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DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN TOURISM: ASSESSING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON TOURISTS' DESTINATION CHOICE

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Abstract. Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped the tourism industry by changing the ways destinations are promoted, tourism information is distributed, and travelers search for, evaluate, and select destinations. Among the various digital technologies, social media has emerged as a particularly influential tool in shaping tourists' perceptions and destination choices. This study examines the influence of social media on tourists' destination choice within the broader context of digital transformation in tourism. Particular attention is given to the role of user-generated content (UGC), electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), destination image, visual content, social media influencers, perceived authenticity, and online engagement. The study adopts a qualitative conceptual research approach based on the analysis and synthesis of recent academic literature on digital tourism and social media-driven tourist behaviour. The findings indicate that social media influences destination choice through several interconnected mechanisms. Visual photographs and videos increase destination awareness and generate emotional attraction, while user-generated content and online reviews provide experiential information that can enhance trust and reduce perceived travel risk. Social media influencers can further strengthen destination attractiveness by creating engaging narratives and personalized recommendations. At the same time, the effectiveness of social media marketing depends on the perceived authenticity, credibility, and relevance of digital content. The study also identifies potential challenges, including misinformation, fake reviews, excessive commercialization, algorithmic bias, unrealistic destination expectations, and the risk of overtourism. The article concludes that tourism destinations should adopt integrated, authentic, data-driven, and sustainable social media strategies. Effective use of social media can strengthen destination image, increase tourist engagement, influence travel intentions, and improve the competitiveness of tourism destinations in the digital economy.

Keywords: digital transformation; tourism; social media; destination choice; destination image; tourist behaviour; user-generated content; electronic word-of-mouth; social media influencers; digital tourism; tourist decision-making; destination marketing.

Introduction. The tourism industry has entered a new stage of development characterized by rapid digitalization, technological innovation, changing consumer behaviour, and increasingly interconnected global markets. Digital technologies have transformed not only the operational activities of tourism enterprises but also the ways in which tourists search for information, evaluate alternatives, communicate their experiences, and make decisions about destinations. In this context, digital transformation can be understood as a comprehensive process through which digital technologies reshape tourism products, services, marketing practices, customer experiences, organizational processes, and destination management. The OECD emphasizes that digitalisation has become an important component of tourism competitiveness, particularly through the use of

digital infrastructure, data, online platforms, and technology-enabled visitor experiences. Among the various technologies contributing to the digital transformation of tourism, social media occupies a particularly important position. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, X, Pinterest, and travel-oriented online communities have transformed tourism communication from a predominantly one-way process into an interactive and participatory environment. Tourists are no longer simply passive recipients of promotional information produced by destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and tourism enterprises. Instead, they actively create, share, evaluate, and redistribute destination-related information through photographs, videos, reviews, comments, blogs, short-form videos, ratings, and personal travel stories. As a result, destination image is increasingly shaped through the interaction between professionally generated content and user-generated content (UGC). This transformation is particularly important because destination choice is a multidimensional decision-making process. Tourists generally consider a combination of functional, emotional, social, economic, and experiential factors before selecting a destination. These may include natural and cultural attractions, accommodation quality, transportation accessibility, safety, price, service quality, environmental conditions, entertainment opportunities, local culture, and the perceived authenticity of the destination. Social media increasingly influences how these characteristics are discovered and interpreted. Instead of relying exclusively on traditional travel agencies, guidebooks, television advertisements, or recommendations from friends and relatives, tourists can now access a large volume of real-time information from other travelers and tourism organizations through digital platforms. Social media has therefore become an important source of tourism information during the pre-travel stage. A potential tourist may encounter a destination for the first time through an Instagram photograph, a TikTok video, a YouTube travel vlog, a Facebook recommendation, or a review posted by another traveler. Such content can generate curiosity and emotional interest even before the tourist actively begins searching for information about the destination. Consequently, social media has contributed to a shift from traditional information-seeking behaviour toward a more continuous and algorithmically influenced process of destination discovery.

