



Sport and tourism: how Indonesian Gen Z promotes destinations and travel intentions through marathon event?

Deporte y turismo: ¿cómo la Generación Z de Indonesia promueve destinos y sus intenciones de viaje a través de eventos de maratón?

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Received: 06-10-25
Accepted: 17-10-25

How to cite in APA

Jamalulel, I., Liu, L.-wei, & Sihombing, A. (2026). Sport and tourism: how Indonesian Gen Z promotes destinations and travel intentions through marathon event?. *Retos*, 75, 159-173. <https://doi.org/10.47197/retos.v75.117797>

Abstract

Introduction: Marathon events have become an important part of sport tourism, attracting participants who also help promote destinations. For Indonesian Gen Z, marathon experiences and social media engagement can strongly influence destination image and travel intentions.

Objective: This study analyzes how marathon experience and social media engagement impact destination image and travel intentions among Indonesian Gen Z, with destination image acting as a mediator.

Methodology: A quantitative survey was conducted with 317 Indonesian Gen Z who joined marathon events. Data were collected using a 4-point Likert scale, and PLS-SEM was used to assess measurement.

Results: Both marathon experience and social media engagement significantly influence destination image and travel intention. Destination image mediates these relationships. The model demonstrates good explanatory power and predictive relevance.

Discussion: Engaging marathon experiences and social media enhance destination attractiveness among Gen Z, consistent with prior research on sport tourism and event marketing.

Conclusions: Marathon events serve as both sporting and promotional tools, strengthening destination image and encouraging travel among Gen Z tourists. Combining experiential event design with social media strategies can effectively promote destinations and support sustainable sport tourism in Indonesia.

Keywords

Sport tourism; destination image; travel intention; generation z; marathon events.

Resumen

Introducción: Los maratones se han convertido en un elemento clave del turismo deportivo, atrayendo a participantes que también contribuyen a promocionar destinos. Para la generación Z indonesia, las experiencias en maratones y la participación en redes sociales pueden influir notablemente en la imagen del destino y en sus intenciones de viaje.

Objetivo: Este estudio analiza cómo la experiencia en maratones y el uso de redes sociales impactan la imagen del destino y las intenciones de viaje entre la generación Z indonesia, con la imagen del destino como mediador.

Metodología: Se encuestó a 317 jóvenes de la generación Z que participaron en maratones. Los datos se recopilaron mediante una escala Likert de 4 puntos y se utilizó PLS-SEM para evaluar mediciones y relaciones estructurales.

Resultados: La experiencia en maratones y la participación en redes sociales influyen significativamente en la imagen del destino y en la intención de viajar. La imagen del destino media estas relaciones y el modelo muestra buen poder explicativo.

Discusión: Las experiencias positivas en maratones y el uso activo de redes sociales aumentan el atractivo del destino para la generación Z, coincidiendo con estudios previos en turismo deportivo y marketing de eventos.

Conclusiones: Los eventos de maratón actúan como herramientas deportivas y promocionales que refuerzan la imagen del destino y fomentan los viajes entre la generación Z. Integrar experiencias del evento con estrategias en redes sociales puede apoyar el turismo deportivo sostenible en Indonesia.

Palabras clave

Turismo deportivo; imagen del destino; intención de viaje; generación Z; eventos de maratón.

Introduction

Sport tourism has emerged as a powerful force in promoting destinations and has evolved into one of the most dynamic sectors in the global travel industry, combining physical activity, leisure, and destination experience. Among its various forms, marathon events have gained prominence as a form of experiential travel that fosters local development and enhances destination branding (Higham & Hinch, 2018; Getz & Page, 2019). It not only promotes physical well-being and community spirit but also catalyzes economic growth, social interaction, and cultural exchange (Esmaeili Mahyari et al., 2025). They enable destinations to showcase unique local attractions while offering participants immersive, memorable experiences that go beyond competition.

In Indonesia, such as the Jakarta Marathon, Borobudur Marathon, and Bali Marathon have become integral to tourism promotion strategies. These events highlight Indonesia's natural landscapes and cultural richness, supporting the government's agenda for sustainable tourism and regional economic empowerment (Murtono et al., 2024). Prior research suggests that large-scale events can significantly enhance destination image, local identity, and visitor satisfaction (Jeong & Kim, 2020; Kaplanidou & Potwarka, 2024). Event participation often stimulates word-of-mouth and revisit intention, which are crucial for destination loyalty (Tkatch et al., 2025).

