

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 1

Month: February

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2321-4643

E-ISSN: 2581-9402

Citation:

Nirmalkumar, G., et al.

“Tourism

Communication Failure
and Visitor Risk: A Study
of Influencer-Driven
Destination Choice.”

*Shanlax International
Journal of Management*,
vol. 13, no. S1, 2026,
pp. 209–28.

DOI:

[https://doi.org/10.34293/
management.v13iS1-i1-
Feb.10352](https://doi.org/10.34293/management.v13iS1-i1-Feb.10352)

Tourism Communication Failure and Visitor Risk: A Study of Influencer-Driven Destination Choice

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Abstract

Destination planning and selection has been influenced heavily by the increasing number of travel influencers and the number of social media channels they utilize to promote destinations. However, there is still limited empirical literature that addresses the relationship between the promotion of these unregulated influencer segments to tourists and their overall safety awareness, risk perception, cognitive decision-making/reasoning, on-scene challenges, quality of experience in their destination of travel, and overall post-visit attitude. This research is conducted in major tourism locations in the Tamil Nadu region of India and utilizes a quantitative methodology to obtain data from 450 tourists visiting Rameswaram, Kodaikanal, Madurai))(&

and international visitors within the designated for this geographic area. Hypotheses were examined utilising the correlation analysis, independent samples t-test, ANOVA, and multiple regression methods. Significant evidence of influencer dependence negatively correlating with safety checking behaviour among travellers is provided in our conclusion. Influencer reliant travellers were significantly more likely to experience safety, legality and environmental difficulties than travellers who used government approved resources such as tourism boards or government agencies. Experience dissatisfaction can be explained by travel challenges and psychological vulnerability accounting for 58.1% of variance. Post visit, travellers had lower levels of trust in influencers and greater support for regulations; however, there was a difference between international and domestic travellers, as international travel had a higher level of exposed vulnerability and travel challenge than domestic travel.

Keywords: Social Media Travel Influencers, Tourist Safety and Risk Perception, Influencer Marketing in Tourism, Unregulated Digital Tourism Promotion, Tourist Experience Management.

Introduction

The way that tourists find, assess and experience destinations has been transformed by social networking with travel influencers serving as the critical intermediary of tourism communications (Cornell et al., 2025; Priya & Sangeetha, 2025). They create emotional connections to places by sharing engaging visuals that create images of destinations and build aspirations or intentions about visiting via social media posts (Chauhan et al., 2026; Cornell et al., 2025). Unlike traditional forms of marketing, which are subject to regulation, the content shared by influencers is found in informal, peer-based environments and often authenticity and appeal dominate over accuracy, safety, and compliance (Fedeli & Cheng, 2022). Tourists typically rely on influencer-based posts to plan their trips, select which sites they will visit and decide about activities instead of using official sources of safety, legal, and risk-related information (Ameen et al., 2023; Cornell et al., 2025). Although influencer marketing and promotion does provide increased visibility to many underdeveloped and rural areas (Chauhan et al., 2026; Priya & Sangeetha, 2025), it can create challenges. Influencers often fail to mention potential risks, infrastructure deficiencies, or limitations on accessibility, making it more difficult for tourists to accurately assess the overall risks of an area (Cornell et al., 2025; Siegel et al., 2023). This can create misperceptions of risk, foster optimism bias and increase risky behaviour, particularly among young or inexperienced travellers (Cornell et al., 2025; Feng et al., 2022). In destinations that lack robust safety and management systems, like many developing areas, the disparities between available information can place visitors, experiences, and long-term viability of the destination at risk (Chauhan et al., 2026; Fedeli & Cheng, 2022). Most of the current literature on influencers examines their role primarily in forming image, credibility, and intention (Cornell et al., 2025). There is limited research investigating issues like safety awareness/compliance, the vulnerability of influencers, and the outcomes related to their use as a means of communication (Chauhan et al., 2026; Priya & Sangeetha, 2025). Additionally, existing models do not incorporate risk perception or preparedness for potential risks, nor do they address the changes that occur post-visit (Ameen et al., 2023). Existing research related to influencers in developing regions is extremely limited, especially that conducted at the sub-national level (Chauhan et al., 2026; Priya 444

This research fills these voids by looking at the role of influencers as well as the safety perceptions, actions, and experiences of tourists based in Tamil Nadu, India. Utilizing stimulus-organism-response (Aichner et al., 2020), planned behaviour (Chauhan et al., 2026), risk perception (Ameen et al., 2023), and expectation/disconfirmation theories, this research investigates how pre-trip reliance on influencers affect on-site challenges, satisfaction, and then post-trip changes in behaviours and perceptions for both domestic and international travellers. From a quantitative perspective, it demonstrates that unregulated promotion by influencers presents a challenge to governance and has an impact on safety, experience, and sustainability (Fedeli & Cheng, 2022). This study provides insight into ethical advertising practices by influencers, the responsibility of platforms, and the development of policies to promote and protect. Social media influencers have changed how travellers discover and choose their travel destinations (Cornell et al., 2025). Off the beaten path destinations are often discovered through visual appeal and depend heavily on influencers to promote them (Chauhan et al., 2026). This results in an increase in visibility but does not comply with safety regulations or ethical advertising standards (Fedeli & Cheng, 2022). Tourists who visit off the beaten path destinations are typically unprepared to deal with hazards, legal issues, and poor experiences at restricted destinations (Siegel et al., 2023). The unpreparedness of tourists also creates a potential threat to the long-term sustainability of these off the beaten path destinations (Fedeli & Cheng, 2022). Only a handful of studies have examined the impact of influencers on risk perception, safety knowledge, and experience (Cornell et al., 2025); thus, there

is little research available regarding how to effectively promote travel to tourists in a safe manner. This research investigates the relationship between influencers, behaviour, safety, and risk-related decisions (Ameen et al., 2023).

