The relationship between brands and influencers: an exploratory study in the hospitality industry

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Abstract

The paper aims to understand the characteristics of the collaboration between influencers and brands in the Italian hospitality sector, from both the influencer and entrepreneurial perspectives. Qualitative and exploratory research was conducted through direct interviews with travel influencers and owners of Italian hotels. The analysis reveals varying objectives, approaches, and assessments of the effectiveness of the collaboration between travel influencers and hospitality entrepreneurs, along with the emergence of diverse compensation methods. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the specific geographic origins of the influencers and entrepreneurs involved, the findings have limited generalizability, recommending further research on the topic. The study suggests that hospitality entrepreneurs should manage strategically their relationship with travel influencers to increase brand awareness, bookings, and loyalty. The originality of the study lies in the analysis of the relationship between brands and travel influencers which has received limited empirical investigation. It reveals numerous novel elements within marketing literature, particularly in how influencers and entrepreneurs manage this relationship.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, Travel influencer, Hospitality, Brands.

Introduction

In recent years individuals have dramatically changed the channels they use to communicate, as they moved online and in particular toward social media (Colicev et al., 2019). Especially, the new generations are always connected to the web through mobile devices, maintaining an "always on" status (Boyd, 2020). In the digital age, consumers can communicate instantly with companies, share opinions on products or brands, and be involved in marketing activities (Cham et al., 2022).

Corporate websites, social media, websites, mobile apps, email marketing, and influencers are among the most important communication tools used by companies in the digital era (Tuten & Solomon, 2020). These tools have increased the number of touchpoints between customers and brands in the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) and, therefore, more opportunities to offer customers a positive and memorable customer experience.

Further, data analysis tools such as Google Analytics allow marketers to personalize and optimize communication campaigns, reducing costs and providing a more effective way to reach a wider audience of customers (Cham et al., 2022). In particular, social media marketing can contribute to developing stronger customer relationships, brand awareness (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019), and loyalty (Laroche et al., 2013).

Within social media, influencers are widely employed as a marketing strategy as they attain trust from followers (Kim & Kim, 2021). Influencer marketing consists of the opportunity to associate – in exchange of payment – a company brand with a special content creator who can influence a large audience of followers on one or more social networks. For this reason, they are also called social media influencers. Therefore, an influencer is a qualified and potentially powerful intermediary between companies with which to collaborate and his/her audience (Evans et al., 2017).

The influencer marketing industry is growing very fast; according to Data Bridge Market Research, it reached $7.36 billion in 2021 and is expected to grow to $69,92 billion by 2029.

Despite the growing attention of the theoretical literature on this phenomenon, there are still many gaps on influencer marketing and there is poor empirical research. Most of the literature on influencer marketing is focused on the consumer standpoint (Boerman and Van Reijmersdal 2020; Hwang and Zhang 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019), while the complex dynamic of influencer-consumer relationship, collaborations between influencers, as well as the understanding from the perspective of the influencer and how brands should effectively collaborate with influencers and manager endorsement activities remains limited (Aw & Agnihotri, 2023).

In this paper, we propose an empirical study to contribute to filling this scientific gap. Specifically, the study is focused on the relationship between travel influencers and hotels and analyses the point of view of the influencer and the brand.

The paper aims to address this gap by proposing an exploration on both the influencers perspective of the cooperation with brands and their approach in creating content and the selection criteria of influencers by firms as well as their objectives and the relationship management with influencer and evaluate its effectiveness.

In particular, the first goal of the study is to identify the motivations of travel influencers to work with hotels and how hotels cooperate in terms of the objectives to reach, the kind of content to diffuse, and tone of voice to be used.

The second goal is to understand how brands pay influencers and measure the results of cooperation.

Therefore, a more holistic perspective can be obtained taking into consideration some key aspects of the use of travel influencers in the hospitality sector.

The paper is structured as follows: the first part reports the theoretical background of influencer marketing, travel influencers, and the relationship between brands and influencers. The next paragraph describes the methodology adopted to conduct the exploratory study in Italy. This is followed by the presentation of results. The last part presents the discussion and conclusions.

