

Sephora Tweens: How Mobile Technology and Social Media Turn Brands into Travel Destinations

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Abstract. This paper explores how mobile technology and social media transform retail brands like Sephora into travel destinations for tweens aged 9 to 12. Tweens' engagement with brands is shaped by digital and cultural trends, with Sephora's appeal extending beyond traditional retail to influence travel behaviours through platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Sephora's mobile app integrates features like geolocation and service booking, enabling tweens to incorporate Sephora visits into their travel plans. This study explores how smart tourism innovations, such as location-based services and augmented reality, enhance Sephora's appeal and create experiences that align with identity-driven aspirations. Using focus group discussions, the research investigates the impact of social media and mobile technology on travel behaviours, highlighting the relationship between technology, identity, and consumer culture. The findings contribute to understanding retail tourism, showing how brands evolve into cultural landmarks within smart city ecosystems, and offer marketing strategies for leveraging digital engagement and smart tourism.

Keywords: Sephora tweens, social media, mobile technology, brand tourism, location-based services, augmented reality, smart city tourism, retail tourism, experiential retailing, travel behaviour, identity-driven consumption

1 Introduction

Tweens, aged 9 to 12, are influential consumers shaping household purchases and market trends (Aguiló-Pérez, 2017). While considered pre-adolescents, they exhibit sophisticated behaviours influenced by cultural and digital trends (Mintel, 2023). Brands like Sephora, with diverse products, innovative experiences, and strong social media presence, resonate with tweens seeking self-expression and social recognition (Tolentino, 2024). As Sephora integrates into the beauty and lifestyle economy, its spaces increasingly become destinations beyond retail (Perriello, 2024). Digital tourism innovations, supported by smart cities and location-based services, reshape travel experiences (Xu et al., 2024), with retail brands like Sephora benefiting from being embedded in these digital ecosystems. Mobile apps, augmented reality, and geo-tagging enable seamless integration of brand visits into travel itineraries (Zhang, 2024). The evolution of brands into cultural landmarks reflects changes in how young consumers engage with retail, viewing stores as immersive experiences shaping identities and social narratives (Borghini et al., 2021). This study examines how mobile technology and social media enable brands like Sephora to become key travel destinations, exploring their role in shaping tween travel decisions.

Through a focus group interviewing of twelve tweens, this study offers insights into how mobile technology and social media are actively shaping the consumption patterns and travel behaviours of tweens. Findings of the paper highlight how intersection of technology, identity, and consumer culture reflects broader shifts in how brands operate as cultural and social phenomena in the digital age.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Tween Consumers and Brand Engagement

Tweens, typically aged 9 to 12, have become a key demographic for marketers due to their growing influence on consumer trends and household purchasing decisions (Aguiló-Pérez, 2017). Their engagement with brands like Sephora reflects a blend of aspirational consumption and social validation, with strong brand loyalty and responsiveness to marketing that emphasises identity, social belonging, and self-expression (Lindstrom, 2004). Beauty brands like Sephora, which offer immersive experiences through personalised services such as makeovers and skin consultations, effectively target this group (Ahn et al., 2022). Sephora's inclusivity and alignment with social awareness further resonate with tweens, who often seek to emulate influencers and celebrities (Nikken & Schols, 2015). This stage of peer-driven development makes social acceptance a key factor in brand choices, enabling Sephora to foster long-term loyalty by intertwining products with broader cultural narratives of beauty, empowerment, and self-expression (Aguiló-Pérez, 2017).

2.2 Social Media Influence on Consumer Behaviour

Social media is a powerful force shaping consumer behaviour, especially among tweens. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have transformed brand interactions by providing visual, interactive spaces where trends and social capital are formed. Research shows that social media drives brand discovery and engagement, with influencers playing a key role in shaping tweens' preferences (Huang & Su, 2018). This is particularly true for brands like Sephora, which has integrated social media into its broader strategy.

