

The Intersection of Social Media, Influencer Attributes, and Travel Intentions: A Review of Research Trends

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ABSTRACT

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Introduction: Increased use of social media in shaping consumers' behaviour has significantly influenced tourism marketing, and social media influencers (SMIs) have become significant drivers in the formation of destination images and travel plans. This review investigates the effects that specific influencer attributes—credibility, authenticity, and the quality of content—have on consumers' decision-making processes and the mediating psychological processes.

Methods: Systematic review of peer-reviewed academic literature between the period 2010 and 2024 in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar was conducted. Empirical and theoretical research on influencer marketing, digital tourist behaviour, and psychological models of persuasiveness were included in the review. The analysis employed the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM).

Results: Results confirm that influencer credibility, relatability, and content consistency have significant effects on destination image and travel intention. These effects are mediated by the most important psychological processes of emotional engagement, FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), parasocial interaction, and social comparison. In addition, the existing literature focused primarily on Instagram without exploring other platforms such as TikTok and Pinterest, less researched destinations, and the application of nano-influencers.

Conclusions: This review highlights the need for more culturally diverse, ethically reflective, and methodologically varied research. It calls for increased focus on nano-influencers, long-term behavioural outcomes, and the integration of immersive technologies (AR/VR) and AI-generated content. Practical implications are outlined for marketers, tourism brands, and destination management organizations seeking to leverage influencer partnerships effectively and responsibly.

Keywords: Social media influencers, travel intention, influencer attributes, digital tourism, psychological mechanisms, destination marketing, Theory of Planned Behaviour.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the convergence of mobile technologies, high-speed internet, and social networking platforms has transformed how people explore, evaluate, and experience travel. The tourism industry, once driven by brochures, TV commercials, and travel agents, now operates in a highly visual and interactive digital ecosystem (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). With over 4.7 billion people worldwide using social media (Statista, 2023), a significant portion engages with travel-related content, significantly altering tourism marketing strategies.

Digitalization has enabled real-time communication, peer recommendations, and participatory storytelling, turning travellers from mere consumers into creators and promoters of travel experiences (Mariani et al., 2020). User-generated content (UGC), such as Instagram photos, YouTube vlogs, and travel blogs, now plays a critical role in shaping destination perceptions and influencing potential tourists. Social media influencers have emerged as powerful intermediaries between the public and the destinations (Abidin, 2021).

It is the influencers who create engaged audiences based on consistent content and self-presentation. They are also seen as being more credible and accessible than common celebrities because they engage constantly with the audience

and the authenticity that the content appears to possess (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Influencer content also differs from common commercials because it integrates into the audience's everyday life and is less intrusive and more believable (Casaló et al., 2018).

Influencers are now a part of tourism marketing. They captivate audiences with personal narratives, visually appealing posts, and interactive encounters, and they often generate emotional reactions that construct destination images (Kim & Kim, 2020). Most destination marketing organizations (DMOs) now work with influencers as a way to reach both global and niche audiences efficiently.

High-profile campaigns like #MyDubai and “Rent a Finn” demonstrate the potential for influencer content to sway public opinion, bring in tourist arrivals, and build national brand reputation (Mariani et al., 2022). These demonstrate that influencers do not just recommend places but also narrate stories, build expectations and shape behaviour throughout the decision-making process. Figure 1 below depicts the influence of influencers, the credibility and engagement of which on these platforms have the potential to significantly sway the traveller’s decision.

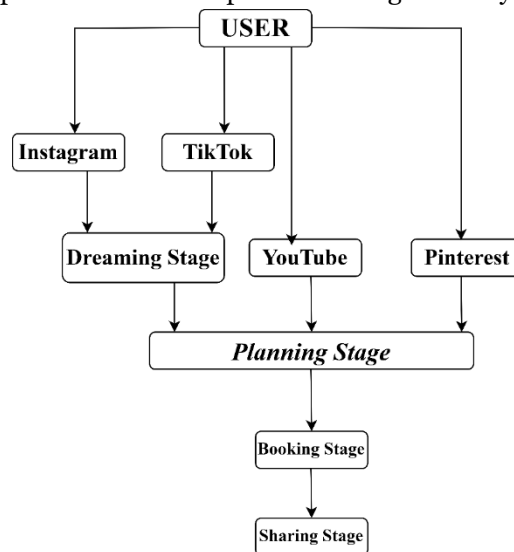


Figure 1: Platform Influence on Travel Decision-Making Stages

It is essential for both theoretical construction and practical application that the impacts of social media influencers on travel intentions are understood. From the theoretical point of view, it builds on extant theory such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) that explains behavioural intention in terms of attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) that distinguishes between the central and peripheral routes to persuasion. These models form the foundation for the explanation of the influence that influencer content—rational or emotional—has on decision-making concerning travel (Audrezet et al., 2020)

Practically, the research has implications for destination marketing organizations, tourism operators, and content producers. In an era in which trust, authenticity, and relatability can be more valuable than conventional advertising, knowing how various influencer types influence different audience segments can enhance campaign targeting and efficiency (Ahmad, Goel, Goyal, Venaik, & Kumar, 2023). Furthermore, exploring the ethical aspects of influencer marketing is ever more critical, particularly in the context of increasing concerns regarding over-tourism, environmental sustainability, and the commodification of culture (Gretzel et al., 2019).

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Social Media and Travel Behaviour

Social media has revolutionized the manner in which travellers find, review, and select vacation spots. In contrast to conventional marketing media, social media enable instant engagement, customized suggestions, and peer-to-peer influence. Travelers now depend more and more on user-generated content as well as professional influencers' content to influence what they anticipate and decide about vacation (Barta et al., 2023). Figure 2 below presents a

visual representation of how different attributes of social media influencers (SMIs)—such as credibility, relatability, authenticity, and content quality—affect a traveller’s intention to visit a particular destination.

