

How Digital Marketing Shapes Uniqueness and Tourist Behavioral Intention

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JEL Classification:

M31

Z32

D91

M37

Received: 26 December 2025

Revised: 01 May 2026

Accepted: 15 May 2026

Published online: September 2026

Abstract

Research Originality: This study introduces a novel perspective by integrating the concept of need for uniqueness into the digital tourism context, highlighting how digital interactions such as electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and digital marketing shape unique travel experiences and influence post-visit behavior.

Research Objectives: This research examines the effect of travelers' need for uniqueness on behavioral intention and tests the mediating roles of eWOM, digital marketing, and place attachment.

Research Method: A quantitative survey of 221 travelers was analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test relationships among variables and mediating effects.

Empirical Results: The findings reveal that need for uniqueness significantly affects behavioral intention, with digital interactions, play, eWOM, and place attachment serving as key mediating variables that translate the desire for unique experiences into intentions to visit or revisit destinations.

Implications: The results provide important insights into digitally driven tourist behavior and emphasize the need for destination managers to develop personalized, experience-oriented digital marketing strategies that enhance visitor engagement and strengthen emotional attachment to destinations.

Keywords:

digital economy; social media; tourist engagement; electronic word of mouth (e-wom); place attachment.

How to Cite:

Sangka, K. B., Haryono, T., Ismoyowati, D., Sugiarto, C., Suryanti, A., & Widiyanti, S. H. (2026). How Digital Marketing Shapes Uniqueness and Tourist Behavioral Intention. *Etikonomi*, 25(2), 491 – 506. <https://doi.org/10.15408/etk.v25i2.49971>.

INTRODUCTION

The search for unique and memorable travel experiences has become an important driver of tourism behavior, especially in the digital era. Travelers increasingly seek not only functional benefits but also symbolic and identity-based experiences that help them distinguish themselves from others (Sakr et al., 2024). Unique travel experiences can help tourists create personal meaning, strengthen self-identity, and build emotional connections with destinations (Schatz-Oppenheimer & Kalnisky, 2014). Therefore, tourists are often influenced by others' travel experiences, particularly when these experiences are seen as distinctive and memorable (Homsud, 2024; Moscardo, 2020).

Digital platforms have strengthened this trend. Social media, travel applications, and online communities are now important channels for discovering, evaluating, and sharing tourism experiences (Tandafatu et al., 2024). Digital marketing interactions and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) also play important roles in shaping tourists' perceptions and behavioral intentions (Armutcu et al., 2023). Positive travel experiences shared online can influence destination choice and build emotional connections, including place attachment, especially when destinations are considered unique and authentic (Zahnow, 2024). However, tourism literature offers different views on what mainly drives tourist behavior. One perspective emphasizes external digital factors, suggesting that online engagement, persuasive content, and platform visibility directly influence destination decisions and revisit intentions (Armutcu et al., 2023; Harrigan et al., 2018). Another perspective focuses on internal psychological motivations, particularly the need for uniqueness, which encourages tourists to seek authentic and different experiences rather than mainstream tourism products (Karagöz & Uysal, 2022; Sharma & Jain, 2020). This suggests that tourist behavior may depend not only on digital exposure but also on whether digital content matches tourists' identity motives.

Although both perspectives are important, they are often studied separately. Previous research provides limited understanding of how the need for uniqueness influences behavioral intention through digital mechanisms (Armutcu et al., 2023; Karagöz & Uysal, 2022). Personalization, authenticity, and self-expression are especially important for consumers with a strong need for uniqueness (Chu et al., 2024; Nunes et al., 2021; Song & Sela, 2023). This need also affects how consumers engage with digital content, including their resistance to conformity and preference for distinctive online experiences (Ingendahl et al., 2021; Talwar et al., 2020). However, existing digital marketing frameworks only partly explain how digital engagement, cognitive evaluation, and emotional attachment jointly influence tourist behavioral intention (Ghorbani et al., 2022; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

This issue is particularly important for emerging tourism destinations, where combining psychological motives and digital strategies can improve competitiveness (Zou et al., 2025). Solo Raya in Central Java is a relevant example. The region has rich cultural, artistic, and historical assets but remains less competitive than established destinations such as Yogyakarta and Bali. Its unique attractions have not yet been fully supported by digital marketing strategies that effectively communicate these characteristics. Limited

integration of digital engagement, eWOM, and place attachment also reduces the region's ability to use its uniqueness to strengthen destination branding and visibility.

