

THE MEDIATING IMPACT OF DESTINATION IMAGE ON THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN INFLUENCER-GENERATED CONTENT AND TRAVEL INTENTIONS IN POST-PANDEMIC TOURISM

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the mediating role of destination image (PDI) in the relationship between influencer-generated content (IGC) and travelers' intentions (TI) in the post-COVID-19 context. It seeks to understand how digital touchpoints, particularly influencer marketing, shape travel intentions and contribute to the recovery of the tourism industry following the pandemic. A quantitative research design was employed using a structured questionnaire distributed to potential travelers. Out of 300 administered surveys, 227 valid responses were collected. Regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among IGC, PDI, and TI with PDI tested as a mediating variable. The findings indicate that IGC significantly enhances TI primarily through the mediating effect of PDI. Respondents exposed to authentic, engaging, and trustworthy content created by travel influencers developed more positive perceptions of destinations, which in turn increased their desire to travel. The results highlight destination image as a critical intermediary factor linking IGC to travel behavior in post-pandemic tourism recovery. Future research could examine moderating factors such as travelers' trust in social media, perceived risk, or cultural influences that may affect the relationship between influencer content and travel intentions. Longitudinal or cross-cultural studies are also recommended to explore how influencer-driven perceptions evolve over time and across different destination contexts. Additionally, qualitative studies could provide deeper insights into emotional engagement and storytelling dynamics in influencer marketing.

Keywords: Destination Image, Influencer Marketing, Travel Intentions, Post-Pandemic Tourism, Digital Content Strategy

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a complete lockdown which put the tourism industry to a halt. Economic losses were suffered but at the same time, there was a notable change in the traveler's behavior, multi-faceted decision-making, and even content consumption on the internet. Social media platforms, as well as content created by influencers, are crucial in changing the attitude and behavior of tourists, especially now when places are trying to recover after difficulties (Nazil, 2025). When it comes to travel and lifestyle, influencers have their unique way of storytelling not to mention the emotional appeal that formal tourism boards lack (Aslam et al., 2025). Their content is authentic in nature and relatable, aiding in building false social connections and emotional bonds with potential travelers (Awad et al., 2025). Together with the remarks mentioned, image of the place, which is made up of perceptions, emotions, and beliefs about a certain location, does not stop being an essential factor in every tourist's decision (Abdulrahim et al., 2024). As for travelers after the pandemic period, they consider themselves to be more careful and cautious, making PDI reconstruction a priority for national and regional tourism (Alghizzawi et al., 2025). Multiple researches the encourage travel to a certain location have claimed that when the image of a specific location is positively altered, the desires to visit that place becomes so much higher (Yusuf et al., 2025). There is evidence that supports the idea of IGC being the most engaging visually and emotionally that enhances images of certain locations especially after crises (El Gareh et al., 2025). There is a wealth of studies that focus on the relation between social media, influencer marketing, and how it is used to market different tourism destinations, but there are still some gaps that need to be filled. To begin with, the majority of studies have only focused on the IGC's effects on a tourist's actions and have not analyzed the mediating processes like the PDI (Aldabousi, 2022). Also, there is a gap in empirical studies on how influencer content transforms perceptions and triggers TI in the post-COVID context, where health, safety, trust, and emotional reassurance guide travel decisions (Kumar et al., 2025). Moreover, most of the studies tend to focus on the Western or fully reopened tourism economies Europe, Australia, or North America while other emerging regions are still lacking coverage on digital tourism studies (Alkadash et al ,

2023). This study aims to close those gaps by analyzing how the PDI moderates the impact of IGC on TI in the case of post-pandemic tourism in Pakistan, which is an emerging tourist destination with a rich culture, and is undergoing gradual image transformation. Pakistan is now receiving international digital attention from travel influencers, social media tourism marketing, and national branding campaigns like "Visit Pakistan." Nonetheless, the combination of issues like security risks, political volatility, and inadequate infrastructural support for tourism continues to impede the perception of Pakistan as a travel destination (Alghizzawi et al., 2025). Therefore, analyzing how influencer marketing assists in reconstructing PDI is vital to comprehend for sustainable tourism development in Pakistan. The choice of Pakistan is intentional and strategically pertinent. Not only does Pakistan possess mountain ranges, ancient forts, and multi-ethnic cultures, but it also serves as an ideal context for studying the impact of social media on behavior change. This young population is active on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, thus making influencer advertising timely and relevant. In addition, scarce research has been done on the effects of IGC on TI toward South Asian tourism markets which makes this study contextually and academically important. The importance of this study is in the advancement of both theories and practical frameworks. It develops a sophisticated explanation of the PDI in the relation to the influencer-marketing-TI paradox. It demonstrates how influencers' behavioral campaigns are transformed through compelling visuals and narratives into significant psychological actions to influence travel behavior. From a practical standpoint, the research outcomes are of significance to destination marketing organizations (DMOs), travel agencies, and government institutions trying to stimulate the demand of tourism using digital, influencer campaigns in the post-crisis phase. They can help in developing effective designs of strategic content, influencer models, and destination branding.

