

Capturing Attention: A Qualitative Exploration of Tourists' Perceptions of Visual Appeal on Social Media

**Jyotiranjana Mohapatra¹, Dr. Manas Ranjan Chowdhury²,
Dr. Rashmi Ranjan Mohapatra³**

¹Research Scholar, Fakir Mohan University, Balasore, Odisha

²Associate professor, Trident Academy of Technology, Bhubaneswar, Odisha

³Assistant professor, ABA College, Balasore, Odisha

Abstract:

In the digital age, social media platforms have emerged as strong instruments for affecting tourist attitudes and travel decisions. The purpose of this study is to investigate how visual content affects travelers' emotional and cognitive reactions to places. Using a qualitative research approach, data were gathered from active social media users (DMO, influencers, and travel agents) who regularly interact with travel-related content through focus groups and in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was adopted to explore the necessary patterns and insights from participant viewpoints. The results show that visual appeal has a considerable impact on destination image development, attachment, and travel intention. Four key elements emerged: Visual Expression & Aesthetic Appeal, Emotional Association and Prospective Experience, Perceived authenticity and Trust, Social Impact and Digital Evidence. Participants stressed that visually appealing and meaningful depictions increase trust and interest, affecting their willingness to visit a destination. Furthermore, user-generated content was discovered to be more convincing than promotion due to its perceived authenticity. The study advances to the rising body of knowledge in digital tourism marketing by emphasizing the value of visual storytelling. It has practical significance for destination marketers looking to create visually appealing and authentic social media campaigns to attract prospective guests.

Keywords: Visual appeal, social media, tourism, Digital, DMOS

Introduction

Tourism has advanced significantly beyond conventional brochures and word-of-mouth advertising in the modern era of digital connectedness (Nandanwar & Karmadkar, 2025). These days, the visual aspect of tourism—photos, videos, reels, and other digital imagery—plays a major role in influencing how people envision, visit, and use travel locations (Anjani & Suryani, 2025). Travel motivation, destination choice, and visitor engagement are all significantly influenced by visual attractiveness, which is predominantly communicated through social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok (Chatzigeorgiou et al., 2025). Travelers are now co-creators of destination imagery, and the transition from textual to visual communication has completely changed how tourism destinations are marketed, transforming commonplace locations into "must-visit" attractions (Saini et al., 2024).

Visual appeal refers to the visual, emotional, and symbolic aspects of images that capture viewers' attention and elicit good feelings about a location. In tourism marketing, photographs are powerful semiotic

instruments for constructing and communicating meaning. Sodikov, (2024) asserts that destination image formation theory proposes that tourists' impressions of locations are formed by both organic (films, news, or social networks) and induced sources (promotional campaigns). Today, social media platforms effortlessly mix these two dimensions: organic and induced, since user-generated content (UGC) frequently matches with or accentuates tourism companies' official branding(Judijanto et al., 2024). Visual imagery's persuasive power stems from its ability to elicit emotions, convey authenticity, and arouse desire – all of which are critical precursors to travel decisions(Aliyah et al., 2025)

Both the competitive dynamics of the tourism business and the behavior of tourists have been profoundly changed by the visual domination of digital culture(Surya et al., 2023). Nowadays, individual travelers, travel influencers, and destination marketing organizations (DMOs) compete in a highly visual market where aesthetic appeal frequently triumphs over in-depth information(Imran, 2024). The popularity of "Instagrammable" places, for example, is a prime example of the phenomena of visual consumption; people are increasingly selecting destinations primarily on their photographic appeal rather than just its historical, cultural, or recreational significance(Wibisono & Lale, 2024). In order to meet the demands of social media-savvy travelers, destinations are renovating their physical and digital areas to improve visual attractiveness. This includes include photogenic landmarks, mural art, and picturesque vantage points(Sutrisno et al., 2024).

Social media has democratized tourism representation, empowering everyday users to define destination pictures through their visual tales(Agrawal, 2025). User-generated photographs are typically more credible than standard marketing since they are viewed as authentic and experiential. Research has demonstrated that peer-shared photographs have a considerable influence on destination image creation and travel intentions (Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2021). These pictures are virtual experiences that allow potential tourists to evaluate the aesthetic and emotional elements of a location before visiting. Thus, visual appeal serves as a persuasive and symbolic mechanism that bridges the gap between perception and action, rather than simply as decoration(Fitri et al., 2023).

