Marketing through Social Media and Technology to Revitalize the Tourism Sector: A Path to Sustainable Growth and Increased Tourist Intention

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Tourism plays a vital role in Malaysia's economy, yet the sector experienced a significant decline in international tourist arrivals due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. This study investigates the impact of social media marketing strategies, destination attributes, technology integration, and sustainability practices on tourists' visit intentions, with trust and credibility as mediating variables. Drawing on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Social Exchange Theory (SET), and Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), a quantitative approach was employed to collect data from 300 international tourists visiting key Malaysian destinations through face-to-face surveys. Results demonstrate that social media marketing and destination attributes significantly influence tourist perceptions, while technology integration and sustainability practices enhance the appeal of Malaysian tourism. Trust and credibility emerged as critical mediators, reinforcing the need for transparency and a positive destination image. The findings provide actionable insights for tourism stakeholders to strengthen digital marketing strategies, improve infrastructure, and promote sustainable tourism practices, ensuring Malaysia's competitiveness and recovery in the global tourism market. **Keywords:** Social Media Marketing Strategies, Destination Attributes, Technology Integration, Sustainability Practices, Tourists' Visit Intentions, Trust and Credibility, Malaysian Tourism, Post-Pandemic Recovery, Tourism Marketing, Tourist Behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a country known for its incredible diversity, stunning landscapes, and warm hospitality. Nestled in the heart of Southeast Asia, it offers a unique mix of modern cities, historical landmarks, and natural wonders that make it a favourite destination for travellers worldwide. From the towering Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur to the serene islands of Langkawi and the ancient rainforests of Borneo, Malaysia has something to offer every type of visitor Tourism has long been a cornerstone of Malaysia's economy, significantly contributing to GDP growth and employment generation. Over the decades, Malaysia has emerged as a leading tourist destination in Southeast Asia, celebrated for its rich cultural heritage, breathtaking natural landscapes, and culinary diversity. Initiatives such as the "Visit Malaysia" campaigns, first introduced in 1990, have played a pivotal role in enhancing Malaysia's global tourism image. These campaigns, supported by government investments in infrastructure and marketing, have successfully positioned the country as an attractive destination for both domestic and international travellers (Cheung et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2024).

The rapid advancement of digital technology has further reshaped the tourism landscape in Malaysia. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become vital tools for promoting destinations, creating engaging content, and influencing tourists' travel decisions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media emerged as a crucial strategy for sustaining the tourism sector by maintaining engagement with potential travelers and promoting virtual experiences (Tham et al., 2024).

Tourism has always been a key driver of Malaysia's economy, contributing significantly to its GDP and providing livelihoods for millions. In 2019, the country welcomed a record 26.1 million international tourists, solidifying its

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position as one of Asia's top travel destinations. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought this progress to a sudden halt. International tourist arrivals fell drastically to 4.3 million in 2020, an 83.5% decline, as highlighted by Jiang et al. (2024). While recovery is underway, with arrivals increasing to 10.1 million in 2022, these numbers remain far below pre-pandemic levels, signalling the need for new strategies to reinvigorate the sector.

The Malaysian government has played a crucial role in rebuilding the tourism industry, introducing initiatives to support local businesses and promote the country's attractions. Efforts like financial aid programs for tourism operators and campaigns leveraging social media have been central to these efforts. According to Halim and Meng (2024), the government has also encouraged the adoption of digital platforms, such as virtual tours and influencer partnerships, to connect with a global audience and adapt to changing traveller behaviours.

One of Malaysia's strengths lies in its advanced infrastructure, which ensures seamless travel experiences for visitors. With world-class airports like Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) and efficient public transport systems, such as the MRT, LRT and high-speed rail, getting around the country is easy and convenient. Additionally, the integration of smart tourism technologies, including mobile apps and AI-driven services, enhances the overall travel experience, making Malaysia a modern and accessible destination (Peong et al., 2024).

Another pillar of Malaysia's tourism recovery strategy is sustainability. In recent years, eco-conscious travellers have shown a growing preference for destinations that prioritize environmental protection and responsible tourism. Malaysia has responded with initiatives like the Langkawi Geopark Conservation Project and marine ecosystem restoration in Sabah, showcasing its commitment to preserving natural treasures while supporting local communities. As noted by Rodrigues et al. (2023), these efforts not only appeal to global trends but also strengthen Malaysia's competitive edge in the market.

The country's unique appeal extends to niche tourism markets as well. For instance, Malaysia has established itself as a global hub for halal tourism, offering Muslim travellers an array of halal-certified accommodations, dining options, and experiences (Wijaya et al., 2024). Medical tourism is another growing sector, with Malaysia attracting visitors seeking affordable yet high-quality healthcare services (Cham et al., 2021).

However, challenges remain. Tourists today are more cautious and selective, prioritizing destinations that offer safety, transparency, and authenticity. Studies by Shariffuddin et al. (2023) and Halim and Meng (2024) underscore the importance of building trust through clear communication and reliable services. Malaysia's proactive measures, such as implementing stringent health protocols and promoting transparent travel policies, are steps in the right direction to address these concerns.

As the world reopens to travel, Malaysia's tourism sector is at a critical juncture. By embracing digital innovation, prioritizing sustainability, and fostering trust among travellers, the country is well-positioned to not just recover but thrive. With its diverse attractions and forward-thinking strategies, Malaysia continues to captivate and inspire visitors from around the globe.

Problem Statement

Tourism has been a vital sector of Malaysia's economy, significantly contributing to its GDP and employment. However, the global COVID-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented disruption to the tourism industry worldwide, and Malaysia was no exception. According to statistical data, the number of international tourists visiting Malaysia dropped drastically from 26.1 million in 2019 to 4.3 million in 2020, representing an 83.5% decline. Although there has been a gradual recovery in recent years, with tourist arrivals increasing to 10.1 million in 2022, in 2023 tourism was increased to 20.1 million, suddenly decreased to 18.4 million in 2024, these numbers are still far below pre-pandemic levels. This significant drop has exposed structural vulnerabilities in Malaysia's tourism sector, requiring a renewed focus on strategies to attract international tourists and restore the industry to its pre-pandemic status.

