

## **The Role of Social Media as a Guide and Reference During Travel: Case Study on Indonesian Millennial Tourists in Japan**

### **Peran Media Sosial sebagai Panduan dan Referensi Selama Perjalanan: Studi Kasus Wisatawan Milenial Indonesia di Jepang**

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#### **Abstract**

*Social media plays a central role in travel planning, particularly among Indonesian millennial tourists who seek information, inspiration, and real-time guidance. This study examines how social media shapes the behavior of Indonesian tourists visiting Japan, employing the framework of digital tourism communication and the theory of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). A mixed-methods design was applied, combining a survey of 494 respondents with in-depth interviews to explore travel habits, digital engagement, and decision-making processes. Findings reveal that Instagram and TikTok serve as primary triggers of travel inspiration, while YouTube, blogs, and Google Reviews are primarily used for information verification and detailed itinerary planning. User-generated content (UGC) is perceived as more credible than commercial content, underscoring the importance of authenticity and trust. However, the viral nature of social media also contributes to overtourism, highlighting the need for sustainable destination management strategies. Theoretically, this study advances the literature by linking UGC, flow experience, and travel decision-making in the context of a developing country. Practically, it provides recommendations for destination managers, policymakers, and service providers to leverage social media strategically while promoting responsible and sustainable tourism practices.*

**Keywords:** *digital tourism communication, eWOM, Indonesian millennials tourist, social media, UGC*

#### **Abstrak**

Media sosial memainkan peran penting dalam proses perencanaan perjalanan, khususnya di kalangan wisatawan milenial Indonesia yang mencari informasi, inspirasi, dan panduan *real-time*. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana media sosial membentuk perilaku wisatawan Indonesia yang berkunjung ke Jepang, dengan menggunakan kerangka komunikasi pariwisata digital dan teori *electronic word-of-mouth* (eWOM). Melalui pendekatan metode campuran, penelitian ini memadukan survei terhadap 494 responden dengan wawancara mendalam untuk menggali kebiasaan perjalanan, penggunaan media digital, serta proses pengambilan keputusan wisatawan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa

Instagram dan TikTok menjadi pemicu utama inspirasi perjalanan, sementara YouTube, blog, dan Google Reviews berperan dalam verifikasi informasi dan penyusunan rencana perjalanan. *User-generated content* (UGC) lebih dipercaya dibanding konten komersial, menekankan pentingnya otentisitas dan kredibilitas. Namun, konten viral juga berpotensi menimbulkan *overtourism*, sehingga diperlukan strategi pengelolaan destinasi yang berkelanjutan. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi teoretis dengan menghubungkan UGC, pengalaman *flow*, dan pengambilan keputusan wisata dalam konteks negara berkembang. Secara praktis, temuan ini menawarkan rekomendasi bagi pengelola destinasi, pembuat kebijakan, dan penyedia layanan untuk memanfaatkan media sosial secara strategis, sekaligus memastikan pariwisata yang bertanggung jawab dan berkelanjutan.

**Kata Kunci:** eWOM, komunikasi pariwisata digital, media sosial, turis milenial Indonesia, UGC

## Introduction

For contemporary travelers, embarking on a journey without a smartphone or social media connection has become almost unimaginable. Similar to how the invention of the camera reshaped tourism by transforming travelers from passive consumers to active producers of experiences (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012), the digital era has elevated this *prosumer* behavior to unprecedented levels (Xiang et al., 2015). Often characterized by their proficiency with technology, millennials are a unique generation whose travel habits are very different from those of their forebears (Mayasari Soeswoyo & Rahardjo, 2020). Digital technologies have a significant influence on their decision-making process, from finding information to making a reservation. Websites, blogs, vlogs, and social media platforms have essentially replaced brochures, guidebooks, and travel agencies (Jog & Alcasoas, 2023). A recurring challenge in the study of millennials is the tendency to treat them as a homogeneous global cohort.

