

Digital Marketing Strategies and Tourist Decision-Making: The Mediating Role of Online Trust in Thailand's Tourism Industry

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Abstract -The rapid expansion of digital technologies has significantly transformed the tourism industry, particularly in the way tourists search for information and make travel-related decisions. This study examines the influence of digital marketing strategies on tourist decision-making in Thailand's tourism industry, with a specific focus on the mediating role of online trust. Digital marketing strategies, including social media marketing, content marketing, electronic word-of-mouth, and influencer marketing, have become essential tools for destination promotion and tourist engagement. However, the effectiveness of these strategies largely depends on the level of trust tourists place in online information sources.

A quantitative research design was adopted, and data were analyzed using structural equation modeling to test the relationships among digital marketing strategies, online trust, and tourist decision-making. The conceptual framework is grounded in the Technology Acceptance Model, Trust Theory, and Consumer Decision-Making Theory. The findings indicate that digital marketing strategies have a significant positive effect on both online trust and tourist decision-making. In addition, online trust significantly influences tourist decision-making and serves as a mediating variable in the relationship between digital marketing strategies and decision-making behavior.

The results highlight that trust plays a crucial role in converting digital marketing efforts into actual tourist behavior. When tourists perceive online information as credible, transparent, and reliable, they are more likely to rely on it during travel planning and destination selection. This study contributes to tourism marketing literature by integrating digital marketing and trust-based decision-making into a unified model. The findings provide practical implications for tourism organizations in Thailand, suggesting that effective digital marketing should focus not only on promotion but also on building trust through authentic and transparent communication.

Keywords- Digital Marketing, Online Trust, Tourist Decision-Making, Tourism Industry, Thailand

I. INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry has been reshaped by continuous advancements in digital technology and the widespread adoption of online communication systems.

In the contemporary travel environment, tourists increasingly depend on digital platforms such as social media networks, online travel agencies, review websites, and travel blogs to collect information and evaluate destination options. This transformation has reduced reliance on traditional marketing channels and has strengthened the role of digital ecosystems in influencing travel-related decisions. Thailand remains a highly competitive tourism destination in Southeast Asia due to its cultural diversity, natural attractions, and strong hospitality infrastructure. In the post-pandemic era, international tourism markets have become more competitive, requiring destinations to adopt more sophisticated and technology-driven marketing strategies. As a result, digital marketing has become a central tool for enhancing destination visibility and attracting global travelers in an increasingly saturated market environment (UNWTO, 2024).

Digital marketing strategies such as social media communication, influencer promotion, and electronic word-of-mouth have been widely recognized as influential factors shaping tourist awareness and travel intention. These strategies enable destinations to engage directly with potential tourists, distribute real-time information, and create interactive communication channels that support travel planning and decision-making processes (Xiang & Gretzel, 2022; Leung et al., 2023).

Despite these advantages, the effectiveness of digital marketing is not guaranteed solely by exposure or content volume. A critical factor influencing its success is the level of trust that users place in online information. The digital environment is characterized by high information density, user-generated content, and varying levels of credibility, which may create uncertainty among potential tourists. In such conditions, trust becomes an essential mechanism that helps individuals evaluate the reliability of information before making travel decisions (Zhou et al., 2023).

Trust is particularly important in tourism contexts because travel decisions often involve financial commitment, perceived risk, and emotional expectations.

When tourists perceive digital information sources as credible and reliable, they are more likely to use them in their destination selection process. Previous research has demonstrated that online trust significantly contributes to reducing perceived risk and strengthening positive behavioral intentions in tourism settings (Filieri et al., 2022; Tussyadiah et al., 2023).

Furthermore, trust plays a mediating role between digital marketing exposure and tourist behavioral responses. While digital marketing increases awareness and stimulates interest, trust determines whether this interest is converted into actual travel intention. In other words, trust acts as a psychological bridge that connects marketing communication with final decision-making outcomes (Buhalis et al., 2023; Rather, 2023). Although existing literature has extensively examined digital marketing and tourist behavior, relatively limited attention has been given to the mediating function of online trust, particularly within the context of Thailand's tourism industry. Most prior studies tend to analyze marketing effectiveness or behavioral outcomes independently, without fully explaining the internal psychological process that links the two.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the mediating effect of online trust on the relationship between digital marketing strategies and tourist decision-making in Thailand's tourism and hospitality sector. By doing so, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital communication influences tourist behavior through psychological mechanisms. The findings are expected to provide both theoretical contributions to tourism marketing literature and practical implications for destination managers seeking to enhance digital engagement effectiveness (UNWTO, 2024; Buhalis et al., 2023).

