

Predicting Johor Bahru's Destination Image Through Social Media Influence, Influencer Endorsement, and Social Media Usage Among Malaysian Young Adults

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Abstract - This study investigates the influence of social media influence, influencer endorsement, and social media usage on Johor Bahru's destination image among Malaysian young adults. Despite the growing importance of digital tourism communication, limited empirical studies have examined the strongest social media related factors influencing Johor Bahru's destination image among young adults in Malaysia. Guided by Media System Dependency Theory, this study adopted a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey approach. Data were collected from 210 Malaysian young adults aged 18 to 35 years through a structured online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The instrument employed a five-point Likert scale and underwent pilot testing and Cronbach's Alpha reliability assessment to ensure internal consistency. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Version 29 through descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis. The findings showed that social media influence had the highest descriptive mean score ($M = 3.775$, $SD = 0.877$), indicating strong agreement that social media shapes tourism perceptions. Multiple regression analysis further showed that social media usage was the strongest predictor of Johor Bahru's destination image ($\beta = .625$, $p < .001$), followed by influencer endorsement ($\beta = .278$, $p < .001$). However, social media influence did not significantly predict destination image ($\beta = .030$, $p = .655$). The regression model explained 78.2% of the variance in destination image perception ($R^2 = .782$). The findings highlight the strategic importance of active social media engagement and influencer credibility in strengthening destination branding and digitally driven tourism promotion strategies among young adults in Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism destination image has become increasingly shaped by digital communication ecosystems, particularly through the rapid expansion of social media platforms and influencer driven content. Contemporary tourists no longer rely solely on traditional destination marketing materials, as travel related perceptions are now constructed through user generated content, visual storytelling, online reviews, and interactive social media engagement (De Las Heras-Pedrosa et al., 2020; Tran & Rudolf, 2022). The transformation of tourism communication has significantly altered how destinations are evaluated, remembered, and promoted among younger audiences. Young adults, particularly Generation Z, actively utilise platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook to search for travel information, compare destinations, and validate travel decisions through peer interaction and influencer recommendations (Akin & Şener, 2024; Wang & Park, 2022). Research further demonstrates that social media exposure contributes directly to destination awareness, emotional attachment, and behavioural intention through continuous digital engagement and virtual travel experiences (An et al., 2021; Tham et al., 2020). Within this context, destination image is no longer formed exclusively through physical visitation but increasingly through mediated digital experiences that shape tourists' cognitive and affective evaluations before travel occurs (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). Consequently, tourism stakeholders are increasingly integrating social media communication strategies into destination branding efforts to enhance competitiveness and visibility within highly saturated tourism markets (Fathy et al., 2024; Lasisi et al., 2023).

The growing influence of social media influencers has further intensified the role of digital communication in tourism marketing and

destination image formation. Influencers function as opinion leaders who shape travel related attitudes through perceived authenticity, parasocial interaction, credibility, and experiential narratives shared across digital platforms (Han & Balabanis, 2023; Su et al., 2021). Unlike conventional advertising, influencer generated content is often perceived as more relatable and trustworthy, particularly among young consumers who value experiential authenticity and peer based recommendations (Kapitan et al., 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021). Previous studies indicate that influencer endorsements significantly affect destination attractiveness, travel intention, and online engagement by creating aspirational travel imagery and emotional attachment toward destinations (Pop et al., 2021; Omeish et al., 2024). Furthermore, the increasing dominance of short form visual platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels has amplified the persuasive capacity of influencer marketing within tourism communication (Bishqemi & Crowley, 2022; Eman & Refaie, 2023). Nevertheless, existing literature remains heavily concentrated on global tourism destinations and broad international contexts, with limited empirical attention given to secondary urban tourism destinations in Malaysia. This creates an important contextual gap, particularly in understanding how digitally mediated tourism communication influences the image construction of Johor Bahru among Malaysian young adults.

