From Serendipity to Sustainability: Exploring the Content Creation and Sharing Experiences of Local Travel Influencers in China

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Abstract

The study explored content creation and sharing experiences of local travel influencers in Meishan City, China. A qualitative phenomenological methodology was used to conduct in-depth interviews with 15 local travel influencers based on social exchange theory and its reciprocal principles. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse data. Study findings showed that being a local travel influencer was an emerging occupation requiring comprehensive competence in specific contextual and cultural backgrounds. Although travel influencers' initial rise to popularity was often serendipitous, supportive policies from the local tourism community could assist travel influencers in achieving sustainable tourism. Local travel influencers face several challenges including staying authentic, monetizing content, dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, avoiding homogenous content, and managing work load. Local travel influencers could serve as a significant liaison between tourists and the local tourism community by collaborating with local tourism stakeholders, building a local multi-layer media matrix, co-creating promotional content, and live-streaming e-commerce. Study findings have theoretical and practical implications for tourism stakeholders in integrating regional tourism community development with local influencer networks.

Keywords: travel influencers, social media influencers, China, influencer marketing, social exchange theory

1. Introduction

The rapid rise in popularity of social media has enabled human beings to create, share and exchange information across the internet community. The interactions between customers and brands on social media facilitate effective knowledge sharing and communication regarding products or services. Previous studies show that consumers are more likely to trust the information generated from social media than from traditional media (Ozuem, 2016; Shareef et al., 2020). Social media users create user-generated content (UGC) in various forms such as photos, videos, audio, and text-based comments. Tourists routinely share experiences and obtain opinions about a tourism destination from social media. Therefore, tourism stakeholders have integrated UGC into their destination marketing strategies not only to promote products or services, but to also stimulate tourists' demands, commercial revenues and a positive destination image (Hays et al., 2013; Litvin et al., 2008).

Due to the influence of social media and user-generated content, individuals are no longer solely relegated to being the passive recipients of traditional marketing messages, but also act as active brand consumers and promoters (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Ultimately, some individuals gain significant popularity and influence among their followers and evolve into social media influencers in a particular field. As third-party brand ambassadors, these influencers substantially impact audiences' perceptions (Freberg et al., 2011). Many terms are used to describe such influencers including content creators, bloggers, vloggers, YouTubers, Instagrammers and internet celebrities (De Veirman et al., 2017; Wilson, 2019). Such influences are generally perceived as "key opinion leaders" or "experts" who provide insights on the latest products or services. Moreover, after long-term interactions, consumers could foster a reliable connection and intimacy with their preferred influencers.

Tourists can generate and share content with their audiences, detail their experiences, itineraries, perspectives, and feedback, and eventually establish themselves as travel influencers. Travel influencers can produce high-quality content about their experiences in various destinations, foster engagement with the tourism sector, and forge connections with their followers. In essence, travel influencers can provide firsthand insights regarding tourism products or services from a consumer's perspective (Ong & Ito, 2021). Existing studies frequently describe travel influencers as appealing and trustworthy information sources that impact tourists' decision-making process (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017; Hanifah, 2019; Pop et al., 2021), tourism demands (Sun et al., 2020), destination image (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2021), and visit intention (Seçilmiş et al., 2021).While existing literature has contributed to understanding the impacts of travel influencers and user-generated content on tourism, limited research has been done on travel influencers especially in the Chinese context (Ay et al., 2019; Yılmaz et al., 2020).

In China, social media influencers are widely known as Key Opinion Leader (KOL). Until 2022, China had more 10.1 million social media influencers with a fan base exceeding 10 thousand followers, and they generally produced around 38.3 million posts per day (Huanqiu, 2023). They are not only recognized as a marketing power, but to also a crucial economic engine promotes the integration of merchants, content platforms, and consumers in any industries in China. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the direct market sizes of China's influencer economy from 2018 to 2020 were 249.1 billion Yuan, 618.8 billion Yuan and 1357.2 billion Yuan respectively, with an average annual growth rate of 150% (Sina F., 2021). It is estimated that the total market size of China's influencer economy will reach 6.7 trillion Yuan in 2025 (Sina F., 2021). In addition, China's social media influencers primarily monetize their businesses through advertising, live streaming rewards, and social (live streaming) e-commerce (CIRN, 2021), and they can create original and brand-endorsed content that covers various niche markets from beauty, travel, food, education fashion etc. (Writer, 2021).In tourism field, the number of full-time travel influencers in China has witnessed significant growth, surging from one thousand in 2016 to 100 thousand in 2021 (Tencent, 2021). It indicates the rising popularity and influence of travel blogging as a new profession in the Chinese context.

As indicated before, previous literature only quantified the impact of influencers (Gómez, 2019), but ignored the qualitative characteristics of travel influencers, such as their geographical location and cultural backgrounds. In this study, local influencers are defined as individuals who maintain a loyal audience and are highly involved in a particular geographical region's local daily life and social interactions (Langer, 2022). They generally focus on niche themes such as lifestyle, gourmet, travel, fitness, beauty etc., in their locale. Local influencers typically start their journey as micro influencers with followers ranging from 10 thousand to 100 thousand. Moreover, these micro influencers often have a highly engaged audience in influencer marketing (Langer, 2022). Previous literature indicates that 69% of China's Generation Z believe that their consumption behaviours are influenced by Chinese micro influencer endorsements (Emerging communication, 2022). Local travel influencers, who actively play the roles of residents, influencers, and tourism promoters in their locality, are also micro influencers because they share similar tourism interests and experiences with their audience. However, no prior studies paid attention to a niche type of influencers like local travel influencers, and only one study explored the identity of local urban influencers in their content creation (Van Eldik et al., 2019).