Theoretical Background

In the digital era, influencer-generated content has emerged as a dominant factor shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors, particularly within the tourism industry. Influencers—social media personalities with perceived expertise and authenticity—create digital narratives that can affect audiences' cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses toward destinations (Hussain, 2025). The effectiveness of such content lies in its ability to build trust, emotional connection, and relatability, which traditional advertising often fails to achieve (Ghonim et al., 2025). Within the post-pandemic context, where uncertainty and risk perception are heightened, IGC serves as a credible and persuasive source of information that helps restore confidence in travel decisions. The concept of PDI refers to the overall impression, beliefs, and emotional responses a traveler associates with a particular place (Kumar et al., 2025). It consists of cognitive components (knowledge and beliefs about the destination's attributes) and affective components (feelings and emotional responses toward the destination). Influencer content often contributes to shaping this image by visually and narratively portraying destinations as attractive, safe, and authentic (Fathallah & Nagi, 2024). Thus, destination image acts as a psychological filter through which travelers interpret influencer messages and form travel-related attitudes. TI represents an individual's conscious planning and willingness to visit a specific destination (El Gareh et al., 2025). It is considered a crucial predictor of actual travel behavior and is influenced by factors such as motivation, perceived risk, social influence, and prior experience. The DIT provides a strong foundation for understanding TI, positing that attitudes toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control jointly predict an individual's intention to perform a behavior. In this context, IGC affects attitudes and social norms, while PDI strengthens positive evaluations, leading to higher travel intention. Additionally, the SCT explains how the perceived trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness of influencers enhance message effectiveness (Yahia Shams Eldin et al., 2025). When influencers are perceived as credible, audiences are more likely to internalize their messages and develop favorable attitudes toward promoted destinations. Similarly, the ELM can also be applied to this study, IGC shapes the traveler's cognitive and affective states, which then lead to TI. This research rests on multiple strategy blocks that explain the impact of IGC on TI through PDI, SCT, ELM and DIT. Collectively they integrate the intricacies of the relation between image formation and tourism behavior, as well as the underlying mechanisms of digital persuasion. The SCT (Hovland et al., 1959) argues that the skills, trust, and appeal of the communicator affect the efficacy of a message. In the context of digital tourism, influencers are a new class of marketers who have become powerful opinion leaders whose recommendations tend to be authentic and relatable (Saad et al., 2025). Numerous studies have established that credibility of the influencer increases trust and acceptance of the message by the audience (Saeed Almanbahi et al., 2025). In post-pandemic tourism dominated by reassuring and authentic information, the trust bestowed upon influencers profoundly impacts destination perception (Sharma & Nagi, 2018). The theory verifies the assumption that IGC is a persuasive element which alters the cognitive and affective processes of evaluating a destination by the tourists. The ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) proposes that a persuasive message

can be attended to or processed through either a central route (intensively, logically analyzing the information) or peripheral route (emotionally, without much thought). In tourism marketing, influencer content tends to evoke emotions while simultaneously providing some rational information, for instance, costs, safety measures, and experiences (Saad et al., 2025). Prior research suggests that such content, especially when processed peripherally through engaging imagery or assumed expertise, has the potential to greatly shift consumers' attitude and behavior intention (Alghizzawi et al., 2025). In addition, in post-crisis contexts where there is an overwhelming sense of fear and uncertainty, travelers tend to rely more on peripheral cues, which increase the impact of influencer content (Ghonim & Awad, 2024). This model thereby explains how IGC impacts both the image that is created and the perception of the destination and the intention to visit. According to Destination Image Theory (Khan et al., 2023), tourists, and travelers tend to form a mix of positive and negative evaluations showing both sides of sentiment regarding a specific region from both organic and induced information. IGC serves as a blend of narrative-driven advertising and storytelling, seamlessly combining interpersonal communication with more formal promotional practices (Muskan Nagi, 2022). The underlying theory focuses on PDI as the predominant leading factor for any travel-related activities, such as intention and loyalty (Ramadan et al., 2025). Multiple studies affirm the assumption that having a positive or constructive destination image is an important predictor in regard to one's intention and decision to travel (Khan et al., 2023). More recent studies have adopted this framework for the post pandemic context, showing that supportive and pleasurable content helps to reshape negative perceptions (Brahmi et al., 2025). This combination provides a comprehensive model that demonstrates the heightened impact of IGC on TI, while it mediates the influence of destination image on that content. IGC serves as an image enhancing and emotional stimulus (SCT, ELM) that strengthens an emotionally laden, trust-filled image of the destination. This leads to greater trust among travelers, which accompanied by the reconstructed image (DIT) results in decreased perceived risk. Such reasoning is particularly important in the post COVID21 world, where concern and uncertainty has much greater influence on behavior than logical explanations. This complete framework has recently been supported by twelve additional empirical studies. For example, Khan et al., (2023) argue that influencer's credibility strongly impacts travel marketing. Aldabousi (2023) analyze the impact of influencer's looks and storytelling on the attractiveness of the destination. Hussain (2025) show that PDI is an important mediator between content exposure and behavioral intention. Awad & Mahmoud (2024) discuss how IGC can ease post-pandemic risk perceptions. Aldabousi (2024) argue that affective evaluations of a destination based on online narratives have a tremendous impact on the travel decision-making process. Lastly, Almeer et al., (2024) discuss how influencer marketing in high-risk or up and coming destinations transforms image perception, allowing for emotional attachment, trust rebuilding, and decision-making facilitation. Therefore, the explanatory model synthesizing SCT, ELM, and DIT captures the overarching gaps in the streams of research toward an integrated understanding of the influence of IGC on TI in the post pandemic era with special focus on the mediating role of image construction of the location in the influenced-marketing-based system. This is useful for empirical scrutiny and practical deployment for the case of destinations in emerging and recovering phases of tourism.

