

Fame Beyond the Screen: Moo Deng Influencing the Zoo Visitors' Decisions

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of social media engagement with Moo Deng, a pygmy hippopotamus at Khao Kheow Open Zoo, on visitors' motivations and their behavior during zoo visits. Employing an explanatory mixed-methods design, the research first analyzed quantitative survey data from 346 participants to identify patterns of social media use, motivations, and demographic factors associated with the intention to visit the zoo after exposure to Moo Deng-related content. Results showed that relaxation, entertainment, and emotional connection were the key drivers of engagement with Moo Deng content, with younger individuals and females demonstrating higher engagement and a greater intention to visit. The qualitative phase, based on focus group interviews, further explored how social media experiences, emotional responses, and peer influence deepened visitors' motivations and shaped their decisions to visit the zoo. Participants described how viral content, social sharing, and positive emotions, such as joy and escapism, motivated real-world actions, while also highlighting the economic benefits and ethical considerations related to animal welfare. The findings highlight the significant impact of social media on shaping public perceptions, fostering emotional engagement, and driving tourism to wildlife attractions. The study offers practical recommendations for zoos and tourism organizations to utilize digital platforms responsibly, striking a balance between effective marketing, animal welfare, and visitor education.

Keywords: Moo Deng, zoo visitor, decisions, social media

Introduction

Social media platforms have become essential tools in the tourism industry, significantly shaping how travelers discover destinations, plan trips, and share experiences. As highlighted by Lama (2024), social media allows tourism businesses to reach and engage with a global audience at minimal cost, while also serving as a primary source of information and inspiration for tourists. Through user-generated content, real-time updates, and direct interaction, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok influence tourists' decisions, enhance brand visibility, and foster authentic connections between travelers and destinations. This digital environment enables personalized marketing, immediate customer service, and the collection of valuable feedback, making social media a critical factor in travelers' purchase decisions and overall travel experiences.

Beyond its impact on general tourism, social media has evolved from a simple communication and entertainment platform into a powerful influence on public perceptions and behaviors. For attractions such as zoos, social media serves as a vital tool to enhance visitor experiences, engage audiences, and promote animal conservation efforts. A notable example is Thailand's Khao Kheow Open Zoo, which leverages social media by sharing engaging photos and videos of its popular pygmy hippopotamus, Moo Deng. These efforts not only showcase the zoo's conservation initiatives but also help build its public reputation. Between October 2024 and February 2025, the zoo welcomed 881,178 visitors, including 87,861 international tourists (Zoological Park Organization of Thailand, 2025). This surge in attendance coincides with Moo Deng's significant online following, suggesting that social media engagement plays a vital role in attracting visitors and shaping public interest in wildlife conservation.

Despite the growing research on social media's influence on tourism, significant gaps remain in our understanding, especially regarding specific attractions such as zoos. Much of the existing literature focuses on how social media affects destination image, travel intentions, and consumer behavior in broader tourism contexts. Still, fewer studies have explored its impact on wildlife attractions or conservation-oriented institutions. In particular, little is known about how the online popularity of individual animals, such as Moo Deng, translates into actual visitation and support for conservation efforts. Addressing this gap can provide deeper insights into the mechanisms by which social media shapes public perceptions and behaviors related to wildlife

tourism and conservation, informing more effective digital engagement strategies for zoos and similar organizations.

Research Objectives

Given the growing influence of social media on tourism, it is essential to understand how online engagement translates into real-world visitor behavior, especially for specific attractions such as Khao Kheow Open Zoo and its popular pygmy hippopotamus, Moo Deng. While previous studies have highlighted the general impact of social media on destination image and travel intentions, less is known about the mechanisms by which viral animal content affects motivations and actual visitation. To address this gap, the present study is guided by two key objectives.

1. To examine the patterns of social media engagement, motivations, and demographic factors influencing the intention to visit Khao Kheow Open Zoo after exposure to Moo Deng-related content.

2. To explore how social media experiences, emotional responses, and perceived impacts explain and deepen understanding of visitors' motivations and behaviors identified in the quantitative phase.

