

## EXAMINING THE ROLE OF TRAVEL INFLUENCERS IN SHAPING TOURISTS PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIOUR

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### ABSTRACT

The rising growth of digital technologies and platforms of social media has significantly transformed the tourism industry worldwide. In India, the increasing penetration of smartphones, affordable internet access, and widespread use of platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and travel blogs have reshaped the way tourists gather information, evaluate destinations, and make travel-related decisions. In recent years, travel influencers have emerged as powerful opinion leaders in the tourism industry. They have been shaping how destinations are perceived and experienced by tourists. While reviewing existing literature and reflecting on my own travel behaviour, I realized that I have also watched travel influencer videos and considered their opinions before making my travel plans. This personal realization highlighted the growing dependence of tourists on influencer-generated content for forming destination perceptions. Therefore, this study has been undertaken to examine tourists' perceptions and understand the influence of travel influencers in shaping and changing tourist behaviour.

Travel influencer's content not only highlights attractions, accommodation, transportation and travel itineraries but also communicates cultural experiences, safety considerations, budget tips, and lifestyle elements associated with travel. As a result, influencer-generated content increasingly serves as a key information source during the pre-purchase stage of the tourist decision-making process. In India, where tourism decisions are often influenced by social validation and peer opinions, travel influencers can have a strong impact on destination image formation and travel intentions.

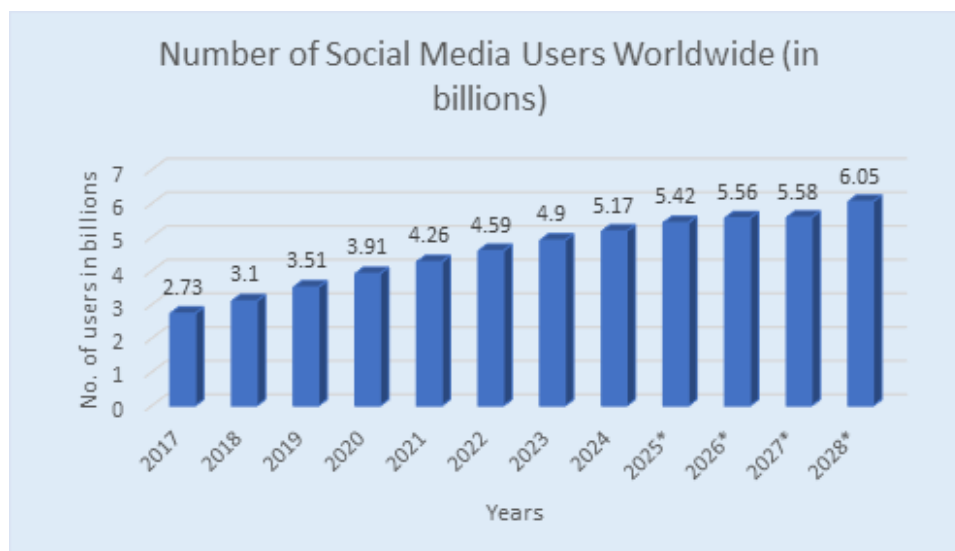
In light of above discussion, the present study seeks to examine tourists' perceptions regarding travel influencers and to analyse the role played by influencers in influencing destination image, trust, and travel-related decision-making within the Indian context. By focusing on Indian tourists, the study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on digital tourism marketing while offering practical insights for effective and responsible use of influencer marketing in India's tourism industry.

**Keywords:** Travel influencers, Tourists, Travel planning, Indian tourism, Social media, Influencer marketing.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Rise of social media in travel planning

Social media has become a primary source for inspiration, discovery, and decision-making. Social media usage is one of the most popular online activities. In 2024, over five billion people were using social media worldwide, a number projected to increase to over six billion in 2028.



**Source:** Compiled from secondary data (Statista, forecast values included “\*”)

The graph illustrates the steady growth in the number of users of social media worldwide, from 2017 to 2028. The data shows a consistent increase from 2.73 billion users in 2017 to an estimated 6.05 billion users by 2028, indicating the rapid adoption of social media across the globe. This upward trend shows the growing importance of social media platforms as key channels for communication, information sharing, and digital influence, including their significant role in shaping consumer and tourist behaviour.

