

การศึกษากลยุทธ์และการปฏิบัติในการจัดการเนื้อหาของอินฟลูเอนเซอร์สายท่องเที่ยวผ่านโซเชียลมีเดีย

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An Investigation into Social-Media Travel Influencers' Content Strategies

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Article Info

Article Type: Research Article

Article History:

Received: May 11, 2023

Revised: July 31, 2023

Accepted: August 9, 2023

คำสำคัญ

อินฟลูเอนเซอร์สายท่องเที่ยว, การตลาดอินฟลูเอนเซอร์, ความน่าเชื่อถือของแหล่งสาร, คุณภาพเนื้อหา, การปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างอินฟลูเอนเซอร์และผู้ติดตาม

Keywords:

Social-media travel influencers, Influencer marketing, Source credibility, Content quality, SMTI-Follower Interaction

บทคัดย่อ

ความก้าวหน้าของเทคโนโลยี โดยเฉพาะโซเชียลมีเดีย ได้สร้างโอกาสใหม่ทางธุรกิจให้กับแบรนด์ โดยการทำงานกับอินฟลูเอนเซอร์ หรือผู้มีอิทธิพลทางความคิด เพื่อช่วยสนับสนุนสินค้าและบริการของแบรนด์ได้อย่างคุ้มค่า บทความวิจัยเรื่องนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาหลักการจัดการเนื้อหาของอินฟลูเอนเซอร์คนไทยสายท่องเที่ยว ผู้ที่หลงใหลในการเดินทางและผลิตเนื้อหาเกี่ยวกับการท่องเที่ยว โดยแชร์ข้อมูลบนโซเชียลมีเดีย สำหรับโพสต์ที่ไม่มีโฆษณาแฝงหรือโพสต์ที่สามารถเห็นได้โดยไม่ต้องโปรโมทแบบมีค่าใช้จ่ายและโพสต์ที่มีสปอนเซอร์ รวมทั้งศึกษาการปฏิสัมพันธ์กับผู้ติดตาม โดยใช้วิธีสุ่มตัวอย่างแบบเจาะจง และการสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งโครงสร้างกับอินฟลูเอนเซอร์ผ่านทางออนไลน์จำนวน 19 คน และใช้วิธีการสังเกตบัญชีโซเชียลมีเดียของผู้ให้สัมภาษณ์ ผลการวิจัยพบว่าองค์ประกอบสำคัญของการจัดการเนื้อหาของโพสต์ที่ไม่มีโฆษณาแฝง คือภาพหรือวิดีโอ ข้อมูลท่องเที่ยว และการปฏิสัมพันธ์กับผู้ติดตาม นอกจากนี้ กลยุทธ์หลักที่อินฟลูเอนเซอร์สายท่องเที่ยวใช้ในการจัดการเนื้อหาที่มีสปอนเซอร์ ได้แก่ เวลาที่โพสต์ จำนวนภาพสินค้า การแทรกโฆษณาแฝงเนื้อหาที่ให้ประโยชน์และน่าสนใจ และการใช้คำโฆษณาแบบบอกเป็นนัย ผู้วิจัยได้แสดงข้อเสนอแนะในทางปฏิบัติสำหรับอินฟลูเอนเซอร์และนักการตลาดเพื่อนำไปใช้ในองค์กรต่อไป

Abstract

The advancement of technology—especially social media—has brought new opportunities for brands to collaborate with social media influencers who, as key opinion leaders, can help them promote products and services in a cost-effective manner. This study aims to explore how Thai social-media travel influencers (SMTIs), travel endorsers who are passionate about travelling, produce travel-related content and share it on their social media platform, organize their organic content and sponsored posts as well as investigate their interactions with their followers. The purposive sampling and a qualitative approach using semi-structured online interviews with 19 influencers were employed in combination with observation of the informants' social-media accounts. The findings reveal that the core elements of the organization of organic content are photographs or videos, travel information, and interaction with followers. When it comes to paid content, the key strategies for organizing sponsored content generated by the influencers include posting time, number of product photographs, tie-in strategies, useful and interesting content, and implicit advertising words. The practical implications for both SMTIs and digital marketers are discussed further.

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1. Introduction

The rise of Web 2.0 and social media has triggered a rapid evolution in how people engage in online interaction (Abubakar & Ilkan, 2016). Traditional communication has been replaced by a new type of electronic word of mouth (eWOM), which is seen as a valuable source of information that empowers both providers and recipients (Litvin et al., 2008). The power of online experience sharing has ushered a new era of marketing communication in various industries, including tourism. In recent years, social media influencers (SMIs), a new sort of third-party endorser, have played an increasingly prominent role in shaping the opinion of each generation (Freberg et al., 2011). People apparently continue to lose interest in traditional advertising as the dynamic interaction between SMIs and consumers is more engaging and connected. Leveraging SMIs as endorsers appears to be more beneficial for brand development as they are seen as more approachable and credible than traditional celebrities, highly affecting their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Han & Chen, 2022).

