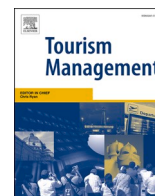




Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.



Instagram travel influencers in #quarantine: Communicative practices and roles during COVID-19

Francisco Femenia-Serra^{a,*}, Ulrike Gretzel^{b,a}, Aurkene Alzua-Sorzabal^a

^a Department of Tourism, Universidad Antonio de Nebrija, Madrid, 28015, Spain

^b USC Center for Public Relations, Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 2PC7+RG, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Influencers
Influencer marketing
COVID-19
Social media
Social media influencer
Crisis communication
Tourism recovery

ABSTRACT

The crisis arising from the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire tourism system, including communication and marketing practices. Of these practices, in recent years influencer marketing has been one of the more successful strategies for both destinations and tourism businesses. This research investigates the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on travel content creators, their communicative practices, and their engagement with audiences, brands and health authorities. The study uses netnography based on immersion, interviews and social media content analysis. The results obtained show that the pandemic has transformed influencer marketing and has driven influencers to change their business strategies, content creation tactics and engagement mechanisms. The findings contribute to the crisis communication literature by illustrating that influencers constitute important allies for organisations when communicating during a crisis and have played a critical role in tourism recovery.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused multiple and interrelated crises. It began as a health emergency and subsequently became an economic and socio-political crisis that has affected tourism in the form of a profound demand downturn (Zenker & Kock, 2020). While crises are not new in tourism, and recovery phases have normally followed (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019), the current crisis is considered as a turning point for the tourism system (Gössling et al., 2020). It is affecting all elements of travel and tourism, including communication and marketing practices. Influencer marketing is one tourism marketing strategy that has recently gained attention due to its effectiveness in promoting travel firms and attracting tourists to destinations (Xu & Pratt, 2018; Gretzel, 2018; Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020). The influencer marketing industry is growing at a fast pace (Schoemer, 2019), with tourism being one of the economic sectors where this strategy is most extensively applied. However, the mobility and business restrictions implemented due to COVID-19 have caused a major shock to travel influencers and tourism influencer marketing (Lorenz, 2020).

Social Media Influencers (SMIs) are vocational content creators, capable of amassing and maintaining engaged audiences and monetising their activity over time (Abidin, 2018). SMIs have emerged as powerful agents able to reshape information flows. At times of crisis, their

persuasion capacity can be leveraged by governments and brands to spread messages to online audiences according to strategic goals, such as promoting safety and health protection guidelines or economic recovery. For instance, public health authorities in Spain have asked influencers to help raise awareness of safety measures among the younger generations who do not consume traditional media. Similarly, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) signed an agreement with influencers in May 2020 to fight misinformation about coronavirus across the globe (IFRC, 2020).

Social media are vital for creating and sharing information during crises (Freberg et al., 2013). Park et al. (2019) explain that “to enhance the strategic significance of social media in crisis communication, in particular, tourism management organisations need to understand the structure of information flow, locate important information sources within the structure, and determine how to effectively influence target audiences facing emergent situations” (p.1814). SMIs are uniquely positioned to help shape social media conversations during a crisis but are themselves not immune to the negative impacts of a global and complex emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Taylor (2020) has recently called for research that sheds light on how COVID-19 is transforming influencer marketing in the long-term and how it is affecting influencer-follower relationships.

This paper responds to this gap in the research by identifying the new

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: ffemenia@nebrija.es (F. Femenia-Serra), gretzel@usc.edu (U. Gretzel), malzua@nebrija.es (A. Alzua-Sorzabal).

roles that influencers can play within a crisis communication context. It examines the ramifications of COVID-19 on the work undertaken by influencers, their engagement with stakeholders and their adaptive capacity. It builds on existing crisis communication literature and emerging influencer marketing research, establishing SMIs as critical stakeholders in strategic recovery efforts who create new opportunities but also need to be carefully understood and managed to achieve crisis communication goals.

In travel and tourism, there is still limited knowledge on the communicative roles of influencers (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020; Ong & Ito, 2019) and scarce empirical evidence on the applications and effects of influencer marketing (Agostino et al., 2019; Magno & Cassia, 2018; Seeler et al., 2019; Yilmaz et al., 2020). There is a need for research on the practices of travel influencers, their content and how they engage with different stakeholders (Duffy & Kang, 2019). Moreover, although tourism crisis communication has been well-documented (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019; Sano & Sano, 2019), there is limited knowledge on the various roles of social media in this context (Möller et al., 2018; Park et al., 2019; Schroeder et al., 2013) and no research to date specifically analysing influencers. Solid empirical data to advance the generation of knowledge and provide support for the sector is required (Zenker & Kock, 2020).

Based on these research gaps, the objectives of this paper are to understand the role(s) played by travel influencers in a crisis context, the potential impact of COVID-19 on their activity, and the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for their engagement with audiences, travel brands and governments. To accomplish these objectives, the study uses a netnography method (Kozinets, 2019) to collect data using online interviews with a sample of travel influencers and to examine the contents they share on Instagram. The results reveal that COVID-19 has had a profound impact on travel influencers, producing changes in terms of the strategies used as well as the communicative and engagement practices with audiences and brands. Moreover, our findings indicate the different roles travel influencers can play in a crisis and how they can contribute to crisis communication and marketing after a shock in the system.

2. Literature review

2.1. Communicative roles of social media influencers

Existing literature on SMIs predominantly uses the two-step flow theory to conceptualise the strategic role of SMIs as communicators. Presented originally by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), the two-step flow theory of communication challenges assumptions of direct media effects (Lievrouw, 2009). According to this theory, information flows from mass media to opinion leaders (*step one*) and then from opinion leaders to the masses (*step two*) (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Opinion leaders internalise, interpret and adapt messages but do not directly create content themselves (Bennett & Manheim, 2006).

While social media affordances facilitate a direct connection between consumers and brands, they have also facilitated the rise of new online opinion leaders, who cultivate targeted audiences. Such social media personalities have become highly influential and have changed the way information is disseminated and consumed (De Veirman et al., 2017). Furthermore, the surplus of media has generated saturated audiences (Khamis et al., 2017) and social media platform algorithms now prioritise content created by individuals to the detriment of brands (El Qudsi, 2018). In this context, a two-step flow of communication has re-emerged in the form of SMIs, who have become a reliable source among the myriad of information possibilities (Schäfer & Taddicken, 2015).

The capacity of SMI to influence others' opinions and behaviours depends on their ability to attract large audiences, their pivotal position in social media and their recognised expertise related to one or several topics (Bakshy et al., 2011). SMIs also constantly work to connect with

their audiences. This is part of the phenomenon Baym (2015) calls "relational labour": unpaid work by which many workers today build relationships with their online audiences to monetise their work (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). To foster a permanent connection with their audiences, influencers are compelled to involve their followers emotionally and make them part of their lives by showing glimpses of their daily routines, by being accessible, close and authentic (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). Sharing "improvised" selfies, holding live streaming sessions or Q&As are other strategies to keep audiences engaged and create deeper bonds (Abidin, 2018; Cotter, 2018; Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016). SMIs generate conversation around the contents they post and encourage their audience to spread messages (Uzunoglu & Misci Kip, 2014).

The combined efforts influencers need to make to keep their online presence alive and their audiences engaged reflect the entrepreneurial spirit required of them (Cotter, 2018). The entrepreneurial activity of influencers includes everything from creativity to operating technical equipment, leading content creation teams, soliciting relationships with brands, and managing finances. These tasks are naturally interwoven with an "always-on" self-branding culture (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). However, this entrepreneurial drive entails a high risk for travel influencers, who frequently depend entirely on themselves to generate income (Stoldt et al., 2019).

Travel brands were quick to understand that they needed to collaborate with these digital entrepreneurs and to insert themselves into this new form of two-step communication flow to remain relevant (Gretzel, 2018). This has allowed many travel influencers to engage with travel brands and tourism boards to monetise their online activity and travelling and content creation has become their full-time professional career (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020). The importance of influencer marketing for travel and tourism has grown enormously, capitalising on the widespread adoption of social media by tourists as sources of information and inspiration.

2.2. Travel influencer marketing

Influencer marketing is defined by Carter (2016, p.2) as a "rapidly growing industry that attempts to promote products or increase brand awareness through content spread by social media users who are considered to be influential." According to Abidin (2018), the influential power of such individuals is based on their ability to accumulate different forms of economic, social and cultural capital, and on their skills to maintain their visibility on social media as a way to sustain a profitable career. These skills include their deep understanding of the needs of brands and audiences, and their ability to adapt their content and practices to the changing features of platforms (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). The latter requires intricate knowledge of social media algorithms (Cotter, 2018). To increase their communicative impact, influencers adeptly blend branded and organic content and appear to be authentic and accessible to their followers (Audrezet et al., 2018). Thus, the main objective of influencer marketing is to use these unique capabilities of SMIs to direct the attitudes and behaviour of individuals in a given direction (De Veirman et al., 2017).

