Social Media Influencers and Thai Tourism Industry: Tourists' Behavior, Travel Motivation, and Influencing Factors

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Abstract

Social Media Influencers (SMIs) have become an important feature in various business activities, including tourism. However, very few studies have investigated the role of SMIs in the tourism industry in Thailand. This study aims to explore the impact of SMIs on the Thai tourism industry, focusing on two major research focusses: influences of SMIs on Thai tourists' behavior and travel motivation; and factors of SMI marketing that influences such behavior and travel motivation. To accomplish such goals, we used a mixed-method design in which the data were collected from two major sources: an online questionnaire responded to by 155 participants, and qualitative interviews with eight informants using phone calls. The results showed that most participants (92.30%) have been influenced by SMIs on travel decision-making. Also, among the nine factors influencing tourists' behavior and their travel motivation, participants preferred to seek travel information from tourism influencers with experience and expertise in certain inclusive information (M = 3.47) and from those with credibility (M = 3.37). The findings also indicate the roles that social media influencer marketing takes on a number of aspects in various business sectors, including the tourism industry in Thailand. The findings suggest that social media influencers create significant impacts on consumers' decision-making in the tourism sector, in which most tourists tend to search for reviews or useful information from SMIs regarding travel plans in order to avoid terrible travel experiences.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, social media is considered as one of the most popular online activities with an estimated 2.95 billion users worldwide in 2019, and this number is projected to increase to almost 3.43 billion in 2023 (Clement, 2020). There is no doubt that social media has considerably changed the way people live their lives (De Veirman, 2017). It allows users to be both senders and receivers by providing an ability to connect and share information simultaneously with anyone around the world.

Due to its evolution and increasing popularity, the emergence of senders, also known as social media influencers (SMIs), is also on the rise (Freberg, Grahamb, McGaughey & Freberg, 2010; De Veirman, 2017). SMIs represent a new type of independent third-party endorser, who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media devices (Freberg, Grahamb, McGaughey & Freberg, 2010). Moreover, according to a recent survey, 63% of social media consumers expressed that hey find the content created by SMIs to be more compelling than scripted advertising written by a marketing professional (IZEA Worldwide Inc., 2020). With the productiveness of SMIs and their interaction with their followers, new forms of advertising have emerged. Some businesses or marketers have thus started to consider partnering with social media influencers as it provides an opportunity for attracting customers' attention and boosting sales, especially in the tourism sector.

SMIs are viewed as users on social media, but these users are very unique or special in the sense that they are capable of accessing a large number of people and persuading them through the use of messages, posts, blogs, and the like (Freberg, Grahamb, McGaughey & Freberg, 2010; De Veirman, 2017). As a result, from the productiveness of SMIs and their interaction with their followers, a new form of advertising has emerged (Freberg, Grahamb, McGaughey & Freberg, 2010). Consequently, some business owners or marketers consider partnering with SMIs as an opportunity for not only attracting customers' attention, but also for boosting sales volume. The same is true for the tourism industry, in which tourists often rely on comments or reviews that certain SMIs post on online platforms. i.e., some tourists decide on travel destinations based on research of available information and suggestions provided by SMIs, as well as to organize trips, flights, and accommodation in advance (Gerritsen & Zeng, 2014). SMIs

have thus become a preferred source of information, in choosing where to travel and planning what to experience via SMIs' posts, reviews, blogs and videos (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). However, there might still be some travelers who are not influenced enough by SMIs and are more likely to trust recommendations from their friends and family.

The role that SMIs have played in general contexts has been witnessed in a number of previous works in other contexts, such as the United States, Greece, and Portugal. However, little attention has been paid to SMIs and tourism in Thailand, even though the country has been a leading destination in the top 20 global tourist attractions since 2012 according to the seventh annual Mastercard Global Destination Cities Index (The Nation, 2018). In order to help businesses and marketers in the tourism sector to improve the feasibility of attracting more customers, we have decided to conduct this study, in which we aim to examine the impact of SMIs on Thai tourist behavior and their travel motivations in Thailand through the following research questions:

1. Do SMIs have influence over Thai tourists' behavior and travel motivations for any provinces in Thailand?

2. If they do have influence over Thai tourists, then what are the factors of SMI marketing that influence Thai tourists' behavior and travel motivations?

The findings are expected to be of use to private or governmental sectors in relation to marketing strategies in the tourism industry, and resulting in possible suggestions on how to implement influencer marketing via social media platforms as a marketing tool in order to raise awareness of its importance, attract more customers, and boost this kind of business strategy.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media Influencers and Roles

With the growth of the digital world, we have seen social media platforms grow rapidly over the last decade. Social media is used by billions of people around the world and has become an essential part of our lives. It has changed several perceptions and created new opportunities in different fields, especially in business where social media can be used as a tool to engage marketing, sales, and customer

relationships in gaining competitive advantages (Uwandu & Mohd, 2013). In this new environment, social media provides space and freedom to ordinary people to post about things they are interested in. Some people with interesting content can also gain attention over time and gain influence on people who follow them.

SMIs represent a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media platforms (Freberg, Grahamb, McGaughey & Freberg, 2010). SMIs can also be defined as a user of social media who accumulates following and established credibility through time and engagement in the relationship between the influencer themselves and their followers, and these actions can lead to impact and persuasion (De Veirman, 2017). SMIs have thus had a great impact on how influencer marketing is done these days.

The attraction of SMIs have been very quickly recognized by marketers as a way for reaching their target markets in a more genuine way compared to celebrity endorsements, which can be seen as action for money instead of presenting sincere information. Accordingly, a SMI is seen as someone who is approachable, natural, and real in the public's eyes, and who has an informal and friendly tone of communication; hence, audiences feel closer to them than celebrities and also see them as more authentic (Alic, Pestek & Sadinlija, 2017). Moreover, many followers consider influencers as friends—people who they truly know since they share so much of their real-lives with them. Such relationship can lead not only to positive reactions from potential customers among the followers of social media influencers, but also a much faster commitment to those followers actually taking action. And although some scholars view SMIs as competing or hostile tools (Gorry & Westbrook, 2009), many people, such as marketers and business owners, consider SMIs as opportunities to promote a brand or organization.