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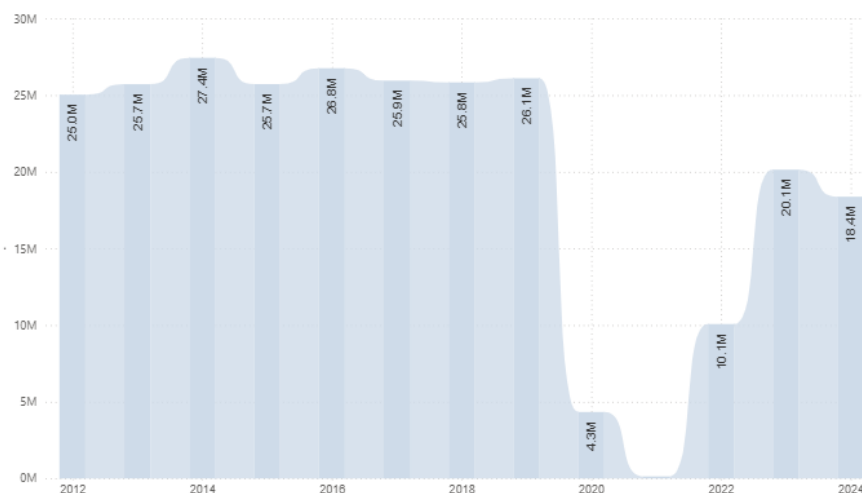
In particular, social media marketing strategies have emerged as a critical tool in shaping tourist behaviours. Studies such as Mazme and Albattat (2022) demonstrate how social media content and influencer endorsements can enhance youth engagement and destination attractiveness. However, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these strategies can effectively cater to diverse demographics and integrate emerging platforms like TikTok to influence visit intentions (Tham et al., 2024; Fong et al., 2024). The absence of targeted social media strategies tailored to younger travellers, particularly Gen Z, limits Malaysia's ability to capitalize on this growing tourist segment.

Furthermore, trust and credibility have been identified as key mediators in tourist decision-making. Research by Halim and Meng (2024) highlights the importance of trust in post-pandemic tourism recovery, while Jiang et al. (2024) emphasize the role of destination safety and trust in influencing Chinese tourists' visit intentions. Despite these findings, there is insufficient exploration of how trust mediates the relationship between social media marketing and visit intentions, particularly in a post-pandemic landscape. This gap underscores the need for tourism stakeholders to prioritize trust-building strategies, such as transparent communication and credible safety assurances, to restore tourist confidence.

In addition, technology integration remains a challenge in Malaysia's tourism industry. Studies such as Phang and Kong (2024) have identified the influence of sensory and technical factors in promoting virtual tours. However, Malaysia lags in adopting cutting-edge technologies like AI-enabled services, virtual tours, and interactive social media campaigns, which have proven to enhance tourist experiences and engagement (Alam et al., 2023; Shariffuddin et al., 2024). The lack of real-world validation and widespread adoption of these technologies presents a barrier to modernizing Malaysia's tourism industry and competing with global destinations.

Equally important are sustainability practices, which are becoming increasingly demanded by global tourists. Research by Liu et al. (2023) and Chiwaridzo and Masengu (2023) highlights the growing demand for eco-friendly practices and green tourism experiences. While Malaysia offers rich biodiversity and eco-tourism opportunities, its sustainability practices remain underdeveloped. Tourists' preference for environmentally conscious destinations (Fauzi et al., 2024) indicates a need for Malaysia to adopt and market more robust sustainability initiatives to meet this demand.

Finally, destination attributes are crucial in shaping tourist perceptions. Malaysia boasts diverse attractions, from cultural landmarks to pristine beaches, but struggles to meet evolving preferences among global tourists. Studies such as Baber and Baber (2023) and Wijaya et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of destination image and perceived value in shaping visit intentions. However, gaps remain in understanding how these attributes interact with social media marketing efforts and tourist behaviour, particularly among niche markets like halal tourism (Hariani et al., 2024) and medical tourism (Seow, 2023).

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Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it provides insights into the key demographic variables influencing tourist behaviours and preferences, enabling the tourism industry to design targeted marketing strategies, allocate resources effectively, and promote sustainable practices. By categorizing tourists by age, gender, nationality, income, and education levels, the study helps stakeholders tailor experiences to diverse groups, from millennials engaged with social media to older adults prioritizing sustainability. Additionally, the analysis of travel purpose and frequency guides regional and international tourism development, while understanding preferences for travel information sources aid in integrating technology and enhancing customer engagement.

Research Scope

This study focuses on identifying the factors influencing Tourist Visit Intention to Malaysia, with a specific emphasis on the post-pandemic tourism recovery. The research investigates the roles of Social Media Marketing Strategies, Destination Attributes, Technology Integration, and Sustainability Practices as independent variables. It further explores how Trust and Credibility mediate the relationships between these variables and tourists' intentions to visit Malaysia.

The study will specifically target international and domestic tourists who engage with tourism-related content on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. It will also consider the perspectives of key stakeholders in the Malaysian tourism sector, including tourism boards, hospitality providers, and travel agencies.

The study's geographic focus will primarily include Malaysia as the destination country, with an emphasis on understanding tourist preferences in prominent tourism segments such as eco-tourism, halal tourism, medical tourism, and cultural tourism. Data collection will be conducted using quantitative methods, such as structured surveys, and will include tourists from diverse demographics, with special attention to younger travellers (e.g., Millennials and Gen Z).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study investigates the factors influencing tourist visit intention in Malaysia by examining the roles of social media marketing strategies, destination attributes, technology integration, and sustainability practices as independent variables (IVs), trust and credibility as the mediating variable (MV), and tourist visit intention as the dependent variable (DV). The framework is underpinned by three key theories: the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the Social Exchange Theory (SET), and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM).

