
THE ROLE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING IN ENHANCING BRAND AWARENESS OF HOTELS AND TOURISM DESTINATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of influencer marketing in enhancing brand awareness of hotels and tourism destinations. Using a quantitative descriptive approach, data were collected from 166 respondents who had been exposed to influencer-generated content related to hospitality and tourism. The study assessed influencer marketing through five indicators, including exposure to hotels or destinations through influencers, communication style, information credibility, visual attractiveness, and trust in recommendations. Brand awareness was measured through brand recognition, differentiation, recall, familiarity, and consideration during vacation planning. The results show that influencer marketing was perceived positively, with visual attractiveness recording the highest mean score of 4.2, followed by awareness of hotels or destinations through influencers at 4.0. In terms of brand awareness, the highest score was found for considering the brand when planning a vacation at 4.1, followed by brand familiarity at 4.0. However, trust in influencer information and brand differentiation recorded the lowest scores, both at 3.5, indicating areas that require further improvement. Overall, the findings suggest that influencer marketing can support brand exposure, recognition, familiarity, recall, and travel consideration in the hospitality and tourism context. Nevertheless, because the study relies on descriptive analysis, the results reflect consumer perceptions rather than statistically proven causal relationships. The study provides practical implications for hotel and destination marketers in selecting credible influencers and developing attractive, authentic, and differentiated content.

Keywords: influencer marketing; brand awareness; hotels; tourism destinations; social media; consumer perception; digital marketing

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of social media has transformed the way hospitality and tourism organizations communicate with prospective consumers. Hotels and destination management organizations increasingly use Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and other digital platforms to communicate destination experiences, accommodation attributes, attractions, and travel-related information. Within this changing communication landscape, social media influencers have emerged as important intermediaries between tourism brands and consumers because they combine personal narratives, visual storytelling, recommendations, and interactive communication with established online audiences. Recent hospitality and tourism research confirms that influencers have become increasingly important for consumer engagement and tourism-related decision-making (Bastrygina et al., 2024).

Influencer marketing can be understood as a form of digital marketing in which organizations collaborate with individuals who possess the capacity to shape audience attitudes and behavior through their social media presence. Unlike conventional advertising, influencer communication frequently combines commercial messages with personal experiences, entertainment, recommendations, and lifestyle content. This combination may make promotional messages appear more accessible and relatable to consumers. Lou and Yuan (2019) found that the informative value and credibility of influencer-generated branded content are important in developing consumer trust, highlighting the importance of both the message and the communicator in influencer marketing effectiveness.

The role of influencers is particularly relevant to hospitality and tourism because tourism products are largely experiential and intangible. Travelers cannot fully evaluate a hotel stay or destination experience before consumption and therefore depend heavily on information, images, videos, recommendations, and experiences shared by others. Social media influencers can reduce this information gap by presenting hotels and destinations through visual and experiential narratives. Li et al. (2023) demonstrated that information quality and source credibility play important roles in shaping consumers' pre-visit perceptions of accommodation brands, with information quality having a particularly important role in pre-visit image formation.

Tourism organizations have consequently incorporated influencers into destination-promotion strategies. Hernández-Méndez and Baute-Díaz (2024) show that influencer marketing has become part of contemporary destination promotion and that different categories of influencers can contribute differently to tourism communication. At the hotel level, Chan et al. (2021) found that consumers value influencers who are experienced travelers, visually competent, knowledgeable about hotel characteristics, and capable of providing useful and unbiased recommendations. These findings demonstrate that choosing an influencer involves more than follower numbers; credibility, communication capability, content attractiveness, and relevance to the promoted experience are also important.

One important marketing outcome of influencer communication is brand awareness. Keller (1993) conceptualizes brand awareness as a key component of customer-based brand equity and distinguishes consumers' ability to recognize and recall a brand as an important foundation of brand knowledge. Strong brand awareness makes a brand more accessible in consumers' memories and increases the likelihood that it will enter the consumer's consideration set during decision-making. For hotels and tourism destinations, brand awareness is particularly important because travelers often select from numerous competing destinations and accommodation providers.

