Social media influencers as co-creators of the tourist destination value

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SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS AS CO-CREATORS OF THE TOURIST DESTINATION VALUE

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to propose a model for co-creating destination value through Social media influencer (SMI) credibility, its congruences with destination products and tourists, by the mediation of tourist-destination product congruence, and perceived overall value creation for the tourist destination experience through SMI (OVCTDESIM).

Methodology – Data was collected from a sample of 211 tourists and 32 tourist boards in Croatia, and it was processed and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) ver. 26. Univariate statistical analysis (descriptive statistics) was used to describe the characteristics of the sample. Multivariate statistical analysis (exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis) was used to confirm the reliability and validity of the scales, and structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypotheses. Thus, structural equation modeling was performed using Amos ver. 26, to analyze the structural relationships between the variables. An Independent-sample t-test was performed to identify the significance of differences between perceived and created or communicated overall value for the tourist destination experience through SMI during previsit, visit, and post-visit stay.

Findings – The model explained 51.3% of the variance in intention to visit and 56.1% of the variance in intention to recommend the destination. Perceived SMI credibility significantly influenced perceived SMI-destination product and SMI-tourist congruences. Research results indicate that perceived SMI-tourist congruence significantly affects the perceived OVCTDESIM. However, the hypothesis regarding the influence of perceived SMI-destination product congruence on OVCTDESIM was not confirmed. The research results reveal that perceived OVCTDESIM significantly influences attitudes toward a destination, consequently influencing the intention to visit and recommend the destination. Additionally, it was established that partial mediation exists between SMI-destination product and SMI-tourist congruences through tourist-destination product congruence. Significant differences are identified between perceived and created or communicated overall value for the tourist destination experience through SMI.

Contribution – The present research aims to close a specific research gap by proposing an original, empirically tested model that can be further developed and expanded in future research related to the use of influencer marketing in creating destination value and possibly in other contexts. Also, findings can serve as a reference for destination management planners to comprehend all the important dimensions to consider when employing influencer marketing to increase destination value.

Keywords: social media influencer (SMI), SMI credibility, SMI congruences, co-creation of destination value.

INTRODUCTION

Influencer marketing is an essential tool that tourist destinations can use to influence the tourist destination value co-creation, starting from creating value in the travel planning phase through the tourist's stay in the destination and all the way to sharing the tourist's experience after the destination visit. Developing the specific concept of travel influencer also speaks of the extent to which influencer marketing is used for the needs of tourism. A travel influencer is a person who deals exclusively or mainly with travel. Stainton (2022) defines a travel influencer as a person who has the ability to influence the behavior or opinions of others in the field of travel and tourism. Travel influencers rely on e-word of mouth to convey their experiences through social networks about the destinations they travel to and the content they use there. Their posts often include reviews, recommendations, and ideas for future visitors to the destination. Thanks to travel influencers, their followers can review a whole range of tourist destinations quickly and analyze the contents offered within the destination to gain a perception of the destination experience (Kujundžić et al. 2022).

Previous studies have demonstrated that effective online advertising significantly influences travelers' attitudes and intentions (Byun and Jang, 2018; Trivedi and Rozia, 2019). More specifically, research conducted by Upananda and Bandara (2022) showed that influencer marketing positively impacts the travel trend of social network users. However, it can be stated that, despite growing researchers' interest in influencer marketing, there are still significant unanswered research questions regarding the effectiveness of influencers and influencer marketing in general (Trivedi et al. 2022) and especially in the context of tourist destination marketing.

Goldsmith et al. (2000) point out that credible endorsers generally positively affect consumers' perceptions (in Lim et al. 2017). Influencers' credibility is closely related to the content they create and the products they promote. Researchers stress the importance of congruence between the promoted product and the influencer (Belanche et al. (II), 2021) for the marketing effort to be effective. If the congruence is not present or is not strong enough, the promotion message could be perceived as unauthentic, which could make the campaign ineffective and harmful to both the brand and the influencer. An influencer could lose followers if perceived as inconsistent or insincere. Choosing the wrong influencer for the brand or the producer could result in various negative effects, from spending money in vain to losing loyal customers due to disappointment in promoted values.

Besides SMI-product congruence, other factors need to be considered by marketers when choosing an influencer, such as the congruence of SMI with the customer. Customers (followers) evaluate information more favorably if they perceive their fit with the influencer (Belanche et al. – I 2021). Following this, the basic idea of influencer marketing is that followers generally tend to follow influencers that they relate to or strive (or at least fantasize) to become like them. Thereby, it is necessary to keep in mind that it is not the case with all influencers. There are also cases of so-called negative influencers that social media users follow because they find them ridiculous and/or to make fun of them or because they enjoy bizarre content. This fact stresses the importance of carefully interpreting the numbers regarding the number of followers and the need to

analyze the content of SMI interactions with followers. Levin (2020) states that three kinds of indicators need to be considered: the audience size, the influencer's affinity, and the strength of the relationship, which refers mainly to audience engagement. For example, as pointed out by Agha (2022), engagement is much more important than audience size for hotel marketing. Engagement refers to followers' readiness to respond, do, or buy what the influencer recommends.

In the present research, social media influencers were investigated to establish their role in the value creation of the tourist destination experience. This paper proposes a model for co-creating destination value through Social media influencer (SMI) credibility, congruence of SMI with destination products and tourists, and perceived overall value creation for the tourist destination experience through SMI (OVCTDESIM). The last is based on Frías Jamilena et al. (2017) research, which proposed that value-creation among tourists during their entire destination experience (before, during, and after their stay) is an antecedent of increased destination brand equity.