Meishan City is in southwestern China, the middle section of Sichuan Province, China. Meishan City has a significant group of local travel influencers who voluntarily produce local travel content to promote Meishan City as a popular destination making it a suitable study setting. By employing social exchange theory as its theoretical framework, this qualitative phenomenological study sought to describe the reciprocal relationships, benefits, and costs that occur following interactions between local travel influencers, tourists, and tourism stakeholders in Meishan City, China. The current research study set out to achieve the following objectives: (1) To explore local travel influencers' perceptions and motivations for being an influencer. (2) To describe local travel influencers' views about competencies required for content creation. (3) To examine the challenges faced by and expectations of local travel influencers in content creation. (4) To investigate local travel influencers' experiences in tourism destination marketing.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Classifications and Characteristics of Social Media Influencers

Influencers can be classified based on follower numbers, content type and level of influence. Detailed classifications can help marketers identify suitable influencers to promote their products or services. Numerous scholars regard follower number as the most crucial criterion for evaluating influencers, as larger numbers typically signify higher trustworthiness among their audiences (De Veirman et al., 2017; Gómez, 2019; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). Additionally, influencers are well-connected with diverse social groups, networks, and online communities that share similar values or identities (Liu et al., 2015). Given these complexities, Campbell and Farrell (2020) proposed five distinct influencer categories based on a combination of follower numbers, perceived authenticity, accessibility, professions, and cultural capital. They explain that celebrity influencers whose public reputations extend beyond social media with over 1 million followers. They have

extensive experience and a high level of perceived professionalism, enabling them to endorse renowned brands and earn high revenues. Second, mega influencers whose possess at least 1 million followers but lack celebrity status. They are internet-famous and collaborate with brands through paid partnerships. Third, macro influencers, who have between 100,000 and 1 million followers usually maintain high engagement rates and receive high brand exposure through large followers. Macro influencers are highly influential within their niche fields and have a regular digital presence across multi-social media platforms (Gómez, 2019). Fourth, micro influencers, with 10,000 to 100,000 followers, constitute the largest influencer group who have a loyal following within their geographical location. Micro influencers are perceived as more relatable to their followers' genuine needs and preferences (Gómez, 2019). Fifth, nano influencers, who generally have fewer than 10,000 followers, display the highest engagement rates among influencer types. Nano influencers are often regarded as the novices in the influencer industry who are more open to diverse partnerships for increased exposure.

However, the existing classifications emphasize the importance of follower numbers over other factors. Wang et al.(2012) posit that it is preferable to evaluate influencers' quality over quantity as influencer quality relates to utilizing highly engaging content to foster robust connections with peer influencers and audiences rather than follower numbers. Furthermore, qualitative evaluation is conducted through assessing influencer authenticity, influencer-followers' interactions, relevance of shared content, quality of comments and engagements (Bakker, 2018; Gretzel, 2017). Existing studies also propose several qualitative approaches to assess the influencers including socio-metric methods, interviews, and observations (Wiedmann & Von Mettenheim, 2021). In fact, Ouvrein et al. (2021) believed that both qualitative or quantitative measures provide an index for the assessment of influencers' profiles. However, Bazaarvoice (2019) indicated that the fast iterations of social media influencers would alter their popularity and commercial value due to "influencer fatigue." Because an influencer's impact is not universal, i.e., having an influence in a particular field does not translate to other domains or to all demographics, marketers should gain an insight into influencers' motivations and fundamental characteristics to tailor their marketing strategies to influencers' attributes, themes, motives, and content creation styles (Audrezet et al., 2020; Liljander et al., 2015).

2.2 Role of Travel Influencers in the Tourism Sector

Social media influencers disseminate their perspectives, ideas, life experiences, daily routines, and behaviours in specific fields. Social media content can be leveraged to influence followers' decisions and intentions (Geyser, 2017). In the travel and tourism context, travel influencers with many followers are perceived as being more reliable and trustworthy than those with a smaller follower base (De Veirman et al., 2017). Most previous studies document the effects of travel influencers on tourists' behaviours and perceptions about a specific destination. For instance, Asan (2022) categorized the "travel influencers' impact scale" into four dimensions: informative effects, motivating effects, role model effects, and combing effects. Asan (2022) also recommended that public and private tourism stakeholders understand travel influencers' characteristics to facilitate effective collaborations for marketing purposes and to also acknowledge travel influencers as active social actors. Ge & Gretzel (2018) illustrated that social media influencers can shape audience attitudes through daily content and brand-related content sharing. Another study revealed that endorser-consumer congruence among travel influencers positively impacts among Chinese Generation Y's intention towards endorsed tourist destinations (Xu & Pratt, 2018). Furthermore, an attribute-value message surpassed a simple or traditional recommendation message in influencing travellers' perceptions and intentions to an eco-friendly hotel (Kapoor et al., 2022). In addition, proactive influencers on social media can catalyze big data that focuses on re-envisioning and reconstructing critical features of a physical destination (Simeone et al., 2014). Particularly, travel influencers can reveal unknown or hidden destinations, catch potential tourists' attention and stimulate tourists' travel intentions (Barbe et al., 2020). Therefore, many scholars recommend that tourism authorities, policymakers, and urban and rural planners should evolve from traditional marketing patterns rooted in a top-down perspective, to actively seeking practical insights and novel perspectives from social media influencers through a bottom-up approach (Hochman & Manovich, 2013; Qian & Heath, 2019).

