



The Role of Social Media in Shaping Tourism Decisions:

A Study of Instagram and TikTok Influences

Information and Communication in Tourism – Assignment

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Abstract

Social media has emerged as one of the most influential forces shaping tourism decision-making in the digital age. With hundreds of millions of active users, Instagram and TikTok have evolved from entertainment platforms into powerful communication ecosystems that significantly shape how travellers discover, evaluate, and select destinations. The rapid growth of visual communication has shifted tourism promotion away from one-directional, organisation-driven messages toward consumer-driven narratives constructed through images, short-form videos, hashtags, geotags, influencer storytelling, and user-generated experiences. As a result, the travel decision-making process has become increasingly visual, interactive, and socially influenced.

This study examines the role of social media—specifically Instagram and TikTok—in influencing tourism decisions, shaping destination images, guiding travel-planning behaviours, and contributing to customer loyalty. Drawing upon consumer behaviour theories such as AIDA (Attention–Interest–Desire–Action), the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Social Proof Theory, and cognitive–emotional models of decision-making, the research explores how digital communication tools shape consumer perceptions, attitudes, and intentions. Instagram’s curated aesthetics, inspirational photography, Reels, Stories, and influencer partnerships serve as aspirational triggers that create desire and encourage users to imagine themselves in specific destinations. TikTok, by contrast, relies heavily on authenticity, spontaneity, and rapidly viral content to motivate travellers—especially Gen Z—to explore new locations, follow trends, and discover “hidden gems” that previously lay outside mainstream tourism promotion.

The methodological approach is qualitative and grounded in secondary research, including academic literature, industry reports from UNWTO, Statista, Skift, and real-world case studies involving Dubai Tourism, VisitScotland, the Maldives Marketing and PR Corporation, Airbnb, and major hotel brands. Content analysis is used to examine how tourism organisations leverage influencers, hashtags, digital advertising, and user-generated media to increase engagement, strengthen emotional appeal, and drive bookings. The study also evaluates how TikTok trends—such as “Top Places to Visit,” “Hidden Gems,” “Budget Travel Hacks,” and “Aesthetic Travel”—operate as global catalysts of tourism demand, sometimes contributing to overtourism and unrealistic traveller expectations.

The findings indicate that Instagram primarily drives desire and long-term destination positioning through idealised visuals, while TikTok influences more spontaneous decision-making through emotional storytelling, community-driven challenges, and virality. Both platforms significantly affect how tourists perceive destination safety, affordability, and uniqueness. At the same time, challenges such as misinformation, deceptive influencer practices, environmental strain, and psychological pressure to recreate “perfect” travel moments highlight the need for more ethical and sustainable communication strategies. The study concludes that Instagram and TikTok are not merely optional marketing tools but key communication infrastructures shaping the entire travel journey—from initial inspiration to post-trip sharing.

Introduction

Tourism is one of the sectors most strongly influenced by developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs). Over the past two decades, the ways in which travellers search for information, evaluate alternatives, make bookings, and share their experiences have shifted from offline, text-based channels to digital, highly visual, and interactive platforms. Social media sits at the centre of this transformation. Instead of relying on brochures, travel agents, or static websites, contemporary travellers increasingly turn to social media platforms for destination inspiration, practical advice, and validation from peers.

Among the many social media channels, Instagram and TikTok have emerged as particularly influential in the context of tourism. Both platforms are fundamentally visual, but they differ in their styles of communication. Instagram built its popularity around carefully curated photographs, aesthetic feeds, destination hashtags, and influencer-driven branding. Over time, new features such as Stories, Reels, and Guides have enabled more immersive and real-time forms of travel storytelling. Hashtags such as #VisitDubai, #TravelJapan, #Maldives, or #HiddenGems function as digital signposts directing potential tourists to a near-infinite library of imagery and experiences shared by past visitors, influencers, and tourism organisations.

TikTok, by contrast, has transformed tourism communication by emphasising short-form video, motion, sound, humour, and authenticity. Its “For You Page” does not depend primarily on who a user follows, but rather on algorithmic recommendations based on behavioural data. This gives lesser-known creators, small local businesses, and emerging destinations the opportunity to reach global audiences quickly without large advertising

budgets. Viral travel trends—for example, “Top 5 destinations for 2024,” “Hidden cafes in Paris,” or “Day in my life in Istanbul”—have become powerful drivers of spontaneous travel interest.

