

Virtual influencers in Tourism Marketing: Opportunities, Challenges, and Future Considerations

Monica Coronel-Padilla, Anna Irimiás

Corvinus University of Budapest

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AIMS OF THE PAPER

Aristotle's Rhetorical Theory has been widely applied in the fields of communication, marketing, and advertising as a model to explore persuasion. Grounded on the three main principles of this theory -ethos, pathos, logos the current study seeks to explore the effectiveness of virtual influencers in promoting tourist destinations.

METHODOLOGY

The Instagram accounts of three virtual influencers created to promote tourism in Italy, Germany, and Brittany (France) were analysed using qualitative and quantitative methods. Instagram analytics were employed to determine the performance and audience profile, whereas the comments extracted from the Instagram posts were examined through an interpretivist thematic analysis.

MOST IMPORTANT RESULTS

The analysed virtual travel influencers face several challenges in generating ethos, pathos, and logos. Regarding ethos, the greatest challenge is the lack of a bodily dimension and, consequently, the absence of practical intelligence. In terms of pathos, while their visual appeal can contribute to evoking positive emotions, their lack of expressiveness prevents a deeper connection between the influencers and their audience. Regarding logos, posts were found to contain AI-generated locations or misleading information about destinations, weakening arguments and rational appeal which is essential to effective persuasion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance the persuasive potential of virtual travel influencers tourism promoters should make them more relatable by showcasing realistic scenarios and authentic locations. Additionally, increasing their expressiveness and ensuring transparency about their management and objectives can foster stronger emotional engagement. Finally, each post should be accompanied by well-curated informative content to provide logical reasons for visiting a destination.

Keywords: destination marketing, virtual travel influencers, persuasion, rhetoric, artificial intelligence.

INTRODUCTION

Two millennia ago, Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), one of the most influential Greek philosophers, wrote *Rhetoric* (350 B.C.E.), a treatise on the ‘art of persuasion’. This treatise addressed a series of techniques for a successful public oratory. Aristotle’s Rhetoric identified three routes to persuasion or persuaders (*pisteis*): the character of the speaker (*éthos*), the emotions evoked in the audience (*pathos*), and the arguments used to convince the audience (*logos*) (Rapp 2023). While Aristotle’s Rhetorical Theory became prominent in classical times among lawyers and politicians, it is still relevant nowadays, especially in advertising and marketing, as a framework to study and create persuasive communication (Onebunne 2025). In this context, several studies have applied Aristotle’s model within different settings, i.e., print advertisement, social media marketing, and social media influencers, as a useful tool to identify effective elements and strategies leading to persuasion and consumer behavior (Baskara et al. 2025, Lamichhane 2017, Nasaruddin et al. 2023, Panigyrakis et al. 2020, Torto 2020).

Rhetoric revolves around the speaker (*rhetor*), whose purpose is to generate trust in the audience and eventually influence the audience’s views, attitudes, and preferences (Vero 2021). Therefore, from its conception it was human-centric. However, the advent of artificial intelligence (AI), especially generative AI, forces an adaptation of Aristotle’s model of persuasion to new roles and realities. For instance, with generative AI, the bodily dimension does not exist, and the machine is the one talking to us (Onebunne 2025).

The use of virtual influencers to promote brands and products is a relatively new and growing phenomenon, proving to be an effective social media marketing strategy to positively impact user’s engagement and purchase intention (Angmo, Mahajan & Ranjitha 2025). In response to this trend, we have recently seen the emergence of virtual influencers created specifically to endorse tourist products. However, their application in tourism marketing raises questions about their persuasive power especially given the unique nature of tourism products which cannot be experienced in advance, making trust in the information source a key factor. Yet, virtual influencers often lack trustworthiness, as they cannot engage in real-life tourism experiences, and their creators often remain anonymous (Xie-Carson & Benckendorff 2024). Furthermore, although tourism products encompass both utilitarian and hedonic dimensions, virtual travel influencers tend to be effective in promoting utilitarian aspects but face serious limitations when

endorsing hedonic products (Belanche et al. 2024, Zhang, Sun & Li 2025).

