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Digital Marketing and Consumer Behaviour in Travel Services: A Conceptual Framework on the Mediating Role of Brand Trust

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Abstract

Digital marketing shapes each moment of the contemporary travel journey, yet limited evidence still obscures how individual tactics foster purchase decisions. This conceptual study will develop an integrative framework that integrates four core touch-points, including social media marketing, email marketing, search engine marketing, and online reviews on travellers' purchase intentions, positing brand trust as the central psychological mechanism. Guided by the Stimulus-Organism-Response theory, thirteen propositions will specify both the direct effects of each touch-point on trust and purchase intention, and trust as a mediator role. To demonstrate the mechanism for empirical validation, future research will conduct a purposive sampling of approximately 350 respondents from online travel agencies in Oman and analyse the proposed relationships using PLS-SEM. By unifying dispersed findings on digital tactics, trust formation, and high-involvement service choice, the framework is expected to advance relationship-marketing theory and equip travel brands with actionable guidance for designing trust-centred campaigns that convert digital engagement into bookings.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Email Marketing, Search Engine Marketing, Online Reviews and Ratings, Brand Trust

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1.0 Introduction

The travel industry has undergone a sweeping digital transformation over the past decade, propelled by the proliferation of mobile devices, ubiquitous high-speed connectivity, and the meteoric rise of user-generated content (Azhar et al., 2023). Travellers now traverse a journey almost entirely mediated by screens from the first spark of inspiration on Instagram to real-time itinerary updates delivered via email. In this environment, four digital touch-points have emerged as the most influential levers of persuasion: social-media marketing (SMM), email marketing, search-engine marketing (SEM), and online ratings and reviews. Each tactic addresses a different stage of the decision cycle, and taken together, they create what industry analysts describe as the “always-on persuasion loop” (Demirbas & Yurt, 2022; Kanhaiya, 2024). Yet the mere presence of these tactics does not guarantee conversion. Travellers must trust that a service provider will deliver on its promises—especially in a domain where products are high involvement, intangible until consumed, and often expensive.

Therefore, brand trust occupies centre stage in contemporary travel marketing. It reduces perceived risk, fosters a sense of psychological security, and converts digital engagement into concrete purchase intentions (Rais, 2025). Personalised emails that respect privacy cues, visually rich social content that displays authentic user experiences, authoritative sponsored links that echo informational competence, and credible peer reviews that signal consistency can each nudge the consumer toward trust. Conversely, hyper-targeted ads that follow a user across platforms, irrelevant outbound email blasts, and dubious reviews from unverified profiles can just as easily erode it (Ali, 2023). Industry observers note that a single instance of perceived dishonesty, such as a manipulated rating or hidden fee, can have a half-life far longer than any isolated short-term promotion. As brands shift budgets from offline channels to digital platforms, understanding how trust is cultivated across multiple contact points is becoming a board-level priority.

Despite that urgency, numerous studies isolate the effects of social-media engagement metrics, email click-through rates, and search-ad positioning, yet very few examine their interconnected influence on travel purchase intentions, much less situate

brand trust as the unifying mechanism (Iruni, 2020; Maia et al., 2022). The resulting literature resembles a patchwork whose pieces cannot explain why a visually stunning Instagram reel sometimes fails to translate into bookings, or why a single negative review can nullify a costly SEM campaign. Moreover, empirical findings are often context-specific, sampling a single platform, demographic, or national setting, which hampers cumulative theory building (Abbasi et al., 2024).

The present conceptual article will develop an integrative framework grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory to address this conceptual vacuum. Within that logic, the four digital touch-points serve as stimuli, brand trust represents the organismic state, and purchase intention constitutes the behavioural response. Thirteen propositions will articulate either a direct influence of a touch-point on trust or purchase intention, or a mediated pathway running through trust, thereby synthesising dispersed insights into a coherent chain of persuasion. While this paper is theoretically focused, it will also outline a roadmap for empirical validation. A future inquiry will survey approximately 350 users of leading online travel agencies in Oman, and the resulting data will be analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM). This brief preview demonstrates the operational feasibility of testing the propositions and will be detailed more fully in a subsequent study.

By unifying isolated findings into a single explanatory mechanism, the framework promises to advance theory in at least three ways. First, it positions brand trust not as an outcome but as a dynamic mediator, thereby addressing calls for richer, process-oriented consumer decision-making models in digital services (Marmat, 2022). Second, it extends S-O-R logic beyond laboratory paradigms to the complex, multi-platform path-to-purchase that characterises contemporary travel (Hochreiter et al., 2022; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Third, it integrates and clarifies contradictory evidence about the relative strength of different digital tactics by situating them within a common trust-based pathway (Han & Balabanis, 2024). Practically, the model offers brands a diagnostic checklist: invest in authentic social storytelling that seeds initial trust; reinforce it with informationally consistent SEM ads and timely, personalised emails; and protect it by curating transparent review ecosystems.

In an era of information overload, algorithmic curation, and privacy anxieties, travellers increasingly rely on trust heuristics when choosing functionally similar offers. A conceptual framework that positions brand trust as the linchpin between digital stimuli and behavioural response provides scholarly insight and actionable guidance. The ensuing discussion will refine each proposition, map theoretical linkages, and highlight avenues for empirical investigation, guiding scholars and practitioners toward a deeper understanding of how clicks coalesce into trips in the digitally intermediated travel sector.

