

# MODELING THE PATHWAY TO VISIT INTENTION: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF TOURIST ENGAGEMENT

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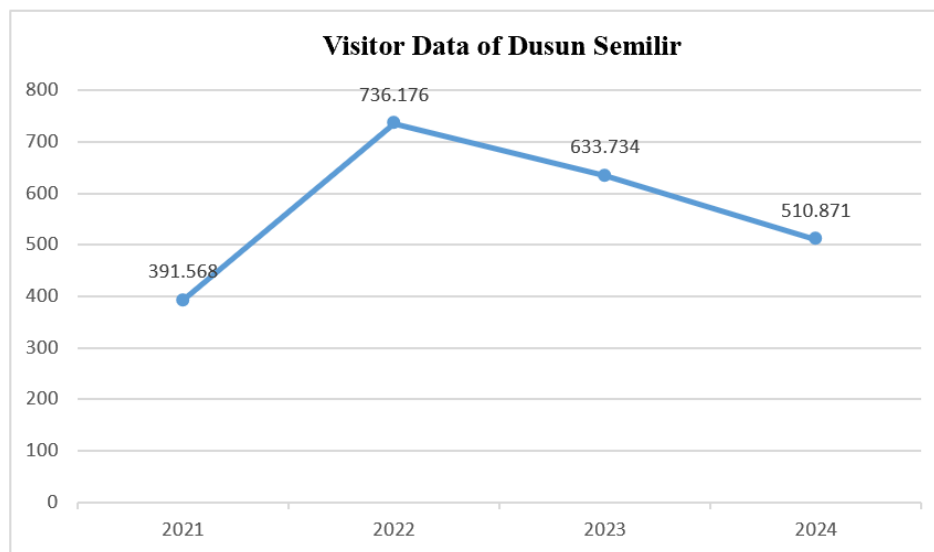
**Abstract.** The digital era has changed the pattern of tourist interaction with destinations through social media, making tourist engagement a strategic factor in building sustainable emotional, cognitive, and behavioral relationships. This study analyzes the role of tourist engagement as a mediating variable in the relationship between social media marketing, destination image, and visit intention in Dusun Semilir tourism, Central Java. Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior and Customer Engagement Theory, this study applies an explanatory quantitative approach with PLS-SEM analysis of 100 respondents selected purposively. The results show that social media marketing and destination image have a significant positive effect on tourist engagement, which then increases visit intention. In addition, tourist engagement acts as a mediating mechanism that strengthens the relationship between tourist perceptions and their visit intention. These findings contribute theoretically by expanding the understanding of the psychological role of tourist engagement in the context of digital tourism marketing, while also offering practical implications for destination managers to design more interactive social media communication strategies and build a strong destination image to increase tourist loyalty and visit intention.

**Keywords:** *tourist engagement, visit intention, social media marketing, destination image, digital tourism, mediation analysis*

## Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly changed tourism marketing strategies around the world. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are now the dominant channels for disseminating destination promotions, shaping visual expectations, and building initial perceptions among tourists (Liu et al., 2024). This phenomenon is known as Social Media Marketing (SMM), which is a marketing strategy that utilizes digital content to attract, engage, and retain the audience's attention (Koivulehto, 2017). In Indonesia, SMM has been widely adopted by various destinations, but its effectiveness in increasing visitor interest still varies, especially in secondary destinations that have to compete with established destinations such as Bali and Yogyakarta. In addition to SMM, another factor that greatly determines tourist behavior is Destination Image (DI). Destination Image is formed through cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions, which in turn influence Visit Intention and word-of-mouth recommendations (Debbagh and Azouaoui, 2021). However, social media often only highlights the visual aesthetic side, while fundamental aspects such as service quality, hospitality, or cultural value are often neglected (Dong et al., 2023). This imbalance makes the Destination Image that is formed less able to sustain Visit Intention. This phenomenon is clearly seen in the thematic destination of Dusun Semilir in Central Java. Although its official Instagram and TikTok accounts have millions of followers, the level of interaction and engagement of visitors is still relatively low. This condition is also reflected in the trend of tourist visits, which has tended to fluctuate in recent years. In 2022, Dusun Semilir

recorded its highest number of visitors at 736,176 people, but this figure decreased to 510,871 visitors in 2024. Nevertheless, this destination still ranks second in terms of the highest number of visits in Semarang Regency, indicating that its popularity remains quite high despite facing challenges in maintaining consistent tourist interest.



