

# Credibility of Travel Influencer on Millennials Traveling Behavior

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## ABSTRACT

The objectives of this study were to understand: 1) the credibility of travel influencers among millennial travelers, and 2) how they motivate millennial travelers' travel behavior. The methodology employed was qualitative and relied on in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted with twelve millennial travelers, aged between 25 and 40, who traveled both domestically and internationally. They had to follow travel influencers on social media and planned at least one trip in the past year. The research instrument used in this study was a set of questions based on four dimensions: travel behavior, source of credibility, attitude toward travel influences, and media usage. The findings showed that travelers had a positive opinion on travel influencers and believed they were a reliable source of information. Online resources inspire and motivate two groups of millennial travelers, particularly the notion that authentic experiences from travel influencers are the most important component needed for related travel behavior. A greater proportion of participants tend to discuss about electronic word-of-mouth findings in relation to travel contexts. However, it is clear that, instead of relying solely on sponsored media, the significance of travel influencers has been increased over time and they are now responsible for inspiring two distinct millennial traveler groups, which constitute a sizable economic force.

**Keywords:** Credibility, Travel influencer, Travel behavior, Millennials, Thailand

## Article Info

Received August 20, 2023

Revised December 11, 2023

Accepted December 15, 2023

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## Introduction

In an age of digitization, social media play a vital role in terms of the availability and dissemination of information. Many daily human activities have moved online (Dreifaldt & Drennan, 2019), and social media is becoming increasingly powerful in brand and consumer behavior (Han & Chen, 2021). The online content provided by social media platforms considerably changes the intentions of consumers, especially during travel activities (Upananda & Bandara, 2022). This boom in the accessibility of travel-related information can be found in the form of user-generated content on social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, X, etc. To this end, the emergence of “senders,” also known as social media influencers (SMIs), is on the rise (Freberg, Grahamb, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2010; de Veirman et al., 2017). These additionally serve as a dynamic third-party advocate to convey a brand’s message to vast audiences all across the world.

Social media influencers represent a new kind of third-party endorser who can shape consumer attitudes and alter people’s lives (Freberg et al., 2010). Social media influencers were individuals who regularly used their social media accounts, participated in a certain topic, and provided new information (Hermenda et al., 2019). It is now common for businesses to employ famous social media influencers to endorse their products and services through social media platforms. In this regard, marketers see this as a valuable type of advertising. Santiago and Castelo (2020) mentioned that “the perception of the effectiveness of influencer marketing by marketers has been positive, playing an increasingly important role in the marketing strategy of brands.

According to the generation of travelers, experts believe that social media has a particularly powerful effect on millennials (also known as Generation Y, born between 1981 and 2000), who are the first social media generation to have grown up and been exposed to readily accessible technology (Think with Google, 2014). Similar to Talabi (2015), it shows the millennials are a potential group of travelers, and they are the generation that is willing to

pay more for experience as they will have the highest purchasing power in recent years. With 38% of millennials also trusting social media influencers and their content, it can be seen that influencer marketing is one of the significant factors in the decision-making process of this generation (Klein, 2018). In addition, millennials have made a significant contribution to the growth of the travel industry through social media platforms. Trip pictures are being posted online every minute, enticing many people to travel. Millennials would choose to have new experiences rather than stay comfortably in a luxury destination. However, the travel activities of millennials will probably change in the near future. Their preferences would change as they aged (Kovacs, 2019).

Global results show that 84% of followers of travel influencers said they have turned to them for recommendations, and 63% said they are engaging with that content, such as posts and reviews, now more than they were before last year’s initial lockdown. This suggests that travel influencers could be a valuable resource for travel brands trying to entice all types of consumers back to their sites (Meyers, 2022). According to social media users and businesses who recognize that social media users are spending more time online, particularly in the most recent year due to COVID-19, businesses have been utilizing these influencer platforms to increase brand awareness, product sales, and conversions. More social media influencers are entering the social media world, resulting in some platforms being overwhelmed by social media influencers. Recently, out of different social media platforms, KResearch’s poll found that Facebook and Instagram are now influential. Based on statistics from AnyMind Group, 2021, the most popular social media influencer verticals are the fashion and beauty, arts and entertainment, and food and beverage verticals, respectively. The content in the travel vertical has been growing over the past few months, and it may soon reclaim third place for the upcoming year.

According to the top social media platforms used by social media influencers in Thailand, YouTube ranks first at 36.39%,

while Instagram and Facebook are similar at 28.95% and 28.26%, respectively. On YouTube, the social media influencer vertical that belongs to arts and entertainment influencers accounts for 45.3% of total social media influencers. On the other hand, there are several famous travel channels that are represented by travel influencers. For example, Chillpainai has a number of 5.82K subscribers, Go Went Go has a number of 6.2K subscribers, The Gaijin Trips has a number of 8.65K subscribers, etc. With restricted movements caused by the pandemic, YouTube had increased audiences and usage durations, which ultimately had a greater impact on social media influencer earnings from content on YouTube and a higher usage rate on YouTube. But there are also the most populous demographics on Instagram and Facebook. However, the largest social media influencer segment in Thailand is micro-influencers, which account for 41.7% of all kinds of influencers.

Traveling requires extensive planning, with various factors to take into account when traveling within the country and more factors to consider when traveling internationally. This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the travel behaviors of millennials through studying two distinct traveler groups: domestic and international travelers. Studying the impact of various travel experiences on individuals can aid in understanding the factors that influence their choice of destination. There are many aspects of these two groups that need to be considered, such as information, accommodations, travel, food, and locations.

