

The Mediating Role of Perceived Authenticity on Relationship Between Social Media Influencers and Domestic Tourist Travel Decision: A Study Focusing on Multiple Tourist Places in Sri Lanka as Travel Destinations

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study explores the impact of social media influencers (SMIs) on travel decision-making in Sri Lanka, aiming to fill a research gap on their role in shaping traveler behavior. It highlights the potential for SMIs to assist the country's tourism recovery post-crises like the 2019 Easter attacks and COVID-19. The findings offer strategic insights for marketing Sri Lanka as a tourist destination and fostering sustainable tourism growth.

Design/methodology/approach: The study uses a quantitative approach and deductive reasoning to investigate how social media influencers (SMIs) affect Sri Lanka's domestic tourism destinations. Also, this study collected 368 qualified responses from Google form as the sample which was collected as primary data other articles and books referred to this as the secondary data source. For the data analysis, this study adopted the IBM SPSS software tool.

Findings: This study examines how Social Media Influencers (SMIs) impact domestic travel decisions, focusing on SMI Content Relevance, Attractiveness, Expertise, and Trustworthiness. A strong correlation is found between these characteristics and travel decisions, with perceived authenticity playing a key mediating role. The analysis reveals a significant combined effect of these factors on shaping travel preferences.

Originality: This research offers a unique exploration of social media influencers' impact on tourism decision-making in Sri Lanka, focusing on the often-overlooked mediating role of perceived authenticity. By examining how SMI attributes—such as content relevance, expertise, and attractiveness—affect independent travel choices, the study sheds new light on the intricate dynamics between influencers and tourists. Its findings provide novel insights for marketers and policymakers aiming to harness influencer power for sustainable tourism growth.

Implications: This research enriches social influence theory by highlighting how social media influencers shape travel trends, particularly within Sri Lanka's cultural context. Practically, it emphasizes integrating influencers into strategic tourism marketing, especially for

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post-crisis recovery, enhancing domestic and foreign tourism appeal. The study provides a foundation for evidence-based decision-making, helping stakeholders align strategies with evolving consumer behavior trends.

Introduction

Background of the Study

According to Charice Hayes (2016) Travel agents, advertising, and promotional activities dominated traditional marketing strategies. However, the advent of social media has added a new element to the equation. To create a more thorough, less biased opinion of the targeted travel items, passengers are increasingly actively seeking a range of information. The rising impact of "eWOM," or electronic word-of-mouth, on customer attitudes, perceptions, intentions, and product selection in the planning environment, presents a significant challenge for marketers in the travel and tourism sector. Another issue brought on by the widespread availability of Internet access via mobile devices (such as tablets and smartphones) is that travelers are delaying many decisions they once made before leaving, like choosing a restaurant at their destination. The popularity of online social networks (OSN) has contributed to the emergence of social media influencers (SMI), also referred to as Internet celebrities (Cox, et al., 2009). Blogs, tweets, and other forms of social media are used by a new category of independent third-party endorsers, social media influencers (SMIs), to sway audience opinions. Although some scholars appear to view SMIs as competing, maybe hostile voices (Freberg, et al., 2011).

The results of the study by Kang and Schuett (2013) suggest marketers of tourism sectors acknowledge social media as an opportunity where tourists can share their trips and look for unbiased, reliable travel information before making travel plans. Social media posts on shared travel experiences are an important source of information for marketers. However, travel marketers do not influence the quantity and quality of user-generated content (UGC). So, time will tell if further research into accuracy and quality control is necessary to guarantee how shared information is evaluated and utilized. (Kang & Schuett, 2012).

This technique enables an all-encompassing examination of influencers at various levels, permitting an investigation of the relationship between the magnitude of their fan base and their capacity to impact tourism-related decisions. Based on influencer fan base influencers can be classified into these segments Mega-influencers (having a minimum of one million subscribers or followers), Macro-influencers (following 100,000 to 1,000,000), Micro-influencers (following 10,000 to 100,000), and Nano-influencers (following less than 10,000). In addition, the study explores the mediating function of perceived authenticity in the context of tourist travel, aiming to clarify the intricate

dynamics between influencers, their audiences, and the decision-making process (Kang & Schuett, 2012)..

The rapid transformation in how people communicate, and the rise of user-generated content has created a new dynamic in marketing communication in many industrial areas, including tourism. (Cox, et al., 2009). Travel intentions of followers are altered, according to a study on SMIs' effects on buying behavior in the travel and tourist business (Magno & Cassia, 2018). On the other hand, social media allows prospective travelers to arrange their travels and interact with their peers (Hudson & Thal, 2012).

Previous research (Litvin, et al., 2008) Has demonstrated the growing importance of social media influencers as reliable sources of travel-related information. These studies have also demonstrated the influence these influences have on consumer behavior in a range of situations. Travelers today are constantly exposed to a diverse range of travel-related content from influencers who post about their travels and offer advice on websites like Instagram, YouTube, and travel blogs. The attraction of the locations that influencers advocate, and their perceived genuineness have a big impact on the opinions and driving forces of tourists. (Chen, et al., 2019). Furthermore, it has been shown that influencers affect consumers' restaurant preferences (Alqadi, et al., 2020).

Although the Sri Lankan government and tourism authorities have launched marketing campaigns to attract foreign tourists, little research has been done on the impact of social media influencers on travelers' decisions to visit Sri Lanka. Thus, this research intends to fill this void by examining the impact of social media influencers on travel decisions specific to Sri Lanka.

