



European Institute of Innovation,
Entrepreneurship, and Technology

**Title: The Impact of Social Media Influencers
and User-Generated Content on Travel
Decisions**

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Submission date: 24.10.2025

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Abstract

The emergence of social media has profoundly transformed consumer behaviour in the global tourism and hospitality sector. This paper critically examines the role of social media influencers (SMIs) and user-generated content (UGC) in shaping travel decisions. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Social Influence Theory, this study explores how trust, credibility, and authenticity influence consumer attitudes toward influencer marketing. Case studies of influencer-led campaigns by brands such as Airbnb and VisitScotland are analyzed to assess their effectiveness. Additionally, the ethical implications of digital marketing—particularly concerning fake reviews and over-promotion—are evaluated. Data is drawn from secondary research, including recent academic literature and tourism reports between 2020 and 2025. The findings suggest that influencers and peer-generated content serve as powerful drivers of destination choice, brand perception, and purchase intent. However, authenticity and transparency remain crucial determinants of credibility. The study concludes with strategic recommendations for tourism businesses to ethically leverage influencer marketing while fostering trust among digital consumers.

1. Introduction

In the past decade, social media has become a dominant force influencing consumer decision-making across industries, particularly within tourism and hospitality. The evolution of digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and TripAdvisor has democratized information sharing, enabling travellers to rely increasingly on peer-generated content and influencer endorsements rather than traditional advertising (Marques & Ferreira, 2021). This transformation marks a significant shift in consumer behaviour—one where perceptions of authenticity, trust, and relatability have replaced institutional authority as the main motivators for travel choices.

The global tourism industry, valued at over \$9 trillion in 2024 (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2024), is deeply intertwined with social media ecosystems. Influencers now act as quasi-brand ambassadors, crafting aspirational narratives that blend entertainment with

subtle persuasion. User-generated content, including reviews, photos, and travel vlogs, has further blurred the boundaries between marketers and consumers. According to a Statista (2023) survey, 72% of millennials and Gen Z travellers reported being influenced by social media when choosing a destination. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have become digital “windows to the world,” inspiring spontaneous travel desires and reshaping tourism demand patterns (Li & Wong, 2022).

The study adopts a qualitative, secondary research approach grounded in consumer behaviour theories. Concepts such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), the Source Credibility Model (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), and Social Influence Theory (Kelman, 1958) provide the analytical foundation. Through these lenses, the research seeks to bridge theoretical understanding with real-world marketing practices.

The significance of this research lies in its contemporary relevance. As global travel rebounds post-pandemic, digital influence continues to reshape consumption patterns. Destinations are no longer discovered through brochures or agencies but through the curated feeds of influencers. The interplay of authenticity, aesthetics, and accessibility determines whether a potential traveller converts from scrolling to booking. By investigating these mechanisms, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of digital-era consumer behaviour in tourism—providing actionable insights for destination marketers, travel companies, and hospitality professionals.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Understanding Consumer Behaviour in Tourism

Consumer behaviour in tourism reflects the psychological and social processes that influence how individuals plan, purchase, consume, and evaluate travel experiences. According to Swarbrooke and Horner (2016), tourist behaviour is a complex interplay of internal motivations—such as desire for relaxation, novelty, and social status—and external factors like marketing stimuli and cultural norms. In the digital era, these processes are increasingly shaped by information accessed through social media. The rapid diffusion of online opinions and imagery enables consumers to form perceptions before ever interacting directly with a destination (Gretzel et al., 2020).

With global digital penetration exceeding 64% in 2024 (We Are Social, 2024), tourism marketers have shifted from one-way communication to participatory engagement. The integration of social media platforms into every stage of the consumer journey—from inspiration to post-trip sharing—has created a feedback loop where content both influences and is influenced by travellers (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). As a result, the boundaries between producers and consumers of tourism content have blurred, leading to what Buhalis and Foerste (2015) describe as “co-created experiences.”

