



INSTAGRAMMABLE WELLNESS (The Impact of Social Media Aesthetics on Sustainable Tourism Choices)

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Abstract: *Instagram's growing influence has transformed how wellness destinations are perceived, leading travellers to associate visually appealing wellness experiences with sustainable tourism. However, research examining how social media aesthetics shape travellers' decision-making regarding sustainability remains limited. This study explores the concept of 'Instagrammable wellness' by investigating how aesthetically curated wellness content on Instagram influences sustainable tourism choices. A qualitative approach was employed through semi-structured interviews with six purposively selected informants who actively engage with wellness-related Instagram content during travel planning and destination selection. Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in participants' perceptions and decision-making processes. The findings indicate that Instagram's aesthetics play a significant role in shaping perceptions of a destination's sustainability by promoting wellness experiences linked to nature, environmental responsibility and local culture. Whilst the pursuit of visually appealing experiences may encourage superficial engagement with health practices, it can also stimulate greater interest in environmentally conscious and socially responsible tourism. This study contributes to the literature on digital tourism and sustainable travel behaviour by demonstrating how visual social media culture mediates the relationship between wellness consumption and sustainability-oriented travel decisions. These findings also offer practical implications for destination managers, wellness service providers and policymakers seeking to integrate visual marketing strategies with sustainable tourism objectives.*

Keywords: *instagrammable wellness; sustainable tourism; social media aesthetics; digital influence*

Abstract: *Pengaruh Instagram yang semakin besar telah mengubah persepsi tentang destinasi kebugaran, sehingga para wisatawan mengaitkan pengalaman kebugaran yang menarik secara visual dengan pariwisata berkelanjutan. Namun, penelitian yang mengkaji bagaimana estetika media sosial membentuk pengambilan keputusan wisatawan terkait keberlanjutan masih terbatas. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi konsep 'Instagrammable wellness' dengan menyelidiki bagaimana konten kebugaran yang ditampilkan secara estetik di Instagram memengaruhi pilihan pariwisata berkelanjutan. Penelitian ini*

menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan enam informan yang dipilih secara purposif. Informan ini secara aktif berinteraksi dengan konten Instagram terkait kebugaran selama perencanaan perjalanan dan pemilihan destinasi. Proses analisis data wawancara menggunakan analisis tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola-pola yang berulang dalam persepsi dan proses pengambilan keputusan berwisata para peserta. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa aspek estetika Instagram memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk persepsi tentang keberlanjutan suatu destinasi dengan mempromosikan pengalaman kebugaran yang terkait dengan alam, tanggung jawab lingkungan, dan budaya lokal. Meskipun keinginan untuk mendapatkan pengalaman yang menarik secara visual cenderung mengarah pada keterlibatan yang dangkal terhadap praktik kebugaran, hal ini juga dapat merangsang minat yang lebih besar terhadap pariwisata yang sadar lingkungan dan bertanggung jawab secara sosial. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada literatur tentang pariwisata digital dan perilaku pariwisata berkelanjutan dengan menunjukkan bagaimana budaya media sosial visual memediasi hubungan antara konsumsi kebugaran dan keputusan perjalanan yang berorientasi pada keberlanjutan. Temuan ini juga menawarkan implikasi praktis bagi pengelola destinasi, penyedia layanan kebugaran, dan pembuat kebijakan yang berupaya mengintegrasikan strategi pemasaran visual dengan tujuan pariwisata berkelanjutan.

Keywords: *Instagrammable wellness; pariwisata berkelanjutan; estetika media sosial; pengaruh digital*

BACKGROUND

Wellness tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments in the global tourism industry, driven by rising demand for experiences that enhance physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. Alongside this growth, Muslim-friendly wellness tourism is attracting increasing attention from both academia and the industry, as Muslim travellers seek wellness experiences that align with their health aspirations and Islamic values (Ashton & Islam, 2025). This development can be ascribed to multiple factors, including heightened awareness of health and wellness among travelers, a rising incidence of chronic diseases, and the accessibility of diverse wellness activities and places today (Mikulić et al., 2024). The concept of tourism is gradually going beyond eating, playing, and enjoying and is changing into the concept of curing, meditation, and healing. The post-pandemic tourism landscape has further reinforced travellers' preference for destinations that promote physical, mental and emotional wellbeing, thereby making wellness tourism an increasingly important segment of the global tourism industry (Smith, 2023). The travelers are building up expectations based on the information they gained from other users' experiences and information (Lex, 2023). Despite wellness tourism's growing significance within the global tourism sector, there is a paucity of empirical data regarding travellers' guidance and emotional engagement in wellness tourism destinations (He et al., 2023). Travellers, particularly wellness tourists, are becoming more aware of the

effects of tourism on communities. This has resulted in a transition from "consuming" to "contributing," a trend that has influenced how operators and stakeholders structure their services. The growing demand among tourists for profound emotional experiences and lasting lifestyle alterations is driving the rise of wellness tourism (Hekmat et al., 2022). The desire of tourists is also influenced by lifestyle and the development of social media.

Today, social media is a part of life that cannot be separated from it. In the 21st century, social media has become popular for people to share text, pictures, videos, and audio through a digital platform. The globe has moved from talking to each other in person to a way that can send data over vast areas of the earth at very high rates (Lalangan, 2020). In recent years, the internet and social media have significantly changed how people plan, experience, and reflect on travel. Travelers increasingly rely on visual content on social media, especially Instagram, to discover destinations, assess experiences, and even determine their personal travel goals, resulting in a trend that has emerged due to the wide range of visually appealing platforms. This has spawned a trend known as 'Instagrammable tourism,' where destinations and tourism activities are often chosen for their aesthetic appeal to be shared on social media. In line with this development, there has been a noticeable interest in wellness tourism travel that supports physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing.

