

The Relationship of Social Media Exposure and Willingness to Visit Siargao Island, Philippines

Destination Image as Mediator

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the relationship between social media exposure and willingness to visit Siargao Island, Philippines, with destination image serving as a mediating variable. It aimed to determine how online content about Siargao influences people's perceptions and travel intentions through both cognitive and emotional responses. The researchers employed a quantitative correlational research design. Data were gathered from 300 active social media users aged 18 and above residing in Metro Manila who have seen Siargao content on any social media platform in the past 12 months. Data were collected using an online survey questionnaire and analyzed using frequency, percentage, weighted mean, Pearson correlation, and mediation analysis through regression and the Sobel test. Findings revealed strong positive correlations among the main variables: social media exposure and destination image, destination image and willingness to visit, and social media exposure and willingness to visit. Results also indicated that destination image partially mediates the effect of social media exposure on willingness to visit, suggesting that exposure to online content enhances people's interest by creating a positive image of the island. The study concludes that social media plays a vital role in shaping tourists' perceptions and travel decisions. Authentic, visually engaging, and experience-driven content about Siargao can strengthen destination image and influence potential visitors' intentions, providing valuable insights for destination marketers and tourism stakeholders in promoting travel through digital platforms.

Keywords

Destination Image
Siargao Island
Social Media Exposure
Tourism Marketing
Willingness to Visit

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**Introduction**

In 2023, tourism generated over 330 million jobs and accounted for 9.1% of global GDP, highlighting its economic significance [1]. The industry has rebounded quickly since the COVID-19 pandemic, yet many destinations struggle to convert online followers into actual visitors. Social media has transformed travel marketing, allowing destinations to connect with global audiences through creative content. However, generating attention does not always increase visitation, raising questions about the ROI of social media, particularly for developing nations with limited marketing resources [2]. The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reports that tourism contributed about PHP 1.87 trillion in 2023, significantly boosting the Philippines' economic growth [3]. Siargao Island, the "Surfing Capital of the Philippines," gained social media fame for its natural scenery, activities, and culture, yet visitor demographics show that popularity alone does not guarantee increased tourist numbers.

The research gap is both empirical and spatial. Empirically, previous studies explored social media's influence on traveler behavior and destination perception [4], but there is limited quantitative evidence linking social media exposure to intention to visit emerging island destinations like Siargao. Most Philippine studies rely on qualitative insights or focus on established urban hubs, leaving a lack of measurable, data-driven analysis. Spatially, research often targets major cities or well-known sites, neglecting smaller or emerging islands with unique tourism dynamics. Siargao's growing social media popularity has yet to be examined in terms of visitor distribution, geographic accessibility, and localized engagement—factors critical for translating online popularity into actual visitation.

This study investigates the relationship between social media exposure and willingness to visit Siargao Island, with destination image as a mediating variable. It examines the frequency and nature of social media exposure, perceptions of the destination image, and how this mediates the link between exposure and travel intention. The study also identifies preferred platforms, content, engagement patterns, and legitimacy of online exposure; evaluates respondents' willingness to visit; assesses perceptions of Siargao's natural features, culture, accessibility, security, and distinctiveness; and provides practical recommendations for tourism marketing strategies to enhance destination branding and promotional effectiveness.

Following the Introduction, the Literature Review establishes the theoretical foundation, presenting key frameworks, prior research, and recent developments related to social media influence on travel behavior. The Materials and Methods section details the research design, sampling, data collection, ethical considerations, and analytical procedures, ensuring replicability. The Results and Discussions section presents the findings clearly and interprets their significance in relation to existing literature, supplemented with figures, tables, equations, or algorithms as needed. The Conclusion summarizes the study's main insights, addresses the research gap, and highlights contributions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

A. Social Media Exposure on Destination Image

Social media significantly influences how travelers form destination images. Llodra-Riera et al. [5] emphasized its role in shaping both cognitive and affective perceptions through user-generated content, supporting the SOR Model linking exposure, image, and behavioral intention. The quality and presentation of online content also affect perception; Kim and Kim [6] noted that relevance, completeness, and design influence how tourists think and feel about destinations. Peralta [7] found that non-Filipino vloggers strongly affect how people view the Philippines, as their authentic storytelling makes destinations more credible and appealing. Likewise, Peralta [7] showed that travel vlogs and Facebook posts shape how tourists perceive destinations, highlighting how authentic stories influence emotions and attitudes. Pan et al. [8] revealed that shared social media photos and posts shape destination image and travel decisions, while Ali and Xiaoying [9] also confirmed that both detailed content and design cues affect cognitive and affective image formation. Sultan et al. [10] emphasized that user-generated content has a stronger influence on travelers' perceptions than operator-produced materials.