2.0 Literature Review

This section synthesises the state-of-the-art research on the five constructs at the heart of this conceptual model—social-media marketing, email marketing, search-engine marketing (SEM), online reviews, brand trust, and purchase intention. For each construct, we (i) summarise consistent empirical findings, (ii) identify limitations or conflicting evidence, and (iii) pinpoint the specific gap that motivates the propositions developed in Section 3. Therefore, the review lays the theoretical groundwork while focusing on unresolved issues rather than reporting new data.

2.1 Social Media Marketing

Social-media marketing (SMM) now sits at the centre of travellers' information search and inspiration phases. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X facilitate image-centric storytelling, user-generated endorsements, and real-time brand–consumer dialogue (Azhar et al., 2023). A growing body of work has established that *interactivity* (two-way comment exchange), *vividness* (high-resolution visuals, immersive video), and *perceived informativeness* each enhance cognitive and affective evaluations of travel brands (Pop et al., 2022). In effect, short-form videos and livestream “virtual tours” operate as experience surrogates that reduce the intangibility of future consumption, allowing would-be travellers to “test-drive” destinations from afar.

The persuasive power of these stimuli, however, is not uniform. Message credibility depends on multiple design cues: source expertise, argument quality, and social endorsement metrics (likes, shares, saves). Research has consistently linked higher cue congruence to stronger ad-evoked emotions and, ultimately, a greater willingness to book (Demirbas & Yurt, 2022). More recent scholars highlight algorithmic content sequencing, noting that platforms increasingly deliver “micro-moments” of inspiration when users exhibit latent intent (Nyagadza, 2022). By predicting interest windows with predictive AI, brands can insert hyper-relevant ads that appear serendipitous rather than intrusive, thereby sidestepping ad-fatigue and enhancing perceived relevance.

Central to these effects is brand trust, the psychological state that reduces perceived risk in high-involvement purchases such as long-haul travel. Trust is nurtured when SMM signals *reliability* (consistent claims across channels), *competence* (expert destination advice), and *benevolence* (traveller-centred tone) (Tan et al., 2022). Personalised replies to user comments, transparent disclosure of sponsored partnerships, and prompt resolution of service complaints all reinforce the credibility of subsequent messages. Conversely, algorithmic retargeting that “follows” consumers across sites, undisclosed influencer fees, or the sudden deletion of negative reviews can erode that credibility almost instantly (Theodorakopoulos et al., 2025). The half-life of negative sentiment is especially long in travel, where purchase decisions are often planned months ahead and involve non-refundable payments.

Despite these insights, extant studies *examine* social media in relative isolation. Meta-analyses reveal that fewer than 8 % of published papers model SMM alongside email marketing, SEM, and eWOM within a single structural framework (Tan et al., 2022). In addition, the causal pathway is frequently truncated: many papers estimate a direct SMM on the purchase intention relationship without testing whether brand trust transmits part of that effect (Othman & Harun, 2021). Limited attention has been paid to sequencing questions, does a high-credibility social-media impression amplify the subsequent impact of a promotional email, or does a well-timed email prime consumers to interpret later Instagram posts more favourably? Similarly, empirical work rarely investigates *boundary conditions* (e.g., traveller risk tolerance, cultural uncertainty avoidance) that might magnify or dampen SMM’s trust-building role.

Another unresolved thread concerns content heterogeneity. Most large-sample studies treat SMM as a monolithic construct, yet practice distinguishes paid ads, brand-generated posts, influencer endorsements, ephemeral Stories, and user-generated reviews. Therefore, future conceptualizations call for a multidimensional view in which each content form exerts distinct (though possibly complementary) influences on trust. Including such nuance is essential if travel brands are to allocate budgets efficiently across paid, owned, and earned sub-channels. Accordingly, the present article will position social-media marketing as the first stimulus in the Stimulus-Organism-Response theory and propose that SMM influences purchase intention directly and indirectly through brand trust. By embedding SMM within a broader constellation of digital touch-points, the framework examines how much social media matters and when and why its effects are amplified or suppressed in the multi-channel path to purchase intention.

2.2 Email Marketing

Research has shown that email marketing is a good way of engaging consumers, especially in the travel sector, where leads require a personal touch to convert into sales. In the last few years, several researchers have focused on the impact of email marketing on consumers' trust, purchase intentions, and consumer behaviour. Trust, especially in digital contexts without physical contact, plays a major role in the consumer's choice (Jude et al., 2023). When executed with clear consent and relevant cues, email marketing may create a feeling of dependability and security, both of which are essential for developing brand trust. Tailored email marketing, as highlighted in a study by Getaruelas and Gnanakumar (2023), which focuses on customer preferences, past purchases, and email engagement, strengthens brand trust by showing the brand's understanding of the consumer's needs. This data-driven personalisation fosters trust toward the brand and increases the likelihood of engagement with subsequent emails and reliance on the brand for purchasing decisions.