However, Müller, Mattke, and Maier (2018) stated that the increasingly popular phenomenon of influencer marketing has become yet another factor that influences the purchase intentions of consumers online. The purpose of this study is to perceive the credibility of travel influencers among domestic and international millennial travelers and how they motivate millennial travel behavior. Marketers will find it helpful when identifying the travel influencers' credible sources. Initially, by identifying the characteristics of travel influencers and ensuring that they match the product and service, Likewise, the objective can explore how travel influencers affect millennials, the

generation that is entering the workforce and is highly tech-savvy in their decision-making about travel, which will provide the methods and approaches for travel influencers to arrange travel-related content--both sponsored and unsponsored--and to interact with sponsors and followers.

## Literature Review

### Influencer Marketing

Since the advent of social media platforms, the development of marketing technology has made it much easier for businesses (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Digital marketing is one of the marketing approaches that has been defined as "the use of digital technologies to create integrated, targeted, and measured brand communication that helps to acquire new consumers and retain existing consumers while building deeper relationships with them" (Langan, Cowley, & Nguyen, 2019). Thus, the way to update information has completely changed. Online is now facilitated by social media through texts, photos, videos, blogs, or social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, or X.

Digital marketing, in particular, relates to online marketing. The real world and internet technologies are becoming more tactile (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). The success rate of digital travel agencies is remarkably high in terms of both numbers and quality. In terms of paid advertising, television has traditionally dominated, but digital advertising spending surpassed it in 2017 (Woods, 2016). Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) marketing has replaced traditional word-of-mouth (WOM), and influencer marketing has emerged (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017).

Facebook and Instagram, for example, are preferred platforms for sharing personal experiences that contribute to a sense of authenticity and credibility; as a result, this type of user-generated content has been widely adopted (Alic, Pestek, & Sadinlija, 2017). Content about a trip or vacation can be easily posted to the Internet and can also generate buzz and motivate travelers' decisions. In order to explore trips and share their personal experiences with a

hotel, restaurant, travel attraction, or activity, consumers also use social networking sites. According to statistical data from 2019, TripAdvisor has approximately 70 million monthly visitors who are actively seeking out travel information and advice from the site. Due to social media's low cost and global reach, Alic et al. (2017) stated that marketers have begun to utilize the advantages of social media by incorporating them into their marketing strategy and stimulating conversations between potential consumers. It has also evolved with the new digital world and is now more commonly referred to as "influencer marketing."

While advertising has historically used celebrities to increase brand awareness of a product or service, influencer marketing is distinct because it uses social media celebrities with a significant online presence. These "social media influencers" can leverage their follower base to purchase products or services from a third-party endorser that they represent (Freberg et al., 2010). This type of advertising, while still a relatively recent phenomenon, is effective compared to other, more traditional marketing strategies. Additionally, this phenomenon is an emerging channel that advertisers invest in, as it promises a strong relationship with consumers and a rise in sales (Knoll 2016; Smartinsights, 2018). As a result, businesses strive to build relationships with their customers by using their trademarks to increase consumer intent to purchase their products and services (Knoll, 2016). Santiago and Castelo (2020) stated that influencer marketing is the practice of using social media users who are regarded as influential to disseminate information in order to "promote products or increase brand awareness." Social media influencers represent a new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience opinions by using blogs, tweets, and other forms of social media (Freberg et al., 2010). As a result, the number of influencers who are available to collaborate with the aforementioned brands has increased, increasing the opportunities available to marketers. According to Haenlein and Libai (2017), influencer marketing market is predicted to increase to \$9.7 billion in 2020,

or about 5% of the total online advertising market of approximately \$250 billion.

### **Influencer Marketing in Tourism Industry**

Influencer marketing has already been shining a light on the travel and tourism industries. Some social media influencers produce impactful travel content that influences travel decisions and motivations while also creating product content for various platforms. These prominent travel influencers establish WOM in the travel context, which spreads among a vast number of followers on social media. Social media, which essentially publishes content created by influencers, is a major source of travel information and a factor in travel intentions (Park, 2015). Gretzel (2018) states that marketers have realized the advantages of using social media influencers to amplify messages catered to a certain niche. Destination marketing has already been utilizing social media as a critical tool in promoting locations (Han & Chen, 2021; Hermenda et al., 2019). Travel marketers can profit from influencers' ability to reach the targeted audience, engage at a higher level, and build relationships and images that are consistent with their brands (Gretzel, 2018).

In recent years, travelers are now using social networking sites for purposes other than just discussing their own personal travel experiences. Online marketers use these platforms to promote their travel-related brands, products, and services through regular users since they are less expensive than digital ads, generate conversation about the product, are highly effective in terms of authenticity and reach, and are more understated than traditional marketing. Users gain from these relationships by making large amounts of money by simply discussing and posting about products and services they genuinely use and enjoy. Thus, social media users who enjoy traveling have aimed to become "travel influencers" by posting about their travels and showing hotels, brands, and services on their accounts in exchange for money or simply a free one-night stay or product. However, developing a strategy that incorporates influencer marketing can be difficult. Brands that use influencer

marketing must exercise caution when deciding which influencer to work with, and keep in mind that a social media influencer with more followers does not necessarily mean that this influencer is better for your brand. There is no definite answer as to whether a micro-influencer will be more effective than a macro-influencer. “Smaller influencers will have lower engagement in absolute terms; they tend to have a greater engagement rate relative to the total number of followers and a more homogenous follower base” (Haenlein et al., 2020). Another survey revealed that “micro-influencers have over 20 times more conversations than average consumers” but also that “80% of people are very likely to follow their recommendations” (Haenlein & Libai, 2017). As a result, there are several factors that businesses consider, such as credibility, e-WOM, etc.

