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IMPACT OF KOL'S IN PROMOTION OF SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL & TOURISM: INSTAGRAM AS A SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM

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ABSTRACT

Digital technologies are advancing quickly and are changing the way travel and tourism are promoted. Key opinion leaders, particularly social media influencers, play a significant role in influencing travel decisions and raising awareness about destinations. This study examines how Instagram can be used as a tool to promote sustainable travel and tourism. The study adopts a qualitative research approach, using the PRISMA framework for literature review and Clarke and Braun's thematic analysis to identify major themes. It analyzes 50 studies published between 2018 and 2025. The results show the development of a digital tourism ecosystem that integrates social media engagement with sustainable practices. The study adds to existing academic research by highlighting the connection between influencer marketing and sustainable tourism, while also offering practical recommendations for tourism stakeholders.

KEYWORDS: Influencer marketing Sustainable Tourism Instagram KOL's, Digital Tourism. PRISMA

1 INTRODUCTION:

The global tourism industry has undergone significant transformation due to the rapid advancement of digital technologies and the widespread use of social media platforms. Traditional marketing approaches, which were mostly one-directional and information-based, are now being replaced by interactive, experience-driven, and user-generated content strategies.

In this evolving landscape, influencer marketing has become a powerful tool for shaping consumer perceptions, travel intentions, and destination image. Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), commonly known as influencers, play a crucial role in influencing tourists' behavior by creating authentic, relatable, and visually engaging content. Among various social media platforms, Instagram has emerged as a leading platform for tourism promotion due to its visual features such as reels, stories, and user-generated content. These features allow influencers to present immersive travel experiences, helping potential tourists visualize destinations before visiting them.

At the same time, sustainable tourism has gained global importance due to increasing concerns about environmental degradation, climate change, and the socio-cultural impacts of tourism. This has created a need to promote responsible travel behavior and encourage sustainable tourism practices.

Despite the growing importance of both influencer marketing and sustainable tourism, there is still a lack of comprehensive research that examines their relationship in a systematic way. In particular, only a limited number of studies have used structured methods such as the PRISMA framework combined with qualitative thematic analysis to explore this area.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the role of Key Opinion Leaders in promoting sustainable tourism on Instagram. It uses a PRISMA-based systematic literature review along with Clarke and Braun's thematic analysis to better understand this relationship.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW: Literature Review

1. Digital Transformation in Tourism

The tourism industry has undergone significant transformation due to rapid advancements in digital technologies and the widespread adoption of social media platforms. Traditional marketing approaches, which were largely one-directional and information-based, have shifted toward interactive, experience-driven, and user-generated content strategies (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). This transformation has enabled tourism stakeholders to

engage more effectively with potential travelers and influence their decision-making processes.

2. Influencer Marketing in Tourism

Influencer marketing has become a key tool in digital tourism promotion. Influencers act as intermediaries between destinations and tourists by creating authentic and experience-based content that builds trust and engagement. Research shows that influencer credibility, attractiveness, and expertise significantly influence travel intention and consumer decision-making (Casaló et al., 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Compared to traditional advertising, influencer-generated content is perceived as more genuine and relatable, which increases its persuasive impact (Freberg et al., 2011).

3. Role of Social Media Platforms (Instagram)

Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, play a crucial role in tourism marketing due to their visual nature. Instagram's features, such as images, videos, reels, and stories, make it highly effective for destination promotion. Studies suggest that visually appealing content and storytelling significantly influence tourists' perceptions and destination image formation (Leung et al., 2013; Molinillo et al., 2021; Gretzel, 2018). These features allow influencers to create immersive experiences, helping potential tourists visualize destinations before visiting them.

4. Consumer Engagement and User-Generated Content

User-generated content (UGC) and consumer engagement are central to modern tourism marketing. Travelers increasingly rely on online reviews, shared experiences, and social media content when making travel decisions (Litvin et al., 2008; Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). Engagement through likes, comments, and shares strengthens the relationship between influencers and their audiences, thereby increasing trust and influencing travel behavior (Harrigan et al., 2017).

5. Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism has become a major focus in tourism research due to growing environmental, social, and cultural concerns. It aims to minimize negative environmental impacts while promoting cultural preservation and economic benefits for local communities (UNWTO, 2018; Weaver, 2006). Recent studies highlight the role of digital platforms in promoting sustainable tourism by raising awareness about eco-friendly practices and responsible travel behavior (Han et al., 2023; Gössling et al., 2020).

6. Influencers and Sustainable Tourism Promotion

Influencers play a significant role in promoting sustainable tourism by integrating sustainability messages into their content. Through storytelling and visual communication, they can encourage followers to adopt responsible travel practices (Kiráľová & Pavlíčeka, 2015; Pop et al., 2022). Their ability to connect with audiences makes them effective in shaping attitudes toward sustainability and responsible tourism behavior.

7. Digital Tourism Ecosystem

The integration of influencer marketing, social media engagement, and sustainability has led to the emergence of a digital tourism ecosystem. This ecosystem combines content creation, user interaction, and technological tools to enhance tourism promotion (Buhalis et al., 2019; Gretzel et al., 2015). It reflects a shift toward more connected, interactive, and experience-based marketing strategies in tourism.

8. Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Despite its advantages, influencer marketing raises several challenges and ethical concerns. Issues such as lack of transparency, sponsored content disclosure, and misleading information can reduce consumer trust (Evans et al., 2017). Additionally, excessive promotion of destinations without sustainability considerations can contribute to over-tourism and environmental degradation (Gössling et al., 2018). Therefore, ethical practices and responsible promotion are essential.

9. Research Gap

Although there is growing literature on influencer marketing and sustainable tourism, most studies examine these areas separately. There is limited research that integrates both concepts using systematic and qualitative approaches. In particular, few studies have applied structured frameworks such as PRISMA combined with thematic analysis to explore this relationship. Therefore, there is a need for comprehensive research to understand how Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) can effectively promote sustainable tourism through digital platforms.