Instagrammable wellness experiences often overlap with sustainability narratives. Many visually appealing wellness destinations incorporate natural materials, local food, renewable energy, or eco-friendly design, which serve as visual cues for environmental responsibility. Images of quiet, contemplative living, local culture, and harmony with the environment frequently inspire travelers. This visual appeal encourages travelers to select locations that promote local economies, environmental responsibilities, and health ethics. When influencers or travelers highlight sustainability practices (e.g., composting, zero-waste design, community partnerships), Instagram becomes a powerful platform to promote sustainable values through emotional and visual storytelling (Rajput & Gandhi, 2025). These events may lead travelers to interpret these aesthetic indicators as sustainable practices, even if such assumptions are not explicitly verified. The intersection of social media aesthetic phenomena, wellness experiences, and sustainability values forms the basis of this research. Sustainable tourism is defined as an effort to meet the current needs of tourists and local communities, while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future (Mandalia & Hidayat, 2026). At the same time, sustainable tourism has attracted global attention as travelers and industry stakeholders become more aware of environmental impacts.

However, this relationship creates a significant tension. Whilst visually appealing images of wellness retreats and eco-friendly accommodation may spark interest in sustainable tourism, they can also encourage superficial engagement driven primarily by a desire to share content, rather than a genuine commitment to environmental or social responsibility. Recent studies indicate that visual content shared via Instagram significantly influences destination image, user engagement and travel intentions by encouraging travellers to visit aesthetically appealing destinations (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024; Hussain et al., 2024). However, these studies have largely focused on destination appeal and online engagement, with limited attention paid to how visually aesthetic wellness-related content shapes travellers' perceptions of a destination's sustainability and whether these perceptions translate into genuinely sustainability-oriented tourism choices. Consequently, the mechanisms through which 'Instagrammable' wellness influences sustainable tourism behaviour remain inadequately understood. To address this gap, this study examines how Instagram-based wellness aesthetics mediate tourists' perceptions of sustainability and influence their decisions to engage in environmentally and socially responsible tourism.

To address this research gap, this study investigates the phenomenon of 'Instagrammable wellness' using a qualitative approach. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with six travellers who actively use Instagram to explore wellness destinations whilst planning their trips, this study seeks to answer two research questions: (1) How does the visual aesthetics of wellness content on Instagram influence travellers' perceptions of a destination's sustainability? Moreover, (2) How do travellers balance visual aesthetics, authenticity and sustainability when making tourism decisions? Informed by theoretical perspectives on visual culture, digital consumption and sustainable tourism behaviour, this research offers an integrated understanding of how digital visual representations shape sustainability-oriented travel choices.

The significance of this research lies in its theoretical and practical contributions. In practical terms, these findings provide contextual insights into how visually mediated experiences of wellness on Instagram shape tourists' perceptions of sustainable tourism, whilst offering useful considerations for wellness tourism operators, destination managers, and destination marketing organisations in developing authentic, sustainability-oriented communication strategies. Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature at the intersection of digital media, wellness tourism, and sustainable tourism behaviour by demonstrating how visual aesthetics influence travellers' interpretations of sustainability in



destination choice. Rather than treating aesthetics and sustainability as separate constructs, this study highlights their interrelated roles in shaping contemporary tourism decision-making.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media and Wellness Tourism

Social media refers to a set of internet-based technologies that enable individuals to create, share and exchange information through user-generated content and online interactions (Kaur & Kumar, 2020). For destination organisations, social media serves as a primary communication channel, combining text, visual and audio-visual formats to build brand identity and reach audiences. Particularly amongst younger demographics, social media has become a key source of travel-related information (Eser & Tuzun, 2022).

Specifically in wellness tourism, TikTok and Instagram have become the primary platforms for producing and disseminating narratives of a healthy lifestyle. Wellman and Germic (2024) analysed how a social media influencer's TikTok documentation of a three-week stay at The Ranch Malibu, an elite wellness resort, shaped public perceptions of wellness tourism. Although this study focuses on TikTok rather than Instagram, it is included here as it demonstrates a mechanism directly applicable to this research: the documentation of curated wellness experiences, presented from a first-person perspective by an influencer, can simultaneously promote and reshape the audience's perceptions of what sustainable, wellness-oriented travel actually entails. This distortion effect, mediated by the influencer rather than the platform itself, is a theoretically relevant finding for Instagram-based studies on wellness tourism, as it illustrates how platform content can decouple the appearance of wellness from its substantive sustainability.

More broadly, the literature cited in this section, including research on digital well-being engagement (Mertz et al., 2024) and generational preferences for authentic content (Agarwal et al., 2024), addresses well-being on social media rather than wellness tourism itself. These sources are retained because digital consumption theory treats platform behaviour as generalisable patterns that precede and shape any specific consumption context. Audiences bring the same expectations regarding authenticity and psychological well-being that they hold towards health content in general to the tourism content they subsequently encounter. In other words, general research on well-being on social media provides behavioural mechanisms, whilst specific tourism studies (Seow et al., 2024; Wellman & Germic, 2024) provide the destination context. This study links the two, rather than treating either in isolation.

