The role of Social Media Influencers to Tourists Travel Decisions

Athanasios Poulis
University of Patras
Evi Chatzopoulou
University of Patras

Paper from the EMAC Regional Conference, Athens, Greece, September 27-29, 2023

The role of Social Media Influencers to Tourists Travel Decisions

Abstract

The travel influencers affect is multifaceted and this can be justified by the effect they have on potential travelers to organize a trip. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the relationship between social media influencers toward the customers' journey. In particular, the study examines the impact of the social media influencers on customers' journey post-, during and pre- travel. The study employs data collected from a survey involving 211 participants. The study follows a path analysis method and structural equation modeling for testing research hypotheses. The empirical results support the claim that the conceptual framework applied in this study better explains the relationship between travel influencers role and pre-travel behavior. Specifically, the findings show a significant, direct and positive relationship between the travel influencers and the decisions which needed to take before the travel, highlighting their role in this purchase stage.

Keywords: Social Media, Influencers, Tourism

Introduction

Influencer marketing is used to identify and target consumer audiences in order to promote and showcase specific products, brands, services, or destinations on social media (Belanche et al., 2021).). Influencer marketing in tourism is based on the form of e-'WOM' (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008). As in other word-of-mouth marketing strategies, its most crucial element is the identification of an appropriate opinion leader or influencer (Araujo, Neijens, and Vliegenthart 2017).

Influencer marketing has become a popular method for promoting brands and products to a specific audience by utilizing influencers who have a significant impact on their followers. According to Bourgeois (2016), influencer marketing is considered the most effective way of communicating with a target group. In fact, 75% of marketers are using influencer marketing as reported by Augure (2015). Influencers are regarded as credible tastemakers within a particular niche or across several niches. As traditional advertising has decreased, brands have turned to influencers to promote their productsand this is seen as a highly trustworthy form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM).

According to Abidin (2016), the vast majority of influencers use Instagram as their preferred social media platform for promoting their posts. This approach is highly attractive to brands because it allows them to convey their message more effectively through the influencers' high levels of credibility and authenticity, resulting in lower resistance to the message among users (de Vries, Gensler &Leeflang, 2012). Moreover, influencer marketing on Instagram enables brands to target specific user groups, as noted by Gladwell (2000). With its massive user base of 1 billion monthly active users, Instagram is a highly effective platform for electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing (Statista, 2022). Additionally, products can be showcased visually through images or videos and named in captions, as Abidin (2016) further observes.

This type of marketing is effective because it leverages the trust that followers have in their favorite influencers, who they perceive as authentic and relatable. As a result, influencer marketing can significantly impact consumer behavior, particularly in terms of purchase decisions. Consumers are more likely to make a purchase based on a social media reference and this is particularly true for younger generations since they perceive the influencer's endorsement as a recommendation from a friend, rather than a sales pitch from a company.By leveraging the trust that followers have in their favorite influencers, businesses can

effectively promote their products or services and influence consumer behavior. However, it is important for businesses to carefully select influencers who align with their brand values and target audience to ensure that the partnership is authentic and effective.

This paper aims to analyze the role of travel influencers and their influence on travelers' decisions, in each stage of their customer journey (Pre, During, and post- travel). Therefore, it will complement the existing literature and will provide additional information for both the tourist (consumer) and tourism professionals.

LiteratureReview

Influencer Marketing is an extension of the original concept of marketing, Word of Mouth (WoM) focused on a social context and implemented in a more professional way (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008). It is a process of "building" relationships, which can be useful for businesses seeking to explore their audience and to create loyal customers through trust and authenticity. Thus, Influencer marketing is defined as a process of identifying and activating leaders who have influence on a specific target audience in order to participate in digital campaigns and to achieve a specific action (increasing users, sales, website traffic etc (Martínez-López et al., 2020). Several authors have posited that influencer marketing is the most efficacious means of communicating with a target audience (Bourgeois, 2016b; Brown & Hayes, 2008; Keller & Berry, 2003). This is attributed to the personal and emotional nature of the communication between influencers and consumers, which fosters perceptions of independence, trust, and reliability on the part of the influencers (Bourgeois, 2016).

