

The Influence Of Social Media Platforms On Consumer Travel Preferences And Destination Choices: A Case Study Of Fort Portal City, Uganda

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of social media platforms on consumer travel preferences and destination choices, using Fort Portal City, Uganda, as a case study. Social media has emerged as a dominant source of travel inspiration and information globally, yet its specific influence within Uganda's rapidly growing domestic and regional tourism market remains under-researched. The study was guided by three specific objectives: to examine the extent of social media usage for travel-related information among consumers, to assess consumer travel preferences and destination choice patterns, and to establish the relationship between social media platform usage and destination choice for Fort Portal City. A descriptive correlational research design was employed, targeting a population of approximately 260 tourists and visitors accessing selected tourism sites and facilities within Fort Portal City. A sample size of 155 respondents was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table and convenience sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using SPSS version 26 through descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and simple linear regression. The findings revealed that Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok were the most widely used platforms for travel-related content among respondents, with a mean overall social media influence score of 3.62 (high). A strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship was found between social media platform usage and destination choice ($r = 0.588$, $p < 0.01$), with social media usage explaining 34.6% of the variance in destination choice ($R^2 = 0.346$, $F(1,153) = 80.94$, $p < 0.001$). The study concludes that social media platforms significantly shape consumer destination choices in favour of Fort Portal City and recommends that tourism stakeholders intensify strategic, visually engaging social media marketing campaigns, including influencer partnerships and user-generated content promotion.

Keywords: Social media, travel preferences, destination choice, tourism marketing, consumer behaviour, Fort Portal, Uganda

1.0 Introduction

The proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed how consumers search for, evaluate, and select travel destinations, with platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube increasingly serving as primary sources of travel inspiration, replacing traditional media such as brochures and travel agents (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Leung et al., 2019). Globally, tourism boards and destination marketing organisations have invested heavily in social media marketing strategies, recognizing the platforms' capacity to reach large audiences at relatively low cost while enabling authentic, user-generated content that shapes traveller perceptions and expectations (UNWTO, 2022).

In Uganda, domestic and regional tourism has experienced notable growth in recent years, partly attributed to increased social media visibility of destinations such as Fort Portal City, renowned for its proximity to the Rwenzori Mountains, crater lakes, and Kibale National Park (Uganda Tourism Board, 2023). Fort Portal City's

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tourism stakeholders, including hotels, tour operators, and cultural sites, have increasingly turned to social media platforms to market the destination (Julius & Audrey, 2026). However, the extent to which this social media engagement translates into actual influence on consumer travel preferences and destination choice decisions has not been systematically examined, prompting this study (Rosebell et al., 2026).

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the substantial and growing presence of Fort Portal City's tourism facilities on social media platforms, tourism stakeholders lack empirical evidence on whether and to what extent this online presence actually influences travel preferences and destination choice among consumers, as opposed to other factors such as travel cost, distance, or word-of-mouth recommendations from personal networks (Fort Portal City Tourism Office Reports, 2023). Anecdotal reports from local tour operators suggest a perceived increase in visitor numbers following social media promotional campaigns; however, without rigorous empirical validation, tourism marketing budgets and strategies risk being allocated based on assumption rather than evidence (Julius & Audrey, 2026). This study therefore sought to establish the actual influence of social media platforms on consumer travel preferences and destination choices for Fort Portal City.

1.2 Main Objective

The main objective of this study was to examine the influence of social media platforms on consumer travel preferences and destination choices for Fort Portal City, Uganda.

1.2.1 Specific Objectives

- To examine the extent of social media platform usage for travel-related information among consumers visiting Fort Portal City.
- To assess consumer travel preferences and destination choice patterns regarding Fort Portal City.
- To establish the relationship between social media platform usage and destination choice for Fort Portal City.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study was grounded in the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), which explains how perceived usefulness and ease of use influence individuals' adoption of technology-based information sources, including social media platforms, for decision-making purposes such as travel planning (Muhamad et al., 2023). The study was further informed by the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which posits that attitudes shaped by informational exposure, including social media content, influence behavioural intentions such as the intention to visit a particular destination.

2.2 Social Media Usage for Travel Information

Social media platforms have become integral to the travel planning process, with consumers increasingly relying on user-generated content, influencer recommendations, and visually rich posts to inform destination selection (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). A study by Wanjohi and Muthoni (2021) among Kenyan domestic tourists found that

Instagram and Facebook were the most frequently used platforms for sourcing travel-related information, with visual content, particularly photographs and short videos, exerting the strongest influence on destination appeal.