In the tourism industry, social-media travel influencers (SMTIs) play an important role in the promotion of destinations and services. They are endorsers who have the ability to influence others' travel decisions by visiting and promoting destinations and generating travel content through online postings (Stoldt et al., 2019). SMIs are viewed as opinion leaders: some 63% of social media consumers considered SMI-created content more compelling than scripted advertising produced by marketing professionals (IZEA Worldwide Inc., 2020). In recent years, there has been notable growth in collaboration between influencers and brands because influencers can create among their followers better attitudes and behavior towards the product they sponsor. In the tourism context, even experienced travelers still depend on the experiences of others to determine the quality of products and services for their decision making (Litvin et al., 2008). The perceived source credibility of SMTI has a significant impact on travelers' attitude toward their content. Because of their popularity, openness, and originality, many marketers choose to advertise their products and services through SMIs rather than conventional celebrities. Thailand is counted as one of the world's top travel destinations with the arrival of international tourists reached 38.2 million people in 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak (Tourism and Sports Ministry, 2019). The term influencer gets more widely used today in this country, particularly in the context of social media. People have a positive attitude towards digital culture since they believe that using the appropriate tools or platforms will undertake the faster and better actions (Pimpiset, 2020). The presence of SMTIs clearly increases and stimulates the desire to travel as well as affecting destination decision making as they are seen to be a credible source (Pop et al., 2022). Previous research has looked at social media's impact on millennials' pre-purchase behavior (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014), the effect of celebrity endorsement on young consumers (Chan et al., 2013), and the impact of followers' awareness of sponsored endorsements (Chan et al., 2013; Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Although these and other studies focused on the demand side, particularly young consumers, there is a scarcity of information obtained directly from content providers or SMTIs in the literature, and the practices of travel influencers. Besides, little attention has been paid to SMTIs in Thailand where influencer marketing has become a dominant tool for shaping perceptions, feelings, and experiences. Therefore, this study attempts to address this research gap by examining the strategies and practices used by Thai STMTIs to organize non-sponsored and sponsored content as well as their interactions with their followers and sponsors.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media Travel Influencers

SMTIs are perceived as individuals who can influence audiences' attitudes through social-media platforms and become opinion leaders by sharing their knowledge in a certain field, engaging with their followers, or expressing their passion, travel, and lifestyle (Audrezet et al., 2020). Unlike celebrities, who are well-known through conventional media, SMTIs have been described as individuals who have a large number of social-media followers, are able to engage them, and can leverage their reputation for marketing to target specific products or services (Kay et al., 2020). Influencers define themselves as ordinary and approachable personalities who can make people feel similar or close to them as peers (Chapple & Cownie, 2017).

SMTIs are often travel enthusiasts who share their travel experiences on social media to inspire people to begin a journey; they are regarded as a reliable and intriguing source, informing their followers about well-known and unknown destinations, cultures, geographies, and other travel-related topics (Stoldt, 2019; Asan, 2021). The audience's positive reactions, such as the amount of favorable feedback (likes, comments, and shares), can motivate SMTIs to create travel content. Meanwhile, SMTIs act as a motivational factor that drives viewers to participate in the tourism movement (Asan, 2021). The interactive communication between SMTIs and their followers is considered an essential characteristic of influencers, which can enhance the SMTI-follower relationship and convert the followers into brand consumers (Glucksman, 2017). Thus, brands have heavily invested in influencer marketing since the early days of social media.

The image of a destination can be shaped by the content produced by video creators or travel influencers (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). The campaign promoted by SMTIs can change consumers' perceptions of the destination, which increases their travel intentions and their desire to spread the word about it, meaning the more successful the campaign, the more favorable perceptions of the destination image they are likely to have (Ong & Ito, 2019). Du et al. (2020) interviewed informants who consume, produce, and share videos on TikTok (Douyin in Chinese) and discovered that several informants are likely to visit specific destinations after seeing travel videos on the social media platform, which has 600 million daily active users as of August 2020 (Choudhury, 2020) and, thus, an impact on the perceived image of a destination. Travel-experience sharing is deemed a powerful influence on traveler behaviors as well as tourism organizations. It increases not only the use of social media in travel planning but also the perceived enjoyment as an intrinsic motivation that has a positive impact on the users (Kang & Schuett, 2013).

2.2 Influencer Credibility

Credibility is an important element for communicators as it can affect the receiver's acceptance of a message in terms of persuasiveness (Lou & Yuan, 2019). The extent to which an audience perceives a communicator's favorable characteristics and motivational message as a trustworthy source is referred to as source credibility (Teng et al., 2014). Ohanian (1990) proposed three dimensions of source credibility: attractiveness, trustworthiness, and the expertise of the communicator. McGuire (1985) described attractiveness as a component of source credibility, noting that a message's effectiveness is determined by an individual's familiarity, likability, similarity, and attractiveness. Trustworthiness, attractiveness, and perceived similarity positively influence followers' trust in sponsored posts (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Although influencers are not necessarily domain experts in traveling, credibility is still expected of SMTIs because their followers want to be able to plan their travels based on public figures, they can trust to give them accurate information. In addition, scholars indicate that trustworthiness and similarity dimensions (e.g., demographics, values, or cultural

background) are the key sources of peer-endorser credibility that strongly influence the effectiveness of advertising (Munnukka et al., 2016).

