

DIGITAL PLACE BRANDING AND VISITOR BEHAVIOUR IN KELANTAN: THE ROLE OF OFFICIAL CONTENT, ONLINE REVIEWS, AND MESSAGING CHANNELS

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of digital place branding in Kelantan by analysing how official digital content, online reviews, and messaging channels influence visit intention and local spending intention. Anchored in Kelantan's digital governance initiatives, including Digital Kelantan, the SUK Kelantan Pendigitalan Plan (2022–2025), and the Blueprint Bandar Pintar Negeri Kelantan 2040, the study adopts a quantitative approach using survey data from 350 domestic travellers. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed to test the proposed relationships and mediation effects. The findings reveal that online reviews exert the strongest influence on visit intention, followed by official digital content and messaging channels. Visit intention significantly predicts local spending intention and mediates the effects of all digital place branding components. The results demonstrate that digital place branding functions as a behavioural mechanism rather than a symbolic communication tool. The study contributes to digital place branding literature by providing policy-relevant empirical evidence from a regional context and offers practical guidance for performance-oriented digital governance in tourism development.

Keywords : Digital governance, Destination branding, Tourism behaviour, Smart state development, Local spending intention

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Digital place branding has become a core instrument for regional governments aiming to strengthen destination competitiveness, attract visitors, and convert attention into local economic activity. In contrast to traditional promotion, digital place branding unfolds within interactive environments where destination meaning is co-created by public agencies, residents, businesses, and visitors through continuous online communication (Anholt, 2010; Govers & Go, 2009). In this setting, the place brand is not simply a logo or slogan, but an ongoing attempt to shape perceptions and mental images through orchestrated actions and communications (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005).

A key shift in the digital era is that official narratives no longer dominate how destinations are evaluated. Visitors increasingly rely on digital information sources that combine (a) official content (websites, social media posts, campaigns), (b) electronic word-of-mouth such as online reviews, and (c) interactive communication tools such as messaging channels. These elements jointly influence destination image formation, perceived trust, and behavioural intentions, including visit intention and spending decisions (Kavaratzis, 2006; Sparks & Browning, 2011).

Online reviews, in particular, have become influential because they reduce uncertainty and shape perceived credibility. Empirical evidence shows that online consumer reviews influence consumer choice and trust perceptions in tourism contexts (Sparks & Browning, 2011), and broader evidence indicates that review valence and volume can affect market outcomes such as sales (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Tourism research also highlights that travellers adopt information from online reviews based on perceived quality, credibility, and usefulness of review content (Filieri, 2016; Filieri & McLeay, 2014). For destinations that depend on experiential appeal, review ecosystems therefore function as a powerful signal of quality and risk reduction. At the same time, official digital content remains important because it provides authoritative information, signals institutional legitimacy, and can frame what a destination “stands for” before visitors encounter user-generated narratives. Recent tourism research continues to support the idea that digital marketing communications can shape tourist behaviours and travel-related intentions (Armutcu & Arıker, 2023). For regional destinations, official content also plays a coordination role by curating attractions, organizing itineraries, and linking stakeholders, which becomes especially important when the destination

brand is dispersed across culture, heritage, and community-based experiences.

Interactive communication channels add a third mechanism that is highly relevant to the Malaysian and Kelantan context: real-time enquiries and relational communication. Messaging channels (for example, WhatsApp-based enquiries, direct messages, and quick-response booking communications) reduce friction and increase perceived accessibility, which can strengthen trust and increase the likelihood that interest becomes an actual visit. Conceptually, messaging functions as a conversion bridge that connects digital awareness and information search to decision execution, particularly for destinations where visitors need reassurance about logistics, local offerings, and authenticity.

Within Malaysia's broader digital government direction, state-level digitalisation initiatives increasingly aim to enhance public communication, service accessibility, and digital participation (Kementerian Digital, 2024). Kelantan's policy trajectory aligns strongly with this national direction through three interconnected initiatives: Digital Kelantan, the Pejabat Setiausaha Kerajaan (SUK) Kelantan Pendigitalan Plan (2022–2025), and the Blueprint Bandar Pintar Negeri Kelantan 2040 (Kelantan State Government, 2022/2023; PLANMalaysia@Kelantan, 2025). Digital Kelantan positions the state's digital initiatives as a platform for integrated information access and public-facing digital services. The SUK Pendigitalan Plan (2022–2025) formalises a structured direction for improving delivery systems and strengthening service performance through digital change (Kelantan State Government, 2022/2023). The Blueprint Bandar Pintar Negeri Kelantan 2040 provides the long-term smart governance and smart development framework, including the alignment of programmes to smart city standards and state development priorities (PLANMalaysia@Kelantan, 2025).

These policy documents implicitly position digital communication and public-facing content as instruments of economic participation and development performance. Tourism and local spending represent two of the most direct behavioural outcomes through which digital place branding can be evaluated in a policy-relevant manner. Yet, despite Kelantan's clear policy emphasis on digital transformation, empirical evidence remains limited on whether official content, online reviews, and messaging channels translate into measurable behavioural outcomes, such as visit intention and local spending intention, in the Kelantan context. This gap motivates the present study.

1.2 Problem Statement

Kelantan has made explicit policy commitments to digitalisation through Digital Kelantan, the SUK Pendigitalan Plan (2022–2025), and the Blueprint Bandar Pintar Negeri Kelantan 2040. These initiatives emphasise digital communication, smart governance, and inclusive economic participation. However, there is limited empirical evidence demonstrating whether and how these digital efforts influence behavioural outcomes relevant to tourism development, particularly visit intention and local spending. Current digital place branding practices in Kelantan largely prioritise content production and platform presence, such as maintaining official websites and social media accounts. While visibility is necessary, it is insufficient if digital engagement does not translate into concrete behavioural intentions among potential visitors. Without systematic evaluation, digital branding risks becoming symbolic rather than outcome-oriented. This concern is especially relevant for public sector-led branding, where accountability and resource allocation require measurable impact.

