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Digital Marketing, Brand Reputation and Luxury Hotel Choice in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of integrated digital marketing (DM) in shaping luxury hotel choice (LHC) among international tourists in an emerging market, with brand reputation (BR) as a partial mediator. **Purpose:** The study addresses conceptual fragmentation in hospitality research by analyzing DM as an integrated system and clarifying its direct and indirect effects on consumer choice behavior. **Method:** A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted among international guests at eleven five-star hotels in Hue City, Vietnam ($n = 489$). DM was modeled as a second-order formative construct comprising seven reflective dimensions. Data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling with bootstrapping. **Results:** DM strongly influences LHC and significantly enhances BR. BR also positively affects LHC; however, its mediating role is limited. The variance accounted for indicates a low-level partial mediation structure, suggesting that most of the total effect of DM operates through direct pathways. **Contributions:** The study contributes by modeling DM as a coordinated higher-order construct and integrating signaling theory with environmental stimulus theory. It provides context-specific evidence from an emerging tourism destination and offers managerial implications for prioritizing digital strategies while identifying directions for future research on resource allocation and emerging digital technologies.

Keywords: luxury hotel choice; brand reputation; higher-order formative construct; PLS-SEM; electronic word of mouth; emerging tourism destination; hospitality marketing; international tourists; online travel agencies

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ОРИГИНАЛЬНАЯ СТАТЬЯ

Цифровой маркетинг, репутация бренда и выбор роскошного отеля во Вьетнаме

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Данное исследование анализирует роль интегрированного цифрового маркетинга в формировании выбора роскошных отелей международными туристами на развивающемся рынке с учетом репутации бренда в качестве частичного медиатора. **Цель:** исследование направлено на преодоление концептуальной фрагментации в научной литературе по гостиничному маркетингу путем рассмотрения цифрового маркетинга как интегрированной системы и уточнения его прямого и косвенного влияния на поведение потребителей при выборе. **Метод:** проведено количественное кросс-секционное исследование среди международных гостей одиннадцати пятизвездочных отелей города Хюэ, Вьетнам ($n = 489$). Цифровой маркетинг был смоделирован как формирующий конструкт второго порядка, включающий семь рефлексивных измерений. Данные были проанализированы с использованием метода частичных наименьших квадратов (PLS-SEM) с процедурой бутстрэппинга. **Результаты:** цифровой маркетинг оказывает значительное влияние на выбор роскошных отелей и существенно повышает репутацию бренда. Репутация бренда также

положительно влияет на выбор отеля, однако ее медирующая роль является ограниченной. Показатель доли объясненной дисперсии свидетельствует о низком уровне частичного медиирования, что указывает на преобладание прямых эффектов цифрового маркетинга. **Вклад:** исследование вносит вклад в развитие научной литературы, моделируя цифровой маркетинг как интегрированный конструкт более высокого порядка и объединяя теорию сигналов с теорией стимулов среды. Работа предоставляет контекстно-специфические эмпирические данные для развивающегося туристического направления и формулирует управленческие рекомендации по приоритизации цифровых стратегий, а также определяет направления для будущих исследований, включая распределение ресурсов и развитие цифровых технологий.

Ключевые слова: выбор роскошного отеля; репутация бренда; формативная конструкция второго порядка; PLS-SEM; электронное «сарафанное радио»; формирующееся туристское направление; маркетинг в гостиничном бизнесе; международные туристы; онлайн-туристские агентства

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1. Introduction

Digital transformation has restructured information flows and competitive signaling mechanisms in the hospitality industry. Luxury hotels increasingly rely on integrated digital channels to communicate value propositions and reduce pre-consumption uncertainty in international markets. Websites, search engine marketing (SEM), social media platforms, online reviews, email campaigns, digital advertising, and content-based storytelling function as primary decision interfaces between hotels and potential guests [1–3]. Empirical evidence indicates that these digital environments significantly influence evaluation processes and booking intention in luxury hospitality contexts [4–6].

The strategic role of digital communication becomes more pronounced in emerging markets characterized by institutional variation and higher information asymmetry. International tourists evaluating unfamiliar destinations frequently depend on digital signals when assessing quality and credibility [7–9]. Vietnam provides a relevant empirical context, as rapid growth in the five-star segment has coincided with increasing digital reliance among international travelers [10, 11].

Despite the expanding body of research on digital hospitality strategy, the literature remains conceptually fragmented. Many studies examine individual instruments such as website quality (WQ), search engine optimization, or online reviews in isolation [12–14]. Other contributions focus on engagement metrics or managerial performance outcomes rather than integrated consumer decision mechanisms [15, 16]. Such approaches do not fully capture the coordinated deployment of multiple digital tools in contemporary luxury hotel strategy

[17, 18]. More importantly, limited research explains how an integrated digital marketing (DM) system influences luxury hotel choice (LHC) directly and indirectly through brand reputation (BR) in emerging destinations [2, 10, 12].

