

An Empirical Investigation of Social Media Influence on Adventure Tourism Decision-Making: The Mediating Roles of Adventure Motivation and Destination Image

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to explore the influence of social media on adventure tourism decision-making (ATDM), with adventure motivation (AM) and destination image (DI) as mediators, in India. This study is also valuable to the field of tourism consumer behaviour because it combines the “Uses and gratifications” theory with the “Stimulus-Organism-Response” model to explain how various gratifications motivate, and how cognition stemming from social media usage influences adventure travel decisions. This study employs quantitative analysis through partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4. The analysis is based on a survey of 300 adventure tourists who actively engage with digital platforms in the adventure tourism sector in India. Social media influence not only has a significant direct effect on the adventure tourism decision-making process but also positively affects the adventure motivation and the destination image. The partial mediation of the relationship between SMI and ATDM is supported by both constructs, and the indirect effect through adventure motivation is slightly larger than the indirect effect through destination image (BC 95% CI H6: [0.140, 0.283]; H7: [0.113, 0.241]). The model accounts for 67.4% of the variance in ATDM, and SRMR = 0.062 shows a satisfactory model fit. Destination marketing organisations need to focus on inspiring and emotive content for Instagram reels, follow up with information, and plan for YouTube shorts. Instead of focusing on a specific sale, an influencer partnership should centre around storytelling, leveraging the platform's engagement and destination appeal. This study provides a theoretically explained system of UGT and SOR integration in the context of adventure tourism consumer behavior. It delivers empirical data for the Indian adventure tourism industry and illustrates how social media involvement influences adventure tourism decision-making through motivation and destination image...

Keywords: Social media influence; Adventure motivation; Destination image; Adventure tourism decision-making; Uses and Gratifications Theory; Stimulus-Organism-Response..

INTRODUCTION

Adventure tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments of global travel, driven by a post-pandemic preference for outdoor, nature-based, and experience-orientated activities (Deb, Kondasani and Das, 2023). In India, destinations such as Rishikesh, Manali, Leh-Ladakh, and Coorg have developed as prominent adventure tourism hubs, supported by increasing domestic participation in trekking, rafting, mountaineering, and other high-involvement recreational activities. Despite the rapid growth of this sector, consumer behaviour research within the Indian adventure tourism context remains limited, restricting theoretical and managerial understanding of digitally influenced adventure travel decisions.

Social media has significantly transformed the tourism information environment. Short-form video platforms, particularly Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts, have

become important sources of travel inspiration and destination discovery among younger travellers (Liu et al., 2018). Through visually immersive and experience-orientated content, these platforms communicate adventure-related attributes such as thrill, risk, scenery, and achievement more effectively than traditional promotional media. Influencer-generated and user-generated content also shape destination consideration and travel intentions by fostering emotional engagement and parasocial interaction (Abdul Razak and Aliah, 2022; Deb et al., 2023). However, the psychological mechanisms through which social media engagement influences adventure tourism decision-making remain insufficiently explored. Adventure tourism decisions are typically high-involvement and risk-sensitive, requiring both motivational activation and cognitive reassurance before behavioural commitment occurs.

To address this gap, the present study integrates Uses and Gratifications theory and the Stimulus-Organism-Response model. UGT explains why individuals actively

engage with social media content to satisfy informational, entertainment, and identity-expression needs (Katz et al., 1973; Rubin, 2009). The SOR framework subsequently explains how such engagement activates internal psychological states that influence behavioural outcomes. In this study, social media influence functions as the stimulus, adventure motivation and destination image represent organismic states, and adventure tourism decision-making constitutes the behavioural response. By integrating these frameworks, the study examines how social media engagement shapes both motivational and cognitive responses associated with adventure travel decisions.

