

The Role of Digital Content Characteristics in Driving Consumer Engagement and Travel Decision: A Study on Malaysian Consumers

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of social media content characteristics on travel decision-making among Malaysian consumers. Specifically, it aims to determine which content characteristics significantly drive consumer engagement, involvement, and travel desire. By addressing key research gaps in digital content marketing, the study seeks to understand how various types of social media content influence consumer behavior and travel choices. Utilizing quantitative methods, data will be collected from social media users who have engaged with travel content on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. The research employs the S-O-R framework to examine the relationship between content characteristics and consumer responses, focusing on cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement, as well as the desire to travel and actual travel decisions. Purposive sampling will be used to target participants who have been influenced by travel content marketing. The study's findings are expected to provide actionable insights for optimizing digital content to enhance consumer engagement and foster travel intentions, ultimately informing more effective digital marketing strategies in the tourism industry.

Keywords— Digital Content Characteristics, Consumer Engagement, Consumer Involvement, Desire to Travel, Malaysian Tourism, S-O-R Model, Theory of Consumption Values

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Malaysia's tourism industry contributes significantly to the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia, direct tourism GDP was recorded at RM47.9 billion in 2022, representing a massive recovery compared to RM11.6 billion in 2021. The Director-General of Tourism Malaysia, Datuk Dr Ammar Abd Ghapar, indicated that the country aims to generate total receipts of RM76.8 billion in the coming years. Given this major economic role, Malaysia's Prime Minister YAB Dato' Seri Anwar Bin Ibrahim announced that the Visit Malaysia campaign would make its comeback in 2026, backed by a RM350 million allocation in the 2024 budget to aggressively promote the sector.

In this fast-changing environment, the internet has transformed tourism marketing. Social media platforms have developed into critical tools for influencing travel decisions, adjusting destination perceptions, and boosting travel desire. Social media marketing (SMM) is now vital, with many businesses adopting digital content marketing (DCM) as a primary tactic. Short-branded videos represent a major component of DCM, with video content projected to account for 82% of all consumer internet traffic by 2025. Videos have higher engagement rates than text-only posts and have a substantial impact on return on investment (ROI).

Malaysia has emerged as one of the world's most tech-savvy nations, with 97.4% (33.59 million) of its 34.13 million population active online. An overwhelming 83.1% (28.68 million) are active social media users.

Malaysians spend an average of 2 hours and 48 minutes daily on these networks. Dominant platforms include WhatsApp (26.8%), TikTok (21.9%), Facebook (18.8%), and Instagram (14%). Significantly, 40.4% of users dedicate time to searching for or finding content on these networks, proving its potential for consumer connection. To capitalize on this trend, Tourism Malaysia has integrated user-generated content (UGC) and influencer partnerships into its 2022–2026 Strategic Plan to drive acquisitions and retain domestic and international tourists.

Statement of the Problem

Despite widespread connectedness, tourism organizations face critical hurdles in developing digital content that deeply engages potential travelers [1]. The social media landscape is undergoing a massive shift away from mere product placement or extravagant displays toward substance-driven content. Audiences are experiencing social media burnout and are becoming increasingly selective, giving rise to 'intellectual influencers' who combine education and entertainment ('edutainment') [2].

Moreover, most prior research on the impact of content characteristics has relied on secondary social media analytics (e.g., natural language processing, manual coding, or counting likes, shares, and comments) rather than directly gathering primary consumer perspectives. In addition, existing studies conceptualize content attributes in diverse, non-standardized ways, leading to inconsistent findings on content effectiveness. This research seeks to address these gaps by conducting a direct, primary consumer survey to evaluate how consumers perceive and emotionally or cognitively react to specific content characteristics.

Purpose and Objectives of the Research

This research aims to meticulously analyze and evaluate the relationship between 15 distinct social media content attributes and their impact on Malaysian consumers' involvement, multidimensional engagement, travel desire, and actual travel decisions. These 15 characteristics are systematically integrated into five key dimensions based on Sheth's Theory of Consumption Values and Ducoffe's advertising model.

