Received: 29 November 2022 | Revised: 13 May 2023 | Accepted: 3 July 2023

DOI: 10.1002/jtr.2594

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILEY

Driving destination brand engagement: The role of traveler participation

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Abstract

This paper explores the importance of two forms of interactions, namely marketer–traveler interaction and traveler–traveler interaction in driving destination brand engagement (DBE) dimensions, and their effect on travelers' short-term and long-term behavioral intentions based on impulse buying and external search behavior. Using multi-group analysis, the impact of DBE dimensions on external search behavior and impulse buying across Generation-Z travelers (aged between 18 and 25) and Generation-Y travelers (aged between 26 and 40) was also explored. The results provide meaningful implications for tourism marketers to drive relationships between travelers and destinations on digital tourism platforms.

KEYWORDS
destination brand engagement, generation-Y, generation-Z, marketer–traveler interaction, traveler–traveler interaction

1 | INTRODUCTION

The diffusion of digital tourism platforms has facilitated interaction between travelers. This has resulted in more than 50% of travelers relying on destination-related information available on digital tourism platforms, such as TripAdvisor, Tuniu, and MaFengWo for their travel planning (Cheung, Pires et al., 2020; Cheung, Ting, et al., 2020). Given its importance, digital tourism platforms are increasingly used to create destination brand communities (DBCs) to disseminate destination related information and facilitate experience sharing (Hook et al., 2018). Tourism marketers can facilitate two-way communication between themselves and travelers and encourage interaction between travelers through marketer–traveler interaction (MTI) and traveler–traveler interaction (TTI) via the DBCs (Hook et al., 2018; Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020).

Tourism marketers interact with travelers via DBCs to disseminate information, helping travelers to learn more about the destination, and to encourage travelers' post-travel opinions (Assiouras et al., 2019). Tourism marketers also facilitate interaction between travelers by creating discussion topics that encourage the sharing of destination-related information with others via the DBC (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020). Frequent interaction between destination marketers and members of DBCs may influence travelers' sense of belonging with the destination and may drive traveler-destination relationships (Brodie et al., 2019). An aspect linked with MTI and TTI, is travelers' DBE. Engagement studies have explored the conceptualization and dimensionality of engagement and agreed that engagement is a multidimensional construct (Hollebeek et al., 2014). In a tourism marketing context, DBE has been conceptualized as a travelers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement with a destination (Harrigan et al., 2018). With the growing importance of DBCs, travelers are increasingly engaged in collaborative action (Brodie et al., 2019), such as co-development of travel plans, sharing of itinerary and group-based travels to destinations, events, and festivals with like-minded strangers on DBCs. It implies that traveler engagement with destinations may be associated with their social connections with other members of the DBCs, suggesting that meaningful connection amongst travelers strengthens travelers' sense of belongings to their interested destinations (Brodie et al., 2019; Mariani et al., 2018).

Social engagement is reflected by connectedness between travelers in relation to their interested destinations, being regarded as an important dimension of engagement studies (Brodie et al., 2019). Social engagement is engendered by interactive and reciprocal relationships formed on brand communities, which in turn strengthens travelers' sense of belonging to their interested destinations. Engaged travelers are involved in the social exchange of destination-related experiences, social connection for shared vision, and social support for trip-planning and group-based travels (So et al., 2020). It appears appropriate that the conceptualization of DBE should be extended with the incorporation of traveler social engagement. This would involve examining the comparative influences of the four DBE dimensions (cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social engagement) with destination brands, to drive travelers' behavior.

Engaged travelers are likely to develop relationships with destinations, resulting in short and long-term behavioral responses (Kim et al., 2020). Travelers' impulse buying behaviors and external search behaviors reflect short and long-term behavioral responses, respectively (Cheung, Leung, Cheah, & Ting, 2021). Impulse buying is conceptualized as a travelers' instinctive purchase behavior based on a sudden desire, reflecting a short-term behavioral response (Chan et al., 2017). External search behavior is conceptualized as a travelers' normal search behavior unrelated to their immediate needs (McColl-Kennedy & Fetter, 2001). Engaged travelers are willing to enjoy tourism-related experiences after social interaction with other users on DBCs, and thus they are likely to organize group travels and purchase services on the DBCs immediately. Engaged travelers are immersed in destination-related information and social connections and are willing to prioritize destinations in their trip-planning process, which in turn strengthens future search intention (Cheung, Pires, et al., 2021). Although external search behavior and impulse buying are intrinsically linked with DBE, an understanding of their relationship with DBE dimensions remains limited.

According to recent tourism literature, young travelers, comprising Generation-Y (Gen-Y), who were born since 1980, and Generation-Z (Gen-Z), who were born since 1997, are regarded as highly engaged travelers who are willing to spend considerable time, efforts and money in traveling (Jiang & Hong, 2021). Generation cohort theory (GCT) has been used to identify the differences in values and behaviors amongst different generation cohorts with similar collective memories and experiences during their formative years (Li et al., 2013). Reportedly, the gap between Gen-Y and Gen-Z in China is much widen than that found in other countries because of their significant differences in their experiences during their formative years (McKercher et al., 2020). While Gen-Y travelers experienced the transition from less developed economy to a modernized economy beginning to embrace consumption and tourism, Gen-Z travelers are "digital natives" who have experienced the dramatic technological and economic development, resulting in heavy desire in social connections with others in DBCs and tourism-related activities (McKercher et al., 2020; Roth-Cohen et al., 2021). Although travelers' age is likely to affect the relationship between brand experience and behavioral intentions (Ye et al., 2019), understanding of the differences in participation via DBCs, amongst Gen-Y and Gen-Z is still very limited.

Seeking to address the knowledge gaps, a research model was created to examine the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of MTI and TTI on the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social engagement dimensions of DBE?
2. What is the impact of the cognitive, emotional, behavioral and social engagement dimensions of DBE on travelers' short-term and long-term behavioral intention?
3. What it the moderating role of travelers' age (Gen-Y vs Gen-Z) in affecting the impact of MTI and TTI on DBE dimensions, and its subsequent effects on travelers' short-term and long-term behavioral intention?

2 | CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1 | Traveler participation via a social media destination brand community (DBC)

A DBC is conceptualized as a specialized community formulated by tourism marketers or admirers of a particular destination (e.g., Osaka, Tokyo, or Beijing) without geographical boundaries (Cheung, Ting, et al., 2020; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). With the increasing popularity of DBCs, travelers are empowered to participate via interaction with tourism marketers via MTI and TTI. MTI is manifested by the sharing of opinions about destinations and hospitality services with tourism marketers for improvement (Carlson et al., 2019). TTI is manifested by the sharing of destination knowledge and opinions with other travelers for trip-planning (Tajvidi et al., 2021). MTI and TTI are posited as important drivers of travelers' relationships with the destination (Touni et al., 2020).