Another factor contributing to the "visual turn" in tourism studies is the abundance of visual content on social media. The idea of the "tourist gaze" was first presented by academics like Urry (1990), who highlighted how travelers selectively look and photograph locations in order to obtain visual pleasure. Travelers are both the spectators and the seen in the era of digital media, making this gaze reciprocal(S, 2023). By posting pictures that support their identities as world travelers and legitimize their experiences, they engage in visual tourism(Wang, 2024). As a result, visual attractiveness serves as a performative component in travel, influencing not only how places are portrayed but also how visitors perceive and recall them. Furthermore, the development of destination branding heavily relies on visual content. A cohesive collection of visual clues, including as colors, symbols, landmarks, and landscapes, that elicit certain associations in viewers' minds are frequently the source of a destination's brand image (Dewayani et al., 2023).

But there are drawbacks to the predominance of aesthetic appeal. Seeking "picture-perfect" experiences can result in superficial interactions with locations, excessive tourism in physically appealing locations, and disregard for lesser-known but culturally significant locations(Mishra, 2024). Additionally, tourists may become dissatisfied or disillusioned upon arrival due to exaggerated expectations created by artificially enhanced or altered photos. In order to preserve authenticity and strike a balance between visitor

experiences and local realities, visual imagery must be managed ethically and sustainably, even while it effectively advertises places(Iglesias-Sánchez et al., 2020).

The potential of photos to link identification, emotion, and imagination is what gives them power on social media(Qian, 2023). Destinations can convey their environment, mood, and sensual appeal—aspects that words frequently fall short of capturing—through visual storytelling(Bejaoui et al., 2024). The emotional resonance of images becomes crucial for distinction in a crowded digital landscape. Travelers now actively participate in co-creating the visual culture of travel, rather than only consuming visual content(Christou et al., 2025). Every shared photo reinforces the cycle of seeing, sharing, and traveling by serving as a marketing tool and a memory.

Objectives

- To investigate how visual appeal influences tourists' perceptions and attitudes toward locations appeared on social media channels.
- To analyze the influence of social media representations on visitors' destination selection and travel intentions.
- To investigate how user-generated visual content (UGC) contributes to the creation and sharing of destination images.
- To examine the link between emotional engagement with visual content and tourists' behavioral intentions.

Research gap

Even while social media is becoming more widely acknowledged as a potent tool for promoting travel, less is known about the psychological and behavioral effects of visual attractiveness on travellers(Bejaoui et al., 2024). While the visual aspect of social media communication has just lately started to gain systematic scholarly study, the majority of the literature currently available on destination marketing has concentrated on textual communication, information exchange, and online evaluations. Few studies have studied how aesthetic attributes, emotional resonance, and symbolic meanings inherent in images influence travel decisions and destination preferences in the digital setting, despite the fact that numerous studies have looked at destination image development (Andersson, 2024)).

Additionally, user-generated visual content (UGC), which currently dominates social media ecosystems, has received less attention in previous study than content produced by destination marketing organizations (DMOs)(Polymeri et al., 2025). When compared to carefully chosen promotional images, there is insufficient empirical data on how regular travelers' photos—which are frequently seen as more approachable and authentic—influence prospective visitors. The psychological processes that connect visual appeal to emotional engagement, perceived authenticity, and behavioral intention have also received little study. Few recent research have applied the idea of the "tourist gaze" (Urry, 1990) to digital and social media contexts, despite the fact that it describes how visuality impacts tourism experiences.

Furthermore, there is still a lack of research on regional and cultural differences in how visual attractiveness is interpreted, especially in developing countries like India. The majority of research has concentrated on Western or international tourism contexts, ignoring the ways that local aesthetics, cultural narratives, and historical imagery affect how both domestic and foreign travelers see a site. As a result, there is a substantial research gap regarding how destination images are constructed, mediated, and transformed by visual appeal on social media and how this visual communication might be properly utilized for genuine and sustainable tourist promotion.