*Figure 1. Visitor data of Dusun Semilir 2021-2024.*

In this context, Tourist Engagement (TE) becomes an important aspect that bridges the relationship between promotional exposure and actual tourist behavior. TE is understood as a multidimensional construct that involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of tourists towards a destination (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Echtner and Ritchie, 1991). High engagement has been proven to strengthen the relationship between Destination Image and Visit Intention, encourage loyalty, increase word-of-mouth promotion, and increase the likelihood of actual visits (Rasul, Santini, et al., 2024). Unfortunately, despite its potential, the role of TE as a mediating variable in tourism studies, especially in Indonesia, has rarely been explored. In addition, previous research findings on the direct influence of SMM and DI on Visit Intention still show inconsistencies. Some studies found a positive and significant relationship (Gomes et al., 2023; Nguyen and Hsu, 2022), while others reported insignificant effects (Benou et al., 2022; Rasmana, 2021). These differing results confirm the existence of an empirical gap that needs to be further explained by considering mediating variables such as Tourist Engagement.

Based on these issues, this study focuses on analyzing the mediating role of Tourist Engagement in the relationship between Social Media Marketing, Destination Image, and Visit Intention. Dusun Semilir was chosen as the research location due to its popularity, intensive use of social media, and fluctuating visitor trends, making it relevant for study. By integrating the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and Customer Engagement Theory (Brodie et al., 2011), this study is expected to contribute theoretically by clarifying the psychological pathways linking digital marketing strategies with Visit Intention. Practically, the findings of this study also offer insights for destination managers in designing more effective engagement-based promotional strategies in the digital era.

## ***Literature review***

### ***Theoretical foundation***

This study is based on two main theories, namely the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Customer Engagement Theory. TPB (Ajzen, 1991) explains that behavioral intention is the main determinant of actual behavior, shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Han et al., 2010). In the context of tourism, Visit Intention reflects the readiness and willingness of tourists to make a visit, which is influenced by experience, perception, and digital information. Meanwhile, Customer Engagement Theory (Brodie et al., 2011) emphasizes that individuals' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement with a brand or experience can strengthen the psychological relationship between consumers and the entities involved. By integrating these two theories, this study views Tourist Engagement as a psychological mechanism that links the influence of Social Media Marketing and Destination Image on Visit Intention.

### ***Social media marketing***

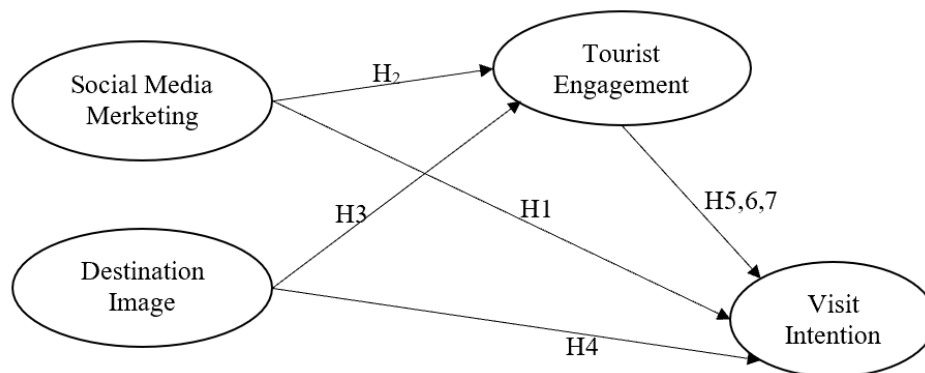
Social Media Marketing (SMM) is a strategic approach in digital marketing that utilizes interactive platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to build two-way relationships between destinations and tourists. SMM enables destinations to create interesting, relevant, and shareable content to shape positive perceptions of the travel experience (Koivulehto, 2017). In tourism, SMM plays an important role in fostering social interaction, increasing emotional engagement, and encouraging visitation decisions through the dimensions of entertainment, interactivity, personalization, trends, and electronic word-of-mouth (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Cheung et al., 2019). Empirical findings show that SMM can strengthen destination image and influence visit intention (Gomes et al., 2023; Gaffar et al., 2022). Hypothesis 1 (H1): Social Media Marketing has a positive effect on Visit Intention; Hypothesis 2 (H2): Social Media Marketing has a positive effect on Tourist Engagement.