Social Media Marketing Strategies

Social media platforms have transformed how destinations connect with tourists. Marketing efforts on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok influence tourists' perceptions, build destination images and increase engagement. Research, such as Chong (2023) and Rodrigues et al. (2023), has demonstrated the effectiveness of social media in driving destination popularity and enhancing tourists' interest. Effective strategies, including targeted advertising, user-generated content (UGC), and influencer collaborations, create trust and inspire tourists to consider a destination.

Destination Attributes

Destination attributes, such as cultural richness, natural beauty, and the quality of infrastructure, significantly shape tourists' intentions. Studies like Jiang et al. (2024) and Cham et al. (2021) highlight the importance of appealing destination features in influencing tourists' decisions. These attributes build emotional connections and satisfaction, increasing the likelihood of tourists visiting or revisiting a destination.

Technology Integration

Advancements in technology, such as virtual tours, smart tourism applications, and seamless online booking systems, play a critical role in enhancing the tourist experience. Peong et al. (2024) and Phang et al. (2024) found that tourists are more likely to visit destinations offering technological convenience. Technology integration not only improves accessibility but also enhances trust by offering transparent and reliable information.

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Sustainability Practices

Sustainability has emerged as a priority for both tourists and destinations. Practices such as eco-tourism, green certifications, and sustainable resource management resonate with environmentally conscious tourists. Research by Rodrigues et al. (2023) and Wijaya et al. (2024) reveals that sustainability initiatives positively influence destination image and tourist loyalty.

Trust and Credibility

Trust and credibility act as crucial mediators between the independent variables and tourist visit intention. Studies by Shariffuddin et al. (2023) and Wijaya et al. (2024) emphasize that tourists' trust in a destination's marketing messages, services, and sustainable practices increases their likelihood of visiting. The credibility of social media influencers, the quality of online reviews, and transparent communication build trust, making it a key driver of tourist behavior.

Tourist Visit Intention

Tourist visit intention is the primary outcome variable in this study. It reflects tourists' likelihood to travel to Malaysia based on their perceptions and experiences with social media marketing, destination attributes, technology integration, and sustainability practices. Research by Cham et al. (2021) and Jiang et al. (2024) supports the idea that positive perceptions of a destination significantly enhance tourist visit intention.

Theoretical Foundations

This study's theoretical foundation integrates the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the Social Exchange Theory (SET), and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to examine the factors influencing tourist visit intention in Malaysia. TPB offers a robust framework for understanding how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control drive tourist behaviour, emphasizing both external influences like marketing strategies and internal motivations such as trust and perceived ease of travel (Ajzen, 1991; Cham et al., 2021). SET complements this by highlighting the reciprocal exchange between tourists and destinations, where benefits such as transparency in social media marketing and positive destination attributes outweigh perceived costs, thereby fostering trust and visit intentions (Blau, 1964; Shariffuddin et al., 2023). Lastly, TAM underscores the importance of perceived usefulness and ease of technology integration—such as virtual tours and smart applications—in shaping trust and enhancing tourists' willingness to engage with destinations (Davis, 1989; Phang & Kong, 2024). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how social media marketing strategies, destination attributes, technology integration, and sustainability practices—mediated by trust and credibility—drive tourist visit intention. Drawing on insights from studies such as Rodrigues et al. (2023), Jiang et al. (2024), and Wijaya et al. (2024), this framework establishes a theoretical basis for exploring the dynamic interplay of these factors within Malaysia's tourism context.

METHODOLOGIES

This study adopts a quantitative research approach to investigate the factors influencing tourist visit intention in Malaysia, focusing on the roles of social media marketing strategies, destination attributes, technology integration, and sustainability practices. Trust and credibility are incorporated as a mediating variable linking these independent variables to the dependent variable, tourist visit intention. A cross-sectional design is employed, allowing data collection at a single point in time to assess the relationships among the variables. The theoretical foundation for this study is grounded in three key theories: the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which explains how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control influence tourist intentions; the Social Exchange Theory (SET), which highlights the value exchange between tourists and the destination, particularly regarding perceived benefits and costs; and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which emphasizes the importance of perceived usefulness and ease of use in shaping behavioural intentions related to technology.

A structured questionnaire is used as the primary data collection tool, starting with demographic questions to gather information about respondents' age, gender, nationality, education level, income, travel purpose, travel frequency, and preferred sources of travel information. The main section of the questionnaire incorporates Likert-

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scale items ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). The questionnaire design is guided by constructs validated in prior studies, ensuring reliability and alignment with the research objectives. Questions related to social media marketing strategies are adapted from Chong (2023) and Rodrigues et al. (2023); items for destination attributes drawn from Jiang et al. (2024) and Cham et al. (2021); questions on technology integration are informed by Peong et al. (2024) and Phang et al. (2024); and sustainability practices are measured using frameworks from Rodrigues et al. (2023) and Wijaya et al. (2024). Trust and credibility-related items are derived from Shariffuddin et al. (2023) and Wijaya et al. (2024), while tourist visit intention questions are based on Cham et al. (2021) and Jiang et al. (2024).

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was chosen for data analysis due to its ability to handle complex relationships between variables and its suitability for exploratory research. Unlike covariance-based SEM (CB-SEM), PLS-SEM does not require the data to follow a normal distribution, making it ideal for analyzing non-parametric datasets. Additionally, PLS-SEM excels in estimating models with formative and reflective constructs, which aligns with the multi-dimensional nature of the research variables in this study. Its robustness in handling small to medium sample sizes ensures reliable and valid results, even with a sample size of 300 participants. This approach enables the study to effectively test the hypothesized relationships and mediating effects within the research model.

The target population includes international tourists who are currently visiting Malaysia and domestic travelers exploring local destinations. Data is collected face-to-face at popular tourist attractions in Malaysia, ensuring direct engagement with respondents who are actively participating in tourism activities. This approach allows for high-quality, real-time feedback and enhances the authenticity of the responses. A non-probability purposive sampling method is used, targeting a sample size of 300 participants, sufficient to ensure statistical robustness for analysis.

