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Dual routes of persuasion in tourism: building marine destination image through the elaboration likelihood model

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Abstract: This study investigates the dual routes of persuasion in shaping destination image and visit intention within the context of Indonesia's marine tourism digital marketing. The research employed a quantitative approach, collecting data from 300 participants aged 21 to 40, most of whom reported daily internet use. The research model explores the influence of central and peripheral route cues on the cognitive and affective dimensions of destination image and visit intention. The findings demonstrate that both argument quality and review quality significantly enhance cognitive destination image, with review quality having a greater impact. Source credibility and visual appeal significantly influenced affective destination image, whereas review quantity did not. Both cognitive and affective destination images positively affect visit intention, with affective image exerting a stronger effect. The results underscore the importance of high-quality content and credible sources in online tourism marketing.

Keywords: argument quality; review quality; source credibility; visual appeal; review quantity; destination image; visit intention.

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1 Introduction

Persuasion, understood as the process of shaping or altering audience attitudes and behaviours, has long been recognised as a fundamental pillar of marketing scholarship and practice (Miles, 2014; Hunter, 2018). In an era where the digital ecosystem saturates consumers with an unceasing flow of information, deciphering the dynamics and mechanisms of persuasion is increasingly paramount. Within this competitive landscape, organisations consistently undertake intentional efforts to influence consumer attitudes and intentions by deploying carefully crafted persuasive messages (Atwood and Morosan, 2015). Among the various theoretical models explaining attitude change, the elaboration likelihood model, or ELM, has emerged as the most widely adopted and empirically grounded framework to understand how individuals process information in persuasive contexts (Allison et al., 2017). The ELM offers a comprehensive lens for examining the effectiveness of persuasive communication and the cognitive processes underlying attitude change (Chen et al., 2020; Jammoul et al., 2023).

The ongoing evolution of digital marketing has amplified the relevance of ELM. Its utility is evidenced by a wide range of applications across digital settings, including studies that have demonstrated its use in exploring persuasive processes within social media environments (Teng et al., 2014), in the context of influencer marketing (Breves et al., 2024), and in investigations of consumer intentions using artificial intelligence platforms such as ChatGPT (Iranmanesh et al., 2024). The academic literature affirms the continued significance of ELM for analysing persuasive communication in the digital domain, especially as organisations seek to anticipate and influence consumer responses amidst intensifying online competition.

At the conceptual core of ELM lie two parallel routes of persuasion: the central route and the peripheral route. Since being articulated by Petty et al. in 1981, these routes have served as the foundation for a vast body of research (Abid et al., 2023; Sang et al., 2023; Fang et al., 2023; Fernandes and Segev, 2024). Importantly, in online and digital contexts, it has been demonstrated that users often process cues from both routes simultaneously (Aghakhani et al., 2020; Shao et al., 2023). The central route involves careful consideration of the quality and substance of arguments, while the peripheral route is shaped by factors such as source credibility, visual appeal, and social recommendations. Empirical studies consistently reveal that these two routes interact, jointly influencing a range of consumer outcomes, from funding decisions to perceptions of well-being (Han et al., 2018; Jamil et al., 2023; Fang et al., 2023).

In online marketing, understanding how consumers process these cues is essential for crafting effective communication strategies. Research by Mousavizadeh et al. (2022) illustrates this dynamic, highlighting that peripheral cues in online reviews, such as attractive visuals or favourable feedback, can serve as catalysts that encourage consumers to engage more deeply with information processed via the central route. Such interactions illustrate the intricate interplay between these two pathways, reinforcing the central premise of the ELM that persuasion in digital environments is rarely linear or singular.

Central route cues, especially the quality of arguments presented, remain critical for effective persuasion (Jamil et al., 2023). The digital transformation of the marketplace has broadened the array of persuasive stimuli, incorporating not only content generated by companies but also consumer-generated information, such as online reviews (Zhang et al., 2014; Dwivedi et al., 2020). Both types of content are crucial in shaping perceptions and influencing decision making (Kim et al., 2017a, 2017b; Arora and Mail, 2018; Maslowska et al., 2019). Online reviews, in particular, are often perceived as more credible than direct corporate messaging, leading to greater consumer responsiveness (Wang and McCarthy, 2020). These reviews facilitate purchasing behaviour, heighten consumer loyalty, and enhance satisfaction, while also serving as key indicators of a company's credibility before a transaction is made (Mo et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2018a, 2018b; Lou and Ye, 2019; Brazyt   et al., 2016; Farzin and Fattahi, 2018).

Emerging empirical evidence continues to deepen understanding of how the ELM operates in the domain of online reviews. For instance, it has been demonstrated that review quality influences consumers' intention to continue using online platforms and shapes their decision-making process (Lou and Ye, 2019; Dong et al., 2018). Nonetheless, several gaps persist in the literature, particularly concerning the simultaneous impact of company-generated and user-generated content as central route cues in online marketing. In response, the present study examines both the quality of

arguments presented by organisations and the quality of reviews generated by consumers as dual central route cues.

On the other hand, the peripheral route of persuasion focuses on cues that are processed with less cognitive effort and often appeal to emotion, such as the credibility of the message source, the attractiveness of visuals, and the perceived quantity of reviews (Lim *et al.*, 2020; Bhattacherjee and Sanford, 2006; Wang, 2015; Cyr *et al.*, 2018). Elements such as engaging imagery and trustworthy sources have been widely shown to evoke affective responses, which in turn influence destination image (Cyr *et al.*, 2018; Park *et al.*, 2019; Lee and Kim, 2020). However, the empirical literature on the influence of review quantity and similar cues remains mixed, underscoring the need for further exploration (Mo *et al.*, 2015; Li *et al.*, 2020; Thomas *et al.*, 2019).

The application of the ELM has expanded beyond the domain of consumer goods to become increasingly significant in tourism research. A growing body of studies has explored the extent to which argument quality and peripheral cues, such as source credibility and visual attractiveness, shape tourists' travel intentions, attitudes, and likelihood of revisiting destinations (Hur *et al.*, 2017; Wang, 2015; Balakrishnan *et al.*, 2021; Cao *et al.*, 2024; Ding *et al.*, 2024; John and De'Villiers, 2020). Despite this progress, research examining the way ELM cues influence the construction of destination image, particularly in the context of Indonesian marine tourism, remains relatively sparse.

Destination image itself is a multidimensional construct, consisting of both cognitive and affective components, and is widely acknowledged as a major antecedent of tourist attitudes and behavioural intentions (Chen, 2019; Stienmetz *et al.*, 2013; Iglesias-Sánchez *et al.*, 2020; Xiang *et al.*, 2016). Messages transmitted through marketing channels, compelling visuals, and user-generated content all play important roles in shaping this image. The interaction between ELM routes and the formation of destination image, particularly with respect to the sequence and mutual influence of central and peripheral cues, remains poorly understood.

Indonesia, with its abundant marine tourism assets and an increasingly ambitious digital marketing agenda, provides an ideal setting for further investigation of these dynamics. Nonetheless, most previous studies have not systematically analysed the combined or interactive effects of central and peripheral cues on destination image and tourist intention. The literature still lacks integrated evidence on how persuasive strategies in online environments translate into concrete perceptions and actions regarding tourism destinations.

Addressing these gaps, this study is designed to provide a comprehensive analysis of how dual routes of persuasion shape the destination image of Indonesia's marine tourism sector through digital marketing. The research investigates the influence of central route cues, specifically argument quality and the quality of online reviews, on the cognitive dimension of destination image. At the same time, it assesses how peripheral cues, including source credibility, visual appeal, and review quantity, affect the affective dimension of destination image. The study further examines how these cognitive and affective images influence tourists' intentions to visit marine destinations. Special emphasis is placed on exploring the mediating and interactive roles of central and peripheral cues, enriching the theoretical and practical understanding of how digital persuasion operates within the context of tourism.

