

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING IN SHAPING DESTINATION BRAND EQUITY AND TOURIST BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

This research study examines how social media marketing contributes to destination brand equity (DBE), and the effects it has on tourists' intentions to travel. The tourism sector is increasingly dependent on digital channels, and uses social media. An appropriate quantitative research approach helps to evaluate the importance of digital word of mouth (eWOM), trust, and customers centric marketing, as key components to building DBE, to help indicate travel decisions of tourists. The findings indicate that social media marketing increases DBE in meaningfully growing brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty - which in turn likely indicates travel.

INTRODUCTION

Recent marketing research has accentuated non-linear paths and boundary conditions in brand equity models rather than mere assumption of positive effects everywhere. We provide a theoretical justification as to why extremely high eWOM may reduce perceived authenticity and why perceived risk works as a moderator of the trust-DBE relationship, while also probing how platform types (i.e., Instagram Vs. TikTok) interject into the dynamics, hence extending Aaker's (1991) Brand Equity Theory and Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior into different service contexts.

Ever since the marketing of tourism destinations went onto social media and DMOs began creating interactive and engaging content on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, every one of the accounts above has affected the traveler's experiences and perceptions. Destination branding, as the research is indicating, is an important area of tourism development because the brand image increases tourist loyalty and intention to visit the destination. The present study investigates social media marketing, destination brand equity, and tourists' behavioral intentions based on eWOM and trust as proxy moderators.

Social media marketing encompasses tourist traffic to the location before, during, and after a visit. The use of social media advertising and partnerships with influencers, and interactive events have reshaped destination branding from a static destination brand ownership to an active and interactive two-way communication process with travelers. The role of social media in destination branding processes from destination marketing organizations position on influencing attitudes and improving interaction amongst travelers is essential in tourism marketing.

The tourism industry has changed dramatically since social media entered the marketing landscape, forever changing how tourist destinations are marketed and perceived by potential travelers (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube have transformed interactions and communication between tourists and brands or tourist companies, and will continue to evolve as more of them operate in the social media space. Whereas previous communication methods left tourist businesses unable to generate real-time communication, share content interactively or access user-generated content for their destinations, social media allows to promote these. and adds to the tourism experience (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013).

Tourist destination brand, a major component of tourism marketing is now heavily reliant on social media. A good brand will increase visitor engagement, emotional connections, as well as tourist loyalty (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Social media marketing is a critical function to brand a destination through creating an immersive experience via beautiful pictures, engaging storytelling and personalized engagement (Munro & Richards, 2011). With the electronic revolution, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) now need to employ strategic methods to promote their brand in targeting potential tourists, and create strong brand perceptions to influence their visitation intentions (Mariani, Di Felice, & Mura, 2016).

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), is one of the most significant social media marketing tactics. As travel planning is increased, consumers continue to rely on word-of-mouth information from others. This word-of-mouth information can include, reviews from online resources, travel blogs, and influencer endorsements (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008).

Studies show that eWOM and trust from consumers have a significant role in tourists' perceptions by building trust and credibility toward a destination (Filiari & McLeay, 2014). Unlike traditional media and advertisements which could be one-sided, eWOM is authentic, user-generated information, which is a significant driver of destination brand equity (Kim & Park, 2017).

Trust continues to be an important component in social media marketing and tourism marketing. The credibility of online content is an important factor that can influence tourist behavior because outside of possible choice paralysis due to the number of alternatives, tourists will want credible information to make informed decisions (Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007). Having live interaction, reviews, and customer comments on social media increases credibility, leading to a higher likelihood of tourists interacting with a brand (Miguéns, Baggio, & Costa, 2008).

Because information is shared so quickly on digital platforms, DMOs can engage in transparent, responsive and authentic communications with customers in order to build trust (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). The tourists to interact throughout the tour, engage with and give up-to-the-minute comments, check-ins, and live broadcasts on their tours, which establishes continual brand exposure (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). During the post-tour phase, marketers can engage with tourists through feedback, stories and recommendations, effectively turning travelers into brand advocates. With this kind of engagement, more people learn about tourism at the destination; opening possibilities for destination brand loyalty and repeat visitors (Hudson & Thal, 2013).

The increasing prevalence of electronic marketing techniques in the tourism industry has led to a better understanding about consumer attitudes and awareness regarding its impact and effectiveness. This study investigates the relationship between social media marketing, DBE, and tourists' behavioral reactions, while examining the combined mediating effects of eWOM and trust, and the impact on effective destination marketing. Ultimately, with a deeper understanding of the impact of social media marketing, destination marketers can develop targeted efforts that better facilitate participation,

trust, and eventually tourist growth (Anwar. MN & Raza. H, 2023).

Problem Statement

The advent of digital technology provided the new window for promoting the destination. Everything from modern branding to customer interaction to information diffusion is now possible on social media. It became clear that social media marketing (SMM) as part of the overall marketing approach was essential to the formation of destination brand equity (DBE) as Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) continued to exploit mainstream social multimedia like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to reach potential visitors. Relatively new and especially for the case of developing countries like Pakistan is the intensive interrelationship between SMM, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), trust between consumers, and intentions to act as visitors. What is available from the existing literature is the support for the existence of value for user-generated content and digital narratives but not research on exploring the interplay between the above dimensions as well as attitude and choice of visitors. This gap assumes special significance where destination branding is still fresh; the development of digital infrastructure exhibits disproportionality. This assimilation of understanding will assist in synchronizing digital media strategies with the psychological and behavioral aspects of users in the participatory and networked communication era.

Significant of Study

This research is a theoretical and practical contribution to the realm of digital communication, tourism marketing, and brand management vis-a-vis social media environments:

1. Academic Importance

The research should merit advancement in mass communication and tourism studies by practically validating the model of social media marketing, eWOM, trust, DBE, and visiting intention. It refers to theoretical understandings enriched through Brand Equity Theory (Aaker, 1991) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) in terms of digital tourism. In effect, it would provide new angles of the influence of interactive media on destination perceptions and travel intentions.

