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Tourist's Intention to Visit Ecotourism Destination: The Role of Key Opinion Leader (Kol) Characteristics and Moderating Impact of Social Media Use Intensity and Social Influence

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Abstract

Particularly in locations with a wealth of natural resources, like Sarawak, Malaysia, ecotourism is one of the main economic drivers of the tourist sector, particularly for the sustainable income of local populations. Due to the increased use of social media, Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) have a greater effect on the attitudes and behaviors of tourists. In order to investigate the impact of KOL characteristics (such as expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and authenticity) on tourists' attitudes and destination image, and consequently on tourists' visit intention to ecotourism destinations, this study employed Theory of Planned Behavior, Social Cognitive Theory, and Source Credibility Theory. The study also attested to the moderating role of social influence and the intensity of social media use. Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4.0 and SPSS Version 23.0 were used to analyze the data, which was collected from both domestic and foreign tourists using purposive sampling and a positivist research philosophy. In addition to providing useful information for policymakers and destination managers in Sarawak's ecotourism destinations, the study is anticipated to conceptually contribute to the body of knowledge already available on digital tourist marketing. The findings indicate that expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and authenticity positively influenced tourist attitudes. Expertise, attractiveness, and authenticity also positively influenced destination image, while trustworthiness did not. Attitude significantly influenced visit intention, whereas destination image did not. Social influence moderated the relationship between destination image and visit intention, while social media use intensity had no significant moderating effects. These findings offer insights for ecotourism marketing and influencer strategies.

Keywords: Expertise, Trustworthiness, Attractiveness, Authenticity, Attitude, Destination Image, Social Media Use Intensity, Social Influence, Intention to Visit

Introduction

Beyond its obvious appeal as a way to travel and have fun, tourism has immense potential to support economic growth, create jobs, foster cross-cultural contact, and improve infrastructure (Tran, 2024). The value of tourism in promoting economic expansion has long been recognized on a global scale (Bazargani & Kiliç, 2020). Local communities also benefit greatly from tourism-related activities in terms of generating revenue (Darto et al., 2025). Tourism may benefit local and regional economies by generating revenue for urban and rural areas, opening up new business opportunities, expanding markets, and enhancing regional reputation (TechnoFunc, 2023). These benefits demonstrate that tourism is still a major contributor to employment and economic expansion worldwide, particularly in developing and tourist-dependent regions.

According to the Global Ecotourism Network (n.d.), ecotourism refers to responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, supports local communities, and promotes knowledge and understanding through education and interpretation for all involved parties, including visitors and staff. It can enhance local economies by providing residents near tourist attractions with jobs and income opportunities. Another benefit of ecotourism is that it teaches tourists about the importance of conserving nature and wildlife habitats. According to Kakroo (2024), the global ecotourism market is projected to expand at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 14.31% from 2024 to 2034, increasing from an estimated USD 248.17 billion in 2024 to approximately USD 945.34 billion by 2034. This projected growth highlights the economic significance of ecotourism and the importance of promoting sustainable tourism development.

Malaysia is recognized as one of the world's megadiverse countries, ranking among the top 12 countries globally in terms of biological diversity (Ministry of Natural Resources, Environment and Climate Change, 2022). Malaysia's ecotourism scene is supported by a network of protected areas, including national parks, natural reserves, and wildlife sanctuaries. With its national parks, natural reserves, caves, and wildlife sanctuaries, Sarawak boasts over 30 ecotourism destinations and is home to some of the oldest tropical rainforests in the world (Sarawak Forestry Corporation, 2024). However, the availability of natural attractions does not necessarily guarantee public awareness or sufficient tourist interest. As such, enhancing awareness and promoting conservation can be accomplished by boosting visibility through promotional efforts (Anyap, 2023). In this context, social media and influencer marketing may provide opportunities to increase the visibility of Sarawak's ecotourism destinations and reach potential visitors through digital communication channels.

Even though Malaysia and Sarawak have plentiful ecotourism resources, drawing in tourists is still a significant challenge (Degefa & Alemayehu, 2023). Ecotourism in Malaysia remains a relatively new and uncommon option for domestic travelers, and local markets are not being effectively targeted for its promotion. The ecotourism sites in Sarawak remain relatively obscure, especially among digital natives like Millennials and Gen Z, who depend on social media and influencer content for their travel choices (Thong, 2024). Conventional promotional strategies used by tourism authorities often fail to engage these segments effectively, thereby limiting the growth potential of ecotourism destinations. Therefore, understanding how digital content influences tourists' perceptions and visit intentions is important for improving the promotion of less-known ecotourism destinations.

Due to technological advancement, over five billion people globally used social media by 2024, representing more than 62% of the global population. Users spent over 100 hours per month on these platforms (Paljug, 2025). Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) have become influential figures who offer professional insights, draw large audiences, and play a major role in shaping consumer behaviour (Jackson, 2024). KOLs influence how destinations are perceived in the tourism sector through personal assessments, visual narratives, and shared experiences. This makes them especially important for promoting specialized markets like ecotourism. However, the influence of KOLs may depend not only on the information they share but also on tourists' perceptions of their characteristics, including expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and authenticity. Besides, tourists' responses to destination-related information may vary with the intensity of social media use and the social influences they experience. Hence, examining these factors together may provide a more comprehensive understanding of tourists' intentions to visit ecotourism destinations.

