

SHAPING DIGITAL GAZE THROUGH INFLUENCER VISIBILITY OF RURAL DESTINATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract: This study investigates the role of social media platforms in shaping tourism trends through the content created by tourism influencers. Using purposive sampling, the research analyses influencer-generated content across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube between 2021 and 2025, focusing on platform affordances and algorithmically mediated visibility. The study uses content and sentiment analysis to identify themes in destination framing and assess followers' sentiments. The research conceptualises a "digital gaze" to explain how influencer narratives, platform algorithms, and audience interactions co-construct destination meanings. Findings reveal high engagement, with visual storytelling and algorithmically amplified content shaping perceptions of remote destinations, contributing to digital placemaking and reshaping tourism landscapes in South Africa.

Key words: Nature-based tourism, Digital gaze, social media influencers, digital place-making, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

In the years that followed the Covid-19 pandemic up to the present day, travel behaviours across the globe have undergone a seismic shift, with safety and proximity being at the centre of travel decisions by many tourists (Saini et al., 2023). The challenge is that lesser-known remote and rural destinations have limited strong marketing frameworks, which affects their maximum potential to attract visitors (Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023). Tourism areas such as inland reserves,

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mountain regions and remote coastal areas are faced with a dual challenge of addressing the tourists' fears of isolation and attracting increased visitations. For instance, in 2022, it was reported that both domestic and international tourists were hesitant to travel to sparsely populated mountain trails and game reserves despite the low Covid-19 risks in such areas (South Africa Tourism (SAT), 2022).

Amid these shifting dynamics, there is a growing emergence of social media platforms seen as vital tools in shaping the travel narrative through the lens of influencers acting as content creators and travel vloggers (Li & Zhou, 2023). These individuals play an indirect, yet significant, destination marketing role by documenting their journeys, activities and experiences in the lesser-known remote, nature-based and rural destinations (Han & Chen, 2022), in real-time through various platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and Instagram (Bou Aragonés et al., 2025). Influencers unintentionally operate as digital ambassadors for natural and remote tourism destinations, particularly those off the beaten path. Their impact is enhanced by the subsequent reciprocal engagements from their followers, whose likes, shares and comments highlight interest and influence travel motives to these remote places (Yi et al., 2025).

Travel influencers are crucial because they efficiently bridge the information gap for potential tourists, providing real-time information and insights into destinations' safety issues, quality of tourism offerings and accessibility factors (Li & Zhou, 2023). Thus, travel influencers are facilitators of digital place marketing who play a vital role in helping to develop captivating visuals and narratives of the identities of underexplored destinations (Babu & Philip, 2025). Such dynamics trigger significant questions regarding the role of social media trends evolving into actual spatial movement and economic boost for less prominent tourism areas (Rao Hill & Qesja, 2023). Crucial to note is that the convergence of post-pandemic travel behaviours and the growing influencer-driven digital marketing creates a distinct space in which remote nature-based and rural tourism destinations can be reimagined and reintroduced to the global tourism audience. Additionally, the visibility of destinations on social media is not entirely dependent on influencers. Platform algorithms and recommendation systems play a significant role in amplifying, filtering, and prioritising content, thereby determining which destinations gain prominence and which ones remain invisible. An additional layer of algorithmic mediation is, therefore, introduced to the digital place-making procedures, where visibility is co-produced by both human actors-influences and followers, and non-human actors- platform logics.

There is plausible literature on the subject matter of 'post covid travel and the impact of digital place-making, particularly in relation to social media influencers' (Lee et al., 2020; Vukmirović et al., 2020). However, notable gaps remain regarding understanding how such travel content shapes travel patterns, especially in developing countries such as South Africa. This is despite the growing visibility of the influencer-led promotion of nature-based and rural destinations (Saini et al., 2023). Scholarship on spatial tourism, both pre- and post-Covid, has focused mainly on urban and well-established tourism geographies, with a notable lack of empirical insights into lesser-known, remote, nature-based tourism destinations. What is lacking is a dearth of studies on these destinations and the nuanced role of social media influencers in the development and growth of remote nature-based and rural tourism areas. Practically, many remote nature-based and rural tourism destinations in South Africa face challenges around digital accessibility, infrastructure and marketing strategies. These gaps necessitate

focused research that can inform tourism development strategies aligned with current digital and social trends, ensuring that the benefits of increased visibility translate into sustainable local economic development.

