

How does the attractiveness of social media content effect travel intention? The case of Georgia*

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Abstract

Social media significantly shapes how people search, share, and ultimately choose a travel destination. Recently, there has been a thorough exploration into the factors shaping travelers' desires and behaviors, especially within the realm of tourism, aiming to gain deeper insights into how individuals interact with specific destinations according to their preferences. Understanding the connection between travel motivations and intentions is crucial. However, this relationship can be complex due to the presence of destination-related factors. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the significant impact of social media content on shaping individuals' intentional behavior toward selecting a travel destination. Specifically, this paper aims to explore the factors that directly influence the intention to travel to Georgia. To do so, the study employs the Visual-Congruence-induced Social Influence (VCSI) theory, which examines how influencers use visual congruence to represent common interests within a specific niche. This visual congruence fosters strong connections between influencers and their followers, ultimately affecting travel intentions. The research uses the questionnaire technique as the primary data collection method, with 346 responses gathered through convenience sampling. Data were obtained via online and face-to-face interviews conducted with foreign tourists who had never visited Georgia before. To analyze the data, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was chosen due to its capability to handle complex models effectively. The findings indicate that social media content has a positive influence on travelers' behaviors and their decision-making process when choosing a destination. This paper offers valuable insights for the development of Georgia's tourism sector, showing how social media content can significantly affect travelers' decision-making. The study makes a unique contribution by revealing the positive impact of social media on travelers' intentional behavior, which can guide tourism industry professionals and destination marketing managers in creating more effective social media strategies to attract tourists, particularly to Georgia.

Keywords

Keywords: Social media marketing, Destination marketing, Social media content attractiveness, Attitude towards destination, Curiosity

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Artificial Intelligence Usage Statement

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence or AI-assisted tools were used at any stage of the preparation of this manuscript, including idea development, data collection, data analysis, text writing, language editing, or reference management. All academic, ethical, and legal responsibility for the content, analyses, and conclusions of the article rests entirely with the authors.



1. Introduction

The impact of social media communication extends across various industries, with tourism being one of the most significantly influenced sectors (Ibrahim et al., 2020). As evidenced by numerous studies (Raji et al., 2020; Saima & Khan, 2020), the widespread adoption and influence of social media has made it a popular subject of research in academia, as well as exploring the correlation between social media content and the intention to visit specific destinations (Eser & Arslan, 2022). Tourism plays a vital role in fostering economic growth and sustainable progress in various regions of Georgia. This research is an important contribution because tourism development is a priority for Georgia. Following COVID-19, events focusing on social media marketing have gained prominence. Despite its importance, research on the influence of social media marketing on travelers' intentions to visit destinations remains limited especially in the context of Georgia.

This study seeks to scientifically examine the influence of social media content on human behavior, specifically identifying the factors that shape individuals' travel intentions toward destination. The primary objective is to assess the extent to which social media content contributes to the formation of travel decisions, with a focused analysis on its impact within the context of Georgia. Specifically, it investigates the role of social media content in shaping individuals' intentions to visit a destination, focusing on the Georgian experience. By exploring the research question, "How does social media content affect destination travel intention?" this study aims to identify the impact of various factors on tourists' intentions to travel to a destination. Researchers introduced the Visual-Congruence-induced Social Influence (VCSI) theory proposed by Argyris et al. (2020), which is a novel concept that is yet to be explored in this context. This study enhances existing literature by exploring the motivational factors that impact intention to visit destinations, supported by quantitative research findings.

Social media not only serves as a channel for communication but also as a space where people can freely express their feelings, ideas, thoughts, and attitudes, particularly in the context of activities or products such as tourist destinations (Seibel, 2021). Moreover, destination awareness is a key factor in tourists' travel decisions (Ngan & Van Chinh, 2020). Given that influencer marketing is a fundamental part of modern marketing strategies, the Georgian National Tourism Administration has increasingly adopted marketing initiatives involving influencers. Moreover, these influencers impart experiential insights to their followers, contributing to the promotion of Georgia and cultivating an enhanced understanding and appreciation among their audiences (GNTA, 2023a, 2023b).

Tourist attitudes significantly influence their decisions to travel to specific destinations (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Ragheb & Tate, 1993). Curiosity also plays a pivotal role as an initial determinant in the decision-making process of potential tourists (Petousi et al., 2023). Moreover, findings from studies by Pop et al. (2022) and Seçilmiş et al. (2022) suggested that travel influencers play a significant role among the many factors influencing individuals' travel intentions.

Researchers aim to use a given theoretical framework to better understand how social media content influences individuals' intention to visit destinations. Despite the proactive efforts of the National Tourism Administration of Georgia (GNTA) in organizing marketing events and leveraging social networks and renowned travel influencers to promote the country, no research has been carried out on topics such as the impact of social media content on the behavior of tourists' intention to travel to Georgia. In conclusion, this study provides a novel perspective on the influence of social media on destination visit intentions in the travel and tourism industry. The findings underscore the research's unique value in enriching knowledge in the travel and tourism literature, offering fresh insights and perspectives to the field.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Visual Congruence induced Social Influence Theory

This study relies on the theory of Visual-Congruence-Induced Social Influence (VCSI) as the foundation for understanding how social media content influences followers' decision-making. This theory investigates the Similarity-Attraction Model in Social Influence literature (Argyris et al., 2020). By employing VCSI, researchers can illustrate how influencers use visual congruence to portray shared interests in a particular area, thereby establishing a robust connection with their followers. Argyris et al. (2020) introduced the concept of visual congruence, defined as a match between the themes of visual elements in influencers' posts and the interests of their followers. Researchers have proposed that visual congruence between influencers, and their followers indicates a high likelihood of influencers sharing similar interests and opinions with their followers in specific areas. In conclusion, researchers used a new conceptual framework called "Visual-Congruence-induced Social Influence (VCSI)" to demonstrate how visual congruence, representing shared interests, strengthens connections between social media platforms and their followers, thereby enhancing followers' brand engagement and increasing their intent to travel to a destination. In this study, visual congruence was centered on destination marketing, a shared mutual interest among followers, and travel-related social media content (Figure 1).