Literature Review

The Role of Social Media in Enhancing Visitor Engagement

Recent research highlights the significant and multifaceted role of social media in enhancing visitor engagement and shaping travel intentions. Social media platforms have evolved into essential tools for both travelers and tourism organizations, serving as interactive forums for the dissemination of information, storytelling, and community building.

Wang and Yan (2022) found that the quality of tourism information on social media platforms not only directly enhances consumers' intentions to visit a destination but also operates indirectly by strengthening self-congruity and trust in the destination. Their study demonstrates that when potential tourists perceive social media content as trustworthy and personally relevant, they are more likely to develop a positive intention to travel. Notably, these effects are particularly pronounced among individuals with less prior knowledge of the destination, underscoring the importance of providing targeted, high-quality content to influence new or less-informed travelers.

During the internet era, social media has become a central force in shaping public attitudes and behaviors, particularly in the fields of tourism and conservation. Platforms such as

Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube serve as two-way interactive forums for zoos, aquariums, and other tourism organizations to engage with the public, disseminate educational messages, and foster emotional connections. Munar and Jacobsen (2019) highlight that social media enables institutions to transcend physical boundaries through storytelling and live streaming, capturing the attention and interest of potential visitors. Learmonth and Gill (2021) further emphasize that animal stories and other relatable content on social media can enhance visitor involvement by making the experience more shareable and personally meaningful. This online engagement often translates into real-world visitation, as digital interactions raise awareness and influence travel behaviors.

Similarly, a recent study by Hussain et al. (2024) provides strong evidence that social media content, particularly on YouTube, plays a significant role in attracting tourists and influencing their travel decisions. By analyzing engagement metrics such as views, likes, and comments across six major tourist destinations in the Arabian Gulf, the researchers found a direct relationship between the consumption of tourism-related content on YouTube and actual tourist inflow. Importantly, independent content creators are perceived as more authentic and influential compared to traditional promotional sources, further motivating tourists to visit featured destinations. These findings underscore the growing importance of social media and digital content creators in shaping tourist behavior, suggesting that destination marketing organizations and tourism stakeholders should actively leverage social media platforms to engage and attract potential visitors.

Moreover, additional research demonstrates that tourists' engagement behaviors on social media, such as consuming, contributing, and creating content, significantly influence their advocacy for destinations and their intention to revisit. For example, consumption and creation behaviors have been shown to positively impact destination advocacy and revisit intentions, underscoring the value of encouraging tourists to engage with and share content related to their travel experiences. Other studies confirm that high engagement with social media platforms correlates with increased influence on destination choice, as tourists rely on peer-generated content, reviews, and real-time updates to inform their travel planning and decisions (Baclig et al., 2024; Zorlu & Candan, 2023).

In summary, social media enhances visitor engagement by providing high-quality, trustworthy, and relatable information, fostering emotional connections through interactive content, and empowering both organizations and independent creators to influence travel intentions and behaviors. Its role is particularly critical for attracting new or less-informed travelers, advocating for destinations, and converting online engagement into actual visits.

Motivations of Zoo's Visitors

Tourist motivation plays a crucial role in understanding visitor behavior and decision-making in zoos, aquariums, and wildlife parks. Shidika and Nugroho (2023) examined the motivations of visitors to Ragunan Wildlife Park in Jakarta, identifying key psychological drivers that influence tourism choices. Drawing on established motivation theories (Kotler, 2003; Josiam & Frazier, 2008), their study categorizes visitor motivations into four main factors: stress relief and enjoyment, family orientation and education, novelty seeking, and achievement.

The primary motivation for visitors was stress relief and fun, reflecting a desire to escape daily pressures and engage in leisure activities within a natural environment. This aligns with psychological frameworks such as the recovery-effect theory (Meijman & Mulder, 1998) and resource conservation theory (Hobfoll, 1998), which emphasize the restorative benefits of leisure experiences. Supporting evidence from Chen et al. (2016) further confirms that tourism can significantly contribute to stress reduction and overall life satisfaction.