Against such a background, this research sought to evaluate the role of social media influencers, particularly travel vloggers, in shaping tourism trends towards remote, nature-based and rural tourism destinations in South Africa. The research aimed to provide actionable insights for tourism planners, digital marketers, and local communities to leverage social media for destination visibility and visitor growth. Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on digital tourism through explicitly focusing on the Global South, particularly South Africa, where remote and rural destinations remain marginalised in digital tourism scholarship. Through this, the research illuminates the distinct socio-economic, infrastructural, and related developmental dynamics that shape tourism visibility in the Global South contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Post Covid-19 tourism shifts, social media and the rise of the remote nature-based, and rural destinations

After the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, travel patterns worldwide experienced significant disruptions, with key emerging drivers of travel decisions being flexibility, isolation and safety (Orindaru et al., 2021). In the wake of heightened concerns of crowded urban spaces and the lingering psychological impacts of the lockdowns, many tourists began looking for different spaces to visit, such as remote, nature-based and rural destinations (Fernando & Ratnayake, 2025). The advantages of such places are that they provide an allure of natural beauty, seclusion and the perceived safety of less populated destinations. Besides the growing demand for off-the-beaten-path experiences, most remote destinations remain hidden and invisible in mainstream tourism circuits (Tegelberg & Griffin, 2024). This is because of several challenges such as limited marketing efforts, poor digital infrastructures and limited promotional frameworks. Amid these challenges, social media has since emerged as a dominant platform for shaping public perceptions and travel choice (Skryl & Gregoric, 2022). Central figures in curating and sharing experiences of remote destinations are the influencers, particularly travel vloggers and digital content creators. These influencers craft visually compelling narratives that bring less-known places into the digital spotlight, using platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube (Kilipiri et al., 2023). The content shared on these platforms acts as a digital bridge that connects secluded regions to a global audience and provides potential tourists with rich imagery and experiential storytelling of these regions (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). It is undeniable that the Covid-19 pandemic altered the global tourism landscape, influencing trends to more natural and sparsely populated destinations (Kusdibyo et al., 2023). While the urban centres became associated with health risks and travel restrictions, many travellers began to seek experiences in destinations that provided physical distance, escape and immersion in nature (Buckley & Cooper, 2022). Such a shift enhanced the appeal of rural and nature-based tourism (NBT), positioning these environments as ideal for post-pandemic recovery travel (Fernando & Ratnayake, 2025). Nature-Based Tourism, a form of tourism that emphasises the greater contact and understanding between people and the natural environment, provided both the perceived safety and emotional reprieve from the pandemic-induced anxiety and

isolation. In a similar fashion, rural tourism offered prospects for authentic experiences, cultural engagement and laid-back and less constricted activities, often absent in highly commercialised urban areas (Makoni & Tichaawa, 2021).

Digital place-making, digital gaze and the influencer culture in remote nature-based, and rural destinations

To understand the role of social media influencers in shaping tourism perceptions, it is crucial to engage with the following interrelated concepts- digital place-making, the digital gaze and the influencer culture. Digital place-making refers to how digital technologies, especially social media, are being used to develop and disseminate narratives about places (Halegoua & Polson, 2021).

In tourism, this implies that physical landscapes are being transformed into symbolic, experiential spaces shared through videos, images and stories. Digital place-making helps physically remote and underdeveloped destinations to be virtually accessible and visually appealing to tourists (Abate et al., 2025). Digital place-making can also enhance the visibility of lesser-known destinations and recontextualise them within the aspirational travel discussions, encouraging spatial reimagining by both visitors and locals (Halegoua & Polson, 2021). The concept of digital gaze builds on the foundational work of John Urry and Larsen, who conceptualised the tourist gaze as socially constructed and mediated through images, cultural representations and expectations (Larsen, 2014) Today, this gaze is increasingly determined by platform-based interactions, algorithmic curation, and user-generated content (Larsen et al., 2007). In many instances, tourists travel based on expectations shaped by interactions with content created by others who have travelled to places of interest (Larsen & Urry, 2011).

In other words, it is largely the mediated imagery that creates the interest to travel to certain places (Priatmoko et al., 2021). Digital placemaking, however, is not a neutral process. Places that gain more visibility rely of platform algorithms, which significantly influence the mediated imagery through privileging content that aligns with engagement metrics, trends and platform-specific logics (Larsen & Urry, 2011). In the digital era, this gaze is increasingly built through dynamically generated content. Influencers design this gaze through an emphasis on specific aesthetics that frame rural and nature-based destinations in ways that align with contemporary travel desires (Lee et al., 2024).

However, the influencers' selective portrayal of landscapes and experiences reinforces certain values- such as aesthetics, solitude and escape, while potentially overlooking other valuable aspects of remote spaces- such as community values, infrastructure, and socio-political realities (Pop et al., 2022). This dynamic is further shaped by the influencer culture. Travel influencers operate as unofficial trusted promoters of destination experiences, often bridging the gap between personal storytelling and commercial promotion (Mqwebu, 2024). The influence of these individuals lies in the aspirational content they post, which fosters parasocial relationships with their followers (Lee et al., 2023). Influencers do not merely portray destinations in their posts, they reframe them through their personal views, often reproducing emotional and aesthetic responses that influence viewers' perceptions and intentions to travel (Peng, 2024). Influencer-follower interactions, through comments, likes, shares and direct messages, reinforce a feedback platform in which the engagement with individuals determines future content and destination visibility as well as perceptions. Such

an interaction is increasingly putting remote, nature-based and rural destinations on the map in the post Covid-19 era (Kusdibyoy et al., 2023).

