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From Motivation to Behavioral Intentions: An Application of Self-Determination Theory to the Chinese Outbound Tourists

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The rise of social media has led to a substantial change in the tourism industry. Nowadays, the inputs presented by social media influencers play an integral part in the consumer behavior of tourists around the world. This study uses self-determination theory, along with emotional perceptions and utilitarian perceptions, to account for changes in consumer behavior. Data from 261 Chinese tourists was collected to understand the impact of engagement between social media influencers and overseas tourists on travel decision-making. Furthermore, a structural equation modeling was used to reach conclusions, whereas the snowball sampling technique was used to determine the sample population. Research shows that emotional perceptions and utilitarian perceptions influence interactions with travel influencers, this association also has a significant positive effect on the behavioral intentions of tourists from China. Overall, the findings provide very useful implications for travel companies to leverage the power of travel influencers in recommending new destinations. **Keywords:** Self-Determination Theory, Travel Influencer Engagement, Emotional Motives, Utilitarian Motives, Chinese Outbound Tourists, Behavioral Intentions, Tourism industry, Travel Decision-Making, Structural Equation Modeling, Structural Equation Modeling

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Social media and influencers have recently played an increasingly important role in advocating for the choice of a destination by outbound tourists. As per the study by Femenia-Serra et al. (2022), social media influencers are able

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to translate unique messages and experiences to consumers by leveraging the community created by social media platforms. This allows a high level of engagement between potential tourists and different destinations. The form of content that is presented to consumers through social media platforms also tends to alter consumer behavior. This is because the use of short videos and reels created by social media influencers addresses the psychological characteristics of potential customers (Cao et al., 2021). This motivates the customers to follow the destination, ultimately changing tourist behavior globally. Consequently, it can be argued that engagement between tourists and social media influencers plays an important role in the tourism industry in changing consumer behavior.

Despite having knowledge of the impact of social media influencers on tourism behavior on a global scale, the studies conducted on China are substantially low. This is a major gap in the literature, which this particular research aims to fill. The consumer behavior of Chinese outbound travelers is substantially different from their Western counterparts. As per the study by Croes and Bartels (2021), Chinese travelers are highly motivated by social and cultural aspects while considering the decision to travel. This leads to these individuals seeking tailored advice from influencers. The presence of such tailored advice helps them to build a sense of connection and trust (Xu, 2022). As a result, the engagement between Chinese tourists and travel influencers is substantially higher than that from the rest of the world.

1.2 Purpose

In order to understand the engagement between outbound tourists and social media influencers, the self-determination theory has been considered. As per Farrell et al. (2022), the self-determination theory postulates that the individual needs to feel connected to an activity in order to enhance their well-being. Therefore, this psychological factor drives the interaction between consumers and influencers. Moreover, Ghaisani et al. (2017) also revealed that certain intrinsic motives, along with extrinsic motives, also drive consumers toward the interaction and lead to the eventual change in consumer behavior. This is because, through such motives, the consumer enhances their personal welfare as well as economic welfare. Therefore, such a framework could be considered to understand the impact of social media influencers on the tourism behavior of Chinese outbound travelers. Moreover, travel influencers regularly use their online presence to develop a sense of trust and loyalty among their followers (Pop et al., 2022). This is very different from traditional marketing strategies as this type of communication is considered to be more personal. Additionally, this customized content enables a stronger courting between the influencer and the user. This is accomplished through a mixture of personal information and visible content (Cao et al., 2021). Such a technique offers the client a unique idea of what to anticipate from a selected destination. As a result, the purpose of the study is to find whether social media influencers are able to interact with Chinese outbound tourists and alter their tourism behavior.

1.3 Research Objectives

The research objective of this particular study is to leverage the emotional motives and utilitarian motives of an individual to understand how these factors create a link between a potential outbound tourist and a social media influencer. Moreover, the same dimensions are accounted for in understanding the change in consumer behavior of

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outbound tourists from China.

1.4 Research Questions

Listed below are the research questions of the study:

a.   Does the emotional motive and utilitarian motive influence the interaction between social media influencers and Chinese travelers going abroad?

b. Does the engagement between social media influencers and outbound tourists impact the behavioral intentions of the latter?

