



The Role of Social Media Influencer Transparency in Building Tourist Trust: Evidence from Saudi Arabia

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Abstract- This research examines the correlation between social media influencer transparency and tourist trust in the context of Saudi Arabian tourism, aiming to fill significant gaps in the comprehension of digital marketing efficacy in non-Western cultural environments. Using a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, data were gathered from 550 Saudi domestic tourists who actively interact with travel influencers in key tourism areas such as Makkah, Riyadh, and the Eastern Province. The study analyzed five principal influencer attributes—expertise, attractiveness, aesthetics, informativeness, and interaction—and their influence on tourist trust and subsequent travel behavior. Structural equation modeling results demonstrated that interaction was the most significant predictor of tourist trust ($\beta = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$), markedly exceeding conventional credibility metrics such as expertise ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.001$) and attractiveness ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < 0.001$). Mediation analysis revealed that trust functions as a vital mechanism connecting influencer characteristics to actual tourist behavior, with interaction exhibiting the most significant mediation effect ($VAF = 0.37$). These results contest established beliefs regarding influencer credibility by emphasizing the superiority of genuine engagement over perceived expertise in the Saudi tourism sector. The study enhances Source Credibility Theory in non-Western contexts and offers practical guidance for tourism marketers formulating culturally tailored digital marketing strategies in accordance with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 tourism development objectives.

Keywords- Social Media Influencers, Transparency, Tourist Trust, Saudi Arabia, Digital Tourism Marketing

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INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution has changed the way people travel in a big way. Social media sites are now the main places where people get ideas for trips, plan them, and make decisions. In this digital world, social media influencers (SMIs) have become important middlemen between destinations and potential tourists. They are digital opinion leaders who use their credibility, expertise, and large following to greatly affect how tourists act and where they choose to go (Liu et al., 2023; Pop et al., 2021; Raafat et al., 2023; Yuan & Lou, 2020). These digital content creators have more power than just promoting products. They tell stories, share experiences, and give advice that can make or break a destination's reputation in the highly competitive tourism market.

As influencer marketing becomes more commercialized and common in the tourism industry, important questions have come up about how honest and open influencer communications are. Transparency in influencer marketing refers to how openly and honestly influencers talk about their sponsorships, partnerships, commercial relationships, and any biases that may be present in their content (Belanche et al., 2020; Han & Chen., 2022). This level of openness is now a major issue for both consumers and regulators because it affects how trustworthy recommendations are and the overall trust between influencers and their followers (Ki et al., 2023; Belanche et al., 2020).

Trust is a crucial and essential element in the intricate relationship between social media influencers and their audiences, especially in the tourism sector, where experiences are inherently intangible, frequently costly, and entail considerable emotional and financial risks for consumers (Anuar et al., 2021; Wang & Yan, 2022). Because tourism products are not physical, people who are thinking about going on a trip must rely heavily on the credibility and authenticity of the information given by influencers, especially when they are thinking about going to a new place or doing something new (Liu et al., 2023; Shwe, 2024). When trust is built and kept, tourists are more likely to follow influencer recommendations, interact with promoted content, and finally decide to go on trips based on influencer endorsements.

Studies have shown that clear advertising disclosures and open communication can greatly lower consumer skepticism while also making influencer content seem more credible and trustworthy (Yuan & Lou, 2020; Kwiitek et al., 2021). When influencers are open about their business relationships and possible conflicts of interest, tourists are more likely to trust and believe in their content, which makes them feel safer and more confident in their travel decisions (Belanche et al., 2020; Ki et al., 2023). On the other hand, a lack of openness or unclear disclosure practices can make people less trusting, more skeptical, and less likely to engage with tourists and make decisions (Belanche et al., 2021; Ki et al., 2023). Theoretical frameworks, including Source Credibility Theory and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), provide a basis for comprehending the impact of transparency on trust in influencer marketing. The Source Credibility Theory posits that an influencer's persuasive power is contingent upon three principal dimensions: trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. Transparency is identified as a vital mechanism for enhancing trustworthiness by mitigating perceived deception and augmenting overall credibility (Shah & Wei, 2022; Fu et al., 2022; Belanche et al., 2020; Ki et al., 2023). The Elaboration Likelihood Model differentiates between central cognitive pathways and peripheral emotional pathways of persuasion, indicating that transparency may captivate tourists through intentional, methodical assessment of content quality and credibility rather than mere superficial indicators (Shiau et al., 2022; Wang & Yan, 2022; Serman & Sims, 2022).

