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DISENTANGLING THE COMPLEXITY OF INFLUENCER-GENERATED CONTENT IN TRIGGERING VIEWERS' TRAVEL INSPIRATION AND BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS

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PhD

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

2025

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

School of Hotel and Tourism Management

Disentangling the Complexity of Influencer-Generated Content in Triggering Viewers' Travel Inspiration and Behavioral Intentions

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

November 2024

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Mehrnaz Alizadeh

ABSTRACT

Social Media Influencer Marketing (SMIM) has emerged as a pivotal strategy for businesses in the tourism and hospitality sectors, where the intangible and experiential nature of travel products positions influencer-generated content (IGC) as a critical source of information and inspiration for travelers. As SMIM adoption expands, scholarly interest in its value and contributions to these industries has grown. This thesis systematically reviews existing SMIM research in tourism and hospitality, identifying several gaps that need to be addressed. To address these gaps, the thesis aims to disentangle the complexity of IGC in triggering viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions. It has two primary objectives: first, to complement the growing stream of research on SMIM by investigating the effect of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple social media influencers (SMIs) on viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions; and second, to investigate how the congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs, as well as the interactivity with content- and source-related characteristics, affect viewers' travel inspiration under more controlled conditions.

To fulfill the first objective, Study One conceptualized and validated the IGC Congruency Scale, a novel measurement tool assessing congruency across multiple pieces of IGC from multiple SMIs. Employing a mixed-method approach, the scale was operationalized as a second-order factor model encompassing five dimensions: "Topic," "Recommendation," "Valence," "Visual," and "Travel Style." Structural Equation Modeling analysis of data from 600 participants confirmed direct positive relationships between IGC congruency, travel inspiration, and behavioral intentions. While the mediating role of IGC credibility and the moderating effect of viewers' susceptibility to interpersonal influence were only partially supported, the study significantly advances literature by introducing the first scale to measure multi-SMI IGC congruency and enriching the customer inspiration framework with new informational and personal factors. Practically, these findings aid practitioners in optimizing SMIM investments.

Study Two addressed the second objective through three between-subject experiments, revealing that viewers perceived multiple pieces of IGC from multiple SMIs covering incongruent topics as more inspirational than congruent topics. Furthermore, the causal effect of IGC congruency (congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) on travel inspiration

remained consistent regardless of SMI type (travel specialists vs. non-travel specialists) or sponsorship disclosure type (partially sponsored vs. fully sponsored). These results underscore the nuanced role of topical incongruency in enhancing travel inspiration, challenging assumptions about content congruency, and source expertise. By employing experimental designs, Study Two extends theoretical understanding of travel inspiration antecedents and boundary conditions, while offering practitioners actionable strategies to improve SMIM efficacy through curated topic incongruency.

Collectively, this thesis advances the SMIM literature by systematically addressing underexplored dimensions of IGC congruency and its interplay with content-source dynamics. It provides a robust empirical foundation for future studies while equipping industry stakeholders with evidence-based insights to leverage SMIM's potential in triggering travel inspiration. The integration of scale development and experimental methodologies further underscores the value of multi-method approaches in unraveling complex consumer behaviors in digital marketing contexts.

Keywords: Social Media Influencers; Social Media Influencer Marketing; Influencer-Generated Content; IGC Congruency; Travel Inspiration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As I conclude this journey and complete my PhD thesis, my mind travels back to the very first time I learned to read and write at the age of seven, to today, at thirty-one, as I submit this work in pursuit of the highest academic degree. It has been a long journey fueled by a passion for learning, relentless hard work, and resilience in overcoming obstacles. The PhD itself was a roller coaster, filled with far more downs than ups, yet I confess it was also an enriching experience. Through it all, my perseverance has been crucial in navigating this path of growth and multitasking. While I am proud of my determination, I know that without the unwavering support of others, I would never have reached this milestone.

First and foremost, I owe my deepest gratitude to Prof. Daniel Leung, my chief supervisor, for his constant guidance throughout my PhD journey at SHTM. Thank you for teaching me to think critically, question deeply, and face challenges with integrity. More than a mentor, you embodied what it means to be an exceptional educator, a thoughtful researcher, and a kind-hearted person. Your belief in me, your patience in shaping my ideas, and your commitment to excellence have profoundly influenced both this research and my growth as a scholar. I am forever grateful for your support, not just academically, but in shaping the person I have become.

Equally instrumental in my academic journey was Prof. Roozbeh Mirzaei, my master's supervisor at the University of Mazandaran. His foundational guidance not only prepared me for this PhD but also provided unwavering support throughout my postgraduate studies. Beyond academia, his mentorship, rooted in wisdom, integrity, and kindness, taught me to think critically and act with compassion. His influence remains a rare and treasured gift, one that continues to inspire me as both a scholar and an individual.

I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to my co-supervisor, Prof. Norman Au, for his invaluable feedback during my thesis writing, which significantly strengthened my work. My appreciation also goes to Prof. Cathy Hsu, Prof. Sabrina Huang, and Prof. Yoohee Hwang for their insightful suggestions during supervisory meetings and my confirmation of registration—their guidance was pivotal in refining my research direction. Additionally, I am grateful to Prof. Jinsoo Lee, Prof. Billy Bai, and Prof. Ulrike Gretzel for

their constructive feedback as BoE Chair and external examiners, which further enriched my thesis.

Beyond my committee, I am deeply thankful to Prof. Kaye Chon, the esteemed Dean and Chair Professor of SHTM, for recognizing my potential and supporting me throughout my time here. His visionary leadership fostered an environment that enabled me to thrive. I also extend my gratitude to Prof. Catherine Cheung, Prof. Deniz Kucukusta, Prof. Sebastian Filep, and Dr. Dave Chan for their encouragement, as well as to the administrative staff, especially Mrs. Yuki Lui, for their unwavering assistance.

To my friends whom I met at SHTM and with whom I built lasting friendships—Meli, Linlin, Emily, and Shida—thank you for your companionship. Your presence made this journey enjoyable. To my super serious tutor team, whom I got to know through my experience as a hall tutor in Hung Hom Hall—Daniyar, Partha, Mohana, Caroline, Qinyu, and Chandra—your friendship turned challenging moments into sweet ones and made happy moments even sweeter. Thank you all for being an integral part of my journey in Hong Kong.

Finally, and above all, my deepest gratitude belongs to my family—Mehran, Sarah, Amitis, and most of all, my parents, Bajoon and Majoon. Your unconditional love, endless patience, and unwavering belief in me have been my anchor through every triumph and struggle. Thank you for nurturing my dreams and standing by me through it all. Being your daughter is my greatest pride, and none of this would have been possible without your sacrifices.

To everyone mentioned—and to those I may have inadvertently missed—thank you for shaping this pivotal chapter of my life. Your support has meant the world to me. Cheers!

DEDICATION

To my beloved Grandma, Mamani. Though she is no longer with us, her spirit remains my guiding light. Her unwavering strength, wisdom, and love continue to inspire me to learn relentlessly, grow fearlessly, and embrace the resilience she embodied—and to become the kind of woman she always believed I could be.

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This chapter begins with an overview of the study's background, focusing on social media marketing and, more specifically, social media influencer marketing. Following this introduction, the second section outlines the research gaps identified in the existing literature, which serve as a foundation for formulating the research objectives. The chapter then presents an overview of the research design and theoretical background, followed by a discussion of the theoretical and practical contributions of the study. Finally, the chapter concludes with an outline of the overall structure of the study and definitions of key terms.

1.1   Research Background

1.1.1   Marketing Approaches Before and After the Advent of Social Media

Marketing as an inevitable part of a business plan is defined by Kotler and Armstrong (2018) as *"the process by which companies engage customers, build strong customer relationships, and create customer value in order to capture value from customers in return"* (p. 5). The fundamental part of this definition is using marketing approaches that build successful supplier-consumer relationships to reach a win-win result. Traditionally, marketing approaches were limited to one-way communication from suppliers to consumers (see Figure 1.1 (a)). In this process, messages have been transported by marketers to their target markets through television, newspapers, magazines, billboards, the Internet, and brochures (Daou, 2020). Consumers, on the other hand, passively consume the messages and react to them by becoming aware of the suppliers, reinforcing their memory about the mentioned products, or simply ignoring the messages (Berthon et al., 2008). For example, in 2005, Carnival Cruises launched a multi-million dollar campaign, which encompassed television commercials, and consumer and trade print placements to promote Carnival Cruises as a holiday gift (Hudson, 2008). Although traditional marketing provides marketers with complete control over their messages and brand image, being limited to local consumers, being expensive, and being difficult to personalize and measure the marketing outcomes are some disadvantages of utilizing the traditional marketing approach (Todor, 2016).

Figure 1.1. Change in power balance between suppliers and consumers

(a) Traditional Marketing

Suppliers   **Consumers**

(b) Social Media Marketing

Suppliers   **Consumers**
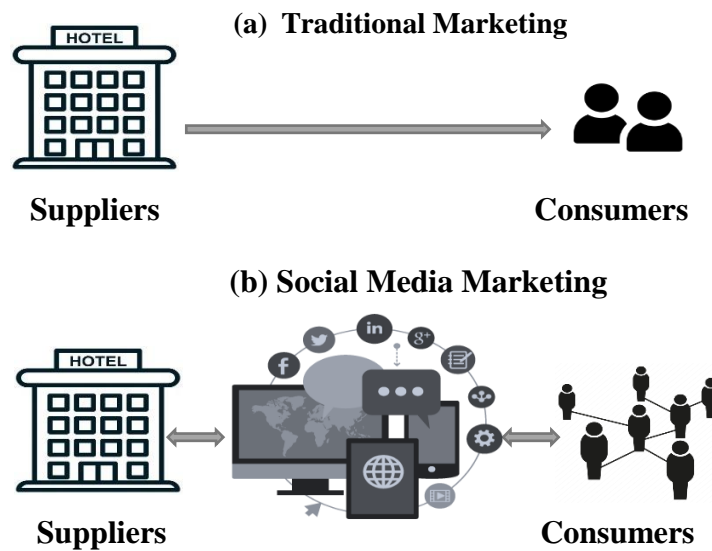
Source: developed by the author (2022)

This traditional paradigm becomes obsolete after the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies. Web 2.0 technologies encompass a broad spectrum of technologies that can enable interactive information sharing (Valdez Soto et al., 2016), including blogs and social networking sites. These technologies alter the supplier-consumer relationship (see Figure 1.1 (b)). With the enormous amount of information available to consumers, they gain the power to influence their lives in the marketplace and beyond (Labrecque et al., 2013). Web 2.0 technologies, especially social networking sites, empower consumers to actively generate and share their content rather than passively receive content created by suppliers (Harrison & Barthel, 2009). #FindingAwesome contest is a successful example of using user-generated content (hereafter UGC) by the Nelson and Kootenay Lakes Tourism team. The tourism team encouraged visitors to share their photos and videos of the region on social media to win the prize. By running this social media contest, the supplier could spread their message to the target audience (CrowdRiff, 2018).

Gradually, the size and significance of UGC have increased as social media has become a more integral part of consumers' lives (Kim & Song, 2018). This growth significantly changes marketing approaches. One major transformation is that consumers have been empowered to share real-time photos, videos, opinions, thoughts, satisfaction, and dissatisfaction of their brand experience. Suppliers cannot have control over every consumer's social media sharing. Therefore, suppliers are no longer the sole source of

information, and they are no longer able to fully control their brand messaging strategies (Fader & Winer, 2012; O'Hern & Kahle, 2013). Instead, ordinary and passionate consumers have the potential to shape other consumers' brand perceptions (Muda & Hamzah, 2021).

This transformation in the enfranchisement of content production has led to consumer-centric collaborative exchanges (Halliday, 2016). Consumers in this relationship can passively consume others' content while also actively producing content. The alteration between being a content producer and a content consumer is described by the term prosumer (Ritzer et al., 2012). Apart from challenges caused by the presence of prosumers, it has brought some opportunities for both consumers and suppliers. Rather than only relying on supplier-generated content, social media provides consumers with multiple sources of information (Oliveira et al., 2020). Consumers have the freedom to search for the information they look for and make their own decisions (Ayeh et al., 2013). On the other side of this supplier-consumer relationship, social media provides suppliers with the opportunity to reach their target anywhere, anytime, with lower costs. Suppliers are also able to analyze the market situation promptly. Through conducting promotional campaigns via social media, they can encourage followers to generate content in order to make their products and services more appealing to the market (Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2014).

1.1.2 Social Media Marketing Approaches

The high efficacy and low cost of using social media as a marketing channel led to the emergence of the social media marketing phenomenon (Broekemier et al., 2015). As shown in Figure 1.2, a total of $ 211.82 billion was spent on social media advertising in 2023. According to Statista (2024), this number is expected to increase to $345.73 billion by 2029.

Businesses typically adopt passive or/and active approaches to integrate social media into their marketing strategies. In the passive approach, marketers listen to their consumers and monitor discussions among consumers on social media platforms (Constantinides, 2014; Schweidel & Moe, 2014). It provides timely information for marketers in the fast-changing

and highly competitive market (Chanthinok et al., 2015). This approach outperforms traditional monitoring practice from conventional market research, which was costly and time-consuming. In the active approach, brands use social media to push supplier-generated content to consumers with textual, visual, and multimedia content (Zhong et al., 2021). This active presence facilitates communication, direct sales, consumer acquisition, and consumer retention (Constantinides, 2014; Tafesse & Wien, 2018). Similar to the other businesses, both passive and active approaches have captivated tourism and hospitality marketers' attention. Travel agents use social media as a marketing tool to inform their target markets about their latest services and offerings. As part of their marketing strategies, destination marketing organizations (hereafter DMOs) also use different platforms to promote their destination and reach a much larger audience compared to the traditional communication media (Uşaklı et al., 2019). Utilizing social media can also improve travel businesses' engagement with their consumers and enhance their reputation (Abou-Shouk & Hewedi, 2016).

Figure 1.2. Social media advertising spending worldwide from 2019 to 2029
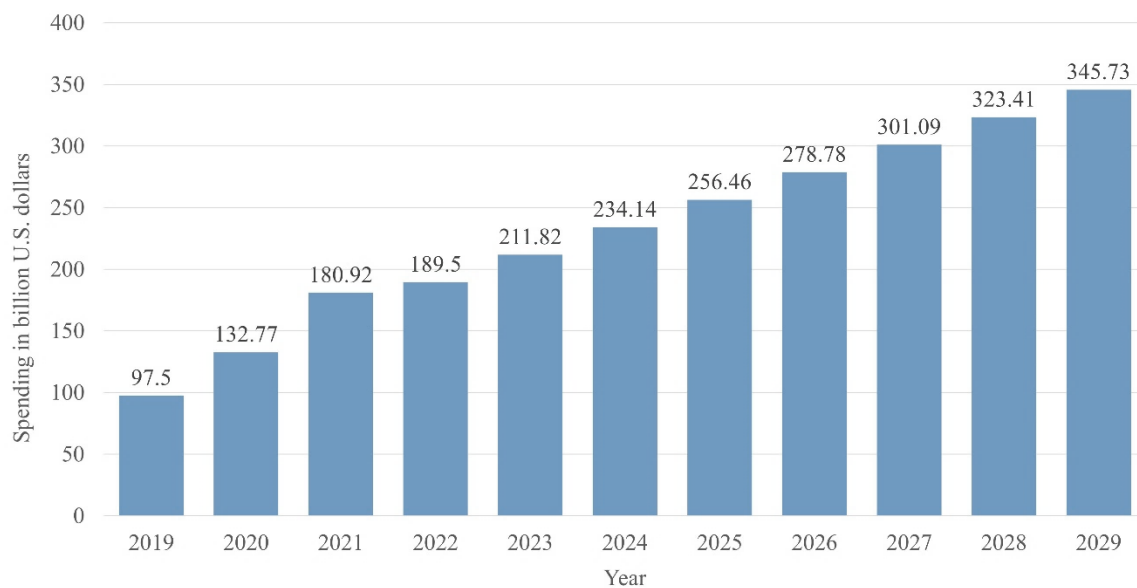
Source: adapted from Statista (2024)

Similar to travel agencies and DMOs, hotel marketers actively use social media for conducting market research, strengthening brand image, fostering engagement with consumers, and creating a community of fans (Veríssimo & Menezes, 2015). For instance, Meliá Hotels International transformed its business when social media changed the marketing approaches of businesses. The company actively utilized social media at the

global, regional, and local levels to convey consistent messages to its consumers. Doing so increased their followers by 15 percent in six months and generated €33.8 million in mobile sales from 2016 to 2017 (Hootsuite, n.d.).

Apart from delivering marketing messages via businesses' social media accounts, marketers indirectly promote brands and products to the social media target audience by collaborating with social media influencers (hereafter SMIs) (Ibáñez-Sánchez et al., 2021). SMIs are prosumers (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016) who are *"substantially more likely than the average to seek out information and to share ideas, information, and recommendations with other people"* (Keller & Fay, 2016, p. 2). They are perceived as credible sources of information by consumers due to their expertise and trustworthiness (Al-Emadi & Ben Yahia, 2020; Munnukka et al., 2019). In addition to their high perceived credibility, the high similarity between SMIs and viewers is an important reason making SMIs more influential than other sources (Schouten et al., 2020). These key factors empower SMIs to influence consumers' attitudes and behavioral outcomes, making them influential promoters for collaboration with businesses (Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). This practice between brands and endorsers is coined as social media influencer marketing (Vrontis et al., 2021).

1.1.3   Social Media Influencer Marketing

In contemporary business practices, social media influencer marketing (hereafter SMIM) has evolved into an integral and highly effective component of marketing strategies across industries. By collaborating with SMIs, suppliers can connect with and captivate target audiences on a larger scale (Lin et al., 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019). According to the American Marketing Association (2022), SMIM refers to "leveraging individuals who have influence over potential buyers and orienting marketing activities around these individuals to drive a brand message to the larger market." This partnership with SMIs, who boast substantial followings, enhances brand visibility, fosters positive brand attitudes, and ultimately drives purchasing decisions (Jang et al., 2021). As a testament to its growing influence, more than 63% of marketers are now investing in SMIM, with the market budget

projected to reach a remarkable US$266.92 billion by the end of 2025 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2025).

This growing reliance on SMIs partnerships is particularly evident in sectors like tourism and hospitality, where access to third-party voices is becoming increasingly important when choosing services and hedonic experiences (Stepchenkova et al., 2025; Stoldt et al., 2019). The intangibility and experiential nature of tourism and hospitality products (Xu, 2010) make travel-related influencer-generated content (hereafter IGC) an important source of information for potential tourists. Today's travelers prefer to collect information about a destination through their relatives, acquaintances, and SMIs (Stoldt et al., 2019). Being up to date about the latest travel trends, receiving accurate and unbiased information, and knowing about discounts are among the reasons for following SMIs (Dutta et al., 2021; Leung, 2021). Apart from being a good source of information, IGC is a potential source of inspiration for viewers to plan their next trip (Fang et al., 2023).

Marketers and practitioners in tourism and hospitality are well informed about the power of SMIs' recommendations on their followers as a touchpoint in marketing campaigns (Asan, 2022). A successful example is Marriott International's collaboration with four SMIs to create authentic branded content on Snapchat. This collaboration aimed to engage millennials who are not as familiar with the Marriott brand and its loyalty program (Gilliland, 2017). The engagement rate and the percentage of viewers watching the videos from beginning to end were important metrics that the Marriott group tracked to evaluate their campaign success (WARC, 2017). By the completion of this SMI campaign, the Marriott campaign got the highest view rate among Snapchat advertising campaigns. It is worth mentioning that the Marriott group could reach 41% of their young target (Gilliland, 2017).

Academic scholars also noted the capacity of SMIs in promoting tourism and hospitality products. Magno and Cassia (2018) revealed the persuasion of SMIs on followers' travel intentions. Assessing the effectiveness of the SMIM campaign of Singapore DMO, Ong and Ito (2019) stated that consumers' behavior was positively affected by SMIM campaigns. Furthermore, SMIM campaigns that engage target audiences are also found to improve destination images, as evidenced by the study. The results of Li et al.'s (2015)

study confirm that SMIs are influential marketing actors and their content can shape both cognitive and affective destination image.

Despite the scholarly attention given to this emerging marketing strategy, several research gaps persist. This thesis aims to disentangle the complexity of IGC in triggering viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions, providing a more accurate representation of the reality of IGC exposure. The identified research gaps, derived from a systematic literature review, are discussed in the following section.

1.2   Research Gaps

Understanding how SMIM practices influence viewers and how viewers process and react to such practices has become a critical research focus in tourism and hospitality. Scholars have increasingly acknowledged the power of SMIs and their content in shaping viewers' attitudinal and behavioral responses (Le & Hancer, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023; Xie-Carson, Magor, et al., 2023). However, despite this growing interest, a systematic review reveals several key gaps that this study addresses:

First, IGC has become a significant source of travel inspiration for many individuals (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). However, despite its growing influence, the inspirational power of IGC remains underexplored within the tourism and hospitality literature. This gap is particularly important given the transformative potential of social media-driven travel inspiration, which can convert casual viewers into motivated tourists by exposing them to novel ideas and perspectives that transcend their everyday concerns (Dai et al., 2022; Gretzel, 2021; Thrash & Elliot, 2004). While IGC is widely acknowledged as a driver of travel-related decisions, there is limited understanding of how it triggers affective responses, such as travel inspiration, which plays a critical role in shaping travel behavior and destination marketing strategies (Polat et al., 2024).

Existing studies on SMIM have primarily focused on viewers' cognitive responses to IGC, such as perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions (e.g., Chen et al., 2014; Kılıç et al., 2024; Nazlan et al., 2024; Padmavathi, 2020; Zhu et al., 2023). To the best of the author's

knowledge, only Nguyen et al. (2023) and Fang et al. (2023) have explored consumers' inspirational perceptions of IGC within the tourism and hospitality context. Nguyen et al. (2023) identified that SMI sincerity, professionalism, and attractiveness are key factors capable of triggering travel inspiration, which subsequently influences travel planning intentions. Similarly, Fang et al. (2023) revealed that the attractiveness of short videos and presenter characteristics positively contribute to travel inspiration. Despite these valuable contributions, the existing research has yet to thoroughly investigate the potential factors that evoke travel inspiration in more realistic IGC exposure scenarios. This gap underscores the need for further research to authentically examine whether and how IGC triggers travel inspiration, as well as whether such inspiration translates into behavioral intentions. Addressing this gap would not only deepen theoretical understanding but also provide actionable insights for leveraging IGC in destination marketing strategies.

Second, prior work narrowly examines IGC from single sources or SMIs (e.g., Dong et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023; Xie-Carson, Magor, et al., 2023), ignoring the industry shift toward multi-SMI, cross-platform campaigns. Suppliers (e.g., DMOs, hotels) increasingly collaborate with multiple SMIs to amplify visibility (Lin et al., 2018), as seen in initiatives like Australia's 200-SMI "Friends of Australia" program or Uzbekistan's World Influencers Congress, which partnered with 100+ SMIs to synchronize cultural content (Kun.uz, 2019; Tourism Australia, n.d.). However, reliance on single-source stimuli in research oversimplifies viewer responses. Critically, the reliance on a single-source stimulus in prior work risks oversimplifying viewer responses to IGC. When audiences encounter multiple pieces of IGC from multiple SMIs—across platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube—their perceptions may be shaped by synergistic, contradictory, or cumulative effects that remain underexplored. Recent scholarship explicitly identifies this gap, urging investigations into the cross-platform dynamics of multiple pieces of IGC (Leung et al., 2022). By examining how simultaneous exposure to multiple pieces of IGC shapes travel inspiration, this study advances a holistic framework for understanding IGC's role in viewer responses, bridging the disconnect between a single-source paradigm and real-world marketing practices.

Third, the congruency among multiple pieces of IGC remains unexamined, despite its relevance to multi-SMI campaigns. The existing body of literature in SMIM has examined the influence of congruence between SMIs and consumers on their behavioral intention

(e.g., Cheng et al., 2020; Dong et al., 2023; Han & Zhang, 2023; Xu & Pratt, 2018). Past research has also investigated the impact of congruence between SMIs and suppliers (e.g., Dong et al., 2023; Xie-Carson, Benckendorff, et al., 2023; Xu & Pratt, 2018). However, a gap remains in the literature regarding the congruency among multiple pieces of IGC and its influence on viewers' cognitive processing and emotional reactions. This gap is striking given the rise of multiple SMIs campaigns where viewers encounter multiple pieces of IGC from multiple SMIs, often with varying tones, narratives, or thematic emphases.

Extant work on UGC suggests that congruency among online reviews (e.g., consistent valence) enhances perceived credibility and persuasiveness (Cheung et al., 2012; Quaschning et al., 2014). However, these findings may not generalize to IGC due to fundamental differences in content creation dynamics. IGC is often curated (SMIs craft content aligned with personal brands), platform-specific (tailored to Instagram vs. TikTok norms), and strategically incentivized (e.g., paid partnerships). Despite these distinctions, no study has systematically examined how congruency or incongruency among multiple pieces of IGC influences viewers' responses. Addressing this gap is critical for both theory and practice, as it advances SMIM scholarship beyond dyadic influencer-consumer-supplier frameworks and provides actionable insights for designing cohesive multiple SMIs campaigns.

Lastly, a critical gap persists in understanding how viewers' personality characteristics and key boundary conditions—susceptibility to interpersonal influence, SMI type, and sponsorship disclosure type—can provide differential impact on viewers' travel inspiration. Building on the customer inspiration model proposed by Böttger et al. (2017), research has shown that in addition to the sources of inspiration, viewers' characteristics can also influence their level of inspiration. Specifically, factors such as an individual's openness to experience, place attachment, frequency of travel, and destination familiarity have been found to have a moderating effect on inspiration (Khoi et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2022; Xue et al., 2022). Susceptibility to interpersonal influence is a personal characteristic that has been shown to affect the consumption of luxury products (Das et al., 2022). However, it remains unexplored in the context of travel inspiration. This omission is significant, as audiences' willingness to internalize external social cues may uniquely shape their responses to coordinated SMIM campaigns. Therefore, this study investigates whether and how viewers' susceptibility to interpersonal influence moderates the effect of

congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration.

The influence of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration may also differ depending on some boundary conditions. A possible boundary condition that influences the inspirational power of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs is the type of SMIs. Previous research acknowledges that the type of SMIs (e.g., macro- vs. micro-influencers) affects consumer behavior (Kim et al., 2021; Spálová et al., 2021; Uribe et al., 2016); however, the distinction between travel-specialist SMIs (e.g., travel SMIs) and non-specialist SMIs (e.g., general lifestyle SMIs) remains unexamined. This oversight limits actionable insights for marketers seeking to optimize influencer portfolios based on expertise alignment. This suggests there is room for further research to explore the distinctions, if any, between these two groups of SMIs and how they may differentially impact viewers' travel inspiration.

Another boundary condition that may influence the inspirational power of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs is the type of sponsorship disclosure. The influence of sponsorship disclosure type, however, remains limited to explicit disclosure, implicit disclosure (Lee & Kim, 2020), honest opinion disclosure (Hwang & Jeong, 2016), and impartiality disclosures (Stubb & Colliander, 2019). Apart from these types, other forms of sponsorship exist in practice, which need further investigation. Therefore, this study examines the moderating role of sponsorship disclosure type (partially sponsored vs. fully sponsored) in influencing the effect of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration. A comprehensive understanding of this subject will enrich the literature on travel inspiration and assist in selecting suitable compensation methods in collaboration with SMIs.

1.3   Research Objectives

The overall goal of this study is to disentangle the complexity of IGC in triggering viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions. Specifically, the research is driven by the following objectives:

(1) To complement the growing stream of research on SMIM by investigating the effect of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions. To achieve this objective, this research will have three sub-targets as follows:

    a. To develop a reliable and valid scale to measure congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs.

    b. To propose and test a model to explain the relationships among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs, IGC credibility, viewers' travel inspiration, and behavioral intentions.

    c. To examine the moderating effects of susceptibility to interpersonal influence on the relationships among constructs.

(2) To investigate how the congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs, as well as the interactivity with content- and source-related characteristics, affect viewers' travel inspiration under more controlled conditions. To achieve this objective, this research will have two sub-targets as follows:

    a. To examine the causal effect of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs (congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) on viewers' travel inspiration.

    b. To examine whether the causal effect of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration differs according to SMIs type (travel specialists vs. non-travel specialists), and sponsorship disclosure type (partially sponsored vs. fully sponsored).

1.4 Overview of Research Design

This section discusses the rationale for selecting the research paradigms and research designs. The detailed explanation of the research methods and procedures for each study is presented in the respective chapters.

1.4.1 Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is defined as a core framework of beliefs and principles collectively accepted by scientists, forming a shared perspective that guides their interpretation of challenges, shapes their worldview, and informs the methodologies they employ in research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A research paradigm consists of three main elements: ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Crotty, 1998). According to (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), ontological assumptions focus on the essence of reality. Epistemological assumptions concern the theoretical connection between researchers and knowledge, including the researcher's role in the inquiry process and their relationship with the subjects or objects of study. Methodology refers to the strategies or most effective ways to acquire knowledge about reality. Grounded in varying foundational perspectives of ontology, epistemology, and methodology, Guba and Lincoln (1994) identified four essential paradigms to guide social science research: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism. Beyond the three paradigms proposed by Guba and Lincoln, our understanding of research paradigms has evolved and expanded. Pragmatism is now considered the fifth research paradigm, emphasizing approaches that best address the research aim, often blending qualitative and quantitative methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The chosen paradigm influences researchers not only in their methodological choices but also in fundamental ontological and epistemological aspects (Creswell, 2013).

This thesis adopts a pragmatic research paradigm, prioritizing methodological flexibility to address the distinct objectives of the thesis. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) note, pragmatism allows researchers to select methods best suited to their research questions rather than adhering rigidly to a single philosophical stance. Study One utilizes a post-positivist approach, emphasizing statistical rigor and iterative scale validation through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, aligning with the assumption that reality, while not entirely objective, can be approximated through systematic measurement (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In contrast, Study Two employed a positivist experimental design, testing hypotheses under controlled conditions to isolate causal relationships, reflecting the premise that objective patterns can be identified through empirical observation (Patton, 2002). This pragmatic framework enabled methodological pluralism, ensuring coherence between each study's aims and its philosophical underpinnings.

1.4.2 Research Design

Research design is a versatile framework of principles and guidelines that connects research paradigms with strategies for data collection and methods of investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Typically, there are three primary research approaches that direct a study: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. The processes of research design, data collection, and data analysis are frequently carried out iteratively. To disentangle the complexity of IGC in triggering viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions, this thesis is structured into two separate studies, employing a mixed-method approach for Study One and a quantitative approach for Study Two. By integrating two separate studies and research designs, this thesis seeks to provide a holistic perspective and yield robust insights into the phenomena under investigation.

Study One aims to complement the growing stream of research on SMIM by investigating the effect of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions. Grounded in a framework of knowledge development (Rossiter, 2001, 2002)—first-order (descriptive), second-order (associational), and third-order (causal)—the study addresses three sub-objectives. The first sub-objective focuses on generating first-order knowledge by describing and labeling the IGC congruency construct within a tourism context. This involves developing a reliable and valid scale to measure congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs, which serves as the foundational contribution of this doctoral thesis. A mixed-methods approach is employed: qualitative insights from content analysis and in-depth interviews with participants exposed to travel blogs, reviews, or social media posts from multiple SMIs inform the conceptualization and initial scale development, while quantitative methods rigorously test and refine the scale's psychometric properties.

The second and third sub-objectives aim to advance second-order knowledge by proposing and testing a model that explains relationships between IGC congruency, IGC credibility, travel inspiration, and behavioral intentions, as well as examining the moderating role of susceptibility to interpersonal influence. These objectives align with Rossiter's (2001, 2002) definition of second-order knowledge, which identifies non-causal associations between constructs—a focus prevalent in tourism research (Dolnicar & Ring, 2014). To achieve this, a quantitative correlational design is adopted, analyzing variable relationships

within a single group (Salkind, 2010). This approach ensures methodological rigor, enabling hypothesis testing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and generalization through randomized sampling (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). By prioritizing quantitative methods, the study ensures reliability, validity, and objectivity while addressing its deductive aims. The integration of mixed methods balances exploratory depth in conceptualizing IGC congruency with statistical rigor in testing associations, thereby cohesively advancing empirical insights into SMIM's role in triggering viewers' inspiration and behavioral intentions.

Study Two advances third-order knowledge by identifying causal relationships between constructs (Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020), aiming to "investigate how congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs, along with interactivity tied to content- and source-related characteristics, affects viewers' travel inspiration under controlled conditions." Using a deductive quantitative approach, the study employs a series of survey experiments to test causal effects. The first sub-objective examines the direct influence of IGC congruency (congruent vs. incongruent topics) on travel inspiration within social media environments. In contrast, the second sub-objective explores whether this effect varies based on SMI type (travel specialists vs. non-travel specialists) and sponsorship disclosure type (partially vs. fully sponsored). To isolate causality, an experimental design (Cash et al., 2016) is implemented across three sub-studies: Study 2a utilizes a simple comparative experiment to establish the baseline impact of IGC congruency on travel inspiration, whereas Study 2b and Study 2c adopt 2×2 between-subjects designs. In Study 2b, IGC congruency is tested alongside SMI type, while Study 2c investigates interactions between congruency and sponsorship disclosure. Across all sub-studies, IGC congruency is systematically manipulated as the independent variable, with travel inspiration measured as the dependent outcome. This structured approach ensures methodological rigor, enabling precise analysis of causal mechanisms while maintaining controlled conditions. By integrating these experimental strategies, Study Two not only clarifies theoretical linkages but also offers actionable insights for leveraging IGC in tourism marketing, bridging academic inquiry with practical application.

In summary, this thesis employs a strategically layered research design to dissect the multifaceted influence of IGC. Study One's mixed-method approach lays the groundwork by defining IGC congruency and mapping its associational linkages. At the same time,

Study Two's experimental rigor isolates causality, revealing how contextual factors modulate these effects. Together, they advance Rossiter's (2001, 2002) knowledge hierarchy—from descriptive to causal—while offering actionable insights for tourism marketers. By harmonizing methodological diversity with theoretical coherence, the research not only enriches SMIM scholarship but also equips practitioners with evidence-based strategies to optimize IGC's impact in real-world settings.

1.5   Theoretical Background

This section elaborates on the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the proposed conceptual models of Study One and Study Two, including the multiple source effect (Harkins & Petty, 1981a), heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken, 1980), and customer inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017).

1.5.1 Multiple Source Effect

The multiple source effect is a psychological phenomenon in which information presented by multiple independent sources is perceived as more credible and persuasive than the same information from a single source (Harkins & Petty, 1981a; Harkins & Petty, 1987). This effect arises from the human tendency to interpret consensus among diverse sources as evidence of objectivity and validity, reducing uncertainty and enhancing trust in the message (Harkins & Petty, 1981b). Central to this phenomenon is the concept of information utility, where audiences perceive multiple sources as offering unique, additive perspectives, thereby motivating deeper cognitive processing of message arguments (Harkins & Petty, 1987). When sources are perceived as independent, their collective endorsement signals a broader validation of the message, heightening its persuasive impact.

Empirical validation of this theory revealed critical boundary conditions. Harkins and Petty (1987) demonstrated that the persuasive advantage of multiple sources disappears when sources are framed as members of a unified committee sharing identical biases. In such

cases, audiences infer that the sources are subject to group pressures or aligned agendas, rendering their arguments non-independent. Consequently, the perceived utility of the information diminishes, and recipients disengage, processing the message no more diligently than they would a single-source appeal. This underscores the necessity of perceived source independence: only when multiple sources are viewed as distinct and unbiased does their collective testimony enhance persuasion by signaling broad consensus and reducing skepticism. When sources are seen as biased or non-independent, such as paid endorsers, their collective testimony may trigger attribution discounting (Harold H. Kelley, 1973), where audiences attribute the message to external incentives (e.g., financial compensation) rather than genuine belief, undermining trust (Sparkman Jr, 1982).

Moore et al's (1994) seminal study tested these theoretical boundaries in advertising contexts. Their experiment revealed that while unpaid multiple sources amplified persuasion (generating more positive thoughts and attitudes than single sources), paid multiple sources had the opposite effect, eliciting skepticism and negative cognitive responses. This divergence underscores the role of source motivation in moderating the multiple source effect. Unpaid sources reinforce perceptions of sincerity and independence, aligning with information utility principles. In contrast, paid sources activate adversarial processing, as audiences perceive each endorser as a "paid confederate" of the advertiser, heightening scrutiny of ulterior motives (Moore et al., 1994). This understanding is particularly relevant in the context of SMIM, where leveraging multiple SMIs can significantly enhance persuasive efforts. For instance, a product or service that receives positive reviews from multiple independent SMIs is likely to be more convincing to potential viewers. Additionally, the repetition of information from different SMIs can aid in reinforcing the message, making it more memorable.

1.5.2 Heuristic-Systematic Model

The heuristic-systematic model, developed by Chaiken (1980), is a dual-process theory that seeks to describe how individuals interpret and respond to persuasive communications. According to this model, individuals can process information through two distinct approaches: systematic or heuristic. Systematic information processing, as

described by Todorov et al. (2002), involves individuals thoroughly considering all relevant information, elaborating on it, and forming judgments based on these elaborations. This approach indicates that recipients invest significant cognitive effort in evaluating arguments and assessing their validity for making judgments (Chaiken, 1980). According to the model's sufficiency principle, individuals are more likely to engage in systematic processing when they have sufficient motivation, ability, and cognitive resources (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). Consequently, highly motivated individuals are more prone to evaluate the arguments within a message, allowing high-quality arguments to exert a greater influence on their decision-making (Sussman & Siegal, 2003). For instance, when users adopt a systematic processing approach to evaluate information in electronic Word of Mouth (hereafter eWOM), the quality of arguments becomes a crucial message cue, with research primarily assessing argument quality based on factors such as accuracy, timeliness, completeness, and the reasoning behind the recommendation (Chauhan & Gupta, 2024). However, while systematically evaluating message cues is vital for determining a message's credibility, not all recipients are able or willing to invest the time and effort required to thoroughly process every message they encounter (Qahri-Saremi & Montazemi, 2019).

Heuristic information processing, on the other hand, involves individuals considering only a few informational cues to form judgments based on these cues (Tam & Ho, 2005). This perspective on persuasion suggests that recipients exert minimal effort and rely on readily available cues, such as the characteristics of information sources, to conclude (Chaiken, 1980). The model's least effort principle posits that heuristic processing is the default strategy because individuals prefer to conserve cognitive resources, preferring to minimize exertion and only investing significant effort when necessary (Bohner et al., 1995). As a result, individuals may automatically use heuristic cues, which can be simple decision rules or rules of thumb, to make judgments quickly (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012). This tendency is evident in the social media environment, where individuals often have a hedonic mindset and are less likely to think critically; they rely on heuristic cues to quickly evaluate messages (Chaiken, 1980; Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991). For instance, they might consider IGC with numerous likes as more credible, regardless of the IGC's actual quality, or evaluate a product or service positively because it is endorsed by their favorite SMIs (Zhang et al., 2014). These mental shortcuts, known as heuristics, such as believing that if many consumers like something, it is probably good, allow individuals to quickly

interpret media content, contrasting with the more effortful process of thoroughly evaluating all available information (Winter, 2020).

While the two modes of information processing affect individuals' attitudes in distinctly different ways, they can also happen at the same time, explained through three extensions: additivity, attenuation, and bias effects (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). Additivity suggests that systematic content analysis and heuristic cue evaluation independently influence decisions (Chaiken et al., 1989), with studies showing both content and cues impact judgments (Bohner et al., 1994). However, detecting additivity can be challenging because systematic processing often overshadows heuristic cues, and attenuation effects may dominate (Bohner et al., 1995). Attenuation occurs when systematic processing weakens heuristic influences, particularly under high motivation, where individuals prioritize systematic methods (Zhang & Watts, 2008). Additionally, conflicting conclusions from both modes may lead individuals to rely on systematic processing to boost confidence, further diminishing heuristic effects (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). In this thesis, the direct effects of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' inspiration and behavioral intentions are tested as outcomes of the heuristic route of information processing, providing insight into how heuristic processing modes interact in the SMIM context.

1.5.3 Customer Inspiration

The term "inspiration" literally denotes the act of taking in breath, but its psychological importance lies in its metaphorical meaning (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). As outlined in the Oxford English Dictionary, the primary figurative and general definition describes it as: *"A breathing in or infusion of some idea, purpose, etc. into the mind; the suggestion, awakening, or creation of some feeling or impulse, especially of an exalted kind"* (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, p. 1036). This conceptualization underscores how external influences or internal processes can stimulate elevated thoughts, emotions, or motivations (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Beyond its psychological roots, the concept of "inspiration" has been studied in diverse fields such as art, literature, education, theology, and psychology (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). However, inconsistent interpretations and vague

definitions of the term have historically limited progress in understanding it. To resolve these challenges, Thrash and Elliot conducted foundational research that distilled common elements from multidisciplinary perspectives, proposing a comprehensive framework applicable across domains.

Central to their framework, inspiration is characterized by three core components: evocation, transcendence, and motivation, which collectively drive individuals to transform ideas into action (Thrash & Elliot, 2003; Thrash & Elliot, 2004; Thrash et al., 2014). Thrash and Elliot (2004) define these components as follows: Evocation refers to inspiration being passively triggered by external stimuli rather than self-generated; transcendence involves the pursuit of goals beyond ordinary concerns; and motivation compels individuals to act on inspired ideas. To operationalize this construct in practical settings, context-specific definitions are essential, particularly in marketing research, where goals, recipients, and sources of inspiration vary (Thrash et al., 2014). Addressing this need, Böttger et al. (2017, p. 129) pioneered the application of inspiration to marketing, defining *customer inspiration* as *"a customer's temporary motivational state that facilitates the transition from the reception of a marketing induced idea to the intrinsic pursuit of a consumption-related goal"*.

Building on Thrash and Elliot's work, Böttger et al. (2017) conceptualize customer inspiration as a transformative journey involving two sequential states: *inspired-by* and *inspired-to*. This transition is critical, as the two states—*inspired-by* and *inspired-to*—are fundamentally distinct yet interdependent, forming a causal chain that defines a complete inspirational episode (Thrash & Elliot, 2004; Thrash et al., 2014). The inspired-by state relates to *"the reception of a marketing-induced new idea and the shift in customer awareness toward new possibilities"* (Böttger et al., 2017, p. 118). Antecedents of this state include source characteristics (e.g., inspirational content, imaginative appeals, approach-oriented messaging) and individual characteristics (e.g., traits influencing receptivity to inspiration) (Böttger et al., 2017). These factors collectively shape the transition to the *inspired-to* state, which embodies the motivational drive to translate ideas into tangible actions, such as purchasing a product or adopting new behaviors (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Critically, the *inspired-to* state is characterized by heightened agency and determination, differentiating it from passive admiration. This distinction is vital, as the *inspired-to* state directly fuels outcomes like purchase intent, loyalty, or delight, which are

consequences rather than components of the inspirational process itself (Böttger et al., 2017). For example, while *intention* emerges as a measurable result of being *inspired-to*, it reflects a downstream effect rather than the motivational state. Thus, the transition from *inspired-by* to *inspired-to* bridges the gap between ideation and action, with the latter serving as the catalyst for real-world behavioral, emotional, or attitudinal consequences.

Extending this conceptualization, Dai et al. (2022, p. 2) defined travel inspiration as *"a motivational state that drives a prospective tourist to bring the obtained new travel ideas into realization"*. Directly aligning with Böttger et al.'s (2017) framework. As these applications demonstrate, the concept of inspiration has been extensively researched and adapted across disciplines. In this thesis, Böttger et al.'s (2017) customer inspiration framework serves as the foundational theoretical lens.

1.6   Significance of the Study

This study contributes new knowledge to the growing body of literature on SMIM and makes significant contributions to the optimization of SMIM approaches. The theoretical and practical contributions are discussed in the following subsections.

1.6.1   Theoretical Contributions

The theoretical contribution of this study is fourfold. Firstly, the systematic literature review presents a framework that summarizes and visualizes the mechanism of SMIM, providing a tool to better comprehend the processes and dynamics involved in SMIM practice. This framework serves as a foundation for future research to assess the effectiveness and impact of SMIM practice. The systematic literature review study went beyond a simple summary of existing literature and instead conducted a thorough, in-depth analysis of the key themes and topics that emerged from the literature. By providing a comprehensive overview of how SMIM has progressed within the tourism and hospitality sectors, this study enhances our understanding of this marketing practice. It sheds light on how this practice has evolved over time to adapt to changes while highlighting areas where

further exploration is necessary. By identifying these areas where research is lacking this study suggests directions for future research.

Secondly, this study employed a mixed-method approach to conceptualize and develop a scale to measure congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs. This scale can be applied across different contexts to examine the congruency among IGC. While existing congruency scales and measures have provided valuable insights, they have remained limited to measuring congruency between two entities (e.g., SMIs and consumers) and have failed to adequately measure congruency among multiple pieces of IGC. Hence, the findings of this study could contribute new knowledge to existing literature.

Thirdly, this study provides a theoretical framework by integrating multiple source effect, the heuristic-systematic model, and the customer inspiration concept. It examines the effect of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration, the mediating role of IGC credibility, and behavioral intentions including intention to search, intention to travel, and intention to share. Theoretically, it provides an understanding of how congruency among multiple pieces of IGC by multiple SMIs can trigger viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions, and further identifies the moderating effect of susceptibility to interpersonal influence. Overall, this study reinforces previous research related to the influence of IGC on viewers, viewers' evaluations and reactions to IGC, and viewers' evaluations of the supplier. This study also echoes the call of Leung et al. (2022) for research on the effect of multiple pieces of IGC by multiple SMIs.

Lastly, drawing on the findings of three between-subject experiments with social media users, this investigation unveils the differential impact of IGC's topical congruency on viewers' travel inspiration. It also identifies the boundary effects of SMIs type (travel specialists vs. non-travel specialists) and sponsorship disclosure type (partially sponsored vs. fully sponsored). The findings of this study could therefore contribute new knowledge to the existing literature through a holistic approach. By considering these implications, it is believed that the current knowledge within the literature can be further explored.

1.6.2 Practical Contributions

Practically, the study is valuable for DMOs, marketers, SMIs, tourism consumers, academia, and other stakeholders. Firstly, the findings from this study provide insightful knowledge to DMOs and marketers, enabling them to gain a comprehensive understanding of SMIM. Since destinations are starting to promote themselves through SMIs, having a deeper understanding of SMIM mechanisms can guide them in devising and executing marketing plans wisely. As evident in SMIM practices, many DMOs promote their destinations by collaborating with multiple SMIs, which can be costly due to the need to invest in multiple SMIs. Therefore, it is crucial for marketers to understand how pushing multiple messages through multiple SMIs could be perceived as credible and inspirational by receivers and lead to behavioral intentions. Hence, knowledge from this study can help DMOs and marketers in optimizing their investments in SMIM.

Secondly, such knowledge can also enhance DMOs' and marketers' understanding of the consumers' reactions toward congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs, as well as the various types of SMIs and sponsorships. With this knowledge, these stakeholders can tailor their SMIM campaigns to inspire better engagement with their target consumers, ultimately driving behavioral intentions and improving their return on investment.

Thirdly, the study can enhance our understanding of how congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs, consumers' perceptions of IGC credibility and inspiration, as well as their behavioral intentions, can differ based on their susceptibility to interpersonal influence. The identification and understanding of this difference could be relevant to destinations that aim to leverage multiple SMIs in their promotional activities, drawing on insights. Such knowledge can also be important for market segmentation strategies.

Lastly, such knowledge can also be helpful for SMIs themselves. It may provide them with important information that can significantly influence their collaborations with other SMIs and DMOs. By gaining a deeper understanding of their collective impact on target consumers, SMIs can learn how to work effectively with other SMIs and design their

sponsored content more effectively. This can ultimately lead to more successful and sustainable collaborations between SMIs and DMOs.

1.7 Overall Structure of the Thesis

This thesis includes five chapters and two studies. Chapter 1 provides the background of the study, outlines the research gaps, presents the research objectives, offers an overview of the research design, discusses the theoretical background, highlights the significance of the study, and defines key terms. Chapter 2 focuses on a systematic literature review of 100 peer-reviewed research papers. The systematic literature review was conducted to examine the current state of research on SMIM in the tourism and hospitality contexts, as well as to provide an agenda for future research on SMIM in these contexts.

The first study, presented in Chapter 3, aims to complement the growing stream of research on SMIM by investigating the effect of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions. Specifically, this study focuses on a comprehensive exploration into the development of a standardized scale with acceptable reliability and validity to accurately assess congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs. Additionally, this study investigates the influence of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions. The mediation effect of IGC credibility between the congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs and the viewers' travel inspiration is also considered. A multigroup analysis is used for the moderating effect of viewers' susceptibility to interpersonal influence on the constructs. This chapter is divided into four sections. First, the hypotheses and conceptual model are presented. Second, the scale development study is explained in detail. The details on scale development procedures include item generation and content validity, scale purification, scale validation, and nomological validity. Third, the formulated hypotheses are rigorously tested, and the corresponding results are reported, allowing for further interpretation. Lastly, the chapter is finalized by the general discussion on the findings of Study One.

The second study, presented in Chapter 4, aimed to investigate how the congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs, as well as the interactivity with content- and source-related characteristics, affect viewers' travel inspiration under more controlled conditions. To achieve this, the study tested the direct effects of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs (congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) on viewers' travel inspiration as well as the moderating effects of SMIs type and sponsorship disclosure type. The chapter is organized into five sections. First, it presents the hypotheses and conceptual model. Second, it details the research method and findings of Study 2a, including the study setting, stimulus development, sampling, data collection, and data analysis. The findings subsection covers manipulation and realism checks, testing of research hypotheses, and a discussion of the results. The third and fourth sections follow a similar structure for Studies 2b and 2c, respectively, outlining their research methods and findings. Finally, the chapter concludes with a general discussion of the findings from Study Two.

Chapter 5 provides a comprehensive conclusion that summarizes the key findings from the studies. It discusses the theoretical implications of the results, explaining how they advance the current understanding of the research topic. Additionally, the chapter explores the practical implications of the study, acknowledging its limitations and suggesting directions for future research. Figure 1.3 outlines the overall structure of the thesis.

Figure 1.3. Overall structure of the thesis

Chapter 1	**Introduction**	

Chapter 2	**Literature Review**	*Research Gaps:* • The previous systematic review studies on SMIM within the tourism and hospitality context have had a limited scope, which is currently missing from the literature.	*Research Objectives:* • To examine the current state of research on SMIM in the tourism and hospitality contexts. • To provide an agenda for future research on SMIM in these contexts.

Chapter 3	**Study One**	*Research Gaps:* (1) The inspirational power of IGC has not been widely studied in tourism and hospitality literature, which has focused more on viewers' cognitive responses rather than their affective perceptions of IGC as the source of inspiration. (2) Previous research has mostly used single sources or individual SMIs, lacking an understanding of the combined effect of multiple pieces of IGC from multiple SMIs. (3) The influence of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration remains unexplored, as findings from user-generated content may not be directly applicable. (4) The differential impact of factors, such as viewers' susceptibility to interpersonal influence, on the relationship between congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs and viewers' travel inspiration is not well understood.	*Research Objectives:* (1) To complement the growing stream of research on SMIM by investigating the effect of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions. To achieve this objective, this research will have three sub-targets as follows: a. To develop a reliable and valid scale to measure congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs. b. To propose and test a model to explain the relationships among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs, IGC credibility, viewers' travel inspiration, and behavioral intentions. c. To examine the moderating effects of susceptibility to interpersonal influence on the relationships among constructs.

		Research Gaps:	Research Objectives:
Chapter 4	**Study Two**	(1) The inspirational power of IGC has not been widely studied in tourism and hospitality literature, which has focused more on viewers' cognitive responses rather than their affective perceptions of IGC as the source of inspiration. (2) Previous research has mostly used single sources or individual SMIs, lacking an understanding of the combined effect of multiple pieces of IGC from multiple SMIs. (3) The influence of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration remains unexplored, as findings from user-generated content may not be directly applicable. (4) The differential impact of factors like SMIs type and sponsorship disclosure type on the relationship between congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs and viewers' travel inspiration is not well understood.	(2) To investigate how the congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs, as well as the interactivity with content- and source-related characteristics, affect viewers' travel inspiration under more controlled conditions. To achieve this objective, this research will have two sub-targets as follows: a. To examine the causal effect of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs (congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) on viewers' travel inspiration. b. To examine whether the causal effect of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration differs according to SMIs type (travel specialists vs. non-travel specialists), and sponsorship disclosure type (partially sponsored vs. fully sponsored).

Chapter 5	**Conclusions**

1.8   Definition of Key Terms

In order to avoid any ambiguity regarding phrases that have been used in this study, a list of phrase definitions is presented subsequently:

- **Social Media Influencer (SMI):** A social media influencer is a third-party user of social media who possesses significant reach and impact on social media platforms, characterized by their expertise in a specific area, authenticity in their interactions, and ability to create intimate connections with their audience, enabling them to influence followers' decision-making and attract a larger, engaged audience (Hudders et al., 2021).

- **Social Media Influencer Marketing (SMIM):** *"Leveraging individuals who have influence over potential buyers and orienting marketing activities around these individuals to drive a brand message to the larger market"* (American Marketing Association, 2022, para 1).

- **Influencer-Generated Content (IGC):** Any form of social media posts, such as videos, images, or texts, created by an influencer (defined by the Author).

- **Congruency Among Multiple Pieces IGC Created by Multiple SMIs (IGC Congruency):** IGC congruency among multiple pieces of influencer-generated content provided by different but not the same social media influencer (Maille & Fleck, 2011).

- **Influencer-Generated Content Credibility (IGC Credibility):** An individual's judgment of the veracity of the influencer-generated content (Appelman & Sundar, 2015).

- **Travel Inspiration:** *"a motivational state that drives a prospective tourist to bring the obtained new travel ideas into realization"* (Dai et al., 2022, p. 2).

- **Inspired-By State:** *"The reception of a marketing-induced new idea and the shift in customer awareness toward new possibilities"* (Böttger et al., 2017, p. 118).

- **Inspired-To Search:** The intrinsic pursuit to search about the endorsed tourism destination (Böttger et al., 2017).

- **Inspired-To Travel State:** The intrinsic pursuit to travel to the endorsed tourism destination (Böttger et al., 2017).

- **Inspired-To Share State:** The intrinsic pursuit to share the IGC of the endorsed tourism destination (Böttger et al., 2017).

- **Intention to Search State:** A potential IGC viewer's subjective probability that he/she will search about the endorsed tourism destination (Wang, 2012).

- **Intention to Travel:** A potential IGC viewer's subjective probability that he/she will visit the endorsed tourism destination (Wang, 2012).

- **Intention to Share:** A potential IGC viewer's subjective probability that he/she will share the IGC of the endorsed tourism destination (Wang, 2012).

- **Congruent Topics:** The consistency among the topics provided by a group of social media influencers concerning tourism destination attributes (defined by the Author).

- **Incongruent Topics:** The inconsistency among the topics provided by a group of social media influencers concerning tourism destination attributes (defined by the Author).

- **Social Media Influencer Type (SMI Type):** Defined as characteristics of a social media influencer (Kapoor et al., 2021).

- **Travel Specialist Social Media Influencer (Travel Specialist SMI):** SMI who constantly generates travel-related content (defined by the Author).

