Social Impact Transfer in Digital Food Tourism: A Dual-Path Conceptual Model of Normative and Informational Social Influence

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ABSTRACT

The influence of social factors has been exacerbated in digital environments for food-related travel behaviour. Accordingly, this paper develops a social impact transfer model that captures how digital food tourism processes influence via two distinct channels. These channels are normative social influence, which is based on social expectations and consensual validation, and informational social influence, driven by accuracy-seeking and cognitive elaboration. Synthesising social impact theory and social comparison theory, the model describes how digitally embedded social cues, such as popularity cues or influencer endorsements, experiential narratives, and credibility cues, are translated into internal psychological states. Two mediators, destination self-congruence and perceived destination attractiveness, represent the identity-based and evaluative pathways for how external influence may become personally relevant. These mediators, in turn, drive electronic word of mouth (eWoM) behaviourally expressed through internalised social impact influences. The framework extends tourism theory by explaining dual-path influence mechanisms, situating social impact as a temporal and transferable concept in a virtual setting, and enhancing our comprehension of how identity congruence and normative valuation jointly yield persuasive effects in the food tourism domain. Practical implications emphasise the strategic importance of shaping influence transfer through identity-relevant message framing, credible information schemas, and visually engaging digital storytelling. Suggestions for additional research to support empirical testing and theoretical development are also provided.

Keywords: Digital Tourism, Social Impact, Self-Congruence, Destination Attractiveness, eW

INTRODUCTION

A digital transformation has altered the way travellers identify, assess, and interact with culinary experiences, with social media becoming a pivotal medium for the generation and dissemination of knowledge and influence (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). As platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube increasingly serve as dominant sources of inspiration for culinary exploration, food tourism has become closely intertwined with social cues, peer evaluations, and digitally mediated content visibility that shape tourist perceptions and expectations (Wang & Yan, 2022). In this environment, tourists are routinely exposed to user-generated content, influencer endorsements, viral street food trends and location-tagged dining experiences, all of which contribute to the formation of shared expectations and socially reinforced behavioural norms (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2017). This growing interdependence between digital media and tourist behaviour reflects a broader shift away from traditional information-seeking patterns to socially embedded decision-making, in which perceptions, preferences, and actions are increasingly shaped by digitally mediated social influence.

The growing prevalence of digital platforms in shaping food tourism choices highlights the need to understand the mechanisms of social influence in these contexts. Recent studies have demonstrated that social cues integrated into digital content, including likes, shares, comments, influencer endorsements, and peer visibility, serve as significant indicators that influence perceptions of credibility, desirability, and value for tourism experiences (Martins et al., 2025). Normative social influence, which arises from individuals' motivation to align with perceived social expectations, is particularly salient in visually orientated digital environments where continuous social comparison of behaviours and identities occurs (Alrefai et al., 2024). On the other

hand, informational social influence plays a crucial role as tourists rely on detailed, experience-based digital content, such as taste evaluations, ambience descriptions, preparation demonstrations, and pricing information, to reduce uncertainty and form informed expectations. (Martins et al., 2025; Oudmine, 2025). Although the significance of these dual influence processes is apparent, the current literature has not fully elucidated the simultaneous operation of normative and informational social influence in digitally mediated food tourism contexts.

In addition, the prevailing literature often treats social influence as a singular construct, failing to distinguish between compliance-driven normative pressure and accuracy-focused informational dependence (Leung et al., 2021). Recent research on online consumer behaviour and tourism has recognised that various social influence mechanisms may simultaneously operate in digital contexts; however, frameworks that distinctly differentiate normative and informational social influence in food tourism environments remain fragmented and theoretically underdeveloped (Lou & Zhou, 2024). This gap is especially prominent in food tourism, as travellers often rely on both collective social indicators, such as popularity signals and influencer presence and specific sensory data, including taste reviews and service evaluations, to guide their choices. Nonetheless, the theoretical understanding of how these two types of social influence separately and collectively affect psychological outcomes remains inadequate.

