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## The Impact of Social Media Environmental Factors on Individuals' Behavioral Intentions toward Karbala as a Religious Tourism Destination

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### Abstract

Religious tourism is one of the most thriving types of tourism in the world, and social networks are considered influential tools for developing various types of tourism. The holy city of Karbala in Iraq has long been one of the most popular destinations for religious tourism, and millions of Muslim and non-Muslim tourists visit this city every year. However, no research was found that examined the impact of social media environmental factors on people's behavioral intentions to visit the city of Karbala as a religious tourism destination. This research was conducted with the aim of filling this research gap. This research was a descriptive-causal study with an applied purpose. 390 people participated in this study and answered the standard questionnaire, the validity of which was examined by content and construct validity and its reliability by Cronbach's alpha and was confirmed. The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods through SPSS and SMART PLS 4 software. The findings showed that the social media environmental factors, including Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing, visibility, and subjective norms, affect envy towards visitors, emotional experience, and cognitive image of the city of Karbala, and these factors also affect people's behavioral intentions. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of paying attention to social network environmental factors in increasing tourists' behavioral intentions to visit the city of Karbala and developing the religious tourism of this city.

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## **Introduction**

The tourism industry has faced significant challenges in recent years, particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and government-imposed travel restrictions between 2020 and 2022 (Subawa et al., 2021). The effects of these challenges persist to this day. Under these circumstances, social media has emerged as a powerful tool in shaping tourists' travel decisions. In fact, attitudes and sentiments conveyed through social media content indirectly shape tourists' perceptions and decision-making processes. The widespread use of social media has transformed these platforms into key tools for advertising, e-commerce, and engaging with tourists (Deb & Mallik, 2023). Studies have demonstrated the impact of social media on tourists' decisions, particularly regarding the sharing of personal travel experiences and the direct influence of social media content on individuals' tourism decision-making (Zheng et al., 2023). These media play a crucial role in inspiring and shaping tourist behavior. Religious tourism, as a significant and growing segment of the global tourism market, has been significantly influenced by social media. Historically, the first form of tourism that humans engaged in was visiting sacred places, now known as religious tourism (Albayrak et al., 2018; Alkhaldeh, 2022). Religious tourism is typically viewed as a form of physical tourism aimed at visiting sacred sites and places that hold spiritual significance for individuals or are part of their religious and belief history (Hassan et al., 2022; Heidari et al., 2018; Kocyigit, 2016; Terzidou et al., 2021). In recent years, religious tourism has experienced significant growth worldwide (Wu & Mursid, 2020). Religious tourism destinations globally attract over 300 million visitors annually (Ohlan & Ohlan, 2024). In the Islamic world, pilgrimage cities located in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Palestine, and other Islamic nations play a vital role in religious worship and shaping the cultural identity of Muslims, fostering spiritual growth and cultural exchange (Pinto, 2023). Mecca and Medina, as the holiest cities in Islam, are the centers of Hajj and Umrah, attracting millions of Muslims annually during these pilgrimages and throughout the year. Karbala, as a religious and historical site, also attracts millions of visitors each year, contributing to the local economy and the spiritual lives of both residents and tourists (Faris & Griffin, 2020). The historical significance of Karbala, particularly in relation to the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, has made it a focal point for Shia Muslims. Over 20 million pilgrims from Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, and other countries visit the city annually. This growth has solidified Karbala's position as a significant religious and cultural center in the Islamic world (Moaven & Shahvali, 2020). Despite the thriving religious tourism among Muslims, attracting tourists to visit destinations has always been a crucial topic in various tourism fields, including religious tourism (Liao et al., 2021). Previous studies have shown the influence of factors such as destination image and emotional experiences on tourists' behavioral intentions (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Yang et al., 2022; Yoo et al., 1998). Additionally, the content available on social media, such as textual narratives, photos, or videos, can significantly impact tourists' information acquisition,

awareness, and motivation to travel (Dramićanin & Sančanin, 2020). Furthermore, destination envy, fostered by social comparison, has become a key factor in tourists' travel choices and behavioral intentions (Asdecker, 2022), and social media has transformed this factor into a primary motivation for tourism (Zheng et al., 2023). Literature suggests that envy, depending on individuals' experiences, ideas, and actions, can be either positive (benevolent) or negative (malevolent) and can influence social relationships and individual behaviors, including purchasing behavior. Given that the city of Karbala houses some of the most significant sites for Shia Muslims, visiting this city is a cherished aspiration for many Iranian Shia. However, due to the long distance, costs, travel difficulties, and unfamiliarity with the area and travel procedures to this city located in Iraq, traveling to Karbala is not easily accessible for many Iranians. This study examines how destination envy, emotional experience, and cognitive image influence tourism decisions on social media. The study focuses on three aspects of primary consumer information sources in social media environments: visibility of information, eWOM, and subjective norms (Zheng et al., 2023), and addresses the dearth of research on these factors in social media marketing, with a particular focus on the city of Karbala as a religious tourism destination. Accordingly, this study elucidates the pathway from social media environmental factors to the behavioral intentions of potential tourists and provides novel empirical evidence for the mechanisms behind this relationship.

