Influencer attractiveness significantly affects visiting decision	Accepted

The regression results confirmed that viral tourism content significantly influenced tourists' visiting decisions. Among all the dimensions tested, emotional appeal had the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.254$, Sig. (= 0.000), indicating that tourists are more likely to develop visiting intentions when viral content triggers excitement, curiosity, or inspiration. This finding supports the argument that tourism decisions are not purely rational but are also strongly driven by emotional stimulation delivered through short-video storytelling.

Entertainment and credibility also had significant effects, suggesting that viral tourism content must be enjoyable while maintaining trustworthiness. In addition, informativeness was found to be significant, implying that tourists do not only seek entertainment and practical information such as accessibility, travel costs, and destination facilities. Finally, influencer attractiveness had a smaller but still significant effect, meaning that influencers play an important role in increasing destination interest, although content quality remains the primary determinant of tourists' decisions.

Discussion

Influence of Viral Content on Tourist Decisions

The statistical findings confirm that viral content has a strong and significant effect on tourists' visiting decisions, meaning that higher exposure to viral tourism videos increases the likelihood of tourists developing interest, planning trips, and making visitation decisions. This can be explained by the fact that viral tourism content serves as a modern form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which is widely recognized as one of the most persuasive sources of travel information. When tourism content goes viral, it reaches a broader audience, creates social validation, and builds a collective perception that the destination is attractive and worth visiting.

Viral content affects tourism behavior because it stimulates curiosity and reduces the psychological distance between tourists and destinations. Short videos provide a fast, immersive, and visually rich representation of a destination, enabling audiences to virtually experience the atmosphere. In many cases, tourists who are repeatedly exposed to the same destination through viral trends may perceive it as popular and socially desirable, which strengthens their intention to visit. This phenomenon reflects the increasing dominance of digital influence on tourism behavior, where tourists are highly dependent on online content during the travel planning process.

Furthermore, viral tourism content often creates a sense of urgency through trending hashtags, challenges, and high-engagement metrics such as views, likes, and shares. This may trigger a fear of missing out (FOMO), especially among young travelers, which encourages them to visit the destination before the trend fades. Therefore, viral tourism content functions not only as information distribution but also as a psychological trigger that shapes tourists' preferences and behavioral intentions toward a destination.

Dominant Factors Influencing Tourist Visiting Decisions

The results indicate that several factors play a dominant role in influencing tourists' visiting decisions, with emotional appeal being the strongest predictor. Emotional appeal is highly influential because tourism is strongly linked to experiential consumption. Tourists do not only purchase a trip, but they also seek feelings of excitement, enjoyment, relaxation, and memorable experiences during their trips. Viral tourism content that successfully conveys emotional stimulation, such as breathtaking landscapes, thrilling adventures, or aesthetic cultural experiences, creates a strong desire among viewers to personally experience the destination.

Another dominant factor is authenticity of the information. Tourists increasingly prefer content that appears genuine and realistic, rather than overly commercial. Authentic content is often delivered through user-generated videos or travel vloggers who document real experiences, including both the positive and challenging aspects of traveling. When content is perceived as authentic, it increases trust and makes the destination feel more attainable and realistic, thereby strengthening the intention to visit.

Visual attractiveness also plays a critical role, particularly on short-form video platforms, where visual impressions are

the primary drivers of engagement. Tourism destinations with aesthetic landscapes, unique architecture, cultural performances, or visually appealing culinary attractions tend to gain viral popularity because they are highly suitable for creating video content. Strong visuals quickly capture attention and encourage users to share, increasing their exposure and destination awareness.

Finally, influencer credibility significantly contributes to tourist decision-making. Tourists often perceive influencers as opinion leaders, and their recommendations shape audience perceptions of destination quality. When influencers are considered knowledgeable, honest, and experienced, their endorsements enhance tourist trust and reduce uncertainty. Credible influencers can strengthen the persuasive impact of viral content by positioning destinations as safe, attractive, and worth visiting. Overall, these dominant factors demonstrate that viral tourism marketing effectiveness depends not only on popularity but also on emotional resonance, perceived authenticity, strong visual quality, and the content creator's trustworthiness.

Role of Platforms (TikTok vs Instagram vs YouTube)

The findings indicate that social media platforms play a crucial role in amplifying viral tourism content, as each platform has unique characteristics that influence how tourism information is consumed and disseminated. TikTok was identified as the most dominant platform for delivering viral tourism content, which can be explained by its algorithm-based content distribution system that enables videos to reach large audiences even when accounts have relatively few followers. TikTok's "For You Page" encourages rapid content discovery, making it highly effective for promoting tourism destinations through trending videos and hashtags.

