

Influencers and Indian Tourism: How Social Media Shapes Travel Decisions

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Abstract

India, a country with a deep historical background and a wide variety of cultural traditions, is well-known for its impressive historical sites and architectural marvels. These landmarks not only interest people who love history but also draw those who are fascinated by the advanced engineering involved in their creation. The nation provides a range of tourism opportunities, including Adventure, Wildlife, Cultural and Heritage, Religious, Business, Cruise, Culinary, Dark, and Retreat Tourism. While influencers are gaining more attention in the tourism industry, there is still limited research on how they affect tourists' choices, especially in India. This study looks into how influencer marketing influences tourists' decisions about where to travel in India, with a focus on the role of digital content creators and social media platforms. The study aims to understand how these creators affect tourists' choices, measure levels of engagement, and evaluate the effect of content promoted by influencers. It is a descriptive study that will use secondary sources such as reports, journals, periodicals, and project documents for data collection. The research provides important insights into how effective influencer marketing is compared to traditional methods and the importance of authenticity in choosing a travel destination. The findings emphasize the increasing role of influencers in tourism and offer useful conclusions for both marketers and policy makers. Future studies could further examine the long-term effects of influencers and their influence on different tourist spots in India and around the world.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, destination choice, tourists, social media platforms, India.

1. Introduction

India, a land of ancient civilization and diverse culture, is renowned for its rich historical monuments and architectural wonders. The country offers a diverse range of tourism experiences, including adventure, Wildlife, cultural and Heritage Tourism, Religious Tourism, Business Tourism, Cruise

Tourism, Culinary Tourism, Dark Tourism, and Retreat Tourism. Among these, Heritage Tourism is particularly significant, as it highlights India's deep-rooted connection to its cultural and religious heritage. The inclusivity and respect for diversity are what make India a unique destination for travelers. The country's royal heritage is showcased in its palaces and forts, many of which have been transformed into luxurious hotels and resorts, offering a glimpse into the opulence of ancient Indian kingdoms. Nature lovers are also drawn to India's vast natural beauty, with numerous waterfalls, lakes, rivers, and hill stations scattered across the landscape. With its blend of history, culture, and natural beauty, India is truly a land of endless discovery and inspiration. Today's content-driven influencer marketing is a combination of traditional and modern content marketing tactics, commonly referred to as influencer marketing. Influencer marketing focuses more on exposing customers to the industry's knowledge, dependability, and leadership (Tešin et al, 2022).

It combines online marketing, word-of-mouth marketing from people we already know and trust, and other user-generated content instead of using dated, corny traditional advertising that keeps pushing undesirable things in front of the customers (López & Sicilia, 2014). Brands use these platforms to manage and enhance their online reputation by collaborating with well-known individuals. This compares the various social media platforms and how they use communication. They have the greatest exposure with this business plan for the lowest investment (Hajli, 2014).

Influencer marketing combines traditional and current marketing tactics. It modernises celebrity endorsements by transforming them into content-driven marketing campaigns. Because companies and influencers work together to create campaign outcomes that have an impact on marketing's core difference. It is also important to recognise that the vast majority of influencers have worked hard to cultivate devoted and impassioned fan communities. It requires demonstrating how your industry perceives authority, credibility, and leadership.

Often, a person's reputation, popularity, or area of expertise has an impact on the market. Marketing to an audience of decision-makers is similar to word-of-mouth promotion. Every year, influencer marketing gains in popularity, and many businesses are noticing that it is boosting customer interest and revenue. Influencers have established their credibility and authority over a sizable fanbase. By telling the "story" of a company,

influencers can be used to manage and engage the target audience.

1.1 Content Of Influencer Marketing:

Influencer marketing refers to a strategic approach that leverages individuals with substantial social influence to promote products, services, or brands across digital platforms. Core components of influencer marketing include sponsored content, product evaluations and recommendations, giveaways and contests, branded or sponsored events, unboxing and first-impression videos, instructional tutorials, brand collaborations and endorsements, sponsored travel or experiences, storytelling integrated with personal branding, as well as live streaming and interactive Q&A sessions. Through sponsored content, influencers highlight a brand's offerings on their social channels, while product reviews and recommendations provide authentic insights based on personal experience.

1.2 What is Influencer Marketing?

Influencer marketing has emerged as one of the fastest-growing domains within the marketing industry and represents a significant area of scholarly inquiry (Audrezet et al., 2018). Influencers are individuals who have invested considerable effort in cultivating both their audience and personal brand, necessitating the safeguarding of their credibility and the trust of their followers.