Besides the growing interests and shifting tourist preferences towards remote, nature-based and rural experiences, especially in post Covid-19 tourism discourse, most of these destinations remain under-leveraged and continue to experience limited measurable tourism growth, particularly in developing contexts. They face several challenges, such as poor digital and physical infrastructure, structural barriers, limited access, and limited marketing efforts (Iswanto et al., 2024). While some of these remote destinations have experienced a moderate increase in domestic tourism during the periods of international restrictions, they have struggled to maintain that gradual growth into a long-term (Kusdibyoy et al., 2023). This current disconnect between the demand and readiness offers a unique opportunity for rethinking how digital media, especially influencer-driven content, can bridge the gap between visibility and accessibility to remote, nature-based and rural areas (Skryl & Gregoric, 2022).

Social media platforms and the influencer-driven destination visibility

Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube are central to the distribution of travel content, allowing for real-time sharing of experiences and direct audience interaction (Peng, 2024; Xie-Carson & Benckendorff, 2024). In the case of the remote, nature-based and rural destinations, these platforms provide a significant opportunity for enhanced destination visibility and storytelling. Influencers are central to this transformation as they act as informal ambassadors of these places through their content (Peng, 2024).

The influencers make use of immersive visuals, personal narratives and relatable content presentations to reposition remote destinations (Meng et al., 2024). For instance, on Instagram, influencers normally pair panoramic landscapes with emotionally resonant captions narrating a sense of peace or escape (Xie-Carson & Benckendorff, 2024). TikTok provides users with an option to create short-form, energetic clips showing hidden gems, local cultures and authentic experiences (Mqwebu, 2024). YouTube provides a platform for longer, documentary-style vlogs, where influencers can post content on their day-to-day experiences of their journeys and stays in remote areas (Iswanto et al., 2024). An advantage of these platforms is that they highlight several destination issues, such as accessibility, safety, and logistical information that is often lacking in official channels. Also, this content forms aid the carefully curated digital gaze that positions remote, nature-based and rural destinations as desirable, safe, emotionally and authentically fulfilling (Iswanto et al., 2024). When influencers make aesthetic choices in their content, such as drone footage, sunset shots and slow-motion videos, viewers and followers are drawn to these as they influence their expectations for a destination (Putu et al., 2020).

The impact of travel influencers on tourism destination marketing

The distinction between the influencers and traditional tourism marketers is their perceived authenticity and relatability to both destinations and their people and prospective travellers. Most people normally view the influencers' content as trustworthy, mainly because it is broadcast as personal experiences instead of corporate messaging (Chatzigeorgiou, 2017). Also, their content is from their own personal and authentic experiences, and the posts are not related to commercial marketing efforts of the destinations. Therefore, this authenticity

creates parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers and makes travel recommendations feel more like suggestions from a friend than an advertisement (Meng et al., 2024). Because of this, influencers play a significant role in shaping tourists' travel motivations, particularly amongst the younger digitally native demographics. It has been observed that influencers act as sources of assurance to travellers who are hesitant to travel to destinations that are remote, nature-based or rural (Kilipiri et al., 2023). Most importantly, influencers demystify the associated challenges with remote and rural travel through documenting their journeys to and stays in such areas (Abate et al., 2025).

This becomes especially crucial in developing countries, such as in South Africa, where safety and infrastructure problems can hinder both domestic and international travel (Mqwebu, 2024). It is, however, important to note that not all social media travel content is accurate and sustainable. One of the major problems faced is that some influencers may overlook other important aspects of the remote and/or rural areas they travel to in their narratives of their experiences (Xie-Carson & Benckendorff, 2024). For example, influencers may romanticise rural life while overlooking the local struggles and cultural realities. Such can contribute to unrealistic expectations and, in some cases, unintended consequences of tourism, such as cultural degradation. Digital visibility does not guarantee equitable benefits for local communities unless it is tied to community-based tourism models and inclusive planning (Bastrygina et al., 2024). Besides this, though, the impact of travel influencers continues to grow, strengthening the significance of understanding the role of digital narratives in shaping real-world tourism flows. For remote and rural areas, specifically, travel influencers provide a substantial means of bridging the gap between invisibility and inclusion in the global tourism discourse.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study investigated the role of social media platforms in shaping tourism trends through the content created by tourism influencers and the reciprocal engagement from their followers. Employing a qualitative research design, the study used content and sentiment analysis to identify themes and visual aesthetics to frame destinations for desirable experiences and assess the potential influence of content posted on followers' travel intentions. Data were collected using purposive sampling techniques focusing on vlogs posted from June 2021 to December 2025. The focus was on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube vlogs posted on remote, rural, and nature-based destinations in the South African provinces. The selection of Instagram, TikTok and YouTube was informed by their dominance in visual storytelling, high user engagement and distinct content affordances. While YouTube offers a platform for long-form immersive storytelling, TikTok prioritises short-form videos and Instagram emphasises curated visual imagery. The differences in these platforms are significant in shaping the manner in which destinations are viewed, represented and visited.

