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Disentangling Digital Influences on Tourist Behavior: The Role of Trust and Destination Image in the Social Media Era

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Abstract

The rise of social media has reshaped how tourists perceive, evaluate, and decide upon travel destinations. This study investigates the direct effects of influencer credibility, content quality, visual aesthetics, and social engagement on tourist trust, destination image, and visit intention. Drawing upon a cross-sectional survey of 232 Indonesian social media users, the proposed structural model was tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results reveal that influencer credibility and visual aesthetics are key drivers of tourist trust, while content quality and visual aesthetics significantly shape destination image. Tourist trust also plays a central role by directly influencing destination image and visit intention. These findings offer theoretical insight into the psychological mechanisms underlying digital persuasion in tourism and provide actionable strategies for destination marketers and content creators to enhance engagement and conversion through credible and aesthetically compelling influencer content.

Keywords: influencer marketing, tourist trust, destination image, social media, visit intention

A. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the tourism industry has undergone a fundamental transformation marked by the rise of digital platforms and social media technologies, reshaping how travellers seek information, form perceptions, and make decisions. Traditional sources like brochures and travel agencies have been increasingly replaced by user-generated content, peer reviews, and social media influencers, with platforms such as Instagram and Facebook becoming vital tools for destination discovery and planning (Karatsoli & Nathanail, 2020; Sudarmanto, 2023; Suryana et al., 2024; Susanto, 2023). Social media's immediacy, interactivity, and visual richness allow users to engage with authentic travel narratives, fostering trust and emotional resonance that often surpass the influence of conventional advertising (Acharjee & Ahmed, 2023; Varga & Gabor, 2021). This paradigm shift alters how tourism experiences are marketed and imagined and consumed, positioning social media as both an inspirational and social validation tool. Influencers, in particular, play a critical role by curating content that aligns with follower values and aspirations, effectively shaping destination image and travel behaviour (Jayawardena et al., 2023; Karadeniz et al., 2022). As a result, tourism marketing has evolved toward a community- and engagement-driven approach, where digital interaction and content quality directly influence tourist attitudes and intentions (Liu, 2024; Sujatha, 2023; Ye et al., 2021).

The rise of social media influencers (SMIs) has become a defining force in digital tourism, positioning them as powerful intermediaries who shape public opinion, consumer trust, and behavioral intentions through curated, emotionally resonant content (Ragab, 2022; Wibowo et al., 2020). These influencers leverage platforms like Instagram and Facebook to present authentic travel experiences that appeal to digital natives seeking personalized and experiential journeys. Grounded in the Elaboration Likelihood Model, their impact is rooted in their messages' perceived authenticity and personal relevance, which foster deeper emotional connections and elevate destination desirability (George, 2021; Ragab, 2022; Singgalen, 2024). By crafting compelling visual narratives and embodying relatable personas, SMIs influence the psychological evaluation of

destinations and the intention to visit them, effectively bridging the gap between aspiration and action. As influencer marketing grows, it cultivates virtual communities and cultural tourism networks, where shared values and immersive storytelling enhance engagement and inspire exploration (Akhtar et al., 2021; Xia, 2023).

From a psychological standpoint, trust and destination image are two pivotal constructs in explaining tourist behavior, particularly within digital environments shaped by social media. Trust reflects the perceived credibility and reliability of social media influencers (SMIs) and serves as a foundation for attitude formation and behavioral intention, as travelers are more inclined to follow recommendations from influencers they deem trustworthy (Fazel, 2023). Simultaneously, destination image—encompassing both cognitive (what tourists know) and affective (how they feel) evaluations—shapes how potential visitors assess a destination's attractiveness and desirability (Arianto et al., 2022; Putri & Widyastuti, 2023). Influencers presenting destinations through visually compelling and emotionally engaging content directly shape both constructs, enhancing tourist perception and intention to visit (Wen & Xu, 2024). Research shows that these curated digital portrayals can significantly enhance or detract from a destination's appeal, highlighting the importance of content authenticity and strategic representation (Fazel, 2023). As social media becomes increasingly integral to travel planning, understanding the interplay between trust and destination image is essential for decoding the decision-making processes of digitally native tourists and designing more effective marketing strategies (Harahap et al., 2023; Rodrigues et al., 2023).