1.3 Influencer Marketing Statistics

The worldwide influencer marketing industry has more than quadrupled since 2019. In 2023, the market is expected to be worth a record \$21.1 billion. As of April 2023, there were 5.18 billion internet users globally, accounting for 64.6 percent of the global population. Of this total, 4.8 billion, or 59.9 percent of the world's population, used social media. By 2022, influencer marketing will be worth \$16.4 billion. Businesses generate a \$5.2 ROI for every \$1 invested on influence marketing. Since 2016, searches for the keyword "influences marketing" have increased by 465% on Google alone. 90% of study respondents agree that influence marketing is a successful method of marketing. 67 percent of businesses use Instagram for impact marketing (statista.com). Table 1 shows the pandemic's impact on Indian tourism.

Table 1: Pandemic Impact on Indian Tourism

Aspect	Tourism (India)	Social Media (India)
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Foreign Tourists (FTA)	2019: 10.93 million 2020: 2.74 million (75% drop from 2019) 2021: 1.52 million (44.5% drop from 2020) 2022: 6.19 million (– 44% vs 2019) 2023: 9.23 million (still below pre-COVID) 2024 (estimate): 9.66 million using preliminary data	2020: 400 million users (29% of population) 2021: 448 million users (32% of population); increased by 78 million (+21%) 2025: 692 million users (49.4% penetration) , largest global base
Domestic Tourists	• 2020: 610 million • 2021: 677 million (+11% YoY) • 2022: 1,731 million • 2023: 2,509 million	Average daily time spent rose dramatically: from 150 min/day pre-lockdown to 280 min/day (1st week of lockdown), an 87% jump, Social media activity surged 50× between Jan–Mar 2020: from 0.4M 20.3M COVID-related mentions by March 24
Economic Impact (Jobs, Revenue)	Q1 2020-21: 14.5 million tourism jobs lost; Q2: 5.2M; Q3: 1.8M (from 34.8M direct jobs in 2019-20) TDGVA dropped 93.3% in Q1 2020-21 (compared to previous year)	Not specific to earnings, but social media advertising hit ₹28,400 crore in 2024, capturing 34% of India's digital ad spend
Platform Shifts & Trends	Sharp rebound in tourism by 2022–23, yet still below 2019 levels; domestic sector recovered faster than international.	TikTok ban (June 2020) spurred rapid adoption of Instagram Reels; Reels achieved 6M video uploads/day vs MoJ's 3M Rural social media user base growing at 18.2%

		annually vs 7.3% in urban areas (2025 data)
Long-term Outlook	International tourism slowly recovering but may lag pre-pandemic; domestic travel has surged back, into the billions	Social media user base doubled in five years (2020–25); India plays a leading role globally in social media growth

Source: Compiled by authors.

1.4 Various platforms for influencing marketing

- a. **YouTube:-** YouTube, which was founded in 2005, has seen significant modifications. Over the past ten years, the platform has grown to become a top marketing tool utilized by social media influencers to promote products (Schwemmer&Ziewiecki 2018).
- b. **Instagram:** - Instagram promises to help companies and businesses engage with their target audiences by displaying captivating images in a lively, visual environment. Furthermore, Instagram provides a route for open communication between users and businesses, making it an ideal platform for businesses to interact with their current consumers.
- c. **Facebook:-** Facebook, a social networking site, has grown immensely popular. Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012) discuss the path of future study. Facebook pages are far more extensive than Twitter profiles. They allow a product to make movies, images, detailed descriptions, and product pages available for viewing by others. Facebook allows users to get event notifications and link to a product's Twitter feed. 93% of company marketers use Facebook to sell their brands.
- d. **Snapchat:** -Snapchat, a popular messaging and photo-sharing app, was created in 2011 by three Stanford University students: Evan Spiegel, Bobby Murphy, and Reggie Brown. The software's initial objective was to allow users to converse back and forth while transmitting visuals that would disappear after 1 to 10 seconds. There are already up to 158 million daily users of Snapchat, which became popular with social media users right away (Vaterlaus *et al.* 2016).
- e. **Twitter:** - Twitter has been increasingly integrated into daily life, regardless of one's physical location. Just ask the estimated 554.7 million individuals worldwide who regularly use the site and publish 58 million "tweets"

every day. Or, ask one of the 135,000 new members that join the network every day (Murthy 2018).

- f. **LinkedIn:** - Online connections between businesses and customers are made possible by sites like LinkedIn. Blogs are used by businesses to market their products, set them apart from the competition, and eventually connect with social media-savvy customers. These businesses value accessibility, innovation, and information. A business or product can use blogs to provide detailed descriptions of their products or services, customer reviews, links to other blogs and social media pages, and more.
- g. **Threads** – Launched by Meta in July 2023, Threads is Instagram’s companion for text-based microblogging, designed as a direct competitor to X (Twitter). Its launch saw over 100 million users in just 5 days, highlighting how much appetite there is for short-form text social networks. Features include trending hashtags, integration with Instagram stories, and reposting content across both apps.
- h. **Bluesky** – Started in 2023 (beta) by former Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey, Bluesky is a decentralized network built on the AT Protocol. It allows users to control their own feed algorithms, moderate content, and follow community rules, making it appealing to users seeking transparency and independence from corporate-controlled social platforms.
- i. **Tourism:** -The tourism business is one of the most competitive industries of the service sector, necessitating effective use of available natural, financial, and human resources. To boost tourism in every country, it is critical to establish the appropriate infrastructure, improve service quality, and increase consumer happiness (Mason, 2020). Marketers utilise a variety of tactics to create customer delight and aversion. The tourism review team works with various media outlets to promote tourism and attract international tourists (Živković et al., 2014).

