

Viral Marketing and Revisit Intention at Pacu Jalur: Brand and Destination Image Mediation

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Abstract.

This study aims to analyze the effect of viral marketing on revisit intention with brand image and destination image as mediating variables at the Pacu Jalur cultural tourism event in Kuantan Singingi Regency, Riau. Using an explanatory quantitative approach, data were collected through questionnaires from 150 respondents selected via purposive sampling. Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling - Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with SPSS and SmartPLS software. The results indicate that viral marketing has a positive and significant direct effect on brand image, destination image, and revisit intention. Furthermore, both brand image and destination image significantly mediate the relationship between viral marketing and revisit intention. These findings confirm that viral promotion strategies on social media not only trigger instant revisit interest, but also effectively strengthen cultural identity and destination perception in the long term. Local government and organizers are advised to improve physical infrastructure facilities to perfect the digitally established destination image.

Keywords: *Viral Marketing, Brand Image, Destination Image, Revisit Intention, Pacu Jalur, SEM-PLS*

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is currently a strategic sector that plays a vital role in driving economic growth, creating jobs, and preserving cultural values and local wisdom. In the modern tourism industry, the success of a destination is no longer measured solely by the number of initial visits, but by its ability to create revisit intention, an indicator of the success of marketing strategies and sustainable destination management. In line with this, the Pacu Jalur Festival in Kuantan Singingi Regency, Riau, has established itself as a national cultural icon recognized as an intangible cultural heritage and has consistently been included in the Kharisma Event Nusantara (KEN) calendar since 2022, and was even selected as one of the Top 10 KEN Events in 2024. As a traditional longboat rowing competition passed down through generations, Pacu Jalur not only symbolizes local identity but has also developed into a tourist magnet capable of attracting the attention of international tourists.

The festival's popularity experienced a dramatic surge in 2025, fueled by the viral phenomenon of a children's dance on a boat known as the "Aura Farming" dance on various global social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. This viral phenomenon had a significant impact, where the number of visitors in 2025 jumped to 1.6 million people with the presence of thousands of foreign tourists, which had implications for increasing the regional economic circulation to more than IDR 165 billion. However, behind the massive digital exposure, there was a crucial empirical problem based on the results of an initial pre-survey of 30 respondents; the intention of tourists to revisit was still in the moderate category (53%) due to visitors' doubts about the professionalism of the organizers and the inadequate quality of public facilities on site. The gap between the high success of viral marketing and the less than optimal quality of the experience on the ground indicates a barrier in the image-building process that could threaten future tourist loyalty.

This issue emphasizes the need for a deeper understanding of revisit intention and viral marketing variables through the perspective of previous research. Hasan et al. (2023) define revisit intention as a tourist's subjective desire to revisit a particular destination, which is reinforced by Kurniawati et al. (2025) as a psychological drive resulting from the evaluation of past positive experiences. Meanwhile, Hadiwijaya et al. (2025) and Hendraningrum et al. (2025) emphasize that this variable is an indicator of loyalty triggered by satisfaction and the perception of a superior destination image. Synthetically, revisit intention is understood

as a multidimensional construct resulting from satisfying experiences that strengthen tourists' commitment, as measured by the following indicators: revisit intention, revisit plan, willingness to recommend, top priority choice, desire to attend the next event, and commitment to return in the future. On the other hand, viral marketing, according to Li et al. (2022), utilizes electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) mechanisms to reach a massive audience. Kraiwanit et al. (2025) and Ernawati (2020) emphasized the role of active consumer participation in increasing destination visibility through the dissemination of organic content, while Kristyani & Kristiyana (2022) highlighted the effectiveness of user-to-user communication in disseminating brand messages. A synthesis of these views suggests that viral marketing is a strategy that leverages emotional content to encourage voluntary user engagement, as measured by the following indicators: content appeal, ease of dissemination, uniqueness, ability to encourage interaction and discussion, and information credibility.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of digital promotion is highly dependent on the internalization process of brand image and destination image. Damara et al. (2025) explain that brand image is based on customer interactions with the brand identity, while Hendraningrum et al. (2025) and Kristyani & Kristiyana (2022) emphasize the dimension of attribute excellence as interpreted by visitors. Synthetically, brand image reflects the professional reputation and unique identity of the Pacu Jalur event, measured through indicators such as positive image, event reputation, distinctive identity, cultural pride, and trust. In parallel, Hasan et al. (2023) and Kadi et al. (2021) define destination image as the accumulation of subjective impressions of destination attributes that motivate loyalty, while Hadiwijaya et al. (2025) highlight the importance of emotional connections from assessments of the physical and ambiance of the location. This synthesis states that destination image is a complex evaluation of the physical excellence and psychological comfort of a destination, measured through indicators such as tourist attractions, public facilities, location access, location layout, pleasant impressions, and comfort. Although various previous studies have examined the relationship between these variables, studies examining the simultaneous mediating role of brand image and destination image in the context of local cultural tourism are still relatively limited.

