

Locating the Influencer

In *Locating the Influencer*, Christian S. Ritter offers an original account of the contemporary travel influencer. This compelling book critically examines how travel influencers monetize their journeys in a world marked by uncertainties, especially those related to the climate crisis.

Professor Mette Mortensen, University of Copenhagen

Locating the Influencer: Place and Platform in Global Tourism

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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List of Abbreviations

AirBnB	air bed and breakfast
API	application programming interface
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
Bcc	blind carbon copy
CNA	Channel NewsAsia
COVID-19	infectious disease associated with the SARS-CoV-2 virus
DJ	disc jockey
DMI	Digital Methods Initiative
GIF	graphics interchange format
GoPro	brand of small action video cameras
HBO	Home Box Office
HTML	hypertext markup language
HTTP	hypertext transfer protocol
NATJA	American Travel Journalists Association
NCT	Neo Culture Technology
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NodeXL Pro	a version of a software product for analysing social network data
PBS	Public Broadcasting Service
Q&A sessions	question and answer sessions
SM Entertainment	a South Korean multinational entertainment agency named after its founder 'Star Museum'
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USA	United States of America
Video ID	video identification

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About the Author

Christian S. Ritter is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Geography, Media and Communication at Karlstad University. He is a co-chair of the working group on Migration and Mobility of the International Society of Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF).

Why Study Travel Influencers? – Foreword

Paolo S. H. Favero

It is highly unlikely for anyone these days to open up social media without being sucked into a triumphant cavalcade of spectacular images depicting amazing places scattered all over our beautiful planet. Scrolling down on my feed the day in which I started writing this text I was met by the mesmerising mirror images created by the Uyuni salt flats in Bolivia; by endless green forests in Bali photographed from a high point of view; by beaches drenched in the orange sunset light somewhere on the shores of the Mediterranean. Coming from places so different and far from each other, all these pictures have nevertheless always something in common: the presence of an influencer behind, on the side of or, most often, right in front of the camera. A hand holding a cocktail glass at the sunset beach; a pair of legs covered by a yellow dress on a 'Balinese' swing; the full body of a smiling young woman or man standing on the line dividing the sky and its mirrored images on the thin layer of water on top of the salt flat. And then the likes and comments (in voice or text, embedded in the images themselves or in the conversations that follow) that draw the boundaries around the 'communitas' (Turner, 1974), that is the temporary community in transition, that surrounds the influencer in question. For the travel influencer, every image is, to use Sontag's (1977) vocabulary, more a matter of 'witness' than of 'record'. An image is always an interpretation of reality rather than 'a faithful copy or transcription of an actual moment of reality' (p. 26). This interpretation always obviously requires the presence of an interpreter, the influencer, the figure who mediates these experiences by inscribing them in broader narratives of freedom, discovery, trauma, success, etc.

Travel influencers are today key traversal figures, hence their relevance as objects of study. Around them we witness the emergence of not only new forms of livelihood and new narrative encroachments but also the reaffirmation of travel's centrality in the affairs of the rich and privileged of this world (as well as for those who provide them with services). We tend to look at travel influencers with the eyes of novelty, yet, they carry on the legacy of many precursors, and among them easily identifiable are the Grand Tour travellers, the hippies and the yuppies. With the former, travel influencers share the desire to become experts (and guides) not in and on places and cultures but rather in and on travel itself. There is a blind desire for discovering beautiful vistas fully endorsing the privileges that travelling entails, seemingly unbothered by the racial, ethnic and class gaps that make these explorations possible. These aspects seldom fit in their accounts. And in common with the hippies they share an unlimited love for freedom, one however commonly centred on the individual rather than on the