1.5 Outline

There are six chapters in this research. The first chapter introduces the topic and provides the background of the research. A theoretical framework is put forth in the second chapter, which also surveys the empirical literature. The third and fourth chapters contain the methodology and the results respectively. Finally, the fifth chapter concludes the study and presents its theoretical and practical implications.

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory is an important theoretical framework that explains the involvement of outbound tourists and travel influencers. A study by Ryan and Deci (2024) suggests that self-determination theory emphasizes that each individual needs to satisfy three psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness to enhance their well-being. These factors ensure that individuals are fully in control and connected with their activities, and as a result, the combination of these factors maximizes individual utility and well-being.

Self-determination theory also plays an important role in distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that ultimately affect motivation and behavior. According to Legault (2020), intrinsic motivation refers to the engagement in activities by the user, which enhances their personal enjoyment. This intrinsic motivation is more self-satisfying and is achieved through participation in activities, despite the presence of external barriers. However, on the other hand, the activities attracted by extrinsic motives lead to the production of specific outcomes (Legault, 2020). These specific outcomes are rather tangible in nature. Therefore, the activities and level of satisfaction driven by extrinsic motives are very different from the self-satisfaction generated by intrinsic motivation. Based on these considerations, it can be understood that outbound tourists interact with travel influencers for leisure. This is guided by personal motivation according to the principle of self-determination. However, travelers can also interact with travel influencers to capture discounts and other tangible offers based on external incentives. As a result, these factors shape how outgoing tourists interact with tourism influencers.

2.1.2 Emotional Motives

Emotion plays a facilitating role in the engagement between travel influencers and outbound travelers. According to

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a study by Croes and Bartels (2021), entertainment is a key emotional attribute that drives interaction between travelers and social media influencers. The information provided by influencers relaxes consumers and provides leisure time for users. This is at par with the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which suggests that individuals search media content for information, entertainment, and escape (Ma et al., 2019). The independent use of these two functions of self-entertainment and tangible information motivates the customer to interact with the content created by the influencer. As a result, this shows how entertainment purposes fulfill the emotional motives of the consumer and lead to engagement with the influencers.

The social interaction that comes from engaging with travel influencers also provides greater emotional value to consumers. According to the study of Shukla et al. (2023), interactions between influencers and outbound travelers lead to the creation of a travel community. It is a platform where the parties involved share their experiences together. Thus, a collaborative community increases the emotional bond between the two parties and enhances the well-being of the consumers. As a result, social interaction, as an emotional incentive, further motivates outbound travelers to interact more with travel influencers.

Finally, the alignment of the preference of the consumer with the content created by the social media influencer also creates a greater emotional connection. According to Xu and Pratt (2018), self-congruence theory suggests that when an influencer is authentic, he or she attracts consumer attention. This creates a sense of loyalty among tourists from abroad for products created by travel influencers. Consequently, this self-consistency creates a greater emotional connection between the user and the influencer, leading to greater engagement for outbound tourists toward the content created by social media influencers.

2.1.3 Utilitarian Motives

The utilitarian motive also facilitates greater engagement between products created by travel influencers and outbound tourists. According to a study by Cheng et al. (2020), individuals receive important information about travel destinations from social media influencers. This enhances their understanding of the destination as well as their knowledge. As a result, this increases the utility of tourists and improves their well-being. Therefore, this utilitarian perspective provides the link between tourists and content created by social media influencers.

The engagement between travel influencers and outbound travelers also leads to the gain of tangible rewards for certain consumers. A study by Gross and von Wangenheim (2022) shows that some Instagram posts sponsored by travel influencers come with offers and discount coupons for consumers. This is a tangible reward that can help consumers financially. The same can also help to improve the overall well-being of the consumers. Thus, in order to gain further economic benefits through such tangible rewards, the consumers enhance their engagement with the content of travel influencers. As a result, this also determines the interaction between the content made by travel influencers and the outbound tourists.

Finally, the interaction between both parties also leads to the creation of credibility, which eventually drives the engagement between the outbound tourists and the content made by influencers. As per the study by Hendricks and Bright (2023), the authentic content produced by social media influencers allows them to be considered a reliable

source of information for tourists. This leads to the loss of skepticism among the consumers, and creates a durable bond where the consumer can rely on any content produced by the social media influencer. As a result, this form of credibility under the utilitarian motive drives the engagement between the content created by travel influencers and outbound tourists. Overall, the utilitarian context is another useful theoretical framework that explains why consumers engage with the content created by social media influencers.

