



# Analyzing the Influence of Commercial Partnerships on the Authenticity of Tourism Content Created by Influencers

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**Abstract:** With digital platforms like YouTube increasingly shaping travel choices, influencers play a valuable role in promoting destinations. However, as influencers engage in sponsorships and paid collaborations, questions arise about the impact of commercial interests on the authenticity of their content. The study employs a qualitative content analysis of 30 videos created by five prominent tourism influencers on YouTube. The analysis focuses on key elements such as personal storytelling, sponsorship disclosure, brand alignment, and audience engagement. The findings reveal that influencers adopt subtle strategies to blend personal experiences with brand promotions, often using storytelling techniques and transparent sponsorship disclosures to maintain credibility. The study identifies key factors that influence audience perceptions of authenticity, such as alignment between the influencer's personal brand and the sponsored content. These insights offer valuable implications for tourism marketing, highlighting how influencer-driven content affects consumer behavior and destination branding. The research provides actionable guidance for influencers, tourism boards, and marketers aiming to balance authenticity with commercial demands in an increasingly commercialized digital environment.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The published content on social media platforms like YouTube (and other primarily video-based social networks) has been transforming the way people make decisions, including the ones in the context of traveling. Travel influencers – social media users who gained a large number of followers by sharing their personal tourist experiences and recommendations, play a significant role in shaping travel behavior and promoting destinations (Stubb et al., 2019). For these reasons, the industry uses influencer marketing which “leverages well-followed online users to sway consumer attitudes and decision-making processes in favor of brands or ideas” (Evans et al., 2017, p. 138). Influencers serve as trusted figures for their audience and their perceived authenticity and reliability contribute to the formation of a virtual community, fostering a desire among audiences to replicate shared experiences (Schouten et al., 2020). They usually offer insights into travel locations, accommodations and activities. However, as the influencer industry grows, so does the pressure to monetize the content. Sponsorships, brand partnerships, and paid collaborations have become the main financial support and the way how influencers sustain their work. These commercial arrangements raise important questions about how they impact the authenticity of the content created by influencers (Abidin, 2016). One of the biggest differences that separate influencers from traditional media (especially when it comes to their relationship with the audience), lies in authenticity because this is often the most important element that drives the audience's trust and engagement.

The audience expects influencers to present honest and personal reflections and experiences, rather than promotional content that can feel overly commercialized (Ercegovac & Tankosić, 2023), which

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creates tension and a unique challenge for influencers. As financial demands increase, they face the difficult task of balancing credibility and audience trust with the demands of brand partnerships and this paper explores that very challenge. Through a qualitative content analysis of travel influencers on YouTube, the study investigates how they navigate between maintaining authenticity and fulfilling commercial obligations. The study seeks to uncover the subtle strategies that influencers use to blend personal storytelling with brand promotion, shedding light on how these efforts affect both consumer behavior and destination branding (Hudders et al., 2021). Given the growing importance of influencer-driven tourism marketing, this research offers valuable insights into how the industry can evolve in a way that benefits both influencers and tourism brands. By focusing on the balance between authenticity and commercialization, this paper also contributes to broader discussions on digital capitalism and the cultural implications of monetized content in the online space (Fuchs, 2020).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencers play a very important role in tourism marketing, fostering trust and influencing consumer decisions through relatable and credible content. Unlike traditional advertising, their ability to connect with audiences on a personal level builds stronger bonds and encourages deeper engagement (Schouten et al., 2020). Research highlights that daily vlogs and user-generated content allow influencers to share genuine personal experiences, creating emotional connections that significantly influence travel motivations (Wu et al., 2024; Zaim et al., 2024). Story-driven narratives, where influencers reflect on their real-life journeys, encourage audiences to consider destinations they might not have previously considered (Evans et al., 2017).