2.2 Social Media and Tourism

Social media has played a significant role in many aspects of tourism, especially in tourism promotion and information searches. Traditionally, television has had the largest share in paid advertising, but in 2017 digital advertising spending surpassed it (Woods, 2016). Traditional Word of Mouth (WOM) has turned into Electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM) marketing, and influencer marketing has emerged (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). The new platform mainly focuses on best practices for interacting with consumers

and how to influence decision-making behaviours (Gerritsen & Zeng, 2014). Social networks such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, where posts of photos and videos can be shared within a second, work as the perfect platform to share personal experiences that give a sense of authenticity and credibility; this meant that this style of user-generated content was rather quickly embraced (Alic, Pestek & Sadinlija, 2017)—content about a trip or vacation can be easily posted for everyone, and can also generate buzz, impacting on tourists' decisions.

Consumers access social networking sites to research trips in order to make decisions and share their personal experiences of a hotel, restaurant, visitor attraction, or airline. A popular social media platform like TripAdvisor, for example, has had a wide-reaching effect on the industry. According to statistic data in 2019, TripAdvisor has around 70 million monthly visitors who are actively seeking out travel information and advice from the site. Because of the low cost of social media and its global reach, marketers have started using the benefits by integrating social media into their marketing strategies and stimulating conversations between potential customers (Alic, Pestek & Sadinlija, 2017).

2.3 SMIs, Tourists' Behavior, and Travel Motivations

The tourism industry has relied more on SMI marketing since it has been proven as a remarkably effective, beneficial and powerful way to access a particular group of target customers in a very trustworthy and approachable way (Alic, Pestek & Sadinlija, 2017). SMIs bring new levels of engagement to the tourism industry, and are considered as a strong connector to potential customers.

The relationships that influencers create and maintain with their followers give travel marketers lots of opportunities to expose the experience of travel in a way that has never been done before. By linking influencers with their target audiences, travel marketers have the ability to show what travel can bring to someone through the eyes of people they identify with, thus leading to changes in tourists' behavior, and travel motivations. Many examples of implementing such marketing activities have shown great success and will no doubt increase in frequency in the future.

A study conducted by Gretzel (2018) found that influencer marketing in the travel and tourism domain has been mainly used by international hotel firms, and while

the use by destinations is increasing, they are still lagging behind. Influencer marketing has been proven to be more effective, and it is considered a solid alternative to direct tourists' decision as the endorsement of destinations by the Destination Marketing Organization (Glover, 2009).

Among the global competition, SMIs can be used to reach more people by engaging followers (Bokunewicz & Shulman, 2017) and attracting demographic segments such as women and digital natives like millennials and Gen Z (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Moreover, influencer marketing can improve a destination's image and serve as a destination' branding strategy (Glover, 2009). This, in turn, can influence tourists' behavior and travel motivations, where tourists seem to take several factors into account in relation to the selection of SMIs. These include a compatibility between the brand and SMIs, numbers of followers, types of created content, reliability, and communicative style (Uzunoǧlu & Misci Kip, 2014). In additon to the use of traditional marketing strategies, knowing your target audience is key for this influencer marketing strategy. The chosen influencers have to be relevant to the target audiences the travel marketers want to pursue. They have to be influencers whose profile complies with the message intended to be sent and promoted (Alic, Pestek & Sadinlija, 2017). As a result, a SMI strategy is very helpful for affecting tourists' behavior and travel motivations.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Framework and Research Design

As this study aimed to explore the impact of SMIs on Thai tourists' behavior and their travel motivations in Thailand, we rested on the research framework that explained such a research focus, as shown here:

Fig. 1 Research Framework

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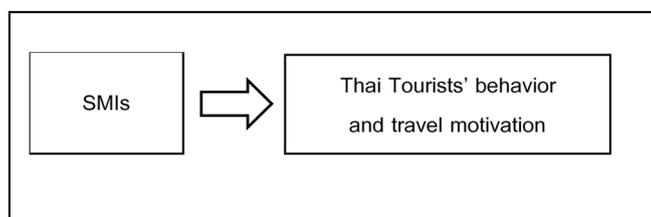
Regarding the research design, this study was conducted using a mixed-method approach that integrated both quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to enrich the evidence and enable questions to be answered more deeply. In the first stage, a survey was adopted to measure the relationship between two variables, which are social media influencers and tourist behavior among our participants. A quantitative approach is often used in order to identify trends in attitudes, opinions, behaviors, or characteristics of a large group of people, and when findings need to be generalized to a population (Creswell, 2005). Contrastingly, the qualitative approach with interview data was incorporated in this study to gain more personal responses from the respondents and to gain an in-depth understanding of human behavior (Terttunen, 2017).

3.2 Participants

Over a period of five weeks, we collected 155 responses from an online questionnaire, and conducted eight phone interviews: five with members of the public and three with SMIs who were selected based on the three roles of influencers mentioned in Medium (2019): (a) nano-influencers, those who had less than 10,000 followers; (b) micro-influencer, those with 10,000 to 100,000 followers; and (c) macro-influencers, those with 100,000 to 1 million followers. The interview responses were used to strengthen the answers from the online questionnaires.

Participants were all Thais who live in Thailand, and use the internet regularly. We used convenience sampling and questionnaire respondents were recruited publicly via LINE, Facebook, and other social media platforms. For the in-depth phone interviews, we used purposive sampling, a strategy in which particular settings persons or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that cannot be obtained from other choices (Maxwell, 1996).