Park and Lee [11] explained that official promotions and organic posts together influence destination impressions, a view supported by Basco et al. [12], who found that tourists rely on accessible and credible social media information when choosing destinations. Wang et al. [1] added that reliable and engaging online content enhances destination image and intention to visit. Similarly, Gholamhosseinzadeh et al. [13] found that travel bloggers shape positive perceptions through storytelling and interaction. The Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development highlighted that travelers' cognitive, emotional, and projected perceptions influence perceived value and travel decisions. Finally, Guerreiro et al. [14] showed that social media posts emphasizing intangible heritage experiences generate stronger emotional engagement compared to activity-based content.

B. Destination Image on Willingness to Visit

A positive destination image plays a vital role in shaping tourist behavior, as travelers who perceive a place favorably tend to feel more satisfied, which encourages them to return and share positive experiences with others. Shafiee et al. [15] highlighted how social media-driven images directly influence satisfaction and revisit intentions. Similarly, Khan et al. [16] found that travel motivations strengthen both the cognitive and emotional perceptions of a destination, while perceived risks can weaken these impressions and affect travel decisions. Philips and Jang [17] further established that travelers' thoughts and feelings toward a destination significantly affect their intention to visit, with emotional motivation serving as a key factor. Supporting this, Styliadis et al. [18] emphasized that destination image consistently drives tourists' decisions to visit, return, and recommend a location, though its impact may vary depending on context and destination attributes. In the post-pandemic period, Susanti et al. [19] confirmed that a strong destination image enhances visit intentions both directly and indirectly through risk perception. Similarly, Gholamhosseinzadeh et al. [13] demonstrated that destination image and residents' perceptions significantly influence tourists' willingness to visit, with attitudes mediating this relationship. Expanding on the psychological dimension, Maghrifani et al. [20] showed that motivations affect both first-time and returning visitors differently, directly and indirectly shaping their travel intentions. Consistent with these findings, Pan et al. [21] revealed that a positive destination image remains a strong predictor of travel intentions, emphasizing the need to cultivate authentic and engaging experiences. Finally, Galleto Jr and Leon [22] underscored that sustaining and promoting tourism destinations also requires government support, aligning with the broader goals of sustainable tourism development.

C. Social Media Exposure on Willingness to Visit

Social media plays a crucial role in influencing consumer behavior and travel decisions in the tourism industry. Studies have shown that interactive online features allow travelers to access relevant information, observe others' experiences, and make more informed choices. It also serves as a major source of travel guidance, shaping tourists' preferences and decisions across all stages of the travel process [23]. Supporting this, research based on the Theory of Planned Behavior confirmed that social media platforms not only affect travel intentions but also actual behaviors, with demographic factors such as gender and education influencing these outcomes. Exposure to travel-related content on social media, particularly Facebook, can further boost people's desire to visit destinations, driven by feelings of connection and envy within online communities [24].

Beyond individual influence, social media marketing helps create favorable impressions of destinations by showcasing their cultural, social, and economic benefits, which inspire support for tourism [25]. Quantitative forecasts have also projected continued growth in Siargao

Island's tourism sector, underscoring the potential of social media and promotional efforts to sustain momentum [26]. Moreover, the quality of online information—both rational and emotional—has been shown to directly and indirectly enhance consumers' intention to travel [27]. Finally, regional findings from Negros Oriental indicate that tourists increasingly rely on mobile and social platforms for travel decisions, with demographic characteristics shaping how they use these tools [28].

D. Destination Image Mediates on Social Media Exposure and Willingness to Visit

Social media is also part of shaping consumer purchasing decisions within the tourism sector. Its interactive features allow users to access essential travel information and learn from others' experiences, influencing their overall travel choices. The study recommended that tourism businesses invest strategically in social media content to enhance online visibility and strengthen customer impressions. Supporting this, social media has become an influential source of travel information that guides tourists' decisions. Through interviews with members of the "Backpacker Indonesia" community, it was confirmed that consistent exposure to online content significantly impacts travelers' willingness to visit destinations [23].

