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# PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF MARKETING COMMUNICATION IN TOURISM THROUGH VISUAL MEDIA

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**Abstract.** *In the era of visually saturated digital environments, tourism marketing relies more and more on visual elements to capture attention, rise emotion, and influence certain decision-driven behaviours. While the role of visual media in consumer experience is widely acknowledged, its psychological aspect and impact on tourism related decision-making still remains underexplored. The paper looks into how visual content activates cognitive, affective, and identity-related processes that shape tourist motivation and behavioural intention. By examining psychology-based literature, social media and tourism marketing studies, the paper proposes a conceptual model outlining the pathways through which visual stimuli affect psychological responses. The model identifies four key mediating components: perception and cognitive framing, emotional response, imaginary projection and identity construction, and social validation.*

**Keywords:** visual media; tourism marketing; psychological processes; perception; marketing communication.

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## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, where visual media dominates digital communication, images, videos and visual graphics have become not only tools of presentation but also powerful instruments of persuasion and psychological influence. This is also the case in the field of tourism marketing, where visual stimuli shape perceptions of place, trigger emotional responses, and create imaginary experiences long before the actual travel occurs. The interaction between media images and cognitive processes plays a critical role in shaping individuals' travel-related desires, intentions, and decisions.

Tourism, by itself, is deeply psychological and involves motivation, imagination, anticipation, and relation to the personal identity of every individual. As people, we seek not only physical movement but also personal meaning and emotional satisfaction through travel, therefore, the role of visual communication becomes central part of the choosing process. Modern tourism marketing relies heavily on strategically crafted images - often through social media and digital platforms filled with influencer and user-generated based content which promise transformation, escape or a feeling of belonging. These visual messages are not just passively received, they are cognitively and emotionally processed, socially validated and often accepted as part of the individual's self.

The **aim of the research** is to propose a conceptual model that explains how visual stimuli affect tourism behaviour through psychological processes such as perception, emotional activation, imaginary projection, and social validation.

The **object of the study** is the psychological mechanisms that underlie individuals' responses to visual tourism-related content.

The **subject of the study** is the influence of visual media on tourist motivation and decision-making behavior, as shaped by perception, emotions, and one's personal identity-based responses.

## PSYCHOLOGY OF PERCEPTION AND VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Visual perception is a fundamental subject in cognitive psychology, essential for understanding how individuals understand and respond to the visual world around them. Perception is not just a passive reception of information, but an active, interpretative process combining cognitive mechanisms that organize and give meaning to sensory input. These mechanisms like attention, memory, pattern recogni-

tion, and emotional processing, shape how individuals engage with visual stimuli in their environment and in communication itself. (Goldstein, 2014). These mechanisms shape how individuals engage with visual stimuli in both their physical environment and mediated communication. Recent studies confirm that perception functions through a dynamic dialogue between sensory data and prior cognitive experience, showing that visual interpretation depends not only on what is seen but also on what is expected and remembered.

A foundational framework explaining the psychological efficiency of images is the Dual Coding Theory, developed by Paivio(1971). According to his theory, human cognition operates through two separate but interconnected systems: one specialized for verbal information and another for visual imagery. When stimuli are processed in both systems such as an image accompanied by text, they are more likely to be encoded deeply and retained in memory. Furthermore, this dual-channel processing also explains the well-documented picture superiority effect, in which images are generally remembered better than verbal information alone (Nelson, Reed, & Walling, 1976). Neuro-cognitive evidence continues to validate the same mechanism in digital image consumption, where parallel verbal-visual activation improves recall and emotional resonance (Wang et al., 2023).

The brain's ability to impose structure on visual input is further explained by principles of perceptual organization, particularly those from Gestalt psychology. Gestalt principles such as proximity, similarity, continuity, and figure-ground differentiation enable individuals to perceive structured wholes rather than disconnected elements (Wagemans et al., 2012). These principles are constantly working in everyday perception, but also in designed visual materials, where layout, contrast, and spatial arrangement control what is seen and how it is interpreted.

