

Social Media Influencers and Their Impact on Destination Selection: A Review of Existing Literature

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<b>KEYWORDS</b> <i>Social media influencers; tourism marketing; destination selection; digital travel behaviour; influencer credibility; destination image; traveller decision-making; influencer typologies; consumer psychology; digital platforms.</i>	<b>ABSTRACT</b> <b>Introduction:</b> The use of social media influencers (SMIs) has become an important part of digital tourism marketing. Influencers shape how destinations are perceived and chosen by potential travellers through visual content, personal narratives, and audience engagement. This review examines how influencer characteristics, platform dynamics, and psychological mechanisms influence tourist decision-making, destination image formation, and behaviour. <b>Methods:</b> This paper follows a systematic literature review design. No primary data were collected. Peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2024 were identified using databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. After applying inclusion criteria focused on tourism, social media influencers, and destination marketing, 38 academic sources were selected. A thematic synthesis was used to group findings into theoretical frameworks, influencer classifications, psychological processes, platform-specific impacts, and industry strategies. <b>Results:</b> Findings indicate that influencers affect destination selection by shaping cognitive and affective destination images, triggering emotional and social psychological responses such as FOMO and identification, and influencing behaviour across the travel decision-making stages (dreaming, planning, booking). Influencer typologies, platform-specific features (e.g., Instagram’s visual focus vs. YouTube’s depth), and campaign strategies by DMOs are key factors in determining effectiveness. ROI is measured through engagement metrics, reach, sentiment analysis, and booking-related conversions, though long-term loyalty impact remains difficult to capture. <b>Conclusion:</b> Social media influencers significantly influence how destinations are discovered and chosen. Their effectiveness depends on credibility, content relevance, and audience alignment. However, gaps remain in the literature, including underrepresentation of the Global South, limited longitudinal studies, and a need for more mixed-methods research. Future studies should explore virtual influencers, immersive digital environments, niche communities, and the role of influencers in promoting sustainable and ethical tourism.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital platform development has transformed the way in which travellers search for, evaluate, and select locations. Among the most influential participants in this revolution are the social media influencers (SMIs) who have built up large audiences by constantly creating content on the likes of Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and others. They function both as content creators and opinion leaders who possess the capacity to make opinions regarding locations based on firsthand accounts, visual representations, and interactive engagements.

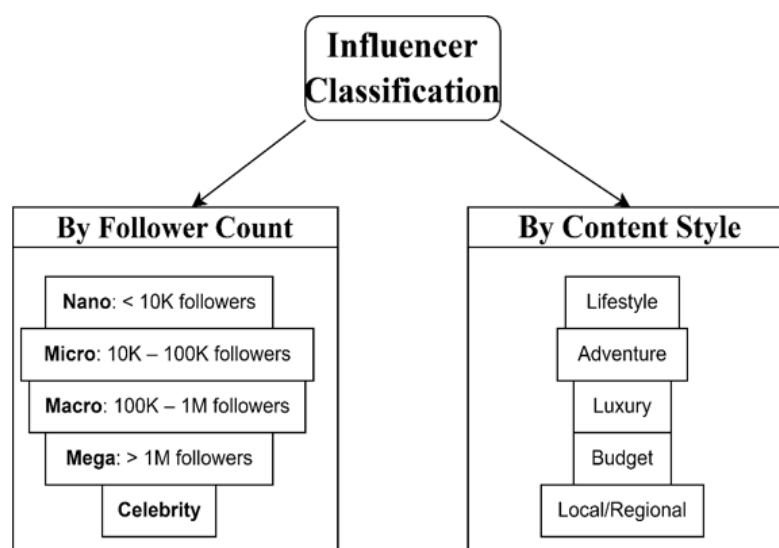


Social media influencers (SMIs) are defined as individuals who possess the ability to influence the opinions, attitudes, and behaviour of the audience who follow them since they are seen as credible, familiar, or knowledgeable in one specific field (Casaló et al., 2018). SMIs are distinct from typical celebrities since they are self-made and have gained credibility by having regular and accessible contact with the online public.

Destination Choice explains the mechanism by which potential tourists choose the destinations they would like to visit. It is based on numerous factors including personal preferences, cost, accessibility, perceived safety, and now the destination's media image—i.e., that created by influencers (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999).

Digital Tourism Marketing encompasses all marketing strategies that leverage digital tools, platforms, and user-generated content to promote destinations. This includes official campaigns by Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), paid advertisements, and increasingly, partnerships with influencers who act as intermediaries between destinations and potential tourists (Mariani et al., 2020).

In the post-digital era, where digital media is seamlessly integrated into daily life, travellers increasingly rely on social media for inspiration, information, and reassurance. Unlike traditional advertising, influencer content is often perceived as more authentic and relatable, influencing not just awareness, but also emotional and behavioural responses toward destinations (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The increasing personalization of travel content—made possible by platform algorithms, micro-influencers, and niche communities—has redefined how destinations are positioned in the minds of potential visitors.



**Figure1: Influencer Classification by Follower Count and Content Style**

Figure 1 presents the typology of influencers based on their follower count (e.g., nano, micro, macro, mega, and celebrity) and the dominant themes of their content.

Simultaneously, the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped global tourism. Uncertainty around health, safety, and mobility has led travellers to place more trust in peer-based, experience-driven content that reflects current conditions on the ground (Abidin, 2022)

This convergence of digital evolution and pandemic-induced behaviour change makes the investigation into influencer impact not only timely but also necessary. While considerable attention has been given to social media marketing in general, there remains a need to synthesise literature that specifically addresses how influencers affect destination image, perception, and behaviour. The current study aims to fill this gap by systematically reviewing existing literature, identifying theoretical foundations, classifying influencer types, and outlining both methodological limitations and future research directions.

### Scope of the Study

This review focuses on literature published between 2010 and 2024, covering peer-reviewed academic work and selected industry reports related to:

- Influencer marketing in the tourism context.
- Destination image and selection processes.
- Digital media engagement and behaviour.
- Strategic use of SMIs by DMOs and tourism boards.



