



# The role of tourist engagement in mediating the influence of digital storytelling and accessibility on tourists' visiting decisions to Aek Sijorni

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the influence of digital storytelling and accessibility on the decision to visit the Aek Sijorni tourist attraction, with visitor engagement as a mediating variable. The study used a quantitative approach using the Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) method. Data were obtained through questionnaires distributed to domestic tourists and potential visitors. The results indicate that digital storytelling does not have a direct, significant effect on the decision to visit, but has a positive and significant effect on tourist engagement. Accessibility has a positive and significant effect on both tourist engagement and the decision to visit. Tourist engagement also has a positive and significant effect on the decision to visit. The results of the mediation test indicate that tourist engagement partially mediates the relationship between accessibility and the decision to visit, and fully mediates the relationship between digital storytelling and the decision to visit. These findings emphasize the important role of tourist engagement in driving the decision to visit. The implications of this research suggest that destination managers need to improve accessibility and develop digital storytelling that can enhance tourist engagement to encourage increased visits.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The tourism sector plays a crucial role in driving regional economic growth by increasing community income and leveraging local potential. Advances in digital technology have transformed tourism destination promotion into a more modern and interactive process, leading tourists to seek information through digital platforms before visiting (Rokhayah, 2021). Therefore, implementing digital promotion strategies is crucial for enhancing the competitiveness of tourism destinations in the digital era (Februari, 2024). Digital transformation has not only transformed promotional media but also influenced tourists' perceptions and interest in visiting. One widely used strategy is digital storytelling, which conveys information through narratives that build an emotional connection between tourists and destinations (Anggraeni, 2025). Authentic and engaging narratives can strengthen a destination's image and drive decision-making, thus becoming a key factor in influencing tourist behavior (Phung et al., 2025).

Aek Sijorni is a leading natural tourist destination in South Tapanuli Regency, known for its tiered waterfalls and pristine natural scenery. South Tapanuli Regency has a population of approximately 322,380, making it a potential market for regional tourism development. This situation makes Aek Sijorni a potential tourist attraction for both local and international tourists (BPS South Tapanuli Regency, 2025).

Despite its high appeal, the number of tourist visits to Aek Sijorni has fluctuated. After declining from 90,965 visitors in 2019 to 83,987 in 2022, the number of visits rebounded to 90,453 in 2023 (Batubara, 2024). This increase indicates a recovery in public interest in tourism activities after the COVID-19 pandemic (Mustika, 2025).

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the tourism sector through mobility restrictions and increased public anxiety, leading to a decline in tourist arrivals. This situation suggests that travel decisions are influenced not only by the attractiveness of the destination but also by external factors and tourists' perceptions of the current situation (Februari et al., 2024).

Fluctuations in tourist arrivals indicate the ongoing challenge of sustaining tourist interest. One factor suspected to be contributing to this situation is suboptimal digital storytelling, even though this strategy can build emotional connections between tourists and destinations (Goli et al., 2021). Furthermore, accessibility, which encompasses ease of transportation, quality of infrastructure, and availability of information, contributes to tourists' perceptions of comfort and safety during their travels. Easy access and adequate infrastructure can reduce travel time, travel risks, and the distance required to obtain destination information, thereby increasing tourists' confidence and assurance in visiting (Javier et al., 2019).

In this study, tourist engagement is positioned as a mediating variable linking the influence of digital storytelling and accessibility on tourist visit decisions. Tourist engagement encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects that can strengthen visit intentions and decisions (Shoukat et al., 2022). Previous research in Aek Sijorni has generally focused on tourism experiences, visitor satisfaction, destination development strategies, and local economic impacts (Harahap, 2025). (R. Z. T. Nasution, 2025) emphasizes the importance of communication strategies in tourism destination development. (Amelia, 2023) explains that the tourism sector contributes to local economic growth. However, previous studies have only examined the direct influence of digital storytelling or accessibility on visiting decisions, while the psychological mechanisms that explain how these two variables influence decisions through tourist engagement have not been widely studied, especially at the Aek Sijorni destination. It is hoped that it will provide theoretical contributions to the development of digital-based tourism behavior studies and practical contributions to destination managers in designing more effective promotional strategies and improving tourist destination accessibility.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a quantitative approach with an exploratory design and cross-sectional method to examine the causal relationship between digital storytelling, accessibility, tourist engagement, and visit decisions. The quantitative approach was chosen because it allows hypothesis testing through numerical and statistical data analysis (Sugiyono, 2022), while the cross-sectional design was used because data collection was conducted over a specific time period without repeated observations of respondents (Ghozali, 2021; Hair et al., 2019). The study was conducted at the Aek Sijorni tourist attraction, South Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra. The study population was tourists who had visited Aek Sijorni, with an unknown population size. Therefore, the sample size was determined using the Lemeshow formula for an unknown population, obtaining a minimum of 96 respondents, which was then rounded up to 100 respondents (Nundy, 2022). The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, with the criteria being that respondents were at least 17 years old, had visited Aek Sijorni, and had obtained or searched for digital information about the destination (Sugiyono, 2022).