Through this integrated and contextually relevant approach, the present research aspires to make a significant empirical and conceptual contribution to the literature of both the ELM and destination image. The study is expected to generate actionable

insights for practitioners and policymakers seeking to enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of Indonesia's marine tourism destinations in the increasingly crowded and complex digital communication environment.

2 Literature review

2.1 Central route of online persuasion and cognitive destination image

The central route of the ELM underscores the importance of message content and logical reasoning in shaping individual attitudes and behaviours. In this context, *argument quality* is defined as the persuasive strength and clarity embedded within a communication message (Pei et al., 2018). High-quality arguments play an essential role in driving attitudinal and behavioural change, as the ELM posits that individuals who are highly involved and motivated will carefully evaluate the substance and relevance of information presented to them (Cao et al., 2024).

In the sphere of tourism marketing, relevant and comprehensive content has consistently been linked to the development of favourable cognitive images of destinations. For example, Kim et al. (2017a) demonstrated that detailed, relevant content can significantly enhance tourists' perceptions of a destination's attributes. Similarly, Wang (2015) found that well-crafted arguments about destination qualities positively shape tourist attitudes. González-Rodríguez et al. (2022) further confirmed that the quality of tourism information shared through online platforms exerts a direct impact on the formation of destination image. Tourists, in turn, are inclined to seek information about potential destinations actively, relying on their cognitive evaluations of information credibility and quality as the basis for image formation (John and De'Villiers, 2020). Based on this theoretical and empirical foundation, the following hypothesis is posited:

H1 Argument quality in marine tourism content will have a positive influence on cognitive destination image.

Beyond the influence of argument quality, online reviews have become an indispensable facet of the central route in digital persuasion. The quality of reviews, encompassing dimensions such as perceived credibility, comprehensiveness, and relevance, can significantly impact not only perceptions of individual products and services but also the broader reputation of a destination or business. Mo et al. (2015) illustrated that online reviews play a vital role in shaping a shop's reputation by addressing elements such as quality, price, and service attitude. Park et al. (2019) further showed that online reviews meaningfully affect consumer attitudes, their decision-making processes, and subsequent recommendations.

Within the tourism sector specifically, Bae et al. (2017) highlighted that travellers frequently base their pre-trip decisions on experiences and evaluations shared by others in online environments. The tendency of tourists to seek and consider such reviews is supported by Xiang et al. (2016), who noted that user-generated information is increasingly relied upon during the destination selection process. The positive impact of review quality on a destination's cognitive image was also demonstrated by De La Hoz-Correa and Muñoz-Leiva (2018). In a similar vein, Book et al. (2018) observed that traveller reviews exert a strong influence on overall consumer evaluations and preferences. The power of reviews in establishing trust and shaping travel intentions

has been substantiated in recent work as well (Su et al., 2021). Based on this robust body of research, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2 Review quality in marine tourism content will have a positive effect on destination cognitive image.

2.2 *Peripheral route of online persuasion and affective destination image*

The ELM not only emphasises the central route of persuasion but also recognises the crucial role of the peripheral route, particularly in contexts where audiences may not perceive a product or service as highly relevant to their immediate needs. In such cases, individuals tend to rely on peripheral cues that are associated with emotional resonance rather than on cognitive evaluation. The peripheral route operates through signals such as the credibility of the message source, the manner in which information is presented, and the appeal of the source itself.

Source credibility is central to the peripheral route, defined as the degree to which a source is perceived as trustworthy, competent, reliable, and possessing integrity (Tseng and Wang, 2015). Its influence extends beyond mere information transmission, as credible sources have been empirically shown to enhance consumer well-being (Jamil et al., 2024). Within the context of tourism, credible information sources are significant in shaping tourist attitudes towards destinations (Wang, 2015). For instance, endorsements by celebrities and other notable figures can generate a positive image for the destinations they promote (C. Chen, 2018). Moreover, source credibility has also been demonstrated to strengthen the affective dimension of destination image, contributing to the emotional connections that tourists form with a place (Qiu et al., 2022). Based on this evidence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3 Source credibility in marine tourism content will positively affect affective destination image.

Visual appeal is another essential peripheral cue in online persuasion. Research by Cyr et al. (2018) has shown that visually engaging content, whether in the form of photographs, graphics, or other visual representations, can inspire behavioural change and influence attitudes. The persuasive function of visuals is further supported by Park et al. (2019), who found that compelling images can enhance the clarity of marketing messages. The importance of photographs in tourism is underscored by Iglesias-Sánchez et al. (2020), who note that sharing photos and experiences, along with inviting commentary and discussion, can significantly shape the overall destination image. Images of marine destinations published on digital platforms can attract and persuade prospective tourists by showcasing natural beauty and unique attractions. Marketers strategically employ visual materials in brochures and online channels to construct and reinforce destination image (Choi et al., 2017). John and De'Villiers (2020) have demonstrated that uploaded photos and videos directly shape destination image, while Filieri et al. (2021) have further affirmed that visual cues meaningfully influence tourists' intentions and their decision-making processes regarding destination visits. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is posited:

H4 Visual appeal in marine tourism content will have a positive effect on affective destination image.

The quantity of reviews and social interactions also operates as a salient peripheral cue. According to John and De'Villiers (2020), user engagement manifested in forms such as reviews, likes, shares, and recommendations can influence destination image through peripheral processing. The significance of post popularity is further highlighted by Chang et al. (2015), who found that the frequency of likes, comments, and shares substantially affects users' preferences and their perceptions of message usefulness. Empirical research in the hospitality sector supports this, with Blal and Sturman (2014) demonstrating that more online reviews and higher hotel ratings drive sales and revenue performance. Kim et al. (2017b) similarly provided evidence that the amount of information available online shapes perceptions of destination image. Given these findings, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H5 Review quantity in marine tourism content will have a positive effect on affective destination image.

2.3 *Peripheral route and central route of online persuasion*

The dynamic interplay between peripheral and central routes of persuasion in online contexts has attracted substantial scholarly interest, especially as digital platforms become increasingly saturated with information. Recent research indicates that, in many situations, peripheral cues tend to exert greater influence than central route cues in guiding consumer behaviour and decision making. Liu and Gao (2024) found that consumers are especially responsive to peripheral cues, such as hashtags, when deciding which online reviews to read. This suggests that, given the limited time and overwhelming abundance of information, individuals strategically rely on peripheral cues to navigate digital content more efficiently (Lee and Hong, 2021).

The relationship between these two routes of persuasion is neither static nor linear. On destination websites, the use of animated features that represent peripheral cues has been shown to spark users' interest and drive engagement with more detailed data, thereby stimulating deeper cognitive processing that characterises the central route. Hardy et al. (2018) argue that such peripheral processes can serve as catalysts, prompting users to elaborate on information that otherwise might be ignored. This idea is further reinforced by Mousavizadeh et al. (2022), who observed that peripheral cues encountered in online reviews can determine whether consumers are motivated to explore more complex information or choose to end their evaluation process. These findings collectively highlight that peripheral cues do not merely supplement central route processing but can actively initiate and shape deeper, more thoughtful engagement with information. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6 Peripheral routes will influence the central route.