Another critical component of visual perception is the selective attention. It is the cognitive process of focusing on specific stimuli while ignoring other and due to the limited capacity of attentional resources, only a subset of visual stimuli could be processed at any given moment. Attention is typically drawn to elements that are visually noticeable - those with distinctive colour, contrast, movement, or emotional value (Itti & Koch, 2001). Eye-tracking studies confirm that people tend to fixate longer on emotionally expressive or high-contrast images, suggesting a tight connection between perceptual salience and emotional engagement (Wedel & Pieters, 2008). In

addition, emotion is a substantial part in visual processing as emotional engagement enhances memory encoding, increases attention and shapes the interpretation of visual material. For instance, emotionally charged images can prime associations, influence judgments, and affect subsequent decision-making, all without conscious reflection.

Furthermore, visual communication is not purely sensory or cognitive; it is also symbolic and cultural. Visuals carry meanings that are shaped by shared codes, social context, and learned associations. Visual messages often are rhetorical, using metaphors and narrative structure to persuade and influence (Forceville, 1996). This rhetorical function makes visual media particularly effective in shaping different attitudes, values, and behavioural intentions in a wide range of fields.

Understanding these perceptual and emotional mechanisms is essential not only for psychology but also for fields that rely on the power of imagery to communicate and persuade. The way people interpret and emotionally respond to visuals determines how messages are received, remembered, and acted upon. This is particularly true in the sphere of marketing communication, where visual content is deliberately designed to attract attention and evoke psychological engagement.

## VISUAL MEDIA IN MARKETING COMMUNICATION

In today's fast-evolving digital environment, visual media plays a central role in marketing communication, serving as a key instrument for attracting attention, shaping attitudes and influencing specific human behaviors. The psychological mechanisms which make visual content effective are closely connected to perception, memory, emotional processing and symbolic interpretations. As visual messages become increasingly dominant in digital and media environments, understanding these mechanisms is essential for developing communication and marketing strategies that resonate with target audiences. One of the primary advantages of visual media is the ability to capture attention easily but efficiently. Visual stimuli, especially those with high visibility such as vivid colors, human faces, movement, or unexpected elements, trigger attention processes, directing cognitive resources toward the stimulus even before the conscious awareness (Itti & Koch, 2001). This is especially important in digital environments where high competition for user attention exists, such as in social media or in

online advertising. In addition to attracting attention, visual media also serves as a powerful tool for emotional engagement, creation of addictive behaviors, dopamine triggers as well as attention-related disorders such as ADHD. Emotional imagery enhances message processing, facilitates encoding in long-term memory, and increases the likelihood of behavioral response (Lang, 2006). In marketing, emotional content often takes the form of smiling faces, nostalgic scenes, or aspirational lifestyles, all visual elements, designed to associate the product or brand with a desired emotional state. In addition, symbolism and metaphors act as additional dimensions by enhancing the communicative power of visual media. Unlike verbal messages, which tend to be explicit and linear, images can convey complex meanings through composition, context, colours and visual associations. Visual metaphors, such as a cracked desert to symbolize drought, or an open road to suggest freedom, rely on shared cultural and cognitive schemes to communicate abstract concepts quickly, intuitively and effortlessly (Forceville, 1996). These symbolic elements can enhance brand positioning and boost message retention, particularly when they resonate with the audience's expectations. The different formats of visual media form different psychological responses depending on their structure, content, and level of interactivity. Static images are particularly effective for evoking immediate emotional reactions and triggering associative memory through visual symbolism (Mesaris, 1997). Videos, on the other hand, combine motion, sound, and specific sequence, allowing for greater emotional immersion and time-based storytelling. Infographics merge visual elements with data, enhancing cognitive processing by facilitating the integration of abstract information into visual schemes. Each format triggers cognitive and emotional paths, and their effectiveness often depends on alignment with the viewer's prior knowledge, perspectives, expectations, and processing style.