This can be observed in the inadequately defined mechanisms by which this impact is internalised in tourism research (Martins et al., 2025). Recent research in digital media and social influence suggests that observable factors, such as influencer appearance and peer endorsement, can trigger profound psychological processes related to identity, self-assessment, and internalisation; nonetheless, the utilisation of these mechanisms in tourism contexts remains limited (Lou & Zhou, 2024). Concepts such as destination selfcongruence and perceived destination attractiveness thus represent interesting but underutilised avenues for elucidating how externally generated social influence translates into internal cognitive assessments. Despite independent examination of these variables in tourist studies, their roles as mediating processes linking social influence to psychological outcomes and behavioural intentions remain theoretically unexplored. These shortcomings collectively highlight a significant conceptual gap in the internal cognitive mechanisms through which social influence is transmitted from digital environments into tourists' decision-making processes.

Tourists frequently document and share their culinary experiences through photos, reviews, videos, and narratives, contributing to an ongoing cycle of social influence that shapes future tourist behaviour (OECD, 2022). This dynamic of electronic word-of-mouth (eWoM) can be used to represent such a decision-making process. Nonetheless, despite its significance, contemporary research seldom incorporates eWoM within a dualpath social influence framework, neglecting the psychological mechanisms that connect social influence to sharing behaviour. The absence of such integration limits understanding of how tourists' internal cognitive evaluations, particularly self-identity alignment and perceived experiential value, drive their willingness to disseminate food-related content online.

Against this background, this paper aims to develop a conceptual model that combines ideas from social impact theory (SIT) and social comparison theory (SCT), to facilitate an understanding of how social drives are translated into digital food tourism and how they influence tourists' psychological and behavioural responses. The model highlights the dual processes of social influence (normative and informational), with destination selfcongruence and perceived destination attractiveness as significant mediators of social influence's effects on WoM. By integrating ideas from social psychology, tourism, and digital communication research, this paper seeks to provide a more explanatory account of how social influence operates in today's digitally mediated food tourism.

Theoretical Foundations

This paper introduces a conceptual model based on two fundamental theories in social psychology: social impact theory (SIT) and social comparison theory (SCT). These theories offer contrasting perspectives on the mechanisms of social influence in digital contexts and on how travellers assimilate and respond to such influence when interacting with culinary tourism information. SIT elucidates the exterior influence of social signals, while SCT clarifies the interior psychological processes by which individuals understand and assess these cues (Christou et al., 2025). Together, they offer a richer and more comprehensive foundation for theorising social influence transfer in contemporary digital food tourism settings.

SIT, initially introduced by Latané, posits that the magnitude of social influence experienced by an individual is a function of three primary elements: strength, immediacy and number of influencing sources (Latané, 1981). These social influence mechanisms are exacerbated in online contexts, where visibility, interactivity, and algorithmic amplification increase the strength and immediacy of social cues while substantially increasing the number of influencing sources, according to contemporary research on digital and social media environments (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Bhukya & Paul, 2023). In the realm of digital food tourism, social media platforms facilitate the dissemination of food-related information created by influencers and seasoned travellers, which wields significant social impact owing to its perceived credibility and aspirational value (Almohammed et al., 2025). Real-time access to food recommendations through feeds, trending content, and personalised algorithms increases the immediacy of influence. At the same time, the collection of large amounts of user-generated content creates social signals that change how tourists think and act (Yang et al., 2025; Bhukya & Paul, 2023).

