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Journal of Smart Tourism

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<https://doi.org/10.52255/smarttourism.2021.1.3.6>

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Empirical Research Article

Word-of-Mouth Redefined: A Profile of Influencers in the Travel and Tourism Industry

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Abstract

The emergence of the digital economy and easy accessibility to Web 2.0 tools has seen an expansion of the influencer ecosystem within the travel and tourism industry. Founded on the principles of reference groups and peer reference there is a growing trend amongst industry practitioners who are now opting to move away from many of the traditional approaches used to market their products and services and are instead taking advantage of the concept of e-word-of-mouth (eWOM). Whilst there is a growing body of academic literature addressing the notion of influencer marketing, there is little understanding of influencer marketers themselves. Consequentially, this study addresses this gap in the literature through the quantitative examination of those who promote products, services, or companies by distributing eWOM through their online digital channels and presence; otherwise known as travel influencers. A quantitative research approach involving an online survey yielded 255 responses from travel influencers. The research findings indicate that those who work in this field prefer not to be awarded the label “travel influencer,” focusing instead on their specific method of influencing, such as blogging and vlogging or sharing Instagram updates. The research also demonstrates how the new influencers have a strong role in generating travel urge and desire. The research contributes to the wider body of academic literature and travel industry practitioners by establishing the general profile of influencers and their increasingly specialized role in tourism and hospitality marketing.

Keywords

travel influencer; Web 2.0; social media; Instagram; electronic word-of-mouth

1. Introduction

With the advent of Web 2.0 has come increasing use of social media within the travel and tourism industry (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Past research has established the significant impact of social media on all stages of the travel consumer journey including the search for travel information, marketing and promotion, decision-making, and during and post-travel sharing of experiences (Amaro et al., 2016; Leung et al., 2013; Pike, 2021). In this regard, digital platforms have come to be seen as central to contemporary travel and tourism marketing and have thus been researched extensively. That being said, research surrounding the role of the “influencer” remains in its infancy, bringing rise to concerns such as who is doing the influencing, what are their motives, and how might their work affect consumer behavior?

The expansion of the internet, particularly social networking, means that the power of personal recommendations has exploded, and digital “word-of-mouth” can play a powerful role in a person’s decision to buy a product (George, 2021, p. 55). People value and listen to the opinion of others who have actually experienced a product or service through their social network connection. Word-of-mouth marketing is no longer merely one-to-one conversation. Customers reviews of travel and hospitality products and tourist destination are posted and shared on social media platforms, and opinions are disseminated

through product review sites TripAdvisor and Trustpilot as well as reviews on search engines such as Google Maps. Many tourism companies also post edited testimonials on their websites. Some consumers even create websites or blogs to praise or punish brands. For instance, helloworld.com is a well-known website that consumers can use to report good or bad service received from a company. Consumers can submit their views about the service they received at any organization in the form of a report posted on the company’s website. In turn, the service provider is able to respond to the customer and attempt “service recovery.”

In today’s digital age, the influence of word-of-mouth marketing operates on a one-to-many basis. In the context of the rise of the digital economy, e-commerce, and online social networking, eWOM plays a crucial role in consumer purchase behaviors and decisions. There is now an increasing uptake of academic research into how information communication technology (ICT) in general, and social media in particular, are affecting the travel decision-making of consumers through eWOM (Amaro et al., 2016; Dolnicar & Ring, 2014; Hudson & Thal, 2013; Leung et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2020). The effectiveness of this new form of redefined WOM is founded on the principles of reference groups and peer influence. A reference group is a group of people who influence an individual’s buying behavior (Sethna & Blythe, 2016). It has been well-documented that reference groups and peer influence play a key role in shaping consumer purchasing decisions (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Childers

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Received 1 September 2021; Received in revised form 18 October 2021; Accepted 1 November 2021

& Rao, 1992; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Less attention, however, has been given to the rise of a new phenomenon of digital/social influencers and their unique role in consumer purchase decision-making and behavior.

This paper examines the people influencing travel and tourism decision-making through their online profiles and presence. There are ongoing shifts in influencer marketing which have traditionally been associated with sport, music, and TV celebrities. The development of the digital economy and user-friendliness of Web 2.0 (or Social Web) tools has seen an expansion of the influencer digital landscape with consequences for tourism away from traditional celebrities. This study, therefore, seeks to provide a profile of the new influencers and their role within the travel and tourism industry. In doing so, it provides tourism marketing organizations and other tourism industry stakeholders with insightful data on who influencers are and what role they play in post-modern travel and tourism marketing. This is particularly important given recent studies that have highlighted possible unethical practices amongst travel influencers (e.g., Boerman et al., 2017; Campbell & Farrell, 2020; De Cicco et al., 2020; Smith, 2021;) alongside the potential for influencers to promote positive actions and behaviors amongst consumers (e.g., Collins & Potoglou, 2019; Kapoor et al., 2021).

2. Reference Groups and Peer Influence

The concept of reference groups has a long tradition in the discipline of sociology where it is used to understand how individuals self-identify with particular other individuals or groups. Originally conceptualized by Hyman (1942), sociologists have long since established that reference groups tend to have influence on the behavior of the individuals who self-identify with that group (Merton, 1957). A common understanding of a reference group is that of a group of people or a person who significantly influences the behavior of other individuals (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). On the basis of such an understanding, the concept of influence through reference groups has been refined within consumer and marketing research over the years. Reference group constructs have commonly been used by marketers in the promotion of products, services, and brands (Kasali & Haryanto, 2009).

This has been accomplished through developing marketing and communication strategies that rely on the use of prominent people or reference group members to endorse products and/or feature in advertisement. Examples of reference groups include family, friends, work colleagues, religious and faith groups, neighborhood associations, formal and informal social leisure groups, music, sports, entertainment figures and social networking sites, among others (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Childers & Rao, 1992; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Sethna & Blythe, 2016).

Notwithstanding the complexities inherent in group dynamics, a general principle is that a given group is made up of those who lead and those who follow (Crutchfield, 1955). Thus, a reference group tends to serve as a point of reference and influence on the attitudes, choices, and beliefs of the individual who follows. Traditionally, reference group influence has taken place through word-of-mouth, over the fence conversations, over the dryline conversation, across-the-street conversations, and within group conversations. In this context, Currie et al. (2008) maintain that it is reasonable for travel and tourism marketers to assume that some potential travelers are likely to choose the same, if not similar, travel and tourism experiences previously undertaken by their friends or peers rather than strike out in an independent approach due to the risk of making a wrong choice. Therefore, while reference groups influence the purchasing and consumption behaviors of individuals, it is the influence of peers that tends to be most dominant (Hsu et al., 2006).

In their seminal study, Bearden and Etzel (1982) examined the variations in reference group influence on publicly versus privately consumed products and luxury versus necessity

products. Findings from their research found that the products and brands individuals choose are susceptible to varying degrees of influence from their reference groups. It was observed that for both publicly consumed luxuries and publicly consumed necessities, the degree of reference group influence was stronger compared to privately consumed products. Thus, the degree of conspicuousness was seen as a key explanatory variable in determining the extent of reference group influence on the product and brand purchasing decisions of individuals. This is largely due to the fact that individuals are most influenced by the things they can see and observe from their reference group (Johar & Sirgy, 1991).

In a replication and extension study, Childers and Rao (1992) examined reference groups in influencing individual purchasing decision *vis-a-vis* ethnicity and product type. Their research aimed at assessing the validity of Bearden and Etzel's (1982) framework over time and across cultural contexts by examining comparable samples in the United States and Thailand. An important distinction was made between peer reference groups and family reference groups. It was found that peer influence was at its strongest regarding decisions on luxury products for American consumers compared to Thai consumers who were most influenced by their family reference groups. Overall, however, the study demonstrated that on one hand, peer reference groups have relatively large influence on decisions on publicly consumed products and luxuries. Family reference groups on the other hand, were able to exercise more influence on purchasing decisions when it comes to private products and necessities (Childers & Rao, 1992). This is likely due to the fact that peer groups have inherent norms and values that individuals must abide to and failure to respond to this peer injunction could make an individual feel distant from the group. This influence of peer group is a well-established social phenomenon (Bearden et al., 1989; Brown & Reingen, 1987).

These research studies underscore the continued importance of reference groups in influencing the purchasing and consumption behavior of individuals. Bearden and Etzel made an important observation that "influence requires the opportunity for social interaction or public scrutiny of behaviour" (1982, p.184). In the pre-Web 2.0 context of this observation, the assumption was that such close social interactions could only be achieved within socially proximal reference groups such as the family or peer networks that one sees on a face-to-face basis. It is on this basis that Childers and Rao (1992) following Deutsch and Gerard (1955) identified reference group constructs as being distinguished into comparative reference groups and normative reference groups. The former are those groups that an individual uses for self-appraisal and includes sports stars and entertainment celebrities whose standards of achievements and lifestyle the individual aspires to also reach. The latter group (normative reference groups) are those through whom an individual forms norms, attitudes, values, and behaviors such as parents, teachers, and peers.

Thus, comparative reference groups are seen as those that the individual does not directly interact with but only observes their behaviors from a distance because such reference groups are relatively further removed from the individual compared to normative reference groups who are socially closer. The advent of the internet age, social media, and Web 2.0 especially makes such distinction redundant. Individuals are now able to interact directly and instantaneously with comparative reference groups in addition to their normative reference groups.

