



INFLUENCER MARKETING FOR HERITAGE TOURISM: HOW DIGITAL STORYTELLING CAN KEEP HISTORICAL DESTINATIONS RELEVANT

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ABSTRACT :

Historical places remain meaningful when people continue to learn about them, visit them and support their protection. However, younger audiences often discover travel destinations through social media rather than through brochures or traditional promotional campaigns. Influencer marketing gives heritage destinations an opportunity to reach these audiences through personal experiences, photographs, videos and stories. This paper explores how influencer credibility and digital storytelling may influence awareness, emotional connection and intention to visit historical places. It also considers concerns such as inaccurate historical claims, excessive commercialisation, overcrowding and unclear sponsorship. The study uses a qualitative approach based on secondary sources, including academic literature and international heritage guidance. The reviewed literature suggests that influencer campaigns are more likely to be meaningful when creators are trustworthy, stories are engaging and historically responsible, and local communities and heritage experts contribute to the content. The paper brings these ideas together in a conceptual framework and offers recommendations for promoting heritage destinations without losing sight of conservation and cultural respect.

Keywords: Heritage Tourism, Influencer Marketing, Digital Storytelling, Social Media, Destination Promotion, Authenticity, Cultural Heritage

Problem Statement

Historic monuments, archaeological sites, museums and heritage towns preserve evidence of the past and contribute to education, community identity and local economies. Yet their continued protection also depends on public interest. Traditional methods such as printed brochures, guided tours and official advertisements remain useful, but they may not always connect with people who rely on social platforms to discover places and plan trips. Short videos, photographs and personal travel accounts can make a destination more visible and shape how potential visitors understand it [6][7].

Influencer campaigns can bring new attention to heritage places, but attention alone does not guarantee a positive outcome. A creator may simplify complex history, present a sacred site mainly as a photo opportunity, or encourage large numbers of people to visit a fragile location. Promotional content can also be misleading when sponsorship is not disclosed or when the creator has not researched the destination. The key issue addressed in this paper is how influencer marketing and digital storytelling can encourage lasting interest in historical destinations while maintaining accuracy, authenticity and respect for the site and its community.

1. Introduction

Heritage tourism involves travelling to places, objects and traditions that help people understand the history and culture of a community. It can create jobs, support local businesses and encourage investment in conservation. It also helps pass knowledge and collective memory from one generation to the next. International agreements, including the World Heritage Convention, underline that protecting cultural heritage is a shared responsibility and that public understanding is an important part of this work [19].

Travel discovery has changed with the growth of online search, social networking platforms and user-generated content. People can now view a destination through other travellers' photos and videos before deciding whether to visit it [6][7]. Travellers also share experiences to connect with others, express their identity or inspire future trips, making visitors themselves part of the way destinations are represented online [9].

Influencers have become important voices in this environment. They build communities around travel, culture, history or other interests, and followers may see them as more relatable than conventional advertisements. Their recommendations can affect destination choices, although their influence depends on factors such as credibility, relevant knowledge and the relationship they have built with their audience [10][11][12][13][14].

Digital storytelling is equally important because historical places are more than physical structures. A fort, temple, old street or archaeological site can be understood through the people who lived there, the events that took place and the meanings attached to it. Narrative content can help audiences

imagine these connections and become emotionally involved with a place [4][5]. Social media stories can therefore contribute to destination image and branding [16].

At the same time, a story must be more than attractive. Audiences may question content that feels staged or excessively commercial, and tourism research shows that authenticity can relate both to the place itself and to the experience a visitor has there [2][3][15]. Increased online attention may also place pressure on local communities and vulnerable sites. This paper examines the opportunities and limitations of influencer-led storytelling, with particular attention to credibility, authenticity and responsible visitor management.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Heritage tourism and visitor interest

Poria, Butler and Airey argue that heritage tourism is closely connected to whether visitors perceive a place as part of their own heritage, rather than simply to the objective features of the site [1]. This suggests that promotion should help people find meaning in a destination instead of only listing its age, architecture or historical importance. Research on immersive heritage experiences also indicates that interpretive technologies can support engagement and learning when they are designed and managed carefully [17].