The specific research objectives (RO) are:

1. To analyze the influence of travel content characteristics on consumers' involvement levels on social media.
2. To analyze the influence of travel content characteristics on consumers' engagement levels across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions.
3. To investigate the mediating role of consumer involvement in the relationship between content characteristics and consumers' desire to travel.
4. To investigate the mediating role of consumer engagement (and its sub-dimensions) in the relationship between content characteristics and consumers' desire to travel.
5. To analyze the correlation between consumer involvement and overall consumer engagement level.
6. To investigate the impact of consumers' desire to travel on actual travel decisions to specific destinations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations

This study integrates two major theoretical frameworks to analyze the effectiveness of digital content marketing on travel choices: the S-O-R framework and the Theory of Consumption Values (TCV).

- 1) The S-O-R Model: First proposed by Mehrabian and Russell [3] and modified by Jacoby [4], the Stimulus-Organism-Response model demonstrates that environmental stimuli (S) activate an individual's internal

mechanisms and feelings (O), resulting in behavioral responses (R). In this study, the stimuli are defined as the 15 travel content characteristics. The organism consists of internal consumer states, including consumer involvement (CI), consumer engagement (CE), and the desire to travel (DT). The response is represented by actual travel decision-making (TD) behavior, including bookings and reservations.

- 2) The Theory of Consumption Values (TCV): Sheth, Newman, and Gross [5] outline five consumption value dimensions that explain why consumers make specific choices: epistemic (informative), emotional, social, functional, and conditional values. Integrating this theory with Ducoffe's

[6] advertising value model provides a comprehensive, value-based framework for evaluating the effectiveness of digital travel content.

Value-Based Content Characteristics

The 15 travel content characteristics analyzed in this study are categorized under the five consumption values as follows:

- 3) Informative/Epistemic Value: This value reflects how well content provides convenient, up-to-date, novel, and useful insights that enhance the consumer's knowledge [7]. It is measured via perceived Informativeness, which enables informed travel planning.
- 4) Emotional Value: Reflects the feelings, emotions, and hedonic pleasure evoked in consumers. This includes Edutainment (blending education and entertainment), Background Music (to set the emotional mood), Storytelling (utilizing narrative characters and plots to connect with viewers), Voice Intonation (conversational pitch, tone, and clarity), Personalization (tailoring content to individual interest), Novelty (presenting unique, original content formats), and Authenticity (ensuring content feels genuine and trustworthy).
- 5) Social Value: Focuses on social approval, status, and community connection. This includes Trendiness (relevance to latest hot topics and hotspots) and Endorser Type (influence of celebrities, experts, or micro-influencers who drive social proof).
- 6) Functional Value: Refers to utilitarian benefits, practical usability, and accessibility of content. This includes Interactivity (enabling active engagement via comments, shares, or polls), Aesthetic (visual and artistic appeal), Length (video duration balanced for completion and retention), and Credibility (trustworthiness and expertise of the information source).
- 7) Conditional Value: Pertains to situational or context-specific benefits that sway consumer action under specific conditions. This is represented by perceived Persuasiveness (use of situational promotions, discounts, and package appeals).

TABLE 1 Value-Based Content Characteristics Categorization

Consumption Value	Theoretical Link / Definition	Specific Characteristics
Information / Epistemic Value	Ducoffe's Informative Value and Sheth's Epistemic Value; refers to providing useful, relevant, and valuable insights to consumers.	Informativeness
Emotional Value	Refers to the ability of content to evoke internal feelings, emotional responses, enjoyment, and memorable experiences.	Edutainment, Background Music, Storytelling, Voice Intonation, Personalization, Novelty, Authenticity
Social Value	Utility derived from association with specific social groups, social status, and prevailing community trends.	Trendiness, Endorser Type (Celebrities vs. Micro-influencers)
Functional Value	Refers to utilitarian benefits, physical usability, convenience, accessibility, and	Interactivity, Aesthetic Appeal, Content Length, Source Credibility

	practical characteristics of content.	
Conditional Value	Refers to situational and context-specific benefits that influence consumers under particular circumstances.	Persuasiveness (Promotional Packages, Discounts, Seasonal Offers)