### ***Destination image***

Destination Image (DI) describes tourists' cognitive and affective perceptions of a destination, which are formed through experiences, information, and visual exposure from various sources, including social media (Beerli and Martín, 2004; Echtner and Ritchie, 1991). A positive DI creates a high-value perception of the destination, fosters trust, and motivates tourists to visit (Debbagh and Azouaoui, 2021; Tasci et al., 2007). However, the image built through social media is often aesthetic and superficial because it focuses on visual beauty rather than cultural meaning or service quality (Dong et al., 2023). In this context, tourist engagement is needed to transform visual perceptions into deeper emotional connections with the destination. Therefore, DI is believed to not only directly influence Visit Intention, but also through Tourist Engagement as a mediator that connects perceptions with tourist behavioral intentions. Hypothesis 3 (H3): Destination Image has a positive effect on Tourist Engagement; Hypothesis 4 (H4): Destination Image has a positive effect on Visit Intention.

### ***Tourist engagement***

Tourist Engagement (TE) is a manifestation of tourists' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement with a destination, which is reflected through active participation in interacting, commenting, sharing, or creating digital content related to travel experiences (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Brodie et al., 2011). TE not only indicates the level of tourist interest but also serves as an indicator of psychological attachment that can influence satisfaction, loyalty, and the intention to revisit (So et al., 2016). Previous research confirms that high levels of tourist engagement strengthen the relationship between destination perception and actual behavior through increased emotional bonds (Rasul et al., 2024). In the context of digital tourism, TE serves as a link between the effectiveness of social media strategies and the formation of tourist visit intentions. Hypothesis 5 (H5): Tourist Engagement positively influences Visit Intention; Hypothesis 6 (H6): Tourist Engagement mediates the influence of Social Media Marketing on Visit Intention; Hypothesis 7 (H7): Tourist Engagement mediates the influence of Destination Image on Visit Intention.



*Figure 2. Conceptual framework.*

## Materials and Methods

This study uses an explanatory quantitative research approach to examine the relationship between Social Media Marketing (SMM), Destination Image (DI), Tourist Engagement (TE), and Visit Intention (VI). Primary data were collected through a closed-ended questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale consisting of 26 statements: five SMM indicators (Koivulehto, 2017), eleven DI indicators (Khan et al., 2017), five TE indicators (Rasul et al., 2024) and three VI indicators (Han et al., 2010). The questionnaire was distributed directly to domestic visitors to Dusun Semilir, Central Java. The sampling technique used purposive sampling with the criteria that respondents had visited Dusun Semilir at least once and followed the destination's official social media accounts. Of the 120 questionnaires collected, 100 data were declared valid and suitable for analysis. All respondents were guaranteed data confidentiality and anonymity of their answers. The data were analyzed using SPSS 26 and Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.1 through two stages: (1) evaluation of the measurement model (validity and reliability), and (2) evaluation of the structural model (path coefficients,  $R^2$ ,  $f^2$ , and mediation test). PLS was chosen because it is suitable for complex models with relatively small sample sizes and is widely used in tourism marketing research (Ghozali, 2021; Hair, 2014).