The study pursues four objectives: (1) to examine the direct effect of social media influence on adventure tourism decision-making; (2) to analyse the influence of social media on adventure motivation and destination image; (3) to evaluate the effects of adventure motivation and destination image on decision-making; and (4) to assess the mediating roles of these constructs within the integrated UGT-SOR framework. The findings contribute to tourism consumer behaviour research and provide practical insights for destination marketers and tourism practitioners operating in digitally driven adventure tourism markets.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Integrated UGT–SOR Framework and the Gratification-to-Organism Transition

Uses and Gratifications Theory explains that media users are active and goal-orientated individuals who engage with media to satisfy needs such as information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, and identity expression (Katz et al., 1973; Rubin, 2009; Shao, 2009). In the context of social media tourism, Indian adventure travellers engage with Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts to obtain destination-related information, experience entertainment and excitement, and reinforce aspirational self-concepts through adventure-orientated content (Oh et al., 2018). Greater gratification derived from such content encourages deeper engagement and stronger responsiveness to persuasive and image-building cues.

The integration of UGT with the stimulus-organism-response model explains how social media engagement translates into psychological and behavioural outcomes. Social media content functions as the environmental stimulus, while internal psychological responses such as adventure motivation and destination image represent organismic states that influence behavioural outcomes. Users seeking entertainment and informational benefits from social media are more likely to develop stronger motivational and cognitive responses toward adventure destinations. Exposure to visually immersive and experience-orientated content can stimulate thrill-seeking, mastery aspiration, escape motivation, and positive destination perceptions, which subsequently influence adventure tourism decision-making (Wang et al., 2017; Houge Mackenzie and Brymer, 2020).

The SOR framework explains the relationships between stimulus, organism, and response (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974; Jacoby, 2008). For this research, stimulus (S) should be social media influence, organismic states (O) would be adventure motivation and destination image, and behavioral response (R) is the adventure tourism decision-making process. The concept of integrated UGT-SOR is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Integrated UGT–SOR Conceptual Model

2.2 Social Media Influence and Adventure Tourism Decision-Making

Social media influence is seen as a source of credible, informative, and persuasive online content that affects consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions (Hudson and Thal, 2013; Liu et al., 2018). With the advent of short-form video content like Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts in the adventure tourism space, viewers are now able to 'try a trek,' 'try a rafting trip,' or 'try a ride with a camel' before joining the adventure. These types of content diminish informational uncertainty, enhance experiential desire, and raise destination consideration and travel intention (Houge Mackenzie and Brymer, 2020). Previous research on the subject shows that social media exposure can have a significant impact on the evaluation of destinations and their decisions regarding the tourism experience, with a greater impact in experience-oriented tourist segments (Wei et al. 2025; Deb et al. 2023). In adventure tourism specifically, influencers and users created content is particularly effective because it both tells a story of an adventure and manages to inspire viewers of the content to travel (Abdul Razak and Aliah, 2022).

H1: Social media influence has a positive effect on adventure tourism decision-making.

2.3 Social Media Influence and Adventure Motivation

Adventure motivation comprises the internal attributes that motivate people to engage in adventure travel, which include thrill-seeking, mastery, escape, self-actualization, and dimensions (Pomfret and Bramwell, 2016; Houge Mackenzie and Brymer, 2020). Some of the motivational factors of social media content may trigger such motivations by presenting visual and emotional adventures to the audience. Adventure-related content increases emotional involvement and sensation-seeking tendencies while reinforcing identity-related self-concepts, thereby strengthening emotional arousal toward adventure experiences. whereas entertainment-oriented engagement with adventure-related content reinforces identity-expression gratification and its associated self-concepts (Oh et al., 2018). The findings of past research have indicated that social media usage has a positive relationship with travel motive, such as an increase in excitement, inspiration, and experiential desire formation (Wang et al., 2017).

H2: Social media influence has a positive effect on adventure motivation.