2.3 Travel Influencer Marketing in China

In 2022, the global influencer marketing size reached a record high at 16.4 billion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2022). Influencer marketing is defined as the process by which influential social media users promote products and services or enhance brand recognition through content sharing (Carter, 2016). Furthermore, influencer marketing encourages influencers and followers to co-create a brand's image on social media (Giles & Edwards, 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2018). Inkybee (2022) stated that influencer marketing involves several critical steps including influencer identification, influencer outreach, design of influencer events, influencer measurement and influencer relations. Another study described common and effective influencer marketing strategies adopted by marketers including brand endorsement, product or service reviews, integrating brand advertment, commercial event communications, sponsored content, and affiliate links (Michelle, 2016). Marketers across various sectors have embraced influencer marketing strategies as collaborating with influential influencers can help brands reach a larger audience (Lou & Yuan, 2018).

China's influencer marketing is fast growing. In 2020, the influencer marketing market size increased to 340 billion Yuan. The number of influencer multi-channel networks (MCNs) increased from 160 in 2015 to 28 thousand in 2022 (Thepaper, 2022). China's influencers have rapidly evolved into professionals. In addition, China's full-time travel influencers have increased from 10 thousand in 2016 to 100 thousand in 2021 (Tencent, 2021). China's full-time travel influences are now recognized as a powerful group in promoting China's tourism development (Worker Daily, 2021). For example, the Enshi city government invited a group of influential travel influencers to collectively launch destination live-streaming marketing events that displayed local tourism uniqueness (Jimu News, 2022). Moreover, the Chinese government has incorporated influencer economy as part of the country's long-term development strategy. For example, both national and local authorities also collaborate with travel influencers to promote "China's Digital Rural Village Program;" an initiative aims to display hidden rural landscapes, unique local cultures, crafts, food, and rural lifestyles of traditional rural villages (Fengmian News, 2022). Live-streaming e-commerce is also as a prominent aspect of travel influencers' marketing in China. Destination marketing organizations have invited travel influencers to conduct immersive cultural tourism live-streaming events to display destination characteristics and sell featured tourism products or services (Chinadevelopment, 2022).Guangzhou City aims to cultivate more than 100 high-quality influencer marketing agencies and conduct 10 thousand top-selling live streaming influencers in recent years (Writer, 2021). In addition, @Xiaoxiaosha, a renowned Chinese travel influencer with 18 million followers, attained market sales of ten million Yuan via live-streaming e-commerce over a five-weeks' period (36Kr, 2020). Although the existing literature has explored various aspects of the travel influencer field, including classifications, impacts, and influencer marketing, the impact of social, geographical, and cultural backgrounds on influence travel influencers' content creation and sharing behaviors has not been established. Thus, this study examined the content creation and sharing experiences of travel influencers who produce local and destination-focused content within the same locality.

2.4 Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory (SET) is one of the oldest theories of social behavior introduced by Homans (1958), indicating any interactions between individuals in an exchange of resources. SET specifically refers to any form of social exchange between individuals that occurs via swapping tangible or intangible resources (Lambe et al., 2001). The social exchange process involves a series of reciprocal transactions between two or more parties (Mitchell et al., 2012). When individuals invest in relationships, they expect to maximize rewards and minimize costs where the outcome of social exchanges is interdependent on their investment in a relationship with others. Actors generally behave in a way that increases the positive benefits they perceive more than the negative costs they perceive. If both parties equally benefit from an affordable exchange process, recurrent interactions will occur because social exchanges with uncertain involuntary, exclusive benefits cannot occur on a "qui pro quo" basis (Konovsky & Pugh, 1994; Whitener et al., 1998). These mutual exchanges might contribute to psychological bonds and motivate individuals to maintain relationships (Blau, 1964). Engaging in a reciprocal relationship can also build a highly trustworthy, effective and behavioral loyalty, and affect relationship harmony between parties (Molm et al., 2000). However, the exchange of resources between parties is always unfair, the relationship might fluctuate or collapse. Actors exchange resources based on what costs they invest in a relationship and what rewards they gain. The benefits could be perceived as tangible materials like money or goods, or intangible symbols like love, status, approval, or prestige (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Foa & Foa, 1980). Different scholars further describe positive intangible symbols as including emotional satisfaction, spiritual values, pursuits of personal traits, and universal humanity values (Lambe et al., 2001). The costs can be recognized as material or non-material, such as money, time, service, embarrassment or shame arising from the exchange process (Ouvrein et al., 2021).