To better understand the mechanism underlying this interaction, it is useful to recognise the multidimensional nature of both routes. The peripheral route comprises source credibility, visual appeal, and review quantity, while the central route is defined by argument quality and review quality. The interaction among these dimensions reveals how various cues in online environments work together to shape persuasion outcomes.

Source credibility, as an important peripheral cue, not only shapes consumers' immediate impressions but also plays a decisive role in influencing their willingness to adopt information and integrate it into travel planning. Research by Chong et al. (2018)

established that credible sources enhance the perceived value of information, while Claggett et al. (2024) found that source credibility directly affects the quality of information processed by consumers. This indicates that trusted sources may significantly elevate the quality of arguments presented to potential tourists.

Moreover, an authoritative and credible source can strengthen the trustworthiness and usefulness of reviews. Evidence from Tien et al. (2018) and Tran et al. (2022) demonstrates that message sources perceived as trustworthy are more likely to elicit reviews perceived as credible and valuable, further reinforcing the centrality of source credibility in the online persuasion process.

Visual appeal, another key component of the peripheral route, also significantly contributes to persuasion. Photographic content, in particular, has been shown to positively affect review ratings and the strength of informational cues (Kim et al., 2021). Wang and McCarthy (2020) reported that photos and videos can enrich the information provided, while Park et al. (2019) argued that compelling visuals play an important role in clarifying and amplifying marketing messages. Consequently, visual appeal not only enhances the quality of arguments but can also increase the credibility and perceived helpfulness of reviews.

In addition, the presentation of appealing visuals can encourage user interaction and feedback. According to Iglesias-Sánchez et al. (2020), sharing travel photos can prompt responses, such as comments and discussions, thereby enriching the destination image. Pan et al. (2023) further confirmed that the visual quality of photographs significantly shapes how useful online reviews are perceived to be by potential travellers.

The quantity of available reviews likewise functions as an influential peripheral cue. Thomas et al. (2019) demonstrated that the number of reviews enhances the overall usefulness of user-generated content, while Hong and Pittman (2020) showed that review quantity is a critical factor in establishing review credibility and shaping consumers' evaluation of arguments. Furthermore, Gavilan et al. (2018) and Hu and Yang (2020) provided evidence that a high number of reviews, when accompanied by strong ratings, increases consumer trust and the likelihood of bookings, thus illustrating the impact of review quantity on both argument quality and review quality. In light of this evidence, the following detailed hypotheses are formulated to map the nuanced relationships between dimensions of the peripheral and central routes:

- H6a Source credibility will influence argument quality.
- H6b Source credibility will influence review quality.
- H6c Visual appeal will influence argument quality.
- H6d Visual appeal will influence review quality.
- H6e Review quantity will influence argument quality.
- H6f Review quantity will influence review quality.

2.4 Destination image and visit intention

Destination image has long been recognised as a critical antecedent in shaping tourists' attitudes and behaviours toward a destination (Chen, 2018; Chaulagain et al., 2019; Abbasi et al., 2023; Ha and Nguyen, 2023; Zhou and He, 2024). At its core, destination image reflects an attitude that encompasses an individual's mental representation of their

accumulated knowledge, emotional responses, and overall impressions concerning a particular place (Kim and Kwon, 2018; Yang et al., 2020; Qian et al., 2023; Su and Li, 2024). This multidimensional construct plays a pivotal role in influencing travel-related decision making and behavioural outcomes (Phung et al., 2023; Zhao, 2024). Recent studies consistently confirm that a strong and positive destination image not only guides tourists' actual travel behaviour and choices (Liu et al., 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Hasan and Ray, 2025) but also affects their intention to recommend the destination to others (Kim et al., 2017a; Kim and Pennington-Gray, 2025). Notably, Abbasi et al. (2023) and Zhou and He (2024) have highlighted the amplifying effect of social media image value and local government promotion on both eWOM and city travel intention, respectively.

The conceptualisation of destination image typically involves two main elements, namely the cognitive and affective dimensions (Kim and Kwon, 2018; De La Hoz-Correa and Muñoz-Leiva, 2018; Cheng et al., 2024). The cognitive image pertains to the knowledge and beliefs an individual holds about a destination's attributes. In contrast, the affective image refers to the feelings and emotional responses elicited by the destination. Empirical research has consistently shown that the cognitive dimension positively influences tourists' behavioural intention to visit a destination (Choi et al., 2017; De La Hoz-Correa and Muñoz-Leiva, 2018; Woosnam et al., 2020; Su and Li, 2024). Drawing on this evidence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7 Cognitive destination image will have a positive effect on visit intention for marine tourism.

Recent literature further supports the centrality of destination image in tourists' decision-making processes (Kim et al., 2019; Kock et al., 2016; Qian et al., 2023), demonstrating that destination image positively affects tourists' willingness to visit, recommend, and pay for a destination. The affective image, which captures emotional attachment and feelings toward a destination, has also been found to shape behavioural intentions positively (Choi et al., 2017; Woosnam et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 2024). Kim and Pennington-Gray (2025) have also shown that communication strategies targeting affective factors are effective for stimulating pro-environmental behaviour and travel intentions. Based on this line of research, the following hypothesis is advanced:

H8 Affective destination image will have a positive effect on visit intention for marine tourism.

The relationship between cognitive and affective components of destination image is further clarified in the literature. Collins and Millar (2019), as well as Beerli-Palacio and Martín-Santana (2019), have established that cognitive image exerts a significant influence on affective image. This pattern has been confirmed in several recent studies, including González-Rodríguez et al. (2022), Yung et al. (2020), Gangadhari et al. (2025) and Laradi et al. (2024), all of which affirm that the cognitive element acts as a precursor to the development of affective responses. Zhao (2024) employs multimodal sentiment analysis to demonstrate how cognitive and affective images can be dynamically intertwined in user-generated content, while Hasan and Ray (2025) reveal that risk perceptions in the post-pandemic era can modulate this relationship in coastal tourism contexts. The most recent findings by Laradi et al. (2024) reinforce the notion that a

strong cognitive destination image is associated with a more favourable affective destination image. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H9 Cognitive destination image has a positive effect on affective destination image.

This interrelationship is further reinforced by the understanding that the cognitive component not only precedes but also enhances the affective aspect of destination image (Leković et al., 2020; Ha and Nguyen, 2023). Studies by Yung et al. (2020), Gangadhari et al. (2025) and Pramanik (2023) consistently show the primacy of cognitive evaluations in shaping affective responses and even influencing tourist loyalty. Moreover, Woosnam et al. (2020) provided evidence that the impact of cognitive image on visit intention becomes even more pronounced when the affective dimension mediates this relationship. This leads to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

H10 Cognitive destination image has a positive effect on visit intention for marine tourism through affective destination image.

3 Method

3.1 Research design

This study employs a quantitative research design grounded in the positivist paradigm. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire comprising closed-ended questions. For the constructs of argument quality, review quality, source credibility, visual appeal, review quantity, cognitive destination image, and visit intention, a six-point Likert scale was employed, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). To measure the affective destination image, a semantic differential scale with six response options was used to reflect the affective dimension of respondents' perceptions.