In this light, there is an increasing interest in academia for exploring the use of virtual influencers within tourism marketing. Most of the published work has attempted to compare the effectiveness of virtual influencers vs. human influencers (Ameen et al. 2024, Hernández-Méndez et al. 2024, Wang et al. 2024, Zhang et al. 2025), whereas the users’ responses to virtual influencers has been explored to a lesser extent (Yan et al. 2024a, Xie-Carson et al. 2024). However, it is important to highlight that prior research has examined globally recognized virtual influencers and selected tourism-related posts. In contrast, the present study specifically focuses on virtual influencers that have been designed specifically to promote tourist destinations.

By employing Aristotle’s Rhetorical Theory, this study aims to determine the persuasive potential of virtual influencers in the context of destination marketing. The study seeks to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse on the effectiveness of virtual influencers. By focusing on virtual *travel* influencers it seeks to provide practitioners -tourist destination promoters and marketers- with useful and specific insights regarding effective persuasive techniques to promote tourist destinations on social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Aristotle’s modes to persuasion

Aristotle’s model introduces three modes of persuasion: *éthos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. These three principles are particularly relevant in the context of marketing and advertising, where persuasion is key to effective communication.

Éthos. It refers to the character of the speaker, which must exhibit moral and intellectual virtues such as practical intelligence or competence (*phronésis*), integrity (*arete*), and good will (*eunoia*) (Rapp 2023, Vero 2021). Audience must feel identified with the speaker’s qualities and virtues to perceive it as sincere and trustworthy (Lamichhane 2017, Onebunne 2025), thus, *éthos* is strongly connected to both the oral and bodily performance of the speaker (Vero 2021). *Éthos* is a key element developed by the speaker to make himself to be perceived as credible and worth listening to (Nasaruddin et al. 2023). A speaker who is perceived as credible is likely to persuade the audience more easily and more quickly (Rapp 2023). Credibility is a quality assigned by the audience (Onebunne 2025), on the basis of the expertise, authority, and credentials of the speaker in a particular topic (Lamichhane 2017, Nasaruddin et al. 2023).

Pathos. It refers to the emotions produced in the audience by the speaker. Emotions play an important role in persuasion as they allow a better connection between the speaker and the audience (Lamichhane 2017) and can be so powerful to modify the audience's judgements (Rapp 2023). Alike *éthos*, *pathos* also relies on the speaker, as this is in charge to invoking positive emotions such as sympathy or negative emotions such as fear, as required (Nasaruddin et al. 2023). To evoke emotions in the audience the speaker can employ several rhetorical devices such as vivid imagery, gestures, voice tone, among others (Onebunne 2025). Attractiveness of the speaker plays a significant role in building *pathos*. For instance, a study on the print ads of a Nepali newspaper found out that the sex appeal of the characters broadcasted in the ads was an effective persuasive element to evoke positive emotions (Lamichhane 2017). The speaker can rely on beliefs, appearance, and imagination to evoke emotions (Rapp 2023).

Logos. It means 'logic' and refers to the quality of the arguments used by the speaker to appeal to rationality. It occurs when the speaker challenges prior beliefs and draws the audience to logical conclusions by the presentation of compelling arguments that include reasons, evidence, and examples (Onebunne 2025, Nasaruddin et al. 2023, Torto 2020). Nevertheless, the speaker shall avoid the use of fallacious or deceptive arguments by presenting real proof that supports the claims (Rapp 2023).