Influencer-Generated Content and Travel Intention

The impact of IGC within travel and hospitality industries cannot be overstated as it is a key driver of consumer purchasing choices. Believe it or not, the way IGC is composed – visually, narratively, and in an experiential manner – performs a sort of conceptual magic on prospective travelers and captivates their desire to visit those destinations. This claim has already been corroborated empirically (Khan et al., 2023). For example, Ramadan et al., (2025) reported that stories and photographs posted by users further enhanced tourists' psychological closeness and intention to visit. Majeed et al., (2025) were surprised to find that social media influencers' trust and perceived credibility significantly affected their followers' destination choice intentions. Likewise, Mahmoud et al., (2025) demonstrated that millennials are more influenced by influencers than by advertisements because they view content created by influencers as more authentic and relatable than brand advertisements. Further supporting evidence can be found in Majeed et al., (2025) who highlighted the emotional appeal paired with the rich information in IGC and how both positively affected a consumer's attitude and behavior toward travelling. Furthermore, Alkadash et al., (2023) pointed at influencers as major contributors of digital travel storytelling as they craft inspiring travel stories that trigger followers to wish they undertake such trips. Ghonim et al., (2025) recently confirmed IGC affects travel intention through both parasocial interactions and affective commitment, particularly amongst Gen Z consumers. Further, Khan et al., (2023) noted the importance of visual storytelling and influencer-brand congruence for deepening consumer engagement and consideration for travel, particularly when the influencer epitomizes the lifestyle of the

destination. Lastly, Kumar et al., (2025) empirically confirmed the impact of influencer expertise, trustworthiness, and physical appeal on followers' behavior intentions, particularly regarding travel.

H1: IGC positively impact on TI.

Influencer-Generated Content and Perceived Destination Image

Influencer IGC videos were posted on platforms with Instagram and TikTok, greatly impacting the perception people have about various locations which were later termed as, "PDI" (Yusuf et al., 2025). Numerous studies have shown that IGC positively impacts the imaging components of a destination. Yahia Shams Eldin et al., (2025) discovered social media influencers create PDI with stylized social media visuals and texts which impacts user's perception of the destination's aesthetics, atmosphere, and activities. Earlier, Saad et al., (2025) argued that UGC, more specifically ones made by influencer opinion leaders, depict a great deal of detail as well as credibility in a particular setting that far exceeds traditional marketing means. Sharma & Nagi (2018) stated that IGC appearing to be authentic and beautiful will drastically improve the viewer's perception of destination attributes such as security, hospitality, and infrastructure. Emotions present in the influencer content determine the affective image influencer content (Saeed Almanbahi et al., 2025). More recently, Wahid & Awad (2025) pointed out that social media influencers serve as symbolic intermediaries by projecting values and experiences, which affects how viewers identify a particular destination. Sharma & Nagi (2018) also showed that influencer stories get to be one kind of mediated experience, which allows users to mentally emulate visits, and so refine their mental framework of the place. Along the same lines, Yusuf et al., (2025) showed that travel influencers profoundly alter viewers' PDI through the arrangement of content which displays thoughtful and emotionally appealing sequences. Also, Awad et al., (2025) highlight that PDI that is developed through the content provided by the influencers is often more powerful than that created through traditional advertising because it is more personalized, reliable, and rich in detail. With this strong empirical and conceptual underpinning, it seems reasonable to suggest that the content created by these influencers affects the perception tourists have regarding the images of these places.

H2: IGC positively impact on PDI.