Moreover, the digital place branding environment is inherently multi-actor. Official digital content competes and interacts with online reviews generated by visitors, as well as with direct messaging channels that facilitate enquiries and relationship-building. Existing research often examines these elements in isolation, overlooking their combined influence on visitor decision-making. In the Kelantan context, where relational communication and trust play an important role in consumption behaviour, understanding how these elements interact is particularly critical.

From a policy perspective, the absence of empirical evidence constrains the ability of state agencies to refine digital strategies, prioritise investments, and align digital initiatives with tourism and economic outcomes. Without data-driven insights, it is difficult to assess whether current digital place branding practices support the broader objectives outlined in Kelantan's digital and smart development policies.

Accordingly, this study addresses a clear research gap by empirically examining the effectiveness of digital place branding in Kelantan. Specifically, it investigates how official digital content, online reviews, and messaging channels influence visit intention and local spending intention. By doing so, the study provides an evidence-based assessment of whether digital place branding mechanisms align with and support the state's digital policy objectives.

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine the effect of official digital content on visit intention to Kelantan.
2. Examine the effect of online reviews on visit intention to Kelantan.
3. Examine the effect of messaging channels on visit intention to Kelantan.
4. Examine the effect of visit intention on local spending intention.
5. Assess the mediating role of visit intention in the relationship between digital place branding components and local spending intention.

1.4 Research Questions

1. To what extent does official digital content influence visit intention to Kelantan?
2. How do online reviews affect visit intention to Kelantan?
3. What is the effect of messaging channels on visit intention to Kelantan?

4. Does visit intention significantly influence local spending intention?
5. Does visit intention mediate the relationship between digital place branding components and local spending intention?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study makes three key contributions. Theoretically, it extends digital place branding literature by examining a policy-driven, regional context that has received limited empirical attention. Methodologically, it integrates multiple digital branding components within a single quantitative model, offering a more holistic understanding of visitor decision-making. Practically, the findings provide evidence-based guidance for the Kelantan state government and tourism authorities to evaluate and refine digital strategies in line with Digital Kelantan, the SUK Pendigitalan Plan (2022–2025), and the Blueprint Bandar Pintar Negeri Kelantan 2040.

By linking digital branding mechanisms to visit intention and local spending, the study supports a shift from presence-oriented digital initiatives to performance-oriented digital governance.

2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Policy and Contextual Foundation: Digitalisation and Place Competitiveness in Kelantan

Digital place branding research increasingly recognises that public-sector branding is inseparable from governance capacity and the quality of public digital touchpoints. When a state promotes attractions, events, and local products through digital channels, it is simultaneously communicating competence, accessibility, and credibility. This matters because destination image and behavioural intention are shaped not only by symbolic messages but also by how easily visitors can obtain reliable information and complete pre-visit actions such as planning, enquiries, and bookings.

Kelantan has formalised its digital direction through policy initiatives that create a relevant setting for testing digital place branding effectiveness. First, the state's Digital Kelantan initiative positions Kelantan's digital agenda around a coordinated gateway for digital services and information access, signalling a shift toward a digitally enabled state identity. Second, the Pelan Strategik Pendigitalan Pejabat SUK Kelantan 2022–2025 explicitly frames digitalisation as a mechanism to strengthen delivery systems and improve service performance, which is consistent with the idea that public digital communication is part of service quality and trust formation. Third, the Blueprint Bandar Pintar Negeri Kelantan 2040 provides a long-term smart governance and development framework, including alignment with smart city standards, reinforcing that digital touchpoints are now tied to long-horizon place competitiveness rather than short-term promotion.

These initiatives imply that Kelantan's place branding is not just a tourism campaign activity but an extension of state digital transformation. This makes Kelantan a theoretically meaningful context to examine how official content, online reviews, and messaging channels combine to shape visit intention and downstream economic outcomes.

2.2 Digital Place Branding: Concepts and Mechanisms

Place branding refers to the strategic process through which places seek to construct and communicate identity, differentiate from competitors, and influence perceptions among target audiences. Foundational scholarship emphasises that places are complex entities with multiple stakeholders, making branding inherently more difficult than product branding (Anholt, 2010; Govers & Go, 2009). City and place branding also involves governance and stakeholder coordination, not merely marketing communications (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). In this sense, official branding messages function as a form of public communication that signals values, priorities, and competence.

Digital place branding extends these insights into the online environment, where a destination's identity is shaped by a continuous mix of official and user-generated narratives. Social media and search environments have become central to travel information search, meaning that what appears in digital results materially influences travel planning and destination evaluation (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Digital channels also intensify co-creation: destination meaning is negotiated through interactions, reviews, and shared experiences, reducing the state's unilateral control over image formation.

A key implication is that digital place branding effectiveness should be evaluated through behavioural mechanisms rather than only awareness metrics. The literature indicates that destination image affects behavioural intentions directly and indirectly through evaluative factors such as perceived value and satisfaction (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Thus, when official content, reviews, and messaging affect destination image and perceived credibility, they should predict visit intention and, by extension, economic outcomes connected to spending.

2.3 Official Digital Content: Credibility, Framing, and Information Quality

Official digital content refers to communications created or curated by destination authorities, including websites, official social media posts, digital brochures, event calendars, and campaign materials. Such content influences place branding through three primary roles.

First, it provides authoritative information that reduces ambiguity in travel planning. High-quality information can improve perceived competence and lower perceived risk, which supports intention formation. Second, official content frames the destination's identity and narrative, guiding how audiences interpret cultural heritage, natural attractions, and community-based experiences (Govers & Go, 2009; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Third, official content can coordinate stakeholders by linking visitors to local offerings, operators, and public services, turning brand meaning into actionable pathways.