From this perspective, influencers may contribute to brand awareness through repeated brand exposure, attractive visual presentation, memorable narratives, and personal recommendations. When prospective tourists encounter a hotel's name, logo, facilities, destination characteristics, or unique experiences repeatedly through influencer content, they may become more familiar with the brand and more likely to recall it when planning future travel. Influencers may therefore contribute not only to immediate promotional exposure but also to the development of brand familiarity and travel consideration.

Nevertheless, existing tourism influencer research has frequently concentrated on travel intention, booking intention, destination image, influencer credibility, authenticity, and consumer engagement. For example, research on destination promotion emphasizes influencer type and promotional effectiveness, whereas studies of accommodation branding emphasize information quality and source credibility (Hernández-Méndez & Baute-Díaz, 2024; Li et al., 2023). Recent qualitative hospitality research has similarly concentrated on the antecedents and outcomes of consumer engagement with influencers (Bastrygina et al., 2024).

Although these studies are valuable, more focused examination is needed to understand how consumers perceive the role of influencer marketing specifically in building different dimensions of hotel and destination brand awareness.

The present study addresses this issue by examining consumer perceptions of influencer marketing and brand awareness in the hotel and tourism destination context. Influencer marketing is evaluated through consumers' exposure to hotel and destination information, perceptions of influencer communication style, information credibility, visual attractiveness, and trust in recommendations. Brand awareness is examined through brand recognition, differentiation, recall, familiarity, and consideration during vacation planning. By examining these dimensions, the study provides a practical understanding of the aspects of influencer marketing that receive the strongest consumer evaluations and the dimensions of brand awareness that appear most prominent.

The study therefore contributes to hospitality and tourism marketing literature by connecting influencer-related communication attributes with specific dimensions of brand awareness, rather than focusing exclusively on final behavioral intentions. Practically, the findings can help hotel managers and destination marketers identify which characteristics of influencer campaigns should be strengthened to improve brand visibility, familiarity, differentiation, and consideration among prospective travelers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencer Marketing in Hospitality and Tourism

Social media influencers are individuals who develop audiences through content creation and are able to shape consumer perceptions through their online communication. Influencer marketing has become particularly relevant in hospitality and tourism because consumers frequently seek inspiration and information online before choosing destinations, hotels, restaurants, and tourism activities. Influencers can provide experiential information through photographs, videos, reviews, narratives, and recommendations that make intangible tourism experiences easier for potential travelers to visualize.

Bastrygina et al. (2024) explain that social media influencers have become important actors in hospitality and tourism because they facilitate consumer engagement and connect brands with audiences through interactive and personally relevant content. Their qualitative findings indicate that consumers' motivations to follow influencers and the outcomes of these relationships depend on multiple combinations of influencer and content characteristics.

Within destination marketing, Hernández-Méndez and Baute-Díaz (2024) show that destination organizations increasingly incorporate mega-, macro-, and micro-influencers into promotional activities. This indicates that influencer marketing has become part of strategic tourism communication rather than merely an informal social-media phenomenon.

Hotels are also increasingly using influencers to communicate hotel experiences. Chan et al. (2021) found that hotel consumers prefer influencers who possess travel experience, attractive visual-presentation capabilities, useful knowledge, and the ability to make relatively unbiased recommendations. These findings reinforce the view that influencer effectiveness depends on perceived relevance and credibility as well as audience reach.

Accordingly, the present study operationalizes influencer marketing through five consumer-oriented indicators: awareness of hotels or destinations through influencers, attractiveness of the influencer's communication style, trustworthiness of information, visual attractiveness of promotional content, and trust in influencer recommendations.

Influencer Credibility and Content Attractiveness

Credibility is one of the most important factors explaining the persuasive capacity of

endorsers and influencers. Ohanian (1990) identified expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness as fundamental dimensions of endorser credibility. Although originally developed in the celebrity-endorsement context, these dimensions remain highly relevant in contemporary influencer marketing because social media audiences also evaluate whether influencers appear knowledgeable, honest, trustworthy, and appealing.