Research Model and Hypothesis Development

According to Buhalis and Law (2008), travel organizations can enhance brand awareness by utilizing social media platforms. Moro and Rita (2018) highlighted the growing significance of social media content, which can profoundly impact consumer awareness of destinations. Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier (2009) noted that social media content shared by tourists has a huge influence on destination awareness. Phillips et al. (2013) favorable word-of-mouth cultivates a positive perception, enhances awareness among unfamiliar tourists, and attracts new visitors. Moreover, research by Al-Gasawneh and Al-Adamat (2020) underscored the importance of social media content in shaping perceptions among potential travelers, directly influencing their decision-making process. As highlighted by Kujur and Singh (2020), social media content holds immense power in capturing attention, shaping attitudes, and prompting behaviors. Tang et al. (2012) found that tourists who are highly engaged with social media tend to have a more favorable attitude toward the destination. Furthermore, numerous researchers, including Bui et al. (2022) have demonstrated a positive relationship between social media use and attitudes toward destinations. Additionally, Tham et al. (2020) noted that social media plays a significant role in influencing tourist preferences and decision-making processes. Furthermore, Vincent (2018) investigated how curiosity influences tourists' intention to visit a destination. According to Dedeoglu (2019), shared content has huge potential to influence potential consumers during their decision-making process by enhancing their interest and curiosity about the destination. Tham et al. (2020) research indicated that people are drawn to social media because it stimulates their curiosity. Based on this information, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

H1: The attractiveness of social media content about traveling in Georgia positively and significantly affects destination awareness.

H2: The attractiveness of social media content about traveling in Georgia positively and significantly affects attitude toward Georgia

H3: The attractiveness of social media content about traveling in Georgia positively and significantly affects curiosity about Georgia

Milman and Pizam (1995) stated that awareness is a critical first step in attracting visitors to a destination. Destination awareness not only impacts destination selection, but also shapes tourists' behavior (Chung & Shin, 2004). Kashif et al. (2015), highlighted that destination awareness significantly influences tourists' decision to choose a destination. Murphy et al. (2007) cited the importance of enhancing destination awareness by creating emotional connections with the destination. Positioning and promoting a destination are key to capturing the attention of potential tourists and motivating them to visit (Ma et al., 2018). As emphasized by Ngan and Van Chinh (2020), heightened destination awareness encourages a positive perception of the destination, thereby influencing tourists' intentions to travel. Yuan and Jang (2008) underscored that destination awareness significantly influences tourists' decisions in the realm of tourism. Vila et al. (2021) explored the factors motivating tourists to visit tourist sites, revealing that destination awareness positively impacts tourist visits. Consequently, the following hypothesis was formulated for testing:

H4: Destination awareness positively and significantly affects the intention to travel in Georgia

As noted by Zarrad and Debabi (2015), numerous studies show a significant correlation between individual tourists' attitudes and their intentions to travel. Zhang et al. (2016) emphasized that the more positive the attitude toward the destination, the higher the likelihood that consumers will choose to travel there. Jalilvand and Samiei (2012) emphasized that tourist attitude serves as a reliable predictor of their decision to travel to a specific destination. Reitsamer et al. (2016) confirmed the significant influence of attitude on determining whether a destination is included in a person's considerations. Carlson et al. (2015) suggested that consumers who hold favorable attitudes towards a destination are more inclined to visit it in the future. Building on this, Carlson et al. (2015) suggested that consumers who hold favorable attitudes towards a destination are more inclined to visit it in the future. Hence, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

H5: The attitude toward Georgia positively and significantly affects the intention to travel in Georgia

As highlighted by Chen and Hsu (2021), in psychology, curiosity is widely recognized as a powerful driving force. Petousi et al. (2023) highlighted curiosity as a significant factor driving individual interest in travel among the many motivations. Vincent (2018) asserted that curiosity is a primary driver of interest in traveling to a destination. Lau et al. (2020) indicated that curiosity is a fundamental aspect of motivation that drives behavior. Ciasullo et al. (2019) highlighted a recent study that specifically examined how curiosity serves as a motivating factor in tourism, identifying it as the initial driving source for potential tourists' decision-making process. Further studies, such as Hill et al. (2016), demonstrated that curiosity impacts behavioral intentions. Additionally, Uslu et al. (2020) suggested that curiosity, as a driving force, can significantly enhance the intention to travel to destinations, thereby benefiting their socio-cultural and economic aspects. Hence, the following hypothesis was formulated:

H6: Curiosity positively and significantly affects the intention to travel in Georgia

The Mediating Role of Destination Awareness, Attitude Toward Destination and Curiosity