Among the 155 respondents, 71% were female and 27.7% were male. Most respondents (65.2%) were 15–25 years old; the majority of the remaining respondents (24.51%) were over 35 years old. The majority of participants (54.80%) were students and some (18.10%) were office workers. Regarding the participants' educational background, most (75.50%) had obtained bachelor's degrees. 71.60 % of respondents had a monthly income of less than 25,000 Baht. A detailed profile of participants is shown in Table 1.

With respect to the participants' backgrounds, in relation to tourism target groups, we were realized that most participants could serve as the representation of research participants due to two major data categories. The first one was the data indicating that most of the participants were students (54.80%) together with office workers (18.10%), in which both groups are main sources for tourism targets—the former are enabled by their free time, preferences, and life style, which has been well perceived in today's information and news; the latter are enabled through their regular income.

The first piece of evidence for the notion of representation of the participants' backgrounds explained was the data indicating their income, in which most of them (36.80% and 34.80%) earned at least 15,000 Thai Baht per month. It can be inferred that student participants have indicated at least THB 15,000 or THB 15,000 - 25,000 income per month. It can be surmised that such income levels from students are usual among middle-class families that are well established financially, and where their children have increased opportunity to study in college and for recreational or leisure activities in their free time. This amount of income (probably obtained from parents) when combined with care-free life-styles would allow these students to choose tourist attractions as part of their life during long holidays or semester breaks. As such, it could be assumed that the participants recruited in this study could serve as one main tourism target group.

Table 1

Participants' profile

Variable	Classification	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Female	110	71.00
	Male	43	27.70
	Unidentified	2	1.30
Age	Below 15	0	0.00
	15 - 25	101	65.20
	25 - 35	16	10.30
	above 35	38	24.50

Variable	Classification	Frequency	Percent (%)
Occupation	Students	85	54.80
	Office workers	28	18.10
	Business owners	12	7.70
	Unemployed	11	7.10
	Government officers	7	4.50
	Other	12	7.30
Education	Higher than Bachelor's Degree	17	11.00
	Bachelor's Degree	117	75.50
	Vocational Certificate	3	1.90
	High Vocational Certificate	4	2.60
	High school	14	9.00
Monthly Income	Less than 15,000 THB	57	36.80
	15,000 - 25,000 THB	54	34.80
	25,001 - 35,000 THB	10	6.50
	35,001 - 45,000 THB	15	9.70
	More than 45,000 THB	19	12.30

3.3 Research Instruments

We constructed research instruments based on our findings from the literature. The instruments used were an online questionnaire and phone interview questions—so both instruments could serve to understand the research phenomena through a mixed-method analysis.

3.3.1 Quantitative Analysis

We created the first research instrument, a self-reported questionnaire, to serve the quantitative analysis, in which in-breadth data were expected. The questionnaire constructed was then transformed to its online version so it could be used in the process of data collection from a large number of participants, which mainly focused on customers' perceptions toward social media influencers in the travel and tourism field in order to answer the research questions.

The questionnaire was divided into three main parts, which are demographics, social media usage, and the impact of social media influencers on participants. First, demographic information consisted of questions regarding gender, age, occupation, education level, and monthly income. Second, the social media usage section focused on which social media platforms were used to follow influencers in the travel and tourism field, the number of followers their tourism influencers had, and a preferred number of followers that their infuencers had. These questions were composed of one category question and two list questions. The last section was related to the impact of SMIs on participants. The participants were asked about travel decision making based on social media influencers, possible effects of those influencers, factors of potential influencers, types of content, characteristics of quality content, social media platforms for following influencers, and further recommendations. For this section, we included both open and closed questions. Close-ended questions included list questions, category questions, and rating questions. These questions required a rating on a scale of 1–4 and were used to gain opinions regarding possible effects of influencers, factors of potential influencers, and characteristics of quality content. The scale of 1 was the lowest rating and was also referred to as *strongly disagree* or *not important at all*, whereas, the scale of 4 was the highest rating and was referred to as *strongly agree* or *very important*. This enabled us to measure participants' attitudes toward their level of agreement on each statement. Moreover, an open-ended question (Fink, 2013), was used to ask participants to share any further recommendations for social media influencers and marketers.

3.3.2 Qualitative Analysis

The second instrument was the qualitative interview, in which we generated questions to gather in-depth information from the participants (Merriam, 1988). We generated the interview questions based on quantitative patterns derived from the online questionnaire. We contacted participants and conducted via phone interviews individually. We collected information on perspectives about becoming an influencer in the tourism field and gained insights from social media users about what they think of influencers and their impacts toward Thai tourist's behavior and travel motivations. We chose to use a phone interview format as we thought that it was more convenient and

safe for interviewer and interviewee as it enabled us to keep social distancing and thus comply with restrictions in place due to the spread of COVID-19 in 2020.

3.4 Research Procedure

Through a mixed-method design, data were collected from two major sources: an online questionnaire responded to by 155 participants, and qualitative interviews with eight informants using phone calls. Both sources not only served as triangulation of data, offering more reliability of the data (Denzin, 1984), but also helped accommodate the participants, who would have been affected by the COVID-19 crisis taking place during data collection from mid-April to late-May of 2020. In terms of method justification, we believed that it would be better to carry out this study with an online questionnaire and phone interview due to the outbreak of coronavirus and short time duration of data collection. With its ease of data gathering, an online questionnaire enabled us to collect a large number of responses in a short time and also allowed our participants to have a variety of ways to access the questionnaire remotely, including mobile devices, tablets, laptops, and so on.

3.5 Data analysis

Given that the data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, we used a survey conducted through a Google Form, in which the data would be analyzed quantitatively. Once an online questionnaire was completed, the data was recorded automatically with graphical representation. However, with the limitations of the analysis by Google, the results were simply presented as frequencies and percentages without standard deviations. Therefore, we transferred the data from the Google Form to MS Excel to obtain means and standard deviations.