Problem Statement

The research problem at the core of this study is the lack of in-depth empirical investigation into the role of social media influencers (SMIs) in shaping tourist travel decisions to Sri Lanka (Cox, et al., 2009; Xiang, et al., 2015). While SMIs have become a dominant force in the travel and tourism industry globally, their specific influence on Sri Lanka's tourism sector remains understudied. Prior research has emphasized the significance of SMIs in influencing consumer decisions, drawing on the source credibility theory, which highlights factors such as content relevance, attractiveness of content, expertise, and trustworthiness as critical elements that enhance an influencer's credibility and impact. Despite these insights, there is a considerable gap in the literature regarding how these factors operate in the context of travel decisions related to an emerging destination like Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, beyond the established components of source credibility, there is growing recognition that perceived authenticity plays a pivotal role in consumer decision-making (Lee & Eastin, 2021), particularly in industries driven by experience, such as travel and tourism. Authenticity in SMI content is increasingly seen as a key determinant of trust,

engagement, and ultimately, the decisions made by potential tourists. However, this aspect has not been thoroughly explored in the context of tourism to Sri Lanka, where cultural diversity and a rich heritage are major draws for international travelers. With traditional marketing approaches still predominant in Sri Lanka's tourism promotion, the role of SMIs in shaping tourists' perceptions, trust, and willingness to travel to the destination remains unclear and understudied.

This research seeks to address these gaps by examining the influence of SMIs on tourist travel decisions to Sri Lanka, integrating the factors of content relevance, attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness from source credibility theory with perceived authenticity as an additional key construct. By doing so, it aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how these elements work together to influence tourist behavior, offering valuable insights for both academia and the tourism industry. Ultimately, this study will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on digital marketing and consumer behavior in tourism, with specific implications for how emerging destinations like Sri Lanka can leverage SMIs to enhance their global appeal.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the impact of social media influencers in on domestic tourism destinations and tourism decisions of domestic tourists
2. To identify how SMIs influence Gen Y and Z's travel choices within the tourism sector.
3. To identify and analyze the key factors related to social media influencers that significantly affect domestic tourist travel decisions.
4. To identify how perceived authenticity influences the interaction between social media influencers and domestic travel decisions made by tourists.

Research Questions

1. What is the impact of social media influencers on domestic tourist destinations in Sri Lanka?
2. What are the factors contributing to social media influencers having a significant impact on travel destination choices?
3. What is the role of social media platforms, such as Instagram, YouTube, and travel blogs, in shaping tourists' perceptions of Sri Lanka as a travel destination?
4. What is the role of perceived authenticity as a mediating factor between Social Media Influencer (SMI) Characteristics and tourist travel destination choices in Sri Lanka?

Literature Review

Tourism and Sri Lanka

One of the main forces behind economic expansion, job creation, and general economic prosperity is the tourism and hospitality sector. The global GDP for travel and tourism was 10.4% in 2019, according to the World Tourism and Travel Council Report. This sector generated 319 million jobs worldwide. [WTTC. 2019. "WTTC Economic Impact Report."] A good destination will also benefit from the domestic tourism industry. Additionally, it supports economic growth, rural and regional development, and the creation of employment possibilities (Shantha, 2010). Tourism was the third-highest source of foreign exchange 3 earnings in the nation, contributing more than 5% of the GDP and employing around 500,000 people. By 2025, Sri Lanka had planned to bring in six million tourists and earn US\$ 10 billion. The terrorist assaults on Easter Sunday in 2019 had a significant negative impact on travel and tourist arrival plunged to record low to post war level (CBSL, 2019). The global COVID-19 pandemic had a greater impact on tourism within a year of the attacks. The ongoing conflict in the Ukraine has made Sri Lanka's difficulties worse, and in 2022 the country experienced its worst economic and political catastrophe. All of which resulted in a drastic drop in tourist arrivals. However, the government has been taking measures to improve the tourism sector in recent months. According to the monthly Tourist Arrivals Reports by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, it showed the increase of more than 150% in tourist arrival since May 2023 compared to the same months last year (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2023). Sri Lanka, often termed the "Pearl of the Indian Ocean", has a unique blend of cultural heritage, natural beauty, and diverse ecosystems. As influencers traverse through the jungles, beaches, and urban areas of Sri Lanka, they shape narratives and influence perceptions. Additionally, it's vital to decipher whether this influence is just a transient phenomenon or has a tangible impact on decision-making. Digital content becomes the bridge that connects potential tourists to destinations they might never have previously considered. Although the Sri Lankan government and tourism authorities have launched marketing campaigns to attract foreign tourists, little research has been done on the impact of social media influencers on travelers' decisions to visit Sri Lanka. Thus, this research intends to fill this void by examining the impact of social media influencers on travel decisions specific to Sri Lanka.

Social Media and Travel Planning

Tourism marketing has seen a significant transformation with the arrival of the digital era, shifting from an emphasis on website functionality to one on user empowerment and accessibility through mobile technology. Higher-order Internet uses (i.e., social media) are now common among certain groups of people, especially among travelers from the younger generation. Traditional Internet use for travel preparation appears to be ubiquitous across all traveler groups (Xiang, et al., 2015). The growth of "social"

technology, such as platforms like TripAdvisor.com, has been a major development and these platforms have drastically altered how passengers obtain information, read and write reviews, and participate in interactive travel forums. Today's travelers' go-to source for travel-related information is social media, which provides real insights on places and experiences through user-generated content including images, videos, reviews, and itineraries (Buhalis & Foerste, 2015). Moreover, in a study conducted by (Islam, 2021) in Thailand showed that most participants acknowledged that SMIs in the travel and tourism industry had influenced their decision-making about where to go because they provide people the opportunity to learn about new locations and unpopular 13 provinces in Thailand, acquire important information, and make the process of making vacation plans much simpler. Additionally, by allowing travelers to actively participate in destination marketing by sharing their own travel experiences, these platforms have promoted a sense of co-creation and interaction between travelers and destinations (Guerreiro, et al., 2019) Additionally, the results of study done by (Xiang, et al., 2015), show that social media and other recently introduced online communication channels have a significant influence on travel arrangements. A growing number of people utilize social networking and photo/video sharing websites as travel planning tools. Examining the information and comments posted by other travelers has emerged as one of the most significant online activities, particularly throughout the online preparation phase. Due to the growing popularity of smartphones, travelers' information-seeking and travel planning habits are significantly impacted by the constant accessibility of the Internet.