Theoretical background

Influencer marketing and travel influencers

Influencer marketing is a communication tactic in which companies pay online influencers (e.g. on Youtbe or Instagram) to interact with their followers on social media to promote the brand products (Leung et al., 2022). (Lou & Yuan, 2019). More shortly, Campbell and Grimm (2019) defined influencer as someone who posts to social media in exchange for compensation.

Influencer uploads content (e.g., videos, images, and stories) that is useful, enjoyable, and appealing to followers and the followers indicate their satisfaction and appreciation through activities such as liking, sharing, commenting, and subscribing activity as rewards (O'Donell, 2018).

Influencers stamp their posts with personal aesthetic touches and personality twists, creating an enjoyable experience for their audience (Lou & Yuan, 2019). In the relationship with companies, influencers bring not only his/her followers (the "reach") but also the kind of relationship with the audience that has developed over time (Kim & Kim, 2021). Companies can compensate influencers either with money or with free products, services, trips or experiences (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Hence, influencer marketing can be considered an hybrid communication tool, as it integrates aspects of positive word of mouth and aspects of public relations, as influencers are recognized as credibel and referenced individuals. At the same time, influencers are perceived by followers as "common people" or peer who express freely in an authentic and spontaneous way their opinions (Leung et al., 2022). Therefore, except for celebrities, an important element of success of an influencer is the "proximity" to their followers which impact positively on trust.

Follower count, authenticity, expertise, accessibility, and cultural capital dimensions may impact on trust of followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). All these dimensions impact on trust which reflects, in the communication context, the follower's confidence and willingness to rely on the message. Similarly, according to Lou and Yuan (2019) the following factors may impact consumer behaviour, that is the reaction of followers to their posts: advertising content value, influencer credibility, perceived trust, brand awareness, purchase intention and individual's involvment.

In particular, social media influencers (SMIs) can be classified into five categories based on follower count, authenticity, expertise, accessibility, and cultural capital dimensions, namely celebrity influencers, megainfluencers

(above 1 million followers), macroinfluencers (between 100,000 and 1,000,0000 followers), microinfluencers (between 10,000 and 100,000 followers), and nanoinfluencers (less than 10,000 followers) (Balaji et al., 2021; Campbell & Farrell, 2020). A recent study findings show that for firms nanoinfluencers can increase message credibility and reduces the perceived risk associated with following the nanoinfluencer's recommendations (Balaji et al., 2021).

Travel influencers (TIs) are a special category of influencers as with their messages they transform travel experiences into inspiring adventures for their followers, thus influencing travelers' perceptions and intentions (Saini et al., 2023).

Through their narratives and distinctive travel styles, these influencers traverse the globe and also shape the aspirations of those dreaming of exploring new destinations.

As the influence of travel influencers continues to grow, another facet of this phenomenon that should not be underestimated involves accommodation facilities. Many of these facilities have transformed into true sanctuaries of well-being and comfort, embracing the digital era by welcoming the online world. They offer guests an all-encompassing experience that bridges the physical and the virtual.

The relationship between influencers and brands: gaps in the literature

A recent report on social media trends stated that 94% of marketers who have used influencer marketing campaigns affirmed that campanigns were effective and yielded 11 times the return on investiment (ROI) of traditional advertising (Ahmad 2018).

Although influencer marketing is an expanding and large phenomenon, relatively little strategic or academic insight exists that is specific to influencers.

It is unclear how firms could enhance influencer marketing effectiveness by selecting influencers, targeting their followers, or managing content. A recent studies stressed that influencer originality, follower size, and sponsor salience enhance effectiveness while post that communicate the launch of new products lauches on the market diminsh it (Leung et al., 2022)

Another study, outlined that influencer originality, follower size, and sponsor salience enhance effectiveness, and posts that announce new product launches diminish it (Aw & Agnihotri, 2023).

Only a few studies explored how social media travel influencer marketing affects tourists' travel intention (among others, Magno & Cassia, 2018; Asan, 2021; Kapoor et al., 2022).