Ethical considerations are integrated throughout the process, with participants providing informed consent and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. This rigorous methodological approach, supported by TPB, SET, and TAM, provides a robust framework for analyzing how various factors influence tourist visit intention. The findings are expected to generate actionable insights for enhancing Malaysia's competitiveness as a global tourism destination.

RESULTS

This section delineates the empirical findings derived from the quantitative analysis of survey data collected from tourists visiting Malaysia. The survey aimed to examine the influence of social media marketing strategies, destination attributes, technology integration, and sustainability practices on tourist visit intention, with trust and credibility acting as a mediating variable. Following a comprehensive methodology that employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to ensure rigorous statistical examination, the responses of 300 participants were analyzed.

These respondents, encompassing a diverse demographic profile, provided insights into various facets of tourism behaviour and decision-making. The data shed light on the role of digital platforms in shaping travel intentions, the importance of sustainable tourism practices, the impact of technological advancements in enhancing the tourist experience, and the influence of perceived trust and credibility on destination choice. Additionally, the survey captured preferences for information sources, travel purposes, and the frequency of travel, contributing to a holistic understanding of tourist behaviours in the Malaysian context.

Respondents' Demographic

The demographic analysis of the respondents reveals diverse characteristics that provide insights into their travel behaviours and preferences. Regarding age, the majority of participants fall within the older age brackets, with 30% aged 45 years and above, and 27% in the 35–44 age group. Younger respondents comprise 22.3% (18–24 years) and 20.7% (25–34 years). In terms of gender, females slightly outnumber males, representing 53.3% of the sample compared to 46.7% of males. Nationality analysis shows that most respondents are international tourists (81.7%), with domestic travellers (Malaysians) accounting for 18.3%. The education level of respondents is predominantly high, with 30% holding postgraduate degrees, followed by 27.3% with high school or less, 22% with graduate degrees, and 20.7%

with undergraduate degrees.

Income levels are evenly distributed, with 27% earning \$1,000–\$2,999, followed by 24.7% earning \$3,000–\$5,999, 24.3% earning below \$1,000, and 24% earning \$6,000 and above. Regarding travel purposes, the largest group travels to visit friends or relatives (27.3%), followed by education/medical tourism (26%), leisure (23.7%), and business (23%). Travel frequency data indicates that occasional travellers (1–2 trips/year) make up 37%, first-time visitors 34%, and frequent travellers (3+ trips/year) 29%. The preferred sources of travel information highlight online reviews/blogs as the most popular (32%), followed by travel agencies and word of mouth (23% each), and social media (22%). These findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the respondents' demographic profiles and their travel-related behaviours.

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics Table 1. provides valuable insights into the central tendencies and variability of the research variables: Social Media Marketing Strategies, Destination Attributes, Technology Integration, Sustainability Practices, and Tourist Visit Intention. With a complete dataset of 300 valid responses and no missing values, the analysis is robust and representative. The mean values for all variables are close to 4 on a 5-point scale, indicating that respondents generally agree with the statements associated with these constructs. Social Media Marketing Strategies have the highest mean (3.9608), followed closely by Sustainability Practices (3.9580) and Destination Attributes (3.9333), highlighting their importance in influencing perceptions. Technology Integration (3.8833) and Tourist Visit Intention (3.8713) also demonstrate relatively high averages, reflecting their significance. The minimum and maximum values for all variables span the full scale (1.00 to 5.00), while the standard error of the mean indicates a low variability, confirming the consistency of responses across the dataset. These findings underline the strong perceptions of the studied factors among respondents.

Table 1.Descriptive Statistics

Statistics

		Social Media Marketing Strategies	Destination Attributes	technology integration	Sustainability Practices	Tourist Visit Intention
N	Valid	300	300	300	300	300
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.9608	3.9333	3.8833	3.9580	3.8713
Std. Error of Mean		.04486	.04547	.05116	.04868	.04609
Minimum		1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Maximum		5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00

Furthermore, Table 2 shows items loading across all the constructs, with the Project Performance variable. 24 items have indication outer loading values below 0.708. Thus, weak items were waived. The appendices provide outer loading tables with and without weak items. Figure 1 shows items with proper loading.

Table 2. Outer Model Cross Loading

	Destination Attributes	Social Media Marketing	Sustainability Practices	Trust and Credibility	Technology Integration	Tourist Visit Intention
DA01	**0.871**	0.556	0.612	0.573	0.569	0.574
DA02	**0.854**	0.461	0.475	0.471	0.379	0.47
DA03	**0.834**	0.504	0.464	0.45	0.404	0.474
DA04	**0.862**	0.611	0.559	0.578	0.531	0.59
SM01	0.502	**0.767**	0.422	0.447	0.377	0.443
SM02	0.537	**0.901**	0.546	0.6	0.563	0.578
SM03	0.592	**0.918**	0.603	0.566	0.569	0.561