Although SIT effectively elucidates the exterior influence of digital cues, it provides less understanding of the interior cognitive and emotional processes by which humans evaluate this information. Digital culinary tourism transcends mere information; it serves as an identity-rich arena where individuals assess their alignment with socially constructed images, norms, and values. This aspect is where SCT becomes essential. SCT asserts that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their behaviours, experiences and attributes to those of others (Festinger, 1954). Recent research underscores that comparison processes are significantly intensified in visually stimulating and socially governed environments, such as social media, where exposure to idealised representations of peer accomplishments is both frequent and pervasive (Appel et al., 2016; Vogel et al., 2014). Tourists often compare their food choices, culinary experiences, and travel lifestyles with those of influencers or peers, using these comparisons to evaluate their identities, preferences, and social standing (Bonfanti et al., 2025).

In addition, the prevailing literature often treats social influence as a singular construct, failing to distinguish between compliance-driven normative pressure and accuracy-focused informational dependence (Leung et al., 2021). Recent research on online consumer behaviour and tourism has recognised that various social influence mechanisms may simultaneously operate in digital contexts; however, frameworks that distinctly differentiate normative and informational social influence in food tourism environments remain fragmented and theoretically underdeveloped (Lou & Zhou, 2024). This gap is especially prominent in food tourism, as travellers often rely on both collective social indicators, such as popularity signals and influencer presence and specific sensory data, including taste reviews and service evaluations, to guide their choices. Nonetheless, the theoretical understanding of how these two types of social influence separately and collectively affect psychological outcomes remains inadequate.

The combination of both theories offers a significant explanatory capacity for informational social influence, driven by individuals' pursuit of accurate information in ambiguous circumstances. Food tourism often entails uncertainty, particularly as tourists navigate unfamiliar cuisines, traditional foods, or street food settings (Ellis et al., 2018). Tourists rely on digital resources, including comprehensive evaluations, experiential accounts, preparatory demos, and sensory-oriented videos, to mitigate uncertainties (Dwivedi et al., 2021). SIT elucidates how the credibility and immediacy of informational cues enhance their persuasive efficacy, and SCT delineates how individuals assess information from various sources to authenticate its validity and improve decision making quality (Latané, 1981; Crusius et al., 2022). Informational influence becomes particularly meaningful when tourists evaluate experiential attributes that cannot be easily verified beforehand, such as taste, aroma, ambience, or cultural authenticity. In tourism, prospective travellers increasingly depend on experience-related information that is disseminated through online reviews and social media to mitigate uncertainty and establish realistic expectations regarding the sensory and experiential aspects of a destination prior to their visit. This is due to the fact that these attributes are intrinsically hedonic and subjective (Tao et al., 2025). Furthermore, online travel reviews and user-generated content influence tourists' perceptions and decisions by providing detailed accounts of other travellers' experiences, acting as significant informational cues that facilitate decision-making in the absence of direct personal experience (Pagaldiviti, 2025).

SIT and SCT elucidate the development of destination self-congruence and perceived destination attractiveness, the two mediators in the suggested framework, in addition to shaping impact pathways. SCT is particularly pertinent to self-congruence, as self-development and assessment frequently arise from

comparisons with others. Digital platforms create environments where the symbolic significance linked to culinary destinations, such as cultural heritage, aesthetic allure, and brand identity, is perpetually highlighted and reinforced through social media marketing tactics and user-generated visual content, thereby influencing tourists' perceptions and destination branding in forms that transcend mere information (Fusté-Forné & Filimon, 2025). In comparison, travellers decide whether these meanings align with how they perceive themselves or how they would like to perceive themselves. Similarly, perceived destination appeal arises from both intrinsic characteristics and socially constructed assessments derived from normative indicators (e.g., popularity, social validation) and informational content (e.g., comprehensive experiential reviews). In the digital age, online travel reviews and social media content significantly influence tourists' destination selections and perceived allure, offering comprehensive evaluative information that prospective visitors use to mitigate uncertainty and form perceptions regarding a destination's appeal, beyond its physical characteristics (Islam et al., 2025; Aboalganam et al., 2025). The alignment of SIT and SCT, therefore, provides a robust explanation for why both types of social influence influence attractiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Normative Social Influence (NSI) and Destination Self-Congruence (DSC)

