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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN PROMOTING TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Social media has changed how travellers discover, judge, and choose destinations, and India is no exception. This study examines how Social Media Influencers (SMIs) shape travel intention among Indian tourists and how this behaviour connects to national tourism development. It combines secondary data from the Ministry of Tourism with a primary survey of 420 Indian tourists who follow at least one travel influencer. A modified Source Credibility Model was tested, with Interactive Engagement and Destination Image added to the classic dimensions of Trustworthiness, Expertise, and Attractiveness. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression, and one-way ANOVA were used. The model explains 75.4% of the variance in travel intention. Destination Image, Trustworthiness, Expertise, and Interactive Engagement are significant positive predictors, whereas Attractiveness has a small, negative, and non-significant effect. Travel intention does not differ significantly across age groups, suggesting that credible influencer content persuades Gen Z, Millennials, and older travellers alike. The findings indicate that Indian tourists value useful information and authenticity over appearance when making high-involvement travel decisions. The paper offers practical guidance for Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) and policymakers on selecting influencers, strengthening the Incredible India Digital Platform, and using influencers to spread visitor flows away from overcrowded and ecologically fragile sites.

KEYWORDS: *Social Media Influencers; Source credibility; Trustworthiness; Destination image; Travel intention; Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM); Parasocial interaction; Incredible India 2.0; Overtourism; Sustainable tourism development; India*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the most resilient sectors of the Indian economy. It earns foreign exchange, supports millions of jobs, and draws on the country's heritage, cultural diversity, and natural landscapes. After the disruptions of the early 2020s, the sector recovered quickly, led by a sharp rise in domestic travel. In 2023, India recorded 2,509.63 million domestic tourist visits, an increase of nearly 45% over the previous year (Ministry of Tourism, 2024).

Alongside this recovery, the way destinations are marketed has changed. Print advertisements, television spots, and brochures once carried a one-way message from tourism boards to travellers. Today, travellers increasingly rely on social media to search for and evaluate destinations (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Hudson & Thal, 2013). Within this space, Social Media Influencers—people who build large followings by sharing curated content on Instagram, YouTube, and similar platforms—have become new opinion leaders (Freberg et al., 2011). Through travel vlogs, reels, and photo stories, they shape how destinations are seen and whether followers decide to visit (Gretzel, 2018; Magno & Cassia, 2018).

The Government of India has responded to this shift. The "Incredible India" campaign, launched in 2002, was followed in 2017 by "Incredible India 2.0", which moved promotion towards market-specific, theme-based, and digital-first communication (Ministry of Tourism, 2026). The Incredible India Digital Platform (IIDP) now brings user-generated content and digital storytelling into national destination branding.

Even so, there is limited empirical evidence on *how* specific influencer attributes—trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and interactive engagement—translate into destination image and travel intention among Indian tourists. A second gap concerns sustainability. Viral content can create a Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) that sends large crowds to the same locations, placing heavy pressure on water, waste systems, and heritage structures (Milano et al., 2019; NaveenKumar et al., 2026).

This study addresses both gaps. It first reviews secondary data on India's tourism growth and digital branding, and then tests a modified Source Credibility Model on a primary sample of 420 Indian tourists. The specific objectives are: (i) to assess the effect of influencer trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, and interactive engagement on travel intention; (ii) to examine the role of

destination image in this process; (iii) to test whether travel intention differs across age groups; and (iv) to draw implications for tourism policy and sustainable destination management in India.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Destination Marketing in India

The Incredible India campaign was the first coordinated attempt to present India as a single, premium tourism brand, highlighting culture, spirituality, yoga, and heritage. As internet and smartphone use expanded, the Ministry of Tourism launched Incredible India 2.0 in September 2017, shifting from generic global promotion to market-specific plans, content creation, and a strong focus on digital and social media (Ministry of Tourism, 2026). The campaign promotes niche products such as wellness, eco-tourism, rural and tribal tourism, and adventure travel. The IIDP extends this approach by integrating user-generated content and thematic storytelling, so that travellers act not only as consumers but also as co-creators of the destination narrative.