Influencers were manually selected if they had a minimum of 1000 followers to ensure there was follower engagement and diversity in opinions, and consistently post-Covid tourism-related content with a focus on remote, nature-based and rural destinations. Also, the threshold of 1 000 followers was chosen to ensure that the selected influencers had an established followers base capable of generating measurable engagement while still capturing a diversity of micro- and mid-tier influencers. It is common that influencers have multiple accounts

across different social media platforms; as a result, the account with the highest number of followers was considered. While some remote, nature-based and rural destinations in South Africa have existing tourism recognition, such as the Wild Coast in the Eastern Cape, The Drakensberg region and some parts of Mpumalanga and Limpopo, the study prioritised influencer content featuring destinations that are relatively underrepresented within mainstream South African tourism marketing. A total of (n=50) influencer profiles were selected for analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. Influencer Profile (n=50)
Source: Authors

Platform	Influencer Code	Number of Followers (in 000)
YouTube	YTV1	8.23
	YTV2	11
	YTV3	1.1
	YTV4	5
	YTV5	23.7
	YTV6	1.05
	YTV7	3
	YTV8	9.1
	YTV9	8.6
	YTV10	2.5
	YTV11	23.6
Instagram	IGV1	37
	IGV2	146
	IGV3	122
	IGV4	105
	IGV5	13.7
	IGV6	20.6
	IGV7	10.6
	IGV8	2
	IGV9	13.7
	IGV10	22.3
	IGV11	300
	IGV12	10.3
	IGV13	1
	IGV14	8
	IGV15	104
	IGV16	14.2
	IGV17	159
	IGV18	2
	IGV19	7.6
TikTok	TTV1	344.4
	TTV2	220.8
	TTV3	3.556
	TTV4	4.2

	TTV5	199.1
	TTV6	156.9
	TTV7	99.4
	TTV8	35.2
	TTV9	41.9
	TTV10	8.1
	TTV11	6.8
	TTV12	187.3
	TTV13	8.2
	TTV14	5.8
	TTV15	8.9
	TTV16	11.7
	TTV17	53
	TTV18	3.5
	TTV19	27.3
	TTV20	10.1

Notes: YTV=YouTube Vlogger, IGV= Instagram Vlogger and TTV= TikTok Vlogger

The study sample included both South African influencers and international visitors, which allowed for comparative insights into how rural and remote destinations in the country are portrayed by both locals and international travellers. For each influencer, their most popular vlog featuring a remote, nature-based or rural destination was selected for analysis. The dataset for the research included both video and associated user comments. For each selected vlog, all the publicly available comments were extracted and analysed, ensuring compliance with platform terms and conditions. The data collection in this regard adhered to the ethical standards for social media research, focusing exclusively on publicly accessible content without interaction with the users (Chen et al., 2023). The researchers meticulously addressed the ethical considerations in line with established guidelines for internet research (Ghermandi et al., 2023). Because the study collated publicly available data, formal ethical clearance was not required (Townsend et al., 2016). However, anonymity and non-identifiability of users were maintained. In addition, researchers did not collect personal and/nor sensitive information, and all data usage adhered to the platform policies.

The metadata collected for each video included the number of views, likes, favourites, shares and comments. Following a thematic coding approach, a content analysis was done, which involved initial open coding, then axial and selective coding to identify dominant themes. Sentiment analysis was then done using NVivo, integrating automated sentiment classification with manual validation to enhance reliability. Coding was done by the authors, with iterative discussions to promote consistency and credibility of interpretations.

FINDINGS

Engagement Analysis

Sharing online content on social media platforms has opened many possibilities for marketing destinations, especially for social media influencers, through their engagement with their followers (Saini et al., 2023). The study presents statistics on top-performing vlogs to gain insight into influencers'

engagement with their followers through the posted vlogs, focusing on remote, nature-based, and rural destinations in South Africa (Table 2).

