Assessing digital media strategies for promoting agritourism in Benguet

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Journal of Tourism, Culinary, and Entrepreneurship

e-ISSN: 2776-0928

Publisher:
School of Tourism,
Universitas Ciputra Surabaya,
Indonesia

Keywords:
Agritourism
Benguet
Digital Media
User-Generated Content
Visit Intention

Received: *August 27, 2026*
Revised: *September 29, 2026*
Accepted: *October 5, 2026*

ABSTRACT

Digital media strategies, user-generated content (UGC), and online visibility are increasingly reshaping promotional efforts across the tourism sector. However, many rural agritourism micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in Benguet remain underpromoted despite the growing influence of digital platforms on consumer travel decisions. Grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Model, this study assessed how online visibility, UGC credibility, and digital marketing are related to Generation Z domestic tourists' perceptions, trust, and visit intentions. Utilizing a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design, data were gathered through a structured online survey from domestic Generation Z tourists who have visited or considered visiting agritourism sites in the province. The findings indicate that user-generated content is highly credible and is strongly associated with travel decision-making. Significant positive relationships were identified between UGC credibility and travel decision-making, as well as between online visibility and visit intention, confirming that digital touchpoints show a significant relationship with tourist behavior. Consequently, agritourism operators and local tourism stakeholders should transition from traditional advertising toward designated photo-worthy farm spots, review incentives, active short-form video engagement, and digital upskilling programs to foster local MSME sustainability and regional economic self-reliance.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, digital media has rapidly grown across online platforms, altering current events, interpersonal interactions, and business operations (Dwivedi et al., 2023). Within the tourism sector, traditional promotional channels such as television commercials and exhibitions have shifted toward dynamic digital marketing strategies (Raji et al., 2024). Social media platforms foster online communities that enable travel destinations to reach prospective travelers by disseminating visually appealing content, videos, and user-generated content (UGC) to enhance brand identity (Birkic et al., 2020). Furthermore, targeted social media

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marketing initiatives directly enhance destination visibility, offering local tourism micro-enterprises an accessible framework to break through traditional promotional barriers (Fasya & Putra, 2025). This digital environment functions as modern electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), where authentic reviews and firsthand accounts posted on social media significantly influence travelers' decision-making and pre-trip planning (Nugroho et al., 2022; Firman, 2025). In the Philippines, initiatives such as the Department of Tourism (DOT) and TikTok's "Content Camp" demonstrate how the national tourism industry actively leverages digital upskilling and social platforms to promote micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) (Pineda, 2025).

Despite this global and national shift toward digital promotion, a persistent empirical problem exists in rural agritourism destinations like Benguet. While mainstream urban and mega-resort destinations successfully leverage digital marketing, rural agritourism MSMEs and agricultural micro-entrepreneurs in Benguet remain underpromoted and underrepresented on major social platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok). These frontline operators face severe operational skill gaps, limited digital capabilities, and a lack of structured online presence, preventing them from connecting with prospective visitors and capturing modern travel demand.

A critical review of existing literature reveals notable inconsistencies and methodological limitations. Prior studies on digital tourism promotion have predominantly focused on mainstream urban destinations, commercial hospitality chains, or broad demographic cohorts, paying insufficient attention to niche rural agritourism sectors (Ranganai et al., 2023; Firman, 2025). Furthermore, previous empirical studies have often examined digital marketing tools as a single construct without adequately distinguishing the different roles of official digital marketing and the credibility of peer-generated user-generated content (UGC) in shaping travelers' perceptions (Kaihatu et al., 2021; Darmawijaya et al., 2025). Additionally, while literature asserts that social media engagement correlates with traveler interest (Adityaji et al., 2023; Osin et al., 2026), there is a lack of empirical verification focusing on Generation Z domestic tourists (aged 18–27), whose unique media consumption habits and high reliance on peer credibility distinguish them from older tourist demographics.