- **Non-Travel Specialist Social Media Influencers (Non-Travel Specialist SMI):** SMI who constantly generate content in any or every non-travel topic such as food, fashion, lifestyle, etc. (defined by the Author).

- **Sponsorship Disclosure Type:** The sponsorship disclosure type in this study considers the inclusiveness level of paid activities (defined by the Author).

- **Fully Sponsored Influencer-Generated Content (Fully Sponsored IGC):** Sponsored influencer-generated content specifically indicating that a supplier provides full sponsorship (e.g., sponsored flight, accommodation, meal, etc.) to social media influencers (defined by the Author).

- **Partially Sponsored Influencer-Generated Content (Partially Sponsored IGC):** Sponsored influencer-generated content specifically indicating that a supplier provides partial sponsorship (e.g., only sponsored accommodation) to social media influencers (defined by the Author).

1.9   Chapter Summary

As the foundation of the study, this chapter provided a foundational overview of marketing approaches before and after the advent of social media, with a primary focus on the SMIM strategy. It outlined the research gaps and presented the research objectives, followed by an overview of the research design and a discussion of the theoretical background. The significance of the study was highlighted, and key terms were defined. The chapter concluded with an overview of the thesis's overall structure (see Figure 1.3). The next chapter will present a systematic review of the existing SMIM literature in tourism and hospitality research.

CHAPTER 2   LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter aims to provide an extensive review of the literature on SMIM, identifying variables and constructs that can be incorporated into the conceptual model. This review will also help strengthen the understanding of the background of SMIM, synthesizing existing SMIM dynamics in the travel and tourism context. The chapter begins with revisiting the definitions and content about social media, social media marketing, and SMIM. Afterwards, previous research on SMIM in tourism and hospitality is synthesized and presented in section 2.4. A thorough list of research gaps identified from the literature is presented in the final section of this chapter.

2.1   Social Media

In the first decade of the new millennium, Web 2.0 technologies enabled a leap forward in the social component of using the Internet and the World Wide Web. Social media has become an inevitable part of Internet advancement, growing in popularity and value since the late 1990s. As a virtual gathering place, a platform for retailing, and now an important marketing tool in the 21st century, social media has evolved into more than just a tool for networking (Ghosh et al., 2014).

The universal definition of social media remains absent, and it varies across different disciplines. From the business perspective, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) defined social media as *"a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content."* In 2015, Carr and Hayes proposed a robust, deductive, and descriptive definition of social media. They defined social media as *"Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others"* (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p. 50).

The commonalities among these definitions were described by Obar and Wildman (2015) in four attributes. Firstly, the platform needs to be internet-based and built upon Web 2.0 technologies, which emphasize UGC, rather than the static, one-way approach of the earlier Web 1.0 era. Secondly, UGC must be the driving force and primary focus of the platform, as social media thrives on the active contributions of its user base. Thirdly, the platform must provide users with the ability to establish their own unique profiles or accounts, as this user profile is central to the overall social experience and interactions. Finally, the platform should facilitate the development of online social networks by enabling users to create and manage social networks by listing individuals they want to connect with, which allows them to engage with content and interactions from those lists. However, some platforms like Yik Yak enable social networking without traditional lists, instead connecting users based on location or content preferences.

As highlighted, social media platforms were initially designed to ease communication among people. Gradually, social media has become a significant part of people's lives, where they create, share, and browse information constantly. Occupying considerable time in people's daily lives, this habitual behavior (Bayer et al., 2022) revolutionized marketing approaches. It is imperative that marketing efforts be directed to where customers are. As consumers spend more time online and on social media, companies are increasingly focusing their marketing efforts there as well (Ghosh et al., 2014). Therefore, social media platforms, as a place for consumer-to-consumer networking, have become a means that enables businesses to interact with their customers 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The utilization of social media in the marketing context has given rise to a new marketing practice called social media marketing.

2.2   Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing has become an increasingly important strategy for marketers. Many researchers have attempted to define social media marketing. Dwivedi et al. (2015, p. 5), for example, defined social media marketing *"as a dialogue often triggered by consumers/audiences, or a business/product/service that travels in a circle amongst the stated parties to set in motion revealing communications on some promotional information,*

or to learn from one another's use experiences, eventually benefitting either or all of the involved parties." Also, Yadav and Rahman (2017, p. 1296) defined social media marketing as *"a process by which companies create, communicate, and deliver online marketing offerings via social media platforms to build and maintain stakeholder relationships that enhance stakeholders' value by facilitating interaction, information sharing, offering personalized purchase recommendations, and word of mouth creation among stakeholders about existing and trending products and services".* While the precise wording may differ, these definitions share a common emphasis on the core attributes of social media marketing - namely, its ability to enable two-way communication and interaction between brands and consumers. This interactive and dialogic nature sets social media marketing apart from traditional, one-way advertising approaches, allowing for more dynamic and mutually beneficial brand-consumer relationships.

Figure 2.1. Social media marketing approaches
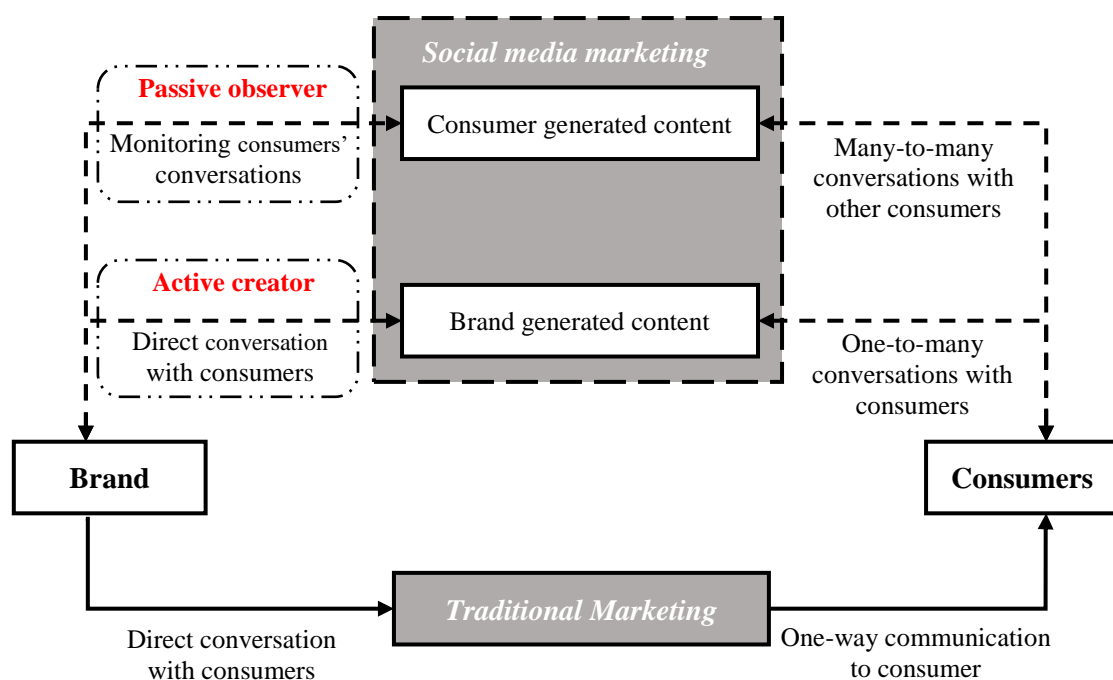
Source: adapted from Sharma and Verma (2018, p. 26)

This interactive and dialogic nature of social media marketing provided marketers with two distinct approaches: the passive observer role and the active creator role (see Figure 2.1). In the passive approach, social media is considered a marketing intelligence source to passively observe, analyze, and predict consumer behaviors through UGC (Lamberton &

Stephen, 2016; Schweidel & Moe, 2014). In the active approach, marketers can use social media as a tool for communication with their target markets, direct sales, consumer acquisition, and consumer retention (Li et al., 2021). This use of social media for one-to-many communication is similar to conventional advertising methods, such as printed advertisements, newspapers, and magazines. But social media outperforms conventional media by offering more interactivity and allowing marketers to engage consumers anytime, anywhere, and across devices (Felix et al., 2017). Gradually, marketers recognized that through consumer-to-consumer interaction in social media, they can engage consumers in a more empowered and collaborative manner, allowing them to participate and speak on behalf of the brand actively (Choi & Thoeni, 2016).

Consumer-to-consumer interaction cannot be understood without first defining eWOM. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004, p. 39) defined eWOM 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."* Consumers are heavily influenced by the opinions posted on social media about products and services (Chen & Xie, 2008). According to Chu and Kim (2011), eWOM in social networking sites can be conceptualized from three angles: opinion seeking, opinion giving, and opinion passing. This framework mirrors the role of opinion leaders—a concept foundational to Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow of communication model. Specifically, opinion givers, who actively share information to influence others' behaviors, align with Katz and Lazarsfeld's definition of opinion leaders as intermediaries who curate and disseminate messages (Vrontis et al., 2021).

Building on this, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) emphasized that opinion leaders occupy central, influential roles within social groups by mediating between mass media and the public. Their research revealed that these individuals were more exposed to media content than the general population, enabling them to filter and reinterpret messages before relaying them to others. This two-step flow model underscores how opinion leaders—whether offline or online—act as gatekeepers, amplifying, altering, or blocking messages based on their authority (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). This dynamic is critical to understanding modern eWOM, where opinion givers (leaders) shape consumer perceptions through digital platforms.

Figure 2.2. Updated social media marketing approaches
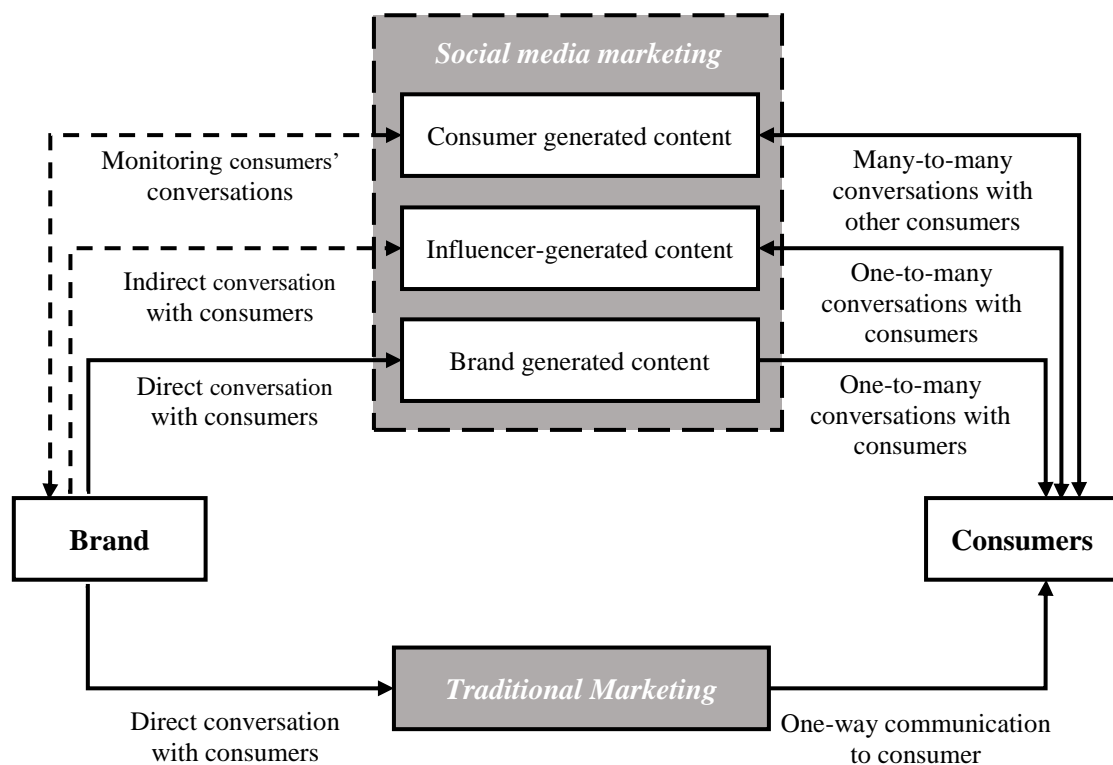
Source: adapted from Sharma and Verma (2018) and developed by the author

However, what is missing in Figure 2.1 is the indirect conversation with consumers through SMIs in businesses' social media marketing. Social media has transformed traditional interpersonal relationships between brands and consumers (Lin et al., 2018), shifting from celebrity endorsements (Erdogan, 1999) to leveraging SMIs—everyday consumers acting as opinion leaders—to disseminate marketing messages (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). This strategic approach, termed SMIM, is shown in Figure 2.2 and reflects Katz and Lazarsfeld's model in a digital context: messages flow from businesses to SMIs (modern opinion leaders), who then curate and transmit them to their followers, demonstrating how the two-step flow persists in shaping communication hierarchies today.

2.3 Social Media Influencer Marketing

The rise of online social networks and the evolving formats of electronic eWOM have catalyzed the emergence of SMIs as pivotal actors in digital communication. Table

2.1 synthesizes recent scholarly definitions of SMIs, reflecting the term's conceptual evolution. Among the earliest definitions, Freberg et al. (2011) positioned SMIs as "a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (p. 90), framing them as distinct from traditional marketers. Later, Keller and Fay (2016) expanded this idea by describing SMIs as "everyday consumers who are substantially more likely than the average to seek out information and to share ideas, information, and recommendations with other people" (p. 2), emphasizing their grassroots influence. Hudders et al. (2021), also featured in Table 2.1, further refined the concept by highlighting SMIs' thematic expertise, authenticity, and ability to cultivate intimate audience connections.

Table 2.1. Definitions of SMI from previous literature

Definition	References
"Social media influencers are referred to as people who have built a sizeable social network of people following them. In addition, they are seen as a regard for being a trusted tastemaker in one or several niches."	(De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 798)
"SMIs are people who have established credibility with large social media audiences because of their knowledge and expertise on particular topics, and thereby exert a significant influence on their followers' and peer consumers' decisions."	(Ki & Kim, 2019, p. 905)
"Third-party actors that have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality to and influence on organizational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web."	(Enke & Borchers, 2019, p. 267)
A social media influencer is a third-party user of social media who possesses significant reach and impact on social media platforms, characterized by their expertise in a specific area, authenticity in their interactions, and ability to create intimate connections with their audience, enabling them to influence followers' decision-making and attract a larger, engaged audience.	(Hudders et al., 2021)
"SMIs are third-party users of social media who have achieved micro-celebrity status in the form of large followings on social media platforms and who have a position of influence on their audience. This achieved social status can be used to communicate marketing messages for brands and influence consumer opinions."	(Delbaere et al., 2021, p. 102)

Collectively, these definitions underscore SMIs' role in inspiring discovery and trust rather than overtly promoting products, with their content serving as a gateway for followers to explore new ideas (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019; Schorn et al., 2022). Notably, the distinction between SMIs and traditional celebrities has blurred, as influence now hinges on reach and engagement rather than pre-existing fame (Koay et al., 2022; S. Zhou et al., 2021). Today, SMIs span a spectrum—from global icons like Cristiano Ronaldo to niche microcelebrities—unified by their capacity to shape audience behavior.

Figure 2.3. Types of social media influencers
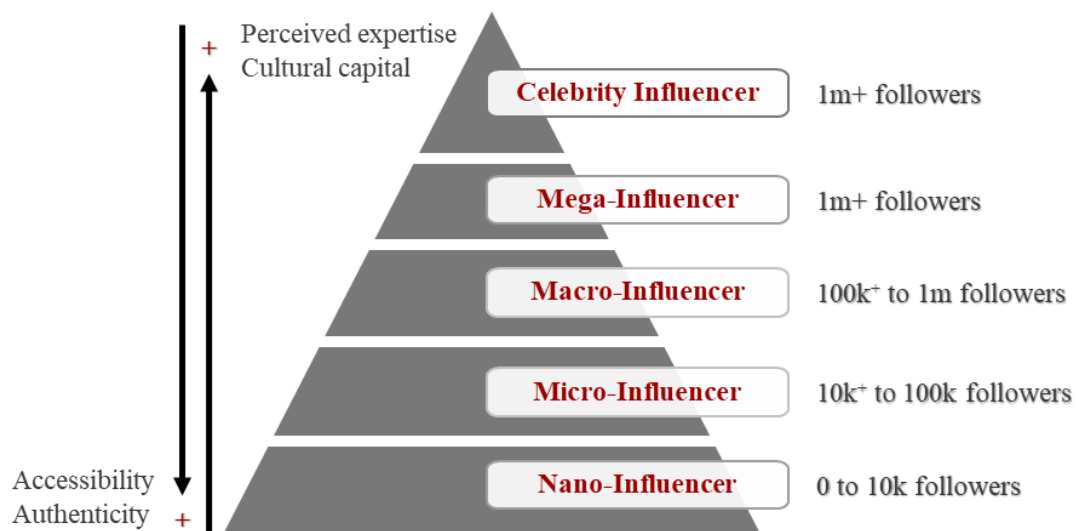
Source: adapted from Campbell and Farrell (2020, p. 471)

To systematize this diversity, researchers classify SMIs using criteria such as follower count, accomplishments, business affiliations, and expertise. Campbell and Farrell's (2020) follower-based taxonomy, illustrated in Figure 2.3, categorizes SMIs into tiers ranging from nano-influencers (<10k followers) to mega-influencers (>1M followers), with celebrity influencers distinguished by fame extending beyond social media. Other studies differentiate SMIs based on achievements (e.g., celebrities vs. self-made personalities), brand partnerships (independent creators vs. corporate representatives), and content specialization (e.g., travel, fashion, or beauty) (Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020; Kapoor et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Spálová et al., 2021). These classifications, alongside the definitions in Table 2.1, inform marketing strategies by mapping influencers' credibility, audience alignment, and engagement potential.

The strategic use of SMIs underpins social media influencer marketing (SMIM), defined as *"leveraging individuals who have influence over potential buyers and orienting marketing activities around these individuals to drive a brand message to the larger market"* (American Marketing Association, 2022, para 1). SMIM objectives—such as enhancing brand advocacy, expanding awareness, and boosting sales conversions—rely on aligning with SMIs whose expertise and audience resonate with a brand's values (Gretzel, 2018; Nanji, 2017). This synergy capitalizes on SMIs' perceived authenticity, enabling them to add value to products and shape purchasing decisions (De Veirman et al., 2017; J. Ge & U. Gretzel, 2018).

2.4 Systematic Review of Literature on Social Media Influencer Marketing

The recognition of the power of SMIM has extended to the tourism and hospitality sectors, where practitioners are well aware of the significant influence SMIs hold over their followers, making them valuable touchpoints in marketing campaigns (Asan, 2022). As a result of the increasing recognition of SMIM's importance, there has been a surge in research papers dedicated to studying this marketing approach within the tourism and hospitality sectors. However, the existing literature remains fragmented and broad in scope. Previous researchers have primarily focused on studying the characteristics of SMIs, the attributes of IGC, and the collaboration between DMOs and SMIs (Bokunewicz & Shulman, 2017; Stoldt et al., 2019). Currently, there is a growing emphasis on understanding how viewers perceive SMIs, how SMIs can inspire viewers to travel to destinations, and identifying characteristics that make SMIs and IGC more influential. To advance both knowledge and marketing practices, it is important to gain a more comprehensive understanding of SMIM in the contexts of tourism and hospitality.

To consolidate the learning from the existing SMIM literature, previous researchers have conducted various reviews in different contexts. For example, De Veirman et al. (2019) conducted a literature review on SMIM among young children (under 12). Vrontis et al. (2021) systematically reviewed 68 studies published in 29 premier academic peer-reviewed journals between 2007 and 2020 by using thematic analysis. Tanwar et al. (2022) applied

bibliometric analysis and content analysis to review 76 SMIM literature between 2011 and 2019. In the most recently published review paper, Fowler and Thomas (2023) conducted a framework-based scoping review, summarizing 150 research papers with an emphasis on publication trends, theories, contexts, constructs/concepts, and methodological approaches. Sesar et al's (2021) review stands out as the only systematic literature review conducted on 15 travel and tourism-related studies published between 2017 and 2021. While previous literature review papers have taken an approach to examining SMIM across fields, a systematic review of SMIM literature within the tourism and hospitality context is currently missing.

By reviewing and synthesizing all the existing SMIM empirical research in tourism and hospitality, this literature review study aims to make three significant contributions to the literature. Firstly, this study presents a framework that summarizes and visualizes the mechanism of SMIM, providing a tool to comprehend better the processes and dynamics involved in SMIM practice. This framework serves as a foundation for future research to assess the effectiveness and impact of SMIM practice. Secondly, this study recognizes the importance of tracking the latest changes and analyzing emerging developments. Therefore, compared to a literature review by Sesar et al. (2021), this study focuses on a wider time frame, covering a larger number of papers. Thirdly, by providing a comprehensive overview of how SMIM has progressed within the tourism and hospitality sectors, this study enhances our understanding of this marketing practice. It sheds light on how this practice has evolved to adapt to changes while highlighting areas where further exploration is necessary. By identifying these areas where research is lacking, this study suggests directions for future research.

2.4.1 Research Method

Providing an overview and clear understanding of the current state of knowledge, a literature review is the most appropriate approach for this study's aim (Palmatier et al., 2018; Tranfield et al., 2003). Among the various methods of literature review, a systematic literature review has been chosen to systematically identify all existing empirical evidence and map future research directions (Snyder, 2019). In this study, the guidelines provided

by Vrontis et al. (2021) have been followed to determine keywords, select research papers, and conduct the analysis. This study adheres to the guidelines outlined by Rowley and Slack (2004) and Verma and Yadav (2021) for conducting the review.

2.4.1.1 Data Selection

The relevant literature was searched in January 2024 across three large, multidisciplinary databases: Web of Science, EbscoHost, and Scopus, to ensure comprehensive search results (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020). These databases, with their broad coverage and multidisciplinary search capabilities, have been frequently used by previous systematic literature review papers in the marketing field (Verma & Yadav, 2021; Vrontis et al., 2021; Y. Zhou et al., 2021).

To create a compilation of search terms, this study followed the approach used by Verma and Yadav (2021) and Vrontis et al. (2021). This method involved identifying a keyword along with its synonyms. Additionally, the search formula "keyword" AND "discipline" was employed to ensure that the selection encompasses the field of tourism and hospitality. Adopting the mentioned search formula, the used search terms in this study are: "influencer marketing" OR "social media influencer marketing" OR "social media influencer" OR "digital influencer" OR "online influencer" OR "online opinion leader" OR "instafamous" OR "vlogger" OR "video blogger" AND "travel" OR "tourism" OR "hospitality" OR "hotel". Similar to the previous systematic literature review papers, titles, abstracts, and keywords were searched (e.g., Fakfare et al., 2022).

Initially, 595 research papers were retrieved from all three databases: 198 research papers from WoS, 114 research papers from EbscoHost, and 283 research papers from Scopus. To collect the most relevant research papers, the following two exclusion criteria were applied. (1) The search results were delimited to full-length journal research papers since articles published in journals are considered "certified knowledge" (Ramos-Rodríguez & Ruíz-Navarro, 2004). (2) Only empirical research papers written in English were considered (Vrontis et al., 2021). After removing duplication, 133 research papers remained for further consideration.

Figure 2.4. Review methodology flowchart

Identification

Database search
WoS (n = 198)
EbscoHost (n = 114)
Scopus (n = 283)

Screening

Total papers found
(n = 595)

Studies excluded (n = 156)
Non-full-length journal papers (n = 135)
Non-English papers (n = 21)

Studies screened
(n = 439)

Studies excluded (n = 306)
Duplicated papers (n = 306)

Eligibility

Studies assessed
(n = 133)

Studies excluded (n = 52)
Non-empirical papers (n = 11)
Irrelevant papers (n = 41)

Studies assessed
(n = 81)

Inclusion

Final sample
(n = 100)

Studies added (n = 19)
Cross-referencing (n = 19)

Source: developed by the author (2024)

In the next step, to ensure the papers were suitable for inclusion in the sample, full-text screening was conducted. At this stage, 52 papers were disqualified, including review papers and conceptual papers due to their lack of prescriptive ability (Law et al., 2020), as well as papers unrelated to SMIM and the tourism and hospitality context. In the final stage, all the reference lists were reviewed to identify any research papers that the search engines

may have overlooked. A total of 19 papers were found from this step. A total of 100 articles were selected for analysis (see Figure 2.4).

2.4.1.2 Data Coding

To ensure the relevance of the information gathered for this study, a thorough examination of the content of each selected paper was conducted (Vrontis et al., 2021). In order to systematically summarize and extract data from these articles, the SMIM mechanism and its associated dynamics were visualized, as depicted in Figure 2.5. This visualization took into account the definitions of SMIM provided by the American Marketing Association (2022) and relevant industry practices. Figure 2.5 illustrates that SMIM consists of six main components: (a) suppliers, (b) influencers, (c) message, (d) media, (e) other targets, and (f) targets. The relationships between these components are indicated by arrows, which illustrate the influence of one component on another.

In line with the SMIM mechanism shown in Figure 2.5, which is on the next page, a data extraction was created in an Excel file. The purpose of using this file was to minimize human error and ensure replicable and transparent results (Tranfield et al., 2003). Each article was coded according to various criteria, including authorship, title, journal name, year of publication, topical focus, geographical focus, industry focus, stakeholders, SMI type, message type, social media platform, methodology, theory or concepts, data collection, participants, data analysis, objective, and main findings. This comprehensive coding process allowed for a systematic organization and analysis of the gathered information.

Figure 2.5. Organizing framework
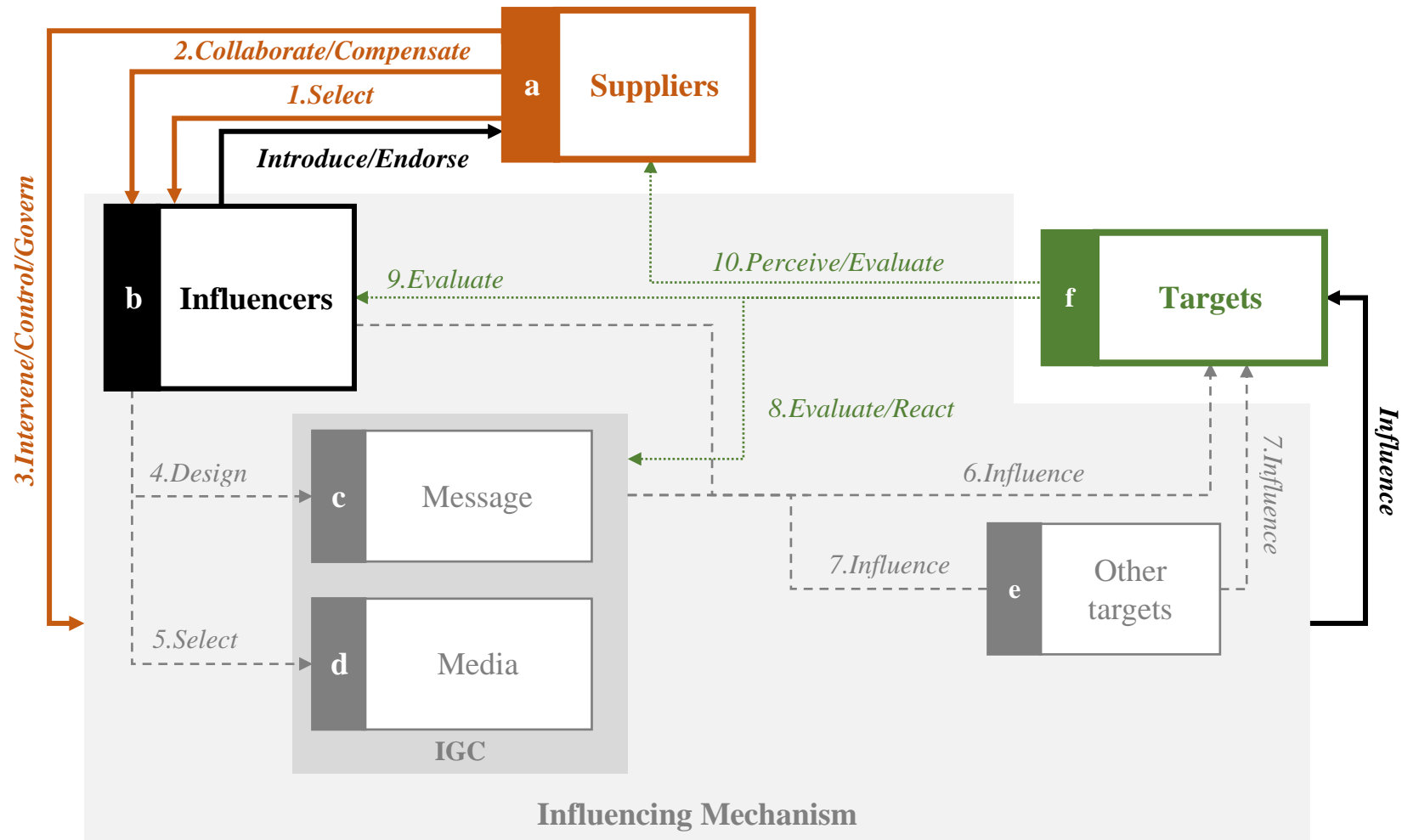
2.4.2 Quantitative Research Findings

Understanding literature on SMIM is crucial for gaining insights into trends, strengths, and weaknesses of the existing literature. This subsection presents observations on various aspects of the reviewed studies, including the year of publication, type of SMIs discussed, message types, and contextual features such as the media platforms. Additionally, the publication journals, research fields, and topical focuses are also specified. These observations provide an important preliminary step in understanding the nature of this research domain and identifying possible gaps that deserve more attention.

2.4.2.1 Year of Publications

Considering the association of this research stream with the advent of social media, it is not surprising that the earliest study included in this investigation was published in 2012. Over six years, from 2012 to 2017, the pace of knowledge creation concerning SMIM in tourism and hospitality increased gradually, constituting 7% of the reviewed papers.

Figure 2.6. Number of publications in a three-year period
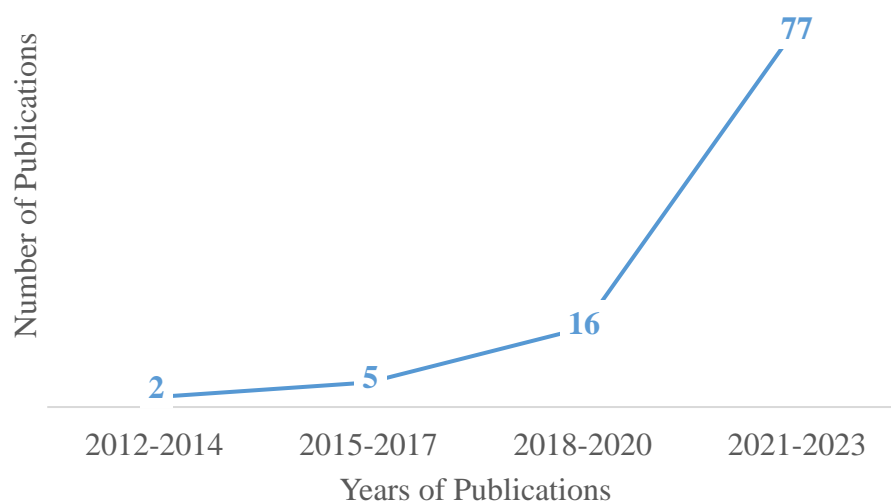
Figure 2.6 illustrates a striking upsurge in the number of publications on this topic in recent years, particularly after 2020. During the three-year period from 2021 to 2023, 77 papers were published on SMIM in tourism and hospitality, collectively representing 77% of the selected research papers. The recent surge in academic interest in SMIM, within the context

of tourism and hospitality, reflects a parallel trend in the widespread adoption of SMIM in practice and the growing attention to its impacts.

2.4.2.2 Social Media Influencer Types

In terms of categorizing SMIs, previous studies have primarily focused on two major categories: the SMIs' areas of specialty and the size of their followers. These studies have adopted various methodologies, including the combination of these two categories or focusing on just one. Among these studies, 43 have adopted a generalist approach without specifying any particular types of SMIs. In contrast, 39 studies have employed a specialized approach, concentrating exclusively on a specific type of SMI without comparing it to other categories. Meanwhile, 18 studies have employed a comparative approach to examine the differences among SMIs with varying specialties and/or follower counts. Table 2.2 presents the number of studies that have employed a specialized approach alongside the adjusted number of studies that have employed a comparative approach.

Table 2.2. Social media influencer types studied

	Mega	Macro	Micro	Nano	NA	Total
Single type						**39**
Travel specialist	0	0	1	0	21	22
Non-travel specialist	3	1	0	0	9	13
NA	1	1	2	0	0	4
Multiple types						**18**
Travel specialist	2.8	3.3	1.8	1	0	9
Non-travel specialist	0.5	1.2	0.7	0.7	0	3
Travel specialist & non-travel specialist	0	1	0	0	0	1
NA	1.2	1	1.5	1.3	0	5
NA	0	0	0	0	43	**43**
Total	8.5	8.5	7.0	3.0	73.0	**100**

2.4.2.3 Message Type

Regarding the types of messages examined in previous research, three distinct categories were identified. As shown in Table 2.3, the majority of studies (n = 38) employed a general approach that did not specify any particular type of message. Of the 36 studies that adopted a single message type, 22 investigated audiovisual messages, followed by

textual (n = 6) and pictorial (n = 8) messages. Among the 26 studies that examined multiple message types, the majority (n = 20) focused on textual and pictorial messages, while only six studies investigated all three message types.

Table 2.3. Message types studied

Message type	No. of publications
Single type	**36**
Audiovisual	22
Textual	6
Pictorial	8
Multiple types	**26**
Textual + Pictorial	20
Textual + Pictorial + Audiovisual	6
NA	**38**
Total	**100**

2.4.2.4 Social Media Platform

Table 2.4 demonstrates that previous research has utilized three distinct approaches in investigating social media platforms. Specifically, 40 studies adopted a general approach without focusing on any specific platform(s). In contrast, the majority of studies examined a single platform (n = 55), with only a few studies investigating multiple platforms (n = 5). Notably, Instagram garnered the most scholarly attention, as indicated in Table 2.4, which aligns with previous studies emphasizing Instagram's status as one of the most popular platforms for SMIM (Barbe et al., 2019; Chatzigeorgiou, 2017).

In 2022, U.S. marketers spent $2.23 billion out of a total of $4.99 billion on collaborations with SMIs on Instagram, according to Enberg (2022). Within the context of tourism and hospitality, Instagram has emerged as a preferred platform for travel SMIs to create inspirational content and generate interest in destinations (Barbe et al., 2020). Skift (2024) reports that, after Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook are the other most popular social media platforms among Generation Z and Millennials for trip planning. In contrast, YouTube (n = 11.5), TikTok (n = 3.5), and Facebook (n = 3) received relatively less attention in the literature.

Table 2.4. Social media platforms studied

Social Media Platform	No. of Publications
Single platform	**56**
Instagram	29
YouTube	11
Twitter	5
Weibo	4
TikTok	3
Facebook	2
Douyin	1
Snapchat	1
Multiple platforms	**4**
Instagram & Facebook	2
Instagram & YouTube	1
TikTok & Bilibili	1
NA	**40**
NA	40
Total	**100**

2.4.2.5 Studies' Approach and Analysis Methods

In this literature review, a total of 100 empirical research studies were analyzed. The table provides a comprehensive overview of the diverse methodologies and data sources used in academic research. Table 2.5 presents a detailed analysis of research approaches and methodologies employed across 100 academic publications, categorized into quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research. Quantitative research, the most prominent with 63 publications, predominantly relies on primary data (55 studies) and utilizes a variety of analytical techniques, including Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), ANOVA, and different regression analyses. Digital trace data is less common in quantitative studies, appearing in only 7 cases and involving methods such as logistic regression, network analysis, and mathematical modeling.

Qualitative research is represented in 27 publications, employing both primary and digital trace data sources. Primary data is often collected through interviews and subjected to thematic analysis, while digital trace data predominantly supports content analysis, critical and technocultural discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and textual examination. This

highlights the focus on rich, context-driven exploration inherent in qualitative methods. Mixed methods research, seen in 10 publications, integrates primary and digital trace data sources to leverage the strengths of both. These studies often combine questionnaires and interviews, applying techniques such as SEM and fsQCA to provide a comprehensive analytical perspective.

Overall, primary data is the predominant source across the research landscape, especially in quantitative and mixed-methods studies, underscoring its importance for robust data collection. Digital trace data is more prevalent in qualitative research, where it facilitates deep content analysis. The variety of methodologies, ranging from statistical modeling and experimental designs to content and thematic analysis, illustrates the diverse analytical landscape in academic research, showcasing a commitment to nuanced, multi-faceted exploration.

Table 2.5. Studies' approaches and analysis methods applied

Studies' approach and analysis methods	No. of publications
Quantitative research	**63**
Primary data	**55**
Experimental design	10
PLS-SEM	1
Content analysis & Chi-squared test	1
ANOVA & PROCESS model analysis	5
ANOVA	1
MANOVA & PROCESS model analysis	1
CB-SEM	1
Questionnaire	44
PLS-SEM	19
SEM	12
ANOVA & SEM	1
Descriptive tests & T-tests	1
Multiple linear regression & PROCESS model analysis	1
Principal component analysis	1
ANOVA & PROCESS model analysis	1
Multiple linear regression	2
Descriptive statistics & Non-parametric tests	1
Correlation analysis & Regression analysis	1
MANOVA & PROCESS model analysis	1
SEM & PROCESS model analysis	1
Simple linear regression & Correlation analysis	1
Descriptive statistics	1
IGC posts & Experimental design	1
ANOVA & PROCESS model analysis	1
Digital trace data	**7**
IGC	6
Logistic regression	1

Mathematical modeling	1
Network analysis	1
Power-law algorithm	1
Cox proportional hazard model	1
Cross-sectional analysis & Multiple hierarchical regression analysis	1
SMIs Pages	**1**
Social network analysis	1
Primary data & Digital trace data	**1**
IGC & Experimental design	**1**
Content analysis & ANOVA & PROCESS model analysis	1
Qualitative Research	**27**
Primary data	**6**
Interviews	**5**
Content analysis & Semiotic analysis	1
Thematic analysis	3
Netnography analysis & Content analysis	1
Interviews & Experimental design	**1**
Content analysis	1
Digital trace data	**18**
IGC	**16**
Content analysis	2
Critical discourse analysis	1
Critical technocultural discourse analysis	1
Discourse analysis	1
Grounded theory approach	2
Narrative analysis	2
Narrative analysis & Content analysis	1
Netnography analysis	1
Netnography analysis & Narrative analysis	1
Textual analysis	1
Thematic analysis	2
Thick data analysis	1
DMOs Pages	**1**
Social network analysis	1
IGC & DMO Websites	**1**
Thematic analysis	1
Primary data & Digital trace data	**3**
Observation & Interviews & Report	**1**
Content analysis	1
Interviews & IGC	**2**
Content analysis & Thematic analysis	1
Netnography analysis	1
Mixed methods research	**10**
Primary data	**5**
Questionnaire	**1**
SEM & fsQCA	1
Interviews & Questionnaire	**3**
Content analysis & Descriptive analysis	1
Thematic analysis & PLS-SEM	1
Content analysis & PLS-SEM	1
Interviews & Experimental design	**1**
Content analysis & Discrete choice modelling	1
Digital trace data	**2**
IGC	**2**

Descriptive statistics & Network analysis	1
Content analysis & Topic modeling analysis & Non-parametric analysis	1
Primary data & Digital trace data	**3**
Interviews & Questionnaire	1
SEM & Ground Theory	1
IGC & Questionnaire & Interviews	1
Textual analysis & SEM & Ground Theory	1
IGC & Questionnaire	1
Content analysis & Correlation Analysis & regression analysis	1
Total	**100**

2.4.2.6 Publication Outlines

Based on the journals outlined in Table 2.6, half of the papers included in our study were published in tourism and hospitality-related journals, while the other half were published in non-tourism and hospitality journals. This observation suggests that SMIM in the context of tourism and hospitality is not solely limited to scholars within the tourism and hospitality discipline but attracts interest and attention from a wide range of academic fields. The inclusion of insights from mainstream fields such as business, social science, and computer science can enrich our understanding of SMIM by providing a broader perspective.

Table 2.6. List of journals included in this study

Journal title	No. of publications
Hospitality & Tourism Journals	**50**
Current Issues in Tourism	7
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology	5
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	4
Journal of Travel Research	4
Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management	3
Journal of Vacation Marketing	3
Tourism Management	3
International Journal of Hospitality Management	2
Tourism Recreation Research	2
Tourist Studies	2
Annals of Tourism Research	1
GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites	1
Information Technology & Tourism	1
International Journal of Hospitality Management	1
International Journal of Tourism Research	1

Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research	1
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights	1
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management	1
Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism	1
Journal of Sustainable Tourism	1
Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism	1
Journal of Tourism, Heritage & Services Marketing	1
Journal of Travel & Tourism marketing	1
Tourism Management Perspectives	1
Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes	1
Non-Hospitality & Tourism Journals	**50**
Sustainability	6
Frontiers in Psychology	3
Heliyon	2
Journal of Business Research	2
Acta Psychologica	1
Applied Mathematics & Information Sciences	1
Balkan Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi	1
Brazilian Journal of Marketing	1
Business: Theory and Practice	1
Computers in Human Behavior	1
Cuadernos de Gestión	1
Howard Journal of Communications	1
Information	1
International Journal of Advanced Science and Technology	1
International Journal of Arts & Sciences	1
International Journal of Data and Network Science	1
International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research	1
International Journal of Research Studies in Management	1
International Journal of Strategic Communication	1
Journal of Internet Commerce	1
Journal of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University	1
Journal of Macromarketing	1
Journal of Marketing Management	1
Journal of Media and Communication	1
Journal of Media Ethics	1
Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity	1
Journal of Social Structure	1
Journal of Spatial and Organizational Dynamics	1
Land Use Policy	1
Media, Culture & Society	1
New Media & Society	1
Place Branding and Public Diplomacy	1
Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal	1
SAGE Open	1

Social Media+ Society	1
Studies in Media and Communication	1
The Service Industries Journal	1
Travel Behaviour and Society	1
Webology	1
Young Consumers	1
Acta Psychologica	1
Total	**100**

Table 2.6 provides a comprehensive inventory of 66 distinct academic journals, along with the number of articles included in our study from each publication. Among the tourism and hospitality journals, the ones with the highest number of relevant research papers (n = 7) are Current Issues in Tourism, Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology (n = 5), followed by Journal of Travel Research and International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management (n = 4). In non-tourism and hospitality journals, Sustainability contains the highest number of publications (n = 6), while *Frontiers in Psychology* has three publications, with the remaining journals included in the review publishing either one or two papers.

2.4.2.7 Topical Focus

Table 2.7 provides a comprehensive overview of the research landscape related to SMIM in the tourism and hospitality context. The table categorizes studies into 10 primary research foci based on their objectives, with an additional category representing studies that did not align with any of these 10 foci and were thus classified as "others." It is important to note that some studies had multiple research objectives, leading to their classification in various research focuses. An analysis of the adjusted number of publications across the different research focuses reveals that the majority of studies have focused on the influence of SMIs and/or IGC on consumers, with a total of 35.17 publications. The second most popular area of research relates to consumers' evaluations and reactions to suppliers, with a total of 23.67 publications. The design of influencing mechanisms has also been a significant area of research, with 20 publications. Other areas that have garnered considerable scholarly attention include suppliers' collaboration with SMIs, with seven

publications. Consumers' perception and evaluation of IGC and SMIs have been explored in 4.83 and 4.33 publications, respectively. Five publications did not fit in with any research themes.

It is worth noting that four streams of research have not captured any scholarly attention: these include the selection of SMIs by suppliers, the intervention/control/governance of influencing mechanisms by suppliers, the choice of medium by SMIs, and the indirect influence of targets through other targets. As illustrated in Table 2.7, the research themes related to SMIM in the tourism and hospitality context are diverse, with a wide range of research focuses being explored. The popularity of research topics varies considerably, with some areas, such as the direct influence of SMIs and/or IGC on consumers, being more extensively researched than others.

Table 2.7. Topical focus of the reviewed papers

Research Focus	Suppliers	Influencers	Targets	Description	References	Absolute Frequency	Adjusted Frequency
1	√	√		How do suppliers select SMIs for collaboration?	_	0	0
2	√	√		How do suppliers collaborate with/compensate SMIs?	Bokunewicz and Shulman (2017); Borowski et al. (2020); Deborah et al. (2019); Lee et al. (2021); Palazzo et al. (2021); Stoldt et al. (2019); Vanninen et al. (2023)	7	7
3	√	√		How do suppliers intervene/control/or govern SMIs' influencing mechanism?	_	0	0
4		√		How do SMIs design their influencing mechanisms?	Arnesson (2022); Arthur (2021); Azariah (2012); Bosangit et al. (2015); Ding et al. (2023); Duffy (2019); Duffy and Kang (2020); Femenia-Serra et al. (2022); Jing Ge and Ulrike Gretzel (2018); Gholamhosseinzadeh (2023); Gholamhosseinzadeh et al. (2023); Ingrassia et al. (2022); Jiao et al. (2022); Kirilenko et al. (2024); Motahar et al. (2021); Nazir (2023); Peralta (2019); Ray Chaudhury et al. (2021); van Nuenen (2016); Wellman et al. (2020)	20	20
5		√	√	Which type/s of media is selected by SMIs to publish their IGC?	_	0	0
6		√	√	How do IGC and/or SMIs directly influence targets?	Abad and Borbon (2021); Akhtar and Siddiqi (2024); Ali and Alqudah (2022); Ameen et al. (2023); Asan (2022); Asdecker (2022); Balaji et al. (2021);	68	35.17

Caraka et al. (2022); Chatzigeorgiou (2017); Chen et al. (2023); Chen et al. (2022); Chen et al. (2014); Cheng et al. (2020); Cholprasertsuk et al. (2020); Deng et al. (2022); Dewantara et al. (2023); Dong et al. (2023); Dutta et al. (2021); El Khoury and Farah (2018); Feng et al. (2023); Guede, De Esteban Curiel, et al. (2021); Guerreiro et al. (2019); Han et al. (2023); Han and Zhang (2023); Hernández-Méndez and Baute-Díaz (2024); Huang et al. (2024); Hutchinson et al. (2024); Irfan et al. (2022); Kapoor et al. (2021); Kapoor et al. (2022); Kilipiri et al. (2023); Kılıç and Gürlek (2023); Kılıç et al. (2024); Le and Ryu (2023); Le and Hancer (2021); Leung et al. (2022); Li et al. (2023); Luoma-aho et al. (2019); Luong and Ho (2023); Manthiou et al. (2024); Mchavu et al. (2022); Nadlifatin et al. (2022); Nazlan et al. (2024); Nguyen et al. (2023); Padmavathi (2020); Pop et al. (2022); Purwandari et al. (2022); Raafat et al. (2023); Rao Hill and Qesja (2023); Schorn et al. (2022); Seçilmiş et al. (2022); Seeler et al. (2019); Shoukat et al. (2023); Shuqair et al. (2023); Silva and Costa (2021); Sizan et al. (2022); Sun et al. (2021); Szymkowiak et al. (2021); Tsai and Hsin (2023); Xie-Carson, Benckendorff, et al. (2023); Xie-Carson, Magor, et al. (2023); Xu and Pratt (2018); Yi et al. (2021);

				Yılmazdoğan et al. (2021); Yousaf (2022); Zaman (2023); Zhu et al. (2023); Zhang et al. (2023)		
7	√	√	How are targets indirectly influenced by IGC and/or SMIs via other targets?	_	0	0
8	√	√	How do targets evaluate/react to IGC?	Balaji et al. (2021); Chen et al. (2014); Hernández-Méndez and Baute-Díaz (2024); Kılıç et al. (2024); Le and Ryu (2023); Mchavu et al. (2022); Nadlifatin et al. (2022); Nguyen et al. (2023); Nazlan et al. (2024); Padmavathi (2020); Purwandari et al. (2022); Xu and Pratt (2018); Yousaf (2022); Zhu et al. (2023)	14	4.83
9	√		How do targets evaluate SMIs?	Asdecker (2022); Chen et al. (2023); Chen et al. (2022); Feng et al. (2023); Le and Hancer (2021); Leung et al. (2022); Luoma-aho et al. (2019); Manthiou et al. (2024); Rao Hill and Qesja (2023); Schorn et al. (2022); Seçilmiş et al. (2022); Yılmazdoğan et al. (2021); Zhang et al. (2023)	13	4.33
10	√		How do targets perceive/evaluate the suppliers being endorsed by IGC?	Abad and Borbon (2021); Ali and Alqudah (2022); Ameen et al. (2023); Asdecker (2022); Balaji et al. (2021); Chatzigeorgiou (2017); Chen et al. (2014); Chen et al. (2023); Chen et al. (2022); Cheng et al. (2020); Caraka et al. (2022); Dong et al. (2023); Dutta et al. (2021); Cholprasertsuk et al. (2020); Feng et al. (2023); Guede, De Esteban Curiel, et al. (2021); Han et al. (2023); Han and Zhang (2023); Hernández-	56	23.67

			Méndez and Baute-Díaz (2024); Rao Hill and Qesja (2023); Huang et al. (2024); Hutchinson et al. (2024); Irfan et al. (2022); Kapoor et al. (2021); Kapoor et al. (2022); Kılıç and Gürlek (2023); Kılıç et al. (2024); Kilipiri et al. (2023); Le and Hancer (2021); Le and Ryu (2023); Li et al. (2023); Leung et al. (2022); Luoma-aho et al. (2019); Luong and Ho (2023); Manthiou et al. (2024); Mchavu et al. (2022); Nazlan et al. (2024); Nguyen et al. (2023); Padmavathi (2020); Pop et al. (2022); Purwandari et al. (2022); Raafat et al. (2023); Schorn et al. (2022); Seçilmiş et al. (2022); Shoukat et al. (2023); Shuqair et al. (2023); Silva and Costa (2021); Sun et al. (2021); Szymkowiak et al. (2021); Tsai and Hsin (2023); Xu and Pratt (2018); Yi et al. (2021); Yılmazdoğan et al. (2021); Yousaf (2022); Zhang et al. (2023); Zhu et al. (2023)		
11	√	Others	Francalanci et al. (2015); Hepworth et al. (2019); Mariani et al. (2021); Wu et al. (2021); Xie et al. (2021)	5	5
Total					100

Note: Citations appearing in **black** color represent single topical focus. Citations appearing in **green** color represent double topical focus. Citations appearing in **blue** color represent triple topical focus.

2.4.3 Qualitative Research Findings

Due to the growing acknowledgment of SMIM's significance, there has been a notable increase in research papers focusing on examining this marketing approach in the tourism and hospitality industries. Identifying major themes of SMIM research in the tourism and hospitality context, unveiled foci and underexplored areas. Having the foundation on SMIM mechanism as illustrated in Figure 2.5, content analysis showed that reviewed studies in our sample (n = 100) has been categories in one or more than of the following themes (Table 2.7): 1) how do suppliers collaborate with/compensate SMIs?; 2) how do SMIs design their influencing mechanisms?; 3) how do IGC and/or SMIs directly influence targets?; 4) how do targets evaluate/react to IGC?; 5) how do targets evaluate SMIs?; 6) how do targets perceive/evaluate the suppliers being endorsed by IGC?; and 7) other research topics. Each research theme is reviewed in the ensuing subsections; recurrent topics are examined inductively to summarize findings.

2.4.3.1 How Do Suppliers Collaborate With/Compensate SMIs?

Tourism and hospitality suppliers have a long history of collaborating with third parties, such as celebrities and athletes, to endorse their brands and products to target consumers (Yang, 2018). With the rise of SMIs, suppliers now have a new marketing method at hand and collaboration with SMIs improves suppliers' visibility in the market (Bokunewicz & Shulman, 2017). The dynamics between travel SMIs and destination marketers were investigated by Stoldt et al. (2019). The findings revealed a shift from traditional travel journalists who were influenced by DMOs to modern travel SMIs who prioritize their personal brand, values, and audience relationships in their content creation. According to Deborah et al. (2019) and Lee et al. (2021), in order to identify suitable SMIs for collaboration, suppliers need to take two actions. First, they should categorize potential SMIs based on their content creation styles (e.g., lifestyle, expert review, entertainer). Second, considering these categories as well as suppliers' goals, marketers can decide to collaborate with any type of SMIs that align with suppliers' product positioning. For instance, if promoting sustainable tourism is a concern, leveraging the influence of sustainability-focused SMIs can be an effective way to raise awareness of sustainable tourism principles (Palazzo et al., 2021). This strategic alignment not only enables

suppliers to collaborate with SMIs effectively but also allows them to promote their brands and products in a way that resonates authentically with their target consumers. It is noteworthy that if a sustainable market growth is desired, having frequent information diffusion by SMIs could be impactful (Borowski et al., 2020).

Moving from investigating proper ways of choosing SMIs for collaboration, Vanninen et al. (2023) delved into how SMIs interpret and convey suppliers' messages to understand the dynamics of commercial collaborations. The study findings indicate that DMOs can opt for either a "decoded approach" or an "encoded approach" when collaborating with SMIs. In the decoded approach, SMIs are chosen based on specific themes to match destination themes, with clear guidelines given. On the other hand, the encoded approach allows SMIs more flexibility to interpret and include brand themes in their content as they see fit. In both approaches, SMIs are expected to maintain their authentic "signature style" in content creation, as audience authenticity is a crucial expectation in IGC. Overall, these studies highlight the significance of aligning with SMIs who can authentically represent a brand's values and engage effectively with consumers.

2.4.3.2 How Do SMIs Design Their Influencing Mechanisms?

This research theme revolves around the design of the influencing mechanism by SMIs. This category of research helps suppliers in finding the most suitable SMIs for collaboration. In the first attempt to investigate SMIs' content creation practices, Azariah (2012) found that bloggers employ a personal narrative approach, emphasizing their own experiences rather than simply promoting destinations. Notably, SMIs use visuals to convey their personal experiences (Arthur, 2021; Ingrassia et al., 2022). SMIs often take on the role of a tourist when creating content (Peralta, 2019). In this role, they share their personal experiences of discovering various attractions, provide information about those attractions, express their excitement, and pose questions to engage their viewers (Gholamhosseinzadeh, 2023; Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2023). A study by Jing Ge and Ulrike Gretzel (2018) showed that engaging viewers can also be achieved through the use of Emojis. SMIs use Emojis to express emotions, convey information, and get feedback from their followers.

To make their content memorable, SMIs tend to share their experiences regarding the risks, challenges, and novelties they encounter during their travels, such as meeting new people and learning about new cultures (Bosangit et al., 2015; Duffy & Kang, 2020). In research investigating IGC about lesser-known destinations, Motahar et al. (2021) and Nazir (2023) found that SMIs emphasize the countries' culture, history, and address misconceptions and fears related to the countries. Incorporating such local elements as people, culture, food, and lifestyle helps SMIs to add a sense of dynamism and authenticity to their content (Duffy, 2019; van Nuenen, 2016). SMIs use authenticity as a guiding principle when producing sponsored content. It is crucial for SMIs to carefully assess whether a brand partnership is consistent with their brand identity and whether it would align with the expectations of their audience (Arnesson, 2022; Wellman et al., 2020).

In addition to creating authentic, memorable, and distinctive content, SMIs sometimes design their content to motivate their viewers. Jiao et al. (2022) and Ding et al. (2023), for example, examined experience-sharing practices by local travel SMIs in China. The findings revealed that SMIs emphasize aesthetic values, cultural values, and traditional values, and demonstrate a sense of responsibility to motivate tourists towards sustainable practices. While the majority of the time, IGC aims to convey constructive messages to viewers, such as promoting individual responsibility towards environmental conservation, there are instances where SMIs may provide IGC that carries negative messaging. This could include demonstrating disrespect towards the natural environment or depicting acts of vandalism (Ray Chaudhury et al., 2021).

