

The Effect of Social Media Influencer Marketing on Sustainable Tourist Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of a converged digital economy and social media landscape, online promotion is a pivotal driver of tourist decision-making and behavior. This study, based on the Knowledge – Attitude – Behavior (KAB) framework, investigates how digital promotion and influencer marketing shape tourists' sustainable tourism behavior via knowledge dissemination, attitude modulation, and social interaction. By systematically reviewing the literature on sustainable tourism, digital communication, and influencer marketing, we construct an integrated theoretical model: "Digital Communication → Cognitive Attitude → Sustainable Behavior," to articulate the psychological and social mechanisms guiding this process in the digital sphere. The findings suggest that online promotion, through the dual mechanisms of information transmission and social influence, not only enhances tourists' cognition of sustainable tourism but also cultivates behavioral intentions through social identity and emotional resonance. Moreover, social media interactivity and influencer social capital are found to moderate the translation of attitude into behavior. The primary theoretical contribution is the extension of the KAB model into a digital context, uncovering the dynamic mediating role of online influence in fostering sustainable behavior. The paper concludes by proposing future research avenues and practical implications, such as longitudinal and cross-cultural studies, and strategic optimization for digital tourism marketing.

KEYWORDS

Sustainable tourism behavior; Digital communication; Influencer marketing; KAB theory

1 Introduction

Under the impetus of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the sustainable transformation of tourism has become a central focus of academic and policy attention. The UNWTO (2024) asserts that the industry's sustainability depends not only on policy- and corporate-level green transitions but pivotally on individual tourist behavior. Tourists' choices regarding low-carbon transport, green lodging, and eco-conscious consumption directly determine the sector's ecological footprint and its social responsibility performance.

Simultaneously, a revolution in digital communication is reshaping tourist behavioral patterns. With the ascent of social media, short-video platforms, and the influencer economy, tourism decision-making has evolved from a function of traditional advertising or word-of-mouth to a complex interplay of digital community engagement and content influence. The global influencer marketing market surged from \$1.7 billion in 2016 to an estimated \$24 billion in 2024 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024), signifying the burgeoning power of digital influence over consumer behavior.

Prior research on sustainable tourism behavior largely adhered to the linear logic of the Knowledge-Attitude-Behavior (KAB) model, where knowledge shapes attitudes that subsequently drive behavior. Yet, the proliferation of social media and evolving information channels have rendered this process more complex. Behavior formation is now modulated not only by knowledge and attitude but also by online sentiment, social norms, and digital interactions. Research indicates that influencers promoting sustainable practices on social media can effectively steer followers toward adoption, thereby advancing sustainable tourism. This suggests that influencer marketing extends beyond enhancing destination awareness to shaping tourist decisions and actions.

Consequently, this paper integrates the socio-psychological mechanisms of digital communication and influencer marketing with the foundational KAB theory. It aims to construct a comprehensive framework to elucidate how online promotion influences sustainable tourism behavior, addressing three core research questions: (1) How does digital communication shape tourists' sustainable knowledge and attitudes? (2) How do social interaction and online influence mediate the attitude-behavior transition? (3) How does the KAB model evolve into a more dynamic, interactive framework in a digital context?

The study's primary contributions are threefold: first, it contextualizes the KAB model within digital communication, uncovering the multidimensional mechanisms behind sustainable behavior; second, it posits a theoretical pathway of "Digital Communication → Cognitive Attitude → Behavioral Practice"; third, it offers a theoretical foundation for digital

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sustainability marketing for tourism destinations and firms.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Research Progress in Sustainable Tourism Behavior

Since the concept of “sustainable development” gained global prominence in the late 20th century, “Sustainable Tourism” has emerged as a key research agenda for academia and policymakers. The UNWTO (2023) defines it as tourism that accommodates the needs of present tourists and host regions while preserving and augmenting future opportunities. Academic consensus holds that Sustainable Tourism Behavior (STB) is the critical microcosmic mechanism for realizing sustainability goals, manifesting an individual’s responsible choices across environmental, social, and economic spheres.

