

# **THEORIZING INFLUENCER MARKETING PROCESS: A GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER-LED TOURISM PROMOTION IN KASHMIR**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to examine the influencer marketing process for tourist destinations and explore the strategies employed at each stage, with a focus on Kashmir. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with destination marketing professionals as well as micro-level and macro-level social media influencers involved in Kashmir's influencer marketing campaigns. A qualitative Grounded Theory approach was applied to analyse the data from nine interviews, using NVivo 12 for coding. The findings reveal that influencer marketing for tourist destinations unfolds in six stages: (1) setting objectives, (2) framing influencer selection criteria, (3) making content decisions, (4) determining the mode of remuneration, (5) coordinating with influencers, and (6) post-campaign content sharing. This study provides detailed documentation of the influencer marketing process in a conflict-affected destination and highlights key strategies adopted at different stages of such campaigns.

**Keywords:** Influencer Marketing, Social Media Influencers, Influencer Marketing Practices, Tourism Promotion, Influencer Marketing Process, Social Media Influencer selection criteria, Influencer Marketing Objectives, Qualitative Approach, Grounded Theory, Travel Sector.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The digital age has transformed every aspect of life, including travel. From discovering new destinations and activities to planning logistics such as hotels, cabs, or flights, travellers now rely heavily on social media (Zivkovic, Gajic, & Brdar, 2014; Bou Mjahed, Mittal, Elfar, Mahmassani, & Chen, 2017). However, despite its ease of use, users are often interrupted by intrusive marketing stimuli like pop-ups, banners, and sponsored ads, which are widely disliked (Niu, Wang, & Liu, 2021; De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017).

Given that contemporary travellers are more active online than offline, marketers must engage them where they congregate. Thus, destination marketing increasingly integrates internet-based channels, social media, blogs, websites, alongside traditional media such as television, print, and radio (Cavlak, 2021). Yet capturing the attention of easily distracted travellers is challenging (Muñoz-Leiva, Hernández-Méndez, & Gómez-Carmona, 2019). Moreover, the effectiveness of online advertising declines with tools like ad blockers (Dogtiev, 2016) and premium subscriptions (Morrison, 2016).

With shrinking attention spans (Tuten & Solomon, 2017), destination marketers are turning to influencers to bypass these obstacles and connect effectively with tourists (Harrigan, Evers, Miles, & Daly, 2017; Singh & Munjal, 2021). Influencers, defined as individuals with a substantial following and strong engagement (Haobin Ye, Fong, & Luo, 2021), act as informed consumers who share authentic reviews and recommendations (Shrivastava & Jain, 2022). Travellers seeking credible advice increasingly rely on them when making informed choices (Pop, Saplăcan, Dabija, & Alt, 2022). Consequently, influencers now shape tourist perceptions of destinations, services, and experiences, prompting hotels, tourism boards, and DMOs to integrate them into marketing strategies (Femenia-Serra, Gretzel, & Alzua-Sorzabal, 2022; Gholamhosseinzadeh, 2023; Shin, Jeong, So, & DiPietro, 2022).

Existing research has explored the impact of influencers on tourist behaviour (Kapoor, Balaji, Jiang, & Jebarajakirthy, 2022), travel intentions (Yılmazdoğan, Doğan, & Altıntaş, 2021), and decision-making (Pop et al., 2022). They have been recognised as valuable for destination awareness (Lou & Yuan, 2019) and brand equity (Es-Safi & Sağlam, 2021). However, gaps still remain. However, there is a cavity of knowledge pertaining to our understanding of how diverse players within the hospitality and tourism industry incorporate influencer marketing and how it affects them. As apparent from a systematic review of studies addressing social media marketing in the context of the tourism sector, forty-four per cent of the studies carried out between 2012 and 2019 lacked a theoretical foundation (Chu, Deng, & Cheng, 2020). Another systematic review conducted on influencer marketing within travel and tourism indicated that most of the studies carried out between 2017 and 2021 were conducted in the USA, followed by Spain, and only two publications were reported in the Indian context (Sesar, Knežević, & Jaković, 2021). Therefore, it is imperative to promote further study focused on countries like India.

Addressing these gaps, this study employs grounded theory to examine influencer marketing in Kashmir, a politically volatile yet resource-rich destination. Kashmir's sociopolitical instability and negative media portrayals hinder tourism promotion, making it an ideal context to study how

influencers enhance trust and reshape destination image. Despite their growing relevance, little research investigates influencer marketing in such turbulent environments. This study seeks to:

- 1) Examine the role of influencers in marketing politically unstable destinations.
- 2) Analyse the sequential process DMOs adopt for influencer campaigns in conflict zones.
- 3) Explore criteria for influencer selection and the strategies employed.

Accordingly, the study is guided by four research questions:

- 1) What is the importance of social media influencers for tourist destinations?
- 2) How does influencer marketing function for tourist destinations?
- 3) On what basis are influencers chosen for travel campaigns?
- 4) What are the motives behind using influencer marketing in politically disturbed areas?