Johor Bahru has experienced substantial tourism and urban development growth due to its strategic geographical location, proximity to Singapore, expanding entertainment infrastructure, and evolving cultural tourism offerings. Attractions such as theme parks, urban leisure spaces, cultural food experiences, and lifestyle tourism activities have strengthened its position within Malaysia's domestic tourism sector (Othman & Samsudin, 2021; Samsudin et al., 2023). However, destination image remains vulnerable to issues associated with

urban congestion, inconsistent tourism narratives, and uneven digital representation across online platforms. In an era where travel decisions are increasingly influenced by algorithmic visibility, online engagement metrics, and social media interaction, understanding the influence of digital communication variables on destination image becomes strategically important for tourism development (Nguyen et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2024). Although previous studies have examined social media and travel behaviour independently, limited research has simultaneously investigated the combined influence of social media exposure, influencer endorsement, and social media usage intensity on Johor Bahru's destination image among young adults. Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationships between these variables and determine the strongest predictor influencing destination image formation. The findings are expected to contribute to destination branding literature while offering practical insights for destination marketing organisations and tourism stakeholders in developing digitally integrated tourism promotion strategies targeting young travellers in Malaysia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

This study is underpinned by Media System Dependency Theory, which explains how individuals increasingly depend on media platforms to obtain information, form perceptions, and guide behavioural decisions in situations characterised by uncertainty and information seeking (Rohmah & Rahmawati, 2023; Semujju, 2020). Within the tourism context, social media platforms function as influential information systems where young adults rely on digital content, influencer narratives, online reviews, and user-generated experiences to evaluate destinations and shape travel-related attitudes. The theory suggests that higher levels of media

dependency strengthen the influence of media messages on cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes. In tourism communication, this dependency is particularly significant among young adults who actively use Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and other digital platforms for travel inspiration and destination evaluation (Akin & Şener, 2024; Wang & Park, 2022). Influencer endorsements and social media interactions further reinforce destination image formation by creating perceived authenticity, trust, and emotional connection between audiences and destinations (Pop et al., 2021; Su et al., 2021). Consequently, Media System Dependency Theory provides a relevant theoretical lens for explaining how social media influence, influencer endorsement, and social media usage intensity contribute to the formation of Johor Bahru's destination image among Malaysian young adults.

2.2 Destination Image in Digital Tourism Communication

Destination image is widely recognised as a critical determinant of tourists' perceptions, satisfaction, behavioural intentions, and destination competitiveness in tourism studies. Afshardoost and Eshaghi (2020) explained that the destination image comprises cognitive and affective evaluations developed through accumulated information, emotional interpretation, and experiential expectations associated with a particular destination. In the contemporary tourism environment, destination image formation is increasingly mediated through digital communication technologies rather than traditional tourism promotion channels alone. Tran and Rudolf (2022) argued that social media platforms have transformed destination branding practices by enabling interactive communication, user participation, and real-time content dissemination. Through digital environments, tourists are exposed to visual narratives, online reviews, travel blogs,

and immersive media content that significantly shape their perceptions before they visit in person.

Research further demonstrates that social media communication contributes positively to destination brand awareness, engagement, and perceived destination quality. Huerta Álvarez et al. (2020) found that continuous social media interaction strengthens destination brand equity and enhances emotional engagement among tourists. Similarly, Dedeoğlu et al. (2020) reported that tourism-related social media sharing significantly improves destination awareness and tourists' perceptions of destination attractiveness. These findings indicate that the destination image is increasingly influenced by digitally mediated experiences, in which tourists actively construct perceptions through online interactions and content consumption. Consequently, tourism stakeholders and destination marketing organisations are increasingly prioritising digital communication strategies to improve destination visibility and maintain competitiveness within highly saturated tourism markets (Fathy et al., 2024). Within this context, Johor Bahru's destination image is likely to be influenced by digital tourism communication patterns, particularly among young adults who are highly engaged with social media.

