



EXPLORING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN SHAPING TOURISTS' VISIT INTENTIONS TO THE MEKONG DELTA

Le Dao Ngoc Thanh, Bui Thanh Khoa*
 Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City

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*Email: buithanhkhoa@juh.edu.vn

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of social media influencers in shaping tourists' visit intentions to the Mekong Delta by examining the psychological mechanisms through which digital engagement influences travel decision-making. Drawing upon an integrated theoretical framework that combines Attachment Theory, Destination Image Formation Theory, and Flow Theory, the study proposes a dual-pathway model consisting of an emotional pathway, mediated by flow experience, and a cognitive pathway, mediated by destination image. Data collected from 241 Vietnamese social media users were analyzed to test the proposed research model. The results support all six hypotheses, demonstrating that interactions with social media influencers simultaneously stimulate psychological processes of attentional immersion, emotional attachment, and cognitive evaluation of the destination. These mechanisms jointly contribute to stronger intentions to visit the Mekong Delta. The findings provide both theoretical and practical implications by explaining how digital engagement is transformed into travel intentions through complementary emotional and cognitive processes. The study also offers strategic recommendations for destination marketers to strengthen destination image, foster emotional connections, and create immersive online experiences that encourage sustainable tourism development in the Mekong Delta. By integrating three complementary theoretical perspectives within a unified framework, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of tourist decision-making in the context of social media and emerging tourism destinations.

Keywords: social media influencers; destination image; flow experience; visit intention; Mekong Delta; sustainable tourism.

Introduction

Over the past decade, the promotion and selection of tourism destinations has undergone a fundamental transformation, largely driven by the rapid expansion of digital platforms. Social media platforms have not only reshaped tourism marketing strategies but have also significantly influenced the psychological processes underlying tourists' decisions to explore new destinations and travel. This phenomenon has been particularly evident in nature-based destinations such as the Mekong Delta, a region renowned for its ecological diversity, cultural identity, and unique riverine landscapes. The Mekong Delta has increasingly been recognized as an attractive destination for sustainable tourism, where environmental conservation and local community development are emphasized (Nguyen Trong Nhan, 2019). Within this context, opportunities have been

created to examine how indirect experiences acquired through social media contribute to the formation of perceptions, emotions, and motivations among potential tourists.

Recent tourism statistics further demonstrate substantial growth in tourism in the Mekong Delta. In 2024, more than 52 million tourists visited the region, including approximately 2.8 million international visitors, and tourism revenue exceeded VND 62 trillion. By 2025, tourist arrivals are projected to reach approximately 63 million, reflecting the considerable growth potential of the Mekong Delta tourism sector amid the recovery and digital transformation of Vietnam's tourism industry (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, 2025).

Despite the growing influence of social media, limited empirical evidence has been provided regarding the psychological transformation

process through which exposure to influencer-generated content is translated into intentions to visit the Mekong Delta (Truong Vu Hoang, 2021). Addressing this research gap is important for psychological research, as mechanisms such as attentional focus, immersion, and empathic engagement during the pre-travel stage may operate differently within the Mekong Delta context, where authenticity and sustainability are highly valued.

Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook have been widely recognized as powerful communication channels through which information is disseminated, perceptions are shaped, and behavioral intentions among potential tourists are stimulated (Wang et al., 2025). Social media influencers play a pivotal role in creating authentic, accessible, and aesthetically appealing content that simultaneously triggers rational evaluations and affective responses. From a psychological perspective, opportunities for social connection are facilitated, focused attention is maintained, and positive emotions are elicited through such content. Nevertheless, the specific mechanisms through which interactions with influencers are transformed into integrated psychological experiences that ultimately foster visit intentions have not yet been fully elucidated.

In this study, a theoretical framework was developed based on three complementary psychological theories. First, Attachment Theory is employed to explain how emotional bonds with influencers and destinations influence information processing, attitude formation, and behavioral orientation. Second, Destination Image Formation Theory is used to describe the processes through which cognitive representations and affective impressions of destinations are developed and modified. Third, Flow Theory was adopted to clarify how deep engagement with influencer-generated content may lead to an optimal psychological state characterized by intense concentration, diminished self-awareness, and intrinsic enjoyment.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, social media influencer engagement is conceptualized as a dynamic psychological process in which cognitive and affective mechanisms are activated. Through this process,

destination representations are formed, emotional connections nurtured, and immersive experiences facilitated. Together, these factors are proposed to contribute to the development of intentions to visit the Mekong Delta through independent and interrelated psychological pathways.