Technology and media developments in the digital age have made Instagram an alternative platform for spreading messages to attract visitors (Mandalia, 2023). Instagram serves as a visual showcase of a healthy lifestyle, featuring tranquil retreats, natural landscapes, and carefully curated scenes of well-being. The electronic word of mouth circulating through these platforms plays a measurable role in shaping tourists' expectations of satisfaction and their intention to revisit wellness destinations (Seow et al., 2024). The resulting feedback loop, in which influencers and travellers jointly produce images of wellness that reinforce a destination's appeal, lies at the heart of understanding how 'Instagrammable' aesthetics translate into actual travel behaviour, and is discussed further in the following section through specific analytical indicators of this concept.

Instagrammable Tourism

The concept of 'Instagrammable' tourism describes how destinations, facilities and tourist experiences are designed, curated and enjoyed with a view to sharing visual content. As this concept serves as a guideline for the thematic coding of interview data and content in this study, it is necessary to define its operational indicators, rather than treating it merely as a descriptive term. Based on the literature review, six indicators were used to identify and analyse the 'Instagrammable' qualities in wellness tourism content:

1. Visual appeal, which refers to the composition, colour and aesthetic quality of an image. Scenery dominated by nature is consistently rated as more visually appealing than urban or artificial environments (Hauser et al., 2022).
2. Natural lighting and landscape framing, which refer to the use of soft natural light and open, picturesque compositions that reflect the visual conventions of Romantic landscape painting (Toresson, 2025).
3. Geotagging and location visibility, which refer to platform features that link content to specific places and have been shown to influence followers' perceptions of a destination's appeal and the credibility of its sustainability (Kilipiri et al., 2023).
4. Influencer credibility, which refers to the perceived level of trust, expertise and authenticity of content creators, which influences whether audiences will act upon information relating to a destination (Wu et al., 2023).
5. User-generated content, which refers to photos and reviews created by travellers themselves, reinforces a destination's narrative and often generates stronger engagement than official promotional material (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024).

6. The authenticity of the narrative, which refers to the extent to which content is perceived as personally meaningful rather than commercially contrived, is a quality increasingly sought after by young travellers (Agarwal et al., 2024) .

These six indicators are used in the Results and Discussion section as coding categories for interpreting interview data and visual material, rather than merely as background descriptions.

The theoretical basis for these indicators draws on the concept of landscape construction on Instagram. Toresson (2025) demonstrates that contemporary Instagram compositions of tourist destinations reflect the visual conventions of Romantic landscape painting, including themes of solitude, unspoilt nature, and an idealised relationship between humans and nature. This connection is analytically significant for this study, as it demonstrates that the appeal of wellness destinations on Instagram is not coincidental but rather follows a recognisable aesthetic tradition that prioritises the appearance of unspoilt, tranquil nature over evidence of actual environmental or social sustainability practices at these destinations. This distinction, between inherited aesthetic conventions and verifiable sustainability outcomes, is directly applied in the analysis of participants' Instagram content in this study.

Engagement patterns further support the relevance of these indicators. Blanco-Moreno et al. (2024) found that photos of destinations generate higher engagement than images of hospitality services. That influencer accounts substantially amplify this effect, a finding with direct implications for how wellness destinations should prioritise their visual marketing investments. Kilipiri et al. (2023) also found that geolocation features and influencer content shape followers' perceptions of a destination's sustainability, with followers of sustainability-oriented accounts demonstrating a greater intention to choose eco-friendly destinations. Overall, these findings suggest that 'Instagrammable' aesthetics and sustainability intentions are not inherently at odds, thereby challenging the assumption that curated, aesthetically driven travel content always encourages superficial or consumerist tourism behaviour.

A Critical Perspective: Greenwashing, Overtourism, and Sustainability That Is Merely for Show

The previous discussion needs to be balanced by literature that views tourism content that is driven by visual aspects and branded as sustainable with greater scepticism. In the hospitality sector, a persistent gap has been documented between the image of sustainability businesses projected through marketing and social media and the actual sustainability that visitors perceive or experience. This discrepancy constitutes greenwashing (Seyfi et al., 2025).

When applied to 'Instagrammable' wellness tourism, this literature raises the possibility that content that appears visually sustainable, tranquil, nature-dominated, and aesthetically pleasing may not align with the destination's actual environmental or social sustainability practices.

Another related issue is overtourism, where the viral spread of certain photogenic locations drives visitor numbers beyond a destination's carrying capacity. Siegel (2023) notes that tourists are increasingly adopting behavioural norms derived from social media, including seeking out specific photogenic locations and imitating photo compositions popularised on Instagram. Whilst this behaviour may direct attention and revenue towards previously under-visited destinations, it can also lead to the homogenisation of the tourism experience and encourage visitors to prioritise photo opportunities over meaningful engagement with local communities and the environment. This study discusses this tension between visibility and genuine sustainability as a performative dimension of 'Instagrammable' wellness tourism, distinct yet related to the aesthetic dimension discussed in the previous section. It serves as the basis for the critical stance adopted towards participants' narratives of their own content-sharing practices in the Results and Discussion section.

Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism is generally defined as tourism that takes full account of current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts whilst meeting the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and local communities (Streimikiene et al., 2021). Over the past two decades, this concept has expanded from its original focus on the environment to encompass social justice, cultural preservation, and economic inclusivity. A comprehensive review of four decades of research on sustainable tourism has identified destination management, ecotourism and community-based tourism as core areas, alongside a growing interest in digital technology as a driver of sustainable practices (Agarwal et al., 2024).