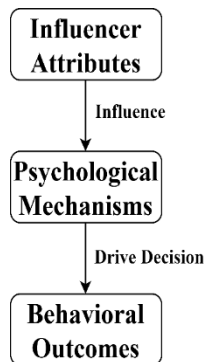


Figure 2: Influencer Attributes & their Impact on Travel Intention

2.2. Role of Social Media Platforms in Travel Decision-Making

Social media platforms serve as both information sources and inspiration engines throughout the travel journey. From initial idea generation to booking and post-trip sharing, platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Pinterest guide users through multiple stages of decision-making (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Each platform plays a distinct role:

- Instagram is favoured for aspirational content. Travelers use it to visually explore potential destinations, accommodations, and experiences (Ahmad, Arora, Sayal, Kumar, & Kumar, 2025).
- YouTube supports longer-form travel content, such as vlogs, destination walkthroughs, and day-by-day itineraries, helping users visualize a complete travel experience (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009).
- TikTok offers short, engaging videos that highlight specific activities, local secrets, or tips—appealing to spontaneous and visually-driven users (Chae, 2018).
- Facebook and Twitter facilitate travel planning through group discussions, travel community posts, and updates from tourism boards or brands (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

Research shows that social media platforms act not only as search tools but also as social proof mechanisms. Seeing a peer or influencer enjoy a destination can validate its appeal and reduce perceived risk, especially in unfamiliar regions (Gretzel et al., 2007). This impact is especially strong among millennials and Gen Z travelers, who use social media as their primary source of travel ideas and validation (Mariani et al., 2020).

2.3. User-Generated Content vs. Influencer Content

Both user-generated content (UGC) and influencer-created content influence travel behaviour, but they function differently in terms of reach, credibility, and perceived value (Ahmad, Goyal, Arora, Bahuguna, & Budakoti, 2025).

User-Generated Content (UGC)

UGC includes posts, reviews, photos, or videos shared by everyday users without formal affiliations to a brand or destination. Platforms like TripAdvisor, Google Reviews, and social media tags (#TravelThailand, #VisitBali) offer thousands of user experiences. This type of content is likely to be authentic, diverse, and abundant, creating a general impression of what a place is like according to multiple perspectives (Xiang et al., 2015).

Influencer Content

In contrast, influencers create highly constructed, specific content that contains explicit framing. While often strategic or sponsored in nature, influencer content is perceived as aspirational and authoritative where the influencer is viewed as credible (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Influencers provide higher-quality images, well-told stories, and more explicit calls-to-action—making their content more effective at creating destination image and eliciting planning or booking behaviour (Casaló et al., 2018).

Table 1: Comparison of User-Generated Content and Influencer Content in Travel Decision-Making

Aspect	User-Generated Content	Influencer Content
Source	General public	Professional/amateur influencers
Perceived authenticity	High (unfiltered)	Mixed (depends on sponsorship)
Visual quality	Variable	High-quality, branded
Narrative	Informal, fragmented	Curated, purposeful
Role in decision-making	Reassurance and social proof	Inspiration and persuasion

Table 1 highlights differences in the source, perceived authenticity, visual quality, narrative style, and their role in influencing destination selection.

2.4. Visual Appeal and Storytelling in Destination Promotion

The role of visual media in travel marketing has grown with the rise of image- and video-based platforms. Aesthetic appeal especially when combined with storytelling has been shown to significantly influence a traveller’s perception of a place and their intention to visit (Kim & Kim, 2020).

Influencers and content creators use visual storytelling to:

- Show hidden or local experiences
- Highlight moods (e.g., relaxation, adventure, culture)
- Create emotional connections
- Frame destinations within broader lifestyle narratives

Research by De Veirman et al. (2017) and Pencarelli et al. (2020) indicates that visual storytelling increases message retention and emotional response, especially when aligned with the viewer’s self-image or aspirations. Well-composed images, cinematic videos, and consistent colour schemes all contribute to forming a strong affective image of a destination, which influences interest and desire to travel (Gannon & Prothero, 2018).

Visual content also shapes cognitive impressions such as perceived cleanliness, accessibility, crowd levels, and safety—based on what the user observes in influencer videos or photos.

Furthermore, the emotional framing of visual content (sunset views, family moments, cultural immersion) deepens user engagement, making social media more persuasive than static advertisements or brochures (Hudders et al., 2021).

Social media has become an integral part of travel behaviour, influencing how individuals discover, evaluate, and choose destinations. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube enable visual, emotional, and community-driven interactions that shape both inspiration and intention (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2022). While user-generated content provides social validation and authenticity, influencer content offers curated experiences and persuasive narratives. Together, these forms of content—amplified through visual appeal and storytelling play a central role in guiding travel-related attitudes and decisions (Khamis et al., 2017)

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media has transformed how individuals discover, evaluate, and choose travel destinations. Unlike traditional marketing channels, social platforms facilitate real-time interaction, personalized recommendations, and peer-based influence. Tourists increasingly rely on digital content from both everyday users and professional influencers to shape their travel expectations and decisions (Lee & Eastin, 2021).

Social media platforms serve as both information sources and inspiration engines throughout the travel journey. From initial idea generation to booking and post-trip sharing, platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Pinterest guide users through multiple stages of decision-making (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Each platform plays a distinct role:

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Research shows that social media platforms act not only as search tools but also as social proof mechanisms. Seeing a peer or influencer enjoy a destination can validate its appeal and reduce perceived risk, especially in unfamiliar regions (Gretzel et al., 2007). This impact is especially strong among millennials and Gen Z travellers, who use social media as their primary source of travel ideas and validation (Mariani et al., 2020).