Moreover, the perception of trustworthiness has been shown to be directly related to the relevancy and material quality of email communication. According to Al Hamdani

and Al Wishahi (2023), consumers view travel firms as authentic and trustworthy when they engage in email marketing by sending relevant information such as destination content or customized travel offers. Transparency, especially in pricing, availability, and opt-out mechanisms, strengthens the consumer's impression of the firm's honesty. This is crucial in the travel industry, where consumers often make significant financial decisions based on virtual interactions (Hosni et al., 2023). The impact of email marketing on consumer purchasing behaviour is apparent in the tourism sector. Studies have shown that targeted email campaigns featuring personalized discounts tailored to past customer interactions stimulate interest and increase bookings.

In addition, Chan et al. (2020) argue that email marketing provides special discounts or exclusive trip-package offers, especially when these emails are tailored to the recipient's preferences, which markedly increases the likelihood of purchase. This notion aligns with findings by Alraja et al. (2020), which demonstrated that travel companies that email-marketed customized vacation plans based on clients' previous interactions had higher conversion rates than those who sent generic, untargeted emails. The literature demonstrates that the timing, frequency, and overall cadence of correspondence also matter in email marketing. Hussain (2024) found that emails sent during high-demand periods, like peak booking seasons or when users have expressed interest in particular destinations, significantly enhance purchase intentions. His data indicate that strategically timed email communications designed to remind consumers of essential items, especially for trips, result in purchase-action-enhancing intent. Further, email marketing enhances brand perception by incorporating value-added tips like bespoke travel guides or branded suggestion lists, which enhances the intention to purchase (Jahmani et al., 2023). Email marketing, trust in a brand, and purchasing intentions can be said to engage in a mutually beneficial cycle. It was established by Al Hamdani and Al Wishahi (2023) that effective email marketing not only enhances purchase intention but also elevates brand trust, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of purchase.

Consumers who trust the brand tend to appreciate email marketing from the company and, as a result, their buying intentions are boosted. This relationship is most pronounced in the travel industry. Consumers engage with email marketing when they

expect value in terms of meaningful information rather than irrelevant promotions. According to Farooque et al. (2021), travel companies' timely email communication with clients not only fortifies brand trust but also increases the chances of client bookings. This interaction emphasizes the importance of developing trust and encouraging purchases by providing customized email content where brand loyalty is absent and vice versa (Huang & Kim, 2023). Despite these insights, existing literature seldom explores how email stimuli interact with other digital touch-points such as social media, search advertising, and online reviews through brand trust to shape travel purchase intention. Addressing this multi-channel gap sets the stage for the conceptual framework developed in the next section.

2.3 Search Engine Marketing

Search-engine marketing (SEM) is widely recognised as a decisive lever for shaping consumer behaviour in the travel sector because it places a brand precisely when a traveller signals informational intent (Irfan et al., 2022). SEM combines paid search advertisements with on-page and technical SEO so that travel firms can surface itinerary pages, fare deals, or destination guides whenever users enter relevant keywords. In the highly competitive travel marketplace, where countless options look interchangeable on the surface, top-of-page visibility itself functions as a heuristic for credibility (Huang & Kim, 2023). A growing body of evidence shows that SEM visibility contributes to brand trust by signalling competence, legitimacy, and financial stability (Khan et al., 2020). Consumers routinely infer that companies willing to bid on travel-related search terms, and able to satisfy ad-platform quality thresholds, must be reliable. Eye-tracking and clickstream studies confirm that a higher ranking in the search engine results page (SERP) triggers a *trust halo*, leading users to perceive the brand as authoritative (Liu et al., 2021). Therefore, reputation visibility amplifies a brand's image and reduces the perceived risk of booking flights, hotels, or multi-stop tours, where service failure can be costly and emotionally distressing (Manzoor et al., 2020).

Frequent exposure to a brand's search ads further deepens familiarity-based trust. (Rais, 2025) shows that repeated impressions foster cognitive fluency, which travellers interpret as proof of legitimacy. For risk-averse consumers in particular, that familiarity lowers the psychological barrier to clicking through and later transacting (Mehraj & Qureshi, 2020). In turn, heightened trust feeds back into loyalty: travellers who perceive a search-advertised brand as dependable are more likely to return directly in the future, reducing the brand's acquisition costs (Hanny et al., 2025). Beyond trust effects, SEM directly influences purchase intention. Paid search ads that deliver concise, offer-congruent information grab attention and accelerate decision speed (Nayak & Narayan, 2019). Time-sensitive incentives such as limited-hour fare drops or inventory countdowns have been shown to heighten urgency and translate intent into bookings, especially for discretionary leisure trips where travellers might otherwise postpone commitment (Sidorkiewicz & Orfin-Tomaszewska, 2022). Post-click behaviour reflects the same pattern: users exposed to SEM ads tailored to their recent searches exhibit higher conversion propensities once on-site (Al-Haraizah et al., 2025). In addition, contextual and personalised targeting further strengthens SEM's impact. Al Harrasi et al. (2021) report that ads aligned with a traveller's prior query history increase both click-through and booking likelihood by clarifying match quality. In tourism settings, advertisers can dynamically insert destination names or season-specific activities into ad copy (Al Ramadhani et al., 2021). Such micro-personalisation reduces information-search costs and boosts travellers' confidence that the offer fits their unique preferences, thereby raising purchase intention.