For the purposes of interpreting the interview data in this study, sustainable tourism is operationalised through four dimensions. The environmental dimension relates to the conservation of natural resources and the minimisation of ecological impacts at destinations. The sociocultural dimension relates to the preservation of local culture and the quality of interactions between tourists and local communities. Research conducted in Indonesia has found that sociocultural factors are the strongest drivers of memorable sustainable tourism experiences, particularly when supported by digital technology and government involvement (Jokom et al., 2025). The local economic dimension relates to the extent to which tourism revenue and opportunities remain within the host community and benefit it, rather than being

captured by external operators. The authenticity and community dimension relates to whether tourism practices are rooted in local knowledge and genuine community participation, rather than in conventions imposed from outside and driven by aesthetics. Emotional solidarity and collaboration between tourists and the host community have been identified as essential prerequisites for authentic and sustainable urban tourism (Phuc & Nguyen, 2023).

These four dimensions, environmental, sociocultural, economic, and authenticity or community, are used in conjunction with the six ‘Instagrammable’ indicators identified in the previous section as an interpretative framework applied to the interview data and content in the Results and Discussion section. This dual framework enables the analysis to distinguish between destinations and practices that merely appear visually sustainable and ‘Instagrammable’ and those that meet the substantive criteria for sustainable tourism as defined above, a distinction that lies at the heart of answering this study’s research questions.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in the interpretative paradigm to explore how ‘Instagrammable’ wellness content shapes tourists’ perceptions of destination sustainability and influences their choices regarding sustainable tourism. The interpretative approach is appropriate, as this study aims to understand participants’ subjective interpretations and lived experiences rather than to establish cause-and-effect relationships. As perceptions of wellness, sustainability and visual aesthetics are social constructs and context-dependent, a qualitative investigation allows for an in-depth exploration of how tourists interpret the wellness-related visual content they encounter on Instagram and incorporate these interpretations into their destination decision-making.

Participant Selection

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, a technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify participants who are rich in information and have first-hand experience relevant to the research phenomenon. Four inclusion criteria were established. Participants were required to: (1) be aged 18 or over, (2) actively use Instagram as a source of travel inspiration, (3) regularly engage with Instagram content related to wellness, including wellness retreats, eco-friendly accommodation, yoga retreats, spa experiences, leisure travel, mindfulness, or nature-based tourism, and (4) have visited, planned, or seriously considered visiting a wellness destination following exposure to Instagram content.



Prospective participants who did not use Instagram for travel planning or who had no prior interest in or experience of wellness tourism were excluded from this study. Participants were recruited through the researchers' professional and social networks using invitation messages sent via Instagram Direct Messages and WhatsApp. Initially, 12 people were contacted, of whom 8 expressed interest. After screening against the inclusion criteria, six participants were selected and agreed to participate in this study. The participants represented diverse professional backgrounds, including design, marketing, consultancy, digital content creation and slow travel advocacy, thereby providing varied perspectives on health tourism and engagement with digital media.

Although only six participants were involved, this sample size was deemed adequate based on the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016). Given that the participants had highly specific experiences relevant to the research objectives and produced rich, detailed narratives, it was anticipated that additional interviews would not significantly expand the conceptual understanding of the phenomenon. In the final stages of the analysis, no fundamental new concepts emerged, indicating that the information obtained was sufficient to answer the research questions.

Tabel 1. Participant Profile

Participant	Age	Occupation	Wellness Tourism Experience	Instagram Engagement
P1	29	Remote Designer	Yoga retreats and nature-based wellness travel	Daily use; regularly saves wellness content and travel inspiration
P2	34	Marketing Professional	Nature spas and wellness retreats	Daily use; saves wellness destinations for future travel
P3	25	Gap-year Traveller	Spiritual retreats and nature-based healing experiences	Daily use; documents travel and follows wellness communities
P4	38	Consultant	Luxury wellness resorts and spa retreats	Daily use; follows curated wellness and travel accounts
P5	31	Mindfulness Content Creator	Slow travel, eco-lodges, and forest retreats	Highly active; produces wellness-related content
P6	27	Food Content Creator	Farm-based wellness tourism and countryside retreats	Daily use; follows food and wellness travel accounts

(Processed Primary Data, 2024)



Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online via Google Meet and WhatsApp video calls between [August–September 2025]. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were conducted in English. The interview guide, comprising sixteen open-ended questions, was structured around the three theoretical perspectives of this study: Visual Culture, Digital Consumption, and Sustainable Tourism Behaviour.

These questions explored four broad areas: (1) participants' patterns of Instagram use, (2) interpretations of visual content relating to wellness, (3) perceptions of destination sustainability, and (4) the influence of Instagram on tourism decision-making and content-sharing behaviour. Follow-up questions were used throughout the interviews to encourage further elaboration, clarify meanings, and explore emerging issues in greater depth.

Prior to each interview, participants received an information sheet explaining the aims of the research. They provided informed consent for voluntary participation, audio recording, and the anonymous publication of their responses. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms (P1–P6), and any information that could identify them was removed during transcription. Audio recordings and interview transcripts were securely stored on password-protected devices and were accessible only to the research team.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using reflective thematic analysis based on the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analysis began with repeated re-reading of the transcripts to understand the data, followed by open coding to identify meaningful segments relating to wellness tourism, Instagram use, perceptions of sustainability, and travel decision-making.

Codes expressing similar ideas were then grouped into broader analytical categories through a process of repeated constant comparison. These categories were subsequently refined into main themes that captured common patterns amongst the participants whilst retaining the contextual richness of individual experiences. Throughout the analytical process, coding decisions and theme development were continually reviewed to ensure conceptual coherence and consistency with the study's theoretical framework.

