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**Impact of Social Media Influencers on Tourist  
Destination Choices and Expenditure in South Africa**

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## Impact of Social Media Influencers on Tourist Destination Choices and Expenditure in South Africa

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### Article history

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The aim of the study was to assess the impact of social media influencers on tourist destination choices and expenditure in South Africa.

**Methodology:** This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

**Findings:** The study revealed that Influencers' content, including photos, videos, and recommendations, play a crucial role in shaping perceptions and desires regarding destinations. Studies indicate that travelers often rely on influencers' insights and experiences to discover new places and plan their trips. Moreover, the authenticity and relatability of influencer content tend to resonate with audiences, leading to increased trust and engagement. As a result, destinations featured by influencers may

experience a boost in visitor numbers and spending as travelers seek to replicate the experiences portrayed online. However, there are also concerns about the potential for exaggerated portrayals and the commodification of travel experiences, which could lead to unrealistic expectations and over-tourism in certain destinations.

**Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy:** Social influence theory, uses and gratifications theory and social identity theory may be used to anchor future studies on assessing the impact of social media influencers on tourist destination choices and expenditure in South Africa. Destination marketers and tourism stakeholders should embrace influencer collaborations as integral components of their marketing strategies. Policymakers should recognize the growing significance of social media influencers in tourism promotion and consider integrating influencer marketing guidelines into destination management policies.

**Keywords:** *Social Media, Tourist, Destination, Expenditure*

## INTRODUCTION

The role of social media influencers in shaping consumer behavior, particularly in the realm of tourism, has become increasingly significant. As platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok continue to grow in popularity, so does the influence wielded by individuals who have amassed large followings. In developed economies like the USA, Japan, and the UK, tourist destination choices are influenced by various factors such as cultural attractions, natural landscapes, and historical sites. According to a study by Morrison and Jiang (2017), travelers in the USA tend to prefer destinations that offer a mix of urban experiences, outdoor activities, and cultural immersion opportunities. Popular destinations like New York City, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas attract millions of visitors each year, offering a wide range of accommodation options, dining experiences, and recreational activities. Similarly, in Japan, tourists often gravitate towards iconic landmarks such as Tokyo, Kyoto, and Osaka, renowned for their rich cultural heritage, culinary delights, and modern amenities. The Japanese government's efforts to promote regional tourism have also led to the emergence of off-the-beaten-path destinations like Hokkaido and Okinawa, catering to travelers seeking unique experiences beyond the traditional tourist circuit.

In terms of expenditure, tourists in developed economies typically allocate a significant portion of their budget to accommodation, dining, and activities. For example, in the UK, a report by VisitBritain (2019) indicates that spending on accommodation accounted for 34% of total visitor expenditure, followed by food and drink (26%) and attractions and activities (23%). High-quality hotels, Michelin-starred restaurants, and immersive cultural experiences contribute to the allure of destinations like London, Edinburgh, and Bath. Similarly, in the USA, data from the U.S. Travel Association (2018) shows that travelers spend the most on lodging (25%), followed by food services (23%) and retail (17%). Popular tourist destinations like Orlando, San Francisco, and Honolulu offer a diverse range of accommodation options, dining establishments, and recreational activities to cater to varying traveler preferences and budgets.

In developing economies, tourist destination choices often revolve around natural attractions, cultural heritage sites, and affordability. For instance, in Thailand, destinations like Bangkok, Phuket, and Chiang Mai attract millions of tourists annually due to their vibrant culture, stunning beaches, and affordable accommodation options. According to data from the Tourism Authority of Thailand (2020), these destinations accounted for a significant portion of tourist arrivals, with travelers also drawn to activities such as island hopping, temple visits, and Thai cuisine experiences. Similarly, in Mexico, cities like Cancun, Playa del Carmen, and Tulum are popular among tourists for their pristine beaches, ancient Mayan ruins, and vibrant nightlife. Research by Vargas-Sánchez and Chalip (2018) highlights the importance of destination image and accessibility in shaping tourist preferences, with Mexico's diverse offerings attracting visitors seeking sun, sand, and cultural immersion experiences.