2.2 | Marketer–traveler interaction

MTI is manifested by travelers' involvement through the provision of suggestions for service improvements, along with ideas for the development of new tourism activities or hospitality services (Assiouras et al., 2019). The tourism marketing literature suggests that a DBC facilitates MTI by encouraging travelers to provide their feedback and suggestions, along with real-time destination experiences, which evoke positive emotions and strengthen loyalty intentions. González-Mansilla et al. (2019) found that traveler participation in value co-creation activities influenced satisfaction. Parihar and Dawra (2020) found that participative behaviors within digital tourism platforms, including feedback related to experiences, suggestions for improvements, and ideas for new services, influenced loyalty intention. This suggests that MTI is a key driver that evokes positive traveler emotions within the experience-sharing process, which in turn builds active and intense relationships between a traveler and the destination. Notwithstanding, an understanding of interaction between marketers and travelers as a driver of strengthening tourists' engagement with the destination, is yet to be explored.

2.3 | Traveler–traveler interaction

Utilizing social-media technologies, travelers form various communities, based on their interests, to share tourism experiences. In DBC, TTI refers to interaction between travelers, as reflected by travelers' participation in information sharing activities to help resolve their peers' tourism challenges. The tourism marketing literature suggests that a DBC empowers travelers by facilitating interactions, enabling travelers to share travel knowledge and real-time experiences, which create additional value within the tourism experience. TTI has been found to influence the creation of consumer destination brand knowledge as consumers often share destination-related news, recommendations, and problem-solving advice (Rihova et al., 2018). During the sharing process, travelers build relationships and create a sense of belonging and shared vision within the DBC (Cheung, Leung, Cheah, & Ting, 2021). These findings suggest the importance of TTI as a driver of relationship building between travelers and its impact on traveler behavior. While prior studies have explored the importance of knowledge exchange, experience sharing, and assistance between travelers, an understanding of interaction between travelers as a driver of engagement between travelers and destinations, is yet to be explored.

2.4 | Destination-brand engagement

Destination-brand engagement (DBE) is an important concept in destination branding as it encompasses psychological and behavioral responses beyond visitation (So et al., 2020). Given its importance, the conceptualization of DBE has received scholarly attention, and its multidimensional nature is widely acknowledged (Harrigan et al., 2018; Rather et al., 2021).

The engagement conceptualization of Hollebeek et al. (2014) has been commonly cited within extant literature to explore engagement with destinations, comprising tourists' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement with destinations (Harrigan et al., 2018; Rather et al., 2021). Although these dimensions are useful in predicting behavioral intentions, belongingness to the focal destination is absent and limits the capacity for greater exploration. Within the domain of destination marketing, engagement occurs when travelers contribute resources to the focal destination and is manifested in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. This incorporates a psychological connection with the destination during the interaction process (So et al., 2020). DBCs can facilitate interactive engagement processes, creating reciprocal relationships, and thereby driving travelers' psychological connection with the DBC and the focal destination (Brodie et al., 2019; Cheung, Ting, et al., 2020). Highly engaged travelers are active in co-creating destination-related experiences through social networks on DBCs, which drives a sense of belonging within the focal destination (So et al., 2016). DBE emerges through iterations of socialization on DBCs, which drives the connectedness amongst various actors (e.g., travelers, marketers and opinion leaders) in experiencing their interested destinations (Brodie et al., 2019). As such, this study extends the conceptualization of DBE by incorporating social engagement as an additional dimension of DBE. The cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions of DBE are linked within travelers' interaction with destinations and will be discussed in the following sections.

2.5 | Cognitive engagement

Cognitive engagement was originally conceptualized as consumers' concerns with focal brands because of consumer-brand interaction (Hollebeek et al., 2014). In the tourism marketing context, cognitive engagement is conceptualized as travelers' interest in a destination because of their interaction with that destination, including pre-trip interaction, real-time interaction during their trip, and post-trip interaction via DBCs (So et al., 2020). With the development of DBCs, travelers are motivated to interact with destination marketers while trip planning, thereby exerting a cognitive effort to obtain and understand destination-related information, such as price, opening hours, and reservation arrangements (Cheung, Ting, et al., 2020; So et al., 2020). Travelers exert cognitive efforts during the interaction process and become immersed in destination-related information during traveler-marketer interaction via DBCs. Mariani et al. (2018) found interaction between marketers and travelers drive travelers' intention to expend cognitive efforts to explore DBC information. Hernández-Ortega et al. (2020) confirmed marketer-initiated content via DBC could drive travelers' intention to analyze and understand the destination-related information. Thus, tourism marketers that encourage travelers to share their ideas via DBCs are likely to see benefits.

Travelers are also active in sharing enjoyable experiences during the trip and post-trip experiences on DBCs. These insights further inform DBCs members understanding of the focal destination. Reichenberger (2017) argued the importance of knowledge sharing as a driver of destination knowledge. Touni et al. (2020) posited that experience sharing between travelers via DBC strengthened travelers' involvement and intention to learn more about the focal destination. Hernández-Ortega et al. (2020) found experience sharing enhanced travelers' awareness of the focal destination. Kumar and Kaushik (2020) posited that the sharing intellectual of experiences about destinations was a driver of the intention to learn more about the focal destination. Thus, TTI and MTI are regarded as meaningful drivers that strengthen travelers' intention to exert cognitive effort to enhance their knowledge about the focal destination, supporting the following hypotheses:

H1a. MTI has a positive impact on cognitive engagement.

H1b. TTI has a positive impact on cognitive engagement.

2.6 | Emotional engagement

Emotional engagement relates to a consumers' magnitude of positive emotions resulting from brand-related interaction

(Hollebeek et al., 2014). This engagement is evident in a consumers' degree of passion, enthusiasm, and excitement towards the brand (Bowden & Mirzaei, 2021). Applied within the tourism context, EE with a destination is positively related to memorable experiences as a result of interaction, such as participative activities initiated by marketers and destination-knowledge sharing between travelers that evokes positive emotions (Kumar & Kaushik, 2020; So et al., 2020). The act of making suggestions to marketers for service improvements via DBCs and sharing destination-related knowledge with peers, help to facilitate self-fulfillment with the destination, and evoke positive affection (Cheung, Ting, et al., 2020).

Prior studies have argued that interaction between tourism marketers and travelers and the sharing amongst travelers via DBCs evoke positive emotions. For example, Kim and Fesenmaier (2017) posited that travelers' post-trip experience sharing via DBCs enhanced emotions towards the focal destination. Cheung, Ting, et al. (2020) found interaction between travelers via DBCs encouraged feelings of joy, love, and positive surprise with a destination. Xie et al. (2021) confirmed the importance of these interactions, suggesting the experience evoked positive emotional value and travelers' enthusiasm. As such, MTI and TTI are influential in driving travelers' enthusiasm with the focal destination, and subsequently evoke positive affection. Therefore, it is logical to hypothesize that:

H2a. MTI has a positive impact on emotional engagement.

H2b. TTI has a positive impact on emotional engagement.

2.7 | Behavioral engagement

Behavioral engagement reflects a travelers' intention to invest energy, time, and effort to participate in tourism-related interaction (Hollebeek et al., 2014). With the advancement of social-media technology, travelers have greater opportunity to exchange knowledge (Touni et al., 2020). Passionate travelers with a high-level of behavioral engagement are willing to recommend activities and invite like-minded peers to enjoy a trip to the destination together (Parihar & Dawra, 2020; So et al., 2020).