Furthermore, as regards the tourism context, scholars suggest that people prefer to obtain travel information from tourism influencers who are competent and experienced in certain restricted information to avoid possible risks (Cholprasertsuk et al., 2020) and expand their travel experience. Hence, attractiveness, trustworthiness, competence, and similarity are the four primary dimensions of the credibility of online sources, adapted from numerous studies (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018; Munnukka et al., 2016; Teng et al., 2014). The physical appeal or likeability of a communicator is referred to as attractiveness. Trustworthiness denotes the audiences' perception of speakers as sincere or truthful. An individual with a high level of trustworthiness is more influential than one with a low level of trustworthiness (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Competence, or expertise, is the extent to which a communicator is seen as holding specific knowledge, capability, experience, and skills. Similarity relates to demographic and ideological characteristics of peer endorsers, such as ethnicity, gender, lifestyle, and cultural background (Munnukka et al., 2016). As social media influencers serve as online opinion leaders who can endorse brands and products, the congruence between the endorser and the brand or product can increase the likelihood of purchase and positive attitude toward the product (Xu & Pratt, 2018). A study found that receivers are likely to be persuaded and willingly accept the words of speakers with a high level of source credibility (Han & Chen, 2022). Building and maintaining the volume of the followership depends on several factors, including consistently approachable, friendly, and truthful communication with consistency as well as inspirational visual content and engaging messages (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018). However, the findings of Lee and Kim (2020) show that influencer credibility did not significantly impact purchase intention, meaning that the effectiveness levels of promotional posts by influencers with high and low credibility were similar. However, people had more positive attitudes toward sponsored postings that were highly credible brands than brands with lower credibility (Lee & Kim, 2020).

2.3 Quality of Travel Content

Travel content is the crucial method for attracting tourists to endorsed destinations or activities (Chen et al., 2014) as tourists prefer to acquire travel-related information in the form of photos, videos, or recommendations before making a final decision. Consumers are more likely to trust websites with reviews or social media influencers than professional guides or travel agencies (Childers et al., 2018). As a result, SMTIs who can create unique and entertaining content will receive greater attention from both potential followers and travel marketers.

Content quality in tourism can be defined as the usefulness of information about travel product attributes in helping tourists measure the worthiness of the product (Chen et al., 2014). The posting of content that SMTIs consider valuable to their audience demonstrates the content-creation ethic of authenticity (Wellman et al., 2020). In addition to usefulness, the attributes of accuracy, enjoyment, timeliness, relevance, and consistency are the essentials of travel content creation (Watts et al., 2009; Chen et al., 2014). People prefer to read comments from tourists on websites such as tripadvisor.com and certain travel blogs because they are user-friendly, authentic, and easy to understand (Greztel et al., 2007). People are likely to follow reviewers who create content that they find informative and interesting (Greztel et al., 2007; Watts et al., 2009). It can be said that people follow influencers who have lifestyles similar to theirs to be inspired to travel to recommended places, whereas they visit travel websites to consult user-generated reviews as second-level validation.

Some blogs or posts on social media might be less trustworthy than traditional word of mouth (WOM). However, content creators need to make fresh content, presenting it in an interesting and entertaining way as well as providing

useful information; otherwise, they can fade or receive unpleasant feedback (Akehurst, 2008). Nadanyiova et al. (2020) discovered that people tend to follow influencers who provide intriguing and captivating content regarding vacation experiences and are a source of inspiration, compassion, relaxation, and fun. The majority of viral travel-video content appears to be engaging, entertaining, and, at times, moving, resulting in increased sharing, subscribers, and followers (Cholprasertsuk et al., 2020). These travel influencers are WOM senders who may affect not just audience engagement but also consumer decision making and, eventually, product sales (Yu et al., 2014).

2.4 Social-Media Travel Influencers and Advertising Disclosure

As travel influencers have become more dependent on sponsored content as a source of income, the decisions regarding which brand to collaborate with are made based on influencers' audience and credibility of brands (Wellman et al., 2020). According to Dhanesh and Duthler (2019), followers' awareness of paid endorsements by SMLs is positively associated with ad recognition, implying that when viewers are aware of paid endorsements, they are more likely to trust and be satisfied with the relationship. Similarly, Kay et al. (2020) revealed that disclosing sponsorship leads to significantly higher levels of purchase intentions. This could mean that followers support the brands that sponsor their favorite influencers to allow the latter to continue to produce quality content on their channel. Audiences that can identify advertisements from endorsers' content and are interested in the activities promoted by influencers are more likely to follow influencers in that field. Audrezet et al. (2020) found that SMLs manage their passionate and transparent authenticity by collaborating with brands that fit their lifestyle, respect their identity, and free their creativity and by providing fact-based information regarding brand partnerships and personal opinions about a product or service.