The answers offer insights for volatile regions like Kashmir, where conventional strategies often fail. Findings related to influencer selection, branding approaches, and tourism promotion can help policymakers, businesses, and tourism boards craft more effective marketing strategies.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section one reviews the literature, section two outlines methodology, section three presents' findings, and the final section discusses implications, limitations, and future research directions.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. *Travel Social Media Influencers (TSMI)*

Social media influencers (SMIs) are transforming online marketing by leveraging their virtual presence to shape brand perceptions (Abidin & Ots, 2016). Unlike conventional celebrities, they create their own content and actively engage followers (Bharti, 2021). As microcelebrities, they showcase daily activities to build significant followings (Abidin, 2014). SMIs may be travellers, activists, humourists, or artists (Abidin, 2016; Lewis, 2018). Within this broad category, travel influencers hold a distinctive niche, shaping preferences for destinations, lodging, and travel intentions (Rajput & Gandhi, 2024). Unlike influencers in gaming, fashion, or cosmetics, they operate in a sector defined by high-cost, immersive, and abstract offerings (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Their content goes beyond reviews or recommendations, incorporating storytelling, immersive visuals, and narratives that engage audiences experientially (Yilmaz et al., 2020).

Travel influencers also differ in remuneration and collaboration. They typically partner with tourism stakeholders such as hoteliers, travel agencies, and DMOs rather than relying on brand sponsorships (Barbe, Neuburger, & Pennington-Gray, 2020). Budding influencers often self-fund their travel (Daly, 2016), while established ones are sponsored through familiarisation (FAM) trips and destination endorsements (Daly, 2016).

SMIs enhance the credibility of destination marketing by making messages appear authentic (Najar, Wani, & Rather, 2024). Credibility, conceptualised as trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise (Ohanian, 1990), is crucial to persuasion. Travel influencers build expertise by focusing

content exclusively on travel (Schouten et al., 2020) and trustworthiness by sharing real-time, immersive updates (Shrivastava & Jain, 2022). They also employ presentation strategies, such as aligning wardrobe with niche aesthetics, to enhance attractiveness and follower appeal (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

The overt nature of influencer endorsements further contributes to campaign success. The Persuasion Knowledge Theory (PKT) explains how consumers recognise and respond to persuasive attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Awareness of influencers' persuasive skills can increase confidence and engagement, particularly when marketing messages are seamlessly integrated into authentic narratives (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Although authentic and credible content makes influencers attractive for destination endorsements (Duong et al., 2022), their growing role presents challenges for DMOs (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2019). The following section explores these opportunities and challenges in detail.

## **2.2. DMOS (*Destination Management/Marketing Organizations*)**

Destination Management/Marketing Organisations (DMOs) are responsible for promoting destinations to attract visitors. They comprise stakeholders such as service providers, accommodations, transport, travel agencies, non-profits like Convention Visitor Bureaus (CVBs), and regional/national tourism organisations. Their goal is to differentiate destinations from competitors, attract tourists beyond the local economy, and generate revenue (Prideaux & Cooper, 2002; Pike & Page, 2014). Unlike consumer goods, DMOs can only help tourists conceptualise the product, the image of the destination (Horrigan, 2009), which is also shaped by word-of-mouth. To communicate and update this image, DMOs use travel journalism (McGaurr, 2012), cinema (Horrigan, 2009), and travel blogging (Pirolli, 2017). Recently, they have shifted towards collaborative channels such as social media influencers to convey brand messaging (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Pike & Page, 2014). In politically sensitive or conflict-affected destinations, influencers act as credible alternative sources, challenging media narratives and reframing places as safe and attractive (Sahin, 2022). However, this reliance complicates conventional strategies. While tourism boards once controlled narratives through campaigns and official media (Pike & Page, 2014), the decentralised nature of social media allows influencers to craft their own portrayals, sometimes diverging from official messages (Najar, Kour & Jasrotia, 2023). This shift offers both opportunities and risks. Influencers extend reach, attract new audiences, build trust, and influence decisions (El Yaagoubi & Machrafi, 2021), but they also reduce message control and may contribute to overtourism (Najar et al., 2023). Still, they remain key intermediaries shaping tourist perceptions (El Yaagoubi & Machrafi, 2021).

Empirical evidence supports their role. Gholamhosseinzadeh, Chapuis, and Lehu (2023) showed through netnography that live conversations between travel bloggers improved perceptions of Okinawa. Femenia-Serra and Gretzel (2020) demonstrated how Benidorm renewed its image via young influencers. Similarly, Farhangi and Alipour (2021) found that influencers enhanced the image of conflict-ridden North Cyprus. Overall, research highlights the growing reliance on influencer marketing, though systematic planning remains essential (Launch Metrics, 2018).

Much of the existing literature addresses commercial influencer marketing. For example, Lin, Bruning, and Swarna (2018) proposed a five-step framework: planning, recognition, alignment, motivation, and coordination, for using digital influencers in brand promotion. However, little is known about how DMOs employ influencers for conflict-ridden destinations, and current frameworks often overlook post-campaign effects. Travel influencers may continue to shape perceptions even after official collaborations end. Therefore, this study investigates how DMOs engage social media influencers to market tourist destinations.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Research Philosophy**

A qualitative approach with an exploratory design was adopted for this study. Such a design is often used in emerging fields like tourism as it can lead to theory development (Manson, Augustyn, & Seakhoa-King, 2010). It is also recommended when little prior knowledge exists about the variables or phenomenon (Creswell & Clark, 2017). Accordingly, this study explores influencer marketing in conflict-ridden destinations, where limited research exists. The research is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2016), which seeks to understand individuals' perspectives and behaviours (Scotland, 2012). This approach allowed for deeper insights by considering multiple viewpoints.

