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THAILAND AS A TOURISM DESTINATION: EXPLORING CHINESE OLDER ADULTS' TRAVEL DECISION-MAKING THROUGH THE LENS OF THE S-O-R FRAMEWORK IN SOCIAL MEDIA CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of factors affecting travel decision-making among older adults based on the S-O-R framework. Using case of Thailand as tourism destination, this study collects 602 Chinese older adults from Beijing, Shanghai, Guanghzou. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was applied to process the data. Findings reveal that information quality and KOL influence play a stronger role than system quality in shaping travel decisions. System quality does not directly influence travel decisions but exerts an indirect effect through perceived destination image and emotional experience. Additionally, emotional experience has a stronger impact than cognitive factors, indicating that older tourists are more influenced by emotional engagement than rational evaluation. KOL recommendations significantly enhance both perceived destination image and emotional connection, ultimately driving travel intention.

Keywords: Information quality; System quality; Tourism KOLs; Tourism social media; Travel decision-making

1. INTRODUCTION

Global aging has been accelerated, and the elderly population has increasingly been recognized as a significant factor in shaping economic development and driving transformations in tourism (Xiao et al., 2024). Senior tourism has been observed to satisfy both leisure and health needs while also stimulating economic growth. Strategies for tapping into this expanding market have been adopted by many countries (Makgosa & Maswabi, 2025). In China, which is regarded as one of the fastest-aging nations, an increase in travel demand among individuals aged 60 and above has been linked to the growth of wellness, leisure, and cultural tourism. It is expected that this trend will further boost the tourism sector and enhance healthcare, transportation, and hospitality services, thereby positioning senior tourism as a key driver of high-quality industry development (Hu et al., 2024; Y. Wang et al., 2024).
By 2050, the global population aged 60 and above will exceed 2 billion, accounting for 22% of the total population. China, as one of the fastest-aging countries in the world, is experiencing a continuous expansion of its elderly population. As of the end of 2023, China had 297 million people aged 60 and above, representing 21.1% of the total population, and this figure is expected to rise to nearly 500 million by 2050, comprising 40% of the national population. In 2023, senior tourists in China accounted for 20.6% of total domestic trips, reaching 116 million trips, and the senior tourism market is projected to grow to 2.7 trillion RMB by 2028, with a compound annual growth rate of 13.6% (Chen & Liu, 2023; Jin et al., 2023; Meixia et al., 2024; Shen et al., 2022).

Thailand has long been a preferred travel destination for Chinese tourists, particularly among older adults. Following the implementation of a permanent visa-free policy between China and Thailand in March 2024, the number of Chinese visitors has surged significantly. As of February 2, 2025, Thailand had received 3.97 million international tourists, with over 710,000 Chinese visitors, making them the largest inbound tourist group. Furthermore, In 2024, Thailand welcomed 6.73 million Chinese tourists, representing a 91.22% year-on-year increase, underscoring the critical role of the Chinese market in Thailand's tourism industry (Lyu et al., 2021; Soh et al., 2024; X. Wang et al., 2024).

This growing trend has involved an important contribution from older adults. The consumption potential of the senior demographic is increasing as global aging accelerates. China's senior travelers make up more than 20 percent of the country's total tourism volume each year, and the population aged 60 and above has exceeded 200 million. The warm climate, rich cultural heritage, and low cost of healthcare services in Thailand are attractive to elderly Chinese tourists, especially those who are seeking leisure and wellness experiences (Duan et al., 2022; Pan et al., 2021; Yin & Cheablam, 2022).

The surge in Chinese tourism to Thailand has been attributed to social media (Kubo et al., 2021). A large amount of study has indicated that short videos, travel blogs, user-generated recommendations, and travel-related persuasive content disseminated on information networks significantly influence travel intentions among Chinese travelers (Li et al., 2023). Societal safety concerns in Thailand have also emerged as a factor influencing travel decisions. For instance, in mid-January 2025, discussions on social media affecting safety in Thailand were found to lead to a 155% year-on-year increase in cancellations of flights to and from China to Thailand (Pitakaso et al., 2024). As a result, the Thai government has taken measures to improve tourist safety and rebuild Chinese visitors' confidence. Thai tourism authorities have also improved management and services for tourists to achieve a safer and more convenient travel experience (Nguyen et al., 2023). Considering that Thailand remains an incredibly appealing destination for Chinese tourists, especially seniors, with various improvements made to the tourism infrastructure and safety measures, it is anticipated that it will rapidly cement itself among the top Chinese outbound travel market destinations.

Social media has become a vital means for elderly people to access travel-related information due to the advancement of digital technology. Considering its intuitive, vivid, and interactive characteristics, travel information available on social media platforms has been shown to surpass the limitations of previous media, making education more easily accessible and engaging. Even short-form content on these platforms has been shown to significantly increase young consumers' intentions to travel, but only when the content of the destinations appears to be of higher quality (Fletcher & Gbadamosi, 2024). Furthermore, it has been reported that the stimulation of sensory perceptions further influences social media's impact on travel motivation. In contrast to younger travelers, elderly tourists have been found to make different decision-making choices (Wang et al., 2023). Research has been conducted on the effect that traditional media, such as television and newspapers, have on senior travelers. Investigations into the role that social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo play in shaping the travel behavior of seniors have also been carried out (Gan et al., 2023). These digital channels have also been studied to suggest that unique patterns in the elderly's travel decision-making are influenced by them (Kim et al., 2023). Several studies have also examined the effects of accessibility and risk perception on travel choices. However, comprehensive research on how social media influences travel decision-making among elderly people is still lacking (Yoon & Nam, 2024).

Additionally, research on social media and travel decision-making has focused on information quality or system quality as the main determinants of user engagement (Abbasi et al., 2023). High-quality travel information can significantly increase viewers' trust in travel destinations, and a smooth user experience can improve decision efficiency (Fu et al., 2024). Yet, little attention has been paid to the role of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) in the decision-making processes of older adults (He & Jin, 2024). KOLs are influential content creators who act as important sources of travel information that help viewers perceive the authenticity and credibility of the content as well as engage with it interactively (Shamim et al., 2024). For the influence of social media on travel decision-making, often perceived destination image and emotional experience were considered as two independent variables without further research on the interplay between these two. Consequently, visual content, namely on social media, has directly led to the appreciation of travel destinations, as previous studies have shown (Luo et al., 2024), and emotionally engaging with target consumers is essential for psychological resonance regarding possible travelers. However, the impact of these factors on elderly tourists' decision-making is not sufficiently integrated in the literature. Therefore, the objectives of the study are:

(1) To validate the impact pathways of system quality, information quality, and tourism KOLs on the travel decision-making of Chinese elderly tourists to Thailand as a travel destination.

(2) To investigate the mediating effects of perceived destination image and emotional experience.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The information systems and framework are a lens for looking at digital platforms with system quality and information quality as determinants of user engagement (Delone & McLean, 2003). In the tourism context, a well-designed digital interface, ease of use, and good quality content facilitate trust and speed in decision-making (Camilleri et al., 2023). While these factors have been well-documented in relation to younger users, elderly travelers may face additional challenges, such as difficulty in navigating digital platforms and evaluating the credibility of the content (Jia et al., 2025). Since they rely more on intuitive system design and reliable information, it is necessary to investigate how these factors affect their decision-making while interacting with social media content. This study examines how system quality and information quality shape elderly tourists' perceptions and behaviors by incorporating ISSM.

Travel decisions are influenced by social media content, and the cognition-affect-behavior (CAB) model focuses on the interplay between cognitive evaluation, emotional response, and behavioral intention (Gartner, 1994). The destination image created by visually appealing content directly impacts travel interest, and emotional experience plays an important role in developing psychological attachment to a destination (Abbasi et al., 2023). By telling stories as compelling and immersive as possible, social media solidifies emotions to increase travel motivation. (Gan et al., 2023).

Social media platforms have a significant impact on the system quality of social media platforms, which in turn affects the travel decision-making of older adults. Ease of navigation, interactivity, and responsiveness of the platform are features that have a great impact on how users access and process tourism information (Camilleri et al., 2023). User-friendly and highly interactive social media platforms help minimize information-seeking costs and promote participation in using destination content (Shamim et al., 2024). Additionally, a system that has been well optimized improves not only cognitive processing but also emotional engagement through the concept of smooth video playback, aesthetically pleasant interface, and interactive tools. As older adults are often confronted with difficulties in adapting to digital platforms, a well-designed system can overcome usability barriers and help older adults access and evaluate tourism information more effectively (Teixeira et al.). In addition, system quality helps emotional engagement by promoting immersion and reducing cognitive overload, which facilitates users to have a deeper emotional connection with destinations. An emotionally responsive high-quality system, with intuitive design and seamless interaction, increases users' emotional responses and anticipation of travel (Shamim et al., 2024). According to these insights, the following hypotheses can be proposed.