Influencers act as intermediaries between brands and consumers, and tweens, still forming their identities, are highly influenced by their curated lives, endorsements, and sponsored content (Lou, 2022; Lou & Kim, 2019). Influencer marketing significantly impacts tweens, who view influencers as more relatable than traditional celebrities (Evans et al., 2017). For Sephora, influencers often highlight in-store experiences and tutorials, making the brand an aspirational lifestyle choice (Tolentino, 2024).

Peer networks also shape tween behaviour on social media, with social proof like likes and shares influencing brand engagement (Lichy et al., 2023; Vassallo et al., 2019). Platforms like TikTok amplify Sephora's visibility through user-generated content and peer-shared experiences (Tolentino, 2024). The highly visual nature of Instagram and TikTok, which suit beauty brand promotion, enhances engagement by offering immersive, aesthetically driven interactions (Aljukhadar et al., 2020; Hudson et al.,

2016). Sephora capitalises on this by promoting its products as lifestyle essentials through visually appealing content (Tolentino, 2024).

2.3 Mobile Technology and Brand Interaction

Mobile technology has transformed brand interaction, making brands more accessible and enhancing the shopping experience (Bonfanti et al., 2023). For digital-native tweens, mobile apps and geolocation services facilitate deeper engagement with brands like Sephora by personalising shopping and providing real-time information (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013; Muzellec et al., 2016). This is particularly important in travel, where proximity to stores can influence decisions.

Sephora's mobile app bridges online and offline engagement with features like augmented reality try-ons, personalised recommendations, and store locators, enhancing convenience and personalisation (Tolentino, 2024; Pantano & Priporas, 2016). Geolocation tools further allow tweens to plan travel around Sephora stores, making the brand a key part of their itineraries (Huang et al., 2018; Dacko, 2017). This trend reflects the rise of "retail tourism," where shopping is integrated into travel experiences (Rabbiosi, 2016).

Digital shopping tools also enhance engagement, allowing consumers to browse products, read reviews, and make purchases, blending digital and physical experiences (Batat, 2022; McLean & Wilson, 2019). This integration fosters convenience and loyalty, making mobile apps essential for brands like Sephora to remain relevant in a digitalised market (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010).

2.4 Smart Tourism and Location-based Services

The growing role of digital technologies in tourism has transformed how retail brands can be integrated into travel experiences. Fernández-Díaz et al. (2023) highlight how digital accessibility in smart cities plays a crucial role in making destinations more inclusive and reducing inequalities. This supports the idea that retail spaces like Sephora can become more accessible and appealing as part of smart tourism efforts, where digital infrastructure is leveraged to enhance the travel experience. Casais and Ferreira (2023) further discuss sustainable tourism practices, noting that smart and sustainable hotels can serve as key components of a city's tourism ecosystem. These insights suggest that retail brands can benefit from being embedded within broader smart tourism strategies, where experiential retailing aligns with sustainable and accessible tourism agendas.

Moreover, Xu et al. (2024) explore how digital innovation in smart tourism destinations, such as the use of geolocation services and augmented reality, has become central to enhancing travel experiences in premier tourist cities. For a brand like Sephora, these technologies can help create a seamless integration between digital engagement and physical store visits, turning shopping into a key aspect of the travel itinerary. Zhang (2024) further elaborates on how smart city construction impacts destination competitiveness, demonstrating that cities adopting these technologies can elevate the appeal of local brands by making them more accessible to tourists. This aligns with the current

study's focus on how mobile technology and social media have turned Sephora into a travel destination for tweens.

3 Methodology

This study used an inductive approach to explore tweens' perspectives on mobile technology, social media, and travel, particularly concerning brands like Sephora. The focus on tweens, aged 9 to 12, is based on their influence on family purchasing decisions, including travel, and their status as early adopters of technology and social media (Aguiló-Pérez, 2017). Their engagement with platforms such as Instagram and TikTok makes them an ideal demographic for studying the intersection of retail and travel, as social media trends significantly shape their preferences and travel plans.

Focus groups were chosen to create a comfortable environment where peer influence could facilitate dynamic discussions, providing insights into consumer behaviours and social dynamics (Morgan, 1996; Krueger & Casey, 2014; Hill, 2006). This method also allowed for the observation of communication patterns and social influences, essential for understanding tweens' engagement with brands and technology (Zeller, 1993).