SMI Content Relevance

In the context of tourism, SMI Content Relevance plays a critical role in determining how well Social Media Influencers' content meets the needs and interests of prospective travellers. This variable shows up as a driving force in the customer decision journey in (Guerreiro, et al., 2019) study, highlighting the importance of content relevance in influencing customers' decision-making process when navigating and choosing travel destinations. One of the most important factors influencing traveler decisions is influencers' capacity to produce content that speaks to the preferences and aspirations of their audience. A well-crafted content strategy guarantees that the content influencers present is appropriate for the context, building a stronger bond with the audience and assisting in the making of more satisfying and well-informed travel decisions.

Trustworthiness of SMI Content

SMI's dependability One of the most important factors in determining whether information shared by influencers in the tourism industry is regarded as genuine and credible is content. According to Guerreiro et al. (2019), trustworthiness is crucial to the customer decision 14 making process, meaning that travelers mainly rely on information they believe to be trustworthy and genuine. Positive attitudes and decisions about travel are greatly influenced by the reliability of influencers. Influencers who are seen as reliable

information sources can guide tourists through their content, giving them more confidence to choose experiences and destinations with knowledge.

Attractiveness of SMI Content

SMI's attractiveness Content explores the attractive qualities and creative thinking of influencers' content, focusing on visual appeal, engagement, and overall enticement. (Guerreiro, et al., 2019) claim that appealing content plays a critical role in the efficacy of influencers in helping consumers make decisions when it comes to tourism. Influencers can effectively convey the attractiveness and individuality of travel destinations by utilizing visually appealing content, which both captures and maintains audience attention. Glamour may refer to the sense of charm and attractiveness that SMIs portray. Fun represents the enjoyment and entertainment that followers derive from their content (Malik, et al., 2023) Thus, tourists' perceptions and preferences are largely shaped by the attractiveness of the content, which tells a captivating story and appeals to their aesthetic sensibilities.

Expertise of SMI

SMI expertise concentrates on the perceived skill and knowledge displayed by influencers, especially in the travel and tourism industry. (Guerreiro, et al., 2019) emphasize the importance of digital influencers in the customer decision-making process, showing that knowledge has a big impact on choices by giving audiences insightful information. Influencers that exhibit competence turn into reliable resources, helping travelers navigate the complexities of decision-making. Content is more appealing to their audience because of their perceived authenticity, accessibility, and expertise in their field, which set them apart from traditional celebrities (Hajli, 2014). Influencers are positioned as knowledgeable guides in the tourism industry thanks to their capacity to share genuine and informed viewpoints, which raises the content's overall value. Influencers' demonstrated expertise plays a crucial role in influencing 15 travelers' perceptions and preferences, resulting in a more well-informed and sophisticated travel decision-making process.

Additionally, Generation Y who were born between 1980 and 1994, and Generation Z who were born between 1995 and 2010 spend nearly 3 hours in various social media sites daily (Pop, et al., 2021). Furthermore, it was found that the use of social media is expanding rapidly. A typical person added three minutes to their daily usage and opened 0.8 new social media accounts from 2017 to 2018. In 2018, 72% of major companies revealed that they were using social media influencers to handle a significant portion of their marketing aspect. Followers are more inclined to make an immediate purchase since they feel as though they are receiving a friend's recommendation for a product.

Perceived Authenticity of SMI Content

Travel decisions made by tourists are increasingly influenced by Social Media Influencers (SMIs) in the dynamic world of modern tourism. The perceived authenticity of the content that these influencers grew is a critical factor that supports their influence. In the context of SMIs, authenticity is the sincerity and reliability of the data and experiences they provide. The significance of perceived authenticity in the context of SMIs and its mediating role in influencing travel decisions made by tourists are explored in depth in this review of the literature.

Authenticity in Social Media Influencers' Content

The study of SMIs' influence on consumer behavior and decision-making in the tourism industry identified authenticity as a major theme. Magno & Cassia (2018) point out that SMIs use a variety of platforms, including blogs and tweets, to sway audience opinions, underscoring the significance of appreciating the authenticity of their material. Personal experiences are a common theme in SMI content, and how authentic these experiences are viewed by the audience is vital to drawing and holding their interest.

The Role of Perceived Authenticity in Decision-Making

In the travel and tourism sector, consumers' decisions are significantly influenced by their perception of authenticity. According to De Veirman et al. (2017), SMIs' visually appealing content shares help to increase the attraction and desirability of destinations. This appeal is strongly related to how genuine the experiences are viewed to be. Genuine and trustworthy content has a greater chance of influencing tourists' perceptions of destinations and ultimately their travel decisions.

Trust as a Component of Perceived Authenticity

According to Cohen et al. (2014), trust is essential to understanding how SMIs affect the travel and tourism sector. One important aspect of perceived authenticity is trustworthiness. The trustworthiness of SMIs' content is strengthened when visitors view them as reliable sources. Authenticity and trust have a mutually beneficial relationship, with trust acting as a key mediating factor in the impact of SMI content on travel decisions.

Authenticity as a Mediator in Tourist Travel Decisions

Expanding on the more general theories about how SMIs affect travel decisions made by tourists, it is critical to acknowledge the mediating function of perceived authenticity. Sashi (2012) contends that to build trusting relationships with their followers, SMIs use real storytelling. This relationship, which is based on perceived authenticity, acts as a moderator, influencing how travelers view different locations and choose their routes.

