

A Study on Social Media Marketing and Customer Engagement in Sabah Tourism

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i12/27293>

Published Date: 17 December 2025

Abstract

Tourism is a key driver of Sabah's economy, contributing to job creation and regional development. This study examines the relationship between social media marketing (SMM) activities and customer engagement within Sabah's tourism sector. The four SMM dimensions, posting frequency, content quality, level of interaction, and influencer collaboration, were investigated to determine their influence on customer engagement in Sabah's tourism sector. Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire distributed to 114 respondents and analyzed with SPSS Version 26, employing descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple regression. The results indicate that interaction level and influencer collaboration are the strongest predictors of customer engagement, whereas posting frequency and content quality are insignificant predictors. These findings suggest that tourism marketers should prioritize creating interactive experiences and leveraging influencer partnerships to strengthen engagement and enhance brand connection. This study contributes to tourism marketing literature by providing empirical evidence from Sabah and offers actionable insights for destination management organizations and tourism operators aiming to improve engagement strategies. Future research could incorporate longitudinal methods or diverse demographics.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing, Customer Engagement, Sabah Tourism, Influencer Collaboration, Interaction Level

Introduction

The rapid development of digital technologies has made social media one of the most influential tools in shaping consumer purchase decisions (Macías et al., 2024). The rapid advancement of digital technology has driven many companies to utilize social media as an effective promotional tool, leveraging platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and others to increase visibility and influence purchase intentions" (Najiah et al., 2024). The presence of social media marketing (SMM) platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok offers both an alternative and an opportunity for businesses to design marketing strategies that enhance purchase intentions (Azizah et. al., 2024). Consistent and strategic social media content

marketing plays a critical role in keeping consumers informed and building sustained brand awareness (Cheung et al., 2021).

Marketers today are encouraged to think critically and creatively to develop high-quality content that meets the personal preferences of their target audience (Wibowo et al., 2021). This approach strengthens the relationship between customers and companies, helping retain loyal customers and encouraging participation in events or programs organized by the business. This shift in marketing strategies is particularly evident in the tourism industry, where digital platforms play a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior and decision-making. In tourism, social media has become the primary channel through which travellers share their experiences and influence others (Lim et al., 2022).

Companies are using strategies such as blogger endorsements, paid advertising, and user-generated content management to build brand awareness (Farivar & Richardson, 2021). These platforms facilitate collaboration, interaction, and sharing among users, contributing to stronger brand communities and increased customer intentions in the digital era (Jamil et al., 2022; Ismael, 2025). Additionally, the capabilities of social media marketing have been linked to enhanced brand equity and overall firm performance (Laradi et al., 2024). In the case of luxury brands, customization, reputation, trendiness, interaction, and entertainment have been found to affect purchase intentions and brand equity significantly (Liu & Burns, 2021). These findings underscore the significance of social media as a marketing tool for enhancing customer engagement, which is particularly pertinent for Sabah tourism businesses aiming to compete in a crowded digital marketplace.

Background of Problem

The oversupply of travel agencies has created a saturated market in Sabah, making it difficult for new entrants to compete and forcing smaller operators to survive through price competition. Price wars can lead to shrinking profit margins and unsustainable business practices (Rao et al., 2000). To remain competitive, companies must improve the quality of interactions on social media and implement marketing activities that are appealing and recognizable to potential tourists (Tourism Malaysia Sabah, 2025).

Social media marketing plays a crucial role in enhancing destination visibility, fostering customer relationships, and promoting sustainable tourism practices. Effective use of social media has been linked to higher engagement and visitation rates, delivering economic benefits for the tourism industry in Sabah (Cheung et al., 2021; Liu & Burns, 2021). This highlights the need to examine which aspects of social media marketing are most influential in driving engagement, so that tourism stakeholders can allocate resources strategically. Therefore, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the relationship between posting frequency and customer engagement for Sabah tourism?

RQ2: What is the relationship between content quality and customer engagement for Sabah tourism?

RQ3: How does the level of interaction influence customer engagement for Sabah tourism?

RQ4: What is the relationship between influencer collaboration and customer engagement for Sabah tourism?

RQ5: Which factor has the strongest influence on customer engagement for Sabah tourism?

Literature Review

Social media marketing (SMM) has become an essential strategy for engaging customers, particularly in service industries such as tourism, where experiential value drives decision-making (Azizah et al., 2024). Customer engagement is viewed as a relational and co-creation process that strengthens satisfaction, loyalty, and overall service experience (Lim et al., 2022). By creating interactive online environments, businesses foster stronger ties with existing customers while attracting new ones (Cheung et al., 2021).