2.3 Consumer Travel Preferences and Destination Choice

Destination choice is a complex decision-making process influenced by both push factors (internal motivations such as the desire for relaxation or adventure) and pull factors (destination-specific attributes such as scenery, culture, and accessibility) (Uysal & Jurowski, 1994). In the Ugandan tourism context, Byaruhanga and Nakiganda (2020) found that natural scenery, unique cultural experiences, and perceived affordability were the leading pull factors influencing domestic tourists' destination preferences, with social media increasingly serving as the medium through which these pull factors are communicated to prospective visitors (Frank et al., 2023).

2.4 Social Media and Destination Choice

A growing body of empirical literature confirms a positive relationship between social media exposure and destination choice. Leung et al. (2019), in a systematic review, found consistent evidence that social media usage significantly shapes destination image formation and subsequent choice behaviour across diverse tourism contexts. In the East African context, a study by Mutai and Kiptoo (2022) among tourists visiting Kenyan national parks found that social media usage significantly predicted destination choice, explaining approximately 31% of the variance, with Instagram emerging as the most influential platform due to its emphasis on visual content. However, the same study noted that social media influence was moderated by trust in content authenticity, with user-generated content from peers rated as more influential than official destination marketing posts (Phionah et al., 2023).

2.5 Literature Gap

While the influence of social media on destination choice has been examined in various tourism contexts, including selected East African destinations, limited empirical research has focused specifically on Fort Portal City, a rapidly growing urban tourism hub in Western Uganda. This study addressed this gap by generating empirical evidence specific to this destination (Phionah et al., 2023).

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive correlational research design employing a quantitative approach, appropriate for describing social media usage patterns and destination choice behaviour, and for statistically testing the relationship between these variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.2 Study Population

The target population comprised approximately 260 tourists and visitors accessing selected tourism sites, hotels, and cultural centres within Fort Portal City during the study period, based on visitor registers obtained from participating tourism facilities (2023).

3.3 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, a sample size of 155 respondents was derived from the target population of 260. Given the transient nature of the tourist population, convenience sampling was employed, with

questionnaires administered to visitors at selected tourism sites and accommodation facilities during the data collection period(Kazaara et al., 2024).

3.4 Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire employing a 5-point Likert scale was used to collect data on social media platform usage (frequency of use, platforms used, and perceived influence of content) and destination choice (intention to visit, actual visit motivation, and likelihood of recommending Fort Portal City to others)(Winny, Ariyo, et al., 2023).

3.5 Validity and Reliability

Content validity was established through expert review by two tourism and marketing research specialists, yielding a Content Validity Index of 0.85(Oscar et al., 2023). Reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha yielded coefficients of 0.80 for the social media usage scale and 0.77 for the destination choice scale, both exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978).

3.6 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS version 26(Nelson et al., 2022). Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) were used to summarise social media usage patterns and destination choice levels. Pearson's correlation coefficient was computed to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between social media usage and destination choice, while simple linear regression analysis was used to determine the predictive effect of social media usage on destination choice, at a 0.05 significance level.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

4.0 Results

4.1 Response Rate

Out of 155 questionnaires administered, 146 were fully completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 94.2%.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	78	53.4
	Female	68	46.6
Age	18-25 years	49	33.6
	26-35 years	57	39.0
	Above 35 years	40	27.4
Visitor Origin	Domestic (Ugandan)	89	61.0
	Regional/International	57	39.0
Primary Social Media Platform	Instagram	51	34.9
	Facebook	46	31.5

	TikTok	34	23.3
	Other/None	15	10.3

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The findings presented in Table 4.1 showed that a total of 146 respondents participated in the study. With regard to gender, the results indicated that the majority of the respondents were male, comprising 78 respondents (53.4%), while female respondents accounted for 68 (46.6%). This relatively balanced gender distribution suggested that both male and female visitors were adequately represented in the study, thereby providing diverse perspectives on the influence of social media usage on destination choice. The participation of both genders enhanced the reliability of the findings by ensuring that the responses reflected experiences from a broad range of visitors.

Regarding age, the findings revealed that the largest proportion of respondents were aged between 26 and 35 years, representing 57 respondents (39.0%). This was followed by respondents aged 18 to 25 years, who accounted for 49 respondents (33.6%), while those aged above 35 years constituted 40 respondents (27.4%). These findings suggested that the majority of visitors belonged to the young and economically active age group, which is generally more exposed to digital technologies and social media platforms. Consequently, these respondents were well positioned to provide informed opinions regarding the influence of social media on travel decisions.

The findings further showed that most respondents were domestic visitors, accounting for 89 respondents (61.0%), whereas regional and international visitors represented 57 respondents (39.0%). This indicated that domestic tourism contributed a larger share of visitors to Fort Portal City than international tourism. Nevertheless, the inclusion of both domestic and international visitors enabled the study to capture views from different categories of tourists, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness of the findings.