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SP01	0.496	0.508	**0.796**	0.664	0.7	0.653
SP02	0.539	0.549	**0.885**	0.713	0.743	0.676
SP03	0.565	0.517	**0.886**	0.721	0.709	0.625
SP04	0.512	0.499	**0.822**	0.749	0.686	0.664
T&C01	0.481	0.457	0.747	**0.835**	0.704	0.705
T&C02	0.529	0.578	0.735	**0.856**	0.706	0.728
T&C03	0.497	0.472	0.66	**0.822**	0.591	0.665
T&C04	0.527	0.52	0.633	**0.814**	0.582	0.672
T&C05	0.512	0.573	0.713	**0.829**	0.727	0.778
TI01	0.488	0.504	0.741	0.666	**0.862**	0.667
TI02	0.51	0.487	0.725	0.688	**0.902**	0.655
TI03	0.457	0.537	0.707	0.727	**0.881**	0.717
TI04	0.509	0.541	0.762	0.721	**0.861**	0.698
TVI01	0.56	0.556	0.707	0.773	0.68	**0.845**
TVI02	0.497	0.52	0.656	0.732	0.684	**0.88**
TVI03	0.583	0.574	0.698	0.749	0.698	**0.887**
TVI04	0.517	0.481	0.614	0.713	0.649	**0.859**
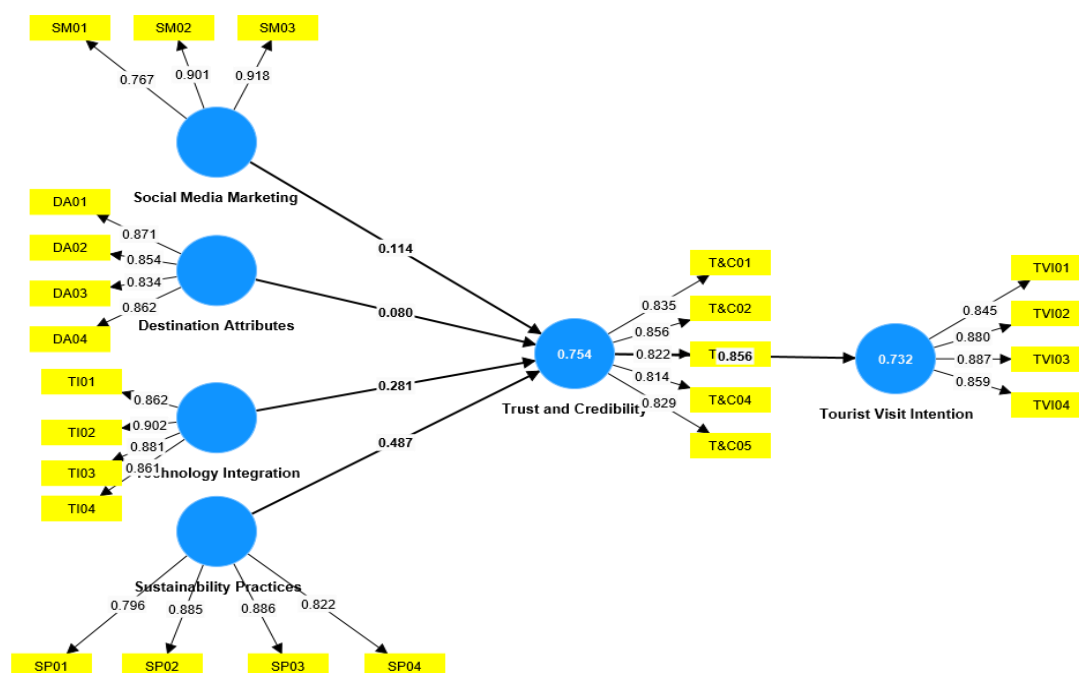
Figure 1. Cross Loading of Structural Model

Source: Smart PLS 3.3.9

## Internal Consistency of Research Variables

The internal consistency of the research variables was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR), both of which measure the reliability of constructs. Values above 0.7 are considered acceptable, indicating strong internal consistency. In this study, all variables exhibit excellent reliability.

"Technology Integration" demonstrates the highest internal consistency, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.899 and a Composite Reliability of 0.900, highlighting its robust measurement. Similarly, "Tourist Visit Intention"

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(Cronbach's Alpha = 0.891, CR = 0.891) and "Trust and Credibility" (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.888, CR = 0.890) show strong consistency. "Destination Attributes" (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.878, CR = 0.888) and "Sustainability Practices" (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.869, CR = 0.871) also exhibit reliable internal consistency. Finally, "Social Media Marketing," with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.829 and a CR of 0.852, maintains a high level of consistency. These results confirm that the constructs are measured reliably and are suitable for further analysis.

Table 3. Outer Model Cross Loading

	Cronbach's alpha	**Composite reliability**
Destination Attributes	0.878	0.888
Social Media Marketing	0.829	0.852
Sustainability Practices	0.869	0.871
Technology Integration	0.899	0.9
Tourist Visit Intention	0.891	0.891
Trust and Credibility	0.888	0.89
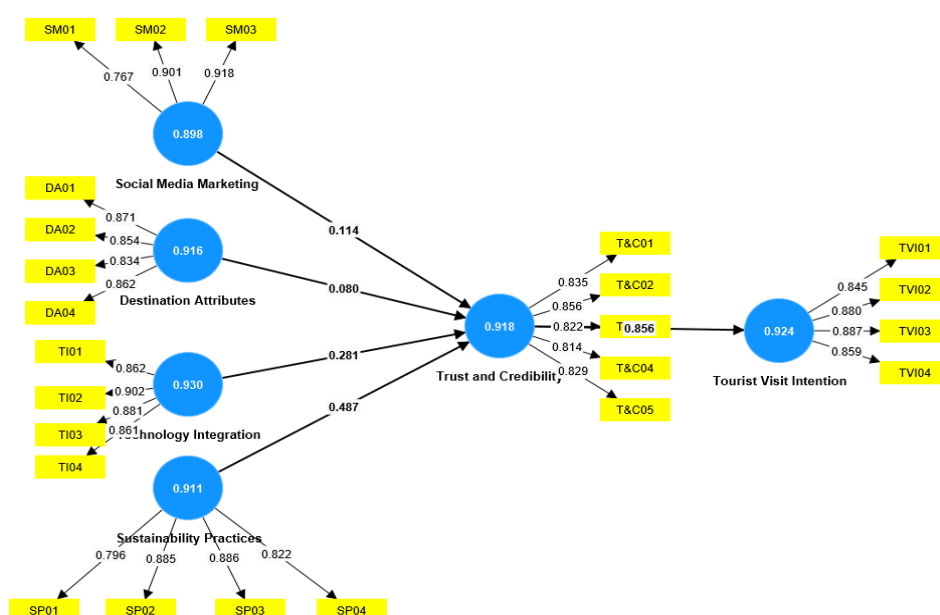
Figure 2. Composite Reliability of Structural Model

Source: Smart PLS 3.3.9

Convergent Validity of Research Variables

Convergent validity assesses whether the research variables are well-represented by their associated indicators, ensuring that the constructs measure what they are intended to. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values provide a metric for evaluating this validity, with a threshold of 0.50 or higher indicating acceptable convergent validity.