Empirical studies have found contributions to service improvement via DBCs can drive behavioral engagement. For example, Bilro et al. (2018) found that interactive content shared by marketers on digital tourism platforms facilitated the intention to share knowledge. This sharing of information was a driver of the loyalty intention to recommend the digital tourism platform services to their friends. Cheung, Ting, et al. (2020) suggested that marketer-initiated experience sharing via DBCs strengthens tourists' loyalty intention. Parihar and Dawra (2020) also found knowledge sharing was a driver of increased commitment to the destination and recommend tourism marketers to spend more resources to encourage travelers to share their feedback and experiences on DBCs, to obtain meaningful inputs for service improvements.

Prior studies also posit that interaction between travelers assists experience sharing and drives the intention to engage with the destination. Kim et al. (2020) found information exchange was a driver of an ongoing intention to engage with restaurants. Garay Tamajon and Morales Perez (2020) recognized that travelers' experience sharing behavior drives a commitment to social-media communities and creates relationships between travelers and the destination. Chi (2021) found that information-seeking and experience-sharing behaviors on DBCs was a driver of eco-tourism knowledge and the consideration of eco-friendly tourism services as a priority within decision-making processes. MTI and TTI manifest the travelers' intention to share knowledge and experiences for improvement and to support peers on DBCs and are regarded as drivers that strengthen the intention to engage with focal destinations beyond purchase. Thus, it is logical to hypothesize that:

H3a. MTI has a positive impact on behavioral engagement.

H3b. TTI has a positive impact on behavioral engagement.

2.8 | Social engagement

Social engagement refers to the dynamic, reciprocal relationship formed between stakeholders resulting from social interaction within a community that creates extra-transactional value (Brodie et al., 2019). social engagement is conceptualized as a form of consumer-initiated engagement, as manifested by the strength of social connection between consumers within these communities (Vivek et al., 2014). When members of a community are engaged in genuine interaction, a strong rapport and trust relationship is created, and members are willing to engage in deeper connections with the focal brands. Socially engaged travelers develop reciprocal and mutual actions throughout the process of social connection, which in turn strengthens a sense of belonging to the DBCs, and thereby enhances their enjoyment of the destination.

Engaged travelers form social circles with others through interaction and become passionate about tourism activities within the destination of interest (Brodie et al., 2019). Canavan (2018) posited that the interactions amongst backpackers in relation to memorable experiences created positive perceptions on destinations. Chen et al. (2021) found that interactions amongst coffee lovers saw the development of social connections between DBC members which enhanced destination interest. It appears genuine interaction between travelers creates opportunities for the development of relationships and may drive a psychological connection with the destination of interest.

By interacting with travelers through the creation of a DBC, marketers encourages travelers to share their real-time experiences, which in turn drives travelers' connection with the DBC and the destinations of interest. Buhalis and Sinarta (2019) recognized that real-time interaction between tourism marketers and travelers facilitated

the intention to share experiences on DBCs. This interaction in turn strengthened a sense of belonging to the DBCs and the destination of interest. Cheung, Leung, Cheah, & Ting (2021) also found that passionate travelers actively contribute and share experiences on DBCs, strengthening DBCs member relationships and the connection with the destination. MTI and TTI via DBC play a role in driving travelers' intention to build reciprocal relationships with like-minded peers and can drive a sense of belonging with the destination. Thus, we hypothesize:

H4a. MTI has a positive impact on social engagement.

H4b. TTI has a positive impact on social engagement.

2.9 | External search behavior

External search behavior is conceptualized as a travelers' normal search behavior that is not directly related to their purchasing needs, being regarded as consumers' long-term behavioral intentions resulting from intimate consumer-brand relationships (McColl-Kennedy & Fetter, 2001). Travelers demonstrate external search behavior when they browse tourism-related information on digital tourism platforms, subscribe to destination related social-media channels, and search for experiences shared on DBCs (Filieri et al., 2020).

Studies have found that external search behavior is linked to the magnitude of relationship between the traveler and the destination. Filieri et al. (2020) found the usefulness of information was a driver of the cognitive effort to seek out information on digital tourism platforms. Kim et al. (2020) found that engaged travelers enjoyed the social-media information search process which developed repeat behaviors. It is apparent that engaged travelers are emotionally attached to their interested destinations, and they are motivated to search for destination-related information using digital tourism platforms on an ongoing basis. Thus, we hypothesize:

H5a. Cognitive engagement has a positive impact on external search behavior.

H5b. Emotional engagement has a positive impact on external search behavior.

Travelers' external search behavior is likely to be driven by relationships between travelers and the destinations of their interest. Leung et al. (2022) revealed that highly engaged travelers were more likely to enjoy virtual reality (VR) tourism experiences in the future. Wang et al. (2020) revealed social connections on digital tourism platforms was a driver of future digital platform use. Engaged travelers are immersed in destination-related information, and they are willing to connect with other users to prepare group-based travels. Thus, travelers with strong behavioral and social engagement are more likely to use digital tourism platforms to search for destination-related information in an ongoing basis. Thus, we hypothesize:

H5c. Behavioral engagement has a positive impact on external search behavior.

H5d. Social engagement has a positive impact on external search behavior.

2.10 | Impulse buying

Impulse buying refers to a consumers' immediate purchase behavior based on an immediate desire (Rook, 1987). Instant purchase behavior is based on positive emotions, with limited consideration of information and alternatives. Chan et al. (2017) differentiates impulse buying from purchase intention, where the former is driven by irresistible desire with limited consideration, and the latter involves a planned buying behavior after the consideration of information and alternatives. The importance of impulse buying is acknowledged in the tourism marketing literature as it reflects travelers' short-term behavioral intentions, being inextricably linked with a travelers' enthusiasm and connection with a destination (Li et al., 2015).

Impulse buying is recognized as a behavioral outcome driven by a relationship with a destination. Engaged travelers are more willing to purchase services related to a destination of interest on digital tourism platforms. Li et al. (2015) argued that passionate travelers who exerted cognitive effort in tourism-related learning activities were more likely to experience impulse buying behaviors. Rezaei et al. (2016) found perceived friendliness and enthusiasm on digital tourism platforms were influential in driving travelers' impulse buying. It was suggested that travelers' impulse buying was driven by a travelers' conscious attention and positive emotions. Thus, we hypothesize:

H6a. Cognitive engagement has a positive impact on impulse buying.

H6b. Emotional engagement has a positive impact on impulse buying.

Prior studies also suggest that strengthening a travelers' intention to engage with destinations will be useful in driving travelers' short-term loyalty intentions (Harrigan et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2020). Cheung, Leung, Cheah, & Ting (2021) found that passionate travelers are willing to spend more energy and efforts to engage with destinations of their interests, and subsequently strengthens their impulse buying behaviors. Dolan et al. (2019) found that social connections between travelers enhanced sense of belonging between DBC members and subsequently strengthens their behavioral loyalty with a destination. Such social connections will lead to travelers' desirability in impulse buying (Chan et al., 2017). This study posits that impulse buying is driven by a travelers' relationship with the destination and is

enhanced by a sense of belonging between DBC members and the destination. Thus, we hypothesize:

H6c. Behavioral engagement has a positive impact on impulse buying.