The paper is structured as follows. After establishing the theoretical background related to influencer marketing and research gap identification, the framework for the hypotheses design was presented. Then the research methodology is elaborated, namely empirical research methods, data collection process, and measurement validation. Research results are then presented and interpreted in light of recent research cognitions. Based on the above, implications for researchers and practitioners are explained, and the research limitations and recommendations for future researchers are pointed out.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND GAPS IDENTIFICATION

The use of influencer marketing in tourist destinations is mentioned in various recent studies with highlighted key elements that complement each other. The essential role of influencer marketing in tourist destinations is promoting the brand and features of the destination through branded content on social media and word of mouth (Gretzel 2018). Using influencer marketing in the context of DMOs is a more effective alternative to direct independent destination promotion. A social media campaign is effective, and DMOs can use influencer marketing to build a destination image, which positively affects travel intention and engagement with the target audience of tourists (Ong and Ito 2019; Hays et al. 2013; Litvin et al. 2008). The timely intervention of DMOs and their close collaboration with influencers, where they should be cautious about when and whom they should collaborate with, will use the benefits of influencer marketing for the success of the tourist destination (Sevin 2013; Zhang and Huang 2022; Dolnicar and Ring 2014; Li and Petrick 2008).

Xiao et al. 2018 and Lee and Kim 2020 stated that customers tend to trust messages and communication from their liked and followed social media personalities than directly from the company's side (in Reva and Boalre 2022). Sokolova and Kefi 2020 and Stubb et al. 2019) pointed out influencers' credibility as an essential issue for influencers (in Belanche et al. (II), 2021). Wang et al. (2017) considered information presented by a credible source (e.g., a social media influencer) can affect consumers' beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors (in Lim et al. 2017). Vesna et al. (2013) found that higher

destination source credibility could enhance the destination image of tourists and their place attachment (in Shang and Luo 2021). Therefore, identifying the attributes and the most impactful variable as an antecedent to perceived social media influencer credibility is essential for studying influencers' effectiveness and contributing to the existing knowledge gap.

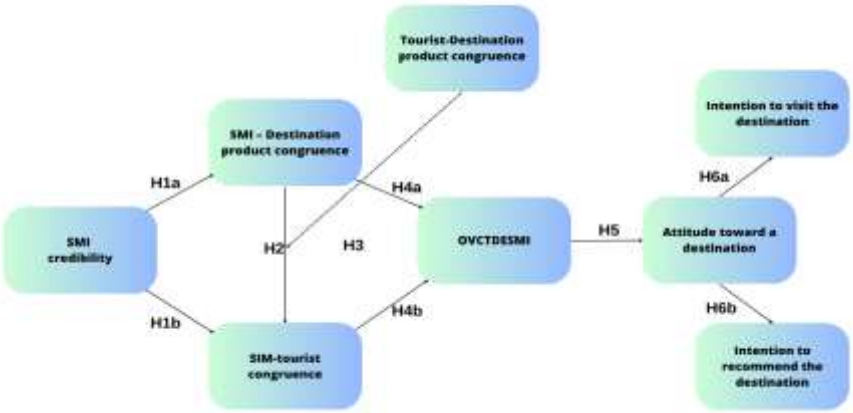
Matching between the tourist product, influencers who promote the tourist destination, and tourists demands a study of the relationship between individual values and brand awareness, visit intention, and intention to recommend a tourist destination (Sesar et al. 2021; Belanche et al. (I) 2021; Masuda et al. 2022). Previous research investigates different SMI congruences, Belanche et al. (I), (2021) point out that prior literature fails to acknowledge that all three elements of the tripartite model are interrelated (i.e., influencer–consumer, influencer–product, and consumer–product) and must align for persuasive influencer communication to occur. Following their approach, the present research considers matches across all three elements of an influencer marketing campaign in a single model to examine their role in co-creating tourist destination value.

The value-creation of the tourist destination experience through SMI was observed from the service-dominant logic perspective (SDL), which states that customers play a fundamental role in the value-creation process during their consumption experience (Grönroos 2011; Helkkula et al. 2012; Karpen et al. 2012, Mohd-Any et al. 2014, adopted from Frías Jamilena et al. 2017). In light of the tourism literature, it is proposed that value-creation is generated throughout the entire consumption experience and includes value-creation in the previsit, visit, and post-visit stages (Frías Jamilena et al. 2017). Through all three stages of the consumption process for tourism stay, there are interactions between customers, suppliers and other participants within the value-creation concept (Grönroos and Voima 2013; Heinonen et al. 2010 adopted from Frías Jamilena et al. 2017). In the present research, social media influencers (as representatives of other participants or co-creators of destination value) were investigated to establish their role in the value creation of the tourist destination experience. Social networks play a significant role before, during, and after holidays, laying the groundwork for DMOs to use influencer marketing at every holiday planning stage (Cox et al. 2009; Fotis et al. 2011; Frías Jamilena et al. 2017). Following this, the perceived overall value of the tourist destination experience is observed through all three stages in the context of SMI use. It should be noted that previous studies have not examined the conceptual framework of SMI integration into the destination value creation process from the SDL perspective and their influence on tourist attitudes. The present research aims at closing this specific research gap.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

After an in-depth literature review, the model was created that contains the elements that ensure attributes to increase the perceived influencers' credibility and its impact on tripartite congruences, tourist destination value-creation, and tourists' attitudes. The research model was created by integrating the adapted Source-credibility Model and value-creation based on service-dominant logic (SDL).
Figure 1 presents the research model according to the research hypotheses set.