Millennial cohorts from developing nations remain relatively under-researched despite their growing significance as tourists. Tourism scholarship continues to emphasize Western markets, while governments in the Global South often focus on inbound tourism rather than examining domestic or outbound segments. For example, Indonesia's *National Tourism Satellite Account* (BPS, 2019) acknowledges the insufficiency of data on domestic tourists, with limited initiatives to address the gap. Interviews with tourism stakeholders in Japan (2019–2020) further revealed that Indonesian travelers are often assumed to rely primarily on word-of-mouth information. These presumptions might be true for older generations who are used to getting guidance from friends, relatives, or travel agencies, but younger cohorts increasingly prefer self-directed information-seeking through digital platforms (Ratten & Braga, 2019).

Against this backdrop, Japan makes an interesting case study. Visa facilitation, effective transportation infrastructure, cultural soft power (anime, popular culture), and safety perceptions that are especially appealing to female solo travelers are some of the factors contributing to its popularity among Indonesian millennials. At the same time, the rise of social media as both a source of inspiration

and a tool for real-time travel guidance highlights the centrality of digital platforms in shaping tourism flows. Post-pandemic dynamics further underscore this relevance: by 2024–2025, nearly 80% of millennial and Gen Z travelers in Asia-Pacific relied on social media as their primary source of travel decision-making (Klook Travel Pulse, 2025), while trends such as “healing tourism” reflected shifting preferences among Indonesian millennials (Indonesia Millennial Report, 2024).

The present study seeks to address these gaps by examining Indonesian millennial tourists visiting Japan, focusing specifically on the role of social media as a contemporary source of travel information. With four out of ten Indonesian millennials engaging in domestic or international travel ((Wayan et al., 2023) and with Japan emerging as one of their most preferred destinations, this case study offers both empirical relevance and theoretical contribution. By analyzing data collected during the five years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, the study highlights how social media not only informs but also shapes millennial travel practices in a developing country context.

## Methods

This study uses a mixed research design, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to produce generalizable patterns and deep contextual insights. The integration of these methods aims to increase validity through triangulation, a strategy that is widely recommended in the fields of tourism and social sciences (Creswell, n.d.). A structured online questionnaire was administered in September 2020 to Indonesian citizens aged 20–39 who had visited Japan at least once between 2015 and 2020. A total of 505 responses were collected, of which 494 were deemed valid after screening for completeness and eligibility. The instrument comprised 53 items covering a wide range of variables, including demographics, budget planning, expenditure patterns, travel motivations, travel companions, internet and communication use, and souvenir-related practices. For the purposes of this study, analysis concentrated on the cluster pertaining to internet and communication behavior, as this aligned most closely with the research focus on social media usage. The quantitative data were analyzed descriptively to identify broad patterns in platform use, travel motivations, and information-seeking practices. To complement the survey, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with a purposive subset of respondents. This qualitative component provided richer insights into how social media influenced their travel-related decision-making. Interviewees elaborated on their planning strategies, platform preferences, reliance on peer-generated reviews, and experiences of engaging with viral content. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically, which emphasizes iterative coding and interpretive depth. Qualitative findings not only add nuance to quantitative results, but also reveal underlying motivations and perceptions that cannot be fully captured through survey data. This is evidenced by the results of a study (Muhtadi, 2023) that successfully identified motivational themes such as the desire for relaxation, seeking closeness to nature, and a more profound cultural experience findings that are difficult to obtain through surveys

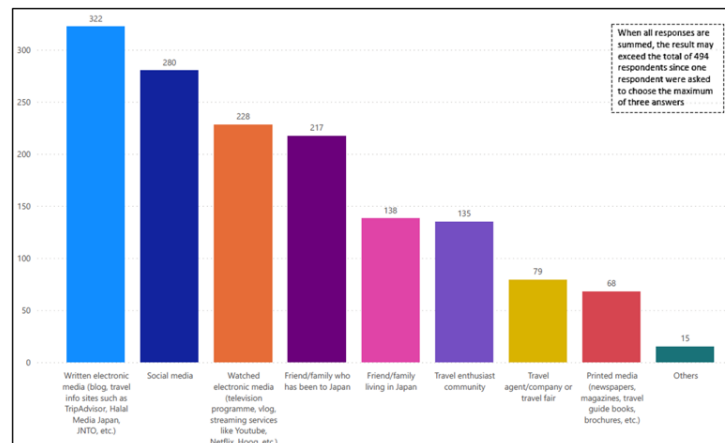
alone. Together, the combination of survey and interview data reflects the strength of mixed-methods approaches in tourism research, particularly when investigating complex phenomena such as digital information-seeking and social media-driven decision-making.