This study uses the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theoretical framework to explain these psychological mechanisms. Viral marketing is positioned as a stimulus (S) that influences the internal state of tourists (organisms), namely brand image and destination image, which ultimately results in a response (R) in the form of revisit intention. By understanding the interrelationship of these variables, the study aims to comprehensively analyze how digital promotion can be converted into continued visitor loyalty at the Pacu Jalur cultural tourism event.

Based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory proposed by Mehrabian & Russell (1974) to explain the psychological mechanism, Viral marketing is positioned as a stimulus (S) that influences the internal conditions of tourists (organisms), namely brand image and destination image, which ultimately results in a response (R) in the form of revisit intention. By understanding the relationship between these variables, this study aims to analyze in depth the influence of viral marketing on brand image and destination image, and the extent to which these two images are able to mediate the influence of digital promotion on tourists' revisit intention. By using a quantitative approach and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis on 150 respondents, this study is expected to provide theoretical contributions in enriching the literature on local culture-based tourism marketing. Practically, the results of this study are intended to provide strategic recommendations for the Kuantan Singingi Regency Government and event managers in formulating sustainable promotional strategies and improving the quality of destination services to improve community welfare through the tourism sector.

II. METHODS

This study uses a quantitative approach with explanatory research to explain the causal relationship between variables through hypothesis testing. The research location is centered on Tepian Narosa, Teluk Kuantan City, Kuantan Singingi Regency, Riau Province, as the main venue for the Pacu Jalur Festival. The population in this study is all tourists who have witnessed or participated in the Pacu Jalur cultural tourism event in Kuantan Singingi Regency, either directly on site or through digital platforms. Given the very large

population, the sampling technique used is non-probability sampling with a purposive sampling method. The specified respondent criteria are tourists aged 17 years and over who have attended or witnessed the festival at least once in the last four years. Based on the provisions of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) which requires a minimum sample size of 5–10 times the number of indicators, this study determined a sample of 150 respondents to ensure the stability and reliability of the analysis results. The data collection instrument used an interval-scale questionnaire distributed offline and online.

The variables in this study consist of Viral Marketing (X) as the independent variable, Revisit Intention (Y) as the dependent variable, and Brand Image (Z1) and Destination Image (Z2) as mediating variables. The research model developed to test the relationship between these variables can be seen in the following figure:

