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# From Posts to Passports: The Role of Social Media Influencers in Shaping International Travel Decisions

## Abstract

This research paper analyses the influence of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) on international travel decision-making. The study attempts to understand the extent of impact SMIs have on different stages of the international travel decision-making process and to identify factors of the characteristics of SMIs that influence travellers' decision-making. The findings suggest that SMIs have distinct impacts on people's behaviours and decisions in each international travel decision-making stage. Post-travel behaviour is the stage in which SMIs influence people the most. Six characteristics of the SMIs were identified: Credibility and trustworthiness, popularity and acceptance, personality and appearance, expertise and experience, frequency of posts, and interaction with followers. Logistic regression analysis revealed that all the identified characteristics do not have the same influence on the international travel decision-making process. The direction and magnitude of the impact of these factors are uncovered through this research.

**Keywords:** social media influencers, social media marketing, decision making, travel decision, influencer marketing

## 1. Introduction

Social Media Influencers (SMIs) have garnered considerable attention from scholars and professionals in the business world due to their potential impact on brand marketing. They have brought about significant transformations in the social media marketing landscape (Cheung et al., 2022). Social media marketing activities are crucial in enhancing consumer communication or improving interactions with them (Ibrahim, 2021).

The rise in popularity of SMIs has led to increased partnerships and cooperation between businesses and these influencers. According to a recent study, 67% of companies planning influencer marketing intend to increase their budgets, with 23% allocating over 40% of their total marketing budget to influencer campaigns, highlighting its growing importance in reaching target audiences (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023). The importance of social media influencers in tourism is underscored by the rising demand for advanced e-tourism platforms like websites, travel applications, and social media. These platforms emphasize features such as functionality, information quality, system reliability, privacy, flexibility, memorability, customization, and security, which are increasingly valued by consumers (Paredes et al., 2021).

In travel and tourism, influencer marketing enhances traditional word-of-mouth recommendations by leveraging SMIs on social media platforms. Initially, tourism marketers partnered with bloggers whose evolving blogs became vital for traveller information and effective marketing channels (Hudders et al., 2021). SMIs wield significant power to shape travel trends, influence decisions, and even impact travellers' perceptions of specific destinations (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Gretzel, 2018; Guerreiro et al., 2019; Ramos et al., 2024; Razak

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& Mansor, 2021; Saini et al., 2023; Xu & Pratt, 2018). Travel and tourism brands can harness influencers' social media reach and credibility to connect effectively with their target audience and gain exposure in a competitive industry.

Existing research has covered aspects of SMIs impacting consumer behaviour, but further exploration is needed to understand their specific influence on international travel decision-making processes. While studies have examined SMIs' general influence on consumer choices, the nuances of their impact on each stage of travel decision-making remain unclear. Research should delve deeper into the attributes of SMIs that shape international travel decisions and how these characteristics exert influence. Therefore, the study aims to address the following research questions:

Q1: How do SMIs impact each stage of the international travel decision-making process for consumers?

Q2: What are the specific characteristics of SMIs that influence the decision-making process for international travel, and how do these attributes impact them?

#### **Objectives:**

- To compare the influence of selected factors on the decision to visit an international destination
- To analyse the extent of impact SMIs have on different stages of the international travel decision-making process.
- To identify factors of the characteristics of SMIs that influence travellers' decision-making

## **2. Literature review**

Social media platforms in recent years have transformed information acquisition, decision-making, and interaction in people's lives. Researchers and marketers have focused on understanding how SMIs influence consumer behaviour, particularly in travel decision-making. This review summarises existing studies on SMI's impact on consumer travel decisions.

SMIs use social media to build relationships, gain social capital, and monetize opportunities (Fowler & Thomas, 2023). With large followings, they influence their audience (Backaler, 2018), meeting followers' intrinsic needs like escapism and self-improvement (Malik et al., 2022).

