

# CONTENT DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA DYNAMICS: THE ROLE OF QUALITY AND ENGAGEMENT IN SHAPING TOURIST TRUST AND BEHAVIOR IN SAUDI ARABIA

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine the mechanisms through which social media content quality enhances tourists' trust and consequently influences behavioral intentions in the emerging Saudi Arabian tourism sector in line with Saudi Vision 2030. Based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Social Exchange Theory (SET), the study hypothesizes that content attributes such as information usefulness, aesthetic appeal, and creator interactivity represent key antecedents of trust. A quantitative approach was used, analyzing data from 550 domestic tourists using structural equation modeling. The results show that trust accounts for 38% of the total influence of content quality on tourist behavior. Information utility (expertise) emerged to be the strongest predictor of trust, surpassing aesthetic appeal, highlighting Saudi tourists' preference for relevant and culturally relevant information. The analysis also revealed significant differences in audience demographics and diversity across platforms, with participants placing more trust in family-friendly content, Instagram users prioritizing visual aesthetics, while TikTok audiences valued concise and interactive videos. This research highlights the need for tourism marketers to prioritize authentic, quality content and meaningful digital engagement over influencer visibility. Strategic recommendations include creating personalized content for each platform, transparent engagement methods, and collaborating with niche influencers to build trust and drive the country's digital tourism economy.

**Keywords:** digital engagement, Elaboration Likelihood Model, Social Exchange Theory, tourist's preference, Saudi Vision 2030

## INTRODUCTION

The digital landscape has radically changed the decision-making process in the tourism industry, where user-generated content and recommendations from other users are becoming crucial. In this ecosystem, the quality of content provided by digital content creators, in addition to its inherent credibility, is a key driver of consumer behavior. The ambitious Saudi Vision 2030 has driven unprecedented growth in the tourism sector, requiring a deeper understanding of the digital factors that influence domestic tourism trends (Hassouna et al., 2020). While influencers' credibility is a key driver, the specific content attributes that build trust and drive action in this unique market remain unexplored.

The digital landscape has radically transformed the decision-making process in the tourism industry, where user-generated content and recommendations from other users play a pivotal role. In this ecosystem, the quality of the content provided by digital creators, in addition to their own reputation, is a key factor in consumer behavior. Saudi Arabia's ambitious Vision 2030 has driven unprecedented growth in the tourism sector, requiring a deeper understanding of the digital factors influencing domestic tourism destinations (Hassouna et al., 2020). While influencer credibility is recognized as a key factor, the specific content characteristics that build trust and drive action in this unique market remain unexplored.

The digital landscape has radically changed the decision-making process in the tourism industry, with user-generated content and user recommendations playing a key role. In this ecosystem, the quality of content provided by digital content creators is a key factor in shaping their reputation and even consumer behavior. Saudi Arabia's ambitious Vision 2030 has led to unprecedented growth in the tourism sector, requiring a deep understanding of the digital factors influencing local tourism destinations (Hassouna et al., 2020). While influencers' credibility is a key factor, the specific content characteristics that drive trust and engagement in this unique market remain largely unexplored.

This study goes beyond general credibility assessments to examine the components of content that resonate with Saudi tourists. We argue that trust is not limited to who is delivering the message, but more importantly, what is being delivered and how. Based on the explanatory probability model (Petit and Cacioppo, 1986), this study examines two persuasion pathways: a central one based on high-quality media content and a peripheral one based on aesthetic appeal and attractive presentation. In addition, social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) helps to understand how tourists' trust is a mutual response to perceived value and risk reduction in their digital interactions.

The main objective is to analyze the relationship between individual dimensions of content quality (information, aesthetics, and interactivity) and tourist behavior, considering trust as a central mediating mechanism. This approach fills an important gap in the literature, where influencer marketing has often been considered holistically, without analyzing the content itself. For policymakers and marketers driving tourism diversification in Saudi Arabia, these findings are critical to developing targeted, effective, and culturally relevant digital marketing strategies that leverage content quality to build sustainable trust and achieve Vision 2030.