In a related study, the Theory of Planned Behavior was applied to examine how social media affects tourist behavior and destination choice. Based on data gathered from Czech millennial students, it was discovered that social media channels have both direct and indirect effects on travel intentions and behaviors, with factors such as gender, education, and tourism promotion also shaping these outcomes. Similarly, exposure to travel-related Facebook content boosts people's intentions to visit destinations, particularly when feelings of benign envy and social belonging are involved, suggesting that emotional connection enhances travel motivation [24].

Further supporting these insights, social media marketing positively influences tourists' perceptions by promoting destinations through engaging and culturally rich content. These campaigns effectively stir emotions, generate interest, and convert online engagement into real-world tourism actions [25]. Complementing this, projections showed an upward trend in tourist arrivals to Siargao Island from 2012 to 2025, underscoring the long-term impact of digital promotion strategies in sustaining tourism growth [26].

The quality of online content—both informational and emotional—also strongly affects consumers' travel intentions, proving that credible and well-crafted content drives tourism interest [27]. Likewise, findings from Negros Oriental revealed that tourists increasingly rely on smartphones and social media as tools for travel planning, where demographic differences further influence travel preferences and decision-making behavior [28].

Overall, existing research confirms that social media serves as a powerful force shaping tourist decision-making by influencing the cognitive, affective, and conative images of

destinations, thereby strengthening the willingness to visit. This synthesis supports the development of the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: There is a significant relationship between social media exposure and destination image.
- Hypothesis 2: There is a significant relationship between destination image and willingness to visit.
- Hypothesis 3: There is a significant relationship between social media exposure and willingness to visit.
- Hypothesis 4: Destination image mediates the relationship between social media exposure and willingness to visit.

Material and Methods

The study utilized a quantitative descriptive–correlational design to examine the relationships among social media exposure, destination image, and willingness to visit. The descriptive aspect presented the demographic characteristics and perceptions of respondents, while the correlational aspect analyzed the interrelationships and mediation effects among the three main variables [29].

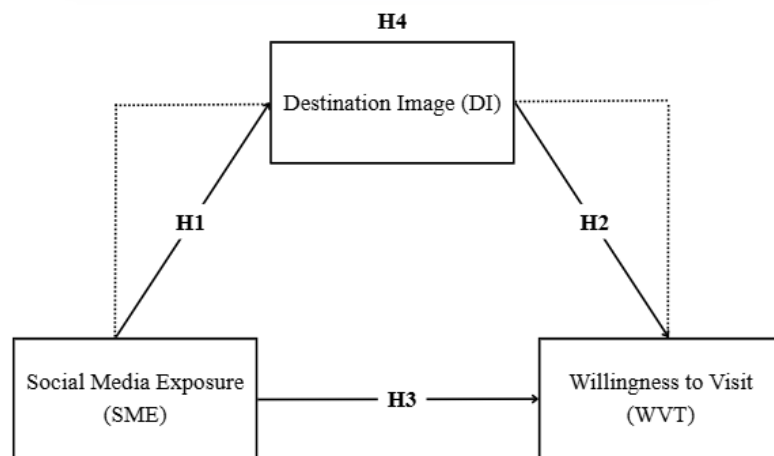


Fig. 1. Research Paradigm

The respondents consisted of 300 active social media users aged 18 years and above, residing in Metro Manila. All participants should have encountered Siargao-related travel content on at least one major platform within the past 12 months. The 300 valid responses represented a 100% usable response rate after the exclusion of incomplete entries. The study employed a convenience sampling technique, a non-probability method chosen for accessibility and efficiency in gathering data from participants readily available online. This approach is commonly applied in quantitative research to reach target respondents who meet specific inclusion criteria [29].

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire developed by researchers based on existing validated instruments related to social media exposure, destination image, and willingness to visit. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: informed consent, demographic information, and 5-Point Likert-scale items assessing the main variables. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was used to measure responses. A pilot test involving 30 respondents was conducted before the main data collection. Reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha, and all constructs achieved acceptable values above the 0.70 threshold, confirming internal consistency and reliability of the instrument [29].