Social media influencers and Aristotle's rhetoric

Social media influencers today are the equivalent to the *rethors* in the ancient Greece (Vero 2021). Instagram celebrities act as opinion leaders, subtly or explicitly endorsing products or services. They influence the behaviour of a target group either by disseminating helpful and meaningful content to them -answering questions, offering guidance, giving advice- or by entertaining them (Veszelszki 2020). Social media influencers, who are perceived as trustworthy and authoritative within specific domains, collaborate with brands to promote products and services in a way that feels more authentic and less intrusive to their audiences. Marketers are increasingly turning to influencer marketing as a more subtle and effective means of presenting sponsored content in response to growing skepticism and rejection of traditional advertising on social media (Buvár 2018).

In this frame, previous studies have employed Aristotle's model to identify the persuasive techniques employed, consciously or unconsciously, by social media influencers. A qualitative study

revealed that Malaysian social media influencers employed the triad - *éthos*, *pathos* and *logos*- to impact their followers' purchasing behaviour (Nasaruddin et al. 2023). *Éthos* was created by praising the local identity of the influencer. *Pathos* was identified using rich imaginary, creating a sense of social status, and promoting personal growth. *Logos* was seen in the use of convincing statements -including scientific facts-, added value, convenience, and transactional reward. The findings revealed that influencers mostly rely on *logos* to persuade followers (Nasaruddin et al. 2023). Similarly, a quantitative study explored the application of the Aristotle's model by an Indonesian Instagram account and how the three concepts influenced the follower's trust (Baskara et al. 2025). The study found out that *logos* comprising reasoning, arguments, data, statistics, facts, and evidence; has the largest impact on trust, followed by *pathos* and *éthos*.

According to Vero (2021), social media influencers foster trust among their followers through constant and direct interaction. They reinforce *éthos* through their performance and the proximity to followers, by showing them their 'real' life -encompassing lifestyle, habits, and behavior-. This process is further enhanced by their deep understanding of their audience, allowing them to craft emotional appeals (*pathos*) and logical arguments (*logos*) that resonate more effectively with their followers.

Can virtual travel influencers really persuade?

Virtual influencer can be defined as a character or entity generated by computer, which is designed and maintained by a third party for product endorsement purposes, are active on social media, and have followers (Ameen et al. 2024, Hernández-Méndez et al. 2024). They can be categorized as mimic-human, which closely resemble and behave like real humans; animated-human, characterized by cartoon-like appearances and simplified human features; and non-human, which emulate figures, animals, or inanimate objects (Yan et al. 2024b).

Virtual influencers represent a useful resource for tourism marketing as they can travel everywhere at any time, making them perfect travel ambassadors (Ameen et al. 2024). Unlike human influencers, virtual influencers are not constrained by time, travel, or availability, and are theoretically capable of maintaining high productivity with minimal interruption. In addition, the fact of being computer-generated makes them to be associated with novelty, innovation, and excitement (Zhang et al. 2025, Wang et al. 2024).

However, virtual influencers can face several challenges when trying to persuade their audience. One of the limitations of virtual influencers is the disembodyment. Virtual influencers are non-human therefore cannot experience the real world as humans do (Kjeldsen 2024). Although they can describe human experiences, due to their lack of practical intelligence, these experiences are fabricated and consequently lack authenticity (Deptula et al. 2025). Additionally, they might strive to exhibit integrity, especially considering ethical issues regarding its staged authenticity and human-mimic behavior (Deptula et al. 2025). However, from a pragmatic point of view, virtual influencers seem to perform well in terms of *pathos* and *logos*. As claimed by Wang (2024), putting aside truth, ethics, emotions, and material realities, generative AI 'gets the work done' through the conscious and purposeful use of language. He calls it a 'post-rhetoric' condition.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is exploring the role of AI travel influencers in destination marketing. To this end, the authors undertook an extensive screening on the Internet and social media to identify virtual travel influencers with this profile. Eventually, three virtual travel influencers were selected as all of them have an Instagram account and were created to promote a tourist destination (table 1). According to the number of followers, our sample comprises a nano influencer (0-10k followers), a micro influencer (10k-100k followers) and a macro influencer (100k-1M followers) (Campbell & Farrell 2020).

