

# EFFECT OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER INVOLVEMENT ON TOURISTS' TRAVEL INTENTIONS: MEDIATING ROLE OF TRAVELER AUTHENTICITY AND DESTINATION IMAGE

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## Abstract

Although TikTok recently emerged as a travel marketing medium, how TikTok influences tourists' perceptions of travel experience and travel intention remains unclear. This paper addresses this void by constructing a structural model that delineates the mechanism by which the involvement of social media influencers with TikTok influences tourists' travel intention through authenticity and destination image. Following the positivism research philosophy and deductive research approach, a questionnaire survey is administered. The questionnaire was distributed among 384 tourists, and data was analyzed using partial least squares- structural equation modelling. Findings revealed that social media influencers' involvement with TikTok increases object-based and existential authenticity and cognitive and affective images of travel experience, ultimately influencing travel intention. Moreover, object-based and existential authenticity and cognitive and affective images of travel experiences mediate the link between social media influencers' involvement with TikTok and tourists' travel intentions. The results add to tourism marketing literature by blending authenticity with the cognitive-affective model in the context of TikTok travel marketing in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** Affective image, cognitive image, existential authenticity, object-based authenticity, TikTok, travel intention.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, user-generated content (UGC)-based social media platforms have been widely recognized as a novel marketing medium for promoting tourist destinations (Wengel et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022). Prior literature indicates that today, most tourists get travel ideas from social media (Gamage et al., 2021). Among the different social media platforms available today, TikTok is identified as a perfect marketing medium for promoting tourism (Wengel et al., 2022), as *"TikTok is a massively popular app that lets users create and share videos up to 60 seconds long"* (Li, 2022). Moreover, Zhu et al. (2022) stated that TikTok is a terrific platform for travel brands looking to reach new customers. As users of TikTok are incredibly active and thirsty for exciting and genuine materials, a novel concept arose called TikTok travel marketing, which refers to *"...the use of TikTok to increase a travel company's reach, build the brand, increase website traffic, increase destination awareness, engage travellers, and boost bookings"* (Wengel et al., 2022). Consequently, with 20.8 billion views, the hashtag #TikTokTravel has become one of the most well-liked hashtags on the app. Using this hashtag paved the way for tourism and travel businesses to have high visibility on TikTok and market their destinations or activities (Wengel et al., 2022). Accordingly, today, many travel and tourism brands worldwide promote travel through paid partnerships with social media influencers (Zhu et al., 2022), and Sri Lanka is not an exception.

According to Herath (2020), TikTok has become the fastest-growing social media platform ever, making it one of the fastest-growing business opportunities for marketers in Sri Lanka. However, on the one hand, in the Sri Lankan context, most advertising firms are still reluctant to use TikTok as a marketing medium due to the assumptions that there is still less recognition for their business clients on TikTok and that TikTok is just a social media platform for fun and joy for youth (Herath, 2020). In contrast, on the other hand, in Sri Lanka, #travel is one of the highest-rated hashtags in TikTok (Lanka Hashtags for TikTok, 2019). But there is still a question, as many Sri Lankan travel and tourism brands have not adequately leveraged this next-generation platform to entice new travellers and promote travel and tourism. Further, many travel and tourism brands have not hired social media influencers to promote their properties through TikTok.

This paper identifies two major under-researched areas related to hiring social media influencers to promote tourist destinations in prior literature. First, a rigorous review of previous literature uncovered that only a few studies have empirically studied how the involvement of social media influencers shapes tourists' travel experience and intentions (Li, 2021; Zhu et al., 2022). Second, although it was generally accepted that the authenticity of the message social media influencers create significantly influences visitors' perceptions and travel

experience, how this mechanism works in the context of tourist encounters in TikTok has not been comprehensively studied yet (Xu et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022). Consequently, this paper attempts to bridge this gap in prior literature by investigating how social media influencer involvement influences tourists' travel intentions, explicitly referring to TikTok travel marketing practices in Sri Lanka.