Therefore, the present study examines the influence of KOLs' characteristics (expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and authenticity) on tourists' attitudes and destination image, within the framework of ecotourism in Sarawak. It also investigates the relationships of attitude and destination image with tourists' intention to visit ecotourism destinations. Furthermore, this study explores the moderating effects of social media use intensity and social influence on the relationships between tourists' attitudes and destination image and their intention to visit ecotourism destinations. By examining these relationships within an integrated research framework, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how KOL characteristics and social factors are associated with tourists' ecotourism visit intentions.

Previous studies have focused on different aspects of social media influencers but have provided complementary insights. For example, AlFarraj et al. (2021) examined the effects of influencer credibility dimensions on purchase intention in the aesthetic dermatology industry, while Sokolova and Kefi (2020) investigated how blogger credibility and parasocial interaction influenced purchase intentions. These studies highlight the relevance of influencer characteristics in consumer decision-making. However, their focus on purchase intention in non-tourism contexts provides limited insight into how KOL characteristics relate to tourists' attitudes, destination image, and visit intention in ecotourism settings. Therefore, further research is needed to examine how KOL characteristics, including expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and authenticity, relate to tourists' attitudes, destination image, and intention to visit ecotourism destinations. This is particularly important because findings from purchase-oriented studies in non-tourism contexts may not fully explain tourists' decision-making in ecotourism settings.

Additionally, social media use intensity and social influence may moderate the relationship between tourists' attitudes and destination image and tourist intention to visit ecotourism destinations. The combined effects of social media use intensity and social influence may influence how individuals respond to destination-related information. However, the strength of these moderating effects may vary across different relationships. Examining these factors together may clarify the conditions under which tourists' attitudes and destination image translate into visit intention. Understanding these factors for ecotourism destinations that

have comparatively received less marketing and promotion, especially in Sarawak, Malaysia, is timely.

From a theoretical perspective, this research incorporates Source Credibility Theory, the Theory of Planned Behavior, and Social Cognitive Theory and offers insights on the process of influencer-driven ecotourism decisions. Although previous studies have examined influencer credibility and consumer responses, further investigation is needed to understand how multiple KOL characteristics can be integrated with behavioural theories to explain tourists' psychological evaluations and ecotourism visit intentions. This study addresses this issue by examining the relationships between KOL characteristics, attitude, destination image, and visit intention within an integrated theoretical framework. Furthermore, this study examines whether social media use intensity and social influence moderate the relationships of both attitude and destination image with tourists' intention to visit ecotourism destinations. By considering these moderating effects within the same framework, the study seeks to clarify whether tourists' social media use intensity and perceived social influence alter the visit intention. Going beyond the traditional frameworks of expertise and trustworthiness, the research includes the construct of authenticity. Taken together, these relationships provide a more complete understanding of the role influencers play in ecotourism decision-making.

From a contextual point of view, this study explores ecotourism in the State of Sarawak, Malaysia. Although Sarawak is endowed with many natural attractions, having these attractions does not guarantee that tourists know about them and intend to visit them. This study aims to identify the role of KOLs in developing attitudes and destination image of visitors towards lesser-known attractions in Sarawak. It is anticipated that this study will provide empirical evidence from Sarawak and aid ecotourism stakeholders in understanding the role of influencer marketing in advancing ecotourism in Sarawak.

Literature Review

Underpinning Theories

This research is based on three foundational theories: Source Credibility Theory, Theory of Planned Behavior, and Social Cognitive Theory. These theories help explain the intention of tourists to visit ecotourism destinations in Sarawak in the context of social media and influencer influence. The Source Credibility Theory elucidates the impact of a source's perceived credibility on people's attitudes and behaviors. As stated by Kelman (1961), source credibility involves viewing an information provider as knowledgeable and trustworthy, and when a source is seen as credible, recipients are more inclined to be persuaded (Hovland & Mandell, 1952). Prior studies have identified three key aspects of source credibility: attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness. Each of these significantly affects message involvement and behavioral intention (AlFarraj et al., 2021). In the realm of digital and social media, especially within tourism marketing, source credibility theory have demonstrated its ability to diminish perceived risk and uncertainty. This effect contributes to a favorable influence on tourists' attitudes, the destination image, and their visit intentions (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) are becoming more prominent as reliable information sources in travel promotion. Their credibility, which stems from their expertise, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and authenticity, is crucial in shaping tourists' perceptions and intentions to visit ecotourism destinations.

Moreover, this research utilizes the Theory of Planned Behavior to elucidate the conversion of psychological factors into behavioral intention. As stated by Ajzen (1991), attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control are the factors that determine behavioral intention. Theory of Planned Behavior has been widely applied in tourism research to predict ecotourism intention and sustainable travel behavior, with attitude consistently identified as a strong predictor of intention. Subjective norms indicate the social pressure one feels, whereas perceived behavioral control pertains to how capable individuals believe they are in executing a behavior given the resources and opportunities at hand. KOL influence attitudes toward ecotourism destinations in the social media context by emphasizing their value, sustainability, and appeal; they shape subjective norms by normalizing eco-friendly travel practices in online communities; and they enhance perceived behavioral control by offering practical travel information that alleviates uncertainty. This study acknowledges the adaptability of the Theory of Planned Behavior by adopting an extended version of the theory that keeps attitude as a primary precursor. In this version, subjective norms are depicted as social influence and perceived behavioral control is illustrated through the intensity of social media use. While the conventional constructs of the Theory of Planned Behavior are modified, the essential theoretical rationale of the Theory of Planned Behavior is maintained to fit the influencer-driven ecotourism context.