Figure 1: **Conceptual model**



According to the Source-credibility Model defined by Ohanian (1990), a source is evaluated in line with three dimensions: trustworthiness, expertise, and physical attractiveness (Argyris et al. 2021). For this research, the Source-credibility Model was adapted and expanded. Source credibility is considered to be a key impacting factor on follower behavior with effective consequences for buying decisions and brand attitude (Ljiljander and Gummerus 2015; Magno and Casia 2018: adopted from Guerreiro et al. 2019). Chiao (2005) points out that numerous research findings support the positive effect of trustworthiness on effectiveness (in Sertoglu et al. 2014). Multiple studies argued that perceived expertise significantly affects the compliance-gaining process and that people are keen to agree with communicators whom they perceive as experts (Xiao et al. 2018; Crano 1970; Crisci and Kassinove 1973: adopted from: Serman and Sims 2022). Credibility, including expertise, is positively related to purchase intention (Masuda et al., 2022). Thus, a lack of expertise can reduce the perceived influencer's credibility (Sokolova and Kefi 2020: adopted from: Masuda et al. 2022). Jun and Yi (2020) considered that followers who feel the influencer enjoys content creation without expecting external compensation become more confident that the content reflects the influencer's thoughts. When followers perceive consistency in the campaign content, they tend to develop a positive assessment of their influencer (Belanche et al. – II 2021). Based on Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), when elaborating involvement with the product or service, the parasocial relationship with the SIM, followers may also undertake processing via argument quality (Ong et al. 2022). Visual and textual presentation of the destination in the influencers' published content can more effectively present a positive image of the destination, whereby attractive and aesthetic experiences in shared content positively impact destination marketing (Ong et al. 2022; Jun and Yi 2020). As a credibility attribute, Till et al. (1998) argued that attractiveness is not a powerful dimension for generating buying activity because there is a poor logical relation between an attractive endorser and purchasing intent (in Reva and Boalre 2022). Following the above mentioned, the influencers' credibility construct in this research is evaluated through five dimensions: trustworthiness, expertise, authenticity, argument quality, and visual aesthetics.

Despite growing researchers' interest in influencer marketing, there are still significant unanswered research questions regarding the effectiveness of influencers and influencer marketing in general (Trivedi et al. 2022) and especially in the context of tourist destination marketing. Research conducted by Upananda and Bandara (2022) showed that influencer marketing positively impacts the travel trend of social network users. Ong et al. (2022) pointed out that SMI credibility positively affects how consumers process the content of the SMI. Digital influencer (or blogger) needs to be recognized as credible for recommendations to be considered by their followers (Ljiljander and Gummerus 2015; Magno and Cassia 2018 adopted from: Guerreiro et al. 2019).

The authors researched various SMI congruences. Researchers point to the importance of congruence between the promoted product and the influencer (Belanche et al. - I 2021) for the marketing effort to be effective. As a brand's spokesperson, social media influencers must exhibit and appropriately match the product features, which will significantly strengthen the advertising results (Lim et al. 2017). Thus, if the congruence is not present or strong enough, the promotion message could be perceived as unauthentic, making the campaign ineffective and harmful to both the brand and the influencer.

Besides congruence with the product, other factors need to be considered by marketers when choosing an influencer for promoting their product, such as congruence of SMI with the customer. Customers (followers) evaluate information more favorably if they perceive their fit with the influencer. (Belanche et al. 2021) As mentioned earlier, social media users are generally more prone to following influencers whose lifestyles and values they relate to or strive to. Also, they will assign more importance to their advice if they can relate to it. Thereby, it is necessary to remember that it is not the case with all influencers. There are also cases of so-called negative influencers that social media users follow because they find them ridiculous and/or to make fun of them or because they enjoy bizarre content. This fact stresses the importance of carefully interpreting the numbers regarding the number of followers and the need to analyze the content of SMI interactions with followers.

Belanche et al. - I (2021) point out the need to overview the mutual congruence among products, consumers, and influencers to determine the effects on consumers' attitudes toward the product and behavioral intentions. Accordingly, we argue that the perceived credibility of SMI will increase SMI congruence with destination products and tourists. It is assumed that their relationship is under the mediating influence of tourist-destination product congruence. Following above mentioned, the hypotheses are designed as follows:

H1a: Perceived SMI credibility significantly positively influences perceived SMI-destination product congruence.
H1b: Perceived SMI credibility significantly positively influences perceived tourist-SMI congruence.
H2: Perceived SMI- destination product congruence significantly positively influences perceived tourist-SMI congruence.
H3: Perceived tourist-destination product congruence significantly moderates the relationship between SMI-destination product congruence and tourist-SMI congruence.

Following the implemented concept of destination value co-creation through SMI based on SDL, it is essential to point out that the findings of Lee et al. (2014) verified perceived value as a predictor of tourists' attitudes (in Shang and Luo 2021). Given the active role that co-created and shared content on social networks plays in consumer behavior, marketers should consider how best to intervene and through which means to intervene at each stage of the customer decision-making journey (Guerreiro et al. 2019). SMIs are seen as co-creators of the tourist destination experience. Some previous studies have demonstrated that effective online advertising significantly influences travelers' attitudes and intentions (Byun and Jang 2018; Trivedi and Rozia 2019). Xu and Pratt (2018) and Ong and Ito (2019) identified SMI as significant in enhancing the campaign experience of destination marketing, which result in forming a positive attitude toward the campaign and/or image formed of the destination marketed, becoming important predictors for travel intention (Ong et al. 2022). The intention to recommend a product predicts whether the consumer offers positive assessments (Casalo et al. 2017 adopted from Belanche et al. – I 2021). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4a: Perceived SMI-destination product congruence significantly positively influences the perceived overall value creation for the tourist destination experience through SMI.
H4b: Perceived tourist-SMI congruence significantly positively influences the perceived overall value creation for the tourist destination experience through SMI.
H5: The perceived overall value creation for the tourist destination experience through SMI significantly positively influences attitudes toward a destination.
H6a: Positive attitude toward a tourist destination significantly positively influences the intention to visit the destination.
H6b: Positive attitude toward a tourist destination significantly positively influences the intention to recommend the destination.