Although prior studies have explored the impact of influencer marketing and digital media on consumer behavior, much of the existing literature remains fragmented, often isolating constructs such as a trust or destination image without considering their interrelation or the broader context of multiple digital content characteristics. Few studies have proposed an integrated framework examining content quality, visual aesthetics, and social engagement in shaping tourist perceptions and intentions. Addressing this gap, the present study introduces a theoretically grounded and empirically tested model that disentangles the direct effects of digital stimuli—specifically influencer credibility, content quality, visual aesthetics, and interactivity—on tourist trust, destination image, and visit intention. Unlike mediation-heavy approaches, this model emphasizes direct relationships to clarify how key psychological and perceptual variables interact in digital tourism contexts. By capturing the immediate influence of social media engagement, this research offers valuable insights for destination marketers, content creators, and tourism stakeholders in designing impactful digital strategies tailored to the expectations of digitally native travelers.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencer Credibility and the Formation of Tourist Trust

Influencer credibility is a multidimensional construct encompassing trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness, shaping how audiences perceive social media influencers' reliability. In tourism, credible influencers function as digital opinion leaders by sharing experiential storytelling, destination endorsements, and lifestyle portrayals often viewed as authentic and persuasive. Studies have shown that trust in influencers is a critical factor influencing consumer behavior and purchase intentions (Chavda & Chauhan, 2024). When influencers are perceived as credible, audiences are more likely to accept their recommendations, forming initial perceptions that influence their willingness to consider visiting a promoted destination (M. Abdullah, 2023; Lee & Eastin, 2021). This trust becomes a psychological gateway through which information is processed, often substituting for direct experience in digital tourism decision-making.

Research has consistently highlighted the importance of influencer traits—such as credibility and expertise—in mediating trust and shaping consumer responses, including in tourism contexts (Mabkhot et al., 2022). Consumers frequently seek validation and reassurance from influencers when evaluating travel options, emphasizing the role of trust in the decision-making process. Additionally, influencers' charismatic and relatable personas help deepen emotional connections with their followers, increasing engagement and persuasiveness (Samala & Rawas, 2024). Through emotionally resonant narratives and personalized storytelling, credible

influencers strengthen perceived authenticity and enhance their influence over audience behavior. Based on this conceptual foundation, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Influencer credibility positively influences tourist trust.

Digital Content Attributes and Tourist Trust

The effectiveness of influencer communication in tourism marketing is shaped not only by the messenger's credibility but also by the quality of the message itself (Rafdinal, Wibisono, et al., 2024). Content quality, defined by clarity, coherence, usefulness, and relevance, is critical in reducing informational uncertainty and enhancing cognitive engagement among potential tourists. High-quality content that aligns with audience expectations fosters greater trust increases the persuasive power of the message, and encourages deeper interaction (Omeish et al., 2024; Rafdinal, Setiawardani, et al., 2024). Equally important is visual aesthetics, as tourism is a highly image-driven industry. Images, layout, and tone help potential travelers visualize their future experiences. Visually appealing content is more likely to capture attention, evoke emotional responses, and stimulate visit intentions. This is especially evident on platforms like TikTok, where engaging visuals—even without polished production—often generate high user interaction and interest (Nurbaiti, 2024).

Beyond content quality and visual appeal, social engagement features—likes, comments, and shares—are powerful social proof indicators (Rafdinal, Setiawardani et al., 2024). These signals enhance the perceived credibility of the content and the influencer, particularly when the content receives significant public validation. When potential tourists observe active engagement from other users, they are more likely to interpret the information as trustworthy and relevant (Abbasi et al., 2024). Emotional resonance increases through this perceived popularity, strengthening user confidence in the message. The interplay between content quality, visual aesthetics, and social engagement collectively fosters tourist trust—a critical psychological factor in shaping early-stage decision-making in tourism (Novitaningtyas et al., 2021). Based on this foundation, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: Content quality positively influences tourist trust.

H3: Visual aesthetics positively influence tourist trust.

H4: Social engagement positively influences tourist trust.

Content and Visuals in Shaping Destination Image

Destination image is a fundamental cognitive-affective construct in tourism decision-making, shaping how tourists evaluate a destination's appeal, uniqueness, and suitability (Rafdinal, Wibisono et al., 2024). This image is largely constructed and reinforced through exposure to various media formats, especially curated digital content. High-quality content—marked by clarity, coherence, usefulness, and relevance—enhances the informational value of the destination, improves understanding, and reduces uncertainty about travel options (Chu et al., 2022). Such content fosters stronger cognitive engagement with the destination by offering meaningful insights and structured narratives. Studies have shown that the use of high-quality augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and digital storytelling enriches tourist perceptions, especially when it reveals deeper historical or cultural contexts (Li & Kieanwatana, 2024; Rafdinal et al., 2025), thereby contributing to a more favourable image of the destination.