The scope includes both conceptual and empirical studies, across diverse platforms (Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter), and across different global regions. However, emphasis is placed on identifying recurring patterns, theoretical applications, and measurable outcomes associated with influencer content and its impact on tourist decision-making (Boley et al., 2023)

## 2. BACKGROUND

The practice of influencing traveller behaviour is not a recent development. Long before the emergence of digital platforms, destination marketing relied on trusted sources, expert recommendations, and word-of-mouth. Over time, the tools, platforms, and sources of influence have evolved significantly (Chung & Lee, 2023).

### 2.1. Historical Background: From Travel Guidebooks to Blogs to Social Media

Tourism marketing has always involved some form of influence, with the earliest forms taking place through written descriptions of destinations. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, travel guidebooks served as the main source of destination information for prospective travellers. These guidebooks, such as Baedeker's and later Lonely Planet, provided structured, authoritative accounts of places, experiences, and practical travel tips. The authors were often seen as experts, and their content carried a strong influence over the travel decisions of their readers (Bhattacharya, 2011).

With the spread of the internet in the late 1990s and early 2000s, travel blogs emerged as a popular alternative. Unlike guidebooks, blogs offered first-person, narrative-driven accounts that were updated frequently and allowed two-way communication through comments. These early digital influencers created informal yet detailed travel stories, often accompanied by photos and advice. The shift from static, edited guidebooks to dynamic, personal blogs allowed readers to connect more directly with the writer, fostering a sense of trust and authenticity (Dixit & Sthapit, 2024).

In the 2010s, social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and later TikTok enabled even broader dissemination of travel content. The format became more visual and immediate, and the creators of content now referred to as influencers gained popularity based on personality, relatability, and engagement rather than formal expertise. Social media allowed influencers to reach global audiences instantly, transforming the nature of destination marketing from formal publications to real-time, peer-shared experiences (García-Rapp, 2021).

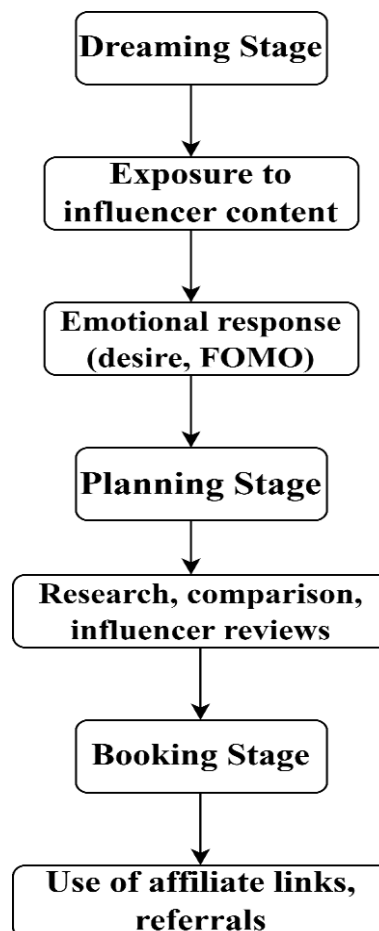


Figure 2: Influencer Classification by Follower Count and Content Style



Figure 2 presents the typology of influencers based on their follower count (e.g., nano, micro, macro, mega, and celebrity) and the dominant themes of their content, including lifestyle, adventure, luxury, budget, and local experiences

## 2.2. Transition from Traditional Media Endorsements to Peer-Based Online Influence

In traditional media, travel promotion was primarily conducted through professionally produced advertisements, magazine features, or television programs. These were typically commissioned by tourism boards, airlines, or travel companies, and presented a polished, commercial image of destinations. The message was one-directional, with consumers positioned as passive recipients of promotional content (Hudson & Thal, 2023).

The emergence of social media altered this structure significantly. Rather than relying solely on brands or government agencies, people began to consult peers and independent content creators for travel recommendations (Abidin, 2016).

This shift also reflected broader changes in media consumption behaviour. As users moved from television to digital devices and from edited content to user-generated material, the influence of peers and micro-celebrities increased. The credibility of traditional endorsements declined in comparison to online personalities who appeared to offer genuine and firsthand experience (Jin et al., 2021).

## 2.3. Growth of Influencer Marketing as a Sub-Discipline in Tourism and Hospitality

Over the past decade, influencer marketing has developed into a distinct area of interest in tourism and hospitality research. Initially considered part of digital marketing or public relations, it is now studied for its own dynamics, effects, and practices.

Academic literature began to pay attention to social media influencers in tourism around the early 2010s. Early studies explored the motivations of bloggers, trust in user-generated content, and the perceived credibility of non-traditional sources (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). As influencer marketing matured, research expanded to investigate audience engagement, emotional impact, destination image formation, and consumer behaviour as it relates to social media influence (Mariani et al., 2020).

Tourism marketers have also adapted. Many destination marketing organizations (DMOs) now allocate specific budgets to influencer partnerships. Influencers are invited on press trips, brand collaborations, and tourism campaigns not merely as content distributors but as key players in shaping the public perception of a destination (Kabil et al., 2023).

The sub-discipline draws upon theories from marketing, communication, psychology, and tourism studies. As more research is published, frameworks are emerging to explain not only how influencer marketing works but also how its effects differ by influencer type (micro vs. macro), platform (Instagram vs. YouTube), and audience demographic. Example: A DMO targeting younger travellers might partner with TikTok creators who make short, humorous travel content, while another may prefer long-form YouTube travel vlogs that provide detailed itineraries (Khan & Idris, 2022).