Coding was carried out manually using a qualitative analysis matrix, which enabled systematic comparisons between participants and facilitated the integration of empirical findings with theoretical perspectives on Visual Culture, Digital Consumption and Sustainable

Tourism Behaviour. This analytical matrix documents the progression from initial codes to categories, themes and theoretical interpretations, thereby providing a transparent audit trail throughout the analytical process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A thematic analysis of the interview data yielded five interrelated themes, which collectively reveal how ‘Instagrammable’ wellness content shapes tourists’ engagement with sustainable tourism. Figure 1 presents this thematic structure, mapping five core domains and the associated subthemes that emerged inductively from the data.

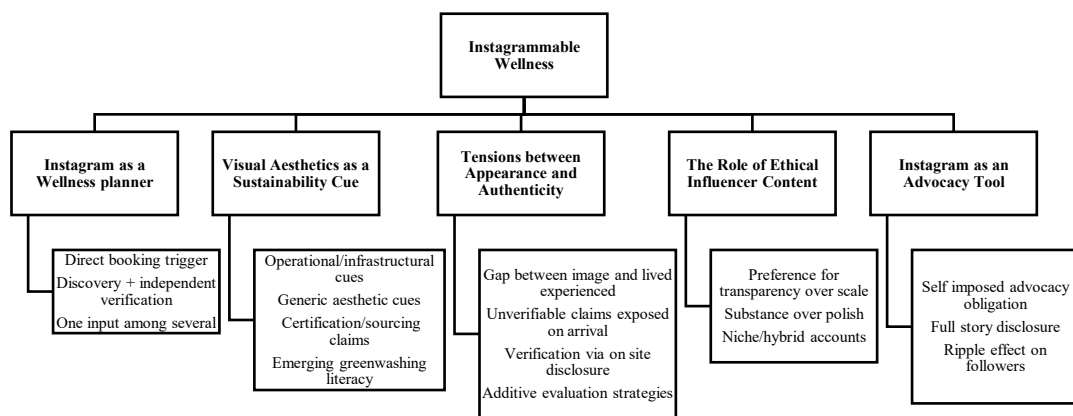


Figure 1. Thematic Structure of Instagrammable Wellness Content and Its Influence on Sustainable Tourism Choices (Authors, 2026)

To clarify the relationship between the raw data and the interpretative categories, Table 1 summarises the selected themes, sub-themes, initial codes and representative quotations taken directly from the six interview transcripts; the discussion below reports findings for all six informants under each theme, not just a selection, and their demographic details are consistent with the participant profiles presented in the Methodology section. The following subsections first report the findings for each theme in the participants’ own words, and then, in a clearly separated discussion, interpret these findings in relation to the relevant theoretical and empirical literature.

Table 2. Coding Structure: Themes, Subthemes, Initial Codes, and Representative Quotations

Theme	Subtheme	Initial Code	Representative Quotation	Informant
Instagram as a Wellness Planner	Direct booking following a single post	Immediate booking trigger	<i>“A yoga retreat I saw in Bali looked so peaceful and well-designed. I booked it.”</i>	P1, 29, remote design
		Immediate booking trigger	<i>“I booked a Finnish lake sauna after seeing a reel...”</i>	P2, 34, marketing

Theme	Subtheme	Initial Code	Representative Quotation	Informant
			<i>as tranquil as it looked and even better in person."</i>	
	Discovery followed by independent verification	Content as initiator, not sole cause	<i>"I found a retreat centre in Peru through a post... I messaged people who had gone there and decided to join."</i>	P3, 25, gap year
	Content as one input among several	Appeal without singular causal claim	<i>"The atmosphere and the personalised wellness plans really appealed to me."</i>	P4, 38, consultant
Visual Aesthetics as a Sustainability Cue	Operational / infrastructural cues	Verifiable sustainability markers	<i>"If they show solar panels, gardens, compost toilets, or water catchment systems those give me a sense that the place is walking the talk."</i>	P3, 25, gap year
	Generic aesthetic cues	Surface-level visual markers	<i>"Use of natural materials, absence of plastic, composting signs, or posts that mention local partnerships."</i>	P1, 29, remote design
	Certification and sourcing claims	Institutional / textual sustainability signal	<i>"Mentions of eco-certifications, local sourcing, plastic-free initiatives, or integration with the natural landscape."</i>	P4, 38, consultant
	Emerging greenwashing literacy	Critical evaluation of sustainability claims	<i>"I'm not perfect, but I'm getting better at spotting greenwashing and asking more questions before booking."</i>	P6, 27, food content creator
Tension Between Appearance and Authenticity	Gap between online image and lived experience	Disconfirmed expectation	<i>"Looked very eco-friendly online, but had a huge environmental footprint: AC running all the time, imported bottled water, no composting. It felt like greenwashing."</i>	P3, 25, gap year
	Unverifiable claims exposed on arrival	Post-arrival discovery of unsustainable practice	<i>"A supposed eco-resort that advertised green practices but flew in products from overseas and had poor waste management."</i>	P4, 38, consultant
	Verification via on-site disclosure	Staff admission contradicting marketing	<i>"The food wasn't local, and the staff admitted most guests don't care about sustainability."</i>	P6, 27, food content creator
	Adaptive evaluation after disappointment	Shift toward critical engagement	<i>"I follow low-key, intentional travel accounts people who reflect and write deeply about their experiences. I trust them more than big influencers."</i>	P3, 25, gap year