The importance of this phenomenon is supported by recent empirical research. Amoah and Jibrile (2024), examining 428 tourists in Ghana, found that destination image, tourism information availability, tourist gratification, and behavioural goals were important factors associated with social media use in destination decision-making. Their findings demonstrate that social media is not merely a promotional channel but can actively participate in tourists' evaluation and selection of destinations. One of the most important mechanisms through which social media influences destination choice is destination image formation. Destination image represents tourists' perceptions, beliefs, expectations, emotions, and associations concerning a particular place. It is generally understood as a multidimensional construct consisting of cognitive and affective components. The cognitive dimension relates to what tourists believe about the physical and functional characteristics of a destination, whereas the affective dimension concerns the emotions and feelings associated with that destination. Social media can influence both dimensions simultaneously. Photographs and videos may communicate cognitive information about landscapes, infrastructure, architecture, accommodation, cultural attractions, and activities, while the emotional tone of a post can create feelings of excitement, relaxation, curiosity, nostalgia, or adventure. Research on social-media-based destination content has demonstrated that both tourism-generated and user-generated content can contribute positively to destination image formation, with UGC playing a particularly important role in shaping tourists' perceptions and sustainable destination selection.

Another major factor is user-generated content (UGC). UGC includes travel photographs, videos, online reviews, ratings, comments, blogs, recommendations, and personal narratives created by tourists. Unlike traditional tourism advertising, UGC is generally perceived as being based on personal experience. This characteristic can increase its credibility and persuasive power. Tourists may consider information from other travelers more authentic because it appears to provide an independent perspective rather than a purely commercial message. The increasing importance of UGC also changes the role of destination marketing organizations. In traditional tourism marketing, DMOs had substantial control over how destinations were represented to potential visitors. In the social media environment, however, destination image is increasingly co-created by tourism organizations, businesses, residents, influencers, and tourists themselves. Consequently, destination managers can no longer rely exclusively on professionally produced promotional material. They must also monitor, understand, and engage with the large volume of content generated by tourists. Research on online destination image similarly demonstrates that user-generated social media content can reveal tourists' emotional reactions and engagement with different aspects of a destination. Closely related to UGC is electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). In the tourism context, eWOM includes online recommendations, ratings, reviews, comments, and discussions through which consumers communicate their experiences to other potential tourists. Since tourism products are largely experiential and cannot be completely evaluated before consumption, tourists frequently face uncertainty when choosing a destination. Online reviews and recommendations can reduce this uncertainty by providing information about accommodation, service quality, attractions, prices, transportation, safety, and the actual visitor experience. The credibility of eWOM can therefore significantly affect tourist trust and destination choice. Positive reviews may strengthen destination attractiveness and travel intentions, while negative reviews can reduce perceived value and increase perceived risk. At the same time, the growing importance of online reviews has created challenges related to fake reviews, manipulated ratings, misinformation, and selective presentation of tourist experiences. These challenges make the credibility and authenticity of digital tourism information increasingly important.

Visual content represents another major mechanism through which social media influences destination choice. Tourism is inherently visual because many destination attributes—landscapes, architecture, cultural events, cuisine, beaches, historical sites, and recreational activities—can be communicated effectively through photographs and videos. The development of short-form video platforms has further increased the importance of visual storytelling in destination marketing. High-quality photographs and videos can create a form of "digital pre-experience" in which tourists mentally imagine themselves visiting the destination. This can stimulate emotional responses and strengthen travel motivation. Recent research has emphasized the role of user-generated content, destination storytelling, and visually appealing content in shaping tourists' destination intentions. At the same time, visual content can create unrealistic expectations. Highly edited photographs, filters, carefully selected locations, and professionally produced videos may present destinations in ways that differ from tourists' actual experiences. This discrepancy can lead to dissatisfaction when visitors discover that the physical reality does not correspond to the image created online. Therefore, the effectiveness of social media marketing should not be evaluated only by its ability to generate attention; authenticity and consistency between digital representation and actual destination experience are equally important.