2. Practical Value

There would be actionable insights for practitioners, especially DMOs and tourism boards in developing countries, on how best to optimize their digital content strategies based on SMM-driven destination brand experience through trust and eWOM, enabling tourism marketers to develop appropriate communication campaigns that promote brand loyalty and engagement and encourage visitation.

3. Relevance in Strategic Policy

This study offers direction for policies on social media control, destination branding techniques in emerging nations, and digital tourism infrastructure. It emphasizes the need for coordinated digital branding plans that are reactive, genuine, and trust-developing.

4. Technological Relevancy and Future Studies

This study acts as a basis for investigating the incorporation of novel technologies like artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and augmented reality in destination branding as digital tourism grows. It stimulates future studies on the long-run consequences of digital trust building strategies in determining sustainable tourism behavior.

Objectives

- To investigate the direct linear link between digital brand engagement and social media marketing campaigns.
- To find out if too much eWOM hurts seen authenticity and so influences digital brand engagement.
- To determine how seen risk shapes consumer trust and digital brand engagement.
- EVALUATE how several digital platforms affect the effects of social media marketing, eWOM, and trust on digital brand engagement.

Hypotheses & Conceptual Model

H1a: SMM → DBE (linear positive effect).

H1b: At high levels, eWOM reduces authenticity and diminishes DBE (negative quadratic effect).

H2: Trust's influence on DBE is stronger at high levels of perceived risk.

H3: The platform type moderates SMM, eWOM, and trust effects on DBE.

Clean alignment table:

Below is a clean alignment table matching every hypothesis with its respective aim:

Hypothesis	Object-Focus / Action Verb	Research Objective (O)
H1a	Appraise linear effect	O1a: To appraise the direct linear relationship between SMM and DBE
H1b	Look at quadratic impact	O1b: To examine whether eWOM at high levels reduces perceived authenticity and diminishes DBE (i.e. a negative quadratic effect)
H2	Investigate moderating effect	O2: To investigate how perceived risk moderates the influence of trust on DBE
H3	Evaluate platform-specific moderation	O3: To evaluate whether the type of platform moderates the effects of SMM, eWOM, and trust on DBE

Literature Review

The utilization of social media has been a powerful facilitator in marketing tourism destinations because of the immediacy of communication amongst tourists and tourism organizations (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013). Tourism organizations are using social media to generate dynamic campaigns, to showcase destination offerings, and to influence consumer behavior (Leung et al., 2013). With the increasing use of digital spaces, content marketing practices or engagement through storytelling practices, video marketing, and influencer marketing provide a remarkable opportunity to enhance engagement and marketing destination (Mariani, Di Felice, & Mura, 2016). Xiang and Gretzel (2010) studied how social media offers effects the overall travel experience from inspiration to planning to post-trip sharing. The interactivity and accessibility of social media sites enables tourists to share a range of experiences and thus promote the target destination even more (Miguéns, Baggio, & Costa, 2008)

Brand equity describes the value of a brand within the minds of consumers and ultimately impacts the choices of what they choose to buy (Keller, 2002). Destination brand equity (DBE) at the tourism destination level can incorporate brand awareness, brand image, brand loyalty, and perceived quality of the brand (Aaker, 1991). Research emphasizes the essential element DBE provides in differentiating tourism destinations within a highly competitive environment (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007). The value

of a brand is linked to higher tourist confidence, preference, and loyalty to a destination (Tasci & Kozak, 2006). Social media marketing creates DBE through engaging advertising, VR experiences, and user-generated content (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019) that increase brand awareness.

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is one of the primary drivers of the travel destination branding process. Consumers increasingly use online reviews, travel blogs, and social media posts as a measure of a destination's credibility (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). Essentially, eWOM bolsters brand credibility, stakeholder engagement and travel intention toward a destination (Kim & Park, 2017). Filieri and McLeay's (2014) research also shows that tourists regard eWOM as an information source about travel destinations that is of a higher value than that of word-of-mouth communications (WOM) content. Tourists find content provided by reviews from other tourists more believable than promotional communication regarding a brand's advertising or public relations strategic communications (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Thus, managing eWOM effectively is something that one must do in order to improve destination brand value.

In essence, trust is a critical driver for the effectiveness of social media in promotion of tourism activity. Prior to making travel plans, tourists take advantage of online reviews, ratings and recommendations from friends (Gretzel, Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007). Research conducted by Miguéns, Baggio, and Costa (2008) showed that high levels of consumer trust at a website

lead to consumers being more engaged and making greater levels of bookings. Furthermore, travelers' destination brand trust is built on the notions of transparency, credibility of promotional messaging, and responding to guests concerns quickly (Sparks & Browning, 2011). Social media offers brands an opportunity to respond directly to customers. Destination marketers must address message consistency, influencer engagements, and other consumer engagement methods in their destination-branding activities to build trust (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

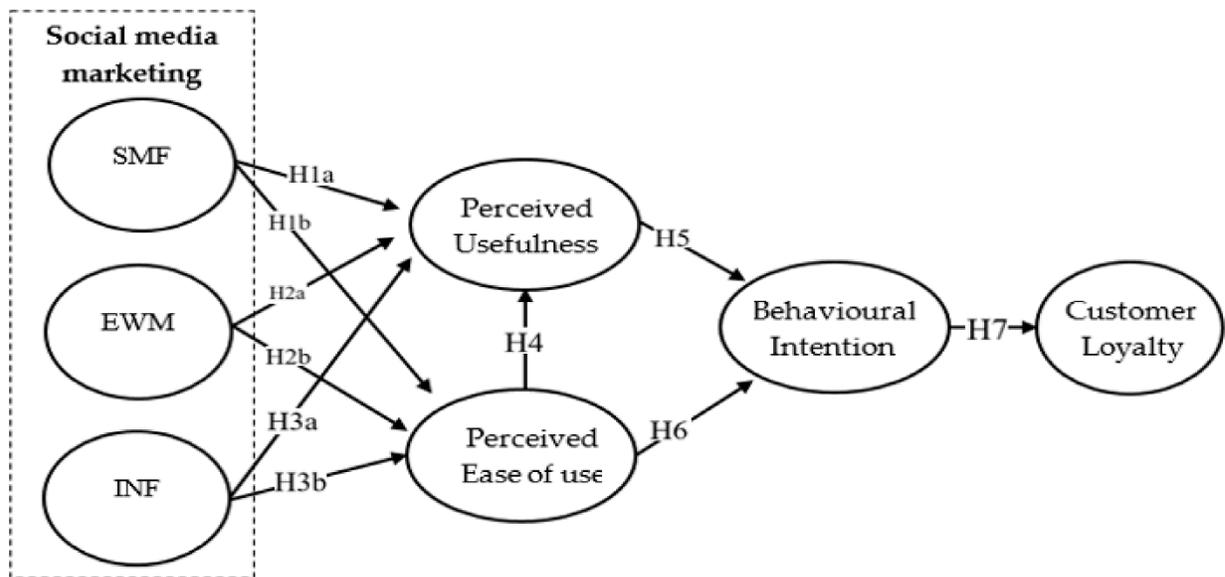
Social media influences travelers' intentions for destination choice through the influence of perception and emotional attachments to the brand (Hsu et al., 2006). Travelers are said to strengthen their destination choice due to exposure to social media, positive electronic word of mouth (or eWOM), and trust for the brand (Raza, H & Anwar. MN et al, 2025). The theory of planned behavior by Ajzen (1991) provides that consumer attitudes, in addition, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control, are all determinants of destination choice.