YouTube influencers have transformed into business innovators, leveraging storytelling techniques to create content that resonates with their audiences while simultaneously capitalizing on commercial opportunities. Books like *The YouTube Formula* by Derral Eves (2021) and *Youtubers* by Chris Stokel-Walker (2019) emphasize YouTube's profound impact on media and marketing. Eves explores how algorithms and engagement metrics determine content success, while Stokel-Walker illustrates how influencers revolutionize niche industries, including tourism, by maintaining relatable connections with viewers. While partnerships and sponsorships offer financial sustainability, they also introduce challenges. Influencers often face pressure to prioritize promotional content, which risks shifting the focus from meaningful storytelling to corporate-driven messaging (Abidin, 2016). When brand deals feel excessive or irrelevant, audiences may question the influencer's credibility and lose trust (Dedić, 2022; Ercegovic & Tankosić, 2023), especially when there is a misalignment between perceived and projected authenticity (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022).

Studies show that younger demographics like millennials are especially critical of content that appears overly commercialized or disconnected from the influencer's usual style (Anubha et al., 2024; Kim & Kim, 2022). Transparent communication about sponsorships, such as clear disclosures early in videos, is essential for maintaining viewer confidence and retention (Roy et al., 2020). To navigate these challenges, successful influencers rely on storytelling techniques that seamlessly integrate personal experiences with promotional messaging. By aligning partnerships with their values and lifestyles, influencers ensure that brand collaborations feel organic rather than forced (Kapita et al., 2022). For instance, travel influencers focused on adventure tourism often work with companies promoting outdoor gear, eco-tourism, or sustainability. This alignment not only enhances credibility but also reinforces the influencer's connection with their audience. Maintaining creative control further strengthens this connection, enabling influencers to produce content that reflects their real interests while addressing commercial obligations (Chen et al., 2023;

Ercegovac et al., 2023). Platform algorithms, particularly YouTube’s recommendation system, introduce additional complexities for influencers. Content visibility is largely determined by engagement metrics—likes, shares, and comments—which incentivize influencers to prioritize commercially appealing or “viral” topics (Chen, 2024). While this may increase visibility, it can sometimes conflict with the influencer’s established storytelling style or content preferences. As a result, influencers must strike a careful balance between producing relatable, value-driven content and meeting algorithmic demands (Acikgoz & Burnaz, 2021), especially as audience perception is often shaped by subconscious cues, as shown in studies combining media theory with neuromarketing approaches (Ercegovac et al., 2022). Those who retain control over their creative process—while aligning brand partnerships with their unique voice—are better equipped to sustain audience engagement without compromising their identity.

Although existing research points out the significance of personal storytelling, brand alignment, and transparency in tourism marketing, little attention has been given to how influencers manage the tension between creative narratives and commercial imperatives. The correlation between personal reflections, sponsorship disclosures, and algorithmic influences remains under-explored. This study addresses that gap, offering insights into the strategies influencers use to balance meaningful content creation with promotional responsibilities.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative content analysis to examine how YouTube influencers balance personal storytelling and commercialization in tourism promotion. The analysis identifies recurring visual and narrative elements, with particular attention to storytelling techniques, sponsorship disclosures, and brand integration. A qualitative approach allows for a deeper understanding of the strategies influencers use to blend personal experiences with promotional content. Data collection involved purposive sampling of five YouTube travel influencers who met specific criteria: a subscriber base of over 500,000, a mix of personal and sponsored content, and regular engagement in brand partnerships with clear sponsorship disclosure. These criteria ensured diversity and relevance in the selected content. A total of 30 videos (six per influencer) were analyzed, capturing a broad spectrum of content across different cultural and geographic contexts. The videos were collected from the influencers’ official YouTube channels and transcribed verbatim to facilitate systematic narrative analysis, following best practices from prior qualitative studies on vlog narratives (Vlahović et al., 2023). The analysis focused on several elements, including sponsorship disclosure practices, personal storytelling, and visual techniques such as location shots, cultural depictions, and aesthetic presentation. Engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) were also recorded to evaluate audience responses. Thematic analysis was conducted in multiple stages: familiarization with the transcripts, coding of authenticity (e.g., storytelling, transparency, creative control) and commercialization indicators (e.g., product placements, brand mentions, calls to action), and grouping codes into broader themes. To enhance reliability, an intercoder agreement process was implemented, where two researchers independently coded a subset of videos. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved, ensuring consistency in the themes identified.