In influencer marketing, social media interactions between influencers and followers create a reciprocal condition where social exchange theory can apply. Several studies have investigated social media influencers using the social exchange theory. Influencers and followers usually exchange commercial benefits and non-material benefits like "words." Influencers produce informative, engaging, and enjoyable content for followers who in turn express their satisfaction and gratitude through social media interactions, including liking, commenting, reposting, following and favoriting behaviors, and according to influencers social power from their trust (Bolat & Gilani, 2018; Kim & Kim, 2021). Chia et al.(2021) utilized social exchange theory to investigate social media influencers' willingness to create unboxing reviews. Social media influences were motivated to create unboxing reviews due to social interaction ties, shared vision with community members, and the willingness to help others, rather than material benefits. Similarly, Giardino (2021) portrayed that micro influencers' motivation to post content and share their lives with others is internally motivated by their desire to inspire and help others and demotivated by a negative mental health cost. Published literature indicates that the exchanges of resources between influencers and followers are universal. However, benefits gained and costs incurred by different types of social media influencers and their followers can inform niche influencer marketing fields. Hence, this study sought to identify the reciprocal relationships, benefits, and costs that occur within interactions between local travel influencers, tourists, and tourism stakeholders by applying SET as its theoretical framework.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The phenomenological study used a qualitative research approach to gain understanding and insights into the essence of a phenomenon. Notably, this approach helps investigate research participants' daily experiences and feelings to comprehensively understand a phenomenon (Wilson, 2015). Qualitative research finds examples of participant's behaviour, clarifies study participants' thoughts and feelings, and interprets their experiences about a phenomena of interest. Qualitative research seeks explanations for uncertain or unknown human behaviours in a particular context (Austin & Sutton, 2014; Miles et al., 2013). This study wished to understand local travel influencers by conducting in-depth interviews with 15 travel influencers representing diverse tourism themes from Meishan, City, Sichuan Province, China. Participants were invited to share their perspectives or experiences on a particular topic, activity, or phenomenon during in-depth interviews.

3.2 Participants' Selection

Local travel influencers were selected from social media platforms and based on local media peers' recommendations using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling chooses 15 local travel influencers based on pre-determined criteria related to study research questions to supply information that cannot be acquired from alternative sources (Tongco, 2007). There were four participant inclusion criteria. First, travel influencers updated their social media platforms weekly. Second, travel influencers with at least 10,000 followers on social media platforms who are generally recognized as micro influencers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), who meet the minimum requirements for influencer personal verification (with a yellow "V" symbol) on China's social media platforms (Marszałek, 2020). Notably, micro influencers account for more than half of the influencer marketing market in China (Ling, 2019). With geographically concentrated followers, such micro influencers have a competitive advantage in promoting regional products and services to attract customers (Mai, 2020). Third, travel influencers who emphasize "localism" in their content that is related to the Meishan context. Fourth, travel influencers who work, study, or live in Meishan City, China.

Table 1. Interviewees' Profiles

No.	Gender	Occupation	Content Themes	Number of Followers	Type of influencer
1	Male	Student	Humanity	15,000	Micro influencer
2	Male	Content Creator	Gourmet and local customs	1,030,000	Mega influencer
3	Male	Graphic designer	Gourmet and rural life	20,400	Micro influencer
4	Male	Photographer	Nature, history, and culture	17,000	Micro influencer
5	Male	Content creator	Urban landscape and policy publicity	35,000	Micro influencer
6	Female	Government staff	Agricultural and cultural tourism	23,000	Micro influencer
7	Male	Content creator	Aerial content of urban landscape	40,000	Micro influencer
8	Female	Teacher	History and culture	32,000	Micro influencer
9	Male	Photojournalist	Local tourism and everyday life	25,000	Micro influencer
10	Male	Bank clerk	Local culture and customs	114,000	Macro influencer
11	Male	Car salesman	Camping trips	20,000	Micro influencer
12	Male	Student	Culture, architecture, and night landscape	40,000	Micro influencer
13	Female	Ecommerce marketer	Tourism attractions	20,000	Micro influencer
14	Female	Content creator	Local dialect, culture, and everyday life	6,150,000	Mega influencer
15	Male	Teacher	History, cultural heritage, and local customs	50,000	Micro influencer

Table 1 presents information about participants' gender, occupation, content themes, follower numbers and influencer types. Participants were referred to by pseudonyms to protect their privacy. The 15 local travel influencers had a total of 7,631,400 followers as of December 2022. Most local travel influencers were micro influencers with followers ranging between 17,000 and 114,000 followers. There were only two known mega influencers with over one million followers and one macro influencer with more than 100,000 followers. In addition, most local travel influencers worked full-time jobs in non-tourism sectors and engaged in travel content production as an interest or as supplementary or part-time job.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Three pilot interviews were conducted before the formal interview process. All participants were informed that the interview would be recorded using digital recorders or manual memos. The language adopted during the in-depth interview was Chinese Mandarin because all the interviewees were fluent Chinese speakers. Each interview session lasted 45 to 75 minutes. Fifteen in-depth interviews with local travel influencers were conducted and transcribed into Chinese text. Interview transcripts were validated by all participants before being translated into English. This study utilizes thematic content analysis. It is a popular qualitative data analysis method used to identify, organize, and search for themes across the entire dataset, was employed in this study. The researchers chose a six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) to conduct the thematic analysis: (1) Data immersion through reading and re-reading the interview transcripts by two coders. (2) Code generation through a comprehensive analysis of the data by two independent coders. (3) Theme identification from codes. (4) Potential themes review. (5) Theme labelling and definition (6) Report writing. Table 2 displays how the researchers performed the open coding process. Table 3 presents actual text extracted from the interview transcripts and demonstrates how the initial codes were examined to grasp respondents' implicit meaning and perspectives. Initial codes were organized into the axial coding or selective coding to reduce the initial codes into main themes which would aid in formulating subcategories of dimensions.