Initial research, often framed within “ecotourism,” focused on tourists’ pro-environmental actions in natural environments. With theoretical advancement, the inquiry expanded to encompass psychological motivations, social norms, and cultural contexts. Stern’s (2000) Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) model posits that pro-environmental behavior is contingent on personal values and a sense of responsibility. Similarly, Ajzen’s (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) highlights the predictive utility of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control on intentions. In the past decade, the focus has broadened from “behavioral intention” to “behavioral practice” and its consequences, including carbon emissions, waste management, and green consumption patterns.

The literature confirms that multiple factors shape STB, including environmental education, socio-cultural backgrounds, destination policies, and external incentives. Nevertheless, the very definition of “sustainable behavior” is debated, with some scholars prioritizing an environmental orientation and others advocating for the integration of Socio-cultural dimensions. Moreover, the pronounced “intention-behavior gap” remains a central “black box” problem in the field.

2.2 KAB Theory and Its Application in Tourism Behavior Research

Originating in educational psychology and health behavior, the Knowledge–Attitude–Behavior (KAB) theory posits that knowledge acquisition leads to attitudinal change, which subsequently drives behavioral transformation^[13]. The framework has been widely applied in environmental and tourism contexts to explain Pro-Environmental Behavior (PEB) and Sustainable Tourism Behavior (STB). However, scholars note that the knowledge-to-behavior link is not always direct. McEachern & Warnaby (2008) argued that while knowledge exerts a “rational constraining effect,” attitude is also shaped by affect and social norms. Consequently, the KAB model’s explanatory power depends on incorporating additional contextual variables.

In tourism research, the KAB model is often integrated with other theoretical frameworks. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) complements KAB by introducing “behavioral intention” as a key mediator between attitude and behavior. The Norm Activation Model (NAM; Schwartz, 1977) explains the role of responsibility by incorporating a “moral norm activation mechanism.” Stern’s (2000) Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) theory offers a more comprehensive causal chain of “value–belief–norm–behavior.” Empirically, Liu et al. (2020) validated the moderating effect of daily green habits on the KAB pathway among US tourists while Alcock et al. (2017) demonstrated that context matters, as behavior often differs between home and tourism settings. Based on TPB, Zhang (2021) found that attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control significantly influence behavioral intentions related to ecotourism’s perceived value¹.

Recent scholarship has sought to expand the KAB model for complex social contexts. Holmes et al. (2019) proposed a “dynamic KAB model” with feedback loops, where behavior can retroactively modify attitudes. Yu et al. (2010) argued for a multidimensional view of attitude, comprising environmental affect, belief, and responsibility. Despite these advances, the traditional KAB model suffers from two key limitations: it largely neglects the external communication environment and social interactions, and it overemphasizes rational cognition at the expense of non-rational drivers like emotion and social identity.

The digital era has fundamentally altered tourists’ knowledge acquisition and attitude formation. Knowledge is now sourced not just from formal education but from online content and communities, while attitudes are increasingly shaped by emotional resonance and social mimesis rather than purely rational calculus. This shift necessitates a contextualized revision of the KAB model to integrate “digital communication and social influence.”

2.3 The Impact of Digital Communication and Influencer Marketing on Sustainable Tourism Behavior

Influencer marketing is defined as a strategy that leverages social media influencers (SMIs) to promote brand offerings and secure consumer endorsement^[5]. This practice has become a focal point for marketing managers as it engages

modern consumers who, raised in the internet age, seek entertainment, challenge, and social connection and prefer interactive social media over traditional one-way communication channels. Propelled by the viral dissemination of information across social networks, influencer marketing has emerged as an efficient new paradigm in information diffusion.

The ubiquity of digital platforms has positioned online marketing, particularly influencer marketing, as a crucial tool for tourism promotion. Research demonstrates that influencers, via their personal brands and follower networks, effectively shape tourist decisions and foster sustainable behaviors. For instance, sharing content about eco-tourism raises followers' environmental consciousness, steering them toward low-carbon choices. The inherent interactivity of social media—likes, comments, shares—amplifies this effect. By engaging with content, tourists not only participate in its dissemination but also reinforce their identification with sustainable tourism principles. This interaction deepens environmental awareness and promotes more sustainable choices. Furthermore, the advent of personalized marketing enables tourism firms to leverage big data to target consumers with tailored, eco-friendly product recommendations. Such personalization not only improves the tourist experience but also facilitates the adoption of sustainable options, thus advancing the industry's sustainability agenda.