In addition, Social Cognitive Theory offers another perspective for elucidating the impact of social and environmental factors on tourists' behavioral intentions. According to Bandura (2001), Social Cognitive Theory highlights the importance of observational learning and social reinforcement, as well as the interplay among personal, behavioral, and environmental factors. People often develop behaviors by watching others, especially those they see as role models or authorities. Tourists in social media contexts encounter the behaviors, values, and travel experiences of KOL. This exposure can impact their beliefs, attitudes, and intentions. KOL serve as modern-day role models, with their behaviors and advice being observed, absorbed, and emulated by followers. This study elucidates the influence of observational learning, social reinforcement, and environmental cues like emotional appeals, visual storytelling, peer validation, and readily available travel information on tourists' intentions to visit ecotourism destinations by merging Social Cognitive Theory with influencer marketing. Social media use intensity moderates and amplifies social learning processes through frequent engagement with digital platforms.

The integration of Source Credibility Theory, Theory of Planned Behavior, and Social Cognitive Theory offers a thorough theoretical basis for comprehending tourists' intentions to visit ecotourism destinations. According to Ajzen (1991), intention, which denotes a person's desire or readiness to perform a specific action, is acknowledged as the most direct predictor of actual behavior. Within the realm of ecotourism, the intention to visit indicates tourists' readiness to engage in environmentally responsible travel that prioritizes conservation, cultural appreciation, and community development. According to previous research, responsible tourism intention is significantly influenced by positive attitudes toward environmental protection, perceived social support, and self-efficacy regarding ecotourism engagement. This study thus provides a solid explanation of how KOL characteristics, social influence, and the social media use intensity together affect tourists' intentions to visit ecotourism destinations in Sarawak by incorporating influencer credibility, psychological determinants, and social media dynamics.

An Overview of Intention to Visit Ecotourism Destinations (Dependent Variable)

The World Tourism Organization (2019) defines ecotourism as all forms of nature-based travel that include educational and interpretive elements, positively affect the natural and socio-cultural environment, and contribute to the preservation of natural areas. Ecotourism is recognized worldwide as an innovative and sustainable way to enhance tourism, safeguard the environment, and support local communities (Pham & Khanh, 2021). It enables tourists to have a holiday while learning about the environmental and cultural features of a place without endangering it (Lim et al., 2023). According to Younus, Rasheed, and Zia (2015), consumer intention refers to the desire for a specific product or service. The Theory of Planned Behavior posits that the main predictors of intention are attitudes, subjective standards, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). The intention to engage in ecotourism pertains to a tourist's aim of taking part in such activities, and it has connections to the conservation and enjoyment of natural sites (Pham & Khanh, 2021). According to earlier research, one's attitude toward environmental conservation has a considerable effect on the intention to engage in responsible tourism (Kang & Moscardo, 2006). Furthermore, those who are aware of the need for environmental protection are more prone to behave in ways that benefit both society and the environment (Weeden, 2002). In the post-pandemic era, the intention for responsible tourism, closely linked to attitudes and environmental awareness, has gained importance. However, further investigation is required to understand the factors that shape tourists' intentions to engage in ecotourism, especially among younger generations and in specific locations like Sarawak.

Key Opinion Leader Characteristics, Attitude, and Destination Image (H1-H8)

Through their perceived credibility and personal attributes, Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) are instrumental in shaping tourists' perceptions and behavioral responses in the context of ecotourism. This study investigates the effects of four key characteristics of KOL, expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and authenticity, on tourists' attitudes and the image of ecotourism destinations. The investigation is informed by Source Credibility Theory and literature on influencer marketing.

Expertise denotes the degree to which a KOL is regarded as having pertinent knowledge, skills, and experience in a particular field. Previous research indicates that KOL who are perceived as knowledgeable and skilled are more likely to be seen as trustworthy sources of information, especially in tourism contexts characterized by uncertainty and information asymmetry. When tourists view KOL as experts, they are more likely to cultivate positive attitudes toward the promoted destination and to construct clearer and more favorable destination images. KOL expertise is particularly crucial in ecotourism contexts, as it encompasses general travel knowledge, ecological awareness, and destination-specific insights. These elements contribute to the persuasiveness of messages and the perceived value of the destination.

Another major factor in how effective an influencer is, is trustworthiness. This quality is characterized by the communicator's perceived credibility, honesty, and integrity. In ecotourism, where cultural and environmental values are paramount, the role of reliable KOL in diminishing perceived risk and uncertainty is especially prominent. Prior studies demonstrate a consistent finding that trustworthiness enhances the acceptance of messages, promotes positive attitudes among tourists, and aids in the creation of a favorable destination

image. In online contexts, audiences are more likely to accept destination-related information and recommendations when they view the KOL as trustworthy and genuine.