In practice, luxury hotels simultaneously manage electronic word of mouth (eWOM), SEM, social media marketing (SMM), email communication, display advertising (DAds), content marketing (CM), and website optimization. User-generated reviews and platform-based evaluations significantly affect evaluation and selection decisions [4, 19, 20]. Social interaction and brand narrative further reinforce symbolic positioning and perceived exclusivity [5, 21]. Conceptualizing DM as a higher-order construct composed of coordinated dimensions may therefore offer a more accurate representation of strategic influence on choice behavior. However, empirical modeling of DM as a second-order formative construct remains limited in hospitality research [2, 10].

The mechanism linking DM to LHC also requires further clarification. Signaling theory posits that observable cues substitute for incomplete information in markets characterized by service intangibility and risk [9]. Environmental psychology further suggests that external stimuli influence internal cognitive and affective evaluations, which subsequently determine approach behavior [22]. Within this integrated perspective, DM operates as a structured set of market stimuli that shape evaluative judgments and ultimately influence hotel selection decisions.

BR constitutes a central evaluative outcome within this process. In luxury hospitality, reputation conveys credibility, symbolic prestige, and perceived service excellence. Empirical evidence indicates that pre-consumption brand evaluations significantly

affect behavioral intention in tourism contexts [7, 8]. Online reviews and digital cues contribute to the formation of trust and comparative standing assessments [1, 19]. Nevertheless, limited research integrates DM strategy, BR, and LHC within a unified structural framework in emerging markets [2, 11].

Emerging destinations may present distinctive patterns of digital reliance and decision dynamics. Institutional variability and unfamiliar market structures can intensify dependence on observable digital signals during hotel evaluation [10, 11]. This context highlights the need to clarify how integrated digital activities translate into brand-level evaluations and economic choice decisions.

To address these gaps, this study asks how integrated DM across key channels influences LHC among international tourists in Vietnam and whether BR explains part of this relationship. DM is conceptualized as a second-order formative construct comprising seven reflective dimensions: eWOM, SEM, SMM, email marketing (EM), WQ, DAds, and CM. BR is modeled as a partial mediator between DM and LHC. The framework integrates signaling theory and environmental psychology to explain how coordinated digital activities shape brand evaluations and influence selection behavior [9, 22], while focusing on established digital practices rather than emerging AI-enabled interactions.

This study contributes to hospitality and business research in three ways. First, it models DM as an integrated higher-order construct rather than isolated instruments. Second, it empirically tests BR as a mediating mechanism linking digital strategy and consumer choice. Third, it provides evidence from Vietnam, extending knowledge on luxury hotel decision-making in emerging markets [2, 11].

The next section reviews the relevant literature and develops the research hypotheses. The methodology section outlines the research design and analytical procedures. The subsequent section presents the empirical results, followed by discussion and conclusions.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

DM has evolved from a tactical communication tool to a coordination mechanism in luxury hospitality. In service markets characterized by intangibility and ex-ante uncertainty, digital channels provide structured information that reduces

asymmetry between providers and consumers [1, 9]. Websites, search engine visibility, online reviews, social media interactions, and digital advertising shape pre-consumption evaluations and influence booking behavior in accommodation contexts [2–4].

Empirical research demonstrates that online reviews and user-generated content significantly influence hotel choice by affecting perceived credibility and service expectations [4, 19, 20]. Social media communication and storytelling further strengthen symbolic brand positioning and emotional engagement in luxury segments [5, 21]. WQ and search engine optimization enhance digital visibility and facilitate efficient information search, thereby influencing intention formation [12–14]. These findings indicate that multiple digital instruments interact in shaping evaluative processes rather than operating independently [17, 18].

In emerging markets, reliance on digital information tends to intensify. International tourists evaluating unfamiliar destinations frequently depend on online environments to infer service quality and credibility [7, 8]. Institutional variation and limited prior brand familiarity increase the relevance of observable digital cues in decision-making [10, 11]. Accordingly, modeling DM as an integrated strategic system rather than isolated tools may better reflect decision dynamics in such contexts [2, 3].

Consistent with this perspective, DM is conceptualized as a second-order formative construct composed of seven reflective dimensions: eWOM, SEM, SMM, EM, WQ, DAds, and CM. eWOM captures peer-generated evaluations across online travel agencies (OTAs) and review aggregators such as Booking.com and TripAdvisor [19, 23, 24]. SMM reflects interactive and narrative brand communication [23, 25, 26]. EM represents personalized digital contact and promotional messaging [27–29]. SEM and WQ capture digital visibility and structured information accessibility [30, 31]. DAds and CM reflect paid communication and content strategies shaping brand perception [16, 27].

The theoretical foundation for the proposed relationships integrates signaling theory and environmental psychology. Signaling theory posits that observable indicators influence belief formation under conditions of incomplete information [9]. In luxury hospitality, digital communication activities act as signals of professionalism, service

standards, and brand competence. Environmental psychology further suggests that external stimuli influence internal cognitive and affective evaluations, which determine approach behavior [22]. DM can therefore be interpreted as a coordinated set of stimuli shaping evaluative judgments and behavioral intentions in high-involvement service settings [7, 8], while the present model focuses on established DM architecture rather than emerging AI-enabled interactions.