The Influence of Perceived Authenticity on Destination Image

The authenticity of SMI content influences travel decisions in the short term and enhances the perception of destinations in general. (Chen, et al., 2019) contend that travelers' perceptions and plans are greatly influenced by the attractiveness of destinations that influencers recommend, as well as by the perception that these recommendations are true. Authenticity plays a mediating role in decision-making, but it also helps tourist destinations create a more positive public image.

Methodology

Research Approach

In accordance with Creswell (2014), this study uses a quantitative approach and deductive reasoning to investigate how social media influencers (SMIs) affect Sri Lanka's domestic tourism destinations. In deductive reasoning, existing ideas are analyzed, hypotheses are tested, and the results are used to validate the theories. This study evaluates how much Sri Lankan SMIs influence travelers' intentions to choose their destinations by using a deductive methodology

Study Design

This study's research design requires a crucial choice between quantitative and qualitative approaches. According to Smith (2015), quantitative methods are applicable in business settings, especially when evaluating the success or failure of managerial and executive decisions. According to Smith (2015), quantitative approaches are especially good at answering questions about what, how many, and how often. Donley (2012) is referred to by 36 Tran (2014), who highlights the importance of understanding causation in the qualitative approach. The chosen methodology is in line with the goals of the study in the context of this research, which examines "The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Domestic Tourist Travel Decisions and the Mediating Role of Perceived Authenticity," with a focus on several tourist destinations in Sri Lanka. According to Collis and Hussey (2013), the utilization of quantitative data, which has numerical values, makes drawing conclusions easier. Collis and Hussey (2013) emphasize the necessity of statistical procedures and theoretical frameworks applicable to quantitative data, which supports the decision to adopt a quantitative approach. Moreover, the pragmatic aspects of temporal and resource efficiency bolster the suitability of a quantitative approach for this research.

Conceptual Framework

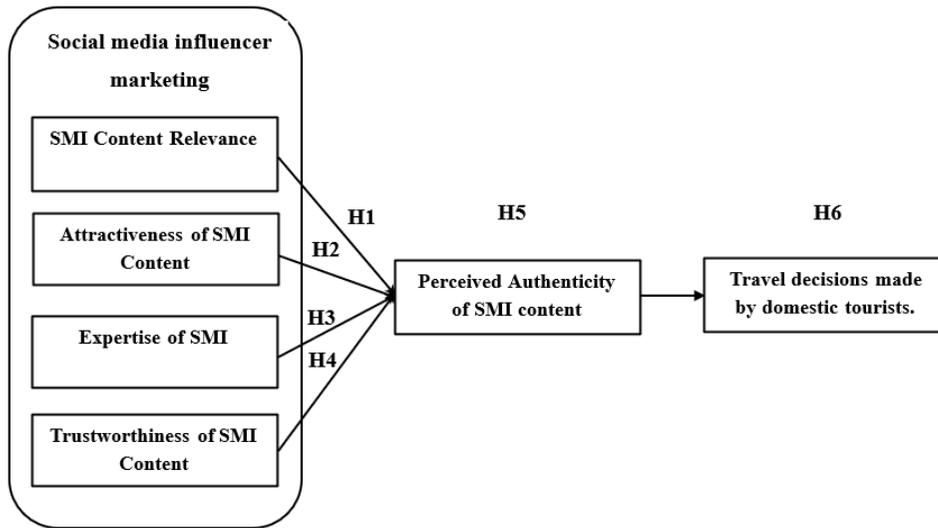


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework (Developed by the Author 2024)

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: SMI Content Relevance has a significant effect on authenticity of SMI content.

Hypothesis 2: Attractiveness of SMI Content of the influencer has a significant effect on authenticity of SMI content.

Hypothesis 3: Expertise of SMI positively affects perceived authenticity of social media influencer content (SMIs).

Hypothesis 4: Trustworthiness of the influencer content has a significant effect on authenticity of SMI content.

Hypothesis 5: Perceived authenticity of social media influencer content mediates the relationship between attributes of social media influencers (SMI Characteristics) and travel decisions made by tourists.

Hypothesis 6: Travel decisions made by domestic tourists visiting locations in Sri Lanka are significantly by Perceived Authenticity of SMI content.

Operationalization

Table 1
Operationalization Table

Variables	Indicator	Measurement Scale	Source
SMI Content Relevance.	Alignment with personal travel interests	Likert Scale	Guerreiro at al. (2019)
	Usefulness of content		
	Matching of content with preferred travel destinations		
Trustworthiness of SMI Content.	Accuracy of content	Likert Scale	Guerreiro at al. (2019)
	Reliability of SMI's information		
	Belief in the trustworthiness of the SMI's recommendations		
Attractiveness of SMI Content.	Visually appealing	Likert Scale	Guerreiro at al. (2019)
	Likeability		
	Familiarity		
Expertise of SMI	Subject Knowledge	Likert Scale	Guerreiro at al. (2019)
	Consistency in Content		
	Engagement with Followers		
Perceived Authenticity of SMI	Authenticity of the content	Likert Scale	Lee & Eastin (2021)
	Authenticity of the SMI's expertise in travel		
Travel decisions made by tourists	Probability of visiting a recommended destination	Likert Scale	Pop et al. (2022)
	Actual booking of trips after seeing SMI content	Ratio Scale	
	Changing travel plans relying on SMI content		

Source: Developed through Literature Review

Population and Sample

This study focuses on investigating the impact of social media influencers on the decisions made by domestic tourists about travel, particularly for members of Generation Y and Z in Sri Lanka who are between the ages of 13 and 44. As of 2023, the Department of Census and Statistics reports that 21,913,245 people call Sri Lanka home of whom 6,339,569 are in the 13-44 age group. Utilizing a disproportionate stratified random sample technique, the research focuses on the both male and female population in the Western Province. The sample collected from western province because according to the tourism

board report most of the local who from western province explore other district places (SLTDA, 2023).