2.3 Social Media Influence and Destination Perception

Social media influence has become one of the most dominant factors shaping tourism-related decision-making among young adults. The rapid expansion of digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube has transformed how tourists search for information, evaluate destinations, and form travel expectations (Akin & Şener, 2024). Young adults increasingly rely on social media content because these platforms provide accessible, visually engaging, and socially validated tourism information that aligns with their

lifestyle preferences and consumption behaviour (Hendrickx, 2024). Research by Tham et al. (2020) highlighted that contextual relevance and authenticity within social media content significantly influence tourists' destination selection processes. The visual and interactive nature of social media enables destinations to create aspirational tourism imagery that stimulates emotional attachment and travel motivation among potential tourists.

Previous studies also demonstrate that user generated content plays a central role in destination image formation. Hua et al. (2024) emphasised that user generated travel content positively shapes cultural perception and destination attractiveness among Generation Z tourists. Similarly, Yamagishi et al. (2023) revealed that social media content significantly influences tourists' visit intention through emotional stimulation and cognitive evaluation processes. The increasing dependency on digital tourism content further reinforces social media's role as a persuasive communication mechanism affecting travel related attitudes and behaviour (Azazi & Shaed, 2020). Moreover, social media platforms encourage active interaction through comments, sharing, liking, and virtual engagement, creating stronger destination familiarity and social validation among users (Chen et al., 2024). These findings collectively suggest that social media influence significantly contributes to how young adults perceive and evaluate tourism destinations, including urban destinations such as Johor Bahru.

2.4 Influencer Endorsement and Tourism Behaviour

Influencer endorsement has emerged as a powerful digital marketing strategy within tourism communication and destination branding. Social media influencers function as opinion leaders who influence audiences through experiential

storytelling, visual representation, and perceived authenticity (Han & Balabanis, 2023). Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, influencers establish continuous interaction with followers, creating parasocial relationships that strengthen audience trust and emotional engagement (Su et al., 2021). Hill and Qesja (2022) argued that influencer authenticity significantly affects audience perception and behavioural response within the travel industry. Influencers who are perceived as trustworthy, relatable, and knowledgeable are more likely to influence tourists' attitudes toward destinations and travel related decision making.

Several tourism studies have reported significant relationships between influencer endorsement and destination attractiveness. Pop et al. (2021) found that influencer credibility positively affects tourists' decision journeys, particularly during information search and destination evaluation stages. Similarly, Shah et al. (2024) reported that influencer marketing significantly shapes travel destination choices among young consumers by increasing destination awareness and emotional attachment. Omeish et al. (2024) further demonstrated that social media usage intensity moderates the influence of social media influencers on destination image and visitation intention, indicating that highly active social media users are more susceptible to influencer persuasion. Hernández Méndez and Baute Díaz (2023) also highlighted that different categories of influencers generate varying levels of tourism marketing effectiveness depending on audience trust, niche relevance, and communication style. Despite extensive global research on influencer marketing, empirical studies focusing specifically on Johor Bahru's destination image within the Malaysian tourism context remain limited. Therefore, examining influencer endorsement alongside social media influence and social media usage intensity is important for

understanding the digital determinants shaping destination image among Malaysian young adults.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the influence of social media, influencer endorsement, and social media usage on Johor Bahru's destination image among Malaysian young adults. A quantitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to examine statistical relationships, measure behavioural tendencies, and evaluate the predictive influence of independent variables on destination image perception. Asryan (2024) explained that quantitative research is suitable for analysing measurable constructs and identifying relationships between variables through systematic statistical procedures. The study also utilised a cross-sectional survey design, which enabled the collection of empirical data from respondents at a single point in time. This design was appropriate because the study focused on current patterns of digital engagement and destination perception among young adults within the Malaysian tourism context.

3.2 Research Approach

The study employed a survey based research approach using a structured questionnaire instrument. Survey research is widely used in tourism and social media studies because it enables efficient collection of standardised data from large populations while allowing statistical generalisation and comparison across variables. Ngo et al. (2022) highlighted that survey methods are effective for examining behavioural patterns and social media engagement within tourism research contexts. The present study focused on measuring respondents' perceptions regarding

social media influence, influencer endorsement, social media usage intensity, and Johor Bahru's destination image. Therefore, a structured survey approach was appropriate to obtain quantifiable data suitable for descriptive and inferential statistical analysis.

