

Revisiting Tourism Through Virality: A Systematic Review of Key Psychological Drivers

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Abstract: This study aims to examine how viral marketing influences revisit intention in the tourism sector by identifying the mediating roles of destination image and consumer satisfaction. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted on 42 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025. The review analysed the conceptual frameworks, methodological approaches, and key findings of each study to trace the indirect pathways linking viral marketing to revisit intention. Results reveal that viral marketing does not directly influence revisit intention. Instead, it exerts its impact through two dominant mediators: destination image and consumer satisfaction. These mediators operate either independently or sequentially, with the most consistent model being a three-stage pathway—viral marketing enhances destination image, which in turn increases consumer satisfaction, ultimately leading to higher revisit intention. This sequential effect highlights the psychological mechanisms through which digital content affects tourist behaviour. The study concludes that effective viral marketing in tourism should go beyond mere visibility and engagement; it must foster positive perceptions and emotional resonance with the audience to cultivate destination loyalty. These findings offer theoretical contributions to tourism marketing literature and practical guidance for destination marketers seeking to optimize digital strategies for sustainable visitor retention.

Keywords: Consumer Satisfaction, Destination Image, Revisit Intention, Tourism Marketing, Viral Marketing

Introduction

In the current era of digital hyperconnectivity, viral marketing has emerged as a dominant force in shaping consumer awareness, perception, and behaviour. Defined by the rapid and organic spread of content across digital platforms, viral marketing leverages user-generated content, emotional storytelling, visual appeal, and peer-to-peer sharing to reach large audiences with minimal direct promotion (Çakirkaya & Aytaç Afşar, 2024) (Dinh & Lee, 2024). Unlike traditional advertising, viral content often feels more authentic and persuasive, especially when disseminated within trusted social networks (Mehdi, 2021). Consequently, viral marketing has proven highly effective in sectors such as e-commerce (Rusni et al, 2023) (Anggraini et al, 2025), skincare (Citradewi et al, 2025) (Hakiki et al, 2024), and education (Chandra & Cahyanti, 2021; Grenčíková et al., 2018), where consumer engagement and emotional appeal are central.

However, its strategic application and psychological impact in the tourism sector—a domain inherently driven by experience, perception, and emotional resonance—remain insufficiently examined in the academic literature (Ernawati, 2020; Nurhayati et al., 2023). Tourism is a high-involvement consumption context, where decision-making is strongly influenced by imagery, expectation, and post-experience evaluation (Hossain et al, 2022) (Ahmed, 2023). In this regard, viral content, such as Instagram visuals, TikTok reviews, and YouTube travel vlogs, plays a pivotal role in shaping a tourist's mental picture of a destination—referred to as destination image (Wei et al, 2024) (Ćulić et al, 2021) (Nam et al, 2022).

This image is formed before the trip and continuously evolves during and after the visit. Simultaneously, tourists' satisfaction with their experience—whether aligning with or diverging from their expectations—significantly influences their future behavioural intentions, particularly revisit intention, or the likelihood of returning to the same destination (Manyangara et al., 2023). Revisit intention is widely regarded as a critical metric of destination loyalty and plays a crucial role in sustainable tourism development (Sobaih et al, 2024) (Liestiandre et al, 2024).

While satisfaction has long been considered a key determinant of revisit intention, recent studies suggest that satisfaction alone may be insufficient to fully explain tourist loyalty (Aditya & Tiarawati, 2023) (Sharma & Nayak, 2019). Destination image—encompassing both cognitive and affective dimensions—has emerged as an equally important predictor of post-visit behavior (Ahmed, 2023) (Wei et al, 2024). Viral marketing, by shaping pre-visit impressions and disseminating narratives about destinations, may significantly affect both destination image and satisfaction, serving as a trigger for the psychological mechanisms that guide revisit behaviour (Nurhayati et al, 2023) (Wayan et al, 2022).

However, the relationship between viral marketing and these psychological drivers remains under-theorized and fragmented. Many existing studies treat satisfaction and destination image merely as internal consequences of service quality or physical destination attributes, overlooking the powerful role of external, digital, and socially shared content in shaping those perceptions (Manyangara et al, 2023) (Hossain et al, 2022). Few have examined how viral marketing serves as a *priming mechanism* that activates tourist expectations and evaluations, even before physical travel begins (Baker, 2025)

For instance, Hossain et al, (2022) demonstrate that destination advocacy—often built on digitally shared stories—indirectly affects revisit intention through satisfaction and destination image. Similarly, Ahmed, (2023) highlights the importance of cognitive-affective imagery in building tourist loyalty, while Liestiandre et al., (2024) emphasize the alignment between cultural content and visitor expectations as a key determinant of satisfaction and revisit intention. Sharma & Nayak, (2019) further argue that pre-visit content exposure shapes the memorability of experiences, which in turn may better predict revisit behaviour than satisfaction alone.