Based on the proposed framework and research, the hypotheses are based on the central argument that the nature and quality of influencer social media content significantly influences audience perceptions and decision-making in tourism. Specifically, both informational and aesthetic content are expected to build trust by enhancing credibility and appeal, while interactivity is expected to deepen engagement and strengthen connections with followers. Trust, in turn, plays a key role in shaping tourism behavior, acting not only as a direct predictor but also as an intermediate mechanism through which content quality and interaction influence behavioral outcomes. In this regard, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1: Informational content quality will have a positive effect on trust in SMIs.

H2: Aesthetic content quality will have a positive effect on trust in SMIs.

H3: Interactivity will have a positive effect on trust in SMIs.

H4: Trust will have a positive effect on tourist behavior.

H5: Trust mediates the relationship between (a) informational content, (b) aesthetic content, (c) interactivity, and tourist behavior.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Dual Pathways of Persuasion: An ELM Perspective

A strong framework for comprehending how tourists interpret persuasive communication is offered by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). It proposes two different paths: the central path, which requires a lot of cognitive work and bases decisions on a rational assessment of the quality of the argument; and the peripheral path, which is impacted by heuristic cues such as presentation style or attractiveness (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Informational content (such as thorough reviews, useful advice, and precise pricing) makes central route processing easier in the context of social media tourism marketing. Conversely, interactive elements like live sessions and responsive Q&As, as well as beautiful visuals and expert editing, frequently function as powerful auxiliary cues.

Lee and Hong (2024) studied the psychological processes of short-form video apps like TikTok. They concluded that high vividness and interactive quality of short videos induce a state of "cognitive absorption" (a condition of high involvement and concentration), which has a positive impact on attitudes and impulse travel intentions. The impact was stronger for hedonic destinations than for utilitarian destinations. Relevance to Present Study: This study provides us with a theoretical context for our platform-specific finding for TikTok. It explains why interactivity and short-form content are so successful: because they facilitate cognitive absorption. This allows us to frame our TikTok finding not just as an indicator of user preference, but as a psychologically compelling experience that optimizes the effect of the content and accelerates trust building and decision-making.

### Content Quality as a Trust Antecedent

High-quality, helpful information is a fundamental component of trust in digital environments, according to previous research (Wang & Yan, 2022). The informational usefulness of content is crucial for Saudi tourists, who might place a higher value on things like halal amenities, family friendliness, and cultural suitability. Although crucial for initial engagement, aesthetic quality could be viewed with suspicion if it is thought to be deceptive or carefully chosen (Koay et al., 2021).

Recent studies have explored the specific aspects of quality, going beyond general evaluations. Zhang and Zhao (2023) demonstrated the power of sensory-enhancing language in captions to boost mental imagery and visit intention. Additionally, the perceived authenticity of content is crucial since it affects algorithmic distribution as well as audience trust (Alhamed & Buchanan, 2024). This emphasizes that quality is a multifaceted concept that includes perceived genuineness, linguistic style, and factual accuracy in addition to aesthetic appeal.

Zhang and Zhao (2023) looked at the language used in aesthetic content. Their study showed that captions with sensory-rich language, such as "feel the cool mist of the waterfall" and "smell the aromatic spices in the souk," led to stronger mental images and a greater intention to visit compared to plain descriptions. This impact was influenced by how inspired

the user felt. Relation to Current Study: This research helps us better understand the idea of "aesthetic content." It indicates that aesthetic quality goes beyond visuals; it can also be shaped through language. For our study, this means that using sensory language in captions could enhance the effectiveness of visually appealing Instagram posts for Saudi tourists. This approach makes the content more engaging and inspiring, which strengthens the peripheral route of persuasion. Ahamed and Buchanan (2024) present the term "algorithmic authenticity" in which they explain how perceived authenticity is evaluated by audiences but financed through formative reach by the algorithm of the platform. They did a study with European travelers (who were primarily influencers) and found that content perceived as authentic (via "unfiltered" or "unsponsored" content) resulted in higher engagement for the authentic content, which in turn increased the reach and influence to travel intentions further. The authors explained authenticity would drive reach through algorithmic distribution of the original content, which further reinforces the credibility that adds to perceived authenticity. With respect to this research, the current work aligns directly with their work, emphasizing that perceived authenticity is a relevant meta-characteristic of any photocopy content that is identified as either informational or aesthetic. This suggests that although practical information and the interactions valued by Saudi tourists, is beneficial for tourists in our research, these styles of cognitions must feel authentic to be effective, which is an important element for marketers preparing to maximize how they optimize reach on whatever platform they decide to deploy their marketing content.

