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Review

The Evolution of Digital Tourism Marketing: From Hashtags to AI-Immersive Journeys in the Metaverse Era

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Abstract

This study examines how social media platforms influence tourism marketing strategies, consumer perceptions, and travel behaviors, addressing their sustainability implications. It aims to evaluate the current state of research on social media in tourism marketing, identify dominant trends, assess empirical evidence of impact, and critically highlight research gaps. The analysis focuses on three core marketing outcomes: destination image, travel intention, and user engagement—and includes a section examining sustainability considerations across environmental, sociocultural, and economic dimensions. The study uses a systematic critical review of 147 peer-reviewed academic articles published between 2015 and 2025, combined with a meta-analysis of 38 quantitative studies that report statistical effect sizes. The meta-analysis uses a random-effects model to compare the influence of different platforms and study contexts. Moderator variables include geographic region, platform type, and methodological design. Findings show that social media marketing has a statistically significant positive effect on destination image (Cohen's d = 0.61), travel intention (d = 0.54), and user engagement (d = 0.43). The analysis also reveals geographic bias, limited research on emerging platforms, and a lack of longitudinal and ethical inquiry. Findings suggest that tourism researchers and marketers may have to adopt more context-sensitive, interdisciplinary, and ethical approaches. Critical sustainability concerns emerge, including "overtourism", cultural commodification, digital inequities, and algorithmic biases. Further studies may focus on specific platform-related behaviors, long-term impacts, and integrated online strategies appropriate for global tourism diversity. Lastly, this paper advocates for context-sensitive, interdisciplinary, and ethically grounded approaches to ensure sustainable digital tourism marketing strategies.

Keywords: social media in tourism marketing; tourism consumer behavior; user-generated content (UGC) travel content; influencer marketing; destination image; AI-powered tourism personalization; digital destination branding; platform-specific strategies (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube); social media engagement metrics; smart tourism technologies and platforms

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Academic Editor: Jun (Justin) Li

Received: 25 May 2025
Revised: 19 June 2025
Accepted: 27 June 2025
Published: 30 June 2025

Citation: Christou, E.; Giannopoulos, A.; Simeli, I. The Evolution of Digital Tourism Marketing: From Hashtags to AI-Immersive Journeys in the Metaverse Era. *Sustainability* **2025**, *17*, 6016. https://doi.org/10.3390/su17136016

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Over the past decade, the tourism marketing field has been subject to an unprecedented transformation as a result primarily of the unprecedented growth in social media platforms. What started as an added form of communication is now an integral part of tourism branding that affects tourists' decision-making and enables personal interaction [1]. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and TripAdvisor have not just

transformed the promotion of tourism products and destinations, but also reformed tourists' attitudes and perceptions about traveling [2,3].

This transformation signifies much more than a mere evolution of technology; it hints at a cultural change. The level of "Instagrammability" of a destination [4] now matches its historical significance or ecological value [5]. The flows of tourists are increasingly influenced by algorithmic trends, viral social media posts, and influencer-generated content rather than historical significance, heritage, value for money, or sustainability. Aesthetics, trending posts, and visibility often overshadow quality and depth of authentic experience [6].

From a critical point of view, this paradigm raises issues in relation to power, representation, and control. Whose voices dominate the social media space? Who benefits from the visibility generated by viral campaigns? Research shows that tourism content often reinforces narrow cultural ideals and privileges urban, Western-centric aesthetics [7,8]. Local communities are frequently left out of these conversations, even as their environments are commodified for digital spectacle.

From a marketing standpoint, the landscape has evolved faster than the academic theory can explain. Metrics such as likes, shares, and engagement rates are volatile and platform-dependent, and often poorly correlated with long-term behavior or loyalty [9]. Meanwhile, practitioners scramble to adapt to shifting algorithms and audience behaviors, often without a clear framework for measuring ethical or strategic impact [10]. Empirical studies provide valuable insights into these complexities. For instance, Soares, Mendes-Filho, and Gretzel demonstrated that hotel managers often adopt new technologies primarily to mimic competitors and gain legitimacy—especially on platforms such as TripAdvisor—highlighting how technology adoption is driven more by external institutional pressures rather than by internal strategic innovation [11]. Similarly, Somera and Petrova highlight that hotels pursuing digital innovations face substantial challenges related to capability gaps and leadership limitations, complicating the multi-stage process from initial detection of innovation needs through institutionalization [12]. Furthermore, Alsharif, Isa, and Alqudah, in their comprehensive review, illustrate that the adoption of smart tourism systems, including IoT and ICT solutions, remains uneven [13]. Companies often demonstrate initial enthusiasm in pilot stages but subsequently encounter significant hurdles related to technological readiness, ethical considerations, and data governance frameworks during broader implementation [11–13]. Collectively, these studies offer detailed sector-specific context, revealing that companies' responses to digital change are fragmented and varied. Some embrace smart technologies strategically to enhance competitiveness and visibility, while others lag behind due to organizational, infrastructural, or ethical barriers. Our study builds upon this nuanced context by going beyond descriptive or adoption-focused analyses, critically examining structural logics of digital platforms—such as algorithmic visibility, governance biases, and shifting promotional authority—to uncover systemic forces shaping tourism businesses' engagement with digital transformation.

Recent empirical studies offer valuable insights into the nuanced responses by tourism companies to digital transformation, illustrating both positive engagement and significant barriers. Sousa, Alén, Losada, and Melo highlight several operational and managerial challenges tourism managers face when integrating virtual reality (VR) technologies, including high initial investment costs, limited technological skills within teams, and resistance to change among staff and customers [14]. Despite recognizing VR's potential for enhancing visitor experiences and competitive differentiation, managers often struggle with practical implementation hurdles and adapting business models accordingly. Further research by Sousa et al. reveals how the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated interest and adoption of VR among tourism businesses, but also clarified ongoing structural and cultural limitations, including gaps in digital competencies, infrastructural inadequacies, and lingering skep-

ticism toward digital innovations among traditional market segments [15]. Thus, while some tourism businesses actively embrace digital tools as strategic assets for branding, customer engagement, and immersive experiences, widespread adoption remains fragmented, cautious, and context-dependent.

All previous cases underscore the complex, uneven landscape of digital transformation in tourism operations and branding strategies, supporting the assertion that companies indeed struggle significantly in adapting effectively and strategically to new digital environments. By critically examining such cases, our study broadens the understanding of prior descriptive research, contributing a deeper theoretical analysis of the underlying structural logics—such as algorithm-driven content curation, platform governance, and the implications of digital authority—shaping this evolving digital landscape.

Despite a growing body of literature, much of the existing research remains descriptive—focused on trends or campaign performance—while failing to interrogate the structural logic of social media itself [16,17]. For example, influential reviews, such as by Leung et al. [1] and Gretzel [2], document consumer and supplier uses of social platforms such as TripAdvisor and Facebook but maintain a descriptive orientation without engaging with algorithmic filtering, platform governance, or the systemic forces at play. Similarly, Ge and Gretzel take an important step toward analyzing the rhetorical–visual structures of tourism marketing on such platforms as Weibo, revealing how message formats shape destination image—but this remains one of the few examples addressing post hoc structural features rather than theorizing how these structures emerge from platform logic [18]. Comprehensive conceptual treatments, such as the critical review by Gössling [19], underline the need for deeper engagement with technological affordances, data biases, and the power dynamics embedded in social media platforms. There is a need to move beyond surface metrics and influencer ROI to explore deeper, systemic transformations: the collapse of promotional authority, the aesthetics of digital travel culture, AI-immersive experiences, and the long-term implications of platform governance for tourism development.

This paper starts from that premise: that social media is not just a set of tools—it is a force reshaping the tourism sector at multiple levels—economic, cultural, ethical, and psychological.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

This paper aims to critically review the state-of-the-art research on social media in tourism marketing. Specifically, it seeks to (1) identify major trends and theoretical developments in the field between 2015 and 2025; (2) conduct a meta-analysis to quantify the impact of social media marketing on tourism-related outcomes; (3) expose gaps and biases in the existing research; and (4) propose a multidisciplinary research agenda that pushes the boundaries of conventional marketing paradigms.

1.3. Relevance and Contribution

While the volume of research in this area has grown rapidly, the literature remains fragmented. Much of it is descriptive, platform-specific, or focused narrowly on short-term campaign metrics. This paper attempts to address the call for a synthesized, critical review that brings clarity to the field and guides future inquiry.

It contributes to the current body of knowledge by offering: (1) a consolidated view of what is currently understood and what remains unclear about social media's role in tourism marketing; (2) a meta-analytic assessment of empirical findings across diverse studies; (3) conceptual clarity through engagement with interdisciplinary theories and models; and (4) a call for more inclusive, ethical, and technologically informed research approaches.

1.4. Structure of the Paper

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the methodological approach, including criteria for study selection and the meta-analytic techniques used. Section 3 reviews the evolution of social media in tourism marketing. Section 4 dives into key themes such as influencer marketing, user-generated content, and AI-driven personalization. Section 5 summarizes dominant theoretical frameworks. Section 6 presents the results of the meta-analysis. Sections 7 and 9 identify interdisciplinary connections and critical research gaps. Section 10 proposes a future research agenda, and Section 11 concludes the paper.

2. Methodology

This study employed a two-pronged research design anchored in established research methodologies. First, we conducted a systematic critical literature review of peer-reviewed academic publications on social media in tourism marketing between 2015 and 2025. This approach followed the key principles from Kitchenham's guidelines for systematic reviews [20], the PRISMA statement [21], and the best practices in the tourism domain [22], ensuring transparent and replicable identification, screening, inclusion, and appraisal of relevant studies. Initially, a total of 1258 articles were retrieved from the Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases using comprehensive Boolean search strings. Duplicate removal was performed using EndNote software, resulting in 972 unique studies. Screening by title and abstract reduced the number to 412 articles, which underwent a rigorous full-text evaluation for methodological soundness and applicability based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Ultimately, 147 articles met the inclusion criteria for qualitative analysis. A PRISMA flowchart documenting each selection stage is included to ensure transparency and replicability (see Figure 1).

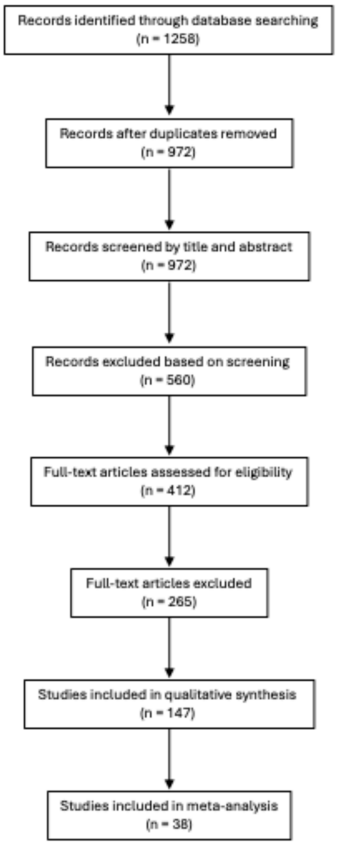


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart of literature selection.

Second, we performed a meta-analysis of empirical studies that quantified the effects of social media on specific tourism marketing outcomes—specifically, destination image, travel intention, and user engagement. Our meta-analytic design was informed by seminal methodological work in tourism and hospitality meta-analyses [23,24], which outline rigorous procedures for effect size estimation, heterogeneity assessment using Cochran's Q and I^2 statistics, and publication bias evaluation. Studies selected for the meta-analysis (N = 38) clearly reported effect sizes or provided sufficient data for their calculation and demonstrated methodological rigor in their design, sampling, and statistical analysis.

Together, these complementary stages enabled us to achieve two key objectives: to synthesize and integrate theoretical contributions across the literature and to empirically assess the current state of evidence regarding social media's impact on tourism marketing. By aligning our methodology with accepted frameworks—including PRISMA-based systematic review and robust meta-analytic protocols—we ensured both the rigor and relevance of our conclusions, while situating our research design within the broader scholarly discourse.

2.1. Systematic Critical Analysis

The current review adheres to the principles outlined by PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), as articulated by Liberati et al. [21], adapted to incorporate a critical approach that explicitly examines not only substantive findings but also epistemological and methodological biases prevalent within the literature. The meta-analysis specifically employed rigorous methodological procedures informed by seminal meta-analytic frameworks described by Borenstein et al. [25], which emphasize standardized effect size calculations, heterogeneity assessment, and bias evaluation techniques. Additionally, we drew on the established meta-analytic practices from the tourism literature, exemplified by Afshardoost and Eshaghi's robust examination of relationships between tourism-related constructs [23], thereby ensuring both theoretical and methodological alignment with recognized standards in quantitative synthesis research.