The study's primary aim is to develop a conceptual framework for the influencer marketing process in conflict-ridden destinations, specifically Kashmir. Given the absence of clear understanding on this topic, a qualitative method was deemed suitable (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016). Among qualitative approaches, grounded theory is most appropriate for examining processes, actions, and interactions across multiple actors (Khan, 2014). Therefore, grounded theory was employed.

Grounded theory develops explanations firmly rooted in data rather than assumptions (Charmaz, 2014). It requires "concurrently collecting and analysing data to identify patterns, categories, and themes" (Glaser & Strauss, 2009). This concurrent process helps identify additional data needed to refine the theory. In this study, researchers began with guiding questions but did not rigidly adhere to them, avoiding an incomplete outcome. Instead, data were analysed alongside collection, enabling adjustments and filling gaps in the evolving process of influencer marketing.

#### **3.2. Research Instrument**

Semi-structured in-depth interviews with travel influencers and destination marketers were chosen because of their participatory nature (Malhotra & Birks, 2007) and insufficient knowledge available on the research topic under study (Merriam, 2009). The author developed the interview questions based on Lin et al.'s (2018) five-step strategy of employing digital influencers to promote a brand's products and services (refer to Appendix 1 for the interview questions). The interview questions underwent initial pre-testing through two interviews and after that, the final questions were framed.

### **3.3. Study Site Selection**

Since 1989, Kashmir has faced persistent conflict, negatively affecting its image as a tourist destination. Recognising the power of word-of-mouth (WOM) in reshaping destination perceptions, the Directorate of Kashmir Tourism and Destination Management Organisations enlist local and national-level influencers to create and share content on social media platforms (Nomllers, 2021). This influencer-generated content serves as a fresh testimony, mitigating the impact of conflict and political instability. Despite ongoing challenges, the use of social media influencers has significantly increased tourist numbers in Kashmir (Timestravel, 2022). Hence, because of the unique nature of Kashmir, it has been chosen as the context to explore influencer marketing practices employed by DMOs to promote the region as a tourist destination.

### **3.4. Sampling Technique**

A non-probability sampling strategy called "purposive sampling" was used to draw a sample out of the population. This method involves actively selecting individuals based on certain features or subject matter knowledge (Patton, 2002). The data was collected from two groups of participants: 1) travel influencers, micro and macro influencers, with followers ranging from 1K to 100K and 100K to 1000K, respectively, and 2) government officers managing influencer collaborations. For influencers, the degree of engagement in Kashmir's tourism sector and following count, and for destination management officials, their participation in influencer marketing activities served as the primary criterion for choosing participants in the study. The purpose of engaging various participant groups was to ensure richness of data on influencer marketing strategies in Kashmir.

### **3.5. Sample Size**

Patton (2002) asserts that qualitative research lacks a rigid sample size criterion. The determination of the sample size in a qualitative study is primarily influenced by factors such as data saturation, the accessibility of the target sample, and the availability of time and resources (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). Hence, till the attainment of theoretical saturation, the process of conducting interviews by researchers continued, and the theoretical saturation point was achieved at the ninth interview. This sample, though not exhaustive of all tourism influencers and marketers in Kashmir, reflects a varied cross-section of industry professionals involved in influencer marketing. Moreover, prior qualitative tourism studies have deemed even six interviews sufficient, supporting the adequacy of the present sample size (Dada, Najar & Gupta, 2022). In addition, the sample size is supported by the fact that Kashmir's influencer community is still relatively niche, with a rising number of content creators in general but a restricted number of influencers that are focused on tourism (Amin, 2024).

Furthermore, to protect confidentiality, participant names were anonymised, and data was securely stored. Table I lists the anonymized respondents' names, designations, and interview details.

### 3.6. Procedure for Data Collection

In compliance with ethical research protocols, the investigator communicated via email or messaging platforms like WhatsApp or Instagram to the participants, explaining the study's objectives and requesting their agreement to take part in the research. Each participant gave their explicit agreement through text or e-mail before the interviews, confirming their voluntary participation. The interviews were carried out between the 30th of January and the 15th of April 2023. The researcher conducted interviews in person or via phone at the convenience of the interviewee. During the interview process, the interviewer requested permission from the participants to record the sessions via phone. The raw data was accessible solely to the research team, and participants had the choice to withdraw at any point during the study. Interviews started with a conversation about the participant's professional background and their perception of travel social media influencers. Next, we explored influencer marketing practices and processes adopted while marketing a destination.

**Table 1:** Study Sample

Name	Designation	Duration/Mode of interview	Number of pages of transcript
Amar	Macro Influencer	52 minutes/ Telephonic interview	9 pages
Ishrat	Macro Influencer	54 minutes/Telephonic interview	9 pages
Wajid	Govt. Official	30 minutes / Face-to-face	6 pages
Fayaz	Micro influencer	58 minutes/Telephonic Interview	8 pages
Gawhar	Govt. Official	29 minutes/ Telephonic Interview	5 pages
Anif	Macro Influencer	33 minutes/Telephonic Interview	6 pages
Ishfaq	Micro Influencer	40 minutes/Telephonic Interview	6 pages
Yaqoob	Macro Influencer	62 minutes/Telephonic Interview	6 pages
Ahad	Micro Influencer	60 minutes/Telephonic Interview	8 pages