Posting Frequency

Consistent posting is essential for maintaining visibility and audience connection. Studies show that higher posting frequency increases likes, comments, and overall engagement, signalling the importance of regular and strategic updates to sustain attention (Laradi et al., 2024; Najiah et al., 2025). However, excessive posting without valuable content may lead to audience fatigue, suggesting that frequency must be balanced with quality (Sprout Social, 2025).

Content Quality

Content that is informative, entertaining, and visually appealing has been shown to drive higher engagement rates (Bazi & Gorton, 2023). Emotional resonance and storytelling techniques amplify consumer responses and strengthen brand loyalty (Nguyen, 2025). Businesses that invest in customized and relevant content encourage users to share and interact, thereby expanding reach (Fileri et al., 2024).

Level of Interaction

Personalized communication and responsiveness on social media—such as replying to comments or providing tailored recommendations—enhance perceived value and build trust (Tran, 2022). Brand communities allow businesses to gather insights, respond to feedback, and co-create experiences with customers, which improves satisfaction and loyalty (Sahibzada et al., 2020; Purnomo, 2024).

Influencer Collaboration

Influencers have become powerful partners in tourism marketing, capable of producing authentic narratives that inspire travel intentions and bookings (Ramya et al., 2024). Collaborating with influencers increases brand credibility, expands reach, and creates relatable endorsements that resonate with potential visitors (Pettersen-Sobczyk, 2023; Belén et al., 2025).

A Proposed Conceptual Model/Framework

The conceptual framework posits customer engagement as the dependent variable, influenced by four independent SMM dimensions: posting frequency (H1: positive relationship), content quality (H2: positive relationship), level of interaction (H3: positive relationship), and influencer collaboration (H4: positive relationship).

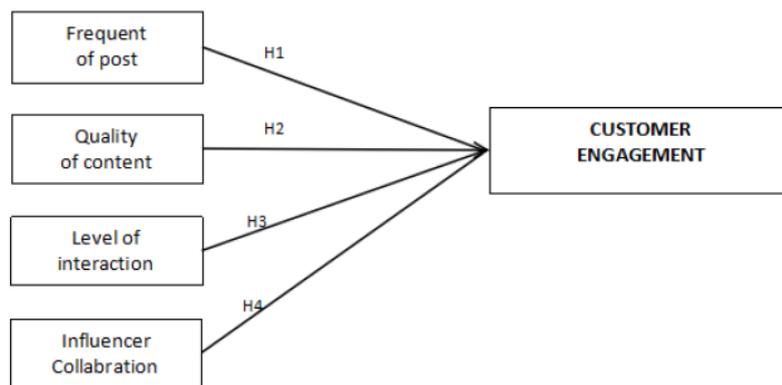


Figure 1. The Proposed Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine the influence of social media marketing (SMM) activities on customer engagement in Sabah tourism. A structured questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms using convenience and snowball sampling, yielding 114 valid responses from 200 targeted invitations (57% response rate). Table 1 illustrates the summary of the profile of respondents who participated in this research. The population comprised Malaysian social media users with stable monthly income who follow official Sabah tourism accounts and have prior travel experience. This sample size satisfied the minimum requirement for regression analysis. Data were analysed using SPSS Version 26 through descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analyses. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, voluntary participation, and data confidentiality were strictly observed.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections: (A) demographic profile, (B) independent variables (posting frequency adapted from Salazar, 2017; content quality adapted from Bazi & Gorton, 2023; level of interaction adapted from Ünal, 2024; Wibowo et al., 2021; influencer collaboration adapted from Ünal, 2024; Bastrygina et al., 2024; Chowdhury et al., 2024), and (C) dependent variable (customer engagement) adapted from Chowdhury et al., 2024. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was applied. Reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.70$ for all scales.

Results and Analysis

Data screening was conducted to ensure the quality and suitability of the dataset for analysis. No missing values were identified, and all statistical assumptions for parametric tests were verified. Normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis measures, with acceptable thresholds of ± 3 for skewness and ± 10 for kurtosis (Kline, 2005). As shown in Table 1, all variables met these criteria, indicating normal distribution: Customer Engagement (skewness = -3.748, kurtosis = -0.185); Frequency of Posting (skewness = -3.018, kurtosis = 1.575); Quality of Content (skewness = -2.283, kurtosis = 1.849); Level of Interaction (skewness = -5.137, kurtosis = 7.857); Influencer Collaboration (skewness = -2.575, kurtosis = 0.445). All were deemed normal.