Table 1. Description of the analysed virtual travel influencers

Influencer	Active from	No. of followers	No. of posts	Creator	Influencer type
@emmatravelsgermany (promotes Germany)	17 October 2024	8574	36 Image=18 Sidecar=7 Video=11	German National Tourist Board	Mimic-human
@annekerdi (promotes Brittany, France)	20 March 2023	12612	469 Image=246 Sidecar=200 Video=23	Sébastien Keranvran	Mimic-human
@venereitalia23 (promotes Italy)	20 April 2023	238789	264 Sidecar=174 Image=46 Video=44	Ministry of Tourism of Italy and National Tourism Agency	Animated-human

Source: Own elaboration

The study is mixed method comprising quantitative and qualitative data. Data collection took place in April 2025. First, we obtained Instagram analytics through the paid platform Hypeauditor.com on the account performance and audience profile. Secondly, we used the paid data scraping service Apify.com to extract the text of comments. Given that there were posts with very few comments and others with a big amount, we extracted the 15 top comments from posts with more than 100 comments and five top comments with posts fewer than 100 comments. A total of 3353 comments were extracted (Emma=388, Anne=1938, Venere=1027). In addition to English, the extracted comments were written in other languages namely German, French and Italian, which was consistent with the countries of origin of the studied virtual travel influencers. Google Translate was employed to translate these comments to English due to its

extensive language coverage (over 100 languages) and high performance in translating from European languages, such as German and French, into English (Wu et al., 2016). Nonetheless, the authors performed human post-editing to ensure the accuracy of the translations. In the database, each translated comment was placed alongside its original version to facilitate comparison. Furthermore, when necessary, individual translations were cross-verified using Instagram's built-in automatic translation feature 'See Translation'.

Thematic analysis of the comments was conducted adopting an interpretivist research paradigm following Walters' (2016) guidelines. This approach is considered suitable for analyzing social media content, as it accounts for the intertextuality between textual and visual narratives and emphasizes the significance of the whole rather than the sum of its parts. To better understand the comments,

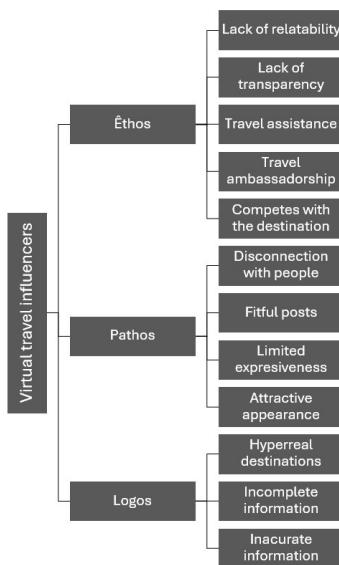
elements such as the emojis accompanying the comments, the photo or video of the post, and even the post captions, were observed during the analysis. Accordingly, codes were developed until saturation, supported by data extracts (relevant comments), and illustrative examples of the posts. These codes were consolidated into basic themes. Then, the authors collaboratively reviewed the findings to create overarching and mutually exclusive global themes.

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, Walters' (2016) checklist criteria were applied, including: *i*) repeated cross-checking of themes against the empirical data to ensure internal consistency, *ii*) dedicating sufficient time to all phases and iteratively revisiting them, and *iii*) ensuring that the analysis is aligned with both the textual and visual material, and presents a convincing argument. In addition, the outcomes of the thematic analysis were systematically compared with the collected Instagram analytics to gain a deeper understanding of the data and to reinforce the validity of the emerging themes.

RESULTS

As a result of the thematic analysis of the Instagram comments, the following themes emerged in correspondence with the Aristotle's modes of persuasion (figure 1).

Figure 1. Emerging themes from the analysis. Aristotle's modes of persuasion adjusted to the case of virtual travel influencers



Éthos of virtual travel influencers

We have identified a series of factors related to the characteristics of the analysed virtual travel influencers that represent both challenges and opportunities for building credibility with their audience.

