

# Social Media Marketing Campaigns of DMOs for Promoting Sustainable Travel: The Case of Thailand

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This study aims to investigate how social media marketing campaigns for sustainable tourism impact Dutch travellers' decision-making processes when planning a holiday. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining a social media content analysis of Thailand's sustainable tourism campaigns with an online questionnaire targeting the Dutch market. The survey collected responses from 377 participants. Thailand launched the "Sustainable Thailand" campaign. It provides insights for the travel industry, stakeholders, and destination management organisations (DMOs) regarding social media campaigns promoting sustainable destinations. Findings reveal that Dutch tourists are less influenced by social media content when they have existing travel plans; however, social media can still influence decisions when concrete plans have not been made. Social media marketing's primary role is to inspire, educate, and encourage Dutch tourists, with DMO Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube pages serving as key information sources for accommodations and activities. Dutch tourists do not consider sustainability a key factor in their decision-making process for selecting a destination. They contend that Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) should advocate for sustainable tourism through social media and exhibit a greater propensity to visit destinations that endorse sustainable practices rather than those that emphasise the adverse impacts of tourism.

**Keywords:** DMOs; social media; sustainable tourism; Thailand; Dutch tourists.

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## 1. Introduction

Digital platforms have replaced more conventional marketing strategies, such as printed brochures, used by destination marketing organisations (DMOs) (Kapoor and Kapoor, 2021). DMOs have developed new strategies and marketing campaigns to engage target audiences while retaining control over destination narratives, as travellers are increasingly relying on user-generated content on social media for destination information (Li et al., 2017). It is often accepted that social media is a crucial and, more significantly, affordable instrument for interacting with tourists (Etemad, 2020; Klein & Todesco, 2021). By enabling more direct communication and engagement, it has improved the relationship between the destination and its visitors (Wibowo et al., 2020; Ibrahim & Aljarah, 2023). Social media activities have become crucial parts of destination marketing activities because of their pivotal role in engaging and connecting with audiences, especially for destination-to-consumer interactions (Sigala, 2012; Leung et al., 2013; Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Choe et al., 2017; Swani et al., 2017; Aji et al., 2020; Al-Abdallah et al., 2024). Additionally, it serves as a great platform for boosting customer engagement (Lalicic et al., 2020).

The proliferation of social media has transformed DMO marketing communication (Kumar et al., 2022; Chugh et al., 2019). DMOs play a crucial role in social media use, making their thoughts on the topic pertinent (Kirářlová & Pavlířeka, 2015). Notwithstanding the growing relevance of social media in the travel and tourism industry, research on its application in tourism is limited (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Kang, 2018). Systematic reviews of social media in tourism and hospitality have also identified this deficiency (e.g., Leung et al., 2013). Existing studies have focused mostly on two topics: (a) how tourists interact with and create content on social media, and (b) how tourism businesses use social media for marketing purposes. Despite its potential, research into the effective use of social media as a marketing tool for DMOs is limited (Mao et al., 2020).

There is limited understanding of the type and extent of social media use by DMOs, which are responsible for managing and promoting travel within specific regions (Munar, 2012). In particular, studies examining how DMOs leverage social media to influence tourist behaviour at destinations remain scarce (Dwivedi et al., 2011; Munar, 2012; Hays et al., 2013; Mariani et al., 2016). Although the academic literature emphasises the potential for DMOs to use social media for marketing destinations and tourist products, as well as the associated challenges and opportunities (Kolb, 2017; Sotiriadis, 2021), few studies have examined how DMOs leverage social media to promote sustainable travel behaviour among visitors. While research has explored DMOs' social media activities and usage (Hays et al., 2013; Roque & Raposo, 2016; Uřakli et al., 2017), these studies highlight the limited investigation into how DMOs influence tourists to adopt desired sustainable practices.

There have been calls for empirical research, particularly quantitative analyses, to assess the impact of social media on marketing communication by examining the content of messages generated by DMOs (Lu et al., 2018). Quantitative approaches are argued to be essential for helping practitioners evaluate the effectiveness of social media marketing strategies (Leung et al., 2013; Molina et al., 2020). For instance, although Facebook has been the focus of substantial research, only a limited number of studies have analysed the effectiveness of messages as a communication strategy within destinations through the examination of DMOs' social media content (Hays et al., 2013; Bonsón et al., 2015; Swani et al., 2017; Mariani et al., 2018).

In response to pleas for additional research, this study fills a significant gap in the literature and expands on earlier work in several important ways. The theoretical contribution is as follows: First, it contributes to the limited body of empirically grounded studies investigating DMOs' social media marketing by integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches within a single unified framework — a methodological combination that remains rare in the field (Li et al., 2017).

Second, data are scarce on Dutch tourists' opinions of DMOs' promotion of sustainability via social media. While earlier research has examined tourists' general perspectives on sustainability (Aydın & Álvarez, 2020) and the sustainability attitudes of Dutch tourists in isolation (Booking.com, 2024), no prior study has systematically explored how Dutch travellers perceive DMOs' sustainability campaigns on social media, nor how exposure to such content shapes their trip planning and destination decision-making. This study directly addresses that void by placing the Dutch market at the centre of its empirical inquiry.

Third, the geographical scope of existing research remains narrow, concentrated predominantly in Western (Lalicic et al., 2020; Leung, 2019) or Chinese (Mao et al., 2020) contexts. By extending the analytical lens to Thailand — a Global South destination navigating the intersection of mass tourism and sustainability — this study broadens the geographical and cultural boundaries of the field and generates insights with relevance beyond established markets.

Fourth, unlike earlier studies that primarily focused on Facebook and Twitter (Hays et al., 2013; Mariani et al., 2016), this research adopts a multi-platform approach, examining Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube simultaneously. This enables a more comprehensive and nuanced account of how DMOs deploy sustainability messaging across platforms with distinct affordances and audience demographics.

Fifth, the study advances existing social media measurement frameworks by building upon and extending Hays et al.'s (2013) content analysis instrument, adapting it to accommodate contemporary platform features and sustainability-specific communication strategies. Critically, no previous research has scrutinised the utilisation of Thailand's sustainability campaign across social media platforms, leaving a substantial empirical gap that this study is uniquely positioned to fill. Taken together, these contributions offer actionable insights for the tourism sector by examining both the supply side — how a DMO constructs and disseminates sustainability narratives — and the demand side — how target audiences receive, interpret, and act upon those narratives. In doing so, the study advances theoretical understanding of social media's role in sustainable destination marketing and sheds new light on the mechanisms through which campaigns such as Thailand's influence the decision-making processes of Dutch tourists.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Social media and DMOs**

Social media refers to a group of Internet-enabled applications that facilitate the creation, communication, and sharing of user-generated content such as comments, photos, and videos (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). DMOs extensively utilise social media to promote destinations and foster relationships with current and prospective visitors. Such interaction has been proven to have a

considerable impact on tourists' intentions to visit a destination (Lalicic et al., 2020). Although the usage of social media in tourism marketing is still growing, DMOs are quickly incorporating new tools to supplement traditional promotional channels (Pachucki et al., 2022). Tourists use social media before, during, and after their travels (Leung & Jiang, 2018).

