

INFLUENCER ATTRIBUTES AND DESTINATION LOYALTY: MEDIATING EFFECTS OF ENGAGEMENT AND ENJOYMENT

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(Received 05th April 2026; revised 25th May 2026; accepted 08th June 2026)

Abstract. This study aims to develop a conceptual framework to examine how influencer attributes influence destination loyalty in the context of Kota Belud, Sabah. Grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) theory, the study investigates how influencer attributes, namely attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise (stimuli), affect tourists' internal psychological processes, specifically enjoyment and engagement (organism), which subsequently shape destination loyalty (response). A quantitative approach will be adopted using a cross-sectional survey design targeting respondents who have prior exposure to influencer-generated tourism content. Data will be collected through structured online questionnaires and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The study expects that influencer attributes will have both direct and indirect effects on destination loyalty through the mediating roles of enjoyment and engagement. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically by extending the application of the S-O-R framework in digital tourism marketing, while also providing practical insights for tourism stakeholders to develop effective influencer marketing strategies that enhance tourist engagement and foster long-term loyalty toward emerging destinations.

Keywords: *enjoyment, engagement, destination loyalty, influencer attributes*

Introduction

Tourism constitutes the movement of individuals for purposes encompassing leisure, business, and cultural engagement, thereby exerting a substantial influence on both economic and social advancement (Buhalis et al., 2023). In Malaysia, the tourism industry plays a crucial role in the national economy by generating revenue, creating employment opportunities, and promoting both domestic and international destinations (Hmedan et al., 2018). In 2025, the sector made a significant contribution to the national economy, generating approximately RM 291.9 billion, or 15.1% of GDP. This represents a steady increase from the previous year's figure of 14.9% (DOSM, 2026). Malaysia consists of Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). Of these regions, Sabah notably offers easy access to islands and beaches (Mabul, Sipadan, Manukan, Sapi, etc.) and rainforest highland areas (Kundasang, Mount Kinabalu, etc.) However, the present study will not investigate these overrated areas, instead, it focuses on a new potential spot for tourism, namely, Kota Belud. Locally, Kota Belud, Sabah, presents burgeoning tourism potential, stemming from its rich cultural heritage, scenic landscapes, and community-based tourism initiatives (Jainol et al., 2025; Louis et al., 2025). Kota Belud offers a diverse range of tourism activities, including visits to the Tamu market for local produce and handicrafts, boat tours on the Kawa River, hiking at

Bukit Bongol, engaging with the local Bajau community during traditional festivals at the Grand Market, and various water sports such as kayaking and diving. However, Kota Belud is not widely recognized as a primary tourist destination in Sabah, largely due to insufficient tourism promotion for the area. The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed the way tourism destinations communicate and engage with potential tourists through social media platforms (Yuan et al., 2022). Social media such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook have become a primary source of travel inspiration, allowing destinations to promote experiences through visual storytelling and influencer-generated content. As digital marketing strategies continue to replace traditional promotional approaches, influencers have a major effect on tourists' perceptions, emotions, and behavioral responses toward destinations (Babu et al., 2025).

Promotional efforts are particularly effective when executed by individuals with substantial followings whose posts, videos, and live streams garner significant viewership, a strategy commonly known as influencer marketing. Recent studies indicate that influencer marketing has become a strategic communication tool, influencing tourists' engagement, decision-making, and loyalty in digital environments (Gupta et al., 2026; Piedade et al., 2024). The integration of interactive features, personalized content, and visual storytelling has transformed social media platforms into dynamic tourism marketing channels, substantially shaping destination image and tourist behavior. Moreover, Jainol et al. (2025) claimed that emerging rural destinations, such as Sabah's Kota Belud, are increasingly leveraging digital promotion to enhance their visibility and attract visitors seeking authentic travel experiences. With its rich cultural heritage, scenic landscapes, and thriving community-based tourism, Kota Belud offers significant tourism potential (Louis et al., 2025). However, rural areas often face greater challenges in converting online visibility into sustained tourist loyalty compared to more established destinations. While influencer-generated content can enhance awareness, many destinations find it difficult to cultivate long-term emotional connections with tourists through digital platforms. This aligns with recent tourism research emphasizing the necessity of comprehending the impact of digital marketing on long-term tourist behavior and destination loyalty (Ramsoondar et al., 2025; Piedade et al., 2024; Rather et al., 2023). Furthermore, previous research in the Malaysian tourism sector indicates that destination loyalty is affected by psychological factors, including perceived value, place attachment, and tourist experiences, which are essential in determining revisit intentions and recommendation behavior (Muhamad Nasir et al., 2022).