To explore gender-specific influences, the study included three groups: one with four girls, one with four boys, and a mixed group of two girls and two boys. This setup aimed to capture differences in brand interaction and technology use in travel decisions. Twelve participants were purposively sampled from local primary schools, with parental consent obtained. Table 1 outlines the participants' profiles, confirming their awareness of Sephora during the focus group discussions.

Table 1. Focus Group Participants Profile

Participant ID	Focus Group (ID)	Gender	Age
P*1	F*1 - Girls	Girl	9
P2		Girl	10
P3		Girl	11
P4		Girl	12
P1	F2 - Boys	Boy	9
P2		Boy	10
P3		Boy	11
P4		Boy	12
P1	F3 - Mixed	Girl	9
P2		Girl	12
P3		Boy	10
P4		Boy	11

**Note: P stands for Participant, F stands for Focus Group*

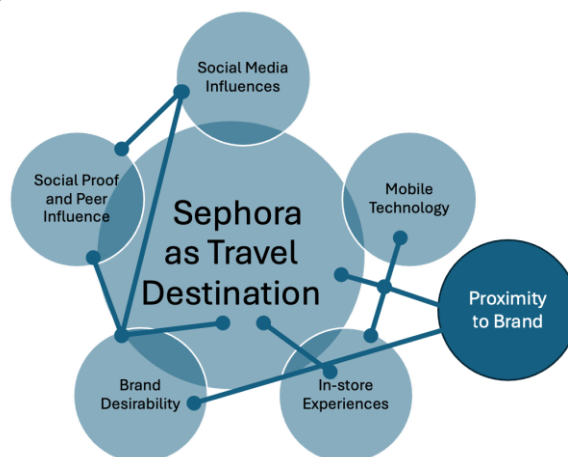
Source: Authors' own.

The decision to divide focus groups by gender was based on research showing that boys and girls engage with brands and digital technologies differently (Vassallo et al., 2019). Girls are more influenced by beauty influencers, while boys are impacted by lifestyle or gaming influencers. A mixed group was included to observe gender dynamics and their effect on brand interactions. Gender-segregated groups also allowed for more open discussions, as tweens are often more comfortable discussing topics like beauty and social media in single-gender settings (Zeller, 1993).

The data was analysed using thematic analysis, chosen for its flexibility and ability to capture detailed patterns in thought and behaviour (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method helped identify recurring themes related to social media, mobile technology, and brand engagement, while also highlighting gender differences in how boys and girls interact with brands. Themes were refined iteratively to ensure they captured the most relevant insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4 Findings and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the focus groups revealed several critical insights into how tweens perceive and engage with Sephora, particularly in relation to social media, mobile technology, and proximity to Sephora locations. These findings help address the research questions regarding the role of digital platforms and brand proximity in shaping Sephora's appeal as a travel destination for tweens. Figure 1 visualises key concepts emerged from primary data.



4.1 Theme 1: The Influence of Social Media on Brand Desirability

Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube play a key role in Sephora's appeal among tweens, particularly girls. Participants, especially in the girls-only group, noted how beauty influencers made Sephora an aspirational destination by showcasing product hauls and in-store experiences. One girl shared, *"I love watching beauty TikTokers, and whenever they do Sephora hauls, I just want to go there and try everything,"* reflecting research on social media's impact on consumer behaviour (Evans et al., 2017).

Boys, though less interested in beauty content, still encountered Sephora through lifestyle content. One boy remarked, *"I've seen Sephora in travel vlogs, but it's not really my thing. I think my sister would like it."* This suggests that while Sephora appeals more to girls, it remains visible to boys through digital platforms. In the mixed group, boys expressed that they might visit Sephora if it's discussed online, highlighting social media's indirect influence on their travel behaviour. One boy noted, *"I'd visit Sephora if it's close by when we travel, just to see what it's like since everyone talks about it online."*

Theme 2: Mobile Technology as a Travel Planning Tool

Mobile technology, particularly Sephora's app, played a key role in shaping travel decisions. Girls in the focus groups were excited to use the app to plan visits to Sephora stores, turning the brand into a travel destination. One girl noted, *"I love using the Sephora app when I know we're going somewhere new. I can see if there's a Sephora store nearby and what products are available."* This reflects research by Pantano and Priporas (2016) showing that mobile apps enhance consumer engagement by personalising the shopping experience.