In summary, the literature on reference group influence in consumer marketing research points out that the degree of influence tends to vary depending on product types and the socio-cultural contexts of individuals. This raises the question of the form of peer reference group influences that are considered most effective.

In their comparative study of housewives and students and their susceptibility to reference group influence, Park and Lessig

(1977) identified three motivational forms of reference group influence. These are informational, value-expressive, and utilitarian reference group influences. *Informational reference group influence* is where influence is internalized by individuals who perceive such influencing information as useful for enhancing knowledge of their environment or their ability to make purchasing decisions of a product, brand, or service, and where the source is perceived as being credible. Informational reference group influencing occurs when an individual actively seeks information from opinion leaders or groups with perceived expertise, or through inference underpinned by observing the behavior of significant others in the groups. This form of reference group does not always involve interaction between the individual and the informational reference group. An example is when individuals rely on the TripAdvisor evaluations as a source of information about hotel products and services (Ayeh et al., 2013). *Value-expressive reference group influence* occurs through two processes. Firstly, an individual adopts the behavior of others for the purpose of bolstering their ego or self-concept through referent identification. Secondly, an individual can be influenced by value-expressive reference group on the basis of affect or simply liking that group's opinions or recommendations. An individual making a purchasing decision experiences *utilitarian reference group influence* when such an individual complies with the preferences and expectations of others on the basis that: (1) they mediate significant rewards or punishments; (2) the individual's behavior will be visible or known to this reference group, and; (3) the individual is motivated to realize the reward or to avoid the punishment. Given these three motivational forms of reference group influence, Park and Lessig (1977) argue that reference groups can be "actual or imaginary individual or group" and that this has important implications for consumer marketing.

In a combined application of the work of Park and Lessig (1977) and Bearden and Etzel (1982), Mehta et al. (2001) conducted a study on working women in Singapore and their susceptibility to reference group influence and the perceived risks of services – fine dining, beauty care services, a haircut, and dental care services – on consumer behavior. Their findings indicated that informational reference group influences were the most influential on all four types of services, especially for luxury services. The implication is that the marketing of services needs to focus primarily on informational reference group influence as part of marketing communication strategies (Mehta et al., 2001). One such form of informational reference group influence is word-of-mouth (WOM).

A digital influencer is essentially a person(s) who promotes a product, service, or company by distributing eWOM through their online digital channels and presence. These digital channels and presence come in the form of followers, subscribers, views, organic/paid reach, domain authority (DA), and search engine optimization (SEO); among others. Within the academic literature the important role of reference groups and peer influence in determining pleasure travel patterns is well established (Currie et al., 2008). Nonetheless, there is a paucity of research attention on this rapidly evolving form of *peer influence marketing* within the travel and tourism sector (Kapoor et al., 2018). There are, however, a number of references to this phenomenon of digital influencer marketing within the grey literature of the marketing industry publications. Thus, it is important to re-examine the variety of influences on consumer decision-making and purchasing processes, particularly within the tourism and travel industry.

3. From Word-of-Mouth (WOM) to Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

It has been well-established that word-of-mouth (WOM) offers an important source of credible and persuasive information source for consumers (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Brooks, 1957;

Park & Lessig, 1977). WOM is considered as the network of interpersonal communication in which consumers share their purchasing and consumption experience of products and services (Brooks, 1957). Research studies suggest that as a form of informational reference group influence, positive WOM is seen as a trustworthy source of information for influencing consumer purchasing decisions (Senecal & Nantel, 2004). However, negative WOM is seen as undermining the credibility of marketing information (Smith & Vogt, 1995) leading subsequently to damaging the reputation of a given brand (Laczniak et al., 2001). Earlier research on WOM in travel and tourism have highlighted the how good WOM increases the awareness of a destination to unfamiliar visitors while through the creation of a positive image of a destination (Phillips et al., 2013). Travel and tourism services are considered high-risk services because it is difficult to evaluate prior to purchasing (Rathmell, 1974, p. 12; Zeithaml, 1981). Consequently, prospective travelers and buyers of such services tend to seek for WOM information before making purchasing decisions (Hussain et al., 2017). Likewise, eWOM tends to be more credible when the consumer using it has previous experience (Sotiriadis & Van Zyl, 2013).

The communication of opinions is no longer carried out interpersonally (i.e., person-to-person or face-to-face), but rather is mediated by ICT (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). With the increasing rise in information and communication technologies (ICT), traditional WOM has become transformed into electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Yang, 2017). eWOM, which is defined as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet" (López & Sicilia, 2014).

This form of communication has taken on special importance with the emergence of online platforms, which have made it one of the most influential information sources on the Web (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016), for instance, in the travel and tourism industry (Sotiriadis & Van Zyl, 2013). Compared to traditional WOM requiring face-to-face communication, eWOM is considerably more influential because it can be transmitted at great speed to reach many people (viral marketing) and can be retrieved and used conveniently. eWOM also allow individuals to develop personal and social networks that reach both friends and strangers on the internet (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Liang et al., 2013). The development of new electronic media has shown the increasing importance of interpersonal influence through eWOM participation. Consumers increasingly use social media platforms (for example, social network sites, product review sites, wikis, blogs, forums, media sharing sites, travel podcasts) to share their opinions about the products and services they consume (Gupta & Harris, 2010; Lee et al., 2011) and to research the companies that sell them.

There are two forms of eWOM participation which are opinion-giving behavior and opinion-seeking behavior (López & Sicilia, 2014). Opinion-giving individuals, also known as "posters," are those who write their opinions and share these on internet forums, blogs, product review websites (such as TripAdvisor, Urbanspoon, and Yelp), among other places. In contrast, opinion-seeking individuals (also known as "lurkers") are those who search for the written opinions of others on the internet. Extant research in travel and tourism has focused on to varying degrees on both aspects of participation in eWOM. However, the main emphasis has been on understanding the motivations and profile of opinion-seeking behavior and how such behavior shapes their travel and tourism service purchasing decisions (Confente, 2015). There has been less interest in going behind the scenes of eWOM in order to understand the motivations and profiles of opinion-giving individuals. Lee et al. (2011) in their study of the online review community on TripAdvisor identified helpful reviewers (posters) who were characterized by having travelled more and are active in posting reviews. For such individuals, a common notion is that they do so

for self-enhancement, altruism, building social capital, and reciprocity (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003). Increasingly, however, such individuals are turning their participation in eWOM into a full-time influencing occupation. This calls for a careful examination of these types of influentials.

4. E-influentials and Influencers

Brown and Hayes (2008) bluntly introduced the notion that “marketing is broken,” emphasizing the need for radical transformation by marketing (or media) agencies and organizations in order to successfully promote products and services to the modern-day consumer. A dozen years later there is strong evidence of such transformation throughout many industries, including that of travel and tourism. In fact, influencing is described by a leading influencer marketing agency (Influencer.uk) as “word-of-mouth redefined.” The term “e-influentials” is believed to have been coined in 1999 by Burson-Marsteller and Roper Starch Worldwide as a description for those opinion-giving leaders who are able to spread information via the internet (Sun et al., 2006). While traditional WOM influencing is restricted by the fact that it relies on face-to-face communication, e-influentials are unrestricted in how they are spread information in the internet age. Internet penetration has increased significantly across the world, and this coupled with increasing rates of computer literacy and abundance of user-friendly devices (Sun et al., 2006), opens up many channels of influence exerted by such reference groups on the purchasing and consumption behavior of individuals. In the contemporary digital age, the routes of influence ranges from a new blog post, a Facebook update, a tweet on Twitter, a photograph on Instagram, a vlog on YouTube, and sharing a video on TikTok, among other digital channels.

According to Ferguson (2008), influencer marketing programs are a form of viral marketing, where the intention is that information is shared extensively amongst the community(s) within which it is intended to be best received. This marketing approach allows for the identification of target influencers in a given market (Brown & Hayes, 2008), such as travel, and for these to subsequently be employed either by

marketing agencies or directly by organizations to “spread the word” on a given product or service. Ferguson (2008) describes the relationship between viral marketing and word-of-mouth (WOM) as being one of cause and effect. The viral marketing undertaken by influencers builds awareness and “buzz,” thus, identifying as the cause, and the subsequent positive WOM, which theoretically leads to trial and acquisition, is the effect.

Framed as testimonial advertising, influencer content can be promoted by potential buyers or by third parties. Said third parties exist either in the supply chain (DMOs, tour operators, online travel agencies, airlines, hotels, etc.) or they may be “value-added influencers” such as journalists, academics, industry analysts, and professional advisers (Brown & Hayes, 2008). While traditionally influencers were inherently limited to the likes of high-profile businessmen, industry analysts or celebrities, the evolution of consumer research techniques and increased usage of internet-based sources and social media accounts (Gillin, 2007) has seen the influencer ecosystem expand exponentially. Nowadays, everybody has the potential to become an influencer, regardless of background, experience, or qualifications.

Keller and Berry (2003) differentiate influencers according to five key attributes. *Activists* are those who are actively involved with community issues such as political movements or charities; *connected influencers* are those with large social networks; *authoritative influencers* are those who are looked up to and respected; *active minds* have multiple and diverse interests and, thus, tend not to focus solely on one area of interest and *trendsetters* are those who tend to “set trends” and are frequently seen as early adopters in the market. The discipline of engaging with key individuals in order to influence a market’s buying behavior is at the core of the influencer’s role (Brown & Hayes, 2008). This can take place through a number of means such as increasing awareness, creating sales incentives, and through marketing activities. Influencers essentially influence decision-makers through their advice, experience, opinion, and research (Brown & Hayes, 2008). This is most apparent on social media platforms, facilitating the formation of a comparative reference group enabling the consumer to undertake observation of the influencer and their online content without directly communicating with them.

