SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER CONSTRUCTS IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY: DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION OF A MEASUREMENT SCALE

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Abstract: ***Drawing upon source credibility theory and influencer marketing literature, this study conceptualizes SMI as a second-order formative construct composed of two first-order dimensions: attractiveness and expertise. A mixed-method approach was employed, including qualitative interviews and quantitative survey analysis. Data were collected from tourism and hospitality consumers with prior experiences following tourism-related influencers and booking travel services online. The proposed scale was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), and formative measurement assessment and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The findings confirmed that attractiveness and expertise are distinct yet complementary dimensions jointly forming the higher-order SMI construct. The proposed scale demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity, supporting the appropriateness of modeling SMI as a reflective-formative hierarchical construct. The study provides theoretical and practical implications for influencer marketing in tourism and hospitality.***

• Keywords: *social media influencer constructs; scale development; formative construct; tourism and hospitality.*

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1. Introduction

The rapid growth of digital tourism has substantially transformed how travelers search for information, evaluate destinations, and make booking decisions. Among emerging digital communication channels, social media influencers (SMIs) have become one of the most influential actors in shaping tourism-related perceptions and behaviors. Through visual storytelling, experiential sharing, and continuous interaction, SMIs increasingly function as trusted opinion leaders in tourism and hospitality contexts.

Existing studies have widely examined the effects of influencers on consumer responses such as trust, booking intention, destination image, and parasocial interaction (Horng et al., 2024). However, the conceptualization and operationalization of SMI remain fragmented. Most prior studies treat influencer characteristics as isolated dimensions, such as attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness, or entertainment value, rather than conceptualizing SMI as an integrated higher-order construct.

Drawing on source credibility theory (Ohanian, 1990) and IM (IM) literature (Aw & Chuah, 2021; 2022), this study conceptualizes SMI as a second-order formative construct composed of two complementary first-order dimensions: attractiveness and expertise. Attractiveness reflects the influencer's physical appeal, similarity, and likability, whereas expertise reflects perceived knowledge, competence, and professional capability in tourism-related content creation.

Therefore, this study aims to develop and validate a multidimensional SMI scale suitable for the tourism and hospitality context. Specifically, the study contributes by:

- Developing a context-specific SMI measurement scale for tourism and hospitality;
- Conceptualizing SMI as a higher-order formative construct;
- Providing empirical evidence for the reliability and validity of the proposed scale.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Media Influencer in Tourism and Hospitality

In tourism and hospitality contexts, such developments have facilitated the emergence of SMIs, who increasingly function as persuasive intermediaries between tourism brands and

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consumers. Compared with traditional celebrities, SMIs possess distinctive communication advantages in digital environments. Unlike celebrities who are often perceived as distant public figures, influencers regularly share personal experiences, travel activities, hotel stays, and everyday lifestyles through interactive social media platforms. Such continuous self-disclosure and reciprocal interaction enhance followers' perceptions of intimacy, relatability, and authenticity (Breves et al., 2021). Consequently, tourism-related recommendations from influencers are frequently perceived as more genuine and socially embedded than traditional advertising messages.

This characteristic is particularly important in tourism and hospitality because tourism products are largely experiential and intangible prior to consumption. Travelers are therefore unable to fully evaluate destinations, accommodations, or service quality before purchase decisions are made. In such uncertain situations, consumers often rely on influencer-generated content as a form of social proof and experiential reference when evaluating tourism alternatives (Kim et al., 2021). Through destination reviews, hotel experiences, travel diaries, and visual storytelling, influencers help reduce perceived uncertainty and shape consumer expectations toward tourism experiences.

