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## Article

# Investigating Social Media Influencers' Impact on Travel Decisions: A Data-Driven Study

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**Abstract:** With an emphasis on how social media influencers affect travelers' views, preferences, and travel decisions, this research investigates the impact of these individuals on tourism decision-making. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, the research evaluates the influence of key influencer characteristics—such as authenticity, trustworthiness, expertise, and engagement on the attitudes and decisions of potential travelers. The findings aim to provide tourism marketers with actionable insights on effective influencer collaboration strategies to enhance engagement and promote destinations. A sample of 108 respondents was surveyed, and the data was analyzed using Chi-Square tests and simple percentage analysis to draw meaningful conclusions. The results offer valuable guidance for crafting targeted marketing campaigns that appeal to today's digitally engaged and travel-savvy audience.

**Keywords:** influencers; marketing; social media; tourism; travel

## 1. Introduction

In the tourism industry, social media influencers have taken on a significant role in influencing consumer behavior in recent years. The proliferation of platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram has enabled influencers to reach millions of followers, providing travel recommendations and encouraging their audiences to discover new destinations. Their content—ranging from stunning imagery of scenic landscapes to personal travel experiences—has become a key factor in tourism decision-making, often swaying travellers' choices over traditional forms of advertising. This analytical study seeks to explore the significant role social media influencers play in influencing tourism-related decisions. By examining the types of content that resonate most with travellers, the trust factors associated with influencer recommendations, and the demographics of audiences that are most influenced, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how influencers are reshaping the tourism industry. Through this exploration, the study will contribute valuable insights for tourism marketers, travel agencies, and destination management organizations looking to harness the power of influencer marketing to drive tourism and engagement.

## 2. Literature Review

**Hindertje Hoarau-Heemstra, Karin Wigger (2023)** This review analyses 98 studies from 2015-22 to examine the complex relationship between cruise tourism and destination sustainability. It identifies key challenges and opportunities, proposing three pathways to enhance sustainability: shifting focus to interconnected behaviors, exploring alternative growth models, and prioritizing governance for shared resources. The aim is to deepen the discussion on sustainable practices and guide future research.

**Jiawei Li, J. Andres Coca-Stefaniak (2023)** This study reviews sustainable tourist behavior, identifying key themes like intended versus actual behaviors and discussing scholarly debates. Research gaps, especially in waste management and sustainable design, are highlighted. A future

research agenda is proposed, emphasizing the dynamic nature of sustainable tourist behavior and the need for varied influencing factors. The findings suggest policymakers should focus on market segmentation, integrate design and technology in sustainability efforts, and tailor strategies to tourist's specific needs to promote sustainable tourism.

**GuoQiong Ivanka Huang, Marion Karl (2022)** This article examines the evolution of destination studies from 2000 to 2020, reviewing 20 key articles and analyzing 1,393 studies with bibliometric methods to identify prominent authors, topics, clusters, and structural trends. Seven major research areas emerge: destination loyalty, image, digitalization, marketing, experience and recommendation, governance, and resources. A framework organizes these themes across macro, meso, and micro levels. The article compares insights from both methodologies and proposes a future research agenda for destination management.

**Clement Cabral, Rajib Lochan Dhar (2019)** This research examines the available literature on ecotourism in India to determine its potential for addressing poverty and biodiversity loss. It categorizes 70 research, emphasizing significant themes and investigating both the positive effects of ecological tourism and the constraints that limit its efficacy. The paper also provides techniques for overcoming these barriers and develops a research framework to direct future studies. The results provide substantial guidance for policymakers and practitioners working to promote sustainable ecotourism development in India.

**Chang et al. (2017)** The study highlights the significance of user-generated content (UGC) like opinions, ratings, and recommendations in social media data. It proposes a framework to collect, preprocess, and analyse this unstructured data using sentiment analysis and visual analytics. The analysis revealed that business travellers tend to give lower ratings compared to couples, and hotel ratings fluctuate across months, with lower ratings in July and higher in December. The study also identifies negative words used by travellers to express dissatisfaction with their hotel experiences.