2.1.1. Data Sources

The Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases were searched for studies published between January 2015 and February 2025 using the following Boolean search strings: ("social media" OR "digital platform" OR "Instagram" OR "TikTok" OR "YouTube" OR "Facebook") AND ("tourism marketing" OR "destination branding" OR "travel promotion" OR "online engagement").

2.1.2. Criteria for Inclusion

Journal articles that were anonymously peer-reviewed (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods); substantial focus on social media in tourism marketing; and publications in the English language.

2.1.3. Criteria for Exclusion

Conference papers, theses, unpublished documents, and non-peer-reviewed or predatory journals; and publications where social media was not the main focus of the study.

A total of 412 articles were thoroughly evaluated based on their applicability and methodological soundness, and 147 were selected for qualitative analysis. Thematic coding was utilized for each study, and particular attention was paid to influential variables including the platform being studied, geographic location, intended results, theoretical context, and types of marketing efforts used.

The critical analysis aspect questioned deeper patterns: Which voices dominate the literature? What theoretical assumptions persist? Which parts of the world are underrepresented? What ethical, cultural, or power dynamics are overlooked?

2.2. Meta-Analysis

Among the 147 studies, 38 specific empirical articles met statistical requirements for inclusion in a meta-analysis. These papers were selected on the basis of three major conditions: (1) the study described effect sizes (e.g., Cohen's d, r, odds ratios) or provided sufficient data to estimate them; (2) the variable(s) used was(were) clearly linked to a tourism marketing system of measurement, influenced by social media; and (3) research design, sampling procedures, and statistical analysis reflected high methodological rigor.

2.2.1. Primary Outcomes Evaluated

Destination image: how social media content influences and/or shapes perceptions of destinations.

Travel intention: likelihood of visiting a destination after exposure to social media content.

User engagement: social media interactions (likes, comments, shares) and their relationship to behavioral consequences such as reservations or brand loyalty.

2.2.2. Meta-Analytic Approach

A random-effects model was used to account for the variability between the studies.

Heterogeneity was evaluated by using Cochran's Q and I^2 statistics.

Moderator constructs explored how variables such as platform type, geographical region, and user demographics had an impact on effect sizes.

The role of meta-analysis went beyond mere aggregation of the results; it aimed at clarifying patterns of causation and identifying inconsistencies and unjustified generalities contained in the empirical literature.

2.3. Thematic Analysis and Critical Integration

The remaining 109 studies were qualitatively analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach inspired explicitly by Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory methodology [26,27]. NVivo qualitative analysis software supported systematic coding procedures. Following Charmaz's recommendations, the coding process involved iterative stages: (1) initial open coding, where key concepts and insights were identified through line-by-line analysis; (2) focused coding, in which the initial codes were organized and refined to identify recurring patterns; and (3) theoretical coding, which integrated focused codes into coherent themes reflecting broader conceptual insights [27]. Coding was conducted independently by two coders, achieving intercoder reliability through regular discussions, with discrepancies resolved by consensus, following the procedures recommended by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña [28]. Cohen's Kappa coefficient was calculated and achieved a value of 0.82, indicating substantial intercoder agreement and methodological rigor as recommended by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña [28]. Significant categories included:

- Influencer marketing dynamics.
- Strategies for user-generated content (UGC).
- Message personalization and algorithmic targeting of the audience.
- Specific platform affordances.
- Crisis management (e.g., COVID-19).

Throughout this process, constant comparison methods were used to ensure that identified themes were grounded robustly in empirical data [29], allowing concepts to emerge organically rather than relying on predetermined categories. To further enhance conceptual coherence, thematic findings were systematically cross-referenced with the outcomes of the meta-analysis. This methodological triangulation, suggested by Denzin [30], allowed for integrating robust empirical evidence ("what works") with a critical exploration of overlooked or underexplored areas within the literature ("what's overlooked").

2.4. Limitations

This methodology is not without limitations. The inclusion of only English-language peer-reviewed studies may introduce cultural and linguistic bias. The rapid evolution of such platforms as TikTok and Threads means recent phenomena may be underrepresented. Finally, publication bias and inconsistent reporting standards in primary studies may affect the meta-analysis.

Despite these constraints, this combined methodological approach offers a robust, interdisciplinary, and critically engaged overview of the state of research on social media in tourism marketing.

3. Evolution of Social Media in Tourism Marketing

Over the past fifteen years, social media has not simply added a new layer to tourism marketing—it has remade it. The once-linear flow of messaging from destination marketers to tourists has collapsed into a dynamic feedback loop where influence, identity, and place branding are co-produced by brands, platforms, and users. What began as a communication tool has evolved into a fully integrated marketing ecosystem, and its evolution can be traced across five overlapping but distinct phases.

3.1. Phase 1: User-Generated Content and the Social Web (2008–2014)

The beginning of social media use in tourist promotion came at the same time as the Web 2.0 technology became available. Groundbreaking platforms such as TripAdvisor, Flickr, and Facebook facilitated a shift from institutionally generated content to member-generated content [31,32]. This new development meant that tourist accounts, which had previously been dictated by destination management organizations (DMOs), were increasingly being created by common tourists [31,33].

The user-generated content (UGC) quickly became a new trust currency [1]. Research conducted during this time showed its potential for building perceived authenticity and for shaping decision-making processes [3,34]. However, such content's authenticity was unregulated and nonstandardized, leading to early concerns around misinformation, rating manipulations, and undermining brand identity [35,36].

DMOs initially struggled to engage. Their responses were often reactive or confined to corporate pages with low interactivity [37]. However, some innovative agencies began adopting community management models, shifting from broadcasting to facilitating conversation [38,39]. This phase set the stage for deeper engagement—but the platforms were still maturing.

3.2. Phase 2: Emergence of the Visual Economy and Influencer Culture (2014–2019)

By the mid-2010s, the marketing terrain shifted again. Visual-first platforms—Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat—became central to tourism storytelling. Destinations were not just described anymore; they were stylized, filtered, and framed into bite-sized, aspirational content [32].

Instagram, in particular, changed the game. Its architecture rewarded aesthetics, repetition, and emotional tone—qualities that aligned perfectly with tourism's visual grammar [5,40]. The "Instagrammability" of a destination began to influence not just where people traveled, but how they experienced those places on the ground [4]. Restaurants painted "selfie walls", viewpoints became photo queues, and landmarks were often visited for their photogenic value alone [3,41].

Simultaneously, the rise of travel influencers marked the emergence of a new kind of marketing agent: one that blurred the line between individual traveler, content producer, and brand ambassador. Unlike celebrities, influencers built micro-audiences based on

perceived authenticity and relatability [42,43]. Brands began reallocating budgets from traditional advertising spending to influencer partnerships, hoping to piggyback on trust and audience reach [44,45].

This era intensified the commodification of place. Destinations became digital symbols to be consumed and shared. While this boosted visibility, it also exacerbated overtourism in fragile locations and deepened inequality between digitally visible and invisible destinations [46,47]. In many cases, the experiences being sold were stylized approximations, carefully curated to fit the feed rather than reflect cultural or geographic complexity [10].

3.3. Phase 3: The Algorithmic Revolution and Hyper-Personalization (2020–2022)

The next phase of evolution was defined less by content and more by how content was distributed. Platforms became increasingly algorithm-driven. Discovery was no longer user-led; it was engineered by machine learning models that fed users what they were statistically most likely to engage with [48,49]. Algorithms optimized for time-on-platform and engagement began shaping not just what users saw, but how they imagined and accessed travel information.

For tourism marketers, this created both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, paid promotions and organic reach could be hyper-targeted based on demographics, behaviors, or even real-time location data [50]. On the other hand, visibility became unstable—dependent on opaque engagement metrics, algorithmic volatility, and platform-specific ranking systems. Campaign performance could fluctuate dramatically with minor changes to algorithm logic, making strategic planning more reactive and uncertain [51].

Artificial intelligence also began shaping the user journey in more proactive and personalized ways. Chatbots handled routine queries across booking platforms and DMO websites. Dynamic content feeds adjusted in real time based on scrolling patterns or device usage. Increasingly, travel agencies and platforms integrated AI-powered recommender systems to deliver tailored itineraries, targeted offers, and predictive booking suggestions [52,53]. These tools promised convenience, efficiency, and conversion—but at a cost.

While these developments improved personalization, they also raised deeper ethical and experiential concerns. Critics warned of algorithmically reinforced "filter bubbles" that reduced exposure to diverse destinations, cultures, or lesser-known experiences [54,55]. As user journeys became more predictive and optimized, the serendipity and exploration often associated with travel risked being minimized. Furthermore, the extensive use of personal data for behavioral targeting reignited longstanding debates around digital privacy, especially in jurisdictions with weaker regulatory oversight [56].

Few studies during this time examined the long-term implications of such hyper-personalization. Most research focused on short-term behavioral metrics—click-through rates, likes, shares, and booking intent—while leaving critical questions of consumer agency, destination diversity, and algorithmic accountability underexplored. As AI continues to mediate visibility and access in tourism, the need for deeper, longitudinal, and critical research becomes increasingly urgent.

3.4. Phase 4: Platform Fragmentation, Authenticity, and Community Trust (2022–2025)

The most recent phase in social media's evolution has been defined by platform fragmentation and a growing skepticism toward polished digital marketing. TikTok emerged as the dominant discovery engine for younger travelers, overtaking Google for trip inspiration in Gen Z cohorts [16,57]. The platform's short-form, candid, and often chaotic content upended traditional tourism storytelling. Instead of scripted hotel walkthroughs or drone

footage, users responded to raw honesty—"travel fails", DIY tips, and unfiltered local interactions [58–60].

At the same time, Reddit, Discord, and niche Facebook groups surged in importance as communities of trust, providing alternatives to the algorithmically manicured mainstream. Travelers increasingly sought out peer advice and authentic reviews in closed, interest-based spaces rather than public influencer feeds [47,61].

This unveiled a paradox that challenges marketing practitioners. The polished visual content that once drove engagement now risks being seen as inauthentic. Influencers have begun rebranding themselves as "content creators" or "storytellers", signaling a pivot toward narrative depth and transparency [44,62]. Platforms, too, have adapted: Instagram introduced Notes and Channels to mimic community forums, while YouTube doubled down on Shorts to compete with TikTok [63].

Amid all this, tourism marketing has become more precarious and democratized. Campaign virality is unpredictable. User-led narratives can uplift or damage a brand in only a few hours, blurring the line between brand asset and user meme, which has become thinner than ever. Perhaps most critically, the architecture of influence is no longer controlled by marketers—it is distributed, unstable, and mediated by opaque algorithms [10,47].

3.5. Phase 5: Integration of AI, Big Data, and Predictive Analytics (2025–?)

While social media platforms have long been recognized as powerful tools for engagement and promotion in tourism, their capabilities have expanded dramatically through the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and big data analytics. This shift represents not just a technological upgrade, but a fundamental reconfiguration of how tourism marketing is conceived, executed, and measured.

The convergence of AI and big data enables marketers to move beyond general audience segmentation into the realm of hyper-personalization. Artificial intelligence applications use considerable amounts of user-related data, including geolocation, scrolling history, clicks, and affective responses, in order to provide content that is contextually relevant at a moment in time [52]. Specifically, within the confines of the realm of tourism, this functionality allows for personalized tourist itineraries for Bali, based on what users did previously while traveling, what they can afford, and how they responded to similar destinations.

The use of predictive analytics has been applied extensively for forecasting tourist demand and creating advertising strategies. Airlines and tourism board organizations use machine learning algorithms for forecasting spikes in consumer demand, which are driven by seasonality, social media interactions, and major global news events. For instance, Marriott has integrated chatbots fueled by artificial intelligence for finalizing real-time bookings for clients, while Expedia has embedded AI into recommendation platforms for boosting conversion rates [37].

Another equally valuable aspect is social media analysis using natural language processing (NLP). Processing large datasets that include reviews, captions, and hashtags allows tourism professionals to identify changes in tourist sentiments, spot emerging hotspots, and rectify service lapses in a timely manner. Sentiment analysis and topic modeling have been widely applied as some of the NLP techniques being adopted to measure reputation across such networks as TripAdvisor, Reddit, and Twitter [64,65].

