



Understanding Users' Perceptions of Travel Accounts on Instagram: Comparing DMO and Travel Influencer Accounts

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Abstract. Social Media has become an important marketing tool for destinations due to its easy access, ability to reach broad audiences and capacity to act as a form of eWOM. Instagram in particular is one of the most popular channels for the visual marketing of a destination as well as for influencer marketing. Through Instagram, DMOs can create travel inspiration, and enhance interest in a destination. This study seeks to understand the tourists' perceptions of Instagram influencers as well as official DMO accounts and looks on their influence on tourists' participation and engagement on social media. A quantitative survey was conducted to analyze users' perceptions of DMO and influencer accounts on Instagram, as well as their participation behavior online. The study found that DMOs are perceived as being more trustworthy and credible than travel influencers. In addition, results indicate that active Instagram users are more likely to have positive perceptions of travel influencers, but online participation does not influence perceptions of DMOs.

Keywords: Influencer Marketing · Social Media · Destination Marketing · Instagram · Social Media Marketing

1 Introduction

In the early 2000s, the introduction of Web 2.0 and social media allowed Internet users to engage with one another more easily. The popularity of social media grew significantly over the next several years, also transforming the way tourism organizations operate, communicate with, and market to consumers. Tourism, as an 'information-intensive industry' [1] that relies on positive word-of-mouth (WOM), particularly experienced the tremendous impact of social media. Social media changed the way tourists search for, obtain, share, and produce information about tourism businesses, destinations and their experiences [2]. To adapt to these changes, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) adopted social media into their marketing practices [3]. Today, the majority of DMOs are active on at least one social media platform for marketing and management purposes [4].

Studies reviewing the literature on social media and tourism have found that the research focus lies mostly on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (recently renamed as “X”), and review platforms such as TripAdvisor [5–7]. While Facebook continues to be the most popular platform with 2.9 billion monthly active users [8], Instagram quickly surpassed Twitter in the number of active users in 2014 and continues to be in the fourth most popular platform world-wide, whereas Twitter is no longer in the top ten most used platforms [8].

Despite Instagram's growth and popularity, tourism scholars are only recently focusing on its importance [4]. The emphasis has been heavily on destination image [9–11], likely due to the platform's visual focus. Tourists use Instagram to share photos or videos of their travel experiences with others and DMOs have similarly adopted Instagram accounts and use the visual emphasis of the platform to promote the destination through photos and videos. Hence through Instagram, DMOs can engage prospective travelers when they are likely looking for ideas, catch them while they are looking for inspiration, and thus increase their interest in the destination, as well as influence their visit intentions [12].

Due to its capabilities for sharing photos as well as shorter videos (stories) and longer videos (reels) in different formats, Instagram has become one of the most popular platforms for influencer marketing [13, 14]. Influencer marketing involves the marketing and promotion of products or services on social media through content and messages spread by influential users [15]. Unlike endorsements from well-known celebrities, such as artists, bands, singers or athletes, influencer marketing focuses on recommendations from ‘ordinary people’ who became popular through their visibility and the content they share on social media [14, 16]. Also known as ‘micro-celebrities’ or ‘digital influencers’ due to their connections and influence on their followers, these individuals are perceived as more trustworthy than ‘real’ celebrities and hence can be seen as a relevant instrument for electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) [13]. Influencers on Instagram in particular vary from thousands to millions of followers [14] and have become increasingly popular for tourism marketing.

The impact of Instagram influencers on a destination as well as their influence on tourists' travel intention and destination image, has been a recent focus of tourism research [17–19]. However, there is little discussion surrounding the perceptions of travel influencers and the comparative impacts between influencer and DMO accounts.

The purpose of this research is to explore the perception of travel influencers in comparison to official Instagram accounts of DMOs. By understanding users' perceptions, DMOs can better cater their content to followers', as well as collaborate with influencers to address areas where users are not interested in following DMO accounts. In addition, this study seeks to examine how users current Instagram usage behavior influencer their perceptions of these accounts.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Social Media Marketing

Through the integration of social media channels on mobile devices and the possibility for users to receive and also to produce content, social media channels, such as Instagram, have become a powerful tool in tourism marketing – especially as a representation for real travel experiences [9]. Social media can be defined as platforms that enable user-generated-content (UGC) facilitating the communication between users, without the influence of marketers [20].

As the tourism and hospitality industry deals with intangible services that are associated with a high risk of purchase, WOM is an influential factor of travel decision-making [21, 22]. WOM in general appears to be more influential on customers than traditional advertising campaigns [21]. On social media, eWOM has emerged as a tool for direct communication. Managing and encouraging positive eWOM can generate more revenue, reinforce a positive destination image and enhance business activity [22].