Literature Review

Social media's explosive growth has revolutionized the production, distribution, and consumption of information about travel destinations (Dewayani et al., 2023).. Among the various communication tools made possible by digital platforms, visual content—such as images, videos, and other image-based media—has emerged as the most important factor influencing visitor interest, engagement, and decision-making (Fitri et al., 2023).. The literature on visual appeal in tourism covers a wide range of academic fields, including social media marketing, user-generated content (UGC), electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), destination image formation, and visual communication. In order to determine the current state of knowledge about how visual appeal influences traveler behavior and destination representation, this study summarizes important theoretical and empirical contributions from these related domains (Mishra, 2024)..

Destination image has been defined as a cognitive and emotive construct influenced by information sources and personal experiences in core tourism literature. Early studies focused on how traditional media, travel guides, brochures, and personal networks shape people's perceptions of places (Sutrisno et al., 2024). These media's visual pictures functioned as potent semantic tools, communicating cultural narratives, symbolic meanings, and aesthetic cues that shaped people's perceptions of locations. As time went on, academics realized that visual appeal might elicit symbolic linkages and emotional reactions, making pictures more convincing than just written descriptions.

The development of destination images has changed from a top-down communication approach to one that is dynamic, participative, and visually focused due to the widespread use of social media (Agrawal, 2025). Social media platforms have made it possible for travelers and destination marketers to create and distribute photos at a speed and scale never seen before. Research on electronic word-of-mouth emphasizes the legitimacy and reach of user-generated content, demonstrating that prospective tourists frequently depend on photos and experiences posted by their peers when assessing places (Imran, 2024). According to a number of studies, images posted by other travelers typically have more authenticity than official promotional images, which has a higher impact on travel intentions.

Researchers studying social media marketing in tourism have emphasized the transformative power of visual platforms in altering customer behaviour (Saini et al., 2024).. Platforms that highlight visual content, such as photo- and video-sharing networks, serve not only as communication conduits, but also as virtual experience places where people can sample destinations. Visual material promotes vicarious consumption by allowing viewers to imagine themselves in gorgeous landscapes, cultural contexts, and experiencing situations. This imagined participation is thought to increase emotional attachment and desire, which are important precursors to actual travel decisions (Wang, 2024)..

Important contributions to the literature highlight how exposure to visually appealing content activates psychological processes (Wibisono & Lale, 2024). To explain how images produce emotional resonance, academics rely on theories of affective response, narrative transportation, and experiential marketing. Joy, curiosity, awe, and nostalgia can all be evoked by visual stimuli; these feelings enhance the appeal of a destination and have an impact on behavior. High-quality images with vivid colors, imaginative compositions, and moving situations typically encourage more user interaction and sharing, which increases their persuasive power. Consumer behavior studies repeatedly show that visually rich material outperforms text alone in terms of attention, retention, and emotional response.

Research has focused on user-generated visual content because of its quantity, variety, and perceived authenticity. In addition to well-known sites, photographs taken by travelers often show individual

experiences, social interactions, and distinctive viewpoints. Potential tourists can view locations via a variety of perspectives thanks to this diversity of pictures, which lessens information asymmetry and strengthens trust (Surya et al., 2023). Meta-analyses of tourism studies show that user-generated content (UGC) has a greater impact on emotive reactions (like emotional connection) and cognitive assessments (like perceived attractiveness) than content created by marketers. Because of this, academics advise destination marketers to incorporate user-generated content (UGC) into their marketing plans instead of depending just on expert images.

Although the literature acknowledges the significance of aesthetic appeal, it also highlights intricate dynamics and difficulties. One field of study looks at the connection between cultural interpretation and the aesthetics of visual content. Travel goals, age groupings, and cultural backgrounds all have different aesthetic preferences when it comes to visual appeal. Images that showcase natural scenery, for instance, could be very appealing to adventure seekers but less so to cultural tourists looking to experience heritage. Domestic and foreign audiences may respond differently to cultural symbolism incorporated into images. Thus, while assessing the influence of visual attractiveness, research highlights the importance of comprehending contextual and demographic moderating elements.

Overtourism, environmental deterioration, and the commercialization of regional cultures have all been connected to the quest for "Instagrammable" situations (Qian, 2023). According to some research, travel destinations occasionally sacrifice authenticity in order to make their physical locations more appealing by adding art installations, picturesque vistas, and social media-ready settings. An increasing amount of research highlights the danger of producing tourism experiences that are shallow, where the destination's appearance takes precedence over its lived, cultural, and environmental substance (Nandanwar & Karmadkar, 2025). Academics advocate for a well-rounded strategy that takes sustainable tourism growth and aesthetic appeal into account.