Table 2. An Illustrative Excerpt of Open Coding

Interview data extracted from interview transcripts	Open coding
A social media influencer is a content creator with popularity or a number of fans…My daily content creation includes field visits, footage shooting…I also need to pay attention to the operating rules and relevant content support policies, because each platform has its content style and content censor system…have a high aesthetic level…be skilled in the use of appropriate equipment, such as cameras and post-production…You should have a particular cultural reserve…social media influencers should act as communicators…As a social media content creator in tourism, your content should primarily have your own style and creativity…The biggest challenge I face in my content creation is the high homogenization of content creation…with too many similar creators, resulting in lower distribution and click-through rates…Some of my fans may have become aesthetically tired of my content……	Accidental popularity; several followers; field visits; footage shooting; post-production; familiarity with platforms' rules and supporting policies; understanding content censor mechanism; high aesthetic ability; meeting audience's preferences; cultural appreciation ability; communicator; display personal style and creativity; homogenous content; low click-through rates; aesthetic fatigue.

Table 3. An Example of The Coding Process

Interview data (line-by-line coding)	Axial coding	Main themes (selective coding)
Accident popularity, many followers, influence, accidental clicks, or revenues, providing tourism information, full-time content creator, tourism opinion leader, model role…	Perceptions of being an influencer.	Serendipity
Proud of Meishan identity, cultural identity, better understanding of Meishan tourism, local identity, displaying local knowledge and expertise, gain reputation and recognition, gain social influence, create social influence, promoting community engagement, displaying personal feelings, responsibility, display cultural confidence…	Perceptions of different motivations for them to continually create and share local travel content.	Motivations
Aesthetic ability, creativity, filming, editing and script writing, learning editing skills, language expression ability, editing and software usage, high aesthetics, communication skills with various stakeholders, planning and execution ability, a good understanding of tourism, a good understanding of complex tourism elements, communication skills…	Perceptions of local travel influencers' comprehensive capacity could position them in competitive tourism content marketing.	Competence
Homogenous content, plagiarism content, an imbalance between commercial benefits and content's authenticity, low click-through rates, cannot acquire enough money, monetizing the content, high expenses for software and hardware updates, Zero COVID-19, travel restrictions, time-consuming, labor-intensive, burnout, limited energy, loneliness, seeking supportive policies from local tourism community…	Perceptions of various challenges in their content creation process and expect to gain support from local tourism community.	Challenges and expectations
Providing excellent and original content for official media, providing original videos or pictures for city-level or district-level tourism publicity departments, co-creating official city promotional film, selling tourism products or services, selling featured fruits, selling local tourism packages, live streaming e-commerce, social commerce, selling seasonal tourism packages…	Perceptions of various tourism marketing events and collaborations with different local tourism stakeholders.	Tourism marketing experiences

Upon completion of all coding processes, researchers sorted and categorized interview data into corresponding categories. After individual coding efforts, all coders discussed and verified interview data categorization until consensus was reached. Subsequently, a categories list was consolidated and simplified by integrating similar categories. After finalizing the categories, researchers consulted with scholars experienced in studying social media influencers and tourism marketing to authenticate categories and codes. Subsequently, five major themes were used to describe content creation and sharing experiences of local travel influencers, including serendipity, motivations, competence, challenges and expectations, and tourism marketing experiences.

4. Results

4.1 Serendipity

When asked about their experiences as travel influencers, most initially uploaded content to share and record travel experiences as ordinary social media users with no intention of becoming influencers. They described the "accidental popularity" (e.g., clicks, followers, or advertising revenues) of their content as an amazing experience that motivated them to dedicate more effort to creating content to maintain their influence and attract more followers. Some respondents considered being full-time influencers once they gained more followers. Moreover, they commonly described themselves as opinion leaders or role models to their audiences and the local community who had an impact on various aspects of the emerging destinations by providing timely tourism information, sharing tourism schedules, building destination image, shaping tourists' revisitation, promoting tourism consumption, and collecting tourists' feedback for local tourism stakeholders.

For instance, *Respondent 6* suggested: "Local influencers with numerous followers can greatly influence the development of a specific destination…they can directly promote the development of smaller destinations since large cities already dominate social media content". *Respondent 9* stated: "Local influences not only provide instant and localized tourism information but also promote a travel consumption model of online recommendation and offline travel experience through social e-commerce".

4.2 Motivations

Local travel influencers create and share content to display local expertise, seek social validation and recognition, embrace localism and community engagement, demonstrate a sense of responsibility, and motivate tourists. Collectively, local travel influencers' intrinsic motivations and strategies positions them as significant contributors in shaping the regional tourism industry.

The first theme highlights influencers' specialised knowledge and experience of their local area which they leverage to provide unique insights and perspectives for their audiences. A fact evident from *Respondent 9's* statements*: "As a Meishan local, I have a better understanding of local tourism resources that could make my content more localized and attractive".

The second theme emphasizes the role of social validation and recognition in influencing content creation by influencers who strive to maintain their status and reputation within their social circles. In support of this statement, *Respondent 1* commented: "We must be creative …. to gain influence and reputation in this competitive market". *Respondent 8* also mentioned: "Our content could potentially influence social groups by permeating certain values or inducing behavioural changes".