Attractiveness encompasses more than just physical appearance; it also includes qualities such as likability, relatability, familiarity, and emotional appeal. The Source Attractiveness Model suggests that attractive communicators are more persuasive as they promote emotional engagement and parasocial interaction. In the realm of tourism, KOL content that is attractive and evokes feelings boosts tourists' affective responses and reinforces their attitudes toward the destination as well as its overall image. This is especially pertinent for the promotion of ecotourism, where experiential narratives, visual storytelling, and emotional connection are essential in forming perceptions of destinations.

The degree to which KOLs are seen as genuine, sincere, and consistent with their values and self-presentation is referred to as authenticity. Because authentic KOL are more likely to form emotional connections with their followers, trust levels rise, attitudes become more positive, and destination images improve. Authenticity plays a crucial role in ecotourism marketing, as it strengthens the perceptions of sustainability, cultural respect, and environmental responsibility. Tourists' assessments of ecotourism destinations are positively affected by authentic narratives and transparent portrayals from KOL, which bolster the cognitive and affective components of destination image.

In general, the existing research backs the perspective that characteristics of KOL have a considerable impact on tourists' attitudes and destination image, which subsequently affect intention to visit ecotourism destination. This study posits, grounded in this theoretical and empirical foundation, that the expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and authenticity of KOLs are positively associated with tourists' attitudes toward ecotourism destinations and the creation of favorable images of these destinations.

H1: Key Opinion Leaders' expertise is positively related to the tourists' attitude.
H2: Key Opinion Leaders' expertise is positively related to the ecotourism destination image.
H3: Key Opinion Leaders' trustworthiness is positively related to tourists' attitude.
H4: Key Opinion Leaders' trustworthiness is positively related to ecotourism destination image.
H5: Key Opinion Leaders' attractiveness is positively related to tourists' attitude.
H6: Key Opinion Leaders' attractiveness is positively related to ecotourism destination image.
H7: Key Opinion Leaders' authenticity is positively related to tourists' attitude.
H8: Key Opinion Leaders' authenticity is positively related to ecotourism destination image.

Attitude, Destination Image, and Tourist Intention to Visit Ecotourism Destination (H9–H10)
Attitude denotes a person's positive or negative assessment of an object, location, or behavior and encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Within the sphere of tourism, attitude denotes tourists' comprehensive assessment of ecotourism and sustainable travel experiences. As stated by the Theory of Planned Behavior, attitude plays a crucial role in determining behavioral intention; those who have favorable attitudes are more inclined to perform the intended behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Prior research has consistently shown that tourists with favorable attitudes toward ecotourism are more likely to intend to visit ecotourism destinations (Ashfaq et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the image of a destination is vital to the formation of tourists' visit intentions. The concept of destination image encompasses the overall cognitive and emotional perceptions that tourists hold about a destination, including their beliefs, impressions, and emotional responses (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). In ecotourism contexts, where perceptions of natural attractiveness, safety, environmental quality, and cultural richness are crucial (Pham & Khanh, 2021), a positive destination image boosts tourists' willingness to visit. Prior studies have demonstrated that a positive destination image greatly enhances tourists' intention to visit or revisit a destination (Senarath & Ranasinghe, 2019).

In the realm of tourism marketing propelled by social media, influencer-generated content plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes and the destination image through visuals, narratives, and signals of credibility. It is crucial for sustainable tourism development to understand how tourists' attitudes and destination image together influence the intention to visit under-promoted ecotourism destinations like those in Sarawak. Consequently, it is anticipated that both attitude and destination image will positively affect tourists' intention to visit ecotourism destinations.

H9: Tourists' attitude is positively related to the tourists' intention to visit an ecotourism destination.
H10: Destination image is positively related to the tourists' intention to visit an ecotourism destination.

Social Media as a Moderator between Attitude, Destination Image and Tourist Intention to Visit (H11–H12)
The frequency and depth of individuals' engagement with social media platforms, referred to as Social Media Use Intensity (SMUI), influences how users process information and make travel-related decisions. According to Sutcliffe et al. (2018), social media users who are highly engaged come across tourism-related material like influencer endorsements, peer reviews, and destination promotions more often than others. This amplifies their perceptions and behavioral reactions. Within ecotourism, such repeated exposure increases the chances that favorable attitudes and positive images of the destination will result in actual intentions to visit.

While earlier research has focused on examining Social Media Use Intensity as a direct predictor of attitudes or visit intention, its moderating role has been studied only to a limited extent. A high SMUI increases users' susceptibility to persuasive content and reinforcement cues, thereby intensifying the links between attitude and intention to visit, as well as between destination image and intention. In contrast, when Social Media Use Intensity is low, limited exposure to digital content can diminish these relationships. As a result, it is anticipated that SMUI will bolster the influence of attitude and destination image on tourists' intentions to visit ecotourism destinations.

H11: Social media use intensity positively moderates the relationship between attitude and tourist's intention to visit ecotourism destinations, such that when SMUI is high, the relationship between attitude and tourist's intention to visit ecotourism destinations is stronger.