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Though often sponsored or strategic, influencer content is perceived as aspirational and authoritative when the influencer is considered credible (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Influencers often deliver higher-quality visuals, coherent storytelling, and more direct calls to action—making their content more effective in shaping destination image and encouraging planning or booking behaviour (Casaló et al., 2018).

The role of visual media in travel marketing has grown with the rise of image- and video-based platforms. Aesthetic appeal—especially when combined with storytelling—has been shown to significantly influence a traveller's perception of a place and their intention to visit (Kim & Kim, 2020). Influencers and content creators use visual storytelling to:

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Social media has become an integral part of travel behaviour, influencing how individuals discover, evaluate, and choose destinations. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube enable visual, emotional, and community-driven interactions that shape both inspiration and intention. While user-generated content provides social validation and authenticity, influencer content offers curated experiences and persuasive narratives. Together, these

forms of content amplified through visual appeal and storytelling play a central role in guiding travel-related attitudes and decisions (Ahmad, Goyal, Arora, Kumar, Chythanya, & Chaudhary, 2023).

Table 2: Summary of Key Studies on Influencers, Social Media, and Travel Intentions

Author(s)	Focus Area	Platform(s)	Key Findings	Methodology
Xiang & Gretzel (2010)	Role of social media in travel search	General social media	Social media is a dominant source of travel information	Literature review
Casaló et al. (2018)	Influencer credibility and opinion leadership	Instagram	Credibility and relatability influence destination perceptions and trust	Survey
De Veirman et al. (2017)	Impact of follower count and content fit	Instagram	More followers ≠ higher trust; content relevance matters more	Experiment
Kim & Kim (2020)	Visual storytelling and travel intentions	Instagram, YouTube	Aesthetic appeal and emotional narrative increase travel intention	Structural equation modeling
Pencarelli et al. (2020)	Parasocial interaction and influencer trust	Instagram	Trust and parasocial bonds drive stronger behavioral responses	Survey + path analysis
Sokolova & Kefi (2020)	Credibility and parasocial interaction	Instagram, YouTube	Influencer trust affects buying and travel intention	Survey
Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier (2009)	Tourist experiences via shared videos	YouTube	Videos shape cognitive and affective impressions of destinations	Content analysis
Kay et al. (2020)	Disclosure effects and influencer type	Instagram	Micro-influencers often outperform macro-influencers in engagement	Experimental design
Lou & Yuan (2019)	Message value and consumer trust	Instagram	Informational and emotional value enhance trust and purchase intent	Survey
Mariani et al. (2020)	Instagram’s role in destination marketing	Instagram	Instagram is central to visual brand storytelling in tourism	Review + case examples

Table 2 reflects the overview of key psychological mechanisms through which influencer content influences user perceptions, emotional responses, and travel-related decisions

3.1 Critical Review of Existing Research:

Influencer Attributes: Credibility, Relatability, and Content Quality: Research has consistently demonstrated that influencer credibility, relatability, and the quality of their content are key factors that shape destination perceptions and consumer travel intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2020). Influencers who are perceived as credible and relatable are more likely to have a positive impact on consumer behaviour. However, studies have predominantly focused on macro and micro influencers, while nano-influencers—who often have smaller but more engaged audiences—remain underexplored. Nano-influencers have been viewed as being more authentic and credible, especially in niches, but the role that they play in tourism marketing has yet to be examined in depth (Kay et al., 2020).

Instagram has remained the most dominant platform for tourism marketing (Mariani et al., 2020), newer platforms like TikTok and Pinterest offer alternative engagement forms that may have varied impacts on travel intentions. TikTok, for example, uses short, highly engaging content that appeals well among young consumers and has the potential to create viral trends that trigger spontaneous travel behaviour (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). The dearth of research that compares the effectiveness of influencer marketing on the platforms is the most significant gap that limits the generalizability of the results derived from Instagram-based research.

Literature covered here pertains directly to the first goal: investigating the influence that characteristics such as credibility, relatability, and content quality have on destination image and travel intentions. Research gap in the less researched function of nano-influencers also pertains to this goal because it calls for further examination of the manner in which smaller influencers influence travel choice among differing segments.

It underscores the need for more holistic models that bring emotional engagement, FOMO, parasocial interaction, and social comparison into one. Considering the interaction between these mechanisms will allow subsequent research to better account for the impact that influencers have on travel decision-making.

3.2. Identified Gaps in the Literature:

1. Nano-Influencers: Although macro and micro-influencers have been studied in detail, nano-influencers' influence has yet to be examined despite having greater engagement rates and perceived authenticity (Kay et al., 2020). Their potential influence on the travel intentions of niche tourism markets needs to be investigated in the future.

2. Dominance by Instagram: Prevalence within the literature limits the generalizability of what we know about influencer marketing on other platforms, such as TikTok or Pinterest. Each platform possesses unique characteristics that may have differing impacts on intentions to travel. The platform gap within the literature provides the potential for extending research from Instagram into newer platforms that engage younger, mobile-based consumers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

3. Psychological Mechanism Isolation: Despite affective commitment, FOMO, parasocial interaction, and social comparison being individually highly popular factors, they are generally studied in solitude. Combined models examining how these psychological mechanisms intersect and operate cumulatively in influencing touristic decision-making are needed to further understand the dynamics involved in influencer marketing for tourism.

3.3 Cultural Diversity and Gaps in the Literature:

There is a gap in the current literature on influencer marketing in tourism in the field of cross-cultural research. Research has largely been conducted within Western contexts in North America and Europe, and there has not been significant consideration for the way that influencer marketing exists within other cultures. That narrow vision denies the complete picture of the way that cultural differences influence the effectiveness of influencer marketing in tourism.