## **Result and Discussion**

Technology advancements and the creation of the internet have completely changed how people travel and given modern visitors the ability to customize their own trip. Almost all of a traveler's fundamental needs may be met by a single device, including booking reservations, finding their way around unfamiliar cities, locating restaurants and tourist attractions, and even interacting with locals. Abundant information can be accessed easily for free, easing the stress one may face during travel. Tourists with impulsive tendencies, for example the Indonesian millennial tourists, may even still create and alter their itinerary when the travel is already in its on-going state. The study *The ideal companion: the role of mobile phone attachment in travel purchase intention* (Rodríguez-Torrico et al., 2020) shows that smartphones have become a routine part of travel preparations and influence travel purchase intentions. It is perhaps true that the only thing outbound tourists need to bring nowadays other than their luggage, money, and passport is their smartphone. Likewise, the Indonesian millennial tourists as a member of the contemporary tourists are also inseparable from their gadgets and internet service. They utilize this means of information gathering both before and during traveling. Field observation and interviews with Indonesian millennial tourists who visited Japan conducted in 2019 to 2020 by the second author reveals that the Indonesian millennial tourists use online streaming videos to gain information about tourist destinations in Japan. One particular group observed in early January 2019 showed an interesting behavior. Instead of making list or remembering the name of the places they wanted to visit, they simply showed short videos from social media platforms to their travel guide. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this method has not been tested yet.

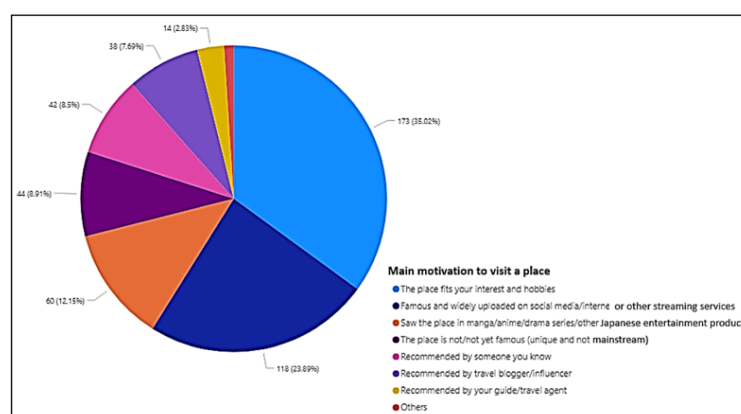
In 2020, an online survey non-probability sampling towards Indonesian millennial tourists who had visited Japan was conducted. Eligible respondents must be a person who owns an Indonesian passport, lives in Indonesia, aged 20-45 years old in 2020, and has visited Japan at least once between 2015 and 2020. The survey was conducted for one week starting on 9 September 2020 and after the filtering process, 494 out of 505 responses were deemed valid and are used in this study. The online survey consists of 53 questions: 13 questions were used to determine the demographic background of the respondents, 1 question used for reward raffle, and the remaining 39 questions were divided into seven clusters namely budget and planning, expense, view on Muslim-friendly service, motivation, travel partner, internet usage and communication, and opinion on experience of being abroad and giving souvenirs. Given that this study examines the role of social media, the analysis was restricted to data from the internet usage and communication cluster. Survey findings challenge the assumption that Indonesian millennial tourists predominantly rely on interpersonal word-of-mouth as their primary source of

travel information. As illustrated in Figure 2, the most frequently consulted sources are written electronic media, social media platforms, and visual electronic media. However, there is a need to note that social media and watched electronic media actually overlap each other since social media such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok also offer short video as one of their services. This makes social media the most dominant information source as when combined, the total combined number of social media and watched electronic media exceeds written electronic media.