Marathon events serve as strategic tools for destination promotion by providing memorable experiences that highlight local culture, natural landscapes, and community engagement. A study highlights that active participants in marathon events in Thailand found that higher perceived event quality positively influences satisfaction; in turn, satisfaction leads to a more favorable destination image, which then increases behavioral intentions (Jantori, 2023). An image of a sports event positively affects the image of a heritage destination, which then enhances tourist loyalty to that heritage site (Du et al., 2025). Another study showed that environmental stimuli from the marathon (e.g., route landscapes) positively shape both cognitive and affective destination images, which then mediate participants' revisit intentions (Duan & Wu, 2024).

Parallel to this trend is the emergence of Generation Z as a transformative force in global tourism. As digital natives, Gen Z travelers value authenticity, visual storytelling, and shareable experiences (Anward et al., 2025). Their travel behavior is deeply intertwined with social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, where they co-create and share content that shapes perceptions of destinations (Li et al., 2025). Studies have shown that user-generated content has a strong impact on destination image and travel intention (Chung & Koo, 2015; Lin & Rasoolimanesh, 2024). In Indonesia, Social media engagement in digital storytelling has been found to enhance tourism awareness and influence peer travel decisions (Nugroho et al., 2025).

Scholars have also linked marathon participation with psychological and emotional experiences that foster attachment to destinations. Kaplanidou and Vogt (2010) found that event satisfaction and emotional engagement predict stronger destination image and revisit intention. Similarly, Chen et al. (2021) argued that marathon events generate "experiential loyalty," where participants' satisfaction translates into future tourism behavior. These findings align with Pine and Gilmore's (1999) Experience Economy Theory, which emphasizes that memorable experiences, such as participating in a marathon in a scenic or cultural setting, enhance perceived value and emotional connection.

Furthermore, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides a useful framework for understanding travel intention, suggesting that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence an individual's decision to visit a destination (Ajzen, 1991; Lam & Hsu, 2006). When combined with social media engagement, these intentions can be amplified through digital influence and peer validation, especially among younger audiences (Li et al., 2018; Alalwan, 2018).

While previous research has examined marathon events, sport tourism, and social media engagement individually, there is limited understanding of how these elements intersect to influence destination image and travel intentions, particularly among Indonesian Generation Z. This knowledge gap is significant because Generation Z represents a highly active, digitally connected, and experience-oriented traveler segment, whose behaviors can shape tourism promotion and destination marketing strategies. To address the identified gaps, this study examines how marathon experience and social media engage-

ment influence destination image and travel intentions among Indonesian Generation Z travelers. It investigates the direct effects of marathon participation and digital engagement on destination image, the impact of destination image on travel intention, and the mediating role of destination image in these relationships. Addressing this gap is crucial to understanding how marathon experiences combined with social media engagement can drive travel intentions and enhance destination branding in Indonesia. Most existing studies focus separately on sports tourism, destination marketing, or social media behavior without exploring their intersections. But understanding how Indonesian Gen Z promotes travel destinations and travel intentions through marathon experiences is also essential to explore in tourism research.

Therefore, this study investigates the relationships among marathon experience, destination image, social media engagement, and travel intention, providing both theoretical insights and practical guidance for sports event managers and tourism policymakers. It aims to provide a conceptual understanding of how marathon tourism can be leveraged as a strategy for destination branding and youth engagement in Indonesia's tourism development.

Literature Review

Marathon Events and Tourism Promotion

Marathon events have evolved beyond athletic competitions into powerful tools for destination marketing and branding. They attract both domestic and international participants, generating economic impacts and increasing destination visibility (Fam et al., 2020). In Indonesia, events such as the Borobudur Marathon, Jakarta Marathon, and Bali Marathon serve as promotional platforms showcasing cultural heritage, landscapes, and hospitality (Pitanatri et al., 2025).

Marathon participation contributes to emotional experiences that shape positive perceptions of destinations (Yamaguchi, 2025). Liu et al. (2024) further noted that event quality and satisfaction significantly affect participants' loyalty and revisit intentions. These findings align with the event tourism theory, emphasizing that event experiences can enhance a destination's image and attractiveness (Deng & Li, 2014). Therefore, the unique experiential and symbolic aspects of marathon events are key determinants of how participants, especially Generation Z, perceive and promote destinations.

