

The Role Of Social Media And Digital Marketing Optimization In Enhancing Sustainable Tourism Destination Promotion

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Abstract

This study examines the role of social media platforms and digital marketing optimization in enhancing sustainable tourism destination promotion in Bangladesh. A mixed-method research design was adopted integrating quantitative survey data and qualitative stakeholder interviews. Quantitative data were collected through Google Forms from 402 respondents and analyzed using SPSS, while 25 semi-structured interviews with tourism stakeholders were analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that social media engagement significantly enhances destination visibility, tourist awareness, destination image, and sustainable travel intention. Digital marketing optimization strategies, including influencer marketing, digital storytelling, and user-generated content, positively influence tourists' perceptions and environmentally responsible behavior. The study further identifies that sustainability-oriented digital communication strengthens environmental awareness and promotes sustainable tourism behavior. However, inadequate digital infrastructure, weak policy coordination, and limited strategic branding remain major challenges affecting sustainable tourism promotion in Bangladesh. The study contributes to sustainable tourism and digital marketing literature by providing empirical evidence from an emerging tourism destination and offers important implications for tourism policymakers and destination marketers.

Keywords: *Social media; Digital marketing optimization; Sustainable tourism; Destination promotion; Environmental awareness; Sustainable travel intention; Bangladesh tourism; Destination image*

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I. Introduction

The tourism industry has undergone a profound transformation in recent years due to rapid technological advancement, digital communication expansion, and the increasing influence of online media platforms on consumer behavior. The emergence of digital technologies has significantly changed how tourism destinations are marketed, how tourists search for information, and how travel experiences are communicated and consumed. Social media platforms, mobile technologies, artificial intelligence-driven marketing systems, and digital communication strategies now play a central role in shaping tourist perceptions, destination image, travel decision-making, and tourism competitiveness (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Contemporary tourists increasingly rely on online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to gather travel-related information, evaluate destinations, share travel experiences, and interact with tourism stakeholders. As a result, social media and digital marketing have evolved into strategic tools for destination branding, tourist engagement, and tourism promotion within the global tourism marketplace.

The increasing importance of digital communication in tourism marketing is associated with changing tourist behavior and the growing dominance of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). Unlike traditional promotional approaches, social media platforms facilitate interactive communication, peer-generated information exchange, and real-time engagement between tourists and tourism organizations (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Travelers frequently perceive user-generated content, travel blogs, online reviews, influencer recommendations, and shared digital experiences as more authentic and trustworthy than conventional advertising messages (Ayeh et al., 2013). Previous studies indicate that social media significantly influences tourists' destination awareness, emotional attachment, destination image formation, and travel intention (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Hudson & Thal, 2013). Furthermore, visual storytelling and immersive digital content have been found to shape tourists' emotional experiences and influence tourism consumption behavior (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Consequently, tourism organizations increasingly utilize digital marketing optimization strategies such as influencer collaboration, personalized marketing communication, audience segmentation,

search engine optimization, engagement analytics, and interactive content creation to maximize promotional effectiveness and enhance destination competitiveness.

Simultaneously, sustainability has emerged as a critical issue within global tourism development due to increasing concerns regarding climate change, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, overtourism, and socio-cultural disruption associated with uncontrolled tourism activities. Sustainable tourism has therefore become an essential framework for ensuring balanced tourism development that simultaneously supports economic growth, environmental conservation, socio-cultural preservation, and community well-being (Butler, 1999). Sustainable tourism emphasizes responsible tourism practices capable of meeting current tourism demands without compromising future generations' ability to access and enjoy tourism resources (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). International organizations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) increasingly advocate integrating sustainability principles into tourism planning, destination management, and tourism marketing strategies to achieve long-term tourism resilience and sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Within this context, social media platforms and digital marketing strategies have become increasingly important for promoting sustainable tourism destinations and encouraging environmentally responsible travel behavior. Sustainable tourism destinations require effective communication strategies capable of not only attracting tourists but also educating travelers regarding environmental protection, cultural preservation, responsible travel practices, and community engagement. Digital marketing optimization enables tourism organizations to communicate sustainability-oriented values more effectively through data-driven communication, visual storytelling, interactive engagement, and platform-specific promotional strategies. Through optimized digital communication, tourism destinations can increase destination visibility, strengthen destination image, and foster environmental awareness among tourists while simultaneously encouraging sustainable travel intention.

Previous research has demonstrated that digital media and social media marketing significantly affect tourism-related behavioral outcomes. Leung et al. (2013) argued that social media has become a powerful communication mechanism influencing tourist information search behavior and destination selection processes. Similarly, Mangold and Faulds (2009) identified social media as a hybrid promotional element that combines traditional marketing communication with consumer-generated interaction and peer influence. Studies further suggest that destination-related social media content positively affects tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness, destination trust, and behavioral intention (Hays et al., 2013). Influencer marketing and digital storytelling have also emerged as influential strategies for creating destination authenticity and emotional connection with potential travelers (Mariani et al., 2018). Consequently, digital tourism marketing has become increasingly associated with tourism competitiveness, destination resilience, and sustainable tourism promotion.

The role of digital marketing in sustainable tourism promotion is particularly significant in developing countries where tourism destinations often face limitations related to infrastructure, international visibility, financial resources, and strategic destination management. Bangladesh possesses substantial tourism potential due to its rich natural landscapes, biodiversity, cultural heritage, and ecological resources. Destinations such as the Sundarbans, Saint Martin's Island, Cox's Bazar, and Sajek Valley possess significant potential for sustainable tourism development. However, tourism development in Bangladesh continues to face several structural and managerial challenges associated with tourism facilities, tourism policy implementation, destination management, and strategic destination promotion (Ananya et al., 2020; Muneem et al., 2020). Research has further highlighted that sustainable tourism management is necessary to ensure environmental preservation and long-term tourism viability within Bangladesh (Muneem & Avi, 2017).

