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To cite this article: Vikas Arya, Priyanka Kokatnur, Srishti Agarwal & Tahir Islam (05 Aug 2025): Like me or not, follow me – motivation and follower engagement among Indian travel influencers, Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change, DOI: [10.1080/14766825.2025.2540366](https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2025.2540366)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2025.2540366>



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Published online: 05 Aug 2025.



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# Like me or not, follow me – motivation and follower engagement among Indian travel influencers

Vikas Arya<sup>a,b</sup>, Priyanka Kokatnur<sup>c</sup>, Srishti Agarwal<sup>d</sup> and Tahir Islam<sup>e,f,g</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Paris School of Business, Paris, France; <sup>b</sup>Corvinus Institute for Advanced Studies, Corvinus University, Budapest, Hungary; <sup>c</sup>Tata Consultancy, Pune, India; <sup>d</sup>Infosys Ltd., Pune, India; <sup>e</sup>Faculty of Management, AGH University of Krakow, Poland; <sup>f</sup>School of Business, Leeds Trinity University, Leeds, UK; <sup>g</sup>Faculty of Management, Prague University of Economics and Business, Prague, Czech Republic

## ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of travel bloggers promoting places, products, and brands, both independently and in collaboration with corporations, is not new. However, research on this phenomenon remains sparse. Few studies have explored the journey of travel bloggers from the perspective of their engagement, as well as the influencers' perceived credibility, expertise, and attractiveness. In the present study, we employ an interpretive approach using in-depth interviews with 25 full-time travel bloggers to uncover their process of becoming influencers. The findings reveal three key concepts: the antecedents to blogging, the barriers, and the outcomes (both positive and negative). The results demonstrate that engagement is a crucial characteristic of influencers, as it determines the effectiveness of the messages they deliver and their perceived attractiveness, particularly when consumers are skeptical. This study contributes to the research on travel bloggers by examining the marketing aspects of blogging and offers relevant managerial implications.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 August 2023  
Accepted 22 July 2025

## KEYWORDS

Travel bloggers; interpretive research; process model; barriers and outcomes of travel bloggers; digitalization in tourism; wellness tourism

## 1. Introduction

Social media has a significant impact on the travel and tourism industry (Hardt & Glückstad, 2024; Kruczek et al., 2023). In 2023, there were 4.89 billion social media users, and this number is forecasted to exceed 5.85 billion by 2027 (Statista, 2023). The growth of various social media platforms continues to attract new users. The digital revolution has enabled users around the world to interact through diverse social media channels (Adukaite et al., 2016; Costa & Carneiro, 2021; Jha & Verma, 2024; Luthra et al., 2024; Schouten et al., 2021; Xu & Pratt, 2018).

The term 'social media influencer' (SMI) has become widely recognized, with Backaler (2018) defining SMIs as 'individuals who can influence the actions/decisions of a loyal group of online followers in relation to their specific area of expertise' (p. 1). According

**CONTACT** Vikas Arya  vikas.aryaa@yahoo.in

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to Association of National Advertisers (2018), 75% of marketers now use influencers to promote their brands on social media. Influencer marketing is particularly effective in increasing users' brand engagement on social media platforms (Han & Balabanis, 2024; Senyao & Ha, 2022; Vessal & Anand, 2022; Xin et al., 2023). This trend is especially relevant to the tourism industry, where hotels, restaurants, and tourist destinations utilize social media and influencers to promote their businesses and extend their reach (Arya et al., 2018; Mariani, 2020; Mariani et al., 2018; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Social media influencers (SMIs) are extensively utilized by brands across a variety of sectors, including fitness, beauty, food, travel, and parenting (Kamins & Gupta, 1994; Pedroni, 2016). SMIs build a strong psychological connection with their followers by creating content that resonates with their interests (Arya, Sahni, et al., 2024; Yamamura, 2020; Agyeiwaah et al., 2022; Ismail et al., 2019; Ladhari et al., 2020). These influencers are perceived as authentic figures who share genuine and trustworthy information (Claeys et al., 2024; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). The positive image of an influencer enhances the brand they endorse (Cheung & To, 2023; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Ryu et al., 2019). By fostering trust with their followers, SMIs can maximize their influence and expand their reach.

The rising incidence of obesity and diabetes, linked to an aging population and changing health needs, has contributed to the increasing significance of wellness tourism in recent years (Stevens et al., 2018). Wellness tourism, which focuses on adopting a healthy lifestyle, has become a key area of research (Cassens et al., 2012; Y. Li et al., 2025; Nefiodow, 2006). In 2017, wellness tourism was valued at \$639 billion and was projected to reach \$919 billion by 2022 (Global Wellness Institute, 2018). SMIs have also played a significant role in promoting wellness tourism, targeting health-conscious followers and creating a niche in this growing sector.

Most research has focused on the effectiveness of SMIs in creating content for tourist destinations (Alper et al., 2024; Gao et al., 2023; Ong et al., 2024; Sigala et al., 2012). In the same context, travel influencers are described as individuals who leverage their online presence to connect with audiences by sharing authentic travel experiences and content (Saini et al., 2023). They engage their followers through blogs, social media platforms, and videos, offering recommendations, insights, and tips (Manthiou et al., 2024).

Despite the growing attention to the effectiveness of SMIs in promoting tourist destinations, less focus has been given to the engagement levels of these social media travel bloggers/influencers with their followers. Therefore, this paper investigates the engagement levels of SMIs with their followers. The motivations behind travel blogs created by these influencers and what drives them to produce such content still need further exploration. By posting content on social media and interacting with their followers, SMIs engage them in various ways (Yamamura, 2020).

Many studies have examined destination images (Alper et al., 2024; Cavender et al., 2020; Lo et al., 2011; Sio et al., 2024). However, today's tourists increasingly share photos and reviews of specific destinations on their digital platforms (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Some influencers are also considered 'a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social media' (Freberg et al., 2011, p. 90). These travel influencers disseminate information (Johnstone & Lindh, 2018) and influence followers' behavior and perceptions (Anwar et al., 2021). Yet, few studies have examined the motivational factors and engagement levels that these influencers cultivate with their followers. Due to their engagement skills, SMIs significantly

impact the tourism sector and the development of tourist destinations (Molinillo et al., 2019).

This study seeks to analyze the factors that determine consumer engagement with content generated by SMIs for tourist destinations, as well as how SMI-based trust influences consumer travel decisions. Furthermore, there is a need to develop a model that links influencers' content and engagement strategies with follower engagement behavior.

The primary objective of this study is to explore the journey of travel bloggers, from their initial motivation to becoming travel influencers and sharing their experiences on social media platforms, to their progression as influencers. This study aims to identify the motivations that drive these travel influencers to blog and sustain long-term engagement with their followers. Engaging followers through various activities is a key aspect that warrants further focus. Therefore, the central aim of this study is to identify the challenges and barriers that travel influencers face. Additionally, the study seeks to explore how these influencers are making an impact with the opportunities provided to them by marketers, despite these challenges. The study's objectives are further refined as follows: (1) What motivates individuals to become travel influencers? (2) What roles and activities do travel influencers engage in to connect with their followers, and what factors determine follower engagement? (3) How do marketers perceive travel influencers?

To achieve the research objectives presented in this paper it is important to enhance the knowledge on social media influencers specifically travel bloggers and their part in tourism sector. Through the understanding of why individuals choose to become travel influencers, what affects sustained engagement with followers and the difficulties encountered by influencers, this study helps to address the research gap. The original contribution is to identify these aspects in the lens of travel influencers, which remain scarce despite the increasing role of influencers in marketing mix decisions. Theoretical contribution of this study provides understanding of the influence of engagement, trust, and credibility of the influencer on the relationship between consumers and influencers, which will help to develop existing theories in the area of social media marketing and influencer relationship management. From a managerial point of view, the outcomes of this research will be important for marketers to understand how to engage with travel influencers, what might go wrong and how to address it, as well as how to improve the engagement. Through fulfilling these research objectives, this study enriches the theoretical foundation of influencer marketing and offers valuable recommendations for practice in the context of tourism industry.