Based on these issues, this study identifies three research gaps. First, limited research explains how the need for uniqueness influences behavioral intention through digital mechanisms. Second, digital marketing, eWOM, and place attachment are rarely examined together as interconnected mediating processes. Third, evidence from emerging tourism destinations in developing countries such as Indonesia remains limited. Therefore, this study examines the effect of tourists' need for uniqueness on behavioral intention through the mediating roles of digital marketing interaction, attitude toward eWOM, and place attachment. The study makes three contributions. First, it connects the need for uniqueness with digital interaction processes to provide a broader explanation of tourist behavioral intention. Second, it examines digital marketing interaction, attitude toward eWOM, and place attachment as parallel mediators, clarifying the relative importance of promotional, cognitive, and emotional pathways. Third, it provides evidence from Solo Raya and shows how culturally unique but less visible destinations can use digital strategies to improve competitiveness, visitor loyalty, and destination branding.

METHODS

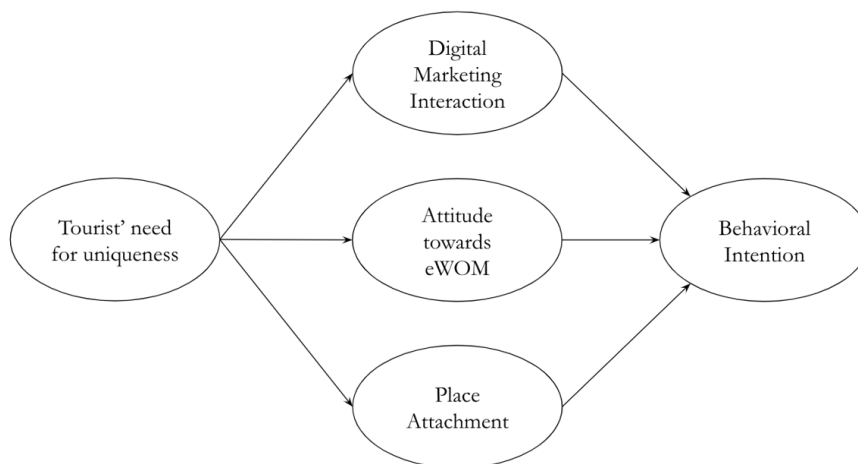
This study uses a quantitative survey design to examine the relationships among the proposed variables. A cross-sectional approach was applied, with primary data collected from respondents at one point in time. Solo Raya was chosen as the research setting because emerging tourism destinations with strong cultural heritage need effective digital branding, reliable online information, and engaging content to attract visitors and encourage revisits (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020; Rodrigues et al., 2023; Tran & Rudolf, 2022). Solo Raya is relevant because it offers rich cultural heritage, culinary attractions, creative communities, and connected tourism assets, but remains less prominent than destinations such as Yogyakarta and Bali. Previous studies show that destination uniqueness alone does not guarantee tourist demand without effective digital engagement and credible online interactions (Marques et al., 2021; Rather, 2020).

Purposive sampling was used to select respondents who (1) had visited Solo Raya destinations at least three times in the past two years and (2) actively used social media for tourism activities, such as trip planning, sharing experiences, or engaging with destination content. Respondents also reported the destinations they visited and their digital activities to ensure data validity. A total of 221 valid responses were collected, with a 68 percent response rate. Sample adequacy was supported by G*Power analysis (Faul et al., 2009), which required at least 77 respondents ($f^2 = 0.15$; $\alpha = 0.05$; power = 0.80; predictors = 3). The inverse square root and gamma-exponential methods also indicated minimum sample sizes of 94 and 81, respectively ($\beta = 0.257$) (Kock & Hadaya, 2018).