## **2.2. DMOs and promotion of sustainability**

DMOs are instrumental in shaping a sustainable image of a destination, which can, in turn, encourage tourists to engage in environmentally and socially responsible behaviours (Băcilă et al., 2022; Abdullah et al., 2019). Although economic sustainability frequently receives the most attention (Ghanem & Elgammal, 2016), clear and compelling environmental and social sustainability messaging can improve tourists' attitudes (Kim et al., 2019), foster emotional connections (Kao & Du, 2020), and increase engagement when visitors are well-informed about sustainability topics (Devkota et al., 2023). Online platforms, such as YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook, are effective in raising awareness (Chalmeta & Barbeito-Caamaño, 2023). DMOs are primarily responsible for raising education and awareness (MacEachern et al., 2024). However, many DMOs fail to effectively utilise social media for sustainability promotion, frequently distributing content that unintentionally contradicts environmental goals (Băcilă et al., 2022). Although sustainability messages may not directly influence behaviour change, their indirect benefits are important (Tanković & Mušanović, 2022).

## **2.3. Sustainability and the decision-making process**

Tourists are increasingly aware of the environmental, social, and cultural consequences of their activities (Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2019). However, a positive attitude or environmental knowledge does not always lead to pro-environmental behaviour (Park & Ha, 2014). Some travellers are sceptical of ecological issues, regarding them as obligations for future generations (Mamula Nikolić et al., 2021). Social media and Web 2.0 have revolutionised trip planning by providing platforms for information sharing, itinerary construction, and word-of-mouth influence (Kilipiri et al., 2023; Xiang et al., 2015; Uşaklı et al., 2017). It has long been acknowledged that internet reviews and blogs have a considerable impact on consumer decisions (Gretzel et al., 2007). However, research on how social media affects the consumer decision-making process is scarce (Hysa et al., 2021). This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the role of social media in tourism decision-making.

Three interconnected themes emerge from the literature. First, while social media has become an indispensable tool for DMO destination marketing, its strategic application for sustainability communication remains underdeveloped and inconsistent. Second, although tourists demonstrate growing environmental awareness, a persistent attitude-behaviour gap means that awareness alone does not reliably translate into responsible travel decisions. Third, despite the acknowledged influence of social media on tourism decision-making, empirical research examining how platform-specific content shapes sustainable destination choices remains scarce.

The present study advances prior research by addressing these three gaps simultaneously. Rather than treating social media effectiveness, sustainability communication, and tourist decision-making as separate lines of inquiry, this study examines their intersection within a single empirical framework. In doing so, it moves beyond descriptive accounts of DMO social media usage toward a causal understanding of how strategically designed sustainability content influences the attitudes and behavioural intentions of a specific target audience. By grounding this investigation in Thailand's

campaign and the Dutch tourist market — a combination absent from the existing literature — the study generates context-specific findings while contributing broader theoretical insights applicable to destination marketing practice worldwide.

### **3. Context of the Study**

Thailand is chosen as an example to examine how DMO is already implementing social media marketing campaigns and incorporating sustainability into their social media. This is done to see what the content looks like and to gauge its reaction from people online. Thailand's DMO was chosen because it is promoting itself as a sustainable destination, utilising various social media marketing campaigns. By searching on Google with the keywords "social media marketing campaign," "DMO," and "sustainability," one destination is chosen: Thailand. The DMO had to meet certain criteria to be considered for this research. Firstly, the DMO needed to promote sustainability via social media campaigns. Secondly, the social media channels they used needed to be in English. These criteria are important as the research goal of the content analysis is to analyse how DMO is already implementing social media marketing campaigns related to sustainability. In 2020, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) collaborated with GLP Films, a sustainable tourism marketing agency, to create a video campaign aimed at strengthening Thailand's future as a responsible tourism destination and positioning it as a leading global travel destination (Tourism Authority of Thailand - Tourism Policy Archive, 2022). Thailand's commitment to sustainability is supported by the "Sustainable Thailand" video campaign, which markets and distributes three new short films as well as social media content highlighting responsible travel experiences. The videos were shot in Chiang Mai and the Andaman Coast in southern Thailand. The movies highlight experiences that promote environmental sustainability, local tourism, and rural community development, encompassing health and wellness, community-based tourism, animal welfare, and conservation (Responsible Tourism, 2020).

The campaign promotes economic development beyond big cities. It highlights tourism's critical role in preserving culture and heritage and strongly supports the 2020 World Tourism Day topic of 'Tourism and Rural Development'. Thailand's 'Sustainable Thailand' video campaign aims to explain its long-term tourism ambitions. Protect cultural and natural heritage, provide meaningful and environmentally responsible experiences, and directly benefit local people. (Travel Tomorrow, 2020). The campaign videos are distributed via digital and broadcast channels as part of a collaborative marketing campaign that involves media, influencers, and the travel trade. Some of the stories on social media offer a glimpse into the daily lives of local communities. The story's goal is to persuade visitors to choose sustainable tourism options, the next time they visit the country, and the stories will appeal to responsible travellers seeking more meaningful travel experiences (Travel Tomorrow, 2020). The videos have been shared on Thailand's official Facebook page (@AmazingThailand) and GLP Films' YouTube account (@glp\_films).

### **4. Methods**

Research was conducted qualitatively, using a content analysis of Thailand's social media campaigns. A descriptive content analysis was used to understand how DMO utilises social media marketing campaigns. Content analysis focuses on gaining detailed knowledge about the purposes, messages, and effects of communication content (Luo, 2022). It is useful in explanatory research for understanding existing phenomena, facilitating comparison, gathering information, or drawing inspiration (Hanington & Martin, 2019). It systematically describes the form and content of written, spoken, or visual materials

expressed in themes and patterns. It counts occurrences of words, phrases, images, or concepts and must be done objectively. In this study, a content analysis was conducted based on similar research by Uşaklı, Koç, and Sönmez (2017). Photos, videos, and textual data were analysed to gain a deeper understanding of Thailand's social media landscape.

#### **4.1. Data Collection**

The official website of Thailand's Destination Management Organisation (DMO) was consulted to source information regarding the sustainable tourism campaign. The website additionally provided links to the DMO's official social media pages, which were used to verify the authenticity of these accounts prior to analysis. The social media posts examined were drawn exclusively from the DMO's verified accounts on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. These platforms were selected on two grounds: they represent the most widely used social media channels among the Dutch population (Vermeulen et al., 2020), and the campaign under investigation was actively conducted across all three. Posts were initially identified through relevant usernames and campaign-specific hashtags, after which screenshots were taken and accompanying text was reviewed. The sample for the content analysis comprises a representative selection of video and photo posts published via the DMO's official accounts. The selection process was guided by the volume of posts available per platform, from which a proportionally representative sample was drawn to ensure balanced coverage across channels.