Importantly, researchers note that SEM seldom operates in isolation. Cross-channel designs reveal that SEM's persuasive power intensifies when post-click pages feature social-proof cues, ratings, testimonials, and recent-booking notifications (Nyagadza, 2022). When SERP visitors navigate to review hubs or UGC galleries linked by the paid ad, they encounter validation that further bolsters intention to buy (Al-Dmour et al., 2024). This synergy suggests that SEM diverts traffic and nudges travellers toward ancillary digital touch-points that cement trust. Despite the robust single-channel evidence, current literature rarely integrates SEM with social-media marketing, email campaigns, and online reviews through the mediating lens of brand trust. Nor does it

systematically test boundary conditions such as traveller risk tolerance, trip purpose (business vs. leisure), or device type, which may amplify or mute SEM's trust-building capacity. Addressing these multi-channel and contingency gaps is essential, and the conceptual framework advanced in Section 3 will posit how SEM stimuli influence purchase intention both directly and indirectly via brand trust, while interacting with the other digital touch-points in a unified persuasion chain.

2.4 Online Reviews and Ratings

The travel industry has seen online reviews and ratings become central arbiters of credibility and choice, profoundly influencing how consumers evaluate destinations, carriers, and lodging providers. Customer-generated content shapes brand image and purchasing intent, including textual reviews, numerical ratings, and multimedia feedback (Said & Muqrashi, 2020). The shift toward a fully digital search process means that reviews and ratings now rank among the first-consulted information cues in travel decision-making (Thottoli & Al Harthi, 2022). Brand trust, formed through customers' perceptions of a product or service, is indispensable for securing purchases and loyalty and is susceptible to review valence. Research shows that favourable reviews nurture trust, whereas harsh criticism triggers scepticism and purchase deferral. AL-Omairi and Hew (2022) observed that endorsements from previous travellers strengthen confidence in a brand's promises, and users regard the brand as reliable while consuming the service. Because reviewers are perceived as impartial peers, their accounts provide an authentic performance signal that bolsters decision comfort (Al Hamdani & Al Wishahi, 2023). Volume and consistency matter as well. Al-Badi et al. (2020) note that a large corpus of coherent, positive reviews on multiple platforms is read as evidence of service quality, thereby elevating trust. In contrast, conflicting narratives or clusters of negative feedback can quickly erode credibility and deter prospects. This dynamic is acute in travel, where the experiential nature of the product makes prior travellers' accounts a proxy for otherwise unobservable quality (Liu, 2024).

The relationship between reviews, ratings, and purchase intention has been studied extensively. Travellers rely on the judgements of others to reduce uncertainty. Alzadjal et al. (2022) report that favourable reviews raise intention by reinforcing perceived value, while Awashreh (2023) finds that negative narratives dampen booking likelihood by exposing potential risks. Beyond sentiment, perceived usefulness and diagnosticity play decisive roles. Chan et al. (2020) show that detailed, experience-rich reviews encourage purchase by clarifying fit; Ezzat (2022) observes a similar effect when review content resolves destination-specific doubts. The rating metric itself exerts a quick-scan influence: higher average stars are read as shorthand for superior service, nudging users toward conversion. Hisam et al. (2022) confirmed that travellers' privilege high-rated offers even when price or location is less competitive, because the rating serves as an easy-to-digest aggregate of collective experience. The interplay of reviews, ratings, and purchase intention is therefore both reinforcing and cyclical. Positive assessments fuel trust, trust boosts intention, completed bookings generate more reviews, and the loop strengthens brand reputation. Hosni et al. (2023) demonstrate that this virtuous cycle is particularly potent in travel, where intangible services rely on customers' recounting prior experiences. Despite this rich single-channel evidence, existing studies rarely integrate online reviews with social-media, email, or search-engine stimuli through brand trust in a unified framework; addressing that gap is a core objective of the conceptual model outlined in Section 3.

2.5 Brand Trust

Consumer purchase behaviour in digital channels, including social media, email, search engine marketing (SEM), and online reviews, has repeatedly been linked to a psychological fulcrum such as brand trust. In the travel domain, where intangibility and financial stakes are high, travellers lean on trust as a shortcut for assessing service quality and reputational reliability. The following review synthesises how prior studies have positioned brand trust as the mechanism that transmits the influence of each digital touch-point to purchase intention, and it identifies the multi-channel gaps that motivate our conceptual framework. From a social media perspective, travel firms incorporate social

platforms to foster dialogue, share time-sensitive offers, and curate user-generated storytelling. Evidence shows that customer endorsements, interactive replies, and narrative-rich posts cultivate brand trust, which subsequently lifts purchase intention (Larsson & Chehade, 2025). In longitudinal tracking, increased social-media engagement has been accompanied by progressive gains in trust scores and a parallel rise in booking likelihood (Hussain, 2024). Yet most studies isolate a single network or content format; few examine how social-media-generated trust interacts with trust signals emitted by other channels.