1.5 Travel and Tourism Statistics

Prior to the pandemic, travel and tourism (including its direct, indirect, and induced consequences) accounted for one-fourth of all new employment produced worldwide, 10.3% of all jobs (333 million), and 10.3% of global GDP (US\$9.6 trillion). Meanwhile, overseas visitor spending reached US\$1.8 trillion in 2019 (6.8% of total exports). In 2022, India registered

Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) of 6.19 million (Provisional), a 305.4% increase over the same time the previous year, resulting in Foreign Exchange Earnings (FEEs) of Rs.1,35,543 crore (Provisional estimates), a 106.77% increase. Furthermore, according to statistics provided by the state/UT governments and other information available to the Ministry of Tourism, there were 677.63 million Domestic Tourist Visits (DTVs) across the country in 2021.

In the 2014-15 academic year, the Ministry of Tourism launched the Swadesh Darshan Scheme to promote the coordinated development of themed tourism circuits around the country. Swadesh Darshan 2.0, the program's new name, has been modified with the motto "vocal for local". Since the program's commencement, the Ministry has authorised 76 projects over 13 themes, totalling Rs. 5315.59 crore in revised sanctioned cost, and disbursed Rs. 4734.11 crore (until December 31, 2022).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Influencer Credibility, Trust, and Effectiveness

Altunel&Erkurt (2015) examined that Involvement, experience quality, satisfaction, and intention to suggest are all variables that this study will experimentally assess. Along with examining the relationship between engagement and intention to suggest in a setting of a cultural tourist destination, the study also examines the mediating role of experience quality and satisfaction. Barbe & Neuburger (2021) highlighted the question of the source legitimacy of social media influencers. The term "social media influencer" refers to internet users who have a significant following on one or more social media sites. The significance of source trustworthiness for the success of advertising has been consistently highlighted in the literature. Draganova (2018) described that Consumers and how they view influencers are the main subjects of this study. Different influencer characteristics, such as perceived physical attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, and positive associations, are examined to determine what consumers pay the most attention to and what influences them the most when deciding whether to purchase a good or service. Gamage and Ashill (2023) investigated whether influencer-created content's commercial orientation reduces followers' confidence in them and the content's perceived validity. According to the mediation results, the commercial orientation of influencer-created content has a negative impact on followers' desire to learn more about the posted product due to its perceived validity and reliability. Belanche et al. (2021) examined that the current

study emphasises how a congruent psychological mechanism utilised in influencer marketing efforts may help to the effectiveness of this novel style of persuasive communication. It is based on beliefs about balance, cognitive dissonance, and congruity.

Lou and Kim (2019) investigated the attraction of influencers among teenagers, finding a positive association between entertainment value, influencer knowledge, trustworthiness, attractiveness, and follower similarity. Parental mediation of social media use is also investigated, however neither active nor restricted mediation are linked. Lou and Yuan (2019) studied the impact of influencer marketing on social media by conducting an online poll to assess the social media influencer value model. The study focusses on how an influencer's reputation, attractiveness, and likeness to followers affect brand awareness and buy intentions. Hudders & De Jans (2022) conclude that Female social media influencers have been the subject of previous studies, but no empirical research has looked at how influencer gender influences the persuasiveness of sponsored material.

Hudders et al (2021) described that Influencer marketing is an efficient and effective marketing strategy that often lacks the perceived advertising effect. Many companies use social media influencers to target specific markets, but without a clear strategic approach, it has been adopted through trial and error. Academic study has expanded, providing a better understanding of consumer impact. Hudders& Lou (2023) described the challenges faced by influencer marketing, focusing on both positive and negative aspects. Influencers may endanger followers' physical and mental health by promoting unrealistic ideals, lavish lifestyles, and poor dietary habits. They may struggle with the constant need for likes and followers, sacrificing privacy for commercial success. The literature lacks adequate coverage of these negative aspects. Kadekova&Holienčinova (2018) described that social media influencers dominate the internet with their strong online presence and significant impact on younger generations.