LHC refers to intention-based selection, including willingness to choose, preference for future stays, and recommendation propensity. Prior research indicates that online information environments significantly influence behavioral intention in tourism and hospitality contexts [7, 19]. Given the informational and signaling functions of coordinated digital channels, a positive association between DM and LHC is expected.

H₁: DM positively influences LHC.

BR represents an accumulated evaluation of credibility, recognition, and comparative standing in the marketplace. In high-involvement service contexts, reputation functions as a risk-reducing mechanism that simplifies decision-making and increases perceived reliability [8, 9]. Digital communication contributes to the informational environment in which such evaluations are formed. Consistent messaging, professional digital presence, and positive eWOM generate observable signals that strengthen reputational beliefs [1, 19].

H₂: DM positively influences BR.

Because reputation reduces perceived uncertainty and signals expected service quality, it should positively influence LHC. Empirical findings in tourism research indicate that favorable brand evaluations significantly enhance behavioral intention and selection probability [7, 8].

H₃: BR positively influences LHC.

DM may influence LHC both directly and indirectly through BR. Under signaling logic, digital cues shape reputational judgments, which guide behavioral decisions [9, 22]. Emerging market contexts may further strengthen this mechanism due to greater reliance on digital signals during evaluation processes [10, 11]. Therefore, a partial mediation effect is expected.

H₄: BR mediates the relationship between DM and LHC.

The proposed conceptual framework is presented in *Figure*.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Research context and sampling procedure

This study employs a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to test the proposed structural relationships. The empirical setting is the five-star hotel segment in Hue City, Vietnam, focusing on international tourists. This population is particularly relevant because international travelers tend to rely extensively on digital information when evaluating and selecting unfamiliar luxury accommodation in emerging destinations. Hue City was selected as an emerging tourism destination within Vietnam, characterized by growth in the five-star hotel segment and increasing reliance on digital channels among international visitors. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within this specific contextual setting rather than generalized to the entire Vietnamese luxury hotel market.

Data were collected from international guests staying at eleven five-star hotels operating in Hue in 2024. A quota sampling strategy was applied to enhance representativeness. Sampling quotas were determined based on the proportional distribution of international tourist nationalities recorded across the eleven hotels during the 2024 operating year. Respondents were recruited in accordance with these nationality proportions to reflect the actual composition of the international guest population. Respondents were screened to confirm prior exposure to the hotel's DM channels during their information search or booking process.

Consistent with established practices in tourism and hospitality research, a retrospective evaluation approach was adopted. Although respondents were surveyed during their stay, they were explicitly instructed to assess the DM stimuli that influenced their decision-making prior to booking rather than their current on-site experience. This approach is appropriate because hotel choice decisions are typically preceded by intensive online information search, while surveying guests during their stay helped capture recent evaluations of pre-purchase digital exposure and reduced potential memory decay.

The required sample size was determined based on model complexity and partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) requirements. Following established guidelines, the minimum sample size should exceed ten times the largest number of structural paths directed at any

