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## Testing the Influencer Marketing Model in Iran's Tourism Industry

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to test impactful marketing in Iran's tourism industry. This study is applied in terms of its objective and descriptive-survey in terms of data collection method. The statistical population in the quantitative section consists of foreign tourists visiting Iran, and according to the World Tourism Organization's latest report, it announced the continuation of the upward trend of foreign tourist arrivals to Iran in 2024. The statistics from this organization indicate that 5.9 million foreign tourists visited Iran in the past 12 months of the Gregorian calendar year. Based on Cochran's formula, at a 95% confidence level and a measurement error of  $\alpha = 5\%$ , a sample size of 385 individuals was selected. Considering the nature of the topic, simple random sampling was used to select the statistical sample in this study. To collect data related to the variables, a researcher-developed questionnaire adapted from Ghavami and colleagues' (2024) doctoral dissertation was employed. In this research, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to determine the reliability coefficient. Composite reliability and the reliability of each research component were calculated, and the results indicate the reliability of the measurement instrument. Moreover, discriminant and convergent validity of the questionnaire confirm its adequate validity. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used for data analysis, employing SmartPLS 4 software. The results indicate the factor loadings, significance levels, and relationships among the main and secondary themes of the impactful marketing framework in Iran's tourism industry. Furthermore, the coherence and model fit of the derived impactful marketing framework in Iran's tourism industry were evaluated as appropriate. Therefore, it can be stated that this framework, by focusing on identifying suitable influencers, producing attractive content, continuous engagement with audiences, and utilizing emerging technologies, can play a fundamental role in enhancing Iran's position in the global tourism industry.

**KEYWORDS:** Impactful marketing, tourist attraction, tourism industry, influencers

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## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, with the expansion of the online and digital economy, the number of websites and online shopping platforms has increased significantly, and hundreds of thousands of users purchase their needed products and services through these platforms daily. Digital marketing has experienced rapid growth, with millions of dollars invested in digital marketing tools (Ashaari et al., 2025).

Indeed, tourism is widely recognized as a key driver of economic and social development and poverty reduction (Fan et al., 2014). One of the essential factors influencing customers' perception of a company is the selection of an appropriate communication tool to introduce the company's products and services. Advertising has gained widespread acceptance as a means of conveying information to large audiences. When companies seek to raise awareness about their products and services, they utilize both well-known and lesser-known individuals (Zedan & Salem, 2016). The rise of social media has fundamentally reshaped the way people interact and communicate. These factors play a crucial role in facilitating greater accessibility and penetration. Engagement, reach, emotions, and growth are pivotal in determining the effectiveness of social media influencers (Arora et al., 2019).

The use of celebrities to endorse products and services in television, radio, billboards, and magazine advertising campaigns is on the rise. In today's world, organizations allocate a significant portion of their marketing budgets to leveraging such individuals to boost product sales. In recent years, the introduction of the "Story" feature on Instagram and Facebook, along with the ability to embed direct links to websites, has transformed influencer advertising. Beyond traditional methods such as posting images and content, influencers can now directly invite their audiences to visit specific websites. A celebrity is defined as an individual widely recognized by a large segment of society, who leverages this recognition to establish effective communication with consumers through appearances in advertisements (Roy et al., 2013). Impactful marketing is a form of marketing in which messages are not communicated directly to the audience. Instead, key individuals within the target audience are selected, and messages are conveyed through them. These key individuals are those whom the target audience trusts and is influenced by. Over time, an influencer builds a credible online persona by consistently sharing valuable content and thereby gains the ability to shape their followers' opinions and behaviors. The content shared by an influencer typically centers around a specific domain, and their views within that domain are regarded as trustworthy and credible by their followers (Kutthakaphan & Chokesamritpol, 2013). Designing an effective impactful marketing framework can not only enhance market share but also foster tourist trust and loyalty. This is particularly crucial in a highly competitive industry where customers seek reliable and efficient solutions. Furthermore, given the rapid advancement of digital technologies, companies that effectively leverage these tools will be better positioned for market success (Alshurideh et al., 2025).