Table 1. Known influencers in the travel and tourism industry*

Influencer	Influencer Overview/Brand	Prominent Online Influence Platforms
Damon and Jo (Shut up and go) www.shutupandgo.travel	A young, multilingual, and diverse pair who left their lives in exchange for travel. They aim to inspire others through their travel tales, encouraging people to “shut up and go.”	Blog: 1, 140 followers Facebook: 98,000+ likes Twitter: 41,000+ followers Instagram: 128,000+ followers YouTube: 1,3 million+ subscribers
Kate McCulley (Adventurous Kate) www.adventurouskate.com	After four years of establishing a marketing career Kate left her job to travel the world. Her goal is to show women that independent and solo travel can be safe, easy, and a lot of fun.	Facebook: 55,000+ likes Twitter: 53,000+ followers YouTube: 2,900+ subscribers Instagram: 99,000 followers LinkedIn: 500+ connections
Louis Cole (Fun for Louis) www.livetheadventure.club www.flybeyondborders.com	A British filmmaker and YouTube personality, best known for posting a daily video blog documenting his life and travels adventuring all over the globe.	Facebook: 460,000+ likes Twitter: 997,000+ followers YouTube: 2 million+ subscribers Twitter: 802,000+ followers Instagram: 1.1 million followers TikTok: 58,000 likes
Dave Bouskill and Debra Corbeil (The Planet D) www.theplanetd.com	A married couple who escaped the “rat race” in exchange for a life on the road. They maintain their travel website as a place for readers to escape life’s daily grind and a place to find inspiration.	Blog: 2.8million followers Facebook: 197,000+ likes Twitter: 134,000+ followers Instagram: 209,000+ followers YouTube: 46,000+ subscribers Pinterest: 65,000+ followers Google+: 3.1million+ followers LinkedIn: 500+ connections

Chris Burkard (Chris Burkard Photography) www.chrisburkard.com	An accomplished explorer, photographer, creative director, speaker, and author. Layered by outdoor, travel, adventure, surf, and lifestyle subjects, he is known for images that are punctuated by untamed, powerful landscapes.	Facebook: 461,000+ likes Twitter: 30,000+ followers Instagram: 3.6million+ followers YouTube: 44,000+ subscribers
Murad and Nataly Osmann (Founders of the #followMeTo hashtag)	Murad Osmanov better known as "Murad Osmann" is a Russian photographer based in Moscow. He and his wife, Natalia Zakharova, founded the series "Follow Me To" which went viral in 2012.	Facebook: 31,000+ likes Twitter: 5,200+ followers Instagram: 3.7million+ followers
Kiersten Rich (The Blonde Abroad) www.theblondeabroad.com	Kiersten left her career in corporate finance to travel the world, volunteer in developing countries, and discover her own "happily ever after." She aims to inspire her followers to live a life they love and settle for nothing less than extraordinary.	Facebook: 184,000+ likes Twitter: 32,000+ followers Instagram: 547,000+ followers YouTube: 33,000+ subscribers Pinterest: 120,000+ followers
Eric Stoen (Travel Babbo) www.travelbabbo.com	An ex-healthcare worker who travels with his wife and kids. He writes about family travel.	Blog: 43,000+ page views per month Facebook: 63,000+ likes Twitter: 30,000+ followers Instagram: 194,000+ followers Pinterest: 57,000+ followers LinkedIn: 500+ connections
Brian Kelly (The Points Guy) www.thepointsguy.com	Brian quit his job at Morgan Stanley to embrace his obsession with air miles and he now flies first class for a living. He blogs about earning and spending air miles.	Facebook: 1.9million+ likes Twitter: 356,000+ followers Instagram: 465,000+ followers TikTok: 150,000+ followers
Nomadic Mike	Matthew is an American travel blogger. At the age of 23 – he took his first overseas trip – to Thailand. The trip convinced Matt to quit his job, finish his MBA, and begin traveling the world and blogging about his experiences.	Facebook: 253,000+ likes Instagram: 125,000+ followers

*Based on the Forbes list of top influencers in travel Statistics as of May 2021.

Although the methods of influencing may be limitless, measuring influence is problematic. Table 1 depicts some of the most well-known influencers in the travel and tourism industry in accordance with their degree of social media prominence. This is, however, far from fool-proof with the likes of Google Analytics and other social media analytics playing key roles in which content appears to which consumer. In essence, influence as a general concept is too nebulous to measure with precision and whilst "how many followers a person has on Instagram" or "how many shares a tweet receives" may provide suitable indication, many influencing methods provide less transparent analytics. This can be said for the influencers noted in Table 1 where the number of times Chris Burkard's books have been read are not represented, neither is the amount of people who have attended Brian Kelly's *TED Talks* or have opened his Snaps on Snap Chat.

From a marketing perspective, determining a suitable influencer is thus a challenging endeavor. Technorati's (2013) digital influence report found that measuring blog traffic along with Facebook and Twitter followers/likes was the prominent method of determining a successful influencer. However, the internet sphere has continued to evolve since this time, with social media providers and search engines using more complex algorithms and analytic tools, meaning that not all content is visible to all members of the comparative reference group. The growth of manipulation techniques has also become a concern and it is important to recognize that numbers can be misleading: followers can be purchased, inactive, irrelevant, uninterested, or fake. Engagement can also be manipulated by paying to expand your reach or through participation with dedicated community groups set up online with the sole purpose of reciprocally increasing engagement for community members through "like for like" exchanges and comment threads on blogs. In addition to this, the authenticity and ethical implications of what content is shared and how it is shared is difficult to determine (e.g., Smith, 2021).

Influencers can range from personal friends and acquaintances to professionals in their respective field, to celebrities, with the most notable difference being the presence or absence of remuneration. Whereas many marketing agencies will take social media statistics into account when determining a suitable compensation package for the influencer's time, a more

common method of assessment is determined by the website's data analytics (DA) score. This is a search engine ranking score developed by an organization called *Moz Analytics*. It predicts how well a website will rank on search engine result pages (SERPs) and providing a subsequent score calculated by evaluating linking root domains and number of total links. This score is seen by marketing agencies as an appropriate measurement when comparing websites or tracking the "ranking strength" of a website over time. Other SEO measurement tools are also becoming more commonly utilized such as *Trust Flow*, which is a flow metric which scores (out of a 100) a website's perceived trustworthiness from the quality of the backlinks.

The income received by influencers in general is not transparent and this is no different for those operating in the travel and tourism sector. The Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) states that adverts must be clearly identifiable, and that the reader must be aware that they are being advertised to (Advertising Standards Authority, 2018). Therefore, theoretically any commercial relationship must be clearly noted. This includes financial remuneration along with gifted products and services (Stainton & Iordanova, 2017). A simple browse through various internet sites, however, indicates that not all influencers comply with this rule or indeed that they are aware of this requirement.

5. Methods

This research study employed the use of positivism, advocating the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality. Associated with deductive logical reasoning, positivist research utilizes only data that is verifiable and that is collected in a value-free manner, enabling objective results to be generated and general scientific laws to be created (Bryman, 2016, p. 27; Punch, 2014, p. 231; Robson, 2011, p. 65). In the case of this research, data was collected through quantitative means in order to facilitate the collection of numerical data which could subsequently be analyzed using mathematically based methods in the form of statistics (Aliaga & Gunderson, 2006, p. 124).

Quantitative studies emphasize the measurement and analysis of casual relationships between variables within a value-

free framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Due to its focus on constructing concepts and measuring variables, it aims to present objective accounts of the subject studied and to develop nomothetic knowledge (Punch, 2014). Such approaches are often favored for their ability to obtain large amounts of data, as such making the research more representative of a larger population (Burns, 2000; Punch, 2014; Robson, 2011). Measurement, quantification, and deductive reasoning lie inherently at the center of the research focus (Burns, 2000; Neuman, 2013; Punch, 2014; Robson, 2011), which allows for findings to be applied to alternative situations within the same realm in preparation for further research (Punch, 2014). This is the intention of this preliminary and exploratory study of the travel and lifestyle influencer.

Despite suggestions that the ability to produce objective research is a benefit of quantitative data collection (Flick, 2009, p. 72; Punch, 2014, p. 215; Robson, 2011, p. 89), it can be argued that research cannot be entirely objective since there is a matter of subjectivity in the very choice of the research problem and the interpretation of the results (Burns, 2000, p. 45). This was acknowledged as a limitation when employing the use of quantitative research as the sole method of data collection. This research employed the use of a structured quantitative survey to obtain closed data regarding the basic demographics and motivations of Influencers working in the travel and tourism industry.

An ideal platform for enabling quantification (Bryman, 2016; Burns, 2000; Crano & Lyrantzis, 2015; Punch, 2014; Yates, 2004), the survey was developed and administered online. Online administration of surveys can be a particularly beneficial way of collecting data (Seale, 2012), allowing for the surveys to reach a large sample both demographically and geographically, with almost immediacy (Aaker et al., 2016, p. 144). Likewise, online surveys can be completed by the respondent and returned quickly at little or no financial cost. Despite the convenience and popularity of surveys as a research method, they are not without their critics. Self-completed surveys risk the incorporation of response errors or missing values (Punch, 2014), while the lack of interaction with the researcher means that respondents can neither be prompted should they find answering the question difficult, nor can they be probed to provide more detailed responses.