SMIs shape consumer behaviour and engage on digital platforms by leveraging authenticity, credibility, and expertise, forging meaningful connections (Zabel, 2023). This connection-building process goes beyond promotion, creating community-focused and commercial content that benefits brands and consumers (Fan et al., 2023). They act as intermediaries, effectively conveying brand messages and offers to their followers (Ul Haque et al., 2023)

Marketers created the 'influencer marketing' strategy by engaging with influencers who can influence consumer behaviour (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Ge & Gretzel, 2018; Gretzel & Yoo, 2013; Veirman et al., 2017). Businesses view SMIs as a crucial marketing strategy (Chen et al., 2023), especially in sectors like tourism, where it drives transformative growth (Raj & Sankar, 2022). Social media influencer marketing (SMIM) enhances engagement for micro-businesses through authentic content and interactive campaigns (Erwin et al., 2024). Platform dynamics shape consumer interactions and experiences with influencers (Lou et al., 2022), highlighting the influence of social media on follower engagement.

Social media and electronic word of mouth substantially influence tourists' perceptions and intentions to travel (Mheidat & Marzuki, 2023). Empirical studies employing the TEARS model and social influence theory shed light on how influencers shape consumer behaviour (Ali et al., 2023; Ekeland & Borenstein, 2020; Sharipudin

et al., 2023). The factors trustworthiness, expertise (Ao et al., 2023; Han & Balabanis, 2023; Sharipudin et al., 2023), attractiveness (Ao et al., 2023; Foughi et al., 2024; Sharipudin et al., 2023), entertainment value (Ao et al., 2023; Foughi et al., 2024), credibility (Ao et al., 2023; Han & Balabanis, 2023), congruence with the product (Ao et al., 2023), originality, and follower size (Leung et al., 2022) emerge as pivotal in shaping consumer responses to influencer marketing initiatives. Psychological influences, content attributes, and contextual factors, which influence consumer attitudes and behaviours, were also identified as factors shaping SMIM's effectiveness and consumer engagement (Sharipudin et al., 2023; Vrontis et al., 2021).

In the digital age, millennials heavily rely on social media platforms for travel decision-making (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). Studies on destination marketing have found that travel influencers influence factors like tourist purchasing decisions and destination image (Li et al., 2015; Ong & Ito, 2019). Travel influencers inform followers about destinations, motivate them to take trips, and foster a sense of community (Asan, 2021). SMIs influence travel planning, including attitudes toward destinations and intentions to visit and recommend them (Priyanga & Ashokkumar, 2023). Social media managers should devise strategies to encourage tourists to share photos and positive narratives about destinations, recognizing that users enjoy showcasing their travels and influencing others' travel decisions (Özdemir & Aslı Arzık, 2022).

Instagram influencer marketing shapes millennials' travel decisions via follower count, personality, and multimedia content. High engagement rates and influencers' ability to form parasocial relationships notably impact destination choices and sustainable tourism (Kilipiri et al., 2023). Perceived congruence between tourists and SMIs enhances destination experiences and affects travellers' attitudes and intentions (Bašan et al., 2023). SMIs also influence cosmetic procedures as part of medical tourism, affecting decision-making from the pre-purchase stage to the final decision (Baán, 2023).

*The perceived image of the influencer can impact visit intentions towards endorsed destinations (Xu & Pratt, 2018). SMIs' physical attractiveness, social appeal, and credibility influence the audience's wishful identification and behavioural intentions. Factors like trustworthiness and attractiveness significantly impact travel intentions more than expertise (Raafat et al., 2023). Participants' perceptions of SMIs vary across generations, with Generation Y showing the highest impact (Zorlu & Candan, 2023). Authenticity and quality of information shared by SMIs positively influence tourists' attachment, enjoyment, and intention to visit destinations (Zhu et al., 2023).*

Trust in tourism decisions links travel intentions with social media information quality (Khan et al., 2024). SMIs foster trust through parasocial interactions based on attractiveness, similarity, and expertise, influencing travel considerations (Chen et al., 2023). Influencers' engagement builds trust and impacts decision-making (Saini et al., 2023). SMIs' user-generated content shapes destination image and visitor satisfaction (Jamaludin et al., 2013; Razak & Mansor, 2021)