Early on, the tourism industry integrated UGC in their marketing strategy such as travel blogs [23, 24] or the use of testimonials or reviews of customers [20]. Many studies have verified the impact of online reviews on consumer behavior of tourists [25]. [26] indicated that online reviews about hotels could enhance the awareness, attitudes of travelers or even increase the number of bookings [27].

In 2010, [20] predicted social media to change how tourism businesses and suppliers market to and communicate with their customers. More than ten years later, tourism marketing has in fact been shaped by the power of UGC and users who gain their popularity solely from the creation of content on various social media channels – influencers. Brands must compete with these influencers for the attention of potential consumers or tourists. Hereby, companies or DMOs often hire or collaborate with influencers to appear in their popular social media channels and promote their products or destinations [28]. Instagram can be seen as the main platform for influencer marketing [29].

2.2 Instagram Marketing in Tourism

The popular visual social media channels such as Instagram, YouTube or TikTok have been successfully used in tourism marketing. As tourism marketing focuses mostly on visual content [30], social media channels play an important role as sources of inspiration for travel decisions and information search [20]. Also from the demand side, images and videos are essential for tourists to remember and share their travel experiences [31, 32].

Research shows that photos cannot only change the perception of consumers towards a certain product or service [33] but also can be memorized easier than just text – especially when it comes to tourism destinations [34]. Therefore, the social media platform Instagram, which is mainly focusing on pictures and ‘stories’, can be seen as an important tool for visual destination marketing. A photo of a destination posted on Instagram can influence the image of a destination through a first visual impression [35]. Moreover, the type of picture and the uniqueness of the posted photo can create emotions towards the destination [35].

In tourism, Instagram is particularly popular by millennials to post selfies and pictures of their holiday destination, hotel or restaurant. Thereby, the 'Insta-worthiness' or 'Instagrammability' – describing the aesthetic and unique features, which make a place 'worth a picture' for Instagram – has become a central factor to choose a certain destination, hotel or restaurant.

2.3 Influencer Marketing in Tourism

Influencers can be defined as individuals who gained popularity online through their content and self-branding [16] and are often perceived as “expert friends giving opinions on the latest products [or services] on the market” [29]. Through their large network of followers [36] influencers use their influential power to promote their lifestyle, opinion as well as products or services [14]. Although most influencers are paid by brands and marketers to communicate their recent or past experiences with products and services, their content is still perceived as eWOM. This can explain the success of influencer campaigns and the impact on consumer behavior and even purchase intention [13].

Tourists reporting their experiences about new destinations and travel routes has been included in tourism theories since the 1970s and 80s [37–39]. Similarly, travel bloggers have been used for marketing purposes since the early 2000s [40, 41]. Travel influencers can be seen as the new opinion leaders in the world of social media and their success can be explained by their followers' perceived authenticity, their intense engagement with their followers as well as the perceived relevance of their content [28].

Along with destinations, also hotels and other tourism suppliers are already working together with influencers. In that way, hotels and destinations can work together to reach their goals of growing business and enhancing the image of a destination.

Despite those successful examples, DMOs need to cautiously weigh the positive and negative outcomes prior to working with influencers to market their destination. As influencer marketing on Instagram is still a growing phenomenon, little research has been done to explore the perceptions of followers of certain Instagram accounts and how this relates to those of DMO accounts.

2.4 Perceptions of Online Sources

With influencer marketing gaining prominence in tourism, understanding how tourists evaluate the credibility of influencers is increasingly important. As the easy access to social media facilitates ubiquitous information, the level of quality of content and information as well as the credibility and trustworthiness of information sources varies across platforms [41].

Several studies have explored the perceived credibility of different online sources such as websites [42], advertisement [43], online reviews [44], travel blogs [41] or travel related UGC [45] and found that users trust and believe official sources as well as traditional WOM more than eWOM. One of the factors for these low levels of credibility and trustworthiness of online content, reviews and other UGC is the anonymity of the contributor of the content. Even when the source of the comment or the photo is visible, the user may have no personal relationship or connection with the content creator [46]. In this case, influencer marketing can overcome this issue as influencers not only promote

products or services but also show their personality, lifestyle and opinions. Therefore, the followers can establish a connection with the content creator. Due to the higher authenticity of influencer campaigns when compared with traditional advertising, the level of credibility can increase [47].

Other literature shows that trustworthiness is an additional factor that is important for the influencer-follower relationship [48]. Thereby, influencers seem to be more trustworthy and credible than celebrities based on a study among young females [49]. The perception of social media channels as credible or trustworthy can be seen as crucial antecedents for the engagement of users in any kind of following or participation behavior with brands on social media [50]. Therefore, it is suggested that the perception of Instagram accounts influences the reasons and motivations to follow certain accounts.