The sample for the content analysis was constructed through a systematic selection process designed to ensure representativeness across platforms and campaign periods. Posts were identified using the official campaign hashtags and usernames associated with Thailand's DMO accounts on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. To achieve a balanced and comparable sample, the total number of posts per platform was first established, after which a proportional selection was made to reflect the relative volume and variety of content on each channel. Both photo and video posts were included to capture the full range of content formats employed by the campaign. Posts were selected to span the full duration of the campaign rather than being concentrated within a single period, ensuring that temporal variation in content themes and engagement patterns was adequately represented. Posts that were unrelated to the campaign, had been removed, or could not be verified as originating from the official DMO account were excluded from the sample. This process resulted in a final sample that reflects the breadth of the campaign's sustainability messaging across all three platforms while remaining analytically manageable within the scope of a content analysis framework.

#### **4.2. Data analysis**

A content analysis was employed to analyse the data from the social media platforms. The analysis was based on similar research from Uşaklı, Koç, & Sönmez (2017) and Erlingsson & Brysiewicz (2017). This content analysis aims to gain a deeper understanding of social media marketing campaigns for sustainable tourism destinations, including the types of content used, their frequency of use, and the most prominent themes of these campaigns.

The analysis was conducted in two stages, combining quantitative description with qualitative thematic coding. In the first stage, posts were described according to their quantitative characteristics. Content published by DMOs was categorised by format — either photo or video posts — and coded across Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. For each post, engagement metrics including likes, shares, comments, and views were recorded. These figures served to quantify user interaction across platforms,

in line with Kenan's (2022) definition of engagement as the measurable ways in which audiences interact with social media content. Posts were further classified by information type, following Uşaklı, Koç, and Sönmez (2017), who distinguish between factual or historical content — such as event dates and locations — and opinion or review-based content, which tends to be more subjective in nature, encompassing recommendations such as top dining selections or accommodation reviews.

In the second stage, a qualitative thematic analysis was applied. A semi-structured coding scheme was developed prior to analysis, drawing on frameworks established by Morrison (2019) and Liu and Mačerinskienė (2016). This scheme comprised four pre-determined thematic categories: socio-cultural factors, ecological factors, economic factors, and an additional category encompassing findings that did not align with the preceding three. Visual maps were subsequently produced to provide an overview of recurring words and phrases across all four themes.

At the post level, each image or video and its accompanying caption were reviewed multiple times. The coding process followed three sequential steps: first, condensation, in which the content was distilled to its core meaning; second, abstraction, in which the condensed content was translated into a concise descriptive code; and third, categorisation, in which each code was assigned to its corresponding thematic category, grouping related content to enable systematic comparison and pattern identification.

### **4.3. Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was produced utilising the Qualtrics platform, which allows for more efficient data preparation, collection, and analysis. The questionnaire has 13 questions in total: eight closed-ended questions, five multiple-choice questions, and three five-point Likert scale questions. The measurement scales were adapted from validated instruments in the existing literature to ensure construct reliability and comparability with prior adopted from (Molinillo et al., 2017; Walsh & Dodds, 2022) social media use, decision-making process (Vermeulen et al., 2020), DMOs (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009), sustainable tourism (Hysa et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2021; Walsh & Dodds, 2022), social media posts, and demographics. A non-probability convenience sampling strategy was employed, with participants selected based on their ease of access via social media posts and online groups. Snowball sampling was also utilised, with participants selecting qualified individuals from their networks. The questionnaire was distributed via Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp from November 21st to December 5th, 2022, resulting in 377 complete responses.

## **5. Findings**

### **5.1 Thailand: General findings**

The analysis of the "Sustainable Thailand" social media campaign reveals a limited scope and engagement. Nine videos were identified across Facebook and YouTube, with the campaign running from September 24 to December 3, 2020—a relatively brief three-month period. Five videos appeared on Facebook (@AmazingThailand) and four on YouTube (@glp\_films).

All nine videos contained a combination of factual and historical information, as well as opinion and review perspectives, combining objective data on elephant conservation and local community practices with subjective views on the importance of mindful travel for Thailand's tourism industry.

Engagement numbers show minimal reach and interaction. Facebook videos received 78 likes, 0 shares, 3 comments, and 8,562 total views. YouTube performed marginally better, with 107 likes, 0 shares, 5 comments, and 10,323 views. The lack of shares across both platforms suggests a low viral potential or audience motivation to spread information.

These engagement metrics indicate that audience participation is lower than the standards for conventional social media campaigns. The brief campaign duration and limited content volume may have restricted sustained audience engagement and campaign effectiveness. The distribution across two different accounts (@AmazingThailand and @glp\_films) could have fragmented audience building and reduced the impact of consistent brand messaging.

Overview of user engagement for both Facebook and YouTube is shown in Tables 1 and 2.

*Table 1. Overview of user engagement for Facebook*

<b>Facebook</b>	<b>Calculation</b>	<b>Total</b>
Average likes	78 / 9	8,7
Average shares	0	0
Average comments	3 / 9	0,3
Average views	8562 / 9	951,3

*Source: Authors' elaboration.*

*Table 2. Overview of user engagement for YouTube*

<b>Facebook</b>	<b>Calculation</b>	<b>Total</b>
Average likes	107 / 9	8,7
Average shares	0	0
Average comments	5 / 9	0,6
Average views	10323 / 9	1147

*Source: Authors' elaboration.*

The findings of the qualitative analysis of the "Sustainable Thailand" campaign are described in this section below.

A visual map of the analysis's coding scheme is shown in Figure 1. See below, please. The top five most important aspects of each theme are described in more detail below.

