Balancing Social Media Reviews and Mass Media Coverage in Tourism Destination Image Building

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Abstract

The image of a tourism destination plays a crucial role in attracting visitors and maintaining its competitiveness in the global market. This study examines the interaction between social media and mass media in shaping destination image, highlighting their complementary roles and the challenges in balancing their influence. Social media, characterized by its speed, interactivity, and user-generated content (UGC), provides early exposure to destinations, enabling rapid dissemination of information through viral campaigns, influencer promotions, and traveler reviews. However, it is often criticized for its lack of credibility, susceptibility to misinformation, and exaggerated portrayals. Conversely, mass media offers higher credibility and long-term influence through feature articles, expert testimonials, and structured storytelling, although it lacks social media's immediacy and engagement levels. This study employs a qualitative case study approach, utilizing content analysis of social media and mass media platforms and semi-structured interviews with 20 tourists and five destination managers. Findings indicate that 70% of tourists prefer social media for travel planning, as it provides real-time reviews and visually engaging content, while 30% rely on mass media for more credible and in-depth information. Destination managers adopt different strategies based on the type of tourism they promote; nature-based and urban destinations favor social media for rapid engagement, whereas cultural and historical destinations prioritize mass media for credibility and structured narratives. The Media Balance Model in Building Tourism Destination Image is proposed as a framework for integrating social media's exposure and mass media's credibility. The study underscores the importance of a holistic communication strategy, where social media is used for immediate attraction and engagement, while mass media reinforces long-term trust and reputation. As a practical implication, tourism stakeholders are advised to actively monitor online sentiment, manage crisis communication effectively, and collaborate with both media types to create a consistent and sustainable destination image.

Keywords: Destination Image, Social Media, Mass Media, e-WOM, Tourism Marketing, Crisis Management.

A. INTRODUCTION

The image of a tourism destination is a key element in attracting tourists and maintaining its competitiveness in the global market (Pike, 2020). This image is shaped by official promotions from governments and industry stakeholders and various forms of digital communication, particularly through social media and mass media (Leung et al., 2013). Social media has revolutionized how tourists obtain information, with platforms like TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, Instagram, and TikTok serving as primary sources in shaping perceptions of a destination. Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) allows tourists to share their experiences directly and influence the travel decisions of others more rapidly than traditional forms of communication (Litvin et al., 2008; Wulandari et al., 2023). On the other hand, mass media, such as newspapers, television, and online news portals, continue to play a crucial role in shaping destination images through in-depth coverage, feature articles, and official reports, which are often perceived as more credible than individual opinions on social media (Avraham, 2016).

However, the imbalance between social media's dominance and mass media's role presents challenges in managing destination image perception. Studies indicate that negative reviews that go viral on social media can significantly impact tourist perceptions, potentially damaging a destination's reputation quickly (Gabbard, 2023). For instance, incidents exposed on social media, such as hygiene issues or poor service, often spread faster than clarifications or positive news reports from mass media (Susanto et al., 2024; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Meanwhile, positive coverage from mass media, which is generally perceived as more credible and enduring, often takes longer to reach a wide audience (Sharma et al., 2017). Therefore, balancing the influence of social media and mass media is a significant challenge for tourism destination managers in ensuring a consistent and sustainable image.

Understanding how these two media interact in shaping tourist perceptions has become increasingly important in this context. Previous studies suggest that tourists rely on various information sources before making travel decisions (Schroeder & Pennington-Gray, 2015; Suryana et al., 2024; Susanto et al., 2024). Thus, an effective strategy is needed to manage communication across both media channels, ensuring a positive and trustworthy image of the destination. This study aims to analyze social media's and mass media's roles in shaping destination image and identify optimal strategies for balancing both media types to create a strong and sustainable perception among tourists.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review discusses key concepts relevant to studying social media's and mass media's role in shaping tourism destination image. Several theoretical frameworks and prior research studies are examined, including 1) Destination Image Theory, 2) The Role of Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) in Tourism, 3) Framing Theory in Mass Media, and 4) Empirical Studies on the Influence of Social Media and Mass Media on Destination Image.

Destination Image Theory

A destination image refers to the perceptions, impressions, and expectations tourists have of a place before visiting it (Gallarza et al., 2002). This theory highlights two primary dimensions: cognitive image, which relates to knowledge and information about the destination, and affective image, which involves tourists' emotions or feelings toward it (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). (Gartner, 1994) further categorizes destination image formation through three main sources: organic sources, which come from personal experiences or word-of-mouth recommendations; induced sources, created by marketers through promotional campaigns; and autonomous sources, which include media coverage such as social media and mass media. In the digital era, social media and mass media play increasingly complex roles in shaping destination image. Social media offers fast, interactive, and user-generated content, while mass media provides in-depth and highly credible information (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2023). This interplay between the two media types presents challenges for destination managers in ensuring a balanced and positive perception of the destination among potential visitors.

Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) on Tourism

Electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) refers to spreading tourist opinions through digital platforms such as social media, travel blogs, and review sites (Litvin et al., 2008). Compared to traditional word-of-mouth (WOM), e-WOM has a wider reach and spreads faster, significantly influencing tourist perceptions as it is easily accessible worldwide (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Research (Gabbard, 2023) reveals that most travelers rely on online reviews before visiting a destination, with social media content often dominating search results. Similarly, a study by (Reza Jalilvand and Samiei, 2012) found that positive social media reviews can significantly enhance a

destination's attractiveness, whereas viral negative reviews can harm its reputation (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). As a result, destination managers must adopt effective e-WOM management strategies, such as responding promptly to negative feedback and engaging with tourists on digital platforms.

Framing Theory in Mass Media

Framing theory explains how mass media selects, organizes, and presents information in ways that shape public perception of an issue (Entman, 1993). In tourism, mass media often frames destinations through features of natural beauty, culture, and hospitality, creating a desirable image. However, the media can also highlight negative aspects, such as safety concerns, political conflicts, or environmental issues, which may reduce tourist interest (Govers et al., 2007). A study found that positive mass media coverage builds a strong destination image in the long term, while negative coverage can quickly damage a destination's reputation (Kim & Richardson, 2003). To counteract negative media framing, governments and tourism stakeholders often use mass media for crisis recovery (Avraham, 2016). For example, destinations affected by natural disasters or political instability use news coverage to narrate recovery efforts, aiming to restore tourist confidence.

Empirical Studies on the Influence of Social Media and Mass Media on Destination Image

Several studies have examined the effects of social media and mass media on destination image formation. Findings suggest combining both media types is more effective than relying on only one. Tourists trust firsthand experiences shared on social media more than official promotional content from travel agencies or governments (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2023). Similarly, (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010) highlighted that search engine results for destinations are often dominated by social media content, reinforcing the platform's role in shaping initial travel decisions. Conversely, (Avraham, 2016) examined how mass media helps restore the reputation of crisis-affected destinations. Positive media reports often contribute to a long-term increase in tourist arrivals, particularly for lesser-known destinations (Sharma et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, (Litvin et al., 2008) emphasized that although social media has a faster impact on tourist opinions, mass media tends to have more lasting effects due to its higher credibility. (Gabbard, 2023) also pointed out that viral negative reviews on social media are harder to control than negative reports in mass media, as social media content spreads rapidly and is difficult to remove once circulated. This finding highlights the need for destination managers to proactively monitor and engage with content across both media types to maintain a balanced and sustainable destination image.

C. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study method to analyze how social media and mass media interact in shaping the image of tourism destinations. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the dynamic balance between user-generated reviews on social media and news coverage in mass media in forming tourists' perceptions of a destination. The exploratory study utilizes content analysis to examine how these two media influence destination image. Data was collected from various social media platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and TripAdvisor, as well as from online mass media sources such as CNN Travel, National Geographic, and Lonely Planet. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourists and destination managers to gain firsthand insights into how social media and mass media shape their perceptions of tourism destinations.

The data collection process involved two primary sources: secondary data from social media and mass media and primary data from interviews with tourists and destination managers. Social media data was collected using web scraping techniques and text analysis to identify trends in tourist opinions about selected destinations. The key parameters analyzed in social media reviews included sentiment analysis (positive, negative, neutral), engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments), and recurring themes in tourist discussions. For mass media,

content analysis was performed on news articles and reports discussing selected tourism destinations, focusing on how news framing in mass media influences the public perception of a destination.

In addition to content analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 tourists actively using social media for travel research and five destination managers responsible for marketing and public relations. These interviews aimed to explore how tourists assess the credibility of information from both media types and how destination managers utilize social media and mass media in their promotional strategies. The collected data was analyzed using sentiment analysis and thematic analysis. Sentiment analysis was applied to social media reviews to determine whether the prevailing perception of the destination was positive, negative, or neutral. Meanwhile, thematic analysis was used on interview transcripts to identify patterns in tourists' perceptions of social media and mass media in shaping destination image. Findings from these two analyses were then compared to assess whether significant differences exist between how social media and mass media construct destination images. The study also examined how these two media can be balanced to create a more consistent and credible destination image.