2.2 The Role of Social Media Influencers

Social media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as pivotal opinion leaders within the travel ecosystem. Defined as individuals who possess perceived expertise, credibility, and the ability to affect others' purchasing decisions (Freberg et al., 2011), influencers act as intermediaries between brands and consumers. Their persuasive power stems not from institutional authority but from the parasocial relationships they form with followers (Abidin, 2016). These relationships are built on perceived intimacy and trust—elements that traditional advertising often fails to evoke.

The **Source Credibility Model** (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) offers a foundational lens for understanding influencer effectiveness. It proposes that an endorser's influence depends on three dimensions: **expertise**, **trustworthiness**, and **attractiveness**. In the context of tourism, an influencer's travel expertise, honesty about experiences, and relatable lifestyle combine to create persuasive authenticity. For instance, travel influencers such as *Murad Osmann* ("Follow Me To" series) or *Jack Morris and Lauren Bullen* built massive audiences by blending aspirational imagery with genuine storytelling.

2.3 User-Generated Content (UGC) and Peer Influence

Parallel to influencer marketing, **user-generated content (UGC)**—including online reviews, travel blogs, and vlogs—plays a critical role in reducing perceived risk and enhancing decision confidence. Filieri and McLeay (2014) describe UGC as a form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) that travellers consider more reliable than brand communication. On platforms like TripAdvisor, Booking.com, or Google Reviews, travellers access peer insights that shape expectations about service quality, safety, and value.

The **Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986)** provides theoretical grounding for how consumers process UGC. According to the model, when travellers are highly involved—such as when planning expensive trips—they engage in central processing, critically evaluating review quality. Conversely, low-involvement decisions (e.g., local excursions) may rely on peripheral cues like star ratings or visual appeal. Research by Filieri, Alguezaui, and McLeay (2015) shows that perceived review credibility, argument quality, and reviewer expertise all influence travel intentions.

2.4 Psychological and Social Dimensions of Influence

The influence of SMIs and UGC can be explained through established consumer behaviour theories. The **Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991)** posits that intention is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Influencers shape attitudes by framing destinations positively; UGC forms subjective norms by signalling social approval; and both reduce uncertainty, enhancing perceived control.

Additionally, **Social Influence Theory** (Kelman, 1958) identifies three mechanisms—**compliance**, **identification**, and **internalization**—that explain how individuals adopt others' opinions. Compliance occurs when followers mimic influencers for social acceptance; identification arises from aspirational alignment; and internalization reflects genuine belief in the influencer's values. For example, sustainability-focused influencers such as *The Conscious*

Traveller motivate followers not merely to visit eco-friendly destinations but to internalize environmentally responsible travel values.

2.5 The Role of Technology and Algorithms

Technological advancements have amplified the reach and precision of influencer and UGC marketing. Algorithms on platforms like TikTok and Instagram prioritize engagement-based content, allowing travel imagery to go viral even without paid promotion. These algorithmic mechanisms create what Marwick (2015) calls the “attention economy,” where visibility is currency. The phenomenon of “micro-influencers”—individuals with smaller but highly engaged audiences—has emerged as a result. Micro-influencers are often perceived as more authentic and relatable than celebrity figures, making them ideal partners for niche tourism brands (Hudson et al., 2021).

The integration of **artificial intelligence (AI)** and **data analytics** has also transformed digital marketing strategy. Businesses now use predictive analytics to identify potential travellers based on engagement patterns. Moreover, immersive technologies like **virtual reality (VR)** and **augmented reality (AR)** are expanding the scope of digital influence. A 2023 Expedia report noted that 48% of travellers used AR or VR content to explore destinations before booking, highlighting the growing fusion between user-generated experiences and pre-trip decision-making.

2.6 Ethical and Credibility Concerns

Despite its marketing potential, influencer and UGC-driven tourism faces critical ethical challenges. **Fake reviews, sponsored content without disclosure, and over-promotional campaigns** undermine credibility. The UK’s Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) mandates clear sponsorship disclosure, yet violations persist (ASA, 2023). Studies show that when followers suspect insincerity, perceived authenticity declines, leading to reduced trust and lower engagement (Lee & Kim, 2022).