Different influences of destination brand value and destination brand experience (Grace and O'Cass 2005; Ambler et al. 2002; Sweeney and Soutar 2001) on social media users should be examined by DMOs or their marketing experts so that destinations will be able to build destination loyalty of potential tourists for them to revisit the destination (Boo et al. 2009; Back and Parks 2003). Marketers in tourist destinations should consider inviting influencers to promote the destination by sharing their experiences through their social media channels to reach and influence the target segment of tourists (Xu and Pratt 2018). In previous studies, influencer marketing on networks to collect travel information, such as Facebook, TripAdvisor, and blogs, was characterized as very successful and useful (Del Chiappa 2011; White 2010; Yoo and Gretzel 2009). A social media campaign is effective, and DMOs can use influencer marketing through social media to build a destination image, which positively affects travel intention and engagement with the target audience of tourists (Ong and Ito 2019; Hays et al. 2013; Litvin et al. 2008). Social networks play a significant role before, during, and after holidays, laying the groundwork for DMOs to use influencer marketing at every holiday planning stage (Cox et al. 2009; Fotis et al. 2011; Frías Jamilena et al. 2017).

H7: There is a significant difference between the perceived and the created/communicated overall value for the tourist destination experience through SMI in all phases of the holiday planning process.

3. RESEARCH METODOLOGY

3.1. Research instrument

A comprehensive literature review provided the bases for determining the constructs and items of the proposed theoretical research model (Appendix). Primary research was conducted based on two separate and interrelated surveys using structured questionnaires as a research instrument. The first survey aimed to identify tourists' perceptions related to the Social Media Influencers' Credibility within the context of creating destination value and attitude toward a destination. The constructs' items were taken and adapted from the previous research: *SMI credibility* – 5 items (Masuda et al. 2022; Jun and Yi, 2020; Ong et al. 2022; Ki et al. 2020), *SMI-destination product congruence* – 4 items, *Tourist-SMI congruence* – 3 items, *Tourist-destination product congruence* – 4 items, *Attitude toward a destination* – 4 items, *Intention to visit the destination* – 4 items, *Intention to recommend the destination* – 3 items (Belanche et al. - I 2021) and *Overall value creation for the tourist destination experience through SMI* – 4 items (Frías Jamilena et al. 2017). The questionnaire also captured if respondents have visited Croatia at least once and the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (gender, age, education and monthly income level). The research instrument was prepared in Croatian and English language.

The second survey was conducted concerning destination management to determine if there are differences between the perceived and created/communicated overall value for the tourist destination experience through SMI. For that purpose, 4 items for overall value creation for the tourist destination experience through SMI were taken and adapted from Frías Jamilena et al. 2017. The questionnaire also captured if tourist boards use influencer marketing in the context of creating and communicating the destination brand. This questionnaire was prepared in the Croatian language.

Both questionnaires were prepared as online forms using Google Forms software. Constructs were assessed with a Likert scale measuring the degree of agreement (1-strongly disagree, 5-strongly agree). For measuring purposes in this study, a 5-point scale was used following Weijiters et al. (2010), who recommended using a fully labeled 5-point scale for the general population and fully labeled seven-point scales for populations with high cognitive skills, as cited in Chiung et al. (2017).

3.2. Sample and data collection

For the first survey, the research population consisted of adult Croatian and foreign citizens. The survey was conducted on a convenience sample of domestic and foreign tourists who have visited Croatia at least once. In total 211 questionnaires were collected (108 domestic and 103 foreign tourists) and included in the analysis. The sample size can be considered adequate and is above the recommended minimum level of at least five observations per variable (Hair et al. 2014).

The data from domestic and foreign tourists were collected through a personal and online survey. A personal survey was realized with the support of the Tourist Information

Centers in Opatija, Rijeka, Samobor, Mali Lošinj, Karlovac and Zagreb and by researchers survey in Opatija and Rijeka. An online survey linked questionnaires to forums (Forum.hr, SkyscraperCity Forum). Additionally, for collecting data from domestic tourists' researchers linked questionnaires on their private LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook profiles and the Facebook pages of different groups:

- Mreža studenata turizma: https://www.facebook.com/groups/209534357305688;
- Putoholičari: https://www.facebook.com/groups/1960833364242947/user/100052860525900;
- Putoholičarski savjetnik za jeftina i ugodna putovanja: https://www.facebook.com/groups/PutoholicarskiSavjetnik;
- Nomadik – savjeti za putovanja: https://www.facebook.com/groups/kristijanilicic;
- Savjetnik za putovanja – Travel Advisor: https://www.facebook.com/groups/savjetnikzaputovanja.traveladvisor;
- Savjetnik za putovanja Hrvatska: https://www.facebook.com/groups/savjetnikzaputovanjaHrvatska;
- Tajanstvena Hrvatska: https://www.facebook.com/groups/blagamisterije;
- Hrvatska 365: https://www.facebook.com/Hrvatska365.

For collecting data from foreign tourists, the Erasmus Student Network was used and by linking questionnaires in different touristic groups:

- Croatia Travel: https://www.facebook.com/groups/croatiatravel;
- Croatia Travel: https://www.facebook.com/groups/1129306787213399;
- Croatia Travel Community: https://www.facebook.com/groups/197455150667185;
- The Travel Squad: https://www.facebook.com/groups/officialtravelsquad;
- Best Destinations To Travel: https://www.facebook.com/groups/BestDestinationsToTravel;
- Digital Nomads Croatia: https://www.facebook.com/groups/digitalnomadscroatia;
- Booking Holiday in Croatia: https://www.facebook.com/groups/180681076593231;
- Young Travelers Network: https://www.facebook.com/groups/YoungTravelersNetwork;
- Croatia Honestly: https://www.facebook.com/CroatiaHonestly;
- Visit Croatia: https://www.facebook.com/Visit.Croatia.hr;
- Visit Kvarner: https://www.facebook.com/kvarner.hr.

The data from destination management were collected through an online survey. The research is aimed at Croatia's counties, municipalities, and city tourist boards. The List of tourist boards from Croatian Tourist Boards was used for research purposes. The questionnaire link was sent to 286 tourist boards' e-mail addresses (21 counties, 116 cities, and 149 municipality tourist boards). In total, 106 tourist boards filled out the questionnaire. For further analysis, 32 tourist boards that declared the use of influencer marketing were included in further research. The other tourist boards that plan or do not use influencer marketing were excluded. Both tourist and destination management surveys were conducted in Croatia from May 4 until June 1, 2022.