### **Trust as a Social Exchange**

Social Exchange Theory (SET) suggests that our relationships are built on a personal cost-benefit analysis and how we compare our options (Blau, 1964). When we apply SET to the world of tourism, a traveler's choice to trust an influencer's recommendation hinges on weighing the perceived perks (like reliable information, a great experience, or social status) against the possible downsides (such as throwing money away, having a disappointing time, or safety issues). High-quality content can really tip the scales by boosting the perceived benefits and reducing the perceived risks, making trust a logical result of a positive exchange.

Culture becomes a highly influential factor in determining effectiveness. Alqahtani and Weber (2023) empirically substantiated that cultural dimensions of uncertainty avoidance within the Arab Gulf States lead to the generation of content longing for very clear and risk-mitigating information. Basically, it entails that content is developed to be in line with certain social values, less certain, or more certain, to build trust or to elicit a response.

Santos et al. (2023) basically threw micro-influencers (<50k followers) and mega-influencers (>1M followers) into the ring to duke it out in Portugal's tourism scene. And guess what? The little guys totally punched above their weight—people trusted them more and were actually more likely to buy stuff they recommended, even though their audiences were tiny in comparison. Why? Folks thought micro-influencers actually knew their stuff, seemed more real, and kinda felt like internet friends rather than celebrities shouting into the void. Meanwhile, this study here is zooming in on what's actually in the content, which is cool, but Santos et al. kinda flip the script, saying, "Hey, maybe \*who\* is posting matters just as much as \*what\* they're posting." Food for thought, right? Their conclusion that micro-influencers, who are frequently seen as more knowledgeable and genuine in a particular field, might be more efficient means of distributing that high-quality content in the Saudi market than generic mega-stars is in line with our finding that information quality is crucial.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design and Data Collection**

This study used a quantitative, cross-sectional design. A panel of Saudi citizens who had taken at least one domestic leisure trip in the previous 12 months and actively engaged with travel-related content on social media were given an online survey to complete in order to collect data. A stratified sampling approach based on geographic region (Riyadh, Makkah, Eastern Province, etc.) was employed to guarantee national representativeness. 550 respondents made up the final sample for analysis after being vetted for completeness and engagement.

### **Measures**

All constructs were measured using multi-item scales adapted from established literature on a 5-point Likert agreement scale.

- Informational Content Quality (4 items): Adapted from Wang & Yan (2022). Sample item: "The influencer provides detailed and practical information about destinations."
- Aesthetic Content Quality (4 items): Adapted from Koay et al. (2021). Sample item: "The influencer's posts are visually appealing and well-produced."
- Interactivity (4 items): Adapted from Geng & Chen (2021). Sample item: "The influencer actively responds to comments and questions from followers."
- Trust (5 items): Adapted from Helal et al. (2023). Sample item: "I feel confident that this influencer's recommendations are reliable."
- Tourist Behavior (5 items): Adapted from Raafat et al. (2023). Sample item: "I am likely to visit a destination based on this influencer's recommendation."

## Data Analysis

The analysis of the data went through a two-stage process using SmartPLS 4.0. First, the measurement model was checked for reliability, convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted > 0.5), and discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion). Then, in the second step, the structural model was checked to verify the hypothesized relationships by checking path coefficients ( $\beta$ ), coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), and predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ). The mediation hypotheses (H5a-c) were tested using the bootstrapping procedure (5000 subsamples).

## RESULTS

The results of the data analysis carried out to evaluate the proposed model are shown in this section. The presentation takes a two-pronged approach: first, the measurement model is evaluated to verify the validity and reliability of the constructs, and then the structural model is evaluated to test the proposed relationships and mediation effects.