**Table 1: Key Milestones in the Evolution of Influencer Marketing in Tourism**

Period	Medium	Key Characteristics	Type of Influence
Pre-Internet Era	Travel guidebooks, print media	Expert-written, structured, limited updates	Authoritative, expert-driven
Early Internet Era	Travel blogs, online forums	Personal narratives, comment-based interaction	Informal, peer-like
Social Media Era	Instagram, YouTube, TikTok	Visual content, real-time sharing, high engagement	Relatable, peer-based, community-driven
Current Stage	Integrated influencer campaigns	Paid partnerships, data-driven targeting, niche segmentation	Strategic, measurable, interactive

Table 1 This table outlines the significant milestones in the development of influencer marketing within the tourism industry. The development of influencer marketing in tourism mirrors broader changes in media, technology, and consumer trust. From expert-written guidebooks to peer-shared social media content, the source and nature of travel influence have changed dramatically. The personal, dynamic, and interactive nature of influencer content has allowed it to become a powerful tool in shaping destination choices (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2024).

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencer credibility has been consistently found to be one of the most influential determiners of the persuasiveness of influencer content. Credibility typically includes three dimensions: trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness (Hovland et al., 1953).



De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) also examined the effect of influencer credibility on brand attitudes and found that belief in the message being promoted grew when there was belief in the influencer. Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2018) replicated the same in the tourism area and proved that influencers who were perceived as knowledgeable and credible positively influenced travel intention.

Research has also considered the effect of engagement and the number of followers. Although larger numbers of followers may imply popularity, mid-tier influencers who have between 10,000 and 100,000 followers were shown by one study to be more credible and authentic than celebrities or mega-influencers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Destination marketing implications are that micro-influencers have the potential to have greater influence on specialist travel choice because they are seen as being more authentic (Leung et al., 2023).

The form and visual quality of influencer content—its authenticity, visual appeal, and narrative potential—significantly shape the manner in which audiences perceive destinations.

Kim and Kim (2020) have established that when influencers pair high-quality visual content with personal accounts, the content not only draws attention but also elicits positive emotional reactions. These reactions in the viewer have the effect of impacting the attitude towards the destination and the intention to visit.

Similarly, Mariani et al. (2020) examined Instagram content and determined that real, everyday presentations of travel experience were more effectively persuasive than commercial or highly produced content. Their findings suggest that audiences respond to content that appears unscripted and authentic and are in line with earlier research by Abidin (2016), who pointed out that the relatability of influencers will often be based on "everydayness" and perceived authenticity.

Another critical element that exists is sponsorship disclosure. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that if influencers disclose paid sponsorships clearly, this has implications for trust based on audience expectations. While there are fans who welcome transparency, there are others who doubt the objectivity of the content (Mkono, 2022).

Various psychological models have been utilized in order to explain the effect that influencer content has on traveller behaviour. Theory of Planned Behaviour has been widely used in order to assess the relationship between attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control that all contribute towards behavioural intention (Ajzen, 1991).

Agag et al. (2019) applied the theory of Planned Behaviour in the tourism setting and found that perceived content usefulness and influencer credibility significantly influenced perceived behavioural control. If the user feels that the visit to the destination is acceptable and feasible, the user will most likely take action.

In addition to TPB, the theory of Social Learning Theory by Bandura (1977) has also been used in explaining the mimicry of influencer behaviour. Self-identifiers among the users were found by Chetoui, Lebdaoui, and Chetoui (2020) to have increased chances of mimicking behaviour's even for travelling ones. Identification mechanism functions well among youth audiences who have the tendency of identifying influencers as models for lifestyle.

Emotional engagement also has a mediating effect. Mariani et al. (2016) demonstrated that emotionally engaging content promotes recall and has effects on attitudes towards the destination. Excitement, admiration or curiosity are typically evoked by visually engaging tourism content that pushes followers towards action.

Another particular line of research investigates the interaction between followers and influencers and the process by which that interaction results in intention or action. Unlike traditional media, social media allows for two-way communication, which enhances the feeling of interpersonal connection (Nobre & Sousa, 2023).

De Veirman et al. (2017) found that high levels of engagement (likes, comments, direct messages) increase an influencer's persuasive power. Engagement acts as a form of social proof, encouraging users to believe in the credibility and popularity of both the influencer and the destination being promoted.

Xiang and Gretzel (2010) emphasized the role of user-generated content (UGC), arguing that people rely more on peer content and reviews than official marketing material. Influencers function as a hybrid between UGC creators and informal endorsers. As a result, their content occupies a trusted space between personal opinion and commercial endorsement.

Furthermore, platform dynamics matter. For instance, Instagram and YouTube offer visually rich content ideal for showcasing destinations, while TikTok leverages short-form, viral trends. Yet, scholarly attention remains heavily focused on Instagram, with TikTok and newer platforms receiving limited academic analysis (Mariani et al., 2020).

While much research focuses on attitudes and intentions, fewer studies have investigated the actual influence on real-world travel behaviour. Casaló et al. (2018) conducted a rare longitudinal study showing that exposure to influencer content not only increases travel intention but also correlates with actual trip bookings.

Most other studies rely on self-reported intentions, which may not always translate into action due to situational constraints such as cost, time, or competing commitments. However, intentions remain an important predictive measure, especially when combined with perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991).



It is also worth noting that influencer impact can vary depending on destination type. For instance, influencers may be more effective in promoting emerging or lesser-known destinations where potential visitors rely heavily on visual and peer-based information. In contrast, established destinations may see less marginal influence from social media campaigns (Tuten & Solomon, 2017).

The current literature shows that social media influencers play a significant role in shaping how potential tourists perceive, evaluate, and select destinations. Key influencing factors include the influencer's credibility, the authenticity and appeal of their content, and the emotional and cognitive responses they evoke. Research supports the use of psychological models such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Social Learning Theory in explaining how influencer content leads to behavioural outcomes (Pabel & Prideaux, 2023).

However, several gaps remain. There is a reliance on cross-sectional survey data, limited exploration of actual behaviour, and a lack of diversity in platforms and cultural contexts. These gaps provide opportunities for future research to explore new models, methods, and underrepresented audiences in influencer-driven tourism.