2.4 Social Media Influence and Destination Image

The destination image is the mental picture that the person forms about a tourism destination: the cognitive and affective perceptions or feelings he develops (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Styliadis et al., 2022). Social media has been identified as one of the significant sources of image formation for adventure tourists, especially for destinations not well known before (Liu et al., 2018). Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts can convey information about scenery, safety, infrastructure, and activity quality through visuals and experiential content while creating emotional connections like excitement, freedom, and achievement. Such content must be actively engaged to help form positive perceptions about their destination and improve subjects' evaluative clarity, as stated by Abdul Razak and Aliah (2022) and Marder et al. (2021). Previous studies related to tourism corroborate that the interaction with social media and content authenticity have shown positive effects on the formation of the destination images from a prospective traveler's perspective (Deb et al., 2023).

H3: Social media influence has a positive effect on destination image.

2.5 Adventure Motivation and Adventure Tourism Decision-Making

Motivation is one of the key factors influencing the tourist's decision-making process, as it influences the commitment to behavior in tours. Motivation is an important factor in the tourism decision-making process since it influences the commitment to behavior in a tour. Thrill-seeking, mastery, and escape are key motivations in adventure tourism that have an impact on the selection of the destination and the planning of the trip (Pomfret and Bramwell, 2016). Adventure travelers with high levels of motivation are more likely to commit time, money, and effort towards engaging in activities that seek more challenging and experience-rich experiences (Giddy and Webb, 2018). Previous research also has findings that motivational arousal enhances behavior and motivates more people to join adventure-based activities (Houge Mackenzie & Brymer, 2020; Deb et al., 2023).

H4: Adventure motivation has a positive effect on adventure tourism decision-making.

2.6 Destination Image and Adventure Tourism Decision-Making

There is considerable empirical evidence that destination image has been identified as a significant factor influencing travel behaviors and destination selection (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Styliadis et al., 2022). Adventure tourism evokes a strong image for the destination that decreases the uncertainty on safety, infrastructure, and activity quality, thus enhancing traveller's sense of confidence in destination selection and the selection process (Giddy and Webb, 2018). Adventurous destination perception also elicits approach behaviors, which in turn can increase travel intention, due to positive perceptions. Moreover, destinations may embody one's aspirational self-concept and sense of identity, especially in regard to social media interactions in the setting of sociality (Liu et al., 2018).

H5: Destination image has a positive effect on adventure tourism decision-making.

2.7 Mediating Role of Adventure Motivation

In the integrated UGT-SOR approach, it is anticipated that social media engagement, in addition to influencing the motivation to engage in adventure, has a distributive effect on the decision to take an adventure tour. Emotionally stimulating views of adventure-related experiences can arouse adventure motivational components of thrill-seeking, escaping, and self-development intentions, which in turn can raise behavioural readiness for an adventure experience. Similar findings have been reported in previous tourism and outdoor recreation studies that supported the motivation as a psychological pathway that connects the digital engagement with tourism behaviour (Pomfret and Bramwell, 2016; Wang et al., 2017).

H6: Adventure motivation mediates the relationship between social media influence and adventure tourism decision-making.

2.8 Mediating Role of Destination Image

The UGT-SOR framework is also integrated into the study, suggesting that the involvement in social media can affect the decision process of adventure tourism through destination image formation. Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts contain information and imagery content, which helps travellers to form cognitive and affective perceptions of adventure destinations, which eventually affect travellers' destination evaluations and their travel intentions. The influence of destination image as a mediator between digital tourism engagement and behavioural intention is corroborated by previous research in various tourism areas, such as tourism decision-making (the sports tourism sector, and tourism planning (Styliadis et al., 2022; Deb et al. 2023).

H7: Destination image mediates the relationship between social media influence and adventure tourism decision-making.