In addition to content quality, visual aesthetics play a pivotal role in shaping destination images. Tourists rely heavily on visual cues to anticipate what they might experience, and thus, elements like imagery, layout, and tone contribute significantly to evoking emotional responses (Silaban et al., 2022). Appealing and immersive visuals allow potential travellers to imagine themselves within a destination, leading to deeper emotional connections and more positive evaluations. When these visuals are well-integrated into digital marketing strategies, they attract attention and reinforce the destination's attractiveness and desirability (Chu et al., 2022). Research in social media contexts confirms that visually compelling narratives enhance overall perception and

tourist interest (Li & Kieanwatana, 2024), underscoring the importance of aesthetics in shaping decision-making. Based on this foundation, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5: Content quality positively influences destination image.

H6: Visual aesthetics positively influence destination image.

The Role of Trust in Building Destination Image and Intention

Trust developed toward influencers or digital content sources directly impacts how potential tourists cognitively and emotionally evaluate destinations (Su et al., 2022). When audiences perceive the source as trustworthy, they are more inclined to accept positive interpretations of a destination's qualities, including safety, accessibility, excitement, and comfort. This trust shapes the destination image's cognitive and affective dimensions, central to tourism decision-making (Kim & Kim, 2020; Su et al., 2022). Research shows that influencer credibility and the high quality of shared content significantly enhance trust, leading to more favourable impressions of the destination (Azizah & Said, 2024). The formation of trust encourages deeper engagement with content and facilitates a psychological environment in which positive destination attributes are internalized more readily.

Furthermore, trust does not only influence perception—it may also directly influence behaviour. Studies suggest that when influencers are seen as reliable, their followers are likelier to form intentions to visit the destinations they promote (Anggraeni & Astini, 2020). This direct relationship highlights the dual role of trust: as a cognitive gateway to forming a destination image and as a behavioural driver. In parallel, destination image has long been recognized as a predictor of visit intention, where stronger and more positive images significantly increase tourists' willingness to visit, revisit, or recommend a destination (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Cheung et al., 2020). Based on this foundation, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H7: Tourist trust positively influences destination image.

H8: Destination image positively influences visit intention.

H9: Tourist trust positively influences visit intention.