In this context, this study has two research objectives: First, to develop the literature on the impact of social media environmental factors on tourists' behavioral intentions; and second, to evaluate the impact of factors such as positive envy towards content posted by others on social media, emotional experience, and cognitive image on the behavioral intentions of religious tourists to the city of Karbala.

### **Research background**

Rachman and Rosyadi (2024), in a study titled "Synergistic Action of Religious Tourism Development in the Royal Region of Bangkalan in the Age of Digitalization", concluded that the level of cooperation and coordination among various societal sectors in developing religious tourism in the Royal Region of Bangkalan during the digital age is insufficient. The study emphasizes the need for precise guidance and effective resource management to advance in this field. Moreover, the establishment and development of social, cultural, and individual systems are crucial for the successful development of religious tourism in the Bangkalan region.

Guriță and Scortescu (2023), in their research titled "Religious Tourism and Sustainable Economic Development in the Context of Globalization in the Northeastern Region of Romania," found that religious tourism offers a sacred and spiritual atmosphere that can significantly influence the motivations of individuals seeking cultural and religious sites to enhance their spiritual well-being. They argue that

by improving infrastructure, fostering a conducive business environment, enhancing promotional efforts, developing accommodation options, and upgrading services, this region can achieve a higher quality of life and promote sustainable development.

Bad (2024), in a study titled “Study of the Perception of Participants in the Arbaeen Super Event, a Religious Tourism Phenomenon in the World Today,” found that factors such as the inefficiency of the domestic decision-making system, along with various crises faced by the government and its administrative structures in political, economic, social, and cultural domains, significantly impact attendance at this event. Additionally, social inequality is seen as a consequence of participants experiencing feelings of religious discrimination and deprivation of rights. The transformative experience of pilgrims at this event fosters social participation and solidarity, encourages cultural change, and acts as a bridge connecting stakeholders with government officials.

Fasihi et al. (2024), in a study titled “Analysis of factors inhibiting tourism development in Karbala Province, Iraq,” concluded that in terms of the intensity of the impact on inhibition, the role of 11 infrastructural factors, including roads and transportation, is more prominent than other factors. Additionally, the findings from the path diagram revealed that service-welfare factors explain more than 34% of the inhibition of tourism development in Karbala Province.

## **Theoretical findings**

### **Environmental factors of social networks**

In today's society, social networks like Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter play a crucial role in connecting people across the globe. With billions of active users, these platforms have become essential for maintaining relationships and staying connected (Heather tontwitt, 2024). Businesses also leverage social networking sites for targeted marketing, customer engagement, and building brand loyalty (Liashuk et al., 2023). The popularity of SNSs has grown rapidly in recent years, as they facilitate interactions between consumers, brands, and peers, creating a sense of community and shared experiences. User-generated content, such as reviews and testimonials, has a significant impact on consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions (Mishra, 2024).

In this study, user-generated content related to the destination creates a strong value-driven environment. This environment is influenced by the social norms of social media, Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing, and visibility in destination marketing communications.

The influence of social media subjective norms on tourist behavior goes beyond just perceived social pressure, as it reflects the opinions of significant individuals and groups that individuals respect (Palinggi et al., 2021). Normative beliefs can be affirmative or descriptive, affecting the perceived social pressure to conform to certain behaviors. In the context of social media, users' subjective norms are

shaped by the content shared by influential figures they follow, such as friends, experts, or celebrities, making them highly susceptible to their words and actions. This highlights the importance of understanding how social media influences behavior and decision-making in the tourism industry (Zhang et al., 2023).

Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) is a crucial factor shaping consumer behavior in the digital age. Online reviews, recommendations, and influencer-generated content significantly influence consumer purchase decisions and brand perceptions. Research has demonstrated that e-WOM factors such as brand reputation, information quality, and trust play pivotal roles in shaping consumer attitudes and loyalty (Patel, 2024). Moreover, e-WOM channels, particularly social media, enhance perceived brand quality, thereby stimulating purchase intent (Beyari & Garamoun, 2024). However, manipulating e-WOM through practices like opinion spam can erode consumer trust and expose the ethical complexities of marketing strategies (Gupta & Bala, 2024).

