

Impact of Social Media Influencer Marketing on Young Travelers' Destination Choice

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Abstract

Social media has transformed marketing strategies in the tourism industry, with influencer marketing emerging as a powerful tool shaping travel behaviour among younger generations. Despite its growing prominence, limited research has examined the psychological mechanisms through which influencer characteristics affect destination choice. This study addresses this gap by investigating how traits such as trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, and content quality influence travel decisions among millennial and Gen Z travellers in Sri Lanka. It further explores the mediating roles of emotional engagement and brand image in this relationship. Grounded in the Social Credibility Model, Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework, and Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), the study adopts a quantitative research design. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 331 young social media users in Sri Lanka during the second quarter of 2025, using a non-probability convenience sampling technique. The findings reveal that influencer characteristics—particularly attractiveness and content quality play a significant role in shaping destination choices. Among the examined attributes, attractiveness had the strongest influence on travel intention, while content quality demonstrated a positive but relatively weaker effect. Although the hypothesized mediating roles of emotional engagement and brand image were partially supported, emotional engagement showed a negative effect in certain contexts, suggesting a complex dynamic in influencer-driven persuasion. The study contributes theoretically by integrating multiple behavioural and psychological perspectives to explain how digital influencers impact tourism decision-making. Practically, it provides valuable insights for tourism marketers and Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), underscoring the importance of selecting influencers who align with brand identity and foster authentic engagement. A data-driven and psychologically informed approach to influencer marketing is recommended to enhance resonance with young travellers in the digital era.

Keywords: brand image, emotional engagement, influencer marketing, social media, travel intention