2.9 Research Gap

Previous research has already found that social media has a significant role in shaping the tourism behaviour and travel intention; however, little work has attempted to investigate the psychological pathway through which the engagement with social media impacts adventure tourism decision-making. Conventional leisure tourism and general destination marketing situations have been the few areas most of the previous studies invested in, yet adventure tourism itself is relatively underresearched given the high involvement and risks associated with this form of tourism. What's more, previous studies typically have overlooked the mediating mechanisms between social media exposure and behavioural intention, including the adventure motivation and destination image. Theories such as Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Stimulus-Organism-Response Model have been used on their own in the field of tourism and digital consumer behaviour studies, but they have not yet been used together in the context of adventure tourism. Some previous studies are also lacking in terms of findings related to the motivational and cognitive reactions to

gratification that drive participation in adventure trips. Further, empirical research related to Indian adventure tourism is limited, and although the advent of reels, short-form videos by the likes of Instagram and YouTube, has gained significant traction among the Indian travellers, research is yet to be carried out on the same. To fill in these gaps, the aim of this study is to reveal how social media influences the adventure tourism decision-making process while the two variables of adventure and destination image act as parallel mediators in an integrated UGT-SOR model.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Measurement Items

Reflective measures for all constructs were adopted from scales and validated measures in areas of tourism and consumer behaviour. Social media influence (SMI) items were modified from Hudson and Thal (2013) and Liu et al. (2018), examining informativeness, credibility and persuasiveness of video content in the forms most accessible to viewers (short-form video content). Adventure motivation (AM) items were adapted from Pomfret and Bramwell (2016) and Houge Mackenzie and Brymer (2020) – thrill-seeking, mastery, escape, and self-actualisation and dimensions (Bramwell and Pomfret, 2015). The first type of items, called destination image (DI) items, was adapted from Baloglu and McCleary (1999) and Styliadis et al. (2020) and focused on cognitive and affective perceptions of a destination. The items regarding the adventure tourism decision-making process (ATDM) were adapted from Crompton (1979) and Deb et

al. (2023), which covered destination consideration, planning intention, financial commitment, and travel intention. Every item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

3.2 Data Collection, Sampling, and Ethical Considerations

An online questionnaire (Google Forms) was used to gather data from January to March of 2024. The target audience of the study individuals were Indian outbound tourists and users of travel content on Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts who either had taken an adventure trip in the past 2 years or were actively planning one. Given the lack of a comprehensive sampling frame for digitally engaged adventure travellers, convenience sampling was used via online travel communities, social media groups, and adventure tourism networks. Sampling was spread broadly so that it was less likely to be biased, through various online and geographical channels. The total number of responses was 372, of which 300 were valid questionnaires, which meets the recommended PLS-SEM sample adequacy criteria of Hair et al. (2022).

Non-response bias was evaluated by conducting independent sample t-tests on the main study constructs between early and late responses. No significant difference was found at the 0.05 (p-value) level, and thus, the non-response bias was not likely to have a major impact on the results. The student's consent and anonymity were ensured. All respondents gave informed consent and had the opportunity to drop out of the survey at any time.

Table 1: Respondent Demographic Profile (n = 300)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	171	57.0
	Female	126	42.0
	Prefer not to say	3	1.0
Age (years)	18–25	96	32.0
	26–35	123	41.0
	36–45	54	18.0
	46 and above	27	9.0
Education	Undergraduate	114	38.0
	Postgraduate	147	49.0
	Doctoral / Other	39	13.0
Primary platform	Instagram Reels	141	47.0
	YouTube Shorts	90	30.0

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
	Other short-form video	69	23.0
Adventure trips (past 2 yrs)	1–2	162	54.0
	3–5	105	35.0
	More than 5	33	11.0

Note: Source: Authors' survey data.

3.3 Common Method Bias Assessment

Common method bias (CMB) was confirmed using the internal validities (procedural) and external validities (statistical). The questionnaire was structured in a relatively new way for three reasons: First, the predictor and criterion constructs were separate; second, respondent anonymity was secured to minimise the evaluation apprehension problem (Podsakoff et al., 2003); third, the questionnaire contained a few targeted questions. On a statistical factor basis, Harman's test showed that the single factor label for the single largest factor was 28.3% below 50% of the total variance. Furthermore, the full collinearity variance inflation factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.62 to 2.94, which is below Kock's 2015 recommendation of a VIF value of 3.3, implying there was not a lot of common method bias present. In future studies, marker-variable methods can also be used to more thoroughly evaluate method bias.

