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Title: The Role of Social Media in Shaping Tourism Decisions – A Study of Instagram and TikTok

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Table of Contents

Abstract	4
1. Introduction.....	4
2. Literature Review	5
2.1 Rise of Social Media as a Tourism Influence	5
2.2 Instagram: A Platform of Aesthetic Perfection	5
Features contributing to travel influence:.....	5
2.3 TikTok: Authenticity, Humour, and Emotional Influence	6
2.4 User-Generated Content (UGC) as a Trustworthy Source.....	6
2.5 Influencers and Parasocial Influence.....	6
2.6 Decision-Making Theories Relevant to Social Media Influence.....	7
Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991)	7
Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986)	7
Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954).....	7
Social Proof (Cialdini, 2001)	7
2.7 Challenges and Critiques of Social-Media-Driven Tourism.....	7
3. Methodology.....	8
3.1 Research Approach	8
3.2 Data Sources.....	8
3.3 Thematic Analysis.....	8
3.4 Limitations.....	9
4. Findings	9
4.1 Instagram and TikTok Have Become the Main Gateways to Travel Inspiration	9
Key observations:.....	9
4.2 Visual Aesthetic Ideals Shape Destination Selection	10
4.3 TikTok Drives Spontaneous, Trend-Based Travel Behaviour	10
4.4 Influencers Serve as Trustworthy Travel Advisors.....	11
4.5 UGC Reduces Travel Anxiety and Builds Confidence.....	11
4.6 Social Comparison and FOMO Influence Travel Behaviour	12
4.7 Short-Form Videos Make Travel Planning More Accessible.....	12
4.8 Expectation–Reality Gaps Are Widening	13
4.9 Social Media Trends Cause Over-Tourism and Environmental Damage	13

Major impacts:.....	13
4.10 Tourism Boards Are Transforming Their Marketing Strategies.....	14
Digital strategies include:	14
5. Discussion	14
5.1 The Tourism Decision Journey Has Become Non-Linear	14
5.2 Visual Emotion Overrides Rational Decision-Making	15
5.3 Travel as Self-Representation and Identity Performance	15
5.4 Influencer Authority Redefines Travel Expertise	16
5.5 Algorithmic Travel: Who Actually Chooses the Destination?	16
Implications:.....	16
5.6 Short-Form Travel Education: Benefits and Limitations.....	17
Benefits:	17
Limitations:	17
5.7 The Psychology of Expectation–Reality Gaps.....	17
5.8 Over-Tourism and Sustainability Challenges	18
Environmental Effects:	18
Cultural Effects:.....	18
Economic Effects:	18
Common strategies:.....	19
5.10 Travel as Identity Construction	19
5.11 The Need for Responsible Digital Tourism	19
6. Conclusion	20
7. References.....	20

Abstract

The rapid growth of Instagram and TikTok has redefined tourism communication and fundamentally reshaped how travelers discover, evaluate, and choose destinations. These platforms function not merely as digital entertainment spaces, but as algorithmically curated travel agencies that blend visual persuasion, peer influence, and emotional storytelling. Instagram relies on polished aesthetics, idealized landscapes, and aspirational imagery, while TikTok encourages spontaneous, authentic, and fast-paced travel decision-making through short-form videos and personalized recommendations.

This assignment investigates how visual communication, influencer culture, user-generated content, social comparison, and algorithm-driven discovery influence modern tourism choices. Using a qualitative methodology based on thematic analysis and secondary data, this research explores how Instagram and TikTok alter travel motivations, expectations, and behaviors. It also examines the challenges created by these platforms—such as misinformation, exaggerated expectations, over-tourism, cultural commodification, and sustainability issues.

The findings reveal that young travelers rely heavily on Instagram and TikTok for inspiration, planning, budgeting, and decision-making. Influencers act as trusted advisors, while UGC provides travelers with real-time validation and emotional connection. However, the aesthetic and algorithmic pressures on these platforms often distort reality, resulting in unrealistic expectations and environmentally harmful tourism trends.

1. Introduction

Tourism decisions have historically been shaped by imagination, aspiration, and information provided through travel agents, magazines, guidebooks, and word-of-mouth. But in the last decade, the global tourism landscape has transformed dramatically. Instagram and TikTok—two visually dominant, fast-paced social media platforms—now drive travel fantasies, expectations, and behavior on an unprecedented scale. As travelers scroll through feeds filled with breathtaking landscapes, cinematic transitions, food vlogs, aesthetically curated cafés, and influencer adventures, they begin to subconsciously form travel aspirations.