3.3 Sampling and Data Collection

The target population consisted of Malaysian young adults aged between 18 and 35 years old who actively use social media platforms for travel information and tourism engagement. This demographic group was selected because young adults are among the most active social media users and are significantly influenced by digital tourism communication and influencer-generated content (Akin & Şener, 2024; Hendrickx, 2024). The study employed convenience sampling to ensure broader representation of respondents with similar demographic and social media engagement characteristics. A total of 210 respondents participated in the study, exceeding the minimum recommended sample size for quantitative behavioural research and improving the reliability of statistical estimation procedures (Gumpili & Das, 2022).

Data collection was conducted using a self-administered online questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. Online distribution was considered appropriate because the respondents were digitally connected individuals familiar with social media platforms and online interaction. The questionnaire consisted of two sections, namely demographic information and measurement items related to the study constructs. A five point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree was used to measure respondents' perceptions and attitudes toward the variables examined in the study.

3.4 Research Instrument and Pilot Testing

The research instrument was developed by adapting constructs from previous tourism, influencer marketing, and social media studies to ensure content validity and construct relevance. Schnitzlein (2024) emphasised that carefully structured questionnaire design improves measurement accuracy and response consistency. The instrument measured four primary constructs, namely social media influence, influencer endorsement, social media usage, and destination image. Prior to the actual data collection process, a pilot study was conducted to evaluate the clarity, readability, and consistency of the questionnaire items. Reliability testing was performed using Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency. According to Raykov et al. (2024), reliability coefficients above the acceptable threshold indicate that the measurement items consistently represent the intended constructs. The pilot testing process, therefore, strengthened the reliability and suitability of the instrument for the main study.

3.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS Version 29 through descriptive and inferential statistical procedures. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distribution, percentage, mean score, and standard deviation, were used to summarise respondents' demographic profiles and response patterns (Cooksey, 2020). Inferential statistical analysis was subsequently performed using Pearson correlation analysis to examine the strength and direction of relationships between the independent variables and Johor Bahru's destination image. Multiple regression analysis was also employed to identify the strongest predictor influencing destination image formation among young adults. These statistical techniques were appropriate because they allow systematic examination of predictive relationships and statistical significance between behavioural variables within quantitative tourism research.

(Asryan, 2024).

3.6 Theoretical Lens

This study was guided by Media System Dependency Theory, which explains that individuals increasingly depend on media platforms for information acquisition, perception formation, and behavioural guidance in modern communication environments (Semujju, 2020). Within tourism contexts, social media platforms function as influential communication systems where young adults rely on online reviews, influencer endorsements, user generated content, and visual narratives to evaluate tourism destinations. Rohmah and Rahmawati (2023) argued that higher levels of media dependency increase the influence of media content on individuals' cognitive and behavioural responses. In the present study, social media content, influencer communication, and tourism related digital interaction were conceptualised as media stimuli influencing destination image perception among Malaysian young adults.

3.7 Ethical Consideration

The study adhered to ethical research principles throughout the data collection and analysis process. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire. No personal identifying information was collected, ensuring respondent anonymity and confidentiality. The online survey format also allowed respondents to participate without coercion or external pressure. All collected data were used strictly for academic purposes and analysed in aggregate form to maintain privacy and ethical integrity throughout the research process.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Profile of Respondents

This section presents the findings derived from the quantitative data analysis conducted using IBM SPSS Version 29. The analysis focuses on respondents' demographic characteristics and the relationships between social media influence, influencer endorsement, social media usage, and Johor Bahru's destination image among Malaysian young adults. Descriptive statistical analysis was performed to summarise respondents' profiles and identify patterns of social media engagement relevant to tourism behaviour and destination perception. Understanding respondents' demographic background is important because demographic variables such as age, education level, employment status, and social media usage intensity may influence tourism information seeking behaviour and digital interaction patterns. The findings provide empirical insights into how digitally connected young adults perceive Johor Bahru as a tourism destination through social media exposure and online communication environments.