Lack of relatability

The lack of embodiment prevents virtual travel influencers from genuinely experiencing the destination.

“I don't understand, how can we promote Breton gastronomy without being able to taste it? How to promote Breton landscapes without going there? Without breathing it? Without feeling it? Like a human with all his senses....” (refer to Anne)

“AI cannot share with us the human experience of a travel destination, or connect with others regarding their human experience on what it was like to visit somewhere or the emotions and feelings that they felt when they went to that location” (refer to Emma)

As a result of the lack of practical intelligence, their representations sometimes depict unrealistic scenarios and situations.

“Emma put your hat on because it's cold!!!!” (to Emma)

“Put a jacket on, it's almost November and it's starting to get chilly” (on Venere)

This aspect prevents followers from identifying with the travel influencer and, in turn, diminishes the influencer's relatability and credibility.

Lack of transparency

Analysis of the comments reveals serious concerns, especially from locals, regarding the rationale for using virtual travel influencers for destination marketing purposes, the identity and role of human staff backstage, the cost-effectiveness of such initiatives, and the level of autonomy granted to the AI for content creation.

“Artificial intelligence?! It's an original idea. Is it a computer that responds automatically or is there a real person behind the screen? It's a weird and slightly creepy concept...” (to Anne).

Travel assistance

One of the most notable actions of goodwill by virtual travel influencers is their ability to provide real-time travel assistance by answering inquiries and offering personalized recommendations.

“Erfurt is such a beautiful city. What corners can you recommend?” (to Emma).

Acting as virtual tour guides is very appreciated and helps virtual travel influencers to gain the trust and admiration of their followers.

“Thank you so much. Wonderful pictures and information” (to Anne).

Travel ambassadorship

Residents, local tourism boards, and tourism-related businesses see in virtual travel influencers a great opportunity for promotion of lesser-known or emerging locations. These stakeholders take advantage of the platform to invite the virtual travel influencers to ‘visit’ these locations or to redirect audience attention to their own digital channels.

“Hello Emma, why don’t you come to Regensburg? The beautiful, medieval old town has five different Christmas markets” (to Emma).

“Thank you for retracing the history of the Fleur de Lampaul. More photos and information on this link” (to Anne).

This act of goodwill certainly helps to build ethos. Residents, for instance, show appreciation for the promotion of their hometowns.

“Thank you for promoting our beautiful region” (to Anne).

Competes with the destination

An act that is definitely opposite to goodwill is the tendency for the virtual travel influencers to overshadow the destination. In a significant number of Instagram posts the influencers are situated at the spotlight, while the destination is secluded to the background, becoming barely visible (figures 2–3). The prominence of the influencers over the destination has drawn criticism about their ‘selfish’ behaviour.

“This looks like a beautiful place but you are standing in front of it! How about more of what you are seeing and less with you in the photo!” (to Emma)

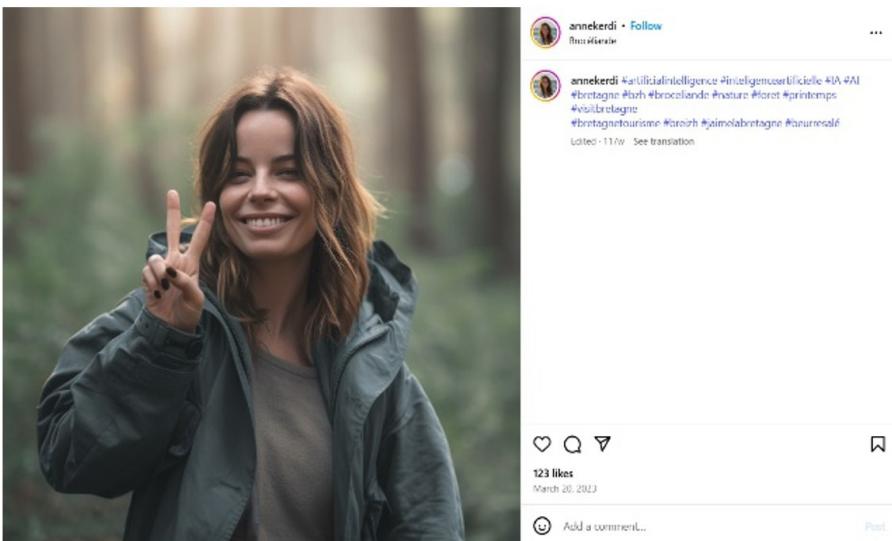
“Why a blurry image of a Christmas tree with Venus wearing a t-shirt and a cardigan (...)? Why not a reel of Italian squares lit up by Christmas, images of our Christmas dishes or similar (...)? You talk about discovering our beautiful Italy” (to Venere)