2.2 Social media and travel decisions

Xiang and Gretzel identify social media as an important part of online travel information search, where peer-generated material sits alongside official information [6]. Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier explain that shared videos let viewers imagine a destination before travelling and can shape their expectations of the experience [7]. Research on film tourism similarly shows that media representations can raise interest in the locations shown on screen [8]. Electronic word of mouth also influences how people form opinions, helping explain why personal accounts may be persuasive in travel decisions [18]. Together, these studies highlight the role of digital visual content in creating awareness.

2.3 Influencer marketing in tourism

Influencer marketing uses creators with engaged audiences to communicate experiences and recommendations in a personal style [10]. In tourism, this approach may increase awareness when the creator's interests and image fit the destination being promoted [11]. Research in related fields suggests that audiences may respond positively to influencers they find relatable, while trust also depends on the quality and credibility of the message [12][13]. On Instagram, perceived opinion leadership is linked to factors such as originality and the quality of the creator's profile [14]. For heritage destinations, the right partnership therefore involves more than selecting the account with the largest following: knowledge, content style and fit with the place matter too.

2.4 Authenticity and credibility

Authenticity is a longstanding issue in tourism research. Cohen examined how commercial activity can change the perceived authenticity of cultural experiences, while Wang distinguished different ways in which authenticity is experienced and understood by tourists [2][3]. Influencer research also suggests that audiences value creators who communicate genuine interest and remain transparent when working with commercial partners [15]. In heritage promotion, credibility requires both an honest communicator and content that respects historical evidence. Input from historians, site staff and local communities can help keep stories attractive without sacrificing accuracy.

2.5 Storytelling and destination branding

Narrative is one way people organise experiences and make sense of the world [4]. Green and Brock's work suggests that becoming absorbed in a story can affect how audiences respond to its message [5]. In destination branding, Lund, Cohen and Scarles show how social media storytelling can shape a place's image and create emotional connections with audiences [16]. These ideas are especially relevant to heritage tourism because history naturally involves people, events, choices and change. Presenting these elements as well-researched stories may keep audiences interested more effectively than presenting isolated facts alone.

2.6 Literature summary

The literature reviewed here points to four connected ideas: social media contributes to travel decisions; influencer impact depends partly on trust and relevance; authenticity affects whether content is accepted; and stories can build emotional connections with places. These ideas are well established across tourism and marketing research, but their combined role in sustaining interest in historical destinations deserves further attention, particularly where promotion must also support conservation.

3. Research Gap

Earlier studies have considered social media in travel search, influencer credibility, authenticity and storytelling in destination branding [6][12][13][15][16].

However, these topics are often examined separately, and influencer research frequently focuses on leisure tourism, hospitality or consumer products. Historical places present additional responsibilities because their value depends on reliable interpretation, cultural meaning and physical preservation. There remains a need for an integrated view of how influencer marketing and digital storytelling can maintain interest in heritage destinations while reducing the risks of commercialisation, inaccurate representation and overcrowding. This paper responds by bringing together research on heritage tourism, influencer communication and narrative engagement.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To explain heritage tourism and the contribution of digital storytelling to communicating historical value.
2. To examine how influencer marketing can affect awareness of and interest in historical destinations.
3. To identify narrative, visual and immersive approaches that may encourage continued audience engagement.
4. To consider how credibility, authenticity and trust influence heritage promotion.
5. To discuss risks such as commercialisation, misinformation, overcrowding and insufficient sponsorship disclosure.
6. To develop a conceptual framework and practical suggestions for heritage managers, destination organisations and content creators.

5. Research Methodology

The study follows a descriptive, qualitative design based on secondary information. Rather than collecting new survey responses or testing statistical relationships, it reviews existing research to develop a joined-up understanding of influencer marketing, digital storytelling and heritage tourism.

5.1 Research design

A narrative literature review was used alongside thematic analysis. Relevant publications were examined to understand how influencer marketing, narrative engagement, authenticity and destination communication have been discussed. Repeated ideas were then grouped into themes connected to maintaining public interest in historical places.

5.2 Data sources

The material includes peer-reviewed journal articles in tourism, marketing and communication, foundational publications on storytelling and authenticity, and international heritage guidance such as the World Heritage Convention [19]. Sources were selected for their relevance to heritage or cultural tourism, social media, influencer marketing, destination branding and online travel decisions.