Data Collection Method

The data collection instrument will be a self-administered structured questionnaire created using Google Forms. Questionnaire will consist of closed-ended questions based on the extensive literature review. Questionnaire will contain responses that offer responses in Likert scale and multiple-choice. The reason for selecting Google Forms is that it is user friendly, accessible, and has the capacity to share the survey link on other social media networks, therefore reaching a larger audience. The questions designed to:

- Assess the influence of SMIs on respondents' travel decisions.
- Evaluate the perceived authenticity and credibility of SMIs. Content
- Understand the differential impact of various social media platforms.
- Collect demographic information.

A pre-test of the questionnaire conducted with a small group to ensure clarity and comprehensibility. Participants will be asked to complete the questionnaire within a specified timeframe, and the data will be collected electronically.

Data Analysis Methods

Data will be analyzed using SPSS version 23. Quantitative analysis will be performed by using statistical methods such as descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) will be used to summarize participant responses. Inferential statistics (T-tests, ANOVA) will be used to find correlations and make inferences related to research hypotheses. Also, the mediating effect measure with the use of SPSS process model.

Data Analysis, Discussion and Findings

The data analysis of this study consisted of three steps 1) a liability test was conducted initially where the questionnaire was administered among 368 respondents from Sri Lanka to collect data and Cronbach's Alpha coefficient technique was used to validate the questionnaire 2) evaluating the accuracy of measurements 3) analysis to determine the influence and impacts between variables and univariate, correlation, coefficient, regression, and multiple regression analysis performed using SPSS.

Sample Profile

The survey was used to collect information from participants engaged with the tourism in Sri Lanka. This survey collected 368 respondents. As a summary of demographic data, 58% of people have fallen under the male category while female respondents were 42%. 45% of the majority represent the 18 to 24 age category. 60% of respondents were employed. Facebook shows a high level of involvement, with 39.4% of participants (145)

consistently utilizing it followed by Instagram and YouTube. From the participants 37.1% are interested in Travel & Destinations followed by Fashion & Beauty.

Results of Normality, Reliability and Validity

Concerning the scales' reliability, it used Cronbach's alpha (Chronbach, 1970) with a cutoff value of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978). When it considering the independent and dependent variables of the study respectively, SMI Content Relevance has recorded 0.784, Attractiveness has recorded 0.750, Expertise has recorded 0.830 and trustworthy has recorded 0.867 of reliability Cronbach alpha value which is greater than 0.7. Travel decision, the dependent variable of the study state that the reliability Cronbach alpha value is 0.869 which is greater than 0.7. Perceived authenticity has stated the reliability Cronbach alpha value is 0.900. Hence all the Cronbach alpha values of major variables are greater than 0.7.

Table 2
Reliability Analysis

Construct	Number of questions	Cronbach's Alpha
Independent Variables		
SMI Content Relevance	04	0.784
Attractiveness	04	0.750
Expertise	04	0.830
Trustworthy	04	0.867
Dependent Variable		
Travel Decision	05	0.869
Mediating Variable		
Perceived Authenticity	05	0.900

Source: Developed by the Author Using SPSS Analysis 2024

The table shows that the overall KMO value is 0.758 and the Bartlett's Test (sig) value is 0.000, both of which are within the acceptable range. Hence the study states that validity of this study is capable enough to measure what it seeks to assess, as the statistical values of the research instrument demonstrated its overall validity in relation to the study.

Table 3
Validity Analysis

Variable	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure	Sig.
SMI Content Relevance	.786	.000
Attractiveness	.758	.000
Expertise	.801	.000
Trustworthy	.812	.000

Perceived Authenticity	.889	.000
Travel Decision	.872	.000

Source: Developed by the Author Using SPSS Analysis

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis is a statistical method used to assess both the strength and direction of relationships between two or more variables. It determines the extent to which changes in one variable are linked to changes in another. The correlation coefficient, symbolized by "r," serves as the main numerical indicator in this process. A positive correlation (where $0 < r < 1$) suggests that as one variable increases, the other tends to increase as well, with the strength of this relationship growing as "r" approaches 1. On the other hand, a negative correlation (where $-1 < r < 0$) means that as one variable increases, the other tends to decrease. The results of the correlation analysis are presented in the table below.

Table 4
Correlation Analysis

Variables	Pearson Correlation Coefficient	P value
SMI Content relevance vs Travel Decisions	0.745	0.000
Attractiveness vs Travel Decision	0.772	0.000
Expertise vs Travel Decision	0.826	0.000
Trustworthy vs Travel Decision	0.804	0.000
Perceived Authenticity vs Travel Decision	0.824	0.000

Source: Developed by Author based on SPSS Analysis 2024

The given values indicate that the correlation between each independent variable and the dependent variable is statistically significant, with a p-value of less than 0.05. Additionally, the correlation coefficient for all independent variables with customer engagement exceeds 0.6, signifying a strong relationship. In every instance, the correlation coefficient is positive, highlighting a robust positive relationship between Social media influencers and travel decisions in the tourism industry. This underscores the strong impact that Social media influencer has on enhancing travel decisions.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Regression analysis can be used to assess the relationship between independent factors and dependent variables. Simple regression analysis and multiple regression analysis are the two primary types of regression analysis that are frequently used. When there is only one dependent variable and one independent variable, simple regression makes sense; when there are multiple independent variables, multiple regression is used (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). In this study, there are four independently identifiable variables which are

being considered for analysis. Consequently, to evaluate the level of correlation between the independent variables and the variable under investigation, the researcher employed multiple regression analysis.