H1a: Older adult individuals' perceived destination image is positively influenced by the system quality of tourism social media.

H1b: System quality of tourism social media positively affects older adult individuals' emotional experience.

The cognitive perception and emotional response of users towards travel destinations depend on the information quality of social media. In the area of high-end destination marketing, the findings show that high-quality content with vivid visual representations, authentic storytelling, and detailed destination insight could enhance people's perception of an activity and create trust with people's feelings of that activity's intention (Zhang & Ramayah, 2024). Users perceive content after learning perceived authenticity, richness, and informativeness, with authenticity being highly correlated with meaningful engagement and accurate perception (Luo et al., 2024). Also, emotional engagement is closely associated with information quality. Through immersive storytelling techniques and high-quality content, viewers are less resistant to commercialized messages, thereby further enthralling them with the emotional effect experienced through hearing the messages while shifted to a subconscious state (Zhou et al.). Older adults are more likely to rely on credible and accessible content when forming perceptions of a destination (Seo et al., 2020). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a. The perceived destination image of older adult individuals is positively influenced by the information quality of tourism social media.

H2b. The older adult individuals' emotional experience is positively influenced by the information quality of tourism social media.

Influential content creators on social media platforms who are considered Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) have a great influence on viewers' perceptions and emotional engagement with destinations (Guo et al., 2024). KOLs increase the credibility of content and increase audience trust in the presented tourism information. More specifically, KOLs' personalized storytelling, real travel stories, and interactive communication style enhance users' understanding and enrich the cognitive destination representation (Li & Tu, 2024). In addition to cognitive perceptions, KOLs influence emotional experiences by producing emotionally engaging narratives and encouraging audience interaction, thereby increasing users' affective responses to the destination (Correia et al., 2025). KOLs are a trusted source of information for older adults in reducing uncertainty and increasing confidence in travel decisions. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed based on these findings:

H3a: Tourism KOLs have a positive effect on older adult individuals' perceived destination image.

H3b: Tourism KOLs positively affect older adult individuals' emotional experience.

The cognitive and affective evaluation of a destination perceived as a destination image is termed as perceived destination image (Marques et al., 2021). Besides creating immersive content and influential recommendations, social media has been shown to improve these perceptions and travel decision-making, satisfaction, and long-term destination loyalty (Najar & Rather, 2023). Here, it has been shown that a powerful cognitive and emotional image of a destination increases tourists' travel intentions and satisfaction and improves travelers' expectations and likelihood of choosing the destination (Zhang et al., 2023). A positive destination image for older adults is a positive thing; it creates a sense of security and comfort and makes them more likely to choose a particular travel destination.

Tourism-related content can evoke emotional experiences in the form of excitement, nostalgia, relaxation, and an emotional connection with a destination (Abbasi et al., 2023). It has been found that emotional engagement during social media consumption increases viewers' interest in a destination and has a significant effect on their travel intentions (Nieves-Pavón et al., 2024). Furthermore, emotional experience not only affects the decision-making process but also tourists' satisfaction and long-term loyalty (Omo-Obas & Anning-Dorson, 2023). As older adults tend to rely more on affective evaluations than purely cognitive assessments when deciding about a destination's appeal (Zou et al., 2021), emotional experience is often a key driver for decision-making for older adults (H1).

H4: Older adult individuals' travel decision-making is positively influenced by perceived destination image.

H5: Older adults' travel decision-making is positively influenced by emotional experience.

H6: Perceived destination image mediates the relationship between the information quality of tourism social media and older adult individuals' travel decision-making.

H7: Perceived destination image mediates the relationship between the system quality of tourism social media and older adult individuals' travel decision-making.

H8: Perceived destination image mediates the relationship between tourism KOLs and older adult individuals' travel decision-making.

H9: Emotional experience mediates the relationship between the system quality of tourism social media and older adult individuals' travel decision-making.

H10: Emotional experience mediates the relationship between the information quality of tourism social media and older adult individuals' travel decision-making.

H11: Emotional experience mediates the relationship between tourism KOLs and older adult individuals' travel decision-making.

The research combines the S-O-R Model with ISSM and CAB Model to study how tourism social media affects the travel choices of older adults through system quality, information quality, and KOL recommendations. The research assesses the intervention effects of perceived destination image together with emotional experience on how these variables influence travel behavior patterns. The empirical assessment will investigate social media's travel decision effects on older adults through system quality, information quality, and KOL recommendations while generating both theoretical suggestions along with practical marketing implications for tourism content development. Figure 1 depicts these research elements.

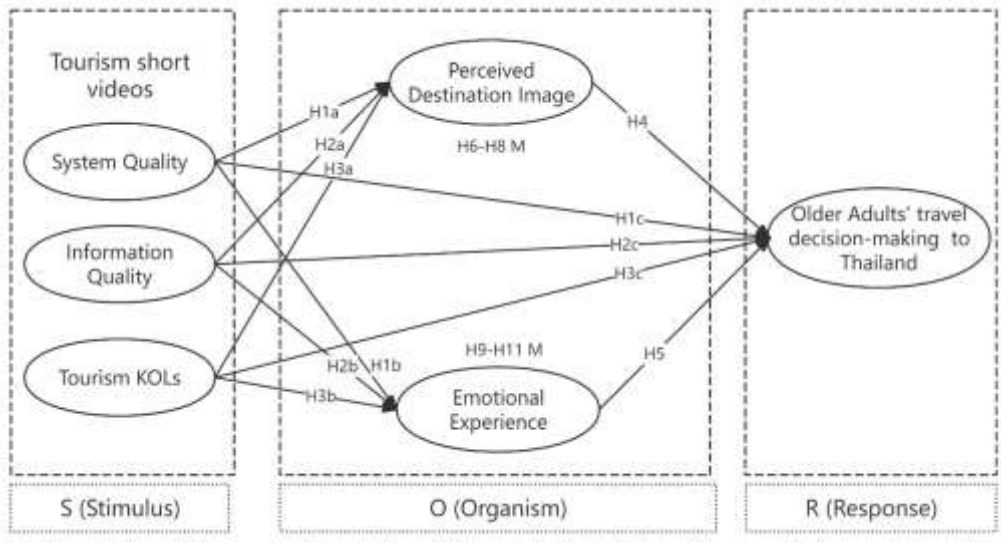

Figure 1. Model of tourism social media affecting Chinese older adults' tourism decision-making

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1. Data collection

This study combined online and offline survey approach. The questionnaire was distributed via major Chinese social media platforms, including WeChat, Weibo, and QQ, using the Wenjuanxing platform for online data collection. Additionally, the study leveraged international travel agencies, tourism KOL communities, and offline channels at tourism attractions in Thailand to ensure sample diversity and representativeness. The data collection period spanned from March 1, 2025, to March 20, 2025. Convenience sampling combined with purposive sampling, 602 valid responses were obtained from Chinese older adults aged 55-79 who actively use short video platforms for travel information. The respondents were from Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Invalid responses, such as incomplete questionnaires and inconsistent answers, were excluded from the dataset to ensure data reliability. This study received ethical approval on February 27, 2025, from Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, under the reference number R.36/2025.

3.2. Instrument

The scale was adapted from Laumer et al. (2017) and contained eight measurement items: completeness, relevance, timeliness, usefulness, format, consistency, and understandability. The seven measurement items of this scale were adapted from Laumer et al. (2017). Reputation, perceived fit, and production involvement of tourism KOLs. The scale was adapted from Tran and Uehara (2023) and consisted of six measurement items. Perceived destination image of Thailand as a travel destination based on the respondents' cognitive, affective, and conative perceptions of Thailand as a travel destination, which was shaped by social media. The nine measurement items of this scale were adapted from Quynh et al. (2021). The second part of the study focuses on emotional experience and examines the affective responses of the respondents (pleasure, excitement, and memorability) after exposure to social media content. The scale adapted from Quynh et al. (2021) consisted of five measurement items. Determining whether the respondents were likely to visit Thailand after being exposed to social media content. The measurement scale originated from Kim and Kim (2019) and included four specific items. All variables in Appendix 1 use a seven-point Likert scale which ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

3.3. Data analysis

The research instrument was tested before the formal survey to evaluate its reliability and validity. Older Chinese tourists aged 55-79 who were engaged with social media content about Thailand travel and who expressed an intention to visit the destination were selected, resulting in a total of 42 valid responses. The reliability analysis described above revealed that all constructs had strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's α values greater than 0.7 for each of the measurement scales. Validity analysis was also conducted using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test (0.787) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($\chi^2 = 2651.729$, $p < 0.001$) to confirm that the dataset was suitable for factor analysis. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) further validated the factor structure, with all factor loadings exceeding 0.5 and a cumulative explained variance of 72.254%, demonstrating strong construct validity. Based on the pretest findings, minor refinements were made to enhance item clarity. The final questionnaire was deemed statistically robust, providing a reliable foundation for the full-scale data collection phase. After the pretest, we proceeded to descriptive statistical analysis, reliability and validity tests, confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling.

