

Travel influencers (Global)

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Travel influencers (Global)

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Travel influencers shape opinions and inspire travelers by sharing their experiences on social media. They provide online advice on where to find the best places to rest, where to have fun and how to avoid typical touristic traps (Fabry, 2008: 13). Named *influenceur voyage* in French, *influencer viajeros* in Spanish or *wang hong* in Chinese, these individuals represent a 'new type of independent third-party' (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey and Freberg, 2011: 90) who claims to embody an authentic voice in a profit-oriented leisure market while having a significant impact on it (Xu and Pratt, 2018: 958).

Travel influencers



Location: Global

Definition: Social media opinion leaders focused on travel and tourism

Keywords: Global – Influence – Influencers – Cyberinformality – Internet – Social media – Tourism – Entrepreneurship

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It is generally admitted that influencers produce their original content only out of passion (Reech, 2020). Nevertheless, sponsorships are frequently practiced among social media influencers. Classical actors of the tourist sector seek to partner with the most followed opinion leaders in order to reach a broader audience (Bayle, 2019). Indeed, new communicative behaviors on the internet affect the way of selling destinations. Web 2.0 has been transforming tourism globally by both empowering people 'to identify, customize and purchase tourism products' and to undertake 'reservations in a fraction of time' (Buhalis and Law, 2008: 609-610). Data shows that, even before 2007, user-generated content has been creating more than US$10 billion in online travel purchases per year (Xu and Pratt, 2018: 958). Unlike cases of follower buying, travel influencers have a real content engaged audience. Ratings, comments, regular assessments from travelers are game-changers. Touristic promotion is no longer about the location benefits than it is about understanding consumers' demands (Fabry, 2008: 13).

To measure influencer's weight, companies rely on the number of daily hits on a blog, the number of times a post is shared, or the number of followers (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey and Freberg, 2011: 90). Micro-influencers normally broadcast their activities to a scale from 1 000 to 100 000 individuals whereas the expert ones bring together sometimes millions (Bayle, 2019). They navigate and publish their narratives on different web platforms. They adapt each content to the targeted interface and their respective audience's characteristics. For instance, a blog enables to provide tourists with practical information to organize a stay abroad. Instagram allows exploring visual and esthetical

aspects of the leisure trip. YouTube is a dynamic and vivid invitation to reproduce the examples proposed in the videos. As new generations account more and more on online social media to obtain travel information (Xu and Pratt, 2018: 959), the tourism industry has been facing increasing economic challenges.

Influence is a very popular concept in management disciplines (Vaublanc (de), 2019: 237-239). The notion is nonetheless not recent in social sciences. In the thirteenth century, the word was known to be used in Astrology and meant to define the *fluxus* which supposedly flowed from the stars to change the fate of men' (Huyghe, 2009: 139). Today, the meaning of this term remains linked to persuasion. While advertising strategies operate through many iterations of the product's benefits, influence is more easily related to reasoning and seduction. The goal is to modify people's mental paradigms so they can 'choose' to act according to expected behaviors (Op. Cit.: 141). To make this kind of exhortation effective, web communities managers have to prove they are entitled to make recommendations (Charaudeau, 2009: 6-7). Their voice must be perceived as a truthful, informed and attractive source (Xu and Pratt, 2018: 959). Producing texts, images and videos based on the real experience of travel allows internet users to provide advice. The perception of content creators' statements authenticity is based both on the process of publishing these testimonials and on the intonations of a word that is intended to be familiar and enthusiastic (Rosier, 2006: 117). To address travel topics in an informal way differentiates these spokespersons from the habitual seriousness of the touristic industry communication, making them look more credible.

Despite a playful tone, social media influencers are highly skilled. Their capacities to create and animate multiple social web communities require technical and publishing aptitudes. Indeed, in order to improve their visibility on the Internet they must know how to optimize their ranking in search engines by using html language or by sharing hyperlinks with other web players (Cardon, 2013: 33). They generally are educated people. To maintain their audience's interest, they need to write and publish regularly new content. In addition, they have to show and demonstrate the knowledge of their field to make their voice credible as the one of an expert (Juillet et Racouchot, 2012: 162-163). To do so, they structure their posts with the same textual organizations and headings that traditionally characterize guidebooks and travel magazines ('the top ten best places to visit', 'the 10 best cheap eats in…', 'where to stay', 'things to do'). They take similar pictures to those of the touristic advertising productions (the traveler faces a wonderful and unbelievable beautiful view alone or with his/her companion).

In their speech, they use the discursive routines that mainly appear in touristic promotion leaflets as well. Destinations' descriptions are full of exclusively positive reviews with no or just a few negative comments that are immediately neutralized by mentioning a superior benefit (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004: 137). They use adjectives specific to the semantic fields of magic and authenticity to characterize the uniqueness of the place presented as touristic brochures do (Dann, 1996: 55-62). Through these semiotic and discursive strategies, travel influencers nourish people's desire to travel (MacCannell, 2013: xvi; Boorstin, 1992: 84). Those abilities are all directed into one objective: to build in discourse the image of a credible touristic recommendation.

The activity of travel influencers consists of transforming a web community into potential consumers through equally seductive and authentic testimonials seasoned with apparent amateurism. As travelers are overwhelmed by touristic offers, digital nomads emerge as truthful voices. They create, for their followers, discursive, visual, and graphic injunctions to desire the world through travel.

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