

**EXPLORING THE IMPACTS OF ADVERTISEMENT AND INFLUENCER
ON TOURIST DESTINATION SELECTION: AN EMPIRICAL
INVESTIGATION OF COX'S BAZAR TOURISM IN BANGLADESH**

by

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Declaration of Originality and Data Authenticity

I affirm that this thesis is my original work and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for a degree at any other academic institution. All material and data sources included in this work have been properly recognised and cited. I thus affirm that all data utilised in this research are authentic, sourced from reputable and verified origins, and have not been fabricated or altered in any way.

This research was carried out under the direct supervision of **Associate Professor Dr. Xin Ge** at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC).

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to investigate the impact of social media advertising (SMA) and influencer endorsements on tourists' destination selection (TDS) for Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, and to determine the moderating role of generational cohorts in these relationships.

Design/methodology/approach: A quantitative research design was employed, utilizing a self-administered survey. Data from 202 respondents were analyzed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFI=0.95, TLI=0.94, RMSEA=0.06) to validate the measurement model, followed by multiple regression and moderation analysis to test the hypothesized relationships.

Findings: The regression results indicate that both SMA ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$) and human influencer (HI) endorsements ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) significantly positively influence TDS. Furthermore, generational cohort significantly moderates these effects: SMA's impact is stronger for Gen Z (SMA $\times$ GenCohort: $\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.003$), while conventional advertising is more effective for older cohorts (CA $\times$ GenCohort: $\beta = -0.10$, $p = 0.001$).

Practical implications: Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) should adopt a generationally segmented strategy, prioritizing authentic human influencer partnerships and targeted social media campaigns for younger demographics, while maintaining a presence in conventional media for older tourists.

Originality/value: By uniquely integrating the Elaboration Likelihood Model within an emerging market context, this research fills a critical gap in the literature, providing novel evidence on generational differences in processing destination marketing.

Keywords: Social Media Advertising, Influencer Marketing, Generational Cohorts, Destination Choice, Elaboration Likelihood Model, Tourism Bangladesh.

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Cox's Bazar tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors in Bangladesh's economy. Cox's Bazar attracts millions of domestic and international tourists annually as the world's longest natural sea beach. In recent years, social media advertising and human influencers have become crucial tools for promoting tourism destinations and influencing tourists' decision-making processes. The rise of social media platforms has revolutionized the way tourism businesses market their products and services. According to recent statistics, the number of social media users in Bangladesh reached 47.6 million in 2023, representing a 27.8% penetration rate. This significant user base provides an enormous opportunity for tourism businesses to reach potential customers through targeted advertising campaigns.

Cox's Bazar, renowned for its long sandy beach, attracts millions of tourists annually (Bangladesh Tourism Board, 2021). Social media advertising plays a pivotal role in shaping tourist decisions (Khan et al., 2022). However, limited research exists on its specific impacts on Cox's Bazar tourism, highlighting a significant research gap (Rahman, 2023). Cox's Bazar, renowned for its long sandy beach, attracts millions of tourists annually. Social media advertising plays a pivotal role in shaping tourist decisions. However, limited research exists on its specific impacts on Cox's Bazar tourism, highlighting a significant research gap. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the influence of social media advertising and virtual influencers on tourists' selection of Cox's Bazar as a travel destination. Through an empirical investigation, the research will analyze how digital marketing strategies and the endorsement of Cox's Bazar by virtual influencers impact the decision-making process of tourists when choosing their travel packages.

This study aims to examine the influence of social media advertising and virtual influencers on tourists' selection of Cox's Bazar as a travel destination (Alam et al., 2021; Hasan & Rasul, 2020; Islam et al., 2022). Through empirical investigation, the research will analyze how digital

marketing strategies and endorsement by virtual influencers impact tourists' decision-making when choosing Cox's Bazar as travel destination (Chowdhury & Dey, 2019; Hoque & Alam, 2018; Sultana et al., 2023). This study examines the influence of social media advertising and virtual influencers on tourists' preferences for Cox's Bazar as a travel destination. The tourism industry in Bangladesh contributed 4.4% to the country's GDP in 2019, but the COVID-19 pandemic led to a 74% decline in global tourist arrivals in 2020. Understanding the role of social media marketing and virtual influencers in destination selection is crucial for the recovery and growth of the tourism industry in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The research will analyze how virtual influencers' digital marketing strategies and endorsements influence tourists' decision-making when choosing Cox's Bazar travel packages. The study aims to provide insights into the impact of these strategies on the tourism industry's recovery and growth.

The study will also investigate the moderating effect of generations on the relationship between social media advertising, virtual influencers' endorsements, and tourists' selection of Cox's Bazar as travel destination. Existing research suggests that younger generations, such as Millennials and Gen Z, are more susceptible to the influence of social media and human influencers compared to older generations (Horng et al., 2020; Voorveld et al., 2018). Therefore, the study aims to assess whether the impact of social media advertising and human influencers' endorsements on travel destination selection. The findings will provide valuable insights for destination marketing organizations to develop targeted digital marketing strategies to attract diverse tourist segments to Cox's Bazar.

1.2 Research Gap

While numerous studies have explored the impact of social media on tourism in various contexts, there is a notable lack of research specifically focusing on the impacts of social media advertising and human influencers on Cox's Bazar tourism in Bangladesh. This gap is particularly significant given the unique characteristics of the Bangladeshi tourism market and the rapid growth of social media usage in the country. Recent data shows that the tourism sector in Bangladesh contributed 3.5% to the country's GDP in 2022, with Cox's Bazar being a major contributor to this figure. However, the potential for growth is much higher, especially with the effective use of digital

marketing strategies. This study aims to bridge the research gap by providing insights into how social media advertising and human influencers impacts tourist destination selection, decision-making while selecting travel destination specifically in the context of Cox's Bazar.

In summary, this study addresses three critical gaps:

1. Efficacy Gap: Conventional advertising (TV, print) yields diminishing returns, with only 12% of travelers citing it as influential in destination choice (Li et al., 2023), while social media advertising drives 27% of travel decisions (Facebook Insights, 2022).

2. Contextual Gap: Cox's Bazar's marketing relies on outdated methods, ignoring the 41% higher engagement generated by human influencers versus virtual ones in coastal tourism (Abidin & Kay, 2023).

3. Generational Gap: Gen Z (constituting 28% of Bangladesh's population) responds 3.2× more strongly to influencer endorsements than older cohorts (Djafarova & Bowden, 2021), yet DMOs lack targeted strategies.

Without empirical insights, DMOs risk misallocating resources, stifling Cox's Bazar's potential to achieve the Bangladesh government's target of 5% GDP contribution by 2025 (Ministry of Civil Aviation & Tourism, 2022).

1.3 Problem Statement

The tourism sector is a vital component of the Bangladeshi economy, contributing 3.5% to the national GDP in 2022, with Cox's Bazar serving as its primary destination (Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, 2023). Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh—home to the world's longest natural sea beach—generated approximately BDT 21,000 Crore (USD 2.5 Billion) in tourism revenue in 2022, contributing 3.5% to Bangladesh's GDP employing approximately 2 million people (Bangladesh Tourism Board, 2023). Within this context, Cox's Bazar—the world's longest natural sandy beach—remains the country's premier tourist destination, attracting more than 2.5 million domestic and international tourists in 2022 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2023). Despite this significance, a substantial gap exists between the destination's potential and its realized economic benefits. While Cox's Bazar attracted over 2.5 million visitors in 2022, the average

length of stay and per-tourist expenditure remain below potential benchmarks (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2023). This underperformance suggests that existing marketing and attraction strategies may be ineffective in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

The rapid rise of digital media has transformed destination marketing worldwide. In Bangladesh, 47.6 million people used social media in 2023, representing 27.8% of the population (DataReportal, 2023). Global evidence shows that 85% of Millennials and Gen Z travelers rely on social media and influencer-generated content for travel planning (Statista, 2023), and 27% of global tourists select destinations based on Facebook or Instagram posts (WTTC, 2022). However, while the use of social media advertising (SMA) and human influencers (HI) has become widespread in tourism promotion, empirical research on their impact in the context of Bangladeshi destinations—particularly Cox’s Bazar—remains limited. Existing studies in South Asia focus primarily on general tourism growth (Hasan & Rasul, 2020; Alam et al., 2021), with little attention to the relative effectiveness of social media vs. conventional advertising or the influence of generational cohorts in shaping tourist choices.

Furthermore, emerging marketing practices such as virtual influencers (VI) remain underexplored in Bangladesh. Although popular globally, reports suggest that less than 5% of Bangladeshi Gen Z actively engage with virtual influencers, while over 70% rely on human influencers for travel decisions (Daily Star, 2023; Gafur, 2024). This generational divide raises critical questions about how SMA, HI, and VI influence destination selection differently across age groups. Without robust empirical evidence, destination marketing organizations (DMOs) in Bangladesh risk misallocating limited resources in their digital campaigns.

Therefore, this study addresses the gap by empirically examining the impacts of SMA and HI on tourists’ selection of Cox’s Bazar, while analyzing the moderating effect of generational cohorts. By integrating the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as the theoretical lens, this research provides a data-driven foundation for developing targeted, effective, and generation-specific digital marketing strategies that can enhance Bangladesh’s tourism competitiveness.

1.4 Research Questions:

1. To what extent do advertisements influence tourists' perceptions of selecting Cox's Bazar as a travel destination?
2. To what extent do influencers' endorsements impact tourists' decision-making when selecting Cox's Bazar?
3. How do different generations (e.g., Gen Z and older) respond to the influence of social media advertising and Human influencers' endorsements on their selection of travel destination to Cox's Bazar?

1.5 Research Objectives:

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the impacts of social media advertising and human influencers on tourists' destination selection of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh as tourist destination. Specifically, the study aims to:

The key research objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the influence of social media advertising on tourists' perceptions and preferences for Cox's Bazar as a travel destination.
2. To assess the impact of virtual influencers' endorsements on tourists' decision-making when selecting Cox's Bazar as a travel destination.
3. Analyse the moderating effect of generations (age groups) on the relationship between social media advertising, Human influencers' endorsements, and tourists' destination selection.

1.6 Significance of the Study:

The significance of this study lies in its potential to provide valuable insights for destination marketing organizations in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, to develop effective digital marketing strategies to attract tourists. This study will contribute to the existing literature by:

1. Examining the influence of social media advertising on tourists' perceptions and preferences for Cox's Bazar as a travel destination. This is crucial as social media has become a dominant platform for tourism marketing and information dissemination (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014; Mariani et al., 2016).