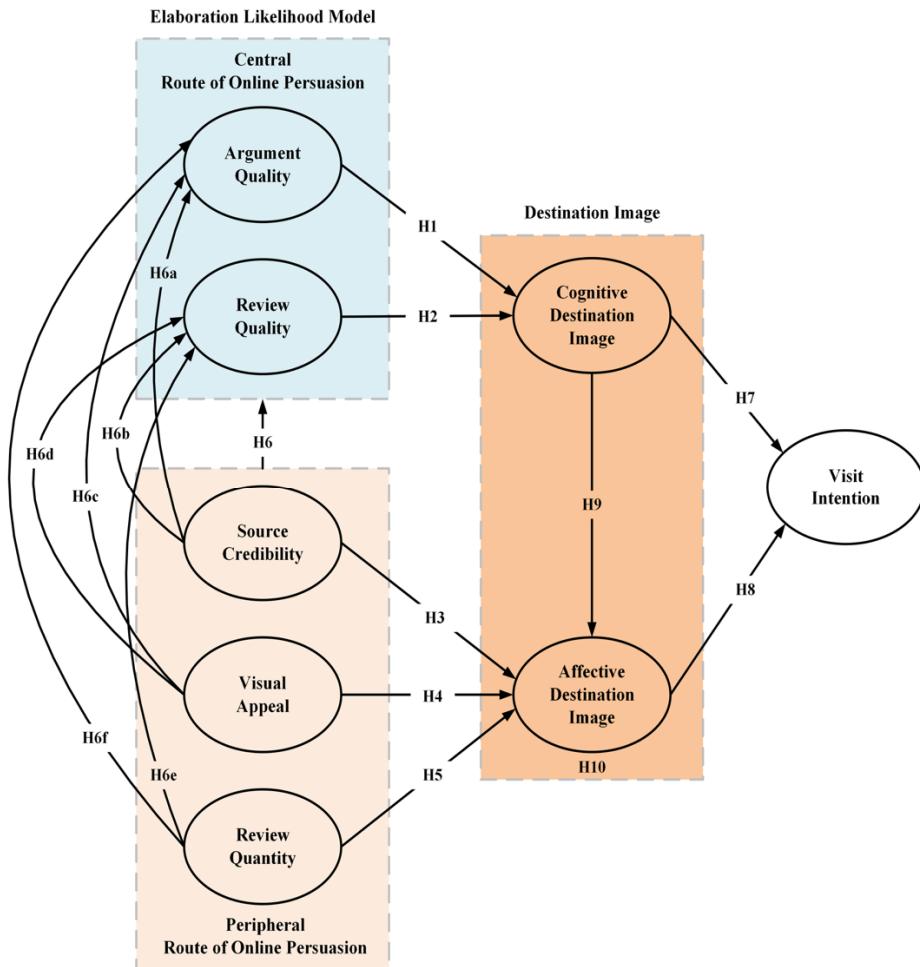
To analyse the relationships among variables and to test the proposed hypotheses, this study employs structural equation modelling (SEM). The partial least squares (PLS) approach was chosen due to its suitability for complex models, its efficiency in handling measurement and structural models simultaneously, and its robust performance with relatively small to medium sample sizes. PLS-SEM is recognised as an effective tool for examining theoretical models and empirically validating conceptual frameworks in business and social research (Putra, 2022; Fahmi et al., 2024a; Kunaifi et al., 2022). As a variance-based SEM technique, PLS enables comparison between a priori theoretical knowledge and empirical data, making it an ideal choice for studies that seek to bridge conceptual and empirical insights (Fahmi et al., 2024b; Putra, 2022). The complete conceptual framework of this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

3.2 Measurement item

The constructs in this study are operationalised using measurement items adapted from previous research, ensuring contextual relevance to marine tourism. Argument quality captures the persuasive strength of informational content, drawing indicators from Bhattacherjee and Sanford (2006), Atwood and Morosan (2015), Cyr et al. (2018), Hur et al. (2017) and John and De'Villiers (2020). Review quality reflects the depth,

relevance, timeliness, clarity, and credibility of consumer-generated evaluations, as established by Cheung et al. (2012), Chong et al. (2018), Leung and Ma (2020), Lee and Kim (2020) and Arora and Mail (2018). Source credibility is measured through indicators of trustworthiness, knowledgeability, honesty, and sincerity, drawing from Bhattacherjee and Sanford (2006), Tseng and Wang (2015), Hur et al. (2017), Atwood and Morosan (2015), Dedeoglu (2019) and John and De'Villiers (2020).

Figure 1 Conceptual model (see online version for colours)



Source: Authors (2025)

Visual appeal refers to the emotional and aesthetic resonance of photos and videos, as indicated by Cyr et al. (2018). Review quantity is assessed by the number of reviews, likes, and shares, reflecting popularity and reputation (Arora and Mail, 2018; Cheong et al., 2020; Chang et al., 2015). Cognitive destination image is measured by six dimensions, including natural beauty, accessibility, economic value, cleanliness, facility quality, and activity variety (Woosnam et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2017; Lam et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2017a; Ragh et al., 2020; De La Hoz-Correa and Muñoz-Leiva, 2018;

Lai et al., 2017). Affective destination image captures tourists' emotional responses using indicators adapted from Kim et al. (2017a), Choi et al. (2017), De La Hoz-Correa and Muñoz-Leiva (2018), Lam et al. (2020) and Ahmad et al. (2020). Visit Intention is measured by three items reflecting future travel plans, following Jiménez-Barreto and Campo-Martínez (2018) and John and De'Villiers (2020). For a detailed description of all measurement items and operational definitions, please refer to Table 2.

3.3 Unit analysis

This study employed non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling, targeting respondents aged 21 to 40 years who belong to the millennial generation (Generation Y). The inclusion criteria required participants to have visited the official online media platforms of the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy within the last six months and to have accessed both content and online reviews related to marine tourism destinations. Data were collected via an online survey, yielding 319 responses, of which 300 were valid questionnaires. A preliminary pilot study involving 30 respondents was conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument.

The final sample comprises Indonesian millennials who actively engage with marine tourism content and reviews on digital channels managed by the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, such as Instagram, Facebook, X, TikTok, and official websites. Survey distribution occurred from July to September 2024.

Table 1 Respondent demographic characteristics

Category	Proportion (%)	Category	Proportion (%)
Gender		Occupation	
Male	45.3	Student	10
Female	54.7	Private employee	39.7
Total	100	Civil servant	12.7
Age		Professional	3.7
21–25 years	15.3	Entrepreneur	7.7
26–30 years	36.7	Housewife	14
31–35 years	27.3	Lecturer	4.7
36–40 years	20.7	Others	7.7
Total	100	Total	100
Highest education level		Frequency of domestic travel in the past year	
High school/vocational	21.3	Once	28.7
Bachelor's degree (S1)	62.7	2–4 times	51.3
Master's degree (S2)	15	More than 4 times	20
Doctoral degree (S3)	1	Daily internet usage duration	
Total	100	≤1 hour	0.7
		2–4 hours	26
		5–6 hours	70
		More than 6 hours	3.3
		Total	100

The demographic characteristics of respondents, summarised in Table 1, reveal a diverse profile. The majority were female (54.7%), with most participants falling within the 26–30 age range (36.7%) and holding at least a bachelor's degree (62.7%). Most respondents worked as private employees (39.7%) and travelled domestically two to four times a year (51.3%), indicating that frequent travellers constituted the dominant segment. This aligns with the findings of Pavesi et al. (2021), who noted that frequent travellers are typically more critical in evaluating destination information, while infrequent travellers are generally more receptive and less analytical.

In terms of digital habits, most respondents (70%) reported daily internet usage of five to six hours, reflecting a high level of dependence on digital media for information, communication, and entertainment. Only a small proportion (0.7%) used the internet for less than one hour per day, highlighting the pervasiveness of digitalisation in daily life.

Regarding destination preferences, Bali's beaches attracted the most attention (40%), underscoring Bali's enduring popularity for its natural beauty, cultural richness, and variety of tourist activities. Raja Ampat and Labuan Bajo each accounted for 20% of the content consumed, reflecting growing interest among travellers seeking adventure and pristine environments. Lake Toba also emerged as a notable destination, accounting for 11.5% of total content viewed, underscoring the diversity and appeal of Indonesia's marine tourism offerings.