Ryu et al. (2013) highlighted that destination awareness significantly shapes visitors' perceptions and intentions to travel to a particular destination. Moreover, Chu (2018) emphasized that information gleaned from social media platforms can directly impact an individual's desire to visit the destination. As articulated by Tobias-Mamina et al. (2020), consumers' destination visit intent relies on on their understanding of the destination, and their potential to make assessments. Building on this, Pop et al. (2022) suggested that social media content can cultivate the desire to visit a destination, consequently, elevating destination awareness. Furthermore, Jalilvand and Samiei (2012) highlighted that social media content plays a pivotal role in shaping tourists' attitudes towards destinations and their intentions to travel there. Castaneda et al. (2009) highlighted the significance of tourists' attitudes toward social media sites in explaining their attitudes toward destination and intentional behavior. Additionally, Jalilvand et al. (2012) emphasized the importance of attitudes in shaping travel behavior and underscored the power of tourist attitudes in determining their decisions to travel to specific destinations. Besides, the findings of Smith (2014) indicated that viewing social media content about destinations from others makes people curious, which is a significant motivation for using social networks. Urista et al. (2009) posited that curiosity plays a significant role in the success of social media sites. Fang (2014) highlighted that curiosity driven by social media content increases intentions to engage in related experiences, such as traveling. Based on these assumptions, the next hypotheses are postulated:

H7: Destination awareness mediates, the affects of the attractiveness of social media content about traveling in Georgia in intention to travel in Georgia

H8: Attitude toward Georgia mediates the affects of the attractiveness of social media content about traveling in Georgia in intention to travel in Georgia

H9: Curiosity mediates the affects of the attractiveness of social media content in intention to travel in Georgia

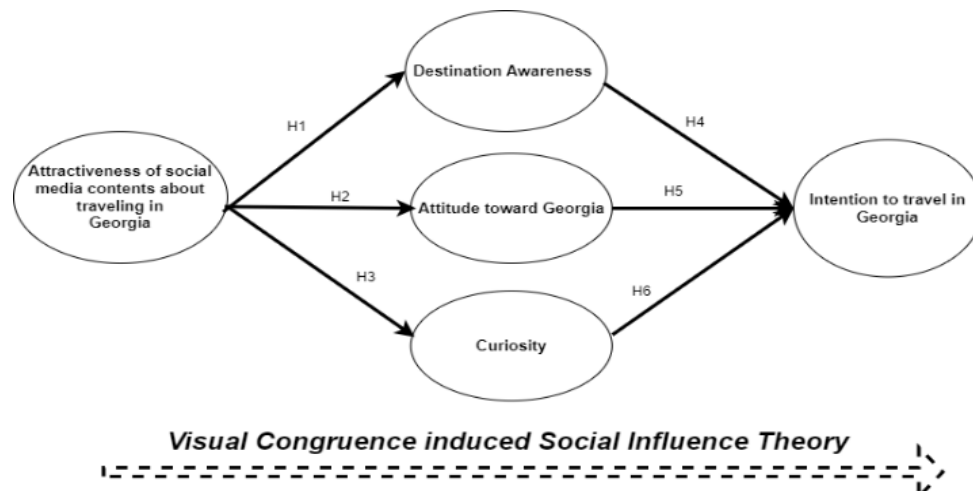


Figure 1. Research Model

3. Methods

Questionnaire design and data collection

This research explores the influence of social media on travel intentions and identifies the factors that affect this behavior. It uses multi-item scales, with proven validity from existing literature, which were adapted for the purpose of this study. The survey was conducted in both English and Turkish. To ensure accuracy, the authors translated all items into Turkish using Brislin's (1970) back-translation method for non-English speaking participants.

Later, the authors and a language expert translated answers from Turkish back to English. Finally, all authors and a language expert edited the final version of the questionnaire by analyzing the possible inconsistencies in the translation. Questionnaire technique was used to collect data. All items were adapted from previous studies in the literature and were designed using a five-point Likert scale. Since the scales used were taken from international literature, linguistic, cultural, and conceptual validity research was conducted. A pilot study was conducted to identify and eliminate potential errors involving 50 participants. The results indicated that the survey items were clear and easily understood. Consequently, the

survey form was adopted without any modifications. The questionnaire used in the research consisted of two parts. The first section included scales related to the attractiveness of social media content, destination awareness, intention to travel to destination, attitude toward the destination and curiosity. The second part included statements regarding the demographic characteristics of the participants.

In this study, the following indicators were used to measure the role of social media in destination visit intention. The scale created based on these indicators was discussed based on expert opinion. The scales used in this study are listed in Table 1.

This research focuses on Georgia due to its resources and tourism development potential. Tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy in the world, and it can also be in Georgia. According to statistical research by the Georgian national tourism administration, the number of international travelers in 2023 amounted to 7,072,220 (GNTA, 2024). Apart from the fact that Georgia has great potential for the development of tourism, it is also vital for the country's economy since it is an important source of income. As mentioned in the updated overview of the Georgian National Tourism Administration, Georgia has received a record of 4.1 billion dollars in revenue (GNTA, 2024).

Table 1. Research Indicator Scales

Attractiveness of social media contents	(Narangajavana et al., 2017)
When I decide to travel to a Georgia, information on Social media, raise my intention and make me more confident to travel there.	
I often consult Social media contents to choose an attractive destination in Georgia.	
I often check online travel reviews on social media to know if Georgia makes good impressions on others.	
To be sure, I make the right decision about traveling in Georgia, I often check other people's reviews on social media	
I often read other tourists' online travel reviews to know if Georgia makes good impressions on others.	
Destination Awareness	(Matikiti-Manyevere & Kruger, 2019)
After viewing social media content about Georgia, I could tell that Georgia is better among other destinations	
After viewing social media content about Georgia, it comes to my mind as a top choice when I am thinking of traveling	
After viewing social media content about Georgia, I can now quickly recognize which destination it is among the other places	
After viewing social media content about Georgia, I am aware of those destinations and all the facilities which this destination is suggesting	
After viewing content about traveling in Georgia which was suggested in social media, I can quickly recall some features of this destination	
Attitude toward the destination	(Narangajavana et al., 2017)
I think Contents of the Georgia on social media match the actual situation	
After seeing contents of Georgia on social media, I feel I know what to expect from this destination before I travel there	
I believe that recommendations in social media about Georgia are fact-based	
I believe that what social media contents sharing about traveling in Georgia is reliable.	
Curiosity	(Litman & Spielberg, 2003)
I would like to discuss about other people's travel experiences in Georgia	
I am Interested in seeing contents about traveling in Georgia on social media	
0After viewing social media content about traveling in Georgia, it raised my interest about culture of Georgia	
After viewing social media content about traveling in Georgia, it raised my curiosity to travel there	
Intention to travel to destination	(Sánchez-Fernández & Jiménez-Castillo, 2021)
In the future, I am likely to travel to Georgia which was endorsed and recommended in the social media content that I follow.	
I would travel to Georgia based on the advice I am given by the Social media content that I follow.	
I would consider all the facilities in Georgia which is recommended by the social media content that I follow	
I would feel comfortable acting upon the Georgia information given in the Social media content that I follow	