2.2 Impact on Tourism Behavior with Travel Influencer Engagement

The engagement between travel influencers and outbound tourists could be understood using emotional motivations and utilitarian motivations. However, the same factors could also lead to a change in the behavioral intentions of the consumers. According to the study by Xie-Carson et al. (2023), the presence of an influencer, as a mediator, leads to a change in the behavioral intentions of the consumer. This is because the interaction with the influencer leads to emotional fulfillment for the consumer. Moreover, utilitarian factors also motivate the consumer toward a decision to enhance their economic welfare. Therefore, this helps one to understand that the presence of a travel influencer, as a mediator, helps in influencing the consumer behavior of the outbound traveler.

Moreover, the content produced by the influencer also plays a pivotal role in changing consumer behavior. As per the study by Munar and Jacobsen (2014), the usage of visual content has a high value in the decision-making part of travel destinations. This is because the usage of well-articulated visuals captures the attention of the consumer in a short period. This further caters to the psychological needs of the consumer, thereby motivating them to make a decision on future travel destinations. Therefore, such emotional and utilitarian content enhances the attractiveness of the tourist destination and increases tourist engagement.

The engagement of outbound tourists with travel influencers, driven by emotional motives and utilitarian motives, also creates a ripple effect among the consumer behavior of outbound tourists. The study by Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019) suggests that once tourists receive a positive emotional and utilitarian outcome from the interaction with the content created by a travel influencer, they would recommend it to their friends and families. This is because the consumer believes that doing the same would also enhance the welfare of their relatives. Therefore, this shows that a ripple effect is being caused by the travel influencer engagement.

2.3 Model and Hypothesis Development

The conceptual model used in Figure 1 has been considered in this particular research. This shows whether emotional motives and utilitarian motives impact the engagement with travel influencers, and whether the engagement further leads to a change in behavioral intentions.
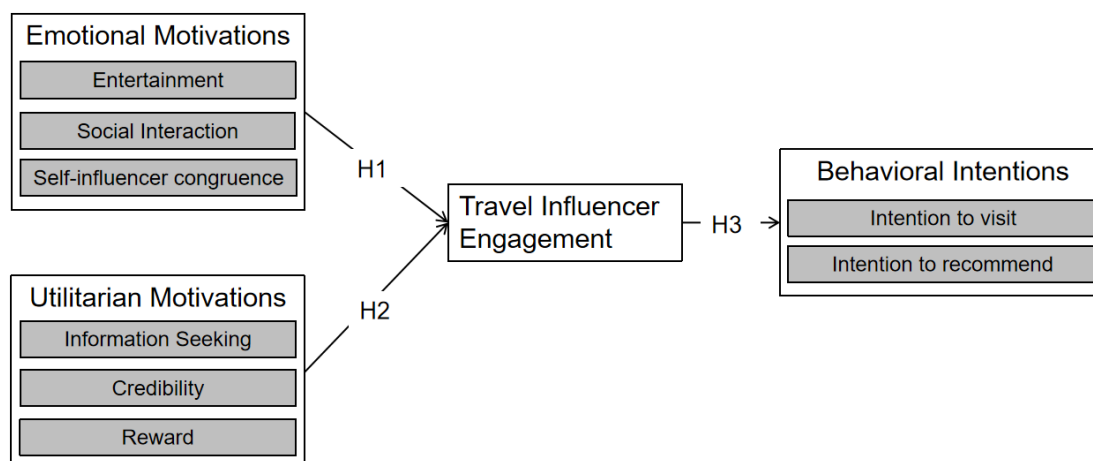
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Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Emotional motives are one of the key factors that influence the engagement of travel influencers with users. As per the study by Croes and Bartels (2021), the entertainment factor is one of the key motives that drives engagement between social media influencers and travelers. The study found that relaxing entertainment impacts the interaction behavior of consumers by 0.12 percentage points. This result could be achieved from a study using 415 young people from Holland between the ages of 16 and 25. Moreover, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and ANOVA test were conducted to reach a conclusion. Such a phenomenon could be observed because of the authentic content that the social media influencers produce for their followers, which leads them to gain substantial intrinsic value. Furthermore, the experiences created by the social media influencers, through their content, also allow them to build an emotional bond with the outbound travelers. As per the study by Olavarria-Benavides et al. (2021), the experience provided by the content has a 49 percent correlation with engagement levels. This could be understood from a sample of 339 national tourists between the ages of 16 and 60 from various regions. Furthermore, the study conducted a cross-sectional, non-experimental design to reach the conclusions. This is because the experience of providing authentic and informative content creates a stronger emotional bond between the social media influencer and the outbound traveler. This further drives the engagement levels between both parties. The same instance is upheld by the study conducted by Qu and Lee (2011), who revealed there is a positive behavioral interaction between social media and users, when the same leads to a unique community experience. This research has been conducted using data from 352 participants, and the analysis was done using a structural equation. On the basis of the study, it could be understood that the creation of a community experience led to a greater emotional bond between the social media influencer and the traveler. As a result, this also drove the engagement between both the parties. Based on the empirical evidence, the following hypothesis could be drawn:

H1: Emotional motives positively influence the engagement between outbound travelers and travel influencers.

Utilitarian motives also show the interaction between tourists and travel influencers. According to the study by Cheung et al. (2022), the gain in additional information from social media influencers, regarding a particular destination, has a positive impact of 0.138 percent on consumer engagement levels. This has been determined using

Research Article

a sample of 236 respondents from the Malaysian economy, using a partial least squares regression model. This is because interaction between content created by social media influencers increases consumer awareness. Moreover, this also makes the decision-making process easier for the customer due to the information provided. As a result, the utilitarian motives lead to better engagement between influencers and travelers, based on the authenticity of the information provided

Secondly, when travel influencers provide authentic content, their credibility also improves. This also affects the magnitude of interactions between social media influencers and tourists. According to the study by Cheng et al. (2020), credible influencers lead to an increase in consumer engagement by 0.43 percent. This can be understood from the study, which uses data from 352 individuals over 12 months, and implements a multiple linear regression model to extract the results. This is because credible influencers create a loyal base of followers who extract authentic information from their content. Moreover, the outbound tourists use the same information in a practical aspect to plan their own travel itinerary. As a result, through utilitarian motives, the presence of credible influencers enhances the engagement levels with consumers.

Finally, the presence of tangible rewards also allows travel influencers to connect with outbound travelers. According to a study by Hendricks and Bright (2023), the availability of discounts and tangible rewards increases customer engagement by 0.20 percent. This has been determined by using data from 179 Instagram users and implementing a linear regression model. The main reason for such increased participation is that incentives, such as offering discounts, enhance the financial well-being of the customers. Therefore, the presence of tangible rewards caters to the utilitarian motives of the consumers and leads to enhanced engagement between both parties.

H2: Utilitarian motives positively influence the engagement between outbound travelers and travel influencers.

The engagement of outbound tourists with travel influencers also leads to a substantial change in their consumer behavior. This could be observed from the research by Pop et al. (2022), who reveal that the trustworthiness of social media influencers leads to a 0.301 percentage point change in the purchase decision of the consumer. This could be understood from the study, which considered data from 162 individuals. The conclusion was reached using a structural model. The main reason behind such a change in consumer behavior is that when the influencer is trustworthy, it appeals to the emotional motives of the consumer through their authenticity. Moreover, the content also reduces the risk of uncertainty in information for the consumers, thereby catering to their utilitarian motives. As a result, the engagement of outbound tourists with travel influencers leads to an alteration in consumer behavior. The same has also been advocated by the study conducted by Zhang and Huang (2021), who reveal that influencer attraction leads to a 0.213 percentage point positive impact on travel interests. This has been understood using data from Chinese individuals, which has been mined from the Baidu search engine. The study reveals that the influencers have a moderating effect on the change in travel interests. Therefore, this shows that influencers create a personal as well as professional relationship with their audience, by catering to their emotional and utilitarian motives. This leads to a greater level of engagement between both parties, which eventually alters the purchase decision of the consumers as well. On the basis of the empirical evidences, the following hypothesis can be drawn:

Research Article

H3: Engagement with travel influencer impacts behavioral intentions positively

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Questionnaire Design and Measures

To empirically test the hypothesis using the conceptual framework, a variety of factors are considered to account for the emotional and utilitarian motives, behavioral intentions, and travel influencer engagement. To ensure reliability and validity, scales validated in the existing literature are adopted. The Likert scale, which captures five points, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, is also used in the study.