In times of adversity, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, travel SMIs faced significant challenges in creating their typical content. With restrictions on travel, many of these SMIs were unable to produce their target content. As a result, they had to resort to alternative strategies, including reposting old content, refocusing the content of their accounts, or reducing the frequency of updates on their blogs (Kirilenko et al., 2024). Research by Femenia-Serra et al. (2022) has shown that SMIs took on a multifaceted approach in their online interactions. On one hand, they aimed to instill a sense of positivity and community solidarity among their followers. Simultaneously, these SMIs also played a role in disseminating important COVID-19-related information and updates.

2.4.3.3 How Do IGC and/or SMIs Directly Influence Targets?

The most common research theme in extant literature deals with the direct influence of IGC and/or SMIs on consumers. Generally, the effect of SMIM on consumers derives from the SMIs and/or IGC attributes. SMIs' effects on consumers are categorized into informative effects, motivating effects, and effects as a role model (Asan, 2022; Seeler et al., 2019; Y. Zhou et al., 2021). In terms of their effect as a role model, SMIs' characteristics can influence viewers. Several researchers have investigated the influential effect of SMIs' credibility on viewers (e.g., Dewantara et al., 2023; El Khoury & Farah, 2018; Guerreiro et al., 2019; Le & Ryu, 2023). These studies have considered various key credibility factors, including sincerity (Guerreiro et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2023), similarity (Chen et al., 2023), reliability (Silva & Costa, 2021), trustworthiness (Guerreiro et al., 2019; Le & Hancer, 2021; Nadlifatin et al., 2022; Raafat et al., 2023; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021), expertise (Chen et al., 2023; Le & Hancer, 2021; Nadlifatin et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023; Raafat et al., 2023; Seçilmiş et al., 2022; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021), and attractiveness (Dewantara et al., 2023; Le & Hancer, 2021; Luong & Ho, 2023; Raafat et al., 2023). While these studies have generally found these credibility factors to be influential, the literature presents mixed findings on the relative impact of these factors.

For instance, while some studies have identified SMIs' expertise as an influential factor (e.g., Chen et al., 2023; Le & Hancer, 2021; Nadlifatin et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023; Seçilmiş et al., 2022; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021), others have found that viewers' behavioral intentions are more influenced by the SMIs' experience rather than their expertise (Hernández-Méndez & Baute-Díaz, 2024; Silva & Costa, 2021). Similarly, the impact of SMIs' attractiveness is also not consistent across studies. Contrary to the findings of Yılmazdoğan et al. (2021) and Chen et al. (2023), which did not support the influential effect of SMIs' attractiveness, recent studies have confirmed that SMIs' physical and social attractiveness do exert an influential effect on viewers (Dewantara et al., 2023; Le & Hancer, 2021; Luong & Ho, 2023). However, the literature also suggests that gender plays a role, with female SMIs generally being perceived as more physically and socially attractive than male SMIs, while male SMIs are assessed as more credible and trustworthy (Le & Hancer, 2021; Leung et al., 2022). In addition to SMIs' credibility, SMIs' personality (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017), SMIs' popularity (Akhtar & Siddiqi, 2024; Chatzigeorgiou, 2017;

Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023), and professionalism (Caraka et al., 2022) strongly influence viewers' responses.

Regarding SMIs' types, studies have shown that viewers generally prefer human SMIs over virtual SMIs in terms of perceived realness and authenticity. This is likely due to the novelty and unfamiliarity of virtual SMIs compared to human SMIs that viewers are more accustomed to (Xie-Carson, Magor, et al., 2023). However, viewers are more likely to engage with virtual SMIs in a tourism context when they appear either more human-like or clearly not human-like (Xie-Carson, Benckendorff, et al., 2023). While this suggests that the choice between using human SMIs or virtual SMIs in marketing and advertising may depend on the specific context and the nature of the message being conveyed, virtual SMIs can be more effective than human SMIs in certain situations, such as when the message about a destination is positive (Ameen et al., 2023). Similarly, the effectiveness of message appeals may also depend on the perspective from which the message is conveyed. When a social media post is written from a pet's point of view, consumers respond more positively to a rational appeal (vs. an emotional appeal). This is in contrast to when the post is written from the owner's point of view, where consumers show a similar level of attitude and booking intention regardless of the message appeal (Zhang et al., 2023).

In terms of SMIs and viewers' mutual characteristics effect, previous research identified that perceived parasocial relationship (Chen et al., 2022; Silva & Costa, 2021), self-congruity (Chen et al., 2022; Cheng et al., 2020; Han & Zhang, 2023; Xu & Pratt, 2018), homophily experience (Purwandari et al., 2022), self-prototypicality (Leung et al., 2022) have an impact on viewers' perceptions and reactions toward IGC and suppliers. However, Dong et al. (2023) failed to predict any significant effect between SMIs-viewers congruency and perceived objective authenticity. Viewers' attitudes towards SMIs were also identified as an indicator of their behavioral intentions (Pop et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2021).

SMIs can significantly influence viewers' reactions through their direct or indirect suggestions (Irfan et al., 2022; Kilipiri et al., 2023; Tsai & Hsin, 2023). These effects can be attributed to various characteristics of the IGC. Previous studies have demonstrated that IGC informativeness (Kılıç & Gürlek, 2023; Kılıç et al., 2024), attractiveness (Manthiou et al., 2024; Seçilmiş et al., 2022), credibility (Abad & Borbon, 2021), inspirational power

(Dutta et al., 2021; Manthiou et al., 2024), authenticity (Chen et al., 2014; Manthiou et al., 2024), arousal and thematic compatibility (Szymkowiak et al., 2021) are all important determinants of viewers' perceptions and reactions.

In addition to the IGC attributes, the method of conveying a message is also intended to influence viewers (Feng et al., 2023; Guede, Curiel, et al., 2021). For instance, Kapoor et al. (2021) in their studies on message appeals indicated that sustainability messages with guilt appeals lead to a higher perception of the hotel's environmental corporate social responsibility and a higher intention to stay at eco-friendly hotels. The studies by Li et al. (2023) and Deng et al. (2022) found that food-related attributes are valued more by viewers than other attributes. However, Nazlan et al. (2024) showed that frequently mentioning a food item in a review does not necessarily trigger viewers' intention. Conversely, the use of emotional expression (Nazlan et al., 2024) and sensory-rich language (Hutchinson et al., 2024) has been found to positively influence viewer attitudes, leading to enhanced behavioral involvement with the food and increased intention to taste. Although Hutchinson et al. (2024) and Nazlan et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of emotional expression in food-related content, Xie-Carson, Magor, et al. (2023) identified that in the context of destination marketing, Instagram users preferred captions with rational discourses rather than emotional discourses. Particularly, in post-disaster situations, conveying testimonial messages (showcasing visiting experiences by SMIs) was identified as more influential (Huang et al., 2024).

Building on the conveying message, it is evident that the way sponsorship disclosures are presented by SMIs significantly impacts viewers' behavior and attitudes towards products and services (Cholprasertsuk et al., 2020). Balaji et al. (2021) and Luoma-aho et al. (2019) found that a positively framed, detailed message regarding service providers enhances viewers' perception of the sponsored brand. In terms of disclosure, Schorn et al. (2022) discovered that standardized disclosure does not increase interest in learning more about a product compared to no disclosure. However, when comparing paid partnership disclosure to in-text disclosure, research shows that the former positively affects viewer responses (Shuqair et al., 2023). Furthermore, Shuqair et al. (2023) noted that the type of content (experiential vs. material) can moderate the impact of sponsorship disclosure, with consumers responding more positively to experiential content, which helps alleviate negative reactions. In the sustainability context, studies found that using an attribute-value

message for sponsorship disclosure is more effective than a simple recommendation message (Kapoor et al., 2022) and highlighting personal benefits is more effective compared to ecological benefits (Schorn et al., 2022) in promoting sustainable products.

2.4.3.4 How Do Targets Evaluate/React to IGC?

A growing body of research has explored viewers' evaluations and reactions toward IGC. For instance, Nazlan et al. (2024) found that viewers perceive IGC as more informative when it includes both visual and written elements. The increased informativeness of IGC positively affects viewers' cognitive responses, such as ascribed responsibility, perceived information quality, and curiosity, in the context of volunteer tourism (Kılıç et al., 2024). Balaji et al. (2021) determined that positively framed, detailed messages about service providers enhance viewers' perceptions of IGC credibility. Previous studies have also shown that SMIs' self-reflection can influence viewers' attitudes toward IGC (Mchavu et al., 2022), the congruency between SMIs and the destination (Xu & Pratt, 2018), the authenticity and experiential values incorporated in IGC (Yousaf, 2022), and SMIs' credibility (Hernández-Méndez & Baute-Díaz, 2024).

The credibility, information quality, and majority influence of SMIs affect viewers' trust in IGC (Le & Ryu, 2023). Additionally, viewers perceive IGC as useful when the information is up-to-date, but information relevance, accuracy, and comprehensiveness do not significantly affect perceived usefulness (Nadlifatin et al., 2022). IGC usage enjoyment has been identified as another viewers' cognitive response toward IGC, which can be affected by IGC attributes (Chen et al., 2014; Padmavathi, 2020; Zhu et al., 2023) and attachment to SMIs (Zhu et al., 2023). In addition to cognitive responses, IGC can also trigger viewers' affective responses, such that the experience between viewers and SMIs influences viewers' emotional dimensions, including arousal and control (Purwandari et al., 2022). Furthermore, perceived SMIs' credibility has been found to trigger viewers' travel inspiration (Nguyen et al., 2023).

2.4.3.5 How Do Targets Evaluate SMIs?

Research on how viewers evaluate SMIs has identified several key factors that influence their perceptions and attitudes. First, IGC attributes (Manthiou et al., 2024) and SMIs' type (Zhang et al., 2023) were found to have a significant effect on viewers' attitude toward SMIs. Positive priming of IGC and SMIs' popularity can enhance perceptions of their authenticity, particularly for viewers who believe SMIs are generally self-serving (Luoma-aho et al., 2019; Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023). Building on this, the way SMIs present information also impacts viewer perceptions. Schorn et al. (2022) found that highlighting personal benefits over ecological benefits can positively influence viewers' perceptions of an SMI's expertise, trustworthiness, and likability. However, they also discovered that receiving financial support from a company to promote sustainable products may adversely affect a SMIs' perceived expertise. Furthermore, Seçilmiş et al. (2022) identified that SMIs' expertise and attractiveness of IGC enhance viewers' trust in SMIs. However, self-disclosure by SMIs has been found to influence female viewers' trust in them negatively (Leung et al., 2022).

Another important factor in viewer evaluations of SMIs is the development of parasocial relationships. Yılmazdoğan et al.'s (2021) study found that the trustworthiness and expertise of SMIs were significant factors in the development of parasocial relationships, while attractiveness did not play a role. In contrast, Chen et al. (2023) research identified attractiveness and perceived similarity of SMIs as important predictors of stronger parasocial relationships, but did not find expertise to be an influential factor. Leung et al. (2022) further suggest that social attraction between viewers and SMIs can be influenced by prototype clarity and self-prototypicality.

Finally, while SMIs' physical attractiveness, social attractiveness, and credibility positively influence viewers' wishful identification (Le & Hancer, 2021), viewer responses to SMIs can also include envy, especially in the context of luxury consumption and travel-related content. Asdecker (2022) found that exposure to travel-related IGC increases viewers' envy toward SMIs. Building on this, Feng et al. (2023) discovered that humblebragging by SMIs is more likely to elicit malicious envy and lower trust, notably when the SMI lacks expertise or is highly similar to the viewer.

2.4.3.6 How Do Targets Perceive/Evaluate the Suppliers Being Endorsed by IGC?

The last research theme revolved around consumers' evaluations of suppliers being endorsed by SMIs. Generally, previous studies have shown that viewers' responses to IGC are categorized into behavioral changes, attitudinal changes, and emotional changes regarding the endorsed brand (e.g., destination, hotel, restaurant). Among the behavioral changes, travel decision making and travel intention have been found to be among the most researched consequences of SMIM. Studies have identified that viewers' travel decision making and travel intention can be influenced by SMIs attributes (Caraka et al., 2022; Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Chen et al., 2022; Cholprasertsuk et al., 2020; Kirilenko et al., 2024; Raafat et al., 2023), IGC attributes (Abad & Borbon, 2021; Han et al., 2023; Irfan et al., 2022; Shuqair et al., 2023; Tsai & Hsin, 2023), IGC designs (Huang et al., 2024; Luoma-aho et al., 2019) viewers' attitudes (Han & Zhang, 2023; Hernández-Méndez & Baute-Díaz, 2024; Manthiou et al., 2024; Pop et al., 2022; Xu & Pratt, 2018; Yi et al., 2021), viewers' cognitive responses (Chen et al., 2014; Kılıç et al., 2024; Padmavathi, 2020; Seçilmiş et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2023), viewers' parasocial interactions (Chen et al., 2023; Kılıç & Gürlek, 2023; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021), and viewers' affective responses (Asdecker, 2022; Le & Hancer, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023; Purwandari et al., 2022). Additionally, SMIM can lead to viewers' WOM intention (Cheng et al., 2020) and attitudinal changes regarding the endorsed destination (Dong et al., 2023; Guede, De Esteban Curiel, et al., 2021; Luoma-aho et al., 2019).

Studies have also shown that SMIM can lead to behavioral changes regarding the endorsed hotel. Viewers' information search, room booking intention, and impulse buying intentions can be influenced by SMIs attributes (Schorn et al., 2022; Silva & Costa, 2021; Zhang et al., 2023), IGC attributes (Dutta et al., 2021; Szymkowiak et al., 2021), IGC designs (Kapoor et al., 2021; Kapoor et al., 2022), and viewers' cognitive responses (Balaji et al., 2021; Le & Ryu, 2023). Viewers' attitudinal changes regarding the endorsed hotel may be influenced by viewers' emotional responses toward IGC (Feng et al., 2023). Lastly, viewers intention to visit a restaurant as well as social sharing intention about a restaurant were identified to be influenced by viewers' cognitive responses (Hutchinson et al., 2024; Leung et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023; Luong & Ho, 2023; Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023).

2.4.3.7 Other Research Topics

The research studies included in this category do not fit neatly into the previous themes but still provide valuable insights. Hepworth et al. (2019) and Mariani et al. (2021) both examined the structure of SMIs' networks. Hepworth et al. (2019) found that SMIs with higher activity levels on social media tend to have greater outreach and popularity within their networks. Building on this, Mariani et al. (2021) showed that professional travel SMIs are more likely to emerge as opinion leaders in their respective networks, a process driven by the provision of valuable information (Wu et al., 2021).

Shifting the focus to SMIs' influence, Francalanci et al. (2015) used power-law graphs in user opinion semantic networks to investigate SMIs' representation and influence. They emphasized the importance of examining both central "hub" nodes and peripheral nodes to gain a comprehensive understanding of how influence spreads. The findings suggest that central SMIs tend to have more generalist tourism content, while peripheral SMIs are highly specialized.

Finally, Xie et al. (2021) explored the impact of entrepreneurial characteristics on the performance of travel SMI entrepreneurs in India. They found that innovation, leadership, and planning positively influence the performance of SMIs by predicting their entrepreneurial intentions. Overall, this diverse set of studies provides a multifaceted view of SMIs, their networks, influence, and entrepreneurial aspects, complementing the insights from the previous research themes.

2.5   Research Gaps

This systematic review provides valuable insights into various aspects of SMIM. However, our understanding of how SMIM can be effectively leveraged in specific situations and for particular purposes remains limited. Further research is needed to gain a deeper comprehension of this complex phenomenon and expand its marketing applications and external validity. By considering the descriptive information from the quantitative approach and the findings of the qualitative approach, this study explores areas where

extant scholarly work is sparse and insufficient. It suggests key issues that need to be addressed in future research.

2.5.1 Gaps Identified from Quantitative Research Study

The existing literature on the effectiveness of SMIs in supplier (e.g., destinations, hotels, restaurants) promotion has primarily focused on a generalist approach, without delving into the nuances of different SMI types. As noted in subsection 2.4.2.2, nearly half of the studies (49 studies) employed a generalist approach without specifying the particular types of SMIs examined. While some research has compared different types of SMIs, the scope has been limited. The study by El Khoury and Farah (2018) is one of the few that investigated the differences between travel specialist SMIs and non-travel specialist SMIs. However, the literature still lacks a comprehensive understanding of how the effectiveness of SMIs in supplier promotion may vary based on their expertise and follower numbers.

The studies reviewed in Table 2.3 examined a diverse range of message types, but there does not appear to be a clear focus or emphasis on particular message formats. For instance, the reviewed research generally examined audiovisual messages without delving into the distinctive features of specific audiovisual formats, such as live-streamed video, Instagram Stories, and other emerging social media content types. As suggested by Nguyen et al. (2023), these distinct message formats may elicit different cognitive and emotional responses from viewers. To further our understanding of the impact of SMIM on viewer reactions, it would be beneficial to expand the scope of message types investigated. Exploring the unique characteristics and effects of various social media message formats could provide more detailed and contextualized insights into how viewers engage with and respond to SMIM content. This expanded focus on message types would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underlying the influence of SMIM on audience perceptions and behaviors.

Regarding social media platforms, the existing research indicates a strong focus on specific platforms (see Table 2.4). Most studies either did not refer to a specific social media platform or investigated Instagram. In contrast, other prominent platforms, such as

YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook, received relatively less attention in the literature. This is noteworthy, as different social media platforms can vary in their content, message modality, and the way they influence user processing and reactions (Alsaeed et al., 2023; Balaji et al., 2021). To increase the generalizability of findings, future research would benefit from incorporating a wider range of social media platforms into its investigations. This multi-platform approach could yield valuable insights that advance our knowledge in this field.

Concerning Table 2.4, it is evident that a variety of research approaches have been employed in the existing literature on this topic. However, a key limitation is the lack of longitudinal studies that could provide valuable insights. Longitudinal studies are essential in this domain, as they enable tracking of consumer behavior when exposed to SMIM over time (Vrontis et al., 2021). Such studies can shed light on how the relationship between SMIs and audiences evolves and matures over extended periods. This approach would address a notable gap in existing literature and advance our understanding of this dynamic and evolving marketing practice.

2.5.2 Gaps Identified from Qualitative Research Study

As evident in Table 2.7, compared to the substantial effort invested in resolving the question of "how do suppliers collaborate with/compensate SMIs?", existing knowledge about "how do suppliers select SMIs for collaboration?" and "how do suppliers intervene/control/or govern SMIs' influencing mechanism" is largely scarce at the time of this writing. Future researchers may find value in conducting studies to explore the criteria that suppliers use to select SMIs for collaboration. This research could delve into the significance of SMIs' characteristics and the role of data analytics in suppliers' decision-making processes. Furthermore, examining how the selection processes of SMIs vary across different industries, such as tourism, hospitality, and restaurants, could provide valuable insights into industry-specific practices and trends. To answer the question about "how do suppliers intervene/control/or govern SMIs' influencing mechanism", future research could explore the effectiveness of current strategies used by suppliers to intervene in or control SMIs' activities.

Regarding the question of "how do suppliers collaborate with/compensate SMIs?", the existing literature has discussed the importance of aligning with SMIs who can authentically represent a brand's values and engage effectively with consumers (e.g., Deborah et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2021; Vanninen et al., 2023). However, there is limited research on quantifying the actual impact and effectiveness of these collaborations through measuring the return on investment (ROI). Another potential research idea that academic researchers can explore in the future is how SMIs can be effectively integrated with other marketing channels, providing a more holistic understanding of the role of SMIs in the overall marketing mix.

Drawing on the findings reported in those 20 articles exploring "how do SMIs design their influencing mechanisms?", it is well evident that influencing mechanism design gains scholarly attention. However, Previous studies (Gholamhosseinzadeh, 2023; Jiao et al., 2022; van Nuenen, 2016) discuss how SMIs design their influencing mechanism by incorporating authentic experiences, aesthetic, cultural, and traditional values in their content to attract viewers. Future research, for example, can build on the findings of a study by Jing Ge and Ulrike Gretzel (2018) to find out other rhetorical techniques used by SMIs. As noted earlier, studies in this stream focused on the content, while how SMIs adapt their content for different social media platforms is still under-researched. Exploring how content is tailored to suit the unique features and audience preferences of each platform (e.g., video content on YouTube, visual content on Instagram) can shed light on effective content adaptation strategies for maximizing engagement. Furthermore, the existing studies (e.g., Bosangit et al., 2015; Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2023; Motahar et al., 2021) have either focused on non-sponsored travel IGC or did not clearly specify whether the IGC studied was sponsored or not. However, SMIM practices have confirmed that SMIs are often sponsored by DMOs or other third parties. This sponsorship relationship may impact the content that SMIs share with their followers. The researcher suggests that future studies could investigate non-sponsored IGC, DMO-sponsored IGC, and third-party sponsored IGC separately, and compare their respective influencing mechanisms on consumers.

As shown in Table 2.7, the question of "which type/s of media is selected by SMIs to publish their IGC" has not been thoroughly explored in prior research. To address this gap, future studies could focus on investigating the key factors that influence SMIs' media selection choices, such as their target audience demographics, the suitability of different

content formats, engagement metrics across platforms, and prevailing platform-specific trends. Additionally, research could examine how SMIs leverage a cross-media content distribution strategy, leveraging the synergies between various social media platforms. For instance, exploring how SMIs use features like Instagram Stories to drive traffic and engagement to their YouTube videos or other long-form content can provide valuable insights into how they optimize their reach and impact across multiple channels. This type of investigation into SMIs' multimedia content strategies can yield important findings about the evolving practices in the SMIM landscape.

The existing research literature has thoroughly investigated the question of "how do IGC and/or SMIs directly influence targets?". However, despite the extensive exploration of this topic, the findings reported in previous studies remain inconclusive. This suggests that there are still opportunities for future research to further explore and clarify the mechanisms and dynamics underlying the direct influence of IGC and SMIs on target audiences. As shown in subsection 2.4.3.3, the contrasting findings are reported in prior studies on the relative impact of credibility factors such as expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness on viewers' perceptions and behavioral intentions (e.g., Hernández-Méndez & Baute-Díaz, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2023; Silva & Costa, 2021; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021). A research gap could involve a comparative analysis to determine which credibility factors have the most significant influence on consumer behavior when considering SMIs. The discrepancy between the impact of SMIs' experience versus their expertise on viewers' behavioral intentions also presents an interesting research gap. Further exploration could aim to clarify which factor holds more weight in shaping consumer attitudes and actions.

Pertinent to the topic about SMIs type (human SMIs vs. virtual SMIs or human SMIs vs. pet SMIs), the existing studies by Ameen et al. (2023), Xie-Carson, Magor, et al. (2023), and Zhang et al. (2023) have been limited to examining the effects of pictorial and textual content on viewer reactions on Instagram. It would be valuable to expand this research and investigate the impact of audiovisual content attributes on viewer reactions, particularly on other platforms like YouTube. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to consider how contextual factors, such as consumption goals and user characteristics, might interplay to influence viewer reactions. As noted earlier in subsection 2.4.3.3, the existing body of literature has examined the influence of congruence between SMIs and viewers on viewers' behavioral intention (e.g., Cheng et al., 2020; Dong et al., 2023; Han & Zhang, 2023; Xu

& Pratt, 2018). Past research has also investigated the impact of congruence between SMIs and suppliers (e.g., Dong et al., 2023; Xie-Carson, Benckendorff, et al., 2023; Xu & Pratt, 2018). However, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the congruency among IGC and its influence on viewers' cognitive processing and emotional reactions. Additional research is needed to address this knowledge gap by exploring the congruency among travel IGC and investigating viewers' processing and responses towards such congruency.

Findings reported in Schorn et al. (2022) as well as Shuqair et al. (2023) studies undoubtedly provide insights about the effects of inclusion or exclusion of sponsorship disclosures and their impact on viewers' behaviors and attitudes. Future research, however, could explore the effectiveness of other commonly used sponsorship disclosure types (e.g., partially sponsored, fully sponsored) in influencing viewers' perceptions and responses towards sponsored content. Apart from studying the sponsorship effects of IGC created by SMIs, another potential research topic could be analyzing sponsored posts that appear in users' feeds from accounts they do not actually follow. Future research might examine the influence of these posts on viewers. As evident in Table 2.7, while the direct influence of IGC on viewers caught a lot of scholarly attention, the question about "how are targets indirectly influenced by IGC and/or SMIs via other targets?" is ripe for investigation in the coming future. Future researchers may find value in conducting studies to map out the social networks and information diffusion pathways between IGC/SMIs, intermediary targets, and end targets.

As shown in subsection 2.4.3.4, researchers are increasingly exploring viewers' evaluations and reactions toward IGC. While prior studies (e.g., Balaji et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2023) have investigated how targets generally evaluate and respond to IGC, these existing studies did not differentiate participants based on their underlying travel motives, such as business or leisure. This is an important consideration, as travel motives can influence information processing and decision-making (Nadlifatin et al., 2022). To address this gap, further research is needed to examine the interplay between IGC attributes and viewers' travel motives on their overall evaluations of IGC. Additionally, while existing literature (e.g., Le & Hancer, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2023) suggests that IGC could potentially inspire and influence viewers' behavior, the inspirational impact of IGC on viewers remains an area that requires further investigation. Addressing this research gap could provide valuable insights into our understanding of information processing by viewers. Existing literature

also remains limited to the IGC created by a single SMI. In practice, however, suppliers (e.g., DMOs, hotels, restaurants) collaborate with multiple SMIs on different platforms to get viral. Studying the combined effect of multiple pieces of IGC by multiple SMIs across various platforms is a worthwhile area for future investigation. This potential gap has already been highlighted by a recent study (Leung et al., 2022).

The existing literature on viewers' evaluations and reactions to SMIs has primarily focused on positive perceptions, such as SMIs' credibility (e.g., Chen et al., 2022; Le & Hancer, 2021), trust (e.g., Leung et al., 2022; Seçilmiş et al., 2022), authenticity (e.g., Luoma-aho et al., 2019; Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023), and parasocial interactions (e.g., Chen et al., 2023; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021). While a few studies, such as Asdecker (2022) and Feng et al. (2023), have examined viewers' envious perceptions of SMIs, there is a need for further research to investigate the negative attitudes and reactions of viewers towards SMIs, and to understand how these negative perceptions might influence their behavioral intentions. This is particularly important, as any mistrust or negative perceptions among viewers about SMIs could potentially lead to disregarding behaviors (Gerrath et al., 2024).

The existing knowledge about viewers' perceptions and evaluations of the endorsed supplier is extensive but uneven. As evident in subsection 2.4.3.6, viewers' WOM and eWOM intentions have seldom been the focus of previous researchers, compared to their interest in studying travel intention. More scholarly attention should be dedicated to exploring whether IGC may increase or reduce one's WOM and/or eWOM about suppliers (e.g., destinations, hotels, restaurants). Moreover, although intentions are a valid predictor of actual behavior, future research can investigate the link between heuristically generated intentions and viewers' actual purchases. This potential gap has already been highlighted by recent studies (Asdecker, 2022; Leung et al., 2022; Nazlan et al., 2024), suggesting that further exploration in this area could yield valuable insights. Notably, extant studies are primarily conducted in the contexts of travel (e.g., Kirilenko et al., 2024; Raafat et al., 2023), hotel (e.g., Feng et al., 2023; Kapoor et al., 2022), and restaurant (e.g., Li et al., 2023; Luong & Ho, 2023), highlighting the need to examine the contribution of IGC in the airline and cruise contexts as potential areas for future research.

2.6   Chapter Summary

This chapter began by describing the role of social media in marketing as a broader concept. It then narrowed its focus to defining social media marketing, followed by an explanation of SMIM. Next, the study provided a review of all full-length journal papers related to SMIM in tourism and hospitality contexts. The existing literature was summarized systematically, helping to identify current research gaps. The chapter concluded by elaborating on these existing research gaps in the literature. The next chapter presented Study One in detail.

CHAPTER 3   STUDY ONE

This chapter outlines the first study undertaken to address the identified research gaps and fulfill the first main objective of this thesis. To address research gaps and thoroughly understand how congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs (hereafter, IGC congruency) influences viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions, a mixed-methods study was conducted. In this chapter, the research hypotheses and model will first be presented (section 3.1). Next, since the scale for measuring IGC congruency was absent, the systematic process used for developing the scale is presented in section 3.2. In the final section of this chapter, the nomological validity of the developed scale and the hypothesis testing will be presented.

3.1   Research Hypotheses and Model

The proposed research hypotheses and conceptual model of this study are grounded in a comprehensive literature review. Each hypothesis is presented in a separate subsection below, followed by the conceptual model, which is presented in subsection 3.1.6.

3.1.1   Impact of IGC Congruency on Viewers' Inspired-by State

In the context of information processing, Harkins and Petty (1981a) argue that a message delivered through multiple sources can enhance its persuasiveness. In other words, when individuals receive a marketing message from various sources, they may be more easily persuaded to accept the information due to perceived congruency (Zhao et al., 2018). Research on online reviews, a form of multiple-source messaging, has empirically demonstrated that perceived congruency among reviews positively influences their persuasiveness (Aghakhani et al., 2021; Cheung et al., 2012; Cheung et al., 2008; Quaschning et al., 2014). In a social media environment, where individuals often have a hedonic mindset and are less likely to think critically, they rely on heuristic cues, such as message congruency (Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991), to quickly evaluate messages (Chaiken, 1980). For instance, when multiple SMIs congruently highlight "a particular

destination" through consensus recommendations (e.g., traditional cuisine) and valence (e.g., positive captions), the consensus implies correctness (Chaiken & Ledgerwood, 2012), reducing cognitive effort and skepticism. By minimizing cognitive effort, such congruency facilitates heuristic processing, which prioritizes affective resonance over critical analysis (Chaiken, 1980; Kim et al., 2019). Ultimately, viewers emotionally engage with the content, making them more susceptible to inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017; Dai et al., 2022).

Critically, this emotional engagement, as theorized by the gateway belief model (van der Linden, 2021), is not merely a passive outcome but a gateway to deeper motivational states. The model posits that when experts send consensus-threatening messages related to climate change, the perceived consensus triggers consistent emotional responses, such as worries, which precede and shape an individual's actions, such as avoidance. Applying this model to the SMIM context in which SMIs send persuasive messages to the viewers, the perceived consensus among IGC may trigger emotional responses such as arousal and approach motivations. In general, emotions are particularly vulnerable to social influences compared to attitudes and beliefs because they are immediate and often triggered by interactions with others (Goldenberg et al., 2020). When individuals encounter congruent IGC, this emotional primacy manifests as an instant internal reaction (e.g., inspiration) that bridges perception and action (Chang, 2020; Oltra et al., 2022). Specifically, inspiration in its initial phase involves two interrelated processes: (1) emotional arousal (e.g., excitement or awe) and (2) transcendence, where individuals envision aspirational possibilities (Thrash et al., 2014), such as thinking, "This trip could redefine how I experience new foods" (Thrash & Elliot, 2003). By framing emotional engagement as a conduit, the gateway belief model underscores how congruency amplifies not only persuasion but also the aspirational dimensions of the inspired-by state—a motivational response characterized by emotional resonance and transcendent goals (Böttger et al., 2017).

Building on these concepts from past literature, including the multiple source effect (Harkins & Petty, 1981a), the heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken, 1980), the gateway belief model (van der Linden, 2021), and customer inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017), this study proposes that IGC congruency—defined as the congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by different SMIs—is expected to increase viewers' inspired-by state. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: IGC congruency positively influences viewers' inspired-by state.

3.1.2 Mediating Role of IGC Credibility

Message credibility refers to the individual's judgment of whether the message is perceived as accurate, truthful, and believable (Appelman & Sundar, 2015). Previous research confirmed that IGC credibility mediates the relationship between promotional message and consumers' cognitive and affective responses (Kim et al., 2022; Kim, Thorson, et al., 2024; Kim, Xie, et al., 2024). Hence, this study proposes that IGC credibility mediates the relationship between IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-by state.

In a study on the eWOM context, which is a good example of multiple sources, Cheung et al. (2008) revealed that consumers' recommendations' congruency has a positive impact on perceived eWOM credibility among readers. Building on this, Cheung et al. (2012) confirmed in another study that congruency among eWOM positively affects its credibility due to the perceived believability of the information. In other words, when different members of the group hold similar opinions, those opinions are considered more credible in terms of objectivity and representativeness (Zhao et al., 2018). The expected relationship between congruency and credibility can be explained by the heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken, 1980), mentioning that congruency is often considered an indication of correctness by individuals (Chaiken, 1987). In other words, the more congruency exists among multiple pieces of IGC about the same brand or product (e.g., destination, hotel rooms, restaurant services), the more likely viewers will perceive the IGC as credible, which in turn may result in viewers' travel inspiration.

Previous studies have documented the IGC credibility as a message characteristic that can trigger viewers' inspiration. Raggatt et al. (2018), for example, found that social media users are more inspired by the information shared by SMIs, compared to that of traditional celebrities, largely because IGC is perceived as more authentic and credible. Similarly, Ki et al. (2022) identified that an SMI whose content is perceived as credible is more likely to inspire and influence its audience. Therefore, IGC credibility is arguably an important

determinant that elicits viewers' travel inspiration. Grounded in aforementioned logic, this study posits that IGC credibility is likely to mediate the relationship between IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-by state. Thus, H2 is proposed:

> *H2: IGC credibility mediates the relationship between IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-by state.*

3.1.3 Impact of Viewers' Inspired-by State on Inspired-to State

Customer inspiration includes two sequential states—inspired-by and inspired-to (Böttger et al., 2017; Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Particularly, after a consumer is passively provoked by an external source and experiences transcendence, they feel intrinsically motivated to act upon the inspirational source in the second order, which is referred to as an "inspired-to state" (Böttger et al., 2017). Previous studies have provided further insights into customer inspiration by demonstrating that customer inspiration occurs in two causally related states. An empirical study by Rauschnabel et al. (2019) showed that in a brand's AR marketing, the inspired-by state affects the inspired-to state. Consumers are inspired by brands' virtual products that AR apps simulate, which, in turn, encourages them to try the new products displayed in the AR apps. Integrating social defaults theory into customer inspiration, Ki et al. (2022) showed that the inspired-by state indeed affects the inspired-to state in the context of SMIM.

Similarly, in the tourism context, a study by Fang et al. (2023) confirmed that inspired-by travel state induced by short-form travel video positively impacts the audience's inspired-to travel state. According to the SMIM literature in tourism and hospitality contexts, consumers' reactions toward IGC include willingness to search for further information, intention to travel, and willingness to share the content with others (Gamage & Ashill, 2023; Guerreiro et al., 2019; Le & Hancer, 2021; Sun et al., 2021). Building on Böttger et al.'s (2017) customer inspiration,, as well as drawing on previous studies' findings, this study presumes that viewers who are inspired by IGC will be inspired to act on them, including being inspired to search for further information about the destination, inspired to

travel to the destination, and inspired to share the IGC about the destination. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H3_{a-c}: Inspired-by state positively influences inspired-to (a) search state, (b) travel state, and (c) share state.

3.1.4 Impact of Viewers' Inspired-to State on Behavioral Intention

According to Böttger et al. (2017), customer inspiration can lead to behavioral consequences to actualize the new idea. The behavioral consequences depend on the inspirational source's new idea (e.g., IGC), which can result in the impulsive or spontaneous acquisition of products or services, as well as further investigation of the offering or other meaningful interactions with the marketing company (Böttger et al., 2017). Recent research has consistently found that customer inspiration leads to positive behavioral outcomes, such as travel planning behavior (Nguyen et al., 2023), WOM intention (Zanger et al., 2022), and travel intention (Fang et al., 2023). Considering that a successful SMIM campaign positively impacts consumers' awareness about the travel destination, enhances their interest in searching for more information, triggers their desire to visit the destination, and encourages them to share the IGC with others (Abbasi et al., 2022; Hudson et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2021), the following hypotheses are formulated:

H4_{a-c}: Inspired-to state positively influences intention to (a) search, (b) travel, and (c) share.

3.1.5 Moderating Role of Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence

The extent to which IGC influences consumers may differ by their level of susceptibility to interpersonal influence. In a consumption context, susceptibility to interpersonal influence, which refers to *"the tendency of a person to change as a function of social pressure"* (McGuire, 1968, p. 1131), plays an important role in consumers' affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses (Chu & Kim, 2011; Das et al., 2022; De

Pelsmacker et al., 2018; Park et al., 2011). Previous studies on eWOM showed that consumers who are highly susceptible to interpersonal influence are more likely to perceive eWOM as credible (Park et al., 2011). Individuals with high susceptibility to interpersonal influence are more likely to be inspired toward luxury products by their need for uniqueness, because they are more open to accepting information from credible sources (Bearden et al., 1989; Das et al., 2022). According to Böttger et al. (2017), the intensity of an inspirational experience is likely to be influenced by individual characteristics. In other words, customer inspiration suggests that individual characteristics influence the creation and strength of the inspiration they experience (Boettger, 2019). Consumers are more likely to experience inspiration when they are actively seeking and receptive to new information from their environment (Böttger et al., 2017).

Given the outcomes of previous studies and the characteristic nature of susceptibility to interpersonal influence, it is plausible that differences exist between viewers with low susceptibility to interpersonal influence and those with high susceptibility in their IGC credibility perceptions, inspiration by IGC, and behavioral intentions. This study thus hypothesizes that the patterns of significance on path coefficients will differ across individuals with low and high susceptibility to interpersonal influence. The following hypothesis is therefore postulated:

> **H5:** *The relationship between IGC congruency, IGC credibility, viewers' travel inspiration, and behavioral intentions is stronger when viewers' susceptibility to interpersonal influence is high compared to when it is low.*

3.1.6 Proposed Conceptual Model

The proposed conceptual model integrates multiple theoretical foundations, including the multiple source effect (Harkins & Petty, 1981a), the heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken, 1980), and customer inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017). The conceptual model, illustrated in Figure 3.1, depicts the key constructs and their interrelationships. Specifically, the model hypothesizes that IGC congruency positively influences viewers' inspired-by state, which is mediated by IGC credibility. Viewers'

inspired-by state positively affects viewers' inspired-to state. Furthermore, travel inspiration is expected to impact the intention to search, intention to travel positively, and intention to share. Lastly, the model proposes that susceptibility to interpersonal influence moderates the relationships among the various constructs.

This integrative approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which congruency among multiple pieces of IGC and their perceived credibility can inspire consumers and shape their behavioral intentions in the tourism context.

Figure 3.1. Proposed conceptual model – Study One
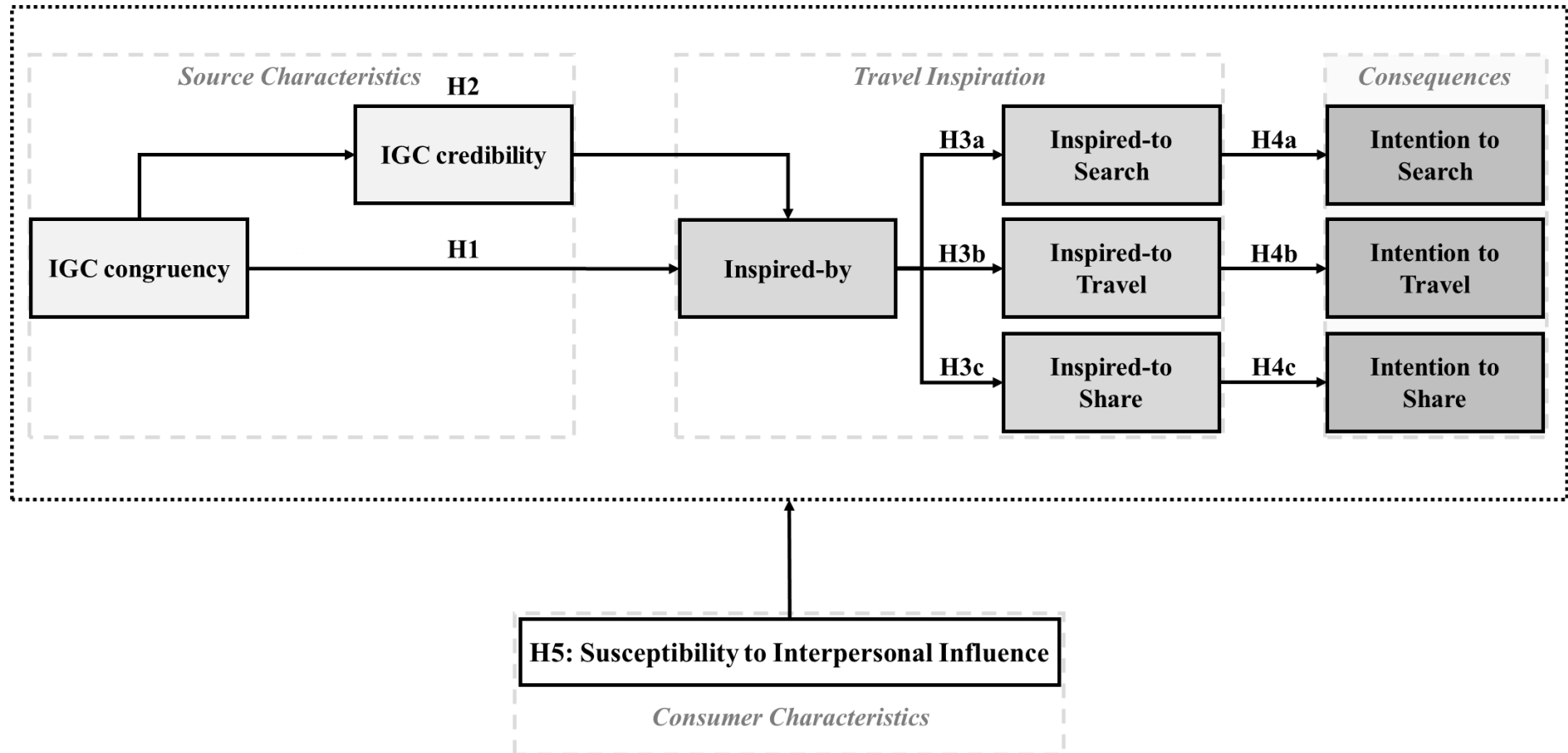
3.2   Development of IGC Congruency Scale

Considering there is no measurement that exists in the literature to measure IGC congruency, it was imperative to commence the research process by defining the concept and acquiring theoretical themes from existing literature through an initial qualitative inquiry. In the literature, congruence is defined as *"an evaluation, either natural or learned, expressing how many of a number of entities are perceived as going well together"* (Maille & Fleck, 2011, p. 87). The notion of congruence, explored by multiple researchers, encompasses either one or two aspects. Heckler and Childers (1992) posit that the concept of congruence comprises two distinct aspects, namely expectancy and relevancy. Expectancy is defined as *"the degree to which an item or piece of information falls into some predetermined pattern or structure evoked by the theme"* (Heckler & Childers, 1992, p. 477). The principal aspect, referred to as relevancy, is derived from the perception of a semantic correlation among entities (Maille & Fleck, 2011). This perceived semantic connection can emerge from observed resemblances in physical attributes, objectives, temporal or spatial context, imagery, target audience, knowledge, expertise, and affective responses elicited by these entities (Maille & Fleck, 2011). Relevancy serves as the primary aspect predominantly employed by researchers adopting the congruency concept (Maille & Fleck, 2011). The current study adopts the relevancy aspect of congruency and defines IGC congruency among multiple pieces of IGC provided by different but not the same SMI.

Several researchers have made efforts to understand "review congruency" within the UGC research. Various researchers have provided different conceptualizations and conducted research attempts to measure and explain review congruency. Cheung et al. (2012) developed a two-item scale to measure review congruency among online reviews. Despite its applicability within the UGC context to measure congruency of recommendations, its application in the IGC context does not provide a comprehensive picture of IGC congruency, as it is not capable of thoroughly assessing the congruency among IGCs. Hence, there is a need to develop a robust and valid measurement scale capable of assessing IGC congruency. The development of the IGC congruency concept allows examining the congruency among IGC instead of falling into controversial discussions about the congruency between SMIs and consumers, the congruency between SMIs and brands, and the congruency between brands and consumers. It can thus guide the academic community to value the issue of IGC congruency.

To address the need for developing a scale to measure IGC congruency, this study follows the guidelines outlined by Churchill (1979) to develop a reliable and valid scale. The scale development process consists of four stages: (1) item generation and content validity, (2) scale purification, (3) scale validation, and (4) nomological validity. Figure 3.2 provides a visual representation of this four-stage procedure, which is derived from the original stages proposed by Churchill (1979).

Figure 3.2. Procedure for developing the IGC congruency scale
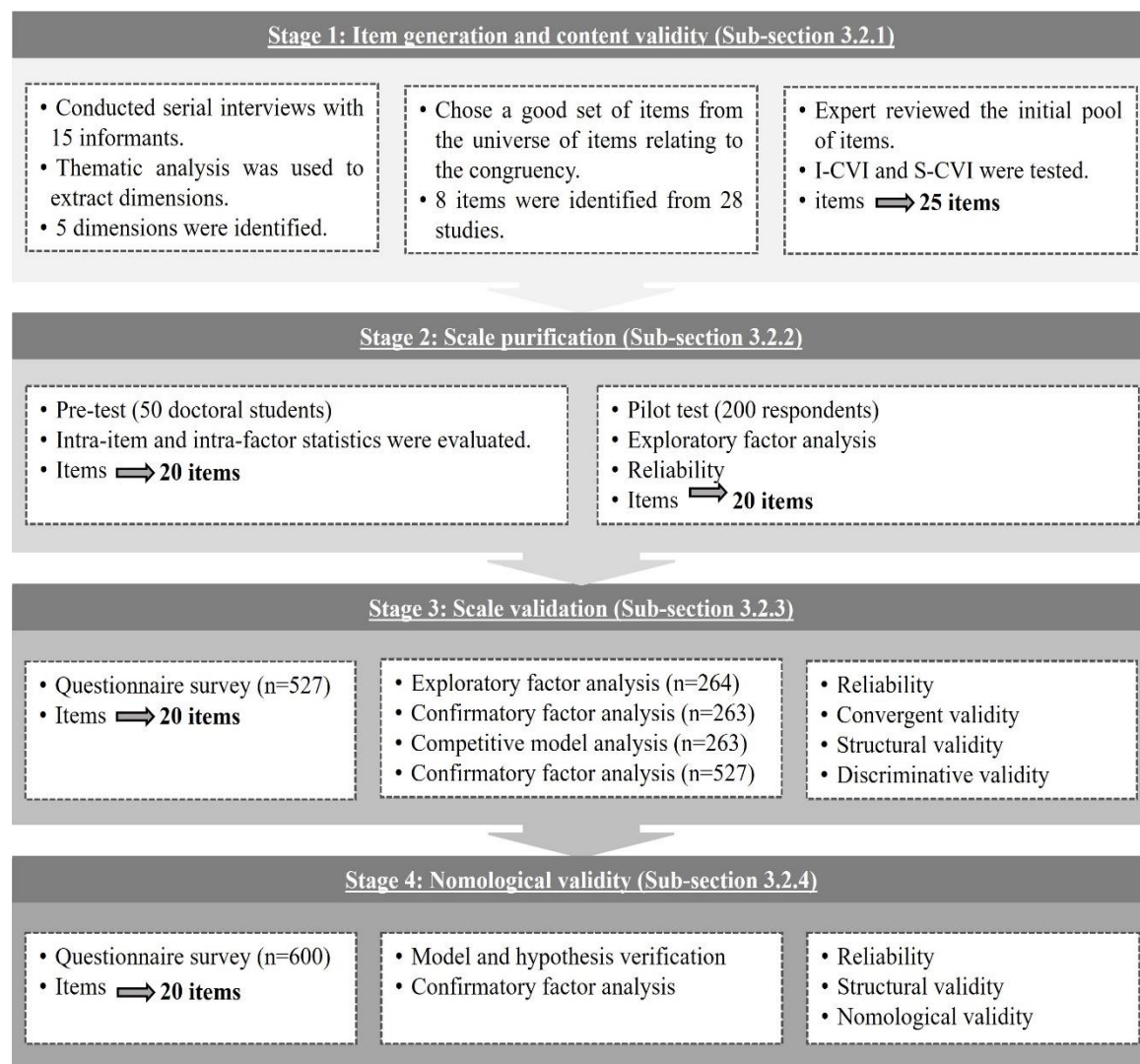
Source: developed by the author

3.2.1 Stage 1: Item Generation and Content Validity

The primary stage in scale development, as outlined in previous studies (Churchill, 1979; Hinkin, 1998), involves identifying and defining the various dimensions associated with a particular concept. This process entails formulating a precise and comprehensive definition of the phenomenon that researchers intend to measure (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2022). During this phase, researchers must establish specific criteria to determine the inclusion or exclusion of items, ensuring the accurate assessment of the construct (DeVellis, 2017).

This study employed a mixed-method approach (serial interviews and literature review) to generate the initial items for the IGC congruency scale, based on two key reasons: (1) The IGC congruency is a novel concept, which introduces complexities such as specificity, content intricacy, and the need for more robust empirical support. Given the conceptual newness, it was challenging to generate initial scale items solely based on the theoretical foundation (Zhang et al., 2024). (2) While prior research on user-generated content has produced a relevant measurement scale, the fundamental differences between that body of work and the IGC congruency concept made it infeasible to directly adapt highly suitable scale items from the existing item pool (Kock, 2021). To address these limitations, this research utilized a combination of serial interviews with informants and literature review to establish the structural dimensions of IGC congruency and develop an initial item pool (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2022). Hence, the dimensions of IGC congruency and the initial pool of items were generated through serial interviews as well as literature review, respectively. Finally, the content validity of the initial pool of items was examined by an expert panel.

3.2.1.1 Dimensions of IGC Congruency (Serial Interviews)

The current study employs a qualitative methodology, specifically serial in-depth interviews (see Figure 3.3), to enhance comprehension of viewers' perspectives (Read, 2018) regarding the congruency among multiple pieces of IGC within the context of travel and tourism. This research utilizes in-depth interviews rather than focus groups as the data collection method, because in-depth interviews often provide more detailed and richer insights compared to focus groups. Additionally, in-depth interviews are generally less

susceptible to social desirability bias, where participants may respond with opinions they believe are more socially acceptable rather than their actual opinions (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001).

Figure 3.3. Serial interviews flowchart
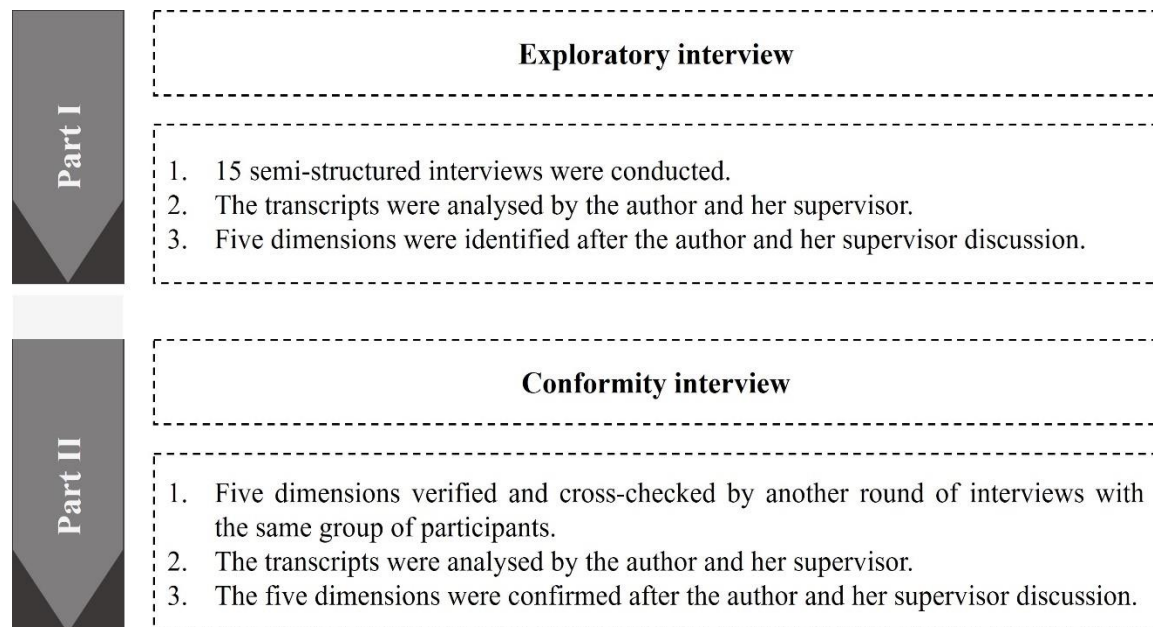
Serial Interviews Process

A purposive sampling strategy (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) was implemented, and people who have read and/or watched multiple travel blogs/reviews/social media posts produced by multiple SMIs were recruited to share their insights. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eligible participants, and the following open-ended question was prompted during the interviews:

- *How do you consider influencer-generated content created by several influencers about a specific tourist destination as congruent [incongruent]?*

Serial Interviews - Part I

The first round of interviews was conducted between mid-July and early August 2023. A total of 15 interviews (Table 3.1 provides the profiles of interviewees) were conducted, and the saturation point was reached after interviewing the last interviewee. The average completion time was 20 minutes, and all interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The author first transcribed the interview conversations for further analysis. In the next step, the author and her supervisor analyzed the transcripts separately to identify common themes and patterns. Following the initial coding process, the researchers convened to engage in comprehensive discussions aimed at refining and further developing the identified themes. A total of five dimensions were identified after synthesizing and cross-comparing the analysis results conducted by the author and her supervisor.

Table 3.1. Demographic information of the serial interviews' participants

ID	Gender	Age group	Nationality	Frequency[a]	Reliance[b]	No. SMIs[c]
Interviewee A	M	18_26	Chinese	Often	6	6-10
Interviewee B	F	27_42	Chinese	Always	6	10
Interviewee C	M	27_42	Indian	Often	6	10
Interviewee D	M	27_42	Kazakh	Sometimes	6	3
Interviewee E	M	27_42	Italian	Sometimes	5	10_20
Interviewee F	M	18_26	Indian	Often	7	4_5
Interviewee G	F	27_42	Indian	Infrequently	4	4
Interviewee H	M	27_42	Chilean	Often	4	10
Interviewee I	F	27_42	Hong Kongers	Always	4	20
Interviewee J	F	27_42	Mexican	Infrequently	4	5
Interviewee K	F	27_42	Iranian	Often	6	20
Interviewee L	F	27_42	Mexican	Infrequently	3	2
Interviewee M	F	27_42	Iranian	Sometimes	5	4
Interviewee N	F	27_42	Iranian	Sometimes	4	7
Interviewee O	M	27_42	Iranian	Sometimes	3	5

a. Frequency of using IGC for decision making
b. Reliance on IGC in decision making from 1: not at all to 7: very much.
c. SMIs being referenced before decision making.

Serial Interviews - Part II

To verify and cross-check the information, a second round of interviews was conducted with the same group of participants (Read, 2018) in mid-August 2023. The interviewees were given a list of five identified dimensions and asked to indicate which

ones they perceived as congruent and/or incongruent with one another, providing detailed explanations for their responses.

Similar to the approach used in the first round, the interview conversations were first transcribed by the author to facilitate subsequent analysis. The author and her supervisor then individually examined the transcripts to identify the dimensions. Following the initial coding phase, the researchers convened to engage in comprehensive discussions, with the objective of refining and advancing the identified themes.

