



Tourist Engagement in the Era of Influencers: Integrating Parasocial Interaction and Destination Preferences into a Conceptual Framework

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Abstract. The increasing importance of social media influences in travel promotion has transformed how destinations are visualized, trusted, and selected as part of the travel decision. Recent studies show that influence credibility, travel vlogs, which are often referred to as travel storytelling, viewer engagement, and parasocial interaction are important for selecting travel destinations, but in the recent studies literature remains fragmented. Engagement is often treated as an indicator, parasocial interaction as an independent social construct, and destination choice as a downstream outcome disengaged from border destination theory. This study addresses that gap by developing an integrated conceptual framework that links tourist engagement, parasocial interaction, destination brand image, and destination preference. Drawing attention to parasocial interaction theory, customer engagement literature, and destination theory. This paper argues that engagement with influencer content is the initiating condition that reinforces one-sided relational closeness with travel influencers; that parasocial interaction shapes the co-creation of destination brand image; and that destination image translates into digitally mediated meanings into destination preference. Inspired by a problematic approach to destination scholarship, this paper also reframes destination preference as more than an individual response to promotional messages. It is an outcome emerging from symbolic, relational, and sociocultural processes in digital markets. Seven propositions are advanced, and implications are developed for theory, destination management, influencer strategy, and future empirical research. This study contributes by shifting the discussion from narrow persuasion logic to a more understanding of how influence-led marketing shapes destination preferences.

Keywords: Tourist Engagement, Parasocial Interaction, Destination Preference, Destination Image, Social Media Influencer, Tourism Marketing

1 Introduction

Tourism Marketing now operates in an environment wherein destinations of travel are not only communicated by destination management, online travel applications, and official brand campaigns (Xiang & Gretzel, 2009). In this creativity led ecosystem; travel influencers do more than just display destinations. They create experiences by framing model lifestyles, curate meanings and shape the symbolic value of places before travelling. As a result, potential tourists increasingly evaluate destinations through the stories, aesthetics and personalities which is attached to influencer content rather than formal communication. (Kabra, 2024)

This evolution matters because tourism products are intangible, experimental and difficult to assess prior to consumption. Hence, tourists rely on cues that reduce doubts and help them imagine their experiences in future for travelling. Research has already been done wherein results show that customer engagement on social media matters for brand evolution and behavioral outcomes (Hollebeek & Solem, 2017). Parasocial interaction with influencers can affect travel intention, and that destination image it strongly predicts tourists' behavioral intentions (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021). These streams have developed in parallel rather than as an integrated explanatory system.

The main limitation of the current literature is not a lack of relevant constructs, but it is lack of conceptual integration. Recent studies on influencer marketing often prioritize source credibility, attractiveness, or content performance. (De Veirman et al., 2017; Ki & Kim, 2019; Ohanian, 1990). Parasocial interaction studies emphasize relational closeness between social media audiences. Destination studies often focus on image and behavioral intention without fully summarizing how digitally mediated relationships transform perceptions of place. Scholarship still lacks a coherent framework explaining how the tourist engagement with influencer content evolves into parasocial interaction, to know how that relationship shapes the image of the destination, and how the resulting image of a destination also to know how the resulting image converts into destination priority (Liu et al., 2023).

This study develops such a framework, which specifically proposes that tourist engagement operates as the initiating condition, parasocial interaction as the rational mechanism, destination image as the interpretive and meaning making layer, and destination preference as the downstream evaluative outcome. The study also brings inspiration from destination theory that challenges static, managerially defined views of destinations and instead conceptualizes destinations as strong, socially constructed markets in which meanings are produced and negotiated by multiple actors. This initiative is important because influencer driven tourism is not only a communication problem; it is also a destination meaning problem.

Accordingly, the objective of this study is two-sided; first, to integrate tourist engagement on social media platform wherein influencer is posting, and destination preference into a single conceptual framework. Second, it is to reposition destination preference within a broader sociocultural understanding of tourism marketing. By doing so, the study aims to produce a stronger conceptual platform for future empirical work and a more rigorous basis for destination managers seeking to frame influencer strategies that go beyond reach and visibility.

2 Challenging Current Approaches to Influencer – Driven Tourism

Several previous studies highlight that influence-driven tourism mainly focuses on views, likes, and followers. But all these things do not fully explain why people choose a place to visit and like to visit. Sometimes tourists are not influenced by just beautiful content, but also by emotions, trust, and how real the influencers feel to them. Here, a very significant question is whether influencers truly help people to make better travel choices or just create temporary excitement. So here these approaches showcase how to look at influence-driven tourism in a more realistic, deeper way.

