

Travel Influencers as Catalysts for Fostering Open Innovation of Tourism: A Case Study in Da Lat

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ABSTRACT

The travel industry has witnessed a paradigm shift in recent years with the emergence of travel influencers and the power of social media. This study explores the role of travel influencers as catalysts for open innovation within the tourism sector, challenging the traditional closed innovation model. By examining their impact on destination awareness, travel inspiration, and the creation of innovative tourism experiences, this study aims to uncover the dynamic interplay between travel influencers and the future of tourism. Drawing upon quantitative data collected through a structured survey of 157 young visitors aged 18-29, who were not followers of selected travel influencers (namely Ly Thanh Co, Bong Tim, Le Ha Truc, and Khoai Lang Thang), as well as an analysis of online reviews from engaged followers, this research delves into the extent to which travel influencers foster open innovation in the tourism industry. Additionally, a case study in Da Lat, Vietnam, provides insights into the specific activities and effects of travel influencers within the Vietnamese context. The findings of this study contribute to the existing knowledge on travel influencers and their impact on the tourism sector. The research highlights the potential of travel influencers as catalysts for open innovation, emphasizing their ability to involve a broader range of actors, encourage co-creation, and facilitate knowledge sharing. These insights can guide tourism stakeholders, policymakers, and destination marketers in leveraging the influence of travel influencers to shape the future of tourism in Vietnam and beyond.

Keywords: destination awareness, innovative tourism experiences, open innovation, tourism digital ecosystems, travel influencers

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary landscape of the travel industry has undergone a discernible paradigm shift in recent years, primarily propelled by the ascendance of social media platforms and the concurrent rise of individuals who wield considerable influence within the domain—namely, travel influencers. Manifesting through their distinctive online presence and the presentation of captivating content, these influencers have assumed a pivotal role in exerting substantial sway over the decision-making processes and experiential aspects of contemporary travel (Gretzel and Yoo 2008). This study endeavors to systematically scrutinize the complex role of travel influencers as catalyzing agents for open innovation within the tourism sector, thereby challenging the conventional framework of closed innovation. Through an exploration of their impact on fostering destination awareness, imparting travel inspiration, and engendering the inception of innovative tourism experiences, this scholarly inquiry endeavors to elucidate the dynamic interplay between travel influencers and the evolving trajectory of the tourism industry.

In the traditional tourism industry, innovation has been predominantly driven by closed processes, wherein organizations develop innovations internally or through collaborations within limited stakeholder networks (Chesbrough 2017). However, the advent of travel influencers has ushered in a new era of open innovation. Open innovation entails integrating external ideas, resources, and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders to drive innovation and create value (Chesbrough 2017). Travel influencers, with their extensive networks and digital platforms, are breaking down the barriers of closed innovation by involving a broader range of actors and encouraging co-creation and knowledge sharing (Gretzel and Yoo 2008; Sesar, Hunjet, and Kozina 2021)

In terms of open innovation, travel influencers have the potential to facilitate collaboration, co-creation, and knowledge sharing among various stakeholders in the tourism industry. Their social media platforms act as a medium for engaging with diverse audiences, including tourists, local communities, and businesses. Travel influencers encourage dialogue, interaction, and the exchange of ideas, leading to the generation of innovative tourism experiences (Ye, Zhang, and Law 2009; Jaya and Prianthara 2020)

Furthermore, travel influencers play a crucial role in bridging the gap between tourists and destinations. By showcasing unique and lesser-known locations, they encourage travelers to venture beyond traditional tourist hotspots, thus promoting the discovery of new destinations and experiences (Yuniati, Hardi, and Primasari 2021; Gholamhosseinzadeh, Chapuis, and Lehu 2023). This exposure to alternative travel options fosters open innovation by diversifying the range of tourism offerings and encouraging collaboration between different regions and stakeholders (Jaya and Prianthara 2020).

However, it is important to recognize that the extent to which travel influencers foster open innovation in tourism is not without limitations and challenges. While they facilitate knowledge sharing and co-creation, issues of authenticity, ethics, and sustainability arise (Gholamhosseinzadeh, Chapuis, and Lehu 2023). The commercial nature of influencer collaborations and the potential for biased or manipulated content may raise concerns regarding transparency and trust (Ye, Zhang, and Law 2009). Additionally, the popularity of certain

destinations promoted by influencers can lead to issues such as overtourism and the strain on local resources and communities (Wengel et al. 2022).