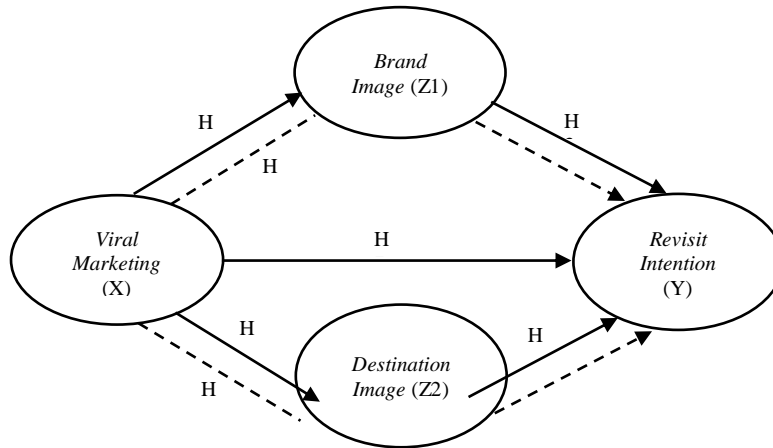


Fig. 1. Research Model

The data analysis technique used is Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Square (SEM-PLS) using SmartPLS 4.0 and SPSS software. Model evaluation is carried out through two main stages, namely outer model and inner model testing. Measurement Model Evaluation (Outer Model) Aims to evaluate the feasibility of the indicators forming the latent variables. This stage includes the Convergent Validity test (Average Variance Extracted/AVE > 0.50 and outer loading > 0.70), Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker criteria, HTMT ratio < 0.90, and cross loading), and Reliability Test (Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability > 0.70). Structural Model Analysis (Inner Model) Aims to test the hypothesis and the strength of the relationship between constructs. The evaluation was carried out by assessing the Determination Coefficient (R-Square), Model Fit (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual/SRMR < 0.08 for a fit model), and Hypothesis Testing using the bootstrapping method with the criteria of t-statistic value > 1.96 and p-value < 0.05.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The respondent characteristics in this study describe the profile of visitors to the Pacu Jalur Cultural Tourism Event who have visited at least once. Respondent profiles are categorized based on gender, age range, highest level of education, occupation, region of origin, frequency of visits, and sources of information used. This demographic mapping aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the audience's background, which serves as an important foundation for interpreting findings related to viral marketing, brand image, destination image, and revisit intention.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Category		F	(%)	Category		F	(%)
Gender	Male	58	38,7	Region of Origin	Kuantan Singingi Regency	49	32,7
	Female	92	61,3		Other Regencies in Riau	96	64,0
Age	< 20 years	35	23,3		Outside Riau Province	5	3,3

	20-29 years	54	36,0	Frequency of Watching Pacu Jalur	1 time	42	28,0
	30-39 years	23	15,3		2-5 time	58	38,7
	40-49 years	22	14,7		6-10 time	23	15,3
	>= 50 years	16	10,7		>10 time	27	18,0
Education Level	Elementary School	0	0,0	Source of Information on Pacu Jalur	Social Media	115	76,7
	Junior High School	2	1,3		Friends / Family	29	19,3
	Senior High School	74	49,3		Online Media / News	6	4,0
	Diploma (D3)	5	3,3		Ads / Promotions	0	0,0
	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	57	38,0		Others	0	0,0
	Postgraduate Degree (S2/S3)	12	8,0				
		Students	71		47,3		
Occupation	Civil Servants (PNS)	14	9,3				
	Private Employees	31	20,7				
	Entrepreneur /Self-Employed	13	8,7				
	Farmers	4	2,7				
	Others	17	11,3				

Source: Processed Data, 2026

Analysis of respondents' demographic profiles provides an important contextual foundation for understanding the interaction between tourist characteristics and the effectiveness of implemented digital marketing strategies. Based on gender data, respondents in this study were predominantly female, with a percentage reaching 61%. This finding confirms the tourism literature presented by Moons et al. (2020) that women tend to have a higher interest and motivation in cultural offerings and community-based tourism. Furthermore, active digital information-seeking behavior makes women more susceptible to viral marketing content, as revealed by Salem et al. (2024) who found that women are more comprehensive in processing information through social media.

In terms of age, the highest percentage is in the 20–29 age group at 36%, indicating that visitors are dominated by a dynamic young generation. According to Marfin et al. (2025) and Fz et al. (2026), this group is an active generation that dominates the use of digital technology. This group tends to be more responsive to viral information on social media, where according to Royali et al. (2025), promotional content and digital reviews significantly influence their decision to visit cultural tourism destinations.

In terms of educational and occupational background, the majority of respondents were high school graduates (50%) and students (47%). Runtuwarow et al. (2024) explained that this demographic group, which includes Gen Z and Millennials, is an active social media user and a primary target for viral content distribution. Attractive visual strategies are more effective in building positive perceptions among this group, so according to Syahreza & Wibisono (2021), digital marketing is a key driver of revisit intention. Furthermore, Mamangkey et al. (2023) emphasized that students' flexible time makes them key drivers in the ongoing viral marketing cycle.

Characteristics based on region of origin indicate that 64% of respondents came from other regencies in Riau Province, such as Indragiri Hulu, Pelalawan, and Pekanbaru. Aulina et al. (2024) assessed that this high number of regional respondents demonstrates the effectiveness of viral marketing in penetrating local geographic boundaries. This finding is further supported by Firdaus et al. (2022) and Marfin et al. (2025), who stated that digital strategies can foster local cultural identity as a key attraction for regional domestic tourists.

Regarding visit intensity, 39% of respondents had watched Pacu Jalur two to five times, reflecting ongoing visitor loyalty. Imanda & Anandya (2020) explained that past experiences have a significant direct influence on return intentions. For new visitors (28%), the momentum of virality in 2025 was the main driver of their attendance. Özbay & Çekin (2021) added that the use of visual platforms such as YouTube is crucial in converting new audiences' curiosity into physical visits or participation through live broadcasts.