4.RESULTS

4.1. Sample characteristics

This study collected 602 valid questionnaires, targeting Chinese older adult tourists aged 55-79 from Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. The demographic and behavioral characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1, which provides information about participant composition, social media engagement, and Thailand travel interests. The sample exhibits a balanced age distribution, with 66-69-year-olds (26.2%) being the largest group, followed by 60-65-year-olds (25.6%), 55-59-year-olds (25.4%), and 70-79-year-olds (22.8%). The research data indicates that women make up 58.3% of the total participants, while men represent 41.7% of the sample. In terms of education, the survey participants are divided, with 25.7% holding a junior college degree, 23.6% having a bachelor's degree, and 14.3% holding a master's degree or higher. Additionally, 27.9% of the participants completed high school or received vocational training, and 8.5% graduated from junior high school or below. Most participants fall within the middle-to-high-income categories based on income distribution data. Specifically, 27.1% earn 4001-6000 yuan, 26.9% earn above 8000 yuan, and 22.1% fall within the 6001–8000-yuan range. A smaller proportion earns 2001-4000 yuan (15.0%), while 9.0% report an income of below 2000 yuan.

Regarding geographic representation, 35.0% of respondents are from Shanghai, 31.4% from Beijing, and 33.6% from Guangzhou. These cities, as three of China's major metropolises—with Beijing serving as the political and cultural center, Shanghai as the financial hub, and Guangzhou as a key commercial gateway—offer diverse

socioeconomic and digital landscapes that further enrich the study's insights. This composition ensures that the sample reflects urban Chinese older adults with strong purchasing power and a high degree of digital literacy, which is crucial for understanding their engagement with tourism-related social media content.

The study also examined daily social media consumption habits, revealing that 21.9% of respondents use these platforms for less than 30 minutes per day, 18.6% for 30 minutes to 1 hour, 21.1% for 1-2 hours, 19.8% for 2-3 hours, and 18.6% for over 3 hours daily. These findings reflect the increasing reliance of older adults on digital platforms for travel inspiration, decision-making, and entertainment.

Table 1. Information of the Participants

Information and options		**Frequency**	**Percent**
Age	55-59	153	25.4
	60-65	154	25.6
	66-69	158	26.2
	70 -79	137	22.8
Gender	Male	251	41.7
	Female	351	58.3
Education level	Junior high school and below	51	8.5
	High school/vocational school	168	27.9
	Junior college degree	155	25.7
	Bachelor's degree	142	23.6
	Master's degree and above	86	14.3
Education level	Below 2000 yuan	54	9.0
	2001-4000 yuan	90	15.0
	4001-6000 yuan	163	27.1
	6001-8000 yuan	133	22.1
	Above 8000 yuan	162	26.9
Cities	Beijing city	189	31.4
	Shanghai city	211	35.0
	Guangzhou city	202	33.6
Frequency of daily use of social media platforms	Less than 30 minutes	132	21.9
	30 minutes to 1 hour	112	18.6
	1-2 hours	127	21.1
	2-3 hours	119	19.8

More than 3 hours	112	18.6

Figure 2 illustrates that social media engagement plays a significant role in influencing travel behavior. 98.0% of respondents actively use WeChat Video, making it the most dominant platform. Douyin (69.1%) and Kuaishou (62.3%) also see substantial usage, whereas Xiaohongshu (27.4%) and Bilibili (14.3%) have relatively low adoption rates among this demographic.

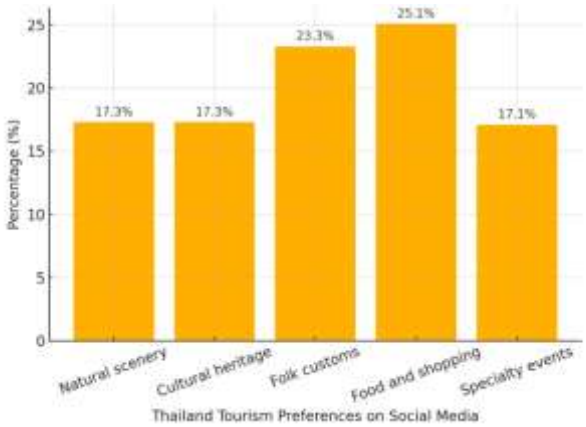

Figure 2. Distribution of Short Video Platform Usage Among Respondents

Figure 3. In terms of Thailand-related travel content preferences, food and shopping (25.1%) rank as the most popular category, followed by folk customs (23.3%), natural scenery (17.3%), cultural heritage (17.3%), and specialty events (17.1%), such as festivals, sporting events, and concerts. These insights suggest that older tourists are particularly drawn to Thailand's cultural richness and culinary experiences, reinforcing the significant role that social media platforms play in shaping travel motivations and destination perceptions.

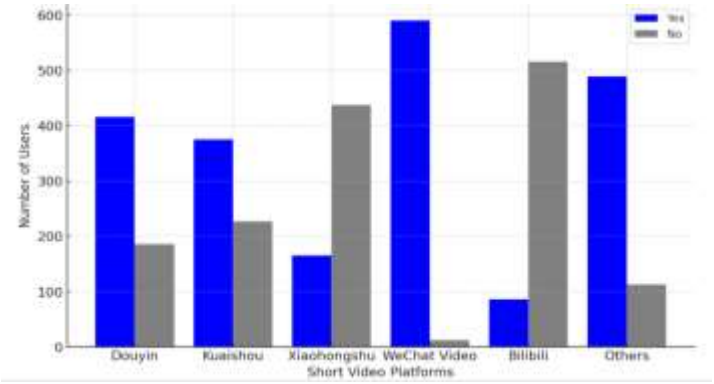

Figure 3. Information about Thailand tourism prefer in social media

4.2. Descriptive statistics

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the variables, providing insights into the central tendency, variability, and distribution of responses. The mean values across all items are relatively high, indicating that respondents generally rated the statements positively. Specifically, System Quality (SQ1-SQ8) exhibits mean scores between 4.56 and 4.66, suggesting that participants perceive social media platforms as user-friendly, interactive, and efficient in delivering tourism content. Similarly, information quality (IQ1-IQ7) and Tourism KOLs Influence (TK1-TK6) demonstrate mean values ranging from 4.53 to 4.70, reflecting respondents' agreement with statements regarding the credibility, usefulness, and reliability of information presented in tourism social media. Perceived destination image (PD1-9) and Emotional Experience (EE1-5) all have consistently high mean values,

emphasizing how social media content influences respondents' perceptions and feelings towards travel. Additionally, average scores of Travel Decision Making (TD1-TD4) above 4.5 indicate that respondents are likely to be influenced by social media content when deciding to visit Thailand.

All standard deviation (S.D.) values range from 1.326 to 1.468, indicating moderate variability in responses. The relatively small dispersion suggests that while most respondents held positive views on the measured variables, there were some variations in perceptions. Notably, Tourism KOLs Influence (TK2, S.D. = 1.461) and Emotional Experience (EE1, S.D. = 1.468) exhibit higher standard deviations, suggesting that respondents had more diverse opinions regarding the influence of KOLs and the emotional responses evoked by social media content. In contrast, variables such as System Quality (SQ4, S.D. = 1.340) and information quality (IQ4, S.D. = 1.333) display lower standard deviations, implying a more consistent agreement among participants regarding these aspects.