1. Theoretical Background

Theoretical Framework

Attachment Theory, originally developed within the field of social psychology, has been widely employed to explain how emotional and psychological bonds are established not only with other individuals but also with places, and how such bonds subsequently influence attitudes and behavioral intentions (Bowlby & Solomon, 1989). From this perspective, insights are provided into the mechanisms by which affective connections are formed and translated into future behavioral tendencies.

Destination Image Theory has been used to explain how tourists' perceptions and impressions of destinations are constructed and continuously updated through indirect information sources, personal experiences, and social interactions (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Within this framework, destination images are viewed as mental representations shaped by both cognitive evaluations and affective responses, thereby influencing destination-related decision-making processes.

According to Flow Theory, a state of deep immersion may be experienced when individuals become fully engaged in an activity, resulting in heightened concentration, intrinsic enjoyment, and a strong sense of involvement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Under such conditions, motivation is enhanced, and subsequent behaviors may be influenced. In digital environments, flow experiences are frequently associated with increased engagement, positive emotions, and favorable behavioral outcomes.

By emphasizing these psychological and emotional processes, attention is drawn to the cognitive and affective pathways activated before actual travel takes place. Through the integration of these three theoretical perspectives, a comprehensive understanding of how interactions with social media content created by influencers promoting the Mekong Delta may affect tourists' thoughts, emotions, and pre-travel immersive

experiences is provided. Within this framework, both direct and indirect psychological pathways through which influencer-generated content may shape individuals' intentions to visit a destination are identified.

Hypothesis Development

Visit intention has been recognized as a key outcome in tourist behavior, reflecting pre-travel motivation and directly influencing travel decisions and destination choice (Wang & Luo, 2024). These intentions are shaped by prior cognitive and emotional experiences. This perspective is consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior, which states that attitudes toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control are the primary determinants of behavioral intentions (Al Ziadat, 2015).

Influencer engagement refers to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral interactions that followers exhibit when exposed to influencer-generated content, including viewing, liking, commenting, sharing, and participating in related activities. From a psychological perspective, such engagement extends beyond simple exposure and reflects the processes of pre-travel cognition, empathic involvement, and anticipatory behavioral readiness. Consumer perceptions and intentions have been shown to be influenced by influencers through their credibility, authenticity, relatability, and social capital (Baxter & Czarnecka, 2025). Through repeated interactions with influencers on social media, parasocial bonds are cultivated, and these bonds may subsequently be transferred to the promoted destination, thereby influencing pre-travel attitudes (Krolikowska et al., 2020; Shen et al., 2022). It has also been reported that greater engagement with influencers enhances the salience of destination images in tourists' minds (Hien et al., 2025). Furthermore, deep engagement with social media content is associated with a higher likelihood of entering immersive psychological states, thereby strengthening pre-travel intentions and intrinsic enjoyment (Hyun et al., 2022). Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1: Influencer engagement has a positive effect on tourists' intentions to visit the Mekong Delta.

H2: Influencer engagement has a positive effect on tourists' flow experiences.

H3: Influencer engagement has a positive effect on tourists' destination image perceptions.

Flow experience is defined as a state of intense concentration and immersion in which individuals become fully absorbed in an activity and experience intrinsic enjoyment, satisfaction, and motivation (Duy et al., 2025). In the context of social media, influencer-generated content about the Mekong Delta may facilitate such experiences. According to Flow Theory, when destination-related content is perceived as novel, visually appealing, and emotionally engaging, viewers' attention may be fully captured even before they physically visit the destination (Dinh Phi Ho et al., 2024). Such pre-travel immersion not only strengthens positive affective responses toward the content but also facilitates deeper information processing and anticipatory engagement with the destination itself. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Tourists' flow experiences have a positive effect on their intentions to visit the Mekong Delta.

Destination image refers to the set of beliefs, perceptions, and feelings that potential tourists have about a destination (Hien et al., 2025). The rapid growth of social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok has significantly influenced destination image formation, particularly during the pre-travel stage. Content shared by both ordinary users and influencers provides authentic representations of tourism destinations and often evokes strong emotional reactions. Consequently, favorable mental images are formed in tourists' minds, enhancing destination attractiveness and increasing the likelihood of future visits (Hien et al., 2025). From the perspective of Attachment Theory, emotional bonds with influencers contribute to stronger trust in the messages they communicate, leading to more positive evaluations of destinations and greater receptiveness to the experiences being portrayed (Thomson et al., 2005). Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed.:

H5: Tourists' destination image perceptions have a positive effect on their intentions to visit the Mekong Delta.