Research Hypotheses

By mapping S-O-R and TCV, the study designs a conceptual framework analyzing 19 hypotheses: H1a to H15a propose that Informativeness, Edutainment, Background Music, Storytelling, Voice Intonation, Personalization, Novelty, Authenticity, Interactivity, Aesthetic, Length, Credibility, Trendiness, Endorser Type, and Persuasiveness significantly influence consumer involvement. H1b to H15b state that these 15 attributes significantly influence multidimensional consumer engagement (cognitive, affective, behavioral). In addition, H16 posits that high involvement predicts overall engagement. H17 and H18 hypothesize that consumer involvement and consumer engagement (respectively) positively mediate the relationship between content characteristics and consumers' desire to travel. Finally, H19 states that travel desire directly determines final travel decisions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative, deductive research design to test the proposed hypotheses empirically. A self-administered questionnaire was developed and distributed digitally to capture direct consumer evaluations of travel marketing content.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprises Malaysian consumers who utilize social media networks (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) and have been influenced by digital content marketing when planning or choosing domestic travel. Purposive non-probability sampling was deployed based on three predefined screening criteria: (1) active exposure to travel content marketing, (2) travel to attractions within Malaysia, and (3) travel decisions driven by social media messages.

To establish sample size, statistical requirements for multivariate analysis were reviewed. Simple regressions require at least 50 to 100 samples [8], while structural equation modeling (SEM) suggests 100 to 200 samples [9], [10]. Memon et al. [11] demonstrated that a sample size between 160 and 300 valid observations is moderate and ideal for PLS-SEM to minimize statistical error. Consequently, this study establishes a target sample size of 250 participants to ensure high statistical power and validity.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Primary data was gathered using structured online questionnaires administered via Google Forms. The survey instrument comprises three main sections: (1) demographic background, (2) social media usage behaviors (frequencies, platforms), and (3) adapted scales representing the study's constructs.

The construct measurements were adapted from established scales to maintain high validity: Informativeness, Personalization, and Credibility are adapted from Abbasi et al.

[12]; Edutainment is adapted from Hasbullah et al. [13]; Storytelling is adapted from Mavilinda et al. [14]; Interactivity, Aesthetic, and Length are adapted from Zhao et al. [15] and Kordzadeh and Young [16]; Trendiness is adapted from Bushara et al. [17]; Consumer Involvement and Engagement are adapted from Zaichkowsky [18], Harrigan et al. [19], and Abbasi et al. [12]; and Desire to Travel and Travel Decisions are adapted from Koo et al. [20].

Data Analysis Techniques

Data preparation and descriptive analysis are executed using SPSS. Structural equation modeling is conducted using SmartPLS 3.2.7 software. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) is deployed, as it overcomes the limits of bivariate analyses by simultaneously estimating all complex measurement and structural pathways. It is especially ideal for exploratory models with numerous mediators without requiring strict normality of distributions [21], [22]. Furthermore, PLS-SEM has been widely established in tourism research as a robust method for analyzing multi-sequential relationships [23].

CONCLUSION

This paper proposes a comprehensive, value-based conceptual framework linking digital content marketing characteristics to final consumer travel decisions in Malaysia. Grounded in the grand S-O-R framework and the Theory of Consumption Values, the study provides a robust theoretical integration. By evaluating 15 content attributes across 19 hypotheses, this study will clarify inconsistent findings from prior literature and move beyond simple counts of likes or shares to provide deeper, direct insights into consumer experiences.

Practically, the findings will provide crucial strategies for key industry stakeholders. Marketers and social media content creators can design more impactful edutainment and storytelling campaigns that foster greater consumer involvement. For domestic tourism operators and local SMEs, understanding these dynamics will help optimize digital advertising ROI. Finally, policymakers and government bodies like Tourism Malaysia can utilize these empirical, evidence-based insights to formulate national campaigns, such as Visit Malaysia 2026, aggressively promoting sustainable growth and positioning the country as a premier regional destination.

TABLE II Research Milestones And Timeline

Phase	Milestone Activity Description	Expected Duration
1	Literature Review & Theoretical Integration	1 month
2	Research Design, Survey Preparation, & Pre-testing	2 months
3	Primary Data Collection (Google Forms)	2 months
4	SPSS Data Cleaning & SmartPLS Modeling	1 month
5	Interpretation and Conceptual Framework Assessment	1 month
6	Drafting Journal Manuscript & Result Tabulation	1 month
7	Revision and Peer-Review Optimization	1 month
8	Final Editing, Submission, & Research Dissemination	1 month

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