However, such advances come along with ethical concerns and structural weaknesses. The increased lack of transparency in algorithmic decision-making—particularly around recommendation criteria, ranking, and targeting—raises questions about equity, representation, and power relationships [10]. Biased data can lead algorithms to reinforce exclusionary discourse, prioritizing Western forms of tourism, trendy city destinations, and beautiful content, often at the cost of less commercialized and more diverse alternatives.

Privacy concerns have also escalated. The tourism industry's reliance on third-party data brokers and platform APIs places user data in the hands of actors with uneven transparency and accountability. Travelers may unknowingly surrender vast amounts of behavioral data—location, interactions, preferences—which are monetized with little oversight or opt-out ability.

Moreover, automation in content delivery has reduced opportunities for spontaneous discovery. Personalized feeds, though efficient, tend to reinforce user preferences rather than expand them, potentially narrowing the scope of travel inspiration. This creates "digital filter bubbles" where users are repeatedly shown similar content, limiting serendipity and reducing the visibility of emerging or underrepresented destinations [66].

Despite these risks, the integration of AI and big data is unlikely to slow down. The competitive advantage they offer is too significant for brands and DMOs to ignore. The challenge, then, is not whether to adopt these tools, but how to deploy them responsibly, with transparency, inclusivity, and sustainability as guiding principles.

Critically, the academic literature on this topic has struggled to keep pace. Most existing studies either celebrate AI's efficiency or critique its risks in abstract terms. There is a notable lack of empirical research on how AI-powered tourism marketing affects consumer autonomy, destination diversity, and long-term brand loyalty. This gap presents a significant opportunity for future interdisciplinary inquiry that combines data science with tourism ethics and behavioral psychology.

3.6. Synthesis and Implications: Furthering Tourism Promotion Through Social Media

The evolution of social media in tourism marketing illustrates important changes driven by technological advances and demographic shifts. Long defined as top-down, one-way communication from organizations toward a passive audience, social media has become participatory and networked. The centralized powers of tourism have been replaced by a decentered network between influencers, travelers, and algorithmic platforms. This shift is not just about embedding new technology into established practice but is instead a radical remaking of goals: from dispersal of carefully curated images toward production of dynamic, real-time content and from simple communication with customers toward collaborative creation that involves growing numbers of people who are increasingly acting as creators of content; from mental imagery to travel inspiration [67], including instigating emotions (e.g., pleasure and arousal) [68].

These changes have important implications. The role of tourism marketing has shifted from essential corporate image maintenance to a concern for intentional management of that image in an increasingly dynamic environment controlled by such factors as emotional connections, consumer conduct, and organizational habits. The levels of transparency are guided not merely through innovative methodology but through algorithms that are not explicitly stated. Meanwhile, trust is increasingly developed not through official certification but through authenticity, shared social values, and past experience.

- To successfully navigate this complex environment, scholars and marketers alike need to develop new literacies. Strategic agility is certainly required, but alone, it will not suffice. A deeper understanding of the operationally embedded logics in online tourist media—social, psychological, and ethical—is needed. This requires an analysis of critical issues such as representation, consent, privacy, and algorithmic bias. Many practices in the industry are reactive or trend-led, and scholarship often lags behind technological developments. What is needed, then, is an ongoing, interdisciplinary methodology that sees social media not as an external factor molding the touristic experience, nor as a marketing technology, but as an architectural building block for the touristic experience itself.

4. Key Themes Identified: Critical Review and Meta-Analysis

The meta-analytical exploration and overall evaluation highlighted well five major themes that characterize social media and tourism marketing relationships: (1) influencer marketing, (2) user-generated content (UGC), (3) artificial intelligence and personalization, (4) crisis communications and reputation, and (5) platform-specific strategies. Not only do these themes serve as recommendations for future research, but they have a direct impact on interactions between destinations, organizations, and tourists in cyberspace as well.

4.1. Influencer Marketing

The influencer phenomenon has moved swiftly into focus in academic discussion and evaluation in the field of tourism media research. The development of "travel influencers", which refers to influential content creators who have high follower counts and earn revenues from monetizing audience interactions through collaborative content partnerships, has reshaped promotional strategies adopted by destinations. Influencers are increasingly found at the center of tourist promotions, acting as important go-betweens connecting enterprises and customers [39,55,69].

These influencers combine advertising content with personal anecdotes, a practice that is seen as being more trustworthy and engaging than traditional advertising practices [32,36]. Their effect is based upon parasocial intimacy principles; they present a sense of familiarity, which then reinforces trust and persuasiveness [69]. Audiences perceive influencers as authentic peers, not professional spokespeople, allowing branded content to feel native within a feed, rather than intrusive.

However, studies reveal growing concerns around authenticity erosion, undisclosed sponsorships, and brand dilution [44]. Research shows that audience trust is highly conditional—when users detect overt commercial intent or repetitive brand promotion, engagement and credibility suffer [43,70]. Recent investigations also highlight how influencer marketing reinforces aspirational norms, class biases, and exclusionary aesthetics [37], often under the guise of "authenticity".

The influencer economy remains lightly regulated, with inconsistent transparency requirements across platforms and countries [71]. Despite increasing calls for standardized disclosure practices, enforcement is limited and patchy, leaving ethical responsibility largely to individual creators and brands.

From a research standpoint, influencer marketing remains a fragmented and undertheorized domain. Much of the literature centers on influencer selection, engagement metrics, or short-term return on investment. Few studies interrogate the deeper power dynamics at play—who gets funded, whose experiences are amplified, and how cultural representation is constructed and commodified in digital tourism [72].

Finally, emerging work has begun to explore influencer labor conditions, noting the precarious, always-on nature of content production, algorithmic dependency, and emotional burnout [62,73]. These insights point to a growing need for a critical and intersectional lens—one that not only analyzes influence as a marketing tool, but also as a sociotechnical phenomenon shaped by platform capitalism, inequality, and visibility politics.

4.2. User-Generated Content (UGC)

UGC, particularly in the form of photos, videos, and reviews, has transformed the tourism marketing playbook. Travelers trust other travelers more than official campaigns—a shift that reflects broader patterns of peer-to-peer trust and participatory culture [3,6,74]. Platforms such as TripAdvisor, YouTube, and Instagram serve as decision-making ecosystems where content flows horizontally rather than top–down, enabling a more democratized yet decentralized production of destination narratives [75].

Why it matters: UGC assists in destination image creation, expectation management, emotional engagement, and destination image [5]. There is evidence that UGC not only influences travel intention but also post-holiday satisfaction, through the reconciliation between expectation and experience [40,59,76]. UGC is both social proof and experiential foretaste—offering visual and narrative content that allows tourists to mentally simulate future experiences [77].

However, UGC is subjective. It has an effect that is contingent upon content quality, user trustworthiness, and platform visibility. The prevalence of highly dramatized content has the potential to skew portrayals toward idealized or "Instagrammable" looks, excluding less exciting or more diverse experiences [59]. Moreover, high volumes of positive content can create overhyped destinations, leading to visitor disappointment, carrying capacity strain, and eventual destination fatigue. Conversely, negative UGC—even if isolated—can disproportionately damage brand equity due to algorithmic amplification or emotional salience [65].

UGC also raises ownership and consent issues. Tourist-generated media is often reappropriated by brands without compensation, consent, or credit. While legal frameworks are often vague, the ethical implications are clearer: marketers are profiting from unpaid digital labor, often sourced from users unaware of the commercial value of their contributions [61]. These concerns are magnified when UGC features local communities, children, or culturally sensitive locations—raising questions about representational justice and digital colonialism [15], considering the value co-created in the tourism ecosystem [78].

Finally, most research treats UGC as a variable, not a phenomenon. There is limited engagement with the aesthetics, rhythms, or cultural codes of UGC production. Few scholars interrogate how UGC reinforces specific visual tropes—such as tropical beaches, rooftop pools, or street food—as globalized, aspirational icons. Through repetition and stylization, UGC can contribute to the commodification of place, turning lived destinations into visual products optimized for engagement, rather than cultural understanding or sustainability [79].

4.3. Personalization and AI

The growing use of AI and big data has shifted tourism marketing from broadcasting to behavioral orchestration. Algorithms now personalize user experiences—from trip planning apps to targeted Instagram ads—based on preferences, browsing patterns, and prior behavior [52,65,80]. These systems draw on vast datapoints—clickstreams, sentiment, dwell time, location—to dynamically tailor content that aligns with the user's psychological profile and real-time context [81].

Why it matters: Personalization increases relevance, boosts conversion, and enhances user satisfaction. AI systems can recommend flights, hotels, or destinations tailored to specific emotional states, mobility constraints, or budget thresholds. In theory, this leads to a smoother, more fulfilling customer journey and higher retention rates [82,83]. AI-enhanced personalization has also proven valuable in crisis contexts, such as COVID-19, helping adapt offers to changing travel restrictions and health concerns [64].

Yet personalization also introduces ethical concerns [84]. Filter bubbles, confirmation bias, and algorithmic exclusion can narrow the range of choices users see—limiting discovery and reinforcing digital inequality [85]. Popular destinations receive disproportionate exposure, while emerging or alternative options are suppressed by platform logic. Personalization, in this sense, can become a mechanism of homogenization rather than empowerment.

Privacy is another issue: consumers often have little awareness of how much data are collected, how they are profiled, or how they are monetized by third-party systems [86,87].

Consent is frequently buried in unread terms, and data sharing across ecosystems (e.g., Facebook–Instagram–Booking.com) makes meaningful opt-out nearly impossible.

Moreover, personalization can create emotional manipulation risks. Recent research highlights how AI can exploit psychological vulnerabilities—e.g., through urgency cues, social proof, or mood-based pricing—to drive behavior that may not align with the user's best interests [88]. These subtle manipulations blur the line between assistance and coercion.

Academic work on AI in tourism marketing remains heavily techno-optimistic. Much of the literature focuses on functionality—recommendation accuracy, conversion rates, or user satisfaction—while overlooking systemic bias, algorithmic opacity, or consumer resistance. As AI takes on a more autonomous and affective role in shaping tourist behavior, there is a critical need for ethically grounded research that considers not just what AI can do, but what it should do—and under what constraints [89,90].

4.4. Crisis Communication and Reputation Management

Crisis response has emerged as a strategic priority in tourism marketing, particularly in the wake of global disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media platforms were central to how destinations communicated closures, safety protocols, and reopening plans [47,91]. They also became battlegrounds for public relations, misinformation, and community management. In the early weeks of COVID-19, for instance, destinations used platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and WeChat not only to inform but also to project reassurance, solidarity, and control [92].

Why it matters: Effective social media use during crises can preserve brand trust, stabilize visitation intent, and support stakeholder coordination. Empirical research has proven that quick communication, sensitive messaging, and positive engagement are associated with crisis recovery and audience loyalty enhancement [93,94]. Those brands that modified their messaging in accordance with current discourse—health, well-being, and emotional relationships instead of promotion-related content—usually showed positive results in terms of enduring trust and crisis recovery.

However, many brands failed to adapt. Some communicated too late, others relied on tone-deaf messaging that ignored local suffering or public health guidelines [95]. The pandemic exposed a gap in platform fluency—brands accustomed to curated, promotional content often struggled to pivot to crisis dialogue, especially in dynamic, emotionally volatile settings [96]. Missteps—such as insensitive influencer campaigns or ambiguous updates—sometimes did more reputational harm than silence.

Furthermore, social media crises are often multi-actor environments, involving not just DMOs and brands, but travelers, residents, journalists, and platform moderators. This complicates message control and increases reputational volatility. User-generated backlash, viral misinformation, and algorithmic amplification can all escalate situations rapidly.

Despite its growing importance, crisis communication on social media remains under-theorized in tourism. There is a lack of integrated models that account for the real-time, interactive, and emotionally charged nature of social platforms [97]. Much of the existing literature is descriptive or post hoc, focused on content analysis rather than strategy development. Adaptive frameworks—combining crisis typologies with platform logic and user dynamics—are still rare, despite increasing demand from practitioners.

Looking forward, more attention must be given to pre-crisis planning, cross-platform coordination, and response agility, especially as new crises emerge—from climate-induced disasters to geopolitical shocks and viral brand controversies.

4.5. Platform-Specific Strategies

One of the most underappreciated insights in the literature is that social media is not monolithic. Each platform has unique affordances, user cultures, and algorithmic logics that shape how content is created, shared, and consumed [51,98]. These affordances are not static; rather, they evolve in response to user behavior, platform updates, and broader sociotechnical trends.