“And this image is supposed to represent which place in Brittany?” (to Anne)

Figure 2. Post by Emma (@emmatravelsgermany)



Figure 3. Post by Anne (@annekerdi)



In response to such critiques, the influencers have implemented other content formats such as videos and image carousels (sidecar posts) as a good alternative to showcase the destinations. Furthermore, recent posts demonstrate a shift in

visual strategy: influencers are now more often positioned peripherally or occupy a minimal area within the frame, or in some cases, are scarcely visible (figure 4).

Figure 4. Change of focus in pictures over the time on Venere's posts



Pathos of virtual travel influencers

Our analysis has revealed a few, mostly unfavorable, factors that hinder the analysed virtual travel influencers from appealing to their audience's emotions and from forming stronger connections with them.

Disconnection with people

Virtual travel influencers frequently appear alone in their visual representations, emphasizing natural or architectural elements while omitting the human component that contributes significantly to a destination's identity. Their disembodiment makes

interaction with people -an essential element of travel experiences- impossible, leading to a sense of disconnection with their followers.

“How beautiful the Italian people are. Oh no, there is no one. As always.” (on Venere)

Moreover, the exclusion of human presence in the posts represents a considerable constraint on their potential to evoke emotional responses in the audience.

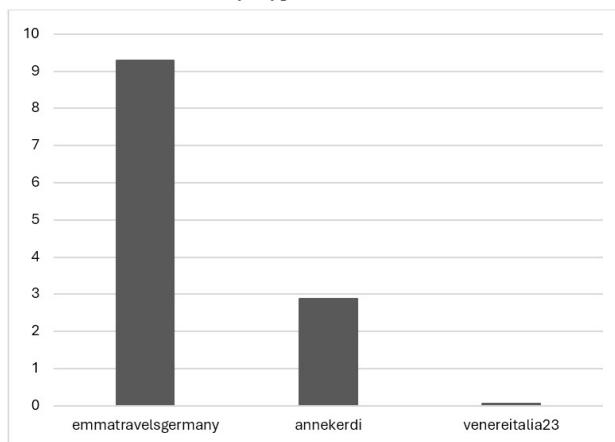
Pitiful posts

Contrary to the expected, the analysed virtual travel influencers do not post that often as real

influencers. More notably, Venere took a two-month break from posting -from 27 June to 29 August 2023- coinciding with the peak summer tourism season, which raised considerable criticism from followers: "The first slacker influencer in history" (to Venere). This may have negatively impacted follower engagement. In fact, Venere records the

lowest engagement rate ($=0.06$) among the three virtual travel influencers (figure 5). This inactivity contrasts sharply with the assumed operational efficiency of virtual influencers. Furthermore, this behaviour can significantly undermine the relation with followers as it can be interpreted as a lack of interest and commitment.

Figure 5. Engagement rate by the three virtual travel influencers. Own elaboration based on report by Hypeauditor.com



Note: Engagement rate is the percentage of audience engaged with the content posted by the influencer, including likes and comments.

