

The Role of Trust in Mediating the Influence of Digital Promotion on Tourists Visiting Decisions: A Study of Guk and Yuk Sidoarjo Tourism Ambassador Community

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Abstract

This study investigates the effect of digital promotion on tourists' visiting decisions, with trust as a mediating variable in the Guk and Yuk Sidoarjo tourism ambassador community. Grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework, digital promotion acts as the stimulus, trust as the organism, and visiting decisions as the response. A quantitative causal design was employed, involving 240 respondents from @gukyusidoarjo followers. Data were collected via online questionnaire and analyzed using PLS-SEM. The results indicate that digital promotion does not directly influence visiting decisions. However, it has a significant positive effect on trust, while trust significantly affects visiting decisions. Trust fully mediates the relationship between digital promotion and visiting decisions. These findings suggest that digital promotion effectiveness depends on its ability to build trust among potential visitors. The study enriches SOR theory application and offers practical insights for tourism stakeholders in Sidoarjo to develop trust-oriented digital promotion strategies.

Keywords:

Digital Promotion; Trust; Visiting Decision; SOR Theory; Tourism Ambassador Community

JEL Code: M31; M37; Z33; L83

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INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector remains one of the most influential contributors to the global economy, accounting for nearly 10% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), equivalent to approximately USD 10.9 trillion (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2025). In Indonesia, tourism has experienced substantial growth following the COVID-19 pandemic, as reflected by the increase in its contribution to national GDP from 2.30% in 2021 to 4.67% in 2023 (Kemenpar RI, 2025). A similar positive trend can be observed in East Java Province, where international tourist arrivals increased by 47.42% in 2024 compared to the previous year (BPS Provinsi Jawa Timur, 2025). Nevertheless, tourism development in Sidoarjo Regency has not

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demonstrated the same level of stability and continues to experience fluctuations.

As a strategic entry point to East Java through Juanda International Airport, Sidoarjo Regency possesses considerable tourism resources. The region is home to 94 tourist attractions distributed across 18 districts, encompassing historical landmarks, marine tourism destinations, and cultural heritage sites (Disporapar Sidoarjo, 2025; Beritajatim.com, 2020). Despite this abundance of tourism assets, visitor numbers remain inconsistent. Data published by BPS Provinsi Jawa Timur (2025) indicate that tourist arrivals declined by 19.6% in April 2025, decreasing from 1,486,253 visitors in the previous month to 1,195,515 visitors. This condition is particularly noteworthy given the extensive digital promotional efforts undertaken by the Guk and Yuk Sidoarjo Tourism Ambassador Community through its Instagram account, @gukyusidoarjo, which recorded 2,531 posts, 50,003 followers, and an engagement rate of 0.35% (Socialblade, 2025). The discrepancy between intensive digital promotion and fluctuating tourist arrivals raises concerns regarding the effectiveness of current promotional strategies.

The advancement of digital technology has transformed tourism marketing practices, encouraging destinations to utilize digital platforms as key promotional channels. Among these platforms, Instagram has become one of the most widely used tools for disseminating tourism information and fostering interaction with potential visitors (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019). This trend is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where Generation Z represents 61% of daily social media users (YouGov, 2025). As a result, travel-related decisions are increasingly influenced by information obtained through digital media. However, many tourism destinations, particularly those managed through community-based initiatives, continue to face challenges in implementing systematic and measurable digital promotion strategies. Promotional activities are often conducted inconsistently and without clear planning, thereby limiting their effectiveness (Budiani et al., 2018). This issue is especially relevant in Sidoarjo, where the Guk and Yuk community functions as one of the primary tourism promotion actors.

Previous studies have frequently identified digital promotion as an important factor influencing tourists visiting decisions. Several researchers reported a significant positive relationship between digital promotion and visiting behavior (Segara et al., 2023; Sitepu et al., 2024; Andini et al., 2024). Nevertheless, other findings suggest that digital promotion does not always exert a significant direct influence on tourists decisions to visit a destination (Sumantri et al., 2023). These mixed findings indicate that the relationship may involve underlying psychological processes rather than operating solely through direct effects. In this regard, trust has been recognized as a key

mediating factor connecting marketing stimuli and consumer decision-making processes (Hanaysha et al., 2025; Septiyanti & Andriani, 2025). Despite its importance, studies examining trust as a mediating variable have predominantly focused on e-commerce and product marketing contexts, while research within tourism ambassador community settings remains limited, particularly when promotional activities are conducted by local tourism ambassador communities such as Guk and Yuk Sidoarjo.