community surrounding it. And this individual-centrism guides us to identify yet another category of people that somehow seems to exercise influence on the travel influencer. These are the yuppies of the 1990s with their endless celebration of the value of monetary success. Uniting these different ambitions and tendencies and giving them a new (digitally based and often very diversified) façade, travel influencers appear, regardless of whether we like the qualities they represent or not, to be an important phenomenon, key to the doings of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Hence, it is absolutely worthy of attention by the social sciences. Travel influencers do not simply exemplify evolving online forms of communication and labour. They also importantly point us in the direction of the changing ways in which neoliberal capitalist societies envision subjects, communities and cultural diversity. The escape from what the author of this book calls ‘the over-codifications and striations of Fordistic workplaces’ (Ritter, 2024a, p. 46) is much more than a matter of pure labour but also one of social stratification, of new possibilities for imagining the meaning of the individual, family and community. Travel influencers seem to signal (while beautifying it) the triumph of the process of individualisation that is central to the project of neoliberalism capitalism. Yet what more can we learn from them?

Offering a detailed unpacking of the (symbolic and material) economy of travel influencers, this book is definitely a stepping stone for the study of this ever-evolving and diverse world. This study beautifully details a platform for the study of these individuals and the temporary communities they surround themselves with. Of particular value is the use that it makes of a combination of established qualitative methods (such as participant observation and interviews) with different types of quantitative methods (network data analysis) for identifying the online journey and dissemination of specific contents. So besides laying forth the fundamentals for what looks like a promising series of new research engagements in the field of travel influencers, this book can also offer methodological inspiration for those scholars exploring phenomena at the intersection of online and offline worlds.

Paolo S. H. Favero

Reference

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I would also like to express my gratitude to several scholars who have discussed tourism research issues with me and helped me refine theoretical perspectives. The various chapters of the book are inspired by priceless comments from Pablo Abend, Georgia Aitaki, Alexandre Diallo, Arthur Mason, Henrik Örnebring and Jolynna Sinanan. I also wish to acknowledge the support of Emerald's editorial team. Jen McCall encouraged me to submit a book proposal from the very start of our conversations, and Lydia Cutmore guided me through the final stages of the project. Finally, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A stage is filled with a small group of people in a corner of Hall 5 in Singapore's Exhibition Centre. Crowds flock to the event which is held close to the Changi airport. It is the second day of the 2023 Singapore Creator Fest, and a small group of people occupy the stage in Hall 5 of the city's Exhibition Centre. A panel discussion is about to start in the *Creators' Hub* area. The panel consists of a toy modeller, an illustrator, an anime filmmaker and the moderator. Approximately 50 spectators look on eagerly. The moderator Santhi¹ begins by expressing her excitement about the fest. She then invites the three speakers to talk about their career plans and how they acquired their professional skills. Each speaker steps next to a large screen and gives a 10-minute presentation about their professional life. Bao, sat in the first row of the audience, takes the microphone and thanks the anime filmmaker Samantha for sharing her professional experiences. He then goes on to ask her: 'Where do you sell your videos and how can you make a living from your videos? Do you have any side jobs?' Bao, an aspiring travel influencer, comes to the Creator Fest in search of professional guidance and inspiration for future projects.

The Creator Fest in Singapore can be seen as a liminal event. It unites more traditional crafts, such as illustration and toy-making, with more contemporary skills, such as vlogging and smartphone photography. Bringing into dialogue the more traditional anime filmmaker and the platform-oriented content creator, the event heralds a transitional moment in creative practice. The more traditional crafts are on display in cubicles while cosplay stars pose for photos with their fans in the long hallways of the exhibition centre. A myriad of such photos is immediately shared on digital platforms where they enter the realms of metrics and possibly monetisation. The scenes in the exhibition centre bare a resemblance to a phenomenon that the philosopher Ernst Bloch describes as the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous (Bloch, 1996). Resembling the pluralistic style of some paintings and architecture, two opposed modes of creativity inhabit the aforementioned event in Singapore's Changi area. Different phenomena belonging to

¹Pseudonyms are used for the vast majority persons described in this book to protect their personal identities.

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different eras co-exist in a single location. On the one hand, sculptors and illustrators create material objects while, on the other hand, content creators work towards the creation of aesthetically pleasing digital photos or videos destined for circulation on digital platforms.