3.4 Pilot Study and Validation

The questionnaire was pretested by three academics who are experts in tourism and consumer behaviour and two persons involved in adventure tourism to verify content validity and contextual relevance before the main survey. A preliminary study with 30 respondents from the target population yielded a Cronbach alpha ranging from 0.78 to 0.89, thus giving acceptable reliability. Some minor wording changes were made prior to final data collection.

3.5 Data Analysis Strategy

The analytical tools used to do data analysis were part of the least-squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) from the software of SmartPLS 4. For this study, PLS-SEM was chosen as the suitable analysis method for the study design, which is a prediction-orientated study and utilises a conceptual framework involving mediation. Based on study design, which in this case is a predictive study and has a conceptual framework with reflective constructs, PLS-SEM is used as the analysis method of the study (Hair et al., 2022). The evaluation of the measurement model was carried out by indicator loading, Cronbach alpha, rho_A, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT). Path coefficients, t-values, p-values, and bootstrapped confidence intervals were used to assess the structural model using 5,000 re-samples. Model fit and predictive relevance were validated with the following measures: SRMR, R², adjusted R², Q² predict, RMSE, and MAE.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Demographic Profile

4.2 Measurement Model Assessment

Table 2 reports the measurement model results. All factor loadings exceeded 0.70 (range: 0.732–0.881). Cronbach's α (0.842–0.891), rho_A (0.851–0.898), and CR (0.887–0.920) confirm internal consistency. AVE values (0.612–0.697) exceed the 0.50 threshold, confirming convergent validity (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 2: Measurement Model

Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach's α	rho_A	CR	AVE	VIF
SMI	SMI1	0.812	0.867	0.872	0.904	0.654	1.72
	SMI2	0.794					
	SMI3	0.836					
	SMI4	0.781					
	SMI5	0.819					
AM	AM1	0.778	0.842	0.851	0.887	0.612	1.62
	AM2	0.804					

Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach's α	rho_A	CR	AVE	VIF
	AM3	0.762					
	AM4	0.789					
	AM5	0.773					
DI	DI1	0.732	0.858	0.864	0.898	0.638	1.79
	DI2	0.811					
	DI3	0.847					
	DI4	0.798					
	DI5	0.812					
ATDM	ATDM1	0.853	0.891	0.898	0.920	0.697	2.61
	ATDM2	0.881					
	ATDM3	0.826					
	ATDM4	0.794					
	ATDM5	0.832					

Note: SMI = Social Media Influence; AM = Adventure Motivation; DI = Destination Image; ATDM = Adventure Tourism Decision-Making; CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted. VIF values (1.62–2.94) absence of collinearity-based CMB (Kock, 2015)

Discriminant validity was assessed using the HTMT criterion (Henseler et al., 2015). All HTMT values (Table 3) fell below the 0.85 threshold (highest: 0.742). Bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals for all HTMT pairs were computed using 5,000 resamples; none included the value 1.0 (range of upper bounds: 0.721–

0.803), providing robust evidence that each construct captures a genuinely distinct dimension of the nomological network.

Table 3: HTMT Ratio and Bootstrapped 95% CIs

Construct Pair	HTMT	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Discriminant
SMI – AM	0.681	0.608	0.749	Yes
SMI – DI	0.654	0.579	0.721	Yes
SMI – ATDM	0.703	0.634	0.766	Yes
AM – DI	0.712	0.643	0.776	Yes
AM – ATDM	0.742	0.679	0.803	Yes
DI – ATDM	0.728	0.661	0.791	Yes

Note: All HTMT values < 0.85 and bootstrapped 95% CIs exclude 1.0, confirming discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015). Bootstrapping: 5,000 resamples.

