

**DIGITAL MARKETING AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN TOURISM
MARKETING: A LITERATURE REVIEW**

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ABSTRACT	KEY WORDS
Digital technologies and social media platforms have fundamentally reshaped how tourism destinations, organizations, and enterprises engage with prospective travelers, transforming both the strategic planning and operational practice of tourism marketing. This paper presents a literature review of recent scholarship on digital marketing and social media in tourism, synthesizing findings from systematic literature reviews, bibliometric analyses, and empirical studies published predominantly between 2023 and 2025. The review addresses four principal thematic areas: the evolving role of social media in destination image formation and marketing communication; the persistent gap between strategic marketing frameworks and their practical implementation within tourism organizations; the influence of social media influencers and user-generated content on travel decision-making; and the emergence of frontier digital technologies, including the metaverse, artificial intelligence, and immersive media, as new tourism marketing channels. Across this literature, a recurring finding is that while tourism enterprises widely recognize the strategic importance of digital and social media marketing, many continue to apply these tools in an ad hoc, poorly documented manner, with underdeveloped performance measurement and limited integration with overall organizational marketing goals. The review concludes that future research should prioritize the development of structured implementation frameworks and rigorous, comparable measures of digital marketing effectiveness specific to the experiential and intangible nature of tourism products.	Tourism marketing; digital marketing; social media; destination marketing; influencer marketing; literature review

Introduction

The tourism industry has long recognized effective marketing as central to attracting and retaining visitors, and the emergence of digital technologies and social media platforms over the past two decades has profoundly transformed the tourism marketing landscape, presenting both new opportunities and new challenges for destinations and enterprises within the sector. Because tourism products are experiential and cannot be physically examined prior to purchase, tourism businesses have come to rely heavily on visual storytelling, user-generated content, and destination imagery

disseminated through social media to build traveler trust and to influence travel decision-making at every stage of the customer journey.

Digitalization has become a key driver in the transformation of tourism destination marketing strategies more broadly, with the development of social media, online platforms, mobile applications, and smart tourism technologies changing the way tourism destinations are promoted and managed. At the same time, the proliferation of digital touchpoints has increased the complexity of the tourist customer journey, making it increasingly difficult for tourism organizations to monitor and coordinate their engagement with travelers across physical and digital channels within a coherent strategic marketing plan.

This paper reviews recent literature on digital marketing and social media in tourism, drawing primarily on systematic literature reviews, bibliometric analyses, and empirical studies published between 2023 and 2025. The review is organized around four thematic areas identified as recurring foci in this literature: the role of social media in destination marketing and image formation; the gap between strategic marketing theory and practical implementation in tourism organizations; the growing influence of social media influencers and electronic word-of-mouth on travel behavior; and the emergence of frontier technologies, including the metaverse and artificial intelligence, as new tourism marketing frontiers.

Social Media in Destination Marketing and Image Formation

A content analysis of academic literature on social media in tourism, screened using the PRISMA methodology across articles published between 2005 and 2022, categorized the accumulated body of research into six major thematic areas: marketing, destination experience and image, tourism recovery, smart tourism, and communication and promotion (Solanki & Thomas, 2025). This thematic breadth reflects the extent to which social media has become embedded not merely as a promotional channel but as a constitutive element of how destination images are formed and negotiated among multiple stakeholders.

Consistent with this, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) have been found to co-create destination images together with tourists themselves through user-shared photographs and other visual content on social media platforms, rather than unilaterally controlling destination branding messaging as in traditional marketing channels (Zhao et al., 2014). Research examining DMO social media engagement strategies has further shown that the richness of information shared through platform-specific formats, such as Facebook event pages, measurably influences the degree of customer engagement achieved (Lee et al., 2024), underscoring that platform-specific content strategy, rather than social media presence alone, is a key determinant of marketing effectiveness.

The Gap Between Strategic Frameworks and Practical Implementation

A systematic literature review examining how tourism organizations strategically leverage social media marketing to create value found that, despite social media's substantial impact on tourism marketing practice, theoretical strategic frameworks remain largely disconnected from practical application within the industry (Pahor Zvanut & Zabukovec Baruca, 2025). The review identified that while tourism organizations broadly recognize the importance of social media marketing strategy, many lack structured implementation frameworks, a deficiency evidenced by an absence of formal

documentation, limited integration of social media activity with broader organizational marketing goals, and inadequate mechanisms for measuring marketing performance.

