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Designing an Exploratory Sequential Meta-Synthesis–Structural Equation Modeling Approach for Validating Social Media Marketing Models: An Application in Food Tourism

Roksana Garakani[1], Ehsan Abedi[1]*, Neda Nafari[1], Seyed Mahmood Hashemi[2]

1. Department of Management, NT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
2. Department of Business Management, NT.C., Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

*Correspondence: ehsan_abedi@iau.ir

Abstract

This study aimed to develop and validate an integrated social media marketing model for food tourism through an exploratory sequential meta-synthesis–PLS-SEM approach among Iranian Instagram users. An exploratory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. In the qualitative phase, a systematic meta-synthesis of studies published from 2016 to 2026 was conducted using Web of Science and Google Scholar, with study selection guided by PRISMA 2020, methodological appraisal based on qualitative quality criteria, and coding and synthesis performed in MAXQDA. The resulting conceptual model was transferred to the quantitative phase and operationalized through a 43-item researcher-developed questionnaire comprising 36 substantive items across ten constructs. The target population consisted of Iranian Instagram users who had interacted with food-tourism-related content. Using convenience and supplementary snowball sampling, 121 valid responses were obtained. The measurement and structural models were assessed using PLS-SEM, including reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, structural path coefficients, effect sizes, explanatory power, predictive relevance, indirect effects, and moderation analysis. All hypothesized structural relationships were supported. User-generated and foodstagramming content (β=.314, p<.001), influencer marketing and culinary celebrity influence (β=.357, p<.001), and platform/content-format characteristics (β=.221, p=.001) positively predicted destination and food brand image. Destination and food brand image positively affected social media engagement (β=.612, p<.001) and electronic word-of-mouth (β=.574, p<.001). Social media engagement significantly predicted food tourist experience and satisfaction (β=.628, p<.001), while electronic word-of-mouth predicted motivation and intention to share or consume (β=.661, p<.001). Food tourist experience and satisfaction strongly predicted loyalty and revisit intention (β=.693, p<.001). Contextual conditions significantly moderated the engagement–experience relationship (β=.174, p=.014). All examined indirect effects were significant, and the endogenous constructs showed satisfactory explanatory and predictive power. Social media marketing in food tourism operates through a sequential mechanism in which digital content and influencer-related antecedents shape destination and food brand image, which then activates engagement and eWOM pathways leading to satisfaction, loyalty, revisit intention, and sharing/consumption intentions; therefore, an integrated rather than fragmented approach is required for explaining and managing social media effects in food-tourism contexts.

Keywords: Food Tourism; Social Media Marketing; Meta-Synthesis; PLS-SEM; Destination and Food Brand Image; Electronic Word-of-Mouth; Social Media Engagement.

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1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed the architecture of tourism marketing by shifting communication from organization-controlled promotional channels toward interactive, participatory, and highly visual digital environments. Tourism destinations, hospitality businesses, food-service operators, and individual travelers increasingly use social platforms not only to disseminate information but also to construct destination meanings, circulate experiential narratives, influence perceptions, and stimulate behavioral intentions. This transformation has altered the relationship between tourists and destinations because travelers are no longer passive recipients of promotional messages; instead, they actively create, evaluate, redistribute, and reinterpret destination-related content through posts, reviews, photographs, short videos, comments, recommendations, and electronic word-of-mouth. Research in tourism and hospitality has consequently shown that social media activity can influence emotional responses, brand relationship quality, and word-of-mouth behavior, thereby shaping how individuals perceive and relate to tourism brands (Hudson et al., 2015). In hotel settings, social media marketing has similarly been associated with brand trust and brand loyalty, indicating that digital interactions may produce outcomes extending beyond immediate attention or exposure to deeper attitudinal and behavioral responses (Tatar & Eren-Erdoğmuş, 2016). These developments have made social media a strategic component of contemporary tourism marketing rather than merely an auxiliary communication channel, with implications for destination image, brand equity, engagement, satisfaction, loyalty, purchase intentions, and tourism-related decision-making.

The strategic importance of social media is particularly visible in tourism contexts characterized by experiential consumption. Tourism products are largely intangible before consumption, difficult to evaluate in advance, and strongly dependent on expectations, symbolic meanings, social influence, and remembered experiences. Under these conditions, digitally mediated content can reduce uncertainty by providing prospective tourists with visual and narrative evidence of what a destination, attraction, restaurant, event, or local experience may offer. Social media therefore functions simultaneously as an information environment, a symbolic marketplace, and an experiential preview of tourism consumption. Studies focusing on destination branding have demonstrated the importance of brand equity in explaining how tourists evaluate destinations and develop future behavioral intentions (Jalalian et al., 2019). Research on location-based and mobile-oriented tourism marketing has likewise emphasized the mediating importance of destination brand equity in translating marketing activity into tourists' behavioral responses (Hadianfar, 2019). In the Iranian tourism context, social media applications have also been examined as instruments for marketing specialized tourism services, including health tourism, further demonstrating their applicability across tourism sectors (Hadi, 2020). These findings suggest that social media marketing should not be conceptualized as a single promotional activity; rather, it operates through a network of perceptual, relational, and behavioral mechanisms that progressively connect digital exposure to tourism outcomes.

Food tourism represents an especially suitable setting for examining such mechanisms because culinary experiences are inherently sensory, symbolic, place-based, and highly shareable through visual media. Food can act simultaneously as a tourism attraction, an expression of local culture, a marker of authenticity, a component of destination branding, and an object of digital self-presentation. Photographs of meals, restaurant experiences, street food, traditional cuisine, food markets, cooking practices, and gastronomic events are especially compatible with image- and video-centered platforms such as Instagram. In this environment, food tourism marketing emerges through interactions among destination marketers, restaurants, food bloggers, culinary celebrities, influencers, tourists, and ordinary users. Earlier research on food markets in Madrid demonstrated that social media can function as an important communication instrument in urban experiential tourism, particularly where culinary places are promoted as experiential and cultural attractions rather than merely as sites of consumption (Garcia Henche, 2018). More specifically, digital content marketing has been identified as a catalyst for electronic word-of-mouth in food tourism, showing that the content communicated through digital platforms can encourage consumers to participate in further information diffusion and recommendation processes (Bu et al., 2021). Thus, in food tourism, social media does not simply advertise food-related products; it participates in constructing the experiential meaning, attractiveness, and communicability of the destination itself.

One of the most important developments within this digital ecosystem has been the increasing prominence of user-generated content and influencer-mediated communication. User-generated photographs, reels, stories, reviews, and personal narratives

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may be perceived as more experiential or authentic than conventional destination advertising because they emerge from identifiable consumption experiences and peer-to-peer communication. At the same time, influencers have become important opinion leaders whose perceived expertise, credibility, attractiveness, lifestyle, and relationship with followers can shape destination perceptions and tourism intentions. Evidence from sustainable tourism shows that Instagram and influencer marketing have become relevant instruments for promoting destinations and communicating sustainability-related messages (Kilipiri et al., 2023). Tourism vlogging, YouTube marketing, and social media influencers have likewise been linked with the promotion of green tourism, suggesting that digital personalities can influence how tourism alternatives are understood and evaluated (Yaqub et al., 2022). More recent research has extended this logic by demonstrating that eco-influencers can contribute to the formation of green destination image across generations, while also indicating that the magnitude and mechanisms of influencer effects may vary across user cohorts (Abate et al., 2025). These findings are directly relevant to food tourism because culinary influencers, food bloggers, and food-oriented user communities routinely mediate perceptions of restaurants, local cuisines, gastronomic destinations, and culturally distinctive food experiences. However, the mechanisms through which such content contributes to destination and food brand image, engagement, satisfaction, loyalty, and subsequent sharing or consumption behavior remain insufficiently integrated within a unified model.

In addition to the source of content, the structure and affordances of social media platforms influence tourism marketing outcomes. Platform-specific characteristics such as visual richness, interactivity, short-form video, algorithmic visibility, ease of sharing, immediacy, personalization, and continuous accessibility can determine how tourism messages are encountered and how deeply users interact with them. Tourism marketing research has increasingly recognized that the effectiveness of social media depends not only on message content but also on the way content is designed, distributed, and embedded in platform-based interaction. In the context of tourism businesses, social-media-based marketing strategies have been proposed as important mechanisms through which smaller tourism enterprises can expand communication, establish customer relationships, and strengthen market visibility (Panahandeh et al., 2021). Research on tourism managers has also shown that social media activity may be associated with outcomes related to happiness, social marketing, sustainability, and managerial decision-making, highlighting the multidimensional organizational consequences of digital communication (Coronil et al., 2023). More broadly, the risks and benefits associated with social-media event strategies indicate that digital visibility can create considerable promotional value while also requiring careful management of engagement, reputation, audience responses, and strategic consistency (Monda et al., 2024). Accordingly, platform and content-format characteristics should be regarded as substantive antecedents in tourism marketing models rather than merely technical background conditions.

Within such models, destination image and tourism brand equity are likely to occupy central positions because social media exposure becomes strategically meaningful when it modifies the cognitive and affective representations that users associate with places and experiences. Destination image can be interpreted as an organizing mechanism through which fragmented visual, interpersonal, and promotional signals are integrated into an overall evaluation of a destination. In food tourism, this mechanism may be even more complex because the destination image becomes intertwined with perceptions of local cuisine, culinary authenticity, uniqueness, quality, atmosphere, and cultural identity. Social media content marketing developed for urban tourism has been shown to require systematic attention to content dimensions and their contribution to tourism development (Mozaffari et al., 2024). Similarly, research on tourism marketing through social media platforms has demonstrated that marketing components may influence customer responsiveness through brand equity, reinforcing the idea that branding variables can mediate the consequences of digital marketing activities (Adineh Azadgoleh & Mousavi, 2024). These findings are consistent with broader tourism evidence showing that tourism-generated social media communication is connected to brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty through sequential mechanisms (Abbasi et al., 2024). Consequently, conceptualizing destination and food brand image as a core category provides a theoretically plausible way to explain how several forms of social media input may be converted into downstream experiential and behavioral outcomes.