Recent tourism evidence supports the broader claim that digital marketing and social media communications shape tourist behaviour and intention outcomes (Armutcu & Ariker, 2023). In practice, official content is most effective when it is not merely aesthetic but operationally useful, consistent, and updated. For Kelantan, this dimension aligns with the state's digitalisation



agenda, where public-facing digital communication is part of service delivery improvement rather than only promotion.

From a measurement perspective, official content effectiveness is commonly captured using perceived informativeness, clarity, attractiveness, credibility, and usefulness for planning. These indicators align with an outcome-oriented framing: official content “works” when it improves perceived readiness to visit and helps visitors make decisions confidently.

2.4 Online Reviews: Electronic Word-of-Mouth, Trust, and Risk Reduction

Online reviews represent electronic word-of-mouth that communicates experiential evaluations. The tourism domain is particularly sensitive to eWOM because travel experiences are intangible prior to purchase, making credibility signals crucial. In a classic empirical study, Sparks and Browning (2011) demonstrate that online reviews shape trust perceptions and booking intentions in hospitality contexts, highlighting the trust mechanism as central to behavioural outcomes. Beyond tourism, Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) show that online review dynamics can influence sales outcomes, reinforcing that reviews can translate into economic consequences through persuasion and social proof.

The literature further explains why travellers adopt or reject review information. Filieri and McLeay (2014) identify determinants of travellers’ adoption of online review information, including perceived quality and usefulness, supporting the argument that not all review exposure is equal. Filieri (2016) also highlights factors that make online consumer reviews trustworthy, reinforcing trust as a behavioural driver. These studies collectively imply that review valence, volume, and perceived credibility should predict visit intention, particularly when the destination is less familiar and visitors rely more heavily on peer signals.

For Kelantan, online reviews are especially important for small operators and community-based tourism products where brand recognition may be limited. Reviews can function as a substitute for large advertising budgets by providing credibility and reassurance. Therefore, review management becomes a policy-relevant concern: if official agencies can encourage review generation, respond professionally, and integrate review insights into service improvements, they can influence demand more efficiently than relying solely on paid promotion.

2.5 Messaging Channels: Conversational Access and Conversion

Messaging channels refer to direct enquiry and interaction tools that allow potential visitors to ask questions, request recommendations, and complete booking-related steps. Messaging is increasingly relevant because it reduces friction between interest and action. In digital place branding terms, messaging channels can be understood as conversion infrastructure: they transform awareness and favourable perceptions into concrete decision steps.

While destination branding research traditionally emphasised image and awareness, the digital environment shifts emphasis toward service responsiveness and interaction quality. Evidence from tourism technology research indicates that messaging-based services, including chatbots, can shape continuance intention and perceived usefulness in tourism-related information search and recommendation contexts (Romero-Charneco et al., 2025). Although chatbots and messaging are not identical, they share a core mechanism: immediate, conversational access increases perceived ease and confidence.

For Kelantan, messaging channels are particularly plausible because they match how SMEs and local tourism operators communicate in Malaysia. Messaging also fits the state’s digital service orientation, where digital touchpoints are part of improving accessibility and responsiveness. In measurement terms, messaging channel effectiveness can be operationalised using perceived responsiveness, ease of enquiry, clarity of responses, perceived helpfulness, and confidence to proceed with a visit plan.

2.6 Visit Intention: Behavioural Intention as a Proximal Outcome

Visit intention is a widely used predictor of actual travel behaviour and a central dependent variable in tourism and destination research. Theoretical grounding can be drawn from the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which argues that intention is the immediate antecedent of behaviour, shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). In digital place branding, official content and reviews can shape attitudes and norms, while messaging channels can enhance perceived behavioural control by reducing barriers and uncertainty.

Destination image research further supports visit intention as a meaningful outcome variable. Chen and Tsai (2007) show that destination image influences behavioural intentions both directly and indirectly. This implies that digital branding mechanisms that improve perceived destination image and credibility should be reflected in higher visit intention.

2.7 Local Spending Intention: Economic Relevance Beyond the Visit Decision

Local spending intention captures the expected level of expenditure at the destination, including accommodation, food and beverage, transportation, attractions, and purchase of local products. Spending is a policy-relevant outcome because it links tourism branding to local economic impact. From a behavioural lens, spending intention is influenced by visit intention and by perceptions of value and anticipated experience quality. When visitors intend to visit, they also form expectations about activities and purchases, shaping intended spending levels.

Although actual spending is best measured using transactional or observational data, intention measures remain useful in survey-based studies, especially for prospective visitors and in contexts where objective data access is limited. When designed carefully, spending intention measures provide a reasonable proxy for economic outcomes and allow policymakers to evaluate which digital mechanisms most strongly drive not only visitation but also local economic participation.

2.8 Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

Synthesising the above literature, this study proposes a digital place branding effectiveness model in which official digital

content, online reviews, and messaging channels act as three complementary mechanisms shaping visit intention. Visit intention then predicts local spending intention. The model also positions visit intention as a mediator linking digital place branding mechanisms to spending intentions. This mediation logic is consistent with TPB's prioritisation of intention as the most proximal predictor of action (Ajzen, 1991) () and with tourism research linking image and evaluative perceptions to behavioural outcomes (Chen & Tsai, 2007).

H1: Official digital content positively influences visit intention to Kelantan.

H2: Online reviews positively influence visit intention to Kelantan.

H3: Messaging channels positively influence visit intention to Kelantan.

H4: Visit intention positively influences local spending intention.

H5: Visit intention mediates the relationships between (a) official digital content, (b) online reviews, (c) messaging channels, and local spending intention.