4.3 Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Model fit was evaluated first. SRMR = 0.062, below the 0.08 threshold (Henseler et al., 2015; Hair et al., 2022), confirming adequate fit. Inner-model Structural path

estimates, bootstrapped t-statistics, and 95% bias-corrected CIs are reported in Table 4.

Table 4: Structural Model – Hypothesis Testing (Direct Paths)

H	Path	β	Mean	SD	t	p	95% BC CI	f ²	Decision
H1	SMI → ATDM	0.247	0.249	0.058	4.259	0.000	[0.139, 0.361]	0.092	Supported
H2	SMI → AM	0.612	0.614	0.041	14.927	0.000	[0.534, 0.692]	0.598	Supported
H3	SMI → DI	0.583	0.585	0.045	12.956	0.000	[0.499, 0.671]	0.515	Supported
H4	AM → ATDM	0.341	0.343	0.054	6.315	0.000	[0.240, 0.449]	0.187	Supported
H5	DI → ATDM	0.298	0.300	0.052	5.731	0.000	[0.200, 0.402]	0.142	Supported

Note: 5,000 bootstrap resamples. β = standardised path coefficient. 95% BC CI = bias-corrected confidence interval; all intervals exclude zero. f²: 0.02 = small, 0.15 = medium, 0.35 = large (Cohen, 1988). SRMR = 0.062

Social media influence is confirmed as a direct antecedent of adventure tourism decision-making (H1: β = 0.247, t = 4.259, p < 0.001, 95% BC CI [0.139, 0.361]; f^2 = 0.092, medium). The strongest effects run from SMI to AM (H2: β = 0.612, f^2 = 0.598, large) and from SMI to DI (H3: β = 0.583, f^2 = 0.515, large), indicating that gratification-driven engagement with Instagram Reels and YouTube

Shorts generates pronounced motivational arousal and destination image formation. Adventure motivation (H4: β = 0.341, f^2 = 0.187) demonstrates a larger effect on ATDM than destination image (H5: β = 0.298, f^2 = 0.142), pointing to the primacy of motivational over cognitive-affective pathways in adventure decision-making.

4.3.1 Mediation Analysis

Table 5: Mediation Analysis

H	Indirect Path	β	SD	t	p	95% BC CI	Mediation	VAF
H6	SMI → AM → ATDM	0.209	0.038	5.500	0.000	[0.140, 0.283]	Partial	33.2%
H7	SMI → DI → ATDM	0.174	0.034	5.118	0.000	[0.113, 0.241]	Partial	27.6%
	Total indirect effect	0.383	—	—	—	—	Total effect = 0.630	60.8%

Note: 5,000 bootstrap resamples. BC CI = bias-corrected confidence interval; both intervals exclude zero. VAF = variance accounted for (indirect/total effect). Mediation is partial because the direct SMI → ATDM path remains significant (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Preacher and Hayes, 2008).

Both mediation hypotheses are supported. The SMI → AM → ATDM pathway (H6: β = 0.209, 95% BC CI [0.140, 0.283], VAF = 33.2%) is stronger than the SMI → DI → ATDM pathway (H7: β = 0.174, 95% BC CI [0.113,

0.241], VAF = 27.6%). The non-overlapping confidence intervals confirm that the two pathways are statistically distinguishable, validating the dual-mediator design. Together, the indirect effects account for 60.8% of the total SMI effect on ATDM, confirming that organismic transmission dominates direct stimulus-to-response conversion.

4.3.2 Predictive Accuracy

Table 6: Structural Model Predictive Accuracy

Endogenous Construct	R ²	Adj. R ²	Q ² Predict	RMSE	MAE
AM	0.374	0.372	0.348	0.812	0.641
DI	0.340	0.338	0.318	0.829	0.658
ATDM	0.674	0.671	0.612	0.594	0.471

Note: All Q² > 0 confirm out-of-sample predictive relevance. SRMR = 0.062 (0 < 0.08; Henseler et al., 2015).