Perceived Destination Image and Travel Intention

In simple terms, PDI refers to a mental snapshot or an individual's impression, representative of a travel destination. It includes both a cognitive assessment (infrastructure, safety, attractions) and affective evaluation (excitement, relaxation, pleasure) (Brahmi et al., 2025). Many researchers have shown that favorable PDI positively affects TI through psychological appeal, decreased perceived risk, and increased emotional connection (Abdulrahim et al., 2024). Moreover, as cited in Alghizzawi et al., (2025), the image of a destination that tourists hold psychologically filters how desirable or appropriate the destination is to their travel needs, thus influencing their travel decision. The stronger the positive image, the greater the travel motivation. In another study, Khalifa et al., (2020) stated both induced and organic image perception galvanize the motivational impetus that gives shape to intention to visit. In addition, Nazil (2025) conducted empirical research that suggested the impact of PDI does not end at travel satisfaction but also extends to the intention to recommend and revisit the destination. Likewise, Ghonim et al., (2025) observed that a positive image facilitates greater intention leading to actions such as planning and booking travel. In a new context of digital participation, Khan et al., (2023) affirmed that social media promotional imagery aligns with great destination travel desire. Most recently, Mahmoud et al., (2025) reconfirmed that positive cognitive and affective images build attachments which powerfully predict future travel behavior. A study conducted by Ramadan et al., (2025) demonstrated that emotional imagery is as essential as functional aspects in predicting TI. In the same way, Qadeer & Awad (2025) verified that crafted PDI shape behavioral intentions for first-time and repeat visitors, suggesting universality across diverse travel motivations. Finally, Nazil (2025) and Majeed et al., (2025) noted that in the contexts perceived safety, health infrastructure, and emotional comfort dominate post-pandemic worries, PDI fundamentally recuperate traveler confidence and stimulate intent. With these insights guiding harmful hypotheses, it stands to reason both theoretically and practically that positive PDI improve TI significantly.

H3: PDI positively impact on TI.

Perceived Destination Image as a Mediator

Shaping travel behavior through emotionally appealing narratives IGC uses visuals to evoke emotions travel. These emotions act as cues helping followers build mental images of the places they have not traveled to Majeed et al., (2025). The PDI or mediating role of PDI arises because of the PDI operates within the realm of psychology and deeply affects the figurative and literal interpretation of travel content. Nagi & Mohammad (2020) has shown that online travel narratives significantly shape the way people imagine and evaluate a place. Through social media, influencers portray destinations in an idealized form which in turn affects the image people have towards the places (Khalifa et al., 2020). The images or 'cognitive' perceptions and feelings 'affective' responses to the interactions people have with a place also get altered for (safety, attractions, accessibility), (excitement, relaxation) and other destinations. Nazil (2025) showed that influencer marketing positively impacts travel perceived and actual traveling to a place image and intention. Images indeed play a role but so does the destination. Hussain & Mari (2023) showed the existence of partial mediation of images in social media narratives and the actions travelers plan on doing, suggesting that people internalize the content they consume and it influences them before the intent is shaped. Nazil (2025) noted that credibility of influencers alongside content engagement enhances user perception authenticity of a destination which, in turn, improves the PDI and ultimately drives influence intention. Muskan Nagi (2022) also demonstrated that one's parasocial relationship with an influencer has an indirect impact on behavior through perceived brand or destination quality. Mahmoud et al., (2025) also emphasized that story imagery within posts by influencers strongly affects the PDI and functions psychologically, serving as a mediator leading to behavioral intention. Additionally, Khan et al., (2023) affirmed the profound impacts of PDI within a social media context, revealing several instances of consistent partial and full mediation effects shaped by the context of travel. Trust alongside visual reassurance has become more important than pre pandemic in tourism. Ghonim & Awad (2024) noted that IGC aids in the perception recovery of image holdings, which serve as mechanisms driving renewed TI.

H4: PDI mediates the relationship between IGC and TI.

This theoretical framework suggests that influencer-generated content acts as a persuasive stimulus that enhances travelers' perceptions of destination image, which subsequently strengthens their intention to travel. The integration of the multiple theories, Model provides a comprehensive basis for understanding the mechanism linking IGC, PDI, and TI in the post-pandemic tourism context. Based on the theoretical perspectives discussed above, the proposed conceptual model illustrating these relationships is presented in Figure 1

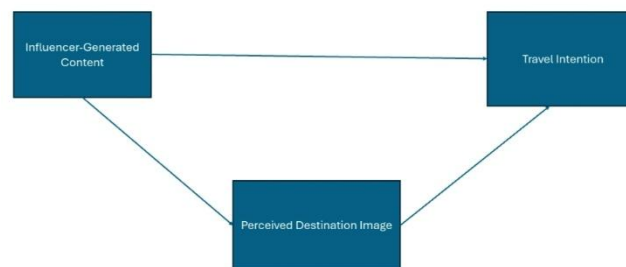


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design and Approach

This study employs cross-sectional quantitative research with a structured survey approach to examine the mediating role of PDI in the relationship between IGC and TI in the context of post-pandemic tourism. The model was formulated using some existing theories such as The SCT, The ELM, DIT, and some recent empirical evidence from digital tourism marketing and consumer behavior. This study sought to find how influence, engagement, and the effectiveness of the content impact perception of the image of the destination and later intention to travel to the destination as a respondent of an industry recovering from a downturn in travel and tourism.