Furthermore, observations of the @gukyusidoarjo Instagram account reveal a notable shift in content strategy during 2026. Based on an examination of 27 posts published during this period, the majority of content emphasized internal organizational activities, including recruitment programs and the selection process of tourism ambassadors, rather than promoting tourism destinations. The most recent destination-related promotional content was identified in posts published in 2025. Such a shift may reduce the effectiveness of Instagram as a tourism marketing platform because the content no longer corresponds to the informational needs of prospective visitors. Consequently, the relatively high engagement rate of 0.35% may not be effectively converted into actual tourist visits.

Considering these issues and research gaps, this study investigates the influence of digital promotion conducted by the Guk and Yuk Sidoarjo community on tourists visiting decisions, with trust proposed as a mediating variable. Specifically, this study aims to examine: (1) the direct effect of digital promotion on visiting decisions; (2) the influence of digital promotion on tourist trust; (3) the effect of trust on visiting decisions; and (4) the mediating role of trust in the relationship between digital promotion and visiting decisions. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory within the context of community-based digital tourism marketing and provide practical recommendations for the Sidoarjo Tourism Office and the Guk and Yuk community in designing more effective trust-oriented promotional strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory

This study is based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory developed by (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). The SOR framework explains that environmental stimuli (S) influence an individual's internal psychological state (O), which subsequently shapes behavioral responses (R). Unlike the traditional Stimulus-Response (S-R) model, SOR emphasizes the role of cognitive and emotional processes as mediating mechanisms between external stimuli and behavioral outcomes. In digital tourism marketing, this theory helps explain how promotional content affects tourists psychological evaluations before influencing their travel decisions. Recent studies have

confirmed the relevance of the SOR framework in tourism research. Iriani et al. (2025) found that visual vividness in 360-degree video promotions enhanced tourists psychological experiences and visiting intentions. Similarly, Wu & Wang (2025) reported that accessibility, authenticity, and interactivity in AI-based virtual tourism influenced tourists attitudes and behavioral responses. These findings suggest that the SOR model can accommodate various digital stimuli and psychological mediators, including trust (Asyraff et al., 2023). In this study, digital promotion through Instagram is conceptualized as the Stimulus (S), trust as the Organism (O), and visiting decisions as the Response (R). Trust reflects tourists evaluation of the credibility and reliability of promotional information, while visiting decisions represent the behavioral outcome resulting from this evaluation process.

Digital Promotion

Digital promotion refers to marketing communication activities conducted through digital media, particularly social media, to deliver information, strengthen brand image, and encourage audiences to take specific actions, including visiting tourism destinations (Kotler & Keller, 2016; J. Tarigan & Sanjaya, 2013). Instagram is considered an effective platform for tourism promotion because it enables destinations to present attractive visual content through photos, videos, and stories. In this study, digital promotion is measured using indicators adapted from the 4C framework proposed by Solis & Kutcher (2011) and complemented by Khatib (2016), namely: (1) attractive and relevant content, (2) interaction between audiences and information providers, (3) interaction among audience members, (4) ease of access and information sharing, and (5) audience trust in social media and promotional content.

Previous studies have demonstrated that digital promotion positively influences tourists visiting decisions (R. D. Andini et al., 2024; Segara et al., 2023; Sitepu et al., 2024). However, Sumantri et al. (2023) reported inconsistent findings, suggesting that the relationship may involve additional mechanisms. Based on the SOR framework, digital promotion serves as a stimulus that can directly influence behavioral responses.

H1. Digital promotion has a positive and significant effect on tourists visiting decisions.

Trust

Trust refers to an individual's willingness to place confidence in another party based on the belief that the party will behave in a reliable, honest, and beneficial manner (Mayer et al., 1995). Within the context of digital tourism marketing, trust represents tourists' confidence in the credibility, accuracy, and dependability of information communicated through digital promotional platforms (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In this study, trust is assessed using four indicators adapted from Morgan & Hunt (1994) and

Mayer et al. (1995), namely: (1) reliability, (2) integrity, (3) benevolence, and (4) ability. Previous empirical evidence indicates that digital marketing initiatives can strengthen consumer trust significantly (Anggraini & Sobari, 2023; Baskara et al., 2025).