Literature Review

Influencers on social media have designed images of destinations, seen them as a great way for motivation and ultimately making decisions (Priya & Sangeetha, 2025). When sharing authentic images, an influencer builds trust from their followers through credibility and parasocial relationships (Dinç, 2024; Priya & Sangeetha, 2025). This is especially true in India, where social media influencers are directing the youth to off-the-beaten-path locations (Chauhan et al., 2026; Priya & Sangeetha, 2025). Influencers have been shown to be more popular among people seeking inspiration and planning their travel than travel companies or other sources (about 40% of all tourists), resulting in the development of rural tourism (Chauhan et al., 2026). The vast majority of posts made on social media by influencers regarding travel do not discuss safety, local laws, or possible risks, creating an environment for hope bias (overestimating the probability of being safe) and engaging in unsafe behaviours, which results in accidents and overcrowding at travel locations and damaging the sustainability of these locations (Azimi, 2025; Cornell et al., 2025). One of the regulations governing the activity of social media influencers is to publicly disclose any sponsorships (Jhavar et al., 2023; Pal et al., 2023) related to the content they post; however, there are no regulations regarding the safety of their posts. While promoting rural destinations in Tamil Nadu, the state government has partnered with social media influencers to promote these areas based on their authenticity and the need for balance (Priya & Sangeetha, 2025). There are a small number of studies that examine the impact of safety-related information on the behaviour of tourists travelling to or within the Tamil Nadu region (Cornell et al., 2025). This study will fill that void by exploring how social media influencers affect tourists' awareness of risks and their experiences.

Research Objectives

The aim of this study is to explore the risks associated with unregulated social media influencer content in the tourism industry through the following objectives: (1). To Investigate how influencer-generated travel content affects tourists' perception of risk, as well as their awareness of safety in relation to natural hazards and restricted areas. (2). To Study the correlation between travellers' reliance on influencer recommendations and their engagement in unsafe travel behaviours or experiences perceived as unsatisfactory. (3). To Evaluate tourists' reliance on influencers for destination selection and planning, typically without verifying safety guidelines or legality of access via other official sources. (4). To Identify the types of common safety, legal, environmental and logistical issues faced by tourists who rely on influencer recommendations at Tamil Nadu tourism destinations. (5). To Assess the severity and impact of these challenges on experiences, satisfaction with the destination, and perception of destination quality. (6). To Examine the relationships between trust in influencer-generated content and their perception of risk, safety awareness, and their level of preparedness when travelling. And they analyse whether travellers' views of influencer trust, credibility, and safety communication changed after their travel experience. These objectives will generate empirical data informing the role of influencers in tourist risk assessment and safety-related behaviours at Tamil Nadu's emerging tourism destinations. This research will contribute to the development of responsible communications strategies that create a balance between promoting tourism and ensuring visitor safety, particularly when influencers are prominent in influencing travel decisions.

Hypothesis of the Study

Based on the available research regarding the influence of social media influencers upon the decision-making process of tourists, how they perceive risk after receiving safety information through social media, and how to communicate safety in terms of tourist destinations. The following null hypotheses regarding influencer impact will be tested through structured evaluation: H01: There is no significance relationship according to tourist reliance upon influencer content and verification with official safety protocols, evidence of being lawfully allowed to travel to a destination, and obtazwusrr

legal, environmental challenges faced by travellers using primarily influencer sourced information versus statistically sourced information is not statistically significant. H03: The experience quality of a tourist has no effect of perceived quality and satisfaction in a destination primarily influenced by travel challenges. H04: Trust in the influencer has no effect of a tourist's perception of risk or safety level within or at their destination, or their level of preparedness to travel. H05: The influence a traveller had in selecting their influenced source does not change after experiencing travel challenges or negative experiences associated with travel. H06: Influencer reliance and level of safety awareness do not vary according to the age, gender, or prior experience of travellers. H07: The type of destination led tourists to experience safety challenges, legal challenges, etc., associated with using influencer sourced information. H08: There is no difference between foreign and domestic long-distance travellers with respect to reliance upon an influencer, safety awareness as influenced by an influencer, or challenges experienced during their travel as a result of using infl □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This investigation combines the Stimulus – Organism – Response (S–O–R) model (Aichner et al., 2020); Theory of Planned Behaviour (Azimi, 2025; Chauhan et al., 2026); and Risk Perception Theory (Cornell et al., 2025; Xie et al., 2020) to illustrate the relationship between influencer-generated content and tourists' perception, decision-making, and experience. As the immediate source of influence, influencer-generated content serves as a stimulus to the organism via its visual appeal; credibility; authenticity; frequency of exposure; and frequent omissions of safety-related information (Cornell et al., 2025) affecting the tourist's state of trust, destination attractiveness, risk perception, and safety awareness, thereby influencing their response to the stimulus via their choice of destination, their preparation for travel, and their degree of adherence to tourist norms (Aichner et al., 2020). TPB describes how the various states of the organism lead to the formation of intentions and behaviours via attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Azimi, 2025; Chauhan et al., 2026). Influencers develop positive attitudes by representing destinations as safe and appealing while at the same time normalising the risks of travel through the use of normalised subjective norms and by suggesting that they are easily accessible (Chauhan et al., 2026; Priya & Sangeetha, 2025). To some extent, Risk Perception Theory explains tourists' underestimation of risk; however, there are many sources of risk and different ways in which risk can be derived from each of those sources; some of the ways that risk can be perceived (Sun et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2020). Influencers create unrealistic expectations regarding the risk associated with travel, creating an optimistic bias regarding travelling to a given destination (Cornell et al., 2025; Villacé-Molinero et al., 2021). Expectation – Disconfirmation Theory explains the relationship between a tourist's level of satisfaction and the difference between his or her actual experience and his or her expected experience with respect to travel (Papadopoulou et al., 2022). Influencer-generated content creates exaggerated expectations regarding both safety and access to a destination; resulting in negative disconfirmation and tourist dissatisfaction as a result of any challenges encountered while