People continue to consume the content on social media even when there are commercial breaks, arguing that as long as the content is free, seeing ads pop up is not important (Nielson, 2017). Because consumers feel that "everyone knows it is paid," they still choose to follow influencers when they find them genuine and relevant, with a high degree of engagement and parasocial interaction with followers (Childers et al., 2018). Evans et al. (2017) reported that the use of the term "Paid Ad" by online influencers boosts ad recognition, implying that consumers will pay more attention to the message and report higher product knowledge. In the tourism context, some audiences may find sponsored content appealing as it allows them to learn about new locations to visit (e.g., a partnership with a hotel). Thus, it is crucial that influencers should communicate with audiences regarding content that is sponsored in a clear and engaging way (Cholprasertsuk et al., 2020).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Participants

The target population consisted of Thai SMTIs with at least 10,000 followers because these influencers can achieve solid visibility of audience and strong engagement rates (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). This study focuses on Facebook channel since it ranked first among other platforms used by Thai people (Kemp, 2023) while other platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, are popular among young audience. Further, Facebook supports a wide range of content formats, allowing users to post several photos, long-form videos, and long caption which are suitable for promoting travel content as it can reach a broader audience. The total number of informants who agreed to participate was 19 (Table 1), and most of them were micro (10,000–100,000 followers) and macro influencers (100,001–1,000,000 followers). In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to fulfill the research's objective of identifying the practices and strategies that SMTIs use to organize their content, their interaction with followers and sponsors, and their impact on tourists' travel

decisions. The advantages of in-depth interviews are that the interviewer can ask follow-up questions or probe for more information to better understand the interviewee's thoughts and motives.

Table 1

Profile of the SMTIs

Informants	Category of influencer	No. of followers (Facebook)	Start date of Facebook page	Type of travel	Type of content
1	Mega	1.9m	Aug 2, 2015	Nature/Hotel/Camping	Photo
2	Micro	69.7k	Feb 27, 2017	Nature/Culture/Arts	Photo
3	Micro	26.6k	Apr 6, 2017	Nature/Hotel/Café	Photo and video
4	Micro	42.2k	Sep 21, 2017	Nature/Culture	Photo
5	Micro	92.9k	Feb 2, 2018	Nature/Camping/ Homestay	Photo and vlog video
6	Micro	36.1k	Jan 14, 2017	Nature/Food/Café/ Hotel/Homestay	Photo
7	Macro	100k	Jan 4, 2019	Nature/Adventure/ Hotel/Homestay	Photo and short video
8	Micro	82.8k	Jan 16, 2016	Nature/Adventure/ Camping	Photo and vlog video
9	Micro	42.5k	Oct 21, 2013	Nature/Camping	Photo
10	Micro	50.8k	Aug 20, 2013	Nature/Culture	Photo
11	Macro	919.6k	Jun 30, 2015	Nature/Solo adventure/Culture	Photo and vlog video
12	Micro	67.3k	Jan 28, 2019	Nature/Food/Café	Photo
13	Micro	38.3k	Feb 26, 2017	Nature/Café	Photo
14	Macro	270k	Mar 20, 2017	Nature/Camping/ Homestay	Photo
15	Macro	356k	May 9, 2016	Nature/Homestay/ Hotel/Culture	Photo
16	Macro	609k	Aug 18, 2015	Nature/Hotel/Café/ Family activity	Photo
17	Macro	101k	May 7, 2018	Nature/Solo adventure	Photo
18	Macro	27.8k	Oct 1, 2017	Nature/Food/Café/ Hotel/Homestay	Photos and vlog video
19	Macro	124k	Aug 5, 2019	Nature/Café/Hotel	Photo

3.2 Data Collection

The qualitative method included online interviews with Thai SMTIs via a communication tool and phone interviews. All influencers had a Facebook page, with their email address shown on their profile page for business inquiries. Hence, most influencers were contacted initially via email, with Facebook Messenger being another option for those who did not provide an email address on their page. As the population of travel influencers is unidentified, the researcher interviewed SMTI until the sample size reached the saturation goal. An average of 12-13 interviews reached saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). More than 50 letters of permission were delivered, and 19 influencers agreed to participate in the research. The period of data collection was between March 20 and June 10, 2021. The letter requesting permission to interview was written by the researchers and revised before being sent with advance notice of the questions. The

informants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and used solely for academic research. Following the participants' consent, appointments were scheduled, and interviews were conducted mostly via phone, Google Meet, and Line. The informants were also asked whether they agreed to have their voices recorded for the duration of the session, which lasted approximately 30–45 minutes.

3.3 Data Analysis

This study employed content analysis to investigate how SMTIs organize their content creation—both organic and sponsored posts—as well as their interaction with their followers. A basic inductive content analysis is performed according to the following phases: data reduction, data grouping, and the formation that can be used to answer the research questions (Kynge, 2020). This inductive approach uses detailed readings of data from the interviews to derive the frequent and dominant themes through interpretation by the researcher (Thomas, 2006), observing repeated words and considering possible meanings. An important part of the data abstraction process is to open code to form sub-categories. The transcripts were read several times to identify the categories of data, and a coding frame was developed to further refine the themes. Compelling quotes from the informants were selected as examples for further discussion.