Family-oriented and educational motivations also emerged as significant factors, with visitors seeking opportunities for quality time and learning in a setting conducive to social bonding. The park's design and programming facilitate these experiences, highlighting the importance of social and educational gratifications in tourism.

Novelty seeking was identified as a motivating factor, driven by visitors' interest in encountering new animal species and environments. However, the study notes that the impact of novelty is somewhat constrained by limited innovation in park attractions, which may affect repeat visitation.

Finally, achievement-related motivation, associated with feelings of pride and social recognition, was the least influential. The authors suggest that enhancing visitor engagement through improved photo opportunities and showcasing unique animal collections could strengthen this motivation.

These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of tourist motivation and offer valuable insights for wildlife parks seeking to enhance visitor engagement. Emphasizing stress relief and family experiences, while innovating attractions and fostering a sense of achievement, can effectively attract and retain visitors. This framework offers a helpful foundation for exploring visitor motivations in other zoological and ecotourism contexts, including studies on how digital media phenomena influence tourism behavior.

Khao Kheow Open Zoo, Moo Deng, and Social Media in Wildlife Conservation and Environmental Education

Khao Kheow Open Zoo, located in Chonburi province and operated by the Zoological Park Organization of Thailand under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, exemplifies the evolving role of modern zoological parks in conservation, education, and public engagement. Since its establishment in 1978 as Thailand's first open-concept zoo, Khao Kheow has prioritized creating naturalistic habitats and immersive visitor experiences, housing over 8,000 animals across more than 300 species, including many that are endangered or protected. The zoo's design, featuring thematic zones such as the African Savannah, Night Safari, and Walk-through Aviary, aims to balance recreation with environmental stewardship, allowing visitors to observe animal behaviors in settings that closely resemble their natural habitats. Educational programs, including zoo schools, guided tours, and interactive feeding sessions, serve as a living classroom, fostering awareness of biodiversity and promoting sustainable coexistence between people and wildlife. These initiatives are supported by special courses for students and broader community outreach, emphasizing the zoo's commitment to conservation and environmental education.

The emergence of Moo Deng, a baby pygmy hippopotamus born in mid-2024, highlights the growing influence of social media on shaping public interest and visitation patterns at zoological attractions. Moo Deng's viral popularity on the zoo's official social media channels led to a surge in both online engagement and physical attendance, demonstrating how digital platforms can amplify educational messages and attract new audiences (Khaosod English, 2024). However, this phenomenon has also sparked ethical debates regarding animal welfare and the risks associated with turning animals into internet celebrities. Concerns raised by animal welfare organizations, such as PETA, focused on the potential stress and long-term impacts of heightened public exposure, underscoring the need for zoos to balance public engagement with the well-being of their animals (PETA, 2025). In response, the Zoological Park Organization emphasized its commitment to Moo Deng's health and ethical care. This case reflects broader global discussions about the responsibilities of contemporary zoos to integrate conservation, education, and ethical considerations in the digital age (Moorhouse et al., 2017; Skibins & Powell, 2013).

By combining immersive educational experiences with responsible use of social media, Khao Kheow Open Zoo demonstrates both the opportunities and challenges faced by modern zoos

in influencing visitor decisions and fostering a deeper understanding of wildlife conservation in an increasingly connected world.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), first introduced by Katz et al. in 1973, provides a valuable framework for understanding how individuals actively select media to fulfill specific social and psychological needs, such as entertainment, information, identity, and social interaction. Unlike earlier theories that viewed audiences as passive recipients, UGT highlights the purposeful and goal-oriented nature of media use, emphasizing that people engage with media content to satisfy personal motivations.

Over time, UGT has evolved to address new digital and interactive media environments, especially social media. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) expanded the theory by identifying cognitive, affective, and social gratifications, demonstrating that motivations such as information seeking, convenience, and interpersonal utility strongly predict media use and interactive behaviors, including sharing and commenting. Sundar and Limperos (2013) further advanced the theory for the internet age by introducing new dimensions of gratification, including modality (platform features), agency (user control), interactivity, and navigability.