In conclusion, the literature emphasizes the transforming effect of visual appeal on tourism in the digital age. Visual material on social media is a persuasive and emotionally engaging medium that influences destination image, travel intentions, and tourist behavior. User-generated graphics, in particular, serve as genuine sources of influence, but professional imagery is still crucial for company identification. However, cultural interpretation, ethical considerations, and platform differences complicate the picture, emphasizing the importance of nuanced methods. The present collection of research lays a solid framework for future empirical investigations, notably into cross-platform effects, algorithmic affects, and long-term visual communication techniques.

Methodology

In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how visitors perceive and interpret visual appeal in social media imagery and how these perceptions impact their travel reasons and destination choices, the qualitative research approach can be successfully utilized to this study. Qualitative research is especially useful for investigating the symbolic and experiential aspects of visual appeal because it places more emphasis on meaning, emotion, and context than quantitative approaches, which concentrate on numerical relationships.

In-depth or semi-structured interviews can be done with travelers, travel influencers, and destination marketers to understand their impressions of what makes a picture visually appealing and how social media visuals influence travel intentions. These interviews give rich, narrative data that captures the emotional and cultural significance of visual engagement. Open-ended questions allow respondents to freely express their experiences and attitudes.

Study site

The state of Odisha, India, is the suggested study site for this research because it has a diversified and picturesque landscape that is perfect for investigating the function of visual appeal in tourism promotion. Odisha is a strong potential for visual storytelling on social media because of its rich cultural legacy, immaculate beaches, historic temples, traditional arts, and tribal variety. Important locations including Bhubaneswar, Konark Sun Temple, Puri Beach, and Chilika Lake draw tourists from both domestic and foreign countries, who often post about their experiences online.

The region is a perfect site to investigate how visual appeal, as documented in images and videos, promotes destination image formation and tourist engagement. The Odisha tourist administration and local stakeholders are increasingly relying on social media campaigns to promote traditional festivals like as the Rath Yatra and eco-tourism efforts in Chilika and Similipal. These activities generate a large amount of visual content across platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, providing valuable data for content analysis and audience perception research.

Thus, Odisha offers a dynamic and real visual landscape that combines tradition and modernity, making it an appropriate and exemplary location for studying the influence of images in generating tourism narratives on social media.

Study Procedure

In order to investigate the opinions, beliefs, motivations, and attitudes of travel agents, social media influencers, destination marketers, the qualitative approach was used, which helps investigate people's everyday lives where they live, work, and interact (Yin, 2014). As part of the exploratory nature of this study, individual semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted to collect detailed information. This provided an ideal platform for the interviewer to delve deeper and broaden the respondents' responses regarding motivations, knowledge, and beliefs (Saunders & Thornhill, 2016). In-depth interviews have the advantage of emphasizing a "specific, naturally occurring situation," providing "rich and holistic" accounts of "real life" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10).

The sample of travel agents, social media influencers, destination marketers were identified through a criteria-based snowball sampling technique from the referrals of the initial participants to generate additional participants (Breakwell et al., 2000). For instance, once interviewed, participants were asked if they can refer to any others with similar characteristics. A purposive sampling technique was used in this study with varying demographic and occupational backgrounds. Purposive samples are simple, quick, and inexpensive (Silverman, 2013). Hence, a purposive sampling strategy was used to select interview participants based on how well they could collect data from a particular community (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Interview process

A collection of interview guidelines with relevant questions was created in order to conduct semi-structured interviews based on existing literature (Roy & Ballantine, 2020). Using these principles, the researcher looked into relevant topics that might come up during the interviews. The instruments' face and content validity, as well as their applicability to research, were evaluated by a group of academic experts (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Participants who agreed to participate in the interviews gave a statement stating the study's goals. Interview participants were contacted by email and/or phone. A consent form was produced and distributed to each respondent, who was informed that their participation was optional and confidential. The locations and interview dates were then finalized.