4. Findings

4.1 SMTIs' Strategies for Organizing Sponsored Content

In travel and tourism, it is undeniable that SMTIs play an important role in today's marketing especially in the context of social media. The capacity of SMTIs to influence others' opinions and behaviors depends on their ability to attract a wide range of audiences and their recognized competence on related fields. When organizing sponsored content, SMTIs focus on factors such as posting time, the number of product photographs, tie-in strategies, interesting content, useful information, and avoiding explicitly using words related to sales and marketing. More than half of the informants noticed that posting at a specific time can enhance the likelihood of greater audience reach and engagement. The most popular exposure times are 9:00 to 10:00 and 19:00 to 20:00. Conversely, some SMTIs post their content at a random time. Furthermore, most influencers asserted that the frequency of publishing sponsored content should be considered as well—for example, limiting sponsored content to two or three posts per week so that audiences stay engaged and are not bothered by the content generated by SMTIs:

When organizing [a] sponsored post, we will keep time distance for posting. For example, we would post sponsored content once a day and follow with two posts of organic travel content for the next couple of days. (Informant 1).

One of the techniques discussed by travel influencers is the number of product photographs in a post since several sponsored visual messages and texts might induce dissatisfaction and boredom in the audience. As a result, the majority of informants reported restricting the number of product images in a post to no more than 10 and attempted to balance them with non-product pictures.

When it comes to exposing an advertisement, the tie-in strategy, also known as product placement, is a common marketing method that allows SMTIs to use a product or service throughout their journey. Product placement refers to the technique of including brand names in content, whether on traditional or online platforms. The informants advised against using only the large-scale product image since it could make the post appear too commercial, which can lead to lower interaction. Meanwhile, endorsing a travel-related product or service can increase audience engagement through using a product recommended by influencers regularly and provide a sense of authenticity:

Since most people know which post is sponsored, a tie-in strategy can help your post appear more natural, rather than too commercial. (Informant 10).

The products or services must be related to the travel content. (Informant 7).

Furthermore, most influencers agreed that creating fascinating content is a vital practice even if the postings contain advertisements. As long as travel influencers can create interesting and enjoyable content, people still want to read or watch it:

It doesn't matter whether it is a sponsored post or an organic post, what really matters is the content itself. I prefer to post photos and tell a short story about what happened during my journey. Besides, I have also started posting videos on YouTube because it can convey feelings better and people are likely to watch the video that is fun and exciting and can easily feel engaged with me and my content. (Informant 11).

Audiences are more inclined to view content that offers helpful information and serves as a credible source to help them weigh their options before making a final decision. In addition, content may be seen as entertaining or as an opportunity to learn something new. Although the postings are sponsored, the audience can find them beneficial.

In our opinion, the content that the audiences wish to see is the content that can provide something useful and enjoyable... like destination information, getting to a place, expense per trip, etc. (Informant 1).

The words chosen to describe the product and service can have an impact on how the audience perceives it. Because the viewers have already spotted the advertisement, it is important to choose a friendly sentence or phrase that does not irritate or overwhelm the audience. Instead of disclosure language featuring "sponsored by," SMTIs are likely to expose the advertising through product placement by recommending the product or service at hand.

We don't have to explicitly tell the audience that this post is sponsored. But we attempt to use other friendly words that will not annoy the audience. (Informant 1).

Although people have already known that the post is sponsored, influencers still need to tell them directly... but I will explain one way or another to let them know. (Informant 7).

4.2 STMTs' Practices in Organizing Organic Content and Interaction with Followers

When it comes to non-sponsored postings, the majority of informants are likely to create content in the form of photographs as the primary method. Whether filtered or not, a beautiful photograph is rated as the most crucial component of content quality. A caption or text message is another effective practice to capture viewers' attention. Most informants describe the visited destination, providing the needed information. Informant 15 pointed out that most organic posts in their page include name of place, location, price, contact number, open hours, and highlights. In addition, each SMTI uses different descriptive writing styles to convey their personal experiences or feelings about a destination, which depend on their personal characteristics.

Our findings show that organic postings receive more interaction than paid content. One influencer noted that when generating non-sponsored posts, content can be produced freely without worry about the target level or engagement rate set by sponsors. Some influencers often include a hashtag with the name of their page as well as the location. Informant 11, who has almost one million followers and good interaction rates, narrates his journey in an adventurous and distinctively authentic way. His photographs might not be as stunning as those of others, but his unique personality and travel style differentiate him as he shares his extreme experiences, travel-related techniques, and perspectives toward life throughout his journey:

I'm not the type of travel influencer who reviews hotels, restaurants, or cafés. I would share my exotic and special travel experience with my followers, who I have met during the trip, how many days a trip takes, sharing my thought about life. My journey is not visiting some place for a couple days, but I ride my motorbike from the south to north of Thailand or ride a bike from Hua-Hin to Lampang.