Empirical research has demonstrated the intricate and occasionally contradictory characteristics of transparency in influencer marketing within the tourism industry. Studies consistently show that clear, direct disclosures build trust by following ethical marketing rules and what customers expect (Belanche et al., 2020; Kwiitek et al., 2021). However, there is also evidence that too much commercialization—when influencers seem to care more about sponsorships and business partnerships than making real content—can actually hurt trust and make people less interested (Han & Chen., 2022; Ki et al., 2023). This careful balance between being open and being real is especially important in tourism, where people spend a lot of money and time based on what influencers say (Raafat et al., 2023; Helal et al., 2023).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia offers a distinctive and significant context for analyzing influencer transparency and its effect on tourist trust, attributed to the nation's swift digital transformation and ambitious tourism development strategies under Vision 2030 (Alnasser et al., 2020; Alyoubi, 2024). As Saudi Arabia endeavors to diversify its economy from oil dependence and vigorously promotes tourism as a vital economic sector, social media influencers have emerged as crucial figures in marketing the Kingdom's developing destinations and cultural experiences to both domestic and international audiences (Alwafi et al., 2022; Alsakkaf et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the distinct cultural subtleties, conventional values,

and developing regulatory structures in Saudi Arabia may profoundly affect the perception, interpretation, and implementation of transparency by both influencers and their audiences (Aldossary et al., 2022; Alhajri & Pierce, 2022). Although there is a lot of research on different parts of influencer marketing, we still don't know enough about how transparency affects tourist trust, especially in non-Western cultures. Most existing studies have concentrated on general credibility metrics, content quality evaluations, or the overall efficacy of influencer marketing, while overlooking the intricate and specific functions that disclosure practices and transparency mechanisms serve in establishing and sustaining trust relationships (Wang & Yan, 2022; Yuan & Lou, 2020; Belanche et al., 2020; Ki et al., 2023). Furthermore, the intricate dynamics among transparency, trust development, and cultural influences in tourism settings are markedly under-researched in scholarly literature, especially concerning their expression in nascent tourism markets with unique cultural traits (Alnajim, 2023; Alwafi et al., 2022).

This study tackles these significant research gaps by investigating the impact of social media influencer transparency on tourist trust in the Saudi Arabian context, yielding both theoretical contributions and practical ramifications for the swiftly changing digital tourism marketing environment. The research adds to the small but important body of knowledge about how influencer transparency affects tourism markets outside of the West. It also gives Saudi Arabia's growing and increasingly important tourism sector culturally relevant and context-specific insights.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study utilized a quantitative research methodology to systematically investigate the correlation between the transparency of social media influencers and the trust levels of tourists. The methodology was meticulously crafted to guarantee scientific rigor while fulfilling the research objectives via suitable data collection and analysis methods.

1. Research Design

The study utilized a cross-sectional survey design to gather data from domestic tourists in Saudi Arabia who actively interact with travel influencers on social media platforms. This design was selected for its efficacy in recording perceptions and behaviors at a particular moment in time. The study concentrated on three principal constructs: influencer transparency (evaluated via disclosure practices and content authenticity), tourist trust (measured by the credibility of recommendations), and travel behavior (analyzed through actual visitation to promoted destinations). All items used five-point Likert scales that went from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

2. Sampling Strategy

The target population comprised Saudi domestic tourists aged 18 and older who had undertaken at least one trip within the country in the preceding 12 months. A cluster sampling method was used, with a focus on major tourist areas like Makkah, Riyadh, and the Eastern Province to make sure that all areas were represented. The final sample comprised 550 domestic tourists who actively engage with social media travel influencers. 57.1% (n=314) of the people who answered were men, and 42.9% (n=236) were women. The most common age group was 35 to 44 years old (32.5%), and the second most common age group was 45 to 54 years old (28.4%). YouTube was the most popular place to get travel information (21.3%), followed by Twitter/X (19.3%) and Facebook (18.5%). Most of the people who answered said they traveled within the country 2–3 times a year (38.2%) or 4–5 times a year (36.4%).

3. Data Collection Procedures

The research instrument was created by modifying validated measurement scales from recognized studies in influencer marketing and tourism literature. Before full implementation, a pilot test with 38 people was done to see how clear and reliable the questionnaire was. The pilot results showed that all constructs had Cronbach's alpha coefficients over 0.80, which means they were very consistent within themselves. The last survey was done online using professional survey platforms that included quality control measures like attention checks and response validation.

4. Scenario Development

The analytical method utilized SPSS 26 and SmartPLS 4 software to analyze the gathered data. Initial descriptive statistics offered a summary of respondent attributes and response distributions. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to test the measurement model. It looked at convergent validity ($AVE > 0.5$) and composite reliability ($CR > 0.7$). We then used structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the hypothesized relationships between constructs, using bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) to see if they were statistically significant.

