

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) and Adventure Tourism: Conceptualizing Social Media's Role in Shaping Travel Intentions

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become an important source of travel information, inspiration, and social influence. This role may be particularly significant in adventure tourism, where experiences such as trekking, rafting, paragliding, scuba diving, and camping are frequently represented through visually engaging photographs, short videos, stories, and user-generated content. Beyond providing destination information, social media exposes individuals to the travel experiences of friends, peers, influencers, and other users, and this continuous exposure may create the perception that others are enjoying rewarding experiences one is missing, generating Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). Although FOMO has attracted growing attention in tourism research, most existing empirical work has examined it as a direct predictor of travel intention within general or influencer-driven tourism contexts, leaving its role as a sequential, mediating mechanism in adventure tourism specifically, and its distinction from actual behavioural participation comparatively underdeveloped. This paper addresses that gap by proposing a conceptual framework explaining how social media stimuli generate FOMO, how FOMO influences adventure tourism travel intention, and how travel intention contributes to actual participation in adventure tourism. Drawing primarily on Social Comparison Theory and supported by the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Uses and Gratifications Theory, the paper conceptualises FOMO as an affective mechanism that links social media stimuli to travel intention within a sequential pathway: social media stimuli → FOMO → travel intention → adventure tourism participation. The paper contributes to tourism literature by integrating social media exposure, emotional response, intention formation, and behavioural participation within a single, testable framework, and by explicitly separating psychological readiness (intention) from behavioural execution (participation). It also identifies boundary conditions under which the proposed pathway is more or less likely to hold. It provides a foundation for future empirical research examining how digitally mediated social experiences influence adventure tourism behaviour.

Keywords: Fear of Missing Out, FOMO, social media, adventure tourism, travel intention, tourism participation, Social Comparison Theory

INTRODUCTION

Social media has profoundly changed the way people find, evaluate, and share travel experiences. Travellers are searching for destinations, seeking recommendations, viewing others' experiences, and developing ideas about where they would like to travel and what they would like to do, using mostly social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook (Saini et al., 2023). Earlier, the tourism experiences were communicated largely through brochures, advertisements, travel agents, and word of mouth. However, these days, user-generated content, influencer posts, short-form videos, stories, and online travel communities are constantly shaping and sharing (Madondo, 2018). As a result, social media has become an

important part of decision-making in tourism, particularly in adventure tourism. Adventure tourism typically includes experiences that are marked by novelty, physical activity, excitement, challenges, and interactions with natural or unfamiliar environments (R. Buckley, 2012; Huang et al., 2024). Activities such as trekking, mountain climbing, river rafting, camping, scuba diving, surfing, paragliding, and bungee jumping are widely represented across various social media platforms (Stanišić et al., 2024). These activities are shared primarily because of their highly visual and experiential nature (Kim et al., 2020). Before deciding to participate in these adventurous activities, people experience them virtually through photographs, videos, reels, and stories. People who have never visited a particular place can witness other tourists trekking across mountains, rafting down rivers, or diving underwater and develop expectations about what such experiences might be like (Wu & Lai, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2020).

However, social media's impact goes beyond just spreading travel and activity-related information. Additionally, it fosters a social atmosphere in which people are constantly exposed to others' experiences and can assess their own lives based on what they see online (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Slater & Sanchez-Vives, 2016). People may feel they are missing out on experiences others are having when they are frequently exposed to friends, peers, influencers, and other travellers engaging in thrilling or unique activities (Rahjasa et al., 2024). This emotion is frequently linked to FOMO, which is the worry that others might be enjoying fulfilling experiences while one is not (Aitamurto et al., 2021). The extensive usage of social media platforms may exacerbate this feeling by providing users with a continuous stream of information about what others are doing and experiencing (Alabri, 2022). Tourism provides a particularly relevant context for examining FOMO because travel experiences are widely visible, easily shared, and frequently portrayed as desirable and memorable accomplishments (Zaman et al., 2022; Marine-Roig, 2019). In adventure tourism, where experiences are often linked to thrills, success, individuality, personal challenge, and identity expression, this may be even more pronounced (Davidson & Hons, 2006). One may therefore feel as though they are losing out on something worthwhile or particularly significant when they witness others engaging in similar activities. FOMO is increasingly seen as a potential psychological mechanism by which online experiences influence travel intentions, and emerging tourism research has begun to link social media exposure, social comparison, FOMO, and travel-related intentions (Álvarez-Monzoncillo, 2022).