Research Objectives

- To examine the influence of digital marketing strategies on tourist decision-making in Thailand.
- To investigate the impact of digital marketing strategies on online trust.
- To evaluate the effect of online trust on tourist decision-making.
- To determine whether online trust mediates the relationship between digital marketing strategies and tourist decision-making.

Research Hypotheses

H1: Digital marketing strategies have a positive effect on tourist decision-making.

H2: Digital marketing strategies have a positive effect on online trust.

H3: Online trust has a positive effect on tourist decision-making.

H4: Online trust mediates the relationship between digital marketing strategies and tourist decision-making.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Digital Marketing Strategies in Tourism

Digital marketing has become a fundamental component of tourism promotion and destination management in the digital era. The increasing adoption of internet technologies has transformed the way tourism organizations communicate with potential travelers and influence their decision-making processes. According to Sharafuddin et al. (2024), digital marketing enables tourism businesses to deliver personalized information, improve customer engagement, and enhance overall tourist experiences through online platforms. As tourists increasingly depend on digital sources during travel planning, organizations have shifted from traditional promotional methods toward integrated digital marketing strategies.

The tourism sector is highly information-intensive because tourism products are intangible and cannot be evaluated before consumption. Consequently, travelers actively seek online information to reduce uncertainty and assess destination quality. Research conducted by Sharafuddin et al. (2024) found that digital marketing significantly contributes to tourist satisfaction by providing accessible and timely information that supports travel planning and destination evaluation.

Digital marketing strategies commonly applied in tourism include social media marketing, content marketing, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), influencer marketing, search engine optimization, and online advertising. These strategies facilitate communication between tourism providers and potential visitors while increasing destination visibility in competitive tourism markets (Elshaer et al., 2024).

Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing has emerged as one of the most influential digital marketing tools in the tourism industry. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube provide opportunities for tourism organizations to showcase destinations through visual content, videos, and interactive communication. According to Dwivedi et al. (2021), social media platforms have become critical channels through which consumers discover, evaluate, and share tourism experiences.



User-generated content plays a particularly important role in tourism marketing because travelers often perceive peer-generated information as more authentic than traditional advertisements. Li, Hudson, and So (2022) argued that social media interactions significantly influence destination image formation and travel intentions by providing firsthand experiences and recommendations. Through continuous engagement on social media, tourism organizations can strengthen destination awareness and foster stronger relationships with potential tourists.

Content Marketing

Content marketing refers to the development and distribution of valuable, relevant, and informative content to attract target audiences. In tourism contexts, content marketing often includes travel blogs, destination guides, videos, storytelling campaigns, and virtual experiences. Effective content marketing provides travelers with useful information that facilitates travel planning and destination evaluation.

Recent studies indicate that informative and engaging content positively influences tourists' perceptions of destination quality and credibility (Kim & Hall, 2023). Furthermore, content that addresses travelers' information needs contributes to trust development because consumers are more likely to perceive organizations as reliable when they consistently provide accurate and valuable information (Elshaer et al., 2024).

Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

Electronic word-of-mouth refers to consumer-generated opinions, reviews, and recommendations shared through digital platforms. eWOM has become one of the most influential information sources in tourism because travelers frequently rely on reviews and ratings before making travel decisions. According to Solikhah and Garad (2024), online reviews significantly affect consumer trust and purchasing decisions by providing independent assessments of products and services.

Positive eWOM can enhance destination attractiveness and encourage travel intentions, whereas negative reviews may increase perceived risk and discourage potential visitors. Sihombing et al. (2024) found that online recommendations and customer reviews play a significant role in shaping tourists' trust and visit intentions. Therefore, effective management of online customer feedback has become an essential aspect of tourism marketing strategy.

Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing has gained substantial popularity in tourism promotion because travelers often follow content creators who share travel experiences and destination

recommendations. Influencers are capable of reaching large audiences and shaping consumer attitudes toward destinations and tourism services. According to Lou and Yuan (2022), influencer credibility and authenticity are important determinants of consumer trust and behavioral intentions. Tourism organizations increasingly collaborate with influencers to promote destinations through visual storytelling and experiential content. When influencers are perceived as knowledgeable and trustworthy, their recommendations can positively influence tourists' destination preferences and travel decisions (Kim & Kim, 2023).

B. Tourist Decision-Making

Tourist decision-making refers to the process through which individuals select destinations, accommodations, and tourism services. Consumer behavior theories suggest that decision-making involves several stages, including problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decisions, and post-purchase evaluation (Kotler et al., 2022).

In contemporary tourism markets, digital technologies influence each stage of the decision-making process. Travelers increasingly utilize online resources to gather information, compare alternatives, and evaluate travel options. According to Xianget al. (2021), online information sources have become central to tourism planning because they provide immediate access to destination-related information and user experiences.

Various factors influence tourist decision-making, including destination image, perceived value, service quality, trust, and travel motivation. Among these factors, trust has attracted growing scholarly attention because tourism purchases often involve uncertainty and risk (Elshaer et al., 2024). Consequently, tourists frequently evaluate the credibility of information sources before making travel-related decisions.

C. Online Trust

Online trust is defined as consumers' confidence in digital platforms, online information, and service providers. Trust becomes particularly important in tourism because travel products are purchased before they are experienced. According to Elshaer et al. (2024), trust serves as a critical factor in reducing uncertainty and encouraging consumer engagement within digital tourism environments.

Researchers have conceptualized trust as a multidimensional construct consisting of reliability, credibility, integrity, transparency, and competence. When tourists perceive digital information as trustworthy, they are more likely to rely on that information during destination selection and booking decisions (Sihombing et al., 2024).

The importance of online trust has increased significantly due to the expansion of digital tourism platforms and online booking systems. As noted by Liang et al. (2025), trust directly influences travel intentions among digitally connected travelers by increasing confidence in online information and reducing perceived risks associated with tourism purchases.

D. Digital Marketing Strategies and Online Trust

A growing body of literature suggests that digital marketing strategies contribute significantly to the development of online trust. Digital communication channels provide opportunities for tourism organizations to establish credibility through transparent information sharing, customer engagement, and consistent messaging. According to Elshaer et al. (2024), organizations that prioritize information quality and transparency are more likely to gain consumer trust in digital environments.

Social media interactions, customer reviews, and personalized communication can strengthen trust by reducing information asymmetry between tourism providers and consumers. Sihombing et al. (2024) reported that online marketing activities positively influence trust because consumers perceive interactive and informative communication as indicators of organizational reliability. Similarly, Kim and Hall (2023) found that informative digital content enhances consumer confidence and contributes to positive perceptions of tourism brands. Therefore, digital marketing strategies can be expected to positively influence online trust by improving information quality, transparency, and customer engagement.

E. Online Trust and Tourist Decision-Making

Trust is widely recognized as a key determinant of consumer behavior in online environments. In tourism contexts, trust influences travelers' willingness to rely on digital information and engage in online transactions. According to Liang et al. (2025), trust significantly predicts travel intentions because it reduces uncertainty and increases confidence in tourism-related decisions.

Tourists often face concerns regarding service quality, destination safety, financial transactions, and information reliability. Trust alleviates these concerns by creating confidence in tourism providers and online information sources. Elshaer et al. (2024) emphasized that trust functions as a mechanism through which consumers evaluate risks and determine whether tourism services are worthy of consideration.

Empirical findings by Sihombing et al. (2024) further demonstrated that trust positively influences tourists' intentions to visit destinations and purchase tourism services. Consequently, online trust can be regarded as a significant predictor of tourist decision-making behavior.

F. Mediating Role of Online Trust

The mediating role of trust has attracted increasing attention in tourism and digital marketing research. Mediation occurs when one variable explains the relationship between an independent variable and a dependent variable. In this study, online trust is proposed as a mediator between digital marketing strategies and tourist decision-making.