Data were collected through an online survey to reach respondents from various regions. The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). All measurement items were adapted from established

studies to ensure content validity; tourists' need for uniqueness was adapted from Cengiz & Akdemir Cengiz (2023), digital marketing interaction from Armutcu et al. (2023), place attachment from Peng et al. (2023), attitude toward eWOM from Zainal et al. (2017), and behavioral intention from Tang & Qiu (2015). The research framework, as shown in Figure 1, examines the effect of tourists' need for uniqueness on behavioral intention, with digital marketing interaction, attitude toward eWOM, and place attachment as mediating variables, capturing the interplay between psychological motivation, digital engagement, and emotional bonding in shaping tourist behavior.

Figure 1. Research Framework



Source: Author's own elaboration

Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. The analysis followed a two-stage approach. First, the measurement model was evaluated for internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Second, the structural model was assessed by examining path coefficients, t-values, and p-values using bootstrapping. Model quality was further evaluated using R^2 and predictive relevance (Q^2). In addition, the PLS-Predict procedure was conducted to assess out-of-sample predictive power by comparing prediction errors (RMSE and MAE) between the PLS-SEM model and a linear benchmark model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 summarizes the demographic data for the research respondents, showing that respondents were predominantly from outside the Solo Raya area (63.8% of the total sample). Female respondents accounted for 67.0% of participants, and the majority were aged 21–25 (62.0%). In terms of educational background, the largest proportion of respondents had completed an undergraduate degree (48.9%) and were unmarried (75.1%).

Common method bias (CMB) was evaluated using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Harman's Single Factor Test. Table 2 shows that all VIF values are below 3.3, indicating no multicollinearity and that CMB is not present (Kock, 2015). Harman's

Single Factor Test reveals that the first factor explains only 45.99% of the variance, below the 50% threshold (Podsakoff et al., 2003), confirming that the dataset lacks common method bias. The measurement model was evaluated for indicator reliability, internal consistency, and convergent validity. As shown in Table 2, all outer loading values (λ) exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory indicator reliability (Hair et al., 2019). Furthermore, Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, and composite reliability (CR) values exceed 0.70 for all constructs, verifying strong internal consistency. Each construct's AVE value exceeds 0.50, thus establishing convergent validity. Discriminant validity was tested using the Heterotrait–Monotrait Model, with Table 3 demonstrating that all HTMT values are below 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015). Collectively, these findings confirm the model's reliability and validity for further analysis.

Table 1. Respondent Profile

Demographic	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Residence		
Solo Raya	80	36.2
Outside Solo Raya	141	63.8
Gender		
Male	73	33.0
Female	148	67.0
Age Range		
17–20 Years	21	9.5
21–25 Years	137	62.0
26–30 Years	37	16.7
31–35 Years	10	4.5
36–40 Years	4	1.8
>40 Years	12	5.4
Educational Background		
High School / Vocational	96	43.4
Diploma	11	5.0
Undergraduate	108	48.9
Master's Degree	5	2.3
Marital Status		
Unmarried	166	75.1
Married	55	24.9