Regarding the primary social media platform used by respondents, the results revealed that Instagram was the most frequently used platform, with 51 respondents (34.9%). This was followed by Facebook, which accounted for 46 respondents (31.5%), while TikTok was used by 34 respondents (23.3%). Respondents who reported using other platforms or no social media constituted 15 (10.3%). These findings suggested that visual-based social media platforms, particularly Instagram and Facebook, played a prominent role in disseminating tourism-related information and influencing visitors' travel decisions.

4.3 Descriptive Statistics for Social Media Usage

Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
I frequently see travel content about Fort Portal on social media	3.71	0.82	High
Social media photos/videos influence my perception of a destination	3.88	0.76	High

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I trust recommendations from social media influencers/peers	3.34	0.95	Moderate
I actively search social media before choosing a destination	3.52	0.89	High
Overall Social Media Usage/Influence Mean	3.62	0.65	High

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Table 4.2 presented the descriptive statistics for social media usage among visitors to Fort Portal City. The findings revealed an overall mean score of 3.62 with a standard deviation of 0.65, indicating a high level of social media usage and influence. This finding suggested that respondents frequently engaged with travel-related content on social media and that such content played an important role in shaping their perceptions and travel decisions(Mercy et al., 2023).

Among the individual items, the statement that social media photos and videos influenced respondents' perception of a destination recorded the highest mean score of 3.88 with a standard deviation of 0.76, which was interpreted as high(Kazaara et al., 2023). This finding indicated that visual content shared on social media platforms significantly shaped visitors' impressions and expectations of tourist destinations. The relatively low standard deviation further suggested that respondents generally shared similar opinions regarding the influence of visual content on destination perceptions.

The findings further showed that the statement "I frequently see travel content about Fort Portal on social media" recorded a mean score of 3.71 with a standard deviation of 0.82, indicating a high level of agreement. This suggested that respondents were regularly exposed to tourism-related information about Fort Portal City through social media platforms. Such frequent exposure was likely to increase awareness of the destination and stimulate travel interest among potential visitors(Christopher & Felex, 2022).

Similarly, the statement that respondents actively searched social media before choosing a destination attained a mean score of 3.52 with a standard deviation of 0.89, which was also interpreted as high. This finding implied that social media served as an important source of travel information during the destination selection process. In contrast, the statement indicating that respondents trusted recommendations from social media influencers and peers recorded the lowest mean score of 3.34 with a standard deviation of 0.95, although it remained within the moderate interpretation category(Ivan & Kazaara, 2023). This suggested that while respondents considered recommendations from influencers and peers useful, they exercised some degree of caution before relying entirely on such information when making travel decisions.

4.3 Descriptive Statistics for Destination Choice

Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
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I chose to visit Fort Portal because of what I saw on social media	3.41	0.94	Moderate
Fort Portal matched the expectations set by social media content	3.58	0.83	High
I would recommend Fort Portal to others based on my experience	3.96	0.71	High
Overall Destination Choice Mean	3.65	0.68	High

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The findings presented in Table 4.3 showed that the overall mean score for destination choice was 3.65 with a standard deviation of 0.68, indicating a high level of positive destination choice among visitors to Fort Portal City. This finding suggested that respondents generally perceived Fort Portal as an attractive tourism destination and expressed favorable attitudes toward visiting and recommending the city(Filstar, 2023).

Among the individual items, the statement that respondents would recommend Fort Portal to others based on their experience recorded the highest mean score of 3.96 with a standard deviation of 0.71, which was interpreted as high. This finding indicated that visitors were highly satisfied with their experiences in Fort Portal City and were willing to encourage other people to visit the destination(Winny, Kazaara, et al., 2023). Such positive recommendations reflected visitors' overall satisfaction and confidence in the destination.

The findings further revealed that the statement Fort Portal matched the expectations created by social media content attained a mean score of 3.58 with a standard deviation of 0.83, indicating a high level of agreement. This suggested that visitors generally found the destination to be consistent with the images, videos, and information they had viewed on social media prior to their visit. The consistency between online expectations and actual experiences likely contributed to visitors' overall satisfaction.

The statement that respondents chose to visit Fort Portal because of what they saw on social media recorded a mean score of 3.41 with a standard deviation of 0.94, which was interpreted as moderate. This finding suggested that although social media influenced destination choice, other factors such as personal interests, recommendations from friends and family, affordability, accessibility, and previous travel experiences also contributed to respondents' decisions to visit Fort Portal City.