However, the understanding of the phenomenon from the influencer point of view and how brands should effectively collaborate with influencers and manager endorsement activities remains limited.

For example, the influencer's approach to create content and the nature of collaboration deserves investigation. Also, the best ways to manage all the relationship and collaboration require a better understanding, from the selection of influencers to the evaluation of the success of a communication campaign.

From the perspective of firms, a dilemma may arise when an excess of control diminishes the creative autonomy of influencers in content creation, thus conducting to lack of interest of excitement. Sometimes influencers could also decline to participate to campaign. There is need to better understand also how to maintain the relationship influencer over time and monitor and assess performance of partnership. Therefore, future research should develop a brand-influencer relationship management and collaboration framework (Aw & Agnihotri, 2023).

In the hospitality and tourism sector, the phenomenon of influencer marketing, in particular travel influencer marketing is even less understudied.

Our empirical study aims to contribute to analyzing the relationship between brands and influencers, focusing on the hospitality sector in Italy, a country with a higher quality cultural heritage and natural landscapes.

In particular, the research questions are the following:

RQ1. How do travel influencers collaborate with accommodation providers, considering their motivations, content strategies, objectives, expected compensation and evaluation of their efforts in the hospitality sector?

RQ2. How do hotels collaborate with travel influencers, focusing on selection criteria, objectives, strategies for engagement and monitoring, compensation models, and the evaluation of results?

Methodology

To address the research questions, four in-depth interviews were conducted: two with Italian travel influencers and two with Italian hotels owners. Additionally, secondary data from Instagram and websites were collected and analyzed to provide insights into both influencers and hotels.

The interview protocol consists of five open-ended questions for influencers and hotels. For influencers, the questions are designed to explore their motivation for working within the hospitality and tourism sector, their content strategy, the goals of their collaborations, their compensation expectations, and how they assess the outcomes of their efforts.

For the hotels, the questions aimed to identify the criteria used to select travel influencers, the objectives of the collaboration, the methods employed to intervene and monitor influencer activity, the compensation provided and the metrics to assess of the effectiveness of the influencer marketing.

Interviews were recorded and analysed with traditional coding and key quotes useful to answer the research questions were extracted (Saldaña, 2021).

Findings

The travel influencers and hotels' characteristics

In this section, lives and experiences of two distinctive personalities will be described, seeking to understand what makes them so captivating and influential in the world of travel blogging: Alessandro Magni e Guido Catelli. Alessandro, born in 1988, falls into the category of globetrotters and has turned his two passions—photography and travel—into his profession. Alessandro's passion for travel was developed during his university studies in Communication Sciences, and by applying what he learned, he quickly found success within his online community. Today, he boasts 209,000 followers on Instagram and nearly 10,000 followers on TikTok. He also runs a blog where, in addition to travel, he covers other areas such as lifestyle, beauty, fitness, and food. Initially contacted by fashion brands to promote their products, his appeal quickly drew the attention of renowned hotel chains, automotive companies, tech firms, and event organizers. Today, his presence is also sought after by tourism boards and event management companies, highlighting his indispensable role in the realm of digital influence.
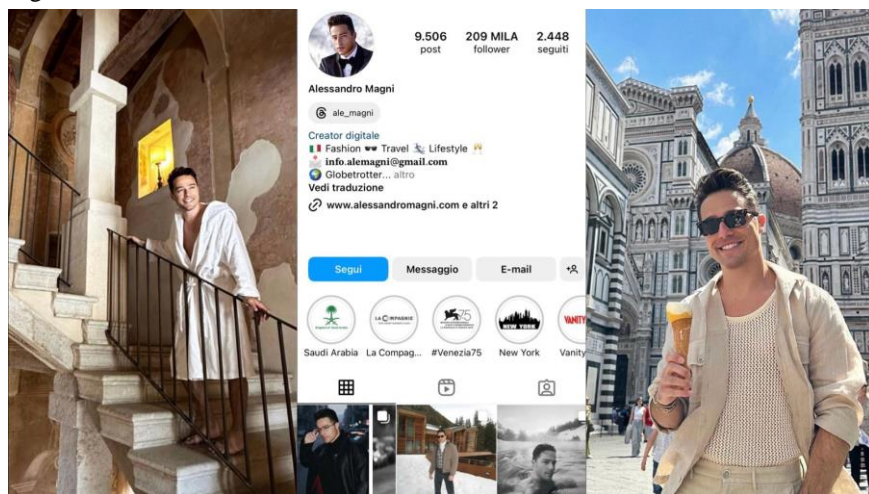