In line with the increasing economic and social importance of SMIs, research on influencers in the field of marketing has grown exponentially over the last few years. Recent contributions in the field are focused on the effectiveness of influencer marketing in terms of brand loyalty, attitude towards the promoted product or service, purchase intention and eWOM intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019). This effectiveness is moderated by many factors according to different studies that analyse the role of influencer credibility (e.g. Lee & Kim, 2020; Reinikainen et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2018), such as the opinion leadership of influencers and their para-social relationship with followers (Farivar et al., 2020), the disclosure of the promotional nature of posts (e.g. De Cicco et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2017; Lee & Kim, 2020), or congruence between the featured brand and the influencer (De Cicco et al., 2020; Martínez-López et al., 2020). From the influencer perspective,

authenticity, interactivity and emotional attachment seem to impact the effectiveness of influencer marketing (Jun & Yi, 2020). The importance of the influencer's background has also been examined by Schouten et al. (2020), who find that "instafamous" influencers seem to be more trusted than classic celebrities. These authors also demonstrate that a higher level of trustworthiness is associated with greater advertising effectiveness. Most of these studies employ quantitative methods, mainly surveys and experiments, and focus on Instagram as the preferred platform for influencer marketing.

Other studies on influencer marketing analyse the content and narratives shared by influencers in their posts (Feng et al., 2020) and their trajectory over time, as well as the types of relationships established with brands (Nascimento et al., 2020). When examining influencers and their interactions with other agents, Campbell and Farrell (2020) identify the functional roles of influencers, while Haenlein et al. (2020) create a typology of influencers and describe the most relevant platforms for influencer marketing. In these cases, qualitative methods such as interviews, content analysis and netnography are employed. Fashion, beauty and lifestyle influencers are the focus of most of these studies, irrespective of their specific orientation or the methods used.

Focusing on tourism, Jin & Cheng (2020) identify influential Twitter users and the role they played in the communication of a mega event by conducting network analysis, while Francalanci & Hussain (2016) use a more generic context (a total of seven destination brands) to identify the most prolific and influential users. Also relying on network analysis but taking a slightly different approach, Bokuniewicz and Shulman (2017) found that some specific individuals and media accounts constitute ideal allies for DMOs to disseminate their messages, as these organisations normally have a very limited scope on social media.

Tourism scholars have studied influencer marketing effectiveness and its effects on potential tourists. The findings in this regard suggest that influencers are useful for increasing destination visit intention (Tobias-Mamina et al., 2020) and attracting younger tourists to small hospitality businesses (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). Data from real cases demonstrate that influencers have already been successfully employed by DMOs to attract a larger number of visitors by generating content that evokes positive attitudes towards the destination (Ong & Ito, 2019). Within this context, it seems that the higher the engagement rates of influencers, the greater the capacity to increase visit intentions to the promoted destination (Jang et al., 2020). From the DMO perspective, recent findings demonstrate that influencer marketing in tourism is cost-efficient and has a higher impact than traditional marketing strategies (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020). Another recent study involving a survey among DMOs and an analysis of the reach of travel influencers in Spain confirms these benefits and the enormous potential that SMIs offer for destination marketing (Martínez-Sala et al., 2019).

From the demand point of view, SMIs also play a role in mediating tourist experiences, as their followers engage through them with different places and people (Seeler et al., 2019). Accordingly, a recent study by Barbe, Neuburger & Pennington-Gray (2020) found that usefulness, entertainment and enjoyment were the main factors motivating users to follow travel influencers on Instagram, as compared to information and incentives in the case of DMOs. These findings suggest that the relationships between tourists and SMIs are not just functional and therefore also have a more long-term orientation than direct relationships with travel brands and destinations. Travel influencer marketing permits tourism marketers to strategically build on these deep connections between travel SMIs and their audiences.

In general, destinations can work with influencers to reposition their image, promote places of interest, attract certain market segments, and keep or increase the flow of visitors (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020). Hence, the main roles of travel influencers are to increase visit intention, reshape destination image, generate content and elicit online engagement as well as raise brand awareness and attract higher numbers of consumers to hotels, airlines or restaurants (Gretzel, 2018; Xu & Pratt, 2018). In exchange, SMIs receive a fee or establish a barter promotion

(Yılmaz et al., 2020). This relationship between influencers and DMOs has become increasingly mediated by different agents (managers, agencies, platforms) and is now professionalised, which reduces the risks for destinations (Stoldt et al., 2019).

2.3. COVID-19 and crisis communication on social media

Within the current context of a global pandemic, social media are playing a critical role in terms of tourism information sharing and relationship maintenance (Gretzel et al., 2020). Tourism communication and marketing on social media has been able to shape online conversations during the crisis and is expected to have a pivotal position in the recovery phase. Many campaigns from different countries, such as Portugal's #Cantskiphope, have gained attention, trying to persuade tourists to abide by the rules while sending optimistic messages about the future. Online content consumption and smartphone usage have grown exponentially during lockdowns (Kemp, 2020), with thousands of content creators entertaining and informing people. Influencers with expertise in cooking or fitness have increased their audiences and health experts have moved into the limelight. However, tourism content creators are struggling economically and are being even more closely scrutinised by public opinion, as reported by Abidin et al. (2020) and Lorenz (2020). Part of this scrutiny responds to the misbehaviour of certain travel influencers observed on social media, and to the questionable marketing strategies of some DMOs at times of general lockdowns and mobility restrictions for most people (Ives, 2021).

Crisis communication is paramount, but the coronavirus pandemic is a very complex crisis because of its depth, scale and impact. It eludes the traditional definitions of organisational crisis. Originally, it was a natural event but then developed into a health, economic and socio-political crisis. Responsibility is thus blurred, while public pressure for its control is high. The COVID-19 crisis does not affect a single organisation, but in each territory involves a set of stakeholders, mainly health authorities and governments at different levels (national, regional, local) as well as the World Health Organization (WHO). A lack of clear data in some cases, and changing recommendations as well as the circulation of abundant fake news have confused citizens (O'Connor & Murphy, 2020). Meanwhile, efforts by governments have been focused on persuading citizens to abide by the health authorities' recommendations.

Reynolds and Seeger (2005) argue that crisis communication "seeks to explain the specific event, identify likely consequences and outcomes, and provide specific harm-reducing information to affected communities in an honest, candid, prompt, accurate, and complete manner" (p. 46). Crisis communication research has traditionally focused on organisation-to-consumer communication, following linear models in which information flows from the organisation to the public (Park et al., 2019). Audiences had few possibilities to respond to mass mediated messages about the crisis. However, social media has converted citizens into creators and disseminators of information, who are now able to engage dynamically and without time and space constraints (Austin et al., 2012). In the new context, health organisations might not be the most influential voices during a health crisis; social media influencers are more likely to be listened to and have the capacity to influence others (Freberg et al., 2013). This opens up a new era for crisis communication, one that is more interactive and partly dominated by SMIs (Park et al., 2019). SMIs can be hired by companies to mitigate the negative effects of a preceding reputational crisis (Singh et al., 2020). Recent studies on organisational crisis communication through influencers indicate the advantages of working with them (Zhao et al., 2018). SMIs are capable of building the necessary relationships between organisations and the public and act as spokespersons who can translate complex messages into relatable contents and words (Sng et al., 2019).

In tourism, crisis communication focuses on issues such as destination image, economic impact and public safety (Park et al., 2019). Accordingly, research has been focused on destination and company

recovery marketing strategies after an emergency (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). There are many studies that analyse the response of DMOs during and after crises, but few on the information exchanged on social media by tourists and their opinions (Park et al., 2019). Möller et al. (2018) synthesise the scarce research conducted on social media in tourism crisis communication into three main streams: (i) social media effects on tourists' risk perception; (ii) how brands use social media to manage reputation; (iii) how businesses and DMOs use social media to restore their image after a crisis.

Social media can be useful for tourists to obtain updated information about a crisis, share information and communicate to their relatives and friends (Schroeder et al., 2013). Thus, they should be incorporated into crisis planning to help organisations minimize risks, address the impacts and communicate properly with tourists, and facilitate inter-tourist communication (Schroeder et al., 2013). This is particularly important in health crises, as proactive communication by tourism organisations can shape tourists' understanding of the risks and their ability to protect themselves (Liu-Lastres et al., 2019). With respect to social media, it is desirable for tourism authorities to identify influential users on the different platforms so that their messages go further and deeper into the network (Park et al., 2019). Although partnering with SMIs involves a certain risk (Singh et al., 2020), the positive results outperform the potential negative drawbacks (Austin et al., 2012).

Linking the literature on crisis communication and influencer marketing, this paper explores the roles that SMIs play in crisis situations by adopting an influencer perspective. Therefore, it seeks to add an important dimension to the current understanding of SMIs within crisis communication.

3. Methods

Netnography is a qualitative research method that adapts ethnography to computer-mediated communications and is aimed at understanding online cultures and behaviours (Kozinets, 2019). Netnography is particularly valuable for making sense of the traces individuals leave in different formats (pictures, videos, text, audio) and on various platforms. It can also make use of online interviews in its more interactive versions (Kozinets et al., 2014) and has been adopted by tourism researchers to explore an array of phenomena (Whalen, 2018). This paper extends the use of netnography to the world of travel influencers and collects data in three ways: (i) immersion in the influencer context through participant observation; (ii) online interviews with travel influencers; and (iii) analysis of social media posts (Instagram).