Within the context of Vietnam's tourism industry, the activities of travel influencers have gained significant traction. Travel influencers in Vietnam, including the city of Da Lat in Lam Dong province, have harnessed the power of social media platforms to captivate audiences and shape travel behaviors. Da Lat, located in the central highlands of Vietnam, is a charming city known for its natural beauty, temperate climate, and unique cultural heritage. As one of the most popular tourist destinations in Vietnam, Da Lat offers a diverse range of attractions, making it a haven for nature enthusiasts, adventure seekers, and those seeking a tranquil retreat (Dalat City 2024). Tourism is recognized as the driving force of Da Lat's economy. The "Strategy on Viet Nam's tourism development until 2020, vision to 2030" approved by Prime Minister in Decision 2473/QĐ-TTg dated December 30th, 2011, identified Da Lat as one of the major ecological and leisure tourism centers in the country. It is a key point in the vibrant tourism triangle: Ho Chi Minh City – Da Lat – Nha Trang; Nha Trang – Ninh Chu – Da Lat (Dung 2011).

The travel influencers' contents, ranging from destination recommendations to immersive experiences, have played a pivotal role in influencing travelers' perceptions, emotions, and travel motivations (Duong et al. 2022). However, while the impact of travel influencers on tourism experiences and consumer behavior has been studied to some extent, their role as catalysts for open innovation within the industry remains relatively unexplored.

To what extent do travel influencers foster open innovation in tourism in the future? This is the research question that guides the inquiry for this study. By investigating the degree to which travel influencers contribute to open innovation, this research aims to gain insights into their potential influence on the future of tourism. Additionally, through a case study in Da Lat, Lam Dong, the specific activities and effects of travel influencers within the Vietnamese context will be examined, shedding light on the role they play in fostering open innovation in the tourism industry.

By addressing these research objectives, this study seeks to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on travel influencers and their impacts on the tourism sector. The findings will provide valuable insights for tourism stakeholders, policymakers, and destination marketers, enabling them to leverage the potential of travel influencers as catalysts for open innovation in order to shape the future of tourism in Vietnam and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are considered as the four most tourism-inspired social networking platforms for Vietnamese users (Thuy 2024). These platforms are also the primary sources for the dissemination of the four major types of content: text, audio, images, and videos (Duong et al. 2022). Based on these popular social media platforms, the study established a filter according to the following criteria: (1) travel influencers in Vietnam, yielding 76 results; (2) travel influencers specifically focusing on Da Lat, resulting in 37 findings; and (3) travel influencers who produce content relating to Da Lat with the highest number of followers across the four platforms, namely, Ly Thanh Co, Bong Tim, Le Ha Truc, and Khoai Lang Thang (see Figures 1 to 4).

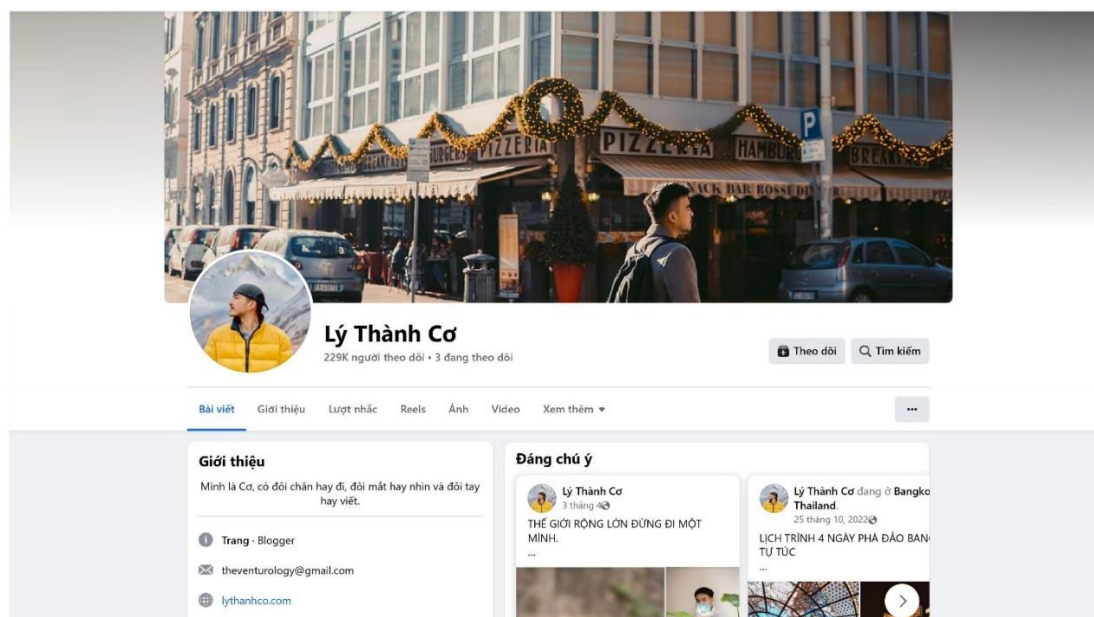


Figure 1. Ly Thanh Co's fanpage on Facebook platform. Source: screenshot on August 22, 2024.



Figure 2. Bong Tim's fanpage on Tiktok platform. Source: screenshot on August 22, 2024.