Digital communication and social media are increasingly recognized as important mechanisms for tourism promotion within Bangladesh. Avi et al. (2019) found that internet-based tourism promotion positively contributes to destination visibility and tourism communication effectiveness in Bangladesh. Likewise, Avi et al. (2020) emphasized that social media platforms facilitate tourism administration and stakeholder communication by enabling tourism organizations to interact more effectively with tourists and tourism stakeholders. Furthermore, media exposure significantly influences tourists' post-trip behavioral intentions and tourism experiences within the Bangladeshi context (Shoeb-Ur-Rahman et al., 2020). Rural tourism has also been identified as a potential contributor to sustainable development goals through local community empowerment, environmental conservation, and socio-economic development (Rahman et al., 2018). These findings collectively indicate that optimized social media and digital marketing strategies may substantially contribute to promoting sustainable tourism destinations and encouraging responsible tourism behavior in Bangladesh.

Despite the growing importance of digital tourism marketing and sustainability-oriented destination promotion, several important research gaps remain within existing literature. First, many previous studies have primarily focused on general destination marketing rather than sustainable tourism promotion specifically. Second, limited empirical research has examined how digital marketing optimization strategies influence

tourists' environmental awareness, sustainable travel intention, and destination perception. Third, while prior studies within Bangladesh have explored tourism policy, tourism promotion, sustainable tourism development, and tourism administration (Ananya et al., 2020; Avi et al., 2020; Muneem & Avi, 2017), insufficient attention has been given to understanding the integrated role of social media engagement, digital marketing optimization, and sustainability communication within sustainable tourism destination promotion. Furthermore, most empirical evidence concerning digital tourism marketing originates from developed countries with advanced technological infrastructure and tourism systems, resulting in a limited understanding of how digital marketing optimization functions within emerging tourism economies such as Bangladesh.

Additionally, existing tourism literature increasingly calls for more theoretically grounded studies examining tourists' behavioral responses to digital tourism communication and sustainability-oriented marketing content (Sigala, 2018). There is also a growing need to understand how social media engagement, influencer-generated content, user-generated media, and digital storytelling shape tourists' sustainable behavioral intentions and destination loyalty. Addressing these research gaps is particularly important for tourism destinations seeking to strengthen sustainability-oriented branding and destination competitiveness in the digital era.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of social media platforms and digital marketing optimization in enhancing sustainable tourism destination promotion. Specifically, the study seeks to investigate how social media engagement, digital storytelling, influencer marketing, user-generated content, and optimized digital communication strategies influence destination image, environmental awareness, and sustainable travel intention. By integrating perspectives from sustainable tourism, digital marketing, and consumer behavior theories, this study intends to contribute to the growing body of literature concerning sustainable tourism promotion in emerging economies. The findings are expected to provide valuable practical implications for tourism policymakers, destination marketing organizations, tourism entrepreneurs, and tourism stakeholders in designing effective sustainability-oriented digital marketing strategies capable of enhancing destination competitiveness, tourist engagement, and responsible tourism behavior within Bangladesh.

II. Research Objectives

General Objective

To examine the role of social media platforms and digital marketing optimization in enhancing sustainable tourism destination promotion.

Specific Objectives

1. To analyze the influence of social media engagement on sustainable tourism destination image.
2. To examine the effect of digital marketing optimization strategies on tourists' sustainable travel intentions.
3. To investigate the role of user-generated content and influencer marketing in promoting sustainable tourism destinations.
4. To evaluate the relationship between environmental awareness and sustainable tourism destination promotion.
5. To identify effective digital marketing strategies for enhancing the visibility and competitiveness of sustainable tourism destinations.

Research Questions

1. How do social media platforms influence sustainable tourism destination promotion?
2. What is the effect of digital marketing optimization strategies on sustainable travel intention?
3. How do user-generated content and influencer marketing contribute to sustainable tourism destination image?
4. What role does environmental awareness play in shaping tourists' sustainable behavioral intentions?
5. Which digital marketing strategies are most effective for promoting sustainable tourism destinations?

III. Literature Review

Social Media and Tourism Promotion

Social media has transformed tourism marketing by reshaping how destinations communicate with tourists and how travelers search for, evaluate, and share tourism experiences. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have become influential channels for destination branding, tourist engagement, and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). Tourists increasingly rely on user-generated content, online reviews, and digital storytelling when making travel decisions (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Hudson & Thal, 2013). Social media content is often perceived as more authentic and trustworthy than traditional advertising, thereby significantly influencing destination image and travel intention (Ayeh et al., 2013).

Previous studies further indicate that social media enhances tourist engagement and strengthens destination competitiveness through interactive communication and visual content strategies (Hays et al., 2013; Leung et al., 2013). Within Bangladesh, social media and internet-based promotion have also been identified as

important mechanisms for improving tourism visibility and stakeholder communication (Avi et al., 2019; Avi et al., 2020). However, existing research remains primarily focused on general tourism promotion, with limited attention to sustainability-oriented destination marketing.

Digital Marketing Optimization in Tourism

Digital marketing optimization refers to the strategic use of digital technologies, engagement analytics, personalized communication, and platform-specific strategies to improve marketing effectiveness and tourist interaction. The advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has significantly transformed tourism marketing by enabling data-driven communication, real-time interaction, and personalized tourism experiences (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

Recent tourism research highlights the growing importance of digital marketing tools such as influencer marketing, search engine optimization, engagement tracking, and interactive content in enhancing destination visibility and competitiveness (Buhalis et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2018). Digital storytelling and influencer-generated content are particularly influential in shaping destination trust and emotional attachment among tourists. Nevertheless, the relationship between digital marketing optimization and sustainable tourism promotion remains insufficiently explored, particularly within developing countries' contexts.

Sustainable Tourism Destination Promotion

Sustainable tourism has emerged as a critical framework for balancing tourism development with environmental conservation, socio-cultural preservation, and long-term economic sustainability (Butler, 1999). Sustainable tourism destination promotion involves communicating environmentally responsible tourism practices, conservation initiatives, and community-oriented tourism experiences through strategic marketing activities.

Prior studies emphasize that sustainability-oriented tourism development requires effective governance, stakeholder collaboration, and responsible destination management (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Within Bangladesh, sustainable tourism management has been identified as essential for preserving tourism destinations and enhancing long-term tourism viability (Muneem & Avi, 2017). Similarly, Rahman et al. (2018) highlighted the contribution of rural tourism to sustainable development goals through environmental conservation and local community empowerment.