Influencer marketing has many applications such as establishing brand/ business credibility in the market, creating buzz, and promoting the brand's product/ services. So, its value can be measured in many ways based on the main goal. Its application is divided into two sub-categories (Sciarrino et al.,. 2020). The first category includes earned marketing influencers, that comes from unpaid influencers or influencers who already have content, from a previous collaboration, and promote it, with the aim of increasing their followers.The second category is about paid influencer marketing. Influencers receive paid sponsorships in order to promote the required content on various platforms.Therefore, many tourism businesses or even destinations invest in the power offered by influencer marketing, instead of the traditional way of advertising.

Pop et al. (2022) argue that tourism marketers have been collaborating with bloggers since they first appeared, as blogs quickly became important sources of travel knowledge and valuable tools for marketers.The traditional form of "WOM", Influencer marketing has become a profitable digital marketing strategy for increasing hotel brand awareness and customer loyalty. This is because e-WOM is significantly faster than the original and has the potential to reach a larger audience. More importantly, influencers have an exponential rise in authority, credibility and trust among today's consumers. People are more likely to trust the recommendations and opinions of other consumers than traditional advertisements (such as TV commercials) when making travel decisions (Keller & Fay, 2009). Consumers are looking for authentic advice and have become desensitized to traditional promotional advertising that is increasingly being ignored or dismissed (Miller, 2015).

2.1 Travel Influencers

The concept of opinion leaders appeared in 1944, by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, and they are called people who are likely to influence the opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations and behaviors of others (Burt, 1999; Rogers and Cartano, 1962; Valente and Pumpuang, 2007). Opinion leaders are defined as those persons to whom others turn for advice and information (Rogers, 1961).In the realm of social media, opinion leaders have renamed influencers, as social media influencers (SMIs). The rapid performance of social media has contributed significantly to the social construction and deconstruction of communications, in which influencers play a key operational role (Schultz, Utz, &Goritz, 2011). More specifically, influencer is anyone who has the ability to influence the purchasing decisions of other people, due to the real or perceived power, opinion, and position they hold on social media platforms. The FCT (Federal Trade Commission) defines influencers as advocates because they provide advertising messages that consumers are likely to believe.

Travel influencers often connect a variety of channels, such as websites, video platforms and social media platforms. In recent years, forms of transmedia storytelling mainly include sharing photos on the Instagram platform and videos on the YouTube platform. Travel influencers follow transmedia strategies to spread their travel experiences. Transmedia approaches have been developed in the social sciences and humanities since the early 2000s.Travel influencers create accounts where they regularly emphasize their authenticity through their travel content. With story-telling, they combine pictorial and audio-visual travel content that the public can follow on various social platforms. They could be

described as independent, self-employed, sole traders, providing attractive travel content.Travel influencers' important source of income comes from partnerships with tourism businesses. Another viable revenue option is creating content in the form of YouTube videos and product sponsorship.

This trusted voice of influencers, speaking to their personal audience, is the most effective and organic exposure a brand can have. Almost 49% of consumers rely on influencer recommendations when making purchasing decisions, 41% of consumers buy an item after seeing the influencer's promotion on social media, and 20% of consumers have spoken to friends or family about a product or service they learned about from an influencer (nealschaffer.com, 2023).

It has been observed that while influencers themselves may not necessarily purchase the products they promote, their endorsement of a particular product or brand to their audience can create heightened awareness and drive sales for that product or brand within their network (Brown & Hayes, 2008). Despite the differences between micro-influencers and macro-influencers, both groups engage in branding activities, which are crucial to their online popularity (Senft, 2008). Branding efforts typically involve the promotion and sponsorship of various products or brands. Senft (2008) argues that micro-influencers are often viewed more positively due to their willingness to share personal information with their followers and their relatable qualities, which foster greater identification with their audience compared to celebrities. Marwick & Boyd (2010) posit that a brand's success is closely tied to audience size, as factors such as likes, shares, followers, comments, and retweets increase with larger audiences. As a result, a brand's growth is facilitated by increasing its audience size.