Serial Interviews Findings

Participants' answers to the question, *"How do you consider influencer-generated content created by several influencers about a specific tourist destination as congruent [incongruent]?"* were classified into five dimensions, including: "Topic", "Valence", "Recommendation", "Visual", and "Travel style". Each dimension is discussed in this subsection.

- **Topic**

The first dimension identified in the interview is "Topic" (mentioned by 14 out of 15 interviewees), referring to the focus of the content provided by SMIs. As interviewee M explained, *"I will consider the influencers' posts as congruent if they cover similar aspects and topics such as the culture, people, food, and so forth."* In another example, mentioned by interviewee C, the topical congruency is explained as the focus of IGC. *"I think congruency is about the focus of the content created by influencers. Let's say for a restaurant, are they focusing on the food or decoration or the atmosphere?"* Prior research has elaborated that SMIs, particularly travel SMIs, tend to have distinct topical foci in their content about a destination, such as coverage of local attractions, cuisine, culture, and so on (Asan, 2022; Bosangit et al., 2015; Ding et al., 2023; Jiao et al., 2022; Peralta, 2019). The similarities or overlaps in the specific topics covered by SMIs in their IGC can lead to a perceived congruence or consistency among their posts, according to the relevancy

dimension of the congruency concept (Maille & Fleck, 2011). As illustrated by interview findings, several participants indicated that if the IGC from different SMIs contains information about the same key topics, such as local attractions, food, or costs, they are more likely to view this content as congruent. This suggests that topical similarity across IGC plays an important role in shaping viewers' perceptions of IGC congruency.

- **Valence**

Another remarkable antecedent of IGC congruency is "Valence" (mentioned by 13 out of 15 interviewees), which describes the sentiment [from very positive to very negative] used by SMIs to describe their experience/advice. Valence is a key component of a message, and consumers' reaction to information can vary depending on whether the message is presented positively or negatively (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Prior research identified the message valence as the component of IGC that influences viewers' responses to SMIM (Balaji et al., 2021; Xu, 2019). Viewers consider IGC valence as congruent when either positive opinions or negative opinions are provided by SMIs (Maille & Fleck, 2011). This can be best illustrated in the interviewee A's and interviewee E's explanations, *"If different posts show the details of the same things, just like they [SMIs] went to the same place for example a country and they [SMIs] got the same feelings just like they're all positive or they're all negative, I may consider the IGC as congruent."* (Interviewee A). *"If the majority say positive or majority say negative about a place, the information will be congruent. The information would be incongruent when there is no commonality among sentiment"* (Interviewee E).

- **Recommendation**

"Recommendation" (mentioned by 11 out of 15 interviewees), which refers to the advice/suggestive information provided by SMIs about the reviewed subject, was identified as another determinant of IGC congruency. Recommendation has been known as a significant advantage of IGC, particularly in the tourism products which involve service and experience (Guy et al., 2017; Purwandari et al., 2022). For the establishment of IGC

congruency, recommendations provided by SMIs should be aligned with each other (Maille & Fleck, 2011). An interview participant also acknowledged the importance of recommendation by stating, *"If they [SMIs] give me certain ways like how to explore the destination, such as must avoid things and must do things and I find that there are no conflicting views among influencers, I consider their posts as congruent"* (Interviewee F). Similarly, interviewee B mentioned that *"Let's say for Victoria Peak [an attraction in Hong Kong], I may want to see if they all have the same perspective about it, like if it really has a very good view to see the whole of Hong Kong, and if they all mentioned that the view is better than other places. Or if they all like the atmosphere and the food, and anything else."*

- **Visual**

The fourth dimension, "Visual" (mentioned by 8 out of 15 interviewees), refers to the selection of visuals posted by SMIs. Visual has been identified as the main component of IGC that SMIs leverage to create engaging content (Arthur, 2021; Gholamhosseinzadeh, 2023; Ingrassia et al., 2022). The most straightforward yet timeless method of showcasing an object (e.g., attraction) is through visual representation. SMIs use different visualization practices, and the similarity among them makes the visuals congruent for the viewers (Maille & Fleck, 2011). For example, one interviewee, H, explained: *"[…] images are within the same theme, or you can tell that this Blogger is posting the same as the other Blogger […]."* *"When they are trying to appeal to a certain group of audience let's say to promote a very chill lifestyle, then the kind of filter that they use tends to be congruent."* (Interviewee I).

- **Travel style**

The last dimension is "Travel style" (mentioned by 8 out of 15 interviewees), which describes the travel style of SMIs, which could be budget traveler, luxury traveler, adventure traveler, etc. As it is evident from the practice, the majority of SMIs consider themselves attached to a particular or some travel styles, such as solo male or female

travelers, luxury travelers, adventurous travelers, camper van travelers, etc., and create the content for the group of audience with similar interests. This has been verified in previous studies, according to Gholamhosseinzadeh (2023) as well as Duffy and Kang (2020), SMIs have objective approaches in providing content based on their interests and travel styles. Based on the relevancy dimension of congruency concept, the similarity among their travel styles is one of the antecedences of IGC congruency (Maille & Fleck, 2011), as indicated by an interviewee who stated that *"There are different influencers that each of them have their own travel style, like budget friendly travelers who usually focus on creating content about affordable accommodations, cost saving hacks or any other information related to travel affordably. There are also other influencers who showcase all the information about luxury experiences or adventure lovers who do extreme activities, etc. Yeah. So, this tool actually helps me to check both congruent and incongruent information"* (Interviewee K). Similarly, interviewee N explained that *"The travel style also makes them very consistent. Of course, when the travel style is similar, the hotels, sightseeing places, and restaurants they choose are similar, and as a result, the content becomes consistent."*

3.2.1.2 Item Generation (Literature Review)

Literature Review Process

The deductive approach to scale development employs conceptual definitions of constructs that are derived from a thorough examination of existing literature (DeVellis, 2017). Accordingly, the initial items used to measure congruency in this study were derived from a comprehensive review of past studies examining various areas of marketing.

Literature Review Findings

An initial item pool was generated from two different sources. Specifically, this study drew on insights from interviews, as well as existing congruency literature, to develop a preliminary item pool for the identified five dimensions. The initial items used to measure congruency were derived from a review of past studies on various marketing areas,

resulting in a total of 8 items identified across 28 studies (see Table 3.2). The measurement of congruency had five dimensions, and eight items were used to measure each dimension. This resulted in an initial pool of 40 items (5 dimensions × 8 items per dimension = 40 total items).

Having identified an initial classification of IGC Congruency items, the semantic differential scaling measurement format was chosen due to its extensive applicability and usefulness for one or more stimuli (DeVellis, 2017). This format is recognized for its reliability in assessing perceptions, beliefs, experiences, and attitudes, as well as for its ability to gauge the level of agreement among participants regarding the measurement items.

Table 3.2. Initial pool of IGC congruency items

Congruency items	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	Total
Compatible																					√						√		2
Consistent	√		√		√			√					√	√	√					√		√						√	10
Similar	√		√					√				√					√	√		√				√	√	√			10
Relevant				√		√			√							√	√		√								√		7
Complementary		√	√										√									√				√			5
Congruent										√	√							√		√									4
Goes well						√	√																						2
Link				√																									1

References: 1. Ahluwalia and Gürhan-Canli (2000); 2. Aaker and Keller (1990); 3. Becker-Olsen (2003); 4. d′Astous and Bitz (1995); 5. Ellen and Bone (1998); 6. Fleck and Quester (2007); 7. Galan (2009); 8. Gwinner and Eaton (1999); 9. Heckler and Childers (1992); 10. Kamins (1989); 11. Kirmani and Shiv (1998); 12. Klink and Smith (2001); 13. Lafferty et al. (2004); 14. Lane (2000); 15. Lee and Thorson (2008); 16. Lee and Faber (2007); 17. Lee et al. (2020); 18. Martin and Stewart (2001); 19. Menon and Kahn (2003); 20. Park et al. (1991); 21. Rifon et al. (2004); 22. Simonin and Ruth (1998); 23. Speed and Thompson (2000); 24. Sujan et al. (1986); 25. Walchli (2007); 26. Weeks et al. (2008); 27. Xu and Pratt (2018); 28. Xu and Yao (2015)

3.2.1.3 Content Validity (Expert Panel)

After generating an initial pool of items, experts were invited to review and evaluate the validity of the items.

Expert Panel Process

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select the participants for the interviews. This sampling approach was deemed appropriate as it ensured that individuals with the necessary expertise and knowledge were included in the study to provide appropriate information (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Regarding the sample size, it is advised to have a minimum of three experts, while exceeding a total of ten is considered unnecessary (Lynn, 1986). Hence, ten faculty members from the School of Hotel and Tourism Management at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University were selected through a purposive sampling technique. The academics had extensive knowledge of scale development and had published widely on user-generated content in reputable journals. They were invited via email to participate in the expert evaluation stage of scale development. A survey (see Appendix I) including three main parts was provided for their evaluation.

In the first part, general information about the study purpose, definition of the terms, and an illustration of IGC congruency were provided. This information was included to facilitate a clear understanding of the study's context and assist academics in completing the evaluation. In the second part, a detailed description of the main study procedures was provided to the academics in order to ensure a clear understanding of what the participants in the main study would receive. In the third part, instruction was provided to the academics for facilitating their evaluation. In this part, academics were asked to evaluate the degree to which the items are relevant to the definition of IGC congruency by rating the relevancy level on a 4-point scale. Rating items on a 4-point ordinal scale is recommended by Lynn (1986) and Waltz and Bausell (1981) and has been applied in the past literature. Although Lynn (1986) acknowledged the feasibility of employing 3- or 5-point rating scales, they recommended the use of a 4-point scale to avoid the inclusion of a neutral and ambivalent midpoint. Hence, the most frequently used 4-point scale advocated by Davis (1992): 1 (not

relevant), 2 (somewhat relevant), 3 (quite relevant), or 4 (highly relevant) was used in this study. Two open-ended questions were also provided for collecting potential comments and suggestions from academics. The results of the expert evaluations are presented in the following subsection.

Expert Panel Review Findings

The expert's evaluation took place in October 2023. The ten completed surveys have been collected and converted into an Excel file for content validity evaluation using the content validity index (Polit & Beck, 2006). The results of the expert evaluations, including amendments to scale items through the use of the content validity index, as well as amendments to survey instructions, are presented in the following two subsections, respectively.

- **Amendments on Scale Items**

According to Polit and Beck (2006), content validity index refers to the extent to which an instrument adequately represents a construct through its selection of items. Both individual items' content validity index (I-CVI) and scale-level content validity index (S-CVI) were tested. The I-CVI was calculated as the proportion of content experts giving an item a relevance rating of 3 or 4 (See Formula 1). When there are six or more experts, having I-CVIs not lower than 0.78 is recommended (Polit & Beck, 2006). Following the results of the I-CVI, items 4, 5, and 7 were removed due to their I-CVI being lower than 0.78 (see Table 3.3).

$$\text{Formula 1} \qquad \text{I-CVI} = \frac{(I_{quite\ relevant} + I_{highly\ relevant})}{Number\ of\ experts}$$

For testing scale-level content validity index, the average of the I-CVIs for all items on the scale was calculated (See Formula 2). A threshold of 0.80 or higher for the Scale Content Validity Index (S-CVI) is considered as acceptable by Polit and Beck (2006).

$$\text{Formula 2} \qquad \text{S-CVI} = \frac{I-CVI_1 + I-CVI_2 + \cdots + I-CVI_n}{n}$$

After removing items 4, 5, and 7, the S-CVI was calculated. The calculation below shows the S-CVI equal to 0.975. Having S-CVI greater than 0.80 confirmed the fit of items for the construct being measured.

$$\text{S-CVI} = \frac{0.88+1+1+1+1}{5} = 0.975$$

Table 3.3. Computation of an I-CVI for an 8-item scale with ten expert raters

Items	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7	E8	E9	E10	No. of agreement	I-CVI
Item 1	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7	0.88
Item 2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	1.00
Item 3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	1.00
Item 4	-	-	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	2	0.5
Item 5	-	-	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	3	0.25
Item 6	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	1.00
Item 7	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	-	-	5	0.63
Item 8	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8	1.00

E: refers to the experts who participated in this study
Item 1: The X highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are [1: Not compatible – 7: Compatible] with one another.
Item 2: The X highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are [1: Inconsistent – 7: Consistent] with one another.
Item 3: The X highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are [1: Dissimilar – 7: Similar] with one another.
Item 4: The X highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are [1: Irrelevant – 7: Relevant] with one another.
Item 5: The X highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are [1: Not complementary – 7: Complementary] with one another.
Item 6: The X highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are [1: Incongruent – 7: Congruent] with one another.
Item 7: The X highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are [1: Does not go well – 7: Goes well] with one another.
Item 8: The X highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are [1: Not link – 7: Link] with one another.

Table 3.4. Amendment of the survey's instructions and items

Revisions
Influencer-generated contents (IGCs) ➔ Influencer-generated content (IGC)
Please recall your most recent experience of coming across with three or above influencer-generated content shared by different but not the same influencers about a specific destination. ➔ Please recall your most recent experience of coming across three or more influencer-generated content about a specific destination by different influencers.
In the subsequent pages: Group A refers to the IGC (e.g., Instagram posts, YouTube videos) you viewed and recalled. Group B refers to the influencers who contributed those IGC you viewed and recalled.
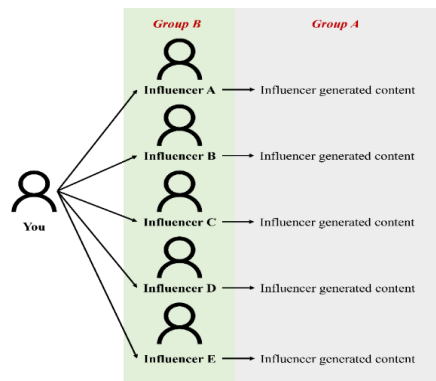
➜ Influencers (see green box) should be considered as multiple influencers who contributed their own IGC you have viewed and recalled.

➜ IGC (see gray box) should be considered as multiple pieces of IGC (e.g., Instagram posts, YouTube videos) you viewed and recalled.

➜
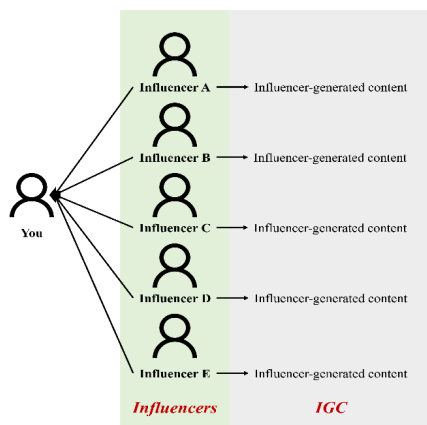
The valence (i.e., sentiment used to describe their experience)
➜ The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience)

The aspects (i.e., focus/topic of the contents)
➜ The topic

The X highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are [1: Dissimilar – 7: Similar] with one another.
➜ The x highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are [1: Dissimilar – 7: Similar] to one another.

The X highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are [1: Not link – 7: Link] with one another.
➜ The X highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are [1: Not link – 7: Link] to one another.

- **Amendments on Survey Instructions**

Reviewing the experts' responses to two open-ended questions, which requested their suggestions and comments about the survey, resulted in some revisions. Experts' comments were reviewed, and the survey was revised accordingly. The changes are shown in Table 3.4.

As shown in Table 3.4, the experts noticed grammatical errors and requested revisions. For instance, they pointed out that "IGCs" should be revised to "IGC" because "content" is an uncountable noun when referring to ideas, and therefore should be singular. They also suggested replacing the phrase "different but not the same influencers" with "different influencers" for clarity. Additionally, the experts advised using "influencers" and "IGC" directly instead of referring to them as "Group B" and "Group A" in the figure, as it would be easier for participants to understand. The experts also mentioned that some terminology, including valence and sentiment, may be unclear for participants because they might not be familiar with the terms. Providing further explanation was recommended. Therefore, valence was explained as the negativity and/or positivity of experience. They also recommended directly using the term "topic" instead of "aspects" (i.e., focus/topic of the contents) to make the items more transparent for participants.

3.2.1.4 Operationalizing IGC Congruency Scale

This study conceptualized IGC congruency as a second-order factor model with five dimensions for three key reasons. First, based on the conceptualization and serial interviews, there is initial evidence to suggest that IGC congruency is a latent variable that is manifested through the identified dimensions, rather than being formed by them. Second, in contrast to formative constructs commonly used in tourism research, IGC congruency can be easily articulated by individuals themselves, indicating that it is not merely a theoretical construct defined by its dimensions and underlying theory (Kock, 2021). Third, modeling IGC congruency as a reflective construct helps overcome potential limitations associated with a formative measurement model, such as difficulties in interpreting the model weights, high covariances among items, and lack of fit indices when estimated using partial least squares approaches.

3.2.2   Stage 2: Scale Purification

After receiving input from the expert panel, the generated scale items underwent a rigorous process of purification and refinement. Following the purification of the generated

items, a pilot study was conducted to verify further the robustness of the scale's construction and its potential for generalizability to broader populations and contexts. This multi-step approach helped to strengthen the psychometric properties and real-world applicability of the final measurement instrument. The details of the pre-test and pilot-test are presented in the following subsections, respectively.

3.2.2.1 Pre-test

According to Churchill (1979), the scale purification stage involves pre-testing, analysis, and validation checks to ensure the validity and applicability of the generated items. This is done to verify the validity and usefulness of the generated items by refining and optimizing the measurement items.

Sampling and Data Collection

In this stage, a group of fifty doctoral students specializing in tourism and hospitality was selected. A purposive sampling technique was employed to deliberately recruit participants with the necessary knowledge about questionnaire evaluation (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Similar to the experts' evaluation stage, the participants were asked to review the survey instructions, rate their level of agreement with each statement using a 4-point ordinal scale recommended by Lynn (1986) and Waltz and Bausell (1981), and provide comments on the survey's instructions as well as items. The survey (see Appendix II) was emailed to the participants.

Pre-test Findings

- **Amendments on Scale Items**

The purification exercise took place in November 2023. Fifty completed surveys have been collected and converted to an Excel file for content validity evaluation by using both

statistical criteria (Bhat et al., 2022). For each item within the instrument, the evaluation of intra-item and intra-factor statistics involved assessing the mean, standard deviation (SD), as well as the degree of skewness and kurtosis coefficient (Arora & Kaur, 2019).

According to Dawes (2008), to meet the assumption of intra-item validity, items should possess a mean value that is near the positive side of the central scale point, i.e., 2.5 in the case of a 4-point ordinal scale. Table 3.5 presents descriptive statistics for the intra-item coefficients. The results in Table 3.5 indicate that the mean values for all items are higher than 2.5. Additionally, the majority of items have standard deviations (SD) that are close to or below 1 (Bhat et al., 2022). Table 3.5 shows that the first criteria of Intra-item statistics were met.

Table 3.5. Results of intra-item statistics (descriptive statistics)

Items	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Topic 1	3.30	.789	-.857	.015
Topic 2	3.56	.733	-1.350	.289
Topic 3	3.28	.882	-1.151	.677
Topic 4	3.26	.853	-.743	-.624
Topic 5	2.88	.940	-.213	-1.057
Valence 1	3.44	.644	-.723	-.442
Valence 2	3.54	.706	-1.235	.166
Valence 3	3.30	.863	-1.032	.230
Valence 4	3.34	.848	-1.147	.586
Valence 5	2.96	.925	-.241	-1.171
Recommendation 1	3.48	.735	-1.694	3.405
Recommendation 2	3.56	.611	-1.075	.191
Recommendation 3	3.42	.835	-1.159	.156
Recommendation 4	3.46	.813	-1.288	.580
Recommendation 5	2.86	.926	-.193	-.997
Visuals 1	3.36	.776	-1.010	.379
Visuals 2	3.22	.932	-.935	-.142
Visuals 3	3.22	.954	-.905	-.337
Visuals 4	3.26	.899	-1.075	.369
Visuals 5	2.86	1.010	-.450	-.872
Travel style of influencers 1	3.34	.772	-.959	.330
Travel style of influencers 2	3.28	.927	-.920	-.425
Travel style of influencers 3	3.32	.844	-1.102	.535
Travel style of influencers 4	3.16	1.037	-.905	-.477
Travel style of influencers 5	2.84	.997	-.309	-1.017

Table 3.6 presents descriptive statistics for intra-factor coefficients. The five constructs or factors were derived by calculating their mean scores from the corresponding items. The results in Table 3.6 indicate that all five constructs exhibit means that are in proximity to the central scale point of relevance rating, which is 2.5 in the case of a 4-point ordinal scale. Additionally, the standard deviation (SD) for each construct is below 1. Analysis of the skewness coefficients reveals that they are all below 1, while the kurtosis coefficients are below 1.5. These findings indicate that the criterion for intra-factor statistics has been satisfied.

Table 3.6. Results of intra-factor statistics (descriptive statistics)

Items	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Topic	3.26	0.573	-.343	-.930
Valence	3.32	0.561	-.420	-.801
Recommendation	3.36	0.505	-.525	-.169
Visuals	3.18	0.599	-.650	-.053
Travel style of influencers	3.19	0.721	-.780	-.019

Hence, the process of purifying the scale by examining descriptive statistics within individual items and factors did not lead to the elimination of any items or factors based on statistics. According to scale purification practice (Wieland et al., 2018), however, the item "Link - do not Link" was deemed inappropriate and removed from the list of items for each factor. A summary of the items after statistical and judgmental purification has been presented in Table 3.7.

Table 3.7. Revised version of IGC congruency measurement items

Items
Topic

The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

                    1   2   3   4   5   6   7

Not compatible	Compatible
Inconsistent	Consistent
Dissimilar	Similar
Incongruent	Congruent

Valence

The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

                    1   2   3   4   5   6   7

Not compatible	Compatible

Inconsistent	Consistent
Dissimilar	Similar
Incongruent	Congruent

Recommendation

The recommendation (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

<div align="center">1   2   3   4   5   6   7</div>

Not compatible	Compatible
Inconsistent	Consistent
Dissimilar	Similar
Incongruent	Congruent

Visuals

The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

<div align="center">1   2   3   4   5   6   7</div>

Not compatible	Compatible
Inconsistent	Consistent
Dissimilar	Similar
Incongruent	Congruent

Travel style of influencers

The travel style of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another.

<div align="center">1   2   3   4   5   6   7</div>

Not compatible	Compatible
Inconsistent	Consistent
Dissimilar	Similar
Incongruent	Congruent

- **Amendments on Survey Instructions**

After analyzing the feedback provided by doctoral students in response to two open-ended questions about the survey, some revisions were made. The comments from the participants were carefully assessed, and adjustments were made to the survey accordingly. During the review process, it was noted that specific instructions in the survey were ambiguous, as pointed out by the doctoral students. They specifically highlighted concerns about the term "influencer", suggesting that it could potentially impact participants' judgment or evaluation. It was mentioned that participants who do not perceive themselves as being influenced by anyone might be hesitant to complete the questionnaire or provide inaccurate information. To address this issue, the phrase "different influencers" was modified to "different influencers you are following" in order to provide more explicit clarification. Furthermore, it was recommended to provide further explanation in the figure, specifically

regarding the IGC being about the same destination. To enhance clarity, the phrase "Influencer-generated content" was revised to "IGC about destination A," to emphasize the focus of the IGC. The changes are shown in Table 3.8.

Table 3.8. Amendment of the survey's instructions

Revisions
Please recall your most recent experience of coming across three or more influencer-generated content about a specific destination by different influencers.
➔ Please recall your most recent experience of coming across three or more influencer-generated content about a specific destination by **different influencers you are following.**

3.2.2.2 Pilot test

Following the purification of the generated items, a pilot study was undertaken to verify the robustness of the scale's construction and its potential for generalizability. The objective of the pilot study was to validate and confirm the instrument's content while identifying any potential challenges related to the design and methodology of data collection.

Sampling and Data Collection

Regarding the sample size, this study utilizes the sample size ratio of 10/1 as recommended by Hair et al. (2017). Consequently, considering the inclusion of 20

measurement items, this study necessitates a minimum of 200 samples. The research instrument for the pilot study was developed using Qualtrics' survey design tool, recognized for its user-friendly interface, appealing layout, and simplicity. Given that the target participants were based in the United States, the survey was conducted in English. It included multiple sections, which are outlined in Appendix III. Employing a purposive sampling approach, the pilot study was conducted using an online panel via CloudResearch. The participants were asked to answer two screening questions. The primary objective of the first screening question was to exclude participants who had previously participated in the study because this study is divided into several studies, and excluding those who had previously participated can prevent any conflicts. The second question aimed to specifically target participants who watched, read, or saw any travel-related content shared by SMIs. Only samples that met these criteria were used for data analysis. The pilot test was conducted in early January 2024, during which a total of 200 questionnaires were collected.

Pilot-test Findings

- **Data Screening**

The collected data underwent a screening process to determine its quality for analysis. This screening process included detecting outliers, missing values, and a normality check (Kline, 2011). To identify issues, box plots and descriptive analysis were utilized as practical tools (Hair et al., 2018). SPSS software version 26 was used to conduct data screening accurately. Additionally, attention was given to participants who responded to all survey items (i.e., straight-line responses). Furthermore, the time taken by participants to complete the survey was examined, considering that the survey was conducted online. It should be noted that missing values were not recorded, as participants were obliged to answer all questions in the survey.

- **Normality Test**

Prior to analyzing the data, a test for normality was conducted to evaluate whether the data adhered to a normal distribution. The normality of the data was assessed by examining its skewness and kurtosis measures. Most item distributions align with normality, though slight left-skewness and platykurtic behavior were observed. These deviations do not rule out normality but suggest the distributions are slightly flatter and have lighter tails than a perfect normal distribution (Costello & Osborne, 2005; Kim, 2013). Overall, the data can be considered approximately normal, with only minor deviations. Detailed information on descriptive analysis is presented in Table 3.9.

Table 3.9. Descriptive analysis in the pilot test (n = 200)

Items	Mean	SD [a]	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	SE [b]	Statistic	SE
The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Not compatible: Compatible	5.15	1.619	-.655	.172	-.183	.342
The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Inconsistent: Consistent	5.32	1.462	-.638	.172	-.244	.342
The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Dissimilar: Similar	5.17	1.478	-.598	.172	-.296	.342
The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Incongruent: Congruent	4.94	1.550	-.389	.172	-.508	.342
The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Not compatible: Compatible	4.84	1.662	-.551	.172	-.419	.342
The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Inconsistent: Consistent	4.79	1.588	-.342	.172	-.547	.342
The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Dissimilar: Similar	4.83	1.609	-.465	.172	-.500	.342
The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience)	4.91	1.581	-.590	.172	-.220	.342

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highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Incongruent: Congruent						
The recommendation (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Not compatible: Compatible	5.15	1.546	-.485	.172	-.539	.342
The recommendation (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Inconsistent: Consistent	5.16	1.418	-.459	.172	-.414	.342
The recommendation (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Dissimilar: Similar	4.99	1.596	-.546	.172	-.484	.342
The recommendation (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Incongruent: Congruent	4.95	1.619	-.407	.172	-.519	.342
The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Not compatible: Compatible	5.21	1.552	-.722	.172	-.084	.342
The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Inconsistent: Consistent	5.00	1.482	-.477	.172	-.302	.342
The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Dissimilar: Similar	4.89	1.562	-.239	.172	-1.019	.342
The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Incongruent: Congruent	5.10	1.593	-.624	.172	-.156	.342
The travel style of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another. - Not compatible: Compatible	4.84	1.520	-.195	.172	-.737	.342
The travel style of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another. - Inconsistent: Consistent	4.77	1.506	-.128	.172	-.643	.342
The travel style of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____	4.81	1.557	-.286	.172	-.744	.342

with/to one another. - Dissimilar: Similar						
The travel style of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another. - Incongruent: Congruent	4.97	1.461	-.386	.172	-.329	.342

a. SD = Standard deviation
b. SE = Standard Error

- **Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

Table 3.10 provides a comprehensive overview of the sociodemographic characteristics of participants involved in the pilot study. In the final section of the survey, participants were asked to disclose specific information, including their gender, age, nationality, the extent to which they referenced IGC for travel decision-making, their level of reliance on IGC for making travel decisions, and the number of SMIs they used as a reference source for these decisions. The results reveal that female participants accounted for a larger share of the sample (60%) compared to male participants (39%). The age distribution of the sample showed that Millennials represented the largest group (32.5%), closely followed by Generation X (31.5%), indicating significant participation from individuals within these age cohorts. In terms of ethnicity, the majority of participants identified as White Americans (82.5%), while African Americans made up 8.5% of the participants.

Regarding the usage of IGC for travel decision-making, approximately half (49%) of the participants indicated that they referenced IGC during their decision-making process. A notable finding was that participants reported a high level of reliance on IGC, with many indicating a reliance score exceeding four on the scale used. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority (92.4%) of participants reported referring to IGC from multiple SMIs, highlighting the common practice of using content created by multiple SMIs. The most frequently utilized platforms for accessing IGC included YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, underscoring the pivotal role these social media platforms play in shaping travel inspiration and behaviors.

Table 3.10. Demographic information of participants in the pilot test (n = 200)

Items	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	120	60.0
	Male	78	39.0
	Non-binary/third gender	1	0.5
	Prefer not to say	1	0.5
Age	18 – 26	20	10.0
	27 – 42	65	32.5
	43 – 58	63	31.5
	59 – 68	28	14.0
	Over 69	24	12.0
Ethnicity	White Americans	165	82.5
	African Americans	17	8.5
	Latino Americans	7	3.5
	Asian Americans	2	1.0
	Others	9	4.5
Level of reference to IGC	Never	22	11.0
	Infrequently	26	13.0
	Sometimes	98	49.0
	Often	43	21.5
	Always	11	5.5
Level of reliance on IGC	Not at all	28	14.0
	Slightly	23	11.5
	Somewhat	30	15.0
	Moderately	35	17.5
	Quite a bit	48	24.0
	Very	21	10.5
	Very much	14	7.0
Number of SMIs	One SMIs	15	7.6
	More than one SMIs	185	92.4
Social media platform	Instagram	109	23.4
	Facebook	116	24.9
	YouTube	125	26.8
	TikTok	68	14.6
	Pinterest	37	7.9
	Other	11	2.4

- **Exploratory Factor Analysis of IGC Congruency Scale**

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to identify the underlying domains of the IGC congruency scale using the principal component factor extraction method and varimax rotation method (Hair et al., 2010). The factor model generated a four-factor solution model. All factor loadings ranged from 0.578 to 0.799. Barlett's test of sphericity

($\chi2$=2569.566, p <.001) and KMO measure of sampling adequacy (.911) evidenced a validation of the factor model. The four-factor structure explained 67.89% of the variance. The four factors were labeled as follows: Content, visual, travel style, and valence. Their reliability alphas for all three domains were higher than the criterion of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978), indicating each domain showed internal consistency among items. Mean values in each domain were 5.104, 5.05, 4.849, and 4.838, respectively. Table 3.11 shows the findings of the exploratory factor analysis of items associated with the IGC congruency scale.

Table 3.11. EFA of the IGC congruency scale in the pilot study (n = 200)

Domains and items	Communalities	Factor loadings	Mean
Domain 1: Content (Eigenvalue= 9.61, Variance explained= 19.42%, Cronbach's α= .893, Grand mean = 5.104)			
The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Dissimilar: Similar	0.566	0.688	5.17
The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Not compatible: Compatible	0.618	0.687	5.15
The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Inconsistent: Consistent	0.601	0.676	5.32
The recommendation (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Inconsistent: Consistent	0.711	0.669	5.16
The recommendation (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Incongruent: Congruent	0.700	0.629	4.95
The recommendations (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Not compatible: Compatible	0.607	0.618	5.15
The recommendation (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Dissimilar: Similar	0.676	0.589	4.99
The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Incongruent: Congruent	0.629	0.578	4.94

Domain 2: Visual (Eigenvalue= 1.502, Variance explained= 17.39%, Cronbach's α= .884, Grand mean = 5.05)			
The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Incongruent: Congruent	0.741	0.747	5.10
The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Inconsistent: Consistent	0.683	0.669	5.00
The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Dissimilar: Similar	0.662	0.656	4.89
The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Not compatible: Compatible	0.667	0.637	5.21
Domain 3: Travel style (Eigenvalue= 1.456, Variance explained= 15.60%, Cronbach's α= .866, Grand mean = 4.849)			
The travel style of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another. - Inconsistent: Consistent	0.761	0.756	4.77
The travel style of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another. - Dissimilar: Similar	0.761	0.748	4.81
The travel style of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another. - Incongruent: Congruent	0.687	0.676	4.97
The travel style of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another. - Not compatible: Compatible	0.607	0.647	4.84
Domain 3: Valence (Eigenvalue= 1.007, Variance explained= 15.47%, Cronbach's α= .867, Grand mean = 4.838)			
The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Inconsistent: Consistent	0.737	0.799	4.79
The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Dissimilar: Similar	0.734	0.770	4.83
The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Not compatible: Compatible	0.759	0.766	4.84
The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Incongruent: Congruent	0.689	0.725	4.91

- **Revision of Questionnaire for the Main Survey**

Having validated the measurement items through expert reviews, purification by doctoral students in tourism and hospitality, and a pilot study using a dataset of 200 participants, the questionnaire was revised for the primary survey. A total of 20 items were used for the questionnaire. Based on a careful process of scale development and validation, the items were considered valid and reliable before the primary survey was launched. The details of the retained items for the primary survey have been presented in Table 3.12.

Table 3.12. IGC congruency measurement items retained for the main study

Items
Topic
The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.
1   2   3   4   5   6   7
Not compatible   Compatible
Inconsistent   Consistent
Dissimilar   Similar
Incongruent   Congruent
Valence
The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.
1   2   3   4   5   6   7
Not compatible   Compatible
Inconsistent   Consistent
Dissimilar   Similar
Incongruent   Congruent
Recommendation
The recommendations (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.
1   2   3   4   5   6   7
Not compatible   Compatible
Inconsistent   Consistent
Dissimilar   Similar
Incongruent   Congruent
Visuals
The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.
1   2   3   4   5   6   7
Not compatible   Compatible
Inconsistent   Consistent
Dissimilar   Similar
Incongruent   Congruent

Travel style of influencers						

The travel style of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not compatible								Compatible
Inconsistent								Consistent
Dissimilar								Similar
Incongruent								Congruent

3.2.3   Stage 3: Scale Validation

After refining the IGC congruency dimensions and items, a main study was conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the scale. This cross-validation process involved several analyses, including the use of exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis techniques. Detailed information about the data collection, study participants, data analysis, and scale validation findings is subsequently explained.

3.2.3.1 Sampling and Data Collection

Participants

In order to establish appropriate criteria and define the sample frame for the main study, participants were purposively selected based on specific parameters. The study specifically focused on participants from the United States due to several key factors. Firstly, the United States is recognized as having a substantial number of social media users, ranking third globally after China and India, with 302.25 million users according to Statista (2022). Although the total number of social media users in the United States is lower compared to China and India, the ratio of users to the population is higher, indicating a significant presence of social media usage within the country. Moreover, the social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) commonly used in the United States have a global reach, making them influential on a worldwide scale. Additionally, the United States is a prominent segment that holds a significant share in the global outbound tourism market, as highlighted by the World Tourism Organization (2021). This aligns with the research focus, emphasizing the relevance of studying social media usage in a context

where tourism plays a substantial role. Furthermore, the official language in the United States is English, which reduces potential language barriers for the author conducting this study. This linguistic alignment facilitates communication and data collection processes, ensuring clarity and accuracy in the research outcomes.

The second requirement for inclusion in the sample was that participants must have engaged with travel-related content shared by multiple SMIs. The emphasis on travel-related content was due to the distinct nature of tourism products. Furthermore, the term multiple was used to specifically target participants who received content from a group of SMIs. Only participants who met these criteria were considered representative of social media users included in the study.

Sample Size

The determination of sample size in scale development studies is crucial and depends on the number of items associated with each construct under investigation. It is essential to ensure sufficient representation within the sample to enhance the validity of the study. Previous studies have proposed different guidelines for determining sample size, such as having at least five times as many observations as variables (Hair et al., 2010) or ensuring a larger sample size to increase the likelihood of statistical significance (Cohen, 1988). Considering the need for cross-validation, the dataset should be divided into two subsets - one for exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and another for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). To ensure a valid and statistically significant sample size for this scale validation study, a target sample size of 600 participants was chosen. This sample size is deemed appropriate based on prior research, which followed the same procedures (e.g., Kock, 2021; Lee & Park, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024).

Instrument and Measurement

The instrument for this study was developed using Qualtrics' survey design tool, renowned for its user-friendly interface, visually appealing presentation, and ease of use.

Considering that the target participants were from the United States, the survey questionnaire was designed in English. The survey comprised multiple sections, as outlined in Appendix IV. The initial section served as an introduction, providing participants with concise information about the study, their right to withdraw from the survey, and the confidentiality of their data. Towards the conclusion of this section, participants were asked to respond to a consent-related question.

Participants who consented to participate in the study proceeded to the next section, which included eligibility check questions. This section aimed to ensure that participants met specific criteria. The first eligibility check question, *"Have you ever participated in this survey before*?*"*, was asked to exclude individuals who had previously taken part in the study. The second eligibility check question, *"Have you ever watched, read, or seen travel-related content shared by multiple influencers?"*, was asked to include only a representative sample of participants for the study.

After passing the eligibility screening questions, participants entered the third section. In this section, participants were provided with definitions of influencers and influencer-generated content to ensure a clear understanding of these terms consistent with the study. Additionally, participants were asked to recall their most recent experience of coming across three or more influencer-generated content about a specific destination by different influencers they were following." To help them keep in mind multiple influencers and multiple pieces of IGC while answering the questions, a visualization was used (see Appendix IV). Once participants became familiar with the study context, they proceeded to answer the main questions.

The fourth section included measurement items for the developed IGC congruency scale. Participants were asked to answer these questions in the semantic differential scaling measurement format. Additionally, to ensure scale validity and identify careless participants, attention check questions have been recommended by previous literature (e.g., Berinsky et al., 2014; Huang et al., 2015). In line with these recommendations, a study conducted by Kung et al. (2018) confirmed that attention checks do not pose a threat to scale validity, contrary to what was expected based on existing literature. The study also found that attention check questions did not significantly influence participants' answers to or understanding of the scale. Therefore, one attention check questions *"I am selecting*

"strongly disagree" to show I am paying attention to this question" were utilized in this section of survey.

The last section included questions about both the social media usage characteristics and demographic information of the participants. Specifically, the social media usage characteristics section encompassed variables such as the level of reference to IGC for travel decision-making, the level of reliance on IGC for travel decision-making, and the number of SMIs used as a reference source for travel decision-making. Additionally, demographic information was collected in the form of gender, age, and nationality.

Data Collection

The data collection was conducted using CloudResearch, an online survey company. Compared to other platforms, the data collected through CloudResearch exhibited higher quality. Participants on CloudResearch demonstrated a greater likelihood of passing attention checks, providing meaningful responses, adhering to instructions, retaining previously presented information, possessing unique IP addresses and geolocations, and taking their time to carefully read all survey items (Berry et al., 2022; Douglas et al., 2023). CloudResearch also excelled in allocating participants from the United States and adhering to specific participant criteria provided by researchers. Overall, using an online survey company like CloudResearch not only saves time and effort in participant recruitment but also ensures higher data quality.

The data collection employed a purposive sampling technique, which is a form of non-probability sampling. This approach is efficient when studying a specific domain that requires input from experts (Tongco, 2007). The survey was conducted between mid-February and late February 2024, during which a total of 600 questionnaires were collected.

3.2.3.2 Data Analysis

For the data analysis, two main software tools, SPSS version 26 and AMOS version 26, were utilized to capitalize on their respective strengths and effectively address the research objectives. The data analysis entailed both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, such as means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis values, and percentages, were employed to examine variables associated with normality, social media usage characteristics, demographic characteristics, and other explanatory factors. Rigorous measures were taken to ensure data quality, including a thorough examination of missing values and outliers upon data receipt. In this study, the Qualtrics survey tool was employed, and the challenge of missing data was tackled by implementing the "add requirement" function, which mandated participants to provide answers for all survey questions. Furthermore, outlier detection procedures were implemented.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

To cross-validate the dimensionality of the scale, the sample was randomly split into two subsamples for scale validation (DeVellis, 2017). EFA was employed to explore the factor structure of the IGC congruency scale. EFA is particularly suitable for examining scales in their initial stages of development (Byrne, 2016). The suitability and adequacy of the data for EFA were assessed based on the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy (≥ 0.7) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p \leq 0.05$) (Hair et al., 2018). The principal axis factoring technique with oblique rotation was employed to examine the dimensional structure of the items. Factors were extracted based on eigenvalues ≥ 1, and the principle was to exclude items with factor loadings of < 0.4 and a communality of < 0.4 (Hair et al., 2018).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

After completing the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), the study proceeded with Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to validate the dimensions and measurements

obtained from the EFA, as suggested by Gerbing and Anderson (1988). The CFA also aimed to address any potential need for model modification. To meet the prerequisites for conducting the CFA, various aspects were evaluated, including parameter estimates, explained variance, covariance between dimensions, and residual error variance of observed variables. Additionally, model fit indices such as the Chi-square statistic, goodness-of-fit index (GFI), root mean square error approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) were assessed, following the methodology recommended by Hair et al. (2018). Several researchers have suggested specific thresholds for these indices, including a normed Chi-square value ranging from 1 to 5, CFI $\geq$ 0.8, RMSEA $\leq$ 0.08, TLI $\geq$ 0.8, and GFI $>$ 0.8 (Baumgartner & Homburg, 1996; Hair et al., 2018; Otoo et al., 2020).

Furthermore, alternative measurement models were developed and compared to determine the optimal fit of the measurement model to the data, following the guidance of Anderson and Gerbing (1988) and Baumgartner and Homburg (1996).

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the scale, several analyses were conducted. Construct validity refers to the extent to which the measured variables accurately represent the underlying theoretical construct they are intended to measure (Hair et al., 2018). Evaluating both discriminant and convergent validity is crucial in assessing construct validity. Convergent validity, as described by Kline (2011), is achieved when the measurement items exhibit moderate inter-correlations or share a substantial proportion of variance. On the other hand, Hair et al. (2018) defined discriminant validity as the measurement's ability to differentiate from theoretically unrelated constructs.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was utilized, and convergent validity and discriminant validity were examined within this framework. Convergent validity was determined by assessing the average variance extracted (AVE), with a threshold of 0.5 or higher, as supported by previous studies (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Lee & Park, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the squared

correlation coefficients with the AVE values. Higher AVE scores indicated stronger evidence for discriminant validity, following the methodology proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981).

To assess the reliability of items within each factor, composite reliability was examined using Cronbach's alpha. A threshold of 0.7 or higher for the alpha value was employed, as recommended by Nunnally (1978).

3.2.3.3 Scale Validation Findings

Data Screening

A total of 600 responses were obtained. The collected data underwent a screening process to determine its quality for analysis. Initially, attention was given to participants who failed the attention check questions, provided straight-line responses across all survey items, and spent less than 3 minutes completing the questionnaire. Notably, missing values were not recorded as participants were obligated to answer all questions. Fifty-three responses were dropped as they failed in the first screening stage. In the next step, box plots and descriptive analysis were utilized to examine outliers, after which 20 questionnaires were identified as outliers and were removed. Consequently, 527 questionnaires were used for the data analysis.

Normality Test

Prior to analyzing the data, a test for normality was conducted to evaluate whether the data adhered to a normal distribution. This procedure is significant in structural equation modeling and involves assessing skewness and kurtosis (Hair et al., 2018). In the context of structural equation modeling, it is generally deemed acceptable for skewness values to range between -3 and +3 (Brown, 2006), while a kurtosis value of between -7 and +7 is considered acceptable for this study (Byrne, 2016). As indicated in Table 3.13, the skewness values ranged from -0.647 to -0.237, while the kurtosis values ranged from -0.535 to -0.054. These results suggest that the data followed a normal distribution.

Table 3.13. Descriptive statistics of measurement items (n = 527)

Items	Mean	SD [a]	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	SE [b]	Statistic	SE [b]
Topic 1	5.12	1.626	-.647	.106	-.109	.212
Topic 2	5.10	1.540	-.583	.106	-.138	.212
Topic 3	4.98	1.595	-.586	.106	-.201	.212
Topic 4	4.89	1.547	-.548	.106	-.054	.212
Valence 1	4.84	1.596	-.526	.106	-.210	.212
Valence 2	4.85	1.507	-.373	.106	-.412	.212
Valence 3	4.87	1.532	-.406	.106	-.417	.212
Valence 4	4.78	1.514	-.312	.106	-.409	.212
Recommendation 1	5.03	1.489	-.596	.106	-.156	.212
Recommendation 2	4.98	1.471	-.456	.106	-.429	.212
Recommendation 3	4.89	1.419	-.237	.106	-.507	.212
Recommendation 4	5.01	1.396	-.343	.106	-.518	.212
Visual 1	5.12	1.562	-.620	.106	-.277	.212
Visual 2	5.10	1.437	-.443	.106	-.363	.212
Visual 3	5.01	1.520	-.449	.106	-.416	.212
Visual 4	5.01	1.427	-.416	.106	-.271	.212
Travel style 1	4.74	1.682	-.492	.106	-.535	.212
Travel style 2	4.81	1.578	-.437	.106	-.404	.212
Travel style 3	4.64	1.619	-.366	.106	-.483	.212
Travel style 4	4.81	1.531	-.386	.106	-.432	.212

a. SD = Standard deviation
b. SE = Standard Error

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Table 3.14 provides a detailed overview of the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants in the main study. In the concluding section of the survey, participants were asked to provide information on their gender, age, nationality, frequency of referencing IGC for travel decision-making, level of reliance on IGC, and the number of SMIs they used as reference sources. The data reveal that female participants made up the majority of the sample at 59.8%, compared to 39.7% male participants. The sample's age distribution was primarily composed of Millennials (aged 27-42), who represented 35.1% of participants, followed closely by Generation X (aged 43-58), making up 29.0%. In terms of ethnic background, a significant portion of the participants identified as White Americans (86.9%), while African Americans accounted for 7.8% of the sample.

Regarding the use of IGC in travel decision-making, 47.2% of participants reported that they sometimes referenced IGC when planning their travels. A notable observation was the

high reliance on IGC, with many participants indicating a reliance level exceeding four on the scale used to measure dependency. This trend underscores the substantial influence that IGC holds over travel-related decision-making processes. Additionally, the findings highlighted that the vast majority of participants (91.8%) referred to multiple SMIs for travel-related content. YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram emerged as the most frequently preferred platforms for accessing IGC, reflecting the significant role these social media platforms play in shaping consumers' travel inspiration and behaviors.

Table 3.14. Demographic information of participants in the main study (n = 527)

Items	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	315	59.8
	Male	209	39.7
	Non-binary/third gender	3	0.6
	Prefer not to say	-	-
Age	18 – 26	44	8.3
	27 – 42	185	35.1
	43 – 58	153	29.0
	59 – 68	69	13.1
	Over 69	76	14.4
Ethnicity	White Americans	458	86.9
	African Americans	41	7.8
	Latino Americans	17	3.2
	Asian-Americans	8	1.5
	Others	3	0.6
Level of reference to IGC	Never	51	9.7
	Infrequently	82	15.6
	Sometimes	249	47.2
	Often	119	22.6
	Always	26	4.9
Level of reliance on IGC	Not at all	80	15.2
	Slightly	55	10.4
	Somewhat	85	16.1
	Moderately	107	20.3
	Quite a bit	100	19.0
	Very	61	11.6
	Very much	39	7.4
Number of SMIs	One SMIs	43	8.2
	More than one SMIs	484	91.8
Social media platform	Instagram	242	21.1
	Facebook	286	24.9
	YouTube	349	30.4
	TikTok	165	14.4
	Pinterest	88	7.7
	Other	18	1.6

Cross-validation of Data

To ensure adherence to the guideline that CFA models should not use the results of EFA on the same sample, the dataset was divided into two subsamples. This division, endorsed by DeVellis (2017), aims to improve generalization and ensure the reliability of the findings. The "random sample of cases" function in SPSS was employed to split the dataset, resulting in two subsamples comprising 264 and 263 samples, respectively. The first subsample underwent EFA to identify the underlying dimensions, while the second subsample was subjected to CFA.

Exploratory Factor Analysis of the Measurement Model

The principal axis factoring with promax rotation was employed to identify the underlying dimensions of IGC congruency. This specific rotation method has been utilized by past literature (Lee & Park, 2023), as it is beneficial for handling large datasets (Field, 2018). In this study, the principle was only to include factors with eigenvalues $\geq$ 1, and items with factor loadings of < 0.4 and a communality of < 0.4 (Hair et al., 2018). Moreover, Harman's single-factor test was conducted, revealing that the first extracted factor accounts for only 41.93% (below 50%). As a result, common method bias was not a concern (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

The results of the EFA have been presented in Table 3.15. The KMO value of 0.912 illustrates that the 264 exploratory sample size was adequate and suitable for the study. Additionally, Barlett's test of sphericity ($\chi2$ = 3504.306, p < .001) demonstrated the factorability of the measurement model. The factor model generated a five-factor solution model with all factor loadings ranging from 0.886 to 0.578. The five-factor structure explained 65.471% of the variance. Communalities in these dimensions ranged from 0.500 to 0.766, suggesting that 50% to 76.6% of the variance was explained in the specific dimensions. The internal consistency of each dimension was deemed satisfactory as indicated by Cronbach's alpha scores exceeding 0.70 (Hair et al., 2018). The five factors were labeled as "Travel style", "Topic", "Valence", "Visuals", and "Recommendation".

Table 3.15. EFA results of IGC congruency scale (n = 264)

Factors and items	Communalities	Factor loadings	Mean
Factor 1: Travel style (Eigenvalue= 4.63, Variance explained= 43.01%, Cronbach's α= .891, Grand mean = 4.79)			
The travel style of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another. - Dissimilar: Similar	.706	.846	4.70
The travel style of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another. - Inconsistent: Consistent	.709	.826	4.80
The travel style of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another. - Incongruent: Congruent	.656	.814	4.85
The travel style of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another. - Not compatible: Compatible	.654	.778	4.80
Factor 2: Topic (Eigenvalue= 5.76, Variance explained= 9.60%, Cronbach's α= .879, Grand mean = 4.99)			
The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Incongruent: Congruent	.657	.846	4.83
The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Inconsistent: Consistent	.732	.815	5.07
The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Dissimilar: Similar	.609	.786	5.00
The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Not compatible: Compatible	.638	.656	5.08
Factor 3: Valence (Eigenvalue= 6.55, Variance explained= 5.33%, Cronbach's α= .894, Grand mean = 4.79)			
The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Not compatible: Compatible	.766	.886	4.78
The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Inconsistent: Consistent	.716	.814	4.84
The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Incongruent: Congruent	.637	.742	4.80
The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Dissimilar: Similar	.645	.718	4.73
Factor 4: Visual (Eigenvalue= 6.42, Variance explained= 4.16%, Cronbach's α= .881, Grand mean = 4.97)			

The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Inconsistent: Consistent	.697	.852	5.02
The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Not compatible: Compatible	.696	.791	5.03
The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Dissimilar: Similar	.675	.746	4.93
The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Incongruent: Congruent	.571	.602	4.90
Factor 5: Recommendation (Eigenvalue= 6.26, Variance explained= 3.38%, Cronbach's α= .840, Grand mean = 4.92)			
The recommendations (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Dissimilar: Similar	.653	.787	4.84
The recommendations (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Incongruent: Congruent	.576	.729	4.90
The recommendations (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Inconsistent: Consistent	.601	.717	4.90
The recommendations (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - Not compatible: Compatible	.500	.578	5.02

Note: Total variance explained =65.471%, Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy =0.912. Bartlett's sphericity test = $p=<0.001$

As shown in Table 3.15, EFA results identified a five-factor structure related to SMIs and their content congruency. Factor 1, "Travel Style", consisted of four items that assessed the congruency among SMIs' travel style, with a grand mean of 4.79. Factor 2, "Topic", explained 9.60% of the variance and exhibited a high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) value of 0.879. It focused on issues related to congruency among the topics discussed by influencers. Factor 3, "Valence", depicted issues concerning the congruency of sentiment, ranging from very positive to very negative, used by influencers to describe their experiences and provide advice. The fourth factor, "Visual," explained 4.16% of the variance with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.881, and it consisted of items that assessed the congruency among the selection of visuals and photos posted by SMIs. Factor 5, "Recommendation", had a grand mean of 4.92 and included four items that depicted the congruency of suggestive information provided by influencers regarding the subject being reviewed. This factor explained 3.38% of the variance.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Measurement Model

Following EFA, a CFA was performed to validate the dimensions and measures obtained from the EFA and address model specification concerns, as stated by Gerbing and Anderson (1988). Before proceeding with CFA, Harman's single-factor test was conducted, revealing that the first extracted factor accounts for only 43.06% (below 50%). As a result, common method bias was not a concern (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To assess the suitability of the model in relation to the data, various model fit indices were utilized, including the normed Chi square (between 1 to 5), CFI (> 0.9), TLI (> 0.9), GFI (> 0.8), and RMSEA (< 0.08) (Baumgartner & Homburg, 1996; Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Hair et al., 2018; Wheaton et al., 1977). The findings demonstrated that the second-order factor model of IGC congruency exhibited a satisfactory fit to the data ($\chi2$ =334.495 [df =165, p = 0.000], CFI = 0.948, TLI = 0.940, GFI = 0.886, RMSEA = 0.063). The factor loading coefficients were between 0.709 and 0.872 (>0.6), indicating that the measurement model aligns well with the data. The results of the CFA are presented in Table 3.16. As shown in Table 3.16, all 20 items exhibited significance (p < 0.001). In conclusion, the second-order factor model of IGC congruency structure identified in our study demonstrates strong stability.

In Table 3.17, the AVE values for the five factors were found to be greater than 0.5, and the composite reliability (CR) values for each variable exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.7, indicating high convergent validity for each dimension, as suggested by Hair et al. (2018). Furthermore, the square root of the AVE for each factor was higher than its correlation with other factors, establishing discriminant validity. The squared estimated correlations between all pairs of factors are below the 0.85 threshold, which suggests the factors demonstrate discriminant validity (Kock, 2021). Additionally, the correlation matrix in Table 3.17 shows the correlations between the four factors range from 0.475 (for the topic-visual pair) to 0.618 (for the visual-recommendation pair). This indicates the factors are related to each other, as required for second-order reflective constructs. However, the correlations are not excessively high, which is another criterion for second-order reflective constructs.

Table 3.16. CFA results of the measurement model (n = 263)

Factors and items	Mean	SD	Std Factor Loading	AVE	CR	Cronbach's Alpha
Factor 1: Travel style				0.7	0.904	0.903
Travel style 1	4.68	1.73	0.843			
Travel style 2	4.83	1.59	0.824			
Travel style 3	4.57	1.67	0.810			
Travel style 4	4.76	1.54	0.872			
Factor 2: Topic				0.58	0.849	0.848
Topic 1	5.16	1.68	0.818			
Topic 2	5.12	1.54	0.772			
Topic 3	4.96	1.64	0.754			
Topic 4	4.94	1.53	0.709			
Factor 3: Valence				0.67	0.890	0.888
Valence 1	4.90	1.61	0.864			
Valence 2	4.86	1.51	0.830			
Valence 3	5.00	1.51	0.835			
Valence 4	4.76	1.56	0.741			
Factor 4: Visual				0.58	0.844	0.843
Visual 1	5.21	1.53	0.764			
Visual 2	5.18	1.41	0.764			
Visual 3	5.10	1.50	0.727			
Visual 4	5.11	1.40	0.779			
Factor 5: Recommendation				0.61	0.863	0.860
Recommendation 1	5.05	1.54	0.741			
Recommendation 2	5.07	1.45	0.813			
Recommendation 3	4.94	1.44	0.798			
Recommendation 4	5.11	1.42	0.773			

Note. All factor load coefficients reached ***$p < 0.001$ significance test.