Lou and Yuan (2019) further demonstrated that message value and influencer credibility contribute to consumers' trust in branded influencer content. Their findings highlight that successful influencer marketing requires both credible communicators and useful or attractive messages. Thus, an influencer with a large following may not necessarily generate strong responses when followers consider the information unreliable or overly commercial.

This issue becomes particularly important in tourism. Potential travelers face uncertainty because the quality of a future travel experience cannot be fully assessed before arrival. Li et al. (2023) found that both information quality and source credibility contribute to the formation of consumers' pre-visit perceptions, although information quality had a particularly important role. This implies that tourism marketers should consider not only who communicates the promotional message but also the relevance, clarity, completeness, and attractiveness of the information presented.

Visual attractiveness is similarly significant because hospitality and tourism are highly visual consumption contexts. Photographs and videos can allow audiences to imagine rooms, landscapes, facilities, food, attractions, and activities before visiting. Therefore, visual presentation can strengthen attention and memory, potentially increasing consumers' familiarity with the promoted hotel or destination.

Brand Awareness

Brand awareness refers to the strength of a brand's presence in consumer memory. Keller (1993) positions brand awareness as one of the two fundamental components of brand knowledge, together with brand image. It includes the consumer's ability to recognize a brand when exposed to relevant cues and recall the brand when considering a particular product or service category.

In hospitality and tourism, brand awareness is important because consumers frequently encounter multiple competing hotel brands and destinations. A hotel or destination that can be recognized and readily recalled may have a stronger opportunity to enter the traveler's consideration set. However, brand awareness is broader than simple name recognition. Familiarity, differentiation from competitors, recall, and consideration during travel planning also provide useful indications of the extent to which a brand occupies a meaningful position in consumers' minds.

Customer-Based Brand Equity theory provides an appropriate conceptual foundation for the present study. Keller (1993) argues that favorable customer-based brand equity occurs when consumers possess strong brand knowledge and respond differently to marketing activities because of that knowledge. Thus, repeated and meaningful exposure to hotel and destination brands through influencers can potentially strengthen consumer familiarity and memory structures.

The present study therefore evaluates brand awareness through five indicators: recognition of brand names, logos, or distinctive characteristics; differentiation from competitors; brand recall; familiarity with the brand; and consideration of the brand when planning a vacation.

Influencer Marketing and Brand Awareness

Influencer marketing may contribute to brand awareness because influencers

repeatedly expose followers to brand names, visual identities, experiences, and recommendations.

Unlike a single conventional advertisement, influencer content can contextualize the brand within stories and experiences, potentially making brand-related information more memorable.

Lou and Yuan (2019) provide evidence that influencer content and credibility contribute to consumer responses, including brand awareness and purchase-related outcomes. This indicates that brand awareness can develop through a combination of message value and trust in the communicator.

In tourism, the relationship is reinforced by the experiential nature of travel information. Influencers can introduce followers to previously unfamiliar destinations and accommodation providers while simultaneously presenting distinctive visual and experiential attributes. Hernández-Méndez and Baute-Díaz (2024) demonstrate the growing role of influencers in destination promotion, while Chan et al. (2021) show that hotel consumers value influencer characteristics related to experience, visual presentation, usefulness, and impartiality.

However, awareness should be distinguished from final purchase or travel behavior. A consumer who recognizes or recalls a hotel may not necessarily make a reservation. Similarly, considering a destination during vacation planning does not indicate that a visit has occurred. In this study, influencer marketing is therefore examined primarily in relation to perceived brand awareness, familiarity, and consideration, rather than as evidence of actual purchasing behavior.

The literature consequently supports a simple conceptual understanding in which influencer marketing provides consumers with credible, attractive, and memorable brand information, while brand awareness represents the extent to which hotels and destinations become recognizable, familiar, recallable, differentiated, and considered by consumer.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design to examine consumer perceptions of influencer marketing and brand awareness in the context of hotels and tourism destinations. A quantitative approach was considered appropriate because the research sought to measure respondents' evaluations of predefined indicators and summarize their perceptions numerically. The study was descriptive rather than causal because the analysis focused primarily on mean scores for influencer marketing and brand awareness rather than testing causal relationships between the constructs. Accordingly, the findings are interpreted as patterns of consumer perception and should not be considered evidence that influencer marketing statistically causes changes in brand awareness.