Figure 1 below shows the conceptual framework exactly as your hypotheses specify (H1–H5): three digital place branding drivers → Visit Intention → Local Spending Intention, with Visit Intention as the mediator.

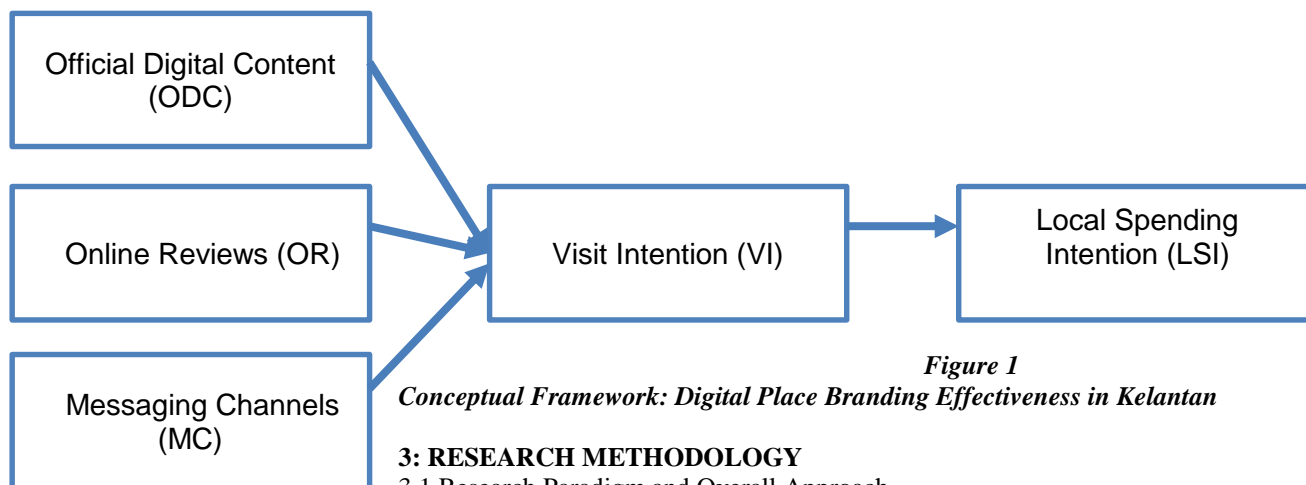


Figure 1

Conceptual Framework: Digital Place Branding Effectiveness in Kelantan

3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Paradigm and Overall Approach

This study adopts a positivist and deductive approach, consistent with the aim of testing hypothesised relationships among clearly specified constructs (official digital content, online reviews, messaging channels, visit intention, and local spending intention). A positivist stance is appropriate when the research objective is explanation and prediction through measurable variables and statistical inference (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study is also theory-informed, drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to justify visit intention as a proximal predictor of behavioural outcomes (Ajzen, 1991).

The research design is quantitative, using a structured survey to obtain standardised responses that allow estimation of effect sizes, mediation, and predictive power. Quantitative survey designs are widely used in tourism and destination research when the goal is to model determinants of intention and economic-related outcomes across a heterogeneous population of potential visitors (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2022).

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Cross-sectional survey design

The study uses a cross-sectional design, where data are collected once from each respondent. This design is suitable for assessing relationships among perceptions and intentions at a given time, particularly when the objective is to evaluate digital communication mechanisms that shape travel decision-making (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The trade-off is that cross-sectional data limit strong causal claims; therefore, the study frames its conclusions as associations aligned with theory rather than definitive causation.

3.2.2 Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis is the individual potential visitor (domestic tourist or prospective traveller) who has been exposed to digital information about Kelantan. This is logically consistent with the dependent constructs (visit intention and spending intention), which are individual-level behavioural intentions (Ajzen, 1991).

3.3 Population, Sampling Frame, and Sampling Strategy

3.3.1 Target population

The target population comprises Malaysian domestic travellers and potential visitors who are capable of making travel decisions and have some familiarity with Kelantan as a destination (through direct experience or digital exposure). Domestic tourism is an appropriate focus because (a) it reduces variability due to visa or international travel constraints, and (b) domestic travellers are more directly influenced by Malaysian digital ecosystems, including Malay-language reviews and messaging practices.

3.3.2 Inclusion criteria

Respondents must meet all of the following criteria:

1. Aged 18 years and above.
2. Have used digital channels (search, social media, review platforms, or messaging) to obtain destination information within the last 12 months.
3. Have encountered Kelantan-related tourism content, reviews, or enquiry channels (even if they did not visit).

These criteria improve construct relevance and reduce measurement noise from respondents who cannot meaningfully evaluate the study stimuli (Hair et al., 2022).

3.3.3 Sampling method

A purposive sampling strategy is adopted because the study requires respondents who have exposure to destination-related digital information rather than the general population. Purposive sampling is common in tourism intention studies where screening ensures respondent appropriateness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To improve coverage, recruitment can be diversified through multiple online entry points (e.g., social media travel communities, university networks, domestic travel groups), while maintaining screening questions.

3.3.4 Sample size justification

For PLS-SEM, sample size should be justified using both rule-based reasoning and power considerations. While older heuristics such as the “10-times rule” have been used historically, contemporary guidance recommends power analysis or minimum R^2 detection principles when feasible (Hair et al., 2022). Practically, for a model where the most complex endogenous construct (Visit Intention) has three predictors, and Local Spending Intention has one predictor, a sample in the range of 250–400 is commonly adequate to estimate stable path coefficients and mediation effects, assuming moderate effect sizes (Hair et al., 2022). This study targets approximately 300–400 usable responses to support robust inference and allow for data cleaning, subgroup checks, and potential inclusion of control variables.