H6d. Social engagement has a positive impact on impulse buying.

2.11 | Moderating effects of age

Generation Cohort Theory provides theoretical lens to consider age as an important moderator influencing the relationship between constructs (Mckercher et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2019). Based on GCT, values and behaviors of members of each generation are largely influenced by the collective memories and experiences during their formative years (Li et al., 2013). Members of different generation cohorts such as generation X (Gen-X) (born between 1965 and 1980), generation Y (Gen-Y) (born between 1981 and 1996) and Gen-Z (born from 1997 onwards), are expected to have different values, preferences, and behaviors (Mckercher et al., 2020). Based on GCT, prior studies have found the differences in consumption, travel and engagement with smart technologies amongst individuals in different cohorts. For example, Çera et al. (2020) found that Gen-Z consumers have higher preferences on gamification and mobile banking than Gen-Y consumers. Rather and Hollebeek (2021) found that the impact of travel experiences has a higher impact on visit intention of Gen-X travelers than Gen-Y travelers. Thach et al. (2021) also found that Gen-Z consumers report higher preferences than Gen-Y consumers in socializing with their friends and more willing to spend their time and resources in different social-media platforms. In addition, Fan et al. (2022) found that social interaction value of peer-to-peer accommodation has a higher impact on behavioral intention of Gen-Z travelers than Gen-Y travelers. Seemingly, consumers of different generation cohorts have different values and preferences in technology adoption and social media usage, justifying further exploration in the behavioral differences amongst them.

Prior studies have argued that young generations, including Gen-Y and Gen-Z members, are more willing to travel compared to older generations, justifying for the importance of studying values and behaviors of Gen-Y and Gen-Z travelers (Li et al., 2013; Mckercher et al., 2020). Although Gen-Y and Gen-Z are regarded as important groups for creating future growth in digital technologies, there are differences in digital media usage behaviors between them. Compared to Gen-Z members, members of Gen-Y have a higher ability to control their emotions, and they make their purchase decision based on functional-cognitive information (Roth-Cohen et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2019). Gen-Y travelers are more experienced in traveling, and make their decision based on utilitarian needs, such as functional benefits and cost (Roth-Cohen et al., 2021). In contrast, Gen-Z members have experienced dramatic advances in information communication technology during their formative years, and hence they are willing to exert considerable amounts of efforts searching for trendiness information and interact with technologies (Cheung, Leung, et al., 2020). Gen-Z travelers are heavy users of digital tourism platforms, being increasingly involved in experience sharing on digital tourism platforms (Jiang & Hong, 2021). Gen-Z travelers prefer to enrich their destination brand experience by participating in value co-creation activities on DBCs (Ye et al., 2019). We expect that Gen-Z travelers may have higher intentions to interact with marketers and other travelers on DBCs, and their relationship with destinations are more likely to be influenced by participative activities on DBCs. Thus, we hypothesize:

H7. The impact of MTI on (a) cognitive engagement, (b) emotional engagement, (c) behavioral engagement and (d) social engagement will be higher for Gen-Z travelers than Gen-Y travelers.

H8. The impact of TTI on (a) cognitive engagement, (b) emotional engagement, (c) behavioral engagement and (d) social engagement will be higher for Gen-Z travelers than Gen-Y travelers.

Gen-Y travelers are less likely to make their decisions based on emotional attachments, and more willing to exert cognitive efforts to search for detailed information in their decision-making processes (Roth-Cohen et al., 2021). Gen-Z travelers are more likely to engage in tourism-related value co-creation activities, such as providing feedback, getting involved in co-designing literary with other travelers, and co-organizing group-based travels based on their emotions and interests (Ye et al., 2019). Gen-Z travelers make their travel decisions based on their need for uniqueness and peer influence, and hence they are more likely to develop sense of belongingness to their favorite destinations based on social connections on DBCs (Jiang & Hong, 2021; Mckercher et al., 2020). Gen-Z travelers are more likely to make immediate purchases and be immersed in destination-related information based on emotional attachment, intimate relationship and social connections that built in DBCs. Thus, we hypothesize:

H9. The impact of cognitive engagement on (a) external search behavior and (b) impulse buying will be higher for Gen-Y travelers than Gen-Z travelers.

H10. The impact of emotional engagement on (a) external search behavior and (b) impulse buying will be higher for Gen-Z travelers than Gen-Y travelers.

H11. The impact of behavioral engagement on (a) external search behavior and (b) impulse buying will be higher for Gen-Z travelers than Gen-Y travelers.

H12. The impact of social engagement on (a) external search behavior and (b) impulse buying will be higher for Gen-Z travelers than Gen-Y travelers.

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Data collection

This study adopted a purposive sampling technique to collect data from Chinese travelers who were experienced in browsing destination-related information on DBCs (e.g., Tuniu, MaFengWo, and TripAdvisor). The research team prepared and hosted the self-administrated online survey through Qualtrics from December 2019 to January 2020. The relevancy of respondents was checked by screening questions. Respondents with no tourism and hospitality service browsing or purchase experience on DBCs were excluded. Respondents were required to base responses on their perceptions of a familiar destination (e.g., Tokyo, Osaka, Bangkok, and London).

3.2 | Measurement items

This study adapted measurement items from prior studies (See Table 2) to measure the constructs using seven-point Likert scales (i.e., 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). MTI and TTI were measured by three items, each adapted from Tajvidi et al. (2021). DBE dimensions, including cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social engagement were measured by three items each, adapted from Vivek et al. (2014) and Bowden and Mirzaei (2021). External search behavior and impulse buying were measured by items adapted from McColl-Kennedy and Fetter (2001) and Adelaar et al. (2003) respectively. After conducting a pilot test, we made slight modifications in the questionnaire wordings to fit the DBC and destination engagement context.

3.3 | Data analysis

Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was adopted to analyze the collected data through a 5000-bootstrap procedure. PLS-SEM was adopted to test the research model due to its unique advantages: (1) suitable for studies with a large number of constructs; (2) appropriate for studies aiming to identify key exogenous constructs in a research model; (3) appropriate for exploratory research with a combination of explanatory and prediction (Hair et al., 2017). As the objective of this study is to identify key predictors of travelers' external search behaviors and impulse buying in a theoretical framework with a large number of constructs, PLS-SEM is appropriate for this study. As such, we follow recent marketing studies (e.g., Cheung et al., 2022; Leung et al., 2023; Sharipudin et al., 2023) with similar objectives to adopt PLS-SEM to analyze the data.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Respondent profile

The research team sent an online survey to 671 respondents. A total of 498 agreed to participate, with 20 responses rejected due to a lack of DBC experience. A further 27 incomplete surveys were discarded, leaving 451 viable for data analysis. The sample comprised of males (37.7%) and females (62.3%), aged from 18 to 40. The majority of respondents were aged between 18 and 25 (49.1%), followed by 26–30 (21.9%), 31–35 (19.1%) and the remaining were aged 36–40 (9.9%). All respondents were experienced users of digital tourism platforms like TripAdvisor, Tuniu, and MaFengWo.