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of social media users who had been exposed to influencer-generated content related to hotels or tourism destinations. Respondents were required to have experience viewing tourism-related influencer content so that they could provide meaningful evaluations of influencer communication and brand awareness. A purposive sampling technique can be used because participants are selected according to their relevance to the research objective. The final study involved 166 respondents.

Research Instrument and Measurement

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of two principal constructs: Influencer Marketing (IM) and Brand Awareness (BA). The influencer marketing construct consisted of five indicators. IM1 measured whether respondents became aware of hotels or destinations through influencers; IM2 assessed the attractiveness of influencer communication style; IM3 measured perceived trustworthiness of influencer information; IM4 assessed the visual attractiveness of promotional content; and IM5 measured trust in influencer recommendations. These indicators reflect the importance of credibility, communication quality, and content attractiveness identified in previous influencer-marketing research (Chan et al., 2021; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Ohanian, 1990).

Brand awareness was also measured using five indicators. BA1 assessed respondents' ability to recognize the brand name, logo, or distinctive characteristics; BA2 measured the ability to distinguish the brand from competitors; BA3 assessed brand recall; BA4 measured familiarity with the brand; and BA5 measured whether respondents considered the hotel or destination when planning a vacation. The conceptualization of brand awareness was informed by Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity framework, particularly the importance of brand recognition, recall, familiarity, and brand accessibility in consumer memory. Questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale, you may state: All indicators were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed to eligible respondents who had previously encountered hotel- or destination-related influencer content on social media. Before completing the questionnaire, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and that participation was voluntary. Responses were collected anonymously, and the information obtained was used exclusively for academic purposes. Completed questionnaires were checked for completeness before being included in the analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, particularly mean scores, to identify respondents' perceptions of influencer marketing and brand awareness. Each indicator was analyzed individually to determine which aspects received the highest and lowest consumer evaluations. For Influencer Marketing, the analysis compared IM1 to IM5, while Brand Awareness was assessed by comparing BA1 to BA5. The mean scores provided an overview of the relative strength of consumers' perceptions toward each indicator.

Based on the results, IM4, concerning the visual attractiveness of promotional content, obtained the highest score of 4.2, followed by IM1 at 4.0 and IM5 at 3.9. For Brand Awareness, BA5 recorded the highest score of 4.1, followed by BA4 at 4.0. These descriptive statistics were interpreted in relation to previous literature on influencer credibility, digital content, and customer-based brand equity. Because the current analysis is descriptive, the study does not claim statistical causality between influencer marketing and brand awareness. If the research intends to conclude that influencer marketing has a statistically significant effect on brand awareness, an additional inferential analysis such as correlation, regression, or structural equation modeling would be required.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 166 respondents and examined consumer perceptions of influencer marketing and brand awareness in the context of hotels and tourism destinations. Overall, the findings indicate that respondents perceived influencer marketing positively. A total of 81% of respondents gave a score of 4 or 5 to the statement that they became aware of hotels or tourism destinations through influencer content. This finding suggests that influencers represent an important source of hotel and destination exposure among consumers. However, because the study did not directly compare influencer marketing with other promotional channels, the result should not be interpreted as evidence that influencer marketing is more effective than all other forms of promotion.

Influencer Marketing

Based on analysis the overall average score for influencer marketing was 3.86, indicating a generally favorable consumer perception. Among the five indicators, IM4, "Attractive visual promotional content," obtained the highest mean score of 4.2. This result indicates that visual attractiveness is the strongest element of influencer marketing in the hospitality and tourism context. Photographs, videos, hotel facilities, destination scenery, culinary experiences, and travel activities allow potential tourists to visualize an experience before actually consuming it.