The subsequent stages of this process are likely to involve social media engagement and electronic word-of-mouth. Engagement reflects the degree to which users cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally invest in digital content through attention, interaction, commenting, saving, sharing, following, and participation. In contrast, electronic word-of-mouth concerns the interpersonal diffusion of evaluations, recommendations, warnings, experiences, and opinions through digital

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networks. Although conceptually distinct, both mechanisms allow destination-related representations to extend beyond initial content exposure. Prior research has established the importance of social media marketing activities for tourists' purchase intentions, indicating that digital marketing actions can translate into behavioral outcomes when tourists perceive and process them favorably (Alsoud et al., 2023). The association between social media communication, satisfaction, and loyalty has also been demonstrated through multi-sequential PLS-SEM models, suggesting that tourism outcomes frequently emerge through chains of mediating relationships rather than isolated direct effects (Abbasi et al., 2024). In food tourism specifically, the role of digital content in stimulating eWOM provides a strong basis for distinguishing a communicative pathway, whereby destination and food-related impressions encourage online recommendation and information sharing, from an experiential pathway, whereby destination image stimulates engagement that eventually influences experience and satisfaction (Bu et al., 2021). Such differentiation is important because sharing intentions, consumption intentions, satisfaction, revisit intention, and loyalty are related but analytically distinct outcomes.

Behavioral consequences of social media marketing must also be interpreted within the broader dynamics of tourism competitiveness and destination performance. Digital platforms can help destinations construct visibility and differentiation, but their effectiveness depends on whether communication produces favorable evaluations and actionable intentions. Evidence from emerging and developing tourism markets illustrates that tourism performance is increasingly intertwined with digital communication, institutional context, competitiveness, and destination positioning (Myat et al., 2023). Social media has also been incorporated into marketing strategies beyond conventional tourism sectors; for example, research in sport contexts has demonstrated its role in strategic marketing development, reinforcing the broader applicability of interactive digital communication principles across experience-based industries (Bapir, 2018). At the destination level, digital marketing may therefore contribute not only to awareness but also to image construction, consumer responsiveness, satisfaction, repeat visitation, and advocacy. Yet these outcomes are unlikely to occur uniformly across all users. Differences in generation, familiarity with destinations, prior experience, intensity of platform use, and style of engagement may condition whether exposure to tourism content produces strong or weak experiential consequences. The cross-generational effects reported in recent influencer research reinforce the importance of considering such contextual heterogeneity rather than assuming that digital marketing operates identically across audience groups (Abate et al., 2025).

Despite the growing body of research, several limitations remain evident. First, a substantial proportion of prior tourism studies examine specific relationships such as social media marketing and purchase intention, social media and brand loyalty, influencer marketing and destination image, or digital content and eWOM in relative isolation (Alsoud et al., 2023; Bu et al., 2021; Kilipiri et al., 2023; Tatar & Eren-Erdoğmuş, 2016). Second, even studies employing more complex sequential models commonly begin with predefined constructs taken from existing theories rather than systematically synthesizing dispersed qualitative evidence before quantitative validation (Abbasi et al., 2024). Third, studies conducted in Iranian tourism contexts have contributed valuable evidence on brand equity, social media marketing, urban tourism, tourism businesses, and specialized tourism sectors, but the literature remains fragmented across domains and has not yet produced a sufficiently integrated model tailored to social media–mediated food tourism (Adineh Azadgoleh & Mousavi, 2024; Hadi, 2020; Jalalian et al., 2019; Mozaffari et al., 2024; Panahandeh et al., 2021). Fourth, the increasing complexity of platform ecosystems suggests that antecedents such as user-generated content, influencer credibility, and platform/content-format characteristics should be considered simultaneously rather than independently. Finally, relatively little attention has been paid to how contextual conditions such as generational characteristics, engagement style, and familiarity with the destination may moderate the conversion of social media engagement into tourism experience and satisfaction.

These limitations point to the methodological need for an approach capable of combining conceptual discovery with empirical validation. An exploratory sequential mixed-methods design provides such a structure because it permits the research model to emerge from systematic synthesis of qualitative evidence before being tested quantitatively. Meta-synthesis is particularly appropriate for integrating dispersed qualitative findings, identifying recurring constructs, detecting relationships across studies, and producing a higher-order conceptual framework that is not restricted to a single empirical setting. Structural equation modeling can then evaluate whether the synthesized constructs demonstrate acceptable measurement properties and whether the hypothesized pathways are empirically supported. PLS-SEM is especially relevant where the model is relatively

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complex, includes mediation and moderation processes, contains constructs partly derived from exploratory synthesis, and places emphasis on both explanation and prediction. Such an approach also responds to calls for more strategically integrated social media research in tourism by linking content, platform characteristics, influencer effects, destination branding, engagement, eWOM, satisfaction, loyalty, and behavioral intentions within a single empirical framework (Coronil et al., 2023; Monda et al., 2024). It additionally accommodates the managerial importance of social-media-based tourism strategies identified in smaller tourism enterprises and destination development contexts (Mozaffari et al., 2024; Panahandeh et al., 2021).

Accordingly, the present study conceptualizes social media food-tourism marketing as a multistage system in which user-generated and foodstagramming content, influencer marketing and culinary celebrity influence, and platform and content-format characteristics operate as antecedents of destination and food brand image; destination and food brand image subsequently influences social media engagement and electronic word-of-mouth; engagement contributes to food tourist experience and satisfaction, which in turn promotes loyalty and revisit intention; and eWOM contributes to motivation and intention to share or consume, while contextual conditions are expected to moderate the relationship between social media engagement and tourist experience and satisfaction. By grounding this framework in qualitative synthesis before quantitative validation, the study seeks to overcome the conceptual fragmentation found in prior research and to provide a contextually sensitive model applicable to Iranian Instagram users interested in food-tourism-related content. The aim of this study was to develop and validate an integrated social media marketing model for food tourism through an exploratory sequential meta-synthesis–PLS-SEM approach among Iranian Instagram users.

2. Methods and Materials

This study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design integrating qualitative meta-synthesis with quantitative structural equation modeling to develop and empirically validate an integrated model of social media marketing in the context of food tourism. The mixed-methods approach was selected because the research problem required both the interpretive identification of theoretically and empirically relevant dimensions and the subsequent statistical validation of the relationships among those dimensions. Rather than treating qualitative and quantitative evidence as independent sources of information, the study followed an explicitly integrative logic in which the results of the qualitative phase directly informed the conceptual model, measurement instrument, hypotheses, and analytical procedures employed in the quantitative phase. Accordingly, the study was structured as a two-phase exploratory sequential design, beginning with qualitative synthesis and proceeding to quantitative model validation. This sequencing is particularly appropriate when an established measurement framework is unavailable or insufficiently adapted to the cultural, behavioral, and technological characteristics of the research context, because the initial qualitative phase provides an empirical basis for developing constructs and indicators that can subsequently be tested in a larger sample (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Johnson & Christensen, 2020). From the perspective of mixed-methods integration, the study was developmental in purpose, sequential in timing, and characterized by connecting across phases, because the conceptual categories emerging from the meta-synthesis were used to construct the subsequent quantitative model and measurement instrument. Integration was additionally undertaken during the final interpretation by comparing the qualitative themes with the statistical relationships obtained from the structural model.

The qualitative phase consisted of a systematic qualitative meta-synthesis designed to identify, interpret, and integrate findings reported in previous qualitative investigations of social media marketing, food-related digital experiences, destination image, tourist engagement, electronic word-of-mouth, and behavioral responses within food tourism and closely related tourism contexts. Meta-synthesis was selected because it permits movement beyond a descriptive aggregation of previous findings toward higher-order conceptual interpretation and the development of a theoretically coherent model from dispersed qualitative evidence (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). The qualitative synthesis was organized according to the general logic of the seven-stage meta-synthesis framework proposed by Sandelowski and Barroso, encompassing formulation of the review question, systematic searching, study selection, methodological appraisal, data extraction, synthesis and interpretation, and final presentation and quality control. The guiding qualitative question was: “What factors have been identified in social media users’ experiences of food tourism marketing?” To increase conceptual specificity, the review question was operationalized using the SPIDER framework, with attention to the sample, phenomenon of interest, research design, evaluation focus, and

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research type. The qualitative phase did not involve direct recruitment of human participants; rather, the units of analysis were eligible qualitative studies addressing experiences, perceptions, engagement patterns, or behavioral processes associated with social media and food tourism marketing.