Table 1 presents the descriptive demographic profile of the respondents involved in the study. The findings indicate that female respondents constituted the majority of the sample, representing 62.9% ($n = 132$), while male respondents accounted for 37.1% ($n = 78$). This distribution suggests stronger participation among female young adults, which aligns with previous studies indicating that female users tend to demonstrate higher engagement with tourism related social media content and online travel interaction. In terms of age distribution, the majority of respondents were between 22 and 25 years old, with 41.9% aged 24 to 25 and 41.0% aged 22 to 23. This demonstrates that the study largely captured perspectives from digitally active emerging adults who are highly exposed to social media communication and influencer generated tourism

Table 1. Table of descriptive demographic

Characteristics	Descriptions	Frequency	Valid Percentage(%)
Gender	Male	78	37.1
	Female	132	62.9
Age	<18	10	4.8
	19-21	11	5.2
	22-23	86	41.0
	24-25	88	41.9
	26-28	8	3.8
	29+	7	3.3
Level of Education	High School and equivalent	21	10.0
	Diploma	39	18.6
	Bachelor's Degree	136	64.8
	Master's Degree	14	6.7
Employment Status	Student	110	52.4
	Unemployed	7	3.3
	Self-Employed	5	2.4
	Employed Part Time	11	5.2
	Employed Full Time	77	36.7
Monthly Income	Below RM2,000	137	65.2
	RM2,000 - RM3,999	58	27.6
	RM4,000 – RM5,999	11	5.2
	RM6,000 and above	4	1.9
Social Media Usage	A few times a week	3	1.4
	Once a day	5	2.4
	Multiple times a day	202	96.2
Visited Johor Bahru	Yes	167	79.5
	No	43	20.5
Primary Source of Information	Friends and Family	43	20.5
	Social media	158	75.2
	Travel Agencies	3	1.4
	Travel Websites	6	2.9

content. Grosemans et al. (2020) highlighted that individuals within this age category actively explore identity, lifestyle, and experiential consumption patterns, including tourism related activities and digital engagement behaviour.

The educational background of respondents further reflects a relatively educated sample population, where 64.8% possessed a Bachelor's

Degree qualification, followed by Diploma holders at 18.6%. This finding suggests that the respondents are likely to possess higher levels of digital literacy and information evaluation capability when interacting with tourism related social media content. In terms of employment status, students represented the largest respondent category at 52.4%, followed by full time employees at 36.7%. This demographic composition is

consistent with the study's focus on young adults who are highly active within digital communication environments and frequently utilise social media for travel inspiration and destination exploration. Additionally, the majority of respondents reported monthly incomes below RM2,000, indicating that affordability and accessible tourism information may significantly influence travel decision making behaviour among this demographic group.

The findings also reveal exceptionally high levels of social media engagement among respondents. A substantial 96.2% reported using social media multiple times a day, demonstrating that social media platforms have become deeply integrated into their daily communication and information seeking behaviour. This supports the argument by Akin and Şener (2024) that young adults increasingly depend on digital platforms for tourism related information and destination evaluation. Furthermore, 79.5% of respondents had previously visited Johor Bahru, indicating that most respondents possessed some level of familiarity or experiential exposure toward the destination. Most importantly, social media emerged as the dominant primary source of tourism information, accounting for 75.2% of responses, while traditional information sources such as travel agencies and travel websites recorded minimal influence. This finding strongly reinforces the growing dominance of digital tourism communication and highlights the significant role of social media platforms in shaping destination image, travel perception, and tourism behaviour among Malaysian young adults.

OBJECTIVE 1

To Examine the Level of Social Media Influence, Influencer Endorsement, Social Media Usage, and Johor Bahru's Destination Image Among Malaysian Young Adults

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to

determine the level of social media influence, influencer endorsement, social media usage intensity, and Johor Bahru's destination image among Malaysian young adults. Mean score analysis was employed to identify respondents' overall perception and agreement levels toward each construct measured in the study. According to Cooksey (2020), descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation provide important insights into respondents' behavioural tendencies and response distribution patterns. The findings indicate that all variables recorded moderately high to high mean scores, suggesting that social media related factors significantly influence respondents' tourism perception and destination evaluation processes. Table 2 presents descriptive data examining the tone of different captions from the TikTok posting.

