

# Mapping the Influence of Digital Marketing on Travel Decisions: A Qualitative Exploration of Student Perceptions in Jayapura

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to map the influence of digital marketing through social media on the travel decision-making processes of university students in Jayapura. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, data were collected through open-ended surveys administered to 23 students from three universities, selected via purposive sampling. Thematic analysis revealed that social media influences travel decisions through three sequential phases: inspiration through aesthetic visual content on Instagram Reels and TikTok, validation via practical information and user reviews, and the final decision shaped by contextual factors such as distance and accessibility. The findings also identified three pillars of persuasive content: authentic visuals, practical information, and personal experience narratives. Furthermore, a hierarchy of source credibility was mapped, indicating that friends and travel bloggers are the most trusted sources, while celebrities and anonymous accounts are viewed with skepticism regarding their objectivity. This study provides theoretical contributions by enriching digital tourism decision-making models with an Eastern Indonesian contextual perspective, alongside practical implications for tourism stakeholders in developing authentic and trust-based content strategies.

**Keywords:** digital marketing, travel decisions, university students, thematic analysis, social media

## 1. Introduction

In the current digital era, social media has emerged as the core of destination marketing and a primary source of inspiration for prospective travelers (Sigala, 2016). The younger generation, particularly university students, no longer rely on conventional brochures or advertisements as their main reference. Instead, they immerse themselves in the digital realm such as exploring posts, stories, and recommendations from fellow users to generate ideas, plan trips, and form expectations about a place (Verma et al., 2022). This shift has fundamentally transformed travel decision-making from a linear process into a dynamic, non-linear journey filled with interactions, exploration, and digital influence at every stage (Choi et al., 2022).

However, although numerous studies have addressed the impact of social media on tourism, several research gaps remain. Previous studies, such as those by Widarmanti & Nugraha (2019) and Melvern et al. (2025) on domestic tourist behavior in Indonesia, have often adopted quantitative approaches and focused on mass tourism contexts or established destinations like Bali or Yogyakarta. Consequently, they have seldom captured the in-depth, qualitative nature of how digital-native students actually experience these processes. Furthermore, limited research has specifically explored what content is considered persuasive by students in unique regions such as Jayapura. Most theories and models still rely on Western contexts (Pop et al., 2022) or other developed Asian countries, which may not fully represent the perceptions and behaviors of youth in Eastern Indonesia, where socio-cultural contexts and tourism development differ significantly (Pelly & Baiduri, 2020). Therefore, a qualitative approach is essential not only to answer "what" the influences are, but also to further explore "how" and "why" these processes operate within a distinct setting (Patton, 2015).

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Based on this background, this study aims to deeply investigate how social media influences the travel decision-making process of university students in Jayapura. We pose two core research questions: first, how does digital marketing—specifically through social media—affect each stage students undergo, from inspiration to final decision? Second, what factors in digital content do they find most persuasive and influential in their considerations? By focusing on personal experiences and subjective perceptions of students, our objective is to map these rich dynamics without attempting to generalize, but rather to contextually understand their complexities.

The significance of this study lies in two main contributions: theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the findings will enrich the body of knowledge in digital tourism marketing by offering perspectives from a rarely explored context—Eastern Indonesia—while refining existing models with distinctive cultural and generational nuances. Practically, the results can serve as a valuable guide for destination managers, tourism businesses, and local governments in Jayapura to design more effective, authentic, and targeted communication strategies. By understanding the digital language and motivations of young people, stakeholders can better deliver content that not only attracts but also builds trust and encourages sustainable visits.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The Role of Social Media in Travel Decision-Making**

Social media has profoundly transformed the modern tourism industry by creating new dynamics in information exchange and decision-making processes. According to Almeida-Santana et al. (2020), digital platforms have evolved into complex ecosystems characterized by multi-directional interactions among destination marketers, influencers, and potential tourists. This transformation is particularly evident among Millennials and Generation Z, who utilize social media as their primary source for destination exploration. Abramovic (2018) revealed that 52% of Facebook users in the United States acknowledge that their friends' photos inspire their travel choices, demonstrating social media's value as a powerful tool for attracting potential travelers. Recent surveys in the United States further indicate that younger generations increasingly rely on social media for travel inspiration, with 52% of Gen Z and 46% of Millennials citing social media as their main source of travel inspiration, while older generations still predominantly depend on friends and family for recommendations (Hines, 2025).