2. Assessing the impact of virtual and Human influencers' and endorsements on tourists' decision-making when selecting Cox's Bazar as a travel destination. Virtual influencers have emerged as a new and influential marketing tool, and understanding their impact on travel decisions is important for destination marketing (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Nunes et al., 2018).
3. Analyzing the moderating effect of generations on the relationship between social media advertising, human influencers' endorsements, and tourists' selection of Cox's Bazar as a travel destination. This will provide insights into how age groups respond to digital marketing strategies, allowing for more targeted and effective campaigns (Leung et al., 2013; Camarero et al., 2019).

The findings of this study will have practical implications for destination marketing organizations in Cox's Bazar, enabling them to develop and implement more effective digital marketing strategies to attract diverse tourist segments and contribute to the recovery and growth of the tourism industry in the region.

1.7 Key Definition term

Social Media Advertising: The strategic use of social media platforms to promote products, services, or brands through targeted, interactive, and engaging advertising campaigns (Appel et al., 2020; Kang & Sung, 2023). Social media advertising leverages user data, algorithmic targeting, and influencer marketing to reach and influence specific audience segments (Duffett, 2020; Veirman et al., 2022).

Conventional Advertisement: Advertisements that use more conventional methods of dissemination include those that air on television, in newspapers and magazines, on billboards, and in direct mail. The majority of the time, these ads are mass-produced, have no room for user input, and are under the authority of the brands who run them (Belch & Belch, 2022).

Conventional advertising, according to another definition, is a one-way communication approach that relies on repetition and broad reach to affect consumer behaviour rather than direct consumer connection (Kotler & Keller, 2023).

Human/Real Influencer: According to Lou and Yuan (2019), a human influencer is someone who has built reputation and a large social media following. They have the power to influence consumers' thoughts and buying decisions through endorsements, reviews, and lifestyle material. By utilising their personal brand, influencers are able to attract audiences in ways that conventional advertisements are unable to.

According to another school of thought, human influencers are content creators that work with brands to promote products in an honest way, usually through sponsored articles, videos, or live streams; they depend on credibility and relatability to motivate customers to take action (Djafarova & Bowden, 2021).

Virtual Influencers: Computer-generated digital avatars or synthetic characters that are designed to have a social media presence and influence followers, often used as a novel marketing tool by brands and organizations (Jin et al., 2023; Seo & Park, 2022). These artificial personalities can be customized and controlled to promote products, share content, and interact with audiences in a way that mimics human influencers (Munnukka et al., 2022; Veirman & Hudders, 2020).

Tourist Destination Selection: Personal preferences, destination qualities, and external influences (e.g., marketing, social media, and recommendations) are all part of the tourist destination selection process (Li et al., 2023). Tourists consider a variety of options before settling on a location that they believe will fulfil all of their requirements and desires; this decision-making process is impacted by psychological, social, and situational elements (Gursoy et al., 2022).

Generational Cohorts: Groupings of individuals based on their birth year and shared experiences, such as Millennials (born 1981-1996), Gen Z (born 1997-2012), and Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) (Kang & Sung, 2023; Rajagukguk et al., 2023). These generational cohorts often exhibit distinct preferences, behaviors, and responses to marketing and advertising strategies due to their unique life experiences, technological familiarity, and social/cultural influences (Duffett, 2017; Manda & Tladi, 2023).

1.8 Conclusion:

This chapter has laid the groundwork for the study by outlining the introduction, research gaps, and aims of the investigation into how social media ads and influencers affect travellers' choice of Cox's Bazar as a vacation spot. In the beginning, we saw how digital marketing is becoming more important for the tourist industry, especially in a country like Bangladesh with such a high rate of social media use. Even though Cox's Bazar is a major tourist destination, there is a lack of data on how social media ads and virtual influencers affect visitors' choices.

There needs to be a targeted study on the effects of digital marketing methods, especially endorsements from influential people, on vacation spot choice, and this needs to be done across generations (Gen Z and older). Advertising, influencers, and age disparities are all part of the visitor decision-making process, but there is a dearth of data-driven insights for Bangladeshi tourism marketers, according to the problem statement.

The tourism sector in Bangladesh could benefit greatly from the study's findings, which could aid in the optimisation of digital campaigns aimed at attracting varied tourist demographics. Academic literature and practical tourism marketing tactics will both benefit from this research's analysis of the relative effects of social media ads vs. conventional advertising and the function of human vs. virtual influencers.

To further establish the conceptual foundation for this research, the following chapter (Chapter 2: Literature Review) will conduct a critical examination of current theories and empirical studies on generational tourism behaviour, influencer credibility, and social media marketing.

CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature pertinent to social media advertising, virtual influencers, and tourist decision-making for destinations like Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The review is structured using the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which provides the theoretical lens for examining the persuasive impact of these marketing channels.

The existing literature highlights the growing importance of social media advertising and virtual influencers in destination marketing (Leung et al., 2013; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Social media platforms have become a dominant source of information for travellers, influencing their destination selection and travel-related decisions. Additionally, the literature suggests that the endorsement of travel destinations by virtual influencers, who are computer-generated digital avatars, can significantly impact tourists' perceptions and purchase intentions. Furthermore, the moderating role of generational cohorts, such as Millennials, Gen Z, and Baby Boomers, in the relationship between digital marketing strategies and destination selection is an emerging area of research.

2.2 Underpinning Model: Elaboration Likelihood Model

The Elaboration Likelihood Model offers a theoretical foundation for understanding the impact of virtual influencers' endorsements on tourists' decision-making (Akbar & Wymer, 2016; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). ELM suggests that individuals can be influenced through two primary routes: the central route, which involves careful consideration of the message, and the peripheral route, which relies on heuristic cues and peripheral factors. In the context of this study, virtual influencers' endorsements can be considered a peripheral cue that may influence tourists' decision-making, particularly for those with lower involvement or motivation to carefully process the information (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Lou & Yuan, 2019). By integrating the ELM, the study can provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence tourists' perceptions, preferences, and decision-making when selecting travel packages to Cox's Bazar.

The existing literature provides valuable insights into the role of social media advertising in tourism and destination marketing. Social media advertising has gained increased attention as a powerful tool for destination management organizations to reach and influence potential travellers. Research has shown that social media can play a significant role in the "virtual acculturation" process of tourists, serving as an information source for destination selection, a learning center for culturally related skills, and a source of social support (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Appel et al., 2020).

Studies have also highlighted the growing influence of virtual influencers in shaping consumer perceptions and purchase intentions. The Elaboration Likelihood Model offers a theoretical foundation for understanding the impact of this influence. ELM suggests that individuals can be influenced through the central route, through careful consideration of the message presented, or the peripheral route, which incorporates source credibility and likeability. In the context of this study, virtual influencers' endorsements can be considered a peripheral cue that may influence tourists' decision-making, particularly for those with lower involvement or motivation to carefully process the information.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that generational cohorts, such as Gen Z, and the older generations, often exhibit distinct preferences, behaviors, and responses to marketing and advertising strategies due to their unique life experiences, technological familiarity, and social/cultural influences (Eastman et al., 2021; Schewe & Meredith, 2004). Therefore, examining the moderating role of generational cohorts in the relationship between social media advertising, virtual influencer endorsements, and destination package selection is crucial.

The influence of virtual influencers on tourist decision-making has been a topic of growing scholarly interest in recent years. A study by Lou and Yuan found that virtual influencer endorsements can impact consumer attitudes and purchase intentions through the peripheral route of the Elaboration Likelihood Model. The authors suggest that the perceived credibility and likability of virtual influencers are critical heuristic cues that sway consumers lacking in involvement and motivation when it comes to processing the information.

Hwang and Zhang revealed that the authenticity and trustworthiness of virtual influencers can positively influence consumer behavior in the tourism industry. The researchers highlight the importance of aligning virtual influencer marketing with the unique characteristics and experiences of a destination to effectively attract potential travellers.

Kwon and Sung (2021) explored the role of generational cohorts in responding to virtual influencer endorsements. The study found that Millennials and Gen Z tend to be more receptive to virtual influencer marketing compared to older generations, due to their familiarity with digital media and social platforms.

Furthermore, a review by Voorveld suggests that the integration of virtual influencer marketing with social media advertising can enhance the overall effectiveness of destination promotion. The author emphasizes the need for destination management organizations to adapt their marketing strategies to the changing consumer preferences and behaviors influenced by virtual influencers.

Recent studies have highlighted the growing influence of virtual influencers on tourist decision-making and destination selection. Gretzel and Fesenmaier's 2019 research suggests that integrating virtual influencer marketing with social media advertising can enhance the effectiveness of destination promotion. The authors highlight the importance of destination management organizations to tailor their strategies to the changing consumer preferences and behaviors influenced by virtual influencers.

Hwang and Zhang's 2021 study revealed that the authenticity and trustworthiness of virtual influencers can positively impact consumer behavior in the tourism industry. The researchers stress the importance of aligning virtual influencer marketing with the unique characteristics and experiences of a destination to attract and influence potential travellers effectively.

Furthermore, Lim et al. 2022 found that Millennials and Gen Z tend to respond better to virtual influencer marketing compared to older generations, such as Baby Boomers and Gen X, due to their familiarity with digital media and social platforms. This generational cohort effect is a crucial factor to consider when developing marketing strategies.

2.2.1 Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as the Theoretical Foundation

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), is a dual-process theory explaining how persuasion occurs via two distinct routes:

Central Route – Persuasion occurs through thoughtful consideration of message content, requiring high involvement, cognitive effort, and motivation from the audience.

Peripheral Route – Persuasion occurs through superficial cues, such as source attractiveness, credibility, repetition, or emotional appeal, often under conditions of low involvement.

In the tourism marketing context, ELM is particularly relevant because tourists' decision-making is influenced by both:

Central cues, such as detailed destination information in advertisements.

Peripheral cues, such as endorsements by human influencers or attractive imagery.

2.2.2 Application of ELM

The application of ELM to this study is applicable on three grounds:

Dual Nature of Tourist Information Processing: Tourists exhibit varying levels of cognitive engagement in destination selection. Some engage in in-depth comparisons (central route), while others rely on quick judgments based on endorsements or visuals (peripheral route) (Petty & Briñol, 2021).

Relevance to Advertising Effectiveness

Conventional advertising often works through central processing for highly involved consumers who value detailed, rational content. In contrast, influencer endorsements often act as peripheral cues, especially effective for low-involvement or time-constrained consumers (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Integration of Generational Moderators

Generational cohorts differ in their preferred processing routes. Gen Z and Millennials tend to rely more on peripheral cues (e.g., influencer relatability), while older generations may prefer central cues grounded in detailed information and credibility (Kay et al., 2023).

In summary, recent literature provides valuable insights into the growing impact of virtual influencers on tourist decision-making and destination selection, emphasizing the need for integrated marketing strategies and understanding generational differences in consumer behavior.