The skewness and kurtosis values help researchers understand both the symmetry and shape characteristics of their data distribution. The majority of items display negative skewness, which demonstrates that participants tended to give higher ratings on the survey scales. The strong negative skewness of -0.957 appears in SQ1, SQ3, and TK5, demonstrating that participants strongly favored these items. The data distribution shows normal characteristics with a moderate peak distribution because kurtosis values remain near zero (Busse & Jelly, 2023). The responses with the highest kurtosis scores of PD6 (0.337) and TK5 (0.291) show a distribution pattern that is tightly clustered around the mean, but SQ6 (-0.440) and PD8 (-0.377) display a slightly wider spread of responses. The data meets statistical requirements for analysis because all skewness and kurtosis values stay within accepted ranges.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics Results

Study variables	Items	Mean	S.D.	Skewness		Kurtosis	
				Value	S.E.	Value	S.E.
System Quality	SQ1	4.650	1.364	-0.957	0.100	0.141	0.199
	SQ2	4.580	1.400	-0.835	0.100	-0.146	0.199
	SQ3	4.660	1.378	-0.957	0.100	0.278	0.199
	SQ4	4.620	1.340	-0.978	0.100	0.257	0.199
	SQ5	4.640	1.400	-0.831	0.100	-0.195	0.199
	SQ6	4.580	1.419	-0.761	0.100	-0.440	0.199
	SQ7	4.560	1.376	-0.946	0.100	0.106	0.199
	SQ8	4.580	1.421	-0.894	0.100	-0.041	0.199
Information Quality	IQ1	4.610	1.382	-0.844	0.100	-0.185	0.199
	IQ2	4.700	1.396	-0.842	0.100	-0.135	0.199
	IQ3	4.580	1.347	-0.953	0.100	0.161	0.199

	IQ4	4.570	1.333	-0.810	0.100	-0.103	0.199
	IQ5	4.590	1.378	-0.965	0.100	0.023	0.199
	IQ6	4.590	1.346	-0.922	0.100	0.055	0.199
	IQ7	4.640	1.352	-0.945	0.100	-0.012	0.199
	TK1	4.600	1.368	-0.981	0.100	0.061	0.199
	TK2	4.540	1.461	-0.877	0.100	-0.243	0.199
Tourism KOLs	TK3	4.660	1.341	-0.938	0.100	0.180	0.199
	TK4	4.600	1.358	-0.947	0.100	0.125	0.199
	TK5	4.650	1.344	-1.002	0.100	0.291	0.199
	TK6	4.620	1.357	-0.884	0.100	-0.156	0.199
	PD1	4.620	1.391	-0.964	0.100	-0.044	0.199
	PD2	4.630	1.397	-0.970	0.100	-0.065	0.199
	PD3	4.580	1.396	-0.950	0.100	0.090	0.199
	PD4	4.630	1.400	-0.948	0.100	0.080	0.199
Perceived Destination Image	PD5	4.610	1.412	-0.949	0.100	0.060	0.199
	PD6	4.590	1.361	-1.048	0.100	0.337	0.199
	PD7	4.620	1.384	-1.037	0.100	0.217	0.199
	PD8	4.570	1.406	-0.835	0.100	-0.377	0.199
	PD9	4.640	1.404	-1.017	0.100	0.243	0.199
Emotional Experience	EE1	4.610	1.468	-0.897	0.100	-0.056	0.199

	EE2	4.530	1.348	-0.815	0.100	-0.192	0.199
	EE3	4.580	1.326	-0.923	0.100	0.070	0.199
	EE4	4.620	1.360	-0.968	0.100	0.090	0.199
	EE5	4.610	1.360	-0.926	0.100	0.014	0.199
Travel decision-making	TD1	4.610	1.408	-0.946	0.100	0.209	0.199
	TD2	4.520	1.365	-0.889	0.100	-0.193	0.199
	TD3	4.600	1.381	-0.985	0.100	0.146	0.199
	TD4	4.620	1.343	-0.929	0.100	0.109	0.199

4.3. Reliability analysis

The reliability statistics in Table 3 evaluate measurement scale consistency using Cronbach's alpha (α) to analyze the internal consistency of study variables. The research demonstrates acceptable consistency with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.7, and strong reliability emerges when values exceed 0.8 (C. Wang et al., 2024). The measurement scales in this research demonstrate robustness because they show good internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values ranging between 0.838 and 0.929 for all study variables. Perceived destination image (α = 0.929) has the highest internal consistency among all constructs, which indicates that the items within this variable are highly correlated and consistently measure respondents' perceptions of the destination. Finally, the system quality (α = 0.913) and information quality (α = 0.898) are also highly reliable, which indicates the strength of these constructs in measuring the usability and content accuracy of tourism social media platforms. These values indicate that respondents were consistent in their evaluations of system effectiveness and content quality, and thus the measurement instruments are validated. The reliability (α = 0.885) of the Tourism KOLs Influence scale indicates a high level of reliability in measuring observable KOL influence on participants' attitudes towards travel. Likewise, the scale is reliable in capturing emotional experience (α = 0.850), which is also solid, as emotional experience is like emotional experience. Finally, although slightly lower than the other variables, travel decision-making (α = 0.838) still exceeds the 0.8 threshold, suggesting that the items in this construct accurately measure the likelihood of older tourists making travel decisions based on social media content, which further strengthens the robustness of the study's methodological framework and provides a solid empirical basis for studying the role of social media in shaping older tourists' travel behavior.

Table 3. Reliability Statistics

Study variables	**Number of questions**	**Cronbach's α**
System Quality	8	0.913
Information Quality	7	0.898
Tourism KOLs	6	0.885
Perceived Destination Image	9	0.929
Emotional Experience	5	0.850
Travel decision-making	4	0.838

4.4. Validity analysis

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity are two important measures of the validity of the dataset and its suitability for factor analysis, which are presented in Table 4. The KMO value of 0.968 indicates that the sampling adequacy is excellent, as values closer to 1.0 indicate that the data is very appropriate for factor extraction. KMO values of 0.8 and above are considered very good, and values of 0.9 and above are considered outstanding levels of sampling adequacy (C. Wang et al., 2024). The KMO value observed=0.968 is far beyond these benchmarks and indicates that the dataset has a strong factor structure, i.e., the variables in the study are highly correlated and suitable for factor analysis and structural equation modeling. This result indicates that the measurement model has construct validity, and the study's variables measure the intended theoretical dimensions. The validity of the dataset is further supported by Bartlett's Test of Sphericity, which tests whether the correlation matrix of the study variables is significantly different from an identity matrix (variables would be completely uncorrelated). The Chi-Square value obtained from the test results is 13,850.017 with 741 degrees of freedom (df) and a significance level (p-value) of 0.000. This strongly rejects the null hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix, and hence the study variables have strong intercorrelations that are suitable for factor extraction. The Bartlett's test result is highly significant, confirming that the dataset is statistically appropriate for conducting exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in the subsequent stages of analysis. The KMO measure and Bartlett's Test results together offer robust statistical evidence of the validity and reliability of the dataset, indicating that the variables are properly structured for further analytical procedures like factor analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM). This also strengthens the methodological rigor of the study and ensures that the constructs used in this research indeed measure the underlying theoretical concepts.

Table 4. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		**0.968**
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	13850.017
	df	741
	Sig.	0.000

4.5. Measurement model and fit metrics

The measurement model used in Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis is shown in Figure 4, with observed variables (rectangles), latent variables (ovals), and error terms (small circles) indicated as relationships between those variables. The factor loadings and interrelations among latent variables are used to assess the validity and reliability of the constructs in the measurement model. The model has multiple observed variables (indicators) for each latent variable in the model (system quality, information quality, tourism goals, perceived destination image, emotional experience, and travel decision making), each of which represents a conceptual dimension of the latent variable. The factor loadings, indicated by the numbers along each path connecting latent constructs to their observed indicators, measure the degree to which each observed variable represents the underlying latent construct. High factor loadings suggest strong associations, affirming that the observed variables effectively capture the intended construct. In this model, most factor loadings exceed 0.7, indicating a high level of construct validity and measurement reliability.

The correlations between latent variables are represented by curved bidirectional arrows, providing insights into the relationships among constructs within the theoretical framework. the correlation values range from 0.490 to 0.694, indicating moderate to strong associations. notably, perceived destination image and emotional experience (0.647), as well as information quality and system quality (0.657), exhibit strong positive correlations, suggesting that these constructs are interdependent in shaping travel decision-making. similarly, the correlation between tourism kols and emotional experience (0.606) underscores the influential role of digital influencers in shaping tourists' emotional responses.

The error terms (e1 to e39) capture the measurement errors and variance unexplained by the latent constructs. The presence of distinct error terms for each observed variable highlights that while the constructs explain a significant portion of variance, some measurement inconsistencies exist, which is expected in social science research.

In summary, the measurement model demonstrates strong validity and reliability, with high factor loadings and well-established inter-construct correlations, supporting its suitability for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and hypothesis testing in subsequent SEM analysis.