2.2 Social Media Influencers and e-WOM

Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) is a powerful force in hospitality and tourism because travel is an intangible, high-risk purchase (Litvin et al., 2008). Influencer content is often perceived as a peer recommendation rather than an advertisement, which makes it more persuasive than conventional promotion (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Casaló et al., 2020). Influencers inspire trips, but they also guide smaller decisions such as hotel choice, local transport, and where to eat. Trust in influencers has been shown to affect every stage of the traveller's decision journey (Pop et al., 2022), and a recent systematic review confirms their growing role in travel decision-making (Saini et al., 2023).

2.3 The Source Credibility Model

The Source Credibility Model, rooted in early persuasion research (Hovland & Weiss, 1951) and formalised by Ohanian (1990), holds that a message is more persuasive when its source is seen as trustworthy, expert, and attractive.

Trustworthiness refers to the audience's confidence in the influencer's honesty and objectivity. In travel, this includes disclosing sponsored trips and being willing to mention a destination's drawbacks. **Expertise** is the perceived knowledge and competence of the influencer, reflected in accurate itineraries, cultural context, and budget advice. **Attractiveness** concerns physical and visual appeal. Its relevance in digital tourism is debated: polished, glamorous content may build appeal, but it can also be seen as staged and inauthentic (Schouten et al., 2020).

Recent studies add **Interactive Engagement** to the model. Influencers who reply to comments, host live sessions, and share personal experiences build parasocial relationships—one-sided bonds in which followers feel they know the creator personally (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Such relationships have been found to strengthen the effect of credibility on travel intention (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021). Indian evidence likewise shows that expertise, trustworthiness, and intimate self-disclosure drive tourists' travel intention (Faisal & Dhusia, 2022; Joy & Gireesh Kumar, 2025).

2.4 Information Adoption, Destination Image, and Travel Intention

The Information Adoption Model suggests that people accept information when they judge both the source and the argument to be credible and useful (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). Adopted information shapes **Destination Image**, which includes cognitive beliefs about a place's attractions and facilities and affective feelings about its atmosphere (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). Destination image, in turn, is closely linked to tourists' later attitudes and behaviour (Veasna et al., 2013). **Travel Intention** is the stated likelihood of visiting a destination and is widely used as a proxy for behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). Influencer studies report that self-congruence and credibility strengthen visit intention towards endorsed destinations (Xu & Pratt, 2018; Leite et al., 2024).

2.5 Generational Effects, FOMO, and Overtourism

Millennials and Generation Z are often assumed to be the most responsive to influencer marketing. Among Indian millennials, social comparison on social media and FOMO have been linked to impulse travel (Kumar & Kumar, 2024). FOMO—the anxiety of missing rewarding experiences that others are having (Przybylski et al., 2013)—can push large numbers of people to the same places at the same time. Recent Indian research finds that influencer credibility and engagement contribute to overtourism-related travel behaviour, with FOMO acting as a key mediator (NaveenKumar et al., 2026). The consequences are visible on the ground: in Chittorgarh, Rajasthan, tourist arrivals rose from about 0.68 million in 2015 to over 24 million in 2024, creating serious stress on groundwater and local infrastructure (Nagori & Kalia, 2026).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Conceptual Model and Hypotheses

Drawing on the literature, the study proposes that Trustworthiness (TRU), Expertise (EXP), Attractiveness (ATT), and Interactive Engagement (INT) shape Destination Image (DES), and that these variables together predict Travel Intention (TRA). The following hypotheses were tested:

H1: Influencer trustworthiness has a positive effect on travel intention.
H2: Influencer expertise has a positive effect on travel intention.
H3: Influencer attractiveness has a positive effect on travel intention.
H4: Interactive engagement has a positive effect on travel intention.
H5: Destination image has a positive effect on travel intention.
H6: Travel intention differs significantly across age groups.