This creates a clear theoretical gap within the tourism and consumer behavior literature. Grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), prior applications have primarily tested external environmental stimuli in physical settings or general e-commerce platforms. However, the theoretical mechanisms through which specific digital stimuli (S), including UGC credibility, digital media strategies, and online visibility, influence cognitive and affective states (O), such as perceived trust and destination

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awareness, and subsequently shape behavioral intentions (R) in the context of rural agritourism MSMEs remain insufficiently integrated and lack empirical validation.

To address these limitations, this study offers a direct research contribution by bridging the gap between digital marketing theory and rural MSME sustainability. By contextualizing the SOR model within Benguet's agritourism sector, this study provides empirical clarity on how digital touchpoints relate to Generation Z domestic tourists' decision-making. Practically, the findings offer data-driven guidelines for agricultural micro-entrepreneurs, Local Government Units (LGUs), and tourism stakeholders to design targeted digital upskilling programs, optimize UGC engagement, and foster regional economic self-reliance without relying on expensive intermediary marketing channels.

Accordingly, the primary research objectives of this study are to evaluate how digital media strategies and online visibility are associated with Generation Z domestic tourists' perceptions, trust, and visit intentions toward agritourism destinations in Benguet. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

a. How do travelers perceive the digital media content of agritourism sites in Benguet in terms of:
   - Credibility of user-generated content?
   - Influence of digital content on travel decision-making?
b. How do agritourism sites in Benguet utilize digital platforms to promote themselves in terms of:
   - Social media presence?
   - Digital marketing strategies?
c. How is the online visibility of agritourism sites in Benguet related to tourists’ interest and engagement in terms of:
   - Awareness of the destination?
   - Visit intention?
d. Is there a significant relationship between travelers perceived credibility of user-generated content and the influence of digital media on their travel decision-making regarding agritourism sites in Benguet?
e. Is there a significant relationship between online visibility and tourists’ visit intention toward agritourism sites in Benguet?

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design. A quantitative approach was selected to systematically measure variables and use statistical techniques to identify patterns and correlations between digital media exposure and tourists'

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behavioral intentions toward agritourism sites in Benguet. The participants consisted of 100 domestic tourists aged 18–27 belonging to Generation Z. These individuals were selected due to their high activity on digital platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok), identification as travel enthusiasts, and status as having visited or considered visiting agritourism destinations in Benguet.

The study utilized purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique. This sampling method ensured the inclusion of information-rich cases, specifically respondents exposed to tourism-related digital media regarding Benguet agritourism, thereby enhancing the internal validity of the quantitative findings.

Data were gathered using a structured online survey created via Google Forms. The questionnaire comprised the following sections:

a. Section I: Demographic Profile: Age, gender, educational attainment, travel frequency, traveler type, digital exposure, and preferred platforms.
b. Section II: Perceptions of Digital Media Content: Assesses credibility, reliability, and appeal of online exposure.
c. Section III: Influence of Digital Media on Travel Decision-Making: Evaluates the degree to which digital media affects destination choices.
d. Section IV: Digital Media Strategies Used: Measures social media presence, post consistency, content delivery, and marketing strategy application.
e. Section V: Online Visibility, Awareness, Trust, and Visit Intention: Measures discovery ease, brand awareness, exposure frequency, and visit intention.

Statements were scored using a 4-point Likert scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, and 4=Strongly Agree. The instrument underwent content validation by tourism experts and the research adviser. Reliability was evaluated via pilot testing, utilizing Cronbach’s alpha to confirm internal measurement consistency across questionnaire subscales prior to full deployment.

Upon receiving institutional approval, a trial survey was conducted. The primary survey was distributed digitally via online messaging platforms (Messenger, email). Assistance was provided for participant queries, and all submissions were securely saved for statistical analysis. Data were coded and analyzed using the following statistical methods:

a. Descriptive Statistics: Frequency counts, percentages, weighted means, and standard deviations to summarize demographics and perception scores.
b. Inferential Statistics: Pearson’s r correlation to evaluate the strength and direction of relationships between (1) UGC credibility and travel decision-making, and (2) online visibility and visit intention. T-tests and ANOVA were assigned for subgroup comparisons.