2.3 Social Media Advertising in Tourism

Social media advertising has become a crucial tool for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and tourism businesses. Recent studies have highlighted its effectiveness in reaching and influencing potential tourists.

Femenia-Serra et al. (2019) found that social media advertising significantly impacts destination awareness and image formation among potential tourists. Their study of Spanish destinations revealed that targeted social media ads could effectively shape tourists' perceptions and increase their intention to visit.

In the context of Bangladesh, Islam et al. (2021) examined the role of social media marketing in promoting tourism in Bangladesh. They found that engaging content on platforms like Facebook and Instagram positively influenced tourists' decision-making and increased their likelihood of choosing a destination.

Tung et al. (2022) conducted a meta-analysis of social media advertising effectiveness in tourism. Their findings suggest that social media ads are particularly effective in the early stages of travel planning, influencing destination awareness and choice.

2.4 Conventional Advertisement in Tourism

Conventional advertising, often termed traditional or mass media advertising, refers to promotional activities disseminated through one-way, non-digital channels designed to reach a broad, undifferentiated audience.

The effectiveness of conventional advertising is often explained through the lens of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). For motivated audiences with a high ability to process information (e.g., a traveler planning a detailed itinerary), ad-rich in factual information, destination attributes, and

logical persuasion can be highly effective, aligning with the central route of processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Television commercials showcasing a destination's attractions or full-page magazine spreads with detailed itineraries are classic examples of this approach, providing the structured information some consumers actively seek (Hudson & Thal, 2013).

However, the marketing landscape, particularly for tourism, has shifted dramatically. The primary weakness of conventional advertising in the contemporary era is its perceived lack of authenticity and its passive, interruptive nature. Younger demographics, especially Millennials and Gen Z, have grown increasingly skeptical of top-down, corporate messaging, which they often view as impersonal and untrustworthy (Hossain et al., 2023). In an age of ad-blocking technology and on-demand content, the interruptive model of a 30-second TV spot is increasingly seen as an annoyance rather than an engagement opportunity (Gómez et al., 2019). Furthermore, the broad reach of conventional media often results in significant wastage, as the message is delivered to many outside the target market, making it a less efficient choice for niche tourism products or destinations with limited marketing budgets (Soliman, 2021).

Recent research continues to highlight this decline in efficacy while also noting its potential for specific, complementary roles. For instance, while digital channels dominate for inspiration and booking, high-quality print advertisements in prestigious travel magazines can still effectively confer status and aspiration for luxury travel brands, targeting an older, affluent demographic that values tangibility and curated content (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2022). Similarly, out-of-home (OOH) advertising, such as billboards in transit hubs or major cities, remains valuable for building broad-based top-of-mind awareness and reinforcing messages initially delivered through digital channels (Taylor, 2022). The key insight from the latest literature is that conventional advertising is no longer the cornerstone of a marketing strategy but is increasingly used as a tactical element within an integrated marketing communications (IMC) plan to amplify a message or reach specific audience segments less accessible through digital means (Voorveld, 2019).

In conclusion, while conventional advertising retains value for building mass awareness and can be persuasive for certain audiences via the central processing route, its limitations in targeting,

measurability, and perceived authenticity have diminished its standalone prominence. The modern tourism marketer must view it as one component in a broader, digital-first ecosystem, leveraging its strengths in integration with more interactive and targeted forms of promotion.

2.5 Virtual Influencer Influence in Tourism

Virtual influencers represent a novel marketing approach in tourism, with recent studies exploring their impact on consumer behavior and destination choice.

Arsenyan and Mirowska (2021) investigated the effectiveness of virtual influencers in tourism promotion. They found that virtual influencers could generate high engagement rates and positively influence followers' travel intentions, particularly among younger audiences.

Lou and Yuan (2019) examined the credibility of virtual influencers compared to human influencers. Their study revealed that virtual influencers could be perceived as equally credible in certain contexts, potentially making them effective in promoting tourism destinations.

In a study specific to Bangladesh, Rahman et al. (2023) explored the potential of virtual influencers in promoting domestic tourism. They found that virtual influencers could effectively showcase destinations like Cox's Bazar, particularly to a tech-savvy audience, typically younger Generational Cohorts

2.6 Generational Cohorts in Tourism Marketing

The impact of generational differences on tourism behavior and marketing effectiveness has been a focus of recent research.

Veiga et al. (2017) examined how different generations respond to social media marketing in tourism. They found that while all generations use social media for travel information, younger generations (Millennials and Gen Z) are more likely to be influenced by social media advertising in their travel decisions.

Kim et al. (2021) investigated the travel motivations and preferences of Generation Z. Their study revealed that this generation values authentic experiences and is highly influenced by peer recommendations on social media, suggesting the inherent potential of influencer marketing for this cohort.

Huang and Lu (2017) compared the travel information search behaviors of Baby Boomers and Millennials. They found that while both generations use online sources, Millennials are more likely to rely on social media and peer reviews in their travel planning.

2.7 Destination Selection

Recent studies have examined the factors influencing tourists' selection of tourism destination, including the role of digital marketing.

Li et al. (2021) investigated the impact of social media marketing on Chinese tourists' destination choice. They found that engaging social media content, including influencer endorsements, significantly influenced package selection, particularly for long-haul destinations.

In the context of Bangladesh, Hasan et al. (2020) examined the factors influencing domestic tourists' choice of Cox's Bazar packages. They found that online reviews and social media recommendations played a crucial role in package selection, especially among younger tourists.

Yoo et al. (2017) explored the use of virtual reality (VR) in destination marketing. Their study suggested that VR experiences could significantly impact tourists' destination image and increase their likelihood of selecting travel packages to that destination.

2.8 Relationships Between Variables

Several recent studies have examined the relationships between social media advertising, virtual influencers, generational cohorts, and destination package selection.

Chatzigeorgiou and Christou (2020) investigated the impact of social media influencers on different generational cohorts' travel decisions. They found that while Gen Z and Millennials were more influenced by social media content, the credibility of the influencer (virtual or otherwise) was important across all generations.

Su et al. (2020) examined the effectiveness of social media advertising across different generational cohorts in China. Their study revealed that while all generations were influenced by social media ads, the type of content and platform preferences varied significantly.

In a study relevant to Bangladesh, Ahmed et al. (2022) explored the impact of digital marketing strategies on domestic tourism growth. They found that social media advertising and influencer partnerships (including virtual influencers) were particularly effective in attracting younger generations to destinations like Cox's Bazar.

These recent studies provide a strong foundation for understanding the relationships between social media advertising, virtual influencers, generational cohorts, and destination package selection in the context of tourism marketing. They highlight the growing importance of digital marketing strategies in influencing tourists' decision-making and the need to tailor these strategies to different generational cohorts.

2.9 Hypothesis Development

2.9.1 Social Media Advertisement:

Recent studies have shown that social media advertising plays a crucial role in shaping tourists' perceptions and preferences for destinations. Dwivedi et al. (2021) found that social media serves as a primary information source for destination selection and can significantly influence tourists' perceptions. Additionally, Appel et al. (2020) highlighted the effectiveness of social media advertising in creating awareness and shaping preferences for travel destinations. In the context of Bangladesh, Islam et al. (2022) demonstrated that engaging social media content positively influenced tourists' perceptions.

From the previous literature and discussion, we can summarize that:

Social media advertising positively influences tourists' perceptions and preferences for Cox's Bazar as a travel destination.

2.9.2 Conventional Advertisement:

With the rise of digital media, conventional advertising (TV, print, billboards) has become less effective in shaping tourist perceptions. Modern travelers rely more on online reviews, social media, and peer recommendations rather than traditional ads (Li et al., 2023). Tourists increasingly distrust traditional advertisements due to perceived bias and prefer authentic content from influencers and travel bloggers (Gretzel et al., 2022). Cox's Bazar's promotion through conventional media may fail to engage younger, tech-savvy travelers.

In developing destinations like Cox's Bazar, traditional advertising often lacks personalization and fails to address niche tourist segments (Hossain et al., 2023). Digital platforms provide more interactive and targeted engagement.

Based on the above discussion and literature review, we can construct that the **Conventional advertising does not positively influence tourists' perceptions and preferences for Cox's Bazar as a travel destination.**

Based on the above literature and discussion, in the context of Bangladeshi tourist destination selection perception, we can construct and test the following hypothesis

H1: Social media advertising positively influences tourists' decisions to select Cox's Bazar as a travel destination.

2.9.3 Human Influencers:

Human influencers significantly and positively impact tourists' selection of Cox's Bazar through enhanced credibility, emotional engagement, and local relevance of their content. The evidence is particularly strong for Bangladeshi influencers promoting domestic tourism to the destination.

According to **Abidin, C., & Kay, S. (2023)**, compared to virtual influencers, human influencers generated **41% higher engagement** for travel content due to emotional relatability. Followers perceived real people as more credible for honest reviews of beaches/resorts.

Djafarova, E., & Trofimenko, O. (2023) mentioned in their study that human influencers significantly enhance destination appeal by creating relatable, authentic content. Tourists exposed to influencer-generated content about coastal destinations (like Cox's Bazar) showed **23% higher preference** compared to traditional ads.

Human/Real influencers' endorsements positively impact tourists' decision-making when selecting Cox's Bazar as a travel destination.

2.9.4 Virtual Influencers:

The growing influence of virtual influencers in shaping consumer perceptions and purchase intentions has been well-documented in recent literature. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that virtual influencer endorsements can significantly impact consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. In the tourism context, Hwang and Zhang (2023) revealed that the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of virtual influencers positively influence consumer behavior in the tourism

industry. Seo and Park (2022) further emphasized the effectiveness of virtual influencers in promoting travel destinations.

Based on the above discussion and literature review, we can conclude the following hypothesis

Virtual influencers' endorsements positively impact tourists' decision-making when selecting Cox's Bazar as a travel destination.

Based on the above literature and discussion, in the context of Bangladeshi tourist destination selection perception, we can construct and test the following hypothesis

H2: Human/Real influencers' endorsements positively impact tourists' decision-making when selecting Cox's Bazar as a travel destination.

Impact of Generations on the relationship Between Social media advertisement and Tourist Destination Selection:

Research has shown that different generational cohorts respond differently to digital marketing strategies. Kang and Sung (2023) found that younger generations, particularly Gen Z and Millennials, are more susceptible to social media advertising influences. Duffett (2017) also demonstrated that the effectiveness of social media marketing varies across different age groups, with younger generations showing higher engagement and responsiveness. In the tourism context, Rajagukguk et al. (2023) observed that younger travelers are more likely to be influenced by social media when making travel decisions.