Social media has the knack to unite people and dismantle barriers. This gives them a variety of chances to travel, connect with people from different cultures, and discover new places. In addition to making it simpler to organize travels, social media has made it simply possible for people to share their travel experiences, which might inspire others to go out on their own adventures. It has changed how individuals look up travel-related information or data. Travelers now have a better notion of what to anticipate before arriving at their target destination because to the abundance of content available on digital and social media, which also makes it simpler for people to find unusual, less taken and off-the-beaten-path locations they may not have previously heard of. We can now effortlessly and readily find details regarding any trip thanks to social media sites. There is an abundance of location data because there are millions of travel posts and thousands of travel influencers. Nowadays, a good percentage of tourists choose their vacation spots based on what they have seen on social media. Modern travellers have easy access to information about exotic locales, along with breath-taking photos, which motivates them to explore these places.

### **Changing behaviour of tourists information search**

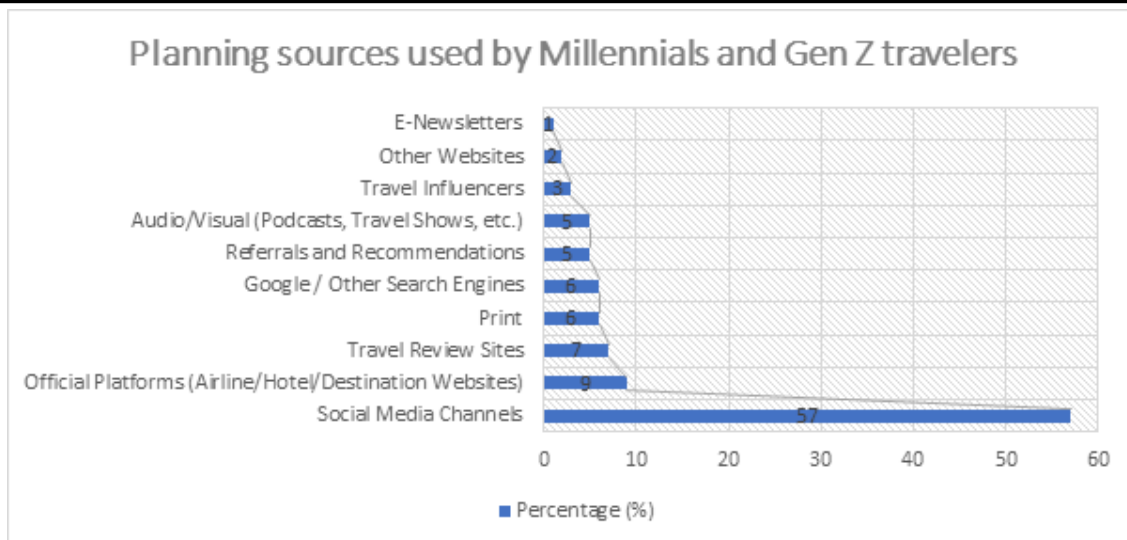
The information search behaviour of tourists has undergone a significant transformation due to rapid digitalisation and the widespread use of social media platforms. Tourists increasingly rely on online sources rather than traditional information channels such as travel agents, newspapers, or television advertisements. According to recent global trends, social media platforms have become one of the most influential sources of travel inspiration, with a growing number of tourists using Instagram, YouTube, and travel blogs during the pre-travel planning stage. Visual and experience-based content shared online plays a vital role in shaping destination perceptions and expectations.

In the Indian context, this shift is even more pronounced. Studies indicate that nearly 50% of Indian travellers are inspired by travel influencers, a significantly higher proportion compared to several Western countries. The rising penetration of smartphones, affordable internet access, and increased digital literacy have empowered Indian tourists to actively search, compare, and evaluate travel-related content online. Tourists today prefer authentic, real-time information such as reviews, vlogs, reels, and personal travel narratives, which are perceived as more trustworthy than traditional promotional messages.

Furthermore, the growth of the creator economy and influencer marketing has accelerated this change in information search behaviour. With the number of influencers in India growing from 9.6 lakh in 2020 to over 40.6 lakh in recent years, tourists are exposed to a vast range of niche travel content catering to diverse interests and budgets. As a result, travel planning has become more interactive, personalised, and socially influenced, highlighting the growing importance of digital and influencer-driven information sources in modern tourism decision-making.

### **Emergence of travel influencers as opinion leaders**

With 64 million engaged influencer Instagram accounts (Trendhero, 2023), the influencer market has risen rapidly over the last few years, with an estimated value of \$21.1 billion, up from \$500 million in 2015 (Statista, 2024). Concurrently, about 70% of travel companies use influencers to increase reservations and brand awareness (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). Travel influencers are inundating hotels with demands for free lodging, food, or other amenities in exchange for social media praises as their impact and quantity have grown (Hugh et al., 2022; Manthiou et al., 2024).