Table 2. Engagement analysis

Source: Authors

Influencer	Destination	Engagement statistics				
		Views	Likes	Favourites	Share	Comments
YTV1	Mpumalanga	1 200 000	80 000	6 000	1 200	4 500
YTV2	Mpumalanga	850 000	55 000	4 000	900	3 200
YTV3	Mpumalanga	600 000	40 000	3 200	700	2 300
YTV4	Limpopo	1 500 000	120 000	10 000	1 800	6 800
YTV5	Mpumalanga	750 000	50 000	4 000	800	2 700
YTV6	Free State	500 000	32 000	2 500	600	1 900
YTV7	Mpumalanga	900 000	60 000	5 000	1 000	3 500
YTV8	Northern Cape	650 000	45 000	3 800	750	2 400
YTV9	Eastern Cape	1 100 000	76 000	6 200	1 300	4 800
YTV10	KwaZulu Natal	1 300 000	90 000	7 500	1 600	5 200
YTV11	KwaZulu Natal	700 002	48 000	4 200	800	2 600
IGV1	Western Cape	420 000	35 000	6 000	1 200	1 800
IGV2	Mpumalanga	300 000	20 000	3 200	650	1 200
IGV3	Western Cape	580 000	45 000	7 500	1 400	2 300
IGV4	Western Cape	340 020	26 000	4 200	800	1 500
IGV5	Free State	200 000	15 000	2 500	500	800
IGV6	Eastern Cape	480 005	38 000	6 000	1 100	1 700
IGV7	Western Cape	620 000	47 000	8 200	1 600	2 500
IGV8	North West	230 000	18 000	2 800	550	900
IGV9	Western Cape	710 000	52 000	8 800	1 800	3 000
IGV10	Western Cape	890 000	65 000	10 000	2 200	3 600
IGV11	Western Cape	540 000	40 000	6 500	1 300	2 100
IGV12	Mpumalanga	310 000	22 000	3 500	700	1 300
IGV13	Limpopo	260 000	19 000	3 000	600	1 100
IGV14	North West	180 003	13 500	2 200	450	700
IGV15	Western Cape	600 000	44 000	7 800	1 700	2 400
IGV16	Western Cape	820 000	60 000	9 500	2 000	3 100
IGV17	KwaZulu Natal	470 000	36 000	6 000	1 200	1 800
IGV18	Northern Cape	210 000	15 500	2 600	500	800
IGV19	Northern Cape	240 000	17 500	2 800	600	900
TTV1	Limpopo	231 700	9 540	2 470	12	59
TTV2	Limpopo	2 800 000	146 000	38 300	99	908
TTV3	North West	247 000	1 957	1 667	109	27
TTV4	Eastern Cape	572 400	62 100	8 046	1 591	880
TTV5	North West	145 700	13 900	3 004	225	284
TTV6	Mpumalanga	1 100 000	33 100	11 500	841	472
TTV7	Mpumalanga	38 300	954	240	20	21
TTV8	Free State	341 500	14 800	4 147	125	459
TTV9	Limpopo	225 400	10 500	2 212	115	170
TTV10	Eastern Cape	402 900	12 500	1 138	1 409	134
TTV11	Eastern Cape	65 700	4 062	175	698	156
TTV12	Mpumalanga	1 500 000	73 000	5 781	5 911	70

Table 2 of the engagement statistics shows strong engagement between social media influencers and their followers. Social media platforms serve as platforms where influencers create compelling content that inspires and informs potential travellers (Ahluwalia & Shukla, 2024). Findings show that when influencers post their content on social media, their followers view the content and engage through likes, favourites, shares and comments. This is because social media users with high engagement levels are usually first perceived as peers by their followers (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). This support (Chamboko-Mpotaringa & Tichaawa, 2021)’s view that social media fosters a sense of community and connection among users.

Construction of Destination Appeal

There were notable differences that emerged across the platforms in how the destination appeal was constructed. For example, TikTok vloggers prioritised short-form, trend-driven discovery while YouTube vloggers posted immersive narrative experiences, and Instagram vloggers focused more on the curated visual aesthetics. The study examined how social media influencers construct destination appeal across Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, focusing on content related to remote, nature-based and rural tourism destinations in South Africa. Four key themes emerged (Table 3), illustrating the narrative strategies and aesthetic techniques used to frame destinations as desirable tourism experiences. In the presentation of the results and discussion, the following codes and meanings are used: YTV (YouTube Vlogger), IGV (Instagram Vlogger) and TTV (TikTok Vlogger) to denote the social media influencer.

Table 3. Themes and subthemes for the construction of destination appeal
Source: Authors

Theme	Sub-theme
Immersive natural aesthetics	Scenic views. Calming water-based moments. Sunset and stargazing moments.
Emotional wellness and escape	Relaxation and mental reset. Peaceful solitude and couple or family bonding. Spiritual and emotional elevation.
Unique local encounters and authenticity	Interaction with local people and culture. Discovery of hidden gems and lesser-known places. Rustic simplicity
Camera technique	Selfie-style narration Drone footage and aerial views Panoramic and wide-angle shots

Immersive natural aesthetics

Immersive natural aesthetics, with subthemes: scenic views, calming water-based moments and sunset and stargazing moments were recurring strategies by many social media influencers in constructing the destination appeal of remote, nature-based and rural tourism destinations. Many influencers consistently showcase visuals that emphasise untouched natural beauty and atmospheric serenity. Their vlogs are often accompanied by captions describing the settings as breathtaking or unreal, positioning the landscape as the destination’s main drawcard. One influencer shared, “The views were stunning, rolling hills, wide

open skies, and fresh air everywhere” (YTV4), while another stated, “Name a better artist than God?” (TTV4). These narratives support (Lee et al., 2024)’s view that influencers emphasise specific aesthetics to frame tourism. Other influencers’ vlogs featured water-based destinations, showcasing the waterfalls, rivers and infinity pools as tranquillity spaces. As influencers narrated, “We dipped our feet in the cool water and just sat on the rocks talking and enjoying the view” (YTV11) and “The canoe ride was peaceful and beautiful... the river was calm, and the trees made it feel like a dream” (IGV9). These narratives reinforce the connection between nature and personal well-being. Moreover, sunset and stargazing moments were reflected as emotional and introspective experiences. Examples include narratives such as, “The sunset from here is stunning, like the whole sky turns orange and pink” (YTV2) and “Spent time stargazing from a hammock... the sky was so clear, I could see everything” (IGV1). These narratives are consistent with insights from existing literature that recognise social media influencers as digital ambassadors who promote destinations through visually appealing content (Meng et al., 2024; Sodikov, 2024)