3 Theoretical Basis and Analytical Framework

3.1 Theoretical Framework: An Extended KAB Model

The Knowledge – Attitude – Behavior (KAB) model was originally formulated to explain the relationship between educational interventions and behavioral change. Its core premise is that an individual's knowledge shapes their attitude, which in turn dictates their behavior. This model is a foundational theory in environmental education and sustainability research^{[7][8]} and serves as a theoretical cornerstone for understanding sustainable tourism behavior.

In the contemporary context of digital communication and influencer marketing, however, this linear pathway exhibits greater structural complexity. First, online promotion functions as an antecedent—driving information dissemination, affective arousal, and social interaction—thereby acting as a primary force in constructing sustainable knowledge. Second, within the digital media ecosystem, mechanisms of emotional resonance and social identification transform attitude formation from a purely rational process into a composite outcome of knowledge, emotion, and social influence.

Accordingly, this study extends the KAB model. While retaining its core Knowledge → Attitude → Behavior pathway, we introduce “influencer marketing” as an antecedent variable to underscore its pivotal role in knowledge construction and attitude formation. Concurrently, we conceptualize a multidimensional “sustainable attitude” comprising three elements—environmental affect, environmental belief, and environmental morality—to provide a more holistic account of tourists' psychological mechanisms at both cognitive and affective levels.

3.2 Model Construction

Drawing on the literature and theoretical logic, this paper proposes an extended KAB framework that delineates a causal chain: “Influencer Marketing → Sustainable Knowledge → Sustainable Attitude → Behavioral Intention → Sustainable Tourism Behavior.” The model's central hypothesis posits that online promotion, particularly influencer marketing, shapes tourists' sustainable cognitions and affects through information dissemination and social influence. This, in turn, influences their sustainable tourism behavior via the mediating roles of attitude and behavioral intention.

Influencer Marketing as an Antecedent Variable. Influencer marketing is conceptualized as the process of content dissemination and value-based guidance conducted by socially influential individuals on digital platforms. Its core mechanisms include emotional contagion, social identification, and trust-building. In tourism, it has become a key trigger for information diffusion and attitude formation. We therefore position influencer marketing as an external driver that indirectly impacts STB by shaping knowledge and affective experiences.

Sustainable Knowledge. Sustainable knowledge is defined as the tourist's cognition regarding environmental protection, social responsibility, and sustainable practices, acquired through digital communication. It encompasses an understanding of sustainability concepts, perceived benefits of eco-friendly actions, and awareness of tourism impacts. In our model, knowledge functions as both a mediator between influencer marketing and attitude and the cognitive foundation for behavior.

Sustainable Attitude. We operationalize “sustainable attitude” as a composite construct of environmental affect, belief, and morality. Affect pertains to emotional responses to environmental issues; belief reflects cognitive judgments about the outcomes of sustainable actions; and morality represents an individual's sense of responsibility and ethical identity. In the digital sphere, attitude formation is amplified by emotionalized narratives and social norms, leading to greater affective attachment and social mimicry.

Behavioral Intention. Following Ajzen (1991), behavioral intention is the immediate antecedent to actual behavior. In

this model, intention reflects not only an internal predisposition but is also shaped by social pressure and identity confirmation, reinforced by external interactions like influencer advocacy and peer resonance.

Sustainable Tourism Behavior (STB). STB refers to conscious actions taken by tourists that support ecological conservation and social responsibility, such as eco-friendly transport choices, waste management, and patronage of local culture¹. It is the terminal outcome of cognition and attitude, while also serving as a feedback loop that reinforces the internalization of sustainable values through experience.

3.3 Causal Pathways and Theoretical Deduction

The proposed model comprises the following logical pathways:

Influencer Marketing → Sustainable Knowledge. Through visual storytelling, immersive experiences, and emotionalized content, online promotion enhances tourists' cognitive absorption and retention of sustainability information. High-trust, high-interaction influencer content significantly boosts the dissemination efficiency of this knowledge.

Sustainable Knowledge → Sustainable Attitude. Knowledge accumulation fosters positive environmental beliefs and affective identification. As Liu et al. (2020) note, knowledge influences not just the valence of an attitude but also its stability and moral orientation.

Sustainable Attitude → Behavioral Intention. A positive sustainable attitude enhances psychological readiness for pro-environmental action, which translates into behavioral intentions via emotional resonance.