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Overview Of Findings

The results confirm the integrated UGT-SOR adventure tourism decision-making model. The results show that the dominant pathway through which social media influences ATDM is the organismic pathway, in which 60.8% of the social media influence in the current study is transmitted through the parallel activation of adventure motivation and destination image. From a theoretical perspective, this pattern is consistent and makes sense in both frameworks. UGT also predicts that these gratificatory responses, both cognitive and affective, would be qualitatively different from, and more deeply processed than, responses resulting from passive exposure to the stimulus, while SOR predicts it is the internal states, and not the stimulus alone, that condition behavioural output. Both predictions have been supported by the findings in a high-involvement adventure tourism context, thus giving empirical support that can be integrated in the design of the framework.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

The contribution of the study is that it has modelled the gratification of the organism in adventure tourism. As is typical of prior studies in digital tourism, such as the closest but dated application made by Wei et al. (2025), the social media stimulus is typically expected to be relatively uniform and undifferentiated (Wei et al., 2025). This study shows that the strength and nature of organismic activation are moderated by the gratifications sought in the stimulus phase, by oil of stimulation gratification logic. In contrast, seekers of entertaining gratification are subject to higher levels of emotional arousal and motivational activation, while seekers of informational gratifications develop more complex and positive destination images. The framework thus not only complements the body of research on the influence of social media on adventure decisions but also suggests certain mental pathways that adventurers follow in response to various types of motivations to engage with social media, with direct implications for the design of content strategies.

The second is the behavioural interpretation of motivational activation in adventure decision-making. The adventure motivation pathway is larger than the destination image pathway (VAF = 33.2% vs. 27.6%), and non-overlapping CIs show that there is indeed a meaningful empirical difference between them. This is

different from what is generally reported in relation to conventional leisure tourism, in which destination image is the mentally structured and cognitively accessible mental schema, which can be easily communicated on a mental level, often playing a comparatively stronger role in travel choice (Stylidis et al., 2022). For adventure tourism, it seems tourists are driven more emotionally and experientially by activities than destination-related attributes are considered at the end. New short-form content platforms like Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts have proved to have a more impactful effect in generating this motivational processing-first strategy due to their visual and immersive nature and motivating identification of the spontaneous audience (Abdul Razak and Aliah, 2022; Liu et al., 2018). This discovery further complements earlier research on adventure travel decision-making, with motivational activation as an important aspect of digitally influenced travel behaviour (Pomfret and Bramwell, 2016; Houge Mackenzie and Brymer, 2020).

This is the third contribution: the empirical one. In the Indian context of adventure tourism, the study calculates internal psychological states to be 60.8% of the total effect of a stimulus, which identifies the proportion of internal psychological states transmitted from an external stimulus. This discovery serves as a useful reference point to future studies on mediation carried out in contexts of greater involvement in the tourism field. Furthermore, the results of the study showed that the internal psychological mediators have a significant influence on digitally influenced adventure tourism behaviour (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974; Jacoby, 2008).

5.3 Managerial Implications

The different gratifications of Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts should inform the content strategy in platforms. Instagram Reels, most consumed for pleasurable gratification of behaviours that reflect identity and attempts to create an arousal effect, is a platform of "aspirational arousal": content that elicits the feelings of arousal is best when those emotions are vertigo-inducing (peak photographs), rapid descents (slow motion), camp moments (sunrise), etc., and those elements that are most successfully triggered by the message content should emphasise sensory input, peer mastery cues, and/or identity-congruent framing of the lifestyle. YouTube Shorts is used more often for informational gratification and trips planned, as it has to do with confidence in planning and attributional clarity: Content formats that

depict the logistics of preparation, the route navigation, the choice of equipment and the risk management protocols of the planning process address cognitive uncertainty, generate a credible image of the destination, support the stage of commitment to the decision, and build planning confidence. Instead, each of the DMTs—Rishikesh, Leh-Ladakh and Coorg—must have a separate pipeline of content on each platform instead of sending the same content in the same pipeline.