Despite this growing attention, a significant gap remains. Most existing research has examined FOMO as a direct predictor of travel intention, particularly in the context of general tourism and influencer marketing. However, less attention has been paid to how FOMO may operate within the decision-making process in adventure tourism, particularly in distinguishing between an individual's intention to travel and their eventual participation in an adventure activity. This distinction is important because a person's intention to engage in an adventurous activity does not translate into actual participation. Financial limitations, time constraints, accessibility, safety concerns, and perceived danger are among the factors that can affect whether an intention is ultimately translated into behaviour. To explain how social media exposure and FOMO may influence adventure tourism behaviour beyond the formation of trip intentions, it is crucial to understand this shift.

Research Gap

Although social media has become an important source of tourism information and inspiration, the psychological processes by which it influences adventure tourism behaviour remain poorly acknowledged.

Firstly, previous studies have examined the influence of social media on tourism decisions and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) in relation to travel intention. Limited attention has been paid to the specific context of adventure tourism, where experiences are highly visual and often associated with excitement, achievement, novelty, and perceived risk.

Second, existing studies have largely examined FOMO as a direct predictor of travel intention, with less attention to its role as a mediating factor through which social media stimuli may influence travel intention. Third, existing research focuses on behavioural intention without clearly distinguishing it from actual participation in adventure tourism. An individual may intend to participate in an adventure activity but ultimately may not do so due to factors such as cost, time, accessibility, safety concerns, or perceived risk.

These gaps point to the need for a more comprehensive conceptual approach that accounts for how social media could influence adventure travellers' behaviour. It is crucial to understand whether social media stimuli can cause FOMO, whether FOMO can affect travel intention, and whether travel intention can lead to actual participation in adventure tourism.

The objectives of the present conceptual paper are:

1. To identify the theoretical relevance of social media in shaping adventure travel behaviour, including the contextual and situational conditions that may facilitate or constrain the transition from travel intention to actual participation.
2. To explain the role of FOMO as a mediating mechanism through which social media stimuli may influence travel intention in the context of adventure tourism.
3. To develop a conceptual framework linking social media stimuli, Fear of Missing Out (FOMO), travel intention, and adventure tourism participation.

Theoretical Background

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory helps to understand why individuals actively engage with social media content and what they seek to gain from such engagement (Mehran et al., 2023). People use media for different purposes, including obtaining information, entertainment, social interaction, self-expression, and escapism (Getz & Page, 2014). Adventure tourism content can satisfy several of these needs simultaneously. For instance, individuals may watch travel vlogs to learn about destinations and activities, follow adventure influencers for inspiration, interact with other travellers to exchange experiences, or enjoy visually engaging adventure content (Cohen et al., 2014; Silaban et al., 2022). This active engagement is important because individuals who regularly seek adventure-related content are more likely to encounter repeated representations of other people's travel experiences (Pomfret et al., 2023). Over time, such repeated exposure can make others' experiences more visible and provide greater opportunities for individuals to compare their own experiences with those they observe online (Brown & Kuss, 2020).

Social media includes features such as visual appeal, informative value, entertainment, opportunities for interaction, and social cues (Xu et al., 2023). These characteristics can encourage users to engage more closely with adventure tourism content while also increasing its social visibility and emotional appeal (Wang & Iahad, 2025). Uses and Gratifications Theory, therefore, provides a useful basis for understanding why individuals engage with adventure tourism content and how this engagement can increase their exposure to others' experiences, thereby creating the conditions for subsequent social comparison and FOMO.

Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory provides a foundation for understanding how exposure to social media leads to FOMO in adventure tourism. The theory was advanced by Festinger, who stated that individuals have an inherent tendency to evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities, opinions, and circumstances with those of others (Visser, 1998). Unlike traditional tourism communication, which was episodic and mediated through official channels, social media offers real-time, unfiltered glimpses into others' lives (Sujatmiko et al., 2025). Due to this exposure to a continuous stream of travel experiences shared not only by friends and acquaintances but also by influencers, celebrities, and strangers, social media users have dramatically expanded the scope and immediacy of such comparisons (Paul et al., 2024; John & Supramaniam, 2026).

This tendency towards comparison may be particularly relevant in adventure tourism. Adventure experiences are often visually appealing and socially visible, making them easy to share and compare online (Teles et al., 2025). Images of reaching a mountain summit, videos of white-water rafting, or posts showing paragliding experiences not only present a destination or activity but also communicate excitement,

achievement, novelty, and exclusivity (Göker, 2022). When individuals repeatedly encounter such experiences, they may begin to compare their own lives and experiences with those of others they see enjoying. This comparison may create a sense that others are experiencing more exciting or rewarding activities, while they themselves are being left out (Slavich et al., 2023).