As the qualitative data collected from the interviews might be unstructured, we transcribed it to observe patterns, applying an inductive approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and comparing incidents applicable to each category, and integrating categories and their properties. To increase the efficacy of the analysis, each researcher validated the coding process and the patterns of data. This served as a process of peer checking (Denzen & Lincoln, 1998), in which data interpretation was validated three times according to the number of researchers involved.

4. Results

This study focuses on the impact of social media influencers (SMIs) on Thai tourist behavior and travel motivations in Thailand. The results are analyzed from 155 participants who are aged above fifteen years old, living in Thailand. We also interviewed five social media users from different age groups and three social media influencers to gain a deeper understanding from these specific subjects. The results will be shown in tables, bar charts, and pie charts according to the research questions.

Research Question 1: Do SMIs have Influence on Thai tourists' Behavior and Travel Motivations for any Provinces in Thailand?

In order to bring potential insights and further analyze this research question, we examined the answers to the following two sub-questions from the questionnaire: (a) Have Social Media Influencers ever influenced your travel decision making? (ex. tourist attractions, hotels, modes of transportation, cafe and more); and (b) on a scale of 1–4, how does social media influencers affect Thai tourists' behavior and travel motivations in Thailand?

To answer the first question, we found out the number of participants who have been influenced by social media influencers on their travel decisions so that we could see how much tourism SMIs impact on Thai tourists.

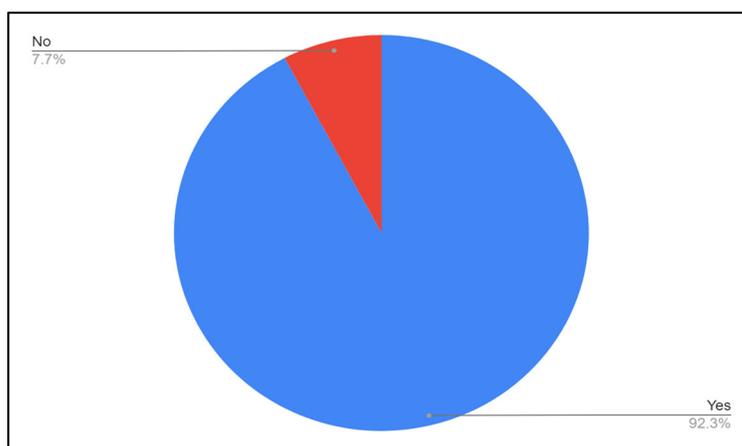**Fig. 2** Participants' travel decisions influenced by SMIs

No
7.7%

Yes
92.3%

Fig. 2 shows that the majority of participants (92.30%) have been influenced by SMIs on their travel decisions, whereas only 7.70% of participants stated that SMIs have never affected their travel decision making, meaning that SMIs influence the majority of the Thai tourists sampled in our survey and that this new kind of media can be used as an effective tool in marketing for reaching targets in the tourism field.

In order to strengthen the quantitative analysis, we also used qualitative interpretation to gather more sources of data. Specifically, we interviewed five participants who are social media users and three participants who are tourism social media influencers. The results from the interview show that 100% of the interviewees confirm that SMIs have affected Thai tourist's travel decision making. For instance, Interviewee C (26, guest service agent) stated that "Social media influencers have more influence because recommendations from friends or family members are not very detailed. Social media influencers usually present new information or a new discovery of the destination; therefore, they have so much more impact" (Translated interview transcription). Similarly, Interviewee G (early 30s, micro-influencer) believed that "Of course, Social media influencer does influence Thai tourist. For example, the hotel I once promoted for gave me a feedback that a reservation was increased up to one to two hundred thousand Baht" (Translated interview transcription).

As we already know that social media influencers have affected Thai tourist's travel decision making, we would like to be specific by focusing on how those social media influencers have had an impact on Thai tourists in order to understand more about the efficiency of SMI marketing.

Table 2

Effects of SMIs on Thai tourists' behavior and travel motivations (n = 155)

Item	Effects of SMIs I ...	Level of Opinion (percentages)				M*	SD
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree		
1	know new destinations/places in Thailand	3.23	2.58	44.52	49.68	3.41	0.70
2	know unpopular provinces in Thailand	1.94	7.74	47.10	43.23	3.32	0.70
3	am more interested to travel in Thailand	3.23	6.45	55.48	34.84	3.22	0.71

Item	Effects of SMIs I ...	Level of Opinion (percentages)				M*	SD
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree		
4	am more interested to travel in unpopular provinces in Thailand	3.23	10.97	50.32	35.48	3.18	0.75
5	make travel planning processes much easier	2.58	10.97	39.35	47.10	3.31	0.77
6	receive useful information	1.94	7.74	44.52	45.81	3.34	0.71
7	trust in influencers rather than celebrities and travel agencies	2.58	16.13	50.97	30.32	3.09	0.75
8	learn more about Thai cultural knowledge	3.87	20.00	56.77	19.35	2.92	0.74
Overall values						3.22	0.73

*Note: 1.00–1.74 = Not Influenced; 1.75–2.49 = Slightly Influenced; 2.50–3.24 = Moderately Influenced; 3.25–4.00 = Highly Influenced

As shown in Table 2, overall, SMIs impact Thai tourists' behavior and their travel motivation in Thailand on a moderate level (M = 3.22). According to the average value of our 4-point rating scale, the results can be divided into two main groups. The results show that SMIs helped the participants know new tourism destinations/places in Thailand (M = 3.41). Having been influenced by SMIs, the participants expressed that they received useful information (M = 3.34), learned more about tourism attractions or provinces that are not well-known (M = 3.32), and thus planned for travel much easier (M = 3.31). These four items seem to be most influential on the participants as indicated by the average values that fell on a highly influenced level, 3.25–4.00. In addition to this, participants' responses with respect to the other four items could be categorized in a moderately Influenced group. Given the SMIs effects on tourism activities, the participants were more interested to travel in Thailand (M = 3.22), try some unpopular provinces or places in Thailand (M = 3.18), learn more about Thai cultural knowledge (M = 2.92). Interestingly, the data indicated more trust the participants revealed with SMIs (M = 3.09).