The role of social media becomes increasingly crucial considering the characteristic behavior of younger generations who tend to conduct extensive research before making travel decisions. Choi et al. (2022) found that university students typically spend 5-7 hours exploring various social media platforms before finalizing their destination choices. This process extends beyond mere information gathering to include emotional engagement through visual content and personal narratives. Recent studies indicate that content capable of evoking positive emotions has three times greater impact on visit intention compared to factual information alone.

### **2.2. Tourism Decision-Making Stages and Social Media Influence**

Conventional tourism decision-making models have undergone significant disruption with the emergence of social media. Widarmanti & Nugraha (2019) identified that modern decision-making processes are circular and iterative, where potential tourists can simultaneously engage in multiple stages. During the inspiration stage, visual content on Instagram and TikTok serves as the primary trigger, with higher engagement rates compared to other platforms. Subsequently, in the planning stage, users migrate to platforms offering more comprehensive information such as YouTube and travel blogs.

The evaluation stage represents a critical point where user-generated content and online reviews play a determining role. Recent research demonstrates that Indonesian university students consider reviews from fellow travelers more trustworthy than official promotions (Melvern et al., 2025). This phenomenon indicates a power shift from traditional marketers to the wisdom of the crowd. However, existing research remains concentrated on developed destinations like Bali and Yogyakarta, thus inadequately representing dynamics in emerging destinations such as Jayapura, which possesses unique socio-cultural characteristics (Ekaristi et al., 2023; Ismail, 2020).

### **2.3. Persuasive Factors in Digital Marketing Content**

The effectiveness of digital marketing content in tourism contexts is significantly influenced by its ability to establish authentic connections with audiences. Pop et al. (2022) underlined that authenticity as a key factor substantially contributing to young tourists' purchase intentions, including those of university students. Content presenting genuine experiences that avoid overt advertisement characteristics demonstrates higher persuasive power. Visual appeal emerges as another crucial factor, where high-quality visuals can enhance engagement through social media platform algorithms.

Social proof and influencer endorsement have become increasingly dominant persuasion mechanisms, particularly among university students. For instance, Melvern et al. (2025) found that social media marketing significantly influences travel interest among communities in Yogyakarta Special Region, as visually appealing short video content successfully promoted the region's culinary uniqueness. Viral short-form content can generate strong curiosity and interest. As Julita (2022) found, the reason Instagram food bloggers' content has a major impact on Millennials' interest in culinary tourism is its inherent persuasive strength, which comes from the audience finding the content highly relatable and trustworthy. However, the effectiveness of these persuasive factors is strongly influenced by cultural context. Previous research

further demonstrates that content featuring local wisdom and cultural elements, or at least possessing distinct characteristics, performs better than generic content (Pelly & Baiduri, 2020).

#### **2.4. Research Gaps and Jayapura's Specific Context**

Existing literature on digital tourism marketing continues to demonstrate significant geographical and methodological disparities. Most research concentrates on Western contexts, major Asian destinations, or Western Indonesian regions with more advanced infrastructure, facilities, and development concepts (Alhally, 2025; Carlisle et al., 2023; Saputra, 2023; Sharma & Sharma, 2024). Meanwhile, regions like Eastern Indonesia remain underrepresented in academic discourse. This gap is exacerbated by the dominance of quantitative approaches that often fail to capture the nuances and complexity of decision-making processes within specific cultural contexts.