Recent research consistently demonstrates that UGT is particularly relevant to social media, as users engage with platforms for various reasons, including social interaction, information seeking, entertainment, relaxation, and self-expression. For example, Whiting and Williams (2013) identified several key uses and gratifications for social media, including social interaction, information sharing, entertainment, and gaining knowledge about others, highlighting the multi-faceted and intentional nature of social media engagement.

Applying UGT to this current study offers a valuable lens for exploring the various motivations behind engagement with Moo Deng-related content on social media. It helps capture the range of gratifications users seek when interacting with such content, from entertainment and information to social connection. Additionally, the theory's attention to individual differences aligns well with examining how demographic factors may influence online engagement and subsequent behaviors, such as visiting the zoo. Overall, UGT provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex relationship between digital media use and real-world visitor decisions in the context of this study.

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by Albert Bandura, explains how people learn and perform behaviors through the reciprocal interaction of personal, environmental, and behavioral factors (Bandura, 1986). At the heart of SCT is observational learning, which suggests that individuals acquire new behaviors and attitudes by watching models in their social environment, whether in real life or through media. This learning process involves three key mechanisms: attention, retention, and reproduction. Observational learning is most effective when the model is perceived as attractive, competent, or likable, and when the behavior is rewarded. Bandura (2001) later applied SCT to mass communication, emphasizing that media can act as powerful socializing agents by modeling behaviors, norms, and values that audiences are likely to imitate.

Another important aspect of SCT is the concept of self-efficacy, which refers to people's belief in their ability to perform behaviors that affect their lives. Media messages can influence self-efficacy by showing specific actions as effective or socially acceptable, encouraging individuals to adopt those behaviors (Bandura, 1997). In the current technology era, interactive platforms such as social media strengthen these effects because users engage with content and receive feedback that supports the adoption of observed behaviors (Rimal & Real, 2003).

Recent research continues to support the application of SCT in online settings. For example, Tiggemann and Slater (2014) found that adolescents' exposure to idealized images on social media influenced their body image concerns through social comparison and perceived social norms, processes explained by SCT. Similarly, Holbert et al. (2020) highlighted the theory's usefulness in understanding behavior change in environmental and public health campaigns, where media models shape attitudes and intentions toward participation. These findings affirm that SCT remains a valuable framework for studying how individuals internalize and respond to media messages. Its focus on reciprocal determinism and observational learning is beneficial for exploring how media influence public opinion, behavior, and social norms.

Given these strengths, SCT provides a meaningful perspective for examining how social media content, such as viral stories about Moo Deng, influences viewers' attitudes and behaviors. Understanding how observing such content may influence people's decisions to engage with the material online and potentially motivate real-world actions, such as visiting the zoo, is helpful.

Conceptual Framework

This study used an explanatory mixed-method approach. The researchers formulated a research framework based on the concepts and theories of Katz et al. (1973), Papacharissi and Rubin (2000), Whiting and Williams (2013), Bandura (1986), Rimal & Real (2003), and Holbert et al. (2020). The independent variables were 1) Social Media Use and Motivation, and the dependent variable was Zoo Visit Decision-Making.

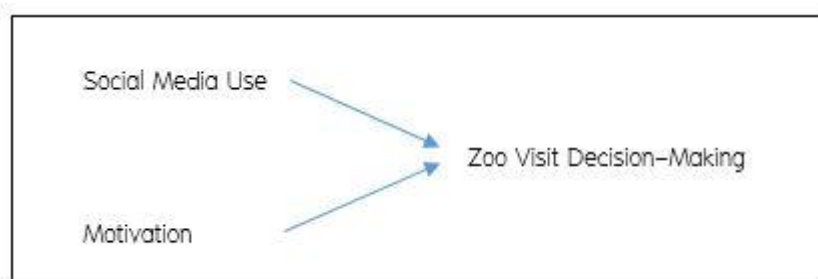


Figure 1: Research conceptual framework

Research Methodology

This study employed an explanatory mixed-methods research design, consisting of two sequential phases. The first phase involved collecting quantitative data to identify general patterns and relationships. The second phase involved qualitative data collection to explain further and deepen the understanding of the quantitative results. Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) noted that this design is effective for clarifying unexpected findings or elaborating on statistical trends by exploring participants' perspectives in more detail. By combining both methods, the study provided both breadth and depth in addressing the research questions.