H2: Digital promotion has a positive and significant effect on tourists' trust.

Visiting Decisions

Visiting decisions refer to tourists' selection of a destination after considering and evaluating the information available as well as alternative travel options (Damanik & Weber, 2006; Wijaya et al., 2021). In the context of digital tourism marketing, visiting decisions can be understood as the behavioral outcome that arises after tourists process and interpret promotional content delivered through digital platforms (Iriani et al., 2025). Prior research has consistently shown that trust plays a significant role in shaping tourists' decisions to visit a destination (Kitsios et al., 2022; Tarigan et al., 2025).

H3: Trust has a positive and significant effect on tourists' visiting decisions.

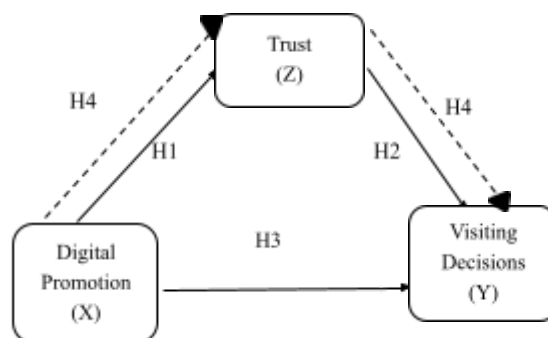
The Mediating Role of Trust

Based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory, trust functions as an internal psychological mechanism that links external stimuli to behavioral responses. In this study, digital promotion is positioned as the stimulus, trust as the organism, and visiting decisions as the response. The conceptual framework therefore proposes that tourists' trust may explain how digital promotion influences visiting decisions. Previous studies have highlighted the mediating role of trust in the relationship between marketing stimuli and consumer behavior (Andini & Ali, 2025; Septiyanti & Andriani, 2025). Similarly, Hanaysha et al. (2025) found that trust mediates the effect of various digital stimuli on consumers' behavioral intentions. Despite these findings, the mediating role of trust remains underexplored in the context of tourism ambassador community.

H4: Trust significantly mediates the relationship between digital promotion and tourists' visiting decisions.

Figure 1

Research Framework



Source: Authors work (2026)

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a quantitative approach using a causal research design to investigate the relationships among digital promotion, trust, and tourists' visiting decisions. Primary data were collected through an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms to 240 followers of the @gukyusidoarjo Instagram account. The respondents were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on three eligibility criteria: (1) having been exposed to digital promotional content published by the Guk and Yuk Sidoarjo Tourism Ambassador Community, (2) being between 17 and 45 years of age, and (3) having visited at least one tourist destination in Sidoarjo Regency.

The research instrument comprised 24 measurement items evaluated on a five-point Likert scale. The measurement indicators were adapted from several well-established references, including Damanik and Weber (2006), Khatib (2016), Kotler and Keller (2016), Mayer et al. (1995), Morgan and Hunt (1994), and Solis and Kutcher (2011). Before the main survey was conducted, the questionnaire underwent a pilot test involving 30 respondents to verify its validity and reliability. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 software. The analytical procedure involved evaluating both the measurement model and the structural model. Hypothesis testing was carried out through the bootstrapping technique using 5,000 resamples with a significance level of 5%.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Profile

A total of 240 respondents participated in this study. Female respondents constituted the majority of the sample, accounting for 67.92%, while male respondents represented the remaining 32.08%. Regarding age distribution, most participants were between 17 and 24 years old (77.5%), followed by respondents aged 25-34 years (16.67%) and those between 35 and 45 years old (5.83%). In terms of domicile, 80.42% of the respondents resided in Sidoarjo Regency, whereas 19.58% lived outside the region.

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was assessed to determine the validity and reliability of the research constructs. The results showed that all indicator loading values were greater than the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming satisfactory convergent validity. In addition, both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values exceeded 0.70 for every construct, indicating strong internal consistency. The average variance extracted (AVE)

values were also above the minimum acceptable level of 0.50, suggesting adequate convergent validity. Furthermore, discriminant validity was established based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, with all HTMT values falling below the threshold of 0.90 (Hair et al., 2019).