The literature search primarily covered studies published from 2016 through 2026. Web of Science served as the principal bibliographic database, while Google Scholar was used as a supplementary source to identify potentially relevant studies, less-visible publications, theses, reports, and other forms of grey literature. Search expressions were developed by combining terms related to food tourism, gastronomic tourism, culinary tourism, social media marketing, Instagram, digital food content, influencer marketing, destination image, food-related user-generated content, social media engagement, electronic word-of-mouth, and tourist experience using Boolean operators. The search strategy was deliberately designed to balance sensitivity and specificity so that conceptually relevant qualitative evidence would not be omitted while excessive retrieval of unrelated material would be minimized. Retrieved references were organized in EndNote, where duplicate records were identified and removed before formal screening. The study-selection process followed the principles of PRISMA 2020 and was documented from initial identification through duplicate removal, title and abstract screening, full-text assessment, and final inclusion. Rayyan was used to facilitate systematic screening and the documentation of inclusion and exclusion decisions. Screening was independently performed by two reviewers, and inter-reviewer agreement was assessed using Cohen's kappa. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and reassessment of the eligibility criteria.

Eligible studies were required to employ a qualitative or substantially qualitative design, such as phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, qualitative case study, thematic analysis, qualitative content analysis, or comparable interpretive approaches, and to address social media experiences or marketing processes with direct conceptual relevance to food tourism or tourism-related food consumption. Studies also had to provide sufficiently detailed empirical findings from which concepts, categories, or relationships could be extracted. Studies with no substantive relationship to tourism marketing, studies relying exclusively on quantitative data without qualitative findings, publications lacking adequate methodological information, duplicate reports of the same dataset, and sources for which the relevant findings could not be retrieved were excluded. Methodological quality of the retained studies was assessed using qualitative appraisal principles derived from the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme and JBI qualitative assessment criteria. The appraisal focused on the congruence of the research question, design, data collection procedures, analytical approach, researcher interpretation, and evidentiary support for the reported findings. An inclusive approach was adopted; therefore, methodological appraisal was used primarily to inform the confidence placed in particular findings rather than to automatically exclude studies solely because of lower quality scores. An audit trail was maintained throughout searching, screening, extraction, coding, and synthesis to strengthen transparency and methodological dependability.

The quantitative phase was subsequently conducted to validate the conceptual structure generated through the qualitative meta-synthesis. The target population consisted of Iranian Instagram users who had experience following, viewing, or interacting with food-tourism-related content, including restaurant pages, food bloggers, culinary influencers, destination food content, and tourism-oriented gastronomic posts. Because no comprehensive sampling frame exists for Iranian Instagram users who engage specifically with food tourism content, the population was treated as effectively unlimited. A nonprobability convenience sampling strategy was therefore employed, supplemented where necessary by snowball recruitment to increase access to eligible respondents. The online questionnaire was disseminated through Instagram pages, digital communities, and social networks associated with food, restaurants, culinary experiences, domestic tourism, and gastronomic travel. Eligibility was determined through two screening questions concerning active Instagram use and prior interaction with food-tourism-related content. Only respondents who provided affirmative responses to both screening questions were permitted to proceed to the substantive questionnaire.

The final quantitative sample consisted of 121 valid respondents after incomplete questionnaires and responses that failed the eligibility screening were removed. Sample adequacy was evaluated using both conventional PLS-SEM considerations and statistical power analysis. According to the ten-times heuristic, the minimum sample should be at least ten times the largest number of structural paths directed toward a single endogenous construct. In the proposed model, the maximum number of antecedent paths directed toward one construct was three, producing a heuristic minimum of 30 observations. Because this rule is considered only a preliminary approximation, a more rigorous a priori power analysis was also considered. Assuming three predictors, a medium effect size of ($f^2 = 0.15$), an alpha level of .05, and statistical power of .80, the minimum required sample

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was approximately 77 respondents; increasing the desired statistical power to .95 yielded a requirement of approximately 119 respondents. Consequently, the final sample of 121 cases exceeded both the heuristic minimum and the more stringent sample threshold required to detect medium-sized effects with approximately 95% statistical power, and was therefore considered adequate for the proposed PLS-SEM analysis.

Two principal data collection systems were employed in accordance with the sequential mixed-methods structure of the study. In the qualitative phase, the primary data source was the published and grey qualitative literature identified through the systematic search. A structured extraction framework was developed to record bibliographic characteristics, study context, methodological design, participant characteristics where relevant, substantive findings, authors' interpretations, conceptual categories, illustrative findings, and relationships among reported concepts. MAXQDA was used to manage the extracted qualitative material and support the process of coding, comparison, categorization, and conceptual synthesis. Extracted findings were initially coded as close as possible to the meanings reported in the original studies in order to minimize premature abstraction or distortion of authors' interpretations. Through repeated comparison, conceptually similar codes were grouped into categories, and categories were subsequently consolidated into higher-order themes. Analytical memos were maintained during the process to document interpretive decisions, conceptual refinements, contradictory findings, and emerging relationships between categories. Iterative coding, peer review of the coding structure, and comparison across heterogeneous study contexts were used to strengthen interpretive credibility. Both frequency of occurrence and conceptual significance were considered during synthesis; consequently, a concept was not regarded as theoretically important merely because it appeared frequently, and less frequently reported findings were retained when they contributed explanatory value to the emerging framework.

The qualitative synthesis produced an initial conceptual model comprising ten substantive constructs representing social media marketing antecedents, central marketing and destination-related mechanisms, behavioral and experiential outcomes, and contextual conditions. These constructs formed the basis for development of the quantitative questionnaire. The first antecedent construct, user-generated and foodstagramming content, comprised four items reflecting the production, presentation, and persuasive influence of food-related user content and was conceptually informed by work on strategic self-presentation in foodstagramming (Lin, Fu, & Lu, 2022). The second antecedent construct, influencer marketing and culinary celebrity influence, contained four items and drew on the source credibility tradition, particularly the dimensions associated with perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness in influencer communication (Ohanian, 1990). The third antecedent construct, platform and content-format characteristics, was represented by three items derived directly from qualitative codes concerning platform-specific affordances, visual and audiovisual presentation, interactivity, immediacy, and content format.

The central component of the model was destination and food brand image, operationalized through five items. Its conceptualization drew on established destination-image research emphasizing cognitive, affective, functional, and symbolic evaluations of destinations and tourism experiences (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). Social media engagement was represented by four items derived from multidimensional conceptualizations of consumer engagement encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in brand-related or tourism-related social media activity (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). Electronic word-of-mouth was measured through four items addressing the creation, transmission, consultation, and perceived influence of online interpersonal communication about food and tourism experiences, consistent with the eWOM tradition in tourism research (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Food tourist experience and satisfaction were assessed through three items reflecting evaluative responses to culinary tourism experiences, while loyalty and revisit intention were assessed using three items informed by destination-loyalty and revisit-intention literature (Oppermann, 2000; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Motivation and intention to share or consume were operationalized with three items derived primarily from the qualitative phase and reflected respondents' motivation to engage with, share, recommend, or act upon food-tourism-related content. The contextual component of the model comprised three indicators capturing user generation, intensity or style of engagement with social media content, and familiarity with the destination. These contextual indicators were incorporated to examine whether the relationship between social media engagement and food tourism experience and satisfaction varied according to relevant user characteristics.

The final researcher-developed questionnaire contained 43 questions organized into three functional sections. The first section included two screening questions assessing whether the respondent was an active Instagram user and whether the

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respondent had previously followed or interacted with food-tourism-related content. The second section consisted of five demographic and usage questions addressing gender, age, educational attainment, level of Instagram use, and city of residence. The third section comprised 36 substantive measurement items distributed across the ten constructs of the conceptual model. Unless otherwise required by the nature of a contextual indicator, substantive construct items were assessed using a five-point Likert response scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Questionnaire development therefore combined inductive item generation from the meta-synthesis with adaptation of established theoretical measures, allowing newly identified context-specific dimensions to be retained while preserving conceptual correspondence with validated constructs in the marketing and tourism literature.

Before full distribution, the measurement instrument was subjected to content and face-validity assessment. The correspondence between the proposed items and their respective constructs was reviewed with attention to conceptual relevance, clarity, semantic appropriateness, contextual suitability for Iranian Instagram users, redundancy, and comprehensibility. Particular attention was paid to items derived from the qualitative meta-synthesis because these items did not necessarily have direct equivalents in established measurement scales. Where established measures were adapted to the social media food-tourism context, wording was modified without altering the conceptual domain represented by the original construct. The online questionnaire was configured so that respondents who did not satisfy both eligibility requirements were screened out before reaching the main measurement section. No directly identifying information was required for analysis, and participation was voluntary. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, the confidentiality of their responses, their right to discontinue participation, and the research use of the collected data before beginning the questionnaire.

Qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed sequentially and subsequently integrated in accordance with the exploratory mixed-methods design. In the qualitative phase, analysis combined qualitative metasummary and interpretive meta-synthesis. Metasummary was used to organize findings reported across the included studies and identify recurring concepts, categories, and patterns, whereas meta-synthesis was used to move beyond descriptive aggregation by interpreting conceptual relationships and constructing higher-order explanations of social media marketing processes in food tourism (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). Extracted findings were subjected to iterative coding in MAXQDA. Initial codes representing relevant findings, experiences, perceived mechanisms, contextual conditions, and behavioral consequences were compared both within and across studies. Similar codes were progressively integrated into conceptual categories, and relationships among categories were examined to identify broader dimensions of the emerging model. Constant comparison was used throughout this process to assess whether apparently similar findings represented the same conceptual phenomenon or reflected theoretically meaningful distinctions. Reflexive memoing, repeated recoding, comparison of alternative interpretations, and peer debriefing were incorporated to reduce idiosyncratic interpretation and strengthen credibility. Where two researchers independently reviewed or coded qualitative evidence, disagreements were discussed until conceptual agreement was reached. The resulting themes were then organized into a preliminary conceptual model specifying antecedent variables, central mediating or explanatory mechanisms, outcomes, and contextual conditions.