Strict ethical standards were enforced:

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a. Voluntary Participation: Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the survey and retained the right to withdraw at any time.
b. Informed Consent: Explicit consent detailing study objectives, completion time, risks, benefits, and privacy rights was mandated on Google Forms before survey access.
c. Confidentiality: Personal identifying information was excluded. Raw data were stored in a password-protected Google Drive folder, to be retained for two years post-study before permanent deletion.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study on the effectiveness of digital media strategies in promoting agritourism in Benguet. The results are presented according to the research objectives, focusing on respondents' perceptions of user-generated content, digital media strategies, online visibility, travel decision-making, and visit intention. The findings serve as the basis for addressing research questions and evaluating the study's hypotheses.

Table 1. Summary of Overall Weighted Means for Traveler Perceptions

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Interpretation
Credibility of User-Generated Content	3.16	Agree
Influence of Digital Content on Travel Decision-Making	3.37	Agree
Social Media Presence and Digital Marketing Strategies	3.11	Agree
Online Visibility, Awareness, and Visit Intention	3.28	Strongly Agree
Overall Mean	**3.16**	**Agree**

Across all measured indicators, respondents generally agree on the credibility of user-generated content shared on digital platforms (overall mean = 3.16), on the significant influence of digital media content on their travel decision-making (overall mean = 3.37), and on the effective use of social media and digital marketing strategies by Benguet agritourism destination-related platforms, (overall mean = 3.11). Moreover, they strongly agree on how high online visibility of these agritourism destinations increases destination awareness and drives visit intention (overall mean = 3.28).

Table 2. Relationship between Credibility of UGC and Travel Decision-Making

Variables	r value	Sig. value	Interpretation	Decision to Ho
Credibility of UGC * Travel Decision-Making	0.656	< 0.001	There is a moderate positive significant relationship	Reject Ho

Pearson's correlation analysis in Table 2 shows a statistically significant moderate positive relationship between UGC credibility and travel decision-making ($r=0.656, p<0.001$). Because $p<0.05$, the null hypothesis was rejected.

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Table 3. Relationship between Online Visibility and Visit Intention

Variables	r value	Sig. value	Interpretation	Decision to Ho
Online Visibility * Visit Intention	0.838	< 0.001	There is a high positive significant relationship	Reject Ho

Pearson's correlation analysis in Table 3 demonstrates a statistically significant high positive relationship between online visibility and visit intention ($r=0.838, p<0.001$). Because $p<0.05$, the null hypothesis was rejected. The empirical results confirm that digital media strategies significantly influence Generation Z tourists' perceptions and behavioral choices regarding agritourism in Benguet.

The findings in Table 1 regarding UGC credibility (overall mean = 3.16) imply that authentic photos, videos, and reviews created by previous visitors build traveler confidence and reduce pre-visit uncertainty. This outcome is supported by Sujatmiko et al. (2025), who revealed the enhanced effectiveness of user-generated content in shaping destination perceptions and visit intentions through rational and emotional personalized narratives.

The strong agreement regarding digital content's influence on travel decision-making (overall mean = 3.37) implies that visually engaging digital content enables travelers to visualize the destination experience. This conforms with Dai et al. (2022), who established that travel inspiration and visual media significantly guide tourist destination choices and evaluation stages.

In terms of platform utilization (overall mean = 3.11), the results demonstrate that active social media profiles and digital marketing strategies improve destination awareness. This aligns with Qiu et al. (2024), who found that interactive digital content across Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube effectively expands audience reach and enhances destination visibility.

Results regarding online visibility and visit intention (overall mean = 3.28) demonstrate that consistent exposure to digital media strengthens destination familiarity, builds trust, and encourages potential tourists to consider visiting. This is strengthened by Sari et al. (2023), who demonstrated that effective digital content marketing combining informative and engaging online elements acts as a primary driver converting online browsing into concrete travel considerations.