Interaction with followers is another crucial practice for SMTIs since the potential audience who sends likes and comments on their posts may have a huge impact on the page's traffic, which indicates the popularity and impact of the content. All SMTIs respond to their followers' comments and questions, whether via inbox chat or the text box beneath the post. Furthermore, the content created by the influencer is another way to engage with their audience; for example, some SMTIs choose to produce a post about a specific place or activity in response to requests from their followers. Influencers try to avoid sharing negative travel experiences that they may have had at a certain destination in order not to ruin its image, warning their viewers about certain concerns instead. Potential viewers also provide inspiration for travel influencers by asking them to generate specific content which plays an important role in keeping their motivation to create content.

Table 2

Categories of important attributes mentioned by the informants

Categories	No. of informants
Content quality dimensions	
Beautiful pictures/photographs	15
Interesting and entertaining content	15
Authenticity	15
Sufficient and concise information	13
Useful information	11
Strategies for organizing sponsored content	
Tie-in strategy	17
Relevance of the product to an SMTI's character	15
Implicit advertising disclosure	14
Number of product photographs	11
Posting time/timeliness	8
Measurement of the effectiveness of SMTIs' posts	
Engagement rate (like, share, comment)	19
Awareness (impression and reach)	17
Number of followers	2

5. Discussion

5.1 SMTIs' Practices and Strategies for Organizing Sponsored Content

Because of influencers' ability to deliver customized messages and reach broad and highly engaged audiences, influencer marketing is one of the most cost-effective marketing strategies. Social networking has increased in popularity as a consumer-to-consumer medium, particularly in the tourism sector, as it provides useful information for trip planning and decision making about destinations, products, and services (Kang & Schuett, 2013). Although celebrity endorsers are viewed as brand ambassadors or commentators, influencers may be more efficient at spreading knowledge about products or services and offer higher levels of engagement and personal relationships (Childers et al., 2018). In tourism context, SMTI has been successfully employed by destination management organizations (DMOs) to attract the large number of tourists by producing content that evokes positive attitudes toward destinations (Ong & Ito, 2019). Hence, the collaboration of travel influencers and tourism marketers or brands is very beneficial for brand exposure, social engagement, and sales (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Yu et al., 2014).

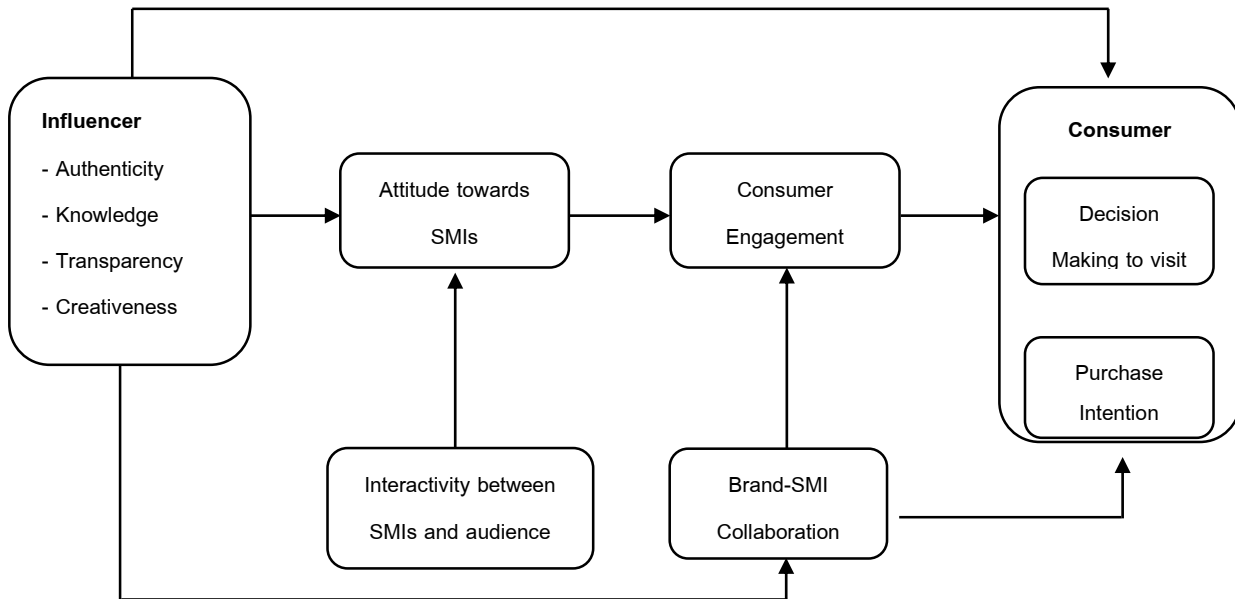
The identity of an influencer is important as it symbolizes the value and reputation of the endorsed brands. Most marketers prudently seek a suitable endorser who can promote the brand's product or service in an authentic way. The page traffic of SMTIs is one of the first indicators that marketers look at when evaluating their performance or content. Influencers, on the other hand, ought to pick sponsors carefully because endorsers who create content to promote a product that is unrelated to their own characteristics receive less engagement and, consequently, are seen as less credible by the audience. This confirms the idea that influencers' uniqueness has a peer-to-peer effect on their followers (Munnukka et al., 2016). Our findings reinforce the research conducted by Audrezet et al. (2020) on SMI-brand partnership authenticity management. They discovered that SMIs adopt passionate and transparent authenticity in their initiatives. SMIs choose companies that suit their style, respect their identity, and allow them to be creative to maintain passionate authenticity. The second type of authenticity relates to a genuine presentation by sharing fact-based information about the product or service as well as personal judgments, demonstrating a feeling of integrity. Informant 2 explained: I use [the products I promote] as a part of my life. I think being yourself is the most important thing. The findings of this study regarding brand selection also align with Childers et al. (2018) research which mentioned influencer selection process. Influencers first look at how the brand are relevant to them, what kind of product or service it offers whereas social media marketers see how well the influencer aligns with the brand and use present and past sponsorships to access whether he/she is a good fit. The agency also reviews the previous posts to check content, sentiment, and engagement. Hence, these collaborations are considered the effective strategy that facilitates arousal, information processing, and decision making.