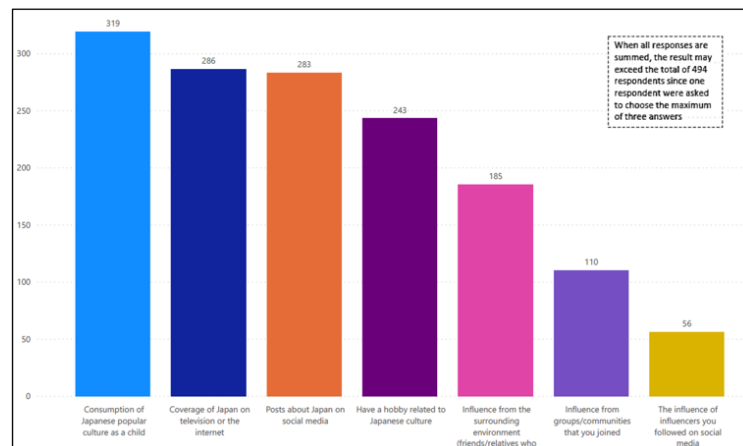


**Picture 1: Main Source of Information**

Picture 1 shows the main motivation to visit a place when traveling. Other than the answer 'the place fits your interest and hobbies', all of the other options are external factors. According to the data in Picture 2, respondents' desire to visit a location is influenced when it is well-known and frequently shared on social media, the internet, or other streaming services. From here, it can be understood that the respondents use social media as a guide-cum-reference when they travel.



**Picture 2: Main Motivation to Visit a Place**



**Picture 3:** Rank of Motivations Related to Indonesian Millennial Tourists

Meanwhile, Picture 3 provides the answer to the question what motivates the Indonesian millennial tourist to visit Japan. As expected, the internet and social media play a crucial role in shaping the travel motivations of Indonesian millennial tourists visiting Japan. Interestingly, while influencers actively use social media platforms for endorsements, their impact on motivating Indonesian millennials ranks the lowest. Indonesian millennial tourists perceive influencer-generated content that explicitly promotes specific destinations or organizations as mere advertisements, diminishing its uniqueness and effectiveness (Cahyani, 2023). This suggests that while digital platforms play a major role in travel decision-making, credibility and authenticity continue to be important determinants of travel behavior.

In the context of tourism communication, social media serves as an essential platform for destination marketing, experience sharing, and peer influence (Sutrisno et al., 2024). Studies show that user-generated content (UGC) on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and travel blogs significantly influences potential travelers by offering visual storytelling and firsthand narratives. This supports the idea that one of the main factors influencing decisions about travel in the modern era is digital word-of-mouth, or eWOM. Since eWOM content is shared by other travelers rather than by businesses, it is viewed as more genuine than traditional marketing. For Indonesian millennials, social media sites have become essential resources when making travel plans. These platforms are excellent resources for travel information because they give users access to first-hand accounts, user-generated suggestions, and real-time reviews. The ability to engage with visual content, such as photos and videos, enhances the decision-making process by allowing travelers to visualize destinations before visiting them. Additionally, Google reviews and travel blogs remain crucial in verifying the reliability of travel-related content found on social media. This highlights the shift from traditional travel guides to digital platforms where authenticity, peer validation, and immersive visual experiences shape travel behavior. Research such as 'Authenticity in Objects and Activities' (2022) shows that the authenticity of objects and activities, as well as presence in Virtual Reality experiences, greatly influence satisfaction with digital platforms.

**Table 1.** Informants interview excerpts on social media use

Informant Profile	Main Platforms Used	Key Insights
Female, 32, private sector employee	Google, blogs, TikTok, Instagram	Relied on blogs for detailed travel routes and costs; used Google Reviews to validate; anime interests influenced itinerary
Female, 34, private sector employee	Google, blogs, TikTok, Instagram	Preferred blogs for narrative depth; consistently checked Google Reviews; anime-related destinations central to choices
Male, 25, student	Instagram, TikTok, Google Reviews	Used Instagram for visual discovery, then cross-checked with reviews; focused on food and mainstream attractions

Insights from research informants further support these findings. The first informant, a 32-year-old private sector employee, reported that before traveling to Japan, she primarily relied on Google and travel blogs to gather information. She found blogs particularly useful as they provided firsthand experiences, detailed travel routes, estimated costs, and practical travel tips. Additionally, she consistently checked Google reviews to validate the credibility of destinations before finalizing her travel plans. She also noted that social media posts from friends within her network who had previously visited Japan, particularly on TikTok and Instagram, served as valuable references in determining her travel destinations. Furthermore, as an anime enthusiast, she often considered anime-related locations as part of her itinerary.

