

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

THE IMPACT OF INFLUENCERS IN THE PROMOTION OF TOURISM DESTINATIONS: THE ROLE OF OPINION LEADERSHIP

Carmina Fandos-Herrera

Universidad de Zaragoza

cfandos@unizar.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2952-0750>

Raquel Gurrea Sarasa

Universidad de Zaragoza

gurrea@unizar.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5487-5203>

Alberto Labuena García

Universidad de Zaragoza

alabuena@unizar.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8821-2854>

Carla Viñals Marcos

Universidad de Zaragoza

carlamaella@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8078-1059>

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current context of digital marketing, influencers have established themselves as key figures in the promotion of brands and services, including tourism. Influencer marketing, by leveraging the trust and closeness that these figures generate in their audience, allows establishing deep and lasting emotional connections with consumers. This strategy has proven to be particularly effective in the tourism sector, where the intangibility of the product and the high level of uncertainty in decision-making require sources of information that are perceived as reliable.

Numerous studies support the power of influencers to shape the perceptions and behaviors of their followers, especially when their content is perceived as authentic and relevant. Tourism influencers create content about destinations and experiences and have become key figures in digital communication within the sector. Through platforms such as Instagram, YouTube or TikTok, influencers share personal experiences that, in addition to informing, inspire and motivate their audience. In this context, concepts such as authenticity, content quality, credibility and homophily (perceived similarity between the influencer and the follower) emerge as determining fact. Due to the intangible nature of tourism, travellers face complex decisions and seek to minimize risks. In this sense,

recommendations from influencers on social media are key, as they generate more trust and interest than traditional advertising, especially among millennials and Gen Z. Furthermore, posts mentioning influencers receive more interaction.

Despite the growing academic and business interest in influencer marketing, most of the literature has focused on sectors such as fashion and beauty, leaving a gap in research applied to tourism. In addition, little research has comprehensively addressed the relationships between influencers' characteristics, their opinion leadership and impact on consumers' behavioral intentions, such as visiting or recommending a destination.

2. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to analyze the antecedent factors of perceived opinion leadership of influencers in the tourism domain, as well as their impact on followers' intention to visit and recommend tourism destinations. Specifically, the effect of perceived authenticity, content quality, credibility and homophily on opinion leadership, and how it influences tourism behavior decisions, is explored.

The study proposes a theoretical model that articulates these constructs, integrating theories of communication and consumer behavior. At the same time, it seeks to offer practical implications for the design and management of destination marketing strategies based on collaborations with influencers.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a quantitative approach through the application of a structured survey aimed at social network users with an interest in travel and tourism. A non-probabilistic convenience and snowball sampling was used, achieving a total of 257 valid responses. The surveys were distributed during the months of July and August 2024.

The questionnaire included 7-point Likert-type scales to measure the constructs of perceived authenticity, content quality, credibility, homophily, opinion leadership, intention to visit, and intention to recommend a destination. The scales were adapted from previous validated literature.

Data analysis was performed with SmartPLS 4.0 software, using the structural equation modelling technique (PLS-SEM). The convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs were assessed, as well as the reliability of the scales using Cronbach's Alpha index, composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE).

4. RESULTS

The results show that perceived authenticity has a positive and significant effect on opinion leadership (H1), indicating that followers tend to value more those influencers they consider genuine. Similarly, it is confirmed that content quality not only positively impacts opinion leadership (H2), but also perceived authenticity (H3).

Although it was hypothesized that credibility would directly influence opinion leadership (H4), the results do not support this relationship. However, credibility does signifi-

cantly improve perceived content quality (H5), indicating that content quality mediates the relationship between perceived credibility and perceived opinion leadership in influencers.

Homophily is revealed as a critical factor: it positively influences both credibility (H7) and opinion leadership (H6). This perceived similarity between influencer and follower reinforces trust and affinity, fundamental aspects in the effectiveness of the message.

Finally, opinion leadership has a clear impact on the intention to visit (H8) and recommend (H9) tourist destinations, validating the hypothesis that influencers, when perceived as leaders, motivate their followers to make concrete tourism decisions.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study provides empirical evidence on the relevance of opinion leadership in the context of influencer-based tourism marketing. The results highlight the importance of maintaining an authentic image, generating high quality content and establishing a connection based on similarities with the audience. Although credibility does not directly impact opinion leadership, it does play a mediating role through content, suggesting that followers value what an influencer says more if they believe the influencer provides trustworthy information. Homophily is presented as an essential mechanism in building credibility and leadership, and as a key criterion in the selection of influencers for tourism marketing campaigns.

From a practical perspective, the results offer clear guidelines for the selection of influencers by destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and tourism companies. It is recommended to work with influencers who reflect the values and lifestyle of the target audience, and who generate emotionally engaging and truthful content since the use of attractive images, emotional videos, and real testimonials helps capture tourists' attention and motivate their travel decisions. In addition, encouraging participation through contests or content campaigns improves the destination's visibility and builds trust. Likewise, it is essential that collaborations with influencers promote realistic and achievable experiences, encouraging follower identification and active participation. The inclusion of educational content, personal anecdotes and practical tips can enhance the perception of usefulness and the intention to replicate the shared experiences.

Among the main limitations is the composition of the sample, focused mainly on young adults, which limits generalization to other generational cohorts. Future studies could explore generational differences in the perception and response to tourism influencers. Moreover, it is suggested to investigate other influential factors such as the reputation, experience, communication skills and empathy of the influencer, as well as to perform comparative analyses between different types of influencers (micro vs. macro) and platforms (Instagram vs. TikTok). Finally, future research can explore how destinations could use Big Data and Artificial Intelligence in their strategies, and how this affects the credibility and quality of influencer content. This study constitutes a significant advance in the understanding of the impact of influencers in tourism, providing a robust conceptual framework and applicable recommendations to optimize communication and promotion strategies in this sector.