The reliability analysis confirms that all constructs achieved acceptable to excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.70, indicating that the instrument is reliable and consistent. Social media exposure construct showed stable measurement across frequency, platform type, content nature, and engagement, with experiential and culture-related content emerging as the most consistent indicators, highlighting the importance of content quality over mere exposure. Destination image construct likewise demonstrated strong reliability in both cognitive and affective dimensions, suggesting that rational evaluations of Siargao's attributes are closely aligned with emotional responses formed through social media. Willingness to visit construct also recorded excellent consistency, indicating that travel intentions and recommendation behaviors are strongly connected. Overall, the results support the point that effective social media exposure contributes to a positive destination image, which in turn strengthens tourists' willingness to visit and recommend Siargao.

The data-gathering process began after obtaining approval from professors and relevant authorities. The survey was administered online using Google Forms and disseminated through Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to ensure accessibility and reach among the target population. Participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Data collection was conducted within 2 weeks during the approved research period, ensuring sufficient time for responses. The data were collected from participants residing in Metro Manila, Philippines. The survey was conducted online using Google Forms. Pub mats with QR codes and links were distributed through major social media platforms, allowing respondents to access and complete the questionnaire conveniently. Data were analyzed using Frequency and Percentage to describe respondent demographics; Weighted Mean to determine the level of agreement on each variable; Pearson Correlation to assess the strength and direction of relationships among social media exposure, destination image, and willingness to visit; and Mediation Analysis using regression and Sobel test to

examine direct and indirect effects, identifying the mediating role of destination image in the relationship between social media exposure and willingness to visit.

Results

A. Correlation between Variables

1. Correlation Between Social Media Exposure and Destination Image

A strong positive correlation was found between social media exposure and destination image ($r = 0.780$, $p = 0.000$), indicating that higher exposure to Siargao-related content leads to a more favorable perception of the island.

Table 1. Summary of Relationships

Variables	R-Value	P-Value	Remarks
The Relationship of Social Media Exposure and Destination Image	0.780	0.000	Strong Positive Correlation
The Relationship of Destination Image vs. Willingness to Visit	0.825	0.000	Strong Positive Correlation
The Relationship of Social Media Exposure vs. Willingness to Visit	0.767	0.000	Strong Positive Correlation

This result implies that when individuals frequently encounter Siargao through posts, vlogs, or other travel-related content, their mental and emotional impressions of the destination improve. Supporting this finding, Kim and Kim [6] explained that consistent exposure to social media posts enhances tourists' understanding and appreciation of a destination's image. Conversely, Su and Teng [30] argued that repetitive or overly commercial content may reduce credibility and weaken audience perception. Overall, the findings affirm that social media exposure has a significant effect on destination image. Frequent, authentic, and visually engaging posts about Siargao positively shape how people view the island, making it appear more appealing and desirable. Tourism marketers are encouraged to maintain regular, credible, and visually appealing content to strengthen Siargao's image and attract potential tourists.

2. Correlation Between Destination Image and Willingness to Visit

The analysis revealed a very strong positive correlation between destination image and willingness to visit ($r = 0.825$, $p = 0.000$), signifying that a more favorable image of Siargao corresponds to a stronger intention among respondents to travel to the island. This result supports the idea that how people perceive a destination greatly influences their motivation to visit. As Styliadis et al. [31] emphasized, a destination's positive image enhances emotional attachment and encourages intent to visit. However, Huang and Liu [32] noted that even a strong image may not always lead to actual travel behavior when limited by external factors such as budget, distance, or travel restrictions. Therefore, while destination image is a major factor driving tourist intention, it operates effectively only

when supported by accessible and realistic travel conditions. Respondents who perceive Siargao as attractive, safe, and unique are more likely to include it in their travel plans. Tourism authorities should continue to cultivate Siargao's authentic image through consistent social media storytelling and credible promotions to strengthen tourists' interest and encourage actual visits.