2.1 The managerial persuasion approach

The first stream treats influencer marketing primarily as a promotional technique. (Freberg et al., 2010). Here, the major problem is to prioritize whether influencer attributes such as credibility, trustworthiness, experience, expertise, attractiveness, or platform performance can enhance and increase travel intention or revisit intention. How attributes and features change the mindset of tourists towards travel intention. This approach has practical relevance because destination marketers often make influencer decisions on the principle of visibility, appropriate content, and persuasive power. (De Veirman et al., 2017). The main tends to be inclined to frame destinations as end products to be packaged and communicated, and followers as targets to be influenced. Such a logic favors traditional destination marketing models that view destinations as bundles of attributes managed for consumption. Apart from that, this stream explains why certain influencers accomplish better than others, because it offers only a one-sided story of destination preferences formation. It de-emphasizes how followers actively analyze, build meanings around places, and bring their own identities and imagination into the assessment. It also risks reducing destination preference to a narrow communication outcome rather than a more layered social and symbolic process. (Gretzel et al., 2015).

2.2 The relational psychological approach

The second stream and objective majorly emphasize parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships. This stream is a major advance because it explains why influencer communication can feel unusually persuasive: audiences often see creators as familiar, relatable, and trustworthy companions. (Lou & Kim, 2019). In the tourism industry, this is crucial because travel decisions are future-oriented or based on future demand and imagination. When followers feel emotionally close to a creator's portrayal of a destination become more vivid, authentic, and believable. (Kim & Song, 2016). Ultimately, followers are emotionally closed by something, so their visit intention automatically increases. Even this stream often isolates parasocial interaction from the broader engagement process that makes ties possible. Parasocial interaction does not emerge in a vacuum. It is preceded by repeated attention, emotional involvement, and behavioral

participation in content. A model that treats parasocial interaction as a standalone construct misses the cumulative role of engagement and the way platform-based interaction intensifies relational closeness over time (Tukachinsky, 2011).

2.3 The destination image and behavioral intention approach

Now the third-stream center highlights destination image, attitude, intention, and preference. This literature has consistently shown that thinking of tourists and feelings about a place strongly affects whether they intend to visit, recommend, or return. The meta-analytic evidence confirms that destination image is a powerful predictor of tourist behavioral intentions. (Zhang et al., 2014) Although this stream has generally paid less attention to how the image is increasingly shaped in digital. Socially networked environments where narratives circulate through influences, the viewers, and platform interactions. (Abidin, 2016)

As a result, image formation is often discussed as if it were an outcome of exposure to destination information rather than a socially mediated and emotionally filtered process. In influencer-led contexts image is not only simply accepted; it is co-created through storytelling, which is often called vlogs. Also, other factors are included in it, like identification, commentary, imitation, and aspirational comparison. All these factors are very crucial for the influence of travelers.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Theoretical Approaches and the Proposed Integrative Perspective

Approach	Primary focus	Contribution	Key Limitation for this study
Managerial Persuasion	Influencer credibility, attractiveness, reach, persuasion	Explain campaign effectiveness and source effects	Treats the destination as a passive promotional object and followers as targets
Relational Psychology	Parasocial Interaction and Audience Closeness	Explains why influencers feel persuasive and trustworthy	Underplays engagement as the initiating condition
Destination image/Behavioral intention	Image, attitude, visit, intention, preference	Links destination perception to behavior	Under theorizes how digital relationships shape image formation
Integrative view proposed here	Engagement → parasocial interaction → image → preference	Connects platform interaction, relational bonds and destination meaning	Requires future empirical validation across contexts

2.4 Why is a broader destination perspective needed

A more fundamental problem cuts across three streams: the destination itself is too often treated as a stable object rather than a socially constructed market. Destination theory, destinations are not merely geographic containers or packages of attractions. They are effectual configuration of actors, institutions, representation, and meanings that are constantly negotiated. This point becomes even more important in social media environments, where destinations are continuously re-authored by influencers, followers, residents, and algorithmically amplified stories.

In this way, destination preferences are not just the end conclusion of exposure to persuasive content. It is the result of how digital audience engages with narratives on social media or other platforms, form relational bonds with content creators and internalize destination meanings that fit their own self- concepts and expected experience as they have seen in vlogs and content posted by influencers on social media.

3 Toward an Integrative Framework

This paper proposes an integrative framework that links tourist engagement, parasocial interaction, destination image and destination priority. The model combines a micro-level explanation of tourist psychology with a broader destination concept. At the micro level, it tells us how tourists engage with influencer content and develop one-sided relational engagement. At the destination level, it clarifies how this relational process shapes the symbolic construction of place and eventually destination preference.