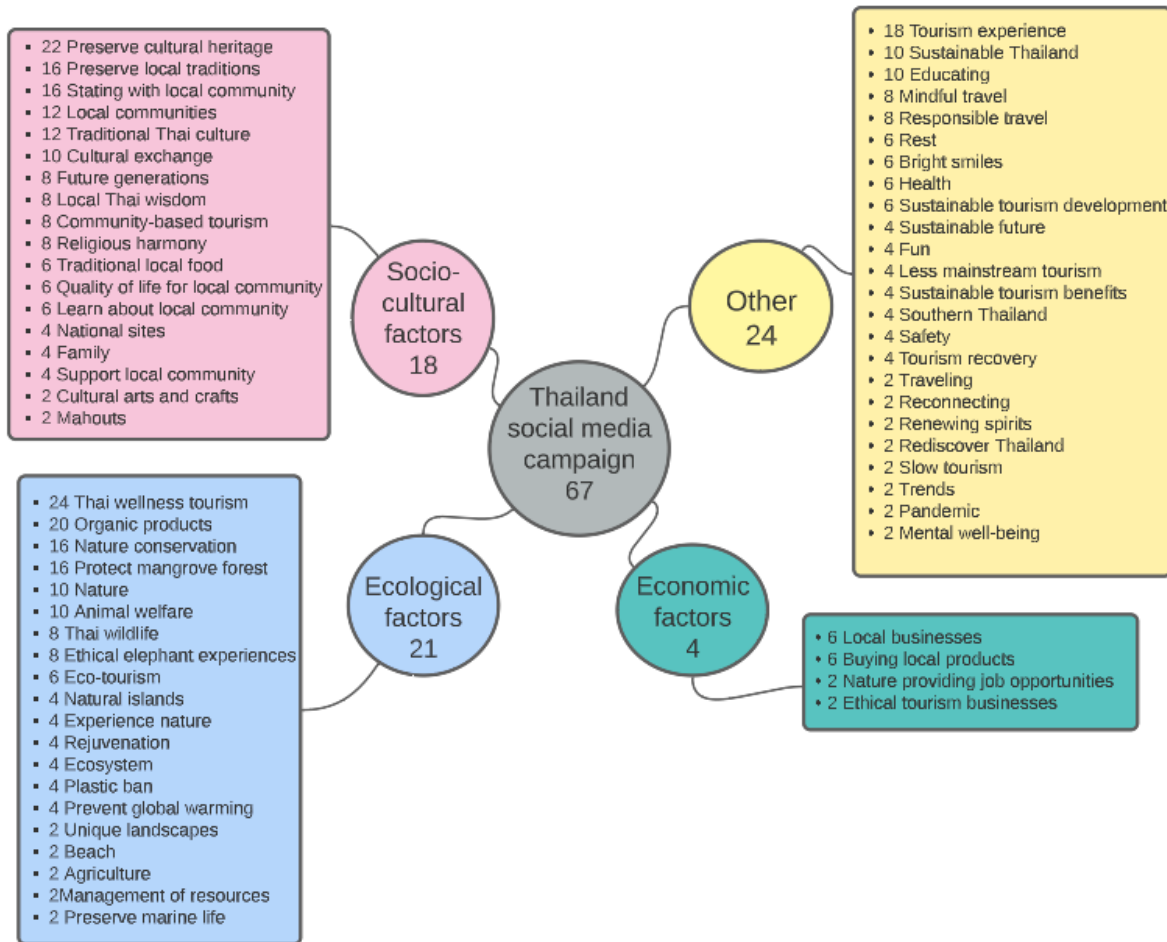


Figure 1. Visual map of the social media campaign in Thailand.

Source: Authors' elaboration.

### ***Environmental aspects***

The top five most important and frequent phrases derived from the "Sustainable Thailand" campaign are Thai wellness tourism (24), organic products (20), nature conservation (16), protecting mangrove forests (16), nature (10), and animal welfare (10). The phrase "Thai wellness tourism" appeared 24 times in the ad, making it the primary focus of the theme. The DMO's overall objective is to market Thailand as a destination for wellness, nature, and community-based tourism (Tourism Authority of Thailand, n.d.), and the campaign effectively reflects this. For example, one of the videos features a local homestay that focuses on wellness tourism, aiming to provide visitors with a traditional Thai wellness experience. The video's caption mentions: "Health and wellness is top of mind right now, and we predict wellness travel will be important for tourism recovery next year. The village of Baan Rai Kong Khing has a long history of traditional health and wellness practices offered through unique homestay experiences in Chiang Mai, Thailand."

### ***Socio-cultural aspects***

The top five most important and frequent phrases derived from the "Sustainable Thailand" campaign are: preserve cultural heritage (22), preserve local traditions (16), stay with local communities (16), local communities (12), and traditional Thai culture (12). The phrase "Preserve cultural heritage" is mentioned 22 times in the campaign, making it the most important focus in this category. The second most important words mentioned in the campaign are "Staying with local communities" and "Local communities", aligning with Thailand's mission to make Thailand a place for community-based tourism. For example, one of the videos mentions community-based tourism and conservation: "Homestays provide responsible travellers with the best travel experiences. A chance for cultural exchange, to see and learn about a place through the eyes of a local villager, and an opportunity to slow down and be a part of a community."

### *Economic aspects*

The top four most important, frequent, and only phrases derived from the campaign are Local business (6), buying local products (6), nature-providing jobs (2), and ethical tourism businesses (2). The phrases "Local business" and "Buy local products" were mentioned six times in the campaign, making them the most important focus of this theme. This demonstrates that the local community and nature are important to Thailand, and the country aims to highlight this in its "Sustainable Thailand" campaign. For example, the videos show locals using locally produced and organic ingredients for cooking traditional meals for visitors and taking visitors to local markets to buy these products, adding the caption: "As responsible travellers, we can immerse ourselves in local communities and help to support and preserve cultural heritage. Herbal treatments, traditional massage practices, freshly prepared organic meals, and meditative walks bring wellness and rejuvenation, a win-win for travellers, our overall Health, and the well-being of local communities."

The videos are filmed in less-visited destinations. By promoting these remote destinations within Thailand, such as the Andaman coast, they aim to drive economic development outside of major cities and foster more community-based tourism.

### *Other aspects*

The top five most important and frequently used phrases derived from the campaign are 'tourism experience' (18), 'sustainable Thailand' (10), 'educating' (10), 'mindful travel' (8), and 'responsible travel' (8). The phrase "Tourism experience" is mentioned 18 times in the campaign, making it the most important focus in this category. This shows that the campaign highlights the tourism experience and prioritises the traveller's experience, wanting to make it memorable and meaningful for them. Furthermore, this highlights the importance of the DMO in educating travellers about sustainable tourism and how they can travel sustainably, experiencing the destination through the eyes of local culture.

## **5.2 The Questionnaire**

### *Socio-demographics*

Of the survey respondents, 65.2% identified as female, 34.1% as male, and 0.6% selected 'Other'. Regarding age distribution, nearly half of all respondents (49%) fell within the 18–24 age bracket, while 35.2% were aged between 25 and 30, indicating that the sample skews predominantly towards younger

demographics (see Figure 2). In terms of educational attainment, the largest share of respondents held a bachelor's degree (46.2%), followed by a secondary vocational education diploma (26.6%), a high school diploma or equivalent (13.8%), and a master's degree (12.2%). A small minority (1.4%) reported an educational level below high school.

*Social media use of Dutch tourists*

Most respondents reported being active social media users, with 95% (n = 346) of the total sample (N = 364) indicating regular use, while 5% (n = 18) reported not using social media at all. Figure 3 illustrates the platforms used and their respective frequency of use.

Among the platforms examined, Instagram and Facebook emerged as the most frequently used. Instagram recorded the highest daily usage, with 77.7% of respondents accessing the platform daily, followed closely by Facebook at 54.3%. Conversely, Twitter was identified as the least used platform, with 69.9% of respondents reporting they never use it, followed by Pinterest at 40%.

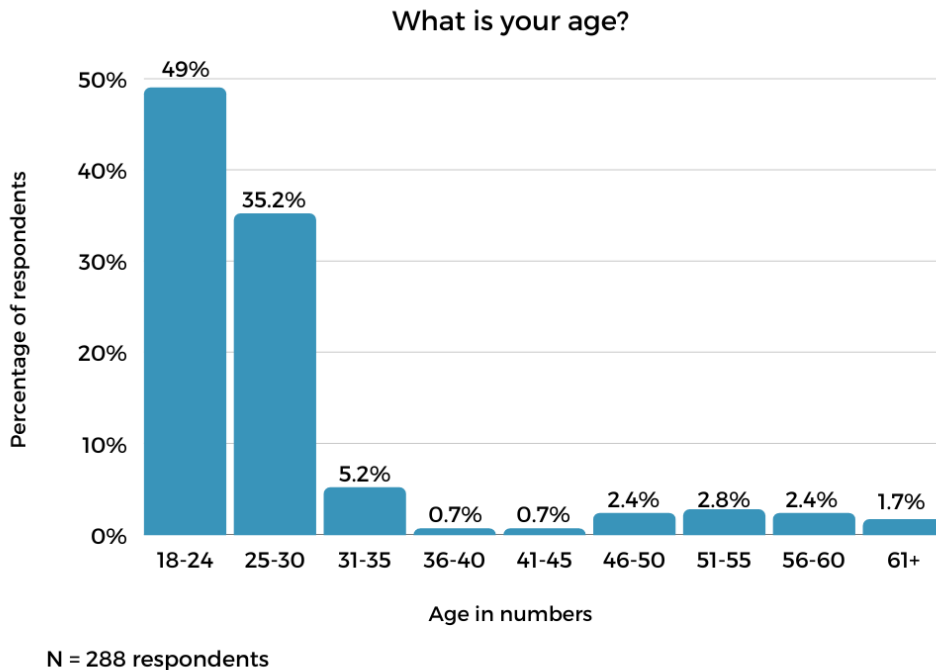


Figure 2. Age distribution of respondents.  
Source: Authors' elaboration.