This shift from static, top-down communication to dynamic, user-driven storytelling has significant implications for how tourism decisions are made. Travellers now undertake a visually rich and socially mediated journey in which they first encounter destinations through posts or videos, then save or share them, and eventually translate inspiration into concrete itineraries and bookings. Consumer behaviour theories help explain this process. The AIDA model clarifies how attention is captured through striking visuals, interest is sustained through narrative, desire builds through emotional association, and action is finally triggered in the form of bookings or on-site visits. Likewise, Social Proof Theory explains why people feel more confident choosing destinations that appear popular and positively reviewed by others.

At the same time, social media-driven tourism presents challenges. Idealised pictures and edited videos may create unrealistic expectations and dissatisfaction when reality fails to match the digital image. Viral trends can lead to overtourism, with fragile environments and small communities suddenly facing unsustainable visitor numbers. Influencer partnerships, if poorly regulated, may prioritise commercial interests over authenticity and transparency.

Against this background, the present study investigates how Instagram and TikTok shape tourism decisions, focusing on their roles as communication tools, their psychological influence on travellers, and their strategic use by tourism organisations. The aim is to

contribute a structured understanding of how these platforms affect consumer behaviour, with a view to informing more ethical, sustainable, and effective tourism communication strategies.

Literature Review

Social media and tourism have been tightly interlinked for more than a decade. Early studies already recognised that online reviews, travel blogs, and photo-sharing websites influence destination image and choice. Xiang and Gretzel (2010), for example, described social media as a core component of online travel information search, highlighting how user-generated content offers experiential knowledge that traditional marketing cannot provide. Since then, the landscape has evolved further: visually oriented platforms such as Instagram, and more recently TikTok, now dominate tourism-related social media use.

Instagram has been widely examined as a tourism communication tool. Henderson (2019) introduced the concept of “Instagrammability,” arguing that travellers increasingly choose destinations partly based on their visual appeal in photographs. This aligns with Destination Image Theory, which distinguishes between cognitive components (knowledge and beliefs) and affective components (feelings and emotions). Instagram content primarily strengthens the affective component by framing destinations in idealised, emotionally appealing ways. Research by Leung et al. (2013) and Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) confirms that tourists increasingly use visual platforms for information search, inspiration, and sharing.

Influencer marketing is central to Instagram's tourist impact. Gretzel (2018) classifies travel influencers as cultural intermediaries who translate destinations into aspirational lifestyle images. Kusumasondjaja (2020) demonstrates that influencer credibility—based on expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness—significantly predicts consumer attitudes and behavioural intentions. Micro-influencers, who have smaller but more engaged audiences, often produce stronger persuasion effects than celebrities, because they appear more authentic and accessible. This is consistent with Social Influence Theory and Social Learning Theory, which suggest that individuals adopt behaviours they observe in relatable role models.

TikTok has received increasing academic attention in recent years. Arthurs et al. (2022) and Mariani and Borghi (2021) describe TikTok as a game changer for destination marketing because of its algorithmic virality, short-form storytelling, and emotionally engaging content. Unlike Instagram's curated aesthetics, TikTok is associated with authenticity and spontaneity. Video formats such as "day in the life," "travel hacks," and "hidden gems" invite creators to share imperfect, realistic glimpses of their experiences. This style aligns with contemporary youth values that favour transparency and relatability over perfection. From a psychological perspective, TikTok's rapid, emotionally charged content fits with dual-process models of decision-making, which suggest that intuitive, emotional processes often guide choices more strongly than rational deliberation.

User-generated content (UGC) plays a critical role across both platforms. Munar and Jacobsen (2014) identify motivations for sharing tourism experiences online, including self-presentation, social interaction, altruism, and enjoyment. UGC functions as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), significantly influencing others' travel decisions.

Numerous studies (Ayeh et al., 2013; Sigala, 2018) show that travellers perceive UGC as more credible than organisation-created content, especially when it includes candid reviews, unedited images, or behind-the-scenes impressions. This enhanced credibility is central to Social Proof Theory, according to which individuals look to others' behaviour to reduce uncertainty.

Consumer behaviour theories provide essential lenses for interpreting the influence of Instagram and TikTok. The AIDA model helps explain how visual content leads consumers from attention to action: eye-catching photos or videos attract initial attention, storytelling and informational captions sustain interest, aesthetic and emotional resonance build desire, and finally, links, discount codes, or saved posts support action in the form of bookings. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) suggests that travel intentions are shaped by attitudes (how appealing a destination seems), subjective norms (what significant others and social networks think), and perceived behavioural control (beliefs about one's ability to travel, including cost and accessibility). Social media contributes to all three elements by shaping attitudes with attractive imagery, reflecting social norms through like and view counts, and enabling users to estimate feasibility through shared tips and budget breakdowns.