3.3.1 Cross-Cultural Gaps in the Literature:

1. Western-centric Research: Most existing research focuses on Western nations like the United States, the UK, Germany, and other Western nations (Mariani et al., 2020). These studies usually focus on the psychological processes of FOMO, social comparison, and parasocial interaction within the individualism and consumerism framework common in most Western cultures. Therefore, for example, Lou & Yuan (2019) analyse the effect of influencer credibility on Instagram using European and North American markets. Their findings may not hold across all cultures, especially where there are diverse social structures, values, or relationship dynamics.

2. Cultural Differences in Influencer Effectiveness: Cross-cultural studies are sparse, but they point to distinct differences in how influencer content is perceived across different regions. In collectivist cultures, such as many East Asian and Latin American countries, social influence and group harmony play a more significant role in decision-making than in individualistic cultures (Hofstede, 2001). For instance, research on China by Xiang & Gretzel (2010) suggests that Chinese consumers place more trust in peer reviews and influencers who appear to belong to the same cultural or social group.

3. Southeast Asia and Latin America example: One such example that stands out is the instance of tourism in Southeast Asia and Latin America where the success of influencer marketing varies significantly from Western contexts. As one example, in Malaysia and Indonesia, the influence of micro-influencers in the region has been found to be stronger than that of international influencers because they are seen as being more credible and more relatable (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Foreign influencers in these regions are less effective than influencers who create content in the native language and who have the capacity to mirror the customs and values within the region, towards the importance of being culturally relevant.

4. Cultural Sensitivity and Trust towards Influencers: Similarly, in the case of the Middle Eastern region as well, cultural sensitivity also decides the success of influencer marketing. De Veirman et al.'s (2017) study found that the authenticity and credibility perceived by the influencers in these regions are very closely related to cultural norms such as respect towards religion, tradition, and family. Influencer posts that resonate within the local practices in these cultures are significantly more likely to resonate and have influence on the intentions to travel. Influencer campaigns that do not take these cultural sensitivities into consideration are likely to be seen as inauthentic and less likely to build trust (Nadeem et al., 2020).

5. Cross-Cultural Variations in Emotional Engagement: Emotional engagement is another area where cultural variations can influence influencer success. As an example, Kim & Kim's (2020) visual storytelling in tourism study illustrates that Westerners are likely to engage more with aspirational and visual content, while in most countries in Asia, informative and utilitarian content will prove more effective. This necessitates that tourism influencers tailor content based on the emotional and cognitive preferences of different cultural groups.

There exists no cross-cultural research on influencer marketing in tourism, which is one significant gap in the literature. It constrains the amount that we know about the potential effectiveness of influencer marketing across the world's tourism markets. Effective influencer communication in one cultural setting would not necessarily work in another because the success of influencer marketing usually depends on cultural values, social norms, and the establishment of trust that does not exist universally (Pöyry et al., 2019).

3.4. Research Objective

a. To examine the impact of certain influencer attributes such as credibility, similarity, and expertise on the destination appeal and travel behaviour of tourists.

b. To recognize and examine the psychological mechanisms (e.g., emotional involvement, FOMO, parasocial interaction) by which travel decision-making is influenced by social media updates of influencers.

4. INFLUENCER MARKETING IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

4.1. Evolution of Influencer Marketing in Tourism

Conventionally, destination promotion depended on official tourism boards, travel magazines, and guidebooks. These traditional channels offered standardized one-way information with no personal context or relevance (Schouten et al., 2020).

With the emergence of Web 2.0 and the rise of the social media platform, travellers also turned towards user-generated content, peer reviews, and blog posts for destination information. Travel blogs during the early 2000s were the original generation of digital influencers. As the use of platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Pinterest grew, content creators began creating audiences around visually stimulating, experience-driven narratives. This marked the dawn of the age of the social media influencers (SMIs) as the centrepiece for tourism marketing (Sparks et al., 2021).

By the late 2010s, Destination Marketing Organizations and brands were actively working with influencers in creating highly specific, immersive campaigns that would speak to specific niches in the marketplace. Influencer marketing shifted from an informal trend to a structured sub-discipline of digital marketing in tourism, supported by contracts, performance analytics, and strategic content planning (Mariani et al., 2020).

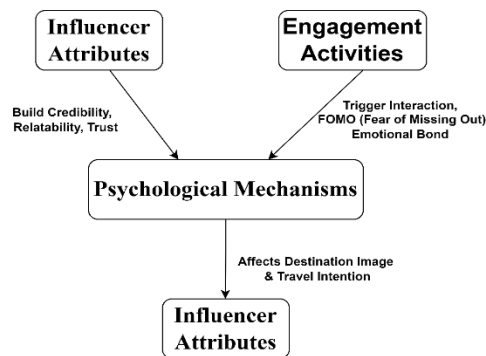


Figure 3: Influencer Engagement Dynamics and Psychological Mechanisms

Figure 3 visualizes the relationship between influencer engagement dynamics (such as how influencers interact with their audiences) and the psychological mechanisms that mediate these interactions, influencing travel intentions.

4.2. Types of Influencers: Nano, Micro, Macro, and Mega

Influencers are typically categorized by their follower count, which is often linked to their reach, engagement potential, and type of audience relationships. This classification helps marketers select influencers based on campaign goals whether to build broad awareness or drive niche trust (Tandoc et al., 2015).