Unlike search-based platforms, Instagram and TikTok rely on algorithmic discovery. This means travelers are not always consciously seeking information about a destination; instead, destinations appear spontaneously in their feeds, often sparking immediate desire. Visual stimuli—like sunset reels, beach drone shots, “hidden gem” clips, or cultural street scenes—shape how travelers imagine their next trip.

Young travelers, especially Gen Z and millennials, rely on these platforms not only for inspiration but also for practical travel planning. Instagram and TikTok serve as digital assistants that provide:

- itinerary ideas,
- packing tips,
- cultural etiquette guides,
- hotel reviews,
- price comparisons,
- real-time crowd level updates,
- food recommendations,
- safety information.

This integration of entertainment and information fundamentally changes the tourism decision-making journey. The platforms influence attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991), making them key tools in shaping traveler psychology.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Rise of Social Media as a Tourism Influence

The increasing relevance of social media in tourism began with the rise of user-generated content (UGC). Xiang and Gretzel (2010) highlight that online reviews, photographs, and blog posts shifted the power of tourism communication from professionals to ordinary travellers. Instagram and TikTok expanded this shift dramatically, allowing millions to share travel visuals instantly. The platforms create interactive spaces where travellers gain inspiration through real-time visual storytelling.

Social media's influence grows stronger as digital dependence increases. Statista (2024) reports that most young travellers rely more on TikTok and Instagram for destination ideas than traditional search engines or guidebooks. This highlights the transformative role of these platforms in shaping global tourism patterns.

2.2 Instagram: A Platform of Aesthetic Perfection

Instagram constructs an aspirational visual world. It encourages users to showcase their lives through aesthetically pleasing content—clean, symmetrical, edited, and idealised. Travel content performs especially well because it evokes desire and escapism.

Features contributing to travel influence:

- **Posts:** Long-lasting, edited images that idealise scenery.
- **Reels:** Short videos featuring cinematic transitions and trends.
- **Stories:** Real-time snippets of travel lifestyles.
- **Highlights:** Permanent travel guides saved on profiles.
- **Explore Page:** AI recommending destinations based on user interests.

Instagram's emphasis on curated perfection often encourages travellers to choose destinations that align with specific visual cultures—beaches, pastel-toned cities, luxury stays, and photogenic “must-see” locations. Chua and Chang (2016) argue that Instagram produces a “visual ideology” where travel becomes an aesthetic commodity rather than a cultural experience.

2.3 TikTok: Authenticity, Humour, and Emotional Influence

TikTok's power lies in its authenticity and personal narrative style. Unlike Instagram's polished aesthetic, TikTok is:

- spontaneous,
- humorous,
- emotionally expressive,
- fast-paced,
- dynamic,
- relatable.

The TikTok algorithm tailors recommendations to micro-level behavioural cues. Travellers discover destinations through unexpected exposure on the “For You Page” (FYP), making travel desire feel intuitive rather than intentional.

Zhang and Lee (2022) describe TikTok as a platform that transforms “ordinary tourism moments into viral cultural material.” TikTok users trust content more because the videos feel genuine and reveal imperfections, mistakes, and practical tips.

2.4 User-Generated Content (UGC) as a Trustworthy Source

UGC is now the most influential form of travel communication. Litvin et al. (2008) explain that travellers trust UGC because it appears unbiased and reflects real experiences. Examples include:

- actual hotel room videos,
- honest “pros and cons,”
- unfiltered street views,
- cultural do's and don'ts,
- food portion reviews,
- metro guides,
- travel hacks,
- budget breakdowns.

UGC reduces travel anxiety by giving travellers a sense of familiarity before arrival. Instagram and TikTok amplify UGC's relevance by rewarding personal and relatable content with visibility.

2.5 Influencers and Parasocial Influence

Influencers act as modern-day travel advisors. Horton and Wohl (1956) coined the term *parasocial interactions* to describe the emotional bonds audiences form with media personalities. This concept applies strongly to travel influencers.