Figure 1. Instagram profile of Alessandro Magni

Guido Catelli, aged 30, is another prominent online figure known for his unique way of narrating his life experiences. His story diverges from others because when he began posting photographs of his travels, the concept of a travel influencer did not yet exist. His initial collaboration was with Flixbus, an experience from which he realized that his passion for travel could indeed become the profession of his dreams. He is highly active on Instagram, where he shares his adventures with his 108,000 followers. Guido has engaged in various

collaborative relationships with brands such as Nivea, Daniel Wellington, Blackberry Mobile, and many hotels and resorts around the globe.
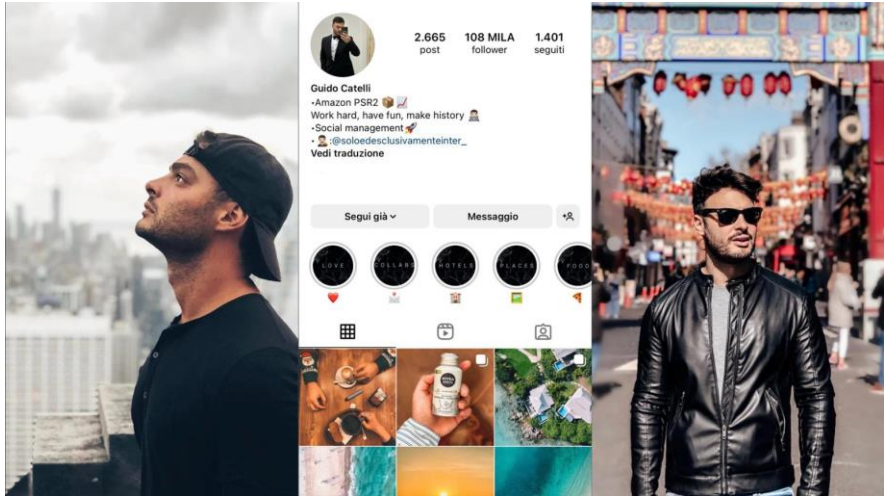

Figure 2. Instagram profile of Guido Catelli

Concerning the accommodation facilities, an analysis was conducted on QC Terme and Grand Hotel Tremezzo. They not only open their doors to guests but also to collaboration opportunities with influencers to offer an unforgettable travel experience, both online and offline.

QC Terme is a chain comprising 12 thermal centers and 6 hotels, with locations spread across Italy, France, and New York.

Within the expansive architectural spaces and vast gardens of the QC Terme centers, guests can enjoy a wide range of wellness treatments, including hydro-massage, saunas, Turkish baths, foot baths, waterfalls, showers, relaxation areas, and high-quality massage services. The concept behind these wellness centers is to continue the philosophy of the SPA of Imperial Rome, aiming to provide moments of absolute relaxation, whether alone or in company, and to escape from the stress of everyday life.

QC Terme is present online with its website www.qcterme.com, where visitors can explore the various locations that offer SPA services and resorts and check availability for bookings. Indeed, there is a description for each location and every wellness service that QC Terme offers, as well as a detailed description of every hydro-massage tub or experiential pool.

QC Terme maintains an online presence not only through its website but also via social media pages on Facebook, with 143,000 followers, and on Instagram with 372,000 followers. Daily, they post photos or videos showcasing moments and details that clients can experience in the SPAs and resorts, accompanied by captions in English, evidencing their international audience engagement.