The third theme focuses on the influencers' commitment to promoting localism and community engagement by using their platforms to support local businesses and foster a sense of community pride. *Respondent 2* happily expressed: "I think 'hometown feelings' should be the primary motivation to positively lead myself to introduce the competitive tourism elements of his hometown". *Respondent 14* said: "As the most influential influencer (6.15 million followers) in Meishan, I hope to introduce local daily life, interesting local stories, and tourism elements to enrich residents' understanding".

Fourthly, influencers demonstrate a sense of responsibility by utilizing their content to diminish negative perceptions of their locality and promote local lesser-known attractions. *Respondent 12* said: "As grassroots creators, we bear the responsibility of not only producing content but also promoting Meishan tourism". Similarly, *Respondent 10* commented: "Local travel influencers have a more important responsibility in regional tourism publicity".

Finally, local travel influencers also desire to attract tourists to their respective locations by showcasing their confidence in the unique cultural and tourism elements which highlights their genuine passion for their locations. *Respondent 5* stated: *"*I expect that my content could vividly display the characteristics and beauties of my hometown to make my audiences learn about it and fall in love with it".

4.3 Competence

Travel influencers should possess comprehensive competence to position themselves in competitive influencer marketing. Local travel influencers recognized the need for continuous improvement and developing fundamental content creation abilities, particularly in advanced editing and post-production training courses. According to *Respondent 15*: "For most micro travel influencers, we need continual "input" to have effective "output." I follow many excellent bloggers to learn about shooting and post-production skills".

Travel influences also valued cultural understanding and appreciation, and recognized the importance of promoting cultural elements in their content. In support of this statement, *Respondent 7* said: "Simple introductions of tourism elements no longer satisfy the audience's curiosity about a destination". Various types and complexities of tourism destinations require comprehensive knowledge. Moreover, tourists have transitioned from pursuing "sensory experiences" to "spiritual experiences". Therefore, creators' cultural level and aesthetic ability will play an increasingly important role in future tourism content creation.

Effective communication and interpersonal skills are required for social media operations and interacting with followers and fellow creators. As *Respondent 14* stated: "It is essential for creators to reflect on their content and learn from excellent peers".

Industry-specific knowledge and expertise facilitate tourism content creation and business operations. As *Respondent 9* said: "Tourism creators should have a comprehensive understanding of the tourism field, such as budget management, tourism planning abilities, and public relations' issues". Additionally, *Respondent 14* emphasized: "Mastering accurate knowledge of relevant cultural and historical elements can limit incorrect descriptions and unnecessary social controversy".

Finally, personal branding and storytelling showcase the influencers' unique personalities, styles, and interpretations of

tourism elements. *Respondent 2* argued: "Social media influencers should hold unique insights and creative perspectives on destination elements, rather than imitate other creators".

4.4 Challenges and Expectations

Several challenges affected the performance and sustainable development of local travel influencers. Firstly, influencers found it difficult to create unique and engaging content while staying true to their brand identity. Travel influencers are under pressure to constantly produce new and interesting content to maintain and grow their audiences. However, they also need to maintain their own brand's authenticity and stay true to their values and vision. *Respondent 15* expressed: "Limited creative ability and resources generally lead to an emphasis on superficial introductions of tourism elements and a lack of in-depth exploration". *Respondent 9* also criticized: "Some tourism creators may intentionally pander to their audience's preferences or commercial benefits and use exaggeration, glorification, or defamation of tourism destinations to attract attention and increase click-through rates".

Secondly, travel influencers faced challenges monetizing their content. While local travel influencers may enjoy creating content for their love of travel, they also need to earn a living. Influencers must constantly navigate sponsorships, affiliate marketing, and product placement, while ensuring they do not compromise the integrity of their content. *Respondent 3* expressed: "Making commercialized content is very tough for micro-influencers, as the reduction of click-through rates significantly impacts commercial opportunities and future investment in content creation." *Respondent 5* mentioned: "Content creation requires continuous expenditures on different items such as hardware equipment, software services, and travel fares".

Thirdly, the COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges to local travel influencers. Travel restrictions, closures, and other safety measures limited their ability to create new content. The pandemic also impacted the tourism industry making it difficult for influencers to find sponsors or partners. According to *Respondent 7*, "the strict "Zero COVID-19" policy brought many uncertainties and risks for both tourists and creators".

Fourthly, with many creators focusing on the same themes, high content homogenization results in lower click-through rates and the audience's aesthetic fatigue. As *Respondent 9* stated: "Some travel content creators excessively imitate or plagiarize others, resulting in a high degree of homogeneous content". *Respondent 5* also sighed: "Homogeneous content cannot highlight an influencer's personal characteristics".

Finally, work overload was also mentioned by some respondents. Creating content is time-consuming and labour-intensive. Local travel influencers maybe overwhelmed by the complex creation process, mental pressures, work overload, and lack of community support. Supporting this idea, *Respondent 5* mentioned: "I am currently working a full-time job which makes it impossible to maintain stable content updates".

However, respondents also wished that local tourism communities could recognize their efforts in promoting local tourism development and formulate substantial supportive policies. *Respondent 15* expressed: "We expect that the local government could draft supportive policies for us." *Respondent 3* emphasized: "Local governments should recognize influencers' existence and formulate policies that support and guide them towards regional tourism development".