The app's features—mapping stores, browsing products, and booking services—make Sephora part of the travel experience itself. One girl described it as *"planning an adventure,"* while another noted always looking forward to visiting Sephora when travelling. Boys were less enthusiastic about using the app, but some acknowledged its convenience. One boy said, *"If I needed to find something for my sister, I'd probably use the app to see where the closest Sephora is."* This highlights gender differences, with girls viewing the app as essential for travel, while boys use it more functionally.

Theme 3: In-Store Experience vs. Online Shopping

A key theme was the importance of the in-store experience, particularly compared to online shopping. Many tweens, especially girls, preferred visiting Sephora in person while travelling. One girl noted, *"I prefer going to Sephora in person because I can try out the products, and it's just more fun,"* highlighting the value of tactile and social experiences (Ahn et al., 2022). This interaction adds to Sephora's allure as a travel destination.

In contrast, boys preferred the convenience of online shopping, with one saying, *"I'd rather just order online unless we're already there."* This reflects a more functional

approach to brand engagement. However, in the mixed group, some boys acknowledged visiting Sephora as part of family traditions, making it a shared experience. One girl remarked, *"We always go to Sephora when we're on holiday. It's like a tradition with my mum and sister."* This shows how Sephora has become a memorable part of the broader travel experience.

Theme 4: Social Proof and Peer Influence

Social proof and peer influence also emerged as critical factors in shaping tween travel decisions and their prioritisation of Sephora as a destination. Several participants mentioned how likes, shares, and comments on social media contributed to their desire to visit Sephora. In the girls-only group, one participant (F1, P1, girl) commented, *"When I see my friends posting about Sephora or sharing products they bought, it makes me want to go too."* This reflects the powerful role that social validation plays in driving tween consumer behaviour, with Sephora being positioned as a socially desirable brand. And the argument aligns with Hudson et al. (2016), who found that social media engagement enhances brand desirability through peer validation and social sharing.

In the boys-only group, peer influence played a role, albeit in a different way. For example, one participant (F2, P1, boy) noted, *"My friends don't really talk about Sephora, but if we're travelling and they say we should go, I'd go with them."* This suggests that while boys may not actively seek out Sephora, peer recommendations still influence their decisions, particularly in social or group settings.

The mixed group further illustrated how social proof affects decisions to visit Sephora during travel. One participant (F3, P2, girl) shared, *"If I see people I follow going to Sephora when they're on holiday, I feel like I should do the same. It's kind of like keeping up with trends."* This response demonstrates the strong role that social media plays in shaping travel itineraries for tweens, particularly through the desire to replicate the experiences of influencers and peers. For boys in the mixed group, however, social proof appeared to have less of an impact, with one participant (F3, P3, boy) saying, *"I don't really care what my friends do, but if I'm with them and they want to go, I'll go."*

Discussion

The thematic analysis shows that Sephora has become embedded in tweens' travel behaviour, largely driven by social media, mobile technology, and peer influence. A key finding is the influence of beauty influencers, especially on girls, who are drawn to Sephora through social media content showcasing products and experiences. This aligns with research highlighting social media's role in shaping consumer behaviour and travel decisions (Evans et al., 2017; Hudson et al., 2016). Boys, while less affected by beauty content, still acknowledge Sephora's presence through lifestyle or travel-related media, showing a gendered pattern in brand engagement.

The study reveals significant gender differences in how tweens interact with Sephora. For girls, the brand is not just a retail outlet but a source of social validation

and experiential engagement, often using the mobile app to plan visits. This reflects findings that mobile apps and geolocation services enhance consumer loyalty (Pantano & Priporas, 2016). Boys, however, engage less with Sephora unless peer influence is involved, preferring convenience over brand interaction. This contrast aligns with broader consumer behaviour patterns, where girls value experiential shopping more than boys (Ahn et al., 2022).