From a sociological perspective, visibility is closely linked to the free flow of information. By providing easy and accessible information, media outlets empower tourists to make informed decisions about their travel plans (Villeneuve, 2014). Conversely, the information disseminated to the public must be accurate and reliable (Wang et al., 2015). Visibility ensures that tourists have access to relevant information about destinations, services, and regulations, aiding in their travel planning (Musa, 2019).

## **Envy**

Envy is a complex emotion that can lead to feelings of inadequacy, hostility, and dissatisfaction towards others who possess desired attributes (Ling et al., 2023). This emotion can be divided into two types: benign envy, which motivates individuals to improve themselves, and malicious envy, which drives individuals to belittle or demean others to reduce their own feelings of inadequacy. Benign envy is characterized by the absence of hostile intentions, while malicious envy is accompanied by hostility towards the envied individual. Understanding the motivations behind envy can help individuals manage their emotions and strive for personal growth instead of tearing others down (Machado et al., 2021). In the realm of consumer behavior and tourism, the feeling of benign envy can lead to an increased desire to visit places or purchase products, and social media plays a significant role in this regard. Social networking sites allow users to share their photos and opinions, which influence consumer behavior (Miao, 2020). Experiential purchases (such as travel) showcased on social media elicit more envy than material purchases. Since travelers' intention to visit a tourist destination is considered an effective indicator of their future travels, sharing photos and posts about tourist destinations on social media can serve as a stimulus capable of evoking feelings of envy in users, and may influence their desire to visit the depicted destinations and their likelihood of traveling in the future (Machado et al, 2021). In this

context, Zhang et al. (2023) demonstrated that both the content generated on social media can stimulate benign envy among tourists towards a destination and reinforce their behavioral intentions. Additionally, Liu et al. (2019) showed that sharing experiences on social media can influence individuals' positive envy. Based on these findings, the following hypotheses can be stated:

H<sub>1</sub>: Electronic word-of-mouth has a significant impact on envy

H<sub>2</sub>: Subjective norms have a significant impact on envy

H<sub>3</sub>: Visibility has a significant impact on envy

### **Emotional experience to the destination**

According to some researchers, the initial reaction to a destination is emotional, and these emotions influence an individual's subsequent actions towards that destination (Woosnam et al., 2020). Agapito et al. (2013) have shown that emotional attributes have a greater impact on individual behavior than cognitive attributes, thus emphasizing the reinforcement of the emotional component in destination marketing strategies. A tourist destination is far more than a geographical location where a tourist decides to spend time. Such a destination is a combination of products, services, and experiences capable of attracting visitors. In other words, a tourist destination is a complex and integrated set of services that provides a holiday experience to meet the needs of tourists. The experiential approach considers the individual as sensory, emotional, and affective. They consume products, services, or activities to live experiences that give them feelings, emotions, and excitement (Tlili & Amara, 2017). Emotional experience in tourism is a very complex and dynamic factor, and various factors influence its formation. Studies have shown that certain demographic characteristics such as education, occupation, income level, and some travel characteristics like domestic or international travel, frequency of visits to the destination, and travel companions, cause tourists to have different emotional experiences from their trips (Šagovnović & Kovačić, 2021). Since tourism activities are challenging and dynamic, attention should be paid to tourists' emotional experiences; as the impact of these experiences on their satisfaction and behavioral intentions is very important. Wang et al. (2023) examined the impact of emotional experience on tourists' behavioral intentions in their study. They categorized emotional experience into two types: positive emotional experience and negative emotional experience. Their findings showed that positive emotional experience has a significant impact on tourists' behavioral intentions (Wang et al., 2023).

With the emergence of the internet and online platforms, the process of shaping destination images has become more complex. <sup>1</sup> Today, the imaging and perception of destinations primarily occur in virtual communities on social networks. Emotional and cognitive experiences have received significant attention in the tourism literature (Garay, 2019). <sup>2</sup> Social networks serve as both a tool for tourists to



acquire information and a platform for creating content and sharing it with others.<sup>3</sup> This user-generated content is considered a contemporary form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Garay, 2019). Arismayanti et al. (2024) concluded that electronic word-of-mouth positively impacts a destination's emotional experience, increasing its attractiveness and appeal. Furthermore, Pranaya et al. (2023) pointed out that positive reviews and shared experiences contribute to a favorable destination image, which is crucial for attracting potential visitors. Nguyen and Hu (2022) concluded that subjective norms positively influence emotional experience, and this emotional experience mediates the relationship between subjective norms and purchase intention, highlighting the importance of social influences in marketing strategies. Additionally, neuroimaging studies suggest that social influence alters neural valuation computations, indicating that subjective norms can change emotional experiences at a neural level (Zaki et al., 2011). Visibility significantly impacts the emotional image of targets, such as brands, by increasing user understanding and trust. Research suggests that transparent communication fosters positive emotional connections, leading to increased perceived likeability and competence. Springer and Whittaker (2018) concluded that visibility can improve perceptions but may lead to negative outcomes if user expectations are not met, highlighting the complexity of its effects. Therefore, the following hypotheses can be stated:

H<sub>4</sub>: Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has a significant effect on the emotional experience of a tourism destination.

H<sub>5</sub>: Subjective norms have a significant impact on the emotional experience of a tourism destination.

H<sub>6</sub>: Visibility has a significant impact on the emotional experience of a tourism destination.

### **Cognitive image of the destination**

Destination image has garnered significant attention in tourism research. This image represents visitors' perceived beliefs about the destination's attributes (Ling et al., 2023). The cognitive image component reflects the mental evaluation of a destination's characteristics, regardless of whether the destination has been visited or not (Woosnam et al., 2020). Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) significantly impacts tourists' mental image, shaping their perceptions and purchase intentions. Research shows that eWOM serves as a credible source of information, often considered more trustworthy than traditional advertising. This increased credibility can positively influence destination image, tourist satisfaction, and visitation intentions (Pranaya et al., 2023). Arismayanti et al. (2024) found that satisfied tourists tend to share their positive experiences, which enhances the destination image and attracts new visitors. Furthermore, subjective norms significantly influence destination image by shaping perceptions, behaviors, and social interactions. te Velde (2014) demonstrated that norms can lead to destructive behaviors when individuals conform to harmful social expectations, highlighting the potentially

negative consequences of social pressure. Visibility significantly impacts a tourism destination's cognitive image by shaping tourists' perceptions and experiences. The integration of online communication tools and user-generated content plays a crucial role in this process, as it provides authentic insights into the destination. Antunez (2022) concluded that online platforms facilitate information distribution and allow potential tourists to access diverse viewpoints about a destination. Zhou and Li (2024) reported that user-generated content, such as reviews and travelogues, increases the credibility of information, consequently impacting tourists' mental image. This emphasizes the importance of visibility in providing a comprehensive view of a destination, which can enhance its attractiveness. Therefore, based on the preceding background and theoretical framework, the following hypotheses can be proposed.

H<sub>7</sub>: Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has a significant impact on the cognitive image of a tourism destination.

H<sub>8</sub>: Subjective norms have a significant impact on the cognitive image of a tourism destination.

H<sub>9</sub>: Visibility has a significant impact on the cognitive image of a tourism destination.

### **Behavioral intention**

In 1988 and 1991, Icek Ajzen developed the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Hassan et al., 2016). The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is a widely used social psychological model that not only explains behavioral changes but also predicts future behaviors. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), intention is the best predictor of behavior (Al-Mamary & Alraja, 2022; Emekci, 2019). Since human behavior is a complex concept that is difficult to explain and measure, this theory is considered the most popular and useful model for explaining human behavior and is widely applied in understanding individuals' behaviors (Zhang et al., 2024). Intention refers to the degree to which consumers are willing to seek more information, actively engage with others, and form the intent to visit a specific destination (Nunes, 2021). To attract tourists to a particular destination, the emotional component, which involves expressing feelings (Zhang et al., 2021), has gained increasing importance (Yang et al., 2022). Individuals often translate their emotional responses to different places into visual images and lasting memories. Empirical evidence suggests that higher levels of positive affect are associated with more favorable cognitive evaluations of a place's characteristics (Woosnam et al., 2020). The choice of a destination is influenced by both cognitive and affective factors that a tourist attributes to a destination. Research has shown that both cognitive and affective components are highly important in destination choice (Kim & Yoon, 2003). However, Woosnam et al. (2020) argued that people's affective evaluations of a destination are primarily influenced by their prior knowledge of that place. Mehrabian and Russell (1974) further emphasized the importance of accessing mental factors for a



destination, as these factors develop through attention to events and motives, understanding them, recalling past experiences, and making evaluations and decisions. The rationale for emphasizing a destination's cognitive image lies in its direct observability, descriptiveness, and measurability. These characteristics make it a more tangible and interpretable construct for understanding a destination's unique attributes (Lee & Xie, 2011). Consequently, cognitive factors represent an individual's cognitive perception of a tourism destination's features, including its landscape, attractions, services, and infrastructure. Narangajavana Kaosiri et al. (2019) concluded that sharing travel experiences through social media has a significant impact on users' awareness, expectations, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Additionally, Machado et al. (2021) observed that tourists' visitation intentions toward a tourism destination are a strong indicator of their future travel behaviors. Therefore, the following hypotheses can be stated:

H<sub>10</sub>: Envy has a significant impact on behavioral intention.