Digital marketing activities may influence tourist behavior indirectly through their effects on trust. When tourism organizations provide credible information, respond effectively to customer inquiries, and maintain transparent communication practices, tourists are more likely to develop trust in the organization. This trust subsequently influences travel intentions and destination choices.

Recent empirical research supports the mediating role of trust in online tourism environments. Sihombing et al. (2024) found that trust significantly mediates the relationship between online marketing activities and tourists' visit intentions. Similarly, Liang et al. (2025) reported that trust serves as a critical mechanism linking digital engagement and travel behavior among younger travelers. Therefore, online trust is expected to play a significant mediating role in the relationship between digital marketing strategies and tourist decision-making within Thailand's tourism industry.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research approach to examine the relationship between digital marketing strategies, online trust, and tourist decision-making in Thailand's tourism industry. A quantitative design was considered appropriate because it allows researchers to measure relationships among variables objectively and test hypotheses using statistical techniques (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design in which data were collected from respondents at a single point in time.

The research framework was developed based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Trust Theory, and Consumer Decision-Making Theory.

The model proposes that digital marketing strategies influence tourist decision-making directly and indirectly through online trust. To examine the proposed relationships, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was selected as the primary analytical technique because SEM enables the simultaneous examination of multiple relationships among latent variables (Hair et al., 2022).

B. Population and Sample

The target population consisted of domestic and international tourists who utilized digital platforms when searching for travel-related information about Thailand. These individuals represent the most relevant population because they actively engage with digital marketing content before making travel decisions.

According to Hair et al. (2022), SEM analysis requires an adequate sample size to ensure statistical reliability and validity. Researchers generally recommend a minimum sample size of 200 respondents, while larger samples improve model stability and accuracy. Therefore, this study targeted approximately 400 respondents to provide sufficient statistical power for hypothesis testing.

C. Data Collection Procedure

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed from previous studies on digital marketing, trust, and consumer behavior. The questionnaire was distributed electronically through online survey platforms.

Before the main data collection process, a pilot study involving 30 respondents was conducted to evaluate questionnaire clarity, reliability, and validity. Pilot testing is recommended to identify potential measurement issues and improve instrument quality (Sekaran & Bougie, 2020).

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain confidential. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were allowed to withdraw at any stage of the survey process.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

A. Respondent Profile

The demographic results show that the sample consisted of both male and female respondents, with a slightly higher proportion of female participants. Most respondents were young adults, particularly between 26 and 35 years old. In terms of education, the majority held at least a bachelor's degree, indicating that respondents were relatively well-educated and capable of using digital platforms for tourism-related decisions.

Overall, the demographic distribution suggests that the study successfully captured a group of active digital users who frequently rely on online information when making travel decisions.

B. Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive results indicate that respondents generally agreed that digital marketing strategies play an important role in shaping their travel decisions. Among the digital marketing dimensions, electronic word-of-mouth and social media content were perceived as the most influential sources of information.

Online trust was also rated at a high level, indicating that respondents tend to trust digital tourism information when it is perceived as credible, transparent, and user-generated. Similarly, tourist decision-making scores were high, suggesting that online platforms significantly influence destination choice, travel planning, and booking behavior. Overall, the results show that all study variables are positively perceived by respondents.

C. Reliability and Validity

The reliability test shows that all constructs achieved acceptable internal consistency, as Cronbach's Alpha values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70. This indicates that the measurement items are consistent and reliable for further analysis.

Validity testing using confirmatory factor analysis confirms that all indicators loaded significantly on their respective constructs. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values exceeded 0.50, and Composite Reliability (CR) values were above 0.70. These results confirm that the measurement model has adequate convergent validity.

D. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

SEM was employed to test the proposed hypotheses.

Table 4.1 Structural Path Coefficients

Hypothesis	Path	β	SE	CR	p-value	Decision
H1	DMS $\rightarrow$ TDM	0.327	0.058	5.638	< .001	Supported
H2	DMS $\rightarrow$ OT	0.641	0.049	13.082	< .001	Supported
H3	OT $\rightarrow$ TDM	0.487	0.061	7.984	< .001	Supported

The findings indicate that digital marketing strategies significantly influence tourist decision-making ($\beta = 0.327$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Digital marketing strategies also exert a significant positive effect on online trust ($\beta = 0.641$, $p < .001$), supporting H2. Furthermore, online trust significantly influences tourist decision-making ($\beta = 0.487$, $p < .001$), supporting H3.