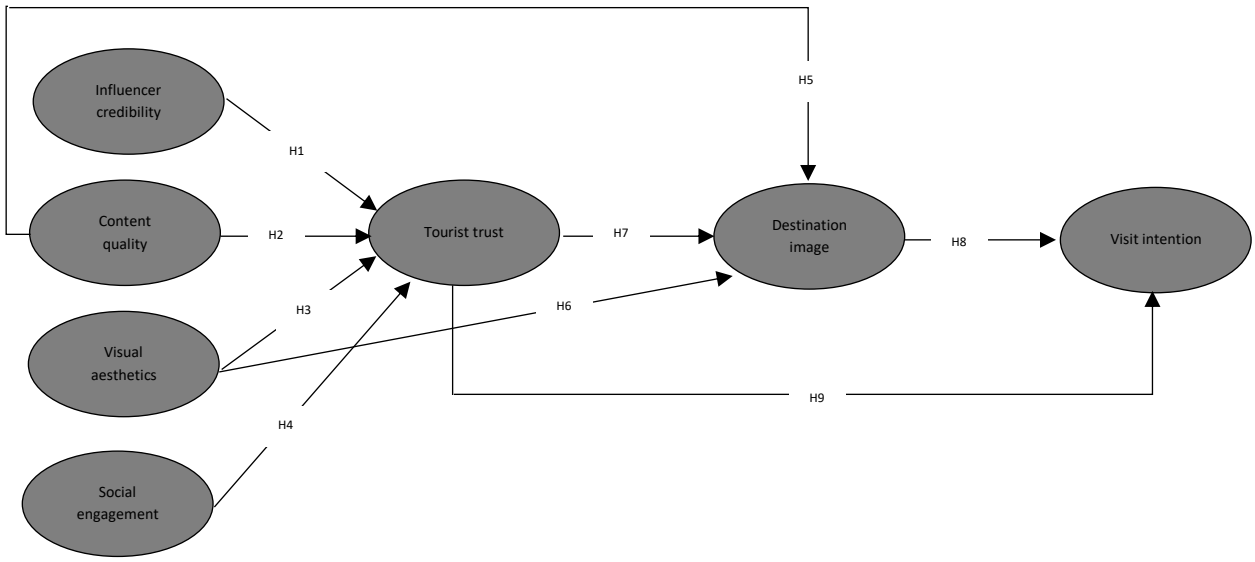


Figure 1. Proposed Framework
Source: Research data, 2024

C. METHODS

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the direct effects of digital content factors—influencer credibility, content quality, visual aesthetics, and social engagement—on tourist trust, destination image, and visit intention. The research focused on Indonesian social media users who actively engage with travel-related content posted by influencers on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. A purposive sampling method was used to target respondents with relevant exposure, and data were collected using an online self-administered questionnaire distributed through social media networks and online communities. Before completing the main survey, participants were asked a filter question to ensure they encountered influencer-generated travel content within the past six months. Respondents were also provided with a brief explanation of the research purpose and an informed consent form to ensure ethical compliance, voluntary participation, and anonymity. The final sample size was determined based on the complexity of the structural model and the recommended threshold for PLS-SEM analysis (Hair et al., 2022), with a minimum of 150 responses targeted to ensure adequate statistical power.

The questionnaire consisted of multiple items adapted from established scales in prior studies, revised slightly to suit the context of digital tourism. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The constructs included influencer credibility (e.g., trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness), content quality (e.g., clarity, relevance, usefulness), visual aesthetics (e.g., appeal, tone, emotional resonance), social engagement (e.g., frequency of likes, shares, comments), tourist trust (e.g., confidence in the information source), destination image (e.g., cognitive and affective impressions of the destination), and visit intention (e.g., likelihood of visiting, willingness to recommend). A pilot test involving 30 respondents was conducted to ensure the items' clarity, reliability, and usability, and minor adjustments were made based on the feedback. Data were analyzed using SmartPLS software through a two-step approach. The first step assessed the measurement model, examining indicator loadings, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity. The second step tested the structural model by evaluating the path coefficients, t-statistics via bootstrapping (5,000 resamples), R^2 values, and predictive relevance (Q^2). All hypotheses were tested at a 95% confidence level, with significance at $p < 0.05$ (Hair et al., 2022).

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Respondent Profile

A total of 232 valid responses were collected for the study. The demographic and behavioural characteristics of the respondents are summarized as follows: Most respondents were female (62.1%), while male respondents accounted for 37.9% of the sample. In terms of age, the dominant age group was 21–25 years old (45.7%), followed by those aged 26–30 years old (32.3%), 18–20 years old (14.7%), and a smaller proportion aged 31 years and above (7.3%). This age distribution reflects a digitally active and socially engaged demographic, which aligns with the study's target audience of social media users exposed to influencer content. Regarding educational background, most respondents were undergraduate students or graduates (Bachelor's degree holders) (68.5%), followed by Master's degree holders (18.1%), senior high school graduates (10.3%), and a small portion with doctoral or other qualifications (3.1%). This educational profile suggests a relatively well-informed group of digital consumers capable of critically engaging with content. Regarding monthly income or allowance, 41.8% of respondents reported earning between IDR 2,000,000–4,000,000, while 28.4% earned less than IDR 2,000,000, indicating a large student and early-career segment. Meanwhile, 19.0% earned IDR 4,000,000–6,000,000, and the remaining 10.8% earned more than IDR 6,000,000. When asked about their preferred social media platforms for travel content, Instagram was the most frequently used (76.3%), followed by TikTok (59.5%), YouTube (48.7%), and Facebook (22.4%). Some respondents reported using more than one platform regularly. Regarding the frequency of exposure to travel influencer content, 52.2% reported encountering such content several times a week, 29.7% said almost daily, 13.4% encountered it occasionally (a few times per month), and 4.7% rarely viewed such content. Regarding past travel behaviour, 61.2% of respondents stated

they had visited a destination based on influencer recommendations at least once, demonstrating the real-world influence of digital endorsements on travel behaviour.

Measurement Model

The measurement model was evaluated to ensure the reliability and validity of all latent constructs. The evaluation involved testing indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and collinearity statistics (VIF) (Hair et al., 2022). All constructs in the model were measured reflectively. Indicator reliability was assessed through outer loadings. As shown in Table 1, all item loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating that each item reliably represents its intended construct. No indicators were removed, and all items were retained for further analysis.