4.5 Tourism Marketing Experiences

Two key themes characterize the tourism marketing experiences of local travel influencers. The first theme revolves around collaborations with various local tourism stakeholders to build a local multi-layer media matrix; a primary strategy employed by local travel influencers. Local travel influencers often collaborate with government agencies, tourism publicity departments, local TV stations, and official new media channels to provide original video and photo content for various official media platforms. These collaborations aim to promote regional tourism and help build a distinctive destination image for a city. *Respondent 3* expressed: "I mainly provide city-level and district-level tourism publicity departments with video and picture materials related to urban landscapes and rural tourism themes... three of my works were even reproduced by national-level media platforms".

In addition, some local travel influencers are invited to participate in the co-creation of official tourism promotional content that positions them as vital intermediaries between tourists and local tourism stakeholders. Through these joint co-creation events, local travel influencers understand competitive tourism characteristics and promote Meishan as an attractive and unique destination.

Next, travel influencers comprehensively employ live streaming e-commerce, social e-commerce, and product placement advertising to showcase and sell local tourism products. These products include famous cuisine, featured fruits, and local tourism packages. Such processes aim to boost the local economy and raise awareness of local tourism products and services among a wider audience. For example, live-streaming e-commerce and social e-commerce are seen as trendy channels for local tourism businesses to promote their unique products. *Respondent 14* described: "We conducted live-streaming e-commerce of Ponkan on DouYin platforms, resulting in millions of views and marketing sales". *Respondent*

8 mentioned: "I assisted the local tourism department in creating product placement videos for introducing seasonal tourism activities and included commercial links for travel tickets in the content".

5. Discussion

This study significantly contributes to understanding travel influencers in China. Most local travel influencers from emerging destinations are micro-influencers with less than 100,000 followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Micro-influencers are the largest group of influencers and are known to be geographically loyal to their locality and competitive in promoting local products or services. Micro-influences also contribute to half of the influencer marketing market in China (Gómez, 2019; Ling, 2019; Mai, 2020). In addition, influencer following positions local travel influencers as key opinion leaders or role model in displaying emerging or unknown tourism destinations (Barbe et al., 2020; Simeone et al., 2014), (also known as building destination image) (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2021; Peralta, 2019; Xu & Pratt, 2018), affecting tourists' revisitation, promoting tourism consumption (Emerging communication, 2022; Hsiu-Yuan, 2012; Langer, 2022), and obtaining tourists' feedback on behalf of local tourism stakeholders (Hochman & Manovich, 2013; Qian & Heath, 2019). These study's findings also concur with previous research that states that influencers with a large following emerge as leaders among their audiences (Asan, 2022; Gómez, 2019). However, although local travel influencers still emphasize the number of followers as an indicator of their influence, they place greater emphasis on their own geographical and cultural characteristics of content creation and sharing.

Secondly, there were five dimensions of motivations driving local travel influencers to create content, including displaying local expertise, seeking social recognition and validation, embracing localism and community engagement, demonstrating a sense of responsibility and motivating tourists. Some of these motivations are consistent with the previous studies on influencers' motivations, such as seeking social recognition (Langner et al., 2013), community engagement (Asan, 2022; Wang et al., 2012), and motivating tourists (Ay et al., 2019; Yılmaz et al., 2020). But two dimensions, displaying local expertise, and exhibiting a sense of responsibility are unique to this study. These two dimensions emphasise the cultural identity and geographical characteristics of travel influencers who are local influential role models in the regional tourism community and maybe connected to the collective spirit in the context of Chinese culture. Chinese individuals prioritize their duties over their rights when their cultural identity is activated (Hong et al., 2001). These unique dimensions also support the need to explore the experiences of social media influencers in different cultural settings concurrent with previous literature (Yılmaz et al., 2020). Although, previous literature overly emphasizes quantitative aspects of influencers' influence, such as follower numbers, likes, reposts, and clicks (De Veirman et al., 2017; Gómez, 2019; Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014), the "perfect number" may not reflect an influencer's impact (Brown & Hayes, 2008). Thus a qualitative evaluation could aid tourism stakeholders gain an in-depth understanding of influencers' motivations and characteristics (Audrezet et al., 2020; Liljander et al., 2015).

Thirdly, local travel influencers' competencies include advanced creation skills, cultural understanding and appreciation, effective communication and interpersonal skills, industry-specific knowledge, personal branding, and storytelling. Such skills indicate local amateur travel influencers' eagerness to professionalize both their content production and cultural tourism appreciation to produce more attractive and high-quality content for their own sustainability. In fact, with an annual growth rate of 53% in travel influencers, the average lifecycle of Chinese social media influencers ranges from three to five months (Xinbang, 2020). Moreover, the top-level influencers from MCN institutions accounted for 70% of influencer market shares in China (Sina M., 2020). Micro influencers must forge on with content innovation and creativity, multiple platform operations and extend their professional careers to maintain "freshness and attractiveness" (Xinbang, 2020). In the literature, attribute-value content is also recognized as more effective than simple recommendation messages in influencing tourists' perceptions and intentions (Kapoor et al., 2022).