Theme	Subtheme	Initial Code	Representative Quotation	Informant
The Role of Ethical Influencer Content	Preference for transparency over scale	Trust in small, values-driven creators	<i>"I follow small pages that talk about eco-conscious travel without the gloss. I prefer transparency over luxury."</i>	P1, 29, remote design
	Substance over polish	Credibility through honesty, not aesthetics	<i>"Pages that blend style with substance they give honest reviews and spotlight efforts toward sustainability."</i>	P4, 38, consultant
	Niche / hybrid accounts	Values-aligned niche credibility	<i>"Hybrid foodie-wellness accounts that focus on conscious travel. I like the combination of taste and values."</i>	P6, 27, food content creator
Instagram as an Advocacy Tool	Self-imposed advocacy obligation	Personal responsibility in content creation	<i>"I believe if I'm encouraging others to travel, I should also promote responsible choices."</i>	P4, 38, consultant
	Full-story disclosure	Balancing beauty with impact and context	<i>"My content is about awareness. I try to tell the full story not just highlight beauty but also challenges and learning."</i>	P5, 31, mindfulness/slow-travel vlogger
	Ripple effect on followers	Follower engagement and behavioural response	<i>"Especially when I volunteer at community or nature-based projects. I usually get meaningful replies and questions from people wanting to do the same."</i>	P3, 25, gap year

(Processed Primary Data, 2024)

Instagram as a Wellness Planner

Findings

All six participants stated that a specific piece of Instagram content had influenced their wellness trip. However, the direct extent of this influence was not consistent across the entire sample, and the data do not support the assumption that Instagram is a consistent determining factor in the booking process. For four participants, exposure to a single piece of content was followed shortly afterwards by an explicit booking action.

"The yoga retreat I saw in Bali looked so peaceful and well-organised. I booked it and ended up having a life-changing experience."

(P1, aged 29, works remotely in design)

"I booked a lakeside sauna in Finland after seeing a Reel. The place was just as peaceful as it looked, even better in person."

(P2, aged 34, works in marketing)

P5 (aged 31, runs a vlog on mindfulness and leisure travel) recounted that she followed an Instagram page about nature-based train journeys in Japan and then “finally took that trip”, which she described as “peaceful and soothing, exactly as described.” P6 (aged 27, a food content creator) booked accommodation at a wellness farm in Tuscany after seeing a post that “looked authentic and cosy,” and reported that they “had booked the accommodation and really enjoyed it.”

For the other two participants, Instagram content triggered rather than concluded the decision-making process, indicating a more mediated form of influence.

“I found a retreat centre in Peru through a post discussing herbal treatments. I got in touch with people who had been there and decided to go. It was one of the most intense and healing experiences I have ever had.”

(P3, aged 25, currently on a gap year)

Here, the Instagram post served as a discovery mechanism, which was subsequently supplemented by self-verification, namely P3 contacting previous participants directly before a decision was made. P4 (aged 38, consultant) discovered a wellness resort in the Maldives via a carousel post and reported that “the atmosphere and personalised fitness programme were truly appealing” to them, but did not describe a direct or singular causal link between the post and the booking, suggesting that Instagram played a role alongside other considerations, such as the resort’s service offerings, rather than as the sole determinant of this participant’s decision.

Discussion

These findings are generally consistent with research showing that visual and narrative content on social media platforms generates aspirational cues that enable users to imagine themselves in the experiences depicted, an effect mediated by emotional engagement, fear of missing out (FOMO), parasocial interaction, and social comparison (Uniyal et al., 2025). At the same time, the variations observed in this sample serve as a reminder not to characterise Instagram’s role as a uniform determining factor. For P1, P2, P5 and P6, a single piece of content appeared to act as a direct trigger for booking. For P3, Instagram serves as a discovery channel, with peer verification validating the decision before it is made. For P4, the platform contributes to, but does not solely determine, the final choice. These differences complement the findings of Kilipiri et al. (2023), which show that Instagram’s geolocation features and influencer content shape perceptions of destinations, suggesting that the path from exposure to

booking is neither linear nor uniform, but rather varies depending on how travellers combine the platform's content with other planning strategies.

Visual Aesthetics as a Sustainability Cue

Findings

The six participants explained that, in the absence of direct or verifiable information, they relied on visual cues to assess whether a health destination was likely to be sustainable. P1 looked for “the use of natural materials, the absence of plastic, signs of composting, or posts mentioning local partnerships and eco-friendly initiatives.” P2 looked for “photos featuring recycled materials, open landscapes without artificial lighting, or photo captions mentioning eco-friendly values.” P4 looks for “mentions of eco-certifications, the use of local raw materials, plastic-free initiatives, or integration with the natural landscape.” P6 looks for “reusable materials, home-grown food, or shared values surrounding a ‘slow living’ lifestyle,” whilst adding that “photo captions mentioning sustainability help to confirm this.”

“If they feature solar panels, a vegetable patch, a composting toilet, or a water harvesting system, these things give me the impression that the place is genuinely practising what they preach.”

(P3, aged 25, currently on a gap year)

“Photos of recycled materials, locally sourced food, or eco-friendly features such as solar panels or rainwater tanks.”

(P5, aged 31, a content creator focusing on self-awareness and leisurely travel)

A closer examination of these accounts reveals that not all visual cues are considered equally credible. P3, in particular, distinguishes between general aesthetic markers, such as a neat, uncluttered visual style, and specific cues based on operational practices, such as composting toilets or water-harvesting systems, which imply concrete infrastructure investment rather than merely a stylistic choice. This suggests that participants do not apply visual literacy unthinkingly: cues linked to identifiable and verifiable systems are regarded as stronger evidence of genuine practices than those that could reasonably be achieved through styling or photography alone.