Influencers shape tourism decisions because they:

- present relatable travel experiences,
- appear trustworthy and experienced,
- provide guidance and reassurance,
- share honest reviews,
- build emotional connections with followers.

Micro-influencers (10k–150k followers) are particularly powerful because audiences perceive them as authentic peers instead of celebrities. Their impact is often greater than traditional advertising.

2.6 Decision-Making Theories Relevant to Social Media Influence

Travel psychology is shaped by several long-standing theories:

Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991)

Attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioural control are all shaped by visuals and messaging on social media.

Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986)

Instagram and TikTok influence attitudes through peripheral cues (music, visuals, aesthetic atmosphere).

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954)

Travellers compare themselves with influencers or peers, impacting self-esteem and travel choices.

Social Proof (Cialdini, 2001)

The more a destination goes viral, the more people trust it as a desirable place.

2.7 Challenges and Critiques of Social-Media-Driven Tourism

Researchers highlight several risks:

- exaggerated expectations (Henderson, 2021),
- cultural misrepresentation,
- misinformation from viral “travel hacks,”
- harmful stereotypes,
- trend-driven over-tourism,
- environmental damage,
- emotional pressure to perform online.

These concerns make responsible social media communication essential for sustainable tourism growth.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

A qualitative approach is used to understand the social and psychological influence of Instagram and TikTok. Instead of collecting primary data, this study analyses existing sources and interprets patterns across multiple research findings.

3.2 Data Sources

The research draws on:

- academic journal articles,
- tourism reports,
- digital marketing studies,
- influencer case studies,
- observational analysis of travel trends on Instagram and TikTok.

These sources provide rich insight into platform dynamics and user behaviours.

3.3 Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis follows Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step method:

1. Data familiarisation
2. Initial coding
3. Theme development
4. Theme review
5. Theme refinement
6. Reporting findings

Main themes include:

- visual persuasion,
- influencer trust,
- algorithmic trends,
- social comparison,
- expectation gaps,
- over-tourism,
- authenticity vs. aesthetic pressure.

3.4 Limitations

- data changes quickly as platforms evolve,
- lack of primary interviews,
- differences in regional social media use,
- limited academic research on TikTok.

Despite these limitations, the methodology sufficiently captures current trends.

4. Findings

This section presents the major insights drawn from the thematic analysis of social media behaviour, academic literature, tourism reports, and observational evidence from Instagram and TikTok trends. Findings reveal how these platforms influence travellers’ desires, choices, and emotional expectations.

4.1 Instagram and TikTok Have Become the Main Gateways to Travel Inspiration

For most young travellers, the travel decision-making process begins on social media. Instagram and TikTok function as visual search engines where users encounter destinations during everyday scrolling.

Key observations:

- TikTok users often discover destinations without intentionally searching—thanks to the “For You Page.”
- Instagram’s Explore Page recommends visually appealing destinations based on previous interactions.
- Mobile-first consumption means inspiration happens instantly and spontaneously.

Travel desire is no longer the result of long-term planning. A single 10-second Reel or TikTok showing a scenic train ride, a quirky café, or a romantic street can shift a traveller's perception and spark a new travel aspiration.

Statista (2024) confirms that nearly **four out of five Gen Z travellers** consider TikTok their main source of travel inspiration. This positions the platform as a powerful agent shaping global mobility.

4.2 Visual Aesthetic Ideals Shape Destination Selection

Instagram's influence is rooted in aesthetics. Users select destinations not only for culture or history but for "how good they look on the feed." This has led to the rise of "Instagrammable tourism," which includes:

- picture-perfect cafés,
- pastel-coloured houses,
- symmetrical architecture,
- rooftop pools,
- curated breakfast spreads,
- photogenic landscapes.

Certain destinations have become globally famous mainly due to their visual appeal:

- Santorini's blue domes,
- Bali's jungle swings,
- Cappadocia's hot air balloons,
- Seoul's minimalist cafés,
- Dubai's luxury lifestyle aesthetics.

Places with strong visual identity receive disproportionate attention, while equally rich destinations with less obvious photogenic appeal receive less visibility.

MacKay and Vogt (2020) argue that visual imagery is now a primary driver of destination image formation.