Contextualization becomes crucial considering Jayapura's unique characteristics as a destination rich in cultural heritage yet still in the stage of tourism infrastructure development (Behabol et al., 2017; Indrawan et al., 2019). Patton (2015) emphasizes the importance of qualitative approaches for understanding phenomena deeply embedded within particular cultural contexts. This research aims to address this gap by conducting an in-depth exploration of Jayapura university students' perceptions and experiences. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for developing more inclusive and culturally sensitive theoretical frameworks.

### **3. Methods**

This study employed a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of university students in Jayapura regarding the influence of social media marketing on their travel decisions. The qualitative approach was selected for its suitability in exploring "how" and "why" phenomena occur, and its capacity to uncover the subjective meanings embedded in participants' experiences (Creswell, 2009; Malterud, 2001). This approach was specifically chosen to richly explore how students interpret and experience the social media-influenced travel decision-making process.

The study population consisted of active students from three private universities in Jayapura: Universitas Yapis Papua, Universitas Ottow Geisler, and Universitas Sains dan Teknologi Jayapura (USTJ). The research initially targeted a sample of 30 participants, selected with consideration for reaching the point of saturation in qualitative research—the stage where collected data begins to show repetition and no longer yields new insights (Sechelski & Onwuegbuzie, 2019). In this study, data saturation was achieved with 23 participants, as their responses ceased to provide new perspectives and tended to echo previous participants' expressions. Purposive sampling was utilized with the following criteria: (1) active students who had undertaken leisure travel within the past 12 months; (2) regular users of at least one social media platform (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, or Facebook) for seeking travel inspiration or information; and (3) willing-ness to participate in the study through a qualitative survey.

The research instrument was a qualitative survey based on open-ended questions, developed according to the research questions and literature review. The survey comprised two main sections: (1) questions related to the decision-making process (e.g., "Describe your experience when you were first inspired to visit a tourist destination through social media"); and (2) questions concerning persuasive factors in digital content (e.g., "What three elements make social media content convincing enough for you to visit a place?"). Data collection commenced with the online distribution of the survey via Google Forms, disseminated through student affairs units at each university. Participants who provided informed consent completed the survey, which took approximately 20–30 minutes. Data were collected during the period of June to August 2025.

To ensure validity in this qualitative research, method triangulation was conducted by comparing findings across the three universities to identify consistent patterns. Additionally, member checking was performed by presenting preliminary findings to a subset of participants to verify the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations (Decrop, 1999). Reliability was maintained through an audit trail that documented the entire research process from data collection and transcription to analysis, ensuring the process is traceable and verifiable by other researchers (Dikko, 2016).

Data from the qualitative survey were analyzed using thematic analysis, adopting the steps outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) and Walters (2016): 1) Familiarization with the data: repeated reading of all survey responses to understand their depth and context; 2) Initial coding: labeling and grouping data relevant to the research questions; 3) Searching for themes: identifying patterns emerging from the codes to form preliminary themes; 4) Reviewing themes: ensuring the themes were consistent with the complete dataset; 5) Defining and naming themes: articulating the essence of each theme; and 6) Reporting findings: presenting the analyzed results in a structured narrative. The analysis process was supported by qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 12, to manage codes and themes.

Furthermore, this study received ethical approval from the research ethics committee of Universitas Yapis Papua. On the initial page of the qualitative survey, all participants were presented with an informed consent form explaining the purpose of research, data confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded by using identification codes (e.g., Participant 01 = P01; Female/Male = F/M) instead of real names, and by removing any personal information that could identify participants. Data were stored in encrypted format and accessed only by the principal researcher.

## 4. Result and Discussion

This study involved 23 students from three private universities in Jayapura: Universitas Yapis Papua, Universitas Ottow Geisler, and Universitas Sains dan Teknologi Jayapura (USTJ). The participant composition consisted of 13 females (56.52%) and 10 males (43.48%), aged between 18-24 years. All participants were active social media users, with an average usage frequency of 3-5 hours per day. The most predominantly used platforms were Instagram (91.3%), TikTok (86.9%), and YouTube (73.9%). Furthermore, 21 participants (91.3%) reported having no fixed income, while one participant (4.3%) had a fixed income and another (4.3%) had irregular income.