**Source:** Compiled from Skift research exploring Gen Z & Millennial travel habits (2023)

The graph indicates that social media channels are the most widely used planning source among Millennials and Gen Z travelers, accounting for 57 percent of responses. Traditional and official sources such as airline, hotel, and destination websites are used far less frequently, followed by travel review sites and search engines. The findings highlight the dominant role of digital and social media platforms in shaping travel planning behaviour among younger travelers.

Travelers now share their journeys and experiences with a bigger audience thanks to social media platforms, which has led to the emergence and evolution of "influencer" travelers who utilize their online following to encourage others to travel to comparable places. Consumers are increasingly using content in a variety of formats, including reels, videos, and vlogs, to discover new places and obtain insightful information for future travel planning. Because of their large fan base, influencers have the power to influence their followers' travel decisions and are now a useful resource for travel agencies looking to work with them to market their offerings and raise public awareness.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

- **Farooqui (2025)** highlights the rapid expansion of the influencer ecosystem in India, noting a significant rise in the number of influencers from 9.6 lakh in 2020 to over 40.6 lakh in recent years. This growth reflects increasing demand for specialised and niche content across multiple sectors. Initially dominated by fashion and lifestyle creators, the influencer industry has diversified to include areas such as health, education, finance, and travel, indicating the growing importance of influencers in shaping consumer opinions and communication patterns.
- **Choudhary (2024)** emphasizes the growing role of travel influencers as agents of change within the tourism sector. Travel influencers not only shape travel trends but also promote responsible and sustainable tourism practices. By showcasing authentic local experiences, eco-friendly accommodations, and sustainable dining options, influencers contribute to raising awareness about mindful travel behaviour while simultaneously supporting local communities and regional economies.
- **T3 News Network (2025)** reports that social media advertisements and travel influencers have become dominant sources of travel inspiration over the past five years. The study reveals that Indian travellers are significantly more influenced by travel influencers compared to travellers in countries such as the US, UK, Germany, and France. This indicates a strong shift away from traditional media channels towards influencer-driven content in shaping destination choices among Indian tourists.
- **Swarup (2025)** discusses the transformation of the Indian travel market, driven largely by travellers from Tier II and Tier III cities. Improved digital connectivity, rising disposable incomes, and technological advancements have encouraged Indian tourists to explore diverse travel experiences, including cultural tourism, religious travel, leisure holidays, and international travel. This evolving traveller profile creates a conducive environment for digital and influencer-led tourism promotion.
- **Arora and Lata (2020)** conducted an empirical study among travellers in Delhi to examine the impact of YouTube content on travel intentions. Their findings indicate that tourists actively evaluate and analyse

influencer-generated videos before making travel decisions. The study confirms that influencer content plays a critical role during the information search and evaluation stages of the tourist decision-making process.

- **Vavo Digital (2025)** observes that influencer-driven content has surpassed traditional advertising mediums such as television and newspapers in influencing Indian travellers, particularly millennials and Gen Z. Influencer recommendations are increasingly perceived as authentic and trustworthy, resembling personal advice rather than promotional messaging. This perceived authenticity enhances the credibility of influencer content and strengthens its impact on tourist perceptions and behavioural intentions.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

**The core objective of this paper is to investigate the role of travel influencers in shaping tourist perceptions. The aim of the study:**

- To examine tourists' perceptions of Indian travel influencers as a source of travel-related information.
- To assess the influence of Indian travel influencers on tourists' travel planning and decision-making behaviour.
- To assess the impact of travel influencer content on tourists' intention to visit a particular destination.
- To evaluate the relationship between age and the impact of travel influencers on tourists.
- To provide suggestions and recommendations for tourism marketers, travel influencers, and destination planners.

### Hypothesis 1

**(H0):** There is no significant impact of travel influencers on tourists' perceptions.

**(H1):** There is a significant impact of travel influencers on tourists' perceptions.

### Hypothesis 2

**(H0):** Indian travel influencers do not significantly influence tourists' travel planning and decision-making behaviour.

**(H1):** Travel influencer content has a significant impact on tourists' intention to visit destinations.

### Hypothesis 3

**(H0):** There is no significant association between age and the impact of travel influencers on tourists.

**(H1):** There is a significant association between age and the impact of travel influencers on tourists.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Data collection

To achieve these objectives, this research paper will employ an approach, adopting a quantitative research approach using structured questionnaires.

**Primary data:** The primary data is collected through a questionnaire. It has been collected from 110 tourists who are residents of Mumbai.