travelling(Narangajavana et al., 2017; Papadopoulou et al., 2022). Influencer characteristics shape mediators (like risk perception and expectations) resulting in behaviours and outcomes that alter visitors’ trust after their visit and their future behaviour (Dinç, 2024). Ideas concerning this model are also consistent with the rapid promotion of tourism sites in Tamil Nadu (Priya & Sangeetha, 2025), with the uneven development of its infrastructure (Mallick et al., 2020), where the effect of safety has not been well-studied (Cornell et al., 2025). This model shows how tourism site promotions connect with behaviours / outcomes and advances the literature on risk and marketing; therefore, it provides the foundation for the analysis of unregulated influences of influencers on their audience’s cognition, behaviour, and experience to help develop hypotheses for testing, inform policy, and support ethical integration (Cornell et al., 2025; Priya & Sangeetha, 2025).

Research Methodology

This study was conducted using a descriptive-explanatory research design (Babu et al., 2025) and aimed to examine the impact of unregulated social media influencers on the safety awareness, risk perceptions, and overall experiences of tourists at different destinations within Tamil Nadu. Participants’ exposure to influencer marketing, cognitive and affective responses, actions taken while visiting, and post-visit perceptions were measured with a quantitative cross-sectional survey (Babu et al., 2025; Priya & Sangeetha, 2025). A purposive sample composed of six Tamil Nadu tourist destinations, Rameshwaram, Kodaikanal, Madurai, Kanyakumari, Sivaganga, and Tirunelveli (Mallick et al., 2020), was selected to highlight the region’s diversity in terms of heritage, religion, eco-tourism, pilgrimage and offbeat sites reflecting Tamil Nadu’s tourism diversity, tourism infrastructure and online visibility. A convenience sample of 450 international and domestic tourists was selected.

A structured questionnaire based on the proposed conceptual framework was developed using five sections: (i) Demographics/Travel Profile, (ii) Influencer Exposure/Reliance, (iii) Cognition/Affect, (iv) Action Experience & (v) Perception Post Visit (Priya & Sangeetha, 2025). Items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale (Babu et al., 2025; Chauhan et al., 2026) and surveys were available in English and Tamil at tourism sites, lodging establishments, and tourism hubs to accommodate mobile respondents and to facilitate cross-cultural analysis in this mature and diverse tourism market. Data were coded, cleaned, and analysed by the authors using SPSS to conduct descriptive statistics to characterise respondents and reliance on influencer marketing and inferential statistics to determine whether or not the hypotheses were supported (Babu et al., 2025; Priya & Sangeetha, 2025). All ethical principles were adhered to, including voluntary consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study (Chauhan et al., 2026; Priya & Sangeetha, 2025).

Result and Discussion

Table 1 Construct Quality Assessment

Construct	α	CR	AVE	VIF
Influencer Exposure & Engagement	0.89	0.91	0.62	1.86
Influencer Credibility & Commercial Awareness	0.86	0.88	0.59	1.96
Safety Awareness & Info Seeking	0.88	0.90	0.61	2.08
Risk Perception & Psychological Vulnerability	0.91	0.92	0.64	2.17
Behavioural Decision-Making	0.87	0.89	0.60	2.26
Safety, Legal & Environmental Challenges	0.90	0.93	0.66	2.38

Experience Quality & Satisfaction Impact	0.92	0.94	0.68	–
Post-Visit Attitude toward Influencers	0.89	0.91	0.63	2.04
Responsible Travel Intention	0.88	0.90	0.65	–
Source: Primary Normality Check ~ Normal Overall Reliability ~ Excellent with 0.94				

The measurement model (Table 1) has high quality in terms of psychometrics across all constructs, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.86 to 0.92 and composite reliability scores ranging from 0.88 to 0.94, indicating strong internal consistency and reliability of the scales. Normality assumptions hold for all constructs, indicating they are suitable for use with parametric analyses. All constructs also have high levels of convergent validity as measured by average variance extracted (AVE) values which exceed the recommended 0.50 cutoff point, showing that these items measure their associated underlying latent factors well. There is no multicollinearity to be concerned about since variance inflation factor (VIF) values are far below the critical threshold ($VIF < 5$), confirming that the constructs are independent and stable. The overall scale's reliability ($\alpha = 0.94$) indicates that the instrument is strong, reliable, and suitable for the performance of complex statistical analyses and hypothesis testing.

Table 2 Demographic and Travel Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	%
Age Group	20–26	176	40.2
	27–32	128	29.2
	33–38	86	19.6
	39 and Above	48	11.0
Gender	Male	254	58.0
	Female	166	37.9
	Transgender	18	4.1
Nationality	Indian	358	81.7
	Foreign	80	18.3
Educational Qualification	Undergraduate	262	59.8
	Postgraduate	154	35.2
	Doctoral	22	5.0
Travel Companion	Friends	182	41.6
	Tour Group	126	28.8
	Family	98	22.4
	Solo	32	7.2
Purpose of Visit	Leisure	342	78.1
	Nature	48	11.0
	Adventure	32	7.3
	Cultural	16	3.6
Prior Experience	None	108	24.7
	Low	82	18.7
	Moderate	186	42.5
	High	62	14.1

Primary Platform	Instagram	298	68.0
	YouTube	52	11.9
	Facebook	26	5.9
	Blogs	18	4.1
	Others	44	10.1

Source: Primary Data

Young adults dominate profiles as the top customer demographic (40.2% were aged 20-26 years), with 29.2% in DC & MD 27-32 years old; therefore, this indicates that the vast majority of respondents belong to the same age group and are part of an active, digital tourist segment. Just over half (58.0%) of overall respondents are male and 37.9% are female; however, there are very few transgender respondents. The majority (81.7%) use Indian (national) passports to travel to the area. The remaining 18.3% represent tourists that hold foreign passports, providing an opportunity for comparison amongst domestic tourists and help to establish a baseline against which immigrant tourists can”

In the area of education – the study respondents are well-educated (59.8%), with most respondents attaining at least an undergraduate degree, and 1/3 of respondents attained at least a post-graduate degree; thus, respondents are presumed capable of measuring cognitive thought and making sound travel-related decisions based on travel information.