PRISMA FRAMEWORK

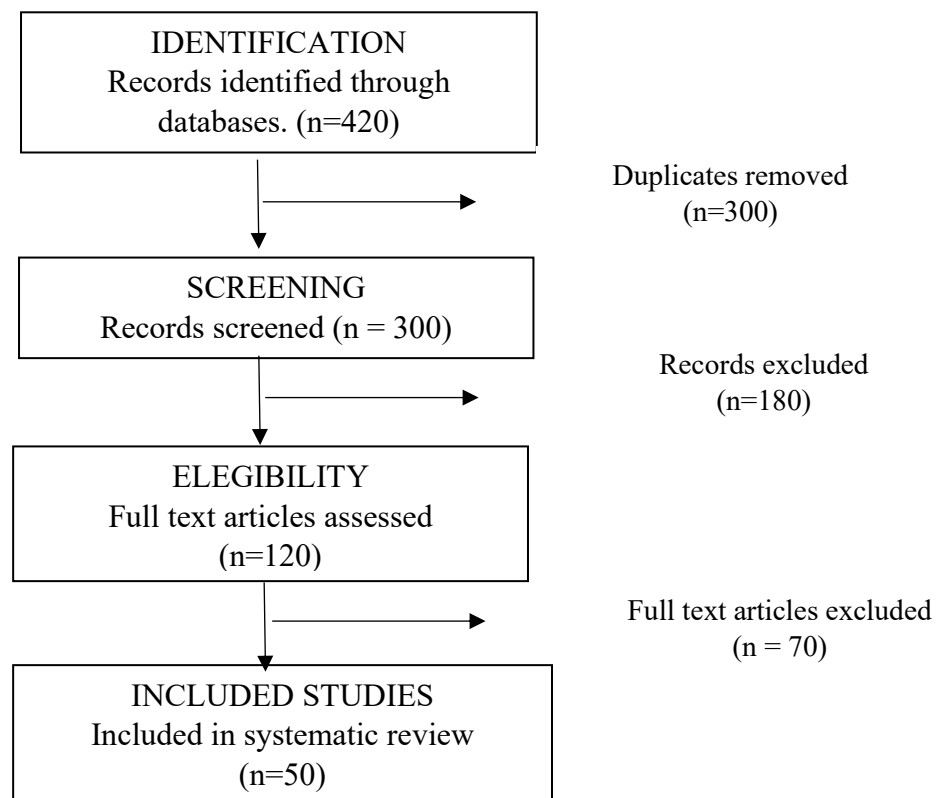


Fig 1: PRISMA Framework

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE:

The study follows a PRISMA approach to ensure a systematic and transparent review process. Initially, relevant studies are identified from major databases using predefined keywords. The selected studies are then screened by removing duplicates and reviewing titles and abstracts for relevance. Articles were further assessed for eligibility based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, such as relevance to the research topic, methodological quality, and publication type. The final set of studies were analysed using a thematic framework, where key concepts were coded and grouped into themes. These themes were then interpreted to generate meaningful insights related to the research objectives.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a **qualitative research design** for exploration of the role of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) in promotion of sustainable tourism via Instagram. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it enabled an in-depth understanding of the patterns, themes, and relationships within an existing literature which are related to influencer marketing and sustainable tourism. The study also employs a systematic literature review (SLR) by using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework for ensuring a transparent and rigor in the selection of relevant studies (Moher et al., 2009). Academic databases like Scopus, Emerald Insight, Web of Science, and Google Scholar had been used for identification of relevant literatures. Keywords included were "influencer marketing," "KOLs," "sustainable tourism," "Instagram tourism," and "digital tourism engagement" had been used for retrieval of studies published between 2018 and 2025. The selection process included four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Initially, 420 studies were taken into consideration, out of which 300 remained after removal of duplicates. Following the title along with abstract screening, 120 articles were analysed for eligibility, and ultimately, 50 studies were taken into consideration for qualitative analysis.

For data analysis, the study adopted a Clarke and Braun's (2013) thematic analysis approach, which involved six stages: Familiarization with Data, Coding, Theme Identification, Reviewing of Themes, Defining of Themes, And Reporting. This method allowed for systematic identification of recurring patterns along with themes which are related to influencer-driven sustainable tourism promotion.

4. FINDINGS (THEMATIC ANALYSIS)

The thematic analysis of the selected studies revealed that several key themes which explained the role of KOLs in promotion in sustainable tourism through Instagram.

VISUAL STORYTELLING - Emerging as a dominant theme. Influencers used high-quality images, reels, and narratives for creation of visually appealing representations of destinations. Such content enhances the destination attractiveness which enables potential tourists for experiencing destinations virtually, thereby increasing the awareness and interest.

INFLUENCER CREDIBILITY AND AUTHENTICITY - Play a critical role for shaping tourist behaviour. Followers perceive influencers as regards the relatable and trustworthy sources of information, which increases the effectiveness of sustainability messages. Authentic content that reflected the real experiences is more likely for influencing of travel decisions.

USER-GENERATED CONTENT (UGC) - Contributes majorly to tourism promotion. Tourists actively share the experiences on social media, which help in amplification of the destination with visibility and creation of a participatory marketing environment. The organic form of promotion enhances the credibility along with engagement.

DIGITAL TOURISM ECOSYSTEM - Highlights the integration of influencers, social media platforms, along with sustainability practices. This interconnected system enables more effective and a holistic tourism promotion strategies.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of the study highlighted that the transformative role of influencer marketing in promotion of sustainable tourism. The major use of visual storytelling on Instagram enhances an emotional engagement. Allows tourists to form a mental image about destinations even before visiting the destinations. This aligns with the existing research suggesting about the visual content which significantly influences travel intentions.