3. Correlation Between Social Media Exposure and Willingness to Visit

A strong positive correlation was also observed between social media exposure and willingness to visit ($r = 0.767$, $p = 0.000$), showing that greater exposure to Siargao-related social media content significantly increases respondents' desire to visit the island. This finding implies that social media serves as a persuasive platform that builds emotional engagement, trust, and curiosity toward destinations. In line with Huang and Liu [32], social media exposure encourages travelers by fostering emotional connections through real experiences, photos, and testimonials that enhance familiarity and excitement. However, Albuquerque and Oliveira [33] found that exposure alone may not be sufficient to drive travel behavior if the content lacks authenticity or appears overly promotional, as this can diminish confidence and interest. Hence, social media exposure exerts a significant effect on willingness to visit when the content is credible, authentic, and emotionally appealing. Tourism marketers are advised to sustain consistent, high-quality storytelling and visually engaging materials that showcase real experiences, as these can effectively transform online interest into actual visitation.

B. Hypothesis Testing

This section examined whether destination image serves as a mediating variable between social media exposure and willingness to visit Siargao Island. The goal was to determine whether social media exposure influences tourists' travel intentions directly or indirectly through their perception of Siargao's image.

Table 2. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	(β) Path Coefficients	t Statistics	P-Value	Interpretation
H1	SME $\rightarrow$ DI	0.746	21.533	0.000	Supported
H2	DI $\rightarrow$ WTV	0.591	11.782	0.000	Supported
H3	SME $\rightarrow$ WTV	0.749	20.664	0.000	Supported
H4	SME $\rightarrow$ DI $\rightarrow$ WTV (mediation)	0.309	6.438	0.000	Supported (partial mediation)

For Hypothesis 1 (H1: Social Media Exposure $\rightarrow$ Destination Image), results revealed a significant path coefficient of $\beta = 0.746$, with a t-value of 21.533 and $p = 0.000$, indicating a strong and significant positive relationship. This means that greater exposure to Siargao-related social media content enhances respondents' perception of the island's image.

For Hypothesis 2 (H2: Destination Image $\rightarrow$ Willingness to Visit), a significant relationship was also observed with a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.591$, $t = 11.782$, and $p = 0.000$. This demonstrates that a favorable image of Siargao significantly increases tourists' willingness to visit.

For Hypothesis 3 (H3: Social Media Exposure $\rightarrow$ Willingness to Visit), the analysis produced a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.749$, $t = 20.664$, and $p = 0.000$, confirming that exposure to Siargao-related content directly influences respondents' intent to travel to the island.

Lastly, Hypothesis 4 (H4: Social Media Exposure $\rightarrow$ Destination Image $\rightarrow$ Willingness to Visit) tested the mediating effect of destination image. The indirect effect (Path A = 0.746, Path B = 0.591) was found to be significant, while the direct effect (Path C = 0.309, $p < 0.05$) also remained significant. This indicates partial mediation, meaning that social media exposure affects willingness to visit both directly and indirectly through destination image.

Overall, the findings confirm a significant indirect effect of social media exposure on willingness to visit through destination image. This suggests that social media enhances tourists' perceptions of Siargao's beauty, culture, and uniqueness, which in turn strengthens their travel intent. To maximize this effect, tourism marketers and authorities should prioritize authentic, emotionally engaging, and credible social media storytelling that reinforces the island's identity and encourages actual visitation.

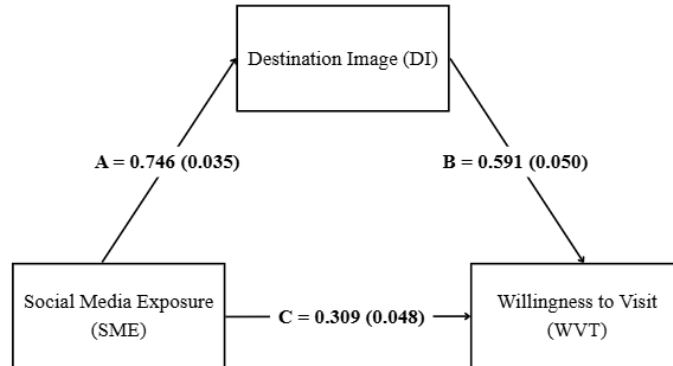


Fig. 2. Research Paradigm with Numerical Figures

Discussion

This section examined whether destination image acts as a mediating variable between social media exposure and tourists' willingness to visit Siargao Island. The purpose of this analysis was to determine whether social media exposure influences potential tourists directly or indirectly through the way they perceive Siargao's overall image as a travel destination. The findings revealed a partial mediation effect, meaning that while social media exposure directly affects travel intention, a portion of this influence also operates through destination image.

