

# ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS IN TOURISM: THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL CONNECTION WITH THE CONTENT, THE DESTINATION AND THE INFLUENCER

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## Extended Abstract

Enhancing user engagement on social media has become a crucial objective for marketing experts and, as a result, the impact of social media influencers (SMIs) is profoundly reshaping promotional strategies (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). This is particularly relevant in tourism, as increasing engagement on social media helps to enhance, among others, destination visibility and visiting intention (So et al., 2024). Similar to the previous role of celebrities (Pradhan et al., 2023), SMIs have helped bridge the gap between destinations and potential tourists by enhancing the destination's familiarity and desirability.

However, due to the proliferation of SMIs, there is a need to better understand what type of SMIs should be employed to maximize engagement. In addition, the academic exploration into the impact of SMIs within the travel and tourism sector remains limited (Manthiou et al., 2024). In this respect, previous literature has mainly focused on the impact of personal characteristics of SMIs (Xie-Carson *et al.*, 2023) and consumer perceptions about the content (Casaló et al., 2020), while the emotional connection that viewers of the posts may experience has been overlooked. To move on this topic, this study explores the drivers of engagement with SMIs posts about tourism destinations, focusing attention on the user emotional connection with the influencer, the content of the post and the destination. To do that, this study is grounded in the strength of weak ties theory (Granovetter, 1973) and focuses on Instagram because it has about 3 billion monthly active users and is considered one of the main platforms for travel influencers nowadays (Casaló *et al.*, 2020).

First, we may argue that the connection with the influencer is formed due to the influencers' follower count. The categorization of influencers varies, but a common classification is based on the number of followers (e.g, macro [ $>50,000$ ], micro [ $10,000-50,000$ ], or nano-influencers [ $<10,000$ ]). While conventional wisdom suggests that influencers with larger followings may

generate a higher number of total interactions, influencers with smaller followings achieve higher engagement rates. Nano- and micro-influencers might have fewer followers than macro-influencers, but are perceived as more authentic compared to their macro counterparts, which may result in higher engagement rates (Agostino et al., 2019). In other words, it is not just about who has the most followers, but it is about who can authentically engage an audience to foster meaningful interactions.

Second, users can also develop an emotional connection with the content of the post. In this respect, users may develop different emotional ties depending of the sentiment (positive or negative) of the content sentiment (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024). Specifically, we argue that followers may react more intensely to negative content, because of the empathy developed with the influencer, reinforcing the closer and more direct bond of the SMI with their community.

Third, user may also develop emotional ties as a result of the SMIs territorial connection with the destination. Specifically, SMIs may reside or not in the destination, which implies that they can be classified as local influencers (residents) and universal influencers (visitors or non-residents). In this respect, previous literature states that both types of influencers may serve to develop the image of the destination (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024) and, considering that residents share a common place identity (Belanche et al., 2017), we expect that users may develop stronger emotional connections with SMIs that reside in the destination as their posts will be perceived as more authentic. As a result, we propose the following hypotheses:

**H1:** Engagement is negatively associated with the number of SMI followers, so that nano-influencers will achieve a greater engagement rate.

**H2:** The relationship proposed in H1 is reinforced for negative (vs. positive) posts.

**H3:** The relationship proposed in H1 is reinforced for local (vs. universal) influencers.

Web-scraping is used to collect the data about a specific cultural and gastronomic destination in Spain (León), and artificial intelligence (both machine and deep learning) is used to extract the information from each post. Specifically, this research analyzes the engagement received by more than 30,000 posts shared by more than 10,000 SMIs about the selected destination. From each post, we obtained specific engagement metrics (likes, comments and overall engagement). From each SMI, we obtain his/her number of followers to classify them as

nano, micro or macro-influencers. Following Gunter and Önder (2021), the number of posts about the destination and the time between the first and last post for each SMI were used to distinguish between residents and non-residents. Machine learning served to extract the sentiment of the text and deep learning helped determine the sentiment of the image; both measures were then combined to obtain a global measure of the sentiment of the post.

Results from an ANOVA indicate significant differences in the engagement rate. Regarding the hypothesis testing, firstly, we find support for H1 as the three types of influencers according to the number of followers exhibit significantly different levels of the overall engagement rate ( $F = 467.71$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ). To be precise, nano-influencers achieve higher engagement rates than micro and macro influencers. Secondly, the analyses reveal an interaction effect; the significant differences in the engagement rate depend on the sentiment expressed in the SMIs' posts ( $F = 9.22$ ,  $p < 0.00$ ), being these differences higher for negative posts. Therefore, we find support for H2. This result is in line with the results of previous research concluding that negative content activates users' participation on social media platforms (e.g., Akuma et al., 2021; Boot et al., 2021; Steinert, 2021), and we further expand the academic literature by concluding that this effect becomes more extreme among influencers with a smaller number of followers, such as nano-influencers. Thirdly, the analyses show that the significant differences in the overall engagement rate also depends on the origin of the influencer ( $F = 4.20$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), being these differences higher for universal influencers. Therefore, we do not find support for H3. Probably, this unexpected result is due to the perceived novelty of the content by their audience.

Interestingly, if we replicate the analysis with likes and comments, significant differences arise again for likes rate, but not for the comments rate. This may be explained by the fact that actual differences in user behavior with SMIs' posts are mostly seen in likes, rather than comments, due to the effort required for each action (Aldous et al., 2021). While giving a "like" requires the least effort, commenting on a post is the action that requires the most time and effort (Mariani et al., 2016).

In sum, this study confirms that SMIs with a larger number of followers create weaker links, while SMIs with a smaller number of followers create stronger links, which lead to more intense emotional responses and therefore a higher engagement rate. This effect is reinforced for negative posts and, contrary to expected, when the SMI is not a resident. These results have interesting practical implications for destination marketing organizations in terms

of SMIs selection to promote the destination. Although it may be tempting to choose an influencer with a high number of followers, this is not the best strategic marketing option.

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