Tabel 1.

Measurement Model Assessment

Construct	Items	Outer Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Digital Promotion	DP1	0.755	0.932	0.942	0.619
	DP2	0.788			
	DP3	0.795			
	DP4	0.793			
	DP5	0.793			
	DP6	0.813			
	DP7	0.760			
	DP8	0.790			
	DP9	0.790			
	DP10	0.789			
Trust	T1	0.821	0.922	0.938	0.739
	T2	0.851			
	T3	0.829			
	T4	0.853			
	T5	0.842			
	T6	0.824			
	T7	0.760			
Visiting Decisions	VD1	0.774	0.941	0.952	0.683
	VD2	0.803			
	VD3	0.872			
	VD4	0.895			
	VD5	0.866			
	VD6	0.894			
	VD7	0.907			

Source: Authors work (2026)

Hypothesis Testing Results

The structural model was assessed to examine the proposed hypotheses and the relationships among the research constructs. Table 5 presents the path coefficients, t-statistics, p-values, and the results of hypothesis testing. The coefficient of determination (R^2) for visiting decisions was 0.472, indicating that digital promotion and trust jointly explained 47.2% of the variance in visiting decisions. Meanwhile, the R^2 value for trust was 0.614, suggesting that digital promotion accounted for 61.4% of the variance in tourists' trust. These results indicate that the model possesses moderate explanatory power in predicting both trust and visiting decisions. The effect

size (f^2) showed that trust had a moderate influence on visiting decisions, with a value of 0.289. In contrast, digital promotion demonstrated a substantial impact on trust, as reflected by its f^2 value of 1.589. Furthermore, the Q^2 values for visiting decisions (0.313) and trust (0.610) were both greater than zero, indicating that the structural model possesses satisfactory predictive relevance.

Tabel 2.
Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficient	T-Statistic	P-Value	Result
H1	DP → VD	0.073	0.912	0.362	Not Supported
H2	DP → T	0.783	28.690	0.000	Supported
H3	T → VD	0.628	9.336	0.000	Supported
H4	DP → T → VD	0.492	8.901	0.000	Supported

Note: Sig. at $p < 0.05$
Source: Authors work (2026)

Discussion

The Effect of Digital Promotion on Visiting Decisions

The results indicate that digital promotion does not have a significant direct effect on tourists' visiting decisions, leading to the rejection of H1. This finding is consistent with previous studies conducted by Sumantri et al. (2023) and (Anggraini & Sobari, 2023), which also reported the absence of a significant direct relationship between digital promotion and consumer decision-making.

One possible explanation is the shift in content focus on the @gukyusidoarjo Instagram account during 2026. Most posts emphasized internal organizational activities, such as recruitment and ambassador selection processes, rather than tourism destination promotion. Consequently, the content became less relevant to potential tourists seeking travel-related information. In addition, the promotional content tended to be informative and formal, with limited storytelling elements capable of generating emotional engagement.

From the perspective of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory, digital promotion functions as a stimulus that does not automatically lead to a behavioral response. Instead, the stimulus must first be processed through an internal psychological state, namely trust, before influencing visiting decisions. This finding suggests that promotional exposure alone is insufficient to encourage actual visits when tourists have not yet developed trust in the information provided. The result is further supported by the dominance of Generation Z respondents, who tend to be more selective and place greater value on authentic and credible content than on conventional promotional messages (Hana & Ernawati, 2025).

The Effect of Digital Promotion on Trust

The findings show that digital promotion has a positive and significant effect on tourists' trust, supporting H2. This result is consistent with previous studies by Baskara et al. (2025) and Anggraini & Sobari (2023), which found that digital marketing activities can strengthen consumer trust. The mean score of the trust variable was 3.77, indicating that respondents generally agreed with the trust-related statements.

Among the trust indicators, the highest scores were recorded for T2 ("I can rely on Guk and Yuk Sidoarjo as a source of tourism information that meets my expectations") and T5 ("I believe the promotions conducted by Guk and Yuk Sidoarjo are based on genuine care and a sincere desire to help tourists obtain correct information"). These results suggest that respondents perceive the Guk and Yuk Sidoarjo community as a credible and dependable source of tourism information.