Instagram emphasizes aesthetics, consistency, and visual branding. TikTok privileges spontaneity, humor, and virality. YouTube rewards long-form depth and storytelling. Twitter thrives on real-time commentary and controversy. Reddit fosters community expertise and authenticity. Each of these logics supports different modes of tourism representation, from the polished to the participatory. These differences are not trivial—they fundamentally affect how tourism narratives are constructed and received [47,65].

Why it matters: Platform literacy—understanding the native "language" of each space—is essential for marketing effectiveness. Yet, much of the academic literature treats platforms as interchangeable or generalizes insights from one (usually Instagram) to the entire ecosystem [5,99]. This flattening overlooks the fact that the same campaign may perform very differently across platforms, depending on such factors as algorithmic promotion, content format, or user demographics [50].

Some recent studies push back against this. Guerreiro et al. show that TikTok's informal, low-production-value aesthetic fosters a different type of trust than Instagram's polished visuals [59]. Meanwhile, Qu et al. reveal how YouTube comments provide valuable sentiment cues for destination marketers [100], often revealing deeper emotional responses than Instagram likes or shares. Others have explored how Reddit's community-driven norms provide rich qualitative feedback but resist overt marketing attempts, requiring more subtle, value-adding participation [37].

Still, scholarly work remains platform-agnostic. There is a need for comparative, platform-specific analyses that account for changing algorithms, user base shifts, and affordance evolution. Recent work by Buhalis et al. emphasizes that "nowness", co-creation, and real-time value delivery differ not just by segment but by platform logic [101]. Tourism marketers must design content and campaigns not for "social media" in general, but for each platform's architecture of visibility and engagement.

Additionally, new platforms continue to emerge. Threads, BeReal, and Discord each offer distinct marketing challenges and opportunities. BeReal's anti-filter ethos contrasts sharply with Instagram's aesthetic bias; Threads' conversational style may revive aspects of early Twitter discourse; and Discord offers intimate, community-based tourism engagement that may be ideal for niche branding or loyalty programs [39,102].

Without platform-specific fluency, marketers risk tone-deaf messaging, low engagement, or reputational damage. Future research must better map the cultural grammar and technical affordance of each platform, especially as the social media landscape continues to fragment and evolve.

4.6. Synthesis and Implications: Five Themes Define the Terrain

The five core themes identified in this review—influencer marketing, user-generated content (UGC), personalization and artificial intelligence (AI), crisis communication, and platform-specific strategies—together form the intellectual backbone of contemporary research on social media in tourism marketing. Each of these themes analyzes distinct areas of digital mediation, promotion, and tourist consumption patterns. Taken together, these themes describe an increasingly dynamic, rapidly changing, and inherently interdisciplinary field that includes perspectives from marketing, media studies, technology, psychology, and cultural theory.

Despite the wide variety of topics involved in these challenges, there exists a common and pervasive lack of methodological and conceptual rigor in the literature. Within even discrete areas of inquiry, each study often stands alone, with little interdisciplinary cross-fertilization or inclusion into broader theoretical frameworks. This isolation results in redundancy, measurement inconsistency, and foreclosed comparative analysis opportunities. Much of today's work is mainly based on measures of short-term participation, trends tied to individual platforms, or standalone case studies instead of examining systemic or long-term processes.

It is important to note the significant lack of longitudinal frameworks that track social media use throughout time and its correlation with offline conduct. Additionally, there is a lack of focus given to intersectional issues—most specifically in terms of how gender, race, class, or cultural identity shape online discussion and, vice versa, how these various identities get constructed through such interactions [103]. Minimal research efforts try to connect online engagements and quantifiable results in the real world.

These gaps suggest that while the field has expanded in scope, it now faces a deeper challenge: to grow in depth, reflexivity, and relevance, aligning scholarly inquiry with the complex realities of digital tourism.

5. Identification of the Major Theoretical Frameworks Employed

The study of social media in tourism marketing has rapidly expanded, but its theoretical development remains uneven. Much of the existing literature is driven by managerial outcomes—engagement, conversion, loyalty—rather than foundational inquiry into the psychological, social, or cultural mechanisms at work. Nevertheless, several key theoretical frameworks have shaped the field's evolution, while others remain underutilized or only recently emerging.

This section highlights the most influential theoretical approaches identified in the review and meta-analysis, including technology acceptance models (TAM/UTAUT); stimulus–organism–response (S–O–R); uses and gratifications theory (UGT); social exchange theory (SET); narrative and identity-based approaches (emerging).

5.1. Technology Acceptance and Behavioral Intention Models

The technology acceptance model (TAM) and its extensions, including UTAUT (unified theory of acceptance and use of technology), have been widely used to examine how tourists adopt digital platforms for information search, planning, or booking [104,105]. Studies applying the TAM typically focus on perceived usefulness, ease of use, and behavioral intention to use social media for travel purposes [106].

These models have proven useful in explaining first-time use or platform adoption. However, their application in tourism contexts often lacks nuance—flattening complex social behaviors into linear, rational processes. Critics argue that TAM-based studies often ignore affective, symbolic, and cultural factors influencing social media engagement [9,107].

5.2. Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) Models

The S–O–R model is a popular framework for understanding how marketing stimuli—images, captions, videos—trigger emotional responses (organism) influencing behavioral outcomes such as travel intention (response) [108]. It is particularly relevant in explaining how emotionally rich social media content impacts users' perceptions of destinations.

S–O–R has been used to model the emotional impact of influencer posts, destination imagery, and interactive features such as polls or comment threads [95]. However, the model's effectiveness depends heavily on how "organism" variables—such as involvement, enjoyment, or trust—are conceptualized. The literature shows inconsistency in opera-

tionalization and a tendency to retrofit variables to fit the model rather than let theory drive design.

5.3. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

The UGT provides a media-centric perspective, focusing on why individuals actively seek out certain platforms or content types. Applied to tourism, the UGT explains why travelers use social media for trip inspiration, information validation, social interaction, or self-presentation [1,109,110].

This framework has been especially useful in explaining content creation behaviors, such as posting reviews, tagging locations, or engaging with influencer content. However, it often assumes rational and individualistic motives, underplaying the influence of algorithmic cues, social pressures, and monetization structures that increasingly shape user behavior on commercial platforms.

5.4. Social Exchange Theory (SET)

The social exchange theory posits that human relationships are guided by perceived rewards and losses related to such encounters. In the tourism marketing context, the SET comes into play when analyzing how value is created cooperatively between users and influencers or brands [111,112].

For instance, travelers may follow an influencer or brand account if they perceive informational or social value, while marketers benefit from exposure or the UGC. The SET has also been applied to understand online reviews and destination loyalty [113].

However, the SET's transactional logic may oversimplify complex relational dynamics. In the context of influencer marketing, for example, follower loyalty is not purely economic or rational—it is also emotional, aspirational, and shaped by identity alignment.

5.5. Emerging Approaches: Narrative, Identity, and Cultural Theory

Hitherto, a limited but growing body of research draws from the narrative theory, the identity theory, and cultural studies to explore how travelers use social media to construct and perform identity through travel narratives [42,114]. These approaches treat tourism not just as consumption, but as meaning-making.

Influencer content, tourist narratives, and online outings are explored as performative demonstrations through which people experience notions of authenticity, social capital, and belonging [115,116]. This focus then allows for a detailed exploration of representation, colonial aesthetics, and platform labor—areas that have been underexplored in traditional scholarship on tourist marketing.

While productive, these frameworks remain marginal in tourism scholarship and are further embedded in areas such as communication, media, or gender studies. Such frameworks applied to tourism marketing hold potential for constructing more evolved and context-based understanding of how online environments shape tourist experiences.

5.6. Synthesis and Implications: Dominant Theoretical Approaches

Theoretical development in social media tourism marketing research continues to lag behind the field's rapidly shifting practical landscape. While frameworks such as the technology acceptance model (TAM), stimulus–organism–response (S–O–R), and the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) remain dominant, their appeal lies largely in their simplicity and quantifiability. These models are well-suited for predicting user adoption or engagement, but they fall short in capturing the social, cultural, and ethical complexities that now define the digital tourism experience.

What is missing is a broader theoretical lens—one that can grapple with questions of identity, representation, platform politics, and digital labor. The fast-evolving nature of

social media, where trends shift overnight and platform logics are algorithmically governed, demands more than behavioral prediction. It requires theoretical approaches that are as agile and multidimensional as the media environments they aim to explain.

Moving forward, the task is not merely to apply familiar models to new contexts, but to rethink what theory is needed for a world where tourism is co-created through images, data, and social interactions. This means integrating critical perspectives, media theory, and cultural analysis with empirical inquiry—bridging the gap between what is happening and why it matters in the platform-shaped future of tourism marketing.

6. Meta-Analysis Findings

This section reports the results of a meta-analysis synthesizing the empirical evidence on the impact of social media marketing on three core tourism outcomes: destination image, travel intention, and user engagement. A total of 38 peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and early 2025 met the inclusion criteria, each providing statistically analyzable data on the relationship between social media activity and consumer tourism behaviors.

6.1. Selection and Coding of Studies

The eligible studies presented the following characteristics: (1) reported quantitative metrics (Cohen's d, Pearson's r, or other effect sizes); (2) focused on the influence of social media content or strategy in tourism marketing contexts; (3) examined at least one of the following: perceived destination image, consumer intention to travel, or digital user engagement; and (4) used empirical methods with sample sizes $\geq$ 100 and transparent methodological procedures [60,117].

Each study's design, location, platform focus, and theoretical framework were coded for moderator analysis. Effect sizes extracted were converted to Cohen's d for consistency.

6.2. Meta-Analytic Procedure

The meta-analysis employed a random-effects model to accommodate heterogeneity across study contexts and measurement tools [118]. The key steps included calculating weighted mean effect sizes with 95% confidence intervals, assessing heterogeneity using Cochran's Q and I^2 statistics, and conducting moderator analysis based on region, platform, and methodology.

6.3. Summary of Effect Sizes

The meta-analysis aggregated data from 53 independent effect sizes across three primary outcome variables to evaluate the overall impact of social media marketing in tourism. Table 1 presents these findings.

Table 1. Overall impact of social media marketing in tourism.

Outcome Variable	k (Studies)	Mean Effect Size (Cohen's d)	95% CI	I^2 (%)	Interpretation
Destination image	22	0.61	0.48–0.74	72.1%	Moderate-to-strong effect
Travel intention	18	0.54	0.39–0.69	68.5%	Moderate effect
User engagement	13	0.43	0.29–0.57	63.4%	Small-to-moderate effect

The above results put forward considerable evidence suggesting that social media use has a significant impact on significant behavioral trends among tourists within the sector. Of the three areas under study, the impact is strongest in terms of the destination image perception (d = 0.61), thus verifying that social media sites, especially those that are

visual-based, such as Instagram and YouTube, influence people's perceptions, judgments, and sentiments about vacation spots [6,35].

An effect size of 0.61 for Cohen's d shows that consumer perceptions are substantially affected by social media-presented images of destinations. This result is significant in light of the fact that destination image is an exclusive factor in an overall scenario for consumer choice, which generally precedes and is an antecedent to behavioral intention [25]. This result further acknowledges that perception building is of prime importance in the context of online channel-based promotion in the field of tourism.

The study shows that the intent factor, which was determined to be the second most affected (d = 0.54), falls into a level that is moderate in nature. This provides evidence for the proposition that social media content consumption affects destination awareness and, at the same time, increases the prospect of planning, booking, or setting destinations for future journeys. This aligns with earlier studies showing that user-generated content and influencer narratives act as trust-enhancing mechanisms that increase travelers' willingness to act [43].

The small-to-moderate effect on user engagement (d = 0.43) reflects the more complex and variable nature of online interactions. Engagement—likes, shares, comments—is highly dependent on content format, platform algorithms, and user mood, making it harder to standardize or consistently influence. However, the fact that social media still demonstrates a statistically significant effect suggests that strategic content design can reliably boost interaction, even amid high variability [43].

The I^2 values, all exceeding 60%, indicate considerable heterogeneity, underscoring that these effects are not uniform across contexts. This justifies the need for moderator analyses (see Section 6.4) and points to the importance of cultural, technological, and methodological context in interpreting effect sizes.