Following Kozinets et al. (2014) and Kozinets (2019), the first phase of the research comprises preparation and gaining *entrée*. To collect data, Instagram (IG) was selected from among other potential online data sites because of its relevance for influencer marketing (De Veirman et al., 2017), and its popularity among travel and tourism brands, tourists and influencers (Gretzel, 2018). To sample influencers on the platform, several lists published by social media and marketing experts were consulted to identify popular travel influencers worldwide. From these influencers, only those who included a clear reference to travel as their main activity in their bio description were retained, resulting in a preliminary list of 129 influencers. An ad hoc Instagram account was created to follow these influencers and to send direct messages to each of them, in which the research team presented themselves and invited them to be interviewed.

A total of 12 influencers agreed to participate and were interviewed online, following a flexible but focused interview guide contemplating the impact of COVID-19 on their activity, their adaptation to the new scenario, their engagement with brands, followers and institutions in a crisis context and their communicative efforts and roles. One of the interviews was a double-interview, as two influencers who share the same IG account were interviewed at the same time. The interviewees represent a wide array of travel styles, come from different countries, and have audiences from 12K to 368K (see Appendix 1 for detailed

information).

Having gained formal consent, all the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim during May and June 2020. The average length of the interviews was 43 min. The participating influencers gave us permission to record the interviews and use the resulting data, and also allowed us to use images from their IG feeds to illustrate the findings obtained without the need to anonymise them. In the case of quotes from the interviews, the participants' names have been removed and replaced with numbers to protect their privacy. These numbers do not correlate with the order of the participants in Appendix 1.

The second phase was focused on Instagram data collection. Content posted by these twelve influencers pertaining to the period between 1st January and June 20, 2020 was manually collected. This period was selected so the potential changes from pre-pandemic to during-pandemic could be observed. Therefore, data were classified into two time-lapses: before March 11, 2020, and from that day onwards. The collected data included screenshots of posts (to capture images/shots of videos) and copies of text (captions and hashtags). The collected social media content data during the observation period covered over 500 pages, representing a total of 817 posts. The posts were analysed in terms of the picture(s)/video contained in them, as well as captions and hashtags.

Additionally, the authors carried out an immersion in the universe of these influencers by taking notes, recording reflections and impressions from observations in their immersion journals (Kozinets, 2019). The immersion stage involved following the sampled influencers for the entire duration of the research, observing and collecting data, organising and archiving it in a systematic way. Both researchers had followed travel influencers other than those in the immediate sample in an ad hoc fashion before the start of the research and continued to engage with their accounts during the research period to broaden their experience. Immersion in this online culture for a long period of time allows a richer interpretation of data and a holistic understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Kozinets et al., 2014).

Third, the data analysis followed an iterative approach and was conducted collaboratively by three researchers, allowing for an open discussion and exchange of views in recurring rounds. For interview data, transcriptions were first read and initially coded separately by the three researchers, who then compared and discussed their code books, adjusting them by deleting, creating new codes and refining others until a unified codebook was obtained. Subsequently, these codes were applied to the transcripts using Atlas.ti software. Finally, overall themes were obtained and interpreted following recommendations for qualitative data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The data drawn from the social media posts, including images, were subject to an open coding, interpretation and classification into different codes that were subsequently compared, reviewed, adjusted and merged into higher-order themes that were finally used to classify all the material. Inspired by netnographic research recommendations made by Wu and Pearce (2014), throughout this process the themes were subject to reflection by researchers in iterative rounds, compared to the discussed theoretical frameworks, interpreted alongside the reflective notes captured in the researchers' immersion journals, and scrutinised using the experience of the research team in the field, which was critical to conduct the analysis.

Specifically, the social media post categories were formed inductively according to the content of pictures, using hashtags and captions of each post and following the procedures of qualitative visual content analysis applied in similar studies (Fileri et al., 2021). More than one code could be assigned to the same post. The purpose of this manual coding of pictures was not only to capture manifest meaning but also to interpret latent meaning (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015).

The posts were gradually classified into the themes that had emerged, which reflected content related to (i) COVID-19, coronavirus, lockdown, quarantine, pandemic; (ii) Pure travel content (new, fresh); (iii) Home and personal life; (iv) Personal philosophy and reflections on

life; (v) Politics and activism; (vi) Old travel content (reposted); and (vii) Self-branding and promotion of brand. Additionally, each post was examined closely to determine whether it included branded content (paid promotion) or not. The results of this analysis and counts are presented via frequencies and other descriptive statistics that support the qualitative observations (see [Appendix 1](#)).

4. Findings

The findings drawn from both the interviews and social media data are organised into four identified themes. These four themes are: (i) Impact on travel influencers, business diversification and pivoting; (ii) Changes in travel influencers' communicative practices; (iii) Changes in engagement practices; (iv) Role of influencers in crisis communication and recovery marketing in travel and tourism.

4.1. COVID-19 impact on travel influencers, business diversification and pivoting

General mobility restrictions have had a major impact on influencers, for whom frequent trips constitute their main context for content creation and their natural nexus with tourism brands and audiences. For all of the participants, these measures meant the cancellation or postponement of most contracts with travel firms and DMOs. Changing mobility policies continue to cause high uncertainty regarding future business.

Cancelled trips affect the personal income of the SMIs. However, cancellations and rescheduling have also affected other business lines for influencers, such as public speaking engagements, affiliate links, advertising revenue, magazine shootings, contracts with other sectors (fashion, consumer goods), and so on.

I lost nine speaking engagements, 27 trips within 48 hours, like everything cancelled. I mean I literally lost over \$100,000 of revenue (#9)

The difficult part is that we've lost 75 percent of our revenue, YouTube advertising is absolutely horrible, 75 percent loss on YouTube, our Amazon affiliate earnings have been slashed by 90 percent (#3)

This is reflected in the data retrieved from the influencer accounts ([Appendix 1](#)), which reveal that sponsored posts dropped by 59.2% among the sampled influencers in comparison with the months before the pandemic. The economic situation is complicated for full-time content creators compared to part-time influencers. Another effect of the crisis noted by some influencers was the quick surge in the number of content creators, which resulted in increased competition. This was coupled with reduced interest in travel content, which several content creators acknowledged. Some interviewees registered lower engagement compared to pre-pandemic times, while others felt engagement went through several phases, or even reported increased engagement. This is reflected in the number of comments and likes per post, which have grown on average 36.2% and 3.8% respectively, but with great variability within the sample ([Appendix 1](#)). Therefore, we can observe great diversity in terms of followers' interest in travel content, which, in turn, has effects on the monetisation capacity of influencers:

I kind of let my blog die because no one's reading posts right now so like I turned my ads off because I was making like \$0.50 a month, because people didn't pay for ads on travel websites right now (#11)

I've got a lot of messages from people saying "I just unfollowed you because I cannot see travel content for a while, but I'll follow you back when all this is over" which is weird, but it gives you a sense of how consuming this type of content can damage some people's minds when they're stuck at home and cannot move (#1)

As a result, influencers developed several strategies aimed at

diversifying their income sources. Some of these processes were already underway before the pandemic, but the rapid shift in the market accelerated the process. Many interviewees saw in the lockdown a (partly) welcome break from their frenetic lifestyle and an opportunity to rethink their commercial relationships, explore alternative monetisation models and strategise their future. New income sources explored by influencers include the sale of Instagram presets, photo-editing courses and workshops for followers, development of website-based membership programmes, counselling for marketing plans, creation of recovery plans for companies, corporate training, engagement in online events, writing books (see [Fig. 1](#)), and so on. Some have opted for more complex endeavours, such as creating talent and digital marketing agencies and events production and organisation.

We're moving a lot more into the educational space because the goal was to launch like an academy for travel content creators, help them with brands and all of this [...] but for me it was such a great pivot because now I don't have to depend necessarily on travel (#5)

Some influencers are also slowly expanding their audience to capture new segments where content creation can continue despite the pandemic, such as fashion, food or general lifestyle. In addition to transitioning to new spheres, moves within the same sector have been noted, such as the promotion of more sustainable tourism consumption patterns and eco-tourism initiatives:

We've been shifting into more ecotourism, so we've been working with not just hotels, but also with some non-profits or the government local authorities or government associations for eco-tourism promotion. Because a lot of places have overtourism situations, so they actually want to use this time. For example, the project I did in Amsterdam, they want to use this time to review their project and maybe can change that into that direction (#10)

In terms of travel, influencers have changed their usual practices (international, long trips) and since 2020 they have only travelled domestically. Their new objective is to collaborate with local firms, appeal to national followers and work with DMOs seeking to attract domestic visitors. Those influencers with a more international and diversified audience report difficulty in convincing companies and destinations they have the right audience. In some cases, participants expressed a desire to travel within their own continent. However, fear of new virus waves and potential travel restrictions were also considered when planning future trips.

Another practice that has changed profoundly due to the COVID crisis is the formerly unidirectional relationship between brands and influencers. While in pre-pandemic times brands usually approached influencers, now SMIs sometimes invert the flow and proactively reach out to travel companies and destinations. Influencers are proposing plans and alternatives for re-activation and brands have asked for advice and support from the influencer community:

They all of a sudden started to reach out to me when this pandemic happened I was getting emails every day from like people I've talked to like two years ago and they're like "now we don't have any foot traffic, we don't have travel agents sending us people like, what am I supposed to do?" [...] they have to show what safety measures, what health measures, they have put into place, so I'm working with a lot of them on that messaging and some of them are putting together videos, some of them are doing photos, some of them are doing live videos (#9)

I got in touch with our partners last week just to check if we can still do something together. I also let them know we plan to travel locally this summer, just to see if they want to have us in their strategy (#6)

Other influencers preferred not to push deals or collaborations and simply offer free support while waiting for better times. Finding the right



Fig. 1. Example of influencer business diversification strategy Source: Instagram @wanderreds; reprinted with permission.

point between the need to monetise, the difficulties travel companies are going through and the need to create content, are driving the changes in this area. Influencers are also sensitive to the potentially lower budgets of companies for influencer marketing and are open to reducing their fees in some cases.