The research data consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through a questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale to measure respondents' perceptions of the

indicators for each research variable (Ghozali, 2021). The research instrument was developed based on indicators for each variable studied. The digital storytelling variable was measured using six indicators: narrative quality and strength, visual and audiovisual appeal, relevance to tourist needs, content interactivity, the ability to stimulate imagination, and the ability to evoke emotions. The accessibility variable was measured using indicators such as road infrastructure, transportation availability, ease of obtaining route information, clarity of directions, time accessibility, and cost affordability. Furthermore, the tourist engagement variable was measured using attention and interest, emotional interaction, frequency of information seeking, willingness to share information, and psychological commitment. The decision to visit variable was measured using indicators such as confidence in visiting, readiness to plan, preference over alternatives, time commitment, resource allocation, and visit realization.

While secondary data were obtained from scientific journals, books, and reports relevant to the research topic. Data analysis was conducted using the Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) method because it is capable of analyzing simultaneous relationships between latent variables in complex models and effectively testing mediation effects (Ringle & Sarstedt, 2021). The analysis process included testing the outer model to evaluate construct validity and reliability, and testing the inner model to examine the relationships between variables and the proposed research hypotheses (Ghozali, 2021).

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

#### Description of Research Data

Based on respondent characteristics, the majority of tourists in this study were female (95 people) (75.2%), while 30 were male (24.8%). In terms of age, the majority of respondents were between 21 and 25 years old (98 people) (78.4%), followed by 21 (16.8%) aged 17 and 20 years old (17.2%), and 6 (4.8%) aged 26 and 30 years old (26.8%). There were no respondents over 30 years old. These results indicate that Aek Sijorni visitors are predominantly female and a younger age group who are relatively active users of digital media.

Based on visit frequency, the majority of respondents were first-time visitors to Aek Sijorni (52 people) (41.6%), followed by 43 (34.4%) who had visited 2–3 times, 16 (12.8%) who had visited more than 5 times, and 14 (11.2%) who had visited 4–5 times. Meanwhile, the most common source of information about Aek Sijorni was friends or family (74 people, 59.2%), followed by social media (46 people, 36.8%). Information from the internet/websites and news media each accounted for 1.6%, while information from the surrounding community was 0.8%. These findings indicate that the dissemination of information about Aek Sijorni is still dominated by word-of-mouth communication, although social media also plays an important role in introducing the tourist destination to tourists.

#### Measurement Model Analysis (Outer Model)

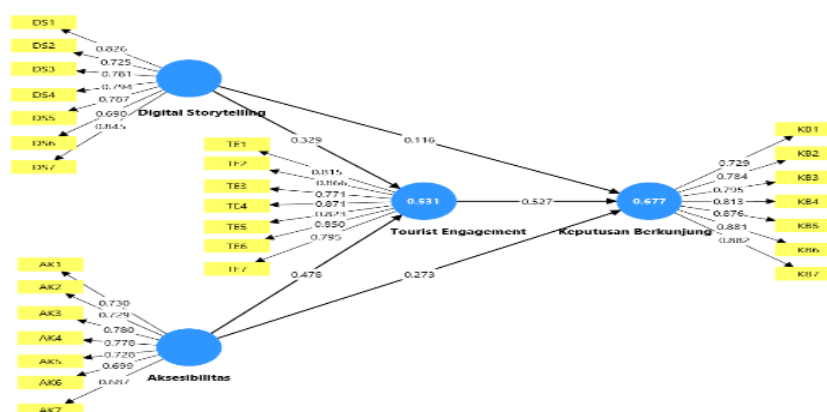


Figure 1. Outer model evaluation path diagram

Source: Processed by the author using the SmartPLS application (2026)