### 3.1 Methodology

#### 3.1.1. Research Design

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to synthesise existing knowledge on the influence of social media influencers in the context of tourist destination selection. The purpose is to provide a structured overview of theoretical models, empirical findings, influencer typologies, platform-specific effects, and industry practices related to influencer marketing in tourism.

#### 3.1.2. Data Sources and Search Strategy

Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and industry reports were sourced from the following databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, Google Scholar. Search keywords included combinations of:

- “Social media influencer” + “destination selection”
- “Influencer marketing” + “tourism”
- “Destination image” + “Instagram/YouTube/TikTok”
- “DMO” + “influencer strategy”
- “Travel intention” + “social media”

The search was limited to articles published between 2010 and 2024, in English, and with a focus on tourism or hospitality.

**Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Peer-reviewed articles or well-cited industry reports	Non-English sources
Focus on influencers in tourism or travel context	Studies only about fashion, tech, or unrelated sectors
Empirical or theory-based papers	Blog posts or anecdotal evidence

The table 2 presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied during the systematic literature review process.

#### 3.1.3. Review and Synthesis Procedure

After removing duplicates, a total of 112 papers were screened by title and abstract. 45 studies were selected for full-text review. The final sample of 38 articles was analysed using a thematic synthesis approach, grouping studies into six main themes:

- Theoretical foundations
- Influencer typologies
- Psychological mechanisms
- Platform dynamics
- Destination image formation
- Industry engagement and ROI

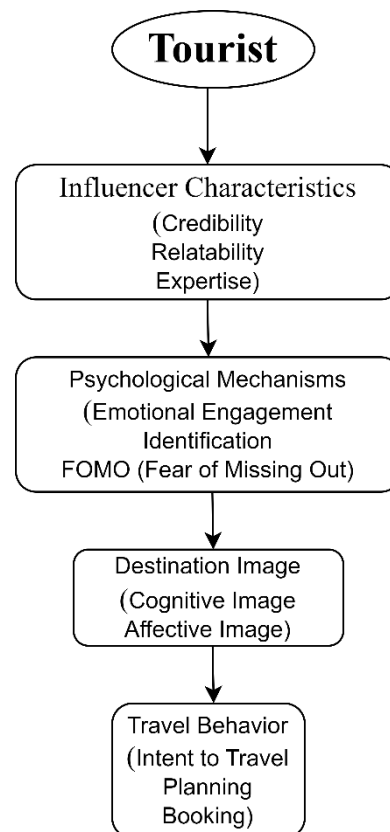
Coding was performed manually, and thematic connections were established based on recurring concepts, citations, and empirical convergence





#### 4. ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN DESTINATION MARKETING

Social media platforms differ not only in terms of format and user demographics but also in how they shape the way destinations are perceived, discussed, and chosen. Influencer marketing in tourism is platform-dependent, as each platform offers specific affordances that affect content style, audience interaction, and information dissemination. These differences also influence the extent to which users form intentions, develop emotional connections, and act on travel decisions.



**Figure 3: Simplified Conceptual Framework of Influencer Impact on Destination Selection**

Figure 3 illustrates how a tourist's exposure to influencer characteristics (credibility, relatability, expertise) influences psychological mechanisms (emotional engagement, identification, FOMO), which in turn shape destination image (cognitive and affective) and ultimately affect travel behaviour, including intent to travel, planning, and booking.

##### 4.1. Platform-Specific Impacts

###### a. Instagram: Visual Aesthetics and Aspirational Travel

Instagram is a highly visual platform centered on images and short-form videos, often accompanied by minimal text. It has become a central tool for destination marketing due to its ability to present aesthetically pleasing visuals that evoke emotion and aspiration.

Research indicates that Instagram posts significantly influence destination image formation and travel intention, particularly among younger travellers (Mariani et al., 2020). The platform's emphasis on idealized imagery contributes to the creation of aspirational content, where influencers present destinations as desirable lifestyle choices.

Influencers use Instagram to showcase iconic landmarks, unique accommodations, and curated experiences. The visual presentation often leads to emotional engagement, a key mechanism described in prior literature, and contributes to positive attitude formation (Kim & Kim, 2020).

###### b. YouTube: Long-Form Storytelling and Experiential Travel

YouTube enables long-form video content, allowing influencers to provide in-depth narratives, personal reflections, and step-by-step travel experiences. Unlike Instagram, where engagement is often passive and image-focused, YouTube encourages immersive viewing and extended interaction (Rahman & Zaman, 2024).



Casaló et al. (2018) suggest that travel vlogs can lead to a higher level of cognitive involvement, which in turn contributes to behavioural intention. The depth of information and perceived authenticity of the influencer's voice on YouTube fosters trust, a central factor in source credibility (De Veirman et al., 2017).

This platform is especially effective for promoting experiential and informative content — such as cultural explanations, budget planning, or day-by-day itineraries

#### **c. TikTok: Viral Travel Trends and Bite-Sized Information**

TikTok focuses on short, rapid content that emphasizes creativity, trends, and virality. Though initially not associated with travel content, the platform has grown to host a wide range of bite-sized travel recommendations, often with music overlays, quick transitions, and text overlays.

Due to the platform's algorithm-driven discovery mechanism, travel content on TikTok often reaches audiences who were not actively searching for it. This creates serendipitous exposure, where users are introduced to lesser-known destinations or travel hacks. TikTok's strength lies in promoting unfamiliar or emerging destinations through viral challenges or content trends.

While research on TikTok's role in tourism is still emerging, preliminary studies suggest that it plays a growing role in influencing early-stage awareness and stimulating curiosity (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Entertainment and information together create high initial interest that can lead to subsequent in-depth engagement on other platforms.

#### **d. Facebook and Twitter: Discussion-Based Destination Promotion**

Facebook and Twitter serve an additional function in travel marketing. They are text-based sites that focus on discussion, sharing opinions, and interacting within a group. Facebook is used by influencers and tourist boards as a way of hosting travel communities where consumers ask questions, make recommendations, and discuss particular destinations.