Finally, the dominance of social media as the primary source of information (77%) confirms that viral marketing instruments are the most crucial factor in promoting this event. Andiaresmi & Pramono (2023) noted that digital content surpasses the effectiveness of conventional media in building a relevant brand image. Analytically, Mustaqin & Wardi (2025) and Firdaus et al. (2022) concluded that interactive online visual narratives not only attract first-time visitors but also consistently motivate tourists to plan future returns.

Table 2. Summary of Research Variable Descriptions

Variable	Average Category	Score
Viral Marketing (X)	4,48	Very High
Brand Image (Z ₁)	4,52	Very Good
Destination Image (Z ₂)	3,99	Good
Revisit Intention (Y)	4,17	High

Source: Processed Data, 2026

Descriptive results show that Viral Marketing and Brand Image are at a very positive level, but there is a note on Destination Image where the public facilities indicator obtained the lowest score due to the imbalance between the number of visitors and the availability of supporting facilities.

1. Measurement Model Evaluation (Outer Model)

The measurement model evaluation stage was conducted to ensure that the instruments used in this study were valid and reliable before proceeding to structural testing. A visualization of the measurement model test results using SmartPLS can be seen in Figure 2 below:

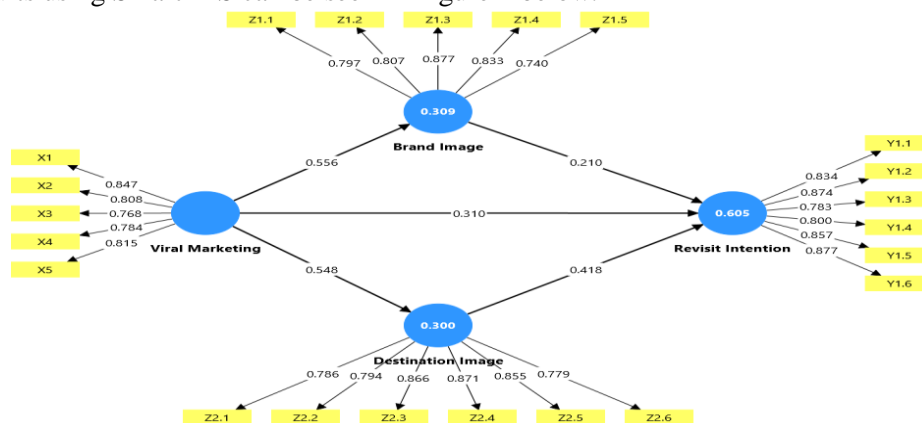


Fig.. 2. Measurement Model

Source: Output SmartPLS, 2026

To summarize the test results of the measurement model in the figure above, Table 3 presents the results of the convergent validity and reliability evaluation of the instrument:

Tabel 3. Hasil Evaluasi Model Pengukuran (*Outer Model*)

Variabel	Indicator	Outer Loading	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability
Viral Marketing	X1 - X5	0,768 – 0,847	0,647	0,864	0,902
Brand Image	Z1.1 - Z1.5	0,740 – 0,877	0,659	0,87	0,906
Destination Image	Z2.1 - Z2.6	0,779 – 0,871	0,683	0,907	0,928
Revisit Intention	Y1.1 - Y1.6	0,783 – 0,877	0,703	0,915	0,934

Source: Output SmartPLS, 2026

Based on Table 3, the results of the measurement model evaluation (outer model) confirm that the research instrument used has fully met convergent validity standards. All indicators forming the variables Viral Marketing, Brand Image, Destination Image, and Revisit Intention show excellent outer loading values and have exceeded the minimum threshold. According to Hair et al. (2019), meeting the outer loading

criteria > 0.70 proves that each indicator is able to accurately measure its latent variable. Furthermore, the reliability of this measurement is strengthened by the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values obtained from all variable constructs that are above the minimum feasibility standard (0.50). As emphasized by Hair et al. (2019), achieving this AVE criterion indicates that most of the indicator variation has been successfully explained by its latent construct, so the instrument is declared convergently valid.

