Digital Influence in Tourism: The Environmental and Social Impacts of Influencers in the Balearic Islands

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Abstract: Digital platforms and influencers have fundamentally transformed how tourist destinations are promoted and consumed (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Freberg et al., 2011). Based on an extensive literature review, this study explores the influence of influencers through the lens of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and Source Credibility Theory (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Ohanian, 1990). Focusing on the Balearic Islands, particularly hotspots like Caló des Moro, it reveals that intense digital exposure has led to over tourism, environmental degradation, and social tensions (Dodds & Butler, 2019; Milano et al., 2019). This phenomenon is exacerbated by social media algorithms that disproportionately amplify popular visual content (Gössling et al., 2021). The findings underline the urgent need for Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) to adopt sustainable digital strategies that integrate authenticity, community participation, and innovative digital storytelling tools (Sigala, 2018; Mariani & Matarazzo, 2022). Managed responsibly, influencer-driven digital promotion offers both challenges and opportunities, potentially enhancing destination resilience while maintaining a balance between tourism growth and conservation (Kapoor et al., 2018; Neuhofer et al., 2015).

Keywords: Digital platforms, Balearic Islands, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), Source Credibility Theory

Introduction & Theoretical Framework

Digital technology and the proliferation of social networks have fundamentally reshaped how tourist destinations are promoted and perceived. Tourist information is now disseminated not only through institutional and traditional media but primarily through user-generated content (UGC) shared on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Digital influencers, as a new form of mediator, play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions and enhancing destination attractiveness, often acting as informal "digital ambassadors" (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016; Sigala, 2018).

This phenomenon is theoretically rooted in eWOM, which involves informal, unpaid information sharing via digital channels (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Litvin et al., 2008). Particularly in tourism, eWOM has proven significant, as travelers tend to trust other users' experiences and reviews more than official promotions (Filieri & McLeay, 2014). Source Credibility Theory explains that this influence depends on the perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of the messenger (Ohanian, 1990), further bolstered by social validation and emotional resonance of the content.

Influencers can transform a relatively unknown destination into a popular tourist hotspot in a very short time by using visually curated and emotionally charged narratives (Abidin, 2016; Mariani et al., 2023). However, uncontrolled digital exposure can lead to over tourism, environmental degradation, and loss of local authenticity, especially in vulnerable areas without control mechanisms (Milano et al., 2019; Gössling et al., 2021).

The case of the Balearic Islands in Spain serves as a prime example. The viral promotion of beaches and landscapes by high-reach influencers led to unchecked surges in visitor numbers, environmental strains, and social tensions. Local authorities have been forced to adopt restrictive measures to mitigate the negative impacts of digital overexposure.

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Thus, DMOs are called upon to redefine their role —shifting from mere promoters to strategic managers of digital reputation and visitor experience. There is a critical need to develop coherent, authentic, and sustainable digital storytelling strategies (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Sigala, 2018; Mariani & Matarazzo, 2022).

This study aims to examine the role of influencers and eWOM in shaping a destination's image and dynamics, focusing on the Balearic Islands as a case study. It employs a literature review and analysis of institutional interventions to identify pathways for enhancing digital governance in tourism toward a more resilient, participatory, and sustainable direction.

Methodology

This work adopts a qualitative literature review methodology to understand the influence of social media and digital influencers on tourism planning and experience. The approach focuses on analyzing secondary sources, including digital campaigns (hashtags, digital videos, Instagram and TikTok posts), and tourism or news outlets covering over tourism in the region, to systematically identify key theoretical trends and practical applications in digital tourism management discourse (Snyder, 2019).

Additionally, it incorporates case study analysis of the Balearic Islands to empirically investigate the consequences of influencer-driven overexposure and local institutional responses. The case was selected due to its frequent mention in international literature as a region facing intense pressures from digital over tourism (Milano et al., 2019; Gössling et al., 2021). Data comes from journalistic sources, official announcements from local government, and academic analyses to enhance validity.

The Balearic Islands

The Balearic Islands —Mallorca, Menorca, Ibiza, and Formentera— are among Spain's busiest tourist destinations, attracting over 16 million visitors annually (Govern de les Illes Balears, 2023). Digital exposure, especially through platforms like Instagram and TikTok, has been intensified by popular influencers acting as trendsetters and boosters of "Instagram tourism."

