Eduvest – Journal of Universal Studies
Volume 6 Number 6, June, 2026
p- ISSN 2775-3735 - e-ISSN 2775-3727

The Influence of Affiliate Marketing on Millennial Tourists' Intention To Visit Bali with Brand Trust as A Mediating Variable

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Keywords:
Affiliate Marketing;
Brand Trust;
Visit Intention;
Digital Marketing;
Millennial Tourists

ABSTRACT

Digital marketing transformation has reshaped tourist decision-making, particularly among millennials who rely heavily on influencer-generated content. This study investigates the influence of affiliate marketing on millennials' intention to visit Bali, with brand trust serving as a mediating variable. Adopting a quantitative approach, data were collected from 500 respondents who had never visited Bali but had been exposed to affiliate marketing content. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed for data analysis. The results indicate that affiliate marketing has a positive and significant direct effect on both brand trust and visit intention. Brand trust, in turn, significantly enhances visit intention and partially mediates the relationship between affiliate marketing and visit intention. The indirect effect through brand trust is stronger than the direct effect, underscoring the central role of trust in digital tourism marketing. These findings contribute to the digital marketing and tourism literature and offer actionable implications for destination managers seeking to design trust-oriented affiliate marketing strategies to attract millennial tourists to Bali.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of digital platforms has fundamentally altered the landscape of tourism marketing, compelling destinations to reconsider conventional promotional approaches. Among millennials, broadly defined as individuals born between 1981 and 1996, digital channels have become the primary conduit for travel-related information seeking, destination evaluation, and decision-making (Armutcu et al., 2023; Samarah et al., 2022). This demographic cohort's pronounced reliance on social media and peer-generated content distinguishes it from older traveler segments and creates distinctive opportunities for destination marketers willing to leverage influencer ecosystems (Wang et al., 2023).

Affiliate marketing, a performance-based digital strategy in which third-party promoters (affiliates or influencers) disseminate sponsored content to targeted audiences in exchange for commission-based rewards, has emerged as a particularly salient channel in the contemporary tourism promotional mix (Dhankhar et al., 2023; Kertiriasih, 2023). Unlike traditional advertising, affiliate marketing leverages the perceived authenticity and social proximity of influencers, thereby reducing the psychological distance between destination imagery and

prospective visitor attitudes (Chawla et al., 2024). This is especially relevant in the context of Bali, one of Southeast Asia's most globally recognized leisure destinations, where digital word-of-mouth and influencer-driven narratives significantly shape international and domestic demand (Liu et al., 2023).

Despite this practical relevance, the academic treatment of affiliate marketing within destination tourism contexts remains limited. Existing scholarship on social media and tourism predominantly focuses on user-generated content, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), and broad social media engagement metrics (Abubakar et al., 2017; Alghamdi & Abdulwahid, 2025), with comparatively scant attention devoted to the affiliate marketing mechanism per sesion.

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between digital marketing and tourist behavior. Alghamdi and Abdulwahid (2025) conducted a systematic review demonstrating that social media marketing significantly shapes destination image, trust, and travel intentions, yet they emphasized that the specific mechanisms through which influencer-driven content operates remain underexplored. Similarly, Salhab et al. (2023) found that brand trust mediates the relationship between social media marketing and purchase intention in broader marketing contexts, but their study did not specifically address the affiliate marketing channel or the tourism destination context. Kertiriasih (2023) investigated the effect of affiliate marketing on consumer behavior and purchase intention, revealing positive associations; however, this research focused on general consumer goods rather than tourism destinations and did not examine the mediating role of brand trust.

Furthermore, studies by Casaló et al. (2020) and Lou and Yuan (2019) have established that influencer credibility and parasocial relationships enhance consumer trust and behavioral intentions. Yet these studies primarily examined commercial products and services in general, without specifically addressing how affiliate marketing content translates into destination visit intention through trust-building mechanisms. Chawla et al. (2024) demonstrated that the informational credibility of Instagram posts influences tourist decision-making, but their research did not isolate affiliate marketing as a distinct digital promotional channel or examine its multidimensional nature.