Table 1
Result of Normality Analysis

Variables	Skewness	Kurtosis	Decision
Dependent Variable: Customer Engagement	-3.748	-0.185	Normal
Independent Variables: Frequent of Post	-3.018	1.575	Normal
Quality of Content	-2.283	1.849	Normal
Level of Interaction	-5.137	7.857	Normal
Influencer Collaboration	-2.575	0.445	Normal

The sample size (n=114) exceeded the minimum requirement of 82 for four predictors (10 cases per variable). Although one multivariate outlier was detected (Mahalanobis distance = 30.376 > 18.47), sensitivity analysis indicated minimal impact on results, so the full dataset was retained.

Descriptive analysis revealed a predominantly female (78.95%), Malay (73.68%), and millennial (40.35%) sample, with most in private sector occupations (68.42%) earning RM2,001–5,000 (50.00%). This profile aligns with active social media users in Malaysia, though it limits generalizability.

Descriptive analysis from Table 2 showed predominantly female (78.95%), Malay (73.68%), millennial (40.35%) respondents in private sector roles (68.42%) with incomes of RM2,001–5,000 (50%).

Table 2
Demographic Profile of Respondents

No. Variables	Profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Gender	Male	24	21.05
	Female	90	78.95
2. Race	Malay	84	73.68
	Indian	21	18.42
	Chinese	7	6.14
	Others	2	1.75
	18 – 27 years old (Gen Z)	46	40.35
3. Age	28 – 43 years old (Millennials)	51	44.74
	41 – 59 years old (Gen X)	17	14.91
	60 years old and above (Baby Boomer)	0	0
	Student	7	6.14
4. Occupation	Government	11	9.65
	Private	78	68.42
	Self-Employment/Freelance	18	15.79
	Retired	0	0
	Income range		
5.	RM2,000 and below	14	12.28
	RM2,001- RM5,000	57	50
	RM5,001-RM10,000	32	28.07
	RM10,000 and above	11	9.65
6. Marital Status	Single	44	38.60
	Married	69	60.53
	Divorced	1	0.88
	Others	0	0
7. Nationality	Malaysian	4	3.55
	Non-Malaysian	110	96.45

Correlation Analysis

Measures of relationship show the degree to which two quantifiable variables are linked to each other. The degree of relationship between two variables is conveyed as a correlation coefficient ranging from -1.00 to +1.00. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine bivariate relationships between independent variables and customer engagement, with *r* values interpreted as low (0.10–0.29), moderate (0.30–0.49), or high (≥ 0.50) (Cohen, 1988). Tables below demonstrate the result of the Pearson Correlation analysis between the relationship.

Frequency of Posting

demonstrates the result of the Pearson Correlation analysis between the frequency of posting on social media marketing and customer engagement in Sabah tourism. As illustrated in Table 3, the *R*-value = 0.224. There was a significant low correlation between the frequency of posting on social media marketing and customer engagement in Sabah tourism. Hence, *H*₁ was supported.

Table 3

Result on Pearson Correlation Analysis between the Frequency of Posting on Social Media Marketing and Customer Engagement in Sabah Tourism

Variables	R	p-value	Decision
Correlation between frequency of posting on social media marketing and customer engagement in Sabah tourism.	0.224	0.008 ($p > 0.05$)	<i>H</i> ₁ is supported

Quality of Content

As illustrated in Table 4, the result shows the relationship between quality of content and customer engagement with *R*-value is 0.301, indicating a moderate positive correlation between the variables. Thus, it can be assumed that there was a moderately significant relationship between the quality of content and customer engagement in Sabah tourism. Therefore, *H*₃ was supported.

Table 4

Result on Pearson Correlation Analysis between the Quality of Content and Customer Engagement in Sabah Tourism

Variables	R	p-value	Decision
Correlation between quality of content and customer engagement in Sabah tourism.	0.301	0.001 ($p < 0.05$)	<i>H</i> ₂ was supported

Level of Interaction

Table 5 presents the correlation between the level of interaction and customer engagement in Sabah tourism. As depicted in Table 4, the *R*-value is 0.591, indicating a high positive relationship between the level of interaction and customer engagement in Sabah tourism. Therefore, it can be assumed that there was a significantly high positive relationship between

the level of interaction and customer engagement in Sabah tourism. Subsequently, H4 was supported.