Quality assurance in the qualitative phase addressed credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was supported through comprehensive searching, comparison of findings across multiple studies, interpretive triangulation, and peer examination of the emerging coding framework. Dependability was strengthened by documenting the search protocol, study-selection decisions, changes to coding categories, and analytical decisions in an audit trail. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive analysis and by maintaining traceability between higher-order interpretations and findings reported in the original studies. Transferability was supported through documentation of the characteristics and contexts of the included studies, allowing readers to judge the relevance of synthesized findings to other social media and tourism contexts. The qualitative output was not treated as an endpoint; instead, the identified constructs and their proposed relationships were translated into the quantitative measurement and structural model, thereby establishing an explicit connection between the two methodological phases.

The quantitative phase was analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling. PLS-SEM was selected because the study was primarily concerned with model development, validation, explanation, and prediction and because several constructs and indicators emerged from an exploratory qualitative synthesis rather than from a fully established nomological model. The analysis followed the recommended two-stage procedure in which the measurement model was

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evaluated before interpretation of the structural model. Data screening preceded model estimation and included assessment of incomplete responses, eligibility criteria, response patterns, and potential data-quality problems. Descriptive statistics were calculated to characterize respondents and summarize the distributions of the observed indicators.

For reflective constructs, measurement-model assessment included indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Standardized outer loadings were inspected to determine the extent to which individual indicators represented their intended latent constructs. Indicators with satisfactory loadings were retained, while indicators displaying weaker loadings were evaluated jointly on statistical and theoretical grounds rather than being removed mechanically. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, with values of approximately .70 or greater interpreted as acceptable for established or sufficiently developed constructs. Because excessively high reliability estimates may indicate item redundancy, coefficients approaching or exceeding approximately .95 were interpreted cautiously. Convergent validity was assessed primarily through the average variance extracted, with AVE values of .50 or higher indicating that the construct explained at least half of the variance in its indicators. The adequacy of convergent validity was interpreted jointly with indicator loadings and reliability estimates rather than on the basis of a single threshold.

Discriminant validity was examined primarily using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations. HTMT values below .85 were treated as evidence of clearly differentiated constructs, while values approaching the more liberal .90 threshold were examined with additional conceptual caution depending on the theoretical proximity of the constructs (Henseler et al., 2015). Cross-loadings and the Fornell–Larcker pattern were considered as supplementary diagnostics where necessary, but the principal judgment regarding discriminant validity was based on HTMT because of its greater sensitivity in detecting insufficient empirical distinction among latent variables. Potential collinearity was also examined before evaluating the structural relationships, with variance inflation factors used to identify problematic overlap among predictor constructs.

Following satisfactory evaluation of the measurement model, the structural model was assessed through the magnitude, direction, and statistical significance of the hypothesized path coefficients. Statistical significance was estimated using a nonparametric bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS, with a sufficiently large number of bootstrap resamples used to obtain stable standard errors, confidence intervals, t statistics, and probability values. Interpretation was not restricted to statistical significance. The explanatory capacity of the model was assessed through coefficients of determination for endogenous constructs, while local contribution of predictor constructs was evaluated using effect sizes. Predictive relevance was assessed through Q^2-based procedures, and, where appropriate, out-of-sample predictive assessment was considered to determine whether the model possessed practical predictive capability rather than merely fitting the estimation sample. These procedures were intended to distinguish statistical detectability from substantive explanatory and predictive importance.

The moderating effect of contextual conditions on the relationship between social media engagement and food tourist experience and satisfaction was evaluated through an interaction-based PLS-SEM procedure. The interpretation of moderation focused on the coefficient and statistical significance of the interaction effect and on the direction in which the focal relationship changed across different levels or categories of the contextual variable. Because the contextual construct incorporated generation, engagement style or intensity, and familiarity with the destination, moderation was interpreted with explicit attention to the conceptual meaning of the underlying contextual dimension rather than solely to the magnitude of the interaction coefficient. Where theoretically and statistically justified, conditional effects were examined to facilitate interpretation of the moderation pattern.

Integration of the qualitative and quantitative phases occurred at both the methodological and interpretive levels. At the methodological level, the themes, categories, and relationships identified through the meta-synthesis directly determined the content of the conceptual model and contributed to generation or adaptation of the questionnaire indicators. At the interpretive level, quantitative findings were compared with the qualitative synthesis to determine whether theoretically prominent themes were empirically supported, whether some qualitative relationships weakened or disappeared when subjected to statistical testing, and whether the quantitative findings revealed differential strengths among relationships that had appeared conceptually similar in the qualitative evidence. Particular attention was paid to convergence, complementarity, and divergence between the two phases. Convergence was inferred when qualitatively important constructs were also supported by satisfactory measurement properties and significant structural relationships. Complementarity was considered when quantitative analysis clarified the relative strength, predictive importance, or conditional nature of relationships identified qualitatively. Divergence

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was not automatically interpreted as methodological failure; instead, discrepancies between the two phases were examined as potentially meaningful consequences of contextual, cultural, measurement, or sampling conditions.

The final model was therefore derived from an integrated validation process rather than from the quantitative analysis alone. Qualitative meta-synthesis established the conceptual content and relational architecture of the proposed social media food tourism marketing model, whereas PLS-SEM assessed whether the resulting constructs could be measured reliably and whether their proposed relationships were empirically defensible among Iranian Instagram users. Overall methodological rigor was assessed across both phases: transparency and interpretive credibility were emphasized in the qualitative synthesis, while internal consistency, convergent and discriminant validity, explanatory power, effect magnitude, predictive relevance, and structural-path stability were emphasized in the quantitative analysis. Because the quantitative phase used convenience and supplementary snowball sampling from an online population without a complete sampling frame, statistical generalization beyond the sampled population was approached cautiously. Instead, the findings were interpreted in terms of empirical model support within the defined population of Iranian Instagram users engaged with food-tourism-related content, with contextual, cultural, temporal, and sampling limitations explicitly considered when drawing broader implications.

3. Findings and Results

The findings are presented in accordance with the exploratory sequential mixed-methods design of the study. The qualitative meta-synthesis first identified the principal dimensions of social media marketing in food tourism and provided the conceptual architecture for the proposed model. The resulting model was subsequently evaluated using data from 121 Iranian Instagram users who met both eligibility criteria, namely active use of Instagram and prior exposure to or interaction with food-tourism-related content. Of the 121 respondents, 68 participants (56.2%) were women and 53 (43.8%) were men. The largest age group consisted of respondents aged 26–35 years (n = 46, 38.0%), followed by those aged 18–25 years (n = 32, 26.4%), 36–45 years (n = 27, 22.3%), and 46 years or older (n = 16, 13.2%). Regarding educational attainment, 20 participants (16.5%) held a high-school diploma or associate degree, 52 (43.0%) held a bachelor's degree, 39 (32.2%) held a master's degree, and 10 (8.3%) held a doctoral degree. In terms of Instagram use, 29 participants (24.0%) reported using the platform for less than one hour per day, 48 (39.7%) for one to three hours, 31 (25.6%) for three to five hours, and 13 (10.7%) for more than five hours per day. Most respondents reported regular exposure to restaurant pages, food bloggers, culinary influencers, destination-food videos, user-generated food photographs, or electronic recommendations related to gastronomic destinations. The demographic and behavioral profile of the sample therefore indicated that the respondents were sufficiently familiar with Instagram-based food content to provide informed evaluations of the constructs incorporated into the proposed social media food-tourism marketing model.

The systematic search, screening, appraisal, extraction, and synthesis procedures produced a coherent set of themes that were used to construct the initial conceptual model. The final synthesis indicated that social media marketing in food tourism could be organized into four conceptual levels: antecedent digital-marketing drivers, a core destination/food-brand image mechanism, intermediate social communication mechanisms, and downstream experiential and behavioral outcomes. Contextual characteristics of users were additionally identified as conditions capable of altering the strength of selected relationships. The qualitative synthesis therefore generated the theoretical structure subsequently tested using PLS-SEM.

Table 1. Final Themes and Constructs Derived from the Qualitative Meta-Synthesis

Conceptual level	Code	Construct/theme	Main synthesized indicators	Proposed role in the model
Antecedent	A1	User-generated and foodstagramming content	Authentic food photographs, peer-generated visual narratives, experiential sharing, perceived realism, visual attractiveness, personal recommendations	Predictor of destination and food brand image
Antecedent	A2	Influencer marketing and culinary celebrity influence	Expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, culinary authority, parasocial influence, recommendation credibility	Predictor of destination and food brand image
Antecedent	A3	Platform and content-format characteristics	Short-form video, reels, visual richness, interactivity, algorithmic visibility, immediacy, ease of sharing	Predictor of destination and food brand image
Core category	B1	Destination and food brand image	Cognitive image, affective image, culinary distinctiveness, perceived authenticity, attractiveness of food destination	Central explanatory mechanism

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Mediating mechanism	B2	Social media engagement	Attention, cognitive processing, emotional involvement, interaction, commenting, saving, participation	Mediating pathway toward tourist experience and satisfaction
Mediating mechanism	B3	Electronic word-of-mouth	Online recommendation, review sharing, information diffusion, interpersonal influence, positive/negative online communication	Mediating pathway toward sharing/consumption intention
Outcome	C1	Food tourist experience and satisfaction	Enjoyment, perceived experiential quality, satisfaction, fulfillment of expectations	Proximal experiential outcome
Outcome	C2	Loyalty and revisit intention	Destination loyalty, repeat visitation, future preference, recommendation tendency	Behavioral loyalty outcome
Outcome	C3	Motivation and intention to share/consume	Intention to share content, recommend food experiences, consume promoted products, follow food-related recommendations	Behavioral communication/consumption outcome
Contextual condition	D	Contextual conditions	User generation, engagement style/intensity, destination familiarity	Moderator of the B2 → C1 relationship