Generation Z and Social Media Engagement

Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) represents a digitally native cohort characterized by high social connectivity, preference for authentic experiences, and reliance on peer-generated content (Shen et al., 2024). Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube play a central role in how consumers share experiences, express identity, and influence others' decisions (Jamalulel et al., 2025). Social media engagement not only amplifies word-of-mouth promotion but also strengthens destination awareness and image (Alghamdi & Wahid, 2024). Studies have found that users' emotional connection and content-sharing behavior on social media significantly influence travel intention (Arica et al., 2022).

The integration of digital storytelling and marathon participation has become a means of destination advocacy, where runners document routes, local scenery, and cultural experiences—creating viral tourism content (Kasemsarn & Nickpour, 2025). Social media engagement functions as both a mediator and amplifier of destination perception among Gen Z marathon participants.

Destination Image

Destination image refers to the totality of perceptions, beliefs, and emotions that tourists associate with a place (Styliadis et al., 2017). It has both cognitive (knowledge-based) and affective (emotional) dimensions (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). A strong destination image enhances visitor satisfaction, intention to visit, and recommendation behavior (Yuan & Vui, 2023). Research in Indonesia shows that destination image significantly influences visit intention (Nurazizah & Marhanah, 2020; Choirisa et al., 2021). Marathon participants' exposure to a destination's scenery, organization, and cultural elements shapes their perceptions of the destination's quality and appeal (Weed, 2007). Moreover, social media acts as a visual narrative that strengthens destination image formation through shared photos, videos, and live updates

from marathon events (Blanco-Gómez & Gómez-Ortiz, 2024). This interplay between event experience, media engagement, and destination image becomes central to understanding Gen Z's travel motivation.

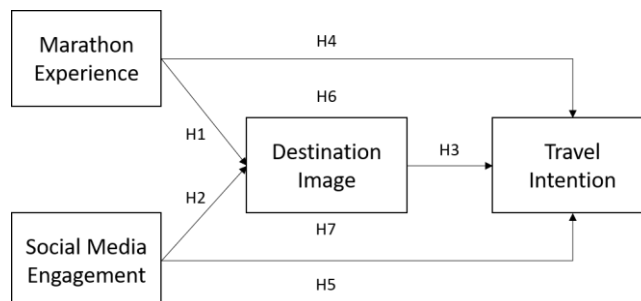
Travel Intention

Travel intention represents an individual's likelihood of visiting a particular destination, based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). It is influenced by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, all of which can be shaped by online information and experiences. Studies have shown that positive destination image and meaningful event experiences significantly enhance intention to travel (Kutlu & Ayyıldız, 2021; Kaplanidou, 2006). In the context of Generation Z, influencer and social media exposure amplify their desire to travel to places seen as authentic, photogenic, and experience-rich (Francis, 2024; Moni et al., 2025). Thus, marathon events that offer scenic, well-organized, and socially shareable experiences may directly and indirectly increase travel intention among Gen Z participants.

Hypothesis Development

The proposed model integrates marathon experience, social media engagement, destination image, and travel intention, reflecting both direct and indirect effects. Generation Z's digital-native behavior and propensity for experiential tourism provide a theoretical foundation for these relationships. Testing these hypotheses will clarify how marathon events contribute to destination promotion and travel behavior among young Indonesian travelers. The proposed model integrates marathon experience, social media engagement, destination image, and travel intention, reflecting both direct and indirect effects. Generation Z's digital-native behavior and propensity for experiential tourism provide a theoretical foundation for these relationships. Testing these hypotheses will clarify how marathon events contribute to destination promotion and travel behavior among young Indonesian travelers. Figure 1 shows the research model of this study. Each hypothesis is grounded in prior studies, theories of tourism and event experiences, and the characteristics of Generation Z travelers.

Figure 1. The Research Model



Based on the literature reviewed, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Marathon Experience positively influences destination image.

H2: Social media engagement positively influences destination image.

H3: Destination image positively influences travel intention.

H4: Marathon Experience positively influences travel intention.

H5: Social media engagement positively influences travel intention.

H6: Marathon Experience positively influences travel intention through destination image.

H7: Social media engagement positively influences travel intention through destination image.

Method

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey method to examine the relationships between marathon experience, social media engagement, destination image, and travel intention among Indonesian Generation Z. Quantitative methods allow researchers to test hypotheses statistically and identify correlations and causal paths among latent constructs (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A descriptive and causal-explanatory design is applied to explain how marathon participation and digital engagement shape destination image and travel behavior. Data are collected once at a single point in time using a self-administered online questionnaire distributed through social media and running communities.