This study focuses on the perception of Instagram users towards travel-related accounts managed by Instagram influencers and official DMOs. Furthermore, this study looks at the differences in users' perception of those accounts and how their Instagram usage behavior (participation) influences these perceptions. To achieve the purpose of this study, this research answers the following research questions:

1. How do Instagram users perceive DMOs on Instagram compared to travel influencers?
2. How does Instagram usage behavior (participation) influence the perceptions of travel-related accounts on Instagram?

3 Method

For this study and in order to answer the respective research questions, a quantitative research design using an online survey was conducted. The study was pilot tested using a convenience sample ($N = 63$) and the questions were adapted to the feedback. The final survey was distributed using the platform Amazon Mechanical Turk. The survey questions were all adopted from pre-validated studies for validity and reliability purposes. At the beginning of the survey, participants were asked if they use Instagram on a regular basis (minimum once a week) in order to screen out non-users. In addition, participants were asked if they follow any travel-related accounts on Instagram.

Depending on their answer, participants were asked to rate only those accounts that they follow: DMO ($n = 139, 68.8\%$) and/or influencers ($n = 186, 92.1\%$). Therefore, the sample size of results varies throughout the study. Only 9 respondents (4.5%) follow only DMO accounts, whereas 56 respondents (27.7%) follow only influencers. The majority of respondents ($n = 130, 64.4\%$) follow both influencers and DMO accounts.

3.1 Measures

As the purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions of travel-related accounts on Instagram, the main measurement items include: demographics, perceptions and Instagram behavior and participation.

Perceptions. The perception of influencers or DMOs through their accounts on Instagram were derived from prior literature about celebrity endorsement and consists of the four constructs 'expertise', 'trustworthiness', 'attractiveness' and 'self-congruity' [51–53]. Based on the results from the pre-test, due to DMOs being an organization and not

an individual, attractiveness and self-congruity were not examined when looking at the perceptions of the DMO.

The variables were assessed using 14 items and adapted to the Instagram context of the study. Expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness are assessed on a 7-point semantic differential scale (e.g. non-expert/expert, dishonest/honest, plain/elegant). A 7-point Likert scale was used to measure self-congruity of the user with the Instagram influencer or the DMO. Cronbach's Alpha indicated the reliability of the constructs as following: expertise ($\alpha = .93$), trustworthiness ($\alpha = .87$), attractiveness ($\alpha = .86$) and self-congruity ($\alpha = .87$).

Participation. Few studies have been published or have been conducted about participation in online environments. In order to explore the behavior of users on Instagram, the participation scale from [54] about participation behavior in online communities was used for this study and adjusted to the context of Instagram. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) with four items as follows: I participate actively on Instagram, I use to contribute to the conversation on Instagram, I usually provide useful information to other Instagram users and I post messages and responses on Instagram with great excitement and frequency. Again, Cronbach's Alpha was used to indicate the reliability of the construct participation on Instagram ($\alpha = .90$).

To enhance the clarity of the data analysis, three groups (low/medium/high Instagram participation) were created. Respondents with mean participation scores of 1.00 to 2.99 were categorized as 'low participation', those with mean participation scores of 3.00 to 4.99 were categorized as 'medium participation', and those with mean participation scores of about 5.00 were categorized as 'high participation'.

4 Results

4.1 Sample Description

The sample of this study consisted of $N = 202$ final participants. The average study participant was at the age of 32 ($M = 32.33$, $SD = 8.70$), with most participants were younger than 30 (46.0%). Although the sample was specified on MTurk to those who are US residents, 25.9 per cent indicated they currently do not live in the US. Nearly half (48.5%) of participants have an undergraduate degree (48.5%), and 19.3 per cent have at least some college education. Most participants have an income of below \$60,000 (55.4%). While only 18.9% of participants have their own passport, 17.8% of participants stated that they have never traveled outside of the US.

4.2 RQ1: How Do Instagram Users Perceive DMOs on Instagram Compared to Travel Influencers?

The respondents' perceptions of influencers were generally high, with expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness each above a mean of 5 out of 7 on the Likert-scale ratings, indicating that influencers were perceived as experts, being trustworthy, and attractive.

However, self-congruity with influencers was not as high ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.30$). The respondents' perceptions of DMO accounts were even greater than the influencers, with mean expertise and trustworthiness greater than 6.05.