To ensure the validity of the findings, this study applied source triangulation, comparing data obtained from social media, mass media, and interviews. Additionally, member checking was conducted with selected respondents to confirm that data interpretations accurately reflected their perspectives. A double coding method was used to enhance research reliability, where two independent researchers analyzed the same content to minimize subjective bias. Despite offering valuable insights into the role of social media and mass media in shaping destination image, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis focuses on selected destinations, meaning the findings may not be fully generalizable to all tourism destinations. Second, since opinions on social media change quickly, the findings of this study are contextual and may not remain relevant in the long term. Future research should adopt a longitudinal approach to address these limitations, analyzing destination image formation over an extended period. This would help develop more effective strategies for balancing social media and mass media influence in tourism marketing.

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Content Analysis of Social Media and Mass Media in Destination Image Formation

The social media content analysis reveals that the image of a tourism destination formed through traveler reviews is dynamic and emotionally driven. Data from TripAdvisor, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok indicate that most travelers share personal experiences, whether positive or negative. Sentiment analysis of over 500 social media posts related to the selected case study destinations shows that 65% carry a positive sentiment, 20% are neutral, and 15% have a negative sentiment. The dominant themes in positive posts include natural beauty, local hospitality, unique experiences, and recommendations for hidden tourist spots. On the other hand, negative posts frequently highlight issues such as cleanliness, overpriced services, and unsatisfactory customer service.

Conversely, the analysis of mass media coverage suggests that news reports about tourism destinations are more informative and structured, adopting a formal and fact-based approach. Established travel media outlets such as CNN Travel, National Geographic, and Lonely Planet commonly feature destinations through travel articles, destination guides, and expert recommendations. Out of 50 analyzed articles, 80% framed the destination positively by emphasizing historical and cultural aspects and unique attractions. Only 10% of the articles framed the destination negatively, mostly regarding security concerns or environmental impacts of mass tourism. Unlike social media, where negative sentiments can spread rapidly and become difficult to control, mass media coverage tends to be more regulated and has a long-term impact on shaping the destination's image.

Comparison of the Influence of Social Media and Mass Media on Tourist Perception

Table 1 presents data indicating that 14 out of 20 respondents (70%) prefer social media as their primary source of information when searching for travel destinations. The main reasons cited include the speed of information dissemination, visually appealing content, firsthand experiences shared by fellow travelers, and easy accessibility through online searches. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and TripAdvisor frequently are primary references in determining which destinations to visit. Meanwhile, 6 out of 20 respondents (30%) rely more on mass media sources such as CNN Travel, National Geographic, and Lonely Planet when seeking travel information. These respondents, mostly aged 35 and above, believe that social media content is often exaggerated or subjective, whereas mass media is perceived as more credible due to its verification and editorial processes before publication. These findings suggest that age and information consumption habits significantly influence travelers' preferences in selecting travel information sources. Younger travelers tend to respond more favorably to social media content due to its fast, interactive, and community-driven nature. In contrast, older travelers are more cautious in choosing their destinations, preferring mass media sources, which they perceive as more accurate and reliable.

Table 1. Summary of Interview Findings on the Influence of Social Media and Mass Media on Tourist Perceptions

Aspect	Social Media	Mass Media
Level of Trust	More trusted by younger tourists (ages 18–35) as reviews are considered more authentic and experience-based.	More trusted by selective and cautious travelers, especially those over 35, who seek verified information.
Accessibility	Easily accessible through quick searches on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and TripAdvisor.	Harder to access directly; usually found through special articles, travel reports, or news sites.
Speed of Information Dissemination	Extremely fast, with high potential for virality, but often lacks verification.	Slower than social media, but information is more structured and verified before publication.
Impact on Tourist Decisions	70% of respondents are more likely to choose a destination based on social media user reviews.	30% of respondents seek validation from articles or news reports before deciding.
Type of Information Provided	Tends to be subjective, based on personal experiences, and often emotionally driven.	Tends to be objective, fact-based, and provides a broader destination perspective.
Advantages	Capable of creating new travel trends and rapidly increasing destination visibility.	Provides credibility and in-depth perspectives on a destination in the long term.
Disadvantages	Prone to spreading false information (hoaxes) or biased opinions. Viral negative reviews are difficult to control.	Not always updated quickly, making information sometimes less relevant to current travel trends.

Source: Research Data, 2025

Table 1 illustrates that while social media is highly influential in shaping immediate perceptions and travel trends, mass media remains an important source for credibility and long-term destination branding. The results emphasize the need for a balanced strategy that leverages the advantages of both media types to create a consistent and sustainable destination image.