### **Theory of Reasoned Action**

Many studies have found that human behavior may prove to be complex, particularly in regards to the variables that motivate actual conduct. The theory of reasoned action by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) explains that behavioral intention is the strongest predictor of volitional behavior. Moreover, the behavioral intention is influenced by two factors, which are attitudes and subjective norms.

**Attitudes:** The study demonstrated that attitudes are often formed by experiences, knowledge, and wisdom gained from past experiences, also known as “the outcome of the attitudes” (Ajzen, 1991). **Subjective Norms:** The socially perceived pressure to perform or refrain from performing a behavior. It is the function of the beliefs and motivations of consumers to comply (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). For two factors, normative beliefs refer to the things that are perceived as significant regarding their behavior. However, Ajzen (1991) refers motivation to the emotional pressure to conform to perceived social expectations. It can be seen that if the subjective norms towards a particular behavior are positive, it is likely that behavior will become stronger in the future (Ajzen, 1991).

**Behavioral Intention:** One crucial component of the theory of reasoned action

is behavioral intention, which is meant to capture motivational factors that motivate a behavior. Moreover, it shows how willing someone is to attempt and how much effort they are willing to put into doing a particular behavior. Most behavioral performances are also somewhat dependent on factors like the availability of necessary opportunities and resources like time, money, skills, and other people's cooperation (Ajzen, 1991). These elements relate to a person's actual level of behavioral control. Understanding travel behavior and travel intention is crucial (Haenlein et al., 2020). It is required to gain information about where they desire to travel. This study will apply the theory of planned behavior, which developed from the previous theory, to predict the intention to travel. The theoretical purpose is to look in depth within the individual to understand how behavior is created (Ajzen, 1991). According to Ajzen (1991), intentions are interpreted as the factors that motivate a particular behavior. Therefore, the theory of planned behavior was developed. This model incorporates perceived behavioral control as a third component and expands to the theory of reasoned action.

### **Source of Credibility**

The source credibility theory, as propounded by Hovland, Janis, and Kelly (1953), states that people or receivers are more likely to be persuaded when the source presents itself as credible. Similar to the perceived credibility of an influencer, which refers to whether an individual perceives the influencer's recommendations as unbiased, believable, true, or factual (Han & Chen, 2021). The credibility of an influencer indicates that a message's effectiveness is dependent on the influencer's perceived level of expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland et al., 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990). Credible information sources can influence beliefs, opinions, attitudes, or behaviors through a process known as “internalization,” which occurs when receivers embrace the source's influence in terms of their personal attitude or belief (Erdogan, 1999). Similarly, source credibility is defined as “believability” and refers to a person's perception of the truth of a piece of information. For example, source

credibility is often used to pay attention to the influencer's positive characteristics that influence the consumer's acceptance of communication. Because the principal information source is the influencer (Hermenda et al., 2019).

The Ohanian (1990) model of source credibility plays an important role in conveying the persuasiveness of a message in the process of communication with a target audience, which depends on the characteristics of the source (Bilro et al., 2020). According to three dimensions, which are a combination of social media influencer expertise, attractiveness, and trustworthiness, especially in the advertising process (Sertoglu et al., 2014). The current study incorporates and adapts both models in order to measure the perception of purchase intention, in which the social media influencer served as a platform for marketers to market their products, particularly travel. Therefore, as proposed by Ohanian (1990), the perceived credibility of an influencer is measured in three dimensions: perceived attractiveness, perceived trustworthiness, and perceived expertise.

**Trustworthiness:** It is defined as believability, honesty, and transparency possessed by the influencers, and that is how the receiver unbiasedly perceives the source (Han & Chen, 2021). **Expertise:** Daneshvary and Schwer (2000) indicated expertise as a high level of skills or knowledge from which the influencer is derived to have the adequate skills, knowledge, or experience to promote brands. The most crucial element for an endorsement to be successful is expertise.

**Attractiveness:** According to attractiveness, it is the "stereotype of favorable associations for an individual and not only entails physical attractiveness but also other characteristics such as personality and ability" (Erdogan, 1999). **Quality of the Content:** According to Müller et al. (2018), influencer content on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram is the presentation of their posts, photos, videos, voices, or words that have a motivation for the receiver.

### Travel Behavior

Consumer behavior is the process of selecting, buying, and using a good or

service to satisfy one's desires and needs. While doing so, the consumer desires to maximize benefits and reduce the amount of time. The various factors that motivate consumers are social, cultural, personal, psychological, and economic (Cobble, 2011). Alic et al. (2017) proposes a model for consumer behavior in which they include the value of information. Consumer behavior is classified as a cognitive process. Typically, the consumer chooses how to solve their problem during this process. According to Erasmus, Boshoff, and Rousseau (2001), it is essential for the study of consumer behavior to adapt to the particular circumstances or products that are the subject of purchase. Depending on the outcome, specific decisions made during the decision-making process may be more or less dangerous. They also include all the actions that occur both before and after the purchase in their model of consumer behavior. In the tourism context, it will help effectively define whom to target, when to target them, and where to target a particular destination. More importantly, it will help persuade travelers to select a certain destination that was created to satisfy their unique needs and desires.