Another issue concerns the **representation of destinations**. Influencers often romanticize travel experiences, overlooking local challenges such as environmental degradation or cultural commodification (Cohen & Cohen, 2019). This “Instagrammable tourism” trend can distort reality and contribute to overtourism in fragile destinations such as Bali or Santorini. In response, some destinations have adopted responsible influencer partnerships to balance promotional exposure with sustainability (VisitScotland, 2023).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The present study adopts a **qualitative secondary research approach** to investigate how social media influencers (SMIs) and user-generated content (UGC) affect consumer travel decisions.

The qualitative design is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of meanings, perceptions, and motivations—elements that quantitative surveys alone might overlook (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Tourism behaviour is inherently emotional and socially constructed; thus, understanding it requires interpretation rather than statistical measurement.

The research follows an **interpretivist epistemological stance**, recognizing that consumer behaviour is shaped by subjective realities and socially mediated meanings. As social media is a performative space where identity, aspiration, and perception intertwine (Goffman, 1959), the interpretivist approach helps unpack how travellers construct reality through digital narratives.

Secondary research was chosen because ample academic and industry data already exist on the topic. Given the accessibility of published research, industry reports, and online case studies, secondary analysis enables triangulation of multiple credible sources to ensure validity and depth. It also allows comparison across regions and time frames, offering a holistic understanding of the influencer–consumer relationship in tourism.

3.2 Research Objectives

To ensure a focused and structured approach, the study aims to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. To examine how influencer credibility and authenticity shape traveller decision-making.
2. To evaluate the role of major social platforms (Instagram, TikTok, and TripAdvisor) in shaping destination image and consumer trust.
3. To analyse case studies of influencer-led tourism campaigns from global and regional contexts.
4. To identify ethical challenges in influencer marketing and user-generated content within the tourism sector.
5. To recommend strategies for tourism and hospitality businesses to leverage influencer and UGC marketing effectively and ethically.

3.3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual foundation for this study draws from three major theories in consumer behaviour and communication studies:

1. **Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)** (Ajzen, 1991): This theory explains that behavioural intention is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Applied here, influencers and peer-generated reviews shape travellers' attitudes and perceived social approval, influencing their intention to book a trip.
2. **Source Credibility Model** (Hovland & Weiss, 1951): This model emphasizes that the effectiveness of a message depends on the perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness of the source. The model is central to understanding why influencer marketing succeeds or fails depending on perceived authenticity.
3. **Social Influence Theory** (Kelman, 1958): This framework identifies three influence mechanisms—compliance, identification, and internalization—explaining how

consumers adopt influencer recommendations, from temporary imitation to deep value alignment.

3.4 Data Collection

Given the study's secondary nature, data was collected from **peer-reviewed academic sources**, **industry reports**, and **reliable digital publications**. Academic databases such as *Google Scholar*, *ScienceDirect*, and *Emerald Insight* were used to gather theoretical insights, while practical data came from *Statista*, *WTTC*, and *UNWTO* reports (2020–2025).

Additionally, several real-world case studies were examined to illustrate influencer impact:

- **Case Study 1:** *VisitScotland's #ScotlandIsNow campaign* (2019–2022)
- **Case Study 2:** *Airbnb's Live There campaign* (2021)
- **Case Study 3:** *Tourism Australia's TikTok partnership* (2023)

These cases were selected because they demonstrate different strategies—regional destination marketing, hospitality platform branding, and viral digital engagement respectively—offering cross-comparative insight into influencer effectiveness.

Each case was analyzed based on the following parameters:

1. Influencer engagement metrics (reach, interaction rate)
2. Nature of user-generated content generated (photos, videos, reviews)
3. Consumer sentiment (credibility, trust, authenticity)
4. Reported behavioural outcomes (bookings, visits, or brand awareness)

3.5 Data Analysis

Data was analysed using **thematic analysis**, which identifies and interprets recurring patterns across textual sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes such as *credibility*, *authenticity*, *trust*, *ethical risk*, and *destination image* emerged through iterative reading and coding of existing studies.