Although sustainability has gained increasing importance in tourism research, limited studies have examined how social media and digital marketing optimization contribute to sustainable tourism destination promotion, particularly in emerging tourism economies such as Bangladesh.

Social Media, Environmental Awareness, and Sustainable Travel Intention

Social media platforms increasingly influence tourists' environmental awareness and sustainable travel behavior by facilitating sustainability-oriented communication and digital engagement. User-generated content, influencer communication, and digital storytelling can shape tourists' perceptions regarding destination authenticity, environmental responsibility, and ethical tourism practices.

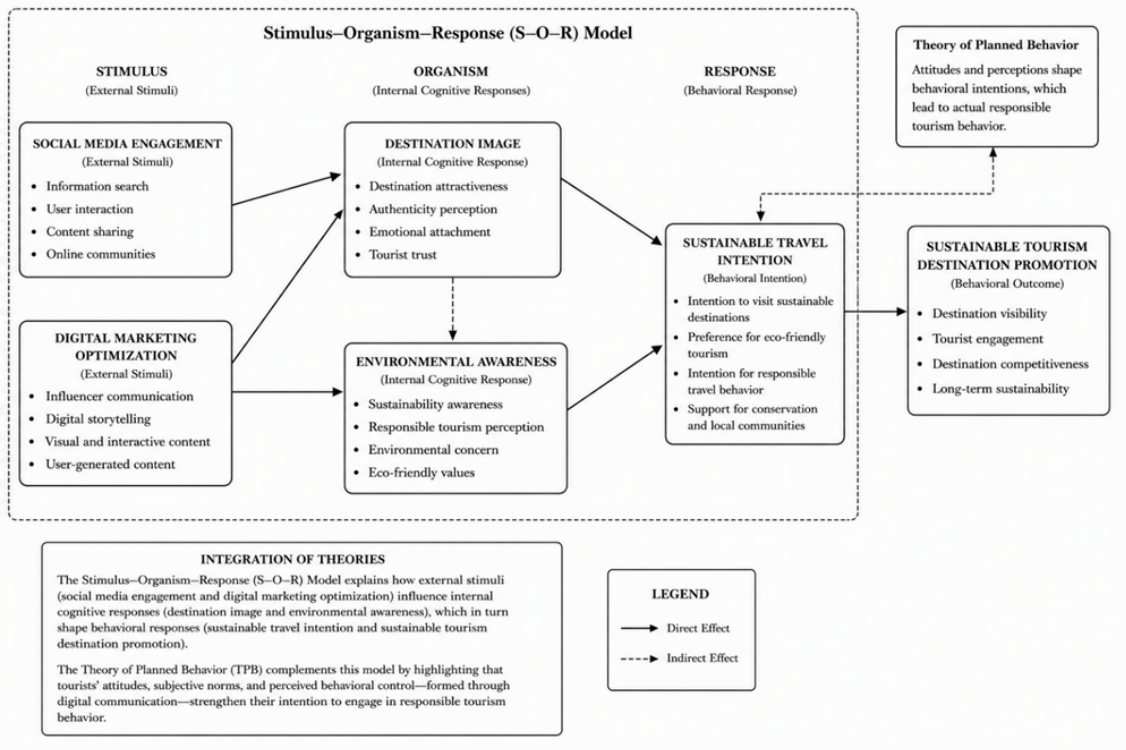
Research suggests that sustainability-focused digital communication positively influences destination image, emotional attachment, and sustainable travel intention. Influencer marketing and online engagement also contribute to tourists' behavioral responses by encouraging responsible tourism practices and environmentally conscious travel decisions. However, empirical research examining the integrated relationship among social media engagement, environmental awareness, destination image, and sustainable travel intention remains limited.

Theoretical Foundation

This study is primarily grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response Model, which explains how external stimuli influence individuals' internal evaluations and behavioral responses Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In this study, social media engagement, digital marketing optimization, influencer communication, and user-generated content represent external stimuli, while destination image and environmental awareness function as internal cognitive responses influencing sustainable travel intention.

The study also incorporates insights from the Theory of Planned Behavior, which suggests that attitudes and perceptions significantly shape behavioral intentions. Sustainability-oriented digital communication may therefore influence tourists' willingness to engage in responsible tourism behavior.

Figure: Conceptual framework



Research Gap

Despite growing literature on tourism marketing and digital communication, several gaps remain evident. First, previous studies have primarily focused on general tourism promotion rather than sustainability-oriented destination marketing. Second, limited research has examined how digital marketing optimization strategies influence sustainable tourism destination promotion and sustainable travel intention. Third, although studies in Bangladesh have explored tourism promotion, social media communication, and sustainable tourism development (Avi et al., 2019; Avi et al., 2020; Muneem & Avi, 2017), limited empirical attention has been given to integrating these dimensions within a unified analytical framework.

Furthermore, most existing studies originate from developed economies, creating limited understanding regarding how social media and digital marketing optimization contribute to sustainable tourism promotion in emerging tourism destinations such as Bangladesh. Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by examining the role of social media platforms and digital marketing optimization in enhancing sustainable tourism destination promotion within the Bangladeshi tourism context.

IV. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-method research design to examine the role of social media platforms and digital marketing optimization in enhancing sustainable tourism destination promotion in Bangladesh. A convergent parallel mixed-method approach was employed, where quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and integrated during interpretation. This design is appropriate for examining complex tourism phenomena involving behavioral, technological, and sustainability dimensions because it combines statistical analysis with contextual stakeholder insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The study is theoretically grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response Model and incorporates perspectives from the Theory of Planned Behavior to explain how digital communication influences tourists' sustainable behavioral intentions.

Quantitative Method

The quantitative component was based on primary data collected through a structured questionnaire administered using Google Forms. The target population included tourists and tourism-oriented social media

users familiar with sustainable tourism destinations in Bangladesh. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure respondents possessed relevant experience regarding tourism-related digital content and social media engagement. The questionnaire link was distributed through tourism-related Facebook groups, travel communities, university networks, and online tourism forums.