Cronbach's alpha coefficients for travel style, topic, valence, visual, and recommendation were 0.903, 0.848, 0.888, 0.843, and 0.860, respectively. All of these coefficients surpassed the threshold of 0.7, indicating that each dimension demonstrated strong reliability and satisfactory internal consistency. Additionally, in order to address concerns regarding multicollinearity between the endogenous and exogenous variables, the study examined the variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance. According to the results, none of the variance inflation factors (VIF) for any item exceeded the strict threshold of 3.3 (Dattalo, 2013; Kock, 2021), suggesting that the analysis was unlikely to be affected by multicollinearity.

Table 3.17. Correlation, square root of AVE, mean, and standard deviations (n = 263)

	Travel style	Topic	Valence	Visual	Recommendation
Travel style	**0.838ᵃ**				
Topic	.484**	**0.764ᵃ**			
Valence	.540**	.553**	**0.819ᵃ**		
Visual	.544**	.475**	.503**	**0.759ᵃ**	
Recommendation	.589**	.546**	.585**	.618**	**0.782ᵃ**
Mean	4.71	5.05	4.88	5.15	5.04
SD	1.44	1.32	1.34	1.21	1.23

Note. a: Square root of AVE.

b**: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

Assessment of the Dimensional Structure

The validation of competing models for IGC congruency was performed using the sample, following the guidelines of Anderson and Gerbing (1988) and Baumgartner and Homburg (1996). A one-factor non-hierarchical model with 20 items was tested (Model 1), where the items were treated as direct reflective indicators of IGC congruency without any dimensional structure. Additionally, an alternative model was tested to demonstrate why the second-order factor model with four dimensions (Model 2), identified during the pilot study, was not considered. Both models showed unsatisfactory fit and were significantly inferior to the developed second-order factor model with five dimensions (see Table 3.18).

Table 3.18. Model comparisons of IGC congruency (n = 263)

Fit index (Threshold)	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
CFI (> 0.9)ᵃ	0.689	0.887	0.948
TLI (> 0.9)ᵃ	0.652	0.871	0.940
GFI (> 0.8)ᵇ	0.647	0.809	0.886
RMSEA (< 0.08)ᶜ	0.150	0.091	0.063
χ2	1174.704	529.695	334.495
Df	170	166	165
χ2/df (2 to 5)ᵈ	6.910	3.191	2.027
p-value	0.000	0.000	0.000

Note: a: Bentler and Bonett (1980); b: Baumgartner and Homburg (1996); c: Hair et al. (2018); d: Wheaton et al. (1977)

According to Table 3.18, it was found that model 1 and model 2 did not meet the criteria for model fit, indicating that one first-order factor model does not represent the optimal

measurement structure for IGC congruency. On the other hand, model 3 exhibited good fit to the data, with factor loadings exceeding 0.6 ($p < 0.001$). Since the three models share the same covariance structure and are nested, a χ^2 difference test was performed (Kock, 2021). The results showed that the second-order factor model with five dimensions is superior ($\Delta\chi^2 = 840.209, \Delta df = 5, p < 0.001; \Delta\chi^2 = 195.2, \Delta df = 1, p < 0.001$). These results, in conjunction with the goodness-of-fit indexes, provide empirical support for the proposed measurement of the second-order factor model with five dimensions for IGC congruency.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Measurement Model

Upon conducting cross-validation of the data, the measurement model was assessed using the entire sample, consisting of 527 participants. The results indicated an overall satisfactory level of fit to the data, as shown in Table 3.19. The goodness-of-fit indices demonstrated favorable results, including the normed Chi square (between 1 to 5), CFI (> 0.9), TLI (> 0.9), GFI (> 0.8), and RMSEA (< 0.08) (Baumgartner & Homburg, 1996; Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Hair et al., 2018; Wheaton et al., 1977). The findings demonstrated that the second-order factor model of IGC congruency exhibited a satisfactory fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 509.313$ [$df = 160, p = 0.000$], CFI = 0.948, TLI = 0.940, GFI = 0.905, RMSEA = 0.063). Furthermore, the standardized factor loadings for the items ranged from 0.725 to 0.853, surpassing the threshold of 0.5. This indicates that the items exhibited strong associations with their respective factors.

As shown in Table 3.20, the AVE values for the five factors were found to be greater than 0.5, and the composite reliability (CR) values for each variable exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.7, indicating high convergent validity for each dimension, as suggested by Hair et al. (2018). Furthermore, the square root of the AVE for each factor was higher than its correlation with other factors, establishing discriminant validity.

Table 3.19. CFA results of the measurement model (n = 527)

Factors and items	Mean	SD	Std Factor Loading	AVE	CR	Cronbach's Alpha
Factor 1: Travel style				0.69	0.898	0.897
Travel style 1	4.74	1.68	0.831			
Travel style 2	4.81	1.58	0.833			
Travel style 3	4.64	1.62	0.818			
Travel style 4	4.81	1.53	0.833			
Factor 2: Topic				0.61	0.864	0.863
Topic 1	5.12	1.63	0.822			
Topic 2	5.10	1.54	0.818			
Topic 3	4.98	1.60	0.751			
Topic 4	4.89	1.55	0.739			
Factor 3: Valence				0.67	0.892	0.891
Valence 1	4.84	1.60	0.853			
Valence 2	4.85	1.51	0.836			
Valence 3	4.87	1.53	0.827			
Valence 4	4.78	1.51	0.763			
Factor 4: Visual				0.62	0.865	0.864
Visual 1	5.12	1.56	0.794			
Visual 2	5.10	1.44	0.795			
Visual 3	5.01	1.52	0.774			
Visual 4	5.01	1.43	0.776			
Factor 5: Recommendation				0.59	0.852	0.851
Recommendation 1	5.03	1.49	0.725			
Recommendation 2	4.98	1.47	0.795			
Recommendation 3	4.89	1.42	0.797			
Recommendation 4	5.01	1.40	0.756			

Note. All factor load coefficients reached ***p < 0.001 significance test.

Overall, the IGC congruency scale was developed and validated through a rigorous planning process. Using a mixed-methods approach and the results of the content validity test, an initial set of 20 items was created, which were subsequently validated through detailed quantitative analysis methods. This validation process included exploratory factor analysis, which resulted in a five-dimensional solution, and confirmatory factor analysis, which confirmed the use of 20 items. Additionally, the IGC congruency scale was periodically reviewed and validated by participants and experts to address concerns regarding the number, comprehension, and omission of items. Finally, it was found that the IGC congruency scale consists of five dimensions and 20 items.

Table 3.20. Correlation, square root of AVE, mean, and standard deviations (n = 527)

	Travel style	Topic	Valence	Visual	Recommendation
Travel style	**0.829**[a]				
Topic	0.402[b**]	**0.783**[a]			
Valence	0.461[b**]	0.564[b**]	**0.820**[a]		
Visual	0.507[b**]	0.504[b**]	0.563[b**]	**0.785**[a]	
Recommendation	0.481[b**]	0.555[b**]	0.608[b**]	0.618[b**]	**0.769**[a]
Mean	4.75	5.02	4.83	5.06	4.98
SD	1.40	1.33	1.33	1.25	1.20

Note. a: Square root of AVE.
b**: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

3.2.4 Stage 4: Nomological Validity

To validate the IGC congruency scale's capability to predict its theoretical associations with other concepts, the study incorporated nomological validity. Kock et al. (2019) raised concerns about the absence of nomological validity assessments grounded in a theoretical framework in numerous tourism scale development studies, recommending the inclusion of theoretical rationale and empirical findings that could serve as references for nomological validity testing. Leveraging theoretical support, a hypothetical model was developed to assess the nomological validity of the IGC congruency scale (see Figure 3.1).

3.2.4.1 Sampling and Data Collection

Participants

Similar to the scale validation stage, participants were purposively selected for the main study based on specific criteria to establish the sample frame. The study focused on participants from the United States due to factors such as its large and active social media user base, the global reach of commonly used social media platforms, the country's significant share of the global outbound tourism market, and the use of English as the official language (Statista, 2022; World Tourism Organization, 2021). Additionally, participants were required to have engaged with travel-related content from multiple SMIs, as this aligned with the study's focus on tourism products and the influence of a group of

SMIs. Only those meeting these parameters were considered representative of the social media users to be included in the research.

Sample Size

Determining the sample size is vital and relies on the number of items linked to each construct being studied. It is important to ensure that the sample is adequately representative to improve the study's validity. Previous studies have proposed different guidelines for determining sample size, such as having at least five times as many observations as variables (Hair et al., 2010). Additionally, statistical significance is more likely to be achieved with a larger sample size, as noted by Cohen (1988).

This study also needs to consider sample size requirements specific to structural equation modeling (SEM). SEM results necessitate a sufficient sample size for accurate estimation and interpretation (Hair et al., 2010). Generally, a structural equation model with 10 to 15 indicators should have a sample size of 200 to 400, and a sample size below 200 is considered inadequate for hypothesis testing (Barrett, 2007). According to Hair et al. (2018), models with a large number of constructs require a minimum sample size of 500. To ensure a valid and significant sample size for this study, a targeted sample size of 600 participants was chosen, aligning with the recommendation by Hair et al. (2018), who emphasize the importance of considering the complexity of models and the characteristics of measurements when determining sample size.

Instrument and Measurement

Like the scale validation phase, the research instrument for this study was created using Qualtrics' survey design tool, which is well-known for its intuitive interface, attractive layout, and ease of use. Since the intended participants were located in the United States, the survey was formatted in English. It consisted of several sections, detailed in the Appendices (see Appendix V). The first section functioned as an introduction, offering participants brief information about the study, their right to withdraw, and assurances

regarding data confidentiality. At the end of this section, participants were prompted to answer a question related to consent. Participants who consented to participate in the study proceeded to the next section, which included eligibility check questions. This section was designed to confirm that participants met specific criteria. The first eligibility question, *"Have you ever participated in this survey before?"*, aimed to exclude those who had previously taken part in the study. The second question, *"Have you ever watched, read, or seen <u>travel-related content</u> shared by <u>multiple influencers?</u>"*, was intended to include only a representative sample of participants.

After successfully passing these eligibility questions, participants proceeded to the third section, where they received definitions of influencers and influencer-generated content to ensure a shared understanding of these concepts relevant to the study. Participants were then asked to recall their most recent experience with three or more pieces of influencer-generated content about a specific destination from different influencers they followed. To assist them in remembering multiple influencers and pieces of content while responding, a visualization was provided (see Appendix V). Once participants were familiar with the study context, they proceeded to answer the main questions.

The fourth section included measurement items for the developed IGC congruency scale as well as previously validated scales found in the literature, including IGC credibility, travel inspiration, intention to search, intention to travel, intention to share, and susceptibility to interpersonal influence. All items were adapted to meet the specific context of the study. The measurement items and measurement formats for IGC credibility, travel inspiration, intention to search, intention to travel, intention to share, and susceptibility to interpersonal influence are shown in Table 3.21.

Table 3.21. List of variables and measurement items in the nomological validity stage

Constructs and items	References
IGC congruency 1: Not compatible to 7: Compatible; 1: Inconsistent to 7: Consistent; 1: Dissimilar to 7: Similar; and 1: Incongruent to 7: Congruent.	
- The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another. - The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.	Developed by the Author

- The recommendations (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.
- The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.
- The travel style of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another.

IGC credibility

Measured by a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

Williams and Drolet (2005); Ki et al. (2022)

- I find those influencer-generated content are believable.
- I find those influencer-generated content are credible.
- I find those influencer-generated content are authentic.

Inspiration

Measured by a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

Inspired-by State

- My imagination of the destination was stimulated by the influencer-generated content.
- I was intrigued about the destination by the new idea provided in the influencer-generated content.
- I unexpectedly and spontaneously got new ideas about the destination from the influencer-generated content.
- My horizon about the destination was broadened by the influencer-generated content.
- I discovered something new about the destination through the influencer-generated content.

Inspired-to search

- After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was inspired to search about the destination.
- After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt a desire to search about the destination.
- After viewing the influencer-generated content, my interest in searching for the destination was increased.
- After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was motivated to search about the destination.
- After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt an urge to search about the destination.

Böttger et al. (2017)

Inspired-to travel

- After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was inspired to travel to the destination.
- After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt a desire to travel to the destination.
- After viewing the influencer-generated content, my interest in traveling to the destination was increased.
- After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was motivated to travel to the destination.
- After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt an urge to travel to the destination.

Inspired-to share

- After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was inspired to share the influencer-generated content about the destination with others.
- After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt a desire to share the influencer-generated content about the destination with others.
- After viewing the influencer-generated content, my interest to share the influencer-generated content about the destination with others.
- After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was motivated to share the influencer-generated content about the destination with others.
- After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt an urge to share the influencer-generated content about the destination with others.

Intention to search
Measured by a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

- I will be likely to search for more information about the destination after being exposed to those influencer-generated content.
- I will be likely to check with my friends if they have any experience about the destination.
- I have an interest in knowing more about the destination.

Yu et al. (2019)

Intention to travel
Measured by a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

- I will visit the destination I saw in those influencer-generated content.
- I am planning to visit the destination I saw in those influencer-generated content.
- I am willing to visit the destination I saw in those influencer-generated content.

Ying et al. (2021); Fang et al. (2023)

Intention to share
Measured by a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

- I intend to share those influencer-generated content in social media in the future.
- I expect to share those influencer-generated content contributed by other users.
- I plan to share those influencer-generated content in social media.

Bigné et al. (2023)

Consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence
Measured by a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

- I often ask others to help me choose an appropriate product.
- I often collect information from others about the products I want to buy.
- It is important that others like the product I am buying.
- I often buy the products that others may approve of.

Bearden et al. (1989); Guan et al. (2023)

  - I often connect with people by buying the same products as they
    do.

To ensure the validity of the scale and to identify inattentive participants, prior research has suggested the use of attention check questions (e.g., Berinsky et al., 2014; Huang et al., 2015). Supporting these recommendations, a study by Kung et al. (2018) found that attention checks do not compromise scale validity, which was contrary to earlier expectations. The findings also indicated that these questions had no significant impact on how participants answered or understood the scale. Consequently, two attention check questions were included: *"I am selecting "strongly disagree" to show I am paying attention to this question"*. The final section of the survey gathered information on social media usage patterns and demographic details of the participants. This included variables such as the extent of reference to IGC in travel decision-making, the degree of reliance on IGC for those decisions, and the number of SMIs as a reference source for travel decision-making. Additionally, demographic data such as gender, age, and nationality were collected.

Data collection

Data collection was conducted using CloudResearch, an online survey platform recognized for its superior data quality compared to other options. Participants sourced from CloudResearch were more likely to pass attention checks, provide thoughtful responses, follow instructions, recall previously presented information, have unique IP addresses and geolocations, and take the time to read all survey items thoroughly (Berry et al., 2022; Douglas et al., 2023). Additionally, CloudResearch was effective in recruiting participants from the United States while meeting specific criteria set by researchers. Overall, utilizing an online survey company like CloudResearch not only streamlines participant recruitment but also enhances data quality.

The study employed a purposive sampling technique, a type of non-probability sampling that is particularly useful for gathering insights from experts in a specific field (Tongco, 2007). The survey was conducted from mid-March to late March 2024, resulting in 600 complete questionnaires.

3.2.4.2 Data analysis

For data analysis, two primary software tools were used: SPSS version 26 and AMOS version 26. This choice aims to leverage their strengths in effectively addressing the research objectives. The analysis included both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics—such as means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis values, and percentages—were utilized to assess variables related to normality, social media usage patterns, demographic characteristics, and other explanatory factors.

To ensure data quality, rigorous measures were implemented, including a comprehensive review of missing values and outliers upon receipt of the data. The Qualtrics survey tool facilitated this process, and the issue of missing data was addressed by using the "add requirement" function, which required participants to answer all survey questions. Additionally, outlier detection procedures were conducted.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The CFA was conducted to evaluate the measurement model. To fulfill the prerequisites for the CFA, several factors were assessed, including parameter estimates, explained variance, covariance between dimensions, and the residual error variance of observed variables. Additionally, model fit indices were evaluated, such as the Chi-square statistic, goodness-of-fit index (GFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), in accordance with the methodology outlined by Hair et al. (2018). Researchers have proposed specific thresholds for these indices: a normed Chi-square value between 1 and 5, $CFI \geq 0.8$, $RMSEA \leq 0.08$, $TLI \geq 0.8$, and $GFI > 0.8$ (Baumgartner & Homburg, 1996; Hair et al., 2018; Otoo et al., 2020).

Structural Equation Modeling

To examine and test the proposed model, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed in this study. The hypothesized model posited a causal relationship between IGC congruency, inspired-by IGC, inspired-to search, inspired-to travel, inspired-to share, intention to search, intention to travel, and intention to share. Additionally, the study hypothesized the mediating effect of IGC credibility and the moderating effect of susceptibility to interpersonal influence on the relationships among these constructs.

SEM is a powerful analytical technique that combines factor analysis and multiple regression methods (Hair et al., 2018). It is particularly effective in modeling complex relationships within multivariate data. SEM enables the examination of causal relationships between exogenous and endogenous variables, overcoming the challenges associated with analyzing intricate causal pathways. Considering the strengths of SEM and its suitability for addressing the study's objectives and hypotheses, it was chosen as the appropriate analytical approach. SEM provided a robust framework for exploring the interconnections among the variables and investigating the proposed causal relationships within the research context.

3.2.4.3 Nomological Validity Findings

Data Screening

A total of 609 responses were collected. The data underwent a screening process to assess its quality for analysis. In the initial screening round, focus was placed on participants who provided consistent responses across all survey items and completed the questionnaire in less than 3 minutes. Participants who did not pass the attention check questions were excluded via the link. Additionally, missing values were not allowed as participants were required to answer all questions. 9 responses were excluded due to failing the initial screening. Subsequently, box plots and descriptive analysis were employed to identify outliers; no questionnaires were identified as outliers and were removed. As a result, 600 questionnaires were included in the data analysis.

Normality Test

Prior to analyzing the data, a test for normality was conducted to evaluate whether the data adhered to a normal distribution. This procedure is significant in structural equation modeling and involves assessing skewness and kurtosis (Hair et al., 2018). In the context of structural equation modeling, it is generally deemed acceptable for skewness values to range between -3 and +3 (Brown, 2006), while a kurtosis value of between -7 and +7 is considered acceptable for this study (Byrne, 2016).

Table 3.22. Descriptive statistics of measurement items (n = 600)

Items	Mean	SD [a]	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	SE [b]	Statistic	SE [b]
Travel style 1	5.15	1.673	-.680	.100	-.272	.199
Travel style 2	5.13	1.611	-.622	.100	-.276	.199
Travel style 3	5.04	1.685	-.633	.100	-.321	.199
Travel style 4	5.04	1.569	-.543	.100	-.200	.199
Topic 1	5.33	1.515	-.649	.100	-.367	.199
Topic 2	5.28	1.469	-.625	.100	-.249	.199
Topic 3	5.26	1.531	-.704	.100	-.184	.199
Topic 4	5.24	1.500	-.569	.100	-.307	.199
Valence 1	5.10	1.626	-.596	.100	-.355	.199
Valence 2	5.14	1.560	-.586	.100	-.355	.199
Valence 3	5.06	1.599	-.591	.100	-.377	.199
Valence 4	5.07	1.544	-.587	.100	-.259	.199
Visual 1	5.33	1.607	-.866	.100	.079	.199
Visual 2	5.30	1.535	-.755	.100	-.041	.199
Visual 3	5.30	1.556	-.801	.100	.005	.199
Visual 4	5.28	1.535	-.710	.100	-.158	.199
Recommendation 1	5.28	1.520	-.730	.100	-.035	.199
Recommendation 2	5.23	1.493	-.567	.100	-.397	.199
Recommendation 3	5.19	1.572	-.655	.100	-.224	.199
Recommendation 4	5.27	1.454	-.635	.100	-.028	.199
Credibility 1	5.07	1.500	-.575	.100	-.204	.199
Credibility 2	5.02	1.509	-.496	.100	-.341	.199
Credibility 3	5.02	1.595	-.561	.100	-.425	.199
Inspired-by 1	5.21	1.592	-.749	.100	-.105	.199
Inspired-by 2	5.29	1.532	-.666	.100	-.340	.199
Inspired-by 3	5.00	1.647	-.592	.100	-.391	.199
Inspired-by 4	5.26	1.543	-.701	.100	-.255	.199
Inspired-by 5	5.37	1.517	-.861	.100	.104	.199
Inspired-to search 1	5.17	1.634	-.729	.100	-.185	.199
Inspired-to search 2	5.30	1.573	-.865	.100	.178	.199
Inspired-to search 3	5.30	1.637	-.921	.100	.157	.199
Inspired-to search 4	5.11	1.658	-.745	.100	-.168	.199
Inspired-to search 5	5.20	1.684	-.853	.100	-.059	.199
Inspired-to travel 1	5.08	1.674	-.723	.100	-.203	.199

Inspired-to travel 2	5.00	1.717	-.647	.100	-.398	.199
Inspired-to travel 3	5.09	1.659	-.747	.100	-.166	.199
Inspired-to travel 4	5.03	1.675	-.717	.100	-.193	.199
Inspired-to travel 5	5.01	1.738	-.697	.100	-.324	.199
Inspired-to share 1	4.41	1.941	-.273	.100	-1.054	.199
Inspired-to share 2	4.28	1.913	-.235	.100	-1.047	.199
Inspired-to share 3	4.32	1.919	-.220	.100	-1.072	.199
Inspired-to share 4	4.36	1.909	-.259	.100	-1.012	.199
Inspired-to share 5	4.40	1.966	-.307	.100	-1.067	.199
Intention to search 1	5.08	1.738	-.774	.100	-.161	.199
Intention to search 2	4.72	1.819	-.529	.100	-.668	.199
Intention to search 3	5.42	1.544	-.997	.100	.602	.199
Intention to travel 1	4.83	1.814	-.513	.100	-.734	.199
Intention to travel 2	4.66	1.880	-.385	.100	-.920	.199
Intention to travel 3	5.35	1.588	-.862	.100	.161	.199
Intention to share 1	4.02	2.050	-.109	.100	-1.249	.199
Intention to share 2	4.06	1.986	-.080	.100	-1.177	.199
Intention to share 3	3.94	2.064	-.011	.100	-1.283	.199

a. SD = Standard deviation
b. SE = Standard Error

As indicated in Table 3.22, the skewness values ranged from -0.997 to -0.011, while the kurtosis values ranged from -1.283 to +0.602. These results suggest that the data followed a normal distribution.

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Table 3.23 provides a comprehensive summary of the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants involved in the primary study. After the survey, participants were asked to share details about their gender, age, nationality, extent of utilizing IGC for travel decision-making, reliance on such content, and the number of SMIs they referenced during their decision-making process. The findings reveal that female participants constituted a significant majority at 60.5%, compared to 38.7% for male participants, indicating a higher representation of women in the study. Age distribution showed that Millennials (31.5%) and Generation X (30.3%) were the most represented age groups, reflecting the prominent role of these generations in leveraging IGC for travel-related decisions.

In terms of nationality, the sample was predominantly composed of white Americans, who accounted for 78.8% of the participants, while African Americans represented 14.8%. This demographic composition highlights the ethnic makeup of the sample and provides context for understanding the study's generalizability within different racial groups. Regarding the use of IGC for travel decision-making, approximately 46% of participants reported using IGC as an occasional source of information. Additionally, there was notable reliance on IGC, with reliance levels reported as exceeding four on a Likert scale, demonstrating significant engagement with IGC among participants. This underscores the perceived credibility and influence that such content holds for individuals planning travel. A substantial portion of the participants (92.2%) indicated that they utilized IGC from multiple SMIs. The most commonly preferred platforms for accessing IGC were YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. This trend highlights the importance of these social media platforms as influential tools for travelers seeking inspiration and guidance.

Table 3.23. Demographic information of participants in the main study (n = 600)

Items	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	363	60.5
	Male	232	38.7
	Non-binary/third gender	5	0.8
	Prefer not to say	0	0
Age	18 – 26	49	8.2
	27 – 42	189	31.5
	43 – 58	182	30.3
	59 – 68	97	16.2
	Over 69	83	13.8
Ethnicity	White Americans	473	78.8
	African Americans	89	14.8
	Latino Americans	25	4.2
	Asian Americans	6	1.0
	Others	7	1.2
Level of reference to IGC	Never	59	9.8
	Infrequently	93	15.5
	Sometimes	281	46.8
	Often	135	22.5
	Always	32	5.3
Level of reliance on IGC	Not at all	92	15.3
	Slightly	69	11.5
	Somewhat	87	14.5
	Moderately	109	18.2
	Quite a bit	114	19.0
	Very	72	12.0
	Very much	57	9.5

Number of SMIs	One SMIs	47	7.8
	More than one SMIs	553	92.2
Social media platform	Instagram	279	21.22
	Facebook	311	23.65
	YouTube	388	29.51
	TikTok	219	16.65
	Pinterest	88	6.69
	Other	30	2.28

Measurement Model Testing (CFA)

Upon conducting cross-validation of the data, the measurement model was assessed using the entire sample, consisting of 600 participants. The results indicated an overall satisfactory level of fit to the data, as shown in Table 3.24. The goodness-of-fit indices demonstrated favorable results, including the normed Chi square (between 1 to 5), CFI (> 0.9), TLI (> 0.9), GFI (> 0.8), and RMSEA (< 0.08) (Baumgartner & Homburg, 1996; Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Hair et al., 2018; Wheaton et al., 1977). The findings demonstrated that the second-order factor model of IGC congruency exhibited a satisfactory fit to the data ($\chi2$ = 2902.186 [df = 1233, p = 0.000], CFI = 0.946, TLI = 0.942, GFI = 0.840, RMSEA = 0.048). Furthermore, the standardized factor loadings for the items ranged from 0.719 to 0.951, surpassing the threshold of 0.5. This indicates that the items exhibited strong associations with their respective factors. Moreover, Harman's single-factor test was conducted, revealing that the first extracted factor accounts for only 46.73% (below 50%). As a result, common method bias was not a concern (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Table 3.24. CFA results of the measurement model (n = 600)

Factors and items	Mean	SD	Std Factor Loading	AVE	CR	Cronbach's Alpha
Factor 1: Travel style				0.60	0.857	0.855
Travel style 1	5.15	1.67	0.719			
Travel style 2	5.14	1.61	0.816			
Travel style 3	5.04	1.68	0.741			
Travel style 4	5.05	1.57	0.818			
Factor 2: Topic				0.60	0.857	0.856
Topic 1	5.33	1.52	0.782			
Topic 2	5.28	1.47	0.803			
Topic 3	5.26	1.53	0.721			
Topic 4	5.24	1.50	0.788			
Factor 3: Valence				0.66	0.887	0.887

Valence 1	5.10	1.63	0.807			
Valence 2	5.14	1.56	0.819			
Valence 3	5.06	1.60	0.799			
Valence 4	5.07	1.54	0.832			
Factor 4: Visual				0.67	0.888	0.888
Visual 1	5.33	1.61	0.809			
Visual 2	5.31	1.53	0.842			
Visual 3	5.31	1.56	0.792			
Visual 4	5.28	1.54	0.819			
Factor 5: Recommendation				0.66	0.887	0.886
Recommendation 1	5.28	1.52	0.813			
Recommendation 2	5.23	1.49	0.841			
Recommendation 3	5.19	1.57	0.811			
Recommendation 4	5.27	1.45	0.789			
Credibility				0.80	0.925	0.924
Credibility 1	5.07	1.50	0.902			
Credibility 2	5.02	1.51	0.914			
Credibility 3	5.02	1.59	0.875			
Inspired_by				0.68	0.913	0.912
INSB1	5.22	1.59	0.785			
INSB2	5.29	1.53	0.818			
INSB3	5.00	1.65	0.81			
INSB4	5.27	1.54	0.883			
INSB5	5.37	1.52	0.818			
Inspired_to search				0.82	0.958	0.957
INSTS1	5.08	1.67	0.92			
INSTS2	5.00	1.72	0.912			
INSTS3	5.09	1.66	0.866			
INSTS4	5.03	1.68	0.917			
INSTS5	5.01	1.74	0.91			
Inspired_to travel				0.78	0.947	0.947
INSTT1	5.17	1.63	0.882			
INSTT2	5.30	1.57	0.879			
INSTT3	5.30	1.64	0.846			
INSTT4	5.11	1.66	0.918			
INSTT5	5.20	1.68	0.89			
Inspired_to share				0.89	0.975	0.975
INSTSH1	4.41	1.94	0.948			
INSTSH2	4.28	1.91	0.944			
INSTSH3	4.32	1.92	0.937			
INSTSH4	4.36	1.91	0.941			
INSTSH5	4.40	1.97	0.935			
Intention to search				0.71	0.879	0.877
INTS1	5.08	1.74	0.919			
INTS2	4.73	1.82	0.773			
INTS3	5.42	1.54	0.828			
Intention to travel				0.74	0.895	0.887
INTT1	4.83	1.81	0.914			

INTT2	4.66	1.88	0.92			
INTT3	5.35	1.59	0.735			
Intention to share				0.88	0.957	0.957
INTSH1	4.02	2.05	0.951			
INTSH2	4.06	1.99	0.929			
INTSH3	3.94	2.06	0.938			

Note. All factor load coefficients reached ***$p < 0.001$ significance test.

As shown in Table 3.25, the AVE values for the five factors were found to be greater than 0.5, and the composite reliability (CR) values for each variable exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.7, indicating high convergent validity for each dimension, as suggested by Hair et al. (2018). Furthermore, the square root of the AVE for each factor was higher than its correlation with other factors, establishing discriminant validity. According to the findings from the CFA, the survey meets all the criteria outlined in the proposed model. The proposed model is deemed sufficiently reliable and valid for assessing the structural model.

Table 3.25. Correlation, square root of AVE, mean, and standard deviations (n = 600)

	TS	TO	VA	VI	RE	CRE	INSB	INSTS	INSTT	INSTSH	INTS	INTT	INTSH
TS	**0.775**												
TO	.639**	**0.774**											
VA	.540**	.562**	**0.814**										
VI	.609**	.657**	.555**	**0.816**									
RE	.562**	.625**	.606**	.613**	**0.814**								
CRE	.523**	.473**	.476**	.496**	.500**	**0.897**							
INSB	.482**	.445**	.383**	.479**	.445**	.706**	**0.823**						
INSTS	.397**	.349**	.266**	.402**	.360**	.514**	.680**	**0.905**					
INSTT	.433**	.387**	.327**	.436**	.421**	.589**	.758**	.752**	**0.883**				
INSTSH	.370**	.335**	.298**	.329**	.345**	.503**	.572**	.659**	.605**	**0.941**			
INTS	.361**	.323**	.229**	.330**	.275**	.465**	.617**	.816**	.714**	.693**	**0.842**		
INTT	.356**	.357**	.272**	.386**	.369**	.529**	.554**	.665**	.738**	.593**	.729**	**0.861**	
INTSH	.350**	.284**	.256**	.266**	.298**	.426**	.476**	.568**	.512**	.856**	.627**	.524**	**0.939**
Mean	5.09	5.28	5.09	5.30	5.24	5.04	5.23	5.04	5.22	4.35	5.07	4.94	4.01
SD	1.36	1.26	1.37	1.35	1.30	1.43	1.35	1.56	1.49	1.84	1.53	1.59	1.95

Note: All correlations are significant at the 0.01 level. The square root of AVE is in bold on the diagonal line.

Structural Model Testing

The study developed a measurement model by assessing model fit, reliability, and validity. Subsequently, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to assess the conceptual model. To examine direct effects and mediation effects, two SEM models were created for this study, following the guidelines provided by Hayes and Preacher (2010) and Hair et al. (2006). The SEM approach was chosen not only for its capability to test multiple regression equations at once, but also for the insights it offers regarding the overall model's "fit" while accounting for measurement errors (Holmbeck, 1997; MacKinnon et al., 2002). Furthermore, Hayes and Preacher (2010) note that using SEM with bootstrapping enables the examination of complex path models that include a greater number of variables. SEM software offers bootstrapped confidence intervals (CIs) along with statistical significance tests for indirect paths. Bootstrapped CIs are considered the most reliable approach for testing the significance of indirect effects, especially when normality assumptions may be violated. Therefore, the structural model was estimated. This analysis utilized the maximum likelihood estimation method and the bootstrap approach, implemented using AMOS 26.0 software.

Table 3.26. Comparison of the direct effect model and the mediated model

Fit index (Threshold)	Direct effect model	Mediated model
CFI (> 0.9)[a]	0.932	0.932
TLI (> 0.9)[a]	0.928	0.928
GFI (> 0.8)[b]	0.822	0.818
RMSEA (< 0.08)[c]	0.054	0.053
χ^2	3094.402	3382.884
Df	1115	1260
χ^2/df (2 to 5)[d]	2.775	2.685
p-value	0.000	0.000

Note: a: Bentler and Bonett (1980); b: Baumgartner and Homburg (1996); c: Hair et al. (2018); d: Wheaton et al. (1977)

Prior to testing the hypotheses within the two models, various fit indices were assessed. Although the Chi-square value was found to be significant in both models, indicating a poor fit to the data, the normed Chi-square value suggested an acceptable fit. Additionally, other model fit indices, such as CFI, TLI, GFI, and RMSEA, supported the conceptual models. The comparison of results from direct and mediated models showed that while both models demonstrated acceptable χ^2/df and fit indices, such as CFI, TLI, GFI, and

RMSEA, the direct effect model provided a superior representation of model fit, as indicated by the favorable fit indices presented in Table 3.26.

3.3 Testing Research Hypotheses and Model

Five main hypotheses were developed for this research. Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4 are subdivided into three sub-hypotheses each. In total, seven direct effects were analyzed, as detailed in Table 3.26 and Figure 3.4. Additionally, one mediation effect and one moderating effect were explored within the proposed pathways.

3.3.1 The Direct Effects (H1, H$_{3a-c}$, H$_{4a-c}$)

The study analyzed the direct regression paths among the constructs, and the findings are detailed in Table 3.27. All seven hypothesized path coefficients were statistically significant at the 0.001 or 0.05 level of significance.

Table 3.27. Results of the direct paths for the structural model (n = 600)

Hypotheses	Path			Standard coefficient (β)	t-value	Result
H1	IGC congruency	→	Inspired-by	0.617	12.283***	Accepted
H3$_a$	Inspired-by	→	Inspired-to search	0.793	19.261***	Accepted
H3$_b$	Inspired-by	→	Inspired-to travel	0.855	20.118***	Accepted
H3$_c$	Inspired-by	→	Inspired-to share	0.668	16.365***	Accepted
H4$_a$	Inspired-to search	→	Intention to search	0.903	30.389***	Accepted
H4$_b$	Inspired-to travel	→	Intention to travel	0.774	17.312***	Accepted
H4$_c$	Inspired-to share	→	Intention to share	0.884	33.553***	Accepted

Note: $\chi 2$= 3094.402, (p=0.000); CFI = 0.932; TLI = 0.928; RMSEA = 0.054; GFI = 0.822.
***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Hypothesis 1 states that IGC congruency is likely to affect inspired-by positively. This was tested by examining the relationship between "IGC congruency" and "inspired-by". The result showed that the path coefficient was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.617$, $t = 12.283$, p < 0.001). This means that if multiple pieces of IGC provided by multiple SMIs are congruent, then viewers are more likely to be inspired-by IGC, supporting Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 3_a states that viewers' inspired-by state is likely to affect their inspired-to search stage positively. This was tested by examining the relationship between "inspired-by" and "inspired-to search". The result showed that the path coefficient was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.794$, t = 19.261, p < 0.001). This means that viewers who are highly inspired by IGC have a high level of inspiration to search for the destination. Accordingly, hypothesis 3_a is supported.

Hypothesis 3_b states that viewers' inspired-by state is likely to affect viewers' inspired-to travel stage positively. This was tested by examining the relationship between "inspired-by" and "inspired-to travel". The result showed that the path coefficient was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.855$, t = 20.118, p < 0.001). This means that viewers who are highly inspired by IGC have a high level of inspiration to travel to the destination. Accordingly, hypothesis 3_b is supported.

Hypothesis 3_c states that viewers' inspired-by state is likely to affect viewers' inspired-to share stage positively. This was tested by examining the relationship between "inspired-by" and "inspired-to share". The result showed that the path coefficient was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.668$, t = 16.365, p < 0.001). This means that viewers who have a high level of inspiration by IGC have a high level of inspiration to share the IGC about the destination. Accordingly, hypothesis 3_c is supported.

Hypothesis 4_a states that viewers' inspired-to search stage is likely to affect viewers' intention to search positively. This was tested by examining the relationship between "inspired-to search" and "intention to search". The result showed that the path coefficient was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.903$, t = 30.389, p < 0.001). This means that viewers who are highly inspired by IGC have a high level of inspiration to search for the destination. Accordingly, hypothesis 4_a is supported.

Hypothesis 4$_b$ states that viewers' inspired-to travel stage is likely to affect viewers' intention to travel positively. This was tested by examining the relationship between "inspired-to travel" and "intention to travel". The result showed that the path coefficient was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.774$, t = 17.312, p < 0.001). This means that viewers who are highly inspired by IGC have a high level of inspiration to travel to the destination. Accordingly, hypothesis 4$_b$ is supported.

Hypothesis 4$_c$ states that viewers' inspired-to share stage is likely to affect viewers' intention to share positively. This was tested by examining the relationship between "inspired-to share" and "intention to share". The result showed that the path coefficient was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.884$, t = 33.553, p < 0.001). This means that viewers who have a high level of inspiration by IGC have a high level of inspiration to share the IGC about the destination. Accordingly, hypothesis 4$_c$ is supported.

Figure 3.4. Result of the direct path for the structural direct effect model
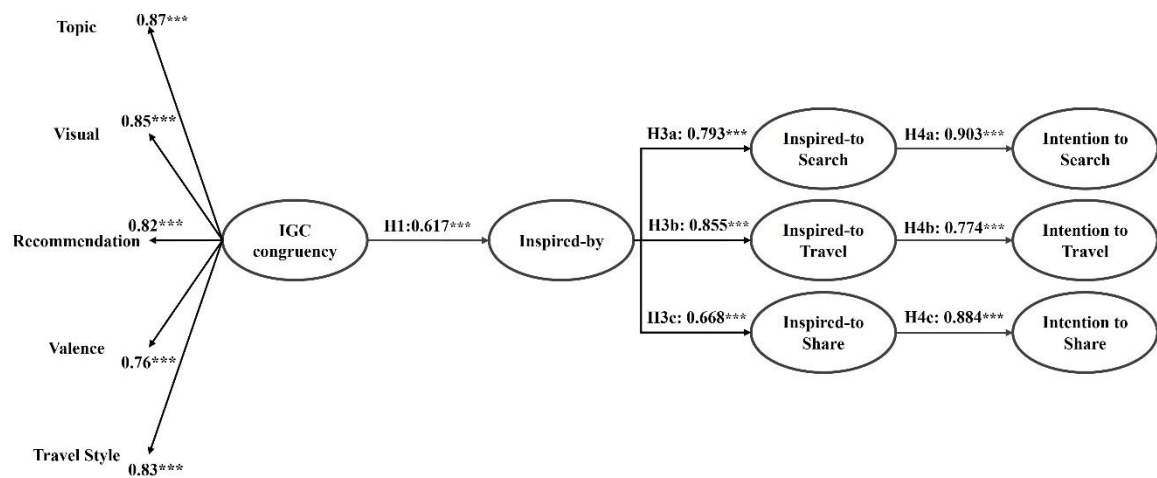
*** p< 0.001, ** p< 0.01, * p< 0.05

3.3.2 The Mediation Effect (H2)

The mediation effect of IGC credibility was examined to test hypothesis 2. Mediation exists when a predictor variable affects the outcome variable indirectly through a second variable, known as the mediator. To demonstrate the existence of a mediation

effect, specific conditions must be satisfied. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), to determine mediation, four key relationships need to be verified: a significant relationship should exist between the predictor variable and the outcome variable; a significant relationship must be established between the predictor variable and the mediator variable; the mediator variable should significantly relate to the outcome variable; and when the mediator variable is included in the structural model, the predictor variable should decrease in significance or become insignificant for full mediation to be confirmed. If the predictor variable decreases but remains significant, partial mediation may be indicated. Based on these conditions, the mediation effect model was tested (see Figure 3.5). Descriptive statistics and correlations between the predictor, mediator, and outcome variables were generated, and the results are presented in Table 3.28.

Figure 3.5. Result of the paths for the structural mediated model

*** p< 0.001, ** p< 0.01, * p< 0.05
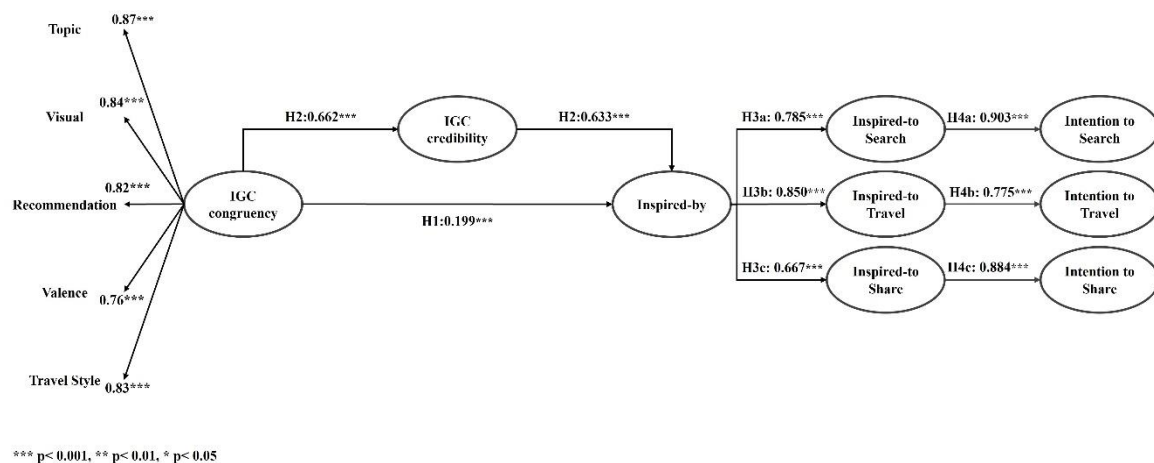
Hypothesis 2 states that IGC credibility is likely to mediate the effect between IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-by state. This was tested by examining the total effect of "IGC congruency" on "inspired-by" in the main effect model, the direct effect of "IGC congruency" on "inspired-by", and the indirect effect of "IGC congruency" on "inspired-by" through "IGC credibility" in the mediated model. As shown in Table 3.28, all the paths' coefficients were statistically significant. Additionally, the total, direct, and indirect effects of the predictor and mediator variables based on the SEM bootstrap approach are indicated in Table 3.29.

Table 3.28. Results of the paths for the structural mediated model (n = 600)

Hypotheses	Path			Standard coefficient (β)	*t*-value	Result
H1	IGC congruency	→	Inspired-by	0.199	4.397***	Accepted
H2	IGC congruency	→	IGC credibility	0.662	13.972***	Partially Accepted
	IGC credibility	→	Inspired-by	0.633	12.878***	
H3$_a$	Inspired-by	→	Inspired-to search	0.785	19.269***	Accepted
H3$_b$	Inspired-by	→	Inspired-to travel	0.850	20.256***	Accepted
H3$_c$	Inspired-by	→	Inspired-to share	0.667	16.468***	Accepted
H4$_a$	Inspired-to search	→	Intention to search	0.903	30.393***	Accepted
H4$_b$	Inspired-to travel	→	Intention to travel	0.775	17.332***	Accepted
H4$_c$	Inspired-to share	→	Intention to share	0.884	33.555***	Accepted

Note: χ^2= 3382.884, (p=0.000); CFI = 0.932; TLI = 0.928; RMSEA = 0.053; GFI = 0.818.
***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

The findings from the models indicated that IGC congruency directly affected IGC credibility. Furthermore, IGC credibility exhibited a positive and significant relationship with inspired-by state, while the direct effect of IGC congruency on inspired-by state remained significant. The initial significant effect of 0.617 and the newly observed significant effect of 0.199 align with the hypothesis of a partial mediation effect. This supports H2 of the study, which posits that IGC credibility serves as a mediator in the relationship between IGC congruency and the inspired-by state.

Table 3.29. Total, direct, and indirect effects in a structural equation mediated model

Effects	Standardized Estimation	*p*-value	Result
Total Effect	0.618	0.004**	Significant Impact
Direct Effect	0.199	0.003**	Significant Impact
Indirect Effect	0.419	0.002**	Significant Impact

3.3.3 Moderating Effect (H5)

The moderating effect of susceptibility to interpersonal influence (hereafter SII) was examined. Participants were classified into two groups: those with high SII and those with low SII.

3.3.3.1 Measurement Invariance

The moderating effect of SII was examined by conducting a multi-group analysis. The items were adapted from previous studies (Bearden et al., 1989; Guan et al., 2023) and measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree). Prior to conducting the multigroup analysis, an EFA was conducted on five items (see Table 3.30). All factor loadings ranged from 0.769 to 0.875. The results revealed a single-factor solution with an eigenvalue of ≥ 1.0, explaining 70.5% of the variance. Barlett's test of sphericity ($\chi2 = 1765.6$, $p < .001$) and the KMO measure of sampling adequacy (.860) indicated validation of the factor model. Communalities indicated that the factors accounted for approximately 59.1% to 76.6% of the variance in the variables.

Table 3.30. EFA results of SII trait (n = 600)

Domains and items	Communalities	Factor loadings	Mean
Domain 1: SII (Eigenvalue= 3.524, Variance explained= 70.5%, Cronbach's α= .895, Grand mean = 3.81)			
I often ask others to help me choose an appropriate product.	0.675	0.822	3.74
I often collect information from others about the products I want to buy.	0.591	0.769	4.57
It is important that others like the product I am buying.	0.766	0.875	3.29
I often buy the products that others may approve of.	0.751	0.867	3.86
I often connect with people by buying the same products as they do.	0.740	0.860	3.59

Following the EFA, the SII variable was transformed from a continuous to a categorical variable. Since this study is interested in individuals who have high versus low SII, the

sample was divided into two groups using a median split (Streiner, 2002), such that participants who scored less than or equal to 3.60 (50.3% of participants) were classified as having low SII (n = 302). Those who scored above 5.40 (49.7% of participants) were characterized as having high SII (n = 298).

To prepare for investigating how SII moderates the proposed model, an analysis of measurement invariance was conducted to confirm the consistency of the measurement model across two groups, namely, high and low SII. The Chi-square difference test was employed to assess this consistency. Following the approach outlined by Yoo (2002), an unrestricted model was first evaluated, followed by the comprehensive metric invariance CFA model. The findings of the measurement invariance assessment are detailed in Table 3.31.

Table 3.31. Measurement invariance for low SII (n = 302) and high SII (n = 298) groups

Models	χ^2/df	$\Delta\chi^2/\Delta df$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Non-restricted measurement model	5085.751/2466		0.911	0.904	0.042
Full metric invariance of CFA model (L(X)Y=IN*)	5136.622/2509	50.871/43[a]	0.911	0.906	0.042

Note: *IN = invariance
[a]. Chi-square difference test: $\Delta\chi^2$ (df) < χ^2.01 (43) = 67.46; accordingly, the full metric invariance model was supported.

The χ^2 difference test was employed to evaluate measurement invariance, with invariant measurement models indicated by non-significant differences in the χ^2 values (Yoo, 2002). The conducted $\chi2$ difference test (see Table 3.31) between these models supported full metric invariance ($\Delta\chi2$ (df) = 50.871 < χ^2 (43) = 67.46), indicating that the two groups were invariant (Yoo, 2002). Consequently, the full metric invariance model was utilized as a baseline for testing structural invariance between the two groups (those with low and high SII).

3.3.3.2 SEM Results of the Low SII and the High SII Groups

To analyze the relationships among the constructs in the groups being studied (i.e., those with low SII and those with high SII), structural equation modeling was conducted. Tables 3.32 and 3.33 displayed some similarities and differences between the two groups. Upon closer examination of the model fit indices for the dataset of those in the low SII group, it was found that, apart from the Chi-square value ($\chi2$ (1260) = 2799.563, p = 0.000), which was significant (though the normed Chi-square was 2.222), the other model fit indices, such as CFI = 0.906, TLI = 0.901, and RMSEA = 0.064, supported the conceptual model.

Table 3.32. Results of the SEM analysis of the low SII group (n = 302)

Hypotheses	Path			Standard coefficient (β)	t-value	P-value
H1	IGC congruency	$\rightarrow$	Inspired-by	0.120	1.844	0.065
H2	IGC congruency	$\rightarrow$	IGC credibility	0.619	9.342	0.000
	IGC credibility	$\rightarrow$	Inspired-by	0.630	8.847	0.000
H3$_a$	Inspired-by	$\rightarrow$	Inspired-to search	0.682	11.271	0.000
H3$_b$	Inspired-by	$\rightarrow$	Inspired-to travel	0.773	12.286	0.000
H3$_c$	Inspired-by	$\rightarrow$	Inspired-to share	0.538	8.961	0.000
H4$_a$	Inspired-to search	$\rightarrow$	Intention to search	0.878	20.819	0.000
H4$_b$	Inspired-to travel	$\rightarrow$	Intention to travel	0.691	10.876	0.000
H4$_c$	Inspired-to share	$\rightarrow$	Intention to share	0.825	20.346	0.000

Note: $\chi2$= 2799.563, (p=0.000); CFI = 0.906; TLI = 0.901; RMSEA = 0.064.
***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

The analysis revealed that all the path coefficients were statistically significant except "IGC congruency" to "inspired-by" (β = 0.0.120, t = 1.844, p >0.05). The significant paths included from the "IGC congruency" to "IGC credibility" (β = 0.0.619, t = 9.342, p <0.001), "IGC credibility" to "inspired-by" (β = 0.630, t = 8.847, p <0.001), "inspired-by" to "inspired-to search" (β = 0.682, t = 11.271, p <0.001), "inspired-by" to "inspired-to travel"

(β = 0.773, t = 12.286, p <0.001), and "inspired-by" to "inspired-to share" (β = 0.538, t = 8.961, p <0.001). "Inspired-to search" to "intention to search" (β = 0.878, t = 20.819, p <0.001), "inspired-to travel" to "intention to travel" (β = 0.691, t = 10.876, p <0.001), "inspired-to share" to "intention to share" (β = 0.825, t = 20.346, p <0.001). The results of the direct paths for the structural model for the low SII group were illustrated in Figure 3.6.

Figure 3.6. Results of the direct path for the structural model (Low SII Group)

*** p< 0.001, ** p< 0.01, * p< 0.05
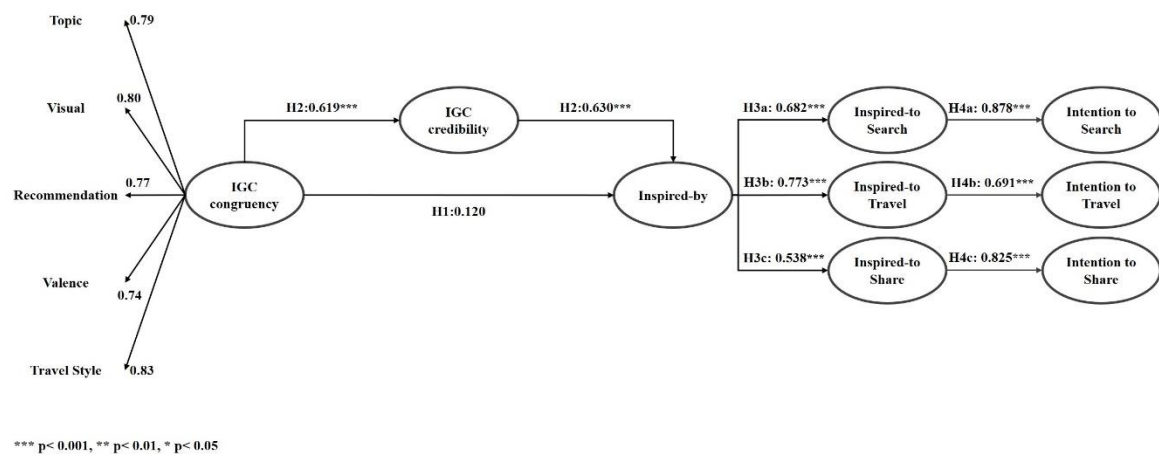
Regarding the group, follow SMIs with high SII, the model fit indices indicated a satisfactory level of fit to the data: normed Chi-square = 2.173 ($\chi 2$ (1260) = 2473.477, p = 0.000), CFI = 0.887, TLI = 0.881, and RMSEA = 0.063.

Analysis of the data revealed that four out of eight path coefficients were statistically significant. These significant paths included from the "IGC congruency" to "inspired-by" (β = 0.0.120, t = 1.844, p >0.05), "IGC congruency" to "IGC credibility" (β = 0.0.619, t = 9.342, p <0.001), "IGC credibility" to "inspired-by" (β = 0.630, t = 8.847, p <0.001), "inspired-by" to "inspired-to search" (β = 0.682, t = 11.271, p <0.001), "inspired-by" to "inspired-to travel" (β = 0.773, t = 12.286, p <0.001), and "inspired-by" to "inspired-to share" (β = 0.538, t = 8.961, p <0.001). "Inspired-to search" to "intention to search" (β = 0.878, t = 20.819, p <0.001), "inspired-to travel" to "intention to travel" (β = 0.691, t = 10.876, p <0.001), "inspired-to share" to "intention to share" (β = 0.825, t= 20.346, p <0.001). The results of the direct paths for the structural model for the low SII group were illustrated in Figure 3.7.