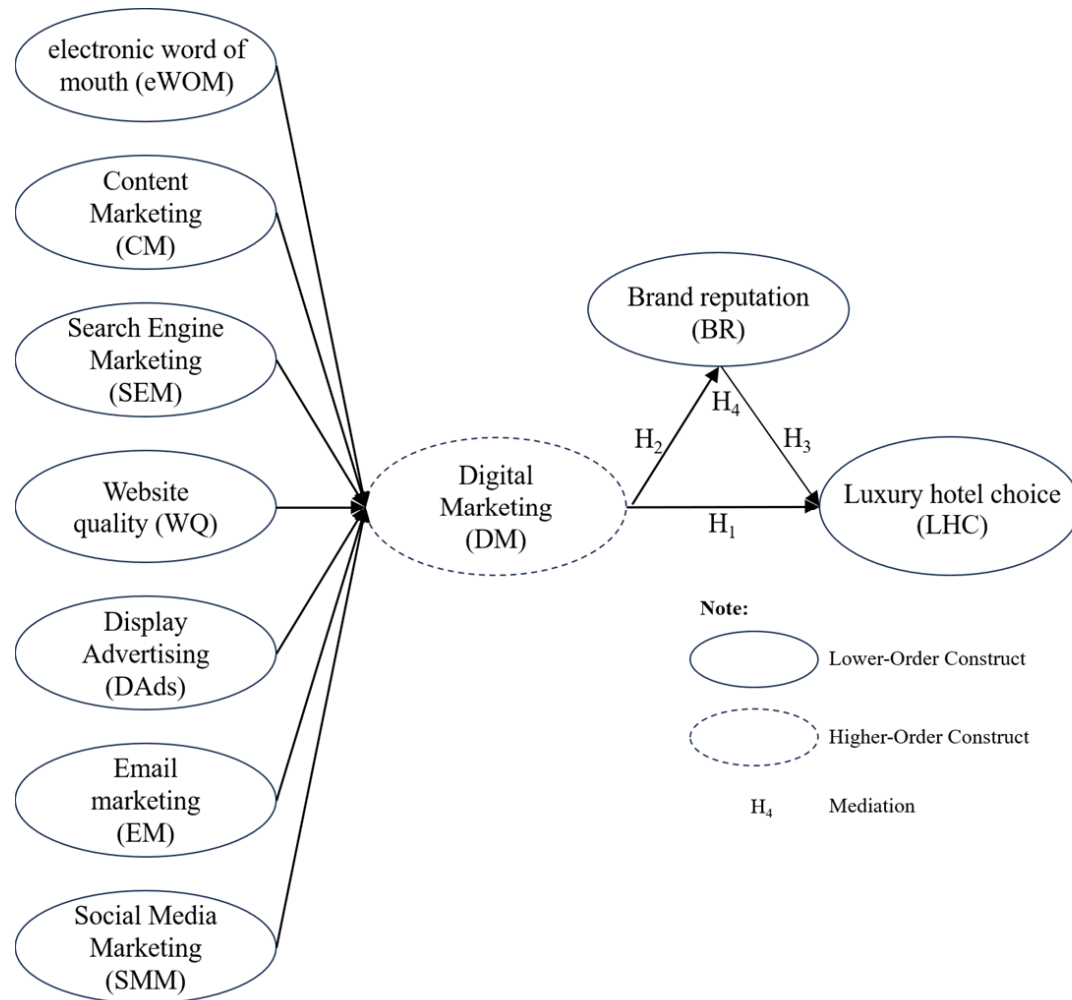


Fig. Research model of digital marketing, brand reputation, and luxury hotel choice

Source: developed by the authors.

endogenous construct [32]. In the present model, LHC receives two direct paths and BR receives one path. The final valid sample exceeds this threshold and is sufficient to ensure stable estimation and adequate statistical power for detecting medium-sized effects.

The questionnaire was administered in English. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. To mitigate common method bias, respondents were assured that there were no right or wrong answers, and the questionnaire items measuring predictor and outcome constructs were positioned in separate sections of the survey instrument. Incomplete and inconsistent responses were removed prior to analysis.

The demographic and travel characteristics of respondents are summarized in *Table 1*.

3.2. Measurement specification

All constructs were measured using multi-item scales adapted from previously validated instru-

ments and refined for the five-star hotel context in Vietnam. The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

DM was specified as a second-order formative construct composed of seven reflective first-order dimensions: eWOM, SMM, EM, SEM, WQ, DAdS, and CM. Each first-order construct was operationalized using three to four indicators adapted from established scales. The selection and contextual relevance of these seven dimensions were further supported by a prior FAHP-based expert evaluation conducted within the Vietnamese five-star hotel sector [33]. All eleven five-star hotels operating in Hue in 2025 actively implemented these seven DM tools as part of their integrated communication and customer engagement strategies. This assessment was confirmed through semi-structured interviews conducted with senior marketing or operations managers of each hotel prior to the survey administration. Their consistent application across

the population supports the empirical relevance of modeling DM as a higher-order construct composed of these dimensions.

eWOM was measured using three items capturing the influence of user-generated reviews and comments about the hotel across digital platforms, including social media and OTAs such as Booking.com and TripAdvisor. The items were adapted from scales developed in hospitality and tourism research that conceptualize eWOM as peer-generated evaluative information affecting hotel choice [19, 23, 24].

SMM was measured using four items capturing informativeness, interaction quality, and attractiveness of the hotel's social media communication. The measurement scale was adapted from established luxury branding and DM instruments [23, 25, 26].

EM was measured using four items evaluating clarity, relevance, and usefulness of promotional emails from the hotel. The items were adapted from hospitality DM research [27–29].

SEM was measured using three items reflecting ease of locating hotel information through search engines and prominence of search results. The scale was adapted from studies examining digital visibility and online search behavior in hospitality contexts [28, 30, 31].

WQ was measured using three items capturing completeness, clarity, and usability of information provided on the hotel's official website. The items were adapted from WQ measures in tourism research [30, 31, 34].

DAds was measured using three items assessing visibility, clarity, and professional consistency of paid online advertisements. The scale draws on prior research on digital advertising effectiveness in service industries [27, 31].

CM was measured using three items evaluating the informational value and decision-support function of hotel-generated digital content. The scale was adapted from digital content strategy research in tourism and hospitality [27, 28].

The seven first-order constructs were treated as reflective because their indicators represent manifestations of specific channel perceptions. The higher-order DM construct was specified as formative because the seven dimensions jointly represent the overall scope of DM activities, and removing one dimension would alter the conceptual meaning of the construct.

Table 1
Sample characteristics

Profile	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	250	51.12
	Female	239	48.88
Age	20–31	49	10.02
	32–45	213	43.56
	45–60	184	37.63
	Above 60	43	8.79
Nationality	Taiwan	110	22.49
	Spain	65	13.29
	United Kingdom	63	12.88
	United States	62	12.68
	South Korea	50	10.22
	France	41	8.38
	Greece	37	7.57
	Italy	24	4.91
	Australia	15	3.07
	Canada	13	2.66
	China	9	1.84
Trip purpose	Leisure	156	31.9
	Business/work	151	30.88
	Event/conference	145	29.65
	Other	37	7.57
Total		489	100.00

Source: compiled by the authors.

BR was operationalized as a reflective construct measured with three items capturing overall evaluative judgment regarding the hotel's credibility, recognition, and comparative standing. The scale was adapted from prior studies examining BR and service evaluation in hospitality contexts [35–37].