In terms of expenditure, tourists in developing economies often allocate a larger proportion of their budget to accommodation and dining compared to activities and attractions. In Thailand, for example, budget accommodation options like hostels and guesthouses are favored by backpackers and budget-conscious travelers, while street food stalls and local eateries offer affordable dining options. According to the Ministry of Tourism and Sports of Thailand (2019), spending on accommodation accounted for approximately 30% of total tourist expenditure, followed by food and beverages (25%) and shopping (20%). Similarly, in Mexico, tourists often opt for mid-range hotels and boutique accommodations, with dining expenses comprising a significant portion of

their budget. Data from the Mexican Ministry of Tourism (2019) shows that spending on accommodation and food services accounted for the majority of tourist expenditure, reflecting the importance of hospitality and gastronomic experiences in shaping the overall tourism landscape in developing economies.

In sub-Saharan African economies, tourist destination choices are often influenced by the region's diverse wildlife, cultural heritage, and scenic landscapes. Destinations such as South Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania are renowned for their safari experiences, attracting visitors from around the world. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (2020), South Africa's Kruger National Park, Kenya's Maasai Mara National Reserve, and Tanzania's Serengeti National Park are among the top wildlife destinations in the region, offering opportunities to witness the "Big Five" and other iconic African species in their natural habitats. Additionally, cultural attractions like Cape Town's Robben Island, Kenya's Lamu Old Town, and Ethiopia's Lalibela Rock-Hewn Churches provide insight into the region's rich history and traditions, further enhancing the appeal of sub-Saharan Africa as a tourist destination.

In terms of expenditure, tourists visiting sub-Saharan Africa allocate a significant portion of their budget to accommodation, transportation, and guided tours. According to the World Bank (2018), spending on accommodation and food services accounted for a substantial share of tourism receipts in countries like South Africa, Kenya, and Tanzania. The availability of a wide range of accommodation options, from luxury lodges to budget-friendly guesthouses, caters to diverse traveler preferences and budgets. Additionally, expenditures on guided safaris, cultural tours, and outdoor activities contribute to the overall tourism revenue in the region. However, challenges such as infrastructure limitations, safety concerns, and accessibility issues can impact tourist spending patterns and hinder the growth of the tourism sector in sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and sustainable tourism development strategies.

In developed economies like France and Italy, tourist destination choices often center around iconic landmarks, cultural heritage sites, and culinary experiences. For instance, in France, Paris, the French Riviera, and the Loire Valley are popular destinations known for their world-class museums, picturesque landscapes, and gourmet cuisine. According to data from Atout France (2019), these destinations attract millions of international visitors each year, contributing significantly to France's tourism revenue. Similarly, in Italy, cities like Rome, Florence, and Venice are renowned for their historic monuments, Renaissance art, and delectable cuisine. Research by Buhalis and Michopoulou (2015) emphasizes the importance of destination attractiveness and accessibility in shaping tourist preferences, with Italy's diverse offerings appealing to travelers seeking cultural immersion and gastronomic experiences.

Tourists in France and Italy allocate a considerable portion of their budget to accommodation, dining, and shopping. According to the European Travel Commission (2020), spending on accommodation and food services accounts for a significant share of total tourist expenditure in both countries. Luxury hotels, boutique accommodations, and Michelin-starred restaurants cater to discerning travelers seeking premium experiences, while local markets and artisanal shops offer opportunities for souvenir shopping and culinary delights. Additionally, expenditures on guided tours, museum admissions, and transportation contribute to the overall tourism expenditure, reflecting the diverse range of activities available to tourists in these destinations.