To explain the effectiveness of IM, prior studies have commonly adopted the source effect and source credibility perspectives. This stream of research emphasizes that consumers' responses toward endorsements are strongly influenced by the personal characteristics of influencers. Among the most extensively examined attributes are attractiveness, credibility, and expertise (Schimmelpfennig & Hunt, 2020). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that these attributes positively influence consumer trust, engagement, purchase intention, and behavioral responses in digital environments (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

Within tourism and hospitality settings, attractiveness and expertise appear especially relevant. Attractiveness reflects the extent to which influencers are perceived as visually appealing, likable, elegant, or socially desirable. Attractive influencers tend to generate stronger emotional engagement and perceived similarity, thereby facilitating identification processes among followers (Chung & Cho, 2017). Given the highly visual nature of tourism marketing, attractive influencers are often more effective in stimulating destination appeal and experiential imagination.

By contrast, expertise refers to the perceived knowledge, competence, and experience of influencers regarding tourism-related products or destinations. Expertise becomes particularly important because tourism decisions involve substantial informational uncertainty. Consumers frequently depend on experienced influencers to interpret service quality, destination value, and travel experiences that cannot be directly evaluated beforehand. Influencers perceived as knowledgeable are therefore more likely to generate informational influence and persuasive credibility among followers. More recently, IM research has expanded beyond personal attributes to examine social media indicators such as follower numbers and online popularity. Several studies suggest that influencers with larger follower bases are perceived as more influential and socially validated (De Veirman et al., 2017). However, findings remain inconsistent. While some studies report positive effects of follower size on consumer perception and engagement, others indicate insignificant or even negative effects due to concerns regarding authenticity and excessive commercialization (Aw & Chuah, 2021; Boerman, 2020). These inconsistencies imply that influencer effectiveness cannot be adequately explained through quantitative popularity metrics alone.

Despite growing attention to IM, existing literature remains fragmented regarding the conceptualization of SMI effectiveness. Most previous studies examine influencer characteristics independently rather than treating influencer effectiveness as an integrated multidimensional construct. As a result, limited understanding exists regarding how different influencer attributes collectively shape consumer perceptions and responses in tourism and hospitality contexts.

Drawing on source credibility theory and IM literature, this study conceptualizes SMI as a higher-order construct formed by two complementary dimensions: attractiveness and expertise. This conceptualization is particularly appropriate in tourism and hospitality because tourism consumption simultaneously involves emotional evaluation and informational assessment. Attractiveness enhances affective connection and social identification, whereas expertise strengthens informational credibility and interpretive authority. Together, these dimensions jointly shape the overall

effectiveness of SMIs in influencing tourism-related consumer perceptions and behaviors.

2.2. Dimensions of SMI scale

SMI was conceptualized as a second-order formative construct composed of attractiveness (ATT) and expertise (EXP). This specification is theoretically appropriate because ATT and EXP represent conceptually distinct yet complementary dimensions that jointly define the overall perception of influencer effectiveness in tourism and hospitality contexts. Drawing upon source credibility theory, prior studies have consistently suggested that influencer effectiveness is not reflected through a single homogeneous characteristic, but rather formed through multiple independent attributes such as attractiveness, expertise, and trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990). The formative specification is supported by the non-interchangeability of the two dimensions. Attractiveness reflects the influencer's visual appeal, likability, and perceived similarity, whereas expertise captures perceived tourism-related knowledge, competence, and experiential capability. An influencer may possess strong tourism expertise without necessarily being highly attractive, while another influencer may be visually appealing but lack substantial tourism knowledge. Therefore, changes in one dimension do not necessarily imply corresponding changes in the other dimension, indicating that ATT and EXP do not measure the same underlying trait. This characteristic aligns with the fundamental logic of formative constructs, where dimensions collectively form the meaning of the higher-order construct rather than merely reflect it (Jarvis et al., 2003).

This conceptualization extends the influencer effectiveness framework proposed by Aw and Chuah (2021), who identified attractiveness and expertise as two core influencer attributes shaping consumer responses in social media environments. Although Aw and Chuah (2021) operationalized these dimensions as separate first-order reflective constructs, their theoretical logic implicitly supports a formative higher-order conceptualization because attractiveness and expertise represent distinct and complementary facets of influencer effectiveness rather than interchangeable manifestations of a single underlying trait.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods, following the scale development procedure suggested by Hair et al. (2020). The qualitative phase aims to refine scale items and ensure contextual relevance in tourism settings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourism marketing experts, hotel managers, travel bloggers, and frequent online travel consumers. The findings were used to adjust wording and eliminate ambiguous items.