Phase 1: Quantitative Phase

In the first phase, individuals who had viewed Moo Deng-related social media content and subsequently visited Khao Kheow Open Zoo were targeted. The sample size for this phase was determined using Cochran's (1977) formula for populations of unknown size, with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, resulting in a recommended sample size of 385 respondents. Voluntary sampling was employed, and participants were recruited through internet outreach, social media advertising, and direct messages that contained the study description and survey link. Ultimately, 346 valid responses were collected. Data were collected using a pre-tested, structured online questionnaire that measured demographics, motivation, involvement, and behavioral intentions. Three academic experts established content validity, and a pre-test with 30

external zoo tourists confirmed reliability (Cronbach's Alpha ≥ 0.70). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, means, standard deviations) and inferential statistics (ANOVA) to assess the influence of demographic variables on behavioral outcomes.

Phase 2: Qualitative Phase

After the quantitative analysis, a purposive sample of ten participants was selected for the qualitative phase. Inclusion required that participants had visited the zoo specifically because of Moo Deng-related content, while those visiting for other reasons were excluded. Focus group interviews were conducted to provide deeper insights into motivations and experiences, using a semi-structured guide developed from the survey findings. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify and interpret key themes, thereby explaining and enriching the quantitative results. This explanatory mixed-methods approach allowed for initial quantitative trends to be clarified and expanded through qualitative exploration, as recommended by Creswell and Plano Clark (2017).

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for mixed-methods research. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Burapha University (No. HU 005/2568), ensuring that the research design and procedures met institutional and national ethical guidelines. All participants in both the quantitative and qualitative phases were informed about the study's objectives and procedures prior to their participation. Informed consent was obtained from every participant, and it was emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

To protect participants' privacy, all individuals were assured that their personal information and identities would be kept strictly confidential. Data were anonymized and stored securely on the principal researcher's password-protected computer, with access limited to the research team. Following best practices for data management in mixed methods research, all data will be permanently deleted following the publication of the research.

Additional ethical considerations included minimizing participant burden by ensuring that the survey and focus group processes were as concise and respectful of participants' time as possible, and by providing clear communication throughout the study. The research team also remained attentive to power dynamics and cultural sensitivity, especially during qualitative data collection, to foster an environment of trust and respect. These procedures align with established ethical

guidelines for mixed-methods research, which emphasize informed consent, confidentiality, data security, and the respectful treatment of participants throughout the research process (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Research Results

Phase 1: Quantitative Phase

A total of 346 participants took part in the study, with the majority being female (76.27%). Nearly half of the participants were under the age of 22 (47.69%). Most of them identified as students (55.49%), and the majority resided in Chonburi or neighboring provinces (56.65%).

Social Media Use and Motivation

Most participants (97.69%) reported being exposed to Moo Deng content via social media. TikTok was the most common platform for such exposure (41.04%), followed by Facebook (24.28%), with other platforms being used less frequently. The leading motivation for following Moo Deng content was relaxation and stress relief (42.90%), followed by entertainment (36.39%). Participants indicated that the content best fulfilled their needs for entertainment and pleasure (65.68%), with helpful information being the next most cited benefit (29.88%).

Perception and Behavioral Imitation

A large proportion (82.37%) of participants interacted with Moo Deng content by commenting or sharing, primarily because they perceived the content as cute (65.61%). The content fostered a positive attitude toward the zoo in 85.96% of participants and led to behavioral imitation in 41.75% of participants. Additionally, 82.81% agreed or strongly agreed that the information helped them better understand animals.