This gap between strategic recognition and structured implementation appears to be compounded by the increasing complexity of the digital customer journey. As tourism companies have adopted a growing array of digital applications and data sources, monitoring the full set of digital touchpoints with customers has become substantially more difficult, particularly for organizations attempting to manage physical and digital marketing channels jointly within a single coherent strategic plan (Pahor Zvanut & Zabukovec Baruca, 2025).

Social Media Influencers, User-Generated Content, and Travel Behavior

A comprehensive review combining bibliometric analysis with a systematic literature review of eighty journal articles examined the role of social media influencers in tourism and hospitality management, documenting the exponential growth of influencer-related tourism research alongside a persistent gap in comprehensive synthesis of influencer impact, effectiveness, and integration within the industry (Javed et al., 2025). Complementing this, an applied empirical study examining digital marketing strategies among tourists visiting Saudi Arabia's Asir region found that social media marketing, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and online advertising all significantly affected both brand awareness and tourists' intention to visit a destination, with social media marketing demonstrating the strongest effect on both outcomes among the three strategies examined (Awad & Alharthi, 2025).

These findings collectively suggest that user-generated and influencer-mediated content operates through partially distinct mechanisms from official destination marketing communications, exerting influence on travel decision-making via perceived authenticity and peer-based trust rather than through the institutional credibility associated with traditional destination marketing organization messaging.

Frontier Technologies: The Metaverse and Beyond

A systematic literature review of 386 initially identified articles, narrowed to 86 directly relevant references through a PRISMA-guided screening protocol, investigated tourism marketing within the still-emerging context of the metaverse, examining the primary technologies employed at the intersection of marketing, tourism, and virtual environments, including artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality, blockchain, non-fungible tokens, and digital twins (Sánchez-Amboage et al., 2024). This review established, for what the authors describe as the first time in the literature, the foundational components of tourism marketing within the metaverse: tourism products, the metaverse functioning as a distribution and branding channel for tourism, and the tourist positioned as an active protagonist within virtual tourism experiences rather than a passive content recipient.

Although metaverse-based tourism marketing remains at an early, largely exploratory stage relative to established social media marketing practice, its emergence signals a broader trajectory in the literature toward increasingly immersive and technologically mediated forms of tourism marketing communication, extending well beyond the two-dimensional image- and text-based content that has characterized social media marketing to date.

Discussion

Taken together, the literature reviewed here indicates that digital marketing and social media have become deeply integrated into tourism marketing practice at a descriptive level, evidenced by the sheer

volume and thematic breadth of research documented in recent systematic reviews and bibliometric analyses. At the same time, a consistent and arguably more consequential finding across this literature is the persistent disconnect between the widely acknowledged strategic importance of digital and social media marketing and the comparatively underdeveloped state of structured implementation, performance measurement, and organizational integration reported within actual tourism enterprises (Pahor Zvanut & Zabukovec Baruca, 2025).

This disconnect carries practical implications for tourism organizations seeking to translate social media presence into measurable marketing outcomes: the finding that platform-specific information richness and content format influence customer engagement, and that social media marketing exerts the strongest measured effect on brand awareness and visit intention relative to other digital marketing strategies, suggests that tourism marketers may benefit more from refining content strategy within existing platforms than from further channel proliferation absent a coherent measurement framework. The emergence of frontier technologies such as the metaverse further suggests that the field of tourism marketing is likely to continue diversifying technologically at a pace that may outstrip organizations' capacity to develop correspondingly mature strategic and measurement frameworks, a concern already documented with respect to established social media platforms and therefore plausibly relevant to emerging virtual and immersive channels as well.

Limitations of the reviewed literature include the geographic concentration of several systematic reviews toward European and, in some cases, single-region contexts, which may limit the generalizability of specific findings regarding implementation gaps or influencer effectiveness to tourism markets in other world regions; the reliance in several reviews on database coverage that varies in currency and completeness; and the still-nascent empirical base specific to metaverse and other frontier-technology tourism marketing applications, which restricts conclusions in this area to an exploratory rather than a confirmatory status.

Conclusion

This review of recent literature on digital marketing and social media in tourism indicates substantial and thematically broad scholarly attention to the subject, spanning destination image co-creation, strategic implementation gaps, influencer-mediated travel decision-making, and emerging frontier technologies including the metaverse. A recurring and practically significant finding across this body of work is that tourism organizations' recognition of the strategic importance of social media and digital marketing has outpaced their development of structured implementation frameworks and rigorous performance measurement systems. Future research would benefit from developing standardized, comparable measures of digital marketing effectiveness suited to the experiential and intangible characteristics of tourism products, alongside continued empirical investigation of rapidly emerging channels such as the metaverse as their adoption within the tourism sector matures.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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