The integration of digital innovations, such as location-based services, plays a significant role in Sephora's appeal as a travel destination. As noted by Fernández-Díaz et al. (2023), smart cities provide the digital infrastructure necessary for making retail brands accessible within tourism landscapes. Sephora's mobile app, with features such as store locators and augmented reality try-ons, exemplifies how retail brands can leverage smart tourism technologies to become integral components of travel planning. This approach aligns with Xu et al. (2024)'s findings on the importance of digital services in enhancing tourists' experiences by enabling them to easily find attractions and shopping venues.

Additionally, Zhang (2024) highlights the impact of smart city features on the competitiveness of destinations, which can extend to retail brands like Sephora by improving their visibility and accessibility to tourists. By incorporating geolocation tools and mobile notifications, Sephora not only enhances consumer engagement but also positions itself as a convenient and desirable stop within a travel itinerary. This convergence of digital and physical experiences supports the notion of retail tourism, where shopping is seamlessly integrated into travel activities.

Overall, findings from this study contribute to the broader trend of brands evolving into travel destinations. Sephora stores offer immersive, tactile experiences that online shopping cannot replicate, supporting research on the importance of experiential retailing in creating memorable consumer encounters (Zollo et al., 2021). For tweens, visiting Sephora while travelling has become a social and experiential highlight, turning the brand into a destination in itself.

5 Conclusion

This study highlights the pivotal role of social media platforms and mobile apps in transforming Sephora into a travel destination for tweens. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, driven by beauty content creators, position Sephora as an aspirational brand, especially for girls, through product showcases, tutorials, and immersive in-store experiences (Evans et al., 2017). Boys, though less influenced by beauty content, still engage with the brand through lifestyle content and peer networks, demonstrating Sephora's broader appeal (Hudson et al., 2016). Sephora's mobile app, with geolocation, product exploration, and service booking features, personalizes the shopping experience and enhances the brand's integration into travel plans. This aligns with smart tourism principles, using technology to enrich the visitor experience and position retail brands as integral components of smart city tourism ecosystems (Xu et al., 2024).

The findings suggest that retail brands can capitalize on the trend of retail tourism by positioning themselves as travel destinations. Marketers should employ strategies

emphasizing in-store experiences, exclusive products, and influencer-led promotions. Location-based marketing tactics, including geo-targeted ads and push notifications, can guide tourists to stores situated near key attractions, thus integrating the retail experience into travel itineraries (Dacko, 2017). This approach aligns with research showing that smart city features can enhance a brand's visibility and attractiveness as a destination (Zhang, 2024).

This study's primary limitation is its focus on a specific demographic—twins aged 9 to 12—limiting the generalizability of findings to other age groups. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the research, based on focus group discussions, may not capture the full range of tween travel behaviours. The influence of cultural and regional factors was not extensively explored, which could affect how different consumer groups perceive retail brands as travel destinations.

Future research should explore the evolving role of other lifestyle brands as travel destinations and assess the long-term effects of digital engagement on travel behaviours as tweens mature into older consumers. Further studies should also examine cultural and regional differences in brand preferences, exploring how these factors influence travel decisions. Investigating how technologies like augmented reality and personalized navigation can enhance the retail experience will also provide valuable insights into the future of retail tourism (Batat, 2022; Fernández-Díaz et al., 2023).

Sephora and similar brands can strengthen their roles as travel destinations by embracing sustainable and smart tourism practices. Collaborating with smart cities on sustainability initiatives can appeal to eco-conscious consumers and support tourism agendas that aim to reduce inequalities and enhance accessibility (Casais & Ferreira, 2023). Brands like Sephora can further enhance their role as travel destinations by embracing sustainable and smart tourism principles. Collaborating with smart cities on sustainability initiatives can appeal to eco-conscious consumers and support tourism agendas focused on reducing inequalities and improving accessibility (Casais & Ferreira, 2023).

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