Although participant responses varied considerably, the data analysis revealed several major themes illustrating the influence of digital marketing (social media) on students' travel decisions in Jayapura. These themes include: 1) Travel decision-making phases: from inspiration to validation; and 2) Persuasive elements in digital content and hierarchy of source credibility.

### 4.1. Travel Decision-Making Phases: From Inspiration to Validation

The research findings reveal that social media influences students' travel decisions through three sequential yet dynamic phases.

#### 4.1.1. Phase 1: Inspiration Through Aesthetic Visual Content

In the initial phase, social media functions as an inspiration trigger through appealing and easily consumable visual content. Instagram Reels and TikTok emerge as the primary platforms in this stage, where short visual content showcasing natural beauty serves as the initial interest catalyst. The majority of participants indicated that attractive visuals with aesthetic value significantly enhance attention capture. As one participant expressed:

*"I was scrolling through reels when a short video about a tourist spot with incredibly beautiful scenery appeared... it made me curious." (P9)*

This finding aligns with research by Verma et al. (2022) and Tsani et al. (2025), which states that short-form video content possesses strong capabilities in capturing young generations' attention within brief timeframes. However, the distinctive aspect in Jayapura's context is participants' tendency to be attracted not only to visual beauty but also to storytelling elements within the content.

#### 4.1.2. Phase 2: Validation Through Practical Information and Reviews

Following initial interest, participants transition to more in-depth information seeking. This validation phase becomes critical in building confidence to visit. Primary activities include searching for reviews, examining tagged photos, and exploring travel blogger accounts for practical information.

*"From the caption and location tag, I tried to find out more, then found several travel blogger accounts creating short review content. There, they didn't just show the location's beauty but also provided route information, entrance tickets, and tips..." (P7)*

This phenomenon confirms findings by Melvern et al. (2025) and Purba & Irwansyah (2022) regarding the importance of user-generated content in the destination evaluation process. However, this study reveals a new nuance where Jayapura students demonstrate a strong tendency to verify promotional content authenticity through tagged photos from ordinary visitors, considered more representative of actual conditions.

#### 4.1.3. Phase 3: Final Decision Influenced by Contextual Factors

The final decision to visit depends not only on social media information but also considers practical and personal factors.

*"If the information I find shows that the place is interesting, easily accessible, and meets expectations, then I become more confident to visit. Conversely, if many reviews highlight obstacles... then I might reconsider." (P7)*

This finding enriches conventional consumer decision journey models by emphasizing the importance of local contextual factors like travel distance and accessibility within Papua's unique geographical context.

### 4.2. Persuasive Elements in Digital Content and Hierarchy of Source Credibility

Beyond understanding the decision-making process, this research also attempts to identify specific elements in digital content considered most persuasive by participants, while examining the credibility levels of various travel recommendation sources on social media. The findings reveal that not all content possesses equal persuasive power. There are key elements that make content not only attractive but also capable of convincing students to actually visit a destination. Furthermore, the credibility of content creators

becomes a determining factor equally important as the content itself. This analysis converges on two main aspects: three pillars of convincing content and a hierarchy of source credibility mapping participants' trust levels toward various types of social media accounts.

#### 4.2.1. Pillars of Convincing Content

Within the sub-theme of convincing content pillars, analysis identifies three key elements that make digital content persuasive for students. *First*, authentic visuals. Several participants explained they become more convinced by content displaying beauty without excessive editing. This creates an impression of originality without manipulation. *Second*, practical information. For participants, content influences their decisions when complemented with supplementary destination elements like routes, costs, and facilities. This provides input and consideration for travel planning. *Third*, personal experience narratives. Content incorporating the creator's personal travel stories provides real context. For participants, experiences lived and felt by content creators (not merely destination promotion) add elements of trustworthy, factual, and accountable information. These findings support Pop et al. (2022) research on the importance of authenticity in digital content, but with special emphasis on practical information needs potentially related to infrastructure challenges in Eastern Indonesia.