Bourgeois (2017) highlights the fact that Instagram has made it easy to trivialize the paid sponsorship of products, as it can be difficult to distinguish between influencer posts that are sponsored and those that are not. This has created a fine line between product posts that influencers receive payment for and those that they do not.

Influencer credibility

According to Erdem and Swait (2004), influencer credibility is the perceived believability of brand messages. Brand credibility, in turn, has a positive influence on brand choices. The credibility of an influencer is also transferred to the brand they promote, such that the more credible the influencer, the more credible the associated brand or product. In

addition, high influencer credibility can reduce purchasing risks (Srinivasan &Ratchford, 1991). Micro-influencers have gained popularity as they are perceived as more trustworthy and credible, and therefore, have a stronger connection with their audience. This can lead to increased brand awareness and sales. However, there is limited research on the impact of micro-influencers on purchase intentions.

2.2 Purchase decision

The purchase decision is a complex process that is divided into distinct stages. The determination of the time corresponding to each stage varies according to the type of product or service. However, there are at least three stages in all purchase decisions.

Stage 1: Pre-purchase. The consumer's journey starts from the pre-purchase stage, which incorporates all the "touchpoints" the customer had with the brand in general or with the product or service in particular, before the actual purchase stage (Nolvi, 2018). This stage concerns everything that precedes the purchase (identifying the need, examining and comparing alternative means of satisfying the need, searching for information by talking to other consumers or following advertising messages, examining the gathered information and making the decision to buy).

Stage 2: Purchase. This stage includes every interaction between the consumer and the business throughout the purchase process. At this stage important factors are time and place of the purchase, the quantity purchased, the price paid and the terms of payment.

Stage 3: Post-Purchase. This stage includes the storage of the product (when it concerns the purchase of a product), the use of the product or service, but also the evaluation of the results of this use, that is the comparison of the satisfaction expected with that achieved.

Methodology

In order to accomplish the objectives of this study, a questionnaire was used to obtain data from travel consumers in Greece. The questionnaire consisted of 5 parts and adopted from the work of Voorhee et al. (2017) and Klaus and Maklan (2013). The first section of the questionnaire investigated the travel behavior of respondents. The second section was about the stages before the travel (dream-plan-book) and the third part investigated the behavior of

tourists during and after their travel (experience-share). The fourth section examined the respondents' opinion on the role of influencers in tourism and the fifth section described the demographics of the participants. All scales were measured on a 5-point likert scale.

The data were collected by using the Google Forms platform and were distributed through Social Media (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn), where the travel influencers are active, and through emails. The survey took place on summer 2022 and data collection yielded a final usable sample of 211 responses.

Due to limited time and the need for participants who follow travel influencers on social media, it was decided to apply the non-probability sampling technique of purposeful sampling. As defined by Bougie and Sekaran (2019), purposeful sampling is the technique of selecting information-rich participants who could have been selected because of age, gender, status, or experience with the phenomenon. For this reason, the purposeful sampling technique in which the researchers found participants who followed travel influencers on social media was essential to obtain the information needed to design an accurate survey. The reliability and validity of the analysis methods that were applied in this research were maintained by the fact that they were used in researches with similar objectives. The design of the questionnaire was based on validated questionnaires.

Moreover, pilot testing was used in order to help with the validity of the questionnaire (Saunders et al., 2000). Factor analysis was employed to validate the factors of the measurement model. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (K-M-O) was used to indicate that the factor model is appropriate and measured the sampling adequacy which should be over 0.5 for a satisfactory factor analysis. Barlett's Test measures the equal variance among the questions and their level of significance. In order to test the internal cohesion of the questionnaire's elements and ensure that the group questions measure the same theme (Howitt & Cramer, 2005) the method of reliability alpha was applied. As Bagozzi& Yi (1988) suggest, an alpha that is over 0.7 can be considered strong evidence of convergent validity.