5.3 Main concepts

The central outcome is sustained interest in historical destinations, understood as awareness, emotional connection, intention to visit and continued engagement with a destination's story. The main factors considered are influencer credibility, relatability and reach, alongside the accuracy, depth, emotional appeal and format of the story. Other conditions include perceived authenticity, clear sponsorship disclosure, involvement of local communities and heritage custodians, and the destination's ability to manage visitor numbers.

5.4 Analytical approach

Key arguments and concepts from the selected sources were organised into five themes: credibility and trust; authenticity; narrative engagement; destination awareness and branding; and immersive or experiential formats. These themes guide the findings and the conceptual framework presented later in the paper.

5.5 Limitations

Because the research relies on published sources, it does not directly measure audience behaviour or establish statistical cause and effect. The reviewed literature also reflects particular platforms and geographic contexts, while digital platforms and user behaviour continue to change. The framework should therefore be understood as a basis for future testing rather than as a set of experimentally confirmed relationships.

6. Conceptual Background

Heritage tourism

Heritage tourism centres on places, objects and traditions that represent a community's past. Its appeal depends partly on whether visitors find a

personal or cultural connection with that past [1]. Long-term success also depends on protecting the sites and practices that make these experiences possible.

Influencer marketing

Influencer marketing involves working with people who have developed an engaged audience and asking them to communicate about a destination or experience in their own voice [10]. Relatability and trust can make this communication effective [12], but hidden commercial motives or limited understanding of the subject can weaken its credibility [15].

Digital storytelling

Digital storytelling combines formats such as writing, photographs, audio, video and interactive media to communicate a story online. For heritage sites, it can connect historical events with people's experiences and local perspectives, helping audiences understand why a place matters [4][5][16].

Authenticity

Authenticity concerns how genuine a place, experience or communicator appears to an audience [2][3]. In heritage content, it includes the accuracy of the historical account and the honesty of the creator about their knowledge, perspective and any sponsorship.

Sustained interest

Sustained interest goes beyond a short-lived spike in views or a viral post. It includes continued curiosity, further learning, meaningful engagement, willingness to visit and support for the protection of a destination.

7. Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework views influencer credibility and storytelling quality as the main drivers of interest in historical destinations. Their effects depend on whether the content is authentic and transparent, whether local knowledge is included, and whether the destination can accommodate visitors responsibly.

- Influencer credibility: Creators who are trusted, relatable and knowledgeable may help heritage content reach audiences and earn their attention.
- Storytelling quality: Accurate stories built around people, events and meaning may strengthen emotional connection with a destination.
- Authenticity and transparency: Honest presentation and clear disclosure of paid partnerships can support trust in the creator and the content.
- Participation by custodians and communities: Historians, conservation staff, guides and local residents can contribute context and help prevent misrepresentation.
- Destination capacity: Visitor planning and responsible promotion can reduce the risk that rising popularity harms fragile sites or local life.

The framework leads to four propositions for future research:

- P1: Greater influencer credibility and relatability are associated with higher awareness of and interest in historical destinations.
- P2: Narrative-led and emotionally engaging content is associated with stronger, more lasting interest than content that provides facts alone.
- P3: Perceived authenticity and clear sponsorship disclosure strengthen the relationship between influencer storytelling, trust and intention to visit.
- P4: Involvement of heritage custodians and local communities improves content accuracy and acceptance while helping reduce the risk of commercialisation.

Taken together, the framework connects communication choices with audience perceptions and the practical responsibilities of destination management.

8. Key Findings and Analysis

The thematic review produced five broad findings. These are interpretations of the published literature, not results from a new survey or experiment.

8.1 Credibility and trust

The reviewed research suggests that people may respond more positively to creators they consider relatable and credible than to messages that feel entirely controlled by a brand. Trust is also shaped by the usefulness and quality of the information being shared [12][13]. Heritage organisations should therefore assess a creator's knowledge, audience relationship and fit with the subject, rather than choosing a partner solely because of follower numbers. This is consistent with P1, while recognising that destination-creator fit also matters [11].