A total of 450 responses were initially collected. After data screening and removal of incomplete responses, 402 valid responses were retained for final analysis. This sample size is considered appropriate for multivariate statistical analysis in tourism and behavioral research (Hair et al., 2019). The questionnaire was developed based on previously validated scales adapted from tourism marketing and digital behavior literature (Ayeh et al., 2013; Hays et al., 2013; Buhalis et al., 2019). The instrument measured social media engagement, digital marketing optimization, influencer marketing, user-generated content, destination image, environmental awareness, and sustainable travel intention using a five-point Likert scale.

Prior to final data collection, the questionnaire was pilot tested with 30 respondents to ensure clarity and reliability. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondent characteristics and variable distributions, while correlation and regression analyses were employed to examine relationships among the study variables. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha to ensure internal consistency of the measurement scales.

Table 1: Inclusion criteria of respondents and participants.

Category	Participants	Inclusion Criteria	Sample Size (n)
Quantitative Study	Tourists and social media users	Individuals familiar with tourism-related digital content and sustainable tourism destinations in Bangladesh	402
Qualitative Study	Tourism entrepreneurs	Individuals involved in tourism business operations and destination promotion activities	7
	Tourism practitioners	Individuals engaged in tourism services and digital tourism communication	6
	Tourism academicians	Academicians and researchers with expertise in tourism and digital marketing	5
	Tourism officials	Individuals associated with tourism administration and destination management	4
	Travel content creators	Individuals actively involved in tourism-related social media content creation	3
Total (Qualitative)			25

Qualitative Method

To complement the quantitative findings, qualitative data were collected through 25 semi-structured interviews with tourism entrepreneurs, tourism practitioners, tourism academicians, tourism officials, and travel content creators. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was employed to identify participants with relevant expertise in tourism promotion, digital marketing, and sustainable tourism development in Bangladesh (Hall, 2011).

The interviews explored themes related to social media usage, digital marketing practices, sustainability communication, destination branding, and challenges associated with sustainable tourism promotion. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which enabled systematic identification of recurring themes and stakeholder perspectives (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). The qualitative findings were subsequently integrated with the quantitative results to strengthen triangulation and interpretive validity.

For the quantitative component, inclusion criteria required respondents to be active social media users with prior exposure to tourism-related digital content. For the qualitative component, participants were required to possess professional, academic, or practical involvement in tourism promotion or sustainable tourism development activities in Bangladesh.

Reliability, Validity, and Ethical Considerations

Several procedures were undertaken to ensure methodological rigor. Content validity was ensured through literature-based instrument development and expert review, while reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. Pilot testing further improved measurement consistency and question clarity. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the study through methodological triangulation (Hair et al., 2019).

Ethical standards were maintained throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents and interview participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly ensured. All collected data were used solely for academic purposes.

V. Findings

The findings are presented using a mixed-method triangulation approach integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media platforms and digital marketing optimization contribute to sustainable tourism destination promotion in Bangladesh. The quantitative findings are interpreted through descriptive statistical analysis, while the qualitative findings are presented through thematic coding and stakeholder narratives. The integration of both approaches enhances interpretive depth and strengthens the robustness and credibility of the findings.

Social Media Engagement and Sustainable Tourism Promotion

The quantitative findings indicate that social media engagement plays a highly significant role in promoting sustainable tourism destinations in Bangladesh. The descriptive statistics reveal that 67% of respondents agreed and 18% strongly agreed that social media platforms positively influence their awareness and perception of sustainable tourism destinations. In contrast, 10% remained neutral and only 5% expressed disagreement. The mean score for social media engagement (M = 3.89, SD = 0.71) reflects a comparatively high level of agreement among respondents regarding the effectiveness of social media communication in destination promotion.

The findings further indicate that tourists increasingly depend on social media platforms for tourism-related information search, destination evaluation, and travel planning. Respondents frequently identified Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and travel-related online communities as important sources of tourism information and destination inspiration. This suggests that social media platforms have become central components of tourism communication ecosystems within Bangladesh.

The qualitative findings strongly support quantitative evidence. Interview participants consistently emphasized that digital platforms have transformed destination communication and tourist engagement practices.

“Most tourists now rely heavily on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and travel-related digital content before making destination choices. Social media has become the primary source of tourism information for younger travelers because it provides visual experiences, reviews, and real-time interaction with destinations” (Interview-3).

Another participant explained:

“Social media enables smaller and less-developed tourism destinations to gain visibility without requiring extensive promotional budgets. Through digital platforms, even remote destinations can reach large audiences and attract tourists interested in eco-tourism and sustainable travel experiences” (Interview-7).

Similarly, a tourism practitioner noted:

“Digital platforms are now the fastest and most effective channels for reaching tourists and communicating environmentally responsible tourism experiences. Sustainability messages spread much faster through social media than through conventional promotional approaches” (Interview-9).

The thematic coding process identified several recurring themes, including destination visibility, tourist engagement, digital communication, low-cost promotion, and sustainability awareness. These themes collectively indicate that social media platforms substantially contribute to sustainable tourism promotion by improving digital accessibility, expanding destination reach, and increasing sustainability-oriented communication. The triangulated findings indicate that social media engagement significantly contributes to sustainable tourism destination promotion in Bangladesh by enhancing destination visibility, tourist engagement, and sustainability-oriented communication. Qualitative interviews revealed that digital platforms have transformed destination communication practices by enabling wider tourist reach, real-time interaction, and cost-effective promotion of eco-tourism experiences. Thematic coding identified destination visibility, digital communication, tourist engagement, low-cost promotion, and sustainability awareness as dominant themes emerging from the interviews. These findings support previous studies emphasizing the importance of internet-based tourism promotion and social media communication within Bangladesh’s tourism sector (Avi et al., 2019; Avi et al., 2020) and align with broader tourism literature highlighting the growing influence of digital communication on destination awareness and tourist behavior (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Leung et al., 2013).