Instagram was identified as the most frequently accessed platform for marine tourism content, with @wonderfulindonesia (39.7%) and @pesona.indonesia (32.3%) serving as the primary sources of information. The interactive nature and real-time engagement capabilities of social media are key drivers of this preference (Hays et al., 2013).

4 Results

4.1 Measurement model evaluation

The evaluation of the measurement model is a crucial preliminary step in partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), ensuring that the constructs in the model are measured reliably and validly before further analysis (Hair et al., 2022; Fahmi et al., 2024b; Putra, 2022). This study adopts the widely accepted two-step approach recommended in the SEM-PLS literature: first, an assessment of convergent validity and construct reliability, followed by an evaluation of discriminant validity.

Convergent validity was assessed using three primary criteria: indicator loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability. In line with best practices (Hair et al., 2022; Fahmi et al., 2024a; Putra, 2022), indicators with outer loadings below 0.70 were scrutinised. During the initial iteration, the item CDI5 was removed from the cognitive destination image construct because its loading failed to meet the threshold, ensuring that only indicators with substantial contributions to their respective constructs were retained. The final model was reached after two iterations of the PLS algorithm.

Table 2 Convergent validity and construct reliability

Constructs	Items	Code	\bar{x}	s	γ_1	γ_2	λ	α	ρ_a	ρ_c	AVE
Argument quality	Provides informative information	AQ1	4.970	0.981	-1.111	1.529	0.899	0.924	0.926	0.943	0.768
	Provides useful information	AQ2	4.993	0.913	-1.070	1.614	0.891				
	Presents valuable arguments	AQ3	4.737	1.027	-0.680	0.108	0.891				
	Delivers persuasive arguments	AQ4	4.737	1.059	-0.830	0.635	0.828				
	Presents complete arguments	AQ5	4.720	1.024	-0.653	0.011	0.873				
Review quality	Delivered promptly	RQ1	4.590	0.984	-0.601	0.565	0.813	0.902	0.904	0.927	0.718
	Adequate and meets needs	RQ2	4.693	1.029	-0.611	0.063	0.859				
	Provides relevant information	RQ3	4.700	0.978	-0.593	0.325	0.868				
	Clear	RQ4	4.783	0.950	-0.562	0.259	0.855				
	Credible	RQ5	4.973	0.973	-1.083	1.466	0.842				
Source credibility	Credible source	SC1	4.640	0.995	-0.636	0.655	0.869	0.928	0.945	0.775	
	Good knowledge of marine tourism	SC2	4.593	1.024	-0.694	0.656	0.868				
	Provides honest information	SC3	4.647	0.974	-0.592	0.201	0.904				
	Provides information sincerely	SC4	4.677	0.986	-0.720	0.766	0.870				
	Trustworthy	SC5	4.730	0.933	-0.551	0.240	0.892				
Visual appeal	Photos and videos match content	VA1	5.027	0.909	-1.044	1.481	0.782	0.895	0.896	0.923	0.705
	Photos and videos are satisfying	VA2	4.963	0.896	-0.767	0.505	0.860				
	Photos and videos display the excitement of the destination	VA3	5.130	0.829	-0.813	0.579	0.870				
	Photos and videos are attractive	VA4	5.100	0.862	-0.916	0.838	0.859				
	Photos and videos are emotionally appealing	VA5	4.993	0.898	-0.930	1.328	0.825				

Note: \bar{x} – mean; s – standard deviation; γ_1 – skewness; γ_2 – excess kurtosis; λ = outer loadings; α = Cronbach's alpha; ρ_a – composite reliability (rho_a); ρ_c = composite reliability (rho_c); AVE – average variance extracted.

Table 2 Convergent validity and construct reliability (continued)

Constructs	Items	Code	\bar{x}	s	γ_1	γ_2	λ	α	ρ_a	ρ_c	AVE
Review quantity	A high number of reviews indicates popularity	REVQ1	4.960	0.905	-0.654	0.090	0.846	0.823	0.828	0.894	0.738
	A high number of reviews indicates quality	REVQ2	4.937	0.898	-0.681	0.204	0.868				
	A high number of likes and shares indicates a trustworthy reputation	REVQ3	4.913	0.923	-0.823	0.885	0.862				
	Beautiful beaches	CDI1	5.357	0.850	-1.377	1.648	0.777	0.773	0.780	0.848	0.530
Cognitive destination image	Interesting activities	CDI2	5.327	0.779	-0.984	0.391	0.762				
	Economic value	CDI3	5.273	0.836	-1.033	0.617	0.824				
	Clean and hygienic environment	CDI4	4.620	1.008	-0.282	-0.524	0.649				
	Quality hotels	CDI5	4.910	0.822	-0.302	-0.554	Deleted				
Affective destination image	Accessible infrastructure and convenient transportation	CDI6	4.547	1.135	-0.474	-0.397	0.604				
	Stimulating / Sleepy	ADI1	5.047	0.811	-0.613	0.147	0.862	0.831	0.837	0.888	0.666
	Exciting / Boring	ADI2	5.073	0.873	-0.688	-0.231	0.862				
	Relaxing / Stressful	ADI3	5.093	0.908	-0.937	0.575	0.805				
Visit intention	Safe / Risky	ADI4	4.623	0.977	-0.220	-0.492	0.726				
	Intend to visit a marine tourism destination within the next year	VII	5.050	1.017	-1.114	1.015	0.834	0.839	0.842	0.903	0.757
	Marine tourism destinations in Indonesia are the first choice for future travel	VI2	4.930	1.045	-0.934	0.593	0.877				
	Preference to visit a marine tourism destination in Indonesia when planning travel	VI3	5.000	1.007	-1.084	1.578	0.898				

Note: \bar{x} = mean; s = standard deviation; γ_1 = skewness; γ_2 = excess kurtosis; λ = outer loadings; α = Cronbach's alpha; ρ_a = composite reliability (rho_a); ρ_c = composite reliability (rho_c); AVE = average variance extracted.

Table 3 Discriminant validity

Constructs	Items	Cross loadings						Fornell-Larcker criterion
		AD1	AD2	AD3	AD4	CD1	CD2	
Affective destination image	AD11	0.862	0.503	0.499	0.519	0.479	0.440	0.525
	AD12	0.862	0.453	0.461	0.477	0.468	0.421	0.458
	AD13	0.805	0.450	0.490	0.484	0.391	0.466	0.391
	AD14	0.776	0.513	0.440	0.540	0.406	0.469	0.393
Argument quality	AQ1	0.531	0.899	0.529	0.710	0.503	0.629	0.478
	AQ2	0.502	0.891	0.498	0.723	0.541	0.615	0.448
	AQ3	0.546	0.891	0.516	0.689	0.519	0.644	0.449
	AQ4	0.494	0.828	0.481	0.643	0.475	0.555	0.440
Cognitive destination image	AQ5	0.501	0.873	0.529	0.753	0.539	0.655	0.405
	CD11	0.422	0.438	0.777	0.367	0.464	0.318	0.412
	CD12	0.423	0.419	0.762	0.378	0.501	0.350	0.441
	CD13	0.472	0.415	0.824	0.424	0.520	0.403	0.457
Review quality	CD14	0.406	0.444	0.649	0.499	0.455	0.483	0.301
	CD16	0.376	0.407	0.604	0.474	0.355	0.452	0.265
	REVQ1	0.413	0.475	0.496	0.505	0.846	0.446	0.469
	REVQ2	0.428	0.493	0.557	0.605	0.868	0.562	0.408
	REVQ3	0.531	0.544	0.579	0.596	0.862	0.547	0.429