In this vein, the analysis unveils that social media marketing in tourism is not just influential—it is meaningfully transformative across perception, intention, and interaction. The field must now move toward nuanced, context-aware strategies that account for variability while leveraging the consistent power of social media to shape tourist behavior.

6.4. Moderator and Heterogeneity Analysis

Substantial heterogeneity was observed across all outcomes, suggesting contextual variability across studies, as measured by high I^2 statistics (>60%) and significant Q-statistics ($p < 0.05$), indicating that variation in effect sizes was not solely attributable to sampling error. This suggests that contextual and methodological factors influence outcomes. Moderator analysis was therefore conducted across three dimensions: platform type, geographic region, and methodological design.

6.4.1. Platform Type

Studies examining Instagram and YouTube reported a notably stronger average effect on destination image (Cohen's d = 0.68) than those focused on Facebook or Twitter (d = 0.44). This supports the previous literature suggesting that visual-centric platforms are more effective at evoking emotional responses and shaping perceptions due to their immersive and aesthetic content formats [8]. Platforms optimized for visual storytelling appear to amplify persuasive power in the tourism context, especially when user-generated visuals and influencer narratives are combined.

6.4.2. Region

Research conducted in Western contexts (e.g., Europe, North America, Oceania) reported significantly higher effects on travel intention (d = 0.61) than studies from Asia, Latin America, or Africa (d = 0.38). These differences may reflect broader disparities in

digital infrastructure, social media penetration, and platform-specific adoption trends [91]. Additionally, Western markets often feature more mature content ecosystems and consumer familiarity with influencer culture, which may enhance the persuasive capacity of social media campaigns.

6.4.3. Methodology

Empirical research yielded effect sizes of higher magnitude (d = 0.63) than those found from survey-based cross-sectional designs (d = 0.49). This result highlights ongoing concerns about the limitations when using behavioral intention as a proxy for behavior. Controlled experimental designs can offer a clearer evaluation of causality and psychological impact [119] under different conditions, such as different message frames, channels, or levels of interactivity.

These findings underscore the importance of context when interpreting the impact of social media marketing in tourism. Not all platforms are equally effective, not all audiences respond similarly, and not all research designs capture influence with the same fidelity. Future studies should account for these moderators when designing interventions or interpreting marketing outcomes. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Moderator analysis results.

Moderator	Subgroup	Effect Size (Cohen's d)
Platform type	Instagram/YouTube	0.68
Platform type	Facebook/Twitter	0.44
Region	Western contexts	0.61
Region	Non-Western contexts	0.38
Methodology	Experimental	0.63
Methodology	Survey-based	0.49
0.29–0.57	63.4%	Small-to-moderate effect

The above table illustrates how the type of platform, geographic context, and research design significantly moderate the observed effects of social media marketing on tourism-related outcomes.

6.5. Publication Bias

To assess the potential for publication bias in the meta-analytic results, three complementary diagnostic techniques were employed: funnel plot visual inspection, Egger's regression test, and the trim-and-fill method. These are standard approaches recommended for evaluating the robustness of effect size estimates and detecting the overrepresentation of statistically significant results in published literature [120].

6.5.1. Funnel Plot Analysis

Visual inspection of the funnel plot showed reasonable symmetry across the three outcome variables, with datapoints clustering evenly around the central mean effect size. This pattern suggests a low likelihood of small-study effects or selective reporting, particularly for destination image and user engagement (Figure 2).

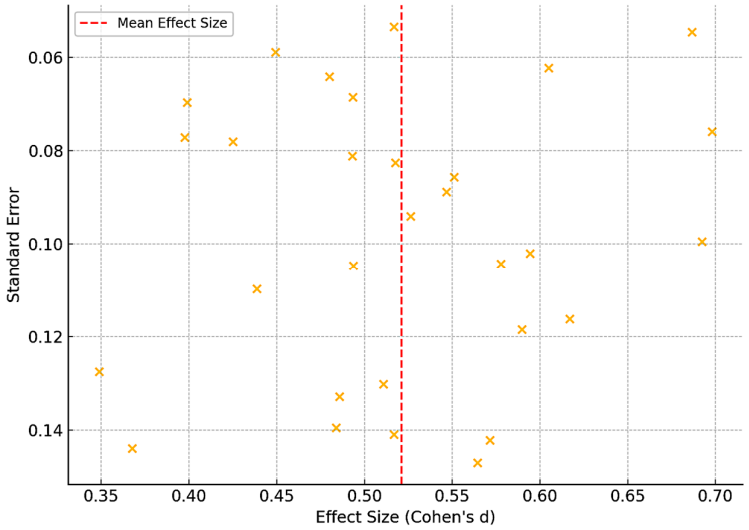


Figure 2. Funnel plot: travel intention studies.

This funnel plot visualizes the distribution of effect sizes for travel intention studies, thereby showing a reasonably symmetric pattern centered around the mean effect size, with some dispersion at higher standard errors—consistent with the minor publication bias detected in Egger's test and the trim-and-fill adjustment.

6.5.2. Egger's Regression Test

Egger's regression test (Figure 3) revealed statistical significance ($p < 0.05$) for the travel intention outcome, indicating a potential small but nontrivial publication bias in this subset of studies. This suggests that studies reporting larger effects may be more likely to be published, especially those focusing on behavioral intentions.

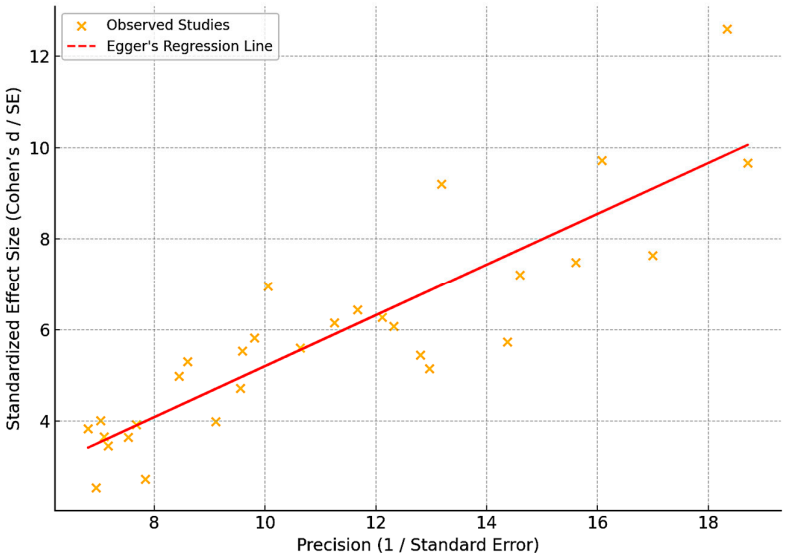


Figure 3. Funnel plot with Egger's regression line: travel intention studies.

The red line in Egger's regression plot represents the regression line predicting the standardized effect size based on study precision. The slight slope in the line suggests a modest degree of asymmetry—supporting the earlier statistical indication of potential publication bias.

6.5.3. Trim-and-Fill Adjustment

Applying the trim-and-fill method led to a reduction in the estimated effect size for travel intention from d = 0.54 to d = 0.49. While this suggests the presence of missing studies with smaller or null results, the adjusted effect size remains statistically significant and practically meaningful, affirming the robustness of the original finding.

Table 3 presents the publication bias diagnostics; these checks provide confidence in the validity of the meta-analysis, while also acknowledging a modest tendency for stronger results to be more visible in the literature. This pattern is consistent with broader trends in publication bias across the social sciences, highlighting the need for future research to report null findings and use pre-registered, transparent methodologies. Findings presented in Table 3 support the conclusion that while some degree of publication bias exists, especially for studies on travel intention, the overall findings remain robust and credible.

Table 3. Summary of publication bias diagnostics.

Test Type	Application Outcome	Implication
Funnel plot	Visual symmetry observed, no major asymmetry detected	Suggests limited small-study effects or missing studies, especially for destination image
Egger's regression test	Statistically significant for travel intention ($p < 0.05$), indicating potential bias	Implies modest publication bias in travel intention studies, with stronger results overrepresented
Trim-and-fill adjustment	Adjusted effect size for travel intention decreased from d = 0.54 to d = 0.49	Effect remains statistically and practically significant; indicates some missing smaller studies

6.6. Implications and Limitations

The findings from this study affirm that social media plays a powerful role in shaping consumer behavior from a tourism marketing perspective. It significantly influences how travelers perceive destinations and form travel intentions, validating its status as a core mechanism in contemporary marketing strategies. However, a deeper look into the literature exposes several structural and conceptual limitations that hinder the field's ability to evolve alongside the digital environment it studies.

A major concern is the emphasis given to quantitative performance metrics, such as likes, shares, or intentions expressed, at the cost of longer-term behavioral effects, such as destination loyalty, return visits, or sustained brand interaction. Without longitudinal assessments, this domain is devoid of the empirical evidence needed to investigate genuine effects across a sustained period.

A further gap is the lack of representation of newer platforms such as TikTok, BeReal, and Reddit. These sites are increasingly shaping conversations around travel, especially for younger generations; however, they are significantly underrepresented in the current corpus of tourism literature [59].

A geographical and cultural bias exists, as the majority of these studies take place in settings found in the Global North. The results are, therefore, made less applicable to other forms of alternative tourism and do not consider local cultures that operate in different ways.

Lastly, ethical concerns such as data privacy, algorithmic biases, and social implications of AI-based personalization are not adequately addressed, although these are increasingly determining content visibility and consumption-related choices [10].

To move forward, tourism marketing research should adopt more diverse methodologies, engage with underrepresented voices, and ask not just what works, but why, for whom, and at what cost.

7. Interdisciplinary Connections

Social media in tourism marketing does not exist in a disciplinary vacuum. On the contrary, the phenomena at its core—representation, influence, user behavior, platform dynamics—are deeply entangled with concepts and methods from across the social sciences, humanities, and information sciences. Yet, much of the current research remains siloed, drawing primarily from business and marketing traditions. To evolve, the field may well adopt an interdisciplinary lens.

This section highlights the key intersections with psychology, sociology, information science, communication studies, and ethics, revealing how each discipline can enrich the understanding and practice of digital tourism marketing.

7.1. Psychology: Cognition, Emotion, and Decision-Making

Tourism decisions are rarely made rationally. They are emotional, aspirational, and deeply subjective. Psychological theories—especially from consumer psychology and behavioral economics—help explain how visual stimuli, social validation, and emotional resonance shape perceptions of destinations [40,121].

The cognitive load theory, for example, can help explain why travelers gravitate toward simplified, image-rich content on such platforms as Instagram. Meanwhile, the theory of planned behavior has been used to model how attitudes formed online influence travel intentions [122,123].

However, the psychological dimensions of algorithmic influence, addiction, and dopamine-driven design in social platforms are under-researched in tourism. Future work should explore how psychological vulnerabilities are exploited or amplified by tourism marketing—especially among younger users.

7.2. Sociology: Identity, Belonging, and Social Capital

Sociological frameworks allow us to move beyond individual preferences and examine how social norms, group identity, and symbolic capital shape online travel behavior. Social media, particularly in tourism, is a site for performing identity—through check-ins, photos, and curated narratives [123].

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social capital can explain how influencers gain legitimacy and power, not just through content, but through their embeddedness in aspirational social networks. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory is frequently invoked to interpret travel content as a staged performance [124].

These insights are vital to understanding why people share travel content—not simply to inform, but to claim status, aesthetics, or lifestyle alignment. Yet, many tourism marketing studies treat content creation as purely instrumental, ignoring these deeper social functions.

7.3. Information Science: Algorithms, Data, and Platform Logic

The operation of social media platforms is governed by opaque, rapidly evolving systems of data collection, machine learning, and content curation. Information science provides the tools to critically assess how data are gathered, filtered, and monetized—shaping what users see, and therefore, how destinations are perceived.

Concepts such as algorithmic governance, platform capitalism, and data asymmetry help unpack the structural biases embedded in tourism marketing online [16]. For instance, destinations with more content or higher engagement are algorithmically favored, reinforcing digital visibility for the already-visible.

Tourism researchers need stronger technical literacy and collaboration with data scientists to better understand these mechanisms and to critically engage with the platforms shaping the field itself.

7.4. Communication and Media Studies: Narrative, Representation, and Power

Media studies offer tools to examine how tourism narratives are constructed, circulated, and consumed. Influencer content, for example, functions as soft power—disguised persuasion embedded in lifestyle storytelling [52]. Representation matters: the consistent portrayal of certain cultures as exotic, romantic, or consumable can reinforce colonial imaginaries [7].