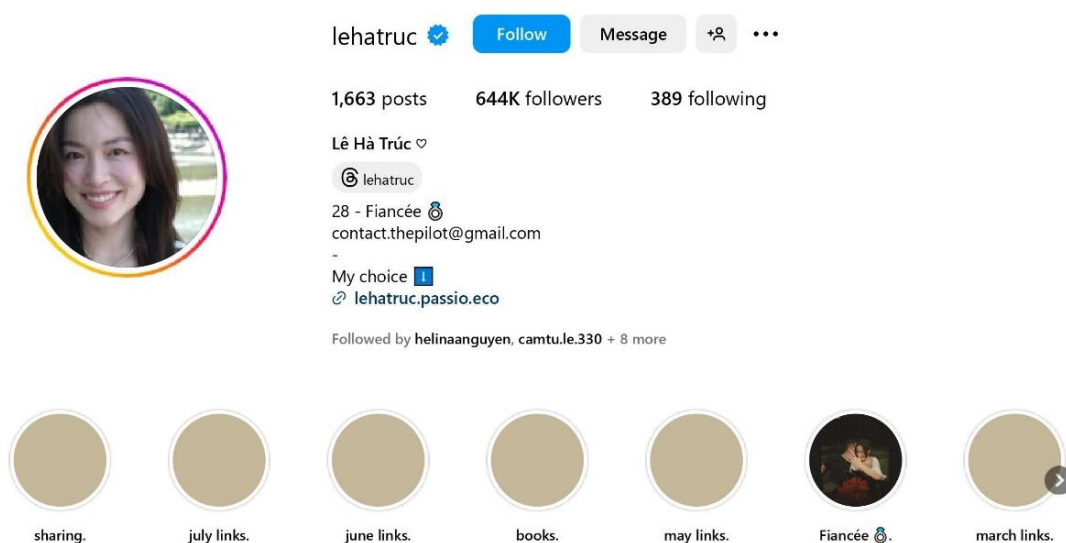


Figure 3. Le Ha Truc's fanpage on Instagram platform. Source: screenshot on August 22, 2024.



Figure 4. Khoai Lang Thang's channel on YouTube platform. Source: screenshot on August 22, 2024.

Then, the content analysis method was conducted between 2015 and 2022 to analyze posts and videos created by four selected travel influencers. The research focused on examining the usage of hashtags by the influencers within three categories: (1) Travel influencer brand name, (2) travel-related, and (3) trend-related hashtags. By analyzing the content and categorizing the hashtags, this method provides insights into the patterns and trends in the influencers' messaging and content creation over time. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed for the identification of changes and evolutions in the usage of hashtags, providing valuable information on the influencers' strategies and the impact of their content on open innovation in tourism.

The online reviews analysis was conducted between 2015 and 2022 to analyze reviews on various platforms, including Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. The research focused on reviews from followers who actively engaged with the content of selected travel influencers. Due to the large number of comments (13,051), processing all of them within a limited time frame would have been an overwhelming task. Therefore, the sample sized was limited to a symbolic 5%. A sample size of 653 reviews was analyzed. By examining these reviews, the study aimed to gain insights into the followers' perceptions, experiences, and feedback related to the travel influencers' content. This method provides a comprehensive understanding of the impact and effectiveness of their content in influencing travel decisions and fostering open innovation in the tourism industry.

The questionnaire method was employed in April 2022 to gather data from a sample of 157 young visitors aged 18–29 who were not followers of four selected travel influencers. The method involved administering a structured survey to collect information on the respondents' perceptions and behaviors related to travel influencers and their impacts on tourism innovation. The sample size of 157 provides a substantial dataset for analysis, allowing for meaningful insights into the research questions. The questionnaire method offers a systematic approach to gather quantitative data and provides an efficient way to measure the extent of travel influencers' impact on open innovation in the tourism industry.

The in-depth interview method was expected to gather opinions from four (4) travel influencers; however, due to personal schedules, three of them were unable to arrange time to participate in the interviews. The interview with travel influencer Ly Thanh Co was conducted on April 24th, 2022. The purpose of the interview was to gather insights and opinions from the influencer regarding the attractiveness of Da Lat as a destination and the promotion of this location through shared content.

The method involved asking targeted questions to elicit detailed and comprehensive responses from the interviewee, allowing for a deeper understanding of their perspectives, experiences, and recommendations. By conducting this in-depth interview, the study gained valuable firsthand information from the travel influencer, providing unique insights into the destination's appeal and the role of shared content in its promotion.

This mixed-method approach was chosen to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of Travel influencers on open innovation in the tourism industry in the context of Vietnam. The combination of quantitative data from surveys and online reviews, along with qualitative insights from content analysis and in-depth interviews, offers a holistic understanding of the research topic. By employing these methods, the study ensured the collection of reliable and diverse data, enabling comprehensive analysis and meaningful conclusions.