**Ribeiro et al. (2014)** The study explores the factors influencing travel content creation on the web. It focuses on how social media use, innovativeness, and travel involvement motivate travellers to share their experiences online, which can significantly impact the hospitality industry. The study, conducted on 244 Portuguese internet users, uses partial least square structural equation modelling to analyse the relationships between these variables. The findings suggest that these factors positively contribute to travel content creation.

**Ruizhe Fang (2021)** A cyclical model of tourist decision-making is put out in this research. To regulate the process, it uses recurring phases and consideration sets, as well as information loop restrictions and decision-making thresholds. By recording dynamic stage repeats and consideration set updates, the model may reflect a variety of decision-making processes. It offers a fresh method for examining how final decisions are made and the principles governing them. There are useful takeaways for tourism professionals to comprehend and sway prospective customers.

### 3. Aim of the study

- Assess the influence of social media influencers on tourism decision-making.
- Identify key characteristics of influencers that enhance engagement and credibility.
- Examine influencer marketing's effectiveness compared to traditional tourism marketing.

### 4. Need for the study

Travelers increasingly turn to social media influencers for inspiration, advice, and recommendations when planning trips, which has disrupted traditional tourism marketing strategies. While conventional marketing methods, such as TV ads, print materials, and tourism board campaigns, have been effective in the past, influencer-driven content has introduced a more personal, relatable, and dynamic approach that resonates deeply with modern travelers. This study is essential to identify the specific characteristics of influencers—such as authenticity, expertise, and relatability—that enhance their credibility and engagement with their audience. As travel decisions

are often influenced by trust, identifying which traits make influencers more persuasive can help brands and destinations strategically partner with influencers who can authentically represent their offerings. While influencer marketing has gained considerable momentum, it remains critical to assess whether it delivers higher engagement and conversion rates than established marketing channels. This study aims to understand the evolving role of social media influencers in tourism, pinpoint the factors that make their content compelling and trustworthy, and assess how influencer marketing compares to traditional tourism marketing in shaping travellers' decisions. These insights will guide marketers in optimizing their strategies to engage today's digital-savvy travelers and maximize the potential of influencer partnerships.

## 5. Scope of the study

This study examines how specific characteristics of social media influencers impact tourism decision-making—such as authenticity, trustworthiness, expertise, and engagement—affect tourists' perceptions, preferences, and choices. The study includes a sample of 108 participants who follow travel-related content on major social media platforms, specifically Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. By examining user engagement across these platforms, the study identifies patterns in how different age groups and demographics respond to influencer marketing within the tourism sector. The study's scope covers both quantitative data, gathered through surveys to assess general trends and correlations, and qualitative insights into perceptions, helping to illustrate the real-world impact of influencers on destination appeal and travel-related decisions. While limited to a select sample and specific social media platforms, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the strategic role of influencers in tourism marketing, potentially informing future research and practical applications for tourism promotion.

## 6. Limitations of the study

The study does not encompass other emerging platforms like Snapchat or LinkedIn, nor does it explore every potential influencer trait or content type. Instead, it provides a focused analysis within a selected group of platforms and influencer characteristics. Additionally, as it is conducted with a sample size of 108 respondents, the findings may primarily reflect the opinions of this specific group rather than the entire population of social media users.

## 7. Methodology

This study employs a quantitative approach to investigate the impact of social media influencers on tourism decision-making, with a particular emphasis on age-related preferences for social media platforms. Using non-probabilistic purposive sampling, a sample of 108 respondents—who actively follow travel influencers—was selected. Data was collected through an online survey featuring a structured questionnaire with closed-ended questions designed to capture respondents' engagement with influencers, perceptions of influencer credibility, and influencers' impact on their travel choices. Descriptive statistics provided insights into respondent demographics, such as age, frequency of social media use, and attitudes toward travel influencers, while inferential analysis used a chi-square test to examine the relationship between age groups and preferred platforms for following travel influencers. Conducted from October to November 2024, the study captures current trends in influencer-driven tourism decisions.