## 2. Literature review

The internet revolution has brought significant changes worldwide, especially in how travelers access information. Social media platforms now provide an abundance of information for travelers (Y. C. Huang, 2024; Senyao & Ha, 2022; Xin et al., 2023). Every day, people create various types of content – videos, photos, blogs, reviews, and more – on these platforms (Arya, Sambyal et al., 2024; Yamamura, 2020). This content captures the attention of businesses and marketers, who leverage it to influence consumers' brand decisions. Marr & Co. (2021) reported that 90% of the world's data was generated in the last two years alone. With more than 7 billion people using the internet, social media platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn are sharing a

substantial amount of tourism-related content every minute. Businesses analyze data based on clicks, shares, likes, and comments to gauge engagement with this content (Bulchand-Gidumal, 2024; Sano et al., 2024).

Social media's interactive nature enables immediate communication between content creators and their audiences (Lin & Chang, 2018), providing valuable insights for marketers to shape future strategies. As social media usage continues to grow, businesses have adapted their marketing strategies to engage with audiences through digital platforms. One such strategy is Influencer Marketing, which capitalizes on the fact that travelers now turn to social media to decide on their next destination (Anand et al., 2023; Pop et al., 2022). Marketers are increasingly focusing on digital platforms to reach their consumers and gain a competitive edge.

### **2.1. Who are influencers?**

The internet revolution has brought significant changes worldwide, especially in how travelers access information. Social media platforms now provide an abundance of information for travelers (Senyao & Ha, 2022; Xin et al., 2023). Every day, people create various types of content – videos, photos, blogs, reviews, and more – on these platforms (Chang & Wu, 2024; Yamamura, 2020). This content captures the attention of businesses and marketers, who leverage it to influence consumers' brand decisions. Marr & Co. (2019) reported that 90% of the world's data was generated in the last two years alone. With more than 7 billion people using the internet, social media platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn are sharing a substantial amount of tourism-related content every minute. Businesses analyze data based on clicks, shares, likes, and comments to gauge engagement with this content (Bulchand-Gidumal, 2024; Y. Liu et al., 2024).

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### **2.2. Influencer marketing**

In 2017, 63% of companies in the United States increased their influencer marketing budgets (Bloglovin, 2017), and Merchant reported that these budgets grew by nearly 60%. The rising popularity of social media influencers has led to a new trend in brand advertising through these platforms (Igarashi et al., 2024; Ki et al., 2020; Ki & Kim, 2019). Retailers and marketers now approach social media influencers to create engaging content about their brands or products, aiming to increase follower engagement and boost brand awareness (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Piehler et al., 2021). Marketers leverage social media accounts with large followings, using these platforms to amplify the brand's message (Chidiac & Bowden, 2022; Jacobson et al., 2021). Influencers also collaborate with companies by creating posts about the brand's product or service, often being

compensated for their efforts (Tapinfluence, 2017). Moreover, marketers recognize that consumers are more likely to purchase products endorsed by their idols (Fowles, 1996).

There has been a significant rise in influencer marketing, with influencers now being compared to traditional celebrities – individuals who enjoy celebrity-like recognition due to their online presence (De Veirman et al., 2019). Studies show that followers identify more strongly with influencers who post authentic content compared to traditional celebrities (Schouten et al., 2020). Followers can relate to these influencers because of their relatable, local content, which enhances the effectiveness of brand endorsements (Childers et al., 2019).

### **2.3. Travel influencers**

Travel influencers often form partnerships with brands or tourism boards to promote products or destinations, influencing consumer behavior (Guo et al., 2024). Their content, shaped by expertise in niches like luxury travel or adventure, builds trust and community with followers, thereby shaping perceptions and travel choices (Ong et al., 2024). They play a significant role in digital marketing by inspiring and guiding travel decisions. Past literature has explored various factors related to travel influencers, including their motivations for writing about destinations, different types of collaborations, and other related aspects (Bates, 2016). Motivation is a key characteristic that drives action or behavior (Huang et al., 2007).

Travel influencers have multiple motivations for blogging, which can evolve over time (Y. R. Li et al., 2015). The objectives of travel influencers can be varied and the main one is to make money, which they do through brand collaborations, sponsored posts, and affiliate marketing (Kılıç et al., 2024; Manthiou et al., 2024). Another motivation includes the love for travel where the social media power house tries to encourage other people through sharing their experiences and tips. Creating a powerful brand identity and gaining credibility as an influencer within particular niches in travel, for example, adventure or sustainable travel is also important (Leung et al., 2025). Some of the travel-lover users also want to engage with their followers and create a community that they can rely on. Some of them also want to make the world a better place through advocating for issues such as sustainable travel and cultural diversity (Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023). Finally, job prospects and networking through social media platform also lead to more reason to develop and enhance their reach.

In their model, Huang et al. (2007, p. 474) explain that motivations for becoming a travel influencer include 'self-expression, life documenting, commenting, community forum participation, and information seeking.' Liao et al. (2010) further categorize travel influencers or bloggers into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic factors may include 'spending time blogging, documenting, sharing a piece of my life with others, venting out my feelings on my blog, and gaining fame and recognition by blogging' (Liao et al., 2010, p. 675). Extrinsic factors involve 'validation from others, speaking about something important, connecting with followers, connecting with new people, and paying attention to others' feelings' (Liao et al., 2010, p. 675). These motivations enable travel influencers to reach thousands of people by creating content and documenting their travel experiences. Additionally, these influencers play a significant role in shaping their followers' choices regarding tourist destinations (Bullas, 2013).

Travel influencers have also become advocates of wellness tourism, which has an impact on both the economy and globalization (Evans, 2008; Hall, 2012). They promote wellness

tourism, which aims to balance the mind, body, spirit, environment, and, most importantly, the quality of life of individuals (Hartwell et al., 2018; Voigt & Pforr, 2013). As the number of wellness hotels rises, travel influencers have more opportunities to endorse wellness tourism, helping their followers achieve balance in body, mind, and spirit (Dryglas, 2020). Furthermore, these influencers enjoy benefits such as free tickets, complimentary stays, discounts, and more. They are leveraging these opportunities to monetize their blogging hobby (Netherwood, 2014). As a result, many travel influencers have turned their passion into a full-time profession, enjoying financial gains along the way.

#### **2.4. Role of travel influencers from an engagement perspective**

The tourism industry has witnessed a surge in influencer marketing, particularly with travel influencers (Hernández-Méndez & Baute-Díaz, 2024; Yılmaz et al., 2020). It is generally believed that travel influencers with a higher number of followers on social media platforms are perceived as more popular and credible than those with fewer followers (De Veirman et al., 2017; Rialti et al., 2018; Shen et al., 2022). Therefore, the number of followers is a critical factor in determining the effectiveness of a travel influencer's messages or content (De Veirman et al., 2017; Leite et al., 2024).

Engagement is defined as 'a customer's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activities' (Hollebeek, 2011, p. 555). Travel influencers engage with their followers at various levels, with one of the most significant forms being content creation. They often involve their followers by reposting exciting content on platforms like Instagram or TikTok, which boosts the followers' status. Reels are used to create engaging content, while IGTV is particularly effective for promoting tourist destinations. However, it is ultimately authentic and creative content that followers desire most.

Followers' engagement with travel influencers can be analyzed through various metrics such as click-through rates (CTR), the number of likes or comments on specific posts, the maximum number of followers, the duration of interactions, sharing or reposting content, and the time spent creating content (Valentini et al., 2018).