*Source:* Authors own findings

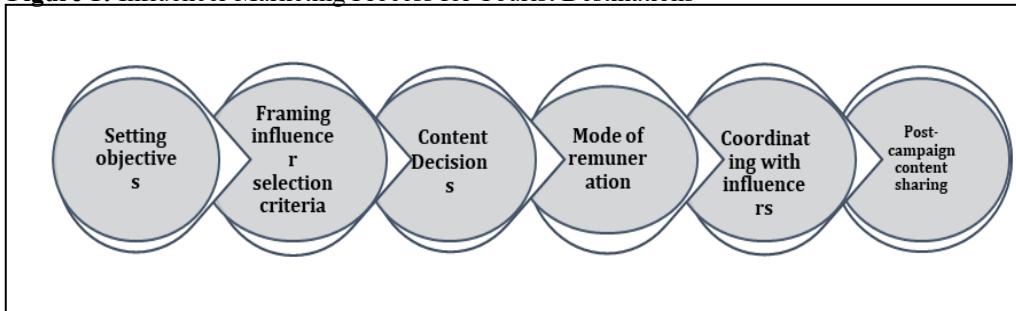
## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All interviews were recorded using a phone and transcribed using Google Docx. On average, an interview lasted 46 minutes. The average length of the transcript was six pages. The transcripts were analysed in NVivo, a computer software package. Coding, one of the most preferred methods of analysing qualitative data to build theory, was used to analyse data (Tan, Fatt Hee, & Yan Piaw, 2015). The three-step coding approach, i.e., open, axial, and selective coding, as recommended by Corbin and Strauss (1990), was adopted to analyse the data. The data collection

and analysis were done simultaneously. To maintain consistency in the inductive coding process, two researchers concurrently coded the interview transcripts, followed by a comparative analysis. All disputes were addressed via dialogue until a consensus was achieved (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As shown in Figure 1, the analysis resulted in seven selective codes, six pertaining to the steps of the influencer marketing process and one to the significance of social media influencers for tourist destinations.

The researchers also explored the procedure followed by DMOs to implement influencers in the same context. It was confirmed that study question 2, which looks at the structure of an influencer marketing campaign for tourist spots, follows the plan put forward by Lin et al. (2018). However, this paper leads to the identification of an additional step, i.e., post-campaign content sharing for tourist destinations, in addition to the existing five: “1) planning, 2) recognition, 3) alignment, 4) motivation, and 5) coordination.”

**Figure 1: Influencer Marketing Process for Tourist Destinations**



Source: Authors Own Findings

#### **4.1. Importance of Influencers**

Considering the growing utilisation of information produced by influencers on social media platforms and its influence on tourists' exploration of new destinations (Gholamhosseinzadeh, 2023), the marketing strategies of tourism places now heavily rely on influencers. The interviewees unanimously affirmed the value of influencers in the tourist sector because of the experiential nature of tourism products, their art of exchanging experiences and ideas, the organic nature of endorsements involving influencers, and their perceived credible source.

Wajid, a government official who served in several important positions in the Directorate of Kashmir Tourism and supervised many marketing campaigns in Kashmir, stated:

*Social media influencers are essential for the marketing of destinations. Social media, whether it's Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram, is highly effective; it reaches a large audience with minimal effort and resources, and people are extremely active on these platforms. Hence, it is imperative that apart from other avenues and other means of marketing and promotion, we use social media very extensively.*

The effectiveness of authentic and immersive influencer content in conflict-prone destinations aligns with Persuasion Knowledge Theory (Friestad & Wright, 1994), which suggests that resistance to persuasion decreases when manipulative signals are overt. In politically disturbed

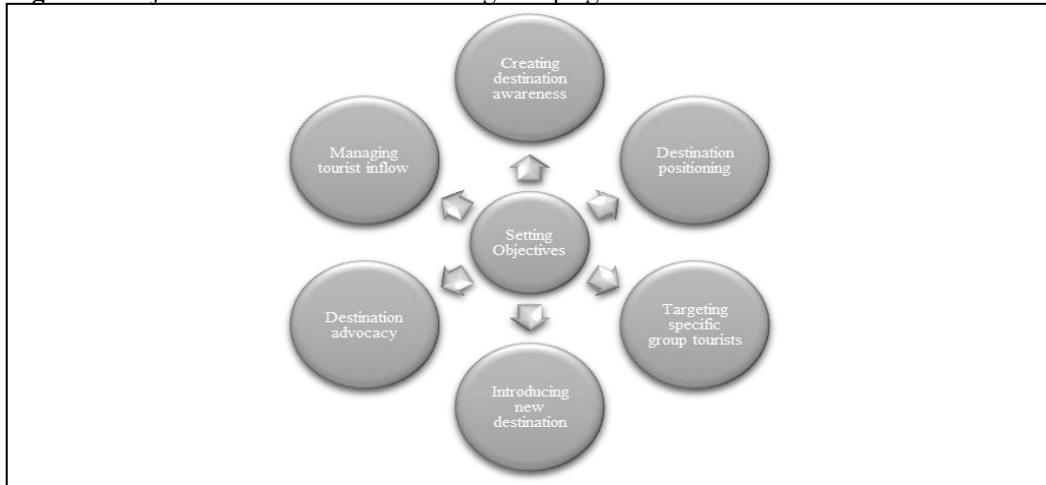
regions, people are skeptical of DMO promotions as they appear commercial, but influencer content, being organic, authentic, and immersive, makes such signals less visible, leading to stronger impact. Local influencers further enhance credibility by blending local values and realities, making their content appear more natural. This supports Source Credibility Theory, which highlights trustworthiness as central to perceived credibility. Consistent with Najar et al. (2024), endorsements by credible influencers in politically disturbed regions strengthen brand trust in the destination.