H12: Social media use intensity positively moderates the relationship between destination image and tourist's intention to visit ecotourism destinations , such that when SMUI is high, the relationship between destination image and tourist's intention to visit ecotourism destinations is stronger.

Social Influence as a Moderator between Attitude, Destination Image and Tourist Intention to Visit (H13–H14)

Social influence is the degree to which a person's attitudes and behaviors are molded by the views, actions, and anticipations of others, especially peers and reliable opinion leaders. In the digital realm, social influence is magnified by likes, shares, comments, and endorsements that serve as indicators of social approval and normative support. When assessing destinations and determining travel plans, tourists frequently depend on social signals from friends, peers, and Key Opinion Leaders (KOL).

When social influence is robust, tourists are more inclined to translate positive attitudes and favorable destination images into actual visit intentions, as social validation diminishes uncertainty and enhances confidence in decision-making. By contrast, without a strong social influence, even if perceptions are positive, they may not be enough to drive the intention to travel. While previous research has looked at social influence as a direct predictor of attitude or intention, its moderating role has been underexplored, especially in the context of ecotourism and in lesser-known destinations like Sarawak. Therefore, it is anticipated that social influence will reinforce the connections among attitude, destination image, and tourists' intentions to visit ecotourism destinations.

H13: Social influence positively moderates the relationship between attitude and tourist's intention to visit ecotourism destinations, such that when SI is high, the relationship between attitude and tourist's intention to visit ecotourism destinations is stronger.

H14: Social influence positively moderates the relationship between destination image and tourist's intention to visit ecotourism destinations, such that when SI is high, the relationship between destination image and tourist's intention to visit ecotourism destinations is stronger.

The following conceptual model with indication of hypotheses

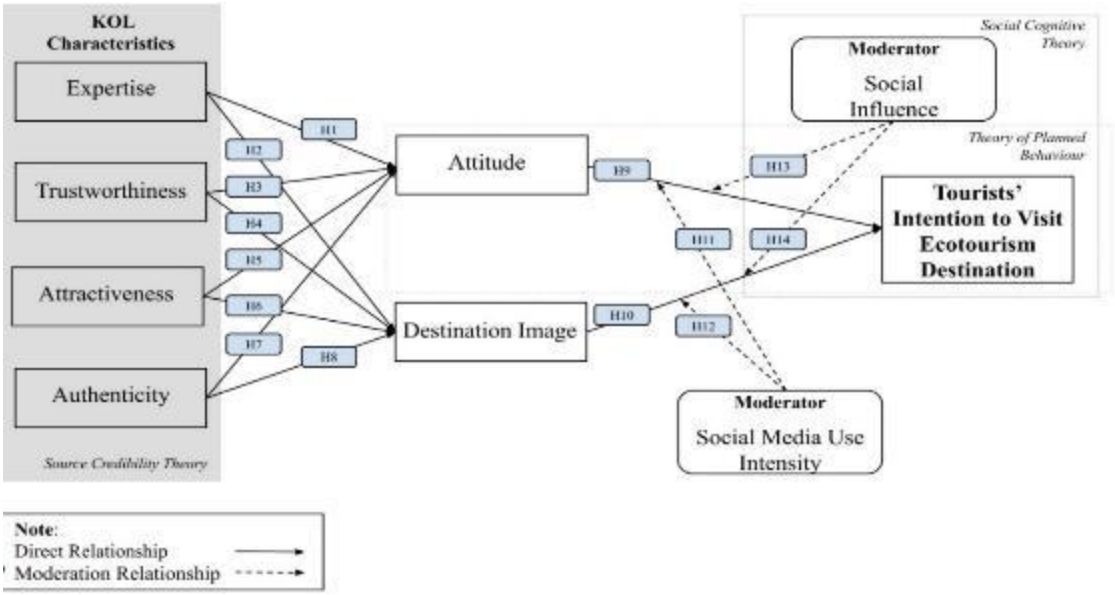


Figure 1. Conceptual Model with Indication of Hypotheses.

Research Methodology

This research utilizes a quantitative methodology within a positivist research philosophy to investigate tourists' intentions to visit ecotourism destinations in Sarawak, Malaysia. The focus is on Key Opinion Leader (KOL) characteristics and the moderating effects of social media use intensity and social influence. A deductive research design was employed to empirically test the proposed hypotheses, guided by the Theory of Planned Behavior, Social Cognitive Theory, and Source Credibility Theory.

Research designs of both the exploratory and the descriptive kind were employed. The exploratory design helped refine constructs based on existing literature, while the descriptive design entailed gathering primary data via a structured questionnaire. The research focuses on Sarawak, situated on Borneo island, known for its abundant biodiversity, cultural heritage, and significant prospects for ecotourism growth. Even with these qualities, Sarawak has not been marketed as extensively as other Malaysian destinations, which renders this study particularly pertinent and timely.

The target population included individuals who had knowledge of or were involved in ecotourism activities in Sarawak, encompassing both former visitors and potential tourists. Because of the lack of a comprehensive sampling frame and the geographically dispersed population, a combination of purposive and non-probability convenience sampling techniques was utilized. Data were gathered using a combination of online and offline approaches. Data were gathered online through social media platforms, travel-related Facebook groups, and WhatsApp networks, while offline data collection took place at chosen ecotourism hotspots such as national parks, nature reserves, and community-based tourism destinations. It was necessary for respondents to be at least 18 years of age.