In addition, travel influencers often promote brands or tourist destinations, earning incentives through referrals (Bastrygina et al., 2024; Pansari & Kumar, 2017; Tolkach & Pratt, 2021). Referred customers contribute to increased profits for the firm (Van den Bulte et al., 2018). Long-term engagement with followers can significantly impact business success (Kumar et al., 2010; Manthiou et al., 2024). Travel influencers collaborate with brands in various ways (Ay et al., 2019; Caz, 2014), engaging in different forms of collaboration to enhance their influence and maintain strong connections with their followers.

#### **2.5. Social influence theory**

Social influence theory has been instrumental in understanding the relationships between influencers and their followers (Melnychuk et al., 2024; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Followers begin to identify with the influencer, establishing a personal connection (Kelman, 2006). Once this relationship is established, followers tend to imitate the influencer's behavior (Kelman, 1961). The influence is shaped by several factors, including the influencer's authenticity, popularity, and creativity, all of which contribute to a long-

term, desirable relationship with followers (Kelman, 1974, 2006). This connection is also influenced by the level of engagement the influencer maintains with their followers. The engagement level plays a significant role in shaping the followers' self-concept. Followers view social media influencers (SMIs) as popular, credible, and relatable (Bussy-Socrate & Sokolova, 2024; Kim & Kim, 2020; Schouten et al., 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

In our current study, we measure the influencer's engagement level, which includes factors such as the number of followers, content creativity, authenticity, popularity, and trustworthiness – elements derived from the social influence theory (Arora et al., 2019). Therefore, social influence theory provides a valuable framework for examining the nature of the influencer-follower relationship on social media.

Social influence theory is a theoretical framework which focuses on the way in which individuals are influenced by other people in terms of their behavior, attitudes and decisions (C. Y. Li, 2013; Sedera et al., 2017; Tanford & Montgomery, 2015). With regards to travel influencers, there are two main concepts of social influence that are most important: normative social influence and informational social influence help influencers (Book & Tanford, 2020). These explain how travel influencers can influence consumers and consumer behavior as well as followers' engagement, and control their followers' decisions and preferences in the context of travel. The first of these is normative social influence which is the pressure that people yield to, to meet the standards of others and receive acceptance from others, which is vital in understanding how influencers set trends in travel (Luo et al., 2022). The second concept is informational social influence and it is concerned with how followers look for information from influential people including influencers to help them in decision making especially where they are not very sure of what to do (Kim et al., 2018). Both these concepts are important for analyzing the working of influencer marketing in the travel and tourism sector.

**1. Normative Social Influence:** Normative social influence refers to the pressure that is exerted on the individuals to comply with the norms and expectations of the society in order to be accepted and liked by others (Nolan et al., 2008). In the case of travel influencers, this is especially pertinent as influencers set and define norms for travelers, destinations, products, and lifestyles that followers would like to emulate (Doran & Larsen, 2016). It is also evident from the findings of this study that the followers engagement is basically a result of the perceived norms and behaviors that are demonstrated by the influencers. For example, when an influencer posts about specific destinations, or certain products or experiences then the followers tend to post to conform to these trends to gain social acceptance or to be a part of the lifestyle that the influencer has chosen. This phenomenon is quite noticeable when talking about destination selection (Boto-García & Baños-Pino, 2022). As travel influencers post about a certain type of destination (for instance, eco-tourism in remote areas), the destinations are more likely to be visited by the followers of the influencers especially those who identify with the personal brand or lifestyle of the influencers.

**2. Informational Social Influence:** The second concept is the informational social influence which defines especially how when people they look have for to approval make from a others, decision (Cohen & Golden, 1972). In the travel and tourism sector, social influencers act as credible content creators who offer quality information

to their followers to assist them in making the right choices (Kim et al., 2018). This is where the findings from the engagement and content creation are connected with the theory of informational social influence. They offer detailed itineraries, reviews of places to stay and things to do, and serve as a source of information that viewers trust (Sedera et al., 2017; Wei et al., 2023). The followers who may not be very sure about the destinations or services to choose from travel to the influencers and their choices influence their decision on travel destinations (Ong et al., 2024).

### 3. Research methodology

In alignment with the predominantly exploratory and interpretive research objectives, we adopted a qualitative approach. The primary goal of the study was to shed light on and understand the travel influencer's journey from the perspective of follower engagement. To fully comprehend the phenomena surrounding these travel influencers in their blogging journey, it was essential to gather elaborate narratives directly from the bloggers themselves. Researchers have recommended qualitative techniques for such purposes (McAdams, 2012). Thus, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for our study.

The researchers selected travel influencers based on their level of engagement with followers and the size of their follower base. Influencers who were actively engaging in high-interaction activities with their followers were chosen for detailed interviews. A set of interview questions was designed to guide the research. These questions were divided into three sections: The first part focused on the motivations for becoming a travel influencer, and how credibility and popularity contribute to their success. The second section explored the challenges in creating engaging content and maintaining follower interaction. The third part addressed the personal and professional outcomes of blogging. The entire interaction was centered around detailed narratives provided by the travel influencers. We specifically inquired about their challenges in various aspects of blogging, their strategies for engaging followers, and their professional interactions with marketers.

#### 3.1. Data collection

The present study aims to address existing gaps by examining how travel influencers' content and engagement strategies are linked to the engagement behaviors of their followers on Instagram. Colliander and Marder (2018) note that Instagram is a platform where many influencers share their creative videos and images. Additionally, Instagram's digital tools for enhancing photos and videos (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) are essential for travel influencers to create visually captivating content.

The travel influencers selected for this study had been active in running their blogs for at least three years, posting a minimum of two times per week. This criterion was crucial to ensure that the influencers were consistently creating content and engaging with their followers. The second criterion was that the influencers' content was primarily focused on travel destinations. The final criterion was that the influencers' travel experiences were central to both their blogging activities and their interactions with followers. The selection of full-time travel influencers/ blogger was purposeful, as their professional commitment allows for a deeper understanding of the industry and the production of more

authentic, consistent content, better storytelling skills, and the ability to capture the nuances of destinations and experiences. Full-time travel influencer/ blogger typically have more substantial audiences and are able to dedicate more time and resources to creating high-quality, well-researched content, making them ideal for this study and, which can result in more authentic and well-researched travel insights. Additionally, full-time bloggers often have established audiences and stronger social media influence, making them more effective in reaching and engaging target demographics.

Prior appointments were made with the travel influencers for interviews once they agreed to participate in the study. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews, each lasting between 1 to 1.5 h, during which the influencers discussed their motivations, engagement strategies, and the marketers' perspectives toward them. These interviews encouraged the travel influencers to share their motivational stories and experiences of becoming influencers (Cochran, 1990; Larty & Hamilton, 2011).

The interview questions focused on their motivations for starting the travel blog, challenges in content creation, and strategies for endorsing specific destinations. The researchers recorded and transcribed the interviews verbatim (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data analysis was conducted at each stage, beginning with the first interview. Theoretical saturation was reached after interviewing 25 travel influencers, and no further interviews were necessary. The characteristics of the influencers interviewed are presented in Table 1.