4.2. Changes in communicative practices

In addition to affecting strategic business decisions, the coronavirus pandemic has led to changes in terms of content creation and communicative practices. Many interviewees acknowledged a change in the

content of pictures, text and videos shared on Instagram, including posting or reposting past pictures (*throwbacks*) and showing more behind-the-scenes glimpses and content based on their daily routines and lives (Fig. 2). In some cases, this was related to a shift towards more reflective, emotional content that showed an intimate side of influencers with which audiences could easily connect in times of uncertainty:

When I announced that I was going to be a father, everyone was really happy, and I decided to launch a few snippets of stories that I normally don't share about my private life. Sometimes showing that little vulnerability and that intimacy of your private life, in times like



Fig. 2. Shift to home-based content Source: Instagram @coconutsandcoordinates; reprinted with permission.

these when there's little content to be done, that makes that surprise factor work and that makes that engagement and bonding work (#1)

This shift is also reflected in the contents shared by influencers. As we can observe in the data presented in [Appendix 1](#), posts purely related to travel content decreased during the pandemic by 25.55%, throwbacks to past trips grew by 153.45% and posts containing home, daily life scenes and intimate content rose by a remarkable 1325%. In some cases, a conflict emerged between the need to keep engagement rates high by shifting to different topics while addressing the pandemic context and the desire to stay authentic:

For us, we wanted to stay true to who we are, on our Instagram feed and continue sharing outdoor stuff. Because we are outdoor content creators, it affected us because we weren't able to get out and do as much (#8)

Some participants reported a conscious move towards more interactive formats, such as videos, IG stories, livestreaming sessions and virtual tours, through which they elicited higher real-time engagement with their followers. Additionally, the interview findings reveal a clear migration to TikTok, a platform that became particularly popular during the initial lockdowns:

That interest started at the beginning with doing more lives and doing different things that we didn't do before. I was one of the first travel influencers I know to start doing lives with others to talk about travel, we tried to do one every day. I started this thing called "quarantine travel talks" [...] I tried to do Q&As, and tried to mix it up, tried to do some quizzes, tried to keep people entertained as well as giving them value and travel inspiration (#1)

I also needed some entertaining and so I had TikTok for quite some time and I posted a couple videos and I just started enjoying it, having fun and I started getting all these ideas. So, I started producing entertaining videos for the community and stuff and we were like "this is the type of content that we're gonna be creating during this time" (#5)

Overall, many travel influencers were faced with the dilemma of either providing information or entertaining their followers in a global emergency context. It seems that they have to navigate a challenging space between individual and collective responsibility and the need to keep their business alive by engaging brands and followers. Staying true to their values while dealing with reduced interest in tourism and the potential backlash from followers and haters is part of maintaining this equilibrium.

4.3. Changes in influencers' engagement practices

A key aspect for influencers and influencer marketing has always been engagement between content creators, followers and partner brands. As revealed in the interviews, the effects of COVID-19 have permeated these interactions on many levels. Influencers report that during the first general lockdown, internalising audiences' needs and active listening became even more important. This includes bearing in mind the responsibility of having an influence on their decisions at a critical time. In general, participants reported an extra effort on their part to inspire positivity and build stronger community ties during hard times:

I wanted people to really have a positive outlook on this, because at first, everybody was freaking out and that's not, as far as with my brand and certainly in and travel content, I don't believe in feeding into fear [...] I was like "how can I contribute positively?" we're all in this and trying to navigate this, I just want to share positive messages, so please use me as a way to get those positive messages out" (#7)

Additionally, travel influencers, more so than before, track the reactions of their followers in real-time through comments and metrics. Tracking responses is also fundamental for preventing backlash, which is a phenomenon that has escalated during the pandemic. Some influencers report negative reactions towards travel branded posts and the use of humour during the hardest weeks of the pandemic. This fact also seems linked to the intense politicisation of the measures to control COVID-19 in countries such as the United States or Spain:

I need to be really careful of how I say it because I know people would get offended. And I know now everything is very politicized and even in Spain right now, if you just say "I'm for opening, relaxing the measures, for opening tourism." I haven't said it, but if I'd say it I know people will deem me as a right party supporter, cause that's the reality in many countries right now, Spain and the United States. (#1)

The interviewees feel pressured to keep up with expectations while preserving their creative freedom. At the same time, audiences expect influencers to be outspoken about the pandemic but also about issues such as racism or climate change. Influencers see these expectations as both an opportunity to collaborate with brands in building their statements and as a potential source of conflict. This has been particularly visible with the *Black Lives Matter* movement, with some influencers pivoting towards activism ([Fig. 3](#)). As we can observe in [Appendix 1](#), political posts grew by 1550% during the pandemic.

The findings also show how influencers volunteer for non-profit initiatives as a way to "give back" to society. This has translated into SMIs offering their help to businesses, destinations and former partners, and has been perceived as almost a compulsory movement during the pandemic. However, it also seems to generate frustration, as some interviewees report that their willingness to collaborate for free needs to have limits:

I've had like a tourism board reach out like "do you mind sharing a freebie post?" and I've thought about it, but honestly it's kind of a little insulting because it's like you're a big tourism board and I know everyone's hurting right now but if you're hurt, imagine how much I'm hurt (#11)

4.4. Influencer roles in crisis communication and recovery marketing

The fifth and last theme identified is related to the different roles that travel influencers can play during a crisis. The roles content creators can adopt are shaped by how the relationships with different stakeholders have changed. Regarding their approach toward the pandemic, the virus, the public health situation and the promotion of prevention measures by governments and health authorities, the results show that influencers have taken different paths, which are not exclusive of each other and in some cases occur sequentially.

First, the data clearly reveal coronavirus topic avoidance and controversy circumvention strategies, as several participants refuse to be outspoken about COVID-19 or its consequences for tourism. These interviewees argue that they lack the required expertise, and that specialists (epidemiologists, virologists, public health experts) should be the ones speaking in public and giving advice. Others feel they needed to avoid the topic because they feel social media users are already overwhelmed with information on conventional media and want to disconnect from reality when engaging with their favourite influencers on Instagram. The lack of reliable information and clear international safety standards to prevent infections at the beginning of the pandemic contributed to the desire of many to evade the topic:

I've seen so many people say ridiculous things. We have to be careful, we have to only speak about the things we know. If you are like a fitness influencer, talk about fitness and fitness at home, but don't talk about healthcare maybe or how to use a mask [...] So I think it's

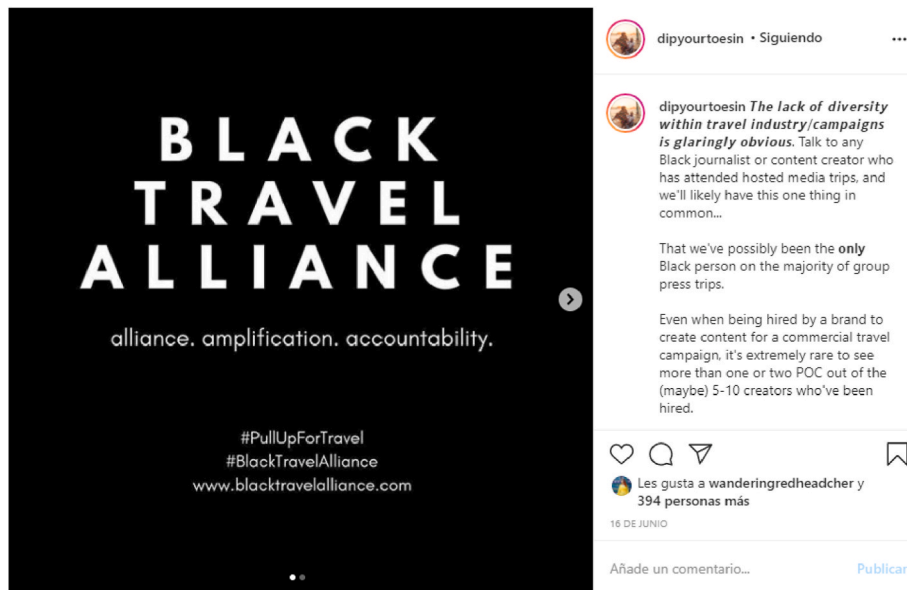


Fig. 3. Influencer engagement in activism against racism in the travel industry Source: Instagram @dipyourtoesin; reprinted with permission.

really hard, not even experts get it right, so it's really hard for an influencer to talk about these things because they need some kind of training, or background, or study, or research (#1)

Despite the tendency toward avoidance, coronavirus was a widely discussed topic across the entire sample. Posts that contain some type of information or reference to coronavirus represent 32% of the total posts shared by participants after March 11, 2020 (Appendix 1).