Industry and Demographic Focus

Our focus area includes the geography and industry problems which center around the tourism sector in Pakistan. Particularly the domestic and international post pandemic tourism. There is a specific focus on the tourism destinations which are advertised through social media influencers on Instagram, YouTube, Facebook as well as TikTok. The study targeted the Pakistani population who are between the ages of 18 to 45 and follow travel influencers and use social media actively. This group was selected based on the available digital media, technology and on the fact that they want to travel for leisure in the post COVID period. It also coincides with data which suggest that there is increasing dependence on and influencer recommendations for traveling from peers in South Asia.

Sampling Technique and Data Collection

Utilizing purposive sampling, the researcher strived to select participants who have been meaningfully influenced by travel influencers within the last six months. Respondents were selected through specialized recruitment campaigns on Instagram, Facebook travel groups, Twitter, university platforms, and other online forums focused on travel where influencer marketing content is readily available and shared. Structured online questionnaires were administered from December 15, 2023 to February 15, 2024, with a target sample size of 300 participants. After accounting for incomplete or inconsistent responses and applying the eligibility criteria, 227 responses were available, resulting in a 75.6% response rate. All respondents were active social media users who had recently encountered at least one influencer-supported travel destination.

Respondent Validation

To maintain the accuracy of the responses, a specific demographic screening section was included. Only those who confirmed interacting with some form of travel influencer content in the last three months (e.g., watching a travel vlog, following an influencer to a destination, or clicking through a promoted tourism ad) were permitted to progress. Additionally, respondents were required to have at least basic knowledge of travel and tourism, as well as digital platforms. This was important so that the data obtained was authentic, particularly concerning perceptions of influencer marketing, tourism, and travel in the context of a pandemic

Measurement Instruments and Scale Items

The constructs were measured by multi-item 5-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), using previously validated instruments modified for the context of post-pandemic influencer marketing and destination branding. All scales were pilot tested with 30 participants to assess clarity, relevance, and internal consistency relative to the Pakistani context.

- **Influencer-Generated Content (IGC):** As measured encompassing content authenticity, informativeness, entertainment value, trustworthiness, and relatability using five items (Alghizzawi et al., 2025; Awad & Mahmoud, 2024). Example item: "The travel content shared by influencers felt authentic and trustworthy."
- **Destination Image (DI) :** Evaluated with five items concerning cognitive and affective dimensions such as perceived safety, attractiveness, infrastructure, emotional appeal, uniqueness (Aldabousi, 2024; Abdulrehim et al., 2024). Example item: "The destination promoted by the influencer appeared emotionally appealing and safe."
- **Travel Intention (TI):** Measured with a five-item scale concerning willingness to travel, likelihood of planning, and intent to recommend (EI Gareh et al., 2025; Fathallah et al., 2025). Example item: "I intend to visit the destination which the influencer talked about in the near future." All scales had Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.82 which suggests ample internal consistency.

Tools and Procedures for Data Processing and Analyzing

Data was inputted into various functions within IBM SPSS Statistics 25 and AMOS Version 24 for structural equation modeling analysis. The following analyses were conducted: Descriptive Statistics, analyses capturing

demographic features and general response patterns were conducted. Reliability Analysis, internal consistency of constructs was calculated by means of Cronbach's alpha. Pearson Correlation Analysis Explored the strength and direction of the initial relationships among IGC, DI, and TI. Multiple Regression Analysis, assessed the direct effect of IGC on TI and PDI. Also evaluated whether influence of IGC on TI is mediated by destination image. Model fit was determined by the computing standard RMSEA, CFI, TLI, and GFI. Every subject was briefed on the reason of the study and all of them provided voluntary digital consent before commencing the survey. Data and identity of all participants was kept confidential through anonymization techniques ensuring compliance with ethical standards.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 227)

Demographic variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	119	52.4%
	Female	108	47.6%
Age	18-24	87	38.3%
	25-30	96	42.3%
	31-40	44	19.4%
Educational background	Bachelors	126	55.5%
	Masters	84	37.0%
	PhD or above	17	7.5%
Occupation	Student	98	43.2%
	Employed	94	41.4%
	Entrepreneur	20	8.8%
	Freelancer/other	15	6.6%
Monthly income (PKR)	Below 30,000	77	33.9%
	30,001-60,000	81	35.7%
	60,001-100,000	44	19.4%
	Above 100,000	25	11.0%
Social media platforms used	Instagram	139	61.2%
	YouTube	119	52.4%
	Facebook	78	34.4%