FINDINGS

The latest bibliometric analysis on open innovation in hospitality and tourism services by Robayo-Acuña and Chams-Anturi (2023) indicates that there is a recent and growing interest among academics, especially since 2017. Additionally, four key research areas have emerged: overtourism and sustainability, value co-creation, open innovation and competitive advantage and their effects on hotel industry organizations, as well as the relationship between external knowledge and internal resources in innovation management and open innovation performance.

Open innovation through travel influencers has become a significant aspect of marketing strategies for tourism boards, hospitality businesses, and destination marketing organizations worldwide. Several influencer marketing campaigns in travel and tourism have achieved notable success by effectively leveraging the reach and influence of content creators. Taking Airbnb's #LiveThere campaign as an example. Being launched in 2016, the campaign focused on encouraging travelers to experience destinations like a local rather than a tourist. The campaign partnered with various travel influencers who shared their unique experiences staying in Airbnb accommodations around the world (Kolsquare 2022). The initiative successfully engaged 2.5 billion potential participants, resulting in a 32% boost in travel interest registered through the campaign. Bookings surged by 27% via the Airbnb platform following the campaign's launch (Khan 2023). In Vietnam, #HelloVietnam is one of the tourism promotion campaigns that has garnered a lot of attention, initiated by TikTok for the first time in 2019 after receiving approval and sponsorship from the National Administration of Tourism. Within the framework of the campaign, TikTok implemented the experiential tour activity #HelloVietnam with a scale of 60 prominent content creators from around the world embarking on a journey to four provinces and cities. During the campaign, there were over 300 high-quality videos uploaded by content creators about experiential tours, attracting more than 100 million views and positive feedback from the community, with #HelloVietnam itself achieving an impressive figure of over 1.5 billion views (TikTok 2024). This demonstrates the enormous influence of TikTokers and travel influencers in the era of digital technology on user communities.

Overview of the Da Lat theme by travel influencers

The approach and activities of travel influencers in Da Lat have not been extensively addressed in scientific literature (Duong et al. 2022). However, in general, their activities are closely linked to the development of social media platforms. Although the development of these platforms cannot be surveyed in a defined sequence because their emergence and prevalence overlap with each other, there are periods when travel influencers tend to favor using certain prominent or newly emerged platforms that attract a large number of users.

The overview of travel influencers in Da Lat provides a comprehensive look at the evolution of their activities across various stages, reflecting the dynamic landscape of social media platforms. There are periods when travel influencers tend to prefer using certain social media platforms (often prominent social media platforms, newly emerged, or attracting a large number of users) that predominantly utilize one or more forms of information dissemination. Therefore, to gain a general understanding of the current state of activities of travel influencers in Da Lat, said activities can be divided into three research stages:

Stage 1 represents the formation and development of blogs. Due to their simple operational methods, blogs have gained prominence in conveying information mainly through written text. The activities of travel influencers in Da Lat were primarily self-driven and not strongly connected with Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs). The travel influencers in this stage could be considered as “daring pioneers.” Some notable travel influencers such as Nhi Dang, Tam Bui, Vinh Gau, Huyen Chip, Rosie Nguyen, Dinh Hang, and Nguyen Phuong Mai can be mentioned.

Stage 2 witnesses the development of Facebook, Instagram, and similar social media platforms. This stage combines written text with images to provide shared experiences for followers. In addition to continuing to share content about natural attractions in Da Lat, many travel influencers expanded into local food, cozy homestays, and interesting entertainment. Simultaneously, the quality of images and content improved, attracting a large number of followers due to global coverage. Many travel bloggers are still active at this stage, shifting their focus from personal blogs to Facebook due to their pre-existing following. Additionally, there are quite a few travel influencers who have emerged and established themselves through Facebook, such as Ly Thanh Co, Le Ha Truc, Khoai Lang Thang, and Fahoka Xe Dich. This stage demonstrated the maturity of travel influencers. Travel bloggers who initially viewed their writing on social media platforms as a personal hobby began to recognize travel influencing as a genuine profession, leading to the specialization of their careers.

Stage 3 corresponds to the development of platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. Content marketing is diversified, combining written text, images, and sound to create new genres, with video clips being the most representative. This stage demonstrates the remarkable success of the travel influencer community making content about Da Lat, both in terms of quality and quantity. It witnesses the proliferation of travel influencers across various social media platforms. Building upon and leveraging the achievement of previous stages, the destination marketed by travel influencers are becoming increasingly diverse and abundant. Some travel influencers at this stage include Khoai Lang Thang, Bong Tim, Huy Hay Di, Khoa Pug, Mike Nhan Phan, Win Di, and Le Hoang Nam.