Additionally, it will enhance the creation of successful strategies and satisfy travelers. Understanding the motivations underlying travel decisions, the form of attitudes toward destination choice, and how various reference groups exert individual travel decision-making are crucial for the implementation of effective marketing strategies in the tourism sector. On the other hand, connected to the decision-making process within the consumer behavior activity.

In a review of the literature in the field of travel behavior, making a decision can be one of the early stages of a purchase in some models, and other researchers even make it the core of their model of travel behavior. The process of traveling comprises planned, impulsive, and spontaneous purchases. Moreover, it included the following eight crucial indicators that reflect travel decision-making: values, motivation, self-concept, expectations, attitude, perception, satisfaction, trust, and loyalty. Theoretically, there are five stages of the consumer decision-making process: 1)

need recognition, 2) information search, 3) evaluation of alternatives, 4) product or service choices, and 5) post-purchase evaluation (Maritz, Yeh, & Shieh, 2013).

Specifically, purchase intention can be described as the desire for a consumer to acquire certain products and services. However, this does not imply that it will result in a purchase (Han & Chen, 2021). In addition, Hannu and Johannisson (2020) and Maritz et al. (2013) also explained that purchase intention does not resemble actual buying behavior but rather conveys the intention of the intended purchase.

According to Müller et al. (2018), travel intention is one form of motivation to travel regarding one's demographics, visuals, content creation, and emotions. Some of the studies indicated that travelers' attitudes towards user-generated content were positively related to their intention to use the information in planning their trips (Ayeh, 2015; Ayeh, Au, & Law, 2013).

### **Word of Mouth**

Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) was based on the same principles established by word-of-mouth, such as social ties, strength, and trust. The potential reach of e-WOM was vastly increased by allowing those with influence to expand their network exponentially. Previously, influencers could only influence their local community, but they can now use the power of the internet to reach vast virtual communities located far beyond their geographical boundaries. The primary use of e-WOM in this context was on the internet with "comments and reviews of products on blogs, sites, or social media platforms" (Talabi, 2015). E-WOM has become popular in recent times. Because of

the large number of social media users, the characteristics of e-WOM, such as opinions, reviews, comments, and recommendations, have increased in importance due to the speed of information. E-WOM can provide various benefits, including reducing the risk associated with online purchases from influencers. It shows the credibility of e-WOM when a consumer has made a successful previous purchase by relying on e-WOM and the ease with which e-WOM spreads. However, e-WOM spreads much faster than WOM because of where it is published: on social media platforms.

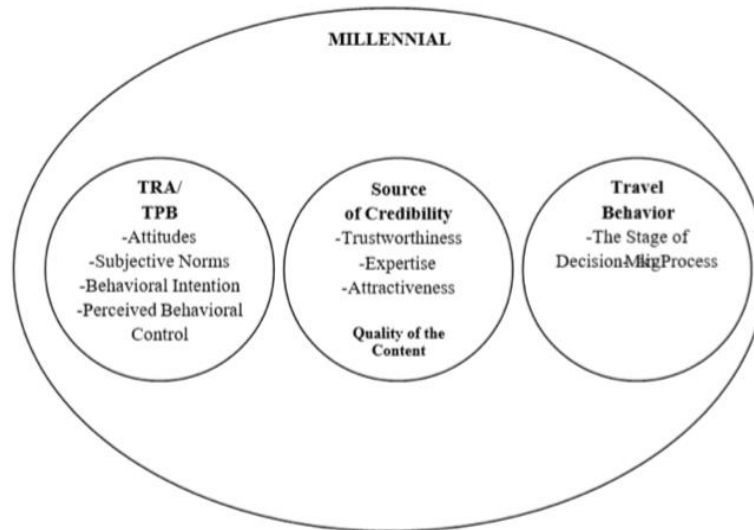
### **Millennials**

Millennials refer to people who were born between 1980 and 2000 (Young, Amy, Hinesly, & Mary, 2012). also known as "generation Y" (Alic et al., 2017). They are known to be the most tech-savvy group, or "digital natives" (Deegan, 2021). Millennials accepted themselves with technology early on. Millennials are becoming a significant and increasing growth segment for travel activities (Lončarić et al., 2019). Throughout the millennial generation, there have been various motivations and inspirational travel arrangements. They also enjoy comparing themselves to others and are more likely to envy other people's posts on social media.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The illustration in Figure 1 shows an overview of the concept that will be used in this study. The focus of attitude and source of credibility towards travel influencers among millennial travelers. Moreover, millennial travel behavior will be explored.

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework for this study



## Methodology

This study follows an exploratory research design and a qualitative approach based on the use of in-depth interviews. Qualitative studies involve the interaction between individuals to produce findings based on human behavior and social characteristics. The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of travel influencers on millennial travelers and how they motivate millennial travel behavior.

### Participants and Sampling Method

This study uses a qualitative approach to investigate the perceived credibility of travel influencers on millennial travel behavior. In order to fulfill the purpose, purposive sampling was used to select a total of twelve people to be chosen as participants. Participants can be either male or female millennials, defined as those who were born into the digital age and are between the ages of 25 and 40. They can range in level of expertise, business, and location. The interview will be divided into two groups. The first groups are international travelers who have a trip or staying overnight outside of Thailand for business, pleasure, or other purposes. Second, they are domestic travelers who travel within Thailand for work or pleasure. Each participant must actively follow travel influencers relevant to

their interest in travel-related content and organize the trip based on online sources within one year. The study concentrated on this generation because they are a significant economic force.