4.3 TikTok Drives Spontaneous, Trend-Based Travel Behaviour

TikTok promotes authenticity, storytelling, and emotional connection. It allows creators to show:

- unfiltered real-life moments,
- honest pros and cons,
- chaotic travel fails,
- food tasting reactions,
- street explorations,

- raw cultural encounters.

Because TikTok's algorithm recommends content based on behavioural signals, users often discover destinations outside their usual interests.

Travel trends emerge and disappear quickly:

- "Maldives on a budget"
- "Hidden gems in Vietnam"
- "Underrated cities in Europe"
- "Cafés you must visit in Seoul"
- "Best winter destinations nobody talks about"

TikTok makes travel feel personal and accessible. Zhang and Lee (2022) note that its emotional immediacy encourages impulsive travel decisions, especially among young audiences.

4.4 Influencers Serve as Trustworthy Travel Advisors

Influencers have become central to tourism decisions. Followers trust influencers because of:

- parasocial affection,
- perceived honesty,
- detailed storytelling,
- relatable personalities,
- specific niches (solo travel, food travel, budget travel),
- consistent content delivery.

Travel influencers provide deeper insights than traditional advertisements:

- hotel reviews,
- itinerary recommendations,
- hidden local spots,
- packing lists,
- safety concerns,
- cultural etiquette.

Because followers feel emotionally connected to influencers, their advice carries more weight than official tourism boards or commercial promotions.

Micro-influencers in particular create a high-trust environment, as their lifestyles appear more achievable than celebrities.

4.5 UGC Reduces Travel Anxiety and Builds Confidence

User-generated content is spontaneous, diverse, and honest. Examples include:

- “first-time solo travel” diaries,
- airport navigation guides,
- “what I wish I knew before visiting” series,
- cost-of-travel breakdowns,
- videos recorded on public transport.

This type of content removes uncertainty. When travellers see real people navigating local buses, using metro systems, or eating street food, they feel more confident.

Because UGC is perceived as unbiased (Litvin et al., 2008), it functions as a peer-to-peer travel advisory network.

4.6 Social Comparison and FOMO Influence Travel Behaviour

Social media encourages people to compare their lives with others. According to Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), users evaluate themselves by comparing their travel experiences, lifestyle, and achievements with those presented online.

Examples of FOMO-driven travel include:

- #EuroSummer pressure among young travellers,
- viral Bali villa stays,
- cherry blossom season in Japan,
- iconic Dubai desert photoshoots,
- Switzerland winter train reels.

Many users book trips not because they genuinely want the destination, but because they want to keep up with social trends or replicate viral experiences.

4.7 Short-Form Videos Make Travel Planning More Accessible

Short-form content democratises travel knowledge. It compresses complex information into easy-to-understand visual guides:

- one-minute itineraries,
- “top 5 foods to try,”
- budget breakdowns,
- “what to pack,”
- “how to use Tokyo metro,”
- “Instagram spots you can’t miss.”

This micro-learning format appeals to travellers who prefer quick summaries over long blogs or guidebooks. It especially benefits inexperienced travellers who fear unfamiliar cities.

However, this simplified style can cause problems:

- missing critical details,
- spreading outdated information,
- encouraging risky behaviour,
- creating unrealistic expectations.

Short-form knowledge is useful but lacks nuance.

4.8 Expectation–Reality Gaps Are Widening

Because Instagram and TikTok dramatise travel experiences through filters, edits, and perfect lighting, travellers often encounter reality shock when they visit the destination.

Common examples include:

- crowds at sunrise points in Bali,
- overbooked Santorini viewpoints,
- extremely long lines at Disneyland Tokyo,
- misrepresented food portions,
- popular “quiet streets” in Paris that are actually noisy and crowded.

Henderson (2021) highlights that curated visuals distort travel expectations, leading to lower satisfaction when travellers experience the unfiltered version.

4.9 Social Media Trends Cause Over-Tourism and Environmental Damage

Viral tourism is now one of the biggest challenges worldwide. Platforms amplify certain destinations, causing sudden spikes in visitation that overwhelm local ecosystems.

Major impacts:

Environmental

- coral reef destruction in Thailand,
- erosion in Icelandic canyons,
- plastic waste on Bali beaches,
- pressure on freshwater resources in island regions.

Social

- crowding in residential areas,
- disrespectful tourist behaviour,
- disruption of cultural rituals,
- loss of community identity.