A second type of strategy that has been widely adopted and related to this tendency is the redirecting towards expert sources and the reposting of key information from mass media and institutions. Influencers adopting this position recirculate and repost information from official sources. In this approach, honesty is seen as invaluable, starting with the influencers recognising their own lack of expertise on health issues, but also exploiting their capacity to redirect questions and to repost information that comes from real experts or even health workers fighting against the virus. By doing so, influencers contribute to the spread of important information and help prevent misinformation, which is one of the main objectives of the authorities:

At the beginning, we have a couple good friends, one is a general practitioner in the U.S., and she was like talking about crisis and how she's responding because she works in the front line and is treating patients. So, we've done things, made sure that we amplify their messages, their content (#5)

I don't think we should be like "do this" because I think it should be more like "this is fact, this is what experts say, so you should listen to them" and reshare resources and things like that. I think it's important to help spread the correct information (#11)

Taking a step further, two participants reported that health authorities had contacted them to offer a collaboration. Participant #2 for instance collaborated with Visit Brussels to convince people to stay at home, while Participant #10 worked directly with the state of New York and the city of New York to spread official guidelines. However, another participant reported she had been approached by the WHO to work together in a paid collaboration but refused because she felt it was inappropriate to monetise her participation in this type of project. This reveals the variety of feelings and approaches and roles influencers can adopt in crisis communication.

A third role is based on generating content in which COVID-19 and prevention measures are integrated in a natural, personal way. Under

this premise, travel SMIs offer their own interpretation of the crisis and translate official messages into their own language and visuals. In this case, messages from authorities such as the WHO are implicitly embedded in visually attractive contents, which increases the persuasive power of the message (Fig. 4). Influencers also integrate rules and safety measures (wearing a mask, keeping the distance, staying home) in their content, as part of their current daily life, but also use humour and collaborations with other influencers in creative campaigns to convey the message seamlessly to the audience:

We also talk about good practices, like hand washing and sanitizing, and how to stay healthy on a cruise, and we always have done that, how to stay healthy in general, both through exercise, nutrition and avoiding contagion and things like that. So, it's a part of our narrative normally, without trying to be health experts (#3)

Several participants acknowledged that while they would start travelling as soon as it was allowed, they encouraged their followers not do so until they felt sure about it. This behaviour is driven by public expectation, peer pressure, but also inner feelings of responsibility towards people who might follow their actions and recommendations. Most participants are aware of their power of persuasion and feel that they need to manage it carefully:

With social media you have to be very careful because you don't know who's on the other side of the screen. What is he going to interpret based on his background, you have no idea, so you have to be careful and try to be as responsible as you can. Maybe there's a kid out there watching, you never know. so definitely I do feel more responsible now (#4)

Fourth, regarding the future of travel influencer marketing, participants believe they can play a major role in the recovery of the sector. On the one hand, influencers report that they can translate key information into persuasive messages that seem natural in the eyes of audiences. By embedding information in a consistent, entertaining, motivating and implicit way, influencers gain access to users (for example, young people) who might avoid official sources and mass media. Travel SMIs feel they have the capacity to do something brands and governments cannot: appear as an authentic, independent and trustable source. Moreover, influencer marketing is inexpensive, fast and effective according to the participants, who argue that this type of marketing will be critical for the expected rebound of tourism demand. Hence, participants are optimistic



Fig. 4. Coronavirus content integration by travel influencers Source: Instagram @readysjetset; reprinted with permission.

about their future while acknowledging that the transition towards the growth phase may be traumatic. An opportunity to strengthen their position is identified by many, who see themselves as an alternative to costly, non-digital and partly obsolete marketing strategies. Travel influencers firmly believe that both destinations and travel businesses will need to have a strong presence on social media to build trust and regain interest:

I really believe that not only it's gonna be profitable, but even we have a responsibility to help those countries to get back on track because if they don't have money because of the economy and they have to spend, I strongly believe that the solution will be content creators (#2)

I think I immediately after the travel bans are lifted there's a huge opportunity for people like us, because tourism needs to develop again and grow again and everyone that will have an empty room will invite a content creator to show it and take this opportunity to renew. I really believe this is a good opportunity for us in the short term and long term (#4)

5. Discussion, conclusions, and implications

This research seeks to gain an understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on travel influencers, specifically their communicative and creative practices. It also explores the roles they can play in terms of crisis communication and recovery marketing. As such, it addresses the need indicated by Freberg et al. (2013) to conduct more research on the role of influencers in a crisis by observing how they create and share information. It also responds to calls for empirical research in order to understand the impact of the crisis on tourism-related phenomena (Zenker & Kock, 2020), and on influencer marketing (Taylor, 2020).

The results show that the COVID-19 has produced profound and diverse impacts on travel SMIs and influencer marketing. The capacity of influencers to generate new content, engage with brands, and therefore, monetise their online activity was halted in the first phase of the pandemic. This is consistent with the profound shock that COVID-19 has caused to tourism in general (Hall et al., 2020), and demonstrates how

all the agents of the tourism system, including those not traditionally considered, have been dramatically affected. The crisis has driven influencers to diversify their business, moving away from depending solely on tourism towards alternative activities so as to stay afloat. These findings firmly establish SMIs as important tourism stakeholders and an integral part of the tourism communication system but also reinforce the thesis of Yilmaz et al. (2020) regarding the vulnerability of influencers considering changes in the system. The initial effects observed by Lorenz (2020) have not vanished over time, and travel influencers and travel influencer marketing are facing a profound structural change that goes beyond contract cancellations and postponements.

SMIs have also changed their content and communicative practices to keep audiences engaged during the crisis. This confirms previous findings suggesting that influencers display a high adaptive capacity and are skilful in changing their practices (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). Their ability to make experiences relatable is of great value for tourists and brands (Seeler et al., 2019) and also confirms that authenticity, relationship building and constant interaction are key for influencer marketing (Audrezet et al., 2018; Jerslev & Mortensen, 2016), especially during a crisis. Overall, this indicates increasing professionalisation in the travel influencer space and clearly establishes SMIs as more than just opinion leaders.

Moreover, influencers have adopted a more pro-active attitude towards brands and have inverted conventional relationship standards in influencer marketing. Nonetheless, our results also suggest that many influencers have been eager to help the industry when approached. This is in line with Möller et al. (2018) who indicate the great power of social media to help in reconstruction after disasters. This practice is called "influencer communication" rather than influencer marketing to stress the focus on partnerships and the voluntary spread of messages. However, tensions around free labour and the many forms of "non-paid" collaborations have also been detected. In addition, the increased scrutiny by public opinion and the politicisation of the crisis and blurred roles sometimes put influencers in an uncomfortable position. In the past year, tabloids have frequently shamed influencers for disregarding COVID-19 safety measures or portraying privileged lives (Abidin et al., 2020). These findings indicate that influencer-follower and influencer-brand relationships are continuously evolving, and that

influencer marketing conceptualisations and practices need to adapt. The timing of influencer marketing campaigns seems critical and needs to consider the changing epidemiologic situation as well as the norms being applied in each territory to control the pandemic and the general emotional state. Influencer marketing is a double-edged sword in times of COVID-19.

This research makes several contributions to existing theory. The results shed light on the roles that travel SMIs can play during a crisis. Influencers occupy a pivotal space in the communication between health authorities, tourism organisations and tourists. The results of this study support the previously argued importance of social media in a tourism crisis (Möller et al., 2018; Schroeder et al., 2013), and add crisis communication and marketing recovery to the other advantages of working with influencers already identified by Femenia-Serra and Gretzel (2020), Ong and Ito (2019) or Xu and Pratt (2018), among others. Our findings reveal that influencers are powerful allies for health authorities and DMOs because they hold a key position in social media and can reach different audiences in organic ways (Park et al., 2019). The results referring to the different roles influencers can adopt (such as transforming information and branded content into interactive and engaging posts) broaden our knowledge on the advantages previously mentioned by Sng et al. (2019) and Zhao et al. (2018), by proving that content creators can act as a crucial link between organisations and individuals in times of emergency.

In contrast to existing literature that generalises across influential social media users (for example, Park et al., 2019; Austin et al., 2012) and assumes networked communication flows through which messages/conversations are co-created (Kozinets et al., 2010; Filieri et al., 2021), this research reveals the central/bridging role influencers play in crisis communication and their strategic approach towards content creation and audience engagement that sets them apart from other social media users. Building on the social-mediated crisis communication model proposed by Austin et al. (2012) that suggests the existence of communicative exchanges between the different stakeholders on social media, Fig. 5 depicts the many roles influencers can play during and after a crisis and the specific communicative practices identified in this study. Influencer accounts clearly emerge as separate, carefully branded communication channels within social media platforms through which messages are created, interpreted, amplified, targeted, and curated.

During a crisis, influencers must carefully manage this channel but can also take advantage of or create opportunities for new communication flows.

The proposed framework reveals a notable increase in terms of complexity in communication flows, particularly in times of crisis, thus challenging the understanding of social media influencers as mere opinion leaders (Casaló et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2018; Schäfer & Tad-dicken, 2015; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). The findings of this study indicate that the conceptualisations of influencers need to go beyond opinion leadership and acknowledge the complexity and diversity of the influencers' job as well as their flexibility and capacity to adapt to new circumstances. The elaborate content creation efforts and the active and strategic curation and management of audiences by SMIs exemplified by our findings are not reflected in opinion leadership literature (Katz, 1957; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) and basic theories of social influence (Kelman, 1961). Social media influencers have instead developed into a much more nuanced and adaptable agent in communication than conventional opinion leaders.