The questionnaire, prepared in English and self-administered, included a Bahasa Malaysia version to promote inclusivity and understanding. The measurement tool was composed of 44 items derived from established studies in tourism and marketing. These items were designed to assess KOL expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, authenticity, attitude,

destination image, social media use intensity, social influence, and the intention to visit ecotourism destinations. A pilot test with 30 respondents was conducted before the main survey to evaluate item clarity and reliability. The results showed that all constructs obtained Cronbach's Alpha values above the recommended threshold of 0.70, and no significant revisions were needed.

The smallest required sample size was calculated with G*Power version 3.1.9.7. To meet the criteria of a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), a significance level of 0.05, statistical power of 0.95, and eight predictor variables, at least 160 valid responses were necessary. Data analysis utilized the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses, as well as Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS to evaluate the measurement and structural models, incorporating both direct and moderating effects.

A total of 312 questionnaires were distributed to visitors in Sarawak, Malaysia, and 288 questionnaires were returned, with a response rate of 92%. Subsequently, data screening was conducted using SPSS Version 23.0, resulting in the removal of four responses due to outliers, missing data, and straight-lining responses. Thus, 284 valid responses were retained for subsequent measurement and structural analysis.

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 1

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

			Respondents (N=284)
Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentages (%)
Age	20 years old and below	7	2.5
	21-30 years old	214	75.4
	31-40 years old	35	12.3
	41 years old and above	28	9.9
Gender	Male	152	53.5
	Female	132	46.5
Education Level	Secondary School	24	8.5
	Diploma	81	28.5
	Bachelor's Degree	173	60.9
	Postgraduate	6	2.1
Monthly Income	RM1,500 and below	23	8.1
	RM1,501-RM3,000	120	42.3
	RM3,001-RM4,500	86	30.3
	RM4,501-RM6,000	41	14.4
	RM6,001 and above	14	4.9
Ethnic Group	Malay	28	9.9
	Chinese	77	27.1
	Iban	57	20.1
	Bidayuh	84	29.6
	Indian	38	13.4
	Other	0	0
Country of Origin	Sarawak (Local)	159	56

	Other States in Malaysia (Domestic) Other (International)	123 2	43.3 0.7

Demographic characteristics of the 284 valid respondents. Most of the respondents were in the age group of 21-30 years (75.4%), followed by 31-40 years (12.3%). The gender split was 53.5% male and 46.5% female. The majority of the respondents possessed a Bachelor's degree (60.9%) and 42.3% earned between RM1,501 and RM3,000 a month. Of the total tourists, 56.0% were from Sarawak, 43.3% were domestic tourists from other Malaysian states, and 0.7% were international visitors. The demographic profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Results

The measurement model was tested using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. Construct reliability and validity were evaluated using factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). Factor loadings >= 0.70, CR values > 0.70, and AVE values >= 0.50 were considered acceptable. The results of the measurement model are presented in Table 2.

Result of the Measurement Model

Table 2

Measurement Model Assessment

Model Construct	**Measurement Item**	**Loading**	**CR[a]**	**AVE[b]**	**Loading**	**CR[a]**	**AVE[b]**
		First iteration			Final iteration		
Expertise (EP)	EP_01 EP_02 EP_03 EP_04	0.708 0.789 0.778 0.754	0.756	0.575	0.708 0.789 0.778 0.754	0.756	0.575
Attractiveness (AT)	AT_01 AT_02 AT_03	0.772 0.684 0.871	0.692	0.607	0.772 0.684 0.871	0.692	0.607
Authenticity (ATT)	ATT_01 ATT_02 ATT_03 ATT_04 ATT_05	0.759 0.716 0.763 0.641 0.777	0.785	0.537	0.759 0.716 0.763 0.641 0.777	0.785	0.537
Trustworthiness (TW)	TW_01 TW_02 TW_03	0.831 0.763 0.830	0.763	0.654	0.832 0.763 0.830	0.763	0.654
Destination Image (DI)	DI_01 DI_02 DI_03	0.783 0.694 0.780	0.752	0.574	0.781 0.696 0.776	0.752	0.574

	DI_04	0.770			0.744		
Attitude (AD)	AD_01 AD_02 AD_03 AD_04	0.715 0.721 0.793 0.818	0.770	0.582	0.715 0.721 0.793 0.818	0.770	0.582
Social Influence (SI)	SI_01 SI_02 SI_03 SI_04 SI_05	0.741 0.593 0.728 0.770 0.798	0.784	0.533	0.736 0.599 0.730 0.773 0.794	0.783	0.532
Social Media Use Intensity (SMU)	SMU_01 SMU_02 SMU_03	0.799 0.752 0.787	0.683	0.608	0.797 0.757 0.784	0.682	0.608
Intention to Visit Ecotourism Destination (INTENT)	INTENT_01 INTENT_02 INTENT_03 INTENT_04 INTENT_05 INTENT_06 INTENT_07	0.694 0.601 0.701 0.707 0.709 0.518 0.737	0.804	0.450	0.699 Omitted 0.715 0.703 0.739 Omitted 0.770	0.775	0.527

(Source: Author's own compilation)
Note: Item INTENT_02, and INTENT_06 were deleted.