Furthermore, as regards credibility and authenticity of influencers aid in contributing for building trust, which is also crucial factor which helps in influencing consumer behaviour. The study also emphasized on the importance of user-generated content in expansion to reach and impact of tourism promotion. UGC not only enhances the engagement but also aids in reinforcing an authenticity, as it reflects the real experiences of tourists.

Thus, the concept of a digital tourism ecosystem provides a comprehensive understanding of about how various elements like influencers, social media platforms, and sustainability practices, interact to enhance tourism promotion. This integrated approach thus supports the development more effective and sustainable marketing strategies.

6. PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed framework of the study highlights as regards how KOLs influence sustainable tourism promotion via Instagram. Influencers act as the primary source of content creation, using visual storytelling techniques for engaging the audiences. This content thus leads for user interaction in the form of likes, shares, comments, along with user-generated content.

The engagement generated via Instagram contributes to increasing sustainability awareness among tourists. As a result of which tourists are more likely to adopt responsible travel behaviour and choose eco-friendly destinations. The framework highlights the mediating role of engagement and the moderating role of sustainability awareness in influencing tourism behaviour.

7. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have significant implications for various stakeholders in the tourism industry.

For **tourism authorities**, the study suggests the need to integrate influencer marketing into sustainability campaigns. Collaborating with influencers can enhance destination visibility and promote responsible tourism practices.

For **tourism businesses**, the study highlights the importance of adopting sustainable practices and partnering with influencers to communicate these initiatives effectively. This can improve brand image and attract environmentally conscious tourists.

For **regional economic development**, particularly in emerging tourism destinations, influencer-driven promotion can increase tourist inflow, generate employment opportunities, and support local communities while maintaining sustainability.

8. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) play a significant role in promoting sustainable travel and tourism through Instagram. By leveraging visual storytelling, authenticity, and user engagement, influencers enhance destination awareness and encourage responsible travel behaviour. The integration of influencer marketing

with sustainability represents a transformative approach to tourism promotion in the digital era.

The study contributes to existing literature by providing a systematic and qualitative analysis of influencer-driven sustainable tourism promotion. It also offers a conceptual framework that explains the relationship between KOLs, digital engagement, and sustainable tourism behaviour.

9. LIMITATIONS

The study is limited to secondary data and focuses primarily on Instagram, which may restrict the generalizability of findings across other social media platforms and geographic regions. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study may involve subjective interpretation.

Despite of providing valuable insights into the role of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) in promoting sustainable tourism through Instagram, this study has a few limitations which would be vital for acknowledgement.

This study is purely based on a qualitative research design by using of secondary data, which limits the ability as regards the establishment of causal relationships between influencer marketing along with sustainable tourism behaviour. The findings of the study are interpretative in nature which depend on the analysis of existing literature rather than that of the primary empirical evidence.

Further, the study relies on a PRISMA-based systematic literature review, which, although rigorous, is restricted by the availability and selection of the published studies. Relevant studies from outside were selected databases or those published in non-English languages have been excluded, potentially limiting for the comprehensiveness of the review.

The research's primary focus is on Instagram as the core platform, which have a possibility of restricting the generalizability of the findings to other social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, or upcoming digital environments. Different platforms may be exhibit in varying levels of engagement, content formats, along with influencer impact.

Another limitation is in the timeframe of the selected studies (2018–2025), which captures the recent trends but may overlook the earlier foundational research which could provide an additional theoretical depth. Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of the digital technologies and social media trends relate to the findings which may become as outdated over time.

Finally, the application of the thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun) involves a degree of a subjectivity in coding of the theme development. Although there

being a systematic procedures followed. The interpretation of themes may have been varying depending on the researcher's perspective, which could influence the findings.

10. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research could focus on:

- Conduction of empirical studies with usage of primary data
- Comparing of different social media platforms
- Exploring the role of artificial intelligence as regards the influencer marketing
- Analysation of cross-cultural differences in sustainable tourism behaviour.

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