Martínez-López et al. (2020) explained that social media influencers can enhance consumer trust and interest in products. However, research on their impact on consumer trust and purchasing decisions is limited. This study explains how perceived brand control and commercial orientation affects influencer credibility, with perceived brand control having a greater negative impact. Masuda (2022) found that influencer marketing on social media has gained traction for building

parasocial relationships (PSRs) between influencers and their followers. A research looked at three characterisations (trustworthiness, perceived competence, and PSR) and three personal qualities (attitude homophily, physical beauty, and social attractiveness) as predictors of purchase intention. Pop (2022) investigated how social media influencers (SMIs) are influencing customer behaviour in the travel industry, with trust being critical for influencer and tourist marketing. This study investigates consumer journey variables like as desire, information seeking, and satisfaction, and concludes that confidence in SMIs impacts travel decisions. Tourism marketers could employ SMIs to pique interest and boost reputation, eventually influencing destination decisions.

Rungruangjit (2022) stated that micro-influencers have become essential knowledge resources for customers, resulting in brand evangelism and long-term consumer-brand ties. This research combines a unified framework into literature-based frameworks, consumer-based digital content marketing, information relevance theory, observational learning theory, consumer-influencer engagement behaviour, and brand evangelism. Seibe (2021) defined that the increasing presence of social media influencers (SMIs) is transforming consumer behavior in the travel sector. Trust is crucial in influencer and tourism marketing, establishing long-term connections between businesses and customers. Smart PLS analysis reveals that customer trust in SMIs influences travel decision-making, enhancing credibility and influencing destination choices. Serra (2022) explained that influencer marketing impacts various industries, including travel and tourism. Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) utilize social media influencers to attract travelers and improve their destinations. This study provides insights into influencer marketing for travel destinations, utilizing interviews, content analysis, and internal reports. Sesar (2021) stated that Influencer marketing influences consumer attitudes and decisions in various sectors, including travel and tourism.

2.2 Social Media Platforms and Communication Channels

Asan & Yolal (2022) stated that Technology advancements caused mass media to change, and social media emerged along with it. Today's societies cannot exist without social media. Social media, which allows users to interact with others and create material, has also influenced various ideas, ways of life, and communication conventions. The social media influencer is one of these ideas. In subjects relating to tourism as well, influencers that affect customers are regularly. Bizirgianni &

Dionysopoulou (2013) find that significant changes in the way consumers seek, evaluate, produce, buy, and consume information, goods, and services have been brought about by the growth of social media and information and communication technologies (ICTs). Particularly, young tourists who constitute the largest proportion of new technology users actively participate in a variety of tourist industry production processes, including design, development, and distribution. Camilleri & Kozak (2022) this study explores impressions of the appeal of online information, interactive interaction, and real-time conversational skills. The study postulates that these variables affect the social media users' opinions of the social media groups associated with the places, and their plans to visit them again, and may even have an impact on how they engage in social facilitation. Chatzigeorgiou (2017) explores how social media and the Internet might help rural companies appeal to millennials. It has become clear that using social media accounts to connect with millennials is the most effective strategy.

Cooley & Parks-Yancy (2019) investigates how celebrities, influencers, and close friends affect the buying behavior of millennial customers. It reveals that while YouTube is most useful for learning about cosmetics and hair products, Instagram is most frequently used for learning about clothes. However, they are more likely to believe information coming from people they know. Marketing should take into account that people still believe personal recommendations from people they know, and efforts to increase consumer trust shouldn't be replaced by relying solely on celebrities and influencers. Dwivedi et al. (2021) discovered that the use of social media and the internet has changed both customer behaviour and corporate operations. Organisations may reap a range of benefits from social and digital marketing, including lower costs, improved brand recognition, and better sales. Haenlein et al (2020) described that Influencer marketing is a crucial extension of content marketing, offering opportunities and challenges. Brands must relinquish control to enable natural communication.

According to Hajli (2014), social media has increased customers' ability to communicate socially online. Consumers utilise social media, such as online communities, to generate content and network with others. Social media analysis may also help firms assess the benefits they stand to gain. A multidisciplinary model was created, based on the technological acceptance model and relevant studies on trust and social media. According to Hall (2019), marketers are increasingly

hiring influencers to promote products on social media, which might potentially generate usefulness. A cost-effective social media influencer marketing issue is presented, with iterative selection of influencer and item pairs. The strategy offers near-optimal marketing utility, as evidenced by empirical trials that demonstrate its better cost-effectiveness and computing efficiency. Han et al. (2023) investigated how a cost-effective strategy maximises marketers' value by choosing appropriate pairwise combinations of influencers and commodities, resulting in near-optimal marketing utility while maintaining superior cost-effectiveness and computational efficiency.

Schwemmer and Ziewiecki (2018) investigated how YouTube has grown into a marketing tool for social media influencers promoting items via electronic word-of-mouth processes. However, the extent of this phenomena remains unknown. Murthy (2018) examined that Twitter microblogging technology has significantly influenced modern human communication, differing significantly from earlier innovations like the telegraph and telephone. It has infused itself into daily life, regardless of geographic location. Nadkarni & Hofmann (2012) explained that Facebook's popularity is driven by two fundamental requirements: belonging and self-presentation. Neuroticism, narcissism, shyness, self-esteem, and self-worth are more influenced than demographic and cultural factors. Future research directions discuss these factors. Terttunen (2017) investigates the impact of Instagram on travel planning, location selection, and Instagram marketing in the travel sector. It explores consumer behavior, visual communication, and Instagram in the context of travel and tourism.