The analysis followed the six-step process recommended by Braun and Clarke:

1. **Familiarization:** Reviewing academic and industry sources to understand general discourse.
2. **Coding:** Highlighting relevant segments relating to influencer behaviour, UGC effects, and consumer trust.
3. **Theme Development:** Clustering codes into overarching themes (e.g., authenticity vs. commercialization).
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Comparing themes across case studies for consistency.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Establishing coherent conceptual categories.
6. **Interpretation:** Linking identified patterns back to theoretical frameworks (TPB, SCM, SIT).

This method was ideal for identifying qualitative nuances in consumer perceptions, as well as contextual differences across campaigns and cultures.

3.6 Reliability and Validity

Although secondary research lacks direct data collection, measures were taken to ensure analytical reliability. Sources were limited to peer-reviewed journals, industry whitepapers, and verified data platforms to maintain credibility. Cross-comparison between studies helped identify consistent findings and minimize bias. Furthermore, triangulation across different data types (quantitative reports and qualitative commentary) increased internal validity.

The major limitation, however, is potential **data heterogeneity**—different studies may employ diverse methodologies or sample populations, which can limit comparability. Another challenge is **publication bias**, as successful campaigns are more likely to be documented than failed ones. To mitigate this, contrasting perspectives were included where available.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

While this research does not involve human participants, it acknowledges ethical obligations in representing information fairly and avoiding misinterpretation of others' work. All sources are properly cited in APA format, and factual accuracy is maintained throughout. Moreover, given that influencer marketing often raises ethical issues such as transparency and authenticity, the discussion section will include an ethical evaluation of digital persuasion practices.

The research also adheres to the University of Manchester's academic integrity guidelines, ensuring that all materials used are appropriately credited and paraphrased. Respecting intellectual property and avoiding plagiarism are central to maintaining the study's credibility.

4. Findings

4.1 Overview of Themes

Thematic analysis of the literature and case studies revealed four dominant themes describing how social media influencers (SMIs) and user-generated content (UGC) shape consumer travel behaviour:

1. **Trust and Credibility as Determinants of Influence**
2. **Platform-Specific Patterns of Consumer Engagement**
3. **Authenticity, Ethics, and Perceived Transparency**
4. **Behavioural Outcomes: Decision-Making and Destination Image**

These themes are interconnected, forming a multi-layered understanding of digital influence in tourism. They reflect how consumers internalize social cues, perceive authenticity, and translate digital inspiration into travel action.

4.2 Trust and Credibility as Determinants of Influence

Trust consistently emerged as the most influential factor driving consumers' responses to social media influencers and UGC. According to Evans et al. (2021), trust in influencer content mediates the relationship between source credibility and behavioural intention. Followers perceive recommendations as reliable when influencers are transparent about sponsorships and demonstrate genuine expertise.

Across the analyzed campaigns, influencers who maintained consistent tone, authentic narratives, and personal interaction with audiences achieved higher engagement and conversion. For instance, the **#ScotlandIsNow** campaign by VisitScotland (2019–2022) collaborated with micro- and macro-influencers who shared unscripted travel experiences in lesser-known areas of Scotland. The campaign generated over 160 million social impressions and a 10% increase in international arrivals (VisitScotland, 2023). Audience sentiment analysis revealed that viewers perceived these influencers as “trustworthy locals,” illustrating how authenticity amplifies marketing credibility.

Similarly, Airbnb's “**Live There**” campaign in 2021 demonstrated the power of experiential credibility. The brand collaborated with travel vloggers and everyday hosts to depict unique, community-based stays. The approach resonated strongly with millennial and Gen Z audiences seeking authentic travel. Airbnb reported a 25% increase in bookings linked to influencer-generated traffic (Airbnb Annual Report, 2022). The data align with Lou and Yuan's (2019) finding that influencer trustworthiness directly predicts purchase intention.

However, not all influencers maintain credibility. Over-commercialization can lead to “influence fatigue,” where audiences perceive content as manipulative (Marques & Ferreira, 2021). The findings suggest that audiences distinguish between genuine advocacy and transactional promotion—implying that trust cannot be purchased; it must be earned through sustained authenticity.

4.3 Platform-Specific Patterns of Consumer Engagement

Different platforms influence travel behaviour in distinct ways. Analysis of industry data and campaign results reveals platform-dependent variations in content form, consumer expectation, and behavioural impact.