Similarly, the second informant, a 34-year-old private sector employee, stated that she depended on Google and travel blogs as her main sources of information when planning her trip to Japan. She preferred blogs for their in-depth and personal travel narratives compared to general travel information. Furthermore, she routinely consulted Google reviews to ensure that the recommended tourist attractions and dining establishments aligned with her expectations. Like the first informant, she also found social media posts from friends on TikTok and Instagram to be useful references. Additionally, her passion for Japanese culture, particularly anime, influenced her choice of destinations, as she sought locations that had connections to her favorite series. In contrast, the third informant, a 25-year-old university student, indicated that he primarily used Instagram to seek travel references for Japan. He valued Instagram for its visual content, which allowed travelers to share their experiences through photos and videos. However, after discovering appealing destinations through Instagram, he cross-referenced his findings by checking Google reviews and reading credible travel blogs to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information before finalizing his travel itinerary. Unlike the first and second informants, he was more focused on culinary content and popular tourist destinations rather than locations influenced by anime or J-

drama. He also highlighted that travel recommendations from friends on Instagram and TikTok were helpful in selecting specific places to visit in Japan.

These results highlight the importance of social media and online resources as major information sources for millennial travelers from Indonesia. While different platforms serve distinct functions, Google and blogs for in-depth research, Instagram and TikTok for inspiration, the need for credible reviews remains a consistent factor in travel decision-making. This highlights social media's dual function as both a guide and a reference point in contemporary travel planning, shaping not only individual decisions but also influencing broader tourism trends (Gössling, 2017). These findings are consistent with tourism communication research highlighting the critical role of digital engagement in shaping travel decisions, as well as the growing dependence on peer-generated content as a credible information source (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The study's conclusions highlight the importance of social media and online resources as essential sources of travel-related information for millennial travelers from Indonesia. While blogs and Google offer in-depth research and comprehensive itineraries, Instagram and TikTok only inspire and pique curiosity. These media serve complementing purposes. However, the requirement for reliable reviews doesn't change throughout these phases, establishing social media as a resource for contemporary travel preparation as well as a guide and reference. In line with other research that emphasizes digital interaction and peer-generated content as increasingly reliable sources in tourism, this dual function influences both individual decision-making and more general travel patterns (Gössling, 2017; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Japan has emerged as one of the most popular destinations for Indonesian millennials, largely driven by the abundance of engaging and accessible social media content. These travelers' itinerary planning, attraction selection, and on-the-go alterations are greatly influenced by platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Modern Indonesian tourists rely on interactive, visually appealing information that presents firsthand experiences and genuine testimonies from other travelers, as opposed to previous periods when guidebooks and travel agencies predominated (Sigala, 2018). Instagram and TikTok in particular play a dominant role in the inspiration stage. Their emphasis on short-form videos, curated imagery, and influencer content creates powerful visual triggers that stimulate destination desire. Popular hashtags such as *#JalanJalanKeJepang* and *#VisitJapan* foster interconnected digital communities that collectively promote Japanese tourism. Social media algorithms further personalize recommendations, ensuring that Indonesian millennials are continually exposed to culturally relevant and seasonally updated content (Zhou et al., 2023). Moreover, collaborations between influencers, travel bloggers, and tourism boards amplify Japan's digital visibility and appeal.

For planning and preparation, YouTube has become indispensable. Indonesian content producers' long-form vlogs provide helpful guidance on budgeting, transit, cultural etiquette, and specialized topics like halal cuisine and shopping suggestions. These vlogs are more convincing than typical brochures because of their authenticity, which is further supported by interactive comment sections (Mariani et al., 2022). Blogs and Google Reviews further support this stage by providing personalized narratives and credibility checks, particularly



valued by first-time travelers. During the verification and decision-making stage, Indonesian millennials consistently cross-reference visually appealing content from Instagram or TikTok with more detailed, review-based platforms. Blogs authored by Indonesian travelers and community-based forums such as specialized Facebook groups provide nuanced recommendations on halal-friendly services, visa applications, and hidden attractions. These practices underscore the importance of peer validation and authenticity in establishing trust, echoing Filieri, Alguezaui, and McLeay's, (2015) argument that user-generated reviews are central to credibility formation.

