

Destination Image Mediates the Effect of Digital Marketing and Word of Mouth on Visit Decisionse

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Abstract: This research analyzes how digital marketing and word of mouth influence visit decisions both directly and indirectly through destination image for the religious tourism destination of the Our Lady of All Nations Statue in Atambua, Belu Regency, Indonesia. A quantitative explanatory design was used, with data collected from 170 visitors via structured questionnaires and analyzed using Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings show that digital marketing and word of mouth each have a positive and significant direct effect on visit decision. Destination image also positively and significantly affects visit decision and is significantly influenced by both digital marketing and word of mouth. Furthermore, destination image mediates the effects of digital marketing and word of mouth on visit decision, following a complementary (partial) mediation pattern. These results underline the strategic roles of digital promotion and interpersonal communication in shaping positive destination image and driving tourist visit decisions. The study enhances tourism marketing literature, specifically for religious destinations in emerging regions, and provides practical recommendations for destination managers and local government to strengthen integrated digital marketing and word-of-mouth management to increase tourist arrivals and repeat visits.

Keywords: Digital Marketing; Word Of Mouth; Destination Image; Visit Decision; Religious Tourism; Atambua.

1. Introduction

Tourism is a strategic sector for Indonesia due to its large contribution to foreign exchange earnings, job creation, and regional development. The rising popularity of both domestic and international destinations in recent years has motivated local and national governments to further develop promising tourism locations, including religious tourism. At the local level, the success of destination development depends largely on the number of tourist visits since these visits are the main source of revenue through entertainment taxes, tourist attraction levies, accommodation services, and other related economic activities.

In this context, the visit decision becomes a key variable determining the success of a destination. Visit decisions do not occur spontaneously; they result from a decision-making process involving information search, evaluating alternatives, and consideration of various factors, both internal tourist motivations and destination attractiveness. Tourists generally visit destinations to gain satisfaction, pleasure, and new experiences, so destinations must meet these needs and expectations to encourage both initial and repeat visits.

Competition among tourist destinations is becoming tighter in both national and regional contexts, especially with advances in information and communication technology. This necessitates destination managers to implement effective marketing strategies, particularly digital ones, to attract and retain visitors. At the same time, word of mouth (WOM) continues to be one of the most trusted information sources for evaluating the quality of a destination.

A crucial factor connecting various marketing efforts to tourist decisions is destination image. Destination image is built on tourist perceptions, knowledge, and experiences with a place, including natural attractions, cultural aspects, facilities, accessibility, and comfort. A positive image increases the likelihood of tourists choosing, visiting, and recommending a destination.

Belu Regency in East Nusa Tenggara Province features a notable religious tourist attraction: the Our Lady of All Nations Statue at Teluk Gurita, Dualaus Village, Kakuluk Mesak District. This ~41-meter-high statue is a new religious icon not only for the local community but also for visitors from other regions and even neighboring countries. The beautiful landscape of Teluk Gurita, with its white sand beaches, calm sea, and green hills, strengthens its attraction as a combination of religious and nature tourism.

This statue was opened as a tourist attraction at the end of 2019, temporarily closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and reopened in early 2021. After a surge in visits in 2022, numbers dropped in 2023–2024 following a temporary closure for further construction. This development indicates significant potential for visitor growth, but also challenges in sustaining and increasing tourist numbers over time.

In a competitive tourism era with increasingly digital tourist behavior, digital marketing and word of mouth are expected to play important roles in shaping destination image and visit decisions. Previous studies show that digital marketing increases tourist interest via destination exposure, while WOM—both direct and social media-based—strengthens visitor trust and decision certainty. However, there remains a need for empirical study focused on religious tourism in border regions like Atambua.

Based on the background above, this study aims to analyze: (1) the effects of digital marketing and word of mouth on visit decisions; (2) their effects on destination image; and (3) the mediating role of destination image in the relationship between digital marketing, word of mouth, and visit decisions for the Our Lady of All Nations Statue in Atambua.

This research is expected to contribute theoretically to tourism marketing literature for religious destinations and provide practical recommendations for local governments and destination managers in designing more effective marketing strategies.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Visit Decision

In tourism, the visit decision parallels purchase decision in consumer behavior theory. It results from a complex process, including need recognition, information search, evaluating alternatives, and the final decision to visit a destination over a certain period. Both internal (needs, motivations, preferences, personal values) and external factors (culture, society, economy, and destination image and promotion) influence it.

Definitions emphasize that a visit decision is a tourist's act of selecting a destination for satisfaction aligned with their needs and desires. Tourists consider attractions, facilities, accessibility, costs, and recommendations from others. Thus, visit decision is the outcome of tourists' perceptions and evaluation of all destination attributes.