Table 3: Types of Influencers and Their Relevance to Tourism Marketing Objectives

Type	Follower Count	Typical Attributes	Relevance to Objective 1
Nano	< 10,000	Highly personal, niche content, strong local ties	High relatability and trust; low reach
Micro	10,000 – 100,000	Balanced engagement and quality; niche authority	High engagement; perceived authenticity
Macro	100,000 – 1 million	Professional quality, lifestyle branding, broader reach	Good reach and visual appeal; lower intimacy
Mega/Celebrity	> 1 million	Mass reach, mainstream appeal, global visibility	High influence but often lower relatability

Table 3 categorizes influencers based on their follower count, ranging from nano-influencers to mega-influencers.

Micro-influencers are often considered the most effective in tourism for generating parasocial interaction and authentic engagement (Kay et al., 2020). They may lack celebrity status but are valued for their credibility and perceived expertise, especially in niche travel areas such as eco-tourism, solo female travel, or cultural immersion. This directly supports Objective 1, as their trustworthiness shapes traveller perceptions.

On the other hand, macro and mega influencers can be powerful in high-budget campaigns aimed at rapid visibility or repositioning of destinations, such as the case of Dubai or Iceland’s influencer-led campaigns (Vrontis et al., 2021).

4.3. Influencer–Audience Engagement Dynamics

The core strength of influencer marketing lies in the interactive, emotionally resonant relationships influencers build with their audiences. Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers communicate frequently with followers through comments, DMs, Q&A sessions, polls, and real-time content. This facilitates parasocial interaction, a psychological mechanism where followers feel emotionally connected and invested in an influencer’s journey and lifestyle (Pencarelli et al., 2020). Several dimensions characterize influencer–audience engagement:

a) Emotional Engagement

Influencers often share personal stories, travel challenges, and cultural encounters that evoke emotions such as awe, nostalgia, or wanderlust. Emotional content helps audiences form affective bonds with both the influencer and the destination, which aligns with Objective 2.

b) Perceived Relatability and Authenticity

Especially in the case of micro and nano influencers, followers perceive content as honest, unfiltered, and similar to their own travel realities. This sense of similarity increases identification, making audiences more likely to trust and follow travel advice (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

c) Social Proof and FOMO

Seeing others especially admired influencers—traveling to a location can trigger FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), a driver of spontaneous interest and booking behaviour. Repetitive exposure to appealing destinations through multiple influencers amplifies this effect.

d) Interactivity and Reciprocity

Two-way communication enhances credibility and reinforces the influencer's expertise. For example, influencers responding to follower questions about visa policies, local customs, or budget tips increase their perceived value as reliable travel sources.

Influencer marketing in the tourism industry has matured into a strategic practice driven by platform innovation, evolving consumer trust, and audience-centric engagement. The type of influencer chosen—whether nano or mega—impacts not just campaign reach but also audience psychology. Successful influencer marketing depends on credibility, relatability, content quality, and the ability to trigger emotional and behavioral responses. These dynamics explain why influencer content increasingly drives travel interest, destination perception, and ultimately, travel intention.

5. TRAVEL INTENTIONS AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Travel intentions represent the psychological inclination or readiness of a consumer to engage in travel-related behaviour, such as researching, planning, or booking a trip. In digital environments, where decision-making is shaped by an abundance of visual, narrative, and peer-generated content, travel intentions are increasingly influenced by psychological and social factors—many of which are activated by social media influencers. This section explores the primary factors shaping travel intentions, the theoretical frameworks used to explain such behaviour, and the mechanisms of social proof and parasocial interaction in tourism contexts.

5.1. Factors Influencing Travel Intentions

Several studies have identified a combination of cognitive, emotional, and social factors that influence travel intentions in the context of social media and influencer exposure. These include:

- **Destination Image:** Formed through both cognitive (e.g., infrastructure, safety, activities) and affective (e.g., emotional appeal, atmosphere) impressions (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).
- **Perceived Value and Utility:** Travelers weigh costs, convenience, and the expected benefits of visiting a destination.
- **Emotional Engagement:** Emotions evoked by influencer content (e.g., awe, inspiration, FOMO) significantly shape desire and intent to travel (Kim & Kim, 2020).
- **Trust and Credibility of the Source:** Audiences are more likely to act on suggestions from influencers they perceive as authentic and knowledgeable (Casaló et al., 2018).
- **Social Influence:** Decisions are often shaped by peer behaviour and societal norms, especially when validated by a visible or admired online figure (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

These factors do not operate independently but interact dynamically through psychological processing and social media engagement.

5.2. Theoretical Frameworks

a) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) posits that behaviour is primarily predicted by three components:

- Attitude toward the behaviour
- Subjective norms (social pressure or expectations)
- Perceived behavioural control (confidence in ability to perform the behaviour)

In tourism, TPB has been widely used to explain how travellers form intentions to visit destinations. Influencer content impacts attitude by creating favourable impressions, affects subjective norms by showing what others are doing, and can even enhance perceived control through practical tips and recommendations. For example, a YouTube vlogger showcasing step-by-step solo travel in Japan may improve both perceived feasibility and positive attitude toward that trip.

b) Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) explains how individuals process persuasive messages through two routes:

- Central route: Deep, thoughtful evaluation of the message content (e.g., cost, itinerary, logistics)
- Peripheral route: Influence based on superficial cues (e.g., attractiveness, popularity of influencer, visual appeal)

Influencer content often works through the peripheral route, especially when content is entertaining, emotionally charged, or visually rich. However, high-involvement users (e.g., those planning a complex trip) may shift to the central route, critically evaluating destination details. The dual-route approach explains how different types of followers respond to influencer messaging depending on motivation and involvement.

5.3. Social Proof and Parasocial Relationships

a) Social Proof

Social proof refers to the tendency of individuals to align their behaviours or choices with those of others, especially in uncertain situations (Cialdini, 2001). On social media, the visible popularity of a destination—measured through likes, shares, influencer visits, or viral trends—acts as a form of validation.