Economic

- inflation in popular neighbourhoods,
- pricing-out of locals,
- overtourism-driven gentrification.

These consequences highlight the need for balanced tourism communication.

4.10 Tourism Boards Are Transforming Their Marketing Strategies

Tourism boards now recognise that traditional advertising is insufficient. They must adapt to social media behaviours.

Digital strategies include:

- collaborating with micro-influencers,
- producing aesthetic Reels and TikTok travel guides,
- curating photo zones and murals,
- implementing “responsible tourism” campaigns,
- using hashtags and trends strategically,
- analysing user-generated content through social listening,
- shifting promotion to off-season dates.

Countries like Singapore, Dubai, Japan, and South Korea excel in digital tourism outreach.

5. Discussion

The discussion interprets the findings and connects them to academic theory.

5.1 The Tourism Decision Journey Has Become Non-Linear

Traditionally, travellers followed a step-by-step journey:

1. Dream
2. Research
3. Plan
4. Book
5. Experience
6. Share

Social media collapses these stages into a fluid loop. For example:

- discovery happens during passive scrolling,
- planning happens through saved Reels,
- booking is influenced by influencer recommendations,
- experience is shaped by recreating viral shots,
- sharing creates new inspiration for others.

Gretzel et al. (2015) describe this as the cycle of “smart tourism,” where digital connectivity mediates every stage.

5.2 Visual Emotion Overrides Rational Decision-Making

Instagram and TikTok persuade users through peripheral cues:

- music,
- scenery,
- transitions,
- atmosphere,
- emotional storytelling.

According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), this triggers low-effort emotional persuasion. Travellers make decisions based on:

- “vibes,”
- colour palettes,
- aesthetic trends,
- emotional resonance.

This explains the rise of spontaneous travel bookings influenced by short videos.

5.3 Travel as Self-Representation and Identity Performance

Social media converts tourism into a performance of lifestyle and identity. Goffman (1959) suggests individuals perform roles to shape others’ perceptions. Instagram and TikTok amplify this through:

- curated vacation outfits,

- aesthetic photography,
- cinematic editing,
- carefully chosen locations.

Travel becomes part of a user's personal brand. This influences motivation, pushing travellers to seek destinations that match their digital persona.

5.4 Influencer Authority Redefines Travel Expertise

Influencers are now more influential than traditional travel experts because they provide:

- personalised advice,
- trustworthy narratives,
- emotional openness,
- lived experience.

Parasocial relationships create emotional loyalty, making followers highly receptive to travel recommendations.

5.5 Algorithmic Travel: Who Actually Chooses the Destination?

One of the most significant findings of this study is that *users are not always the ones choosing their destinations*. Instagram's Explore Page and TikTok's For You Page push content based on:

- micro-interactions,
- viewing time,
- audio preferences,
- hashtag trends,
- previous engagement patterns.

This means the algorithm actively shapes what a user sees—and therefore what a user desires.

Implications:

- **Taste engineering:** Algorithms guide travellers toward similar types of destinations (e.g., beach resorts, pastel-coloured cities).
- **Popularity cycles:** Destinations trend and fade quickly, creating unstable tourism waves.
- **Homogenisation of travel:** Users end up visiting the same places, often copying identical photo angles.
- **Overexposure:** Some destinations become “viral hotspots,” while others remain invisible.

This supports the idea that social media platforms function as powerful cultural gatekeepers.

5.6 Short-Form Travel Education: Benefits and Limitations

Short-form videos offer fast, accessible, and practical travel information. For example, TikTok is filled with videos such as:

- “How to use the Osaka metro,”
- “10 things you must avoid in Bali,”
- “Cheapest bus from Dubai to Abu Dhabi,”
- “Paris scam warnings,”
- “Top 5 foods you must try in Seoul.”

Benefits:

- reduces anxiety for first-time travellers,
- compresses essential information,
- visually demonstrates processes,
- helps travellers prepare efficiently.

Limitations:

- can oversimplify complex details,
- creators may unintentionally spread misinformation,
- content is not always updated,
- videos lack cultural nuance.

Thus, while social media democratizes travel knowledge, it also risks promoting shallow understanding.