Table 3 Discriminant validity (continued)

Constructs	Items	Cross loadings						Fornell-Larcker criterion					
		ADL	\bar{AO}	CDI	FEV \bar{O}	RA	SC	ADL	\bar{AO}	CDI	FEV \bar{O}	RA	SC
Review quantity	RQ1	0.460	0.681	0.450	0.813	0.485	0.686	0.456	0.500	0.536	0.589	0.635	0.665
	RQ2	0.543	0.689	0.476	0.859	0.543	0.644	0.490	0.518				
	RQ3	0.512	0.659	0.466	0.868	0.606	0.676	0.433	0.515				
	RQ4	0.553	0.696	0.565	0.855	0.582	0.719	0.412	0.619				
	RQ5	0.544	0.680	0.517	0.842	0.597	0.658	0.472	0.598				
Source credibility	SC1	0.484	0.643	0.437	0.721	0.471	0.869	0.351	0.503				
	SC2	0.451	0.664	0.468	0.682	0.514	0.868	0.400	0.505				
	SC3	0.475	0.617	0.525	0.741	0.563	0.904	0.387	0.590				
	SC4	0.498	0.579	0.520	0.684	0.552	0.870	0.430	0.601				
	SC5	0.508	0.614	0.466	0.688	0.572	0.892	0.441	0.599				
Visit intention	VI1	0.484	0.557	0.516	0.558	0.507	0.623	0.493	0.782				
	VI2	0.521	0.584	0.601	0.591	0.659	0.549	0.543	0.860				
	VI3	0.525	0.491	0.583	0.514	0.673	0.497	0.432	0.870				
	VI4	0.504	0.488	0.556	0.508	0.675	0.462	0.456	0.859				
	VI5	0.469	0.535	0.562	0.555	0.605	0.525	0.431	0.825				
Visual appeal	VI1	0.485	0.388	0.408	0.399	0.362	0.320	0.834	0.436				
	VI2	0.462	0.452	0.446	0.495	0.439	0.422	0.877	0.454				
	VI3	0.476	0.479	0.504	0.495	0.511	0.443	0.898	0.574				

All constructs demonstrated composite reliability, as reflected in Cronbach's alpha, rho_a, and rho_c, with values exceeding 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency and measurement stability (Fahmi et al., 2024b; Kunaifi et al., 2022). Furthermore, all AVE values exceeded the recommended minimum of 0.50, confirming that each construct accounts for at least half of the variance in its indicators. This outcome provides evidence that the retained indicators effectively represent their respective constructs and meet the stringent standards for convergent validity in PLS-SEM. Descriptive statistics for each indicator, including means, standard deviations, skewness, and excess kurtosis, were also examined to verify the suitability of the data for SEM-PLS analysis. These checks are important for identifying any problematic items and ensuring the robustness of the measurement model (Hair et al., 2022).

Discriminant validity is an essential aspect of construct validity, as it establishes whether the constructs in the model are truly distinct from one another. This study employed multiple approaches to assess discriminant validity, following methodological recommendations (Hair et al., 2019; Fahmi et al., 2024a; Putra, 2022).

The first method used was the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which requires that the square root of the AVE for each construct be greater than its highest correlation with any other construct. The results, as summarised in Table 3, demonstrate that for each construct, the diagonal values (the square roots of AVE) are consistently higher than the off-diagonal elements, which are the correlations with other constructs. This indicates that each construct is empirically distinct from the others in the model.

The second method involved assessing cross-loadings. Each indicator should have a higher loading on its intended construct than on any other construct in the model. As shown in Table 3, all items exhibit the highest loadings on their respective constructs, with no significant cross-loadings. This further supports the establishment of discriminant validity among the constructs.

In addition to these two main approaches, the cross-loadings structure and the Fornell-Larcker criterion were cross-checked to ensure there was no overlap among constructs. This multi-method assessment is consistent with rigorous SEM-PLS standards and reinforces the validity of the measurement model (Hair et al., 2022; Fahmi et al., 2024a; Putra, 2022).

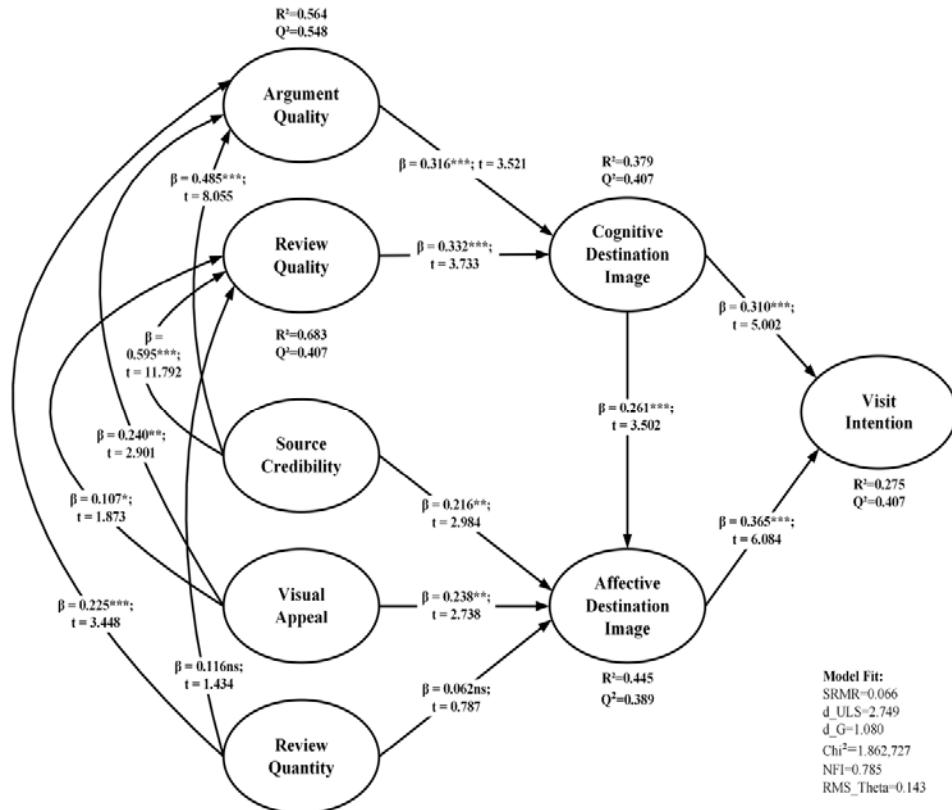
In summary, the findings of the measurement model evaluation demonstrate that all constructs fulfil the requirements for convergent validity, construct reliability, and discriminant validity, as established by leading methodological authorities (Hair et al., 2019; Fahmi et al., 2024a; Kunaifi et al., 2022; Putra, 2022). This provides a strong foundation for the subsequent evaluation of the structural model and hypothesis testing, ensuring that the measurement instruments employed are psychometrically robust and theoretically sound.

4.2 Structural model evaluation

The structural model evaluation in partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) is crucial for assessing relationships among constructs and determining the explanatory power and predictive relevance of the proposed model. In accordance with established guidelines (Hair et al., 2022; Fahmi et al., 2024b; Putra, 2022), this assessment incorporates several key metrics, including the coefficient of determination (R^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), and global model fit indices such as SRMR, d_ULS, d_G, chi-square, NFI, and RMS_Theta.