Additionally, our findings point to an intensification of what Baym (2015) coined as "relational labour", indicating that in moments of crisis, SMIs are expected to increase their engagement with audiences using engagement strategies that go beyond providing information, entertainment, and persuasion (see Fig. 5). The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated the pressure on content creators to fulfil the already high expectations of audiences and brands (Yılmaz et al., 2020) because of the increased need to effectively target and interpret messages. Importantly, the intricate and varied relationships depicted in Fig. 5 have arisen under the scrutiny of mass media and general social media audiences, which have grown exponentially during the pandemic (Abidin et al., 2020).

The results obtained also shed light on the role that influencers can play within an highly volatile context characterised by the proliferation of fake news and changing norms, such as the coronavirus pandemic (O'Connor & Murphy, 2020), therefore adding significant new knowledge to the crisis communication literature. Specifically, this paper complements previous contributions on crisis communication in the case of COVID-19 focused on social media, such as Yu et al. (2020), but also challenges classic crisis communication theories: Influencers change the relationships and dynamics previously identified in crisis

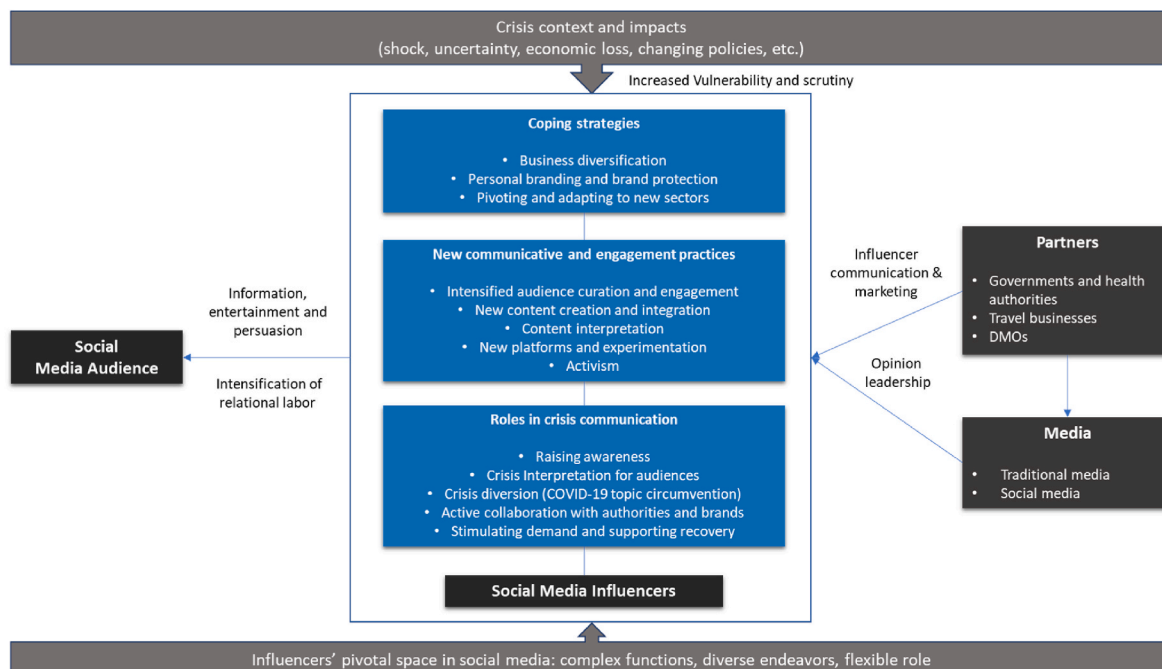


Fig. 5. Travel influencers and crisis communication: practices, roles and actors.

communication (Liu et al., 2015; Liu-Lastres et al., 2019). They also expand the communicative capacity of authorities and brands and add new communication strategies to the existing crisis communication repertoire.

Our findings confirm the need for collaboration with influencers in a tourism crisis, highlighting their ability to translate messages and create entertaining and informational content at the same time. This is useful not only during the crisis itself, but also in the recovery phase that usually follows. As such, this research firmly establishes influencer marketing as a form of crisis communication and a strategic tool on the path to tourism recovery, once the health situation is under control. By bridging crisis communication, health communication and influencer marketing, this research opens new avenues for conceptualising influencers as strategic communicators.

From a practical perspective, our research shows that influencers can help DMOs and travel brands communicate about the current health emergency and can become strategic partners in the pursuit of long-term objectives, whether it is recovery or repositioning. Consequently, tourism marketers should add influencer marketing to their crisis communication toolbox. Using influencers as role models that demonstrate how travel is possible in the new normal will be critical for building post-crisis trust in travel. However, brands need to understand that SMIs are specialists in their own business and should give them sufficient creative freedom, especially during a crisis such as the current pandemic that fundamentally changes audience expectations. Our findings also suggest that because of the structural changes initiated by SMIs, travel influencer marketing will likely become more competitive and increasingly professionalised.

6. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged, and which are partly shared by other research projects involving netnography (see Wu & Pearce, 2014). First, the observation period (January to June) was limited to a relatively short pre-pandemic period and the first months of the pandemic and therefore offers a vision focused on how travel influencers have coped with the first wave of the pandemic. Data collection over longer periods of time could provide valuable insight into the evolution of the effects of COVID-19 and vaccination programmes on influencer marketing and the response of different actors as travel returns (if so) to pre-pandemic levels. Longitudinal studies are required to observe the evolution of the reported trends. Future studies should also include the perspective of DMOs and travel businesses participating in influencer marketing. Additional studies are needed to better understand the effectiveness of the strategies used by influencers during and beyond this crisis, which will require the implementation of quantitative methods based on larger datasets from social media and surveys of influencers, DMOs and other crisis communication stakeholders.

Moreover, the objectives of this study did not include the analysis of how audiences and potential tourists have perceived the messages of travel influencers during the health crisis. However, obtaining a deep comprehension of the needs and reactions to messages of tourists during a crisis is of vital importance (Liu-Lastres et al., 2019) and should be considered for future studies. Finally, while social media are gradually adopted by older generations, young people are still prevalent in platforms such as Instagram and among the followers of the sampled influencers. This might have consequences in terms of the type of engagement this audience establishes with influencers and how crises are communicated by SMIs. Addressing potential impacts of audience types requires a deeper understanding of how older tourists, and also the youngest, engage with influencers on various platforms but particularly

on Instagram, which constitutes a rich data source not yet extensively used in tourism research (Yu & Sun, 2019). Further studies based on Instagram are needed, but they also need to be complemented with data collected from other social media platforms on which influencers are active (YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, among others). The forthcoming years will be marked by the widespread use of social media by all generations to communicate. This requires further attention to the characteristics of these communication channels, particularly in terms of crisis communication. Thus, more studies based on the use of a wide range of methods are needed that examine how the pandemic is transforming communication and marketing in travel and tourism.

The findings open new questions and research lines regarding SMIs in general. These include the adaptation of influencers to the different affordances of new social media platforms. Each social media platform has its own codes and culture (Abidin, 2018), and thus it is fundamental to understand how individuals and organisations modulate their behaviour and relationships with others as social media evolve and humans adapt, and vice versa. Additionally, research is needed on how audiences perceive the importance and agency of influencers. This is fundamental to creating a full picture of the potential power of influencers in crisis communication. Finally, while the pandemic accelerated change, it is important to acknowledge that the communicative and business practices of SMIs are constantly changing and will continue to change after the crisis. More research is needed to understand influencers from an entrepreneurial perspective as well as a resilience point-of-view.

Acknowledgements

None.

Credit author statement

Francisco Femenia-Serra: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Project administration. Ulrike Gretzel: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing. Aurkene Alzua-Sorzabal: Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing.

Impact statement

This paper contributes to a better understanding of the impact of the coronavirus crisis on travel influencers and influencer marketing by specifically looking at how the shock caused by COVID-19 has altered travel influencers' roles and practices. The obtained results offer critical implications for DMOs, policy makers, hospitality and tourism companies, and for health authorities. Findings provide key insights into how influencer marketing is being transformed and offer recommendations on how to collaborate with travel influencers in crisis communication. Influencers are critical allies for destinations and companies to build trust, spread the right information and foster demand recovery. Health authorities and tourism boards can leverage the power of influencers to persuade residents and tourists to abide by safety measures in non-intrusive ways. Influencers are valuable spokespersons during crises, are capable of translating key messages into visually attractive content and can redirect information flows towards experts and official organisations.

Declarations of competing interest

None.