The findings indicate that SMIs could have a strong impact on Thai tourists' travel behavior. What the participants experienced with SMIs could have helped them

in terms of basic information that plays a key role in their decisions made for any trip. Equally important, SMI is a platform incorporated by the internet that facilitates tourists' everyday activities, including travelling, whose processes could be conducted more quickly and conveniently. The more tourists learned that the information obtained from SMIs was accurate, the more they trusted the information shared by SMIs. Accordingly, more roles of SMIs have been witnessed in this study.

The finding was then strengthened by the interview data, in which the role of SMIs were more obvious. Interviewee E (23, college student), for instance, stated that "an influencer named Brinkkty helped me to know there are new photo spot destinations besides from cafe existed in Chiang Mai. And, Bas from Go Went Go Facebook page make me want to go to unpopular provinces in Thailand" (Translated interview transcription).

As we can see, SMIs could influence the participants in terms of their travel behavior. Facilitated by SMIs, the participants could have learned ahead about certain elements of their travel, such as scenery, and this could help them decide about destinations for their travel. The qualitative data derived from interviews confirmed the quantitative analysis, and both types of the data strengthened the role of SMIs very well.

Research Question 2: What are the Factors of SMI Marketing Influencing Thai Tourists' Behavior and Travel Motivations?

According to the results of the questionnaire, there are many factors related to SMIs that can affect Thai tourists' behavior and their travel motivations. The data below shows the significance of each factor.

Table 3

Factors of SMIs in terms of encouraging travel decision-making (n = 155)

Item	Factors of social media influencer	Levels of Opinion (percentages)				M*	SD
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree		
1	Credibility	1.94	3.23	50.32	44.52	3.37	0.65
2	Popularity	2.58	12.90	57.42	27.10	3.09	0.71
3	Appearance	14.84	36.13	37.42	11.61	2.46	0.88
4	Expertise and experience	1.29	6.45	36.13	56.13	3.47	0.68
5	Personality	3.23	9.68	52.90	34.19	3.18	0.73
6	Number of followers	3.23	24.52	51.61	20.65	2.90	0.76
7	Frequency of posts	5.81	35.48	43.87	14.84	2.68	0.80
8	Interaction with followers	1.94	20.65	56.77	20.65	2.96	0.70
9	Number of shares	5.81	29.68	47.10	17.42	2.76	0.81
	Overall values					2.98	0.74

Note: 1.00–1.74 = Not Influenced; 1.75–2.49 = Slightly Influenced; 2.50–3.24 = Moderately Influenced; 3.25–4.00 = Highly Influenced

Table 3 indicates the participants' opinions on potential factors of SMIs encouraging Thai tourists' behavior and travel motivations. According to the interpreted results scale, the data indicate a moderate level from the SMI factors influencing such behaviors (overall M = 2.98). The results fall into three main groups. We found that the factors of SMIs in relation to expertise and experience (M = 3.47) and credibility (M = 3.37) were the most important for influencing people as these elements were indicated in a highly influential range (M = 3.25–4.00), followed by factors falling into a moderately influenced group, which consisted of personality (M = 3.18), popularity (M = 3.09), interaction with followers (M = 2.96), number of followers (M= 2.90), number of shares (M = 2.76) and frequency of posts (M = 2.68), respectively. Lastly, it should be noted that appearance of SMIs was expressed as the least important factor influencing tourists' behavior and travel motivations, as inferred by its 2.46 mean on a slightly influenced level.

Not surprisingly, individuals usually tend to observe one's trustful characteristics before getting to believe and trust in what that person says, just like in the case of SMIs. Travelers would seek information on social media from influencers who are credible and experienced, in order to make purchasing decisions wisely. Similarly, according to the literature, Lim et al. (2017) stated that endorsers who lack credibility or go beyond their respective expert fields could indirectly impair consumers' perceived images, causing ultimate negative purchase intentions.

As we already know the factors of SMIs that have an impact on Thai tourists, we would like to be specific by focusing on practical types of content from the SMIs for increasing audiences' travel motivations, in order to understand more about social media influencer marketing.

Fig. 3 Types of content obtained from SMIs
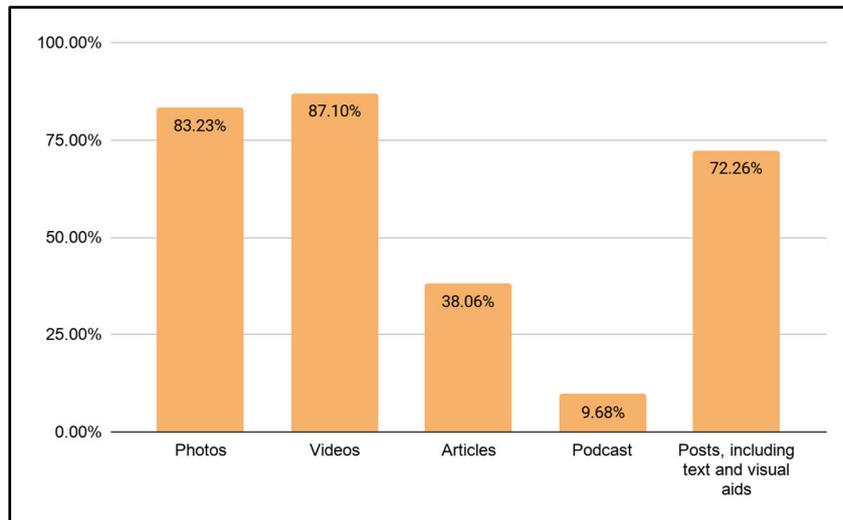
Fig. 3 demonstrates the popularity of each type of content from SMIs in tourism that could satisfy audiences and increase their travel motivations. From the perspective of the audience, the most preferred types of content are videos (87.10%), photos (83.23%), and posts, including text and visual aids (72.26%). Besides those types, only 38.06% of participants prefer to read articles from tourism influencers, followed by the least effective type of content which is a podcast (9.68%).