Zoo Visit Decision-Making

Content related to Moo Deng motivated 36.14% of participants to plan a zoo visit, with 20.41% specifically visiting to take photos or videos. However, 65.09% reported that other reasons were more potent motivators for their visit. Notably, nearly 62% held positive expectations about the zoo based on images they had seen, and the campaign had a significant influence on recommendations, with almost 90% of respondents indicating they were likely or very likely to recommend visiting the zoo.

Table 1 Comparison of differences between demographic subgroups

Group 1	Group 2	Mean Difference (meandiff)	p-value	Significant (reject)
age	area	-0.2948	0.0003	True
age	decision	-0.7081	0.0	True
decision	gender	0.3497	0.0	True

*p-value < 0.05: This means the difference is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

**Negative average difference: Indicates that Group 1 has a lower average than Group 2.

Based on the ANOVA results ($F = 25.35$, $p < 0.001$) presented in Table 1, evidence showed a statistically significant difference in responses by age. Tukey's HSD post-hoc test revealed that age groups had a significant effect on respondents' intention to visit the zoo ($p < 0.05$). The post-hoc test also confirmed that gender significantly influenced zoo visitation, with females reporting a higher likelihood of visiting ($p < 0.05$).

Phase 2: Qualitative Phase

Focus group interviews were conducted with ten participants who had been exposed to Moo Deng content on social media and had subsequently visited Khao Kheow Open Zoo to see Moo Deng in person. The purpose of these interviews was to explore participants' awareness, motivations, and experiences shaped by Moo Deng's social media presence. Three main themes emerged: the impact of social media, emotional engagement in visitor decisions, and economic and ethical considerations.

Table 2 Summary of themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Impact of Social-Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Viral Content and Algorithmic Recommendations - Peer Sharing
Theme 2: Emotional Engagement in Influencing Visitor Decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Joy and Curiosity - Relaxation and Escapism - Expectation and Reality
Theme 3: Economic Impact and Ethical Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Economic Contributions - Ethical Awareness

Theme 1: Impact of Social Media

Viral Content and Algorithmic Recommendations

Participants described how social media algorithms increased Moo Deng's visibility and appeal, making the content appear more personalized and inviting. This sense of exclusivity encouraged deeper engagement and anticipation for visiting the zoo. The discussions highlighted that social media was not only a platform for sharing videos but also an effective tool for influencing visitor choices and inspiring action, echoing findings that social media can drive both awareness and behavioral change in zoo contexts. The viral nature of Moo Deng's content generated widespread discussion and excitement, prompting participants to plan zoo visits.

Peer Sharing

Most participants reported first learning about Moo Deng through friends' or relatives' social media posts, underscoring the strong influence of peer networks in shaping public interest. Peer recommendations and group discussions played a significant role in motivating visits, as participants often arranged zoo trips together after sharing Moo Deng content. This finding reinforced the importance of social interaction and peer influence in decision-making, particularly when trying new experiences, such as visiting the zoo.

Theme 2: Emotional Engagement in Influencing Visitor Decisions

Joy and Curiosity

Participants frequently expressed feelings of happiness and curiosity after viewing Moo Deng content. Many described the videos as uplifting and inspiring, which motivated them to seek similar joyful experiences during their visit to the zoo. This aligns with research indicating that zoo animals often elicit positive emotions such as excitement, curiosity, and joy, which can influence empathy and engagement.

Relaxation and Escapism

Several participants noted that watching Moo Deng's videos provided a welcome escape from daily stress, offering moments of relief and relaxation. This emotional benefit strengthened their desire to visit the zoo, as they associated the experience with positive feelings.

Expectation and Reality

There was a dynamic interplay between online anticipation and real-life experience. While some participants found their expectations matched their actual encounters with Moo Deng, others felt slightly disappointed, noting that the reality did not always align with the idealized online

portrayal. This highlighted the need for managing visitor expectations, as social media can sometimes create heightened or unrealistic anticipations.

Theme 3: Economic Impact and Ethical Considerations

Economic Contributions

Participants acknowledged Moo Deng's significant impact on the local economy, noting increased zoo attendance driven by his online popularity. Many reported that seeing Moo Deng on social media directly influenced their decision to visit, often bringing friends or family along with them. The phenomenon also extended to merchandise sales and special events, with participants purchasing Moo Deng-themed souvenirs and attending zoo promotions. These activities contributed to the zoo's financial success and enhanced its public profile, consistent with research showing that social media campaigns can boost both visitation and secondary revenue streams.