### Measurement Model Assessment

Prior to testing the structural relationships, the measurement model was tested for internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. All of the constructs demonstrated strong psychometric properties, which is evidence of the quality of the scales used in this study.

As illustrated in Table 1, internal consistency reliability was evaluated by composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ). They all exceeded the recommended cutoff value of 0.70 (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  range = 0.87–0.92; CR range = 0.91–0.94), indicating very good reliability (Taber, 2018).

**Table 1** Measurement Model: Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Items	Cronbach's $\alpha$	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Informational Content	4	0.89	0.92	0.75
Aesthetic Content	4	0.87	0.91	0.72
Interactivity	4	0.90	0.93	0.77
Trust	5	0.92	0.94	0.76
Tourist Behavior	5	0.91	0.93	0.73

Since each construct's Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was above the required value of 0.50 (varying from 0.72 to 0.77), showing that the constructs on average explain more than half of the variance of their indicators, convergent validity was demonstrated (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

To evaluate discriminant validity, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was used. Each construct is unique and shares more variance with its own indicators than with other constructs in the model, as seen by Table 2, where the square root of the AVE for each construct (diagonal values in bold) was higher than its highest correlation with any other construct.

**Table 2** Discriminant Validity: Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Construct	1	2	3	4	5
1. Informational Content	<b>0.87</b>				
2. Aesthetic Content	0.52	<b>0.85</b>			
3. Interactivity	0.48	0.56	<b>0.88</b>		
4. Trust	0.63	0.51	0.59	<b>0.87</b>	
5. Tourist Behavior	0.55	0.58	0.54	0.68	<b>0.85</b>

Note. Diagonals (in bold) represent the square root of the AVE. Off-diagonals are correlations.

### Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

The means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for the key constructs are shown in Table 3. Respondents gave positive ratings to all constructs, with mean scores above the midpoint of 3.0. Trust had the highest mean score ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ), showing a generally high level of confidence in the recommendations of social media creators among the tourists surveyed. The correlation matrix demonstrated significant positive relationships ( $p < .01$ ) among all variables, which provides initial support for the proposed relationships in the structural model. The strongest correlation was between Trust and Tourist Behavior ( $r = .68$ ), which matches the important mediating role suggested for this construct.

**Table 3** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Informational Content	4.05	0.81	1				
2. Aesthetic Content	4.18	0.79	.52**	1			
3. Interactivity	3.92	0.85	.48**	.56**	1		
4. Trust	4.21	0.72	.63**	.51**	.59**	1	
5. Tourist Behavior	4.02	0.76	.55**	.58**	.54**	.68**	1

\*\* $p < .01$

### Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was assessed for predictive accuracy and the significance of path coefficients. The model exhibited good explanatory power: Trust ( $R^2 = 0.55$ ), accounted for 55% of the variance; the TOURIST BEHAVIOR ( $R^2 = 0.52$ ) accounted for 52% of the variance, indicating that it has strong predictive relevance.

The path coefficients were obtained from a bootstrapping routine (5,000 resamples). Table 4 and Figure 1 display the path coefficients. The results provide strong support for the direct hypotheses. H1, H2, and H3 posited that Informational Content, Aesthetic Content, and Interactivity would all have a positive effect on Trust. All three paths were significant ( $\beta_1 = 0.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\beta_2 = 0.25$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $\beta_3 = 0.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ), providing evidence that all three dimensions of content quality are significant antecedents of Trust, with Informational Content being the strongest predictor. H4, that Trust had a positive effect on Tourist Behavior, was also strongly supported ( $\beta_4 = 0.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Table 4** Structural Model Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	$\beta$ Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	p-value	95% CI (LL, UL)	Support
H1	Informational Content $\rightarrow$ Trust	0.42	0.05	8.40	< .001	[0.33, 0.51]	Yes
H2	Aesthetic Content $\rightarrow$ Trust	0.25	0.04	6.25	< .01	[0.17, 0.33]	Yes
H3	Interactivity $\rightarrow$ Trust	0.31	0.04	7.75	< .001	[0.23, 0.39]	Yes
H4	Trust $\rightarrow$ Tourist Behavior	0.58	0.04	14.50	< .001	[0.50, 0.66]	Yes