Table 5
Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	Durbin-Watson
1	.875 ^a	.765	.763	.38158	.765	295.751	4	363	.000	1.906

a. Predictors: (Constant), Avg_TrustW, Avg_SMICContent, Avg_Attractive, Avg_Expertise

b. Dependent Variable: Avg_TravelDec

Mediation Analysis

To attempt to analyze this hypothesis, the researcher believed two models and used PROCESS macro modeling to determine the mediating variables' impact on the relationship between independent and dependent variables (Hayes & Rockwood, 2017).

Table 6
Model Summary- Mediation Analysis

Model Summary						
R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
0.8801	0.7745	0.1391	626.7812	2	365	0.0000

Source: Developed by the Author Using SPSS Analysis 2024

This model predicts for Average Travel Decisions (Avg_TD) including Avg_SMIC and Avg_Auth. Average Social Media Influencer Characteristics (Avg_SMIC) is the average of SMI Content Relevance, Trustworthiness of SMI Content relevance, Attractiveness of SMI Content, Expertise of SMI.

The model exhibits adequacy with an R-square value of 0.7745, indicating that approximately 77.45% of the variance in "Average Travel Decisions" is explained by the average of independent variables and the mediating variable, Perceived Authenticity. This substantial R-square value signifies a strong ability of the model to predict and account for variations in the dependent variable.

Furthermore, the model's validity is robust, supported by a significant F-statistic of 626.7812 with a p-value of .000. The F-statistic assesses whether the overall model is

statistically significant, and in this case, the extremely low p-value suggests that the model is highly significant. This underscores the collective influence of the independent variables (SMI Content Relevance, Trustworthiness of SMI Content, Attractiveness of SMI Content, Expertise of SMI) and the mediating variable (Perceived Authenticity) on domestic tourist travel decisions.

In conclusion, the model demonstrates both adequacy and validity, indicating its effectiveness in explaining and predicting the variations in Average Travel Decisions among domestic tourists in Sri Lanka.

Total effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	c_cs
0.9472	0.0275	34.4202	0.0000	0.8931	1.0013	0.8741

Direct effect of X on Y						
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	c'_cs
0.7315	0.0588	12.4316	0.0000	0.6158	0.8472	0.675

Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Avg_Auth	0.2157	0.0692	0.0707	0.3456

With a correlation of 0.2917 ($p = 0.000$), the direct relationship between Average Social Media Influencer Characteristics (Avg_SMIC) and Average Travel Decisions (Avg_TD) was highly significant. This suggests that Avg_SMIC has a direct positive impact on Avg_TD, even without considering the mediator. Through the mediator Avg_Auth, the mediation analysis showed a strong indirect effect of Avg_SMIC on Avg_TD. It was found that Avg_Auth had an indirect effect of 0.2157 and a bootstrapped standard error of 0.0692. The bootstrapped 95% confidence interval, which fell between 0.0707 to 0.3456, suggested that the mediation effect was reliable and significant.

The mediation analysis provides robust evidence of the significant influence of Average Social Media Influencer Characteristics (Avg_SMIC) on Average Travel Decisions

(Avg_TD), both directly and indirectly through the mediator Average Authenticity (Avg_Auth).

Hypothesis Testing and Discussion

Table 7
Hypothesis Testing

Number	Hypothesis	Result	Justification
01	There is a significant relationship between SMI Content relevance and Travel decision	Hypothesis accepted	$r = .745$ $p = 0.000$
02	There is a significant relationship between Attractiveness and Travel decision	Hypothesis accepted	$r = .772$ $p = 0.000$
03	There is a significant relationship between Expertise and Travel decision	Hypothesis accepted	$r = .826$ $p = 0.000$
04	There is a significant relationship between Trustworthy and Travel decision	Hypothesis accepted	$r = .804$ $p = 0.000$
05	There is a significant relationship between Perceived authenticity and Travel decision	Hypothesis accepted	$r = .824$ $p = 0.000$
06	There is a significant relationship between attributes of social media influencers (SMI characteristics) and travel decisions made by tourists is significantly mediated by Perceived Authenticity	Hypothesis accepted	BootLLCI - 0.0707 BootULCI - 0.3456

Source: Developed by the Author

Discussion and Conclusion

Summary of Findings

The impact of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) on travel decision-making has become increasingly significant in today's environment. The goal of this study is to understand the complicated relationships that exist between important influencer characteristics and domestic travelers' decisions. Discovering the complex relationships influencing travel decisions is the goal of the study, which focuses on SMI Content Relevance, Attractiveness, Expertise, and Trustworthiness. The study underscores the noteworthy impact of social media influencer (SMI) content on travel decisions, as evidenced by a substantial correlation coefficient of 0.849. Additionally, the influential role of expertise in shaping travel choices is highlighted by a robust correlation coefficient of 0.830. These findings emphasize the significance of SMI characteristics in shaping individual travel preferences. Furthermore, a robust positive correlation ($R = 0.897$) is revealed through Linear

Regression Analysis between the dependent variable (travel decision) and a combination of independent variables (SMI Content Relevance, Attractiveness, Expertise, and Trustworthiness). This implies a unified effect of these characteristics on the decision-making process. Notably, the correlation ($R = 0.902$) between the dependent variable (travel decision) and the mediating 75 variable (perceived authenticity) is even more pronounced, underscoring the pivotal role of Perceived Authenticity in moderating the association between travel decisions and the independent variables. Perceived Authenticity emerges as a crucial mediator in the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable, as evidenced by the observed enhancement in the R-value.