Population and Sampling

The target population of this study comprises Indonesian Generation Z (aged 18–28) who have participated in or followed local marathon events such as the Jakarta Marathon, Borobudur Marathon, and Bali Marathon within the last 5 years. A purposive sampling method was used to select participants who belonged to the Indonesian Generation Z (ages 18–27) and had attended marathon events. This approach ensured that respondents had relevant experience with both marathon participation and potential social media engagement related to the event, focusing on respondents who:

- Are Indonesian nationals within the Gen Z category.
- Have participated in or engaged with marathon events either as runners, spectators, or through social media interaction.

This sample size was considered sufficient based on statistical power requirements for PLS-SEM analyses. The “10-times rule” recommends at least ten times the maximum number of structural paths pointing to any construct in the model (Wagner & Grimm, 2023). With four predictors for the most complex construct, the minimum required sample is 40, making the actual sample size more than adequate for robust structural modeling and reliable results.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using a self-administered online survey distributed through social media platforms and running communities associated with marathon events. Data are gathered through a structured online questionnaire designed in Google Forms. The data collection took place over eight months from January to August 2025. Participants provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire, and data were collected at a single point in time (cross-sectional design).

Research Instrument

The instrument consists of five sections: demographic information, marathon experience, social media engagement, destination image, and travel intention. All measurement items use a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree, ensuring both granularity and ease of response for participants.

The research instrument consists of a structured questionnaire designed to measure four latent constructs: Marathon Experience (ME), Social Media Engagement (SME), Destination Image (DI), and Travel Intention (TI). Marathon Experience is measured using four items adapted from Kaplanidou and Vogt (2010), capturing the participants’ personal experiences and perceptions of event quality. Social Media Engagement, also measured with four items, is adapted from Ozimek, Brailovskaia & Bierhoff (2023), assessing the frequency and intensity of sharing, posting, and interacting with marathon-related content. Destination Image is captured through five items based on Lu et al. (2020), reflecting both cognitive and affective evaluations of the marathon destination. Finally, Travel Intention, measured with four items adapted from Škorić, Mikulić & Barišić (2021), evaluates participants’ likelihood to revisit or recommend the destination. This instrument has been validated through expert review and pilot testing to ensure content clarity, reliability, and construct validity, providing a robust foundation for quantitative analysis using PLS-SEM. A pilot test involving 20 respondents is conducted to ensure clarity, reliability,

bility, and content validity of the instrument. Reliability is assessed using Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) values (threshold > 0.70), while validity is confirmed through Average Variance Extracted (AVE) (> 0.50) and discriminant validity using the HTMT ratio (< 0.90) (Henseler et al., 2015; Hair et al., 2021).

Data Analysis

The collected data will be analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) through SmartPLS 4.0, which is suitable for examining complex relationships between latent constructs and handling non-normal data distributions. The analysis begins with the measurement model (outer model) to assess reliability and validity. Reliability is evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR), with values above 0.70 considered acceptable. Convergent validity is assessed through Average Variance Extracted (AVE), with values exceeding 0.50 indicating that the items adequately represent their latent constructs. Discriminant validity is examined using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT), ensuring values below 0.90 to confirm that constructs are distinct. Once the measurement model is confirmed, the structural model (inner model) is assessed by examining path coefficients, t-values, and p-values obtained through bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples. This procedure allows for testing all hypothesized direct and indirect relationships between Marathon Experience, Social Media Engagement, Destination Image, and Travel Intention, providing empirical evidence to support or refute the proposed hypotheses.

Results

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 317 Gen Z respondents who participated in this study. The majority of respondents are female (56.5%), with most aged between 21 and 23 years (49.2%), representing the core of Indonesia's Generation Z segment.

Table 1. Demographic Overview of Participants

Profile	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	138	43.5
	Female	179	56.5
Age Group	18–20 years	92	29
	21–23 years	156	49.2
	24–26 years	69	21.8
Education Level	Senior High School	57	18
	Undergraduate (Bachelor's)	214	67.5
	Postgraduate (Master's/Doctorate)	46	14.5
Monthly Allowance	Below IDR 2,000,000	101	31.9
	IDR 2,000,001–4,000,000	142	44.8
	Above IDR 4,000,000	74	23.3
Marathon Experience	1–2 events	121	38.2
	3–5 events	137	43.2
	More than 5 events	59	18.6
Main Source of Travel Information	Social Media	222	70
	Friends/Family	58	18.3
	Online News/Blogs	37	11.7

In terms of education, the majority hold an undergraduate degree (67.5%), reflecting a young, educated population actively engaged in travel and sports events. Regarding income, 44.8% reported a monthly allowance between IDR 2,000,001–4,000,000, suggesting moderate spending power suitable for domestic travel. Most respondents have participated in 3–5 marathon events (43.2%), indicating a growing interest in sports tourism among youth. Social media is identified as the primary source of travel information (70%), supporting the premise that digital engagement plays a crucial role in shaping travel behavior and destination awareness among Indonesian Gen Z travelers.