Based on Table 2, it was found that three out of five destination managers rely more on social media for their marketing strategies. The primary reason for this preference is that social media allows for rapid information dissemination, greater flexibility in adapting to tourism trends, and stronger appeal to younger, digitally active travelers. Destinations such as nature-based tourism, marine tourism, and urban tourism rely heavily on social media due to its visual-centric content, which can quickly capture the attention of potential tourists. Meanwhile, two out of five destination managers place greater emphasis on mass media, particularly for cultural and historical tourism. They argue that mass media provides higher credibility and more in-depth information than social media, which is often perceived as too superficial or inaccurate. Cultural and historical destinations require a more structured narrative, making coverage from reputable media outlets such as National Geographic, BBC Travel, and The Guardian more effective in establishing a strong and authentic

destination image. These findings highlight the importance of a tailored media strategy, where different destinations benefit from different promotional approaches. While social media is ideal for dynamic and visually appealing content, mass media remains crucial for credibility and in-depth storytelling. Therefore, destination managers must strategically integrate both media channels to maximize the reach and reliability of their tourism marketing efforts.

Table 2. Summary of Interview Findings on the Utilization of Social Media and Mass Media by Destination Managers

Aspect	Social Media	Mass Media
Level of Trust	More frequently used to attract young tourists and increase destination exposure rapidly.	Used to build credibility and provide in-depth information about destinations.
Accessibility	Easily accessible through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter.	Information is commonly found in feature articles, documentaries, or online media reports, which are not always updated in real time.
Speed of Information Dissemination	Extremely fast, allowing high virality and the rapid spread of travel trends within hours.	Slower compared to social media but provides a long-term impact on destination image.
Impact on Destination Promotion	Effective in creating instant appeal, particularly for nature-based, marine, and urban tourism.	More effective in building an authentic image for cultural and historical tourism.
Type of Information Provided	Often based on tourists' personal experiences, usually in the form of reviews, photos, and short videos.	Tends to be objective and research-based, often presented as long-form articles or documentaries.
Advantages	Capable of reaching a wider audience quickly and increasing direct engagement with tourists.	Higher credibility and the ability to shape a destination's image in the long term.
Disadvantages	Prone to misinformation and the spread of negative reviews that are difficult to control.	Does not always reflect the latest travel trends and is less flexible in adapting to market changes.
Utilization Strategy	Uses influencers, travel bloggers, and digital storytelling campaigns to attract tourists.	Collaborates with major media outlets to publish feature articles and documentaries that strengthen destination branding.

Source: Research Data, 2025

Despite the differences in media use, almost all destination managers recognize the importance of balancing social media and mass media. A common strategy is to use social media to increase initial exposure and attract young travelers, while mass media strengthens credibility and provides more in-depth information. Some managers also use influencers and travel bloggers as a bridge between the two media so that their destination can be widely promoted through various platforms.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that social media and mass media play complementary roles in shaping the image of tourism destinations. Social media serves as a platform that enables fast interactions, user-generated experiences, and high virality potential. In contrast, mass media provides greater credibility, verified information, and long-term influence on a destination's image. These fundamental differences affect how tourists obtain and trust information about a destination and how destination managers incorporate both media types into their marketing strategies. Interviews with tourists reveal that most respondents rely on social media during the initial stage of travel information search. The main reasons for this preference are that social media provides real-time reviews of firsthand experiences from fellow travelers and is easily accessible through online searches. These findings align with the research of (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010), which suggests that modern travelers increasingly depend on User-Generated Content (UGC) when planning their trips. However, some respondents still seek validation from official news sources to ensure the accuracy of the information obtained

from social media. This indicates that while social media is dominant in shaping tourists' initial decisions, mass media remains essential for building trust and providing deeper insights into tourism destinations.

Destination managers adopt different strategies in leveraging both types of media, depending on the type of tourism they manage. Nature-based, marine, and urban tourism destinations rely more on social media, as it creates new travel trends, attracts younger tourists, and enhances engagement with audiences. Conversely, historical and cultural tourism destinations favor mass media, as it is better suited for presenting in-depth, authentic, and educational information to visitors. Despite these differences, most destination managers agree that integrating social and mass media is the most effective strategy. Social media generates initial exposure and emotional appeal, while mass media strengthens credibility and provides a broader context about the destination. These findings align with integrated marketing communication (IMC) in tourism (Govers & Go, 2009), emphasizing the need to balance digital and traditional media communication to establish a strong and sustainable destination image.