A collaboration between SMIs and destination marketing organizations (DMOs) is required to maximize their immense potential (Saini et al., 2023). The success of influencer marketing hinges on the alignment between influencers and target consumer segments, as Žák and Hasprová (2020) emphasise. Understanding factors influencing travellers' decision-making helps DMOs leverage SMIs to engage future travellers and build strong connections with their followers (Saini et al., 2023). The message format, message appeal, motives, and time orientation of posts by social media influencers significantly influence tourists' online engagement (Banerjee & Verma, 2024). Carefully selecting trustworthy influencers who resonate with the target audience is essential to mitigate risks in influencer endorsements. Even in compensated endorsements, authenticity is crucial for credibility (Gretzel, 2018).

This assessment of the literature emphasizes the substantial importance of SMIs in determining consumer travel decisions. Influencers have emerged as a powerful force in motivating, enlightening, and directing travellers, with a clear impact on tourism. Further investigation is required to comprehend the involvement of SMEs, particularly in international travel decision-making, and the characteristics that affect the decision-making.

### 3. Methodology

The data collection tool is a questionnaire with close-ended and 5-point Likert scale questions divided into four parts. Part one covers essential demographics. Part two compares factors influencing international travel decisions, including SMIs. Part three explores SMIs' impact on each travel decision stage, drawing items from existing literature (Chen et al., 2022; Lee, 2013; Guerreiro et al., 2019; Pop et al., 2021; Saini et al., 2023). Part four examines SMI characteristics, incorporating existing items (Kurdi et al., 2022; Cholprasertsuk et al., 2020; Lee, 2013; Guerreiro et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2023) as well as additional relevant items introduced by the authors.

A pilot study was carried out to verify the instrument's reliability. Additionally, the survey's conceptual validity and content were examined. The population of the study is people who have gone on international vacation at least once in the last five years. In millions, international tourist arrivals were 1,462.27 (2019), 406.56 (2020), 457.51 (2021), 960.19 (2022), and 1,285.66 (2023) (Statista, 2024), totalling a population of 4,572.19 million.

Sample size calculation was performed using the formula for estimating sample size based on population size, confidence level, and margin of error (Cochran, 1977). The formula used is as follows:

$$n = \frac{Z^2 \times p \times (1 - p)}{E^2}$$

Where  $n$  is the sample size,  $Z$  is the Z-score corresponding to the desired confidence level,  $p$  is the estimated proportion of the population, and  $E$  is the margin of error. The calculations were conducted assuming a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of 5%. The calculation revealed that the study should have a minimum of 384 samples for data analysis. Thus, our primary data was collected from 392 respondents from Bangalore city based on simple random sampling. Respondents were randomly approached at major international tourist hubs, with 206 responses from Kempegowda International Airport, followed by Lalbagh Botanical Garden, Cubbon Park, and Bangalore Palace. Participation was open to people of all nationalities, and the survey was conducted over four weeks.

The IBM SPSS 23.0 was used for this analysis. ANOVA and Chi-Square Test are adopted to analyse the relationship between the demographic variable of the respondents and the influence of SMIs on their travel decision-making process. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) aids in identifying a concept's latent dimensions. Logistic regression is used to determine how these factors affect the decision-making process. These analyses provide insights for testing the hypotheses formulated for the study.

#### The following hypotheses are set for this research:

*H1*: SMIs significantly influence

- a. the need recognition stage of the international travel decision-making process.
- b. the search for information stage of the international travel decision-making process.
- c. the evaluation of information and destination selection stage of the international travel decision-making process.
- d. the post-travel behaviour stage of the international travel decision-making process.

*H2a*: The credibility and trustworthiness of SMIs significantly influence international travel decision-making.

*H2b*: The popularity and acceptance of SMIs significantly influence international travel decision-making.

*H2c:* The personality and appearance of SMIs significantly influence international travel decision-making.