Table 2. Construct Validity and Reliability

Construct	Items	Outer Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composit Reliability (CR)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Marathon Experience (ME)	ME1	0.902	0.931	0.932	0.828
	ME2	0.919			
	ME3	0.905			
	ME4	0.912			
Social Media Engagement (SME)	SME1	0.872	0.904	0.904	0.776
	SME2	0.877			
	SME3	0.878			
	SME4	0.897			
Destination Image (DI)	DI1	0.890	0.924	0.924	0.766
	DI2	0.880			
	DI3	0.854			
	DI4	0.869			
	DI5	0.884			
Travel Intention (TI)	TI1	0.893	0.924	0.932	0.778
	TI2	0.868			
	TI3	0.892			
	TI4	0.874			

The measurement model was evaluated for indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, and convergent validity. As shown in Table 2 and Figure 1, all outer loadings for the indicators exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, ranging from 0.854 to 0.919, indicating that each item strongly reflects its respective construct (Hair et al., 2021). The Cronbach's Alpha values for all constructs ranged between 0.904 and 0.931, surpassing the minimum criterion of 0.70, confirming excellent internal reliability. Similarly, the Composite Reliability (CR) values were between 0.904 and 0.932, suggesting high internal consistency across the items used to measure each construct. Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were all above 0.50, specifically between 0.766 and 0.828, demonstrating strong convergent validity, meaning that a substantial portion of variance in the indicators is explained by their underlying latent constructs.

Figure 1. Measurement Model Results



Discriminant validity ensures that each construct is empirically distinct from others within the model. It was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) as suggested by Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2015). Table 3 displays the HTMT values among the latent constructs: Marathon Experience (ME), Social Media Engagement (SME), Destination Image (DI), and Travel Intention (TI).

All HTMT values are below the conservative threshold of 0.85 (and well under the liberal threshold of 0.90), indicating strong discriminant validity among the constructs (Henseler et al., 2015; Hair et al., 2021).

Table 3. HTMT Ratio Results

Construct	DI	ME	SME	TI
DI	-			
ME	0.757	-		
SME	0.568	0.580	-	
TI	0.568	0.463	0.491	-

This means that the constructs such as: Marathon Experience, Social Media Engagement, Destination Image, and Travel Intention are conceptually distinct and do not exhibit significant overlap.

Consequently, the measurement model satisfies the requirements for both convergent and discriminant validity, confirming that each latent construct represents a unique theoretical concept in the model. This establishes a solid foundation for evaluating the structural relationships among the variables in the next stage of analysis.

Table 4 presents the R^2 , Adjusted R^2 , Q^2 predict, RMSE (Root Mean Square Error), and MAE (Mean Absolute Error) for the general structural model examining the relationships among Marathon Experience, Social Media Engagement, Destination Image, and Travel Intention.

The R^2 values indicate the proportion of variance in the endogenous constructs explained by the predictor variables. In this study, Destination Image (DI) has an R^2 of 0.524, suggesting that marathon experience and social media engagement explain approximately 52.4% of the variance in DI. Meanwhile, Travel Intention (TI) has a lower R^2 of 0.270, meaning that about 27% of the variance is accounted for by the predictors, indicating a moderate level of explanatory power. The Adjusted R^2 values (DI = 0.521; TI = 0.268) are slightly lower, accounting for model complexity, and confirming the stability of the model's explanatory capacity. The Q^2 predict values (DI = 0.518; TI = 0.212) are positive, demonstrating that the model has predictive relevance for both constructs (Shmueli et al., 2019). Positive Q^2 values indicate that the model can reliably predict out-of-sample observations, reinforcing its robustness beyond the sample data.

Table 4. R-Square Statistics Model Goodness of Fit Statistics

Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Q^2 predict	RMSE	MAE
Destination Image (DI)	0.524	0.521	0.518	0.7	0.559
Travel Intention (TI)	0.27	0.268	0.212	0.895	0.708

The RMSE and MAE values provide further insight into predictive accuracy. The DI construct has RMSE = 0.7 and MAE = 0.559, while TI shows RMSE = 0.895 and MAE = 0.708. These results indicate that the model predicts Destination Image more accurately than Travel Intention, though both constructs fall within acceptable prediction error ranges for behavioral research. Overall, these indicators demonstrate that the structural model possesses adequate explanatory power, predictive relevance, and accuracy, supporting its use for understanding how marathon experiences and social media engagement influence destination image and travel intention among Gen Z travelers.