Emotional motivation can be understood in three basic ways: entertainment, social interaction, and self-influencer congruence. To quantify the entertainment factors, the sample questionnaire used by Cheung et al. (2022) and Farrell et al. (2022), has been considered. The questionnaire on social interaction that was developed by Cheung et al. (2022) was adopted in the study. Finally, Reinikainen et al. (2021) provided insights for the questions on self-influencer congruence. Utilitarian motivation is measured through information seeking, credibility, and reward. Information-seeking questions are adapted from Cheung et al. (2022). In addition, the study by Pinto and Paramita (2021) provides guidelines for questions to estimate credibility. Finally, rewards are measured by adapting the questions posed by Farrell et al. (2022) and Cheung et al. (2022). Engagement between consumers and travel influencers were measured through questionnaires administered by Cheung et al. (2022). In addition, behavioral intentions are captured using questions adapted from Le and Hancer (2021) and Kumar and Nayak (2019).

Participants were given an online questionnaire. Moreover, two probing questions were used in the questionnaire to ensure compliance. After passing these questions, consumers turned to demographic questions. Then, they were shown questions about emotional factors, behavioral intentions, and associations with travel influencers. The first questionnaire was written in English and later translated into plain Chinese. The "back-translation method" was used to confirm that the translation of the questionnaire was also valid.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

The data in the present study were collected using a snowball sampling method. Due to the vast geographical area of China and the large number of travelers going abroad, the study presents obstacles to reaching specific target audiences within a limited time and budget. As a result, the study used a snowball sampling method, which is particularly useful for reaching geographically remote populations (Leighton et al., 2021). This sampling strategy uses networks of primary respondents to identify and recruit new interventions, thereby increasing the sample size through referrals.

The target population for this study has two main characteristics: they are Chinese outbound tourists and followers of travel influencers on social media. Given China's distinct social media ecosystem compared to other nations, this study will gather its initial sample from the two most popular social media platforms, WeChat (87.3%) and Douyin (78.4%). To ensure diversity and representativeness, we will include initial participants from various demographic

Research Article

backgrounds, including different age groups, genders, and regions. This approach will help mitigate potential biases associated with snowball sampling and enhance the generalizability of the findings.

After identifying 50 seed respondents with characteristics matching the study sample, the researcher disclosed her identity, the academic nature of the survey, and the anonymity of the questionnaire through WeChat Moments and WeChat video channels, as well as through private messaging on Douyin. Each participant will be asked to refer other individuals within their network who also follow travel influencers.

After data review, 11 replies were eliminated during the data cleaning phase, which also comprised ensuring that the data was normal and free of item response bias. Ultimately, 261 valid questionnaires were collected over approximately two months, from March 26, 2024 to May 19, 2024. According to previous research, a sample size of 261 is adequate for testing structural equation models and other statistical techniques used in this study. The profile of respondents is detailed in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1. Participants' demographic profiles

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage	Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender			**Education**		
Male	149	57%	PhD	5	1.9%
Female	112	43%	Master	61	23.4%
Age			Bachelor	143	54.8%
19-26	35	13.4%	College	38	14.6%
27-34	129	49.4%	High school	13	5.0%
35-42	77	29.5%	Others	1	0.4%
>42	20	7.7%			

3.3 Data Analysis

Following the completion of data collection, statistical software like SPSS and AMOS were used to analyze the responses. The sample's demographics were summarized using descriptive statistics, and the conceptual framework's postulated relationships were tested using inferential statistics. The technique of structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to assess the overall fit of the model and the strength of the suggested hypotheses.

4. RESULTS

4.1. The Measurement Model

The measuring methodology was evaluated so as to confirm the constructs' validity and reliability. This prepared the way for investigating the mediating effects and structural model. Convergent and discriminant validity, as well as reliability analysis, were evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).

Research Article

The reliability has been measured using Cronbach's alpha. As indicated in Table 2, all structures exhibited high internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha values above the acceptable limit of 0.70 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). A high degree of correlation between items within a concept and their measurement of the same underlying notion is known as convergent validity. Convergent validity was evaluated using three metrics: factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR), as shown in Table 2. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), each item's loading was more than the recommended cutoff point of 0.70, indicating that each item accurately reflected the corresponding construct.