Table 1. Outer Loadings and Reflective Statements for Each Construct

Code	Reflective Statement (Item)	Loading
Content Quality		
CQ1	The influencer's content is clear and easy to understand	0.827
CQ2	The influencer provides relevant and accurate information	0.896
CQ3	The content shared is useful for planning a trip	0.900
CQ4	The content is consistent and well-organized	0.866
CQ5	The content is coherent and easy to follow.	0.856
Destination Image		
DI1	The destination looks attractive based on the content I've seen	0.817
DI2	I find the destination unique and interesting	0.885
DI3	The destination gives me a positive emotional impression	0.805
DI4	I can picture myself enjoying a visit to this destination.	0.882
Influencer Credibility		
IC1	The influencer is knowledgeable about the destinations they present	0.847
IC2	The influencer seems honest and trustworthy	0.893
IC3	The influencer provides reliable travel recommendations	0.916
IC5	I believe the influencer has expertise in tourism-related content.	0.894
Social Engagement		
SE1	The influencer's content receives many likes and shares	0.889
SE2	I often see people engaging with this content through comments and reactions	0.941
SE3	Social interaction around the influencer's content increases my interest in the destination.	0.903
Tourist Trust		
TT1	I trust the travel content shared by this influencer	0.776
TT2	I believe the influencer shares reliable destination information	0.854
TT3	I feel confident about using this influencer's recommendations	0.871
TT4	I would rely on this influencer for travel planning.	0.853
Visual Aesthetics		
VA1	The visual design of the content is attractive	0.880
VA2	The content is aesthetically pleasing	0.895
VA3	The visuals make me more interested in visiting the destination	0.898
Visit Intention		
VI1	I intend to visit the destination shown in the influencer's content	0.828
VI2	I am planning to travel to the destination shortly	0.852
VI3	I will recommend the destination to others	0.832
VI4	I would consider this destination as a travel option	0.905
VI5	I want to experience the destination personally	0.833

Source: Research data, 2024

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, rho_A, and Composite Reliability (CR) (Hair et al., 2022). All values exceeded the threshold of 0.70, confirming the internal reliability of the constructs. Convergent validity was verified through Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and all constructs showed AVE values above 0.50, indicating that the items adequately explain their respective constructs.

Table 2. Internal Consistency Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE
Content Quality	0.919	0.923	0.939	0.756
Destination Image	0.869	0.872	0.911	0.719
Influencer Credibility	0.910	0.917	0.937	0.788

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	AVE
Social Engagement	0.898	0.900	0.936	0.830
Tourist Trust	0.859	0.860	0.905	0.704
Visit Intention	0.904	0.905	0.929	0.723
Visual Aesthetics	0.870	0.870	0.920	0.794

Source: Research data, 2024

Discriminant validity was examined using the HTMT ratio (Heterotrait–Monotrait) (Hair et al., 2022). All HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.90, indicating that each construct is empirically distinct.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity – HTMT Ratio

Construct	DI	IC	SE	TT	VI	VA
Content Quality (CQ)	0.524	0.503	0.438	0.582	0.470	0.705
Destination Image (DI)	—	0.620	0.726	0.664	0.602	0.602
Influencer Credibility (IC)		—	0.562	0.597	0.515	0.582
Social Engagement (SE)			—	0.525	0.587	0.522
Tourist Trust (TT)				—	0.689	0.788
Visit Intention (VI)					—	0.574

Source: Research data, 2024

The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was examined to detect multicollinearity among indicators (Hair et al., 2022). All VIF values were below the threshold of 5.0, indicating no serious multicollinearity issues in the model.

Table 4. Collinearity Statistics – VIF Values

Indicator	VIF	Indicator	VIF	Indicator	VIF
CQ1	2.227	DI1	2.084	IC1	2.275
CQ2	3.279	DI2	2.655	IC2	3.020
CQ3	3.232	DI3	1.931	IC3	3.484
CQ4	2.824	DI4	2.429	IC5	2.834
CQ5	2.649				
SE1	2.486	TT1	1.616	VA1	2.094
SE2	3.750	TT2	2.195	VA2	2.427
SE3	2.811	TT3	2.424	VA3	2.461
		TT4	2.234		
VI1	2.421	VI3	2.554	VI5	2.368
VI2	2.607	VI4	3.711		

Source: Research data, 2024

Structural Model

To assess the explanatory and predictive power of the model, both R^2 and Q^2 values were examined. As shown in Table 5, Tourist Trust had an R^2 of 0.519, indicating moderate explanatory power, while Destination Image (R^2 = 0.379) and Visit Intention (R^2 = 0.423) also showed acceptable predictive strength. The Q^2 values for all endogenous constructs were above 0.25, further supporting the model's predictive relevance.

Table 5. R^2 and Q^2 of Endogenous Constructs

Construct	R^2	R^2 Adjusted	Q^2	Interpretation
Tourist Trust	0.519	0.511	0.349	Moderate explanatory power
Destination Image	0.379	0.371	0.265	Acceptable predictive power
Visit Intention	0.423	0.418	0.295	Acceptable predictive power

Source: Research data, 2024

Model fit was assessed using the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) and Normed Fit Index (NFI). The SRMR value for the estimated model was 0.084, which is still within the acceptable range (< 0.10), though slightly higher than the more conservative threshold of 0.08. The NFI value was 0.782, indicating a moderate model fit suitable for exploratory models with complex paths.