Tešinet al. (2022) stated that social media has significantly impacted the tourism industry, making it essential for planning trips, vacations, and returning home. This study aimed to determine how Instagram, a popular social media platform, influences travel decisions. The study also explored how sociodemographic features and inspiration sources influence respondents' travel preferences Vaterlaus (2016) stated that Snapchat, a social media platform, enables users to send images, videos, and text, influencing interpersonal relationships.

2.3 Consumer Behavior and Tourism Decision-Making

Belanche et al. (2021) examined that the current study emphasises how a congruent psychological mechanism utilised in influencer marketing efforts may help to the effectiveness of this novel style of persuasive communication. It is based on beliefs about balance, cognitive dissonance, and congruity.

Understand what motivates customer behaviour when they receive product recommendations from Instagram fashion influencers. Bizirgianni & Dionysopoulou (2013) find that significant changes in the way consumers seek, evaluate, produce, buy, and consume information, goods, and services have been brought about by the growth of social media and information and communication technologies (ICTs). Particularly, young tourists who constitute the largest proportion of new technology users actively participate in a variety of tourist industry production processes, including design, development, and distribution.

Camilleri & Kozak (2022) this study explores impressions of the appeal of online information, interactive interaction, and real-time conversational skills. The study postulates that these variables affect the social media users' opinions of the social media groups associated with the places, and their plans to visit them again, and may even have an impact on how they engage in social facilitation (Cartwright & Davies, 2022).

Dwivedi et al. (2021) discovered that the use of social media and the internet has changed both customer behaviour and corporate operations. Organisations may reap a range of benefits from social and digital marketing, including lower costs, improved brand recognition, and better sales. However, there are significant challenges due to unfavourable online brand visibility and electronic word of mouth. Febrian (2022) defined that Niche tourism refers to activities catering to a specific niche in the tourist market. Kanwel (2019), the rising interest in food-related tourism has resulted in an increased interest in street meals. These experiences are critical for building good opinions about a location and enticing visitors. Street food quality has an impact on visitor experience, destination image, life satisfaction, and word-of-mouth. López & Sicilia (2014) analyzed that eWOM influence on individual decision-making, revealing that opinion-seeking and opinion-giving behaviors predict eWOM influence.

2.4 Strategies, Models, and Tourism Industry Impact

Cartwright & Davies (2022) investigates the dynamics of influencer marketing in the business-to-business (B2B) market using the theories of employee advocacy, customer reference marketing, and organizational endorsement. It explains the strategic application of influencer marketing in the B2B context and identifies the difficulties B2B organizations face when using influencer marketing. Haenlein et al (2020) described that Influencer marketing is a crucial extension of content marketing, offering opportunities and challenges. Brands must

relinquish control to enable natural communication. Influencer Marketing Strategy guides selecting the right influencer, planning content, and incorporating influencer marketing into a wider strategy.

Martínez-López et al. (2020) explained that social media influencers can enhance consumer trust and interest in products. However, research on their impact on consumer trust and purchasing decisions is limited. This study explains how perceived brand control and commercial orientation affects influencer credibility, with perceived brand control having a greater negative impact. Influencer trust is crucial for forecasting post credibility, which predicts interest and willingness to seek more information. Mason (2020) concluded that Tourism Impacts, Planning, and Management is a text that focuses on the three key aspects of tourism: impacts, planning, and management. It discusses strategies for effectively managing tourism impacts, examining participants like tourists, host communities, and industry professionals. Song (2012) examined visitors' perceptions of environmental friendliness at the Boryeong Mud Festival in South Korea, finding positive anticipated feelings, subjective norms, and attitudes positively impacting desire and behavioral intention.

Xu & Pratt (2018) explained that The tourist industry favors celebrity endorsements, which can be a powerful marketing tactic. The study uses the self-congruity hypothesis to determine the impact of SMIs, finding that endorser-consumer and endorser-destination congruence positively influence visit intentions to endorsed destinations. Yesiloglu & Costello (2020) explained that Influencer marketing is a powerful tool that can impact a brand's marketing and advertising strategies, creating communities around businesses.

2.5 Research Gaps

Hudders & Lou (2023) described the challenges faced by influencer marketing, focusing on both positive and negative aspects. Influencers may endanger followers' physical and mental health by promoting unrealistic ideals, lavish lifestyles, and poor dietary habits. They may struggle with the constant need for likes and followers, sacrificing privacy for commercial success. The literature lacks adequate coverage of these negative aspects. Martínez-López et al. (2020) explained that social media influencers can enhance consumer trust and interest in products. However, research on their impact on consumer trust and purchasing decisions is limited. This study explains how perceived brand control and commercial orientation affects influencer credibility, with perceived brand

control having a greater negative impact. Influencer trust is crucial for forecasting post credibility, which predicts interest and willingness to seek more information.