- a. Convergent Validity Test, to ensure that the data collection tool has high accuracy in measuring variables, a convergent validity analysis was conducted. The essence of this validity test is to confirm the extent to which the instrument is able to produce data consistent with the concept being measured (Ghozali, 2021). The convergent validity assessment using the SEM-PLS approach refers to the requirement of an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value above 0.50 and a minimum loading factor coefficient of 0.70. However, methodological literature states that loading factor values in the range of 0.60–0.70 can still be accommodated (Hair et al., 2019). By meeting these empirical standards, the research instrument is deemed to have adequate validity.

Table 1. Loading factor, mean, ST, and AVE test results

Indicator	Accessibility	Digital Storytelling	Visit Decision	Tourist Engagement	Mean	Standard Deviation
AK1	0,730			3,75	0,80	
AK2	0,729			3,83	0,87	
AK3	0,780			3,79	0,77	
AK4	0,778			4,06	0,75	0,538
AK5	0,728			4,12	0,68	
AK6	0,699			3,97	0,68	
AK7	0,687			3,86	0,76	
DS1	0,826			3,97	0,66	
DS2	0,725			4,09	0,63	
DS3	0,781			4,24	0,65	
DS4	0,794			4,01	0,68	0,608
DS5	0,787			4,23	0,58	
DS6	0,690			4,22	0,64	
DS7	0,845			4,03	0,76	
KB1		0,815		4,22	0,64	
KB2		0,866		4,15	0,71	
KB3		0,771		3,98	0,78	
KB4		0,871		3,58	1,00	0,680
KB5		0,823		3,79	0,87	
KB6		0,850		3,85	0,85	
KB7		0,795		3,80	0,86	
TE1			0,729	3,84	0,73	
TE2			0,784	3,89	0,74	
TE3			0,795	3,92	0,76	
TE4			0,813	3,81	0,83	0,686
TE5			0,876	3,74	0,76	
TE6			0,881	3,94	0,76	
TE7			0,882	4,05	0,74	

Source: Processed by the author using the SmartPLS application (2026)

All constructs in this study met convergent validity criteria, as indicated by Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values above 0.50 for each variable. These AVE values include accessibility (0.538), digital storytelling (0.608), visiting decisions (0.680), and tourist engagement (0.686), making all variables suitable for use in the structural model analysis.

- b. Discriminant Validity Test, to ensure there is no overlap between variables and that each construct in the model measures a different dimension, a discriminant validity test is conducted. According to Ghozali (2021), this validity criterion is considered met if the square root of a construct's AVE is greater than its correlation with other constructs, and its constituent indicators contain the highest values within their own constructs.

Fornell-Larcker Criterion, the next discriminant validity test was applied using the Fornell-Larcker standard, which compares the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of each construct with the correlation coefficients between the other constructs. The methodological standard proposed by Ghozali (2021) states that a construct's discriminant validity is considered met

if the square root of its AVE is proven to be greater than the correlation value formed between the constructs.

Table 2. Fornell-larcker criterion test results

	Accessibility	Digital Storytelling	Visit Decision	Tourist Engagement
Accessibility	0.734			
Digital Storytelling	0.613	0.780		
Visit Decision	0.703	0.612	0.825	
Tourist Engagement	0.680	0.623	0.785	0.828

Source: Processed by the author using the SmartPLS application (2026)

The validity of the discriminant validity in this study was confirmed by the results of the Fornell-Larcker Criterion test, which showed that the square root of the AVE (Average Variance Extracted) of each construct exceeded its correlation value with constructs outside the construct. Based on these results, all variables were declared discriminantly valid and suitable for use in subsequent modeling.

- c. Reliability Test, to assess the instrument's reliability in measuring latent variables, a reliability test is conducted. According to Ghozali (2021), reliability is closely related to the ability of a measuring instrument to collect data consistently. Reliability measurement in the SEM-PLS approach relies on two main indicators: Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability. A construct is considered reliable if the score for both indicators is above 0.70.