#### 4.2. Influencer Marketing Process

##### 4.2.1 Setting objectives

In total, 44 distinct open codes were recognized, categorized into 15 axial codes, which subsequently resulted in 6 selective codes. Thus, the six motives behind using TSMIs are: creating destination awareness, positioning, targeting specific age group tourists, introducing new destinations, advocating for destinations, and managing tourist inflow, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Objectives of Influencer Marketing Campaigns**



*Source: Authors Own Findings*

*Creating Destination Awareness:* TSMIs are employed to create awareness among the tourists about different facets of Kashmir tourism, create awareness about new tourist destinations, inform people about accommodations, accessibility, and new activities like canoeing in Gurez and new attractions like glass cafés, igloo cafés, etc.

Amar, a macro influencer who mostly showcases the cultural aspects of Kashmir, says:

*...there is a place in Leh where the Indian Astronomical Observatory is located; it is a very remote area; hardly anyone used to go there; only people interested in astronomy or astrophotography knew about it and used to go there, but now they are making it a tourist place and using SMIs for that, due to which the area will get commercialised.*

*Adding new destinations:* SMIs are also used to add new destinations to the tourist map of Kashmir. For tourists, travelling to new destinations is perilous, and SMIs travel to the off-beat destination, create content, and later share it with their community. SMIs' content acts as a testimony for their followers and other people who go through their content, as SMIs are entitled to credible sources of information. Hence, SMIs are the most effective marketing channels for introducing new destinations.

As supported by the statements of Fayaz, a micro-influencer who showcases the natural beauty of Kashmir:

*I recently made a few reels on Peer Ki Gali, and I can't tell you how excited my followers were to visit Peer Ki Gali. They asked me about its location and expressed their willingness to go there. So, new destinations excite people if they are beautiful and have the potential. In a sense, incorporating new tourist destinations requires engagement with social media influences.*

*Destination Advocacy:* Destination advocacy pertains to the efforts of people who enthusiastically endorse and suggest tourist destinations in online communities (Lever, Elliot, & Joppe, 2021). The role of SMIs as destination advocates includes providing information and clarification and spreading positive WOM about Kashmir.

The influencer named Ahad, who promotes natural beauty of north Kashmir adds:

*Some people still feel unsafe about travelling to Kashmir; they are not certain about their safety in Kashmir; people want to know how they should travel, what place they should see, and how they should spend. Such people talk to us first, and then they decide whether they should come to Kashmir or not.*

*Destination positioning:* Destination positioning pertains to the strategic task of distinguishing a destination from its competitors through the establishment of a unique image and identity (Saqib, 2019). SMIs are employed to set Kashmir apart from other destinations by creating content on Kashmir focusing on unique attributes of Kashmir. As SMIs share out-of-the-box content, they always try to cover new aspects of Kashmir, like the culture of Kashmir, ethnic tribal communities, alpine lakes, etc., resulting in the positioning of Kashmir as a destination. However, while positioning a destination, those SMIs are chosen whose attributes match the destination to be promoted, like a TSMI that shares content on adventure destinations, are chosen for an adventure destination.

As further commented by Ahad:

*...destinations are positioned using influencer marketing; if you have to create content about Alpine lakes, you have to find an influencer who treks a lot, and if I tell you about myself, I am a person who won't trek, so if you have to position a destination like a trekking destination, you have to employ that influencer who you know continuously shares trekking content whose audience is composed of those people who love adventure tourism so this is how we position destinations using influencer marketing.*

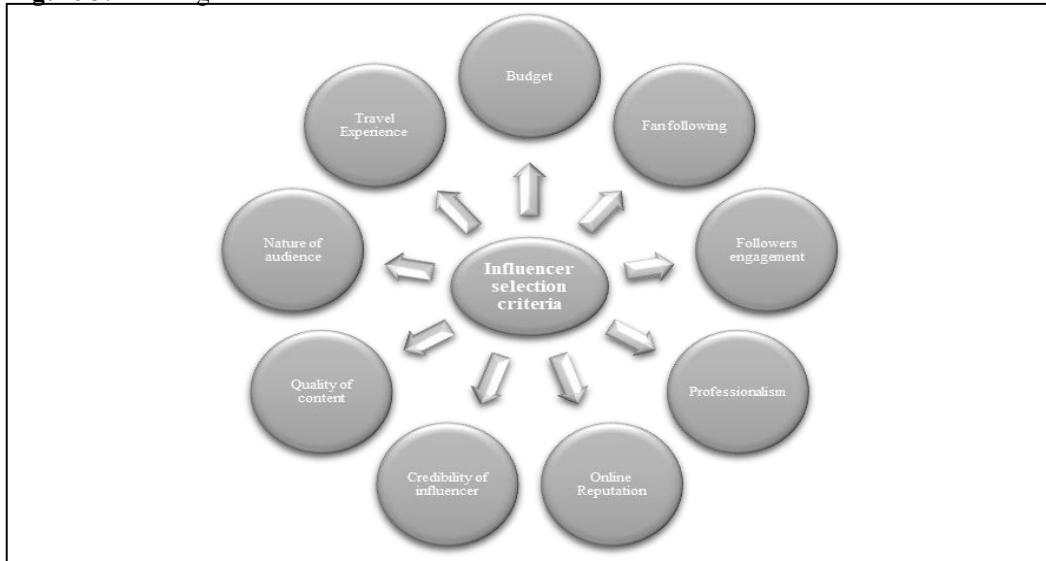
The findings are corroborated by Kapoor et al. (2022), who propose that influencer recommendations on eco-friendly hotels are crucial for persuasion of promotional message. Additionally, Farhangi and Alipour (2021) state that the use of social media by destination

management organisations in conflict-ridden destinations, like Northern Cyprus, has improved their tarnished image.