The study focuses exclusively on YouTube to maintain consistency in content format and audience behavior, as platforms like Instagram and TikTok differ significantly in structure and engagement strategies. YouTube’s long-form video format allows for a more detailed exploration of storytelling and brand integration. However, several limitations should be noted. The purposive selection of five influencers limits the generalizability of findings to the broader tourism influencer population. The analysis relies on self-reported sponsorship disclosures, which may underrepresent

undisclosed partnerships. The exclusive focus on YouTube means the findings may not apply to other platforms with shorter-form content. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into how influencers manage the balance between commercial and personal content, offering practical implications for marketers, tourism boards, and brands seeking to leverage influencer-driven promotion.

#### 4. FINDINGS

The analysis of the five selected YouTube influencers — Louis Cole (FunForLouis), Nadine Sykora (Hey Nadine), Christian LeBlanc (Lost LeBlanc), Eva zu Beck, and Kara and Nate — reveals a nuanced approach to managing authenticity and commercialization. Across the 30 videos analyzed, several recurring themes emerged that shed light on how these influencers balance personal storytelling with sponsored content, maintain credibility, and engage their audiences.

A consistent approach across all five influencers is the use of **personal narratives** to connect with their audiences. By sharing candid moments, challenges, and reflections, they offer content that feels relatable and grounded in personal experience. Eva zu Beck, for instance, frequently emphasizes her solo travels to remote and culturally significant locations, combining adventure with meaningful insights. Her storytelling appeals to viewers who value raw and immersive travel experiences. Similarly, Louis Cole integrates moments of spontaneity and self-reflection into his videos, with a particular focus on themes of freedom and sustainability. These narratives resonate with audiences seeking content that feels personal rather than overly curated. **Transparency about sponsorships** is essential for maintaining audience trust. All five influencers disclose their partnerships through verbal mentions, on-screen text, or video descriptions. For example, Christian LeBlanc and Kara and Nate acknowledge sponsorships early in their videos, while Nadine Sykora includes promotional codes in descriptions to keep the content unobtrusive. This openness helps audiences engage without feeling misled, as videos with clear disclosures typically receive more positive responses and steady engagement.

An effective strategy observed among the influencers is the **seamless integration of brand partnerships** into their content. Rather than presenting sponsorships as separate segments, influencers integrate promotional content naturally into their narratives. Nadine Sykora shows how travel services enhance her experiences, while Kara and Nate incorporate hotels or travel insurance into their trip stories. This approach reduces the commercial tone, making promotions feel more relevant and relatable. In contrast, when sponsorships dominate the content, viewer responses tend to be less positive. For example, Christian LeBlanc's video on a luxury cruise emphasized amenities and services so heavily that many viewers felt the personal connection was lost, leading to critical feedback and lower engagement.

The **alignment between influencer values and sponsored content** also plays an important role in shaping audience perceptions. Collaborations that align with an influencer's established style and interests are generally well-received. For example, Louis Cole's partnerships with eco-friendly and adventure-oriented brands are consistent with his sustainability-driven persona, reinforcing the connection with his audience. By contrast, his occasional promotion of luxury products has led to mixed reactions, as some viewers found the content inconsistent with his usual free-spirited and down-to-earth image. Similarly, Eva zu Beck's collaborations with local tourism initiatives complement her off-the-beaten-path travel content, enhancing her credibility among viewers. Audience responses to these partnerships reflect a preference for sponsorships that feel genuine and closely tied to the influencer's identity. The extent and presentation of **commercial content**

significantly influence audience engagement. Videos with subtle, well-integrated promotions tend to attract higher interaction rates, including positive comments, likes, and shares. Kara and Nate's content, for instance, often receives praise for seamlessly incorporating sponsorships into their travel experiences without distracting from the overall narrative. On the other hand, overt commercialization can lead to viewer dissatisfaction. Christian LeBlanc's luxury travel videos, which feature frequent product placements and direct calls to action, are sometimes criticized for prioritizing brand promotion over personal storytelling. Comments on these videos often reflect frustration that the commercial focus overshadows the authenticity viewers seek.

