

The Influence of Social Media Influencers on Consumers' Willingness to Travel

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Abstract

Integrating the perspectives of source credibility and narrative transmission, this study systematically explores how social media influencers (SMIs) can motivate consumers to visit cultural heritage destinations through personal traits and story-based content. Based on the combination and theoretical deduction of relevant literature at home and abroad, (1) when influencers are perceived as professional and credible, their credibility can be effectively transferred to the endorsed heritage sites, reducing risk perception and increasing the intention to visit. (2) Although perceived attraction can quickly capture attention, its persuasive effect depends on the value consistency between influencers and fans. (3) The narrative transmission triggered by story-based content can significantly amplify the above effects, so that the audience can have emotional resonance with the heritage narrative. (4) In addition, the interaction effect of high credibility and high narrative produces the most substantial increase in visitor intention. Based on this, this study proposes management implications for cultural authorities, destination marketing organizations, scenic spot managers, and influencers themselves, such as hierarchical cooperation, co-creation of narratives, immersive touchpoints, and credible markers, which provide a theoretical basis and practical path for the precision marketing and sustainable governance of cultural heritage tourism in the digital era.

Keywords: social media influencers marketing; cultural heritage tourism; consumer behavior

Introduction

The digital era has fundamentally reconfigured how information is produced, circulated, and consumed. Social media platforms now function as global sense-making infrastructures that shape perceptions and behaviours at scale. (Frias et al., 2008). As users devote an increasing proportion of their daily media diet to social feeds, mental representations of destinations are progressively filtered through the images, clips, and narratives encountered online rather than through traditional channels.

This shift is especially consequential for cultural tourism, where intangible sentiments and symbolic meanings are central to the value proposition. (ILIEVA, 2023). Social networks mobilise vast, heterogeneous publics, thereby opening unprecedented avenues for both the promotion and the safeguarding of heritage assets. (Zhu et al., 2023). Within this ecology, social-media influencers (SMIs) have emerged as non-negligible intermediaries: their personae function as micro-brands capable of reaching disparate niches while simultaneously enhancing top-of-mind awareness. Empirical evidence confirms that SMI campaigns generate significantly higher consumer engagement compared to conventional advertising. (Gross & von Wangenheim, 2022). Importantly, the composite of likes, comments, and shares is not merely a vanity metric; it constitutes a behavioural proxy for latent interest and purchase intent. (Koay et al., 2022).

Heritage destinations—whose appeal is inseparable from historically embedded narratives—derive amplified benefits from influencer marketing. Here, SMIs act as de facto brand ambassadors whose perceived credibility modulates audience beliefs and travel decisions. Their capacity to render distant pasts emotionally immediate and personally relevant bridges cultural and linguistic divides, globalising heritage discourse without diluting authenticity. Recent content-analytic work suggests that posts employing structured storytelling techniques outperform those with purely scenic visuals in eliciting positive affect and increasing click-through intention. (Cao et al., 2021). Storytelling, therefore, functions as a persuasive scaffold that transports prospective tourists into imagined heritage experiences, fostering an empathic connection that static imagery seldom achieves. (Ben Youssef et al., 2019).

Consequently, the present study leverages dual-process persuasion models and narrative transportation theory to examine how SMIs' personal attributes (credibility, attractiveness) and narrative strategies jointly influence consumers' intentions to visit cultural heritage destinations.