Table 3. Construct reliability test results

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_c)
Accessibility	0,857	0,891
Digital Storytelling	0,892	0,915
Visit Decision	0,921	0,937
Tourist Engagement	0,923	0,938

Source: Processed by the author using the SmartPLS application (2026)

All measuring instruments in this study were deemed reliable and suitable for application because they met the required reliability criteria. This feasibility was demonstrated by the Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability scores for each variable, which consistently exceeded 0.70. By meeting these parameters, each construct demonstrated strong internal consistency in collecting research data.

**Structural Model Evaluation Analysis (Inner Model)**

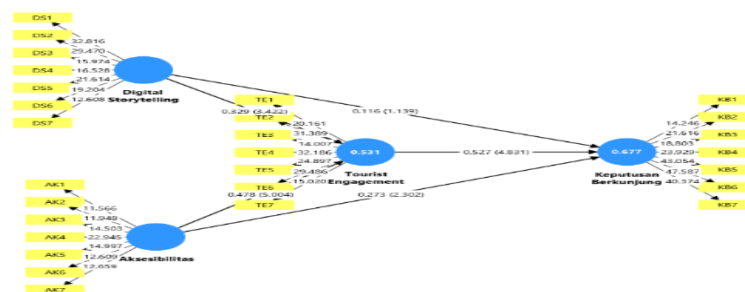


Figure 2. Inner model evaluation path diagram

Source: Processed by the Author Using the SmartPLS Application (2026)

- a. R-Square (R<sup>2</sup>) value, to evaluate the extent to which variations in the dependent variable can be predicted and explained by the independent variables in the structural model, R-Square value analysis is used.

Table 4. R-square ( $R^2$ ) test results

	R-square	R-square adjusted
Tourist Engagement	0,531	0,523
Visit Decision	0,677	0,669

Source: Processed by the author using the SmartPLS application (2026)

The coefficient of determination evaluation shows that the Adjusted R-Square value for the visit decision variable is 0.669, which is included in the strong category. This indicates that the combination of digital storytelling, accessibility, and tourist engagement variables can explain 66.9 percent of the variation in visit decisions. Meanwhile, the tourist engagement variable has an Adjusted R-Square value of 0.523, which is included in the moderate category, so 52.3 percent of the variation is explained by digital storytelling and accessibility.

- b. F-square (Effect Size), to measure the contribution of each latent variable in the model, Effect Size or F-Square analysis is used. In the SmartPLS application, this value is used to determine the strength of the influence of exogenous variables on endogenous variables. Based on the criteria of Savitri et al., the F-Square value is categorized as strong if it is greater than 0.35, moderate at around 0.15, and weak if it is around 0.02.

Table 5. F-square (effect size) test results

	Tourist Engagement	Visit Decision
Digital Storytelling	0,144	0,023
Accessibility	0,304	0,110
Tourist Engagement		0,403

Source: Processed by the author using the SmartPLS application (2026)

Based on the results of the F-Square value test to assess the effect size of each relationship path, the following conclusions were obtained: a) Digital storytelling has a moderate effect on tourist engagement with a value of 0.144; b) Digital storytelling has a very small effect on the decision to visit with a value of 0.023, making it categorized as weak; c) Accessibility has a strong effect on tourist engagement with a value of 0.304; d) Accessibility has a moderate effect on the decision to visit with a value of 0.110; e) The strongest effect is found in the relationship between tourist engagement and the decision to visit with a value of 0.403, making it categorized as strong.

- c. Predictive Relevance Test ( $Q^2$ ), the measurement of the model's predictive relevance to endogenous variables was carried out using a blindfolding technique to obtain the Q-Square (Predictive Relevance) value. According to Hair et al., a model is said to have good predictive relevance if the Q-Square value is greater than 0, while a value less than or equal to 0 indicates that the model has no predictive ability for endogenous variables.