Furthermore, visual storytelling has emerged as a dominant strategy in brand communication. Narrative visuals - whether in the form of sequential images, videos, or user-generated content - activate parts in the brain associated with empathy, mental simulation, and memory (Green & Brock, 2000). This effect is particularly noticeable in campaign formats such as Instagram stories or short-form video ads and reels, where visual media must create a clear and meaningful whole within limited time or space. Visual media also benefits from social and interactive aspects, especially in digital contexts. Instagram and TikTok, users do not only consume visual con-

tent - they also produce it, share it, like and comment on it – it is a dual-sided process of interaction. This interactivity enhances perceived authenticity and increases emotional investment. Moreover, algorithmic systems tend to boost emotionally charged or visually bold content, creating feedback loops that further stimulate the use of visual media in persuasive communication (Bucher, 2012).

While these dynamics are present across different industries, their application in tourism marketing is particularly illustrative. Destinations and touristic brands often rely on visually driven campaigns and user-generated content to evoke desire, simulate experience, and shape a desired destination image. A single photograph or short video can represent not only a place, but also an entire set of imagined emotions, values, and narratives associated with visiting that place, making it a dream destination in order to experience and feel the same emotions produced by watching the content. Studies confirm that more than 75% of travellers report being influenced by social-media visuals when choosing destinations (Statista, 2024). As such, tourism serves as a practical example of how visual communication influences psychological processes behind the real decision-making.

## VISUAL MEDIA AND TOURISM EXPERIENCE FORMATION

Visual media plays a central role in shaping the cognitive and emotional frames through which individuals engage with tourism. Images, videos, graphics and digital representations of destinations function not only as an informational guidance but also as triggers for affective and imaginative responses, guiding tourists' expectations and decisions way before any actual travel takes place (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Recent studies confirm that destination-related visuals act as *mental simulations*—they trigger imagination, emotion, and personal memory networks that shape pre-travel intentions (Wang et al., 2023).

Tourist motivation, therefore, is not driven solely by rational decision-making or material needs. It is deeply affected by projected fantasies and symbolic associations embedded in visual representations. The concept of the “imagined destination” or “dream destination” refers to the internal idea of a place based on accumulated visual impressions, often influenced by consumed media content and social networks. The idea of a dream destination activates emotional desires such as escape, retreat,

transformation or belonging, which influence the final choice and perceived value of the destinations. From a psychological point of view, imaginative representations serve as a bridge between perception and motivation. Visual stimuli encountered in media activate memory networks and personal associations, allowing individuals to simulate potential experiences and emotions. All of this aligns with the idea of “possible selves,” in which travel images contribute to desired identities or idealized versions of oneself. Tourism, then, becomes not a mere activity but also a psychological journey shaped by symbolic consumption leading to different choices.

Nowadays, more and more often, social media platforms intensify the role of visual communication by giving continuous exposure to different representations of places, monuments, landmarks etc. On visual social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, content creators and destination marketers often rely on visual archetypes – well known patterns of imagery such as “untouched nature”, “local authenticity”, “culture and tradition” or “luxurious experience” - that appeal to specific emotional and psychological needs or desires. These kinds of archetypes simplify complex environments into instantly recognizable and personally driven experience, facilitating quick emotional resonance and resulting in the final target - decision-making. Ultimately, destination choice is often guided by underlying psychological mechanisms and motives activated through visual media that constructs an idealized version of the anticipated travel experience. In the era of everyday use of social media, users not only consume but also produce tourism representations, contributing to a shared visual experience. User-generated content often triggers more reliance in people than the regular paid marketing strategies. Organic content is preferred, when desiring to receive prior experience and information about the chosen destination prior the final decision-making. Active user participation normalizes specific visual styles and patterns, contributing to the standardization of aesthetic preferences, putting emphasis on “Instagrammable” locations which are socially shareable.

In essence, visual media connects perception, imagination, and motivation. They operate before the act of travel, forming cognitive and emotional frameworks that define how destinations are anticipated and later experienced. Tourism, therefore, becomes both a psychological and a symbolic process—an experience constructed as much through imagery as through physical reality.

## VISUAL FRAMING IN PRESENTING DESTINATIONS

If visual media shape the imaginative and motivational dimensions of tourism, visual framing determines how these images construct specific meanings and expectations. Framing refers to the deliberate use of composition, colour, light, and perspective to guide interpretation and evoke a desired emotion (Govers & Go, 2024).