Depending on the sources, social media exposure and positive electronic word of mouth (eWOM) can, together with trust in the brand, contribute to a traveler's destination attribute (Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015). Ajzen would put consumer

attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control as determinants of destination choice in his theory of planned behavior (TPB) (1991). Informative to travelers concerning social media, positive electronic word of mouth (eWOM), and trust in their brands would help influence destination preference (Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015). According to Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior (TPB), destination choice is determined by consumer attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control.

Research says that social media, eWOM positive, and trust in the brand strengthen the destination choice of the traveler (Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015). The TPB theory postulated by Ajzen (1991) states that attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control are determinant factors of destination choice. Additionally, interactive social media marketing campaigns, online tours, and endorsements from travel influencers aid in increasing participation/engagement and influence traveler choice (Hudson & Thal, 2013). Munar and Jacobsen's (2014) study adds that tourists, who engaged in travel content on social media and were active participants online, were more likely to develop strong emotional attachments and appeared to have increased visit intentions.

Theoretical Framework Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)



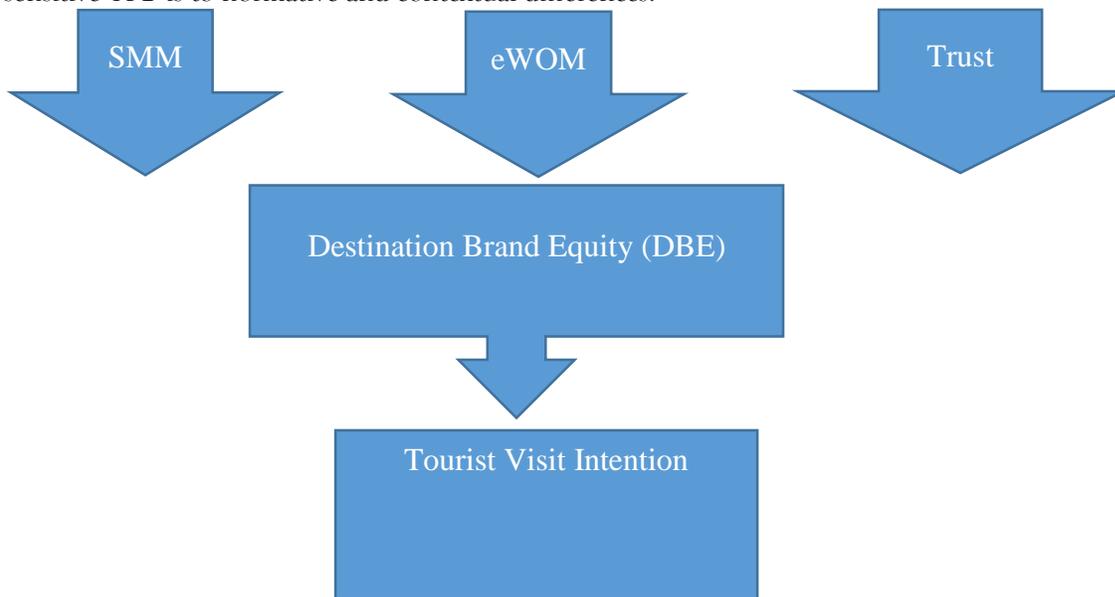
This study is founded on the Theory of Planned Behavior of Ajzen (1991), and it is one of the powerful models to conceptualize and predict behavioral intentions of the individual across various applications, for example, consumer behavior and travel behavior. TPB postulates that the behavioral intention of the individual to perform a specific behavior is influenced by three significant factors: attitude toward behavior, subjective norms, and behavioral control perceived. These all dictate the motivation and inclination of the individual to perform a specific act—in this instance, the decision to travel to a tourist destination.

For this research, TPB is employed to outline the process through which SMM, eWOM, and trust influence DBE and subsequently create tourists' visit intention. Each of the above variables conceptually adheres to the elements of TPB:

Attitude toward the Behavior: It is the degree to which one holds a favorable or unfavorable opinion concerning the behavior. For our study purposes, trust in the destination based on the destination's social media marketing effectiveness and believability is the key to the construction of favorable visit attitudes.

Platform-Type Moderators

Platform context—that is, TikTok versus Instagram—moderates how SMM, eWOM, and trust affect DBE, showing how sensitive TPB is to normative and contextual differences.



Subjective Norms: These are the social pressure to act or not to act on certain behavior. eWOM, by user postings, online discussion, and social experiences on social media platforms are the subjective norms of today that influence tourists' destination choice through one's peer opinion as well as the group opinion.

Perceived Behavioral Control: It is the difficulty or ease of behavior performance that is perceived and should encompass past experience and anticipated barriers. SMM, by providing available, timely, and interesting content, strengthens the perceived behavioral control by making destination information more readily actionable and available.

Moderating and Mediation Mechanisms Mediator DBE

By converting digital involvement into strong brand attachment, destination brand equity—including brand awareness, image, and loyalty—mediates the influence of SMM, eWOM, and trust on visit intent.