#### 4.2.2 *Framing influencer selection criteria*

When it comes to the selection of an influencer, 54 open codes appeared, which led to 17 axial codes, from which nine selective codes were identified: Budget, Fan following, Followers engagement, Online reputation, Travel Experience, Nature of the audience, Professionalism, Credibility of influencer and Quality of content. The budget available for the campaign guides the destinations in choosing the type of influencer to be employed in a campaign, as SMI charges depend on the size of the following. The interviewees also discussed the fan following of the SMI. They debated that SMI's size, reach, and nature of following, i.e., whether following is organic or fake, are essential factors in selection. Follower engagement was also perceived as an important factor, defined as the interaction and circulation of content in the influencers' circle of influence. Another vital factor is Travel Experience, which is the number of destinations the TSMI visits and the number of destinations showcased through social media handles. When choosing SMI to market tourist destinations, those SMIs whose proportion of the non-local audience is more remarkable and whose most of the content is about travel rather than fashion, fitness, gaming, etc. [Insert Figure 3:]

**Figure 3: Framing influencer selection criteria**



*Source: Authors Own Findings*

The professionalism of the SMI also appeared to be an essential factor, as it facilitated the connection between the influencer and the destination marketer. Prior work experience, professional skills like photography, cinematography and presentation skills are essential factors contributing to the professionalism among TSMIs. The quality of the content showcased by the SMI through his social media handle also determines his consideration for an influencer

marketing campaign. SMIs who are known for posting decent content are given more weightage. The credibility of SMIs also determines the qualification of an SMI for the campaign.

These requirements for selecting an influencer are confirmed by Wajid (Government official):

*When engaging social media influencers, we assess the type and quality of their content, their outreach, the size of their social media following, the reputation of the platform, audience demographics, the proportion of external viewers, and the rates they propose. In government organisations, payment criteria adhere to the tendering process, differing from the flexible approach of private entities.*

Further, Gawhar, another government official who is trusted with the management of one of the most popular destinations in Kashmir adds:

*Earlier, it used to be only the number of followers, but now we do not rely solely on the number of followers; we see the quality of work and engagement.*

Macro-Influencer Amar, who has not only worked for Kashmir Tourism but also with many international tourism boards like the Manchester Tourism Board, stated:

*Usually, destinations contact us through influencer marketing agencies; rarely, people contact us directly. They convey their requirements, and later on, these influencer marketing agencies to which we are connected approach us on their behalf.*

This finding backs up earlier ones, like Schreiner's (2021), which found that the level of engagement by followers is affected by the topic, components of the content (for example, media richness), as well as whether the post is new or shared again. Candraningrum, Loisa, Utami, & Irena (2022) also support the findings by suggesting that followers' characteristics, like age, are vital for understanding audience behaviours and engagement patterns. Further, the rising demand for professionalism among social media influencers by tourism marketers is in resonance with previous studies. As Stoldt, Wellman, Ekdale, & Tully (2019) noted, intermediaries between travel influencers and destination marketers formalise and professionalise this unorganised influencer marketing industry to ensure its seamless operation.

#### **4.2.3 Content Decisions**

Given the alignment of content for influencer marketing campaigns, 19 open codes leading to 5 axial and one selective code, i.e., Content Decisions, were discovered from the data. Decisions regarding the social media platform to be used, the type of promotion to indulge in, the format in which sponsorship will be disclosed, the duration of the collaboration, and the kind of content to be created were some of the critical decisions made in this phase. High-quality images known as static posts; short interactive posts with real-time experience as stories and reels; real-time engagement with followers in the form of live sessions; detailed narratives, and storytelling in the form of long, in-depth videos are some of the commonly opted content formats by destination marketers. The content format options vary depending on the type of platform chosen, hence, it is important to decide on the platform in advance. If a campaign is to be carried on Instagram, short, visually appealing and engaging content in the form of reels, stories and static posts is preferred; on YouTube, preference is given to long videos; and for travel-related debates and discussions, Twitter is preferred. The collaboration could be long-term or short-term, and depending upon the discretion of the influencer, the promotion could be free, paid or bartered. If the promotion is

paid or bartered, the format of sponsorship disclosure must be decided. Then comes the decisions regarding the type of content to be created. The most preferred forms of content are coverage and participation in events or festivals like the cycling marathon, Gurez Festival, etc., or creating a dedicated video of a destination covering its different aspects or an itinerary.

As confirmed by Wajid, while discussing his personal experience of destination management:

*If I conduct an event in this district, local social media influencers are involved in that; we recently held some event, and we did call some of these social media influencers because some of the influencers are photographers also; they do other jobs also apart from it, so we call them, so if they are available, we welcome them.*

#### **4.2.4 Deciding the mode of remuneration**

Concerning the strategies employed by destination management companies to incentivise and compensate digital influencers, 12 distinct open codes converged into three axial and one selective code, that is, mode of remuneration. The participants affirmed that the most common method of compensating travel influencers is covering their travel expenditures, like accommodation, transportation, and food charges during collaboration. Additionally, it appears that financial compensation is becoming increasingly significant due to the expansion of the influencer industry, its professionalisation, and destination brand managers' increased recognition of the role of social media influencers in promoting tourism.