Visual framing in tourism marketing plays a significant role in designing potential travellers' understandings and expectations. Rather than only presenting information, visual content constructs a carefully curated information that strikes emotions, memories, and desires through specific images and composition techniques. These frames can influence how individuals imagine and evaluate destinations, serving as cognitive shortcuts in decision-making processes. Common visual frames in destination marketing often emphasize on elements such as pristine nature, cultural heritage, traditions, gastronomic and other authentic local experiences. For instance, natural landscapes like mountains, beaches, and forests symbolize tranquility, escape, and calmness, appealing to tourists' desire for relaxation and disconnection from the everyday stressful life. Also, visuals highlighting cultural festivals, historic architecture, or local gastronomy match the search for authenticity and traditional experiences, addressing psychological needs for exploration, cultural growth and self-expansion (Wagemans et al., 2012).

The strategic use of colours, light, and perspective further increases the emotional aspect of these frames. Warm tones and bright lighting can generate feelings of warmth, safety and happiness, while cool tones like deep green or blue refer to peace and connection to nature. By controlling these visual elements, marketers craft immersive and inspirational images that encourages tourists to form positive associations with the destination, object or product. Moreover, visual frames are increasingly designed to align with the aesthetics preferred on social media platforms, where image sharing for validation is crucial for the normal user. This dynamic of active participation not only shapes the representation of destinations but also influences tourists' expectations through shared visual norms and trends (Wang et al., 2023).

In summary, visual framing in tourism marketing is a complex process that uses psychological principles of perception and emotion to construct captivating destination descriptions. These descrip-

tions simplify complex destination views into emotionally charged images that guide future tourist motivations and choices.

## EMOTIONAL APPEAL AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN TOURISM MARKETING

Building upon the emotional function of visual framing, the affective appeal of tourism marketing operates at the core of how audiences internalize and identify with visual messages.

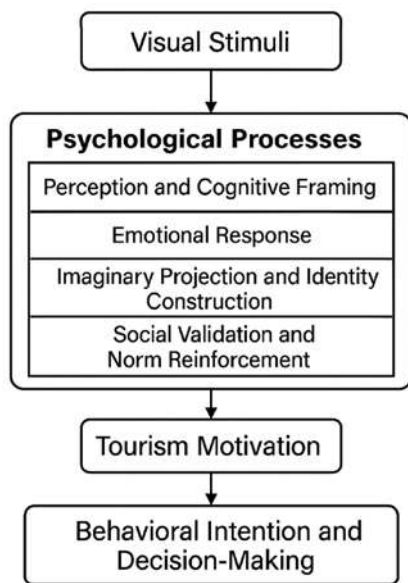
Emotions are a crucial composing element to the effectiveness of visual marketing in tourism, as they engage potential travelers on a psychological level that exceeds rational information processing. Visual content often appeals to core emotional states such as joy, nostalgia, calmness - which can trigger powerful motivational responses and shape travel intentions. Tourism marketing uses these emotions to create a state of personal connection and identification with the target audience. Images of idyllic landscapes or vibrant cultural scenes do not merely represent a place, they create a sense of invitation, so individuals can picture themselves experiencing those moments and projecting the future through self-imagination. This imaginative engagement helps tourists to align travel choices with their self-concept and personal characteristics, preferences and identities. The proclaimed feelings of escapism and transformation that offer a temporary departure from routine life and an opportunity for self-renewal and improvement resonate especially strongly in the modern society, characterized by stress and monotony, making tourism a highly desirable and dreamt of means of emotional rest.

Social media platforms have a tendency to intensify these emotional appeals by enabling sharing and validation within personal networks because of specific needs of self-importance and social status engagement. The resulting collective experiences contribute to the social construction of desirable tourist identities and motivating informed destination choices.

In essence, the emotional dimension of visual tourism marketing is a key driver in constructing meaningful and motivating travel experiences. By appealing to affective states and supporting the human identity, these visual communications transcend advertisement to become integral components of both tourist's unconscious and conscious psychological journey.