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Data for this study were collected using web-based questionnaires and convenience sampling. A method frequently utilized in studies (Hung & Petrick, 2012; Kılıç & Gürlek, 2023). It is effective for both large and small samples that do not require a normal distribution and supports structural equation modeling. Participants were recruited both in Türkiye's

tourist areas, engaging directly with tourists and locals, and through social media platforms globally. The target audience comprised regular social media users who had never visited Georgia but intended to travel and followed Georgia-related content on social media. Participants were informed about the research and asked for their willingness to participate, ensuring they met eligibility criteria. The study was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Eskişehir Osmangazi University. Number of ethics committee approval report: No. 2023-16. Additionally, no guidance was provided to the participants during data collection. As the data collection technique used in the research, the measurement of the expressions in the survey forms was used to measure the desired structure, and the participants in the survey were expected to answer the questions honestly.

Data were collected via an online survey from December 1, 2023, to March 1, 2024, to statistically test the hypotheses. To ensure the questionnaire was error-free and limited to the target audience, two screening questions were included at the beginning. Risk questions were “Have you ever traveled in Georgia before?” and “Do you follow any social media accounts (Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, etc.) that post about Georgia?”. If participants provided unfavorable answers to these screening questions, the survey was terminated. Finally, the survey was selected directly for the target segment. Of the 550 online questionnaires distributed, 380 were returned. An additional 50 participants were interviewed face-to-face, resulting in a total of 430 participants. Of 430 responses received, 386 remained after the first risk question. After the second risk question, 346 participants remained as the target audience. After excluding incorrect and incomplete responses, 346 questionnaires were retained (Appendix 1).

Analysis of Data

Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to test the hypotheses due to its suitability for complex model analysis. PLS-SEM is widely recognized as effective for testing complex models (Rasoolimanesh & Ali, 2018; Usakli & Kucukergin, 2018). Furthermore, the PLS-SEM method is widely recognized as a frequently used approach in tourism research (Rather et al., 2022). Moreover, PLS-SEM is considered a more suitable tool for exploratory studies (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017a). To analyze the participants’ demographics, a frequency analysis was initially conducted using SPSS 23. PLS-SEM, a covariance-based SEM technique, was employed as it is well-suited for exploratory research and theory development, aligning with the objectives of this study. Additionally, PLS-SEM is suitable for analyzing ordinal data, such as Likert scales, and excels in both explanation and prediction (Hair, Jr., Matthews, Matthews, & Sarstedt, 2017b). This analysis enhances the precision of identifying interaction effects (Sarstedt et al., 2020). Hence, PLS-SEM is an appropriate analytical tool for this research.

In this study, PLS-SEM algorithm was applied to examine the relationships between the constructs in the model. One key decision in PLS-SEM analysis is determining whether the model is formative or reflective. For the current analysis, a reflective model was used, where indicators are assumed to reflect the underlying latent variable. This decision is based on the assumption that the indicators are measurements of the construct and are interrelated. The reflective nature of the model aligns with the theoretical framework and the nature of the constructs being analyzed (Hanafiah, 2020).

4. Findings

The measurement model

First, the external model was tested to assess whether internal consistency, reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were achieved (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017a). The results of the outer model are presented in Table 2. 2 items were removed from Attractiveness of Social Media Contents: (“When I decide to travel to a Georgia, information on Social media, raise my intention and make me more confident to travel there”) and (“I often read other tourists’ online travel reviews to know if Georgia makes good impressions on others”). 2 items were removed from Destination Awareness: (“After viewing social media content about Georgia, I could tell that Georgia is better among other destinations”) (“After viewing content about traveling in Georgia, which was suggested in social media, I can quickly recall some features of this destination”). From Intention to travel to Georgia 1 item was removed: (“In the future, I am likely to travel to Georgia which was endorsed and recommended in the social media content that I follow”). From Attitude toward the Georgia 1 item was removed: (“I believe that what social media contents sharing about traveling in Georgia is reliable”). From Curiosity 1 item was removed: (“After viewing social media content about traveling in Georgia, it raised my curiosity to travel there”). These items were removed because their factor loadings fell below 0.50, which substantially reduced other values.