Results

The final model showed good fit. Some of Goodness-of-fit indices are examined, χ^2/df is calculated 4.923, p. < 0.1, normed fit index [NFI] is estimated 0.97 (Lohmoller and Lohnoller, 1989), standardized root mean square residual [SRMS] is measured 0.063 and

Comparative Fit Index [CFI] is estimated 0.92 (Henseler et al., 2014). As well as, standardized chi-square is between 1 to 5 (Bagozzi& Yi, 1988), NFI value is greater than 0.90 (Hu &Bentler, 1999), SRMS is less than 0.08 (Hu &Bentler, 1999) and CFI - recommended for samples greater than 100 observations (Levy & Varela, 2003) - is above 0.9 (Bentler, 1990). All meet or exceed the recommended cut-off criteria (Bagozzi& Yi, 1988).

Path coefficients, t-value and p-value were obtained through the bootstrapping and PLS algorithm. The examination of the travel influencers' role construct showed the expected positive statistically significant relationship (significant at the 0.01 level), between consumer behavior before travel (path coefficient 0.634, p-value 0.000), explaining the 39,9% of the dependent construct. The travel influencers' role had a positive statistically significant relationship with the travelers' behavior during their travel construct (path coefficient 0.321, p-value 0.000), but not as strong an effect as the previous relationship. Moreover, the effect of travel influencers' role to the post-travel tourists' behavior (path coefficient 0.264, p-value 0.331) is not statistically significant.
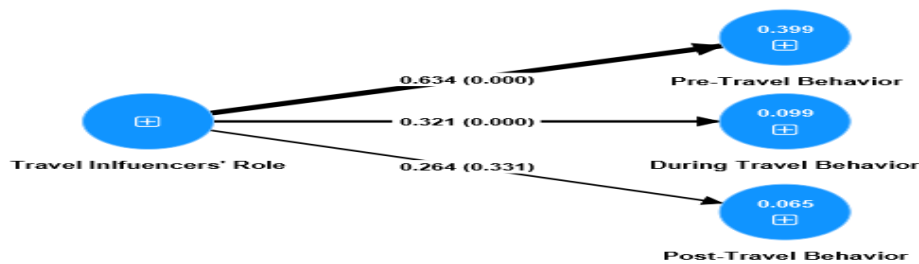

Figure 1. StructuralModel

Conclusions

The main objective of this paper was to study the influence exerted by travel influencers in each of the stages of the customers' journey. The results of this research confirm that the role of travel influencers is largely achieved by influencing the prospective traveler, with the main influence being occurred in the travel preparation stage. Accordingly, it was found that the role of travel influencers decreases during the trip and is not active at all in the post-trip stage.

The impact of travel influencers depends on how important the potential traveler considers his role. Thus, if a prospective tourist believes that travel influencers display

quality, creative and communicativecontent, then they have a positive effect, especially in the pre-travel stage.This content could capture destinations, travel agencies, travel enterprises, tourist business or the combination of them.The promotion of a destination, an ideal landscape, a unique travel experience, a place/a business' hospitality and authenticity, are elements that can act as a driving force for the start of a travel purchasing process.The travel dream is a state that is induced without the customer even having any plans to travel in the immediate future. However, this dream will be designed in his mind, having imagined himself in this destination or in this tourist enterprise, many times before he even begins to plan it. This is what makes successful travel influencers stand out and makes their role strategic in the customer journey.