In terms of reliability, this research instrument has also proven to have very strong internal consistency. This is demonstrated by the results of the Cronbach's Alpha test for all variables that have met strict statistical feasibility criteria. According to Garson (2016), meeting the minimum standard Cronbach's Alpha value (> 0.70) confirms that the indicator is reliable even though repeated measurements are carried out. The accuracy of this instrument is also absolutely supported by the Composite Reliability test, where all variables successfully exceeded the recommended critical value (> 0.70). In accordance with the view of Hair et al. (2019), meeting these criteria ensures a high level of reliability and internal consistency of each constructed construct. Therefore, because all instruments have been proven valid and reliable, the research data is certainly very suitable to proceed to the structural analysis stage (inner model).

2. Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model) and Hypothesis Testing

The R-Square value indicates that the variables Viral Marketing, Brand Image, and Destination Image simultaneously explain 60.5% of the variation in Revisit Intention. A visualization of the structural model, showing the path coefficients between the variables, is presented in Figure 3 below:

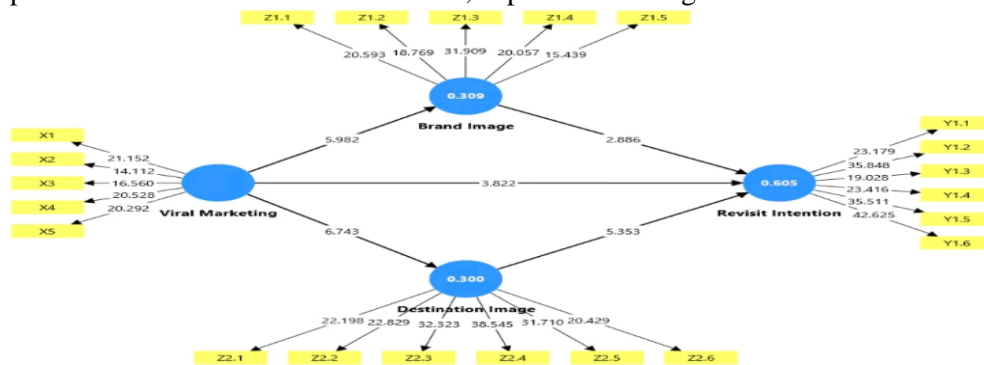


Fig. 3. Structural Model

Source: Output SmartPLS, 2026

The results of hypothesis testing using the bootstrapping procedure to see the significance of the relationship between variables in more detail are presented in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Hypothesis Testing Results (*Path Coefficients*)

Hypothesis	Path of Influence	Original Sample	T-Statistics	P-Values	Conclusion
H ₁	Viral Marketing → Brand Image	0,556	5,982	0	Accepted
H ₂	Viral Marketing → Destination Image	0,548	6,743	0	Accepted
H ₃	Brand Image → Revisit Intention	0,21	2,886	0,004	Accepted
H ₄	Destination Image → Revisit Intention	0,418	5,353	0	Accepted
H ₅	Viral Marketing → Brand Image → Revisit Intention	0,117	2,393	0,017	Accepted
H ₆	Viral Marketing → Destination Image → Revisit Intention	0,229	3,678	0	Accepted
H ₇	Viral Marketing → Revisit Intention	0,31	3,822	0	Accepted

Source: Output SmartPLS, 2026

Based on the results of hypothesis testing through the bootstrapping procedure, all hypotheses proposed in this study were proven to have a positive and statistically significant influence. This decision was based on the t-statistic value obtained from all relationship paths that had exceeded the critical threshold of 1.96, as well as the p-value obtained which was consistently smaller than the 0.05 significance level. In the direct effect test, the analysis results proved that viral marketing had a positive and significant influence on the formation of brand image (H₁) and destination image (H₂), and also had a positive direct impact on revisit intention (H₇). Furthermore, the brand image (H₃) and destination image (H₄) variables were also confirmed to have a positive and significant influence in stimulating tourists' revisit intention.

Furthermore, in the indirect effect test, the structural analysis results determined that brand image significantly mediates the influence of viral marketing on revisit intention (H₅). In parallel, the destination image variable was also proven to act as a positive and significant mediator in bridging the relationship between viral marketing and revisit intention (H₆). With the acceptance of these seven hypotheses, the structural model framework developed in this study is declared empirically valid and highly suitable for further interpretation and in-depth discussion.