From the email marketing perspective, personalised messages that contain tailored offers, reminders, or discount codes continue to rank among the highest-ROI tactics in travel. Jude et al. (2023) demonstrate that email campaigns drive purchase intention indirectly, through heightened trust, when recipients perceive genuine personal relevance and transparent value propositions. Likewise, Kamalaseena and Sirisena (2021) find that the “feeling of being valued” mediates the jump from email engagement to transaction. However, granular distinctions among email sub-types (welcome series, lifecycle triggers, transactional notices) remain under-theorised, leaving open questions about which formats build the *strongest* trust. For search-engine marketing, by elevating sponsored listings and SEO-optimised pages, SEM boosts brand visibility at the precise search moment. Like Liu et al. (2021) report that prominence in results pages signals dependability, thereby enhancing trust and, in turn, the likelihood of clicking and purchasing. In addition, Maia et al. (2022) added that this mediated effect grows when ads contain competence cues such as price guarantees or real-time availability badges. Still, current work rarely tests whether trust generated by SEM *carries over* to amplify subsequent email or social-media messages.

Like online reviews and ratings, peer feedback delivers powerful social proof in travel. Manzoor et al. (2020) document that exposure to positive narratives elevates both trust and bookings; Mishra et al. (2020) explicitly identify brand trust as “the primary conduit” between constructive reviews and purchase intention. Conversely, clusters of negative commentary erode trust and curb bookings, even when price advantages exist (Rais, 2025). Yet extant studies seldom embed reviews within a broader digital-touch-point sequence, leaving unclear how trust built on review platforms interacts with paid

media signals. The evidence collectively portrays brand trust as the linchpin that transforms digital impressions into revenue-producing actions. Saleem et al. (2022) argue that trust magnifies the effectiveness of every tactic, while Thottoli and Al Harthi (2022) warn that its absence nullifies even well-funded campaigns. What remains under-explored is how trust generated on one touch-point modulates or reinforces trust cues from others, and under what conditions this multi-source trust accelerates or impedes purchase intention. Addressing these interplay gaps is central to the conceptual framework presented in Section 3, where brand trust is positioned as the organismic state that mediates and potentially synchronises the influence of social media, email, SEM, and online reviews on travellers' booking decisions.

2.6 Purchase Intentions

Purchase intention expresses the probability that a traveller will convert interest into an actual booking. It emerges from cognitive appraisals of value and quality, is nudged by persuasive cues, and is tempered by perceived risk (Chatterjee et al., 2022). In digital contexts, those cues now arrive via four principal touch-points, including social media, email, search-engine marketing (SEM), and online reviews, as each shapes attitudes that feed into intention (Liu et al., 2021). Positive engagement on social platforms, for example, elevates trust and thereby raises the likelihood of reserving flights or accommodation (Al Ramadhani et al., 2021). Online reviews and ratings supply social proof that further calibrates intention. Pocchiarri et al. (2024) show that favourable narratives and high scores signal service reliability; conversely, critical feedback introduces doubt, lowering the propensity to book. These findings underscore the reputational leverage of review platforms in the travel sector, where customers often commit substantial sums based on virtual impressions.

SEM influences intention by intercepting searchers at the point of need. Paid listings deliver concise, relevance-loaded information, prompting click-through and, frequently, immediate reservation (Mishra et al., 2020). Targeted keyword campaigns heighten perceived fit between offer and need, which Hussain (2024) links to stronger booking intention. Email remains an effective catalyst when content is tailored. For

instance, Alzadjal et al. (2022) report higher conversion propensities when reminders or offers reference unfinished searches or stated preferences. Triggered messages that surface abandoned itineraries or limited-time discounts nudge wavering travellers toward completion, illustrating email's role as a final-mile persuader.

Taken together, these studies confirm that each digital tactic can elevate purchase intention, yet almost all analyse a single channel in isolation. Limited studies about how intentions form when travellers encounter multiple touch-points in rapid succession, or how brand trust integrates those cues into a coherent “go/no-go” judgement. Addressing this multi-channel gap is essential for advancing theory and practice. Therefore, Section 3 proposes an integrative Stimulus–Organism–Response model in which social media, email, SEM, and online reviews each influence purchase intention both directly and indirectly through brand trust.

3.0 Conceptual Framework and Propositions

This article will develop a Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework in which four digital touch-points—social-media marketing, email marketing, search-engine marketing (paid and organic), and online reviews—serve as stimuli (S). Brand trust is positioned as the organismic state (O) that absorbs and interprets those stimuli, whereas purchase intention functions as the behavioural response (R). Social-media initiatives will be conceptualised as mechanisms for building awareness and engagement; email campaigns as personalised triggers that nudge decision completion; search-engine marketing as the visibility driver that captures in-market travellers; and peer reviews as reputation cues that signal service quality. These interventions are expected to raise travellers' confidence in a provider, thereby strengthening their intention to book. Therefore, brand trust mediates the relationship between each digital stimulus and the purchase decision, amplifying persuasive impact whenever travellers perceive the brand as competent, reliable, and benevolent.