Table 3.33. Results of the SEM analysis of the high SII group (n = 298)

Hypotheses	Path			Standard coefficient (β)	t-value	P-value
H1	IGC congruency	→	Inspired-by	0.341	5.282	0.000
H2	IGC congruency	→	IGC credibility	0.667	9.414	0.000
	IGC credibility	→	Inspired-by	0.557	8.405	0.000
H3$_a$	Inspired-by	→	Inspired-to search	0.853	14.128	0.000
H3$_b$	Inspired-by	→	Inspired-to travel	0.926	14.731	0.000
H3$_c$	Inspired-by	→	Inspired-to share	0.684	11.775	0.000
H4$_a$	Inspired-to search	→	Intention to search	0.908	17.038	0.000
H4$_b$	Inspired-to travel	→	Intention to travel	0.842	12.166	0.000
H4$_c$	Inspired-to share	→	Intention to share	0.875	19.070	0.000

Note: $\chi2$= 2473.477, (p=0.000); CFI = 0.887; TLI = 0.881; RMSEA = 0.063.
***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Figure 3.7. Results of the direct path for the structural model (with high SII)
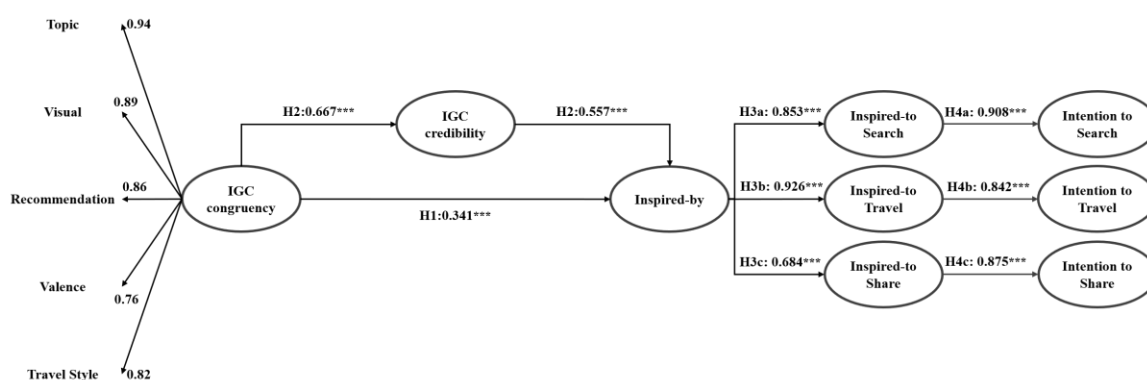
*** p< 0.001, ** p< 0.01, * p< 0.05

The findings of the structural equation modeling analysis, along with the direct path for the structural model of the high SII, are detailed in Table 3.33 and Figure 3.7. Figure 3.8 illustrates the results of the direct path for the structural model of the two datasets.

Figure 3.8. Results of the direct path for the structural model (low and high SII)

*** p< 0.001, ** p< 0.01, * p< 0.05
L= Low SII Group; H= High SII Group
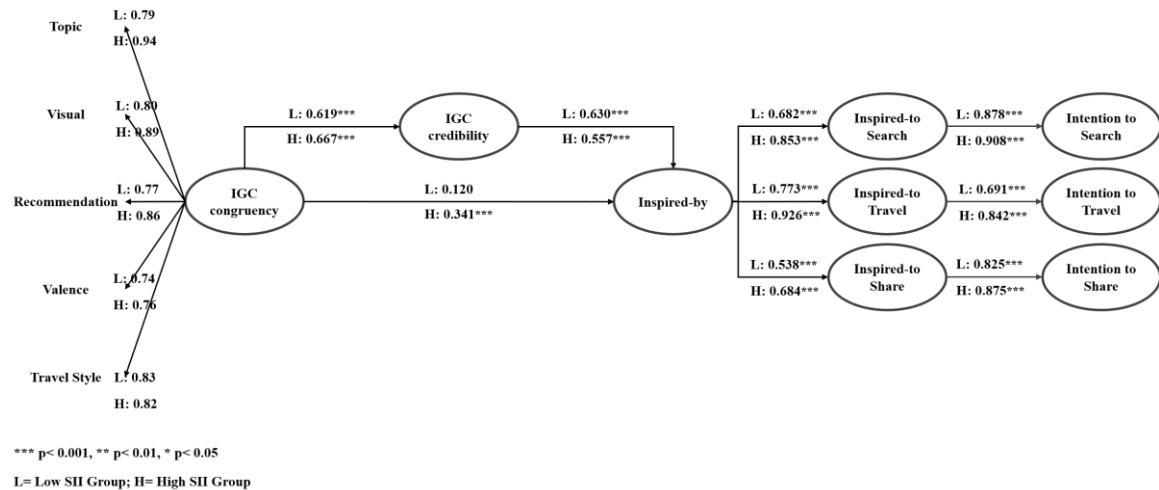
3.3.3.3 Structural Invariance

To verify the equivalence of the proposed structural model across both groups, a test for structural invariance was conducted. A Chi-square difference test was conducted between the baseline model (representing full metric invariance of the structural model) and the full path invariance model (indicating invariance of paths across the two groups) as a prerequisite (Yoo, 2002). The results revealed a significant difference in the Chi-square values between the baseline model (full metric invariance) and the full path invariance model. This suggests that complete structural invariance was not established between the group with low SII and the group with high SII ($\Delta\chi2$ (df)= 41.913 > χ^2 .01(9) = 21.666).

These results indicate that the paths between the two groups were either different or not entirely equivalent. For further details on the structural invariances between the two groups, refer to Table 3.34.

Table 3.34. Structural invariance for low (n = 302) and high (n = 298) SII groups

Models	χ^2/df	$\Delta\chi^2$/Δdf	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
Full metric invariance model (L(X)Y=IN)	5590.405/2563		0.897	0.893	0.044
Full path invariance model (L(X)Y=IN, GA=IN, BE=IN)	5632.318/2572	41.913/9[a]	0.896	0.893	0.045

Note: [a].Chi-square difference test: $\Delta\chi2$ (df)= 41.913 > χ^2 .01(9) = 21.666, therefore there is no support for full structural invariance, and the paths across the two groups are not the same.

3.3.3.4 Invariance Test for the Paths

The results of the invariance test comparing the specific paths between the cohort with low SII and the cohort with high SII are detailed in Table 3.35. Each path between the two groups was assessed for invariance individually. For instance, the path coefficient from IGC congruency to IGC credibility was compared between the baseline model and the constrained model for the two cohorts. All paths in the baseline model were then systematically evaluated and compared between the low SII and high SII cohorts.

Table 3.35. Structural invariance for low SII (n = 302) and high SII (n = 298)

Hypotheses	Path			Low SII vs. High SII	
				χ^2/df	$\Delta\chi^2$/Δdf
	Free model			5590.405/2563	
H1	IGC congruency	$\rightarrow$	Inspired-by	5592.815/2564	2.410/1
H2	IGC congruency	$\rightarrow$	IGC credibility	5591.112/2564	0.707/1
	IGC credibility	$\rightarrow$	Inspired-by	5594.773/2564	4.368/1[**]
H3$_a$	Inspired-by	$\rightarrow$	Inspired-to search	5598.236/2564	7.831/1[***]
H3$_b$	Inspired-by	$\rightarrow$	Inspired-to travel	5591.265/2564	0.860/1
H3$_c$	Inspired-by	$\rightarrow$	Inspired-to share	5603.755/2564	13.35/1[***]
H4$_a$	Inspired-to search	$\rightarrow$	Intention to search	5605.518/2564	0.185/1
H4$_b$	Inspired-to travel	$\rightarrow$	Intention to travel	5605.518/2564	15.113/1[***]

H4$_c$	Inspired-to share $\rightarrow$	Intention to share	5593.832/2564	3.427/1[*]

Note: [*] The source of significant differences ($\Delta\chi^2$ /df > $\Delta\chi^2$ 0.1 (1) = 2.706).
[**] The source of significant differences ($\Delta\chi^2$ /df > $\Delta\chi^2$ 0,05 (1) = 3.841).
[***] The source of significant differences ($\Delta\chi^2$ /df > $\Delta\chi^2$ 0.01 (1) = 6.635).

The outcome of the inter-group invariance test revealed notable distinctions between the cohort with low SII and the cohort with high SII. Specifically, significant differences were observed in five paths examined. Notably, the path coefficient from the IGC credibility to inspired-by was significantly lower in the high SII group compared to the low SII cohort. However, the path coefficients from inspired-by to inspired-to search and from inspired-by to inspired-to share were significantly greater in the high SII group compared to the low SII cohort. Similarly, the path coefficient value from inspired-to travel to intention to travel and inspired-to share to intention to share were significantly higher in the high SII cohort than in the low SII cohort. These findings provide partial validation of the moderating impact of SII, thereby Hypothesis 5 is partially supported.

3.4   Discussions

This section presents a discussion on the findings of Study One. Study One was conducted with the main objective to complement the growing stream of research on SMIM by investigating the effect of IGC congruency on viewers' travel inspiration, and behavioral intentions. To achieve this objective, this research had three sub-targets. The results of each sub-target are discussed in the following subsections.

3.4.1   Research Objective 1$_a$

Research objective 1$_a$ aimed to develop a reliable and valid scale for measuring IGC congruency (congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs). Following the procedures outlined in the previous studies (Churchill, 1979; Kock, 2021; Kock et al., 2019; Lee & Park, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024), this study conceptualized and

developed the IGC congruency scale. A mixed-method approach was utilized to develop the scale and verify its theoretical structure.

First, strictly following the procedure proposed by Churchill (1979), this study developed the concept of IGC congruency based on the congruency concept identified in previous literature (Heckler & Childers, 1992; Maille & Fleck, 2011). The new concept of IGC congruency refers to the congruency among multiple pieces of IGC provided by different but not the same SMI. Through conducting a qualitative study (serial interviews), IGC congruency was conceptualized as a second-order factor model with five dimensions, named: "Topic", "Recommendation", "Valence", "Visual", and "Travel style". Each dimension reflects the congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs.

"Topic" refers to the focus of the content provided by SMIs. Previous studies (e.g., Asan, 2022; Bosangit et al., 2015; Ding et al., 2023; Jiao et al., 2022; Peralta, 2019) have noted that multiple pieces of IGC contain distinct topical focuses about a destination, such as coverage of local attractions, cuisine, culture, and so on. The similarities or overlaps in the specific topics covered in the IGC can lead them to be perceived as congruent, according to the relevancy dimension of the congruency concept (Maille & Fleck, 2011). Thus, this study clarifies that topical congruency plays an important role in shaping viewers' perceptions of IGC congruency.

Followed by topic "Valence" was identified as another domain of IGC congruency that refers to the sentiment [from very positive to very negative] used by SMIs to describe their experience/advice. The valence of multiple pieces of IGC is considered congruent when either positive opinions or negative opinions are provided (Maille & Fleck, 2011). Building on previous research (e.g., Balaji et al., 2021; Xu, 2019)and interview findings, this study identified valence as a dimension of IGC. Another remarkable antecedent of IGC congruency is "Recommendation" which refers to the advice/suggestive information provided by SMIs about the reviewed subject. Recommendation provided in IGC has been known as a significant advantage of IGC by previous researchers (e.g., Guy et al., 2017; Purwandari et al., 2022). For the establishment of IGC congruency, recommendations provided in IGC should be consistent with one another (Maille & Fleck, 2011). The current study, therefore, considered recommendation as one of the five dimensions of IGC congruency.

The fourth dimension, "Visual", refers to the selection of visuals posted by SMIs and has been recognized as the key element of IGC (Arthur, 2021; Gholamhosseinzadeh, 2023; Ingrassia et al., 2022). SMIs use different visualization practices, and the similarity among them makes the visuals congruent for the viewers (Maille & Fleck, 2011). This thesis demonstrates that visual congruency is a significant dimension of IGC congruency. Lastly, "Travel style" refers to the travel style of SMIs, which can be categorized as budget traveler, luxury traveler, adventure traveler, etc. Previous studies (e.g., Duffy & Kang, 2020; Gholamhosseinzadeh, 2023) have indicated that SMIs provide content based on their interests and travel styles. Therefore, based on this prior research and the findings of interviews, this study considers the congruency among SMIs' travel styles as one of the antecedents of IGC congruency.

Second, informed by qualitative serial interviews as well as deduced from the literature review, the first quantitative study developed a reliable, valid, and parsimonious IGC congruency measure. Following a rigorous filtering process of the items, pilot test, and the performance of EFA and CFA on the items, an IGC congruency scale with 20 items under five dimensions (Topic, Visual, Recommendation, Valence, and Travel style) was developed. The five dimensions "Topic", "Visual", "Recommendation", "Valence", and "Travel style" have four items each, measured in the semantic differential scaling measurement format. Moreover, the mean score of the topic (M= 4.99) was the highest, followed by visual (M= 4.97) and recommendation (M= 4.92). Valence and travel style followed next with mean scores of 4.79 and 4.79, respectively. The mean scores analysis suggests that participants perceived higher congruency in topic and visual dimensions, possibly because they require less cognitive processing. Recommendation and Valence, on the other hand, required more cognitive effort to perceive congruency. Interestingly, Travel Style scored the lowest among the dimensions. This could be attributed to the fact that individuals have diverse preferences when it comes to travel style.

Lastly, the results of CFA presented high-level reliability, convergent validity, construct validity, discriminant validity, and cross validity. Importantly, the study conducted a comparison of two competing models, ultimately confirming that the proposed measurement of the second-order factor model with five dimensions for IGC congruency aligns with the data analysis and is supported by the findings. Moreover, this research confirmed the developed scale with robust theoretical validity. In fact, the impact of IGC

congruency on viewers' cognitive responses has been theoretically determined. The results of the nomological validity stage from the empirical study will be presented in the following subsection.

3.4.2 Research Objective 1$_b$

Research objective 1$_b$ aimed to propose and test a model explaining the relationships among IGC congruency (congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs), IGC credibility, viewers' travel inspiration, and behavioral intentions. Utilizing SEM to analyze responses from 600 participants, this study empirically validates that IGC congruency positively influences viewers' inspired-by state. Specifically, this study found that the more viewers perceive that the multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs are congruent, the more they are "inspired by" the IGC. Support for this finding can be linked to the tent of customer inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017), which emphasized that source characteristics trigger customer inspiration.

In line with empirical findings in tourism (e.g., Fang et al., 2023) and non-tourism studies (e.g., Aljukhadar et al., 2020; Ki et al., 2022; Tang & Tsang, 2020), the characteristics of IGC have been proven to exert a positive influence on viewers' inspired-by state. As noted by Dai et al. (2022), social media content can be the source of travel inspiration for viewers. Fang et al. (2023) echo and supplement that the characteristics of social media content, such as the attractiveness of short videos, have a positive influence on viewers' travel inspiration. Given that the characteristics of IGC can trigger viewers' travel inspiration, it is plausible that perceived IGC congruency, which is reflected in congruency among topic, visual, recommendation, valence, and travel style, triggers viewers' travel inspiration.

Some previous studies have postulated that IGC credibility mediates the relationship between promotional message and consumers' cognitive and affective responses (Kim et al., 2022; Kim, Thorson, et al., 2024; Kim, Xie, et al., 2024). This research lends empirical credence to these aforementioned studies by showing that IGC credibility partially mediated the relationship between IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-by state. This

suggests that the influence of IGC congruency on viewers' inspired-by state was partially engendered through its influence on IGC credibility.

In their previous study on online reviews, Cheung et al. (2008) identified that the recommendation congruency of online reviews can enhance online reviews' credibility perceptions by consumers. This is because, according to the heuristic theory and multiple source effect, individuals tend to assume congruency among opinions of different members of the group as a normative cue that indicates correctness (Chaiken, 1987; Harkins & Petty, 1981a, 1981b). In another study about online reviews, Cheung et al. (2012) proposed and empirically verified that review congruency enhances review credibility because information that is consistently presented by multiple reviewers is generally seen as more believable. Similarly, a study by Quaschning et al. (2014) revealed that review valence congruency results in attributing the review congruency to product-related attributions rather than personal motivation of reviewers, which leads to the reliability of the reviews. The current study identified a positive and significant influence of IGC congruency on IGC credibility, which in turn positively influences viewers' inspired-by state. This is in line with a study by Ki et al. (2022), which showed that an SMI whose content is regarded as credible is likely to inspire its viewers. Therefore, this study confirms and complements these previous studies by demonstrating that IGC credibility enhances the relationship between IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-by state.

Concordant with the tenet advocated by Thrash and Elliot's (2003) transmissional model of inspiration, this study's findings showed that viewers' inspired-by state predicts their inspired-to search, inspired-to travel, and inspired-to share states, which actualize the new idea attained during the inspired-by state. The core concept of customer inspiration provides support for these findings, which emphasize that customer inspiration happens in two distinct states as the shift from initially accepting a marketing-driven concept to then personally pursuing a goal related to consumption (Böttger et al., 2017). The results also provide support for previous studies in the tourism context. Given that searching for more information and sharing content on social media are common social media users' behavior, this study demonstrates that after being "inspired-by" IGC congruency, viewers are then more likely to be "inspired-to" search for additional information, travel, and share the content with their friends. Overall, the findings provide further insights into the multistage customer inspiration process.

Finally, the present investigation verifies that this transcendental experience affects viewers' intention to search, intention to travel, and intention to share. Support for these findings can be linked to the tenets of customer inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017), which emphasized that intrinsic motivation leads to actualization of a new idea. These findings also lend support to previous studies in the tourism (e.g., Fang et al., 2023; He et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023) and non-tourism contexts (e.g., Das et al., 2022; Ki et al., 2022; Oltra et al., 2022). For example, He et al. (2023) found that in the realm of wellness tourism, landscapes offering therapeutic or restorative benefits are perceived as more inspiring, leading to increased engagement behaviors. Furthermore, Study One's findings confirmed the results of a study by Fang et al. (2023), which revealed that inspiration evoked by watching short videos leads to consumers' travel intentions.

3.4.3   Research Objective 1$_c$

Research objective 1$_c$ aimed to examine the moderating effects of susceptibility to interpersonal influence (SII) on the relationships among the constructs. This study identified some similarities and differences between those individuals with low SII and high SII. These results also reinforce previous studies (e.g., Chu & Kim, 2011; Das et al., 2022; De Pelsmacker et al., 2018; Park et al., 2011), suggesting that SII plays an important role in consumers' affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses. Generally, individuals with high SII are more likely to be affected by WOM and eWOM (Liao & Cheung, 2002; Park et al., 2011). In line with previous studies, the findings of the current study show that the path coefficient from inspired-by to inspired-to search and from inspired-by to inspired-to share was significantly higher in the high SII group than in the low SII group. Likewise, the path coefficient from inspired-to travel to intention to travel and from inspired-to share to intention to share was also significantly greater in the high SII group compared to the low SII group.

3.5   Chapter Summary

This chapter presented Study One, which was designed to address the identified research gaps and achieve the first objective of the thesis. The chapter began by articulating the hypothesis and presenting the conceptual model. In the next section, the development of the IGC congruency scale was thoroughly explained. The nomological validity of the developed scale was tested through an empirical study. The hypotheses and conceptual model were evaluated, and the results were presented in section 3.3. Finally, the chapter discussed the study's findings by drawing connections with previous research. The next chapter will present Study Two.

CHAPTER 4   STUDY TWO

This chapter outlines the second study undertaken to address the identified research gaps and fulfill the second objective of this thesis. To address the research gaps and thoroughly understand how IGC congruency, as well as its interaction with content- and source-related characteristics, affects viewers' travel inspiration under more controlled conditions, three experimental studies were conducted. In this chapter, the research hypotheses and model will first be presented (section 4.1). Afterwards, each experimental study will be presented in a separate section. In the final section of this chapter, the general discussion will be presented.

4.1   Research Hypotheses and Model

The proposed research hypotheses and conceptual model of this study are grounded in a comprehensive literature review. Each hypothesis is presented in a separate subsection below, followed by the conceptual model, which is presented in subsection 4.1.4.

4.1.1   Impact of IGC Congruency on Viewers' Travel Inspiration

In information processing, Harkins and Petty (1981a) suggest that a message's persuasiveness increases when delivered through multiple sources. However, in marketing realms like SMIM, messages from multiple sources (e.g., SMIs) do not necessarily create an additive effect on influence (Moore & Reardon, 1987). This is because the persuasiveness of these messages depends on the degree of congruency among them (Aghakhani et al., 2021; Cheung et al., 2012; Cheung et al., 2008; Quaschning et al., 2014). Oltra et al. (2022) empirically showed that encountering persuasive messages elicits inspiration, a prompt internal reaction supported by heuristic processing (Chaiken, 1980). In social media, where individuals often adopt a hedonic mindset and are less likely to engage in critical thinking, they rely on heuristic cues, such as message congruency (Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991), to quickly evaluate messages (Chaiken, 1980). Chaiken and Ledgerwood (2012) argue that consensus implies correctness, reducing cognitive effort

and skepticism. By minimizing cognitive effort, congruency facilitates heuristic processing, which prioritizes affective resonance over critical analysis (Chaiken, 1980; Kim et al., 2019), ultimately leading viewers to emotionally engage with the content, making them more susceptible to inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017; Dai et al., 2022).

According to Goldenberg et al. (2020), emotions are more socially influenced than attitudes. The gateway belief model (van der Linden, 2021) further supports this argument, positing that emotional engagement, triggered by perceived consensus in messages (e.g., messages from multiple SMIs), drives motivational states, prompting actions such as avoidance or approach. In SMIM, IGC elicits inspiration through emotional arousal (e.g., excitement) and transcendence (aspirational envisioning), amplifying persuasion and aspirational goals. Building on these, it is assumed that when IGC topics (e.g., travel attractions, culture) are congruent, the topical congruency acts as a heuristic cue that evokes emotional arousal (e.g., excitement) and transcendence (aspirational envisioning), enhancing inspiration (Thrash et al., 2014). By contrast, incongruent topics disrupt this automatic response, demanding effortful cognitive processing (Thrash & Elliot, 2003).

Customer inspiration is characterized by two interrelated states: the "inspired-by" state, which is a passive reaction to external stimuli, and the "inspired-to" state, which reflects motivated action (Böttger et al., 2017; Thrash & Elliot, 2003). Research demonstrates that inspiration in one state facilitates progression to the next. For example, Rauschnabel et al. (2019) found that augmented reality marketing content transitions customers from a passive inspiration state to an active engagement state. Similarly, Ki et al. (2022) found that IGC in SMIM inspires viewers' travel intentions, reinforcing the connection between these states. Building on this framework, the current study hypothesizes that congruent (vs. incongruent) IGC topics are more effective at elevating viewers' inspired-by state, which in turn enhances their inspired-to state. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed.

> ***H1*_{a-b}:** *(a) IGC congruency has a direct effect on viewers' inspired-by state, such that IGC posted by multiple SMIs with congruent topics (vs. incongruent topics) lead to a greater (lower) viewers' inspired-by state, (b) which in turn positively influence viewers' inspired-to travel state.*

4.1.2 Moderating Role of SMIs Type

Given the significance of how a message is conveyed to an audience, the impact of IGC congruency (congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) on viewers' travel inspiration may be influenced by specific factors, one of which could be the type of SMIs involved. SMI type, defined as the communicator's characteristics (Kapoor et al., 2021), has been classified in past research based on follower numbers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Kostygina et al., 2020), accomplishments (Kim et al., 2021), business affiliations (Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020; Kapoor et al., 2021), and areas of expertise (Spálová et al., 2021). Figure 2.3 presents SMI classification by follower count. Additionally, accomplishments refer to whether an SMI is a recognized celebrity or gained popularity solely through social media. Business affiliations distinguish between third-party and business account sources, while expertise indicates the SMI's specific knowledge and skill focus, such as travel, lifestyle, fashion, or cosmetics.

McGuire's (1989) communication-persuasion matrix highlights source characteristics alongside message, channel, receiver, and destination as essential components of effective communication. Specific characteristics, such as source expertise, enhance persuasive power and can act as heuristic cues for persuasion (McGuire, 2001; Petty et al., 1981). The halo effect suggests that expert SMIs are perceived as more persuasive than non-expert SMIs in delivering IGC (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Uribe et al., 2016). Since inspiration can be a result of effective persuasion, an SMI's expertise may significantly influence their inspirational impact (Chang, 2020; Oltra et al., 2022).

This study focuses on two SMI types based on expertise: travel specialists and non-travel specialists. Travel specialists possess in-depth knowledge of travel and tourism (Sandholmen & Olsen, 2019), while non-travel specialists typically share diverse aspects of their everyday lives (Abidin, 2015). These categories were selected due to the recognized influence of expertise on consumer attitudes (Ismagilova et al., 2020). Supporting this idea, Fang et al. (2023) demonstrated that an SMI's expertise can inspire consumers. Based on this, it is proposed that congruent IGC from travel specialist SMIs may enhance viewers' travel inspiration because the level of expertise in travel-specific content may enhance the persuasiveness of the message, making it more compelling for viewers seeking travel inspiration (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Uribe et al., 2016). Conversely, non-travel specialists,

while able to inspire through general content, may lack the travel-specific credibility needed to achieve the same depth of influence on viewers' travel inspiration (Biswas et al., 2006). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is suggested:

> *The relationship between IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-by state is moderated by SMIs type (travel specialists vs. non-travel specialists).*
>
> ***H2:*** *IGC with congruent topics (vs. incongruent topics) results in higher viewers' inspired-by and higher viewers' inspired-to travel state only when the SMIs are travel specialists.*

4.1.3   Moderating Role of Sponsorship Disclosure Type

Another critical boundary condition influencing the inspirational power of IGC congruency is the type of sponsorship disclosure. As sponsorship disclosures explicitly inform consumers about the commercial intent of content, they heighten awareness of its advertising nature (Friestad & Wright, 1994). However, the impact of such disclosures is not uniform; instead, their effect on viewer inspiration may vary depending on their design and transparency. Prior research underscores that sponsorship disclosure types can significantly moderate consumer cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses (Hwang & Jeong, 2016; Kapoor et al., 2022; Stubb & Colliander, 2019). For example, Hwang and Jeong (2016) revealed that while non-disclosed or "honest opinions" disclosures fostered positive attitudes toward sponsored IGC, simple disclosures (e.g., "sponsored post") elicited skepticism. Similarly, Stubb and Colliander (2019) found that impartial disclosures, which subtly acknowledge sponsorship without overt promotional language, enhanced credibility by mitigating perceptions of overt advertising. These findings collectively suggest that the framing of sponsorship disclosures plays a pivotal role in shaping audience reactions.

This distinction becomes particularly relevant when considering the incentives offered to SMIs, who typically expect compensation for their content creation efforts (Vicuña, 2021). Sponsorship arrangements vary widely, ranging from partial coverage of expenses (e.g., accommodation) to full sponsorship encompassing flights, meals, and activities (Gordon, 2023). Such variability in compensation models raises questions about how the extent of

sponsorship, partial versus full, might influence audience perceptions. For instance, partial sponsorship disclosures may subtly signal collaboration without overt commercial intent, whereas full sponsorship disclosures could emphasize a more transactional relationship.

This study examines sponsorship disclosure in terms of the extent of sponsorship, contrasting partial sponsorship (e.g., only accommodation) with full sponsorship (e.g., flight, accommodation, meals, and other expenses). These levels of sponsorship disclosure may influence viewers in different ways. Partially sponsored IGC might be perceived as more authentic and influential, fostering a greater impartiality toward the sponsor. Conversely, fully sponsored IGC may be perceived as more aligned with traditional advertising and, therefore, less inspirational, because the chance of fully sponsored IGC being biased is relatively high (Boerman et al., 2014; Pfeuffer & Huh, 2020; Stubb, 2018). Regardless of IGC congruency, viewers' inspiration is similar when IGCs are disclosed as fully sponsored. Building on these insights, this study hypothesizes that disclosing IGC as partially sponsored may enhance viewers' travel inspiration when topics are congruent. In contrast, fully sponsored disclosure is likely to yield a similar inspirational effect, regardless of topic congruency. Hence, the following hypothesis is developed:

This study specifically examines how these two levels of sponsorship disclosure—partial versus full—moderate the inspirational effects of IGC. Partial sponsorship, by disclosing limited financial support, may enhance perceptions of authenticity and impartiality, as audiences perceive SMIs as retaining greater editorial control (Boerman et al., 2017; Pfeuffer & Huh, 2020). In contrast, full sponsorship disclosures risk aligning IGC with traditional advertising, potentially diminishing inspiration due to heightened skepticism about bias (Boerman et al., 2017; Pfeuffer & Huh, 2020). Building on these insights, this study posits that the inspirational potential of congruent IGC hinges on the type of sponsorship disclosed. Specifically, congruent topics are likely to amplify travel inspiration only when paired with partial sponsorship, as the reduced perception of bias allows thematic alignment to resonate more authentically. Conversely, fully sponsored IGC may neutralize the benefits of congruency, as viewers' skepticism overrides the content's thematic relevance. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> *The relationship between IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-by state is moderated by sponsorship disclosure type (partially sponsored vs. fully sponsored).*

H3: IGC with congruent topics (vs. incongruent topics) results in higher viewers' inspired-by and higher viewers' inspired-to travel state only when IGC are partially sponsored.

4.1.4 Proposed Conceptual Model

The conceptual framework shown in Figure 4.1 is introduced based on the background literature presented in the preceding section. The conceptual framework depicts the key constructs and their interrelationships. Specifically, the model hypothesizes that IGC congruency has a direct effect on viewers' inspired-by state and in turn indirectly influence viewers' inspired-to travel state through viewers' inspired-by state. Furthermore, the model proposes that SMIs type and sponsorship disclosure type, as boundary conditions, moderates the relationships among the constructs. This approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the causal relationship among IGC congruency and their inspirational power in the tourism context.

Figure 4.1. Proposed conceptual model – Study Two
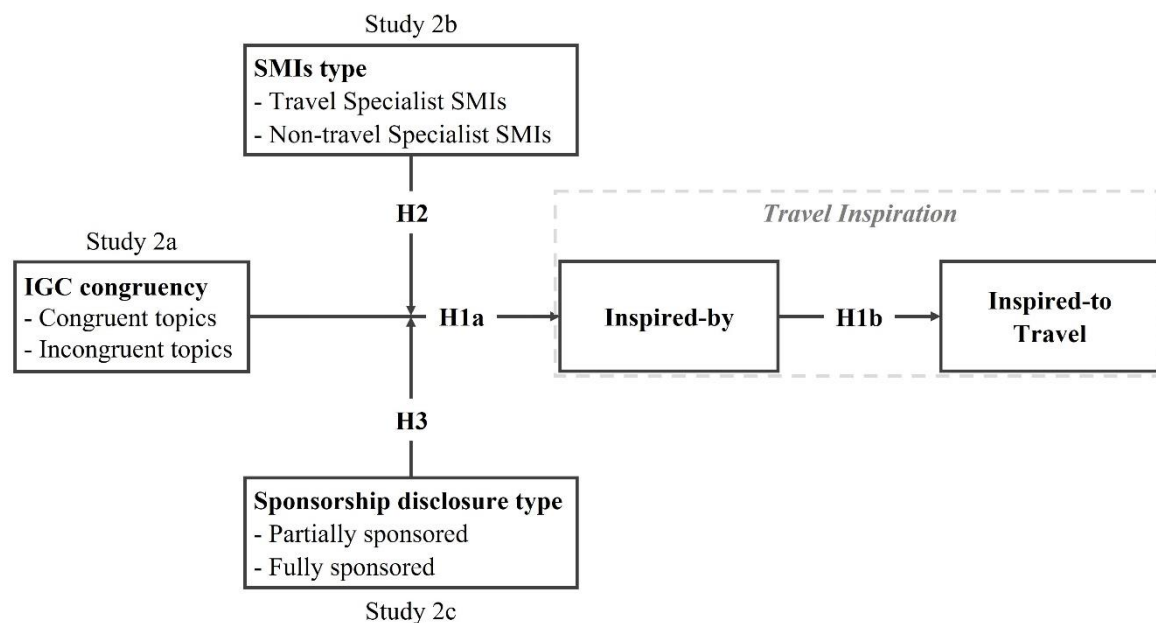
4.2   Study 2a

This study aims to examine the effect of IGC congruency (congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration. To achieve this objective and specifically test the developed H1a and H1b (see Figure 4.1), one simple comparative experiment was conducted.

4.2.1   Research Method

Aiming to determine the causal relationship among variables, experimental investigation has been chosen for Study 2a (Cash et al., 2016). This study employed a simple comparative experiment (IGC congruency: congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) to test H1a and the PROCESS Model 4 to test H1b. In this study, IGC congruency was manipulated, and viewers' inspired-by state and viewers' inspired-to travel state were measured.

4.2.1.1 Study Setting and Stimuli Development

Selected Tourism Destination

To ensure the scenario was realistic, a tourism destination was selected to feature in the fictitious Instagram feeds. The selection process was guided by criteria emphasizing the destination's prominence as a leading tourism hotspot, its richness in attributes such as food, landscapes, people, and heritage, and its general reputation as a safe and secure destination. These criteria aimed to facilitate meaningful manipulation of the topics in IGC while minimizing potential biases stemming from a pre-existing negative image of the destination (World Tourism Organization, 1996; Zou & Yu, 2022). Based on international tourist arrival data over the past five years, Greece emerged as one of the top-performing tourism destinations (World Tourism Organization, 2024). In addition to its leading position in global tourism, Greece offers a diverse and vibrant range of attributes, including its renowned cuisine, breathtaking landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and hospitable people. Furthermore, its reputation for safety and security aligns with the research requirements

(Metaxas et al., 2022). Therefore, Greece was selected as the featured destination in the study's stimuli.

Selected Platform

The study employed a series of fictitious Instagram posts as stimuli, with each post depicting the travel experiences of SMIs. The selection of Instagram as the platform for this investigation was driven by its substantial dominance over other social media platforms in terms of spending and marketer utilization, as highlighted by Enberg (2022). Enberg (2022) reported that in 2022, US marketers allocated $2.23 billion out of a total expenditure of $4.99 billion toward collaborations with SMIs, specifically on the Instagram platform. Moreover, numerous studies have consistently identified Instagram as one of the most popular platforms for SMIM (Barbe et al., 2019; Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Ong & Ito, 2019). Furthermore, the selection of Instagram was supported by the growing popularity of travel SMIs on the platform, who have effectively utilized it to inspire and generate interest in various destinations (Barbe et al., 2019).

Stimulus Material

Four fictitious account names were selected, one for each Instagram post in each treatment, to control for pre-existing attitudes toward the SMIs' account names (Till & Busler, 2000). Additionally, the four account names displayed in Figure 4.2 featured an equal number of male and female SMIs to eliminate gender bias. All fictitious profile photos were obtained from Unsplash, a collection of non-copyrighted images.

Figure 4.2. Fictitious SMIs' profile

To manipulate IGC congruency, a total of eight variations of Instagram posts were created. The congruent topics treatment involved presenting the beauty of the landscape as a single destination attribute, expressed in four distinct styles. In contrast, the incongruent topics treatment encompassed four different destination attributes, each unique to a set of four Instagram posts. To determine the selection of destination attributes, an extensive review of both SMIs' Instagram posts and relevant literature was conducted to enhance the authenticity and credibility of the fictitious Instagram posts. The attributes that emerged as frequently mentioned throughout the analysis included food, landscape, people, and heritage (Klenosky, 2002; Yuan & McDonald, 1990). To ensure that Instagram posts could be read without the need for scrolling and without consuming too much mental effort, this study followed Tiggemann et al.'s (2020) study and selected post length to be between 8 and 12 words (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1. Fictitious congruent and incongruent Instagram captions

Scenario	Fictitious Instagram caption
Congruent topics	Create lifelong memories on Greece's stunning scenery, pure bliss awaits!
	Greece stole my heart with stunning landscapes and endless charm!
	Greece surprises with awe-inspiring landscapes and picturesque charm!
	Breathtaking landscapes adorn every corner of Greece's beautiful land!
Incongruent topics	Greece's culinary delights are a flavorful journey for the senses!
	I'm completely blown away by the beautiful landscapes of Greece!
	Warm welcome and genuine smiles of Greeks touch the soul!
	Greece's rich heritage weaves tales of ancient wonders and traditions!

Based on the topic of each Instagram caption, a non-copyrighted image was obtained from Unsplash. Each image was carefully selected by the author and her supervisor to match the designed captions. Ultimately, the eight fictitious Instagram posts were created using the online platform zeoob.com (see Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3. Study 2a stimuli

Treatment 1

Treatment 2

Incongruent scenario

travelista_diaries ● travelista_diaries Greece's culinary delights are a flavorful journey for the senses! ... more

femme_wonderlust ● femme_wonderlust I'm completely blown away by the beautiful landscapes of Greece! ... more

nomadic_adventurer ● nomadic_adventurer Warm welcome and genuine smiles of Greeks touch the soul! ... more

worldly_voyager ● worldly_voyager Greece's rich heritage weaves tales of ancient wonders and traditions! ... more

4.2.1.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Participants

In order to establish appropriate criteria and define the sample frame for Study 2a, participants were purposively selected based on specific parameters. The study specifically focused on participants from the United States due to several key factors. Firstly, the United States is one of the leading inbound travel markets in Greece (Bank of Greece, 2024). Secondly, it is recognized as having a substantial number of social media users, ranking third globally after China and India, with 302.25 million users according to Statista (2022). Although the total number of social media users in the United States is lower compared to China and India, the ratio of users to the population is higher, indicating a significant presence of social media usage within the country. Thirdly, the social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) commonly used in the United States have a global reach, making them influential on a worldwide scale. Fourthly, the United States is a prominent segment that holds a significant share in the global outbound tourism market, as highlighted by the World Tourism Organization (2021). This aligns with the research focus, emphasizing the relevance of studying social media usage in a context where tourism plays a substantial role. Lastly, the official language in the United States is English, which reduces potential language barriers for the author conducting this study. This linguistic alignment facilitates communication and data collection processes, ensuring clarity and accuracy in the research outcomes.

In addition to the place of origin, the second requirement for inclusion in the sample was that participants must be registered Instagram users. The third requirement for inclusion in the sample was that participants must have watched, read, or seen at least one piece of travel-related content shared by SMIs on Instagram. Only participants who met these three criteria were considered representative of social media users included in the study.

Sample Size

According to Viglia and Dolnicar (2020), a standard optimal sample size does not exist for experiments. A larger or smaller sample can result in the rejection of the null

hypothesis, although the treatment effect remains the same (Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020). Based on the sample size of previous experimental design studies (e.g., De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Martínez-López et al., 2020), an average sample size of 40 to 50 per treatment was found common among previous studies. Therefore, a sample size of 100 (2 treatments × 50) was considered for this experiment.

Instrument and Measurement

The research instrument for this study was created using Qualtrics' survey design tool, which is well-known for its intuitive interface, attractive layout, and ease of use. Since the intended participants were in the United States, the survey was formatted in English. It consisted of several sections, detailed in the Appendices (see Appendix VI).

The first section served as an introduction, providing participants with brief information about the study, their right to withdraw, and assurances regarding data confidentiality. At the end of this section, participants were prompted to answer a question related to consent. Participants who consented to participate in the study proceeded to the next section, which included eligibility check questions.

The second section was designed to confirm that participants met certain criteria. The first eligibility check question, *"Have you ever participated in this survey before?"*, aimed to exclude participants who had previously participated in Study One to prevent learning effects (Charness et al., 2012). The second question, *"Are you a registered user of Instagram?"*, targeted participants who were registered Instagram users specifically. Lastly, the third screening question, *"Have you ever watched, read, or seen any travel related content shared by social media influencers on Instagram?",* served the purpose of including participants who had watched, read, or seen any travel related content shared by SMIs on Instagram. After successfully passing these eligibility check questions, participants moved on to the third section.

In section three, participants were shown the four SMIs' Instagram profile photos and asked to *"Imagine that you are a follower of the following influencers"*. To make sure that participants went through each Instagram account and could successfully imagine

themselves as their followers, proceeding to the next scenario page was activated after 5 seconds. Later, they were asked to read the scenario: *"One day you casually browse your Instagram feed and then you come across the following Instagram posts"*. To make sure that participants went through the scenario and could successfully imagine themselves in the scenario, the stimuli page was activated after 5 seconds. Afterwards, participants of each treatment randomly received the four designed stimuli. To create a more realistic experimental experience, the four stimuli were presented to participants one at a time. Each stimulus page was displayed for a minimum of 10 seconds, allowing participants to engage with each stimulus thoroughly before manually proceeding to the next one. This approach ensured careful consideration of each stimulus. After being exposed to all four stimuli, participants proceeded to the fourth section.

Table 4.2. List of measurement items in Study 2a

Constructs and items	References
Inspiration Measured by a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).	Böttger et al. (2017)
Inspired-by State	
- My imagination about Greece was stimulated by those four Instagram posts. - My curiosity about Greece was stimulated by those four Instagram posts. - My horizon about Greece was broadened by those four Instagram posts. - My inspiration about Greece was stimulated by those four Instagram posts. - I was intrigued about Greece by new ideas presented in those four Instagram posts. - I unexpectedly and spontaneously got new ideas about Greece from those four Instagram posts.	
Inspired-to Travel State	
- After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was inspired to travel to Greece. - After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt a desire to travel to Greece. - After viewing the influencer-generated content, my interest in traveling to Greece was increased. - After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was motivated to travel to Greece. - After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt an urge to travel to Greece.	

The fourth section included several measurement items. Based on previously validated scales found in the literature, measurement items were adapted for this study. Adaptations were made to all items according to the study's specific context. Items were measured by a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Table 4.2 shows measurement items of inspiration construct.

To ensure the validity of the scale and to identify inattentive participants, prior research has suggested the use of attention check questions (e.g., Berinsky et al., 2014; Huang et al., 2015). Supporting these recommendations, a study by Kung et al. (2018) found that attention checks do not compromise scale validity, which was contrary to earlier expectations. The findings also indicated that these questions had no significant impact on how participants answered or understood the scale. Consequently, an attention check question was included: *"I am selecting "strongly disagree" to show I am paying attention to this question."*

The fifth section included a series of questions for a manipulation check as well as a realism check. To check whether the manipulation for IGC congruency was successful, participants were asked to choose the most appropriate answer to the following statement, *"In my opinion, the topic highlighted in these four Instagram posts is _____ [1: Congruent to 7: Incongruent]"*. To evaluate the perceived realism of the scenario, participants were asked to answer two questions, which are *"The four Instagram posts I saw earlier are similar to the Instagram posts published by influencers in the real world [1: Strongly disagree to 7: Strongly agree]"* and *"It is easy for me to imagine myself in the scenario [1: Strongly disagree to 7: Strongly agree]."*

In the final section of the survey, participants were asked to indicate their gender, age, nationality, level of reference to IGC for travel decision-making, level of reliance on IGC for travel decision-making, number of SMIs used as a reference source for travel decision-making, and whether they had ever been in Greece before. Participants' answers to the demographic questions helped to understand the participants' profile and control their influence on the outcome (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016).

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using CloudResearch, an online survey platform recognized for its high data quality relative to other alternatives. Participants recruited through CloudResearch were more likely to pass attention checks, provide thoughtful answers, adhere to instructions, recall previously presented information, have distinct IP addresses and geolocations, and carefully read all survey items (Berry et al., 2022; Douglas et al., 2023). Furthermore, CloudResearch effectively recruited participants from the United States while fulfilling specific criteria established by the researchers. Overall, using an online survey platform like CloudResearch not only simplifies participant recruitment but also improves data quality. The study utilized a purposive sampling technique, a form of non-probability sampling that is especially valuable for obtaining insights from knowledgeable experts in a specific area (Tongco, 2007).

Pilot-test

After designing the experiment stimuli and questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted to ensure that the experiment was well-designed and the questionnaire was well-constructed. In detail, the pilot test was conducted with several goals as follows: (1) to check whether the manipulation of IGC congruency was successful in each treatment; (2) to check the realism of stimuli in each treatment; and (3) to check the reliability of measurement items.

The pilot test for Study 2a was conducted in early April 2024. Fifty-four participants were recruited using a purposive sampling approach via CloudResearch. After collecting a sufficient number of participants (a sample size of 25 participants was targeted for each treatment), an Independent Samples t-Test was conducted to examine whether participants perceived the scenarios differently. Participants in the congruent scenario showed a significantly different mean score than the incongruent scenario ($M_{\text{Congruent topics}}$= 2.43, $M_{\text{Incongruent topics}}$= 4.96; p <0.001). Thus, the manipulation of the IGC congruency was successful.

Calculating the mean value for realism check questions revealed a mean of 5.19. The average rating level of 5.19 shows that the designed Instagram posts are similar to the real ones. They also highly agreed that it was easy for them to imagine themselves in the scenario (M = 5.76). Additionally, Cronbach's alpha, a scale reliability measure, was used to check the internal consistency of the items. The results of Cronbach's alpha showed significant levels higher than 0.7 for all the items (Hair et al., 2010). The results of the pilot test revealed that no modifications were needed. Therefore, the experiment materials and questionnaire were shared via CloudResearch for data collection. The main survey was conducted in April 2024, resulting in 100 completed questionnaires.

4.2.1.3 Data Analysis

To test the manipulations of IGC congruency and participants' responses to the realism check questions, an Independent Samples t-Test as well as One-Sample t-Test were conducted, respectively. A univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) and PROCESS Model 4 were conducted to test the stated hypotheses ($H1_{a-b}$). The analyses were done using SPSS software.

4.2.2 Research Findings

A single-factor (IGC congruency: congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) between-subject factorial experimental design was used to examine the impact of IGC congruency on viewers' travel inspiration. The independent variable was manipulated, and the proposed dependent variables were measured. One hundred US Instagram users were recruited from CloudResearch and randomly assigned to one of two conditions. They were exposed to four stimuli in each condition. Twelve responses were excluded for failing attention check questions and spending less than 3 minutes on the questionnaire. The final sample included 88 participants (76.1% Millennials, 64.8% male) recruited from the platform. Fifty-two percent of participants sometimes referenced IGC for travel decisions, showing a high reliance on IGC, with a score exceeding five on the scale. All participants

(100%) sought IGC from multiple SMIs, and 71.6% had previous travel experience in Greece.

4.2.2.1 Manipulation Check and Realism Check

IGC congruency. The manipulation checks worked as intended. An Independent Samples t-Test showed that the participants exposed to the incongruent IGC perceived the IGC's topics as more incongruent (M = 4.66, SD = 1.38) than did those exposed to the congruent IGC (M = 3.95, SD = 1.61), t (86) = −2.201, p < 0.05. Thus, the manipulation of the IGC congruency was successful.

Regarding the perceived realism of the scenario, the findings of the One-Sample t-Test show that participants largely agreed that the four Instagram posts were similar to the posts published by influencers in the real world (t = 16.422, p < 0.001; M = 5.48, SD = 0.844). Another One-Sample t-Test result also reveals that participants largely agreed that it was easy for them to imagine themselves in the scenario (t = 16.278, p < 0.001; M = 5.38, SD = 0.792). No significant difference was observed across the conditions ($p_{n.s} > 0.05$).

4.2.2.2 Testing Research Hypotheses

Impact of IGC Congruency on Viewers' Travel Inspiration (H1$_{a-b}$)

H1a posits the main effect of IGC congruency on viewers' inspired-by state. To test the stated hypothesis, a univariate analysis of variance was conducted (see Table 4.3). A univariate analysis with IGC congruency as the fixed factor, inspired-by state as the dependent variable, and visit experience as covariates reveals a significant main effect of IGC congruency ($F_{1,87}$ = 36.822, p < 0.001) and nonsignificant effects of covariates (visit experience: $F_{1,87}$ = 0.106, $p_{n.s} > 0.05$) on viewers' inspired-by state. Specifically, it was found that participants in the congruent condition (M = 4.946, SD = 0.079) indicated a lower inspired-by state than those in the incongruent condition (M = 5.636, SD = 0.079).

Unlike the assumptions, the results showed the greater effect of incongruent topics on viewers' inspired-by state. Thus, H1a was not supported.

Table 4.3. Main effect analysis summary-Study 2a

Hypothesis	IGC congruency	N	Mean	S.D.	M.D	Result
H1a	Congruent topics	44	4.946	0.079	-0.690[*]	Not supported
	Incongruent topics	44	5.636	0.079		

Note: * The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

H1b posits the indirect effect of IGC congruency on viewers' inspired-to travel state through viewers' inspired-by state. To test the indirect effect, Hayes' (2018) PROCESS Model 4 was employed. The bootstrap sample size was set to 5000, and a 95% confidence interval was used. The IGC congruency was selected as the independent variable, the viewers' inspired-by state as the mediator, the viewers' inspired-to travel state as the dependent variable, and visit experience as a covariate. The results revealed a significant main effect of the IGC congruency on viewers' inspired-by state ($\beta = 0.690$, SE = 0.114, t = 6.068, p < 0.001). As predicted in H1b, the viewers' inspired-by state influenced viewers' inspired-to travel state ($\beta = 0.723$, SE = 0.093, t = 7.808, p < 0.001). Specifically, the indirect effect of IGC congruency on viewers' inspired-to travel state ($\beta = 0.499$, BootSE = 0.099, 95% BootCI [0.318, 0.700]) through viewers' inspired-by state was significant, such that the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero. However, there was no direct correlation between the IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-to travel state ($\beta = -0.190$, SE = 0.116, 95% CI [-0.421, 0.041]). Thus, viewers' inspired-by state fully mediates between the IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-to travel state, supporting H1b (see Table 4.4).

Table 4.4. Indirect effect analysis summary- Study 2a

Hypothesis	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		t-statistics	Result
H1b				Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
IGC congruency-> Inspired-by state-> Inspired-to travel state	0.309	-0.190	0.499	0.318	0.700	2.44	Supported

4.2.2.3 Discussion

Contrary to H1a, the findings from Study 2a indicate that viewers experienced a stronger inspired-by state when exposed to IGC from multiple SMIs covering incongruent topics. Consistent with H1b, IGC congruency indirectly influences viewers' inspired-to travel state through viewers' inspired-by state. The study suggests that IGC covering incongruent topics is perceived as more inspirational, significantly enhancing viewers' sense of travel inspiration compared to IGC with congruent topics.

To thoroughly investigate the underlying mechanism of the IGC congruency effect, while re-examining H1$_{a-b}$, Study 2b further explores the moderation role of SMIs type on viewers' travel inspiration.

4.3 Study 2b

This study aims to re-examine the effect of IGC congruency (congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration (i.e., H1a and H1b). In addition, Study 2b aims to examine whether the influence of IGC congruency (congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) on viewers' inspired-by state differs according to SMIs type (travel specialists vs. non-travel specialists). To achieve this objective and test the developed hypotheses (see Figure 4.1), a 2×2 between-subjects experiment was conducted.

4.3.1 Research Method

Aiming to determine the causal relationship among variables, experimental investigation has been chosen for Study 2b (Cash et al., 2016). This study employed a 2 (IGC congruency: congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) $\times$ 2 (SMIs type: travel specialists vs. non-travel specialists) between-subject factorial experimental design to retest hypotheses H1$_{a-b}$ and test hypotheses H2. In this study, IGC congruency and SMIs type

were manipulated, and viewers' inspired-by state and viewers' inspired-to travel state were measured.

4.3.1.1 Study Setting and Stimuli Development

Selected Tourism Destination

Similar to Study 2a, Greece as an emerging tourism destination was chosen to be mentioned in the stimuli.

Selected Platform

Similar to Study 2a, Study 2b employed a series of fictitious Instagram posts as stimuli, with each post depicting the travel experiences of SMIs.

Stimulus Material

To manipulate the SMIs type, two types of fictitious SMIs were considered. This study includes both travel specialist SMIs and non-travel specialist SMIs. Travel specialists are those who constantly generate travel-related content (e.g., @muradosmann). In contrast, non-travel specialists create content on any or every non-travel topic such as food, fashion, lifestyle, etc. (e.g., @pamela_rf). In order to control pre-existing attitudes toward the SMIs, fictitious account names were used (Till & Busler, 2000). Mega-SMIs (see Figure 2.3) were selected for this study based on previous research indicating that SMIs with a larger follower count tend to be perceived as more trustworthy, knowledgeable, and credible (Hill et al., 2020). Hence, two scenarios as well as four interfaces of travel specialist SMIs and non-travel specialist SMIs were created to manipulate the SMIs type. The eight account names are displayed in Figure 4.4. featured an equal number of male and female SMIs to eliminate gender bias. All fictitious profile photos were obtained from Unsplash, a collection of non-copyrighted images.

The IGC congruency was manipulated following the same steps as Study 2a. Ultimately, sixteen fictitious Instagram posts were created using the online platform zeoob.com (see Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.4. Fictitious travel specialist and non-travel specialist SMIs' profile

Imagine that you are a follower of the following influencers who generate content in travel and tourism:

Imagine that you are a follower of the following four influencers who generate content in any or every topic such as fitness, fashion, lifestyle etc.:

Figure 4.5. Study 2b stimuli

Treatment 1

(Continue to the next page)

Treatment 2

(Continue to the next page)

Treatment 3

Treatment 4

Incongruent Topics × Non-travel Specialist SMIs Scenario

4.3.1.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Participants

Participants for Study 2b were purposively selected using the same criteria and sample frame as in Study 2a. Consistent with Study 2a, Study 2b specifically targeted participants from the United States.

Sample Size

Viglia and Dolnicar (2020) indicate that there is no universally optimal sample size for experiments. Both larger and smaller samples can lead to the rejection of the null hypothesis, even if the treatment effect remains unchanged (Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020). Reviewing previous experimental design studies (e.g., De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Martínez-López et al., 2020), an average sample size of 40 to 50 per treatment was commonly observed. Consequently, a sample size of 200 (4 treatments × 50) was deemed suitable for this experiment.

Instrument and Measurement

The research instrument for this study was created using Qualtrics' survey design tool. Since the intended participants were in the United States, the survey was formatted in English. It consisted of several sections, detailed in the Appendices (see Appendix VII).

The first section served as an introduction, providing participants with brief information about the study, their right to withdraw, and assurances regarding data confidentiality. At the end of this section, participants were prompted to answer a question related to consent. Participants who consented to participate in the study proceeded to the next section, which included eligibility check questions.

Section two was designed to confirm that participants met certain criteria. The first eligibility check question, *"Have you ever participated in this survey before?"*, aimed to

exclude participants who had previously participated in Study One and Study 2a to prevent learning effects (Charness et al., 2012). The second question, *"Are you a registered user of Instagram?"*, targeted participants who were registered Instagram users specifically. Lastly, the third screening question, *"Have you ever watched, read, or seen any travel related content shared by social media influencers on Instagram?",* served the purpose of including participants who had watched, read, or seen any travel related content shared by SMIs on Instagram. After successfully passing these eligibility check questions, participants moved on to the third section.

In section three, participants in each treatment group were shown four SMIs' Instagram profiles. Participants in the travel specialist SMIs treatments (treatment 1 and treatment 2 in Figure 4.5) were asked to *"Imagine that you are a follower of the following influencers who generate content in travel and tourism".* While participants in the non-travel specialist SMIs treatments (treatment 3 and treatment 4 in Figure 4.5) were asked to *"Imagine that you are a follower of the following four influencers who generate content in any or every topic such as fitness, fashion, lifestyle etc."*. To make sure that participants went through each Instagram account and could successfully imagine themselves as their followers, proceeding to the next scenario page was activated after 5 seconds. Later, they were asked to read the scenario: *"One day you casually browse your Instagram feed and then you come across the following Instagram posts"*. To make sure that participants went through the scenario and could successfully imagine themselves in the scenario, the stimuli page was activated after 5 seconds. Afterwards, participants of each treatment randomly received the four designed stimuli. To create a more realistic experimental experience, the four stimuli were presented to participants one at a time. Each stimulus page was displayed for a minimum of 10 seconds, allowing participants to engage with each stimulus thoroughly before manually proceeding to the next one. This approach ensured careful consideration of each stimulus. After being exposed to all four stimuli, participants proceeded to the fourth section.

The fourth section included several measurement items. Based on previously validated scales found in the literature, measurement items were adapted for this study. Adaptations were made to all items according to the study's specific context. Items were measured by a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Table 4.2 shows measurement items of the inspiration construct.