3.1 Tourist engagement as the initiating condition

Engagement is conceptualized here as a multidimensional state involving cognitive attention, emotional involvement, and behavioral involvement. This understanding is compatible with engagement scholarship that treats engagement not merely as an observable activity but as an optimistic brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment. In tourism, engagement includes watching and revisiting travel vlogs uploaded on social media, saving posts, scrolling through comments, imagining oneself in the destination, and sharing content with others on social media. The bigger picture matters because influencer content is essentially immersive. The experience of tourism must be imagined before it is experienced, consumed, and actively engagement provides real psychological energy through which that visualization happens. Repeated engagement with a creator's travel narrative increases familiarity, interpretive depth, and emotional intensity, creating the conditions under which parasocial interaction can grow.

3.2 Parasocial interaction as the relational mechanism

Parasocial interaction theory clarifies how audiences form one-sided but psychologically meaningful ties with media figures (Lee & Jin, 2017). In social media environments, these ties are strengthened because influencers are perceived as accessible, personal and authentic. Unlike traditional celebrities, travel influencers often invite audiences into ordinary moments, BTS (Behind the scenes) experiences and first-person narration, making the relationship between influencer and audience feel more engaging and less distant.

With the proposed model, parasocial interaction is the central relational mechanism that translates engagement into persuasion. The more tourists engage with the influencer's content, the more they feel that the influencer's content is worth their trust and treat their destination portrayal as experimentally credible. Parasocial interaction, hence, becomes the bridge between platform-based engagement and destination-related cognition.

3.3 Destination image as co-created meaning

Destination image is often treated as the cognitive and affective picture a tourist holds of a place. That remains useful, but in influence-led tourism, it is important to push the concept further. Destination image is not formed solely by destination attributes or formal communication; it is assembled through narratives, images, comments, imagined lifestyles, and symbolic associations circulating in the digital market. In this sense, an image is a less simple mental snapshot and more of a co-created interpretive structure, and it also provides a wider and clearer picture of a destination.

Parasocial interaction intensifies this process. When followers feel close to the influencer, they do not merely observe the destination; they view it through the influencer's relational lens. The evaluation of a destination is done by places with attractions, scenery, and various facilities, but also as a setting for a desirable identity performance, a meaningful experience, and a story worth inhabiting. This is where destination theory and influencer theory meet most clearly and provide a road map to practical application.

3.4 Destination Preference as an evaluative outcome

Destination preference refers to a favorable orientation toward one destination relative to competing alternatives. In the present framework, preference is not limited to intention to visit. It includes comparative desirability, willingness to prioritize a destination, emotional learning toward one place, and the tendency to treat one destination as a

preferred future choice. Such preference is framed not only by destination attributes but by the meanings attached to them.

Accordingly, destination preference is theorized here as the outcome of a process in which engagement deepens relational closeness, and parasocial interaction shapes destination meaning. The model also leaves room for a direct path from parasocial interaction to preference because tourists may want to follow an influencer’s lifestyle or reproduce the influencer’s experience even before a full destination image is combined.

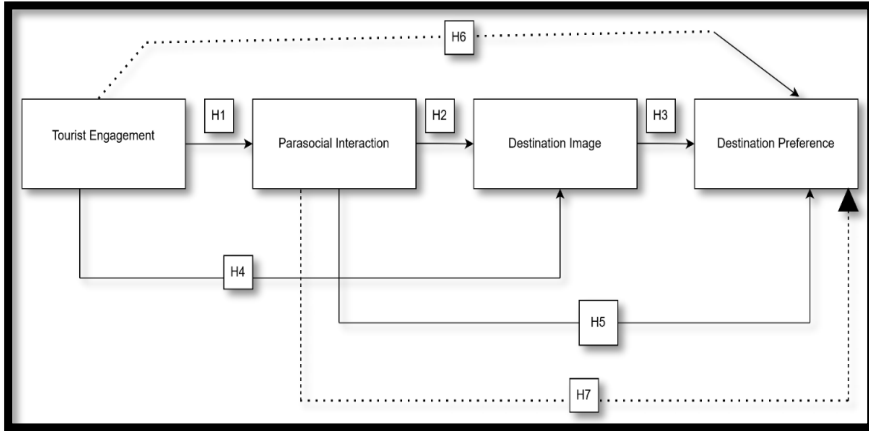


Fig. 1. Proposed Conceptual Framework of Tourist Engagement, Parasocial Interaction, Destination Image, and Destination Preference.