As mentioned, this study used in-depth interview methodology, to figure out a deeper level of information. The method allows participants to explain their feelings and opinions in more detail. In this study, their findings can be transferred into an understanding of travel intentions towards travel influencers. Each of the interviews ranged in length from 45 to 60 minutes. All participants met in their preferred locations and used the Zoom Cloud Meetings Application, which created a relaxing atmosphere. A digital recorder was utilized since it recorded interviews and allowed the interviewer to concentrate on the interaction as well as emotions, body language, nonverbal signals, and perceived experiences. Therefore, their answers were confidentially recorded and transcribed.

### Data Collection and Data Analysis

The researchers used a question guideline as the research instrument. It is based on existing literature and covers the subjects of 1) demographics and media usages, 2) attitude towards travel influencers, 3) source of credibility, and 4) travel behavior (see Appendix).



Haenlein et al. (2020) discussed two important factors when considering qualitative analysis. That is, how the data collection process should be integrated, and what the research is trying to achieve. Qualitative data collected usually consists of a vast amount of textual material. To analyze the in-depth interviews, data were collected in the form of notes and records to allow the researchers to gain a better understanding. The data were gathered into a summary of all the transcripts, and all components of the theoretical framework were investigated and connected to the gathered data.

## Findings

### Demographics and Media Usages

A total of twelve participants were millennials, both male and female. They all live in Bangkok. Some of them are business owners with flexible hours, while others work as full-time employees in a variety of companies. The majority of them used smartphones to communicate with friends and access regular internet searches, while using laptops or iPads for business or in-depth information search.

More specifically, participants use social media for an average of five hours a day. Additionally, the number of platforms that they use daily varies based on usage; for example, they primarily search for travel-related information on YouTube and Facebook, while Line is used for communication and social interaction at work. X, TikTok, and Instagram are used for entertainment. The majority of participants kept watching YouTube about travel influencer videos because they intended to experience the atmosphere of the destinations through the motion of the videos.

### Attitude towards Travel Influencer

Many travel influencers, like *“Go Went Go, Asapapailong, Thuean Travel, I Roam Alone, and others,”* have been followed by them. Each participant claimed that they had planned the trip within the preceding year, both domestic and international trip, and used social media platforms to search for travel-related

information, especially on *“YouTube and Facebook.”* However, the vast majority of them also organized the trip based on the situation and timing. When asked the definition of travel influencers, many of the participants stated that travel influencers are *“tour guides”* and *“persuasive people”* who have travel experience and express travel content authentically for travelers. Positive repetitive attitudes were mentioned by some participants: travel influencers explore new things and create content that is both entertaining and newsworthy.

When questioned about the criteria to select the most appropriate travel influencer, *travel lifestyles, travel destinations, storytelling, and fresh Content* is one of the four categories into which the participants split the criteria they use to choose the best content. For example, the majority of them stated that travel influencers who have a similar *“travel lifestyle”* are connected with finding travel information that would suit their itinerary, such as a travel budget or travel schedule. Some of them mentioned that they are looking for a travel influencer who can provide comprehensive information to aid in planning or making a trip. Since they can be easily followed, there will be an increase in their needs and travel behaviors.

Secondly, participants are inspired by *“travel destinations,”* and given this knowledge, they may easily fit the destination into their travel plans. Meanwhile, *“storytelling”* comes in third. Travelers increasingly focus on how travel influencers convey their information and how creators may come up with gimmicks to make it more interesting since travel reviews have gone online. One of the last criteria indicated above is that the content that travel influencers expose should be *“fresh content,”* in addition to developing the creator. Travelers will therefore find something new or different from other online reviews. However, none of the participants mentioned well-known travel influencers as a consideration. Those who are *“follower seekers”* or *“popularity seekers”* are less likely to engage. The fact is that travelers appreciate travel influencers' content more than their popularity. The motivation of the participants is typically

provided by travel influencers through a variety of sources.

In terms of perceived behavioral control, based on their travel interests, each participant has named their preferred travel influencer. The Go Went Go channel is the one that gets the most attention. They have followed Bas when he was a singer, but when he transitioned to become a travel influencer, he could convey the context of travel well and was neutral. Additionally, he has a talented content creator who produces infographics, inserts information, and creates videos that cover comprehensive travel information. However, he constantly improves his channel and provides a variety of destinations for travelers to consume travel-related content. The travel information, such as budget or transportation, that he provided would also be an alternative for travelers to make a decision. Since the researcher exposed the criteria that motivate their travel behavior in the previous section, many participants made a direct connection to travel influencers. They seemed to learn from influencers when it came to acquiring advice, recommendations, or approval regarding travel products and activities. All participants have a positive attitude regarding their content and feel as though they are traveling with them. Additionally, travel influencers are beneficial for *"travel advice and risk management,"* which are connected to perceived behavioral control. However, travel influencers, as many of them mentioned, provided the travel barriers as an alternative for travelers to be aware of how they intend to behave.

### Sources of Credibility

**Trustworthiness:** Participants perceive travel influencers favorably, as was already mentioned. Because they had *"experience"* and recorded the entire situation, they all claimed that the travel influencers they had been relying on were reliable. Especially for travel influencers who have traveled before, it can increase their credibility. Travel influencers occasionally go out of their way to stay with locals in order to gain first-hand experience in addition to the knowledge they already possess. This might also give it the appearance of being more credible.

However, more trust will be placed in sincere and authentic travel influencers in particular. Meanwhile, half of them claimed that credibility is less defined by the *"number of followers."* Because the content they have stated depends on the travel content.

