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Social Media Influencers: Expectations vs Reality in Traveling

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Abstract

Social media influencers are an effective marketing instrument on social media. This research looks at how social media influencers build audience expectations through the content they are sharing, to the reality that audiences get as tourists. This research used an explanatory qualitative method and conducted in-depth interviews with 20 interviewees to get primary data. The researcher observed that social media influencers are used by the tourism sector in Lake Toba to promote tourism destinations by inviting influencers to attract audiences to visit by expecting the same experience when viewing the influencers' content. The results of this study indicate that the role of influencers is very important to promote tourism destinations and help to direct and provide information to the audience from the travel experiences shared by them so as to influence the perception, interest in visiting, and travel decisions of tourists.

Keywords

Social Media Influencer, Tourism, Expectation, Reality, Lake Toba

1. Introduction

The influence of social media in the tourism industry has become increasingly significant in recent years. With easy and fast access to various social media platforms, users can easily get information about tourist destinations, travel experiences, and reviews from fellow users (Luo & Zhong, 2015). The perceptions and experiences shared by social media users can significantly influence a person's travel decisions. Posting about interesting holiday experiences or positive reviews about a particular destination can encourage other people to visit that place. The presence of social media influencers who have many followers can have a significant influence on shaping perceptions and trust in a particular tourism destination or brand. Xiang et al. (2015) the use of social media also allows tourism industry players to interact directly with potential customers. Hotels, airlines, and travel agents can leverage social media to promote special offers, provide live customer service, and get feedback from users. Thus, social media has become an important platform in marketing and promotional strategies in the tourism industry. Effective use of social media can also help create a more positive customer experience and increase customer loyalty in the long term. Thus, the role of social media in the tourism industry cannot be underestimated, and industry players need to continue to monitor and adapt to developing trends and dynamics that occur in social media to remain relevant and compete in an increasingly competitive market.

The influence of social media influencers in shaping audiences' attitudes and perceptions towards tourism destinations has been the subject of significant research. Based on research by Zhang et al. (2017), content created by social media influencers has great potential to shape audience attitudes and preferences towards tourist destinations. Influencers' involvement in sharing their experiences in an authentic and engaging manner can build trust among their followers. This is the reason why tourism marketers are increasingly interested in working with social media influencers, considering their ability to influence audiences and strengthen brand images. Although the presence of social media influencers can provide significant benefits in building audience trust, there are also challenges that must be faced by tourism marketers. As stated by Magno and Cassia (2018), the costs of using influencer services can be very expensive. Influencers tend to have high expectations for their compensation, especially if they have a large number of followers and interactions on their social media. Research by Galeotti and Goyal (2009) shows that influencers often have a desire to gain high levels of social and financial recognition (Veirman et al., 2016).

Marketing strategies via social media make tourists switch from traditional or conventional methods. This has been researched extensively in various contexts such as the positive impact on peer-to-peer markets (Ert & Fleischer, 2019). Intention to purchase tourism products online Ponte et al. (2015), the use of eWOM Abubakar & Ilkan (2016), on the positive impact of influencer marketing (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In this research, researchers want to observe how social media influencers build the expectations and reality that tourists receive after travelling. Hu & Olivieri (2020), in their research, stated that social media influencers are the main digital contacts who influence travel decisions. Therefore, further investigation is needed as consumers increasingly rely on social media. This research was conducted in the Lake Toba area, one of the leading tourist destinations in Indonesia.

2. Literature Review

Social media influencers in recent years have become a significant phenomenon in the marketing and communications industry. Social media influencers often focus on certain topics or niches, such as fashion, beauty, travel, food, technology, and

more. This focus allows them to build an engaged and committed audience on the topic, thus becoming an authoritative source for their followers. Influencers' ability to deliver relevant and engaging content on specific topics makes them effective catalysts for brands looking to reach specific markets. For example, an influencer who focuses on travel topics could be an ideal partner for a tourism brand looking to promote their destination to an audience interested in travel. The definition of social media influencers as a new type of independent third party that can shape audience attitudes, as expressed by Freberg et al. (2011), reflects the increasingly important and influential role that influencers have in today's digital world. The powerful influence that social media influencers have lies in their ability to build emotional connections with their followers, thereby influencing behaviour and purchasing decisions. The trust that followers place in social media influencers is often considered higher than in traditional advertising, as they are considered more authentic and personal.

Chan (2022) highlights the effectiveness of using influencer services in digital marketing. The findings suggest that investing in influencer services can generate a significant return on investment (ROI), estimated to be up to 11 times that of traditional advertising. These numbers confirm that working with social media influencers can be a highly profitable marketing strategy for brands looking to reach a wider, more engaged audience. With the high level of interaction and engagement that influencers have with their followers, the results obtained from marketing campaigns with influencers tend to be more significant and sustainable. Leung et al. (2022) also revealed interesting trends in the use of influencer services in digital marketing. The significant budget increases planned by marketers in 2018, with 39% of them planning to increase their budgets for using influencer services and even 19% of them planning to spend up to \$100,000 per campaign, reflects increased confidence in the potential and effectiveness of influencers in achieving marketing goals. This shows that influencers have become one of the most effective tools in digital marketing today, with many brands seeing significant value in working with them to achieve their business goals.