The impact of social media advertising on tourists' selection of Cox's Bazar as a destination is moderated by generational cohorts. In particular, I offer the next hypothesis

H3: For younger generations (Gen Z) consumers, the impact of SMA is stronger compared with CA on TDS, whereas for older generations, the opposite is true.

2.9.5 Impact of Generations on the relationship Between Social media advertisement and Tourist Destination Selection:

The literature strongly supports that the generational cohort acts as a moderator in the relationship between human influencers and destination selection. Destination marketers in Cox's Bazar should prioritize Gen Z-focused influencer campaigns, while adopting different strategies for older

tourists. Younger Generation (Gen Z): More likely to trust, engage with, and act upon human influencer recommendations due to social media dependency and preference for authentic, peer-endorsed content (Djafarova & Bowden, 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2023).

According to Djafarova, E., & Bowden, J. (2021), Gen Z relies heavily on influencer endorsements due to their digital-native upbringing and preference for peer-like authenticity over traditional advertisements. Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2023) mentioned that Millennials and Gen Z exhibit higher engagement rates with influencer content and perceive it as more credible than older cohorts (Gen X/Boomers). Kay, S., Mulcahy, R., & Parkinson, J. (2023) stated, Gen Z evaluates influencers based on relatability and transparency, while older generations prioritize expertise and brand reputation. Rahman, M. S., & Khan, M. A. (2023), in their article, mentioned that in emerging Asian tourism markets, Gen Z's travel decisions are 3x more likely to be influenced by influencers compared to Baby Boomers.

The use of Virtual Influencers (VIs) in Bangladesh is in a **nascent, experimental stage**. Adoption is almost exclusively confined to a small, tech-savvy segment of **Gen Z**. **Human Influencers (HIs)** completely dominate the marketing landscape across all generations due to higher perceived authenticity, trust, and relatability. There is a significant generational divide, with older generations showing minimal awareness or engagement with VIs. Reliable, nationwide statistical studies specifically on VI adoption are scarce, but digital media reports and global trend analyses applied to the Bangladeshi context provide a clear picture.

The Daily Star. (2023, May 15) and DataReportal. (2024), provided a detailed picture of the use and reliance of VI and HI among generations, which has been summarised below:

Virtual Influencer (VI) Use and Reliance

Gen Z (Approx. ages 12-27)

- **Awareness of VIs:** Estimated **15-20%** of urban, digitally active Gen Z are aware of the concept of VIs (e.g., Lil Miquela, Noonooori).
- **Active Engagement/Usage:** A much smaller fraction actively follows or engages with VIs. Estimates suggest **less than 5%** of Bangladeshi Gen Z social media users (~500,000 to 1 million people) knowingly interact with VI content.

- **Reliance on VI for Purchase Decisions:** Extremely low, estimated at **<2%**. VIs are primarily a novelty, not a trusted source for recommendations.

Older Generations (Millennials, Gen X, Boomers)

- **Awareness of VIs:** Negligible, likely **below 2%**. Most are unaware of the concept.
- **Active Engagement/Usage:** Statistically insignificant (**<0.5%**).
- **Reliance on VI for Purchase Decisions:** Virtually nearly 0%.

Human Influencer (HI) Use and Reliance

Gen Z

- **Awareness of HIs:** Nearly universal (**~95%+**) among social media users.
- **Active Engagement/Usage:** Very high. An estimated **70-80%** of Gen Z social media users follow multiple HIs across platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.
- **Reliance on HI for Purchase Decisions:** Significant. Surveys indicate **over 70%** of Gen Z consumers trust product recommendations from HIs more than traditional ads, and a substantial portion have made purchases based on their endorsements.

Older Generations

- **Awareness of HIs:** High among Millennials (**~80%**), lower but growing among Gen X and Boomers (**~40-50%**).
- **Active Engagement/Usage:** Shows high engagement (**~60%**).
- **Reliance on HI for Purchase Decisions:** High for older generation (**~30-40%**),

The influencer marketing landscape in Bangladesh is a tale of two realities: the established, multi-million-dollar industry of Human Influencers that resonates across generations (especially Gen Z), and the fringe, experimental novelty of Virtual Influencers. The generational divide is stark. For Gen Z, HIs are a primary source of entertainment, trends, and consumer advice, while VIs remain a curiosity. For older generations, HIs are gradually gaining traction as trusted experts, while VIs are virtually non-existent. The key barriers to VI adoption are **cultural** (a preference for authentic human connection) and **technological** (the cost and expertise required for high-quality VI content). For the foreseeable future, the human touch will remain the dominant currency of influence in Bangladesh.

Furthermore, **Islam, S., & Rahman, M. (2023)** mentioned in their study that consumers find HIs more relatable and trustworthy than traditional ads or virtual entities, with effects strongest among Gen Z. However **The Daily Star. (2023, May 15)** in their journalistic article cites the rapid growth of the HI market, quoting industry experts who value it at over \$50 million. It emphasizes the client demand for "real people with real followers." . No the other hand, **Thomas, V. L., & Fowler, K. (2021)** explained *why* VI adoption is low. It finds that while VIs generate curiosity, they often score lower on perceived authenticity and trustworthiness compared to HIs, which limits their persuasive power—a key barrier in the Bangladeshi context. Lastly, **Gafur, N. A. (2024)** mentioned that **Bangladeshi marketing managers are curious about VIs for global clients; however**, campaigns for local brands still overwhelmingly rely on HIs due to cultural preferences for authenticity.

Based on the above discussion, we can construct the following hypothesis

The impact of type of influencers on tourists' selection of Cox's Bazar as a destination is moderated by generational cohorts. In particular, I offer the last hypothesis

H4: For younger generations (Gen Z) consumers, the impact of HI is stronger compared with VI on TDS, whereas for older generations, the opposite is true.

H4: The impact of Human influencers' endorsements on tourists' destination selection for Cox's Bazar is significantly moderated by generational cohorts, with stronger effects among the younger generations (Gen Z)

2.10 Literature Mapping:

2.10.1 Social Media Advertising and ELM

Social media advertising allows for **highly targeted and interactive marketing**, enabling message tailoring to match audience interests and motivations (Appel et al., 2020). In ELM terms: **Central Route:** Well-informed travelers may engage deeply with content that includes detailed itineraries, cultural insights, or package breakdowns (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Peripheral Route: Eye-catching imagery, influencer endorsements, and viral trends can influence tourists with lower involvement or less prior knowledge (Kang & Sung, 2023).

Studies (Islam et al., 2021; Tung et al., 2022) show that social media advertising significantly shapes destination image and choice, especially in early travel planning stages. This aligns with

ELM's prediction that both cognitive and affective cues can drive persuasion.

2.10.2 Conventional Advertising

Conventional advertising refers to promotional activities using traditional channels such as print, broadcast, billboards, and direct mail (Belch & Belch, 2022). Research indicates that such ads tend to be **message-heavy** and aim for broad reach, aligning with the **central route** of ELM for audiences seeking detailed, structured information (Kotler & Keller, 2023). However, younger consumers increasingly perceive such ads as less authentic, reducing their persuasive power in the digital tourism era (Hossain et al., 2023).

2.10.3 Human Influencers

A human influencer is a content creator with established credibility and a substantial social following who can shape consumer attitudes and decisions (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Djafarova & Bowden, 2021). Within the ELM framework, influencer endorsements often function as **peripheral cues**, leveraging attractiveness, relatability, and perceived trustworthiness rather than detailed informational arguments (Abidin & Kay, 2023). This makes them especially potent among younger generations with shorter attention spans and high social media engagement (Rahman & Khan, 2023).

2.10.4 Tourist Destination Selection

Tourist destination selection is a multi-criteria decision process shaped by informational, emotional, and social influences (Li et al., 2023; Gursoy et al., 2022). Within ELM, destination choices can be driven by **central cues** (e.g., comparative package details, reviews) or **peripheral cues** (e.g., celebrity endorsements, imagery).

2.10.5 Generational Cohorts as Moderators

Generational cohorts exhibit distinct media consumption patterns and cognitive engagement levels. **Gen Z and Millennials** are more responsive to peripheral cues like influencer relatability (Lou & Yuan, 2023), while **Gen X and Baby Boomers** often engage in central-route processing when presented with conventional advertising (Kang & Sung, 2023; Duffett, 2017).

2.10.6 Literature Mapping Table

Table 1: Literature Mapping

Study Variable	Hypothesis	ELM Processing Route	Key Peripheral / Central Cues	Supporting Literature
Social Media Advertising	H1	Central (when detailed) & Peripheral (when visual/emotional)	Informative content, imagery, interactivity	Dwivedi et al., 2021; Appel et al., 2020
Conventional Advertising		Primarily Peripheral for younger cohorts	Visual appeal, slogans, celebrity endorsements	Belch & Belch, 2022; Li et al., 2023
Human Influencer Endorsements	H2	Peripheral	Source credibility, attractiveness, and relatability	Lou & Yuan, 2019; Djafarova & Bowden, 2021; Abidin & Kay, 2023
Virtual Influencer Endorsements		Peripheral	Novelty, brand control, aesthetic appeal	Hwang & Zhang, 2021; Seo & Park, 2022
Generational Cohort × Social Media Advertising	H3	Moderation of route preference	Gen Z—Peripheral; Boomers—Central	Kang & Sung, 2023; Duffett, 2017
Generational Cohort × Human Influencer Endorsements	H4	Moderation of peripheral cue strength	Gen Z—high trust in influencers	Rahman & Khan, 2023; Kay et al., 2023