*H2d:* The expertise and experience of SMIs significantly influence international travel decision-making.

*H2e:* The frequency of posts by SMIs significantly influences international travel decision-making.

*H2f:* The interaction with followers by SMIs significantly influences international travel decision-making.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Demographic profile

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of 392 respondents. The majority are aged 18-25 (42.5%) and 26-35 (20%). Male respondents account for 60.25%, while 37.75% earn less than 1 lakh annually. 77% of the sample is from urban regions. 49.25% are undergraduates and 58% work in the private sector. Most respondents spend 1-3 hours daily on social media.

**Table 1**  
*Demographic profile of the respondents*

Variable	Categories	Percentage
Age group	18-25	42.5
	26-35	20
	36-45	13.5
	46 and above	24
Gender	Male	60.25
	Female	39.75
Annual income	Less than 1 Lakh	37.75
	1 Lakh to 4 Lakhs	15.5
	4 Lakhs to 7 Lakhs	27
	Above 7 Lakhs	19.75
Location	Rural	23
	Urban	77
Level of education	Below under graduation	9.75
	Undergraduate	49.25
	Postgraduate and above	41
Employment status	Unemployed	14
	Private	58
	Government	12
	Self-employed	16
Time approximately spent on social media	Less than 1 hour	28.75
	1-3 hours	52.25
	3-6 hours	19

Note. Compiled by authors.

### 4.2. Factors influencing the decision to visit an international destination

Respondents were asked to rank the given factors based on their influence in their decision to visit an international destination from 1 (highest influence) to 7 (lowest influence). Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the factors influencing the respondents' decision to visit an international destination. A lower mean value suggests that the factor has a higher influence since rank one is given to aspects of high influence.

Respondents ranked factors influencing their decision to visit international destinations. 'Posts of SMIs' had the lowest mean (2.62), indicating significant influence from social media and influencers. 'Previous knowledge or awareness about the destination' followed (mean = 3.55), emphasizing the role of prior information. 'Previous travel experience' ranked third (mean = 4.22). 'Information from the destination' and 'Word of mouth' had the least influence (4.51 and 4.52, respectively), suggesting these factors are less impactful than others studied.

**Table 2**  
*Descriptive statistics*

Factors	Mean	Std. deviation
Posts of SMIs	2.62	0.711
Previous knowledge or awareness	3.55	0.784
Previous travel experience	4.22	0.921
Information from the mass media	4.26	0.972
Destination reputation	4.42	0.984
Information from the destination	4.51	0.727
Word of mouth	4.52	0.756

Note. Compiled by authors.

### 4.3. Influence of SMIs across different stages of the international travel decision-making process

The ANOVA results in Table 3 highlight that the influence of SMIs varies significantly across different stages of the international travel decision-making process. Influencers impact people's behaviours and decisions at various points in their journey.

In the Need Recognition stage, the influence of SMIs is present but relatively moderate. Responses to statements about influencer influence exhibit statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ), indicating that influencer content has an impact even at this early stage. This influence likely inspires individuals to explore more about international destinations and find the content attractive. Hence, H1a is accepted, confirming the significant impact of SMIs in the need recognition stage.

As individuals move to the Search for Information stage, the influence of SMIs becomes more pronounced. Statements such as 'I search for travel-related information on SMIs pages before travel booking' and 'SMIs are a trustable source for information on facilities and services at an international destination' show significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ). This suggests that influencer content guides information-seeking behaviours and shapes perceptions about facilities and services. Therefore, H1b is accepted, supporting the significant impact of SMIs on the search for information stage.