Securing a high degree of involvement by respondents in a survey can be problematic, particularly when administering the survey via the Internet (Robson, 2011; Seale, 2012). The survey was distributed through links on social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. This combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was deemed most appropriate as it is the place of which many influencers undertake their work. The survey was shared both directly and indirectly with influencers. This was in the form of private messages sent to those who identified themselves as an influencer and through posting status updates in social media groups dedicated to influencers. Due to the lack of a definitive definition regarding who and what constitutes being an "influencer," there was no specific criteria for a respondent to judge themselves as a travel influencer, rather it was determined by their prior knowledge and perceptions of what an "influencer" is, naturally this does have limitations in that the title is inherently subjective.

The group functionality allowed for the survey to be shared amongst respondents that were not direct connections with the researchers. While it can be argued that the use of convenience and snowball sampling approaches can limit representation of the data collected (Bryman, 2016), this was not viewed as a concern due to the exploratory nature of the research. A total of 255 responses were collated, at which point it was determined that saturation point had been reached due to multiple respondents stating that they had been contacted by the researcher across multiple social media platforms.

The survey consisted predominantly of closed questions to facilitate simple analysis of the data. Questions were designed based on questions that were frequently asked on social media platforms, such as Facebook (e.g., "how much can I earn as a travel influencer?"). Data was collected in the month of January 2019. After the process of data cleansing, data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Several questions were multiple choice, yielding nominal data. For these questions it was not possible to make any general assumptions about the population that the sample was drawn from, such as normal distribution and equal variance (Ho, 2006, p. 63; Pallant, 2007; Privitera, 2015). Therefore, the majority of statistical tests undertaken were nonparametric (Pallant, 2007). The chi-square test was of particular interest in identifying relationships between variables.

The remaining collected data was in the form of numbers, for example average income or age. This data lent itself well to the use of basic descriptive statistics, namely aspects such as mode, mean, and standard deviation. Data was tabulated and grouped to allow for thorough exploration of crucial themes and trends. The key findings are presented and discussed below. Whilst more complex statistical analysis may indeed be warranted in the future, for the purposes of this seminal paper on the profile of influencers in the travel and tourism industry it was deemed most appropriate to present basic demographic and psychographic criteria only, with the view of it acting as a precursor for future investigations in this area.

6. The Travel Influencer: A Profile

Although there is ample information on the internet about influencers and the roles they play in marketing, academic references on the subjects are far fewer in general and scant within the tourism and travel literature. Furthermore, current studies tend to address this from a broad perspective (see: Belanche et al., 2021; Chopra et al., 2021; Conick, 2018; Freberg et al., 2011), failing to take into account the diversity and complexity of influencer marketing within different industries, such as travel and tourism.

Given the scale of the influencer market nowadays, it is surprising that such little attention had been paid to this area. The growth in influencer marketing witnessed an estimated market size increase from \$6.6 billion in 2019 to \$9.7 billion in 2020. In 2020, over 380 new influencer marketing-focused platforms and agencies entered the market. Back in 2015, there were just 190 influencer platforms and agencies. This grew to 335 in 2016, 420 in 2017, 740 in 2018, and 1120 in 2019. (<https://influencermarketinghub.com/influencer-marketing-benchmark-report-2020/>)

7. Key Profile Criteria

First, respondents were asked if they would describe themselves as a travel influencer. Despite all members of the sample population demonstrating evidence that they did influence in some regard based on the premise of reference groups, peer influence, and e-WOM as outlined in this paper, 84% answered yes and a further 10% were unsure. This indicates that there is some disparity in terms of definitional clarity. This sentiment is also echoed in the academic landscape, whereby there appears to be no formal attempt at defining the term "travel influencer" (Gretzel, 2018, p. 4). Consequentially, the results presented in the proceeding pages are used to inform the formation of an operational definition, which is proposed in summary at the end of this paper.

The research found 84% of travel influencers were female, 14% male, and the remaining 2% did not reveal their gender. Influencers ranged from age 19 to 62; with the average age being 34. The majority of respondents were European (62%), followed

by those from North America (22%) (See Figure 1). The least common nationality of influencers was African with less than 1% of respondents. While the global distribution amongst current domiciles was largely similar to nationality, there was evidence of movement amongst respondents, with 25% stating that their

nationality was different from their current residence. Most commonly these respondents described themselves as “location independent” (39%), but it was also noted that it was common for North Americans and Australasians to be residing in Europe (see Figure 2).