The anecdote about Bao's ambition to specialise in the production of creative content and make a living as a travel influencer epitomises techno-social processes that have transformed both contemporary everyday life and professional career trajectories. Such processes have also reached the system of professions within tourism over the last two decades, during which travel influencers became a new professional group in the global tourism industry. The public presentation of the majority of tourism destinations undergoes digitisation processes as tourist attractions are increasingly portrayed on digital platforms. The platformisation of seemingly innumerable tourist sites illustrates how tourism can act as a force of world ordering (Teshfahoney & Schough, 2016). This transdisciplinary investigation into travel influencers brings to light how tourism destinations are entangled in processes of platformisation and commodification. Furthermore, the ethnographic study of travel influencers illuminates their organic place-making through their bottom-up local video production (Lew, 2017, p. 450). By recording tourist places and circulating footage on digital platforms, travel influencers claim individual agency. Questioning the reduction of influencer practices to their marketing strategies, which are widely examined in the literature on influencers in tourism studies, this investigation foregrounds the acquisition and transfer of digital expertise among influencers (Boyer, 2010). In addition, the case of travel influencers provides practical insights for both destination planners and touristic amateur videographers as it illustrates the techno-social dynamics between the local settings of tourist places and their representations on digital platforms such as YouTube. The ethnographic study describes video-editing practices in empirical detail and reveals how destination planners resist the platformisation of their sites.

Despite the diverse array of terms used in tourism contexts around the world to describe YouTubers producing vlogs about travelling – content creator, videographer, vlogger, digital creative, or filmmaker – the category influencer is used throughout this investigation for the following reasons. In the initial phase of the fieldwork, which took place in the Baltic capitals, I met numerous travel vloggers who described themselves as 'influencers' during our early encounters. The vast majority of these individuals were frequently invited to 'creators' events' where influencers and representatives from various tourism organisations could mingle. Since a prime methodological aim of the ethnographic investigation was to follow a mobile community, I accompanied influencers to various travel destinations. The emic category 'influencer' was thus central throughout the journeys. This investigation is grounded in travel ethnography, presenting an extended case study which is examined through different theoretical lenses (Burawoy, 1998). The travel ethnography guides the reader through various tourism destinations. The composition of the ethnographic account is inspired by Edward Bruner's mobile fieldwork in anthropological tourism research. Tourism ethnographies revolve around 'an open-ended array of spatially non-contiguous practices, images, sites,

narratives, actors, including but not limited to those grounded in specific tourist destinations' (Leite et al., 2019, p. 12). Bruner positioned himself between two different types of fieldwork locations. The first is 'with the tourist' and the second is 'in the travel destination' (Bruner, 2005a, p. 16). The task of the ethnographer is thus to understand the meaning of the tourist's travel by analysing both their experiences in destinations and the stories shared during their travels.

Following a mobile community of loosely connected travel influencers, the ethnography traces various transnational networks in which the platform practices and life-worlds of the research participants were entangled. Since this research is based on an ethnographic immersion in a mobile community, the influencers portrayed here are described as an emerging professional group, and their everyday practices are primarily studied in social terms. Although many influencer industries are enveloped in regional economies and supported by national governments, the researched travel influencers are primarily embedded in global assemblages. Given their professional mobility, travel influencers engage in encounters with Others in various local contexts. Their collaborations with tourism organisations and other influencers are scattered over several continents. Such mobile lifestyles generate cosmopolitan sociability which consists of forms of competencies and communication skills based on the human capacity to initiate social relations of inclusiveness and openness towards the world (Glick Schiller et al., 2011, p. 402). As there was a backlash against many travel influencers during the COVID-19 pandemic, the term influencer became less popular and 'creator' began to be more widely used. The majority of the researched influencers had 100,000 or more followers. Indeed, some of the YouTubers I first met in the summer of 2018 received a 'YouTube silver plate' for amassing 100,000 subscribers in 2020.