Table 6. Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Saturated Model	Estimated Model	Threshold	Interpretation
SRMR	0.057	0.084	< 0.10	Acceptable fit
d_ULS	0.987	2.111	–	Informational only
d_G	0.551	0.643	–	Informational only
Chi-Square	777.887	852.516	–	Lower is better

Fit Index	Saturated Model	Estimated Model	Threshold	Interpretation
NFI	0.801	0.782	> 0.90	Moderate (exploratory)

Source: Research data, 2024

Hypothesis testing was conducted based on the predefined nine fixed hypotheses (H1–H9). The results are presented in Table 7 and Figure 2, which include standardized path coefficients (β), t-statistics, p-values, and conclusions. All hypotheses were supported statistically significant.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing and Path Coefficients

No.	Hypothesis	Path	β	t-Stat	p-Value	Result
H1	Influencer credibility → Tourist trust	IC → TT	0.192	2.667	0.004	Supported
H2	Content quality → Tourist trust	CQ → TT	0.082	1.370	0.086	Supported*
H3	Visual aesthetics → Tourist trust	VA → TT	0.487	7.049	<0.001	Supported
H4	Social engagement → Tourist trust	SE → TT	0.096	1.394	0.082	Supported*
H5	Content quality → Destination image	CQ → DI	0.171	2.363	0.009	Supported
H6	Visual aesthetics → Destination image	VA → DI	0.156	1.823	0.034	Supported
H7	Tourist trust → Destination image	TT → DI	0.378	4.857	<0.001	Supported
H8	Destination image → Visit intention	DI → VI	0.264	3.982	<0.001	Supported
H9	Tourist trust → Visit intention	TT → VI	0.462	6.075	<0.001	Supported

*Supported @p-value=<0.1

Source: Research data, 2024

The following diagram (Figure 2) summarizes the structural model tested using SmartPLS, including all latent variables, observed indicators, and path coefficients (β).

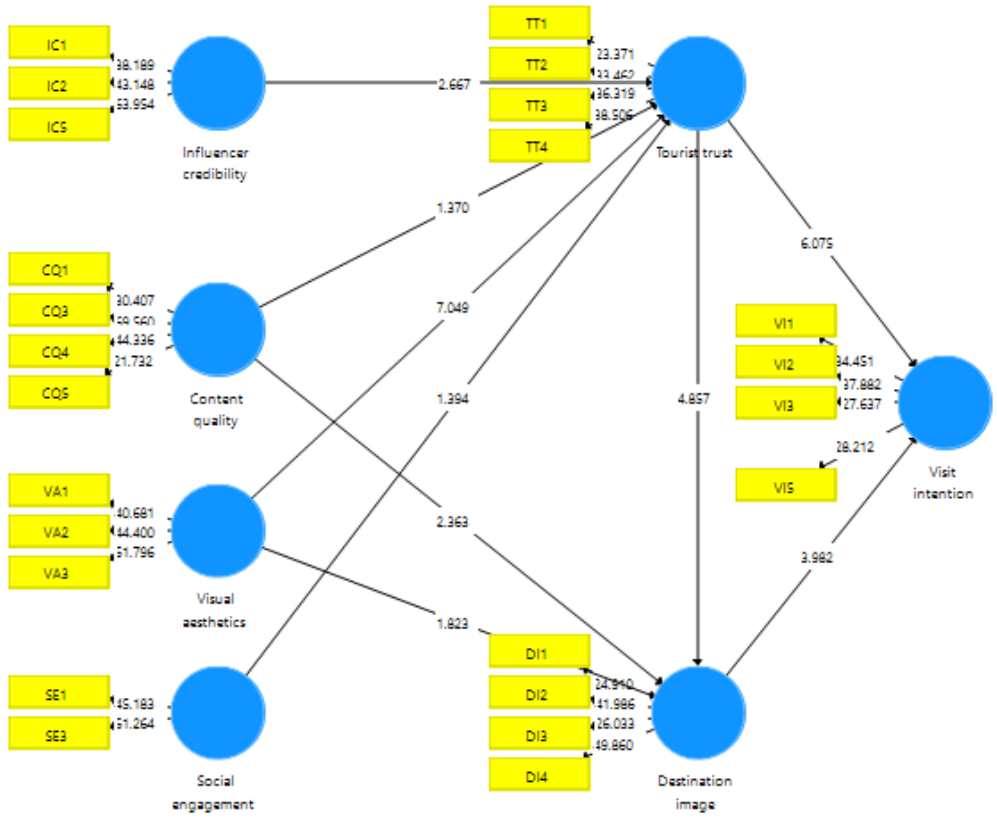


Figure 2. Tested Model

Source: Research data, 2024

Discussion

This study examined how various characteristics of social media content and influencer attributes influence tourist trust, destination image, and, ultimately, visit intention. The findings confirm the growing significance of digital dynamics in shaping consumer behaviour in the tourism domain, reinforcing insights from prior literature.