LHC was measured using three items reflecting intention to select, prefer, and recommend the hotel. The scale was adapted from prior tourism and hospitality research where behavioral intention

Table 2
Constructs and measurement definitions

Construct	Measurement form	Number of items	Definition in this study	Primary sources
DM	Second-order formative	7 dimensions	Overall coordinated deployment of digital communication channels	Conceptualized based on integrated DM literature
eWOM	Reflective	3	Perceived influence of user-generated reviews across social media and OTAs	[19, 23, 24]
SMM	Reflective	4	Perceived effectiveness of hotel social media communication	[23, 25, 26]
EM	Reflective	4	Perceived usefulness and relevance of hotel email communication	[27–29]
SEM	Reflective	3	Perceived ease and prominence of finding hotel information via search engines	[28, 30, 31]
WQ	Reflective	3	Perceived clarity and completeness of official website information	[30, 31, 34]
DAds	Reflective	3	Perceived visibility and professional presentation of paid online advertisements	[27, 31]
CM	Reflective	3	Perceived informational value of hotel-generated digital content	[27, 28]
BR	Reflective	3	Overall evaluative judgment of credibility and standing relative to competitors	[35–37]
LHC	Reflective	3	Intention to select, prefer, and recommend the hotel	[38–40]

Source: compiled by the authors.

is used as a proxy for choice in high-involvement service settings [38–40].

All items were slightly reworded to ensure contextual clarity while preserving their original conceptual meaning. Detailed item wording is available from the authors upon reasonable request. The constructs and their operational definitions are summarized in *Table 2*.

3.3. Data analysis procedure

The model was estimated using PLS-SEM with SmartPLS. This approach is appropriate due to the presence of a higher-order formative construct and the study's predictive orientation [32].

The analysis followed a two-step procedure, as recommended in PLS-SEM research [32]. First, the

measurement models were evaluated. For reflective constructs, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were assessed. For the formative higher-order construct, collinearity among dimensions and the significance of outer weights were examined.

To model the higher-order formative construct of DM, the disjoint two-stage (embedding) approach was employed. In the first stage, latent variable scores of the lower-order reflective dimensions were estimated. In the second stage, these latent scores were used as manifest indicators to form the higher-order formative construct. This approach is suitable for formative and conceptually distinct higher-order constructs because it reduces potential bias associated with the re-

Table 3

Reliability and convergent validity

Con-struct	Item	Outer Load-ing	Cron-bach's Alpha	Com-posite Reli-ability	AVE
eWOM	eWOM1	0.792	0.732	0.848	0.651
	eWOM2	0.809			
	eWOM3	0.819			
SMM	SMM1	0.746	0.795	0.866	0.619
	SMM2	0.741			
	SMM3	0.830			
	SMM4	0.825			
EM	EM1	0.711	0.730	0.829	0.548
	EM2	0.762			
	EM3	0.712			
	EM4	0.774			
SEM	SEM1	0.845	0.769	0.867	0.684
	SEM2	0.857			
	SEM3	0.777			
WQ	WQ1	0.780	0.700	0.833	0.625
	WQ2	0.828			
	WQ3	0.763			
DAds	DAds1	0.829	0.721	0.843	0.642
	DAds2	0.767			
	DAds3	0.808			
CM	CM1	0.792	0.702	0.832	0.623
	CM2	0.754			
	CM3	0.820			
BR	BR1	0.778	0.712	0.839	0.635
	BR2	0.813			
	BR3	0.799			
LHC	LHC1	0.805	0.715	0.840	0.636
	LHC2	0.813			
	LHC3	0.775			

Source: Compiled by the authors using SmartPLS 4.

peated indicators approach and supports more stable parameter estimation.

Second, the structural model was assessed. Path coefficients were estimated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to obtain robust standard errors and confidence intervals. Explanatory power was evaluated using coefficients of determination, and effect sizes were examined to assess practical relevance.

The mediating role of BR was tested by analyzing the indirect effect of DM on LHC. The type of mediation was determined based on the statistical significance and magnitude of direct and indirect effects, following established mediation assessment procedures in PLS-SEM [32].

4. Results

4.1. Measurement model assessment

The measurement model was evaluated prior to hypothesis testing. Reliability and convergent validity of reflective constructs were assessed using outer loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted. The results are presented in *Table 3*.

All outer loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, ranging from 0.711 to 0.857. This indicates satisfactory indicator reliability. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.700 to 0.795, meeting the minimum requirement of 0.70. Composite reliability values ranged from 0.829 to 0.867, exceeding the threshold of 0.70 and confirming strong internal consistency.

All average variance extracted values were above 0.50. The lowest AVE was observed for EM at 0.548, which still satisfies the criterion for convergent validity. These results confirm that the reflective constructs demonstrate adequate reliability and convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio criterion. The results are presented in *Table 4*.

All HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85. The highest value was 0.810 between CM and EM, which remains within acceptable limits. These results confirm that all constructs are empirically distinct.

The higher-order construct of DM was specified as a formative second-order construct composed of seven reflective dimensions. The formative measurement assessment is reported in *Table 5*.