Common indicators adapted from consumer decision theory include:

- Confidence in choosing a destination after searching and knowing information
- Visiting due to preference for the destination
- Compatibility with tourists' needs and desires
- Visiting based on recommendations

2.2. Destination Image

A destination image is the mental picture, perception, and belief that tourists have about a destination, formed by information, direct experience, and others' experiences. It encompasses assessment of attractions, infrastructure, amenities, cleanliness, security, socio-cultural atmosphere, and management professionalism. A positive destination image increases visit interest, satisfaction, and loyalty, including intentions to revisit and recommend to others.

Conceptually, destination image consists of cognitive (knowledge) and affective (feelings) elements built from stimuli from multiple sources—such as promotions, mass media, social media, and WOM—shaping an overall impression. In tourism competition, destination image is a key differentiator between places offering similar physical products.

Indicators adopted include:

- Infrastructure condition (quality of tourism support facilities and infrastructure)
- Travel convenience (cleanliness, security, comfort)
- Tourism environment (unique culture, history, and friendly social environment)
- Unique experience (special impressions only available at the destination)

2.3. Digital Marketing

Digital marketing consists of promotional strategies using digital technology, especially the internet, to reach wider and more specific audiences. In the tourism context, it includes websites, social media (Instagram, Facebook,

TikTok), video sharing, travel apps, and other digital channels to spread information, inspire visits, and facilitate interaction with tourists.

Digital marketing advantages include wide reach, targeting precision, cost efficiency, two-way interactivity, and the ability to display engaging visual content (photos, videos). In tourism, digital content that showcases scenery, facilities, and visitor experiences influences initial perceptions and creates a positive destination image that shapes visit decisions.

Indicators used include:

- Accessibility (ease of accessing destination info online)
- Interactivity (two-way communication between managers and tourists)
- Entertainment (extent of engaging/attractive digital content)
- Credibility (trustworthiness of digital information and promotion)
- Informativeness (completeness and clarity of digital information)

2.4. Word of Mouth

Word of mouth (WOM) is informal communication between individuals about their experiences, opinions, or recommendations on products, services, or destinations, either face-to-face, in writing, or via electronic media. In tourism, WOM can be direct (conversation) or electronic (e-WOM via online reviews, social media, blogs, travel platforms).

WOM is seen as more credible and influential than paid advertising because it comes from real consumer experiences and trusted persons (friends, family, colleagues). Positive WOM enhances destination image and encourages visitation; negative WOM dampens interest and erodes trust.

Indicators include:

- Tourists receive information about the destination from others
- Tourists visit due to recommendations or stories from others
- Tourists are likely to recommend the destination after their own visit

2.5. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

The theoretical review proposes that digital marketing and WOM directly affect visit decisions, while also impacting destination image, which subsequently affects visit decisions. Destination image thus serves as a mediator. The following hypotheses are formulated:

- H1: Digital marketing positively and significantly influences visit decisions
- H2: Word of mouth positively and significantly influences visit decisions
- H3: Destination image positively and significantly influences visit decisions
- H4: Digital marketing positively and significantly influences destination image
- H5: Word of mouth positively and significantly influences destination image
- H6: Destination image mediates the effect of digital marketing on visit decisions
- H7: Destination image mediates the effect of word of mouth on visit decisions.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Research Design

This study implements a quantitative approach with a descriptive-verify type and explanatory research design to test the influences of digital marketing and word of mouth on visit decisions, mediated by destination image.

3.2. Population and Sample

The population is all tourists who visit the Our Lady of All Nations Statue in Teluk Gurita, Dualaus, Kakuluk Mesak, Belu. Due to the unknown total population and time limitations, sampling was conducted using non-probability sampling with accidental sampling (i.e., tourists present and willing to participate during data collection).

The final analyzed sample consisted of 170 respondents, which is sufficient for PLS-SEM analysis.

3.3. Data Collection

Primary data were obtained through structured questionnaires directly administered to tourists at the site, with all items measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) for each variable.

Data were gathered in June 2025 until the sample quota was reached, with respondents providing informed consent, being briefed about research objectives, confidentiality, and their rights.

3.4. Measurement Instruments

All variables were measured using indicators adapted from prior literature and adjusted for the Atambua statue context:

- Digital marketing (X_1): accessibility, interactivity, entertainment, credibility, informativeness
- Word of mouth (X_2): information received from others, motivation to visit from recommendation, tendency to give recommendations
- Destination image (Z): infrastructure condition, travel convenience, environment, and unique experience
- Visit decision (Y): confidence, preference-match, decision due to recommendation

The questionnaire was pre-tested for clarity and relevance.

3.5. Validity and Reliability

Construct validity and reliability were tested via measurement model evaluation in PLS-SEM. Convergent validity was indexed by factor loading and Average Variance Extracted (AVE); discriminant validity used the Fornell–Larcker or HTMT criterion. Internal reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) (≥ 0.70). All constructs passed minimum criteria.