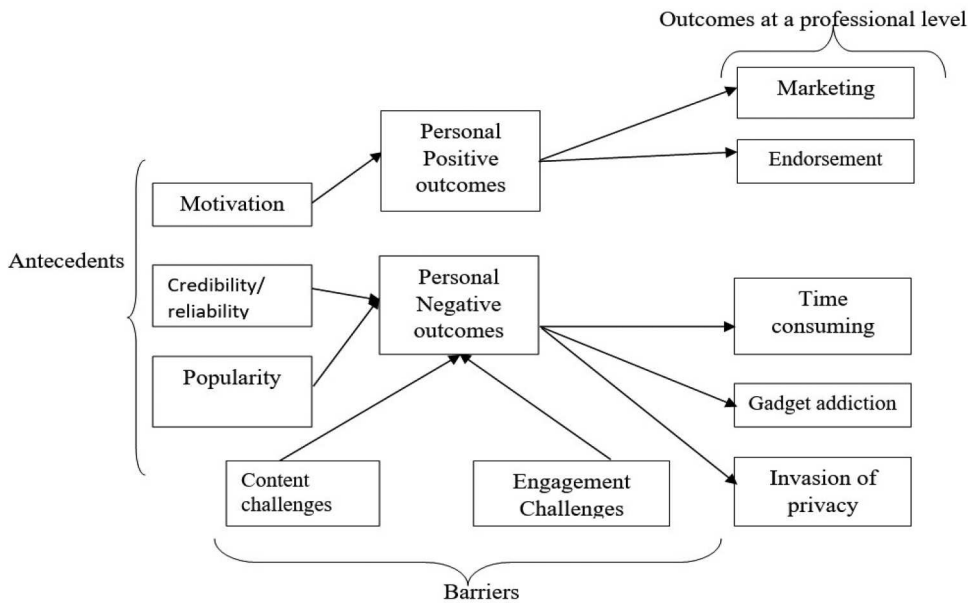
#### 4. Analysis

The transcripts of the interviews underwent an initial open coding procedure, followed by axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The researcher who conducted the interviews independently performed the coding process, which was then followed by an inter-coder comparison. The resulting codes were discussed with the other authors to ensure validity. Afterward, axial coding was applied to identify themes and establish correlations. In the next stage, the themes generated by the researchers were presented to a subsample of 8 participants to verify reliability and credibility (Flint et al., 2002). Finally, the themes and

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the respondents.

Attribute	Category	Details
Nationality	Indians	All of them are Indians, living in various Metro Cities in India.
Age Range	20–45 years	Participants were from different age groups
Gender	Male/Female/Other	Balanced representation of genders
Content Themes	Travel, Adventure, Luxury, Eco-tourism, Sustainable Travel, Family Travel, etc.	Multiple themes related to travel
Number of Participants	25 influencers	Total number of participants interviewed
Influencer Type	Full-time	Differentiation between full-time and part-time influencers
Primary Motivation	Personal passion, Financial gain, Professional growth, Social engagement	Various motivations for participating in influencer activities
Platform Used	Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Blogs	Diverse platforms where influencers share content
Average Follower Count	10k–500k followers	Range of follower counts among participants
Content Style	Authentic storytelling, Promotional, Interactive (e.g. Q&A, live streams)	Differing approaches to content creation

Source: Authors.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model. Source: Authors.

codes were reviewed by one industry expert and one sociologist (with expertise in social media research) to assess external validity and confirmability. Once reliability and validity were established, the authors developed the conceptual model shown in [Figure 1](#). The themes and their relationships are discussed in [Table 2](#).

## 5. Results and discussion

The analysis revealed four key themes in the travel influencer's journey: Antecedents, Barriers, Outcomes at a personal level, and Outcomes at a professional level ([Table 2](#)). These themes emerged from the codes, which were classified into categories based on their similarities. The following sections discuss each theme in detail.

### 5.1. The antecedents to blogging

Several antecedents contributed to the decision to start blogging about travel, with the key factors being motivation, credibility, and popularity. The initial drive stemmed from internal motivators within the travel influencers, who were eager to try something new. Additionally, a strong intrinsic motivation was found to be the desire to document their travel journey.

Blogging is the best way for me to connect with people, share my travel experiences, and inspire them to explore new places. The desire for digital fame motivates me to create and post captivating, creative content on social media, as I know people are drawn to visually appealing pictures. I aim to make an impact by sharing content that resonates with my followers, helping me build a meaningful online presence and gain recognition in the digital space. (R1)

**Table 2.** Codes for the results.

Theme	Category	Sample codes
Antecedents	Motivation	Hobby, influence and encourage people to travel, the content was available, wanderlust.
	Credibility or Reliability	The trust of my followers, content should be a reliable, good relationship with other influencers and genuine feedback of the property; trust leads to loyalty, honesty, reputability, committed toward followers.
	Popularity	More number of followers, relatable content, more years in blogging, consistent image, the experience of blogging
Barriers	Content challenges	The creativity of the content, Reels, videos, and pictures to connect to a place instantly, the originality of the content, and the quality of the content, bring authenticity to wellness tourism.
	Engagement challenges	Long-term relationship with the followers, replying to followers, reposting the followers' content, involvement of the followers in content creation, consistently active on social media to update travel posts
Outcome at Personal Level	Positive outcome	Celebrity feeling, evolution as a person, travel brand ambassadors, popularity, recommendations to friends, better image
Outcomes at the Professional Level	Negative outcome Marketing	Time-consuming, social media addiction, negative comments
	Endorsements	More number of followers, connect with the followers, loyalty toward travel influencer, good quality of life of the followers. A selective approach toward brands, visit the place and then endorse the policy, promoting local places, wellness tourism, Authentic Collaboration.

Source: Authors.

Or

... Traveling is my passion; I'm a wanderlust at heart. I wanted to document each of my journeys and show the world's beauty through my lens. The need for creative freedom drives me to capture and share these experiences, as it allows me to express my individuality and explore new ways of storytelling. The comments from my followers keep me motivated and inspired, reinforcing my desire to continuously innovate and share content that reflects my personal journey. (R8)

The analysis highlighted that the motivators enabled these travel influencers to document their journeys and inspire others to travel. Blogging brought them a sense of positivity, with many influencers mentioning how their content encouraged others to explore new places. Key motivators included influencing people worldwide to make the most of their time and discover new destinations.

Content is the game-changer, always. To grow your presence and build genuine followers, you must post authentic content. The influence of social media trends plays a role here, as followers are drawn to content that aligns with what's currently popular or meaningful. However, the key to sustained growth lies in staying true to your own voice and consistently offering interesting, valuable content that resonates with your audience. Followers are not easily deceived; they seek authenticity, and adapting to trends while remaining true to your personal brand allows for deeper, more meaningful connections. (R7)

Content was found to be the most influential antecedent for travel influencers. The consensus among influencers was that followers are only drawn to your page if the content is compelling and consistent. One influencer shared:

Consistency is key to success, absolutely. If you're not visible for long, followers will unfollow you, and engagement becomes impossible. You should aim to post two or three times a week, keeping in mind peak engagement times. (R16)

Another crucial antecedent identified was the reliability of the content. Reliable content fosters trust with followers. As one influencer emphasized:

In any case, your message must be reliable. I've never faked anything. You won't gain followers' trust by posting false information or fake content. I've been posting for four years, and I've built my reputation through trustworthy content. This desire for authenticity and credibility ties closely to the need for creative freedom. Being authentic in your content allows you the creative freedom to showcase your true self and values. When you're not forced to conform to inauthentic trends or expectations, you can freely express your individuality, which, in turn, helps build trust and establish long-term relationships with your audience. (R25)

Additionally, commitment to followers was highlighted as an essential factor. Involving followers in content creation helps them feel valued and engaged. As another influencer stated:

It's crucial to stay committed to your followers. Involving them in content creation is a great way to engage with them. They feel heard and appreciated. It's important to respect their input and check what they want to see next on your page. This commitment to engagement aligns with the influence of peer networks. By listening to and involving your followers in your content decisions, you foster a sense of community and collaboration, which is essential for building a loyal audience. Moreover, it connects to the influence of social media trends, as understanding and responding to the evolving needs of your followers allows you to adapt to and align with current trends, ensuring that your content stays relevant and engaging. (R24)

## ***5.2. Barriers: content and engagement challenges***

The data revealed two main barriers faced by travel influencers: content creation challenges and engagement difficulties. Among these, content creation posed a significant challenge. While travel influencers have a great deal of creative freedom, producing content that resonates and makes an impact is not easy.

