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The Contribution of Digital Marketing to Tourist Visit Intention through Destination Image Mediation: Creative Tourism Perspective

I Kadek Daniel Surya Nadi[1]
Ni Nyoman Sri Wisudawati[2], Putu Ratna Juwita Sari[3], Anak Agung Istri Agung Maheswari[4]
[1]Management,Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Pendidikan Nasional, Denpasar, Indonesia
[234]Tourism Destination Management,Faculty of Tourism, Universitas Pendidikan Nasional, Denpasar, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: I Kadek Daniel Surya Nadi, danielsurya102@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Creative tourism has increasingly shifted the tourism value from passive sightseeing into participatory cultural experience, strengthening emotional destination attachment and revisitation intention. However, seasonal fluctuation and global tourism competition continue to challenge visitor stability in Bali, particularly in artistic hubs including Ubud, Celuk, Mas, and Batuan, Gianyar Regency. This examines how digital marketing influences tourist's intention to visit, while positioning destination image as the intermediary factor, viewed through a creative tourism context and Destination Branding Theory. A quantitative method was applied using survey-based data and variance-using a Structural Equation Modeling approach (SEM-PLS). The study population consists of potential and past tourists interested in creative tourism activities such as silver crafting, wood carving, traditional painting, and cultural workshops. Indicators of digital marketing include social media utilization, search engine optimization, email marketing exposure, and Google business visibility. Destination image is measured through cognitive, affective, and uniqueness dimensions, while visit intention is assessed via attraction appeal, accessibility, amenity, and revisit interest. Findings from previous empirical benchmarks confirm that digital marketing significantly improves destination image, which in turn drives visit intention. However, contradictory evidence suggests that digital exposure does not always directly increase visit intention without a strong destination identity and experiential value. This study fills the gap by positioning destination image as the key mediator, specifically within creative tourism attributes emphasizing co-creation experiences, authenticity, and interactive cultural engagement. The study contributes theoretically to Destination Branding Theory expansion and practically as a digital marketing strategy framework for creative tourism destinations in Bali.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Destination Image, Tourist Visit Intention, Creative Tourism, Destination Branding.

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INTRODUCTION

Bali's tourism landscape has evolved from conventional leisure-based activities into experience-oriented journeys, where tourists actively participate in cultural, artistic, and locally immersive programs. Creative tourism provides co-creation experiences allowing visitors to interact, produce creative outcomes, and engage directly with local communities (Richards, 2020).This shift is essential as tourists increasingly value authenticity and personal involvement more than passive consumption (Kromidha et al., 2023). Despite its strong global tourism branding, Bali faces recurring challenges, particularly seasonal demand decline and intensified regional competition from Thailand, Vietnam, and emerging cultural tourism destinations in Southeast Asia (Apriliani, 2024). Additionally, digital behavior now shapes more than 76% of travel decisions, where platform visibility, content relevance, and review-based credibility strongly influence destination selection (Armutcu et al., 2023). Digital marketing not only promotes tourism products but constructs destination image through narrative framing, social proofing, and virtual engagement (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2000). Destination image functions as a cognitive–affective mental representation influencing visitation intention and behavioral loyalty. In creative tourism, image formation goes beyond scenery—built from experience identity such as silver crafting in Celuk, wood carving in Mas, egg painting in Batuan, and artistic immersion in

Ubud (Bestari & Widhiasthini, 2023). Tourists who co-produce artistic experiences tend to form stronger emotional recall, increasing visit intention and advocacy behavior more sustainably than conventional tourism. While digital marketing influence on travel intention has been widely studied, contradictory outcomes remain. Several studies confirm strong direct effects (Carroline & Ritonga, 2024),while others find nonsignificant direct influence without interactive destination appeal and mediated perception variables (Ardinata et al., 2023). Limited research focuses on creative tourism contexts positioning destination image as a mediating construct highlighting a theoretical and empirical gap. Applying Destination Branding Theory, this study investigates the structural influence of digital marketing on visit intention through destination image mediation in Gianyar's creative tourism clusters. The results are expected to strengthen theoretical development while providing strategic digital tourism marketing frameworks supporting resilience against seasonal volatility.