5. Ethical Considerations

Before collecting data, the Saudi Tourism Research Ethics Committee gave the study its ethical approval. All participants gave their informed consent after being fully informed about the purpose of the research and how the data would be handled. Anonymizing responses and using secure data storage protocols kept the information private. Participants were told that they could leave at any time without any consequences.

6. Limitations

Even though the methodology was carefully planned, some limitations need to be recognized. The emphasis on Saudi domestic tourists may restrict applicability to international settings. The cross-sectional design, although effective, is incapable of determining causal relationships. Moreover, self-reported data may be influenced by response biases, despite the implementation of procedural safeguards to mitigate this risk. Subsequent research may mitigate these limitations by employing longitudinal designs or experimental methodologies.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Before looking at the structural relationships, the measurement model's reliability and validity were thoroughly tested. Table 1 shows that all of the constructs had very good internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.92 to 0.97, which is much higher than the recommended threshold of 0.70. The composite reliability (CR) values also ranged from 0.94 to 0.97, which showed that the measurement scales were consistent with each other. Average variance extracted (AVE) values, which ranged from 0.72 to 0.84 and were all higher than the minimum requirement of 0.50. These robust psychometric properties provide strong confidence in the measurement model's ability to accurately capture the intended constructs.

Table 1: Measurement Model Assessment

Construct	α	CR	AVE
Expertise	0.93	0.94	0.77
Attractiveness	0.93	0.95	0.79
Aesthetics	0.94	0.95	0.80
Informativeness	0.94	0.95	0.80
Interaction	0.97	0.97	0.78
Trust	0.95	0.96	0.84
Reaction Behavior	0.92	0.94	0.72

Direct Effects on Tourist Trust

The structural equation modeling results showed that all of the influencer traits had a strong effect on tourist trust, as shown in Table 2. Interaction was the most important factor in predicting tourist trust ($\beta = 0.36$, $t =$

6.29, $p < 0.001$), which means that Saudi tourists really value social media influencers who are direct and responsive. This finding is consistent with the cultural focus on personal relationships and communication in Saudi society, where interpersonal connections are greatly esteemed. The informativeness of influencer content significantly influenced trust formation ($\beta = 0.17$, $t = 3.14$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that tourists value reliable, comprehensive, and practical information when assessing travel recommendations.

Table 2: Direct Effects on Tourist Trust

Path	B	t
Expertise → Trust	0.12**	2.94
Attractiveness → Trust	0.13**	2.91
Informativeness → Trust	0.17**	3.14
Aesthetics → Trust	0.14**	3.13
Interaction → Trust	0.36**	6.29

Note: ** $p < 0.001$

The moderate yet significant impacts of aesthetics ($\beta = 0.14$, $t = 3.13$, $p < 0.001$), attractiveness ($\beta = 0.13$, $t = 2.91$, $p < 0.001$), and expertise ($\beta = 0.12$, $t = 2.94$, $p < 0.001$) on trust indicate that, although these factors play a role in trust development, they are not as essential as interactive engagement and the quality of information. The comparatively diminished impact of expertise in relation to interaction is particularly significant, as it contests conventional beliefs regarding the supremacy of perceived expertise in influencer credibility. This finding indicates that, within the Saudi tourism context, tourists may value genuine engagement over exhibited expertise, signifying a preference for relatable and approachable influencers rather than remote authority figures.

Mediation Analysis and Behavioral Outcomes

The mediation analysis in Table 3 shows important information about how trust works as a middleman between the traits of an influencer and the behavior of tourists. The variance accounted for (VAF) values show that mediation happens to different degrees along different pathways. Interaction exhibited the most significant mediating effect via trust (VAF = 0.37), indicating that roughly 37% of the overall impact of interaction on behavioral outcomes functions through the trust mechanism. This significant mediation effect underscores the essential function of trust as a conduit between influencer engagement strategies and actual tourist decision-making.

Table 3: Trust Mediation Effects

Mediation Path	Effect			VAF
	Direct	Indirect	Total	
Informativeness → Trust → Behavior	0.12*	0.03*	0.15	0.20
Interaction → Trust → Behavior	0.12*	0.07***	0.19	0.37
Aesthetics → Trust → Behavior	0.17***	0.03*	0.20	0.15
Attractiveness → Trust → Behavior	0.19***	0.03*	0.22	0.14
Expertise → Trust → Behavior	0.13*	0.02*	0.15	0.13

Note: * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$

The informativeness construct exhibited a moderate mediation effect (VAF = 0.20), signifying that informative content directly affects behavior, while a substantial portion of its influence is mediated by increased trust. This finding corroborates the theoretical assertion that high-quality, informative content enhances credibility,

thereby affecting tourist decisions. The lower VAF values for aesthetics (0.15), attractiveness (0.14), and expertise (0.13) indicate that these traits have a more direct impact on behavior, while trust has a less significant mediating role.