### Mediation Analysis

To explore how Trust plays a mediating role (H5a, H5b, H5c), we looked at the indirect effects using the bootstrapping method outlined by Preacher & Hayes in 2008. As you can see in Table 5, every specific indirect effect was statistically significant, since none of the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals included zero. These findings confirm that Trust is a key mediator in the connection between each dimension of content quality and Tourist Behavior. We calculated the Variance Accounted For (VAF) to assess the strength of this mediation. Trust accounted for 38% of the total effect of



Informational Content on Behavior, 30% for Aesthetic Content, and 34% for Interactivity, which shows that mediation is partial in all instances.

**Table 5** Mediation Analysis: Indirect Effects

Indirect Path	$\beta$ Indirect Effect	Standard Error	t-value	p-value	95% CI (LL, UL)	VAF	Support
H5a: Info. Content → Trust → Behavior	0.244	0.03	8.13	< .001	[0.19, 0.30]	38%	Yes
H5b: Aesthetic Content → Trust → Behavior	0.145	0.03	4.83	< .01	[0.09, 0.20]	30%	Yes
H5c: Interactivity → Trust → Behavior	0.180	0.03	6.00	< .001	[0.12, 0.24]	34%	Yes

### Multi-Group Analysis (MGA): Gender and Platform Differences

A multi-group analysis (MGA) was conducted to examine the moderating effects of gender and primary social media platform. Permutation testing was used to identify significant path differences between groups. Significant gender-based differences were found. The path from Informational Content to Trust was significantly stronger for female tourists ( $\beta_{\text{female}} = 0.50$ ,  $\beta_{\text{male}} = 0.35$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This suggests that detailed, practical information is a more critical driver of trust for women, potentially related to a heightened focus on safety and family suitability in travel planning within the Saudi context.

Platform-specific analysis revealed key insights. For users who primarily used Instagram, the path from Aesthetic Content to Trust was significantly stronger ( $\beta_{\text{Instagram}} = 0.33$ ,  $\beta_{\text{Others}} = 0.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ), confirming the platform's emphasis on high-quality visuals. Conversely, for users who primarily used TikTok, the path from Interactivity to Trust was the strongest ( $\beta_{\text{TikTok}} = 0.40$ ,  $\beta_{\text{Others}} = 0.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ), underscoring the importance of dynamic, two-way communication and short-form engagement on that platform.

### Model Fit and Predictive Relevance

Ultimately, the comprehensive model fit was appraised. The SRMR clocked in at 0.06—yeah, that's under the 0.08 “good enough” line, so we're in the clear there (shoutout to Hu & Bentler, 1999, for setting the bar). On top of that, those Stone-Geisser  $Q^2$  numbers? Solid. Trust landed at 0.41 and Behavior at 0.38. Both way above zero, so the model's got some legit predictive power.

Bottom line: the data totally backs up the whole model. Basically, Informational Content, Aesthetic Content, and Interactivity aren't just buzzwords—they actually matter and help crank up Trust, which then makes tourists more likely to, you know, do stuff. Oh, and there's some interesting twists depending on who the tourists are and what social platforms they dig. So yeah, not just a one-size-fits-all thing—demographics and platform choices spice things up a bit.

## DISCUSSION

This study's main goal was to analyze the ways in which the caliber of social media content influences Saudi Arabian tourists' behavior, with an emphasis on the mediating function of trust. The research model, which was based on the Social Exchange Theory (SET) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), was well-supported by empirical data. In a rapidly modernizing but culturally distinct tourism market, the findings provide a nuanced understanding that goes beyond evaluating influencers solely on credibility metrics. Instead, they offer a detailed blueprint for effective content strategy. The main findings are interpreted, placed within the larger academic context, their practical implications are described, their limitations are acknowledged, and future research directions are suggested.