Table 2: Thematic Coding for Social Media Engagement

Code	Emerging Theme	Frequency
Destination visibility	Increased awareness of tourism destinations	18
Tourist engagement	Interaction between tourists and destinations	15
Digital communication	Online promotion and information sharing	13
Cost-effective marketing	Low-cost promotional opportunities	10
Sustainable awareness	Promotion of eco-friendly tourism practices	9

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that social media engagement positively enhances destination visibility and strengthens tourists’ awareness regarding sustainable tourism destinations. The findings further indicate that digital communication increasingly functions as a strategic mechanism for sustainability-oriented destination promotion within emerging tourism economies.

Digital Marketing Optimization and Destination Image

The findings further demonstrate that digital marketing optimization positively influences destination image and destination attractiveness. The quantitative results indicate that 64% of respondents agreed and 16% strongly agreed that optimized digital marketing strategies improve their perception of tourism destinations. Meanwhile, 13% remained neutral and 7% expressed disagreement. The mean score for digital marketing optimization (M = 3.76, SD = 0.69) reflects a positive perception regarding the effectiveness of digital communication strategies in destination branding and promotion.

The findings suggest that tourists are highly influenced by visually driven and interactive digital content, particularly travel videos, influencer-generated content, destination storytelling, and online reviews. Respondents frequently identified digital storytelling and visual media as influential factors shaping destination attractiveness and destination trust.

The qualitative findings reinforce these observations.

“Digital storytelling, travel videos, and immersive visual content create strong emotional attachment with destinations. Tourists become emotionally connected when they see authentic travel experiences and sustainability-related narratives online” (Interview-11).

Another participant stated:

“Tourists increasingly trust online reviews, travel influencers, and user-generated content more than traditional advertising because these forms of communication appear more authentic, relatable, and experience-based” (Interview-14).

Similarly, one tourism entrepreneur observed:

“Destinations with stronger online branding, visually attractive digital content, and consistent social media engagement attract significantly greater tourist attention and online interaction” (Interview-16).

The thematic analysis identified destination branding, influencer credibility, visual storytelling, tourist trust, and online visibility as the most dominant themes. These findings indicate that optimized digital marketing strategies substantially contribute to destination image formation by strengthening tourists’ emotional connection, perceived authenticity, and destination attractiveness. The triangulated findings demonstrate that digital marketing optimization significantly strengthens destination image and destination attractiveness through visually engaging and interactive digital communication. Qualitative interviews revealed that digital storytelling, travel videos, influencer-generated content, and online reviews create stronger emotional attachment, perceived authenticity, and tourist trust toward tourism destinations. Participants further emphasized that destinations with stronger online branding and consistent digital engagement attract greater tourist attention and interaction. Thematic analysis identified destination branding, influencer credibility, visual storytelling, tourist trust, and online visibility as dominant themes influencing destination perception. These findings support previous studies highlighting the importance of digital marketing technologies, visual communication, and influencer marketing in destination branding and tourism promotion (Buhalis et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2018). The findings also align with earlier tourism studies emphasizing the growing influence of user-generated content and digital engagement on tourists’ destination perceptions and behavioral intentions (Ayeh et al., 2013; Hudson & Thal, 2013). Within the Bangladeshi context, the findings further reinforce previous research suggesting that internet-based tourism promotion and tourism administration through digital platforms significantly contribute to destination visibility and tourism communication effectiveness (Avi et al., 2019; Avi et al., 2020), while strategic tourism development and destination management remain essential for strengthening tourism competitiveness in Bangladesh (Muneem et al., 2020; Muneem et al., 2018).

Table 3: Thematic Coding for Digital Marketing Optimization

Code	Emerging Theme	Frequency
Destination branding	Positive destination image creation	16
Influencer marketing	Influence of travel influencers	14
Visual storytelling	Emotional connection through digital content	12
Tourist trust	Credibility of online information	11

Online visibility	Increased digital reach and promotion	10
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The triangulated findings therefore suggest that digital marketing optimization significantly enhances destination image and destination competitiveness through visually engaging and strategically targeted communication practices.

Environmental Awareness and Sustainable Travel Intention

The quantitative findings reveal that environmental awareness significantly influences sustainable travel intention among tourists. Approximately 69% of respondents agreed and 14% strongly agreed that sustainability-oriented social media content increases their awareness regarding responsible tourism practices. The mean score for environmental awareness (M = 3.94, SD = 0.66) indicates a comparatively high level of agreement among respondents.

The findings further suggest that tourists exposed to sustainability-focused digital communication are more likely to demonstrate environmentally responsible attitudes and behavioral intentions. Respondents particularly emphasized the importance of online environmental campaigns, eco-tourism content, and sustainability-related travel information in shaping their travel decisions.

The qualitative findings strongly support these interpretations.

“When tourists are exposed to environmental messages, conservation campaigns, and eco-friendly tourism practices through social media, they become more conscious about responsible travel behavior and environmental protection” (Interview-18).

Another participant noted:

“Social media campaigns emphasizing environmental protection, local culture, and sustainable tourism practices create more positive attitudes toward sustainable destinations and encourage responsible tourism behavior” (Interview-21).

Similarly, one academic respondent explained:

“Digital communication platforms can educate tourists regarding environmental responsibility and sustainable tourism practices much faster and more effectively than conventional awareness campaigns because tourists are continuously exposed to online tourism content” (Interview-19).

The thematic coding identified environmental education, responsible travel behavior, eco-friendly tourism, sustainability communication, and tourist consciousness as dominant themes. The triangulated findings indicate that sustainability-oriented digital communication significantly influences tourists’ environmental awareness and sustainable travel intention. Qualitative interviews revealed that environmental campaigns, eco-friendly tourism content, and sustainability-focused social media communication positively shape tourists’ attitudes toward responsible tourism behavior and environmental protection. Participants further emphasized that digital platforms function as effective educational tools capable of disseminating sustainability-related information more rapidly and interactively than conventional awareness campaigns. Thematic coding identified environmental education, responsible travel behavior, eco-friendly tourism, sustainability communication, and tourist consciousness as dominant themes emerging from the interviews. These findings support previous tourism studies emphasizing the importance of sustainability-oriented tourism communication and environmentally responsible destination management (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Butler, 1999). Within the Bangladeshi context, the findings further reinforce earlier studies highlighting the significance of sustainable tourism management and rural tourism development in promoting environmental conservation and long-term tourism sustainability (Muneem & Avi, 2017; Rahman et al., 2018). The findings also align with prior media and tourism research suggesting that digital communication significantly shapes tourists’ behavioral responses and tourism-related attitudes (Shoeb-Ur-Rahman et al., 2020; Sigala, 2018).