Table 6. Predictive relevance ( $q^2$ ) test results

	$Q^2$ predict	RMSE	MAE
Tourist Engagement	0,505	0,717	0,550
Visit Decision	0,519	0,706	0,519

Source: Processed by the author using the SmartPLS application (2026)

The model's reliability in predicting endogenous variables is demonstrated by Q-Square values of 0.505 for tourist engagement and 0.519 for visit decisions, both above 0, indicating good predictive relevance. Low MAE and RMSE values also indicate small prediction errors, thus the model is deemed feasible and has high predictive ability for endogenous variables.

- d. Hypothesis Testing

Table 8. Direct effect

	Path Koefisien	T statistics	P values
Digital Storytelling → Tourist Engagement	0,329	3,422	0,001
Digital Storytelling → Visit Decision	0,116	1,139	0,255

Accessibility → Tourist Engagement	0,478	5,004	0,000
Accessibility → Visit Decision	0,273	2,302	0,021
Tourist Engagement → Visit Decision	0,527	4,831	0,000

Source: Processed by the author using the SmartPLS application (2026)

Based on the Direct Effect test, the following results were obtained: a) Digital Storytelling → Tourist Engagement has a p-value of  $0.001 < 0.05$ , so H1 is accepted, meaning Digital Storytelling influences Tourist Engagement; b) Digital Storytelling → Visiting Decision has a p-value of  $0.255 > 0.05$ , so H2 is rejected, meaning Digital Storytelling does not influence Visiting Decision; c) Accessibility → Tourist Engagement has a p-value of  $0.000 < 0.05$ , so H3 is accepted, meaning Accessibility influences Tourist Engagement; d) Accessibility → Visiting Decision has a p-value of  $0.021 < 0.05$ , so H4 is accepted, meaning Accessibility influences Visiting Decision; e) Tourist Engagement → Visiting Decision has a p-value of  $0.000 < 0.05$ , so H5 is accepted, meaning Tourist Engagement influences Visiting Decision.

Table 9. Indirect effect

	Path Koefisien	T statistics	P values
Digital Storytelling → Tourist Engagement → Visit Decision	0,252	2,993	0,003
Accessibility → Tourist Engagement → Visit Decision	0,174	3,038	0,002

Source: Processed by the author using the SmartPLS application (2026)

Based on the Indirect Effect test, the following results were obtained: a) Digital Storytelling -> Tourist Engagement -> Visiting Decision obtained a p-value of  $0.003 < 0.05$ , therefore H6 is accepted, namely Digital Storytelling influences Visiting Decision through Tourist Engagement; b) Accessibility -> Tourist Engagement -> Visiting Decision obtained a p-value of  $0.002 < 0.05$ , therefore H7 is accepted, namely Accessibility influences Visiting Decision through Tourist Engagement.

### The Influence of Digital Storytelling on Tourist Engagement

Empirical evidence in this study confirms that tourist engagement plays a significant role as a mediating variable linking digital storytelling to the decision to visit. The structural model test results show a path coefficient of 0.329 with a significance of  $p = 0.001 (< 0.05)$ , indicating that digital storytelling has a positive and significant effect on tourist engagement at the Aek Sijorni destination. Digital narratives showcasing the natural beauty of Aek Sijorni can shape tourists' imaginations and expectations, thereby increasing their engagement.

These findings align with the Theory of Planned Behavior, which explains that attitudes and perceptions can be formed during the pre-visit phase through cognitive and emotional aspects. This is supported by research by (Chairy, 2025) and (J. M. Nasution, 2019) on the effectiveness of digital content. Furthermore, this study expands on this concept by incorporating an Islamic perspective, where attitude formation in Muslim tourists is also influenced by spiritual values (J. Nasution, 2023) and (Nurchahyo et al., 2024). In this context, digital storytelling serves as a medium that encourages reflection through contemplation and reflection, thus forming a more comprehensive tourist engagement encompassing intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects.

### The Influence of Digital Storytelling on Visiting Decisions

The results showed that digital storytelling did not significantly influence the decision to visit, with a path coefficient of 0.116 and a p-value of  $0.255 (> 0.05)$ . This finding indicates that digital storytelling content has not been able to directly encourage tourists to decide to visit Aek Sijorni. From the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), digital storytelling plays a more dominant role in shaping initial attitudes, but is not strong enough to directly influence behavior without the support of other factors. These results are in line with (Pratiwi & Soemitra, 2024) who stated that digital content tends to work indirectly through mediating variables such as involvement or trust, so its impact is more visible at the interest stage than the final decision.