4.2 | Common method bias

As self-reported data was collected from a single source, common method bias (CMB) may inflate the magnitude of the relationship between the constructs in the research model. Therefore, a full collinearity assessment was conducted following the procedures suggested by Kock and Lynn (2012). This was undertaken by creating a dummy variable using random numbers for a full-collinearity model run, where all variables in the theoretical model point to the dummy variable. Table 1 presents the results revealing that the variance inflation factor (VIF) values of all constructs were <3.3, suggesting a lack of CMB in this study.

4.3 | Measurement (outer) model results

Following the recommended analytical procedures, a two-stage approach was adopted to analyze the data using PLS-SEM. During the purification process, an emotional engagement item was dropped due to a low item loading, and average variance extracted (AVE). Composite reliability was used to check the internal consistency of the measurement (outer) model. Table 2 reveals that all values exceeded 0.821, and the level of internal consistency was confirmed. Loadings of all measurement items exceeded 0.746 and exceeded the recommended 0.70 threshold. As the AVE scores of all constructs exceeded 0.605 and were well above the recommended 0.50 threshold, convergent validity was confirmed (see Table 2). Discriminant validity was examined following the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion. As reported in Table 3, the square roots of the AVEs for the latent constructs were larger than the corresponding latent-variable

TABLE 1 Full collinearity assessment.

Construct	Random dummy variable
Behavioral engagement	1.954
Cognitive engagement	1.978
Emotional engagement	1.553
External search behavior	1.102
Impulse buying	1.646
Marketer–traveler interaction	1.490
Social engagement	1.349
Traveler–traveler interaction	1.032

TABLE 2 Measurement model results.

Construct	λ	*t*-value	CR	AVE
Marketer–traveler interaction (MTI)			0.838	0.633
I often express my personal opinions to marketers of destination X on DBCs in digital tourism platforms.	0.758	29.94		
I often find solutions to my problems together with marketers of destination X on DBCs in digital tourism platforms.	0.819	44.16		
Marketers of destination X encourages consumers to create solutions together on DBCs in digital tourism platforms.	0.808	43.32		
Traveler–traveler interaction (TTI)			0.825	0.611
I am willing to ask other travelers on DBCs in digital tourism platforms to provide me with their suggestions about destination X before planning my trip.	0.750	29.17		
I am willing to share information on tourism activities and hospitality services about destination X with other travelers on DBCs in digital tourism platforms.	0.808	36.92		
I am willing to recommend tourism activities and hospitality services of destination X to other travelers on DBCs in digital tourism platforms.	0.786	33.03		
Cognitive engagement			0.821	0.605
I like to know more about destination X.	0.788	37.47		
I like to learn more about destination X.	0.798	34.14		
Anything related to destination X grabs my attention.	0.747	28.22		
Emotional engagement			0.853	0.744
I feel very positive when I visit destination X.	0.860	59.34		
Visiting destination X makes me happy.	0.865	54.85		
I feel good when I visit destination X. (Dropped)				
Behavioral engagement			0.838	0.633
I spend a lot of my discretionary time considering destination X.	0.759	28.19		
I try to fit browsing information about destination X into my schedule.	0.831	50.01		
I am heavily into destination X.	0.795	37.62		
Social engagement			0.828	0.616
I love visiting destination X with other travelers from DBCs.	0.808	45.15		
I enjoy destination X more when I am with other travelers from DBCs.	0.760	31.25		
Destination X is more fun when other travelers on the DBCs visit it too.	0.785	37.87		
External search behavior			0.840	0.637
I am interested in browsing blogs, vlogs, and reviews of destination X regularly.	0.755	21.08		
I would be interested in reading information about visiting destination X.	0.851	45.63		
I have compared services amongst digital tourism platforms that provide vacation packages to visit destination X.	0.785	26.27		
Impulse buying			0.856	0.748
I will purchase tourism and hospitality services related to destination X that appear on this digital tourism platform immediately.	0.875	64.47		
I intend to purchase tourism and hospitality services related to destination X on this digital tourism platform immediately.	0.854	50.27		
When I see something about destination X that really interests me, I buy it on this digital tourism platform without considering the consequences. (Dropped)				

correlations; confirming discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2017). In addition, we also further examined discriminant validity by checking the Heterotrait and Monotrait (HTMT) ratio (Henseler et al., 2016). As reported in Table 4, the values of the HTMT ratio for all constructs were less than the recommended threshold 0.90 (Hair et al., 2017), and thus discriminant validity was achieved.

4.4 | Structural (inner) model results

The hypotheses were tested by examining the structural model and analyzing the significance of paths between constructs. As presented in Figure 1, the results supported 13 of the 16 hypotheses. Specifically, the impact of MTI on social engagement ($\beta = 0.496$, $p = 0.000$)

TABLE 3 Discriminant validity of measurement model—based on the Fornell and Larcker Criterion.

	BE	CE	EE	ESB	IB	MTI	SE	TTI
BE	0.796							
CE	0.591	0.778						
EE	0.540	0.587	0.862					
ESB	0.329	0.340	0.303	0.798				
IB	0.519	0.582	0.425	0.290	0.865			
MTI	0.589	0.597	0.533	0.351	0.532	0.796		
SE	0.552	0.617	0.599	0.290	0.532	0.62	0.785	
TTI	0.436	0.521	0.447	0.348	0.397	0.488	0.497	0.782

Abbreviations: BE, behavioral engagement; CE, cognitive engagement; ESB, external search behavior; EE, emotional engagement; IB, impulse buying; MTI, marketer–traveler interaction; SE, social engagement; TTI, traveler–traveler interaction.

TABLE 4 Discriminant validity of measurement model—based on the HTMT ratio.

	BE	CE	ESB	EE	IB	MTI	SE	TTI
BE	0.857							
CE	0.481	0.506						
ESB	0.794	0.888	0.436					
EE	0.754	0.863	0.440	0.644				
IB	0.829	0.858	0.512	0.778	0.770			
MTI	0.745	0.853	0.411	0.880	0.773	0.848		
SE	0.627	0.766	0.524	0.669	0.591	0.702	0.694	

Abbreviation: BE, behavioral engagement; CE, cognitive engagement; ESB, external search behavior; EE, emotional engagement; IB, impulse buying; MTI, marketer–traveler interaction; SE, social engagement; TTI, traveler–traveler interaction.

was the strongest, followed by behavioral engagement ($\beta = 0.494$, $p = 0.000$), cognitive engagement ($\beta = 0.450$, $p = 0.000$), and emotional engagement ($\beta = 0.414$, $p = 0.000$), supporting H1a, H2a, H3a, and H4a. The impact of TTI on cognitive engagement was the strongest ($\beta = 0.301$, $p = 0.000$), followed by social engagement ($\beta = 0.256$, $p = 0.000$), emotional engagement ($\beta = 0.245$, $p = 0.000$), and behavioral engagement ($\beta = 0.195$, $p = 0.000$), supporting H1b, H2b, H3b, and H4b.