Impactful marketing is one of the most transformative marketing strategies in the tourism industry. By harnessing social networks and the persuasive power of influencers, it helps shift consumer behavior and promotes tourism destinations. This marketing approach not only enables the development of lesser-known destinations but also creates substantial value for tourism businesses by fostering deeper engagement, building trust, and reducing advertising costs (Zhang & Huang, 2022). At the same time, authenticity, transparency, and ethical considerations in this form of marketing are essential to achieving desirable outcomes. Therefore, impactful marketing represents an emerging area in marketing, and developing an appropriate framework for it can serve as a highly valuable instrument for advancing Iran's tourism industry. The findings of this research can lead to the identification and formulation of practical guidelines for the future development of impactful marketing in Iran's tourism sector by highlighting its significance in attracting both domestic and international tourists.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations and Literature Review

In today's world, impactful marketing has become one of the key tools for attracting customers across various industries, including tourism. This approach leverages the persuasive power of social media influencers to foster closer engagement with potential customers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Impactful marketing is a form of marketing in which communication with the audience is not direct, and messages are not sent straight to consumers (Zhang & Huang, 2022). Instead, marketers identify key individuals within their target audience and convey their messages through them (Kutthakaphan & Chokesamritpol, 2013).

The tourism industry is a dynamic service sector facing intense global competition and undergoing continuous change. Consequently, innovation in creating and sustaining competitive advantage has become critically important. Innovation capability includes the potential to adopt and utilize new technologies to enhance productivity and management, which are regarded as key competitive factors (Zhang & Huang, 2022). Like other production or service sectors, the tourism industry requires innovative advancements to remain viable; otherwise, its products or services risk obsolescence and diminished demand. Social media, which harnesses global opportunities, can play a significant role in this process through stakeholder collaboration (Labanauskaitė et al., 2020). Given that tourism heavily relies on personal experiences and recommendations, impactful marketing can improve destination image, increase brand awareness, and generate travel intent (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020).

Among the theoretical frameworks related to impactful marketing is the **Social Influence Theory**, which posits that individuals tend to be influenced by the behaviors, attitudes, and recommendations of others. In impactful marketing, influencers act as sources of social power and play a crucial role in shaping tourists' attitudes and decision-making (Kilipiri et al., 2023). Additionally, **Social Exchange Theory** suggests that social interactions are formed through the exchange of valuable resources. Influencers enhance audience loyalty by providing valuable

content (e.g., travel experiences) and encourage positive engagement with brands (Sesar et al., 2021). **Experiential Marketing Theory** emphasizes that customer experiences are the primary driver of brand value. Impactful marketing, by focusing on influencers' personal experiences, evokes emotions and excitement among tourists, thereby increasing their intention to visit or purchase (Zhang & Huang, 2022).

Impactful marketing has emerged as a powerful and effective instrument in the tourism industry, playing a pivotal role in attracting tourists, enhancing destination image, and fostering cultural interactions. This approach not only contributes to sustainable tourism development but also strengthens human connections and creates unique experiences for travelers. In today's competitive landscape, leveraging impactful marketing can serve as a core strategy for advancing national tourism industries.

Polat et al. (2024), in a study titled "Past, present, and future scene of influencer marketing in hospitality and tourism management," conducted a comprehensive review of research on influencer marketing within tourism and hospitality. Co-citation analysis reveals that recent studies have primarily focused on travel blogs, vlogs, celebrity endorsements, and influencer credibility. Bibliographic coupling indicates that influencer marketing research has largely centered on travel blogs, vlogs, celebrity endorsements, and influencer authenticity. This hybrid review contributes to both theory and practice by mapping the past, present, and future of influencer marketing research in this domain. Kilipiri et al. (2023), in their study titled "Social media and influencer marketing for promoting sustainable tourism destinations: The Instagram case," demonstrated that travel influencers on Instagram, as social media communicators, exhibit a positive relationship with the selection of sustainable destinations. However, their use of geotagged content did not significantly increase travelers' inclination toward such choices. Yangjuan Hu (2020) examined the effectiveness of localized celebrity endorsements for brands on Chinese social media. The study analyzed whether Chinese celebrities generate more social media engagement compared to Western celebrities. Findings indicated that local celebrity influence is most effective when moderated by patriotism. Specifically, endorsements by local (vs. international) celebrities led to higher social media engagement. Moreover, using international celebrities enhanced brand value more for consumers with low (vs. high) levels of patriotism. Castillo and Santos (2019), in a paper titled "The role of digital influencers in brand recommendation: Examining their impact on engagement, expected value and purchase intention," argued that digital influencers not only foster engagement but also enhance perceived value and behavioral intentions toward recommended brands. This study provides deeper insight into the power of digital influencers and offers practical guidance for companies developing social media communication strategies.