## VISUAL INFLUENCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RESPONSE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR TOURISM MARKETING

Considering the proven significance of affective and cognitive processes in shaping tourist decision-making process, the author proposes a conceptual model (Figure 1) that illustrates the sequential relationship between perceptual, emotional, and motivational responses activated by visual stimuli in tourism marketing.



Source: The model is created by the author.

**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of visual influence in tourism decision-making process

The model outlines four interdependent stages through which visual communication influences tourist behaviour:

### 1. Visual stimuli

Visual stimuli represent the entry point of the model and include all visual content designed to influence tourist perception. These include professionally produced images, promotional videos, influencer content, user-generated videography and photography, digital campaigns popularized across websites and social media platforms. A key feature of visual stimuli in tourism marketing is their reliance on recognizable typologies, each of which targets distinct affective and symbolic associations:

- Natural landscapes (beaches, forests, mountains, etc.) create a feeling of calmness, freedom, and rejuvenation.
- Cultural and heritage scenes apply to authenticity, tradition, and uniqueness.

- Lifestyle-oriented imagery highlights aspirational identity - youthfulness, luxury, sense of belonging, etc.
- Fantasy destinations consist of often idealized and surreal tropic or especially distinct environments, appealing to escapism and imagination.
- Everyday authenticity (moments with locals, spontaneous travel photos, representation of living the dream life) signals relatability and fosters emotional response and copying desires.

Stimuli of this type function as triggers for deeper psychological engagement, shaping how destinations are mentally and emotionally constructed prior to any real-life experience.

According to Statista (2024), 74% of travellers report being directly influenced by destination imagery encountered on social media. Similarly, UNWTO (2023) data indicate that visual engagement increases destination awareness by over 50%, confirming the practical significance of visual stimuli in pre-experiential image formation.

### 2. Psychological Processes

The essence of the model is defined by a set of interrelated psychological mechanisms that guide the influence of visual stimuli on tourist motivation and behaviour. These processes are not linear but interact dynamically to produce meaning and impact.

#### • Perception and Cognitive Framing

Visual content is never perceived in isolation - it is filtered through prior knowledge, cultural frameworks, and individual expectations, resulting in copying certain statuses, activities and choices oneself identifies with. Visual framing defines what aspects of a destination are emphasized or left out, subtly guiding attention and interpretation resulting in the desired end result. Framing also shapes certain level of comprehension, allowing viewers to create imaginative stories about the destination (Govers & Go, 2024).

#### • Emotional Response

Emotion is central to how visual messages resonate. Tourism imagery often evokes feelings such as nostalgia, sense of belonging, serenity, desire, etc. which increase memory retention and value. These affective responses serve as opportunities - they make the imagined experience feel real, desirable, and worth pursuing. Zhang et al. (2022) point

that destination image influences nostalgic feelings and flow experience, which in turn affect behavioural intention.

• **Imaginary Projection and Identity Construction**

Visual stimuli provoke viewers to mentally put themselves in the pictured scene. This imaginative exercise helps bridge external images with internal feelings. The tourist begins to align his destination choice within personal goals such as self-renewal, exploration, cultural enrichment or social validation. This way, the destination becomes a symbolic vehicle for expressing identities.

• **Social Validation and the feeling of being seen and approved of.**

In the digital environment, especially on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, visual content is embedded within social networks of influence. The engagement of others—likes, comments, shares—not only validates one’s individual preferences but also creates aesthetic standards and behavioural paths to be followed. This creates the desire to make a certain destination decision, solely relying on trends, what is preferred and approved of by society and what can uplift the social status of oneself through gaining a specific amount of likes, shares, comments, etc. which will eventually create a certain feeling of importance.

3. *Tourism Motivation*

Through the processes above, visual stimuli rise motivation, not just as an internal drive, but as a dynamic construction shaped by specific symbolic interpretation. These motivations include:

- **Relaxation and escape** – seeking peace or recovery from stress.
- **Novelty and discovery** – the desire for new experiences and learning.
- **Social bonding** – shared experiences with others, belonging.
- **Personal transformation** – self-expansion, growth, reflection.
- **Social distinction** – building symbolic capital, status via curated travel.