As one influencer explained:

Content is a direct reflection of the brand. Content's effectiveness is largely determined by active engagement, such as comments and followers. If the content isn't great or appealing, getting likes and comments becomes difficult. This ties into the content fatigue barrier. The constant pressure to create fresh, high-quality content can lead to burnout, making it harder to consistently produce engaging material. When influencers struggle with maintaining creativity and producing content that resonates with their audience, they may face challenges in sustaining engagement and growing their followers, contributing to a cycle of diminished interaction. (R21)

Another influencer emphasized the challenge of deciding what appeals to followers:

'It's hard to pinpoint exactly what will appeal – pictures, videos, IGTV, or reels. Reels are popular these days, but sometimes the right music for the right photo makes all the difference. I check all the trending music so that once I post, my followers are immediately transported to that place in their minds.' This connects with the platform dependency barrier. Influencers often feel pressured to keep up with the ever-changing trends and algorithms of platforms like Instagram. The constant need to adapt content (e.g. using the latest music trends, formats like reels) to maintain visibility can be exhausting and challenging, especially when platforms prioritize certain types of content, like reels over static posts, or

alter algorithms that affect engagement rates. Influencers must continuously adjust to these shifts to stay relevant and maintain their follower engagement. (R19)

... Honestly, when I first started, I never thought I'd be able to make money from blogging and sharing my travel experiences. But as my personal brand grew, it started to attract attention from brands and companies that saw the value in what I do. Now, I'm able to monetize my content through sponsored posts, affiliate marketing, and even partnerships. It's empowering to know that I've built something that not only provides me with creative satisfaction but also gives me financial freedom. The more followers I have and the more I engage with them, the more opportunities come my way. I've reached a point where I can sustain myself financially through my passion, which is a dream come true. (R11)

Engagement was another major challenge. Building and maintaining a consistent relationship with followers is crucial. One influencer shared:

You need to be present for your followers. Replying to their comments is a key engagement strategy. Followers look up to us as celebrities, but at the same time, they feel connected to us. We should regard them in every sense. Consistent interaction is a great way to build long-term relationships. (R14)

Another noted the effectiveness of reposting followers' content to increase engagement:

Reposting followers' content works well. It may lead to more recommendations and broaden your reach. (R11)

The promotion of wellness tourism has become increasingly important due to its positive impact on consumer well-being. However, creating content around wellness tourism presents unique challenges. Travel influencers noted that promoting wellness, especially health-related experiences, requires utmost authenticity and trust.

As one influencer stated:

Creating content for wellness tourism isn't easy. You're endorsing something that's directly linked to health, which can be risky. You need to be authentic and particular, because your followers need to trust you. I only collaborate if I've personally experienced the place and felt a difference in my body and mind. (R2)

Similarly, influencers stressed the responsibility of providing accurate, trustworthy information, especially when discussing sensitive topics such as wellness tourism. As one influencer shared:

You can't play with your followers' health. They trust me a lot. I only talk about wellness tourism if I feel it's authentic and genuine. I try to help them improve their quality of life and mental well-being. I even engage with them individually if they're looking for something specific. That helps me build stronger engagement. (R6)

And, ... Travel has certainly changed me and made me more positive towards life. These life-changing experiences have motivated me to share them with my followers, and I really want them to experience it too. However, I know that as I grow in this space and gain more visibility, it opens me up to criticism. Being a public figure means I am constantly under scrutiny. Sometimes, people question my authenticity or even my intentions. They may think I'm promoting something just for the money or that I'm only showing the 'perfect' side of travel. It can be tough to maintain a balance between being true to myself and meeting the expectations of my followers, and I've learned that it's important to stay grounded, even if others may not always understand my journey. (R12)

### **5.3. Positive outcomes at the personal level**

Blogging provides a new platform to collaborate and network with other travel influencers, which can be comforting and encouraging at the same time. Networking and creating your travel community can lead to the person's evolution.

I have evolved. Yes, I have. Travel has certainly changed me and made me more positive towards life. These are life-changing experiences, and I want my followers to experience them too. (R3)

Travel influencers are regarded as celebrities by their followers. These followers worship them, and at the same time, they imitate them too.

I feel like a celebrity. My followers ask for my recommendations which I feel are a huge achievement for me. (R3)

### **5.4. Positive outcomes at the professional level**

The travel influencers in the study reported two major positive outcomes at the professional level: self-marketing and their development as endorsers. The concept of marketing 'the self' was closely tied to the relationship between the blogger and their followers. The findings suggested that for a successful and lasting connection with followers, it was crucial for the influencer to project a personality that was relatable and approachable.

One influencer noted:

Well, I've always made it a point to stay authentic and genuine with my content. A lot of influencers focus on international tourist destinations, but I've found that my followers really appreciate the local content I post – places that are off the beaten path and aren't necessarily the typical tourist spots. I often explore lesser-known locations that people don't usually visit. What makes me different is that I focus on the everyday, the 'hidden gems' in our daily lives, which resonates more with my followers. Many of them are more interested in discovering local culture and experiences, and that's exactly what I aim to offer. It's been great because this approach has allowed me to carve out my own niche in the travel influencer space. I think that's helped expand my personal brand in a way that feels true to who I am. (R4)

The study also found that a larger following often led to increased effectiveness in endorsing products or brands. With more followers came higher engagement rates, boosting the influencer's visibility and credibility.

As one influencer explained:

I really feel like a celebrity now! My followers ask for my recommendations, and I can't tell you how much that means to me. It's a huge achievement to know that my thoughts and experiences influence their decisions. As my followers grow, I've noticed that my personal brand has expanded far beyond just sharing travel experiences. People now turn to me not only for travel inspiration but for advice on where to go, what to see, and even what to avoid. It's amazing how my personal brand has evolved from being just another travel blogger to someone who's recognized as a trusted voice in the industry. This has opened up so many doors for collaborations with brands that I align with, which is incredible. (R3)

Yes, more followers matter, but it should come from organic growth. Followers who are paid to follow won't stay for long. So, it's important to win hearts by being authentic, and more followers will naturally follow. (R4)

For some travel influencers, the opportunity to monetize their creative content and build a strong connection with their followers was a key motivator. These influencers discovered that their growing credibility as content creators could help them become endorsers and earn money through their work.

One influencer shared:

At first, I thought this was just a hobby, something I was passionate about without expecting anything in return. But when I was asked how much I would charge for posting content, it really hit me – I had built a reputation, and my credibility was valuable. It was a huge realization that my creative content could be monetized, and that I could actually earn an income from it. That has been a big motivator for me. Now, collaborating with brands feels like a natural progression, and it's rewarding to see how my influence can translate into real economic independence. It's not just about making money, though – it's about having the freedom to choose which brands to work with, and to keep control over the content I share. This economic freedom has given me a sense of security, and I can keep focusing on creating content I'm passionate about while sustaining my business. (R23)

Another influencer emphasized authenticity over financial gain, underscoring the importance of maintaining trust with their audience:

Absolutely. For me, it's all about maintaining the trust I've built with my followers. I only endorse products and destinations that I genuinely believe in because I want to provide my audience with valuable and authentic recommendations. My followers trust me because I've always been transparent and honest with them. If I promoted something just for the money, it would hurt my personal brand and risk losing that trust. That's why it's so important for me to work with brands and places that align with my values. This approach has helped me grow my personal brand in a way that's not just about fame or income – it's about being seen as a trusted voice in the travel community. Over time, this has expanded my influence and positioned me as an expert in the industry, and that's what matters most to me. (R8)

As their popularity grew, travel influencers began writing sponsored posts for various brands and properties. Marketers, recognizing the trust and credibility these influencers had with their followers, sought to collaborate with them. However, the influencers were selective in choosing these collaborations, knowing that their reputation was at stake.

One influencer explained:

Being selective with collaborations is vital for me because my personal brand is built on trust. I only promote places I've personally visited to maintain credibility and provide honest, authentic advice to my followers. This approach has helped me expand my influence and attract meaningful partnerships that align with my values. It's also enabled me to monetize my content and turn my passion into a sustainable income stream. (R10)

Furthermore, many travel influencers reported that discussing wellness tourism had significantly increased engagement with their followers. As health and wellness became a trending topic in the tourism industry, influencers found that sharing recommendations on wellness tourism helped improve the health and lifestyle of their followers.