H6: Tourists’ destination image perceptions have a positive effect on their flow experiences.

2. Research Methodology

The target population comprised social media users in Vietnam who were interested in tourism-related content and had been exposed to social media influencers. To be eligible for participation, respondents were required to satisfy the following criteria: (1) be at least 18 years of age; (2) actively use at least one major social media platform, including Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube; (3) follow at least one influencer associated with tourism-related content; and (4) possess basic awareness or knowledge of tourism in the Mekong Delta region.

According to Hair et al. (2019), the minimum required sample size can be determined using the formula: $5 \times \text{the number of research variables} + 50$. Given that four research constructs were included in the proposed model, a minimum sample size of 70 respondents was required for the study. A total of 241 valid responses were collected, exceeding the recommended threshold and ensuring adequate statistical power for the analysis. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 1.

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire distributed via tourism-related social media groups and platforms. Participation was voluntary, and responses were restricted to individuals who satisfied the predefined eligibility criteria. The survey instrument consisted of four constructs measured using 17 indicators. All measurement items were adapted from established studies and assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”).

Specifically, the constructs included: Influencer Engagement (IE), measured using three indicators adapted from Zhou et al. (2023); Flow Experience (FE), measured using four indicators adapted from Duy et al. (2025); Destination Image (DI), measured using seven indicators adapted from Chung and Chen (2018); and Visit Intention (VI), measured using three indicators adapted from Wang and Luo (2024).

For data analysis, the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach was employed using SmartPLS 4.0 software. This method was selected because of its suitability for theory development, prediction-oriented research, and simultaneous assessment of measurement and structural models.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	101	41.91
	Female	140	58.09
Age	18-25 years	135	56.02
	26-35 years	84	34.85
	Above 35 years	22	9.13
Occupation	Senior Manager	10	4.15
	Employee	65	26.97
	Freelancer	67	27.80
	Student	82	34.02
	Other	17	7.05
Educational Level	Vocational Diploma	19	7.88
	College Degree	22	9.13
	Bachelor’s Degree	137	56.85
	Master’s Degree	58	24.07
	Doctoral Degree	5	2.07

Daily Social Media Usage	1-2 hours	84	34.85
	2-3 hours	63	26.14
	3-4 hours	43	17.84
	More than 4 hours	51	21.16

(Source: Compiled by the authors)

3. Research Results

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was first evaluated to assess reliability and validity. The results indicated that all indicator loadings exceeded

the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming strong correlations between the indicators and their respective constructs, as well as their suitability for measurement purposes.

Table 2. Reliability and Validity Assessment Results

Construct	CA	CR	AVE	OL
DI (Destination Image)	0.872	0.891	0.716	0.713-0.845
IE (Influencer Engagement)	0.764	0.825	0.621	0.754-0.795
FE (Flow Experience)	0.785	0.863	0.538	0.765-0.824
VI (Visit Intention)	0.782	0.857	0.754	0.756-0.815

(Source: PLS-SEM analysis results from the survey)

Cronbach’s alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR) were employed to assess the reliability and internal consistency of the constructs. All Cronbach’s alpha values exceeded 0.70, while all Composite Reliability values were also above the recommended threshold of 0.70. These results confirm the satisfactory reliability of the measurement model. Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all

constructs exceeded 0.50, indicating adequate convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was subsequently examined using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) criterion. As shown in Table 3, all HTMT values were below the recommended threshold of 0.85, thereby confirming satisfactory discriminant validity among the constructs.

Table 3. HTMT Results

Construct	FE	DI	IE	VI
FE	-			
DI	0.658	-		
IE	0.775	0.835	-	
VI	0.744	0.726	0.815	-

(Source: PLS-SEM analysis results from the survey)

Structural Model Assessment

The structural model was then evaluated to determine its explanatory and predictive capabilities. As reported in Table 4, the model explained 34.2% of the variance in Destination Image (DI), 35.4% of the variance in Flow Experience (FE), and 51.3% of the variance in Visit Intention (VI). In addition, strong predictive relevance was demonstrated, with Q² values ranging from 0.376_0.534.