Twenty-five numbers of travel agents, social media influencers, and destination marketers were interviewed for the study. All interviews were conducted face-to-face in English on a one-on-one basis and lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. To safeguard their confidentiality, all participants were given pseudonyms and were each given a letter and number identification. For instance, respondents are marked as P1, P 2. After completing the interview, participants were given a discount coupon to dine at their favourite restaurants as a reward

Interviews with participants were conducted over two months (January to February, 2026). During the interview sessions, participants were asked to express their perceptions and motivations, highlighting their pertinent role in use of social media and other perspectives on visual appeal for destination promotion. Questions regarding the visual appeal and social media were adapted from literature (Gretzel Ulrike et al.,2016; Liu Beiqi et al, 2020). The addition of new questions allowed for a deeper analysis and is hereby attached to see the complete list of questions asked to participants (see Appendix A). Table 1 shows the details of the interview participants.

Table 1 List of interview participants

S.No	Gender	Age	Role of Participants	Duration(in minutes)
1	Male	67	Travel agent 1	45
2	Male	64	Travel agent 2	42
3	Male	61	Travel agent 3	39
4	Male	57	Travel agent 4	38
5	Female	54	Travel agent 5	36
6	Male	49	Travel agent 6	35
7	Male	45	DMO 7	40
8	Male	39	DMO 8	41
9	Female	33	DMO 9	44
10	Female	29	DMO 10	45
11	Female	26	DMO11	36
12	Female	24	DMO12	37
13	Female	26	DMO 13	44
14	Male	55	DMO 14	35
15	Female	46	SMI 15	43
16	Female	38	SMI16	37
17	Male	51	SMI17	38
18	Female	35	SMI18	35
19	Male	61	SMI 19	44
20	Female	56	SMI20	43

Source: Authors (Field study 2026, DMO: Destination marketing Organisation, SMI; Social Media Influencers)

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission. The transcripts were validated before data analysis. To ensure validity and dependability, transcriptions were reviewed by two social media superstars with extensive domain knowledge. Thematic analysis is the most commonly utilized method for analyzing interview data (Squires, 2023). Data were manually extracted within the appropriate headings based on subject groupings. Thematic analysis involves identifying themes and categories that "emerge from

the data" (Burnard et al., 2008, p. 430), regardless of whether the data is reviewed manually or with software.

This study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method to analyze interview data and build a theme (Appendix A, Table 3). To increase the study's credibility, all research activities were documented, and a detailed protocol was produced. The travel agents involved in the interview consisted primarily of male informants, with five males and one female participant. Most were aged above 50 having good industry experiences. A similar pattern emerged for marital status: the majority were married, and the remaining was single. In the DMO category, females also dominated, with only two male informants. Most of them are in the age group of 35 to 45. Similarly, social media influences (SMI) consisted of females of four numbers and males of 2 numbers having the age range in between 45 to 55.

Based on the comments from the interviews, the results are summarised into four thematic areas: (1) Visual Expression & Aesthetic Appeal (2) Emotional Association and Prospective Experience (3) Perceived authenticity and Trust (4) Social Impact and Digital Evidence

Table 2 Themes and sub –themes of FGD

Participant	Main Theme	Sub-Themes
P1	Visual Expression & Aesthetic Appeal	Color vibrancy, Scenic composition
P2	Visual Expression & Aesthetic Appeal	Visual narratives, Cultural representation
P3	Visual Expression & Aesthetic Appeal	Lighting effects, Landscape appeal
P4	Visual Expression & Aesthetic Appeal	Framing techniques, Uniqueness of visuals
P5	Visual Expression & Aesthetic Appeal	“Instagrammability”, Artistic presentation
P6	Emotional Association and Prospective Experience	Sense of relaxation, Escape from routine
P7	Emotional Association and Prospective Experience	Excitement, Adventure imagination
P8	Emotional Association and Prospective Experience	Nostalgia, Personal connection
P9	Emotional Association and Prospective Experience	Dreaming of destination, Fantasy building
P10	Emotional Association and Prospective Experience	Mood enhancement, Emotional attachment
P11	Perceived authenticity and Trust	Trust in user-generated content (UGC)
P12	Perceived authenticity and Trust	Skepticism toward edited images
P13	Perceived authenticity and Trust	Real vs staged visuals
P14	Perceived authenticity and Trust	Transparency in content
P15	Perceived authenticity and Trust	Credibility of reviews/images
P16	Social Impact and Digital Evidence	Influence of likes and shares
P17	Social Impact and Digital Evidence	Peer recommendations
P18	Social Impact and Digital Evidence	Influencer impact
P19	Social Impact and Digital Evidence	Trending destinations
P20	Social Impact and Digital Evidence	Social media popularity effect

Source: Authors' own analysis

Visual Expression & Aesthetic Appeal

P3: "I trust locations that other users frequently recommend."