Source: Author's Work

Table 2. Measurement Model Assessment

Indicators	λ	VIF
Tourists' Need for Uniqueness (TNE) — CA: 0.911; rho_A: 0.917; CR: 0.933; AVE: 0.736		
TNE1: Since I feel different from most people, I travel to unusual tourist destinations.	0.817	1.997
TNE2: My goal in choosing tourist destinations is to select those that align with my uniqueness.	0.867	2.318
TNE3: Because I enjoy being authentic, I usually take different routes at tourist destinations in Solo Raya.	0.851	2.600
TNE4: My favorite vacation destinations are unique places that reflect my uniqueness.	0.896	2.108
TNE5: In general, I travel to new destinations that I feel contribute to my personal uniqueness.	0.858	2.011
Digital Marketing Interaction (DMI) — CA: 0.889; rho_A: 0.896; CR: 0.924; AVE: 0.752		
DMI1: I use digital marketing channels to search for information about tourist destinations in Solo Raya.	0.801	2.586
DMI2: I use digital marketing channels to read others' experiences and opinions about tourist destinations in Solo Raya.	0.904	2.218
DMI3: I use digital marketing channels to view comments about tourist destinations in Solo Raya.	0.890	3.006
DMI4: I use digital marketing channels to discover and learn about recommendations for tourist destinations in Solo Raya.	0.869	2.747
Attitude Toward e-WOM (AT EWOM) — CA: 0.888; rho_A: 0.888; CR: 0.917; AVE: 0.690		
AT EWOM1: I have a positive outlook on advice/information obtained from social media about tourism in Solo Raya.	0.823	2.086
AT EWOM2: I think following advice/information obtained from social media will be beneficial for me.	0.830	1.743
AT EWOM3: Overall, my attitude toward advice/information obtained from social media is positive.	0.854	1.928
AT EWOM4: I like the advice/information obtained from social media.	0.831	3.045
AT EWOM5: I think following advice/information obtained from social media will be good for me.	0.814	2.806
Place Attachment (PA) — CA: 0.851; rho_A: 0.855; CR: 0.900; AVE: 0.692		
PA1: I feel that tourist destinations in Solo Raya are a part of me.	0.841	2.366
PA2: Tourist destinations in Solo Raya are my favorite places.	0.886	2.008
PA3: Tourist destinations in Solo Raya are special places for me.	0.834	2.582
PA4: No other tourist destinations can compare to those in Solo Raya.	0.761	2.016
Behavioral Intention (Blnn) — CA: 0.899; rho_A: 0.903; CR: 0.923; AVE: 0.667		
Blnn1: I will revisit tourist destinations in Solo Raya.	0.850	1.590
Blnn2: I will consider Solo Raya as my primary choice for entertainment and recreation.	0.798	2.371
Blnn3: I will recommend tourist destinations in Solo Raya to relatives and friends.	0.865	2.628
Blnn4: I will recommend tourist destinations in Solo Raya to others.	0.839	2.676
Blnn5: I will share the positive aspects of tourism in Solo Raya.	0.803	3.251
Blnn6: I will purchase products sold at tourist destinations in Solo Raya.	0.738	2.521

Abbreviations: CA = Cronbach's alpha; rho_A = Dijkstra-Henseler's rho; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; VIF = variance inflation factor; λ = outer loading

Source: Author's Work

The strength of the independent variables' effect on the dependent variable is evaluated using the R^2 and f^2 values. In addition, this analysis also shows the relative impact of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Tables 5 and 6, respectively, present the results of the R^2 and f^2 analyses.

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio

Variable	Attitude Towards eWOM	Behavioral Intention	Digital Marketing Interaction	Place Attachment
Attitude Towards eWOM				
Behavioral Intention	0.879			
Digital Marketing Interaction	0.848	0.807		
Place Attachment	0.500	0.649	0.428	
Tourists' Need for Uniqueness	0.436	0.514	0.276	0.688

Source: Author's Work

Table 4 presents the structural model evaluation using the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2). The results indicate that behavioral intention exhibits substantial explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.715$), while place attachment shows moderate explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.367$). In contrast, attitude toward eWOM ($R^2 = 0.159$) and digital marketing interaction ($R^2 = 0.066$) explain relatively less variance. The effect sizes (f^2) indicate that tourists' need for uniqueness has a large effect on place attachment ($f^2 = 0.579$), a moderate effect on attitude toward eWOM ($f^2 = 0.189$), and a small effect on digital marketing interaction ($f^2 = 0.071$). In addition, attitudes toward eWOM ($f^2 = 0.303$) and place attachment ($f^2 = 0.197$) contribute meaningfully to behavioral intention, whereas digital marketing interaction shows a relatively smaller effect ($f^2 = 0.112$). Furthermore, the predictive relevance assessment indicates that all endogenous constructs have Q^2 values greater than zero, suggesting adequate predictive relevance. Behavioral intention demonstrates strong predictive relevance ($Q^2 = 0.468$), followed by place attachment ($Q^2 = 0.248$), while attitude toward eWOM ($Q^2 = 0.106$) and digital marketing interaction ($Q^2 = 0.045$) exhibit lower but still acceptable predictive capabilities.