Table 2. Outer Model

Dimensions and Items	Loadings	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Attractiveness of Social Media contents		0.908	0.909	0.845
I often consult Social media contents to choose an attractive destination in Georgia.	0.910			
I often check online travel reviews on social media to know if Georgia makes good impressions on others.	0.905			
To be sure, I make the right decision about traveling in Georgia, I often check other people's reviews on social media.	0.941			
Destination Awareness		0.950	0.951	0.909
After viewing social media content about Georgia, it comes to my mind as a top choice when I am thinking of traveling	0.960			
After viewing social media content about Georgia, I can now quickly recognize, which destination it is among the other places.	0.947			
After viewing social media content about Georgia, I am aware of those destinations and all the facilities, which this destination is suggesting	0.953			
Intention to travel to Georgia		0.971	0.971	0.945
I would travel to Georgia based on the advice I am given by the Social media content that I follow.	0.972			
I would consider all the facilities in Georgia recommended by the social media content that I follow	0.965			
I would feel comfortable acting on the Georgia information in the Social media content that I follow	0.978			
Attitude toward the Georgia		0.954	0.956	0.916
I think the content of the Georgia on social media match the actual situation.	0.937			
After seeing the content of Georgia on social media, I feel I know what to expect from this destination before I travel there.	0.972			
I believe that recommendations in social media about Georgia are fact-based	0.962			
Curiosity		0.923	0.924	0.867
I would like to discuss about other people's travel experiences in Georgia	0.943			
I am Interested in seeing contents about traveling in Georgia on social media	0.931			
After viewing social media content about traveling in Georgia, it raised my interest about the culture of Georgia	0.919			

Source: Authors' own elaboration

External loadings were assessed to evaluate indicator reliability, with all loadings exceeding 0.70. This confirms that indicator reliability has been achieved. The Cronbach's alpha values exceeded 0.70, indicating internal reliability. Additionally, the composite reliability (CR) values are above 0.90, indicating that construct reliability is achieved (Hair, Jr., Matthews, Matthews, & Sarstedt, 2017b) (Table 2). It has been observed that the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values are well above 0.50, that indicates convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Finally, discriminant validity was examined (Table 3). The square root of the AVE values should be higher than the correlation coefficients between the constructs, confirming Discriminant Validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Additionally, it was found that the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios were lower than 0.90. According to this result, discriminant validity is also established (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 3. Discriminant Validity

HTMT criteria	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) Attractiveness of _Social Media_ Contents about Georgia					
(2) Attitude toward Georgia	0.736				
(3) Curiosity	0.801	0.667			
(4) Destination Awareness	0.874	0.637	0.899		
(5) Intention to travel in Georgia	0.778	0.688	0.848	0.834	
Fornell-Larcker criteria					
(1) Attractiveness of _Social Media_ Contents about Georgia	0.919				
(2) Attitude toward Georgia	0.686	0.957			
(3) Curiosity	0.735	0.628	0.896		
(4) Destination Awareness	0.815	0.608	0.842	0.938	
(5) Intention to travel in Georgia	0.735	0.665	0.807	0.807	0.969

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Inner Model – Hypothesis Testing

After confirming the external model, the evaluation of the internal model followed the steps suggested by previous studies (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017a). To assess the fit between the data and the model, the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) value was utilized (Henseler et al., 2016).

First, the variance inflation factor (VIF) was checked, and as no value exceeded 5, multicollinearity was not an issue (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2017a). R² values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 are considered significant, moderate, and weak

respectively (Hair & Sarstedt, 2011). As shown in Table 4, all R² values exceeded 0.50, indicating moderate to strong explanatory power. The blindfolding technique was applied to determine Q² values. Since all Q² values exceed 0, the model was determined to have predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2019). The *f*² statistic was used to assess the impact of the independent variable on R². *f*² values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 are classified independently as small, medium, and large (Cohen, 1992). All *f*² values are within acceptable limits (Table 4).

Table 4. Inner Model Results

Hypothesis	Direct Effect	Path Coefficients	t	Result	VIF	<i>f</i> ²
H1	ASC – DA	0.869***	36.966	Supported	1	3.096
H2	ASC – ATG	0.736***	21.342	Supported	1	1.179
H3	ASC – CU	0.769***	23.664	Supported	1	1.451
H4	DA -ITG	0.502***	5.185	Supported	4.351	0.230
H5	ATG – ITG	0.255***	4.682	Supported	1.696	0.151
H6	CU – ITG	0.195**	2.137	Supported	4.130	0.037

ATG R²= 0.541, Q²= 0.468; DA R²= 0.756, Q²= 0.653; CU R²= 0.592, Q²= 0.496; ITG R²= 0.747, Q²= 0.537

Note. ASC = Attractiveness of social media contents DA = Destination awareness; ITG = Intention to travel to Georgia; ATG = Attitude toward Georgia; CU = Curiosity; ****p*<.01(*t*>2,58), ***p*<.05(*t*>1,96), **p*<.10(*t*>1,65)

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The findings indicate that the attractiveness of social media contents about traveling in Georgia positively and significantly affects destination awareness ($\beta = 0.869, p < 0.01$). The attractiveness of social media content about traveling in Georgia positively and significantly affects attitude toward Georgia ($\beta = 0.736, p < 0.01$). The attractiveness of social media content about traveling in Georgia positively and significantly affects curiosity about Georgia ($\beta = 0.769, p < 0.01$). Destination awareness positively and significantly affects the intention to travel in Georgia ($\beta = 0.502, p < 0.01$). The attitude toward Georgia positively and significantly affects intention to travel in Georgia ($\beta = 0.255, p < 0.01$). Curiosity about Georgia positively and significantly affects the intention to travel in Georgia ($\beta = 0.195, p < 0.05$) (Figure 2).