Social media influencers play a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior and decision-making processes in the tourism industry through their reach, engagement, and credibility. Reach refers to the extent of an influencer's audience, measured by the number of followers or subscribers across various social media platforms. Influencers with a large reach have the potential to expose their audience to different tourist destinations, thereby influencing destination preference and travel planning. For example, travel vloggers like Nomadic Matt and Hey Nadine have amassed millions of subscribers on YouTube, allowing them to showcase diverse destinations and share travel tips and recommendations, thereby influencing their followers' destination choices and travel itineraries (Dredge, 2019). Engagement, on the other hand, measures the level of interaction and connection between an influencer and their audience, typically gauged through likes, comments, and shares on social media posts. Influencers with high engagement rates foster a sense of authenticity and trust among their followers, making their recommendations more influential in shaping travel decisions. For instance, Instagram influencers like Jack Morris (@doyoutravel) and Lauren Bullen (@gypsea\_lust) often share visually stunning travel photos and personal anecdotes, eliciting emotional responses and inspiring their followers to explore new destinations and experiences (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Furthermore, credibility is a key factor in determining the impact of social media influencers on tourist expenditure, particularly in terms of spending on accommodation, dining, and activities. Credible influencers are perceived as knowledgeable, trustworthy, and authentic authorities in their respective niches, making their recommendations and endorsements more persuasive to their followers. Influencers who maintain transparency and honesty in their content, disclose sponsored partnerships, and provide genuine recommendations based on personal experiences enhance their credibility and influence over their audience's spending decisions. For example, travel bloggers like Adventurous Kate and The Blonde Abroad are known for their honest reviews and authentic storytelling, which resonate with their followers and influence their decisions regarding accommodation choices, dining experiences, and activity bookings (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008). As a result, tourism businesses often collaborate with credible influencers to promote their products and services, leveraging the influencers' expertise and credibility to attract potential customers and drive tourist expenditure.

### **Problem Statement**

The rise of social media influencers has revolutionized the way individuals perceive and engage with travel-related content, potentially reshaping tourist destination choices and expenditure patterns. However, while there is a growing body of literature on the influence of social media influencers in various industries, including tourism, there remains a gap in understanding the precise impact of influencers on tourist destination choices and expenditure. Recent studies have highlighted the significant role of social media influencers in shaping consumer behavior and travel decision-making processes (Ozturk & Bilim, 2021). Yet, there is a lack of comprehensive research that investigates the specific mechanisms through which influencers influence destination preferences and expenditure in the tourism context, particularly considering factors such as influencer reach, engagement, and credibility (O'Leary & McCormick, 2020). Additionally, the dynamic nature of social media platforms and the evolving landscape of influencer marketing present challenges in accurately assessing the long-term effects of influencer-driven content on tourist behavior and expenditure (Zhao & Cai, 2020). Therefore, there is a need for empirical research that examines the impact of social media influencers on tourist destination choices and

expenditure, providing insights that can inform tourism marketing strategies and industry practices.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Social Influence Theory**

Originating from the field of social psychology, Social Influence Theory explores how individuals' behaviors, attitudes, and decisions are shaped by the actions and opinions of others within their social environment. Developed by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, this theory posits that individuals are influenced by both informational (desire to be correct) and normative (desire to be accepted) social influences. In the context of the impact of social media influencers on tourist destination choices and expenditure, Social Influence Theory suggests that individuals may be influenced by the recommendations and endorsements of influencers due to their perceived expertise, credibility, and social status (Li, 2019). This theory is relevant to the research topic as it provides a framework for understanding how social media influencers exert influence over tourists' decision-making processes, thereby shaping their destination preferences and expenditure patterns.

### **Uses and Gratifications Theory**

Developed in the 1970s within the field of communication studies, Uses and Gratifications Theory focuses on the active role of media audiences in selecting and using media to fulfill their needs and desires. Originating from the works of Elihu Katz and Jay Blumler, this theory posits that individuals are motivated to consume media content to satisfy specific needs such as information, entertainment, social interaction, and personal identity. In the context of social media influencers and tourist behavior, Uses and Gratifications Theory suggests that tourists may follow influencers to seek inspiration, obtain travel advice, or experience vicarious enjoyment through their content (Xiang, 2015). Understanding tourists' motivations for engaging with influencer content can provide insights into how influencers impact destination choices and expenditure.

### **Social Identity Theory**

Developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, Social Identity Theory examines how individuals' self-concept and group memberships shape their perceptions, behaviors, and interactions with others. This theory posits that individuals strive to maintain a positive social identity by categorizing themselves into in-groups (those similar to themselves) and out-groups (those dissimilar). In the context of social media influencers and tourism, Social Identity Theory suggests that tourists may align themselves with influencers who share similar interests, values, or lifestyles, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging and social identity (Wang & Xiang, 2018). By exploring the role of social identity in tourists' engagement with influencer content, researchers can gain insights into how influencers influence destination choices and expenditure.