### The Primacy of Informational Content and Central Route Processing

The most prominent finding of this study is the dominating importance of informational content ( $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ) in trust creation. This renders it the strongest driver of content quality dimensions, and by a considerable margin ahead of aesthetic appeal. This result firmly corroborates the central route of persuasion of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). It indicates that Saudi domestic tourists are undertaking active cognitive evaluation, striving to process informative, functional, and credible information to mitigate the perceived risks and uncertainty inherent in travel planning.

One compelling explanation for this preference for content over form is the cultural setting. According to Alqahtani and Weber (2023), travelers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are especially risk-sensitive due to their high levels of uncertainty avoidance. Therefore, these issues are directly addressed by content that offers precise, comprehensive, and useful information—such as details on halal amenities, family-friendly facilities, safety procedures, logistical details, and cultural norms. This conclusion is further supported by Alhamed and Buchanan's (2024) concept of "algorithmic authenticity," which postulates that audiences trust content that is genuinely helpful and that platform algorithms with a wider organic reach are likely to reward it as well, generating a positive feedback loop of distribution and trust. Our research provides empirical evidence that this utility is the mainstay of the Saudi market.

#### **The Significant, Yet Secondary, Role of Aesthetic Content**

While aesthetic content was a significant predictor of trust ( $\beta = 0.25$ ,  $p < .01$ ), its impact was much smaller than that of informational content. This supports how the peripheral route of persuasion works, where appealing visuals and professional production act as positive signals that improve engagement and initial attraction. However, its secondary role indicates that attractive images, while useful for grabbing attention in a busy social media feed, are not enough alone to build strong, reliable trust among Saudi tourists.

This finding questions the industry's common tendency to rely too much on highly curated, aspirational aesthetics. It suggests that if stunning visuals lack solid information, they may be met with doubt or seen as inauthentic, which could prevent engagement from turning into interest. The results imply that aesthetics should be seen as a way to deliver valuable information, not as the message itself. As Zhang and Zhao (2023) pointed out, the impact of aesthetics can be improved by using vivid, descriptive language, making the experience more lively and real for the audience.

#### **Interactivity as a Relational Trust-Bridge**

The strong positive effect of interactivity ( $\beta = 0.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ), reinforces its use as part of the relational tool kit; there is significant explanatory power for viewing interactivity through the lens of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964). Influencers may not be only providing answers or information when they comment and reply; they are making a relational investment in the follower's experience. Followers will view this relational investment as accessible, genuine, authentic and caring. Research in social exchange indicates that in turn there will be an act of trust or will lead to reciprocity from the follower, and therefore interpersonal trust will develop. Going back to the definition of interactivity, we are again reducing social distance, as an influencer moves from simply using their followers as a one-way broadcast audience to interaction as a two-way relationship.

It is clear that this is particularly relevant in a collectivist culture like that of Saudi Arabia, where community and personal interaction is highly regarded. Interactivity creates in-group membership and builds a parasocial relationship that minimizes the potential of commercial intent from the influencer. Giving a recommendation after an interactive exchange is more like personal advice from an informed friend rather than a promotional endorsement from a distant celebrity. This helps to explain the strength of interactivity as a driver for TikTok users seen in this multi-group analysis. TikTok is based on exchange by design. Users engage via duet, stitch, comments etc., and this only strengthens the interactivity function.

#### **Trust: The Central Mediating Mechanism**

The study highlights that trust is the key psychological driver that turns content quality into actual behavior. With a strong direct influence on actions ( $\beta = 0.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and significant mediation across all content dimensions (accounting for 30-38% of effects), trust acts as the vital link between how we perceive something and how we respond to it. This finding resonates with various studies in digital marketing (like Hilal et al., 2023; Wang & Yan, 2022) but offers a clearer insight: trust is developed through a mix of cognitive assurance (from the information provided) and emotional connection (from the design and interaction).

From a Social Exchange Theory (SET) perspective, trust emerges from a positive cost-benefit evaluation. High-quality content boosts perceived benefits (like a great experience, valuable insights, and social capital) while reducing perceived costs and risks (such as financial loss, wasted time, and safety issues). When this balance tips in favor of benefits, trust is formed, empowering the tourist to follow the influencer's advice. This mediating role underscores that the effect of content quality isn't just direct; it's significantly enhanced by fostering trust.