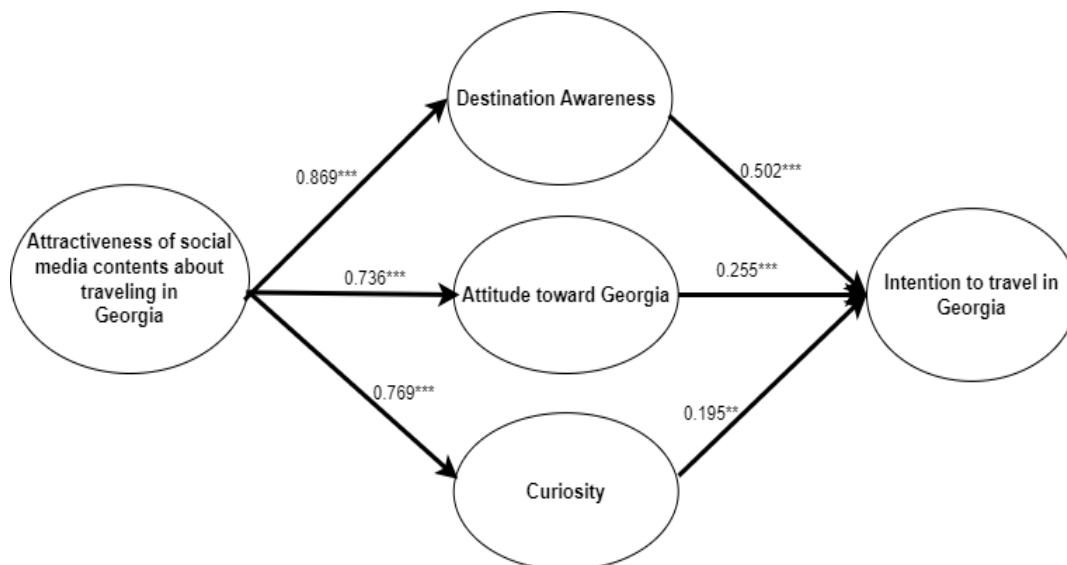


Figure 2. Hypothesis Testing Results

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Bootstrapping was used for mediation effects analysis (Zhao et al., 2010). Within this framework, 5,000 sub-samples were created at a 95% confidence interval. Firstly, the significance of indirect effects was examined, followed by the significance of the direct effects of independent variables on the dependent variable. Upper and lower confidence intervals in all four cases do not contain zero, it is confirming the mediation hypotheses (Table 5). In this context, the indirect effect of the attractiveness of social media contents on the intention to travel to Georgia through destination awareness is significant ($\beta = 0.380, p < 0.000, CI [0.270, 0.493]$). Similarly, the indirect effect of the attractiveness of social media contents on the intention to travel to Georgia through attitude toward Georgia is significant ($\beta = 0.179, p < 0.000, CI [0.110, 0.252]$). Additionally, the indirect effect of the attractiveness of social media contents on the intention to travel to Georgia through curiosity is significant ($\beta = 0.151, p < 0.001, CI [0.065, 0.240]$).

Mediating effects

Bootstrapping was used for mediation effects analysis (Zhao et al., 2010). Within this framework, 5,000 sub-samples were created at a 95% confidence interval. Firstly, the significance of indirect effects was examined, followed by the significance of the direct effects of independent variables on the dependent variable. Upper and lower confidence intervals in all four cases do not contain zero, it is confirming the mediation hypotheses (Table 5).

Table 5. Results of Mediation Analysis

Hypothesis	Indirect Effect	BC confidence interval			Type of mediation	
		t-value	p-value	Low		High
H10a: ASC-> DA-> ITG		6.677	0.000	0.270	0.493	Indirect-only (Full mediation)
	0.380					
H10b ASC -> ATG-> ITG		5.014	0.000	0.110	0.252	Indirect-only (Full mediation)
	0.179					
H10c ASC -> CU-> ITG		3.402	0.001	0.065	0.240	Indirect-only (Full mediation)
	0.151					
	Total indirect effect					
ASC-> ITG	0.709	24.682	0.000	0.650	0.762	

Note. ASC = Attractiveness of social media contents DA = Destination awareness; ITG = Intention to travel to Georgia; ATG = Attitude toward Georgia; CU = Curiosity; Source: Authors' own elaboration

In this context, the indirect effect of the attractiveness of social media contents on the intention to travel to Georgia through destination awareness is significant ($\beta = 0.380$, $p < 0.000$, CI [0.270, 0.493]). Similarly, the indirect effect of the attractiveness of social media contents on the intention to travel to Georgia through attitude toward Georgia is significant ($\beta = 0.179$, $p < 0.000$, CI [0.110, 0.252]). Additionally, the indirect effect of the attractiveness of social media contents on the intention to travel to Georgia through curiosity is significant ($\beta = 0.151$, $p < 0.001$, CI [0.065, 0.240]).

5. Discussion

The objective of this research was to investigate how social media content influences individuals' desire to visit a destination, specifically focusing on factors shaping travelers' decisions in the context of Georgia. Despite frequent marketing campaigns in Georgia, comprehensive research or statistical documentation is lacking. The research findings validate all hypotheses and the conceptual model derived from the literature review. The empirical study confirms that all proposed hypotheses are supported by the data. The outcomes of hypothesis testing indicate a clear positive and significant relationship between the appeal of social media content related to travel in Georgia and the awareness of the destination (H1), the attitude towards Georgia (H2), and the curiosity about Georgia (H3). These findings align with earlier research (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020; Tham et al., 2020; Bui et al., 2022). The results for hypothesis (H4) confirm the significance of destination awareness in influencing travel intentions to Georgia (Ngan & Van Chinh, 2020). Similarly, the results for hypothesis (H5) were consistent with prior research on the correlation between attitude toward a destination and the intention to travel there (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Moreover, the outcomes of hypothesis testing (H6) align with earlier studies indicating curiosity as a driving factor in increasing the intention to travel to a destination (Vincent, 2018; Uslu et al., 2020). The research also examined the mediating roles, revealing that all mediators—destination awareness (H9a), attitude toward the destination (H9b), and curiosity (H9c)—were supported. These results echo previous studies (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012; Tassiello & Tillotson, 2020) indicating that these factors mediate the attractiveness of social media content about travel intention to Georgia. Based on the outcomes derived from the research model grounded in the Visual-Congruence-induced Social Influence theory, it is evident that social media content impacts positively and significantly on factors directly influencing consumers' intention to travel to a destination.