Ethical Awareness

Some participants raised concerns about animal welfare and the ethical implications of Moo Deng's popularity. While they appreciated the positive attention brought to the zoo, they also discussed the responsibility of ensuring Moo Deng's well-being and the importance of ethical communication in social media campaigns. This reflects broader discussions in the literature about striking a balance between marketing success and animal welfare, as well as responsible messaging, in zoo settings.

Overall, the focus group findings demonstrated that Moo Deng's social media presence played a central role in shaping visitor motivations, emotional engagement, and economic outcomes. While social media effectively generated interest and influenced behavior, it also raised important considerations regarding expectation management and ethical responsibility. These insights suggest that zoos can harness social media to enhance visitor engagement and support economic goals, provided they remain attentive to the welfare of their animals and the accuracy of their messaging.

Discussions

Patterns of Social Media Engagement, Motivations, and Demographic Factors

The quantitative phase revealed that nearly all participants were exposed to Moo Deng content on social media, with TikTok and Facebook being the primary platforms. Relaxation, stress relief, and entertainment emerged as the most significant motivations for engaging with this

content, supporting the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which posits that individuals seek out media to fulfill specific psychological and social needs (Katz et al., 1973; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Most respondents reported positive attitudes toward the zoo after seeing Moo Deng content, and a substantial proportion engaged interactively by commenting or sharing, often driven by the perceived cuteness and uplifting nature of the material.

Notably, the results showed that demographic factors, particularly age and gender, significantly influenced both engagement and the intention to visit the zoo. Younger participants and females reported higher engagement and a greater likelihood of visiting, a pattern consistent with prior research indicating that younger users and women are more active in sharing and responding to animal-related content on social media (Pew Research Center, 2021; Holbert et al., 2020). Statistical analysis (ANOVA and post-hoc tests) confirmed these differences, suggesting that social media campaigns targeting specific demographic groups may be especially effective in increasing zoo visitation. These findings reinforce the idea that social media can serve as a powerful tool for influencing public attitudes and behaviors, particularly when content is emotionally appealing and tailored to the interests of key demographic segments (Sundar & Limperos, 2013).

Social Media Experiences, Emotional Responses, and Perceived Impacts

The qualitative phase provided more profound insight into the motivations and behaviors identified quantitatively. Focus group discussions revealed that social media algorithms and peer sharing amplified Moo Deng's popularity, making the content feel more personal and exclusive. Participants described how viral content and recommendations from friends or relatives played a crucial role in their decision to visit the zoo, underscoring the significance of social influence and network effects in shaping offline behaviors (Sundar & Limperos, 2013).

Emotional engagement was a central theme, with participants frequently expressing feelings of joy, curiosity, relaxation, and escapism after viewing Moo Deng content. These positive emotions not only motivated online engagement but also translated into real-world actions, such as planning zoo visits and purchasing related merchandise. This finding aligns with research suggesting that emotional connections to animals and uplifting online experiences can drive both empathy and behavioral change (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Ballantyne et al., 2008).

The focus groups also highlighted the economic impact of Moo Deng's popularity, with increased attendance at the zoo, merchandise sales, and special events attributed to the viral campaign. However, participants expressed concerns about the ethical implications of using animal

farming for commercial gain and emphasized the need for responsible messaging and effective animal welfare practices. This echoes broader debates in the literature about balancing marketing success with ethical considerations in zoo and wildlife tourism (Carr & Cohen, 2015).

In sum, the qualitative findings enriched the quantitative results by revealing the underlying emotional, social, and ethical factors that drive engagement and visitation. They suggest that while social media can effectively promote zoos and stimulate economic benefits, careful attention must be paid to managing visitor expectations and ensuring that ethical standards are upheld.