Discussion

Objective 01: To identify the impact of social media influencers on domestic tourism destinations and tourism decisions of domestic tourists

This study explores the influence of social media influencers (SMIs) on tourists' behaviour and travel motivations in Sri Lanka. Findings reveal a strong positive correlation between SMI content and travel decisions, with a Pearson coefficient of 0.745 (p-value 0.000). Key factors such as attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, and perceived authenticity significantly impact tourists' decisions, with all factors showing strong correlations above 0.77. Authentic and engaging SMI content plays a critical role in shaping tourists' choices. Similarly, Guerreiro et al. (2019) stated that people who follow SMIs seem to regard their expertise, authenticity, honesty, and trustworthiness, influence their tendency to visit the locations they recommend. Hajli (2014) provided evidence that people's intentions to purchase or take recommendations from social media are positively impacted by their level of trust in influencers and social media. The intention of users to make purchases on social media is positively impacted by perceived usefulness and authenticity as well, which confirms the finding of my study. Pop et al (2022) also confirmed that the trust the followers had on the SMIs content had influenced their decision for purchasing satisfaction after purchasing tourist products SMI recommended. In particular, the mediating role of perceived authenticity was highlighted, indicating that when tourists perceive the content as genuine and authentic, it significantly enhances the influence on their travel decisions. This aligns with the growing importance tourists place on authentic and unique experiences when choosing a travel destination. In accordance with the previous studies (Alic et al. (2017), Guerreiro et al. (2019)) where their results supported that the digital influencers play a significant role in influencing travel decisions, particularly when their content is perceived as authentic; our study showed authenticity of the SMI and their content played a significant role in travel decisions.

Objective 02: To identify and analyze the key factors related to social media influencers that significantly affect domestic tourist travel decisions.

This study explores how social media influencers (SMIs) shape tourists' perceptions of Sri Lanka as a travel destination, highlighting their influence on domestic travel decisions. Key factors like attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, and authenticity are found to have significant positive associations with travel choices. SMI content, in particular, plays a critical role, with these factors explaining a substantial portion ($R^2 = 0.765$) of the variance in travel decisions, and SMI content showing a strong, positive impact ($p < 0.001$). Previous research (Litvin et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2002) has demonstrated the growing importance of social media influencers as reliable sources of travel-related information, which also suggests the importance of the content SMI share as they are the source where they get information from, moreover it was found that tourists prefer to receive information for their travel planning from social media influencers (Cholprasertsuk et al., 2020). The coefficient of attractiveness also shows a positive and significant impact on average travel decisions ($p < 0.001$). Tourists are evidently influenced by visually appealing content in their destination choices. The attractiveness of influencers depends on various factors including their interaction with the followers and content of their posts. Their genuineness and intelligence affect the followers' perception (Malik et al., 2023). According to a study by Chen et al. (2019), the recommendation content's presentation style—vicarious expressiveness and aesthetic appeal—serves as a signal that informs followers about the quality of the products and services. Additionally, their research shown that social media-based content-driven commerce might begin with excellent content and conclude with an impulsive buy, which emphasizes the role of content, its attractiveness and SMI expertise influences in services marketing. The expertise of influencers significantly affects average travel decisions ($p < 0.001$). This underscores the importance of influencers showcasing their knowledge and expertise related to Sri Lanka. Lee and Eastin (2020) mentioned that expertise is conceptually associated with authenticity, and it strongly predicted attitude toward the SMI and follow intention. Trustworthiness demonstrates a strong positive impact on average travel decisions ($p < 0.001$). Trust in influencer content plays a crucial role in shaping tourists' perceptions of Sri Lanka. Guerreiro et al. (2019) mentioned that people who follow SMIs value their advices based on their expertise, authenticity, honesty, and trustworthiness. Model 2 introduces an additional factor, Authenticity, which further enhances the explanatory power of the model ($R^2 = 0.778$). The coefficient for Authenticity is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), emphasizing the pivotal role of authenticity in shaping tourists' perceptions. The correlation analysis reinforces these findings, indicating strong positive correlations between SMI content, attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, perceived authenticity, and travel decisions (all p -values < 0.001).

Objective 03: To identify how perceived authenticity influences the interaction between social media influencers and domestic travel decisions made by tourists.

The study measured the impact of social media influencer (SMI) content on tourists' travel decisions, highlighting the importance of authenticity and visual appeal. A Pearson

correlation coefficient of 0.772 (p-value 0.000) showed a strong positive relationship between visual attractiveness and travel decisions. Content traits like ambition, beauty, and uniqueness also encourage followers, with SMIs gaining more influence when their persona aligns with that of their audience (Malik et al., 2023). Additionally, De Veirman et al. (2017) showed that, for SMIs to positively impact a brand, they must be viewed as credible, attractive, and well-liked. 73 Additionally, the emphasis on authenticity within SMI content played a pivotal role in influencing tourists' decisions. The mediating role of perceived authenticity was evident in the correlation coefficient of 0.824, with a p-value of 0.000. This emphasizes that when tourists perceive the content as authentic, it significantly enhances the influence on their travel decisions. Authenticity becomes a key driver for tourists seeking genuine and unique experiences, contributing to the attractiveness of Sri Lanka as a travel destination. According to Lee & Eastin (2020), SMI endorsements work best when the endorser appears to be selflessly motivated to support the product and his posts are authentic. Additionally, when a post is viewed as being commercially oriented and not authentic it lowers SMI trust, decreases interest in the post, and decreases readiness to look up additional information about the content, which supports the findings. The visual appeal and authenticity collectively contribute to shaping a positive perception of Sri Lanka as a desirable travel destination. Tourists are increasingly drawn to destinations that not only offer picturesque landscapes but also provide authentic and culturally rich experiences, as highlighted by the success of SMI content in influencing travel decisions. In conclusion, the findings related to Objective 03 highlight the substantial impact of SMI content, emphasizing visual appeal and authenticity, on tourists' decisions to choose Sri Lanka as their preferred travel destination. The positive correlations and statistical significance reaffirm the success of incorporating these elements in SMI marketing strategies.