Influencer Engagement (IE) was found to exert a moderate effect on Destination Image (f²

= 0.265) and Flow Experience (f² = 0.208), while its direct effect on Visit Intention was relatively smaller (f² = 0.186). Notably, Destination Image exhibited the strongest influence on Visit Intention (f² = 0.352), whereas Flow Experience demonstrated a moderate effect (f² = 0.278). These findings highlight the important role played by social media influencers in fostering positive destination images, which subsequently facilitate immersive psychological experiences and ultimately enhance tourists’ intention to visit the Mekong Delta.

Table 4. Results of R², Q², and f²

Dependent Variable	R ²	Q ²	Independent Variable	f ²
DI	0.342	0.482	IE	0.265
FE	0.354	0.376	IE	0.208
			DI	0.253
VI	0.513	0.534	IE	0.186
			DI	0.352
			FE	0.278

(Source: PLS-SEM analysis results from the survey)

The significance of the structural relationships was evaluated using the bootstrapping procedure. A t-value greater than 1.96 indicates a statistically significant relationship at the 95% confidence level and supports the corresponding research hypothesis. As shown in Table 5, all t-values

exceeded the threshold of 1.96, indicating that the structural paths were statistically significant. Therefore, the structural model demonstrated adequate explanatory power and robustness, and all the proposed hypotheses were supported..

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis: Path	Beta	t-value	Result
H1: IE → VI	0.235	18.763	Supported
H2: IE → FE	0.173	13.682	Supported
H3: IE → DI	0.395	9.247	Supported
H4: FE → VI	0.202	16.935	Supported
H5: DI → VI	0.432	12.476	Supported
H6: DI → FE	0.275	15.243	Supported

(Source: PLS-SEM analysis results from the survey)

4. Discussion

The findings provide empirical evidence regarding the role of social media influencers in shaping potential tourists’ intentions to visit the Mekong Delta. The relationships identified in the proposed model indicate that this process is facilitated by both cognitive and affective mechanisms.

First, Influencer Engagement (IE) positively Visit Intention (VI). This finding suggests that online interactions, such as viewing content, liking posts, and commenting, should not be regarded as mere communication activities. Rather, psychological connections between followers and destination-related content are fostered through such interactions. From the perspective of Attachment Theory, repeated exposure and engagement may lead to the development of

parasocial relationships between followers and influencers, thereby increasing interest in and motivation to explore the destinations being promoted (Krolikowska et al., 2020; Shen et al., 2022).

The positive relationship identified between Influencer Engagement and Flow Experience further demonstrates the capacity of digital content to generate psychological states characterized by intense concentration and intrinsic motivation (Hien et al., 2025). Users are more likely to become immersed in their content experience when they engage with personalized storytelling, live-streaming activities, or visually appealing destination content. Such a state of flow not only enhances engagement with tourism-related information but also serves as a psychological bridge through which online

interactions with influencers are transformed into stronger interest and intentions to visit the destination in the future.

Similarly, the effect of influencers on Destination Image was confirmed, suggesting that both cognitive and affective processes are involved in destination image formation (Hyun et al., 2022). Through personalized content, authentic narratives, and visually attractive representations, influencers shape tourists' perceptions of the Mekong Delta while simultaneously strengthening emotional connections with the destination. Thus, digital communication functions not only as a source of information but also as a catalyst for the development of positive mental representations, which subsequently promote travel intentions.

The findings also support the positive relationship between Flow Experience and Visit Intention, indicating that immersion in tourism-related content can enhance the perceived value and intrinsic rewards associated with a prospective trip (Dinh Phi Ho et al., 2024). Through this mechanism, virtual experiences encountered during information consumption are transformed into motivations for destination exploration, thereby reinforcing the intention to visit the Mekong Delta.

Furthermore, the positive relationship between Destination Image and Visit Intention suggests that favorable cognitive and affective representations of the Mekong Delta play an important role in guiding destination evaluations and strengthening emotional attachment to the destination (Hien et al., 2025). When a clear and positive destination image is developed, more favorable attitudes toward the destination are likely to be formed, resulting in stronger intentions to visit.