**Expertise:** The majority of participants declared that they were aware of travel influencers' expertise. They listed *"experience"* as one of the primary components of competence. Travel-related experience is necessary, and knowledge and skills will follow. While less of them claimed that since it involves travel, skills are more crucial, without travel influencers would not be able to survive and complete their trip.

**Attractiveness:** Firstly, the attractiveness of the travel influencer. More than half of participants agreed that it is significant, but only as a source of attractiveness in relation to the travel influencer's personal image. In this case, being *"overly beautiful or handsome"* for a travel influencer is not a consideration. Due to the fact that they go outside and occasionally go to various locations, it is important to *"act appropriately and dress appropriately."* If they act inappropriately, it might make travelers less inclined to watch their content. While the majority of participants argued that a travel influencer's personality has attracted their attention after a travel influencer visited a stunning or luxurious destination, It should be more attractive to follow the destinations. However, the personal image of a travel influencer has less of an impact on how appealing a destination is to visit. Travel influencers should focus on the right approach because it might increase participants' willingness to believe in or like their content and support their channel. Secondly, the attractiveness of the content has been less mentioned by participants. Only some of them mentioned that they would choose to watch beautiful images on the Instagram platform. Actually, they need *"comprehensive information on content more than beauty."*

### Travel Behavior

The researchers separated millennial travelers into two groups (international

travelers and domestic travelers) to understand different decision-making processes and travel behaviors. The five stages of traveler decision-making include: needs recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, product or service choices, and post-purchase evaluation.

**International Travelers:** Regarding their “*needs recognition*” during the pre-trip phase The majority of participants stated that their need to travel was higher after COVID-19 gradually declined. They all agreed that there were several reasons for concern before making a trip due to the regulation change. However, they want to make a long trip, return to their lost time, and start to think of where to go. Moreover, in addition to their needs, several factors come into play. The majority of participants indicated that money and time were the two most important considerations when deciding whether or not to go. When it comes to money, it all depends on how they can spend it to accomplish the goals they desire. It is not about a cheap vacation. For instance, the ticket price or accommodation price that will suit the season. Additionally, they simply want to scope out the money for readiness. Moreover, each participant was a millennial and has a full-time job; they must ensure that there is adequate time and the right time to travel in this circumstance. Especially when traveling abroad, they must plan ahead and manage their work because they have made the decision to go. However, if they have the money and time together, the trip will be a possibility.

Secondly, “*information search*” is another step in the decision-making process. After they realize the need for recognition, the majority of participants who have traveled internationally will search for travel information, especially on Google and YouTube platforms. They claimed that Google fully covers the basic information that they need to carefully prepare for things like travel information, costumes, weather, documents, etc., and that it takes about two or three weeks. And then they will search for travel influencer channels, especially on YouTube, to see detailed information because, while travel influencers are traveling, participants can surround themselves with the environment that travel influencers walk

through. Moreover, even though they are traveling during the COVID-19 situation, participants have to seek more strict documents. Sometimes, the official website is not updated. Travel influencers are another way to help them gain more information because they are real, experienced travelers. Otherwise, they use Instagram less frequently because it is difficult to search for international travel.

Regarding the third stage of evaluation, the majority of participants stated that they can discover more travel information on various platforms due to the internet’s widespread availability. To find common practices to follow and accurate information, they will compare a variety of sources and decide on a trip. Additionally, the international traveler spends more than a week searching for information and determining whether it is sufficient based on checklists and feelings, particularly when traveling abroad. However, they all claimed that travel online sources had a high level of trust, more than overall. The remaining participants are made up of outdated or personally evaluated information. Since they traveled abroad when the COVID-19 situation was in transition, they all agreed that there were several factors about which to be concerned. They *prepare* “where” or “country” before researching travel details. They did not mention any special bargains; instead, they will look for safety and compare seasonal pricing. By making this assumption, they were simply assuming that they would want to carry out the plan. Some participants mentioned that they would look up the basics on Google first, and then they would look up travel influencers on YouTube to get more knowledge.

Afterwards, they would plan their trip and collect the necessary information for a travel schedule. In contrast to those who travel domestically, this group adheres strictly to the itinerary in order to avoid a complicated journey and unforeseen circumstances, such as the necessity to make a temporary itinerary. Nevertheless, it does not mean that they are concerned; rather, they believe that dealing with the situation is exciting. *After the trip*, they have lately visited several other countries. Although each of them had a different experience, they all insisted that the

trip had been enjoyable and satisfying. They will return for another visit if they have the chance. They both share real-time pictures on personal accounts and discuss WOM and e-WOM with friends. Thus, it can be seen that the first group of international travelers ultimately gains new knowledge on the trip since they encounter real-world challenges and must adapt to fit in with the locals. Online reviews also include those from actual travelers.

**Domestic Travelers:** The majority of the second group of participants, who travel within a country, claimed that the COVID-19 situation and the fact that the destination country is not free and open are the main reasons why they prefer to travel locally. As a result, their “needs recognition” was to have leisure time since they had not traveled in a long time. Actually, they were in the “information search” stage, deciding where to go on a trip using the resources available online. One of the participants, a male, made the interesting point that, following COVID-19, he had become a passive traveler who viewed sources before being active in his travels, such as watching beautiful reels on Instagram. More than half of the second group of travelers stated that they are the type of people who do not strictly adhere to the plan because they are either very familiar with the country or have a strong desire to explore it. They gathered some data and were “venture travelers” who were confronted with the current situation during a trip. Moreover, the majority of them use a variety of platforms, like Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, to search for information because these sources are constantly available.