H<sub>11</sub>: Emotional experience with a tourism destination has a significant impact on behavioral intention.

H<sub>12</sub>: Cognitive image of a tourism destination has a significant impact on behavioral intention.

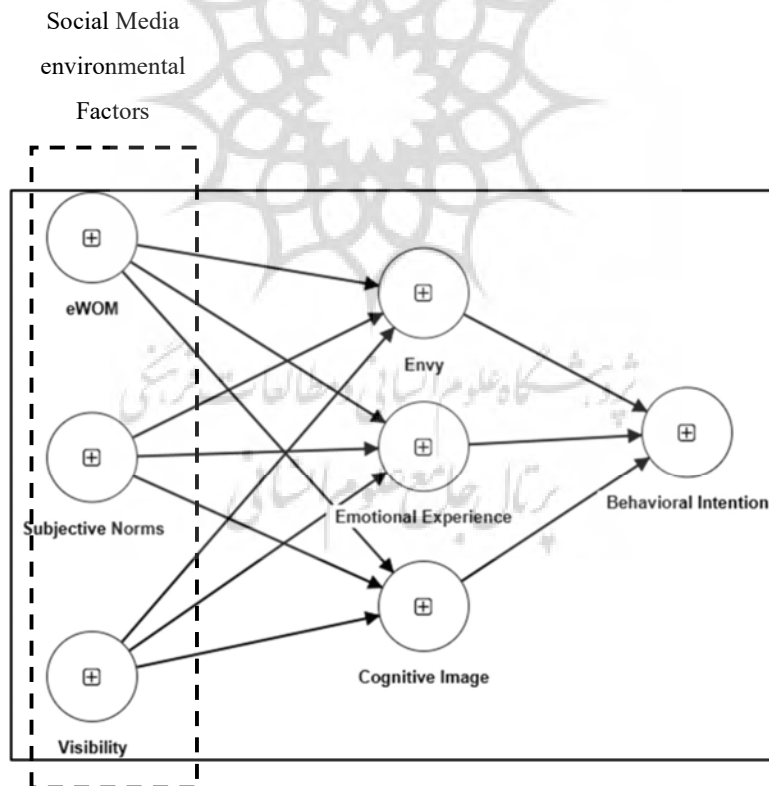


Figure 1. Conceptual research model

### Research methodology

This research is applied in terms of its purpose and descriptive-causal in terms of its method. The research approach is quantitative. The statistical population of this research consisted of individuals who had access to social media and followed pages or were members of groups with contents of travel to the city of Karbala and had recently seen at least one piece of content, such as a photo, video clip, or written post, shared by religious tourists in the city of Karbala. The tool used in this research was a standard questionnaire adapted to the contextual variables of the research. To this end, for the variables of social media environmental factors, envy, and behavioral intention, the article (Zheng et al., 2023) was used, for the emotional experience variable, the article (Patwardhan et al., 2020) was used, and for the cognitive image variable, the article (Pereira et al., 2022) was used in the form of an electronic questionnaire. For the questions, a 5-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1) strongly disagree to 5) strongly agree. The questionnaire link was randomly provided to individuals in the population. Finally, out of the completed questionnaires, 390 questionnaires were considered usable and were used in data analysis.

The reliability of the research variables was assessed using Cronbach's alpha with a standard level of 0.70 and composite reliability (CR) with a standard level of 0.70 and average variance extracted (AVE) with a standard level of 0.50 using SPSS26 and Smart PLS4 software. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for all dimensions of the studied model was more than 0.70. Therefore, it can be claimed that the questionnaire had acceptable reliability. To assess the questionnaire's validity, content validity and construct validity were used. Table 1 presents the variables and items used, factor loadings, and the results of Cronbach's alpha coefficients, composite reliability, and convergent validity.