In this study, Table 4. all the variables exceed this threshold, demonstrating strong convergent validity. "Technology Integration" has the highest AVE value (0.768), indicating that its indicators effectively capture the construct. Similarly, "Social Media Marketing" (0.747) and "Tourist Visit Intention" (0.754) exhibit high AVE values, reflecting the reliability of their measurement indicators. "Destination Attributes" (0.732) and "Sustainability Practices" (0.719) also show robust representation by their indicators. Lastly, "Trust and Credibility," with an AVE of 0.691, meets the validity criteria but has a slightly lower value compared to other

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variables. Overall, the results confirm that all constructs are well-measured and demonstrate satisfactory convergent validity within the research model.

Table 4: Convergent Validity Assessment of Research Variables

	(AVE)
Destination Attributes	0.732
Social Media Marketing	0.747
Sustainability Practices	0.719
Technology Integration	0.768
Tourist Visit Intention	0.754
Trust and Credibility	0.691

Multicollinearity Assessment of Research Variables

The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is employed to determine the lack of significant multicollinearity between independent and dependent variables, where a VIF range of 0.2 to 5 is regarded as acceptable Moh'd Abu Raje, H., (2024). Moreover, to ascertain the absence of this effect, the average tolerance value should exceed 0.10, or the VIF should not exceed 10, as elucidated by sources Moh'd Abu Raje, et al, (2024). The outcomes from the Multiple Regression Analysis, depicted in Table 5, indicate that tolerance values vary from 0.393 to 0.543 and VIF values range between 1.843 and 2.543. These metrics significantly surpass the 0.10 tolerance threshold and maintain VIF values below 5, suggesting no multicollinearity among the variables analyzed Moh'd Abu Raje, H., (2024). Consequently, all VIF metrics reside within an acceptable scope, confirming the absence of multicollinearity in the study.

Table 5. Multicollinearity Validity Assessment of Research Variables

	Model	Collinearity Statistics	
		Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)		
	Social Media Marketing Strategies	.393	2.543
	Destination Attributes	.543	1.843
	technology integration	.470	2.127
	Sustainability Practices	.538	1.860

Assessing Predictive Power of Research Model

The assessment of the predictive power of the research model in Table 6. demonstrates its effectiveness in explaining the variance in the dependent variables. The R Square value for "Tourist Visit Intention" is 0.732, indicating a moderate level of predictive power, while the Q Square value of 0.665 signifies a large predictive relevance, showing the model's capability to predict outcomes reliably. Similarly, for "Trust and Credibility," the R Square value of 0.754 indicates a strong predictive power, and the Q Square value of 0.744 confirms a large predictive relevance. These results suggest that the research model is robust and well-suited for explaining and predicting the key constructs of Trust and Credibility and Tourist Visit Intention, underscoring its reliability in capturing the dynamics of the studied relationships.

Table 6. Predictive Power and Predictive Relevance of Proposed Model

	Predictive Power		Predictive Relevance	
	R Square	Status	Q Square	Status
Tourist Visit Intention	0.732	moderate	0.665	large
Trust and Credibility	0.754	strong	0.744	large

Assessing Constructs Effective Size ƒ Square of Research Model

The f^2 effect size quantifies the impact level of a latent variable within a structural model, essentially measuring its contribution to the model's predictive power. Initially, the predictive power is assessed for the entire model; subsequently, a latent variable is removed, and the predictive power is re-evaluated. The discrepancy in predictive power with and without the latent variable represents the f^2 effect size of that variable on the model's predictive capacity. According to the guideline set by the source (Moh'd Abu Raje, H., 2024), the f^2 values are categorized as follows: small for values around 0.02, medium at approximately 0.15, and large for values near 0.35. The assessment of effective size for research variables in Table 7 reveals that for Trust and Credibility, the effect size is significant, with a value of 2.734 on Tourist Visit Intention, indicating a substantial impact on Tourist Visit Intention.

Table 7. Effective Size Assessment of Proposed Determinants

	Tourist Visit Intention	
	f^2 value	Status
Trust and Credibility	2.734	Large

Path Coefficient of Research Model Relations

The path coefficient assessment highlights in Table 8 the direct relationships between the variables in the research model. Among the findings, Destination Attributes were found to have a weak and insignificant impact on Trust and Credibility (Std. Beta = 0.068, p = 0.101), indicating that this factor does not strongly contribute to building trust. In contrast, Social Media Marketing showed a significant positive relationship with Trust and Credibility (Std. Beta = 0.098, p = 0.010), emphasizing its role in influencing tourists' perceptions. Sustainability Practices exhibited the strongest effect on Trust and Credibility (Std. Beta = 0.416, p = 0.000), highlighting their critical importance in establishing trust. Similarly, Technology Integration demonstrated a significant positive impact (Std. Beta = 0.240, p = 0.000), showcasing its role in fostering credibility. Lastly, Trust and Credibility had the most substantial effect on Tourist Visit Intention (Std. Beta = 0.856, p = 0.000), underscoring its pivotal role as a driver of tourists' decision-making processes. These results reveal the varying strengths of the relationships and the centrality of trust in shaping tourist behaviour.

Table 8. Path Coefficient Assessment of Research Variables

Hypo	Relationship	Std. Beta	Std. Error	T statistics	P values	Status
H1	Destination Attributes -> Trust and Credibility	0.068	0.042	1.638	0.101	Unsupported
H2	Social Media Marketing	0.098	0.038	2.574	0.010	Supported

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|						
	-> Trust and Credibility					
H3	Sustainability Practices -> Trust and Credibility	0.416	0.059	7.097	0.000	Supported
H4	Technology Integration -> Trust and Credibility	0.240	0.054	4.433	0.000	Supported
H5	Trust and Credibility ->Tourist Visit Intention	0.856	0.021	41.083	0.000	Supported

Mediation Effect Assessment

In mediation assessment, there are three variables: the independent variable, the dependent variable, and the mediation variable. The mediation analysis estimates the extent of the mediator's effect in the relation between the independent and dependent variables. If a significant effect is added indirectly through the mediator, then there is a mediation effect Hayes, (2017). In the mediation analysis, three scores must be calculated: direct effect to assess the path coefficient between the independent variable and dependent variable, the indirect effect to assess the path coefficient between the independent variable and dependent variable through the mediator, and the total effect, which is the summation of both direct and indirect effect. The mediation can be full or partial, the partial is the availability of direct and indirect effect, and the full is the availability of indirect effect only.