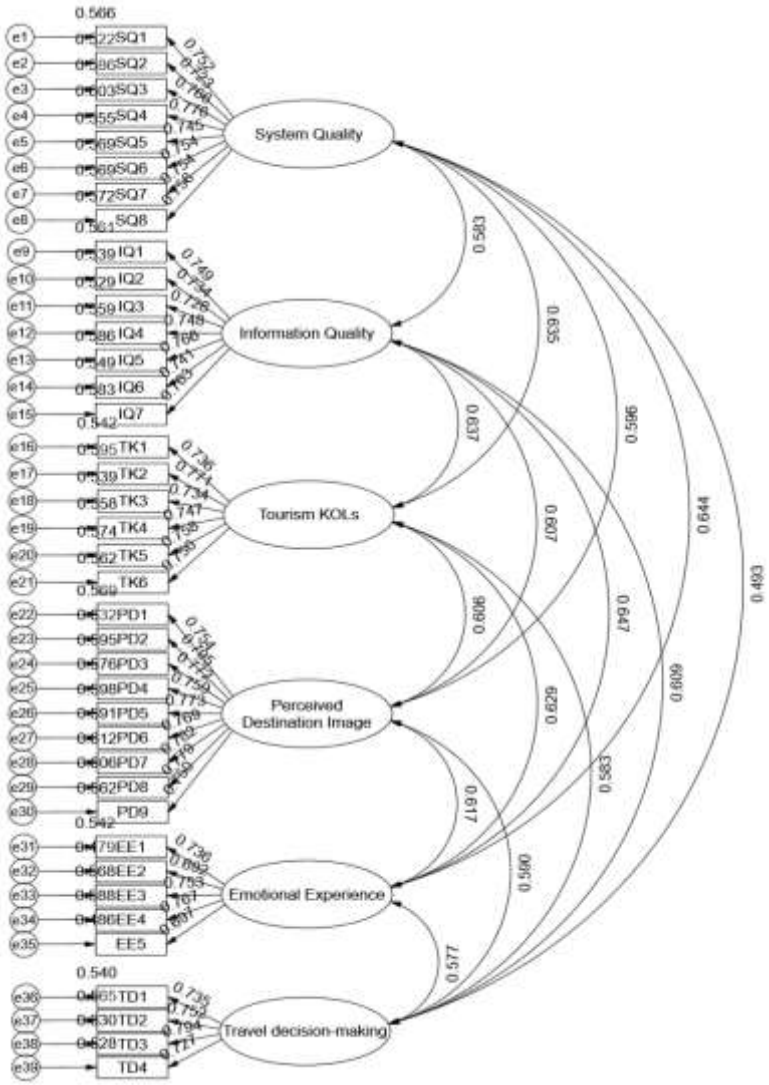

Figure 4. Measurement model

The evaluation of the measurement model's adequacy relies on the fit indices shown in Table 5. The chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df) = 1.383 demonstrates that the model fits the data structure appropriately because it remains below the standard threshold of 3.0. The model fit assessment indicates success with a value of 0.025 because this number remains below the threshold of 0.08. These results show that the model's specification contains minimal residual error. The model demonstrates sufficient capability to represent the observed indicators' variance and covariance relationships. The model demonstrates good absolute fit against a null model based on the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) = 0.927 and Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) = 0.917. The hypothesized model successfully explains a large amount of dataset variance and covariance because both indices surpass the recommended threshold of 0.927. The model's robustness is confirmed through the Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI) because it considers model complexity. The Normed Fit Index (NFI) = 0.933, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.979, and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.980 evaluate the proposed model against a null model that assumes no variable relationships. The model fits well when values surpass 0.9, and the observed data matches the theoretical model strongly based on the TLI and CFI values exceeding 0.97. These results demonstrate that the measurement model exhibits excellent comparative fit, reinforcing the appropriateness of the theoretical framework. The measurement model demonstrates statistical robustness and effective variable relationship capture because all fit indices surpass their recommended thresholds.

Table 5. Measure model fit metrics

Fit index	χ2/df	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	NFI	TLI	CFI

Reference standards	<3	<0.08	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9
Result	1.383	0.025	0.927	0.917	0.933	0.979	0.980

4.6. Convergent validity

A detailed assessment of convergent validity, which is core in CFA and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), is provided in Table 6, as it evaluates how many indicators that are supposed to measure the same latent variable are internally consistent and strongly correlated with each other. If factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) are above recommended thresholds, then convergent validity is established, and each construct effectively captures the intended theoretical concept (Sureshchandar, 2023).

Each observed indicator's connection to its associated latent variable is measured through factor loadings. The acceptable threshold for factor loadings is 0.7 or higher, according to Saeed et al. (2022), indicating proper representation of latent constructs by observed variables. The observed variables in this study display strong relationships with their corresponding constructs because all factor loadings fall within the acceptable range. The reliability of the System Quality construct (SQ1-SQ8) items is confirmed by their factor loadings, which range between 0.723 and 0.776. The validity of Information Quality (IQ1-IQ7) and Tourism KOLs (TK1-TK6) is supported by their factor loadings, which range from 0.728 to 0.766 and 0.734 to 0.771, respectively.

The measurement indicators for each construct exceed the recommended threshold of 0.7 in composite reliability (CR). The constructs System Quality (CR = 0.913) and Perceived Destination Image (CR = 0.929) demonstrate exceptional reliability because they effectively measure their underlying dimensions. The measurement model gains strength from the excellent internal consistency statistics of Information Quality (CR = 0.898) and Tourism KOLs (CR = 0.885). The first four observed variables, Emotional Experience (CR = 0.850) and Travel Decision-Making (CR = 0.839), reach an acceptable reliability level, demonstrating that they correctly measure their intended constructs. The value of average variance extracted exceeding 0.5 demonstrates that the construct explains more than 50% of the variance found in its measured indicators. The study demonstrates that the Perceived Destination Image (AVE = 0.594) displays the highest AVE value because it explains a large portion of its indicator variables through the latent construct. The constructs of System Quality (AVE = 0.568), Information Quality (AVE = 0.558), Tourism KOLs (AVE = 0.562), Emotional Experience (AVE = 0.532), and Travel Decision-Making (AVE = 0.566) demonstrate sufficient variance explanation for their observed indicators as their AVE values surpass 0.5. Overall, table 6 confirms that the measurement model exhibits strong convergent validity, as factor loadings, CR values, and AVE scores meet or exceed the recommended benchmarks.

Table 6. Convergence Validity

Latent variables	**Observation indicators**	**Factor loading**	**CR**	**AVE**
System Quality	SQ1	0.752	0.913	0.568
	SQ2	0.723		
	SQ3	0.766		
	SQ4	0.776		
	SQ5	0.745		
	SQ6	0.754		
	SQ7	0.754		
	SQ8	0.756		
Information Quality	IQ1	0.749	0.898	0.558
	IQ2	0.734		
	IQ3	0.728		
	IQ4	0.748		
	IQ5	0.766		
	IQ6	0.741		

Tourism KOLs	IQ7	0.763	0.885	0.562
	TK1	0.736		
	TK2	0.771		
	TK3	0.734		
	TK4	0.747		
	TK5	0.758		
	TK6	0.750		
Perceived Destination Image	PD1	0.754	0.929	0.594
	PD2	0.795		
	PD3	0.772		
	PD4	0.759		
	PD5	0.773		
	PD6	0.769		
	PD7	0.782		
	PD8	0.779		
	PD9	0.750		
Emotional Experience	EE1	0.736	0.850	0.532
	EE2	0.692		
	EE3	0.753		
	EE4	0.767		
	EE5	0.697		
Travel decision-making	TD1	0.735	0.839	0.566
	TD2	0.752		
	TD3	0.794		
	TD4	0.727		

4.7. Discriminant validity

Table 7 demonstrates the discriminant validity assessment which represents a fundamental aspect of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to ensure statistical uniqueness between latent variables and their theoretical framework components. A construct establishes discriminant validity when its relationship with its own indicators exceeds the relationships with any other construct in the model. The validity test involves comparing the square root of average variance extracted (AVE) diagonal values with the construct correlations found in off-diagonal values. The diagonal values show the square root of AVE for each construct where system quality reaches 0.754 and Travel Decision-Making reaches 0.752. These values demonstrate the ratio between latent variable variance and measurement error. Rönkkö and Cho (2020) establish discriminant validity through a comparison of construct square root AVE values with the maximum correlations between constructs. The study results show that discriminant validity exists because all off-diagonal correlation values remain lower than their corresponding diagonal values in each row and column. The relationship between Emotional Experience (EE) and System Quality (SQ) amounts to 0.644 yet the square root of AVE for SQ stands at 0.754 surpassing all other construct correlations. Travel Decision Making (TD) demonstrates a square root of AVE value of 0.752 which exceeds the 0.609 value of information quality (IQ) and all other constructs.

Additional insights into the relationships among variables are provided by the inter-constructed correlations. The highest correlation in the table is 0.647 between Emotional Experience (EE) and information quality (IQ), indicating that high-quality travel information in social media has a significant impact on older tourists' emotional engagement. Similarly, Tourism KOLs (TK) exhibits a correlation of 0.637 with information quality (IQ), suggesting that trusted key opinion leaders contribute significantly to the perceived quality of travel-related information. These relationships align with theoretical expectations while still maintaining sufficient discriminant validity.

Table 7 demonstrates that every latent construct maintains its uniqueness compared to other constructs thus preventing variable overlaps in the measurement model. The robustness of the structural model receives support from this strong discriminant validity because each constructs measures distinct travel decision-making aspects influenced by social media content.