Additionally, social media serves as a real-time travel guide. While Instagram Stories and TikTok provide immediate suggestions for local sites, Google Maps makes navigation easier. Tourists frequently save posts or videos in advance to reference on-site, while community platforms such as WhatsApp groups or Telegram channels provide real-time updates on transport, weather, or promotions. This immediacy enables Indonesian travelers to adjust their itineraries dynamically, boosting the importance of social media as a continual travel companion. Nevertheless, the dominance of social media is not without limitations. The curated nature of Instagram and TikTok content often fosters unrealistic expectations, as editing techniques and aesthetic framing obscure the authentic reality of destinations. This sometimes leads to disappointment when experiences fail to meet digitally constructed images. More critically, viral social media trends contribute to overtourism, particularly at once-obscure locations that suddenly attract mass attention. Such phenomena, already visible in parts of Kyoto and Bali, generate pressures on local infrastructure and communities. Addressing these challenges requires responsible content creation, the promotion of sustainable practices, and policies that disperse tourism flows.

Survey data (n = 494) also revealed that assumptions about Indonesian tourists primarily relying on interpersonal word-of-mouth are increasingly outdated. Instead, electronic and social media dominate as preferred sources of information. Respondents reported heightened desire to visit destinations that had achieved digital visibility, supporting (Dai et al., 2022) conclusion that exposure to UGC triggers positive emotions such as desire and envy, thus strengthening travel intention. Importantly, qualitative interviews highlighted a consistent credibility gap between influencer-generated promotional content and peer-generated UGC. Influencers continue to be visible, although their material is frequently written off as advertising. In line with more general research on the importance of authenticity in digital tourism, Indonesian millennials showed increased trust in travel blogs, peer reviews, and Google ratings (Liu, Jiang, & Muhammad, 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, the findings enrich the literature on digital tourism and consumer behavior, particularly in the context of developing countries. The data illustrate how UGC functions simultaneously as an emotional trigger and a practical validator, while platforms like TikTok foster immersive *flow experiences* that accelerate impulsive decisions. From a practical standpoint, the findings indicate that governments and destination management ought to leverage social media's influence while concurrently tackling environmental issues. Promoting lesser-known locations, tightening laws governing influencer marketing, and

encouraging digital literacy in tourists to assist them distinguish between real and fake content are some possible tactics.

## Conclusion

The study highlights the crucial role of social media in shaping the travel behavior and decision-making processes of Indonesian millennial tourists visiting Japan. As digital natives, these tourists heavily rely on online platforms for information gathering, itinerary planning, and real-time adjustments during their trips. The results show that millennials now choose digital sources, especially social media and electronic media, above conventional interpersonal references, defying the notion that Indonesian tourists rely mostly on word-of-mouth recommendations from acquaintances.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become the dominant sources of travel inspiration, with visual content playing a significant role in influencing destination choices. Influencer-generated promotional content, on the other hand, is seen as having less of an impact because millennials tend to view it as adverts rather than genuine recommendations, even though social media content is extensively watched. Instead, user-generated content (UGC), travel blogs, and Google reviews serve as key references due to their perceived credibility and firsthand insights.

Additionally, the study underscores the need for further research on millennial tourists from developing countries, particularly within Southeast Asia. Current academic discourse on tourism and millennial behavior remains predominantly centered on developed Western nations, leading to an incomplete understanding of how social, historical, and economic factors shape the travel preferences of millennials in emerging economies. This study fills a research gap in tourism by concentrating on Indonesian millennial visitors and highlighting the digital transformation of trip preparation and the growing significance of social media as a main source of travel information. It also suggests that tourism stakeholders should adapt their marketing strategies to align with the preferences and behavioral patterns of contemporary digital-savvy travelers.

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