**Table 1. Reliability, validity and distribution coefficients of the research variable questions**

Variables and items	Load factor	R - square	AVE	Cronbach's alpha	CR
Subjective norm		-	0.533	0.742	0.773
Subnor1	0.708				
Subnor2	0.789				
Subnor3	0.688				
Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)		-	0.512	0.763	0.839
Ewom1	0.722				
Ewom2	0.738				
Ewom3	0.765				
Ewom4	0.714				
Ewom5	0.631				
Information visibility		-	0.614	0.785	0.826
Infrans1	0.734				
Infrans2	0.847				
Infrans3	0.765				

Variables and items	Load factor	R - square	AVE	Cronbach's alpha	CR
Envy		0.401	0.635	0.801	0.873
Envy1	0.764				
Envy2	0.740				
Envy3	0.689				
Envy4	0.967				
Emotional experience		0.338	0.549	0.791	0.857
Emeng1	0.616				
Emeng2	0.724				
Emeng3	0.736				
Emeng4	0.714				
Emeng5	0.791				
Cognitive image		0.318	0.653	0.861	0.903
Desimg1	0.732				
Desimg2	0.781				
Desimg3	0.713				
Desimg4	0.785				
Desimg5	0.895				
Behavioral intention		0.431	0.529	0.757	0.843
Bhvint1	0.701				
Bhvint2	0.527				
Bhvint3	0.705				
Bhvint4	0.627				
Bhvint5	0.931				

**Table 2. Comparison matrix of the AVE square root and correlation coefficients of the constructs (divergent validity)**

	Mental image of the destination	Emotional experience	Envy	Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing	Information visibility	Subjective norm
Emotional experience	0.751					
Envy	0.542	0.775				
Electronic word-of-mouth marketing	0.512	0.576	0.659			
Information visibility	0.491	0.444	0.634	0.886		
Subjective norm	0.656	0.436	0.644	0.552	0.698	
Behavioral intention	0.659	0.653	0.675	0.628	0.545	0.681

Divergent validity is another criterion for measuring validity. Divergent validity indicates the degree of correlation of a construct with its indicators. Divergent validity is acceptable when the square root of AVE for each construct is greater than the shared variance between that construct and other constructs in the model. As shown in Table 2, the square root of AVE for each construct (main diagonal values) is greater than the correlation coefficients of that construct with other constructs (values in the same row and column), which indicates the acceptability of the convergent validity of the constructs.

### Data analysis and findings

The results related to the demographic characteristics of the research showed that 62% (242 people) of the respondents were women and 38% (148 people) were men. In the sample, the highest frequency of respondents, 25.1%, was in the age group of 36 to 40 years, and the lowest frequency, 14.8%, was in the age group of 24 to 29 years. Finally, in the sample, the highest frequency of respondents, 35.8%, had a bachelor's degree, and the lowest frequency, 7.9%, had an associate's degree.

**Table 3. Demographic characteristics of the studied sample**

Scale	Categories	Abundance	Percentage of frequency
Gender	Woman	242	62
	Man	148	38
	Between 18-23	60	15.3
	Between 24-29	58	14.8
	Between 30-35	80	20.5
	Between 36-40	98	25.1
	Between 41-50	67	17.1
	Over 50 years old	27	6.9
Education	Diploma	63	16.1
	Associate degree	31	7.9
	Bachelor's degree	140	35.8
	Master's degree	107	27.4
	PhD	49	12.5

Hypothesis testing and model fit were conducted using SPSS26 and Smart PLS4 software. To assess the fit of the structural model, two methods were used: determining significant t-values and  $R^2$ . The most basic criterion for measuring the relationship between constructs in the model (structural part) is the significance of t-values. If the value of these numbers exceeds 1.96, it indicates the validity of the relationship between the constructs and, consequently, the confirmation of the research hypotheses.

Figure 2 shows the significance levels in the relationship between the research constructs. As shown in the figure, the t-values being greater than 1.96 indicates the confirmation of the research hypotheses and the fit of the structural model.