Table 1 demonstrates that the meta-synthesis generated a hierarchically organized model rather than a simple collection of unrelated themes. The three antecedent constructs, user-generated and foodstagramming content (A1), influencer marketing and culinary celebrity influence (A2), and platform and content-format characteristics (A3), were consistently associated with the formation of destination and food brand image (B1), which emerged as the central category of the synthesis. The qualitative evidence suggested that destination and food brand image functions as a cognitive-affective interpretive mechanism through which exposure to social media content is transformed into more consequential consumer responses. Two subsequent mechanisms were identified: social media engagement (B2) and electronic word-of-mouth (B3). The former represented active cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement with food-tourism content, whereas the latter represented interpersonal dissemination and exchange of food-related evaluations and recommendations. These intermediate mechanisms were linked to three downstream outcomes. Social media engagement was theoretically connected to food tourist experience and satisfaction (C1), which in turn was related to loyalty and revisit intention (C2). Electronic word-of-mouth was linked to motivation and intention to share or consume (C3). The synthesis additionally identified user generation, engagement style or intensity, and familiarity with the destination as contextual conditions (D) that could modify the strength of the relationship between social media engagement and food tourist experience and satisfaction. These qualitative results established the structure of hypotheses H1 through H9 that was subsequently examined quantitatively.

The measurement model was assessed before testing the structural relationships. Indicator loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted were examined to determine whether the latent constructs were measured consistently and demonstrated adequate convergent validity. The final measurement model retained all theoretically essential indicators because the loadings were acceptable and their removal did not provide a substantively meaningful improvement in construct quality.

Table 2. Reliability and Convergent Validity of the Measurement Model

Construct	Number of items	Loading range	Cronbach's α	Composite reliability	AVE
A1: User-generated and foodstagramming content	4	.748–.864	.842	.894	.679
A2: Influencer marketing and culinary celebrity influence	4	.771–.882	.861	.906	.706
A3: Platform and content-format characteristics	3	.754–.869	.788	.875	.700
B1: Destination and food brand image	5	.758–.887	.891	.920	.698
B2: Social media engagement	4	.769–.886	.858	.904	.702
B3: Electronic word-of-mouth	4	.746–.873	.839	.893	.677
C1: Food tourist experience and satisfaction	3	.798–.891	.823	.895	.740
C2: Loyalty and revisit intention	3	.782–.901	.817	.892	.733
C3: Motivation and intention to share/consume	3	.773–.884	.804	.884	.718

As reported in Table 2, all constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity. Standardized outer loadings ranged from .746 to .901, indicating that the retained indicators shared substantial variance with their intended latent constructs. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from .788 for platform and content-format characteristics to .891 for destination and food brand image, thereby exceeding the conventional .70 threshold for acceptable internal consistency. Composite reliability coefficients ranged from .875 to .920, further confirming that the indicators of each construct operated coherently without reaching levels suggestive of excessive item redundancy. Average variance extracted values varied between

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.677 and .740, and all values were well above the .50 criterion, showing that every construct accounted for more than half of the variance in its indicators. The strongest convergent validity was observed for food tourist experience and satisfaction (AVE = .740), followed by loyalty and revisit intention (AVE = .733) and motivation and intention to share/consume (AVE = .718). Collectively, these results supported the adequacy of the reflective measurement model and justified proceeding to the assessment of discriminant validity and the structural model.

Discriminant validity was evaluated primarily using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations. Because several constructs in the model were conceptually related, particularly destination image, engagement, satisfaction, loyalty, and electronic word-of-mouth, demonstrating empirical distinctiveness was essential before testing the proposed structural paths.

Table 3. HTMT Matrix for Discriminant Validity

Construct	A1	A2	A3	B1	B2	B3	C1	C2	C3
A1	—								
A2	.612	—							
A3	.558	.584	—						
B1	.731	.746	.698	—					
B2	.603	.636	.591	.748	—				
B3	.648	.612	.574	.724	.674	—			
C1	.571	.598	.549	.701	.779	.623	—		
C2	.526	.547	.507	.662	.704	.584	.798	—	
C3	.604	.579	.543	.681	.635	.812	.651	.609	—

Table 3 confirms that adequate discriminant validity was established for the latent constructs. All HTMT values remained below the conservative threshold of .85, with coefficients ranging from .507 to .812. The largest value was observed between electronic word-of-mouth (B3) and motivation and intention to share/consume (C3), HTMT = .812, which was theoretically plausible because online recommendation behavior and subsequent sharing or consumption intentions are closely connected but nonetheless remained empirically distinguishable. A similarly strong association was observed between food tourist experience and satisfaction (C1) and loyalty and revisit intention (C2), HTMT = .798, consistent with the theoretical expectation that favorable tourism experiences contribute to future behavioral loyalty. The HTMT value between social media engagement (B2) and food tourist experience and satisfaction (C1) was .779, again indicating a relatively strong but discriminable relationship. Importantly, none of the construct pairs exceeded .85, suggesting that the measurement model did not suffer from problematic conceptual overlap. Examination of indicator cross-loadings likewise showed that indicators loaded most strongly on their intended constructs. Therefore, the nine substantive constructs were treated as empirically distinct for subsequent structural-model analysis.

After confirmation of measurement reliability and validity, the structural model was evaluated. Collinearity diagnostics indicated that predictor VIF values remained below problematic levels, permitting estimation of the proposed relationships without evidence of severe multicollinearity. Path significance was evaluated through bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples. The direction, magnitude, confidence intervals, and statistical significance of each hypothesized relationship were examined jointly.

Table 4. Structural Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Structural path	β	SE	t	p	95% bootstrap CI	Decision
H1	A1 → B1	.314	.071	4.423	<.001	[.176, .451]	Supported
H2	A2 → B1	.357	.069	5.174	<.001	[.221, .489]	Supported
H3	A3 → B1	.221	.067	3.299	.001	[.092, .354]	Supported
H4	B1 → B2	.612	.057	10.737	<.001	[.494, .714]	Supported
H5	B1 → B3	.574	.061	9.410	<.001	[.447, .684]	Supported
H6	B2 → C1	.628	.055	11.418	<.001	[.511, .726]	Supported
H7	B3 → C3	.661	.052	12.712	<.001	[.549, .749]	Supported
H8	C1 → C2	.693	.049	14.143	<.001	[.590, .780]	Supported
H9	B2 × D → C1	.174	.071	2.451	.014	[.038, .314]	Supported

The structural results in Table 4 provided support for all nine proposed hypotheses. Among the three antecedents of destination and food brand image, influencer marketing and culinary celebrity influence (A2) exhibited the strongest direct effect on B1 (β = .357, p < .001), followed by user-generated and foodstagramming content (A1; β = .314, p < .001) and

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platform and content-format characteristics (A3; β = .221, p = .001). These findings indicate that although technological and content-format features contribute to destination image formation, the perceived credibility and persuasive influence of culinary influencers, together with authentic user-generated food content, exerted comparatively stronger effects. Destination and food brand image, in turn, significantly predicted both social media engagement (B2; β = .612, p < .001) and electronic word-of-mouth (B3; β = .574, p < .001), confirming its role as the core explanatory construct of the model. Social media engagement exerted a strong positive effect on food tourist experience and satisfaction (C1; β = .628, p < .001), while electronic word-of-mouth had an even stronger effect on motivation and intention to share or consume (C3; β = .661, p < .001). The strongest direct structural relationship in the model was observed between food tourist experience and satisfaction and loyalty and revisit intention (C1 → C2; β = .693, p < .001), demonstrating that favorable gastronomic tourism experiences were closely associated with subsequent destination loyalty and willingness to revisit. Finally, the interaction between social media engagement and contextual conditions was statistically significant (β = .174, p = .014), supporting H9 and indicating that the effect of engagement on tourist experience and satisfaction varied according to user generation, engagement style or intensity, and familiarity with the destination.

The structural model was further evaluated in terms of explanatory power, effect magnitude, and predictive relevance rather than relying exclusively on path significance. Coefficients of determination were examined for all endogenous constructs, and effect sizes were calculated to determine the substantive contribution of individual predictors. Stone–Geisser Q^2 values were also assessed to establish whether the model possessed predictive relevance for the endogenous constructs.