P4: "I can determine whether a place is truly wonderful by reading comments and reviews."

P1: "Images with vivid colors immediately grab my attention and make the place look appealing."

P2: "I like photos that are visually balanced and well-composed—it makes the destination look more appealing."

P3: "Photos taken at sunset or golden hour look more lovely and inviting; lighting plays a huge role."

P4: "A destination stands out from ordinary photos thanks to unique angles or perspectives."

P5: "Photos that appear artistic and professionally taken appeal to me."

P10: "Photos that have been heavily edited or filtered can occasionally feel fake and less appealing."

P11: "I am drawn to aesthetically pleasing interiors, architecture, and cafés."

P12: "Images that showcase local culture in a visually appealing manner are more captivating."

Emotional Association and Prospective Experience

P1: I quickly feel at ease and as though I'm there when I see pictures of mountains or beaches.

P2: I can envisage a tranquil vacation from my everyday grind when I look at certain photographs.

P3: "It feels like a future memory—I frequently picture myself sitting in that café or strolling through those streets."

P4: "Travel photos excite me; they make me want to feel the same happiness depicted in the pictures."

P5: "Some places make me think of previous travel experiences, which fosters a sentimental bond and inspires me to go again."

P6: "I become curious and emotionally involved with the place when I see pictures of local life or cultural festivals."

Perceived Authenticity and Trust

P9: "Influencers occasionally promote locations that don't match the actual experience."

P10: "Before making a decision, I cross-check images on different platforms."

P11: "The content is more credible when images depict crowds, the weather, and actual conditions."

P12: "My trust in the image is diminished by excessive editing or filters."

P13: "I trust content that shares real-life experiences, even bad ones."

Social Impact and Digital Evidence

P1: "I think a place must be worth visiting if it has a lot of likes and shares."

P2: "I automatically become interested in trending destinations on social media."

P8: "To find out how many people have visited a place, I frequently check hashtags."

P9: "I feel more confident about the destination when there is more interaction on a post."

P17: "Digital reviews and ratings serve as evidence of quality."

P18: "I occasionally pick travel destinations based only on popularity."

P19: "When I see others traveling on social media, I get a fear of missing out (FOMO)."

P20: "A destination becomes more appealing the more visible it is online."

Discussion and implications

Tourists' impressions and behavioral intentions are shaped by social media images in a variety of ways, according to the qualitative results of the focus group talks. Participants' narratives across the four themes—Aesthetic Attractiveness & Visual Storytelling, Emotional Association & Prospective Experience, Perceived

Authenticity & Trust, and Social Impact & Digital Evidence—showcase how visual content serves as a persuasive and experiential stimulus in addition to being information.

First, participants frequently stressed the significance of visual components including color vibrancy, composition, and lighting in drawing attention under the theme of Aesthetic Attractiveness & Visual Storytelling. Visually appealing photos were described as "inviting" and "engaging" by many respondents, indicating that aesthetics act as the first trigger when evaluating a place. Additionally, a destination's perceived richness is enhanced by the storytelling element incorporated into photos, which show culture, lifestyle, and local experiences. This suggests that tourist marketers should use narrative-driven visual methods that convey genuine experiences instead of static commercial graphics.

Second, the concept of Emotional Association & Prospective Experience shows how pictures elicit powerful emotional reactions and make it easier to mentally recreate trip experiences. Relaxation, thrill, and escapism were often stated by participants; some even claimed that images allowed them to "visualize future memories." This implies that pre-visit experiences are shaped by social media images, strengthening the urge to travel. Theoretically, this kind of emotional involvement is consistent with behavioral intention theories, in which affective reactions play a major role in decision-making. Practically speaking, tourism stakeholders should create visual campaigns that arouse feelings and enable prospective travelers to see themselves in the setting of the location.