Table 5

Result on Pearson Correlation Analysis between the Level of Interaction and Customer Engagement in Sabah Tourism

Variables	R	p-value	Decision
Correlation between level of interaction and customer engagement in Sabah tourism.	0.591	0.00 ($p < 0.05$)	H ₃ supported

Influencer Collaboration

Table 6 presents the correlation analysis between influencer collaboration and customer engagement in Sabah tourism, with R-value of 0.585, indicating a significantly high positive relationship between influencer collaboration and customer engagement in Sabah tourism. Subsequently, H4 was supported.

Table 6

Result on Pearson Correlation Analysis between Influencer Collaboration and Customer Engagement in Sabah Tourism

Variables	R	p-value	Decision
Correlation between influencer collaboration and customer engagement in Sabah tourism.	0.585	0.000 ($p > 0.05$)	H ₄ was supported

Multiple Regression Analysis

The multiple regression shown in Table 7 assessed the combined predictive power of the independent variables on customer engagement. The model was significant ($F = 18.395$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 40.3% of variance ($R^2 = 0.403$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.380$; Table 4.8). This moderate explanatory power suggests other unexamined factors (e.g., platform type) may influence engagement.

Only the level of interaction ($\beta = 0.298$, $p = 0.030$) and influencer collaboration ($\beta = 0.310$, $p = 0.015$) were significant predictors, with the latter showing the strongest effect (RQ5). Frequency of posting ($\beta = 0.119$, $p = 0.119$) and quality of content ($\beta = 0.063$, $p = 0.461$) were non-significant, indicating they contribute little beyond bivariate associations when controlling for others.

These findings partially support H3 and H4, while H1 and H2 hold only at the correlation level. In Sabah's saturated market (>800 agencies; Tourism Malaysia Sabah, 2025), relational strategies like interactions and influencers outperform content volume, aligning with global tourism trends where authenticity drives loyalty amid price wars (Rao et al., 2000; Pettersen-Sobczyk, 2023). Non-significant predictors imply over-reliance on frequency risks

fatigue, echoing inverted U-shaped effects (Salazar, 2017). Limitations include self-reported biases and cross-sectional design; future qualitative explorations could unpack mechanisms.

Table 7

Results of the Multiple Regression Analysis to determine the Significant Factors that Affect the Customer Engagement in Sabah Tourism

Variables	Unstandardized Beta	Standard Beta	T-value	p-value	Decision
Frequent of Post	0.098	0.119	1.572	0.119	Not Significant
Quality of Content	0.082	0.063	0.740	0.461	Not Significant
Level of Interaction	0.259	0.298	2.201	0.030	Significant
Influencer Collaboration	0.370	0.310	2.468	0.015	Significant
R ²	0.403				
F-Value	18.395				
P-Value	0.000				

Discussion

In our research on the impact of social media marketing (SMM) on customer engagement within the context of Sabah tourism, we found that influencer collaboration emerged as the most significant factor. Influencers, particularly those who are well respected in the travel and tourism sector, bring a level of authenticity and trust that is difficult for brands to achieve on their own. According to Lou and Yuan, the perceived authenticity and credibility significantly enhance consumer trust. This trust is crucial in tourism marketing where potential tourists rely heavily on the experience and recommendations of others (Lou, 2020). An influencer who shares their genuine travel experiences and highlights the beauty and unique aspects of Sabah can create a compelling narrative that resonates with their followers. This authentic portrayal not only attracts potential tourists but also engages them by providing trustworthy information and personal recommendations. Influencers can reach a wide audience, according to De Veirman, who highlights that influence with a substantial following can significantly enhance brand reach (Veirman, 2020). Collaborating with an influencer may increase visibility among potential customers. The visual and engaging content created by these influencers can capture the attention of a broad audience, thereby enhancing customer engagement. Influencer's ability to provide authentic, high-quality content, reach a wide range of audiences, and target specific demographics makes them invaluable partners in promoting Sabah as a premier travel destination. These collaborations drive higher engagement levels, fostering a deeper connection between potential customers and the unique experiences that Sabah has to offer it.

Conclusions

Based on our findings, it is essential to build upon this foundation with further research. Here are some recommendations for future research that can deepen our understanding and optimize the effectiveness of social media marketing in the tourism sector. Future research should compare the impact of different types of influencers (e.g., micro-influencers vs. macro-influencers) on customer engagement in Sabah tourism. By delving into the specifics of influencer typers, content strategies, and demographic influences, researchers can provide valuable insights that can further enhance the effectiveness of social media marketing in the tourism industry.

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