The factor loadings, for instance, varied from 0.75 to 0.88 for entertainment, 0.73 to 0.85 for social interaction, and 0.78 to 0.87 for self-influencer congruence. Each construct's AVE value was greater than the minimal threshold of 0.50, meaning that the constructs accounted for more than half of the variance in the items. All constructs exhibited good internal consistency, as shown by CR values more than 0.70. Furthermore, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was utilized for assessing discriminant validity. The square root of the AVE for each concept was bigger than its associations with other items, confirming discriminant validity, as Table 3 illustrates.

Table 2. Construct reliability and validity

Constructs and Items	Loading	CR	AVE	α
Entertainment (EN)		0.89	0.65	0.88
EN1: I find the content of travel influencers entertaining.	0.75			
EN2: Watching travel influencer content is a pleasurable activity for me.	0.78			
EN3: I enjoy viewing the visual content shared by travel influencers.	0.88			
Social Interaction (SI)		0.85	0.6	0.83
SI1: I think it's great to chat with like-minded people on travel influencer channels.	0.73			
SI2: It is fun to communicate with others on travel influencer channels.	0.77			
SI3: I look forward to talking, discussing, and sharing information with others on travel influencer channels.	0.85			
Self-Influencer Congruence (SC)		0.87	0.68	0.86
SC1: I feel that travel influencers are similar to me.	0.78			
SC2: Travel influencers make me feel comfortable as if I am with friends.	0.81			
SC3: I see myself in the experiences shared by travel influencers.	0.87			
Information Seeking (IS)		0.84	0.62	0.82
IS1: I follow travel influencers to get tips and advice about travel.	0.76			

Research Article

IS2: The information provided by travel influencers is useful for planning my trips.	0.79			
IS3: Travel influencers provide valuable insights about destinations.	0.82			
Credibility (CR)		0.9	0.7	0.89
CR1: I trust the recommendations of travel influencers.	0.8			
CR2: Travel influencers are credible sources of information.	0.85			
CR3: I believe that travel influencers provide honest reviews.	0.9			
Reward (RE)		0.88	0.66	0.87
RE1: I engage with travel influencers to get exclusive deals and discounts.	0.79			
RE2: I follow travel influencers so that I can save money.	0.84			
RE3: Travel influencers often offer incentives that are valuable to me.	0.87			
Travel Influencer Engagement (TIE)		0.91	0.72	0.9
TIE1: I actively follow updates from travel influencers.	0.78			
TIE2: I frequently "like" or comment on travel influencer posts.	0.81			
TIE3: I initiate posts related to travel influencers.	0.85			
Intention to Visit (INV)		0.88	0.69	0.87
INV1: It is likely I will travel to the destinations recommended by travel influencers.	0.76			
INV2: I am willing to visit the places featured by travel influencers.	0.8			
INV3: I plan to visit the destinations highlighted by travel influencers.	0.83			
Intention to Recommend (INR)		0.91	0.73	0.89
INR1: I would recommend destinations featured by travel influencers to others.	0.77			
INR2: I will say positive things about this destination to other people.	0.8			
INR3: I will encourage friends and relatives to visit this destination.	0.85			

Table 3. Discriminant validity- Fornell-Larcker Criterion

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Entertainment	**0.80**								
2. Social interaction	0.66	**0.77**							
3. Self-influencer congruence	0.58	0.72	**0.82**						
4. Information seeking	0.47	0.50	0.55	**0.79**					
5. Credibility	0.56	0.59	0.64	0.63	**0.84**				
6. Reward	0.62	0.60	0.65	0.66	0.67	**0.81**			

Research Article

7. Travel influencer engagement	0.73	0.70	0.75	0.72	0.75	0.78	**0.85**		
8. Intention to visit	0.68	0.64	0.69	0.65	0.69	0.72	0.79	**0.83**	
9. Intention to recommend	0.71	0.68	0.73	0.68	0.72	0.76	0.81	0.82	**0.86**

Note: Diagonal elements (bold figures) are the square root of the AVE (the variance shared between the constructs and their measures). Below-diagonal elements are the correlations among variables.

The overall fit of the measurement model was assessed using several fit indices: Chi-square (χ^2), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI). The χ^2/df ratio was 2.5, which is below the recommended threshold of 3.0, indicating an acceptable fit (χ^2 = 890.25, df = 356, $p < 0.001$). The RMSEA value was 0.05, indicating a good fit (values below 0.08 are acceptable). Both CFI (0.95) and TLI (0.94) values were above 0.90, indicating a good fit of the model to the data. The results of the CFA and reliability analysis suggest that the measurement model demonstrates adequate reliability and validity. This provides a solid foundation for testing the structural model and examining the hypothesized relationships.