According to the accepted research model in this study, intentional behavior is influenced by destination awareness, attitude toward the destination (Georgia), and curiosity. Consequently, the research model, grounded in the VSCI theory, suggests that these motivational factors play a crucial role in shaping intentional behavior, particularly in the context of the intention to travel to the destination (Georgia). In conclusion, the findings suggest that tourists' attitudes and desire to visit a destination are influenced by various factors, including content attractiveness, destination awareness, and curiosity. Essentially, it can be inferred that social media marketing, particularly through visual congruence, significantly influences tourists' behavior and travel intentions. Considering all the information presented, the research findings offer a fresh and valuable perspective to tourism literature. Unlike previous studies (Cheung et al., 2020; Chatterjee & Kar, 2020; Pop et al., 2022; Dollarhide, 2024), this research highlights the critical role of social media marketing as an antecedent. This research enriches the existing literature by exploring the motivational factors influencing tourists' decision-making processes regarding travel to specific destinations through social media content.

Theoretical Implications

The study extends the literature on visual congruence by applying it to social media in tourism, a previously unexplored area. The study is based on the visual-congruence-induced social influence theory (Argyris et al., 2020). This framework enhances understanding of the relationship between social media marketing and travel intentions. This research is distinct as no prior studies in tourism literature have utilized VSCI theory to explain tourist behavioral intentions. The study reveals the impact of tourism-related content on social media on human curiosity, attitude, and intentional behavior. Additionally, empirical findings suggest that such content effectively stimulates travel intentions, enriching the literature on social media's role in tourism (Abad & Borbon, 2021; Jaya & Prianthara, 2020).

Finally, this study provides valuable insights into social media consumption in the tourism sector. Examining social media's influence on travel significantly contributes to the existing literature. The study fundamentally enhances researchers' understanding of social media marketing by revealing its impact on travelers' behavioral intentions.

Practical Implications

This study provides valuable insights for travel professionals and destination marketers, emphasizing practical implications. The findings suggest that destination marketers should examine how factors like destination awareness, curiosity, attitude, and visual congruence affect marketing effectiveness. First, successful marketing campaigns require identifying the target audience and incorporating motivational factors highlighted in this research. Tailoring destination information involves identifying countries with low awareness of Georgia and strategically sharing targeted content. This approach seeks to engage audiences unfamiliar with Georgia, as current social media content primarily targets those already familiar with the country. Second, companies should carefully select influencers for destination awareness campaigns and focus on activities that spark tourist curiosity. Influencers can leverage established scales to effectively promote specific destinations. Thirdly, Information sources play a critical role in building awareness of destinations (Molina et al., 2010). Unfortunately, obtaining destination information in Georgia is challenging, especially for tourists. Additionally, digitizing tourist information services can enhance travel experiences, improve perceptions, foster trip planning, and increase visit intentions. According to the research findings, establishing a positive attitude towards a destination is crucial. Therefore, destination marketers and influencers should prioritize shaping this perception when promoting a location. Today, tourists seek unique, personalized experiences during their travel. Exploring local culture and cuisine, once a major attraction, has become less compelling due to its global availability. However, countries can captivate tourists by offering unique experiences, such as making churchkhela or participating in traditional winemaking in Georgia. When influencers share these experiences on social media, they can significantly boost other travelers' curiosity and intent to participate in such activities. Influencers shouldn't share only beautiful places in Georgia, but also which experiences tourists can involve while traveling. Furthermore, the developed scale provides a tool to assess the effectiveness of companies' social media strategies, highlighting strengths and weaknesses. Managers can gain valuable insight from the scores assigned to each factor.

Limitations and Recommendations for future research

The present study has some limitations. First, the findings cannot be generalized because the sample is restricted to individuals who follow social media content about traveling in Georgia. If the research were conducted in another country, the results might differ. Second, the results are influenced by geographical location and the cultural traits of the participants. As this study was conducted in Türkiye, most participants were Turkish, particularly students. If the study were conducted in another country with participants of different nationalities and backgrounds, it could yield varied results. Third, in this study, the VSCI theory was employed to better understand the impact of social media content on travelers' intentional behavior. Additionally, the survey focused on specific factors, suggesting that including others might produce different results. Future research could replicate this study in other cultural contexts or focus on a single nationality. Exploring additional factors influencing travel intentions could refine the destination personality scale validated in this study and enable comparisons with these findings.

6. Conclusion

The objective of this study is to investigate how social media content influences individuals' desire to visit a particular destination, specifically focusing on the factors that shape travelers' decisions within the context of Georgia. This study provides valuable insights and a new perspective on understanding travelers' intentional actions through social media marketing. It aims to investigate whether social media content influences individuals' intentions to travel to destinations and analyze how various factors shape this behavior using the VSCI theory framework.

In the research model, destination awareness, attitude toward the destination, and curiosity serve as mediators between the appeal of social media content and intention to travel to the destination. This model was examined using a quantitative approach among individuals from various countries who have not previously visited Georgia but express an interest in or

are planning to travel there. The study's conclusion emphasizes that social media marketing serves as an important promotional tool for many destinations, highlighting the need for greater attention and a deeper examination of this aspect. The results confirm that when destination marketing organizations (DMOs) utilize social media to showcase the cultural and scenic attractions of a destination, it significantly enhances tourists' interest and positively impacts their intention to travel there. DMOs should concentrate on their social media endeavors to facilitate decision-making and trip planning to attract visitors.