Social Media Influencer Marketing

In today's media landscape, mass communication channels, such as television stations, radio stations, and newspapers, are no longer the primary sources of information for consumers. Instead, they often use social media channels or virtual communities for information exchange and relationship-building (Hair et al., 2010). After the COVID-19 epidemic, many industries are adapting and transforming their industry structures and business models, with around 70% of new value being created through digital platforms, and the adoption of a high level of digitalization, such as the use of social media, may help companies make progress in the aftermath of a crisis. (Abdul Aziz et al., 2023). Social media has transformed the way people interact, engage, and influence one another. These emerging trends in the social media market are prompting individuals from diverse backgrounds to reconsider their marketing and promotional strategies. (Ragab, 2022). The popularity of social media influencers is also on the rise. (Nafees et al., 2021). At the confluence of modern communication and marketing, Social media influencer marketing (SMIM) is playing an increasingly important role. (Doshi et al., 2023). Influencer marketing has become one of the fastest and most effective marketing techniques since the inception of online social networks. A recent survey by Rakuten Advertising (Degreef, 2019) showed that around 80% of consumers made purchases recommended by influencers. A social media influencer can promote a product/brand to a massive audience with a single click. Studies have shown that partnering with influencers for advertising results in an increase in a brand's revenue within a short period of time. (Doshi et al., 2023). Today, this marketing strategy, which redefines marketing by establishing authentic connections and trust through influential digital personas, has become an integral part of promoting and positioning products and services in various industries. (Han et al., 2023) Social Media Influencers (SMI) are third-party endorsers that attempt to shape consumer attitudes toward a brand. (Freberg et al., 2011). They shape the attitudes of their audiences through the use of social media. (Gorry & Westbrook, 2009). SMI is an expert in their field, with over 10,000 followers, and social media influencers express their views and experiences broadly and in a targeted manner (Caraka et al., 2022). They are opinion leaders, often with expertise in a particular field, and unlike celebrities, they are friends with their followers, who trust and worship them. These followers are happy to follow them when choosing a product or service, and they post information on social media as e-word-of-mouth rather than advertising. (ILIEVA, 2023). They actively share products and provide

product information to help promote products, and the content they share in turn increases the loyalty of their followers.

The Source Effect Theory

The source effect theory identified two characteristics of successful marketing communication sources: credibility and attractiveness. (Serman & Sims, 2023). Credibility is defined as the degree to which the consumer perceives an influencer as believable and reliable. Source trustworthiness refers to “the extent to which a source of information is considered to have expertise relevant to the topic of communication and can be trusted to provide an objective opinion on that topic”. Previous research on source credibility has investigated the impact of spokespersons on consumers (e.g., (Cunningham & Bright, 2012; Dwivedi et al., 2015; Lee & Koo, 2015).

Attractiveness refers to the degree to which a consumer perceives an influencer as physically appealing, desirable, beautiful, classy, or elegant. (Bawack & Bonheure, 2023). ELM points out that when the audience is highly engaged in information processing, the credibility of the information source is the most important in persuasion. When the audience is less engaged, superficial characteristics such as attractiveness, fame, or similarity of the information source have a greater impact on the persuasion effect. Followers may initially be attracted to a particular source of information through peripheral pathways (attraction or similarity). Still, as trust is built, the persuasive effect may gradually shift to a central path based on credibility.

In the context of social media marketing, SMI is the primary source of followers, whose decisions influence the decisions of consumers. On the one hand, the Source Credibility model proposes that the effectiveness of a message depends on receivers’ perceived level of expertise and trustworthiness in an endorser, and a credible source can influence receivers’ beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors. (Riley, 1954).

Nosi et al. (2021) find that trust in social media influencers has a significantly positive impact on online brand trust. Additionally, in Malaysia, trust in social media influencers among millennial youths is particularly crucial in encouraging them to purchase cosmetics.. A recent study reveals that the credibility of social media influencers affects trust in new brand body lotions in the beauty and fashion niche markets. (Leite & Baptista, 2022). The perceived credibility of SMIs is posited to mediate the relationship between SMIs and consumers' attitudes toward brands. This dynamic can

be interpreted as the ongoing engagement of the audience, which augments the influence of SMIs and thereby instills confidence in the credibility attributed to them.

Consequently, the audience may project their trust in the SMI onto the brands they endorse. (Nafees et al., 2021). (Salhab, 2024) The experiential results reveal the role of social presence in evaluating the impact of Instagram celebrities on trustworthiness, positive brand attitude, and direct interaction. Influencer marketing has a significant impact on Instagram celebrities, as it can enhance trust and positivity. (Kilipiri et al., 2023) Research indicates that SMI power and SMI perceived source trustworthiness are crucial in shaping consumers' attitudes towards brands (Nafees et al., 2021). Hassan et al. (2021) investigated the impact of social media influencer credibility on millennials' choice and use of cosmetics in the beauty industry. They concluded that credibility traits such as knowledge, attractiveness, and relevance are the core elements of social media influencers' influence on young millennials.