A t-test was conducted to test whether the differences in perceptions between influencers and DMOs were statistically significant. Perceived expertise was significantly greater for DMOs ($M = 6.05$, $SD = 1.12$) than influencer accounts ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.20$): $t(323) = -3.830$, $p < 0.000$. Similarly, perceived trustworthiness was significantly greater for DMOs ($M = 6.06$, $SD = 1.17$) than influencer accounts ($M = 5.71$, $SD = 1.17$): $t(323) = -2.703$, $p = 0.007$.

4.3 RQ2: How Does Participation Influence the Perceptions of Travel-Related Accounts on Instagram?

ANOVA was used to examine whether the level of participation respondents have on Instagram influenced their perceptions of influencers and DMOs (Table 1). There was a statistically significant difference between groups of different participation levels (low/medium/high) for all perception variables for influencers. Homogeneity assumption was violated for influencer expertise, therefore Welch was used to evaluating significance ($F(2,57.59) = 7.19$, $p = 0.002$). The Tamhane post-hoc test revealed that those with high participation on Instagram perceived influencers as having significantly greater expertise than those with low ($p = 0.031$) or medium ($p = 0.009$) participation.

Table 1. Instagram Participation and Perceptions of Accounts

		Influencer			DMO		
		Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
Expertise	MEAN	4.99	5.29	5.86	6.02	5.79	6.20
	SD	1.51	1.27	0.95	1.02	1.31	0.99
Trust	MEAN	5.46	5.40	5.97	3.48	4.38	5.19
	SD	1.33	1.08	1.13	1.20	1.13	1.16
Attractiveness	MEAN	5.59	5.41	5.89			
	SD	1.14	1.02	1.02			
Self-Congruity	MEAN	3.48	4.38	5.19			
	SD	1.20	1.13	1.16			

Tukey post-hoc tests were used to evaluate the results for trustworthiness ($F(2,183) = 5.49$, $p = 0.005$), attractiveness ($F(2,183) = 4.63$, $p = 0.015$), and self-congruity ($F(2,183) = 25.08$, $p = 0.000$), and found that those with high participation perceived influencers as being significantly more trustworthy ($p = 0.006$), attractive ($p = 0.012$), and self-congruent ($p = 0.000$) than those with medium participation. Self-congruity perceptions were also significantly different between those with low and high participation ($p = 0.000$) and low and medium participation ($p = 0.004$), whereby the greater

the participation on Instagram the more the respondents feel that influencers are similar to them. Unlike influencer perceptions, participation on Instagram did not significantly affect the perceptions of DMO accounts.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Despite the influx of influencer marketing and the research stating that influencers provide a greater ROI due to eWOM [13], the perceptions of DMO accounts on Instagram were significantly greater than perceptions of influencers in regard to expertise and trustworthiness. This indicates that respondents are aware that DMOs are experts on the destination, more so than a travel influencer. However, other factors could be more critical for influencers, such as their relatability.

As discussed previously, although DMOs are considered to be experts and more trustworthy, influencers may be more impactful because they are deemed more relatable. In the literature on celebrity endorsement, consumers were found to prefer brands with personalities congruent to their own [55]. Instagram influencers create their own self-brand through what they share on Instagram [56], and therefore Instagram users follow influencers who portray a lifestyle most similar to their own.

Finally, this study found that the level of participation predicts perceptions of influencers. This finding is somewhat intuitive as active Instagram users are likely to have greater perceptions of influencers they follow and engage more actively with. However, participation does not affect the perceptions of DMOs, perhaps as they are already perceived to be experts on their destination.

The theoretical implications of this study go beyond filling the gap in the literature on users' perceptions of travel-related accounts and provide a stepping stone to theory development on the unique phenomenon of influencer marketing in tourism. Understanding the differential perceptions of influencers and how these perceptions are stronger for active Instagram users, can inform researchers as to how consumer behavior influences opinions of online sources.

This study also increases knowledge of the industry, particularly for destination managers looking to understand influencer marketing. Influencer marketing can be an effective strategy for driving potential visitors to the DMOs Instagram pages, increasing awareness of the DMO. However, once the DMO has established an Instagram audience, influencer marketing may not prove as effective as influencers are not perceived as being as trustworthy and knowledgeable about the destination as the official DMO account.

A limitation of this study includes the use of Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Despite pretests, attention checks and open-ended questions to improve the quality of the data, it cannot be ensured that all participants filled out the questionnaire with due diligence. However, the data was filtered for double answers or IP addresses and invalid answers. Furthermore, research on Instagram and influencers is still emerging, especially as it relates to tourism, which presented itself as both a limitation and an opportunity. While this study provided insights into users' perception of travel influencers on Instagram, future research should consider whether these perceptions influence users' visit intentions, and if these findings are similar for different influencer platforms, such as TikTok.

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