The theoretical foundations for understanding these relationships draw from several established frameworks. Source credibility theory (Ohanian, 1990) suggests that perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness of message sources influence persuasive outcomes—a concept directly applicable to affiliate marketing, where influencer credibility shapes audience reception. Parasocial interaction theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) further explains how audiences develop one-sided relationships with media personalities, facilitating trust transfer from influencers to endorsed brands. The stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) provides a comprehensive lens for understanding how affiliate marketing content (stimulus) activates cognitive and affective responses, including brand trust (organism), ultimately producing behavioral intentions such as visit intention (response).

While brand trust has been theoretically positioned as a critical determinant of consumer behavioral intention (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001), and previous research has confirmed its mediating role in various marketing contexts (Salhab et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2022), its mediating function specifically between affiliate marketing stimuli and visit intention in a tourism

destination context has not been systematically examined. Moreover, research by Rather and Hollebeek (2021) and Chen et al. (2022) has demonstrated brand trust's importance in tourism and hospitality settings, yet the specific antecedent of affiliate marketing remains unexplored in these studies. This gap is particularly significant given the rapid growth of influencer marketing in the tourism industry and the increasing reliance of millennials on such content for travel planning (Ana & Istudor, 2019; Han & Chen, 2022).

The present study addresses these identified gaps by integrating source credibility theory, parasocial interaction theory, and the S-O-R framework into a unified conceptual model that positions brand trust as a mediating mechanism between affiliate marketing exposure and millennial tourists' visit intention to Bali. This integration extends prior research by specifically examining affiliate marketing as a multidimensional construct comprising source credibility, engagement, physical attractiveness, attitude homophily, and social attractiveness—dimensions that previous studies have examined in isolation but not within a comprehensive affiliate marketing framework applied to destination tourism.

This research addresses these gaps by pursuing three primary objectives: (1) to assess the direct effect of affiliate marketing on millennials' intention to visit Bali; (2) to examine the effect of affiliate marketing on brand trust among millennial tourists; and (3) to evaluate the mediating role of brand trust in the affiliate marketing–visit intention relationship. The findings are expected to extend theoretical understanding of trust-based digital marketing and provide evidence-based guidance for Bali's destination marketing organizations and stakeholders.

METHOD

Research Design and Sampling

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design using a structured online survey to collect primary data. The target population consisted of Indonesian millennial consumers (aged 30–45 years at the time of data collection) who had never visited Bali but had been exposed to Bali-related affiliate marketing or digital tourism content via social media platforms. Focusing on non-visitors ensured that the measured outcome reflected prospective visit intention rather than post-visit experience or revisit motivation.

Purposive sampling was used with three eligibility criteria: (1) respondents belonged to the millennial age cohort; (2) respondents had never visited Bali; and (3) respondents had been exposed to at least one instance of Bali-related affiliate or influencer marketing content within the previous six months. A total of 500 valid responses were retained after data cleaning procedures. This sample size met the minimum threshold recommended for PLS-SEM analysis involving models with multiple indicators (Hair et al., 2019).

2. Measurement Instrument

The survey instrument comprised three construct batteries measuring affiliate marketing (18 items across five dimensions: source credibility, engagement, physical attractiveness, attitude homophily, and social attractiveness), brand trust (15 items covering credibility, integrity, benevolence, and reliability), and visit intention (4 items). All items were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale anchored at 1 (Strongly Disagree) and 5 (Strongly Agree). Items were adapted from validated scales in the extant literature and refined through expert panel review and a pilot test with 30 respondents.

3. Analytical Approach

Data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 software. PLS-SEM was selected for its appropriateness in evaluating complex predictive structural models with reflective constructs and its robustness under conditions of non-normal data distributions (Ringle et al., 2020). Furthermore, PLS-SEM is particularly appropriate for hierarchical component models (HCMs), enabling the assessment of both first-order and second-order constructs within a single analytical framework.

In this study, Affiliate Marketing and Brand Trust were modelled as higher-order constructs consisting of multiple dimensions. Therefore, the hierarchical component model (HCM) approach was employed to evaluate the relationships between higher-order constructs and their respective lower-order dimensions. The higher-order constructs were assessed using the two-stage approach, which is widely recommended for estimating reflective-reflective hierarchical models in PLS-SEM.

The analytical procedure comprised three sequential stages. First, the measurement model (first-order construct assessment) was evaluated through convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability analyses. Convergent validity was assessed using outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) and the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Second, the second-order construct assessment was conducted to examine the extent to which the lower-order dimensions adequately represented their corresponding higher-order constructs. This stage evaluated the significance and strength of the relationships between the higher-order constructs and their underlying dimensions.