3.3. Data analysis

After conducting the research and collecting the necessary data, it was processed and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) ver. 26. Univariate statistical analysis (descriptive statistics) was used to describe the characteristics of the sample. Multivariate statistical analysis (exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis) was used to confirm the reliability and validity of the scales, and

structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypotheses. Thus, structural equation modeling was performed using Amos ver. 26 to analyze the structural relationships between the variables.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of 211 tourists included in the research, according to the gender structure, 68.72% are female, and 31.287% are male. According to the age structure of the respondents, predominate younger respondents up to 35 years. Respondents aged 18-24 account for 45.02%, and aged 25-34 for 36.97% of the sample. Following participants aged 25-44 for 11.85% and those aged 45-54 for 5.21. No participants in the age group over 65 took part in the survey, and the least number of participants belonged to the age group 55-64 years old, 0.95%. Regarding their educational level, 44.07% of the respondents reported a higher education degree, while 28.43% said they are high school graduates, and 27.49% have a university degree or a higher qualification. When asked about their monthly income, 37.44% of respondents reported having an income of € 500-999 and 27.96% an income of € 1.000-1.499. Participants with an income below € 500 represented 22.28 %, and 12.34% were participants with an income above € 1.500. The research sample on destination management included 32 tourist boards in Croatia.

4.1. Exploratory factor analysis

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using SPSS 26 to identify and confirm factors within each construct. Suitability for performing EFA analysis was determined by Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin coefficient (0.921; KMO > 0.7) and Bartlett's test for sphericity ($\chi 2 = 6213.08$; $p<0.001$). After confirming suitability, a Principal component analysis (PCA) with oblique rotation was performed because of the high correlations between factors. Table 1. shows the items, factor loadings for each item and Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each construct.

Table 1: **Exploratory factor analysis**

Variable	Item abbr.	Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha coefficient
SMI characterization	SMIC1	0.812	0.921
	SMIC2	0.699	
	SMIC3	0.813	
	SMIC4	0.635	
	SMIC5	0.675	
SMI-destination product congruence	SMIPC1	0.707	0.942
	SMIPC2	0.897	
	SMIPC3	0.886	
	SMIPC4	0.873	

Table 1 *(continued)*

Tourist-destination product	TDP1	0.831	0.949
	TDP2	0.905	
	TDP3	0.846	
	TDP4	0.852	
Tourist-SMI congruence	TSC1	0.411	0.912
	TSC2	0.642	
	TSC3	0.630	
Overall value creation for the tourist destination experience through SMI (OVCTDESMI)	OVCTDESMI1	0.598	0.923
	OVCTDESMI2	0.764	
	OVCTDESMI3	0.775	
	OVCETDSMI4	0.863	
Attitude toward tourist destination	ATTD1	0.723	0.918
	ATTD2	0.900	
	ATTD3	0.757	
	ATTD4	0.580	
Intention to visit the destination	ITV1	0.864	0.734
	ITV2	0.352	
	ITV3	0.582	
Intention to recommend the destination	ITR1	0.970	0.924
	ITR2	0.842	
	ITR3	0.720	

Source: authors' calculations

The calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.734 to 0.949. Following, the internal consistency of the scales for each construct was confirmed by Cronbach's alpha coefficient (>0.70), as recommended by Hair et al. (2014).

4.2. Confirmatory factor analysis

Data analysis for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed using AMOS structural equation modeling software, version 26. Several indices of model fit were examined to evaluate the structural model, as Bollen (1990) recommended. The selection of fit indices was based on the suggestions of Hu and Bentler (1995), since a model may be suitable for one fit index but unsuitable for others. Hu and Bentler (1999) suggest a two-index presentation format. This always includes presenting the SRMR with the NNFI (TLI), the RMSEA, and the CFI. According to Kline (2005), CFI, IFI, and TLI values above 0.95 indicate very good great model fit, while values above 0.9 indicate a reasonably good model fit. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: **Confirmatory factor analysis – convergent validity test**

Constructs	Items	Standardized Loadings	CR	AVE
SMI characterization	SMIC1	0.87	0.918	0.692
	SMIC2	0.858		
	SMIC3	0.821		
	SMIC4	0.889		
	SMIC5	0.709		
SMI-product congruence	SMIPC1	0.839	0.944	0.808
	SMIPC2	0.908		
	SMIPC3	0.929		
	SMIPC4	0.917		
Tourist-SMI congruence	TSC1	0.901	0.913	0.777
	TSC2	0.899		
	TSC3	0.843		
Tourist-destination product congruence	TDP1	0.819	0.944	0.808
	TDP2	0.969		
	TDP3	0.949		
	TDP4	0.849		
Overall value creation for the tourist destination experience through SMI (OVCTDESMI)	OVCETDSMI1	0.827	0.924	0.752
	OVCETDSMI2	0.911		
	OVCETDSMI3	0.907		
	OVCETDSMI4	0.819		
Attitude toward tourist destination	ATTD1	0.857	0.916	0.734
	ATTD2	0.941		
	ATTD3	0.849		
	ATTD4	0.771		
Intention to visit the destination	ITV1	0.947	0.776	0.552
	ITV2	0.497		
	ITV3	0.715		
Intention to recommend the destination	ITR1	0.931	0.926	0.806
	ITR2	0.906		
	ITR3	0.854		

Goodness-of-fit (benchmarked values)	Fit statistics
$\chi 2/DF \leq 2$ (Tabachnick and Fidell 2007)	1.791
CFI > 0.90 (Kline 2005)	0.952
IFI > 0.90 (Kline 2005)	0.952
NNFI (TLI) > 0.90 (Kline 2005)	0.944
SRMR <0.08 (Hu and Bentler 1999)	0.048
RMSEA <0.07 (Steiger 2007)	0.061

Source: authors' calculations

The confirmatory factor analysis results showed that the factor loadings for the latent constructs ranged from 0.497 to 0.969, strongly supporting construct validity (Hair et al. 2014). The values of the average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs exceeded

the benchmark of 0.50 recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981), and the composite reliability coefficients for all constructs exceeded 0.70, indicating high internal reliability (Fornell and Larcker 1981). All CR scores were higher than AVE scores, demonstrating convergent validity. The goodness-of-fit statistics of the measurement model also showed good fit with the data ($\chi 2/df = 1.791$; CFI = 0.952; IFI = 0.952; TLI = 0.944; RMSEA = 0.061; SRMR = 0.048).