Source: www.qcterme.it

Figure 3. The QC Terme

Another hospitality establishment renowned for its online presence is the Grand Hotel Tremezzo, located on Lake Como, embodying full Liberty style architecture. It was founded by Enea Gandola, a gentleman from Bellagio who had extensively traveled across Europe at the turn of the 20th century. On July 10, 1910, together with his wife, he decided to create a facility of unique elegance designed for the sophisticated traveler.

The Grand Hotel Tremezzo has navigated through more than a century of history, continuing to embody the essence and spirit of the Belle Époque.

The hotel is distinguished by its formal rooms with views of Lake Como, equipped with every conceivable comfort and amenity, ranging from WiFi and minibar to room service. The suites feature a panoramic terrace with a Jacuzzi and offer the luxury of a personal butler. Breakfast is served in a lavish restaurant with a terrace and the hotel also boasts a private beach, a SPA, a marina, a tennis court, three swimming pools, and a fitness room. Beyond these amenities, it provides its guests with the opportunity to indulge in gastronomic experiences such as cooking classes or tours of vineyards with tastings; lake excursions; the convenience of a chauffeur and a personal shopper for retail expeditions; painting courses, or participation in theatrical performances.
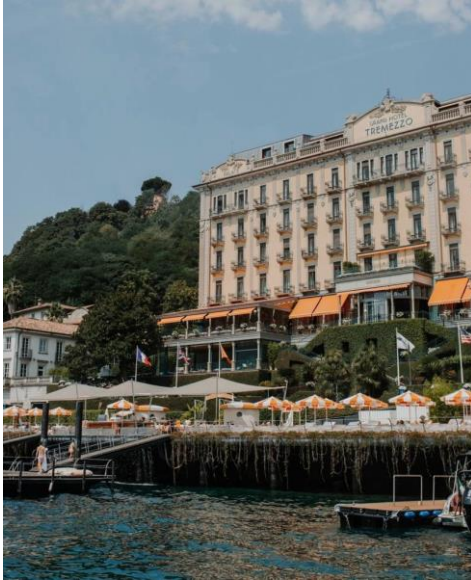
Source: www.grandhoteltremezzo.com

Figure 4. Grand Hotel Tremezzo

The collaboration between travel influencers and hospitality entrepreneurs

The travel influencer's perspective

Several differences and common elements characterize the relationship between influencers and hotels owners.

Concerning the influencers approaches to hospitality sector, first and foremost is the passion for travel, rooted from a young age. Each has a unique background but shares the desire to explore new places and share these experiences with an audience. The testimonies of Guido and Alessandro demonstrate a willingness to connect with a broader audience.

However, each influencer adopts distinct content strategies. Alessandro stated: "*I carefully plan my content, deciding when to post new posts or videos and which topics to cover. The quality of the images is also crucial in the digital world; hence, I always seek the best natural light for my photos. I prefer Instagram reels for narrating my journey because I can include multiple moments of the vacation in a single post*". One can discern the precision and commitment with which the influencer shares their shots. The language he employs is meticulously detailed, conveying a sense of class and sophistication. The descriptions are filled with evocative and elegant imagery that captivates followers, transporting them into the experiences the influencer personally undergoes.

Conversely, Guido affirmed: *"I do not to follow a specific content strategy but I simply share my best photographs with my audience and remain open to provide advice to those seeking it".*

Indeed, the tone of voice Guido uses is informal and approachable, as if he were speaking with friends. He prefers the use of positive and emotional expressions to convey the enthusiasm he feels and to stimulate his audience's interest in his travels. He aims to create an empathetic connection with his followers, encouraging interaction and inviting them to share their opinions.