Such feelings provide an important basis for understanding Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). In this sense, social media exposure does not necessarily directly create FOMO. Rather, exposure to others' experiences creates opportunities for comparison, which may lead individuals to feel they are missing desirable experiences. FOMO can then become an important psychological mechanism linking social media exposure with individuals' interest and intention to undertake similar adventure experiences (Elhai et al., 2021).

Proposed Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework is presented in Figure 1. It shows a sequential pathway in which social media stimuli create the environmental conditions under which FOMO may emerge. FOMO subsequently influences travel intention, and intention translates into actual participation in adventure tourism, with the entire chain from stimuli to participation additionally proposed as a serial mediation bounded by the practical constraints.

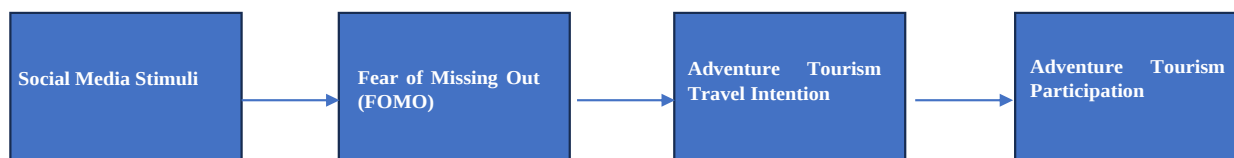


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework

Social Media Stimuli and FOMO

Social media stimuli refer to the characteristics of digital content that attract users' attention and influence how they perceive and respond to what they see online (Hsiao & Tang, 2021). In adventure tourism, these stimuli are particularly important because adventure experiences are largely communicated through photographs, reels, and short videos that highlight landscapes, physical challenges, excitement, and emotional experiences (Dumitras et al., 2021). Among the different characteristics of social media content, four are particularly relevant to the development of FOMO: visual vividness, temporal immediacy, social validation, and narrative closeness (Panadero, 2017).

Visual vividness refers to the richness and intensity with which an experience is presented. High-quality photographs and immersive videos can make adventure activities appear more immediate, realistic, and emotionally engaging (Barth et al., 2025). By seeing the landscape, the physical challenge, and participants' reactions, viewers may find it easier to imagine themselves engaging in the activity (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Temporal immediacy relates to the perception that an experience is happening now or has occurred very recently. Features such as real-time updates, live streams, and temporary stories can create a sense of urgency, making users feel that an opportunity is current and may not remain available for long (Rischer et al., 2020; Granic et al., 2020). This sense of immediacy can make others' experiences feel more relevant to the viewer's own life.

Social validation is reflected through likes, comments, shares, and views. These visible reactions can signal that a particular destination or adventure activity is popular, desirable, or socially valued (Boateng et al., 2018). When users see that many others are engaging with or approving an experience, they may perceive it as something worth experiencing themselves.

Narrative closeness refers to the extent to which social media content feels personal, authentic, and relatable. First-person trekking videos, personal travel stories, or authentic accounts of rafting experiences

can help viewers connect with the experience on a personal level and imagine themselves participating in a similar activity (R. C. Buckley, 2018).

Taken together, these characteristics can make adventure tourism experiences more visible, engaging, and emotionally meaningful to social media users (Asata et al., 2021). When an experience is presented as vivid, immediate, socially valued, and personally relatable, users may become more conscious of what others are experiencing and more likely to feel that they are missing out. In this way, social media stimuli can create conditions that increase the likelihood of FOMO (Owusu-Mensah et al., 2025). Once this feeling develops, it may encourage individuals to move beyond simply viewing adventure content and begin considering similar travel experiences for themselves (Gülmez et al., 2025). Thus, Social media stimuli characterised by visual vividness, temporal immediacy, social validation, and narrative closeness are positively associated with FOMO in adventure tourism.

FOMO as the Central Mediating Mechanism

Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) represents the central psychological mechanism in the proposed framework (Wegmann et al., 2017). When individuals repeatedly see others engaging in adventure tourism, they may feel they are missing out on something important or desirable (Rihova et al., 2018). This feeling can create a desire to reduce the gap between their own experiences and those they observe online (Blau & Kahn, 2017). A person who frequently encounters posts about trekking in the Himalayas may initially view the content as simply a source of information or inspiration (Chen et al., 2020). However, when such exposure continues, particularly when friends, peers, or online communities are shown participating in these experiences, the content may gradually create a feeling of being left out (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). This feeling can increase the desire to visit the destination or undertake a similar activity, moving the individual from passive engagement with social media content towards an intention to travel (Flavián et al., 2019).