For Hypothesis 1 (H1: Social Media Exposure → Destination Image), results showed a path coefficient ($\beta = 0.746$), t-value of 21.533, and $p = 0.000$, signifying a strong and significant positive relationship. This implies that frequent exposure to Siargao-related content—such as photos, videos, and travel reviews—enhances how respondents visualize and appreciate the island. The more travelers encounter engaging and authentic content, the stronger and more positive their mental image of Siargao becomes. This result is consistent with Kim and Kim [6], who found that consistent exposure to destination-related posts increases familiarity and appreciation, thus reinforcing a favorable image. Similarly, Li and Fang [34] suggested that social media serves as an intermediary that shapes both the emotional and cognitive perceptions of a place, establishing a mental image that guides travel interest.

For Hypothesis 2 (H2: Destination Image → Willingness to Visit), the findings indicated a path coefficient ($\beta = 0.591$), t-value of 11.782, and $p = 0.000$, confirming a significant positive effect. This result demonstrates that tourists with a favorable perception of Siargao—based on its natural attractions, culture, safety, and hospitality—tend to show a higher level of intention to visit. The findings align with Stylidis et al. [31], who highlighted that a destination's positive image fosters emotional attachment and motivates tourists to travel. However, Huang and Liu [32] noted that a strong image may not always guarantee actual travel due to constraints like cost, accessibility, or external factors such as travel restrictions. Despite this, a compelling destination image remains one of the most persuasive psychological drivers of travel intention.

For Hypothesis 3 (H3: Social Media Exposure → Willingness to Visit), results revealed a path coefficient ($\beta = 0.749$), t-value of 20.664, and $p = 0.000$, showing a strong and significant direct effect. This indicates that tourists who are more frequently exposed to Siargao-related social media content develop stronger intentions to visit the island. This outcome corresponds with Zollo et al. [35], who emphasized that social media exposure fosters emotional engagement and trust, which can lead to concrete behavioral intentions. Nevertheless, Albuquerque and Oliveira [33] cautioned that excessive or insincere promotional content may reduce credibility and weaken travel motivation. This means that while exposure frequency matters, the authenticity and emotional resonance of the content determine its persuasive power.

For Hypothesis 4 (H4: Social Media Exposure → Destination Image → Willingness to Visit), the mediation analysis showed that the indirect effect (Path A = 0.746, Path B = 0.591) was statistically significant, while the direct effect (Path C = 0.309, $p < 0.05$) also remained significant. This pattern confirms partial mediation, implying that social media exposure influences willingness to visit both directly and indirectly through destination image. In other words, exposure to social media content enhances the perception of Siargao's image, which in turn heightens travel intention. The mediating role of image supports the idea that tourists do

not make travel decisions solely based on content exposure but also on the meanings and emotional responses formed through it. This aligns with Amin and Tarun [36], who noted that the effectiveness of mediation depends on content credibility and the degree to which it authentically represents the destination.

Overall, the findings affirm that destination image plays a crucial mediating role in translating social media exposure into behavioral intent. The analysis underscores that the stronger and more positive the image formed through social media interactions, the higher the likelihood of visitation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that social media is a pivotal factor in shaping tourists' perceptions and behavioral intentions toward Siargao Island. Exposure to online content significantly influences both the cognitive and emotional aspects of the destination image, which in turn enhances willingness to visit. The findings confirm that destination image partially mediates the relationship between social media exposure and travel intention, highlighting the capacity of visually engaging, credible, and emotionally resonant content to translate digital engagement into actual visitation.

By providing quantitative evidence on an emerging island destination, this research addresses notable empirical and spatial gaps in the literature, which have predominantly focused on established urban centers or relied on qualitative insights. Expected outcomes underscore the critical role of social media in influencing travel behavior, while the partial mediation effect reveals the nuanced interplay between perception and intention. Limitations include the concentration of respondents from Metro Manila and reliance on self-reported measures of social media exposure, which may affect generalizability. Future studies could broaden the geographic scope, incorporate behavioral tracking for more precise exposure measurement, and examine the impact of influencers, user-generated content, and repeated online exposure on destination image and travel behavior.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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