**Commercial markers** such as product placements, endorsements, and calls to action were evident in all 30 videos. Christian LeBlanc's content relied on product placements, particularly in videos featuring luxurious travels and upscale accommodations. Nadine Sykora, meanwhile, frequently included promotional details and affiliate offers in her video descriptions. While these markers effectively communicate sponsorship intent, audience responses varied based on execution. Subtle brand mentions integrated into the narrative tended to be received more positively, while overt sponsorships, particularly those that dominated the content, led to mixed reactions. The findings show that influencers manage audience trust and engagement by combining personal storytelling with sponsorship transparency and carefully chosen brand collaborations. These results emphasize the importance of subtle execution, transparency, and aligning commercial content with an influencer's established image to sustain trust and maintain strong audience relationships.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings from this study provide critical insights into how YouTube influencers navigate the tension between authenticity and commercialization in their tourism-related content. By analyzing the five selected influencers, it becomes evident that maintaining credibility while engaging in commercial partnerships requires a delicate balance, and this balance is reflected in the main themes of authenticity, commercialization, transparency, audience engagement, and brand alignment.

**Table 1.** Coding Scheme with examples

Code	Description	Example
<b>Authenticity</b>	Personal storytelling, personal anecdotes, or reflections to build trust.	Louis Cole sharing personal adventures in travel vlogs.
<b>Commercialization</b>	Inclusion of sponsored content or product placements.	Nadine Sykora promoting travel services during vlogs.
<b>Transparency</b>	Clear disclosure of sponsorships either verbally or visually.	Christian LeBlanc mentioning sponsorships at the start of videos.
<b>Audience Engagement</b>	Audience reactions including metrics like comments, likes, and shares.	Kara and Nate receiving positive feedback on sponsored content.
<b>Brand Alignment</b>	Aligning sponsorships with the influencer's personal brand and values.	Eva zu Beck collaborating with local tourism initiatives.

**Source:** Own research

The analysis shows that influencers manage authenticity by incorporating personal storytelling and experiences into their content. Table 1 outlines the coding scheme used to identify markers of authenticity, commercialization, transparency, audience engagement, and brand alignment across the videos analyzed. The influencers, such as Eva zu Beck and Louis Cole, consistently presented their content in ways that highlighted personal reflection and unfiltered experiences, which scored high in authenticity (Table 2).

Table 2. Influencer Metrics

Influencer	Authenticity Score	Commercialization Score	Transparency Score	Audience Engagement Score	Brand Alignment Score
Louis Cole	8	5	9	8	8
Nadine Sykora	7	6	8	7	8
Christian LeBlanc	6	8	7	7	6
Eva zu Beck	9	4	9	9	9
Kara and Nate	8	6	9	8	8

Source: Own research

According to the data presented in **Figure 1**, authenticity was highest among influencers who prioritized storytelling and cultural immersion over overtly commercial content. Eva zu Beck’s emphasis on personal journeys to remote and culturally rich areas, where sponsorships were minimal or aligned with her brand, set her apart as one of the most authentic influencers in the study. This focus on local culture and immersive experiences aligns with research on how influencers visually frame destinations to influence audience perceptions (Motahar et al., 2024). Louis Cole similarly demonstrated authenticity by focusing on adventure travel and sustainability, although his occasional partnerships with luxury brands slightly lowered his score.



Figure 1. Authenticity score

Source: Own research

In contrast, **Figure 2** highlights the commercialization aspect, where Christian LeBlanc had the highest score. His content leaned heavily into brand partnerships, with frequent product placements and endorsements. While his videos still attracted an audience, the high degree of commercialization reduced the authenticity of his content in the eyes of some viewers, which led to mixed audience engagement (Table 2). The high commercialization score reflects the difficulty influencers face when monetizing content, as they must strike a balance between earning revenue and retaining audience trust.