The significance of social media is particularly evident in the changing tourist decision-making process. The traditional decision-making model generally describes a sequence from need recognition to information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, consumption, and post-

purchase evaluation. In the digital tourism environment, these stages are increasingly interconnected. Tourists may discover a destination through social media, search for additional information through online reviews, compare alternatives using digital platforms, make reservations through online systems, document their experiences during the trip, and subsequently produce UGC that influences other tourists.

This creates a continuous digital feedback loop:

Social media exposure → destination awareness → information search → destination image formation → trust and perceived value → travel intention → destination choice → tourist experience → UGC/eWOM → influence on future tourists.

This feedback mechanism demonstrates that tourists are simultaneously consumers and producers of tourism information. Their experiences become part of the digital representation of the destination, which subsequently influences the decisions of other potential visitors. Despite the growing body of research on social media and tourism, several research gaps remain. First, the influence of different types of social media content is not uniform. Professionally generated content, user-generated content, influencer content, and peer reviews may have different effects on destination perceptions and behavioural intentions. Second, the role of authenticity and trust requires further investigation because the increasing commercialization of social media may reduce the credibility of tourism information. Third, algorithmic personalization creates new questions regarding how tourists' exposure to destination information is structured and whether such mechanisms narrow the diversity of destination choices. Fourth, the relationship between social media promotion and sustainable destination management requires greater attention because successful online promotion can simultaneously generate economic benefits and contribute to overtourism.

Addressing these questions is theoretically and practically important. From a theoretical perspective, understanding the relationship between social media and destination choice contributes to the growing literature on digital tourism, consumer behaviour, destination image, and technology-mediated decision-making. From a practical perspective, the findings can help destination management organizations, tourism enterprises, hotels, travel agencies, policymakers, and digital marketers develop more effective and authentic social media strategies. Ultimately, the digital transformation of tourism requires a shift from viewing social media simply as a promotional tool toward understanding it as a dynamic ecosystem in which destinations, tourists, businesses, influencers, and local communities continuously create and exchange information. The competitiveness of tourism destinations increasingly depends not only on their physical attractions but also on how these attractions are represented, interpreted, discussed, and experienced in digital environments. Consequently, understanding the influence of social media on destination choice has become an essential component of contemporary tourism research and destination management.

Literature Review. The relationship between digital transformation, social media, and tourist decision-making has become one of the most actively investigated areas within contemporary tourism research. The rapid development of digital platforms has fundamentally changed the ways in which tourism destinations communicate with potential visitors and how tourists search for, evaluate, share, and consume destination-related information. Traditional tourism communication was largely characterized by a one-directional flow of information from destination marketing organizations (DMOs), travel agencies, tour operators, and other tourism businesses toward consumers. The development of social media has transformed this model into an interactive and participatory communication environment in which tourists themselves have become active creators, distributors, and evaluators of tourism information. A systematic review of 114 peer-

reviewed studies on social media and destination branding identified five major research dimensions: destination brand strategy, user-generated content, cognitive dimensions, affective dimensions, and behavioural dimensions. This classification demonstrates that social media should not be considered merely a promotional instrument but rather as a multidimensional mechanism influencing destination perception, emotional responses, and tourist behaviour.