Twitter being real-time based has more use in event-based marketing or news about locations such as seasonal festivals or travel alerts. Comment-based discussions and personal interaction on these websites facilitate complex decision-making where followers weigh multiple opinions and experiences before acting (Sánchez-Franco & Rey-Moreno, 2022).

These platforms function best in decision support, providing information support, and planning problem-solving and less in the formation of initial desires. Therefore, they contribute more toward Objective 3, where actual behaviour such as booking or itinerary planning may be influenced through dialogue and peer validation (Sotiriadis & van Zyl, 2023).

### **4.2. Algorithmic Visibility and Virality in Shaping Destination Appeal**

Social media platforms use algorithms to determine what content users see. These algorithms are designed based on factors such as:

- Engagement levels (likes, comments, shares)
- Content freshness
- User behavior and preferences
- Platform-specific signals (e.g., sound trends on TikTok, hashtags on Instagram)

The algorithmic selection of content amplifies certain messages and suppresses others, making visibility partially dependent on system design rather than purely user intent. For tourism marketing, this means that content may become popular and influence destination selection not because of its quality alone, but because it fits the platform's algorithmic preferences. (Abidin, 2016).

## **5. CONSUMER BEHAVIOR THEORIES**

### **5.1 Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)**

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) explains that an individual's behaviour is determined by their intention to perform the behaviour, which is influenced by three key factors: attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control

#### **a. Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model**

This model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) describes how an external stimulus (such as an influencer's travel post) affects an individual's internal state (organism), which then leads to a behavioural response. Influencer content acts as the stimulus, influencing the viewer's emotions and thoughts (organism), which may result in the decision to choose a travel destination (response).

#### **b. Social Learning Theory**





Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) states that individuals learn behaviour through observation. When audiences observe influencers visiting and endorsing certain places, they may imitate this behaviour. This is especially true if the influencer is perceived as successful, relatable, or trustworthy.

## 5.2 Media and Communication Theories

### a. Source Credibility Theory

This theory (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953) holds that the credibility of the information source affects how persuasive the message is. Influencers perceived as credible due to their expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness are more likely to persuade followers to consider their travel recommendations.

### b. Two-Step Flow of Communication

This model (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) proposes that media effects flow from media to opinion leaders, and then from these leaders to the wider audience. Influencers function as modern opinion leaders. They interpret travel-related content and pass on their judgments to their followers, who may then be influenced in their travel decisions.

### c. Uses and Gratifications Theory

This theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974) explains that people actively select media to satisfy specific needs. For travel, individuals may follow influencers to gain ideas, information, or entertainment. If an influencer meets these needs effectively, the audience may adopt the destinations they recommend.

## 5.3 Application of Theories to Influencer Marketing and Destination Choice

The theories discussed can be directly connected to how social media influencers shape travel behaviour. The table below summarises the applications.

**Table 3: Application of Theories to Influencer Marketing and Destination Selection**

Theory	Key Concept	Application to Influencer Marketing and Travel
Theory of Planned Behaviour	Attitudes, norms, perceived control	Influencers shape attitudes and perceived norms about destinations
S-O-R Model	Stimulus affects emotion and response	Influencer posts trigger emotions and lead to destination decisions
Social Learning Theory	Learning through observation	Followers imitate influencers' travel choices
Source Credibility Theory	Trust in the source increases persuasion	Influencers seen as credible are more persuasive in promoting destinations
Two-Step Flow of Communication	Media → Opinion Leaders → Public	Influencers interpret and share destination content with followers
Uses and Gratifications Theory	Active media use to satisfy needs	Followers use influencer content to fulfil travel planning needs

The table 3 summarizes how various psychological and communication theories.

These theories explain different aspects of how social media influencers affect destination choices. Some focus on internal motivations and perceptions (TPB, S-O-R), while others consider communication processes (Source Credibility, Two-Step Flow). Together, they offer a complete view of how influencer marketing operates in tourism (Tussyadiah & Wang, 2023).

## 6. PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT ON TRAVELER DECISION-MAKING

The decision to travel is not purely rational. It is shaped by a complex mix of emotions, perceptions, expectations, and social influence. Social media influencers through their curated content, personal storytelling, and perceived authenticity have been shown to trigger a range of emotional and cognitive responses that influence destination preference, travel intention, and planning behaviour (Wang & Sparks, 2024).

### 6.1. Emotional and Cognitive Responses Triggered by Influencer Content

Influencer posts are likely to provoke emotional responses such as excitement, admiration, relaxation, or wanderlust. These emotional responses have direct implications for attitude development that constitute the very basis for the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).



Kim and Kim (2020) found that emotive and attractive posts created positive emotional responses that in turn affected the viewer's intention to visit the destination. This accords with the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory whereby the influencer's content is the stimulus that triggers emotional (organism) responses that ultimately lead to behavioural responses such as planning the visit or reservation (Zhang & Xu, 2023).

## **6.2. FOMO, Aesthetic Desire, and Social Comparison**

### **a. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)**

FOMO is the anxiety that other individuals are doing something that oneself is not. FOMO on social media is driven by the endless exposure to other individuals' travel experiences, particularly by influencers whose lifestyles are sold as exciting and significant.

Research shows that FOMO can be a powerful motivator of travel behaviour. FOMO, according to Mariani et al. (2016), induces immediate emotional responses that increase the urgency sense in the decision-making process. Influencer images of unique events, far-off places, or limited-time events hold the potential to create near-term surges in intentions, prompting followers to investigate travel possibilities they previously had not entertained.