Respondents typically travelled with friends (41.6%) and in organised tour groups (28.8%), which indicates that ‘socially motivated’ travel was common; however, few respondents travelled as lone individuals. Leisure was the primary purpose for travel, with 78.1% of respondents travelling for that purpose; therefore, the findings suggest that experiential and escape-oriented trip characteristics were most common.

In comparison to overall all respondents, there are many respondents who have relatively little prior travel experience to the type of destination being studied (42.5%); however, there are very many respondents who have never travelled to a similar destination or have very little travel experience, increasing their vulnerability to potentially misleading online content regarding travel to the area by first-time, or low-experience, travellers.

Instagram was used as a primary platform for respondents to source their travel inspiration (68.0%); therefore, it was the dominant source of travel inspiration for respondents, demonstrating how it is a significant influencer in the decision to travel to the types of destinations being studied, as well as supporting the relevance of influencer-driven behaviours that affect travel decision-making for tourists.

Table 3 Exploratory Factor Analysis

Section	Details	Value / Loadings	Interpretation
Sampling Adequacy	Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) Measure	0.918	Excellent
	Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity (χ^2)	18,742.63	Factorable ($p < 0.001$)
	Degrees of Freedom	2485	
Communalities	Range > 0.70	29 items	Strong explained variance
	0.60–0.69	26 items	Good explained variance
	0.50–0.59	14 items	Moderate explained variance
	< 0.50	2 items (removed)	Items excluded to improve model clarity
Total Variance Explained	Factor 1	14.82	20.9%
	Factor 2	7.21	10.2%
	Factor 3	5.18	7.3%
	Factor 4	4.37	6.2%
	Factor 5	3.86	5.4%
	Factor 6	3.12	4.4%
	Factor 7	2.84	4.0%
	Factor 8	2.31	3.3%
	Factor 9	1.98	2.8%
	Extraction & Rotation	Eigenvalues > 1; Varimax with Kaiser Normalization	Nine factors extracted explaining 64.5% variance (>60% recommended)
Rotated Component Matrix (Varimax Loadings > 0.50)	B1–B5	0.69–0.81	F1: Influencer Exposure & Engagement
	C1–C4	0.71–0.79	F2: Credibility & Disclosure Awareness
	D1–D4	0.72–0.82	F3: Safety Awareness & Info Seeking
	E1–E3	0.77–0.83	F4: Risk Perception & Psychological Vulnerability
	F1–F3	0.74–0.81	F5: Risk-Oriented Travel Decisions
	G1–G3	0.79–0.85	F6: Safety, Legal & Environmental Challenges
	H1–H3	0.77–0.84	F7: Experience Impact & Satisfaction Loss
	I1–I2	0.79–0.83	F8: Post-Visit Attitude Shift toward Influencers
	J1–J2	0.77–0.81	F9: Responsible Tourism Intention

Source: Primary Data

Results from factor analysis confirm the validity and reliability of the measurement structure for this research. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure (0.918) indicates excellent sampling adequacy, while Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was highly significant ($\chi^2 = 18,742.63$, $p < .001$), indicating that the data is suitable for factor analysis. The majority of items had communalities above 0.60,

demonstrating that many of the variance on these items can be explained by the factors extracted, and therefore two weak items were removed for clarity purposes. Nine distinct factors were extracted through Principal Components Analysis using Varimax rotation; together, they account for 64.5% of the total variance, exceeding the recommended threshold for social science research. All of the retained items loaded strongly ($\geq .50$) onto their respective factors, indicating a clear factor structure with very few cross loads, and the extracted factors have a high degree of alignment with the original theoretical constructs, suggesting strong construct validity and supporting the overarching conceptual framework regarding tourism behaviour influenced by an influencer as a driver and

Table 4 Relationship Between Influencer Reliance and Safety Verification Behaviour

Component	Indicator	Safety Verification Behaviour
Correlation Analysis	Pearson Correlation (r)	-0.61
	Significance (2-tailed)	0.000
	Relationship Strength	Strong Negative
Decision Criteria	Significance Level (α)	0.05
	$p < \alpha$	Yes
	Hypothesis Decision	H ₀ 1 Rejected

Source: Primary Data

The analysis shows a strong reliance on social media influencers' content when making travel decisions ($M = 3.92$), while the same tourists exhibit a low level of engagement with official means of safety or legal verification ($M = 3.11$). The Pearson correlation coefficient of $r = -0.61$ ($p < .001$) demonstrates that there is an inversely proportional statistical relationship between reliance on influencer content and the behaviour of travellers checking for verification of safety. Therefore, this inverse relationship indicates that as traveller's reliance on influencer content increases, the likelihood of those same travellers checking official safety guidelines, or access conditions, or professional travel recommendations decrease significantly. The strength and significance of this relationship provide strong empirical evidence that influencer content crowds out institutional safety communications. Thus, the null hypothesis H₀1 is rejected, affirming reliance on influencers has a significant and negative impact on safety verification behaviour among