Table 7. Discriminant validity test

Latent variables	**SQ**	**IQ**	**TK**	**PD**	**EE**	**TD**
System Quality	0.754***					
Information Quality	0.583	0.747***				
Tourism KOLs	0.635	0.637	0.750***			
Perceived Destination Image	0.596	0.607	0.606	0.771***		
Emotional Experience	0.644	0.647	0.629	0.617	0.729***	
Travel decision-making	0.493	0.609	0.583	0.590	0.577	0.752***

Note: The diagonal is the square root of the corresponding dimension AVE

SQ:System Quality; IQ: Information Quality; TK: Tourism KOLs; PD: Perceived Destination Image; EE: Emotional Experience; TD: Travel decision-making.

*** : P <0.005

4.8 Model fit metrics for the structural model

Table 8 demonstrates the model fit metrics for both theoretical and observed data assessment of the structural model. The evaluation process depends on multiple fit indices which measure different aspects of model performance. The research results demonstrate an exceptional match which validates the theoretical relationships between constructs. χ^2/df) = 1.386 (<3.0), RMSEA) = 0.025 (<0.05), GFI = 0.927; NFI = 0.933, TLI = 0.979, CFI = 0.980. The model fit quality can be considered acceptable when values exceed 0.9 and near optimal when they reach or surpass 0.95. The structural model demonstrates exceptional improvement over the null model because the TLI and CFI values exceed 0.9 which confirms the theoretical soundness of proposed relationships.

Table 8. Model fit metrics

Fit index	**χ2/df**	**RMSEA**	**GFI**	**AGFI**	**NFI**	**TLI**	**CFI**
Reference standards	<3	<0.08	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9
Result	1.386	0.025	0.927	0.917	0.933	0.979	0.980

4.9 Path analysis for direct effects

The results of the path analysis via the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach providing for the direct effects between the hypothesized latent constructs are shown in Table 9. It includes unstandardized regression estimates (Estimate in the table), standardized regression weights (β), standard error (S.E.), critical ratio (C.R.), and p-value, which account for all relationships and observe their significance and strength. The unstandardized regression weights (Estimate) indicate how much the dependent variable changes for a one-unit increase in the predictor variable, while all other factors are kept constant. Conversely, the standardized regression weights (β) ensure the effect sizes of the different constructs can be compared directly, considering the scales. The critical

ratio (C.R.) is determined by dividing the regression estimate by its standard error and is used as a z-score to decide the statistical significance, where C.R. more than 1.96 would be significant at a 95% level. Finally, p-values of less than 0.05 confirm statistical significance, while p-values of less than 0.001 are deemed highly significant.

The results reveal that system quality significantly influences perceived destination image (H1a, $\beta = 0.307$, $p < 0.001$) and emotional experience (H1b, $\beta = 0.377$, $p < 0.001$), but does not directly impact travel decision-making (H1c, $\beta = 0.006$, $p = 0.916$). This finding implies that although a well-designed and interactive social media platform can improve tourists' perceptions and emotional engagement, it does not directly impact travel-related decision-making. This relationship and other matters not related to direct media may be mediated by intervening factors, such as those related to cognitive and affective evaluations of the destination.

Similarly, information quality exerts a significant positive influence on perceived destination image (H2a, $\beta = 0.276$, $p < 0.001$), emotional experience (H2b, $\beta = 0.256$, $p < 0.001$), and travel decision-making (H2c, $\beta = 0.216$, $p < 0.001$). These results indicate that high-quality tourism-related information in Social media not only enhances cognitive and affective perceptions of a destination but also directly impacts the final decision-making process, reinforcing the importance of accurate, engaging, and visually compelling travel content.

The role of Tourism KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) is also evident, with significant effects on perceived destination image (H3a, $\beta = 0.237$, $p < 0.001$), emotional experience (H3b, $\beta = 0.222$, $p < 0.001$), and travel decision-making (H3c, $\beta = 0.142$, $p = 0.019$). The study shows that influencer credibility together with engagement strongly influences tourist perception and emotional responses but Tourism KOLs directly affect travel choices at a lower level which still maintain statistical significance. The study confirms that digital influencers hold substantial marketing power to influence consumers during their decision-making phase in tourism. Travel decision-making significantly depends on both perceived destination image (A) and emotional experience (B) according to the research findings (H4: $\beta = 0.199$, $p < 0.001$, H5: $\beta = 0.289$, $p < 0.001$). Emotional experiences demonstrate a stronger influence than a perceived destination image when it comes to motivating older travelers to visit destinations. The results support academic research indicating that emotional marketing uses are becoming more prominent in digital tourism advertising.

Among the 11 tested hypotheses, 10 are supported, with only H1c (System Quality → travel decision-making) being non-significant. The strongest effects are observed in the relationships between System Quality and emotional experience (H1b, $\beta = 0.377$), and emotional experience and travel decision-making (H5, $\beta = 0.289$). These findings suggest that emotionally engaging digital content plays a fundamental role in driving travel decisions, and that destination image and platform interactivity contribute indirectly through emotional engagement.

Overall, the results confirm that high-quality tourism-related digital content, influencer credibility, and emotionally engaging storytelling are essential in shaping travel perceptions and decisions among older Chinese tourists. Although technical aspects of social media platforms alone do not directly determine travel behavior, their influence through perception-building and emotional engagement suggests an indirect pathway, warranting further mediation analysis.

Table 9. Direct path effects

Hypothesis	Path	Estimate	β	S.E.	C.R.	P	Results
H1a	SQ→PD	0.314	0.307	0.052	6.023	***	Supported
H2a	IQ→PD	0.280	0.276	0.052	5.444	***	Supported
H3a	TK→PD	0.247	0.237	0.056	4.424	***	Supported
H1b	SQ→EE	0.398	0.377	0.057	6.960	***	Supported
H2b	IQ→EE	0.268	0.256	0.055	4.872	***	Supported
H3b	TK→EE	0.239	0.222	0.060	3.999	***	Supported

H1c	SQ→TD	0.006	0.006	0.061	0.106	0.916	Non-supported
H2c	IQ→TD	0.216	0.216	0.058	3.690	***	Supported
H3c	TK→TD	0.145	0.142	0.062	2.351	0.019	Supported
H4	PD→TD	0.196	0.199	0.053	3.682	***	Supported
H5	EE→TD	0.276	0.289	0.060	4.557	***	Supported

Note: SQ:System Quality; IQ: Information Quality; TK: Tourism KOLs; PD: Perceived Destination Image; EE: Emotional Experience; TD: Travel decision-making.

***: $p<0.001$

4.10 Path analysis for indirect effects

Table 10 shows the indirect pathways system quality and information quality and tourism kols use to influence travel decision-making by means of perceived destination image and emotional experience. The research used bootstrap analysis for statistical estimation which performed repeated resampling to determine reliable indirect effects and their confidence intervals. The bias-corrected 95% confidence interval (CI) helps determine statistical significance of indirect effects because non-inclusion of zero within the interval indicates effect significance. The results establish that perceived destination image together with emotional experience act as critical intermediaries between quality systems feedback and travel decisions. Travel decision-making receives indirect effects from system quality which operate through perceived destination image (H6, effect = 0.061, CI = [0.015, 0.135]) and emotional experience (H9, effect = 0.110, CI = [0.026, 0.211]) yet emotional experience demonstrates a stronger mediation effect. This suggests that although platform usability does not directly impact travel decision-making, its influence is realized through improved destination perception and emotional engagement.

Similarly, information quality indirectly affects travel decision-making via perceived destination image (H7, effect = 0.055, CI = [0.013, 0.120]) and emotional experience (H10, effect = 0.074, CI = [0.026, 0.197]), confirming that high-quality tourism content enhances both cognitive and emotional factors that ultimately drive travel decisions. For Tourism KOLs, both mediation paths are significant (H8, effect = 0.048, CI = [0.011, 0.139]; H11, effect = 0.066, CI = [0.015, 0.148]), reinforcing the importance of influencer-driven content in shaping tourist perceptions and emotions, which in turn influence travel intentions.

Overall, the results show that there is a significant mediation of the relationships between system quality, content quality, influencer recommendations, and travel decision-making by destination perception and emotional engagement over direct effects. This proves that without this emotion, there is a lack of connection between digital engagement and actual consumer behavior, and as such, could be of great value to the tourism marketer and content creator in optimizing their digital tourism campaigns.

Table 10. Indirect effect bootstrap analysis

Hypothesis	**Mediation path**	**Effect value**	**SE**	**Bias-Corrected 95%CI**		**Results**
H6	SQ→PD→TD	0.061	0.030	0.015	0.135	Supported
H7	IQ→PD→TD	0.055	0.027	0.013	0.120	Supported
H8	TK→PD→TD	0.048	0.028	0.011	0.139	Supported

H9	SQ→EE→TD	0.110	0.047	0.026	0.211	Supported
H10	IQ→EE→TD	0.074	0.038	0.026	0.197	Supported
H11	TK→EE→TD	0.066	0.032	0.015	0.148	Supported

Note: SQ: System Quality; IQ: Information Quality; TK: Tourism KOLs; PD: Perceived Destination Image; EE: Emotional Experience; TD: Travel decision-making.