Third, the structural model (inner model) was evaluated to test the proposed hypotheses and the mediating role of Brand Trust. Structural model assessment included model fit evaluation, coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), path coefficient estimation, and mediation analysis. Hypothesis testing was performed using the bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples to determine the significance of direct and indirect effects.

To ensure the robustness of the findings, Common Method Bias (CMB) was assessed through Harman's single-factor test. The first unrotated factor accounted for 28.7% of the total variance, falling below the 50% threshold (Podsakoff et al., 2003), suggesting that common method bias does not constitute a significant threat to the validity of the findings. Collinearity among predictor constructs was evaluated using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), with all values below the threshold of 3.33, confirming the absence of problematic multicollinearity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

No.	Characteristics	Levels	Persons	%
1.	Domisili	Jakarta (Daerah Khusus Ibukota)	108	21.6
		Jawa Tengah	87	17.4
		Jawa Barat	78	15.6

		Jawa Timur	64	12.8
		Yogyakarta (Daerah Istimewa)	17	3.4
		Gorontalo	16	3.2
		Kalimantan Barat	15	3
		Banten	13	2.6
		Nusa Tenggara Timur	10	2
		Sumatera Utara	9	1.8
		Sulawesi Tenggara	8	1.6
		Bengkulu	7	1.4
		Lampung	7	1.4
		Sulawesi Tengah	7	1.4
		Aceh	6	1.2
		Kalimantan Selatan	6	1.2
		Sulawesi Selatan	6	1.2
		Nusa Tenggara Barat	5	1
		Sulawesi Utara	5	1
		Kalimantan Tengah	4	0.8
		Kalimantan Timur	4	0.8
		Riau	4	0.8
		Sumatera Selatan	4	0.8
		Maluku	2	0.4
		Sulawesi Barat	2	0.4
		Sumatera Barat	2	0.4
		Kalimantan Utara	1	0.2
		Kepulauan Bangka Belitung	1	0.2
		Kepulauan Riau	1	0.2
		Maluku Utara	1	0.2
		Total	500	100.00
2.	Gender	Female	252	50.4
		Male	248	49.6
		Total	500	100.00
3.	Age	36-40 years old	202	40.4
		30-35 years old	193	38.6
		41-45 years old	105	21
		Total	500	100.00
4.	Education	Bachelor’s / Master’s Degree	220	44
		Associate Degree / Diploma	175	35
		Senior High School / Vocational High School	91	18.2
		Postgraduate (Master's / Doctorate)	11	2.2
		Junior High School	3	0.6
		Total	500	100.00
5.	Occupation	Private Sector Employee	161	32.2
		Entrepreneur	152	30.4
		Freelancer	84	16.8
		Government Employee	48	9.6
		Housewife	34	6.8
		Student	15	3

		Unemployed	5	1
		Police Officer	1	0.2
		Total	500	100.00
7.	Intended Travel Companionship	Friends / Peers	158	31.6
		Family (Parents/Siblings)	152	30.4
		Partner	95	19
		Alone	79	15.8
		Group Tour (Academic/Business)	16	3.2
		Total	500	100.00
8.	Intended Travel Timeframe	No definite plans	116	23.2
		More than 1 year	114	22.8
		Within 7–12 months	95	19
		Within 4–6 months	90	18
		Within 1–3 months	85	17
		Total	500	100.00
9.	Visit Bali (Last 5 Years)	No	500	100
		Yes	0	0
		Total	500	100.00

Source: Processed data (2026)

The sample of 500 respondents was demographically balanced, with females constituting 50.4% and males 49.6% of respondents. Age distribution revealed that 40.4% were aged 36–40 years, 38.6% were aged 30–35 years, and 21.0% were aged 41–45 years. The dominant education category was bachelor's or master's degree holders (44.0%), followed by diploma graduates (35.0%). Occupationally, private sector employees (32.2%) and entrepreneurs (30.4%) represented the largest groups.

2. Assessment of Measurement Model

The measurement model assessment was conducted in two stages, namely the first-order construct assessment and the second-order construct assessment. The first-order assessment aimed to evaluate the validity and reliability of each construct through convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability tests. Subsequently, the second-order assessment was performed to examine the extent to which the dimensions represented the higher-order constructs. Following the confirmation of the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated using model fit indices, coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), predictive relevance (Q^2), hypothesis testing, and mediation analysis.