Discriminant Validity of Constructs (Fornell & Larcker Criterion)
The discriminant validity was tested through the Fornell–Larcker criterion. The square root of the AVE for each construct was higher than the respective correlations with other constructs, as shown in the table below. The diagonal values ranged from .565 to .690 and were higher than all of the inter-construct correlation values. Hence, the Fornell–Larcker criterion was achieved, suggesting sufficient discriminant validity among all constructs. The Fornell–Larcker criterion results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Discriminant Validity of Constructs (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

	AD	AT	ATT	DI	EP	INTENT	SI	SMU	TW
AD	**0.658**								
AT	0.223	**0.675**							
ATT	0.203	0.216	**0.609**						
DI	0.234	0.264	0.337	**0.639**					
EP	0.244	0.237	0.329	0.226	**0.620**				
INTENT	0.309	0.293	0.414	0.259	0.343	**0.565**			
SI	0.287	0.285	0.367	0.256	0.370	0.343	**0.609**		
SMU	0.297	0.198	0.318	0.254	0.295	0.353	0.307	**0.663**	
TW	0.324	0.171	0.206	0.262	0.252	0.250	0.222	0.274	**0.690**

Coefficient of Determination and Predictive Relevance

To assess the explanatory power of the structural model, the coefficient of determination (R2) was measured and the predictive relevance of the structural model was assessed using Q2. The findings showed the R^2 values of 0.827 for Intention to Visit. 0.758 for Attitude and 0.692 for Destination Image. All Q^2 values were above zero, Intention to Visit (0.782), Attitude (0.737), and Destination Image (0.660), which indicated the predictive relevance of the model.

Table 4

Coefficient of Determination and Predictive Relevance

Endogenous Construct	**R^2**	**Q^2**
Intention to Visit	0.827	0.782
Attitude	0.758	0.737
Destination Image	0.692	0.660

Path Coefficients and Hypotheses Testing

Table 5

Path Coefficients and Hypotheses Testing

H	**Relationship**	**Standard Beta**	**P- Value**	**t- Value**	**Decision**	**VIF**	**F^2**
H1	**Expertise - Attitude**	0.179	0.023	2.268	Supported	**3.124**	**0.042**
H2	**Expertise - Destination Image**	0.260	0.003	2.931	Supported	**3.124**	**0.070**
H3	**Trustworthiness - Attitude**	0.202	0.010	2.592	Supported	**3.272**	**0.051**
H4	**Trustworthiness - Destination Image**	0.134	0.217	1.236	Not Supported	**3.272**	**0.018**
H5	**Attractiveness - Attitude**	0.307	<0.001	4.007	Supported	**2.740**	**0.142**
H6	**Attractiveness - Destination Image**	0.208	0.020	2.333	Supported	**2.740**	**0.051**
H7	**Authenticity - Attitude**	0.277	0.000	3.660	Supported	**3.707**	**0.142**
H8	**Authenticity – Destination Image**	0.316	0.001	3.201	Supported	**3.707**	**0.087**
H9	**Attitude – Intention to Visit Ecotourism Destination**	0.425	0.000	4.453	Supported	**9.511**	**0.110**
H10	**Destination Image – Intention to Visit Ecotourism Destination**	0.089	0.428	0.792	Not Supported	**11.425**	**0.004**
H11	**Social Media Use Intensity* Attitude - Intention to Visit Ecotourism Destination**	0.123	0.087	1.714	Supported	**5.276**	**0.026**
H12	**Social Media Use Intensity***	-0.035	0.608	0.513	Not Supported	**6.486**	**0.002**

	Destination Image - Intention to Visit Ecotourism Destination						
H13	**Social Influence* Attitude - Intention to Visit Ecotourism Destination**	-0.015	0.866	0.169	Not Supported	**6.786**	**0.000**
H14	**Social Influence* Destination Image – Intention to Visit Ecotourism Destination**	0.146	0.039	2.063	Supported	**6.466**	**0.029**

Note: $p < 0.01$, $t > 2.33$ $p < 0.05$, $t > 1.645$* (H = Hypothesis)

The path coefficients and hypothesis testing results are presented in Table 5, and the findings demonstrate that expertise notably enhances attitude ($\beta = 0.179$, $p = 0.023$, $t = 2.268$), affirming H1, and has a significant influence on destination image ($\beta = 0.260$, $p = 0.003$, $t = 2.931$), thereby confirming H2. Trustworthiness significantly influenced attitude ($\beta = 0.202$, $t = 2.592$, $p = 0.010$), supporting H3; however, it did not have a significant effect on destination image ($\beta = 0.134$, $t = 1.236$, $p = 0.217$), thus H4 was not supported.

The results further demonstrate that attractiveness significantly enhanced attitude ($\beta = 0.307$, $t = 4.007$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H5, and also had a significant positive effect on destination image ($\beta = 0.208$, $t = 2.333$, $p = 0.020$), thus supporting H6. Authenticity significantly and positively influenced attitude ($\beta = 0.277$, $t = 3.660$, $p < 0.001$), thus corroborating H7, and also had a significant positive impact on destination image ($\beta = 0.316$, $t = 3.201$, $p = 0.001$), thereby supporting H8.