Table 4. Structural Model Evaluation (R^2 , f^2 , and Q^2)

Endogenous Variable	f^2 (TNE)	f^2 (DMI)	f^2 (AT eWOM)	f^2 (PA)	R^2	R^2 Adjusted	Q^2
AT eWOM	0.189	–	–	–	0.159	0.155	0.106
DMI	0.071	–	–	–	0.066	0.062	0.045
PA	0.579	–	–	–	0.367	0.364	0.248
Blnn	–	0.112	0.303	0.197	0.715	0.711	0.468

Source: Author's Work

To evaluate predictive relevance, we conducted hypothesis testing using a bootstrapping procedure and assessed significance based on t-values and p-values. As shown in Table 5, all hypothesized relationships are statistically significant, with t-values exceeding the 1.96 threshold and p-values below 0.05, fully supporting the proposed model (Hair et al., 2019). Figure 2 also illustrates the bootstrapping results, visually depicting the strength and direction of the structural relationships. Tourists' need for uniqueness significantly influences digital marketing interactions, attitudes toward eWOM, and place attachment, which, in turn, have significant positive effects on behavioral intention. In addition, all indirect effects are significant, confirming that digital marketing interaction, attitude toward eWOM, and place attachment mediate the relationship between need for uniqueness and behavioral intention.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing

		O	M	STDEV	t value	p values	Conclusion
H1	Tourists' Need for Uniqueness -> Digital Marketing Interaction	0.257	0.264	0.074	3.497	0.000	Supported
H2	Tourists' Need for Uniqueness -> Attitude Towards eWOM	0.399	0.407	0.065	6.106	0.000	Supported
H3	Tourists' Need for Uniqueness -> Place Attachment	0.606	0.611	0.055	11.071	0.000	Supported
H4	Digital Marketing Interaction -> Behavioral Intention	0.274	0.272	0.069	3.984	0.000	Supported
H5	Attitude Towards eWOM -> Behavioral Intention	0.464	0.466	0.074	6.301	0.000	Supported
H6	Place Attachment -> Behavioral Intention	0.264	0.264	0.046	5.785	0.000	Supported
H7	Tourists' Need for Uniqueness -> Digital Marketing Interaction -> Behavioral Intention	0.071	0.072	0.028	2.519	0.012	Supported
H8	Tourists' Need for Uniqueness -> Attitude Towards eWOM -> Behavioral Intention	0.185	0.190	0.045	4.131	0.000	Supported
H9	Tourists' Need for Uniqueness -> Place Attachment -> Behavioral Intention	0.160	0.161	0.033	4.863	0.000	Supported

Abbreviations: O = original sample; M = sample mean; STDEV = standard deviation; t value = t-statistic ($|O/STDEV|$); p values = probability values.