The quantitative phase was conducted using survey data collected from travelers in Ho Chi Minh City who had booked accommodation online within the previous 12 months and followed at least one tourism-related influencer on social media platforms. A total of 341 valid responses were collected for data analysis. Regarding gender, female respondents accounted for a slightly higher proportion of the sample (56.3%), while male respondents represented 43.7%. In terms of age, the majority of respondents belonged to younger consumer groups, with most participants ranging from 18 to 34 years old, reflecting the dominant demographic of active social media users and online tourism consumers.

3.2. Measurement Development

The initial measurement items were adapted from:

- Ohanian (1990);
- Aw and Chuah (2021; 2022);
- IM and source credibility literature.

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

Table 1: Proposed SMI Measurement Scale

No.	Dimensions	Sources
I	**Attractiveness (ATT): 3 items**	
ATT1	I find (SMI's name)'s social media contents good-looking.	Aw & Chuah (2021)
ATT2	I find (SMI's name)'s social media contents attractive.	Ohanian (1990)
ATT3	I find (SMI's name)'s social media contents visually appealing	Aw & Chuah (2021)
II	**Expertise (EXP): 5 items**	
EXP1	Experienced	Ohanian (1990)
EXP2	An expert in his/her field	Ohanian (1990)
EXP3	Qualified	Ohanian (1990)
EXP4	Knowledgeable	Ohanian (1990)
EXP5	Competent	Ohanian (1990)

Source: The authors' data analysis

4. Data analysis and Discussion

4.1. Cronbach's Alpha

The Cronbach's Alpha Test is used to check scale reliability. All scales meet the reliability requirements: Cronbach's Alpha of the scales is greater than 0.7. After an in-depth review, the decision to maintain all items is given.

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha Ressult

Factor	No of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Attractiveness	3	0.889
Expertise	5	0.901

Source: The authors' data analysis

4.2. EFA

Table 3: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	.913
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity - Approx. Chi-Square	2,146.382
df	45
Sig.	.000

Source: The authors' data analysis

Table 3 showed that all factor loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.50, while KMO value reached 0.913, indicating excellent sampling adequacy. Furthermore, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant with a significance level of 0.000 (< 0.05), confirming that the correlation matrix was appropriate for Exploratory Factor Analysis (Hair et al., 2019). Therefore, the proposed SMI scale satisfied the criteria required for EFA.

Table 4: Total Variance Explained

Component	Eigenvalues	% of Variance	Cumulative%
1	5.184	51.840	51.840
2	2.394	23.940	75.780

Source: The authors' data analysis

The total variance extracted reached 75.780%, exceeding the 50% threshold, indicating that the two factors, ATT and EXP, effectively explain the structure of the SMI scale.

Table 5: Rotated Component Matrix

	ATT	EXP
ATT1	0.899	
ATT2	0.904	
ATT3	0.911	
EXP1		0.815
EXP2		0.867
EXP3		0.844
EXP4		0.851
EXP5		0.849

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
a. Rotation converged in 02 iterations.

Source: The authors' data analysis

Table 6: Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Relationship	Outer Weights	Outer loadings	VIF	p-value
ATT → SMI	0.666	0.857	1.137	.000
EXP → SMI	0.55	0.781	1.137	.000

Source: The authors' data analysis

The formative measurement assessment demonstrated that both attractiveness and expertise significantly contributed to the higher-order SMI construct. The outer weights of ATT and EXP were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), confirming their substantial contribution in forming the overall perception of social media influencer effectiveness. Moreover, the VIF values were below the recommended threshold of 3.3, indicating the absence of multicollinearity issues.