Variance inflation factor values ranged from 1.291 to 2.018, indicating no multicollinearity concerns. All outer weights were positive and statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. SEM exhibited the strongest contribution to DM, followed by SMM and eWOM. WQ showed the lowest but still significant contribution.

Overall, the measurement model satisfies reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and formative assessment requirements.

4.2. Structural model and hypothesis testing

The structural model was assessed using bootstrapped path coefficients, effect sizes (f^2), and explanatory power (R^2). The results are reported in *Table 6*.

Table 4

Discriminant validity assessment using HTMT criterion

Construct	CM	DAds	EM	SEM	SMM	WQ	eWOM
DAds	0.655						
EM	0.810	0.554					
SEM	0.578	0.277	0.523				
SMM	0.688	0.340	0.628	0.294			
WQ	0.687	0.581	0.720	0.521	0.637		
eWOM	0.520	0.479	0.527	0.347	0.340	0.505	

Source: Compiled by the authors using SmartPLS 4.

Table 5

Formative weights of second-order digital marketing construct

Path	Weight	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value	VIF
CM → DM	0.181	0.181	0.026	6.966	0.000	2.018
DAds → DM	0.200	0.199	0.023	8.594	0.000	1.423
EM → DM	0.204	0.204	0.024	8.649	0.000	1.904
eWOM → DM	0.220	0.219	0.024	9.253	0.000	1.332
SEM → DM	0.279	0.277	0.024	11.735	0.000	1.585
SMM → DM	0.256	0.256	0.025	10.288	0.000	1.715
WQ → DM	0.122	0.123	0.027	4.494	0.000	1.291

Source: Compiled by the authors using SmartPLS 4.

Table 6

Structural model assessment

Panel A. Hypothesis testing (bootstrapping)						
Hypothesis	Path	β (O)	95% CI (2.5%, 97.5%)	t-value	p-value	Decision
H ₁	DM → LHC	0.780	[0.713, 0.840]	23.846	< 0.001	Supported
H ₂	DM → BR	0.849	[0.824, 0.866]	80.414	< 0.001	Supported
H ₃	BR → LHC	0.161	[0.096, 0.231]	4.576	< 0.001	Supported
Panel B. Effect sizes (f^2)						
Predictor → Endogenous construct			f^2 (O)	t-value	p-value	Effect magnitude
BR → LHC			0.047	2.378	0.017	Small
DM → BR			2.581	10.865	< 0.001	Large
DM → LHC			1.116	7.092	< 0.001	Large
Panel C. Explanatory power (R^2 and adjusted R^2)						
Endogenous construct	R^2 (O)	t-value	p-value	Adjusted R^2 (O)	t-value	p-value
BR	0.721	40.161	< 0.001	0.720	40.047	< 0.001
LHC	0.848	75.123	< 0.001	0.847	74.760	< 0.001

Source: Compiled by the authors using SmartPLS 4.

Note: β = path coefficient (original sample). CI = bias-corrected 95% confidence interval. Effect size interpretation follows conventional thresholds (0.02 small, 0.15 medium, 0.35 large).

Table 7
Mediation analysis

Panel A. Specific indirect effect						
Hypothesis	Effect	Path	β (0)	95% CI (2.5%, 97.5%)	t-value	p-value
H ₄	Indirect	DM → BR → LHC	0.137	[0.072, 0.191]	4.522	< 0.001
Panel B. Total effects						
		Path	β (0)	95% CI (2.5%, 97.5%)	t-value	p-value
		BR → LHC	0.161	[0.085, 0.223]	4.576	< 0.001
		DM → BR	0.849	[0.829, 0.871]	80.414	< 0.001
		DM → LHC	0.917	[0.904, 0.929]	140.685	< 0.001

Source: Compiled by the authors using SmartPLS 4.

DM has a strong and positive effect on LHC ($\beta = 0.780$, $t = 23.846$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H₁ is supported.

DM also exerts a substantial positive effect on BR ($\beta = 0.849$, $t = 80.414$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H₂.

BR positively influences LHC ($\beta = 0.161$, $t = 4.576$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H₃.

The effect size of DM on BR is very large ($f^2 = 2.581$). The effect size of DM on LHC is also large ($f^2 = 1.116$). The effect of BR on LHC is small to moderate ($f^2 = 0.047$).

The coefficient of determination indicates substantial explanatory power. DM explains 72.1 percent of the variance in BR ($R^2 = 0.721$). DM and BR jointly explain 84.8 percent of the variance in LHC ($R^2 = 0.848$).

4.3. Mediation analysis

The mediation results are presented in Table 7.

The indirect effect of DM on LHC through BR is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.137$, $t = 4.522$, $p < 0.001$).

The total effect of DM on LHC is 0.917. The direct effect is 0.780, and the indirect effect is 0.137.

The variance accounted for was calculated as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}
 VAF &= \frac{\text{Indirect effect}}{\text{Total effect}} = \frac{\beta_{DM \rightarrow BR} \times \beta_{BR \rightarrow LHC}}{\beta_{DM \rightarrow LHC}} = \\
 &= \frac{0.137}{0.917} = 0.149,
 \end{aligned}$$

where the indirect effect represents the effect of DM on LHC through BR, calculated as the product of the path coefficients from DM to BR and from BR to LHC, and the total effect represents the sum of the direct and indirect effects of DM on LHC.