Fourthly, local travel influencers experience challenges in creating unique and engaging content while staying true to their personal value and identity, monetizing content, adjusting to restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, competing with homogenous content and completing workloads. Similar challenges were established by other researchers, such as staying authentic when producing content (Wellman et al., 2020), monetizing content (Glatt, 2021; Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020), adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022; Pinho et al., 2021), homogenous content (Duffy, 2015; Ziyi, 2020), and work overload (Yılmaz et al., 2020). Local travel influencers expressed their wish for the local tourism sector to draft supportive policies to guide and better integrate them into local tourism communities. Such challenges also reflect the competitive nature of China's travel influencer market, where there were 100 thousand full-time travel influencers in 2021 with an average iteration time ranging from three to five months (Worker Daily, 2021; Xinbang, 2020).

Finally, tourism marketing experiences of local travel influencers currently collaborate with local tourism authorities and official publicity channels to build a local multi-layer media matrix mainly by providing original and excellent content materials, co-creation of official tourism promotional films, and promoting and selling tourism products or tourism

packages through live-streaming e-commerce. Selling tourism products or services through live-streaming e-commerce and co-creation of tourism promotional content are crucial travel influencer marketing strategies for showcasing destination attributes and achieving substantial monetization in China (36Kr, 2020; Gemar et al., 2019; Gustafsson & Khan, 2017). One unique aspect of this study, its focus on local travel influencers providing high-quality and original content for local tourism authorities and official publicity channels, could help in building a comprehensive multi-layer media matrix for destination promotion. Local travel influencers could also be acknowledged by local officials as important sources of tourism information, particularly for little-known destinations with limited sources of tourism communication media content. Moreover, such collaborations are an effective channel for showcasing local social identity and maintaining interactions between local travel influencers and tourism stakeholders.

These research findings are also beneficial to tourism boards, marketers and other stakeholders that intend to use travel influencer marketing strategy to foster successful collaborations, particularly for small or emerging tourism destinations with limited online exposure.

Local governments and tourism authorities can design and implement appropriate policies and strategies based on motivations of local travel influencers. Such policies will in turn encourage local influencers to create more culturally sensitive and authentic content that builds a distinctive destination image and provides valuable information to potential tourists. Local travel influencers can utilise their local expertise to create content that resonates with potential tourists by highlighting local culture, heritage, and attractions in their places. In the Chinese context, cultural responsibility and collective values could inspire local tourism stakeholders to create campaigns and initiatives that tailor deep connections with influencers. Furthermore, such collaborations could potentially foster a sense of local tourism community and pride and assist regional tourism authorities in facilitating sustainable and authentic local tourism development.

Secondly, the study emphasized the importance of comprehensive competence. Most local travel influencers are born from amateur creators, but they are aware of the importance of "professionalization" in their sustainable development. Tourism organisations and businesses can help enhance their comprehensive abilities through training programs, workshops, and local influencers' networking opportunities, which would in turn improve the content quality and overall effectiveness of local travel influencer marketing events.

Thirdly, local travel influencers were faced with challenges such as authenticity, monetization and work overload. Based on such information, the local government and private sectors could offer local travel influencers substantial support and resources for instance by actively participating in local influencers' initiatives and creating a conducive environment for local influencers to thrive and contribute to local tourism development.

Lastly, local travel influencers' tourism marketing experiences offer valuable insights and lessons on effective tourism marketing strategies to tourism stakeholders. Collaborations with influencers to create unique content and utilize live-streaming e-commerce can boost the success of marketing a destination's attributes, tourism products and service sales. However, tourism stakeholders should be cautious when collaborating with local travel influencers in the trends of live-streaming e-commerce by ensuring that local tourism values and authenticity are not compromised in the pursuit of direct economical revenues and audience reach. Tourism authorities and stakeholders should be aware of the potential risks of over relying on travel influences during marketing campaigns, which might negate the voice and influence of official publicity channels. It is crucial to maintain a balanced and diverse marketing strategy by integrating local travel influencers' local knowledge, cultural identity, and personal branding, with innovative marketing approaches. Future research should emphasize the positive social effects of tourism attributed to travel influencers that extend beyond marketing the destination to developing a new destination or new tourism products, and supporting travel community culture.

6. Conclusion

This study employed the social exchange theory to understand the content creation and sharing experiences of local travel influencers in Meishan City, China. Our findings concur with previous literature on social media influencers that demonstrates that local travel influencers, tourists, and local tourism stakeholders can engage in a reciprocal exchange of tangible and intangible resources (Lambe et al., 2001). Such exchange of resources can promote sustainable tourism development. Furthermore, this study supports the view that exploring the categorization of benefits and costs among different types of social media influencers and their followers (Ouvrein et al., 2021), can provide valuable insights into niche influencer marketing and enhance our understanding of social exchange in diverse influencer-follower and influencer-stakeholder relationships. Specifically, five major themes are identified for describing the content creation and sharing experiences of local travel influencers in this study, including serendipity, motivations, competence, challenges and expectations, and tourism marketing experiences. The results indicated that being a local travel influencer is an emerging occupation requiring comprehensive competence in special social and cultural contexts. Additionally, necessary supportive policies from the local tourism community can help transform local travel influencers into sustainable

development, because their initial popularity of them is generally serendipitous and they need to deal with many challenges. Finally, the study revealed that local travel influencers are a significant liaison between tourists, destinations, and the local tourism community through reciprocal collaborations with different tourism stakeholders, including building a local multi-layer media matrix, co-creating promotional content and live-streaming e-commerce. This study provides insights for tourism stakeholders to understand the local travel influencers, which can help promote the integration of regional tourism community development and local influencer networks.

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