The results reveal that influencer credibility significantly positively affects tourist trust. This confirms that when influencers are perceived as trustworthy, knowledgeable, and authentic, they gain the psychological confidence of their followers, which is consistent with the findings of (M. F. Abdullah et al., 2023; Chavda & Chauhan, 2024). The ability of influencers to act as credible digital intermediaries reinforces trust-based mechanisms essential in the absence of physical experiences (Mabkhot et al., 2022). Interestingly, content quality also has a positive effect on tourist trust. While the effect size is modest, this finding supports the argument that informational clarity and relevance foster consumer confidence, even in complex online environments (Omeish et al., 2024). Although borderline, it suggests that clear and coherent content may function synergistically with other factors like influencer credibility to build trust.

The most substantial predictor of tourist trust in this study is visual aesthetics. This emphasizes that in visually driven platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, well-designed imagery and compelling visual narratives are critical in establishing emotional appeal and cognitive resonance (Nurbaiti, 2024; Silaban et al., 2022). Digital content's aesthetics capture attention and shape deeper perceptions, as noted by (Li & Kieanwatana, 2024). Social engagement, another hypothesized antecedent of trust, also shows a positive influence. This suggests that likes, shares, and comments may function as a form of social proof, validating the credibility and popularity of content (Abbasi et al., 2024). Although not statistically strong, engagement mechanisms can modestly contribute to trust formation when combined with visual and textual quality. Theoretically, these findings underscore the increasing relevance of affect-laden digital stimuli in trust formation, particularly on platforms where peripheral cues dominate user attention. This reinforces and extends the Elaboration Likelihood Model by illustrating that in tourism contexts, peripheral cues such as aesthetics and social validation are not merely supportive but may act as primary drivers of trust. Moreover, it invites future research to reconsider the traditional hierarchy of informational influence—placing visual and emotional resonance at the forefront of digital persuasion mechanisms.

Three significant predictors of destination image emerged from the model. First, content quality was positively associated with image perception. This aligns with (Chu et al., 2022), who emphasize that well-crafted content increases cognitive clarity and emotional relevance in destination portrayal. Second, visual aesthetics also significantly influence destination image. This further substantiates the emotional power of imagery in forming cognitive-affective evaluations, as observed in immersive content studies (Li & Kieanwatana, 2024). Most notably, tourist trust strongly influences destination image. This supports previous claims that trust is a cognitive gateway that amplifies how tourists interpret and internalize destination attributes (Fazel, 2023). When audiences believe in the messenger, they are more receptive to constructing positive images of places they have never visited (Wen & Xu, 2024). The final stage of the model confirms the dual importance of destination image and tourist trust in predicting visit intention. These findings are consistent with those (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020), who emphasize the centrality of destination image in travel behaviour models.

Additionally, the strong direct impact of trust on visit intention highlights its role as a perceptual mediator and a behavioural driver in the decision-making process—particularly in digital tourism contexts (Cheung et al., 2020). Theoretically, this underscores the need to view destination images not as an isolated perceptual construct but as a dynamically constructed outcome of trust and media exposure in digital ecosystems. It highlights the cognitive-affective duality of destination image and supports integrative models that combine source credibility, message aesthetics, and emotional appraisal.

These findings contribute to digital tourism theory by reinforcing the multidimensional nature of trust formation, which is influenced by influencer attributes, content design, and social feedback. Moreover, the model validates trust and image as sequential mediators linking digital content to behavioural intentions. The modest significance of social engagement and content quality indicates that visual storytelling and source credibility may carry more weight than textual richness alone in an experience-based economy.