New Knowledge from Research

This study contributes new insights into how viral social media content featuring an animal mascot, Moo Deng, influences both online engagement and real-world behavior in the context of wildlife tourism. It highlights that relaxation, entertainment, and emotional connection are key drivers motivating social media users to engage with such content and consider visiting the zoo. The research confirms that demographic factors, particularly age and gender, significantly influence engagement levels and visitation intentions, with younger audiences and females exhibiting higher responsiveness.

Moreover, the study reveals the critical role of social media algorithms and peer networks in amplifying content reach and encouraging group visitation, emphasizing the social nature of digital influence. Emotional responses, such as joy, curiosity, and escapism, were found to mediate the relationship between online exposure and offline behavior, underscoring the importance of affective engagement in tourism marketing. Ultimately, the research reveals the dual economic and ethical dimensions of viral animal fame, highlighting its potential to enhance local tourism and merchandise sales while also promoting awareness about animal welfare and responsible communication.

Conclusion

This study investigated the influence of Moo Deng's social media presence on visitor engagement and behavior toward Khao Kheow Open Zoo using an explanatory mixed-methods design. The quantitative phase revealed that exposure to Moo Deng content on platforms such as TikTok and Facebook significantly motivated zoo visitation, especially among younger audiences

and females. Key motivations for engaging with the content included relaxation, entertainment, and stress relief. Demographic factors also played a significant role in shaping both online interaction and visitation intention.

The qualitative phase provided more profound insights into how social media algorithms, peer sharing, and emotional engagement contributed to these behaviors. Participants described feelings of joy, curiosity, and escapism triggered by Moo Deng's videos, which translated into real-world actions such as planning zoo visits and purchasing merchandise. The study also highlighted the decisive role of social networks in spreading awareness and encouraging group visits. Moreover, the research identified important economic benefits resulting from increased tourism and merchandise sales linked to Moo Deng's popularity.

At the same time, ethical considerations emerged as a critical theme, with participants emphasizing the importance of responsible communication and animal welfare in maintaining public trust and ensuring sustainable tourism practices. Overall, the study demonstrates that viral animal content on social media can be a highly effective tool for promoting wildlife attractions, provided that emotional engagement is balanced with transparent messaging and a commitment to ethical responsibility. These findings provide valuable guidance for wildlife parks seeking to utilize social media to enhance visitor experiences, support conservation efforts, and contribute to local economies.

Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, wildlife parks and similar attractions are encouraged to develop targeted social media strategies that focus on engaging younger audiences and female users, as these groups demonstrated higher levels of interaction and visitation intention. Prioritizing popular platforms such as TikTok and Facebook can help reach these demographics more effectively. Content that evokes positive emotions, such as joy, curiosity, and relaxation, should be emphasized, as emotional engagement is a strong motivator for both online interactions and physical visits. Sharing playful animal moments, behind-the-scenes footage, and stress-relief themes can enhance audience connection and interest.

Furthermore, leveraging peer influence is essential. Encouraging visitors to share content and participate in group activities or social challenges related to the animal mascot can amplify viral reach and motivate collective visits. Social interaction not only increases engagement but also strengthens visitor anticipation and satisfaction. However, it is equally important to manage visitor expectations transparently. Providing accurate and authentic portrayals of the animal and the zoo experience will help prevent disappointment and maintain trust. Clear communication about what visitors can realistically expect is crucial for maintaining positive attitudes and encouraging repeat visitation.

Another critical recommendation is to prioritize animal welfare and ethical messaging in all marketing efforts. Ensuring that promotional content respects the well-being of the animal mascot and includes educational components about conservation can enhance the zoo's credibility and public support. Transparency regarding animal care practices fosters ethical awareness among visitors and aligns with the principles of responsible tourism. Lastly, wildlife parks should continuously monitor the economic and social impacts of viral campaigns. Regular assessment of how these campaigns impact tourism, merchandise sales, and community attitudes will enable timely adjustments to maximize benefits while addressing any ethical concerns that may arise. By adopting these strategies, parks can effectively and responsibly harness the power of social media, promoting both visitor engagement and conservation goals.

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