4.2. Structural Model Evaluation and Hypotheses Tests

The structural model's fit using structural equation modeling (SEM) was also satisfactory: χ^2 (df) = 970.45 (426), CFI = .96, TLI = .95, and RMSEA = .04. Table 4 shows the hypotheses test results. Emotional Motivation (H1: β = 0.45, $p < .001$) significantly affected Travel Influencer Engagement (TIE). Specifically, Entertainment (H1a: β = 0.45, $p < .001$), Social Interaction (H1b: β = 0.40, $p < .001$), and Self-Influencer Congruence (H1c: β = 0.42, $p < .001$) all significantly influenced TIE. Utilitarian Motivation (H2: β = 0.40, $p < .001$) also significantly affected TIE, with Information Seeking (H2a: β = 0.38, $p < .001$), Credibility (H2b: β = 0.35, $p < .001$), and Reward (H2c: β = 0.37, $p < .001$) showing significant impacts. TIE, in turn, significantly influenced Behavioral Intentions (H3: β = 0.50, $p < .001$), specifically Intention to Visit (H3a: β = 0.50, $p < .001$) and Intention to Recommend (H3b: β = 0.52, $p < .001$).

Table 4. Structural Model Results

Hypothesis	Path	Path Coefficient	p-value	Support
H1	Emotional Motivation $\rightarrow$ TIE	0.45	<0.001	Supported
H1a	Entertainment $\rightarrow$ TIE	0.45	<0.001	Supported
H1b	Social Interaction $\rightarrow$ TIE	0.40	<0.001	Supported
H1c	Self-Influencer Congruence $\rightarrow$ TIE	0.42	<0.001	Supported
H2	Utilitarian Motivation $\rightarrow$ TIE	0.40	<0.001	Supported
H2a	Information Seeking $\rightarrow$ TIE	0.38	<0.001	Supported
H2b	Credibility $\rightarrow$ TIE	0.35	<0.001	Supported
H2c	Reward $\rightarrow$ TIE	0.37	<0.001	Supported
H3	TIE $\rightarrow$ Behavioral Intentions	0.50	<0.001	Supported
H3a	TIE $\rightarrow$ Intention to Visit	0.50	<0.001	Supported
H3b	TIE $\rightarrow$ Intention to Recommend	0.52	<0.001	Supported

Research Article

4.3. Mediation Evaluation

Using bootstrapping (n = 261) with a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval, we examined the mediating effects of Travel Influencer Engagement (TIE) on the associations between emotional/utilitarian motivation and behavioral intentions. Table 5 displays the significant p-values and non-zero confidence intervals indicating the bootstrap results, which show significant indirect impacts of TIE on the interactions between both emotional and utilitarian motivation and behavioral intentions.

Table 5. Mediation Effects

Path	Indirect Effect	95% CI	p-value	Support
Emotional Motivation → TIE → Behavioral Intentions	0.22	[0.15, 0.30]	<0.01	Supported
Utilitarian Motivation → TIE → Behavioral Intentions	0.20	[0.12, 0.28]	<0.01	Supported

These results confirm that TIE significantly mediates the relationships between both emotional and utilitarian motivation and behavioral intentions. The mediation effect highlights the critical role of TIE in translating initial motivation into actionable behavioral intentions. The importance of TIE in the overall model is further supported by this study, which provides an in-depth examination of how emotional motives and utilitarian motives influence behavioral intentions.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The results of the study show that emotional motivations have a 0.45 percentage point positive impact on engagement with travel influencers. Furthermore, the sub-components of emotional motivation like entertainment, have a 0.45 percentage point positive impact on engagement with influencers, whereas components like social interaction and self-congruence have an impact of 0.40 percentage points and 0.42 percentage points respectively. The results of the findings are at par with the findings by Croes and Bartels (2021), who believe that entertainment is a key emotional attribute that drives engagement between travelers and social media influencers. This is because the consumption of travel content by travelers leads to a better source of entertainment for them. This, in turn, improves their well-being and advocates for a higher level of engagement between the parties. On the other hand, social interactions also play a major part in influencing the engagement between the parties. This has been further shown in the study by Shukla et al. (2023), where it is advocated that the interaction between influencers and consumers leads to the development of an exclusive community, which is pivotal in enhancing the welfare of the individuals. As a result, this explains the positive impact of social interactions on engagement with travel influencers. Finally, the relationship between self-congruence and entertainment is also further explained through the study conducted by Xu and Pratt (2018). The