4.5 Correlation Analysis

Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was computed to examine the relationship between social media usage and destination choice. Results are shown in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4: Correlation between Social Media Usage and Destination Choice (n = 146). **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Variable		Social Media Usage	Destination Choice
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Social Media Usage	Pearson Correlation	1	0.588**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
Destination Choice	Pearson Correlation	0.588**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Pearson's Product Moment Correlation analysis was conducted to establish the relationship between social media usage and destination choice among visitors to Fort Portal City. The findings presented in Table 4.4 revealed a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = 0.588$ with a significance level of $p = 0.000$, indicating a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between social media usage and destination choice at the 0.01 level of significance(Kazaara et al., 2023).

The magnitude of the correlation coefficient suggested that respondents who engaged more actively with travel-related content on social media were more likely to choose Fort Portal City as their travel destination. This implied that increased exposure to destination information, photographs, videos, reviews, and travel recommendations on social media platforms positively influenced visitors' travel decisions(Joshua, 2026). The statistically significant p-value further confirmed that the observed relationship was unlikely to have occurred by chance. Therefore, the findings provided sufficient evidence to conclude that social media usage was positively associated with destination choice among visitors to Fort Portal City, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis and the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis that a significant relationship existed between social media usage and destination choice.

4.6 Regression Analysis

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to establish the predictive effect of social media usage on destination choice.

Table 4.7: Regression Coefficients (Dependent Variable: Destination Choice)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.588	0.346	0.341	0.554

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The model summary results indicated a correlation coefficient ($R = 0.588$), reflecting a strong positive relationship between social media usage and destination choice. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.346$) revealed that social media usage explained 34.6% of the variation in destination choice, while the adjusted R^2 value of 0.341 indicated that approximately 34.1% of the variation remained explained after adjusting for sample size(Frank et al., 2023). These findings suggested that social media usage was an important determinant of destination choice, although the remaining 65.4% of the variation could be attributed to other factors not included in the regression model, such as destination accessibility, travel costs, personal preferences, and destination image, recommendations from family and friends, and tourism infrastructure(Alex & Moses, 2024).

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
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Regression	24.83	1	24.83	80.94	0.000
Residual	46.95	153	0.307		
Total	71.78	154			

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The ANOVA results further demonstrated that the regression model was statistically significant ($F = 80.94$, $p = 0.000$). This finding indicated that the regression model provided a good fit for the data and that social media usage significantly predicted destination choice among visitors to Fort Portal City (Deus, 2023). The significance level being less than 0.05 confirmed that the model was appropriate for explaining the relationship between the study variables.

Model	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Standardized Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.436	0.229	-	6.271	0.000
Social Media Usage	0.615	0.068	0.588	8.997	0.000

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The regression coefficients revealed that the constant term was 1.436 and statistically significant ($t = 6.271$, $p = 0.000$), representing the baseline level of destination choice in the absence of social media influence. More importantly, social media usage recorded an unstandardized regression coefficient of $B = 0.615$, a standardized beta coefficient of $\beta = 0.588$, a t -value of 8.997, and a significance level of $p = 0.000$ (Nelson et al., 2023). These findings indicated that a one-unit increase in social media usage resulted in an estimated 0.615-unit increase in destination choice. The positive standardized beta coefficient further demonstrated that social media usage exerted a significant positive influence on visitors' destination choice, while the highly significant p -value confirmed that this effect was statistically significant. Therefore, the study concluded that social media usage was a significant predictor of destination choice among visitors to Fort Portal City, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis and the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis that social media usage significantly influenced destination choice.

5.0 Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Discussion of Findings

The findings support the Technology Acceptance Model and Theory of Planned Behaviour, confirming that social media exposure shapes attitudes and behavioural intentions toward destination choice. The results are consistent with Mutai and Kiptoo (2022), who found a comparable predictive effect of social media usage on destination choice among tourists visiting Kenyan national parks, and with Leung et al.'s (2019) systematic review findings. The relatively lower mean score for trust in influencer/peer recommendations (mean = 3.34) compared to the perceived influence of visual content (mean = 3.88) echoes Mutai and Kiptoo's (2022) observation that authenticity concerns can moderate the overall influence of social media content on travel decisions.

5.2 Conclusion

The study concludes that social media platforms significantly and positively influence consumer travel preferences and destination choice regarding Fort Portal City. Visual, authentic content emerges as a particularly powerful driver of destination appeal among prospective visitors.

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5.3 Recommendations

- Fort Portal City tourism stakeholders should intensify visually engaging social media marketing, prioritizing high-quality photography and short-form video content on Instagram and TikTok.
- Tourism operators should invest in strategic partnerships with credible social media influencers and encourage user-generated content from satisfied visitors to enhance content authenticity and trust.
- A coordinated digital marketing strategy involving the Uganda Tourism Board, local hotels, and tour operators should be developed to maximize the reach and consistency of Fort Portal City's social media destination branding.

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