From a theoretical standpoint, influencer marketing research typically investigates characteristics like attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise. These traits influence audience perceptions and behavioral responses by enhancing credibility, visual appeal, and informational value in digital content, thereby encouraging interaction with tourism-related information. Recent studies also underscore the significance of psychological responses in digital environments, where enjoyment and engagement are key mechanisms shaping tourists' reactions to influencer-generated content (Ramsoondar et al., 2025; Piedade et al., 2024). While previous research has examined direct relationships between influencer attributes and behavioral intentions, there is limited exploration into how these attributes foster destination loyalty via emotional and interactive responses, especially within rural tourism contexts. Moreover, one of the most suitable underlying theories that supports these relationships is the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R), introduced by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). However,

limited research has employed this theory to support the link between influencer attributes and behavioral intentions, especially in the context of individuals' psychological responses in digital environments.

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework offers a valuable theoretical lens for explaining how external stimuli influence internal psychological states, which subsequently shape behavioral outcomes (Baber and Baber, 2023; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Within this framework, influencer attributes are conceptualized as external stimuli that elicit internal psychological responses, such as enjoyment and engagement, subsequently influencing destination loyalty. This study extends existing tourism marketing literature by integrating emotional and interactive responses into influencer marketing research, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of how digital interactions influence tourists' long-term behavioral outcomes (Ramsoondar et al., 2025; Piedade et al., 2024; Rather et al., 2023). Building on the growing body of digital tourism marketing research, this study proposes a conceptual framework that explains how influencer attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise influence destination loyalty. While previous studies have examined influencer credibility and engagement separately, limited research has integrated enjoyment and engagement within a unified theoretical framework, particularly in emerging rural destinations. Therefore, this study contributes to tourism marketing literature by positioning enjoyment and engagement as key organism responses within the S–O–R framework, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how influencer marketing influences long-term destination loyalty. Accordingly, the main objective of this conceptual study is to develop a conceptual model explaining how influencer attributes influence destination loyalty through enjoyment and engagement in the context of Kota Belud, Sabah.

Literature review

Influencer attractiveness

Influencer attractiveness refers to the overall physical appearance, visual appeal, and presentation style of an influencer who captures audience attention (Wang et al., 2024). In tourism marketing, influencer attractiveness refers to how captivating and appealing influencers are when they talk about travel (Mohamed et al., 2025). Recent research suggests that visually appealing influencers are more effective at capturing attention, generating favorable impressions, and enhancing emotional responses toward promoted destinations through tourist enjoyment (Gupta et al., 2026; Zhang et al., 2025; Yusra et al., 2023). Furthermore, visually appealing and well-presented content can stimulate tourist interest and encourage active engagement with influencer-generated content on social media platforms (Aldlimi et al., 2025; Ramsoondar et al., 2025). Consequently, two hypotheses are posited as follows:

H1a: There is a significant relationship between influencer attractiveness and enjoyment

H1b: There is a significant relationship between influencer attractiveness and engagement

Influencer trustworthiness

Influencer trustworthiness refers to the degree to which an influencer is perceived as honest, reliable, and sincere (Wang and Weng, 2024). In tourism marketing, trustworthiness reflects tourists' belief that influencers provide accurate and unbiased information about destinations (Sun et al., 2026). Previous research suggests that credible influencers enhance tourists' confidence and mitigate uncertainty when evaluating travel-related information, thereby fostering greater enjoyment during destination visits (Christouli, 2026; Madi et al., 2024; Yusra et al., 2023). When tourists perceive influencers as credible, they are more likely to experience positive emotional responses and actively engage with influencer-generated content (Ramsoondar et al., 2025; Piedade et al., 2024). Therefore, two hypotheses are developed as follows:

H2a: There is a significant relationship between influencer trustworthiness and enjoyment

H2b: There is a significant relationship between influencer trustworthiness and engagement

Influencer expertise

Influencer expertise refers to the perceived knowledge and competence of an influencer in providing tourism-related information (Huang et al., 2026). In tourism marketing, expertise is how well influencers talk about destinations and provides their followers with useful travel tips (Kılıçarslan and Caber, 2026). Previous studies indicate that expert influencers enhance tourists' understanding and satisfaction, making tourism content more informative and engaging, fostering better enjoyment during destination visits (Gupta et al., 2026; Sama et al., 2026). In addition, knowledgeable and well-structured content helps reduce uncertainty and encourages tourists to interact more actively with influencer-generated content (Madi et al., 2024). Hence, two hypotheses are proposed as follows:

H3a: There is a significant relationship between influencer expertise and enjoyment

H3b: There is a significant relationship between influencer expertise and engagement

Enjoyment

Enjoyment refers to the degree of pleasure, entertainment, and positive emotions experienced by tourists when consuming influencer-generated tourism content (Zhang et al., 2025). In digital tourism marketing, enjoyment represents an affective response that reflects how enjoyable and satisfying tourists perceive social media content (Abir, 2026). Previous research demonstrates that engaging tourism content can fortify tourists' emotional connection to destinations and improve their overall experience with digital travel information (Piedade et al., 2024; Sthapit et al., 2024). Furthermore, when tourists experience enjoyment while interacting with influencer-generated content, they are more likely to develop favorable attitudes and stronger behavioral intentions toward the promoted destination (Ramsoondar et al., 2025; Rather et al., 2023). Past literature has thoroughly investigated the direct effects of influencer attractiveness (Gupta et al., 2026; Mohamed et al., 2025; Farhadi Uonaki and Jahanian, 2023), influencer trustworthiness (Christouli, 2026; Madi et al., 2024), and influencer expertise (Gupta et al., 2026; Sama et al., 2026) on the enjoyment. Additionally, several studies have empirically proven the direct effect of enjoyment on destination loyalty (Piedade et al.,

2024; Sthapit et al., 2024). However, there is a significant lack of research examining how enjoyment mediates the relationships between these influencer characteristics and destination loyalty. Therefore, to fill in the research gaps, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H4a: There is a significant relationship between enjoyment and destination loyalty
- H4b: Enjoyment mediates the relationship between influencer attractiveness and destination Loyalty
- H4c: Enjoyment mediates the relationship between influencer trustworthiness and destination Loyalty
- H4d: Enjoyment mediates the relationship between influencer expertise and destination Loyalty

Engagement

Engagement refers to the level of interaction, involvement, and emotional connection that tourists develop when interacting with influencer-generated content on social media platforms (Juliana et al., 2025). In tourism marketing, engagement includes behaviors such as liking, commenting, sharing, and paying attention to influencer content. Higher levels of engagement indicate stronger cognitive and emotional involvement, which can enhance tourists' attachment to a destination and influence their behavioral intentions (Ramsoondar et al., 2025). Consequently, engaged tourists are more likely to form positive perceptions and develop favorable attitudes toward destinations promoted through influencer-generated content (Xu and Zhou, 2025; Rather et al., 2023). While extensive literature has explored the direct effects of influencer attractiveness (Aldlimi et al., 2025; Ramsoondar et al., 2025), trustworthiness (Ramsoondar et al., 2025; Piedade et al., 2024), and expertise (Madi et al., 2024) on engagement, and other studies have established a direct link between enjoyment and destination loyalty (Ramsoondar et al., 2025; Rather et al., 2023), a significant gap remains where there is a notable absence of research examining engagement's mediating role in the relationships between these influencer characteristics and destination loyalty. Therefore, the following hypotheses are developed:

- H5a: There is a significant relationship between engagement and destination loyalty
- H5b: Engagement mediates the relationship between influencer attractiveness and destination loyalty
- H5c: Engagement mediates the relationship between influencer trustworthiness and destination Loyalty
- H5d: Engagement mediates the relationship between influencer expertise and destination loyalty

Destination loyalty

Destination loyalty refers to tourists' commitment to a destination, reflected through their intention to revisit and their willingness to recommend the destination to others (Herrero-Crespo et al., 2024). Destination loyalty is considered a key outcome in tourism, as it contributes to sustainable tourism development and enhances long-term destination competitiveness. Recent studies highlight that destination loyalty is strongly influenced by tourists' emotional experiences and engagement with digital tourism

content (Piedade et al., 2024; Sthapit et al., 2024). In addition, social media interactions and influencer-generated content play an important role in shaping tourists' perceptions and behavioral intentions toward destinations (Gupta et al., 2026; Mendieta-Aragón et al., 2024). This is consistent with prior findings in the Malaysian tourism context, which emphasize that destination loyalty is influenced by factors such as perceived value, tourist experience, and place attachment, ultimately shaping revisit intention and recommendation behavior (Muhamad Nasir et al., 2022). Therefore, destination loyalty is positioned as the main outcome variable in this study.