As one influencer reflected:

For me, the most satisfying outcome is knowing that my recommendations on wellness tourism have genuinely improved the quality of life for my followers. They've shared with me how they feel healthier and more balanced, and that's incredibly fulfilling. There's no

greater reward than knowing I've made a positive impact on their lives. This kind of connection really strengthens the bond I have with my followers and reinforces the trust they place in me. (R24)

### **5.5. Negative outcomes**

The travel influencers in the study also experienced a number of negative outcomes during their journey as bloggers. One of the most common challenges they faced was dealing with negative comments and criticism on their posts. Despite the potential backlash, influencers emphasized the importance of staying focused on their goals and maintaining their agenda.

One influencer shared:

Unfortunately, negativity and criticism are part of the territory when you gain a significant following. I've faced comments about the places I feature, with some people accusing me of promoting locations just for money or claiming my page is overloaded with sponsored content. It can be tough, especially when I put so much effort into creating genuine and helpful content. This kind of public scrutiny can make me question whether I'm staying true to myself or just chasing engagement. It's definitely a challenge, but it also pushes me to stay authentic and keep focused on the bigger picture: offering value to my followers. (R9)

Additionally, travel influencers reported that the demands of constantly traveling and documenting their journeys could be overwhelming. They often struggled to find the right balance between being present in the moment and capturing content for their followers.

As one influencer explained:

People sometimes criticize me for posting so much about my travels, calling it social media addiction. In India, especially, there's a lot of negativity around the constant presence on platforms like Instagram. It's hard to explain that I'm just trying to share my experiences and stay connected with my followers. The pressure to maintain an online presence while dealing with these judgments can definitely take a toll on your mental health. (R2)

### **5.6. Influencers' motivation**

The analysis of travel influencers' motivations shows that the motivations are quite complex and varied with the influencers being motivated by a range of intrinsic, extrinsic and social factors. From the data that was gathered from the interviews and content analysis, the following themes were identified: Several themes were identified, each of which captured a specific type and degree of motivations that oscillate the influencers' behaviors, approaches to content creation, and interactions with the followers.

#### **1. Personal motivations**

An important conclusion made based on the interviews is that most of the travel influencers are inspired by their love for traveling and individuality. Some of the influencers revealed that they were simply passionate about sharing their experiences in social media and specifically, the focus was on the excitement of exploring new places,

meeting new people, and experiencing life's most unforgettable travel moments. For such influencers, the process of posting has been a way of satisfying their needs and the content that they create tends to be real, narratives and experiences tied with specific locations. Several influencers noted that their personal motivation was not just to inform, but to inspire their followers to embark on similar journeys. This is in line with the intrinsic motivation for providing value through the use of storytelling.

## **2. Professional motivations**

Another key motivation that has been identified in the study is the career advancement goal to create a sustainable career as a travel influencer. Some of the influencers who were in the middle or senior levels of their careers highlighted financial returns, brand collaborations and the ability to generate income from their posts. This particular group of influencers understood the value of their channels since they didn't only see them as hobbies or passions but as businesses. Some of them earned money from brand deals, collaborations with tourism boards, and companies where they post sponsored pictures, videos or link their products. These influencers were keen on enhancing their scope and enlarging their contacts, which would translate to more earnings. This is a change from the internal drive to the main external reason, which is job and income.

## **3. Social Motivations**

A third major theme that was identified was social motivations, which referred to the influencers' desire to create a community and to become a leader within the travel niche. For many of the influencers, their social media accounts were more than just a way of sharing content but was also a way of interacting with their audience. Some of the influencers stated that they felt that they had a duty to respond to their audience and meet their needs, wants, and questions regarding destinations, hotels, and how to travel. This motivation was especially evident in the educators or the influencers who try to equip their followers with information and suggestions.

The study also found that there was a huge difference in the level of motivation of influencers at the different stages of their career. The main motivation for the early-stage influencers was the immediate reward which include engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) and the validation they got from their followers. At this stage, influencers were aiming to establish themselves and get fame among the members of travel community. However, the latter group of influencers was motivated by the intangible goals such as, establishing brand partnerships, sponsorships and creating a financial stability. They shifted their focus toward career development, personal branding, content creation that is relevant to them and which supports their goals both in the personal and business life. These motivations played a very important role in the content creation process of the influencers.

The former group of influencers who were driven by passion for the job produced content that was based on stories, which was quite personal and genuine. The second category of influencers, which was motivated by professional goals, tried to post more collaborative and promotional content with the purpose of enhancing the brand partnerships and acquiring sponsorships from the tourism boards and travel companies. On the

other hand, the socially motivated influencers posted more engaging content such as live sessions, Q&As, and polls with the aim of increasing interaction and building a community. These various motivations were seen in the different kinds of content that the influencers produced, which included personal blogs, photo diaries, professional photos and videos, and branded content. This is because the various motivations, intrinsic or extrinsic, affect the way and manner in which the travel influencers present their content to their followers.

## 6. Discussion

In the recent times, influencer marketing has become very popular and effective in engaging the followers as well as in shaping the brands. The current research focuses on the antecedents, barriers and outcomes relevant to travel influencers which provides a rich understanding of the journey of the influencers. All these themes are valuable in understanding not only the reasons and issues of the influencers but also the effects on the followers' engagement and the effectiveness of the marketing strategies.

The antecedents explored in this study highlight key motivators, such as the desire for digital fame, creative self-expression, and community building. For many influencers, the intrinsic passion for documenting travel experiences is coupled with the extrinsic rewards of audience validation and brand partnerships. These motivations are not only pivotal in shaping their identities as influencers but also in driving their ability to connect with and inspire followers to explore new destinations.

However, travel influencers face a range of barriers that complicate their ability to maintain authenticity and engagement. One of the most prominent challenges is navigating the fine balance between genuine content creation and the commercial pressures of sponsored collaborations. Additionally, influencers encounter platform dependency, where algorithm changes and visibility limitations directly impact their outreach. These challenges underline the fragility of influencer success in a constantly evolving digital landscape.

The outcomes of being a travel influencer span both personal and professional dimensions. While influencers often gain financial independence and enhanced credibility through successful brand collaborations, they also grapple with issues like burnout and identity tensions due to constant public scrutiny. On the positive side, the role of influencers in shaping travel trends and promoting wellness tourism has demonstrated their potential to foster meaningful engagement and societal impact. Followers' trust in influencers is further solidified when they prioritize authentic collaborations and relatable content.

Previous research has emphasized authenticity and credibility as central tenets of influencer marketing (Abidin & Ots, 2016). Our findings build upon this by demonstrating how travel influencers strategically navigate these values to build stronger connections with followers. By adopting selective approaches toward brand endorsements and carefully curating exciting and reliable travel content, influencers not only enhance their engagement rates but also safeguard their reputations. This is crucial, as over-commercialization or inconsistent messaging can undermine trust, reducing both follower loyalty and marketing effectiveness.

This study also reveals that engagement effectiveness is not solely dependent on follower numbers but also on the quality of interactions facilitated by influencers. Engagement activities, such as incorporating follower-generated content or prioritizing wellness tourism narratives, highlight the diverse ways influencers sustain interest and drive value for brands and destinations. Moreover, the emergence of emotional connections between influencers and their followers underscores the importance of authenticity in fostering long-term loyalty and influence.