#### 4.2.2. Hierarchy of Source Credibility

Beyond persuasive content elements, data analysis reveals that recommendation sources play an extremely crucial role in building participant trust. Not all social media accounts are considered equally credible. The findings successfully map a clear credibility hierarchy, illustrating students' trust levels toward various account types, from most trusted to those questioned for objectivity. This hierarchy emphasizes not only expertise aspect but more importantly factors of honesty, authenticity, and absence of hidden commercial motives. *First*, most trusted sources like ordinary friends and travel bloggers. Many participants indicated that friends usually describe experiences as they are, without exaggeration, while travel bloggers generally provide detailed and practical information, like travel routes, cost estimates, facilities, and visit tips. *Second*, questioned sources like celebrity influencers and anonymous accounts. These sources tend to be distrusted due to suspected separate agendas like paid endorsements for promotion, rather than the destination's actual quality. *Third*, basic information sources like official government accounts. For participants, these sources seem too formal and impersonal. Additionally, honest reviews about destination shortcomings are rarely found. These findings align with previous studies by Pop et al. (2022) and Junaedi et al. (2025) regarding the importance of authenticity in digital content, while providing contextual understanding about trust dynamics in social media travel recommendations within Eastern Indonesia's specific context.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the research findings presented, it can be concluded that social media plays a crucial role in influencing the travel decisions of university students in Jayapura through a dynamic and complex process. This process comprises three interconnected main phases: commencing with the inspiration phase through aesthetic visual content on Instagram Reels and TikTok platforms, progressing to the validation phase through practical information searches and user reviews, and culminating in the decision-making phase influenced not only by social media content but also by contextual factors such as distance, accessibility, and personal considerations. Furthermore, persuasive elements in digital content and source credibility emerge as primary determinants in building trust and influencing student decision-making. The three content pillars considered most convincing include authentic visuals, reliable practical information, and honest personal experience narratives. Meanwhile, the hierarchy of source credibility demonstrates that ordinary friends and travel bloggers occupy the top positions as the most trusted sources, followed by official government accounts as basic information sources, while celebrity influencers and anonymous accounts tend to be questioned for objectivity due to underlying commercial motives.

These research findings offer several significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study enriches digital tourism marketing literature by providing perspectives from the under-researched Eastern Indonesian context, while refining existing tourism decision-making models through the incorporation of distinctive contextual and cultural elements. This research also confirms and expands source credibility theory by demonstrating that within Papua's socio-cultural context, factors of honesty and personal relationship proximity can surpass expertise factors in trust building. Practically, these findings can serve as guidelines for destination managers, tourism businesses, and local governments in Jayapura to design more effective and targeted communication strategies. The presentation of authentic, informative, and personal content, coupled with collaboration with trusted sources such as local travel bloggers and micro-influencers, can enhance the appeal and credibility of tourism destination promotions.

Despite providing meaningful contributions, this research acknowledges several limitations. First, the findings are contextual and cannot be broadly generalized due to the focus on students in Jayapura with specific socio-demographic characteristics. Second, the use of qualitative methods with a relatively small sample, despite reaching saturation point, limits the capacity for statistical analysis or more in-depth comparisons. Third, the collected data relied on participants' subjective responses through written surveys, thus constraining the exploration of deeper dynamics compared to direct interview methods.

Based on these limitations, future research is recommended to expand geographical scope by involving participants from various regions in Eastern Indonesia to test finding consistency and identify contextual variations. Mixed-methods approaches could also be adopted to combine qualitative data depth with quantitative data generalization capabilities. Further exploration regarding the role of local culture and indigenous wisdom values in shaping digital perceptions and preferences also presents a potential area for investigation. Additionally, future research could examine the influence of emerging social media platforms and the evolution of youth digital behavior in the post-pandemic era to maintain relevance with contemporary developments.

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