“I’m not perfect, but I’m getting better at spotting greenwashing and asking more questions before placing an order.”

(P6, aged 27, food content creator)

This demonstrates a continuously evolving, rather than static, ability amongst participants to distinguish authentic sustainability signals from purely cosmetic ones.

Discussion

This near-universal reliance on visual aesthetics as a sustainability heuristic reflects a broader pattern described by Kilipiri et al. (2023), who found that Instagram content featuring eco-certifications, locally sourced ingredients and plastic-free initiatives positively shapes perceptions of a destination's sustainability. At the same time, these findings raise legitimate questions regarding the validity of this heuristic. Since the very same visual language used to convey authentic sustainability practices could, in principle, be mimicked by destinations that do not substantially practise them, visual aesthetics serve as an unreliable rather than a reliable indicator. This is consistent with the findings of Jokom et al. (2025), who observed that the proliferation of user-generated content enhances transparency in tourism whilst simultaneously creating conditions in which unverified sustainability claims can mislead environmentally conscious travellers.

Given this tension, this study proposes the term 'green visual signals' to describe aesthetic conventions, such as natural materials, soft colour palettes and visible eco-friendly infrastructure, which are used to communicate environmental values on Instagram, regardless of the underlying operational practices, whether represented or not. This term is introduced as an interpretative category derived from the current dataset, rather than as an established term drawn from previous literature. It is offered as a candidate construct for future testing. Overall, these findings suggest that participants are increasingly focusing on the specificity and verifiability of a cue rather than its aesthetic appeal when assessing sustainability claims. This critical stance is discussed further in the following section.

Tensions Between Appearance and Authenticity

Findings

The six participants recounted at least one experience in which a destination that appeared visually appealing on Instagram failed to live up to their expectations of genuine sustainability or meaningful wellbeing when they experienced it first-hand. These stories span various geographical locations and types of destinations, namely a spa in Europe (P1), a mountain lodge in an unnamed eco-friendly area (P2), an eco-friendly hotel in Mexico (P3), an unnamed eco-friendly resort (P4), a glamping site (P5), and a farm stay (P6), demonstrating

that the gap between appearance and authenticity is not limited to a single type of destination or location, but recurs across various settings.

“There is a spa in Europe that looks peaceful online, but in reality, the place is crowded, overdeveloped, and has appalling eco-friendly practices.”

(P1, aged 29, remote worker in design)

P2 describes a mountain lodge that “features imported décor and serves non-local food, despite being in an environmentally sensitive area.”

“I stayed at an eco-friendly hotel in Mexico that looked very eco-friendly online, but had a massive environmental footprint: the air conditioning was on all the time, there was imported bottled water, and no composting. It felt like greenwashing.”

(P3, aged 25, on a gap year)

“An eco-friendly resort that advertises green practices, but imports products from abroad and has poor waste management.”

(P4, aged 38, consultant)

P5 described a luxury glamping site that “had cleared part of the forest to build it and used single-use products,” and called the experience “extremely disappointing.”

“There is a ‘farm stay’ that looks authentic online, but the food is not locally sourced, and the staff admit that most guests do not care about sustainability.”

(P6, aged 27, food content creator)

Across these accounts, the discrepancy between online representations and the experience is consistently detected only upon arrival. In most cases, this occurs through direct observation of operational practices, energy use, food and raw material sources, waste management, and land use, rather than through pre-trip verification methods available on Instagram itself. P6’s account also illustrates a different verification channel: informal admissions from on-site staff that directly contradict the destination’s marketing, rather than travellers’ personal observations of the physical infrastructure.

In response to these disappointing experiences, participants explained that they adjusted their evaluation practices for future trips, rather than abandoning Instagram as a planning tool. This adaptive strategy involves favouring transparent, value-oriented influencer accounts over polished commercial pages and, in P3’s case, proactively contacting previous visitors before deciding to book, the same verification strategy he used when deciding to travel to Peru (see Theme 1).



“I follow simple, meaningful travel accounts, people who reflect deeply and write thoughtfully about their experiences. I trust them more than big influencers.”

(P3, aged 25, currently on a gap year)

Discussion

These experiences illustrate the productive tension at the heart of ‘Instagrammable wellness’: the same visual logic that makes sustainability aesthetically comprehensible can also be exploited to project a false impression of environmental responsibility. This aligns with the findings of Siegel et al. (2023), who show that travellers are increasingly adjusting their expectations based on social media representations, thereby creating a situation in which the gap between curated images and real-life experiences can lead to significant disappointment.

Crucially, as all six participants in this sample reported similar experiences, these findings suggest that this gap is not an isolated occurrence, but rather a recurring feature of Instagram-mediated wellness tourism as described by this group. The data further suggests that this gap functions not as a barrier to digital planning, but as a catalyst for more critical digital literacy: having been misled, several participants reported adopting more meticulous and sceptical verification practices, including contacting previous visitors directly, when planning their subsequent trips. This suggests that the tension between appearance and authenticity is not merely a limitation of the concept of ‘Instagrammable wellness’, but rather a mechanism through which tourists’ sustainability literacy develops over time.

The Role of Ethical Influencer

Findings

Participants consistently distinguished between different types of Instagram influencers based on the level of trust they inspired and the perceived alignment with genuine sustainability values. In all six interviews, participants expressed a preference for small-scale, transparent and value-driven creators over large commercial accounts characterised by high follower counts and a flawless aesthetic.