The findings revealed that social media influence recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.775$, $SD = 0.877$), indicating a high level of agreement among respondents regarding the role of social media content in shaping their perceptions toward Johor Bahru as a tourism destination. This finding suggests that respondents are strongly influenced by online travel content, destination-related posts, reviews, videos, and visual tourism narratives available across digital platforms. The result supports previous studies by Tham et al. (2020) and Chen et al. (2024), which found that social media communication significantly affects destination awareness, travel motivation, and tourism decision making among young adults. The relatively low standard deviation also indicates consistency in respondents' perceptions regarding the influence of social media on destination image formation.

Social media usage intensity also demonstrated a high mean score ($M = 3.667$, $SD = 0.927$), reflecting that respondents actively engage with social media platforms multiple times daily for information seeking, entertainment, and tourism

Table 2. Table of descriptive of caption tone

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social Media Influence	3.775	0.877
Influencer’s Endorsement	3.483	0.952
Social Media Usage	3.667	0.927
Johor Bahru's Destination Image	3.685	0.906

Note: Scale range 1-5 (Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree)

related exploration. This finding reinforces the argument that young adults are highly dependent on digital communication environments for travel inspiration and destination evaluation (Akin & Şener, 2024). Frequent exposure to tourism related exploration. This finding reinforces the argument that young adults are highly dependent on digital communication environments for travel inspiration and destination evaluation (Akin & Şener, 2024). Frequent exposure to tourism related content potentially increases familiarity, emotional attachment, and positive perception toward destinations such as Johor Bahru. Meanwhile, Johor Bahru’s destination image recorded a moderately high mean score ($M = 3.685$, $SD = 0.906$), suggesting that respondents generally possess positive perceptions regarding the city’s tourism attractiveness, accessibility, and travel appeal.

In contrast, influencer endorsement recorded the lowest mean score among the variables, although the level remained moderately high ($M = 3.483$, $SD = 0.952$). This indicates that while respondents acknowledge the importance of influencer recommendations and endorsements, influencer marketing may exert a slightly lower influence compared to general social media exposure and overall social media usage behaviour. Nevertheless, the findings remain consistent with Pop et al. (2021) and Omeish et al. (2024), who argued that influencer credibility and authenticity significantly contribute to destination attractiveness and travel intention among digitally connected youth populations. Overall, the descriptive findings

demonstrate that social media related variables play a substantial role in shaping destination image perception among Malaysian young adults, with social media influence emerging as the most dominant construct in this study.

OBJECTIVE 2

To Examine the Influence of Social Media Influence, Influencer Endorsement, and Social Media Usage on Johor Bahru’s Destination Image Among Young Adults in Malaysia

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the combined effects of social media use, influencer endorsement, and social media use on Johor Bahru’s destination image among Malaysian young adults. Regression analysis is an important inferential statistical technique used to determine the predictive strength of independent variables toward a dependent variable and to evaluate the overall explanatory power of the research model (Asryan, 2024). In this study, social media influence, influencer endorsement, and social media usage were treated as predictor variables, while Johor Bahru’s destination image represented the dependent variable. The analysis aimed to determine the extent to which digital communication-related factors contribute to destination image formation among young adults.

Table 3 presents the model summary for the regression analysis. The findings indicate a strong positive relationship between the independent variables and Johor Bahru’s destination image, as

Table 3. Model summary of social media influence, influencers' endorsement and social media usage on Johor Bahru's destination image among young adults in Malaysia

Model 1	R	R Square	Adjust R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
	.885*	.782	.779	3.83163
1	Residual	3024.266	206	14.681
	Total	13897.167	209	

a. Independent : Social Media Influence, Influencers' Endorsement and Social Media Usage

b. Dependent : Destination Image of Johor Bahru

reflected by the correlation coefficient value of $R = 0.885$. This demonstrates that social media influence, influencer endorsement, and social media usage collectively exhibit a very strong association with respondents' perception of Johor Bahru as a tourism destination. According to behavioural and tourism research standards, an R value approaching 1.0 indicates a substantial predictive relationship between the variables examined. The findings therefore suggest that digital communication environments significantly contribute to the development of destination image among young adults in Malaysia.