3.2 Data Collection and Sample

A quantitative, cross-sectional design was used. A structured, self-administered questionnaire was distributed to Indian tourists who were active on major social media platforms and followed at least one travel influencer. Respondents were asked about influencer content they had seen and their travel decisions over the previous twelve months. Purposive convenience sampling yielded 420 complete and valid responses, which is adequate for multiple regression and variance analysis (Hair et al., 2019).

3.3 Measurement

All constructs were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree), with items adapted from validated scales in prior tourism and influencer research (Ohanian, 1990; Faisal & Dhusia, 2022). Trustworthiness (4 items) captured honesty and transparency about sponsorship; Expertise (4 items) captured knowledge of travel logistics and culture; Attractiveness (3 items) captured visual and aesthetic appeal; Interactive Engagement (3 items) captured responsiveness and community-building; Destination Image (4 items) captured cognitive and affective perceptions of endorsed places; and Travel Intention (4 items) captured the likelihood and plans to visit.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed in Python using the Pandas, SciPy, and Statsmodels libraries. The analysis included descriptive statistics with skewness and kurtosis to check normality; Pearson correlation to examine associations and multicollinearity; OLS multiple regression to test H1–H5; and one-way ANOVA to test H6.

4. SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS: TOURISM GROWTH IN INDIA

Secondary data from the Ministry of Tourism show the scale of the sector's recovery (Table 1).

Table 1: Key Tourism Indicators, India (2022–2023)

Indicator	2022	2023	Change
Domestic Tourist Visits (DTVs)	1,731.01 million	2,509.63 million	+44.98%
Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs)	—	9.52 million	≈87% of pre-pandemic level
Foreign Exchange Earnings (FEEs)	US$ 21.36 billion	US$ 28.08 billion	+31.50%

Source: Ministry of Tourism (2024), India Tourism Data Compendium 2024.

Domestic travel is the main engine of growth. It cushions the industry against global shocks and fluctuating airfares. Foreign arrivals reached 9.52 million in 2023, and foreign exchange earnings grew by 31.5%. The momentum continued into 2024, when domestic visits rose further to about 2,948 million.

Table 2: Leading States by Tourist Visits (2023)

State	Domestic Visits	Foreign Visits	Main Attractions
Uttar Pradesh	478.53 million	—	Heritage, religious circuits
Gujarat	286.01 million	2.81 million	Business, culture, diaspora
Maharashtra	—	3.39 million	Business hubs, heritage

Source: Ministry of Tourism (2024).

Tourist flows are highly concentrated. Uttar Pradesh leads in domestic visits, driven by religious and heritage circuits, while Maharashtra and Gujarat attract the most foreign visitors. Emerging states are also repositioning themselves. Telangana's first tourism policy (2025–30) aims to attract ₹15,000 crore in investment, create three lakh jobs, and develop 27 Special Tourism Areas, including eco-tourism and tribal circuits (Government of Telangana, 2025). At the same time, rapid growth carries risks. The Chittorgarh case, with a compound annual growth rate of nearly 48.5% in arrivals between 2015 and 2024, shows how sudden demand can overwhelm local water resources and waste systems (Nagori & Kalia, 2026). This tension makes responsible digital promotion—and the role influencers play in it—a policy issue.

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5. PRIMARY DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

5.1 Respondent Profile

Table 3: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 420)

Variable	Category	Percentage
Age group	Gen Z (18–25)	45.0%
	Millennials (26–40)	40.0%
	Gen X and above (>40)	15.0%
Gender	Male	51.0%
	Female	47.0%
	Non-binary/Other	2.0%
Primary platform	Instagram	55.0%
	YouTube	30.0%
	Moj/ShareChat	10.0%
	Facebook	5.0%

Source: Primary data.

Younger travellers dominate the sample: Gen Z accounts for 45% and Millennials for 40%. Gender distribution is balanced. Instagram (55%) and YouTube (30%) are the main sources of travel content, confirming the importance of visual and video storytelling. Regional short-video apps such as Moj and ShareChat (10%) also play a notable role.