The coefficient of determination, R^2 , represents the proportion of variance in the endogenous constructs explained by the exogenous variables within the model. High R^2 values indicate that the model has substantial explanatory power, while lower values suggest more modest explanatory capabilities. The results of this study reveal the following R^2 values: argument quality ($R^2 = 0.564$), review quality ($R^2 = 0.683$), cognitive destination image ($R^2 = 0.379$), affective destination image ($R^2 = 0.445$) and visit intention ($R^2 = 0.275$). These results indicate that the exogenous constructs explain 56.4% of the variance in argument quality and 68.3% of the variance in review quality, which are considered substantial according to the thresholds proposed in the literature (Hair et al., 2022). The R^2 values for cognitive destination image (37.9%), affective destination image (44.5%), and visit intention (27.5%) fall into the moderate category, suggesting that the model provides a meaningful yet not exhaustive explanation of the determinants of these constructs. This aligns with previous tourism research employing PLS-SEM, where R^2 values for intention-related constructs often range from moderate to substantial (Fahmi et al., 2024b; Putra, 2022).

Figure 2 Bootstrapping results



Predictive relevance, assessed via the blindfolding procedure, provides insight into the model's ability to predict the observed data. Q^2 values above zero indicate that the model has predictive relevance for the respective endogenous constructs (Hair et al., 2019; Fahmi et al., 2024b). The Q^2 values in this study are as follows: argument quality

($Q^2 = 0.548$), review quality ($Q^2 = 0.407$), cognitive destination image ($Q^2 = 0.407$), affective destination image ($Q^2 = 0.389$) and visit intention ($Q^2 = 0.407$). All Q^2 values are well above zero, confirming that the model demonstrates strong predictive power for each endogenous variable. In particular, the Q^2 value for argument quality (0.548) reflects very high predictive relevance, which is further corroborated by the high R^2 value for this construct. Q^2 values for other constructs also indicate that the proposed model reliably predicts not only perceptions of destination image but also tourists' intention to visit, thereby fulfilling the criterion of predictive relevance recommended for PLS-SEM studies (Fahmi et al., 2024b; Putra, 2022).

Evaluation of the model fit involves multiple indices to ensure the adequacy of the proposed structural model. The following values were obtained for this study: SRMR (0.066), d_ULS (2.749), d_G (1.080), chi-square (1,862.727), NFI (0.785) and RMS_Theta (0.143). The SRMR value of 0.066 is below the recommended threshold of 0.08, indicating good model fit (Hair et al., 2022). The NFI value of 0.785 approaches the cut-off value for acceptable fit, further supporting the overall adequacy of the model. Both d_ULS and d_G are within acceptable ranges as per PLS-SEM conventions. The RMS_Theta value of 0.143 suggests that the degree of correlation residuals is sufficiently low, supporting the appropriateness of the model structure. The chi-square statistic, while useful for comparative purposes, should be interpreted with caution in PLS-SEM due to its sensitivity to sample size and model complexity.

Collectively, these indices provide robust evidence that the estimated structural model fits the empirical data well and is suitable for hypothesis testing and further interpretation. The combined results of R^2 and Q^2 values, along with global fit measures, demonstrate that the structural model developed in this study meets the rigorous standards set by methodological authorities for PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2022; Fahmi et al., 2024a; Kunaifi et al., 2022; Putra, 2022). The model exhibits substantial explanatory power for argument quality and review quality, and moderate yet meaningful explanatory power for destination image and visit intention. Furthermore, the strong predictive relevance of the model, as evidenced by consistently positive Q^2 values, underlines its capacity to predict key behavioural and perceptual outcomes in the context of marine tourism. These findings validate the conceptual model and lay a solid foundation for hypothesis testing, enabling an in-depth examination of the mechanisms through which central and peripheral cues influence destination image and visit intention in digital marketing settings. The robustness of the structural model evaluation further supports the utility of the ELM in explaining the dual routes of persuasion in the tourism domain.

4.3 Hypothesis testing

The hypothesis-testing section presents a comprehensive evaluation of the proposed relationships within the research model, using the structural equation modelling approach to verify each hypothesis empirically. This analysis focuses on both the direct and indirect effects between constructs, as detailed in Table 4, and discusses the statistical significance and practical implications of each test. Through the use of standardised path coefficients (β), t-statistics, p-values, and confidence intervals, the results provide evidence regarding the hypothesised influences among the central route, peripheral route, destination image, and visit intention in the context of marine tourism digital marketing.

Table 4 Hypothesis testing

Path		β	t	p	CI5.0%	CI95.0%
H1	Argument quality → Cognitive destination image	0.316	3.521	0.000	0.170	0.466
H2	Review quality → Cognitive destination image	0.332	3.733	0.000	0.184	0.476
H3	Source credibility → Affective destination image	0.216	2.984	0.001	0.090	0.331
H4	Visual appeal → Affective destination image	0.238	2.738	0.003	0.096	0.382
H5	Review quantity → Affective destination image	0.062	0.787	0.216	-0.066	0.196
H6a	Source credibility → Argument quality	0.485	8.055	0.000	0.382	0.581
H6b	Source credibility → Review quality	0.595	11.792	0.000	0.512	0.678
H6c	Visual appeal → Argument quality	0.240	2.901	0.002	0.108	0.383
H6d	Visual appeal → Review quality	0.107	1.873	0.031	0.016	0.203
H6e	Review quantity → Argument quality	0.116	1.434	0.076	-0.017	0.249
H6f	Review quantity → Review quality	0.225	3.448	0.000	0.117	0.330
H7	Cognitive destination image → Visit intention	0.310	5.002	0.000	0.207	0.411
H8	Affective destination image → Visit intention	0.365	6.084	0.000	0.268	0.468
H9	Cognitive destination image → Affective destination image	0.261	3.502	0.000	0.135	0.379
H10	Cognitive destination image → Affective destination image → Visit intention	0.095	2.967	0.002	0.046	0.151

Note: β – standardised path coefficient (beta); t – t-statistic; p – p-value (significance level); CI5.0% – lower bound of the confidence interval; CI95.0% – upper bound of the confidence interval.

The analysis reveals that several core hypotheses are supported by statistically significant results, indicating that the relationships specified in the conceptual framework are valid and meaningful. Supportively, H1 is accepted, as argument quality has a significant positive effect on cognitive destination image ($\beta = 0.316$, $t = 3.521$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that persuasive and high-quality arguments enhance tourists' cognitive perceptions of a marine tourism destination. H2 is also accepted, showing that review quality exerts an even stronger positive influence on cognitive destination image ($\beta = 0.332$, $t = 3.733$, $p < 0.001$). This demonstrates the critical role of credible, relevant, and comprehensive online reviews in shaping potential tourists' mental representations of a destination.

In the peripheral route, H3 is accepted, indicating that source credibility significantly influences affective destination image ($\beta = 0.216$, $t = 2.984$, $p = 0.001$). This highlights that trustworthy, knowledgeable sources elicit more favourable emotional responses toward the destination. H4 is also accepted, as visual appeal positively affects affective destination image ($\beta = 0.238$, $t = 2.738$, $p = 0.003$), underscoring the persuasive power of compelling photos and videos in creating strong emotional impressions. However, H5 is not supported, since review quantity does not have a significant effect on affective destination image ($\beta = 0.062$, $t = 0.787$, $p = 0.216$), indicating that, for this sample, the sheer volume of reviews, likes, and shares is less influential in eliciting emotional reactions.