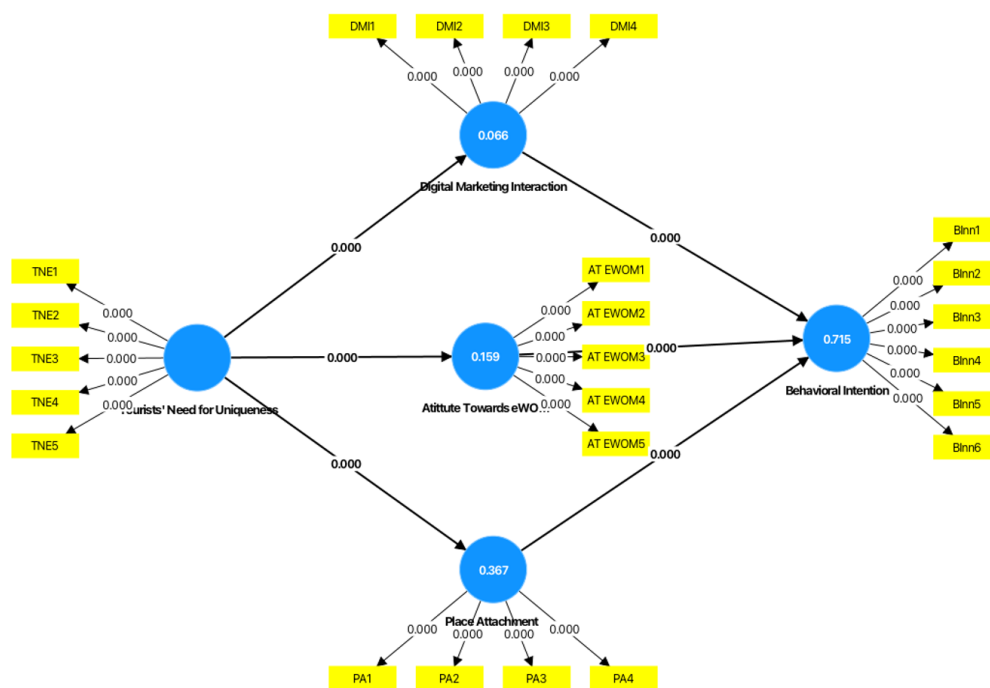
Source: Author's Work

The PLSpredict procedure was applied to assess out-of-sample predictive performance by comparing the PLS-SEM model's prediction errors to those of a linear benchmark

model (LM). Table 6 shows that all Q^2 predict values exceed zero, signifying adequate predictive relevance (Shmueli et al., 2019). Behavioral intention exhibits the highest predictive relevance (Q^2 predict = 0.175), while Digital Marketing Interaction indicators reveal the lowest (e.g., Q^2 predict = 0.015), illustrating variation in predictive strength among constructs. Moreover, most indicators (16 of 19) show lower RMSE values in the PLS-SEM model than in the linear model, indicating greater predictive performance. Although a few indicators show similar or marginally higher errors, the results confirm that the PLS-SEM model outperforms the linear benchmark for out-of-sample forecasting.

The findings confirm that TNU significantly influences digital marketing interaction, attitudes toward eWOM, and place attachment, supporting Uniqueness Theory, which argues that individuals seek differentiation through their consumption behavior (Liu et al., 2021; Marques et al., 2021). This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that consumers with strong uniqueness motives actively engage with digital content to find authentic and distinctive experiences (Bu et al., 2021). However, this study extends previous research by showing that uniqueness motives not only encourage digital engagement but also create more positive attitudes toward eWOM and stronger emotional attachment to destinations. Tourists with strong uniqueness motives are more likely to seek destinations that represent individuality, authenticity, and uncommon experiences. They therefore tend to engage with destination-related digital content, value travel information shared by other visitors, and develop emotional connections with distinctive places. These findings also support Uses and Gratifications Theory, which explains that digital platforms provide tourists with information and opportunities for self-expression (Moon & An, 2022).

Figure 2. Bootstrapping Analysis



Source: Author's Work

The study further shows that attitude toward eWOM and place attachment have a stronger influence on behavioral intention than digital marketing interaction. This is consistent with previous research emphasizing the role of peer-generated information and emotional connections (Hung & Khoa, 2022; Luong, 2023). However, unlike studies that mainly emphasize the direct effects of digital marketing exposure, these findings indicate that social trust and emotional attachment are stronger predictors of tourist intention. The importance of eWOM suggests that tourists trust credible recommendations and authentic experiences shared by other visitors. For high-involvement decisions such as travel, social proof can help reduce uncertainty and perceived risk. Unlike previous studies focusing mainly on iconic destinations (Vien Vu et al., 2024) or single-city destinations (Elsawy & Magdy, 2026; González-Reverté et al., 2025), this study shows that strong place attachment can also develop in Solo Raya, a heritage-based regional tourism cluster. Emotional attachment can therefore emerge not only in globally recognized destinations but also in less-explored cultural regions where tourists experience connected attractions, local authenticity, culinary identity, and living traditions.