These empirical findings carry significant commercial implications for local farm operators acting as agricultural micro-entrepreneurs. For small-scale agritourism MSMEs in Benguet, maintaining active digital touchpoints is not merely a promotional endeavor, but an essential business strategy that builds long-term commercial viability. Higher online visibility directly strengthens the financial resilience of farm owners by driving foot traffic, encouraging direct consumer bookings, and supporting community-based economic self-reliance.

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The correlation analysis in Table 2 ($r=0.656, p<0.001$) proves that as travelers perceive UGC to be more credible, the influence of digital media on their travel decision-making increases. This is supported by Ayeh et al. (2013), who reported that travelers who perceive user-generated travel reviews as credible rely heavily on them during trip planning.

Finally, the high positive correlation in Table 3 ($r=0.838, p<0.001$) indicates that higher online visibility directly relates to stronger visit intentions. This finding is supported by Cheng and Jiang (2025), who confirmed that the quality and reach of digital marketing initiatives directly and positively influence destination image and travel intentions toward rural and agricultural destinations.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital media plays a significant role in promoting agritourism in Benguet by shaping Gen Z travelers' perceptions and intentions. Respondents generally perceive user-generated content (UGC) as credible and authentic, reducing uncertainty and building travel confidence. Digital content strongly influences travel decision-making by helping tourists visualize farm experiences, supporting previous study regarding the effectiveness of short-form video formats (TikTok, Reels).

While Benguet agritourism sites maintain an online presence, opportunities remain to enhance short-form video integration and UGC adoption. The statistically significant positive correlations between UGC credibility and decision-making, as well as between online visibility and visit intention, confirm that trustworthy content and higher visibility directly drive travel planning. These findings validate the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Model and support earlier evidence that digital storytelling strengthens agritourism destination image and visit intention.

Implications of the Study

From an academic perspective, this study provides valuable empirical evidence contextualized within rural Philippine agritourism. By grounding the investigation in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework, the findings confirm that authentic, peer-generated visual media functions as a vital stimulus that reduces tourist uncertainty, enhances credibility, and builds cognitive trust among Generation Z consumers.

In terms of practical implications, the strong positive correlations demonstrate that digital touchpoints directly govern tourist decision-making and visit intentions. Consequently, local agritourism operators and tourism boards must pivot away from static, traditional advertising and transition toward interactive digital strategies. Operators should actively design photo-worthy spots within their farms, offer review incentives, engage in short-form video creation, and leverage location-tagging to boost real-time destination discoverability.

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Looking toward future possibilities, these findings lay the groundwork for deeper inquiry into how distinct digital content formats directly influence physical visitation rates across diverse demographic profiles. Future research could examine the long-term economic effects of user-generated content on rural agricultural communities. Further studies could also explore the application of emerging technologies, such as AI-based recommendations and virtual tours, and conduct comparative analyses of agritourism practices across different regions.

Recommendations

Based on the study's conclusions, several strategic recommendations are offered for key tourism stakeholders. First, agritourism operators in Benguet should actively strengthen their digital marketing presence by consistently publishing engaging and authentic content across social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Operators are encouraged to provide on-site prompts and incentives that motivate visitors to share photos, post videos, write reviews, and tag destination accounts. These activities can strengthen the credibility of peer-generated content and increase destination visibility.

Second, Local Government Units (LGUs) and regional tourism organizations, including the Department of Tourism (DOT), should establish structured capacity-building workshops and digital training initiatives. These programs must focus on upskilling agricultural micro-entrepreneurs in content creation, algorithmic engagement, and social media management, while also fostering collaborative partnerships with travel content creators and local influencers to amplify regional campaign reach.

Finally, future researchers are advised to broaden the analytical scope by examining additional variables that influence travel behavior, such as changing post-pandemic consumer preferences and emerging marketing technologies. Expanding the sample size to cover multiple geographical regions and adopting mixed-methods research designs will offer a more comprehensive understanding of digital media's long-term role in promoting sustainable agritourism.

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