Regarding the consequences of DBE dimensions, the impact of cognitive engagement ($\beta = 0.164$, $p = 0.005$) and behavioral engagement ($\beta = 0.155$, $p = 0.005$) on external search behavior was positive and significant, supporting H5a and H5c. However, the impact of emotional engagement ($\beta = 0.096$, $p = 0.066$) and social engagement ($\beta = 0.046$, $p = 0.228$) on external search behavior was insignificant, rejecting H5b and H5d. The impact of cognitive engagement ($\beta = 0.331$, $p = 0.000$), social engagement ($\beta = 0.220$, $p = 0.000$), and behavioral engagement ($\beta = 0.209$, $p = 0.000$) on travelers' impulse buying was positive and significant, supporting H6a, H6c, and H6d. However, the impact of emotional engagement ($\beta = -0.014$, $p = 0.387$) on travelers' impulse buying was insignificant, thus H6b was rejected.

Additionally, the R^2 values of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social engagement, together with external search behavior and impulse buying were 0.425, 0.330, 0.376, 0.435, 0.149, and 0.412 respectively. The R^2 values exceeded the recommended criterion benchmark (≥0.10), suggesting that the model explains the variation in the endogenous constructs reasonably well (Chin, 1998).

A blindfolding procedure to check the predictive relevance (Q^2) of the research model (Shmueli et al., 2019) was also undertaken. The results demonstrated that the Q^2 values for cognitive engagement ($Q^2 = 0.252$), emotional engagement ($Q^2 = 0.242$), behavioral engagement ($Q^2 = 0.234$), social engagement ($Q^2 = 0.260$), external search behavior ($Q^2 = 0.085$), and impulse buying ($Q^2 = 0.301$) were greater than zero, confirming predictive relevance of the model. The predictive power of the research model was also examined using PLS-predict to test prediction error statistics and the root mean square error (RMSE) for all measurement indicators (Shmueli et al., 2019). As presented in Table 5 the RMSE results revealed that all indicator values of cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, behavioral engagement, and impulse buying in the PLS model were smaller than the linear regression model, suggesting high predictive power. The value of majority indicators for social engagement and external search behavior in the PLS model was smaller than the linear regression model, suggesting moderate predictive power. Overall, the results of the PLS-predict assessment suggest that the research model had predictive power for new observations.

4.5 | Moderating effects of age

Finally, we examined the path differences for Gen-Y and Gen-Z travelers using PLS-MGA (see Table 6) to explore moderating effect of travelers' age. The sample was divided into two age-based subgroups,

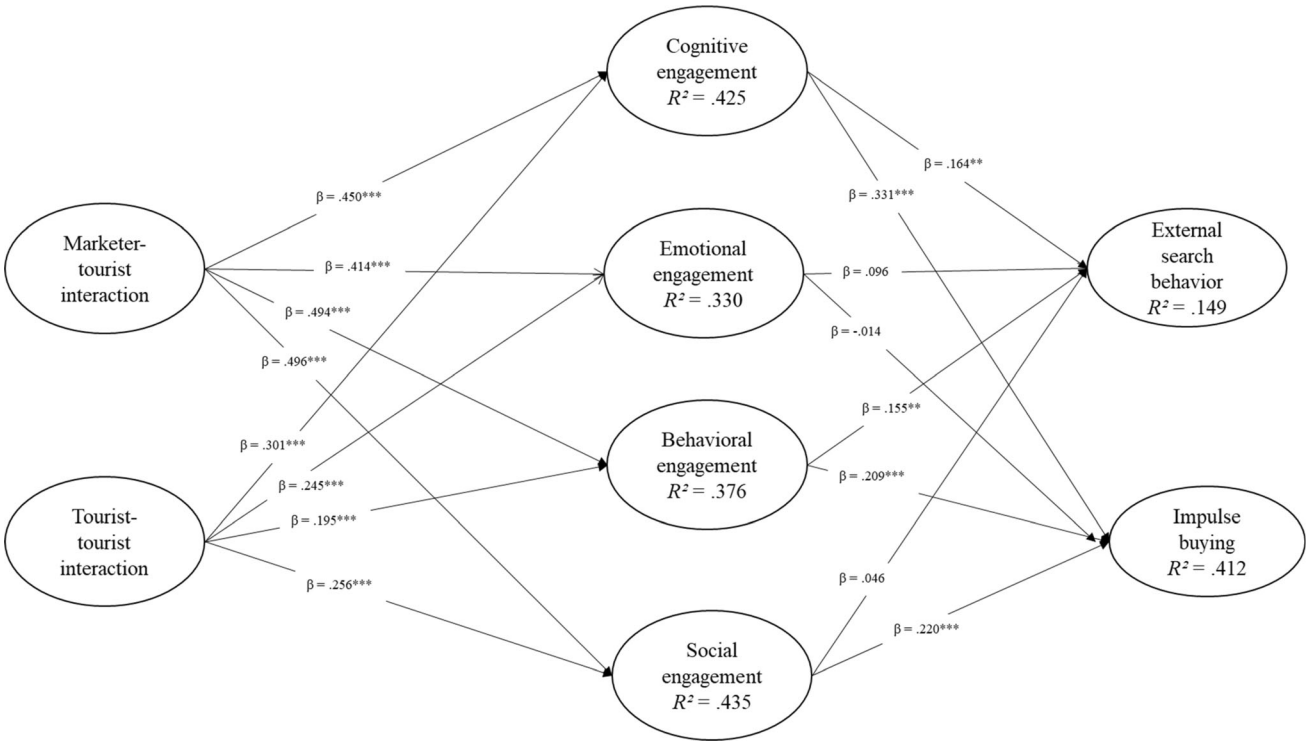

FIGURE 1 Results of the research model. **Path significant at the 0.001 level. ***Path significant at the 0.000 level.

TABLE 5 PLS-predict assessment.

Items	PLS		LM		PLS-LM		Decision of predictive relevance
	RMSE	Q^2_predict	RMSE	Q^2_predict	RMSE	Q^2_predict	
BE1	1.506	0.226	1.512	0.219	−0.006	0.007	Strong
BE2	1.514	0.224	1.518	0.22	−0.004	0.004	
BE3	1.463	0.248	1.465	0.247	−0.002	0.001	
CE1	1.481	0.225	1.494	0.211	−0.013	0.014	Strong
CE2	1.371	0.255	1.38	0.246	−0.009	0.009	
CE3	1.384	0.274	1.385	0.273	−0.001	0.001	
EE1	1.431	0.233	1.442	0.222	−0.011	0.011	Strong
EE3	1.381	0.247	1.395	0.231	−0.014	0.016	
ESB1	1.655	0.12	1.652	0.122	0.003	−0.002	Moderate
ESB2	1.652	0.077	1.663	0.065	−0.011	0.012	
ESB3	1.597	0.075	1.609	0.061	−0.012	0.014	
IB1	1.409	0.232	1.413	0.228	−0.004	0.004	Strong
IB2	1.517	0.212	1.525	0.203	−0.008	0.009	
SE1	1.401	0.28	1.408	0.273	−0.007	0.007	Moderate
SE2	1.431	0.22	1.446	0.204	−0.015	0.016	
SE3	1.433	0.287	1.431	0.29	0.002	−0.003	

Abbreviations: BE, behavioral engagement; CE, cognitive engagement; ESB, external search behavior; EE, emotional engagement; IB, impulse buying; MTI, marketer–traveler interaction; SE, social engagement; TTI, traveler–traveler interaction.

namely Gen Y ($n = 228$) and Gen Z ($n = 223$), and subsequently tested the relationships amongst paths across the two subgroups. A permutation test, using MICOM in Smart-PLS, was used to assess the measurement invariance of measurement items of constructs across the two sub-groups (Henseler et al., 2016). The results revealed that the differences of permutation c-value ($= 1$) of the constructs

TABLE 6 Multi-group analysis—Moderating effect of travelers' age (Gen Y vs. Gen Z).