Influencer marketing in the next decade will grow significantly as people read and rely less on tourism-themed articles, while increasingly drawing inspiration and information from short videos (Protopapadakis, 2022). In order to improve their content, Influencers in these stages can follow a strategy for designing their videos/posts.Short-duration videos are becoming increasingly important in the digital marketing quiver, so influencers should increase their creativity and adapt their content to this new medium.The creation of these short videos is suggested to be accessible in the search of tourists, when they need to be informed during their trip.Regarding, the post-trip stage, the influencers' impact on consumer behavior is not direct.For this reason, it is suggested to create a relationship of trust and co-creation content between the influencers and the travelers. Travel influencers, moreover,could encourage travelers to create their videos, in order to achieve a positive influence and interaction in the post-travel stage.Travelers based on their experience and the content of the influencers could be able to evaluate the influencers' suggestions and propose their own ideas.Therefore, users will co-create content with influencers, the exposure of which will act as a credibility element of recommendations for future travelers.

Limitations have been identified and can serve as a point of interest for future studies. The size and origin of the sample constitute a limitation and researchers are welcome to investigate this topic extensively. More research is needed, to examine the complexity and the customers' involvement. Some studies have found that travelers' behavior could change according to trip complexity, and usually purchase less complex travel online and prefer booking complex travel from a traditional travel agent(Kamarulzaman, 2007). Therefore, future research should investigate more factors of the role of travel influences than those obtained in this study, as the influence may differ depending on the type of trip with low or

high planning complexity.

References (Key References)

Bagozzi, R. P., & Yi, Y. (1988). On the evaluation of structural equation models. *Journal of the academy of marketing science*, 16, 74-94.

Belanche, D., Casaló, L. V., Flavián, M., & Ibáñez-Sánchez, S. (2021). Understanding influencer marketing: The role of congruence between influencers, products and consumers. *Journal of Business Research*, 132, 186-195.

Bougie, R., & Sekaran, U. (2019). *Research methods for business: A skill building approach*. John Wiley & Sons.

Hu, L. T., &Bentler, P. M. (1999). Cu toff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Structural equation modeling: a multidisciplinary journal*, 6(1), 1-55.

Kamarulzaman, Y. (2007). Adoption of travel e-shopping in the UK. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 35(9), 703-719.

Klaus, P. P., & Maklan, S. (2013). Towards a better measure of customer experience. *International Journal of Market Research*, 55(2), 227-246.

Keller, E., & Fay, B. (2009). The role of advertising in word of mouth. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 49(2), 154-158.

Litvin, S. W., Goldsmith, R. E., & Pan, B. (2008). Electronic word-of-mouth in hospitality and tourism management. *Tourism management*, 29(3), 458-468.

Lohmöller, J. B., &Lohmöller, J. B. (1989). *Predictive vs. structural modeling: Pls vs. ml*. Latent variable path modeling with partial least squares, 199-226.

Martínez-López, F. J., Anaya-Sánchez, R., Esteban-Millat, I., Torrez-Meruvia, H., D'Alessandro, S., & Miles, M. (2020). Influencer marketing: brand control, commercial orientation and post credibility. *Journal of marketing management*, 36(17-18), 1805-1831.

Miller, F. M. (2015). Ad authenticity: An alternative explanation of advertising's effect on established brand attitudes. Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising, 36(2), 177-194.

Pop, R. A., Săplăcan, Z., Dabija, D. C., & Alt, M. A. (2022). The impact of social media influencers on travel decisions: The role of trust in consumer decision journey. *Current Issues in Tourism,* 25(5), 823-843.

Protopapadakis, I. (2022*). E-tourism*. Ion Publications, 2nd edition.

Sciarrino, J., Wilcox, G. B., & Chung, A. (2020). Measuring the effectiveness of peer-to-peer influencer marketing in an integrated brand campaign. *Journal of Digital & Social Media Marketing*, 8(1), 85-95

Voorhees, C. M., Fombelle, P. W., Gregoire, Y., Bone, S., Gustafsson, A., Sousa, R., &Walkowiak, T. (2017). Service encounters, experiences and the customer journey: Defining the field and a call to expand our lens. *Journal of Business Research*, 79, 269-280.