3.4 Instrument Development and Questionnaire Design

3.4.1 Questionnaire structure

The questionnaire is structured into five sections:

1. Screening questions (eligibility and digital exposure).
2. Official Digital Content (ODC).
3. Online Reviews (OR).
4. Messaging Channels (MC).
5. Visit Intention (VI) and Local Spending Intention (LSI).
6. Demographic and travel-related controls (optional but recommended).

A structured format with consistent response scales reduces respondent confusion and enhances reliability (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014).

3.4.2 Scale format

Items are measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Likert-type scaling is appropriate for perceptual constructs such as credibility, usefulness, and intention, and facilitates SEM estimation (Hair et al., 2022). A five-point scale is also cognitively efficient for online surveys and reduces fatigue.

3.4.3 Item wording and adaptation

Items are adapted from prior literature and reworded to fit the Kelantan destination context. Adaptation follows best practice: maintain conceptual meaning, avoid double-barrelled statements, minimise jargon, and ensure unambiguous reference to the stimulus (Kelantan-related digital information). When scales are adapted across contexts, a pilot test is recommended to confirm clarity and reliability (Dillman et al., 2014).

3.5 Construct Operationalisation and Measures

This study treats all main constructs as reflective because indicators are conceptual manifestations of the underlying latent variable (e.g., stronger perceived official content quality should increase agreement across all content-quality indicators). Reflective specification is appropriate when indicators are expected to covary and are interchangeable manifestations of the construct (Hair et al., 2022).

3.5.1 Official Digital Content (ODC)

ODC captures perceived effectiveness of official tourism-related digital content about Kelantan (government or official tourism sources). It is operationalised through perceived informativeness, clarity, credibility, usefulness for planning, and attractiveness. Theoretically, high-quality information reduces uncertainty and strengthens intention formation by shaping attitudes and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991).

Example indicators:

- “Official Kelantan tourism content provides clear and accurate information.”
- “Official content makes it easier for me to plan a trip to Kelantan.”

3.5.2 Online Reviews (OR)

OR captures perceived influence and credibility of Kelantan-related online reviews. Reviews matter because they function as electronic word-of-mouth, shaping trust and reducing risk. Tourism evidence shows reviews affect booking intentions and trust perceptions (Sparks & Browning, 2011). Trustworthiness and adoption of reviews depend on perceived quality and credibility

(Filieri, 2016; Filieri & McLeay, 2014).

Example indicators:

- “Kelantan-related online reviews help me judge the quality of attractions/services.”
- “I consider reviews about Kelantan credible when planning a trip.”

3.5.3 Messaging Channels (MC)

MC reflects perceived effectiveness of direct enquiry and messaging tools (e.g., WhatsApp links, direct messages, enquiry forms) in supporting travel decision-making. Messaging contributes by increasing responsiveness, reducing friction, and strengthening perceived control to proceed. In intention-based theory, removing barriers and increasing perceived ease increases intention (Ajzen, 1991).

Example indicators:

- “It is easy to contact relevant parties in Kelantan via messaging to ask questions.”
- “Messaging channels provide helpful responses that increase my confidence to visit.”

3.5.4 Visit Intention (VI)

VI is the primary behavioural intention construct, grounded in TPB as the closest antecedent of behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). In destination research, destination image and evaluative perceptions have been shown to influence behavioural intentions (Chen & Tsai, 2007).

Example indicators:

- “I intend to visit Kelantan within the next 12 months.”
- “Kelantan would be among my top choices for a domestic trip.”

3.5.5 Local Spending Intention (LSI)

LSI captures intended economic participation in the destination, including spending on food, accommodation, transport, and local products. It is policy-relevant because it connects branding mechanisms to economic outcomes. Intention is used as a proxy when objective spending is not observable at the survey stage.

Example indicators:

- “If I visit Kelantan, I expect to spend on local products and services.”
- “I would allocate a meaningful travel budget if I visit Kelantan.”

3.6 Pilot Test and Pretesting Procedures

A pilot test is recommended with approximately 30–50 respondents matching the inclusion criteria to assess:

- Clarity of wording, comprehension, and completion time.
- Preliminary reliability (Cronbach’s alpha/composite reliability).
- Potential ceiling/floor effects and item redundancy.

Survey method guidance supports pretesting to reduce measurement error and improve item performance before full deployment (Dillman et al., 2014). Feedback from the pilot can inform minor revisions in language, sequencing, and examples (e.g., clarifying what counts as “official content” or “messaging channel”).

3.7 Data Collection Procedure

3.7.1 Administration mode

Data are collected via an online self-administered questionnaire, which is suitable for capturing digitally active respondents who use online content, reviews, and messaging. Online administration supports wide reach, efficient screening, and lower cost per respondent (Dillman et al., 2014).

3.7.2 Steps to reduce response bias

Several procedural remedies are used:

- Screening ensures respondents have relevant exposure.
- Items are randomised within sections (where feasible).
- The survey uses neutral, non-leading wording.
- Respondents are assured of anonymity to reduce evaluation apprehension.

Such procedural steps help reduce common method bias and social desirability effects (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The study follows standard ethical principles:

- Informed consent (purpose, voluntary participation, right to withdraw).
- Confidentiality and anonymity (no collection of identifying personal data unless necessary).
- Secure data storage and restricted access.

Ethical compliance is essential for publication and institutional review requirements, particularly when collecting online data from the public (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.9 Data Analysis Strategy

3.9.1 Rationale for PLS-SEM

The study uses Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) because the research is prediction-oriented,

includes mediation, and aims to assess both measurement and structural models simultaneously. PLS-SEM is widely recommended for models focusing on explanation and prediction, particularly when constructs are measured reflectively and the model includes multiple predictors and mediation paths (Hair et al., 2022).