Normative social influence (NSI) plays a significant role in shaping destination self-congruence (DSC) because digital environments enhance visibility, social expectations and identity-relevant comparisons. Empirical research in tourism indicates that social norms, including subjective and descriptive norms, profoundly affect tourists' behavioural intentions and preferences by enhancing perceived social expectations and accepted behaviours. This, in turn, influences how individuals match their self-image with a destination's image (Wasaya et al., 2022). Additionally, peer pressure, exposure to social media, and large social networks can influence people to conform to the behaviours and expectations of their social circles. This makes the traveller's identity and destination choice more consistent.

Recent research suggests that identity-based conformity is higher in online settings where symbolic consumption is observable and can be socially judged. Within the context of tourism, destination images produced and disseminated by social media influencers serve as normative cues that shape tourists' perceptions and behaviours by continuously portraying certain places and experiences as desirable or prestigious (Pourazad et al., 2025). In this regard, these views of "must-eat" or "viral" food landmarks, while adjusted to the social media lens, become normative stimuli that prompt tourists to make choices consistent with socially prestigious identities.

Informational Social Influence (ISI) and Destination Self-Congruence (DSC)

Informational social impact (ISI) influences destination self-congruence (DSC) through cognitive alignment mechanisms driven by accuracy-seeking behaviours. Tourists often rely on comprehensive digital information to assess whether a place aligns with their personal values, interests, or identity-related motivations, especially when making decisions amid uncertainty and limited firsthand experience (Islam et al., 2024). Informational cues, including professional reviews, taste reviews, cultural explanations and ambience portrayals, mitigate uncertainty and elucidate the symbolic significance of a food destination by conveying experiential and cultural values that travellers cannot readily ascertain before their visit (Moura et al., 2025). Tourists assess whether a destination aligns with their self-image, lifestyle, or cultural tastes by comparing various information sources, as empirical evidence indicates that superior tourism information on social media positively affects selfcongruity, enabling consumers to synchronise their self-concept with destination portrayals before visiting (Wang & Yan, 2022).

Normative Social Influence (NSI) and Perceived Destination Attractiveness (PDA)

Normative social influence (NSI) significantly shapes perceived destination attractiveness (PDA) by influencing how tourists evaluate destinations based on socially shared opinions and collective approval expressed in digital environments (Wasaya et al., 2022). Tourists often interpret popularity, social validation, and viral circulation on social media as indicators of desirability and quality, which in turn influence their perceptions of PDA; research shows that social media marketing and user-generated content significantly contribute to shaping destination image and PDA by increasing visibility and perceived appeal of tourist places

(Alzaydi & Elsharnouby, 2023; Bonilla-Quijada et al., 2025). The concept of engagement, which measures user involvement through interactions such as likes, comments, and opinions, has become a crucial element in digital tourism competition. Engagement has emerged as a key criterion for assessing the effectiveness of tourist promotion efforts on social media channels (Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2024; Zaib-Abbasi et al., 2023). Even with scant personal knowledge of the site, the prominence and recurrence of normative cues influence tourists' views of its appeal. The evidence indicates that appeal arises from both inherent attributes and social agreement fostered by digital interaction and viral impact.

Informational Social Influence (ISI) and Perceived Destination Attractiveness (PDA)

Informational social influence (ISI) enhances the perceived attractiveness of a destination (PDA) by providing tourists with comprehensive evaluative cues that reduce uncertainty and increase trust in the experiential value of the destination. Research suggests that the quality and credibility of digital tourism content influence tourists' evaluations and travel intentions. (Wang & Yang, 2022). Digital platforms provide extensive information on taste profiles, sensory attributes, preparation techniques, ambience design, cultural relevance, and price equity. When this information is regarded as credible and consistent across various social media outlets, tourists develop favourable cognitive assessments that enhance PDA (Hussain et al., 2024). Recent research emphasises that ISI is particularly pronounced when tourists encounter unfamiliar culinary styles or culturally rich food contexts, which are characterised by high uncertainty and a reliance on external information. Studies indicate that users' reliance on social media for travel information significantly impacts their perceptions of those destinations.