This finding is consistent with Li et al. (2023), who found that information quality on social media plays an important role in shaping consumers' pre-visit perceptions of accommodation brands. Because tourism products are highly experiential and intangible, consumers cannot fully evaluate the service before traveling. Therefore, attractive and informative visual content can reduce uncertainty while increasing attention toward a hotel or destination.

The second-highest score was recorded for IM1, "Becoming aware of hotels or destinations through influencers," with a mean of 4.0. This suggests that influencers play an important role in the early stage of brand awareness formation. Influencers can introduce audiences to hotel names, destinations, attractions, facilities, and distinctive experiences that may previously have been unfamiliar. This finding supports Lou and Yuan (2019), who reported that message value and influencer credibility contribute to trust in branded content and are related to brand awareness and purchase-related responses.

IM5, "Trust in influencer recommendations," recorded a mean score of 3.9, showing that respondents were generally receptive to influencer recommendations. In tourism decision-making, recommendations are important because consumers often face uncertainty when selecting hotels and destinations. Hernández-Méndez and Baute-Díaz (2024) similarly show that influencers have become an important component of destination-promotion strategies and can shape consumer responses toward tourism brands.

In contrast, IM3, "Information from influencers can be trusted," received the lowest mean score of 3.5. This finding is important because it suggests that although respondents may consider influencer recommendations, they remain relatively cautious about the reliability of the information provided. Lou and Yuan (2019) emphasize that trustworthiness is a key component of influencer credibility. Therefore, hotels and destination organizations should not select influencers solely based on follower numbers but should also consider credibility, authenticity, expertise, transparency, and the match between the influencer and the promoted brand.

This interpretation is also consistent with De Veirman et al. (2017), who found that a large number of followers may increase perceived popularity but does not always lead to stronger brand responses. In certain circumstances, influencer characteristics may even affect perceptions of brand uniqueness. Thus, audience size alone is not sufficient to determine

influencer effectiveness; the compatibility among the influencer, the brand, the content, and the target audience is also essential.

Brand Awareness

Based on analysis the overall average score for brand awareness was 3.82, indicating a relatively high level of awareness among respondents. The highest score was obtained for BA5, "Considering the brand when planning a vacation," with a mean of 4.1. This result suggests that hotels and destinations promoted through influencers are sufficiently memorable to enter consumers' consideration sets during vacation planning.

However, BA5 should not be interpreted as evidence that influencer content directly causes actual travel decisions. Rather, the result is more appropriately understood as brand consideration, meaning that the hotel or destination is more likely to be included among the options considered by consumers. According to Keller (1993), brand awareness is a fundamental component of customer-based brand equity because the ability to recognize and recall a brand increases the likelihood that the brand will be considered during decision-making.

The second-highest score was recorded for BA4, "Feeling more familiar with the brand," with a mean of 4.0. This suggests that exposure to influencer content is associated with greater familiarity with hotels and destinations. Repeated exposure to a brand name, visual identity, hotel facilities, attractions, or travel experiences can strengthen brand associations in consumer memory.

This finding is consistent with Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity framework, which positions brand awareness and brand knowledge as important foundations of consumer responses to marketing activities. Influencer marketing may therefore contribute to brand equity by first increasing recognition and familiarity before consumers move toward evaluation and consideration.

BA1, "Recognizing the brand name, logo, or distinctive characteristics," obtained a mean score of 3.8, while BA3, "Recalling the brand name," received a mean score of 3.7. These results suggest that brand recognition is slightly stronger than brand recall. This pattern is reasonable because recognizing a brand when a visual or verbal cue is present is generally easier than recalling a brand without assistance. Nevertheless, both recognition and recall are important indicators of how strongly a brand is represented in consumer memory.

The lowest score was obtained for BA2, "Differentiating the brand from competitors," with a mean of 3.5. This result has an important managerial implication. Influencer marketing appears to be relatively effective in introducing brands and creating familiarity, but it may be less effective in communicating what makes a particular hotel or destination different from competing alternatives.

Therefore, influencer campaigns should not focus only on visually attractive content. They should also emphasize distinctive attributes such as unique facilities, authentic local experiences, signature services, cultural characteristics, sustainability practices, or destination-specific attractions. Such elements can help audiences understand why one hotel or destination should be preferred over another.