Table 5 Difference in Safety, Legal, Environmental, and Logistical Challenges Based on Information Source

Component	Indicator	Influencer-Based Tourists (n = 261)	Official / Traditional Source Tourists (n = 177)
Descriptive Statistics	Mean Challenges Score	4.12	3.28
	Standard Deviation	0.61	0.58
	Minimum	2.10	1.95
	Maximum	5.00	4.65
Assumption Test	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances (F)	-	1.42
	Significance (p)	-	0.234
	Variance Equality Assumed?	-	Yes

t-Test Results	t-value	-	12.84
	Degrees of Freedom (df)	-	436
	Significance (2-tailed)	-	0.000
Effect Size	Cohen's d	-	0.92 (Large Effect)
Decision Criteria	Significance Level (α)	-	0.05
	$p < \alpha$	-	Yes
Hypothesis Decision		H ₀₂ Rejected	

Source: Primary Data

(Table 5) Results indicate that tourists experiences with safety, legal, environmental, and logistical challenges differ according to their primary information source about travel. Tourists who primarily used social media influencer content had a much higher level of difficulty ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.61$) compared to those who used official or other traditional sources of travel information ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.58$). Levene's test showed homogeneity of variances ($p = .234$), allowing the use of an independent samples t-test. The difference between these two groups was statistically very significant ($t(436) = 12.84$, $p < .001$), and the effect was large (Cohen's $d = 0.92$), indicating that there was a large practical significance between the two groups. This finding confirms that relying on influencer-based information will leave tourists more exposed to real-world travel challenges than those who do not primarily use influencer-based information for planning their travels. Thus, the null hypothesis H₀₂ is rejected, indicating that influencer-based travel planning makes tourists more vulnerable to safety and operational risks during travel than those who do not use influencer-

Table 6 Impact of Travel Challenges on Experience Quality and Satisfaction

Component	Indicator	Value
Model Summary	R	0.762
	R ²	0.581
	Adjusted R ²	0.579
	Std. Error of Estimate	0.41
ANOVA (Model Fit)	F-value	301.42
	df (Regression, Residual)	2, 435
	Significance (p)	0.000
Regression Coefficients	Constant (B)	0.41 (p = 0.002)
	Challenges Faced (G): β	0.63
	t-value	16.91
	p-value	0.000
	Risk Perception (E): β	0.21
	t-value	5.84
	p-value	0.000
Effect Strength	Variance Explained	58.1% (Large)
Decision Criteria	Significance Level (α)	0.05
	Overall Model Significant?	Yes
Hypothesis Decision		H ₀₃ Rejected

Source: Primary Data

According to the findings of the (Table 6) multiple regression analysis, travel-related challenges have a major and statistically meaningful influence on visitors' experience quality ($R = 0.762$), and satisfaction. Overall model exhibits exceptional explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.581$), with explained safety, legal and environmental problems as well as perceived psychological vulnerability comprising 58.1% variability in experience outcomes. In addition, the model is very significant ($F(2,435) = 301.42, p < .001$), indicating strong correlation between the independent and dependent variables in measoç

Three independent variable categories (safety, legal/financial, and environmental) are found to be the largest contributors to decreased experience quality ($\beta = 0.63, p < .001$). This means that problems encountered at destinations or during travel have a very detrimental effect on visitors' satisfaction as well as their perceived quality of the destination. Both the psychological variable of vulnerability to loss and perceived risk also contribute to diminished experiences, although to a less extent than the first three challenges ($\beta = 0.21, p < .001$). Clearly, both the challenges presented by some experiences and the psychological state of the tourists impacted the quality of the tourists' experiential outcomes. The results confirm the rejection of null hypothesis H_03 ; therefore, the travel-related difficulties experienced by visitors adversely impact their overall experience and sa

Table 7 Relationship Between Trust in Influencers and Risk-Related Travel Cognitions

Component	Indicator	Risk Perception	Safety Awareness	Travel Preparedness
Descriptive Statistics	Mean	3.87	3.42	3.26
	Std. Deviation	0.71	0.69	0.73
Correlation with Trust in Influencers	Pearson r	-0.52	-0.59	-0.55
	Significance (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000
Relationship Strength	Interpretation	Moderate-Strong	Strong	Moderate-Strong
Decision Criteria	Significance Level (α)	0.05	0.05	0.05
	$p < \alpha$	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hypothesis Decision			H_04 Rejected	

Source: Primary Data

(Table 7) shown that there is a statistically significant negative correlation between trust in social media influencers and tourists' risk-related travel cognitions. Based on Pearson correlation analyses, there was a significant relationship between greater trust (influencer content) and decreased risk perception ($r = -0.52, p < .001$), safety awareness ($r = -0.59, p < .001$), and travel preparedness ($r = -0.55, p < .001$). The strength of these relationships was moderate to strong and, therefore, consistently represented across the cognitive and behavioural dimensions. Therefore, when tourists trust influencers more, they tend to underplay the actual risks they might face, are less likely to look for safety-related information, and engage in less thorough planning before their travel. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis of H_04 , which establishes that trust in influencers negatively

Table 8 Effect of Travel Challenges and Experience Impact on Post-Visit Attitude Toward Influencers

Component	Indicator	Value
Model Summary	R	0.781
	R ²	0.610
	Adjusted R ²	0.608
	Std. Error of Estimate	0.39
ANOVA (Model Fit)	F-value	339.21
	df (Regression, Residual)	2, 435
	Significance (p)	0.000
Regression Coefficients	Constant (B)	0.32 (p = 0.004)
	Experience Impact (H): β	0.48
	t-value	11.72
	p-value	0.000
	Challenges Faced (G): β	0.36
	t-value	8.49
Effect Strength	p-value	0.000
	Variance Explained	61.0% (Large)
Decision Criteria	Significance Level (α)	0.05
	Overall Model Significant	Yes
Hypothesis Decision		H ₀ 5 Rejected

Source: Primary Data

The (Table 8) results from regression reveal that tourists' post-trip perceptions of social media influencers are predominantly affected by their experiences while traveling and any difficulties they faced. This model has substantial explanatory ability ($R=0.781$) while the challenges tourists faced and negative experiences accounted for 61.0% of the variance found in post-trip attitudes ($R^2=0.610$). There is statistically significant overall regression model ($F(2,435)=339.21$, $p<0.001$) demonstrating a strong connection between predictor variables and attitude alteration.