4.11 Total effects

The total effect of key latent variables in the structural equation model, including direct and indirect effects, is presented in Table 11, which summarizes the total effect of one variable on another, including the direct effect and all mediated effects through perceived destination image and emotional experience.

system quality, information quality, and tourism kols significantly impact emotional experience and perceived destination image, both of which further shape travel decision-making. among these, system quality exerts the strongest total effect on emotional experience (0.398, CI = [0.203, 0.584]), reinforcing that well-functioning and interactive social media platforms enhance users' emotional engagement with tourism content. Similarly, information quality (0.268, CI = [0.107, 0.517]) and Tourism KOLs (0.239, CI = [0.064, 0.431]) also contribute significantly to emotional experience, highlighting the importance of content accuracy, visual appeal, and influencer credibility in generating affective responses among older travelers.

In terms of perceived destination image, all three predictor variables exhibit significant effects: system quality (0.314, CI = [0.132, 0.446]), information quality (0.280, CI = [0.124, 0.432]), and tourism KOLs (0.247, CI = [0.082, 0.470]). these findings suggest that a combination of platform usability, high-quality travel content, and influencer recommendations enhances the cognitive and emotional perceptions of a travel destination. Regarding travel decision-making, the strongest predictor is information quality (0.344, CI = [0.174, 0.552]), confirming that well-structured and reliable travel information significantly influences tourists' willingness to visit a destination. tourism KOLs also exhibit a notable total effect (0.260, CI = [0.038, 0.460]), reinforcing the influence of digital influencers in shaping travel behavior. While System Quality shows a lower total effect on travel decision-making (0.178, CI = [-0.013, 0.363]), its influence primarily operates through mediating variables, as suggested by its non-significant direct effect in previous analyses.

Finally, emotional experience (0.276, CI = [0.097, 0.466]) and perceived destination image (0.196, CI = [0.021, 0.340]) both have significant total effects on travel decision-making, with emotional experience playing a more dominant role. These findings confirm that the affective connection formed through digital tourism content is a stronger determinant of travel decisions compared to purely cognitive perceptions.

Overall, these results highlight that the influence of digital tourism platforms on older travelers' decision-making is largely mediated through emotional engagement and destination perception, with information quality and tourism KOLs playing particularly critical roles in driving travel intentions.

Table 11. Total Effects

Effect path	**Effect size**	**SE**	**Bias-Corrected 95%CI**	
SQ→EE	0.398	0.090	0.203	0.584
IQ→EE	0.268	0.090	0.107	0.517
TK→EE	0.239	0.094	0.064	0.431
SQ→PD	0.314	0.080	0.132	0.446
IQ→PD	0.280	0.080	0.124	0.432
TK→PD	0.247	0.094	0.082	0.470
SQ→TD	0.178	0.089	-0.013	0.363
IQ→TD	0.344	0.091	0.174	0.552

TK→TD	0.260	0.101	0.038	0.460
EE→TD	0.276	0.097	0.097	0.466
PD→TD	0.196	0.078	0.021	0.340

Note: SQ: System Quality; IQ: Information Quality; TK: Tourism KOLs; PD: Perceived Destination Image; EE: Emotional Experience; TD: Travel decision-making.

The structural model of the relationships between the variables is shown in Figure 5. The results show that the perceived destination image is significantly influenced by system quality and information quality, and tourism KOLs and information quality are important determinants of emotional experience. The effects that both perceived destination image and emotional experience have in influencing travel decision makings point out the dual role which cognitive and affective factors play in deciding tourism behavior. Standards of the path coefficients imply that the influence of the information credibility and interactive engagement in shaping elderly tourists' perceptions and decisions. The model confirms the importance of digital tourism platforms in enhancing user experiences, thereby facilitating informed and emotionally driven travel choices.

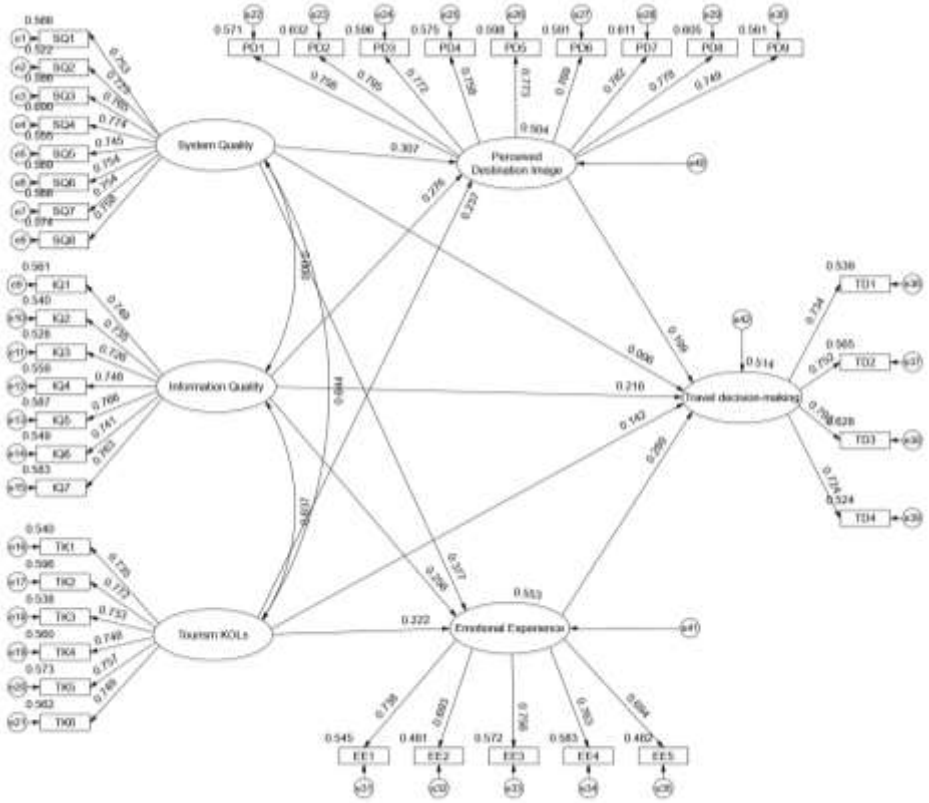

Figure 5. Structural model diagram

5.DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1. Theoretical Implications

In this study, it is shown how perceived destination image and emotional experience mediate between system quality, information quality, and tourism KOLs to travel decisions. Second, this study extends the use of the S-O-R model in demonstrating how external stimuli (S: social media platforms) affect users' cognition (perceived destination image) and affect (emotional experience), which, in turn, leads to travel decision-making (R). Previously, these studies have mostly focused on how younger users consume content on social media. However, this study is different in that it breaks down the pathways that users take through the cognitive aspect as well as the emotional aspect of the travel decision-making process among older adults. This is contrary to previous research

that suggests younger consumers primarily use rational evaluations in their travel decisions (Fernandes & Pereira, 2021). By proving that emotional drivers have more influence in the case of older travelers, this study extends an S-O-R model to point out that affective engagement must be taken into consideration in digital tourism marketing. At the same time, it suggests a more detailed investigation of age-dependent differences in online consumer behavior.

Second, this study enhances the ISSM framework by providing empirical evidence that system quality does not directly impact travel decision-making but exerts an indirect influence through perceived destination image and emotional experience. Traditional ISSM research has suggested that system quality plays a direct role in shaping user behavior, particularly in e-commerce and online travel booking contexts (Han et al., 2023). However, this study reveals that within the social media marketing environment, users prioritize content quality over platform functionality. In contrast to any previous study that places emphasis on the impact of system quality in driving user behavioral information in the digital environment (Saura et al., 2021), this study outlines how in social media tourism marketing, unlike system quality being a direct facilitator of user decision-making, its contribution is largely supportive in facilitating content accessibility and engagement. These results highlight the importance of technical and content optimization in tandem to optimize both engagement and decision-making in social media platforms

This study also contributes to the CAB model by demonstrating the superior impact of emotional experience on perceived destination image on travel decisions. Based on the literature, prior studies have primarily focused on a cognitive viewpoint, i.e., destination image, as drivers of tourist behavior, and emotions have not been the focus (Tavitiyaman et al., 2021). Yet, the results contradict this view as they show that in the social media context, emotional engagement matters more than purely cognitive evaluations when it comes to travel decision-making. Consequently, older travelers seem to use emotional resonance more than logic in the analysis of digital tourism content. This study extends the CAB model to social media-based tourism marketing and highlights that emotional content strategies are needed within social media-based tourism marketing because emotional EIU's should be created by using storytelling, immersive visuals, and sensory engagement to influence older consumers' travel intentions. This study, thus, closes a critical gap in KOL marketing research by evaluating the impact of social media-based influencers' content on both cognitive and emotional reactions of older adults. Previous research has demonstrated the significance of social influence in tourism decision-making; however, most of the research has been on traditional e-WOM (electronic word of mouth) and text-based recommendations on social media (Akbari et al., 2022). This work extends the understanding of KOL marketing by showing that social media platforms do not only boost the perceived image of the destination but also improve the emotional experience that leads to the decision-making of going to any destination. The results also indicate that compared to user-generated content (UGC), KOL content carries greater credibility and persuasive power, aligning with Informational and Normative Influence Theory (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). More importantly, this study reveals that the effectiveness of KOL marketing in the social media environment is primarily driven by emotional engagement rather than rational persuasion, offering a new perspective for future research on influencer-driven tourism promotion.