Instagram, particularly through Reels and Stories, plays a significant role in tourism promotion, but tends to emphasize lifestyle representation, aesthetic visuals, and curated travel experiences. Instagram content is often used to build destination images through photography and short videos that highlight luxury, beauty, and cultural uniqueness. Compared to TikTok, Instagram is more associated with personal branding and visual identity, making it more effective for long-term destination branding than rapid viral exposure.

Meanwhile, YouTube Shorts provides tourism content in a short-form format but is often linked to longer travel vlogs available on YouTube. This makes YouTube influential in shaping deeper travel decisions, as tourists may seek more detailed information by watching longer travel reviews. Therefore, TikTok may function as a strong platform for destination discovery and trend creation, Instagram for destination lifestyle branding, and YouTube for credibility-building and detailed travel evaluation. The differences among platforms suggest that tourism marketers should adopt platform-specific strategies to maximize their promotional effectiveness.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The results of this study are consistent with prior research, emphasizing the importance of social media and viral marketing in shaping tourist behavior. Previous studies have shown that social media content significantly influences travel intentions through destination image formation and eWOM communication. The dominance of emotional appeal found in this study aligns with research suggesting that emotionally engaging content is more likely to be shared and remembered, increasing behavioral intention among audiences. Similarly, the significant effect of credibility supports earlier findings that trust in digital content creators plays a key role in tourism decision-making.

However, this study provides additional insights by highlighting the strong relevance of short-form viral video platforms, particularly TikTok and Instagram Reels, which have received limited attention in earlier tourism marketing research that traditionally focused on Facebook, Instagram posts, or online travel reviews. In contrast to earlier studies that emphasized textual reviews and long-form travel blogs, the current findings suggest that tourism promotion is shifting toward fast-paced, visually immersive, and emotionally driven short-video consumption. This indicates a transformation in tourism marketing dynamics, where the attention economy and algorithmic exposure strongly determine destination popularity. Furthermore, this study contributes to the literature by integrating multiple viral content dimensions into a quantitative regression model, providing empirical evidence on which content characteristics most strongly affect tourists' visiting decisions. This strengthens previous conceptual discussions on viral tourism marketing by offering measurable statistical results that can be tested and applied to destination management strategies.

Implications for the Tourism Industry

1. Digital Campaign Optimization Strategies

These findings imply that tourism stakeholders must optimize their digital marketing strategies by focusing on viral content characteristics that significantly influence tourists' visiting decisions. Tourism boards and destination marketers should design campaigns that prioritize emotional storytelling, visual appeal and authenticity. Marketing strategies should incorporate narrative elements that highlight unique experiences, local culture, and memorable moments to stimulate emotional engagement with the destination. Additionally, marketers should actively monitor engagement metrics, such as views, likes, shares, and comments, as key indicators of campaign effectiveness and public interest.

Tourism stakeholders should collaborate with credible influencers and travel content creators to enhance trust and increase audience reach. Influencer selection should not only be based on follower count but also on credibility, audience relevance, engagement rate, and authenticity of content. This approach ensures that influencer campaigns generate not only visibility but also real visit intentions among target tourists.

2. Importance of Short-Form Video Content

The results emphasize that short-form video content is one of the most effective promotional formats in contemporary tourism marketing. Short videos are highly suitable for capturing attention within seconds, making them ideal for social media environments characterized by rapid scrolling. Therefore tourism destinations should develop short-form video marketing strategies that highlight key attractions in visually compelling formats, such as panoramic views, cultural performances, culinary experiences, and adventure activities.

Moreover, tourism marketers should adopt trend-based promotional techniques, such as popular audio tracks, hashtags, challenges, and interactive features, to increase content discoverability. As TikTok and Instagram Reels strongly rely on algorithmic distribution, aligning content with trending patterns can significantly improve the likelihood of achieving virality and increasing destination exposure.

3. Data-Driven Tourism Marketing Approaches

This study also highlights the importance of adopting data-driven tourism-marketing approaches. Tourism stakeholders should utilize digital analytics tools to evaluate audience engagement, demographic segmentation, and content performance across platforms. By analyzing engagement behavior, marketers can identify which content themes generate the strongest emotional responses and which segments of tourists are most responsive to viral tourism campaigns.

In addition, tourism organizations can integrate consumer feedback from comments, shares, and user-generated content into destination development strategies. Viral tourism content can serve as a valuable source of market insight, revealing tourist preferences, trending destinations, and potential service improvements. Therefore, integrating viral content analytics into destination management planning can strengthen competitiveness, improve marketing efficiency, and support sustainable tourism growth in the digital era.

CONCLUSIONS, PROPOSALS, RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to examine the influence of viral social media content on tourists' destination choices in the digital tourism era. The results of multiple linear regression analysis confirm that viral tourism content distributed through social media platforms significantly influences tourists' visiting decisions. This indicates that exposure to short-form tourism videos has a meaningful impact on shaping tourist interest, stimulating travel planning, and encouraging actual visitation behavior.