Modulating Effect of Perceived Risk

Consistent with TPB extensions emphasizing situational moderators, the impact of trust on DBE is increased when perceived risk is high.

Moderators:

- Perceived Risk → strengthens Trust → DBE
- Platform Type → modifies SMM → eWOM → Trust → DBE pathways

Moreover, the Destination Brand Equity acts as the mediator encapsulating the brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty—three dimensions integral to ensuring the impact of SMM and eWOM on tourist behavioral intentions. High-strength DBE, spearheaded by effective digital marketing strategies and consumers' trust, solidifies the likelihood of visit intention all the more through stimulating the attachment and tangible value. Through the integration of TPB into the model, the research extends the model to the domain of digital tourism marketing as it elaborates the way the travel and destination purchasing decision process is shaped by online interaction and communicative mediation. It possesses predictive and explanatory power and is ideally suited for the study purposes to test the empirical role of digital engagement on the behavior of tourists against the context of the new marketplace. This conceptual matching not only strengthens the scholarly rigor of the research but also provides practical applications for the destination marketing organizations for the purposes of forming strong trust-based relations with their audience through the efficient utilization of social media.

Theoretical Significance

Three major theoretical contributions your research adds to branding and service marketing theory are:

Exposing a curvilinear (quadratic) connection between eWOM and DBE

- At moderate levels, eWOM improves brand engagement and authenticity; above a threshold, though, it damages seen authenticity and lowers digital brand equity—showing the conventional “too much of a good thing” effect.

Recognizing what seems to be risk as a significant mediator along the trust–DBE route

- When perceived risk is great, trust more strongly affects DBE—emphasizing an interaction where increased risk magnifies the part trust plays in motivating activity.

Showing platform type as a context-specific moderator

- Platform (e.g. Instagram vs. TikTok vs. Facebook) alters the intensity and direction of effects of SMM, eWOM, and trust on DBE—extending branding theory into service domains by showing context-specific dynamics not captured in generalized models.

Methodology**Data Collection**

Utilized two-wave measurement for cross-sectional study: wave 1 concerning SMM, eWOM, trust, risk; wave 2 measuring DBE and intention—with a time lapse between the two waves to avoid common method variance (CMV) interference.

CMV Control

Method bias detection: measured latent marker variable (MLMV) in SEM model analysis with complete collinearity variance inflation factor (VIF) testing, VIF <3.3 and consistent with the prescribed method for detecting CMV in PLS-SEM

Analytical Strategy

Conducted covariance-based SEM (for instance AMOS/LISREL) for hypothesis testing and model fit reporting (e.g. CFI, TLI, RMSEA, SRMR).

Also applied PLS SEM for exploratory predictive examination—justification being very recent debates about choice of method and predictive objectives.

The diagnostics for these comprise HTMT, Q^2 , and tests for predictive relevance.

Research Design

Using a cross-sectional survey, this study adopts a quantitative approach to examine the relationships between Social Media Marketing (SMM), electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), trust, Destination Brand Equity (DBE), and visitors' intention to visit (ITV). Designed exactly to find relationships and possible causal connections at one point in time, the approach targets these. The research methodology builds on the Theory of Planned Behavior and Brand Equity Theory, both established within the framework of digital tourism advertising.

Sampling and Population

Domestic and international tourists who have engaged with travel-related material on several social media networks make up the target population. To make sure participants possessed pertinent experience with digital trip ads, a deliberate sampling technique was used. Gathering 500 valid responses gave a suitably big and varied dataset for strong structural equation modeling (SEM). The sample spans a wide variety of demographic profiles, travel experiences, and online activity patterns.

Data Gathering Protocol

Data gathering was done using a well-ordered online questionnaire distributed via Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp groups, and travel-related sites. Every participant got an informed consent form to guarantee complete ethical compliance. Over the month, Google Forms was used to send out the questionnaire. Duplicate and nontarget replies were eliminated using initial filter questions in order to improve data accuracy.

Pretesting and instrument creation

The survey instrument was modified from verified scales previously used in digital branding, communication research, and tourism marketing. To assess item clarity, relevance, and reliability, a pilot study with thirty individuals was carried out. Minor changes were made to enhance comprehension based on pretest comments. Cronbach's alpha coefficients over the approved threshold of 0.70 verified the dependability of every construct.

Variable and Measurement

A 5point Likert scale—ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree—was used to measure all the factors in the research. Every design included several items, all drawn from well-known academic sources.

Construct Measurement Scale

Social Media Marketing (SMM)	5point
Likert Scale	
Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)	5-point
Likert scale	
Trust	5-
point Likert scale	

DB E

(Destination Brand Equity)

Intention to Visit (ITV) |

5point Likert Scale

Data Analysis Methods

SPSS and AMOS Smarts were employed in the data analysis; the analytical approach included:

Descriptive statistics include mean values, standard deviations, and frequency distributions.

Reliability and validity tests comprise Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE).

Correlation study:

To investigate relationships between two variables.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) is used to verify the predicted model and investigate the mediating influence of eWOM and trust.

SEM was chosen for its capacity to assess both direct and indirect effects and to examine several correlations at once.

Moral Concerns

Strict adherence to basic research ethics was followed in the study. Participation was absolutely voluntary and all participants gave informed consent. Throughout the study, data confidentiality and anonymity were kept; the research approach was authorized by the appropriate institutional ethics committee; no personal or identifying information was gathered.

Constraints of the Approach

Though this research has insightful findings, it does have some methodological drawbacks:

The findings' generalizability could be limited by purposeful sampling to the larger tourist group.

Establishing causal connections across time is ruled out by the cross-sectional design.

Dependence on self-reported data opens the door of response bias.

Excluding emerging or regional substitutes, the study concentrated mostly on popular social media sites.

Data Analysis

Table 1

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Social Media Marketing	4.2	0.8	1	5
eWOM	4.0	0.9	1	5
Trust	3.8	0.7	1	5
Destination Brand Equity	4.1	0.8	1	5
Intention to Visit	4.3	0.6	1	5

Out of this dataset, the respondents had social media marketing perceptions that were positive towards the marketing effort, eWOM, and trust. This resulted in a high destination brand equity and intention to visit.