Destination Self-Congruence (DSC) and eWoM

Destination self-congruence (DSC) is a significant factor in the promotion of eWoM. Tourists who perceive a match between their self-concept and a destination are more inclined to share their experiences as a means of expressing their identity, as self-congruity is positively correlated with favourable behavioural outcomes, such as word-of-mouth in tourism contexts. (Liu et al., 2025). Research suggests that identity-consistent experiences result in increased satisfaction, emotional resonance, and self-expressive value, all of which increase motivation to share. Studies have shown that self-congruity in conjunction with a positive emotional experience has a positive impact on positive eWoM and customer satisfaction in hospitality contexts, indicating stronger sharing intentions when the self-concept is in alignment with the experience (Fitriyah et al., 2023) and when emotional engagement enhances favourable evaluations (Liu et al., 2025).

Perceived Destination Attractiveness (PDA) and eWoM

Perceived destination attractiveness (PDA) also strongly predicts eWoM because tourists are more inclined to share experiences that they perceive as appealing, culturally meaningful, or visually compelling. Research shows that a positive destination image and tourist perceptions significantly influence eWoM behaviour in tourism contexts (Saputra et al., 2026). Visual and sensory attractiveness, in particular, enhances emotional engagement and motivates tourists to produce content that showcases aesthetic or experiential value, as supported by findings that visual social media content about destinations boosts engagement and sharing intentions among travellers (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024). Cognitive assessments, including perceptions of authenticity, quality, or uniqueness, bolster the motivation to disseminate beneficial or experiential information, as evidence indicates that the destination image shaped by online experiences affects tourists' behavioural intentions and recommendations (Herstanti et al., 2025).

Informational motivations also play a role: tourists who perceive the destination as attractive often feel that sharing their experience may benefit others by providing reliable insights. As studies show, perceived information usefulness and destination image positively motivate tourists to share experiential knowledge through eWoM (Wang & Yan, 2022). In a normative sense, the social relevance of eWoM is enhanced by participation in digital trends, such as sharing viral culinary content. (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024). Consequently, attractiveness drives eWoM through both emotional and informational channels, making it a crucial psychological process within the framework.

METHODOLOGY

Conceptual research is increasingly acknowledged as a sound and acceptable methodology for theorising, disentangling construct relationships and limiting conceptual fragmentation within complex and dynamic streams of research. Prior scholarship highlights the importance of clear design, well-founded theoretical applications, and structured argumentation in non-empirical studies (Jaakkola, 2020), while emerging literature on conceptual proposition development emphasises systematic methodologies for constructing conceptual contributions (Hollebeek et al., 2024). Given that the objective of this paper is to theorise how NSI and ISI are transferred within digital food tourism environments, a conceptual approach is particularly suitable for generating theoretical integration and explanatory depth.

This study uses a theoretical analysis and integrative synthesis to evaluate the internal logic, construct boundaries, and causal assumptions of the SIT and SCT framework, rather than conducting an empirical inquiry or systematic literature review. The conceptual development is informed by a focused analysis of key theoretical publications and significant empirical studies on digital tourism, self-congruence, destination attractiveness, and eWoM. To ensure theoretical consistency, the model was refined through iterative comparison with the social impact mechanisms, including normative and informational influence, identity-related constructs, and tourist behaviour outcomes.