Motivations emerge as psychologically meaningful goals, closely linked to how the visual message was interpreted emotionally by oneself.

4. *Behavioural Intention and Decision-Making*

Last but certainly not least, at the end of the model lies the formation of behavioural intentions - a conscious or unconscious preference toward a specific destination, travel type, or brand. The intention is rarely based on purely rational criteria such as price or accessibility; rather, it reflects an internalized emotional vision activated and constructed through the previous stages.

Table 1. Empirical foundation of the conceptual model

| Stage of the model                  | Key psychological process                                 | Empirical support (source)                                                                          | Main findings / effect                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Visual stimuli                      | Visual typologies (matural, cultural, lifestyle, fantasy) | Wang et al. (2023), <i>Frontiers in Psychology</i> 14, 1140519                                      | Quality and vividness of online images significantly predict conative destination image and travel intention.              |
| Perception & framing                | Selective attention, cognitive organization               | Wedel & Pieters (2008), <i>Foundations &amp; Trends in Marketing</i> 1 (4)                          | Eye-tracking evidence shows attention bias toward emotionally salient and human-focused visuals.                           |
| Emotional response                  | Affective resonance, nostalgia                            | Zhang et al. (2022), <i>Frontiers in Psychology</i> 13, 954299                                      | Nostalgic feelings and flow experience mediate the link between destination imagery and behavioral intention.              |
| Imagination & identity construction | Self-projection, symbolic interpretation                  | Markus & Nurius (1986), <i>American Psychologist</i> 41 (9)                                         | Possible-selves theory explains how imagined travel scenarios support identity exploration and aspirational self-concepts. |
| Social validation                   | Social feedback, online influence                         | Bucher (2012), <i>New Media &amp; Society</i> 14 (7)                                                | Algorithmic visibility and social reinforcement amplify user-generated tourism content engagement.                         |
| Motivation & intention              | Affective-cognitive integration                           | Lam & Hus (2006), <i>Tourism Management</i> 27 (4); Han & Hyun (2014), <i>Tourism Management</i> 46 | Emotional satisfaction and destination image predict travel intention                                                      |

This intention, once formed, influences the final decision-making process, both in concrete terms (destination choice, booking behaviour) and in symbolic ones (sharing content, performing self-identity). In this sense, visual tourism marketing is not only persuasive but constitutive: it helps create the very desires and identities that lead individuals to travel.

The conceptual framework was cross-validated through secondary empirical evidence drawn from established studies in tourism and consumer psychology. Table 1 presents previous research that supports the sequential logic of the model, confirming that it elucidates how perceptual, emotional, and motivational mechanisms interact dynamically to shape tourist behaviour.

The principal contribution of the model lies in synthesising diverse psychological processes - imagination, emotion, and social validation, into a coherent structure that explains how visual stimuli evolve into motivational and behavioural outcomes. The model not only enhances theoretical understanding of visually driven persuasion in tourism but also provides a practical analytical tool for destination branding, digital content design, and campaign evaluation. Moreover, it positions visual communication as a measurable determinant of tourist experience formation, particularly relevant for younger, experience-oriented, and culture-seeking audiences.

## CONCLUSION

Visual communication has become a defining force in shaping the contemporary tourist experience. The psychological mechanisms that underlie perception, attention, emotion, and identity construction reveal that visual media do not merely represent destinations — they actively create meanings, expectations, and motivations. By examining how visual stimuli trigger cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses, the present study contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological foundations of marketing communication in tourism.

The proposed conceptual framework demonstrates that visual influence is not a superficial marketing tool but a complex psychological process grounded in perception, emotion, and imagination. It synthesises evidence from cognitive and affective theories with empirical findings in tourism psychology, thereby establishing a coherent bridge between theoretical abstraction and practical application.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the model offers an analytical perspective for future research

and practice, enabling the assessment of visual persuasion, authenticity, and identity formation in destination marketing. Ultimately, the study reaffirms that in an era of digital visual saturation, understanding the psychological dimensions of visual communication is essential for creating meaningful, emotionally resonant, and ethically responsible tourism marketing strategies.

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