Arora et al. (2019), in a study titled "Measuring social media influencer index—Insights from Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram," identified engagement, reach, sentiment, and growth as critical factors in determining social media influencers. Their findings have implications across various

domains, including e-commerce, viral marketing, social media marketing, and brand management—areas where identifying effective influencers is essential. Ganga and Dhanesh (2019), in a paper titled “Relationship management through social media influencers: Effects of followers’ awareness of paid endorsement,” found that followers’ awareness of paid endorsements is associated with the influencer–follower relationship and correlates with purchase intention and electronic word-of-mouth. However, mere recognition of advertising content does not negatively affect the influencer–follower relationship. The theoretical implications of these findings are further discussed in their work. Stubbe and Jonas (2019), in a study titled “The effects of impartiality disclosure and e-commerce landing pages on consumer responses to social media influencer posts,” noted that social media influencers routinely share opinions about products and brands. Their findings revealed that when impartiality disclosures are presented concurrently with influencer posts, brand attitude and purchase intention decrease.

Audrezet et al. (2018), in a paper titled “Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation,” argued that social media influencers (SMIs) increasingly collaborate with brands for product promotion. While SMIs can monetize their influence through brand partnerships, such collaborations risk undermining their perceived authenticity. The study concludes that both influencers and companies require guidance on how to collaborate effectively to create win-win relationships while preserving influencer authenticity. Ghotbivayghan et al. (2015), in a study titled “Effect of celebrity endorsement on consumer’s perception of corporate image, corporate credibility and corporate loyalty,” examined the impact of celebrity endorsements on young consumers’ fashion apparel purchases in Hong Kong. Results indicated that young consumers are significantly influenced by advertisements featuring celebrities promoting fashion apparel and hold positive attitudes toward brands using such endorsements. Suki (2014), in a study titled “Does celebrity credibility influence Muslim and non-Muslim consumers’ attitudes toward brands and purchase intention?” found that celebrity expertise and consumer attitudes toward brands are more strongly predicted among Muslim consumers than non-Muslim consumers. Additionally, Muslim consumers’ faith and trust may be linked to their perception of celebrity-endorsed products and services that align with Sharia-compliant and Islamic principles.

Overall, despite extensive research on impactful marketing, theoretical gaps remain regarding its application in attracting tourists to Iran. Notably, limited studies have addressed the role of Iran’s indigenous cultural context and its influence on tourist behavior. Developing a comprehensive model that incorporates local influencers and appropriate digital platforms could significantly contribute to the advancement of Iran’s tourism industry.

### 3. Research Methodology

This study is applied in terms of its purpose and descriptive-survey in terms of data collection approach. The data collection method employed in this research is quantitative. The statistical population for the quantitative component consists of foreign tourists visiting Iran. According to

the latest report by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Iran continues to experience an upward trend in inbound tourism, with approximately 5.9 million international visitors recorded over the past 12 months of the Gregorian calendar year (2024). Based on Cochran's formula, with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ), a sample size of 385 respondents was determined. Given the nature of the research topic, simple random sampling was used to select the statistical sample.

To collect data related to the research variables, a researcher-developed questionnaire adapted from Ghavami et al.'s (2024) doctoral dissertation was utilized. In this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was employed to assess reliability. Composite reliability and the reliability of each research construct were calculated, and the results confirm the reliability of the measurement instrument. Furthermore, both discriminant and convergent validity analyses indicate that the questionnaire possesses adequate validity.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed for data analysis using SmartPLS 4 software.

#### 4. Findings

To evaluate model fit, we examined the measurement model fit, structural model fit, and overall model fit. To assess the reliability of the measurement model, we analyzed factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and composite reliability values. The threshold criterion for acceptable factor loadings is 0.4. All factor loadings for the questionnaire items exceeded 0.4, indicating that this criterion is satisfied.

According to the SmartPLS 4 data analysis algorithm, after assessing the factor loadings, the next step involves calculating and reporting Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability coefficients. The second criterion for evaluating measurement model fit is convergent validity, which examines the extent to which each construct correlates with its respective indicators (items). The results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Results of Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for the Latent Variables

Latent Variables	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha > 0.7$ )	Composite Reliability (CR > 0.7)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE > 0.5)
Enhancing Audience Engagement	0.702	0.778	0.624
Utilization of Emerging Marketing Technologies	0.858	0.859	0.779
Implementation of Targeted Campaigns	0.717	0.744	0.645

<b>Emphasis on Iran's Competitive Advantages</b>	0.853	0.874	0.774
<b>Creation and Distribution of Engaging Content</b>	0.703	0.743	0.629
<b>Measurement and Evaluation of Marketing Effectiveness</b>	0.845	0.860	0.763
<b>Identification and Selection of Suitable Influencers</b>	0.869	0.874	0.795

Given that the acceptable threshold for both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability is 0.7, and as shown in Table 1 above, all latent variables meet or exceed this criterion, the reliability of the research instrument is confirmed. Similarly, since the acceptable threshold for Average Variance Extracted (AVE) is 0.5, and all latent variables in Table 1 report AVE values above this benchmark, convergent validity of the measurement model is also supported.