Table 6. Assessment of the PLSpredict

Indicator	Q ² predict	PLS-SEM		LM		PLS-LM		Prediction Assessment
		RMSE	MAE	RMSE	MAE	RMSE	MAE	
AT EWOM1	0.095	0.652	0.510	0.638	0.508	0.685	0.536	Low
AT EWOM2	0.106	0.695	0.539	0.700	0.543	0.735	0.571	Good
AT EWOM3	0.079	0.741	0.560	0.754	0.565	0.773	0.548	Good
AT EWOM4	0.098	0.699	0.518	0.715	0.529	0.736	0.534	Good
AT EWOM5	0.110	0.704	0.540	0.719	0.558	0.746	0.527	Good
BlInn1	0.117	0.704	0.546	0.724	0.558	0.749	0.577	Good
BlInn2	0.126	0.733	0.555	0.744	0.569	0.785	0.548	Good
BlInn3	0.119	0.683	0.536	0.697	0.545	0.727	0.570	Good
BlInn4	0.121	0.711	0.538	0.737	0.555	0.758	0.572	Good
BlInn5	0.129	0.641	0.482	0.653	0.490	0.687	0.506	Good
BlInn6	0.175	0.749	0.591	0.750	0.593	0.824	0.637	Medium
DMI1	0.015	0.663	0.561	0.672	0.566	0.668	0.577	Good
DMI2	0.031	0.730	0.579	0.746	0.591	0.742	0.601	Good
DMI3	0.030	0.747	0.579	0.756	0.589	0.759	0.592	Good
DMI4	0.067	0.720	0.578	0.727	0.582	0.745	0.612	Good
PA1	0.290	0.731	0.550	0.733	0.542	0.868	0.685	Medium
PA2	0.192	0.738	0.549	0.754	0.569	0.821	0.686	Good
PA3	0.230	0.702	0.529	0.727	0.538	0.800	0.668	Good
PA4	0.248	0.944	0.750	0.959	0.747	1.089	0.928	Good

Source: Author's Work

Although digital marketing interaction significantly influences behavioral intention, its weaker effect differs from studies reporting stronger direct effects (Armutcu et al., 2023). This may indicate that tourists prioritize uniqueness and authenticity over generic promotional content. Tourists with high TNU may respond more strongly to authentic, personalized, and experience-based content (Čivre et al., 2024; Yin et al., 2024). Thus, digital marketing is more effective when it communicates destination uniqueness, symbolic value, and visitor stories rather than simply providing information. Strategies should emphasize uniqueness, storytelling, and meaningful experiences that reflect tourists' self-concept. In this context, eWOM remains important for building trust and encouraging behavioral intention because tourists rely on credible, experience-based information when evaluating destinations.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that the need for uniqueness influences behavioral intention both directly and indirectly. Attitude toward eWOM and place attachment are the strongest mediating factors, suggesting that social trust and emotional connection are more important than digital exposure alone in shaping tourist decisions. Although digital marketing interaction has a significant effect, its influence is weaker, indicating that psychological and experiential factors play a greater role in tourist behavior.

The study also suggests that Solo Raya should develop an integrated regional branding strategy based on cultural uniqueness, local authenticity, culinary identity, and interconnected attractions. Digital marketing should move beyond generic promotion toward personalized, authentic, and experience-based content that reflects the destination's uniqueness and tourists' identities. Tourism authorities can strengthen eWOM through visitor reviews, user-generated content, travel creator collaborations, and digital storytelling. Place attachment can also be enhanced through cultural events, heritage experiences, and community participation. For secondary destinations such as Solo Raya, long-term competitiveness depends not only on visibility but also on creating meaningful and memorable visitor experiences.

This study has several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships and observe changes in tourist behavior over time. Future studies should use longitudinal approaches. Second, the diverse characteristics of respondents may limit the findings' contextual specificity. Future research could focus on specific tourism segments or geographic areas. Finally, future studies could expand the model by examining additional mediating or moderating factors, such as engagement quality and trust in user-generated content, to better understand how digital experiences influence emotional attachment and behavioral intention.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors express their sincere appreciation to the Ministry of Higher Education for their support through the Grant for Fundamental Research 2024. This funding

from the Ministry has been instrumental in advancing their research and facilitating groundbreaking discoveries across these academic fields.

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