Social Media and the Digital Transformation of Tourism. Digital transformation in tourism refers to the integration of digital technologies into tourism marketing, distribution, communication, customer relationship management, service delivery, and destination management. Social media represents one of the most visible components of this transformation because it enables tourism stakeholders to communicate directly with consumers while simultaneously allowing consumers to communicate with each other. The literature indicates that the significance of social media in tourism has developed beyond conventional advertising. Social platforms facilitate information search, destination discovery, peer-to-peer communication, online reviews, visual storytelling, influencer marketing, and post-travel experience sharing. As a result, social media is involved throughout almost the entire tourist journey, from initial awareness of a destination to post-visit evaluation and recommendation. This development has also changed the traditional power structure of destination marketing. Previously, destination marketing organizations exercised considerable control over the information and images associated with destinations. In the social media environment, however, tourists, local residents, bloggers, influencers, tourism businesses, and online communities all participate in destination image construction. Thus, destination branding has increasingly become a process of co-creation rather than a process controlled exclusively by tourism organizations. The literature further demonstrates that this transformation is not limited to highly developed tourism markets. Empirical research conducted in Ghana, for example, found that tourist contentment, destination image, behavioural goals, and tourism information availability were significant driving forces in the relationship between social media use and destination decisions. This finding is particularly important because it demonstrates that social media can influence tourist decision-making even in less digitalized and emerging tourism economies.

Destination Image as a Central Concept in Tourism Decision-Making. Destination image represents one of the most important theoretical concepts for understanding tourist destination choice. It refers to the set of beliefs, perceptions, associations, expectations, and emotional evaluations that tourists hold regarding a particular destination. The literature generally conceptualizes destination image through cognitive and affective dimensions. The cognitive dimension refers to tourists' perceptions of destination attributes, including natural resources, cultural attractions, infrastructure, accommodation, transportation, safety, service quality, entertainment, and accessibility. The affective dimension, in contrast, concerns tourists' emotional responses to the destination, such as whether a destination is perceived as exciting, relaxing, pleasant, attractive, stimulating, or boring. The development of social media has significantly expanded the sources from which destination images are formed. Tourists can now encounter thousands of photographs, videos, reviews, comments, and personal narratives before visiting a destination. Consequently, destination image is no longer formed exclusively through official promotional campaigns or traditional mass media. A major empirical study published in *Tourism Management* in 2024 examined social media affordances and destination image formation using data from 1,751 pieces of tourist data. The study found that social media affordances significantly influenced both cognitive and affective destination images. It also demonstrated that parasocial interaction partially mediated these relationships and that cognitive and affective images contributed to the formation of conative image. These findings are important because they indicate

that social media does not simply provide information about destinations. Rather, the interactive characteristics of digital platforms can influence how tourists cognitively understand and emotionally evaluate destinations. This supports the argument that social media should be analyzed as an active component of destination image formation.

User-Generated Content and Destination Image. One of the most significant developments in tourism communication is the emergence of user-generated content (UGC). UGC includes photographs, videos, travel blogs, online reviews, ratings, comments, recommendations, social media posts, and personal travel narratives created by consumers rather than tourism organizations. The importance of UGC stems primarily from its perceived authenticity. Traditional advertising is generally recognized as commercially motivated, whereas content produced by tourists may be perceived as a reflection of actual experience. This difference can influence the level of trust tourists place in destination information. Research on social-media-based destination content has demonstrated that both tour-operator-generated content and UGC positively influence destination image formation. However, the same study found that UGC had a stronger influence on sustainable destination selection than tour-operator-generated content. The research, based on 425 respondents in Shanghai, further demonstrated that cognitive and affective destination images function as important mediating mechanisms between social media content and destination selection intentions. This finding suggests that the influence of UGC does not operate exclusively through direct persuasion. Instead, UGC first contributes to tourists' perceptions and emotions regarding a destination, which subsequently affects behavioural intentions. Recent bibliometric research also confirms the increasing importance of UGC in destination image research. A 2024 bibliometric analysis examined 89 publications indexed in Scopus between 2010 and 2023 and demonstrated the growing academic interest in the relationship between UGC and tourism destination images. At the same time, the literature does not suggest that UGC is always more influential than traditional or professionally generated media. A 2024 study comparing UGC and mainstream media in hot spring tourism examined 575 international tourists and found no statistically significant difference between the two sources in shaping cognitive and affective destination image. This result is theoretically significant because it challenges the assumption that UGC is inherently more persuasive than conventional tourism communication. The effectiveness of a particular information source may depend on destination type, tourist characteristics, perceived credibility, content quality, and the context in which information is consumed.