To assess discriminant validity, the Fornell–Larcker criterion was employed. The results are presented in Table 2. Discriminant validity is confirmed because the square root of the AVE (shown on the diagonal) for each latent variable is greater than its correlations with all other latent variables in the model.

**Table 2.** Fornell–Larcker Criterion for Discriminant Validity

<b>Latent Variables</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
1. Enhancing Audience Engagement	<b>0.790</b>						
2. Utilization of Emerging Marketing Technologies	0.550	<b>0.883</b>					
3. Implementation of Targeted Campaigns	0.520	0.507	<b>0.803</b>				
4. Emphasis on Iran's Competitive Advantages	0.295	0.341	0.340	<b>0.880</b>			
5. Creation and Distribution of Engaging Content	0.454	0.488	0.344	0.380	<b>0.793</b>		
6. Measurement and Evaluation of Marketing Effectiveness	0.330	0.348	0.238	0.318	0.757	<b>0.874</b>	
7. Identification and Selection of Suitable Influencers	0.456	0.499	0.354	0.426	0.941	0.621	<b>0.891</b>

(Note: Values in bold on the diagonal represent the square roots of the AVE for each construct; off-diagonal values represent inter-construct correlations.)

**Overall Structural Model Fit:** Chin (1998) proposed thresholds of 0.19, 0.33, and 0.67 for  $R^2$  to indicate weak, moderate, and strong explanatory power, respectively. As shown in Table 3, the structural model of this study demonstrates acceptable overall fit, with most constructs exhibiting moderate to strong explanatory power.

**Table 3.** R<sup>2</sup> and Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> Values

Latent Variable	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>
Enhancing Audience Engagement	0.614	0.613
Utilization of Emerging Marketing Technologies	0.665	0.664
Implementation of Targeted Campaigns	0.371	0.369
Emphasis on Iran's Competitive Advantages	0.424	0.423
Creation and Distribution of Engaging Content	0.639	0.638
Measurement and Evaluation of Marketing Effectiveness	0.385	0.384
Identification and Selection of Suitable Influencers	0.670	0.669

The second indicator of structural model fit is the Q<sup>2</sup> predictive relevance index. This criterion assesses the model's predictive power. According to Hair et al. (2017), Q<sup>2</sup> values greater than 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 indicate weak, moderate, and strong predictive relevance, respectively, for endogenous constructs. In this study, all endogenous constructs yielded Q<sup>2</sup> values above 0.35, confirming strong predictive relevance and further validating the structural model fit.

According to Henseler et al. (2014), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) should be below 0.10, and more conservatively below 0.08, to indicate acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). In the present study, the overall model fit is evaluated as appropriate based on this criterion.

**Table 4.** Results of Overall Model Fit: SRMR and NFI

Fit Index	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.092	0.090
NFI	0.919	0.919
d_ ULS	2.322	2.322
d_ G	1.412	1.412

The Normed Fit Index (NFI), also known as the Bentler–Bonett Index, is a comparative fit index that evaluates the model by comparing the chi-square value of the independence model with that of the saturated model. NFI values above 0.90 are generally considered acceptable and indicative of good model fit.

Additionally, bootstrap confidence intervals are used to assess the significance of differences in fit indices. For the d\_ ULS (Euclidean distance) and d\_ G (geodesic distance) criteria, values greater than 0.05 are considered indicative of adequate model fit. In this study, both d\_ ULS (2.322) and d\_ G (1.412) substantially exceed the 0.05 threshold, further confirming the model's acceptable fit.