### **b. Aesthetic Desire**

The aesthetic appeal of influencer content, especially on Instagram, is part of what scholars recognize as aesthetic consumption — seeking experiences for their visual or symbolic appeal. Influencers tend to present destinations as not only where to travel to, but also as scenery to be snapped. This construction prompts visitors to visit destinations that they find to be "Instagrammable" or aesthetically pleasing (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Such a preference for stunning experiences is not only a factor in where individuals opt to travel to, but also how they experience destinations.

### **c. Social Comparison Theory**

Based on Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, individuals compare themselves to others and evaluate their lives and choices. Influencer content offers observable standards of lifestyle and travel experience. Followers tend to compare their lives to their own lives when they perceive influencers as similar or a bit aspirational.

This comparison process can lead to identification, a central mediator in Social Learning Theory. Chetoui et al. (2020) demonstrated that greater identification with an influencer raised the likelihood of copying their holiday behaviour.

## **7. TOURISM INDUSTRY ENGAGEMENT WITH INFLUENCERS**

The social media revolution has caused Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), tourist boards, and travel operators to interact with influencers directly. Having the power to create reach, relevance, and resonance, the tourism sector has incorporated influencer partnerships into internet marketing campaigns (Ahmad, Goyal, Arora, Kumar, Chythanya, & Chaudhary, 2023).

### **7.1. Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) and How They Adapt to Collaboration**

DMOs are supposed to market destinations to domestic and international tourists. They used to rely heavily on advertising, print media, and coordination with travel agencies. The increasing power of user-generated content and peer reviews has compelled most DMOs to cooperate with social media influencers so that they can reach the audience organically. According to Mariani et al. (2020), DMOs employ influencers to:

- Reach specific demographic segments (e.g., Gen Z, solo travellers, digital nomads).
- Promote off-peak seasons or lesser-known locations.
- Reinforce destination image through consistent messaging across platforms.

These partnerships can be paid, in-kind (e.g., complimentary stays), or long-term ambassadorships. Others apply influencers as part of overall digital strategies, combining influencer content with SEO, paid media, and engagement content like quizzes or trip itineraries on an official destination site (Arora, Ahmad, Kumar, & Singh, 2025).

Involvement of influencers in campaign systems ensures that they not only deliver reach, but also messaging in sync and lasting value.

### **7.2. Case Studies of Successful Influencer Campaigns**

#### **a. Iceland – #InspiredByIceland**

The "Inspired by Iceland" campaign is also widely known as a classic case of influencer marketing. The Icelandic Tourist Board invited carefully selected international influencers to explore the country's landscapes, and then to share their authentic experiences with global communities.

Effect: The campaign quickly went viral on social media platforms, particularly YouTube and Instagram.

Strategy: Recruited active adventure influencers and nature and sustainability content creators.



**Impact:** The campaign helped fuel Iceland's spectacular post-2011 tourism boom, with social media being the major driving force behind Iceland's rebranding as an affordable and wonderful destination (Ahmad, Goyal, Arora, Bahuguna, & Budakoti, 2025).

**b. Dubai – Dubai Tourism Influencer Campaigns**

Dubai's tourism board started systematic collaborations with A-list influencers, i.e., lifestyle and luxury niches. "The #MyDubai" campaigns integrated influencer-created content with mass media and live consumer engagement.

**Outcome:** Much increased online exposure, especially from European and Asian millennial and Gen Z travellers.

**Strategy:** Combined luxury hotel stays, desert adventures, shopping, and curated cultural experiences.

**Impact:** Influencer content helped reposition Dubai not just as a luxury destination, but also as vibrant and diverse, appealing to a broader audience.

**c. Bali – Organic and Sponsored Influencer Promotion**

Bali's rise in popularity has been influenced not only by structured campaigns but also by organic promotion through travel influencers and digital nomads. Tourism authorities later formalized partnerships with select influencers to highlight sustainable tourism and cultural depth beyond beaches and resorts.

**Outcome:** Global visibility, especially among wellness travellers, remote workers, and Instagram-oriented audiences.

**Strategy:** Combined natural aesthetics with spiritual and cultural narratives.

**Impact:** Influencer content diversified the image of Bali and increased interest in non-commercial areas such as Ubud and Sidemen Valley.

Influencer marketing is now a strategic tourism marketing tool. DMOs invest in formal partnerships, during which they select influencers deliberately on credibility, relevance to audience, and destination values alignment. Content co-creation ensures influencer stories are true but also work to further amplify overall branding objectives. Examples from Iceland, Dubai, and Bali show how effective influencer campaigns can rebrand destination image, raise awareness, and induce actual travel behaviour.

## **8. MEASURING IMPACT AND RETURN ON INVESTMENT (ROI)**

As influencer marketing is increasingly becoming a part of mainstream tourism promotional campaigns, its performance and return on investment (ROI) is a cause of concern for Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and tourist businesses. As influencer campaigns are in changing and multi-platform environments, performance measurement is a necessity and a challenge (Ahmad, Arora, Sayal, Kumar, & Kumar, 2025).

### **8.1. Quantitative and Qualitative Measures**

In order to determine the success of influencer marketing, tourism authorities typically employ both quantitative measures (e.g., reach, impressions, clicks) and qualitative data (e.g., sentiment, brand fit).

**a. Engagement Metrics**

These are shares, likes, comments, saves, click-throughs, and video views. Engagement rate (interactions divided by posts over followers) is also frequently utilized as a standard metric for performance of content (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Example: A travel influencer's Instagram post promoting a resort might receive 50,000 likes and 1,000 comments, indicating strong viewer interest and potential influence.

**b. Reach and Impressions**

Reach refers to the total number of unique users who saw the content, while impressions refer to the total number of times the content was displayed. These metrics help assess visibility and brand exposure.

**c. Sentiment Analysis**

Qualitative feedback from user comments or messages is analysed to assess emotional tone and brand perception. Sentiment analysis helps evaluate how the audience feels about the destination after engaging with influencer content. Example: Positive user comments such as "This place looks magical" or "I've added this to my bucket list" suggest favourable brand sentiment.