FOMO in this framework does not replace the more direct informational influence of social media. Social media can shape travel intentions by providing information, inspiration, and greater awareness of destinations and activities (Kumar et al., 2024). However, the proposed framework suggests that some of this influence may also occur through an emotional pathway. Repeated exposure to adventure-related content can do more than inform potential travellers; it can create feelings of exclusion and urgency by making them aware of experiences that others are enjoying (Low et al., 2022). These feelings may strengthen their motivation to consider similar travel experiences.

This positioning of FOMO as a psychological bridge is particularly relevant to adventure tourism. Adventure experiences are often visually dramatic, socially visible, and associated with achievement, excitement, and thrill (Beil et al., 2024). When such experiences are repeatedly displayed on social media, FOMO may intensify their emotional appeal and encourage individuals to give greater importance to the opportunity to participate. In some situations, this sense of urgency may even make concerns such as risk or cost feel less important in comparison with the desire not to miss the experience (Tresna, 2025).

The proposed relationship can therefore be expressed as:

Social Media Stimuli → FOMO → Travel Intention

Therefore, FOMO positively influences the intention to travel for adventure tourism, and it mediates the relationship between social media stimuli and that intention.

From Travel Intention to Adventure Tourism Participation

Travel intention refers to an individual's willingness or likelihood of undertaking an adventure tourism experience and represents an important stage between motivation and actual behaviour (Duerden & Witt, 2010). In the context of adventure tourism, intention may be reflected in concrete plans such as selecting a destination, booking an activity, arranging travel, or preparing to undertake a particular experience (Bui &

Kiatkawsin, 2020). A stronger intention generally indicates greater psychological readiness to act on the desire to participate (Frederiks et al., 2015).

However, having an intention does not necessarily mean that actual participation will follow. Adventure tourism often involves practical considerations that can influence whether an intended activity is eventually undertaken. Financial limitations, lack of time, physical preparedness, safety concerns, weather conditions, and accessibility may all create difficulties in translating intention into actual behaviour (Hardy & Maguire, 2016). An individual may develop a strong intention to undertake a trek after repeatedly viewing adventure content online, but may ultimately postpone or abandon the plan due to cost, limited time, safety concerns, or difficulty accessing the destination.

These practical conditions are particularly relevant when considering the relationship between FOMO, travel intention, and participation. FOMO may create a strong desire to engage in an activity and encourage individuals to form travel intentions, but that motivation does not necessarily overcome practical barriers. Thus, the transition from intention to participation may vary depending on the circumstances surrounding the adventure experience. Despite these limitations, intention remains an important stage in the proposed framework because it reflects an individual's psychological readiness and commitment to undertake the experience (Lim et al., 2022). In digitally mediated environments, emotional responses such as FOMO may further strengthen this readiness by increasing the desire to participate and reducing hesitation (Ngo et al., 2025).

The proposed pathway, therefore, continues from FOMO to travel intention and, subsequently, to actual participation. Travel intention represents the motivational stage at which an individual moves from wanting an experience to preparing to undertake it. In contrast, participation represents the point at which that intention is translated into actual action (Doran et al., 2018). Unlike intention, however, actual participation is influenced not only by motivation but also by practical and situational circumstances (Austin, 2008).

Distinguishing travel intention from actual participation is important because social media exposure may generate considerable psychological interest without necessarily leading to behaviour. Recognising this distinction allows the framework to account for the intention–behaviour gap in adventure tourism. It provides scope to examine the conditions under which digitally stimulated intentions are more likely to translate into actual participation (Liberati et al., 2009). Thus, Travel intention positively influences actual participation in adventure tourism. Furthermore, because FOMO is proposed to influence participation through the formation of travel intention, the framework proposes a sequential mediation pathway:

Social Media Stimuli → FOMO → Travel Intention → Adventure Tourism Participation

Theoretical Integration and Contributions

The proposed framework brings together two complementary theoretical perspectives, with each explaining a different part of the relationship between social media and adventure tourism behaviour (de Haas, 2021). Uses and Gratifications Theory explains why individuals actively engage with social media content to satisfy needs such as information, entertainment, inspiration, social interaction, and self-expression (Dunne et al., 2010; Benkler, 2008). In the context of adventure tourism, these motivations may encourage individuals to seek content about destinations, activities, and the experiences of other travellers. As individuals engage with such content, they are increasingly exposed to others' adventure experiences.

Social Comparison Theory helps explain the response that may follow this exposure. When individuals repeatedly see other people's travel experiences, they may compare those experiences with their own. Such comparisons can sometimes create feelings of inadequacy, exclusion, or being left out, which may contribute to FOMO (Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001; Acharya, 2025). Social comparison, therefore, provides an important link between exposure to other people's adventure experiences and the development of FOMO.