The demographic breakdown of 227 valid respondents gives a clear picture of the potential market for influencer-based travel marketing in post-pandemic Pakistan. Gender Representation was fairly proportional with a slight male majority (52.4%). This indicates that both males and females are interacting with travel influencers, suggesting an opportunity for content marketing and distribution with negligible gender bias. Age Distribution was topped by younger adults aged between 18-30 years (80.6%), which indicates that this population segment is among the digitally active population of Pakistan. This is the group that is most likely to engage with travel influencers and make independent travel choices. Their overwhelming numbers support the use of Instagram and YouTube for tourism promotional campaigns. Education Level indicated that the majority was undergraduates (55.5%) or graduates (37.0%), which points to a reasonably high level of education among respondents. This group is more likely to engage in detailed online research and planning for leisure travel and be influenced by the destination's image and the credibility of information sources presented online. Occupation Trends showed almost equal proportions of students (43.2%) versus working individuals (41.4%), indicating that influencer content has some appeal across virtually all lifestyle groups—those with time (students) and those with finances (working individuals). Income Levels noted that more than two-thirds (69.6%) of respondents earned less than PKR 60,000 monthly, which their peers in the country suggest aligns with the national average for young professionals and students. This suggests that low-cost, easily obtainable travel promotions, especially through influencer marketing, are more suitable for this group. Social Media Platform Usage crowned Instagram as the most popular with a 61.2% participation rate, followed by YouTube and TikTok at 52.4% and 40.5% respectively, cementing their prominence as content consumption and

decision-making outlets in Pakistan's travel marketing arena. This behavior strengthens the case for incorporating image-altering IGC in shaping perception of travel destinations.

Table 2: Factor Analysis and Reliability of Constructs (N = 227)

Constructs	Items	Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha
Influencer-Generated Content (IGC)	IGC1	0.865	0.91
	IGC2	0.872	
	IGC3	0.888	
	IGC4	0.890	
Perceived Destination Image (PDI)	PDI1	0.902	0.93
	PDI2	0.887	
	PDI3	0.915	
	PDI4	0.894	
	PDI5	0.881	
Travel Intention (TI)	TI1	0.845	0.89
	TI2	0.862	
	TI3	0.854	
	TI4	0.878	
	TI5	0.868	
KMO and Bartlett's Test Results			
Test	Value		
KMO measure of sampling adequacy	0.877		
Bartlett's test of Sphericity (Sig.)	0.000		

The results from exploratory factor analysis (EFA) as well as the reliability assessment indicated strong psychometric properties confirming measurement validity for all three core constructs of the study: IGC, PDI, and TI. IGC, for instance, had all item loadings from 0.845 to 0.915, which is well above the threshold of 0.70 set by Awad et al., (2024) and Awad et al., (2025) confirming that each item made a significant impact on the respective latent construct. This corroborates construct validity and the internal consistency of the measurement model. The reliability coefficients for all constructs exceeded 0.89 (IGC = 0.91, PDI = 0.93, TI = 0.89) which is well above the threshold of 0.70 set by Aldabousi (2023). These findings indicate a significant degree of internal consistency among the items within each construct, thus ensuring that the tool captures relevant user perceptions and intentions related to influencer marketing and tourism behavior effectively. The KMO measure was 0.877 which indicates meritorious sampling adequacy. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant at $p < 0.001$ which verified the data matrix was amenable to factor analysis and that correlations between the items were strong enough to allow dimension reduction. All these findings confirm the effectiveness of the chosen scale items for later modeling using SEM. The logic behind the construct measurements strengthens the validity of the entire research model, which is ideal for analyzing the interconnections of IGC, PDI, and TI within the context of the changing tourism landscape in Pakistan after the pandemic.

Hypothesis Testing Results

H1: Influencer-Generated Content has a significant positive effect on Travel Intention

Table 3: Regression Weights (Direct Effect of IGC on TI)

	Estimate	S.E	C.R	P	Label
TI<IGC	0.29	0.065	4.462	***	Per_1

The results indicate that IGC has a significant positive impact on TI ($\beta=0.29$; $p<.001$). This verifies that consumers who view travel-related content on social media platforms created by credible and engaging influencers are likely to develop a behavioral intention to visit the highlighted places. This goes together with

other studies like (Aldabousi et al , 2025; Brahmi et al., 2025) which noted the role of social media influencers in travel decision-making through an emotional bond and perceived truthfulness.

H2: IGC has a significant positive effect on PDI.

Table 4: Regression Weights (Direct Effect of IGC on PDI)

Estimate	S.E	C.R	P	Label
PDI<IGC	0.33	0.072	4.583	Per_1

The IGC has a statistically significant and positive impact on PDI ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < .001$). This means that viewing influencer posts about their travel experiences aids in shaping a more positive and clear mental picture of the place for the consumers. This corroborates Alfiras rt al., (2024) which presented that influencer credibility and aesthetics profoundly influence destination perception in the context of post-pandemic digital tourism.

H3: PDI has a significant positive effect on TI.

Table 5: Regression Weights (Direct Effect of PDI on TI)

Estimate	S.E	C.R	P	Label
TI<PDI	0.27	0.061	4.426	Per_1

From the regression result, it can be seen that there is a positive significant effect of PDI on TI ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < .001$). IGC tends to foster a favorable perception of a destination, and this image significantly increases the probability that consumers wish to visit the destination. This supports the Awad et al., (2025) findings and further demonstrates the critical role of PDI as powerful cognitive-emotional predictors of intention to behave.