**Table 3**  
*The level of influence of SMI in different stages of decision-making*

Stage	Statement	F value	df	P value
Need recognition	I find SMIs' posts about international destinations attractive	5.923	3	0.001
	SMIs inspire me to search for information about an international destination	9.125	3	0.000
	I am likely to visit the international destinations reviewed by SMIs	8.231	3	0.001
	Posts by SMIs motivate me to travel to destinations overseas instead of domestic destinations	17.451	3	0.003
	I follow SMIs to get travel inspiration	4.229	3	0.003
Search for information	I search for travel-related information on SMIs pages before travel booking	5.714	3	0.001
	SMIs are a trustworthy source for information on facilities and services at an international destination	6.854	3	0.000
	Searching for information about international travel is easier via SMI pages	10.124	3	0.001
	SMIs' pages have up-to-date information regarding international destinations	8.551	3	0.000

**Table 3 (continued)**

<b>Evaluation of information and selection</b>	SMLs make my international travel decision-making less complex	4.620	3	0.001
	I am likely to consider SMLs' travel experiences when making my international travel decisions	12.046	3	0.000
	My attitude towards a particular international destination is likely to change after reading influencers' comments/reviews about it	15.458	3	0.002
<b>Post-travel behaviour</b>	I am likely to share comments/reviews/blog posts/related articles, etc., with peers or friends via social media after an international trip	18.653	3	0.000
	SMLs inspire me to voice out my feedback after an international travel	32.071	3	0.000
	I compare my international travel experience with the influencer's expertise after my travel	5.308	3	0.003
	I share my international travel experiences on influencer pages.	36.546	3	0.000
	I am motivated to revisit an international destination multiple times due to the influence of SMLs.	42.441	3	0.001

Note. Compiled by authors.

Entering the Evaluation of Information and Selection stage, the influence of SMLs further intensifies. Statements like 'I am likely to consider digital influencer's travel experiences when making my international travel decisions' and 'My attitude towards a certain international destination or related product or service is likely to change after reading influencers' comments/reviews about it' exhibit significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ). This indicates that influencer content plays a substantial role in influencing attitude changes and decision-making. Consequently, H1c is accepted, demonstrating the significant role of SMLs in the evaluation of information and selection stage.

In the Post-Travel Behaviour stage, the impact of SMLs remains strong. Statements such as 'I am likely to share comments/reviews/blog posts with peers or friends via social media after an international trip' and 'I share my international travel experiences on influencer pages' demonstrate significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ). This suggests that influencer content influences behaviour even after the travel experience, indicating its role in shaping post-travel actions and feedback sharing. Hence, H1d is accepted, confirming the strong influence of SMLs in the post-travel behaviour stage.

#### 4.4. Characteristics and influential factors of SMLs

The study continued to investigate the latent features of SMLs that positively or negatively affect travel decisions. Thirty items related to the qualities and characteristics of SMLs or influencers were identified. Respondents were asked to assess the importance of these items in influencing their decisions using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Highly important" to "Least important." Adequacy tests (KMO = 0.921, Bartlett's test of sphericity, Chi-square = 14265.651 with significance value  $< 0.01$ ) supported the EFA's conduct. All 30 elements extracted communalities greater than 0.4, suggesting that each item contributes significantly to the overall variability of the data. With an Eigenvalue larger than one, six factors were found. Table 4 presents the results of the EFA. Thus, these six variables are used in additional research.

**Table 4**  
*Factors of SMLs extracted with exploratory factor analysis*

Rotated component matrix		
Factors		Factor loading
<b>Credibility and trustworthiness</b>	I trust the information shared by	0.932
	Track record of providing accurate information.	0.864
	The information shared is reliable and trustworthy.	0.816
	Have the necessary credentials and qualifications to be an expert in their field.	0.725
	Is respected and well-regarded in their industry.	0.611