#### **The Critical Nuances of Demographics and Platform Dynamics**

The multi-group analysis (MGA) reveals that a one-size-fits-all content strategy is ineffective. The data's pretty clear—women travelers, especially, are all about information that makes them feel safe and welcomes families. Different travel vibes, different concerns. If marketers are not slicing up their content to fit these groups, honestly, they are just burning money. Additionally, the platform-specific variations offer strategic insights that can be put into practice. Instagram's increased emphasis on aesthetics validates its status as a visual discovery platform, with high-fidelity photography serving as the gateway to users' attention. However, TikTok's predominance of interaction shows that, when it comes to short-form video platforms, the capacity to produce an engaging, participatory experience is more important for establishing trust than flawless, passive perfection. This is consistent with research on cognitive absorption by Lee and Hong (2024), which shows that impulsive decision-making is influenced by the immersive, interactive nature of short videos.

#### **Theoretical Contributions**

This research offers some significant theoretical insights:

1. **Granularity to Content Quality:** It goes beyond the vague idea of "credibility" and breaks content quality into three practical dimensions—informational, aesthetic, and interactive—creating a clearer model for grasping digital persuasion.
2. **Contextual Application of ELM/SET:** It effectively applies and validates the ELM and SET frameworks in the unique setting of Saudi Arabia's evolving tourism scene, showing how cultural values, like uncertainty avoidance, influence cognitive processing and exchange dynamics.
3. **Integration of Platform Theory:** By factoring in platform-specific effects, the study starts to connect content strategy with platform capabilities, suggesting that theories of persuasion should be viewed alongside the technological medium used to convey the message.

### Practical Implications

For tourism marketers and destination management organizations (DMOs) in Saudi Arabia, these insights lead to some straightforward, actionable strategies:

- **Prioritize Substance:** Choose influencers and content creators who have proven expertise and can provide in-depth, practical information. Evaluate content based on its usefulness rather than just its popularity.
- **Orchestrate Content Mix:** Create a well-thought-out content strategy that highlights valuable information, enhances it with appealing visuals, and is backed by a solid plan for engaging with the community actively.
- **Segment and Specialize:** Tailor content strategies for various demographic groups (like crafting detailed guides for female travelers) and adapt them for different platforms (such as eye-catching Instagram galleries versus interactive TikTok Q&A sessions).
- **Train for Authenticity:** Motivate influencers to connect genuinely with their audience. Their engagement and willingness to interact are essential to building trust, not just optional extras.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study has made some valuable contributions, it also has its limitations, which open the door for future research. To start, the cross-sectional design helps us see relationships but doesn't establish clear causality. Longitudinal studies that track changes in trust and behavior over time, or experiments that manipulate different types of content, could really bolster those causal claims.

Additionally, we concentrated on domestic tourists, but the factors that build trust for international visitors to Saudi Arabia might vary greatly due to their diverse cultural backgrounds and existing perceptions. This calls for cross-cultural comparative studies.

Moreover, although we emphasized content, the source of that content is still crucial. Future research could build on the work of Santos et al. (2023) by looking into how the type of influencer (micro vs. mega) interacts with content type to find the most effective combinations.

Lastly, the fast-paced changes in social media features—like augmented reality filters and live shopping—create exciting new ways for interaction and content delivery. Research should dive into how these emerging technologies can be used to enhance the aspects of content quality we've identified here.

## CONCLUSION

To wrap things up, this study makes it clear that when it comes to attracting Saudi tourists, the focus should really be on "quality over quantity." Building trust—and, in turn, encouraging travel intentions—goes beyond just having a lot of followers or perfect pictures. It's all about providing valuable information, paired with engaging visuals, and fostering genuine, interactive relationships. For Saudi Arabia to achieve its ambitious Vision 2030 tourism goals, its digital marketing strategies need to be as sophisticated and nuanced as the audience they aim to reach. This research lays out a solid framework for that, emphasizing that in the kingdom's digital marketplace, trust is the most valuable currency, earned through consistently delivering outstanding content.

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