Table 5. Explanatory Power, Effect Sizes, and Predictive Relevance of the Structural Model

Endogenous construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Principal predictor	f^2	Q^2	Interpretation
B1: Destination and food brand image	.594	.584	A1	.128	.397	Moderate effect; satisfactory predictive relevance
			A2	.169		Moderate effect
			A3	.071		Small effect
B2: Social media engagement	.375	.370	B1	.600	.252	Large effect; satisfactory predictive relevance
B3: Electronic word-of-mouth	.329	.323	B1	.490	.219	Large effect; satisfactory predictive relevance
C1: Food tourist experience and satisfaction	.467	.453	B2	.662	.333	Large principal effect; satisfactory predictive relevance
			B2 × D	.041		Small but meaningful moderation effect
C2: Loyalty and revisit intention	.480	.476	C1	.923	.344	Large effect; strong predictive relevance
C3: Motivation and intention to share/consume	.437	.432	B3	.776	.309	Large effect; satisfactory predictive relevance

The results in Table 5 demonstrate that the proposed model possessed meaningful explanatory and predictive capability across all endogenous constructs. The three digital-marketing antecedents jointly explained 59.4% of the variance in destination and food brand image, indicating that users' perceptions of food destinations were substantially shaped by user-generated content, influencer marketing, and platform/content characteristics. Of these antecedents, influencer marketing produced the largest local effect (f^2 = .169), followed by user-generated content (f^2 = .128), while platform and content-format characteristics had a smaller but still meaningful effect (f^2 = .071). Destination and food brand image explained 37.5% of the variance in social media engagement and 32.9% of the variance in electronic word-of-mouth. The corresponding effect sizes of .600 and .490 showed that destination/food brand image was not merely statistically significant but substantively important in generating both engagement and online interpersonal communication. Social media engagement and its interaction with contextual conditions explained 46.7% of the variance in food tourist experience and satisfaction. The principal B2 effect was large (f^2 = .662), whereas the moderation effect was comparatively small (f^2 = .041), which is expected because interaction terms frequently explain incremental rather than dominant variance. Food tourist experience and satisfaction explained 48.0% of the variance in loyalty and revisit intention, while electronic word-of-mouth explained 43.7% of the variance in motivation and intention to share or consume. Q^2 values ranged from .219 to .397 and were positive for every endogenous construct, demonstrating predictive relevance throughout the model. Thus, the model was not limited to identifying statistically significant relationships but also provided meaningful explanatory and predictive performance.

Because the conceptual framework specified a sequential process in which the effects of social media antecedents were transmitted through destination/food brand image and subsequent intermediate mechanisms, indirect effects were examined to

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clarify how early-stage digital-marketing stimuli ultimately influenced experiential and behavioral outcomes. Bootstrapped indirect effects were evaluated using 5,000 resamples.

Table 6. Specific Indirect Effects in the Proposed Social Media Food-Tourism Marketing Model

Indirect relationship	Indirect β	t	p	95% bootstrap CI	Interpretation
A1 → B1 → B2	.192	3.970	<.001	[.105, .296]	Significant indirect effect on engagement
A2 → B1 → B2	.219	4.546	<.001	[.127, .323]	Significant indirect effect on engagement
A3 → B1 → B2	.135	2.943	.003	[.053, .233]	Significant indirect effect on engagement
A1 → B1 → B3	.180	3.789	<.001	[.098, .282]	Significant indirect effect on eWOM
A2 → B1 → B3	.205	4.302	<.001	[.116, .306]	Significant indirect effect on eWOM
A3 → B1 → B3	.127	2.826	.005	[.046, .221]	Significant indirect effect on eWOM
B1 → B2 → C1	.384	7.588	<.001	[.289, .488]	Strong sequential effect on experience/satisfaction
B1 → B3 → C3	.379	7.395	<.001	[.283, .482]	Strong sequential effect on sharing/consumption
B2 → C1 → C2	.435	8.819	<.001	[.340, .536]	Strong indirect effect on loyalty/revisit intention
A1 → B1 → B2 → C1	.121	3.653	<.001	[.063, .194]	Significant serial indirect effect
A2 → B1 → B2 → C1	.137	4.070	<.001	[.075, .214]	Significant serial indirect effect
A3 → B1 → B2 → C1	.085	2.691	.007	[.032, .151]	Significant serial indirect effect
A1 → B1 → B3 → C3	.119	3.554	<.001	[.060, .194]	Significant serial indirect effect
A2 → B1 → B3 → C3	.135	3.953	<.001	[.073, .214]	Significant serial indirect effect
A3 → B1 → B3 → C3	.084	2.612	.009	[.029, .150]	Significant serial indirect effect
B1 → B2 → C1 → C2	.266	6.463	<.001	[.190, .352]	Significant serial indirect effect on loyalty

As shown in Table 6, the indirect-effect analysis supported the sequential process implied by the conceptual model. Each of the three antecedent variables exerted significant indirect effects on both social media engagement and electronic word-of-mouth through destination and food brand image. The strongest antecedent-related indirect effects originated from influencer marketing and culinary celebrity influence, with A2 indirectly predicting social media engagement through B1 ($\beta = .219$, $p < .001$) and electronic word-of-mouth through B1 ($\beta = .205$, $p < .001$). User-generated and foodstagramming content also demonstrated meaningful indirect effects on B2 ($\beta = .192$, $p < .001$) and B3 ($\beta = .180$, $p < .001$), while platform and content-format characteristics exerted smaller but statistically significant indirect effects. More importantly, destination and food brand image significantly influenced food tourist experience and satisfaction through social media engagement ($\beta = .384$, $p < .001$) and significantly influenced sharing and consumption intention through electronic word-of-mouth ($\beta = .379$, $p < .001$). Social media engagement also exerted a substantial indirect effect on loyalty and revisit intention through food tourist experience and satisfaction ($\beta = .435$, $p < .001$). The serial indirect paths extending from A1, A2, and A3 through B1 and B2 to C1, as well as through B1 and B3 to C3, were all statistically significant. The longer sequential pathway B1 → B2 → C1 → C2 was likewise significant ($\beta = .266$, $p < .001$). These findings demonstrate that the influence of social media marketing is better understood as a multistage mechanism than as a set of isolated direct effects: digital content first contributes to destination and food brand image, which subsequently stimulates engagement or electronic word-of-mouth, and these mechanisms then translate into experiential satisfaction, loyalty, revisitation, sharing, or consumption intentions.

The final structural component of the proposed model concerned the moderating role of contextual conditions (D) in the relationship between social media engagement (B2) and food tourist experience and satisfaction (C1). Contextual conditions reflected three theoretically relevant sources of heterogeneity identified during the meta-synthesis: user generation, style or intensity of engagement with social media content, and prior familiarity with the destination.

Table 7. Moderation Analysis for the Relationship Between Social Media Engagement and Food Tourist Experience and Satisfaction

Effect	β	SE	t	p	95% bootstrap CI	Result
B2 → C1	.628	.055	11.418	<.001	[.511, .726]	Significant positive main effect
D → C1	.146	.064	2.281	.023	[.024, .276]	Significant contextual main effect
B2 × D → C1	.174	.071	2.451	.014	[.038, .314]	Significant positive moderation
B2 → C1 at low D (−1 SD)	.454	—	—	—	—	Positive, comparatively weaker
B2 → C1 at mean D	.628	—	—	—	—	Positive
B2 → C1 at high D (+1 SD)	.802	—	—	—	—	Positive, comparatively stronger

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Table 7 provides further evidence for H9 by demonstrating that contextual conditions significantly strengthened the positive relationship between social media engagement and food tourist experience and satisfaction. The interaction coefficient was positive and statistically significant (β = .174, p = .014), indicating that the consequences of engagement were not homogeneous across all users. At relatively low levels of the contextual-condition index, the estimated relationship between social media engagement and tourist experience/satisfaction was positive but more moderate (β = .454). At the mean level of contextual conditions, the effect corresponded to the estimated main relationship (β = .628), whereas at relatively high levels of the contextual condition index the conditional relationship increased to approximately β = .802. Substantively, this pattern indicates that engagement with food-tourism content is particularly likely to translate into a favorable tourism experience and greater satisfaction when users possess contextual characteristics that intensify the relevance of the content, such as stronger involvement with food-related media, greater familiarity with the destination, or user profiles more responsive to visual and interactive social media experiences. The moderation result therefore complements the main-effect findings by showing that social media engagement is not equally consequential for all users. Instead, its experiential value depends partly on the characteristics and prior knowledge of the audience, supporting the inclusion of contextual heterogeneity in social media food-tourism marketing models.

