

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

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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

Sontag, S. (1977). *On photography*. Penguin Books.

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