The results of this paper make two vital contributions. First, this paper is one of the first attempts to empirically investigate how social media influencers' involvement impacts tourists' travel experiences and intentions regarding TikTok encounters in the Sri Lankan context. Second, the findings offer insights for destination marketers and tourist practitioners to understand how they can promote travel destinations and activities based on tourist encounters in TikTok.

## **2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development**

### **2.1. UGC, TikTok, Social Media Influencers, and Travel and Tourism Marketing**

User-generated content (UGC) is defined as "*material that people publish on social media in the form of images, videos, or text*" (Li, 2021, p. 176). Prior literature emphasized that UGC is an effective marketing tool to promote tourist destinations and travel packages (Gamage et al., 2021), as UGC is believed to have higher authenticity and credibility than conventional tourism data sources. Thus, UGC has significantly affected tourists' travel decisions recently (Narangajavana Kaosiri et al., 2019). Among many social media platforms that generate UGC, TikTok is currently the trendiest and most widely used UGC-based social media platform because of its visual aesthetic and presentation modality (Zhu et al., 2022). Consequently, it has steadily taken over people's lives, and most business firms have started using it to promote their products and services (Li, 2021), and the tourism industry is not an exception. In most instances today, many travel and tourism firms hire social media influencers to create and disseminate travel-related content through TikTok.

Social media influencers constantly create useful content to attract a following via interactive social media platforms (Gamage & Ashill, 2023). They are different from conventional celebrities who are famous for their theatrical talents and thus have gained fame through traditional mass media (Hudders et al., 2021). Because of that, social media influencers are regarded as more credible than celebrities in influencing followers' purchasing behaviour, and their reviews are considered more authentic and relatable by their followers (Vrontis et al., 2021). Consequently, in travel and tourism, in recent times, social media influencers have begun to incorporate a more extensive portrayal of their travel and tourism experiences via TikTok to inspire followers and stimulate

their travel intentions (Zhu et al., 2022). However, in the context of TikTok marketing in Sri Lanka, how the authentic and credible content created by social media influencers shapes tourists' travel intentions was not adequately studied in detail.

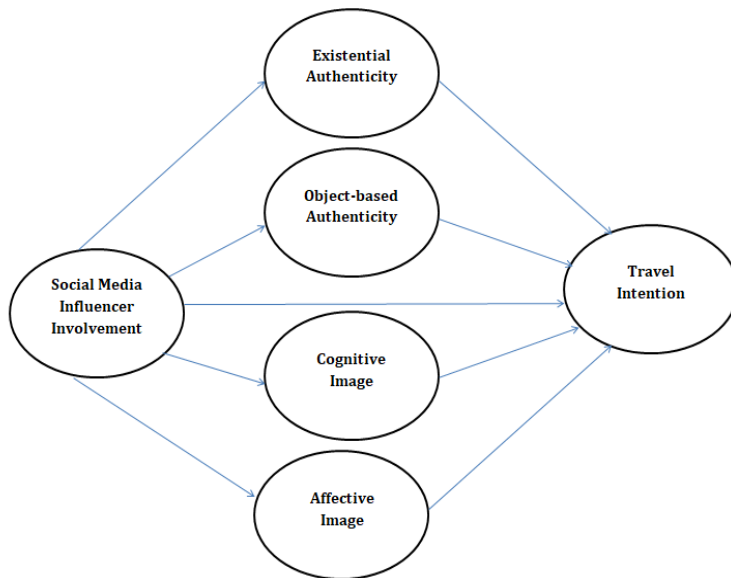
## 2.2. Integrating Notions of Authenticity, Image, and Travel Experience

Concerning the context of travel and tourism, authenticity is defined as "*a phenomenon relating to the thing or associated with the tourism experience*" (Reisinger & Steiner 2006, p. 299). According to Wang (1999), two types of authenticity may be distinguished in how tourists perceive their travel destinations: existential and object-based authenticity (which includes objective and constructive authenticity). Object-related authenticity, as the name indicates, refers to how tourists draw objective perceptions about travel destinations based on the authenticity of objects such as art, artefacts, or buildings they see in the destination (Reisinger & Steiner 2006). In contrast, existential authenticity focuses more on tourists' subjective perceptual experiences and can be defined as "*the potential state activated by tourism activities.*" These two aspects of the authenticity of travel experience have been widely used and accepted in tourism literature (Zhu et al., 2022). Consequently, it is decided to extend Wang's (1999) two-dimensional view of authenticity to study TikTok tourist encounters in this paper.