**Table 4 (continued)**

<b>Popularity and acceptance</b>	Has a large following on social media.	0.835
	Well-known and recognized by many people.	0.762
	Content is widely shared and talked about.	0.712
	Followers are engaged and active.	0.652
	Followers from a wide range of demographics	0.599
<b>Personality and appearance</b>	Approachable and easy to connect with	0.826
	Sense of style and dress well.	0.753
	Appearance is consistent with their brand or image.	0.705
	Likeable and engaging personality	0.612
	Appearance is memorable and stands out.	0.541
<b>Expertise and experience</b>	Deep understanding of their subject matter.	0.732
	A wealth of knowledge and experience in their field.	0.716
	Proven track record of success in their industry.	0.633
	An authority or thought leader in their field.	0.604
	Widely published or recognized for their work.	0.556
<b>Frequency of posts</b>	Posts regularly and consistently.	0.781
	Posts are timely and relevant.	0.732
	The content is up-to-date and fresh.	0.662
	Posts are varied and interesting.	0.581
	The frequency of posts keeps their followers engaged.	0.522
<b>Interaction with followers</b>	Responsive to their followers' comments and messages.	0.889
	Engages with their followers in meaningful ways.	0.845
	It takes time to answer questions and address concerns.	0.711
	Acknowledges their followers and shows appreciation for their support.	0.674
	Fosters a sense of community and connection with their followers.	0.573

Note. Compiled by authors.

Logistic regression is used to determine how these characteristics affect passengers' decision-making. The predictor variable is binary, meaning it is either influenced by the current SMI scenario ( $Y = 1$ ) or not ( $Y = 0$ ).

**Table 5**  
**Model summary**

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R square	Std. error of the estimate
1	.873a	.781	.695	.43678

Note. Compiled by authors.

The R-value denotes the correlation between the dependent and independent variables. A value exceeding 0.4 is deemed suitable for further analysis. In Table 5 model summary, the value stands at .873, indicating a strong correlation. R-square represents the proportion of variance in the dependent variable that the independent variables can explain. A value surpassing 0.5 suggests the model's effectiveness in establishing relationships. In this instance, the value is .781, indicating a significant explanatory power. Adjusted R-square reflects the generalizability of the results, accounting for sample variation from the population in multiple regression. The difference between R-square and Adjusted R-square needs to be minimal. Here, the value remains at .781, close to .695, thus indicating a satisfactory level of generalization.

**Table 6**  
**Model summary**

ANOVAa					
Model	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Regression	13.447	5	2.689	15.973	.000b
Residual	25.928	154	.168		
Total	39.375	159			

Note. Compiled by authors.

Table 6 indicates that the regression model predicts the dependent variable significantly well. Here,  $p < 0.000$ , which is less than 0.05, suggests that the regression model statistically significantly predicts the outcome variable (i.e., it is a good fit for the data).

The hypothesis model is  $Y = \log \left\{ \frac{p(y=1)}{1-p(y=1)} \right\} = \beta_0 + \beta_1$  Credibility and trustworthiness +  $\beta_2$  Popularity and acceptance +  $\beta_3$  Personality and Appearance +  $\beta_4$  Expertise and experience +  $\beta_5$  Frequency of posts +  $\beta_6$  Interaction with followers. The estimates of the regression coefficients are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7**  
*The estimates of the regression coefficients*

Factors identified for characteristics of SMIs	B	S.E.	Wald sig.	Odds ratio
Credibility and trustworthiness	3.124	0.195	0.000	12.056
Popularity and acceptance	0.098	0.177	0.001	0.564
Personality and appearance	0.567	0.154	0.006	0.945
Expertise and experience	1.256	0.138	0.000	2.269
Frequency of posts	-0.129	0.122	0.016	0.423
Interaction with followers	-0.017	0.116	0.003	0.152
Constant	-0.426	0.112	0.000	0.652

Note. Compiled by authors.

The model can be written as the odds:  $\log \left\{ \frac{p(y=1)}{1-p(y=1)} \right\} = -.426 + 3.124 * \text{Credibility and trustworthiness} + 0.098 * \text{Popularity and acceptance} + 0.567 * \text{Personality and Appearance} + 1.256 * \text{Expertise and experience} - 0.129 * \text{Frequency of posts} - 0.017 * \text{Interaction with followers}$ . The accuracy of the model's predictions is 89.4%. The Hosmer Lemshow test (Chi-square = 95.352 with significance value  $< 0.05$ ) also points to the model with all six factors as significant, and the Nagelkerk pseudo-R square value is 0.72.

