

The Impact of Social Media Influencers on Domestic Tourist Travel Decisions and The Mediating Role of Perceived Authenticity: A Study Focusing on Multiple Tourist Places in Sri Lanka as a Travel Destinations

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In recent times, social media influencers have become crucial sources of travel-related information, significantly influencing tourists' behaviour in choosing travel destinations. This is particularly evident in the context of attracting tourists to various destinations in Sri Lanka. This research aims to fill the gap in the existing literature and provide valuable insights into the dynamics of travel decision-making in the context of an emerging and culturally rich destination by examining the impact of social media influencers (SMIs) on travel choices in Sri Lanka. The study used an online questionnaire survey to collect data using a quantitative design. The results showed a strong positive relationship between social media influencers' characteristics and domestic tourists' travel decisions in Sri Lanka, with a mediating effect of perceived authenticity. The factors that affect these choices are perceived authenticity, expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. Findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of influencer marketing, emphasising context-specific insights for Sri Lanka's diverse tourist landscape. The study's practical implications extend to informing targeted marketing strategies for the tourism industry. This study emphasises the crucial role of influencers in guiding tourists' actions, providing valuable insights for marketers and policymakers, especially as Sri Lanka's tourism industry grows.

Keywords: *Generation Z and Y, Perceived Authenticity, Social media Influencer, Travel Decisions, Travel Destinations in Sri Lanka*