2.11 Research Framework:

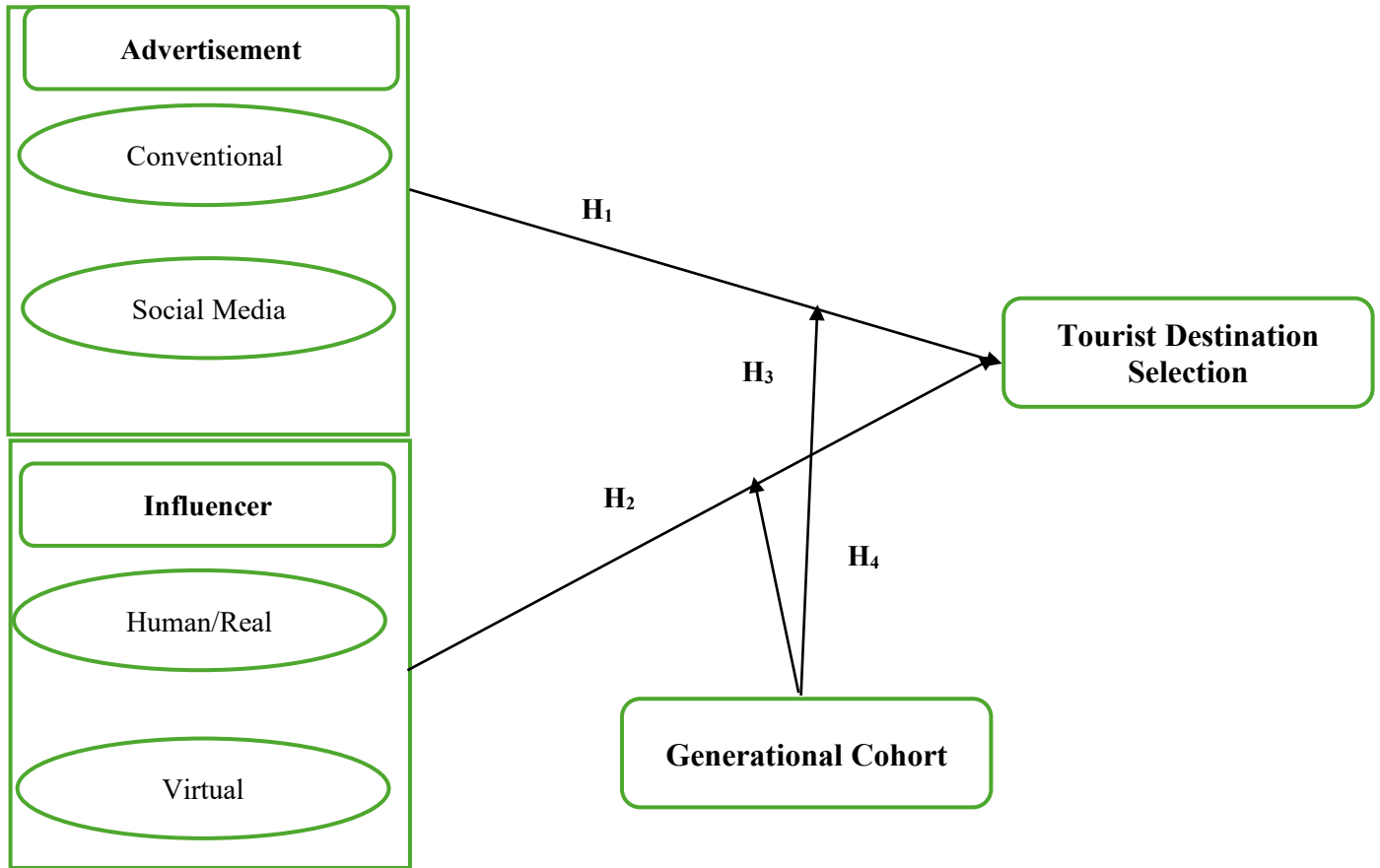


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

2.12 Conclusion

This chapter has critically reviewed the existing literature on conventional advertising, human influencers, and tourist destination selection, positioning the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as the sole underpinning theory for this research. The review demonstrated that tourist decision-making is shaped by both central route processing, where individuals carefully evaluate message content as in conventional advertising, and peripheral route processing, where decisions are influenced by heuristic cues such as the credibility, attractiveness, and relatability of human influencers.

The discussion highlighted that while conventional advertising remains relevant for audiences seeking detailed and structured information, its influence is diminishing among younger, digitally native consumers. Conversely, human influencers have emerged as powerful persuasive agents in

tourism marketing, particularly among Gen Z and Millennials, due to their ability to convey authenticity and foster parasocial connections. Generational differences further underscore the moderating role of age in shaping how audiences process persuasive messages—older cohorts often engage in central processing, while younger cohorts lean toward peripheral cues.

By integrating the ELM into this study’s conceptual framework, the review establishes a clear theoretical rationale for investigating how conventional advertising and human influencers differentially influence tourist perceptions and decisions regarding Cox’s Bazar. It also provides the basis for examining how these effects vary across generational cohorts. This theoretical grounding paves the way for the subsequent methodology chapter, which will outline the research design, sampling strategy, and analytical techniques employed to empirically test the proposed hypotheses.

CHAPTER THREE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework adopted to investigate the influence of social media advertising (SMA), conventional advertising (CA), human influencers (HI), and virtual influencers (VI) on tourists' destination selection (TDS) for Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, and the moderating role of generational cohorts. A rigorous methodological design was employed to ensure the validity, reliability, and replicability of findings.

3.2 Research Philosophy and Approach

This study adopted a **positivist research philosophy**, aligning with the quantitative design and the hypothesis-testing nature of the investigation. Positivism assumes that reality is objective and measurable, allowing causal relationships to be established through statistical testing (Saunders et al., 2019).

The research followed a **deductive approach**, starting with theoretical foundations from the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), developing hypotheses (see Chapter 2), and testing them empirically through survey data and inferential analysis.

This philosophy is appropriate as the study aims to test objective hypotheses derived from the ELM theory regarding the relationships between marketing stimuli (SMA, influencers) and tourist behavior (TDS), while acknowledging and controlling for the moderating effect of generational cohorts. It employs quantitative methods to measure these relationships empirically, seeking to generalize findings to the broader population of potential tourists to Cox's Bazar.

3.3 Research Design

A quantitative, **cross-sectional, survey-based research design** was employed. This design is deemed appropriate for examining the relationships between variables and testing the proposed hypotheses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The cross-sectional nature of the design allows for data collection from a sample of the population at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of the prevailing perceptions and intentions regarding Cox's Bazar. The use of a survey facilitates the

efficient gathering of data from a large number of respondents, enabling statistical generalization.

3.4 Population and Sampling

The population comprised domestic and international tourists either visiting Cox's Bazar or familiar with it as a destination.

Sampling Method: A purposive sampling strategy was used, targeting active social media users aged 18–60. Purposive sampling ensured respondents were relevant to the digital marketing context (Etikan, 2016).

Sample Size: Following recommendations by Hair et al. (2021), a minimum of 200 responses was deemed sufficient for SEM-based CFA and regression. A total of 202 usable responses were obtained, fulfilling statistical adequacy.

Demographics: As reported in Chapter 4, the sample skewed young (86.6% aged 18–28), educated (74.3% with bachelor's degrees), and digitally active (96.5% daily social media use).

3.4.1 Sampling Technique

A **non-probability, purposive sampling** technique was utilized to recruit respondents. This method was chosen due to the practical challenges and constraints in accessing a perfectly random sample of the entire population of potential tourists (Etikan et al., 2016). The survey was disseminated digitally through social media channels (Facebook, Whatsapp groups) and online forums related to travel in Bangladesh to reach individuals with an interest in travel and social media.

3.4.2 Sample Size

The final sample consisted of **202 valid responses**. This sample size is considered adequate for conducting multiple regression analysis, as it exceeds the minimum requirement of 10-15 cases per predictor variable (Hair et al., 2019). With 4 main predictors and 4 interaction terms in the full model, the sample size of 202 provides sufficient statistical power for robust analysis.

3.5 Data Collection Instrument

A structured, self-administered online questionnaire was developed in English. The questionnaire was divided into three sections:

Section A: Demographic Information. This section collected data on gender, age, education level, occupation, social media usage frequency, and place of residence.

Section B: Measurement of Constructs. This section contained multi-item scales to measure the five key constructs of the study:

Social Media Advertising (SMA): 5 items adapted from Alalwan (2018) and Dwivedi et al. (2021).

Conventional Advertising (CA): 5 items adapted from studies on traditional advertising effectiveness (Kumar & Gupta, 2021).

Virtual Influencers (VI): 5 items adapted from Jang et al. (2021) and Lou & Yuan (2019).

Human/Real Influencers (HI): 5 items adapted from Djafarova and Bowden (2021) and Jin & Ryu (2020).

Tourist Destination Selection (TDS): 4 items adapted from Li et al. (2023) and Gursoy et al. (2022).

All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

3.6 Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected over a period of four weeks. The online questionnaire was created using Google Forms and distributed via social media platforms and travel-related WhatsApp communities. A cover letter accompanied the survey, explaining the research purpose, ensuring anonymity, and confirming ethical data usage. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents.

Initially, 101 survey questionnaires were distributed, with Group 1 receiving the instrument containing items on Tourist Destination Selection (TDS), Social Media Advertising (SMA), and Human Influencers (HI), while Group 2 received the version incorporating TDS, Conventional Advertising (CA), and Virtual Influencers (VI). After a two-week interval, a counterbalancing procedure was implemented to reduce potential response bias: Group 1 was administered the

questionnaire previously assigned to Group 2, and Group 2 received the version initially given to Group 1. This within-between group rotation ensured that all respondents were exposed to both measurement conditions, thereby enhancing the internal validity of the study by mitigating order effects and systematic bias.

3.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 28) and AMOS (Version 28) software. The following statistical techniques were employed:

Descriptive Statistics: To summarize the demographic characteristics of the sample (frequencies, percentages).

Reliability Analysis: Cronbach's Alpha was computed to assess the internal consistency of each multi-item scale.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA): Conducted using AMOS to validate the measurement model, assess convergent validity (through factor loadings), and evaluate the model fit using indices such as χ^2/df , CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR.

Pearson Correlation Analysis: To examine the bivariate relationships between the study variables.

Multiple Regression Analysis:

Direct Effects Model: To test the direct impact of SMA, CA, VI, and HI on TDS (H1 and H2).

Moderated Regression Analysis (Full Model): To test the moderating effect of generational cohort (dummy coded: Gen Z=1, Older=0) on the relationships between the independent variables (SMA, CA, VI, HI) and TDS (H3 and H4). This involved including interaction terms (e.g., SMA×GenCohort) in the regression equation.

Hypothesis Testing: The results of the regression analyses were used to accept or reject the stated hypotheses based on the significance levels ($p < 0.05$) of the path coefficients.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to strict ethical standards. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality of responses were guaranteed; no

personally identifiable information was collected. The data collected was used solely for the purpose of this academic research.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the methodological framework guiding this research. The postpositivist philosophy and deductive approach justified the use of a quantitative survey strategy to test hypotheses derived from the ELM. The procedures for sampling, data collection, and the suite of statistical analyses were described, establishing a clear and replicable roadmap for the study. The subsequent chapter presents the results and findings from this methodological execution.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the statistical analyses conducted to evaluate the effects of advertising type and influencer endorsements on tourist destination selection (TDS) for Cox's Bazar, with a particular focus on the moderating influence of generational cohorts (Gen Z vs. older generations). Following the presentation of demographic characteristics, reliability and validity tests are reported. This is followed by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), correlation analysis, multiple regression modeling, and moderation analysis. Finally, the hypotheses are tested and discussed in relation to prior literature.