Vries (2023) found that celebrity endorsers perform better in brand image and word of mouth than influencers in terms of trust and purchasing intention. However, none of the predicted associations hold, requiring further research to fully understand this topic. Zeng and Gerritsen (2014), the growing influence of social media in tourism is an emerging topic of research. Social media is vital for many aspects of tourism, including information discovery and decision-making, tourist promotion, and communicating with clients about unique location requirements. Using social media to promote travel-related things has shown to be an effective strategy. This study reviews and analyses research articles on social media in tourism.

Zhang et al (2022) investigated the impact of smart technology on tourism experiences, focusing on visitor attractions and satisfaction. Results show accessibility and engagement are crucial factors, with perceived benefits directly correlated with satisfaction. Improved infrastructure and services can enhance visitor experiences and competitiveness in tourist attractions. Rajesh (2013) stated that to develop a theoretical framework for destination loyalty using visitor perception, image, and satisfaction. It evaluates tourist happiness, determinants, and factors affecting destination image. The framework model incorporates historical and cultural influences on tourist perception. Živković et al (2014) examined that Information and communication technology is crucial for the tourism industry, particularly eWOM. With the increasing use of digital media, advanced technologies provide personalized travel options based on individual needs.

3. Research Methodology

This study is descriptive in nature; therefore, secondary sources will be used for data collection. The secondary data will be gathered from various credible sources, including government reports, industry databases, published journals, periodicals, and project reports. Data analysis will primarily involve trend analysis focusing on key indicators such as Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTA) and social media penetration rates over recent years to understand evolving patterns in the tourism sector and digital marketing influence. While secondary data provide rich contextual and historical insights, they also have limitations. These include potential inconsistencies in data collection methods across sources, the lack of control over data validity and accuracy, and the inability to capture real-time consumer

behavior dynamics. The study acknowledges these constraints and uses triangulation across multiple reputable sources to enhance data reliability and validity.

3.1 Objectives of the study

1. To examine influencer marketing impact on tourists' decision-making process.
2. To examine the level of engagement and interaction of tourists with social media influencers.
3. To assess the impact of tourists' exposure on influencer-promoted Indian tourism content.

4. Findings

Social media has revolutionized the travel and tourism industry by influencing how travelers make decisions, plan trips, and interact with destinations. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook play a crucial role in inspiring travel, as 43% of travelers now prioritize destinations found on social media. With over 74.4 billion views of the hashtag "travel" on TikTok and more than 624 million travel-related posts on Instagram, social media has become an essential tool for both travelers and tourism businesses.

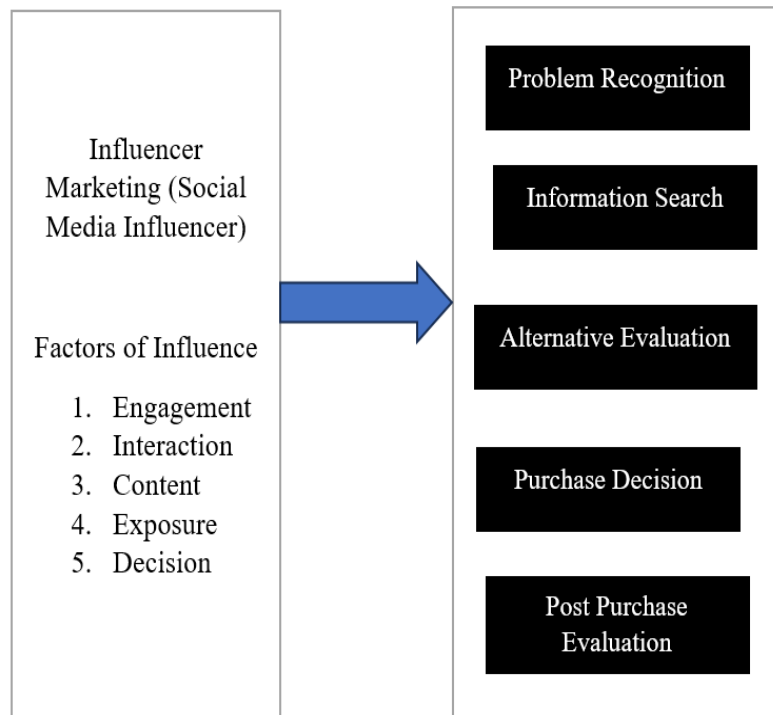


Figure 1: Influencer Marketing Factor

Source: (Fletcher & Gbadamosi, 2024)

Social media enables travelers to discover new destinations, research travel options, and interact with others, significantly shaping their travel decisions. Particularly among younger

generations, over 35% of travelers use social media as a key source of inspiration, with 50% of those under 40 basing travel choices on the destination's social media appeal. Furthermore, the rise of travel influencers, who share experiences and recommendations through vlogs and posts, has created a new avenue for tourism marketing. Travel companies increasingly leverage these platforms to engage with customers, promote destinations, and offer personalized campaigns. However, challenges exist, including managing negative reviews and misinformation, as well as navigating privacy regulations across different regions. Despite these hurdles, social media continues to be an indispensable tool in the tourism sector, driving growth, fostering customer engagement, and enabling businesses to connect with a global audience. As digital media becomes an even more influential force, its role in shaping the future of travel and tourism is undeniable, offering both opportunities and challenges for businesses in the sector (Figure 1).