However, the literature also points to a range of challenges associated with social media-driven tourism. Zeng and Gerritsen (2014) note that tourism organisations have limited control over online narratives once content is widely shared. Overly idealised portrayals can lead to disappointment or a sense of inauthenticity when travellers confront less perfect realities on-site. Coca-Stefaniak (2020) and UNWTO (2022) highlight cases in which viral trends contributed to overtourism in small, fragile destinations unprepared for

sudden global attention. These phenomena raise sustainability and ethics concerns, prompting calls for more responsible digital communication.

In summary, existing literature confirms that social media—particularly Instagram and TikTok—plays a profound role in shaping modern tourism behaviour. Instagram is most closely associated with visually driven aspiration and destination branding, while TikTok is more strongly tied to emotional storytelling, virality, and spontaneous decision-making. UGC and influencers are key actors in this ecosystem, operating within broader frameworks of social proof, planned behaviour, and affective consumer response. At the same time, the literature emphasises the need for critical evaluation of authenticity, sustainability, and ethical marketing practices in digitally mediated tourism.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis. Given the focus on communication patterns, symbolic meanings, and psychological influences, qualitative methods are appropriate because they enable the researcher to interpret not only what is communicated on Instagram and TikTok, but also how it is framed and why it affects travellers the way it does. Rather than collecting numerical survey data, the study analyses texts, images, and videos indirectly by drawing upon academic studies and documented case examples.

Four main components structure the methodology. The first is a systematic literature review of academic research on social media, consumer behaviour, and tourism. Using

databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and ScienceDirect, journal articles were identified with keywords including “Instagram tourism decisions,” “TikTok destination marketing,” “user-generated content in tourism,” and “social proof travel behaviour.” Articles were screened for relevance, recency, and academic rigour. Around fifty key publications were selected to guide the theoretical framework and contextual background.

The second component consists of an examination of industry reports from organisations such as UNWTO, Statista, Skift, and the World Travel and Tourism Council. These sources provide quantitative insights into social media usage patterns, traveller demographics, digital marketing budgets, and emerging trends in tourism behaviour. Although the study is primarily qualitative, such reports help validate the significance of Instagram and TikTok in real-world tourism contexts and support the interpretation of behavioural trends.

The third component involves qualitative content analysis of typical tourism-related posts and videos on Instagram and TikTok. Rather than downloading or storing user content, the researcher conceptually analysed examples of travel hashtags, influencer posts, official destination accounts, and viral travel trends. Attention was paid to recurring visual styles (e.g., drone footage, point-of-view walking shots, room tours), narrative elements (e.g., storytelling captions, voice-overs, hooks like “things I wish I knew before visiting”), and engagement strategies (e.g., asking questions, encouraging saves and shares, including booking links). Although this analysis does not claim statistical representativeness, it provides illustrative evidence of how tourism narratives are constructed on both platforms.

The fourth component is case study analysis. Six tourism-related case studies were selected from different geographical regions and marketing contexts: Dubai Tourism's #MyDubai campaigns; VisitScotland's use of TikTok to promote rural tourism; the Maldives Marketing and PR Corporation's luxury branding on Instagram; Airbnb's integration of short-form video into the promotion of unique stays; and a selection of micro-influencer collaborations used by smaller tourism boards and independent hotels. Each case was analysed in terms of goals, communication strategies, content formats, engagement outcomes, and reported tourism effects. These cases serve to translate theoretical insights into practical examples.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research. Only publicly available secondary data were used, and no attempt was made to collect personal information about individual users. Social media content was discussed at an aggregate, illustrative level without identifying private individuals. All academic sources were cited following APA style to ensure academic integrity. Limitations of this methodology include the absence of primary data from surveys or interviews and the rapidly changing nature of social media platforms, which may evolve beyond the patterns captured in the sources consulted. Nonetheless, the chosen methods provide a sufficiently robust basis for exploring how Instagram and TikTok shape tourism decision-making from a communication and consumer behaviour perspective.

Findings

The findings of this study reveal that Instagram and TikTok both exert strong but distinct influences on tourism decision-making. Instagram primarily shapes long-term destination aspirations and brand images, whereas TikTok strongly affects spontaneous and short-term travel decisions. Across both platforms, user-generated content and influencer communication play crucial roles in influencing attitudes, perceived norms, and behavioural intentions.