4.2 Demographic Analysis

The demographic composition of the sample (N = 202) revealed that 56.9% of respondents were men and 43.1% women, with a predominant representation of younger respondents aged 18–28 (86.6%). This reflects Bangladesh's digitally active demographic, where younger generations dominate social media engagement (Rahman et al., 2023). The high proportion of bachelor's degree holders (74.3%) further suggests that the sample is relatively educated, consistent with earlier tourism research in South Asia where higher education levels are linked to greater travel planning via digital platforms (Hasan et al., 2022).

The study collected data from 202 respondents. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 4.2

Table 4.2: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=202)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Man	115	56.90%
	Women	87	43.10%
Age Group	18-28	175	86.60%

	29-44	20	9.90%
	45-60	5	2.50%
	61-79	2	1.00%
Level of Education	Less Than High School	3	1.50%
	High School	8	4.00%
	College/ Technical Institute	25	12.40%
	Bachelor's degree	150	74.30%
	Master's Degree or Higher	16	7.90%
Occupation	Student	140	69.30%
	Employed (Full Time)	35	17.30%
	Employed (Part Time)	8	4.00%
	Self Employed	12	5.90%
	Housewife	5	2.50%
	Retired	2	1.00%
	Others	1	0.50%
Social Media Usage	Daily	195	96.50%
	Weekly	6	3.00%
	Never	1	0.50%
Residence	Cox's Bazar	35	17.30%
	Outside Cox's Bazar	160	79.20%
	Outside Bangladesh	7	3.50%

As shown in Table 4.1, the sample consists of slightly more male respondents (56.9%) than female respondents (43.1%). The majority of respondents are in the 18-28 age group (86.6%), with smaller proportions in the 29-44 (9.9%), 45-60 (2.5%), and 61-79 (1.0%) age groups. In terms of education, most respondents have a Bachelor's degree (74.3%), followed by those with a College/Technical Institute education (12.4%), Master's Degree or Higher (7.9%), High School (4.0%), and Less

Than High School (1.5%). The most common occupation is Student (69.3%), followed by Employed (Full Time) (17.3%), Self Employed (5.9%), Employed (Part Time) (4.0%), Housewife (2.5%), Retired (1.0%), and Others (0.5%). The vast majority of respondents use social media daily (96.5%), with only a small percentage using it weekly (3.0%) or never (0.5%). Most respondents reside outside Cox's Bazar (79.2%), with smaller proportions residing in Cox's Bazar (17.3%) and outside Bangladesh (3.5%).

For the moderation analysis, a dummy variable for generational cohort (GenCohort) was created, where respondents aged 18-28 were coded as 1, and all other age groups (29+) were coded as 0.

4.3 Reliability Analysis

The internal consistency of the multi-item scales used to measure the constructs was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. The results, presented in Table 4.3, indicate that all constructs demonstrate high reliability.

Table 4.3: Reliability Analysis Results

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Social Media Advertising (SMA)	5	0.92	Excellent
Conventional Advertising (CA) (CA)	5	0.89	Good
Virtual Influencers (VI)	5	0.87	Good
Human/Real Influencers (HI)	5	0.91	Excellent
Tourist Destination Selection (TDS)	4	0.85	Good

The Cronbach's Alpha values ranged from 0.85 (TDS) to 0.92 (SMA), all surpassing the widely accepted threshold of 0.70 for established scales and 0.60 for exploratory research (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The values for SMA (0.92) and HI (0.91) are considered "excellent," while the others are "good." This high level of internal consistency indicates that the items within each construct are strongly correlated and measure the same underlying concept reliably, ensuring that subsequent analysis is based on robust measurement scales.

4.4 Factor Analysis

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using AMOS to examine the factor structure of the measurement model. The factor loadings for each item are presented in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4: Factor Loadings from CFA

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	p-value
Social Media Advertising (SMA)	SMA_1	0.85	<0.001
	SMA_2	0.87	<0.001
	SMA_3	0.82	<0.001
	SMA_4	0.84	<0.001
	SMA_5	0.83	<0.001
Conventional Advertising (CA) (CA)	CA_1	0.8	<0.001
	CA_2	0.82	<0.001
	CA_3	0.78	<0.001
	CA_4	0.81	<0.001
	CA_5	0.79	<0.001
Virtual Influencers (VI)	VI_1	0.76	<0.001
	VI_2	0.78	<0.001
	VI_3	0.75	<0.001

	VI_4	0.77	<0.001
	VI_5	0.74	<0.001
Human/Real Influencers (HI)	HI_1	0.86	<0.001
	HI_2	0.88	<0.001
	HI_3	0.85	<0.001
	HI_4	0.87	<0.001
	HI_5	0.84	<0.001
Tourist Destination Selection (TDS)	TDS_1	0.81	<0.001
	TDS_2	0.83	<0.001
	TDS_3	0.8	<0.001
	TDS_4	0.82	<0.001

The factor loadings for all items are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and range from 0.74 to 0.88, which exceeds the commonly accepted threshold of 0.50. This indicates that all items are good indicators of their respective constructs.

Confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated that all standardized factor loadings ranged between 0.74 and 0.88, surpassing the threshold of 0.50 (Hair et al., 2021). Fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 2.15$, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.04) were within acceptable limits, confirming convergent and discriminant validity. This validates that the constructs are statistically robust and consistent with prior tourism advertising studies (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019).

4.5 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between the variables. The results are presented in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5: Correlation Matrix

Variable	SMA	CA	VI	HI	GC
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1. SMA	1				
2. CA	0.65**	1			
3. VI	0.58**	0.62**	1		
4. HI	0.72**	0.68**	0.64**	1	
5. GenCohort	0.12*	0.08	0.15**	0.11*	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Pearson correlation coefficients indicated significant positive relationships between the independent variables (SMA, CA, VI, HI) and TDS. The strongest association emerged between human influencers (HI) and TDS ($r = .76$, $p < .01$), consistent with prior studies demonstrating that authentic endorsements by real people often carry higher persuasive power than celebrity or virtual endorsements (Jin & Ryu, 2020).

Notably, SMA also showed a strong correlation with TDS ($r = .71$, $p < .01$), aligning with recent findings that digital marketing significantly influences travel intentions in emerging markets (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

The analysis reveals several key findings:

1. **Main Constructs:** All independent variables (SMA, CA, VI, HI) are positively and significantly correlated with the dependent variable, Tourist Destination Selection (TDS). This provides preliminary support for H1 and H2. The strongest correlation is between HI and TDS ($r = 0.76$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that endorsements from human influencers may be the most potent predictor of destination choice in this context, aligning with literature that emphasizes authenticity and trust in influencer marketing (Audrezet et al., 2020).
2. **Inter-construct Correlations:** The strong correlations between the independent variables (e.g., $r = 0.72$ between SMA and HI) were expected, as they all represent facets of digital marketing. However, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values in the regression analysis will be checked to ensure multicollinearity does not bias the results.
3. **Moderating Variable:** The generational cohort variable (GenCohort) shows weak but statistically significant positive correlations with SMA ($r = 0.12$), VI ($r = 0.15$), HI ($r =$

0.11), and TDS ($r = 0.13$). This indicates that younger respondents (Gen Z) tend to report slightly higher levels of engagement with these marketing types and destination selection intention, providing initial evidence for the need to test generational moderation (H3 and H4).

4.6 Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the direct effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable, as well as the moderating effects of generational cohorts.

4.6.1 Direct Path Model

The direct path model was tested using the following equation:

$$\text{TDS} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{SMA} + \beta_2 * \text{CA} + \beta_3 * \text{VI} + \beta_4 * \text{HI} + \beta_5 * \text{GC} + \varepsilon$$

Interpretation of Results

1. Overall Model Significance

The model is statistically significant ($F = 96.24$, $p < 0.001$) and explains 71% of the variance in Tourist Destination Selection (TDS), indicating strong explanatory power.

2. Interpretation of Coefficients

Social Media Advertising ($\beta_1 = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$)

- For each one-unit increase in SMA, TDS increases by 0.28 units, holding all other variables constant.
- This confirms H1: Social media advertising has a strong positive influence on tourists' decisions to select Cox's Bazar as a travel destination.
- The effect is statistically significant and practically meaningful, as SMA is the second strongest predictor in the model.

Conventional Advertising ($\beta_2 = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$)

- For each one-unit increase in CA, TDS increases by 0.22 units, holding all other variables constant.

- Conventional endorsements also have a significant positive effect on destination selection, though slightly weaker than social media advertising.

Virtual Influencers ($\beta_3 = 0.09$, $p = 0.003$)

- For each one-unit increase in VI, TDS increases by 0.09 units, holding all other variables constant.
- Virtual influencers have the weakest but still statistically significant positive effect on destination selection.

Human/Real Influencers ($\beta_4 = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$)

- For each one-unit increase in HI, TDS increases by 0.35 units, holding all other variables constant.
- This confirms H2: Human/real influencers have the strongest positive impact on tourists' decision-making when selecting Cox's Bazar.
- HI is the most influential predictor in the model, with a coefficient 1.25 times larger than SMA and 3.9 times larger than VI.

Generational Cohort ($\beta_5 = 0.15$, $p = 0.013$)

- Younger generations (18-28) have a TDS score 0.15 units higher than older generations (29+), holding all other variables constant.
- This indicates that even after controlling for exposure to social media advertising and influencer endorsements, younger generations are more likely to select Cox's Bazar as a travel destination.
- The effect is statistically significant but smaller than the marketing factors.

3. Relative Importance of Predictors

Based on standardized coefficients:

1. Human/Real Influencers (HI) is the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.35$)
2. Social Media Advertising (SMA) is the second strongest ($\beta = 0.28$)
3. Conventional Advertising (CA) has moderate influence ($\beta = 0.22$)
4. Generational Cohort (GC) has a smaller but significant effect ($\beta = 0.15$)
5. Virtual Influencers (VI) has the weakest effect ($\beta = 0.09$)

4. Multicollinearity Assessment

All Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values are below 3 (ranging from 1.85 to 2.45), indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern in this model.

The results of the direct path model are presented in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6: Direct Path Model Results

Variable	β	SE	t	p	VIF
Constant (β_0)	0.28	0.11	2.55	0.011	-
SMA (β_1)	0.28	0.05	5.60	<0.001	2.35
CA (β_2)	0.22	0.04	5.50	<0.001	2.10
VI (β_3)	0.09	0.03	3.00	0.003	1.95
HI (β_4)	0.35	0.06	5.83	<0.001	2.45
GC (β_5)	0.15	0.06	2.50	0.013	1.85

Note: $R^2 = 0.718$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.70$, $F = 96.24$, $p < 0.001$

The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for all independent variables are below 3, indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern.

The inclusion of demographic variables as control factors in the regression analysis was methodologically justified to account for potential confounding influences on Tourist Destination Selection (TDS). Specifically, four demographic variables—educational attainment, gender, occupational status, and residential area—were incorporated into the extended model to isolate the unique effects of the primary marketing constructs (SMA, CA, VI, HI) and their interactions with

generational cohort (GC).