8.2 Authenticity

Content that looks like a scripted advertisement may struggle to convince audiences that the creator's interest is genuine [2][15]. For historical destinations, authenticity has two dimensions: the story should be faithful to available historical evidence, and the creator should be open about the nature of the partnership. Research-backed content and clear sponsorship disclosure are therefore important parts of responsible promotion.

8.3 Narrative engagement

Narrative research indicates that audiences can become more involved when a story draws them into the experiences and perspectives of its subjects [5]. Destination storytelling can also shape place identity and emotional connection [16]. A short video about the people who built or used a historic site, for example, may give viewers a stronger reason to care than a list of dates alone. This provides conceptual support for P2, although the size of the effect

needs to be tested in heritage-specific campaigns.

8.4 Destination awareness and branding

Social media posts, shared videos and travel accounts can influence how people imagine a place and whether it enters their travel plans [6][7][16]. Influencer content can introduce heritage locations to audiences who might not encounter them through traditional campaigns. For lasting value, these posts should connect to reliable official information, educational resources and practical guidance about visiting.

8.5 Immersive and experiential formats

Virtual tours, short-form video and augmented reality may help people explore historical settings before or during a visit. Research on immersive heritage experiences highlights the importance of careful design and management [17]. These formats should add context and support learning rather than distract from the site or replace the voices of people responsible for its care.

8.6 Risks and sustainability

Higher online visibility can increase visitor expectations and concentrate crowds at a small number of well-photographed places. If promotion is not coordinated with visitor management, the result may be pressure on fragile structures, disruption for residents or disrespectful behaviour at sensitive locations. Campaigns can help by sharing responsible visitor guidance, encouraging off-peak visits and introducing lesser-known places where appropriate. Overall, influencer marketing is best treated as a way to begin a relationship with new audiences; whether that interest lasts depends on accuracy, depth and responsible management.

9. Practical and Theoretical Implications

9.1 Practical implications

Heritage managers and destination marketing organisations should choose collaborators based on subject knowledge, credibility and compatibility with the site, not reach alone. Campaigns can be developed with historians, conservators, guides and local storytellers so that the resulting content reflects reliable information and community perspectives.

Content should explain why a place matters, using people, events and cultural meaning to bring history to life. A combination of short videos, photo essays, virtual tours and interactive features can serve audiences at different stages of trip planning. Paid partnerships should be clearly identified, and creators should receive guidance on respectful behaviour, photography restrictions and the care of sacred or sensitive places.

Promotion also needs to be coordinated with visitor management. Where appropriate, campaigns can provide information about less crowded alternatives, suitable visiting times and responsible conduct. Creators can strengthen their own credibility by researching claims, acknowledging sources and consulting local communities.

9.2 Theoretical implications

The paper brings together ideas about authenticity, narrative persuasion and influencer credibility to explain how interest in historical destinations may be maintained. It shifts attention from promotion alone to the relationship between the source, the story, audience perceptions and the management of the destination. The resulting propositions offer a starting point for empirical research in heritage tourism.

10. Future Research Directions

Future studies could test the framework through visitor surveys, experiments comparing narrative-based posts with fact-focused content, or engagement analysis of heritage campaigns. Longitudinal research would help determine whether online interest leads to visits, repeat engagement, greater historical understanding or support for conservation. Comparisons across countries, platforms and heritage types—including monuments, living traditions and contested histories—could reveal where influencer storytelling works differently. Further research should also consider residents' perspectives and whether increased digital attention creates visitor pressure. Finally, virtual and augmented reality and AI-generated content raise important questions about historical accuracy, disclosure and authenticity.

11. Conclusion

Historical destinations need public interest if they are to remain valued, visited and protected. The literature reviewed in this paper indicates that influencer marketing and digital storytelling can help introduce these places to new audiences and create a stronger emotional connection with the past. Their value, however, depends on more than visibility. Influencers need to be credible, stories should be engaging and historically responsible, sponsorship must be transparent, and heritage custodians and local communities should have a voice in how places are represented. Without these safeguards, campaigns may create temporary attention while spreading misleading impressions or placing extra pressure on vulnerable sites. Influencer marketing should therefore complement—not replace—careful interpretation, conservation and visitor management. Used thoughtfully, it can help

historical places remain relevant to new generations while encouraging people to understand and protect them.

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