Therefore, it appears that most respondents want to see photos and videos when choosing a destination. To avoid some terrible experiences in travelling, it might be better for travellers to observe the real scenario through photos and videos from influencers before making decisions. Moreover, posts on social media that combine text, photos, and videos together seem to be an interesting type of content to raise awareness and grab attention among teenagers as well. For instance, Interviewee B expressed an opinion from the perspective of a teenager about the benefit of posts with text and visual aids:

> *Mostly, I prefer to see a post with photos and text because it's convenient and there is no need to put on headphones. Post can be read anywhere and kept for opening later at any time. It would be easier than watching a video. When I forget and watch it again, I have to find the time that he/she mentioned significant points in that video once again*.

(Translated interview transcription)

To further help SMIs or marketers to maximize benefits from this marketing strategy, we conducted a survey regarding characteristics of quality content that could influence travelers effectively. The results are shown in Table 4:

Table 4

Characteristics of quality content (n = 155)

Item	Characteristics of quality content	Levels of Opinion (percentages)				*M	SD
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree		
1	New	1.94	5.81	47.74	44.52	3.35	0.68
2	Accurate	1.29	4.52	41.94	52.26	3.45	0.65
3	Up-to-date	2.58	9.03	38.06	50.32	3.36	0.75
4	Entertaining	1.94	3.87	38.06	56.13	3.48	0.67
5	Knowledgeable	0.65	6.45	50.32	42.58	3.35	0.63
6	Sponsored content	12.90	41.94	34.84	10.32	2.43	0.84
7	User-generated content	3.87	9.03	40.00	47.10	3.30	0.79
Overall values						3.25	0.72

* Note: 1.00–1.74 = Not Influenced; 1.75–2.49 = Slightly Influenced; 2.50–3.24 = Moderately Influenced; 3.25–4.00 = Highly Influenced

Table 4 illustrates the characteristics of quality content created by SMIs that highly influences audiences' travel motivations and destination choices as indicated by the 3.25 grand mean (3.25–4.00). Most of the characteristics were considered as highly influential based on their average values. The most significant factor was entertaining content (M = 3.48), followed by accurate content (M = 3.45), updated content (M = 3.36), new and knowledgeable content (M = 3.35), and user-generated content (M = 3.30). However, a form of content in which advertisers paid SMIs to publish the materials related to their brands, also known as sponsored content (M = 2.43), was found to have the least effective characteristic of content for influencing audiences since its average value was at a slightly influential level.

Probably, the basis of a good influencer may be the ability to create quality content that consists of accurate and updated information. However, it is still necessary to make content fun, knowledgeable, and not boring, in order to maintain existing followers and attract new followers. In terms of sponsored content, it does not seem to be ineffective at all but it would depend on how influencers create content with sponsorship properly. For example, from our qualitative interpretation from one in-depth interview, Interviewee A (21, college student) gave an opinion about this issue and added a bad example of sponsored content based on her own experience:

> I quite agree with the sponsored content. I didn't feel that it was bad as the purpose is to help to promote the hotel. Even though I knew that there is a sponsorship, I still enjoy watching it because of its nice visuals. Also, it enables me to know more places to travel as well. But the latest video that made me feel unsatisfactory is from social media influencer on Youtube named 20TV. It's the travel video in Koh Larn, Thailand which has Asus as the sponsorship. In that video, the content is about carrying that laptop around to work while traveling, and it doesn't make any sense.

> (Translated interview transcription)

And, to help SMIs or marketers to maximize benefits from this marketing strategy via available social media platforms, it is also necessary to ask questions in order to scope down the platforms that most participants use to follow SMIs in the tourism field.

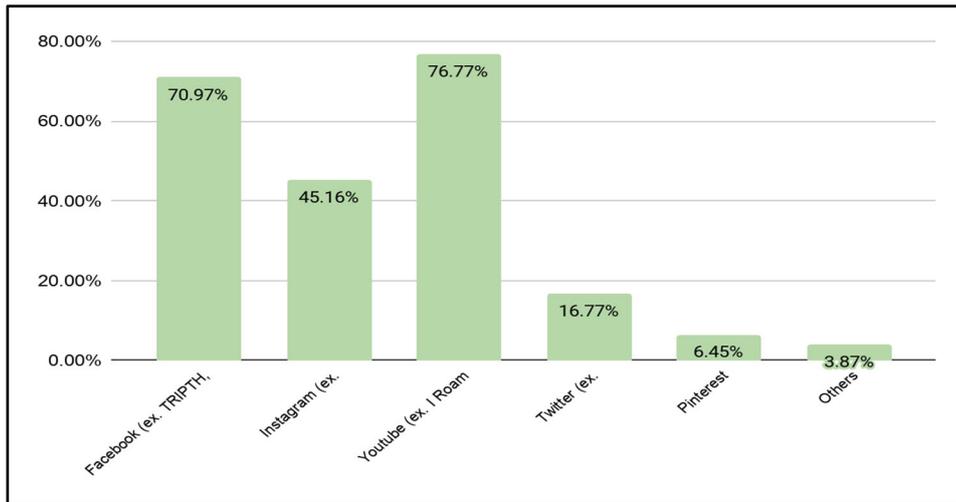**Fig. 4** Social media platforms for following influencers in the travel & tourism sector

Fig. 4 shows the participants' attitudes towards the popularity of social media platforms for following influencers in the travel and tourism sector. It should be noted that the most popular platform is YouTube (76.77%), followed by Facebook (70.97%), Instagram (45.16%), Twitter (16.77%), Pinterest (6.45%), and Others (3.87%).