Electronic Word-of-Mouth and Tourist Trust. Another important concept in the literature is electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). eWOM refers to positive or negative statements made by actual or potential consumers about products, services, brands, or destinations and distributed through online communication channels. Tourism is particularly dependent on eWOM because destinations are largely experiential products. Potential tourists cannot fully evaluate the quality of a destination before visiting it. Consequently, they frequently rely on the experiences and opinions of previous visitors to reduce uncertainty. Online reviews provide tourists with information concerning accommodation, hospitality, food, attractions, transportation, prices, cleanliness, safety, and service quality. Positive reviews may increase perceived value and trust, whereas negative reviews may increase perceived risk and discourage destination selection. The literature suggests that eWOM should therefore be considered an important bridge between social media information and tourist decision-making. Its effectiveness depends not only on the valence of information but also on its perceived credibility, detail, consistency, recency, and relevance. A 2024 systematic review of 41 Web of Science-indexed studies identified eWOM, content quality, destination features, and usability among the major factors influencing tourist destination decisions. The

review also emphasized that content endorsers, information sources, contextual factors, and user characteristics can moderate the influence of social media on destination choice. This suggests that the impact of eWOM cannot be understood independently from the characteristics of the information source and the characteristics of the tourist. For example, a highly detailed review from a traveler perceived as similar to the potential tourist may have greater persuasive value than a generic promotional message.

Visual Content and Tourist Decision-Making. Tourism is inherently visual. Natural landscapes, historical monuments, architecture, cuisine, cultural performances, beaches, mountains, hotels, and recreational activities can be communicated particularly effectively through photographs and videos. Therefore, the development of image- and video-oriented social media platforms has had a significant impact on tourism marketing and tourist behaviour. Research on user-generated photography has expanded considerably. A systematic review of 106 academic articles published between 2006 and 2021 identified four major themes: motivations for photo sharing, destination image perception, tourists' spatiotemporal behaviour, and the impact of user-generated photographs. The review also demonstrated that analytical methods have become increasingly capable of processing large volumes of visual tourism data. Visual content can influence destination choice through several mechanisms. First, it increases destination awareness. Second, it helps tourists construct mental representations of a destination. Third, attractive images can stimulate positive emotions. Fourth, photographs and videos allow tourists to imagine themselves experiencing the destination. Recent research using self-referencing and mental imagery theories found that image-based user-generated advertising can influence tourists' interest in destinations through mental imagery. The effect was also influenced by the relationship between image type, tourists' characteristics, and destination type. This indicates that visual content should not be treated as merely decorative marketing material. It can represent a psychological mechanism through which tourists mentally simulate a potential travel experience.

Destination Storytelling and Emotional Engagement. Beyond individual photographs, social media has enabled the development of destination storytelling. Storytelling involves presenting destinations through narratives that connect places with people, experiences, emotions, history, culture, and identity. The tourism literature increasingly emphasizes that tourists do not select destinations solely according to functional characteristics. Emotional meaning and personal relevance also play important roles. A destination may become attractive because its story corresponds to a tourist's aspirations, identity, lifestyle, or desired experience. Social media provides particularly suitable conditions for storytelling because short videos, reels, blogs, captions, photographs, and live streams allow destinations to be represented through sequential and emotionally engaging narratives. Recent research has specifically examined the effects of UGC, visual appeal, and destination storytelling on destination intentions, identifying these forms of digital content as important components of social media tourism marketing. From a theoretical perspective, storytelling may strengthen the affective component of destination image. Instead of simply informing tourists that a destination contains a historical monument or natural attraction, storytelling allows them to understand why the location is meaningful and what type of experience they may have there. Overall, the literature indicates that social media has evolved from a supplementary marketing channel into a central component of the tourism information ecosystem. Its influence on destination choice operates through multiple interconnected mechanisms. The first mechanism is information accessibility, because social media allows tourists to obtain large amounts of destination information quickly. The second is destination image formation, through which visual and textual content shapes cognitive and affective perceptions. The third is social

proof, represented by reviews, ratings, recommendations, and UGC. The fourth is emotional engagement, generated through storytelling, photographs, videos, and personal narratives. The fifth is influencer-mediated persuasion, through which trusted digital personalities shape destination perceptions. The sixth is algorithmic personalization, which determines which destinations and tourism experiences users are repeatedly exposed to.