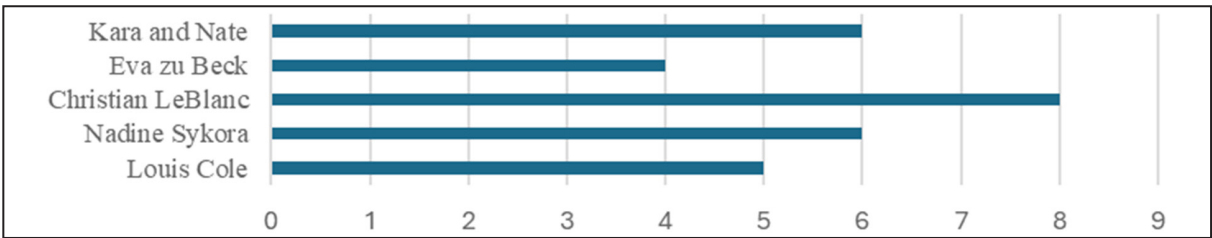
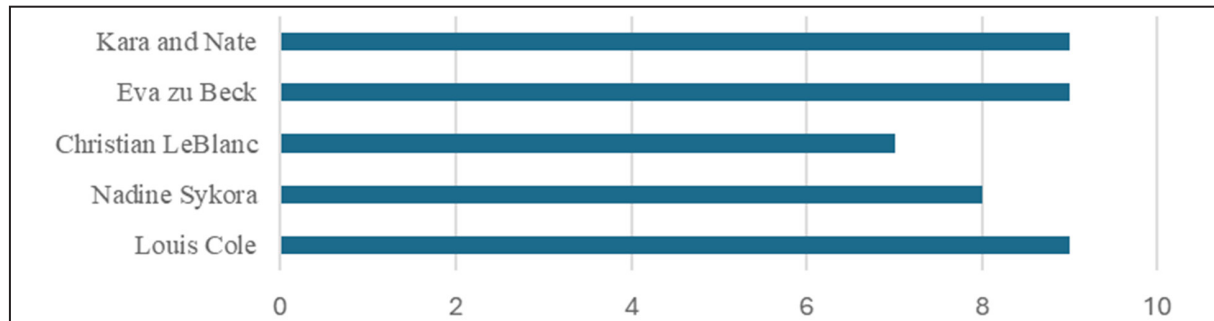


Figure 2. Commercialization Score

Source: Own research

Transparency emerged as a critical factor for maintaining credibility and trust with viewers. As demonstrated in **Figure 3**, transparency scores were consistently high across all influencers, with

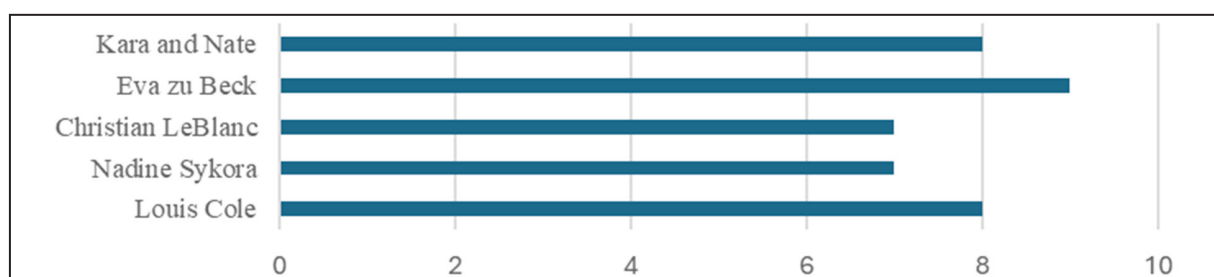
many explicitly disclosing sponsorships verbally or through on-screen text. This practice aligns with previous research that suggests clear sponsorship disclosures are essential to maintaining trust, even in the context of commercialized content (Acikgoz & Burnaz, 2021; Kapita et al., 2022). Kara and Nate, along with Louis Cole, scored particularly high in transparency, which reflects their upfront approach to sponsorship disclosures. Their willingness to clearly communicate the commercial nature of their partnerships likely contributed to the positive audience responses observed in their engagement metrics (Figure 4). Transparency plays a crucial role in managing the commercialization dilemma, allowing influencers to engage in partnerships without alienating their audience.