Thus, approximately 14.9 percent of the total effect of DM on LHC is mediated by BR.

Since the VAF value is below 20 percent, the mediation effect is partial with a predominantly direct influence. Therefore, H₄ is supported, although the indirect pathway represents a limited proportion of the total effect.

5. Discussion

The results indicate that integrated DM emerges as the primary explanatory factor of both BR and LHC among international tourists in an emerging market context. DM exhibits a strong direct effect on LHC and an even stronger effect on BR, while BR provides a statistically significant but modest mediating pathway. The model's substantial explanatory power suggests that, in digitally mediated international travel markets, coordinated digital signals serve as a central basis for pre-consumption evaluation and choice [2, 3, 11].

The strong DM-BR relationship is consistent with signaling logic under information asymmetry. In luxury hospitality, service quality remains largely unverifiable prior to consumption, and international tourists often face limited familiarity with local brands in emerging destinations. Under these

conditions, observable digital cues operate as credible signals that shape judgments of professionalism, reliability, and expected service standards [7, 9, 11]. This inference process also aligns with environmental stimulus theory, which posits that structured external stimuli shape internal cognitive and affective evaluations that subsequently guide approach behavior. Accordingly, integrated DM can be interpreted as a structured stimulus system that strengthens evaluative beliefs about the hotel brand before selection occurs [8, 22].

The findings are consistent with evidence that digital ecosystems increasingly shape tourism evaluation and booking behavior through platform-based information flows. Digital touchpoints across the traveler journey, including brand-managed channels and intermediated platforms, influence evaluation and intention formation [1, 14]. In emerging or transitional economies, international tourists rely more heavily on these environments due to higher perceived risk and lower prior brand familiarity, which amplifies the influence of digital cues on choice [7, 8, 10].

A central contribution of this study lies in its higher-order conceptualization of DM. DM is modeled as a second-order formative construct comprising eWOM, SMM, SEM, WQ, DAdS, EM, and CM. This operationalization reflects the coordinated manner in which luxury hotels deploy digital tools in practice, rather than treating them as independent tactics [17, 18]. Prior research has noted that fragmented, single-tool approaches may underestimate cumulative and reinforcing effects across channels [2, 3]. By capturing the joint contribution of multiple channels, the present model demonstrates that the aggregated digital system materially shapes both reputational beliefs and intention-based choice [2, 3].

The magnitude of the direct effect of DM on LHC suggests that digital influence operates not only through reputational abstraction but also through immediate functional and cognitive decision mechanisms. Search engine visibility reduces search frictions and increases consideration probability in competitive environments [13]. WQ supports clarity, usability, and decision efficiency [12, 14], but its lower formative weight should not be interpreted as dispensability. For luxury hotels, the website remains a minimum digital requirement that confirms brand legitimacy, aesthetic standards, and service consistency, while additional resources can

be prioritized toward higher-contribution channels. Conversion-oriented optimization mechanisms in tourism digital environments further support this logic by showing how interface design and information structure influence consumer actions [41]. Social media content and interaction strengthen evaluative confidence and experiential imagination in luxury contexts [5, 21]. eWOM, including reviews embedded in OTA environments such as Booking.com-type OTA interfaces, provides peer validation and diagnostic experience cues that can trigger choice without requiring fully consolidated reputation judgments [1, 4, 19].

This pattern aligns with emerging evidence that contemporary travelers increasingly depend on real-time digital information, multimodal cues, and platform signals when comparing hotel alternatives. Visual representation and online imagery can shape perceived quality and desirability, particularly in luxury segments where symbolic value is salient [20, 42]. Influencer-style video and vlogger content can also operate as experiential proxies that shape expectations and strengthen intention prior to purchase [6]. Taken together, these mechanisms indicate that digital channels influence both evaluation depth and decision speed in high-involvement booking contexts [10, 11].

Although BR positively influences LHC, the mediation results indicate that its indirect contribution is limited relative to the direct pathway. The variance accounted for is approximately 14.9 percent, indicating low-level partial mediation. This proportion implies that while DM strengthens reputational beliefs, the majority of its total effect on LHC is transmitted directly rather than through the mediating construct [9, 22]. Accordingly, the structural results suggest a stronger direct pathway relative to the indirect pathway, rather than a dominance of mediation. This result refines the common assumption that marketing effects in luxury services primarily transmit through reputational constructs, and it highlights the operational potency of digital performance in choice formation [2, 8].

Theoretical implications follow from the relative weight of direct and indirect effects. Under signaling theory, reputational beliefs represent one channel through which cues influence behavior, but digitally intensive environments create additional pathways through which information architecture and platform design directly shape intention and action [9, 41]. Under environmental stimulus theory,

digital channels can generate immediate cognitive and affective responses that translate into approach behavior even before stable global evaluations fully form [7, 22]. Accordingly, DM in emerging destinations should be viewed as both a signaling system and a functional decision infrastructure [10, 11], while the present findings reflect established digital channels rather than emergent AI-enabled interactions.