The mediation effect assessment examines the indirect influence of independent variables on the dependent variable through the mediating role of "Trust and Credibility." The results reveal that Sustainability Practices and Technology Integration have significant mediated effects on Tourist Visit Intention, with standardized beta values of 0.416 and 0.240, respectively, and p-values of 0.000. These findings underscore the importance of these variables in enhancing Trust and Credibility, which subsequently increases the likelihood of tourists intending to visit. Social Media Marketing also demonstrates a significant mediation effect (Std. Beta = 0.098, p = 0.010), indicating its role in building trust and influencing visit intention, albeit to a lesser extent. However, the mediation effect of Destination Attributes is not significant (Std. Beta = 0.068, p = 0.102), suggesting that this variable does not effectively enhance Trust and Credibility to drive Tourist Visit Intention. Overall, the analysis highlights the critical role of Trust and Credibility in linking key variables to tourist behaviour, with Sustainability Practices and Technology Integration emerging as the most influential factors.

Table 9. Path Coefficient Mediation Effect Assessment

Relationships	Std. Beta	Std. Error	T statistics	P values	Status
Sustainability Practices -> Trust and Credibility -> Tourist Visit Intention	0.416	0.059	7.097	0.000	partial mediation
Technology Integration -> Trust and Credibility -> Tourist Visit Intention	0.24	0.054	4.433	0.000	partial mediation
Destination Attributes -> Trust and Credibility -> Tourist Visit Intention	0.068	0.042	1.638	0.102	No mediation
Social Media Marketing -> Trust and Credibility -> Tourist Visit Intention	0.098	0.038	2.574	0.01	partial mediation

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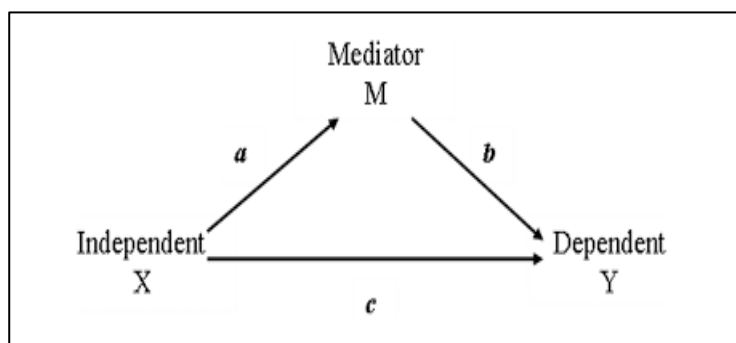
Figure 4.18 Sobel Mediation Procedure

Source: Hayes (2017)

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the factors influencing tourist visit intention in Malaysia, emphasizing the roles of social media marketing strategies, destination attributes, technology integration, and sustainability practices, with trust and credibility as mediating variables. This section discusses these findings in light of the theoretical framework and existing literature.

First, the strong relationship between sustainability practices and trust and credibility aligns with previous studies that highlight the growing importance of eco-conscious tourism in building trust among travellers (Rodrigues et al., 2023; Wijaya et al., 2024). Tourists are increasingly drawn to destinations that demonstrate responsible environmental practices, making sustainability a critical factor in fostering positive perceptions and encouraging visit intentions. This underscores the need for Malaysian tourism stakeholders to prioritize sustainable initiatives and effectively communicate these efforts to prospective visitors.

Second, the impact of technology integration on trust and credibility confirms the relevance of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which emphasizes perceived usefulness and ease of use in shaping behavioral intentions. As tourists rely heavily on digital platforms for travel planning, destinations that offer seamless technological experiences—such as virtual tours, AI-based recommendations, and user-friendly booking systems—are more likely to gain the trust of potential visitors. Malaysia's efforts in embracing digital innovation can play a pivotal role in differentiating its tourism offerings in a highly competitive market.

Third, social media marketing strategies were found to positively influence trust and credibility, albeit to a lesser extent compared to other variables. This result reflects the growing role of social media in shaping perceptions, particularly among younger demographics. The findings are consistent with studies highlighting the impact of influencer marketing, user-generated content, and targeted advertising in building trust and motivating travel decisions (Chong, 2023; Tham et al., 2024). Malaysian tourism campaigns should, therefore, harness the power of social media platforms to reach tech-savvy audiences more effectively.

Interestingly, destination attributes showed a weaker influence on trust and credibility compared to other variables. While this may indicate that tourists are prioritizing intangible factors such as sustainability and technological ease over physical destination features, it also suggests a potential gap in effectively showcasing Malaysia's unique attributes. Efforts to enhance the visibility of the country's cultural richness, biodiversity, and hospitality through innovative marketing strategies may help bridge this gap.

Finally, the mediating role of trust and credibility highlights its centrality in connecting the independent variables to tourist visit intention. This finding aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which stresses the importance of attitudinal and normative factors in shaping intentions. For Malaysia to enhance its competitiveness as a global tourism destination, it is crucial to focus on building and maintaining trust through transparent communication, quality service delivery, and consistent engagement with travellers.

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IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY

This study provides valuable contributions across practical, theoretical, and policy dimensions, aimed at enhancing the understanding and development of Malaysia's tourism sector.

Practical Implications: The findings offer actionable strategies for tourism stakeholders, including government agencies, businesses, and tourism boards. By adopting effective social media marketing strategies, emphasizing destination attributes, and integrating advanced technologies, these stakeholders can improve trust and credibility among tourists. This, in turn, enhances tourist visit intentions and contributes to the overall recovery and growth of the sector.