Table 4: Thematic Coding for Environmental Awareness

Code	Emerging Theme	Frequency
Environmental education	Awareness regarding sustainability	17
Responsible travel	Sustainable tourist behavior	14
Eco-friendly tourism	Interest in environmentally responsible destinations	12
Sustainability communication	Promotion of environmental values	10
Tourist consciousness	Positive behavioral influence	9

The integration of findings indicates that sustainability-oriented social media communication positively shapes tourists’ environmental awareness and sustainable travel intention. The findings also suggest that digital communication platforms increasingly function as educational tools capable of promoting sustainability-oriented tourism behavior.

Challenges in Sustainable Tourism Promotion

Despite the positive influence of social media and digital marketing, the findings reveal several structural and institutional challenges associated with sustainable tourism promotion in Bangladesh. The quantitative results indicate that 58% of respondents agreed that inadequate digital infrastructure, weak policy coordination, and limited strategic marketing constrain effective sustainable tourism promotion. The mean score for perceived challenges (M = 3.42, SD = 0.74) reflects moderate concern regarding institutional and infrastructural limitations.

The findings suggest that although tourism stakeholders increasingly recognize the importance of digital communication, many tourism destinations still lack coordinated branding strategies, professional digital marketing expertise, and sustainability-oriented promotional frameworks.

The qualitative findings further reinforce these observations.

“Many tourism destinations in Bangladesh still lack professional digital marketing strategies, coordinated branding systems, and sustainability-focused promotional planning, which reduces their competitiveness in the digital tourism market” (Interview-22).

Another participant explained:

“There is still limited policy support, insufficient training opportunities, and inadequate institutional guidance regarding sustainable digital tourism promotion and strategic online branding” (Interview-24).

Similarly, one tourism official stated:

“Although digital tourism promotion is gradually increasing in Bangladesh, institutional coordination, long-term strategic planning, and integrated destination marketing initiatives remain comparatively weak” (Interview-25).

Thematic analysis identified policy limitations, infrastructure gaps, weak coordination, limited digital skills, and financial constraints as major challenges affecting sustainable tourism promotion. The triangulated findings reveal that several structural and institutional barriers continue to constrain effective sustainable tourism promotion in Bangladesh despite the growing importance of social media and digital marketing. Qualitative interviews highlighted that many tourism destinations still lack coordinated branding systems, professional digital marketing expertise, sustainability-focused promotional frameworks, and long-term strategic planning. Participants further emphasized the existence of weak policy support, inadequate institutional coordination, limited training opportunities, and insufficient digital infrastructure affecting tourism communication and destination competitiveness. Thematic analysis identified policy limitations, infrastructure gaps, weak stakeholder coordination, limited digital skills, and financial constraints as dominant challenges influencing sustainable tourism promotion. These findings support previous studies emphasizing tourism policy limitations, infrastructural challenges, and destination management weaknesses within Bangladesh’s tourism sector (Ananya et al., 2020; Muneem et al., 2020). The findings also reinforce earlier research suggesting that institutional coordination and tourism administration remain critical challenges affecting tourism development and destination promotion in Bangladesh (Muneem et al., 2018; Avi et al., 2020).

Table 5: Thematic Coding for Promotion Challenges

Code	Emerging Theme	Frequency
Policy limitations	Weak tourism policy support	15
Infrastructure gaps	Inadequate digital infrastructure	13
Lack of coordination	Weak stakeholder collaboration	11
Limited digital skills	Insufficient marketing expertise	10
Financial constraints	Budget limitations for promotion	8

These findings suggest that although social media and digital marketing create substantial opportunities for sustainable tourism promotion, institutional limitations and infrastructural weaknesses continue to hinder more integrated and effective implementation.

Overall Triangulation and Interpretation

The triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates strong convergence across the major dimensions of the study. Quantitative results indicate comparatively high levels of agreement regarding the positive influence of social media engagement, digital marketing optimization, and environmental awareness on sustainable tourism destination promotion. These findings are consistently reinforced by qualitative insights emphasizing the growing importance of digital communication, influencer marketing, visual storytelling, sustainability-oriented content, and online engagement in shaping tourists' perceptions and behavioral intentions.

The findings collectively indicate that social media platforms and optimized digital marketing strategies significantly contribute to sustainable tourism destination promotion in Bangladesh by enhancing destination visibility, strengthening destination image, increasing environmental awareness, and encouraging sustainable travel intention. At the same time, the findings reveal that institutional limitations, inadequate digital infrastructure, weak policy coordination, and limited strategic marketing capabilities continue to constrain the effectiveness of sustainability-oriented tourism promotion.

Overall, the findings suggest that digital communication technologies are increasingly transforming tourism promotion practices within Bangladesh; however, more integrated policy support, institutional coordination, and strategic digital marketing initiatives are required to achieve sustainable and competitive destination development.

VI. Discussion

The present study examined the role of social media platforms and digital marketing optimization in enhancing sustainable tourism destination promotion in Bangladesh using a mixed-method approach. The findings provide strong evidence that social media engagement, digital marketing optimization, and sustainability-oriented digital communication significantly influence destination visibility, destination image, environmental awareness, and sustainable travel intention. More importantly, the study demonstrates that digital communication technologies are increasingly shaping sustainable tourism promotion and tourist behavioral responses within emerging tourism destinations such as Bangladesh.

One of the major findings of the study is the significant influence of social media engagement on sustainable tourism promotion. The quantitative findings revealed comparatively high levels of agreement regarding the effectiveness of social media platforms in increasing destination awareness and tourist engagement, while the qualitative findings further emphasized the growing dependence of tourists on digital platforms for travel-related information and destination evaluation. This finding supports previous tourism research suggesting that social media has fundamentally transformed tourism communication by facilitating electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), interactive engagement, and user-generated content (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Leung et al., 2013). The findings also align with the argument of Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), who emphasized that social media enables more participatory and experience-driven communication compared to traditional marketing approaches.