Proposed framework based on Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) theory

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) theory, initially proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), offers a robust framework for understanding the influence of external stimuli on internal psychological processes and subsequent behavioral outcomes. This theory posits that stimuli (S), such as influencer-generated content and digital marketing messages, elicit internal responses (O) encompassing cognitive and emotional states, which, in turn, lead to behavioral outcomes (R), such as destination loyalty. Contemporary research has applied the S–O–R framework within tourism and digital contexts to elucidate the impact of online content on tourists' perceptions and behaviors (Baber and Baber, 2023). In this study, influencer attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise are conceptualized as stimuli, while enjoyment and engagement represent the organismic state, and destination loyalty represents the response. Consequently, the S–O–R framework provides a strong theoretical basis for explaining the effects of influencer marketing on tourists' behavioral outcomes. Specifically, influencer attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise serve as the independent variables, enjoyment and engagement as the mediating variables, and destination loyalty as the dependent variable (*Figure 1*).

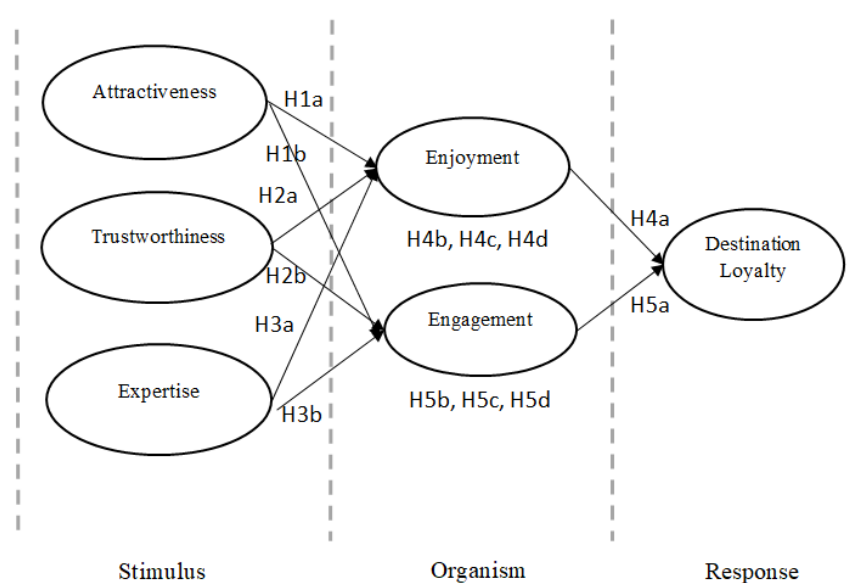


Figure 1. The proposed research framework.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a causal quantitative research design to investigate the impact of influencer marketing attributes (influencer attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise) on enjoyment and engagement, and their subsequent effect on tourists' behavioral outcomes within the context of tourism destination loyalty in Kota Belud, Sabah. Basically, causal quantitative research is commonly employed to investigate relationships among variables and to explain how specific factors influence behavioral intentions in tourism and marketing studies (Cheah et al., 2026; Sarstedt et al., 2023; Hair et al., 2022). This study employs a cross-sectional survey design, collecting data from respondents at a single time point within a defined period of several months. The target population comprises tourists who actively use social media platforms and have been exposed to influencer-generated tourism content in Kota Belud, Sabah. Social media users represent an appropriate population for influencer marketing research, given the significant role of influencer-generated content in shaping tourists' destination perceptions and travel intentions (Hussain et al., 2025). Data will be collected via a Google Forms survey distributed through social media platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp.

The questionnaire is divided into several sections. The first section contains screening questions designed to filter respondents who are 18 years of age or older, actively use social media platforms, and have been exposed to influencer-generated tourism content in Kota Belud, Sabah. The second section gathers respondents' demographic information, including age, gender, education level, and travel frequency, among other factors. The following sections assess the constructs included in the framework, namely influencer attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise, enjoyment, engagement, and destination loyalty. Influencer attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise will be assessed using scales adapted from established influencer marketing and source credibility studies (Aldlimi et al., 2025). The mediating variables, enjoyment and engagement, will be assessed using scales adapted from prior tourism and digital marketing research focusing on emotional and interactive responses to social media content (Ramsoondar et al., 2025; Sthapit et al., 2024). Destination loyalty will be assessed using scales adapted from tourism behavior studies examining revisit intention and recommendation behavior (Piedade et al., 2024; Rather et al., 2023). All measurement items will be assessed using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), which is widely used in behavioral research to capture respondents' perceptions with greater accuracy and reliability (Cheah et al., 2026; Hair et al., 2022).