Despite these advances, viral marketing remains largely overlooked as an initiating factor in the causal chain of tourist decision-making. While some studies address viral marketing in consumer purchase contexts (Rusni et al, 2023) (Kristyani & Kristiyana, 2022)

(Adela & Tuti, 2024), tourism-specific literature is yet to cohesively map its psychological influence on loyalty constructs such as satisfaction and revisit intention. There is a pressing need for an integrative framework that links viral marketing to destination loyalty through these mediating psychological constructs (Nurhayati et al, 2023) (Ćulić et al, 2021) (Nam et al, 2022).

To address this gap, the present study conducts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of empirical studies that explore how viral marketing influences tourists' revisit intention, specifically through the psychological constructs of destination image and consumer satisfaction. By synthesizing findings across disciplines and methodological designs, this study aims to develop a holistic understanding of the role of virality in shaping destination loyalty. Moreover, it seeks to identify dominant theoretical models, recurring empirical patterns, and methodological approaches that may inform future research and guide destination marketing organizations (DMOs) in creating emotionally resonant, digitally empowered strategies.

Accordingly, this research is guided by the following questions:

1. How does viral marketing influence tourists' revisit intention through destination image and consumer satisfaction?
2. What are the key theoretical and empirical patterns connecting viral marketing to these two psychological constructs?
3. How have previous studies conceptualized the role of destination image and satisfaction as mediators in the relationship between viral content and tourist loyalty?

Methodology

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to synthesize and evaluate empirical findings on the impact of viral marketing on revisit intention in tourism, focusing specifically on the psychological mediators of destination image and consumer satisfaction. The SLR method was selected due to its ability to systematically integrate dispersed knowledge, ensure transparency, and allow replication, in accordance with the guidelines outline.

Search Strategy and Data Sources

A structured literature search was conducted across four major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published between January 2015 and March 2025 to ensure that the findings reflect the most recent developments in digital and social media marketing in tourism. Keyword combinations used in the search included:

1. "viral marketing" AND "tourism"
2. "destination image" AND "revisit intention"
3. "consumer satisfaction" AND "tourist loyalty"
4. "social media" AND "travel behavior"

Boolean operators were applied to refine the search, and snowballing techniques were used to identify relevant articles from the reference lists of key studies.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure focus and quality, the following inclusion criteria were applied:

1. Empirical research articles (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods)
2. Published in peer-reviewed journals between 2015 and 2025
3. Written in English
4. Conducted in the tourism or hospitality context
5. Examined viral marketing, destination image, consumer satisfaction, and/or revisit intention
6. Exclusion criteria included:
7. Theoretical or conceptual papers, editorials, and conference abstracts
8. Studies outside the tourism domain
9. Articles published before 2015 or lacking methodological transparency

Selection Process

Following PRISMA guidelines, the search process initially retrieved 312 records. After removing duplicates and conducting title and abstract screening, 86 articles were retained for full-text review. A final sample of 42 empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025 met all eligibility criteria and were included in the synthesis.

Data Extraction and Analysis

From each selected study, the following data were systematically extracted and recorded in a coding matrix:

1. Author(s), publication year, and country
2. Research design and sample characteristics
3. Key variables: viral marketing, destination image, consumer satisfaction, revisit intention
4. Theoretical frameworks (e.g., Theory of Planned Behavior, Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory)
5. Key findings and identified mediating or moderating effects

Studies such as Hossain et al, (2022), Ahmed (2023), Sobaih et al, (2024) and Liestiandre et al, (2024) were included due to their empirical examination of satisfaction, image, and loyalty in tourism. Sharma & Nayak, (2019) were also considered for their analysis of experience-driven revisit intention influenced by emotional branding. Thematic synthesis following Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to identify emerging themes and recurring constructs across the dataset.

Quality Assessment and Ethical Considerations

All selected studies were assessed using an adapted version of the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) to ensure clarity of research objectives, data validity, and methodological rigor. Only studies meeting acceptable quality standards were included in the final review.

This review does not involve primary data collection, human participants, or experimental interventions; thus, no ethical clearance was required. All data analyzed are secondary and publicly accessible. Upon request, the full list of reviewed studies, the coding

protocol, and PRISMA flow diagram can be provided to support replication and transparency.

Result and Discussion

A total of 42 empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025 were included in the final review. These studies were systematically analyzed to examine the role of viral marketing in influencing revisit intention in tourism through two key psychological constructs: destination image and consumer satisfaction.

Distribution of Core Variables

The frequency of each variable investigated across the reviewed studies is presented in Table 1. Destination image was examined in 85.7% of the studies ($n = 36$), while consumer satisfaction appeared in 73.8% ($n = 31$). A direct focus on revisit intention was found in 64.3% ($n = 27$) of the articles, while viral marketing—as either user-generated content, eWOM, or social sharing—was explicitly included in 52.4% ($n = 22$).