Table 3 illustrates the correlations between the constructs and a discriminant validity test. Based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion, *discriminant validity was successfully established* since none of the squared root correlations between constructs exceeded the AVE values for each construct.

Table 3: **Confirmatory factor analysis - Correlations between the constructs and a discriminant validity test**

Constructs	Correlation	Correlation squared (r^2)	AVE1 (AVE1>r^2)	AVE2 (AVE1>r^2)
SMIC – TDP	0.346	0.119716	0.692	0.808
SMIC – TSC	0.743	0.552049	0.692	0.777
SMIC - OVCTDESMI	0.796	0.633616	0.692	0.752
SMIC – ATTD	0.435	0.189225	0.692	0.734
SMIC – ITV	0.267	0.071289	0.692	0.552
SMIC – ITR	0.270	0.0729	0.692	0.806
TDP – TSC	0.475	0.225625	0.808	0.777
TDP - OVCTDESMI	0.402	0.161604	0.808	0.752
TDP – ATTD	0.565	0.319225	0.808	0.734
TDP – ITV	0.381	0.145161	0.808	0.552
TDP – ITR	0.541	0.292681	0.808	0.806
TSC - OVCTDESMI	0.722	0.521284	0.777	0.752
TSC – ATTD	0.428	0.183184	0.777	0.734
TSC – ITV	0.251	0.063001	0.777	0.552
TSC – ITR	0.311	0.096721	0.777	0.806
OVCTDESMI-ATTD	0.454	0.206116	0.752	0.734
OVCTDESMI-ITV	0.222	0.049284	0.752	0.552
OVCTDSMI-ITR	0.357	0.127449	0.752	0.806
ATTD- ITV	0.690	0.4761	0.734	0.552
ATTD-ITR	0.727	0.528529	0.734	0.806
ITV-ITR	0.740	0.5476	0.552	0.806
SMIPC-SMIC	0.628	0.394384	0.808	0.692
SMIPC-TDP	0.420	0.1764	0.808	0.808
SMIPC-TSC	0.755	0.570025	0.808	0.777
SMIPC-OVCTDESMI	0.591	0.349281	0.808	0.752
SMIPC-ATTD	0.460	0.2116	0.808	0.734
SMIPC-ITV	0.339	0.114921	0.808	0.552
SMIPC-ITR	0.287	0.082369	0.808	0.806

Source: authors' calculations

4.4. Structural model validation

A proposed structural model was tested in Amos. The results of the first model test showed that not all selected indicators of model adequacy were within the recommended values ($\chi 2/df = 2.159$; CFI = 0.926; IFI = 0.926; TLI = 0.918; RMSEA = 0.074; SRMR = 0.119). The model was recalculated based on the Amos recommended indices. The following regression weights were added to the structural model: direct influence of Perceived tourist-destination product congruence on Attitudes and SMI characterization on Overall value creation for the experience of the tourist destination through SMI. The recalculated model was improved and all selected indicators of model adequacy were within recommended values ($\chi 2/df = 1.924$; CFI = 0.941; IFI = 0.941; TLI = 0.934; RMSEA = 0.066; SRMR = 0.068).

The model explained 51.3% of the variance in intention to visit the destination and 56.1% of the variance in intention to recommend the destination. The detailed results of the structural model are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: **Structural model testing results**

H	Relationship			Standardized total effects	p value	Hypothesis
H1a	SMIC	→	SMIPC	0.694	0.000	Accepted
H1b	SMIC	→	TSC	0.463	0.000	Accepted
H2	SMIPC	→	TSC	0.428	0.000	Accepted
H4a	SMIPC	→	OVCTDESMI	0.023	0.804	Not accepted
H4b	TSC	→	OVCTDESMI	0.333	0.003	Accepted
H5	OVCTDESMI	→	ATTD	0.170	0.000	Accepted
H6a	ATTD	→	ITV	0.694	0.000	Accepted
H6b	ATTD	→	ITR	0.641	0.000	Accepted
Additional relationship	TDP	→	ATTD	0.427	0.000	
Additional relationship	SMIC	→	OVCTDESMI	0.738	0.000	

Source: authors' calculations

Indirect effects were analyzed to test H3, i.e., the existence of a mediation effect of perceived tourist-destination product congruence between SMI-destination product congruence and tourist-SMI congruence. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: **Mediation effect testing**

Relationship			Standardized total effect	Standardized direct effect	Standardized indirect effect
SMIPC	→	TDP	0.343*	0.343*	-
TDP	→	TSC	0.189*	0.189*	-
SMIPC	→	TSC	0.493*	0.428*	0.065*

*p<0.05

Source: authors' calculations

As illustrated in Table 5, there is a statistically significant direct positive influence of SMI-destination product congruence on Tourist-destination product congruence (β=0.343; $p<0.05$). Furthermore, there is a statistically significant direct positive influence of Tourist-destination product congruence on Tourist-SMI congruence (β=0.189; $p<0.05$). This suggests that mediation exists between SMI-destination product congruence and Tourist-SMI congruence through Tourist-destination product congruence, and it only remains to be determined whether it is full or partial mediation. Based on the significant direct positive effect of SMI-destination product congruence on Tourist-SMI congruence (β=0.428, $p<0.05$), it can be concluded that mediation is only partial and not full (standardized indirect effect=0.065, $p<0.05$). These findings support H3, which can be accepted based on the results.