Regarding the collaboration with brands, the objectives of Guido and Alessandro slightly differ. Guido's primary aim is to share products or services that genuinely interest him and are perceived by his followers as authentic collaborations. Differently form Guido, Alessandro primarily focuses on earning from the collaboration while still maintaining consistency with his travel style. In this regard, Guido declared: *"I have always strived to be consistent with who I am, hence collaborating with merchandise in which I truly had an interest".* Alessandro remarks: *"Brands began to notice my content and my passion for travel. I chose to collaborate with them because I wanted to share high-quality products and services with my followers and, at the same time, fund my adventures. My decision to collaborate with a brand depends on several factors. Firstly, I look for alignment with my travel style and my values. It must be an authentic collaboration that reflects my experience and interests. Secondly, I assess whether the brand offers real value to my followers. It has to be something I believe could be useful or interesting for my community".*

For important agreements, both the influencers prefer the terms and expectations of the collaboration to be clearly outlined. However, in most cases, a balance is sought between financial compensation and non-monetary benefits (free dinners, comfort services, etc.). Guido clarified: *"In my collaborations with brands, I've experienced a flexible approach where, in addition to remuneration, I highly value the opportunity to have unique experiences".*

The effectiveness of a collaboration and the results are measured through likes, comments, shares of posts, and blog traffic. These are all useful indicators for gauging user engagement. Influencers also pay attention to the increase in followers' post-collaboration and direct feedback from users. Alessandro explained: *"I always listen to my audience's feedback. If there are detailed requests about a destination or a specific aspect of a trip, I try to accommodate these requests in future posts".*

The hotel owner's perspective

Exploring the viewpoints of owners and entrepreneurs of QC Terme and Grand Hotel Tremezzo, it was found that both owners follow a meticulous selection process for their collaborations. They choose influencers who have a significant presence across various social media platforms and, most importantly, who boast genuine interest from their followers in the content published. Great emphasis is also placed on the shared values of the influencers, which must align

with those of the accommodation facility. In this regard, the owner of Grand Hotel Tremezzo stated: "*We select influencers based on the type of content they publish and their reach on social media. We prefer profiles with fewer followers but with an engaged and loyal audience*".

The goals of the collaborations for both QC Terme and Grand Hotel Tremezzo are the increase of brand visibility and awareness, the creation of authentic and original content by the influencer, and a boost in bookings following the influencer's promotion. QC Terme owner provided a particularly intriguing testimony: "*On TikTok, a trend was started by two customers who captured their experience in our cinema bath, reaching 25 million views. Now people call us asking to book this experience*".

Both hospitality entrepreneurs allow influencers to freely express themselves in sharing their experiences, as they acknowledge the importance of authenticity and the individuality of each in influencing their followers' opinions. This way, travel influencers can authentically and compellingly convey the essence of the facility to their community.

The compensation for sponsorships can vary and generally includes free accommodation, other benefits such as dinners, massages, additional services, or it may be monetary compensation. For example, QC Terme owner affirmed: "*In addition to offering free lodging, we have implemented a system of monetary compensation based on the extent of the influence and online impact*". These results show that partnerships with influencers can be built on a wide range of benefits, in addition to economic ones.

Lastly, the effectiveness of collaborations with influencers is primarily measured through monitoring user engagement and direct customer feedback. Accommodation facilities also pay attention to an increase in bookings following the company's sponsorship by influencers. If bookings increase, it means that the sponsorship has been successful, according to the managers interviewed. Regarding the evaluation of results, Grand Hotel Tremezzo owner explained that: "*After the collaboration, we always analyze the results achieved in terms of engagement. We check whether the number of website visits or followers has grown during our collaborator's stay*". This evaluation process is crucial for measuring return on investment and adjusting marketing strategies based on the outcomes achieved.

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between travel influencers and hospitality entrepreneurs, from the perspectives of both influencers and brands. An exploratory and qualitative research approach was adopted, utilizing direct interviews. Firstly, we wanted to understand the influencers' viewpoints on various elements of this relationship, including motivations, content strategy, goals, compensation, and the evaluation of their efforts' outcomes. Secondly, the objective was to understand how hospitality entrepreneurs manage such relationships, specifically the criteria for selecting

influencers, the objectives of the collaborations, their engagement with and monitoring of the influencers' content strategies, the compensations provided, and the evaluation of the results.