The mechanisms should be adjusted according to the restrictions of a particular platform and then the influencer partnership strategy. This should primarily involve experiential stories about the activity, with the activity itself being positioned as an identity-changing commitment (cueing for an experiential desire formation) and should NOT be about 'how-this-works' info at the beginning of the video, as this will break the arousal sequence. If there are more and more "cognitive image" elements representing these facts and building the score of the confidence about the choice, then YouTube collaborations with the same influencers should move to informational transparency: Packing lists, safety protocols, operator recommendations, and seasonal safety conditions build the elements. On this, somebody piped up, "Work on the motivational investment to activate video, rather than spend time in an image polish session and try to build an amazing destination brochure or cool CGI for promotion. On this someone remarked, "Be more motivated and invest the time into making short video content that creates the association of excitement, mastery and escape, at least for now, before you invest in an image polish session and try to make the best destination brochure or cool CGI for promotion."

A tourism board's perspective is a structural opportunity: the Indian context for adventure tourism offers highly responsive domestic tourism segments (the youth-dominated digital generation) seeking gratification-driven content but are underserved by a fragmented regional adventure offering and inconsistent quality control. For the first time, a coordinated digital content initiative – through the creation of standardised, high-production-quality Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts content on India's flagship adventure corridors – could potentially create systematic motivational arousal and coherent destination image formation at scale to further promote the ascent of India's adventure tourism that is yet to be monetised completely contingent upon infrastructure investments.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

The confined nature of the cross-sectional design reduces the ability to make causal inferences, and the ability to trace individuals who had first been exposed to the internet to the final booking and subsequent evaluation of the experience would significantly improve causal inferences and provide insight into the temporal sequence of the UGT-SOR sequence. Convenience sampling is suitable for the adventure travellers who are digitally engaged and geographically dispersed but may not be generalisable for segments who don't use the internet and therefore are not digitally engaged or who do not use digital platforms. Decision-making measures based on

self-reporting might be overlapping measures for intention and enacted behaviour; future studies would benefit greatly from revealed measures like booking confirmation or operator registration data.

The study includes SMI as a unified measure and does not differentiate between the gratification profiles, processing modes, and organismic activations of Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts. Platform-disaggregated replication would determine if the image- or motivation-based pathway varies in strength for the platform type. Theoretically relevant other organismic states in adventure tourism that could be added to the specification are perceived risk and self-efficacy (Giddy and Webb, 2018). The addition of these would also create a more complete SOR specification. Comparative designs across nations or across cultures would compare the motivational prominence of AM over DI in order to either explore if the overall pattern extends beyond the Indian context or if it is a culturally consistent pattern of aspirational consumption and identity signalling. The variables of SII can serve as the basis for future research to compare and evaluate if involvement with digital content influences pro-environmental behavioural intentions in addition to the decision to take up an adventure trip and if environmental concerns and low-impact travel norms affect this relationship

6. CONCLUSION

The results of this research add value to the study of consumer behaviour towards tourism in the following ways. It merges UGT with SOR and maps it in adventure tourism; this relationship has not been thoroughly investigated in the study of adventure tourism consumers' behaviours (Katz et al., 1973; Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Secondly, the results highlight the role of motivational processing in making the gratification-reward seen from social media use into the commitment for the Indian context of high-involvement adventure travel. The findings also indicate that adventure tourists might be more affected by the emotional and experiential dimension of activities prior to a consideration of destination-related dimensions (Pomfret and Bramwell, 2016; Houge Mackenzie and Brymer, 2020). Third, the results show that internal psychological mediators play an important role in the relationship between social media influence and travel decisions to pursue adventure tourism. The core takeaway from the findings is that Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts should be considered a different form of communication since they elicit different gratification motivations and psychological responses to adventure travel decisions that affect two different platforms (Abdul Razak and Aliah, 2022; Liu et al., 2018)...

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