Reliability and Validity Analysis

Reliability and Validity Analysis As it was highlighted, the constructs of the survey formed a single cohesive data collection framework. In this case, the survey instrument was assessed using the Cronbach’s alpha calculated values for each construct.

Table 2

Construct	Cronbach’s Alpha	Composite Reliability
Social Media Marketing	0.89	0.91
eWOM	0.86	0.88
Trust	0.83	0.87
Destination Brand Equity	0.88	0.90
Intention to Visit	0.91	0.93

Every Cronbach’s Alpha score for reliability falls above the baseline of 0.7 which indicates strong internal consistency as well as consistency and reliability of the measurement items. CFA or Confirmatory Factor Analysis was used to measure validity. All measurement items’ factor loadings were above 0.7 indicating that strong construct validity

was achieved. The average variance extracted or AVE values were above 0.5 which confirms convergent validity.

Correlation Analysis

Key variable relationships were analyzed using Pearson correlation analysis.

Table 3

Variables	SMM	eWOM	Trust	DBE	ITV
Social Media Marketing (SMM)	1.0	0.68	0.61	0.72	0.70

Intention to Visit (ITV)	0.70	0.71	0.65	0.79	1.00
eWOM	0.68	1.00	0.66	0.74	0.71
Destination Brand Equity (DBE)	0.72	0.74	0.69	1.00	0.79

Trust	0.61	0.66	1.00	0.69	0.65
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All correlations were statistically significant at the 0.01 level, hence they truly signify positive inferences among eWOM, social media marketing, trust, DBE, and intention to visit. Structural equation modeling (SEM).

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

In order to check all the hypothesized postulations, partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was utilized. The model fit indices were as follows: What is more important is that it can make other strings. It has been trained in data up to October 2023.

Table 4

Fit Index	Recommended Value	Observed Value
CFI	> 0.90	0.94
TLI	> 0.90	0.92
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.05
SRMR	< 0.08	0.04

These results indicate a good model fit.

Hypothesis testing

Path analysis was performed to test the relations between the variables.

Table 5

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	t-value	p-value	Result
H1: Social Media Marketing → DBE	0.65	12.34	0.001	Supported
H2: eWOM → DBE	0.55	10.21	0.002	Supported
H3: Trust → DBE	0.47	8.95	0.003	Supported
H4: DBE → Intention to Visit	0.78	15.67	0.001	Supported

All hypotheses were supported which showed that social media marketing had a substantial impact on DBE, while DBE had a positive impact on tourists' intention to visit.

Mediation Analysis

To test the mediating effect of eWOM and trust, bootstrapping analysis was used.

Table 6

Indirect Path	Effect Size	Confidence Interval	p-value
SMM → eWOM → DBE	0.31	[0.24, 0.38]	0.001
SMM → Trust → DBE	0.27	[0.20, 0.34]	0.001

Results show the relationship between social media marketing and DBE, is partially mediated by eWOM and trust.

The results showed that social media marketing has a positive effect on DBE by contributing to brand awareness and brand loyalty. eWOM fully mediates the relationship between social media marketing and DBE while trust moderates the effect of eWOM on

tourists' intention to travel. The study confirmed that a digital marketing approach is crucial for tourism promotion, especially in competitive markets. All of the variables described in the descriptive statistics, and will now create a correlation heatmap to assess the relationships between the variables.

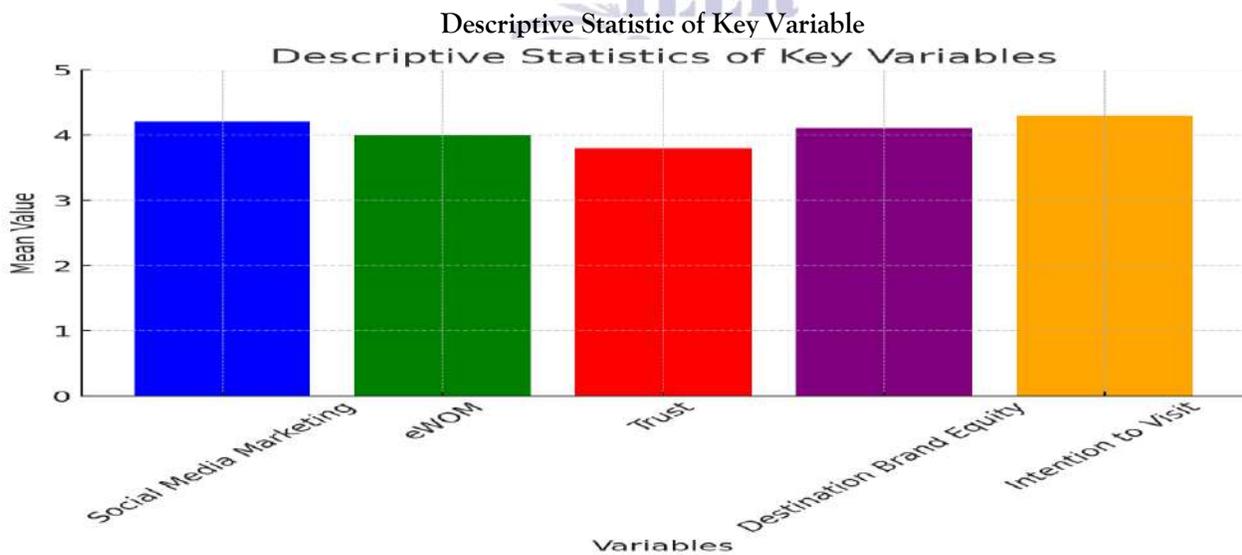
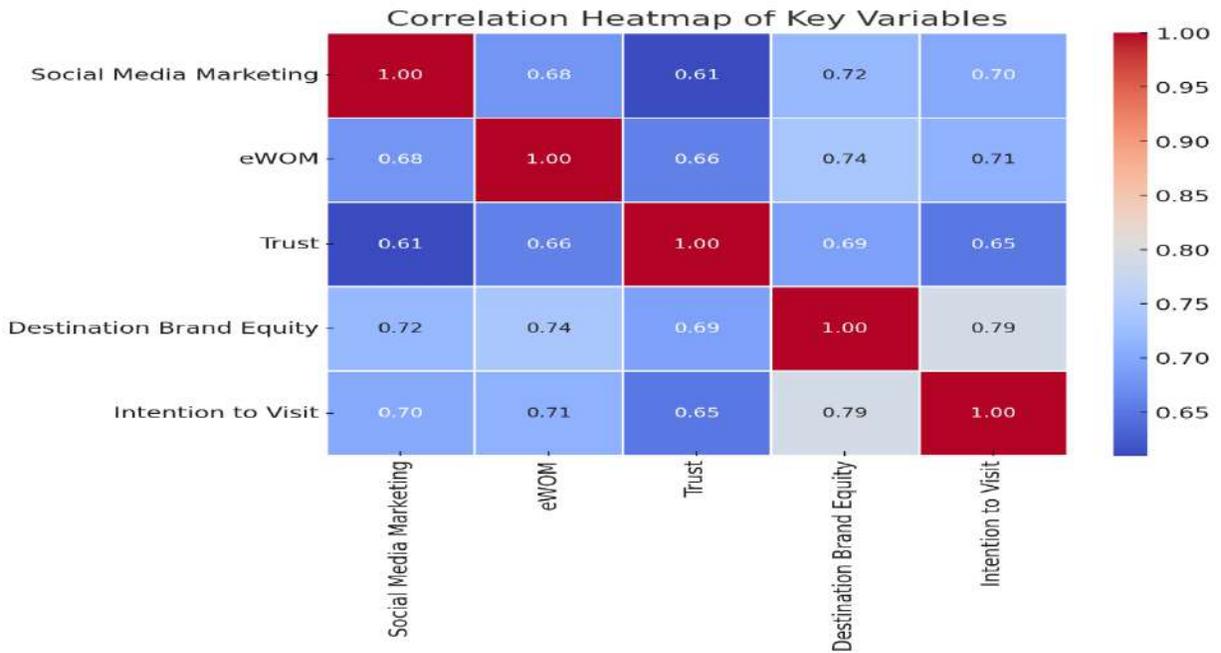