METHOD

Research Design

This research employs a quantitative explanatory design to explore causal relationships among digital marketing, destination image, and tourist visit intention within the creative tourism context of Gianyar, Bali. A variance-based SEM technique utilizing Partial Least Square (PLS-SEM) was employed duet o its suitability for predictive modeling, complex mediation testing, and non-normal data tolerance, (Hair Jr et al., 2021).

Population and Sample

The population consists of:

1. Actual tourists who have visited creative tourism destinations in Ubud, Celuk, Mas, and Batuan.
2. Potential tourists who have interacted with Bali tourism content on digital platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Google Travel, YouTube, travel blogs, or Booking/TripAdvisor Riview).

A purposive sampling technique was applied with the following criteria:

Table 1. Criteria Respondens

Category	Criteria
Actual Tourist	Has visited at least one of the four creative tourism areas in Gianyar.
Potential Tourist	Has viewed, saved, or interacted with Bali tourism digital content in the last 6 monts.
Age	17 years old and above.
Exposure	Active internet user and able to recognize digital tourism promotions.

Based on the 10x rule of PLS-SEM (minimum 10 x highest structural path pointing at a construct), a minimum of 110 respondents was required. The study targets 100-00 responses to increase robustness, (Hair Jr et al., 2021).

Data Collection Methods

Primary data were obtained using structured online questionnaires shared through:

1. Google Form equipped with initial screening
2. QR codes displayed at creative tourism locations

All statements were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Research Variables and Indicators

Table 2. Measurement Indicators

Variable	Dimension	Indikator Code
Digital Marketing (DM)	Social Media	DM1
		DM2
	SEO	DM3
		DM4
	Email Marketing	DM5
	Google Business	DM6

Destination Image (DI)	Cognitive	DI1
		DI2
	Affective	DI3
		DI4
	Uniqueness	DI5
		DI6
Visit Intention (VI)	Atrraction	VI1
	Accessibility	VI2
	Amenity	VI3
	Revisit Intention	VI4
	Recommendation	VI5

Data Analysis Technique

The data was analyzed using PLS-SEM via SmartPLS 4 through the following steps:

1. Outer Model Assessment
    a) Convergent validity (loading > 0,70, AVE > 0,50)
    b) Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker, HTMT < 0,90)
    c) Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha & Composite Reliability > 0,70)
2. Inner Model Assessment
    a) Coefficient of determination (R^2)
    b) Effect size (F^2)
    c) Predictive relevance (Q^2)
    d) Path coefficient significance via bootstrapping (t > 1,96, p < 0,05)
3. Modeling Testing
    a) Indirect effect tested using bootstrapping
    b) Mediation type identified (full/ partial/ No. mediation) based on VAF (variance accounted for)

Research Model

In this study, digital marketing is analyzed as an external stimulus that exposes tourists to information regarding the creative tourism attractions located in Ubud, Celuk, Mas, and Batuan. Through various online platforms such as social media content, search engine visibility, and Google review credibility tourists gain initial knowledge and impressions about these destinations. Their perception of what they see online forms an evaluative judgment known as destination image, which then influences whether they intend to visit the location. The research model below illustrates how digital marketing influences tourist visit intention directly, as well as indirectly through destination image as a mediating variable.