Negative experience effect was the greatest predictor variable in explaining post-trip attitude transformation ($\beta=0.48$, $p<0.001$) followed by the challenges encountered while traveling ($\beta=0.36$, $p<0.001$). This finding suggests that the negative experiences of being dissatisfied, stressed and having a lack of expectations have a very significant impact on decreasing trust in social media influencers, and direct experiences with safety, legality and environmental issues further enhance the amount of change in tourists' attitudes***

hypothesis H₀5 can be rejected; means that negative experiences while traveling and challenges while on-site greatly influence how tourists perceive social media influencers after returning home.

Table 9 Differences in Influencer Reliance and Safety Awareness Across Demographics

Demographic Factor	DV	F-value	p-value	Effect Size (η^2)	Decision
Age Groups	Influencer Reliance	5.42	0.001	0.036	Rejected
	Safety Awareness	4.91	0.002	0.033	Rejected

Gender	Influencer Reliance	2.68	0.072	0.012	Not Rejected
	Safety Awareness	4.18	0.016	0.019	Rejected
Travel Experience	Influencer Reliance	9.73	0.000	0.043	Rejected
	Safety Awareness	8.41	0.000	0.037	Rejected

Source: Primary Data

According to the (Table: 9) ANOVA, significant differences exist between tourist demographic characteristics and how they utilize social media influencers and their awareness of safety. Age had a significant impact on both their reliance on social media influencers ($F=5.42, p=.001, \eta^2=.036$) and their awareness of safety ($F=4.91, p=.002, \eta^2=.033$), with younger tourists relying more upon influencer content and paying less attention to information related to safety. Additionally, travel experience resulted in both significant and consistent influences on both influencer reliance ($F=9.73, p<.001, \eta^2=0.043$) and safety awareness ($F=8.41, p<.001, \eta^2=0.037$); as such, tourists with fewer travel experiences exhibited a greater degree of reliance on social media influencers (i.e., less travel experience equals greater influencer reliance) and less awareness of safety, thus supporting experiential learning to be an important moderator of tourism-related risk behaviours.

The patterns between gender share mixed results. While there are no statistically significant differences between men and women regarding their reliance on social media influencers ($p=.072$), men and women do differ statistically regarding safety awareness ($F=4.18, p=.016, \eta^2=.019$); therefore, it can be concluded that while there are no significant differences regarding media reliance between genders, there are significant differences in both risk and safety cognitions between genders. The effect sizes of the age, travel experience, and gender effects are small to moderate and are considered meaningful effect sizes in terms of hypotheses testing within behaviour research. Thus, all three variables can be concluded to have some degree of systematized effects on tourist's us

Table 10 Effect of Destination Type on Safety, Legal, and Environmental Challenges

Component	Indicator	Heritage	Eco-Tourism	Adventure	Offbeat
Descriptive Statistics	Mean Challenges Score	3.21	3.74	4.31	4.47
	Standard Deviation	0.59	0.61	0.63	0.65
	Minimum	2.10	2.15	2.35	2.50
	Maximum	4.15	4.85	5.00	5.00
ANOVA Results	F-value	-	-	14.62	-
	df (Between, Within)	3, 434	-	-	-
	Significance (p)	-	-	0.000	-
Effect Size	η^2	-	-	0.12 (Large)	-
Decision Criteria	α	-	-	0.05	-
	$p < \alpha$	-	-	Yes	-
Hypothesis Decision			H_0 Rejected		

Source: Primary Data

The results of the ANOVA provide overwhelming evidence that the type of destination affects tourists' experience of safety, legal issues, and environmental concerns in a substantial, significant way. The statistically significant F-value ($F(3,434) = 14.62, p <.001$) indicates meaningful differences between types of destinations based on the statistical category. In addition, the large

effect size ($\eta^2 = .12$), indicates that there are also practical differences across types of destination. Tourists who attended offbeat ($M = 4.47$, $SD = .65$) and adventure ($M = 4.31$, $SD = .63$) destinations rated the highest levels of challenges, suggesting increased exposure to risk, regulatory ambiguity and environmental vulnerability within these types of destinations. Eco-tourism destination types rated by tourists as having moderate levels of challenge ($M = 3.74$) and lastly heritage tourism destination types rated by tourists as having the lowest challenge intensity ($M = 3.21$), indicating a more regulated environment and a developed infrastructure for safety.

This indicates that social media may exacerbate risk-taking behaviours in destinations that are less regulated and more experiential by providing an opportunity for influencers to emphasize novelty & thrill over safety when motivating individuals to visit destinations. Thus, the results support the rejection of H_07 , and suggest destination typology to be an important contextual variable in understanding tourists' exposure to risk. Therefore, there is a need for differentiated safety communication strategies and a higher level of regulatory oversight for destinations found through social media as offbeat and adventure tourism.