- Secondary Data:** It is collected through various E books references, E articles, Blogs, Vlogs, Industry reports, Newspapers articles etc.
- Sample Size:** The researcher used simple random sampling and collected 110 questionnaires responses from tourists who are residents of Mumbai.
- Age Group:** 20 Years and above
- Statistical tools:** Statistical tools such as one-sample t-test, percentage analysis, regression analysis, and one-way ANOVA were used for data analysis.

## LIMITATION OF STUDIES

1. The study is limited to respondents from the Mumbai suburban region, which restricts generalization of the findings.
2. Time constraints limited the depth and duration of data collection.
3. A limited sample size may affect the representativeness of the results.

4. The study relies on responses based on personal perceptions, which may vary among respondents.

**Data analysis and interpretation:**

**Hypothesis testing**

**1. Impact of Travel Influencers as a source of travel related information on Tourists’ Perceptions One-Sample t-test**

Average	3.527272
Standard deviation	0.93562
$\mu$ (test value)	3
t-value	5.9105695
p-value	3.96209E-08*

**Note: 3.96209E-08 = 0.0000000396 \***

Since,  $0.0000000396 < 0.05$ , Reject the Null Hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) which indicates that travel influencers are perceived as a statistically significant source of travel-related information by tourists.

**2. Impact of Travel Influencer Content on Tourists’ travel planning and decision making behavior Regression Analysis**

Regression Statistics								
Multiple R	0.114261							
R Square	0.013055							
Adjusted R Square	0.003917							
Standard Error	0.56705							
Observations	110							
ANOVA								
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>			
Regression	1	0.459374	0.459374	1.428643	0.234604			
Residual	108	34.72695	0.321546					
Total	109	35.18633						
	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	3.657465	0.357938	10.21816	1.49E-17	2.94797	4.36696	2.94797	4.36696
Influencer content	-0.11089	0.092778	-1.19526	0.234604	-0.2948	0.073009	-0.2948	0.073009

The regression analysis indicates that travel influencer content has a weak and statistically insignificant impact on tourists’ travel planning and decision-making behaviour. The R Square value of 0.013 shows that influencer content explains only a small proportion of variation in travel planning behaviour. The model was found to be not significant ( $p = 0.234 > 0.05$ ), and the regression coefficient for influencer content was also insignificant.

Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted, suggesting that travel influencer content does not significantly influence tourists’ travel planning and decision-making behaviour. This indicates that while influencers may shape perceptions, actual travel decisions are influenced by other factors such as budget, time, and personal preferences.

**3. Relationship Between Age and the Impact of Travel Influencers on Tourists One Way ANOVA**

**Anova: Single Factor**

SUMMARY						
<i>Groups</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Sum</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Variance</i>		
20-35	3	12.84	4.28	0.1999		
36-50	3	8.18	2.726667	0.157733		
51-65	3	7.71	2.57	0.3703		
66 and above	3	7.94	2.646667	0.209233		
ANOVA						
<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>F crit</i>
Between Groups	6.031158	3	2.010386	8.580698	0.006998	4.066181

Within Groups	1.874333	8	0.234292			
Total	7.905492	11				

The one-way ANOVA results indicate a statistically significant difference in the impact of travel influencers across different age groups ( $F = 8.58, p = 0.0069$ ). Since the  $p$ -value  $< 0.05$  significance level, the **null hypothesis is rejected**. This suggests that age plays a significant role in influencing how tourists are affected by travel influencers, with younger tourists exhibiting higher levels of influence.

**CONCLUSION**

With a focus on tourists who live in Mumbai, the current study investigated how travel influencers affect tourist’s attitudes and actions. The results of the one-sample t-test show that tourists' impressions are significantly shaped by travel influencers. This suggests that throughout the information search phase, influencer-generated material is seen as a reliable and significant source of travel-related information.

Regression research, however, revealed that travellers’ intentions to visit destinations are not statistically significantly impacted by travel influencer content. This implies that whereas influencers may affect knowledge and perceptions, other factors including financial limitations, time constraints, individual preferences, and family considerations may have an impact on real travel plans.

Additionally, a strong correlation between age and the influence of travel influencers was shown by the one-way ANOVA results. Travel influencer content was found to have a greater impact on younger tourists than on older age groups, underscoring generational disparities in digital media consumption and trust in influencer-driven information.

The study's overall findings highlight the increasing significance of travel influencers in perception creation as opposed to direct decisions about purchases or trip intentions. The results provide tourism marketers and location managers with useful information for creating influencer marketing strategies that are age-specific and ethically transparent. In order to better understand tourists behaviour in the changing digital tourism scene, future research may expand on this study by using a larger and more diverse sample, more demographic characteristics, and qualitative insights.

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