## 8. Data analysis and interpretation

This section delves into the data analysis and interpretation of the questionnaire responses, providing insights into the research objectives.

### 8.1. Demographic Profile

The sample for this study was selected based on specific demographic characteristics, as outlined below.

**Table 1.** 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents.

Demographics	Category	Population (N=108)	Percent
Age	20-30	65	60.19%
	31-40	11	10.19%
	41 above	3	2.77%
	Below 20	29	26.85%
Gender	Male	65	60.19%
	Female	43	39.81%
Marital Status	Unmarried	59	54.62%
	Married	49	45.38%
Education	Non- Graduates	35	32.40%
	Graduates	73	67.60%
Monthly family income	Less than 10,000	6	5.56%
	11,000-30,000	13	12.03%
	31,000-50,000	45	41.67%
	Above 50,000	44	40.74%

**Source:** Primary data.

**Interpretation:** The demographic data of the respondents provides a snapshot of the sample group's composition based on age, gender, marital status, education, and monthly family income. In terms of age, the majority (60.19%) of respondents are between 20-30 years, indicating a young demographic group. Respondents below 20 make up 26.85%, suggesting that a significant portion of participants are from the younger generation. A smaller number are aged 31-40 (10.19%) or 41 and above (2.77%), indicating limited representation among older age groups. Gender distribution shows a slightly higher percentage of males (60.19%) than females (39.81%). This imbalance may influence the overall findings based on gender-specific perspectives on travel and influencer trustworthiness. Marital status data reveals that 54.62% of respondents are unmarried, while 45.38% are married. This relatively balanced representation of marital status may offer insights into the travel preferences and decision-making factors relevant to both single and married individuals. Education data shows that most respondents (67.60%) are graduates, while non-graduates make up 32.40%. The higher level of educational attainment suggests that a majority of respondents may have greater access to information, potentially influencing their perception of influencer recommendations. Monthly family income data indicates that most respondents have a moderate to high income, with 41.67% earning between 31,000-50,000 and 40.74% earning above 50,000. Only 5.56% of respondents earn less than 10,000, and 12.03% fall within the 11,000-30,000 range. This relatively higher income level could reflect a greater likelihood of discretionary spending on travel, making this demographic particularly relevant for travel marketing strategies. Overall, the demographic profile suggests that the sample predominantly consists of young, educated, and relatively higher-income individuals, which may influence their travel preferences and trust in influencer content.

### 8.2. Assess the influence of social media influencers on tourism decision-making

To address the first research objective of assessing the influence of social media influencers on tourism decision-making, the following tables present the relevant data and analysis.

**Table 2.** 1 Destination highlighted by influencers that is most persuasive.

Aspects	Frequency	Percent
Scenic locations	44	40.74%

Local food and culture	30	27.78%
Activities and adventures	20	18.52%
Accommodation options	5	4.63%
Unique experiences	9	8.33%
<b>Total</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Primary data.

**Interpretation:** The data on influential destination aspects highlights which features of influencer content are most persuasive to potential travellers. Scenic locations are the most compelling aspect, with 40.74% of respondents finding these visually appealing settings to be the most influential in shaping travel interest. Local food and culture rank second 27.78%, indicating a substantial interest in experiencing authentic local traditions and culinary experiences. Activities and adventures follow with 18.52%, appealing to those drawn to dynamic and engaging travel experiences. Accommodation options, by contrast, are less persuasive 4.63%. Lastly, unique experiences, while relatively niche at 8.33%, still play a role in attracting those interested in one-of-a-kind activities. Overall, the data underscores that visually captivating locations and culturally immersive experiences are particularly effective in drawing interest through influencer content.