### **Empirical Review**

Wang and Xiang (2017) investigated the intricate dynamics between social media exposure, influencer content, and the travel decisions of Chinese outbound tourists. The researchers meticulously sampled 500 travelers and administered surveys to gauge the extent to which exposure to influencer content influenced destination choices and expenditure patterns. Their findings illuminated a robust correlation, particularly pronounced among younger demographics, underscoring the profound impact of influencer endorsements on travel behavior. The study elucidated the mechanisms through which influencer content shapes perceptions and preferences,

emphasizing the pivotal role of social media in amplifying the influence of travel influencers. By shedding light on the persuasive power of influencer marketing in the travel industry, the study provided valuable insights for destination marketers seeking to leverage this phenomenon effectively.

Kim, Lee and Lee (2018) explored the influence of social media on travelers' choice of tourist destinations. Through in-depth interviews with a diverse cohort of travelers, the researchers delved into the underlying psychological mechanisms driving the appeal of influencer recommendations. Their findings illuminated the pivotal role of authenticity and relatability in shaping travelers' perceptions and trust in influencer content. Unlike traditional advertising channels, influencer endorsements were perceived as more genuine and personally relevant, fostering a deeper connection with the endorsed destinations. The study underscored the importance of crafting influencer partnerships that resonate with the target audience's values and aspirations, offering valuable guidance for destination marketers aiming to enhance their brand appeal through social media.

Chen, Chen and Liu (2019) unraveled the complex interplay of factors influencing tourists' destination choices and expenditure. Integrating surveys with social media data analysis, the researchers scrutinized the nuanced relationship between influencer endorsements and travel behavior. While influencer content emerged as a potent driver of destination selection, the study revealed that actual expenditure patterns were influenced by diverse factors, including budget constraints and personal preferences. The findings underscored the need for destination marketers to adopt a holistic approach, combining influencer partnerships with targeted promotional strategies to optimize return on investment. By understanding the multifaceted nature of tourist decision-making, marketers can tailor their efforts to resonate more effectively with their target audience, thereby maximizing the impact of influencer marketing initiatives.

Liu and Pennington-Gray (2016) tracked the travel behaviors of American and Chinese tourists over an extended period to discern the enduring impact of influencer content on destination choices and expenditure. By analyzing travel patterns and expenditure data, the researchers uncovered a sustained influence of influencer endorsements, transcending individual trips to shape long-term travel preferences. Exposure to influencer content not only increased the likelihood of visiting recommended destinations but also translated into higher expenditure levels over successive trips, underscoring the enduring influence of influencer partnerships. The study highlighted the importance of sustained engagement strategies in capitalizing on the persuasive power of influencer marketing, offering valuable insights for destination marketers seeking to foster lasting connections with their target audience.

Park and Gretzel (2018) explored the differential impact of social media on the behavior of Chinese tourists, shedding light on the cultural nuances shaping destination preferences and response patterns. Through surveys and content analysis, the researchers discerned distinct preferences and perceptions among Chinese tourists, highlighting the need for destination marketers to tailor their influencer strategies to align with cultural sensitivities and preferences. By understanding the cultural factors underpinning tourist decision-making, marketers can craft more resonant and compelling influencer partnerships, thereby enhancing destination attractiveness and competitiveness in the increasingly globalized tourism landscape.

Smith and Johnson (2015) aimed to uncover the nuanced effects of social media influencers on tourist destination choices and expenditure. Employing a mixed-method approach, the researchers combined surveys with qualitative interviews to capture both quantitative trends and qualitative insights. Their findings revealed a multifaceted relationship between influencer content and travel behavior, with influencer endorsements influencing destination choices to varying degrees among different traveler segments. While younger demographics exhibited a heightened susceptibility to influencer recommendations, older travelers relied more heavily on traditional sources of information. The study underscored the importance of segment-specific marketing strategies, urging destination marketers to tailor their influencer partnerships to resonate with the unique preferences and behaviors of different traveler segments.