To ensure the validity of the scale and to identify inattentive participants, prior research has suggested the use of attention check questions (e.g., Berinsky et al., 2014; Huang et al., 2015). Supporting these recommendations, a study by Kung et al. (2018) found that attention checks do not compromise scale validity, which was contrary to earlier expectations. The findings also indicated that these questions had no significant impact on how participants answered or understood the scale. Consequently, an attention check question was included: *"I am selecting "strongly disagree" to show I am paying attention to this question".*

The fifth section included a series of questions for a manipulation check as well as a realism check. To check whether the manipulation for IGC congruency was successful, participants were asked to choose the most appropriate answer to the following statement, *"In my opinion, the topic highlighted in these four Instagram posts is _____. [1: Congruent to 7: Incongruent]".* For the manipulation check of SMIs type, in the initial version of the survey, participants were asked to choose the most appropriate answer to the following statement, *"I think these four influencers are ___ [1: Travel specialist influencers to 7: Non-travel specialist influencers]".* Additionally, to check the recognizability of SMIs, participants were asked to rate their agreements with the statement, *"I think these influencers are recognizable to the Instagram users [1: Strongly disagree to 7: Strongly agree]".*

To evaluate the perceived realism of the scenario, participants were asked to answer two questions, which are *"The four Instagram posts I saw earlier are similar to the Instagram posts published by influencers in the real world [1: Strongly disagree to 7: Strongly agree]"* and *"It is easy for me to imagine myself in the scenario [1: Strongly disagree to 7: Strongly agree]."*

In the final section of the survey, participants were asked to indicate their gender, age, nationality, level of reference to IGC for travel decision making, level of reliance on IGC for travel decision making, number of SMIs as a reference source for travel decision making, and lastly, whether they have ever been in Greece before. Participants' answers to the demographic questions helped to understand the participants' profile and control their influence on the outcome (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016).

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using CloudResearch, an online survey platform recognized for its high data quality relative to other alternatives. Participants recruited through CloudResearch were more likely to pass attention checks, provide thoughtful answers, adhere to instructions, recall previously presented information, have distinct IP addresses and geolocations, and carefully read all survey items (Berry et al., 2022; Douglas et al., 2023). Furthermore, CloudResearch effectively recruited participants from the United States while fulfilling specific criteria established by the researchers. Overall, using an online survey platform like CloudResearch not only simplifies participant recruitment but also improves data quality. The study utilized a purposive sampling technique, a form of non-probability sampling that is especially valuable for obtaining insights from knowledgeable experts in a specific area (Tongco, 2007).

Pilot-test

After designing the experiment stimuli and questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted to ensure that the experiment was well designed, and the questionnaire was well constructed. In detail the pilot test was conducted with several goals as follows: (1) to check whether the manipulation of IGC congruency and SMIs type were successful in each treatment; (2) to check the realism of stimuli in each treatment; and (3) to check the reliability of measurement items.

The pilot test for Study 2b was conducted in late April 2024. 104 participants were recruited by applying a purposive sampling approach via CloudResearch. After collecting the sufficient number of participants, an Independent Samples t-Test was conducted to examine whether participants perceived the IGC congruency differently. Participants in congruent treatments showed a significantly different mean score than incongruent treatments ($M_{Congruent\ topics}$= 1.94, $M_{Incongruent\ topics}$= 3.08; $p < 0.05$). Thus, the manipulation of the IGC congruency was successful. Another Independent Samples t-Test was conducted to examine whether participants perceived the SMIs type differently. Participants in the travel specialist SMIs treatments showed a slightly different mean score than the ones in the non-travel specialist SMIs treatments ($M_{travel\ specialists}$= 3.06, $M_{non-travel\ specialists}$= 3.96; $p < 0.05$).

To overcome this issue and make sure participants perceived the two scenarios differently, the manipulation check question for SMIs type was changed to the multiple-choice question (*"I think these four influencers are ___."* *1= Travel specialist influencers* or *2= Non-travel specialist influencers*). Moreover, participants in travel specialist SMIs and non-travel specialist SMIs scenarios did not report a significant mean difference regarding the recognizability of the SMIs ($M_{travel\ specialists}= 4.58$, $M_{non-travel\ specialists}= 4.73$; $p_{n.s}$). This finding suggests that participants in the experiment agreed on the recognizability of the SMIs in both scenarios.

Calculating mean value for realism check questions revealed the high mean value. The average rating level of 4.88 shows the designed Instagram posts are similar to the real ones. They also highly agreed that it was easy for them to imagine themselves in the scenario ($M= 5.71$). Additionally, Cronbach's alpha, a scale reliability measure, was used to check the internal consistency of the items. The results of Cronbach's alpha showed significant levels higher than 0.7 for all the items (Hair et al., 2010). The results of pilot test showed that one modification on SMIs type was needed, therefore, the experiment materials and questionnaire were modified and shared via CloudResearch for data collection. The main survey was conducted in early May 2024, resulting in 200 completed questionnaires.

4.3.1.3 Data Analysis

To test the manipulations of IGC congruency and SMIs type, an Independent Samples t-Test as well as a chi-square test were conducted, respectively. To analyze participants' responses to the realism check questions, One-Sample t-Test was utilized. A univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA), PROCESS Model 4 and PROCESS Model 7 were conducted to re-test the stated $H1_{a-b}$ and test H2. The analyses were done by using SPSS software.

4.3.2   Research Findings

A 2 (IGC congruency: congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) × 2 (SMIs type: travel specialists vs. non- travel specialists) between-subject factorial experimental design was used to test the moderating role of SMIs type. The independent variables were manipulated, and the proposed dependent variable was measured. Two hundred US Instagram users were recruited from CloudResearch and randomly assigned to one of four conditions. They were exposed to four stimuli in each condition. Twelve responses were excluded for failing attention check questions and spending less than 3 minutes on the questionnaire. The final sample included 188 participants (37.8% Millennials, 60.1% female) recruited from the platform. 41% of participants sometimes referenced IGC for travel decisions, showing a high reliance on IGC with a score exceeding 4 on the scale. Majority of participants (83%) sought IGC from multiple SMIs, and only 9.6% had previous travel experience in Greece.

4.3.2.1 Manipulation Check and Realism Check

IGC congruency. The manipulation checks worked as intended. An Independent Samples t-Test showed that the participants exposed to the incongruent IGC perceived the IGC's topic as more incongruent (M = 3.20, SD = 1.91) than did those exposed to the congruent IGC (M = 1.84, SD = 1.27), t (186) = −5.802, p < 0.01. Thus, the manipulation of the IGC's topic congruency was successful.

SMIs type. As intended, Chi-Square test ($\chi2$=11.653, p< 0.001) showed that the participants in the travel specialists condition reported that the Instagram posts were posted by the travel specialists. Similarly, those in the non-travel specialists condition reported that the Instagram posts were posted by the non-travel specialists. No differences were found between two types of SMIs in perceived recognizability ($M_{travel\ specialists}$= 4.95, SD= 1.409; $M_{non-travel\ specialists}$=4.67, SD 1.653; t (186) = 1.215, $p_{n.s}$ > 0.05). Thus, the manipulation of the SMIs type was successful.

Regarding the perceived realism of the scenario, the findings of the One-Sample t-Test show that participants largely agreed that the four Instagram posts were similar to the posts

published by influencers in the real world (t = 10.815, p < 0.001; M = 5.16, SD = 1.48). Another One-Sample t-Test result also reveals that participants largely agreed that it is easy for them to imagine themselves in the scenario (t = 7.286, p < 0.001; M = 4.88, SD = 1.65). No significant difference was observed across the conditions ($p_{n.s} > 0.05$).

4.3.2.2 Testing Research Hypotheses

Impact of IGC Congruency on Viewers' Travel Inspiration (H1$_{a-b}$)

Consistent with Study 2a, Study 2b verified the reversed main effect of IGC congruency on viewers' inspired-by state and indirect effect on viewers' inspired-to travel state. To re-examine the stated hypotheses, a univariate analysis of variance was conducted (see Table 4.5). A univariate analysis with IGC congruency as the fixed factor, inspired-by state as the dependent variable, and visit experience as covariates reveals a significant main effect of IGC congruency ($F_{1,187}$ = 16.174, p < 0.001) and nonsignificant effects of covariate (visit experience: $F_{1,187}$ = 0.738, $p_{n.s} > 0.05$) on viewers' inspired-by state. Specifically, it was found that participants in the congruent condition (M = 4.27, SD = 0.150) indicated a lower inspired-by state than those in the incongruent condition (M = 5.14, SD = 0.156). Unlike the assumptions, the results showed the greater effect of incongruent topics on viewers' inspired-by state. Thus, H1a was not supported.

Table 4.5. Main effect analysis summary-Study 2b

Hypothesis	IGC congruency	N	Mean	S.D.	M.D	Result
H1a	Congruent topics	90	4.27	0.159	-0.870*	Not supported
	Incongruent topics	98	5.14	0.156		

Note: * the mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

To retest the indirect effect, Hayes' (2018) PROCESS Model 4 was employed. The bootstrap sample size was set to 5000, and a 95% confidence interval was used. The results revealed a significant main effect of the IGC congruency on viewers' inspired-by state (β = 0.870, SE = 0.216, t = 4.022, p < 0.001). As predicted in H1b, the viewers' inspired-by state influenced viewers' inspired-to travel state (β = 0.838, SE = 0.051, t = 16.445, p < 0.001). Specifically, the indirect effect of IGC congruency on viewers' inspired-to travel state (β = 0.729, BootSE = 0.185, 95% BootCI [0.369, 1.101]) through viewers' inspired-by state was significant, such that the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect did

not include zero. However, there was no direct correlation between the IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-to travel state ($\beta = 0.088$, SE $= 0.156$, 95% CI [-0.220, 0.397]). Thus, viewers' inspired-by state fully mediate between the IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-to travel state, supporting H1b (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6. Indirect effect analysis summary-Study 2b

Hypothesis	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		t-statistics	Result
H1b				Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
IGC congruency-> Inspired-by state-> Inspired-to travel state	0.817	0.088	0.729	0.369	1.101	3.478	Supported

The Moderating Effect of SMIs Type (H2)

H2 predicts the interaction effects of IGC congruency and SMIs type on viewers' inspired-by state which in turn positively influence viewers' inspired-to travel state. A univariate analysis with IGC congruency and SMIs type as the fixed factors, inspired-by state as the dependent variable, and visit experience as covariates was conducted. First, there was a significant main effect of IGC congruency on viewers' inspired-by state ($F_{1,187}$ = 15.703, $p < 0.001$; $M_{Congruent\ topics}$=4.274, SD=0.158 vs. $M_{Incongruent\ topics}$= 5.138, SD=0.151), a non-significant main effect of SMIs type on viewers' inspired-by state ($F_{1,187}$ = 0.207, $p_{n.s} > 0.05$; $M_{Travel\ specialists}$= 4.657, SD=0.155 vs. $M_{Non-travel\ specialists}$=4.756, SD=0.153), and a non-significant effect of covariate on viewers' inspired-by state ($p_{n.s} > 0.05$). More importantly, there was a non-significant two-way interaction between IGC congruency and SMIs type on viewers' inspired-by state ($F_{1,187} = 0.153$, $p_{n.s} > 0.05$).

As shown in Table 4.7, for IGC given by multiple travel specialists a lower viewers' inspired-by state was perceived for the congruent IGC than for the incongruent IGC ($M_{Congruent\ topics}$=4.182, $M_{Incongruent\ topics}$= 5.131, $p < 0.01$). This was also true for the IGC given by multiple non-travel specialists, a lower viewers' inspired-by state was perceived for the congruent IGC than for the incongruent IGC ($M_{Congruent\ topics}$=4.367, $M_{Incongruent\ topics}$= 5.145, $p < 0.05$). However, the difference in viewers' inspired-by state between the

participants for the congruent and incongruent scenarios was similar for the travel specialists and non-travel specialists.

Table 4.7. Moderation effect analysis summary-Study 2b

Hypothesis	Dependent variable	F	Sig.	Mean		MD	Result
Interaction effect: IGC congruency × SMIs type							
H2	Inspired-by state	0.153	N.S.	Travel specialists:	$M_{Congruent}=4.182$ < $M_{Incongruent}=5.131$	-0.949*	Not supported
				Non-travel specialists:	$M_{Congruent}=4.367$ < $M_{Incongruent}=5.145$	-0.778*	

Note: * the mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

To test the conditional indirect effect, Hayes' (2018) PROCESS Model 7 was employed. The bootstrap sample size was set to 5000, and a 95% confidence interval was used. The IGC congruency was selected as the independent variable, the viewers' inspired-by state as the mediator, viewers' inspired-to travel state as the dependent variable, SMIs type as moderator variable, and visit experience as covariate. Unlike the prediction, the index of conditional indirect effect of the IGC congruency and SMIs type on viewers' inspired-to travel state through viewers' inspired-by state is not significant as the 95% confidence interval contains zero (IMM = -0.143, BootSE = 0.36, 95% BootCI [-0.874, 0.547]). Unlike the assumptions, the results did not support the conditional indirect effect of the IGC congruency and SMIs type on viewers' inspired-to travel state through viewers' inspired-by state. Thus, H2 were not supported.

4.3.2.3 Discussion

Similar to Study 2a, Study 2b found that viewers experienced a stronger inspired-by state when exposed to IGC from multiple SMIs covering incongruent topics. Consistent with Hypothesis 1b, IGC congruency indirectly influenced viewers' inspired-to-travel state through their inspired-by state. However, contrary to the initial hypothesis, SMIs type did not moderate the relationship between IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-by state. Thus, the findings did not support Hypothesis 2, as no significant differences were observed between travel-specialist SMIs and non-travel-specialist SMIs.

To further investigate the underlying mechanism of the IGC congruency effect, while re-examining H1$_{a-b}$, Study 2c explores the moderating role of sponsorship disclosure type on viewers' inspired-by state.

4.4   Study 2c

This study aims to re-examine the main effect of IGC congruency (congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' travel inspiration. In addition, Study 2c aims to examine whether the influence of IGC congruency (congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) on viewers' inspired-by state differs according to sponsorship disclosure type (partially sponsored vs. fully sponsored). To achieve this objective and test the developed hypotheses (see Figure 4.1), a 2 × 2 between-subject experiments was conducted.

4.4.1   Research Method

Aiming to determine the causal relationship among variables, experimental investigation has been chosen for Study 2c (Cash et al., 2016). This study employed a 2 (IGC congruency: congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) × 2 (sponsorship disclosure type: partially sponsored vs. fully sponsored) between-subject factorial experimental design to retest hypotheses H1$_{a-b}$ and test hypothesis H3. In this study, IGC congruency and sponsorship disclosure type were manipulated, viewers' inspired-by state and viewers' inspired-to travel state were measured.

4.4.1.1 Study Setting and Stimuli Development

Selected Tourism Destination

Similar to Study 2a and Study 2b, Greece as an emerging tourism destination was chosen to be mentioned in the stimuli.

Selected Platform

Similar to Study 2a and Study 2b, Study 2c employed a series of fictitious Instagram posts as stimuli, with each post depicting the travel experiences of SMIs.

Stimulus Material

To manipulate the sponsorship disclosure type, two types of sponsorship disclosure were considered, including partial sponsorship and full sponsorship. As shown in Table 4.8 in the partial sponsorship scenario, four SMIs' Instagram posts included the sentence below:

> Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and sponsoring my:
> ☑Accommodation 🏨

In the full sponsorship scenario, four SMIs' Instagram posts included the sentence below:

> Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and their full sponsorship of my trip. Including:
>
> ☑Flight 🛫
> ☑Accommodation 🏨
> ☑Meals 🍽
> ☑Transportation 🚗
> ☑Other expenses

The emojis have been applied as a way to elaborate the inclusion of sponsored items as well as the paid nature of the Instagram posts. The IGC congruency was manipulated following the same steps as Study 2a and Study 2b. Ultimately, sixteen fictitious Instagram posts were created using the online platform zeoob.com (see Figure 4.6).

Table 4.8. Fictitious Instagram captions

Scenario		Fictitious Instagram caption
Partial sponsor	Congruent	Create lifelong memories on Greece's stunning scenery, pure bliss awaits!
		Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and sponsoring my: ☑Accommodation 🏨

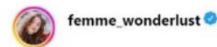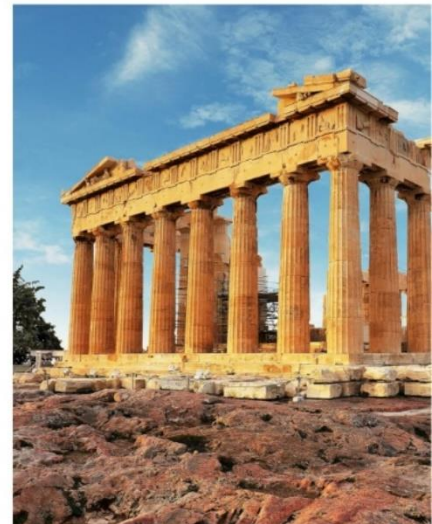|		
		Greece stole my heart with stunning landscapes and endless charm!
		Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and sponsoring my: ☑Accommodation 🏨
		Greece surprises with awe-inspiring landscapes and picturesque charm!
		Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and sponsoring my: ☑Accommodation 🏨
		Breathtaking landscapes adorn every corner of Greece's beautiful land!
		Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and sponsoring my: ☑Accommodation 🏨
		Greece's culinary delights are a flavorful journey for the senses!
	Incongruent topics	Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and sponsoring my: ☑Accommodation 🏨
		I'm completely blown away by the beautiful landscapes of Greece!
		Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and sponsoring my: ☑Accommodation 🏨
		Warm welcome and genuine smiles of Greeks touch the soul!
		Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and sponsoring my: ☑Accommodation 🏨
		Greece's rich heritage weaves tales of ancient wonders and traditions!
		Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and sponsoring my: ☑Accommodation 🏨
		Create lifelong memories on Greece's stunning scenery, pure bliss awaits!
		Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and their full sponsorship of my trip. Including: ☑Flight ✈ ☑Accommodation 🏨 ☑Meals 🍽 ☑Transportation 🚗 ☑Other expenses
		Greece stole my heart with stunning landscapes and endless charm!
Full sponsorship	Congruent topics	Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and their full sponsorship of my trip. Including: ☑Flight ✈ ☑Accommodation 🏨 ☑Meals 🍽 ☑Transportation 🚗 ☑Other expenses
		Greece surprises with awe-inspiring landscapes and picturesque charm!
		Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and their full sponsorship of my trip. Including: ☑Flight ✈ ☑Accommodation 🏨 ☑Meals 🍽 ☑Transportation 🚗 ☑Other expenses

Breathtaking landscapes adorn every corner of Greece's beautiful land!

Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and their full sponsorship of my trip. Including:
✅Flight ✈️
✅Accommodation 🏨
✅Meals 🍽️
✅Transportation 🚗
✅Other expenses

Create lifelong memories on Greece's stunning scenery, pure bliss awaits!

Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and their full sponsorship of my trip. Including:
✅Flight ✈️
✅Accommodation 🏨
✅Meals 🍽️
✅Transportation 🚗
✅Other expenses

I'm completely blown away by the beautiful landscapes of Greece!

Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and their full sponsorship of my trip. Including:
✅Flight ✈️
✅Accommodation 🏨
✅Meals 🍽️
✅Transportation 🚗
✅Other expenses

Warm welcome and genuine smiles of Greeks touch the soul!

Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and their full sponsorship of my trip. Including:
✅Flight ✈️
✅Accommodation 🏨
✅Meals 🍽️
✅Transportation 🚗
✅Other expenses

Greece's rich heritage weaves tales of ancient wonders and traditions!

Thank you @Greecetourismboard for bringing me here, and their full sponsorship of my trip. Including:
✅Flight ✈️
✅Accommodation 🏨
✅Meals 🍽️
✅Transportation 🚗
✅Other expenses

Incongruent topics

Figure 4.6. Study 2c stimuli

Treatment 1

Congruent Topics × Partial sponsorship Scenario

(Continue to the next page)

Treatment 2

Incongruent Topics × Partial sponsorship Scenario

(Continue to the next page)

Treatment 3

Treatment 4

4.4.1.2 Sampling and Data Collection

Participants

To establish appropriate criteria and define the sample frame for Study 2c, participants were purposively selected based on specific parameters. Unlike Study 2a and Study 2b, this study specifically focused on participants from the United Kingdom to increase the generalizability of the previous studies' findings. Additionally, the United Kingdom was selected due to several key reasons. Firstly, the United Kingdom is the second-largest inbound travel market for Greece, with only a slight difference compared to Germany as the top market (Bank of Greece, 2024). Secondly, the official language in the United Kingdom is English, which reduces potential language barriers for the author conducting this study. This linguistic alignment facilitates communication and data collection processes, ensuring clarity and accuracy in the research outcomes. Lastly, Instagram is a growing social media platform among UK social media users (We Are Social & DataReportal & Meltwater, 2024).

In addition to the place of origin, the second requirement for inclusion in the sample was that participants must be registered Instagram users. The third requirement for inclusion was that participants must have watched, read, or seen at least one travel-related content shared by SMIs on Instagram. Only participants who met these criteria were considered representative of social media users included in the study.

Sample Size

Viglia and Dolnicar (2020) note that no single optimal sample size exists for experiments. Both larger and smaller samples can result in the rejection of the null hypothesis, even when the treatment effect remains constant (Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020). An analysis of previous experimental design studies (e.g., De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Martínez-López et al., 2020) found that an average sample size of 40 to 50 per treatment was typical. Therefore, a total sample size of 200 (4 treatments $\times$ 50) was considered appropriate for this experiment.

Instrument and Measurement

The research instrument for this study was created using Qualtrics' survey design tool. Since the intended participants were in the United States, the survey was formatted in English. It consisted of several sections, detailed in the Appendices (see Appendix VIII).

The first section served as an introduction, providing participants with brief information about the study, their right to withdraw, and assurances regarding data confidentiality. At the end of this section, participants were prompted to answer a question related to consent. Participants who consented to participate in the study proceeded to the next section, which included eligibility check questions.

The second section was designed to confirm that participants met certain criteria. The first eligibility check question, *"Have you ever participated in this survey before?"*, aimed to exclude participants who had previously participated in Study One, Study 2a, and Study 2b to prevent learning effects (Charness et al., 2012). The second question, *"Are you a registered user of Instagram?"*, aimed to specifically target participants who were registered Instagram users. Lastly, the third screening question, *"Have you ever watched, read, or seen any travel related content shared by social media influencers on Instagram?"*, served the purpose of including participants who had watched, read, or seen any travel related content shared by SMIs on Instagram. After successfully passing these eligibility questions, participants moved on to section three.

In section three, participants were shown the four SMIs' Instagram profile photos and asked to *"Imagine that you are a follower of the following influencers"*. To make sure that participants went through each Instagram account and could successfully imagine themselves as their followers, proceeding to the next scenario page was activated after 5 seconds. Later, they were asked to read the scenario: *"One day you casually browse your Instagram feed and then you come across the following Instagram posts"*. To make sure that participants went through the scenario and could successfully imagine themselves in the scenario, the stimuli page was activated after 5 seconds. Afterwards, participants of each treatment randomly received the four designed stimuli. To create a more realistic experimental experience, participants were presented with four stimuli, one at a time. Initially, they received an Instagram post without the sponsorship information in the

caption. They were then instructed to click the "Next" button to view the whole caption. Once they clicked "Next," the complete caption, including the sponsorship details, was displayed. This method simulates real conditions, as Instagram captions that exceed the word limit require users to click "… more" to read the entire text. Each stimulus page was shown for a minimum of 10 seconds, allowing participants to engage thoroughly with each one before manually proceeding to the next. This ensured careful consideration of each stimulus. After viewing all four stimuli, participants moved on to the fourth section.

The fourth section included several measurement items. Based on previously validated scales found in the literature, measurement items were adapted for this study. Adaptations were made to all items according to the study's specific context. The items were measured by a seven-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Table 4.2 shows measurement items of the inspiration construct.

To ensure the validity of the scale and to identify inattentive participants, prior research has suggested the use of attention check questions (e.g., Berinsky et al., 2014; Huang et al., 2015). Supporting these recommendations, a study by Kung et al. (2018) found that attention checks do not compromise scale validity, which was contrary to earlier expectations. The findings also indicated that these questions had no significant impact on how participants answered or understood the scale. Consequently, an attention check question was included: *"I am selecting "strongly disagree" to show I am paying attention to this question"*.

The fifth section included a series of questions for a manipulation check as well as a realism check. To check whether the manipulation for IGC congruency was successful, participants were asked to choose the most appropriate answer to the following statement, *"In my opinion, the topic highlighted in these four Instagram posts is _____. [1: Congruent to 7: Incongruent]"*. For the manipulation check of sponsorship disclosure type, participants were asked to rate their agreements with these two statements, *"In my opinion these posts specifically indicate Greecetourismboard provide **full sponsorship** (including: flight, accommodation, meal, etc.) to those four influencers [1: Strongly disagree to 7: Strongly agree]"* and *"In my opinion these posts specifically indicate Greecetourismboard provide **partial sponsorship** (just accommodation) to those four influencers [1: Strongly disagree to 7: Strongly agree]"*.

To evaluate the perceived realism of the scenario, participants were asked to answer two questions, which are *"The four Instagram posts I saw earlier are similar to the Instagram posts published by influencers in the real world [1: Strongly disagree to 7: Strongly agree]"* and *"It is easy for me to imagine myself in the scenario [1: Strongly disagree to 7: Strongly agree]."*

In the final section of the survey, participants were asked to indicate their gender, age, nationality, level of reference to IGC for travel decision making, level of reliance on IGC for travel decision making, number of SMIs as a reference source for travel decision making, and lastly, whether they have ever been in Greece before. Participants' answers to the demographic questions helped to understand the participants' profile and control their influence on the outcome (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016).

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using CloudResearch, an online survey platform recognized for its high data quality relative to other alternatives. Participants recruited through CloudResearch were more likely to pass attention checks, provide thoughtful answers, adhere to instructions, recall previously presented information, have distinct IP addresses and geolocations, and carefully read all survey items (Berry et al., 2022; Douglas et al., 2023). Furthermore, CloudResearch effectively recruited participants from the United Kingdom. While fulfilling specific criteria established by the researchers. Overall, using an online survey platform like CloudResearch not only simplifies participant recruitment but also improves data quality. The study utilized a purposive sampling technique, a form of non-probability sampling that is especially valuable for obtaining insights from knowledgeable experts in a specific area (Tongco, 2007).

Pilot-test

After designing the experiment stimuli and questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted to ensure that the experiment was well-designed and the questionnaire was well-

constructed. In detail, the pilot test was conducted with several goals as follows: (1) to check whether the manipulation of IGC congruency and sponsorship disclosure type was successful in each treatment; (2) to check the realism of stimuli in each treatment; and (3) to check the reliability of measurement items.

The pilot test for Study 2c was conducted in mid-May 2024. 49 participants were recruited by applying a purposive sampling approach via CloudResearch. After collecting a sufficient number of participants, an Independent Samples t-Test was conducted to examine whether participants perceived the IGC congruency differently. Participants in congruent treatments showed a significantly different mean score than incongruent treatments ($M_{Congruent\ topics}$= 1.96, $M_{Incongruent\ topics}$= 3.52; $p <0.01$). Another Independent Samples t-Test was conducted to examine whether participants perceived the sponsorship disclosure type differently. Participants in the partial sponsorship treatments showed significantly lower mean value than the ones in the full sponsorship treatments ($M_{partial\ sponsorship}$= 3.45, $M_{full\ sponsorship}$= 5.78; $p <0.01$) to the question, *"In my opinion these posts specifically indicate Greecetourismboard provide **full sponsorship** (including: flight, accommodation, meal, etc.) to those four influencers [1: Strongly disagree to 7: Strongly agree]"*. On the other hand, they showed significantly higher mean value ($M_{partial\ sponsorship}$= 5.68, $M_{full\ sponsorship}$= 3.30; $p <0.01$) to the question, *"In my opinion these posts specifically indicate Greecetourismboard provide **partial sponsorship** (just accommodation) to those four influencers [1: Strongly disagree to 7: Strongly agree]"*. Thus, the manipulation of the IGC congruency and sponsorship disclosure type were successful.

Calculating the mean value for realism check questions revealed a high mean value. The average rating level of 5.14 shows that the designed Instagram posts are similar to the real ones. Participants also highly agreed that it was easy for them to imagine themselves in the scenario (M = 4.82). Additionally, Cronbach's alpha, a scale reliability measure, was used to check the internal consistency of the items. The results of Cronbach's alpha showed significant levels higher than 0.7 for all the items (Hair et al., 2010). The results of the pilot test showed that one modification to the SMIs type was needed. Therefore, the experiment materials and questionnaire were modified and shared via CloudResearch for data collection. The main survey was conducted in June 2024, resulting in a total of 200 completed questionnaires.

4.4.1.3 Data Analysis

To test the manipulations of IGC congruency and sponsorship disclosure type, an Independent Samples t-Test was conducted. To analyze participants' responses to the realism check questions, One-Sample t-Test was utilized. A univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA), PROCESS Model 4, and PROCESS Model 7 were conducted to re-test the stated H1$_{a-b}$ and test H3. The analyses were done using SPSS software.

4.4.2 Research Findings

A 2 (IGC congruency: congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) × 2 (sponsorship disclosure type: partially sponsored vs. fully sponsored) between-subject factorial experimental design was used to test the moderating role of sponsorship disclosure type. The independent variables were manipulated, and the proposed dependent variables were measured. Two hundred UK Instagram users were recruited from CloudResearch and randomly assigned to one of four conditions, each exposed to four stimuli. Fifteen responses were excluded for failing attention check questions and spending less than 3 minutes on the questionnaire. The final sample included 185 participants (37.3% Millennials, 50.3% female) recruited from the platform. 41.6% of participants sometimes referenced IGC for travel decisions, showing a high reliance on IGC with a score exceeding four on the scale. The majority of participants (55.1%) sought IGC from multiple SMIs, and 47% had previous travel experience in Greece.

4.4.2.1 Manipulation Check and Realism Check

IGC congruency. The manipulation checks worked as intended. An Independent Samples t-Test showed that the participants exposed to the incongruent IGC perceived the IGC's topics as more incongruent (M = 3.30, SD = 1.84) than did those exposed to the congruent IGC (M = 1.89, SD = 1.34), t (183) = -5.976, p < 0.001. Thus, the manipulation of the IGC congruency was successful.

Sponsorship disclosure type. As intended, the results of an Independent Samples t-Test showed that the participants in the partially sponsored IGC conditions reported higher agreement on the statement that the Greecetourismboard provides partial sponsorship (just accommodation) to those four influencers ($M_{Partially\ sponsored}$= 5.27, SD = 1.714; $M_{Fully\ sponsored}$= 2.95, SD = 2.0). While those in the fully sponsored IGC conditions reported higher agreement on the statement that the Greecetourismboard provides full sponsorship (including: flight, accommodation, meal, etc.) to those four influencers ($M_{Partially\ sponsored}$= 3.80, SD = 2.00; $M_{Fully\ sponsored}$= 5.96, SD = 1.557). Thus, the manipulation of the sponsorship disclosure type was successful.

Regarding the perceived realism of the scenario, the findings of the One-Sample t-Test show that participants largely agreed that the four Instagram posts were similar to the posts published by influencers in the real world (t = 53.728, p < 0.001; M = 5.05, SD = 1.278). Another One-Sample t-Test result also reveals that participants largely agreed that it was easy for them to imagine themselves in the scenario (t = 37.398, p < 0.001; M = 4.50, SD = 1.636). No significant difference was observed across the conditions ($p_{n.s}$ > 0.05).

4.4.2.2 Testing Research Hypotheses

Impact of IGC Congruency on Viewers' Travel Inspiration ($H1_{a-b}$)

Consistent with Study 2a, Study 2b, and Study 2c verified the reversed main effect of IGC congruency on viewers' inspired-by state and indirect effect on viewers' inspired-to travel state. To re-examine the stated hypotheses, a univariate analysis of variance was conducted (see Table 4.9). A univariate analysis with IGC congruency as the fixed factor, inspired-by state as the dependent variable, and visit experience as covariates reveals a significant main effect of IGC congruency ($F_{1,184}$ = 16.875, p < 0.001) and non-significant effects of covariates (visit experience: $F_{1,184}$ = 0.441, $p_{n.s}$ > 0.05) on viewers' inspired-by state. Specifically, it was found that participants in the congruent condition (M = 3.82, SD = 1.33) indicated a lower inspired-by state than those in the incongruent condition (M = 4.66, SD = 1.47). Unlike the assumptions, the results showed the greater effect of incongruent topics on viewers' inspired-by state. Thus, H1a was not supported.

Table 4.9. Main effect analysis summary-Study 2c

Hypothesis	IGC congruency	N	Mean	S.D.	M.D	Result
H1a	Congruent topics	93	3.862	0.115	-0.841*	Not supported
	Incongruent topics	92	4.537	0.114		

Note: * The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

To retest the indirect effect, Hayes' (2018) PROCESS Model 4 was employed. The bootstrap sample size was set to 5000, and a 95% confidence interval was used. The results revealed a significant main effect of the IGC congruency on viewers' inspired-by state (β = 0.833, SE = 0.207, t = 4.023, p < 0.001). As predicted in H1b, the viewers' inspired-by state influenced viewers' inspired-to travel state (β = 0.952, SE = 0.047, t = 20.390, p < 0.001). Specifically, the indirect effect of IGC congruency on viewers' inspired-to travel state (β = 0.793, BootSE = 0.202, 95% BootCI [0.409, 1.189]) through viewers' inspired-by state was significant, such that the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero. However, there was no direct correlation between the IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-to travel state (β = -0.106, SE = 0.136, 95% CI [-0.374, 0.163]). Thus, viewers' inspired-by state fully mediates between the IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-to travel state, supporting H1b (see Table 4.10).

Table 4.10. Indirect effect analysis summary-Study 2c

Hypothesis	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		t-statistics	Result
H1b				Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
IGC congruency-> Inspired-by state-> Inspired-to travel state	0.688	-0.106	0.793	0.409	1.189	2.910	Supported

The Moderating Effect of Sponsorship Disclosure Type (H3)

H3 predicts the interaction effects of IGC congruency and sponsorship disclosure type on viewers' inspired-by state, which in turn positively influences viewers' inspired-to travel state. A univariate analysis with IGC congruency and sponsorship disclosure type as the fixed factors, inspired-by state as the dependent variable, and visit experience as covariates was conducted. First, there was a significant main effect of IGC congruency on

viewers' inspired-by state ($F_{1,184}$ = 16.892, p < 0.001; $M_{Congruent\ topics}$= 3.82, SD=0.114 vs. $M_{Inongruent}$= 4.661, SD=0.145), a non-significant main effect of sponsorship disclosure type on viewers' inspired-by state ($F_{1,184}$ = 2.107, $p_{n.s}$ > 0.05; $M_{Partially\ sponsored}$= 4.389, SD = 0.146; $M_{Fully\ sponsored}$= 4.093, SD = 0.142), and a non-significant effect of covariate on viewers' inspired-by state ($p_{n.s}$ > 0.05). More importantly, there was a significant two-way interaction between IGC congruency and sponsorship disclosure type on viewers' inspired-by state ($F_{1,184}$ = 4.357, p < 0.05).

As shown in Table 4.11, for partially sponsored IGC, a lower viewers' inspired-by state was perceived for the congruent IGC than for the incongruent IGC ($M_{Congruent\ topics}$= 3.755, $M_{Incongruent\ topics}$= 5.023, p < 0.001). This was also true for the fully sponsored IGC ($M_{Congruent\ topics}$= 3.885, $M_{Incongruent\ topics}$= 4.30, $p_{n.s}$ > 0.05). However, the difference in viewers' inspired-by state between the participants for the incongruent and congruent scenarios was not statistically significant for the fully sponsored IGC. Unlike the assumptions, the results showed the reverse moderating effect of sponsorship disclosure type on viewers' inspired-by state.

Table 4.11. Moderation effect analysis summary-Study 2c

Hypothesis	Dependent variable	F	Sig.	Mean		Contrast test	Result
Interaction effect: IGC congruency × sponsorship disclosure type							
H3	Inspired-by state	4.357	< 0.05	Partially sponsored:	$M_{Congruent}$=3.755 < $M_{Incongruent}$=5.023	-1.268*	Not supported
				Fully sponsored:	$M_{Congruent}$=3.885 < $M_{Incongruent}$=4.30	-0.415	

Note: * The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

To test the conditional indirect effect, Hayes' (2018) PROCESS Model 7 was employed. The bootstrap sample size was set to 5000, and a 95% confidence interval was used. The IGC congruency was selected as the independent variable, the viewers' inspired-by state as the mediator, the viewers' inspired-to travel state as the dependent variable, sponsorship disclosure type as a moderator variable, and visit experience as a covariate. The index of conditional indirect effect of the IGC congruency and sponsorship disclosure type on viewers' inspired-to travel state through viewers' inspired-by state is significant as the 95% confidence interval does not contain zero (IMM = -0.812, BootSE = 0.388, 95% BootCI [-

1.560, -0.05]). Specifically, the indirect effect of the IGC congruency on viewers' inspired-to travel state through the viewers' inspired-by state was significant for the partially sponsored IGC (β = 1.207, BootSE = 0.248, 95% BootCI [0.718, 1.706]). The indirect effect was not significant for the fully sponsored IGC (β = 0.395, BootSE = 0.304, 95% BootCI [-0.204, 0.981]). Therefore, the results reversely support the conditional indirect effect of the IGC congruency and sponsorship disclosure type on viewers' inspired-to travel state through viewers' inspired-by state. Thus, H3 was not supported.

4.4.2.3 Discussion

Similar to Study 2a and Study 2b, Study 2c revealed that when multiple pieces of IGC posted by multiple SMIs covered incongruent topics, they were perceived as more inspirational. Although cultural background may influence individuals' perceptions, the results showed that this is not a significant factor in the effect. Additionally, Study 2c demonstrated that the previous visit experience is not a crucial factor in the results. In fact, by using a sample from a different culture, the study's findings offer a conceptual replication of the previous studies.

Furthermore, the findings conversely confirmed the initial hypothesis that the type of sponsorship disclosure would moderate the relationship between IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-by state. Therefore, the study did not support Hypothesis 3, as against the assumption IGC with incongruent topics results in higher viewers' inspired-by and higher viewers' inspired-to travel state only when IGC are partially sponsored.

4.5   Discussion

This section presents a discussion on the findings of Study Two. Study Two was conducted with the main objective to investigate how the IGC congruency (congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs), as well as the interactivity with content- and source-related characteristics, affect viewers' travel inspiration under more controlled conditions. To achieve this objective, this research had two sub-targets.

4.5.1 Research Objective 2$_a$

Research objective 2$_a$ aimed to examine the causal effect of IGC congruency (congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) on viewers' inspired-by state. Based on the multiple source effect (Harkins & Petty, 1981a), heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken, 1980), and customer inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017), this study investigates the IGC congruency effect. Overall, the findings of Study 2a, Study 2b, and Study 2c provide converging evidence that viewers' inspired-by state was stronger for the IGC provided by multiple SMIs covering incongruent topics. In other words, the three studies revealed that when multiple pieces of IGC posted by multiple SMIs covered incongruent topics, they were perceived as more inspirational. While these results contradict the initial assumption that multiple pieces of IGC are posted by multiple SMIs with congruent topics, leading to a greater viewers' inspired-by state (because it was expected that viewers interpret the congruency of IGC topics as a normative cue), it is plausible for three reasons.

First, in between-subject experimental design studies, researchers must control numerous variables to ensure the validity of treatments (Fong et al., 2016; Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020). However, this level of control can sometimes result in conditions that fail to reflect real-world scenarios accurately. For example, limiting participants' attention to just four Instagram posts, complete with captions and images, may not capture the complexity of real-world social media interactions. In reality, social media users often engage with multiple platforms that provide overlapping content about specific destinations, which can significantly influence their inspiration.

Second, congruency refers to a spectrum that ranges from highly identical to not identical, affecting how individuals perceive it in diverse ways. When IGCs are very identical in terms of topics, it limits the destination attributes mentioned in IGC to one particular topic (e.g., landscape). The identical topical congruency results in weakening the breadth of shared experiences and informativeness of the IGC (Leung, 2021). Hence, compared to the incongruent topics condition, the congruent one may not expand viewers' mental horizons or enhance their awareness of new possibilities (Böttger et al., 2017).

Third, viewers may attribute the perceived identical congruency to the promotional efforts of SMIs, linking it to their interest in supporting the company (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

This, in turn, can diminish the influential impact of IGC, such as inspirational impact (Chiou et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2021). This argument is supported by previous literature, which suggests that viewers are not passive recipients of information. Instead, they tend to analyze the motives behind why a message source is providing specific information about a particular product or service (Kim & Lee, 2017; Kim et al., 2021). This is consistent with what Cicero mentioned that "the causes of events always interest us more than the events themselves" (cited in H.H. Kelley, 1973, p. 127). In the case of this study, it may be explained by the fact that when viewers receive IGC with incongruent topics, they infer the perceived incongruency as the desire of SMIs for sharing their experience with a lesser financial return for creating the content (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2021). In turn, experiential-sharing attributions enhance viewers' inspiration by IGC.

On the other hand, the identical congruent topics make them suspicious of promotional motives behind content creation (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2021). Hence, promotional-sharing attributions may diminish viewers' sense of being inspired by IGC. Given that Andonopoulos et al. (2023) empirically identified that the evocation and transcendence phase of inspiration can happen through processing stimuli and not necessarily happen immediately after encountering new stimuli, it is plausible that viewers' attributions possibly serve as an underlying mechanism in the inspirational power of IGC. Although these explanations are valid, additional investigation into this relationship is necessary to ensure that participants interpret the information correctly and to enhance the validity of the predictive outcomes.

4.5.2 Research Objective 2_b

Research objective 2_b aimed to examine whether the causal effect of congruency among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs on viewers' inspired-by state differs according to SMIs type (travel specialists vs. non-travel specialists), and sponsorship disclosure type (partially sponsored vs. fully sponsored). Specifically, Study 2b examined the moderating role of SMIs type (travel specialists vs. non-travel specialists) on the effects of IGC congruency on viewers' inspired-by state. The findings of Study 2b showed that regardless of the type of SMIs, the IGCs with incongruent topics are more

effective than the IGCs with congruent topics in inspiring viewers. These rules out the role of the SMIs type on the effects of IGC congruency on the viewers' inspired-by state. This result is quite surprising given that SMIs' expertise has been found to trigger viewers' inspiration (Fang et al., 2023). Some reasons can be presented to explain this surprising result.

First, although the Chi-Square test for the manipulation check of SMIs type showed significant results ($\chi^2 = 11.653$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that participants recognized and differentiated between the two types of SMIs, it is important to note that a substantial number of participants in the non-travel specialist SMIs scenario categorized these SMIs as travel specialists. This misperception indicates a potential overlap in how participants understood the SMIs type, which could skew the results. Such confusion may arise from the fact that many individuals possess sufficient knowledge about travel and may not feel the need for professional expertise, leading to ambiguity in their judgments. Consequently, this misclassification may have impaired the predictive impact of the SMIs type on participant responses.

Second, while some studies have identified SMIs' expertise as an influential factor affecting viewers' responses to IGC (e.g., Chen et al., 2023; Le & Hancer, 2021; Nadlifatin et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023; Seçilmiş et al., 2022; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021), other research suggests that viewers are more influenced by the experience of SMIs rather than their expertise (Hernández-Méndez & Baute-Díaz, 2024; Silva & Costa, 2021). This highlights the possibility that travelers may prioritize the experience of SMIs over their specific expertise, indicating that experience may be a more critical factor in shaping viewers' responses to IGC. Despite these reasonable explanations, further exploration of this relationship is needed to ensure participants accurately interpret the information and to improve the validity of the predictive results.

Study 2c examined the moderating role of sponsorship disclosure type (partially sponsored vs. fully sponsored) on the effects of IGC congruency on viewers' inspired-by state. The findings revealed an interaction effect between IGC congruency and sponsorship disclosure type. However, the assumption that congruent IGC topics would lead to a greater viewers' inspired-by state when the IGC is partially sponsored (as opposed to fully sponsored) was not supported. In fact, for incongruent topics, partial sponsorship resulted in greater

viewers' inspired-by state compared to full sponsorship, while no significant effect was observed for the congruent topics. One possible reason for this result is that when IGC topics are identically congruent, viewers may attribute the congruency to the promotional motivations of SMIs, regardless of the sponsorship disclosure type (Chiou et al., 2018; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2021). Conversely, the findings for incongruent topics echoe the results of previous studies indicating that IGC with low impartiality (e.g., fully sponsored) is less influential and more like traditional advertisements (Boerman et al., 2014; Pfeuffer & Huh, 2020; Stubb, 2018). In contrast, IGC with high impartiality (e.g., partially sponsored) is perceived as more influential (Boerman et al., 2017; Pfeuffer & Huh, 2020). Despite these reasonable explanations, additional investigation into this relationship is necessary.

4.6   Chapter Summary

This chapter presented Study Two, which was designed to address the identified research gaps and achieve the second objective of the thesis. The chapter began by articulating the hypothesis and presenting the conceptual model. Each study's research method and findings were detailed in separate sections. Finally, the chapter discussed the findings of the three experimentally designed studies, drawing connections with previous research. The next chapter will present the conclusions of Study One and Study Two.

CHAPTER 5   CONCLUSION

This chapter presents a general discussion of the findings from Study One and Study Two, outlining both the theoretical and practical implications of the thesis while highlighting its contributions to the field. Furthermore, it acknowledges the limitations of the studies and makes recommendations for future research.

5.1   Summary

The structure of this thesis began with a systematic review and synthesis of existing research on SMIM in tourism and hospitality. This review identified several research gaps and outlined an agenda for future research in the field. To address some of these gaps, this thesis incorporates two separate studies with the overall goal of disentangling the complexity of IGC in triggering viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions. Study One was specifically conducted to complement the growing stream of research on SMIM by investigating the effect of IGC congruency on viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions. To achieve this, the first part of Study One conceptualized the IGC congruency concept and developed a valid multidimensional scale for measuring IGC congruency using a mixed-method approach. Second, by utilizing SEM to analyze responses from 600 participants, the second part of Study One empirically validates that IGC congruency positively influences viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions. Additionally, the mediating effect of IGC credibility between IGC congruency and viewers' inspired-by state was examined, as was the moderating effect of viewers' susceptibility to interpersonal influence.

Study Two was specifically conducted to investigate how IGC congruency, along with the interactivity of content- and source-related characteristics, affects viewers' travel inspiration under more controlled conditions. To achieve this, Study Two was further divided into three between-subject experimental design studies. The findings of Study 2a, Study 2b, and Study 2c provide converging evidence that viewers are more inspired by IGC provided by multiple SMIs covering incongruent topics. Study 2b revealed that, regardless of the type of SMIs, IGC with incongruent topics is more effective than IGC with congruent

topics in inspiring viewers. Additionally, Study 2c found an interaction effect between IGC congruency and sponsorship disclosure type. However, the assumption that congruent IGC topics would lead to greater viewers' travel inspiration when the IGC is partially sponsored (as opposed to fully sponsored) was not supported. For incongruent topics, partial sponsorship resulted in greater viewers' travel inspiration compared to full sponsorship, while no significant effect was observed for congruent topics.

Although the results from the SEM testing (i.e., Study One) appear to contradict those from the between-subject experimental design studies (i.e., Study Two), they provide additional insights into the proposed relationships. The SEM testing showed that IGC congruency with the five dimensions (topic, recommendation, valence, visual, and travel style) as a construct positively influences viewers' travel inspiration. The between-subject experimental design studies, however, demonstrated that when the topics covered in multiple pieces of IGC are incongruent with one another, the viewers revealed greater travel inspiration compared to the condition that the topics covered in multiple pieces of IGC are highly congruent with one another. The Yerkes-Dodson law can interpret these contrasting results. The law indicated that an individual's performance can improve with an optimal level of arousal (drive or motivation), but excessive arousal may result in decreased performance (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). Once arousal exceeds this threshold, it can be viewed as a form of interference. Applying this law to the current thesis, it can be posited that congruency in multiple pieces of IGC topics can enhance viewers' travel inspiration up to a certain optimal level. However, when the topics of multiple pieces of IGC are highly congruent, the inspirational impact may diminish due to the redundancy of information, which may fail to broaden viewers' mental horizons (Böttger et al., 2017). In this context, the results from the between-subject experimental design studies provide further insights into the proposed relationships.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

From the theoretical standpoint, this thesis contributes new knowledge to the growing stream of research on SMIM in various ways. First, this study makes seminal contributions by advancing the conceptualization and measurement of IGC congruency. It

transcends prior research, which predominantly examines pairwise congruency (e.g., SMI-consumer, SMI-brand), by pioneering a multilevel congruency construct that integrates multiple pieces of IGC from multiple SMIs. This novel approach captures the dynamic interplay of cross-content alignment, addressing a critical gap in the literature. Second, it introduces the first comprehensive, multidimensional scale for IGC congruency, challenging oversimplified unidimensional models (e.g., Cheung et al., 2012; Cheung et al., 2008). Through rigorous validation, the study reveals IGC congruency as a five-dimensional construct consisting of "Topic", "Visual", "Recommendation", "Valence", and "Travel style". Empirical results confirm the robustness of this framework, offering a transformative lens for tourism and hospitality research. By systematizing this complex construct, the work not only deepens theoretical understanding but also enables precise, actionable insights into how multifaceted congruency shapes consumer behavior in digital ecosystems.

Third, this thesis delivers a pivotal theoretical advancement by rigorously applying and extending the multiple source effect (Harkins & Petty, 1981a) to SMIM, marking the first empirical validation of how exposure to multiple pieces of IGC from multiple SMIs amplifies viewers' responses. While prior research has implicitly acknowledged the plausibility of multiple source influence (e.g., Leung et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2018), this study uniquely operationalizes the multiple source effect to demonstrate its foundational role in SMIM contexts. It shows that the inspirational power of multiple pieces of IGC from multiple SMIs affects not just quantity but also the perceived congruency of content across SMIs. The findings challenge the field's overreliance on a single SMI as a source of information, which fails to account for the cumulative, synergistic impact of cross-SMI content. This compels future research to prioritize multiple source paradigms to capture the dynamics of SMIM in fragmented media landscapes authentically.

Fourth, while the current literature in tourism and hospitality has accumulated knowledge about the SMIM, the majority of past studies have focused on viewers' cognitive responses toward IGC (e.g., Chen et al., 2014; Kılıç et al., 2024; Nazlan et al., 2024; Padmavathi, 2020; Zhu et al., 2023). Only a few existing studies (e.g., Fang et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023) have explored viewers' inspirational perceptions of IGC in the tourism and hospitality context. This thesis complements those published works on travel inspiration, utilizing customer inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017). This study overall supports earlier

research on the impact of IGC on viewers' travel inspiration (Cheng et al., 2020; Dai et al., 2022). Previous efforts investigated IGC characteristics and SMI characteristics that inspire viewers to travel. However, they do not address how the perceived congruence among multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs can evoke travel inspiration in viewers. The present research provides an answer to this question by empirically documenting that IGC congruency can trigger viewers' travel inspiration. Moreover, it responds to the calls by Böttger et al. (2017) to identify inspiration antecedents. Hence, these findings expand the applicability of inspiration theory in tourism research and underscore the growing relevance of congruency in an era of fragmented digital content consumption.

Fifth, this thesis advances the SMIM literature by redefining the role of credibility in the context of IGC and its impact on travel inspiration. While prior studies (e.g., Ki et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023) primarily treated IGC or SMI credibility as a direct antecedent to behavioral outcomes, this research pioneers its conceptualization as a mediating mechanism that explains how IGC inspires behavioral intentions. By empirically validating IGC credibility as a mediator, the study reveals that the relationship between IGC exposure and viewers' inspiration is not merely direct but unfolds through viewers' cognitive processing of content credibility. This aligns with Andonopoulos et al.'s (2023) theoretical framework, which posits that inspiration involves two phases—evocation (triggered by stimuli) and transcendence (cognitive elaboration)—and underscores that inspiration is not instantaneous but emerges as audiences critically evaluate content. By bridging SMIM research with customer inspiration theory (Böttger et al., 2017), this work demonstrates that credibility acts as a critical filter through which IGCs are internalized, ultimately shaping viewers' aspirational travel motivations. These findings offer a nuanced understanding of inspiration as a process mediated by credibility assessments.

Sixth, this thesis enriches the travel inspiration literature by expanding the conceptualization of inspired-to effects, the behavioral outcomes triggered by inspiration, specifically in response to IGC. While prior studies have linked travel inspiration to broad outcomes like travel planning (Nguyen et al., 2023), general travel intentions (Fang et al., 2023), emotional states (Khoi et al., 2021), engagement (He et al., 2023), or pro-environmental behavior (Kwon & Boger, 2021), this research breaks new ground by identifying and empirically validating two distinct, actionable behavioral intentions: intention to search (actively seeking destination information) and intention to

share (disseminating IGC to others). These findings reveal that travel inspiration is not merely a passive emotional or cognitive state but a catalyst for specific, measurable behaviors critical to destination marketing. By demonstrating that inspired viewers transition from internal motivation (e.g., awe, aspiration) to external actions (searching, sharing), the study bridges a gap between inspiration theory and practical tourism outcomes. This advances the theoretical understanding of inspiration's behavioral consequences—how transcendent experiences evoked by IGC translate into tangible, platform-driven actions that amplify destination visibility and engagement.

Seventh, this thesis addresses Fang et al.'s (2023) call to explore moderators in travel inspiration by introducing SII as a psychological moderator, testing whether inspiration mechanisms vary across individuals. Findings reveal that IGC's effects on travel inspiration, through credibility and congruency, remain consistent regardless of viewers' SII levels, demonstrating the robustness of inspiration pathways. This challenges assumptions that highly susceptible individuals are uniquely responsive to social stimuli, suggesting instead that inspiration transcends individual traits, driven by universal cognitive processing of IGC. These insights refine theoretical boundaries of inspiration and answer calls for deeper exploration of moderators.

Eighth, based on the multiple source effect (Harkins & Petty, 1981a) and customer inspiration (Böttger et al., 2017), this thesis examined the causal effect of IGC congruency (congruent topics vs. incongruent topics) on triggering viewers' travel inspiration. Although prior studies by Harkins and Petty (1981a) and Harkins and Petty (1981b) demonstrated that having multiple sources to convey a message is more effective than a single source, this study extends this stream of literature by examining when and how having multiple SMIs to convey a message through multiple pieces of IGC is effective in inspiring viewers' travel inspiration in the context of tourism. The findings from Study Two of this thesis indicate that when multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs are highly congruent in their topic, their effectiveness in inspiring viewers is diminished.

Lastly, this thesis contributes to the literature on travel inspiration by considering the type of SMIs as a boundary condition. However, prior research demonstrated that SMIs' expertise enhances viewers' travel inspiration. This study found that when multiple SMIs create IGC with congruent topics, the type of SMIs (travel specialists vs. non-travel

specialists) does not make a difference. Finally, by examining sponsorship disclosure type as another boundary condition, this thesis contributes to the literature on travel inspiration. The findings show that the partial sponsorship disclosure enhances viewers' travel inspiration when the multiple pieces of IGC created by multiple SMIs have incongruent topics. Together, these findings refine theoretical frameworks by showing how SMI type and disclosure strategies interact with content congruency to shape inspiration.

5.3   Practical Implications

In addition to the contribution to knowledge and theory, the managerial implications of this thesis are also significant. First, by conceptualizing IGC congruency and developing the IGC congruency scale, this study equips practitioners with a robust tool to assess and enhance alignment across multiple components of IGC in collaborations with SMIs. The scale evaluates congruency across critical dimensions, including IGC topics, recommendations, valence, visuals, and SMIs' travel styles, which collectively shape viewers' perceptions of coherence. This enables DMOs and marketers to systematically identify and address incongruencies in IGC, focusing on specific dimensions to optimize content alignment. Furthermore, the framework encourages a strategic shift in SMI collaborations, moving beyond traditional approaches that prioritize congruency solely between SMIs, brands, or consumers. Instead, it emphasizes holistic alignment across all facets of IGC, empowering practitioners to craft more unified and impactful campaigns.