Prior literature suggests that the destination image affects tourist travel decisions rather than its actual traits. This paper defines the destination image as "*all that the destination evokes in the individual; any idea, belief, feeling or attitude that tourists associate with the place*" (Alcaniz et al., 2009, p. 716). As implied in the definition, it is conceptualized primarily via two dimensions: cognitive and affective components. The cognitive-affective model proposes that cognitive image focuses on evaluating the objective attributes of a place, emphasizing attitudes and knowledge of the destination, while affective image centers on emotional responses related to the characteristics of the destination, such as excitement, pleasure, arousal, and relaxation (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). This model is currently the most widely used conceptualization in studies about the destination image.

Grounded on Wang's (1999) two-dimensional view of authenticity and the cognitive-affective model (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999), this paper postulates how the involvement of social media influencers through TikTok inspires tourists' travel intentions, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Research Model**



Source: Authors' Compilation

## 2.21. Social Media Influencer Involvement and Travel Intention

The link between celebrity involvement and travel intention is well-researched in tourism literature (Zhu et al., 2022). Most scholars emphasized that celebrity involvement positively influences travel intention, stimulating tourists' travel-related decision-making process (Li et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2023). As social media influencers are still emerging (Gamage & Ashill, 2023), the relationship between social media influencers and travel intention has not been adequately studied yet. On the other hand, TikTok has now gradually started to play a vital role in tourists' decision-making process (Li, 2021). However, there is a lack of literature investigating the relationship between social media influencer involvement with TikTok and travel intention. Therefore, this paper postulates that:

H1: Social media influencers' involvement with TikTok positively predicts tourists' travel intentions.

## 2.2.2 Social Media Influencer Involvement and Authenticity and Image of Travel Experience

So far, fewer prior studies have investigated the relationships between social media influencers' involvement and authenticity and the image of the travel experience in tourism literature. Zhu et al. (2022) suggest that social media influencers' involvement influences the authenticity of the travel experience by showing attraction objects in travel destinations through videos posted on social media. As they further emphasized, the travel experiences presented by social media influencers through TikTok videos will further enhance tourists' authenticity of the travel experience, as tourists tend to be emotionally attached to social media influencers as they feel that social media influencers are highly relatable and credible.

Applying object-based and existential authenticity notions in tourism literature emphasizes that the interactions between the tourism experience and objects primarily influence tourists' travel-related decisions (Atzeni et al., 2022). Regarding the context of TikTok travel videos, these videos can portray the real interactions between social media influencers and locals and local attractions in tourist destinations while highlighting the natural scenery of the destinations. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

H2: Social media influencers' involvement with TikTok positively predicts tourists' object-based authenticity of travel experience.

H3: Social media influencers' involvement with TikTok positively predicts tourists' existential authenticity of travel experience.

Several studies suggest that celebrity involvement positively impacts shaping destination images (Kim & Chen, 2020; Zhou et al., 2023). However, social media influencers being an emerging concept, how social media influencers shape tourists' travel destinations by creating a favourable image of the travel destination has not been adequately researched in prior literature (Irfan et al., 2022). However, recently, it was revealed that social media influencers' portrayals of TikTok travel videos act as powerful forces that stimulate tourists' perceptions about travel destinations by creating a positive image (Roostika & Yumna, 2023). Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H4: Social media influencers' involvement with TikTok positively predicts tourists' cognitive image of travel experience.

H5: Social media influencers' involvement with TikTok involvement positively predicts tourists' affective image of the travel experience.