## Results and Discussion

Respondent demographic data were processed using SPSS 26 and summarized systematically as shown in *Table 1*. The demographic profile of respondents shows that the majority are female (73%), with a predominance of those aged 21–30 years. Most respondents had a bachelor's degree (S1) as their highest level of education, worked in the private sector, and had a monthly income in the range of IDR 2,500,000–IDR 5,000,000. These characteristics reflect the typical young middle-class tourist who actively uses social media and is the main target of digital destination promotion.

**Table 1.** Profile of visitors at Dusun Semilir.

| Dimension  | Category                | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|------------|-------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Gender     | Male                    | 27        | 27.0           |
|            | Female                  | 73        | 73.0           |
| Age        | 17–25 years             | 48        | 48.0           |
|            | 25–30 years             | 27        | 27.0           |
|            | > 30 years              | 25        | 25.0           |
| Education  | Doctor (PhD)            | 1         | 1.0            |
|            | Masters (MSc/MA)        | 9         | 9.0            |
|            | Bachelors(BA/BSc)       | 57        | 57.0           |
|            | Diploma                 | 3         | 3.0            |
|            | High School             | 30        | 30.0           |
| Occupation | Private Employee        | 34        | 34.0           |
|            | Government Employee     | 8         | 8.0            |
|            | Students                | 28        | 28.0           |
|            | Entrepreneur            | 30        | 30.0           |
| Income     | < Rp 2,000,000          | 25        | 25.0           |
|            | Rp 2,000,000–5,000,000  | 46        | 46.0           |
|            | Rp 5,000,000–10,000,000 | 12        | 12.0           |
|            | > Rp 10,000,000         | 17        | 17.0           |

### Validity and reliability

In this study, the outer model assessment in SmartPLS was conducted to ensure that the measurement of all constructs was both reliable and valid. Following Hair (2014), composite reliability (CR) is preferred over Cronbach's alpha as a more precise indicator of internal consistency. A CR value above 0.70 is generally considered sufficient, reflecting that the construct's indicators consistently measure the intended latent variable. All constructs in this study exceeded this threshold, confirming the reliability of the measurement items. Convergent validity was assessed using both factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). Indicators with loadings above 0.70 demonstrate strong correlations with their respective constructs, while an AVE greater than 0.50 indicates that more than half of the variance in the indicators is captured by the latent variable rather than by measurement error. In this study, all indicators met these criteria, showing that the constructs effectively represent the underlying theoretical concepts, and therefore, no items were removed during the evaluation. The detailed results of factor loadings, CR, and AVE are presented in *Table 2* and *Table 3*, offering a comprehensive overview of the measurement model's properties. Overall, these findings indicate that the measurement model is both reliable and valid, providing a robust foundation for the subsequent structural model analysis to examine the hypothesized relationships between the study variables.

**Table 2. Discriminant validity.**

| Variabel                     | Indikator                                      | Outer Loading | CR    |
|------------------------------|--|---------------|-------|
| Social Media Marketing (SMM) | Entertainment                                  | 0,813         | 0.905 |
|                              | Customization                                  | 0,749         |       |
|                              | Interaction 1                                  | 0,732         |       |
|                              | Interaction 2                                  | 0,802         |       |
|                              | Electronic Word of Mouth (E-WOM)               | 0,769         |       |
|                              | Trendiness 1                                   | 0,861         |       |
|                              | Trendiness 2                                   | 0,852         |       |
| Destination Image (DI)       | Quality of general infrastructure              | 0,777         | 0.933 |
|                              | Beautiful scenery and natural attractions      | 0,717         |       |
|                              | Interesting cultural attractions               | 0,778         |       |
|                              | Standard hygiene and cleanliness               | 0,703         |       |
|                              | Local people are interesting and friendly      | 0,750         |       |
|                              | Offer suitable accommodations                  | 0,766         |       |
|                              | Offer appealing local food                     | 0,834         |       |
|                              | Unpleasant-pleasant                            | 0,837         |       |
|                              | Sleepy-arousing                                | 0,721         |       |
|                              | Distressing-relaxing                           | 0,737         |       |
|                              | Gloomy-exciting                                | 0,854         |       |
|                              | Tourist Engagement (TE)                        | Attention     |       |
| Enthusiasm                   |  | 0,846         |       |
| Absorption                   |  | 0,798         |       |
| Identification               |  | 0,743         |       |
| Social Interaction           |  | 0,839         |       |
| Visit Intention (VI)         | I plan to visit the destination                | 0,962         | 0.938 |
|                              | I am willing to revisit in the future          | 0,964         |       |
|                              | I will make an effort to visit the destination | 0,947         |       |