Differences Between Foreign and Indian Tourists in Influencer Reliance, Safety Awareness, and Challenges Faced

The (Table 11) shows Significant evidence exists for the disparity between Indian and foreign travel behaviours across three significant variables. First, international tourists rely much more heavily on travel-related content produced by social media influencers ($M = 4.18$ vs. $M = 3.71$) that they use to research travel strategies and navigate the destination; second, international tourists have considerably less awareness of safety-related behaviours ($M = 3.21$ vs $M = 3.84$), which may be a result of being less familiar with local regulations, safety practices and other context-specific travel risks than local tourists; and lastly, international tourists are more likely to experience multiple safety, legal, and environmental-related challenges while travelling ($M = 4.33$ vs. 3.69) than domestic travellers

Table 11 Reliance, Awareness, and Challenges Faced by Foreign and Indian Tourists

Component	Indicator	Indian Tourists (n = 358)	Foreign Tourists (n = 80)
Descriptive Statistics	Influencer Reliance (B)	3.71 ± 0.65	4.18 ± 0.70
	Safety Awareness (D)	3.84 ± 0.68	3.21 ± 0.72
	Challenges Faced (G)	3.69 ± 0.60	4.33 ± 0.61
Independent Samples t-Test	t-value	6.94	7.26
	df	436	436
	p-value	0.000	0.000
Effect Size	Cohen's d	0.66	0.91
Decision Criteria	α	0.05	0.05
	$p < \alpha$	Yes	Yes
Hypothesis Decision		H_08 Rejected	H_08 Rejected

Source: Primary Data

The independent samples t-tests confirm that these observed differences in both accuracy and magnitude are statistically significant ($p < .001$), with the medium to large effect sizes (Cohen's $d = .66$ to $.91$), showing the practical significance of these findings beyond their statistical association.

Therefore, H₀₈ (as tested) is rejected. Thus, the results provide evidence that international travellers are more susceptible to the adverse effects of influencer-generated content as compared to domestic tourists. Overall, these results provide additional support for the need for diverse policy interventions, multilingual safety messages, and improved regulation of influencer-based marketing of tourist destinations, to safeguard international tourists from increased risk while travelling.

Discussion

This study looks at how tourist's behaviour; from an individual's travel behaviours, to their on-site experience to their post-visit attitudes and interest in responsible tourism is affected by social media travel influencers. By blending together psychological, behavioural and contextual factors into one unified empirical framework it fills a major gap in the tourism research community that has primarily focused on influencer marketing as it relates to destination image creation and purchase intentions, while not providing empirical evidence of influencer marketing on safe travel/easy-going travelling.

Reliability of measurement model supports confidence in findings with all constructs exhibiting high internal consistency, high composite reliability, sufficient convergent validity, low multicollinearity and low common method variance. The results of exploratory factor analysis support the theoretical distinctions between the 9 constructs with 64.5% of total variance explained and confirm the multidimensional nature of influencer-mediated travel risk elements.

Using these empirical strengths, descriptive results demonstrate that there is high exposure to and engagement with influencers primarily through their visual appeal impacting how a destination is perceived (Azimi, 2025). In comparison to the overall exposure to influencers, the perception regarding the credibility of influencers and their transparency was relatively low with regard to sponsorship disclosures and emphasis on safety (Choi et al., 2022; Cornell et al., 2025). The contrast in the low credibility of the influencers and the high level of reliance upon them indicates cognitive dissonance, where the affective appeal and social identification have greater influence than rational evaluation which opposes traditional beliefs that credibility must be a prerequisite to have a p

This same dynamic is realised within safety behaviour, evidenced by a lack of awareness with respect to safety practices and inability to validate influencers' narratives compared to using official resources. A statistically significant negative correlation exists between reliance upon influencers and safety behaviour which resulted in the rejection of H₀₁ (Cornell et al., 2025). As such, influencer-driven tourism has the ability to not only influence the selection of a destination but replace existing safety advisories from established institutions (Cornell et al., 2025).

The participants also showed significant psychological vulnerabilities including being under stress and having optimism bias regarding risk minimization (Larsen et al., 2019). Participants used equipment improperly or took risks where they would have been in prohibited areas or not following safety protocol to access a location for the purposes of taking photographs. There was a significant negative correlation between trust in the influencer and risk perception, safety awareness, and level of preparedness and, therefore, H₀₄ was rejected (Ameen et al., 2023). In other words, trust in the influencer negatively impacted how participants perceived risk prior to the trip and their planning process prior to the trip.

Increased exposure to additional risk, safety, legal and environmental consequences (including but not limited to hazardous terrain) was observed. The results of independent t-tests for both risk and safety levels indicated that tourists relying on influencer-advised experiences experienced significantly greater levels of difficulty than those tourists relying on official websites, with significantly greater effect sizes; thus, H₀₂ was rejected (Cornell et al., 2025). The risks associated

with influencer recommendations compounded as you engaged in experiences in off the beaten path and adventure-based locations, where ANOVA results also rejected H₀₇ (Cornell et al., 2025). This demonstrates how influencers disproportionately contribute to the risks associated with locations that are not well regulated.

Therefore, the safety, legal and environmental challenges(s) resulted in lower quality experiences and lower satisfaction levels, compounded by the psychological vulnerabilities of participants, explained 58.1% of the variance and resulted in H₀₃ being rejected. Descriptive data provide evidence of dissatisfaction as it relates to actual experiences vs. experiences shared by influencers provided for by disconfirmation theory (Saqib, 2019).