Emotional wellness and escape

The second theme, centred around emotional wellness and escape, reveals that social media influencers emphasise travel’s therapeutic and restorative potential to remote, nature-based and rural tourism destinations. Influencers’ narratives highlighted disconnection from daily stress, reconnection with inner calmness and experiences such as romantic escapes, family bonding, or solo retreats in natural surroundings. Some influencers narrated, “The peace I felt there was something I will carry with me for a long time...this is the kind of place you go with someone special... laugh, eat well, and feel human again.” (IGV1), “It was a peaceful day filled with nature, good food, and small moments that made me smile.” (IGV7) and “I loved the views from the balcony. It’s a perfect place for nature lovers, which allows you to disconnect from everyday life and reconnect with nature.” (TTV9). Other narratives were of emotional language and expressed through song lyrics or reflective captions. These narratives were shown in these statements: “Hello peace, hello joy, hello love... it is a new horizon” (TTV10) and “This trip made me feel happy and peaceful, and I would love to come back again someday” (IGV11). Influencers’ reviews framed these destinations as sanctuaries for emotional wellness and escape by emphasising relaxation and mental reset, peaceful solitude, small group experiences, and spiritual and emotional connections. These insights are consistent with the views of (Meng et al., 2025) who insist that influencers use emotionally appealing captions to evoke feelings of tranquillity and connection with nature by combining visuals with relatable narratives that emphasise the emotional allure of destinations.

Unique local encounters and authenticity

Many influencers narrated unique local encounters, reflecting authenticity. They showcased their interaction with local people and their culture. One influencer narrated, “They shared stories, spoke in isiZulu, and made me feel like one of their own” (YTV10), and another stated, “The waiter even shared a little story about how the penguins sometimes wander near the restaurant!” (IGV7). Echoing prior literature, influencer content goes beyond destinations’ natural appeal (Sanz-Marcos et al., 2024). It is constructed

through the influencers' engagement with the locals, their cultural traditions and everyday rural life. The shared stories, meals and conversations with local residents were framed as meaningful and memorable while contributing to a sense of authenticity and uniqueness. This confirms the fact that ethnic minority destination endorser impact tourists' perception of authenticity and destination image (Dong et al., 2023). Destinations were often described as hidden gems, positioning them as alternatives to mainstream tourism hotspots. In addition, rustic simplicity was portrayed through posts that emphasised modest, grounded experiences as the core components of the remote, nature-based and rural tourism destinations such as farm stays, traditional meals and braais in the bush.

Narratives such as "I found this gem in my home province... I didn't know this beauty existed here" (TTV8) and "Maiden's Cove is one of Cape Town's best-kept secrets" (IGV4) were noted. Other influencers highlighted that, "We had uphuthu, beans, and chicken stew cooked outside on a fire—it tasted amazing." (YTV10) and "We had a braai while listening to the sounds of the wild; it felt like a dream." (YTV4). These narratives illustrate how social media influencers shape the digital gaze through the visibility of remote, nature-based, and rural destinations, concurring with (Deb & Mallik, 2023) who maintain that the democratisation of information dissemination in social media has effectively bridged geographical divides, bringing previously obscure or less-visited destinations into the forefront of potential travellers' consciousness. This further supports the views of (Wengel et al., 2022), who revealed how TikTok made two off-the-beaten-track destinations in China (Hainan) popular overnight.

Camera techniques

Many influencers used different camera techniques to evoke a sense of presence, enhance immersion, emotion and aesthetic appeal. Some influencers used selfie shots and first-person narrations to build personal connection and authenticity, while others showcase expansive landscapes and scenery with drone and aerial views. These were noted in narratives such as "Drone capturing the dramatic drop of Meiringspoort Falls" (IGV10) and "We flew over the escarpment... this view is heaven." (TTV10). In addition, panoramic and wide-angle shots were used to emphasise the vastness of nature and reinforced the narrative of escape. These narrations confirm that social media influencers utilise the audiovisual attractiveness of destinations to attract attention, employing high-quality images and videos (Akhtar et al., 2024).

Influencer Followers' Sentiments

The strategies employed by influencers in constructing destination appeal played a key role in how destinations were perceived. The comments section across the platforms under analysis provided insights into the influencer's followers' sentiments. The sentiment analysis of the comments section identified four themes: sentimental reflections, validation and shared experiences, travel intention, and barriers and constraints (Table 4). In the presentation of the results and discussion, the following codes and meanings are used: YTF (YouTube Follower), IGF (Instagram Follower) and TTF (TikTok Follower) to denote influencers' followers.