**d. Conversion Metrics**

These include:

- Click-through rates to booking websites.
- Use of promo codes or affiliate links.
- Increase in web traffic or search queries during or after a campaign.



- Measured uplift in bookings or inquiries.

While harder to track, booking conversions provide direct indicators of ROI and connecting engagement with actual travel behaviour (Casaló et al., 2018).

## 8.2. Role of Influencer Analytics Platforms

Several third-party analytics tools have emerged to support the evaluation of influencer marketing efforts. These platforms provide real-time tracking, historical performance data, and campaign-specific insights. Common platforms include:

- HypeAuditor
- Upfluence
- Traackr
- Fohr
- Instagram Insights / YouTube Analytics

These tools help DMOs and marketers assess:

- Audience demographics (age, location, interests).
- Authenticity of influencer followers (e.g., bot detection).
- Content performance across multiple posts and stories.
- Campaign-level ROI estimates based on goals (e.g., awareness vs. conversions).

Strategic Benefit: These analytics support influencer selection and help determine which influencers produce high-resonance content

## 8.3. Limitations in Measuring Long-Term Impact on Destination Loyalty

While short-term metrics such as reach and engagement are relatively easy to measure, assessing long-term effects such as repeat visits, word-of-mouth recommendations, or sustained destination loyalty is far more complex (Ahmad, Goel, Goyal, Venaik, & Kumar, 2023).

### a. Attribution Challenges

Tourists may be influenced by multiple sources — including influencers, review platforms, ads, and peer recommendations. As a result, assigning credit to one influencer or campaign is difficult. Example: A visitor to Iceland may have seen influencer posts, but also browsed official websites, read travel blogs, or discussed the trip with friends.

### b. Time Lag in Behavioural Response

The decision to travel is rarely immediate. There may be a delay of weeks or months between seeing influencer content and booking a trip. Measuring ROI during this lag can lead to underestimation of actual impact (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

### c. Loyalty Measurement Complexity

Destination loyalty involves not just returning to the same location but also recommending it to others and maintaining a positive image over time. These behaviours are difficult to capture in digital metrics unless combined with post-visit surveys or user-generated content analysis.

Baloglu and McCleary (1999) emphasize that emotional connection and image formation are precursors to loyalty yet tracking these over the long term remains methodologically challenging. Measuring the impact and ROI of influencer marketing in tourism requires a combination of quantitative and qualitative metrics.

## 9. REGIONAL AND CULTURAL VARIATIONS

The impact of social media influencers on destination selection is not uniform across the globe. Differences in cultural norms, regional media preferences, and social trust affect how audiences perceive and respond to influencer content. Understanding these variations is essential for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) seeking to adapt strategies to different geographical and cultural contexts.

### 9.1. Influence Dynamics in Different Global Regions

Tourism-related influencer marketing functions differently across major global regions due to variations in media usage, consumer behavior, and technological infrastructure.

#### a. Western Markets

In Western countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and much of Western Europe:



- Individualism is high; audiences respond well to influencer content emphasizing personal experience, autonomy, and discovery (Hofstede, 2001).
- Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook dominate.
- Followers value influencers for their authenticity, expertise, and transparent disclosures (Lou & Yuan, 2019).
- Influencer campaigns tend to focus on lifestyle branding, highlighting personal narratives and aesthetic quality.

*Example:* A Canadian influencer sharing solo travel tips across Europe may attract Western audiences through themes of independence and self-fulfilment.

#### b. Asian Markets

In contrast, markets such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asia often exhibit different dynamics:

- Collectivist cultures place greater emphasis on social validation, group approval, and conformity (Hofstede, 2001).
- Platforms vary significantly: WeChat, Weibo, Douyin (TikTok China), and Xiaohongshu are widely used.
- Influencers, known as Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), often have structured roles, and collaboration with brands tends to be more formalized.
- Influencer content is usually less personal and more aspirational, aligning with social expectations and consumer trends.

### 9.2. Cultural Dimensions Affecting Trust and Destination Appeal

Cultural values directly affect how audiences form trust, interpret influencer content, and perceive destinations. Several cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2001) are especially relevant in tourism influencer marketing:

**Table:4 Cultural Dimensions Affecting Influencer Content and Perception**

Cultural Dimension	Effect on Influencer Content and Perception
Individualism vs. Collectivism	Influencers in individualistic cultures focus on personal experience; in collectivist cultures, social harmony and group benefits are emphasized.
Uncertainty Avoidance	In high-uncertainty-avoidance cultures (e.g., Japan), audiences prefer detailed, factual content to reduce travel-related risks.
Power Distance	In high power distance societies, audiences may prefer authoritative influencers or celebrities over peer-level creators.
Masculinity vs. Femininity	Influences whether destination content emphasizes adventure, success (masculine) or wellness, balance, and relationships (feminine).

The table 5 explores the impact of key cultural dimensions on how influencer content is received and perceived across different regions

### 9.3. Language, Local Customs, and Religious Sensitivities in Influencer Content

Influencer content that is culturally appropriate has a higher chance of building trust and avoiding backlash. Language use, awareness of local norms, and sensitivity to religious or political contexts are all critical for influencing across regions.

#### a. Language

- Posting in local languages or providing translations increases content accessibility and cultural proximity.
- Influencers who are bilingual or local to a region often build higher trust due to perceived insider knowledge.

#### b. Customs and Etiquette

- Behavior such as dress, gestures, or interaction with sacred sites must reflect local expectations.
- Inappropriate content—such as disrespectful selfies at religious landmarks—can generate negative sentiment and damage both influencer and destination reputation.

#### c. Religious and Political Sensitivities

- Food habits, religious celebrations, alcohol consumption, and gender roles may affect the way content is understood.
- Noncompliance with those norms may limit influence or incite controversy, especially in conservative regions.