The analysis of the interviews with influencers revealed that a passion for travel is a common thread among the influencers, an enthusiasm rooted in childhood. Both have a unique background but shares the desire to explore new places and share these experiences with their audience. Their testimonies show how the transition from personal sharing to more professional engagement is often driven by the desire to connect with a wider audience.

This confirms that influencers like to share their passion with followers who perceive them as peers who express freely in an authentic and spontaneous way their opinions (Leung et al., 2022). This "proximity" to their followers is probably the most important reason of their success and trust. It is cricial to hightlight that a sense of closeness to followers is particularly achievable by nanoinfluencers (Balaji et al., 2021), as exemplified by the individuals interviewed in this study.

The differences in content strategies adopted by the two influencers interviewed are evident. It was interesting to note that while one carefully plans content and pays particular attention to the quality of images, the other follows a more spontaneous approach, sharing the best moments without a formal strategy. This finding implies that influencers should manage their content with strategic intent rather than spontaneously when collaborating with companies. This aspect is understudied in the literature.

The analysis of the influencers' goals in collaborations with brands reveals a diverse range of motivations. While one influencer seeks authenticity and a real affinity with the products or services, the other one is primarily focused on earning, yet strives to maintain consistency with his own travel style. This result, in line with the finding regarding motivations, confirms the main literature pointing out that influencers gain trust from followers thanks to their authenticity, expertise, and accessibility (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019) and, at the same time, post to social media in exchange for compensation (Campbell & Grimm, 2019; O'Donnell, 2018).

The analysis of interviews with hospitality entrepreneurs revealed that they follow a careful selection process in choosing influencers for their marketing campaigns. This selection is based on criteria such as presence on relevant platforms, follower interest, and alignment with brand values. Further, we found that common goals of collaborations include increasing brand visibility, generating authentic content, and boosting direct bookings. These outcomes highlight the importance of a careful selection of influencers to achieve the hotel's marketing objectives, while also emphasizing the importance of allowing influencers the freedom to employ their unique tone of voice and style. All these aspects of the collaboration with influencers are included in the literature but requires further empirical investigation (Aw & Agnihotri, 2023; Magno & Cassia, 2018; Asan, 2021; Kapoor et al., 2022). Further, we found that hotels

monitor the effectiveness of campaigns with influencers through key metrics, including user engagement, an increase in bookings, and direct customer feedback. This evaluation process is crucial for measuring the return on investment and adjusting marketing strategies based on the results obtained. The interviews' findings highlight the need for ongoing assessment of collaborations with influencers in order to optimize the impact of campaigns. This aspect is understudied in the literature.

The major theoretical contribution concerns the initial empirical contribution to a wide range of aspects of the management of relationships between brands and influencers, which is understudied in the influencer marketing literature and empirical studies are still rare (Aw & Agnihotri, 2023) also in in the hospitality and tourism industry. Most of the literature on influencers is, indeed, focused on the consumer standpoint (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2020; Hwang & Zhang, 2018; Lou & Yuan, 2019)

Furthermore, this study enriches the literature on influencer marketing and specifically travel influencer marketing offering an interesting and poorly investigate perspective in the literature: both the entrepreneurial and influencers perspectives. Therefore, we can consider this study a starting point in exploring the phenomena taking a broad angle of analysis.

With regards to managerial implications, this study suggests that collaborations between influencers and hotels can be strategic for increasing hotels visibility and direct bookings. However, it is crucial for hotels owners to carefully select influencers, define clear objectives, leave the influencers free to express and measure the effectiveness of the campaigns. These implications could guide hospitality entrepreneurs in optimizing their collaborative marketing strategies. Influencers should also manage strategically their collaboration with companies and try to plan messages, to maintain their tone of voice and style, define the compensation and evaluation of results.

The exploratory study presents some limitations. The small number of interviews and the geographic origin of key informants do not allow generalizability of our results and suggest future research recommendations. Future qualitative research could enlarge the conceptual framework, including for example the factors that may impact the influencer marketing effectiveness (expertise, attractiveness, etc.), and increasing the number of interviews.

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