At each stage, alongside the prominence of certain social media platforms, there are notable travel influencers who emerge and contribute significantly. They may lay the foundation for the stage, pioneer the establishment of personal brands, or inspire other travel influencers. Furthermore, each stage also experiences changes in the interaction among stakeholders, tourists, and third parties.

Travel influencers' impact on their followers

Da Lat's travel influencers have evolved in sync with the development of social media platforms. Each stage brought about changes in content, engagement, and recognition. The investigation on individual influencers highlights their focus areas, follower counts, and audience feedback, providing insights into their impact and popularity within their respective platforms

Social media	Travel Influencer	Followers (January 31, 2024)	Contents related to Da Lat (until October 2022)	Percentage (%) of positive reactions
Facebook	Ly Thanh Co	204,862	66 posts Topic: lodging and check-in sites	88.24
TikTok	Bong Tim	6,400,000	27 short videos Topic: street food, lodging, traveling and check-in sites	54.09
Instagram	Le Ha Truc	522,000	11 posts Topic: lodging and check-in sites	66.67
YouTube	Khoai Lang Thang	2,330,000	11 videos Topic: street food, lodging, experiences	83.96

Table 1. Rate of positive comments about Da Lat from followers of four travel influencers.

Source: author.

On Facebook, Ly Thanh Co has accumulated a follower count of 204,862. With a focus on lodging and check-in sites, Ly Thanh Co has shared 66 posts, receiving a considerable 88.24% positive feedback. This indicates that Ly Thanh Co's content in the lodging and check-in sites category resonates strongly with the Facebook followers.

Bong Tim, a TikTok influencer, commands a sizeable follower count of 6,400,000. Bong Tim's content comprises 27 short videos covering various topics such as street food, lodging, traveling, and check-in sites. The positive feedback percentage for Bong Tim's content stands at 54.09%. While Bong Tim has amassed a significant following, the positive feedback percentage is comparatively lower than the other travel influencers, suggesting potential variations in audience response.

Le Ha Truc, on Instagram, boasts a substantial follower count of 522,000. With a total of 11 posts centered around lodging and check-in sites, Le Ha Truc has garnered a positive feedback percentage of 66.67%. This suggests that Le Ha Truc's posts in the lodging and check-in sites category have been well-received by the Instagram followers.

Lastly, on YouTube, Khoai Lang Thang has garnered a fair follower count of 2,330,000. With 11 videos focusing on street food, lodging, and experiences, Khoai Lang Thang has achieved a moderate positive feedback percentage of 83.96%. This indicates that Khoai Lang Thang's videos, particularly those related to street food, lodging, and experiences, have resonated well with the YouTube audience.

Table 1 reveals that the travel influencers have received positive feedback from their followers across different social media platforms. Content topics such as lodging, check-in sites, street food, and travel experiences have proven to be popular among the followers, albeit with varying degrees of positive feedback percentages across the travel influencers and platforms.

These influencers not only contribute significantly to promoting Da Lat but also play pivotal roles in shaping travel trends, preferences, and interactions among stakeholders. The positive feedback percentages suggest a generally favorable reception, with each influencer carving out a niche within their chosen platform (Cholprasertsuk, Lawanwisut, and Thongrin 2020). As Da Lat continues to evolve as a major tourism hub, the role of these influencers becomes increasingly crucial in shaping perceptions and attracting a diverse range of visitors.

Travel influencers' impact of their non-followers on Da Lat

Figure 5 visually illustrates the impact of four travel influencers on the perceptual framework of non-followers regarding the image of Da Lat. The data, quantified in percentages, is systematically classified into three distinct categories: "Better," "Unchanged," and "Worse."

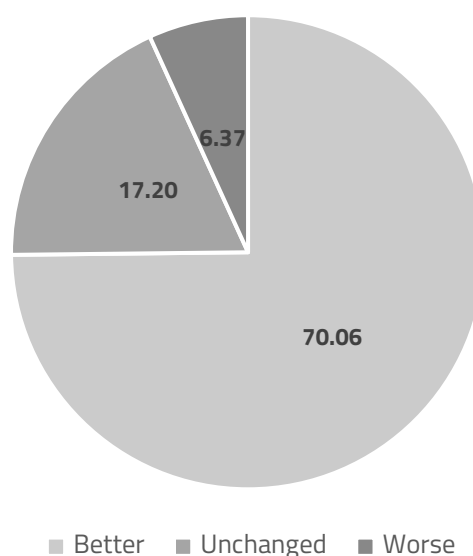


Figure 5. The extent of travel influencer's influence on non-followers' perception about Da Lat's image (%). Source: author.