In the pre-Internet era, mass communication processes were already studied in terms of personal influence. As a foundational investigation in media and communication studies shows, opinion leaders played an active role in diffusing messages within their personal networks in the mass media era (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Travel influencers belong to a specific subgroup of microcelebrities (Senft, 2008). By regularly sharing audiovisual, pictorial and textual content on digital platforms, such as Instagram, X, formerly Twitter, and YouTube, travel influencers seek to amass a large follower base. In the age of platform capitalism, a high number of followers constitutes a form of social capital, which can be converted into financial resources (Abidin, 2015). Committed to a solopreneurial mindset, travel influencers achieve a certain microcelebrity status within a niche sector of the global tourism industry. Influencers can shape perspectives on travel destinations among their online audiences. They regularly share content on one or several platforms and engage in digital storytelling. Having secured a certain level of popularity on platforms, influencers often promote brands and engage in product sponsorship. In addition to their solopreneurial skills, many successful influencers master the craft of creating popular audio-visual content on digital platforms, such as Instagram and YouTube. Grounded in the numerical regimes coded into the affordances of digital platforms, influencers are often classified into various groups, such as mega-influencers, macro-influencers, micro-influencers and nano-influencers. Nano-influencers are often described as content creators with

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up to 10,000 followers on a given digital platform. Micro-influencers are mostly regarded as content creators with a following between 10,000 and 100,000, while macro-influencers have more than 100,000 followers.

Travel influencers expose their selves, their everyday practices and personal relationships on digital platforms. In doing so, they enable digital storytelling about personal experiences, including romantic relationships and travel. By engaging in digital storytelling, influencers seek to portray their everyday lives authentically (Ritter, 2023). This claim of authenticity distinguishes social media influencers from former groups of celebrities who vehemently endeavoured to keep their private lives out of the mass media, and as such were often portrayed, and indeed perceived, as illusory. In contrast, social media influencers are defined as a subgroup of digital content creators who establish a significant online following, distinctive brand personas and lasting relationships with commercial sponsors (Duffy, 2020, p. 1). They can secure revenue by hyping branded services or products on digital platforms where their followers can elicit information about the brands. The brand endorsements of influencers are weaved into the audiovisual and textual cultures of digital platforms, providing an aura of authenticity for online audiences.

Travel influencers are not so much involved in branding small material products since they represent travel destinations, including hotels, tourist attractions, tourist places and tourist services, in videos and photographs. As travel destinations are branded entities in various parts of the world, travel influencers can frequently collaborate with local tourism organisations. Such collaborations can often generate a continuous, stable stream of revenue for travel influencers in the attention economy of platform capitalism (Marwick, 2015). To entertain their followers and fans, influencers create online personas that are formed around mundane experiences shared on one or multiple platforms. In addition to the common influencer topics of beauty, fashion and gaming (Riedl et al., 2023), content on travel and tourism has been popular with platform audiences. Although the vast majority of the research participants were fully dedicated to travelling and the creation of travel content, numerous macro-influencers have blurred the boundaries between the various genres of content creation. For example, a substantial number of macro-influencers collaborate with tourism boards and fashion brands.

Early studies of influencers examined diverse elements of their metier, such as the tacit labour surrounding the posting of selfies (Abidin, 2016). The communicative relationships between influencers and their followers can be described as perceived interconnectedness as influencers imbue their content, and thus the audience, with a sense of intimacy (Abidin, 2015). Given the ongoing professionalisation of the influencer industry, successful practitioners seek to maintain a balance between seeming authentic to their followers and engaging in strategic platform practices to remain appealing to advertisers (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). The production of sponsored content requires an ethical framework for authenticity. Such ethics of authenticity, which should guide influencers, refer to both honesty towards oneself and honesty towards the audience (Wellman et al., 2020). In one recent piece of research, the authentic self-presentations of

The findings presented in these three articles confirm the observation that much of the existing research into travel influencers revolves around marketing and consumer decisions in tourism. In the last decade, the rise of influencers has been extensively explored in the context of the global tourism industry. Initially, travel bloggers, who mainly shared textual and pictorial content with their audiences, balanced the ordinary and extraordinary to establish themselves as successful microcelebrities (Duffy & Kang, 2020). The relationships between travel influencers and destination marketers are increasingly professionalised, requiring third-party intermediaries to formalise agreements between both sides (Stoldt et al., 2019). The platform content of travel influencers may stimulate emotional responses among their followers, encouraging them to purchase hospitality services (Szymkowiak et al., 2021).