The coefficient of determination value, R Square = 0.782, further indicates that approximately 78.2% of the variance in Johor Bahru's destination image can be explained by social media influence, influencer endorsement, and social media usage collectively. This reflects a high explanatory power of the regression model, suggesting that the selected independent variables are substantial predictors of destination image perception. The Adjusted R Square value of 0.779 also demonstrates consistency and stability within the regression model after accounting for the number of predictor variables included in the analysis. Meanwhile, the standard error of the estimate recorded a value of 3.83163, indicating an acceptable level of prediction accuracy within the regression model.

The findings strongly support the growing body of tourism literature highlighting the

dominant role of social media communication in shaping destination branding and tourism perception among digitally connected youth populations. Previous studies by Nguyen et al. (2022) and Tham et al. (2020) similarly found that social media exposure significantly influences destination attractiveness, travel intention, and tourism decision making among young travellers. The strong predictive relationship identified in this study further reinforces the argument that digital tourism communication has become a central mechanism influencing how destinations are perceived and evaluated in contemporary tourism environments. Social media platforms provide continuous exposure to visual tourism narratives, user generated content, influencer recommendations, and interactive engagement that collectively strengthen destination familiarity and emotional connection among audiences.

The findings also highlight the strategic importance of influencer endorsement and social media engagement in destination branding initiatives. Influencer driven communication enables tourism stakeholders to establish perceived authenticity, trust, and relatability among young audiences, thereby strengthening destination attractiveness and behavioural intention (Pop et al., 2021; Han & Balabanis, 2023). Furthermore, the exceptionally high explanatory power of the model indicates that social media related variables are highly relevant determinants of destination image formation in the Malaysian tourism context. Therefore, destination marketing organisations and

tourism stakeholders should strategically integrate influencer marketing, user generated content, and interactive social media campaigns to strengthen Johor Bahru’s tourism image and maintain competitiveness within increasingly digital tourism markets.

Anova Table

Table 4 presents the ANOVA results for the multiple regression model examining the influence of social media influence, influencer endorsement, and social media usage on Johor Bahru’s destination image among Malaysian young adults. The findings indicate that the overall regression model is statistically significant, with an F value of 246.861 and a significance level of $p < .001$. This demonstrates that the combination of the independent variables significantly predicts Johor Bahru’s destination image and confirms that the regression model is appropriate for explaining the relationship between digital communication variables and destination perception. The

regression sum of squares value of 10872.801 further indicates that a substantial proportion of variation in destination image is explained by the predictor variables, while the residual sum of squares value of 3024.266 represents unexplained variance not accounted for within the model. The highly significant ANOVA result suggests that social media influence, influencer endorsement, and social media usage collectively contribute meaningfully to destination image formation among young adults in Malaysia. These findings are consistent with previous tourism studies which argued that digital communication environments significantly influence tourists’ cognitive evaluation, emotional attachment, and behavioural intention toward destinations (Nguyen et al., 2022; Omeish et al., 2024). The results therefore reinforce the importance of strategically leveraging social media communication and influencer marketing to strengthen Johor Bahru’s tourism branding and destination competitiveness within digitally driven tourism markets.