To develop the proposed conceptual framework, a conceptual review was conducted. The review focused on four related research streams: (i) social impact theory and social influence in digital and social media settings, (ii) normative and informational social influence in the context of tourism and consumer decision-making, (iii) destination self-congruence and perceived destination attractiveness; and (iv) electronic word of mouth linked to food/drink centred tourism experiences. We used major academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar) to identify relevant and significant literature in these areas.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The conceptual integration in this study reveals a number of fundamental insights into how social impact transfer functions in the digital food tourism context through NSI and ISI processes. The evidence indicates that social media stimuli significantly influence travellers' psychological states and travel behaviour through affective, identity, and cognitive routes. (Widianingsih & Putranto, 2025). Although the study does not involve empirical testing, the theoretical integration highlights clear and consistent patterns in how social factors embedded in digital platforms influence tourists' psychological evaluations, identity alignment and communicative behaviours.

First, the analysis demonstrates that NSI is an important factor that shapes tourists' perceptions of destinations in digital food tourism contexts. Previous studies have demonstrated that social endorsement signals on social media substantially affect tourists' perceptions of destinations and their behavioural intentions (Wang & Yan, 2022). In algorithm-driven environments, repeated exposure to obvious food-related content amplifies conformity pressures, encouraging tourists to align their choices with socially admired culinary experiences. Studies show that algorithmic amplification and visibility intensify normative pressures in tourism-related social media use (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024). This process extends beyond simple imitation, as tourists strive to maintain social credibility and consistency in their identity through destination selection, consistent with findings that destination choices function as identity-signalling behaviours in digitally mediated tourism contexts (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Second, the results suggest that ISI is a crucial mechanism for reducing uncertainty in the food tourism experience. Food tourism involves unique or creative foods, cultural practices, and experience-loving attributes that must be savoured after consumption. User reviews, creator explanations, and experiential narratives provide such informational cues, which are diagnostically valuable in supporting cognitive appraisal evaluation and confidence-based decision-making. The synthesis suggests that tourists place considerable trust in collectively generated information when assessing the quality, authenticity, and experiential value of destinations (Liu et al., 2025; Wang & Yan, 2022).

Thirdly, the conceptual analysis highlights DSC as a central psychological mechanism through which social influence is internalised. NSI enhances DSC by encouraging tourists to compare their identities with those

projected by socially endorsed destinations, as social comparison processes triggered by influencer and peergenerated content shape aspirational self-alignment in tourism contexts (Nguyen et al., 2023). ISI also reinforces this mechanism by assigning symbolic meanings, such as cultural authenticity, lifestyle conformity, and aesthetic values, to food places. Where these meanings resonate with tourists' self-concept or aspirational identity, destinations are considered personally relevant and identity-consistent. Empirical evidence in food tourism indicates that self-congruity and symbolic experiential meanings significantly influence tourists' evaluations and behavioural responses (Liu et al., 2025). Fourth, the results demonstrate that the interaction of NSI and ISI shaped the perceived attractiveness of a place. Popularity indices and social endorsement augment perceived desirability, whereas specific informational signals elevate perceptions of quality, distinctiveness, and sensory richness. This dual influence leads to a holistic evaluation of destination attractiveness that integrates cognitive, affective and symbolic dimensions, thereby reinforcing the socially mediated nature of attraction in digital food tourism.