One major finding is that Instagram operates as an aspirational catalogue of global destinations. Users browse destination hashtags, geotags, and influencer profiles to identify visually appealing places they would like to visit in the future. High-quality photography, aesthetic colour palettes, and carefully composed images create emotional desire and shape the mental image of a destination long before any booking is made. Many users save posts into collections titled “Future Trips” or “Bucket List,” indicating that Instagram content functions as a personal inspiration library that influences mid- to long-term planning. This aligns with AIDA’s early stages—attention and desire—as well as with the affective dimension of destination image formation.

The analysis also indicates that Instagram plays a practical role in information search and planning. Beyond inspirational imagery, travellers examine comments, location tags, and captions that provide hotel names, restaurant recommendations, cost estimates, and practical tips. Influencers frequently include itineraries or “things to do” lists in their captions or Story highlights, effectively acting as informal travel agents. As a result, potential tourists often rely on Instagram to refine their choices between destinations,

accommodations, and activities based on what appears popular, well-reviewed, and visually satisfying.

In contrast, TikTok's influence is strongest at the level of emotional engagement and immediate action. Short videos that show real-time experiences, such as walking through night markets, trying street food, or jumping into waterfalls, create a sense of presence and immersion. This, combined with catchy audio tracks and editing styles, produces powerful emotional responses. The platform's "For You Page" algorithm introduces users to destinations they may never have searched for explicitly, thereby broadening awareness and stimulating spontaneous interest. Viewers often comment that a particular video "made me want to book a flight immediately," illustrating how TikTok can compress the decision-making process.

Several case examples reinforce this pattern. VisitScotland used TikTok to promote scenic but lesser-known rural locations through short clips featuring misty hills, ancient castles, and hiking trails. These videos not only attracted more visitors but also helped distribute tourist flows away from already crowded sites. Conversely, other viral TikTok trends have unintentionally contributed to overtourism, as seen when previously quiet natural attractions suddenly experienced surges in visits after being labelled "hidden gems." Here, TikTok acts as a double-edged sword, providing opportunities for regional development while also posing sustainability risks.

A further key finding is the central role of user-generated content in establishing credibility. Across both Instagram and TikTok, travellers expressed higher trust in content created by ordinary users than in official advertising. Reviews, candid vlogs, and

behind-the-scenes clips are seen as more authentic and less biased. This validates Social Proof Theory: when many people post positive experiences about the same destination, others infer that it is a good and safe choice. Like and view counts, comment sentiment, and the sheer volume of posts about a place operate as digital heuristics guiding decision-making under uncertainty.

The study also finds that micro-influencers hold significant power in shaping tourism choices. Their content often focuses on niche themes—such as backpacking, halal travel, eco-tourism, or solo female travel—and they maintain strong relationships with their followers through frequent interaction. Because they appear more relatable than celebrities, their recommendations are perceived as genuine advice rather than pure advertising. Tourism organisations that collaborate strategically with such influencers can influence clearly defined segments of the market in an efficient and credible way.

Finally, the findings highlight important challenges. Both platforms contribute to the creation of idealised expectations that may not fully match reality, potentially leading to disappointment or negative reviews when travellers encounter overcrowding, different weather conditions, or less glamorous surroundings. There is also evidence that viral trends can rapidly distort the carrying capacity of destinations. These issues underscore the need for more balanced, transparent, and sustainability-oriented communication from tourism stakeholders who operate on Instagram and TikTok.

Discussion

The discussion of these findings confirms that Instagram and TikTok have become integral components of the tourism decision-making landscape. They do not simply supplement traditional marketing; they fundamentally reshape how destinations are imagined, evaluated, and chosen. From a theoretical standpoint, their influence reflects a convergence of visual culture, social proof, and digitally mediated peer communication.

One key theme is the complementary nature of the two platforms. Instagram's polished aesthetic lends itself to long-term aspiration and brand building. It allows destinations and influencers to craft coherent, visually pleasing narratives that position specific locations as dream-worthy. This fits neatly within the early stages of the decision process, where travellers form awareness and desire. TikTok, on the other hand, thrives on immediacy, emotion, and narrative momentum. The platform encourages users to react quickly to what they see, often with minimal rational deliberation. In psychological terms, Instagram aligns more closely with reflective, planned decision processes, while TikTok taps into intuitive, fast-thinking processes driven by emotion and curiosity.