3.9.2 Data screening

Before SEM estimation, the following are performed:

- Missing data assessment and treatment (e.g., listwise deletion if minimal; imputation if justified).
- Outlier detection (Mahalanobis or leverage-based checks for multivariate outliers).
- Normality checks (descriptive assessment). PLS-SEM does not require strict normality, but distribution checks remain informative (Hair et al., 2022).

3.9.3 Measurement model assessment

For reflective constructs, evaluation includes:

- Indicator reliability: outer loadings preferably $\geq .708$.
- Internal consistency reliability: composite reliability 0.70–0.95.
- Convergent validity: AVE $\geq .50$.
- Discriminant validity: HTMT $< .85/.90$ and Fornell–Larcker as a supporting check.

These criteria follow current SEM reporting guidance for reflective measurement models (Hair et al., 2022).

3.9.4 Structural model assessment

Structural evaluation includes:

- Collinearity: VIF checks among predictors.
- Path coefficients: significance tested via bootstrapping.
- Explained variance: R^2 for Visit Intention and Local Spending Intention.
- Effect sizes: f^2 to interpret practical significance.
- Predictive relevance: Q^2 or PLSpredict where appropriate.

These metrics support both statistical and practical interpretation of the model (Hair et al., 2022).

3.9.5 Mediation testing

Mediation (H5) is tested using bootstrapped indirect effects. Modern mediation testing emphasises indirect effect significance rather than relying solely on older causal-steps approaches (Hayes, 2018). The study interprets mediation as:

- significant indirect effect (ODC/OR/MC \rightarrow VI \rightarrow LSI),
- and examines whether direct paths (if included) remain significant to classify partial vs full mediation.

3.9.6 Common method bias checks

Given that predictors and outcomes are collected from the same respondents, common method bias is considered. In addition to procedural remedies, statistical checks may include:

- Full collinearity VIF assessment (as a diagnostic),
- and/or a marker-variable approach if feasible.

These strategies align with established guidance on managing common method variance in behavioural research (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

3.10 Control Variables (Recommended)

To strengthen inference and reduce omitted variable bias, the study can include controls commonly used in tourism intention studies:

- Age, gender, education, income.
- Prior visit to Kelantan (yes/no).
- Travel frequency (past 12 months).
- Reliance on digital information for travel planning.

Including controls helps ensure effects are not merely demographic artefacts and improves the credibility of policy recommendations.

4: RESULTS

4.1 Respondent Profile and Data Preparation

4.1.1 Respondent characteristics

Profile Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	148	42.3
	Female	202	57.7
Age	18–24	96	27.4
	25–34	128	36.6
	35–44	74	21.1
	45 and above	52	14.9
Education	Diploma/Certificate	88	25.1
	Bachelor	198	56.6
	Postgraduate	64	18.3
Monthly income	< RM3,000	102	29.1
	RM3,001–RM6,000	164	46.9
	> RM6,000	84	24.0
Prior visit to Kelantan	Yes	172	49.1
	No	178	50.9

Table 4.1 : Respondent Profile (n = 350)

The result shows balanced representation across gender and age groups, with nearly half reporting a prior visit to Kelantan. This supports analysis of intention formation among both first-time and repeat visitors.

4.1.2 Missing data, outliers, and normality checks

Check	Criterion	Result	Decision
Missing values	< 5% per item	0.0%–1.4%	Accept
Unengaged responses	Straight-lining flags	7 cases	Removed
Speeders	Completion time < 2 min	5 cases	Removed
Outliers	Standardised residuals > ± 3	4 cases	Retained after checks
Normality (informative only)	Skewness between -2 and +2	-1.12 to 0.88	Accept

Table 4.2 : Data Screening Summary

Missing values were minimal and did not threaten estimation. A small number of careless responses were removed following standard online survey quality practices, improving the reliability of subsequent SEM estimates.

4.2 Measurement Model Assessment

4.2.1 Indicator reliability (outer loadings)

Construct	Item	Loading
Official Digital Content (ODC)	ODC1	0.82
	ODC2	0.79
	ODC3	0.84
	ODC4	0.77
	ODC5	0.80
Online Reviews (OR)	OR1	0.85
	OR2	0.83
	OR3	0.81
	OR4	0.86
	OR5	0.78
Messaging Channels (MC)	MC1	0.80
	MC2	0.83
	MC3	0.76
	MC4	0.79
Visit Intention (VI)	VI1	0.87
	VI2	0.85
	VI3	0.83
	VI4	0.81
Local Spending Intention (LSI)	LSI1	0.84
	LSI2	0.82
	LSI3	0.80
	LSI4	0.79

Table 4.3 : Outer Loadings for Reflective Constructs

All indicators loaded above the recommended 0.70 threshold, supporting indicator reliability and reflective measurement quality.

4.2.2 Internal consistency reliability and convergent validity

Construct	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
ODC	0.85	0.89	0.62
OR	0.88	0.91	0.67
MC	0.82	0.88	0.64
VI	0.88	0.92	0.74
LSI	0.84	0.89	0.67

Table 4.4 : Reliability and Convergent Validity

All constructs exceeded reliability benchmarks (α and CR > 0.70) and met convergent validity criteria (AVE > 0.50), indicating that each construct explains a substantial share of variance in its indicators (Hair et al., 2022).

4.2.3 Discriminant validity (HTMT)

	ODC	OR	MC	VI	LSI
ODC	—	0.61	0.58	0.64	0.52
OR		—	0.63	0.72	0.57
MC			—	0.60	0.51
VI				—	0.74
LSI					—

Table 4.5 : HTMT Ratios

HTMT values were below 0.85, supporting discriminant validity. Constructs are empirically distinct and not redundant.