Table 1. Frequency of variables across selected studies ($n = 42$)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Destination Image	36	85.7
Consumer Satisfaction	31	73.8
Revisit Intention	27	64.3
Viral Marketing	22	52.4

Identified Relationships

From the analysis, three dominant relational models emerged (Figure 1):

Model A: Viral Marketing → Destination Image → Revisit Intention

Model B: Viral Marketing → Consumer Satisfaction → Revisit Intention

Model C: Viral Marketing → Destination Image → Consumer Satisfaction → Revisit Intention

These pathways align with studies highlighting the indirect nature of viral marketing's effect on loyalty

Methodological Characteristics

Most studies employed quantitative methods ($n = 30$, 71.4%), primarily using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). A smaller subset used qualitative approaches ($n = 7$) or mixed methods ($n = 5$). Geographic distribution showed studies concentrated in Asia (notably China, Indonesia, and South Korea), followed by Europe and the Middle East.

Discussion

The results indicate that viral marketing plays a significant indirect role in shaping revisit intention by first influencing destination image and consumer satisfaction. These findings reinforce earlier work by Hossain et al., (2022) and Ahmed, (2023), who highlight the power of pre-travel digital exposure in constructing mental representations of destinations. Viral content—especially when emotionally charged and visually appealing—shapes not only what tourists expect but also how they evaluate their experience post-visit.

Destination image consistently emerged as the most influential mediating variable. Viral narratives on social media—such as travel vlogs, influencer content, and peer recommendations—inform tourists' cognitive and affective impressions of a place before arrival). When these impressions are confirmed or exceeded during the actual visit, they enhance consumer satisfaction, which in turn fosters revisit intention (Sharma & Nayak, 2019) (Ćulić et al, 2021).

Interestingly, the dual mediation effect—via both image and satisfaction (Model C)—was found to be the most robust across studies. This suggests that revisit behavior is not solely a function of experience quality, but rather of expectation-experience alignment, as proposed in expectancy-disconfirmation theory (Wayan et al, 2022). Viral content helps set expectations, and when destinations deliver on these expectations, satisfaction and loyalty are significantly amplified (Aditya & Tiarawati, 2023) (Manyangara et al, 2023).

Additionally, several studies emphasize the interplay between emotions, memory, and digital exposure. For example, (Sumirat, 2025) shows how exclusivity and fear-of-missing-out (FOMO) driven by viral trends can enhance loyalty behavior among digital natives. Similarly, (Awad & Aldabousi, 2024) illustrate how viral narratives influence perceived trust and brand equity, which are essential precursors to loyalty in both tourism and retail settings.

Theoretical Implications

1. The findings highlight the need for destination marketing models to:
2. Integrate viral marketing as a pre-travel influence, not merely a promotional tool
3. Reframe revisit intention as a function of both expectations shaping (image) and emotional confirmation (satisfaction)
4. Recognize the mediating structure that connects digital influence to behavioral outcomes

Practical Implications

1. Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) should encourage shareable, authentic, and emotionally resonant content to shape favorable destination image early.
2. Monitoring user-generated content and viral narratives helps maintain image consistency and expectation management.
3. Strategic partnerships with influencers and content creators can amplify positive perceptions and indirectly foster revisit behavior.

Conclusion

This study conducted a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of 42 empirical studies published between 2015 and 2025 to explore the influence of viral marketing on revisit intention in tourism, specifically through the mediating roles of destination image and consumer satisfaction. The findings reveal that viral marketing, particularly in the form of user-generated content, social storytelling, and influencer-based media, plays a pivotal role in shaping tourists' pre-travel perceptions and post-travel evaluations (Nurhayati et al, 2023) (Wei et al, 2024).

Three dominant relational pathways were identified:

1. Viral marketing → destination image → revisit intention
2. Viral marketing → consumer satisfaction → revisit intention
3. Viral marketing → destination image → consumer satisfaction → revisit intention

The third model was most frequently supported (Liestiandre et al., 2024; Sharma & Nayak, 2019), underscoring that tourist loyalty emerges through both cognitive anticipation and emotional fulfillment.

From a theoretical standpoint, this review contributes to the growing discourse that revisit intention is a multi-stage, psychologically mediated process, influenced by pre-trip digital stimuli, not merely onsite service. Integrating viral content into behavioral tourism models provides a richer understanding of how loyalty is constructed in today's social media environment.

From a practical perspective, DMOs and tourism marketers should reframe viral marketing as a strategic influence mechanism, not an afterthought. The creation and amplification of content that is emotionally rich, visually compelling, and consistent with on-ground realities are essential for shaping positive expectations and ensuring visitor satisfaction.

Future research may benefit from:

1. Longitudinal studies to examine how exposure to viral content influences tourist memory and loyalty over time
2. Experimental designs that isolate viral content characteristics (e.g., emotional tone, narrative style)
3. Cross-cultural analyses that explore how satisfaction and image are constructed differently across audiences and platforms

In conclusion, this review affirms that in the era of digital tourism, virality is not just visibility—it is psychological influence. When aligned with branding and service delivery, viral marketing becomes a behavioral catalyst—one capable of shaping not just where people go, but why they choose to return.

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