These mechanisms can be integrated into a broader conceptual relationship:

Social Media Content + Social Media Affordances → Destination Information Processing → Cognitive and Affective Destination Image → Trust/Authenticity → Travel Intention → Destination Choice → Tourist Experience → UGC/eWOM → Future Destination Perceptions.

Such a framework provides a stronger theoretical foundation for examining digital transformation in tourism because it recognizes that destination choice is not caused by a single type of social media content. Instead, it emerges from the interaction of technological, informational, psychological, social, and behavioural factors. Consequently, the present study builds on existing research by examining social media as an integrated digital ecosystem rather than simply as an advertising medium. Particular attention is given to the relationships among user-generated content, electronic word-of-mouth, visual content, influencer communication, destination image, authenticity, trust, and tourist destination choice. This approach provides an opportunity to explain not only whether social media influences destination choice but also how, through which mechanisms, and under what conditions such influence occurs.

Results and Discussion. The analysis of the existing literature indicates that social media has become a fundamental component of tourists' destination decision-making processes. The findings demonstrate that the influence of social media is multidimensional and operates through several interconnected mechanisms, including information accessibility, destination image formation, user-generated content (UGC), electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), visual attractiveness, storytelling, influencer communication, perceived authenticity, trust, and social engagement. The literature-based analysis suggests that social media should not be conceptualized simply as an additional promotional channel for tourism organizations. Instead, it functions as a dynamic information and interaction ecosystem in which destinations, tourism organizations, businesses, influencers, residents, and tourists continuously produce, distribute, evaluate, and reinterpret destination-related information. Previous empirical evidence strongly supports this conclusion. For example, research involving 428 tourists in Ghana found that tourist contentment, destination image, behavioural goals, and tourism information availability were important driving forces connecting social media use with destination decisions. Similarly, research conducted among 425 respondents in Shanghai demonstrated that both tour-operator-generated content and user-generated content positively influence destination image formation and sustainable destination choice, with UGC demonstrating a particularly strong influence. Therefore, the principal result of the present analysis is that social media influences destination choice not through one isolated variable but through a chain of cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioural mechanisms.

The general relationship can be represented as follows:

Social Media Exposure → Information Search → Destination Image → Trust and Perceived Authenticity → Travel Intention → Destination Choice → Tourist Experience → UGC/eWOM → Influence on Other Tourists.

This circular process demonstrates that tourists are simultaneously consumers and producers of tourism information.

One of the most evident findings is that social media significantly increases destination awareness. Traditional tourism marketing often requires consumers to intentionally search for

information about a particular destination. In contrast, social media allows destinations to appear spontaneously in users' digital environments. Photographs, short-form videos, travel stories, recommendations, hashtags, advertisements, influencer publications, and algorithmically recommended content can introduce users to destinations that they had not previously considered. This mechanism is particularly important for emerging and lesser-known destinations. A destination with limited international marketing resources can potentially achieve substantial visibility if its landscapes, cultural heritage, architecture, cuisine, or unique experiences generate high levels of digital engagement. The findings indicate that destination awareness is therefore increasingly determined by both intentional information search and incidental digital exposure. This represents an important transformation in tourist behaviour because destination discovery may occur before the consumer has developed an explicit intention to travel. The 2024 quantitative study of social media and tourist destination choices similarly emphasizes that platforms such as Instagram and YouTube function as sources of travel inspiration and can influence the process through which tourists discover and select destinations.