The influence of social media on travel decisions is increasingly evident, with many travelers prioritizing destinations that offer visually appealing experiences for their social media profiles. According to a study by American Express, nearly 50% of respondents are motivated to choose a holiday destination based on how well it will look in photos or videos. This desire for visually captivating locations aligns with the fact that 48% of travelers seek destinations that they can showcase on social media platforms (Figure 2).

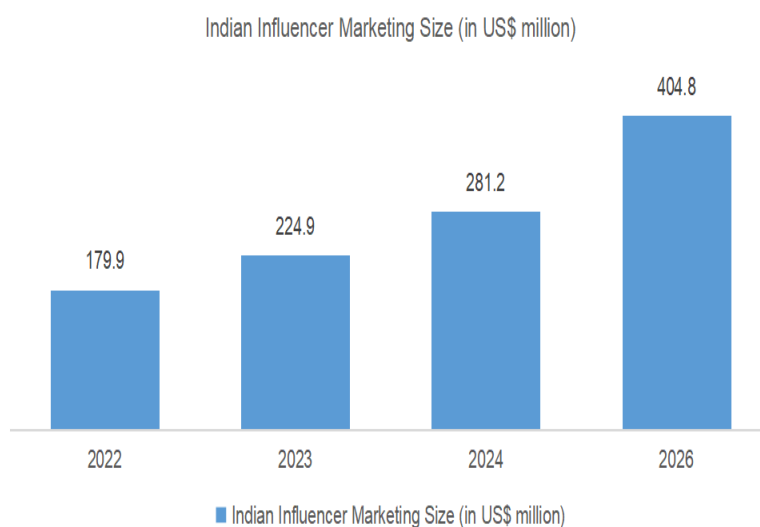


Figure 2: Indian Influencer Marketing Size

Source: EY State of influencer marketing in India report 2023

In addition to the allure of posting stunning selfies, social media serves as the primary source of inspiration for travel planning. A significant 75% of travelers turn to social media to research and gain ideas for their next trip, making it the most common and influential source of travel inspiration, surpassing other media outlets and even recommendations from family and friends. This trend highlights the growing importance of social media in shaping travel choices and underscores the need for destinations to cater to the visual preferences of travelers seeking content-worthy locations.

4.1 Impact of Influencer Content on Destination Choice

Social media has transformed the travel and tourism industry by significantly influencing how travelers make decisions, plan trips, and interact with destinations. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook play crucial roles in inspiring travel, with 43% of travelers now prioritizing destinations discovered via social media. The massive volume of travel-related content—over 74.4 billion views of the hashtag "travel" on TikTok and more than 624 million posts on Instagram—demonstrates social media's centrality as a tool for both travelers and tourism businesses. Influencers, by sharing personal experiences and recommendations through posts and vlogs, have created new channels for tourism marketing. Travel companies increasingly leverage these platforms to engage customers, promote destinations, and offer personalized campaigns, enhancing the visibility and desirability of destinations.

4.2 Level of Engagement with Influencer Posts

Social media serves as the primary source of inspiration for travel planning, with 75% of travelers relying on these platforms to research and gather ideas for trips. This surpasses other traditional sources, including recommendations from family and friends, underscoring social media's growing role in shaping travel choices. Younger generations are particularly engaged, with over 35% of travelers using social media for inspiration and half of travelers under 40 basing their travel decisions on destinations' social media appeal. The high level of engagement with influencer content reflects the interactive and visual nature of these platforms, which foster active participation—from browsing and liking posts to sharing and creating user-generated content.

4.3 Role of Authenticity and Credibility

The influence of social media on travel decisions is increasingly linked to the authenticity and credibility of the content

presented. Approximately 50% of travelers are motivated to choose holiday destinations based on their visual appeal for social media, reflecting the importance of authentic experiences that travelers can share with their networks. Authenticity strengthens trust in influencers and destination marketers, making the shared content more persuasive. Despite challenges such as managing negative reviews, misinformation, and privacy concerns, social media's impact on fostering customer engagement continues to grow due to the perceived honesty and relatability of influencer narratives.