The present study's findings related to the H1a and H1b are in accordance with Ong et al. (2022) stated that SMI credibility positively affects how consumers process the content of the SMI and the need for SMI to match the product to strengthen the advertising results (Lim et al. 2017). The suggested additional relationship between SMIC and OVCTDESIM from the model confirmed that the proposed construct of the influencer's credibility could be used as an efficient tool to improve the influencer's effectiveness as a co-creator of the tourist destination value. The research results related to H2, H3, H4a and H4b support the findings of Belanche et al. – I (2021), which have indicated the need for the mutual interrelation of an influencer with the product and the consumer, and the consumer with the product. It's important to point out that for creating tourist destination value, there is a positive influence of the perceived tourist SMI-congruence but is not a significant influence of the perceived SMI-destination product congruence (H4a not confirmed). The findings of Xu and Pratt (2018) and Ong and Ito (2019) identified SMI as significant in forming a positive attitude and an important predictor for travel intention (Ong et al. 2022) is supported by the results related to the H5, H6a and H6b.

Additionally, an Independent-sample t-test was performed to test H7.

Table 6: **Perceived vs. created/communicated OVCTDESIM**

OVCETDSIM	Tourists		DMO		Levene's Test for Equality of variances		t-test for equality of means	
	AVE	SE	AVE	SE	F	Sig.	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
OVCTDESIM1	3.47	1.458	4.22	0.751	30.008	0.000	4.505	0.000
OVCETDSIM2	3.18	1.453	4.16	0.723	22.853	0.000	6.013	0.000
OVCETDSIM3	3.14	1.443	4.06	0.716	22.184	0.000	5.752	0.000
OVCETDSIM4	3.00	1.375	4,28	0.634	10.371	0.001	8.765	0.000

($p<0.05$)

Source: authors' calculations

The results indicate that creating or communicating overall value for the tourist destination experience through SMI does not meet tourist expectations. Significant differences ($p<0.05$) between created/communicated and perceived overall value for the tourist

destination experience through SMI are found during previsit, visit, and post-visit stay. Thus, the seventh hypothesis (H7) was confirmed based on significance calculations.

CONCLUSION REMARKS

The present research strives to contribute to the growing base of research-based knowledge aimed at helping marketers to optimize their strategies and specific campaigns in both influencer and destination marketing. This paper provides an original, empirically tested model that can be further developed and expanded in future research on using influencer marketing to create destination value and possibly in other contexts. The originality stems from the fact that previous studies have not examined the conceptual framework of SMI integration into the process of creating the tourist destination value from the SDL perspective and their influence on tourist attitudes. The present research aims at closing this specific research gap. Also, this research answers to the call of previous researchers (Belanche et al. – I 2021) to consider matches across all three elements of influencer marketing (i.e., influencer–consumer, influencer–product, and consumer–product) and examines the related congruences since prior literature fails to acknowledge that all three elements of the tripartite model are interrelated. These three elements are included in a single model to examine their role in the co-creation of tourist destination value. By conducting EFA and CFA, the adapted scales' validity and reliability were established in the context of creating destination value since these scales were developed and tested in different contexts. Therefore, the conceptual model design that was created based on an extensive review of previous research and the scales' adaptation for the investigated context also represent the theoretical contribution of the present research.

The proposed model explained 51.3% of the variance in intention to visit the destination and 56.1% of the variance in intention to recommend the destination. This points to the conclusion that the tested model represents a solid base for understanding the effects of social media influencers in tourist destination value co-creation. It can be further expanded with additional constructs to explain the residual variance.

This research empirically confirmed that perceived SMI credibility significantly positively influences both observed congruences (perceived SMI-destination product congruence and perceived SMI-tourist congruence). Also, research results indicate that Perceived tourist-SMI congruence significantly positively affects the perceived OVCTDESIM. However, the hypothesis regarding the influence of perceived SMI-destination product congruence on OVCTDESIM was not confirmed. Furthermore, the research results reveal that perceived OVCTDESIM significantly positively influences attitudes toward a destination, consequently influencing both the intention to visit and recommend the destination. Additionally, it was established that partial mediation exists between SMI-destination product congruence and SMI-tourist congruence through Tourist-destination product congruence. And finally, the research results empirically confirm that there is a significant difference between the perceived and the created/communicated overall value for the tourist destination experience through SMI in all phases of the holiday planning process.

Our findings complement previous studies that have focused on the benefits of influencer marketing. The research empirically confirms the potential and importance of SMI in co-

creating tourist destination value. It points to the importance of influencer credibility, influencing how followers relate to them. It is in line with Belanche et al. - II (2021) conclusion that influencer marketing impacts brands on social media and affects followers' perceptions of the influencer. Also, it confirms the importance of triple congruence. Tourism destination managers must consider the fit between the influencer and the destination product, the fit between the influencer and their target consumers (tourists), and the fit between the tourist and the destination product. Also, it stresses the fact that influencers can impact the destination value co-creation before, during, and after the tourist visits the destination, which should be coordinated between tourists and DMO.

The study's practical implications could be summarised in a conclusion that influencer marketing has become an essential tool for co-creating destination value. However, destination marketing planning needs to carefully consider the influencer's credibility, the influencer's congruence, and the influencer's destination product and congruence with their audience. All of these dimensions are interrelated and have an essential role in influencing the overall value of the tourist destination experience. Also, destination marketing management needs to manage these influences in all holiday planning phases. Ignoring the importance of any of these dimensions could be ineffective and even harmful to the destination. And finally, destination marketing needs to develop customized programs for different tourist segments since the findings confirm the influence of tourist–destination product congruence in the investigated setting, which will increase the destination value.