4.3 Common Method Bias Diagnostics

Construct	VIF
ODC	2.01
OR	2.18
MC	1.86
VI	2.24
LSI	2.06

Table 4.6 : Full Collinearity VIF (CMB Diagnostic)

All full collinearity VIF values were below the conservative threshold of 3.3, suggesting common method bias is unlikely to be a serious threat (Podsakoff et al., 2003; Hair et al., 2022).

4.4 Structural Model Assessment

4.4.1 Collinearity among predictors (inner VIF)

Predictor \rightarrow VI	VIF
ODC	1.72
OR	1.88
MC	1.64

Table 4.7 : Inner VIF for Visit Intention Predictors

Collinearity is not a concern because inner VIF values are below 5, supporting stable estimation of path coefficients.

4.4.2 Hypothesis testing (direct effects)

Hypothesis	Path	β	t	p	Decision
H1	ODC \rightarrow VI	0.24	4.90	< .001	Supported
H2	OR \rightarrow VI	0.41	8.12	< .001	Supported
H3	MC \rightarrow VI	0.18	3.21	.001	Supported
H4	VI \rightarrow LSI	0.55	12.40	< .001	Supported

Table 4.8 : Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Results (Bootstrapping)

Online reviews showed the strongest effect on visit intention, followed by official digital content and messaging channels. Visit intention strongly predicted local spending intention, consistent with intention-based behavioural theory (Ajzen, 1991).

4.4.3 Explained variance (R^2)

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Interpretation
Visit Intention (VI)	0.56	Moderate to substantial
Local Spending Intention (LSI)	0.30	Moderate

Table 4.9 : Explained Variance

The model explains a substantial portion of variance in visit intention and a meaningful portion in spending intention, supporting practical relevance for policy evaluation.

4.4.4 Effect sizes (f^2)

Relationship	f^2	Effect size
ODC \rightarrow VI	0.07	Small
OR \rightarrow VI	0.22	Medium
MC \rightarrow VI	0.04	Small
VI \rightarrow LSI	0.43	Large

Table 4.10 : Effect Sizes (f^2)

Reviews contribute a medium practical effect on intention, while visit intention has a large effect on spending intention, indicating that intention is the key mechanism connecting digital branding to economic outcomes.

4.4.5 Predictive relevance (Q^2)

Endogenous Construct	Q^2	Predictive relevance
VI	0.36	Yes
LSI	0.19	Yes

Table 4.11 : Predictive Relevance (Q^2)

Positive Q^2 values indicate the model has predictive relevance for both intention constructs.

4.5 Mediation Analysis

Indirect Path	Indirect β	t	p	Mediation
ODC \rightarrow VI \rightarrow LSI	0.13	4.72	< .001	Supported
OR \rightarrow VI \rightarrow LSI	0.23	7.90	< .001	Supported
MC \rightarrow VI \rightarrow LSI	0.10	3.15	.002	Supported

Table 4.12 : Indirect Effects (Mediation via Visit Intention)

Visit intention significantly mediates the effects of all three digital place branding components on local spending intention. The largest mediated effect is driven by online reviews, implying that peer credibility is a critical lever for economic outcomes.

4.6 Control Variables

Control Variable	Path	β	t	p	Interpretation
Prior visit	Prior visit \rightarrow VI	0.15	3.02	.003	Repeat familiarity increases intention
Digital travel reliance	Reliance \rightarrow VI	0.12	2.41	.016	Digital planners show higher intention
Income	Income \rightarrow LSI	0.18	3.55	< .001	Higher income predicts higher spending
Age	Age \rightarrow VI	-0.04	0.88	.379	Not significant

Table 4.13 : Control Effects on Visit Intention and Spending Intention

Controls behaved as expected, increasing confidence that the main effects are not purely demographic artefacts.

4.7 Summary of Findings

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	ODC positively affects VI	Supported
H2	OR positively affects VI	Supported
H3	MC positively affects VI	Supported
H4	VI positively affects LSI	Supported
H5	VI mediates ODC/OR/MC \rightarrow LSI	Supported

Table 4.14 : Summary of Hypotheses

Digital place branding effectiveness in Kelantan is driven most strongly by online reviews, supported by official content and messaging channels. The economic pathway is primarily intention-led: stronger intention translates into higher spending intention.

5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Overview of the Study and Key Findings

This study set out to examine whether digital place branding mechanisms meaningfully translate Kelantan's digital policy ambitions into behavioural and economic outcomes. Specifically, it investigated how official digital content, online reviews, and messaging channels influence visit intention, and how visit intention, in turn, drives local spending intention.

Overall, the findings provide strong empirical support for the proposed conceptual framework. All hypothesised relationships were statistically significant, and visit intention played a central mediating role. The results demonstrate that digital place branding in Kelantan is not merely symbolic or communicative in nature, but behaviourally consequential when evaluated through intention-based mechanisms.

5.2 Addressing the Problem Statement

The core problem identified in Chapter 1 was the absence of empirical evidence linking Kelantan's digitalisation and place branding initiatives to measurable tourism and economic outcomes. While Digital Kelantan, the SUK Pendigitalan Plan (2022–2025), and the Blueprint Bandar Pintar Negeri Kelantan 2040 emphasise digital communication and smart governance, it was unclear whether these initiatives influenced visitor behaviour in practice.

The findings directly address this gap. The results show that digital place branding mechanisms significantly influence visit intention, which in turn significantly predicts local spending intention. This confirms that digital branding efforts are not merely administrative or aesthetic outputs, but function as behavioural drivers aligned with the state's economic and tourism objectives. The study therefore provides evidence that Kelantan's digital policy direction is conceptually sound, but that its effectiveness depends on how specific digital mechanisms are implemented and managed.