Which of the following social media platforms do you use and how often?

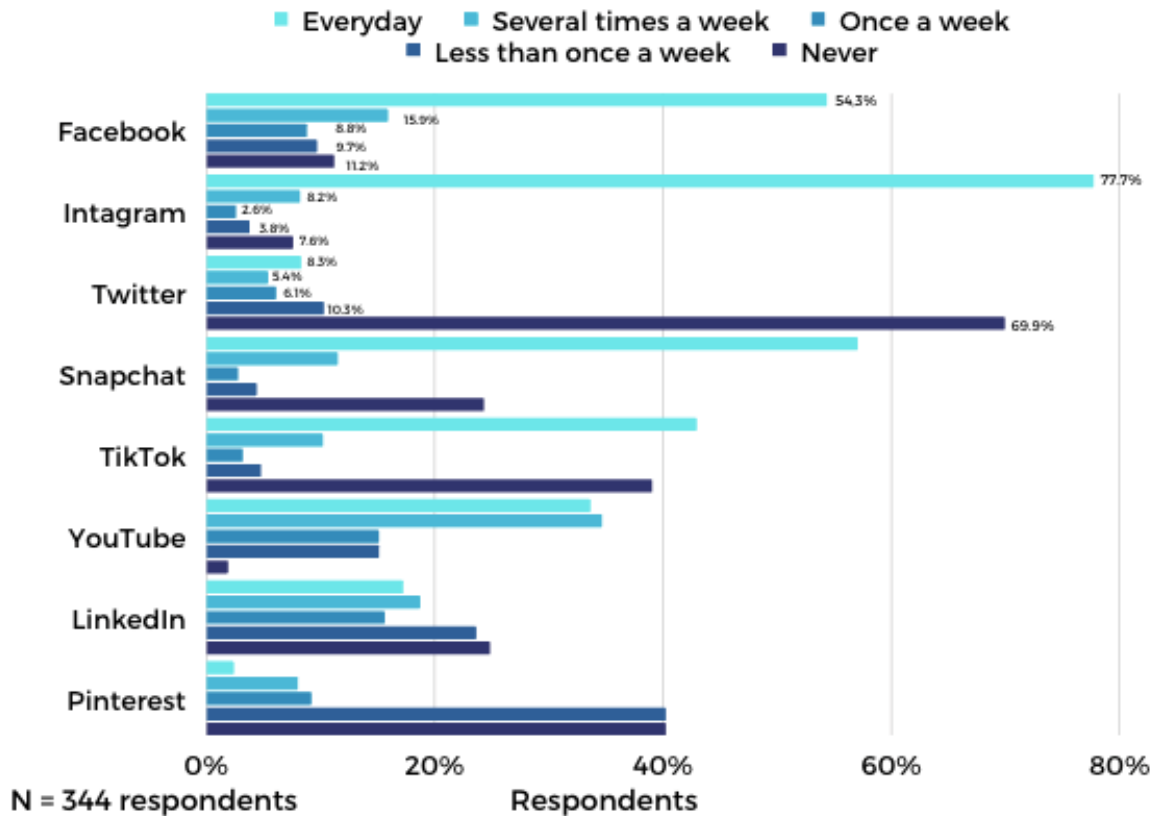
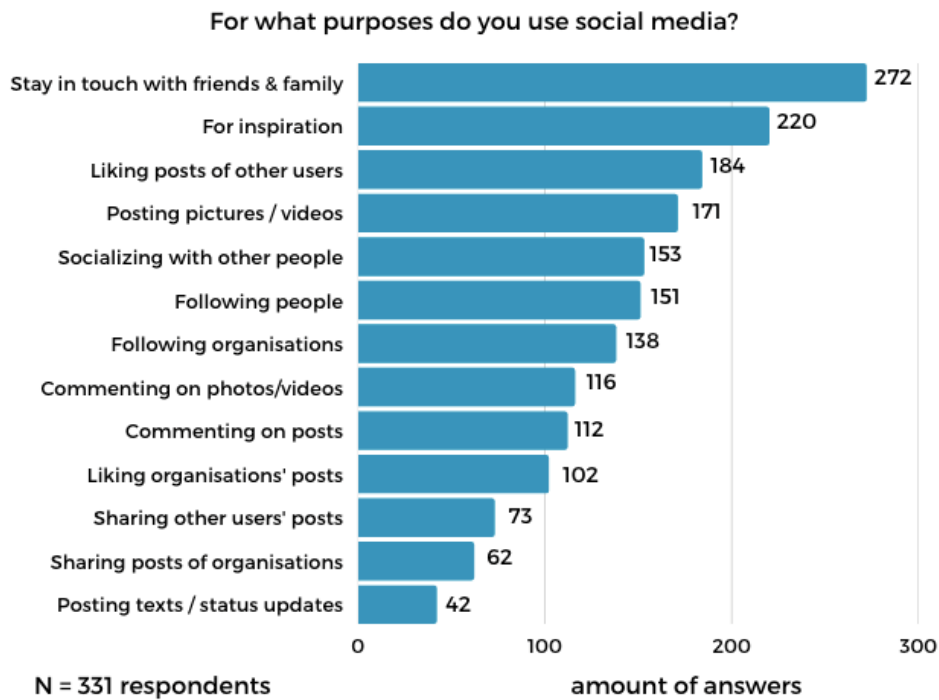


Figure 3. Distribution of social media platforms used and how often.  
 Source: Authors' elaboration.

As illustrated in Figure 4, staying in touch with friends and family was identified as the primary purpose of social media use among respondents. This was followed by seeking inspiration and engaging with other users' content through likes. At the other end of the spectrum, posting text or status updates and sharing organisational content were rated as the least important reasons for using social media platforms.

Respondents were additionally allowed to provide open-ended responses, among which "keeping up with the news" emerged as a frequently cited purpose.



*Figure 4. Respondents' most important purpose of social media use*  
 Source: Authors' elaboration.