3.1 Stimulus–Organism–Response Theory

Mehrabian and Russell (1974), who first introduced the S-O-R (Stimulus-Organism-Response) theory, provided a well-recognised framework for examining consumer behaviour. External environmental stimuli (S) interact with an internal cognitive–affective state (O) and then trigger a behavioural response (R). The present article will extend this classical logic to digital travel marketing, which is a domain where high involvement and intangibility heighten travellers’ reliance on psychological filters. In such contexts, brand communications delivered via social media, email, search engines, and peer reviews serve as the principal stimuli, and the most salient organismic state in the post-pandemic era is brand trust, where confidence in the reliability, honesty, and competence of a provider (Rais, 2025; Tan et al., 2022). Therefore, this study uses social-media marketing, email marketing, search-engine marketing, and online reviews as persuasive digital stimuli (S). Brand trust (O) is conceptualised as an active evaluator that interprets those inputs rather than passively receiving them, consistent with recent evidence that trust functions as a psychological sieve for digital content (Al-Dmour et al., 2024). A traveller’s intention to purchase emerges not merely from message volume or creative style but from the degree of trust those communications succeed in cultivating, thereby constituting the response (R).

Applying the S-O-R lens accomplishes two goals. First, it foregrounds the internal cognitive route—trust—through which dispersed digital cues coalesce into behaviour (Al-Haraizah et al., 2025). Second, it fits the experiential nature of travel services, where consumers frequently commit money without direct interaction and thus rely on trusted proxies. Recent hospitality studies corroborate that exposure to online content (S) shapes brand evaluations (O) that subsequently guide booking intentions (R) (Ali, 2023). A user’s repeated engagement with aesthetically pleasing social-media posts may not prompt an immediate transaction, yet over time, such exposure is expected to strengthen trust through consistency, transparency, and social validation (Othman & Harun, 2021). Accordingly, the conceptual model developed in the following subsection will posit that digital-marketing tactics function first as trust-building instruments and only second as promotional triggers (Hisam et al., 2022). Situating trust at the centre of the organism stage thus clarifies how marketing stimuli are internalised and how

motivated consumer action follows, particularly in digital environments where trust operates as a critical currency.

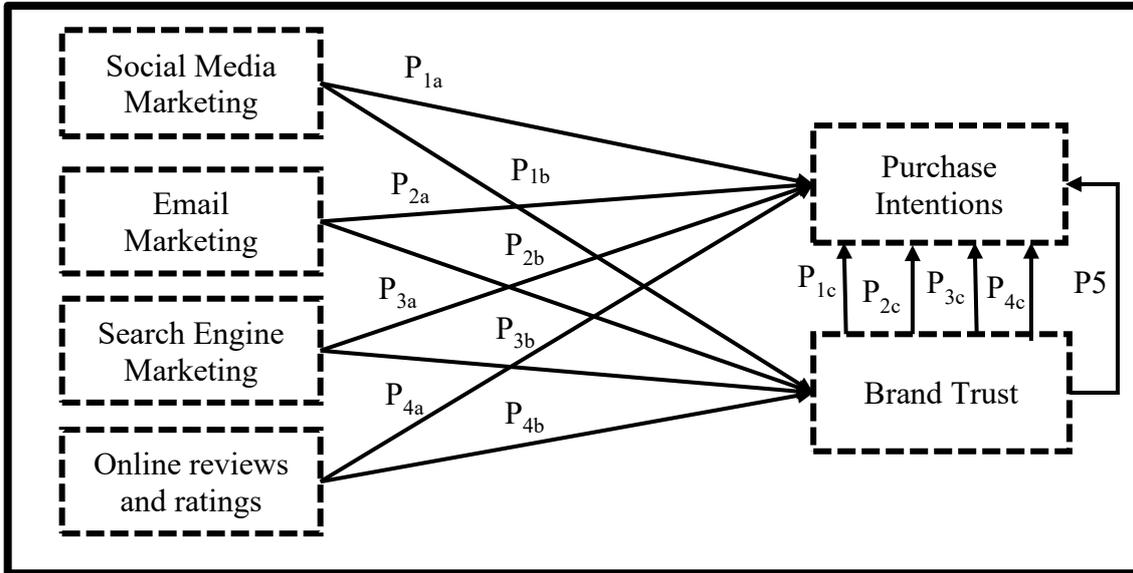


Figure 1: Conceptual Model and Research Propositions

3.2 Development of Propositions

Building on the Stimulus–Organism–Response foundation, this paper proposes that each digital touch-point (stimulus) exerts (i) a direct influence on travellers’ purchase intention and (ii) an indirect influence that is transmitted through brand trust (organism). Brand trust is also theorised to have its own direct effect on purchase intention. These expectations are formalised in thirteen propositions (Table 1).