### 2.2.3. Authenticity and Image of Travel Experience and Travel Intention

Prior literature has explored the link between object-based authenticity, existential authenticity, and tourists' travel intention, considering different travel experiences and contexts (Atzeni et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2023). However, in the context of tourism marketing literature, studies on how tourists' perception of authenticity in TikTok travel experiences shared by social media influencers impact their travel intentions are missing. This paper addresses this void by proposing the following hypotheses.

H6: Tourists' object-based authenticity of travel experience through TikTok positively predicts their travel intentions.

H7: Tourists' existential authenticity of travel experience through TikTok positively predicts their travel intentions.

Prior literature on destination image suggests destination image is a vital determinant of tourists' travel-related decisions (Kim & Chen, 2020; Zhou et al., 2023). The positive association between the destination image and travel intention is a well-established notion in tourism literature (Li, 2021; Zhou et al., 2023). However, it has not been explicitly studied in the context of TikTok travel marketing. Usually, a favourable destination image stimulates a positive tourism experience with a selected tourist destination, enhancing tourists' travel intention to the destination. Hence, it is hypothesized that:

H8: Tourists' cognitive image of travel experience through TikTok positively predicts their travel intentions.

H9: Tourists' affective image of travel experience through TikTok positively predicts their travel intentions.

Finally, based on the above discussion it was hypothesized that:

H10: The relationship between social media influencers' involvement with TikTok and tourists' travel intentions is mediated by tourists' (a) object-based authenticity, (b) existential authenticity, (c) cognitive image, and (d) affective image.

### 3. Research Method

Following the positivism research philosophy and deductive research approach, this paper used an online survey targeting TikTok travel-related video followers in Sri Lanka to test the hypotheses offered. The respondents were tourists belonging to Generation Z, who are frequent TikTok users (measured as using TikTok at least 3 to 5 hours per week) and follow at least one TikTok influencer related to travel and tourism. Generation Z tourists were purposely targeted, as 80% of TikTok users in Sri Lanka belong to this category (Herath, 2020). Further, tourism and travel firms are targeting Generation Z because 70% are

interested in vacation travel, and 75% of parents involve their children in choosing a family holiday (Tseng et al., 2021).

A seven-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 7 =strongly agree) was used to operationalize the key constructs of the study. Social media influencer involvement was measured using items adapted from Yen and Croy (2016). In contrast, object-based and existential authenticity was measured using items adapted from Kolar and Zabkar (2010) and Teng and Chen (2020). Cognitive and affective images of travel experience were measured using items adapted from Woosnam et al. (2020). Travel intention was measured using items adapted from Li (2019).

Before commencing the survey, the questionnaire was pre-tested with three academics specialized in tourism marketing to assess the adequacy of the items and the appropriateness of the measurement scales. Additionally, another pre-test was carried out with ten tourists to determine the clearness and understandability of the questions. Identifying the respondents was challenging because TikTok marketing is a relatively emerging marketing practice in Sri Lanka; thus, a suitable sampling frame was unavailable. Therefore, using purposive sampling approach, 384 tourists belonging to Generation Z, who are frequent TikTok users and follow at least one TikTok influencer related to travel and tourism were selected as the sample. Before attending the survey, the respondents had to answer filtering questions related to their TikTok usage and TikTok travel influencer following habits.

The respondents were then asked to view a selected TikTok travel-related video. The TikTok video was obtained from the account of an authentic TikTok travel influencer in Sri Lanka, who shares TikTok videos related to travel and tourism. However, the identity of the TikTok travel influencer is not revealed to ensure the credibility of the video. After viewing the video, the respondents were requested to complete the questionnaire.

Since Partial Least Squared Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) is perfect when dealing with small sample sizes, and it didn't have rigid requirements for data distribution (Hair et al., 2021), it was used for hypotheses testing.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. Sample Profile**

The final data set included 320 effective responses. There was a slightly higher number of males (60.1%) than female respondents (39.9%), and most respondents were following a bachelor's degree (91.3%), aged between 20 and 22 (76.9%).