Second, by leveraging the IGC congruency scale, DMOs and marketers can elicit more favorable viewer responses, amplify travel inspiration, and strengthen behavioral intentions. Crucially, congruency among recommendations, valence, and visuals across multiple pieces of IGC created by different SMIs plays a critical role in triggering viewers' travel inspiration. To enhance the inspirational impact of cross-SMI IGC in SMIM campaigns, practitioners should prioritize strategic alignment of these three dimensions (recommendations, valence, visuals) in destination-focused marketing communications. By ensuring coherence across these elements, DMOs and marketers can craft a unified narrative that resonates with audiences, ultimately driving higher travel inspiration and behavioral intentions.

Third, the findings of this study suggest that DMOs and marketers can optimize their SMIM strategies by collaborating with multiple SMIs who share similar travel styles. Such stylistic alignment enhances congruency across IGC, fostering a cohesive narrative that resonates with audiences. Notably, however, the study reveals that SMI expertise in travel (e.g., travel specialists vs. non-travel specialists) does not significantly influence viewers' travel inspiration, regardless of whether the IGC is congruent or incongruent. Thus, to maximize inspirational outcomes, the research recommends prioritizing partnerships with SMIs whose travel styles align with one another, rather than focusing on their niche expertise in travel. This approach ensures congruency in content tone, aesthetics, and messaging, which collectively drive viewers' inspiration and behavioral intentions.

Fourth, the findings challenge the assumption that "more congruency is always better," particularly in topical alignment. Excessive uniformity, such as replicating identical topics across multiple pieces of IGC, risks audience fatigue, whereas a strategic blend of consistency and diversity (e.g., highlighting complementary facets of a destination, like culture, cuisine, and landscapes) enhances inspiration. For DMOs, this underscores the need to approach congruency as a nuanced balance rather than mere repetition. By curating multiple pieces of IGC that harmonize core themes with varied perspectives, marketers can transform them into a measurable tool for sparking travel inspiration and motivating actionable intent.

Fifth, this thesis offers empirical evidence that IGC congruency enhances destination marketing performance by elevating viewers' travel inspiration, increasing their intent to seek destination information, strengthening travel desire, and boosting the likelihood of sharing IGC. These findings provide DMOs and marketers with actionable accountability, underscoring the need to design congruency across multiple pieces of IGC strategically. Notably, the relationship between IGC congruency and viewer inspiration, alongside behavioral outcomes, holds consistently regardless of viewers' susceptibility to interpersonal influence. Thus, DMOs and marketers can confidently prioritize cohesive alignment of multiple pieces of IGC when collaborating with diverse SMIs. By curating content from multiple SMIs whose narratives complement one another, practitioners craft a unified yet multifaceted destination story that resonates across audience segments. This strategy not only amplifies inspiration and information-sharing but also drives concrete

behavioral intentions, such as travel planning and destination advocacy, positioning destinations competitively in saturated tourism markets.

Sixth, this thesis offers DMOs and marketers valuable insights into the effects of sponsorship disclosure types. It suggests that DMOs and marketers should consider employing partial sponsorship in their campaigns, particularly when multiple pieces of IGC cover incongruent topics. By strategically using partial sponsorship, they can enhance travel inspiration among viewers, increasing the likelihood of engagement with the promoted destinations. This approach not only helps maintain authenticity and trust but also maximizes the impact of influencer collaborations by providing a strategic blend of consistency and diversity, such as highlighting complementary facets of a destination, like culture, cuisine, and landscapes, thereby amplifying the real-world impact of their marketing efforts.

Lastly, these insights hold significant practical value for SMIs by empowering them to refine their collaborative strategies with peers and DMOs. A nuanced understanding of their collective influence on consumer behavior enables SMIs to co-create sponsored content that prioritizes audience inspiration and engagement. By strategically aligning their messaging and thematic focus, ensuring consistency without sacrificing creativity, SMIs can amplify their resonance with target audiences. Such intentional collaboration not only elevates the effectiveness of individual campaigns but also cultivates long-term, synergistic partnerships between SMIs and DMOs, fostering a cohesive travel marketing ecosystem where authenticity and impact coexist, driving sustainable success for all stakeholders.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Although this thesis provides new insights into SMIM, it has some limitations. First, the exploratory insights and empirical results presented in this thesis were primarily derived from participants residing in the US. Therefore, future research is needed to replicate these results and investigate whether the five dimensions of IGC congruency identified in Study One of this thesis can be confirmed across other cultural contexts. Second, Study One is conducted in the context of destination, highlighting the need to examine the contribution

of IGC congruency in the hotel, restaurant, airline, and cruise contexts as potential areas for future research. It is imperative to validate the IGC congruency scale with larger samples across different contexts to determine whether the five dimensions identified in this study can be consistently confirmed.

Third, Study One acknowledges several limitations in the linguistic rigor of the developed scale. Despite meticulous efforts to ensure clarity, the absence of input from native English speakers during the expert panel's content validation phase led to grammatical inconsistencies, such as improper pluralization (e.g., "content" without context), subject-verb agreement errors (e.g., "the topic… are"), and ambiguous phrasing (e.g., "valence highlighted in IGC"). While a visual figure was incorporated to contextualize the concept of multiple pieces of IGC from multiple SMIs, these linguistic ambiguities may persist, potentially influencing participants' interpretation of items. This limitation underscores the need for greater attention to grammatical precision in scale development.

To address these concerns, future studies should prioritize linguistic validation by involving native English-speaking experts, particularly those familiar with psychometric scale design, to refine grammar, syntax, and terminology (e.g., clarifying countable nouns like "pieces of IGC"). Cross-cultural testing could further explore how linguistic nuances affect participant understanding, especially in multilingual contexts, to ensure the scale's cross-cultural validity. Reproducibility studies are also recommended to assess whether linguistic revisions improve reliability or alter response patterns. Additionally, future researchers are advised to revise the scale's phrasing for precision, such as:

- "The topics highlighted in multiple pieces of IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another";
- "The visuals (e.g., photos, videos) selected in multiple pieces of IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another";
- "The recommendations (e.g., dos and don'ts) highlighted in multiple pieces of IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another";
- "The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) of multiple pieces of IGC shared by influencers is _____ with/to one another"; and
- "The travel styles of influencers (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler) highlighted in multiple pieces of IGC are _____ with/to one another."

These revisions—including subject-verb alignment (valence is), streamlined wording (removing redundant "things" and "etc."), and consistent pluralization—would enhance the scale's validity and applicability across diverse populations.

Fourth, as the first study to conceptualize and develop the IGC congruency scale, Study One focused solely on measuring the effects of IGC congruency on viewers' travel inspiration. To broaden the study's scope, future research could explore the impact of IGC congruency on other viewers' cognitive responses, emotional responses, and behaviors. Fifth, Study One examined susceptibility to interpersonal influence as an individual characteristic. Other individual factors, such as demographic characteristics, previous experience, and familiarity, may influence the effectiveness of IGC congruency on viewers' travel inspiration and their behavioral intentions. Future studies can explore the moderating role of other relevant constructs in the formation of viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions. Investigating different individual factors is not only theoretically important but also has practical implications for DMOs and marketers aiming to attract specific market segments.

Sixth, Study Two focused solely on the topic dimension of the developed IGC congruency for three main reasons: first, the topic dimension was the most frequently identified in the qualitative study and received the highest mean value in the quantitative analysis; second, designing a between-subject experiment for the other dimensions presents greater challenges; and third, there were limitations in available sources. Future researchers are encouraged to consider exploring the other dimensions of the IGC congruency construct and empirically investigate their effects on viewers' travel inspiration and related concepts.

Seventh, Study Two has not considered the implications of attributions such as informational-sharing attributions and promotional-sharing attributions that can mediate the effects of IGC on viewers' responses (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2021). Since Andonopoulos et al. (2023) empirically demonstrated that the evocation and transcendence phases of inspiration can result from the processing of stimuli rather than occurring immediately upon encountering new stimuli, it is plausible that viewers' attributions serve as an underlying mechanism influencing the inspirational power of IGC. To better understand the unsupported results of this study, future research may examine informational-sharing and promotional-sharing attributes as potential mediators.

Eighth, the context of this thesis in Study Two may have affected the analysis. Since social media platforms vary in their main user demographics, levels of engagement, and content richness (Lalicic et al., 2020), researchers should explore other platforms (e.g., Facebook, YouTube) in future studies to examine how IGC congruency influences travel inspiration among viewers. Study Two focused on static posts from the Instagram platform as its primary material. While Instagram posts are a widely recognized source of travel inspiration (Barbe et al., 2019; Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Ong & Ito, 2019), there are numerous other formats of inspirational content in destination marketing, including Instagram videos, live streaming, YouTube videos, etc. Future research could explore how congruency among these dynamic IGC influences travel inspiration. Additionally, Study Two chose Greece as one of the leading tourism destinations, with diverse attributes and a generally safe environment, to address negative perceptions that may limit the external validity of the findings. This research framework could also be tested across different sample pools and cross-cultural contexts.

Ninth, although the boundary conditions, such as the type of SMIs (travel specialists vs. non-travel specialists) and sponsorship disclosure type (partially sponsored vs. fully sponsored), were not supported in this study, they warrant further investigation in other contexts. Future researchers may consider examining their direct effects on consumers' behavioral and emotional responses resulting from SMIM.

Lastly, differing results between Study One and Study Two could stem from Study One's reliance on complex recall of extensive information, whereas Study Two simplified stimulus engagement. This aligns with a broader limitation of between-subject experimental designs, where high variable control (e.g., restricting participants to four Instagram posts with captions/images) may compromise ecological validity by failing to reflect real-world scenarios (Fong et al., 2016; Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020). Such controlled conditions cannot replicate the multi-platform content encounters that shape destination inspiration in natural settings, limiting generalizability. Future research could employ dynamic, multi-platform simulations (e.g., integrating Instagram, YouTube, Facebook) and mixed-method designs (e.g., combining experiments with real-time behavioral tracking) to better mirror organic social media behavior while retaining experimental rigor. With this in mind, it is hoped that the findings of this thesis will inspire future researchers to explore the effects of IGC congruency on various concepts, further examine the combined effect of

multiple pieces of IGC by multiple SMIs on viewers, investigate potential factors that influence viewers' travel inspiration and behavioral intentions within the context of SMIM, and address the limitations of this study.

5.5   Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a general discussion of the findings, examined the theoretical and practical implications of the thesis, and emphasized its contributions to the field. Additionally, the chapter acknowledged the limitations of the study and provided recommendations for future research directions. The appendices and reference lists will be presented on the following pages.

APPENDICES

Appendix I_ Survey for the Expert Review

<p align="center">**Development of a scale to measure
congruency among influencer-generated contents**</p>

Dear Dr. …..:

Good morning and I hope this message finds you well. This is Mehrnaz Alizadeh, a PhD student from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University's School of Hotel and Tourism Management.

I am currently working on a research study (which is a part of my doctoral thesis) that aims to develop a scale to measure congruency among influencer-generated contents (hereafter refer to as "IGCs congruency"). Following the scale development guidelines suggested by Churchill, (1979) I successfully developed an initial list of items for measuring IGCs congruency based on an extensive review of past literature and in-depth interviews with viewers of IGCs.

To ascertain the content and face validities of the initial items, I would appreciate if you (as an expert in this research field and research topic) can evaluate the degree to which the items are relevant to the definition of IGCs congruency by rating 1 (not relevant), 2 (somewhat relevant), 3 (quite relevant) or 4 (highly relevant).

To help you understand the study context and complete the evaluation, the following please find the definitions of key terms used in my study:

__Key terms__ / Definition

- **Influencer** refers to an impartial third-party who shares ideas, information, and recommendations through social media, possessing the power to influence their audience.

- **Influencer-generated contents (IGCs)** refer to any form of social media posts such as videos, images, texts created by an influencer.

- **IGCs congruency** refers to the congruency among influencer-generated content provided by different but not the same influencers (please see Figure 1)

<p align="center">**Figure 1.** Illustration of congruency among IGCs in this study</p>

Thank you for your generous support in advance. If you have any question about this, please feel free to contact me (mehrnaz.alizadeh@   ).

Yours sincerely,
Mehrnaz Alizadeh
PhD student
School of Hotel and Tourism Management
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

In this study:

- **Influencer** refers to an impartial third-party who shares ideas, information, and recommendations through social media, possessing the power to influence their audience.

- **Influencer-generated contents (IGCs)** refer to any form of social media posts such as videos, images, texts created by an influencer.

Step2: Afterwards, participants will be asked to read the following content

Please recall your most recent experience of coming across with three or above influencer-generated shared by different but not the same influencers about a specific destination.

Step3: Afterwards, participants will be asked to read the following content

In the subsequent pages:
- **Group A** refers to the IGCs (e.g., Instagram posts, YouTube videos) you viewed and recalled
- **Group B** refers to the influencers who contributed those IGCs you viewed and recalled

Step4: Afterwards, participants will be asked to answer the following questions

Please answer the following questions based on the most recent experience you recalled:

The **aspects (i.e., focus/topic of the contents)** highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are ____ with one another.								
	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	
Not compatible								Compatible
Inconsistent								Consistent
Dissimilar								Similar
Irrelevant								Relevant
Not complementary								Complementary
Incongruent								Congruent
Does not go well								Goes well
Not link								Link

The **valence (i.e., sentiment used to describe their experience)** highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are ____ with one another.								
	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	
Not compatible								Compatible
Inconsistent								Consistent
Dissimilar								Similar
Irrelevant								Relevant
Not complementary								Complementary
Incongruent								Congruent
Does not go well								Goes well
Not link								Link

..... three more sets of questions (in a similar format) will be presented to target participants

Task#1

Please advise <u>whether the following questions are relevant to the conceptual definition of IGC congruency</u> by rating

- **1** representing "not relevant"
- **2** representing "somewhat relevant"
- **3** representing "quite relevant"
- **4** representing "highly relevant"

To effectively measure "IGC congruency", the following measurement item is :	1	2	3	4
The **X** highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are *[1: Not compatible – 7: Compatible]* with one another.				
The **X** highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are *[1: Inconsistent – 7: Consistent]* with one another.				
The **X** highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are *[1: Dissimilar – 7: Similar]* with one another.				
The **X** highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are *[1: Irrelevant – 7: Relevant]* with one another.				
The **X** highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are *[1: Not complementary – 7: Complementary]* with one another.				
The **X** highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are *[1: Incongruent – 7: Congruent]* with one another				
The **X** highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are *[1: Does not go well – 7: Goes well]* with one another.				
The **X** highlighted in Group A shared by Group B are *[1: Not link – 7: Link]* with one another.				

Task#2

Did you find any unclear wordings in the questionnaire (page 3 to 5)?
Any area/s for further improvement?

Appendix II_ Survey for PhD Students Review

Development of a scale to measure congruency among influencer-generated content

Dear Participants:

I hope this message finds you well. This is Mehrnaz Alizadeh, a PhD student from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University's School of Hotel and Tourism Management.

I am currently working on a research study (which is a part of my doctoral thesis) that aims to develop a scale to measure congruency among influencer-generated content (hereafter refer to as "IGC congruency"). Following the scale development guidelines suggested by Churchill, (1979), I successfully developed a list of items for measuring IGC congruency based on an extensive review of past literature, in-depth interviews with viewers of IGC and in-depth interviews with experts.
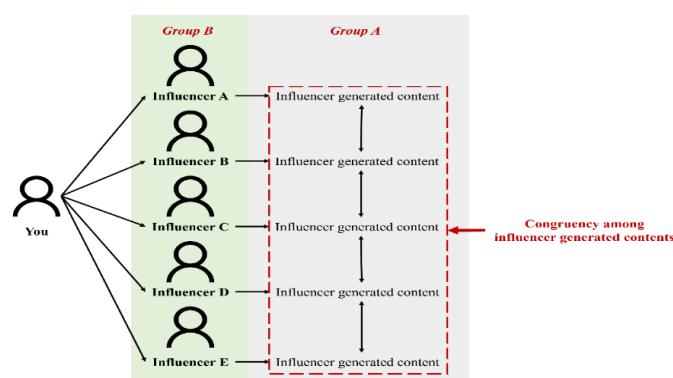
To ascertain the content and validity of the items, I would appreciate if you can evaluate the degree to which the items are relevant to the definition of IGC congruency by rating 1 (not relevant), 2 (somewhat relevant), 3 (quite relevant) or 4 (highly relevant).

To help you understand the study context and complete the evaluation, the following please find the definitions of key terms used in my study:

Figure 1. Illustration of congruency among IGC in this study
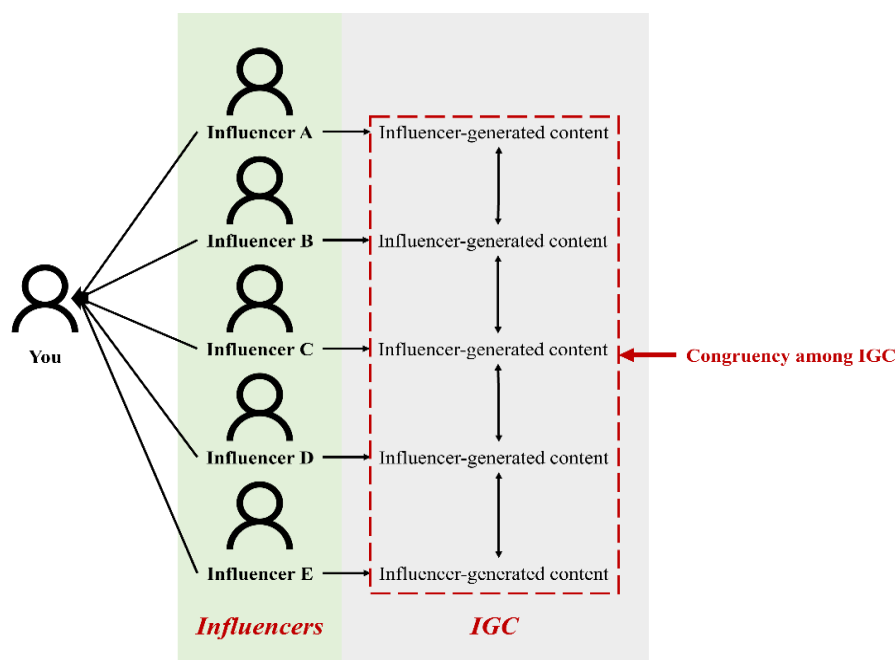
Key terms / Definition

- ***Influencer*** refers to an impartial third-party who shares ideas, information, and recommendations through social media, possessing the power to influence their audience.

- ***Influencer-generated content (IGC)*** refer to any form of social media posts such as videos, images, texts created by an influencer.

- **Congruency among IGC** refers to the congruency among influencer-generated content provided by different but not the same influencers (please see Figure 1)
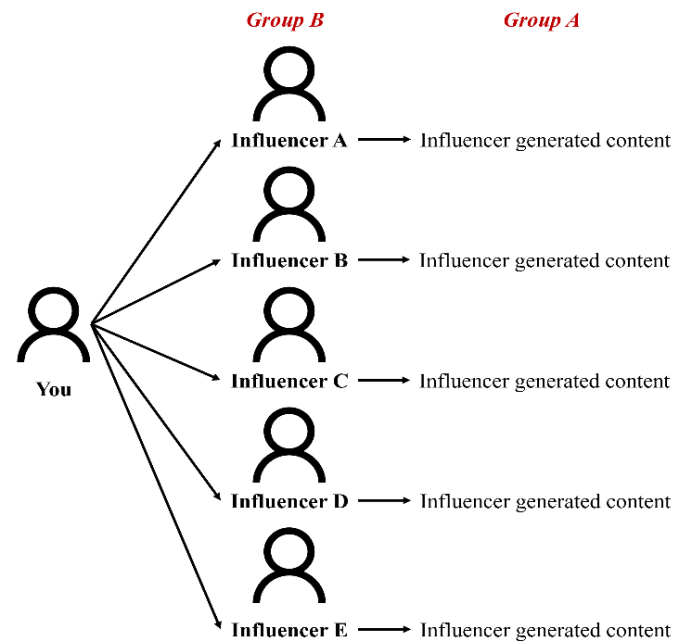
Thank you for your generous support in advance. If you have any question about this, please feel free to contact me (mehrnaz.alizadeh@).

Yours sincerely,
Mehrnaz Alizadeh
PhD student
School of Hotel and Tourism Management
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

In this study:
- **Influencer** refers to an impartial third-party who shares ideas, information, and recommendations through social media, possessing the power to influence their audience.
- **Influencer-generated content (IGC)** refers to any form of social media posts such as videos, images, texts created by an influencer.
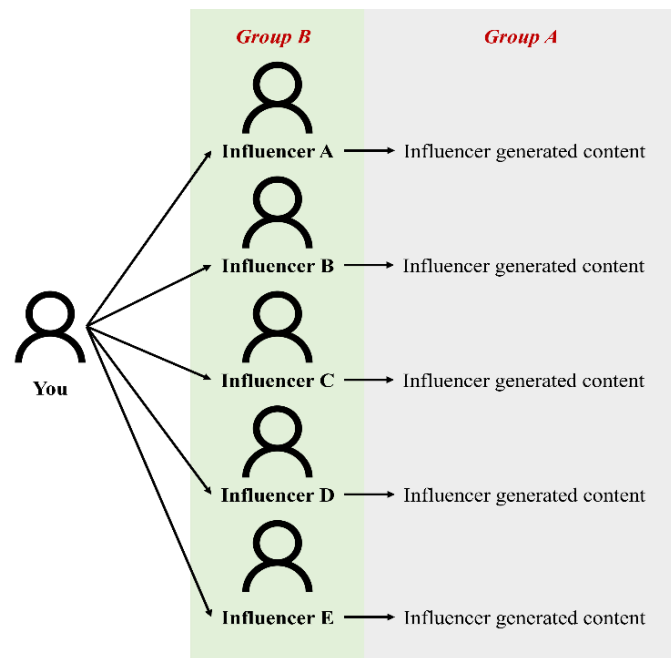
Please recall your most recent experience of coming across three or more influencer-generated content about a specific destination by different influencers.

In the subsequent pages:
- *Influencers* (see green box) should be considered as multiple influencers who contributed their own IGC you have viewed and recalled.

- *IGC* (see gray box) should be considered as multiple pieces of IGC (e.g., Instagram posts, YouTube videos) you viewed and recalled.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2" align="center">*Your Task*</td></tr>
</table>

Task#1

Please advise <u>whether the following questions are relevant to the conceptual definition of IGC congruency</u> by rating

- **1** representing "not relevant"
- **2** representing "somewhat relevant"
- **3** representing "quite relevant"
- **4** representing "highly relevant"

	Rate the relevancy			
The topic highlighted in IGC shared by influencers	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
are *[1: Not compatible – 7: Compatible]* with one another.				
are *[1: Inconsistent – 7: Consistent]* with one another.				
are *[1: Dissimilar – 7: Similar]* to one another.				
are *[1: Incongruent – 7: Congruent] with* one another				
are *[1: Not link – 7: Link]* to one another.				
The valence (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
are *[1: Not compatible – 7: Compatible]* with one another.				
are *[1: Inconsistent – 7: Consistent]* with one another.				
are *[1: Dissimilar – 7: Similar]* to one another.				
are *[1: Incongruent – 7: Congruent] with* one another				
are *[1: Not link – 7: Link]* to one another.				
The recommendation (e.g., do's and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
are *[1: Not compatible – 7: Compatible]* with one another.				
are *[1: Inconsistent – 7: Consistent]* with one another.				

	1	2	3	4
are *[1: Dissimilar – 7: Similar]* to one another.				
are *[1: Incongruent – 7: Congruent] with* one another				
are *[1: Not link – 7: Link]* to one another.				
The visuals (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
are *[1: Not compatible – 7: Compatible]* with one another.				
are *[1: Inconsistent – 7: Consistent]* with one another.				
are *[1: Dissimilar – 7: Similar]* to one another.				
are *[1: Incongruent – 7: Congruent] with* one another				
are *[1: Not link – 7: Link]* to one another.				
The travel style of influencers highlighted in IGC	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
are *[1: Not compatible – 7: Compatible]* with one another.				
are *[1: Inconsistent – 7: Consistent]* with one another.				
are *[1: Dissimilar – 7: Similar]* to one another.				
are *[1: Incongruent – 7: Congruent] with* one another				
are *[1: Not link – 7: Link]* to one another.				

Task#2

Did you find any unclear wordings in the questionnaire (page 3 to 5)?
Any area/s for further improvement?

Appendix III_ Survey for Pilot-test

<div style="border:1px solid">

Survey on Social Media Influencer Marketing

Dear Sir / Madam:

Thank you for taking a moment to participate in this survey - which is a part of research project about Social Media Influencer Marketing.

Please kindly note that:

• This survey includes several sections which will take you less than fifteen minutes to complete.

• Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary.

• You can withdraw at any time without providing any explanation.

• All data collected in this survey will be used for academic purposes only.

• All collected data will be kept confidential, and they will be deleted once the study is completed.

Thank you very much for your time and contribution.

Yours sincerely,

The author

</div>

Consent

Please select the most appropriate answer:

o I understand the content stated above and consent to participate in this survey

o I refuse to participate in this survey

Section II

Eligibility Check

Please answer the following questions before proceeding with the survey:

Have you ever participated in this survey before?

o Yes

o No

Have you ever watched, read, or seen any travel related content shared by social media influencers?

o Yes

o No

Please click the "Next" button and read the instructions carefully:

Please note that in this study:

• **Influencer** refers to an impartial third-party who shares ideas, information, and recommendations through social media, possessing the power to influence their audience.

Influencer-generated content (IGC) refers to any form of social media posts such as videos, images, texts created by an influencer.
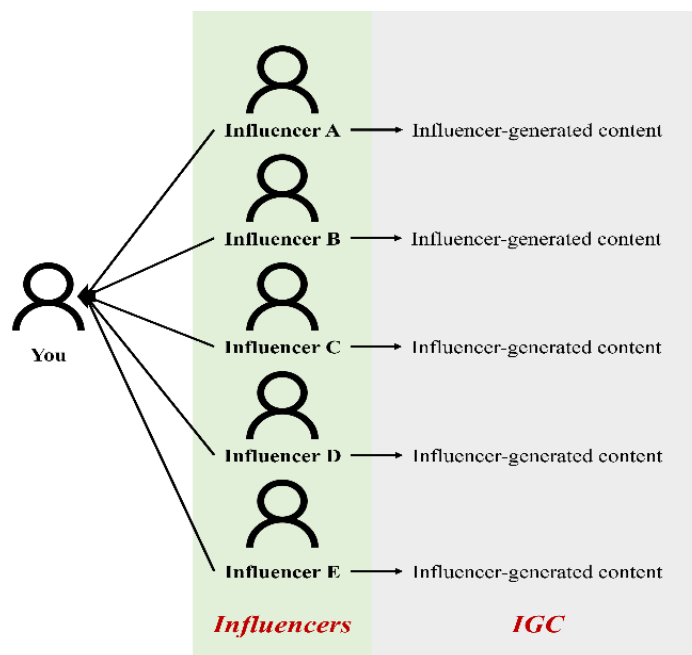
Please recall your most recent experience of coming across three or more influencer-generated content about a specific destination by different influencers you are following.

In the subsequent pages:
- **Influencers** (green box) should be considered as multiple influencers who contributed their own IGC you have viewed and recalled.
- **IGC** (grey box) should be considered as multiple Influencer-Generated Content (e.g., Instagram posts, YouTube videos) you viewed and recalled.

Section III

Based on the experience that you recalled, please indicate the most appropriate option for answering the following questions.

The **topic** highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not compatible								Compatible
Inconsistent								Consistent
Dissimilar								Similar
Incongruent								Congruent

The **valence** (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not compatible								Compatible
Inconsistent								Consistent
Dissimilar								Similar
Incongruent								Congruent

The **recommendation** (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not compatible								Compatible
Inconsistent								Consistent
Dissimilar								Similar
Incongruent								Congruent

The **visuals** (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not compatible								Compatible
Inconsistent								Consistent
Dissimilar								Similar
Incongruent								Congruent

The **travel style of influencers** (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not compatible								Compatible
Inconsistent								Consistent
Dissimilar								Similar
Incongruent								Congruent

Section IV

Demographic information

Please select the answers that are most appropriate to you:

You _____ reference influencer-generated content (e.g., Instagram posts, YouTube videos) for travel inspiration.
o   never
o   infrequently
o   sometimes
o   often
o   always

Before choosing a travel destination, you rely on influencers' opinion about the destination ___.

1: Not at all	2	3	4	5	6	7: Very much

Before choosing a travel destination, you often find, and reference information shared by around _____ influencers.

0	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40	45	50

Drag to your choice

○

Which platform or platforms did you recall while answering this survey?
o Facebook
o YouTube
o TikTok
o Pinterest
o Other

Your gender:
o Female
o Male
o Non-binary / third gender
o Prefer not to say

You age group:
o 18-26
o 27-42
o 43-58
o 59-68
o Over 69

Your nationality: _____

Appendix IV_ Survey for Scale Validation

Survey on Social Media Influencer Marketing

Dear Sir / Madam:

Thank you for taking a moment to participate in this survey - which is a part of research project about Social Media Influencer Marketing.

Please kindly note that:

• This survey includes several sections which will take you less than fifteen minutes to complete.

• Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary.

• You can withdraw at any time without providing any explanation.

• All data collected in this survey will be used for academic purposes only.

• All collected data will be kept confidential, and they will be deleted once the study is completed.

Thank you very much for your time and contribution.

Yours sincerely,
The author

Consent

Please select the most appropriate answer:
o   I understand the content stated above and consent to participate in this survey
o   I refuse to participate in this survey

Section II

Eligibility Check

Please answer the following questions before proceeding with the survey:

Have you ever participated in this survey before?
o   Yes
o   No

Have you ever watched, read, or seen any travel related content shared by social media influencers?
o   Yes
o   No

Please click the "Next" button and read the instructions carefully:
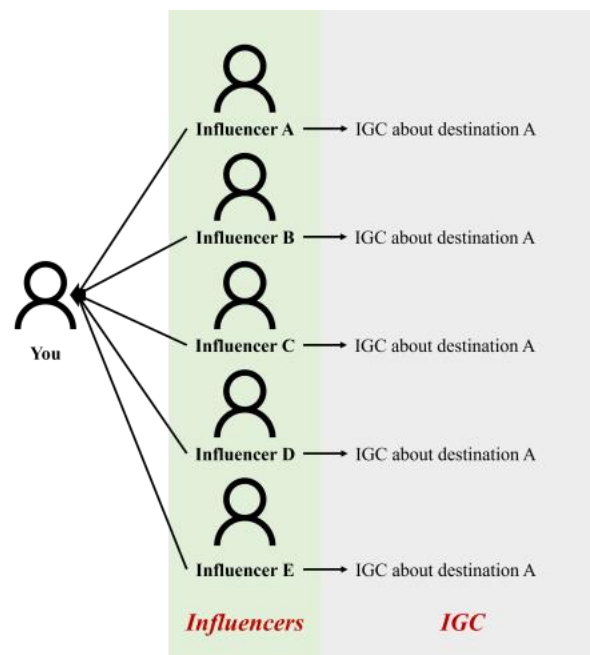
Please note that in this study:

• **Influencer** refers to an impartial third-party who shares ideas, information, and recommendations through social media, possessing the power to influence their audience.

Influencer-generated content (IGC) refers to any form of social media posts such as videos, images, texts created by an influencer.

Please recall your most recent experience of coming across three or more influencer-generated content about a specific destination by different influencers you are following.

In the subsequent pages:
- **Influencers** (green box) should be considered as multiple influencers who contributed their own IGC you have viewed and recalled.
- **IGC** (grey box) should be considered as multiple Influencer-Generated Content (e.g., Instagram posts, YouTube videos) you viewed and recalled.

Influencer A →	IGC about destination A
Influencer B →	IGC about destination A
Influencer C →	IGC about destination A
Influencer D →	IGC about destination A
Influencer E →	IGC about destination A

Influencers   *IGC*

Section III

Based on the experience that you recalled, please indicate the most appropriate option for answering the following questions.

The **topic** highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not compatible								Compatible
Inconsistent								Consistent
Dissimilar								Similar
Incongruent								Congruent

The **valence** (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Not compatible								Compatible
Inconsistent								Consistent
Dissimilar								Similar
Incongruent								Congruent

The **recommendation** (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

<div align="center">1   2   3   4   5   6   7</div>

Not compatible	Compatible
Inconsistent	Consistent
Dissimilar	Similar
Incongruent	Congruent

The **visuals** (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

<div align="center">1   2   3   4   5   6   7</div>

Not compatible	Compatible
Inconsistent	Consistent
Dissimilar	Similar
Incongruent	Congruent

The **travel style of influencers** (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another.

<div align="center">1   2   3   4   5   6   7</div>

Not compatible	Compatible
Inconsistent	Consistent
Dissimilar	Similar
Incongruent	Congruent

Section IV

Demographic information

Please select the answers that are most appropriate to you:

You _____ reference influencer-generated content (e.g., Instagram posts, YouTube videos) for travel inspiration.
- o never
- o infrequently
- o sometimes
- o often
- o always

Before choosing a travel destination, you rely on influencers' opinion about the destination ___.

<div align="center">1: Not at all   2   3   4   5   6   7: Very much</div>

Before choosing a travel destination, you often find, and reference information shared by around _____ influencers.

<div align="center">0   5   10   15   20   25   30   35   40   45   50</div>

Drag to your choice

Which platform or platforms did you recall while answering this survey?
o Facebook
o YouTube
o TikTok
o Pinterest
o Other

Your gender:
o Female
o Male
o Non-binary / third gender
o Prefer not to say

You age group:
o 18-26
o 27-42
o 43-58
o 59-68
o Over 69

Your nationality: _____

Appendix V_ Survey for Nomological Validity

<div style="border:1px solid black">

Survey on Social Media Influencer Marketing

Dear Sir / Madam:

Thank you for taking a moment to participate in this survey - which is a part of research project about Social Media Influencer Marketing.

Please kindly note that:

• This survey includes several sections which will take you less than fifteen minutes to complete.

• Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary.

• You can withdraw at any time without providing any explanation.

• All data collected in this survey will be used for academic purposes only.

• All collected data will be kept confidential, and they will be deleted once the study is completed.

Thank you very much for your time and contribution.

Yours sincerely,
The author

</div>

Please select the most appropriate answer:

o   I understand the content stated above and consent to participate in this survey

o   I refuse to participate in this survey

Section II

Please answer the following questions before proceeding with the survey:

Have you ever participated in this survey before?

o   Yes

o   No

Have you ever watched, read, or seen any travel related content shared by social media influencers?

o   Yes

o   No

Please click the "Next" button and read the instructions carefully:
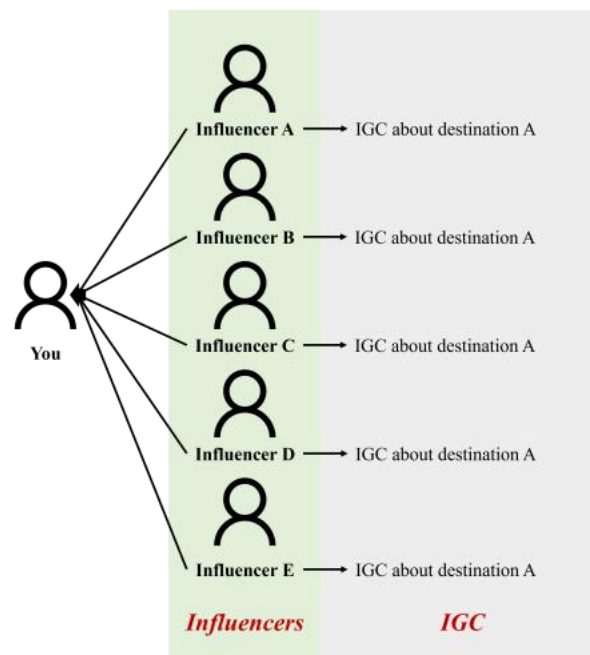
Please note that in this study:

• **Influencer** refers to an impartial third-party who shares ideas, information, and recommendations through social media, possessing the power to influence their audience.

Influencer-generated content (IGC) refers to any form of social media posts such as videos, images, texts created by an influencer.

Please recall your most recent experience of coming across three or more influencer-generated content about a specific destination by different influencers you are following.

In the subsequent pages:
- **Influencers** (green box) should be considered as multiple influencers who contributed their own IGC you have viewed and recalled.
- **IGC** (grey box) should be considered as multiple Influencer-Generated Content (e.g., Instagram posts, YouTube videos) you viewed and recalled.

Section III

Based on the experience that you recalled, please indicate the most appropriate option for answering the following questions.

The **topic** highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

                1   2   3   4   5   6   7

Not compatible	Compatible
Inconsistent	Consistent
Dissimilar	Similar
Incongruent	Congruent

The **visuals** (e.g., photos, videos, etc.) selected in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

                1   2   3   4   5   6   7

Not compatible	Compatible
Inconsistent	Consistent
Dissimilar	Similar
Incongruent	Congruent

The **recommendation** (e.g., dos and don'ts things) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

<div align="center">1   2   3   4   5   6   7</div>

Not compatible	Compatible
Inconsistent	Consistent
Dissimilar	Similar
Incongruent	Congruent

The **valence** (negativity and/or positivity of experience) highlighted in IGC shared by influencers are _____ with/to one another.

<div align="center">1   2   3   4   5   6   7</div>

Not compatible	Compatible
Inconsistent	Consistent
Dissimilar	Similar
Incongruent	Congruent

The **travel style of influencers** (e.g., backpacker, luxury traveler, etc.) highlighted in IGC are _____ with/to one another.

<div align="center">1   2   3   4   5   6   7</div>

Not compatible	Compatible
Inconsistent	Consistent
Dissimilar	Similar
Incongruent	Congruent

Please review the below image one more time before click on the "Next" button:
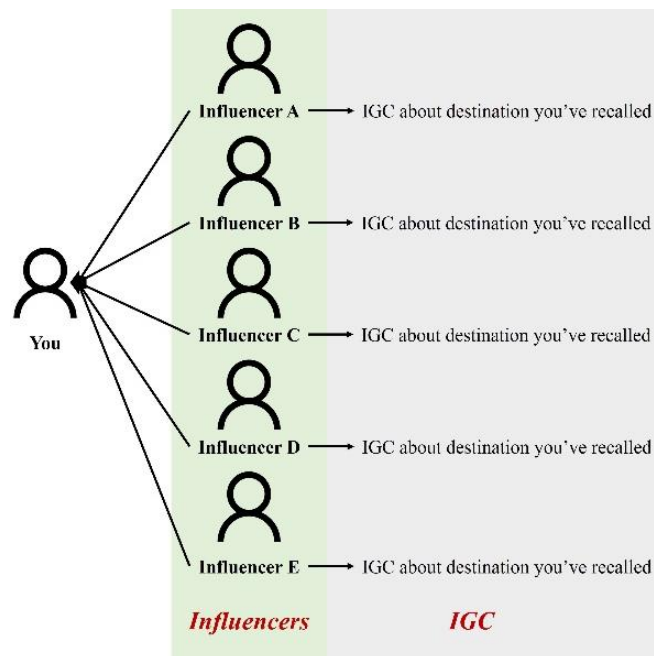
Based on the experience that you recalled for answering the previous questions, please indicate the most appropriate option for answering the following questions.

I find those influencer-generated content are believable.

  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

I find those influencer-generated content are credible.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

I find those influencer-generated content are authentic.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

Based on the experience that you recalled for answering the previous questions, please indicate the most appropriate option for answering the following questions.

My imagination of the destination was stimulated by the influencer-generated content.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

I was intrigued about the destination by the new idea provided in the influencer-generated content.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

I unexpectedly and spontaneously got new ideas about the destination from the influencer-generated content.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

My horizon about the destination was broadened by the influencer-generated content.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

I discovered something new about the destination through the influencer-generated content.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was inspired to search about the destination.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt a desire to search about the destination.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, my interest in searching for the destination was increased.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was motivated to search about the destination.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt an urge to search about the destination.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was inspired to travel to the destination.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt a desire to travel to the destination.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, my interest in traveling to the destination was increased.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was motivated to travel to the destination.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt an urge to travel to the destination.

1: Strongly disagree　　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was inspired to share the influencer-generated content about the destination with others.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt a desire to share the influencer-generated content about the destination with others.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
After viewing the influencer-generated content, my interest to share the influencer-generated content about the destination with others.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was motivated to share the influencer-generated content about the destination with others.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt an urge to share the influencer-generated content about the destination with others.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

Based on the experience that you recalled for answering the previous questions, please indicate the most appropriate option for answering the following questions.

I will be likely to search for more information about the destination after being exposed to those influencer-generated content.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
I will be likely to check with my friends if they have any experience about the destination.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
I have an interest in knowing more about the destination.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

I will visit the destination I saw in those influencer-generated content.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
I am planning to visit the destination I saw in those influencer-generated content.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
I am willing to visit the destination I saw in those influencer-generated content.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

I intend to share those influencer-generated content in social media in the future.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
I expect to share those influencer-generated content contributed by other users.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
I plan to share those influencer-generated content in social media.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

Please select the answers that are most appropriate to you:

I often ask others to help me choose an appropriate product.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
I often collect information from others about the products I want to buy.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
It is important that others like the product I am buying.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

I often buy the products that others may approve of.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

I often connect with people by buying the same products as they do.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

Section IV

Demographic information

Please select the answers that are most appropriate to you:

You _____ reference influencer-generated content (e.g., Instagram posts, YouTube videos) for travel inspiration.
- never
- infrequently
- sometimes
- often
- always

Before choosing a travel destination, you rely on influencers' opinion about the destination ___.
     1: Not at all   2   3   4   5   6   7: Very much

Before choosing a travel destination, you often find, and reference information shared by around _____ influencers.

| 0 | 5 | 10 | 15 | 20 | 25 | 30 | 35 | 40 | 45 | 50 |

Drag to your choice

Which platform or platforms did you recall while answering this survey?
- Facebook
- YouTube
- TikTok
- Pinterest
- Other

Your gender:
- Female
- Male
- Non-binary / third gender
- Prefer not to say

You age group:
- 18-26
- 27-42
- 43-58
- 59-68
- Over 69

Your nationality: _____

Appendix VI_ Survey for Study 2a

Survey on Social Media Influencer Marketing

Dear Sir / Madam:

Thank you for taking a moment to participate in this survey - which is a part of research project about Social Media Influencer Marketing.

Please kindly note that:

• This survey includes several sections which will take you less than then minutes to complete.

• Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary.

• You can withdraw at any time without providing any explanation.

• All data collected in this survey will be used for academic purposes only.

• All collected data will be kept confidential, and they will be deleted once the study is completed.

Thank you very much for your time and contribution.

Yours sincerely,

The author

Please select the most appropriate answer:

o   I understand the content stated above and consent to participate in this survey

o   I refuse to participate in this survey

Section II

Please answer the following questions before proceeding with the survey:

Have you ever participated in an earlier version of this survey before?

o   Yes

o   No

Are you a registered user of Instagram?

o   Yes

o   No

Have you ever watched, read, or seen any <u>travel related content</u> shared by social media influencers on Instagram?

o   Yes

o   No

Section III

Please click the "Next" button and read the scenario carefully:

Imagine that you are a follower of the following influencers:

One day you casually browse your Instagram feed and then you come across the following Instagram posts:

"Participants in congruent treatments received these IGC in a random order"

"Participants in incongruent treatments received these IGC in a random order"

Section IV

Please carefully read the following questions and select the answers that are most appropriate to you:

My imagination about Greece was stimulated by those four Instagram posts.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
I was intrigued about Greece by new ideas presented in those four Instagram posts.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
I unexpectedly and spontaneously got new ideas about Greece from those four Instagram posts.

   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

My horizon about Greece was broadened by those four Instagram posts.

   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

I discovered something new about Greece through those four Instagram posts.

   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was inspired to travel to Greece.

1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt a desire to travel to Greece.

1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, my interest in traveling to Greece was increased.

1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was motivated to travel to Greece.

1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt an urge to travel to Greece.

1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

Section V

Please indicate your level of agreement to each statement by choosing the number that best describes what you think:

In my opinion, the topic highlighted in these four Instagram posts is _____.

        1: Congruent   2   3   4   5   6   7: Incongruent

These four Instagram posts are similar to the posts published by influencers in the real world.

   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

It is easy for me to imagine myself in the scenario.

   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

Section VI

Please select the answers that are most appropriate to you:

Your gender:
o   Female
o   Male
o   Non-binary / third gender
o   Prefer not to say

You age group:
o   18-26
o   27-42
o   43-58
o   59-68
o   Over 69

Your nationality: _____

You _____ reference influencer-generated content (e.g., Instagram posts, YouTube videos) for travel inspiration.
o   never
o   infrequently
o   sometimes
o   often
o   always

Before choosing a travel destination, you rely on influencers' opinion about the destination ___.

    1: Not at all   2   3   4   5   6   7: Very much

Before choosing a travel destination, you often find, and reference information shared by around _____ influencers.

| 0 | 5 | 10 | 15 | 20 | 25 | 30 | 35 | 40 | 45 | 50 |

Drag to your choice

Have you ever been to Greece?
o   Yes
o   No

Appendix VII_ Survey for Study 2b

Survey on Social Media Influencer Marketing

Dear Sir / Madam:

Thank you for taking a moment to participate in this survey - which is a part of research project about Social Media Influencer Marketing.

Please kindly note that:

• This survey includes several sections which will take you less than then minutes to complete.

• Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary.

• You can withdraw at any time without providing any explanation.

• All data collected in this survey will be used for academic purposes only.

• All collected data will be kept confidential, and they will be deleted once the study is completed.

Thank you very much for your time and contribution.

Yours sincerely,

The author

Please select the most appropriate answer:

o   I understand the content stated above and consent to participate in this survey

o   I refuse to participate in this survey

Section II

Please answer the following questions before proceeding with the survey:

Have you ever participated in an earlier version of this survey before?

o   Yes

o   No

Are you a registered user of Instagram?

o   Yes

o   No

Have you ever watched, read, or seen any <u>travel related content</u> shared by social media influencers on Instagram?

o   Yes

o   No

Section III

Please click the "Next" button and read the scenario carefully:

"Participants in travel specialists treatments received these SMIs profiles"

Imagine that you are a follower of the following influencers who generate content in travel and tourism:
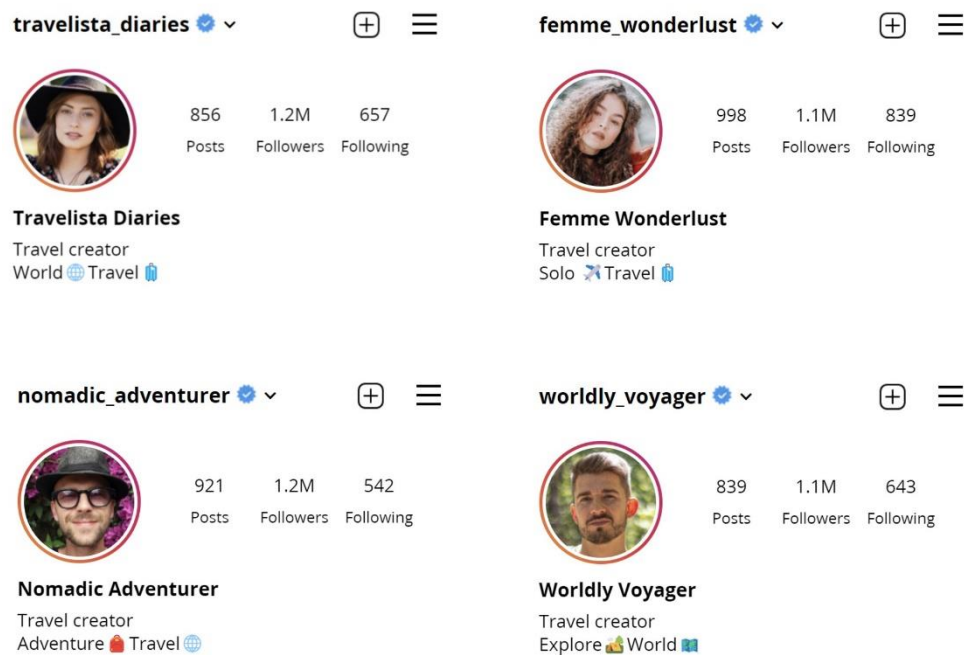
"Participants in non-travel specialists' treatments received these SMIs profiles"

Imagine that you are a follower of the following four influencers who generate content in any or every topic such as fitness, fashion, lifestyle etc.:

One day you casually browse your Instagram feed and then you come across the following Instagram posts:

"Participants in congruent topics and travel specialist SMIs treatments received these IGC in a random order"

"Participants in incongruent topics and travel specialist SMIs treatments received these IGC in a random order"

"Participants in congruent topics and non-travel specialist SMIs treatments received these IGC in a random order"

"Participants in incongruent topics and non-travel specialist SMIs treatments received these IGC in a random order"

wellness_diaries Greece's culinary delights are a flavorful journey for the senses! ... more

femme_flair I'm completely blown away by the beautiful landscapes of Greece! ... more

fashion_forward Warm welcome and genuine smiles of Greeks touch the soul! ... more

fitness_fusion Greece's rich heritage weaves tales of ancient wonders and traditions! ... more

Section IV

Please carefully read the following questions and select the answers that are most appropriate to you:

My imagination about Greece was stimulated by those four Instagram posts.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
I was intrigued about Greece by new ideas presented in those four Instagram posts.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
I unexpectedly and spontaneously got new ideas about Greece from those four Instagram posts.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
My horizon about Greece was broadened by those four Instagram posts.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
I discovered something new about Greece through those four Instagram posts.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was inspired to travel to Greece.
1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt a desire to travel to Greece.
1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
After viewing the influencer-generated content, my interest in traveling to Greece was increased.
1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was motivated to travel to Greece.
1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt an urge to travel to Greece.
1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

Section V

Please indicate your level of agreement to each statement by choosing the number that best describes what you think:

In my opinion, the topic highlighted in these four Instagram posts is _____.
  1: Congruent   2   3   4   5   6   7: Incongruent

I think these four influencers are ___.
o   Travel specialist influencers
o   Non-travel specialist influencers

I think these four influencers are recognizable to the Instagram users.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

These four Instagram posts are similar to the posts published by influencers in the real world.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

It is easy for me to imagine myself in the scenario.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

Section VI

Please select the answers that are most appropriate to you:

Your gender:
o   Female
o   Male
o   Non-binary / third gender
o   Prefer not to say

You age group:
o   18-26
o   27-42
o   43-58
o   59-68
o   Over 69

Your nationality: _____

You _____ reference influencer-generated content (e.g., Instagram posts, YouTube videos) for travel inspiration.
o   never
o   infrequently
o   sometimes
o   often
o   always

Before choosing a travel destination, you rely on influencers' opinion about the destination ___.
  1: Not at all   2   3   4   5   6   7: Very much

Before choosing a travel destination, you often find, and reference information shared by around _____ influencers.

| 0 | 5 | 10 | 15 | 20 | 25 | 30 | 35 | 40 | 45 | 50 |

Drag to your choice

Have you ever been to Greece?
o Yes
o No

Appendix VIII_ Survey for Study 2c

Survey on Social Media Influencer Marketing

Dear Sir / Madam:

Thank you for taking a moment to participate in this survey - which is a part of research project about Social Media Influencer Marketing.

Please kindly note that:

• This survey includes several sections which will take you less than then minutes to complete.

• Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary.

• You can withdraw at any time without providing any explanation.

• All data collected in this survey will be used for academic purposes only.

• All collected data will be kept confidential, and they will be deleted once the study is completed.

Thank you very much for your time and contribution.

Yours sincerely,
The author

Please select the most appropriate answer:

o   I understand the content stated above and consent to participate in this survey
o   I refuse to participate in this survey

Section II

Please answer the following questions before proceeding with the survey:

Have you ever participated in an earlier version of this survey before?
o   Yes
o   No

Are you a registered user of Instagram?
o   Yes
o   No

Have you ever watched, read, or seen any <u>travel related content</u> shared by social media influencers on Instagram?
o   Yes
o   No

Section III

Please click the "Next" button and read the scenario carefully:

Imagine that you are a follower of the following influencers:

One day you casually browse your Instagram feed and then you come across the following Instagram posts:

"Participants in congruent topics and partially sponsored IGC treatments received these IGC in a random order"

Please click the "Next" button to see the full caption:

"Participants in incongruent topics and partially sponsored IGC treatments received these IGC in a random order"

Please click the "Next" button to see the full caption:

Participants in congruent topics and fully sponsored IGC treatments received these IGC in a random order"

travelista_diaries Create lifelong memories on Greece's stunning scenery, pure bliss awaits! ... more

femme_wonderlust Greece stole my heart with stunning landscapes and endless charm! ... more

nomadic_adventurer Greece surprises with awe-inspiring landscapes and picturesque charm! ... more

worldly_voyager Breathtaking landscapes adorn every corner of Greece's beautiful land! ... more

Please click the "Next" button to see the full caption:

"Participants in incongruent topics and fully sponsored IGC treatments received these IGC in a random order"

travelista_diaries Greece's culinary delights are a flavorful journey for the senses! ... more

femme_wonderlust I'm completely blown away by the beautiful landscapes of Greece! ... more

nomadic_adventurer Warm welcome and genuine smiles of Greeks touch the soul! ... more

worldly_voyager Greece's rich heritage weaves tales of ancient wonders and traditions! ... more

Please click the "Next" button to see the full caption:

Section IV

Please carefully read the following questions and select the answers that are most appropriate to you:

My imagination about Greece was stimulated by those four Instagram posts.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
I was intrigued about Greece by new ideas presented in those four Instagram posts.
   1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

I unexpectedly and spontaneously got new ideas about Greece from those four Instagram posts.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
My horizon about Greece was broadened by those four Instagram posts.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
I discovered something new about Greece through those four Instagram posts.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was inspired to travel to Greece.
1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt a desire to travel to Greece.
1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
After viewing the influencer-generated content, my interest in traveling to Greece was increased.
1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
After viewing the influencer-generated content, I was motivated to travel to Greece.
1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree
After viewing the influencer-generated content, I felt an urge to travel to Greece.
1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

Section V

Please indicate your level of agreement to each statement by choosing the number that best describes what you think:

In my opinion, the topic highlighted in these four Instagram posts is _____.
    1: Congruent   2   3   4   5   6   7: Incongruent

In my opinion these posts specifically indicate Greecetourismboard provide **full sponsorship** (including: flight, accommodation, meal, etc.) to those four influencers.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

In my opinion these posts specifically indicate Greecetourismboard provide **partial sponsorship** (just accommodation) to those four influencers.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

These four Instagram posts are similar to the posts published by influencers in the real world.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

It is easy for me to imagine myself in the scenario.
  1: Strongly disagree   2   3   4   5   6   7: Strongly agree

Section VI

Please select the answers that are most appropriate to you:

Your gender:
o   Female
o   Male

- o Non-binary / third gender
- o Prefer not to say

You age group:
- o 18-26
- o 27-42
- o 43-58
- o 59-68
- o Over 69

Your nationality: _____

You _____ reference influencer-generated content (e.g., Instagram posts, YouTube videos) for travel inspiration.
- o never
- o infrequently
- o sometimes
- o often
- o always

Before choosing a travel destination, you rely on influencers' opinion about the destination ___.

    1: Not at all   2   3   4   5   6   7: Very much

Before choosing a travel destination, you often find, and reference information shared by around _____ influencers.

0	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40	45	50

Drag to your choice

Have you ever been to Greece?
- o Yes
- o No

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