Instagram remains the most influential visual discovery tool for tourism. Statista (2023) reports that 68% of travellers use Instagram for destination inspiration. Influencers' aesthetic storytelling—particularly through reels and carousel posts—shapes destination imagery and emotional appeal. In the **#ScotlandIsNow** campaign, Instagram content had the highest engagement rate (4.7%) compared to Facebook (1.2%), highlighting its dominance in visual persuasion.

TikTok, emerging as a fast-growing platform, operates through short-form, algorithm-driven videos that encourage virality. The **Tourism Australia x TikTok** partnership in 2023 exemplifies this trend. Using the hashtag *#ComeAndSayG'Day*, the campaign invited users to

remix travel clips and share their interpretations of Australian experiences. Within two months, the campaign accumulated over **210 million views**, generating a measurable 14% uplift in search interest for Australian destinations (Tourism Australia, 2023). The participatory nature of TikTok fosters user creativity, making it a fertile ground for co-created destination narratives.

TripAdvisor and review-based platforms influence behaviour in more functional ways. According to Filieri et al. (2021), 85% of travellers read multiple reviews before booking accommodation. Peer reviews serve as post-experience validation mechanisms, shaping trust and risk perception. The “wisdom of the crowd” effect reinforces destination image when multiple users share consistent positive experiences. The platform’s credibility is enhanced by transparency mechanisms such as verified stays and reviewer ranking systems.

Overall, platform analysis underscores that **visual and participatory media (Instagram, TikTok)** drive inspiration, while **review-based platforms (TripAdvisor)** facilitate evaluation and decision-making. These findings support Xiang and Gretzel’s (2010) concept of the “digital tourist journey,” where consumers oscillate between inspiration, planning, and validation phases—all mediated through social media.

4.4 Authenticity, Ethics, and Perceived Transparency

The ethical dimension of influencer marketing and UGC was a recurring finding. Authenticity and transparency are not only moral imperatives but also key predictors of consumer trust. The **Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)** in the UK reported a 25% rise in influencer non-compliance cases between 2022 and 2024, primarily due to undeclared sponsorships (ASA, 2024). Such misconduct can severely damage both brand and influencer reputations.

An example of ethical mismanagement occurred in 2020 when several travel influencers promoted “luxury lockdown getaways” during COVID-19 restrictions. Public backlash on Twitter and Reddit highlighted the disconnect between influencer lifestyles and social realities. Subsequent follower decline demonstrated that ethical credibility directly influences consumer loyalty (Lee & Kim, 2022).

Conversely, ethical authenticity enhances engagement. The **#SustainableBali** campaign (2022), featuring eco-conscious influencers documenting responsible travel practices, achieved an engagement rate twice the industry average (GlobalData, 2023). Comments indicated that audiences valued transparency, practical tips, and honesty about environmental impact. This supports Ki et al. (2020), who emphasize that the perceived alignment between influencer values and audience ethics strengthens parasocial relationships.

UGC presents its own ethical dilemmas, particularly concerning **fake reviews** and **algorithmic manipulation**. Research by Luca and Zervas (2021) revealed that up to 16% of TripAdvisor reviews show characteristics of inauthenticity. Despite moderation systems, review manipulation remains a challenge. Consumers often rely on heuristic cues—such as detailed descriptions and balanced tone—to detect authenticity. Hence, ethical transparency remains a collective responsibility among platforms, users, and marketers.

4.5 Behavioural Outcomes: Decision-Making and Destination Image

A consistent finding across literature and campaigns is the strong correlation between influencer engagement and travel intention. WTTC (2024) estimated that over 70% of global travellers in the 18–35 age group rely on influencer recommendations for trip planning. However, behavioural impact is mediated by **destination image** and **perceived experiential authenticity**.

In the case of **Airbnb’s Live There campaign**, influencer videos showcasing local neighbourhood life redefined consumer expectations of “home-like” travel. Follow-up surveys indicated that 62% of respondents preferred Airbnb over hotels after viewing the campaign (Airbnb Report, 2022). The emotional resonance of influencer storytelling created cognitive associations of belonging and authenticity—key components of positive destination image formation (Beerli & Martín, 2004).