**Table 3. Average Variant Extracted (AVE).**

| Variabel               | Average Variance Extracted (AVE) |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Social Media Marketing | 0.633                            |
| Destination Image      | 0.599                            |
| Tourist Engagemnet     | 0.609                            |
| Visit Intention        | 0.697                            |

### Hypotheses testing

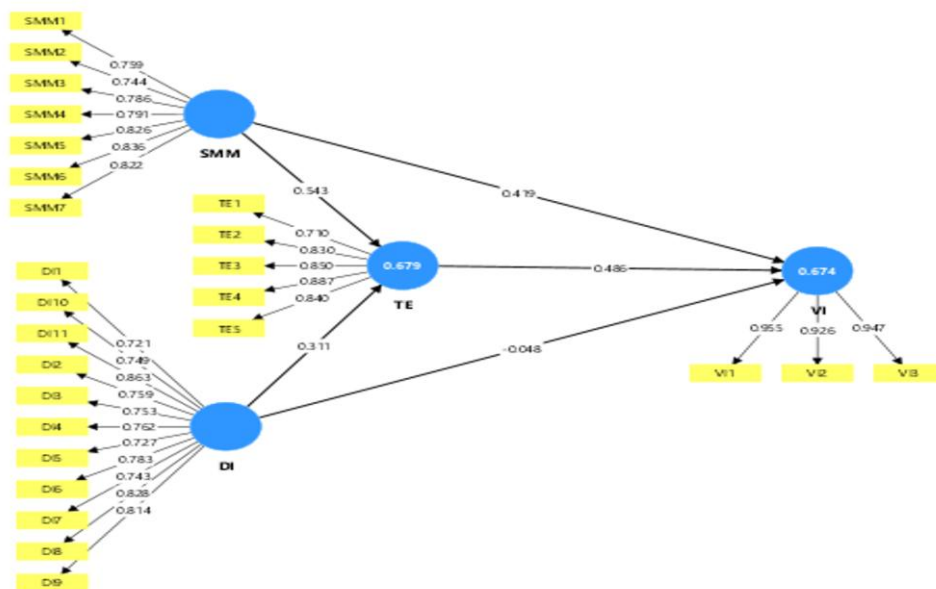
The results of hypothesis testing reveal several important relationships among the study variables. First, Destination Image (DI) was found to have a positive and significant effect on Tourist Engagement (TE), with a path coefficient of  $\beta = 0.311$ ,  $t = 2.625$ , and  $p = 0.004$ , indicating that higher perceptions of destination image enhance the engagement of tourists with the destination. However, the direct effect of DI on Visit Intention (VI) was not significant ( $\beta = -0.048$ ,  $t = 0.354$ ,  $p = 0.362$ ), suggesting that while the destination image influences engagement, it does not directly translate into an increased intention to visit. Meanwhile, Social Media Marketing (SMM) demonstrated a positive and significant impact on both TE ( $\beta = 0.543$ ,  $t = 4.732$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and VI ( $\beta = 0.419$ ,  $t = 2.475$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ). This indicates that effective social media marketing not only increases tourist engagement but also directly enhances tourists' intention to visit. In addition, Tourist Engagement (TE) itself has a significant positive effect on VI ( $\beta = 0.486$ ,  $t = 3.170$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), highlighting that engagement plays a crucial role in motivating tourists to plan their visits.