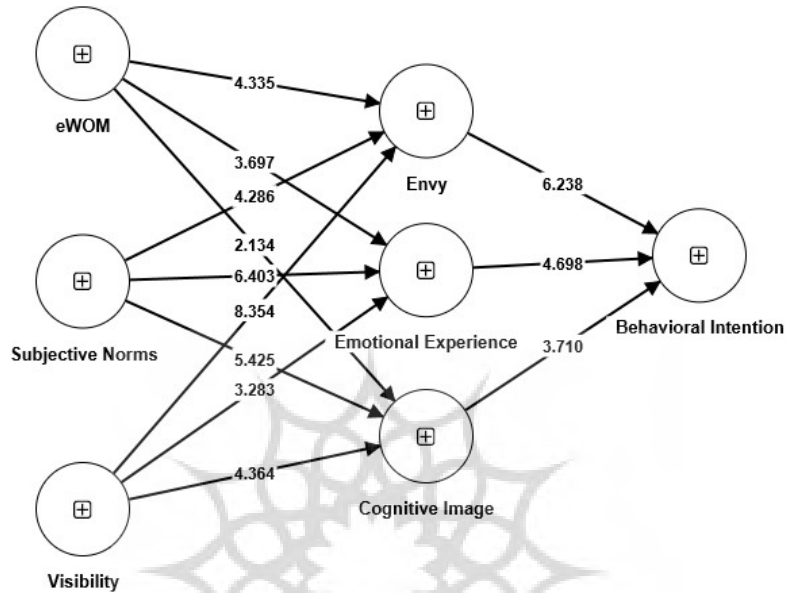
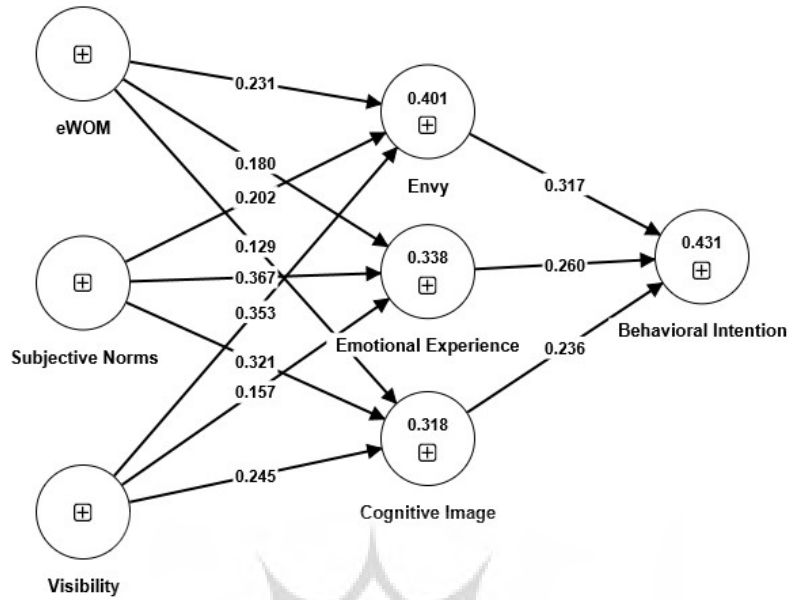


Figure 2. Research model in the case of coefficient significance (t value)

Another important criterion for assessing the structural model fit in the research is the  $R^2$  criterion. This criterion indicates the impact of an independent variable on a dependent variable. The higher the value of this criterion, the better the model fit. The  $R^2$  values for the endogenous variables of envy, emotional experience, cognitive image, and behavioral intention, as well as the path coefficients and factor loadings of the items, are presented in Figure 3. The values of the coefficients of determination indicate a good fit of the structural model of the research.



**Figure 3. The measurement model in the form of path coefficients and coefficients of determination.**

The Goodness of Fit (GoF) index, used to evaluate the overall model fit, was found to be 0.462 for the research model, indicating a good model fit.

Based on the output of the conceptual model of the research presented in Table 4, the research hypothesis is stated and examined.

**Table 4. Summary of the hypothesis testing results**

Route	Path coefficient	Significance coefficient	Result
1 eWOM to Envy	0.231	4.335	Confirmed
2 Subjective norms to Envy	0.202	4.286	Confirmed
3 Visibility to Envy	0.353	8.354	Confirmed
4 eWOM to Emotional Experience	0.180	3.697	Confirmed
5 Subjective norms to Emotional Experience	0.367	6.403	Confirmed
6 Visibility to Emotional Experience	0.157	3.283	Confirmed
7 eWOM to Cognitive Image	0.129	2.134	Confirmed
8 Subjective norms to Cognitive Image	0.321	5.425	Confirmed
9 Visibility to Cognitive image	0.245	4.384	Confirmed
10 Envy to Behavioural Intention	0.317	6.238	Confirmed
11 Emotional Experience to Behavioural Intention	0.260	4.698	Confirmed
12 Cognitive Image to Behavioural Intention	0.236	3.710	Confirmed



The findings related to the first to ninth hypotheses of this research showed that social media environmental factors, including eWOM, subjective norms, and information visibility, have an impact on positive envy toward content published by others on social media, emotional experience, and cognitive image of Karbala city. Furthermore, the findings related to hypotheses ten, eleven, and twelve showed that positive envy toward content published on social media about Karbala city, as well as emotional experience and cognitive image of this city, can influence individuals' behavioral intentions.