For the third stage’s “evaluation of alternatives,” in terms of comparing sources based on online reviews and making decisions about their final destination, routes, activities, or accommodations, they are comparable to the first group. The majority of them said that they only start “product or service choices or travel preparation and travel experiences” two or three days before a trip. When compared to information found online, they all claimed that there will be some variables that are overlooked in evaluations due to crowded places or currently closed restaurants. They all proved highly successful

after the trip, referred to as “travel satisfaction.”

### Word of Mouth

Additionally, many participants said that e-WOM is more significant than WOM in driving travel behavior. due to the influence of the internet and modern travel behavior. It offers the advantage of being real-time and accessible around the clock. Travelers only need to perform a single click to easily find reviews online. Additionally, it has been stated that online reviewers and travel influencers have expertise and skills. Some participants asserted that occasionally they believe e-WOM to be more significant than WOM since WOM is sometimes unable to explain the problem very precisely because it lacks photos or sources that can verify the information. Similar to this, e-WOM nowadays is more trustworthy because sources with more reviews tend to be more reliable. Additionally, pay attention to recommendations from friends who have had genuine travel experiences. They continue to search for more information online. However, the study revealed that travelers have a more favorable perception of online sources because they frequently search for information there. Fewer of them were questioned by friends or neighbors.

## Discussion

### Attitude towards Travel Influencers

There are three key components that comprise attitudes: attitudes, subjective norms, behavioral intention, and perceived behavioral control in relation to the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Under the theory, participants were asked to explain how they define travel influencers and define the types of behavior that lead them to believe, like and follow a travel influencer. Most participants agreed that travel influencers serve as tour guides and persuasive people who attract them online to visit the destination and explore new things. Moreover, the main factors to choose the appropriate travel influencers were the depth of their information, knowledge, entertainment, and fresh content. Meanwhile, travel content will

be consumed less by travel influencers who are primarily seeking to gain followers and popularity. Physically and emotionally, participants had a positive attitude towards travel influencers formed by experiences that gain from travel influencer content.

### Source of Credibility

Regarding credibility, it relates to whether a person perceived their advice as unbiased, believable, true, or factual (Ohanian, 1990). Participants were also questioned about trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness in order to see the effectiveness of online messages. The quality of the content in terms of information will be discussed in this part. In terms of trustworthiness, the vast majority of them agreed that because travel influencers have actual travel experience and information, which strengthens their ability to travel, they have a lot of credibility. While participants seemed to value experience as crucial characteristics for travel influencers expertise rather than knowledge and skills. Meanwhile, some felt that the skills are greater. However, the attractiveness of travel influencers and number of followers also have less significance to travel behavior in this study. On the other hand, paid travel influencers are one of marketing tools that participants are aware of.

### Travel Behavior

According to travel behavior, it was related to the process of the trip performed at a particular destination. The travel behavior connected to the decision-making process within the consumer behavior activity was described by McColl et al. (1994), who also stated that the decision-making process will determine those actions. To better understand, the study divided the questions on travel behavior into three phases: pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip. It also compared two groups of travelers--those traveling abroad and those traveling domestically--to see how their behavior and decision-making processes evolved. Each group of participants travels differently depending on a variety of factors, including place, culture, mode of transportation, environment, and people. One similarity between the two groups is that during the three phases, they all looked

up online and travel influencer reviews, communicated both WOM and e-WOM, and shared real-time photos during the trip. As the previous reviews indicated, millennials spontaneously seek destinations and plan their trips on social media. Taking pictures and sharing them on different social media platforms were the main reasons for using their mobile devices during their trips (Gotardi et al., 2015). This study supports the ideas because Millennials are very tech-savvy, and e-WOM will rise in importance rather than WOM. However, they focus on their needs, and even when they encounter the unexpected, they are able to deal with it, giving the impression that they are adventure travelers.

Deegan (2021) established that millennials are the most tech-savvy group, the study found that they spend a higher rate on social media usage, which is approximately five hours per day, and access all types of platforms based on their goals. Before making a purchase, they particularly turn to social media to search for travel-related information, according to Liu & Wu (2019). They revealed that Google is the most popular search engine and that YouTube is looking for travel influencer content. Also, social media motivates participants' travel behaviors in terms of their desire to travel.

According to Femenia-Serra, Neuhofer, and Ivars-Baidal (2019), millennials use smartphones the most during all stages of travel planning. Participants simply use a computer or laptop to pre-search for trip preparation. In addition, they search for travel influencer content on a variety of channels before booking a trip. Moreover, their need to travel is greater, particularly in light of recent situations like COVID-19. They have a tendency to become "*passive travelers*," who decide after consuming travel-related content. During the trip, millennials realized that there are numerous factors that will come into play. Millennials appear to be an "*adventurous*" traveling group. Another aspect of them was their attitude towards travel influencers and online sources, which aimed to capture the overall perspective of participants. There was a repetitive positive answer from the majority of participants that travel influencers have greater benefits to

travelers as follows: *“travel information, knowledge, updated information, travel attribution, convenience, risk reduction, and entertainment.”*

Comparing how the two groups' travel behaviors differed, it is evident that there are a wide range of behaviors concerning the length of time spent planning a trip, online resources, the itinerary, and the source of credibility--domestic travelers will seek out both friends and the internet, while foreign travelers will conduct more research online. While there is one similarity between the two groups, social media and technology are essential tools for the trip. They remain in close contact with the media before, during, and after their trip in order to get information about travel. They stated that travel influencers and online sources of information also provide advantages for them in terms of knowledge.