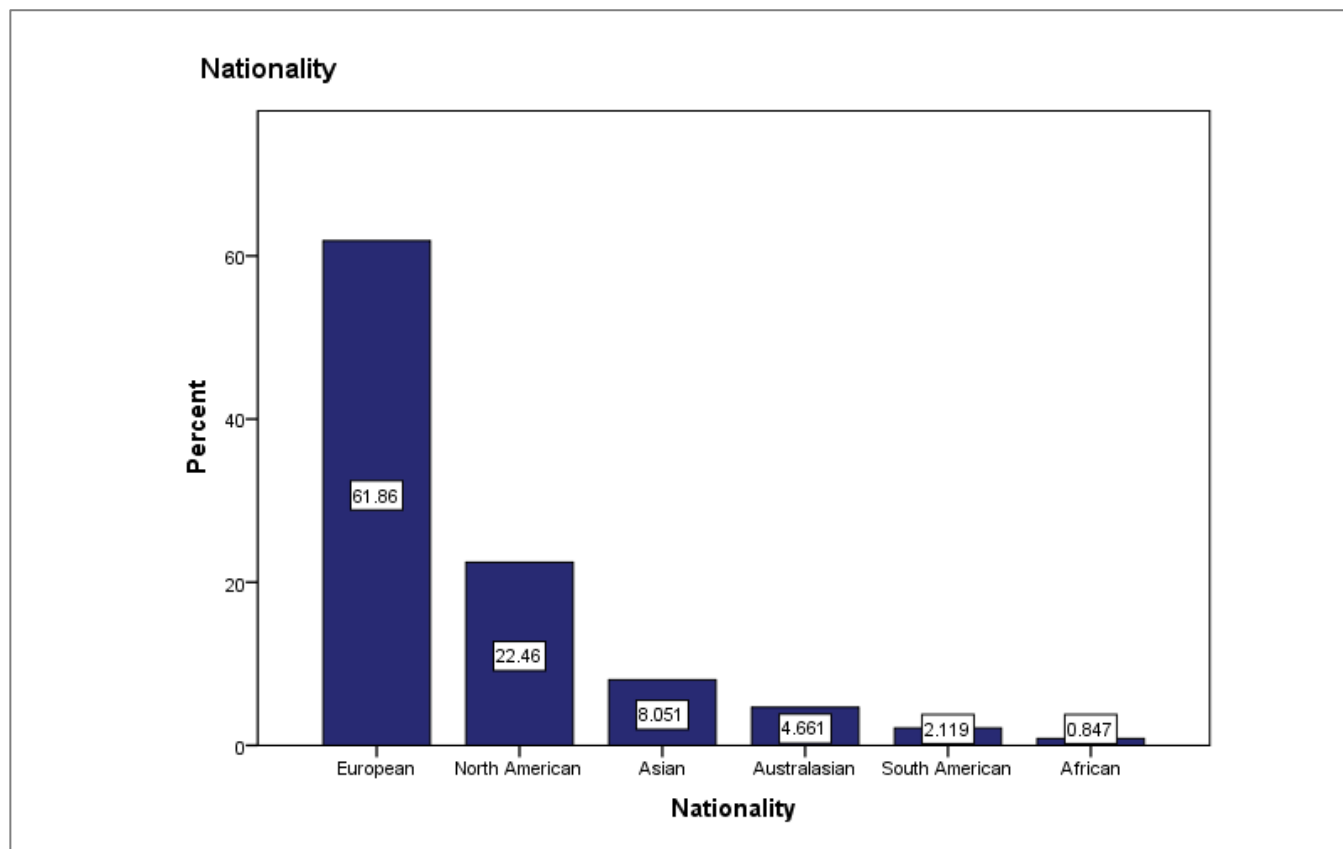


Fig. 1. Nationality of respondents

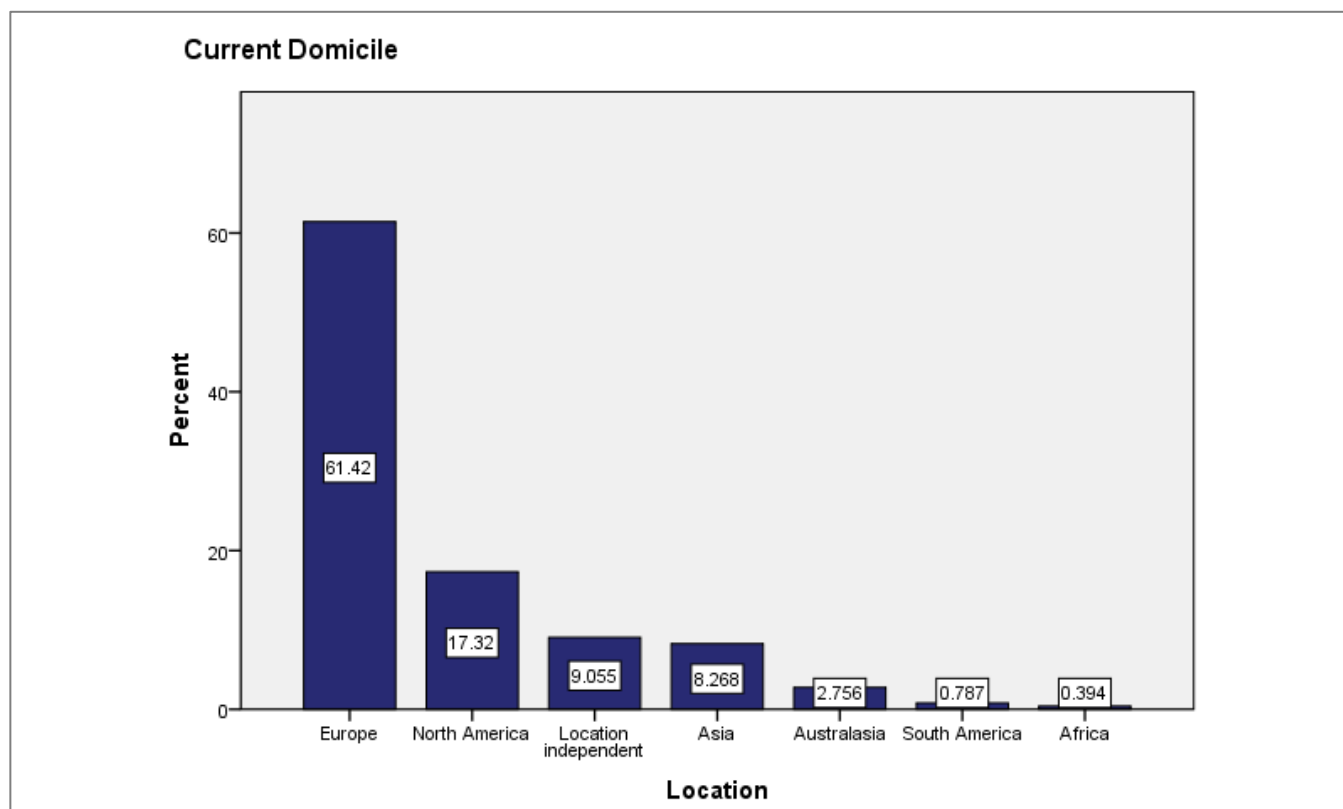


Fig. 2. Respondents' domiciles

According to study respondents, the most common motivation for becoming a travel influencer was enjoyment (41%), followed by the ability to work from home or work while travelling (33%), and then the desire to be their own boss (22%). Other motivations tended to focus on inspiring others and sharing information (see Figure 3). Some quotes from respondents included the following:

"People usually don't travel to my countries list, and I feel glad sharing new information that hard to find online to help travellers" [sic]

"I started my blog in 2011 to empower other women to travel solo. Back then, I was a 'travel blogger.' Today, I still call myself a travel blogger, but there has been a shift and now I would also be classified as an influencer, even though technically that's not what I set out to be." [sic]

"I had a passion for writing, traveling, and inspiring other people to do so."

"We bought a sailboat to travel the world and realized this was a way of making those travels longer, helping others learn to sail, and showing people you can do anything you set your mind to" [sic]

"I didn't decide to become an influencer, I decided to create a blog long before it was even understood that bloggers had influence, and it has never been a motivation for me, I blog because I enjoy sharing ideas, experiences and tips."

"I've been blogging for years and have/will always do it because I love it. I aim to inspire those to take action on what I put out with my content and products."

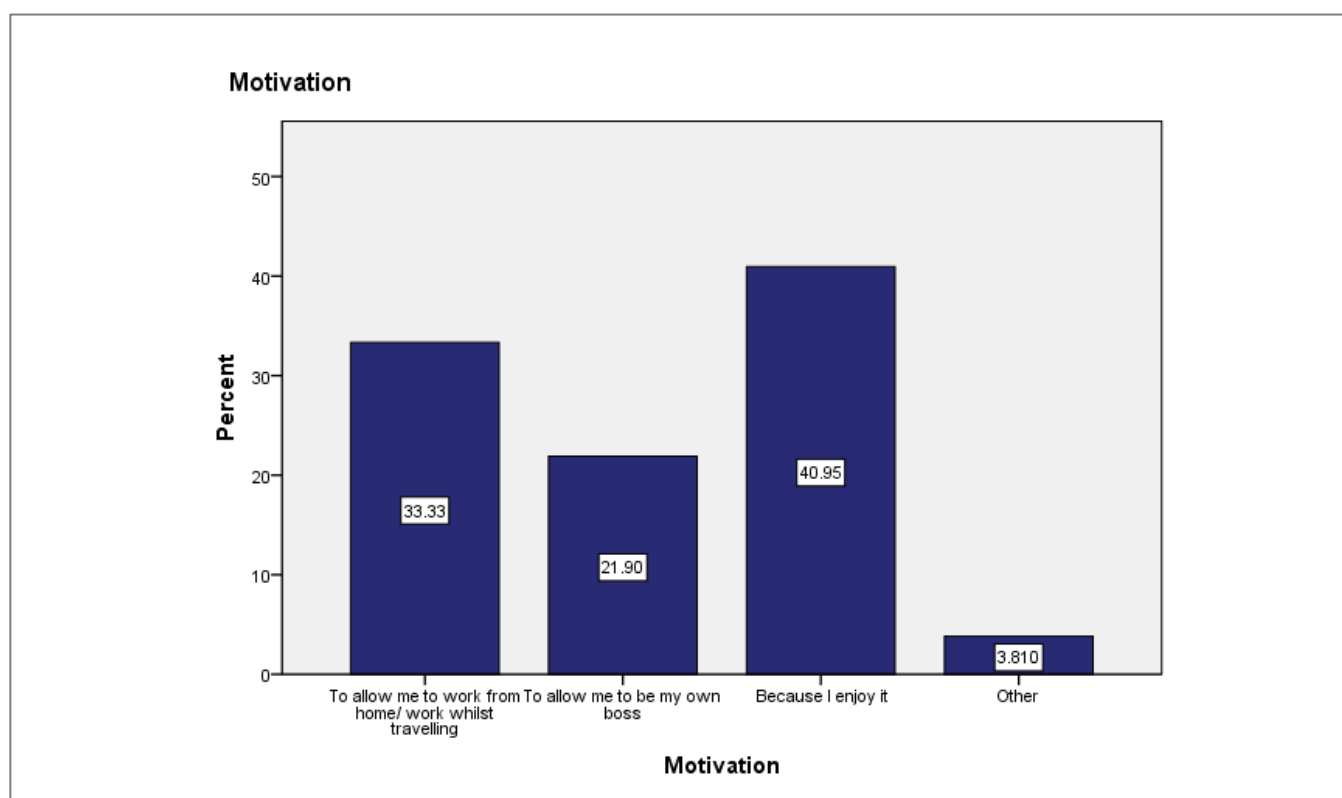


Fig. 3. Motivation for becoming a travel influencer

Almost half (45.8%) of respondents stated that they earn part of their income from charging a fee to include a "do-follow" link in a blog post (see Figure 5). The fee charged ranged from £15 to £750; with the average being £189. The variance was high, with a standard deviation of 146.41 and there was a significant relationship between DA score and the fee charged (chi-square= 0.498) with the fee charged increasing with the authority of the influencer's domain (as shown in Figure 4).

Figure 6 shows that influencers work with a variety of sectors that may be directly or indirectly linked to the travel industry. Over 22% of influencer respondents work with marketing agencies, 15% of influencers work directly with destination marketing organizations (DMOs), 14% with visitor attractions, and 12% with accommodation providers (as shown in Figure 6). Other areas yielding an income noted by influencers included working with major retailers undertaking affiliate marketing, such as booking.com or Amazon.com and selling their own products and services such as online courses or tours. Less commonly, influencers work with areas that may be viewed as being indirectly connected with the travel sector; namely beauty

and wellbeing, health and fitness, home interiors, and financial providers.

It is evident from the data collected that although many influencers do not make an income or make only a small income from their work, it can be a very profitable business. In this research, 67.8% of respondents were happy to reveal details of their approximate monthly income, which average £1,122. There was a large variance between respondents with a range of £30,000 and a standard deviation of 3,514 (see Figure 7). The highest paid influencers receive between £5,000 and £30,000 each month; which equated to only 3.5% of travel influencers.

There was a significant relationship between approximate monthly earnings from influencing and gender (chi square >0.5). On average, females earn £602 compared to their male counterparts who earn an average of £3,791 per month.

Whilst there is a general trend that income from influencing increases with age, no significant relationship between these variables was determined given that the top earners varied in age.