The current results are in strong agreement with and build on earlier studies about how people use social media and how tourists behave in Saudi Arabia. Helal et al. (2023) showed that social media content is a strong predictor of perceived trust, which in turn is a strong predictor of future plans to visit Saudi Arabia again. This directly supports our finding that interaction is the strongest predictor of tourist trust. Al-Gasawneh and Al-Adamat (2020) similarly discovered that social media interaction positively affects travelers' intentions to visit destinations in Saudi Arabia by enhancing confidence and fostering closer relationships, thereby supporting our mediation analysis that identifies trust as a vital link between interaction and behavior. The uniformity of these findings across various Saudi tourism contexts strengthens the validity of the interaction-trust-behavior pathway and indicates that this relationship is essential for comprehending the efficacy of digital tourism marketing in the Kingdom.

The findings also enhance international research while emphasizing potential cultural particularity. Alamer (2023) discovered that social media influencers possessing credibility, high-quality content, expertise, and relatability positively influence Saudi tourists' destination choice intentions, thereby validating our comprehensive model of influencer characteristics. Nonetheless, our discovery indicates that interaction effects significantly surpass expertise effects ($\beta = 0.36$ compared to $\beta = 0.12$). This indicates that Saudi tourists might value genuine interaction over conventional symbols of authority to a greater extent than tourists from other cultural backgrounds. Hu et al. (2023) corroborate this interpretation, revealing that parasocial interaction and audience engagement substantially affect travel intentions via genuine happiness. This suggests that the relational dimensions of influencer communication may hold particular significance in collectivistic cultures such as Saudi Arabia, where community relationships and social harmony are prioritized.

These results offer significant validation for Source Credibility Theory in the context of Saudi tourism, illustrating that various dimensions of credibility function through unique mechanisms. Subsequent research ought to examine the longevity of benefits over extended durations and the ideal duration and frequency of repeated reading interventions for the preservation of psychological advantages. The study's emphasis on preparatory-level students necessitates additional research to ascertain its applicability to other age demographics and educational tiers. Additional research is warranted to investigate the efficacy of repeated reading interventions on self-efficacy and fear of negative evaluation at various developmental stages. Understanding the mediating mechanisms that lead to these benefits could help us make more effective and targeted interventions.

CONCLUSION

This research offers substantial evidence that audience interaction is the paramount factor in cultivating tourist trust and shaping travel behavior among Saudi domestic tourists, eclipsing conventional credibility metrics such as expertise and allure. The results show that trust is a key way that influencer traits affect how tourists behave, with interaction having the strongest effect. These findings significantly enhance the theoretical comprehension of influencer marketing in non-Western tourism settings and underscore the necessity of culturally tailored digital marketing strategies. The focus on interactive engagement over expert authority is in line with Saudi Arabia's collectivistic values and relationship-based decision-making. This means that successful tourism marketing in the Kingdom needs real community involvement instead of one-way advertising. As Saudi Arabia's tourism industry grows under Vision 2030, these tips will help both local and international stakeholders make the most of partnerships with social media influencers in this quickly growing market.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, tourism organizations and social media influencers in the Saudi market should prioritize interactive engagement strategies that promote genuine two-way communication with their audiences through responsive commenting, live streaming, and personalized content creation. Tourism marketers should change how they choose influencers from follower count and perceived expertise to engagement rates and a clear commitment to interacting with their audience. These are the things that are more important for building trust that leads to travel decisions. Destination marketing organizations ought to formulate extensive social media protocols that promote transparency in commercial collaborations while preserving genuine narrative techniques. Additionally, they should allocate resources to training initiatives that educate influencers about the cultural values and communication preferences of Saudi audiences. Also, tourism businesses should keep an eye on trust-building metrics on a regular basis instead of just reach and impressions. They should also form long-term partnerships with influencers who have a consistent audience engagement instead of short-term campaigns with famous but less interactive personalities. Finally, future research should investigate the long-term impacts of influencer transparency on enduring tourist loyalty and assess the applicability of these findings to international tourists visiting Saudi Arabia, thereby enhancing the comprehension of digital tourism marketing efficacy in the Kingdom.

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