The mediating and moderating mechanisms hypothesised in the study are also examined through the relationships specified in H6a–H6f. The results show that H6a and H6b are supported, with source credibility having significant positive effects on both argument quality ($\beta = 0.485$, $t = 8.055$, $p < 0.001$) and review quality ($\beta = 0.595$, $t = 11.792$, $p < 0.001$). Visual appeal also significantly impacts argument quality (H6c: $\beta = 0.240$, $t = 2.901$, $p = 0.002$) and review quality (H6d: $\beta = 0.107$, $t = 1.873$, $p = 0.031$). H6f is supported, as review quantity positively influences review quality ($\beta = 0.225$, $t = 3.448$, $p < 0.001$). However, H6e is not supported, as review quantity does not have a significant effect on argument quality ($\beta = 0.116$, $t = 1.434$, $p = 0.076$).

The relationships between destination image and visit intention are also clearly demonstrated. H7 is accepted, as cognitive destination image significantly enhances visit intention ($\beta = 0.310$, $t = 5.002$, $p < 0.001$). H8 is supported, with affective destination image exerting a significant positive effect on visit intention ($\beta = 0.365$, $t = 6.084$, $p < 0.001$). The analysis further reveals a sequential process, as cognitive destination image positively influences affective destination image (H9: $\beta = 0.261$, $t = 3.502$, $p < 0.001$) and this affective image mediates the effect of cognitive image on visit intention (H10: $\beta = 0.095$, $t = 2.967$, $p = 0.002$), supporting the presence of a significant mediation mechanism.

Taken together, these findings corroborate the central role of argument quality and shaping in building cognitive perceptions of marine tourism destinations, as well as the importance of source credibility and visual appeal in fostering positive affective responses. The accepted hypotheses demonstrate the robustness of the ELM in explaining how dual routes of persuasion operate within the digital marketing context of tourism. At the same time, the non-significant results for review quantity suggest that review volume is insufficient to shape perceptions or intentions without corresponding improvements in quality. This comprehensive hypothesis testing thus lays a strong empirical foundation for the theoretical and practical insights discussed in the subsequent sections of the study.

5 Discussion

The ELM, introduced by Peprovides Cacioppo, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how individuals process information. This study has extended the application of ELM by exploring how digital marketing communication from the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy influences information processing related to marine tourism destinations. The central and peripheral routes described by ELM demonstrate how each contributes to the construction of both cognitive and affective emotions and images, and to their subsequent impact on tourists' intention to visit marine destinations.

A notable contribution of this research lies in its findings regarding the central route of ELM. While argument quality has long been identified as a primary indicator in the central route (Atwood and Morosan, 2015; Wang, 2015; Chang et al., 2015; Hur et al., 2017; Han et al., 2018; Hardy et al., 2018; Cyr et al., 2018; Jammouli et al., 2023; Cao et al., 2024), the present study reveals that, in the context of online marketing, review quality ($\beta = 0.332$) emerges as the most significant central route cue, with argument quality ($\beta = 0.316$) following closely. This result suggests that tourists' reviews or comments play a central role in shaping destination image through the central route. This observation is consistent with the assertions of Shin and Xiang (2023) and Chang and Jung (2024), who highlight the growing importance of online reviews in travel decision making.

A further contribution is the demonstration that central route cues exert a stronger influence on destination image formation compared to peripheral route cues. This result contrasts with the findings of John and De'Villiers (2020), who reported the primacy of peripheral route cues. The dominance of central cues in this study may be explained by the profile of the respondents, most of whom are frequent leisure travellers (with 51.3% travelling two to four times annually and 20% travelling more than four times annually). As noted by Pavesi et al. (2021), frequent travellers tend to be more critical in evaluating destination information, which may enhance their responsiveness to argument quality. These findings also reinforce the established role of argument quality in promoting critical decision making (Han et al., 2018), building trust in customer service (Jammouli et al., 2023), influencing travel intentions (Cao et al., 2024), and even affecting purchase intention in other domains such as halal cosmetics (Anubha, 2023).

This study also brings new insight into the interplay between peripheral and central routes in the persuasive process. It is evident that peripheral route cues, such as source credibility and visual appeal, serve as stimuli that encourage deeper cognitive processing along the central route, specifically enhancing the effect of argument quality. Similarly, source credibility, visual appeal, and review quantity were shown to stimulate the central route process by reinforcing review quality.

Another important finding relates to the role of review quantity as a peripheral cue. Contrary to some previous research (Blal and Sturman, 2014; Kim et al., 2017a; Xiao and Li, 2019), which found review quantity to be a significant factor in sales and perceptions of destination image, the present study did not observe a significant impact of review quantity on affective destination image for frequent travellers. Instead, this result aligns with Thomas et al. (2019), who suggest that the quantity of reviews is of limited importance. This indicates that the number of reviews, likes, and shares becomes less salient for individuals who travel often and are already well-informed about destinations.

Finally, the findings further substantiate the distinction between affective and cognitive dimensions of destination image. Affective destination image ($\beta = 0.365$) was found to be more influential than cognitive destination image ($\beta = 0.310$) in determining the intention to visit marine tourism destinations. This underscores the significance of emotional or affective attributes in shaping destination image and visit intention, especially within the marine tourism context. The definition of an affective image as an emotional response to a destination, capturing intangible attributes related to feelings, is supported by the work of Leković et al. (2020) and De La Hoz-Correa and Muñoz-Leiva (2018), and is reflected in this research's findings.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Unique contributions of the paper

This study provides several clear contributions to the literature on digital marketing communication and destination image in marine tourism. By applying the ELM, the research offers an integrated empirical analysis of both central and peripheral routes of persuasion and their effects on cognitive and affective destination images, as well as visit intention. The results show that review quality, representing the central route, has the strongest influence on the cognitive image of marine tourism destinations. This influence is even greater than that of argument quality, indicating the central role of credible, relevant, and detailed online reviews in forming tourists' perceptions. The findings also confirm that visual appeal has a greater effect than source credibility in building affective destination image. Review quantity, however, does not significantly affect either cognitive or affective image. The sequential mediation effect is also evident, where affective image strengthens the impact of cognitive image on visit intention. By systematically exploring these mechanisms, the study clarifies how both company-generated and user-generated content interact, and extends previous applications of the ELM framework in the context of Indonesia's marine tourism (Guo and Pesonen, 2022; John and De'Villiers, 2020; Hardy et al., 2018).

6.2 Limitations of the research

While the study provides robust empirical support, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, individual psychological factors such as involvement level, personality traits, or previous experience are not included in the model. These factors influence how people process and respond to persuasive online messages. The sample is restricted to Indonesian millennials who are active digital users, so the generalisability of results to other demographics or cultural contexts remains limited. The research also does not explore possible moderating effects such as review valence, cultural differences, or travel motivation. All data are self-reported and collected at a single point in time, which introduces the possibility of response bias and limits the ability to draw causal conclusions.

6.3 Future research directions

Future research is encouraged to address these limitations. Studies could include measures of individual characteristics such as personality, involvement, or cultural values to capture differences in how persuasive cues are processed. Longitudinal or experimental designs allow for analysis of changes in attitudes and behaviours over time, offering stronger causal insights. Researchers are also advised to investigate the moderating role of review valence and the interplay of review quantity and quality, as highlighted by Liu et al. (2024), Bigne et al. (2019) and Hong and Pittman (2020). The process of destination image co-creation, in which tourists actively generate and share content, offers another promising research direction (Glyptou, 2020). Comparative work across different age groups, countries, or types of tourism destinations can test the generalisability of these findings. Finally, integrating psychographic variables and qualitative data would enrich the understanding of how digital persuasion shapes destination image and visit intention in the evolving landscape of digital tourism.

Declarations

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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