Table 4. ANOVA of social media influence, influencers' endorsement and social media usage on Johor Bahru's destination image among young adults in Malaysia

	Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	10872.801	3	3624.267	246.861	<.001
	Residual	3024.266	206	14.681		
	Total	13897.167	209			

a. Independent : Social Media Influence, Influencers' Endorsement and Social Media Usage

b. Dependent : Destination Image of Johor Bahru

Beta Coefficient Table

Table 5 presents the beta coefficient analysis examining the individual contribution of social media influence, influencer endorsement, and social media usage toward Johor Bahru’s destination image among Malaysian young adults. The findings indicate that social media usage emerged as the strongest predictor influencing destination image, recording the highest

standardised beta coefficient value ($\beta = .625, p < .001$). This demonstrates that increased frequency and intensity of social media engagement significantly strengthen respondents’ perceptions of Johor Bahru as a tourism destination. The result suggests that continuous exposure to tourism related digital content, online interaction, travel videos, reviews, and visual narratives substantially shapes destination evaluation among young adults. The strong predictive influence of social media

Table 5. Coefficients of social media influence, influencers' endorsement and social media usage on Johor Bahru's destination image among young adults in Malaysia

Model	Variables	Unstandardised Coefficients(B)	Standardised Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	Sig.
1	(Constant)	3.679		3.104	.002	<.001
	Social Media Influence	.031	.030	.447	.655	
	Influencers' Endorsement	.264	.278	5.017	<.001	
	Social Media Usage	.610	.625	9.402	<.001	

a. Dependent : Destination Image of Johor Bahru

usage supports Media System Dependency Theory, which argues that individuals increasingly depend on digital communication platforms for information acquisition and perception formation (Semujju, 2020). The finding is also consistent with previous studies by Chen et al. (2024) and Wang and Park (2022), which found that active social media engagement significantly affects destination awareness, travel motivation, and tourism behavioural intention among digitally connected youth populations. In the present study, the high beta coefficient indicates that young adults who frequently engage with social media are more likely to develop positive destination perceptions through repeated digital exposure and interactive communication experiences.

The findings further reveal that influencer endorsement also significantly influences Johor Bahru's destination image, recording a positive and statistically significant beta coefficient ($\beta = .278$, $p < .001$). This indicates that influencer recommendations, perceived credibility, and tourism related endorsements positively contribute to destination attractiveness among young adults. Influencers function as persuasive opinion leaders capable of shaping tourism perception through authentic storytelling, experiential narratives, and parasocial interaction with followers (Han & Balabanis, 2023; Su et al., 2021). The findings therefore reinforce the growing importance of influencer marketing within tourism branding strategies, particularly when targeting digitally

active young audiences. However, an important finding emerged whereby social media influence did not significantly predict Johor Bahru's destination image ($\beta = .030$, $p = .655$) despite recording high descriptive mean values in earlier analysis. This suggests that general exposure to social media content alone may not directly influence destination perception unless supported by active engagement behaviour and credible influencer communication. In other words, passive exposure to tourism related content may be insufficient to shape strong destination evaluations without deeper interaction and perceived authenticity. This finding challenges the assumption that all forms of social media exposure exert equal influence on tourism perception and highlights the greater importance of usage intensity and influencer credibility within digital tourism communication. Consequently, destination marketing organisations should prioritise interactive social media engagement and strategic influencer collaboration rather than relying solely on generic social media visibility to strengthen Johor Bahru's destination image among young adults.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study demonstrates that social media related variables play a significant role in shaping Johor Bahru's destination image among Malaysian young adults, with social media usage emerging as the strongest predictor influencing destination

perception. The findings indicate that frequent engagement with digital platforms, tourism related content, and influencer communication substantially strengthens destination attractiveness, familiarity, and travel interest among young adults. Influencer endorsement was also found to significantly contribute to destination image formation through credibility, authenticity, and persuasive digital storytelling, while general social media influence alone did not exert a statistically significant direct effect within the regression model. These findings suggest that active engagement and meaningful digital interaction are more influential than passive social media exposure in shaping tourism perceptions. The study contributes theoretically by extending the application of Media System Dependency Theory within digital tourism communication and destination branding research. Practically, the findings provide important implications for destination marketing organisations, tourism stakeholders, and policymakers in Johor Bahru. Tourism promotion strategies should prioritise interactive social media engagement, user generated content, and strategic influencer collaborations to strengthen destination competitiveness and audience engagement among digitally connected young travellers. The study also highlights the increasing importance of data driven digital tourism marketing approaches in enhancing destination visibility and sustaining tourism growth within contemporary digital communication environments.

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