The importance of emotional engagement emerges strongly from the analysis. Tourism is an experience-based product; it cannot be tested in advance in the same way as a physical object. Because of this, emotions, imagination, and symbolic meaning play a central role in choice. Instagram and TikTok facilitate vivid mental simulations of what a trip might feel like, using imagery, music, and storytelling to let viewers "try on" an experience mentally. This corresponds with affective theories of consumer behaviour, which place emotions at the centre of decision-making rather than treating them as secondary to rational cost-benefit analyses.

Social proof further strengthens the persuasive power of these platforms. When a destination appears repeatedly in users' feeds, tagged by friends, influencers, and strangers alike, it becomes normalised as a desirable choice. This can be seen in the rise of certain "must-visit" destinations and attractions that dominate travel discourse online. While this can help lesser-known places gain recognition, it may also lead to homogenisation in destination choice, with many travellers converging on the same locations from a fear of missing out.

The discussion must also critically address the sustainability and ethics dimensions of social media-driven tourism. Viral content can promote rapid growth without giving destinations time to prepare infrastructure or implement visitor management strategies. Sensitive natural environments, historical sites, and small villages can suffer damage when visitor numbers exceed carrying capacity. Moreover, if influencers promote destinations primarily for financial gain without acknowledging local challenges or environmental pressures, their communication may conflict with principles of responsible tourism.

Yet, social media can also support sustainability when used strategically. Destination marketing organisations can highlight off-season travel, promote lesser-known regions to distribute demand more evenly, and share educational content about respecting local culture and nature. TikTok and Instagram can thus become tools not only for promotion but also for awareness-raising and behavioural change, encouraging travellers to adopt more responsible practices.

Another implication concerns the role of authenticity. Travellers today express a strong desire for authentic experiences, yet the content they consume is often curated, filtered, and strategically produced. This creates an authenticity paradox, in which people chase “real” experiences that are actually mediated through digital performance. Recognising this paradox is important for tourism marketers who must balance attractive presentation with honest representation.

Overall, the discussion shows that Instagram and TikTok are powerful but complex communication tools. They enable creativity, connection, and opportunity, but they also carry risks related to sustainability, mental health (through social comparison and pressure to perform), and information accuracy. The challenge for tourism stakeholders is to harness the benefits while mitigating the negative effects through ethical guidelines, transparent partnerships, and a long-term perspective on destination wellbeing.

Conclusion

Social media, and particularly Instagram and TikTok, has moved to the centre of tourism communication. These platforms influence how people dream about travel, where they decide to go, how they plan their trips, and how they share their experiences afterwards. The study has shown that Instagram tends to shape aspirational, long-term destination images through curated visuals and influencer branding, while TikTok exerts a stronger effect on spontaneous and emotionally driven decisions via short-form, immersive videos and viral trends.

From a consumer behaviour perspective, both platforms activate important psychological mechanisms: they capture attention, stimulate interest and desire, and facilitate action by providing concrete information, booking links, and social validation. The decision-making process is no longer linear or exclusively rational; instead, it is iterative, emotional, and deeply embedded in social networks and digital communities. User-generated content and influencers act as key intermediaries who translate destinations into lived stories that others use as reference points.

At the same time, this transformation brings challenges. Idealised portrayals can distort expectations, viral popularity can threaten the sustainability of fragile destinations, and poorly regulated influencer marketing can undermine trust. These risks call for more responsible digital strategies. Tourism organisations, policy-makers, and content creators must collaborate to ensure that the images and narratives circulating online support not only economic growth but also cultural respect, environmental protection, and community wellbeing.

In conclusion, Instagram and TikTok are not optional extras but central infrastructures in the modern tourism ecosystem. Their influence is likely to grow as younger, digitally native generations become the dominant group of travellers. Stakeholders who understand how these platforms shape perceptions and decisions—and who use them thoughtfully and ethically—will be best placed to build strong, resilient, and sustainable tourism futures.

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Table 1: Comparison of Instagram and TikTok in Tourism Influence

Aspect	Instagram	TikTok
Primary Role	Aspirational branding	Spontaneous inspiration
Content Style	Curated photos and Reels	Short-form, fast-paced videos
Emotional Tone	Idealised, aesthetic	Authentic, energetic
Main Impact	Long-term desire and image	Immediate interest and action

Diagram 1: Simplified Social Media Travel Decision Path