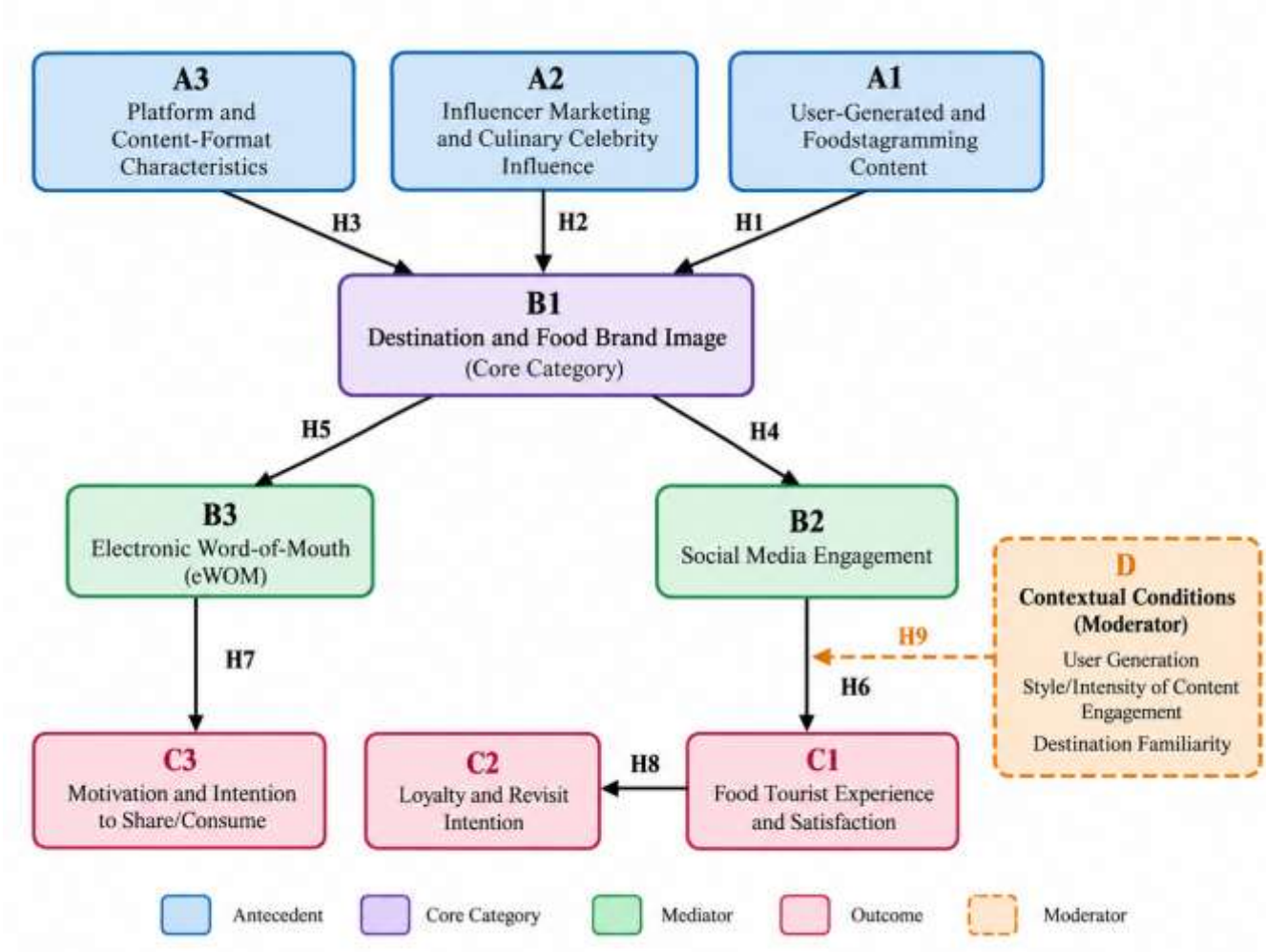


Figure 1. Empirically Validated Structural Model of Social Media Marketing in Food Tourism Based on the Exploratory Sequential Meta-Synthesis–PLS-SEM Approach

The combined interpretation of the two phases demonstrated substantial convergence between the qualitative meta-synthesis and the quantitative validation. The qualitative phase identified destination and food brand image as the central category linking digital marketing inputs with subsequent engagement, communication, and behavioral responses, and the quantitative results strongly supported this interpretation. All three theoretically identified antecedents significantly predicted B1, while B1 subsequently showed strong effects on both B2 and B3. The qualitative distinction between engagement-based and eWOM-

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based pathways was also supported empirically: engagement was primarily associated with experience and satisfaction, while eWOM was primarily associated with sharing and consumption intentions. Similarly, the qualitative expectation that experience and satisfaction would function as a proximal mechanism of loyalty was strongly supported by the C1 → C2 relationship, which was the largest direct coefficient in the structural model. The statistically significant moderation effect additionally confirmed the meta-synthetic observation that social media effects depend partly on characteristics of the user and the user–destination relationship. Thus, the quantitative phase did not merely reproduce the qualitative findings but differentiated the strength of the pathways and established their relative explanatory importance.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study developed and empirically validated an integrated social media marketing model for food tourism using an exploratory sequential meta-synthesis–PLS-SEM approach. The results supported the proposed multistage structure in which user-generated and foodstagramming content, influencer marketing and culinary celebrity influence, and platform and content-format characteristics shaped destination and food brand image, which subsequently influenced social media engagement and electronic word-of-mouth. These mechanisms, in turn, affected food tourist experience and satisfaction, loyalty and revisit intention, and motivation and intention to share or consume. In addition, contextual conditions significantly moderated the relationship between social media engagement and food tourist experience and satisfaction. Taken together, the findings indicate that social media marketing in food tourism should not be understood as a simple promotional process in which exposure directly produces behavioral intention. Rather, its effects appear to unfold through a sequence of image formation, engagement, interpersonal diffusion, experiential evaluation, and behavioral response. This interpretation is consistent with prior tourism research emphasizing that social media influences tourists through interconnected branding, emotional, relational, and behavioral processes rather than through isolated communication effects (Abbasi et al., 2024; Hudson et al., 2015).

The first major finding was that all three antecedent variables significantly influenced destination and food brand image. Influencer marketing and culinary celebrity influence showed the strongest effect on destination and food brand image (β = .357), followed by user-generated and foodstagramming content (β = .314) and platform and content-format characteristics (β = .221). This pattern suggests that the credibility and symbolic authority of content sources may be more influential than technological features alone in forming perceptions of food destinations. Culinary influencers and food-related opinion leaders can reduce uncertainty, interpret unfamiliar gastronomic experiences for audiences, and transform food destinations into socially meaningful consumption objects. This result aligns with studies showing that influencer marketing can shape destination perceptions and promotional effectiveness, particularly when influencers are perceived as credible, knowledgeable, and personally relevant (Kilipiri et al., 2023; Yaqub et al., 2022). It is also consistent with recent evidence that social media influencers can play a substantive role in constructing green destination image across generational groups (Abate et al., 2025). In a food-tourism context, where visual appearance, authenticity, taste expectations, cultural distinctiveness, and social desirability all contribute to destination evaluation, the interpretive role of influencers may therefore be especially important.

The significant effect of user-generated and foodstagramming content on destination and food brand image further demonstrates the importance of peer-created communication in tourism branding. User-generated food photographs, restaurant experiences, culinary narratives, short videos, and personal recommendations may be perceived as more experiential and less institutionally controlled than formal advertising. Such content can provide prospective tourists with vivid representations of how food is consumed, presented, discussed, and embedded in place-specific culture. This finding is compatible with earlier research showing that social media communication influences emotions, brand relationship quality, and word-of-mouth behavior (Hudson et al., 2015), as well as evidence that tourism-generated social media communication contributes to brand equity and subsequent tourist outcomes (Abbasi et al., 2024). It also supports the broader argument that destination brand equity can be shaped by digitally mediated tourism information and then influence behavioral intentions (Hadianfar, 2019; Jalalian et al., 2019). In the present study, foodstagramming therefore appears to function not merely as a self-presentation practice but also as an informal destination-branding mechanism through which users collectively construct the perceived attractiveness and meaning of gastronomic places.

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Platform and content-format characteristics also had a significant positive effect on destination and food brand image, although the magnitude of this relationship was smaller than those of influencer marketing and user-generated content. This suggests that affordances such as visual richness, short-form video, immediacy, interactivity, algorithmic visibility, and ease of sharing facilitate destination-image formation but may function mainly as enabling conditions through which persuasive content is delivered. This interpretation corresponds with studies emphasizing the strategic importance of digital content design in tourism marketing (Mozaffari et al., 2024) and the role of social media as a communication infrastructure for urban experiential tourism (Garcia Henche, 2018). It is also consistent with research showing that tourism businesses can use social media strategically to increase visibility and customer responsiveness (Adineh Azadgoleh & Mousavi, 2024; Panahandeh et al., 2021). The result therefore implies that platform characteristics matter, but their effectiveness is likely contingent on the quality, credibility, and experiential relevance of the content they carry.

A particularly important result concerned the central role of destination and food brand image. Destination and food brand image had a strong positive effect on social media engagement (β = .612) and electronic word-of-mouth (β = .574), supporting its conceptualization as the core category of the model. These findings indicate that favorable cognitive and affective representations of a gastronomic destination encourage users not only to pay greater attention to content but also to interact with it, discuss it, and circulate related recommendations. This is consistent with the literature suggesting that brand equity and destination image function as intermediate mechanisms linking marketing stimuli to tourist responsiveness and behavioral intentions (Adineh Azadgoleh & Mousavi, 2024; Hadianfar, 2019). The result also corresponds with the sequential logic identified by Abbasi et al., who demonstrated that tourism-generated social media communication can influence brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty through interconnected pathways (Abbasi et al., 2024). In this respect, destination and food brand image appears to operate as a psychological conversion mechanism: social media content becomes behaviorally relevant when users integrate it into a coherent and favorable representation of the destination.

The strong effect of destination and food brand image on social media engagement is also theoretically important because it suggests that engagement is not generated only by entertainment or technological interactivity. Instead, users appear more willing to interact with tourism content when they already perceive the destination as attractive, distinctive, authentic, or emotionally appealing. This result extends previous findings regarding social media marketing and brand-related responses in tourism and hospitality (Tatar & Eren-Erdoğmuş, 2016). In hotel contexts, social media marketing has been associated with brand trust and brand loyalty, indicating that digital engagement may be embedded in broader relational evaluations rather than constituting an isolated behavior (Tatar & Eren-Erdoğmuş, 2016). Similarly, research examining social media managers and tourism communication has highlighted the importance of strategic digital interaction in producing broader social, sustainability, and marketing consequences (Coronil et al., 2023). Therefore, the present finding reinforces the view that engagement should be interpreted as a relational response to meaningful destination representations, rather than simply as platform activity.

The effect of destination and food brand image on electronic word-of-mouth was likewise substantial. This finding indicates that tourists and prospective tourists are more likely to communicate, recommend, or redistribute food-tourism information when they hold favorable impressions of the destination and its culinary identity. The result directly aligns with evidence that digital content marketing can stimulate eWOM in food tourism (Bu et al., 2021). It also corresponds with broader tourism findings showing that positive brand experiences and social media interactions are associated with word-of-mouth behaviors (Hudson et al., 2015). The distinction between engagement and eWOM is noteworthy. Engagement represents involvement with the content and destination, whereas eWOM represents the outward diffusion of evaluations to others. The present model suggests that destination image can activate both processes simultaneously, thereby increasing both personal involvement and network-level communication.