First-Order Construct Assessment

Convergent validity was assessed using outer loading values and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). According to Hair et al. (2019), indicators are considered valid when their outer loading values exceed 0.70, while constructs demonstrate adequate convergent validity when AVE values are greater than 0.50. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR), with values above 0.70 indicating satisfactory reliability.

The results show that all indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70. The outer loadings ranged from 0.775 to 0.853 for Affiliate Marketing, 0.750 to 0.827

for Brand Trust, and 0.818 to 0.897 for Visit Intention. These findings indicate that all indicators adequately represent their respective constructs.

Table 2. Construct Reliability and Validity

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Affiliate Marketing (AM)	0.973	0.975	0.683
Brand Trust (BT)	0.960	0.964	0.643
Visit Intention (VI)	0.885	0.921	0.744

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS (2026)

Based on Table 2, all constructs achieved Cronbach's Alpha, and Composite Reliability values above the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming strong internal consistency reliability. Furthermore, all AVE values exceeded 0.50, indicating satisfactory convergent validity. Therefore, all constructs are considered valid and reliable for further analysis.

Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) and the Fornell-Larcker criterion. According to Hair et al. (2019), HTMT values should be below 0.90 to establish discriminant validity.

Table 3. HTMT Ratio

Constructs	AM	BT	VI
Affiliate Marketing (AM)	-		
Brand Trust (BT)	0.720	-	
Visit Intention (VI)	0.770	0.813	-

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS (2026)

As shown in Table 3, all HTMT values are below 0.90, indicating adequate discriminant validity among the constructs.

Table 4. Fornell-Lacker Criterion

Constructs	AM	BT	VI
Affiliate Marketing (AM)	0.826		
Brand Trust (BT)	0.697	0.802	
Visit Intention (VI)	0.715	0.751	0.863

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS (2026)

The Fornell-Larcker results demonstrate that the square root of AVE for each construct is greater than its correlations with other constructs. For example, Affiliate Marketing has a square root of AVE value of 0.826, which is higher than its correlations with Brand Trust (0.697) and Visit Intention (0.715). Similar results are observed for the remaining constructs. Therefore, discriminant validity is established according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Second-Order Construct Assessment

Model Second-Order

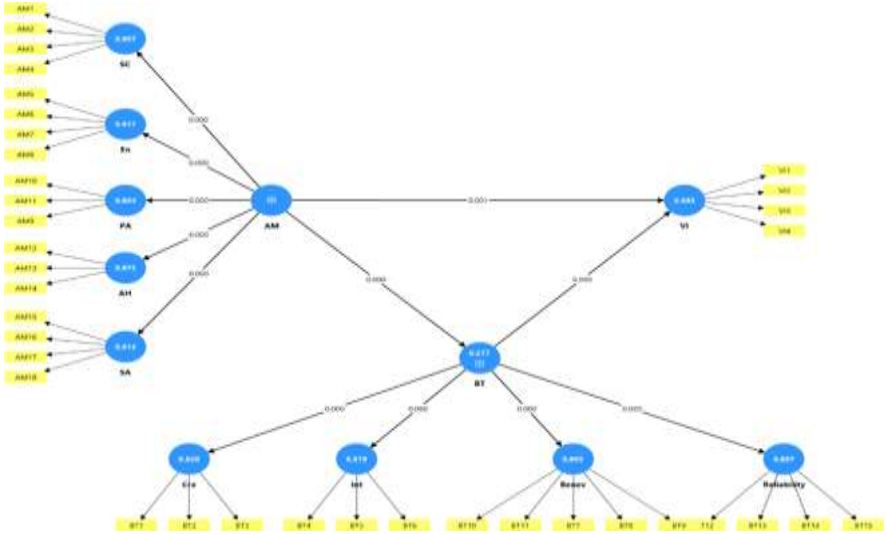

Figure 1. Second-Order Construct Model

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS (2026)

After confirming the validity and reliability of the first-order constructs, the second-order construct assessment was conducted to examine the extent to which the dimensions represent their respective higher-order constructs. The second-order model is presented in Figure 1.