Theoretical Implications

This study offers important contributions to growing digital tourism and influencer marketing knowledge. First, it extends existing models by empirically validating the combined effects of influencer credibility, content quality, visual aesthetics, and social engagement on trust, destination image, and visit intention—offering a more holistic understanding of tourist behaviour in the social media era. Second, the study emphasizes the centrality of tourist trust as both an outcome and a driver, reinforcing its dual role as a mediator between digital content stimuli and destination-related outcomes. This aligns with the conceptual logic of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), wherein credible messengers and emotionally resonant messages engage audiences through the peripheral route but with lasting cognitive outcomes (M. F. Abdullah et al., 2023; Ragab, 2022). Third, the findings nuance our understanding of visual aesthetics, which emerge as a strong predictor of both trust and destination image—suggesting that emotional resonance from visuals can be just as powerful, if not more, than textual content or direct engagement. The significance of aesthetic dimensions aligns with evolving theories in media richness and immersive marketing, reinforcing the affective dimension of tourist decision-making (Goeltom et al., 2023; Kusdibyo et al., 2023; Li & Kieanwatana, 2024; Susanto et al., 2020). Finally, the findings suggest that engagement-based social proof (e.g., likes, shares) plays a secondary but relevant role in forming trust, especially when evaluated alongside more enduring attributes like source credibility and visual storytelling. This opens space for future theoretical models to incorporate multi-modal constructs and layered effects of digital interaction.

Practical Implications

From a practical standpoint, this research offers actionable insights for destination marketers, social media strategists, and tourism stakeholders. First, it underscores the importance of partnering with credible influencers with perceived expertise and authenticity, as these factors drive audience trust and behavioural intention. Brands and DMOs (Destination Marketing Organizations) should prioritize influencer selection based on audience fit and perceived authority. Second, the role of visual aesthetics should not be underestimated. Tourism content creators and destination marketers must invest in high-quality visuals that are attractive, emotionally engaging, and aligned with the desired destination image. Content strategies should move beyond information dissemination to experiential storytelling, ideally using platforms optimized for visual-first consumption (e.g., Instagram Reels, TikTok). Third, while content quality and engagement metrics are valuable, their marginal effects on trust in this study suggest that these features function best when supporting a broader narrative led by credible messengers and visual impact. Rather than chasing viral trends, content creators should focus on building narrative consistency and visual coherence. Lastly, the confirmed effects of destination image and trust on visit intention highlight the strategic need for integrated campaigns that combine influencer marketing, branded content, and destination storytelling. The alignment of these elements can elevate perception and conversion rates, ultimately contributing to sustainable tourism promotion.

For tourism sector policymakers, this study's findings provide strategic insights into how digital ecosystems can be leveraged to enhance destination competitiveness. Recognizing the pivotal role of visual aesthetics and influencer credibility in shaping tourist trust and visit intention, public tourism agencies should consider establishing formal partnerships with qualified digital influencers who align with national or regional branding goals. Investment in visual content infrastructure—such as professional content libraries, storytelling guides, or immersive media training—can significantly improve the quality and consistency of destination representation across platforms. Moreover, policies encouraging ethical and authentic digital promotion, including guidelines for transparency and cultural sensitivity in influencer content, can help build long-term trust with digital audiences. By aligning tourism promotion strategies with the dynamics of social media behaviour, policymakers can foster a more resilient and emotionally engaging tourism brand that appeals to digitally native travellers.

E. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the direct effects of entrepreneurial education, learning experience, industry openness, and digital efficacy on the entrepreneurial intention of vocational tourism students while also assessing the roles of self-efficacy and attitude toward entrepreneurship as psychological predictors within the framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Using a structural equation modeling approach with 278 respondents from vocational tourism programs in Indonesia, the study found that six out of ten proposed hypotheses were statistically supported. The results revealed that entrepreneurial education is central to shaping self-efficacy and attitude toward entrepreneurship, highlighting its importance as a foundational vocational training element. Learning experiences, particularly practical and immersive, significantly boosted students' entrepreneurial confidence, although their effect on attitude was not statistically confirmed. The strong influence of industry openness on entrepreneurial intention reinforces the value of creating collaborative, accessible environments between vocational institutions and the tourism industry.

While digital efficacy did not directly influence self-efficacy or intention, it significantly impacted attitude—suggesting that digital competence contributes to students' perception of entrepreneurship as modern and achievable. Interestingly, self-efficacy, often emphasized in TPB, did not directly predict intention in this context, indicating the possibility of mediating or moderating variables that could shape its role. Conversely, attitude toward entrepreneurship emerged as a robust and consistent predictor of entrepreneurial intention. Theoretically, the study extends the TPB framework by integrating contextual and educational factors relevant to vocational tourism education, offering a more nuanced understanding of what drives entrepreneurial intention in applied learning environments. Practically, the findings suggest that vocational institutions should strengthen entrepreneurial education components, expand partnerships with industry, and integrate digital entrepreneurship training to foster both the mindset and capability needed for new venture creation. Future research should explore mediating effects, longitudinal impacts of educational interventions, and the role of institutional culture in shaping entrepreneurial behaviour.

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