This interpretation is also relevant to De Veirman et al. (2017), who show that influencer characteristics can affect perceptions of brand uniqueness. Accordingly, effective influencer marketing should aim not only to create brand exposure but also to strengthen brand differentiation and positioning

DISCUSSION

Taken together, the findings reveal a clear pattern between influencer marketing and brand awareness. Visual attractiveness was the strongest influencer-marketing indicator (IM4 = 4.2), while travel consideration was the strongest brand-awareness indicator (BA5 = 4.1). These results suggest that the strength of influencer marketing in hospitality and tourism lies not merely in audience reach but also in its ability to transform intangible tourism experiences into vivid, engaging, and easily imagined content.

The findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing the importance of information quality, source credibility, visual presentation, and message attractiveness in digital marketing communication (Li et al., 2023; Lou & Yuan, 2019). In destination marketing, Hernández-Méndez and Baute-Díaz (2024) also demonstrate that influencers have become an important part of tourism-promotion strategies and can influence consumers' attitudes toward destinations and tourism-related content. At the same time, the two lowest-scoring indicators, trust in influencer information (IM3 = 3.5) and brand differentiation (BA2 = 3.5), reveal two areas requiring improvement. High exposure alone does not automatically create strong credibility or a distinctive brand position. Therefore, hotels and tourism destinations should ensure that influencer content is not only visually attractive but also credible, informative, authentic, and clearly differentiated. The findings indicate that influencer marketing can serve as an important brand-awareness facilitator for hotels and tourism destinations, particularly in strengthening exposure, recognition, familiarity, recall, and consideration. However, because the present analysis is based on descriptive statistics, the results represent consumer perceptions and response patterns rather than statistically proven causal effects. If the study seeks to claim that influencer marketing significantly influences brand awareness, additional inferential analysis such as correlation, regression, or structural equation modeling would be required.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that influencer marketing plays an important role in supporting brand awareness for hotels and tourism destinations. Based on responses from 166 participants, influencer-generated content was generally perceived positively, particularly in terms of visual attractiveness, brand exposure, and recommendation value. Among the influencer marketing indicators, visual content obtained the highest mean score, showing that attractive photographs, videos, and travel-related presentations are especially effective in capturing consumer attention.

The findings also indicate a relatively high level of brand awareness. The strongest brand-awareness dimension was the tendency to consider a hotel or destination when planning a vacation, followed by greater familiarity with the brand. This suggests that influencer content can help hotels and destinations become more visible, memorable, and relevant in consumers' travel considerations. However, the lower scores for trust in influencer information and brand differentiation show that there is still room for improvement. Consumers may be exposed to and interested in influencer content without fully trusting the information or clearly understanding how one hotel or destination differs from its competitors. Therefore, influencer marketing should not rely solely on attractive visual content or audience reach. Credibility, authenticity, informative content, and clear brand positioning are equally important. The study demonstrates that influencer marketing can function as an effective communication tool for strengthening brand recognition, familiarity, recall, and consideration in the hospitality and tourism industry. Nevertheless, because the study is based on descriptive analysis, the

findings should be interpreted as consumer perceptions rather than evidence of a statistically proven causal relationship.

Hotels and tourism destinations are encouraged to collaborate with influencers who are not only popular but also credible, authentic, and relevant to the target market. Influencer selection should consider content quality, audience engagement, communication style, expertise, and compatibility with the brand image. Greater attention should also be given to content differentiation. Influencer campaigns should highlight distinctive hotel facilities, local culture, unique experiences, sustainability practices, signature services, and other characteristics that make the promoted brand different from competitors. Future studies should employ inferential statistical methods such as correlation, regression, or structural equation modeling to examine the relationship between influencer marketing and brand awareness more rigorously. Future research may also investigate additional variables such as influencer credibility, parasocial interaction, destination image, brand trust, engagement, and travel intention. Further studies could compare different types of influencers, social media platforms, destinations, and consumer generations. Such comparisons would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how influencer marketing effectiveness varies across different tourism contexts and audience segments.

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