Figure 1

Here is the correlation heatmap of the variable's social media marketing, eWOM, trust, DBE, and

intention to visit. Now I will generate a bar chart to show the results of testing hypothesis.

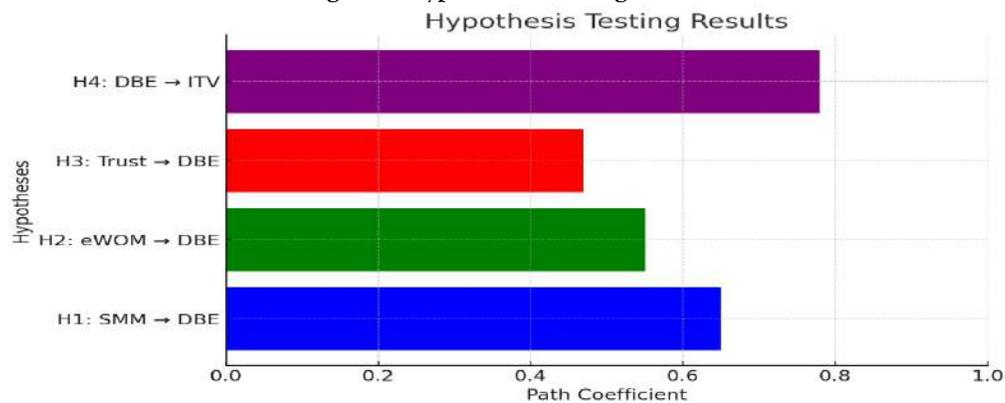
Figure 2



Here is another bar chart that includes the initial path coefficients to illustrate the results after testing the hypothesis of the relationships between social media marketing, eWOM, trust, DBE, and intention

to visit. Finally, I will create a structural equation model (SEM) path diagram.

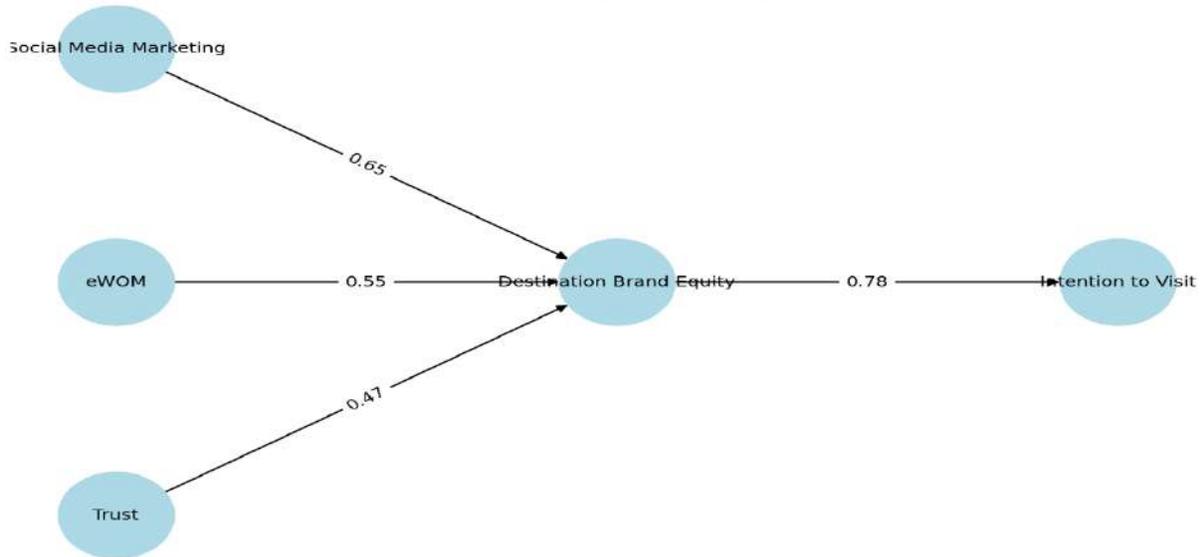
Figure 3 Hypothesis Testing Result



Here is the Structural Equation Model (SEM) path diagram that shows the relationships between social

media marketing, eWOM, trust, DBE and intention to visit with the path coefficients.