The findings reveal that a predominant majority of non-followers, encompassing 70.06%, articulated an improved perception of Da Lat subsequent to the influence exerted by travel influencers. This underscores the efficacy of the influencers' content, presumably featuring positive experiences and highlighting key aspects of the destination, in augmenting the positive perception of Da Lat among individuals who do not actively follow these influencers. Conversely, a lesser segment of non-followers, constituting 17.2%, reported an unaltered perception of Da Lat post-influence, suggesting that the content disseminated by travel influencers may not have substantially influenced their pre-existing perceptions of the destination. A minority subset of non-followers, representing 6.37%, communicated a deteriorated perception of Da Lat subsequent to exposure to travel influencer content. This suggests that, in specific instances, the content produced by travel influencers may have engendered a negative impact on the perception of the destination among their non-followers, potentially attributable to unfavorable experiences or portrayals.

Similarly, Figure 6 delineates the impact of a travel influencer's sway on the emotional responses of non-followers concerning the portrayal of Da Lat. The presented data, conveyed in percentage terms, classifies emotions into three distinct categories: 'Satisfied,' 'Unsatisfied,' and 'Don't know.'

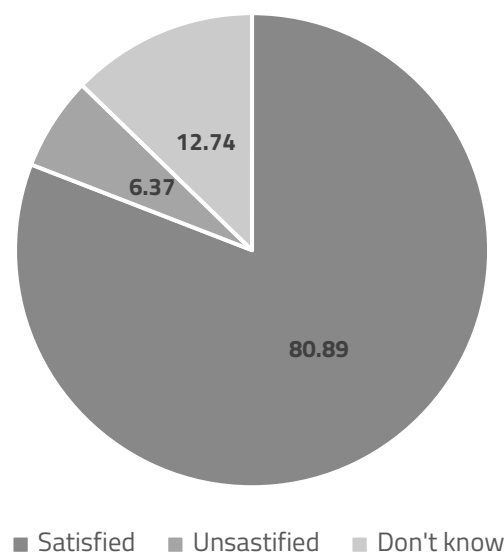


Figure 6. The extent of travel influencer's influence on non-followers' emotion about Da Lat's image (%). Source: author.

Analysis of the data discloses that a substantial majority of non-followers, constituting 80.89%, conveyed a sense of satisfaction with the depiction of Da Lat influenced by the travel influencers. This discernment implies that the content disseminated by the travel influencers, likely accentuating favorable facets of the destination, has proficiently elicited a positive emotional reaction among non-followers, instigating sentiments of contentment and gratification regarding their perception of Da Lat. A nominal fraction of non-followers, approximately 6.37%, articulated feelings of dissatisfaction with the travel influencers' impact on the portrayal of Da Lat. This

observation suggests that certain individuals may have encountered adverse experiences or formulated negative perceptions associated with the destination, conceivably stemming from unfavorable depictions or information propagated by the travel influencers. A segment of non-followers, comprising 12.74%, communicated a state of uncertainty or an absence of a distinct emotional response ("Don't know") towards the portrayal of Da Lat influenced by four travel influencers. This indication implies that the content disseminated by them may not have exerted a profound influence on the emotions or perspectives of these individuals, or they may necessitate additional information or exposure to formulate a definitive emotional response.

Eventually, Figure 7 illustrates the impact of travel influencers on the travel motivation of non-followers intending to visit Da Lat. The data, presented in percentage form, is systematically classified into three distinct groups: "Favourably influenced," "Not influenced," and "Don't know."

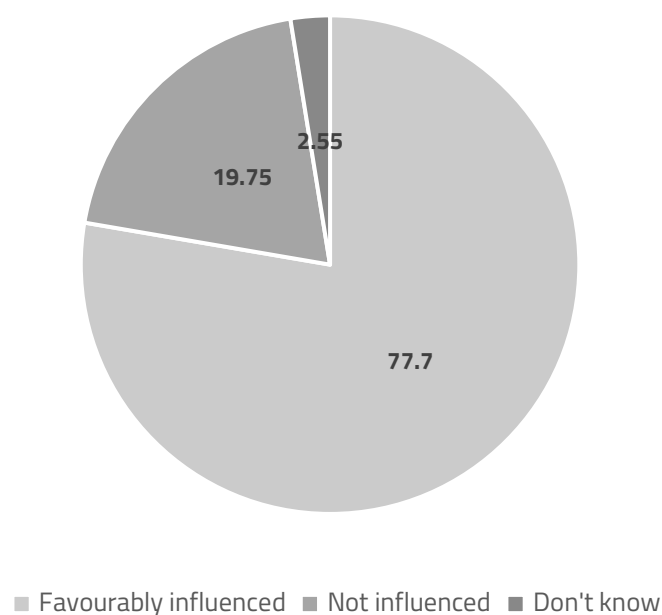


Figure 7. The extent of travel influencer's influence on non-followers' travel motivation to Da Lat (%).

Source: author.