Building on these perspectives, the framework proposes that FOMO may encourage individuals to consider experiences similar to those they see online, thereby increasing their intention to travel. The proposed

process, however, does not end with intention. An individual may have a strong desire or intention to participate in an adventure activity, but may not actually do so. Factors such as cost, time, accessibility, safety, physical preparedness, and perceived risk can influence whether the intended activity eventually takes place.

For the present conceptual framework, this broader theoretical logic is represented through the core pathway shown in Figure 1:

Social Media Stimuli → FOMO → Travel Intention → Adventure Tourism Participation

The proposed framework makes three main theoretical contributions. First, it extends the discussion of FOMO to the specific context of adventure tourism. Although FOMO has received increasing attention in tourism and influencer-marketing research, its application to adventure tourism remains comparatively limited. Adventure tourism provides an interesting setting for examining FOMO because its experiences are highly visual, emotionally engaging, socially visible, and often associated with achievement, excitement, novelty, and thrill (Talukder, 2025). Repeated exposure to these experiences may make individuals more aware of what others are doing and more conscious of experiences they have not had themselves. This provides a useful perspective for understanding the role of FOMO in adventure tourism decision-making.

Second, the framework positions FOMO as an emotional mechanism that links social media stimuli to travel intention. Previous research has highlighted how social media provides travel information, inspiration, destination awareness, and social cues (Kapoor et al., 2018; Joshi et al., 2025). However, social media influence may also develop through the emotions that arise when individuals observe others' experiences. Repeated exposure to desirable adventure experiences may create a sense of missing out, encouraging individuals to consider undertaking similar experiences themselves. In this way, FOMO adds an emotional dimension to existing explanations of social media influence and helps explain how online exposure may develop into travel motivation (Gao et al., 2024).

Third, the framework distinguishes travel intention from actual participation in adventure tourism. Behavioural intention is commonly used in tourism research as an indicator of likely future behaviour, but an intention does not always lead to action. In adventure tourism, practical considerations such as financial resources, available time, accessibility, safety, and perceived risk may affect whether an intended activity is eventually undertaken (Bryson et al., 2013). By treating intention and participation as separate stages, the framework highlights the intention-behaviour gap. It provides scope for future research to examine why some intentions are translated into action while others are not (Assiouras et al., 2025).

Overall, the proposed framework brings together the social, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of social media-driven adventure tourism decisions (Shuqair et al., 2025). Rather than focusing solely on whether social media influences travel behaviour, it considers the process by which exposure to adventure tourism content may contribute to FOMO, how FOMO may strengthen travel intention, and how that intention may eventually translate into actual participation. This perspective provides a foundation for future empirical research to examine these relationships and the circumstances that may influence the transition from intention to participation.

Practical Implications

The proposed framework has useful implications for destination marketers, adventure tourism operators, and social media content creators. Social media can showcase adventure experiences through engaging visuals, authentic travel stories, and user-generated content, attracting attention and interest among potential tourists.

However, promotional content should also provide realistic information about cost, difficulty, safety, equipment, and physical requirements. This is important because FOMO may encourage interest in an activity, but individuals also need to understand what participation actually entails.

The framework also highlights the importance of responsible social media promotion. Tourism stakeholders should consider visitor safety, overcrowding, environmental impact, and local community interests when promoting adventure destinations online. Finally, views, likes, and travel intentions should not be considered evidence of actual participation; enquiries, bookings, and participation can provide a better indication of whether social media interest translates into tourism behaviour.

CONCLUSION

Social media has changed how people discover, evaluate, and engage with adventure tourism experiences. The proposed framework brings together Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Comparison Theory to explain how engagement with adventure-related social media content may contribute to FOMO and influence travel decisions.

The framework posits a sequential relationship in which social media stimuli may generate FOMO, FOMO may strengthen travel intention, and travel intention may contribute to actual participation in adventure tourism. Importantly, it recognises that intention does not always lead to participation, as factors such as cost, time, accessibility, safety, and perceived risk may influence the final decision.

By connecting these stages, the framework provides a broader perspective on how social media may shape adventure tourism behaviour. It also provides a foundation for future empirical research to examine the proposed relationships and to understand better when social media-driven FOMO is likely to translate into actual participation in adventure tourism.

Directions for Future Research

Future research can empirically examine the proposed relationships among social media stimuli, FOMO, travel intention, and actual participation in adventure tourism. It can also explore how factors such as cost, time, accessibility, safety, and perceived risk influence the move from intention to actual participation. Further studies may examine whether these relationships vary across different adventure activities, age groups, destinations, and levels of previous adventure tourism experience.

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