## 4.2. The Measurement Model

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess the overall quality of the measurement model. As shown in Table 1, PLS outer loadings, Cronbach's Alpha, and composite reliability (CR), exceeded 0.7, indicating the measurement items are reliable (Hair et al., 2021). Moreover, as shown in Table 1, all average variance extracted (AVE) values exceed the minimum threshold of 0.5, indicating acceptable convergent validity. As per the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the square root of AVE for each construct was greater than inter-item correlations (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and all heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratios were less than 0.9 (see Table 2), demonstrating acceptable discriminant validity.

**Table 1: Evaluation of the Measurement Model**

Measurement Item	PLS Outer Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
<u>Social Media Influencer Involvement (SMI)</u>		0.914	0.930	0.626
SMI1: SMI has a central role	0.851			
SMI2: Enjoy SMI	0.817			
SMI3: Enjoy discussing SMI	0.798			
<u>Existential Authenticity (EA)</u>		0.819	0.951	0.617
EA1: Prefer special arrangements and events connected to the destination	0.735			
EA2: Inform about the destination culture after viewing the TikTok video	0.863			
EA3: Enjoy the unique TikTok culture life experience	0.797			
<u>Object-based Authenticity (OA)</u>		0.895	0.923	0.706

OA1: The overall image and impression of the TikTok video is inspiring	0.849			
OA2: Like the peculiarity of the video's internal content design	0.816			
OA3: TikTok video reflected the culture of the destination in an authentic way	0.811			
OA4: Prefer the information presented in the TikTok video	0.798			
<u>Cognitive Image (CI)</u>		0.754	0.857	0.661
CI1: Community amenities	0.819			
CI2: Natural attractions	0.834			
CI3: Cultural attractions	0.847			
<u>Affective Image (AI)</u>		0.771	0.820	0.655
Gloomy / Exciting	0.901			
Distressing / Relaxing	0.897			
Unpleasant / Pleasant	0.887			
Sleepy / Arousing				
<u>Travel Intention (TI)</u>		0.881	0.918	0.737
TI1: Will visit the destination	0.881			
TI2: Will consider a trip to the destination	0.876			
TI3: Attractive place deserving a visit	0.841			

Source: Output of Data Analysis

Table 2: Discriminant Validity Assessment

Construct	Fornell-Larcker Criterion						Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratio					
	S MI	EA	O A	CI	AI	TI	S MI	EA	O A	CI	AI	TI
SMI	0.791						0.464					
EA	0.687	0.785					0.626	0.128				
OA	0.414	0.579	0.840				0.394	0.502	0.398			
CI	0.654	0.451	0.376	0.813			0.554	0.309	0.332	0.692		
AI	0.097	0.134	0.234	0.191	0.809		0.053	0.026	0.156	0.167	0.098	
TI	0.256	0.298	0.123	0.367	0.127	0.858	0.159	0.249	0.094	0.283	0.053	0.496

Note: Social Media Influencer Involvement (SMI), Object-based Authenticity (OA) Existential Authenticity (EA), Cognitive Image (CI), Affective Image (AI), Travel Intention (TI)

Source: Output of Data Analysis

### 4.3 Hypotheses Testing

Next, the structural model was tested using the bootstrapping technique with 5,000 resamples. As the findings indicate, social media influencers' involvement with TikTok positively influences object-based ( $\beta = 0.467, p < 0.05$ ), existential authenticity ( $\beta = 0.311, p < 0.05$ ), and cognitive ( $\beta = 0.256, p < 0.05$ ), and

affective images of travel experience ( $\beta = 0.211, p < 0.05$ ), ultimately influencing travel intention ( $\beta = 0.415, p < 0.05$ ). Further, findings indicate that object-based and existential authenticity and cognitive and affective images of travel experience positively influence tourists travel intentions ( $\beta = 0.356, p < 0.05$ ;  $\beta = 0.211, p < 0.05$ ;  $\beta = 0.208, p < 0.05$ ;  $\beta = 0.197, p < 0.05$ ). Thus, all hypotheses are supported.