### **Word of Mouth**

When comparing WOM driving travel behavior, many participants stated that it was more significant, confirming Han and Chen (2021). Online reviews about travel, hotels, and tourism services have become important sources of information for travelers. Firstly, the majority of them stated that e-WOM nowadays is fast and approachable. Travelers only need to click once to quickly find an online review. Second, they stated that e-WOM is now trustworthy because it has numerous pieces of evidence from real travelers that contribute to its authenticity. Not only will they have a source of information, but they will also have to have the skills to review on those platforms.

Moreover, e-WOM includes all kinds of information, for example, video, photo, text, or voiceover, which can increase the understanding of them. Less than ten percent of online reviews are written by people who made an error while reading them and then continued to write them. Most participants claimed that they constantly compared the source because they knew it came from a different point of view. They have to measure it carefully. While there is some WOM, the researcher cannot deny that it is significant because some participants indicated that it was

beneficial to the finding. As a result of the evolution of internet usage and traveler behavior, participants now focus on e-WOM rather than on WOM. Contrast to the paid sponsor, they have a less significant to products or services while tie-in on travel influencer. A generalization form of this marketing is less likely to purchase on products or services.

This study found a significant relationship between credibility and travel influencers, who regarded trustworthiness and experts, particularly experiences, as the top desirable characteristics that increase content consumption and lead to further decision-making. This study rejected previous research that having a high level of followers is less attractive to travelers because they have their own characteristic choices that match with them rather than a favorable one. Marketers need to give more consideration to an influencer's characteristics, trustworthiness, and expertise. Nevertheless, whether this is considered amongst consumers when purchasing a service within this industry will need to be studied in further research.

### **Limitations**

Even though the target group of this study is millennials, there is another age range or generation that is also a traveler and follows travel influencers. Thus, they can be another potential or hidden group involved in buying and supporting brand and travel influencers. Moreover, due to the time of the interview, It should be expanded and transcribed in detail to gain more insight. For further research, it could be replicated in different contexts. This could be arranged by conducting similar research within a wider population of interest. A quantitative replication study involving target groups from several areas across Thailand could be conducted to validate the findings of this thesis.

### **Practical Implications**

Marketers should match those key factors with brands or products. In adverse situations, these findings have shown that participants may be wary about influencers

being compensated for their promotional efforts, resulting in a negative attitude and no purchase intention. In order to stimulate traveler interest and behavior, the marketer must ensure that the travel influencer has positive trustworthiness, is an expert in terms of travel content, and is aware of more promotional messages.

For influencer, being authentic, being oneself, being completely informed, being creative creators, and understanding the target audience are the crucial suggestions provided by participants. It can be an improvement for both marketers and travel influencers in order to enhance their comprehensive abilities

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3. Can you give me an example? (Can you tell me 2-3 choice)
4. Have you arranged a trip based on online sources within 1 year? (Online review, travel influencer, etc.)
- Section 1: Demographics and Media Usages**
1. Can you tell me about yourself? (Name, age, gender, and location).
2. What is your occupation and what do you do in your job?
3. Which electronic devices do you use?
4. Do you use social media on a daily basis? How many hours a day do you use it?
5. What social media platforms do you use? Can you rank it?
- Section 2: Attitude towards Travel Influencer (Attitudes, subjective norms, behavioral control)**
1. How do you define a travel influencer?
2. What are the criteria for choosing the right travel influencer?
3. Which travel influencer do you like the most? Can you give me their name? (An answer will follow their story)
4. What makes you like and follow them?
5. What social media platforms do you use to follow them? (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, X, etc.).
6. What do you think or feel about their content?
7. Can you give me one word to describe their travel reviews?
- Section 3: Sources of Credibility (Trust worthiness, expertise, and attractiveness)**
1. Do you think they are credible? What makes you think they are credible?
2. Do you believe the number of their followers' matter to trustworthiness or not?
3. When did you lose trust in them?
4. Do you believe that the (1) experiences, (2) skills, and (3) knowledge of travel influencers motivate them on social media or not?
5. From 4. What is the most important part of their content?

## Appendix

### Question Guideline Used in this Study

#### Screening Questions

1. How old are you?
2. Do you follow travel influencers?

6. Does their personal image attract your interest or not?

7. How do you define the good quality of travel influencers' content?

8. Do you think their content is good quality or not?

9. What kinds of content material do you like the most? (Text, photo, voice, or video) Can you rank it?

#### **Section 4: Decision Making Process and Travel Behavior**

##### Pre-travel

1. When do you decide to travel?

2. Where do you search for travel information?

3. How long do you search for travel information?

4. From what you searched, do you trust online sources more or less? Can you give me a number of percentages?

5. What kinds of content do you think motivate your travel behavior?

##### During travel

6. Based on your prior trip, can you tell me about your experience?

7. While you travel, do you search more for online information? Can you give me an example of information? Which platforms do you search for?

8. Sometimes, travel influencers not only review destinations but also incorporate travel products such as dinner discounts, spa discounts, or travel packages into their content. Do you purchase or just curious?

##### Post-travel

9. Are you satisfied with your experience? Do you share it with friends or others?

10. Do you think travel influencers contribute useful information or not?

11. Do you think WOM or eWOM motivate travel behavior the most?

12. What advice would you give to travel influencers on how to communicate with you?

13. Will you continue to follow them in the future?