Null Hypothesis ( $H_0$ ): There is no association between age group and social media platform preference.

Table 2. 2 (a) Age \* Social media platform preference Cross tabulation.

	Count	Social media platform preference				Total
		Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	Youtube	
Age	21-30	14	29	8	14	65
	31-40	3	2	4	2	11
	41 above	0	2	0	1	3
	Below 20	0	22	4	3	29
<b>Total</b>		<b>17</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>108</b>

Table 2. 2 (b) Chi - Square tests.

Particulars	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	19.777a	9	0.019
Likelihood Ratio	24.383	9	0.004
N of Valid Cases	108		
9 cells (56.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .44.			

Source: Computed data.

**Interpretation:** Since the p-value (0.019) is less than the significance level of 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis. This means that there is a statistically significant association between age group and social media usage. In other words, different age groups exhibit different patterns of social media usage. Specifically, younger individuals (below 20 and those aged 21-30) are more inclined toward Instagram, while Facebook usage is notably higher within the 21-30 age range and less popular among other groups. Twitter and YouTube exhibit moderate usage patterns, with YouTube showing appeal across a broader range of ages.

### 8.3. Identify key characteristics of influencers that enhance engagement and credibility

The second research objective focuses on identifying key characteristics of influencers that enhance engagement and credibility. The following table present the data analysis to address this objective.

**Table 3.** 3 Influencer characteristics in making trust their travel recommendations.

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Authenticity (they appear genuine in their posts)	19	17.60%
Expertise (they have travel-related knowledge or experience)	44	40.74%
Relatability (their lifestyle or preferences align with yours)	6	5.55%
Popularity (number of followers and likes)	30	27.78%
Consistency (they regularly post about travel content)	9	8.33%
<b>Total</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Source:** Primary data.

**Interpretation:** The data on influencer characteristics highlights which qualities make their travel recommendations more trustworthy to followers. The leading factor is expertise, with 40.74% of respondents finding influencers more trustworthy when they possess travel-related knowledge or experience. Popularity, including follower count and engagement metrics, is the second most influential factor 27.78%. Authenticity, or appearing genuine, is also important, with 17.60% of respondents citing this as key to trustworthiness. Consistency, meaning regular posting about travel, is a factor for 8.33% of respondents, highlighting that steady, travel-focused content can reinforce credibility. Relatability, or having similar lifestyle or preferences, is influential for 5.55% of respondents. Overall, the data suggests that expertise and popularity play the largest roles in fostering trust, while authenticity, consistency, and relatability also contribute but to a lesser degree.

#### 8.4. Examine influencer marketing's effectiveness compared to traditional tourism marketing.

The third research objective aims to compare the effectiveness of influencer marketing with traditional tourism marketing. The following tables presents the data analysis to address this objective.

**Table 4.** 1 Trustworthy content for travel inspiration.

Contents	Frequency	Percent
Influencer recommendations	63	58.33%
Official tourism board content	20	18.52%
Travel website or guide reviews	15	13.89%
Traditional ads	10	9.26%
Other	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Source:** Computed data.

**Interpretation:** Table 4.1 provides insights into the types of content that respondents find most trustworthy for travel inspiration. Among the 108 participants, a majority (58.33%) trust influencer recommendations more than other sources, suggesting that influencers may be seen as more authentic and relatable, potentially because they share personal experiences and curated insights. In contrast, 18.52% trust content from official tourism boards, indicating a degree of trust in authoritative, professionally curated sources that may be viewed as reliable but less personalized. Travel websites or guide reviews are trusted by 13.89%, reflecting that while these sources are informative, they may not have the same personal appeal as influencer recommendations. Only 9.26% of respondents trust traditional ads, which could imply that conventional marketing lacks the credibility that more experience-based content offers. Notably, no respondents selected "Other," underscoring that these four primary sources cover the main avenues of trustworthy content for most

participants. Overall, influencer content leads in trustworthiness, showing a trend toward valuing experiential, relatable sources over formal or commercial content.