After the data analysis, it was discerned that a substantial majority of non-followers, encompassing 77.7%, affirm being positively influenced by the travel influencer's content, thereby enhancing their travel motivation to explore Da Lat. This discernible trend underscores the efficacy of the travel influencer's content in inspiring and motivating individuals who are not part of their follower base, effectively positioning Da Lat as an appealing travel destination replete with distinctive attractions and experiences. Conversely, a noteworthy segment of non-followers, constituting approximately 19.75%, asserts no discernible influence from the travel influencer's content on their travel motivation to visit Da Lat. This observation suggests that the content disseminated by the travel influencer may not have resonated with or captured the interest of this demographic, or alternatively, these non-followers may possess pre-existing travel motivations that remain unaffected by the influencer's recommendations. In a minority subset, comprising 2.55% of non-followers, an inclination towards uncertainty is observed, as they responded with

"Don't know" concerning the extent of the travel influencer's impact on their travel motivation towards Da Lat. This response implies a lack of clarity or uncertainty in their perception regarding the influence exerted by the travel influencer on their decision-making process related to travel.

Generally speaking, travel influencers have demonstrated significant potential in fostering open innovation in the tourism sector. Their influence on perceptions, emotions, and travel motivations, coupled with their role as catalysts of collaboration and knowledge sharing, positions them as key players in shaping the future of the industry. However, to maximize the benefits of travel influencers in promoting open innovation in tourism, careful consideration must be given to the subjectivity of their opinions, the importance of cooperation with Destination Marketing Organizations, and the emerging trend of influencer marketing in the post-pandemic era.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Catalysts for open innovation of tourism on diverse social media platforms

The investigation into the impact of travel influencers on both their followers and non-followers in the context of Da Lat provides a nuanced understanding of their role in fostering open innovation within the tourism sector. The complex analysis is discerningly organized into two distinct sections, each addressing the influence of travel influencers on these divergent groups.

In evaluating the impact on followers, the presented data on four prominent influencers across various social media platforms delineates their follower counts, focus areas, and positive reaction percentages. This information, encapsulated in Table 1, underscores the substantial engagement and resonance these influencers elicit from their respective audiences. Notably, their contributions extend beyond mere promotional activities, as they play pivotal roles in shaping travel trends, preferences, and stakeholder interactions. The varying positive feedback percentages indicate nuanced responses to content themes such as lodging, check-in sites, street food, and travel experiences. These influencers are instrumental in not only promoting Da Lat but also in cultivating a positive perception among their followers, elucidating the influencers' potential to function as conduits for open innovation within the tourism sector.

The subsequent analysis shifts focus to non-followers, offering insights into the perceptual framework and emotional responses of individuals not actively engaged with the influencers.

Figure 5 illustrates the impact on the perceptual framework of non-followers, revealing that a substantial majority experienced an improved perception of Da Lat post-influence. This suggests the efficacy of travel influencer content in positively shaping the destination's image among individuals not following them. Conversely, a minority subset reported a deteriorated perception, emphasizing the need for influencers to exercise caution in their content creation to avoid potential negative ramifications. The emotional response analysis in Figure 6 further corroborates these findings, with a significant majority expressing satisfaction, albeit with a nominal fraction conveying dissatisfaction. These emotional responses offer valuable insights into the influencers' ability to evoke positive sentiments and, conversely, the potential risks associated with disseminating content that may elicit negative emotional reactions.

The examination of travel motivation among non-followers in Figure 7 portrays a significant positive influence on a substantial majority, emphasizing the influencers' pivotal role in inspiring travel intentions. However, a noteworthy segment reports no discernible influence, underlining the diverse nature of responses within this demographic. The "Don't know" category suggests a level of uncertainty among non-followers, highlighting the need for nuanced strategies in addressing the varied motivational triggers inherent in this cohort.

In essence, the comprehensive analysis of travel influencers' impact on both followers and non-followers elucidates their potential as catalysts for open innovation within the tourism sector. By examining the intricacies of perception, emotional response, and travel motivation, this study contributes to the evolving discourse on the transformative role of travel influencers in shaping the future landscape of tourism.

Catalysts in the tourism digital ecosystem amid fluctuations in travel behaviors

The empirical evidence delineates the pivotal role played by travel influencers in the contemporary tourism digital ecosystem, particularly amidst the multifarious fluctuations in travel behavior (Bolici et al. 2020). These influencers wield considerable influence through their curated content, which accentuates destinations, experiences, and attractions, thereby fostering positive associations and augmenting the overall image of destinations. The consequential outcome of this influence is the generation of heightened interest and a discernible impact on the travel motivations of prospective travelers (Jang et al. 2021). The expansive reach of travel influencers, coupled with their ability to engage diverse stakeholders, including local businesses and tourism organizations, positions them as indispensable catalysts driving open innovation within the tourism industry. Their role extends beyond promotional activities, contributing to the collaborative development of innovative tourism experiences and products through facilitation of knowledge sharing and collaborative initiatives.