On the other side, our research identifies several major motivations that impact the travel influencers' behavior. These are the personal, professional and the social motives. The intrinsic motives that are the love for travel, the opportunity to express oneself and the urge to tell the world about real life adventures that one has encounter comes into play with personal motives. While the professional motives are more likely to be extrinsic, these include financial incentives, career advancement, and brand partnerships. Lastly, social motivations refer to the need for approval, the need for affirmation and the need to create a following. We shall clearly distinguish between these categories and show how the that personal is motivation in results line in with more what genuine the content market while requires the and professional may and involve some social strategic motivation collaborations make with the brands. influencers post content The levels of Motivation are also an important factor which will be discussed in more detail in this paper. Social media influencers work on both the short and long-term goals. Most of the time, immediate motivation is centered on engagement metrics (likes, comments, and shares) as this is how the influencers gain instant satisfaction from their followers. However, the long-term motivation is centered on developing a sustainable personal brand, the stability of one's career, and the development of a long-term impact within the travel and lifestyle industry. We shall also determine how these changes in motivation occur over time, distinguishing the early-stage influencers from the well-established users who have more extensive professional and financial objectives. This is going to help us to understand how the influencers negotiate the social status and fame they want in the short run and the development.

## 7. Theoretical implications

Lou et al. (2019) suggest that influencer marketing has emerged as a significant strategy for marketers to leverage the credibility and popularity of influencers on social media. This study focuses on social influence theory (Book & Tanford, 2020; Luo et al., 2022; Sedera et al., 2017), observing 25 travel influencers to examine how their content engages followers and impacts follower behavior.

This study contributes to the existing knowledge base on travel influencers in that it shows the how perceived follower relevance engagement of influences messages made by travel influencers. Theoretically, this study makes a significant contribution as it applies the social influence theory by Kelman (1974, 2006) to the relatively new area of travel influencer marketing. The analysis also shows that the relationship between the influencer and the follower, engagement, credibility, and authenticity play a pivotal role in the shaping of follower's behavior and their travel decisions (De Veirman et al., 2017; De Veirman et al., 2019). The findings also highlight motivation, particularly, the desire for digital fame which is the main reason that drives many influencers to get

millions of followers in hope of getting famous (Ki et al., 2020). This is closely related to the need for creative independence as the influencers require autonomy to create content that is unique to them while being relevant to the current trends on social media. Thus, these antecedents present the mutual connection between individuals' desires and the developments of the digital world which is relevant to the role of social media trends in influencing the influencers' strategies (Melnychuk et al., 2024; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

However, this study also identifies some of the challenges that include; authenticity challenges, platform dependency, content fatigue, negative public perception that affects the sustainability of influencer careers. The expectation to create genuine content that will engage the followers as well as respect the current algorithms of various social media platforms put the influencers in a tight corner of having to keep the followers engaged (Duffy, 2017). In addition, the study reveals the psychological effect of being an influencer which involves the stress of having to be visible and create content consistently which may lead to burnout, anxiety or imposter syndrome according to Schouten et al. (2020). These challenges together with the need to build credibility and trustiness of the influencers cement the applicability of the ecological system approach which sees influencers as part of a system that incorporates brands, platforms and followers. This study also explores the benefits of influencer marketing as well as the individual brand growth and financial freedom for influencers as they get sponsored by brands and sell their branded merch (De Veirman et al., 2017).

The ability to create emotional linkage with the followers through engagement also plays a crucial role in the process of building sustainable success (Ki et al., 2020). In conclusion, this research adds to the theoretical knowledge on how travel influencers control consumers' perceptions and behavior, presenting a conceptual model that frames motivation, barriers, and outcomes with reference to social influence theory. Thus, based on the findings of this study, it is possible to identify the challenges and the motivations of influencers, which may be useful for brands and platforms to comprehend in order to create more effective and sustainable collaborations with influencers and to create a proper environment for a long-term cooperation that would be beneficial for the influencer's personal brand and the brand's marketing strategy (Melnychuk et al., 2024; Schouten et al., 2020).

The social influence concepts when integrated to the social influence theory enhance the explanatory power of the study and offer a richer account of how travel influencers come to control their audiences' behavior and participation (Sedera et al., 2017). As highlighted earlier, the idea of normative influence is evident in the research findings on followers' engagement (Book & Tanford, 2020). Most of the followers engage with the content of influencers not only to acquire information but also to conform their travel choices with the ones recommended by the influencers (Kim et al., 2018). This in turn explains the trend which is the popularity of some certain destinations or travel trends that are being encouraged by the influencers. Informational influence is most evident in the sub-theme on trust where the relationship between influencers and their followers is concerned (Wei et al., 2023). The study reveals how influencers play the role of experts in the travel field and how the detailed content that the influencers provide, be it about a destination, a product or an experience, supports the followers in their decision-making process. This reliance on influencers' content as a credible and useful source of

information is an example of informational social influence at work. To highlight the findings of the study fact that both normative and informational influences play a significant role in the current trends of travel marketing, consumer decision-making, and influencer-follower relationship.

It will be useful to incorporate these theoretical concepts into the discussion of the research findings in order to enhance the theoretical contribution of this paper. This paper uses social influence theory with the focus on normative and informational influence to explain how and why travel influencers can affect their followers' attitudes and behaviors. These concepts help to demonstrate the processes of influencer through which they create engagement with followers, set the trust, and shape consumer's decisions. Thus, expanding on these theoretical relationships in this research makes the theoretical framework of the study more robust and helps to better understand the processes of followers; engagement and followers behavior in the context of travel influencers. This approach does not only help us to better understand the mechanisms of influencer marketing but also enriches the existing literature on social influence and digital marketing in travel and tourism. It offers a new perspective on the emergence of travel influencers and their impact on followers. As organizations and marketers increasingly invest in travel influencers to promote tourist destinations, understanding the journey of these influencers becomes essential. This is where our study makes a unique and valuable contribution.

## 8. Managerial implications

The present study reveals several relevant managerial implications. The findings provide valuable insights for marketers and brands looking to collaborate with travel influencers. First, travel influencers can partner with marketers or brands to promote tourist destinations or services. The influencers in this study were found to have loyal followers who take their recommendations seriously. As a result, marketers may ask these influencers to tag them when creating content, ensuring a targeted reach at a much lower cost compared to traditional media.

Second, having more followers on social media can lead to higher engagement. Marketers should choose potential travel influencers who can foster greater engagement through authentic and relatable content. The study suggests that engagement is a better indicator of a travel influencer's popularity, credibility, and expertise.

In this study, the journey of travel influencers was broken down into three major themes which include antecedents, barriers and outcomes. The discussion in the [Table 3](#) presents a more detailed description of these key factors and therefore can help to understand the more detailed processes that define the travel influencers' experience. The results reveal some specific characteristics of their inspiration, obstacles, and consequences of their activities. These findings can be useful for the brands, platforms and the individuals who are seeking to understand or to shape the future of this emerging field.

The study has implications for management as it identifies various characteristics that affect the likelihood of success and longevity of travel influencers. Antecedents, such as the desire for digital fame and creativity push many people to start an influencer career. Brands need to understand that the influencers they are targeting already have specific goals and aspirations that they want to achieve in their careers; this means

that brands need to consider how their collaboration will fit with the influencers' personal brand and their vision for their content. However, as the case of influencers highlights, there are many barriers that one has to encounter and deal with including the challenges of maintaining authenticity and overcoming dependence on particular digital platforms. This is due to the fact that the demand to produce unique and attractive content on the regular basis may cause the influencer to burn out, and the reliance on the algorithms of the social networks may not allow the influencer to grow organically. As such, companies who are interested in engaging influencers should also appreciate these dynamics and provide supports that will enhance the durability of the relationship between the company and the influencers as well as the freedom that the influencers have in developing their content and remaining true to their personal brand.

The effects of being a travel influencer are also as remarkable as the process of becoming one. Although, the ability to grow a personal brand and gain financial freedom is a strong incentive, the influencers are also likely to experience psychological issues like imposter syndrome or anxiety. Brands and platforms that focus on the wellbeing of the influencers and build relationships with real humans will lead to the formation of more durable and genuine partnerships. Furthermore, recognizing how influencers can change travel preferences and affect buyer behavior will enable businesses to plan their partnerships more strategically and make sure that these partnerships will be effective in engaging the target audience. Hence, through identifying these key elements, the brands, agencies, and social media platforms can have a better understanding of how they can better support the influencers in their journey, which can result in better collaborations in the long run. This study highlights the importance of an ecological system approach that looks into the work and personal life of the influencers as they operate in a fast-paced environment.