IV. DISCUSSION

Conceptually, the results of this study convincingly confirm the validity of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theoretical framework in the dynamics of digital cultural tourism marketing. In the context of this research, Viral Marketing acts as the Stimulus (S) or external stimulus; Brand Image and Destination Image represent the Organism (O) elements that reflect the cognitive and affective internalization processes in the minds of tourists; while Revisit Intention represents the Response (R) or final behavioral reaction.

The test results demonstrate that viral marketing has a positive and significant impact on brand image (H₁) and destination image (H₂). Unique, shareable, and interactive visual content has successfully constructed public perception that the Pacu Jalur Event is not just a race, but rather a prestigious local cultural heritage identity. This finding consistently supports the studies of Li et al. (2022) and Kraiwanit et al. (2025), which demonstrated that viral marketing elements significantly strengthen brand image and brand awareness. Furthermore, viral information distribution is also effective in framing public perception of the Kuantan Singingi tourist destination as a whole. This finding is reinforced by Özbay & Çekin (2021), who found that the use of digital media is highly effective in constructing a destination image for a wider audience.

Furthermore, viral marketing has also been shown to provide a positive and significant direct impact on revisit intention (H₇). The interactive nature of social media and the constant visual exposure act as a powerful emotional reminder, motivating tourists to immediately plan their trips. This finding aligns with research by Ernawati (2020) and Firdaus et al. (2022) that found that the use of viral digital content significantly increases visitor return interest.

Although brand image and destination image were proven to positively and significantly drive revisit intention (H₃, H₄), a crucial finding in this study revealed that the influence of Destination Image was far more dominant than Brand Image. This indicates that tourists' memory to return does not solely depend on the prestigious cultural name of Pacu Jalur, but is largely determined by their comfort and holistic experience of the Kuantan Singingi destination environment itself. Natural beauty, local hospitality, and easy access are the main magnets that encourage tourists to return. This empirical fact is strongly supported by Hasan et al. (2023) and Kadi et al. (2021), who prove that the overall destination image has a real and significant influence in motivating repeat visits.

This study also confirms the partial mediation role of image variables. Brand image (H₅) and destination image (H₆) significantly mediate the effect of viral marketing on increasing revisit intentions. This means that exposure to massive promotional content on social media doesn't work instantly on its own, but rather first instills authentic values and cultural prestige in the minds of audiences.

Interestingly, the indirect influence pathway through destination image has a stronger mediating power than through brand image. This proves that viral marketing strategies will reach their peak

effectiveness in triggering loyalty if the content successfully builds a positive image of the destination's overall comfort. This analysis aligns closely with a systematic literature review by Mustaqin & Wardi (2025), which concluded that the effect of viral marketing on revisit intentions is more often indirect, namely by first shaping and strengthening the destination's image. Overall, the strategic implications of these findings require the Kuantan Singingi Regional Government to evolve its strategy. Given that tourists are more motivated to return due to the overall convenience of the destination than simply the excitement of the race, policy priorities should be directed towards improving infrastructure quality, environmental cleanliness, and holistic event management. Digital marketing communications strategies should also go beyond simply promoting the excitement of the racetrack, but should also comprehensively highlight the allure of the beauty of Kuantan Singingi.

V. CONCLUSION

The results of this study empirically confirm the reliability of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework in the dynamics of cultural tourism marketing in the digital era. Viral marketing has proven to act as a highly effective stimulus, not only directly triggering revisit intention but also successfully constructing a positive brand image (event brand image) and destination image in the minds of tourists. Furthermore, this model demonstrates a partial mediation effect, where digital promotion does not work instantly but must first instill cognitive and affective perceptions. Interestingly, the indirect influence pathway through destination image has a much stronger mediation force than brand image. This confirms that viral marketing strategies will only reach their peak effectiveness in fostering loyalty if the content successfully builds a comprehensive picture of the destination's attractiveness and comfort.

The most essential finding of this study is the dominant role of destination image, with its influence almost twice as strong as brand image in determining revisit intention. This indicates that tourists' decision to return is not solely driven by the fame or euphoria of the Pacu Jalur race, but rather is strongly driven by the convenience of the infrastructure and their holistic experience of Kuantan Singingi Regency as a destination. The strategic implications of this fact require the Regional Government and event organizers to evolve their policy focus. Future digital promotions should no longer simply promote the excitement of the racetrack, but must be accompanied by prioritizing improvements to public facilities, increasing cleanliness, and marketing communications that comprehensively highlight the charm of Kuantan Singingi to secure the loyalty of future tourists.

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