Another area that travel influencers have critiqued is racial injustice in the global tourism industry (Arthur, 2021). White travel imaginaries and place myths about Black travel sites have been contested by Black travel influencers (Arthur, 2020). Many Black female travel influencers engage in practices of digital culture bearing on Instagram, challenging neocolonial narratives of white saviorism (Arthur, 2022). The Black Travel Alliance was created in 2020 as a social movement seeking to hold destination managers and travel brands accountable for promoting diversity in travel marketing and storytelling (Arthur, 2023). A content analysis of the posts shared by the Instagram account @InfluencerPayGap shows that influencers of colour are more likely to receive less monetary compensation for content and sponsored campaigns than their white counterparts (Christin & Lu, 2023). Furthermore, travel influencers became important allies for many tourism organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic since they played a crucial role in crisis communication and tourism recovery (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022). Travel influencers can also play an important role in promoting eco-friendly hotels and sustainability in tourism (Kapoor et al., 2021). While the nascent field of travel influencer research is fast evolving and multiple approaches have been developed by numerous groups of scholars, previous investigations into this professional group have insufficiently addressed the sense of place travel influencers develop and their mobile practices within the global assemblages of tourism.

This ethnographic investigation into the mobile life-worlds of travel influencers in the global tourism industry raises a few questions about shifts in the global system of tourism professions: What constitutes the broader context for the video-making practices of the researched travel influencers? How do they maintain a work-leisure balance during their travels? What role do platform metrics play in the professional trajectories of the researched travel influencers? What role does YouTube's algorithm play in the distribution of audiovisual representations of travel destinations? To what extent can anthropocenic imaginaries circulating on YouTube reinforce sustainable tourism projects? And, finally, how do answers to these empirical questions provide insights into how the mobilities, platform practices and place-making tactics of the researched travel influencers contributed to the formation of a new professional group in global tourism? In generic terms, a digital platform can be seen as a programmable, multi-sided infrastructure on which applications can be built (Gillespie, 2010). A further crucial feature of digital platforms is their Application Programming Interface (API). This backend interface

enables third-party programmers to access the plentiful data that digital platforms generate. The process of platformisation is intrinsically connected with the process of datafication (Dencik, 2020). The everyday practices of the researched travel influencers are enfolded by the fundamental tension between space and place. The term space implies the possible and actual movement of bodies, objects, capital and communication, while place relates rather to deeply layered subjective experiences grounded in particular local conditions and discourses (Adams & Jansson, 2012, p. 301). The tourist places that travel influencers visit are intrinsically interwoven with mobilities, as flows of people, other species, objects and ideas pass through places and constitute them (Salazar, 2023, p. 3). The overall aim of this study is twofold. Firstly, it seeks to provide a better understanding of the everyday practices, and localised meaning-making, of the researched mobile community of travel influencers. Secondly, the investigation aims to trace the development of social networks within the global tourism industry.

Enhancing Ethnography with Computational Network Analysis

Based on a digital ethnography, this investigation entailed fieldwork between August 2018 and January 2020. Computational network analysis complemented the ethnographic immersion in tourist places. The mixed-method research was based on a parallel-convergent approach (Berthod et al., 2017). Qualitative and quantitative data were separately collected and analysed. Places and events were common units of analysis for both the ethnographic fieldwork and the computational network analysis. A convergence of the findings deriving from each method occurred in the later stages of the research cycle. Integrating in-depth understandings of everyday practices from ethnographic fieldwork, with the rigour of network visualisations, provides critical insights into the platformisation of local events occurring at tourist sites. While an ethnographic immersion, on the one hand, made transparent the various meanings travel influencers and local tourism professionals assigned to their skilled practices, network graphs, on the other, enabled the identification of hubs, bridges, or gatekeepers within the online networks of tourism professionals.