#### ***The decision-making process of Dutch tourists***

Respondents were asked to identify their preferred information sources when planning a vacation, with multiple responses permitted. As illustrated in Figure 5, Google was the most frequently consulted source, followed by destination websites in second place and recommendations from friends and family in third. Travel magazines were identified as the least utilised source of information for trip planning. Social media ranked fifth overall, with 179 respondents indicating its use for travel planning purposes. Among those who reported using social media, Instagram was the most popular platform (n = 135), followed by YouTube (n = 81), TikTok (n = 55), Facebook (n = 52), Pinterest (n = 27), Snapchat (n = 6), LinkedIn (n = 5), and Twitter (n = 4).

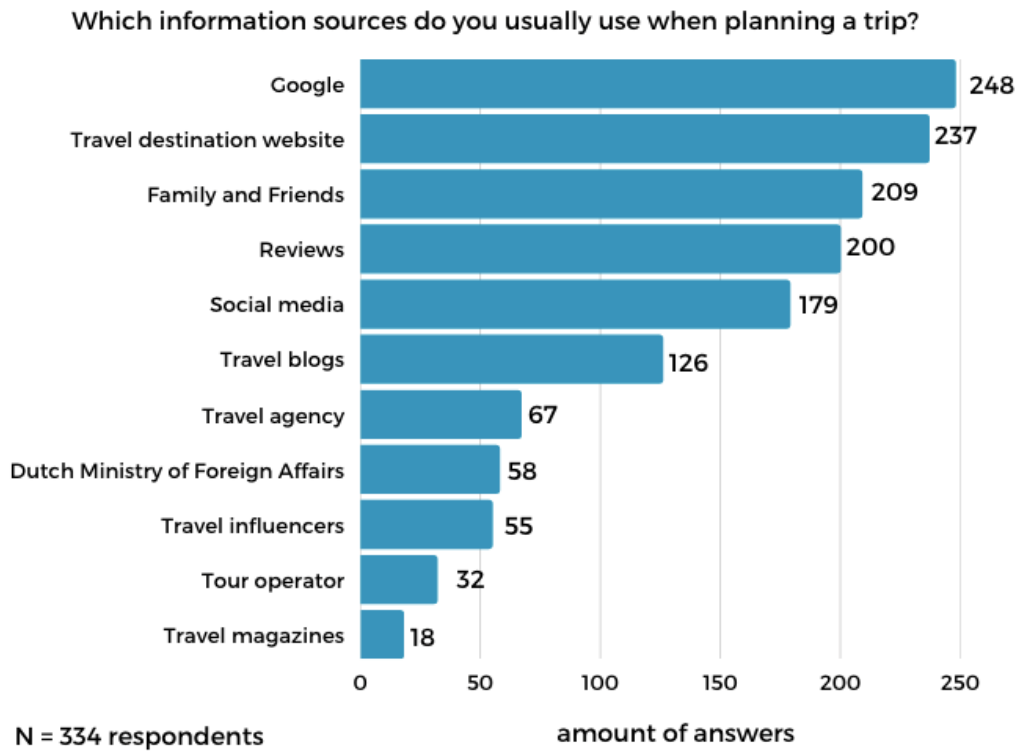


Figure 5. Respondents' most important information sources for trip planning  
Source: Authors' elaboration.

Furthermore, respondents were asked to identify what was most important to them when choosing a travel destination. Figure 6 shows that price is the most important factor when respondents (n = 270) choose a destination. Next to this, sustainability is ranked last with 48 responses.

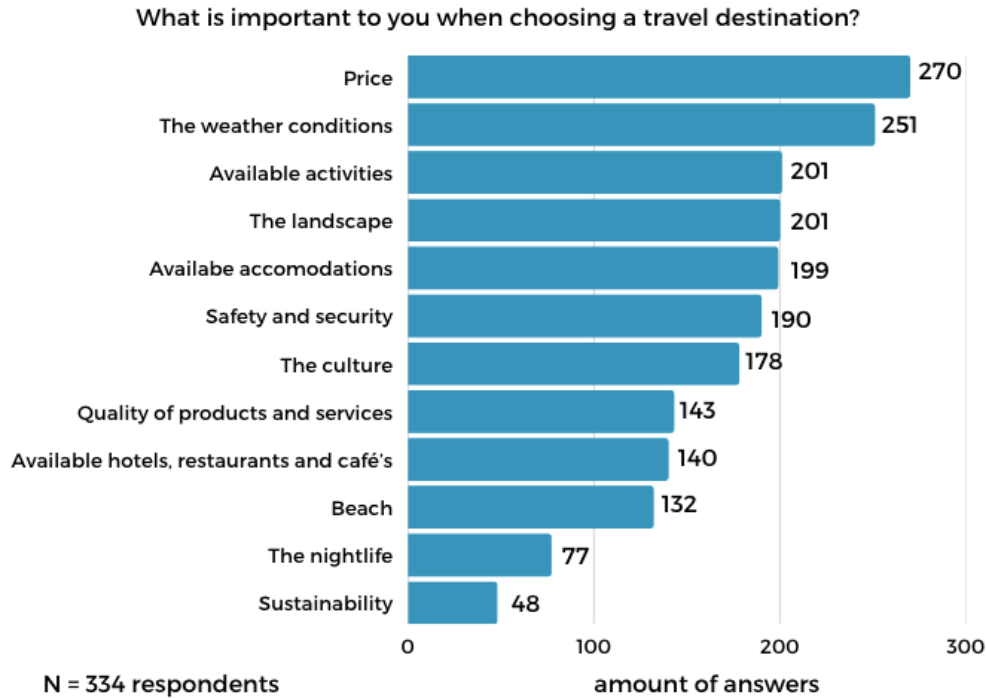


Figure 6. Respondents' most important factors for choosing a travel destination.  
 Source: Authors' elaboration.

The respondents were also asked how they usually book their trip. Out of 330 respondents, 77.6% book their accommodation, activities and transportation online themselves, whereas 7.9% book via a travel agency and 14.5% via a pre-arranged travel package made by a tour operator.

### **DMOs**

Respondents were asked whether they followed any DMO social media accounts. Of the 326 respondents who answered this question, 12.6% (n = 41) reported following at least one DMO account, while 87.4% (n = 285) did not. Among the 285 respondents who did not currently follow any DMO accounts, 46.5% indicated they would consider doing so in the future, while the remaining 53.5% stated they would not.

Those who did follow a DMO account (n = 41) were subsequently asked to specify on which platform(s) they did so. As illustrated in Figure 7, Instagram and Facebook were the most common platforms through which respondents engaged with DMO content.



indicating that the overall impact of DMO content on travel decision-making remains limited and inconclusive among the sample.

### *Sustainability*

This section presents the findings from the questionnaire concerning the influence of sustainability on respondents' travel decision-making. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with four statements. Regarding the personal importance of sustainability in destination selection, responses were notably mixed. A plurality of respondents (42.1%) indicated that sustainability is unimportant to them when choosing a destination, while only 25.4% considered it important. Nevertheless, sustainability was still cited among the factors respondents consider when selecting a destination.