For instance, when multiple influencers highlight a previously unknown destination (e.g., Cappadocia, Georgia, or the Faroe Islands), their collective exposure acts as normative pressure, influencing followers to consider the destination favourably.

Social proof is especially powerful when:

- The influencer is perceived as similar to the audience
- The content is interactive (e.g., Q&A about the trip)
- Other users are visibly engaging with the post (comments, saves)

b) Parasocial Relationships

Parasocial interaction refers to the one-sided psychological bond that audiences form with media personalities (Horton & Wohl, 1956). On social media, these relationships can become surprisingly intimate as influencers share personal stories, travel experiences, and emotions.

In tourism, parasocial relationships:

- Increase trust in influencer recommendations
- Enhance emotional connection with the destination
- Lower perceived risk by simulating “a friend’s advice”

Pencarelli et al. (2020) found that parasocial interaction significantly increases the effectiveness of influencer content in shaping destination perceptions and behavioural intentions, especially among younger audiences.

6. RESEARCH TRENDS AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Social media influencers and their influence on travel intentions have been a rapidly growing area of research in the last decade, as digital interaction transformed tourism behaviour. To comprehend how this research area has evolved, an exploration of the methods used, the geographic concentration of the studies, and the scholarly channels where this research is clustered is necessary. Such a review of the trends also identifies current limitations in scope, data variety, and methodological sophistication.

6.1. Overview of Methodologies Used in Previous Researches

Literature prefers quantitative approaches most notably in the form of survey research based on constructs borrowed from communication and behavioural theory. Surveys typically examine the relationship between variables such as influencer credibility, parasocial interaction, and the intention to visit using structural equation modelling or regression analysis.

Table 4: Methodological Approaches in Influencer Marketing and Tourism Research

Methodological Approach	Typical Tools/Techniques	Purpose	Example Studies
Quantitative	Surveys, SEM, regression	Hypothesis testing; modelling behavioural intentions	Casaló et al. (2018); Lou & Yuan (2019); Pencarelli et al. (2020)
Qualitative	Interviews, content analysis, netnography	Exploring perceptions, narratives, and meanings	Djafarova & Trofimenko (2019); Abidin (2016)
Mixed Methods	Survey + interviews or content analysis	Combining statistical power with contextual insight	Sokolova & Kefi (2020); Tafesse & Wood (2021)

Table 4 summarizes the various methodological approaches used in studies of influencer marketing in the tourism sector.

While quantitative methods dominate, a growing number of studies now use qualitative or mixed methods to explore how influencer content is produced and interpreted by audiences. For example, content analysis of Instagram posts and YouTube vlogs is used to assess narrative structures, visual storytelling, and emotional framing (Kim & Kim, 2020).

A key gap remains in longitudinal designs—very few studies track changes in attitudes or behaviour over time. This limits our understanding of sustained influencer impact or destination loyalty.

6.2. Popular Journals and Regions of Study

Research on influencer marketing and tourism behaviour is published across a wide range of disciplines, including marketing, tourism, communication studies, and digital media. The most frequently cited journals include:

- Journal of Travel Research
- Tourism Management
- Journal of Destination Marketing & Management
- International Journal of Advertising
- Journal of Interactive Advertising

These journals tend to publish empirical work that blends theoretical rigor with managerial relevance, often featuring case studies or country-specific findings.

In terms of regional focus, the majority of studies are concentrated in:

- North America and Europe: These regions dominate the literature in terms of both subject and authorship. Countries like the U.S., UK, Germany, and Italy are frequently examined, often focusing on influencer marketing frameworks and consumer behaviour.
- East and Southeast Asia: Countries such as China, South Korea, Indonesia, and Malaysia are increasingly represented, especially in studies that explore mobile usage and platform-specific behaviour.
- Underrepresented Regions: Despite rich tourism contexts, Africa, Latin America, and the Global South are underexplored. Few studies address how influencers shape travel behaviour in these regions, presenting a significant opportunity for future research.

6.3. Citation Analysis and Bibliometric Review

While a formal bibliometric analysis was not the core method in this study, existing citation studies and reviews (e.g., Mariani et al., 2020; Xiang et al., 2015) offer insight into how the field is evolving.

- The most cited works often apply behavioural models (e.g., TPB, S-O-R) to influencer research.
- Casaló et al. (2018) and De Veirman et al. (2017) are among the most frequently cited in relation to influencer credibility and follower dynamics.
- Instagram is the most researched platform, followed by YouTube and more recently TikTok.
- Highly cited papers tend to focus on source credibility, emotional engagement, and parasocial interaction as mediators of consumer response.

A keyword co-occurrence analysis (in tools like VOSviewer or Biblioshiny) in prior studies has shown that terms such as credibility, travel intention, destination image, parasocial interaction, and social media engagement appear most frequently in this research domain.

The study of influencer-driven travel behaviour has matured, with a methodological tilt toward quantitative survey research, though qualitative insights are gaining ground. Major tourism and marketing journals have served as the primary outlets, with most research centered on developed markets. There remains a clear need for methodological diversification, cross-cultural exploration, and longitudinal approaches to deepen our understanding of how influencer attributes shape consumer decision-making in diverse tourism contexts.

7. GAPS AND LIMITATIONS IN THE LITERATURE

While the literature on social media influencers and travel intentions has grown substantially in recent years, several important gaps and limitations remain. These limitations hinder the development of a holistic and inclusive understanding of how influencer content shapes tourism behaviour, particularly across diverse populations, platforms, and psychological outcomes. Identifying these gaps is essential for guiding future inquiry and ensuring that research remains relevant, balanced, and contextually grounded.