As for the direct effects on behavioral intention, attitude significantly and positively influenced the intention to visit ecotourism destinations ($\beta = 0.425$, $t = 4.453$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H9. On the contrary, the destination image did not significantly influence the intention to visit ecotourism destinations ($\beta = 0.089$, $t = 0.792$, $p = 0.428$), therefore, H10 was not supported.

As for the moderating effects, the findings showed that the intensity of social media use and attitude significantly impacted the intention to visit ecotourism destinations ($\beta = 0.123$, $t = 1.714$, $p = 0.087$). Thus, H11 was deemed supported. The social media use intensity and the destination image did not significantly impact the intention to visit ecotourism destinations ($\beta = –0.035$, $t = –0.513$, $p = 0.608$). As a result, H12 was not supported. Moreover, social influence did not significantly affect the intention to visit ecotourism destinations ($\beta = –0.015$, $t = 0.169$, $p = 0.866$), leading to a rejection of H13. In contrast, the intention to visit ecotourism destinations was significantly and positively impacted by social influence and destination image ($\beta = 0.146$, $t = 2.063$, $p = 0.039$), thus confirming H14.

Discussion of Findings

This section discusses the study's findings in relation to the research objectives and theoretical foundations. This research investigated how the characteristics of Key Opinion

Leaders (KOLs), including their expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and authenticity affect tourists' attitudes and destination image, as well as their intentions to visit ecotourism destination in Sarawak. Furthermore, the moderating effects of the intensity of social media use and social influence were examined.

This research offers an extensive elucidation of the ways in which digital influencers affect tourists' visit intentions regarding ecotourism destinations, based on Source Credibility Theory, Theory of Planned Behavior, and Social Cognitive Theory. A total of fourteen hypotheses were evaluated: ten received support, four did not.

The results show that the expertise, attractiveness, and authenticity of Key Opinion Leader have a considerable positive impact on both tourist attitudes and destination images. While trustworthiness had a positive effect on attitude, it did not have a significant impact on destination image. The findings indicate that although credibility is still significant, tourists prioritize influencers' expertise, emotional resonance, and perceived authenticity to a greater extent when developing perceptions of ecotourism destinations in Sarawak.

In accordance with the Theory of Planned Behavior, attitude had a significant positive effect on tourists' intention to visit ecotourism destinations. In contrast, destination image did not have a statistically significant direct effect on visit intention in this study. This finding suggests that a favorable destination image of Sarawak's ecotourism destinations may not be sufficient on its own to translate into a stronger intention to visit.

As for moderating effects, the social media use intensity significantly amplified the connection between attitude and intention to visit. This suggests that frequent exposure to influencer-generated content bolsters the conversion of positive attitudes into behavioral intentions. On the contrary, the strength of social media use did not have a moderating effect on the connection between destination image and intention to visit an ecotourism destination. The connection between attitude and visit intention to ecotourism destination was not affected by social influence; however, it did significantly enhance the link between destination image and visit intention to ecotourism destination. This underscores the significance of social validation and peer endorsement in decisions related to ecotourism.

This research broadens Source Credibility Theory from a theoretical standpoint by validating the significance of influencer characteristics in influencing tourist attitudes and the destination image in a digital ecotourism environment. Additionally, it enhances Social Cognitive Theory by showing the workings of observational learning and social reinforcement via social media platforms. Moreover, the results bolster the importance of attitude within the Theory of Planned Behavior and demonstrate how its impact on intention is influenced by digital and social factors.

Practically, the findings indicate that tourism stakeholders ought to focus on working with KOL who are knowledgeable, authentic, and appealing in order to improve tourists' attitudes toward ecotourism. To convert favorable perceptions into real intentions to visit, marketers should prioritize emotional storytelling, credibility, and social endorsement rather than depending only on destination image or extensive social media exposure.

It is recommended that future studies include more KOL-related variables, different moderators, and qualitative or longitudinal methods to delve deeper into the processes that drive ecotourism decision-making. Conducting comparative studies across various destinations and cultural contexts might further improve the generalizability of the findings.

Conclusion

Therefore, this study examines the effect of KOL characteristics on tourists' attitude, destination image, and intention to visit ecotourism destinations in Sarawak with the moderation of Social Media Use Intensity and Social Influence. Results indicated that expertise, attractiveness, and authenticity had a positive effect on attitude and destination image, while trustworthiness had a positive effect on attitude but not on destination image. Attitude had a strong positive effect on tourists' intention to visit, while no significant direct effect was found for destination image.

Results also indicated that the level of Social Media Use Intensity significantly moderates the relationship between attitude and intention to visit, and the level of Social Influence significantly moderates the relationship between destination image and intention to visit. These findings highlight the importance of KOL characteristics and social media-related factors in understanding tourists' intention to visit ecotourism destinations in Sarawak. The study contributes to the knowledge of digital influencer marketing in ecotourism and offers practical insights for tourism stakeholders to design promotional strategies based on social media.

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