Iconic sites like Caló des Moro and Playa de Muro went viral, causing extreme visitor concentrations. Reports indicate up to 4,000 daily visitors in areas designed for only 100 people (Gössling et al., 2021; Milano et al., 2019). Lack of regulatory mechanisms exacerbated the impact, putting pressure on infrastructure and causing significant environmental degradation. In Caló des Moro, for instance, increased human presence resulted in the loss of up to 6 tons of sand per quarter, and natural pathways suffered extensive erosion, threatening ecological balance (France24, 2024; Ghilardi, 2023).

Socially, excessive tourist pressure triggered cultural friction and societal unrest. Visitors, inspired by idealized digital depictions, trespassed into private properties or traditional villages seeking the "perfect" image, disrupting residents' daily lives (The Sun, 2024). In Menorca's Binibeca Vell, residents imposed visiting hours (10:00–22:00) and held a local referendum on a full tourist entry ban (The Guardian, 2023; Liaghilardi, 2023; France24, 2024).
In response, Balearic authorities implemented a range of institutional interventions to regulate digital exposure and relieve tourism pressure. Measures included barring influencers from official tourism campaigns, removing highly popular content from state platforms, and reevaluating digital promotion strategies (Travel and Tour World, 2024).

Access restrictions were also introduced in overcrowded natural sites, such as the temporary closure of Es Vedrà in Ibiza, plus reservation systems and daily caps in other areas (The Guardian, 2024; Independent, 2024). Additionally, eco-tax reforms were enacted, imposing accommodation fees of €1–4 per night to support local infrastructure and sustainable management projects.

Another critical issue was the surge in short-term rentals, which increased housing prices and limited availability for permanent residents. Authorities removed over 65,000 illegal Airbnb listings and enacted stricter real estate market controls (Aitran, 2024; El País, 2023).

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The Balearic case clearly illustrates the challenges posed by digital overexposure of tourist destinations. It also shows the need for flexible governance tools aimed at balancing tourism exploitation with socio-economic resilience (Mariani & Matarazzo, 2022; Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015).

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The study highlights significant transformations in the tourism landscape driven by social networks and digital influencers' dominance in shaping destination perceptions. The Balearic Islands case exemplifies how uncontrolled digital exposure, despite increasing visibility, contributed to over tourism, environmental stress, and social pushback (Milano, Cheer & Novelli, 2019; Gössling et al., 2021).

This phenomenon aligns with the theory of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), illustrating that online experience sharing profoundly influences travel decisions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Litvin et al., 2008). When eWOM combines with influencers' credibility (Source Credibility Theory), it significantly affects destination image and consumer behavior (Ohanian, 1990; Abidin, 2016).

The literature review and findings show that DMOs often lack the infrastructure and tools to monitor, understand, and leverage eWOM or social media influence (Sigala, 2018; Mariani & Matarazzo, 2022). This strategic gap hampers the creation of targeted and sustainable tourism policies.

Therefore, destination DMOs must adopt digital reputation management strategies. They should invest in big data analytics, sentiment analysis, and social listening tools to gain meaningful insights into their destination's online presence (Xiang et al., 2015; Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015).

Furthermore, clear, ethically grounded guidelines for influencer collaboration are necessary to prevent overexposure of vulnerable or saturated areas, reinforce authenticity, and embed sustainable tourism principles in all campaigns (Marwick, 2015; Sigala, 2018).

Tourism narratives should also be co-created with local communities, leveraging participatory platforms, locally produced content, and culturally sensitive communication strategies to support identity empowerment and social acceptance (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Morgan, 2020).

Finally, tackling over tourism requires implementing policies for dispersion and redistributing visitation. Promoting lesser-known routes, instituting dynamic visitor limits, and diversifying tourism products are essential to restore balance (Dodds & Butler, 2019; Gössling et al., 2021).

The Balearic Islands' situation underscores the need to redefine tourism promotion in today's age of digital overexposure. Active narrative management by authorities, combined with strategic partnerships with content creators who embrace sustainability and respect for place, is essential for safeguarding long-term destination resilience and appeal.

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