On the other hand, the Source Attractiveness Model posits that the effectiveness of a message depends on similarity, familiarity, and liking for the endorser. Attractiveness encompasses both physical attractiveness and social attractiveness. (McGuire, 1985). Smis' attractiveness presentation stimulated consumers' curiosity and desire to know more about SMI. (Liu et al., 2020). When consumers find the SMI is similar and familiar to them in terms of interest, values, lifestyle, and other aspects, or accords with their idealized self, they would be more likely to interact with the SMI and accept the SMI's attitude and behavior (Sreejesh et al., 2020). In terms of likability, it is believed to be one of the primary reasons why some consumers trust SMI. (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019) Moreover, it can leave a positive effect on triggering the perception of authenticity.

Sokolova and Kefi (2019) reported a negative correlation between the physical attractiveness of fashion bloggers on social media and purchase intentions (PI). While physical attractiveness is related to credibility, the pursuit of an impeccable appearance may not be the primary goal of followers. Furthermore, research has discovered a positive correlation between the social attractiveness of four fashion bloggers on Instagram and YouTube and PI, which is nullified if the respondents belong to Generation Z (born after 1995). (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Literature on attractiveness stereotypes also suggests that exposure to or interaction with attractive individuals can help evoke positive emotions in individuals and facilitate the establishment of intimate relationships. (Lemay et al., 2010). When influencers are perceived as attractive, either physically or socially, consumers pay more attention to them. (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Moreover, according to

social identity theory (Brewer, 1991) Consumers engage more deeply with influencers who produce attractive content to satisfy their self-definition needs. From the perspective of SMI characteristics, PI may be influenced by perceived similarity. (Shan et al., 2020), social attractiveness, and attitudinal homophily (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019).

An SMI who is visually appealing is more likely to gain acceptance for the products they endorse (Lim et al., 2017). The physical attributes and characteristics of SMIs, such as intelligence, beauty, health, psychological traits, and athletic spirit, are inextricably linked to the perceived attractiveness in the eyes of consumers (Onu et al., 2019). Therefore, the effectiveness of an endorser in driving consumer behavioral intentions depends on the degree of attractiveness of the endorser (McGuire, 1985; Till & Busler, 2000; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Existing research indicates that a high level of perceived attractiveness is associated with positive attitudes towards SMIs, which in turn lead to purchase intentions (Lim et al., 2017; Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). In particular, Lou & Yuan found that attractive SMIs can more effectively promote consumer trust in brands, thereby strengthening consumer purchase intentions. Similarly, Weismueller et al. found that the perceived attractiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises is directly related to the purchase intentions of followers.

In the context of social media influencers, persuasion happens when followers assess influencers' personal attributes (like attractiveness or trustworthiness). These attributes shape followers' perceptions of influencers, which then impact their behavioral intentions. For example, followers are more likely to follow cultural heritage sites recommended by influencers they consider trustworthy. (Masuda et al., 2022).

Narrative Transportation

Narrative transport theory examines the degree to which individuals are drawn to or immersed in a new narrative world and assesses the influence of stories on their perceptions of reality. (Green & Brock, 2000). In social media, narrative transmission theory explains how consumers interact with information and motivates mental activity, stating that persuasion occurs in the process of immersion. In narrative theory, "narrative" can refer to the influencer's psychological interpretation of the story based on their knowledge, personality, and other factors (Fishbein & Yzer, 2003). "Transport" refers to a fusion of attention, imagery, and emotion, and is a mental process. The reason why storytelling can attract attention can also be tested in theory. With content

storytelling, influencers can immerse the audience in the story they have created, providing a pleasurable experience for the audience. (Escalas, 2004; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010). In recent research on social media influencers, an extended transportation–image model has been developed to address key elements of narrative transmission theory, stimulating narratives based on the characteristics of both the storyteller (social media influencer) and the storyteller (audience), thereby influencing audience behavior. Here is a paraphrased version of the provided passage with reduced repetition: Regarding the factors influencing narrative transportation, storyteller–related elements include how identifiable characters are (how easily the audience can connect with them), how vividly the plot can be imagined (the ease with which the audience can visualize the sequence of events), and the story’s plausibility (the likelihood of the events occurring in real life). On the other hand, story–receiver factors involve familiarity with the story (prior knowledge or experience), attention (the level of focus on the narrative), transportability (the individual's tendency to become immersed), as well as demographic factors such as age, education, and gender. A meta–analysis by the researchers confirmed that narrative transportation enhances narrative–related thoughts and leads to story–consistent emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral responses while reducing critical thinking. (van Laer et al., 2014)