Moreover, the shift from audience to "produser" (producer + user) changes the dynamics of branding. Tourists are not passive recipients of marketing—they are active co-creators [73], shaping brand meaning through interaction and content generation.

Yet many tourism marketing models still assume a top–down flow of influence. Media studies invite a more decentralized, discursive view of communication, acknowledging conflict, negotiation, and resistance within digital tourism discourse.

7.5. Ethics: Privacy, Equity, and Representation

The ethical dimensions of social media marketing are often treated as footnotes—if they appear at all. However, these issues are central to how the industry operates: Who gets represented? Whose data are collected? Who profits from user-generated content?

Tourism studies must engage with ethical theories from philosophy and media ethics to tackle questions of consent, digital exploitation, and representation. Influencer partnerships with indigenous communities, AI-curated recommendations that exclude low-income destinations, and the repackaging of user content without compensation all raise unresolved ethical questions.

Frameworks such as the ethics of care [125] and the digital rights theory [126] could help reframe tourism marketing not just as a commercial activity, but as a social contract between brands, platforms, and people.

7.6. Synthesis and Implications: Broader Academic Conversations

Social media in tourism marketing is inherently interdisciplinary, notwithstanding the plethora of studies that treat it as a subfield of business or communication studies. Beneath the surface of content strategies, engagement metrics, and platform analytics lie deeper questions about power, identity, technology, and ethics—questions that cannot be fully addressed through commercial or managerial frameworks alone. Social media does more than promote destinations; it shapes how places are seen, who is heard, and what types of travel are validated or excluded.

To remain relevant in a fast-changing digital landscape, researchers should move beyond the narrow lens of ROI and embrace a broader academic dialogue. This means drawing from sociology, media studies, cultural theory, psychology, and information science to unpack how platform algorithms, influencer dynamics, and user-generated content affect not just marketing performance, but cultural narratives and social realities.

Such an integrative methodology would bring together our comprehension of the frameworks, implications, and ethical issues surrounding digital tourism marketing. Through this methodology, it would facilitate deeper, culturally sensitive, and critically engaged research into the transnational dynamics shaping current traveling experiences. In effect, this shift is not just beneficial but is crucial for knowledge development according to methodological rigor and ethical responsibility in an era marked by algorithmic mediation and online exposure.

8. Sustainability Implications of Social Media and Metaverse Tourism Marketing

The transformative role of social media and emerging metaverse environments in tourism marketing goes beyond reshaping consumer behavior and destination image—it carries profound implications for sustainability. Social media-driven tourism often increases visibility but may contribute to overtourism and environmental degradation, notably through accelerated visitor flows to sensitive areas, as documented in such cases as Venice and Barcelona [46,66]. Socio-culturally, digital content frequently commodifies local identities, potentially exacerbating stereotypes or enabling authentic self-representation, depending on who controls narratives and visibility online [9,79]. Economically, while digital platforms can democratize market opportunities, they also risk deepening inequalities between digitally advanced destinations and less-connected regions, highlighting digital divides in global tourism economies [10,65]. Addressing these multifaceted sustainability implications requires responsible, interdisciplinary strategies prioritizing ethical considerations and long-term sustainable development [19].

8.1. Environmental Sustainability

Social media-driven tourism has undeniably amplified destination visibility, significantly increasing tourist flows, particularly to ecologically sensitive and previously less-accessible locations. Popular digital platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have been instrumental in this visibility boom, but they also accelerate environmental strain by rapidly intensifying visitation patterns without adequately accounting for carrying capacities or ecosystem resilience [19,46]. For instance, research indicates that locations frequently featured in visually appealing user-generated content become hotspots for tourism, thereby exacerbating ecological degradation through increased waste generation, habitat disruption, and resource overconsumption [9,41]. However, this body of literature is often limited by its predominantly descriptive nature, seldom critically examining the role played by algorithmic governance on platforms. Few studies interrogate the structural logic underpinning the algorithms that promote specific content, potentially incentivizing environmentally damaging visitation patterns [16].

Moreover, methodological weaknesses are evident in much of the current research, particularly in studies that rely heavily on cross-sectional surveys and user intention metrics rather than actual behavioral impacts over time [10]. The overemphasis on short-term behavioral intentions, often captured through self-report surveys, presents significant limitations in reliably predicting long-term environmental consequences of social media-induced tourism [1]. Thus, there remains a critical need for robust longitudinal studies utilizing mixed-method approaches that can capture sustained behaviors and subsequent ecological impacts.

In contrast, the emerging metaverse provides intriguing potential for environmental sustainability through virtual tourism experiences, theoretically mitigating physical travel demands and reducing ecological footprints [102]. Recent studies highlight possibilities for delivering virtualized access to environmentally vulnerable sites, thus protecting ecosystems by reducing direct human interference [68]. However, the literature on this is nascent and tends toward techno-optimism, frequently neglecting deeper ecological evaluations of virtual infrastructure. Importantly, maintaining expansive virtual environments requires substantial energy resources, often overlooked in early optimistic appraisals of the metaverse as environmentally benign [19]. This contradiction indicates a significant knowledge gap, underscoring the necessity for critical ecological assessments of virtual tourism practices and infrastructure.

Critically, assumptions prevalent in the tourism literature, which present digital experiences as inherently more sustainable, need re-examination. The literature often overlooks the cumulative environmental implications of increased data usage, server demands, and the broader carbon footprints of extensive digital infrastructure, resulting in an incomplete picture of the environmental trade-offs involved [16,19]. Additionally, conflicting findings exist regarding the efficacy of virtual experiences in genuinely replacing physical travel or whether they simply supplement traditional tourism behaviors, thus increasing overall energy consumption rather than decreasing it [65].

Future research and practical applications must rigorously evaluate these environmental impacts, moving beyond simplistic digital-versus-physical binaries. Systematic assessments need to incorporate interdisciplinary methodologies that rigorously quantify and critically interpret ecological impacts, balancing enhanced visibility afforded by social media platforms with the urgent imperative of ecological preservation.

8.2. Socio-Cultural Sustainability

Social media and emerging metaverse applications profoundly shape socio-cultural dynamics in tourism, generating both promising opportunities and concerning threats. Digital platforms, notably Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, actively participate in the commodification of culture, transforming rich local identities into easily consumable visuals optimized for global engagement [7,8]. Studies reveal that user-generated content, while authentic-seeming, often conforms to aesthetic standards and algorithm-driven visibility, reinforcing stereotypical portrayals of places and communities [41]. Theoretical critiques of these platforms highlight their underpinning neoliberal logics, where algorithmic biases prioritize visual appeal over genuine cultural representation, thus privileging Western-centric aesthetics and marginalizing less visually striking but culturally significant elements [16,42].

Conversely, digital platforms can also facilitate marginalized communities' active participation in global tourism discourses, enabling direct authentic self-representation without intermediaries. Recent scholarship acknowledges this potential for digital empowerment, noting examples where Indigenous communities effectively leverage social media for cultural resilience, community-driven storytelling, and asserting cultural sovereignty [9,79]. However, these positive narratives often overshadow critical scrutiny, overlooking the substantial barriers—technological, educational, linguistic, and infrastructural—that many marginalized groups face. The current literature tends to celebrate digital empowerment without sufficiently critiquing unequal power relations or the enduring digital divide, thereby painting an overly optimistic picture of democratized visibility that neglects ongoing structural inequalities [7,16].

Methodological weaknesses also permeate studies examining socio-cultural sustainability within digital tourism platforms. A majority of the existing research heavily relies on content analysis, typically assessing visual and textual representations superficially, without adequately probing creators' intentions, audience interpretations, or underlying power dynamics. Furthermore, most studies lack longitudinal approaches, offering snapshot analyses unable to capture evolving representations and their cumulative socio-cultural impacts [1,9].

The rise of immersive metaverse tourism experiences further complicates these socio-cultural dynamics. Scholars advocate the metaverse's potential to digitally preserve cultural heritage and offer immersive experiences transcending geographic limitations [67,102]. Yet, critical engagement with literature reveals that these virtual environments can paradoxically detach users from authentic socio-cultural contexts, creating simplified or sanitized versions of cultural heritage devoid of deeper historical and social complexities [19]. Such contradic-

tions expose significant theoretical assumptions underlying the optimistic techno-utopian view of the metaverse. Additionally, the literature seldom addresses ethical concerns around cultural appropriation, virtual exploitation, or the loss of contextual authenticity inherent in digitized heritage, emphasizing a gap that requires urgent attention [8,16].

Moving forward, ethically robust frameworks and inclusive practices must be developed. These frameworks should emphasize equitable representation, actively challenge algorithmic biases, and systematically incorporate community-driven narratives into tourism marketing strategies. Addressing socio-cultural sustainability on digital and virtual platforms necessitates critical interdisciplinary research that rigorously interrogates power dynamics, acknowledges structural inequalities, and prioritizes authentic representation and meaningful participation by local communities.

8.3. Economic Sustainability

Social media has profoundly reshaped tourism economics by elevating the promotional power of digitally visible destinations and businesses. According to Zeqiri, Ben Youssef, and Zahar, digital tourism platforms leveraging AI-driven personalization have improved market access and boosted SME growth in economically underserved regions [127]. However, this rosy picture masks deepening digital inequalities: destinations with high digital capital benefit disproportionately, while digitally marginalized regions struggle to compete [10]. This echoes the "urban social media inequality" concept, where content concentration mirrors underlying economic disparities [128].

Critically, much literature relies on descriptive case studies and platform analytics, without robust engagement with local economic data or longitudinal perspectives. For example, while studies show increased Airbnb bookings after Instagram exposure, there's little follow-up on whether revenues benefit the broader community or exacerbate commodification [129]. Such short-term impacts risk reinforcing extractive tourism models that favor global platforms over local economies.

The metaverse has been lauded as a democratizing force, enabling lesser-known destinations to gain global exposure without massive infrastructure investment [130]. Virtual tourism can reduce dependence on physical travel, but the assumption that it equates to inclusive economic opportunity deserves scrutiny. For one, digital divides persist: a global digital divide undermines the metaverse's reach, leaving low-income and rural destinations behind [131]. In practice, only regions with robust ICT infrastructure and digital literacy can meaningfully participate—underscoring infrastructural inequities.

Moreover, algorithmic biases in virtual platforms may further exclude non-Western or low-visibility destinations. The phenomenon of digital redlining—where platforms subtly exclude certain regions—has been documented in advertising [132] and is likely to persist in immersive tourism contexts. Yet, according to Buhalis, Leung, and Lin, the current metaverse tourism literature often neglects such structural biases, instead foregrounding commercial opportunities and user engagement benefits [102].

Conflicting evidence also arises around the economic trade-offs of virtual versus physical tourism. For instance, while some studies suggest virtual experiences can mitigate physical over-tourism and distribute economic opportunities more evenly [133], others argue that they primarily serve as marketing teasers that drive rather than reduce travel demand—potentially deepening seasonal and environmental pressures [19]. Without robust cost–benefit analyses, we lack clarity on whether metaverse tourism truly supports economic resilience or simply reshuffles the existing market dominance.

Recent scholarship on virtual reality (VR) and metaverse tourism frequently relies on novel user engagement metrics—such as immersion duration, interaction frequency, and advanced emotional analytics—to evaluate impact [134]. While these measures offer

valuable insights into short-term user experiences, they often lack substantive correlations with tangible economic outcomes, such as local employment generation, tourism revenue growth, and business sustainability [135]. This methodological limitation stems from an implicit assumption prevalent in the literature that digital engagement naturally translates into real-world economic benefits, an assumption rarely subjected to rigorous empirical testing [136].

Furthermore, theoretical claims positing the metaverse as inherently democratizing frequently overlook persistent structural inequalities, such as disparities in technological infrastructure, digital literacy, and economic capability. Van Dijk extensively critiques such techno-optimistic narratives by emphasizing how digital divides significantly restrict meaningful participation in virtual tourism platforms, particularly among economically disadvantaged regions [131].

A notable example of methodological rigor contrasting typical approaches in this field is illustrated in the evaluation of Seoul's Smart Tourism Platform. This research combined Delphi expert surveys with input–output economic analysis to rigorously quantify impacts across multiple platform dimensions, providing robust triangulation between digital metrics and measurable economic outcomes [137]. This depth of economic integration is largely absent from current VR tourism research, which tends to prioritize immediate platform analytics without robust verification against real-world economic indicators [138].