Appendix 1

Summary of participants and Instagram data analysis results

Travel influencer handle/ Location/Gender	# Followers at time of observation	# Posts before pandemic declared (1st January- 11th March)	# Posts during pandemic (11th March-20th June)	# Total posts in observation period	# Potentially sponsored posts	# Comments per post	# Likes per post	# Posts with questions to audience or direct interaction requests	
@Cruisetipstv/USA/Female	14.7K	26	14	40	Before pandemic 9 During pandemic 0	19.61 40.64	476 520.40	9 9	
@dipyourtoesin/UK/Female	14.8K	21	36	57	7 0	42.23 50.69	360.40 327.80	11 4	
@justwotravel/Spain/Female	78.7K	24	26	50	2 5	214.17 156.92	3,411.40 2,637.70	13 15	
@macs_explore USA/Female	65.5K	26	40	66	7 6	129.73 134.05	1,751.72 1,666.86	7 8	
@momimfine/Belgium/Male	368K	3	8	11	3 0	130.66 388.87	25,319.50 27,905	0 0	
@mrscottteddy/USA/Male	242K	33	25	58	22 7	156.51 135.88	1,440.80 1,544.35	1 1	
@readysjetset/USA/Female	127K	50	35	85	41 3	52.64 41.31	1,872.36 1,609.88	1 0	
@askaconcierge/USA/Female	124K	52	76	128	22 5	91 135.07	2,554.90 2,038.10	7 11	
@wanderreds/Spain/Male	159K	24	29	53	1 0	191.58 295	5,121.27 6,474.78	10 9	
@coconutsandcoordinates/ United Arab Emirates/ Female and Male (double interview)	12K	47	63	110	3 6	89.51 101.47	1,133.64 697.47	5 5	
@myinspireproject/Taiwan/ Male	214K	65	94	159	35 30	29.96 79.56	2,225.98 1,968.51	1 3	
AVERAGE CHANGE FROM PRE-PANDEMIC TO PANDEMIC		Total posting frequency +16.68% (average/number of days per period)				-59.21%	+36.24%	+3.77%	0%
Travel influencer IG handle/ Location/Gender	# Posts mentioning: COVID, coronavirus, lockdown, quarantine, pandemic.	# Posts with travel content	# Posts with home and personal life content	# Posts with life philosophy and deep reflections	# Political and activism posts	# Reposts of old travel content (throwbacks)	# Posts with direct self- branding and own brand references		
@Cruisetipstv/USA/Female	Before pandemic 0 During pandemic 5	23	1	6	0	1	10		
@dipyourtoesin/UK/Female	0 7	10 3	1 7	6 1	1 8	2 4	4 15		
@justwotravel/Spain/Female	0 7	23 24	1 2	1 4	0 0	20 20	3 0		
@macs_explore USA/Female	0 13	20 20	0 5	14 9	0 3	7 9	2 4		
@momimfine/Belgium/Male	0 5	2 1	0 1	1 0	0 1	0 1	1 1		
@mrscottteddy/USA/Male	0 5	23 9	0 5	0 2	0 2	0 1	3 1		
@readysjetset/USA/Female	0 8	48 18	0 4	0 3	0 10	1 16	2 0		
@askaconcierge/USA/Female	2 47	25 5	0 7	16 17	1 6	2 3	0 1		
@wanderreds/Spain/Male	0 7	15 16	1 5	5 5	0 1	13 18	3 5		
@coconutsandcoordinates/ United Arab Emirates/Female and Male (double interview)	0 19	30 15	0 16	27 29	0 1	12 15	1 4		
@myinspireproject/Taiwan/Male	6 21	55 80	0 3	2 8	0 1	0 48	2 0		
AVERAGE CHANGE FROM PRE- PANDEMIC TO PANDEMIC		+1700% (32% of posts in pandemic period)	-25.55%	+1325%	+8.97%	+1550%	+153.45%	+9.68%	

References

- Abidin, C. (2018). *Internet celebrity: Understanding fame online*. Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Abidin, C., Lee, J., Barbetta, T., & Miao, W. S. (2020). Influencers and COVID-19: reviewing key issues in press coverage across Australia, China, Japan, and South Korea. *Media International Australia*, 178(1).
- Agostino, D., Arnaboldi, M., & Calissano, A. (2019). How to quantify social media influencers: An empirical application at the Teatro alla Scala. *Heliyon*, 5(5), Article e01677. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2019.e01677>
- Audrezet, A., de Kerviler, G., & Guidry Moulard, J. (2018). Authenticity under threat: When social media influencers need to go beyond self-presentation. *Journal of Business Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.008>. July, 0–1.
- Austin, L., Liu, B. F., & Jin, Y. (2012). How audiences seek out crisis information: Exploring the social-mediated crisis communication model. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 40(2), 188–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2012.654498>
- Bennett, W. L., & Manheim, J. B. (2006). The one-step flow of communication. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 608(1), 213–232. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716206292266>
- Bokuniewicz, J. F., & Shulman, J. (2017). Influencer identification in Twitter networks of destination marketing organizations. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology*, 8(2), 205–219. doi.org/10.1108/MRR-09-2015-0216.
- Campbell, C., & Farrell, J. R. (2020). More than meets the eye: The functional components underlying influencer marketing. *Business Horizons*.
- Carter, D. (2016). Hustle and brand: The sociotechnical shaping of influence. *Social Media and Society*, 2(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116666305>
- Casaló, L. V., Flavián, C., & Ibáñez-Sánchez, S. (2018). Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership. *Journal of Business Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.005>. October 2017.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research*. Sage Publications.
- Cotter, K. (2018). *Playing the visibility game: How digital influencers and algorithms negotiate influence on Instagram*. New Media and Society. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818815684>
- De Cicco, R., Iacobucci, S., & Pagliaro, S. (2020). The effect of influencer–product fit on advertising recognition and the role of an enhanced disclosure in increasing sponsorship transparency. *International Journal of Advertising*, 1–27.
- De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(5), 798–828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035>
- Duffy, A., & Kang, H. Y. P. (2019). *Follow me, I'm famous: Travel bloggers' self-mediated performances of everyday exoticism*. Media, Culture and Society. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719853503> (in press).
- Duffy, B. E., & Wissinger, E. (2017). Mythologies of creative work in the social media age: Fun, free, and “just being me. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 4652–4671.
- El Qudsi. (2018). *Five ways to beat social media algorithms with influencer*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2018/05/29/five-ways-to-beat-social-media-algorithms-with-influencer-marketing/#4c358ba16db7>.
- Evans, N. J., Phua, J., Lim, J., & Jun, H. (2017). Disclosing Instagram influencer advertising: The effects of disclosure language on advertising recognition, attitudes, and behavioral intent. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 17(2), 138–149.
- Farivar, S., Wang, F., & Yuan, Y. (2020). Opinion leadership vs. para-social relationship: Key factors in influencer marketing. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 102371.
- Femenia-Serra, F., & Gretzel, U. (2020). Influencer marketing for tourism destinations: Lessons from a mature destination. In J. Neidhardt, & W. Würndl (Eds.), *Information and communication technologies in tourism 2020* (pp. 65–78). Springer.
- Feng, Y., Chen, H., & Kong, Q. (2020). An expert with whom I can identify: The role of narratives in influencer marketing. *International Journal of Advertising*, 1–22.
- Filieri, R., Yen, D. A., & Yu, Q. (2021). #ILOveLondon: An exploration of the declaration of love towards a destination on Instagram. *Tourism Management*, 85, 104291.
- Freberg, K., Palenchar, M. J., & Veil, S. R. (2013). Managing and sharing H1N1 crisis information using social media bookmarking services. *Public Relations Review*, 39(3), 178–184. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.02.007>
- Gössling, S., Scott, D., Hall, C. M., Gössling, S., Scott, D., & Pandemics, C. M. H. (2020). Pandemics, tourism and global change: A rapid assessment of COVID-19. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1758708>, 0(0).
- Gretzel, U. (2018). Influencer marketing in travel and tourism. In M. Sigala, & U. Gretzel (Eds.), *Advances in social media for travel, tourism and hospitality: New perspectives, practice and cases* (pp. 147–156). Routledge. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(02\)00014-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(02)00014-2).
- Gretzel, U., Fuchs, M., Baggio, R., Hoepken, W., Law, R., Neidhardt, J., Pesonen, J., Zanker, M., & Xiang, Z. (2020). E-tourism beyond COVID-19: A call for transformative research. *Journal of Information Technology & Tourism*, 43, 1–21.
- Haenlein, M., Anadol, E., Farnsworth, T., Hugo, H., Hunichen, J., & Welte, D. (2020). Navigating the new era of influencer marketing: How to be successful on Instagram, TikTok, & Co. *California Management Review*, 63(1), 5–25.
- Hall, C. M., Scott, D., Gössling, S., Hall, C. M., Scott, D., & Pandemics, S. G. (2020). Pandemics, transformations and tourism: Be careful what you wish for. *Tourism Geographies*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1759131>, 0(0).
- Hearn, A., & Schoenhoff, S. (2016). From celebrity to influencer: Tracing the diffusion of celebrity value across the data stream. In P. D. Marshall, & S. Redmond (Eds.), *A companion to celebrity* (pp. 194–211). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Jerslev, A., & Mortensen, M. (2016). What is the self in the celebrity selfie? Celebification, phatic communication and performativity. *Celebrity Studies*, 7(2), 249–263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2015.1095644>
- Jun, S., & Yi, J. (2020). What makes followers loyal? The role of influencer interactivity in building influencer brand equity. *The Journal of Product and Brand Management*.
- Katz, E. (1957). The two-step flow of communication: An up-to-date report on an hypothesis. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 21(1), 61–78.
- Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). *Personal influence. The part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. Free Press.
- Kelman, H. C. (1961). Processes of opinion change. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 25(1), 57–78.
- Kemp, S. (2020). Most important data on digital audiences during coronavirus. In *The next web*. <https://thenextweb.com/growth-quarters/2020/04/24/report-most-important-data-on-digital-audiences-during-coronavirus/>.
- Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2017). Self-branding, ‘micro-celebrity’ and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity Studies*, 8(2), 191–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292>
- Kim, H., & Stepenkova, S. (2015). Effect of tourist photographs on attitudes towards destination: Manifest and latent content. *Tourism Management*, 49, 29–41.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2019). *Netnography: The essential guide to qualitative social media research*. SAGE Publications Limited.
- Kozinets, R. V., De Valck, K., Wojnicki, A. C., & Wilner, S. J. (2010). Networked narratives: Understanding word-of-mouth marketing in online communities. *Journal of Marketing*, 74(2), 71–89.
- Kozinets, R., Dolbec, P., & Earley, A. (2014). Netnographic analysis: Understanding culture through social media data. In U. Flick (Ed.), *Sage handbook of qualitative data analysis* (pp. 262–275). Sage.
- Lee, S., & Kim, E. (2020). Influencer marketing on Instagram: How sponsorship disclosure, influencer credibility, and brand credibility impact the effectiveness of Instagram promotional post. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, 11(3), 232–249.
- Lievrouw, L. A. (2009). New media, mediation, and communication study. *Information, Communication & Society*, 12(3), 303–325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180802660651>
- Lin, H. C., Bruning, P. F., & Swarna, H. (2018). Using online opinion leaders to promote the hedonic and utilitarian value of products and services. *Business Horizons*, 61(3), 431–442. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2018.01.010>
- Liu-Lastres, B., Schroeder, A., & Pennington-Gray, L. (2019). Cruise line customers’ responses to risk and crisis communication messages: An application of the risk perception attitude framework. *Journal of Travel Research*, 58(5), 849–865.
- Liu, B., Kim, H., & Pennington-Gray, L. (2015). Responding to the bed bug crisis in social media. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 47, 76–84.
- Lorenz, T. (2020). *Coronavirus is causing chaos for travel influencers*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/style/travel-influencers-coronavirus.html>.
- Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 19(1), 58–73.
- Magno, F., & Cassia, F. (2018). The impact of social media influencers in tourism. *Anatolia*, 29(2), 288–290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13032917.2018.1476981>
- Martínez-López, F. J., Anaya-Sánchez, R., Fernández Giordano, M., & López-López, D. (2020). Behind influencer marketing: Key marketing decisions and their effects on followers’ responses. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 36(7–8), 579–607.
- Martínez-Sala, A. M., Monserrat-Gauchí, J., & J., S.-S. (2019). The influencer tourist 2.0: From anonymous tourist to opinion leader. *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 74, 1344–1365.
- Möller, C., Wang, J., & Nguyen, H. T. (2018). #Strongerthanwinston: Tourism and crisis communication through Facebook following tropical cyclones in Fiji. *Tourism Management*, 69(February), 272–284. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.05.014>
- Nascimento, T. C. D., Campos, R. D., & Suarez, M. (2020). Experimenting, partnering and bonding: A framework for the digital influencer-brand endorsement relationship. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 36(11–12), 1009–1030.
- O’Connor, C., & Murphy, M. (2020). Going viral: Doctors must tackle fake news in the covid-19 pandemic. *BMJ*, 24(369), 1587.
- Ong, Y. X., & Ito, N. (2019). “I want to go there too!” evaluating social media influencer marketing effectiveness: A case study of hokkaido’s DMO. In J. Pesonen, & J. Neidhardt (Eds.), *Information and communication technologies in tourism 2019* (pp. 132–144). Springer.
- Park, D., Kim, W. G., & Choi, S. (2019). Application of social media analytics in tourism crisis communication. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 22(15), 1810–1824. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2018.1504900>
- Reinikainen, H., Munnukka, J., Maitty, D., & Luoma-aho, V. (2020). ‘You really are a great big sister’—parasocial relationships, credibility, and the moderating role of audience comments in influencer marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 36(3–4), 279–298.
- Reynolds, B., & Seeger, M. (2005). Crisis and emergency risk communication as an integrative model. *Journal of Health Communication*, 10(1), 43–55.
- Ritchie, B. W., & Jiang, Y. (2019). A review of research on tourism risk, crisis and disaster management: Launching the annals of tourism research curated collection on tourism risk, crisis and disaster management. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 79 (September), 102812. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2019.102812>
- Sano, K., & Sano, H. (2019). The effect of different crisis communication channels. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 79, 102804.
- Schäfer, M. S., & Taddicken, M. (2015). Mediatized opinion leaders: New patterns of opinion leadership in new media environments? *International Journal of Communication*, 9(1), 960–981. <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-114938>