Hypothesis		Gen Z travelers	Gen Y travelers	Path differences	Result
H7a	MTI → CE	0.489***	0.425***	0.064	Not supported
H7b	MTI → EE	0.465***	0.387***	0.078	Not supported
H7c	MTI → BE	0.538***	0.444***	0.094	Not supported
H7d	MTI → SE	0.533***	0.465***	0.068	Not supported
H8a	TTI → CE	0.324***	0.315***	0.009	Not supported
H8b	TTI → EE	0.256***	0.300***	−0.044	Not supported
H8c	TTI → BE	0.224**	0.208**	0.016	Not supported
H8d	TTI → SE	0.274***	0.289***	−0.015	Not supported
H9a	CE → ESB	0.005	0.370***	−0.365**	Supported
H9b	EE → ESB	0.065	0.100	−0.035	Not supported
H9c	BE → ESB	0.281**	−0.023	0.304*	Supported
H9d	SE → ESB	0.046	0.045	0.001	Not supported
H10a	CE → IB	0.231**	0.357***	−0.126	Not supported
H10b	EE → IB	−0.124	0.119	−0.243	Not supported
H10c	BE → IB	0.276***	0.187*	0.089^{+}	Marginally supported
H10d	SE → IB	0.367***	0.112	0.255*	Supported

Abbreviations: BE, behavioral engagement; CE, cognitive engagement; EE, emotional engagement; ESB, external search behavior; IB, impulse buying; SE, social engagement.

amongst the two sub-groups (i.e., Gen-Y and Gen-Z) were non-significant, and thus supporting compositional invariance. Additionally, the permutation means, and variance of the permutation mean differences fell between the upper and lower bounds of 95% confidence interval. The results of the MICOM test confirmed partial measurement invariance in this study, justifying for testing the differences in the path relationship between the two sub-groups.

The MGA results revealed that the impact of social engagement on impulse buying was stronger for Gen Z travelers than Gen Y travelers, while the effect of cognitive engagement on external search behavior was stronger for Gen Y travelers than Gen Z travelers. In addition, the impact of behavioral engagement on impulse buying was marginally stronger for Gen Z travelers than Gen Y travelers. However, non-significant differences between the two groups were found for the influence of the two forms of interaction on the four DBE dimensions. Overall, the results partially supported our hypotheses, confirming the moderating role of travelers' age in the impact of DBE dimensions on impulse buying and external search behavior.

5 | DISCUSSION

This study provides several important findings. First, the results of this study reveal that both MTI and TTI are influential in driving travelers' DBE dimensions, including cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social engagement. The results suggest that MTI is relatively more important than TTI in driving the four DBE dimensions. It seems travelers are willing to spend considerable resources interacting with destination marketers via DBC to satisfy their decision-making process.

Second, this study examined the differential roles of each DBE dimension as a driver of both short-term and long-term behavioral intentions, as manifested by impulse buying and external search behavior, respectively. The effects of cognitive and behavioral engagement on impulse buying are greater than its impact on external search behavior, suggesting that travelers are willing to visit the focal destinations immediately after investing substantial resources to learn about the destination within a DBC. While social engagement was found to be an effective driver of impulse buying, the relationship between social engagement and external search behavior was insignificant. One possible reason is that travelers' intense emotion was strengthened during the social connection, and they are willing to visit their favorite destinations together. As such, socially engaged travelers are more likely to display impulse buying behaviors within the DBCs without the requirement of a detailed search for destination-related information. Travelers also tend to spend time and effort to engage with cognitive information available on the DBCs. Thus, external search behavior is largely determined by cognitive and behavioral engagement rather than social engagement. Although the insignificant relationship between social engagement and external search behavior was unexpected, this finding was consistent with Chow and Shi (2015), where collaboration between users of social-media pages was not a significant predictor of user satisfaction and behavioral loyalty. As such, we posit that social engagement is influential in driving impulse buying but not useful as a driver of external search behavior.

Third, in contrast with previous engagement studies (e.g., Harrigan et al., 2018; Rather et al., 2021), this study revealed that emotional engagement was unlikely to drive impulse buying and external search behavior. The results suggested that cognitive, behavioral, and social engagement exerted a pronounced influence on

impulse buying. However, cognitive and behavioral engagement exerted a pronounced influence on external search behavior. Thus, the impact of emotional engagement on impulse buying and external search behavior was weakened. The unexpected findings are consistent with Cheung, Pires, et al. (2021), where emotional engagement was not found to be a driver of consumer loyalty intention as consumers place greater importance on cognitive information especially in relation to highly involved products. As young travelers are passionate in traveling and highly involved in their trip-planning process, they are more likely to exert greater effort in information-search, experience sharing and social connection for group-based travels on DBCs (Cheng et al., 2023; Jin et al., 2014). More specifically, young travelers are motivated to exert cognitive efforts to understand more about the destinations (e.g., details of events, reviews of theme parks, and opening hours of museums), and to interact with other travelers to plan their itineraries or group-based travels via DBCs. Here, when travelers' perceived destinations attractiveness increases, it will more likely influence their involvement and engagement in the DBE context.

As such, young travelers are more likely to be involved in processing functional-cognitive information and engaging social connection in their trip-planning processes, hence, emotional engagement is less important as a driver of travelers' behavioral responses in the context of DBC. The unexpected findings can also be explained by young travelers' destination preferences. For example, Yeap et al. (2020) found that young travelers' attitude towards destination local street food is driven by taste value, and hence they are motivated to exert cognitive efforts to search for functional-cognitive information about street food before their visit. Cheung, Leung, Cheah, Koay, et al. (2021) also found that young travelers are more willing to pay attention to price value, taste value and health value of tea beverages, and thus they are more likely to engage in social interaction with other like-minded peers to know more about tea beverages before their visit. Taken together, young travelers are more likely to search for reviews describing functional value and engage in social connections with their peers before visiting destinations featuring street food (Malaysia) and tea beverages (Hong Kong).