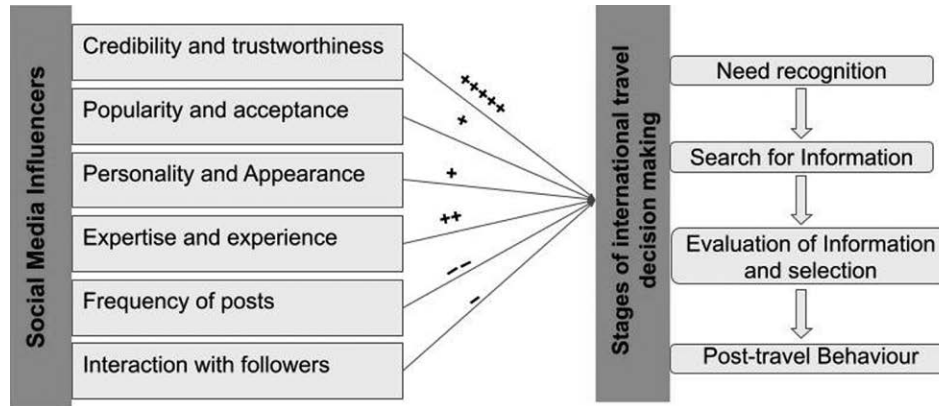
The six components' respective impacts can be compared by comparing the regression coefficients' estimations. We cannot evaluate the relationship between the explanatory variables in contrast to linear regression models. The odds are either smaller (-) or greater (+) concerning the reference level, depending on the sign of the computed logistic regression coefficients.

Interpreting the influence of each factor, figure I shows that an increase in the factors of 'credibility and trustworthiness' and 'expertise and experience' is associated with a significant increase in the possibility of people getting influenced in their international travel decision-making. A one-unit increase in 'credibility and trustworthiness' leads to a 12.056 increase in the log odds of the event occurring, while a one-unit increase in 'expertise and experience' results in a 2.269 times increase. Therefore, H2a and H2d are accepted, as these factors significantly influence international travel decision-making.

Regarding the factors of 'personality and appearance' and 'popularity and acceptance,' an increase in these factors is associated with a moderate to slight increase in the possibility of people getting influenced. The growth rate is 0.945 times for 'personality and appearance' and 0.564 times for 'popularity and acceptance.' Hence, H2c and H2b are accepted, though the impact is not as strong as other factors.

An increase in the remaining two factors, 'frequency of posts' and 'interaction with followers,' is associated with a decrease in the possibility of influence on individuals' international travel decision-making, with rates of 0.432 and 0.152 times, respectively. Therefore, H2e and H2f are rejected, as these factors negatively impact the possibility of influence.

**Figure 1**  
*Research conceptual framework*



[+/- indicates the direction and magnitude of influence]

Source: Authors.

## 5. Conclusion and implications

The study's findings shed light on the significant influence of SMIs on travellers' decision-making processes when choosing international destinations. This aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the SMIs' vital role in shaping travel choices and influencing perceptions of destinations (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Gretzel, 2018; Guerreiro et al., 2019; Abdul & Mansor, 2021; Saini et al., 2023; Xu & Pratt, 2018). Early in the need recognition stage, SMIs moderately impact travellers' decisions, initially inspiring interest and exploring new destinations (Asan, 2021; Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). The moderate influence of SMIs at this stage may result from the need for travellers to recognize a desire for travel based on various sources, including prior experiences and existing knowledge.

The influence of SMIs intensifies during the search for information stage, where travellers actively seek content about potential destinations. As Saini et al. (2023) and Razak and Mansor (2021) mention, SMIs shape travel trends and influence travellers' perceptions of specific destinations. The study finds that SMIs contribute substantially by providing travellers with destination-specific information, recommendations, and inspiration, confirming the importance of their role in this stage (Xu & Pratt, 2018).