The results further showed that social media engagement strongly predicted food tourist experience and satisfaction (β = .628). This finding suggests that active involvement with food-tourism content may shape how users anticipate, interpret, and subsequently evaluate gastronomic experiences. Engagement can increase information acquisition, emotional anticipation, perceived familiarity, and involvement with the destination before actual consumption. When tourists arrive at the destination or interact with related products and services, these prior digital experiences may become part of the experiential evaluation

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process. The finding is broadly consistent with research showing that social media marketing activities influence tourists' purchase intentions and responses (Alsoud et al., 2023), while social media communication can contribute sequentially to satisfaction and loyalty (Abbasi et al., 2024). It also corresponds with the broader idea that interactive digital communication contributes to tourism decision-making and experience construction, as reflected in studies of urban experiential tourism and social media marketing (Garcia Henche, 2018; Mozaffari et al., 2024).

Electronic word-of-mouth exerted an even stronger effect on motivation and intention to share or consume (β = .661). This is one of the clearest behavioral implications of the model. eWOM appears to function as a mechanism through which social information is converted into intentions to act, whether by consuming promoted food products, visiting culinary destinations, sharing food-related content, or recommending experiences to others. This finding strongly supports prior work in food tourism demonstrating that digital content marketing stimulates eWOM and that eWOM can act as a catalyst for behavioral responses (Bu et al., 2021). It also aligns with evidence that social media marketing can significantly influence tourism purchase intentions (Alsoud et al., 2023). The strength of this path indicates that interpersonal digital communication may have greater behavioral significance than one-way promotional exposure because recommendations and peer evaluations reduce perceived risk and provide social validation. In food tourism, where sensory qualities cannot be fully experienced before consumption, the opinions of other users may be particularly influential.

The strongest direct relationship in the model was observed between food tourist experience and satisfaction and loyalty and revisit intention (β = .693). This result confirms that favorable tourism experiences remain a crucial determinant of long-term behavioral relationships, even within a model centered on digital marketing. Social media can stimulate awareness, image, engagement, and intention, but sustainable loyalty ultimately depends on whether the actual or perceived food-tourism experience meets or exceeds expectations. This result is closely aligned with prior evidence linking satisfaction with loyalty in tourism and demonstrating multi-stage relationships among social media communication, brand equity, satisfaction, and loyalty (Abbasi et al., 2024). It also corresponds with findings in hospitality indicating that brand trust and loyalty are influenced by social media marketing processes (Tatar & Eren-Erdoğmuş, 2016). From a destination perspective, this result also supports the importance of destination brand equity in shaping future tourist behavior (Jalalian et al., 2019). The implication is that digital marketing cannot compensate indefinitely for a weak or inconsistent culinary experience; rather, effective social media communication must ultimately be supported by experiential quality.

The indirect-effect analysis reinforced the sequential logic of the proposed model. All three antecedent variables exerted significant indirect effects on social media engagement and eWOM through destination and food brand image, while destination and food brand image affected experience and satisfaction through engagement and affected sharing and consumption intentions through eWOM. These findings are consistent with the multi-sequential perspective reported in tourism research, in which social media communication influences later behavioral outcomes through intermediary branding and attitudinal constructs rather than only through direct effects (Abbasi et al., 2024). The significant serial paths also support the proposition that content marketing operates cumulatively. For example, influencer communication may strengthen destination image; destination image may stimulate engagement; engagement may increase satisfaction; and satisfaction may ultimately reinforce loyalty. This layered mechanism helps explain why some tourism campaigns generate strong long-term effects while others produce only short-lived visibility. The present findings therefore support conceptualizing tourism social media marketing as a process of progressive psychological and behavioral transformation.

The significant moderating effect of contextual conditions on the relationship between social media engagement and food tourist experience and satisfaction adds an important layer to the model. The interaction effect was positive (β = .174), indicating that engagement was more strongly associated with positive experience and satisfaction under favorable contextual conditions. These contextual factors included user generation, engagement style or intensity, and familiarity with the destination. This result is compatible with cross-generational influencer research showing that the effects of social media marketing may vary across user cohorts (Abate et al., 2025). It also resonates with studies emphasizing that tourism marketing outcomes depend on differences in audience characteristics, strategic communication conditions, and destination contexts (Monda et al., 2024; Myat et al., 2023). The moderation finding is particularly useful because it challenges the assumption

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that a single social media strategy will affect all users equally. Instead, users with greater destination familiarity or stronger engagement tendencies may be more capable of translating online involvement into positive experiential evaluation.

The explanatory and predictive indicators further confirmed the substantive usefulness of the model. The three antecedents explained 59.4% of the variance in destination and food brand image, while the model explained 37.5% of social media engagement, 32.9% of eWOM, 46.7% of food tourist experience and satisfaction, 48.0% of loyalty and revisit intention, and 43.7% of motivation and intention to share or consume. Positive Q^2 values for all endogenous constructs also indicated predictive relevance. These results suggest that the model captures a meaningful portion of variation in both intermediate and final outcomes. Its predictive capacity is especially important because tourism social media research increasingly requires models that are not merely statistically significant but also useful for understanding actionable behavior. This finding is consistent with the practical orientation of previous studies examining social media-based marketing strategies in tourism enterprises and destination management (Coronil et al., 2023; Panahandeh et al., 2021). It also reinforces research demonstrating that social media communication and marketing activities can explain substantial variation in tourism-related branding, purchase intention, and behavioral responses (Adineh Azadgoleh & Mousavi, 2024; Alsoud et al., 2023).

More broadly, the findings provide support for applying an integrated digital-marketing perspective to food tourism. Previous studies have investigated social media in different tourism and experience-based contexts, including hotel branding, tourism businesses, sport marketing, health tourism, destination competitiveness, sustainable tourism, and experiential urban tourism (Bapir, 2018; Garcia Henche, 2018; Hadi, 2020; Myat et al., 2023). The present study extends this literature by integrating several of these streams into a single food-tourism model. The findings suggest that digital marketing effectiveness arises from the interaction of source characteristics, user-generated communication, technological affordances, brand-image formation, engagement, interpersonal diffusion, satisfaction, and loyalty. Such integration is particularly valuable in food tourism because culinary consumption simultaneously involves place identity, sensory anticipation, cultural meaning, social signaling, and digital sharing. The validated model therefore offers a more comprehensive explanation of how social media can contribute to the transformation of food-related content into tourism value.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The quantitative phase relied on convenience sampling supplemented by snowball recruitment, and although the final sample of 121 respondents satisfied the statistical requirements of the PLS-SEM analysis, the use of a nonprobability sample restricts population-level generalization. The study was also limited to Iranian Instagram users with prior exposure to food-tourism content, meaning that the observed relationships may differ across countries, cultures, tourism markets, or platforms with substantially different technological affordances and audience structures. The cross-sectional design prevents strong causal inference because all quantitative constructs were measured at a single point in time. The use of self-reported measures also introduces possible common-method effects, recall bias, and social desirability bias. In the qualitative phase, the meta-synthesis depended on the scope, quality, and accessibility of previously published research; therefore, relevant unpublished findings or studies indexed outside the selected databases may have been omitted. Finally, the contextual moderator combined several dimensions, including user generation, engagement style, and destination familiarity, and this aggregation may have obscured more specific forms of heterogeneity.

Future studies should replicate the model with larger probability-based or stratified samples and examine whether the structural relationships remain stable across demographic, geographic, and cultural subgroups. Cross-national comparisons would be particularly valuable for determining whether food-related authenticity, influencer credibility, destination image, and eWOM operate similarly in individualistic and collectivistic cultures or in mature and emerging tourism markets. Longitudinal studies could examine how exposure to food-tourism content changes destination image and intentions over time and whether these effects persist after actual visitation. Experimental designs could manipulate influencer credibility, content format, user-generated versus marketer-generated content, or visual intensity to provide stronger causal evidence. Future research should also disaggregate the contextual moderator and independently test generation, destination familiarity, platform involvement, and engagement intensity. Multi-group analysis could be used to compare age cohorts, frequent and infrequent travelers, or highly involved and less involved users. Further extensions could incorporate perceived authenticity, trust, perceived risk, parasocial interaction, cultural identification, food neophobia, destination attachment, or perceived value as additional mediators or moderators.

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For practitioners, the results indicate that social media strategies for food tourism should prioritize the coordinated management of content, influencers, destination image, engagement, and eWOM rather than focusing only on reach or posting frequency. Destination marketers, restaurants, culinary-event organizers, and tourism agencies should encourage authentic user-generated food content and collaborate with credible culinary influencers whose audiences correspond with the destination's target segments. Visual content should be optimized for platform-specific formats such as short-form video, reels, stories, and interactive posts, but technological sophistication should support rather than replace credible and meaningful storytelling. Marketing campaigns should consistently reinforce a distinctive food-destination image based on authenticity, local identity, culinary uniqueness, and experiential value. Managers should also design content that stimulates comments, saves, shares, reviews, and recommendations because engagement and eWOM are important mechanisms through which image translates into satisfaction and behavioral intention. Finally, audience segmentation should consider generation, familiarity with the destination, and style of social media engagement, allowing destinations to tailor content and calls to action to groups that differ in how strongly online engagement influences their eventual tourism experience and loyalty.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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