Figure 1. Research Model

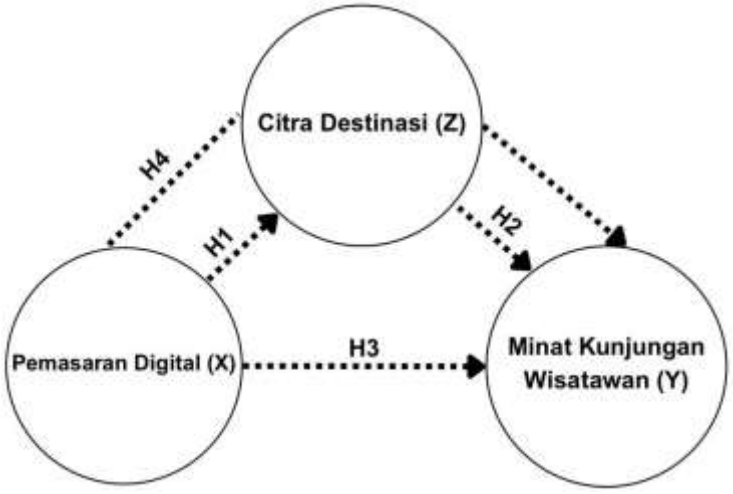


Figure 1 shows the relationship between the three main variables used in this study. Digital marketing (X) is expected to strengthen destination image (Z), and a better image encourages a stronger intention to visit (Y). In addition, digital marketing is also proposed to have a direct influence on visit intention without going through the destination image. This structure explains that digital exposure may generate interest, but tourists become more convinced to visit when they perceive the destination as unique, credible, and emotionally engaging. The model was tested on creative tourism destinations in Ubud, Celuk, Mas, and Batuan, where tourists are given opportunities to participate in cultural and artistic activities such as wood carving, silver crafting, and painting experiences.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Overview

The survey was distributed to 110 respondents who had visited or were familiar with UBUD, Celuk, Mas, and Batuan destinations. Respondents also confirmed exposure to digital promotional content related to the destinations through social media, search engines, email newslatters, or google business platforms.

Measurement Model (Outer Model Evaluation)

The measurement model evaluates how well each indicator represents its corresponding construct. In this stage, every item of the questionnaire is tested to confirm that the measurement indicators are both valid and reliable prior to analyzing the structural model. Convergent validity was examined through indicator loadings, where values exceeding the standard threshold show adequate representation of the construct. AVE was reviewed to ensure that each construct explains most of the variance of its indicators. Reliability was supported by Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha, indicating consistent measurement across indicators.