4.3. Discussion

This study developed and validated a multidimensional scale of SMI in the tourism and hospitality context. Drawing upon source credibility theory and IM literature, the study conceptualized SMI as a second-order formative construct composed of two first-order reflective dimensions: attractiveness and expertise. The empirical findings confirmed that the proposed scale achieved satisfactory reliability and validity, thereby supporting the appropriateness of the proposed measurement structure.

The EFA results demonstrated that all observed variables were loaded onto the intended dimensions with high factor loadings and without significant cross-loadings. This finding confirms that attractiveness and expertise represent two empirically distinct dimensions of SMI effectiveness. The Cronbach's Alpha values also exceeded the recommended threshold, indicating strong internal consistency reliability for both dimensions. Furthermore, the formative assessment revealed that both attractiveness and expertise significantly contributed to the higher-order SMI construct, while multicollinearity issues were not detected. The findings provide several important theoretical implications. First, this study contributes to IM literature by extending the conceptualization of SMI from isolated influencer characteristics toward an integrated higher-order construct. Previous studies have predominantly examined attractiveness, expertise, or credibility independently when explaining influencer effectiveness. However, the present findings suggest that influencer effectiveness in tourism and hospitality cannot be adequately captured through a single characteristic alone. Instead, attractiveness and expertise jointly shape consumers' perceptions of influencers in digital tourism environments.

Second, the study supports the formative conceptualization of SMI at the higher-order level. The findings reinforce the argument that attractiveness and expertise are conceptually distinct and non-interchangeable dimensions. Changes in one dimension do not necessarily imply changes in the other, yet both collectively define the overall meaning of influencer effectiveness. This supports the reflective-formative hierarchical

component modeling approach suggested in prior methodological literature.

Third, the study highlights the unique characteristics of tourism and hospitality services that increase the importance of influencer effectiveness. Tourism products are intangible, experiential, and difficult to evaluate prior to consumption. Consequently, consumers rely heavily on social cues and influencer-generated content when reducing uncertainty and evaluating tourism experiences. In this context, attractiveness primarily enhances emotional engagement and social identification, whereas expertise strengthens informational credibility and interpretive authority. The integration of these dimensions therefore provides a more comprehensive understanding of how influencers affect tourism-related consumer perceptions.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that tourism and hospitality businesses should evaluate influencers using multidimensional criteria rather than relying solely on superficial metrics such as follower counts or online popularity. Although follower size may increase visibility, the effectiveness of IM campaigns depends substantially on whether influencers are perceived as both attractive and knowledgeable. Tourism marketers should therefore select influencers who are not only visually appealing and socially relatable but also capable of providing credible and useful tourism-related information.

This study also presents several limitations. First, the study focused only on attractiveness and expertise as formative dimensions of SMI. Other dimensions such as trustworthiness, authenticity, similarity, or content quality may also contribute to influencer effectiveness and should be incorporated in future research. Second, the empirical context was limited to tourism and hospitality consumers, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other industries. Third, the study employed cross-sectional data, which limits the ability to capture changes in influencer perceptions over time.

Future studies may extend the present framework by integrating additional influencer attributes into the higher-order construct or examining the predictive validity of the SMI scale on behavioral outcomes such as parasocial interaction, booking intention, destination loyalty, or electronic word-of-mouth. Moreover, comparative studies across generations or social media platforms may provide deeper insights into how influencer effectiveness varies across different digital consumption contexts.

5. Conclusions & recommendations

This study developed and validated a multidimensional SMI scale in the tourism and hospitality context. The findings confirmed that SMI can be conceptualized as a second-order formative construct formed by two complementary dimensions: attractiveness and expertise. The proposed scale demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity, supporting its applicability in tourism-related IM research.

The study contributes to the literature by providing a more integrated conceptualization of influencer effectiveness rather than examining influencer attributes independently. Practically, the findings suggest that tourism and hospitality businesses should evaluate influencers based on both emotional appeal and tourism-related expertise rather than relying solely on popularity metrics such as follower counts. Overall, this study offers a useful measurement foundation for future research on IM and consumer behavior in digital tourism environments.

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