Following travel, perceptions of influencers became increasingly cautious, with a focus on ethical responsibilities and possible regulatory approvals. Adverse experiences and problems created 61% of the total variance in posters' attitudes, represented by H₀₅. This indicates a rebuilding of trust from the lack of adequate protection prior to travel. Despite these impairments to their trust in influencers, there was a strong focus on responsible tourism, focusing on travelling to destinations that are considered certified safe rather than recommended by influencers, indicating that experiences that did not meet their expectations may enhance their responsible behaviour (Azimi, 20ç

Demographic differences helped refine opinions: younger/more novice travellers had more reliance on influencers and less focus on safety. Therefore, there is partial rejection of H₀₆ (Omeish et al., 2024) for this group of travellers. Also, further differences were found in the impact that gender had on safety but not for reliance on influencers. Additionally, foreign travellers had a greater reliance on influencers, gained less awareness and had greater challenges than domestic travellers. This provides strong evidence against H₀₈ (Prem & Velmurugan, 2024), highlighting m,"~

Overall, this study achieves its objectives by establishing how dependence on social media influencers leads to decreased emphasis on safety verification, reduces risk awareness, encourages reckless behaviour, increases challenges, dilutes travel experiences, alters perceptions of destinations, and creates accountability for tourism behaviours. The connection between virtual influence and real-world consequences is made clear within the current landscape of both tourism and digital marketing, and recommendations are made for the establishment of ethical standards, compliance requirements, monitoring of platforms, and regulatory efforts to minimize unsafe endorsements (Fedeli & Cheng, 2022). This information also highlights the pressing need for a new integrated framework that combines influencer marketing with safety guidelines in order to ensure the safety of travellers while encouraging responsible tourism. Therefore, this research validates the need for development of responsible communication plans through which destinations will be promoted while ensuring visitor safety, filling a void in current tourism research (Cornell et al., 2025; Omeish et a)

Policy Implication

Governments can support travel creators who create and share engaging content with audiences by implementing an ethical influencer certification for content creators who provide transparent disclosures for their sponsors; portray accurate representations of destinations; and provide safety information for destinations (Antoniou, 2024; Fedeli & Cheng, 2022). Certified creators may be prioritized for official tourism organization partnerships, while repeat violators may face penalties including being removed from a platform (Babu et al., 2025).

In addition to providing an ethical influencer certification, social media platforms providing travel-related content should enable consumers to identify travel influencers who have provided

verified certifications. For example, by providing an icon or label on a travel influencer's profile/account that identifies them as certified (Fedeli & Cheng, 2022). This will allow users to make informed and educated choices about travel content creators. Furthermore, social media platforms displaying travel content should be required to flag content lacking safety information (Cornell et al., 2025) as well as support travel creators in providing this information dependent upon the platform policy (Cornell et al., 2025). This accountability is essential in a time when social media platforms shape the travel decision-making process of a significant portion of the travelling public (Cornell et al., 2025).

Reinforce Official Tourism Information Systems to Compete Digitally: Tourism government bodies should redesign the official channels to be visual, multi-language and mobile-friendly (Babu et al., 2025). Partnerships with certified influencers can merge the official authority of safety guidance with engaging digital storytelling, particularly for international visitors (Azimi, 2025).

Establish Destination-Specific Risk Zoning and Online/Offline Consistency: High-risk destinations should establish zoning regulations that designate clear, unambiguous areas as Safe Areas, Restricted Areas or Vulnerable Areas. Influencers who promote restricted areas without proper authority must face the legal ramifications from improperly representing the real and virtual world (Cornell et al., 2025).

Increase Digital Literacy and Risk Awareness for Tourists: Public awareness campaigns directed at providing tourists with a way to assess the validity of their sources of influencer-generated content, verify the information contained in government safety sources and detect indicators of risk before travelling. These campaigns will enable tourists to become informed decision makers through empowering them to avoid being passive followers (Feijóo et al., 2023).

Create Tailored Safety Communications to Foreign Tourists: Foreign tourists are more likely to experience higher levels of vulnerability while travelling, therefore, they need specific multilingual safety advisories, QR code-linked government resources for their safety requirements that are embedded in influencer-generated material and pre-arrival briefing information. Governments in all countries must cooperate with tourism officials as well as online platforms along the tourist's journey (Babu et al., 2025).

To develop policies in support of Sustainable Tourism, there must also be more consideration given to influencer regulation as part of the wider framework for sustainable tourism. Irresponsible digital promotion from influencers presents issues surrounding visitor safety; sustainability of the destination itself; and the well-being of the local community (Azimi, 2025; Fedeli & Cheng, 2022).

Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to determine how social media travel influencers impact a tourist's perception of safety, risk perceptions, travel behaviours, quality of experiences that can be gained through the experience and post-visit attitude. A sample of 438 tourists was surveyed at popular tourist destinations in Tamil Nadu to identify the link between promotions for tourism through an influencer and increased perceptions of risk to safety, psychological vulnerability and the resulting poor experience outcomes, thus bridging a gap in tourism marketing research. The tourists rely heavily on the content produced by influencers as a source of information, but there is little verification of the official sources of safety information. The aspirational nature of the content combined with the visual appeal of the content creates an environment in which the individual's awareness of the risks involved is diminished. This leads to an individual making an unsafe decision, such as entering into an area that is restricted or ignoring the rules. As a result of these actions, the tourist's safety, state of law and the state of the environment, particularly in

adventure destinations, are all threatened, as well as the quality of the tourist's experience due to stress and disappointment.

Negative experiences erode trust in influencers, encourage support for regulation and create an increased reliance on official sources, leading to a transition toward responsible tourism. Tourists from other countries face increased risk and require targeted interventions. Finally, the current findings highlight how important it is to integrate the monitoring of such influences into sustainable tourism frameworks in order to protect the safety of visitors to a destination, support the integrity of destinations and promote the well-being of the communities of destinations. By providing a multi-dimensional model to represent both digital influence and the potential real-world consequences of these digital influencers on the tourism industry, as well as digital marketing, this study calls for implementation of ethical practices within influencer marketing; greater accountability from social media platforms; and policies designed to ensure the safety, sustainability, and well-being of all people affected by tourism. This research also illustrates the importance of implementing clear guidelines regarding the ethical code of conduct for influencers and properly representing tourist destinations responsibly to m

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