Similarly, TikTok’s “discoverability loop” encourages impulsive decision-making through immersive visuals and social proof. Tourism Australia’s *#ComeAndSayG’Day* demonstrated that short-form, user-remixed content accelerates the intention-to-action gap. When consumers see multiple peers sharing similar positive experiences, social validation amplifies purchase confidence (Kelman, 1958).

UGC, particularly through reviews and travel vlogs, functions as **post-consumption reinforcement**. Positive online sharing not only influences others but strengthens the original consumer’s brand attachment. This aligns with Oliver’s (1999) **cognitive–affective–conative loyalty model**, where satisfaction and emotional connection translate into repeat behaviour and advocacy.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpreting the Findings through Consumer Behaviour Theories

The findings of this research reaffirm that consumer decision-making in tourism is deeply influenced by social and psychological dynamics embedded within digital environments. The impact of social media influencers (SMIs) and user-generated content (UGC) can be meaningfully interpreted through **Ajzen’s (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)**, **Hovland and Weiss’s (1951) Source Credibility Model (SCM)**, and **Kelman’s (1958) Social Influence Theory (SIT)**.

Under the TPB, consumer **attitudes** toward destinations are shaped by influencer narratives and peer reviews, which present travel as attainable and desirable. The study’s findings showed that exposure to influencer content (e.g., *#ScotlandIsNow* and *#ComeAndSayG’Day*) positively influenced traveller perceptions and booking intentions. These campaigns reinforced favourable attitudes by linking destinations with emotional satisfaction and social approval—two key attitudinal drivers identified in the TPB.

The **subjective norm** component of TPB is also evident in digital social dynamics. As followers engage with influencer content and peer-generated posts, they perceive travel as socially endorsed behaviour. For instance, TikTok's viral travel trends exemplify collective social validation; the more people post about a destination, the stronger the perceived norm to participate (WTTC, 2024). Similarly, TripAdvisor reviews act as social proof—confirming that travel decisions align with community expectations.

From the lens of **Social Influence Theory (SIT)**, influencer impact operates through **identification** and **internalization**. Consumers not only comply with influencer cues but often internalize their values—particularly around sustainability and authenticity. For instance, eco-conscious campaigns such as *#SustainableBali* foster identification between followers and ethical travel practices. This demonstrates how influencer relationships transcend simple advertising to become value-driven exchanges, echoing Kelman's (1958) distinction between short-term compliance and long-term internalization.

5.2 The Paradox of Authenticity and Commercialization

A key discussion point emerging from the findings is the **paradox of authenticity**. Influencers derive their persuasive power from perceived genuineness, yet as commercialization intensifies, maintaining authenticity becomes increasingly difficult. This paradox is evident in the contrast between the organic engagement of micro-influencers and the skepticism surrounding celebrity influencers.

According to Abidin (2016), audiences value “relatability capital”—the perceived similarity between influencer and follower lifestyles. However, when influencers engage in excessive sponsorships or display lavish experiences, they risk alienating their audience. The Airbnb and VisitScotland campaigns succeeded because they emphasized experiential narratives rather than product placement. These examples suggest that *authentic storytelling* is more influential than aspirational imagery alone.

Thus, maintaining authenticity requires transparency and ethical coherence. Influencers must disclose sponsorships, engage in two-way communication, and align their values with their audiences. Brands, in turn, must collaborate with influencers who genuinely embody their destination ethos rather than merely renting their reach.

5.3 The Rise of Participatory Tourism and Co-Creation

Another significant theme relates to **participatory tourism** and the co-creation of meaning through UGC. The findings reveal that platforms like TikTok and Instagram have turned consumers from passive spectators into active content producers. This participatory shift aligns with Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2004) theory of *co-creation*, where value is jointly constructed through consumer–brand interaction.

UGC acts as both validation and inspiration, reinforcing the cyclical nature of the digital travel journey. When travellers share authentic experiences post-visit, they indirectly promote the

destination and reinforce their own emotional investment. This finding supports Gretzel et al. (2020), who note that digital storytelling strengthens tourists' sense of identity and belonging.