Sponsorship disclosure can enable SMIs to establish their source credibility and project authenticity (Wellman et al., 2020), and this is confirmed by our findings. The vital attributes are producing content that is useful to audiences, partnering with brands that fit the SMTI's image and style, posting relevant content, and overlooking unpleasant experiences whose mention would be unhelpful to audiences. Previous studies have similarly demonstrated that congruence between endorser and product can increase purchasing intentions and, in the travel context, can identify a destination's distinctiveness (Xu & Pratt, 2018). In this study, the majority of travel influencers used an implicit disclosure message, avoiding sale and marketing terms. They would review the product or service as if it were a friend's recommendation and use tie-in advertising to make sponsored posts more natural and less commercial. Audiences are not disturbed when they recognize the sponsored content because they encounter diverse promotional online content daily (Lee & Kim, 2020). In addition, the collaboration between SMIs and brands especially with a renowned brand can increase positive consumer's attitude and purchase intention (Ibáñez-Sánchez et al., 2022).

Regarding the measures of SMIs' effectiveness, the number of followers is not considered the most accurate indicator of an influencer's popularity and success. This study revealed that some influencers have a large number of followers but low engagement rates (as measured by the number of likes, comments, and shares), whereas some micro-influencers have a smaller number of followers but stronger engagement rates. Some mega and macro SMTIs have been active on social media for a long time and have thus attracted a large number of followers, but their content might not meet audiences' expectations and satisfy them, resulting in lower engagement rates. In contrast, some of our interviewees became macro-influencers relatively quickly owing to the unique and compelling content they produce, even when it is sponsored. Similarly, Glucksman (2017) found that when promoting products, the interactivity between influencers and viewers can maximize brand awareness and convert a follower into a brand consumer. Thus, perceived authenticity, the level of engagement and interaction with followers, and the creativeness of posted content are seen as the crucial characteristics that will enhance an SMTI's credibility, audience perception, and brand partnership.

Figure 1

A conceptual model demonstrates the implemented strategies of the influencer practice for content organization



5.2 SMTIs' Interactions with Followers and Organization of Organic Content

SMTIs are now frequently involved in advertising a destination because of their capacity to influence audiences' travel decisions. The present research looks at how SMTIs interact with their followers, which is seen as one of the most effective ways to maintain the SMI-follower relationship. Most informants claimed that they primarily respond to followers' comments and direct messages. Some influencers invite their followers to share their trip experiences with them, while others pose a short question to encourage feedback. This type of connection strengthens the link between SMTIs and their fans. Influencers should know their audiences and ensure that their response fulfills the viewers' expectations because two-way interaction is proven to be a meticulous tactic and a new dimension of advertising. Since word of mouth from influencers is perceived as more credible and dependable, the contact between SMTIs and their followers seems to be more successful than direct interaction between the brand and customers. SMTIs' or bloggers' pages can be seen as a community in which individuals participate and share similar preferences or values, resulting in positive attitudes and engagement (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

When organizing non-sponsored content, attractive pictures are found to be the most important attributes, followed by informative and engaging messages. The present study is comparable to that of Djafarova and Trofimenko (2018), who found that the quality of posts (interesting posts and good-quality photographs) is the most important element of micro-celebrity. The use of visual filters on images and videos was similar among the informants. Most influencers filtered their materials to make them look professional and attractive.

Apart from photographs with informative messages, video-driven posts are a popular form of travel content that can appeal to viewers and increase travel motivation since audiences can view the real setting before making decisions (Cholprasertsuk et al., 2020). Although beautiful photographs might be a crucial attribute, good-quality content was not less important. The authenticity and uniqueness of SMTIs' characteristics are exposed through quality (Audrezet et al., 2020; Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Campbell & Farrell, 2020). In our study, one of the most popular SMTIs' pictures are not as spectacular as that of other SMTIs, but he was able to differentiate himself from others by relating extreme adventures

and challenging journeys and happily sharing his life experiences with audiences. Furthermore, language usage and communication skills are as important as—or even more than—photograph quality. One interviewee, a micro-influencer, gained a high Facebook engagement rate thanks to touching quotes. Most of her posts include a single photograph that might not be perfect but arouses viewers' feelings:

Someone said people who travel alone possibly have two reasons: they're either running away from something or searching for something.