Implications of Study

This study enriches the understanding of social influence theory by adapting it to the digital age, particularly in the context of travel decisions, and highlights the transformative role of social media influencers (SMIs) as creators of travel trends and shapers of consumer behavior. By emphasizing the dynamics of authenticity and trust, the research bridges traditional and modern influences, offering valuable insights into how social influence operates in tourism. Additionally, the study contextualizes these dynamics within Sri Lanka's unique cultural and geographic setting, filling a significant gap in the literature and underscoring the varying impact of SMIs across cultural contexts. Practically, it emphasizes the strategic integration of SMIs into tourism marketing campaigns as a means to enhance destination appeal, especially amid the rising use of social media and positive trends in visitor arrivals. The findings are particularly relevant in crafting post-crisis recovery strategies for Sri Lanka's tourism sector, addressing challenges posed by the economic crisis, COVID-19, and shifting traveler behaviors. By leveraging influencers' persuasive power, the study advocates for a comprehensive

approach to attract both international and domestic travelers while stimulating sustainable development. Moreover, it strengthens evidence-based decision-making by providing empirical insights into SMI integration, enabling tourism stakeholders to design responsive and effective strategies aligned with evolving consumer preferences. This holistic approach positions SMIs as pivotal in revitalizing and sustaining Sri Lanka's tourism industry in an ever-changing global environment.

Limitations and Further Research Directions

Although the goal of this study is to shed light on how social media influencers affect Sri Lankan travelers' decisions to travel, it is crucial to recognize that there are some limitations that may affect the findings' applicability and breadth. The study's long-term applicability may be impacted by the ephemeral nature of social media trends and the dynamic landscape of travel behavior. Travel decisions may alter because of the rapid evolution of social media platforms and user behavior, as highlighted by (Xiang, et al., 2015). Because digital platforms are dynamic, it's possible that SMIs' impact on travel decisions changes over time. Limitations may arise from cultural nuances and variations in how tourists from different backgrounds view and engage with SMIs, despite the study's goal of examining the influence of SMIs within the Sri Lankan cultural setting. (Chen, et al., 2019) highlight that cultural differences may impact how much SMIs affect travelers, which could have an impact on how generalizable the findings are to other tourist categories. Furthermore, external factors outside the purview of social media influencers that affect travel decisions may not be properly taken into account by this study. According to Xiang et al. (2015), travel decisions and behaviors can be greatly impacted by occurrences like political unrest, economic ups and downs, or global health emergencies. The study's emphasis on SMIs alone might not adequately address the complications that these external variables might present. The study may not have been able to fully capture the intricate interactions between SMIs, travel goals, and decision-making processes since it relied too heavily on methodologies like surveys and interviews. According to Magno & Cassia (2018), user-generated material might have many different aspects and be difficult to quantify completely. It's possible that the study did not fully represent the range of encounters and experiences that tourists have with SMIs.

This research was done on the domestic tourist population; although domestic tourists make up a significant amount of the tourism economy, our country's GDP largely depends on international tourists, so it is recommended to do a similar study on international tourists. This study suggests that social media influencers have a significant impact on domestic tourism, which also suggests that the impact of social media influencers extends to other industries and businesses. Therefore, conducting a similar study in multiple industries will provide a detailed understanding of these influences, which could be used to improve businesses and industries as well.

Conclusion

This study has important ramifications for the academic community as well as the real-world context of Sri Lanka's tourism sector. This study intends to add to the body of knowledge on travel decision-making dynamics, particularly in a developing and culturally diverse location like Sri Lanka, by examining the impact of social media influencers (SMIs) on travelers' behavior and motivations. Previous research, including (Xiang, et al., 2015; Cox, et al., 2009; Magno & Cassia, 2018) has provided empirical evidence that highlights the extensive influence of SMIs on consumer behavior, influencing attitudes, perceptions, and intentions. There is, however, a paucity of study on the precise function that SMIs play in shaping travel decisions to Sri Lanka. By offering findings that are both practically useful and intellectually worthwhile for tourist authorities and marketers looking to leverage the potential of SMIs to draw in and keep travelers, this study aims to close this gap. Furthermore, it is imperative to comprehend the changing patterns of tourist behavior as Sri Lanka's tourism industry works to recover from setbacks like security worries, the Easter Sunday assaults of 2019, and the global COVID-19 epidemic. The study's conclusions can provide guidance for strategic marketing initiatives, allowing for a more specialized approach to destination promotion. According to Chen (2019), the results can help authorities make better use of social media sites like Instagram, YouTube, and travel blogs to showcase Sri Lanka's variety of attractions and draw in a wider range of visitors. The study's importance eventually rests in its ability to contribute to the discussion on how people make travel decisions and provide useful advice for marketing Sri Lanka as a popular tourist destination. This research helps the tourism industry expand sustainably by illuminating the complex interactions between SMIs and visitor decisions, which promotes economic expansion and cross-cultural interaction.

This research explores how social media influencers (SMIs) affect tourists' decision-making in Sri Lanka's dynamic tourism environment. By carefully examining perceived authenticity as a mediator, the study reveals significant relationships between SMIs and independent travel decisions. The results demonstrate how important SMI Content Relevance, expertise, attractiveness, and perceived authenticity are in shaping travelers' choices. Social media influencers all have different but significant roles to play in influencing decisions and perceptions. Authenticity's moderating function highlights the complex relationships between influencers, their audiences, and the decision-making processes, giving the story more depth. Essentially, this study highlights the critical role that influencers play in directing the actions of tourists, providing insightful information to both marketers and policymakers. As tourism in Sri Lanka develops further, using influencers to your advantage becomes increasingly important for long-term growth and better visitor experiences.

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