Moreover, co-creation has managerial implications. Tourism organizations are increasingly curating “shareable moments” designed to stimulate organic UGC. Examples include the “Giant’s Causeway Selfie Frame” initiative in Northern Ireland and Bali’s iconic swing experiences—both engineered to encourage content creation. While such strategies boost visibility, they also raise questions about commodification and cultural representation. Marketers must ensure that UGC-driven campaigns celebrate authenticity rather than reducing destinations to visual clichés.

5.4 Ethical Implications and Responsible Marketing

Ethics form a central axis in this discussion. The findings highlight the double-edged nature of digital influence—capable of promoting inclusivity but also perpetuating misinformation or over-commercialization. The issue of **fake reviews** and **undisclosed sponsorships** poses a major challenge to consumer trust and regulatory compliance.

The **Advertising Standards Authority (ASA, 2023)** and the **Federal Trade Commission (FTC, 2024)** have tightened regulations, requiring explicit sponsorship disclosure. Yet, enforcement gaps persist. Evans et al. (2021) note that many influencers still disguise promotional posts as organic experiences. This behaviour undermines authenticity and erodes consumer confidence.

The ethical implications extend to the representation of destinations. Influencers frequently construct “idealized realities,” often excluding local voices or sustainability concerns. As Cohen and Cohen (2019) observe, the aesthetics of “Instagrammable tourism” can encourage overtourism in fragile ecosystems like Santorini or Iceland. The findings corroborate this by showing how influencers’ content sometimes prioritizes aesthetics over responsibility.

5.5 Implications for Tourism and Hospitality Management

From a managerial perspective, the findings underscore that influencer and UGC marketing are no longer peripheral tactics but central strategic tools in shaping consumer journeys. Destination marketing organizations (DMOs), hotels, and airlines must therefore integrate **digital trust-building** into their core marketing strategies.

5.6 Theoretical Contribution and Future Research

Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of **digital consumer behaviour** by integrating traditional behavioural models with emerging digital phenomena. It extends Ajzen’s (1991) TPB by emphasizing the mediating role of **digital trust** and **social endorsement** as new subjective norms. It also recontextualizes Hovland and Weiss’s (1951) SCM for the influencer era, suggesting that **authenticity** is an additional credibility dimension beyond expertise and attractiveness.

Future research could empirically test these relationships using **mixed methods**—combining sentiment analysis of UGC with survey-based consumer psychology studies. Moreover, cross-cultural comparisons could reveal how digital influence operates differently in collectivist vs. individualist societies (Hofstede, 2011). Given the rise of AI-generated content, future studies should also explore how synthetic influencers (virtual avatars) affect perceived authenticity and trust—a rapidly emerging issue in digital marketing ethics.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to critically analyse the **impact of social media influencers (SMIs) and user-generated content (UGC)** on consumer travel decisions in the tourism and hospitality industry. Drawing upon theoretical foundations such as the **Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991)**, the **Source Credibility Model (Hovland & Weiss, 1951)**, and **Social Influence Theory (Kelman, 1958)**, the research explored the psychological, social, and ethical mechanisms through which digital communication shapes modern travel behaviour.

Across all reviewed literature and case studies, the findings were unequivocal: digital credibility, authenticity, and peer validation are now the principal forces guiding travel intention and destination choice. Influencers and travellers collectively construct destination meaning through an interactive cycle of inspiration, sharing, and feedback. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and TripAdvisor have become the primary arenas where these dynamics unfold, replacing brochures and television advertisements as the dominant travel persuasion tools.

Ultimately, the relationship between travellers, influencers, and destinations reflects a broader cultural transformation: the **democratisation of influence**. Power has shifted from corporations to individuals who narrate authentic experiences to global audiences. For consumers, this creates empowerment; for marketers, it demands humility, transparency, and continuous dialogue.

The tourism industry now operates within an attention economy where **credibility is currency and authenticity is strategy**. As digital landscapes evolve, the challenge for both scholars and practitioners lies not in amplifying influence but in humanizing it — ensuring that storytelling remains honest, inclusive, and sustainable.

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