Operating autonomously, travel influencers leverage their creativity and expertise to generate content that promotes the distinctive image of destinations (Vlahov and Vlahov 2021). This self-sufficiency enables them to present unique perspectives and authentic experiences, resonating effectively with their audience and stimulating innovative thinking. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the subjective nature of travel influencers' opinions, which may inadvertently influence the perceptions of their viewers. While these influencers strive for authenticity and value in their recommendations, the potential for personal biases and preferences shaping the opinions of their followers necessitates careful consideration when evaluating their influence on open innovation within the tourism industry.

In the context of post-pandemic recovery, influencer marketing campaigns have demonstrated success across various industries, yet the application of such strategies specifically for tourist destinations remains underexplored in Vietnam. There exists untapped potential for further exploration and utilization of influencer marketing as a potent tool for fostering open innovation and promoting destinations within the Vietnamese tourism industry. Recognizing the transformative potential of travel influencers, Destination Marketing Organizations should align their strategies accordingly. Collaborating with travel influencers allows DMOs to present authentic and diverse perspectives, thereby enhancing destination attractiveness and competitiveness.

(Campbell and Farrell 2020). Especially pertinent in the post-pandemic landscape, where travel behavior has undergone significant changes emphasizing safety and trust, DMOs can strategically engage with travel influencers to showcase lesser-known destinations and unique local experiences, leveraging the influencers' reach and influence to generate interest among potential travelers.

In light of the growing influence of travel influencers, policymakers in Vietnam are urged to develop a comprehensive legal framework to safeguard the rights and interests of stakeholders engaged in influencer marketing. This framework should address key issues such as transparency, disclosure of sponsored content, and consumer protection, ensuring ethical practices and preserving trust in the industry (Radziwon et al. 2022; Cooke et al. 2022). By implementing regulations that promote transparency and authenticity in influencer marketing partnerships, policymakers can uphold the interests of consumers and safeguard the reputation of the tourism industry in Vietnam.

For travel companies operating in Vietnam, the maximization of profits lies in the effective execution of electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) campaigns facilitated by travel influencers (Marasco et al. 2018). Acknowledging the substantial influence of travel influencers in shaping consumer behavior, travel companies can strategically engage with these influencers to generate positive recommendations and reviews, thereby fostering increased customer engagement and loyalty (Nazare 2019). Through collaboration with travel influencers, travel companies can leverage their extensive networks and credibility to reach wider audiences and enhance their brand reputation.

Finally, the increased research and interest in this topic also encourage travel influencers themselves to pay more attention to every posts. Ly Thanh Co shared in this study that he started creating content about Da Lat mainly because he was interested in and loved this destination. Da Lat is one of the two favorite destinations where he creates content, alongside Japan. Speaking about his perspective when collaborating with service-providing businesses, Ly Thanh Co said: "Now, when reviewing, it will help me generate income. Sometimes I receive advertising posts from restaurants and accommodations, and of course, I have to write information about those places. I really feel that the place is suitable, so I post about it, but there are many jobs that I refuse because the place is very bad, not meeting my needs, then I will not review it." Travel influencers have evolved from merely creating content as a hobby to recognizing their role as integral components of the tourism digital ecosystem. They not only shape trends but also guide their follower communities toward meticulously selected travel destinations. Aware of the symbiotic relationship they share with their audience within an open innovation framework, these influencers understand that influence is not unilateral; rather, their followers actively contribute valuable ideas and suggestions for content creation. It is evident that travel influencers are becoming increasingly deliberate in cultivating their personal brand while fostering strong connections with their communities, enabling them to adapt effectively to shifts in audience behavior.

CONCLUSION

In summation, the findings underscore the imperative for stakeholders in Vietnam's tourism industry, encompassing DMOs, policymakers, and travel companies, to acknowledge and harness the potential of travel influencers as catalysts for open innovation. Through proactive engagement, the implementation of appropriate regulations, and leveraging the power of eWOM, stakeholders can effectively harness the influence of travel influencers to not only enhance destination image but also ensure stakeholder welfare and drive profitability in the digital era of tourism. Recognizing travel influencers as valuable partners is essential for shaping the future trajectory of the tourism industry in Vietnam.

While the research provides valuable insights into the role of travel influencers in shaping the tourism landscape, several limitations need to be acknowledged. The study primarily focuses on the context of Da Lat, Vietnam, and may not be universally applicable to other destinations. The unique characteristics and dynamics of Da Lat might limit the generalizability of findings to a broader tourism context. The evaluation of influencers' impact involves subjective elements, such as perceived satisfaction and motivation. The subjectivity inherent in qualitative analysis may introduce biases in interpreting the influencers' contributions to open innovation. Recognizing these limitations is crucial for refining future research endeavors in the realm of travel influence and open innovation within the tourism sector. Addressing these limitations can enhance the robustness and applicability of insights derived from such studies.

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