4.4 Comparative Insights: Social Media vs. Family Recommendations

While social media increasingly dominates as a primary source of travel inspiration and information, traditional word-of-mouth from family and friends remains significant in traveler decision-making. The data indicate a shift where social media complements rather than entirely replaces family recommendations, especially among younger travelers who display greater trust in visual and influencer-generated content. This interplay suggests a complex decision-making environment where digital and personal influences co-exist, with social media enhancing the reach and immediacy of destination promotion, while family advice provides trusted, personalized endorsement.

5. DISCUSSION

According to the UNWTO Barometer (May 2024), India achieved significant growth in international tourist arrivals (ITAs) in 2023, with 18.89 million ITAs, a 31.9% increase from the previous year. This growth underscores the effectiveness of the Ministry of Tourism's initiatives aimed at enhancing India's global tourism position. Through schemes such as 'Swadesh Darshan', 'PRASHAD', and 'Assistance to Central Agencies for Tourism Infrastructure Development', the Ministry has provided financial support to state and central authorities to develop tourism-related infrastructure. Additionally, campaigns like Dekho Apna Desh and Chalo India, alongside events such as the International Tourism Mart and Bharat Parv, have significantly contributed to promoting India's tourism destinations both domestically and internationally. The launch of the Incredible India Content Hub and the promotion of niche tourism sectors like wellness, culinary, and eco-tourism have further diversified the tourism offering. To enhance visitor experiences, the Ministry has focused on capacity building through initiatives like the 'Incredible India Tourist Facilitator'

(IITF) program. The RCS-UDAN Scheme, in collaboration with the Ministry of Civil Aviation, has also improved air connectivity to key tourist destinations. Additionally, the e-Visa scheme, which now covers 168 countries and offers seven sub-categories, has facilitated easier access for international tourists, supporting India's goal of becoming the world's leading tourism hub.

6. CONCLUSION

Influencer marketing has become a powerful driver of international tourists' destination choices in India, with social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok emerging as primary sources of travel inspiration, surpassing even traditional advertising and word-of-mouth. Tourists, particularly younger generations, increasingly rely on authentic and visually appealing influencer-generated content to make travel decisions, with nearly half of travelers selecting destinations based on their social media appearance.

Influencer credibility, transparency, and engagement significantly shape traveler perceptions, as genuine storytelling tends to build greater trust compared to overly commercialized promotions. Despite challenges such as misinformation, negative reviews, and ethical concerns about lifestyle portrayals, the overall impact of influencer marketing on tourism is strongly positive. Government initiatives like Swadesh Darshan 2.0 and Dekho Apna Desh are complemented by influencer marketing campaigns that offer personalized, experience-driven narratives resonating with global audiences. It is therefore essential for marketers and policymakers to collaborate with credible influencers, leverage multiple platforms, and promote responsible, transparent travel content. Influencer marketing has evolved beyond a trend, becoming a sustainable and indispensable tool that strengthens India's global tourism presence and redefines how destinations are discovered and chosen by modern travelers.

6.1 Future Research Directions

Longitudinal studies tracking how influencer-generated content influences destination choices over time, examining the sustainability of its impact. Cross-cultural research comparing how international tourists from different backgrounds perceive and respond to influencer content. Broader investigations spanning multiple regions within India and internationally to assess influencer marketing's reach and effectiveness in diverse tourism contexts. Experimental research comparing the efficacy of influencer-led campaigns versus non-influencer campaigns

to determine measurable differences in tourist engagement and conversion. Studies focusing on the ethical implications and authenticity of influencer promotions, particularly regarding transparency and trust, to enhance credible and responsible tourism marketing strategies.

6.2 SCOPE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Businesses utilise social media in many aspects of their operations, but influence marketing has had the greatest impact on tourism. The purpose of this research is to assess the impact of influencer marketing in the tourism industry on international visitors' destination selections in India. The project will entail identifying notable digital content providers and influencers, analysing their material across multiple social media platforms, and measuring its impact on travellers' views and decisions. The research will also explore the role of different social media platforms in shaping travelers' preferences and behaviors. Additionally, it will investigate the ethical implications of influencer marketing and its effects on the Indian tourism industry and local communities. The study will provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of influencer marketing compared to traditional strategies and offer recommendations for stakeholders in the travel industry.

6.3 Recommendations

To effectively harness the potential of influencer marketing within the tourism sector, several strategic actions are recommended. Partnership with niche influencers should be prioritized, targeting regional travel specialists, food bloggers, and adventure enthusiasts. These niche influencers possess authentic connections with specific audience segments and can showcase lesser-known destinations, thereby diversifying tourism promotion and enhancing regional visibility. Second, tourism marketers should adopt data-driven campaigns to maximize the return on investment (ROI) of influencer marketing. Using analytics to identify high-performing influencer profiles and campaign strategies will ensure efficient resource allocation and measurable outcomes. Key performance indicators such as engagement rates, reach, and conversion metrics should guide continuous campaign optimization.

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