Furthermore, the mediation analysis demonstrates the pivotal function of TE as a mediating mechanism. Specifically, TE mediates the effect of DI on VI ( $\beta = 0.151$ ,  $t = 2.222$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ) and also mediates the effect of SMM on VI ( $\beta = 0.264$ ,  $t = 2.729$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ), confirming that the influence of both destination image and social media marketing on visit intention occurs indirectly through tourist engagement. These

findings underscore the importance of TE as a central psychological and behavioral mechanism that translates perceptions and marketing efforts into actual visit intentions, providing both theoretical and practical implications for destination management and digital marketing strategies.

**Table 4.** Summary of hypotheses testing.

| Category      | Original Sample (O) | T Statistics ( O/STDEV ) | P Values | Decision  |
|---------------|---------------------|--------------------------|----------|-----------|
| DI → TE       | 0.311               | 2.625                    | 0.004    | Supported |
| DI → VI       | -0.048              | 0.354                    | 0.362    | Rejected  |
| SMM → TE      | 0.543               | 4.732                    | 0.000    | Supported |
| SMM → VI      | 0.419               | 2.475                    | 0.007    | Supported |
| TE → VI       | 0.486               | 3.170                    | 0.000    | Supported |
| DI → TE → VI  | 0.151               | 2.222                    | 0.013    | Supported |
| SMM → TE → VI | 0.264               | 2.729                    | 0.005    | Supported |



**Figure 3.** Path analysis and bootstrapping.

## Results and Discussion

The results of this study confirm that Tourist Engagement (TE) plays a central role in bridging the influence of Social Media Marketing (SMM) and Destination Image (DI) on Visit Intention (VI) among tourists in Dusun Semilir, Semarang Regency. Analysis using the Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach shows that SMM and DI have a significant positive effect on TE, while TE significantly increases VI. However, DI does not have a significant direct effect on VI, but must go through tourist engagement as a full mediating variable. Conversely, SMM has both a direct and indirect effect on VI through TE, indicating partial mediation. These findings indicate that the effectiveness of social media marketing strategies and destination image in encouraging tourist visit intention is highly dependent on the level of psychological and behavioral engagement of visitors with the destination.

Theoretically, these results reinforce the integration between the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Customer Engagement Theory. Within the TPB framework, visit intention is formed through a psychological process that begins with attitude, subjective

norms, and perceived behavioral control. However, the results of this study show that this relationship is reinforced through emotional and cognitive engagement as described by customer engagement theory. SMM and DI act as external stimuli that shape initial perceptions (attitudinal beliefs), while TE acts as an internal mechanism that transforms perceptions into commitment and behavioral intention. Thus, TE is not merely a statistical mediator, but a psychological bridge that explains how digital exposure and destination image can result in actual actions in the form of tourist visits.

Empirically, the significant influence of SMM on VI shows that attractive, informative, and interactive social media content can shape tourists' positive perceptions of destinations. This is in line with the findings of Gomes et al. (2023), Gaffar et al (2022) as well as Koivulehto (2017), which confirm that social media-based marketing strategies play an important role in building tourists' behavioral intentions. In the context of Dusun Semilir, these results can be explained by the dominance of young respondents (aged 17–30 years) who are very active in using social media. Exposure to visual content, short videos, and other visitors' experiences on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok has proven effective in increasing the desire to visit. This shows that social media functions not only as a promotional tool but also as a channel for digital experiences that influence tourists' decision-making processes.

Furthermore, the results of the study also show that SMM has a positive effect on TE. This means that tourists' interactions with destination social media content can increase their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. Content that displays authentic experiences, provides space for participation, and encourages two-way interaction can build closeness between tourists and destinations. These findings reinforce Brodie et al. (2011) view that engagement arises from meaningful interactions between customers and brands, which in the context of tourism translates into relationships between tourists and destinations.