Table 5. Second-Order Construct Assessment

Variabel	Original sample	T statistics	P values
AM → Attitude Homophily	0.935	130.338	0.000
AM → Engagement	0.957	212.712	0.000
AM → Physical Attractiveness	0.929	120.968	0.000
AM → Social Attractiveness	0.955	207.242	0.000
AM → Source Credibility	0.952	205.294	0.000
BT → Benevolence	0.951	152.992	0.000
BT → Credibility	0.908	94.504	0.000
BT → Integrity	0.905	91.905	0.000
BT → Reliability	0.947	157.174	0.000

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS (2026)

The results indicate that all dimensions significantly contribute to the Affiliate Marketing construct. The loading values range from 0.929 to 0.957, with all t-statistics exceeding 1.96 and p-values below 0.05. These findings demonstrate that Attitude Homophily, Engagement, Physical Attractiveness, Social Attractiveness, and Source Credibility are strong representations of Affiliate Marketing.

Similarly, all dimensions significantly contribute to the Brand Trust construct. The loading values range from 0.905 to 0.951, indicating that Benevolence, Credibility, Integrity, and Reliability strongly represent Brand Trust.

Overall, the second-order assessment confirms that all lower-order constructs adequately represent their respective higher-order constructs. Therefore, Affiliate Marketing and Brand Trust can be treated as higher-order constructs in the subsequent structural model analysis.

3. Structural Model Assessment

Model Fit

Table 6. Model Fit

Model Fit	Saturated model	Estimated model	Criteria
SRMR	0.035	0.035	Fit
NFI	0.897	0.897	Marginal Fit

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS (2026)

Structural model assessment began with evaluating the model fit indices. The results show that the SRMR value for both the saturated and estimated models is 0.035, which is below the recommended threshold of 0.08, indicating a good model fit. Furthermore, the NFI value of 0.897 is close to the recommended value of 0.90, suggesting an acceptable level of model fit. Therefore, the proposed model can be considered suitable for further analysis.

Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Table 7. R^2 Results

Variable	R^2	Adjusted R^2
BT	0.486	0.485
VI	0.683	0.682

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS (2026)

The coefficient of determination (R^2) was used to evaluate the explanatory power of the structural model. The results indicate that Affiliate Marketing explains 48.6% of the variance in Brand Trust ($R^2 = 0.486$). Meanwhile, Affiliate Marketing and Brand Trust jointly explain 68.3% of the variance in Visit Intention ($R^2 = 0.683$). These findings indicate a moderate level of explanatory power.

Effect Size(f^2)

Table 8. Effect Size Result

Variable	f^2
AM → BT	0.945
AM → VI	0.195
BT → VI	0.342

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS (2026)

The effect size (f^2) was assessed to determine the contribution of each exogenous construct to the endogenous constructs. The relationship between Affiliate Marketing and Brand Trust shows a large effect size ($f^2 = 0.945$), indicating that Affiliate Marketing plays a substantial role in explaining Brand Trust. The effect of Brand Trust on Visit Intention is also considerable ($f^2 = 0.342$). In contrast, the direct effect of Affiliate Marketing on Visit Intention

is moderate (f^2 = 0.195). These findings suggest that Brand Trust serves as an important mechanism through which Affiliate Marketing influences Visit Intention.

Predictive Relevance (Q^2)

Table 9. Predictive Relevance Result

Variable	Q^2predict
BT	0.479
VI	0.506

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS (2026)

Predictive relevance was evaluated using the Q^2 statistic obtained through the blindfolding procedure. The Q^2 values for Brand Trust (0.479) and Visit Intention (0.506) are both greater than zero, indicating that the model possesses satisfactory predictive relevance and is capable of predicting the endogenous constructs effectively.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 10. Hypothesis Testing Result

Hypothesis / Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1: AM → VI	0.372	5.578	0.000	Supported
H2: AM → BT	0.697	17.569	0.000	Supported
H3: BT → VI	0.492	7.281	0.000	Supported

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS (2026)

The hypothesis testing results indicate that Affiliate Marketing has a positive and significant effect on Visit Intention (β = 0.372, t = 5.578, p < 0.001). Therefore, H1 is supported. Affiliate Marketing also has a positive and significant effect on Brand Trust (β = 0.697, t = 17.569, p < 0.001), supporting H2. Furthermore, Brand Trust significantly influences Visit Intention (β = 0.492, t = 7.281, p < 0.001), supporting H3.