Regional and cultural settings determine influencer marketing dynamics in tourism. Western travellers will prefer



authenticity and novelty, while Asian consumers will trust status influencers and socially approved messages more. Cultural values determine content style, message interpretation, and emotional response. Influencers who adapt language, behaviour, and presentation to local norms will be more credible and well-placed to influence travel choices. These cultural influences are essential considerations for tourism marketers and researchers who aim to evaluate influencer performance in markets.

## 10. CRITICAL GAPS IN EXISTING LITERATURE

In spite of the increasing body of work on social media influencers in tourism, there are some important gaps in the existing literature. These are limiting the generalizability of the results, constraining theory development, and posing challenges for practitioners attempting to transfer knowledge temporally and geographically. This section identifies three of the most important areas that are currently underrepresented: the underrepresentation of destinations in the Global South, the absence of longitudinal studies, and the requirement for methodological innovation through mixed-methods and cross-disciplinary synthesis.

### 10.1 Underrepresentation of Global South Destinations in Influencer Research

Among the greatest constraints of current tourism influencer studies is geographical bias within Global North environments, particularly North America, Western Europe, and Australia. Empirical studies mainly focus on promoting destinations such as Italy, France, the United States, or Scandinavian countries (Mariani et al., 2020; Casaló et al., 2018). On the other hand, African, Latin American, Southeast Asian, and certain Middle Eastern destinations receive little to no mention in the literature.

This geographical gap restricts the understanding of how regional influencers, regionally comparative values, and differences in infrastructure shape the influencer dynamics. It also risks reinforcing Eurocentric tourism narratives, where visibility and impact are measured according to Western marketing norms. For example, the informal and community-based tourism promoted by local influencers in Kenya or Indonesia may be shaped by different forms of trust, storytelling, and cultural representation — yet these dynamics are largely absent from the literature.

Implication: There is a need for more studies that examine destination image formation and traveller behaviour in under-researched regions, using local influencers as key voices in shaping perception. This would improve the global applicability of influencer marketing frameworks and address a growing demand for inclusive tourism scholarship.

### 10.3. Need for Mixed-Methods Approaches and Cross-Disciplinary Integration

The majority of studies in this domain use quantitative methods, particularly surveys, structural equation modelling, or basic content analysis (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Casaló et al., 2018). While useful for testing theory and identifying patterns, these approaches often overlook the nuanced, subjective, and social processes through which influence occurs.

Tourism is an experience-driven field, and understanding the psychological, emotional, cultural, and social mechanisms behind influencer impact requires greater methodological depth and flexibility. Moreover, the current literature is fragmented across tourism studies, marketing, media studies, and psychology, with limited integration. This siloed approach restricts theoretical development and fails to account for the complex interplay between media behaviour, personal identity, and cultural context.

## 11. RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR DESTINATION MARKETING ORGANIZATIONS (DMOS)

Based on the findings of this review, several practical insights emerge for DMOs and tourism marketers seeking to collaborate effectively with social media influencers.

### 1. Prioritize Credibility Over Follower Count

DMOs should focus on micro- and mid-tier influencers who exhibit high engagement and audience trust rather than selecting influencers solely based on follower volume. Authenticity and niche expertise are more important than reach when targeting behaviour change and destination loyalty.

### 2. Align Content Style with Destination Image

Influencers should be selected based on how well their content tone, values, and niche match the desired positioning of the destination. For instance, budget destinations should collaborate with practical, informative creators; luxury destinations may benefit from aspirational storytellers.

### 3. Incorporate Local and Cultural Sensitivity





Influencers operating in culturally diverse or sensitive contexts should be briefed on local customs, religious norms, and language use to avoid negative backlash. Partnering with local influencers or bilingual creators can enhance authenticity and avoid misrepresentation.

#### 4. Take a Multi-Platform Strategy

Influencers on multiple platforms (e.g., visual on Instagram, narrative on YouTube, coverage on TikTok) can engage consumers at different points in the travel decision-making process. Each platform plays a unique role in awareness, emotional association, and planning behaviour.

#### 5. Use ROI Measurement Tools

Campaigns must be organized with well-defined goals, measurable connections, and mutually agreed-on metrics. Use third-party measurement tools (e.g., HypeAuditor, Upfluence) to measure performance and adjust strategies based on real-time results.

#### 6. Focus on Long-Term Relationships

Developing ambassadorships or long-term partnerships with influencers builds consistency and greater audience trust. Long-term partnerships can also build destination loyalty by demonstrating diverse, changing narratives over time.

## 12. CONCLUSION

This review considered the contribution of social media influencers to destination choice with an emphasis on key theoretical frameworks, influencer types, platform-specific processes, psychological processes, and tourism industry conduct. Findings show that influencers play an important contribution to destination image and tourist attitudes, intentions, and in some instances, actual visit behaviour.

Influencer characteristics like credibility, relatability, and relevance of content were found to influence what followers see of destinations. Psychological drivers like emotional connection, identification, and fear of missing out (FOMO) also influence how users interact and react to influencer content. The influencer effect also varied across platforms, with Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok contributing differently to stages of awareness, planning, and decision-making.

Destination marketing organizations are increasingly incorporating influencers into structured campaigns. Through content co-creation and targeted engagement strategies, DMOs aim to increase visibility, promote lesser-known destinations, and influence specific travel segments. Case studies from Iceland, Dubai, and Bali show that such collaborations can effectively reshape destination narratives and improve campaign outcomes.

Despite growing research in this field, several gaps remain. Destinations in the Global South are underrepresented, long-term behavioural effects are rarely measured, and most studies rely on limited methodological approaches. Future research should explore the role of virtual influencers, immersive technologies, niche influencer communities, and sustainable tourism promotion. Greater use of mixed methods and cross-disciplinary integration will be essential to capture the full complexity of influence in tourism.

Social media influencers are now central to how destinations are discovered, evaluated, and chosen. As digital media continues to evolve, their role in shaping travel behaviour is likely to expand. Understanding this influence is critical for researchers, marketers, and policymakers working to connect with modern travellers in an increasingly digital tourism landscape.

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