5.7 The Psychology of Expectation–Reality Gaps

Instagram and TikTok are designed to amplify beauty and excitement. Creators select:

- the best angles,
- sunny days,
- empty scenes,
- dramatic transitions,
- perfect lighting,
- ideal moments.

When travellers arrive, they often confront:

- crowds,
- heat,
- queues,
- high prices,

- weather issues,
- less aesthetic surroundings.

This creates disappointment and sometimes resentment toward destinations. Henderson (2021) notes that this phenomenon damages destination satisfaction and post-travel reviews.

Expectation–reality gaps also influence word-of-mouth, with travellers warning others about “overrated spots” that were exaggerated by social media trends.

5.8 Over-Tourism and Sustainability Challenges

Social-media-driven tourism is a double-edged sword. While it boosts local economies, it can harm the environment and disrupt communities.

Environmental Effects:

- erosion of natural trails (Iceland),
- destruction of coral reefs (Thailand),
- excessive littering (Bali),
- pollution around lakes and mountains.

Cultural Effects:

- disrespect toward sacred spaces,
- interruption of rituals and traditions,
- commodification of local culture for digital entertainment.

Economic Effects:

- inflated housing costs in popular districts,
- monopolisation by large tourism businesses,
- loss of authentic community spaces.

Examples include:

- Hallstatt, Austria (overloaded with day-trippers),
- Kyoto’s Gion district (geisha harassment for photos),
- Tulum, Mexico (overpriced tourism-driven economy).

Social media magnifies tourism demand without allowing destinations time to adapt.

5.9 Tourism Boards Transforming Communication Strategies

Tourism boards worldwide now design campaigns specifically for Instagram and TikTok.

Common strategies:

- hiring local micro-influencers,
- creating official TikTok travel channels,
- building “photo zones” for aesthetic pictures,
- promoting sustainable travel through relatable videos,
- encouraging off-peak travel,
- highlighting lesser-known attractions.

Governments recognise that travellers respond more strongly to influencer content than official ads. As a result, tourism boards increasingly use user-generated content (UGC) to maintain authenticity.

This shift marks a new era of *visual tourism marketing*, where aesthetic value heavily influences communication strategy.

5.10 Travel as Identity Construction

Travel is no longer just leisure—it is part of personal branding. Instagram and TikTok turn travel into a performance of identity.

Travellers select destinations based on:

- lifestyle aesthetics (minimalist, tropical, luxury, vintage),
- fashion trends linked to destinations,
- cultural “vibes” portrayed online,
- content creation potential.

This behaviour reflects Goffman’s (1959) impression-management theory. People travel not only to enjoy but to *show* that they are enjoying. This changes the purpose of tourism from internal experience to external validation.

5.11 The Need for Responsible Digital Tourism

As social media continues to shape global travel, responsible communication becomes crucial. Tourism boards, influencers, and creators must:

- avoid promoting unsafe travel hacks,
- avoid encouraging illegal or disrespectful behaviour,
- be transparent about crowds and costs,
- promote lesser-known or sustainable locations,
- emphasise cultural respect,
- discourage harmful environmental practices.

Balanced storytelling can help protect destinations while still inspiring travellers.

6. Conclusion

Instagram and TikTok have revolutionised the way travellers imagine, choose, and experience destinations. They function as powerful visual platforms that combine aesthetic beauty, emotional connection, algorithmic discovery, and peer influence.

- Instagram emphasises polished, aspirational travel, whereas TikTok promotes authentic, relatable experiences.
- Social media platforms now act as primary sources of travel inspiration for young travellers.
- Influencers replace traditional travel agents by providing trusted, emotionally resonant guidance.
- User-generated content increases transparency and reduces travel anxiety.
- Social comparison and FOMO drive travel demand beyond personal preference.
- Short-form videos simplify travel knowledge but risk misinformation.
- Expectation gaps arise from filtered, edited, and staged content.
- Viral tourism spikes can cause environmental harm and cultural disruption.
- Tourism boards are adapting to the dominance of social media by reshaping marketing strategies.
- Algorithms play a huge role in shaping global travel trends.

Overall, Instagram and TikTok are not just tools—**they are cultural forces reshaping the global tourism ecosystem.** They influence how travellers imagine the world, how they interact with destinations, and how they present their own identities. As these platforms continue evolving, tourism stakeholders must address challenges responsibly to ensure sustainable and authentic travel futures.

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