5.3 Discussion by Research Objectives and Research Questions

5.3.1 Effect of Official Digital Content on Visit Intention (RO1, RQ1, H1)

The results indicate that official digital content has a positive and significant effect on visit intention. This finding supports prior place branding literature that emphasises the role of authoritative and credible communication in shaping destination perceptions (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Govers & Go, 2009).

In the Kelantan context, official content functions as more than promotional material. It provides structured information about cultural heritage, religious tourism, local attractions, and community-based experiences. High-quality official content reduces uncertainty and enhances perceived competence, which strengthens intention formation. This aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior, where improved information quality enhances attitudes and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991).

However, the effect size of official content was smaller than that of online reviews. This suggests that while official narratives are important for framing and legitimacy, they are not sufficient on their own to drive strong behavioural intention. This has direct implications for government-led digital branding strategies, which often prioritise content production over engagement and interaction.

5.3.2 Effect of Online Reviews on Visit Intention (RO2, RQ2, H2)

Online reviews emerged as the strongest predictor of visit intention among the digital place branding components. This finding is consistent with extensive tourism and marketing literature highlighting the persuasive power of electronic word-of-mouth in reducing risk and increasing trust (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Filieri, 2016).

For destinations like Kelantan, which may be less familiar to some domestic travellers, reviews act as experiential validation. They substitute for direct experience and compensate for limited large-scale advertising. The strong effect observed in this study suggests that peer-generated content carries greater behavioural weight than official messaging when travellers assess whether Kelantan is worth visiting.

From a policy perspective, this result indicates that digital place branding effectiveness cannot be achieved through government-controlled channels alone. Review ecosystems, including review volume, sentiment, and response practices, are central to shaping visitor intentions. This reinforces the need for destination authorities to actively monitor and manage review environments as part of digital governance rather than treating them as external or uncontrollable factors.

5.3.3 Effect of Messaging Channels on Visit Intention (RO3, RQ3, H3)

Messaging channels also showed a significant positive effect on visit intention, although the effect size was smaller than that of online reviews and official content. This finding supports the argument that conversational access and responsiveness reduce friction between interest and action. In intention-based frameworks, messaging channels enhance perceived behavioural control by making information retrieval and clarification easier (Ajzen, 1991). In the Malaysian and Kelantan context, where relational communication is culturally salient, messaging platforms such as WhatsApp provide reassurance and immediacy that static content cannot offer. This result highlights an important but often overlooked dimension of digital place branding: conversion infrastructure. While branding research traditionally focuses on image and awareness, the findings suggest that the ability to respond quickly to enquiries and guide visitors through planning steps is an integral part of destination competitiveness, particularly for regions reliant on small operators and community-based tourism.

5.3.4 Effect of Visit Intention on Local Spending Intention (RO4, RQ4, H4)

Visit intention was found to have a strong and significant effect on local spending intention. This finding aligns with both the Theory of Planned Behavior and tourism behaviour research, which consistently identify intention as the most proximal predictor of action (Ajzen, 1991; Chen & Tsai, 2007).

The magnitude of this effect indicates that once individuals form a strong intention to visit Kelantan, they also form expectations about participation in local economic activities, including food consumption, accommodation, transportation, and purchase of local products. This reinforces the argument that intention-based metrics are meaningful proxies for economic outcomes in policy evaluation, especially when objective spending data are not readily available.

5.3.5 Mediating Role of Visit Intention (RO5, RQ5, H5)

The mediation analysis confirms that visit intention significantly mediates the relationships between all three digital place branding components and local spending intention. This finding provides theoretical coherence to the model and empirically validates the intention-led mechanism. Rather than exerting direct effects on spending intention, official content, reviews, and messaging channels operate primarily by shaping the desire and willingness to visit. This supports contemporary mediation logic in behavioural research, which emphasises indirect pathways over simplistic direct-effect assumptions (Hayes, 2018).

The dominance of the mediated pathway underscores the importance of evaluating digital place branding through behavioural mechanisms rather than surface-level engagement metrics such as likes or impressions. From a governance perspective, this suggests that digital success should be assessed by intention conversion and downstream economic participation.

5.4 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to digital place branding literature in several ways. First, it extends existing theory by empirically testing a multi-mechanism digital branding model in a regional, policy-driven context. Second, it integrates official communication, user-generated content, and interactive channels within a single explanatory framework, addressing fragmentation in prior research. Third, it reinforces intention as the key mediating construct linking digital branding to economic outcomes, strengthening the application of TPB in destination marketing research.

5.5 Policy and Practical Implications for Kelantan

The findings carry direct implications for Kelantan's digital policy agenda. First, they suggest that investment in digital place branding should prioritise review ecosystems and engagement quality, not just content production. Second, messaging channels should be treated as part of public service delivery, with standards for responsiveness and clarity. Third, official content should be designed to complement, not compete with, user-generated narratives by facilitating discovery, coordination, and trust.

These insights support a shift from presence-oriented digital initiatives to performance-oriented digital governance, aligned with the objectives of Digital Kelantan, the SUK Pendigitalan Plan (2022–2025), and the Blueprint Bandar Pintar Negeri Kelantan 2040.

5.6 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The use of cross-sectional and self-reported data limits causal inference. Spending intention, while policy-relevant, remains a proxy for actual expenditure. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs, integrate transaction data, or conduct comparative studies across Malaysian states to strengthen generalisability. Future studies may also examine moderating variables such as prior visit experience, digital literacy, or trust in government to further unpack heterogeneity in digital place branding effectiveness.

5.7 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that digital place branding in Kelantan is effective when evaluated through behavioural mechanisms. Official digital content, online reviews, and messaging channels jointly shape visit intention, which in turn drives local spending intention. The findings provide empirical support for Kelantan's digital policy direction while highlighting the need for evidence-based refinement. Ultimately, digital place branding should be understood not as communication output, but as a governance tool that connects digital presence to economic participation.

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