Table 1: Research Propositions for the Conceptual Model

Stimulus	Direct path to Purchase Intention	Direct path to Brand Trust	Mediated path via Brand Trust
Social-Media Marketing	P1a Social-media marketing will positively influence travellers' purchase intention.	P1b Social-media marketing will positively influence travellers' brand trust.	P1c Brand trust will mediate the relationship between social-media marketing and purchase intention.
Email Marketing	P2a Email marketing will positively influence travellers' purchase intention.	P2b Email marketing will positively influence travellers' brand trust.	P2c Brand trust will mediate the relationship between email marketing and purchase intention.
Search-Engine Marketing	P3a Search-engine marketing will positively influence travellers' purchase intention.	P3b Search-engine marketing will positively influence travellers' brand trust.	P3c Brand trust will mediate the relationship between search-engine marketing and purchase intention.
Online Reviews & Ratings	P4a Online reviews & ratings will positively influence travellers' purchase intention.	P4b Online reviews & ratings will positively influence travellers' brand trust.	P4c Brand trust will mediate the relationship between online reviews & ratings and purchase intention.
Brand Trust	—	P5 Brand trust will positively influence travellers' purchase intention.	—

3.3 Future Empirical Validation

A subsequent empirical phase will survey approximately 350 active users of leading online-travel-agency platforms to test the thirteen propositions. Responses to a structured questionnaire (adapted from validated multi-item scales) will be analysed with partial-least-squares structural-equation modelling (PLS-SEM) to assess both the measurement and structural models. Power analysis shows that this sample size can detect medium effects with adequate statistical power. Ethical approval and informed-consent procedures will be completed before data collection begins.

3.3.1 Sample Size Selection

The sample size of 350 participants for the planned empirical phase was determined based on statistical guidelines for structural equation modeling (SEM), particularly when using the Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM) approach. In line with recommendations by Hair et al. (2019), a minimum sample size should be based on the "10-times rule" or, more rigorously, on power analysis. The 10-times rule suggests using 10 times the maximum number of inner or outer model paths pointing to a construct, which in this study involves multiple exogenous variables and mediating paths, justifying a base minimum of around 200. However, to ensure robust statistical power (typically 0.80) for detecting medium effect sizes at a 5% significance level in a complex model with up to 13 hypothesized paths, a priori power analysis using GPower software confirms that a sample size of approximately 350 is sufficient (Cohen, 1992). Furthermore, this sample size aligns with established empirical practices in recent tourism and digital marketing studies using PLS-SEM in similar high-involvement service contexts (Maia et al., 2022; Rais, 2025). Thus, the target of 350 respondents reflects both theoretical robustness and methodological adequacy for ensuring valid, generalizable results.

3.3.2 Sampling Technique

The study intends to employ a purposive sampling technique to identify and recruit respondents who have demonstrable exposure to digital touch-points within the travel services sector. Since the research focuses on evaluating the influence of digital marketing, specifically social media marketing, email marketing, search engine marketing, and online reviews on purchase intention via brand trust, it is essential that participants have prior experience interacting with at least one of these digital channels in the context of online travel services. Screening questions will be incorporated into the questionnaire to confirm respondents' exposure. These include prompts such as whether the individual has booked travel services through online platforms in the last 12 months, whether they follow travel-related social media accounts, receive email offers from travel

brands, or consult online reviews prior to booking. Only those who affirm exposure to at least two of the four touch-points will proceed to the primary survey, ensuring data relevance and conceptual alignment.

The target respondents for this study will be active users of online travel agencies (OTAs) and digital travel platforms within Oman. This group includes domestic and international travellers who rely on digital tools to research, evaluate, and book travel-related services such as flights, accommodations, or package tours. Given that the study aims to assess how digital marketing stimuli influence purchase intentions through the mediating role of brand trust, the sample will focus on individuals who are not only digitally literate but have made or considered travel bookings online. The demographic focus will span a range of age groups (18–60 years), with representation across different travel purposes (leisure, business, family visits), to enhance the generalisability of the findings. The emphasis on active OTA users ensures that respondents possess both experiential knowledge and behavioural relevance to evaluate the proposed digital touch-points critically.

3.3.3 Instrument Development

The instrumentation for the proposed empirical phase of this study is grounded in established multi-item measurement scales drawn from prior validated studies. The survey instrument will consist of structured items for each of the six key constructs in the conceptual framework: social media marketing (SMM), email marketing, search engine marketing (SEM), online reviews and ratings, brand trust, and purchase intention. These constructs will be operationalised using reflective measurement models in line with the guidelines of PLS-SEM. For social media marketing, items will be adapted from Pop et al. (2022) and Azhar et al. (2023), which assess perceived interactivity, informativeness, vividness, and message credibility across platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Approximately 4–5 items will be used to capture this construct, focusing on how respondents perceive social media communications as engaging, trustworthy, and persuasive.

The email marketing construct will be measured using a 4–6 item scale adapted from Jude et al. (2023) and Getaruelas and Gnanakumar (2023), which assesses relevance, personalisation, transparency, and perceived value. These items reflect how consumers interpret email-based communication in terms of its ability to build credibility and foster relational trust. For search engine marketing, the study will adopt items from Irfan et al. (2022), Huang and Kim (2023), and Khan et al. (2020), measuring search ad visibility, relevance, familiarity effects, and perceived authority. Around 4–5 items will be used and adapted to assess how search engine marketing contributes to both cognitive fluency and booking likelihood in travel decision-making.

Online reviews and ratings will be assessed using a 5-item scale based on AL-Omairi and Hew (2022), Alzadjal et al. (2022), and Chan et al. (2020). The items will gauge review valence, volume, consistency, diagnosticity, and authenticity. These elements are critical in evaluating how peer-generated feedback influences both brand perception and booking behaviour. The core mediator, Brand Trust, will be measured with 4–6 items adapted from the work of Manzoor et al. (2020), Rais (2025), and Saleem et al. (2022). These items will capture perceptions of reliability, competence, benevolence, and honesty, aligning with the S-O-R framework's theoretical definition of trust as the organismic filter.