Thirdly, a crucial factor in determining how people perceive and respond to images is perceived authenticity and trust. Participants were skeptical of heavily produced or altered images, frequently favoring user-generated content that captures authentic events. Phrases like "authenticity matters more than perfection" demonstrate how customer preferences are shifting toward relatability and openness. Another important component in fostering trust was the existence of consistent images across various users and platforms. This suggests that while promoting and utilizing user-generated content, tourist marketers should strike a balance between authenticity and aesthetic improvement.

Lastly, the Social Impact & Digital Evidence theme emphasizes how social validation processes affect travel choices. The popularity and legitimacy of a place can be determined by measures like likes, shares, comments, and influencer endorsements, according to the participants. The idea of "digital evidence," in which user participation as a group increases perceived value and desirability, gained significant traction. FOMO, or the fear of missing out, was also found to be a motivating factor, especially for younger participants. This emphasizes the significance of social proof in the digital tourism ecosystem and suggests that in order to increase destination exposure, marketers should actively interact with consumers and cultivate online communities.

Implications

The study has numerous theoretical and managerial consequences. Theoretically, it adds to the expanding body of research on visual consumption in tourism by combining aesthetic, emotional, cognitive, and social characteristics into a single framework. Tourism practitioners should focus high-quality, authentic visual content, incorporate emotion-driven storytelling, and use user-generated content and social engagement analytics to increase destination attractiveness. Furthermore, governments and destination management organizations can use these findings to create more successful digital marketing strategies that appeal to modern travelers. Overall, the results confirm that, in the age of digital media, images are not only

representations but also potent influences of traveler behavior, simultaneously influencing perceptions, emotions, trust, and social validation.

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Appendix A

Table 3

Stages of thematic analysis for present study

Thematic analysis stages	Descriptions
Stage 1: Familiarizing with data	This phase involves reading and re reading the data, to be more indulged and immersed with it and to familiarize more effectively
Stage 2: Generating Codes	This phase entails creating appropriate and unique codes to represent the main properties of the data that are critical for answering the study's research questions. This entails coding the full data collection and compiling all codes and pertinent data extracts for the next stage of analysis.
Stage 3: Generating initial themes	Examining acceptable codes and data sets to identify probable themes. It then matched data to the theme of each interviewed candidate, allowing the applicability and reliability of each theme to be assessed..
Stage 4: Reviewing themes	This phase entails comparing the specified themes to each data set to determine the uniqueness of the themes in addressing each research question evaluated for the study. This phase, often known as the refining stage, involves splitting, combining, and occasionally discarding topics.
Stage 5: Defining& naming themes	This step entails a thorough investigation of each theme, determining its scope and focus, and discovering the story behind each theme. It also includes selecting a thoughtful name for each theme
Stage 6: Writing up & presenting the report	This stage involves conducting the final analysis, which links the most compelling and unique themes to the research questions so that a final report can be created and delivered.

Questionnaire for the interview guideline

1. Could you give a quick overview of yourself and your travel preferences?
2. Which social media sites—like YouTube and Instagram—do you utilize to research potential travel destinations?
3. How frequently do you use pictures from social media to plan a trip? What type of images attract you the most when you see travel-related posts?
4. How do aspects like composition, color, and lighting affect how you see a place?
5. Do you think pictures convey a sense of place? If so, how?
6. What qualities do you find visually appealing or "Instagram-worthy" in an image?
7. Do visually appealing photos inspire you to learn more about a place? Why not, or why?
8. How do you feel about travel-related photos on social media?
9. After seeing such pictures, do you envisage yourself going there? What would you say about that feeling?
10. How do these pictures affect your perceptions of a place?
11. Do these images evoke feelings of adventure, calm, or escape? Please provide more details.
12. Can you think of an image that made you want to go somewhere?
13. What visual characteristics—such as clarity, originality, or creativity—make an image stand out to you?

14. How much of an impact does image quality—such as HD or professional photography—have on your choice?
15. Do you prefer natural or edited images? Why?
16. How do creative elements like angles, filters, or drone shots affect your perception?
17. Do you believe that aesthetic presentation affects your trust or interest in a destination?