- Schoemer, A. (2019). *Influencer Marketing: State of the social media influencer market in 2020*. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/influencer-marketing-report?IR=T>.
- Schouten, A. P., Janssen, L., & Verspaget, M. (2020). Celebrity vs. Influencer endorsements in advertising: The role of identification, credibility, and product-endorser fit. *International Journal of Advertising*, 39(2), 258–281.
- Schroeder, A., Pennington-Gray, L., Donohoe, H., & Kiouisis, S. (2013). Using social media in times of crisis. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 30(1–2), 126–143.
- Seeler, S., Lück, M., & Schänzel, H. A. (2019). Exploring the drivers behind experience accumulation – the role of secondary experiences consumed through the eyes of social media influencers. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 41 (October), 80–89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2019.09.009>
- Singh, J., Crisafulli, B., & Xue, M. T. (2020). ‘To trust or not to trust’: The impact of social media influencers on the reputation of corporate brands in crisis. *Journal of Business Research*.
- Sng, K., Au, T. Y., & Pang, A. (2019). Social media influencers as a crisis risk in strategic communication: Impact of indiscretions on professional endorsements. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 13(4), 301–320. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2019.1618305>
- Stoldt, R., Wellman, M., Ekdale, B., & Tully, M. (2019). Professionalizing and profiting: The rise of intermediaries in the social media influencer industry. *Social Media + Society*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119832587>, 205630511983258.
- Taylor, C. R. (2020). The urgent need for more research on influencer marketing. *International Journal of Advertising*, 39(7), 889–891. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2020.1822104>
- Uzunoğlu, E., & Misci Kip, S. (2014). Brand communication through digital influencers: Leveraging blogger engagement. *International Journal of Information Management*, 34 (5), 592–602. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2014.04.007>
- Wu, M. Y., & Pearce, P. L. (2014). Appraising netnography: Towards insights about new markets in the digital tourist era. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 17(5), 463–474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2013.833179>
- Xiao, M., Wang, R., & Chan-Olmsted, S. (2018). Factors affecting YouTube influencer marketing credibility: A heuristic-systematic model. *Journal of Media Business Studies*, 15(3), 188–213.
- Xu, X., & Pratt, S. (2018). Social media influencers as endorsers to promote travel destinations: An application of self-congruence theory to the Chinese generation Y. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 35(7), 958–972. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2018.1468851>
- Yılmaz, M., Sezerel, H., & Uzuner, Y. (2020). Sharing experiences and interpretation of experiences: A phenomenological research on instagram influencers. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2020.1763270>, 0(0).
- Yu, M., Li, Z., Yu, Z., He, J., & Zhou, J. (2020). Communication related health crisis on social media: A case of COVID-19 outbreak. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 1–7.
- Yu, C.-E., & Sun, R. (2019). The role of instagram in the UNESCO’s creative city of gastronomy: A case study of Macau. *Tourism Management*, 75, 257–268. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2019.05.011>

Zenker, S., & Kock, F. (2020). The coronavirus pandemic – a critical discussion of a tourism research agenda. *Tourism Management*, 81. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2020.104164>

Zhao, X., Zhan, M., & Liu, B. F. (2018). Disentangling social media influence in crises: Testing a four-factor model of social media influence with large data. *Public Relations Review*, 44(4), 549–561.



Dr Francisco Femenia-Serra is a Lecturer at the Department of Tourism, Nebrija University (Madrid, Spain), and a member of the research center in Smart Tourism and Innovation (Smart-tour-INN). He holds Ph.D. in Tourism, a master’s degree in Tourism Management and Planning, and a BA in Geography from the University of Alicante. His research focuses on destinations planning, marketing and management as well as on the intersection between digital technologies, human behavior and experiences in tourism destinations.



Dr Ulrike Gretzel is a Senior Fellow at the Center of Public Relations, Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California and Director of Research at Netnografica, an innovative market research company. She received her Ph.D. in Communications from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and holds a master’s degree in International Business from the Vienna University of Economics and Business. Her research focuses on persuasion in human-technology interactions with an emphasis on credibility perceptions, information search and processing, electronic decision aids, smart technologies, and online and social media marketing.



Dr Aurkene Alzua-Sorzabal holds Ph.D. in International Tourism from Purdue University. She is a principal researcher at the research center in Smart Tourism and Innovation (Smarttour-INN), Nebrija University. Dr Alzua-Sorzabal has coordinated several academic programs and participant in several European excellence networks. Her latest work focuses on smart tourism, identifying emerging metrics for modelling travel and tourism. She is author of a manifold of articles dealing with tourism and information technology.