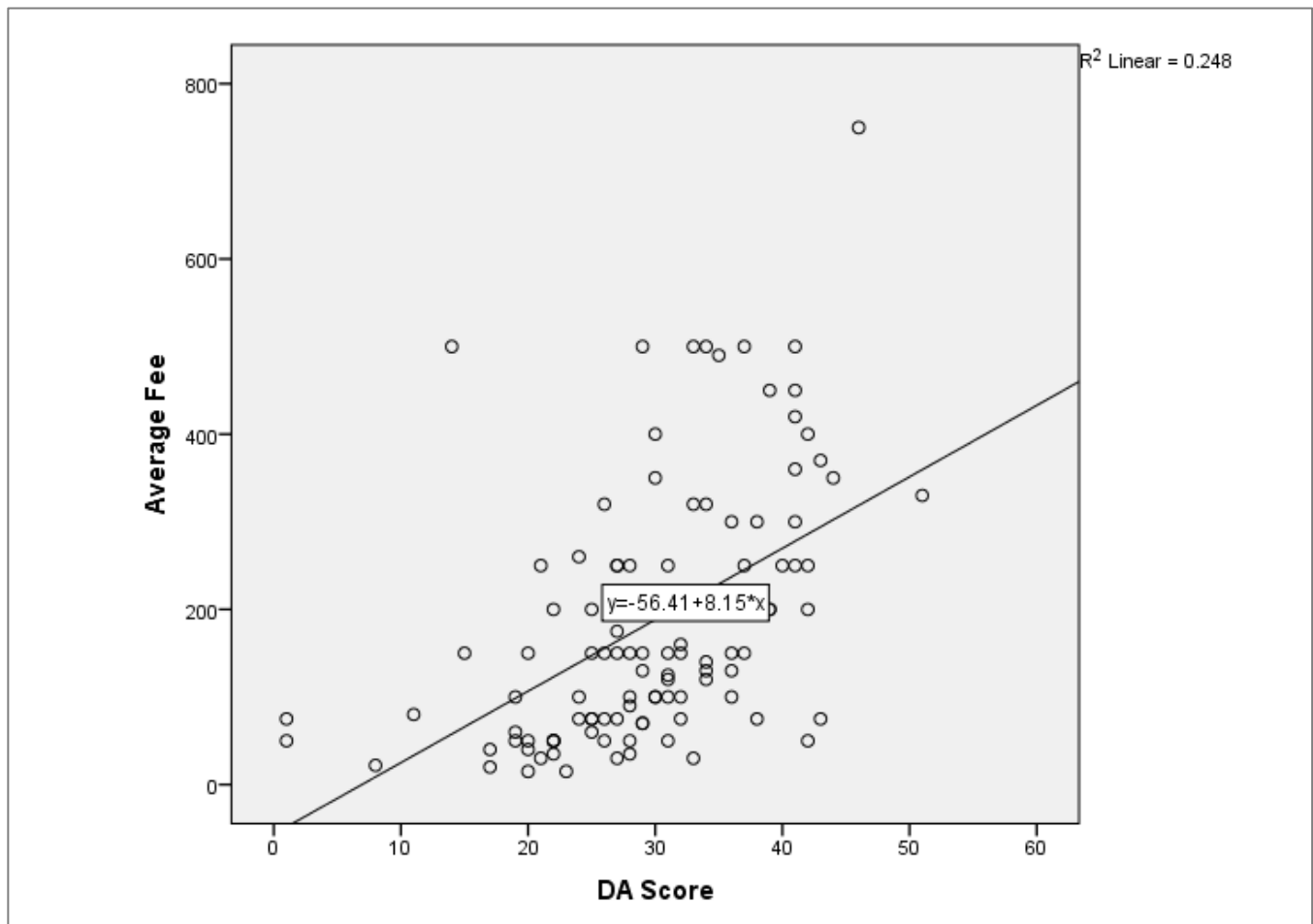


Fig. 4. Relationship between DA score and the fee charged

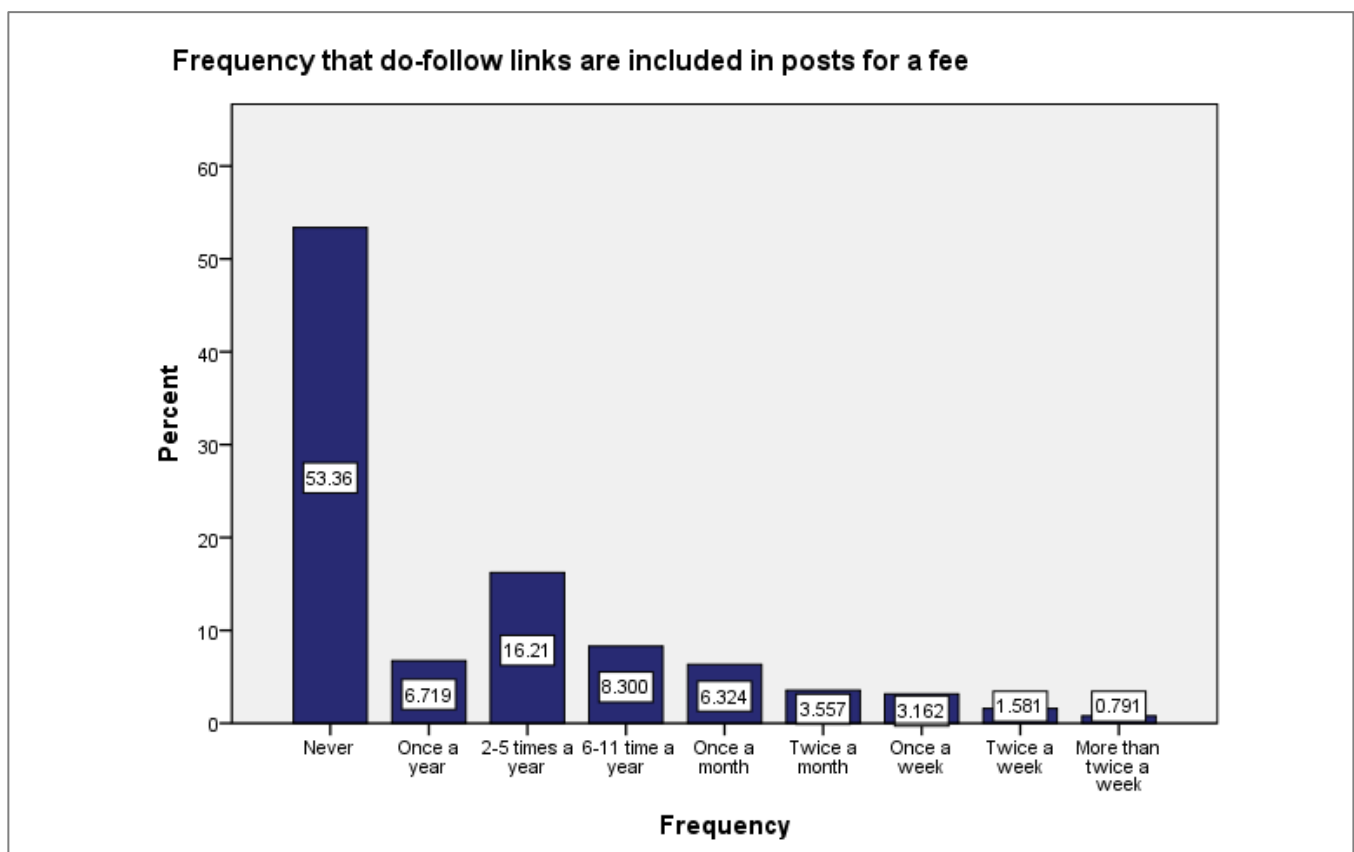


Fig. 5. Frequency that "do-follow" links are included in posts for a fee

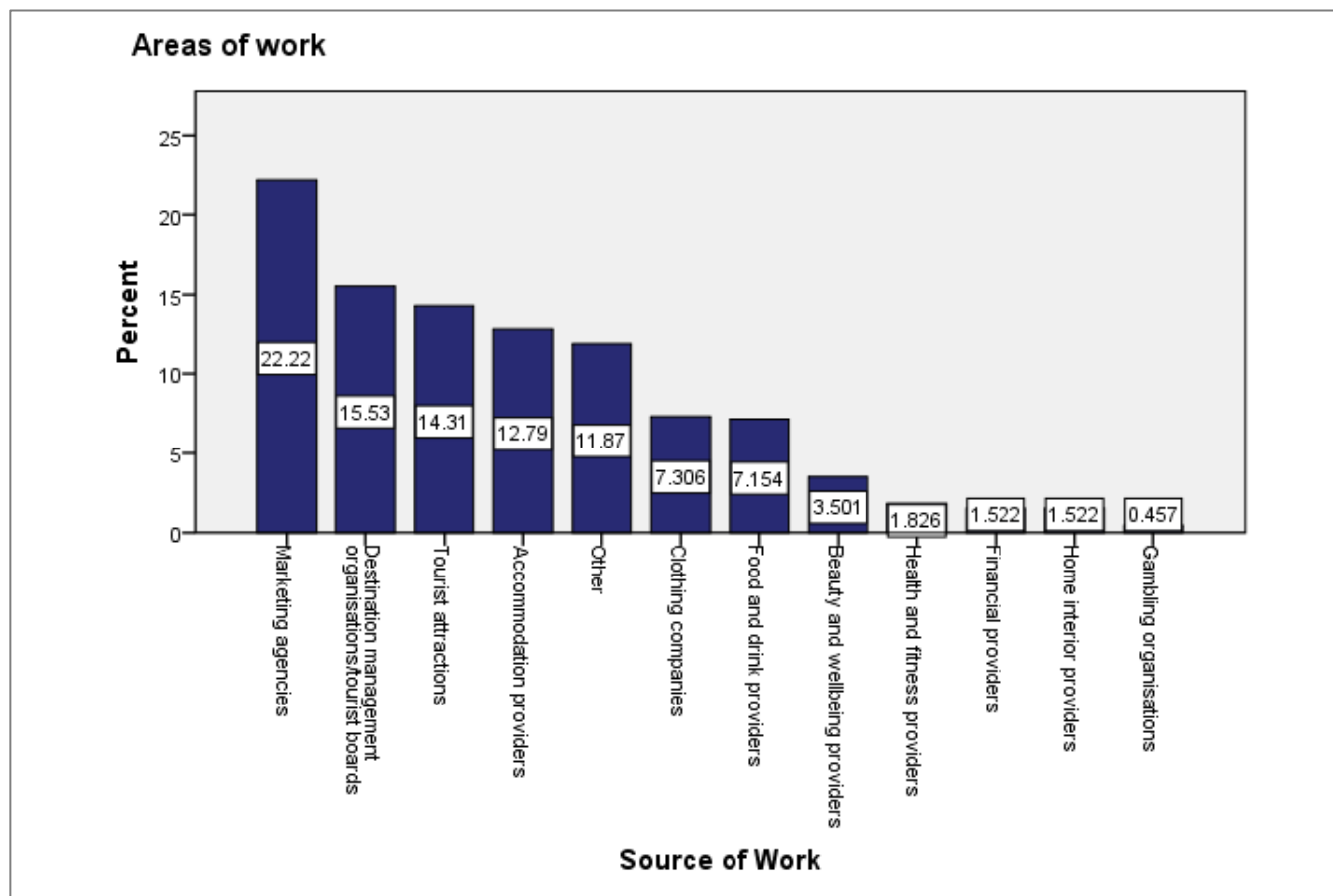


Fig. 6. Travel influencers' areas of work

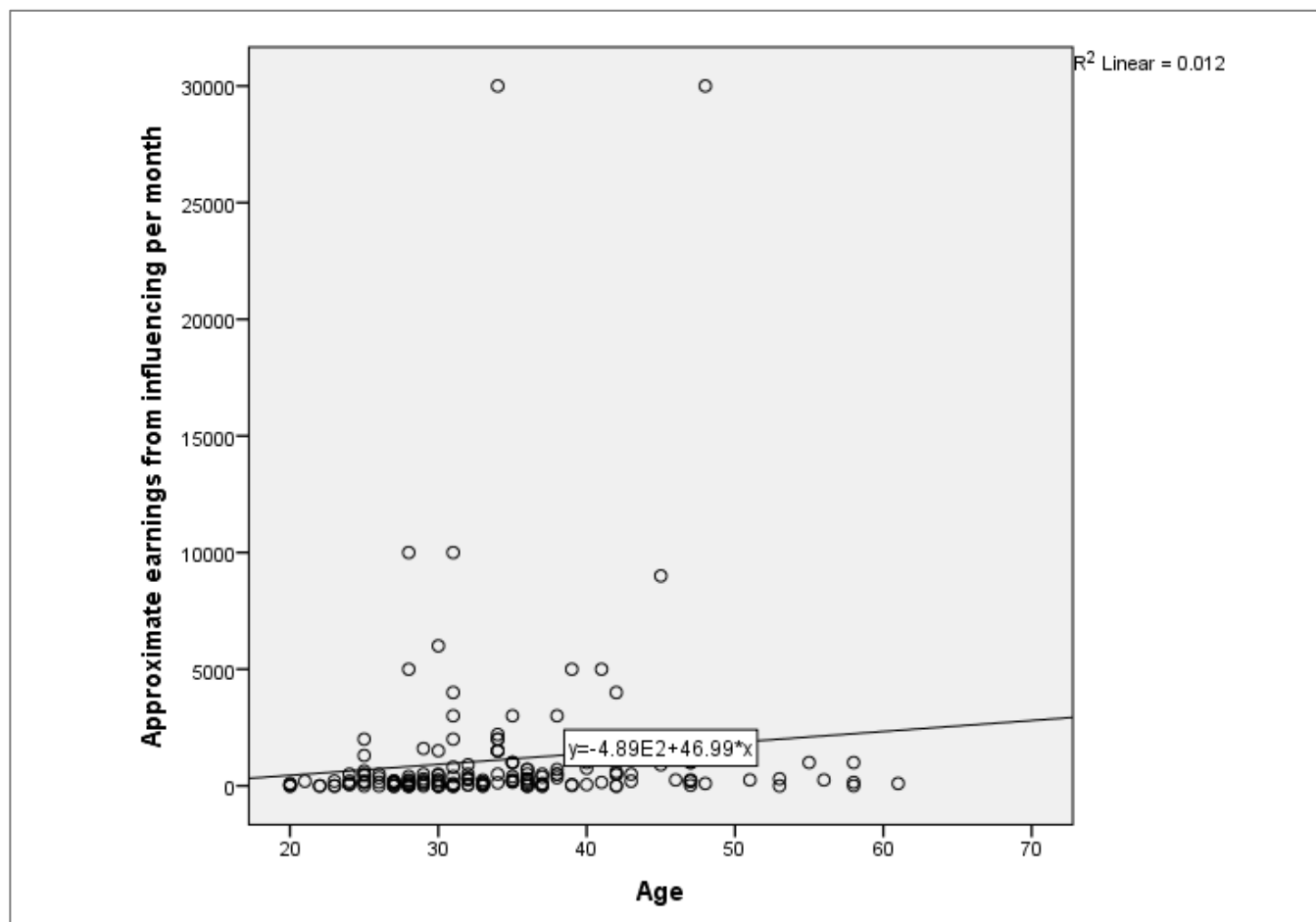


Fig. 7. Influencers' earnings per month

For 30% of respondents, influencing is their primary income with an average salary of £2,686 per month. The remaining 70% of influencers stated that they undertook their influencer work alongside another job. The most popular area of employment was marketing with 18.9% of respondents currently working in this sector. This was followed by education (7.8%), journalism (7.8%), medicine (5.6%), and social media management (5%). It was also identified that several influencers work in the area of tourism (3.3%) and hospitality (2.2%). A number of respondents stated that they do influencing work alongside completing their studies (3.9%) or looking after their children (1.7%). While these figures are indicative of the earning potential within the influencer sector, little is known about hours worked, working conditions, etc. Forty-four per cent of influencers stated that they had either worked or studied marketing at some point, thus, indicating that they may be well-equipped for the role of a travel influencer.

8. “Measuring” Influence

As illustrated in Table 1, the top travel influencers utilize the spaces provided to them on their social media platforms to conduct their role as an influencer. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube appear to be most commonly used platforms by said individuals (see Figure 8), although there are also a range of other techniques employed such as conducting *TED Talks* or sending followers “Snaps” via Snapchat. Although the ability to influence on a particular scale may be a prerequisite for organizations wishing to work with an influencer, measuring influence and return of investment is a complex task. Technorati’s *Digital Influence Report* in 2013 found that influencer success was largely measured by social follower statistics and blog traffic, however, the progressive development of modern technologies and the use of social media have provided both influencers and those working with them with a wealth of data and analytics.