By default, SmartPLS 4 tests path coefficients at the 95% confidence level. The critical t-value at this confidence level is  $\pm 1.96$ . Therefore, any path coefficient with an absolute t-value greater than 1.96 is considered statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

**Table 5.** Direct Paths and Significance Test Results for Research Hypotheses

Path	Path Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	T-Value	p-value	Result
Impactful Marketing → Enhancing Audience Engagement	0.783	41.057	0.000	Accepted
Impactful Marketing → Utilization of Emerging Marketing Technologies	0.815	45.886	0.000	Accepted
Impactful Marketing → Implementation of Targeted Campaigns	0.609	14.623	0.000	Accepted
Impactful Marketing → Emphasis on Iran's Competitive Advantages	0.651	10.236	0.000	Accepted
Impactful Marketing → Creation and Distribution of Engaging Content	0.799	39.488	0.000	Accepted
Impactful Marketing → Measurement and Evaluation of Marketing Effectiveness	0.621	13.844	0.000	Accepted
Impactful Marketing → Identification and Selection of Suitable Influencers	0.819	40.417	0.000	Accepted

As shown in Table 5, all hypothesized paths are statistically significant, with t-values well outside the  $\pm 1.96$  critical range and p-values below 0.001. This confirms that all proposed relationships in the model are significant at the 95% confidence level.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the impactful marketing framework for attracting tourists to Iran's tourism industry is composed of seven interrelated core themes: identification and selection of suitable influencers, creation and distribution of engaging content, implementation of targeted campaigns, enhancement of audience engagement, utilization of emerging marketing technologies, emphasis on Iran's competitive advantages, and measurement and evaluation of marketing effectiveness. Among these, the most influential theme is the identification and selection of suitable influencers ( $\beta = 0.819$ ), followed by the utilization of emerging marketing technologies ( $\beta = 0.815$ ), creation and distribution of engaging content ( $\beta = 0.799$ ), enhancement of audience engagement ( $\beta = 0.783$ ), emphasis on Iran's competitive advantages ( $\beta = 0.651$ ), measurement and evaluation of marketing effectiveness ( $\beta = 0.621$ ), and implementation of targeted campaigns ( $\beta = 0.609$ ). A deeper analysis of sub-themes—based on factor loadings—shows that within influencer selection, credibility and authenticity (0.936), relevance to tourism (0.904), and access to target audiences (0.831) are paramount; in technology adoption, advanced digital platforms (0.916), data

analytics (0.867), and AR/VR applications (0.864) stand out; for content creation, storytelling (0.883), interactivity (0.826), and high-quality visuals (0.653) are key drivers; audience engagement is most effectively fostered through active interaction prompts (0.880), community belonging (0.859), and strategic hashtag use (0.599); Iran's competitive edge is best communicated by highlighting Iranian hospitality (0.919), cultural and historical heritage (0.917), and pristine natural landscapes (0.798); campaign evaluation relies most heavily on pre- and post-campaign comparisons (0.931), ROI tracking (0.856), and feedback analysis (0.831); and targeted campaigns achieve greatest impact through precise audience targeting (0.892), market segmentation (0.827), and co-branded initiatives (0.673). These results are largely consistent with prior studies by Polat et al. (2024), Sesar et al. (2021), Campbell and Farrell (2020), Femenia-Serra and Gretzel (2020), and Audrezet et al. (2018), collectively confirming that the themes do not operate in isolation but function as a dynamic, synergistic system in which market intelligence underpins strategic decisions across all dimensions.

This integrated framework—centered on authentic influencer partnerships, culturally resonant and emotionally compelling content, continuous two-way engagement, and the strategic deployment of digital innovation—holds significant potential to elevate Iran's position in the global tourism landscape. However, realizing this potential requires coordinated collaboration among national tourism organizations, local and international influencers, digital agencies, and data analysts, alongside real-time monitoring of campaign performance to ensure agility and relevance. To further strengthen this ecosystem, several practical measures are recommended: establishing a verified, searchable database of tourism-focused influencers with performance metrics; producing short-form, visually rich storytelling content that highlights Iran's cultural depth, historical legacy, and natural beauty on high-traffic platforms; designing culturally tailored campaigns for specific source markets based on socioeconomic and psychographic segmentation; incentivizing user-generated content through contests or exclusive offers for tourists who share their experiences online; implementing virtual reality (VR) previews of key destinations to attract global audiences in the pre-travel phase; crafting messaging that emphasizes Iran's affordability, hospitality, and unique heritage as competitive differentiators; and leveraging advanced analytics to track KPIs and iteratively optimize marketing strategies.

Looking ahead, future research could explore “The Impact of AI-Driven Influencer Marketing on Attracting International Tourists to Iran,” examining how artificial intelligence can enable hyper-personalization, predictive audience targeting, automated content generation, and real-time sentiment analysis to enhance the effectiveness of influencer campaigns. Such inquiry would not only expand the theoretical understanding of digital tourism marketing but also provide actionable, technology-forward strategies for Iran to compete more effectively in an increasingly dynamic and competitive global tourism market.

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#### ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Authenticity of the texts, honesty and fidelity has been observed.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Author/s confirmed no conflict of interest.