Figure 2. Outer Model Evaluation

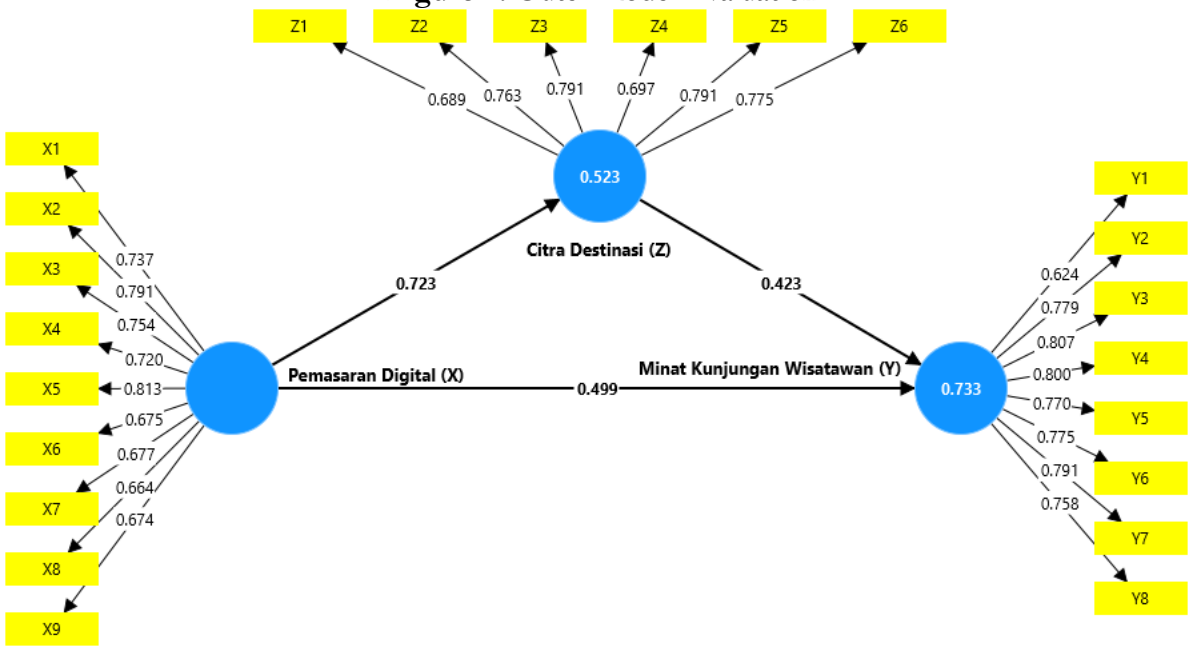


Figure 2 illustrates the outer model results generated through the PLS algorithm. Each latent variable Digital Marketing (X), Destination Image (Z), and Visit Intention (Y) is represented by multiple indicators. The loading values displayed next to each indicator show that the majority exceed the minimum required threshold, meaning that the indicators successfully capture the essence of the constructs. Digital Marketing (X) is explained through nine indicators related to online promotional exposure, Destination Image (Z) is formed from perceptions toward the attractiveness and uniqueness of Ubud, Celuk, Mas, and Batuan as creative tourism destinations, while Visit Intention (Y) reflects the willingness of tourists to visit, revisit, or recommend the area. Based on these results, all constructs have met the validity and reliability requirements, allowing the analysis to continue into the structural model evaluation. All indicators demonstrated acceptable factor loadings. Most indicators scored

>0.70, indicating strong representation of each construct. Several indicators between 0.60–0.69 were still retained as they fulfilled theoretical relevance and reliability criteria as suggested by (Hair Jr et al., 2017). This confirms that the constructs sufficiently capture digital marketing exposure, perceived destination image, and visit intention. HTMT scores for all variable pairs were below 0.90, confirming discriminant validity and ensuring that each construct measures different theoretical concepts.

Structural Model (Inner Model Evaluation)

The structural model evaluation aims to analyze the relationship between the latent variables in the research framework. At this stage, the model is assessed based on how strongly the exogenous variable (Digital Marketing) influences the mediating variable (Destination Image) and the endogenous variable (Visit Intention). The evaluation also determines whether the indirect influence through the mediating variable occurs in the model. Indicators that have passed the measurement model phase are used in this structural testing, ensuring that the relationships examined represent valid and reliable constructs. This procedure allows the researcher to identify the magnitude of the path coefficients and determine whether the hypothesized relationships in the model are supported by the empirical data.