Ishrat, an influencer known for capturing the scenic beauty of Kashmir through drone camera, stated:

*We, as travel influencers, do not travel at our own expense. Instead, we often establish partnerships with the government, travel agencies, or hotels, who cover our travel expenses in exchange for our content creation. For example, if a houseboat does not have much clientele, the influencer will write to them that he will be coming to Kashmir, and if they arrange accommodation for the influencer in their houseboat in return, he will promote them by creating content and by tagging them.*

#### **4.2.5 Coordination with the influencers**

In view of the coordination between influencer and destination marketers, 25 open codes leading to four axial codes, namely Negotiation (8 open codes), Supervising (7 open codes), assistance (6 open codes) and Evaluating (4 open codes), appeared from the data. Negotiation can be one-way or two-way, involving discussions regarding content requirements, remuneration, and calendarization of the campaign. Supervising involves keeping track of likes, comments, content sharing, increase in the following, and the footfall of visitors.

The support given to digital influencers during the campaign mainly involves clarifying doubts on the part of influencers, ensuring the smooth flow of trips, managing passes and permits for influencers, and ensuring smooth documentation for the influencer. Evaluation plays a crucial role in gauging the efficacy of an influencer marketing campaign, providing valuable input to digital influencers, and potentially informing adjustments for future initiatives to enhance outcomes. "Reach" and "engagement", "views", "comments", and "likes" are some of the most

employed metrics to measure the effectiveness of an influencer marketing campaign. Which is supported by the following statements of respondents:

Wajid stated:

*Definitely, we facilitate them in whatever aspect we can. See, we have been providing a lot of trekkers who trek to this place. You won't find a single person who will tell you that the authorities did not facilitate me.*

In the same vein Ishrat adds:

*They do keep track; when the campaign is over, they ask for my insights, I share that with them, and then they document everything. Usually, we don't do it because it is their work.*

Further, Amar also commented:

*We receive extraordinary treatment from the destination authorities when you are working with them; you are treated like a minister. They manage things like permits for you.*

#### **4.2.6 Post-campaign content sharing**

An essential finding of the study was that TSMIs do not stop creating content about a destination with the termination of the campaign. A total of 12 open codes led to four axial codes representing the motives for creating and sharing content about a destination even after the campaign's termination: attachment, self-experience, work-experience and compulsion to engage the audience. Social media influencers' attachment to a place, people, and culture motivates them to create content about a destination post-campaign termination. They also share and create content on a destination because they are compelled to engage the audience and maintain their growth positively. Another reason that appeared was that SMIs get limited opportunities to add their creativity to the content during a campaign, so they voluntarily recreate content about a destination to add their creativity and showcase a destination through their lens. Work experience is also an essential motive for SMIs. By creating content, they gain practical exposure, hands-on practice and field exposure. So, they keep on creating continuously.

As stated by Amar:

*After a campaign ends, I continue creating content for destinations I genuinely love. For instance, my affection for Turkey's culture and vibe leads me to promote the place even unofficially.*

Another micro-influencer, Ishfaq, who has travelled to several countries, stated that:

*While collaborating with a brand, I tailor content to their preferences. However, after the collaboration ends, I continue creating content independently. For example, if I showcased Gulmarg according to a brand's preferences during collaboration, I won't refrain from creating content on my terms when revisiting Gulmarg in the future.*

Ishrat further added:

*See, the lifeline of an influencer is engagement and for engagement, you have to post continuously; you cannot keep a lot of gaps between two posts.*

These study findings are consistent with earlier research (Arica, Cobanoglu, Cakir, Corbaci, Hsu, & Della Corte, 2022; Ba & Song, 2022; Fotis, Buhalis, & Rossides, 2012). Fortis et al. (2011) posited that social media users use social media platforms extensively in the post-trip phase for content and experience sharing. Researchers also looked at variables that affect travellers' decision to post about their travels on social media (Arica et al., 2022; Ba & Song, 2022). The study's findings demonstrated that while the reasons for sharing travel experiences might differ depending on the stage of a person's journey, sharing them during a trip has become a crucial component of a social media user's travel behaviour (Arica et al. 2022).

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to tourism scholarship by examining social media influencers (SMIs) as a vital marketing channel for tourist products in the conflict-prone destination of Kashmir, employing grounded theory as the methodological lens. The findings identified six sequential categories of practices shaping influencer marketing in such contexts representing the six steps of influencer marketing process for conflict-ridden destination.

First, category represents finalizing the influencer marketing intent. Destination awareness, positioning, targeting age-specific groups, introducing new destinations, advocacy, and managing tourist inflow are some of the commonly opted objectives. The practices under each objective varies, for instance, advocacy emphasizes the dissemination of positive word-of-mouth, while positioning highlights cultural narratives, ethnic communities, and natural assets such as mountain lakes. Second step, influencer selection is guided by follower engagement, travel experience, work-based skills, credibility, and content quality. Third step, content finalization entails strategic decisions on platform choice, type of promotion, disclosure of sponsorships, partnership duration, and content format. Fourth, remuneration predominantly takes the form of expense coverage, including lodging, meals, and transportation. Fifth, on-ground coordination encompasses logistical and administrative support such as clarifying influencers' queries, facilitating permits and documentation, and evaluating outcomes through reach, engagement, views, comments, and likes. Finally, post-campaign content sharing often motivated by emotional attachment to the place, people, and culture illustrates that influencer marketing frequently extends beyond formal collaboration periods, particularly applicable to tourism products only.