From a contextual perspective, the results extend understanding of tourism decision processes in emerging economies. The empirical evidence is drawn from Hue City, an emerging Vietnamese destination, and therefore reflects the institutional and market dynamics of this specific setting. Vietnam represents a rapidly digitalizing tourism environment in which OTAs and review platforms function as primary informational gateways for international tourists. The integration of eWOM into booking platforms effectively embeds peer evaluation into the purchase process, amplifying the immediacy of digital influence on choice [1, 4]. While similar digitalization patterns are observable in other major Vietnamese destinations, the present findings should be interpreted within the contextual boundaries of the study site. This context helps explain why operational digital excellence exerts a substantially stronger direct effect compared with the indirect reputational pathway, while BR provides complementary explanatory power rather than acting as a substantive mediator [2, 11].

Managerially, the findings yield several implications for luxury hotels in emerging destinations. DM should be managed as a coordinated strategic system rather than as isolated instruments [3, 18]. In managerial terms, luxury hotels should first secure a baseline digital infrastructure, including a credible website, consistent brand presentation, and active monitoring of OTAs and review platforms, because these elements support legitimacy and reduce decision friction [1, 4, 12, 17, 19]. Beyond this baseline, additional resources should be prioritized toward higher-contribution channels that strengthen visibility, comparison efficiency, and experiential confidence, particularly search-related tools, social media interaction, and eWOM [5, 13, 21]. Promotional communications such as email and content initiatives should therefore complement, rather than replace, performance-critical channels that directly affect search and evaluation efficiency [15, 16].

Finally, the modest mediation effect implies that reputation-building initiatives alone may not maximize booking performance in emerging markets. While BR remains a meaningful evaluative driver, operational digital performance appears to exert more immediate influence on LHC among international tourists [2, 11]. Strategic resource allocation should therefore balance long-term brand positioning with continuous optimization of visibility, responsiveness, and information quality across key decision interfaces [1, 3].

In summary, the findings show that integrated DM functions as a central mechanism shaping both BR and LHC within the context of an emerging Vietnamese destination. The structural results indicate that the direct pathway from DM to choice is stronger than the indirect pathway through BR, while BR provides additional but limited mediation. This evidence clarifies the relative roles of signaling-based reputation formation and direct digital decision infrastructure in high-involvement tourism choices under information asymmetry [9, 11, 22].

6. Conclusions

This study investigated the influence of DM on LHC among international tourists within the context of an emerging Vietnamese destination, with BR specified as a partial mediator. DM was conceptualized as a second-order formative construct composed of seven reflective dimensions, reflecting the coordinated deployment of digital channels in contemporary luxury hospitality. The empirical results demonstrate that DM exerts a strong direct effect on LHC and an even stronger effect on BR. BR positively influences LHC; however, mediation analysis indicates that the indirect pathway accounts for a relatively small proportion of the total effect. The variance accounted for by approximately 14.9 percent confirms a low-level partial mediation structure in which the direct pathway from DM to LHC is stronger than the indirect pathway through BR. These findings suggest that, in this emerging tourism setting, DM primarily shapes behavioral intention through direct informational and decision-support mechanisms, while BR provides complementary explanatory value.

The study contributes to the literature in several respects. First, it advances hospitality marketing research by modeling DM as an integrated higher-order construct rather than examining isolated tools. This approach more accurately reflects how

luxury hotels compete in digitally intensive environments. Second, it refines theoretical understanding by integrating signaling theory and environmental stimulus theory to explain how digital cues influence both evaluative judgments and behavioral intentions. Third, by focusing on an emerging Vietnamese destination as the empirical setting, the study provides context-specific evidence on how international tourists rely on digital information under conditions of heightened information asymmetry and limited prior familiarity.

The findings also offer important managerial implications. Luxury hotels targeting international markets in comparable emerging destinations should manage DM as a coordinated strategic system. Managers should first establish a baseline digital infrastructure, including credible websites, consistent brand presentation, and active management of eWOM across OTAs and review platforms, before prioritizing additional resources toward higher-impact digital channels that enhance visibility, comparison efficiency, and experiential confidence. Although BR remains significant, the results indicate that operational digital performance exerts a substantially stronger direct effect

relative to the indirect reputational pathway. Managers should therefore allocate resources to both long-term reputation building and continuous optimization of digital touchpoints that directly shape purchase intention.

The study is subject to several limitations. First, the empirical evidence was derived from a single-city setting and should therefore be interpreted within the contextual boundaries of Hue rather than generalized to the broader luxury hotel market. Second, although the findings identify key digital mechanisms influencing choice, the study does not determine optimal resource-allocation thresholds or minimum design standards across digital channels. Third, the model focuses on established DM practices and does not incorporate emerging AI-enabled interactions that increasingly shape digital customer journeys. Future research may address these limitations by employing longitudinal or experimental designs, conducting multi-site comparisons across emerging and developed destinations, and incorporating behavioral booking data and additional psychological constructs such as perceived risk, trust, and perceived value to improve explanatory depth and external validity.

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