Lastly, our findings also confirm the moderating role of travelers' age in affecting the effects of DBE dimensions on impulse buying and external search behavior. For Gen Z (vs. Gen Y) travelers, behavioral engagement and social engagement exert stronger effects on external search behavior and impulse buying. The results suggest that Gen Z travelers are tech-savvy and more willing to spend extensive time to engage in collaborative activities related to their interested destinations, and they are more likely to engage in impulse buying and external search behaviors based on their social connections with other members of DBCs. In contrast, for Gen Y (vs. Gen Z) travelers, cognitive engagement is more influential in driving external search behavior. Our results suggest that older travelers are more willing to form relationships with destinations based on functional-cognitive information, and hence exert more cognitive efforts to search for destination-related information on an ongoing basis. However, we did not find significant differences in the importance of MTI and TTI in driving DBE dimensions across Gen Y (vs. Gen Z) travelers, suggesting that MTI and TTI are key predictors of DBE dimensions irrespective of travelers' age.

5.1 | Theoretical implications

While travelers increasingly rely on DBCs for destination-related information, exploration of travelers' DBE dimensions via DBCs are yet to be explored (So et al., 2020). This study responds to calls for research to deepen the understanding of destination marketing engagement by examining the impact of traveler interactions via DBCs on the DBE dimensions and the subsequent effect on travelers' short-term and long-term behavioral intention (Dolan et al., 2019; So et al., 2020). To this end, this study provides several theoretical implications, increasing the scope of tourism marketing literature. Firstly, this study extends the findings of the recent marketing literature (e.g., Carlson et al., 2019; Tajvidi et al., 2021) by developing a comprehensive research model to integrate travelers' value co-creation behavior, as manifested by MTI, and travelers' knowledge-exchange behaviors, as manifested by TTI, to understand how the two forms of participation drive travelers' engagement with a destination. Our findings suggest the importance of encouraging travelers to share their ideas, feedback, and suggestions with destination marketers. The study also highlights that knowledge sharing between travelers is a driver of engagement with the focal destination. This suggests that highly involved travelers who share ideas and knowledge on DBCs, are more willing to exert cognitive effort to learn about the focal destination. Their passion in discussing features and highlights of the focal destination, builds a sense of belonging with the destination.

Second, this study contributes to the engagement literature by incorporating social engagement as an additional dimension of DBE and examines antecedents and consequences of the four DBE dimensions. While prior studies have conceptualized engagement as a multidimensional construct, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement (e.g., Cheung, Pires, et al., 2020; Cheung, Pires, et al., 2021; Harrigan et al., 2018; Hollebeek et al., 2014), this study further advanced the engagement literature by validating the multidimensional nature of engagement to include social engagement (Brodie et al., 2019). Social engagement was shown to be an important dimension in the context of destination marketing. Notably, travelers are increasingly engaged in collective experiences (e.g., itinerary planning, group-based travels to destinations, events, and festivals) with like-minded strangers on DBCs. This highlights the importance of social connections in driving traveler perceptions of destinations, and social engagement as driver that shapes traveler behaviors. Given this importance, this study incorporated social engagement as a dimension of DBE and identified antecedents of the four DBE dimensions, along with their roles in driving travelers' short and long-term behavioral responses in the context of destination marketing. As such, this study contributes to the engagement literature by affirming social engagement engenders traveler engagement with destinations, and that traveler engagement with destinations is formulated by cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioral engagement. These engagement

dimensions play varying roles in driving traveler impulse buying and external search behavior.

Lastly, this study contributes to GCT and engagement literature (e.g., Khan et al., 2020; Li et al., 2013; Rather et al., 2021) by exploring the moderating role of travelers' age in the associations between constructs in the research model. This study explored the moderating role of age in the relationships between travelers' participative behaviors, DBE dimensions, impulse buying and external search behaviors, which has been largely ignored in GCT and engagement literature. These novel findings help academics better understand the relationship between travelers' participative behaviors, DBE and behavioral intentions for different generations of travelers.

5.2 | Managerial implications

This study provides meaningful implications for tourism marketers to engage with travelers and drive short and long-term behavioral responses. Based on the findings, MTI and TTI are significant predictors driving DBE dimensions, including cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social engagement. Thus, tourism marketers are recommended to create interesting posts, images, and videos of destinations to arouse travelers' intention to browse and comment. The introduction of feedback systems for tourism-related activities to facilitate MTI is also advised. The provision of incentives (e.g., discount offers, coupons, and luck draws) to encourage travelers to share opinions and ideas for service improvement, supports the intention to co-create value and subsequently drive DBE.

The allocation of resources to drive traveler social engagement that facilitates social connection is suggested. This may be achieved by rewarding opinion leaders in different areas of interest, such as snow tourism, coffee tourism, and backpacking. These opinion leaders will serve as influencers to strengthen traveler interest and passion towards these tourism activities. In addition, tourism marketers can drive travelers' cognitive and behavioral engagement to strengthen external search behavior. This can be achieved by driving the utilitarian and hedonic benefits obtained from DBCs by providing destination content that is trending, customized, and entertaining.

Lastly, tourism marketers are recommended to adopt different marketing approaches to Gen-Y and Gen-Z travelers based on their differences in DBE. We recommend tourism marketers to allocate more resources to strengthen Gen-Z travelers' social engagement and behavioral engagement to drive their short-term and long-term behavioral intentions. This can be done by facilitating itinerary sharing, tourism trends and initiatives of group-based travels amongst Gen-Z travelers via DBCs, which in turn strengthens their sense of belonging to their interested destinations. More specifically, tourism marketers are recommended to create discussion topics related to itinerary, trends of different tourism practices (e.g., snow tourism, eco-tourism, and medical tourism) and group-based travels in DBCs, to encourage Gen-Z travelers to engage in social connection about tourism practices and group-based travels. For Gen-Y travelers, tourism marketers are recommended to strengthen their cognitive engagement by providing functional-cognitive information. This can be done by disseminating informational contents (e.g., opening hours of theme parks, price of attractions, history of destinations and details of events) and to encourage the sharing of quality-related information about destinations by providing monetary incentives, loyalty rewards, along with non-monetary recognitions via DBCs.

5.3 | Limitations and future research directions

The limitations within the study offer insights to future research directions. First, this study is cross-sectional in nature and was conducted in China, limiting the works generalizability. Future research should consider longitudinal studies as well as comparisons between countries with diverse cultures to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study focused on positive perceptions created by MTI and TTI, and thus the dark side of engagement was overlooked. Future research should explore the dark side of traveler participation, to provide a comprehensive understanding of engagement. Third, future research can include different moderators such as types of travel destinations (e.g., cultural heritage sites, attractions of cities, and museums). Such an approach offers more insights into how the types of travel destinations influence the travelers' participation and engagement in the context of DBC. Fourth, the majority of the respondents (62.3%) are females, creating potential bias for this study. Hence, future research is recommended to pay attention to the gender balance, and to examine gender differences in the relationship between travelers' participation and engagement. Finally, this study focused on the usefulness of only two forms of traveler participation. Thus, future research could compare the relative impact of travelers' participation and other related variables, to identify which variables enhance destination brand building.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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How to cite this article: Cheung, M.-L., Leung, W. K. S., Taheri, B., & Tse, S. Y. (2023). Driving destination brand engagement: The role of traveler participation. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, *25*(6), 565–580. https://doi.org/10.1002/jtr.2594