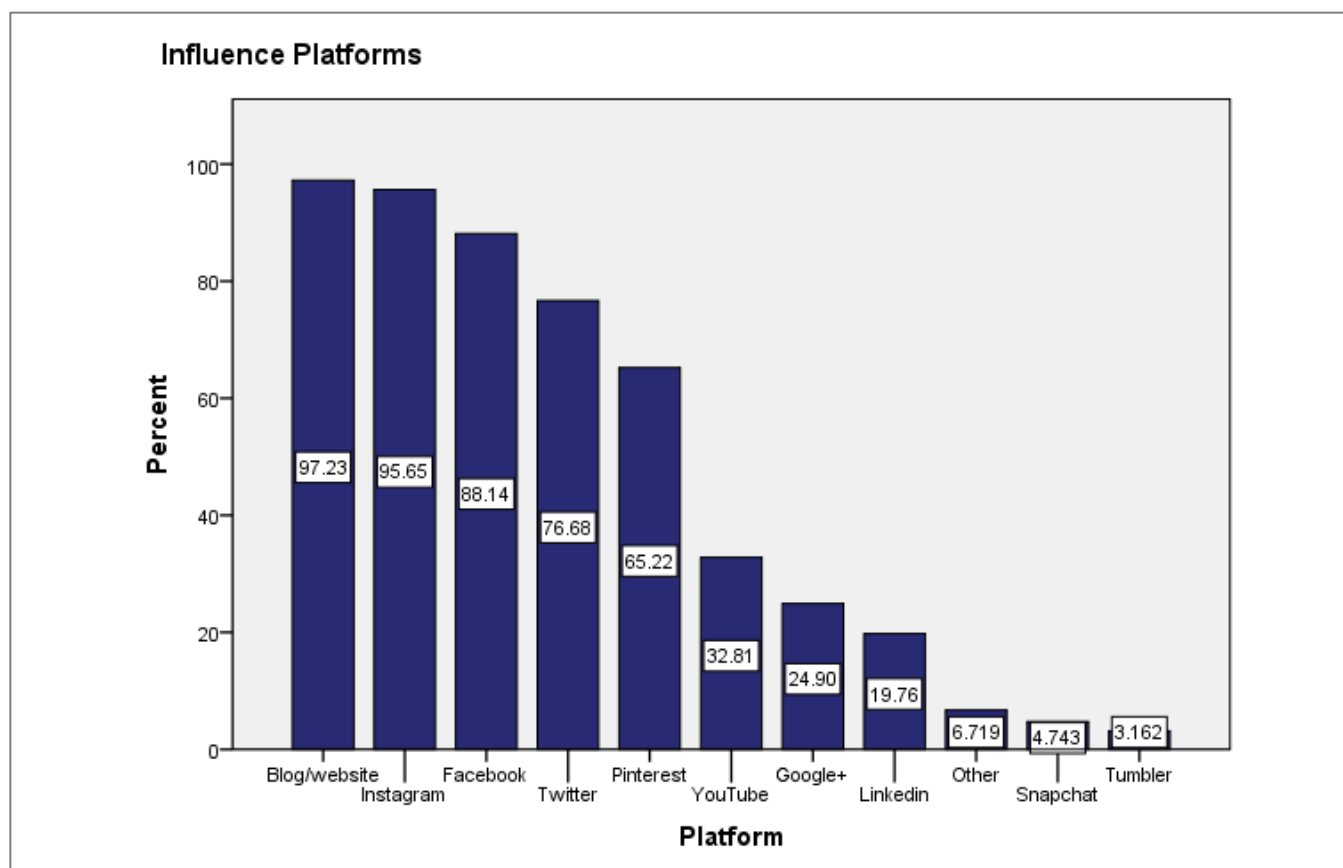


Fig. 8. Influencers’ platforms

Despite this, there appears to be no clear method of determining whether working with a particular influencer is a worthwhile prospect or not.

Other methods of influence included word-of-mouth, podcasts, events and public speaking, electronic newsletters, writing articles for printed media e.g. *National Geographic*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, and social media platforms: TikTok, QQ, Snapchat, Pinterest, TripAdvisor, Flipboard, and StumbleUpon.

Table 2. below shows the average (mean) number of followers/subscribers accorded to each influencer platform. It also shows the standard deviation, demonstrating a large variance between respondents. To facilitate further analysis and simple comparison, respondents were grouped according to the number of followers/subscribers that they had in each area. If the figure for each given area was in the bottom third of all

responses, they were classified as an “amateur” on that particular influencer platform. If they were in the middle third, they were classified as “established,” and if they fell within the top third, they were classified as a “leader.” As shown in Table 2, the vast majority of respondents (87%) are classified “amateur” with regards to the number of followers/subscribers of each influence platform.

Leading on from the earlier discussion in the literature review section, whereby it was proclaimed that the number of social media followers provides limited indication of the extent of influence, this is also not indicative of income. There was no evident correlation identified between the number of social media followers and monthly income.

Table 2. Average (mean) number of followers/subscribers accorded to each influencer platform

Influence Platform	Mean number of followers/ subscribers	Standard Deviation	% Amateur	%Established	% Leader
Blog/website	12633.08	27575.4	87	6.5	6.5
Facebook	4452.08	9538.69	97	1.5	1.5
Twitter	10408.65	17872.91	94.9	3.2	1.9
Instagram	11599.64	19019.44	94.3	5.2	0.5
Pinterest	7624.18	31580.55	97.8	0	2.2
Snapchat	403.68	982.82	88.9	5.6	5.6
YouTube	572.51	1738.13	98.6	0	1.4
Google+	908.68	1573.31	86	8	6
LinkedIn	1433.02	2702.3	96.2	1.9	1.9
Tumblr	831.29	2658.14	92.9	0	7.1

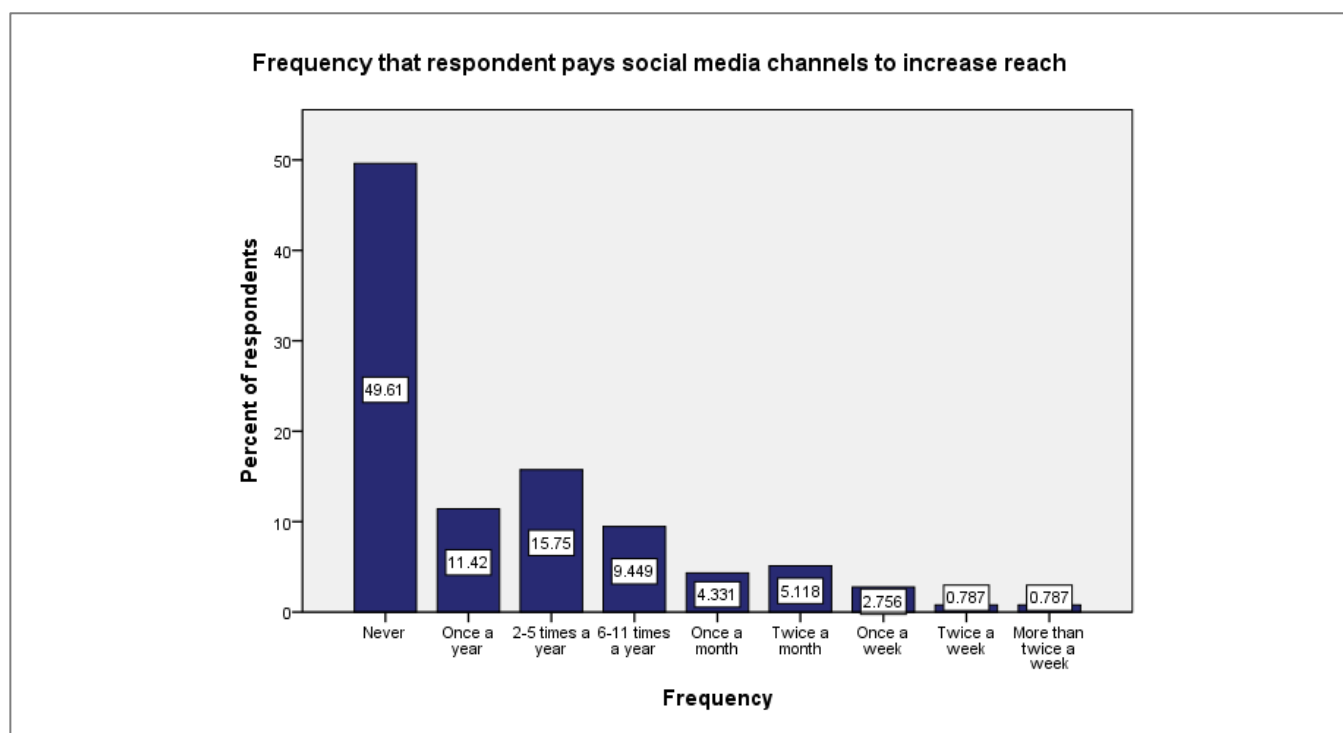
9. Ethical Practices

It is evident that measuring influence is not a straightforward task and that there are various methods of manipulation that play key roles. These can contribute making an influencer appear to be more influential than they actually are.

The amount that a respondent was willing to pay to increase the reach of a post ranged from £1 to £1,000 with the average being £37.00. A positive correlation (chi square >0.000) was identified between average monthly income and the maximum amount that a respondent would pay to increase the reach of their posts. Just over half of respondents (50.4%) stated that they pay social media channels at least once a year to increase reach (see Figure 9).

Only 2.8% of respondents stated that they have previously paid for followers, comments, views, likes, etc. on social media but 77.6% did admit to taking part in mutual exchange activities with other influencers such as “like for like” threads or comment swaps.

In accordance with the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), the majority of travel influencers do declare when they have been gifted or paid to post content (80%), 12% of respondents stated that they sometimes declare this information, and a further 7% stated that they do not declare this information (Advertising Standards Authority, 2018).

**Fig. 9.** Frequency that influencers pay social media channels to increase reach

10. Conclusion

It is clear that there is value in the influencer consumer arena, however, exactly what constitutes an influencer and how the travel influencer space is formulated remains unclear. Throughout human history, we have always shared news via word-of-mouth; although this has become ever so much more powerful since we started conducting it online. No longer are we

limited to only our own social networks; we now have hashtags, interest groups, and targeted advertising.

Influencers have facilitated the formation of a new type of “reference group.” The concept of reference groups has a long tradition in social history where it is used to understand how individuals identify with and form relationships with other individuals or groups. A common understanding of a reference group is where a person or a group of people has the ability to significantly influence the behavior of other

individuals. Reference groups can be family, friends, music, radio and television celebrities, work colleagues, or social networking sites. They can also be a group of people with a shared interest such as university, church, or sporting associates.

While the relationship between eWOM, reference groups and influencers is clear, this research has demonstrated that many people who work in this field prefer not to be awarded the label of “travel influencer,” focusing instead on their specific method of influencing, such as blogging or sharing Instagram updates. However, it can be concluded that the term “influencer” is in actual fact an umbrella term, encompassing a range of influencer types. A travel influencer is, thus, essentially a person who promotes a product, service, or company by distributing eWOM through their online digital channels and presence. These digital channels and presence come in the form of followers, subscribers, views, organic/paid reach, domain authority (trust, flow, etc.) and SEO, among others.

WOM ambassadors and influencers are critical and key for telling new consumers about the holiday experience. While some people will choose to become a travel influencer as a hobby, many will look to monetize their influencing methods. The travel influencer sphere can be a profitable space for the elite few and a modest income for many. This paper aids in achieving a deeper understanding of the concept of travel influencers and how they operate within the marketing and travel industries.

Declaration of competing interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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