Therefore, our results indicate that most participants in our survey follow travel and tourism influencers on YouTube, an online video-sharing platform, the most. There is a good possibility that videos are visually attractive and memorable since it is the easiest way for audiences to understand a message. And, it is the most effective way to convey lots information related to a destination at once via light and sound, which could also build an emotive response from audiences. Facebook was the second most popular platform used to follow SMIs. It could be that Facebook also includes both visual aids like videos and photos but combined with more text. Consequently, an audience may have to read all the messages by themselves, unlike the YouTube platform where the

SMIs act as narrators, as highlighted in an answer from Interviewee E (23, college student):

> I have mostly followed tourism social media influencers in YouTube such as Brinkkty and Bas from Go Went Go channel because they have usually shot beautiful videos. Moreover, they have a good storytelling style, and I don't have to read all of the information by myself.
>
> (Translated interview transcription)

5. Discussion

This study aimed to identify the impact of SMIs on Thai tourist behavior and their travel motivation in Thailand. Our goal was to help business owners and marketers in the tourism sector better perceive and implement influencer marketing via social media platforms as a marketing tool to boost businesses effectively.

We found several main research findings. First, SMIs influenced the Thai tourists' surveyed in our study in terms of travel decisions (92.3%) with respect to new destinations/ places in Thailand (M = 3.41) and useful information about tourist attractions (M = 3.34). Also, the least influential effect on our respondents was learning more about Thai cultural knowledge (M = 2.92). Overall, SMIs seem to impacts the Thai tourists in our study in a positive way.

Second, findings indicated that our participants expressed "expertise and experience" (M = 3.47) and "credibility" (M = 3.37) as the most important factors for influencing their behavior and travel motivations. On the other hand, there is a strong possibility that SMIs' appearance is the least important factor for influencing Thai travelers since its mean was equal to only 2.46 out of 4. Also, the results indicated that the most preferred types of content was video (87.10%), photos (83.23%), and posts including text and visual aids (72.26%). Equally important, the findings provided the significant characteristics of quality content which are entertaining (M= 3.48), accuracy (M= 3.45), up-to-dated information (M= 3.36), new and knowledgeable (M= 3.35), and user-generated content (M= 3.30). Finally, the most popular platform to follow tourism influencers is the online video-sharing site, Youtube (76.77%), followed by Facebook

(70.97%), Instagram (45.16%), and Twitter (16.77%).

According to our findings, SMIs can have an impact on Thai tourist travel decision making, and it seems to be a good choice for businesses to use them for social media marketing. Nowadays, we live in a world where social media plays an important role in everyday life: social media helps people communicate and share information or content with millions of others more easily. Therefore, there is little doubt why people would use its functional capability to search for reviews or information from SMIs about destinations, hotels, transportation, and so on before an actual visit.

Another reason supporting our results could be an intention to prevent bad travel experiences. Many Thai tourists might experience difficulties while traveling in terms of transportation, poor hotels, or bad destinations; therefore, by searching for a review from SMIs before the actual visit, they can avoid problems that would stop them from enjoying their trip. Unlike friends or family members, SMIs usually provide detailed and useful information such as prices, locations, pictures, opening and closing times, and even special tips and tricks, all of which can improve a tourist's travel experience.

Moreover, the utility of two-way communication methods used by SMIs could be another reasons for their influence. Unlike traditional media, which operates one-way communication between senders and receivers, SMIs can generate better audiences experience through interactive activities that build strong connections between influencers and their followers via inbox messaging, comment boxes, and so on. Moreover, being an SMIs has less restrictions, so ordinary people can become an influencer in social media platform. Therefore, it is possible that more influencers can bring introduce new destinations for an audience's attention.

Furthermore, according to our results, the factors of SMIs that influence the Thai tourists sampled in our study the most are credibility, expertise and experience. And, people give least importance to outside appearance. Interestingly, this is unlike the traditional travel TV model that focuses on good-looking hosts to attract the audience's attention. This may imply that the society has changed. People don't judge others from physical appearances any more, and treat each other equally and place importance on individual talent, quality content, and the useful information they can get.

Moreover, video content may be the most influential way for SMIs to communicate. Another confirmation for this hypothesis is that most of our participants use YouTube to follow tourism SMIs. One possible explanation is that videos are the easiest way for audiences to understand a message. They can convey a lot of information quickly, and can use audio for added information transfer. Additionally, we believe that the most important reasons as to why videos have more impact than photos, posts, or podcasts, is because they are more memorable and visually attractive as they include light and sound. However, although photos and posts are not considered the most influential, they are still highly influential.

Furthermore, in our study, Facebook and Instagram were ranked second and third in terms of social media platforms that most participants use to follow SMIs. This seems to be because both of them enable influencers to capture an experience and essence of a place, and create an experience for the viewer through pictures and texts of scenarios of the beach, hotel rooms, or restaurants; however, audiences have try to understand all the content by themselves unlike the capability of the videos.

Podcasts and text-based articles were, as we expected, the two least influential tools for SMIs. First, such media cannot create emotion in the same way as the same as the rest because they only provide audio and text without other visual aids. Therefore, it is hard to describe all the important information related to destinations, places, hotels, and so on. Interestingly, the participants defined quality travel content as entertaining, accurate, up-to-date, new and knowledgeable, and user-generated. This could imply that many social media users mainly follow SMIs for entertainment purposes. i.e., they might not watch travel content to gain travel information only, but rather for fun in their free time or to find new inspiration for their next trip. It can also imply that people do not focus on travel content alone, but rather look for other creative content such as family relationship, lifestyle, and food content. However, quality content has to be useful, updated regularly, contain correct information and real reviews from the influencer.

Moreover, followers may see sponsored content as insincere content with only commercial purposes. However, it does not seem to be ineffective but depends on how influencers create content with sponsorship properly. An interview from three social media influencers illustrated some unexpected information about the purposes of being

SMIs. The results show a relationship between high number of followers and intention for money purposes. For example, at first, the interview answers from the macro-influencer mentioned that they had an intention to be an SMI because of a passion for travel. However, when they obtained a higher number of followers, it brought them sponsors who hired them to promote their products and services. So they were willing to change their lifestyle to meet sponsors' need instead.