Results and Discussion

This study highlights the significant role of influencer marketing attributes in shaping tourists' behavioral responses toward emerging tourism destinations. The proposed framework suggests that influencer attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise are important to drivers influencing tourists' perceptions and evaluations of destinations through social media. Previous studies have shown that influencer attractiveness and expertise positively influence tourists' enjoyment (Sama et al., 2026; Yusra et al., 2023), while influencer attributes such as attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise enhance customer engagement (Ao et al., 2023). In addition, trustworthiness has been found to strengthen engagement and loyalty-related outcomes (Vo et al., 2025). These findings

support the proposed relationships that enjoyment and engagement function as important mechanisms linking influencer attributes to destination loyalty. Therefore, based on the findings of previous studies, the following hypotheses are proposed for empirical testing in the present study. To be exact, *Table 1* reveals several important gaps in the existing tourism marketing literature. Although previous studies have examined selected relationships among influencer attractiveness (AT), trustworthiness (TW), expertise (EP), enjoyment (EJ), engagement (EG), and destination loyalty (DL), they have largely investigated these constructs in isolation rather than within a comprehensive framework. Specifically, limited attention has been given to the simultaneous examination of the direct effects of influencer attributes on enjoyment, engagement, and destination loyalty, as well as the sequential relationships between enjoyment, engagement, and destination loyalty. Consequently, the integrated relationships proposed in the present study remain underexplored, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive model to explain better tourists' destination loyalty in the context of digital tourism marketing. From a theoretical perspective, this study extends tourism marketing literature by applying the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) framework within the context of influencer marketing. Specifically, influencer attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise represent the stimulus, while enjoyment and engagement serve as the organism, influencing destination loyalty as the response. Although previous studies have examined selected relationships individually (e.g., Juliana et al., 2025; Vo et al., 2025; Yusra et al., 2023), limited research has integrated these variables into a single framework. Therefore, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how influencer marketing shapes tourists' destination loyalty, particularly in emerging rural destinations such as Kota Belud, Sabah. From a practical perspective, the proposed framework offers useful implications for tourism stakeholders, destination marketers, and tourism authorities. Tourism organizations should collaborate with influencers who demonstrate strong attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise to produce engaging and credible content. Creating enjoyable and interactive social media experiences can strengthen tourists' emotional connections and encourage long-term destination loyalty. For emerging destinations such as Kota Belud, leveraging influencer marketing can enhance destination visibility, increase tourist engagement, and foster sustainable tourism development.

Table 1. Summary of Previous Studies on Influencer Attractiveness (AT), Influencer Trustworthiness (TW), Influencer Expertise (EP), Enjoyment (EJ), Engagement (EG), and Destination Loyalty (DL).

R	H1	H2	H3	H4	H5	H6	H7	H8	H9	H10	H11	H12	H13	H14
Sama et al. (2026)	x	x	/	x	x	x	/	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Ao et al. (2023)	x	x	x	/	/	/	x	/	x	x	x	x	x	x
Yusra et al. (2023)	/	x	/	x	x	x	/	x	/	x	x	x	x	x
Akram and Majeed (2026)	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	x	x	x	x	x	x
Hussain et al. (2025)	x	x	/	x	x	x	/	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Huang et al.	x	x	x	/	/	/	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

(2026)															
Juliana et al. (2025)	x	x	x	/	/	/	x	/	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Al-Abdallah et al. (2025)	/	x	x	/	/	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Christouli (2026)	x	x	x	/	/	/	x	/	x	x	x	x	/	/	x
Vo et al. (2025)	x	x	x	x	/	x	x	/	x	x	x	x	/	/	x
Current Study	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/

Note: R=Research; H1=AT->EJ; H2=TW->EJ; H3=EP->EJ; H4=AT->EG; H5=TW->EG; H6=EP->EG; H7=EJ->DL; H8=EG->DL; H9=EJ->AT->DL; H10=EJ->TW->DL; H11=EJ->EP->DL; H12=EG->TW->DL; H14=EG->EP->DL.

Conclusion

This study proposes a conceptual framework to explain how influencer attributes affect destination loyalty within digital tourism marketing. Specifically, it integrates influencer attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise with psychological responses, such as enjoyment and engagement, to better understand tourists' behavioral outcomes. The proposed model highlights the increasing role of influencer marketing in shaping tourists' perceptions, emotional experiences, and interactions with tourism content on social media platforms. Theoretically, this study extends tourism marketing literature by demonstrating how influencer attributes can stimulate psychological responses that lead to destination loyalty. Practically, the findings provide valuable recommendations for tourism stakeholders and destination marketers in designing effective influencer marketing strategies to promote emerging destinations, such as Kota Belud, Sabah, and strengthen long-term tourist loyalty.

Acknowledgement

The author conducted this research without external funding, relying entirely on their resources.

Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest among the parties involved in this research study.

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