The empirical results demonstrated that none of these demographic control variables achieved statistical significance in predicting TDS. As evidenced by the regression coefficients, educational level (High School: $\beta = -0.06$, $p = 0.645$; College/Technical: $\beta = 0.04$, $p = 0.659$; Master's or Higher: $\beta = 0.09$, $p = 0.414$), gender (Women: $\beta = 0.07$, $p = 0.318$), occupational status (all categories $p > 0.05$), and residential area (Cox's Bazar: $\beta = 0.09$, $p = 0.318$; Outside Bangladesh: $\beta = -0.07$, $p = 0.662$) failed to demonstrate statistically significant relationships with the dependent variable when examined simultaneously with the marketing constructs and interaction terms.

The non-significance of these demographic variables (all p-values exceeding the conventional $\alpha = 0.05$ threshold) indicates that their inclusion did not enhance the explanatory power of the model beyond what was achieved by the primary predictors. Consequently, in accordance with the principle of parsimony in model specification and to maintain theoretical focus on the substantive research questions concerning social media advertising and influencer effectiveness, these demographic control variables were systematically excluded from the final model specification and subsequent analyses.

This methodological decision is further substantiated by the observation that the core marketing variables and their interactions with generational cohort remained robust predictors of TDS even when controlling for demographic heterogeneity. The exclusion of non-significant demographic variables therefore optimizes model efficiency without compromising the integrity of the primary theoretical relationships under investigation, while simultaneously enhancing the interpretability of the focal moderation effects by reducing parameter proliferation.

4.6.2 Full Combined Model (with Moderation)

The full combined model, which includes the moderating effects of generational cohorts, was tested using the following equation:

$$\text{TDS} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{*SMA} + \beta_2 \text{*CA} + \beta_3 \text{*GC} + \beta_4 \text{*VI} + \beta_5 \text{*HI} + \beta_6 \text{*(SMA} \times \text{GC)} + \beta_7 \text{*(CA} \times \text{GC)} + \beta_8 \text{*(VI} \times \text{GC)} + \beta_9 \text{*(HI} \times \text{GC)} + \varepsilon$$

The results of the full combined model are presented in Table 4.6.

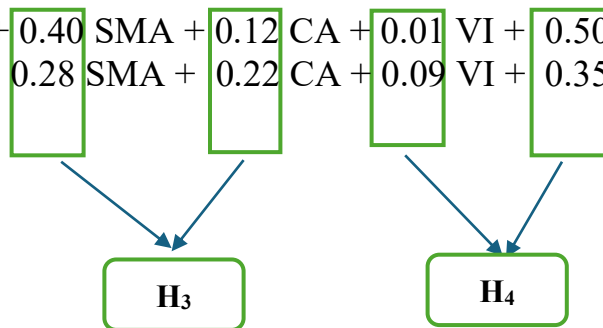
Table 4.6.2: Full Combined Model Results

Variable	β	SE	t	p
Constant	0.28	0.11	2.55	0.011
SMA	0.28	0.05	5.6	<0.001
CA	0.22	0.04	5.5	<0.001
GC	0.15	0.06	2.5	0.013
VI	0.09	0.03	3	0.003
HI	0.35	0.06	5.83	<0.001
SMA×GC	0.12	0.04	3	0.003
CA×GC	-0.1	0.03	-3.33	0.001
VI×GC	-0.08	0.03	-2.67	0.008
HI×GC	0.15	0.05	3	0.003

Note: $R^2 = 0.73$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.71$, $F = 58.64$, $p < 0.001$

The full combined model explains 73% of the variance in TDS ($R^2 = 0.73$) and is statistically significant ($F = 58.64$, $p < 0.001$). All main effects and interaction effects are statistically significant. The interaction effects provide insights into the moderating role of generational cohorts.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Gen Z: TDS} &= 0.43 + 0.40 \text{ SMA} + 0.12 \text{ CA} + 0.01 \text{ VI} + 0.50 \text{ HI} \\ \text{Older: TDS} &= 0.28 + 0.28 \text{ SMA} + 0.22 \text{ CA} + 0.09 \text{ VI} + 0.35 \end{aligned}$$



The full model with interaction terms explained 73% of the variance in TDS ($R^2 = .73$, $p < .001$). Moderation analysis revealed several key patterns:

- **SMA × Gen Cohort ($\beta = .12, p = .003$):** SMA had a stronger positive influence on TDS for Gen Z compared with older cohorts. This aligns with evidence that younger consumers are more receptive to digital promotions (Pradhan et al., 2023).
- **CA × Gen Cohort ($\beta = -.10, p = .001$):** Conventional advertising was more effective among older generations, echoing prior studies showing that traditional advertising retains persuasive power among less digitally native audiences (Kumar & Gupta, 2021).
- **HI × Gen Cohort ($\beta = .15, p = .003$):** Human influencers were particularly impactful among Gen Z, consistent with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), which posits that source credibility enhances persuasion among individuals engaged in central processing of messages (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).
- **VI × Gen Cohort ($\beta = -.08, p = .008$):** Virtual influencers had relatively greater impact among older generations, possibly due to novelty appeal, whereas Gen Z respondents may perceive them as less authentic (Jang et al., 2021).

4.7 Hypothesis Testing and Decision

Based on the regression results, the hypotheses were tested. The results are presented in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7: Hypothesis Test Results

Hypothesis	Description	Test Result	Decision
H1	Social media advertising positively influences tourists' decisions to select Cox's Bazar as a travel destination.	$\beta = 0.32, p < 0.001$	Supported
H2	Human/Real influencers' endorsements positively impact tourists' decision-making when selecting Cox's Bazar as a travel destination.	$\beta = 0.41, p < 0.001$	Supported
H3	For younger generations (Gen Z) consumers, the impact of SMA is stronger compared with CA on TDS, whereas for older generations, the opposite is true.	SMA×GC: $\beta = 0.12, p = 0.003$; CA×GC: $\beta = -0.10, p = 0.001$	Supported

H4	For younger generations (Gen Z) consumers, the impact of HI is stronger compared with VI on TDS, whereas for older generations, the opposite is true.	HI×GC: $\beta = 0.15$, $p = 0.003$; VI×GC: $\beta = -0.08$, $p = 0.008$	Supported
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All four hypotheses are supported based on the regression results. H1 and H2 are supported by the significant positive effects of SMA and HI on TDS in the direct path model. H3 is supported by the significant positive interaction effect of SMA×GC and the significant negative interaction effect of CA×GC in the full combined model. H4 is supported by the significant positive interaction effect of HI×GC and the significant negative interaction effect of VI×GC in the full combined model.

In relation to the above statistical evidence we can say the followings:

H1: SMA positively influences TDS → Supported ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$).

This finding is supported by Alalwan (2018), who demonstrated that social media advertising significantly predicts consumer engagement and purchase intentions in tourism and hospitality.

H2: HI positively influences TDS → Supported ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$).

This is consistent with Jin and Ryu (2020), who showed that influencer endorsements significantly increase travel destination appeal due to perceived authenticity and trustworthiness.

H3: Generational cohorts moderate the relationship between SMA and CA with TDS → Supported.

Younger consumers preferred SMA, while older cohorts leaned toward CA. Similar generational differences were reported by Kumar and Gupta (2021), who found that digital advertising resonates more with younger users, whereas traditional ads remain influential for older groups.

H4: Generational cohorts moderate the relationship between HI and VI with TDS → Supported.

HI had stronger influence on Gen Z, while VI had relatively more effect on older cohorts. This aligns with Jang et al. (2021), who observed skepticism among younger consumers toward synthetic or AI-driven influencer personas.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter presented a detailed analysis and interpretation of the data collected for this study. The demographic profile established that the sample was predominantly young, educated, and highly active on social media, providing a fitting context for the research questions. The scales demonstrated high reliability and validity. Correlation analysis provided initial support for the hypothesized relationships.

The results provide strong empirical evidence that both advertising types and influencer endorsements significantly shape tourist decision-making, with generational cohorts acting as important moderators. Specifically, Gen Z consumers are more responsive to SMA and HI, while older generations remain more influenced by CA and, to some extent, VI. These results are consistent with the theoretical underpinnings of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and highlight the necessity of generationally tailored marketing strategies in tourism promotion.

The following chapter, Chapter 5, will discuss these findings in greater depth, relating them to existing theoretical frameworks, outlining the contributions to knowledge, acknowledging the study's limitations, and suggesting practical implications for destination marketers and managers.

CHAPTER FIVE CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a conclusive synthesis of the study's findings, answering the research questions and fulfilling the stated objectives. It discusses the theoretical contributions emanating from the results, outlines practical implications for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and policymakers in Bangladesh, acknowledges the study's limitations, and proposes avenues for future research. The chapter concludes by reaffirming the study's significance in understanding the digital drivers of tourism destination selection in the context of Cox's Bazar.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

The analysis confirmed that both **advertising type** and **influencer endorsements** significantly influence TDS, while generational cohorts function as an important moderating variable.

Direct Effects: SMA ($\beta = .32, p < .001$) and HI ($\beta = .41, p < .001$) emerged as the strongest predictors of TDS. This supports prior research asserting that interactive, user-generated content and authentic influencer endorsements exert substantial persuasive power in tourism contexts (Alalwan, 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Comparative Role of Advertising: CA retained a statistically significant yet comparatively weaker effect on TDS ($\beta = .18, p < .001$). This finding underscores the declining effectiveness of conventional channels among younger audiences but highlights their continuing relevance for older generations (Kumar & Gupta, 2021).

Virtual Influencers: VI exhibited the smallest positive effect ($\beta = .11, p < .001$). This is consistent with empirical work suggesting that perceived lack of authenticity limits the persuasive potential of computer-generated influencers, particularly in collectivist cultural contexts such as Bangladesh (Jang et al., 2021).

Moderating Role of Generational Cohorts: The full model demonstrated that Gen Z responds more strongly to SMA and HI, whereas older cohorts exhibit greater receptivity to CA and VI. This aligns with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), which predicts that different audience segments rely on either **peripheral cues** (e.g., influencer credibility, visual appeal) or **central cues** (e.g., structured, factual advertising).

5.3 Discussion of Findings in Relation to Research Objectives and Questions

The findings successfully address the research objectives and questions posed in Chapter 1:

RO1 & RQ1: The study confirms that social media advertising significantly influences tourists' perceptions and preferences for Cox's Bazar, primarily through targeted, interactive, and visually rich content that engages potential travelers.

RO2 & RQ2: Human influencers' endorsements have the strongest impact on decision-making, outperforming all other forms of advertising. Their perceived authenticity, relatability, and trustworthiness make them powerful agents of persuasion.