5.2. Practical Implications

This study implicates the destination marketing organizations (DMOs), tourism enterprises, social media platform operators, and content creators, by outlining actionable pathways to enhance the effectiveness of social media in the senior tourism market.

First, DMOs and tourism enterprises should optimize social media content strategies by enhancing emotional storytelling to foster deeper engagement with older travelers. Given that emotional experience exerts a stronger influence on travel decision-making than perceived destination image, tourism marketing strategies should prioritize emotion-driven content rather than relying solely on information. DMOs and tourism enterprises should invest in producing highly immersive and narrative-driven social media, leveraging authentic travel experiences, emotional storytelling, and cultural immersion to stimulate an emotional connection with potential tourists. Tourism enterprises can work closely with these social media platforms to create senior-focused content series on different aspects of travel, from planning to on-site experiences. This way, they would be able to visualize their travel and get familiar with a travel destination. DMOs should also motivate local tourism businesses to cooperate with social media content creators to produce emotionally attractive content that highlights local hospitality, wellness tourism services, and age-friendly services in a bid to reinforce the notion of inclusiveness and comfort for older travelers.

Second, social media platforms and KOL content creators should improve the credibility and interactivity to help older adults make travel decisions. Specifically, the study shows that while KOLs certainly provide travel information, the emotional aspect of their videos greatly improves viewers' emotional experiences, subsequently influencing viewers' travel intentions. For this reason, social media platforms should improve KOL recommendation algorithms to guarantee content authenticity and relevance, and provide personalized recommendations

based on older travelers' preferences. Additionally, KOL content creators should not focus too much on commercialization; rather, they should prioritize authenticity by showcasing real travel experiences and interacting with local cultures or sharing personal reflections. This approach helps viewers understand that the content is genuine and connects with them on an emotional level. Instead of relying heavily on promotional content, KOLs can introduce interviews with residents, immersive cultural interactions, and real-life travel challenges to build stronger social engagement and confidence with the audience. Social media platforms could also incorporate interactive formats like live stream Q&A sessions and immersive storytelling, such as user-generated stories about a place or destination, so older users can immerse themselves in a location and use that experience to make informed travel decisions.

In general, we assert that social media marketing in the senior tourism industry is more efficient than traditional advertising models, and success depends on the ability to trigger emotional engagement and publish credible content that enhances the user experience. To achieve the best results of social media marketing for older travelers, DMOs, tourism enterprises, social media platforms, and KOL creators should collaborate to create strategies that improve content authenticity, increase platform accessibility, and strengthen KOL engagement. Through these coordinated efforts, social media can be a powerful tool to influence travel decisions of older adults and serve as an important information source in the senior tourism market.

5.3. Conclusion

This study developd a model of tourism social media influencing the travel decision-making of older Chinese tourists, which emphasised the significant role of system quality, information quality, and tourism KOLs, with perceived destination image and emotional experience acting as mediators. The findings confirm that high-quality social media content and emotion-driven dissemination strategies significantly enhance travel intentions among older tourists, with emotional experience exerting a stronger influence than cognitive factors. This highlights the necessity for social media marketing strategies to prioritize emotional engagement. Additionally, while system quality does not directly impact travel decision-making, it indirectly contributes to increased travel intention by enhancing information dissemination and user experience.

This study has a few limitations despite its contributions. The first technical limitation is the scope of generalizability, as the study was restricted to Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou to analyze the travel behavior and digital engagement patterns of older adults in regions with varying levels of digital engagement. Second, the cross-sectional design does not allow for an understanding of the long-term effects of social media on travel decision-making. Longitudinal research on changes in travel behavior over time could be considered for future studies. Thirdly, the study does not compare different age groups, levels of digital engagement, and motivations for deeper insights. Fourth, theoretical constraints arise from the exclusive use of the S-O-R model, ISSM, and CAB model without considering other frameworks such as TAM or TPB, which could offer different perspectives on user behavior. Additionally, the study only focuses on travel to Thailand as the destination, so the results may not be applicable to other travel markets. Future research could explore other domestic and international destinations to enhance the broader validity of the conclusions. The sample primarily consists of active social media users, potentially excluding older adults who engage less on social media. Future studies could segment the market and examine the interaction between social media exposure and travel decisions. This study takes the initial step in examining the direct and indirect effects of social media on travel decision-making but does not address post-travel outcomes such as destination loyalty or repeat visitation, which are crucial for understanding the long-term impact of social media marketing on tourism. Addressing these limitations in future research would enhance the robustness, applicability, and theoretical depth of the findings.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (protocol code R.36/2025 and February 27, 2025)

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to academic interests.

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

Appendix A

Appendix A.1 Measurement

Constructs	Measurement Items

System Quality	SQ1: The information search function of tourism Social media is too complex to handle appropriately.
	SQ2 : It is complicated to filter effective tourism information on the tourism Social media platform.
	SQ3 : Travel social media content can adapt to various needs.
	SQ4 : Travel social media content can be flexibly adjusted to meet new requirements or conditions.
	SQ5 : It is easy to switch between pages on the travel social media platform.
	SQ6 : Generally, the travel social media platform is easy to navigate.
	SQ7: The travel social media platform is easy to use.
	SQ8 : Generally, the travel social media platform is user-friendly.
Information Quality	IQ1:Tourism social media provides complete and comprehensive information.
	IQ2: The information on tourism social media is relevant to travel decisions.
	IQ3: The information provided on tourism social media is up-to-date and received in a timely manner.
	IQ4: Tourism social media: The information is informative and valuable for trip planning.
	IQ5: The information presented on tourism social media is well laid out and displayed on the screen.
	IQ6: The information on tourism social media is accurate and reliable.
	The information on tourism social media is easy to understand and clear in meaning.
Tourism KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders)	TK1: I like to travel to places recommended by travel vloggers without scandals, experts (expert, experienced, and knowledgeable), and trustworthy (dependable, honest, and reliable).
	TK2: I prefer to travel to places recommended by intimate travel vloggers
	TK3: The image and content atmosphere of travel vloggers should be relevant and match the travel destination.
	TK4: The expertise of travel vloggers should answer travelers' inquiries about the destination, and their attractiveness when visiting these places makes me want to travel there.
	TK5: I prefer to travel to destinations where KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) give positive and detailed reviews and share their personal experiences about the places.
	TK6: I prefer to travel to destinations when KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) show their direct experiences (virtual tours) and offer special travel deals...
Perceived Destination Image	PD1: After watching the travel social media, l felt the unique history and heritage of the destination.
	PD2: After watching the travel social media, l perceived the friendliness and helpfulness of the local people at the destination.
	PD3: After watching the travel social media, l saw the breathtaking scenery and natural attractions of the destination.
	PD4: After watching the travel social media, l saw the unspoiled and fascinating landscape of the destination.

	PD5: After watching the travel social media, l became interested in the tempting cultural events and festivals of the destination.
	PD6: After watching the travel social media, l considered the destination to have a safe and secure environment.
	PD7: After watching the travel social media, I became interested in the exciting activities (such as boating, fishing, etc.) available at the destination.
	PD8: After watching the travel social media, I found the destination to have good bargain shopping options.
	PD9: After watching the travel social media, I found the destination to have a wide choice of accommodations.
Emotional Experience	EE1: After watching the travel social media, this destination has stimulated my emotions.
	EE2: After watching the travel social media, this destination has been memorable to me.
	EE3: After watching the travel social media, I have experienced distinctive and exciting situations at this destination.
	EE4: After watching the travel social media, I have experienced distinctive and exciting situations at this destination.
	EE5: After watching the travel social media, I consider this destination to be exceptional.
Travel decision-making	TD1: I am significantly influenced by tourism Social media to visit the destination featured in them.
	TD2: I am more likely to make a travel plan to visit the place showcased in tourism Social media in the near future.
	TD3: The tourism Social media create an immediate urge within me to visit the destination depicted in them soon.
	TD4: I am willing to invest both money and time in traveling to the destination I was introduced to through tourism Social media.

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