Within the Bangladeshi context, the findings reinforce earlier studies highlighting the importance of internet-based tourism promotion and social media communication in improving destination visibility and stakeholder interaction (Avi et al., 2019; Avi et al., 2020). The present study extends this literature by demonstrating that social media platforms are not only communication tools but also strategic mechanisms for promoting sustainability-oriented tourism experiences and environmentally responsible travel behavior. From the perspective of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model, social media engagement functions as a powerful external stimulus capable of influencing tourists' cognitive and emotional evaluations regarding sustainable tourism destinations.

Another important finding concerns the role of digital marketing optimization in strengthening destination image and destination competitiveness. The findings suggest that digital storytelling, influencer marketing, visually engaging content, and online branding strategies significantly affect tourists' perceptions of tourism destinations. These findings support previous studies emphasizing the growing importance of digital marketing technologies and visual communication within tourism promotion (Buhalis et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2018). The interview findings further revealed that tourists increasingly perceive influencer-generated content and online reviews as more authentic and trustworthy than traditional advertisements, which strengthens destination credibility and emotional attachment.

This finding is particularly important because destination image has long been recognized as a major determinant of tourist behavior and destination choice within tourism literature. The findings suggest that optimized digital communication strategies significantly contribute to shaping destination attractiveness, perceived authenticity, and emotional engagement, thereby increasing tourists' willingness to visit sustainable tourism destinations. The study therefore extends existing tourism marketing literature by integrating digital marketing optimization and sustainable tourism promotion within a unified analytical framework.

The findings further reveal that sustainability-oriented digital communication positively influences environmental awareness and sustainable travel intention among tourists. Respondents exposed to eco-friendly tourism messages, environmental campaigns, and sustainability-focused digital content demonstrated comparatively stronger responsible tourism attitudes and behavioral intentions. This finding supports prior studies suggesting that digital communication and sustainability-oriented marketing can shape environmentally responsible consumer behavior (Sigala, 2018). The interview findings also indicate that social media increasingly functions as an educational platform capable of disseminating environmental information and promoting sustainable tourism awareness among tourists.

From the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), the findings suggest that sustainability-oriented digital communication positively shapes tourists' attitudes and perceptions, which subsequently influence sustainable travel intention. The study therefore contributes to tourism behavior literature by demonstrating that environmental awareness generated through social media engagement and digital communication significantly influences sustainable tourism behavior.

Despite the positive influence of social media and digital marketing optimization, the findings also reveal several institutional and structural challenges affecting sustainable tourism promotion in Bangladesh. The study identified inadequate digital infrastructure, weak policy coordination, insufficient strategic marketing, and limited digital expertise as major barriers constraining effective sustainability-oriented destination promotion. These findings are consistent with previous tourism studies emphasizing the existence of policy, infrastructural, and governance-related limitations within Bangladesh's tourism sector (Ananya et al., 2020; Muneem et al., 2020).

The qualitative findings further revealed that many tourism destinations still lack coordinated branding strategies, professional digital communication systems, and long-term sustainability-oriented marketing frameworks. This suggests that although digital tourism communication is increasingly recognized within Bangladesh, tourism promotion practices remain fragmented and insufficiently integrated at the institutional level. Similar governance and coordination challenges have also been identified in previous studies concerning tourism administration and destination management in Bangladesh (Muneem et al., 2018; Avi et al., 2020).

Overall, the findings suggest that social media engagement and digital marketing optimization significantly contribute to sustainable tourism destination promotion by strengthening destination visibility, destination image, environmental awareness, and sustainable travel intention. However, the effectiveness of sustainability-oriented tourism promotion in Bangladesh remains constrained by institutional limitations, weak strategic coordination, and inadequate digital infrastructure.

Table 6: Summary of the Findings

Research Objective	Summary of Findings
Social media engagement and destination image	Social media significantly improves destination visibility, tourist awareness, and sustainable tourism promotion.
Digital marketing optimization and sustainable travel intention	Digital storytelling, influencer marketing, and online branding positively influence destination image and sustainable travel intention.
User-generated content and influencer marketing	Tourists perceive influencer content and online reviews as authentic and trustworthy, enhancing destination credibility.
Environmental awareness and sustainable tourism promotion	Sustainability-focused digital communication increases environmental awareness and responsible tourism behavior.
Effective digital marketing strategies	Social media engagement, visual storytelling, influencer collaboration, and sustainability communication are the most effective strategies.
Challenges in sustainable tourism promotion	Weak policy coordination, limited digital infrastructure, and insufficient marketing expertise hinder effective promotion.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study carry several important implications for tourism policymakers, destination management organizations, tourism entrepreneurs, and digital marketers. First, tourism authorities should prioritize the development of integrated digital tourism marketing strategies emphasizing sustainability-oriented destination branding. Tourism organizations should invest more extensively in visually engaging digital storytelling, influencer collaboration, user-generated content strategies, and sustainability-focused communication to strengthen destination competitiveness and promote environmentally responsible tourism behavior.

Second, policymakers should develop coordinated digital tourism frameworks capable of integrating tourism promotion, sustainability communication, and destination management practices. The findings indicate that weak institutional coordination and limited strategic planning significantly reduce the effectiveness of sustainable tourism promotion in Bangladesh. Therefore, stronger collaboration among tourism authorities, local communities, tourism entrepreneurs, digital marketers, and destination management organizations is necessary to ensure more integrated and sustainable destination promotion.

Third, the study highlights the importance of digital capacity development within the tourism sector. Tourism stakeholders should receive training in social media analytics, digital marketing optimization, online destination branding, and sustainability communication strategies. Previous studies emphasize that institutional readiness and stakeholder capability are critical for tourism development and digital transformation within emerging economies (Buhalis et al., 2019; Muneem et al., 2026).

Fourth, tourism policymakers should place greater emphasis on sustainability-oriented communication and environmental awareness campaigns through digital platforms. Social media should be strategically utilized to educate tourists regarding environmental conservation, responsible tourism behavior, local culture, and community-based tourism practices. The findings suggest that sustainability-oriented digital communication positively influences tourists' environmental awareness and sustainable travel intention, thereby contributing to more responsible tourism development.