Finally, the results demonstrate that a positive Destination Image provides a favorable cognitive-affective foundation for the development of Flow Experience (Thomson et al., 2005). Once positive mental schemas regarding the Mekong Delta are established, individuals are more likely to become immersed in influencer-generated content, thereby increasing emotional engagement during the pre-travel stage. This finding highlights the

interconnectedness of cognitive representations and immersive experiences in shaping tourism-related behavioral intentions.

Overall, the results support the proposed theoretical framework by demonstrating that influencer engagement contributes to visit intention both directly and indirectly through the mediating roles of Destination Image and Flow Experience. The findings further suggest that travel decisions in the digital era are increasingly influenced by integrated psychological processes, in which cognitive evaluations, emotional attachments, and immersive online experiences interact to shape tourists' behavioral intentions.

Conclusion

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes significant interdisciplinary contributions by providing a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms through which travel intentions are formed in digital environments. The first major contribution lies in the extension of Attachment Theory to the context of digital communication and anticipatory behavior. The findings demonstrate that parasocial relationships developed in online environments simultaneously activate affective processing systems and schema-based memory structures. Consequently, engagement with social media influencers can be reconceptualized as a multidimensional psychological process that triggers emotional resonance, self-referential information processing, and internalization of symbolic associations with destinations.

The second contribution is the establishment of a causal linkage between Destination Image Formation Theory and immersive experiential mechanisms. The findings suggest that the image of the Mekong Delta is constructed through authenticity-related cues that generate cognitive structures capable of directing attention and serving as a foundation for affective responses. Thus, destination image functions as a cognitive evaluation mechanism and facilitates deeper psychological engagement with destination-related content.

The third contribution is achieved through the extension of Flow Theory to virtual and

anticipatory contexts. The results indicate that flow experiences may emerge through indirect interactions mediated by digital platforms rather than solely through direct participation. This finding broadens the applicability of Flow Theory by demonstrating that immersive psychological states can be experienced during the pre-travel stage through engagement with influencer-generated content.

Collectively, these theoretical extensions are integrated into a dual-pathway framework comprising an emotional immersion pathway and a cognitive structure pathway. The proposed framework provides a comprehensive explanation of how communication stimuli simultaneously activate three interacting psychological systems—attentional immersion, emotional attachment, and cognitive structuring—which ultimately converge to shape the behavioral intentions. Thus, this study advances the theoretical understanding of how digital engagement is translated into tourism-related decision-making processes.

Practical Implications

From a tourism management perspective, the findings highlight the strategic importance of establishing partnerships with social media influencers who can deliver that is not only visually appealing and authentic but also cognitively stimulating and emotionally engaging. Based on the psychological mechanisms identified in this study, tourism authorities and destination marketing organizations in the Mekong Delta should orient their collaboration strategies toward the following objectives:

First, content should be developed to vividly portray the region's riverine landscapes, cultural heritage, and distinctive culinary experiences. Through such representations, potential tourists can construct rich and multidimensional mental images of the Mekong Delta.

Second, priority should be given to content that communicates personal experiences, authentic interactions with local communities, and indigenous cultural values. These approaches may cultivate stronger and more enduring emotional attachments to the destination.

Third, immersive digital experiences

should be designed through the use of virtual reality applications, 360-degree panoramic videos, and interactive live-streaming activities from iconic locations throughout the Mekong Delta. Such initiatives are expected to facilitate flow experiences and strengthen tourists' psychological engagement during the pre-travel stage of the trip.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite providing valuable insights, this study has several limitations.

First, the cross-sectional research design restricted the ability to establish definitive causal relationships among the investigated constructs. Although significant associations were identified, longitudinal or experimental research designs are required to provide stronger causal evidence.

Second, focusing on Vietnamese domestic tourists may limit the generalizability of the findings to international tourist segments characterized by different cultural backgrounds, travel motivations, and social media consumption patterns. Therefore, caution should be exercised when extending these findings beyond the studied population.

Third, the use of self-reported data introduces the possibility of common method and social desirability biases which may influence respondents' evaluations and behavioral intentions.

Future research should build on the process-oriented framework proposed in this study by examining potential boundary conditions and moderating variables, including influencer expertise, audience prior knowledge, trust propensity, and cultural differences. Furthermore, comparative studies involving domestic and international tourists may provide additional insights into the cross-cultural applicability of this framework. Such investigations would contribute to a more refined understanding of the psychological mechanisms and contextual conditions through which digital influencer engagement most effectively promotes sustainable tourism behavior in the Mekong Delta region.

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