The findings indicate safety concerns represent a persistent barrier for tourists considering conflict-affected destinations. To counter negative perceptions, destination management organizations (DMOs) should collaborate with local influencers capable of providing authentic, real-time updates and immersive portrayals of regional conditions. Such efforts help reduce uncertainty during volatile events and challenge external media narratives. Moreover, engaging national and international female influencers could reinforce Kashmir's image as a secure environment for solo female travellers, emphasising its "zero crime record against tourists."

Additionally, while work-based skills are essential, local influencers often lack professional capacity due to limited training opportunities. This skills gap aligns with earlier findings highlighting a disconnect between educational preparation and industry requirements in the hospitality sector (Najar & Bukhari, 2017). To address this gap, DMOs should maintain

systematic records of local influencers and provide capacity-building initiatives, including workshops, hands-on training with content creation tools, and certification programs in storytelling, digital marketing, and ethical promotion. Currently, local influencers are reimbursed only for event-related expenses, as procedural constraints prevent direct government payments. Consequently, collaboration with influencer marketing agencies or event management companies becomes crucial for enabling formal contracting and remuneration.

Further, the “ripple effect” of influencer content whereby followers circulate posts within their own networks further amplifies destination promotion. The intensity and longevity of this effect depend on influencer type: macro-influencers ensure instant visibility and broad reach, while micro-influencers foster relatability and sustained engagement. However, respondents noted that influencers receive financial and permit support only during collaborations, limiting independent content creation. DMOs could address this challenge by offering post-collaboration incentives such as subsidised transport, Gondola rides, and accommodation, thereby motivating influencers to continue producing content about Kashmir.

At present, campaign effectiveness is largely assessed through quantitative metrics such as reach, engagement, views, comments, and likes. Yet, the inclusion of sentiment analysis evaluating the tone and polarity of user comments would provide a more nuanced understanding of audience perceptions and enable content strategies better aligned with visitor expectations.

Currently, SMIs are primarily engaged to divert tourist traffic towards 75 newly identified destinations, reducing pressure on iconic sites such as Pahalgam, Gulmarg, and Sonmarg. However, sustainable tourism requires more than geographic redistribution. By promoting eco-friendly lodging, ethical shopping, waste reduction, and support for local communities, influencers can reorient tourist behaviour towards sustainability rather than price-based decision-making.

This qualitative, context-specific study has limitations in terms of generalisability to other politically sensitive or mainstream tourism destinations. Although data were drawn from two groups of participants, the perspectives of influencers and destination management officers were not directly compared. Future research could expand the sample to include hoteliers, houseboat owners, and influencers, enabling richer triangulation. Comparative analyses across stakeholder groups would further deepen understanding of the dynamics of influencer marketing in tourism.

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## ANEXURE 1

### Practitioner Interview Guide

Interview Block	Question	Response Status
Background Information	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Please describe your job position and the specific tasks you are responsible for in your Organisation/Hotel/Restaurant?</li> <li>2. For how long have you been working in this particular job position?</li> </ol>	
Understanding Travel Social Media Influencers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Can you describe travel social media influencer in your words?</li> <li>2. Do you consider a travel social media influencer important for tourist destination? If yes then why?</li> </ol>	
Understanding influencer marketing practices adopted at various steps of influencer marketing process	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are the main motives for employing social media influencers to market travel destinations?</li> <li>1. On the basis of which characteristics/ factors you identify an influencer for your influencer marketing campaign?</li> <li>1. Which kind of formats and content you usually prefer to work with? Why?</li> <li>2. Who decides the content of influencer marketing campaign?</li> <li>1. Which mode of payment you prefer most (Monetary or non-monetary)? Why?</li> <li>1. What procedure do you follow to negotiate with travel social media influencers?</li> <li>2. Do you keep a watch over your influencer marketing campaigns? If yes then how?</li> <li>3. While influencers are engaged with your influencer marketing campaign, do you support them in any way?</li> <li>4. Do influencers stop creating a content after the termination of campaign?</li> </ol>	

### Influencer Interview Guide

Interview Block	Question	Response Status
Background Information	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. For how long have you been working in the field of influencer marketing?</li> <li>2. What made you to opt for influencer marketing as a career?</li> </ol>	
Understanding Travel Social Media Influencers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Can you describe a travel social media influencer in your words?</li> <li>2. Do you consider a travel social media influencer important for tourist destination? If yes then why?</li> </ol>	
Understanding influencer marketing practices adopted at various steps of influencer marketing process	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are the main motives for employing social media influencers to market travel destinations?</li> <li>1. On the basis of which characteristics/ factors an influencer starts receiving collaborating offers for influencer marketing campaigns from destination marketing officials?</li> <li>1. Which kind of formats you usually prefer to work with? Why?</li> <li>2. Who decides the content of influencer marketing campaign?</li> <li>1. How do you get rewarded for collaborations with destinations?</li> <li>1. Do you receive any support for DMO's while you are engaged with their influencer marketing campaign?</li> <li>2. What procedure do you follow to negotiate with travel social media influencers?</li> <li>3. Do you keep a watch over your influencer marketing campaigns? If yes then how?</li> <li>4. Do influencers stop creating a content after the termination of campaign?</li> </ol>	