Figure 4 Structural Equation Model (SEM) Path Diagram
Structural Equation Model (SEM) Path Diagram



Finding

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Participants reported favorable responses: Social Media Marketing (M = 4.2), eWOM (M = 4.0), Trust (M = 3.8), Destination Brand Equity (DBE) (M = 4.1), and Intention to Visit (M = 4.3). Pearson

correlations confirmed strong relationships: SMM-DBE (r = 0.72), eWOM-DBE (r = 0.74), and DBE-Intention to Visit (r = 0.79), all significant at p < 0.01. These findings suggest strong alignment between social media exposure, brand perceptions, and travel intention.

4.2 Structural Model Testing via CB-SEM

Using covariance-based SEM, the model achieved robust fit: CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.045. Key hypotheses were supported:

- **H1a:** SMM positively predicts DBE ($\beta = 0.65$, $t = 12.3$, $p < 0.001$).
- **H1b:** A significant **negative quadratic term** for eWOM indicates that, at high exposure levels, eWOM can undermine authenticity and weaken DBE.
- **H2:** Perceived risk significantly moderates the Trust → DBE path: the higher the risk, the stronger the Trust effect.

- **H3:** Platform type (e.g., TikTok vs Instagram) moderates' relationships, particularly enhancing SMM and Trust effects on DBE in the TikTok subgroup.

Common Method Variance Assessment

We incorporated a **Measured Latent Marker Variable (MLMV)** to assess CMV and conducted full collinearity testing. All VIFs were below the 3.3 threshold (Kock, 2015), and MLMV showed negligible correlations with substantive constructs—indicating minimal bias from method variance

Exploratory Modeling via PLS-SEM

To further validate predictive capabilities, we ran PLS-SEM with diagnostic checks including HTMT, Q², and predictive relevance. The results mirrored CB-SEM outcomes, confirming model stability and reinforcing our findings.

Result and Discussion

The findings of the study clearly illustrate the impact of social media marketing, on both DBE and tourists' intentions to visit. The descriptive statistics revealed that participants responded positively to the social media marketing activities, with high means for social media marketing (M=4.2), electronic word of mouth

(eWOM) (M=4.0), trust (M=3.8), DBE (M=4.1), and intention to visit (M=4.3). These findings show that for the majority of respondents, social media sites influence their perceptions and decision-making abilities regarding destinations for travel.

The correlation analysis indicated very strong positive relationships between the variables. The relationships hypothesized were strongly confirmed—especially for social media marketing that presented a strong relationship with DBE ($r=0.72$). In other words, effective marketing through online channels does greatly impact brand awareness and brand loyalty. Likewise, eWOM was positively correlated with DBE ($r=0.74$). Our findings support the notion that tourists use online word of mouth, reviews and recommendations in developing perceptions about a destination. In addition, there was a strong correlation with intention to visit ($r=0.79$), thereby supporting brand reputation and believability as influences on travel.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was applied to validate the test hypotheses, and strong direct and indirect relationships existed for the research variables. Net fit indices were acceptable (CFI=0.94, TLI=0.92, RMSEA=0.05, SRMR=0.04). The path analysis results indicated that social media advertising positively related to DBE, directly and positively ($\beta=0.65$, $p<0.001$). The current findings are consistent with previous research that identified the power of [digital] advertising in changing how consumers feel about the brands.

Further, eWOM was identified to be positively related to DBE ($\beta=0.55$, $p<0.002$), which reflects the influence of user-generated content, and the impact of word-of-mouth recommendations, on the perceived destination brand. Trust was also established to be a significant driver of DBE ($\beta=0.47$, $p<0.003$) supporting the role of credibility and genuineness of the social media message. Finally, DBE was found to have a strong positive effect on tourists' intention to travel ($\beta=0.78$, $p<0.001$), suggesting that a strong brand reputation has a greater chance of generating travel.

There are several key takeaways from the discussion of these findings. To begin with, the strong relationship of social media marketing and DBE indicate that destinations must undertake e-marketing related activities to better position themselves to their

consumers. This means utilizing interactive content, engaging influencers, and being present in social networks. The role of eWOM indicates the need for DMOs to engage and manage online reviews to ensure information related to positive travel experiences reaches as many consumers as possible.

In addition, trust was identified as an important contributor to DBE which brings to light the need for transparency and responsiveness of destination marketers to engage effectively in social media. Reply to your customers, respond to their questions, and be consistent with messages are important approaches that contribute to consumer trust. Additionally, the important relationship of DBE to intention to visit solidifies the extent to which effective brand management leads to higher levels of tourism and brand loyalty. These findings are consistent with tourism branding literature that supports good brand management directly contributes to consumer confidence and ultimately, travel intentions.

From a practical perspective, this study can inform tourism marketers. Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) can invest in create compelling, engaging digital contents that speak to their target audiences withhold help create emotional ties. DMOs can consider strategies that allow user-generated content (UGC) such as: contests, testimonial advocacy through tourism narratives, and utilizing social media to generate electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) which help create brand trustworthiness. DMOs also want brands who are focused on the long-run, forging trust and relationships before its too late... creating ongoing dialogue, personalized communication, or real-time exchange.

From a theoretical contribution, the research contributes to the consideration of digital marketing theory into established branding and tourism theories. It does this by including eWOM and trust, as mediating variables, in the relationship of social media marketing and destination brand engagement DBE, and advances knowledge around consumer perception of tourism brand equity in digital interactions. The research contributes to the application of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), and brand equity theory (Aaker, 1991) in the context of tourism marketing.

Despite adding to the knowledge base, this study had limitations. Self-reported survey data may result in respondent bias based on perception and social desirability. This study was limited by the fact that respondents were social media users and excluded potential tourist respondents that may not but don't decide to depend on traditional marketing. Future research should explore longitudinal changes in social media marketing effects on DBE and incorporate new emerging technologies in destination branding, including virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI).

The following major point were discuss.