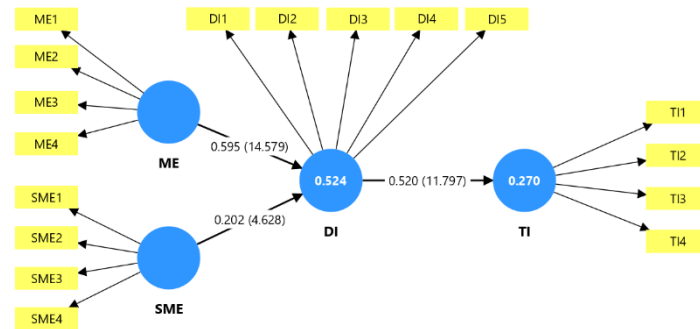
Table 5 and Figure 2 explain the structural model that was tested to examine the hypothesized relationships among Marathon Experience (ME), Social Media Engagement (SME), Destination Image (DI), and Travel Intention (TI).

All hypothesized relationships were found to be statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming the proposed conceptual framework. Specifically, Marathon Experience (H1) had the strongest effect on Destination Image ($\beta = 0.595$, $t = 14.579$), suggesting that positive experiences during marathon events significantly enhance participants' perceptions of the host destination. Similarly, Social Media Engagement (H2) exerted a moderate yet significant influence on Destination Image ($\beta = 0.202$, $t = 4.268$), indicating that online interactions, sharing, and exposure to marathon-related content improve destination perceptions. In turn, Destination Image (H3) strongly predicted Travel Intention ($\beta = 0.520$, $t = 11.797$), confirming that favorable perceptions of the destination lead to higher intentions to visit or revisit. Direct effects also show that both Marathon Experience positively influence Travel Intention (H4) with t -values, 8.806 & p -values, 0.000, and Social Media Engagement influences Travel Intention (H5) with t -values, 4.070 & p -values, 0.000, highlighting that experiential and digital engagement both drive travel motivation among Gen Z travelers. Moreover, the indirect paths (H6 and H7) demonstrate significant mediation effects through Destination Image, revealing that participants' experiences and social media interactions shape travel intentions primarily by enhancing their image of the destination.

Table 5. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypotheses	Path	T-values	P-values	Decision
H1	ME -> DI	14.579	0.000	Supported
H2	SME -> DI	4.628	0.000	Supported
H3	DI -> TI	11.797	0.000	Supported
H4	ME -> TI	8.806	0.000	Supported
H5	SME -> TI	4.070	0.000	Supported
H6	ME -> DI -> TI	8.806	0.000	Supported
H7	SME -> DI -> TI	4.070	0.000	Supported

Figure 2. Structural Model



Discussion

The findings reveal that marathon experiences significantly shape the destination image and travel intention of Indonesian Gen Z travelers, underscoring the role of sport tourism as both an experiential and promotional mechanism. The strong path coefficient from Marathon Experience (ME) → Destination Image (DI) ($\beta = 0.595$, $p < 0.001$) indicates that engaging in marathon events fosters favorable perceptions of the host destination. This aligns with Kirkup & Sutherland (2017), who found that satisfaction and emotional involvement during sport events enhance participants' attachment to the event's location. Marathon events provide immersive experiences that evoke feelings of achievement, belonging, and pride, which are crucial components of experiential branding (Schmitt, 1999; Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2010). The influence of Social Media Engagement (SME) on both Destination Image ($\beta = 0.202$, $p < 0.001$) and Travel Intention ($\beta = 0.105$, $p < 0.001$) supports previous studies emphasizing the digital behavior of younger travelers. Gen Z, often labeled as "digital natives," utilizes social media not only to consume but also to co-create tourism experiences (Ivasciuc et al., 2025; Yamagishi et al., 2024). User-generated content, such as marathon photos or running vlogs, reinforces the symbolic meaning of the destination and serves as a trusted source of travel inspiration (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). As Lund et al. (2018) suggest, digital storytelling transforms individual participation into collective destination narratives that shape public perception.