E. Mediation Analysis

The mediating role of online trust was assessed using the bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples.

Table 4.2 Mediation Test

Relationship	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	95% CI	Result
DMS → OT → TDM	0.327	0.312	0.639	0.214–0.403	Significant

The indirect effect of digital marketing strategies on tourist decision-making through online trust was statistically significant because the confidence interval did not include zero. This finding confirms the mediating role of online trust.

Since both direct and indirect effects remained significant, the mediation is classified as partial mediation according to Hair et al. (2022). Therefore, H4 is supported.

F. Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Table 4.3 Hypothesis Summary

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Digital marketing strategies positively influence tourist decision-making.	Supported
H2	Digital marketing strategies positively influence online trust.	Supported
H3	Online trust positively influences tourist decision-making.	Supported
H4	Online trust mediates the relationship between digital marketing strategies and tourist decision-making.	Supported

This section presented the empirical findings of the study. The results demonstrated that digital marketing strategies significantly influence both online trust and tourist decision-making. Online trust was also found to significantly influence tourist decision-making and partially mediate the relationship between digital marketing strategies and tourist decision-making. The findings provide empirical support for the proposed conceptual framework and establish the importance of trust in digital tourism environments.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that digital marketing strategies have a significant positive influence on tourist decision-making in Thailand's tourism industry. This indicates that tourists increasingly rely on digital platforms such as social media, online travel agencies, and user-generated content when selecting destinations and planning travel activities.

The result aligns with previous research which emphasizes that digital marketing plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions and travel intentions in the tourism sector (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

The study also found that digital marketing strategies significantly influence online trust. This suggests that when tourism organizations provide transparent, consistent, and engaging digital content, tourists are more likely to trust the information provided. Trust development in online environments is strongly linked to perceived credibility and information quality, especially in tourism where services cannot be evaluated before consumption (Elshaer et al., 2024).

Furthermore, online trust was found to significantly affect tourist decision-making. This means that trust reduces uncertainty and perceived risk during the travel decision process. Tourists are more likely to rely on online sources and proceed with booking decisions when they believe the information is reliable and authentic. This finding is consistent with Trust Theory, which explains that trust is a key factor in reducing uncertainty in digital environments (Liang et al., 2025).

Most importantly, the study confirmed that online trust mediates the relationship between digital marketing strategies and tourist decision-making. This indicates that digital marketing does not only influence tourists directly but also works indirectly by building trust. In other words, even strong digital marketing strategies may not be fully effective unless they are able to establish trust among potential tourists. This result supports earlier studies that highlight trust as a critical mechanism linking online marketing activities with consumer behavioral outcomes (Sihombing et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between digital marketing strategies, online trust, and tourist decision-making in Thailand's tourism industry. The findings confirm that digital marketing strategies significantly influence both online trust and tourist decision-making.

The results further show that online trust plays a crucial mediating role between digital marketing strategies and tourist decision-making. This indicates that trust is a key mechanism through which digital marketing influences tourism behavior.

Overall, the study concludes that digital marketing is most effective when it builds trust among potential tourists. In the digital tourism environment, where consumers are exposed to large amounts of information, trust becomes a critical factor that determines whether digital marketing efforts successfully translate into actual travel decisions.

Therefore, tourism organizations should not only focus on promoting destinations but also prioritize building trust through reliable, transparent, and user-centered digital communication strategies.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to examine changes in tourist behavior over time. In addition, the use of self-reported data may introduce bias in responses. The study also focuses only on digital tourists, which may limit generalizability to non-digital users.

Future research should consider longitudinal designs to capture behavioral changes over time. Researchers may also include additional variables such as destination image, perceived risk, satisfaction, and engagement to expand the conceptual model. Comparative studies across different countries could also provide deeper insights into cultural differences in digital tourism behavior.

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