3.6. Data Analysis Technique

Data were analyzed using PLS-SEM (SmartPLS software), following:

- Measurement model (outer model) assessment
- Structural model (inner model) analysis (path coefficients, t -, p -values, R^2 , Q^2)
- Mediation analysis for the indirect effect using bootstrapping.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

PLS-SEM results revealed:

- Digital marketing (X_1) significantly affects visit decision (Y), $t=4.529$, $p=0.000<0.05$
- Word of mouth (X_2) significantly affects visit decision (Y), $t=2.293$, $p=0.022<0.05$
- Destination image (Z) significantly affects visit decision (Y), $t=6.117$, $p=0.000<0.05$
- Digital marketing (X_1) significantly affects destination image (Z), $t=3.181$, $p=0.001<0.05$
- Word of mouth (X_2) significantly affects destination image (Z), $t=3.205$, $p=0.001<0.05$
- The indirect effect of digital marketing (X_1) on visit decision (Y) via destination image (Z) is significant, $t=2.932$, $p=0.003<0.05$
- The indirect effect of word of mouth (X_2) on visit decision (Y) via destination image (Z) is significant, $t=2.751$, $p=0.006<0.05$

All hypotheses (H1–H7) are supported.

4.2. Digital Marketing's Effect on Visit Decision

The evidence shows that digital marketing has a positive, significant influence on visit decisions. Most respondents learned of the site from social media and reported that photos/videos online motivated them to visit. Social media exposure not only promotes the destination but also shapes tourist perceptions, making digital marketing crucial for attracting new visitors.

4.3. Word of Mouth's Effect on Visit Decision

Word of mouth also positively, significantly affects visit decision. Respondents often learned of the destination through friends and family and were strongly influenced by their recommendations and stories. Satisfied visitors tend to share their experiences, further fueling interest and visit intention.

4.4. Digital Marketing's Effect on Destination Image

Digital marketing positively affects destination image. High-quality digital content creates positive impressions before tourists arrive. Respondents agreed that social media and digital sources gave a clear, enticing impression of the destination, supporting digital marketing's importance as a gateway to establishing favorable perceptions.

4.5. Word of Mouth's Effect on Destination Image

Word of mouth strongly influences destination image. Positive stories from family/friends reinforce the site's reputation and expectations, even before a visit occurs. Post-visit, positive experiences strengthen the destination image and encourage further WOM.

4.6. Destination Image's Effect on Visit Decision

A positive destination image significantly increases visit decisions. Tourists perceiving the site as beautiful, safe, comfortable, and spiritually meaningful are more likely to visit and recommend it, reinforcing the value of maintaining high standards for facilities and experiences.

4.7. Destination Image as Mediator

Destination image mediates both digital marketing's and word of mouth's effects on visit decision. Both direct and indirect pathways matter, but the effects are strengthened when marketing and WOM first create a positive destination image that influences the final decision to visit.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Key Findings

The study, analyzing 170 tourist responses, established that:

- Digital marketing positively and significantly influences visit decision ($t=4.529$; $p<0.05$)
- Word of mouth positively and significantly influences visit decision ($t=2.293$; $p<0.05$)
- Destination image positively and significantly influences visit decision ($t=6.117$; $p<0.05$)
- Digital marketing positively and significantly influences destination image ($t=3.181$; $p<0.05$)
- Word of mouth positively and significantly influences destination image ($t=3.205$; $p<0.05$)
- Destination image significantly mediates both digital marketing and word of mouth's effects on visit decision

Strengthening destination image through digital marketing and word of mouth is key to increasing tourist visit decisions at religious tourism sites like Atambua.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to:

- Reinforcing the importance of digital marketing and word of mouth as determinants of tourist behavior, especially for religious tourism in developing regions

- Highlighting destination image's mediating role in linking promotion and informal communication to tourist decisions
- Demonstrating an integrative approach combining digital promotion, WOM, and destination management to explain tourist behavior in the post-pandemic era.

5.3. Practical Implications

Recommendations for destination managers and local government include:

- Strengthening digital marketing: manage social media professionally, post high-quality content showcasing religious uniqueness and natural beauty, and provide complete visitor information
- Managing and encouraging positive WOM: deliver satisfying and safe experiences that result in positive recommendations, respond swiftly to feedback, and prevent negative WOM
- Ensuring consistency between image and reality: maintain cleanliness, security, and order; provide adequate facilities; involve locals for warm, genuine hospitality

Such steps can sustainably enhance destination image, visitor numbers, and local benefits.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

Limitations include:

- Single-site context: Results may not generalize to other sites or types of tourism; further studies should expand contexts
- Cross-sectional design: Longer-term, dynamic changes in perceptions and behaviors need longitudinal study
- Limited variables: Only key marketing and image variables were considered; future research should include service quality, perceived value, and religious or emotional motivations

Despite these, the study offers valuable insight into the mechanisms connecting digital marketing and WOM to visit decisions, mediated by destination image, in the context of religious tourism at Indonesian border regions.

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Conflict of Interest

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Waltrudis Enjel Meak: Conceptualization, literature review, research design, data analysis, draft writing, final revision, hypothesis development, data collection, statistical analysis, manuscript review, project supervision, theoretical framework guidance, critical analysis, and final manuscript approval.