**Figure 3.** Transparency Score

Source: Own research

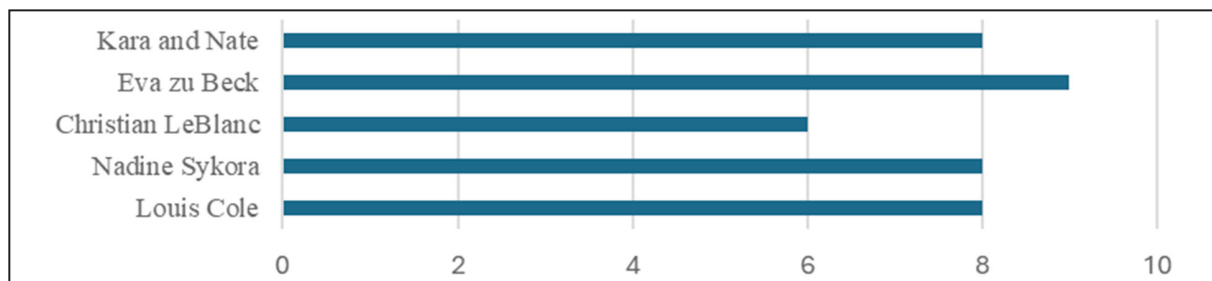
Audience engagement was closely tied to the perceived authenticity of the content. Influencers who successfully blended personal experiences with commercial content saw higher engagement levels, as depicted in **Figure 4**. Kara and Nate, who integrated sponsorships subtly into their travel vlogs, maintained strong audience interaction through comments, likes, and shares. Their ability to balance brand partnerships with personal storytelling made their content feel relatable and genuine to their audience. In contrast, Christian LeBlanc, whose content was more overtly commercialized in specific videos, experienced lower engagement on videos where the sponsored elements dominated the narrative. This supports the idea that while commercialization is an essential aspect of influencer marketing, it must be managed carefully to avoid diminishing audience engagement.



**Figure 4.** Audience Engagement Score

Source: Own research

Another finding worth mentioning, from the study is the importance of brand alignment, shown in **Figure 5**. Influencers who partnered with brands that aligned with their personal values and content style were more likely to maintain credibility and trust with their audience. For example, Eva zu Beck's collaborations with local tourism initiatives and sustainable travel companies resonated well with her audience, as the partnerships matched her established travel ethos. This alignment not only contributed to her high brand alignment score (Table 2) but also supported her strong audience engagement and authenticity.



**Figure 5.** Brand Alignment Score

**Source:** Own research

On the other hand, Christian LeBlanc's partnerships with luxury brands, while consistent with his luxury travel content, sometimes felt disconnected from his earlier adventure-focused persona, resulting in a lower brand alignment score. This mismatch highlights the importance of influencers carefully selecting partnerships that align with their core brand to preserve authenticity.

The findings from this study have important implications for tourism marketers and influencers. First, the balance between authenticity and commercialization must be carefully managed to maintain audience trust. Influencers who prioritize personal storytelling, disclose sponsorships transparently, and align with brands that reflect their values are more likely to engage their audience positively. Tourism marketers should seek to collaborate with influencers who have established a strong personal brand that resonates with their target audience. By aligning with influencers who maintain high levels of authenticity and transparency, brands can effectively reach potential travelers without compromising the influencer's credibility.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study examines how YouTube travel influencers balance authenticity and commercialization in tourism promotion, focusing on strategies for maintaining audience trust and credibility. The findings demonstrate that transparency in sponsorships, alignment with personal values, and integration of promotional content into narratives are essential for achieving positive audience engagement. For example, influencers such as Kara and Nate and Eva zu Beck successfully incorporate sponsorships into their storytelling, enhancing their connection with viewers. By contrast, evident promotional content, as observed in Christian LeBlanc's luxury travel videos, often receives critical feedback as it shifts the focus away from personal connection. Brand partnerships that align with an influencer's established identity resonate more positively with audiences. Louis Cole's collaborations with eco-friendly brands reflect his sustainability-driven persona, reinforcing audience trust, while transparent sponsorship disclosures, as seen in the practices of Nadine Sykora and Kara and Nate, prevent feelings of deception among viewers. These approaches illustrate how influencers maintain the delicate balance between commercial goals and personal storytelling.

The study builds on existing research into authenticity and influencer credibility, emphasizing the importance of strategies that merge storytelling with brand integration (Abidin, 2016; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). By focusing on YouTube's long-form content, the analysis highlights how influencers leverage detailed narratives to combine personal experiences with promotional elements to sustain audience engagement.

Future research should explore how these strategies adapt across other platforms such as TikTok or Instagram, where content formats and audience behaviors differ. Also, studies with larger sample sizes or longitudinal approaches could provide further insights into how these practices evolve. While the study's focus on YouTube and reliance on self-disclosed sponsorships present limitations, it offers valuable insights for marketers and tourism boards seeking to optimize influencer-driven campaigns by blending commercial content with authentic storytelling.

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