### **Conclusion and discussion**

The primary objective of this study was to examine the impact of social media environmental factors on individuals' behavioral intentions towards the city of Karbala as a religious tourism destination. The first hypothesis posits that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has a significant impact on tourism intentions. The findings of this part of the study are consistent with those of Zhang et al. (2023), who concluded that both user-generated content (such as eWOM and subjective norms) and organizational marketing content (such as destination marketing perception) can be used to stimulate positive envy among tourists towards a destination. The second hypothesis of the study states that subjective norms have a significant impact on visitors' envy towards the city of Karbala. Cao et al. (2020) reported that distance, as well as tourists' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, are important variables that positively influence tourists' travel intentions. The third hypothesis states that information visibility has a significant impact on visitors' envy towards the city of Karbala. Yoo et al (2017) reported that information technology-based tourism services and platforms have made travel planning and management easier for travelers. Hypothesis four confirmed that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has a significant impact on emotional experience towards Karbala. Arismayanti et al. (2024) concluded that eWOM positively influences the emotional experience of a destination and enhances its attractiveness. The results of hypothesis five indicate that subjective norms have a significant impact on emotional experience towards Karbala. This finding is consistent with the findings of Nguyen and Ho (2022). These researchers concluded that subjective norms positively influence emotional experience, and this emotional experience mediates the relationship between subjective norms and purchase intention, emphasizing the importance of social influences in marketing strategies. According to hypothesis six, information visibility has a significant impact on emotional experience towards Karbala. The results of this study are consistent with the findings of Springer and Whittaker (2018). In their study, they reported that visibility can improve understanding, but if user expectations are not met, it may lead to negative outcomes, highlighting the complexity of its effects. Therefore, the following hypotheses can be stated. Hypothesis seven states that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has a significant impact on the cognitive image of the city of Karbala. Pranaya et al. (2023) support these results. These

researchers reported that eWOM serves as a credible source of information and is often considered more trustworthy than traditional advertising, consequently enhancing the cognitive image and influencing tourist satisfaction and visitation intentions. The results of hypothesis eight indicate that subjective norms have a significant impact on the cognitive image of the city of Karbala. Arismayanti et al. (2024) support these results. These researchers reported that satisfied tourists share their positive experiences, which enhances their cognitive image and attracts new visitors. Subjective norms significantly shape the cognitive image of destinations by influencing perceptions, behaviors, and social interactions. The results of hypothesis nine indicate that information visibility has a significant impact on the cognitive image of the city of Karbala, which is consistent with the findings of Antunez (2022), who concluded that online platforms facilitate the distribution of information and allow potential tourists to access diverse perspectives on a destination. Zhou and Li (2024) reported that user-generated content, such as reviews and travelogues, increases the credibility of information and consequently influences tourists' cognitive image. This finding is consistent with the findings of Hajli et al. (2018), who showed that sharing photos and posts related to tourist destinations on social networks can act as a stimulus that can arouse destination envy in users and may influence the intention to visit the depicted destinations. Hypothesis eleven states that emotional experience towards the city of Karbala has a significant impact on individuals' behavioral intentions. Woosnam et al. (2020) support these results. These researchers reported that higher levels of positive emotions lead to more positive cognitive evaluations of a place's attributes. Hypothesis twelve states that the cognitive image of the city of Karbala has a significant impact on individuals' behavioral intentions. This is consistent with the findings of Narangajavana et al. (2019) who concluded that sharing travel experiences on social networks plays a significant role in shaping users' awareness, expectations, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors.

The novelty of this research lies in its contribution to a better understanding of how social media environmental factors influence the behavioral intentions of tourists towards religious tourism destinations. This research also investigates factors such as envy towards visitors, emotional attachment to the tourism destination, and the cognitive image of the religious tourism destination, alongside social media environmental factors. Given the confirmed impact of social media environmental factors on envy towards visitors and pilgrims to the holy sites of Karbala in Iraq, and the influence of this variable on shaping the behavioral intention of visiting this religious tourism destination, policymakers and tourism industry stakeholders such as travel agencies and tours are suggested to emphasize this factor in their targeting and social media presence to encourage tourists to visit religious sites. By creating appropriate content, providing suitable and transparent content, emphasizing appropriate subjective norms, and conducting appropriate Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing, they can effectively enhance envy. Furthermore, considering that emotional experience and cognitive image of religious sites have a

significant impact on tourists' behavioral intentions based on the research findings, social media stakeholders can enhance emotional experience and a suitable cognitive image of the religious tourism destination by providing appropriate and transparent information, creating and publishing suitable content, and organizing creative events, and by utilizing social media environmental factors. In this way, they can influence individuals' behavioral intentions to visit religious tourism destinations such as the holy city of Karbala.



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