5.2 Descriptive Statistics

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Constructs

Construct		SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Trustworthiness (TRU)	3.76	0.76	1.54	5.00	-0.244	-0.418
Expertise (EXP)	3.66	0.77	1.00	5.00	-0.278	-0.209
Attractiveness (ATT)	3.91	0.72	1.50	5.00	-0.325	-0.280
Interactive Engagement (INT)	3.49	0.83	1.07	5.00	-0.305	-0.271
Destination Image (DES)	3.83	0.64	1.94	5.00	-0.161	-0.345
Travel Intention (TRA)	3.97	0.64	2.01	5.00	-0.249	-0.540

Source: Primary data (N = 420).

Mean scores are above the scale midpoint for all constructs. Travel Intention has the highest mean (M = 3.97), showing a strong tendency to turn online inspiration into travel plans. Attractiveness also scores high (M = 3.91), whereas Interactive Engagement is lowest (M = 3.49), suggesting that followers notice polished content more often than they experience genuine two-way interaction. Skewness and kurtosis values lie between −1 and +1, supporting the use of parametric tests.

5.3 Correlation Analysis

Table 5: Pearson Correlation Matrix

	TRU	EXP	ATT	INT	DES	TRA
TRU	1.000					
EXP	0.411	1.000				
ATT	0.306	0.297	1.000			
INT	0.411	0.377	0.311	1.000		
DES	0.665	0.588	0.462	0.596	1.000	
TRA	0.729	0.622	0.342	0.596	0.788	1.000

Note: All coefficients are significant at $p < 0.01$. Source: Primary data (N = 420).

Travel Intention correlates most strongly with Destination Image (r = 0.788) and Trustworthiness (r = 0.729), and most weakly with Attractiveness (r = 0.342). Correlations among the influencer attributes remain moderate (highest r = 0.411), indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern for the regression.

5.4 Regression Analysis

Table 6: OLS Regression Results (Dependent Variable: Travel Intention)

Variable	B	SE	t	p	95% CI
Constant	0.542	0.111	4.892	0.000	0.324 – 0.759
Trustworthiness (TRU)	0.300	0.028	10.844	0.000	0.245 – 0.354
Expertise (EXP)	0.189	0.025	7.504	0.000	0.140 – 0.239
Attractiveness (ATT)	-0.038	0.025	-1.543	0.124	-0.087 – 0.010
Interactive Engagement (INT)	0.140	0.023	5.984	0.000	0.094 – 0.186
Destination Image (DES)	0.330	0.042	7.835	0.000	0.247 – 0.412

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Model summary: $R^2 = 0.754$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.751$; $F = 253.5$ ($p < 0.001$); Durbin–Watson = 2.024; Omnibus p = 0.673; Jarque–Bera p = 0.730. Source: Primary data (N = 420).

The model explains 75.4% of the variance in travel intention and is highly significant ($F = 253.5$, $p < 0.001$). The Durbin–Watson value of 2.024 indicates no autocorrelation, and the non-significant Omnibus and Jarque–Bera tests show that residuals are normally distributed.

Destination Image ($B = 0.330$, $p < 0.001$) is the strongest predictor. Influencers who create a vivid and appealing picture of a place—its food, landscapes, or history—are the most effective in prompting visits. H5 is supported.

Trustworthiness ($B = 0.300$, $p < 0.001$) is the most important influencer attribute. In an environment full of undisclosed sponsorships and heavily edited content, followers reward creators who are honest and balanced. H1 is supported.

Expertise ($B = 0.189$, $p < 0.001$) also has a significant effect. Accurate itineraries, budgeting tips, and cultural context increase the usefulness of content, consistent with the Information Adoption Model. H2 is supported.

Interactive Engagement ($B = 0.140$, $p < 0.001$) significantly increases travel intention, confirming that two-way interaction and parasocial connection help turn passive viewing into action. H4 is supported.