The mediating role of Destination Image between experience and behavioral intention is consistent with Chen and Tsai (2007) and Baniya and Paudel (2016), confirming that perception acts as a cognitive bridge linking affective experience to behavioral response. When participants associate marathon events with scenic landscapes, supportive communities, and cultural richness, they internalize these positive cues into a favorable image of the destination. This reinforces the assertion by Tasci and Gartner (2007) that both cognitive (knowledge-based) and affective (emotion-based) components of image contribute to future travel intentions. The strong effect of DI → TI ($\beta = 0.520$, $p < 0.001$) supports this theoretical linkage and aligns with Zhang et al. (2024), who found that event satisfaction and destination image jointly predict revisit intentions among sport tourists.

The direct influence of Marathon Experience on Travel Intention ($\beta = 0.309$, $p < 0.001$) further underscores the strategic importance of sport events in promoting host destinations. This outcome supports Getz and Page's (2019) framework on event tourism, which posits that well-managed sport events can stimulate tourism demand by generating positive associations and emotional value. Similarly, Sato et al. (2018) argue that meaningful experiences derived from sport participation lead to higher destination loyalty and word-of-mouth promotion. For Gen Z travelers, who value authenticity, social belonging, and

health-oriented lifestyles, marathon events fulfill psychological and social needs while simultaneously encouraging exploration and travel.

The findings indicate that marathon experiences and active social media engagement significantly influence destination image and travel intention among Indonesian Generation Z. Engaging and well-designed marathon events not only enhance participants' satisfaction but also foster emotional attachment and "experiential loyalty," aligning with prior research on sport tourism and event marketing. From a practical standpoint, sports event managers can leverage these insights by designing marathons that provide immersive, culturally rich, and visually appealing experiences. Integrating interactive elements, local attractions, and shareable moments can enhance participants' engagement both onsite and online. Tourism policymakers, especially for Indonesian institutions or organization, can use these events strategically to promote regional destinations, support sustainable tourism initiatives, and target younger audiences who are highly active on social media platforms.

The results also highlight the mediating role of destination image, suggesting that positive perceptions of the location amplify the impact of marathon participation and digital engagement on travel intentions. Therefore, coordinated marketing efforts that combine event planning with social media campaigns can maximize the promotional potential of marathon events.

From the digital marketing perspective, the significant role of Social Media Engagement confirms that digital communication is central to destination branding. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are vital arenas for user expression, self-representation, and place promotion. This supports the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), where perceived social norms and attitudes derived from online interactions influence behavioral intentions. Research by Chiengkul et al. (2025) and Cheng et al. (2020) further highlights how digital engagement can strengthen tourists' emotional bonds and increase their likelihood of travel. In the context of Indonesia's emerging digital tourism landscape, these findings reveal how marathon participants transform into active "digital ambassadors," extending the reach of destinations through peer influence.

This study contributes to theory by extending the application of the Experience Economy Theory (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) to the context of marathon tourism among Generation Z travelers. While prior research has primarily examined experiential value in traditional tourism settings, our findings show that marathon events also serve as immersive experiences that shape destination image and travel intention. Additionally, the study advances the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) by integrating social media engagement as an antecedent that influences attitudes and perceived attractiveness of destinations. This integration demonstrates how digital participation can function as an experiential input that reinforces behavioral intentions, especially among digitally native generations. By linking marathon experience, digital engagement, and destination perception in a single model, the study challenges the conventional separation of sport tourism and destination marketing research and introduces a more holistic framework suitable for youth-oriented tourism analysis.

The findings align with earlier research showing that marathon participation enhances destination perceptions and strengthens emotional attachment. Kaplanidou and Vogt (2010) similarly found that positive event experiences increase destination image and revisit intention, supporting the role of experiential factors in shaping travel behavior. Consistent with Chen et al. (2021), the present study confirms that marathon events create memorable experiences that translate into future tourism-related attitudes among participants. Furthermore, the strong influence of social media engagement corresponds with the findings of Li et al. (2018), who demonstrated that user-generated content significantly shapes destination perceptions among young travelers. However, the study diverges from work by Tkatch et al. (2025), who reported a direct effect of social media engagement on travel intention; in our results, the effect operates primarily through destination image. This difference suggests that for Indonesian Generation Z, social media may influence travel behavior indirectly by shaping how they perceive the destination rather than directly motivating travel decisions. Such nuanced differences reinforce the need to consider cultural and generational contexts when examining digital engagement in tourism.