7.1. Overemphasis on Specific Platforms

One of the most consistent limitations in the existing literature is the overreliance on Instagram as the primary platform for studying influencer marketing in tourism. While Instagram is undeniably important due to its visual and interactive nature, this narrow focus has led to the underrepresentation of other emerging platforms, such as:

- TikTok, which emphasizes short-form viral content and appeals to younger, mobile-first travellers.
- YouTube, which supports long-form narrative storytelling and allows deeper emotional engagement.
- Facebook and Twitter, which still play roles in group travel planning, discussion, and event-based tourism.

As a result, platform-specific affordances and audience behaviours remain insufficiently compared across different media ecosystems. The assumption that Instagram-based findings are generalizable to other platforms is problematic and limits the external validity of conclusions drawn.

7.2. Lack of Cross-Cultural and Regional Comparisons

Most empirical studies are heavily concentrated in Western contexts, particularly in North America and Western Europe. While some recent research has expanded into parts of Asia, there is a notable absence of studies from the Global South, including Africa, Latin America, and parts of South and Southeast Asia.

This geographic skew results in a lack of understanding about how cultural variables—such as individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, or uncertainty avoidance—affect:

- Trust in influencers
- Preferred content types
- Interpretation of destination imagery
- Travel motivations and constraints

Cross-cultural studies are needed to determine whether influencer strategies that succeed in one context (e.g., aspirational luxury travel in Europe) are effective or even appropriate in others (e.g., budget or community-based tourism in rural Asia or Africa).

7.3. Limited Research on Nano-Influencers

While macro and micro influencers have been widely studied in tourism marketing, nano-influencers—those with fewer than 10,000 followers—remain largely underexamined. This is surprising given that:

- Nano-influencers often have stronger engagement rates and closer audience relationships.
- Their content tends to be more localized, specific, and authentic.
- They may be particularly effective in promoting community-based or sustainable tourism.

Most existing influencer studies focus on follower count as a measure of influence, yet recent digital marketing insights suggest that intimacy, trust, and perceived similarity—common among nano-influencers—are equally if not more important for behavioral change. Their role in niche tourism segments (e.g., agro-tourism, voluntourism, indigenous experiences) deserves closer investigation.

7.4. Underexplored Psychological Impacts

Research has largely focused on how influencer content positively influences destination appeal and travel intention. However, the negative or complex psychological effects of influencer-driven content in tourism are underexplored. These include:

- **Travel Anxiety:** Overly curated content can create unrealistic expectations or pressure to perform "perfect" travel experiences, contributing to anxiety or dissatisfaction.
- **Over-tourism and Ethical Concerns:** Influencer-led promotion of fragile or culturally sensitive destinations may contribute to environmental degradation, local resentment, or loss of authenticity.
- **FOMO Fatigue:** Continuous exposure to influencer content can lead to emotional fatigue, envy, or a sense of inadequacy among audiences who cannot afford to replicate such experiences.

The current body of literature on social media influencers and travel behaviour has produced valuable insights, particularly around credibility, content appeal, and travel intention. However, several blind spots remain. These include the dominance of Instagram-focused studies, the lack of cross-cultural insights, the neglect of nano-influencers, and the limited attention to psychological side effects such as anxiety or ethical concerns. Addressing these limitations will not only enhance theoretical development but also inform more inclusive and ethically responsible practices in tourism marketing.

Table 5: Summary of Key Limitations and Future Research Opportunities.

Identified Limitation	Description	Future Research Opportunity
Platform Concentration	Most studies focus heavily on Instagram.	Comparative studies across platforms (TikTok, YouTube, Pinterest) to explore diverse dynamics.
Lack of Cross-Cultural Insights	Predominance of Western contexts in current research.	Cross-cultural or cross-regional studies, especially in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia.
Neglect of Nano-Influencers	Limited focus on influencers with <10K followers despite high engagement.	Examine nano-influencer effectiveness in niche, local, or community-based tourism marketing.
Underexplored Psychological Outcomes	Minimal research on travel anxiety, FOMO fatigue, or ethical dilemmas.	Investigate psychological strain, destination over-saturation, and perceived authenticity gaps.
Limited Longitudinal Research	Most studies are cross-sectional, capturing only short-term influence.	Design longitudinal studies to measure sustained impact on destination loyalty and return visits.
One-Sided Impact Focus	Research often highlights only positive influence on travel behavior.	Include studies on unintended effects (e.g., dissatisfaction, over-tourism, unrealistic expectations).

Table 5: shows the summary of current gaps in the literature on influencer marketing in tourism, with corresponding opportunities for future academic inquiry.

8.FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

As influencer marketing continues to evolve alongside digital technologies and shifting consumer values, it presents numerous opportunities for academic exploration. Emerging tools like artificial intelligence (AI), immersive media, and virtual influencers are redefining how travel content is produced and consumed. Simultaneously, issues around authenticity, ethics, and sustainability are becoming increasingly important, particularly in a post-pandemic tourism landscape. This section outlines key directions for future research. Figure 4 outlines the future research directions in the field of influencer marketing in tourism, identifying areas where further exploration is needed to enhance understanding and application.