Figure 3. Inner Model Evaluation

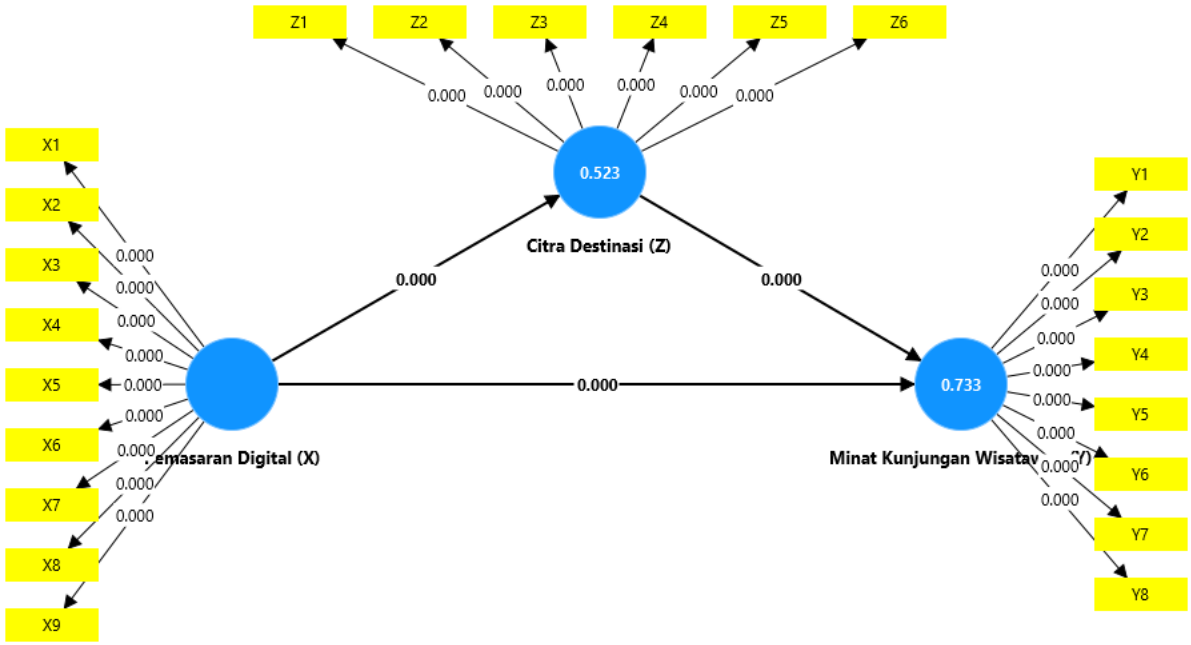


Figure 3 shows the structural model output from SmartPLS, where the path coefficients between variables are displayed. The coefficient value for the relationship between Digital Marketing and Destination Image indicates that marketing activities carried out through digital platforms contribute to the formation of tourists' perception of the destination. Meanwhile, the pathway from Destination Image to Visit Intention shows how the perception that tourists build regarding creative tourism destinations Ubud, Celuk, Mas, and Batuan affects their willingness to visit. The direct pathway from Digital Marketing to Visit Intention explains that online exposure can independently encourage the desire to visit, even without mediation. These results confirm that the structural model can be used to proceed to hypothesis testing through bootstrapping.

Hypothesis Test (Resampling Bootstrapping)

Bootstrapping results confirmed that all structural paths were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), supporting all proposed hypotheses.

Table 4. Direct Effect (Direct)

	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values	Decision
Destination Image (Z) → Visit Intention (Y)	0,423	3,936	0,000	Accepted
Digital Marketing (X) → Destination Image (Z)	0,723	10,566	0,000	Accepted
Destination Image (X) → Visit Intention (Y)	0,805	14.817	0,000	Accepted

The hypothesis testing results indicate the following:

1. Digital Marketing → Destination Image

Digital marketing significantly enhances destination image, as shown by the coefficient of 0.423 ($t = 3.936$; $p < 0.05$). This means online promotional activities—such as social media exposure, search visibility, and reviews—shape tourists' perceptions of creative tourism areas in Ubud, Celuk, Mas, and Batuan, supporting H1.

2. Digital Marketing → Visit Intention

A strong and significant direct relationship was found ($\beta = 0.723$; $t = 10.566$; $p < 0.05$). Digital promotional content can independently stimulate tourists' intention to visit even before an image is formed, thus H2 is accepted.

3. Destination Image → Visit Intention

The coefficient of 0.805 ($t = 14.817$; $p < 0.05$) indicates that favorable perceptions of cultural uniqueness and authenticity significantly increase tourists' willingness to visit, confirming H3.

Table 5. Indirect Effect

	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P Values	Decision
Digital Marketing (X) → Destination Image (Z) → Visit Intention (Y)	0,306	3,612	0,000	Accepted

The mediation test demonstrates that destination image significantly transmits the influence of digital marketing on visit intention. The indirect pathway (X → Z → Y) shows an effect size of 0.306 with a t-value of 3.612 ($p < 0.05$), indicating that digital exposure strengthens tourists' perceptions, which subsequently elevates their likelihood of visiting. These results indicate that digital promotions related to creative tourism in Ubud, Celuk, Mas, and Batuan improve tourists' perception of the destination, which then strengthens their intention to visit. In other words, Digital Marketing does not only influence Visit Intention directly, but also indirectly through the enhancement of Destination Image. Therefore, the mediating effect is proven to be significant, and the hypothesis is accepted.

CONCLUSIONS

The study affirms that digital marketing is a decisive driver in shaping the intention of tourists to visit creative tourism destinations in Gianyar, yet its influence does not stand alone, as destination image functions as the critical psychological pathway that converts online exposure into real visiting interest. The results indicate that promotional reach through digital channels such as social media content, Google visibility, online reviews, and electronically distributed tourism information forms initial awareness, but tourist intention becomes significantly stronger only when the destination is perceived as culturally valuable, emotionally engaging, and creatively distinctive. This shows that modern tourists do not make travel decisions solely based on information availability, but rather from the impressions, meanings, and emotional expectations constructed through what they see, read, and

experience digitally before visiting. The findings highlight that creative tourism locations like Ubud, Celuk, Mas, and Batuan gain greater appeal when their digital representation emphasizes cultural interaction, artisan activities, process-based storytelling, and personal involvement rather than conventional scenic promotion. The study also reveals that digital marketing without strong image framing may attract attention but lacks the persuasive depth required to translate interest into travel intention, reinforcing the idea that perception precedes decision in tourism contexts that rely on experience and cultural identity. Ultimately, this research clarifies that the success of digital tourism promotion is not measured by visibility alone, but by the extent to which digital narratives shape emotional connection, perceived uniqueness, and experiential desirability, making destination image the strategic core of tourism intention formation..

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