The Role of User-Generated Content in Destination Choice. A particularly significant finding concerns the role of user-generated content. UGC includes travel photographs, videos, reviews, ratings, blogs, vlogs, comments, and personal narratives created by tourists. The analysis demonstrates that UGC has a strong influence on destination choice because it provides information that is perceived as more experience-based and authentic than conventional advertising. Tourists can observe how other people experienced a destination and use these experiences as reference points for their own decisions. The empirical evidence from Shanghai supports this interpretation. Tour-operator-generated content and UGC were both found to positively influence cognitive and affective destination images, while UGC had a stronger influence on sustainable destination selection. Similarly, research examining travel blogs and vlogs found that tourists demonstrated a stronger preference for these forms of UGC compared with traditional destination marketing organization content. The study, based on 220 Indian tourists, suggests that blogs and vlogs can play an important role in travel decision-making because they provide detailed and experience-oriented information. These findings indicate that tourism organizations should not attempt to replace UGC with professionally produced promotional content. Instead, they should create conditions that encourage tourists to generate authentic and positive content. From a destination-management perspective, this means that encouraging visitor participation, facilitating social media sharing, creating visually attractive but authentic tourism experiences, and responding to online reviews can become important components of destination marketing.

The Importance of Visual Content. Another major finding concerns the role of photographs and videos in influencing destination preferences. Tourism is an inherently visual industry, and social media intensifies this characteristic. Images allow potential tourists to form mental representations of places before physically visiting them. High-quality photographs and videos can communicate landscapes, architecture, food, cultural activities, people, and experiences more rapidly than lengthy textual descriptions. A 2024 mixed-method study examining social media travel photographs found that categories such as nature and landscapes, ways of life, architecture/buildings, and people influenced future destination choices. The study combined qualitative interviews with quantitative analysis of 388 respondents, demonstrating the importance of photographic attractiveness in destination-choice intentions. Similarly, large-scale research examining more than 27,000 Instagram posts using machine-learning and deep-learning techniques found that photographs focusing on points of interest generated higher engagement than photographs focused on hospitality services. Images containing people also generated greater

engagement, while tourist-generated content strengthened the effect of human presence on engagement. These findings suggest that successful tourism content should communicate not only *where* a tourist can go but also *what it feels like to be there*. Consequently, destination marketers should prioritize visual storytelling that incorporates people, experiences, local culture, landscapes, and authentic moments rather than relying exclusively on standardized promotional photographs.

Storytelling and Emotional Engagement. The findings also indicate that storytelling is an important mechanism through which social media can transform destination information into emotional experience. A simple photograph may communicate that a destination is visually attractive. However, a narrative can provide additional meaning by explaining the history, cultural significance, personal experience, or emotional context associated with the location. Research published in 2024 specifically examined the effects of UGC, destination storytelling, and visually appealing content on tourists' destination intentions. The findings reinforce the importance of combining informative and emotional elements within social media tourism communication. Storytelling can strengthen destination attachment because tourists may begin to associate the destination with particular values, lifestyles, memories, or aspirations. For example, a historical destination may be promoted not simply as a collection of monuments but as a place associated with a centuries-old civilization, local traditions, human stories, and cultural identity. This approach can transform a physical attraction into an emotionally meaningful tourism experience. Therefore, the findings suggest that tourism organizations should move from simple destination promotion toward experience-oriented digital storytelling.

Integrated Discussion of the Findings. Taken together, the findings demonstrate that social media influences destination choice through a complex combination of informational, psychological, social, technological, and behavioural mechanisms.

The most important relationships identified in the analysis can be summarized as follows:

Factor	Main influence on tourist behaviour
User-generated content	Increases perceived authenticity and information credibility
eWOM and reviews	Reduces uncertainty and perceived risk
Visual content	Strengthens destination attractiveness and mental imagery
Storytelling	Creates emotional connection and destination attachment
Influencers	Provides social proof and personalized recommendations
Destination image	Converts information into cognitive and affective evaluations
Social engagement	Strengthens interaction and behavioural involvement
Authenticity	Increases trust and expectation consistency
Algorithmic personalization	Shapes destination exposure and information availability
Sustainability-oriented content	Influences responsible destination perceptions

The findings consequently support an integrated conceptual model in which social media affects destination choice through both direct and indirect pathways.