Overall, this study integrates event experience theory and digital engagement theory to illustrate the dual pathways through which sport tourism drives destination branding and travel behavior. The results provide empirical evidence that sport tourism in the digital era is not limited to physical participa-

tion but extends into digital ecosystems that sustain emotional connection and brand recall. By combining on-ground experience and online engagement, destinations can create a dynamic cycle of promotion that resonates with Gen Z's values of authenticity, health, and connectivity. Sport tourism events like marathons act as catalysts for destination branding and travel decision-making in the Gen Z segment. Integrating event experience and digital engagement provides a holistic understanding of how modern travelers form intentions. These insights suggest that tourism boards and event organizers should not only focus on the operational success of the event but also on post-event digital strategies that extend the destination's visibility and emotional resonance beyond the race itself.

Conclusions

This study set out to explore how marathon experiences and social media engagement influence destination image and travel intention among Indonesian Gen Z travelers. Using PLS-SEM analysis of 317 respondents, all proposed hypotheses were supported, revealing that experiential and digital factors play complementary roles in shaping destination perceptions and behavioral intentions.

The results indicate that marathon events serve as powerful experiential platforms that enhance both emotional attachment and cognitive evaluation of destinations. A positive marathon experience not only strengthens the destination image but also directly increases participants' intentions to visit or revisit the host location. Similarly, social media engagement significantly improves both destination image and travel intention, showing that Gen Z travelers rely heavily on digital platforms for inspiration, validation, and sharing experiences. Importantly, destination image mediates these relationships, confirming that favorable perceptions are the central mechanism linking experiences and digital engagement to travel behavior.

Implications

From a theoretical standpoint, the study enriches event tourism and destination marketing literature by integrating experiential marketing theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior to explain how Gen Z's event participation and social media behaviors shape their travel decisions. The model demonstrates the interconnected nature of experience, engagement, and perception, highlighting a holistic pathway from event-based experience to travel intention.

In terms of managerial implications, the findings suggest that tourism boards and event organizers should view marathon events as destination marketing tools. Strategic collaborations between sports event planners and local tourism authorities can amplify destination branding through participant experiences and digital storytelling. Enhancing event quality, emotional engagement, and social media interactivity can lead to stronger destination images and higher travel interest among young travelers.

Marathon events function not only as sporting activities but also as strategic promotional tools that enhance destination image and stimulate travel intentions among Generation Z tourists in Indonesia. By providing immersive and culturally engaging experiences, these events foster emotional attachment and experiential loyalty, encouraging participants to share their experiences on social media and influence peers' travel decisions. For sports event managers, this highlights the importance of designing marathons that incorporate local attractions, interactive elements, and visually appealing moments that are shareable online.

From a policy perspective, governments and tourism stakeholders in Indonesia can use marathon events to promote regional destinations and foster sustainable tourism. Encouraging Gen Z involvement in sports tourism not only diversifies the tourism market but also supports health, culture, and community engagement goals. Tourism policymakers can leverage these events to strengthen regional branding, attract younger audiences, and support sustainable tourism initiatives. Moreover, the integration of experiential event design with targeted digital engagement demonstrates how sport tourism can serve as a bridge between recreation, marketing, and destination development. Overall, marathon

events represent a multifaceted tool that not only promotes physical activity and community engagement but also drives tourism growth and reinforces the strategic use of social media in destination promotion.

Limitations and Future Research

While the study provides robust quantitative insights, it is limited by its cross-sectional design and focus on Gen Z participants in Indonesia. The cross-sectional design restricts the ability to establish causal relationships between marathon experience, social media engagement, destination image, and travel intention. The sample is limited to Indonesian Generation Z participants who attended specific marathon events, which may reduce the generalizability of the findings to other age groups, cultures, or types of sport tourism events. Also, self-reported data may be influenced by social desirability bias, particularly regarding travel intentions and online engagement. Finally, while PLS-SEM is effective for analyzing structural relationships, it may not fully capture unobserved contextual factors affecting participants' perceptions and behaviors. Future research could adopt longitudinal or cross-cultural approaches to explore whether these relationships hold across different generations or destinations. Additionally, incorporating qualitative data (e.g., interviews or social media text mining) could deepen understanding of how digital narratives and event experiences co-create destination meaning.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the valuable support and cooperation received from all participants who contributed their time and insights to this research. Special appreciation is extended to the Indonesian Gen Z marathon participants who willingly shared their experiences and perspectives, making this study possible. Sincere gratitude is expressed to the Department of Business Administration, Chaoyang University of Technology, Taiwan, for providing academic guidance and research facilities. Finally, appreciation is extended to colleagues and peers who offered encouragement, as well as to family and friends for their constant motivation throughout this research journey.

Financing

This research received no external funding.

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