The ethnographic fieldwork began in the summer holiday season of 2018 when I took part in events and guided tours organised in tourist places in the Estonian cities of Tallinn, Tartu and Pärnu, and, subsequently, in the Latvian capital Riga and the Lithuanian capital Vilnius. I met a handful of travel influencers during the first weeks of the fieldwork and accompanied them to other tourist sites. This study of travel influencers is grounded in multi-sited fieldwork between summer 2018 and spring 2020. Their nomadic lifestyles made it necessary to follow them to other tourist destinations, some much further afield. Since many of the travel influencers who participated in the research identified as ‘digital nomads’, they were studied as a dispersed professional group that was mainly connected through digital platforms. Committed to the principle of holism (Miller & Horst, 2012), I followed a mobile community of travel influencers during their travels and on digital platforms. Between summer 2018 and spring 2020, I studied the skilled practices of various travel influencers, shadowing them to numerous tourist

destinations, including Angkor Wat, Bangkok, Berlin, Hanoi, Helsinki, Kyiv, Kuala Lumpur, Riga, Singapore, Sofia, Stockholm and Vilnius.²

Utilising the ethnographic research tool travel-along, I could actively explore the travel influencers' streams of experience, mobile practices, and localised meaning-making within their travel destinations (Howard, 2017). Participant observation was conducted in numerous physical environments, but I also followed the profiles of the researched travel influencers on digital platforms (e.g. Walton, 2018). Scrolling, reading, watching, liking and posting on Instagram, Twitter and YouTube complemented the observational tactics in physical settings. Throughout the investigation, but particularly after the outbreak of COVID-19, I kept in touch with the researched travel influencers via digital platforms, such as WhatsApp and Instagram. Since the beginning of the global health crisis in early 2020, I regularly arranged video chats with research participants and attended live discussions about the crisis of tourism on the video conferencing platform Zoom. I documented my experiences of places and platforms through observation protocols, photographs and screen recordings. While participating in local events in travel destinations, the researched travel influencers mainly perceived me as an English-speaking, white tourist. To mitigate gender, racial and ethnic biases (e.g. Cheer & Lew, 2021; Chio, 2012), I participated in a variety of events and included numerous voices from different backgrounds in the travel ethnography. In addition, I sought to minimise my interviewer bias by using a loosely structured interview guide. In doing so, I provided my interlocutors with ample opportunities to introducing topics of their own choosing.

The ethnographic immersion in tourist sites was complemented by 35 in-depth interviews with tourism professionals and travel influencers,³ which elicited different

²To gain an in-depth understanding of the existing system of professions in global tourism (e.g. Abbott, 1988), I also shadowed the off-season routines of tourism professionals. I attended numerous professional meetings, including the Tourest tourism fair at Tallinn, Estonia, in February 2019, and the Balttour travel fair in Riga, Latvia, in February 2020.

³All interviewees were given a consent form prior to the recording of the interview, providing them with an opportunity to thoroughly discuss the aims and scope of the research project with the researcher. Since not all the travel influencers and tourism professionals who were interviewed in the course of the research project gave consent to use their personal information in conference presentations and academic publications, a decision was made to use pseudonyms for all interviewees mentioned in this book. Most of the researched influencers can be considered emerging microcelebrities, and they often voiced concern that sharing information about their video craft or platform policies may affect their online reputation. In addition, travel influencers – like many other media practitioners – wished to control how their story is told. Often, I could gain access to further aspects of their everyday life by ensuring that their identities remain anonymous. However, a small number of travel influencers agreed that I could use their profile names and transcribed textual content from their videos. The names of the platform profiles representing the researched tourist destinations on digital platforms were not anonymised, since these profiles did not contain any information that could help identify their administrators.