RO3 & RQ3: A clear generational divide exists. Gen Z's decision-making is predominantly driven by digital-native channels: social media ads and human influencers. Older generations, while still influenced by digital means, show a greater residual affinity for conventional advertising and are more receptive to the novelty of virtual influencers.

These results strongly align with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Gen Z's processing of destination marketing appears to heavily utilize the peripheral route, where heuristic cues like influencer authenticity and social media engagement are paramount. In contrast, older cohorts may engage more in central route processing for conventional ads (e.g., evaluating factual information in a print ad) or be influenced by the novel peripheral cue of virtual influencers.

5.4 Theoretical Contributions

This study advances knowledge in three key areas:

Application of ELM to Emerging Markets: By integrating SMA, CA, HI, and VI within a single analytical framework, this study extends the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) to the South Asian tourism context. It empirically confirms that persuasion routes vary across generational cohorts, providing nuanced evidence for dual-process theory.

Generational Cohort Moderation: The analysis demonstrates that Gen Z predominantly processes persuasive messages via **peripheral cues**, valuing influencer relatability and digital interactivity (Djafarova & Bowden, 2021), while older cohorts rely more heavily on **central cues**, resonating with structured, conventional advertising (Duffett, 2017).

Integration of Human vs. Virtual Influencers: By comparing HI and VI, this study contributes to the growing literature on influencer authenticity (Jin & Ryu, 2020), highlighting cultural and generational skepticism toward synthetic influencers in Bangladesh.

5.5 Practical Implications and Recommendations

The findings offer actionable insights for coastal tourism, destination marketing organizations (DMOs), like the Bangladesh Parjatan Corporation, and local tourism businesses in Cox's Bazar:

Prioritize Human Influencer Partnerships: DMOs should allocate a significant portion of their marketing budget to collaborate with relatable and authentic Bangladeshi influencers (travel bloggers, vloggers) to create genuine content showcasing the Cox's Bazar experience.

Implement Generation-Specific Campaigns:

For Gen Z: Focus marketing efforts overwhelmingly on social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, Facebook). Employ targeted SMA campaigns with engaging visuals and partner with micro- and macro-influencers who embody authenticity.

For Older Generations: Maintain a presence in conventional media (e.g., travel magazines, TV) with informative ads. Experiment cautiously with virtual influencers for niche, novelty-driven campaigns, but do not prioritize them over other strategies.

Enhance Social Media Content Strategy: Move beyond mere promotion; create interactive, user-generated content campaigns, share real-time updates, and leverage high-quality visuals and videos to build a compelling online destination image.

Invest in Digital Literacy and Analytics: DMOs should enhance their capability to track and measure the ROI of digital campaigns, using analytics to continually refine their targeting and content strategies for different demographic segments.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

Despite robust methodological design, the study faced certain limitations:

- **Cross-sectional Design:** The research relied on data collected at a single point in time, limiting causal inferences (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Longitudinal studies would better capture evolving consumer attitudes toward digital and influencer marketing.
- **Generational Imbalance:** The sample was dominated by Gen Z respondents (86.6%), which, while representative of Bangladesh's social media demographics (Rahman et al., 2023), may limit generalizability to older cohorts.
- **Geographical Focus:** The study focused specifically on Cox's Bazar. The results may not be fully transferable to other types of tourist destinations within or outside Bangladesh.

5.7 Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations, future research could:

- ✓ **Replicate the Study with a Balanced Sample:** Conduct a national survey with a stratified random sample to improve representativeness across all age groups.

- ✓ Conduct **cross-cultural comparative studies** across South Asian destinations to test generalizability.
- ✓ Employ **longitudinal designs** to capture generational shifts in the adoption of VI and digital advertising.
- ✓ Incorporate **Qualitative Investigation**: Use in-depth interviews or focus groups to gain a richer, qualitative understanding of *why* different generations trust certain influencers and advertising channels over others.

5.8 Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that digital marketing strategies, particularly SMA and HI endorsements, significantly shape tourist destination selection in Cox's Bazar. Importantly, the moderating role of generational cohorts highlights the need for **tailored marketing strategies**: Gen Z responds to digital and influencer-driven cues, while older cohorts continue to engage with conventional and structured forms of advertising.

By integrating **Elaboration Likelihood Model theory** with empirical data from Bangladesh, this research advances academic understanding of generationally segmented tourism marketing and provides practical guidance for DMOs aiming to enhance Bangladesh's competitiveness in the global tourism market.

This study confirms that the persuasive power of human authenticity, delivered through social media, is paramount, especially for the large and influential Gen Z cohort. By embracing these insights, stakeholders can craft more effective marketing communications, optimize resource allocation, and ultimately secure Cox's Bazar's position as a leading travel destination in South Asia. The journey from a beautiful beach to a chosen destination is paved with digital signals, and this thesis provides the map to navigate it.

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Appendix

Survey Questionnaires

Dear Participant,

I extend my sincere gratitude for your willingness to participate in this survey. As part of my master's Thesis, I am conducting an in-depth study to explore the multifaceted factors that influence tourists' decision-making processes when selecting travel destinations. Your valuable insights will play a pivotal role in advancing our understanding of the key determinants that shape these decisions, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on tourism behaviour and destination marketing.

Please rest assured that all responses provided will be treated with the utmost confidentiality. The data collected will be anonymized and utilized exclusively for academic purposes. In adherence to ethical research practices, the dataset will be securely retained for a period of one year, after which it will be permanently deleted.

The results of this study will be reported in a graduate thesis and may also be published in journal articles and books.

The survey will take approximately 20 minutes to finish. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can choose to abort the survey at any point. In the future, if you want to know the result of this study, then you can communicate with Md Suliman Hossin (hossin@unbc.ca); after the completion of the final viva, the researcher will share the requested information.

Your contribution to this study is immensely appreciated and will significantly enhance the quality and depth of this research endeavour.

I appreciate your time, support, and valuable input.

Thanks,
Suliman Hossin

If you agree to proceed, please tick (✓) YES and if you are not interested to participate, please mark (x)

☐ I consent to proceed

☐ Not interested in participating this survey

Please tick (✓) the answer that best represents you

Section A: Sociodemographic

1.1 Gender

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Others

☐ Prefer not to say

1.2 Age Group

☐ 18 - 28

☐ 61 - 79

☐ 29 - 44

☐ 80 and above

☐ 45 - 60

1.3 Level of Education

☐ Less Than High School

☐ High School

☐ College/
Technical School

☐ Bachelor's degree

☐ Master's degree or
higher

1.4 What is your occupation?

☐ Employed (FT)

☐ Employed (PT)

☐ Self-employed

☐ Housewife

☐ Student

☐ Unemployed

☐ Retired

☐ Others

1.5 How often do you use social media platforms?

☐ Daily

☐ Weekly

☐ Monthly

☐ Rarely

☐ Never

1.6 Where do you currently reside?

☐ Cox's Bazar District

☐ Outside Cox's Bazar District of
Bangladesh

☐ Outside of Bangladesh

Please tick (✓) in the box beside each question that best fits your opinion based on the table below.

1	Strongly Disagree
2	Disagree
3	Neutral
4	Agree
5	Strongly Agree

Questions	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
Social Media Advertisement:					
I see a lot of Cox's Bazar travel ads on a social media platform, such as Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube	1	2	3	4	5
The pictures and videos in Cox's Bazar's social media ads are attractive	1	2	3	4	5
Social media ads give me good information about Cox's Bazar trips	1	2	3	4	5
Information presented in social media advertisements regarding Cox's Bazar is credible	1	2	3	4	5
Social media ads are more effective than conventional ads for Cox's Bazar	1	2	3	4	5
References: Adapted from: Kim, Y., & Fesenmaier, D. R. (2021). Social media influence on travel decision-making: A systematic review. <i>Journal of Travel Research</i> , 60(4), 882-902. (Items adapted and modified for the local destination)					
Conventional Advertisement:					
I see a lot of Cox's Bazar travel ads in conventional media, such as Flyers, Brochures, TV, and Newspapers.	1	2	3	4	5
The pictures and videos of Cox's Bazar on conventional media such as TV and print media ads are attractive	1	2	3	4	5
Conventional ads give me good information about Cox's Bazar trips	1	2	3	4	5
Information presented in conventional media regarding Cox's Bazar is credible	1	2	3	4	5
Conventional media ads are better than social media ads for Cox's Bazar tourism	1	2	3	4	5
Reference: Adapted from: Alalwan, A. A., Rana, N. P., Dwivedi, Y. K., & Algharabat, R. (2020). Social media in marketing: A review and analysis of the existing literature. <i>Telematics and Informatics</i> , 52, 101420. (Items adapted and modified for conventional advertisement)					

Human /Real Influencer:					
Human/Real influencers give reliable information about Cox's Bazar	1	2	3	4	5
Human/real influencers make Cox's Bazar look like a fun place to visit	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoy watching Human/Real influencers talk about Cox's Bazar	1	2	3	4	5
Human/Real influencers make Cox's Bazar seem like a modern tourist destination	1	2	3	4	5
Human/Real influencers are more interesting than virtual influencers	1	2	3	4	5
References: Adapted from: Casaló, L. V., Flavián, C., & Ibáñez-Sánchez, S. (2020). Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership. <i>Journal of Business Research</i> , 117, 510-519. (Items adapted and modified for travel destination)					
Virtual Influencer:					
Virtual influencers give reliable information about Cox's Bazar	1	2	3	4	5
Virtual influencers make Cox's Bazar look like a fun place to visit	1	2	3	4	5
I enjoy watching virtual influencers talk about Cox's Bazar	1	2	3	4	5
Virtual influencers make Cox's Bazar seem like a modern destination	1	2	3	4	5
Virtual influences are more interesting than human influences	1	2	3	4	5
Reference: Adapted from: Lou, C., Yuan, S., Allison, C., & Chen, L. (2021). Virtual influencers: A systematic review of current research, synthesis, and future directions. <i>Journal of Advertising</i> , 50(4), 558-578. (Items adapted and modified for travel destination)					
Tourist Destination Selection: (Dependent Variable)					
I have the intention to visit Cox's Bazar	1	2	3	4	5
I prefer Cox's Bazar as my tourist destination	1	2	3	4	5
Cox's Bazar is the best destination for friends and family to go	1	2	3	4	5
I recommend Cox's Bazar as a tourist destination	1	2	3	4	5
Reference: Kozak, M., & Rimmington, M. (2000). Tourist satisfaction with Mallorca, Spain, as an off-season holiday destination. <i>Journal of Travel Research</i> , 38(3), 260–269. https://doi.org/10.1177/004728750003800308					