Research limitations refer primarily to the fact that only one destination (Croatia) was considered, and all the questions in the survey concerned this destination. To test the theory's robustness, research including more destinations could be conducted. Also, a sample of 211 surveyed tourists could be considered a relatively small sample, especially regarding the number of constructs in the model. A larger sample could lead to the discovery of some more significant influences. Also, a possible research limitation stems from the age structure of the respondents and the fact that younger respondents up to 35 years of age predominate in the sample. Assuring an equal representation of age groups in the sample would contribute to the generalization possibilities since some age differences could be expected regarding influencer marketing.

Considering the established importance and the potential of SMI in the co-creation of the value of tourist destinations, it is necessary for future research to additionally investigate the effects of certain types of content and ways of conveying the message. Also, as Agha (2022) pointed out, it is important to identify influencing factors on user engagement that will directly impact tourist behavior. And finally, as mentioned above, the model could be further expanded in future research on using influencer marketing to create destination value and possibly in other contexts.

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Appendix

Table A.1: **Item used in the research on tourist**

Item abbr.	Proposed research model determinants / Taken and adapted items	Original model determinants	Authors
SMIC	***SMI credibility***	Influencer trustworthiness	Masuda, H., Han, S.H. & Lee., J. (2022)
SMIC1	I feel the influencers I follow are honest and trustworthy.		
SMIC2	I feel the influencers I follow know a lot and are competent to make assertions in their area of expertise.	Influencer expertise	
SMIC3	I feel the influencers I follow are passionate and devoted to providing his/ her best content.	Influencer authenticity	Jun, S. & Yi, J. (2020)
SMIC4	I feel that information I get through the content of the influencers I follow is correct and useful to me.	Argument Quality	Ong, Y. X., Sun, T. & Ito, N. (2022)
SMIC5	I feel the content of the influencers I follow is visually appealing.	Visual aesthetics	Ki, C.W.C., Cuevas, L.M., Chong, S.M. & Lim, H. (2020)
SMIPC	***SMI – destination product congruence***	Congruence between influencer and product	Belanche, D., Casalo, L.V., Flavian, M. & Ibanez-Sanchez, S. (I) (2021)
SMIPC1	Influencers who post content about Croatia as a destination have a good match with the Croatian tourist product.		
SMIPC2	The compatibility between influencers who post content about Croatia as a destination and the Croatian tourist product itself is high.		
SMIPC3	The alignment between influencers who post content about Croatia as a destination and the Croatian tourist product itself is high.		
SMIPC4	Influencers who post content about Croatia as a destination and the Croatian tourist product have a high fit.		

Table A.1 *(continued)*

Item abbr.	Proposed research model determinants / Taken and adapted items	Original model determinants	Authors
TSC	***Tourist-SMI congruence***	Congruence between consumer and influencer	Belanche, D., Casalo, L.V., Flavian, M. & Ibanez-Sanchez, S.(I) (2021)
TSC1	Influencers who post content about Croatia as a destination and the Croatian tourist product are congruent with my values.		
TSC2	Influencers who post content about Croatia as a destination match my personality.		
TSC3	I feel identified with influencers who post content about Croatia as a destination.		
TDP	***Tourist-destination product congruence***	Congruence between consumer and product	
TDP1	Croatian tourist product matches my style.		
TDP2	The compatibility between Croatian tourist product and me is high.		
TDP3	The alignment between Croatian tourist product and me is high.		
TDP4	Croatian tourist product fits my style.		
ATTD	***Attitude toward a destination***	Attitude toward the product	
ATTD1	I think that Croatian tourist product is interesting.		
ATTD2	I think that Croatian tourist product is pleasant.		
ATTD3	I think that Croatian tourist product is likeable.		
ATTD4	I have a favorable opinion about Croatian tourist product.		
ITV	***Intention to visit the destination***	Intention to purchase the product	
ITV1	I would consider travelling to Croatia.		
ITV2	I would contemplate the option of visiting Croatia as a tourist destination.		
ITV3	It is likely that I am going to visit Croatia.		
ITR	***Intention to recommend the destination***	Intention to recommend the product	
ITR1	I will recommend Croatia as a destination to other people.		
ITR2	I will say positive things about Croatia as a destination to other people.		
ITR3	I will encourage friends and relatives to visit Croatia.		
OVCTDESIM	***Overall value creation for the tourist destination experience through SMI (OVCTDESIM)***	Overall value creation for the experience of the tourist destination (OVCETD)	Frías Jamilena, D.M., Polo Peña, A.I. & Rodriguez Molina, M.A. (2017)
OVCTDESIM1	In general, my interactions with others before, during, and after a trip to Croatia will have enabled me to have a good personal experience.		
OVCTDESIM2	The time and effort I devoted to the planning process using influencers' content about Croatia enabled me to design a trip of great value.		
OVCTDESIM3	The time and effort I have invested during my stay in Croatia using influencers' content have proved to be of great value to me.		
OVCTDESIM4	The time and effort I put into sharing my experiences about Croatia as a tourist destination using influencers' content have proved to be of great value to me.		

Table A.2: **Item used in the research on DMO**

Item abbr.	Proposed research model determinants / Taken and adapted items	Original model determinants	Authors
OVCTDESIM	***Overall value creation for the tourist destination experience through SMI (OVCTDESIM)***	Overall value creation for the experience of the tourist destination (OVCETD)	Frías Jamilena, D.M., Polo Peña, A.I. & Rodriguez Molina, M.A. (2017)
OVCTDESIM1	Influencer marketing enables high-quality interactions of tourists before, during, and after a trip to Croatia through published content about the destination, which allows tourists to have a good personal experience.		
OVCTDESIM2	Influencer marketing enables content about Croatia, ensuring that the time and effort tourists devote to the planning process allows them to design a great value trip.		
OVCTDESIM3	Influencer marketing enables content about Croatia, ensuring that the time and effort tourists invested during their stay have proved of great value to them.		
OVCTDESIM4	Influencer marketing enables content about Croatia, ensuring that the time and effort tourists invested into sharing their experiences have proved of great value to them.		

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