Mediation Analysis

Table 11. Mediation Result

Hypothesis / Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H4: AM → BT → VI (Indirect)	0.343	6.809	0.000	Supported

Source: Data processed with SmartPLS (2026)

The indirect effect of Affiliate Marketing on Visit Intention through Brand Trust is positive and significant (β = 0.343, t = 6.809, p < 0.001). Since both the direct effect (Affiliate Marketing → Visit Intention) and indirect effect (Affiliate Marketing → Brand Trust → Visit Intention) are significant, Brand Trust is considered to partially mediate the relationship between Affiliate Marketing and Visit Intention.

This study examined four research questions pertaining to the influence of affiliate marketing on millennial tourists' visit intention to Bali, with brand trust as a mediating variable. The discussion that follows systematically addresses each research question in light of the empirical findings and positions the results within the broader theoretical and empirical literature.

1. Does Affiliate Marketing Directly Influence Millennials' Visit Intention to Bali? (H1)

The first research question concerned whether affiliate marketing directly enhances millennials' intention to visit Bali. The results affirm this relationship ($\beta = 0.372$, $p = 0.001$), consistent with a growing body of evidence documenting the behavioral influence of influencer-mediated promotional content in tourism contexts (L. V. Casaló et al., 2020; Gretzel et al., 2015). The positive coefficient corroborates source credibility theory (Ohanian, 1990): influencers who credibly represent Bali's destination attributes successfully shift prospective tourists' attitudes in a favorable direction, translating into heightened visit intention.

However, the relatively modest direct effect size ($f^2 = 0.195$) suggests that exposure to affiliate marketing content alone is insufficient to strongly propel behavioral intention. This aligns with (Abubakar et al., 2017), who argue that tourist decision-making is contingent upon psychological mediators beyond informational exposure. Practically, this implies that destination marketers should not rely solely on impression-based affiliate marketing campaigns; rather, campaign design must incorporate mechanisms that cultivate psychological dispositions primarily trust that translate attention into actionable intent.

2. Does Affiliate Marketing Influence Brand Trust Among Millennial Tourists? (H2)

The second research question addressed the effect of affiliate marketing on brand trust. The empirical results reveal a very strong positive effect ($\beta = 0.697$, $p < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.945$), indicating that affiliate marketing exerts a substantial and practically significant influence on brand trust formation among millennial tourists. This finding resonates with Lou and Yuan (Lou & Yuan, 2019), who demonstrate that consistent, high-quality, and transparent influencer communications materially enhance consumer trust in the promoted brand.

The strength of this relationship underscores the trust-transfer mechanism inherent in influencer marketing: parasocial credibility accumulated by influencers is progressively transferred to the destination brand through repeated positive exposures (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Shan et al., 2020). This has significant implications for Bali's destination branding strategy. Given that brand trust is the primary channel through which affiliate marketing ultimately drives visit intention, campaigns should prioritize influencer-destination fit, authenticity of content, and long-term influencer partnerships over short-term reach-based metrics. Influencers whose personal values and audience demographics align with Bali's destination brand identity are most likely to generate meaningful trust outcomes.

3. Does Brand Trust Influence Millennials' Visit Intention to Bali? (H3)

The third research question examined whether brand trust is a significant determinant of visit intention. The results strongly support this proposition ($\beta = 0.492$, $t = 7.281$, $p < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.342$), confirming brand trust as a central predictor of behavioral intention in the destination marketing context. This finding is theoretically grounded in Chaudhuri and Holbrook's brand trust model, which posits that trust reduces consumer risk perceptions and increases confidence in behavioral choices – dynamics particularly salient in the intangible, high-involvement tourism service context (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

From a destination management perspective, this finding reinforces the argument that sustainable growth in tourist arrivals to Bali is contingent upon the continuous maintenance and enhancement of destination brand trust. Factors that can erode trust such as inconsistent service quality, negative media coverage, or misleading promotional claims are therefore strategic liabilities that demand proactive management attention (Keller, 2013). Conversely,

investments in consistent destination experience delivery, transparent communication, and responsive visitor engagement programs can compound trust capital over time, producing durable competitive advantages.