This figure presents the proposed conceptual framework examining the relationships among tourist engagement, parasocial interaction, destination image, and destination preference. The model proposes that tourist engagement positively influences parasocial interaction (H1), while parasocial interaction positively affects destination image (H2). Further, destination image is expected to positively influence destination preference (H3). In addition to these sequential relationships, the framework also proposes a direct effect of tourist engagement on destination image (H4) and a direct effect of parasocial interaction on destination preference (H5). Moreover, parasocial interaction is proposed to mediate the relationship between tourist engagement and destination preference (H6), while destination image is expected to mediate the relationship between parasocial interaction and destination preference (H7). Overall, the framework

explains how engagement with tourism-related content may shape tourists' preferences both directly and indirectly through parasocial bonds and destination perceptions.

4 Propositions Development

4.1 P1 Tourist Engagement positively influences parasocial interaction with travel influencers

Repeated cognitive attention, emotional absorption, and behavioral interaction increase familiarity with the influencer's persona, values, communication, style, and travel exposure. As this familiarity deepens, tourists are more likely to experience the influencer as relatable and socially present, which increases parasocial interaction.

4.2 P2 Parasocial interaction positively influences destination image

When followers feel psychologically close to a travel influencer, the influencer's portrayal of the destination is likely to be perceived as more credible, emotionally loud, and experientially vivid. Parasocial closeness, therefore, enhances the quality and positivity of destination image formation.

4.3 P3 Tourist engagement positively influences destination image

Engaged tourist processes travel content in a more effective way, it is closer to symbolic and experiential cues, and they are more likely to imagine themselves in the destination. This enhances the cognitive and affective processing, which should strengthen destination image directly, even before parasocial interaction is considered.

4.4 P4 Destination image positively influences destination preference

A favorable image of a destination increases comparative attractiveness, emotional appeal to the audience, and the likelihood that tourists will privilege that destination over competing alternatives. Destination preference should therefore rise as destination image becomes more positive and coherent.

4.5 P5 Parasocial interaction positively influences destination preferences

Beyond its indirect effect through image, parasocial interaction may directly shape destination preference because followers may desire to imitate the travel experience, trust the influencer's recommendation, and align their future choices with the influencer's lifestyle cues.

4.6 P6 Parasocial interaction mediates the relationship between tourist engagement and destination preference

Engagement alone does not explain why tourism content becomes persuasive. Its persuasive power is partly realized when engagement develops into parasocial closeness, which further translates attention and interaction into destination-oriented preference.

4.7 P7 Destination image mediates the relationship between parasocial interaction and destination preference

Parasocial interaction may first modify the way the destination is imagined and evaluated, and only then influence destination preference. Hence, the image mechanism explains how relational closeness is converted into destination choice tendencies.

5 Discussion

This research proposes a new framework that makes three significant contributions to the theory of tourism marketing. Firstly, it changes the way we think about engagement, seeing it as a process that happens before anything else, rather than just a way to measure how well something is doing. Often, when we look at how influencers are doing, we just count likes, views, and comments. But this study says that these actions are just the tip of the iceberg - they're a sign of something deeper going on in people's minds, like paying attention, being fully involved, and taking part. This is really important because it helps us understand why some content from influencers is so much better at shaping people's decisions about travel than other content that reaches the same number of people but doesn't resonate with them emotionally. By looking at engagement in this new way, we can get a better sense of what really drives people's choices when it comes to tourism. When we think about what makes us want to visit a certain place, one thing that really matters is how we connect with the people who influence our decisions. This kind of connection is called parasocial interaction, and it's like having a relationship with someone we've never met, but who we feel like we know through social media or other channels. Research has shown that this type of interaction can really shape our attitudes towards a destination and even influence our travel plans. What's new about this idea is that it helps us understand exactly how our engagement with influencers can turn into a desire to visit a particular place. It's not just about how credible or relevant the influencer is, but about how they make us feel connected to the place they're talking about. This way of thinking about destination preference is more detailed and theoretically sound than other models, and it helps us see the process of how we become persuaded to visit a certain place. By focusing on the relational mechanism that drives this process, we can get a better understanding of what really matters when it comes to influencing our travel choices. Third, last but not least and most frequently, the paper strengthens the destination side of the argument. Rather than treating the destination as a passive endpoint of communication, the framework draws on a broader destination perspective in which places are socially produced, symbolically mediated and continuously negotiated. This highlights the stronger part of this framework and its relevance

of the current need of hours. This shift is particularly important in influencer-led tourism because destination meanings now circulate through creators, audiences, algorithms and digital communities.