As travellers progress to evaluating information and making selections, the influence of SMIs remains significant. This stage emphasizes the role of influencers in shaping attitudes and decisions and directing travellers towards specific choices (Priyanga & Ashokkumar, 2023). Factors such as credibility, trustworthiness, and expertise of SMIs are critical in impacting travellers' evaluations, in line with prior studies on the significance of these attributes in influencing consumer behaviour (Ao et al., 2023; Han & Balabanis, 2023; Sharipudin et al., 2023).

The study also finds that SMIs influence travellers during the post-travel behaviour stage. Influencers' content shapes travellers' perceptions and actions after the trip, such as sharing experiences and making recommendations (Zhu et al., 2023). This stage emphasizes the relationship between travellers and SMIs, where influencers can strengthen their engagement with travellers and impact future travel decisions (Saini et al., 2023).

The study identifies six key factors related to SMIs that influence travellers' decisions when choosing international destinations: credibility and trustworthiness, popularity and acceptance, personality and appearance, expertise and experience, frequency of posts, and interaction with followers.

Credibility and trustworthiness play a significant positive role in influencing travellers' decisions, aligning with previous studies that highlight these attributes' importance in establishing influencer effectiveness and shaping consumer responses (Ao et al., 2023; Han & Balabanis, 2023; Sharipudin et al., 2023). Trustworthiness builds traveller confidence, encouraging them to follow influencers' recommendations and shaping perceptions of destinations. SMIs' popularity and acceptance moderately influence traveller decisions, enhancing their ability to reach and engage a broader audience. (Backaler, 2018; Malik et al., 2022). However, popularity must be balanced with other attributes, such as credibility and expertise, to ensure effective influence.

The personality and appearance of SMIs have a moderate impact on travellers' decisions. Studies suggest that SMIs who resonate with followers' intrinsic motivations and needs, such as escapism and self-improvement, tend to foster stronger parasocial relationships (Backaler, 2018; Malik et al., 2022). Expertise and experience of SMIs have a significant positive impact on influencing travellers. This finding aligns with prior research emphasizing the value of influencer knowledge and expertise in shaping consumers' trust and decisions (Ao et al., 2023; Han & Balabanis, 2023; Sharipudin et al., 2023). Expertise is crucial in travel, where travellers seek reliable information and recommendations.

The study found that the high frequency of posts negatively affects influencing travellers, potentially decreasing influence (Foroughi et al., 2024). This contrasts with prior findings suggesting frequent posts can boost engagement and visibility but underscores the risk of oversaturation. Limited interaction with followers also diminishes influence, contrary to research highlighting the benefits of active engagement (Erwin et al., 2024). Quality interactions with followers are crucial for maintaining influence, emphasizing meaningful engagement over quantity.

#### **Practical implications:**

As SMIs increasingly influence travellers' decisions, DMOs and travel companies should strategically partner with influencers to enhance marketing efforts and improve traveller experiences. Tailoring content to different decision-making stages can maximize impact, emphasizing credibility and expertise to build trust. Quality over quantity in posts and interactions fosters meaningful engagement. Influencers should align with followers' motivations, providing reliable information for effective travel decisions. Data-driven strategies can optimize influencers' impact and enhance traveller experiences.

Businesses should prioritize credible influencers to boost traveller confidence. Expertise in the travel industry adds value, complementing influencer popularity for effective outreach. Monitoring posting frequency ensures optimal engagement, balancing quality interactions over quantity. Utilizing influencers across the travel decision process—from inspiration to post-travel engagement—optimizes marketing impact and enhances traveller experiences.

## **6. Limitations and future research**

The study's findings may be limited by sample size and diversity, as well as reliance on self-reported data from travellers, which can introduce bias. People may not always accurately report the influence of social media on their decisions due to social desirability bias or memory lapses.

The scope for studies in SMIs and customer decision-making is unlimited. Further studies could explore how cultural differences between influencers and users affect their impact. Analysing influencer posts in-depth could reveal which types (vlogs, itineraries, personal stories) are most influential during decision-making. Investigating how critical perspectives of influencers influence travellers' decisions presents another promising research avenue.

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