On the other hand, the answers from the nano-influencer were completely different. They did not talk about money at all probably because they were new in the field, and did not have many sponsors yet. So they seemed to be SMIs because of their passion for travel. Moreover, they also mentioned that macro-influencers, who have a high impact on their followers, "… don't focus on community or environmental effects at all, but only focus on how much money they will get from the sponsorship, and how good or bad the feedback those places will get when they promoted for".

Comparing our findings with the related studies for our first research question, the results agree with those found in Alic, Pestek and Sadinlija (2017), who point out that the tourism industry has relied more on SMI marketing since. Reasons for this are that it has been proven to be a remarkably effective, beneficial, and powerful way to access a particular group of target customers in a very trustworthy and approachable way. SMIs bring new levels of engagement to the tourism industry, and are considered a strong connector to potential customers.

For our second research question, results are in partial agreement with those found in a study of the impact of SMI marketing in Ho Chi Minh City by Nam and Dân (2018). The authors found that a consumer's purchasing intention is significantly impacted by four factors, including the trust of influencer, the quality of content, the relevance between influencer and product, and the involvement of the consumer. From the findings of the effects of influencer marketing towards consumer buying decisions, the authors emphasized the significant importance of influencer credibility. Furthermore, creating good content and selecting an appropriate influencer also has a positive effect on influencer marketing.

5.1 Research Implications

Our findings indicate that SMIs can be a valuable marketing strategy for the tourism industry. Specifically, by using digital marketing, SMIs are able to influence travelers' decision-making for places to go. According to our findings, most participants admitted that SMIs in the travel and tourism sector have influenced travel decision-making since those influencers enable them to know new destinations/places and unpopular provinces in Thailand, receive useful information, and also travel planning processes much easier. In addition, a majority of participants prefer to gather information for their travel planning from influencers in social media platforms rather than get recommendations from family and friends.

This study also highlights the importance of SMI marketing from the perspectives of the influencer and business owner/marketer as well. The study helps SMIs to perceive the proper way to capture and influence audience travel motivations and destination choices effectively. The findings suggest that tourists are likely to trust and believe in SMIs who are experienced and credible instead of just basing their judgements on SMI's appearance. For quality content, accurate and updated information is needed and necessary to make content fun, knowledgeable, and not boring, in order to maintain existing followers and attracts new followers.

However, care must be taken when promoting sponsored content. Products from sponsorship should be relevant to the influencer's expertise and everything must be based on reality, since over-advertising or hard selling content could affect an audience's attitude towards the trustworthiness of an influencer.

It is also possible that a large number of followers or subscribers is nothing when compared to great content. Hence, influencers should focus more on creating content via the online video-sharing platform, YouTube, where audiences prefer to follow and watch videos on travel and tourism.

Due to the positive influence of SMIs, this study also helps marketers and business owners in the tourism industry to remind themselves that SMI marketing could be considered an inevitable strategy for their businesses. Namely, as a mediator between organizations and customers, influencers have the ability to raise brand awareness, strengthen customer relationships, and reach more targeted audiences. Moreover, when

the organization in the tourism sector can work with the right influencers, with the right audience, it could help them generate positive e-WOM around their offerings and increase visit from the target audience. Implemented with these suggestions, both the Tourism Authority of Thailand and private counterparts could serve tourists' needs better, and thus increase tourism-related income in the country.

5.2 Limitations of the Research

As we had to gather the data in a short time period, the scope of this study is limited as the sample is relatively small and focused only on Thais who have been influenced by SMIs in terms of travel decision-making in Thailand; therefore, having only one case for study would be considered as insufficient to generalize to a whole population—the findings could be different depending on geographical location and culture of the respondents. Moreover, the open-ended question had a low response rate, as it seemed that some participants did not want to take time to answer. This may be because they thought that the information they gave in closed-ended questions had covered all necessary information, and thus there was no need to provide further opinions at the end. All in all, by fulfilling these limitations, this study would have more insights from a larger group of participants and gain a better understanding of the results as well.

5.3 Suggestions for Further Studies

According to our results, we gave several recommendation to let others use our research as a reference for further study of this topic, inlcuding using a higher number of participants and a broader range of samples. This would cover more specific areas like other places and countries where people have high-purchasing power. In addition, future researchers could expand the scope by studying the relationship between SMI marketing and customer decision-making in different business sectors, such as cosmetics, fashion, and so on. Therefore, business owners, marketers, and new-face SMIs could take advantage of future studies in various other fields. Furthermore, future studies could implement more in-depth interviews rather than open-ended questions in order to obtain more detailed information and prevent problems of non-responses to open-ended questions.

6. Conclusion

We conclude that SMIs do have an influence on Thai tourists' behavior and travel motivations in Thailand. Our findings indicate that the influence of social media rests largely on its ability to enable audiences or travelers to know new destinations/places and unpopular provinces in Thailand, receive useful information, and also make travel planning processes easier, which are considered as such essential things and valuable sources for travel decision-making. For planning a trip, of course, some people would like to improvise, but the great majority seem to carry out a lot of online research for reviews or information from SMIs beforehand in order to prevent bad experiences. However, people are likely to follow and trust in a SMI who is experienced and credible rather than good looking.

Moreover, the content is also important for encouraging Thai tourists' behavior and travel motivation since the basis of a good influencer is to create quality content that consists of accurate and updated information, and it is still necessary to make content fun, knowledgeable, and not boring, in order to maintain existing followers and attract new followers. Consequently, by working with the right influencer and quality content, SMI marketing could help organizations in the tourism industry. Therefore, SMIs can not only have an impact on travelers' decision making and travel motivations, but also on marketers or business owners in the tourism industry in terms of increased potential for travel marketing. It can do this by generating positive eWOM and increasing intentions in the target audiences as well.

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