Conflicting evidence further complicates optimistic discourses. Emotional and immersive VR marketing strategies reportedly increased virtual tourism-related revenues dramatically, from approximately $50 million to $1 billion between 2017 and 2020 [139]. However, these studies seldom conduct follow-up assessments to verify whether such revenues translate into sustainable economic growth or simply represent transient consumer interest. Consequently, assertions of significant economic benefits remain inadequately substantiated, highlighting a fundamental methodological gap.

Moreover, investigations of stakeholder perceptions reveal nuanced and conflicting viewpoints on the economic viability of metaverse tourism initiatives. A recent Q-methodology analysis among stakeholders demonstrated polarized perspectives, with participants divided on whether metaverse tools truly offer greater economic benefits compared to traditional social media platforms [140]. However, this research provided limited contextual economic analysis, reducing its capacity to definitively address debates around the realistic economic impacts of VR tourism on diverse local communities.

To overcome these methodological weaknesses, future research should integrate comprehensive mixed-methods approaches that combine platform engagement analytics with rigorous economic modeling, including regional economic input–output analysis and employment impact studies. Additionally, qualitative methodologies, such as stakeholder interviews and comparative longitudinal case studies between digitally advanced and underserved destinations, are essential to critically assess assumptions regarding the democratizing potential of digital and virtual tourism platforms. Without adopting such rigorous methodologies, research risks reinforcing unexamined assumptions, leaving policymakers and tourism professionals without a reliable empirical foundation for fostering equitable and sustainable digital tourism futures.

Looking ahead, ensuring economically sustainable digital tourism demands strategic investments in digital literacy, equitable infrastructure, and governance frameworks. This includes regulatory mandates for algorithmic transparency, local revenue-sharing models in virtual tourism platforms, and public–private partnerships to support underserved destinations. Future research must go beyond technology fetishism—rigorously evaluating who truly benefits, at what cost, and under what structural constraints.

9. Identified Research Gaps

Despite notable growth in social media platforms and increased academic interest in tourism marketing, this review and meta-analysis find a field that remains conceptually fragmented, methodologically stagnant, and ethically inadequately treated. Much of what currently exists focuses on promoting direct impact from campaigns or relying on a simplistic descriptive analysis of websites, which discourages more in-depth exploration into representations, power, and long-term consequences.

9.1. Constraints of Longitudinal and Causal Research

The majority of research in this field is marked by cross-sectional studies based on self-reported intentions. While such methods offer valuable explanations of fleeting observations, they do not sufficiently represent the long-term development of perceptions, activities, or interactions associated with platforms. In particular, a void of longitudinal studies examining the extended effects of social media campaigns on destination image construction, consumer loyalty, or visitation behavior is present.

Causal inference is also rare. Few studies use experimental or quasi-experimental designs to establish actual behavior change driven by exposure to social media content. This limits the field's ability to make reliable predictions or assess the true effectiveness of strategies in complex, real-world environments.

9.2. Underrepresentation of Emerging Platforms

The research is dominated by studies on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. While these platforms remain influential, they are no longer at the forefront of discovery and engagement, particularly among younger travelers. TikTok, BeReal, Reddit, and Discord are shaping travel discourse in new and decentralized ways—yet remain critically underexplored in tourism scholarship [59].

Each of these platforms comes with distinct aesthetic norms, content dynamics, and social mechanics. Understanding how tourism narratives emerge and gain traction on them is essential for future-ready marketing strategies.

9.3. Cultural and Geographic Bias

The field is overwhelmingly skewed toward studies conducted in Western, urban, and highly digitized contexts. There is a clear underrepresentation of the Global South, Indigenous communities, rural destinations, and non-English-speaking user groups.

This bias limits generalizability and overlooks how different socioeconomic, cultural, and technological environments shape social media use and tourism decision-making. Comparative, cross-cultural research is urgently needed to diversify the epistemological base of the field [36].

9.4. Ethical and Regulatory Blind Spots

While issues such as data privacy, sponsored content disclosure, and digital labor are increasingly debated in media and platform studies, they are still treated as peripheral in tourism marketing research.

There is a dearth of work exploring the ethical implications of influencer partnerships, particularly in vulnerable or marginalized destinations. Similarly, the use of AI-driven personalization tools raises important concerns around transparency, manipulation, and consumer autonomy—areas that remain largely unexamined [10].

The paucity of studies embracing normative or critical frameworks in much of the literature reflects a tendency to prioritize industry impact over social responsibility. There-

fore, research agendas should change their focus if the field is to align with broader debates about sustainable and ethical tourism.

9.5. Theoretical Stagnation

As shown in Section 5, the field remains over-reliant on a narrow set of theories—TAM, UGT, and S–O–R—that prioritize individual-level behavioral prediction over structural analysis or critical insight. These frameworks offer limited tools for engaging with platform power, algorithmic bias, identity construction, or narrative politics.

The so-called theoretical stagnation calls for conceptual innovation. The integration of media studies, sociology, and ethics into tourism marketing research could unlock new questions and methods, helping the field grow beyond transactional metrics into deeper analysis of meaning, culture, and impact.

9.6. Synthesis and Implications: Bridging the Gaps

The social media scholarship in the tourism field has identified significant weaknesses, suggesting severe inadequacies in research paradigms in this field, research questions, and methodological choice. In many cases, previous research has seen social media as just a content dissemination channel or a list of quantifiable metrics, failing to capture its nature as a complex system consisting of various interrelated aspects that affect tourist experiences considerably. Such discrepancies raise concerns about the discipline's potential for being overshadowed by technology under research.

Overcoming these shortcomings requires something beyond applying new strategies or rearranging the existing datasets. This requires a radical overhaul that includes an ethical commitment, extensive critical analysis, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Scholars need to take their research beyond the focus on campaign effectiveness and investigate how various platform logics, narrative cultures, and algorithmic forms shape co-production in tourism. In addition, we need to analyze not just social media functions, but their effect in recasting visibility, value, and agency in the context of tourism.

As the field of tourism increasingly embraces digital technologies, crosses geographical borders, and is brokered by private platforms, so too must the academic conversation. This requires moving beyond business-centric models to capture the complexity of the 21st-century travel—marked not only by its global and mobile qualities but also by its data-driven, cultural, identity-constituting, and power-laden qualities. Only in this way can scholarly research remain relevant, influential, and socially responsible.

10. Future Research Agenda

To overcome structural limitations and embedded biases in the existing studies, research into social media in the context of tourism marketing has an urgent need to innovate through the use of new methodologies, develop platform literacy, cultivate ethical awareness, and encourage interdisciplinarity. The following five priorities outline a roadmap for developing a more robust, inclusive, and future-ready body of knowledge.

10.1. Embrace Longitudinal and Behavioral Research

Research in the field of tourism marketing traditionally rested upon cross-sectional surveys and intention-measuring indicators, including expressed intention or plans for travel. These methods are effective at capturing short-term attitudes yet offer little insight into how social media affects sustainable behavior, loyalty, or participative engagement after a visit [36,119]. At a time when website use remains active throughout daily routines, this methodological deficiency has become significantly critical.

To tackle this problem, methodologies need to prioritize longitudinal and behavioral designs to allow monitoring across multiple timeframes and platforms. These methodolo-

gies would allow for probing into relationships between content engagement, emotional reactions, decision-making processes, and memories after travel. The example of tracking a tourist's path from initial motivation generated by exposure to TikTok to onward sharing after a journey gives a clearer image of the mechanisms at work.

New methods exist but are not widely used. The experience sampling method (ESM) provides real-time feedback on users' experiences; A/B testing assesses various message-framing versions and effects; meanwhile, digital ethnography reveals culturally distinctive behaviors and norms intrinsic to specific platforms [70]. Behavioral data—such as click-stream data, geolocation, and eye-tracking technology—can supplement or substitute self-report data and thus provide a fuller picture of user engagement.

These tools enable a more evolved appreciation for causality, together with allowing for flexible and recursive research methods more in touch with the current digital marketing paradigms. For scholarly inquiry within tourism marketing to remain up to date, it must move beyond traditional measures and embrace methods more sensitive to subtleties in the actual digital behavior.

Further suggestions for future research explicitly linked to sustainability dimensions, in the framework of embracing longitudinal and behavioral research, include the following:

- Longitudinal studies should explicitly measure how sustained social media interactions influence environmentally responsible behaviors post-visit, such as the adoption of eco-friendly practices inspired by digital content.
- Behavioral research could track how digital marketing campaigns affect tourist behaviors related to socio-cultural sustainability, including promoting respectful engagement with local communities and traditions.
- Future studies might use digital ethnography to investigate how digital interactions and community feedback on platforms influence sustained economic support for local businesses and sustainable consumption patterns among travelers.

10.2. Platform-Specific and Multiplatform Analyses

Social media has evolved from a hierarchical structure representing a few leading platforms to a more nonlinear, fluid setup where every platform demonstrates different demographics, cultural contexts, and technological profiles. Most studies related to tourism marketing, however, are heavily focused on Facebook and Instagram, thus leaving behind newer platforms such as TikTok, Reddit, Discord, Pinterest, and BeReal [59,110]. The general grouping of these platforms obscures our knowledge concerning how mechanisms driving influence function throughout disparate digital contexts.

There is a need for a more refined, platform-specific approach. TikTok rewards short-form, music-focused content, riding micro-viral waves. Reddit encourages reflective conversation according to user community norms. YouTube focuses on substantial content and authenticity, while Discord enables ongoing engagement through community interaction. These underlying differences have a major impact on engagement, credibility, and persuasiveness.

Travelers do not normally use a single platform for their planning. Their preparation processes usually cross several digital ecosystems—starting with inspiration from TikTok, validation from Instagram, information-seeking from YouTube, and booking through Google, TripAdvisor, or specialized travel websites. To analyze any one platform alone does not take into consideration this mental integration across platforms.

Future studies must utilize multiple methodologies, including API scraping, digital ethnography, and tracking travel behavior [6,39]. Scholars must factor in algorithmic gatekeeping dynamics and temporal considerations related to platform interaction. Rather than trying to determine the best platform, however, researchers need to investigate how

travelers move across and combine multiple platforms to build meaning, develop trust, and develop intent; this constitutes the first step toward understanding the holistic nature of digital influence in contemporary tourism.

Further suggestions for future research explicitly linked to sustainability dimensions, in the framework of platform-specific and multiplatform analyses, include the following:

- Explore how platform-specific content strategies can be optimized to promote environmentally sustainable travel behaviors, such as eco-friendly tourism practices and reduced carbon footprint choices.
- Investigate how community norms and interactions on such platforms as Reddit and Discord influence socio-cultural sustainability, particularly in shaping attitudes toward responsible and respectful engagement with local communities.
- Conduct multiplatform analyses to determine how travelers' integrated digital experiences affect economic sustainability, including support for local businesses, equitable distribution of tourism benefits, and sustainable tourism spending patterns.

10.3. Cross-Cultural, Inclusive, and Context-Sensitive Approaches

Tourism marketing studies are mainly derived from studies within wealthy, Western cultures and urban areas with broad Internet penetration, high levels of digital literacy, and use of social media mainly for entertainment purposes rather than subsistence-oriented ones. This can be seen not only in sample methods applied, but also in functional considerations within limits for globalizability, along with ethical guidelines informing practice [1,36].

As stories more and more mirror how digital media affect global tourism, a critical need arises for studies that intersect, bridge, and situate different cultures. Instead of applying a Western-centric focus, scholars need to investigate how political contexts, infrastructure, and cultural values uniquely affect the construction, reception, and impact of tourism stories. Critical yet neglected questions are related to how "authenticity" can be understood within a postcolonial travel blog, as well as how Indigenous tour operators use social media to promote cultural sovereignty.

Use and access are extremely varied. In some places, Facebook is a required infrastructure; in others, use is heavily determined by censorship, language, or platform literacy. Researchers must investigate how travelers interpret and navigate social media in low-bandwidth, post-colonial, or politically controlled contexts.

Inclusion also entails amplifying underrepresented voices—Global South, Indigenous, rural, and non-English-speaking users—who are traditionally spoken for, instead of being heard from [16,66]. To surpass this digital colonialism, we need participatory decolonial methods that favor local co-authorship and narrative agency.

Future studies must include the full range of digital experiences, either by undertaking platform analyses in their native languages or in collaboration with content creators who have otherwise been excluded. The future shift in the marketing of tourism is more than just digital engagement; it has cultural, ethical, and deeply inclusive ramifications.