According to the trust theory proposed by Morgan & Hunt (1994) and Mayer et al. (1995), trust develops when information providers consistently demonstrate reliability, integrity, benevolence, and ability. Therefore, digital promotion that delivers accurate, transparent, and relevant information can strengthen tourists' trust toward the promotional source.

The Effect of Trust on Visiting Decisions

The results indicate that trust has a positive and significant effect on tourists' visiting decisions, supporting H3. This finding is consistent with previous studies by E. Tarigan et al. (2025) and Kitsios et al. (2022), which highlighted the important role of trust in influencing tourist behavior. The mean score of the visiting decision variable was 3.74, indicating that respondents generally agreed with the statements related to visiting decisions.

The highest-rated items were VD6 ("I solidify my choice to visit a tourist destination in Sidoarjo because I trust the information provided by Guk and Yuk Sidoarjo") and VD7 ("I decide to recommend information from Guk and Yuk Sidoarjo to others as a credible source"). These findings suggest that trust not only strengthens tourists' decisions to visit a destination but also encourages positive electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM).

From the perspective of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory, trust serves as the organism that processes and evaluates promotional stimuli before generating a behavioral response (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). When tourists perceive information as credible and reliable, their perceived risk decreases, increasing their confidence in visiting the destination. This finding supports Zara et al. (2023), who argued that trust developed through consistent information and source credibility plays a crucial role in shaping tourists' visiting decisions.

The Mediating Role of Trust

The results confirm that trust fully mediates the relationship between digital promotion and tourists' visiting decisions, supporting H4. This finding is consistent with previous studies by Septiyanti & Andriani (2025) and Hanaysha et al. (2025), which identified trust as a key mechanism linking marketing stimuli to consumer behavior. The Variance Accounted For (VAF) value of 87.1% indicates that the influence of digital promotion on visiting decisions occurs primarily through trust rather than through a direct effect.

From the perspective of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory, trust functions as the organism that translates promotional stimuli into behavioral responses. Digital promotion contributes to visiting decisions only when it successfully builds tourists' trust through relevant content, interactive communication, ease of information access, and source credibility. Once trust is established, tourists become more confident in making travel decisions. The full mediation effect found in this study suggests that trust serves as a critical psychological bridge between digital promotion and visiting decisions within the context of tourism ambassador community.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the influence of digital promotion on tourists' visiting decisions with trust as a mediating variable in the context of Guk and Yuk Sidoarjo tourism ambassador community. The findings provide empirical evidence that digital promotion does not directly influence visiting decisions but significantly affects trust, while trust significantly influences visiting decisions. Moreover, trust is identified as a full mediator in this relationship, indicating that the impact of digital promotion on visiting decisions occurs primarily through tourists' trust as an internal psychological process.

Theoretically, this study extends the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory by demonstrating that trust functions as the organism that links digital promotion (stimulus) and visiting decisions (response) within tourism ambassador community settings. Practically, the results suggest that the effectiveness of digital promotion depends not merely on content quantity, but on its ability to build trust through consistent, relevant, and credible information aligned with tourists' needs. In this regard, digital promotion should be viewed as a strategic tool that supports destination marketing, strengthens tourist confidence, and contributes to the development of smart tourism initiatives.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the use of a cross-sectional research design prevents the study from capturing changes in tourists' behavior over time. Second, the data were collected using self-administered questionnaires,

which may be susceptible to social desirability bias. Third, this research examines digital promotion solely through the Instagram platform, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other digital media. Fourth, the study is confined to the context of the Guk and Yuk Sidoarjo Tourism Ambassador Community, which may restrict the broader applicability of the results. Finally, the demographic characteristics analyzed were limited to respondents' gender, age, and domicile.

Future studies are encouraged to employ longitudinal or mixed-method research designs to provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourists' behavioral changes. Researchers may also compare the effectiveness of different digital promotion platforms and expand the proposed research model by incorporating additional variables, such as digital capability, institutional support, and competitive pressure, to obtain a deeper understanding of factors influencing tourists' visiting decisions.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author: Conceptualisation and Research Design, Data Collection, Methodology, Supervision, Writing Entire Paper, Conceptualisation, Data Collection and Analysis, Editing and Layouting. All Authors have read the final version of the paper.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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