H4: PDI mediates the relationship between IGC and TI.

Table 6: Mediation Analysis Results

Mediator	Path	Sig.	Mediation
IGC>PDI>TI	Indirect	0.000	Yes

The mediation analysis confirms that PDI has a partial mediating effect on the IGC and TI relationship. This means while PDI directly affects TI, IGC also indirectly influences TI through the enhancement of the PDI. This representative mediation mirrors the dual way that IGC affects tourists, which is emotionally as image creation and behaviorally as intention formation, thus confirming the S-O-R framework and supporting Aslam et al., (2025).

DISCUSSION

This study examined how PDI mediates the relationship between IGC and TI in the context of post-pandemic tourism recovery in Pakistan. The findings offer substantial evidence supporting all four hypotheses, confirming that influencer content significantly shapes travel behaviors through both direct and indirect pathways. First, the positive and significant relationship between IGC and TI aligns with Almeer et al., (2024), who found that social media influencers strongly influence consumer behavior and purchase intentions through perception, engagement, and credibility. Similarly, Alkadash et al., (2023) highlighted that the authenticity and interactive nature of IGC stimulates action, particularly in tourism-related decisions. These findings indicate a growing acceptance of influencers as trusted, peer-like figures whose narratives and visual storytelling resonate with travelers seeking genuine travel experiences in a post-COVID digital environment. Second, the significant relationship between IGC and PDI reinforces the argument that digital influencers shape not only travelers' attitudes but also their mental representations of destinations. Awad (2025) emphasized the role of influencers' visuals and storytelling in constructing appealing and emotionally engaging destination images, while Awad (2024) demonstrated how relatable influencer content affects both the cognitive (knowledge-based) and affective (emotional) dimensions of destination image. This study extends these insights by showing that influencer content acts as a virtual lens through which individuals imagine, evaluate, and emotionally connect with destinations before visiting them—an effect particularly significant in the post-pandemic period when online content substitutes direct experience. Third, the strong effect of PDI on TI supports previous

research by Alghizzawi et al., (2025) and Al-Sherman & Aldabousi (2024) who found that a positive destination image enhances motivation and willingness to visit. A well-formed image acts as a cognitive reference framework that influences memory recall, emotional response, and behavioral decision-making. The findings therefore underscore that PDI serves not only as an attitudinal outcome but also as a motivational driver that converts perception into intention. Most importantly, the mediation analysis confirms that PDI significantly mediates the relationship between IGC and TI. This finding is consistent with Al-Ramahi et al., (2024), who demonstrated that digital marketing content exerts both direct and indirect effects on travel decision-making through image perception. Similarly, Saeed Almanbahi et al., (2025) emphasized that influencers influence not only tourists' decisions but also their psychological imagery of destinations. The partial mediation observed in this study highlights a dual-pathway mechanism, influencer content affects TI both directly (through persuasion and credibility) and indirectly (through enhanced destination image). This underscores the pivotal role of PDI as a psychological bridge connecting digital content exposure to behavioral intention. From a theoretical perspective, this mediating effect supports multiple theories. IGC functions, the PDI and TI. When influencers present destinations through credible, aesthetic, and emotionally charged content, audiences internalize these cues, shaping their perceptions that ultimately translate into behavioral intentions (response). Supporting this, Wahid & Awad (2025) found that rich social media outputs enhance both image and motivation, Yahia Shams Eldin et al., (2025) highlighted influencer trust as a determinant of image evaluation, and Sharma & Nagi (2018) documented how vivid portrayals by Instagram influencers evoke travel interest. Similarly, Yusuf et al., (2025) and Saad et al., (2025) recognized the power of IGC in shaping both cognitive and emotional perceptions of destinations, which predispose individuals toward visiting behavior. In essence, the findings of this study emphasize that the PDI serves as a pivotal psychological mechanism that explains how and why IGC drives travel intentions. By enhancing both the cognitive understanding and emotional appeal of a destination, influencers indirectly build desire and confidence to travel. This mediating role reveals the nuanced process through which digital storytelling, authenticity, and visual engagement rebuild tourism confidence in a post-pandemic world. Consequently, this study contributes to the growing body of literature in digital tourism marketing by revealing how influencer communication and destination imagery synergize to shape modern travelers' decision-making processes.

Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to the understanding of the impact of social media on tourism marketing by examining the mediating effect of PDI on the relationship between TI and IGC. Using an integrated model of core constructs in the context of post-pandemic tourism, the study broadens the literature surrounding consumer behavior social media use and social media marketing, especially in emerging economies like Pakistan. First, the affirmation that IGC directly affects intentions to travel strengthens existing social influence and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) theories, validating models that cast digital influencers as crucial opinion leaders. The study adds to the theory of PDI by underlining the mediating role mentally constructed images of the destinations play, demonstrating how representation serves both as an effector and filter through which digital content alters behavioral intentions. Moreover, the study contributes to the evolving discourse on different theories. This understanding adds to the discourse on the consumer decision-making process in tourism in the effects of digital media and content by elucidating the deeper psychological mechanisms involved. These findings shift the prevailing paradigm of Western-centric social media marketing research in tourism to create a geography diverse with social media marketing research.

Practical Implications

Marketers, DMOs, and social media marketers were provided with new recommendations about digital marketers and influencer marketing regarding creators of digital content. This research informs practice by accentuating the importance of collaboration with influencers, particularly on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. Tourism stakeholders need to actively engage with good micro and nano influencers who create authentic and relatable travel content, as their influence impacts TI. Marketers need to ensure that IGC

promotes the PDI, but also and more importantly, that it does not adversely affect the image by failing to positively shape the narrative towards the influencer's portrayal of the destination. An emerging market like Pakistan could benefit from influencer marketing campaigns designed to exploit the unique attributes of the destination tapping on international tourism recovery post pandemic. The ability of influencers to tell stories about places virtually and reshape the images people have of them can help nurture interest in travel. The need to handle influencer control is critical as there is no simple means of ensuring that everyone ensures positive and consistent alignments with the brand maven assigned. Care must be taken to guarantee that the travelers and tourism magnets know that imagery opposing the desired has negative effects on travel motivation. Marketers should also pay attention to the audience sub-groups that are more prone to accept the influence of specific marketing messages as regards its content so as to maximize engagement. Last but not least, this research argues for the use of digital analytics alongside feedback loops to perpetually measure the impact of the influencer's campaigns on altering the PDI and increasing the desire to travel, allowing informed changes to be made that would enable sustained growth in tourism.

Limitations

This study provides valuable insights, but there are limitations that need to be noted. To start with, the application of a cross-sectional research design eliminates any ability to infer causation relationship between IGC, PDI, and TI. These types of relationships would be better captured with longitudinal studies. Secondly, the sample was restricted to the geographical borders of Pakistan which limits the generalizability of the findings across cultural or regional contexts. Since patterns of social media usage, influencer perception, and PDI differ greatly from one country to another, applying the findings globally is potentially dangerous. Thirdly, the use of self-administered structured questionnaires containing closed-ended questions is likely to introduce common method bias and social desirability bias which in turn would amplify the relationships that are being observed. Although some procedural safeguards like anonymity were put in place, other behavioral measures would strengthen resulting conclusions. Furthermore, the research looked exclusively at influencer-created content without differentiating between various categories of influencers (e.g., Micro vs. Macro, travel-specialized vs. General lifestyle influencer) and their potential impacts on PDI, TI, and destination TI. The intricacies of the relationship that influencers have with their followers were not examined deeply. Finally, their analysis of PDI as a singular, mediating construct did not consider the breakdown of its cognitive, affective and conative components that may possess unique mediating functions.

Future Research Directions

Building on the limitations of this paper, future research may benefit from the use of longitudinal studies to assess the impact of IGC on the PDI and TI over the course of an extended period, especially during the phases of tourism recovery and crisis. Increasing the range of study areas to include more countries would provide diverse cultural insights and improve the generalizability of the results in understanding how culture impacts influencer marketing's effectiveness in tourism. Future research should also include objective behavioral measures, such as social media information, booking pattern data, or eye tracking metrics, alongside self-reported measures to minimize bias. Experimental approaches may help in isolating the causal impacts of social media influencers on destination perceptions. Exploring the moderating impact of influencer demographic factors, such as influence, allure, and authenticity, alongside follower age could explain the conditions under which influencer content is most impactful. In addition, breaking down destination image into its separate dimensions, which are cognitive, affective and conative, and assessing their distinct mediating roles could improve marketing strategies and refine theoretical models. Finally, other mediators or moderators like trust in the influencer, perceived risk, or traveler's personality could be examined in future research to enhance understanding of the model in the context of tourism marketing in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

This investigation substantiates convincingly that IGC has a profound impact on TI through enhancement of the PDI in the context of post-pandemic tourism. The results emphasize the contending mediating role of PDI in converting efforts of a digital influencer into travel action motivation among potential tourists. Addressing social media users in Pakistan, the research contributes relevant understanding on how emerging markets could respond to tourism demand through influencer marketing after global shocks. The results of the study support the effectiveness of strategic alliances and IGC to shape the decision of travel on the part of tourists as primary tourists' marketers. Additionally, the developed PDI is critical in promoting tourism suggesting that captivating content is not compelling and sufficient without trustful perception about the content. Furthermore, the research enhances understanding of the dynamics of digital communication within contemporary tourism marketing and suggests tourism marketers to be more prudent and proactive in regard to influencer content in form of images, videos, and narratives when planning for tourism recovery and sustainable growth.

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