Finally, the synthesis shows that both DSC and PDA can predict eWoM behaviour. Empirical evidence in food tourism shows that self-congruity and experiential evaluations significantly drive positive eWoM. eWOM therefore serves as an output of a social impact transfer mechanism and a stimulus-reinforcing system for preserving reciprocity among social influences in digital ecosystems, consistent with assertions that destination image and attractiveness developed through digital publicity affect group assessments and subsequent inclusive sharing behaviours (Herstanti et al., 2025). Finally, this paper contributes to the existing tourism and social influence literature by conceptualising social impact transfer (as a dynamic psychological construct) in the context of digital food tourism. Intersecting the theories of social impact and social comparison, the study identified a conceptual framework on how external social cues are transformed into internal perceptions and communicative orientations, creating an empirical foundation and testable hypotheses. Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual model that visually integrates hypothesised connections from SIT and SCT, showcasing the dualpath framework of social influence transmission in digital food tourism.
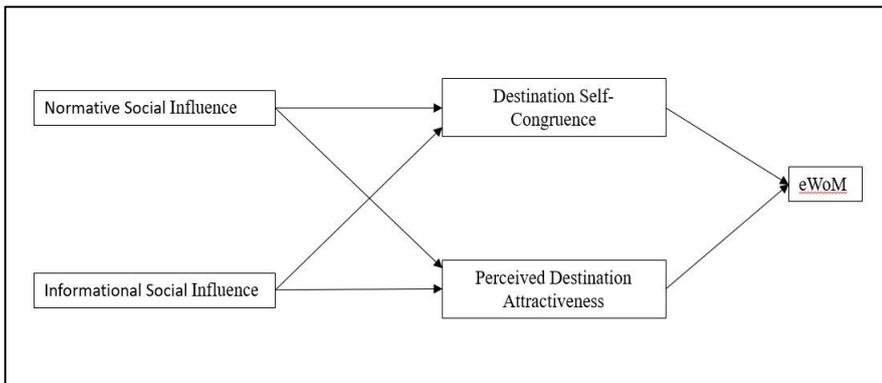

Figure 1. Conceptual framework illustrating the dual-path social influence model in digital food tourism

Theoretical And Practical Contributions

This conceptual paper offers several theoretical contributions to the growing body of literature on digital tourism, social influence, and food-related travel behaviour. First, the paper enhances theoretical clarity by distinguishing between NSI and ISI as distinct yet interrelated pathways in the context of digital food tourism. Although previous tourism studies have recognised social influence, most of them conceptualise it into a single (unified) construct, resulting in theoretical ambiguity and inconsistency between empirical works, since research on social media tourism generally treats social influence as an overall phenomenon rather than separating the underlying mechanisms of it (Wang & Yan, 2022). In adopting a dual-path perspective, the current model offers a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of how influence functions in digital media. This distinction enables scholars to examine more specific causal processes and avoid overgeneralising, as has occurred in some earlier literature on tourism.

Second, SIT provides structural insights into how digital cues influence behaviour through visibility, social endorsement, and repeated exposure. Research shows that socially validated and obvious destination content exerts a more substantial influence on tourist perceptions and behavioural responses in digital environments (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024). In contrast, SCT explains how individuals internalise such cues by engaging in

upward or lateral comparisons within identity-relevant contexts, as social comparisons with influencers and peers have been shown to shape aspirational identity alignment and travel-related decision making (Nguyen et al., 2023). Synthesising these two theories, this paper offers a multi-layered explanation that captures both the external conditions that produce influence and the internal identity and cognition-based processes that translate influence into psychological outcomes. This conceptual combination provides a more profound understanding of when and why digital influence is adopted, as well as why some tourists are more responsive to digital signals than others.

Third, this study contributes to the social influence literature in digital food tourism by adding DSC and PDA as mediators. Equally important, by proposing PDA as a mediator, the model highlights that attractiveness is not solely an antecedent of destination choice but is also constructed through NSI and ISI from digitally mediated reviews (Wang & Yan, 2022). These mediators collectively signify the internal mechanisms by which social influence becomes psychologically significant. This paper advances theoretical knowledge by linking dual-path social influence and psychological mediators to eWoM. The present model reveals that eWoM is not only a product of assessment but also an exercise in identity performance and social engagement, as tourists are motivated to share their food experiences by self-congruence and potential attractiveness. By highlighting how DSC and PDA drive tourist food-related eWoM, this model offers a new perspective on current eWoM theory, showing that food sharing is deeply rooted in identity-driven, socially constructed motivational factors. This interpretation, with current understandings of social media interactions as information production and symbolic action (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024).