4. Does Brand Trust Mediate the Affiliate Marketing–Visit Intention Relationship? (H4)

The fourth and most theoretically central research question concerned whether brand trust mediates the affiliate marketing–visit intention relationship. The mediation analysis confirms partial complementary mediation (indirect effect $\beta = 0.343$, $p < 0.001$), with the indirect pathway through brand trust substantially exceeding the direct effect. Since both the direct effect of Affiliate Marketing on Visit Intention and the indirect effect through Brand Trust remain significant and point in the same direction, the mediation can be classified as complementary partial mediation. This finding is consistent with the stimulus-organism-response framework (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), wherein affiliate marketing stimuli activate trust-related cognitive and affective responses that, in turn, produce behavioral intention outputs.

The partial mediation pattern implies that affiliate marketing operates through two distinct pathways: a relatively weaker direct persuasion route and a more powerful trust-formation route. This nuanced picture extends prior research by Alghamdi and Abdulwahid, who identify trust as the dominant mechanism linking social media marketing to travel intention, by specifically isolating affiliate marketing as the upstream stimulus in the trust-formation chain (Alghamdi & Abdulwahid, 2025). It also corroborates Salhab et al., who demonstrate that brand trust mediates social media marketing's effect on purchase intention in broader marketing contexts, and extends their findings to the destination visit intention domain (Salhab et al., 2023).

Overall, the findings suggest that affiliate marketing is associated with higher visit intention primarily through its ability to foster brand trust rather than through direct persuasion alone. Destination marketers who invest in trust-generating affiliate partnerships characterized by influencer credibility, content authenticity, and value alignment are therefore likely to achieve superior visit intention outcomes compared to those pursuing high-reach but low-trust promotional configurations.

CONCLUSION

This study provided empirical support for the proposition that affiliate marketing functions as an effective digital marketing mechanism influencing millennials' intention to visit Bali. The mechanism operated not only through direct persuasion but more strongly through the development of brand trust. The findings confirmed that all proposed hypotheses were supported: affiliate marketing positively influenced visit intention (H1) and brand trust (H2), brand trust positively influenced visit intention (H3), and brand trust partially mediated the relationship between affiliate marketing and visit intention (H4). Among these relationships, the mediated pathway through brand trust demonstrated a substantially stronger effect than the direct influence of affiliate marketing on visit intention.

These findings suggested that the effectiveness of affiliate marketing in destination marketing depended not merely on content exposure but also on its ability to foster trust in the destination brand. The results contributed to the existing literature in several ways. Theoretically, this study integrated source credibility theory, parasocial interaction theory, and

the S-O-R framework within the context of digital destination marketing, offering a clearer explanation of how affiliate marketing content is translated into tourists' behavioral intentions through a sequential psychological mechanism. Empirically, the study provided robust PLS-SEM evidence from a large Indonesian millennial sample, extending prior research that had largely focused on general social media marketing by specifically highlighting the role of affiliate marketing as a distinct digital channel influencing tourism behavior.

From a practical standpoint, these findings emphasized the strategic importance of affiliate marketing for destination marketing organizations and tourism stakeholders in Bali, particularly when implemented with a trust-centered approach. Marketers should prioritize alignment between influencers and destination values rather than focusing solely on follower size, as perceived authenticity plays a crucial role in shaping audience responses. In addition, developing long-term partnerships with influencers was recommended to support more consistent and authentic destination storytelling, rather than relying on short-term or campaign-based collaborations.

Furthermore, co-creating content with influencers that emphasizes genuine, firsthand travel experiences can strengthen perceived credibility and deepen audience trust. It is also important for marketers to evaluate campaign performance not only through traditional reach and engagement metrics but also by monitoring trust-related indicators such as audience sentiment and the quality of engagement, as these more accurately reflect the effectiveness of affiliate marketing in driving visit intention.

Despite its contributions, this study had several limitations that should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design limited the ability to draw causal conclusions; therefore, future research could adopt longitudinal approaches to examine how repeated exposure to affiliate marketing content gradually builds brand trust and shapes visit intention over time. In addition, the purposive sampling of Indonesian millennials who had never visited Bali restricted the generalizability of the findings to other demographic groups, including international tourists, different age cohorts, and repeat visitors.

Moreover, the current model did not account for other potentially influential variables such as destination image, perceived risk, electronic word-of-mouth volume, or differences across social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Future studies are encouraged to develop more complex moderated mediation models that examine how platform characteristics and content formats influence the relationship between affiliate marketing, brand trust, and visit intention. Finally, qualitative approaches such as in-depth interviews with both tourists and affiliate marketers could provide deeper insights into the micro-level processes through which trust is formed and strengthened in influencer-mediated tourism contexts.

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