Attractiveness ($B = -0.038$, $p = 0.124$) has no significant effect. Although respondents rate influencers as visually appealing, appearance does not drive the decision to travel. H3 is not supported.

5.5 Age-Group Differences

Table 7: One-way ANOVA of Travel Intention by Age Group

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Between groups	0.169	2	0.085	0.202	0.817
Within groups	174.507	417	0.418		

Source: Primary data (N = 420).

The ANOVA result ($F = 0.202$, $p = 0.817$) shows no significant difference in travel intention across Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X respondents. H6 is not supported. This contrasts with the common assumption that only young people respond to influencers. With smartphone and social media use now widespread across age groups in India, credible influencer content appears to persuade travellers of all ages.

6. DISCUSSION

Taken together, the secondary and primary findings help explain India's recent tourism growth. The surge to over 2.5 billion domestic visits in 2023 coincided with the wide use of Instagram and YouTube for travel content. The regression results suggest the mechanism: trustworthy and knowledgeable creators build a strong destination image, and that image is what converts scrolling into travel plans.

The results align with earlier studies that identify trustworthiness and expertise, rather than attractiveness, as the main drivers of travel intention (Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021; Faisal & Dhusia, 2022; Pop et al., 2022). They also support the strategic direction of Incredible India 2.0, which emphasises content creation, niche themes, and digital storytelling. The finding that attractiveness does not matter points to a mature audience: for a costly, high-involvement purchase such as travel, Indian consumers look for useful information and authenticity, not glamour.

The same persuasive power has a downside. Because followers trust influencers and value parasocial connection, they often copy recommended itineraries. When many people act on the same content at once, crowding follows. The Chittorgarh experience shows how such demand can strain water resources and heritage sites (Nagori & Kalia, 2026). Influencer marketing therefore needs to be managed as part of destination planning, not treated only as a promotional tool.

7. MANAGERIAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Influencer selection. DMOs should choose partners on the basis of trustworthiness, expertise, and genuine engagement rather than appearance or follower counts. Niche creators—history vloggers, eco-tourism advocates, local guides—who interact actively with their audiences are likely to deliver better results.

Strengthening the IIDP. The Incredible India Digital Platform should feature verified reviews, clear disclosure of sponsored content, and detailed practical guides from vetted creators. These features directly build the trust and expertise that the results show to be decisive.

Redirecting tourist flows. Influencer agreements can promote lesser-known destinations, such as Telangana's Special Tourism Areas, instead of already crowded sites. Creators can also be briefed to encourage responsible behaviour, framing destination image around respect for local culture and the environment.

Reaching all age groups. Since travel intention does not differ by age, campaigns should not focus only on youth. Content on wellness, heritage, pilgrimage, medical, and family travel can engage older Millennials, Gen X, and senior travellers, who often have greater spending power.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study relies on a cross-sectional, convenience sample, which limits generalisation and causal inference. Travel intention, rather than actual travel, was measured. The regression approach also treats destination image as a predictor alongside influencer attributes rather than testing its mediating role formally. Future research could use structural equation modelling to test mediation, longitudinal or booking data to capture actual behaviour, and multi-state samples to compare regions. Studies on de-influencing, sustainability-focused messaging, and AI-generated influencers would also be valuable.

9. CONCLUSION

India's tourism growth is closely tied to the digital information environment. With over 2.5 billion domestic visits and more than US$ 28 billion in foreign exchange earnings in 2023, the sector increasingly depends on how destinations are presented online. This study shows that social media influencers are central to that process. Indian tourists base their travel intentions on the trustworthiness, expertise, and engagement of creators and on the destination image they build, while physical attractiveness plays no meaningful role. Together, these factors explain about three-quarters of the variation in travel intention, regardless of age. For policymakers and DMOs, the challenge is to use this influence wisely: to promote authentic, informative content, to spread visitors across a wider range of destinations, and to support tourism that is both economically productive and environmentally responsible.

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