Table 4. Influencer followers' sentiment themes and subthemes

Source: Authors

Theme	Sub-theme
Sentimental reflections	Emotional resonance Nostalgia Cultural connection and identity
Validation and shared experiences	Agreement and validation Shared travel experience
Travel intention	Bucket-list goals Readiness to act Future travel intentions
Barriers and constraints	Cost as a barrier Perceived risk

Sentimental reflections

Many of the influencers' followers' comments expressed sentimental reflections, highlighting emotional resonance, nostalgia, cultural connection, and identity. They expressed feelings of peace, joy and emotional upliftment in response to influencers' content. Most of these emotional reactions were framed as deeply personal, as noted in some of the comments, such as "This video made me feel so relaxed. Thank you for sharing" (IGF12) and "This looks like a perfect spot to escape the city and just unwind" (YTF6). These sentiments reveal that the strategies used by influencers to construct destination appeal not only inform and entertain followers but also evoke emotional resonance, nostalgia, cultural connection, and identity, which significantly shape followers' sentiments. This aligns with (Sanz-Marcos et al., 2024), demonstrating the emotional power that influencer-generated content has on its audience, cultivating empathetic connections, and blurring the distinction between commercial and personal content.

Influencers' content triggers memories of previous travel experiences and inspires followers' longing to revisit destinations. Influencers' followers frequently reflect on past travel experiences. Significant comments such as "I visited Meiringspoort Falls two years ago and it was amazing. Watching your video makes me want to go back this summer" (IGF4) and "Your review brought back such good memories" (TTF8) were made reflecting nostalgic longing. These nostalgic comments and longing support previous research that followers share experiences triggered by influencers' content, highlighting the power of shared experiences and the desire to relive positive moments (Conner, 2024) and validates the effectiveness of immersive visuals and narrative cues in generating affective recall among viewers (Sammy et al., 2017).

Influencer content can foster a sense of local belonging and rootedness among locals, forcing them to reevaluate their domestic tourism landscape. Many of the followers' comments revealed an evoked connection, identity and pride towards the destinations featured by influencers. Some TikTok followers commented, "This is why, as South Africans, we must tour our own country first before galivanting overseas" (TTF8). Another commented, "This made me realise how much of my home province I still need to explore" (TTF10). These observations align with the idea that social media influencers can inspire locals to connect with their heritage and explore local areas, thus encouraging domestic tourism (Ahluwalia & Shukla, 2024; Saini et al., 2023)

Validation and shared experiences

The validation and expression of shared experiences by influencers' followers act as social cues, confirming influencers' framing of destination appeal. Their comments validated influencers' content accuracy, with other followers sharing their own past experiences of the featured remote, nature-based and rural destination. This was noted with comments that agreed with influencers' perspectives, exemplified with affirmations, such as 'agree', 'so true' or 'yes'. Comments like "I completely agree with you about the views; Maiden's Cove is amazing" (IGF2), "I totally agree...it's the perfect place to slow down and feel alive again)" (IGF7) and "Yes, our country truly is beautiful" (TTF12) were noted. These sentiments confirm that the credibility of influencers' content stems from its perceived authenticity and relatability, fostering stronger connections with their audience than traditional advertising (Vukmirović et al., 2020).

Beyond validation, many followers commented by sharing their experiences of visiting the featured destinations, adding their own perspectives beyond the influencers'. "Wow, your experience sounds amazing! I stayed at Mjejane a few months back and also loved the peaceful vibe" (IGF8). Others commented, "I remember visiting it a few years ago with a friend, and it was such an unforgettable experience (YTF9)" and "The safari drives were incredible, and we got to see the Big Five! The sunsets were breathtaking, too. If I could, I'd go back in a heartbeat" (TTF9). Influencers' ability to tap into shared experiences reinforces connections (Ebben & Bull, 2023).

Travel intention

Many of the comments from the influencers' followers show how social media influencers' content stimulates travel intentions, planning and in some cases, immediate decision-making. Prominent comments were centred around bucket-list goals, readiness to act and future travel intentions. Many followers strongly desired to visit the featured remote, nature-based and rural tourism destinations by adding them to their travel bucket list. Comments reflecting their long-term travel aspirations included: "This should be on my bucket list." (TTF3). "Definitely adding Muluwa Lodge to my travel list." (YTF2) and "Now I really want to go back and try King Fisher Lodge." (IGF8). Other comments reflected the followers' readiness to act and were often framed with decisiveness. Examples include: "I really want to go there now." (IGF10), "Please share the place details. I want to book." (TTF8), "I will be visiting soon." (TTF10) and "I am definitely coming there in November during my birthday." (TTF14). The comments show confirmations and plans to book, visit, or travel during upcoming occasions.

In addition to bucket lists and readiness to act, many followers expressed generalised future travel intentions. Though not framed as urgent, they signalled followers' intention to travel in the future, driven by influencers' digital content. Followers commented, "We owe ourselves this... one night just to refresh." (TTF25) and "I hope I can visit soon and experience the friendly local vibe you described". (IGF10). Others express their future travel intention, "I love how you shared all the activities you did, from hiking to stargazing. I will definitely try it out with my partner next time" (IGF12). These responses demonstrate the ability of social media to influence travel intentions (S. Chen & Lin, 2019), aligning with (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), who posit that content posted by influencers on social media has significant persuasive and influence power.