Empirically, information obtained through word-of-mouth, particularly from friends and family, has a greater influence on travel decisions than digital media. This suggests that interpersonal trust within the social environment plays a stronger role in tourists' decision-making processes. From an Islamic perspective, decisions are based not only on information but also on intentions and considerations of the public good. Therefore, digital storytelling plays a greater role in shaping initial understanding, but still requires reinforcement of values to translate into action. The dominance of verbal communication also reflects the values of honesty and trust, which strengthen individual beliefs (Marliyah et al., 2021). These findings also reinforce criticisms of the linear nature of the TPB, as attitudes do not always automatically lead to behavior without deeper engagement and internalization of values (J. Nasution, 2023).

### **The Influence of Accessibility on Tourist Engagement**

The results of the study indicate that accessibility has a positive and significant influence on tourist engagement at the Aek Sijorni tourist attraction. This is evidenced by a path coefficient of 0.478 with a p-value of 0.000 ( $<0.05$ ), indicating that the better access to the destination, the higher the tourist engagement formed. Ease of reaching the location, the availability of transportation, and clear information on travel routes can increase tourists' sense of comfort and confidence, thus encouraging them to be more active in seeking information, interacting, and showing interest in the destination. Within the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) framework, this condition reflects the concept of perceived behavioral control which describes an individual's perception of the ease or obstacles in carrying out an action.

From an Islamic perspective, accessibility can be understood as part of the effort to provide convenience for humans. Efforts to provide good access not only function technically but also provide a sense of security and tranquility (tuma'ninah) that support tourists' psychological readiness. This condition strengthens tourists' overall engagement, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and spiritual aspects. Furthermore, this finding aligns with the principle of taysir (ease) in Islam and supports the view of (Grehastuti, 2025) who assert that effective access is part of efforts to realize the welfare of the tourism sector. Thus, accessibility plays a role not only as a physical facility but also as a crucial factor shaping tourist engagement through aspects of convenience, comfort, and utility.

### **The Influence of Accessibility on Visiting Decisions**

The validity of the structural model in this study indicates that tourists' decision to visit the Aek Sijorni tourist attraction is significantly influenced by the quality of destination accessibility. This influence is indicated by a path coefficient of 0.273 with a significance value of  $p = 0.021$  ( $<0.05$ ). Ease of travel routes, clear directions, and good transportation access can reduce tourists' concerns about travel risks, thereby increasing comfort and encouraging intention to visit. This finding aligns with the concept of perceived behavioral control in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which explains that the perception of ease in performing an action can influence the emergence of actual behavior.

This study also provides an additional perspective from a sharia perspective, where Muslim tourists' decision to visit is not only based on rational considerations but also involves spiritual values reflected in the attitude of tawakkul (relief) after making efforts. Providing good accessibility is seen as a form of implementing the principle of maslahah (maslahah) because it provides benefits in the form of comfort and safety for the community. These results support the findings of Marliyah et al. (2021) who emphasize the importance of a sense of security and ease in decision-making, and reinforce the view of (Putu Devi Rosalina, 2024) that perceptions of destination benefits are a major factor in the decision-making process.

### **The Influence of Tourist Engagement on Visit Decisions**

The results of the structural modeling show that tourist involvement has a positive and significant influence on the decision to visit the Aek Sijorni tourist attraction. This is evidenced by a path coefficient of 0.527 with a significance value of  $p = 0.000$  ( $<0.05$ ). Furthermore, the effect size (f-

square) value of 0.403 indicates that this variable has a strong influence on the decision to visit. These findings indicate that the higher the level of tourist involvement from the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects, the greater their tendency to decide to visit the destination. Strong involvement also encourages tourists to more actively seek information, build interest, and create an emotional attachment to the destination.

Cognitive engagement contributes to travel decisions by enhancing tourists' understanding and trust in a destination through active information search and evaluation of available content. Emotional engagement reinforces positive feelings, such as excitement, engagement, and curiosity, which motivate tourists to translate their interest into concrete intentions to visit. Behavioral engagement is reflected in tourists' willingness to interact with destination-related content, share travel information or experiences, and participate in online discussions, all of which strengthen their commitment to visit the destination. The integration of these three dimensions creates a stronger psychological connection between tourists and the destination, thereby increasing the likelihood of actual visitation.