According to research findings, social media content serves as a motivating factor for tourists, heightening their intention to visit a destination. In summary, this study indicates that individuals highly value social media and the content shared by others. The findings reveal that information disseminated through social media influences destination awareness, shapes attitudes toward specific destinations, fosters curiosity, and ultimately affects individuals' decisions to travel to those destinations. Hence, destination awareness, attitude towards the destination, and curiosity emerge as crucial factors in enhancing interest and intention to travel to a particular destination.

This study holds significant value within the tourism literature, particularly for the Georgian tourism sector. It explores essential aspects concerning tourists who express a desire to visit Georgia despite never having been there before. Hence, this study makes a positive contribution to the tourism literature of the country and the broader field of tourism. As previously highlighted, leveraging destination promotion through social media and influencer marketing is important. However, despite the frequency of marketing campaigns in Georgia, there remains a notable absence of comprehensive research or statistical documentation. It is necessary to accurately record the visits of traveling influencers to the country and conduct thorough research involving tourists who have already visited Georgia, those who are planning to visit Georgia, and even those considering alternative destinations. Understanding such research endeavors is essential for fostering the advancement of tourism within the country. Given the importance of social media, a country must wield it effectively, concentrating on tourist destinations and landmarks that hold the greatest allure for potential visitors. For instance, Georgia frequently highlights its wine culture and mountainous landscape. Additionally, the statue of Ali and Nino, situated in the Black Sea region, serves as a captivating attraction, drawing numerous tourists to Batumi solely to witness this monument. Consequently, it is essential to delve into what specifically entices tourists to Georgia and promotes these attractions through social media platforms. Georgia boasts the potential to appeal to a diverse array of tourists, thus maximizing its tourism appeal through strategic social media marketing.

Considering all the information presented, the research findings offer a fresh and valuable perspective on existing literature. Moreover, the results provide essential practical insights for regional tourism planners. In conclusion, this research holds distinctive significance and contributes uniquely to the field. This study makes three contributions to literature. First, it underscores the significance of social media marketing in tourism. Second, it delves into the mediating factors that impact tourists' intentional behavior. Finally, a new theoretical framework is introduced. Overall, the study highlights the significant role of social media marketing in the tourism industry, aiding the development of destinations and boosting traveler numbers.

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APPENDIES

Appendix 1. Demographic Findings

		Frequency	Percentage			Frequency	Percentage	
Gender	Female	197	56.9	Marital status	Single	155	44.8	
	Male	149	43.1		Married	75	21.7	
Age	Under 18	13	3.8	Education	In a relationship	113	32.7	
	18-30	146	42.2		Widow	3	0.9	
	31-40	137	39.6		High School Diploma	45	13.9	
	41-50	38	11.0		Bachelor's Degree	220	63.6	
	51 or over	12	3.5	Master's Degree	63	18.2		
Nationality	Turkish	90	26.0	Profession	PHD's Degree	15	4.3	
	American	10	2.9		Accounting	6	1.7	
	Russian	15	4.3		Architecture	2	0.6	
	Ukrainian	7	2.0		Art	12	3.5	
	Polish	20	5.8		Aviation	14	4.0	
	Italian	15	4.3		Business	13	3.8	
	French	8	2.3		Cooking	4	1.2	
	Spanish	5	1.4		Digital Creator	6	1.7	
	Portuguese	4	1.2		Education	16	4.6	
	German	9	2.6		Engineering	17	4.9	
	British	9	2.6		Finance	3	0.9	
	Belgian	3	0.9		Fashion	5	1.4	
	Canadian	4	1.2		Freelance	19	5.5	
	Austrian	4	1.2		Law	6	1.7	
	The Czech	5	1.4		Media and communication	7	2.0	
	Greek	6	1.7		Medicine	18	5.2	
	Danish	3	0.9		Management	23	6.6	
	Dutch	2	0.6		Photography	19	5.5	
	Azeri	6	1.7		Social media and marketing	15	4.3	
	Arab	7	2.0		Science	7	2.0	
	African	3	0.9		State Structure	9	2.6	
	Armenian	4	1.2		Sport	13	3.8	
	Australian	2	0.6		Student	62	17.9	
	Chinese	5	1.4		Tourism and Hospitality	32	9.2	
	Bulgarian	5	1.4		Technologies	10	2.9	
	Egyptian	4	1.2		Translator	3	0.9	
	Indian	9	2.6		Writing	5	1.4	
	Iranian	8	2.3		Income	Very insufficient	5	1.4
	Japanese	6	1.7			Insufficient	16	4.6
	Jordanian	5	1.4		Medium	131	37.9	
	Kazakh	4	1.2		Satisfied	161	46.5	
	Lebanese	4	1.2		Very Satisfied	33	9.5	
Mexican	4	1.2	Soc.media usage	Less than 1 hour	15	4.3		
Moroccan	7	2.0		1 to 2 hours	106	30.6		
Filipino	5	1.4		3 to 4 hours	159	46.0		
Slovak	3	0.9		5 to 6 hours	52	15.0		
Thai	3	0.9	6 hours or more	14	4.0			
Uzbek	4	1.2						
Palestinian	3	0.9						
Maltese	2	0.6						
Indonesian	3	0.9						
Israeli	4	1.2						
Seychellois	1	0.3						
Singaporean	2	0.6						
Swiss	2	0.6						
Korean	3	0.9						
Lithuanian	4	1.2						
Romanian	5	1.4						
Total		346	100	Total		346	100	

Source: Authors' own elaboration