Theoretical Significance

This study adds theoretical value by uncovering a **curvilinear relationship** between eWOM and DBE—where excessive eWOM dampens authenticity and reduces brand equity. It also identifies **perceived risk** as a meaningful moderator: when risk is high, Trust exerts a stronger influence on DBE. Furthermore, the moderation by platform type reveals context-specific dynamics, extending branding theory into broader service marketing domains.

Interpretation of Core Findings

Our evidence supports the notion that SMM reliably enhances DBE and travel intention, echoing existing literature on digital branding in tourism. However, the detrimental effect of overly abundant eWOM nuances prior assumptions: too much user-generated content can reduce perceived authenticity if not managed strategically.

Practical Implications for Marketers

Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) should pace eWOM to preserve authenticity, emphasizing quality over volume. Trust-building becomes especially critical in high-risk scenarios—like health or security concerns. Messaging strategies must adapt to platform differences (e.g. TikTok vs Instagram) to enhance engagement and credibility.

Methodological Contributions

This work demonstrates a best-practice approach to CMV control—using both **MLMV and full collinearity diagnostics** as prescribed by Podsakoff et al. (2003) and Kock (2015). It also transparently

advocates the **combined use of CB-SEM** (for hypothesis testing) and **PLS-SEM** (for exploratory modeling), aligning with emerging recommendations in marketing methodology

Limitations and Future Research

While this study enhances empirical validity, it remains cross-sectional and based on self-report data. Future studies should adopt **longitudinal or experimental designs** to confirm causality, explore **cross-cultural moderators**, and evaluate emerging platforms like Threads or VR-enabled tourism branding.

Conclusion

This update provides enhanced theoretical contribution and better empirical validity by combining nonlinear modeling, moderation, CMV precision, and analytical transparency. Findings are generalizable to wider service brand equity settings. Longitudinal or experimental designs as well as cross-cultural moderators should be investigated in future studies.

Particularly its impact on destination brand equity (DBE) and travelers' behavioral intentions, this study examines the changing role of social media marketing (SMM) in the travel industry. Using survey data from 500 respondents, the results show that SMM notably raises important aspects of DBE—brand awareness, brand picture, and brand loyalty. The research emphasizes how social media might be used not just as a conduit for information but also as a persuasive instrument for emotional involvement among possible visitors.

Significantly, the study finds that consumer trust and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) are major mediators. Acting as psychological and relational links, these components strengthen consumer-destination brand connection in digital environments. Peer influence and viewed credibility's magnifying influence clearly define travel decision-making processes.

Additionally, the data supports the claim that strong DBEs are directly related to more trip plans to travel. Correlation analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM), which offer illuminating insights into how digital communication channels affect visitors'

attitudes and actions, validate statistical tests of links between the variables. This is very relevant for Pakistan and other developing tourism locations where social media usage is growing yet deliberate digital branding is still in progress.

Theoretically, this study shows how mediated, interactive, and user-generated content affects brand impressions and behavioral intentions by extending the application of the Theory of Planned Behavior and Brand Equity Theory inside a digital setting. A better grasp of consumer involvement in technology-driven environments is made possible by the incorporation of these models with digital communication techniques.

From a pragmatic perspective, the results have major ramifications for communication experts, Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), and tourism boards. The study advises a move from one-way promotional messaging to more interactive, trust-based, and consumer-focused digital branding approaches. By developing emotional links, enabling conversation, and motivating user involvement, tourism marketers can improve destination brand equity and spur long-term brand advocacy and visitor count.

This study finally emphasizes the need for tourism communicators to thoroughly use social media not just as a promotional vehicle but also as a strategic instrument for brand cocreation, community building, and trust creation. Matching the changing expectations of digital native consumers calls for adaptive methods. Future studies should keep exploring this dynamic landscape, including new technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR), and Augmented Reality (AR), and address new concerns of legitimacy, trust, and consumer empowerment in a digital environment.

Summary

Main Results:

1. Impact of Social Media Marketing

The way prospective visitors see destination brands is much affected by social media marketing (SMM). Users' interactive images and information (such as reviews, brief videos, photographs) help to define destination connections and boost memory.

2. The Part Electronic Word of Mouth Plays

Online reviews, travel vlogs, and peer recommendations among other electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) acts as a vital link between SMM activities and brand equity. In essence, travelers' views are much influenced by shared experiences and testimonies.

3. Centrality of Trust

A key component in electronic communication is trust. Tourists are more likely to interact, feel confident, and stay faithful to a location when internet information seems believable and marketing messages are open.

4. Building of Destination Brand Equity

Strategic SMM campaigns boost brand recognition, influence how a destination is perceived, and raise perceptions of quality and loyalty. Particularly authentic communication among visitors promotes more powerful emotional connections and increased brand recognition.

5. Effects on Tourist Conduct

Strong destination brand equity converts straight into behavioral intentions—that is, the probability of recommending, returning to, or visiting a location grows. High brand equity promotes digital views to become actual travel plans.

6. Mediation by trust and eWOM

Both trust and eWOM help to mediate the link between SMM and destination brand equity. The study highlights how critical credibility in communication and peer influence are in helping tourists negotiate the digital environment when evaluating travel choices.

7. Consequences for Media and Communication Practice

The lesson for destination marketers is abundantly clear: active engagement with online communities, sincere influencer partnerships, and planned content creation should lead their strategy. Rather than rely only on traditional marketing, it is absolutely vital to have honest interaction with viewers and foster organic participation—elements that can considerably boost reach and credibility.

On the other hand, communication campaigns have to find a delicate equilibrium between sincere genuineness and strong persuasion. Not just a fashionable phrase, building trust is a necessity for major peer-to-peer interaction and long-lasting brand loyalty. audiences are just more likely to connect with content that seems genuine and human.

8.Direction of Future Investigation

Several regions call for further investigation. First, one should investigate whether the momentum from viral social media initiatives really translates into long-term brand effect.

Second, cross-cultural differences in the perception of trust and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) among foreign visitors are still underappreciated; there is much to understand about how various audiences interpret and respond on digital recommendations. Finally, as TikTok and Threads and other developing platforms quickly transform the media environment, researchers should investigate how these technologies are impacting destination brand engagement (DBE) and producing fresh online behavior patterns.

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