All regions in Indonesia benefit greatly from the tourism sector. Marketing tourist destinations is very important in today's rapidly growing tourism industry. Tourism business players can use social media marketing strategies to promote tourist destinations and attract visitors. One strategy that can be used in this industry is to increase destination visibility through social media (Pabel & Prideaux, 2016). In terms of tourism, it is now developing into a modern or contemporary business. Tourism products, both art attractions and business products, are designed attractively (Benur & Bramwell, 2015). In the world of tourism, the role of social media influencers is to make uploaded posts look interesting and increase tourists' intentions to plan trips to certain tourist destinations (Tham et al., 2020). Therefore, the influence of social media on tourism is an important component in promoting tourist destinations and influencing tourists' interest in visiting those places (Pan et al., 2021).

3. Methods

The research method used in this research is an explanatory qualitative research method to understand how social media influencers shape tourists' expectations before deciding to visit Lake Toba and how they feel after travelling. This research was conducted in two different time periods, namely November – December 2021 and February – April 2022. A total of 20 sources were selected using snowball sampling techniques and then conducted in-depth interviews to obtain the required data. The data will be triangulated using different data sources and different data collection times.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender (20 respondents)		
Female	11 peoples	55%
Male	9 peoples	45%
Age		
17-25 (Generation Z)	8 peoples	40%
26-40 (Generation Y)	12 peoples	60%
Time spent on Social Media (per-day)		
<1 hour	0 peoples	0%
1 hr – 2,9 hrs	2 peoples	10%
3 hr – 5 hrs	10 peoples	50%
>5 hours	8 peoples	40%
Number of followed tourism influencers		
1-3 account	2 peoples	10%
4-6 account	4 peoples	20%
6-8 account	9 peoples	45%
>8 account	5 peoples	25%

4. Results and Discussion

After conducting a thermal analysis of the interview results, there were also 4 points that the researchers found and considered based on supporting literature, namely the informative effect, the effect of visiting interest, travel decisions, and tourist satisfaction. Previous research shows that information obtained by audiences through social media and influencers shapes their expectations, thereby influencing travel decisions (Narangajavana et al., 2017; Monaco, 2017). The research is divided into two phases, namely the expectation phase, which includes informative effects, interest in visiting and travel decisions, and the reality phase, which describes the tourist satisfaction phase. Social media is slowly developing into a part of society in responding to information needs. The role of influencers is increasingly visible because they are generally informative. Asan (2021), in his research, stated that one of the impacts of the existence of influencers is that they are able to motivate their audience to travel. In this research, a group of 5 tourists stated that they planned a vacation after seeing content shared by an influencer.

The source's statement added that they get travel information through shared content related to transportation schedules, geography and certain demographics. These results support previous research which states that influencers are informative (Gretzel, 2017; Asan, 2021). This is recognized as answering the information needs of potential tourists. However, several sources stated things related to trust in influencers.

“Actually, we're not sure whether it's just about content because nowadays, a lot of people use filters. However, after comparing several influencers, we became interested.”

Based on this statement, it is known that audiences filter information to form their expectations. This is also a form of audience trust that is formed before travelling (Pop et al., 2021). Therefore, researchers concluded that audiences expect the same experience when viewing influencer content. Social media influencers are a marketing tool that can connect industry and consumers. When the audience has decided to travel, they expect satisfaction. One of the factors that influences tourist satisfaction is accessibility, as stated in the interview. We did not find it difficult to get to Holbung Hill, and access was quite easy and fast.

Currently, development has been evenly distributed, the port is good, and in Samosir, the roads have also been repaired. This statement illustrates that tourists are happy with the ease of access. This helps tourists realize their desire to enjoy tourist destinations. Without good accessibility, tourist satisfaction is difficult to achieve (Ngoc & Trinh, 2015; Pai et al., 2020). Social media influencers are also known to recommend restaurants that serve regional specialities. The curiosity that arises in tourists is mentioned in the following interview. Almost all the influencers recommended this restaurant, and we are glad we tried it. Some regional foods we tried and liked, but there were also some that didn't suit our tastes.

The statement above implies that travel decisions are the result of searching for information from various influencers, and travel satisfaction is an accumulation of all factors (including information search, interest in visiting, and travel decisions). Satisfaction is the final result that tourists want. When tourists feel satisfied, there will be an intention to return and a willingness to recommend the destination (Bigne et al., 2001). satisfied with the view, very satisfied because this was the first time I saw Lake Toba directly. We already have plans for next year's Christmas holidays here. Completeness of tourism facilities (attractions, amenities and accessibility) supports each other to meet tourist satisfaction. If one of these factors is not met, it will affect tourist satisfaction. There are expectations that are formed through the information search process which are then developed by social media influencers. However, the reality is that the final result is formed based on the tourist's own experience.

5. Conclusion

In reality, social media influencers serve as marketing tools that connect industries and consumers. Researchers see how audience trust is formed during the information-gathering process by comparing the content they view. This can influence a person's interest in making a decision to travel. Influencers are gaining popularity as they provide informative content that motivates travellers to travel. Through their posts, influencers filter information from the audience to shape their expectations. Thus, trust in influencers is a strong influence factor and an important role in reaching a wider range of markets.

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