Further suggestions for future research explicitly linked to sustainability dimensions, in the framework of cross-cultural, inclusive, and context-sensitive approaches, include the following:

- Investigate how culturally diverse digital marketing approaches can promote environmental sustainability by encouraging eco-friendly tourism behaviors sensitive to local ecological contexts.
- Conduct comparative cross-cultural research on how digital platforms can be leveraged to enhance socio-cultural sustainability by empowering marginalized communities and preserving Indigenous knowledge and traditions.

- Examine the role digital inclusivity and local content creation play in supporting economic sustainability, particularly in rural, Global South, and Indigenous communities, fostering equitable economic benefits and reducing economic inequalities.

10.4. Ethical and Critical Technology Studies in Tourism

The expanded use of artificial intelligence, algorithmic personalization, and predictive analytics in tourism marketing calls for a critical analysis of their political, social, and ethical implications. Although media studies and analytical data studies have long been critical of surveillance capitalism and algorithmic discrimination, tourism research has embraced digitalization with a relatively low extent of critical assessment [10,126].

The use of non-transparent algorithmic systems by the tourism industry raises critical questions: How do profit-driven systems with a lack of clarity affect destination suggestions? What kind of creators' content gets more exposure, and whose gets eroded? What are the consequences of travelers being segmented for emotive targeting or affected by co-ops promoting emotive resonance? These interactions have far-reaching impacts for fairness, representation, and consumer agency.

These novel strategies, such as real-time biometric identification, variable pricing models, and algorithmic suppression, deserve close analysis. Dynamic pricing can worsen and deepen economic inequalities, whereas secret emotional profiling risks compromising traditional ethical norms. Censorship regimes raise critical questions about limits to informational equality.

Scholarly endeavors in today's world require large-scale transformations by incorporating paradigms from digital ethics, science studies, and algorithmic studies [47,64]. Platforms need to be conceptualized not just as tools but, more importantly, as having agency in themselves because they impart agency to others. They can thus shape how visibility, value, and power intersect.

Future studies need to explore the manifestations of systemic discrimination linked with artificial intelligence in tourism, how immersive technologies redefine narratives in culture, and how surveillance through moderation affects global visibility. Encouraging cooperation between legal experts, ethicists, computer experts, and affected communities is essential to creating a fair and open digital tourism economy. Without leadership informed by ethics, there are substantial chances for innovation to turn into exploitation.

Further suggestions for future research explicitly linked to sustainability dimensions, in the framework of ethical and critical technology studies in tourism, include the following:

- Investigate the ethical implications of algorithm-driven marketing in promoting environmentally sustainable tourism practices, exploring whether and how algorithms can transparently foster eco-conscious behavior among tourists.
- Conduct research on the socio-cultural impacts of algorithmic personalization, analyzing how targeted content affects cultural representation, respect for diversity, and authentic experiences in sustainable tourism contexts.
- Examine economic sustainability by analyzing the fairness and equitability of algorithmic pricing strategies, considering their impact on local economies and communities, and proposing ethical frameworks to mitigate potential economic exploitation.

10.5. Interdisciplinary Theoretical Expansion

Studies related to tourism promotion are usually found within behavioral and pragmatic models, namely the technology acceptance model (TAM) and the stimulus–organism–response (S–O–R) model. Although these models have been effective in predicting adoption and use, they can potentially oversimplify digital interaction to input–output relationships,

thus limiting our ability to investigate symbolic, political, and cultural meanings embedded in tourism media [9,52].

To develop the field, scholars need to expand their analytical toolkit through the incorporation of theories from across media studies, sociology, cultural studies, and platform studies. These analytical approaches allow for more nuanced examinations of representation, power, performativity, and meaning-making processes in digital tourism spaces.

These dramaturgical principles are especially useful when applied to analyzing impression management and self-presentations in curated travel blogs, stories, and social media profiles [71,141]. Likewise, Bourdieu's social capital theory helps one understand how authority is produced by the influencer and how symbolic capital is translated into economic returns [7]. These two conceptual lenses move our attention away from surface-level consequences to the underlying social structures and cultural reasoning driving digital performances.

Other strong paradigms include the feminist theory, which examines gendered labor dynamics embedded within the influencer culture; the critical race theory, which examines processes of exclusion and inclusion in terms of particular identities in destination branding; and the postcolonial theory, which considers how tourism narratives reinscribe or complicate dominant global power relationships.

Using numerous critical and interdisciplinary approaches enables tourism scholars to move beyond questions of efficacy, enabling them to explore meanings, stakeholders, and dimensions previously neglected in practice contexts. The expansion of theoretical horizons is necessary to respond to the complexity of digital existence and enable research not only focused on the future but also reflective in nature.

Further suggestions for future research explicitly linked to sustainability dimensions, in the framework of interdisciplinary theoretical expansion, include the following:

- Integrate interdisciplinary theories to explore how digital platforms shape and promote environmental sustainability narratives, particularly how cultural representations influence travelers' environmentally responsible behavior.
- Apply the feminist and critical race theories to analyze the socio-cultural sustainability dimensions of digital tourism, including equitable representation, inclusive content creation, and the reduction of digital marginalization in tourism promotion.
- Leverage the postcolonial theory to critically investigate economic sustainability, addressing how digital media narratives influence local community empowerment, equitable distribution of tourism revenues, and economic independence in formerly colonized or marginalized regions.

10.6. Synthesis and Implications: Research Priorities

To be effective within the fast-changing digital environment of today's society, it is essential that tourism marketing studies undergo change in their methodological, conceptual, as well as ethical dynamics. Old paradigms reliant upon linear causality, detailed segmentation at the consumer level, and standardized platform strategies are inadequate to handle the realities modern digital tourists encounter. With platforms developing faster than ever before—often outpacing related timescales for the release of associated scholarly findings—it is essential for studies to demonstrate flexibility, rapid responsiveness, and a sense of responsiveness matching the technologies they seek to investigate.

Future longitudinal studies need to move beyond measuring attitudes or intentions; they need to track changes in behavior, experiences, and loyalty over longer timeframes. This need highlights the use of real-time analytics, ongoing tracking, and dynamic ethnographies in tracking travelers throughout the full length of online engagement, from initial inspiration through post-travel considerations, including related sharing behaviors.

Of equal importance is this turn toward context-sensitive research, where one recognizes and engages with multiple cultural, social, and infrastructural contexts, thus avoiding Western generalizations. The effective practices in cities like Jakarta or Nairobi are bound to be different from those in cities like New York or Paris not only in form, but also in function, usefulness, and communal use.

An effective and evolving discipline must also be adapted to specific platforms. It is critical to engage meaningfully with the algorithms, functionalities, and language styles predominant across different digital spaces—this may require examining virality metrics on TikTok, probing trust mechanisms within Reddit, or researching fleeting story formats used on BeReal.

Above all, the field must be more critically conscious. Scholarship must not only analyze what works in tourism promotion, but what it entrenches—social disparities, information asymmetries, precarious labor, and environmental footprints. Authenticity and attention commodification must be questioned, not simply exploited.

Today, tourism scholars can no longer be observers; they are co-creators in this digital environment. Meeting this challenge requires developing scholarly work that can be empirical and imaginative, critical and constructive, yet at times quick and reflective. It can only be achieved this way if the industry is to move toward more responsible, ethical, and efficient practices in global marketing.

11. Conclusions

Social media have significantly transformed the tourism marketing landscape, evolving from traditional promotional models to dynamic, interactive, and collaborative frameworks shaped by tourists, influencers, digital platforms, and algorithmic processes. This study explicitly aimed to (1) critically synthesize existing academic literature on social media in tourism marketing from 2015 to 2025 and (2) quantitatively assess social media's impacts on core marketing outcomes such as destination image, travel intention, and user engagement through a meta-analysis. These objectives have been systematically addressed, providing an integrated, comprehensive, and critical assessment of the current state of the field; they also provide a state-of-the-art assessment of the field and lay the foundation for a more rigorous, inclusive, and ethically grounded research agenda.

The meta-analysis demonstrated that social media significantly and positively impacts essential tourism marketing outcomes, reinforcing its importance in shaping destination perceptions, influencing travel intentions, and enhancing user engagement. However, these quantitative signals are only part of the story. Complementing these empirical results, the critical qualitative analysis uncovered deeper systemic issues, including theoretical stagnation, methodological limitations, platform biases, and insufficient exploration of ethical dimensions. These findings underscore an essential divergence between short-term managerial priorities and longer-term, systemic understanding [142,143].

Key themes dominating the literature—such as influencer marketing, user-generated content, AI-driven personalization, and crisis communication—reflect the current industry practices but often lack critical and broader contextual analyses. Conversely, important areas, including emerging and alternative platforms, cross-cultural differences, and the sociotechnical dynamics of algorithmic mediation, remain inadequately explored in mainstream tourism research.

Specifically, this study has identified and explicitly articulated five critical research gaps: (1) the absence of longitudinal and causal research designs; (2) limited focus on emerging or alternative platforms beyond mainstream channels; (3) geographic biases with an overrepresentation of Western and urban contexts; (4) insufficient attention to ethical and governance issues related to data privacy and platform accountability; and (5) reliance

on outdated or reductive theoretical frameworks. These gaps persist primarily due to a predominant focus on immediate outcomes and a lack of interdisciplinary collaboration, highlighting a significant opportunity for future research.

Addressing practical implications, our findings offer clear, actionable recommendations for tourism professionals, marketing managers, and policymakers:

- For tourism professionals and marketing managers, there is a need to diversify digital strategies, actively incorporating emerging and less dominant social media platforms to mitigate risks associated with over-reliance on mainstream platforms. Strategic investments should focus on enhancing digital literacy and data-driven insights to navigate algorithmic complexities and biases effectively.
- For policymakers, robust ethical frameworks and governance policies must be established to guide responsible digital marketing practices, emphasizing consumer privacy, transparent use of algorithms, and fairness in digital representation.

Critically, the study underscores the complexity of power dynamics inherent in digital platforms, where algorithmic biases may unintentionally reinforce inequalities and cultural stereotypes. The dominance of Western-centric narratives and urban contexts in existing research perpetuates a narrow perspective that marginalizes diverse global experiences [144]. Additionally, the overemphasis on short-term, measurable outcomes like engagement metrics overlooks deeper issues such as sustainability, cultural authenticity, and the nuanced implications of algorithm-driven decision-making in tourism practices [145]. Researchers must therefore reframe social media marketing not just as a tool to be optimized, but as a terrain of negotiation—where visibility, voice, and value are constantly contested.

This study contributes explicitly to addressing identified gaps by emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary approaches, combining insights from psychology, sociology, media studies, data science, and digital ethics. It advocates for more rigorous methodological practices, including longitudinal designs and deeper qualitative explorations of the sociotechnical interplay shaping digital tourism experiences. Further critical analyses are necessary to understand how platform governance and algorithmic mechanisms influence which narratives gain prominence, whose voices are marginalized, and how digital inequalities may affect tourism development and stakeholder empowerment.

The critical examination and meta-analysis presented here demonstrate not only the profound transformative power of social media and the emerging metaverse in tourism marketing but also underscore urgent sustainability considerations across environmental, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions. Tourism researchers, marketers, and policymakers must embrace sustainability as a central analytical lens—emphasizing responsible management of digital visibility, ethical cultural representation, equitable economic participation, and mindful environmental stewardship. Future studies and practices should prioritize interdisciplinary, ethically conscious, and context-sensitive frameworks, shaping digital tourism marketing toward genuinely sustainable futures.

In conclusion, our research strongly advocates reframing tourism marketing not just as a domain of strategic optimization, but as an arena of continuous negotiation involving diverse stakeholders and complex technological dynamics. Empirical evidence presented throughout this paper supports this reframing, highlighting the critical need for integrative, ethically grounded, and theoretically robust approaches. Future research and practical initiatives must align closely with these multidimensional challenges, helping tourism marketing not just adapt to technology, but proactively shape a responsible and inclusive digital tourism landscape. In short, tourism marketing research must catch up not just with technology, but with the world it is helping to shape.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, E.C., A.G. and I.S.; methodology, E.C., A.G. and I.S.; validation, E.C., A.G. and I.S.; formal analysis, E.C., A.G. and I.S.; resources, E.C., A.G. and I.S.; data curation, E.C., A.G. and I.S.; writing—original draft preparation, E.C., A.G. and I.S.; writing—review and editing, E.C., A.G. and I.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Data sharing is not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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