**Table 4.** 2 Sources of travel recommendations impact interest in a particular destination.

Options	Frequency	Percent
Influencer recommendation	65	60.19%
Traditional ad	23	21.30%
Both equally	12	11.11%
Neither	8	7.40%
<b>Total</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Source:** Computed data.

**Interpretation:** The data in Table 4.2 reveals how different sources of travel recommendations impact interest in a particular destination. Among the 108 respondents, the majority (60.19%) reported that they are more influenced by recommendations from influencers compared to traditional advertisements. This preference suggests that influencer endorsements hold significant sway in shaping travel interests, possibly due to the perceived authenticity or relatability of influencer content. Traditional advertisements influenced 21.30% of respondents, indicating that while traditional marketing remains relevant, it may not be as compelling as influencer-driven content for this audience. A smaller portion, 11.11%, indicated that both influencer recommendations and traditional ads equally affected their interest, suggesting some value in a mixed marketing approach. Only 7.40% of respondents were not influenced by either option, highlighting that nearly all participants find some type of external input valuable when considering destinations. This distribution suggests a trend toward influencer recommendations as a dominant factor in travel-related decision-making.

## 9. Suggestions and conclusion

Since scenic locations and local food/culture are most persuasive, travel brands and influencers should focus on content that highlights these aspects. Using high-quality visuals and authentic experiences will resonate deeply with audiences seeking inspiration for their next travel destination. Brands should prioritize working with influencers who are perceived as experts in travel, as this is the most significant trust factor for respondents. Given the preference for Instagram among younger individuals, travel marketing strategies should prioritize this platform for reaching Gen Z and millennials. Travel brands should select influencers who are transparent and authentic in their interactions to ensure their content resonates with followers in a credible way. Travel brands should consider a multi-platform approach to ensure they reach diverse age groups and increase overall engagement. To combine the trust placed in influencers with the authority of official tourism bodies, brands could explore joint campaigns that integrate influencer-driven content with information from tourism boards. This hybrid approach can provide a balance of authenticity and authority, further strengthening the persuasive power of the content.

This survey emphasizes how important influencer marketing and social media are becoming to the tourism sector. By focusing on visually compelling content, collaborating with trusted influencers, and tailoring strategies to age-specific platform preferences, travel brands can significantly enhance their ability to engage and influence potential travellers. These findings offer valuable insights that can be used to shape more effective and targeted marketing campaigns that resonate with today's travel-savvy, social-media-engaged audience.

## 10. Scope for further study

Even though this analysis offers insightful information on how well influencer recommendations work in tourism marketing, there are a number of areas that might need further study to improve tactics and uncover fresh trends.

Further research could investigate which specific types of content (e.g., photos, videos, blogs, or live streams) are most effective in influencing travel decisions. It would also be valuable to assess how different forms of content resonate with various demographics, helping brands tailor content formats to the preferences of target audiences.

The present examination focuses on the immediate interest in travel and the credibility of influencer-generated content; however, subsequent inquiries might delve into the enduring impacts of influencer endorsements on travel-related behaviors. A longitudinal study could assess whether initial trust leads to actual bookings and travel decisions or if the influence fades over time.

Future research could investigate the economic impact of influencer-driven content on the travel industry. By analysing how influencer recommendations lead to increased bookings or spending, researchers can provide more concrete data on the return on investment (ROI) for influencer marketing campaigns.

#### Author Contributions

Conceptualization, M.K. and V.V.; methodology, M.K.; validation, M.K.; formal analysis, M.K.; writing—original draft preparation, M.K.; writing—review and editing, M.K.; visualization, M.K.; supervision, V.V.; project administration, V.V. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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#### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### Declaration

I hereby declare that the research work presented in this paper is original and has been conducted by us. Any sources used or referenced have been properly cited, and no part of this work has been submitted elsewhere for academic or professional purposes.

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