Overall, the results indicate that social media has fundamentally changed the nature of tourism decision-making. Its influence extends beyond destination promotion and reaches the cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioural dimensions of tourist choice. The strongest conclusion emerging from the analysis is that social media does not simply tell tourists where to travel; it increasingly influences how tourists perceive, imagine, evaluate, trust, and emotionally connect with destinations. User-generated content provides social proof and authenticity, visual content stimulates mental imagery, storytelling creates emotional meaning, influencers provide personalized recommendations, reviews reduce uncertainty, and destination image integrates these

informational and emotional influences into an overall perception of the destination. At the same time, the influence of social media creates important challenges. Misinformation, fake reviews, excessive commercialization, unrealistic visual representations, algorithmic bias, privacy concerns, and overtourism can undermine the positive potential of digital tourism. Therefore, the future of digital tourism marketing should be based not merely on maximizing visibility but on creating credible, authentic, engaging, personalized, and sustainable digital destination experiences. The most competitive destinations will be those capable of combining technological innovation with genuine visitor experiences and responsible destination management. The findings ultimately support the view that digital transformation has changed tourism from a relatively linear communication process into a continuous cycle of content creation, information exchange, destination image formation, tourist decision-making, experience sharing, and subsequent digital influence. Understanding this cycle is essential for both tourism researchers and practitioners seeking to develop effective destination marketing strategies in an increasingly digital global tourism environment.

Conclusion. The digital transformation of the tourism industry has fundamentally changed the way destinations are promoted, perceived, evaluated, and selected by tourists. The findings of this study demonstrate that social media has evolved from a supplementary communication channel into a central component of the contemporary tourism information ecosystem. Its influence extends beyond conventional destination promotion and affects tourists' information search, destination image formation, trust, emotional engagement, travel intentions, and final destination choices. The analysis confirms that social media influences destination choice through a combination of interconnected mechanisms rather than through a single direct effect. User-generated content (UGC), electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), visual content, destination storytelling, social media influencers, platform affordances, destination image, perceived authenticity, and tourist engagement collectively contribute to the decision-making process. This indicates that the relationship between social media and destination choice should be understood as multidimensional and dynamic. One of the most important conclusions is that destination image represents a central mechanism through which social media influences tourist behaviour. Social media content can shape both cognitive and affective perceptions of destinations. Cognitive image is associated with tourists' perceptions of attractions, infrastructure, accessibility, safety, accommodation, service quality, and other functional characteristics, whereas affective image reflects emotional responses such as excitement, relaxation, attractiveness, authenticity, and cultural interest. Recent empirical evidence confirms that social media affordances can significantly influence both cognitive and affective destination images, while these images subsequently contribute to conative destination-image formation. The study also demonstrates the growing importance of user-generated content. Tourists increasingly rely on photographs, videos, reviews, blogs, comments, ratings, and personal travel narratives created by other users. Such content can be perceived as more authentic and experience-based than conventional promotional communication. Consequently, UGC can increase tourists' confidence in destination information and reduce uncertainty associated with travel decisions. Previous research similarly demonstrates that both tour-operator-generated content and user-generated content can contribute to destination image formation and destination selection. Future empirical research should test the proposed relationships using survey data, structural equation modelling, experimental designs, social media analytics, sentiment analysis, and longitudinal methods. Comparative studies across countries, tourism segments, social media platforms, and demographic groups would also provide a deeper understanding of how digital environments influence destination choice. In conclusion, social media has become a strategic

determinant of contemporary tourist destination choice. Its importance lies not simply in its capacity to distribute information but in its ability to shape perceptions, emotions, trust, social influence, and expectations. The future competitiveness of tourism destinations will increasingly depend on their capacity to combine technological innovation with authentic experiences, effective digital communication, responsible destination management, and sustainable tourism development.

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