Barriers and constraints

While social media influencers' content successfully generates interest and the desire to travel and enhances engagement, followers' comments also reveal the realities that limit travel conversions. Cost as a barrier and perceived risk surfaced across all three platforms as significant challenges in converting digitally stimulated interest into actual travel, specifically in developing economies among domestic tourists (Busca & Bertrandias, 2020). These challenges were more pronounced on TikTok, where the users are mainly the younger and economically diverse followers. Followers expressed that although the destinations were appealing, financial limitations prevented them from travelling. Some comments that were noted were: "Beautiful but overpriced." (TTF11), "Looks stunning but not in my budget." (TTF16) and "Money is stopping me from travelling." (TTF17). These findings reveal the unequal access to leisure tourism, often due to structural constraints on tourism consumption (Angeloni & Rossi, 2020), particularly relevant in the South African context, where income disparities and unemployment remain high, rendering leisure travel an unattainable luxury for a considerable portion of the population (Bob & Gounden, 2024).

Some influencers' followers expressed safety-related fear, especially in unfamiliar rural and natural environments, reflecting a psychological barrier to travel. TikTok follower 2 commented, "I would love to do something like this, but I feel like I would be the one they make an example out of." (TTF2). These findings align with safety perceptions having a significant influence on destination choice, particularly in regions perceived as unsafe or unfamiliar (Bob & Gounden, 2024).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study aimed to investigate the role of social media platforms in shaping tourism trends through the content created by tourism social media influencers and engagement with their followers. Drawing of the findings from influencer content posted on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube promoting remote, nature-based and rural tourism destinations, the study showed that tourism social media influencers have strong engagement with their followers and validates the effectiveness of immersive visuals and narratives used by influencers in constructing a "digital gaze" shaping how the featured destinations are perceived. Four themes emerged, revealing how these influencers effectively digitally frame remote, nature-based, and rural tourism destinations as having natural aesthetics, providing space for emotional wellness and escape with unique, local, and authentic experiences while employing various camera techniques to enrich the content. Analysing followers' sentiments revealed four themes (sentimental reflections, validation and shared experiences, travel intentions, and barriers and constraints), which highlight the significant impact that digital narratives created by influencers have on shaping perceptions of destinations and influencing travel decisions.

Theoretically, the study enhances the interrelated concepts of digital place-making, digital gaze and influencer culture by examining how social media influencers transform physical spaces into symbolic and experiential locations through digital narratives. It also explores how these digital representations, through content posted by influencers, influence travel decisions and legitimise destinations. Thus, the study findings contribute to empirical evidence on debates centred around social media and influencers' role in shaping tourism, revealing how digital platforms reshape perceptions of rural and remote tourism landscapes in South Africa through influencer-driven visibility of underrepresented spaces.

The study also shows how the convergence between tourism and technology has blurred the lines between virtual and reality, creating a hybrid space where digitally mediated experiences can influence tourists' perceptions and expectations of actual travel. This dynamic emphasises the necessity for tourism stakeholders to understand and leverage the influence of social media in crafting destination marketing strategies that resonate with today's digitally engaged tourists.

This study provides practical insights for tourism planners, digital marketers, and local communities on effectively using social media to increase remote, nature-based, and rural tourism destinations' visibility and attract more visitors. Digital marketers and destination marketers can enhance their marketing strategies by curating visual content that highlights the natural environment, capturing scenic views, tranquil moments by the water, and mesmerising sunsets, accompanied by evocative captions that emphasise the emotional experiences associated with nature. Additionally, destinations can create opportunities for visitors to share their experiences online, enhancing engagement and authenticity. These approaches can significantly boost interest in remote, nature-based, and rural tourism destinations. As social media and influencers draw tourists' attention to previously under-explored areas, local tourism planners and governments should proactively improve digital visibility and accessibility of these natural areas. The study recommends that governments promote and support community-based tourism initiatives and ensure the availability of basic infrastructure to accommodate increased visitors' interest generated by social media exposure. Domestic leisure tourism must be economically inclusive, with marketers offering a range of prices and promoting accessible tourism experiences (Bob & Gounden, 2024). Policy makers, destinations and organisations must carefully assess the effectiveness of influencer marketing in stimulating travel intentions within the framework of socioeconomic disparities and perceived risks associated with venturing into unfamiliar environments, as these factors can hinder the translation of online engagement into tangible tourism demand, potentially leading to a disconnect between online interest and actual travel behaviour.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitations of this research are mainly related to the research methodology used. The study was limited to purposive sampling and the focus on only three social media platforms. In addition, the research only focused on the analysis of the most popular vlog per influencer. Future research could explore influencer content from developed countries to assess whether similar themes would emerge. Other studies can take cognisance of the growing integration of AI-generated content in tourism marketing and could explore how tourists perceive narratives by machines versus humans.

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