Beyond its theoretical implications, this conceptual paper offers practical insights for tourism marketers, destination managers, and food industry professionals. Firstly, understanding the dual nature of "social influence" empowers marketers to leverage digital media more efficiently. NSI is likely to be further enhanced through influencer endorsements, viral challenges, and social validation indicators (e.g., likes, shares, and visible engagement items) that increase perceived popularity and desirability. At the same time, the ISI can be supplemented by offering credible, detailed, and transparent information, such as cultural stories, travel preparation, and real case studies, that minimise uncertainty and facilitate informed choice among tourists (Wang & Yan, 2022).

Second, destination managers and food tourism stakeholders can leverage identity marketing by aligning digital content with their target prospects' self-identities. Given DSC's influence on both evaluation and eWoM, destinations may focus on symbolic features such as heritage, lifestyle fit, aesthetics, or social status to develop stronger identity links with tourists (Nguyen et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2025). For example, destinations that emphasise cultural authenticity or unique aesthetics will appeal more to a visitor who wishes to be engaged and share meaningful experiences or visually expressive stimuli in digital messaging channels (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024). Learning about identity formation and construction through digital materials, therefore, helps marketers in developing more persuasive narratives relevant to that target audience.

Third, knowledge about PDA underscores the need to consider both intrinsic and extrinsic attributes. Internal factors like food quality, ambience, the sensuality of it all, and cultural exchange definitely still matter, but so do external forces like digital reach, social validation, and narrative placement. Studies indicate that information and visually appealing digital content, along with cues of social endorsement, have a substantial effect on tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness (Wang & Yan, 2022). This implies that PDA can be influenced by well-planned, strategic digital storytelling, stimulating visual representation and cohesive message coordination.

Conclusion, Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This article presents a comprehensive framework that explains the transmission and internalisation of social influence in digital food tourism. Drawing on SIT and SCT, this paper claims that social influence works through two separate paths: normative and informational ones, which formed tourists' internal assessments in different ways. These two effects in turn influence DSC and PDA, with eWoM being a main behavioural consequence. The study, despite its advantages, has some drawbacks that present potential for future empirical investigation. First, the proposed model in this study is yet to be tested as a conceptual framework in a real-life setting. These assumed connections, though they stem from contemporary premises and can be supported by findings from the digital tourism literature, need to be empirically verified under different circumstances.

In the future, quantitative studies using structural equation modelling are needed to test the mediating effects of DSC and PDA and to examine the effects of NSI and ISI on predicting tourist behaviour. Longitudinal study designs could help understand the dynamic trajectory of digital influence, accounting for algorithmic variations, emerging patterns, and evolving consumption behaviours in social media environments (Paul & Barari, 2022). Furthermore, future research testing the model should explore potential moderators that may strengthen or weaken its relationships. Tourists may internalise social factors differently depending on individual differences, such as self-monitoring, social media use, a need for uniqueness, cultural orientation, and identity salience (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Further, future research could extend the framework by conducting cross-cultural validation studies, especially in collectivist cultures, where patterns of social influence may differ. Digital food tourism in Southeast Asia is characterised by specific cultural and social conditions, including a strong communal orientation, an interdependent identity, and a high level of social comparison behaviour. Testing the model in such settings may reveal culturally specific mechanisms or strengthen its theoretical generalisability. Cross-national, parallel studies would also help indicate whether the dual-path theory of social influence is valid across cultures or whether adaptations are needed.

In sum, this study offers a theoretically rooted and conceptually informed framework that enhances understanding of social influence in digital food tourism. By distinguishing between NSI and ISI, integrating identity- and evaluation-based mediators, and connecting these processes to eWoM, their model offers a refined framework for tourism researchers and practitioners to comprehend consumer behaviour in highly computer mediated contexts. This serves as an advantageous starting point for prospective empirical investigations. This is a good starting point for future empirical research. It offers practical advice to destination marketers, digital managers, and policymakers who seek to strengthen engagement, identity congruence, and online advocacy in the culinary tourism context.

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