Limited expressiveness

Another shortcoming of virtual travel influencers is their limited capacity for human expression and natural behaviour. For instance, Venere, inspired on Botticelli's Venus, is a two-dimensional avatar with a hybrid design that combines the animated head of Venus and a human body. In her Instagram posts, she consistently maintains the same pose and facial expression, emulating the original painting. As a result, she neither moves nor gestures and never appears in videos. These traits hinder her ability to connect with audiences and craft compelling narratives about tourism experiences.

"But will the virtual influencer take ALL selfies in the same neck position? Can't it be brought to life?" (refer to Venere)

In contrast, Emma and Anne demonstrate a broader range of expressive abilities: using original audio as their voice, gesticulating, and emulating human movements. Interestingly, they both report higher engagement rates.

Attractive appearance

The influencers' attractive appearance generates an important number of complimentary comments

expressing affection and admiration towards them specially from male followers.

"Morning beautiful you look great" (to Emma)

"Very beautiful Breton woman" (to Anne)

Interestingly, the audience demographics reveal that in Emma's case, 78% of her followers are male, whereas Anne's follower gender distribution is more balanced (48% male). Although, the attractive appearance of the analysed virtual travel influencers might result in emotional engagement, it is questionable whether this deviates from the original purpose of the influencers.

Logos of virtual travel influencers

The analysis revealed three factors that challenge the presentation of strong and convincing arguments by the analysed virtual travel influencers.

Hyperreal destinations

In the case of human-like virtual influencers such as Emma and Anne, pictures and videos in which they appear are entirely AI-generated (figures 6–7). Anne's posts, for example, occasionally incorporate synthography. Although these influencers claim real

locations inspire their visuals, serious concerns arise on whether the depicted destinations exist at all.

“AI? So this picture is fake?” (to Anne)

“No way, Emma! Those places can’t be real! (to Emma)

Furthermore, portraying hyperreal destinations may negatively impact influencers' trustworthiness when residents notice some deceptive practices.

“Fakevideo. Most of the pictures have nothing to do with Leipzig or are mounted” (to Emma)

“I’m from Cochem and this doesn’t look anything like the imperial castle. Please stop!” (to Emma)

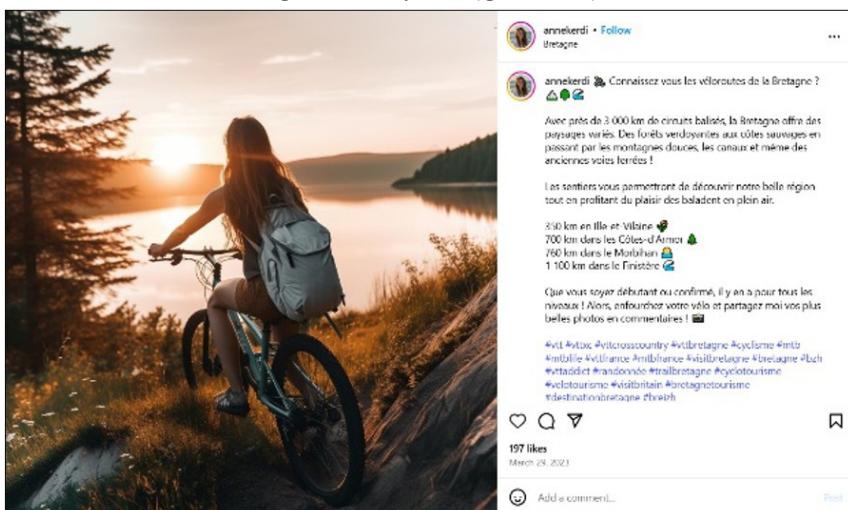
In response to these claims, Anne usually partners with skilled photographers to feature high-quality, pictures of the locations while enhancing credibility.

“Thank you very much for using my photo. One of many that I took during our recent visits to this beautiful little town of character” (to Anne)

Figure 6. Post by Emma (@emmatravelsgermany)



Figure 7. Post by Anne (@annekerdi)



Incomplete information

Captions are a critical element of Instagram posts, providing context and enriching the visual narrative. A notable shortcoming among virtual travel influencers is the lack of relevant information about the featured destinations. Some posts lack captions entirely, while others include only brief text that fails to include important details such as the geographical location.