Behavioral Intention → Sustainable Tourism Behavior. Facilitated by external social incentives (e. g., influencer advocacy, social media feedback), intention is converted into actual behavior. This pathway highlights the amplifying effect of social influence.

Influencer Marketing → Sustainable Attitude / Behavioral Intention (Indirect Path). Beyond its knowledge-mediated effect, influencer marketing can also directly shape attitudes and intentions through value congruence and emotional resonance, establishing a dual cognitive and affective pathway. A model of the causal relationships is constructed as shown in Figure 1.

In conclusion, this paper puts forth an extended KAB framework, with the central hypothesis that: "Influencer marketing indirectly influences behavioral intention and sustainable tourism behavior by enhancing tourists' sustainable knowledge and attitudes."

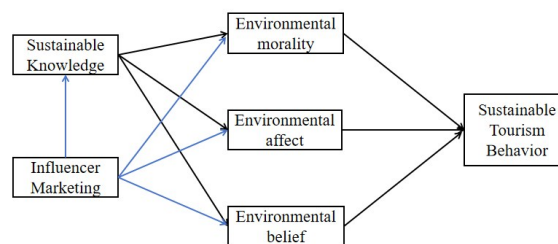


Figure 1 Conceptual Model

4 Discussion

Against the backdrop of burgeoning digital communication and the influencer economy, which shape the diversification and socialization of tourists' sustainable behaviors, this study discusses the mechanism through which influencer marketing affects sustainable tourism behavior, offering theoretical and practical insights.

Theoretically, this study first extends the Knowledge-Attitude-Behavior (KAB) model. Moving beyond the traditional linear static framework, it develops an extended "influencer marketing → sustainability knowledge → sustainable attitude → behavioral intention → sustainable tourism behavior" model. It posits that in digital contexts, knowledge dissemination and absorption are shaped by emotion, interaction, and social identity, thereby adapting the KAB theory to explain digitally-mediated tourist behavior and broadening its application in tourism research.

Secondly, it reveals the socio-psychological mechanisms of influencer marketing, conceptualizing it not merely as a promotional tool but also as a socially meaningful behavior-guiding mechanism. Through parasocial interaction and emotional identification, influencers generate social influence and value orientation within fan communities, facilitating sustainability knowledge dissemination and attitude formation. This signifies a theoretical shift from "promoting consumption" to "disseminating social value," offering a novel interdisciplinary perspective.

Concurrently, the study constructs an integrated model of sustainable behavior within digital communication contexts, establishing the causal chain of "digital communication → cognitive attitude → behavioral intention →

sustainable behavior." It proposes that socialized communication serves a dual function of information transmission and social influence, providing a new paradigm for empirical research and tourism behavior analysis. Furthermore, it enriches the psychological and communicative dimensions of sustainable tourism behavior research by uncovering the communicative logic and socio-psychological pathways from a micro-level individual perspective, thereby fostering interdisciplinary integration and contributing to a more explanatory theoretical system for tourism behavior.

Practically, this study offers implications for various stakeholders. Tourism enterprises should build digital sustainability communication systems, leveraging social media for "green narratives," collaborating with sustainability-focused influencers, and utilizing algorithms for targeted messaging to enhance brand image and behavior change. Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) should activate social influence mechanisms, encourage user-generated sustainable content to form a "public participation dissemination chain," and partner with Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) for personalized storytelling. Policymakers should promote social digital education platforms for interactive policy communication and integrate sustainability education into digital learning ecosystems.

This study has limitations and offers avenues for future research. Cultural context influences responses to digital content, warranting cross-cultural comparative studies for greater generalizability. Rather than focusing on short-term attitude change, longitudinal designs are needed to examine the long-term and cumulative effects of influencer marketing. Integrating emotional communication analysis with image recognition technology and machine learning could quantify the impact of digital affective communication, providing new methods for verifying the role of emotion in the KAB pathway. Applying social network analysis could reveal how influencer network structures on different platforms affect information diffusion and behavioral imitation, uncovering the hidden patterns of the "communication structure-behavior conversion" relationship. Furthermore, incorporating external contextual variables (e.g., policy environment, economic incentives) into the current static theoretical model would help build a multi-level dynamic behavioral system. Future research should also enhance the KAB model's explanatory power regarding the reverse modification of attitudes by behavior.

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