Based on these findings, a media balance model for destination image building can be developed, integrating social media and mass media roles within destination marketing strategies. This model suggests an optimal destination image is achieved when social media exposure and mass media credibility are strategically combined, as illustrated in Figure 1.
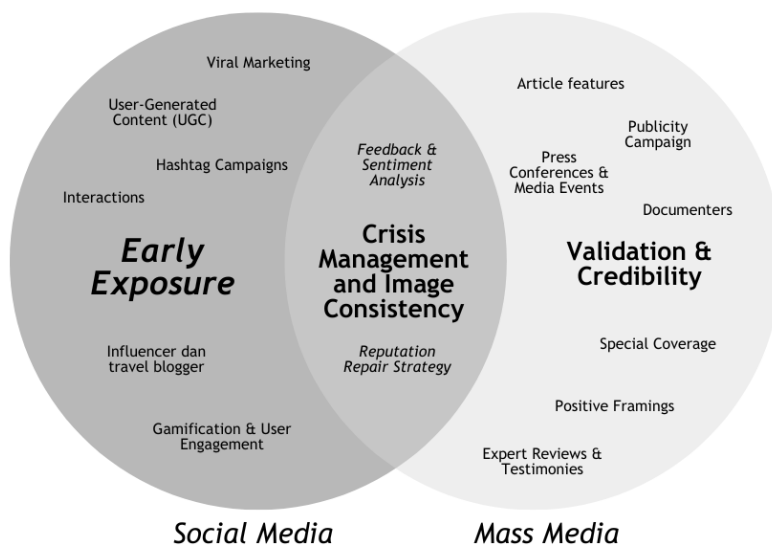
Figure 1. Media Balance Model in Building Tourism Destination Image
Source: Research Data, 2025

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between social media and mass media in shaping tourists' perceptions of a destination. In this model, social media is crucial in providing early exposure through direct engagement, user-generated content (UGC), hashtag campaigns, and promotions by influencers and travel bloggers. Social media is interactive and dynamic, allowing information to spread rapidly, often creating viral trends influencing tourists' decision-making. However, a major drawback of social media is its lack of credibility, as information can be easily manipulated or exaggerated. Conversely, mass media serves as a validation and credibility mechanism (Validation & Credibility). Mass media reports such as feature articles, expert testimonials, publicity campaigns, and special coverage offer a more objective and credible perspective on a destination. Mass media undergoes rigorous editorial processes, making its information more reliable than individual opinions on social media. However, the reach and speed of mass media dissemination are slower than social media, making it less adaptable to rapidly changing tourism trends.

Social media and mass media intersect with crisis management and image consistency (Crisis Management & Image Consistency). An effective communication strategy is crucial when a destination faces challenges—such as negative social media reviews or unfavorable mass media coverage. Two key aspects of crisis management include feedback and sentiment analysis to monitor tourist opinions and reputation repair strategies to restore the destination's image. Social media allows for rapid responses, while mass media clarifies information and systematically improves the destination's reputation. This model emphasizes that destination managers cannot rely solely on one media type. Balancing social media's early exposure with mass media's credibility validation is the optimal strategy for long-term reputation building. With an integrated communication approach, tourism destinations can attract more visitors, maintain a positive image, and effectively respond to challenges. In today's fast-paced digital era, combining social media and mass media is essential in establishing a sustainable and trustworthy destination image.

E. CONCLUSION

This study highlights how balancing social media and mass media is a key factor in building and maintaining the image of tourism destinations. With its interactive, dynamic, and fast-spreading nature, social media allows tourism destinations to gain wide early exposure through user-generated content (UGC), viral campaigns, and promotions by influencers and travel bloggers. However, the information circulated on social media is often less credible, prone to manipulation, and can create unrealistic tourist expectations. On the other hand, mass media serves as a source of validation and credibility. Through feature articles, expert testimonials, special coverage, and publicity campaigns, mass media helps shape a more trustworthy and sustainable destination narrative. Although its information dissemination is slower than social media, the strict editorial processes ensure that mass media remains a primary reference for tourists seeking more objective and accurate information. The intersection of both media lies in crisis management and image consistency, as tourism destinations often face challenges, such as negative reviews on social media or unfavorable mass media coverage. Therefore, an integrated communication strategy is essential, involving tourist feedback analysis and reputation recovery strategies that combine the immediacy of social media responses with the structured clarification provided by mass media.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that destination managers must adopt a balanced approach between social media and mass media in their marketing and image management strategies. Relying on only one media type can lead to an imbalance in tourist perceptions. With a holistic communication strategy, tourism destinations can maximize their appeal, enhance tourist trust, and build a strong and sustainable image in the long term. As a practical implication, this study recommends that destination managers actively monitor and analyze social media trends while collaborating with mass media to create a more credible narrative. By adopting this integrated approach, tourism destinations can attract more tourists, safeguard their reputation, and maintain their global competitiveness.

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