“But did you really put pictures of the places you are supposedly sponsoring without even indicating where and what they are?” (to Venere)

“Where is this located exactly?”(to Emma)

Inaccurate information

Despite the advanced technology of AI, the risk of misinformation remains. Comments show that residents act as informal content curators of the information posted by the virtual travel influencers by identifying inaccurate or outdated information. As such, it is essential that content shared by these influencers be verified by destination experts or individuals who have visited the place.

“The lake is not suitable for swimming and is considered extremely dangerous by the locals. This post is dangerous as well as incorrect. it is not important but even picnicking is not allowed.” (to Venere)

“Nice photos, but the seven islands and Cap Fréhel are in the coast of Armor 22.” (to Anne)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Aristotle's Rhetorical Theory provides an ideal frame for assessing the persuasive potential of virtual travel influencers within the context of destination marketing. The findings reflect the challenges influencers encounter in generating *éthos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, revealing several opportunities for improvement.

Éthos is created by the speaker when sharing personal experiences with the audience. In this regard, the greatest challenge virtual travel influencers face is the lack of a bodily dimension and, consequently, the absence of practical intelligence. Since they cannot experience sensations related to the destination, such as tasting a traditional dish or participating in outdoor activities, posts show them in staged and unrealistic situations. Although their goodwill is reflected in gestures such as serving as travel assistants or travel ambassadors, their overexposure in photos, even at the expense of

the destination they promote, does not generate a positive image of their personality and qualities.

Regarding *pathos*, while their visual appeal can contribute to evoking positive emotions, the core objective of these virtual travel influencers should remain destination promotion rather than the cultivation of fan communities driven by physical attraction. The primary goal of virtual travel influencers is to promote destinations, not to foster personal attachment from followers. Moreover, a lack of expressiveness - often linked to their disembodied nature - undermines a deeper connection between the influencers and their audience. As for *logos*, significant improvements are needed. Sharing hyperreal locations or misleading information about destinations compromises their credibility and rational appeal. Ideally, every posts should be accompanied by information rich in facts and logical reasons to visit a destination. Providing accurate and up-to-date information is essential for maintaining trust in the virtual travel influencers. While the virtual travel influencer is at the foreground, the Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) is at the background. Therefore, the success of the influencer depends on the team of experts responsible for its management. Special attention should be paid to the content: experts on the destination should duly curate it to avoid mistakes and misinformation. In this regard, it is the DMO's duty to foster an active collaboration with different stakeholders: 1) residents who voluntarily and altruistically co-create value by following the influencer, curating the information, promoting their city/town, and providing extra information; 2) local tourism promoters that can collaborate with quality information and recommendations; and 3) content creators that can participate in posts with authentic and creative content. Likewise, ethical and moral concerns diminish their integrity, thus addressing these concerns with greater transparency can help to build trust among the community members.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is not exempt from limitations. For instance, it did not analyze the influencers' posts nor their responses to the comments. Future research could explore the visual and textual elements of the posts, as well as their responses to users's comments to determine the most salient narratives used by the virtual travel influencers.

Furthermore, the current study did not fully examine engagement metrics. Future research could consider metrics such as likes, comments, and

shares, to identify the most engaging posts by virtual travel influencers and their main characteristics.

A key limitation of the present study is that it only considered three cases focusing on destination marketing, which constrains the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could address this limitation by examining recently emerged virtual travel influencers in the hospitality industry across different sectors such as transportation (i.e., @SamaOnTheMove by Qatar Airways), or accommodation (i.e., @sena.zaro by Cenizaro Hotels & Resorts group) to provide a broader understanding of the phenomenon.

Finally, as the thematic analysis involves a degree of interpretative judgement by the authors, its inherent subjectivity may represent a limitation of this study.

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