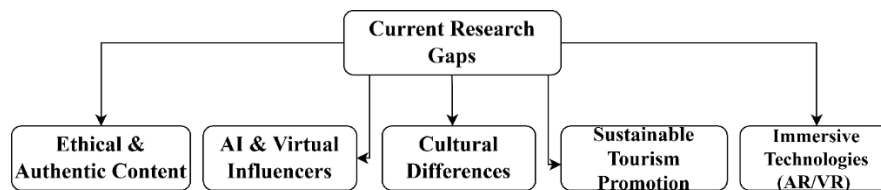


Figure 4: Future Research Directions in Influencer Marketing and Tourism

8.1. Ethical Considerations and Authenticity in Influencer Content

Future studies should examine the ethical boundaries of influencer marketing in tourism. As content becomes more sponsored and curated, concerns around transparency, manipulation, and disclosure are growing. Audiences often struggle to differentiate between genuine travel experiences and commercial promotions, which may undermine trust. Research is needed to explore:

- How authenticity is constructed and perceived in influencer content
- The ethical implications of non-disclosure or misrepresentation of destinations
- The impact of “performative tourism” where influencers visit places solely for content generation without meaningful engagement

Studies could also investigate audience awareness of sponsorship, and how this affects credibility, emotional response, and travel intention.

8.2. Role of AI and Virtual Influencers in Tourism

The emergence of AI-generated influencers (e.g., Lil Miquela) and automated content creation tools opens a new frontier in digital tourism marketing. Virtual influencers can be hyper-tailored to brand identity, programmed to deliver consistent messaging, and are unaffected by physical travel limitations.

Future research could address:

- The psychological effects of engaging with non-human influencers
- Comparisons between human and AI influencers in terms of trust, relatability, and perceived authenticity
- The role of AI in personalizing destination recommendations and simulating experiences

As virtual influencers become more common, understanding their impact on destination image and behavioural outcomes will be essential.

8.3. Cultural Differences in Influencer Effectiveness

Cultural context significantly affects how influencer content is interpreted and acted upon. However, most existing studies are rooted in Western or East Asian consumer models, often ignoring the diversity of media consumption habits, cultural values, and social norms elsewhere. Future studies should:

- Use comparative cross-cultural designs to test influencer strategies across regions (e.g., collectivist vs. individualist societies)
- Examine how local influencers differ in tone, content style, and credibility
- Investigate how religious norms, language, and customs affect what is perceived as appropriate, engaging, or persuasive content

This line of inquiry can inform region-specific influencer campaigns and support the development of culturally inclusive marketing practices.

8.4. Sustainable Tourism Promotion through Influencers

The global shift toward responsible and sustainable travel creates opportunities to reframe influencer marketing around ecological, cultural, and social values. Influencers are increasingly seen not just as promoters, but also as educators and advocates for responsible tourism. Research questions might include:

- Can influencers effectively promote off-season travel or lesser-known destinations to reduce overtourism?
- How does influencer messaging affect tourists' willingness to engage in sustainable behaviour (e.g., supporting local businesses, reducing waste)?
- What characteristics make an influencer effective at delivering sustainability-oriented messages?

There is also scope to explore the tensions between influencer visibility and destination vulnerability, particularly in ecologically fragile locations.

8.5. Integration of AR/VR and Immersive Technologies in Influencer Marketing

Advancements in augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and mixed reality (MR) are reshaping how destinations can be experienced digitally. Some influencers and brands are beginning to use these technologies to offer virtual walkthroughs, 3D hotel previews, and immersive storytelling. Future studies should explore:

- How immersive content affects destination image and emotional engagement
- The extent to which virtual experiences substitute or stimulate real-world travel
- The role of AR/VR influencers in pre-trip planning and expectation setting

The field of influencer marketing in tourism is expanding rapidly, driven by both technological innovation and shifting social values. Future research must go beyond platform-specific performance metrics to consider ethics, authenticity, sustainability, and cultural sensitivity. By investigating the roles of AI-driven content, immersive tech, and ethical messaging, scholars can help guide the next phase of tourism marketing toward greater inclusivity, responsibility, and effectiveness.

9. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The insights synthesized in this review offer several practical takeaways for tourism stakeholders:

- For marketers and DMOs, influencer partnerships should be selected not solely based on reach but with careful evaluation of content authenticity, engagement quality, and audience alignment.
- Micro and nano influencers—while underrepresented in current research—may offer higher trust and relatability, particularly for local, sustainable, or culturally immersive campaigns.
- Content strategy should prioritize storytelling and emotional engagement, particularly on visual-first platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where aesthetic appeal significantly impacts user response.
- Travel brands should be aware of both the motivational and psychological risks associated with influencer content, such as unrealistic expectations or destination saturation.

10. CONCLUSION

The literature on social media influencers and their impact on travel intentions reveals a rapidly evolving field at the intersection of tourism, consumer psychology, and digital communication. This review has examined critically the ways in which certain influencer qualities—specifically credibility, relatability, authenticity, and content quality—shape destination perception and influence behavioural intention. Equally importantly, it has explored the psychological processes whereby influencer content has an effect, including emotional engagement, parasocial interaction, social comparison, and FOMO (Fear of Missing Out).

Influencers are no longer just content creators but also the key drivers of digital narratives for tourism. Their influence does not only arise from the sheer scale that they possess but also the ability to establish trust, evoke feelings, and replicate word-of-mouth referrals in the form of visual interaction and engagement. These outcomes also justify the need for influencers not only being measured in terms of the number of followers that they have but also the quality of the relationship that they establish and the psychological engagement that they create.

From a theoretical point of view, the application of models such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour and the Elaboration Likelihood Model aids in the explanation of the way that influencer content impacts decision-making rationally and affectively. These frameworks, supported by empirical research, demonstrate that influencer effectiveness is contingent upon factors such as perceived expertise, content relevance, and the social context in which information is received and processed.

As consumer behaviour continues to shift in a digital-first, post-pandemic world, the role of influencers in shaping tourism is only expected to grow. Future research must continue to explore emerging technologies (such as AI-generated influencers and immersive AR/VR content), while also addressing ethical concerns, cultural diversity, and long-term effects on destination loyalty and sustainable travel behaviour.

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