The regression results also revealed that among the tested dimensions, emotional appeal was the most dominant factor influencing tourists' visiting decisions. This suggests that tourists are more likely to develop strong visiting intentions when viral content generates emotional stimulation, such as excitement, curiosity, admiration, and inspiration. In addition, other factors such as entertainment value, informativeness, credibility, and influencer attractiveness also demonstrated significant effects, indicating that effective viral tourism content should be visually engaging, informative, and trustworthy, while also being delivered through influential and credible content creators.

Furthermore, the descriptive findings show that TikTok is the most influential platform for disseminating viral tourism content, followed by Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts. This result emphasizes that short-form video platforms have become dominant channels for destination discovery and tourism promotion because of their algorithm-driven distribution systems and high audience engagement. Overall, this study concludes that viral content marketing has become a strategic element in modern tourism promotion and plays a significant role in shaping tourists' decision-making.

Recommendations

1. Recommendations for Tourism Stakeholders

Based on these findings, tourism boards, destination managers, and tourism businesses are strongly encouraged to optimize digital marketing strategies by prioritizing viral content characteristics that significantly influence tourist decisions. Since emotional appeal was found to be the strongest predictor, tourism promotional content should focus on storytelling that evokes excitement and creates an emotional connection with potential tourists. Destinations should highlight unique travel experiences, local culture, natural landscapes, culinary attractions, and adventure activities in a way that stimulates curiosity and the desire to visit.

Tourism stakeholders should ensure that viral content remains informative by including practical travel details, such as ticket prices, access routes, transportation options, accommodation recommendations, and facility availability. This is important because informativeness strengthens tourists' confidence and helps transform their interest into actual travel planning. Additionally, tourism marketers should maintain content credibility by using authentic visuals and real tourist experiences, as credibility reduces perceived risk and increases trust in the destination.

Collaboration with influencers should be implemented strategically by brands. Tourism stakeholders should select influencers not only based on follower count but also on engagement rate, credibility, and relevance to the target tourist segment. Influencers who deliver authentic travel experiences and maintain a trustworthy reputation are more likely to generate stronger tourist interest and intention to visit.

2. Recommendations for Social Media Marketing Strategy

Tourism promotional campaigns should focus on short-form video platforms, particularly TikTok and Instagram Reels, because of their strong influence on destination trends. Marketing teams should actively monitor viral trends, hashtags,

and popular audio tracks to increase content discoverability. It is also recommended that tourism organizations encourage tourists to create user-generated content by providing interactive campaigns such as hashtag challenges, photo/video competitions, and travel storytelling programs. This approach increases digital engagement and strengthens eWOM distribution.

Tourism marketers should also apply data-driven marketing strategies by analyzing social media engagement metrics such as views, likes, shares, comments, and saves. These metrics can serve as indicators of tourist interest and can be used to evaluate which type of content generates the strongest impact on audience behavior. By utilizing digital analytics, tourism stakeholders can improve campaign effectiveness and allocate promotional resources efficiently.

3. Recommendations for Government and Tourism Policy Makers

Government institutions and tourism policymakers should support the development of digital tourism promotion by strengthening infrastructure and digital literacy among local tourism stakeholders. Training programs for tourism SMEs, local tour guides, and community-based tourism groups should be enhanced, particularly in content creation skills, such as video editing, storytelling, and social media branding. Such initiatives will enable local tourism destinations to compete more effectively in the digital tourism market.

In addition, tourism policymakers should develop regulations and guidelines to ensure responsible tourism promotion. Viral tourism content may rapidly increase visitor numbers, leading to overtourism and environmental degradation. Therefore, sustainable tourism management strategies should be integrated into viral tourism campaigns to ensure that tourism growth is balanced with environmental and cultural preservation.

Research Limitations

Although this study provides valuable findings, it has several limitations. First, this study employed a cross-sectional design, meaning that the data were collected at a single point in time. As a result, the study captured respondents' perceptions at one moment and may not reflect changes in behavior over time. Second, the data were collected through online surveys, which may limit the representativeness of the respondents due to self-selection bias. Third, this study focused primarily on short-form viral content exposure and did not include other external tourism factors such as travel cost, safety, destination facilities, or macroeconomic conditions, which may also influence tourists' decisions.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should adopt a longitudinal approach to examine how viral tourism content influences tourists' decisions over time, particularly to measure whether visiting intention leads to actual visitation behavior. Further studies should expand the research scope by including additional variables such as destination image, perceived risk, travel motivation, and social influence, which may strengthen the explanatory power of the research model.

Future studies may also apply comparative analyses across different countries or regions to explore how cultural backgrounds and tourism development levels influence tourists' responses to viral tourism content. Researchers are also encouraged to integrate social media engagement metrics (such as view count, share rate, and comment sentiment analysis) with survey-based behavioral data to provide a more comprehensive and data-driven understanding of the effectiveness of viral tourism marketing.

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