It provides followers with a strong sense of identification when influencers follow them back or repost their content on social media. The findings also highlight the benefits of authentic and creative content, which leads to increased popularity among travel influencers. Additionally, our findings indicate the importance of the 'visit and endorse' policy. However, followers expect genuine feedback from the destinations, and travel influencers seek authentic collaborations that help maintain their image in the eyes of their followers. This serves as a cautionary note for marketers. Therefore, marketers must ensure the relevance and usefulness of their partnerships to encourage travel influencers to promote a destination or service. Moreover, travel influencers are careful about the destinations they endorse. Any confidential information or misleading claims could backfire on the influencer and, in turn, harm the associated brand.

Our study also demonstrates that travel influencers choose the right marketers by balancing their relationships to enhance their travel-related content. It shows that consistently posting content on social media platforms can increase follower interest and generate high engagement. Creative visuals, reels, and IGTVs have become essential for the self-branding of these influencers. Our findings also highlight how travel influencers are using wellness tourism to enhance their popularity among followers and promote a better understanding of health and well-being as a practice.

Finally, travel influencers are more inclined to post information about destinations that are likely to generate high engagement. They value the opportunity to express their opinions on their social media platforms. Regarding credibility, the opinions and

**Table 3.** Expanded summary of antecedents, barriers, and outcomes.

Theme	Sub-theme	Description/Key Findings
Antecedents	Desire for digital fame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Many influencers start with the ambition to build a large online presence.</li> <li>- Digital fame provides both recognition and validation from peers and followers.</li> </ul>
	Need for creative freedom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Influencers seek autonomy over their content, allowing them to express their individuality.</li> <li>- Freedom to innovate and experiment with different formats and themes.</li> </ul>
	Influence of social media trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social media trends (e.g. viral challenges, popular hashtags) often push influencers to create specific types of content.</li> <li>- The need to adapt quickly to these trends.</li> </ul>
	Influence of peer networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Peer networks and collaboration with other influencers can serve as both motivation and source of inspiration.</li> <li>- Early-stage influencers often rely on established creators for guidance.</li> </ul>
Barriers	Authenticity challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Balancing authenticity with the need to create 'likeable' content can be difficult.</li> <li>- Influencers may feel pressured to portray a lifestyle that is not entirely genuine.</li> </ul>
	Platform dependency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Heavy reliance on social media platforms (e.g. Instagram, YouTube) means influencers are vulnerable to algorithm changes and platform policies.</li> <li>- Loss of visibility or followers due to algorithm shifts.</li> </ul>
	Content fatigue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Constant pressure to generate fresh content leads to burnout.</li> <li>- Difficulty in maintaining high creativity levels without repeating content.</li> </ul>
	Negative public scrutiny	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Travel influencers may face public backlash for perceived privilege or exploitation of cultures.</li> <li>- Criticism from followers or the media regarding authenticity.</li> </ul>
Outcomes	Expansion of personal brand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Successful influencers can transition into other industries (e.g. travel consultancy, product lines, publishing).</li> <li>- The growth of a personal brand beyond social media platforms.</li> </ul>
	Economic independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Financial rewards from sponsorships, affiliate marketing, and product launches allow influencers to become economically self-sufficient.</li> <li>- Ability to monetize content at a large scale.</li> </ul>
	Emotional connection with followers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Travel influencers often develop deep emotional ties with followers who value their recommendations.</li> <li>- Some influencers build loyal communities that support them personally and professionally.</li> </ul>
	Influence on travel trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Influencers have the power to shape travel behaviors and tourism decisions.</li> <li>- Their endorsements directly impact how destinations and brands are perceived.</li> </ul>
	Psychological impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The constant need for validation and external approval can lead to feelings of anxiety and imposter syndrome.</li> <li>- Some influencers report struggles with self-worth and mental health challenges due to public exposure.</li> </ul>

Source: Author.

recommendations of these influencers are crucial. Over-commercializing content, however, may lead to hesitancy among followers. Followers might perceive the content as less authentic if it is excessively commercialized by the influencer, which could damage the influencer’s image, popularity, and credibility. Therefore, when using travel influencers as a marketing tool, marketers need to carefully consider followers’ psychological preferences to avoid negative consequences.

### 9. Limitations and future scope

The present study makes an original and timely contribution to social media marketing. However, it has a few limitations that could be addressed in future research. This study relies on a single-source dataset, specifically Instagram, which may limit the generalizability of its findings to other platforms. Future research could explore and compare data

across different social media platforms, as well as examine specific countries or destinations. Since our study is qualitative, future researchers could use quantitative methods to assess the engagement levels of these travel influencers. Additionally, it would be interesting for future studies to analyze and compare engagement levels between male and female travel influencers.

## Acknowledgements

The author(s) acknowledge the use of generative AI tools to enhance the linguistic quality and readability of this manuscript. These tools were employed solely to improve spelling, grammar, and overall clarity, based on the original content created by the author(s). The author(s) take full responsibility for the original content, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this work.

## Author contributions

All authors contributed equally.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Dr. Vikas Arya* is a renowned expert in Digital Brand Management with a doctorate in the field. He serves as an Associate Professor of Marketing Paris School of Business, Paris, France. Dr. Arya is also a Research Fellow at Corvinus University of Budapest for the 2024-2025 academic year. He was awarded the ERASMUS+ European Scholarship in 2022 to deliver academic sessions on Metaverse and AR/VR in Poland. He is founder of BlueForskning Research Academy. Dr. Arya has presented at renowned international conferences and edited special issues for leading journals. His research, published in top-tier journals such as *Business Strategy and the Environment* and *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, focuses on Metaverse, AI, consumer behavior, and brand management. A seasoned expert in quantitative analysis, he has trained over 5000 scholars globally, with expertise in Metaverse and advanced technologies in branding and consumer relationships.

*Dr. Priyanka Kokatnur* is a Marketing professional with a doctoral degree in Marketing. Currently serving as a Consultant at TATA Group, India, she has over 8 years of experience as a professor, trainer, mentor, and instructional designer. Dr. Priyanka previously held the position of Assistant Professor in the Marketing Department at Dr. Vishwanath Karad MIT World Peace University, Pune, India. She is also a skilled researcher, case writer, and marketing consultant, with expertise in training and instructional design.

*Dr. Srishti Agarwal* is a Marketing professional with a Ph.D. in Marketing from Banasthali University, Rajasthan. Currently a Senior Consultant and Business Analyst at Infosys Ltd., India, she has over 8 years of experience in business analysis, market research, and agile project management. Dr. Agarwal holds an MBA with dual specializations in Marketing and HR and is UGC-NET qualified. She specializes in Marketing Research, Consumer Behavior, Sustainability, and Responsible Marketing, with expertise in research techniques like Bibliometrics, Regression, and Text Analytics. A published author with 15+ research papers, she has presented at national and international conferences and is an active reviewer. Dr. Agarwal is a certified Agile Project Management professional and a member of the Rotary Club. Her scholarly contributions focus on Green Marketing, Consumer Behavior, and Influencer Wellbeing.

**Dr. Tahir Islam** is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing at the School of Business, Leeds Trinity University, UK, with a strong research focus on Artificial Intelligence in Marketing, Sustainable Marketing, and Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) in Marketing. He holds a Ph.D. in CSR and customer behavioral outcomes from the University of Science and Technology of China. Dr. Islam has a substantial academic presence with over 70 research outputs, including journal articles and reviews, focusing on topics like consumer behavior, social influence, and sustainability. He has received prestigious awards, including the Chinese Government Scholarship and the German Academic Exchange Programme Fellowship. Dr. Islam is also actively involved in international collaborations and academic events. His research contributes significantly to the evolving landscape of digital marketing and consumer engagement.

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