Finally, purchase intention will be operationalised using 3–5 items adapted from Mishra et al. (2020), Chatterjee et al. (2022), and Al Ramadhani et al. (2021). Items will measure the likelihood of booking, the willingness to recommend, and the readiness to act based on digital exposure. All scale items will be rated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The items will be adapted rather than directly adopted to ensure contextual fit within Oman's digital travel market while preserving original construct validity. The adaptation process will involve minor linguistic and contextual modifications after expert review and pilot testing for clarity and cultural appropriateness.

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

In the planned empirical phase, data analysis will be conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), a robust variance-based technique well-suited for theory development and predictive modeling in studies with complex models and latent variables. The analysis will be structured into two main stages: measurement model assessment and structural model assessment. The reliability and validity of each construct will be examined in the measurement model assessment. Internal consistency reliability will be tested using both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, with acceptable thresholds typically set at 0.70 or higher. The convergent validity will be assessed through average variance extracted (AVE), where values above 0.50 indicate adequate convergence. Discriminant validity will be verified using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT), ensuring that constructs are empirically distinct. The structural model assessment will follow once the measurement model is validated. This involves evaluating the strength and significance of hypothesised relationships among constructs. The coefficient of determination (R^2) will indicate the explanatory power of the endogenous constructs, while the predictive relevance (Q^2) will be examined using blindfolding procedures. The path coefficients will be tested using bootstrapping (with 5,000 resamples) to determine their statistical significance. This non-parametric resampling approach provides confidence intervals and standard errors, allowing for robust inference even under non-normal data distributions.

To assess mediation, particularly the role of brand trust as a mediator between each digital marketing touch-point and purchase intention, the bootstrapping method proposed by Preacher and Hayes will be applied. This approach tests the indirect effects by computing the product of the path coefficients (i.e., from independent variable to mediator, and from mediator to dependent variable). A significant indirect effect with a non-zero confidence interval indicates mediation. Additionally, the variance accounted for (VAF) metric will be used to determine the extent of mediation (partial vs. full). The direct effects will also be examined to identify whether the mediation is complementary (partial mediation with both direct and indirect effects significant) or competitive (indirect significant, but direct non-significant or vice versa). This dual-layered analytical

strategy ensures that both the measurement robustness and the hypothesised mediation pathways in the conceptual model are empirically validated. The approach aligns with best practices in PLS-SEM, particularly when the goal is model fit and theoretical insight into the mediating mechanism of brand trust in digitally driven consumer decision-making processes.

4.0 Implications and Future Research

This conceptual framework offers several key implications for theory, practice, and policy in the digital travel marketing domain. Theoretically, the study advances the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework by positioning brand trust as the central cognitive-affective state integrating multiple digital stimuli. Rather than viewing social media, email, search engine marketing, and online reviews as isolated influences, the model underscores how trust operates as the unifying psychological mechanism that transforms digital exposure into booking intentions. This holistic perspective encourages scholars to shift their analytical lens from single-channel effects to cross-channel trust-building processes. Future empirical research can further examine whether trust operates as a parallel mediator, where each channel independently contributes to trust, or as a serial mediator, in which one channel primes others through a cumulative trust-building effect.

From a managerial perspective, the framework reframes brand trust not merely as a marketing outcome but as a strategic design constraint. Marketers should consider trustworthiness as a guiding principle in crafting every touch-point—whether a social media post, promotional email, search advertisement, or user review interface. Rather than relying solely on click-through rate or cost-per-click metrics, investment decisions should account for each channel's marginal contribution to perceived competence, benevolence, and reliability. Practical implementations might include integrating first-party data from email interactions with real-time review signals, creating a synergistic uplift in trust that ultimately strengthens purchase intention. This approach encourages

brands to prioritise authenticity, transparency, and coherence across their digital ecosystem.

From a public policy angle, the model provides a lens through which tourism regulators can better understand how misleading practices disrupt the trust chain. Tactics such as fabricated reviews, hidden pricing structures, or ambiguous advertising claims distort market fairness and erode consumer confidence. Policy interventions—such as verified-buyer tags, third-party endorsements, or penalties for deceptive content—may be more effective when combined with high-credibility platforms, particularly in SEM environments where consumers are actively searching for trustworthy options. Looking ahead, several research opportunities emerge from the conceptual framework. To uncover potential moderating effects, empirical studies should validate the proposed model across different travel contexts, such as leisure versus business trips.

Additionally, device type (mobile versus desktop) and cultural orientation (individualistic versus collectivist) may influence how trust is formed and acted upon, necessitating comparative or cross-cultural research designs. Longitudinal studies could also enrich the understanding of trust formation by tracing how exposure to multiple digital campaigns over time impacts booking behaviour. Experimental designs, on the other hand, could manipulate message sequencing to determine whether early exposure to trustworthy content inoculates consumers against later negative information. Finally, future research might expand the organismic layer to incorporate emotional states, such as travel anxiety or excitement, to explore whether these affective variables interact with trust or operate independently as mediators of the digital persuasion process.

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