Finally, tourism destinations in Bangladesh should strengthen destination branding and destination differentiation strategies through more professional and consistent digital communication practices. Smaller and emerging tourism destinations particularly require stronger online visibility and coordinated promotional efforts to improve destination competitiveness within the increasingly digitalized tourism marketplace. More effective digital branding and sustainability-oriented tourism promotion may therefore contribute significantly to enhancing Bangladesh's tourism image, destination attractiveness, and long-term sustainable tourism development.

VII. Conclusion

This study examined the role of social media platforms and digital marketing optimization in enhancing sustainable tourism destination promotion in Bangladesh through a mixed-method research approach. By integrating quantitative findings with qualitative stakeholder perspectives, the study provides comprehensive insights into how digital communication technologies shape destination visibility, destination image, environmental awareness, and sustainable travel intention within an emerging tourism economy. The findings demonstrate that social media engagement and optimized digital marketing strategies have become increasingly influential mechanisms for promoting sustainable tourism destinations and influencing tourists' behavioral responses in the digital era.

The findings revealed that social media platforms significantly contribute to sustainable tourism promotion by strengthening destination visibility, improving tourist engagement, and increasing accessibility to tourism-related information. Tourists increasingly depend on user-generated content, digital storytelling, online reviews, and influencer communication when evaluating tourism destinations and making travel-related decisions. These findings reinforce previous tourism research emphasizes the growing importance of social media, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), and interactive digital communication in shaping destination perception and tourist behavior (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Leung et al., 2013). The study further demonstrated that digital marketing optimization significantly enhances destination image and destination competitiveness through visually engaging content, influencer marketing, and sustainability-oriented digital communication. Tourists exposed to immersive digital content and strategically branded online tourism experiences reported stronger perceptions regarding destination attractiveness, authenticity, and credibility.

Another important finding of the study is that sustainability-oriented social media communication positively influences tourists' environmental awareness and sustainable travel intention. Exposure to eco-friendly tourism messages, environmental campaigns, and sustainability-focused digital content was found to encourage more responsible tourism attitudes and environmentally conscious travel behavior. From a theoretical perspective, the findings support the applicability of the Stimulus–Organism–Response Model and the Theory of Planned Behavior in explaining how digital communication stimuli influence tourists' cognitive evaluations and sustainability-oriented behavioral responses.

Despite the positive influence of social media and digital marketing optimization, the findings also identified several institutional and structural challenges affecting sustainable tourism promotion in Bangladesh. Weak policy coordination, inadequate digital infrastructure, limited strategic branding initiatives, and insufficient professional digital marketing expertise continue to constrain the effectiveness of sustainability-oriented tourism communication. These findings suggest that although Bangladesh possesses considerable sustainable tourism potential, the tourism sector still requires stronger institutional coordination, strategic digital transformation, and integrated sustainability-oriented tourism policies.

The study contributes to tourism marketing and sustainable tourism literature in several important ways. First, it extends existing knowledge by integrating social media engagement, digital marketing optimization, environmental awareness, and sustainable travel intention within a unified analytical framework. Second, the study contributes context-specific empirical evidence from Bangladesh, which remains comparatively underrepresented within digital tourism marketing and sustainability literature. Third, the mixed-

method design enhances methodological rigor by combining quantitative evidence with qualitative stakeholder perspectives, thereby strengthening the interpretive depth and credibility of the findings.

From a practical perspective, the findings emphasize the need for tourism policymakers, destination management organizations, tourism entrepreneurs, and digital marketers to adopt more integrated and sustainability-oriented digital marketing strategies. Greater emphasis should be placed on digital storytelling, sustainability communication, influencer collaboration, and environmentally responsible destination branding to strengthen destination competitiveness and promote sustainable tourism behavior. Furthermore, tourism authorities should prioritize digital capacity development, institutional coordination, and sustainability-focused tourism communication strategies to ensure more effective and competitive destination promotion.

Overall, the study concludes that social media platforms and digital marketing optimization have become critical drivers of sustainable tourism destination promotion in Bangladesh. As tourism communication increasingly becomes digitally mediated and experience-driven, the strategic integration of sustainability-oriented digital communication practices will be essential for enhancing destination competitiveness, encouraging environmentally responsible tourism behavior, and supporting long-term sustainable tourism development.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite providing important theoretical and practical insights, the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study focused primarily on respondents familiar with tourism-related social media content in Bangladesh; therefore, the findings may not fully represent tourists with limited digital engagement or individuals from different cultural and geographical contexts. Second, the quantitative data collected through online platforms using Google Forms, which may have excluded respondents with limited internet accessibility or lower digital literacy. Third, the study relied largely on self-reported perceptions and behavioral intentions, which may be influenced by respondent bias and subjective interpretation.

Additionally, the study concentrated mainly on selected dimensions such as social media engagement, digital marketing optimization, destination image, environmental awareness, and sustainable travel intention. Other potentially important variables, including tourist satisfaction, destination loyalty, perceived authenticity, tourist trust, and technological readiness, were not extensively examined. Furthermore, the study was conducted within the context of Bangladesh, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to tourism destinations with different socio-economic, technological, and institutional conditions.

Future research may extend the present study in several important directions. Comparative cross-country studies could examine how social media and digital marketing optimization influence sustainable tourism promotion across different tourism destinations and cultural settings. Future studies may also incorporate additional variables such as destination loyalty, perceived authenticity, tourist trust, and technological readiness to develop more comprehensive models related to sustainable tourism behavior and destination promotion.

Moreover, longitudinal research designs may provide deeper understanding regarding the evolving relationship between digital communication and sustainable travel behavior over time. Future research may further investigate the role of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality, and big data analytics in sustainable tourism marketing and destination management. Additional qualitative and ethnographic studies could also provide richer insights into tourists' emotional experiences, sustainability perceptions, and digital engagement practices.

Finally, future studies should further explore the role of tourism governance, stakeholder collaboration, local community participation, and public-private partnerships in strengthening sustainability-oriented digital tourism promotion. Such research would contribute significantly to developing more integrated, resilient, and sustainable tourism communication strategies within emerging tourism destinations.

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