“I follow small pages that discuss eco-friendly travel without a glamorous vibe. I prefer transparency over luxury.”

(R1, aged 29, remote worker in design)

R2 explained that they prefer “accounts that combine beautiful visuals with practical sustainability tips,” adding that such accounts “help me travel more sensibly.”



“Accounts that blend style with substance, provide honest reviews, and highlight efforts towards sustainability.”

(R4, aged 38, consultant)

“I follow smaller accounts that share real experiences and focus on impact, rather than simply selling a dream. I trust their perspective more.”

(R5, aged 31, mindfulness and slow-travel content creator)

R6 explained that they follow “hybrid food-wellness accounts focused on mindful travel”, citing a preference for “a combination of flavour and values.”

Discussion

These findings reflect a broader pattern identified in the literature on influencer credibility and sustainable consumption. Schorn et al. (2022), who studied sustainability communication on Instagram, found that disclosure of sponsorship and the use of benefit-based calls to action significantly shaped the perceived credibility of purpose-driven creators, sometimes referred to as ‘sinnfluencers’. Specifically within wellness tourism, the current findings suggest that an influencer’s perceived credibility is more closely linked to the consistency and depth of their demonstrated commitment to sustainability than to the number of followers or the quality of their content, a pattern consistent with Schorn et al.’s (2022) emphasis on disclosure and evidence-backed claims rather than aesthetic perfection. Notably, R6’s preference for specialised and hybrid (foodie-wellness) accounts suggests that perceived credibility may also be reinforced by topic specialisation, a dimension not yet fully captured in the previous literature and worthy of further investigation.

Instagram as an Advocacy Tools

The fifth theme relates to Instagram’s role not only as a source of travel planning information but also as an active tool for promoting sustainable wellness tourism. All six participants stated that they felt a certain level of personal responsibility to promote sustainable practices in their respective content, although the depth of this commitment varied.

“Of course. I try to show both its beauty and its impact, and mention what is being done to protect nature.”

(R1, 29 years old, works remotely in design)

R2 reported: “I do that now. I highlight eco-friendly features and provide honest reviews so people know what to expect.” R4 stated: “I believe that if I encourage others to travel, I should also promote responsible choices.”

“Of course. My content focuses on raising awareness. I try to tell the whole story, not just highlighting the beauty but also the challenges and lessons learned.”

(R5, 31 years old, mindfulness and slow-travel content creator)

R6 described this as an evolving practice, not an established one: “I’m learning to include more of the story behind it. It’s not just about sharing cute cabin photos, but about what makes it special and responsible.”

Participants also described immediate effects when they shared wellness-related content with their followers. R1 reported receiving “lots of questions and interactions, especially when I mention sustainability.” R2’s post about staying in a treehouse “went viral” among their friends. R4 shared a reel from a luxury eco-friendly resort and received requests for “links and recommendations.”

“Especially when I volunteer for community- or nature-based projects. I usually get meaningful responses and questions from people who want to do the same.”

(R3, 25 years old, currently on a gap year)

R5’s photo series from a permaculture retreat sparked a similar response, with followers asking “how to volunteer there,” while R6’s post about a retreat that produces its own kombucha and offers herbal workshops was met with “very positive” curiosity from followers.

Discussion

These accounts demonstrate that Instagram, in this context, functions not only as a medium for aesthetic consumption but also as a platform for education and advocacy surrounding sustainability in wellness tourism. This aligns with the findings of Kilipiri et al. (2023), which show that destination marketers can leverage geolocation data and influencer content on Instagram to promote sustainable travel options broadly. The current findings expand on this by showing that individual tourists, not just marketers, also play a similar advocacy role. When tourists with positive and authentic wellness tourism experiences share them transparently, they appear to generate effects capable of shaping subsequent behavior as well as followers’ perceptions of the destination, as illustrated by the questions regarding volunteer activities received by R3 and R5.



This advocacy role also intersects with broader questions regarding digital citizenship and social media user responsibility. It aligns with Mertz et al. (2024), who found that consumers are increasingly striving to align their digital engagement with broader values related to health, responsibility, and social good. In health tourism, this is reflected in a growing trend, evident among all six participants to varying degrees, in which travelers use Instagram not primarily to project an aspirational lifestyle, but rather to contribute to a more sustainable and equitable travel culture.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine how ‘Instagrammable well-being’ shapes tourists’ engagement with sustainable tourism. In the context of the six participants interviewed, the research findings suggest that Instagram functions as more than just a platform for visual exploration, but also serves as a tool for active planning, a framework for assessing sustainability, an arena of tension between aesthetics and authenticity, an ecosystem of trust mediated by influencers, and a channel for advocating environmentally conscious tourism. Overall, these five themes demonstrate that, for the tourists in this study, social media aesthetics play a complex and sometimes contradictory role in shaping wellness tourism behaviour, rather than merely serving as a marketing façade.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of knowledge regarding digital consumption in tourism by demonstrating that these participants interact with Instagram content through a sophisticated and evolving interpretative framework, rather than merely as passive recipients of curated images: they interpret aesthetic choices as signals of sustainability, critically evaluate the credibility of influencers, and use their own content creation practices to advocate for responsible tourism. This suggests that a narrow view of social media-driven tourism, which positions tourists primarily as passive consumers of images, might benefit from a more in-depth theoretical engagement with digital visual culture, the active role of tourists, and sustainable behaviour.

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