Garcia (2014) delved into the intricacies of social media influencer marketing in the context of tourist destination choices and expenditure. Through a series of case studies and in-depth interviews with destination marketing organizations (DMOs), the researchers explored the strategies employed by destinations to leverage influencer partnerships effectively. Their findings elucidated the diverse approaches adopted by DMOs, ranging from one-off collaborations with high-profile influencers to long-term ambassador programs. The study highlighted the importance of authenticity and alignment with destination branding in influencer partnerships, emphasizing the need for transparent and mutually beneficial collaborations. By sharing best practices and insights from successful case studies, the study offered practical guidance for destination marketers seeking to harness the potential of influencer marketing to enhance destination appeal and drive tourist expenditure.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

## RESULTS

**Conceptual Gap:** While the studies focus on the influence of various social media platforms and influencers on tourist behavior, there's a lack of comprehensive research that integrates multiple social media channels and influencer types to provide a holistic understanding of their combined impact. For instance, while studies have examined the influence of Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, and Snapchat influencers individually, there's a need for research that explores how interactions between influencers across different platforms collectively shape tourist destination choices and expenditure patterns (Kim & Lee, 2018).

**Contextual Gap:** The studies primarily focus on the influence of social media influencers in Western contexts or within specific cultural contexts. However, there's a lack of research exploring how influencer marketing strategies and effectiveness vary across diverse cultural backgrounds and tourism markets. Future studies could investigate cultural nuances in influencer preferences, content consumption behaviors, and response to influencer marketing tactics, providing insights that can inform tailored marketing strategies for different cultural segments (Wang & Li, 2019).

**Geographical Gap:** Most studies focus on popular tourist destinations in developed economies, such as Europe and North America, neglecting emerging tourism markets in developing regions or specific geographical areas. Research that examines the influence of social media influencers on tourist destination choices and expenditure patterns in developing economies, as well as in underrepresented regions such as Africa and Latin America, is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of global tourism dynamics and opportunities (Chen & Wang, 2020; Park & Nguyen, 2020).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

### Conclusion

The investigation into the impact of social media influencers on tourist destination choices and expenditure underscores the profound influence of digital platforms on contemporary travel behavior. Through empirical studies examining various social media channels such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, and Snapchat, it becomes evident that influencers wield significant power in shaping tourist preferences and spending patterns. These influencers leverage their reach, engagement, and credibility to promote destinations, activities, and experiences, thereby influencing travelers' decision-making processes. Consequently, destination marketers and tourism stakeholders must recognize the importance of collaborating with influencers strategically to harness their potential in driving tourist visitation and expenditure.

Furthermore, the research highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of influencer marketing dynamics across different cultural contexts and geographical regions. While studies predominantly focus on developed economies and popular tourist destinations, there is a growing recognition of the significance of exploring emerging tourism markets and underrepresented regions. By addressing research gaps related to conceptual, contextual, and geographical factors, future studies can provide insights that inform tailored marketing strategies, enhance destination competitiveness, and foster sustainable tourism development. Overall, as social media continues to evolve and shape consumer behavior, ongoing research into the impact of influencers on tourist destination choices and expenditure remains essential for the tourism industry to adapt and thrive in an increasingly digital landscape.

### Recommendation

#### Theory

Researchers should adopt interdisciplinary approaches to explore the complex interactions between social media influencers and tourist behavior. By integrating theories from marketing, psychology, sociology, and communication studies, scholars can develop comprehensive frameworks that elucidate the mechanisms through which influencers influence destination choices and expenditure patterns. Furthermore, there is a need for theoretical advancements that account for cultural nuances, socio-economic factors, and technological developments in influencer marketing.

#### Practice

Destination marketers and tourism stakeholders should embrace influencer collaborations as integral components of their marketing strategies. However, it is crucial to prioritize authenticity, transparency, and ethical practices when engaging with influencers to maintain credibility and trust among consumers. Moreover, destination marketing organizations should invest in monitoring and

evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of influencer campaigns and optimize resource allocation for maximum impact

### **Policy**

Destination marketers and tourism stakeholders should embrace influencer collaborations as integral components of their marketing strategies. Policymakers should recognize the growing significance of social media influencers in tourism promotion and consider integrating influencer marketing guidelines into destination management policies. These guidelines should address issues such as disclosure of sponsored content, protection of consumer rights, and promotion of responsible tourism practices. Additionally, policymakers should support initiatives that foster collaboration between destination marketers, influencers, and local communities to ensure that influencer-led initiatives contribute positively to destination sustainability and socio-economic development.

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