Meanwhile, the positive influence of DI on TE shows that a good destination image, both cognitively (knowledge of facilities, uniqueness, and accessibility) and affectively (emotions and enjoyment felt), can increase tourist engagement. Tourists who have a positive perception of the atmosphere, aesthetics, and attractiveness of Dusun Semilir tend to be more active in interacting with destination content, posting on social media, and giving positive reviews. However, the results showing that DI does not directly influence VI indicate that a positive image alone is not enough to encourage visitation intent without active engagement. In other words, destination image serves as an initial perception that needs to be translated through engagement in order to drive real action. This is in line with the research by Dong et al. (2023), which confirms that destination image often only has a significant effect on intention if tourists are emotionally and socially involved with the destination.

Furthermore, the positive relationship between TE and VI shows that tourist engagement is the main driver of visit intention. Tourists who are cognitively (thinking about and seeking information about the destination), affectively (feeling emotionally close), and behaviorally (participating in promotional activities or digital interactions) engaged will have a greater desire to visit the destination in person. These results reinforce the findings that engagement is a strong predictor in the formation of behavioral intent, as engagement creates a more personal and sustainable relationship between tourists and destinations. Practically, these findings have important implications for the managers of Dusun Semilir and similar destinations. Marketing strategies that focus only on improving visual image need to be directed towards

forming interactive relationships with tourists. Destination managers can increase engagement through the creation of participatory content such as photo contests, hashtag campaigns, tourist experience videos, or interactive live sessions on social media. In addition, storytelling-based content that highlights cultural values and authentic experiences will strengthen the emotional closeness of tourists. Local governments can also play a role by supporting digital literacy training for local tourism actors and providing communication infrastructure that supports technology-based tourism experiences.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the development of a conceptual model that integrates planned behavior theory with customer engagement theory. This integration provides a more comprehensive understanding that behavioral intentions in the context of digital tourism are not only the result of rational factors such as attitudes and perceived control, but are also influenced by emotional and interactive dimensions shaped through engagement. Thus, this model can be a reference for further research in examining tourist behavior in an increasingly competitive digital era. Overall, the results of this study show that the success of a destination no longer depends solely on the strength of its image or the intensity of digital promotion, but on the destination's ability to create a digital experience that invites active participation from tourists. Tourist Engagement has proven to be a psychological bridge that transforms social media exposure and destination image into actual visit intentions. Therefore, modern tourism marketing strategies need to place engagement at the core of marketing communication and destination management, especially in the context of the younger generation who are the main drivers of tourism behavior in the digital era.

## Conclusion

This study confirms that Tourist Engagement plays a key role in bridging the influence of Social Media Marketing and Destination Image on Visit Intention among tourists visiting Dusun Semilir. The analysis results show that SMM and DI have a significant positive effect on TE, and TE significantly increases VI. However, DI does not have a direct effect on VI, but rather through TE as a full mediator, while SMM has a direct and indirect effect on VI through TE. These findings prove that tourist visit intention is not only influenced by digital promotion or image perception, but also by the level of tourists' emotional and participatory engagement with the destination. Theoretically, this study enriches the Theory of Planned Behavior and Customer Engagement Theory by emphasizing the psychological role of tourist engagement in shaping behavioral intention in the era of digital marketing.

This study has several limitations that need to be considered. First, the relatively limited number of respondents (100 people) and the focus on only one tourist destination, namely Dusun Semilir, limits the generalization of the results to other destinations. Second, the data was collected through a questionnaire with a self-reported approach, which has the potential to cause respondent perception bias. Third, this study uses a cross-sectional design, so it cannot explain changes in the dynamics of engagement and visit intention over a certain period of time. Future research is recommended to expand the coverage area by involving various types of destinations (natural, cultural, man-made) to strengthen the external validity of the model. A longitudinal approach can be used to observe how engagement and visit intention develop over time. In addition, future researchers can add new variables such as e-trust,

perceived value, or destination experience quality to understand the more complex psychological mechanisms in the formation of visit intention. Comparative studies between generations (e.g., Gen Z and Millennials) are also important to see how the characteristics of digital natives influence the relationship between SMM, DI, TE, and VI in the context of modern tourism.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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