From an Islamic perspective, tourist engagement is understood not only as a psychological process but also as a form of spiritual reflection through contemplation and reflection, strengthening the intention to travel. Tourists with high levels of engagement tend to interpret travel not only as a recreational activity but also as a means of acquiring values and learning. Thus, tourist engagement acts as a bridge between the rational and spiritual aspects of the decision-making process. This finding aligns with research by (Pratiwi & Soemitra, 2024) and (J. Nasution, 2023), which asserts that value-based engagement can strengthen individual decisions in choosing a course of action.

### **The Role of Tourist Engagement Mediation**

Testing the mediation hypothesis indicates that tourist engagement plays a significant role in linking the influence of digital storytelling and accessibility on visit decisions. For digital storytelling, the indirect effect proved significant with a p-value of 0.003 ( $<0.05$ ), indicating full mediation. This indicates that digital storytelling does not directly influence visit decisions, but rather through tourist engagement (Iswanto, 2024).

Meanwhile, tourist engagement also acts as a partial mediator in the relationship between accessibility and visit decisions with a p-value of 0.002 ( $<0.05$ ), as accessibility has both direct and indirect effects through tourist engagement. Within the Theory of Planned Behavior framework, tourist engagement functions as a psychological process that transforms external stimuli into action, where digital storytelling shapes emotional and attitudinal aspects, while accessibility represents the perceived ease of action (Khalid Alawneh, 2026). From a sharia perspective, tourist engagement is understood as a process of internalizing values that integrates rational, emotional, and spiritual aspects in decision-making. This finding also shows the limitations of the linear nature of the Theory of Planned Behavior as proposed by (Nurbasari et al., 2024) and (Fahlevi, 2025).

The findings of this study have important practical implications for developing digital promotion strategies in tourism destinations. Because digital storytelling does not directly influence visitation decisions but exerts influence through tourist engagement, destination managers need to focus on developing digital content that fosters cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement, rather than simply conveying promotional information. Interactive storytelling, authentic visitor experiences, immersive visual content, and providing space for user participation can strengthen tourists' emotional connection to the destination. Digital promotion strategies also need to be integrated with efforts to improve destination accessibility and encourage the dissemination of information through electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM), as these factors can collectively increase tourist engagement and ultimately increase the likelihood of actual visits.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that tourists' decisions to visit Aek Sijorni are significantly influenced by their level of emotional and rational engagement. This engagement is significantly driven by digital storytelling strategies and accessibility. Through structural modeling, high-quality digital content is

proven effective in increasing visitor engagement, although this stimulus must pass through intermediary variables and cannot directly drive the decision to visit. The opposite phenomenon is found for accessibility, which plays a dual role, contributing both directly and indirectly to both driving engagement and tourists' willingness to visit.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the development of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) in the tourism context by demonstrating that tourist engagement functions as an important psychological mechanism linking external factors, namely digital storytelling and accessibility, with visiting decisions. The findings suggest that attitudes and perceived behavioral control alone are insufficient to explain tourists' behavioral intentions unless they are translated into cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. Therefore, this study extends the TPB by highlighting tourist engagement as a complementary construct that explains how external stimuli are transformed into actual visiting decisions, particularly in nature-based tourism destinations.

Based on these conclusions, practical recommendations for Aek Sijorni management include updating digital narrative tactics to be more authentic, improving physical facilities and providing clarity in route information, and creating memorable tourism experiences to engage visitors. Finally, in order to improve the limitations of this theoretical model, future research is encouraged to broaden the understanding of tourist behavior in nature-based tourism destinations by examining additional variables such as destination image, tourist satisfaction, trust, perceived value, and electronic word-of-mouth. Comparative studies across different types of nature tourism destinations and longitudinal research designs are also recommended to capture changes in tourist behavior over time. Furthermore, future studies may investigate the influence of emerging digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and personalized digital marketing, as well as environmental sustainability and cultural values, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of factors shaping tourists' visiting decisions.

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