Theoretical Implications: The study contributes to existing tourism literature by integrating the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Social Exchange Theory (SET), and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). It highlights the mediating role of trust and credibility, offering a deeper understanding of how these factors influence tourist behavior in the context of digital transformation and social media marketing. This provides a framework for future research into tourist decision-making processes.

Policy Implications: Policymakers can utilize the study's findings to develop focused initiatives that address post-pandemic challenges in the tourism industry. Specific areas of focus include promoting sustainable tourism practices, investing in technological infrastructure, and implementing programs that build trust and enhance Malaysia's destination image. Such measures can position Malaysia as a competitive and preferred global tourist destination.

CONCLUSIONS

This study comprehensively investigated the relationships between social media marketing strategies, destination attributes, technology integration, and sustainability practices in influencing tourists' visit intentions, with trust and credibility as mediating factors. By addressing a critical gap in the literature and responding to the challenges posed by the global pandemic, the findings emphasize the pivotal role of digitalization and trust-building efforts in revitalizing Malaysia's tourism sector.

The study revealed that social media marketing strategies are no longer optional but essential tools for reaching potential tourists, shaping their perceptions, and influencing their decision-making processes. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok offer opportunities for tourism stakeholders to showcase unique destination experiences, promote cultural heritage, and highlight sustainable practices. Furthermore, destination attributes—including infrastructure, cultural appeal, safety, and environmental sustainability—were found to be significant determinants of tourists' visit intentions. Tourists today seek meaningful experiences that blend technological convenience, cultural immersion, and environmental responsibility.

The role of technology integration further enhances the findings, indicating that tools such as virtual tours, smart tourism platforms, and real-time digital reviews play a critical role in enriching the tourist experience. These innovations not only improve accessibility but also align with evolving traveller preferences for convenience and interactivity. Meanwhile, the incorporation of sustainability practices reflects a growing shift toward eco-conscious travel, where tourists favour destinations committed to preserving natural resources, reducing carbon footprints, and promoting responsible tourism.

A key theoretical contribution of this study lies in the integration of three widely recognized models: the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Social Exchange Theory (SET), and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). Together, these theories provide a holistic understanding of how external strategies (e.g., marketing and technology) and internal perceptions (e.g., trust and credibility) drive tourists' behavioral intentions. The mediating role of trust and credibility highlights the importance of building authentic connections between destinations and travellers, as positive perceptions of transparency, reliability, and reputation strongly influence travel decisions.

From a practical perspective, the findings offer actionable insights for policymakers, tourism boards, and businesses. To achieve a competitive advantage, stakeholders must prioritize social media campaigns, invest in technological infrastructure, and adopt sustainable practices that appeal to modern tourists. Government efforts,

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such as the promotion of "smart tourism" technologies and public-private partnerships, are essential for enhancing destination attractiveness and meeting post-pandemic recovery goals. This study demonstrates that by strategically leveraging digital tools, improving destination attributes, and fostering trust and credibility, Malaysia's tourism sector can effectively recover and thrive in the highly competitive global market. Moving forward, tourism stakeholders must continue to adapt to technological trends, prioritize sustainable development, and address the evolving expectations of travellers.

RECOMMENDATION

This study offers several recommendations to enhance Malaysia's tourism sector and increase tourist visit intentions. Firstly, tourism stakeholders, including government agencies and businesses, should strengthen social media marketing strategies by leveraging platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube to promote destinations through immersive content, influencer partnerships, and virtual tours. Enhancing destination attributes such as transportation infrastructure, safety, and cleanliness, and showcasing Malaysia's rich cultural diversity and festivals will further improve the tourist experience. Additionally, the integration of smart tourism technologies, including augmented reality (AR), virtual tours, and digital booking systems, is essential to meet the expectations of tech-savvy travellers and provide convenience. Emphasizing sustainability practices by promoting eco-tourism initiatives, conserving natural resources, and reducing waste will appeal to environmentally conscious tourists while positioning Malaysia as a responsible travel destination.

Furthermore, efforts to build trust and credibility through transparent pricing, reliable information, consistent service quality, and encouraging positive reviews from tourists and credible influencers are crucial for fostering confidence among visitors. Government-led initiatives, such as international campaigns like "Visit Malaysia," improving visa facilitation, and fostering public-private partnerships, will play a significant role in accelerating tourism recovery. To attract emerging tourist segments, such as eco-tourists, adventure travellers, and medical tourists, Malaysia should develop targeted strategies that highlight its unique offerings, including its natural beauty, medical facilities, and rich cultural heritage. Lastly, improving data collection and analysis through advanced analytics will allow stakeholders to monitor tourist behaviour, preferences, and satisfaction levels, enabling the refinement of marketing strategies and service delivery. By implementing these recommendations, Malaysia can effectively recover from the challenges faced by the tourism sector, achieve sustainable growth, and position itself as a leading global destination.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has laid a strong foundation for understanding the relationships between social media marketing strategies, destination attributes, technology integration, sustainability practices, and their impact on tourists' visit intentions, with trust and credibility as mediating factors. However, there are several areas that future research can explore to further enrich the findings and contribute to the growing body of tourism literature.

Firstly, future research can examine additional mediating or moderating variables such as tourist satisfaction, perceived value, and cultural differences to provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourist behaviour. This would help identify other significant factors influencing visit intentions across diverse tourist segments. Secondly, longitudinal studies could be conducted to track the long-term impacts of social media strategies and sustainability practices on tourist behaviour over time. This would provide insights into whether these efforts generate sustained interest and repeat visits.

Another area for future research involves comparative studies between Malaysia and other similar tourism markets. Such studies could highlight unique strategies and best practices that can be adopted to improve destination competitiveness. Additionally, future research could focus on specific tourist segments, such as eco-tourists, medical tourists, adventure travellers, and Gen Z tourists, to better understand their unique needs and expectations.

Finally, incorporating advanced technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR), and big data analytics into future research would allow for an in-depth understanding of how digital innovations influence tourist perceptions and decisions. By exploring these areas, future studies can address existing limitations, offer

new insights, and further support the development of innovative and sustainable tourism strategies.

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