At the same time, attitudes towards DMO-led sustainability communication were considerably more favourable. Over half of respondents (54%) agreed that it is important for DMOs to promote sustainable tourism through social media, compared to 22.3% who disagreed and 23.7% who remained neutral. Similarly, 52.4% indicated that exposure to social media posts depicting the negative impacts of tourism would lead them to reconsider or avoid such trips. Furthermore, 41.3% stated they would be more likely to visit destinations that actively promote sustainability, while 29.5% disagreed. Taken together, these findings point to an apparent paradox: although respondents do not consistently prioritise sustainability in their personal travel choices, they broadly support its promotion by DMOs and demonstrate sensitivity to messaging around tourism's negative impacts. This suggests a degree of awareness regarding sustainability issues that does not yet translate into systematic behavioural change at the individual level.

### *Social media post*

Respondents were presented with two sample social media posts and asked to select which image would be more likely to motivate them to visit Phuket, Thailand. Photo A comprised an Instagram post sourced from Thailand's official DMO account, while Photo B was drawn from a travel blog. Of all respondents, 71.7% selected Photo A and 28.3% selected Photo B.

These findings suggest that respondents showed a clear preference for content depicting Phuket's cultural and historical heritage (Photo A) over content portraying its vibrant nightlife (Photo B), indicating that DMO-produced imagery may hold greater motivational appeal than user-generated travel blog content when considering a destination



**tourismthailand** Phuket Old Town

**tourismthailand** Phuket - Listed as a UNESCO City of Gastronomy, Phuket showcases its legends and history through its distinctive cuisine. This is where one can enjoy Hokkien-style dishes prepared with local flair and ingredients. Don't miss the island's famed seafood, cooked fresh to your orders.

ภูเก็ต... ซิมของเตี๊ยะระดับตำนาน เตรียมท้องให้ว่าง ก่อนบุกตะลุยเกาะแห่งความอร่อยที่ของดีของเด็ดของจะ โบกมือเรียกคุณทุกโค้ง ทุกแยก ไม่ว่าจะเป็น ไอ้ะอ้อ ไอ้ะอ้าว โทงจะ โทงเบ้ง ข้าวต้มแห้ง โทงจะต้มซำอีกนับสิบๆ ร้าน หรือจะแวบเข้าไปชิมน้ำยาปูกับเส้นขนมจีนหรือบนข้าวสวยก็เลิศรส ดอด้วยหมี่ตันโพธิ์ โสภะที่หอมฟุ้งตั้งแต่ยังเดินไม่ถึงร้าน หรือจะปิดท้ายด้วยเกี่ยม ไก่ยหรือขนมถ้วยเค็ม และ อ่า ไปัง ที่ครอบครัวนอกนุ้ม ในสบายๆ ไปเที่ยวคราวไหนรับรองว่านำหนักขึ้นพรวด ใครอยากตามรอยให้ดีต้องปล้ำเข้าเกาะ แล้วลัดเลาะชิมของเด็ดให้เอร็ดจนพุงกางไปเลย

#Amazingthailand#NewChaptersOfExperience#AugustforAllLove#instagood#photography#picoftheday#travel #inspiration#holiday#Thailand#travel#travelingram#mytravelgram#instatraveling#travelphoto#adayinthailand#thailandtravel#insta\_Thailand#phuket

6 w. Vertaling weergeven

**drmanojnkumar** Beautiful

6 w. 1 vind-ik-leuk Reageren Vertaling weergeven

9,698 vind-ik-leuks

SEPTEMBER 20

Een opmerking toevoegen... Plaatsen

Photo A: Instagram post from Thailand's official destination management organization  
 Source: Tourism Authority of Thailand [tourismthailand], 2022.



Photo B: Photo from a travel & adventure blog article, NerdsNomads.  
 Source: Wulff Hauglamm, 2021.

## 6. Discussions and Conclusions

The content analysis reveals that Thailand's social media campaign is evenly divided between video and photo posts, reflecting a deliberate strategic balance between formats. This finding both confirms and extends existing scholarship. While Uşaklı et al. (2017) observed that DMOs typically share videos less frequently than photos, Thailand's campaign departs from this pattern by treating both formats as equally essential. This departure is theoretically significant: it suggests that Thailand's DMO has recognised the persuasive limitations of static imagery when communicating a complex sustainability mission and has responded by investing in video as a richer informational medium. This is consistent with Crowel et al.'s (2020) finding that two in three consumers watch online travel videos during trip planning, confirming that video content is not merely supplementary but central to effective destination marketing. The visual dominance of the campaign more broadly aligns with Cakici et al.'s (2017) conclusion that visual information is processed more rapidly and retained more durably than textual content, reinforcing the strategic logic of prioritising imagery across Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. Captions function as a complementary layer, adding contextual and informational depth to visual content rather than serving as the primary communication vehicle — a practice consistent with De las Heras-Pedros et al.'s (2020) identification of Facebook and Instagram as the most effective platforms for tourism promotion due to their visual-first architecture and ease of information sharing.

The thematic coding reveals that ecological and environmental aspects constitute the most prominently featured dimension of Thailand's campaign, accounting for 21 coded phrases, followed closely by socio-cultural aspects with 18 phrases. This prioritisation of environmental content is noteworthy considering Ghanem and Elgammal's (2016) observation that economic sustainability typically dominates DMO messaging. Thailand's campaign represents a meaningful departure from this norm, suggesting a more holistic and values-driven approach to sustainability communication. This aligns with Kim et al.'s (2019) finding that clear environmental messaging improves tourist attitudes toward responsible travel, and with Kao and Du's (2020) argument that sustainability content fosters emotional connections between tourists and destinations when it is specific, visually compelling, and culturally grounded. The prominence of socio-cultural content further reflects Egger et al.'s (2022) observation that DMOs frequently deploy imagery of landscapes, nature, and cultural heritage — a pattern confirmed in this study — though Thailand's campaign goes further by embedding these visual elements within an explicit sustainability narrative rather than using them purely for aspirational promotion.

The survey findings present a nuanced picture of social media's influence on Dutch tourists' destination decision-making. Facebook and Instagram emerged as the most widely used platforms among respondents, corroborating Van Tiel's (2024) finding that Facebook remains the dominant social networking platform in the Netherlands. However, despite their high platform usage, respondents did not demonstrate a clear or consistent view of DMO social media content as a direct driver of destination choice. The majority disagreed that they would alter existing travel plans based on DMO posts, though a small majority acknowledged that such content is helpful when choosing between two destinations. This ambivalence is consistent with Hysa et al.'s (2021) finding that social media is increasingly important for travel planning — particularly among Generations Y and Z — while also reflecting the broader scholarly recognition that the relationship between social media exposure and behavioural decision-making is mediated by numerous individual and contextual factors (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Wang, 2016). Uşaklı et al.'s (2017) characterisation of social media as a critical word-of-mouth platform influencing traveller decisions is partially supported here: respondents acknowledge the informational utility of DMO content while stopping short of attributing decisive influence to it. This

suggests that social media functions more as a confidence-building and information-supplementing tool than as a primary decision trigger — a distinction with important implications for how DMOs frame their content objectives.

Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding concerns the persistent disconnect between Dutch tourists' expressed sustainability values and their actual decision-making priorities. While more than half of respondents rated sustainability as an unimportant factor in destination selection, the majority simultaneously endorsed the importance of DMOs promoting sustainability. This paradox directly reflects what Juvan and Dolnicar (2014) term the value-action gap — the well-documented tendency for individuals to act inconsistently with their stated values, particularly when competing priorities such as affordability intervene. Affordability was identified by respondents as the most important criterion in destination selection, while sustainability ranked last, echoing findings from Booking.com (2024) on Dutch tourist priorities and confirming that pro-environmental attitudes have not yet been sufficiently translated into purchasing behaviour within this market. This is consistent with Park and Ha's (2014) finding that environmental knowledge and positive attitudes do not reliably predict pro-environmental behaviour, and with Mamula Nikolić et al.'s (2021) observation that some travellers continue to regard ecological responsibility as a deferred rather than immediate obligation.

Critically, however, the findings also indicate that respondents are more inclined to visit destinations that actively promote sustainable tourism than those that highlight the negative impacts of tourism — a finding consistent with Mihanyar et al. (2015), who demonstrated that sustainability-informed destination knowledge enhances tourist satisfaction and visit intention. This suggests that while sustainability alone may not drive destination selection, it functions as a meaningful differentiator when integrated into a broader, aspirationally framed destination narrative. For DMOs, this implies that the most effective sustainability communication strategy is not one that foregrounds environmental obligations but one that presents sustainable experiences as enriching, culturally immersive, and experientially desirable — reframing sustainability as an enhancement to the tourist experience rather than a constraint upon it.

The findings make major theoretical and practical contributions to our understanding of social media usage for promoting sustainability in the context of DMOs by examining Thailand campaigns and Dutch visitors' impressions of DMO marketing. From an empirical perspective, this study bridges the gap between tourism and marketing communications, offering valuable insights for multidisciplinary research.

The findings of this study make substantial theoretical and practical contributions to the understanding of social media usage for promoting sustainability within the context of DMOs, with particular focus on Thailand's campaigns and Dutch visitors' perceptions of DMO marketing. From an empirical standpoint, the study bridges a longstanding divide between tourism studies and marketing communications, offering a genuinely multidisciplinary contribution that advances scholarship across both fields. This study makes four significant contributions to the tourism literature.

First, it directly addresses the underexplored research gap concerning how social media campaigns influence sustainable visitor behaviour (Mariani et al., 2016). While prior scholarship has acknowledged social media's role in raising sustainability awareness, fostering connections between tourists and destinations, and shaping decision-making processes (Goel et al., 2023), empirical evidence grounded

in specific destination campaigns has remained scarce. By building on and extending the foundational work of Hays et al. (2013) and Uşaklı et al. (2017), this study validates their frameworks within contemporary social media environments while generating new, context-specific knowledge about traveller behaviour in relation to Thailand's destination campaigns. Crucially, it reveals how Thailand communicates its hedonic identity through social media — an aspect of destination branding that has received negligible scholarly attention.

Second, the study advances destination social media research by deepening the understanding of communication sources and DMO platform strategies. It demonstrates that Thailand's campaign content meaningfully outperforms standard promotional activity in generating favourable destination impressions, influencing destination choice, and cultivating pro-sustainable behavioural intentions among potential visitors. This finding extends the work of Hysa et al. (2021), who established that social media platforms have become increasingly central to travel preparation, particularly among Generations Y and Z, who rely predominantly on digital information when forming travel decisions. It further reinforces Uşaklı et al.'s (2017) conclusion that social media functions as a critical word-of-mouth mechanism — one that exerts measurable influence on traveller decision-making at scale.

Third, this study makes an original empirical contribution by being the first to examine Dutch tourists' perceptions of DMO sustainability promotion on social media and the role these platforms play in their destination decision-making. Although prior research has investigated tourists' general sustainability attitudes (Aydın & Álvarez, 2020) and the sustainability orientations of Dutch travellers specifically (Booking.com, 2024), the intersection of DMO-led sustainability communication and Dutch tourist behaviour has remained entirely unstudied. This study fills that gap directly, establishing a new empirical baseline for future research targeting this market.

Fourth, the study contributes novel theoretical insight into how social media content can function as a form of virtual transportation — immersing potential visitors in a destination's identity and meaningfully shaping their perceptions before any physical travel occurs. This dimension expands the conceptual boundaries of destination marketing research and positions content-driven immersion as a theoretically significant mechanism in sustainable tourism promotion. Together, these contributions offer actionable guidance for DMOs operating in an evolving digital landscape, demonstrating how strategically designed, platform-specific content can simultaneously inspire travel intent and advance sustainability goals among target audiences.

From a managerial standpoint, the findings carry several concrete implications for DMOs, tourism marketers, and destination policymakers. First, the content analysis confirms that visual storytelling remains the most powerful vehicle for sustainability communication across Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. DMOs should therefore prioritise high-quality visual production — including short-form video, immersive Reels, and documentary-style YouTube content — that does not merely showcase a destination's aesthetic appeal but actively embeds sustainability narratives within that visual experience. Rather than treating sustainability as a secondary message appended to promotional content, DMOs should position it as the central and emotionally compelling thread running through all campaign material.

Second, platform differentiation should be treated as a strategic imperative rather than an operational afterthought. Instagram's visual and aspirational culture makes it well-suited for communicating

destination identity and inspiring sustainable travel intentions, particularly among younger demographics. Facebook's broader demographic reach and longer content formats offer opportunities for deeper educational engagement — sharing destination histories, cultural contexts, and practical sustainability information that informed Dutch tourists specifically seek when planning trips. YouTube, meanwhile, is uniquely positioned to function as a long-form sustainability education channel, enabling DMOs to produce content that virtually transports viewers to a destination while simultaneously informing them about responsible travel practices, local ecosystems, and community impact.

Third, given that Dutch tourists demonstrate a pronounced tendency to consider the environmental and social impact of their travel decisions, DMOs targeting this market should develop content that directly speaks to these values. This means moving beyond generic sustainability messaging toward content that is specific, credible, and verifiable — highlighting concrete conservation initiatives, community-led tourism programs, and measurable environmental outcomes. Transparency in sustainability claims is particularly important for value-driven audiences such as Dutch travellers, for whom vague or performative green messaging is likely to generate scepticism rather than engagement.

Fourth, DMOs should invest in user-generated content (UGC) strategies as a complement to their own campaign activity. Incentive programmes that encourage tourists to share authentic experiences of sustainable practices — through challenges, competitions, or recognition schemes — not only extend organic reach but also lend social proof to sustainability claims that institutional messaging alone cannot achieve. Authentic peer testimonials carry persuasive weight among Generations Y and Z, who are simultaneously the most digitally active and the most sceptical of branded content.

Finally, at a strategic level, DMOs should regard social media sustainability campaigns not merely as marketing tools but as instruments of behavioural change. By educating potential visitors about sustainable choices before departure — covering food alternatives, eco-certified accommodations, low-impact transport options, and culturally respectful practices — DMOs can shape travel behaviour upstream, reducing the environmental burden of tourism at the destination itself. Thailand's DMO stands to benefit from a coordinated multi-platform strategy that aligns its sustainability ambitions with the values and information-seeking behaviours of high-potential markets such as the Netherlands, translating campaign exposure into genuinely responsible visitation patterns.

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