6 Implications

6.1 Theoretical implications

The study takes a closer look at how people interact with destinations in the tourism industry, and how this interaction can lead to a stronger connection with the place. By doing so, it sheds light on the importance of engagement in shaping our preferences for certain destinations. What's more, the research suggests that engagement is not just a result of effective tourism communication, but also a crucial step in building a relationship with the destination and forming a lasting image of it. This is a significant contribution to our understanding of how destinations are perceived and experienced. Furthermore, the study brings a fresh perspective to the field by highlighting the role of socio-cultural and market constructions in influencing tourism persuasion. This means that the way we think about and interact with destinations is not just shaped by marketing efforts, but also by the social and cultural context in which we experience them. By exploring this new aspect of the tourism sector, the study opens up new avenues for future research, particularly in the digital ecosystem where destination meanings are created and shared. Ultimately, this research has the potential to help us better understand how people engage with destinations, and how we can foster a deeper connection between tourists and the places they visit.

6.2 Managerial Implications

For organizations managing destinations and tourism marketers, the model indicates that influencer campaigns ought to be assessed not merely by surface-level exposure metrics but rather by their ability to foster significant engagement and relational intimacy. It suggests that the followers count alone is not only sufficient, appropriate, or an inadequate criterion for adequate collaboration. Influencers who are narratively strong, perceived as authentic, and capable of generating repeat interaction may be more valuable than high reach creators with weak relational appeal. The suggested framework also suggests that destinations should be presented not merely as scenic products but as storied spaces of possible identity, emotion, and experience. Campaign design should thus emphasize immersive storytelling, personal reflection, interaction within comment layers, and content formats that enable followers to envision them-

selves in the destination. Campaign design should thus emphasize immersive storytelling, personal reflection, interaction within comment layers, and content formats that enable followers to envision themselves in the destination. The given influencer strategy becomes more efficient and effective when it is primarily aligned with the destination's meaning rather than detached from the promotional visibility

6.3 Social and Policy Implications

Influence-led tourism has wider outcomes for how destinations are socially understood. Influencers can democratize destination discovery, draw attention to under-promoted places, and support local businesses and cultural visibility. Simultaneously, they have the potential to enhance tourism, create aesthetically pleasing locations in deceptive manners, and generate unrealistic expectations. Parasocial interactions can increase the effectiveness of persuasion, making ethical concerns paramount. The key focus is on the various ethical dilemmas related to this. Policymakers and destination authorities ought to advocate for transparent disclosure, responsible storytelling, and collaborations that align influencer campaigns with sustainable tourism objectives. This approach will also significantly contribute to the formulation of effective governance strategies. Additionally, influencer strategies can be oriented towards promoting dispersal, enhancing heritage awareness, and fostering community-based tourism.

6.4 Future research agenda

The framework is theoretical and necessitates empirical validation across various platforms, types of destinations, and segments of tourists. Future investigations could explore whether the model exhibits different behaviors for luxury, adventure, spiritual, heritage, or rural destinations. Additionally, it would be beneficial to analyze short timing videos in comparison to vlog-based platforms on YouTube and Instagram, as the rhythm and intimacy of the content may influence the development of parasocial interactions. Factors such as authenticity, self-congruity, familiarity with the destination, platform characteristics, sponsorship, and the type of influencer should also be examined. Likewise, subsequent research could broaden the outcome aspect of the model to encompass visit intentions, willingness to pay, advocacy for the destination, or actual booking behaviors. From a methodological perspective, this model could be developed through survey-based structural equation modeling, experiments utilizing simulated influencer content, or mixed-method approaches that integrate engagement analytics with perceptual assessments.

7 Conclusion

This study sets out to strengthen the conceptual foundation of influence-led tourism research. It argued that the existing literature remains fragmented because engagement, parasocial interaction, and destination preference are often examined in isolation, while

the destination itself is too frequently treated as a static object of promotion. In response, the paper proposed an integrative framework in which tourist engagement initiates a relational process, parasocial interaction operates as a central mechanism, destination image functions as a co-created meaning structure, and destination preference emerges as the evaluative outcome. By integrating engagement theory, parasocial interaction theory, and a comprehensive perspective on destinations, this manuscript provides a more robust foundation for future research and offers refined guidance for practitioners in the field of destination management. The central assertion is clear yet significant: in the era of influences, preferences for destinations are shaped not merely by exposure to information, but rather through engagement, relationships, meaning, and imagination.

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