Some studies have applied narrative transportation to short video marketing, suggesting that narrative content has a positive impact on the brand of tourist destinations. (Cao et al., 2021). According to a TikTok User Profile Report, most videos uploaded use narrative techniques. These short videos tell a series of anecdotes in chronological order, as viewers tend to seek causality. The pursuit of causality makes narrative videos more likely to capture the attention of potential tourists than promotional videos with dynamic scenes of scenic spots. Narrative transportation theory can also explain why narratives are compelling in capturing attention. Narratives can help immerse potential tourists in the narrative world. (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010), which can be a pleasurable experience (Escalas, 2004). Some scholars also claim that advertising narratives can enhance persuasiveness. (Deighton et al., 1989; Escalas, 2007). van Laer et al. (2014) show that one of the divisions of narrative persuasiveness is the attitudinal consistency towards the story's internal experience, which is a result of narrative transportation. The enjoyment derived from narrative transportation experiences has been shown to enhance attitudes towards the advertising theme. (Kalch & Bilandzic, 2017), product attitudes (Ching et al., 2013), and consumer attention (Huang et al., 2018). While previous research supports the positive impact of using narratives in advertising,

this effect has yet to be explored in the context of social media influencers. Research indicates that narrative transportation can occur through various media types, from traditional media (e.g., magazines, television, radio, books, films) (Appel & Malečkar, 2012; Appel & Mara, 2013; Bezdek & Gerrig, 2017; Scolari, 2009) to technology-mediated media (e.g., online advertisements, blogs) (Ching et al., 2013; Hsiao et al., 2013). In the social media context, tourism videos may engender narrative transportation. Social media messages, comprising photos, videos, and text with narrative content, can foster narrative transportation, persuading message recipients. The content features of SNS advertising are thought to influence the extent of consumer-brand interaction. (Rohm et al., 2013)

Conclusion

This study combines source credibility theory and narrative transportation theory to explain how social media influencers stimulate consumers' willingness to travel to cultural heritage destinations. We find that when social media influencers are perceived to be professional and credible, they play a significant role as a bridge between the "periphery-center" persuasion path. Their credibility can effectively influence the cultural heritage destinations they endorse, reduce consumers' perceived risks, and effectively increase their willingness to visit. Although the attractiveness of social media influencers can quickly capture consumers' attention and enhance the relationship between consumers and influencers, their persuasive effect depends more on whether the values of influencers and their fans are aligned. The narrative transmission triggered by story-based content evokes strong emotional empathy among consumers. When consumers become immersed in the narrative situation, an emotional bond forms between the audience, the influencer, and the heritage destination. The interaction effect of high credibility and high narrative will increase the likelihood of visiting. In summary, social media influencers are not simply mediums of attention but can act as "cultural mediators" who translate digital engagement into on-the-ground visits when they emerge as credible storytellers.

There are also practical lessons to be learned from the fact that, for cultural authorities and governments, when relevant social media influencers create content, they can provide moderated storylines, archival influences, and implementation checklists for influencers to incorporate into their personalized narratives. Impact funds could be set up to encourage influencers to develop innovative outreach programs for lesser-known sites. For cultural tourism enterprises, select influencers, local

historians, and artisans can be invited to co-create co-branded content, which simultaneously enhances credibility and narrative richness. For cultural heritage tourism destinations, digital means such as AR signs or QR codes can be set up at corresponding tourist attractions to trigger micro-stories, extending the influencer's narrative to the scene. For social media influencers, ensure that content creation is professional, authentic, and cohesive in narrative. For cited cultural heritage-related materials, they should be marked in the work to enhance credibility. By synergizing the symbolic authority of credible, engaging, and story-savvy influencers with accessible and perceptible experiences of cultural heritage destinations, the emotional connection between influencers and consumers is strengthened through the spread of social media platforms, and this emotional connection is transformed into sustainable cultural travel.

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