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theory suggests that when the consumer finds that the content provided by the influencer is at par with their own expectations and personality, it leads to a unique level of relatedness for the consumer. Such a relatedness between expectations and reality leads to a greater form of welfare for the consumer. As a result, this emotional factor further explains why there is a positive relationship between self-congruence and engagement with a travel influencer.

On the other hand, the utilitarian motives also show that there is a positive impact on engagement with travel influencers. The results show that the information-seeking function has a positive impact of 0.38 percentage points on influencer engagement. This is supported by the stance provided by Cheng et al. (2020), where it is mentioned that exposure to new information enhances the knowledge of the consumer. This leads to a specific outcome that is caused by the engagement between travelers and travel influencers. As a result, in order to enhance their knowledge, consumers opt for greater interaction with social media influencers. This indicates a positive correlation between the variables in the study.

The credibility of the influencer also has a positive impact of 0.35 percent on engagement with consumers. These findings are at par with the conclusions drawn by Hendricks and Bright (2023), who argue that credible influencers offer actual content to customers, which helps them plan an itinerary effectively. This permits credible influencers to create a long-lasting bond with the outbound tourists, which finally drives personal engagement to the content created through social media influencers. Therefore, this justifies how credible influencers enhance engagement among with outbound tourists.

Finally, the rewards received by the consumers also impact the interaction between outbound tourists and travel influencers positively. The findings of the study show that there is a positive coefficient of 0.35 percentage points between both variables. The results of the study are at par with the findings by Gross and von Wangenheim (2022), who argue that the presence of incentives leads to greater economic benefits for the consumer. This further drives the engagement of consumers towards the content created by social media influencers. As consumers tend to improve their financial well-being, they need to interact with such influencers who are providing incentives. Thereby, this drives the engagement levels between both parties.

5.2. Practical Implications

The findings of the study also contribute to a number of practical implications. Interactions between social media influencers and tourists can be leveraged by marketing organizations to suggest new locations in the market. According to a study by Ki et al. (2020), social media influencers lead to the creation of a network built on emotional motives and utilitarian motives. This allows the influencers to endorse new activities to a bigger target market with ease. Therefore, by employing social media influencers, tourism companies can boost a new location to the general market and change consumer behavior.

Additionally, by leveraging the position of social media influencers, many travel companies can also enhance their brand value by hiring such influencers. According to the study by Haobin Ye et al. (2021), when consumers feel there is a similarity between what the company offers and their own preferences, they feel more connected to the brand. Therefore, these could be marketed by tourism companies, wherein the parasocial interactions of the influencers

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could advocate in favor of driving consumer engagement with the brand. In this way, a brand can become more popular and reach out to a wider audience in an economy.

Finally, the social media influencers providing knowledge regarding an offbeat destination could also lead to a change in consumer behavior. The discovery of such an offbeat destination acts as an inspiration for many outbound tourists (Manthiou et al., 2024). This further encourages travelers to go to novel places instead of mainstream destinations. Such a phenomenon resonates with the utilitarian motivations of the consumer, but also leads to a change in consumer behavior. Overall, these are the practical implications of understanding the factors that lead to engagement between social media influencers and outbound travelers.

5.3. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Despite providing relevant insights into the factors influencing outgoing tourist engagement with social media influencers, there are still significant limitations to the study. One of the major limitations of the study is using a snowball model. According to the study of Leighton et al. (2021), the snowball modeling process introduces a significant bias in the results and reduces the generalizability of the analysis. Therefore, alternative sampling strategies, such as random sampling, can be used in future studies. Secondly, the study mainly deals with Chinese tourists. However, doing the same also reduces the scope of the study in the general population. As a result, future research could consider other geographic areas to compare how consumer engagement for travel influencers differs. Finally, separating the characteristics of social media influencers into macro-influencers and micro-influencers will also provide greater insights for marketing companies (Pradhan et al., 2023). Future research will extend the literature with a similar perspective and show the impact of social media influencers on consumer behavior from a broader perspective.

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