Organic travel posts produced by SMTIs not only contribute to travel decision making but also inspire people to create their own content to keep and share their memorable experiences in a digital journal. Most SMTIs began by accumulating their travel experiences and uploading them to social media for the simple purposes of sharing with friends, storing photos, or creating a portfolio for their clients (e.g., marketers and sponsors) to view their work.

6. Implications

6.1 Theoretical Implications

The role of SMTIs remains understudied. Previous research investigated how SMTIs affect tourist behavior and motivation to travel (Cholprasertsuk et al., 2020). The present study extends the literature using qualitative methods to explore influencers' content-creation practices and strategies for both organic and sponsored posts. That is, it examines how they choose to work with brands, what type of content they produce, the content that audiences hope to see, how the influencers interact with their followers, the characteristics that should have, and how they manage content including sponsored campaigns in a genuine way. Semi-structured interviews were to obtain more insights into the process of organizing sponsored travel-related content.

This study found that the marketing message presented in travel influencers' content is perceived as more authentic and effective than direct interaction between the brand and the target audience because the influencers' reviews are seen as similar to a friend's recommendation. SMTIs are hailed as key opinion leaders in the tourism-related field and perceived as reliable sources of travel information who play a crucial role in eWOM and can reach broader audiences within a short period; they are thus considered vitally influential. The findings of this study demonstrate that awareness (audience reach) and the engagement rate (number of likes, shares, and comments) are more effective indicators than the number of followers. The main reason is that the content that SMTIs produce is compelling and useful. SMTIs' posts are widely used as an information source that can shape audiences' perception of a destination and stimulate intentions to travel.

6.2 Practical Implications

SMTIs can draw implications from these findings. First, to build a stronger relationship with followers, in addition to replying to comments and answering questions in the chat box, SMTIs might create question-and-answer content about travel-related topics. Inquiring about the opinions of followers can improve the interactive relationship while also demonstrating appreciation for their valuable responses. Second, SMTIs should disclose sponsorships, either implicitly or explicitly, to give a sense of transparency and authenticity, and they should take this opportunity to show their ability to create content. Further, the product or services endorsed by influencers should be relevant to their characteristics so that the content is more persuasive and can receive favorable feedback. Third, as pictures have been widely used in travel posts, generating video content may be a good option for SMTIs to enhance their page's traffic and popularity because it can elicit stronger feelings and be more engaging. Furthermore, people tend to consume more video content, such as vlogs, which are one of the most popular forms of content creation. Video content also brings in more revenue for

influencers since it looks professional and attracts digital marketers, but it requires video-editing skills and takes longer to create.

Digital marketers can also draw implications from this study. When selecting an SMI to hire, marketers should not focus exclusively on the number of followers but also on whether the SMTI's characteristics match their products or services, the performance of their content, the type of content in which they specialize, their followers' demographics, and their engagement rates. In addition, marketers should let influencers or content creators freely produce their content to exhibit their creativeness because influencers often enhance engagement with brand-related messaging more effectively and personally than brands can (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Marketers should be willing to receive both favorable and unfavorable reviews from influencers since the latter are potential consumers who spread eWOM; this would make the reviews more persuasive. To reach their target audience, marketers should understand the functions and algorithms of each social-media platform as well. For example, if brands wish to post a one-minute video to catch viewers' attention, Instagram and TikTok might be the best options, whereas YouTube is more suitable for longer content as YouTubers can create their own (online TV) channel.

7. Conclusion and Limitation

The strategies and practices of SMTIs in organizing travel content and interacting with their followers and sponsors are vital factors that lead to successful endorsements and brand promotion. The findings empirically indicate that transparency and authenticity are the key relationship-management factors for influencers to both build trust among their followership and develop and preserve their credibility in the long term. The study also demonstrates that the uniqueness of SMTIs' characteristics exposed through their content is the crucial factor in making them more influential, which positively affects the audiences' perception of the endorsed destination and brand image regardless of whether a sponsorship exists.

This study has demonstrated the role of travel influencers as part of a marketing strategy. Its scope was limited to Thai SMTIs and was conducted in Thailand only because of limitations on international travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewing both Thai and foreign influencers, including those who blog about international tourism, might result in different perspectives on influencer credibility. The practices and strategies used by foreign influencers could also shed light on some cultural differences and variations in blogging practices across countries as concerns content creation, sponsor collaboration, and follower interaction. Since there are several types of SMIs, specializing in different areas of interest or types of travel (e.g., solo, couple, family, food, LGBT, luxury, etc.), future research could examine other specific SMIs to gain different insights and practical implications.

The present research looked at the effectiveness of influencer marketing focusing on SMTIs. Future studies could also examine the effectiveness of endorsements by interviewing digital marketers to obtain insightful information regarding the measurement of sponsored posts produced by SMTIs and the criteria the marketers use to select an influencer. Lastly, some sponsors might hire digital marketers as intermediaries to recruit influencers to advertise their products; therefore, interviewing sponsors or the company owning a product can produce further insights into—among others—influencer reputation and the costs and risks of influencer marketing.

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