Further, the effect sizes ( $f^2$  values) are calculated, and all  $f^2$  values ranged from 0.049 to 1.324, indicating small to large effect sizes (Hair et al., 2021). Further, the variance explained ( $R^2$ ) values by object-based authenticity, existential authenticity, cognitive image, affective image, and travel intention were 47.1%, 51.3%, 44.9%, 45.8%, and 43.1%, respectively, indicating a robust research model.

### 4.3.1 Testing the Mediating Effects

Table 3 summarizes the assessment of the proposed mediating effects related to object-based authenticity, existential authenticity, and cognitive and affective images of travel experience. Results indicated object-based authenticity, existential authenticity, and cognitive and affective images of travel experience mediate the relationship between social media influencers with TikTok and travel intention, thus supporting H10(a) to H10(d). The findings are in line with Li (2021), Zhou et al. (2023), and Roostika and Yumna (2023), who emphasized the potentiality of tourists' authenticity and destination image in mediating the link between social media influencer involvement and tourists' travel intention.

Table 3: Assessing the Mediating Effects

	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Mediation
SMI --- EA ----TI	0.415	0.147	Yes
SMI --- OA ----TI	0.415	0.047	Yes
SMI --- CI ----TI	0.415	0.111	Yes
SMI --- AI ----TI	0.415	0.097	Yes

*Note: Social Media Influencer Involvement (SMI), Object-based Authenticity (OA) Existential Authenticity (EA), Cognitive Image (CI), Affective Image (AI), Travel Intention (TI)*

Source: Output of Data Analysis

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper aims to investigate the mechanism by which the involvement of social media influencers with TikTok inspires tourists' travel intentions through authenticity and destination image. Based on Wang's (1999) two-dimensional view of authenticity and the cognitive-affective model (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999), a structural model is proposed and empirically tested with data collected from 320 tourists in Sri Lanka. Findings revealed that social media influencers' involvement with TikTok increases object-based and existential authenticity and cognitive and affective images of travel experience, ultimately influencing travel intention. Further, as hypothesized, it was revealed that object-based and existential authenticity and cognitive and affective images of travel experiences mediate the positive link between social media influencers' involvement with TikTok and travel intention.

### **5.1 Implications for Theory and Practice**

Findings from this paper have several notable theoretical implications. First, this paper extends the applicability of Wang's (1999) two-dimensional view of authenticity and the cognitive-affective model into tourism marketing literature by examining how social media influencers' involvement impacts tourists' travel intentions regarding TikTok encounters in the Sri Lankan context. Second, this paper contributes to tourism marketing literature, revealing the significant role of object-based and existential authenticity and cognitive and affective images of travel experience in formulating tourists' travel intention concerning TikTok encounters.

From a practical perspective, this paper demonstrated that the tourists' perceptions towards visiting a tourist destination can be stimulated via the involvement of social media influencers with TikTok. Therefore, in the future, destination marketers and tourist practitioners may consider promoting tourist destinations by collaborating with social media influencers promoting travel and tourism through TikTok, especially when promoting travel packages. Further, this paper revealed that object-based and existential authenticity and cognitive and affective images of travel experience mediate the relationship between social media influencers' involvement with TikTok and travel intention. This indicates that destination marketers and tourist practitioners should request social media influencers to produce stories about the travel destinations by preserving the natural scenery of the destination as much as possible to stimulate tourists' travel intentions.

### **5.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions**

Despite the contributions made by this paper to tourism marketing literature, some limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. First, this

paper focused only on Generation Z tourists in Sri Lanka, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other tourist destinations. Hence, caution should be taken when applying these findings to other tourists in the country or different research contexts. Second, the study used a cross-sectional research design, which limits the applicability of the identified causal relationships between variables to other research settings. Future research may use longitudinal or experimental research designs to overcome this limitation. Additionally, future research could include additional variables to provide a more complete comprehension of the factors influencing tourists' travel intentions regarding TikTok travel marketing. It is recommended to conduct qualitative studies in the future to provide more in-depth insights into the identified mechanism. Lastly, researchers recommend future researchers consider international tourists' travel intentions and add value to develop the tourism sector in Sri Lanka.

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